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Aphonicity: Trafficking In The Silences Of Puerto Rico's Narcotics War

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Abstract
What does annihilation sound like? Annihilation, as it turns out, is often harrowingly quiet. This dissertation is a longitudinal ethnographic study of how a vast constellation of variegated silences amidst one narcotics dominated public housing community in the Caribbean, Alelí, coalesces to form an almost impenetrable tapestry of both protections and risk. Beneath a cloak of aphonicity, or soundlessness, the dialogues and concomitant silences of youth narco-soldiers, elders, school staff, both transnational and micro-traffickers, civil servants, and grassroots organizers are plumbed in order to glean an eye-level perspective of how life trajectories are impacted by illicit trafficking flows. Almost a tenth of the Island's school deserters leave prior to completing elementary school; attendance is highly—if not entirely—discretionary. Yet to the extent that children are not matriculated, engaged in, and consistently attending the public schools, to that same extent the Island is actively fomenting and fostering its own insecurity internally. This dissertation argues that the children's aphonic, premature exits from state sponsored schooling contribute significantly to the phenomena of truncated life trajectories—wherein the transitions from truant to deserter to youth soldier to premature demise occur in rapid succession. This dissertation sits anchored in the wake of such unspectacular scholastic departures, primarily examining how, through social and institutional networks, Islanders surrounding such young people unwittingly or intentionally participate in or fight against this all too prevalent default mode of desertion and its predictable aftershocks. In Alelí, just as in some of the other impenetrable government housing projects Islandside, artillery is already an integral and not aberrant component of the soundscape. As such, I trace an arc wherein young men's loss of vocality and visibility becomes translanguaged into firearm detonations. During more than eight years immersed in Alelí's soundscape, I observe how the aphonicity of voice lays masterful claim over terrain wherein silence reigns as a deeply embedded form of cultural capital, loquacity is not a skillset but an impediment, and intel swiftly transforms into liability.

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APHONICITY:

TRAFFICKING IN THE SILENCES OF PUERTO RICO’S NARCOTICS WAR

Audrey Winpenny

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements of the

Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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Audrey Winpenny

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Para Aleli

&

In memory of my father
tan queridísimo y demasiado de bello,

Tom Winpenny

without whom this all
would have been impossible.
Somos la misma gota.
Acknowledgments

In simultaneous celebration of and lamentation for the lives of all young Islanders who, like Nael, deserved the world and in every way we did not deliver. In honor of their intrinsic and inviolable value, luminosity, and beauty. And in the hope that one day we might be not only forgiven for, but altogether rid of the scourge of our own blindness as a society with regard to their worth.

Further, I extend my gratitude to all the residents of Alelí, and particularly to Melquisedec, The Mayor, Castiel, and Abdiel. Thank you for always treating me as a sister, for your endless kindnesses, and for your sacrificial and vigilant protection. This work, in part, is submitted in recognition and appreciation of your unconventional, expansive paternities: Gracias por siempre estar lxs mismxs conmigo. Ustedes me muestran que, “La familia no siempre es de sangre.”

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ABSTRACT

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Audrey Winpenny

John L. Jackson, Jr.

What does annihilation sound like? Annihilation, as it turns out, is often harrowingly quiet. This dissertation is a longitudinal ethnographic study of how a vast constellation of variegated silences amidst one narcotics dominated public housing community in the Caribbean, Alelí, coalesces to form an almost impenetrable tapestry of both protections and risk. Beneath a cloak of aphonicity, or soundlessness, the dialogues and concomitant silences of youth narco-soldiers, elders, school staff, both transnational and micro-traffickers, civil servants, and grassroots organizers are plumbed in order to glean an eye-level perspective of how life trajectories are impacted by illicit trafficking flows. Almost a tenth of the Island’s school deserters leave prior to completing elementary school; attendance is highly—if not entirely—discretionary. Yet to the extent that children are not matriculated, engaged in, and consistently attending the public schools, to that same extent the Island is actively fomenting and fostering its own insecurity internally. This dissertation argues that the children’s aphonic, premature exits from state sponsored schooling contribute significantly to the phenomena of truncated life trajectories—wherein the transitions from truant to deserter to youth soldier to premature demise occur
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Preface

When I tell my primijo—a cousin of mine whom I helped raise, the cousin whose father is from Cataño—that after more than a decade in Puerto Rico I might have a job interview in California, his response is one of distress. That is to say, distress in an aleliano, affective flat line, do-not-blink-or-you-will-miss-it sort of way. The unflappable, slow to speak cousin who always prefers to listen interrupts with an understated, yet staunch protest: “California? You can’t move to California.”

Weeks later when I travel to Pennsylvania, I press him to elaborate upon this visceral repugnance towards my potential relocation:

That’s far away, California. Puerto Rico is not as far. Or is it? I don’t know, it’s different. When you’re in Puerto Rico it’s like you’re not really gone because you’re still around our peoples. When you are in California, you are in California—you feel me? I don’t know. I don’t know what the big deal is [grinding thumbs together loudly]. I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t know what it is. I feel better with you being over there in Puerto Rico, I guess…because I feel like you’re going to be taken care of over there… you’re already dug in over there, people know you over there already. [Whereas] you’re going to start off new in California—it might be more, ah, more dangerous. It’s different. East Coast/West Coast, you know what I mean? We don’t like the West Coast. North Philly all day. All day. Sometimes all night.

Immediately taking it to a Biggie vs. Tupac level, he asserts that the proposition of my relocation is preposterous. For regardless of where he might be geographically in the world, he understands Puerto Rico as proximal, as never “that far” because in the mind’s eye residence “here” and residence “there” are fluid lines, lines of a bidirectional flow of nourishing lifeblood. Hence, any permanent departure from the Island somehow represents an affective severance with him personally. This dissertation is submitted as an Eben-ezer to the presence of multiple homelands, to the inseverability of diasporic ties, and to the ever-present and resplendent imaginaries we all hold in our hearts.
Aperture of Phonicity I: Reimagining an Island

Colonial Hauntings and the Eschewal of Abundance

“Chaco” Vargas Vidot
Community Activist

Melquisedec
Trafficker

Misí Magda
Elementary Teacher

I’m telling you, there are things that work well in other countries but that don’t work at all here in this country. [Here] we are very accustomed to abundance, to be able to have.

Here the poor in Puerto Rico have air conditioning, they watch Cable, they watch Jay Leno, ESPN. It’s not the same poor person who’s in Santo Domingo. Or the poor person in Costa Rica, Bolivia, Perú. Here you don’t see barefoot children like in Bolivia… That’s why it’s difficult to change the mentality of a people who have had everything, you understand? It’s difficult.

When one has spent an entire lifetime like that it is difficult to change the mindset of the people… I’m not saying that it’s bad due to the United States, no, On the contrary, [in that regard] it has gone well. But how can you say to a child that he can no longer suck on that popsicle when his whole life he has had those sweets in the freezer, and packs of them?

We as Puerto Ricans have lost the notion of pain. Why is it that we lose the Caribbean Baseball series? Not because of the pitcher, the catcher, the shortstop—none of that. We lose because those who win win because they are hungry. Because a young man who plays baseball in the Dominican Republic is playing for his life, the player from Perú is playing for his life, from his heart. We come to play; they come to work. There’s no heart in that.

From 1940-1952 we had a ton of baseball players who went to the major league because they were looking to eat.
We don’t know what hunger is anymore, we have lost the connection; abundance has overtaken us. This situation is the predecessor of a revolution.

It’s tough. The abundance that we have had, the abundance of federally issued checks and all those things—although it is meant to help, I know, I know—but I don’t see it, I don’t see how that has helped us. Yes, it helps us in economic terms, but as a result, many people just go sit back, and relax.

Our Puerto Rican culture has a much longer history of hardworking, industrious people than the years that we have been on assistance. All of the assistance began in 1968—a very brief amount of time compared to the years that the Puerto Ricans always, always distinguished themselves as a multi-faceted, intrepid people working from sunrise to sunset. Practically all of our folk songs are based on sweat and laboring in the countryside.

There are Latin American countries that don’t have this government “assistance”—in the long term I question whether it is assistance because for me what it does is destroy a people morally, robbing them of dignity. And over time they become more and more uneducated. The objective appears to be that they can do with them what they want—that is to say every four years more votes for their political party. They can be manipulated and treated any which way

Something that would be better would be You want to receive a benefit? You want to receive food stamps? Well, then you have to work and we will help you. But if you don’t work, then we won’t give you food stamps, we won’t give you health coverage. I think in Canada in order to receive benefits like that you have to work. Here none of this matters to anyone, here they are ungrateful—it’s because
we are accustomed to seeing everything, to having everything…

We are a people who have been systematically influenced. The work that the Spanish did, the US, even the French who were here for three months. All of them were in charge of producing a mindset submerged, engulfed in uncertainty.

There has been a systematic shutting down of the consciences of the people…but the virtue of this moment in history is that it is going to force us to see ourselves for who we are and finally decide from a naked perspective—bitterly naked, painfully naked—who we are.

The problem of the Puerto Rican is that they have been educated to think that quality of life consists of having a new car every three years, a 32 inch television in the living room except no money for food. The people here confuse quality of life with the ability to buy and buy and buy and buy—until they are in debt up to their forehead, until they are completely entangled. How can you value something for which you have not had to work? To me, our people have been annihilated, they have been killed, they do not know where they are going nor where they have been. We have a serious identity problem. Very serious.

To address the poverty in Puerto Rico one has to work on it fundamentally from a mental and emotional framework. One needs to be concerned not only with the source of income, but also with the mentality people have.

They don’t have to work, they don’t have to study, they don’t have to do anything. Nothing more than receive money. So [when] this class begins to feel that they
no longer have assistance,
they may join in the emerging underground
market, resulting in an increase in crime—not
because they are criminals, but rather
because they have to survive.
They have never, ever needed skills
because the politicians taught them
their only skill was to vote

Working and earning money gives you
dignity. When they maintain you, when you don’t know
who you are or why you are alive or for what [reason] you are living
you lack motivation. What incentive can you have
living life like that? What desire
to do things? It is as if the United States robbed
your spirit. As if the United States has sucked out
your soul. Just like when Hitler shaved the heads
of all the prisoners and clothed them
all the same. He began by robbing their identities
because in this way it is much easier
to make that person do what you want them
to do. It is what the men do
who end up killing their women: they begin
alienating them from their own emotions and telling them
they are no good and not worth
anything, robbing them of any self-worth. Little by little
they do away with the women, with their identity
and who they are, so that they then can
attack, monopolize and possess them, becoming
their owner. And if at some point she tries
to leave, well, then: they kill her.

The level of resignation
that the governments have been able to sow
in the hearts of the people—a moment will come
and no one knows when, that people
will no longer be able to stay resigned

The youth we have now are already
damaged. We have to change
the mentality of the ones who are being born
now so that from that era onward
the [coming] generations will be different
because with regard to those that are here now, it’s difficult
very difficult. I’m not going to say impossible—but it’s
difficult
Puerto Rico favors a lot of liberty. They have had a lot of liberty—too much.

I believe that [the United States] has done the same thing to the Puerto Rican people—making us think that we have no worth in and of ourselves, that we need to depend upon another nation. No, it is not a healthy interchange. It is absolute and complete dependency. The United States has annihilated us as a people, they have finished us off. They have been robbing our will. Truthfully, those who decide our destiny here are the North Americans. That is [our] reality.

If we keep pressuring the citizenry, eliminating the middle class, fomenting a poverty that will eventually explode because they have been assisted and then later they will not be….? These are times when we need revolutionary outbreaks; how creative can we be so that such outbreaks are not armed? I don’t know.
CHAPTER 1 Introduction: Swallowing the Stories

Silencio, que están durmiendo/
Los nardos y los azucenas/
No quiero que sepan mis penas/
Porque si me ven llorando morirán
—Silencio, a bolero by Rafael Hernández

For the most part, teachers do not enter the urban government housing community abutting their public elementary school. The principal, the social worker—on occasion. But teachers’ presence in the community is exceptional. The sudden death of one student’s mother in November 2013, however, precipitated an organized procession of all school staff to pay their respects; her casket, as is tradition, was displayed in the family’s living room. It was en route back to the school property that morning, then, when Misi Aurora saw him: Nael. A former student who had stopped attending a few years earlier, who had never completed sixth grade. Her countenance clouds as she recounts:

He was sitting on a bench and when he saw me he ran over to where I was and gave me a hug, a gigantic hug. I mean he wouldn’t let me go. But he remained mute. He couldn’t talk, he didn’t talk at all. He was... I don’t know... I feel that due to his desire to be respectful—because he knows that things have happened and therefore feels ashamed in front of me— he didn’t speak a word. Mute, mute, mute. I think that he doesn’t want to say something to me that is not true. And so he prefers to be silent. No words fell from his lips. [Instead], he lowered his head, hid his face. I think it is really tough to live in two worlds.

Nael, not unlike many of his peers, finesses this breach through a very present corporeality and an accompanying silence. The tensions evident in his straddling reflect a desire to insulate one world from the other. The child, in all of his magnanimous

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1 Keep quiet, the lilies and nardin are sleeping
I don’t want them to know my troubles
They would die, were they to see me crying.
2 Interview, 11.2014.
splendor, seeks to protect the genteel adult from the atrocities of his everyday. Love, after all, never wants to disappoint.

Narcotics, violence, and children constitute a nefarious cocktail. And as *el bajomundo* has never looked kindly upon verbosity, *callarse*\(^3\) swiftly becomes a cardinal virtue. Given that significant swaths of Puerto Rico’s public school system are in the midst of a dizzying drug and arms induced maelstrom, children learn not only to esteem silence, but to wield it as a tripartite shield: as succor, as strength, as salvation.

Particularly if a family’s primary sustenance is sought through illicit trafficking, such household’s children are catechized in reticence. As pressure mounts, children’s self-expression often becomes increasingly nonverbal and more highly nuanced. In turn, children in heavily dominated narcotics contexts utilize the absence of speech to their advantage; even words themselves become instruments of clever equivocation, of semantic “bobbing and weaving.”

Accordingly, the phenomenon of youth narco-soldiers is sharpened, clarified when apprehended through an epistemological framework of silence and unspectacularity. We can begin to recognize their silences no longer as vacuous—as a lack of sound—but as substantive, as constitutive in and of themselves of cultural practice and process. While not failing to address violence in its manifold instantiations, this project will privilege the routinely silenced, disregarded, and deceptively “less egregious” violences, those violences which are not immediately perceived as a danger to the State (Rich 2009).

\(^3\) Remaining quiet. See poem “*Callar es...*,” in Appendix A which hangs framed on some residents’ walls.
This dissertation considers the constellations of social and institutional networks which permit the scholastic trajectories of the Island’s most vulnerable youth to be so abbreviated. Children with the least support eschew their studies for labor in the streets prior or soon after sixth grade. Further, this project examines these transitions through the lenses of the children, their parents, community elders, teachers and administrators, local micro-traffickers and retired transnational traffickers, social workers, and government officials in order to isolate critical moments wherein they pursue youth soldiering, exchanging their silenced voices for the raucous detonations of gunfire. And given that insecurity plays such a large role in everyday transactions, this project excavates the multi-layered dynamics of security within the academic and community setting and its subsequent impact on these youth.

In the public eye the global phenomenon of youth narco-soldiering and its accompanying human rights violations are generally associated with civil wars and unrest in the southern hemisphere (predominantly Africa and South and Central America; see Springer 2004, Vigh 2006, Ben-Ari 2009). Yet there are ways in which the illicit narcotics industry also trains and exploits its own youth in a parallel manner. Historically there has been scant discussion of the youth soldiers currently laboring within the geographical borders of the United States. Why does the youth soldiering that occurs “north of the border” remain a silenced phenomenon? Or, from another perspective, what stands to be lost regarding our perception of ourselves, were such a concession to be made? Although Mexican cartels increasingly are hiring children just above the border to commit their most ghastly grunt work, to date child soldiering is still most often conceived of as a “foreign ill.” My project will provide a much needed corrective to this
misperception from the angle of the United States’ “other southern border” (Sierra-Zorita 2011), Puerto Rico, by providing a grassroots, ground-level explication of how the failures of the State and the unraveling of the community fabric may contribute to the individual nodes on the chain of a child’s transition into the unremitting violence of el bajomundo (the open air “underground” economy).

Within the Island’s public discourse and in online media it is clear that neither the age nor the circumstances of these children disqualify them from vilification. On the contrary, most often they are stripped of any semblance of humanity through venomous aspersions, recalling the mid 90’s references to “superpredators” (DiIulio 1995). Yet these youth seek work as adultified mercenaries for some of the same reasons as those in other countries, most notably hunger and interpersonal intimacy. Further, this work will illuminate the faces and spirits of those who have borne the brunt of the current recession, those surviving in economies where, increasingly, violence as labor (Kovats-Bernat 2006:106, Hoffman 2011:xvi) is understood to be the most viable option (Bourgois 2002). This reality is reflected in the Island’s juvenile homicide rate which is ten times higher than for minors stateside (Allison & MacEwan 2004).

Context & Background

Armored Cars: Protecting Lives
Hato Rey
“¡Sal blinda’o!” (Hit the town bulletproofed!) challenges the metro area billboard provocatively… as if the status of “bulletproof” were the latest, most fashionable accoutrement one could don. Then it probes further: What level of bulletproofness best suits you? For residents of Puerto Rico, this is a fairly new question. Yet gunfire has become almost as ubiquitous as the steel bars that encase every backyard, balcony, and window. From a 73 billion dollar deficit to a lengthy recession and an unemployment rate hovering around 15%; from Street & Poor’s demotion of our bonds to junk status this past February to a labor participation rate around 40%; from a homicide rate that placed us seventh globally in 2011 to a compliance with 13 of the 15 United Nations criteria for becoming a narco-state, some have begun referring to this as Puerto Rico’s “lost decade” (Vélez-Hagan 2014).

FIGHT The People [Come] Before the Debt
Miramar

Of course! The people always come first when it’s time to apply more taxes, cut off services, not pay tax refunds, eliminate the deductibles of income taxes, raise the costs of services, etc., etc…in that the people always come first!

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4 “¿Qué nivel de blindado te conviene?”
Before I forget, to all the damn political pigs:

I wish for you the best of the bankruptcies to all the damn political pigs who have brought us to the debacle in which we find ourselves. The majority are a mafia who have neither sense of decency nor shame at the hour of robbing money from us, [those contributing to] the tax base.

I wish for you that you lose your savings, your houses, your cars, so that you discover what the people suffer [as a result of] your making yourselves rich along with your bosom buddies, at the cost of the rest [of us].

I wish for you that you would end up in the street and will have to go out looking for work just like any other neighbor’s kid has to, and suffer in your own skin that which those of us below have to suffer.

I wish for you that the only employment that you will obtain is at Burger King during the night shift so that you find out what it costs to work for minimum wage.

I wish for you that you would not have anything with which to plan for health insurance, so that you would have to depend on the CDT clinics and state sponsored medical coverage and wait months for a medical appointment.

I wish for you that you would not have [enough] money to pay for private schooling and that you would have to take your children to public schools, to the deficient physical plants which have no books or equipment so that you would see with your own eyes what has been created by misspending the funds of the Department of Education.

I wish for you that you would have so little money that you have to choose the cheapest meat in the grocery store, that you would have to choose between buying rice or buying ham and cheese because there is not enough money for both. That you would have to wait for the specials in order to purchase certain items because at their regular price you cannot afford them. So that they suffer it in their own skin what they have caused by imposing taxes without any rhyme or reason or order and without having a whore of an idea with regard to the repercussions.

I wish for you that if you find work, that it would be far from your home and that you would have to use the toll highway so that you would have to pay the fee EVERY day in both directions, or use the streets full of potholes so that you would find out the repercussions of giving carte blanche to Metropistas in order to raise the tolls whatever way they like or have to suffer the damage to your tires, struts and shocks for having misspent the Department of Highways’ budget for years and now there is no money to fix them.

I wish for them a medical emergency, and that there would be neither helicopters nor ambulances to pick [you] up, and that you would have to wait upon a family member to take you to a CDT where a lone doctor is waiting upon like 50 patients in line ahead of you. So that you find out about the escape of hundreds and thousands of doctors [from Puerto Rico], thanks to you.

I do not wish them any evil—I only wish upon them that which they have caused to happen to the rest of us—while they suffer not at all. On the contrary, they fVck everyone else over in order to ensure their bosom buddies and
themselves another dollar. I could just wish them death, but that would be a very easy way out.

—Online comment posted by “Chencho Matapuerco” (Cruz 2016)

At times, narcotics gangs wield more power than police and—at least within many public housing communities and some barriadas—often are perceived as offering protection to citizens in the face of the state’s failure (Goldstein 2003; Penglase 2009; Leeds 1996; Bourgois 2009). Yet as Penglase (2009:47) observes, “in exchange for providing local security and enforcing social norms, traffickers have demanded the complicity and silence of… residents.” Further, the enactment of martial law and routine deployment of the National Guard has occurred on the Island since the 1950s: originally to quell the nationalist movement, more recently to address narcotics and arms trafficking. As the narco war intensifies, emigration to the mainland has been accelerating rapidly since 2000 and statistically resembles the emigration of the 1950s and 1960s. The 2010 Census indicates that 50,000 people leave the Island annually (López Alicea 2012), but in the first half of 2014 alone 72,000 residents relocated to the continental US (Notiuno 2015).

Traffic lights (not flashing, but disabled) are replaced by a stop sign in this newly sleepy intersection in Juncos.
My research takes place in the *caserio* (government housing project) Alelí\(^5\) in a metropolitan area of Puerto Rico, which consists of apartments in four story walkups under the jurisdiction of HUD (Housing and Urban Development) in the United States. Today Alelí, among others, is notorious for being one of the Caribbean’s hubs for the transnational narcotics (of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana from Colombia and Venezuela) and arms trade (from the U.S. and Canada).

\(^5\) All names and places are referred to with pseudonyms. All details have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of research subjects.
Theoretical Considerations & Guiding Theories

*Imputing problems to those who suffer the most is neither realistic nor new.*
—Fassin & Fassin (2010)

How do we account for both the violences of the historical context and the institutional and societal oppressions endemic to any given locale? As Daniel (1996) asserts, “Violence is not peculiar to a given people or culture; violence is far more ubiquitous and universally human, a dark wellspring of signs with which…we must communicate and also as a force we must hold at bay” (9). As Thomas (2011) concurs, “violence generally is not a cultural phenomenon but an effect of class formation, a process that is immanently racialized and gendered” (4). Further, an action that may seem peculiar from one person’s ethnocentric point of view, may simply possess a rationale not immediately apparent to her or him. Hoffman (2004) reminds us that “[a]nthropology’s mandate… [is] in part to refute [simplistic] interpretations by explicating the emic logic in… seemingly inexplicable acts” (327). Das (2007) corroborates this view, asserting that “[a]cts that might appear as fruits of absolute contingency can be shown to bear the tracks of histories, of institutional failures, and of routine violence of everyday life…the everyday grows the event; violence, even if it appears shocking, shares in the heterogeneity of everyday life” (emphasis added) (136). Violence, as it were then, incubates on a slow simmer long before it is birthed.

In Puerto Rico as in Brazil, “What is occurring… is a local manifestation of a larger global context of insecurity where economic flows are connecting with forms of violence. This process highlights concerns about the state’s monopoly over legitimate forms of violence…” (Penglase 2011:434). As such, particularly in the past decade, the
transnational narcotics war has had a tremendous impact on the ways in which violence is distributed and executed across the Antilles.

**The Journey into Aphonicity: Coalescence and Alignment**

I, too, as Eli Cane (2017) acknowledges, “…am alive today because of medical technology.” And when, over a decade ago I moved to Puerto Rico, the days seemed short as I mostly just slept—the hours smearing one into the other like streaks of a child’s too-wet watercolor, pooling and puddling and obliterating any linearities. My daily routine held little variation: from bed to hammock and then hammock to bed. It took more strength than I had to remain vertical. Even for something as simple as chopping vegetables, I had to be sitting down. Mostly, though, I just skipped the vegetables. Invalid, regardless of which syllable you accent. Otherly-capacitated.

It was also from that balcony hammock in San Juan that I bore witness to evening symphonies composed of the *coquis*[^1] song interspersed with an insistently staccato peppering of automatic gunfire. Unlike some other newly arrived Continentals in 2007, I did not mistake the detonations for fireworks. Thanks to extended family, I grew up with some familiarity with regard to automatic and semi-automatic firearms; one cousin boasts a more than foot long tattoo of a “chopper” (AK-47) on his inside forearm.

“They see some of us as problems. We see them as relatives,” one of Ralph’s research subjects, Tamara explains (2014:48). For good or ill, I intentionally approached the traffickers from my fieldwork as if I were interacting with my own kin. Perhaps, in part, this is because by the time I began my fieldwork, I was already deeply embedded in the community networks by way of volunteering through the Rotary Club.

[^1]: Tiny tree frogs native to the Island.
(2013) beautifully lays out all of the doublebinds inherent when fieldwork hits close to home—the ways in which an author’s spirit is irremediably intertwined with her or his research subjects. The ways in which you continually feel that you are letting everybody down on a personal level. Like Contreras, I was intimately familiar with and tied in to my research community through longstanding and cathected familial bonds.

Unlike Contreras, however, I grew up not immersed in one world, but straddling two: that of the white middle class and that of the streets of lower North Philadelphia— I am white with some extended family of Puerto Rican heritage. Kindergarten was the year the Island appeared on my horizon, its diaspora becoming family. Only a fleeting ten years later, my father gave his own cemetery plot with his parents, so that his nephew-in-law catañense would have a final resting place.

Without stumbling into what Wacquant (2002:1527) disquietingly terms “the soft sand of sentimentalism,” I scour the few remaining photographs of him in my family’s possession—grossly over-pixilated and composed of more shadows than light—for undercurrents of his departure, for incidental indications that might have warned us that the days were constricting, that the last breaths asphyxiating. Listening backwards, somehow I still want to hear “the way a door closes” (Smith 2003). Or maybe to see his departure foreshadowed in the flowing undercurrent of trauma’s stream: his transcendent, intergenerational transmission of tenacity. For tenacity is never borne of leisure. How, then, is memory rightfully stewarded? Despite the ravages of this narcoinsanity, it cannot be all tears. It cannot wrest away everything. In the end laughter may prove a greater investment than tears (Jackson 2010). This project is offered in that spirit.

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7 This is the North Philadelphia of Steve Lopez’s 3rd & Indiana fame, where Spanish is the dominant language and open-air narcotics sales are bested only by those in nearby Kensington.
So as Deb Thomas points out, I entered this ethnography backwards. For who could think of a more tiresomely archaic trope than that of a “white, foreign, card-carrying-citizen-of-the-Colonizer” studying a segregated, marginalized “brown” population? But whether it matters or not, the origins of this project were actually inadvertent. The origins were simply a rather plain indignance at the Island’s homicide rate coupled with strident familial resonances.

When we lost my cousins’ father in the late 80s his demise was shrouded in a panoply of competing storylines. One version, then another. Each muscling the previous narrative out of the limelight. We were always led to believe his death was a homicide. That loss impacted the course of many lives, as well as my entire career trajectory towards homicide prevention and homicide intervention. As one of his sons expresses, “No matter how he died, he’s gone. He’s dead. How he died? It’s not important.” Those words frame the impetus behind this ethnography. What matters is that his father is no longer with us. What matters is that because of the nature of the War on Drugs, the demographics of entire communities are being irrevocably altered and permanently eviscerated by the loss of their fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, nephews. What follows is mi granito de arena, offered in the hope that, at a minimum, we can continue to change the conversation toward tropes of rehumanization and liberation.

Population, Methodology, & Data Analysis

On those latent evenings in the hammock, I began wondering how a person might best “love one’s neighbor” in this context. A former urban elementary school teacher, I

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8 Observation offered 11.2016.
9 Would an ethnography of Islanders participating in the global plutocracy have been a more fruitful endeavor? Perhaps. But counterfactuals are just that.
offered my skills as a behavior specialist consultant, volunteering at a local public elementary school that serves children of the community of Alelí. Engaging the wider community, not ethnography, was my goal. Thoughts of graduate school came much later. Principally, I sought to engage the primary and intermediate school deserters (and their families)—those still officially matriculated who had become elective non-attenders for various often indeterminate sieges. During the three years I dedicated to doctoral studies stateside, I was intentional to maintain contact with parents, children and staff through frequent extended visits, phone calls, texts, Skype, Facebook and social media.

My dissertation research was being conducted through extended qualitative fieldwork within the schools and community of one of the more than 330 government housing projects on the Island, with an eye towards addressing the insecurity exacerbated by rampant school desertion. My formal research regimen included 42 months of fieldwork. One member of my committee requested permission from HUD for me to reside in the community, but it was denied.\textsuperscript{10} I have continued to be a participant observer in the community and local schools and have conducted 110 in-depth, iterative interviews with 58 research subjects (community members, school faculty and staff, students, former students, local and transnational arms and narcotics traffickers, former community residents who now live in the continental US, government officials, law enforcement agents, and Islanders who reside outside the community) on issues related to school desertion, the narcotics war, preventative intelligence, and “weaponization.” Additionally, I have recorded and transcribed (or took notes and later paraphrased the pertinent sections of) 126 informal conversations on these and ancillary concerns.

\textsuperscript{10} See Appendix B.
Infinitely more informal conversations that were not recorded informed my research over the years. Instead, I would write up the conversations afterwards upon my arrival home. The educational trajectories of students either at risk for desertion or in some cases already deserters also were monitored informally while in the community.

I began the study at one school, El Flamboyán, and then subsequently expanded the study to include other metro area schools as well. Although it was overly ambitious given the scope of my involvement directly in the community at Alelí, I wanted to include more breadth to my understanding of what was occurring at an institutional level. In the end, my interactions were quite limited at other institutions. At some of the other seven schools, I had contact only with administrators; at others I had the opportunity to talk with the faculty and staff as well. One school closed during the course of my project and at another I received no response.

I analyzed my data as it was collected, immediately transcribing critical components of recorded sessions and all interviews (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995). I coded both the transcriptions and fieldnotes implementing an inductive approach and use methodological triangulation to ensure that my conclusions are consistent across data sources (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). I also returned to my data sources iteratively and recursively to document and verify emergent themes.

**Mute, mute, mute: The overt ethics of purposeful aphonicity**

I can no longer eat spinach. Or, more specifically, I cannot chew it. Over the course of this ethnographic study, my molars have been ground into eight glossy mini ice rinks. The dentist tells me that I need my entire mouth reconstructed. That it will require jaw realignment. That the protracted procedure could take years. Then grabs her knees and admits she’s never done it before.
Like any other methodology, urban ethnography exacts some unseen tolls. As the ads for University of Pennsylvania’s Veteran’s Hospital reminds us, “Not all wounds are visible.” The thought that kept me awake at night, the scene that hijacked my slumber was this: If the safety of any of my research participants were ever to be compromised as a result of my project, how could I live with myself? The nightmares that came were in techni-color. In-vivo. Some weeks unrelenting. It is some small comfort that all of the gorgeous souls who grace these pages are, in turn, composites (of two to four people) or, conversely, “fractals” of selected people with whom I have had the privilege to share the past decade. Details have been altered in order both to safeguard and respect their honest contributions. The spirit of their contributions, however, I trust remains as true as possible to its original full resplendence.

I learned quickly that fieldwork can become self-destructive. Both from within and from without. For at turns, you can be anyone’s enemy and no one’s friend. But particularly when conducted in illicit sectors, fieldwork can prove a brittle, acerbic, and solitary space. There are pacts we make with ourselves, in conversations with other researchers, with family members that both flail and fail.11 Seasons come when it appears that continuing fieldwork defies wisdom, when refusing to desist in the face of threat feels abusive towards the very family members who sustain us. Over Skype one afternoon, a colleague gave me his word that, were it necessary, he would pull the final threads of this piece together.

At times one becomes electively mute. And then there are times when nothing is elective, but rather when one is forcibly mute. Throughout the narrative I will not flag the

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11 For some, “Survival Notes” may read as much a prayer as a poem. See Clare 2017:169.
distinctions between when such decisions are coerced and when they are elective, rather those distinctions will remain aphon. But aphonility, properly understood, is just part and parcel of the implicit contract as an ethnographer in Aleli. And although aphonility is not equivalent to opacity, there are striking and pervasive overlaps.

This project traverses everything from aphon municities to aphon public school teachers to an aphon State. Unsurprisingly, after a decade in Aleli, aphonility often becomes my affective default mode as well. My propensity towards being allusive or elusive within the text that follows may derive from these honed skillsets of learned equivocation. On occasions that I am confronted with circumstances wherein the security of individuals from the Aleli community, members of the police force, or myself and my own family could be jeopardized, I elect authorial aphonility. Such aphonilities may be flagged by the deployment of any number of the variegated silences: I slalom; I eschew elaboration; I deploy pre-climactic elisions.12

Alternately, I operationalize Misi Aurora’s precise words to describe Nael, her former student turned youth narco-soldier, when he visited her after having transitioned into a gatillero: “Mute, mute, mute.” In deploying this phrase, my intention is twofold. First, I utilize it as a literary device to flag an event which requires intentional self-censoring—for any myriad of reasons, but primarily pertaining to issues of security. Second, I want these words to serve as a mnemonic device, a directive—maybe even at times coercive—circling back of the reader to the exigency of aphonility in contexts such as Aleli and to the grim fate Nael endured. I want the reader to be reminded of the costs, both seen and unseen, that aphonility exacts.

12 See Chapter 7 for a description of these variegated silences.
Mute, mute, mute. For me 2007-2017 was a decade subsumed by the everyday—and at times disorienting—mechanics of sub-sonicity. Amidst the layers of what some have found to be a maddening aphonicity, readers will note an abundance of seemingly melodramatic wrist-grabbing, of painstakingly-detailed recounts of haptics, of scripts that would play better as video footage. All true. But this is a project which, as a whole, intentionally focuses on the b-roll. Indeed, it largely is narrative b-roll: showing, but not necessarily telling. Or, as Moonlight’s Barry Jenkins describes it: inverting the iceberg, focusing on “that ninety percent that is underneath” and hidden from the public sphere (Brown 2016). There are multitudinous ways in which, as an author, I have had to be necessarily, unapologetically, and avowedly silent.

This text is simply an invitation into the same margins into which I myself have been alternately both welcomed and expelled, embraced and scorned, received and ignored. Above all, however, I borrow from Klima (2002:xi) in foregrounding that my construction of this ethnography is “not an attempt to share an actual ‘[Aleliano] worldview’ or least of all, to tell [Alelianos] what they think.” On the contrary, my intent is that as the voices of the Alelianos themselves tell their own stories, they also serve to uproot any stale, one-dimensional images of public housing residents that currently dominate the public imaginary.

**Children in the Context of Violence and Trauma**

*Perhaps the hardest thing in life to see is a suffering child.*

—Browning, 2011:160

Beyond contributing to the interdisciplinary literature on silence, this project also contributes to the processes of knowledge production vis-à-vis precarious life trajectories and the transitions which catalyze their progression. My work elucidates further current
social science understandings of how and why the cycle of premature demise is kept in motion and the machinations by which it might best be interrupted. This research provides insight into the eye-level street reality of what historically have been emically and etically deigned as “inevitable” transitions and serves directly to inform policy reformation and intervention initiatives aimed at forestalling the present slaughter which is occurring along rigidly class-demarcated lines. This work has immediate relevance for the government housing communities on the Island wherein funerals for young men are now commonplace, as well as for communities globally who are plagued by similar collisions of youth laboring as narcotics soldiers in various yet parallel manifestations of war. The preliminary research has already yielded on-site benefits, most notably through street involved youth becoming reconnected in meaningful ways with both their families and with select educational institutions, thereby interrupting their heretofore default or even expected trajectory.

Within the anthropology of childhood, scholars have studied a broad range of topics, everything from children as labor potential (Nieuwenhuys 1996) to children as beings to be “purged” (Scheper-Hughes & Stein 1987). As often the greatest violences are committed against our most structurally excluded populations, I intend to illuminate more pointedly those children who occupy the margins, the periphery of society, as the outcasts, the “misfits.” As those at once labeled and ignored. As those both sensationalized and forgotten. As those who are overpowered and as those who wrest power for themselves. As those hypervisible and those beyond ocular apprehension.

I will begin by focusing on the Westernized construction of childhood and elucidate throughout the ways in which delineations are made between childhood and
adulthood. I also explore the marginalization or pathologizing of children through misunderstandings of maltreatment (i.e., neglect and abuse) and trauma and the event of their role conscription (or election) as street children, gang members, or child soldiers. I will also consider how the psychological conceptualization of attachment theory might serve to interanimate the anthropological discussion of mother-child dyads and conclude by considering a recent debate with regard to the diagnosis and treatment of children who have endured trauma, thereby entering into the complementary realms of psychiatry and psychology.

The literature shows that when addressing violence in relation to children, it is critical that it be from a perspective which takes into consideration not only developmental and ecological aspects, but also that interventions privilege resiliency, safety and relationally oriented actions which ultimately can serve to be policy transforming in nature as well (Silverman & Feerick, 2006). Further, issues of trauma must be addressed in a nuanced manner as exposure to violence is not always necessarily causally determinative of children actually experiencing trauma (Glaser, 2000). Given these two presuppositions, I would like to begin with a recognition that there is a tug-of-war between disciplines as regards rights of the child. On the one hand, anthropology tends to assert that, by and large, Western conceptions of parenting continue exerting an imperialistic force over what are misrecognized cultural distinctives and that (in the case of conjectured maltreatment) for example, whenever possible children should be maintained in their home of origin (Pupavac 2001). On the other hand, psychology presents itself as elevating the child’s rights over that of the parents or the goal of maintaining family integrity (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz 1988). Regardless of the
discipline to which one prescribes however, when addressing violence in the lives of children, Hart (2006) cautions against a single issue approach, arguing persuasively that to isolate and address one area (e.g., sex trafficking, child soldiering, etc.) within a constellation of violences which constitute their social world could readily backfire, further jeopardizing their already precarious position in new unforeseen ways. Failing to bear this in mind, activists on either side have caused much “well-intentioned” damage.

The Construction of Childhood

Philippe Aries (1962), the well-known French historian who first tackled the construction of childhood in the Western hemisphere, posits that in Medieval times a social distinction was not made between children and adults, that this conceptual cleavage only emerged later in the seventeenth century. Though his contemporary critics were many—most notably Stone—ironically most have now become subsumed under the same theoretical heading with Aries due to their shared belief of “the emergence of the affectionate with a developmental conception of the life process” (102).

Hutton (2004) clarifies that it was Ozment, a German historian on the Reformation, who took particular issue with Aries’ assertion of defined, abrupt change, arguing forcibly for continuity. In one sense, however, Ozment’s understanding of parenting in Germany, a coalescence arising from the analysis of many families’ personal documents, in some ways offers “a Protestant reply to a Catholic analysis” of this shift within the domestic sphere (Hutton, 100). Yet, regardless, it proves a challenge to isolate the specific moment when this transition from “old indifference to new affection” occurred (101). Further, it is Orme who argues that the paucity of evidence (as very little written data from families is available; Aries largely based his conjectures on portraits
(104)) and not affection is what is at issue (emphasis added) (Hutton, 101). Much later, Stone (1990) also privileges written over iconographic data as being less subjective. Further, he criticizes Aries’ disregard for distinctions between classes and counters that the introduction of formalized schooling represented not a concerted elevation of and investment in the child but a cold relegation to institutionalized care (versus the assumed intimacy of the domicile). Wilson (1980), on the other hand, simply dismissed Aries’ work as superficial and amateurish. Pollock (1983), who criticized both Aries and Stone, asserted that parents always have been cognizant of their children’s developmental differences and that affection, as demonstrated specifically towards children, was not a new concept. In addition to familial archives, Pollock surveyed legal records and newspaper articles to conclude that childhood was more positive than Aries claimed; further, she alleged that Aries did not sufficiently substantiate his claims.

Cunningham (1991) examines how conceptions of childhood were transformed within England from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, specifically focusing on how child labor was an expected aspect of children of the poor. He argues that it was not until the horrid working conditions of the Industrial Revolution that others began to think about the rights and entitlements of children—all children. Cunningham pinpoints the late Victorian era, then, as the window during which even the state began to involve itself in the welfare of its smallest members. The well-known works of Engels (2009) and Mayhew (1985) serve to capture the graphic and grueling nature of an unprotected childhood and, in the case of the former, positively correlate the dramatic rise in children’s deaths to phenomena such as the opening of the mills.
Despite the passage of time, Aries’ seminal work still serves as a polemic against the modern western assumption that all childhood, intrinsically, unilaterally and universally, is to be equated with Western notions of tranquility, protection and idyllic social landscapes, as it were. Yet who, in the end, gets to define what childhood is—or “should” be? Das and Reynolds (2003) caution that 

There is a fine line between suggesting that Western models of childhood are not applicable cross-culturally and the careless assumption that somehow people in other cultures are immune to the sorrows and travails of losing children in warfare or seeing their children become fearful embodiments of violent rage. (9) Since the mid-1920s there have been two major strands or schools of thought when it comes to children at a global level: either they are to be studied (see Mead, 1928) or they are to be saved (see Jebb 1924). Arguably, those Mead was studying at the time in Samoa were in the midst of neither violence nor trauma, but anthropology as a discipline—even more broadly speaking—has been criticized for its rather awkwardly delayed confrontations with violence (e.g., some have accused of Geertz of having been oblivious to the Indonesian army’s anti-communist purge—during which about a half of a million people were killed—which occurred co-terminously with his fieldwork there in the mid-1960s). Whether inadvertent or not, “anthropologists interested in [the study of children] have tended to focus on situations of relative stability” (Hart 2006:5). The following exploration, then, is decidedly oriented toward how the various literatures have conceived of the unstable and precarious contexts in which children are forced to act and react in relation to a vast array of violences.
Gangs: A Perceived Refuge from Other Embattled Frontiers¹³

[A] street gang [is] a whole troop of suicidal persons who play a type of street Russian roulette.

—Vigil (2003:237)

The literature on gangs in the United States initially explicated White ethnicities on the eastern seaboard, only shifting from the 1980’s onward to focus on minorities (Vigil 2003). This reorientation also encompassed a change in weaponry from less to more sophisticated technology. In Canada’s (1995) classic Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun, he distinguishes the aforementioned shift by demarcating the former as “industrial” and the latter as “postindustrial” periods (see also Hagedorn 1998). Thrasher (1927) is recognized as the first to research the phenomenon of gangs.

Frameworks for this literature have varied wildly, beginning with Merton’s strain theory, an economic theory which highlights the inherent disparity created when the material expectations set by society are unobtainable by the poor and so they seek recourse through illicit means—with often violent consequences (Merton 1949, Cloward & Ohlin 1960, Kornhauser 1978). Later the theory of a “subculture of violence” (Wolfgang & Ferracuti 1967) was proposed, which posits that within some groups of society there are norms which accept and actually promote violence. Within this tradition of thinking were spawned a variety of related perspectives on aggression, honor, and bravado (e.g., Horowitz, 1983; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989). Critiques of this framework demonstrate that it presumes an organizational dynamic that is by and large functionally nonexistent in many gangs, as per studies conducted by Klein & Crawford 1967, Suttles 1968, and Vigil 2002 among others.

¹³ This section owes a tremendous debt to J. D. Vigil’s annual review article, Urban Violence and Street Gangs (2003).
In contrast to the “subculture of violence,” however, the framework of “routine activities” (Felson 1987) was aimed more towards viewing crime and gangs as percolating in relation to patterns of opportunity presented by given locales and temporalities. Those who developed these ideas further include Kennedy & Baron (1993), who focused on factors contributing to potentiality and Sampson & Lauritzen (1990), who focused on how the configuration of social networks of influences the likelihood by which violence occurs. This framework is problematic as it conveys scant ethnographic detail, instead rooting itself firmly in quantitative sources (Vigil 2003). Yet one factor which is irrefutably helpful in this approach is its consideration of locale; Covey et al (1992) Block & Block (1995) and Venkatesh (1996) also link the occurrence of violence with aspects of specialization.

As the aforementioned frameworks proved insufficiently holistic, more aggregative frameworks were initiated. One was referred to as “multiple marginality” (i.e., the various demographic ways such as economic status, segregation level, etc. in which a population is deemed peripheral or oppressed vis-à-vis the rest of a given society) (Vigil & Yun 1998, 2002), and another known as “integrated systems” (Elliot 1994; Farrington 1996). Increasingly there has been more research, particularly within criminology, that analyzes the influence of ecological variables (see for example Cartwright & Howard 1966).

Mendoza-Denton’s (2008) Homegirls is one of the few recent pieces that has attracted attention to the growing issues associated with young women in gangs. While in prior decades women have remained largely peripheral to the discussion of gangs, the
body of literature with regard to their involvement is steadily increasing (see Moore 1991, Campbell 1991, Messerschmidt 1995, Miller 2001).

**Youth in the Context of War: Child Soldiers and Beyond**

*Military structures place seniority behind the front line and juvenility in the very centre of it.*

—Vigh, 2006:90

Children are impacted by structural violence, such as that which is embedded in the illicit trafficking within their communities (see Garbarino 1999, Bourgois 1995, 1998), but it can also be the children themselves wielding the weapons. A preponderance of literature regarding children caught in the contexts of war has focused on issues of the effects of *exposure* (Garabino & Kostelny, 1996; Povrzanovic 1997; Rafman 2004; Wainryb & Pasupathi 2009) and yet until recently, decidedly less on the effects of active combat *participation* (Guyot 2005, Boothby et al 2006, Kohrt et al 2008a, Kohrt et al 2008b, Betancourt et al 2008, Betancourt & Ettien 2010, Betancourt et al 2010a, Betancourt et al 2010b, Betancourt et al 2010c, Betancourt et al 2011). Vigh (2006) asserts that in the context of war, youth are quickly assigned to the role of “potential victim” or “potential perpetrator” (92). Or, to put it another way, as themselves *embodying* the risk or as being “at risk” themselves (Bucholtz, 2002). Their position, then, could be likened to Bateson’s (2000) doublebind: an absence of good options.

Honwana (2005) writes that even the term “child soldier” is paradoxical since, “[t]he possession of guns and a license to kill places them outside of childhood. But… their age and physical immaturity” preclude their “full-scale incorporation into adulthood” (32) (in Hart, 2006, 8). Further, Read (2001) throws into question the “use of age as an arbitrary and universal index of agency or competence…counter[ing] prevalent
assumptions that the young can only be made to fight through coercion or delusion rather than their own political conviction, social frustration or economic need.”

The academy’s (and arguably also the media and public’s) captivation with child soldiers inadvertently has created a relative dearth with regard to the status of girls in the same war-torn regions, as more recent literature is finally highlighting (Nordstrom, 1999). Sexual and domestic slavery are the violences most often perpetrated against girls as part and parcel of their “conscription” in these armies, but some scholars also are recounting their role as soldiers in some instances (e.g., see Mazurana & Carlson, 2006; McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Endeavoring to conceptualize universalities with regard to youth is futile. While the West clings to and indeed pursues fantasies of eternal youth, for some West Africans youth is a category they are eager to surpass. In Richards’ perception of Sierra Leone (1996), youth is associated with scarcity and hunger, whereas elders retain a tight-fisted monopoly on power, wealth, and—due to gluttony—ill health. Vigh (2006) echoes these observations, lamenting that for the present generation the traditional transition into adulthood now eludes them—that is to say, there is no manner by which they can procure the capital necessary to become an adult (i.e., fiscally solvent, independent, and only thereby in a position to marry).

The resulting privation spawned by war also merits some attention as regards its impact on the family unit. As Quesada (2004) suggests, when remaining at home, older children often take the place of absent fathers, sacrificially eating less, are resourceful regarding house repairs, and essentially do all in their power to protect and cohere the
family unit. Alternately, youth fighting in wars also can help to obtain basic needs in that manner (see Peters & Richards 1998, Reynolds 1996).

The endless dilemma of agency and its moral implications as exercised by youth in this situation has long been an area of extensive scholarly debate (see Ben-Ari, Eyal 2009, Betancourt 2011, Wainryb 2011). Additionally, some researchers argue that categorizing the child soldiers strictly as victims restricts the debate to psychologically based trauma healing approaches instead of assessing macro issues at a structural level (Peters & Richards 1998). It would be oversimplifying the polemic to assert that it is a sparring between the fields of anthropology and psychology, however, as many psychologists prefer to de-emphasize the victimhood role as well. What has happened in the past few decades is that some well-intentioned NGO and humanitarian aid workers have failed to persuade youth soldiers that they are utterly devoid of culpability for their actions. This has spurred a debate wherein Wainryb (2011) argues forcefully that a degree of cognizance of moral agency must be maintained and that space for contrition and grief should be set apart for youth to process their past. For an autobiographical account of this resistance from a youth perspective see also Beah (2007).

Finally, whereas Singer (2005) locates the existence of child soldiers in the moral failings of a country’s people, Hart (2006) encourages those in the debate to consider the ways in which those in the global network have contributed to the destabilization of these sites where child soldiering is the only or most lucrative option, and not imagine that a given country’s “moral landscape extends only as far as the borders of the state” (6).
Society’s Unclaimed Children: Protection, Provision & Participation

...street urchins, guttersnipes, newsies, bootblacks, ragamuffins, street arabs, waifs, riffraff, offscourings, dock rats, street rats, lil’ imps of darkness...

Clearly, the act of naming carries with it a moral valence. Even as late as 1981, there were still scholarly articles referencing unhoused urban children as “street urchins” (Felsman). But relatively soon thereafter, a decided shift in appellation with regard to children who reside in the streets occurred. Whereas prior to the 21st Century, the standard nomenclature was “street children,” around the turn of the century scholars began to use terms like “urban children at risk” (Kapadia 1997), as it was becoming more clear that it was not just children who lived in the streets whose life trajectories were substantially impacted by poverty, violence, malnutrition and other social ills. Another main consideration was the reality that children’s residences were fluid, that they may spend a weekend at home and return to the streets (i.e., their status of residence in the streets was neither necessarily static nor permanent) (see Hecht 1998). Like “childhood,” of course, the concept of “street children” is socially constructed. Consequently,

Whereas Hecht’s (1998) understanding of street children divides them into those taking on the role of “nurturing” and those being “nurtured,” Veale et al (2000) conceptualize them as either “abandoned” or “abandoning.” What are the nuances of running away vis-à-vis getting kicked out? Do not both presume an ambiance of hostility in one form or another? More recently, Jonah Steinberg (2012) has referenced such children as “solo children,” preferring to highlight their status relative to other children

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who might have more oversight and/or resources from their family or community (personal conversation, 5.12.12).

One of the major shifts in the field has been from that of viewing the child as subjects requiring pity to viewing them as autonomous, agentive citizens (Ennew 1995, 2000; Myers 1988). And Dallape’s (1988) was the voice calling for the analysis of street children to be conducted through the lens of class, shifting the analysis from their families of origin onto the upper class of the greater society. In so doing, he was suggesting that the responsibility for such children should rightfully be shouldered by more than a nuclear or even kin network.

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, a preponderance of literature was published on street children in Africa (for a representative swath see Dodge and Raundalen 1987, Dallape 1988, Ojanuga 1989, Swart 1990, Skelton 1993, Laforte 1994, Ennew 1995) and Latin America (Myers 1988, Dimenstein, 1991, Connolly 1996, Rizzini 1996), but other geographical areas (with the exception of India) received less attention. It was closer to the turn of the century, for example, when more work on Nepali and Bangladeshi street children began to surface. Not surprisingly, both South and Central America surged into the spotlight when illicit yet ostensibly government-sanctioned death squads began “cleansing” their streets of undesired children through extrajudicial executions (Dimenstein 1991). In fact, to this day, it could be argued that the global public memory correlates Brazil with the murder of street children.

The Realities of Being Algarete (Adrift Without an Anchor): Emotional Tethering, Attachment Theory, & The Grey Zone of the Family

According to Nancy Schepfer-Hughes’ (2004) observation that “the family is one of the most violent of social institutions” (p. 3), it is critical to devote significant attention
to the emotional sphere of the home. Further, the dynamic she observes in *Death Without Weeping* of children’s responses to their mothers’ rejection—i.e., where they clamor even more desperately for her attention in the face of repeated, condemnatory dismissals—(1992:471) points toward the phenomenon which Hecht (1998), amidst his work with street children, cites as the primary cause of children “defecting” from traditional home and school life: felt “maternal rejection” (55). Hence, emotional tethering between the mother-child dyad (or lack thereof), appears to impact the trajectory of the child’s life trajectory in profound and at times seemingly inscrutable ways (Toth et al 2002).

Attachment theory is a critical lens for the examination of the dynamics in children’s psychological maturation, particularly in the event of later developmental psychopathology. Children who have not benefitted from having a “secure base” appear to be more vulnerable to the stresses encountered in life. Thus, when considering issues of maltreatment and children who spend more time on the streets than in homes, a brief examination of the mother-child dyad is requisite. John Bowlby (1944; 1951), the father of attachment theory, began his exploration of attachment through considering the origins of delinquency in youth. He locates dysfunction in the failure of a mother-infant or mother-child dyad to form secure attachments (1980; 1990). Highlighting the primacy of the maternal role, he asserts that, fundamentally, “[w]hat cannot be communicated to the mother cannot be communicated to the self” (61).

Scholars subsequently have addressed attachment by delineating specific types, as in “secure,” “anxious-resistant insecure,” and “anxious-avoidant insecure” (Ainsworth, et al, 1979) and later “disorganized, disoriented insecure” (Main & Solomon, 1986), a response in infants attributed to severe maternal depression. Among other things, the
theory has been used to inform both how to improve parental response and engagement with progeny and also how to determine the best options for children developmentally with regard to guardianship (i.e., residing with biological, foster, or adoptive parents) (see Goldsmith, et al, 2004 and Juffer, et al, 2008). McHale (2007) troubles some of the longstanding assumptions behind the dyadic nature of attachment theory by examining triadic and group systems in relation to secure bonding practices.

**Developmental Trauma Disorder: DTD Rejected as a Diagnostic Category**

*The most common problems for children in psychiatric care [are] trauma-related disorders.*

—Bessel van der Kolk, 2009:456

*The single largest public health problem in the United States is the consequences of adverse childhood experiences.*

—Fellitti et al, 1998

Just as John Bowlby in relation to infants and Tobias Hecht in his study on street children in Brazil determine that the single most vital factor in determining a child’s future is the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the child and her or his mother, so too Bessel van der Kolk places primacy on the interpersonal in early childhood. Van der Kolk (2009) links the possession of mental health to “secure attachment bonds…for optimal cognitive and interpersonal functioning” (457). Since 2005 a dozen of the nation’s most eminent psychiatrists have been meeting in order to craft a proposal for a new diagnostic category on the DSM-V\(^{16}\) (due to be released in 2013), namely developmental trauma disorder.

In February of 2009, after conducting well over one hundred field trials (e.g., van der Kolk, B. A., Roth, S., Pelcovitz, D., Sunday, S., & Spinazzola, J. 2005), a team of

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\(^{16}\)Diagnostic and Statistic Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association.
twelve leading researchers and practitioners in the field of psychiatry (including both MDs and PhDs) submitted a thirty-five page paper to the American Psychiatric Association explaining why the diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Complex (C-PTSD) is inadequate to diagnose children who have suffered chronic, complex early maltreatment (abuse or neglect) at the hands of a caregiver (see Sar 2011, van der Kolk 2005, van der Kolk et al 2005). Fundamentally, the argument is that interpersonal, chronic abuse has a markedly different impact on a child’s life than that of a single, acute, impersonal event (i.e., a natural disaster). The subsequent difference in etiology, van der Kolk and others argue, then directly shapes DTD’s later more severe sequelae as well. So instead of receiving a single diagnosis, maltreated children (who generally do not display what are recognized to be classic PTSD symptoms) are currently weighed down—and, not inconsequentially, pathologized—by a disparate smattering of diagnoses unrelated to the etiology of trauma—which, in and of itself, seems an additional perpetration of abusive violence. Further these misdiagnoses lead to mismatched or unnecessary pharmacological interventions (for empirical evidence see Nemeroff et al 2003; for ethical critiques see Wylie 2010, Singer 2008, Szasz 2003, 2010).

Eschewing approaches that are exclusively pharmacological, van der Kolk argues that where clinical practitioners need to focus their energy in helping those with DTD is primarily in relation to the addressing the anger, fear and shame associated with their childhood trauma through support in the regulation of affect, and in the enhancement of

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17Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD, Robert S. Pynoos, MD, Dante Cicchetti, PhD, Marylene Cloitre, PhD, Wendy D’Andrea, PhD, Julian D. Ford, PhD, Alicia F. Lieberman, PhD, Frank W. Putnam, MD, Glenn Saxe, MD, Joseph Spinazzola, PhD, Bradley C. Stolbach, PhD, Martin Teicher, MD, PhD.
attention (tendency to distractibility), consciousness (tendency to dissociate, i.e., engage in depersonalization, derealization, amnesia, or fugue states in order to mitigate severe psychological stress), and healthy interpersonal relations. Practitioner researchers such as Levin (2009) appear to have a particularly vested interest in the acceptance of DTD in the upcoming DSM-V (see his study for the impact of a non-psychopharmaceutical approach to address DTD in youth over a two year period at a residential placement home). 18

This debate over a new diagnostic category for children grew out of studies on what clinicians in the past two decades have begun to label as complex trauma or complex PTSD (Herman 1992, van der Kolk 1996, Courtois 2004, Cook et al 2005, Cloitre et al 2009, Dorahy et al 2009, Dyer et al 2009) and as a result, considerable attention has been devoted to disassociation as distinctly manifest in DTD (van der Hart et al 2005). Compared to more “lucrative” disorders, dissociation has received little attention over the past decades, but for those with DTD it is perhaps the most critical component that needs to be addressed. Connections with trauma and comorbidity of dissociative disorder in relation to borderline personality disorder, conversion disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, and suicide have also been made (Sar et al 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, Lochner et al 2004, Rufer et al 2006, Tamar-Gürol et al 2008, Ross & Keyes 2004). And more recently, even closer links between dissociation and

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18 Levin (2009) records that the number of children receiving medication, the amount and number of medications used, and the number of aggressive incident reports fell dramatically… Regarding mood and conduct disorders as manifestations of past trauma, rather than as manifestations of biochemical imbalances, is the dominant focus of an analytically-informed treatment of DTD. (emphasis added) (519). He argues, further, that we must begin to “[c]onceptualize irritable and moody youths as likely to be responding to early, chronic and severe traumas, that is, suffering from DTD… rather than from a neurochemical impairment” such as bipolar disorder (emphasis added) (520).

On January 29, 2011, a seven page response from Matthew Friedman, M.D. Ph.D., on behalf of the National Center for PTSD, was sent to the DTD proponents.^{20} Disregarding its condescending tone and an apparent misunderstanding as to who has the right to speak on behalf of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), the letter cites an abundance of obstacles to the serious consideration of DTD for the DSM-V. Primarily, they contend that DTD is not sufficiently different from PTSD to merit its own diagnostic category…and then to complicate matters, that all nine of the symptoms of borderline personality disorder are also identified as symptoms of DTD—which, it is leveled—would create not a diagnostic solution, but a diagnostic nightmare.

Fundamentally, the reviewers also contest that the interpersonal component so heavily emphasized by van der Kolk and his team is (to date) empirically irrelevant, conceding only that “additive” exposure has been proven to worsen symptoms. Further, they reject the idea that “developmental disruptions” result from early childhood adversity (i.e., that such causality cannot be proven). Citing that the both “range of symptoms and diagnostic criteria” were too broad, they also insist upon a DTD assessment tool with psychometric qualities. They assert that the proposal and field studies lean more on intuition than science, that the data lacks the requisite “latent structure and confirmatory factor analyses” to ascertain appropriate symptom clusters (i.e., that it was conducted deductively with the criteria formulated retrospectively to the

\footnote{For dissociation more broadly conceived, see Hornstein & Putnam 1992, Lewis 1996, Putnam 1996, Ogawa et al 1997; and specifically, as it relates to PTSD in van der Hart et al 2005 or with reference to later criminality in Lewis et al 1997.}

\footnote{The letter is entitled \textit{DTD Final Rejection by APA} \url{http://ebookbrowse.com/gdoc.php?id=57524219&url=d5222bee1c05ceb4d276b155e8f4ba09}}
data gathering). On the other hand, the consolation they offer is that there will likely be a subcategory of Complex-PTSD created which is more developmentally sensitive than prior versions. Friedman closes by citing two interventions that, contrary to the DTD proposal’s assertion, have been successful with particularly resistant trauma clients: Trauma–Focused Evidence Based Treatment (TR-EBT) and Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP). Nonetheless, Alarcón (2002) offers an incisive look at the dynamics of politics and policing that mold the creation of the DSM.

While all of the above paint a glum picture of prospects for supporting children with DTD through modalities other than those of a pharmacological ilk, there have been some shifts in public policy. In Compton, California there is a slight glimmer indicating that the real and actual impact of trauma on children and their educational trajectory is beginning to be recognized through legislation: a class action lawsuit argues that trauma be classified as a disability and that accordingly, students must be given help (accommodations) instead of punishment (suspension, expulsion, etc.) (Turner 2015).

Yet to attribute generalized “trauma as disability” like a comforter draped over every student in the entire city is just as readily a disservice (if not an insult) towards the same population whom the lawsuit is aiming to support. Because while it is encouraging that these issues are finally receiving airtime, the semantics have to be applied more judiciously or new initiatives may only serve to marginalize further already alienated populations.21 For the trauma which students in Compton—and any other unstable context—experience is, by definition, not a pathological response to their context. Rather, it is evidence of their adaptability and resilience. What, then, are the strengths

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21 See literature on well-intentioned programs for child soldiers in West Africa and the unintended consequences of aid can create new challenges through the fomentation of jealousy and contempt with regard to the allotment of resources.
which can be drawn from these skillsets of such youth? What are the muscle groups which they develop and exercise through everyday use about which youth in idyllic settings know nothing? Could we not, rather, simply provide more scaffolding and enrichment to trauma-processing youth rather than seeking to label them with yet another disability? While I deeply appreciate the spirit of this new legislative endeavor, the script must be inverted lest, in the end, our own words be used against us.

The Roadmap

In the Introduction: Swallowing the Stories, the reader is welcomed into the high stakes climate of illicit trafficking and its concurrent costs—particularly upon those who are employed as youth soldiers. Beyond an orientation to the literature of children within contexts of violence and trauma, this chapter also presents the quandaries facing children in trafficking circles as they strive to maintain an equilibrium while balancing between two antithetical worlds: the school and the streets. Chapter Two then, Welcoming Dusk at la foga\textsuperscript{22}: Desertion, Deployment, and Demise in Puerto Rico’s Public Housing, outlines some of the recent history and the current context of Puerto Rico as a war-torn nation for those residing in public housing and how the detonations of firearms has replaced the voice of the youth narco-soldiers. In Chapter Three, The Great White Dope: Nuances in Ethnographer Positionality, unfolds some ways in which urban ethnography exposes the inherent insecurities within a community. The nuances of threat are explored and the implications for long term ethnography are analyzed vis-à-vis the spectrums of vulnerability for both the researcher and those who serve as research subjects. In Chapter Four, Insecurity from Within, Insecurity from Without: Micro-trafficking as

\textsuperscript{22} The bonfire.
Synechdoche for the Island’s Inequality, the direct impact of residing in one of the world’s societies with the highest inequality is examined. Both macro and micro level factors such as widespread impunity alongside the ubiquity of firearms are evaluated as per their contribution to insecurity on the Island. Events of everyday classism are parsed and serve to throw flood lights on structures of deeply-ingrained alienation and highly stratified ideals. In Chapter Five, Endless Rounds of Whack-A-Mole: The Impact of Illicit Flows Islandside, the focus is on how narcotics and arms sales influence far-reaching and multi-layered dynamics on the Island and how futility mixes with impunity to create a potent force to undergird and sustain the Island’s day to day functioning. In Chapter Six, Excess in the Face of Extinction serves as a flashpoint by which to pull back the curtain on the Island’s long held tradition of celebratory shelling during the New Year holiday and also sheds light on other practices which align to undermine the Island’s stability. Chapter Seven, Luminescence is an Evasive Trope: Aphonic Ethnography, begins with of a review of the literature that relates to silence. It then goes on to explore how the impact of an unstable context is reflected in the patterns of operationalized silence within some residents’ linguistic repertoires. In Chapter Eight, Teaching through the Trauma of Narco War in Puerto Rico’s Public Schools: How Silence, Trauma, (In)security, and Faith Intertwine, the nature of community/school interactions and classroom dynamics are examined in light of the stresses of narco-war. Further, it addresses pedagogical strategies and failures alike with regard to the navigation of residual trauma which some school children battle. In Chapter Nine, When the State Fails: Early Desertion, Child Grooms, & Premature Demise, the institutional failures of the state (particularly the Department of Family and the Department of
Education) are explored along with how they contribute to the social phenomena of preadolescent, adolescent, and teen boys being “married off” to women sometimes twice their age and their subsequent premature death as a result of participating in the narcotics labor force. In Chapter Ten, Here the Women Call the Shots: Female Druglords and Pentecostal Prayer Warriors, there is an investigation of how women in leadership—whether narcotics or non-narcotics involved—impact the community and how the social fabric (particularly with regard to school desertion and child grooms) is transformed by women increasingly dedicating large amounts of time to trafficking efforts in place of the household. Chapter Eleven, Accommodation & Resistance Amidst Insecurity: Current Community & Bureaucratic Responses to Narco War, entails a summary of both community and state level responses—or non-responses—to issues of increasing insecurity amidst the mass exodus from the Island during the past few years. One example of this is the advent of an acoustical surveillance system, Shotspotter, as a response to Puerto Rico’s outlier status as having the highest firearm related homicide rate globally; another is how local school employees reach across steep class lines to build bridges for better communication within the ranks of illicit networks. And finally, in Chapter Twelve, The Moral Economy of Culpability: Restructuring Global Repertoires about Children in Organized Armed Violence in Latin America’s Narcotics War, the argument is put forth that all youth in war torn contexts are deserving of specialized services in order to re-acclimate them to society and in order to raise awareness that by pinning moral culpability exclusively onto the youth soldiers themselves, society only loses credibility in the eyes of nations for whom such a reality would never be permitted, let alone ignored. In this spirit of reconciliation, hope is asserted that culpability might
soon become more broadly shared as we examine the fissures which allow the most vulnerable sectors of our Island’s population to be decimated.

Furthermore, the two Apertures of Phonicity braid together three local voices of leadership from disparate sectors of Puerto Rican society: Chaco, an activist and public health expert who in 2016 became a senator, Melquisedec, a middle-aged narcotics-involved entrepreneur, and Misi Magda, a public elementary school teacher. None of the three are acquainted with the others and yet as the burdens of their hearts for the welfare of their country spill onto the paper, intersecting and overlapping, the braids strengthen in resonance. Additionally, the Aphonic Interludes are both private and public moments that provide intimate windows onto the ways in which aphonicity reigns within Alelí. Its interminable trajectory, morphing and contorting in a chameleon-like manner, manifests primarily through events of soundless visual symphonies: like the *amanecidos*23 consuming their dinner atop construction equipment to preclude loose pit bulls from snatching it; like loved ones electing to communicate through mutual gaze transaction instead of speech; like *amanecidos* in pajamas playing basketball through rainstorms; like love using as little speech as possible to insert itself in delicate scenarios for the purposes of protection; like a father who can only speak in private of the violence semantics wreak amidst the grief he carries; like the voicelessness in the workplace and the celebrations under the radar; like the assumptions, assertions, and indignations of jurisdiction in narcotics landscapes; like the stiff-arming eschewal of tears despite an irrefutable inclination towards them. In all, these Aphonic Interludes welcome one into the corners and the crevices where we otherwise may never have been invited. As if each were a

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23 Children who “break night” in the community without ever returning home to eat or sleep.
distinct origami flower, every one of the eleven installments showcases a singular aphonicity in process, soundlessly folding and unfolding until it is just so. Eleven alelies, birthed through and onto paper.

**Conclusion**

To make headway in the field of childhood studies and anthropology of the child, Hart (2006) insists that it is only “[c]areful ethnography… [which can] enable us to learn about the inequities and injustices of the current global order as encountered in the everyday lives of children and gain greater clarity about the multiple sources of threat” (emphasis added) (8). The manner in which the amelioration of these threats will rarely be unilaterally clear, but it is within the context of these subfields that we have received our marching orders: to take in the broader contexts while acting and speaking with great care in the many micro-moments that constitute each day in the field.

The use of gags in Latin American narco-culture is a painfully ironic redundancy. For in the relentlessly grim context of San Juan’s streets, it is the scene-robbing, deafening machine gun blasts which continue to drown out the voices of youth narco-soldiers. It was late on a Saturday night less than a month after Misi Aurora detailed her bittersweet reunion with Nael that the authorities encounter an SUV engulfed in flames. Inside the trunk, a child’s charred remains. Nael. He had been gagged, bound by both hands and feet, and shot multiple times. He was 14.

Here, as in so many other narcotics dominated contexts, instead of words, it is “The bullet [which] says it all without talking”24 (Calle 13, 2012). If ever over the years his silences were in fact elective, as a society we must share the conviction that in the end

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24 “La bala va diciéndolo todo sin hablar”
they most decisively were not. For as they pressed duct tape from one side of Nael’s jaw to the other just prior to shooting and dousing him with a yellow bottle of lighter fluid, it really made no difference that Nael, the child of lowered eyes, had never said a word.
Aphonic Interlude I: Showcasing the Shell Casings

_Padrinos de casquillos_25 and the Encapsulation of Power

It is said that on Adalberto’s bedroom bureau rests a rinsed out _padrino_ brimming with expended shell casings he has collected since he was small. One evening shortly after a _tiroteo_,26 Adalberto walks alongside me down the main promenade of Alelì; he’d offered to help me to locate his elderly neighbor from whom I’d ordered a dozen homemade _pasteles de yuca_. When he spies a shell casing from the earlier _tiroteo_, he stoops down to recover it without breaking his cadence. Flipping it over a few times, he remarks as to its caliber and then hands it to me. When we pass a friend, he motions for it back and gifts it to him instead.27 This was ages before he himself was a _matón_.28

Fast forward one year. It’s an oppressively humid night and the now 17-year-old is seated on a parking curb, entertaining us with songs on his harmonica. Adalberto camps out here; this spot just inside one of the entrances to Alelì is his locale of choice. I wonder how this talent could be channeled into a job, a hobby—something dignity inducing. I make a mental note to speak with his family about it later.

Not long thereafter, while chatting with some of the other adults gathered, he asks me how to say, _No vendemos drogas por acá_ (We don’t sell drugs here) in English. I share that there would be a few ways he could express that sentiment and ask why. He relays that he is tired of being misunderstood when he says it repeatedly in Spanish to all the American tourists who come both by foot and by car into his community looking for drugs. He wants a way to be clearer with them. Essentially, he just wants them to go

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25 Plastic two liter bottles of shell casings.
26 Gunfight or shooting (usually between gangs).
27 Fieldnotes, 7.2013.
28 A local hitman who often serves as a bodyguard for the _bichote_ as well.
away. To go away and stop bothering him. While he recounts this with a weary but
tempered annoyance, I struggle to stifle my anger. “What else would you like to say to
them?,” I press further. “That’s it,” he insists; his graciousness and patience humble me.
He simply wants them to leave him alone. We go in search of a pen and paper, and the
initial phonetic rendering I come up with is:

\textit{Wi du not sel drogz jir}

But a community elder peers over my shoulder and changes \textit{jir} to \textit{jier}, suggesting that as
such it is closer to the English pronunciation—almost as if it were a diphthong more
closely approximating two syllables instead of one (e.g., “kiut,” a rendering of cute, also
becomes disyllabic in translation). Adalberto practices reading it aloud to us; I suggest he
post it on his refrigerator in order to facilitate memorization.

Fast forward four years. Just after the plastic-coated screen door slams behind the
last customer, there is a quiet moment in the pizza shop. In a verbal stutter step, I pause—
as if to acknowledge the cavernous breach, the foreboding partition between the fierce
demarcations of public and private spaces—before her grandson’s name tumbles out of
my mouth. A one word lament. Seated, his grandmother freezes. Then placing the stack
of invoices down beside her, she lowers her head.

I know from her private messages on social media that she has been waiting to
talk with me. Waiting until I got back in town. She turns 180 degrees to look at me and
imparts, “The newspaper writes what it wants—they say that he walked around
terrorizing all of Alelí, that he was a \textit{sicario}, that he had previous federal cases—” her
voice breaks off; her gaze paints its own vanishing point. “They just make things up,” she
demurs and tosses a hand in the air with a dismissive wave. I nod, tightening my eyes. In all of Alelí there is no one I know who fears her grandson.

This bereft grandmother is not denying the throat constricting lifestyle choices this grandson may or may not have made. But quietly, privately, she is lamenting the ease, the abandon with which outsiders from more elevated social classes apply hyperbole to those with whom they have never had even the remotest contact. Her words oppose the “caserío imaginary,” which seems ineluctably rooted in the Island’s public domain. Raising her hand in perpendicular delineation, she continues, “A sicario is someone who delights in killing, who reaps some pleasure from the act. Like the guy I know who enjoyed watching the body ‘jump’ as it absorbs a fusillade of bullets. He’d tell me, ‘Tengo deseos de dar gatillos.’”

“Whereas a matón is a matón strictly for business purposes,” I offer. She nods. “I notice that people generalize in ways which overpopulate the community with gatilleros, when, in reality, there are relatively few. Most are tiradores who work unarmed.” He nods again. “In a way,” I continue, “We can’t really expect most people to be savvy enough to make those distinctions.” Covering her forehead with her hand and rubbing her temple, she explains further, “You know, sometimes a gatillero kills to defend himself: if he does not kill he will be killed. But then the manner in which it’s done is completely different. There is no torture involved, it is not long and drawn out. There is no focus on causing pain; on the contrary, it is done quickly and without enjoyment.”

While in both cases there is premeditation, her point is that for a matón the action is mechanical, perfunctory. Theirs is an obligation to kill, not a predilection. Of course,

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29 “I have the urge to pull the trigger.” I refer to this as “triggerlust.” See Chapter 2.
30 Slingers
judicially speaking, the body count is the bottom line. But certainly, through a mental health lens a significant contrast exists. Such nuances may serve only minimally to assist a jury in sentencing, but to a tired and shell-shocked grandmother fighting to maintain her sanity, such distinctions are essential. For what do you do when, against your wishes, against all your hopes and desires, your grandson elects the pathway of a *matón*? When you spend years in mutual silence because the Pentecostal righteousness in which you are steeped demands stark bifurcations—goats to the left, sheep to the right—and the crystalline gulf which grows between you and your grandson becomes too painful to breach. An aphonic propinquity rendered even more severe by a fossilized church.
CHAPTER 2 Welcoming Dusk at *la fogata*

Desertion, Deployment, and Demise in Puerto Rico’s Public Housing

*Si humilde corremos, pues, corremos humilde.*
*Pero si guapo corremos, pues, corremos guapo... Tú decides.*

—Abdiel

Lowering the tinted windows on both sides of his car, Melquisedec—or Quis (pronounced kēz) for short—glances over at me in the passenger seat and smiles, *Soy un diablito bueno.* Maybe he wants to reassure me. It’s almost midnight and we are backing down one of the snaking driveways of Aleli; he’s giving me a ride home. He has never before offered—in fact he once stated it is too dangerous for me to ride with him. But given the hour and that I had arrived by my *Dodge patita* for an impromptu birthday celebration, Abdiel looked to him for the favor. Even though I may have been happy to walk home, Quis didn’t consider it an option: *Te queremos y por eso te cuidamos y te protegemos.* Thanking him, I share that in their presence I feel that I am *en familia.* He nods as I mention about the challenge of having family so far away.

A rare Skype conversation with both my father and nephew. My work on the Island is tied intimately to the legacy of this nephew’s other grandfather *catañense.*

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31 If we’re taking things humbly, then humble is the way we’ll roll with one another. But if we’re taking things like a smart alec, then like wisenheimsers is the way we’ll roll with one another. You decide.

32 “I’m a good little devil.”

33 On foot.

34 We love you and therefore we take care of you and protect you.

35 While it has become in vogue to fetishize fieldwork, the realities of extended absences during family health crises is not without cost.
In order to understand best the phenomenon of youth narco soldiers, the context within which they are nested is critical to examine. In a way that is analogous to how one must look at a solar eclipse, I have elected not to study the youth directly, but to focus on the social and structural constellations in which they are embedded. Children who are disengaged from institutional structures at a young age encounter a ready community of (predominantly) young men with whom to pass the long hours: local micro-traffickers. As such, this dissertation will nudge back the curtain of the practices, processes, and mindsets of some of the folks pulling the strings behind the scenes of one of San Juan’s open air drug and arms market.

Through a decision to incorporate a greater percentage of men in their twenties, thirties, and forties from the community in my research, I have been able to gain a broader perspective as to the social realities which the youth narco-soldiers confront vis-à-vis their education levels. Further, many of the community men who left formal schooling prior to ninth grade and some prior to sixth grade recounted for me the pathways which lead them into the illicit economy, providing insight as to the most efficacious preventative measures that might be implemented for the youth of this present generation. Although over the past four years I have maintained communication with many alelianos, the three figures who most profoundly and consistently shape this work are Quis, The Mayor and Abdiel. It is their patient voices which serve as the scaffolding necessary to understand the nuances inherent in youth soldiering on the Island. Indeed, it is also to them that I am most indebted.

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36 I am in Carolyn Chernoff’s debt for this image.
Broader Community Paternities

Now I can’t pledge allegiance to your flag
Cause I can’t find no reconciliation with your past
When there was nothing equal for my people in your math
You forced us in ghettos and then you took our dads

—Lupe Fiasco (2012) Strange Fruition

Gang members…are like those sturdy, boarded-up greystones:
rugged and frayed on the exterior, but valuable assets at their core.

—Ralph (2014:48)

Aphonicity is a “restaging” (Ralph 2014:xx) of traffickers in San Juan’s public housing in a manner which foregrounds their contributions to the intricate textile that is urban fare, a piece which intends a rehumanization of a population that heretofore may have served as so many pushpins on a criminologist’s demographics map, as the detritus or collateral damage in the War on Drugs. In sum, as scourge. This ethnography refocuses on unconventional paternities, on aging out of illicit sectors, on the horizons of the grim, anthropocentric shadowscapes left on offer for the children ducking out of academic trajectories only half way through.

When watching the stunning masterpiece that is Jenkins’ Moonlight (Romanski, Gardner, & Kleiner 2016), one is faced with an endlessly cathected reality of how narcotics leadership, proscribed masculinities, and scrambled violences are at once interwoven and realigned. Almost reflexively, humans seek out a plumb line—or create their own. But the expansive moralities embedded within the reels of Moonlight persistently defy that demand. Divinities aside, has there ever been a story so simple as to only be composed of only good versus only evil? None of us are distillates just yet; all are, in fact, but composites. And it is here that Solzhenitsyn (2003) reminds us,
…[T]he line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts…Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil…

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

The social and economic apartheid bolstered by the narcotics industrial complex encourages, instantiates, and reifies a mentality of bifurcation.

Yet as Misi Magda laments, fathers do not darken scholastic doorways. An occasional grandfather, perhaps, but by and large the fathers of Alelí envision the passage of their shadows over other thresholds. Many licit, some not. In reference to the child’s only father figure in *Moonlight*, screenwriter Tarell Alvin McCraney relays,

> It often pains me to know that people…see [the neighborhood drug dealer acting as a father figure] and go, “Oh, that’s unusual.” When I think… back over my life and there have been many times when I’ve run into many people like him—who were reflections of him in my mind and I hear other people go, “No, I had a person like that in my life, too!” So, I keep thinking well what are we doing? Why are we silencing that story? What is happening to us that are we not seeing him more often? (Brown 2016)

With Quis, and perhaps even more so the Mayor, we see parallel figures to Juan. Like the background hum of the Frigidaire, they are always present; we lean on them without even the cognizance that it is they who prop us up. Yet the leering of outside eyes proves insistent. The morality of paternity is not expansive in all spheres. Even in *Moonlight*, the last time the viewer is permitted to see Juan is his admission to the adolescent, is his confession as to his underworld occupation. From that moment forward he is erased from the script. Even, it seems, from his memory. The cleavage is abrupt and unwelcome. As if Juan’s paternity were annulled by this lapse in morality—annulled
beyond any possible point of redemption. Yet even while Moonlight showcases the cleft, it simultaneously presses us to think more expansively about paternity: that a trafficking inflected paternity is paternity nonetheless. Throughout the pages of Aphonicity I invite the reader to reconsider community paternity and what presence can mean functionally when, in a more global sense, paternal absence predominates.

An Eye Toward Street Masculinities

As I am seldom privy to the daily macro level trafficking operations, I mention very little by way of the functioning of the transnational supra-structures. Rather, I exegete the interpersonal dynamics of a ground level street scene with an eye towards the reengagement of youth who, from a larger societal perspective, have been otherwise discarded. To this end, Quis serves as a mouthpiece for others in illicit leadership networks since out of the many nodules within this occult network, it is he who elected to speak publicly. The irony, of course, is that Quis is the only trafficker I know who, from an ethical standpoint, is unwilling to employ minors. As he explains with a shrug of one shoulder and a dismissive shake of his head,

I am from the streets. I am not going to give work to even one of these children because they are children, and it is men who work with me… [but] when I do not give them work they look for another alternative. There is work on a drug point and there they don’t have to fill out an application. Neither do they ask for a clean record of behavior, nor a certificate verifying your health. That is to say, [the children] can avoid all of that and can earn money from the first day of employment onward.37

Perhaps it is due to this common ground of setting apart minors from the wider narcotics network that a space for dialogue and mutual critique could emerge between us. Amidst a context of otherwise impermeable crystalline silence, Quis is a languid yet moving

37 Interview 6.2014.
cerulean river of commentary who releases me from the tautological conundrum of, “He who knows doesn’t talk; he who talks doesn’t know.”

Along the way to my home, Quis talks of buying a retirement home on the west coast of the Island, somewhere nothing like here. But he says it in such a way that I’m persuaded not even he believes it will happen. Switching gears, he points out the storefronts of all the people to whom he is connected and shows me the route he always takes through this part of town—whether it is due to preference, habit, or superstition he does not say. Elaboration is not part of common parlance. I’ve ridden with other *alelianos* where we have just sat staring silently through the windshield. Given the context, Quis is a regular chatterbox tonight.

Although almost two decades his elder, Maité, a firecracker community senior, refers to Melquisedec as Papá. “Llegó Papá,” she chuckles to herself when all of the users appear instantaneously as if through quantum tunneling to greet him and his wares. “*Es un celebrito*,” Mamá Amada confides. “He was supposed to be a marine biologist, but he didn’t study.” At this, she purses her lips and slits up her eyes in warm disapproval, her trademark of loving rebuke. All of *her* children have no choice but to study. So far, without exception, her progeny have earned bachelors degrees and have acquired professional jobs—no small feat in this pinched economy.

A week later my cell vibrates; a text from Maité announces: Melquisedec is in intensive care. It is almost eight in the evening, so rush hour is over and I can arrive quickly from a neighboring *municipio*—but it is already past visiting hours. The security guard borders on belligerent when I ask to leave a note for Quis with the nurses, so at
least he knows an attempt to see him was made. Careening between English and Spanish the guard dismisses me with a wave of his hand, telling me to return the next day.

Trying to imagine life in the community without Quis brings me up short. Folks do not refer to him as Papá without reason; their affection for him is longstanding. Known for being the consummate gentleman publicly—a trait he attributes to his early mentorship by Italian *mafiosos* in New York City—Quis acts as an anchor for the *alelianos* in multiple, if compromised ways. He explains how the circle within which he operates is essentially impermeable:

We all grew up together, we all know one another really well and identify with each other because whether in the short run or in the long run those in the community always come to ask you for a favor. You know how many nebulizers I have purchased for children? Like forty some. Want to know how many baby cribs? How many burials? I have no idea how much money I have given away to bury folks who have died. [The families] ask me for money; they come to me—not to the government, no. They come to the one who, to the narcotics traffickers since they are the ones who can resolve the issue in the very moment. If they know the trafficker, he will give them everything—“Here, buy it.” [He gestures with both hands, as if flinging money towards them] And that, well, helps the trafficker because they are folks who will take care of the trafficker afterwards since they remain in his debt: I helped you and you, as a result, are going to be faithful to me. You understand? Since I helped you in the moment that you needed something and I gave you what you needed, well then, that favor remains because *I never told you no*. That is loyalty. Yes, loyalty: you can count on me.

This quiet confidence Quis both wears and wields. Such reciprocity and social obligation (Mauss 1990) are perhaps standard fare across varying cultural contexts involved in the narcotics economy. Loyalty as earned commodity is the angle to which he ascribes.

When considering relations between community members and traffickers, while there is perhaps an understood pressure to conform to the exigencies of their business in

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38 Coto (2010) notes that in Puerto Rico almost 30% of children have asthma, however, for children residing in public housing such as Alelí, the percentage rises to 40% (with Puerto Ricans of European ancestry more likely to be effected)
the everyday, most often there is not a brute show of force. In fact, compared to some other Latin American narcotics hotspots, Puerto Rico is almost sedate. At times even traffickers’ decision to engage in dialogic shelling—though intended to be intimidating—is elected in lieu of violence and in order to reestablish peace. On the Island there is not an entrenched pattern of gratuitous violence or violence as spectacle—for the intended sake of display—as in Mexico.

Furthermore, the meting out of transnational vendettas through gangs such as El Salvador and Honduras’s MS-13 stand in contrast to those aggressions committed by traffickers based on the Island, which tend to be both more localized and more circumscribed. Certainly, over the past decades there have been transnational hits, but those were generally hired assassins from Central America coming to the Island to eliminate traffickers who run afoul of transnational DTOs, not Islanders crossing into other nation states for the purpose of a manhunt. Islanders are not known to pursue reprisals towards those who exit their water bordered nation. Instead, a simple, clear mandate is issued which prohibits the individual in question from ever again “pisar en la Isla” or set foot on the Island. It is understood that if one abides by the “no return rule,” one has nothing to worry about stateside (unless in the meantime one has run afoul of the

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39 Exceptions to this include three less common phenomena: 1) During a period between 2011 and 2014 professional assassins from the Mara Salvatruchas of El Salvador were imported to the Island in order to kill. It is said that the signature of those murders was notably graphic. 2) There is also a custom which entails an intentional burning of the victim’s body in order to ensure that the family of the victim cannot have an ataúd abierto (open casket) (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bugTVBESANI&feature=related). This extension of the tentacles of violence further into the kinship network wrests from the survivors even the smallest residual comfort of being able to say—as one mother posted online after her teenaged son’s service, “Todo nos salió bien” (The funeral went well). The idea of obliteration at a molecular level, of an utter, irreducible decimation seems to be what is at stake here: leave nothing to salvage. 3) In November of 2009 there was a dismemberment and burning of a gay man who was a leader in the LGBT community in Cayey.

40 See Chapter 5 for a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon.

41 Beheaded men seated in lawnchairs in the town’s central plaza, cadavers hung from a bridge by legs or neck, etc.
State). Like the recess game of *frizaito* (freeze tag): by touching the base and then staying there, you remain safe.

Not only in this way, but also in reference to tactical engagement with authorities and the role which the State yields, Puerto Rico decidedly represents a midpoint between the narcotics sieges in the United States and Mexico. Unlike Mexico, there is a distinct advantage to keep the slaughter on the streets to a minimum as not to attract the interest and attention of the federal forces. Yet similar to Mexico, the narcotics related violence has become normalized and expected. Hence, the algorithms of violence are dispatched in forms and frequencies which, depending on the context, prove most productive for trafficking flows.

Just the week prior a distressed woman approaches local evangelist and micro-entrepreneur Leo under the tarp of his makeshift *kiosko* while he is setting up his grill for the weekend traffic. She has just moved into the community. Petite, almost dainty, the tentative young woman of no more than twenty-five is explaining what was stolen from her. With the completion of less than two sentences, Amado, seated just adjacent, summons Quis by name. Not within view, but decidedly within earshot, Quis does not tarry. Even though he rarely gets up from his beach chair, only moments later he, too, is next to me underneath the tarp, arms akimbo, listening intently to the frazzled new resident’s saga. Others gather to listen—five men are visibly mobilized to attend to the concern. Quis takes verbal inventory of the items of which she had been robbed: “grapes, milk, cheese…” paid for by her WIC allotment. Amado corroborates, “She has a young daughter, too,” which automatically elevates the severity of the charges and single-handedly amplifies everyone’s rumbling disgust.
“Don’t worry,” reassures Quis, “They will appear. They will appear.” The young woman, radiant with gratitude and relief, reminds me of the undeniably stabilizing presence which the narcotics traffickers can and habitually do wield. Though inevitably paradoxical, they routinely purvey an indisputable sense of safety and justice. While not discounting the violence that accompanies their trade, it is likewise critical not to elide the aesthetics, affects, and machinations of security which they render day to day.

The extemporaneous process of arbitration continues just moments later when someone spots a woman carrying bags of groceries down the street. Some raised voices and swiftly she is corralled and brought before the informal magistrate: Quis. Along with everyone else, I arise, mentally delineating the steps I will take to intervene were the scene to transform into one of greater violence.\(^42\) We all draw close as Quis spits questions at her. The contents of her plastic grocery bags are physically apprehended and examined. It is, indeed, a citizens’ arrest. The impromptu defendant becomes visibly shaken by the insistent demands of Quis. From a distance, Abdiel, the diplomat, extends his arm toward her and with a gentle tamping down motion of his hand calls over, “Tranquila, tranquila.” At this, the alarmed elder’s posture relaxes a bit. After a few more interrogations it is proven to be a case of mistaken identity. She is released to go on her way.

\(^42\) Fieldnotes 7.2015. When at all possible, the ethnographer has a responsibility to ameliorate the potential for violence, to delimit harm. One may readily underestimate the power at one’s disposal. As a case in point, it took me years to realize that I could call off the community mongrel, Basil. It is not clear what constitutes threat for Basil, but there seems to be a pattern: she fixates on and then lustily feigns attack upon anyone who appears indigent and, in some capacity is utilizing non-motorized wheels. She lets the four tracks go by without even so much as an ear flicker—perhaps she realizes she has no chance of being intimidating. But a homeless man wheeling his shopping cart of freshly picked coconuts? A lone cyclist? She launches into action. Tonight, it is a local bearded addict and Basil is relentless. She barks and nips at him until he is distressed. It is the second time this evening that I have had to call her off of guard duty. Once she finally accedes, the man, relieved to be on his way again, looks back and thanks me. “He has always been a humble man,” Maité observes.
Los bueneantes\textsuperscript{43} of la fogata: Those who “still have consciences”

Tell your professor from France that if it were not for the Americans, right now he would be speaking German.\textsuperscript{44}

—Melquisedec in response to a request that he talk with one of my advisors

I already knew the answer before I asked. More than once Quis had mentioned to me that he has no desire to meet anyone new. Ever. Even when he is working out, he puts on his headphones and creates his own world within public spaces. As far as business goes, it makes sense: keep the circle small, minimize risk. Quis has remained consistent in this since we met. On one occasion, due to an oversight on my part, I failed to prevent a non-aleliano friend from approaching la fogata. Within ninety seconds of the stranger’s arrival Quis slipped away and did not return.

In Alelí you introduce yourself to no one. Likewise, you meet no one who wishes to remain unknown. I met Abdiel the day Abdiel decided he wanted to be known by me. It was not happenstance; it was not coincidental. He made a decision. An ex-con who walked away from his former lifestyle, Abdiel now uses no hard drugs and is dramatically faithful to his job in the private sector which involves various types of manual labor. Upon meeting me for the first time, he stresses to me that he is not, by definition, a maleante and furthermore, he wants to be very clear with me that he does not carry a gun. Seated below him on a curb, I have no concern either way and throw the sides of my mouth downward briefly in a facial shrug.\textsuperscript{45} The overwhelming majority of young men in the community are unarmed; those who are armed tend towards concealed carry. Nonetheless, something propels Abdiel to certify himself as “non-threatening” in

\textsuperscript{43} The good “bad guys”—a play on the term “maleante” (malefactor, miscreant)
\textsuperscript{44} Informal conversation, 5.2016.
\textsuperscript{45} In part this indifference is requisite for the work I’m trying to do; it also inadvertently reflects my position of tremendous privilege wherein I inhabit a demographic rarely impacted by firearms.
Standing in front of me, he lifts up his t-shirt to show me his waist, then twists his torso to the right and then to the left. This “performance of self” (à la Goffman 1959) is not a spontaneous eruption, but the result of a calibrated decision to construct an accurate reflection of his character and integrity for me—someone whom, heretofore, he has exclusively chosen simply to observe from a distance for over seven years. Now that Abdiel wants me to know him, he also is concerned I feel safe in his presence.

**The Imaginary is Directional:**
**Media Misappropriation and Nuance in Absentia**

Keenly cognizant of outsiders’ perceptions of his community, Abdiel takes this approach with me in order to override any “buy-in” I may harbor as to the public imaginary. He is wise to do so. For even the moorings of my own heart instruct me that the imaginary is, if nothing else, directional. I know from all the deadlocked, velvet evenings on my balcony: how one’s gaze is pulled propulsively, magnetically, toward the same angle. Towards that angle which offers synthetic nostalgias against a backdrop of phantom potentialities. Though often imperceptibly, our hearts are always moored, always dragging beneath them an at once unforgiving yet insufficient anchor.

So too, the public imaginary is not objective but irretrievably moored to its subconscious conventions. Not attracted so much to the lights as to their intermittence; not so much to the whistles and fanfare as to the co-motion. The public imaginary is irredeemably, irrefutably, ineluctably, and irremediably suggestible, painfully resistant to independent thought, and shockingly susceptible to frenzy. This dissertation is an insistence against that streamlined, almost effortless public imaginary which, at its crux, thrives, blossoms, and reproduces even while rife with inaccuracies. My intention is that this body of work serve as stolid testimony to segments of the rampant, if rugged, beauty
threaded throughout the backstory of everyday headline violence channeled by media outlets in Puerto Rico to Islanders, the Diaspora and beyond. Or, to put it another way, in reference to the grainy, gray scale footage caught by the security camera: What happened prior. Everyone knows where we are. The concern is to examine how we arrived here.

The phenomenon of “carrying” and its outsider/insider conceptualizations may be a place as good as any to begin. Roles within trafficking contexts can be fluid, can be blurry. Yet the longer I worked in Alelís, the more clearly I could see the distinctions—as well as their implications. The public imaginary to which we all subconsciously subscribe at one level or another must first be scrubbed clean before the pictures can be repainted in the mind’s eye. Initially in my fieldnotes, I naively referred to anyone associated with micro-trafficking as a gatillero, or triggerman. In actuality, I was simply mirroring the discourses within the community which often utilize terms like maleante and gatillero interchangeably. What became apparent over time, however, is that only a small percentage of traffickers are, indeed, in the role of actual “triggermen,” “hitmen,” “sharpshooters,” “assassins,” or “snipers”—as gatillero alternately might be translated. And while there is an extent to which the community refers to all gang related participants as gatilleros (and for that matter all women involved in trafficking as bichotas), I want to be careful not to mirror the community’s colloquial usage to the extent that it is misleading or imprecise in the public representation of such young men. Certainly in daily speech there is a conflation of roles—particularly by the elderly.

Further, while the elderly may use terms like pistolero or bandolero more commonly to describe such young men, those under fifty do not. I also decline using the Island’s

46 As illustrated in the chart in the following section, FBI raids corroborate that the vast majority of those arrested during raids are simply sellers.
perhaps even more common emic term “maleante” throughout to refer to the young men on account of its semantic proximity to “malhechor” (miscreant, malefactor, etc.). For the aforementioned reasons, I utilize the term traficante, or trafficker, unless the individual is, in fact, known to be an established gatillero.47

In online documentation of the quantifiable aspects of completed anti-narcotics operatives, the federal government refers to gatilleros specifically as “enforcers.”48 This semantic choice distances itself almost entirely from affect, rather it simply intimates the use of power. The election of a more abstract and arguably amoral term such as “enforcer” is striking given the customarily heavily affect laden language commonly espoused by other federal actors with regard to the War on Drugs.49 What might account for this antiseptic neutrality, this almost euphemistic nomenclature? Unlike the media’s portrayals of government housing, the federal presence within these communities seems to capture with almost uncanny precision the relatively lower incidence of matones within the illicit trafficking scene. Consider the following chart of the more sizeable raids conducted in recent years and the distribution of those arrested:

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47 Even given these more tightly defined linguistic parameters, however, I use this term over fifty times in the text.
48 Curiously, Contreras uses the term enforcer in reference to a position held within the hierarchies of Puerto Rican drug networks stateside (2013:147). Although the translation “esnajpel,” for sniper can be heard on the Island, I am unaware of any circulation of the anglicized term of enforcer.
49 See various articles detailing federal operatives at www.dea.gov
Given that these data exclusively reflect the numbers of those arrested, it can only be said that they are loosely representative of the distribution of the labor force on the ground. Although Río Piedras is an outlier for its high number of enforcers, this number also corresponds with an exponentially higher number of owners, implying that the more puntos in a given locale, the more armed one needs to be. Because, generally speaking, a proliferation of “gatilleros” is not necessary—not unless a given bando is at war with another, in which case, for a limited time, everyone becomes armed.

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50 Interview, 10.2016. “Bichote” is sometimes translated “big shot” and most often refers to the on-the-ground, local leader of a narcotics and arms trafficking association. With increasing frequency, bichotes are electing to live outside of the areas which they control and instead govern at a distance (making the occasional weekend visits, if at all). While the term bichote emphasizes the power, position, and status of the narcotics leader, the term maracachinba can be used more informally and affectionately by those within the leader’s inner circle.
Yet given the bursting cornucopia of firearms and munitions at their proximal disposal (there are an estimated three million firearms in Puerto Rico), what is curious is how many traffickers are, electively, almost never armed. How the overwhelming majority eschew carrying at all possible costs. Given their seemingly endless stockpiles of weaponry, this is almost counter-intuitive. Yet the arms often spend more time in the respective stash houses than on the streets. Carrying is viewed as largely elective and, for those with an awareness of federal mandatory minimums, exponentially risky. When traficantes do carry, most persuade themselves that it is “in order to defend themselves,” while others undoubtedly value the additional bravado it affords.

Carrying is also seasonal: when the atmosphere is caliente, then most every traficante may carry. When things are quiet hardly anyone does. In fact, it is only when the bandos51 are at war (regardless of whether the war is inter-case,52 intra-case, or even intra-bando) that all the men “andan arma’o,” or walk around armed. That is to say, the status quo is that they are not carrying. Within the community verbal advisories are issued at departures indicating any change in status (as in: Andan arma’o or Ya no andan arma’o) in order to indicate the level of alert the commuter should have. Further, during the most recent riot, the most common weapon observed was that of a golf club. Is this an attempt on the part of the organization to delimit violence? Or a scaled reaction which designates certain offenses as requiring prescribed responses—that is to say, disciplinary

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51 Groups. In Puerto Rico the term “gang” appears to be frowned upon both by those within illicit trafficking networks as well as, ironically, by those combatting them. The former do not want the negative connotation that accompanies the label of gangs; for example los Neta insist upon being referred to as an “association,” and upon casting themselves in a rather glowing light, as protectors of women, children, and the elderly. On the other hand, authorities may avoid using terms like “pandilla” because when they compare the Island’s networks to those in Colombia or Mexico, they feel that Island networks are far too disorganized and haphazard to qualify as gangs. For some police, it is instead the hierarchical and more formally structured gangs of Central and South American which represent the “true” sense of the word. Interview, 11.2016. Ironically, the term “corillo” which can literally mean gang is most often used as an affectionate reference to one’s extended family or social group and completely unrelated to trafficking in any sense.

52 One term for public housing, el caserio, is at times referred to colloquially as simply “el case.”
responses beyond murder. At times una pela\textsuperscript{53} suffices. Yet as alluded to previously, regardless of this reality, within the public imaginary there tends to be an overpopulation of gatilleros within the housing projects.\textsuperscript{54} But while the federal authorities report more responsibly, the media, in what may amount to no more than a clamor for audience retention, camps out in the superlative. Through the work of this dissertation, my aim is to prompt a shift within the public imaginary by residing in those quiet and even mundane reflections which occur beneath the canopies of communities and which rarely reach the ears of outsiders. To transfer, and perhaps linger within, just a moment of the magical iridescence a blithely unaware toddler feels when snuggled in the arms of a parent whose trafficking could spell their imminent evanescence.

**The Art of Ambush and Death by Indifference**

Reminiscent of the Gabriel García Márquez classic, *Una muerta anunciada*, a significant percentage of the homicides committed on the Island are announced and well publicized ahead of time—whether through social media or word of mouth—and become more common knowledge than “public secret.” As one police officer explains, “The majority of homicides that occur here in Puerto Rico are through acecho, or ambush. The [perpetrators] spy on their target until they find a good opportunity to kill him.”\textsuperscript{55} With precious few exceptions, such hits are timed carefully in order to avoid injuring children or other non-involved bystanders.

\textsuperscript{53} A physical beat-down.

\textsuperscript{54} Now one could argue reasonably that the number of firearms on the street at any given moment is immaterial in the sense that even one is too many. But there is an advantage to climates wherein traffickers do not feel carrying is compulsory and therefore are not at any given moment mere seconds away from ending another’s life. Not carrying at all times, then, implies that some level of premeditation will be required in order for the firearm’s services to be commissioned.

\textsuperscript{55} Interview, 11.2016.
One *bichote* gains an extra twenty-four hours of life because the first time he is approached with an assault rifle, the friend accompanying him flashes his own firearm, prompting the potential attacker to desist.56 This wordless exchange sufficed—at least temporarily—to deter a bloodbath. When executing a hit, no one is interested in seeking “a fair fight.” No one wants to voluntarily entertain return fire. The following day, however, when the *bichote* ventured out alone, *lo limpiaron*: they annihilated him. The victim knew, unequivocally, that he was marked for death and by whom. Even still, he took no steps to preclude this ending. Even still, he walked solo. He spent his last evening listening to music on the patio of non-narcotics involved friends. Was his venturing out alone the next day at some level indicative of “death by indifference”? Or better, “death by denial”? It is said that one of the three AK-47s used to eliminate the *bichote* was his own. That the person he hired to clean and recondition his firearm of choice ended up turning it on him. Trust as an engine of duplicity; ownership as a condition of volatility.

Although assigned homicide is a business, a few outliers may view it as an adrenaline rush. Some do kill in order to feel more “manly,” or physiologically speaking, to light up the reward center of their brain. In all of my time in Aleli, I knew of only one. As one *gatillero* is to purportedly have shared, “Sometimes I feel like shooting and killing someone. I miss feeling the gun in my hands and the [sensation] of the bullets discharging. I miss firing my gun and seeing it perform.” This triggerlust, akin to that which Adalberto’s grandmother mentions,57 this unsettling agitation to release detonations, can be overinflated and used—as discussed in reference to the public

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56 Informal Conversation, 10.2016.
57 See Aphonic Interlude I.
imaginary—to caricature an entire swath of men in communities such as Alelí, but inaccurately so.

In regard to those with triggerlust, Quis is emphatic: “For people who kill randomly and repeatedly, for sexual abusers of children—yeah, I’m all for the death penalty: ¡Que los chicharan!”\(^58\) Additionally Quis even acknowledges the necessity of the State’s utilization of helicopters in their policing of the Island’s government housing projects. When I am in a restaurant days later with his friend, she observes with a chuckle, “Yeah, Quis is a delincuente raro. [A strange delinquent.] He wants the police to win.” Hence, notwithstanding the presence of an occasional sicario, the reality is that the business of homicide is second nature to no one. And while the intersections of drugs with violence are complex and highly contested, one Islander who hails from the municipality of Vieques who has observed the scene closely for years remarks,

> All the people you see who kill and all that here in Puerto Rico, all of them are under the effect of pills, of some controlled substance. Always, always, always. They always, always are. You know, like Percoset or whatever. They always have something in their system. So that’s part of [the problem]; they pop them like Tic-Tacs. Here there is a lot of problems with prescription drugs: way too much. These drugs what they do is change your personality. That’s why the gatilleros pop so many pills before killing someone. It’s like every single gatillero in Puerto Rico has a dependency. On pills. All of, all of the stories that I ever heard, all the people that I know that do this, they have a big dependency on pills. And when I say big, it's like hundreds of dollars a week. Pills. Dependency. So.\(^59\)

That is to say, if one must become “empepa’o,” or pepped up on pills, in order to commit the crime, one has not internalized a comfort level with the actions or events at hand. Self-medication, then, reveals a discomfort with the requisite baseline of violence within trafficking. Further, the alternative activity of shooting into the air serves as a mitigating factor.

\(^{58}\) “Let them be fry!”

\(^{59}\) Interview, 7.2013.
release valve for the ever-percolating compressed agitation just under the surface of many of these traffickers’ lives. For the overwhelming majority, the inevitability of homicide becomes simply a business reality.

As a favor, with the intention of imparting a bit of elder’s wisdom, Quis advised one young man not to cross that line (of carrying a firearm) for one reason: the young man’s family has extremely limited financial resources. Quis’ reasoning is that—not if but—when the young man ends up incarcerated, he will have no financial support from his family while he does his time. So the negative is not viewed as “having to do time” as much as “having to do time” while broke. Given that the young man is presently incarcerated in the continental U.S. (there are no federal prisons on the Island; there is only a federal detention center which houses prisoners until their sentencing is complete), he is now not only without resources but also relatively cut off from his familial network as well. Quis is without pity, “I told him, and he didn’t want to listen. Now he pays the consequences.”

As illustrated by the aforementioned story, it is doubtful that decisions made by the younger generation vis-à-vis carrying are directly correlated with federal mandates in sentencing. The deterrent is more intimate and immediate: many eschew carrying due to personal preference or simply social stigma. A clear threshold is passed once one becomes an armed actor. In chatting about a mutual friend who began carrying a firearm, one trafficker (a tirador) puzzles, “I don’t know what happened to him. He got damaged.” Hence, it is when one starts to carry a gun that one is considered to have become damaged—se dañó. Prior to crossing that threshold, one is viewed as still rather innocuous. According to this line of thought, simply tirando—or selling—narcotics does
not automatically re-categorize a person. Of course, neither is the status of “carrying” or “not carrying” an arm necessarily a static one, but can vary according to season and station of life or even a swift turn of events. That is to say, it was not without precedent that Abdiel felt compelled to show me his unarmed waist.

The day after I write up these fieldnotes, I go to lunch with friends. Normally when I conceive of homicide reduction interventions or related endeavors, I automatically align myself as on the creation, development, and implementation side of things. Yet as I talk about ideas regarding long-term initiatives aimed at lowering the juvenile homicide rate, one new acquaintance, Raimundo, flips the script. He begins intermittently to cover his face. First his lips. Then his nose. Then his eyes and forehead—in rapid yet random rotation. I grow increasingly uncomfortable. “Twelve years,” he says firmly. “They can give you twelve years for *perjuicio.*” I blink. ¿*Perjuicio? Contra qué?* I didn’t follow.

Then I think back on how ethnographers, often by necessity, are at times referred to as “traffickers of secrets” (Theidon 2016). Clearing his throat once, Raimundo speaks quietly, watches me intently: he is fearful that the work could compromise me, put me in an unsavory position of perceived opposition towards the State. So he feels compelled to tell me what he knows of their procedures:

They will have you in an all white room with special lights that are made to affect you psychologically. It will be cold. You will be made to keep your hands like this. He lays his forearms one atop the other and parallel to his chest. They will show you pictures of people and ask you if you know them. You will say neither yes nor no. You will say, “*Me parece*” or “*Creo.*” That is all. Nothing more.

I grimace internally; the cold is a particularly effective modality in their favor.

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60 I intentionally use the term “perceived” here because insofar as I am able, I do all in my power to work towards the greater security of all. Though I do not always possess sufficient wisdom as to how to proceed in order to affect this ideal, that is, nevertheless, my steadfast intention and goal.

61 “It appears to be.”

62 “I think so.”
Later Raimundo pulls me aside, “You need to realize that you have no idea who is armed.” Straight-faced, he takes my left hand and places it under the untucked tail of his dress shirt, onto the back pocket of his khakis. Then he asks rhetorically if I feel it before proceeding to present me with a gleaming silver palm sized .380. It looks almost like jewelry. I look up at him, admitting that it escaped my notice. Raimundo blinks, then nods sharply. Seemingly satisfied, he slips the gun back into its case.63

To further contrast the distinction between the traffickers known as maleantes and those I am referring to as bueneantes, or those engaged in a milder version of illicit events at la fogata, the characteristically reticent Abdiel elaborates that when someone such as himself is forced to interact with the proximal tier of the narcotics involved community members at the point (i.e., those from whom he would distinguish himself, the actual, “certified,” card-carrying maleantes), they speak pejoratively to him, insulting him, calling out, “¡Pendejo!” as he passes by. With a soberly offset jaw, he looks at me and flips his palm upward, “‘Yep. The most pedejísimo of them all!’ that’s what I tell them back; I just agree and keep walking.” One of sparse men in the community who is old enough to be viewed as a paternal figure, the reason Abdiel represents such a threat to the teen and twenty-something traficantes remains unclear. Perhaps the tension results from a blend of jealousy and contempt, of conviction and shame. Or perhaps it arises from a need to emasculate any option of constructing a livelihood that is considered “softer”64 than the one which they elect.

63 Informal conversation, 2.2016.
64 Informal conversation 5.2015. Leo, the Pentecostal and a traficante laugh together discussing an acquaintance who has the comparably “soft” job of modelando celulares (“modeling” cell phones).
At a community level, even if one is a “bonafide” maleante, distinctions still are drawn between how such an individual wields power and the ways in which humility is—or is not—interwoven into one’s administration of leadership. As one community elder observes, there is marked appreciation for a bichote who intentionally delimits violence,\(^{65}\) who conducts business without an excessive display of force. A person who is “bold or daring but not abusive,” who prefers to assign a punishment of two mind-numbing blows to the head than to kill the offending gang member—such a person is considered reasonable, respectable. Beyond these characteristics, however, perhaps the most salient distinction between those in narcotics leadership is the delineation between those who “still lower their heads to their mothers (and other community elders) and request la bendición” and those who do not.\(^{66}\) Wider swathes of forgiveness are extended to leadership who display such outward, symbolic vestiges of prostration—whether towards elders or in a nod toward religiosity. Along with the ubiquitous icon strings of handguns, bombs, knives, and alcohol on social media is the masculine self-descriptor “humildón,” or, the grand humble one.

These distinctions dovetail with the local delineations made between variegations of narcotics related violence. Despite appearances to the contrary, within trafficking circles in the metro area of San Juan there are, in fact, normative expectations as per the execution of force. These expectations, while largely implicit, become more explicit after instances wherein a shooting is judged to have been a display of excessive force or contains some other unnecessary, abusive aspect. When acts of aggression surpass that which is

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\(^{65}\) See reference to use of balas al aire versus balas de matanza in Chapter 5.

\(^{66}\) I witnessed a display of humility (or chivalry) on the part of a twenty-something traficante when, while riding his four track around the corner of a building, he came head to head with a matriarch from a non-narcotics related family who was riding her four track. He ceded her passage immediately; she did not hesitate to proceed.
considered normative, leadership in the local networks will issue a public statement advertising a specific price for each of the perpetrators thereof.\textsuperscript{67} This statement, diffused orally, will specify whether or not the trafficking leaders desire the perpetrators alive. When the request is made for them to be delivered alive, it is most often in order to ensure that the perpetrator can be tortured prior to being killed. This detail serves the dual purpose of both discipline and deterrent: not only providing a consequence for behavior deemed extreme or abusive, but likewise announcing to the greater metro area that such excesses will not be entertained. One example of such commandeering is when a \emph{gatillero} or group of \emph{gatilleros} “\emph{borran la cara}”\textsuperscript{68} of their target without cause.\textsuperscript{69} This action is to be reserved for grave infractions such as pedophilia, not for traffickers engaged in the routine praxis of the industry.

Abdiel concludes by making the distinction between those at \emph{la fogata}, whom I can trust, who seek to protect me, and those on the point, the aforementioned “\emph{maleantes},” who “lack conscience.” Barely finishing this sentence, he adds a caveat: “But listen, Áurea, you’re too trusting. You admire Mamá Amada, right? Well, learn from her: \emph{Ella no se deja}.”\textsuperscript{70} She doesn’t let anyone f*** with her. Don’t trust anyone fully here—not even me,” he spreads his fingers across his chest. “Not even Quis,” he tosses a hand in the direction of his friend. All the while his gaze never leaves mine, “No one.”

\textsuperscript{67} In a 2016 event, the monetary remuneration for delivering the person alive was set at upwards of $25,000. Much depends on the source of the funding, however, whether it is local or transnational—the latter having deeper pockets. For instance, it is said that in a separate incident in El Cerro, Naranjito the compensation for a \emph{bichote}’s death was closer to $200,000. He was killed by non-national paid assassins who came to the Island for that sole purpose.

\textsuperscript{68} Obliterate or erase the face (with detonations from their firearms). See Chapter 4 for further discussion.

\textsuperscript{69} If they do have cause, then this action is understood as entirely appropriate.

\textsuperscript{70} She doesn’t let anybody take her for a fool.
Outside the hospital the night is muggy and thick with Sahara dust, some extra sludge for our lungs. It is weeks later and I am missing the vacilón of la fogata, or bonfire, as Mamá Amada affectionately refers to the circle of folks who gather around Quis when he visits with his wares most every evening. Mamá Amada christened the group with the name “bonfire” when one evening, as she and her family are relaxing in bed, the wind blows all-enveloping gusts of marijuana smoke into their bedrooms. The smell is so strong that she starts to get “una nota.” Climbing out of bed she calls down to them to put out the fogata, or she would bring down marshmallows to roast there. Her laughing rebuke propelled the circle of aficionados to be more strategic in their selection of reunion locale and to sit decidedly away from her apartment’s bedroom windows.

Abandoned School, Arecibo

All else being equal, Quis’ presence is not something I should take for granted. Even beyond the gift of his friendship, I am dependent on him primordially for supporting my work, for his (largely implicit) endorsement of me. His arm behind his head as he reclines, he describes himself as “One of the few who remain, one of the few oldheads. That’s me.” He attributes his longevity to the following factors:
• He was sent to jail at a “good time” (i.e., those left behind were in a bloodbath)
• He involved himself in a sport unconventional to his peers/context
• He was “a man” (i.e., he kept his mouth shut for the fifteen years inside)
• He learned respect from the Italian mafiosos in New York City
• He was arrested him as a really young boy (prior to his twenties)

As noted, reticence is part and parcel of his game plan. It is well understood that, “El bocón no hace na'; el verdadero hombre no habla—sencillamente se monte y le llegue.” Everyone knows that the bocón, or loudmouth, is not the one who acts. Rather it is the silent one whose potency is respected and marked. As non-vocality reigns, visuality triumphs over all else: weapons are brandished in place of verbalizations; detonations ascribe to themselves a seemingly limitless venue of significations; and the body itself becomes a banner—to be flown in stalwart bravado or to be perforated in defeat.

Melquisedec’s longevity is particularly salient given that the majority of entrepreneurs in narcotics businesses age-out of such “a finite social role” (Rodgers and Jones 2009:15). Beyond this, however, he also notes that he is distinctive because he “does not make noise.” Everything about him deflects rather than attracts attention. It then goes without saying, then, that he does not participate in recreational shelling72 nor other versions of gratuitous expenditure.

Non-negotiable Transparency & Anemic Hits

At the same time, Quis is dependent on me to be who I say that I am. He confides:

Where my life would be put at risk is if you were talking with me—and the people always see us talking—and all of the sudden the feds come and they take everybody with them and you end up being one of their agents. Then folks here are going to look for me, to kill me because “It was your friend who was the

71 “Whereas the loudmouth doesn’t do anything, the real man does not talk—simply gets in the car and arrives [to annihilate his victim].” Attribution unknown.
72 See Chapter 5.
When he says this, I wonder, quite seriously, if I should even be doing this project. Accordingly, for me, transparency is never optional. Recently I approached the bonfire knowing I had to breach the topic of forensics in a way that conveys my involvement is to bless and not to harm. I begin by talking about corruption and how it doesn’t appear that statistics from the state police align with those of forensics (it was subsequently explained to me why this is the case). I share about an appointment for the following day with the folks at forensics and ask if anyone has a suggestion as to what to ask. A weary Melquisedec quickly shuts down the conversation: *That’s your project, ask what you think you should ask.* A few minutes later when I get up to leave he tosses his head to one side, arches an eyebrow and cautions, “You know, if you were in Colombia asking about numbers like that, the government would plant a bomb in your car, so that when you turned the key in the ignition a bomb would go off and kill you.” He tips his head slightly, proceeds to close up shop and head over towards the apartment where his dinner awaits.

Melquisedec is considered to be the resident expert on Colombia, entertaining the circle with tales from his exploits there during another era. Most scene depictions sound akin to a VanDamme movie. I wonder if he is entertaining himself with that scenario—or if he, at some level, is simply warning me. “But not here, right,” I offer as a belated afterthought. Quis does a slight stutter step and looks back over his shoulder at me. “Here, no,” he agrees before continuing onward. I get the sense these conversations wear on him. Always generous and gracious with me, he too has a threshold. Medically fragile,
he wears a vague aura of resignation. It seems that he regards Puerto Rico as “soft” in comparison to Colombia. And that what I am doing is a bad idea. This news was not so well received and—I hold my eyes shut for a moment—I have yet to share about my brief interview of a homicide detective. I will though; just need to time it well.

In the hospital elevator I think back to our last conversation the weekend prior: I am perched next to Abdiel on the back bumper of Quis’ truck—half inside, half out—while Quis reclines a few feet below in a frayed beach chair. I am asking him his opinion on initiating a four month investigation by la Interpol in order to obtain the security clearances necessary to access the files of Nael, the youth we lost almost six months prior. I dread submitting myself to the process, but know no other way to obtain access to the information. He looks at me squarely, “That kid got paid back for what he did.” For a moment I say nothing. But then insist, “He was fourteen, Quis. Fourteen.” The more we disagree, the more intently he studies the screen of his flip cellphone. Finally, with a sigh I stand up and put a hand on his shoulder, “I know you lose patience with me, Quis, but think about if he were your son… if it had been a son of yours…” My departing statement to him is received and answered with silence. Quis, like me, has no children.

The Staggered Silences Behind the Bullets: Desertion, Deployment & Premature Demise in Community of Extended Kin

To frame my observations, I utilize the lens of three concatenated phenomena, which serve as metaphors for silence within the needlessly truncated life trajectories of chronic truants in the Island’s public school system: (elementary) school desertion, child soldier deployment, and premature demise. These three phenomena represent silence in hauntingly parallel yet distinct ways. While it is tough to argue that context is unilaterally determinative, its impact is incontrovertible. The realities, implications, and outworkings...
of early desertion, youth narco-soldier deployment, and premature demise are deeply embedded in the folds of everyday community life.

**School Desertion**

It’s 10:30 in the morning and a groggy shirtless 14-year-old Demetrio appears in Nazarena’s living room doorway, head bowed, rubbing one of his eyes. “And why isn’t this one in school today?” inquires the judicial caseworker skeptically. Her question is neither incidental nor rhetorical. She is here conducting a home evaluation in order to determine the most appropriate disposition for his older brother, and she wants an answer. A bit too swiftly to be credible, Nazarena shoots back, “The doctor said he had to stay home from school today because he strained his shoulder yesterday.” With that permission, the child wordlessly takes a seat next to me on the other end of the couch. The caseworker does not comment, but looks back down at her notes. Demetrio cuts his eyes towards me, one side of his mouth curling upwards slightly, and blinks in silent greeting. I toss back a barely perceptible nod, appreciative of the welcome.

By and large, aleliana mothers and other caretakers in general seem willing to get their children out of bed for elementary school, but by sixth or seventh grade this willingness appears to evaporate. By then, the autonomous nature of the child generally is regarded as insurmountable, as determinative. It is then that the youth may, for example, elect to spend the day canvassing the neighborhood as a sidekick to the ice cream truck man—confident no one will take action either way. Although rare, there are exceptions to accepted truancy. One occurs when the annual state exam, *las Pruebas Puertorriqueñas*, roll around. After the fact, Demetrio’s teacher shares with me that she

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74 Fieldnotes, 3.2015.
had called every relative of his whose phone number she had, pleading for some family member to ensure his attendance. It worked, but only fleetingly. Ultimately, he showed up for three of five testing days. But by and large, there’s a resignation that sooner or later the streets win. That the grandmotherly teacher hugs can’t compete with an income independently earned. Spending power, sadly, trumps most everything else.

Even years later when I visit her, she still asks to see pictures of his child. Her face brightens momentarily upon beholding the chubby clear-eyed toddler. Yet her weary gaze and slow shuffle belie what her lips cannot: even with retirement imminent she requests a classroom of fourth graders for the coming year. Witnessing sixth graders drop off into a narcotics lined abyss year after year proves just too much for a careful, watchful soul to absorb. When I speak with her, she most often deflects her gaze towards the aged ceramic tile floor. Hers is a silent lament, a lament visible in her eyes, her gait. She never agrees to a formal interview. In fact, sometimes it feels as if she viscerally fears my approach. So instead, once in a while I call her at home, check in with her about her delicate health, the health of her equally compromised loved ones. She is always surprised. When I try to offer support, she only ever asks of me one thing: Prayer.

Ultimately, she agrees to allow me to tell the scant patches that I know of her story. Yet for those unable to conceptualize precisely how the profession of teaching can turn lethal, forensics must acquire new instruments—ones which collect and measure the intractable grief of a countenance and the dilatory, pensive plodding of a hope-sapped heart.

Like many other locales, school desertion in Puerto Rico does not occur with great fanfare; it is often a wordless, almost shrinking desistence. Yet its scalar magnitude is tremendous: Irizarry y Quintero (2005) cite Puerto Rico’s drop-out rate at 42%. And
whereas most research on school desertion focuses on high school or the transition from junior high into high school, the transition from elementary into junior high is generally overlooked. Yet the best figures we have suggest that in Puerto Rico elementary school drop-outs constitute more than 9% of the entire drop-out population (junior high, 35%; high school, 58%) (Vales, Santiago, Rivera, Flores, & Morrell 2002). Hence, before even arriving at the threshold of high school, almost half (44%) the total students that will be lost to school desertion are already gone—and this is a generous estimation. Even Puerto Rico’s Department of Education admits it does not have adequate statistics on drop-outs with regard to transitions between elementary, middle, and high schools (Vales 2002:123).

It has been established that dropping out is a process (Mac Iver 2010), punctuated by established patterns of absences and retentions, which begins as early as the first grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey 1997; Schultz & Gandy 2007). School desertion is the result of additive experiences which produce a “weak school attachment” (Finn 1989). Affective tethering, it appears, needs to occur in school settings as well (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris 2004); gang literature (Vigil 2003) clearly corroborates this. In their extensive study on adjudicated youth, Vales et al (2002:108,111) point out that while school desertion consistently remains a greater problem for boys than girls, only rarely (in 1% of cases) are disciplinary problems implicated in their evanescence from the scholastic milieu. The overwhelming indicator of dropping out in Puerto Rico, which mirrors many other parts of the United States, is a preponderance of absences and prior retentions (Vales et al 2002:115, 117, Calderón, Robles, Reyes, Matos, Negrón, & Cruz 2009, Vélez Pérez 1994). These, then, are not “spectacular” exits, but seemingly languid
and deceptively “inconsequent” ones… particularly given that narcotics traffickers prefer to target drop-outs (Vales et al 2002:89,107).

Schooling within the community of Aleli appears to be highly—if not entirely—discretionary. This is perhaps one of our best public secrets, one of our most insidious conspiracies. One principal states plainly that there simply is insufficient time to pursue those who drop off the rolls, “Accompanied by the school counselor, I go to their homes personally and knock on their doors to find out why they are not attending and what we can do to support them—but that is usually about after three or four months of non-attendance.”75 On paper there are laws and protocols regarding excessive absences, but they are rarely enforced—are mere leyes muertas. Truancy is regarded as normative—even in some elementary schools. As Povinelli (2006:85) chides, “The normal has decamped, and with it the presuppositions of the ethics of the norm.” Hence, on any given day, parents may or may not be aware of their child’s nonattendance, and teachers expect truancy—particularly from children hailing from families of historically “ill repute” (read: involved in illicit trafficking). The police themselves, far from taking unschooled little ones into their custody and referring them to social services, may simply remind those hustling in the streets to be careful of the cars whizzing past. On a more rare occasion a police officer may inquire, “Where is your mother?”76 albeit rhetorically.

Through informal conversations with teachers and family members I encountered a rather wide discrepancy between their perceptions and beliefs and the commonwealth’s

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75 Interview 1, 2016.
76 Note here that these civil servants do not inquire as to the child’s parent, nor as to the child’s father. It appears that the welfare of the child is understood primordially to be the sole responsibility of his or her mother.
globally lauded (alongside Finland) (UNESCO 2011) and ostensibly mandatory 14 years of schooling from age five to eighteen (due to compulsory kindergarten). For both community members and staff, even the concept of compulsory schooling seemed foreign: one veteran teacher strove to elucidate the matter for me: *if* [a fifth grade student with two prior retentions] *decides not to attend school, it’s because he doesn’t want to.*

Her momentarily suspended shoulders and raised eyebrows punctuate her belief in the futility of pursuing an eleven-year-old who has already chosen his preferred lifestyle: day labor in the streets. One grandmother (who did not have the opportunity to finish elementary school herself) mirrors this response, musing that the children operate according to their own volition. As such, they are granted an intractable—even if self-annihilating—autonomy; in abandoning scholastic endeavors, they meet with no resistance. Both the aforementioned women reflect a time-worn acceptance and habituation to the phenomenon of elementary school desertion. Absent is any outrage, any sense of injustice. As Povinelli (2006) elaborates, within such “zones of dysfunction” where familiarity breeds, “if not contempt, then neglect,” pathology itself “must be made pathological” again. As it stands, agency is attributed primarily, if not solely to the children… and they are vilified or beatified according to their choices—even if they are only in first grade.

Further, the official calendar of school holidays turned out to be a dim reflection of days students were actually bodily in attendance (e.g., Fridays are often half days) as there really isn’t much school to be truant from… and yet this laxity seems only to

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78 Informal Conversation, 5.2013.
heighten the propensity for non-attendance. Personally having witnessed the glaring incongruence between the district calendar and the days the school gate was actually open for business, I gained critical perspective on how public schooling is operationalized on the Island. As it stands, due to astoundingly high teacher absence rates (about five weeks annually) and the concurrent lack of provision of substitute teachers, it is estimated that Puerto Rican public school students attend class 14% less of the legislated 180 days than students stateside (Krueger 2006). However, given the reality of water main breaks, rationing, flash flooding, hurricanes and tropical storms, I would postulate that the percentage is actually far greater. As such, we ignore the links between attendance and desertion to our own detriment.

What requires more attention is the reality that school desertion is precipitated by a psychological silencing and is only consequently followed by a corporeal silence (i.e., the student’s actual bodily absence). On the Island, the major affective element vis-à-vis dropping out is “la percepción de no sentirse parte del núcleo escolar” (the perception of not feeling part of the school core) (Gottfredson in Vales 2002:115) along with “un bajo nivel de apego e interés por la escuela” (a low level of attachment and interest in their school) (Vales et al 2002:93). In actuality, the alienation which such children may encounter within school walls ensures that their voices remain stifled whether they are bodily present or not. On the contrary, where they may feel not merely welcome but also functional is at el punto or the point or in a largely recreational social circle like la fogata.
Deployment:
Raised by the Point Amidst Affective Lapses & Hyper-consumption

Why are the Island’s municipal police forced to “make do” with used bullet proof vests donated from New York (Agencia EFE 2016)? Why is toilet paper viewed as a “non-essential” for public school children? These are the everyday insults that become increasingly grating over time. It is unnecessary to ask why the Island’s exodus is occurring. Only perhaps, instead, to ask why it had not occurred sooner.

The status quo is untenable. As showcased by the dialogue chain in the Aperture in Phonicity I, some of the Island’s most progressive thinkers resist the prospect of continued assistance from the United States. The concern, at one level, is how to mobilize a population not accustomed to the workforce participation. Trends suggest that upwards of 60% of our residents receive government assistance and our middle and working class may be replaced by a handful of billionaires. The current exodus of middle-aged and young families begs the question of how we propose to engage the latent labor force which remains (See how the United Arab Emirates finds itself problem solving vis-à-vis the similarly low LPR of its nationals). While the unemployment rate has improved over the past few years, our LPR remains dismal. The easiest option for most who leave the academic realm early is the illicit sector.

How do silent transitions from chronic truant to youth narco-soldier (or day laborer in the illicit economy) occur? What are the ways in which these roles are at times embodied simultaneously or fluidly? What are the ways in which school desertion actually becomes privileged? Conversely, what are potential catalysts for reenrollment?

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79 Some children routinely have fecal matter under their nails. With the Swine Flu outbreak in 2009 the lack of standard hygiene provisions was all the more concerning.

80 [www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG786.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG786.pdf)
What are the machinations behind these processes and how do deceptively involuntary cycles become fossilized and self-perpetuating? These are some of the questions I wrestle with as I consider the best angles from which to approach the amelioration of school desertion.

As Puerto Rico’s musical prophets Calle 13’s (2012) “La Bala” (“The Bullet”) suggests, *There’s little education and there are a lot of cartridges/When one reads little, one shoots a lot.* Given that from elementary school onward the students who electively un-enroll themselves are not pursued scholastically—by *anyone*—their very existence is jeopardized, deemed irrelevant by default. Failing to note one’s absence—or, alternately, one’s presence—is not merely a silencing of said individual but also an actual perpetration of psychic violence. It follows, then, that any violence potentially emanating from them in their deployment as child soldiers can be understood “as a struggle for visibility by a community of youth excluded from the political process” (or from the institutional schooling process, the legitimate economy, etc.) (Hoffman 2004:327).

Edmonds (2010) muses that “[a]ppearing can be seen as a forceful reversal of invisibility often felt acutely in the body itself” (218). For simply “…to be *seen* is known to be profitable and becomes an end in itself” (emphasis added) (Hoffman 2011:973). When the Egyptian maidservant Hagar is alone and desolate in the desert wilderness, she refers to Yahweh as “El Roi,” or the God who *sees* me. Being seen is not only integral but critical to social vibrance; invisibility, on the other hand, is social death. Youth narco-soldiering offers an opportunity to be seen if not once again, at least once and for all.

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81 *Hay poca educación y hay muchos cartuchos/Cuando se lee poco, se dispara mucho.*

82 Genesis 16:13.
Amongst the youth narco-soldiers, this phenomenon of “bullet as a proxy for voice,” of “artillery as newfangled communicative repertoire,” as will be explored further in subsequent chapters, can be understood as a variant of translanguaging (García 2009:45) (i.e., multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds). That is to say, when potential for expression is eclipsed in one language, they slip seamlessly into expression by way of another. Arguably, the brandishing and discharging of military weaponry should not be part and parcel of one’s developmental process: behind the ear-splitting displays of gunfire lurks the theft of youth, of the luxury of not having to “study war,” as it were. The spectacle, the ephemeral conveyance of a larger than life image has a tragically short shelf life.

In the relentlessly grim context of the streets, it is the bullets which grab center stage, which demand an audience. Once again it is this wordless, scene-robbing spectacle which almost necessarily eclipses the potential for the formation of coherent narratives. It is the deafening machine gun blasts themselves which drown out the actual agential capacity of these child soldiers, who—at least for now—have seized upon this manner of coping with the society from whom they’ve been unilaterally discarded, the society who has told them repeatedly that their words, their lives index nothing more than impotence. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, “a riot is the language of the unheard.” And sometimes those silences emerge as an eruption of gunfire. For sooner or later these youth will speak. They will be heard. It just may not be with words.

It’s not a new topic, this theme I am pressing with Quis. Another evening prior at la fogata we conversed about the brevity of Nael’s life, his early narcotics involvement,
his grisly finale. But any suggestions remedial in nature Quis swats away as if they were so many mosquitoes irritating his repose; eventually he just bows his head and stares at the ground. When he does lift his head, he looks dead at me and says plainly:

If you want kids to have a chance of not dying young in the streets, you are in the wrong country. It’s never going to happen here. You need to go to a country like Nicaragua or La República Dominicana…

Don’t you know that Puerto Rico is the only country in Latin America where the poor wear Jordans [sneakers], where the poor dress in Armani and Gucci? If you go to Bolivia, you don’t see that. The poor here aren’t hungry. You have to go to a country where the government does not maintain its poor, like El Salvador. Then it may have a chance of working. Here it never will.83

He says all this and yet he is the only trafficker I know who delimits the age of those whom he is willing to employ. As Quis explains, the kids who become youth narco-soldiers are those who might have a place to study, but they don’t have a place to work. Their families don’t give them any orientation, don’t help them. So where do they look for that support? Well, from people like me in the streets. They talk to me all the time and ask me for work. And I give work to none of these boys because they are boys. It is men who work with me.84

He elaborates that his refusal to employ minors stems from his desire to respect the fact that they are someone’s children and if he were to have children himself he would not appreciate someone offering to pay his children to work in the streets. Or a loose version of “love your neighbor as yourself.” Vargas Vidot echoes these sentiments when he expounds that for some youngsters in the community it is the drug point that functionally does the child rearing. For Quis the issue of school desertion and early trafficking also finds its roots in the culture of consumption which has become ingrained and established on the Island:

83 Informal Conversation, 3.2015.
84 Interview 7.2015.
There’s a poisoning of people’s thinking. In modern society as you are growing up, the moment that you watch television for the first time you see the companies announce specials on clothes, food, travel—and what happens? Your mind grows sick because that which is a pleasure—everyone wants it. Everyone wants to travel, everyone wants to go shopping and buy new clothes, everyone wants new cars. And that’s what happens, it opens up your mind, it stains your mind, it creates desire because you want that [item or experience]. But in order for you to have that, you need to work or you need to prepare yourself [academically] and what happens with us is that we want the item instantly. We saw it last night and we want it here now, right. So what happens? We sacrifice schooling. We go to the streets to work in the streets to get what we just saw on television.

For Quis, the operative ideology he is accustomed to observing is reflected in the refrain written across t-shirts, “Money is my drug.”

**Premature Demise**

The ultimate silence, the unspeakable silence, is the silence of these young men’s ever-looming and expected demise. The overly pixilated portraits on Mylar balloons eternally ascending, as if indifferent to the Atlantic trade winds, relentlessly stalk social media networks with their virtually present absence (Stewart 1996). The Facebook rolodex spins incessantly; the suggestion to “friend” the deceased inevitably appears, their virtual entailments shamelessly self-perpetuating and no less accretive than during their lifespan: like the kite’s tail—always just out of reach.

Islandwide, the juvenile homicide rate translates into the loss of about twenty students per high school cohort (Allison & MacEwan 2004). As mothers find themselves scrambling to scrape together enough cash for one way tickets to cities as disparate as Buffalo, Milwaukee and Tampa, they are forced to confront the logistics of scheduling departures. One factor rises saliently above the rest: boys leave first. While some simply leave the housing projects, most are sent off the Island altogether. Amidst the mass exodus of families from the Island, there is a clear privileging of preadolescent to teenage
boys. If the move is permanent, sisters and parents follow later. One evening amidst an
anguished search for cheaper fares to Cleveland, a mother looks at me with a deadpan
gaze, and says plainly, “I don’t want to lose another son.” Other mothers take a fatalistic
approach towards their narcotics-involved sons, declaring: *Ya lo lloraba; ya lo enterraba.*
Or, “I already cried his death; I already buried him.” That is to say, they prepare for his
impending death while he still lives. I refer to this as “premeditated grief,” a form of
anticipatory mourning.

Given the “generative” nature of violence, how do the silences of premature
demise reshape categories of kinship (Thomas 2011:3) and transform the category of
youth from a carefree epoch to a dangerous moment? I will plumb the community
discourses of loss through developing the concept of “subtractive peopling” within
families, wherein maternal figures are pressed continually to count and re-count their
children (or, conversely, to set them adrift—*al garete*—prematurely) through a lens of
unlikely survival (Scheper-Hughes 1992): “I have three of my four left…” one mother
mused to me recently as she stared unblinkingly at the horizon. This maternal
phenomenon of framing loss in numerary terms recalls the counting on her fingers in
which Tina (of Bourgois’ *Righteous Dopefiend*) speaks of her seven scattered children—
lost to her in a different sense of the word, yet nonetheless undeniably still lost to her
(2009:200-1). These regressive expectations of “fractional progeny” bleed into all aspects
of daily existence, into even local institutional settings as well—where outsider adults
esteem insider adults, “You know what loss is.” Where—as a result of the narcotics and
arms trade—these tragic, violent, premature deaths are now normative for young men
and are now somehow seamlessly becoming absorbed as *non*-rupture and organically
woven into a new tier of thought life, prayer and daily Facebook discourses—where even birthdays for the deceased are celebrated virtually—as yet one more homage to how absence makes itself present (Stewart 1996).

**Recuperative Grace**

The day after I am ejected from the hospital, Mamá Amada and I arrive again—this time granted passage into the ICU—only to be told that our attire violates hospital standards of covered shoes and shoulders. But apparently they are feeling gracious and allow us entry regardless. Qui is allowed one hour visits twice a day; we squeeze in for fifteen minutes before his family arrives. His shirt reads 100% SATO85 and he has wires coming from everywhere—stomach, fingers, chest—yet grins broadly upon seeing us. He appears weak, but his color is good. Apparently, he had been close to slipping into a coma. Lights out. I throw up four fingers: “You missed your insulin for four days in row?” He nods a bit sheepishly, adding that his doctor was out of town.

Yet what may be a bit closer to reality, is the predicament that his insulin of preference, Lantus©, costs almost $500 a bottle—and then lasts him less than a month. Amada immediately reminds him that he can go to any emergency room to get insulin when he runs out. Conceding her point, Qui nods half-heartedly. It appears he knows this but just didn’t bother. I wonder if he is giving up, if he just doesn’t want to be here anymore. Diabetes is a tedious, exhausting disease. Mamá Amada places her palm on his forehead, I rest mine on his shoulder. Praying forcefully, fervently she asks the Lord, the “Doctor of Excellence” (as some folks Islandsiders are fond of saying) to take control of his body and restore his health. Afterwards Mamá Amada entertains him with some

85 “Sato” is the term used for the stray dogs which wander the streets of the Island.
stories about a young man interested in dating her daughter, gets him laughing, and then we leave him to rest.

When we are walking out Mamá Amada grabs my forearm, her face luminous, “Did you see how quickly he bent his head to pray when I asked him?” As we begin the inexorable spiral down the parking garage floors, she recounts to me how almost two decades earlier a house fire started by a curtain and a candle almost took her mother’s life. But Melquisedec, thinking her small children might be inside, broke down the front door, found her mother sleeping amidst the flames, and carried her out unharmed. At this, I find myself driving through a blur of tears, “Beautiful,” I concur, and we discuss where to grab lunch.
Aphonic Interlude II: Backlit Masculinities

Quarantined Tears and the Exigencies of Anger

The Mayor is annoyed. Leaning over the three lidded pots distributed across the electric cooktop with a plate in his hand, he has three quarters of it covered with arroz amarillo con salchichas. But I just showed him how much less than that portion of a glycemic load I can handle. Clattering the serving cuchara dramatically back into the half full caldero, the Mayor, with no slight amount of consternation, intones, “That small amount is not even worth it. You do not have to eat out of obligation.” My impromptu defense attorney, Castiel dodges between us physically to interject that I had already eaten. Upon remembering this, the Mayor visibly softens. It is almost midnight. For the Mayor, though, it is the first time he has eaten since breakfast. He sighs and, as a compromise after scraping off two quadrants of rice, spoons an extra scoop of codos con carne molida onto my plate before tossing it into the microwave.

A half hour later the Mayor’s eyelids are closed as, stretched out atop two thin pillows and a neatly tucked bedspread, he listens to a Lourdes Robles song on his cell phone. About three songs in, he opens his eyes:

The Mayor: Music is a highway, a path directly to the heart, right? Because a song can make you feel a ton of emotions, am I right? Well, that’s what I say.
Áurea: Yeah, it can speak to your heart, right.
The Mayor: There are times when I hear songs like this—I cry.

It takes me a moment to realize that this is a confession.

Áurea: Me too. That’s okay.

His forehead deeply ridged, he looks over and studies my face.

The Mayor: That’s not okay. Why does one have to cry?
Áurea: Because people want to express themselves.

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86 My dietary limitations are an endless source of misunderstanding between the Mayor and me.
The Mayor: Okaaaaay, but one cries for nothing. You hear something, and it makes you sad, and you begin to cry. I [do].
Áurea: But that’s something beautiful about you.
The Mayor: Ay, but it makes me furious. It makes me want to kill everyone.
Áurea: For crying?
The Mayor: Ay sí.

I take his wrist: You were humiliated for crying as a child; you were never allowed to express yourself openly for fear of the abuse which would follow; you were in surroundings where you never felt safe. It’s not your fault. His eyes languid pools of tearless obsidian, the Mayor stares back at me and repeats, more to himself than to me:
…if one would have grown up within different surroundings... And this time, as he closes his eyes again, he is nodding.
CHAPTER 3 Nuances of Ethnographer Positionality

The Ethnographer as Vessel of Insecurity

It is not a typical Saturday morning. There’s been a woman murdered only hours earlier: a woman not known for spending time in the streets, a woman no one ever associated with trouble. One hand gripping her forehead as she leans against the chain-link fence, Maité’s daughter stands immobilized on the corner, leery of venturing into Robles, the sector of the community where the murder transpired. But the dilemma is that she needs to return the Mayor’s phone to him. When I offer to deliver it for her she swiftly agrees. One inevitable hitch, however, is that he is no longer where I last saw him earlier at the cumple,\textsuperscript{87} nor is he talking with any of the weekend revelers. After a few scanning but fruitless jaunts into the wider arteries with which I have a modicum of familiarity, I give up and ask one of the traficantes. With a nod of his head he assigns an escort to lead me to him.

Twisting our way through Robles, we encounter him inside a low-lit, makeshift barbershop wedged at the end of a forgotten hallway. It reminds me of the nail salon enclaves here, the nooks of entrepreneurial imagination which bubble over into the public sphere.\textsuperscript{88} Basking in my surprise, the Mayor channels Charlie Chaplin eyebrows and offers, “There are many hidden places like this in Alelí.” He is propped up on a barber’s chair, a woman poised behind him—as if in the backstage of a movie set—with an electric razor near his head. Like the two lower points of an isosceles, the escort and I sit down simultaneously on either side of the corridor just below the swiveling, cross-legged

\textsuperscript{87} Birthday party.
\textsuperscript{88} As Dinzey-Flores (2013:88) acknowledges, illicit, homespun businesses are often simply ignored by the management.
Mayor. Smiling at me wryly from under a black cape, he lowers his head to show me how his retreating hairline reflects the topography of Loiza between its two bridges: an inlet on either side, leading to los manglares.89

We are there no longer than five minutes when the escort says slowly, “Deeeeee-a…” breathing out in a low under-the-breath style whistle. It’s quiet. Then, a bit more insistently, staring at the Mayor, he emits, “Siiiiiiiiii-i-lla…,” again extending the first syllable as if his vocal chords were dragging their feet. The escort’s attempt to code his warning is not aphonic, nor accompanied by any notable haptics or kinesics. Yet finally it registers with me. Recognizing the alert, I jump in to finish his list, “Efe-be-i-iiiiiiii…”90 and look at the Mayor with wide eyes.

Turning back to the escort I ask, “Do I look like someone who would carry a gun?” I stand up, raise my arms above my head, turn in a circle, and inquire further, “Where would I even put it?” As many guns as I may have seen in my lifetime, I’ve never touched one. In my household growing up, even toy guns were strictly prohibited; my brother used to make them out of wood blocks in nursery school and bring them home. The Mayor dismisses him with a wave of his hand, “Áurea has worked at la Flamboyán Elementary for twenty years.” Skeptical, the escort throws some more side eye and shoots back at him that he does not remember me and cites the dates of his attendance there as proof. In a rare moment of concession, the Mayor yields, “Okay, ten.”

89 The mangrove forests, for which Loiza is known.
90 Fieldnotes, April 2016. The escort’s latter word sounds, ostensibly, as if it were silla, or chair, in Spanish. But in reality, the escort is pronouncing the federal agencies by their English acronyms as if they were Spanish words: DEA and CIA. I join in so as to indicate that I am cognizant of the ruse, adding FBI—which is not readily pronounced in Spanish—by simply naming the letter string.
Under the Microscope

It was early evening, almost boring, when Quis sends a manda’o to get everyone drinks; he looks over at me, “¿Qué quieres? ¿Un agua?” What do you want? A water? I look at him quizzically, bemused. He tosses his head to the side, “I noticed that you never drink beer or anything—not even a soda. The only thing I have seen you drinking is water.” “Ay sí, that’s true,” I admit. When the manda’o returns with the message that the kiosko was out of water Quis apologizes, “Te debo un agua.”

To no one’s surprise, the nature of my presence in Aleli has been the object of perennial scrutiny. Seven years in, I discover that community members were so confused as to my continued presence there that they used to tease the elementary school students to whom I had been assigned that one day when I took them with me I would not bring them back. Overcome with laughter, Leo slaps the door of my car and confesses, “We always told them that ultimately you were going to use them for organ trafficking.”

Early one evening at la fogata Melquisedec looks over at me, nods decisively, and announces, Quiero ayudarte con tu proyecto. Pleasantly surprised by this newly forged resoluteness, I tell him to let me know when it would be most convenient to interview him formally. After a few days pass volleying around potential locales for said appointment, he invites me to dinner. No fixed time he says; he wants to keep the logistics to a minimum. To coordinate I ask for his number and offer him mine. His response: he doesn’t give out his number. I should not have been surprised, but as usual I am not paying attention.

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91 Fieldnotes, 7.2013. “I owe you a water.”
92 Fieldnotes, 7.2013. “I want to help you with your project.”
As my startled response morphs into indifference, I begin troubleshooting as to how we will connect. He then interrupts to say that indeed he will entrust it to me. Then I refuse to take it. He insists, emphasizing that his yes is yes and that he is now fully certain he is comfortable doing so. I reply that now I’m not. He seems mildly amused. In fact, I tell him, here’s my number but don’t ever call me directly from yours—that way there’s no traceable connection between us.

**Side Eye Ethnography and Other Indelicate Reorientations**

We meet up in the community and he lets me know he’s ready. He feels taking his car would be a bad idea. Mine was about fifty yards away. As I begin to walk towards mine, he balks. Having observed our exchange, both a nearby resident and her mother begin rebuking me harshly, “Go get your car and drive it over here! Don’t you make him walk over there!” Confused as to their motivation, I offer some initial resistance; they remain unflinching. Any protest on my part is met with higher decibel consternation on theirs. Ultimately, without a modicum of understanding—this can’t be a turf issue, we are inside our bounds—I defer to their authority. Directives in our community, particularly urgent ones, are seldom offered alongside explanations. A reflexive, unreflective adherence is expected. I was comforted later when I recalled Ivan Illich’s surmisal, “If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell.”[^93] In the end the invisible intersecting webs of local knowledge (Geertz 1983) must trump an outsider’s visible, superficial logic. I am side eyed into compliance.

In the car Melquisedec offers by way of an explanation that it isn’t a good idea for me to be seen with him. That in the eyes of the community he is “bad” and I am “good,” that the women were trying to protect my reputation as an upstanding, non-substance using person associated with the school. Perhaps there is more to it than that, but I will never be privy to all the customs and networks here.

Later over baked salmon and romaine salad he shares that his doctor had given him only a few more years, so inconsistent is he in maintaining his sugars. We commiserate on issues of poor health. Eventually I share with him the story of the teacher mistaking me for a fed. He understood:

Here you have to think about things as if you were in Afghanistan. At the beginning I was like this with you [pulls his body away from the table and retracts his neck]… a little scared. I don’t want to say that I thought you were a federal but… I was careful around you, thinking: Okay, you arrived [he places his hands out like bookends on the table]. But nobody knows you.

You know how many federal agents I have had at my side talking to me in Spanish just like you are? A ton. [Demanding:] Tell me who this is! With a photo. Like that. People just like you. Americans. In the District Attorney’s office in South District, New York. The same way I see them, I could visualize you…

I wasn’t divine wherein I could know [about your motivations for being in the community], but I saw that you always worried about the little boy and so on. I saw you talking with him a lot, hanging out with his family. So, little by little [I began to trust you] but always watching. Always.

I then confide that when I was thinking about traveling with him to another locale to conduct the interview, I had tried to picture him as violent… but really couldn’t. He smiles a bit sheepishly and tossing his head towards his shoulder confirms that he generally lets most people see his laidback side. Maybe it was too many summers of Mennonite vacation Bible school when I was growing up, but I still had trouble
visualizing it. Marijuana aficionados in general aren’t known for their violence. Yet outside the restaurant just moments prior I’d gotten a glimpse.

When a man begins to approach the parking lot with his daughter—I—feeling the pinch of time and needing to accommodate Melquisedec’s schedule—continue forward instead of ceding the way (which is routine, if not expected, culturally). He snarls a cynical, “Gracias” and Melquisedec bolts forward from his dramatically reclined seat, leans out the passenger window, and spits icily: “De nada.” He is visibly agitated. I have never seen him like this: in the community I don’t know a calmer, more courteous guy. What alarmed me was that his response, ostensibly, was in defense of me, of my action. Yet I would have flat-lined it, would have seen no need for any response whatsoever. We read it differently. Melquisedec—regardless of his exterior—is resolved never to be mistaken for a chump.

**A Group Consensus and Brass Tacks**

![](image)

*A street artist asks, “Are you a friend or a rat?”*  
Cantera, San Juan, PR

*You know how many [U.S.] federal agents I have had at my side talking to me in Spanish just like you are right now? A ton.*

—Melquisedec (a.k.a. Quis)

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*Interview, 6.2014.*
But I bet they didn’t have an aleliano accent I challenge him, grinning broadly. I win that one. But his tentativeness is palpable, is legitimate. He’s newly indecisive and I don’t want to make light of his concern. Or the solemnity with which he is deciding to confide in me; he looks at me soberly and states that we are going to take it slowly. I write on a napkin all the organizations I am associated with and encourage him to look them up online. He declines, however, to take the napkin with him; his aversion to documents, to pen and paper, to anything written is consistent. Anytime I approach la fogata with paperwork in my hands he panics. An ages old trauma trigger lies therein: the official appearance of documentation, the window dressing of authority. I accommodate him as much as I can. The most I carry in my hands are keys, wallet and cell: all visible, all self-explanatory.

With a series of sober nods, a traficante known as Sión confirms to me, “Somos querendones.” He is corroborating how sweet many of the other traffickers have been towards my outsider presence. During times of guerra civil, I have been taught that when entering sectors where I am less known (such as Guaraguao or Robles) I am to demonstrate open hands to the watchful gaze of the traficantes, pat myself down in front of them, and declare—as if by sworn oath—“Estoy clara” (I’m all clear; i.e., I’m not involved in the war), so that they will let me pass without any hindrance. It seems counterintuitive that a stranger’s “word” would hold any weight in such contexts, but on any given day—that is to say, when the war is suspended—there is sufficient walkie talkie communication between bandos which serves to corroborate and ensure that folks are who they claim to be.

95 We are really loving guys.
96 As yet, I have never found it necessary to invoke this script as my passage has never been obstructed.
Although averse to paperwork, Quis leans in with marked interest as I discuss potentialities for the decriminalization of narcotics. At one point he chokes on the food in his mouth because he misunderstands something I say; the moment remains tense, even as I clear up my sloppy form of expression. Regardless however, by the end of the three hour meal he concludes *I’m going to trust you... but we hope we are not wrong.* I actually take comfort in the knowledge that this is not a solo flight, that the decision to allow me entrance is a corporate one—that their relationship towards me—those *bueneantes* of *la fogata*—has been discussed and debated, that the decision does not rest on one person’s shoulders alone.

*“La chota muere.”* For years the tag scrawled in drippy crimson graffiti—as if for added effect—adorned the side of a battered dumpster by the entrance of my now deceased closest friend’s driveway. A reminder that we were not only endlessly surveilled by the state, but also by one another. I never took a photograph of those words (as doing so would cost someone a lot of “normal points”), but even though long since they have been painted over, they remain an image etched indelibly in my mind’s eye, an image which continues to inform my daily work and approach at a subconscious level.

The greatest concern—and one relatively frequent cause of homicide—is the phenomenon of serving as a “satélite,” one who transfers intel from one location to

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97 Interview 6.2014. “Voy a confiar...pero esperamos no equivocar.”
98 Conscience ascribing traffickers
99 The snitch dies.
100 “Normal points” can be hard to come by as a foreigner engaged in ethnographic work. I sought to be at once highly visible—so that residents would be comfortable with my presence, yet also in the commonplaces and ubiquity of my presence to be unobtrusive/inconspicuous. They are not as diametrically opposed goals as they might seem. When at all possible, I strive to avoid what I refer to as “ethnographic drive-bys,” (wherein one simply passes through the community to take a pulse on current happenings), as such information seeking quests can be viewed as tedious, even grating—particularly as I have not often been a fount of economic gain. I’ve found it helpful to have concrete reasons for showing up (e.g., when a coconut harvester sees me in another part of town and asks for a ride, I am sparing him a long walk, but also receiving an opportunity to be organically present in the community). As such, invitations and favors factor into how I can at once make myself useful and incorporate myself more seamlessly into the everyday machinations of community life.
another. Consequently, as an academic, I am subject to “the narco non-compete clause,”\footnote{See Stone 2011 and Yagoub 2015 where the overuse of “narco” as a prefix is addressed.} which dictates that I may not spend time nor be in communication of any format with folks from another government housing project on the Island. When I was assimilated into Aleli’s fogata, this was implicit. Yet on subsequent occasions it has been made more explicit through questions as to whether or not I were spending time in other housing projects.

I also am beholden to report as to those with whom I am associating who may appear to pose a threat. During the most time intensive stretches of my fieldwork I would report all of my contacts and their nature to Quis in advance. Occasionally I would do so after the fact if, for some reason, we were not in communication. This phenomenon also applies to other professions. At the end of 2015 a secretary from one of the schools serving Aleli was transferred involuntarily to a school serving another government housing project fifteen miles away. Recognizing the risk, she refused to go. The Department of Education conceded, rerouting her transfer to a school located in an urban neighborhood not associated with nor within geographic proximity to any other residenciales.
When Rumor is Reality & Truth an Irrelevant Sidebar: Methodologies of Ether

“The perlocutionary force of rumor shows how fragile may be the social world we inhabit.”

—Das (2007:134)

“Nena, te llegaron con un chisme increíble y tú les creiste…”

—Reykon (2016)

I hope that this Easter they find the eggs that they are missing in order to say things to my face.

Arecibo

What nobody ever seems to mention about fieldwork, what it never occurs to anyone to say is that there comes a time when you can’t take fieldnotes. None. Because regardless of your status as a researcher, regardless of your training you have a threshold.

For you are only resilient… until you’re not. This happened to me various times for a

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102 “Girl, they came at you with a juicy piece of gossip, and you believed them.” The ostensible implication here being that, although enticing, it is ill-advised to be drawn into the community rumor mill.

103 A common euphemism for testicles (i.e., signaling fortitude, courage).
variety of reasons: losing my friend unexpectedly, losing a student, a sudden nosedive in my physical health, the grim reality of being misperceived as an undercover federal agent. Weeks go by and you are just trying to survive. You never expected this relentlessly grinding roulette. You never knew where to spend the time you have because you can never predict whose would be up next. It always ended up being a surprise. So you slip into the mode of premeditated grief—of missing even those who are still with you.

What is security for a foreign-born researcher affiliated with the local schools? In late spring 2014 I am approached by a colleague after work whose face is grave: she says we need to talk and motions to my car. Once we are in the sealed space she shares with me that a new teacher has begun to spread *chisme* that I am an undercover federal agent. She knows this misinformation endangers my life; she is determined I be informed in the event that the rumors were to reach the community. Such an incident reveals the minute miscalculation needed to completely dismantle, in a word, years of investment. It is synecdoche for the incredibly delicate balancing act we are all daily executing across a tightrope with no nets beneath: as Taussig (1992:34) so warily reminds us, “in the state of emergency which is not the exception but the rule, *every possibility is a fact*” (emphasis added).

Likewise, every rumor is reality—and can have real consequences (Fagone 2017). When the risk is to life and limb, they can’t afford to be mistaken. Maybe this was simply a sober reminder that we’re all just a hairsbreadth away from becoming finely crushed grist under the punishing stone of the rumor mill. One’s integrity, one’s

104 See Chapter 3.
105 A young man in Philadelphia was shot to death for a false rumor; this dynamic also occurs on the Island.
reputation appears to be only as resilient as the next semi-plausible confabulation which arrives neatly packaged at one’s feet. In one forty-eight hour period I count fourteen *traficantes* who stop speaking to me. Five months later, that number has been whittled back down to five. Given the velocity at which change occurs within our community, any work attempted is always and inherently partial and unfinished. As Scott (1992) delineates,

> Conformity…rests heavily on social pressure… [M]echanisms of social control are painful and often ugly. Slander, character assassination, gossip, rumor, public gestures of contempt, shunning, curses, backbiting, outcasting are only a few of the sanctions that subordinates can bring to bear on each other.

And what I learned in Alelí is that we are all subordinates. All perhaps, except for the *bichote*, priest, and pastor. In that order. I was just as vulnerable to slander and defamation as anyone else there—perhaps more.

Maité is rubbing the corners of her mouth with her index finger and thumb.

Agitated. Gazing out the window she finally laughs dismissively. Turning slowly to address me she levels,

You are no plain clothes federal agent because the plain clothes agents have gripped them up, they threw away the key—are you following me? The same people who they say have been their friends, have turned out to be plain clothes agents, and have been by their sides for four, five, or six years. They are moronic to think that of you. They should be ashamed, you know, because it is the selfsame plain clothes agents who sell them out, who come to [sapiarles]. For the *traficantes*, everyone is a friend of theirs, because when one is a man, for them there are no plain clothes agents who are men. Then afterwards you see them in court when they call the witness to the stand: *Ahhh!!! It can’t be!!!* They don’t take care of what they need to take care of—they know what your work consists of, my God! They are already entangling you in this, soon you will see… from what you know about the drugs and those things…

I really cannot perceive of—I really cannot accept anyone who comes to tell me that you are a plain clothes federal agent because I am going to dispute it, I am going to dispute it: *Give me proof that, give me a sign that shows [it]. You think that?* I wouldn’t even play. *Prove it! Right? Because you remember when they...*
caught you? They hid two worlds... I am going to tell them: You remember when they caught you, when you envisioned the guy as your friend and you introduced him to everyone as your cousin and [in the end] he was the one who took everyone out, when you yourself were almost killed and thrown in jail. That guy wasn’t a plain clothes federal agent to you. Nope. And he was the one who got all of you guys locked up! Show me proof that Áurea is a fed! Because I get heated with these kinds of things, with this slander...

Maité’s words reflect most of the eventual community response. Over time most seemed to disbelieve the rumor. But others never did. To this day they look through me; it is as if I do not even exist. Transparency, the remix.

Years later, Castiel confides that the moment he no longer doubted my status was on the evening I brought my parents to hang out with everyone near la fogata. To this day, folks talk about how my father was reclining in a broken chair—that almost collapsed entirely—until the Mayor insisted he switch to another. On the institutional front, Misi Aurora was not the first or only to speak up in my defense, but she may have been the most vehement:

I have never, ever heard Áurea speak against anyone in the Alelí community. Never. When this teacher or that teacher make a comment, when they share about the travails in the classroom or the strained interactions with parents and complain, she is the first to ask us to look at the issue from another angle, to bear in mind that the student’s parent may be fighting their own battles, to imagine what might be the hidden influences contributing to their reactions. That is why I cannot believe that she is a fed. I just cannot envision a fed talking like that, or having that perspective. I don’t know, I just can’t see it. No. No way.

So ultimately, the “aguacero de chismes”106 blew over—but not without leaving some unpleasant residual detritus in its wake. In time, all but two of the fourteen traficantes resumed their normal interactions with me. Months later, I am in another conversation

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106 Downpour of gossip.
nearby when I hear Misí Aurora recounting this incident to colleagues, “¡Yo me meto la cabeza en la picadora por ella!”

Ethnographer as Object of Insecurity

*I may be a real f****r, but I love you a lot.*

—an Aleliana great grandmother to me, Christmas Eve 2016

Love as Protection, as Willingness to Fight

A new resident, a young kid about fifteen recently arrived from the Bronx, approaches *la fogata* seeking yerba; my two compañeros arise and, in order to accommodate the request, head toward a destination behind me which I intentionally fail to note. Without slowing his gait, the elder of the two, the Mayor, yells back over his shoulder directing the teen to stay with me until they return, adding parenthetically, “if a c***s***** comes through here to f*** with her, split his face open.” While this aggressively overprotective stance is more humorous affection than standing threat, implicit therein is the reality that I am no longer a free agent, but am tied in—however tenuously and fitfully—to a fictive kin network…and any would-be meddlers will be forced to answer to them in the event of foul treatment.

In 2013, after five years of engagement with the residencial of Alelí, there was a seismic shift in the manner by which residents framed my presence there. No longer was I identified as “*una social*” or “*una mentora*” or perhaps most commonly as “*una

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107 “I would stick my head in a food processor for her!” That is to say, I am so certain of this that even at the prospect of potential harm to myself, I would defend her.

108 *Si viene un h****s***** por aqui para j**** con ella ¡que le para la cara!*

109 Fieldnotes, 10.2014. An ex-con returns to the community and upon observing me a few hours, inquires generally as to my profession. “*A social worker?*” she wonders aloud. A mother alongside her smiles at me from across the driveway and, as she parks her stroller perpendicularly, posits, “Ya no.” Elaboration eschewed in all of its resplendent glory. Her disyllabic response conveys, essentially, “not anymore.” This transition of mine was imperceptible to me, but may have been directly correlated with the increasing percentage of time I spent in the community versus in the schools.
“misi.” Instead, whenever I met folks for the first time, they immediately isolated me as “the Mayor’s friend.” In the cathedetic politics of nomenclature, this indicates a meaningful paradigmatic shift. For within the context of Alelí, it is one’s relational, collectivist identity which holds sway, not one’s individualistic identity. As such, were one to remain in the category of one’s professional role (i.e., teacher), one almost lacks authentic personhood.

Three years later, with my subsequent “role” having remained static, I question the Mayor as to why I continue to be identified exclusively as his friend. I want to know why is it that no one, for example, describes me as Melquisedec’s friend, or Maité’s friend, or Mamá Amada’s friend. He shrugs, then smiles and concludes buoyantly: “But it’s better that way—if everyone knows you as my friend no one will dare to f*** with you.” The Mayor, as it turns out, is known to be a bit of a revolucero—a troublemaker or a person who is “quick to fight.” As for me, I finally settle on amigo hermano for how to introduce the Mayor to acquaintances. His actual relation first, his functional station second—not dissimilar to how I introduce the cousin I helped raise, my primo hijo. Or mi primijo as we’ve come to say. Spanish affords these greater indulgences, these broader categories which English boxes out.

A few evenings later there are so many folks visiting the Mayor that he has to stand against the wall while nine of us—mostly his nephews and nieces and brothers—take up the rest of his double bed. His older brother explains to me that unlike his younger sibling, he elects to have very few friends. Three or four at most, he elaborates, because he does not like to fight. His reasoning is that someone like his brother, who has

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110 Friend brother.
111 Cousin son.
many friends, ends up having to fight with marked frequency as a result. Very often in Alelí, love is demonstrated by a willingness to fight for another person.

As a case in point, Abdiel has taken pains to detail how he would intervene (i.e., standing up and physically modeling his stances) if someone were to approach me with bad intentions, and is careful to distinguish between how his interventional methodology would differ vis-à-vis the attacker’s gender. These not infrequent discourses of protection also serve as a barometer of the status of one’s relationships. For as Melquisedec has instructed me soberly various times, it is not necessarily those with whom you socialize who are your actual friends (i.e., those who laugh with you), nor those who “look for you,” which is a commonly circulating norm as per determining one’s interpersonal commitment to another, it is rather: “The people who protect you, those are the ones who are your true friends.”

Badge of Honor: My Security Clearance for Visitation at a Metro Area NICU
The infant’s teen mother, my former student & fictive kin, assigns me the designation “Abuela.”

112 As the teen mother explained to me afterwards, she intentionally selected “paternal grandmother” (see the specific denotation of an underscored “a” followed by the abbreviation “pat”) as my identity because she was concerned that
Yet any proclivity I may possess as to waxing overly sentimental about how community members defend or protect me can be disproven at any given moment without provocation. One local school administrator, whom students refer to as “El Mister,” always rebukes me, arguing that, regardless of what those at la fogata might say, the mere act of sitting alongside them places me at greater risk of becoming an inadvertent target. I attempt to hold these two realities in tension.

Given that Puerto Rico’s then director of HUD (Housing & Urban Development), Hernandez-Vivoni, denied my request to reside within Alelí, I initially moved in across the street from the community. As alluded to previously, immediately upon arrival, I was advised by my landlord to keep my porch door closed to forestall the entry of bullets. Beyond homicide, safety issues in Alelí include torture, dismemberment, and beheading. With seasoned assiduity risks can be mitigated, but only to an extent (Sluka 2007:268, Baird 2009:74). Although some use tactical strategies for conflict zones (Hoffman 2003), I tap into local knowledge (Geertz 1983), often requesting that the traficantes themselves advise me as to issues of safety (e.g., which bus stops to use, which shortcuts to avoid) and am intentionally transparent about my intentions, focus, and advocacy. While realizing nothing is fail proof, I heed the directives and accept the counsel and escorts residents offer. I view my research subjects as fictive kin (Edmonds 2010:169) and endeavor to treat them as such (e.g., assisting mothers in relocating sons whose lives are threatened). In unstable contexts, one cannot “arrive asking,” and expect to be

due to phenotypical differences between us security might doubt the veracity of her claim that I was her mother and consequently deny me entrance.

113 See Appendix B.
accommodated (Theidon 2001:28). Rather, having worked with these youth narco-
soldiers since 2008, access has unfolded fitfully yet organically.

Sluka (2007:268) warns that in unstable locations, “[m]anaging the dangers
inherent in fieldwork…is not something that can be gotten out of the way in the first few
weeks in the field and then dismissed as taken care of.” When a committee member asked
me if I’d thought about my own funeral, I point out that there are instances in which a
person’s death is more productive than their continued presence. Or, as Quis points out, is
utterly irrelevant. Intending to be neither flippant nor anxious, for the most part I heed the
counsel of the residents and accept escorts when offered (this primarily happens after
dark, usually after 7 pm) or in areas that are particularly “caliente” hot). If anything, I
have mostly felt well protected. Yet perhaps this level of protection proffered perhaps
indexes the very asymmetry of worth which Fassin (2010) aims to address.

Friends in the community sometimes refer to me as sanana—which loosely
translates into idiotically innocent, or (perhaps a bit more kindly) devoid of malice. After
more than seven years in the community I imagined myself to be rather acclimated. Then
an elder confides to me the recent observation of a mutual friend, “She is not awake. She
needs to be awoken. Wake her up!”114

In having studied the minutiae of so many interactions, I’d felt pretty confident
that I was able to discern the manifold ways in which one mafiosa actively cared for—
and dare I say—was mildly affectionate with me. Then I got the phone call. And began to
think: yeah this Aphonic Ethnography is completely misguided. It's 7:30 on a Friday
night and I’m in Cupey with a friend finding culinary refuge in a bowl of Turkish red

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114Fieldnotes, 9.2014. “No está despierta. Hay que despertarla. ¡Despiértala!”
lentil soup and kofte. I haven’t seen her in four months, so when my cell lights up, I ignore it. A few hours later, seated on the front landing of their condo in the rolling hills of Trujillo Alto I return the call. The voice of a community elder, Maité, on the other end of the phone warns, “She wants to kill you, but she doesn’t dare, she doesn’t dare. That’s why today she almost hit you with her car. I saw it from my window.”115 I look up at the staircase light fixture. Probably three pounds of lifeless insects lie entombed in the frosted glass orb; maintenance is not always our strong suit on the Island. In all fairness, however, there’s a lot to maintain in a climate where the humidity is almost always higher than the temperature. I sigh. Seems like speculation on her part, a florid imagination. Or perhaps endless naïveté on mine.

I tend to lack the primal safety mechanism most people have known as fear116; I also tend to interpret the threat of vehicular assault as playful affection. The last time someone aimed their car at me, I was standing in the drive-thru lane of a McDonald’s in Lancaster City absorbed in conversation. Swerving at the “last second” (he actually gave me a few feet), a local trafficker wanted to see if he could scare me. Indignant until I recognized him—an old friend I hadn’t seen in years—I laughed along with him as he leaned his head out the window to engage in a fond repartee. Urban humor is not always genteel, and—like love itself—can be at turns clumsy and unsettled, high voltage and sporadic. That rare sighting of a loved one who’d kept himself intentionally “off the grid” was a welcome reunion. So while “reckless endangerment” wasn’t high on my list of impromptu mental categorizations of the day’s earlier close call, vehicular homicide, I

115 Informal conversation. “Ella te quiere matar, pero no se atreve, no se atreve. Por eso hoy casi te chocó con el carro. Lo vi desde mi ventana.”
116 At the 2016 American Anthropological Association’s annual conference in Minneapolis, I was recruited by a UK researcher seeking to construct a team of “risk indifferent” researchers for further narcotics investigations in Latin America (in this instance, specifically in Michoacán).
realize now, was entirely absent. It hadn’t occurred to me to be scared; I was just momentarily annoyed. Wouldn’t have given the incident another thought.

But Maité remains insistent. “You never noticed,” she demands, “how when you arrive she grabs her car keys and leaves? She wants you to know that she’s rejecting you because you don’t give her what she wants.”

“I don’t buy my friends,” I replied staunchly, “but just out of curiosity, what exactly do you think would finally gain her good graces?” “Maybe if you gave her a thousand dollars.” A thousand dollars. I have trouble just paying my rent. In earlier years I’d allowed myself to be blackmailed more than once into buying children’s school uniforms by the simple fact that they can’t attend without one. The stringency with which this is enforced borders on lunacy: more than one child I know has been barred from entering schools for weeks at a time simply for having more than one color on the requisite “all black shoes.” Who knew that I needed to stock my glove compartment with an arsenal of black Sharpies?

Her next comment refocuses my attention: “She wants to make an enemy out of you. What would have happened if her brakes had failed?”117 Weary, I resign myself to labeling the recklessness as a sentiment of ill-will. “What do I do?” I ask closing my eyes and pressing on my aching sinuses. “Nada,” she commands anti-climactically, “Keep coming. But pay attention! You always have to know what’s going on around you. I am going to rebuke her.”118 “Okei,” I agreed, “And maybe you should mention it to the Mayor.”

117 Ella te quiere enemistar. ¿Qué hubiera pasado si los frenos habían fallado?
118 Sigues viniendo. Pero ¡Que prestes atención! Siempre tienes que saber lo que está pasando. Yo le voy a regañar.
Later that same weekend I fail to notice a woman walking towards me in the check-out line as I drop my last bag of packed groceries into my cart. Quietly she asks, “You aren’t talking to me anymore?” But I hadn’t seen her! It’s a former student’s mother. She looks concerned, “Don’t go to Aleli: things have turned. Did you go today?” I told her yes…earlier. She said don’t return tonight because they are conducting rounds with their automatic weapons.\footnote{No voyas allá: ha revuelto. ¿Fuiste hoy? No regreses esta noche porque están haciendo rondas con las armas…} I thank her and request she greet me more loudly next time. She is one of the mothers who no longer allows me to take her children to the pool.\footnote{Over the years, as my schedule has allowed (sometimes as often as weekly), I take a carload of children to my friends’ condominium’s pool and their children spend the day playing together with the Aleliano children.} In person she is very polite—even sweet. But my association with those in the circle of la fogata appears to have subjugated me to a realm which does not intersect with responsible adulthood childcare. By the sheer number of hours spent and my close association with the traffickers (Bourgois 2011), I have become ineligible to interact in the same ways as I once did when I was conceived of as simply an upstanding Misí from the local school.

Three months later little has changed. One late October afternoon I make an even exchange, swapping the 108 degree weather of my apartment for the 108 degree weather of Maité’s. While philosophizing about her neighbors, she stops abruptly, gives me the side eye, and brings up a tired topic:

[There are folks here who] see your face as a dollar sign. I can tell you this because they have talked about it in front of me. That you have money. That’s why sometimes… I am texting you to see if you are okay and all that, you understand me? Because—uh, people have a good bit of malice, some people here have a lot of malice. If something happens to you I am going to blame la mafiosa because… Look, [kisses the tips of her fingers and lifts them up to God] before Daddy God: She is the one who I’ve heard talking—that you’re loaded. I will accuse her. She knows I will accuse her. I don’t have to say anything to her. I have family who are in the NIA and all that, who are feds. I am telling you this
because that’s the reason I am **always** [begins drumming her fingers loudly on the table] texting you: [to see] if you are alright, this and that. Understand? **To know if you are ALIVE!** [Ends the drumming with one loud punctuating slap]
Understand?

…I also don’t trust [them]. I don’t trust them. Because, it’s that, my concern is that you have taken people where you didn’t have to take them: to where you live. You can’t bring people to your house. Perhaps… perhaps…perhaps… [you can offer people] trust and good treatment, but you know… Everyone who laughs with you is not your friend, understand? What I’m saying to you is not that something is going to happen to you, no, because I know that Daddy God has to protect you a lot because you what you have done is good, understand? But it’s not a good idea [to take people where you live]. Here in the community no one knows where Melquisedec lives. In Manatí. (Claps her hands twice). Nothing more. [And people ask:] But where? Which neighborhood? [But he says only] in Manatí. That’s it. Period. No one.121

So Maité feels I have been sloppy, overly trusting; the men at *la fogata* proceed to make this even more clear. Years later I piece together that the concern expressed by Maité and *los bueneantes* was due to an incident wherein trust was extended in a similar manner to *alelianos* by a person from a neighboring community, and he ended up being murdered in his own home when they robbed him.

**Street Level Apologetics & Wisdom in the Round**

The cemetery is full of people who were too trusting.

—Quis

You know *panas*?122 *Panas* are everywhere, they are fruit that falls from the trees all over the ground, they fall and then they rot there. That’s what *panas* are—a dime a dozen.

—Abdiel

Both narcotics involved and non-narcotics involved community members
diligently direct me as to how to conduct myself with regard to the local gangs’
headquarters, stash houses, and open-air distribution points. With few exceptions, their

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121 Informal Conversation, 10.2014.
122 Breadfruit, a starchy round vegetable which hangs from trees. Also used colloquially to denote friend. Abdiel is making the distinction between an acquaintance and an authentic friend “amigo,” of which one likely has few.
counsel inevitably reflects a deference to celestial authority. Alarmed I could lose my life, a distressed friend of mine went so far as to retrieve me from a stash house one evening. 123

It is around 9 pm and I am awash in a symphony of suggestions: each member of la fogata’s circle invariably making his case as to why he does not want me at el punto or inside the stash house. Leo advises that people could think I was wearing a wire—a rather old-fashioned sentiment given the wireless age—and further, as referenced earlier, given that even the traficantes turn one another in, why wouldn’t they automatically suspect someone like me? So it seems no one—not even any one of them—is ever “in the clear,” as I tend to delude myself. But overall, they urge me repeatedly to stay attentive.

Arching his left eyebrow and leaning towards me, the Mayor warns, “They are going to charge you with conspiracy.” 124 He must not appreciate my subsequent countenance because he sits back and punctuates his warning with a reproachful, “En serio.” As a concession he softens his own, offering that I may stand outside of the balcony areas and converse with folks at that distance. I mull over how incredibly less intimate catching up through the stark latticework of peeling painted steel bars is versus the cozy context of a living room sofa. I’m torn. Over the past six years without incident, I had been going to these locales customarily to visit various friends. Though not opposed to their counsel, I find myself rather crestfallen trying to reconcile what it means in terms of maintaining those relationships that had taken so long to forge.

It all began with my telling the Mayor that I about having wanted to visit an ailing grandmother who lives next to el punto the other night but since it was evening, I didn’t

123 See Aphonic Interlude VI.
124 Te van a dar conspiración.
know what to do as I didn’t want to disrespect him by going against his counsel by being there at night. He responds that, “It doesn’t matter whether it’s day or night, one shouldn’t go over there.” The Mayor reminds me again that the charge would be conspiracy were I there during a raid. His concern is not unfounded. I respond that there are many people that I care about there, whom I would like to continue to visit…\textsuperscript{125} We are at a crossroads. The irony is that that which had been daily fare, had now become off-limits as a result of deepening and more serious social ties. He takes a few slow draws on his cigarette and studying me concedes, “Or you could go there—if you need to be in such places, but when God tells you to leave, you must leave immediately. Just like that.”\textsuperscript{126} I smile slightly, nodding. It seemed we’d reached a compromise. I clarify, “So when I have the feeling that I shouldn’t stay any longer there, then I should leave?” “That’s right,” he confirms.\textsuperscript{127} Essentially, the same conclusion as implemented for many other of life’s quandaries: \textit{Lo dejamos en las manos de Dios.} We leave it in God’s hands.

Later, backpedaling a bit, the Mayor adds that the important thing is that now I know it is a drug point, so I can just use my discretion; his primary concern was that I hadn’t known. Finally, peering over his glasses, Melquisedec levels with me in a fatherly tone: “I come at it in terms of probabilities; I like to consider things with regard to probability—the probability that someone is going to kill you at el punto is high, it’s more likely. Because there are more gunfights there. Over here, not as much. So…”\textsuperscript{128} Then sitting back in his lawn chair, he tosses a hand into the air and lets it fall. He remains gazing at me as if awaiting confirmation that I concur. Instead I wonder aloud,

\textsuperscript{125} Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
\textsuperscript{126} Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
\textsuperscript{127} Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
\textsuperscript{128} Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
“But a gunfight could happen here, too. So either way, right?” Melquisedec shifts in his chair. I scan their faces but no one meets my gaze. Productive silence—falling under the colloquial category of, “lo que no se ve no se dice.” I was highlighting the obvious. Presumably all these nights we were supposed to sit here and actively not think about that possibility. This swollen silence is akin to the response I received upon asking Melquisedec his “official role” within the local narcotics network. Far from seeking to operate a confessional, I was simply in search of appropriate terminology. Nonetheless, that query too fell under the aforementioned classification: inappropriate and therefore swallowed into the vortex of productive silence.

Days later Melquisedec stands across from me, rocking back and forth on one heel, studying me. Squinting his eyes in disbelief, he inquires again: “But all those years nobody ever mentioned anything to you about it being a stash house?” I shrug... “Que yo sepa, no.” It seems a mutually beneficial endeavor, his desire to analyze this dramatically slow evolution of my cognizance that I was in the midst of a narcotics ring. I thought a bit more. Maybe it was because I really didn’t care either way; such details had no impact on why I was there. I never made a distinction between narcotics involved families and non-narcotics involved families—except that there were more funerals in the former. But mostly it just didn’t matter. My own family is composed of both; love is love.

Finally, I recall an offhanded explanation, “Well one thing I remember that was a bit strange was when the pit bulls would do their low-throated growl towards me or one

129 Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
130 That which is seen does not have to be said.
131 ¿Pero todos esos años nadie nunca te decía nada?
132 That I know of, no.
of my visiting family members, their owner would reassure me that they were not
dangerous, that they were trained to attack only police.” At this, Melquisedec seems
mildly irritated, takes a long draw on his blunt and then declares that they were not truly
friends if they hadn’t protected me. “The ones who protect you: those are your friends.”
That said, definitions are rarely static. And love in Alelí—as I was learning—often meant
protection and being willing to fight for someone.

This correlation became uncomfortably evident when I uncovered an exchange
which occurred in my absence between a community elder, Maité, and a younger
resident:

Á: You know that Lali has been good with me lately.
M: Yes, well, she’s not going to f*** with you anymore.
Á: She’s not going to f*** with me anymore?
M: Nah!
Á: In what sense?
M: Because I have threatened her.
Á: Wait, what?
M: I told her, I said, “Whoever f**** with Áurea is going to have to f***
with me because that girl what she is doing is working for the community
and for our children…so that they will be somebody in the future and not
become more maleantes than we already have.” Then I [hacerme la
pendeja] and kept walking. “She’s a really good person, Maité,” she called
after me. “That’s why I said what I did!” I told her. [A bichota\(^{133}\)] said the
same thing to me about you—and she knows who I am. That I don’t mess
with just anybody. Let me find out that someone f**** with you and I will
go and I will [stop/pay it]—whether it’s a man or a woman…I don’t like
abuse.

Maité’s public dictum valorizes not only my presence in the community, but my primary
purposes for being there. As I quickly realize, community buy-in means little unless
those undergirding you hold sway. Her words, I imagine, are not merely words. Only a

\(^{133}\) Female druglord.
few months ago Maité sucker punched another community member who had stolen her money.134

As a rule, I do not bring anyone but family members into the community. One exception to this is a friend of mine who is a pastor. Very often folks ask for prayer, or less commonly, for him to come and give a service. In 2013 a group came in with me to do a parranda (in which the community members also participated, providing drinks and refreshments for everyone), but such instances are exceptional. And in that instance many community members expressed interest in our returning to do another. By and large, however, when I receive inquiries from outsiders, I decline—whether or not they are laced with macabre notes of atrocity tourism. But in Alelí, as family is sacred, my family is welcome.

My only brother visits—during a period of relative peace. Quickly encircled by adolescent boys, he taps into his coaching acumen to supervise impromptu chin-up competitions from the terrace rejas and push-up regimens. His natural reticence and inspiring size make his presence more fluid than most. Yet his last time Islandside, he was reluctant to visit. In defense of my brother, Melquisedec sustains that if he were vacationing, he wouldn’t go to the bad parts of that country either. Pondering this further, Melquisedec leaves the circle and walks towards the main artery. A few yards from us he scans the topography and counsels: “Think about being here as if it were Afghanistan, a countryside of death.”135 Or killing fields. Sweeping his arm across the expanse of the parking lot he throws open his fingers in consecutive bursts, commemorating each life

134 Fieldnotes 6.2014
135 “Piénsalo como que si fuera Afganistán,” me avisó, “un campo de matanza.”
lost: “Wherever you look here, you think about who died in that spot.” He was quiet for a moment, then rubbing the five o’clock shadow on his chin, he turns back towards us, looks at me and decides, “Really, this place is like a concentration camp.” Quis is not alone in making this parallel.

**Before You Leave Your House:**
**An Invitation to a More Meditative Ethnography**

Later Leo, becomes even more directive than when he passed through *la fogata*.

His rebuke leaves no ambiguity:

*I saw you Tuesday back in there [at the point] during the nighttime, walking way back in there, at that hour and Melquisedec accompanying you. ¡Ay Aurea! I know you do what you do with love, with the love that God demands [of all of us], but do it with a level of precaution. Be careful. Pray before you go anywhere. Before you dive deeply into such a place: pray! You can’t leave your house to visit anyone without having prayed.*

*Before you leave your house, before you even put your foot in the street, you need to get on your knees, shut the door to your bedroom, and ask God in the name of Jesus:*

*Look, I’m going to leave my house: Have mercy on me. Guard me. I’m going to visit this person, that person. I ask you Lord, that for the love of Your Word that I ask by the merits of Your Son, that You guard me, protect me. Give me words for that person. Protect me from the encroachment of the enemy, from [his] plots, in the name of Jesus, protect me from all the schemes of Satan. I walk in the name of Jesus: everything that rises against me [will be cast off]. [Let me give what is fitting] to the person who most needs it. And rebuke, cut loose, cut loose, I cut loose right now in the name of Jesus—Your Word says, “What is cut loose on the earth will likewise be cut loose in heaven.” So I cut loose right now a squadron of angels who watch over and accompany me with Your scabbard-less sword. Lord, carry me with Your Shekinah [glory] and cover me. You know that the Holy Spirit is always welcome in this room. Holy Spirit, here [I am], Your servant declaring it to be so.*

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136 “En dondequiera que te mire, piensas en quien se murió allí.”
137 “Aquí es como un campo de concentración.”
138 Given that there had been multiple episodes of recreational shelling that night, Melquisedec offered to accompany me to retrieve my car which was caddy corner from *el punto*. He subsequently requested I refrain from parking there in the future and directed me to park across the street in an adjacent lot.
139 Informal conversation, 4.2014.
140 Fieldnotes, 4.2014.
For Leo it was distressing to see me with Quis because Quis does not move without provocation; he, too, is anchored to a circumscribed space—a space decidedly set apart from that of the *traficantes* at the point. So Leo offers the rebuke instructionally, in an effort to protect me from future harm. He feels uncomfortable that I was there without what he understands to be an appropriate spiritual covering. Every time I read over these fieldnotes I have to acknowledge my laxity in this department, and mull over the potential benefits of a more meditative ethnography.

That said, Leo is not only concerned for my physical safety, but my spiritual health. One night after a long absence on my part, Leo accompanies me to my car as I prepare to leave:

> Don’t let go of Christ because up until now, the one who has kept you standing has been him. Believers need to gather for fellowship, look for a way to fellowship more in the church. It’s that gathering with others that’s going to save you—not just being in a church, but, but you’re obeying the mandates of the Word of God that says, “Gather together in fellowship, not like those who have forsaken the custom of gathering together...” It’s not only Paul who says that; but also David in the Psalms, “I was glad when they said, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” and he also wrote saying, “Better one day in Your house than thousands outside of it.” Live!
At least in good time, you are coming [here] to see people that maybe you care about them and love them and they care about you and love you, but you could talk to them about God and it is like talking to the face of a rock. They are people who [se van por la vida de Cristo] here and you see them in their daily lifestyle, their daily practice. It’s not bad that you visit them, but if you can take time out to visit church before coming here, do it. Like just a moment to gather together—and then if you leave early from there you pass by here [he assumes a posture to imitate how I should act towards them, what I should say], “Listen, how are you? God bless!”

The emphasis here appears to be on brevity. Mixture, sustained engagement—not so much. He draws some rather distinct lines on fellowship: on brethren and non-brethren, on those with whom one should fully engage and those with whom one should perhaps be merely polite.

[When] you see those people smoking marijuana? Move away from them. They light up a Fili? Get away. That’s what I do. They are my friends and I care about them. We were raised together our whole lives—since we were small. We talk for a moment when I’m here with them. [But] they go over there to smoke. They move. I’m going to teach them that I love and care about them, but I don’t love that conduct. God loves the sinner, but I don’t love what they do. God detests the sin and the Bible says “Now I do not live, rather Christ lives in me.” Christ is sick of that. We have to love them because they are souls for salvation, and they are our friends but it’s not like—

Leo is cut off by the motorcycles rocketing by us. As soon as they are gone, he laments,

“I’m telling you, it never fails: the motorcycles come through when we are talking about God. Whenever we are talking about a God-related theme, the motorcycles go by.” Later I challenge Leo as to his understanding of Jesus’ interactions with those marginalized by society. He corrects my theology by asserting that such occasions were exceptional.
Meanwhile, Leo himself is under another informal version of surveillance. His elbow out and his hand firmly on his thigh, Abdiel leans in and demands indignantly, “Can a person be a Christian and at the same time steal?” Amidst a verbal flagellation of Leo, Quis and Abdiel are protesting that his professed Christianity is not authentic because he does not pay taxes to the government. Hyper-sensitized as to all aspects of illegality—perhaps in a subconscious effort to downplay their own—the bueneantes school me as to which micro-enterprises in Alelí pay taxes and which do not. Abdiel explains that the kiosks on the main drag “have their papers,” whereas those on the inside mostly do not. However, the regulator of such businesses, Hacienda, rarely comes inside to check. At this pronouncement Abdiel breaks into a wide grin, “Because they’re scared.” Then adds parenthetically, “But if they do come, they bring a lot of police with
them.”

It is common knowledge that Alelì is not readily dominated. As one Puma gas station attendant across the street from the community demands of me angrily, rhetorically,

Who dares enter Alelì? Who? Not the police, not social services, no one. The only way social services goes in there is with a brigade of police in tow. They don’t dare. The whole site needs to be leveled, demolished and the residents relocated: each family to a different municipality on the Island. That’s what needs to happen. There is no other solution.

**Paper Amulets**

Overall Leo remains troubled that I do not share his style of interpersonal interaction; he fears that I am misguided or perhaps naïve. In general he nurses a gnawing concern about my status as a Christian; it is difficult for him to reconcile those areas where he encounters our theological differences to be misaligned. In any case, he continues to counsel me:

*Always walk with something on you. You always want to have this, look. [He pulls out a Bible tract]. Always carry these on you so that when you stop to talk with them, you can give them out. It’s so that you can give them out wherever you might stop...um, um, they’re called tracts. So look, when you stop to talk with someone always have them in your hand so that if someone passes by your side, [you can tell them] “Look, God bless you. Amén.” If God blesses him I scream, jump. He’s going to repent because the reign of heaven is already close. That’s what you are to be preaching. You have to tell them the Word. You don’t have to argue any further, just:*

  “God bless you.”
  “Jesus loves you.”
  “Christ is coming soon.”

*And just with that, you’ve preached. And that’s better. Then in life, you’re going to learn more—a pretty, intelligent girl like you. I’m telling you this so that you begin to practice this custom, understand? If you don’t have a church, come with me! Come with me to church and I’ll go there with you.*

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141 Fieldnotes, 3.2016.
142 Informal Conversation, 3.2016.
A few times a month, members from local churches in a neighboring working class barrio come through two or three at a time, handing out tracts to those residents who happen to be outside. Doing something that approximates the Charleston Shuffle, the elderly or middle aged church folk dressed in loose-fitting, muted attire make their way through the non-church folk and the *domingueros*. These are the folks that believe firmly in “Los 4P,” the four P’s, which stand for: *Pantalones* (Pants—women can’t wear them), *Pantallas* (Earrings—women can’t wear them), *Pelo* (Hair—women can’t cut theirs), and *Pintarse* (Make-up Application—women can’t wear it). Like the Amish, women are instructed also not to pluck their eyebrows.

Although I have yet to encounter the men’s version of these laws, I understand that t-shirts are frowned upon—particularly those with Old English or German Gothic font, that is associated with Satanism; some iteration of a tie also acts as a social marker of respectability. While door to door evangelism is not a custom I have observed here,

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143 The alternately affectionate or pejorative name for folks who only attend church on Sundays and are therefore not considered *entregadas*, or committed to Christ. *Domingueros* is a less lax but still derogatory version of the English term “Chreaster” which refers to those who profess to be Christians but who attend church only on Christmas and Easter.

144 “Los 4P” are not to be confused with “los 3P”: *Peluá, Peluá, y Pidiendo* (broke, needing a haircut, and begging).
these one on one transactions appear quite unobtrusive: maybe a word or two exchanged, a hand extended, a polite reception—yet notably with little or no gaze transaction. Both sides already know the script. The exchange almost appears rehearsed, wooden.

While these tracts are not understood to be imbued with the brujería, or witchcraft, of bulletproofness à la Sierra Leonean amulets (Hoffman 2011), neither are they entirely devoid of their own mystique. As such, what I have never witnessed is an individual refuse a tract. What I have never come across is a tract crumpled and discarded on the street. Here in Alelí, a tract does not constitute litter. And while the common areas outside are largely kept immaculate, you may see a take-out container, contents half-eaten, abandoned on the ground, or a soda can someone tossed over their left shoulder; you may spy a collection of two by fours temporarily left mid-project which children convert into a make-shift see-saw; you may even encounter a few rectangular bundles of hay awaiting distribution to community horses. But one thing you will never see propelled by the wind across the dusty terrain of Alelí is a Bible tract—those three by two inch pamphlets filled with urgent spiritual instructions as to how to change your life trajectory, so that after a 180 degree about face, it aims towards the Triune God.

These paper amulets, which outline the steps to salvation or counsel for a troubled heart, possess their own agential and transcendental force and are thereby considered sacred, are regarded as instruments of potential life transformation. As such, the phenomenon of tract dispersion and reception acts as a barometer for community members’ personal reflection upon and understanding of their peace with God. One evening tract dispersal incites a quarrel between two young men as to their status before

\[145\] A 6-8 man team from Vivienda comes daily and works full eight hour shifts to maintain them. Residents are responsible for maintaining their stairways clean, although Vivienda does paint them routinely.
God. One of the parties—an ex-con who eschews heteronormativity in favor of pansexuality—explains, “I am a brother in faith; I may not walk as closely with the Lord as others, but I am still a brother in the faith.” He maintains this stance even in the face of those, like Leo, who argue the opposite. Such skirmishes, though low-level in appearance, are nonetheless ever-present micro-aggressions which contribute to the tenor of the community at large.

As exhibited in the colorful exchange which follows, the Mayor is not ambivalent when it comes to the intrinsic value of tracts.

Heriberto, between blunts, dutifully thanks the just-past-the-knee-length skirted woman for the tract before passing it to his great aunt to hold. “Read it!” demands the Mayor. “Not now,” he strikes back. The Mayor does not stand for this. Incensed, he repeats, ‘Not now? Not now? Huh! You know what’s going to happen to you? On the Day of Judgment the Lord is going to tell you the same thing: Not now. And then you will be judged last. The very last one. Everyone will go before you. You will have to wait.” Harrumphing in his seat a bit, the Mayor leans back and punctuates his rebuke with a reference to Matthew 10:33: “Because, remember, he said, ‘If you deny Me on earth then I will deny you in heaven.’” Nonplussed, Heriberto stretches his elbows forward onto his knees, folds his hands across his forehead, and looks down at the concrete beneath his feet.146

With no small amount of paternal fervor, the Mayor intends to enforce a code of conduct wherein one receives the tract and then proceeds to respectfully skim—if not read—through its contents before tucking it tastefully into one’s pocket or waistband. The idea is that you do not refuse a blessing. You do not show contempt for the Word of God. Even the lone atheist, Melquisedec, wordlessly receives the slips of paper and nods slightly to express thanks.

Personally, I have never handed out a tract a day in my life. And while just like the careful placement of Gideon Bibles in every hotel room nightstand since the 1950s

has been done with the intention of averting suicides, the distribution of tracts may also serve as palliation—particularly within a context of deliverance-oriented culture. As such, tracts are not, as I might be tempted to think, entirely without merit. Even with this concession, however, I was not signing on as Leo had envisioned.

I’m not judging you. No, what I’m doing is talking to you. I’m having a conversation with you, telling you, “Look, sometimes there are things in our lives that sometimes impede our fellowshipping together as we should—or perhaps in the manner that—how you do it God knows…I’m not judging you, I’m saying, “Look, let your gratitude always be given to God, always set apart for Him. Always take a little time out. Always take out your tract in order to read the Bible. They sell them 100 for three dollars; keep the rest in the plastic packet at your house. And I’ve always said, “At the church service, at the bus stop or on the bus, you cannot fail to distribute them because we are to proclaim Christ. We should practice the Gospel with actions so that you can be saved, you hear?

With photographs as visuals and color ink, the pamphlets given to me by Leo for purposes of distribution are the Rolls Royce of Bible tracts.

Over a year later while we are congregating at fogata, a church van pulls up to drop-off the faithful. An elderly man wearing a neatly pressed guayabera makes wordless rounds, extending to each one of us a tract. Subsequently, as Quis and I are talking, he notices that his manda’o, Romi, is fixated upon trying to decipher the drawing on the
tract’s cover. He calls over to him gently, “You’ve got it upside down.” With a cautionary motion, Quis looks back over at me and raises his index finger, “Even though I am an atheist, yo respeto. I read them and then I pass it along to another person. I don’t throw them away.”

Later on, I offer to read Romi’s tract to him and he confides that he was once an evangelical—only he “fell away.” But to clarify, he wants me to know that he still retains some knowledge about God… and that he tucks all the tracts he’s given into a Bible he keeps in his bedroom because they are “a testament of the love of God” and “a message from God to man telling them to visit church.” He tugs his ball cap down, “It is God’s angel who distributes them.” Then echoing the Mayor’s sentiments from years prior, he adds, “Those who discard them do not believe in what God’s angel is delivering to them.”

**Listening Backwards over a Lifetime:**
*Transparency and Emotional Tethering in Reflexive Ethnography*

There are three ethnographically situated and intentionally recuperative prongs to my dissertation: reflexive, linguistic, and cultural. With regard to the reflexive component, I ask how can the silence within anthropology with regard to the dynamics of
affective tethering between researchers and their subjects might be challenged? When Das organizes a summer camp for children traumatized by violence, there is an implicit sense that the geographical change in locale matters, that the established emotional tethering between she and the children matters. And that language production and affective states are intrinsically, inherently connected. It was there, within a space of safety, that those who were customarily mute “suddenly found language pouring out of their mouths” (Das 2007:201). Conventionally within the realm of academic endeavors emotion is bracketed out—or at least firmly allocated to the margins. What if, instead, such frictions, such connections were reconvened centripetally? For is it not the sanctioned ethnographic activity of “building rapport” which in some ways serves merely as a euphemism for the more candid transaction of emotional tethering? And is it not this almost necessarily highly cathected tethering which even allows for the possibility of knowledge production?

The privileging of conversation is not universal (Hymes 1966). From literary icons to philosophers, many have argued that there is at least equal if not greater emotion, greater intimacy in the conveyance of shared silence, than in morsels of speech (Potok 1987, Deleuze & Guattari 2011, Enninger 1991). It is no small irony that much of the initial (and continued) affective tethering between the children and me occurred, both inside and outside of the third grade classroom, primarily through the construction of a repertoire of wordless intimacies—where empathic gaze, attentiveness, mirroring, and emotional synchrony all coalesced to communicate vested attunement. Ritualistically, one child spends the first forty minutes of every trip to the pool plunging to the depths to recover scattered flower petals and then wordlessly depositing them—not on the ledge of
the pool—but in my hand. Both in the school where silence is read as recalcitrance and in the homes where silence is read as a lack of respect, I have been chastised for indulging the children in these silences, for failing to demonize their non-vocalized contributions. Yet when the children reach the point where their hyper-vigilance can recede, when they can fall asleep on the car ride home, when they are allowed—even encouraged—to use silence as their sanctuary, it is then, it is then that they begin to speak.

To date, we lack a substantive apologetic for ethnographic transparency in field intimacies. What if rather than being relegated to a smattering of poignant vignettes, the sentiments of affection, pain, pleasure became the bricks and mortar of the ethnographic campaign, the verbal jousting challenges between the researcher and alternately willing and resistant fictive kin became the very foundation of raw, grassroots, no-holds-barred ethnography? If our unit of analysis becomes the affective collision (Jackson 2010), wherein the intimacies and complexities of the ethnographic relationship are front and center, sweating under the unrelenting beams of stage lighting? How can the hegemonic definition of what ethnography is traditionally (e.g., apolitical, detached) be challenged through a more intimate, invested, and organic alternative? How can the vehicle of urban ethnography serve to wrest affect from the footnotes and ascribe it a more salient role?

Given that the questions grounding my research are not simply methodological and epistemological but also incredibly personal, I am constrained to reconsider the interventional politics of social sciences—with its delayed notion of change (i.e., research now, intervention to follow): what if the vaunted and seemingly most unobtrusive “action” of waiting invariably constructs the researcher as a volitional accomplice to observed violences? And within the discipline of ethnography can we ever put a decisive
finger on evil (Fassin 2008)? If in-vivo-dismembering-of-young-men-whose-age-still-
renders-them-ineligible-to-vote qualifies, how far down the spectrum can we proceed
before there is dissension, before there is contestation? Can we not somehow be at once
both militant (Scheper-Hughes 1995) and nuanced (Fassin 2010)? Arguably, it is only in
becoming meticulous students of the unspoken silences of violence that ethnographers
can hope to serve as an Aaronic mouthpiece for those entangled in what is misrecognized
as an “inarticulate” response to trauma (Scarry 1985). There is, as it turns out, no
neutrality. How might we, as ethnographers, hope to participate—with immediacy—in
the substantive amelioration of trauma as part and parcel of, as indivisible from our daily
work? These are among the questions which foreground and undergird all of my work,
both on and off the field.

Navigating the Conflicted Role of Researcher Identity:
Ethnographer off-kilter

During a quiet evening at la fogata, the Mayor absentmindedly extends his
forearm towards me to pass his blunt. When he sees me shaking my head and realizes
what he has done, he recoils violently declaring: “If you had smoked it, I would stop
talking to you!” Again, I shake my head smiling at his consternation. As repulsed as he is
by the idea of me smoking, the Mayor is relaxed enough to commit the oversight, to feel
comfortable enough in my presence to forget my non-participation in this aspect.

Some academics, with no small amount of skepticism, have inquired as to how
one might “infiltrate” such a tightly knit narcotics circle without participating in the use
of controlled substances. Most notably a former colleague of my father’s suggested that
such embedded work would be impossible without “full participation.” As exemplified
above, such an assessment is only possible because he’s never met the Mayor. Whenever
anyone at la fogata even began to explicate in too much detail anything regarding the characteristics of various illicit products on offer, the Mayor would intervene and put a swift end to it. “Áurea doesn’t need to know any of that,” he would snap. Quis, on the other hand, always encouraged me to join in; I never did.

But the extent to which I was sheltered during my tenure in Alelí is perhaps best encapsulated by my unintentional yet complete unfamiliarity with the packaging of crack on the Island. When one Teniente at the Cuartel General in Hato Rey was kind enough to walk me through photos of the contraband seized in various recent stings,¹⁴⁷ for example, I was unable to recognize the crack capsules because they did not contain “rocks” like the stateside equivalent I was accustomed to seeing in North Philadelphia during prior decades. This, and yet crack is ostensibly the substance most commonly sold in Alelí. All told, this sheltering which I experienced was attributable not only to folks like the Mayor who wanted to ensure my distance from the “catagion,” but also to the very distinct “culture of use” on the Island, which varies considerably from that in North Philadelphia.

But the rather boring reality is that in regard to attaining access, one is vetted through a step-by-step process. Then granted an invitation that is extended conditionally. My role vis-à-vis my acceptance, just as in the non-blunt-smoking, has been almost entirely passive. What still bothers Quis at times—and I imagine always will bother him to some extent—is that no one in Alelí has known me “since Pampers.”¹⁴⁸

The irony of my conditional acceptance which many may fail to consider, however, is that given the dramatically Pentecostal flavor and spiritual overtones which permeate the Island’s residenciales, one can be accepted precisely because he or she

¹⁴⁷ Interview, 10.2016.
¹⁴⁸ Interview, 6.2014.
chooses not to partake. The corresponding catch-22, however, is that traffickers then see my role as clear cut, as without nuance. Any gray area complicates, confuses the panorama. Somehow in Alelí stark binaries feel safer. Such demands for highly regimented cultural stratification carry over into even musical taste. At the Mayor’s birthday celebration, I comment about enjoying one of the songs playing, and he breaks into a flurry of protests. For him, such a predilection on my part reflects a dissonance between the worldview with which he has categorized me and that which is reflected by the content of the song lyrics. Such regimented expectations vis-à-vis gender norms feel like being told to sit in a pink velvet lined jewelry box and paste a ribbon onto one’s head. But for the Mayor any blurring of lines of his prescribed morality is received as violence, as an assault on the safety he expects to feel within the context of our friendship. Above all else, safety as emotional biome remains both primordial and paramount.

149 This rigidity in perspective can apply to gender norms as well. See Goffman (2014:250) on “ideals of femininity.”
Aphonic Interlude III: Trafficking in Sub-sonic Intimacies

I enter the Mayor’s bedroom to find him cross-legged on the bed sorting through newly washed laundry; I sit down to assist, finding that that the ribbing of his ankle socks are not yet dry. Returning them to the clothesline on the balcony, I let him know. But he corrects me with an edge of consternation, “Mo-JA-DAS, not mojáh—.” I repeat after him, hedging but dutiful. The Mayor is unapologetically stringent on this point: he does not want me speaking with an identifiably aleliano accent. His fear is that, as a result, I will be treated poorly by other Islanders. His purpose is to shield me from one of the few everyday forms of social violence to which he is not subjected: this is because the Mayor is highly conscious of the register he selects. He demands that I be more so. But it is an upward battle: the majority of my time on the Island has been spent here. Theirs is the Spanish I hear. “And anyways,” he reconsiders, “you wouldn’t say they’re wet, you’d say they’re ‘húmedas.’”

Later that evening at la fogata, I lean in to give and receive a customary goodnight departure air kiss. Our cheekbones taut one against the other, the Mayor doesn’t release his embrace. Instead, hushed words pepper my ear with continuous rapid-fire urgency: Take-care-of-yourself-and-I-love-you-and-always-remember-to-keep-me-in-prayer-every-day-please-don’t-forget-it’s-very-important. As if reciting a frenetic rosary of half-whispered petitions, the Mayor unwraps his arms only after the last word is safely deposited.

Here in Alelí privacy is a pipedream.

Here, people must literally and corporeally create their own. Amidst countless louvered window slats adjusted to observe while obscuring a return gaze, the labyrinthine
high density housing turns Foucault’s panopticon inside out. Nodding in the affirmative as I step away, stage left, his hand slips in staggered freeze frame snapshots from my bicep to my elbow, from elbow to forearm, from forearm to wrist, then lightly graces my hand. This has happened before: this wrist holding, this delaying of separation in an effort—physically, palpably—to override a hurt. Some misplaced word, some inadvertent oversight, some unintended indiscretion. But tonight there has been no breach between us. Right now this only feels like fear.

When disputes go viral, as I am told his had, silence is an escape valve. The Mayor never mentions the events in their specificity. However domestic turbulence, no matter how publicly it might be rendered, is decidedly not a demonstrably public anxiety. But days later Maité lays out the underlying turmoil like an antebellum storytelling quilt in the morning sun. She guides me across the patches: the color brown means a safe house; circles mean prayers. We are, all of us, at any given time, capable of being many persons. And, at any given moment, we may not be proud of any of them.
CHAPTER 4 Insecurity from Within, Insecurity from Without

Microtrafficking as Synecdoche for the Island’s Inequality

*It is the history of living people that attracts us that grand unknown who is [our] neighbor, towards whom Christian law commands us to love, and from whom the logic of a fragile urban society compels us to mistrust.*


I remember the photo itself only vaguely: it was of the Mayor standing alongside someone…perhaps his cousin Nefti, with the beach as backdrop. And I remember that it was with no small amount of affection that I shared it with Misi Aurora. Yet with one look she wrests her gaze away exclaiming: *Parecen asesinos.* They look like murderers.

At those words, I draw back physically, unable to process what she has just said. I stare at the photo in my hands, mute with confusion, with indignation. Crushed. In that moment I realize: we are not looking at the same photo. And we may never be able to look at the same photo. So all-encompassing are the social constructions of the mind’s eye that they readily overpower any reality, any beauty, any majesty which for others is undeniably present. Our minds can default into mere laminating machines: blindly coating broad swathes of the population in categories of unknown—and therefore somehow correspondingly repulsive—otherness. Perhaps it is this reflexive reaction of repugnance which explains, in part, the reluctance of some *alelianos* to venture far from home. Surveillance from the State and other gangs is a daily reality in Alelí. But ultimately, condescension from fellow Islanders often has an even deeper bite.
Bregando con las brechas⁵⁰

“There are days when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. I can’t be a pessimist—because I’m alive. But the question that you’ve got to ask yourself, the White population of this country, is: Why it was necessary to have a n***** in the first place? Because I’m not a n*****. I’m a man. And if you think I’m a n***** it’s because you need it. And you better find out why. And the future of the country depends on that.”

—James Baldwin

Retail clothing store adjacent to public housing: “Authentic N***** Wear” Carolina

“El puertorriqueño golpea para abajo, no para arriba”¹⁵¹

—Héctor Cordero Guzmán, Sociologist
(Rodríguez Andino 2016)

[On the Island] the minority is always calling the majority, “fringe.”

—Fernando Picó (Coss & Colón Montijo 2008, translated)

We had not even gotten to the first of five landings on the staircase up to the apartment of the prestigious triple gated community before the Mayor turns around and,

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⁵⁰ Laboring against the gaps/chasms/breaches.
⁵¹ “The Puerto Rican punches those below, not those above.”
with an index finger pointed straight up into the air, warns me, “Don’t imagine for one minute that that woman is your friend. She is no kind of friend.” Everyone chimes in to concur as the Mayor gives me a step-by-step replay of the interaction which had just occurred: the six of us returned from the pool and were taking a group picture when a resident from said wealthy urbanización approaches us. Adamant that I not misread the dynamic which unfolded, the Mayor explains that,

If she had authentically wanted to greet you and know how you were doing, she would have come over with her boyfriend and introduced you to him [as well]. [Then] all of us would have entered into a conversation together. She would have presented to us the person accompanying her and [likewise] you would have introduced us to them.

But that is not what she wanted. What she wanted was simply to find out who you were with and what kind of people you were bringing into her neighbor’s house. Didn’t you see how fast she came over here? Well, she only came over with the intention of finding out who you were with…because when she turned onto the street, she saw us, parked the car, and came straight over to us. She wanted to know what those blacks were doing over there. Her smile was false… it didn’t come from her soul. [On the one hand,] she just wanted to be nosy, but she also saw all these black people…

His voice trails off. The tiresome reality of being flagged on sight as problematic. Even on one’s day off, even as one partakes of what was intended to be un vacilón, a relaxing swim. Even then the divisive social reality breaks in to break it up.

Revisiting the theme back at la fogata, the Mayor states that such run-ins are commonplace. Quis concurs, citing personal experiences of when he’s been part of groups which get passed over in restaurants in favor of lighter skinned patrons. And yet outsiders comment on how folks from government housing so often stay close to home. Felt all the more acutely in the public eye, the oppression of gaze—or in this instance, of false smiles—can be remarkably difficult to quantify. The newsy neighbor during the
visit to the upscale housing development triggers a cascade of stories, of similar aggressions. The Mayor recounts,

At my niece’s quinceñera my aunt had a catered party at a hotel. I went to the reception area to request a dolly that they weren’t using so that I could help take some of the equipment upstairs. And they didn’t want to loan it to me. Now why would they not want to loan it to me if they were not using it? So I would dare to postulate that if it were you, Áurea, who were not staying there at the hotel, nor paying for anything there and you enter for a moment alongside me and you request it, they would loan it to you. They would give it to you, you understand? [But] then, since I went in speaking Spanish—

Since they didn’t want to loan it to me, they told me to move my car and then called the police. But I began to curse out the bell hop… I returned later that night for the party, of course, and that bell hop was not there. But I don’t care if he had been, I would have called the news team and the cameramen and explained the situation. I dare to think… I would wager—putting my neck on the guillotine, [even if] they were to give me the death penalty—that in that exact moment, what if Áurea had requested it?

Here Quis jumps in with quick affirmation, “Ah, they’d have given it to her. And fast.”

As the aggressions pile up, it can become easier just to stay home. For depending on the sector of the city one happens to be traversing, as journalist Mario Alegre Barrios (2014) so poignantly captures, sometimes even sitting on a public park bench is not a right all citizens can enjoy. Spaces, even theoretically “public” ones, are demarcated violently (Davis 2006) along class lines.

The conversation calls to mind how mutual gaze transaction is highly valenced and can be employed equally for enhancing intimacy as for increasing alienation. Typically, I consider mutual gaze transaction as affectively positive, an under-utilized instrument for the communication of disarming and tender sentiments, yet the instance that follows highlights how it also can serve as unnerving. Dinzey-Flores (2013:140) records a wealthy resident of the urbanization Alhambra in Ponce as relaying,

“Crackheads and addicts go by every minute, all the time looking at us…you see them
pass by, and you stay on your porch, and they look at you…” (emphasis added). What are the dynamics of these gaze transactions and what work are they doing? Her palpable discomfort means these are agentic, soul-meddling gazes. At some level these gazes penetrate beyond those structures built purposefully not only to deny, but also to dis-imagine contact. And it is unsettling. Like precarity, visibility is more interrogatory than exclamatory.

Out of nowhere my vision begins to gray. Perhaps it is dehydration. Perhaps it is a persistent failure to eat regularly. Whatever it is, my blood pressure is plummeting and although already crouching I start to sway, needing to steady myself on the parked car next to me. The Mayor offers me his chair screaming, “Oh my God, you do look pale!” in feigned alarm. This he quickly follows up with, “Oh, it’s that you are pale!” grabbing both my shoulders and curling over me as he is overcome by hysterics at his own joke. Meanwhile, Quis makes sure I get a bottle of water.

Recovering from his fit of laughter, the Mayor scolds me, “We need to be informed of your medical status. You need salt and we don’t realize it! Imagine what could have happened if we force-fed you something sweet and thereby end up killing you! You need to start carrying salt packets with you.” He opens up Castiel’s leftover Chinese take-out and insists I take the soy sauce soaked beef to aid in my recuperation.
(In)security Isleño… and Subsequent Responses of Insularity

On the Island insecurity is fueled, in part, by this ever present and yet widening inequality, by the constant instantiations of and ever firmer delineations between “us’ es” versus the “thems.” Of constant reminders designating which public spaces are implicitly—or even explicitly, as exemplified in the photo below—reserved for which populations.

152 “Prrra,” the expression coined by reguetón artist Archangel, is an onomatopoeic rendering of gunfire. The following are other examples of ballistic detonations: “Pram, Pram” from Jamaican dancehall; “Plop, Plop” from Endo & Lele; “Prrrum” and “Plaka, Plaka” from Coscuela; “Pao, Pao” from Vico C & Reimi.2
Arguably, such bald classism constitutes, indeed, its own violence, its own state of exception. On the sidewalk on Ashford Avenue in San Juan’s tourist district in front of an open air bar stands a sign which at once advertises, designates, and boasts its space as one which is both caco (read: street thug) and reguetón-free. It punctuates this declaration with the ironic usage of the linguistic emblem “Prrra!” made famous by reguetonero Arcangel (by some measures a quintessential embodiment of caco-hood) which connotes artillery gunfire, potency and bravado. The sentiment is not subtle: We are excluding you. We are returning your ubiquitous gunfire back upon yourselves. We are dismantling your Island smothering empire by usurping your own linguistic tools to fire back at you metaphorically (master’s house....) Yet the sign, in no uncertain terms, is self-consciously extending an invitation even as it excludes: it aims to woo a more “highbrow” and “discriminating” population by promising that all potential patrons will be “free from our society’s escoria (refuse) at this locale.” Such unapologetic pandering results in a cordonning off of ostensibly “public” spaces and evidences that relaxation and leisure—at least as enjoyed by the theoretically non-narcotics involved elite—have become synonymous with a coveted form of status boosting social apartheid.

In this same vein, Dutch philosopher Zygmunt Bauman refers to gated communities\textsuperscript{153} as “voluntary ghettos” (2011:62), arguing that “[t]he less time one spends in the company of strangers, the further one’s tolerance and appreciation for the unexpected recedes…” for “behind the walls anxiety grows instead of dissipat[es]” (2011:67). This, in turn, fosters a disdain for locality. He reasons that, “Locking oneself

\textsuperscript{153} Given that I was not granted permission by Puerto Rico’s HUD to live within the Alelí community, I resided in three different communities nearby, one gated. Upon moving in to one apartment, the landlord advised me to keep my balcony door closed to avoid the entrance of stray bullets).
in a gated community in order to chase fears away is like draining water out of a pool in order to make sure that the children learn to swim in complete safety” (2011:68). The irony, of course, is that those very things from which one—at least in one’s imaginary—is ostensibly protecting oneself often reside within the gates anyway. This gives a wry new resonance to the term “inside job.” Further, it is the narcotics war itself which occasionally serves as an equalizer across the class spectrum: these torched cars are within two (but not the third) concentric gates inside an exclusive urbanización in the foothills of the metro area.154

Hence, the idea of insulating oneself from threat is undeniably attractive yet ultimately short-sighted. Theologian Jurgen Moltman (2012:194) argues that the wealthy “destabilize their states more than any terror bands can do” through the “neoliberal privatization of security,” or the transformation of ‘security’ into a commodity. When

154 This event occurred on 2.25.2014.
security becomes no longer a basic civil right, but a commodity which needs to be brokered, the average citizens are left exposed as a result and left to their own devices.

Not surprisingly citizens often find protection from the very forces with whom the state is at odds. Perhaps the most extreme form of elective autonomy to date, however, is the proposal of billionaire Peter Thiel: a new form of government which would “crea[e] permanent living spaces at sea, outside the territory and jurisdiction of any government or standing nation. These autonomous and mobile communities in theory would operate in international waters by 2019.” With the creation of “sea-steading,” then, we have arrived at a new level of social distancing, rivaled perhaps only by the recent penchant for space travel.155

Negotiating Precarities of the Illicit Economy: Five Variables Impacting Security

Amidst a baseline of narco-war, three critical macro (or Island) level factors contribute to insecurity in the community of Alelì: high elementary school desertion rates (as addressed previously), the ready availability of arms (primarily due to the Island’s

155 In Puerto Rico privilege can be measured by yards—that is to say, when a woman shares that her family yacht is only two third the length of her ex’s, this indicates that he is automatically granted greater esteem in certain social circles.
relationship with the United States), and the impunity of offenders. Further, two critical factors at the micro (or community) level which contribute to insecurity in Aleli are multiple drug distribution points (as well as distributors) within the same community and the high rate of transience (unrootedness) of traficantes. These five variables all coalesce to impact uniquely the use of firearm violence and insecurity in our community. The burden of this insecurity falls disproportionately and primarily upon those directly engaged in trafficking related skirmishes and reprisals, but often falls upon non-armed actors within the community as well.

The first factor, school desertion, has been touched upon already: it requires little imagination to visualize how a ready-made population of bored former students can be speedily integrated into the everyday networks of trafficking violence. Yet it is also critical to examine how the ease of availability of arms and the reigning Islandwide impunity contribute to this dynamic and serve to exacerbate our community’s vulnerability.

In Puerto Rico almost three quarters of the guns seized by authorities in 2010 originated from the United States (ATF 2010). The proliferation of firearms is due to “weaponization” (also known as pistolization), “which refers to the process whereby handguns and other small arms become embedded in significant sectors of a particular civil society” (Agozino et al, 2009:288). This process, unsurprisingly, goes hand in hand with trafficking in narcotics since “firearms accompany the drugs like fleas ride on shipboard rats, but firearms stay behind on the islands and the effects spill over onto the streets long after the drugs have been moved on to more lucrative destinations” (Agozino et al 2009:293). As such, the citizenry gain the upper hand over the State—in what is referred to as “out-weaponization.” Further, “altered glocks (those made into full
automatics) are used by citizens and fire 40 bullets in three seconds, whereas the police use semi-automatic guns (Glocks and AR-15s) which fire 10 bullets in three seconds—a colossal disadvantage."\(^{156}\) In an ironic yet perhaps helpful twist, the out-weaponized State is being petitioned by the ACLU to raise their trigger weights from their current range (factory settings) of 5.5 to 6.5 to a more standard 8.5 in order to prevent accidental homicides (ACLU 2012).

The Weaponization of the Citizenry and the Out-weaponization of the State

*Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power.*
—Arendt 1970:53

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\(^{156}\) “[pistolas Glock alteradas (full Automatic), la policía tiene una Glock semi automaticas, rifles AR15 en semi automático y mientras un delincuente le dispara 40 balas en 3 segundos la policía sólo le responde con 10 en 3 segundos, una desventaja colossal.][http://prsugenteymas.blogspot.com/2011/01/donde-estan-los-barrosos-el-super.html](http://prsugenteymas.blogspot.com/2011/01/donde-estan-los-barrosos-el-super.html) (blog currently dismantled).
In the fall 2015 Puerto Rico’s qualifying competition for Miss Universe 2016 two of the young women strode down the catwalk displaying high power firearms: Miss Aguadilla and Miss Salinas (Negrón 2015). Both were representing their municipality’s respective military base, but given the Island’s oversaturation with violence, their costume selections received hearty critique. The rebuttal is that neither woman represented narcotics culture, but rather the protection proffered by the State. The controversy, however, is unsurprising given the daily tensions created and fomented by both the blatant and more insidious aspects of intermingling the citizenry with the *narco-cultura*. An inherent skittishness results from such a nerve taxing climate.

Although most Latin American countries are averaging a firearm related homicide rate which hovers around 157,157 as an in-house exercise in the interest of homicide reduction, it might be beneficial to theorize further and more contextually the differences between homicide by firearm and other forms of homicide (e.g., distance). In contrast, as “Papo el carnicero” emphasizes, “I wanted to leave a different stamp than what a bullet leaves. I used a fireman’s ax, an iron shovel, and a saw. And for me the enemy was just one more animal, he wasn’t a human being” (Figueroa Rosa 2017). Puerto Rico is an outlier in more ways than one: as Caraballo-Cueto (2015) observes, from 1970 to 2010 “homicides quadrupled by four times while the population was aging and declining.”

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60 percent (Asia and Europe enjoy rates of 20 and 21, respectively), Puerto Rico is a dramatic global outlier at 91.5 percent (Gilgen 2012). As evidenced in the graph (see Appendix E), for more than the past decade the Island’s homicide rate has been highest for men in their twenties. What is critical to note, however, is that the fourth highest age group for homicide is that of young men ages 15-19. While the data provided by the Department of Health is not disaggregated for narcotics and non-narcotics related homicides, it is estimated that currently more than eighty percent of murders are narcotics related. And as Robert Muggah of the Igarapé Institute explains, “homicide is a proxy for a much wider set of insecurities…” (Garson 2015). As such, the homicide rate serves as a barometer of sorts for the Island’s overall societal climate.

**The Unique Challenge of Double-Edged Impunity: Perpetrators and Police**

There is a saying on the Island that, “Your first murder is free.” If only about one out of every five perpetrators are persecuted for their homicides, then it stands to reason that this is likely the message Islanders receive. Further, Puerto Rico is the only country in the western hemisphere where, prior to sentencing, those in custody for violent crimes like murder and rape have a right to post bail and return to the community (Coto 2012). Further, some of the sentences meted out—for example, twenty-four (24) years of probation for murder charges—also point towards rather “unconventional” (and ergo corrupt) approaches to justice (see Figueroa Cancel 2016). And as recently as 2012, Puerto Rican citizen have voted—although by a slim margin (54%)—to continue to defend this right. Many, however, attribute to this law the impunity which currently reigns. Further, is customary is to petition the judge to lower the bail: in 2010 the

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158 See Cobián 2015b. The Island’s state institutions are notorious for releasing inmates who have perpetrated federal offenses. To illustrate, one teen was arrested for homicide in 2008 and over the span of the next three and a half years
majority of 3,700 requests for lower bail were granted (Coto 2012). Given that the Island’s clearance rate of homicides is a dismal 20 percent\(^\text{159}\) and flight risk to the continental US is high, releasing suspects prior to trial seems a bit optimistic. Yet constitutionally only federal judges can deny suspects the right to post bail, as in when a case comes under federal jurisdiction (e.g., for federal gun charges). Then bail is disallowed since federal law trumps state law.\(^\text{160}\)

But it is not solely the defendants’ ability to bond out of prison which contribute to impunity, it is also a deluged and understaffed forensics institution. Even though “From 2000 to 2013 the rate of homicides increased by 30%,” staffing needs have not risen accordingly (Quintero 2015). Puerto Rico’s Institute of Forensic Sciences (hereafter ICF) functions at a tremendous disadvantage: they service the entire Island with a staff that is half to one third of what a forensics team stateside would be staffed. “Forensics is the lungs of the criminal justice system,” observes the director of ballistics Edward Pérez, and therefore,

If after the preliminary hearing, the public defender of the case against this person isn’t ready, it is forensics’ fault. But the reality is that we have been saddled with this deficiency of employees in all of the areas (pathology, ballistics, toxicology, etc.) and that reality contributes to it. (Quintero 2015)

Presently the most sizable conflict lies between the constitutional rights of a defendant to a swift trial and a reasonable timeline by which forensics can comply with the rigorous and sometimes long delayed requirements of an autopsy. And while as of 2014 the

\(^{159}\) Additionally, from a statistical standpoint, homicides by firearm consistently yield lower clearance rates due to the distance a perpetrator can maintain from its victim (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2011:102)

\(^{160}\) According to former Police Chief Pesquera in 2013, two flights a week send those ineligible for bond to the continental US since the Island lacks sufficient capacity to hold them (Miller 2013).
homicides Islandside have been decreasing substantially (40% since 2011), suicides—perhaps due to an even more drastic financial downturn as of late—have been on the rise. As such, the flurry of activity at ICF shows little sign of respite.¹⁶¹

Say No to Suicide and Yes to Christ:
To raise awareness, a Santurce resident organizes marches throughout metro area neighborhoods.

Additionally, a novel custom of using barrages of gunfire to attack both state and federal government institutions has gained some traction in the past few years. The edifice of the federal detention center in Guaynabo was the object of automatic gunfire twice in 2013 (“FBI reservado sobre,’’ 2013; “Tirotean otra vez,’’ 2013), while the police headquarters in Ponce was attacked in 2016 (“Tirotean cuartel,’’ 2016). Additionally, when parolees arrive for hearings at the federal court in Hato Rey they swiftly can become targets of gunfire as well (Colón Dávila & Cobián 2015). These attacks are

¹⁶¹ Given their limited resources, it is all the more laudable that ICF has been fundamental in the process of Mexico becoming credentialed in their forensics procedures.
committed from moving vehicles, *gatilleros en marcha*, and most often are reprisals of one stripe or another.

The frustration with the mediocrity of the criminal justice system extends to those within it. On July 30, 2015 federal judge José A. Fusté released a thirty page memorandum decrying governmental inefficiency with regard to the sentencing of a convicted kidnapper. He argues that the federal charges leveraged against the accused should not override state charges, and that neither should the sentences be served concurrently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Charges</th>
<th>3.7.2015</th>
<th>Federal Charges</th>
<th>2.21.2015</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Violation of Firearms Law</td>
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<td>Violation of Firearms Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restriction of liberty through violence and intimidation</td>
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<td>Carjacking (dismissed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td></td>
<td>Armed Robbery (dismissed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggravated Robbery</td>
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<td>(Laureano 2015)</td>
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<td>Illegal use of a weapon</td>
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<td>Aiming a firearm (3 counts)</td>
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All state charges against the defendant were dismissed in lieu of the federal charges. In another example, on July 16, 2010 federal agents re-arrested José Colón de Jesús after the state had acquitted him of 41 charges for the Pájaros massacre on April 30 of that same year. Hence, at times it would appear that the two systems work entirely in opposition one with the other even though, theoretically, they are to work in concert.

Almost sheepishly the state police officer tucks his ear towards his shoulder momentarily before admitting that he actually prefers when the feds take over jurisdiction. It seems like an ego-swallowing concession.

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162 This is yet another example of the reigning impunity. But impunity does not appear to be solely an issue of the State. In 2009 when federal agents arrested a known *bichote* of Caimito, Ángel Falero Vasquez (known as “el Goyo”), he was sentenced to 151 months (more than 12 and a half years) in 2009 but was paroled in 2011 (Hernández Pérez 2017).

163 Interview, 11.2016.
You have to understand, that for us it’s an endless obstacle course: first we have to convince the District Attorney that the case is even worthwhile. Then it is entirely their prerogative whether or not they even decide to press charges. And even if they do, very often the case “falls” due to a technicality (e.g., if evidence from forensics does not arrive in time).

He emphasizes that if the point [of policing] is to make the streets safer, then very often at the state level that proves much more difficult to achieve. Citing an intervention in which he participated, the officer describes a young man who is pulled over and found to have three pistols in his possession. As they discover the weapons one by one and the man is handcuffed, his attitude appears to be one of joking and relaxed indifference. “A mí me archivaron un caso de armas hace poco,”164 the young man shrugs.

Moments later another man arrives, who perhaps due to cultural misconceptions of appearance does not stand out to the young man as being a Continental. This man expresses to the group in broken Spanish, “Yes, with those two pistols altered to be automatic, we will take over the jurisdiction in this case.”165 Only then does the owner of the vehicle inquire as to who this man is, and the state forces clarify that he is from ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms, a federal agency). In that moment the young man’s buoyant smile disintegrates and he bows his head. While not fully accurate, the presiding perception on the Island of the Feds is that they will make the charges stick, that a certain conviction will be obtained, y que el vacilón se acabó.166

This cathected dance between state and federal authorities extends to dispositions such as the death penalty. The last execution for the death penalty in Puerto Rico was in 1927; capital punishment was abolished two years later (Goodnough 2003). Yet given

164 They just dropped a case of mine a short while ago.
165 Criminal cases automatically shift to federal jurisdiction in the following instances: 1) If a firearm is altered to be fully automatic, 2) if there is a homicide that results from a carjacking, 3) when there is a kidnapping, and 4) when a firearm is used within less than 100 meters of a school.
166 And that the party/goofing off is over.
Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth, it remains subject to federal interventions.

Hence, amidst other residual colonialisms, the death penalty looms as a threatening spectre above the Island, a condescending reminder that sovereignty and self-governance remain nothing more than a pipedream (Goodnough 2003).

No to the Death Penalty, Old San Juan

Yet Fusté’s complaint is more far-reaching than simply the disjunctive outcome of one defendant’s case. He highlights that the pattern of impunity has left all Islanders vulnerable.

Typically, in big cities there are secure places where bodyguards are unnecessary. In Puerto Rico there is no place that is secure. The housing projects are alongside places of luxury. The cost is shared by people of very distinctive walks of life, and there is the necessity of constantly having to watch one’s back.

( Laureano 2015) (Translation mine)

See Appendix C.
Such “democratization of violence” (Kruijt and Koonings 1999:11) disposes of the notion that there are “enclaves” of security.\(^\text{168}\) Indeed, a newly arrived hedge fund manager from the United States’ eastern seaboard shares that he informally interviews tourists who cross his path, asking them two questions: 1) Are you enjoying your vacation? And 2) Will you come back? He reports that overwhelmingly the response to the former is positive, but to the latter is negative. Probing further, their response invariably includes a marked discomfort with the harsh juxtaposition of poverty with wealth. The complaint, then, is that amidst the Island’s already stratospheric inequality there is not more segregation.\(^\text{169}\) For according to economist Dr. José Caraballo Cueto (Criollo Oquero 2015), Puerto Rico’s level of inequality is amongst the top five countries globally.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{A graffiti on a wall in Juncos, Puerto Rico: "WE ARE NOT MILLIONAIRES But we are MORE happy than poor —LA MUSA Juncos"}
\end{figure}

\(^{168}\) A recent shooting in Miramar illustrates this: one candidate for governor, David Bernier, scrambled for cover at the restaurant La Casona alongside everyone else when a shooting broke out in the afternoon (Colón Dávila 2016).

\(^{169}\) Of course, tourists also complain on TripAdvisor about the rooftops of surrounding buildings marring their ocean view—with no thought given to their having selected a metropolitan locale at which to vacation.
On the other side of the coin, with regard to police brutality on the Island, in September of 2011 the U.S. Department of Justice department released a report detailing a vast array of abuses. Subsequently, 133 requisite remedial measures to be implemented within the more than 17,000 member Puerto Rican Police Force. In order to address corruption within the police force, the FBI has conducted various operatives\textsuperscript{170}—some arresting more than ninety law enforcement officers at once (ACLU 2012). When considering present security measures, it is vital to bear in mind the Island’s longstanding tension between impunity and brutality.

In response to this concern, Luis Romero has spearheaded an initiative: the creation of \textit{Basta Ya} Zones. Such wherein residents are assured, contrary to the sentiments of Fusté, that they will be safe. While there has been next to no publicity about this development, the first zone\textsuperscript{171} has been established in Caguas. Romero, who himself lost his son, a member of the US Coast Guard, to street robbery gone bad asserts with a staunch and unwavering conviction, “We are going to recover Puerto Rico one small piece at a time.”

Further, the judicial system is designed in such a way as to discourage participation or support from the citizenry. As one homicide detective explains,

\begin{quote}
In reality, the system of government that we have here does not protect the names of the [witnesses] and that is a grave error that our system has. I for one critique it openly. If you are going to testify against me, I know from the beginning that it is you who are doing it. It’s not like the federal system that protects the identity until the trial. Here in the state system, from the beginning the witness’ name must appear in the complaint. No one is going to testify [against anyone] given that arrangement. And then for the victims and witnesses, what it creates is an
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{170} “Operation Guard Shack” (the bureau’s most massive police corruption operative in history) in 2010 which netted arrests of more than 90 law enforcement officers for participation in illegal drug transactions, “\textit{Cantazo Azul}” in 2014 which netted 16, and a third in 2015 for which the numbers have not yet been made available.

\textsuperscript{171} Although I made an attempt on various occasions, I was unable to find it. Perhaps it is not marked.
enormous chaos, a tremendous fear wherein many people end up losing their houses, their belongings. And [the places] where they end up taking refuge—you would rather kill yourself than stay there. And I have always thought that those who are testifying in the favor of the community in order to clarify a case, it is that person, that witness whom they are penalizing—as if they were putting them in prison. No, I shouldn’t have to take away the liberty of the witness, on the contrary, the one whom we should be depriving of liberty is the criminal.

The option that the government offers is to pay for the time spent in hiding on the Island and then for the plane tickets to leave the Island and make another life in the States—everything else is at the witnesses’ own expense. There’s no month’s cushion to absorb resettling expenses, nothing.

The solution is to create a system that protects the identity of the witness, then create a system of support and compensation—that for a person who has lost his clothes, his personal belongings—that in no less than 72 hours the government gives him a voucher to replace what he had prior. And right now such a system does not exist in Puerto Rico, it just doesn’t exist.

The system makes it so that the people don’t cooperate with us because usually they lose their homes and then they have to rely on relatives [living in another town]; the government expects a relative to protect them, to provide them with refuge. And I think to myself, how is it possible that an event happens and they have to grab their family and seek refuge in another person’s house when in reality it is not their fault? They are the ones cooperating with us, with the people. But the government doesn’t care about that. And we, we—I, as an investigator, have had to take money from my own pocket to pay for meals and clothing for the witnesses. That [money] is not reimbursed to us. Going through the process can take 24 hours and currently the government provides no form of voucher in order to buy food for the person who is cooperating [with them]. If on that given day Investigator so and so does not have any cash on him, well— [throws his hands up in the air].

It makes us very angry. Not to mention that many of my fellow officers and I have gone without eating, have used our own lunch money in order to buy food for a witness. It is a moral value: at least at my headquarters my fellow officers and I are very generous. We have the mentality that, whether it is a child or an adult, for us it is very important that this person who is cooperating with me, it is not possible to let him go without eating. We prefer to not eat ourselves in order to give food to that person. That’s part of our everyday life.
Luis Romero echoes this sentiment, pointing out how the corrections system is tilted in favor of the offender and not the victim of the crime. He cites the abundance of services offered to the offender immediately upon incarceration (e.g., healthcare, dental care, etc.) and asks rhetorically: to what is the victim entitled?\textsuperscript{172}

\textbf{Intra vs. Inter-Case Violence and Traficante Transience}

Multiple distribution points play a role in escalating insecurity at a local level within Alelí. When compared to the other more than 330 public housing projects (or caseríos) on the Island, Alelí, while in many ways representative of the rest, is also an outlier. While the majority of the caseríos have a single drug distribution point, ours has multiple and these points are controlled by discrete and spacially demarcated gangs. Far too frequently this has led to the additional burden of \textit{“intra-case”} violence to deal with as well as \textit{“inter-case”} violence. Although, during times of peace, it is understood that the threat of \textit{“friendly fire”} is eliminated. Nazarena reflects on the difference:

\begin{verbatim}
W- But now there is more peace between our sectors?
N- Yes. What happens is that the problem here always has been when others come from outside, the guys that come from outside [of the caserío]. They only enter to engage in gunfights. They aren’t the people who live here.
W- So that’s already been fixed?
N- In quotation marks/supposedly/theoretically, because those from outside, since they don’t want them here, when they enter, they come to have a shootout.
W- Aja, at our people?
N- Yes, and they don’t use judgment, they don’t use a measured perspective. They shoot at whatever they see, whether it’s a boy, a girl, elderly people, babies…To them it doesn’t matter.
W- But those inside are more cautious, more mindful?
N- Yes.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{172} Interview, 4.2015.
This has a two-fold impact on security as well as various demographic and territorial implications. First, with so many loci of distribution, there are less “safe areas,” that is to say, one has far greater likelihood of encountering a problem given that the trafficking is not occurring in a single isolated location. As a result, lines of communication are more muddled, power has become more dispersed and nebulous. It is also apparent that while the open-air drug market is weakened yet intact, there has been a proliferation of in-home sales as well. One fall day in 2014 navy helicopters hover over the community for almost two hours, purportedly filming the various points. Further, as in any of the larger, more notorious caseríos, there is a degree of recreational shelling which occurs—to a lesser or greater extent given the predilection of the given bichote. Some utilize it as a default form of communication, others are more judicious in their use of detonations. As will be discussed to a greater extent in Chapter Five, initially Shotspotter did not seem to make much of an impact as to this pastime. As one former community member describes it,

Right now the projects are quiet, but even so I risk my life by walking through it because it is a time bomb: we don’t know who is making war right now, right now we don’t know, no one knows directly. One might know that there are some situations, that there are some people outside who have situations with some inside [the community], but with whom? Which ones are the actual warriors these days? [It is not clear] because not everyone who walks around with a gun is a drug warrior or, that is to say, involved the current mess. Because anyone can have a gun and say that he is in the battle and it’s not [necessarily] true. Because there’s no bichote (head druglord) right now, no concrete leader who can say “I call the shots, I’m the boss of the young bucks.” They are imprisoned, all of them are imprisoned. They’re all prisoners, from each sector.

To make [profits] these days, just as the economy is bad [generally speaking], so too the economy is bad for them: there is no money. Those who are hustling don’t have money. It’s not like before, when you saw things flowing in the community. Now you can go [outside] and not even know who is who. Sometimes I walk
around and say, “And that new person, I don’t know him. There are a lot of new people, people from outside.”

You go to other communities and you will see only one drug point, you won’t see diverse drug points in many housing projects. And you know that you can’t pass through there because that’s the area of a drug point and it is one singular place administered by this guy or that person, right. It’s not like here. Here from your place you don’t know from whence a maleante is going to appear because they have so many entrances and exits that you can’t differentiate who is who, right.

In this era, many of the traficantes are highly mobile, and at any given time, less than half may not be from the caserío in which they work. This contributes to insecurity locally because, as unknown entities, there is more suspicion between the trafficker themselves—it is said now that “los mismos maleantes se chotean entre sí.” Alliances along gang lines also appear to be more quickly made and more quickly broken—more of a de-territorialization of those engaged in violence as labor.

Likewise, between the community members and the traffickers, there is no longer always a shared history upon which to draw. This lack of a personal connection to the community (i.e., not have family residing there) contributes to alienation on both sides. A former community member elaborates that while “there has always been mistrust, [at least] if you know a person, you have the knowledge and background of what family they come from.” So the level of rootedness of armed actors in their communities has a direct impact on the community’s degree of insecurity because when gang members work in their community of origin they are much less apt to use violence carelessly or

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173 Interview, 5.2014.  
174 Interview, 5.2014.  
175 See dialogue in Aphonic Interlude VI.  
176 Even the traffickers snitch on each other.  
177 See Hoffman’s War Machines (2011).  
178 Interview, 5.2014. “Es que siempre ha existido desconfianza pero... que [por lo menos] si tú conoces a la persona puedes saber de qué familia viene.”
Such affective tethering makes it more incumbent upon traffickers to control and channel their business negotiations more tightly.

**Geographies of Distribution:**
**Open Air Drug Sales as New-fangled Flea Market**

In what some argue is a newer development, one metro area government housing community’s *bichote* set up a narcotics distribution system similar to a strip mall or flea market wherein “vendors” from other *caseríos* would come in to his *caserío* and each would sell their distinctive wares from an individually assigned geographical sector. Simultaneously these itinerant vendors would be disallowed from selling or even trespassing upon the other sectors’ assigned areas. Then, in return for renting the space, all the vendors from other *caseríos* receive protection from this resident *bichote*.

Logistically, this business dynamic particularly appeals to those who have, for one reason or another, fallen from grace in their own communities and are no longer permitted to sell there. With this alternative, sellers could commute back and forth to the area and maintain a relatively stable illicit income despite having lost such a privilege in their own communities due to prior bad behavior. All told, this *bichote* presided over vendors from more than six other government housing communities. Such extensive and centralized rental agreements of *puntos* is a relatively recent development, but may gain some traction or popularity, particularly in those government housing communities where there is an open flow of traffic, which enables customers to enter and exit fluidly (i.e., those which have bidirectional traffic and more than one entrance and exit). On the other

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179 An example of this is reflected in the homicide rate of the countries constituting the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). All three have exponentially higher homicide rates than that of neighboring Nicaragua, due largely to the repatriation of more than 45,000 adjudicated gang members from the US who consequently supplanted local gangs (Jutersonke, Muggah, & Rodgers 2009). The narcotics war in Nicaragua, on the other hand, is still predominately between locals.
hand, those which are in the form of a unidirectional circle such as Nemesio Canales and Villa Kennedy, or those which are very small like the one that resembles an urbanización in Las Piedras would not be conducive to this recent innovation.

**Beyond Normalization to Ubiquity:**
**When Even Jesus Owns a Drug Point**

*Puerto Rico is swaddled in drugs and sharpshooters. There is no work. The people live by way of food stamps and accursed drugs. It is a danger just to be alive—even Jesus Christ himself has a drug point.*

—online comment by username: W. Figueroa (2016 Golpe a millionaria…) (translated)

One worker for the Island’s Department of Health who formerly made house visits to patients with AIDS in the government housing projects Sabana Abajo and Fidalgo Diaz remembers,

The important part was to have your work issued identification badge on you, visible, and to show it to the guys guarding the entrance to the community. They will always approach you if you do not speak to them first. Or they will follow you if you are on foot. They may tell you when you arrive at the entrance to the community, “Las cosas están nebulosas. Venga otro día.” Right now, things are uncertain. Return another day. When that happens, I thank them and turn around. Then I return another day, just as they advise.  

The authority of those who orchestrate the everyday machinations of *el punto* is an accepted facet of government housing and *barriada* communities—both from those within and those without. There are even instances when the State not only acknowledges it, but defers to it.  

And while the authority that emanates from those who operate such *puntos* can be channeled to sow fear in residents, there are also select ways in which authority is wielded to promote residents’ welfare.

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180 Informal Conversation, 8.27.2016.
181 See Chapter 10.
Points of Succor: IPV Intervenors, Shadow Medics, and First Responders

It is early evening and the Mayor is next to me arranging Cripi neatly onto a rectangular paper. Forty feet from us on the second floor a door slams. Too hard. Strident words rustle the leaves with their rancor and tumble down onto the street. Glancing over, the Mayor presses his knees together to prevent the filled paper from falling and, as if beaming a laser of succor from his palm, extends his hand towards the apartment, “Señor,” he asks plainly, “Que le pongas Tu paz allí.” Lord, put your peace there. A simple prayer.

In Alelí not only intimate partner violence but also any form of abuse can be brought before those at the point, or el punto, in order to seek refuge. While abusive practices can also emanate from these puntos, it is clear that a significant portion of residents also feel confident that they have a strength and variety of moral authority which can serve to protect as well. One of the Island’s largest prison gangs, los Ñeta, regularly make public service announcements from behind bars—usually published by less prestigious, more colloquial news sources such as www.informatepr.net or www.tunoticiapr.com. These viral messages, whether audio or video, usually pertain to a call for behavior modification: in the aftermath of a shooting wherein young lives were taken, los Ñeta demand that the shooting of small children stop; in response to the “scary clown phenomenon” sweeping the continental United States, los Ñeta determine that this too will be disallowed (HC Admin 2016b). They seem intent on maintaining a perception of themselves as enforcing and delimiting types and styles of violence permissible on the Island.
In Alelí intimate partner violence is a public event. Many times interventions are made during its occurrence. If a woman’s comai, or comadre, is aware of the situation (it would be exceedingly rare that she is not), she will be vigilant to intercede as needed and will be aware of patterns as to specific times of day or any extenuating circumstance which may increase the likelihood of a violent event. These familial or extended/fictive kin interventions occur when the situation is considered on-going and low-level, that is to say “a lovers’ spat” of sorts. As such, a significant amount of intervention occurs intra-kin.

Personally, I was not prepared to be included within these circles of concern and mutual care, yet time and again that is precisely what happened.

While the two of us eat bowls of stir-fry at a local mall’s food court, my student Thalia, an adolescent girl, points at my bicep. Holding her gaze on mine, she says nothing. I look down to see the marks at which she is pointing, the multiple but fading bruises of forgotten origin mottling my skin. When I look up again her eyes are searching mine, her forehead creased with concern. I clasp her wrist gently, “Thank you. It’s okay,” I tell her, “I am okay. No one is hurting me.” At this she nods almost imperceptibly, visibly relaxes, and sits back in her chair to continue sipping her soda.182

Even though Thalia constructs her question through layered silences, kinesics, and proxemics, her query is no less resonant. Perhaps due to the unfortunate ubiquity of intimate partner violence on the Island, in Alelí, dating is a community event. There is the “asiento caliente” for the young man who wishes to date a family’s daughter: the obligatory barrage of questions, the elders leaning in, the sweat and uncertainty of that seat’s occupant. One component of being woven into the social fabric of Alelí is a mutual obligation to keep folks current and informed about one’s safety.

182 Fieldnotes, 4.2009.
Heading out for a *bicicletada* in a neighboring municipio, I stop by one *aleliano* household to drop off a package; one interaction leads to another and six hours flash past. I miss la bicicletada *por completo*. Finding myself, ultimately, at *la fogata* I tell Quis that I better head out because I feel my blood sugar dropping; he tells me to wait and looks through a cooler in the back of his truck before handing me a small tub of apple sauce dyed kryptonite green. Surprising even himself, he then discovers a wrapped plastic spoon in his glove compartment and presents me with my second offering of repast that day: he wants me to stay. Not much later at the *pre-fogata*, just Quis and Abdiel, the conversation turns to courtship. Abdiel elaborates upon the only kind of person a woman should consider, “A man who asks her in the mornings, ‘Did you wake up well?’” They instruct me that anyone I date should be screened by them: “Bring him here,” they invite. “Let us talk to him, and we will tell you if he is good or not. Remember, we have *malicia*, we can tell.”

Opening his eyes the width of a papercut, Abdiel tilts his head to the side, “I will say, ‘¿Qué es lo que tú quieres con Áurea?’” We will be like your father. We will make sure that he understands that you have *baqueo*.” Quis nods, “*Somos tu familia aquí.*” He pauses before pointedly repeating himself, “*Tu. Familia.*” Then everyone chuckles as he jokes about the supposed arsenals of artillery each participant at *la fogata* possess. Such is the protection proffered to an outside researcher, such is the caution routinely exercised when there is potential for new pairings to develop. Better an incisive preemptive strike than to risk potentially lethal entanglements.

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184 What is it that you want with Áurea?
185 *Baqueo* is Spanglish for back-up, reinforcements. Often used as an implicit reference to arms.
186 Fieldnotes, 3.2016. “We are your family here. Your. Family.”
On the other hand, measures taken by those beyond kin networks occur when either the kin network is either absent or low functioning, or in what broadly would be considered more extreme case scenarios. On such occasions, then, those on the point get involved. And while the presence or absence of informal protocols may vary from one residencial to another—there is no one monolithic approach, there is general agreement that any violence against women, children, and the elderly is reprehensible. According to Celeste, herself rescued from a violent domestic partnership by those at the point, if a woman is physically attacked by her partner, usually the bichote or one of his wingmen will call her and ask if she wants help. If she denies there is a problem, then those at the point desist and respect her choice to continue in the relationship with the perpetrator.

However, if through talking with her she agrees to receive help, then “o lo sacan o lo matan,” the violator is either removed or killed. Much more commonly it is the former: the perpetrator is bodily removed from the residencial and told, under threat, never to return. In the instance of a child being sexually assaulted, however, the latter can be more prevalent. As Mamá Amada concedes,

We all know that only God can take a life—and it’s true, no one has a right to take another person’s life, so I am not excusing it. But the reality is that if the police handle it, that guy will be in prison for five years and then back out on the streets hurting more children.  

At this, she unclasps her hands and tosses them outward, as if to ask with her raised eyebrows and multiple nods: what other option is there? As such, there is unspoken yet implicit support for such localized interventions. Both swift and definitive, this manner of street justice is common enough to be expected—and, as Quis has suggested, common enough that perpetrators should know what awaits them. He assures me that he would

have no problem calmly eating his dinner alongside the dismembering of a pedophile. “I would not even get nauseous,” he adds parenthetically, “Because that guy is getting paid for what he did.” At this, he shrugs, lifts one eyebrow, and smiles weakly.

The Mayor is our community’s first responder. Any time there is a shooting, a car accident—he is the first to arrive. Oblivious to the crimson spatter soaking through his shorts, he is quick to peel off his t-shirt to tie it as a makeshift tourniquet. There is mercy here. And much prayer. Indeed, if one accounts for the number of ¡Padre Amado!s that escape the mouths of the grandmothers and great grandmothers, prayer in Alelí is almost continual.

And yet even amidst an environment of greater transience and upheaval, there are families whose presence in the caserío has been a mainstay for over four generations. In a substantive way, the community is increasingly looking to non-state armed actors to perform a version of justice which lies beyond what is viewed as the anemic reach of the state. For some, there is a psychic comfort (Bailey 2008:391) which emanates from having a functional authority in light of a failed state. And sometimes mercy appears where one might least suspect.

Localizing Safety & the Liminalities of Liberation

Albizu was practicing poverty law, and his clients were simple people...who paid with chickens, vegetables, and sometimes a simple thank-you...Albizu had no savings or property, but he was building something more important: a reputation as a man of principle, a man who could be trusted.

—Denis (2016:114)

They seek him out. Stalk him, actually. Then divebomb him with their bodies. With flushed cheeks, community children dangle off the Mayor’s thighs, crash into his knees, laugh until they hiccup. They climb up his vertebrae, their wudgy fingers pressed
desperately against his forehead for a firmer grip. Peeling them off one at a time, he grabs an elbow and an armpit, twirling one in the air while another attacks from below. He distributes the aural likeness of *cocotazos* and *galletas* with all of the theatrical pomp required to propel those anklebiters into an overture of hysterics, howling, and protestations of delight. As the little ones triumphantly ignore his eventual pleas for desistance, at times the Mayor is forced to ask nearby adults for assistance disentangling himself from their clinging limbs. They know all too well that he is far too gentle, far too kind to forcibly remove them.

I hadn’t seen the Mayor in weeks, when, crossing a neighborhood intersection on foot, he appears like royalty without an entourage. So regal, so debonair that from a distance I am unsure whether I have identified him properly. But he approaches the car and instructs me to meet him at *la fogata*. Reading my expression as declining his offer, he pauses and with furrowed brow commands, “*Ven donde mi.*” Essentially, “Come to where I am.” When I hesitate and look away, he folds his arms across the passenger window’s ledge, pokes his face inside, and repeats himself, “*Ven. Donde. Mi.*” Looking back over at him, I sigh. Then nod once almost imperceptibly. He smacks the car three times in confirmation and pivots back out into the street with an effortless aplomb.

Not unlike the indignant and succor-extending Christ of the Synoptic gospels, the Mayor insists that the vulnerable come under the mantle of his protection. Within the scope of hermeneutics, there is the tradition of typology, of considering how Old Testament figures foreshadow or reflect a type of Christ (see Clowney 1989). Just as Christ was referred to pejoratively as, “The King of the Jews,” so too, while imprisoned

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in *La Princesa*, Albizu Campos\(^{189}\) was pejoratively referred to as “*El Rey de las Toallas*” or “The King of the Towels” (Denis 2016) because he kept wet towels on his head to inhibit the damage inflicted upon him through radiation. Like Christ himself, Albizu Campos gave everything, his very life, for his people. During my tenure in Aleli, the Mayor stands also as a formidable type of Christ, heralding, “Let the little children come…” Ankle-biters and adults alike.

Weeks later it is a quiet evening and for now *la fogata* is composed of only two solitary silhouettes: the Mayor’s and mine. Mid-story,

He reaches for my hand and then, as if directing a guided tour on the history of Island brutalities, palpates my fingers in small circles over each individual lump, each jagged keloid which populates his skull: eight in all. “And this one here is from when…” For a moment I imagine the perplexity through which the reversed panopticon\(^{190}\) may read this interaction, but the need to listen well quells my fear and overrides any residual qualms of “¿Qué dirán?” or “What might others say?”\(^{191}\)

After reliving the eight stories tied to each scar, we drink in glass after glass of a settled silence which the night hands us.

Another evening weeks later we find ourselves once more the sole constituents of *la fogata*, again imbibing the quiet, again immersed in the stillness. The Mayor glances at my countenance intermittently as if somehow subversively seeking to break an encryption code. Troubled, he relays, “You know, when I was little I didn’t even know what affection was. I never received any from anyone.” This perpetual ache is something he has shared with me more times than my memory’s length extends; it also may explain his preternatural level of compassion. I close my eyes. Again, I am revisited by strains of

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\(^{189}\) President of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party for 35 years.

\(^{190}\) See a discussion of the panopticon later in the chapter.

\(^{191}\) Fieldnotes, December 2013.
Albizu Campos, orphaned twice: first by a father who refused to acknowledge him, then by a mother who, taking him with her more than once to the river, sought an evasive solace for them through drowning. “How,” I ask him, “Might the healing process for that be set in motion? How,” I am thinking aloud, “Might the horrors from the past somehow be barricaded so that they no longer pull you down in the present?” Submerged in thought, he takes a long drag on his blunt and, to affect a greater pungency, seals the smoke tightly into his lungs.

**Sexual Abuse of Children and the Politics of Faciality**

*Faciality reigns materially over that whole constellation of significances and interpretations.

*When the face is effaced, when the faciality traits disappear, we can be sure that we have entered another regime, other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible*

—Deleuze & Guattari 2011:115

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192 “Why do you doubt the all-powerful God? The sun will darken when [you] least expect [it]. The heavenly forces will shake. The son of man will come. Believe in God, not in the fire of hell. You will see the power of God. Don’t abuse anyone’s children.” On this property in southern Puerto Rico there is not one Christ as a silent onlooker of this advisory, but four: one as a replica of the Pietà (a cadaver in his mother’s lap), one hanging from the cross, and two resurrected.
Still wearing her elementary school jumper, a preadolescent arrives at the point that afternoon with the crotch of her shorts underneath badly bloodied. The child reports to the young men there that, on this occasion, it happened at the hands of her stepfather. A brief phone call and within moments a traficante’s girlfriend appears and spirits the child away with her to a private home where an interview is conducted and the conversation recorded. The child details a dizzying history of male visitors forcing themselves on her amidst jeers from a mother who pockets the profits.

At a nearby outdoor bar, in the middle of a game of dominos, the word arrives. Like a pill lodged midway down one’s throat, a brief gasping panic alights upon one participant. The stepfather hands the only item of value presently in his possession, his cell phone, to a friend to pass on later to his girlfriend. Then it is said that within only hours of the child’s revelation, this stepfather is jumped, kidnapped, driven to a nearby street outside of the community, and shot more than fifty times in the face.

*Es para borrar la cara*, Quis explains, “To completely obliterate any feature of his face.” The functionality of this obliteration is, “So that everyone knows what it is that this man did.” Such targeted erasure is productive: it is Puerto Rico’s version of the Mexican *narcomanta*. In the Island version, however, the message is not written on fabric, is not hung from a bridge or a building, is not a spectacle in the center of the town plaza, and, decidedly is not on display for the greater public. Instead, the message is “written” strictly on the body of the perpetrator itself, the inscription wrought neither with paint nor ink but with lead. In this instance the message, consequently, is circulated

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193 It is to erase the face.
194 Banners displayed in highly visible public locations utilized by cartels in order to send messages to the government or citizenry or both. See Campbell 2012.
via a video shot during the actual *borradora* of the stepfather’s face and is exclusively accessible to those within the community. As such, the public impact is tightly managed, exposure is lessened and subsequent interference from state or federal authorities is relatively mitigated.

When I ask Melquisedec to comment, he is grim. “For something like that everyone puts in money. Let’s say I put in two thousand, this guy throws in two thousand, another throws in fifty… everyone contributes [because] we can’t have a lion on the loose here.” Although seemingly counterintuitive, by the nature of the trust they inspire, their sheer proximity, and their almost limitless accessibility to residents at all hours, those on the point serve a function those at the Department of the Family never could. Without overly whitewashing their role in the community, it is critical to maintain a level of nuance in assessing services they actually do proffer, whether proactively or inadvertently. It remains unhelpful in the process of rehumanization to delimit specific actors to their most heinous acts (Stevenson 2012, Ralph 2014:27, 47).

Yet as Quis concedes, “*Hay quien que merece estar preso.*” There are those who deserve to be prisoners. “Yeah,” Abdiel elaborates, “for psychopaths, people who enjoy killing.” Here the understanding is not that the carceral model is inherently or even pervasively flawed, but simply that it casts too wide a net for its population. Those with triggerlust, they argue, can be addressed no other way.

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195 Before student use of cell phones was outlawed in the public education system, teachers report the elementary school children sometimes would watch uploaded videos of violent community events during free time at school. Currently there is no forum through which community events such as these might be discussed or addressed. Each classroom teacher is left to his or her own resources as to how—or even whether—to address the unsettling events. While teachers have the option of sending students to the social worker to receive support, this is not always an option they elect. Neither teachers, nor administrators, nor students receive formalized support as to the processing of such events. To be fair, some of these events fly well under the radar of education officials outside of school grounds. Yet it is also important to protect those not exposed to the grim events, so in that sense the silence of the school’s authority figures is more than justified. What is a clear need, however, is to provide teachers with basic aftercare in the aftermath of such events and to involve the parents of any children impacted either directly or vicariously by the violence.
In another scenario, Celeste left the Island with an uncompromising determination to evade the death sentence gloomy prognosis of end stage renal failure and a staunch refusal to allow them to amputate her diabetically-induced ulcerated foot.

Sign at “El Presby,” a private hospital in Condado

But in recounting her perception vis-à-vis the righteous administration of the community, she remains firm. As a single mother, she felt protected, even supported.

Á: Well so you have always known that any day of the week that you want the help of those in the street, that they would help you? You have always known that, or…?
Celeste: I could go into the street and kick my ex-husband out of Alelí. Right now he cannot be in Alelí.
W: Why?
Celeste: The father of my children can’t be in Alelí.
W: Why?
Celeste: Because those of the gang from the sector los Cumbres want to talk with him.
W: Those from los Cumbres. Why?
Celeste? For what he did to me.
W: With regard to taking your child from you?
Celeste: Mmmhhmm.
W: Who from the los Cumbres is going to talk to him?
Celeste: [indecipherable] I don’t know who they are.
W: Ah, but who told you this?
Celeste: My son’s godfather.

This is liberating talk for a 41-year-old IPV survivor over 2,500 miles away from home in a hospital bed battling end stage renal failure and awaiting quintuple bypass surgery. With the exception of the super righteous (i.e., those identifying as Pentecostal, etc.), most community members locate some level of psychic comfort in the gangs presence. There is an interdependence of non-narcotics involved families with narcotics involved individuals. Their being desirous of “talking to him”—as they are desirous of talking with no one usually—is of course an obvious euphemism for physically harming him.

In another instance of the local gang wielding its own colloquial form of justice, one traficante makes the mistake of stealing the valuables from a community member’s house. When the complaint is brought before the gang, a concise, non-negotiable command is given “¡Que los reaparezcan!” Or, “[Make] them reappear!” The consequence of failing to have the furniture and electronics reappear is implicit. There is a community norm that disallows any theft whatsoever within the confines of Alelí. Were someone to commit theft outside the walls, however, there is no moral prohibition against that—perhaps some mild disapproval (i.e., folks thereafter referring to you as a “pillo” or simply making the hand sign for thief\(^{196}\) when your name is mentioned)—but nothing more.\(^{197}\)

\(^{196}\) Opening and closing one’s hand in a grasping motion.
\(^{197}\) There are exceptions to this. At times when a local paper posts a photo of video footage identifying an individual from within the community caught shoplifting, another community member may post it to their social media account. However, this is mainly para chavar (to irritate another in a joking manner), and not with the intention to report the alleged thief.
It is the act of leaving the community, then, which makes one eligible for such attacks. Prior to my departing Alelí one afternoon, a worried grandma presses a brown paper bag into my hands, “Put your wallet in here, so that no one will see it. You should not be walking with it in your hands, visible to those who want to rob it from you.” Her concern is justified. My experience within Alelí parallels that which Hoffman (2011:223) describes of a hotel utilized as an outpost in early 2000s war ravaged Sierra Leone:

The supposedly antisocial kamajor youth were gracious hosts who feared for my safety outside the hotel every bit as much as others feared for my safety inside it. Passing between the hotel and the streets beyond meant passing between order and chaos, though which was which depended upon where one stood.

These insider/outsider motifs hold true across many areas on the Island besides the phenomenon of theft.

There are also, as would be expected, critical rings of reciprocity within Alelí. These are exclusive and non-random. That said, by and large, the community runs on dollar exchanges: if you want any task done, you call a manda’o—usually out your front window and, for a variable amount, they will retrieve what you need. You lower the bucket from your balcony with the money inside then lower it again to receive what they have retrieved for you. As one handicapped community member remarked, “Aquí no hay amistades. Todo es de chavo. Ley de vida.” 198 Or as one often hears, “Un amigo es un peso en la bosilla.”199 And on the contrary, “Uno no es un peso de cien que se cae bien con todo el mundo”—no one is a one hundred dollar bill, that everyone enjoys.

Some non-narcotics involved residents are integrally but indirectly involved in their support of traffickers through offering them a place to shower, eat, and change

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198 “Here there are no friendships. Everything is money. It’s the law of life.”
199 “Your friend is the dollar in your pocket.” This aligns well with the popular t-shirt which proclaims, “Money is the Best Drug.”
clothes if they reside outside the community. Very often such hospitality is offered in exchange for nebulizers; Quis reflects that over the years he has paid for more than forty. Such longstanding relationships of reciprocity create an impermeable bond of support, wherein *la confianza* is never in doubt. So there is an aspect of mercy—albeit cathected—interwoven through their actions, relieving medical issues not readily resolved otherwise.

During a visit I made to the home of one elder, she angrily waves a prescription for post-op pain medication at me, telling me her *Reforma* doesn’t cover it. Almost as if on cue, the next door neighbor, a relocated (non-native *aleliano*) *traficante*, exits his adjacent apartment and pops his head in the doorway to see if she needs anything. *Un Tramadol*, she reports dryly. Herein, the illicit economy serves a wider spectrum of the populace than one might at first suspect. As such, the point’s customers are not simply addicts and habitual or recreational users, but the elderly who cannot always navigate the nuances of healthcare system.
Aphonic Interlude IV: Eavesdropping on Adulthood

*La fogata as Pedagogical Chrysalis for los amanecidos*

*Who does this baby belong to? Who does this little shorty belong to? He’s just hanging around y’all? He’s just hanging around y’all, right? So he see everything you all do, right? So if this brother right here catch a case and do a hundred years, whose fault is it? It’s his fault? ... [pacing and looking at all of the gathered young men’s eyes]. Teach him righteous. Y’all got it? Y’all got it? Alright. I’m looking to you.*

—Ameena Matthews to gang members in Chicago regarding a twelve-year-old boy in their midst (James, Kotlowitz & Piper 2011)

The size of the circle of *la fogata* is never static. Some are invited to sit, some sit without an invitation. Unequivocal, Quis states, “I don’t want to meet anyone new.” When an unknown face arrives, Quis is quick to pack up and leave. But far more often than alarm, a sentiment of monotony predominates at *la fogata*. For contexts wherein trafficking is pedestrian there is a lot of aimless cellphone surfing. A lot of laidback reminiscing. Yawning and eye rubbing. The Mayor announcing to no one in particular that he is bored. Quis engaging in colloquial theorizing—like ruminating over the bald hypocrisy of social media: “I get sick of seeing people post prayer requests for disfigured children overseas one minute, and then the next they are threatening to fight another woman over *una estupidez*.”

He proceeds to show me the rebuke he posted on social media: an image of the Ten Commandments. Below it the atheist writes, “Unless you follow these rules, do not call yourself a Christian. It’s like preaching a sermon in a bikini.” According to its participants, *la fogata* generally is a space of reflection, where folks seek respite for their nerves, or a mind “wiped clean” of former yet ever-looming psychological injuries.

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200 Something dumb or minor.
When Dr. Vargas Vidot talks of children in Puerto Rico being “raised by the point,” it is understood that very often the youngsters (often future or current *amanecidos* themselves) are present to listen to the daily conversations, to absorb the espoused ideologies of those employed there. During their formative years, such children’s worldviews are shaped by those who—even if they do not often engage with them directly—permit their presence. Accordingly, I would be remiss not to foreground the dialogue to which the children are routinely privy at *la fogata* given that all such interactions serve to inform their worldview and undoubtedly influence the trajectory of their life course to one extent or another.

**Lying to Scrub Toilets: Everyday Indignities & Daily Humiliations**

**A Soliloquy to Those in the Licit Labor Force**

Tonight *la fogata* is convened and the energy level is exceptionally high. While Melquisedec is vocal about his unwillingness to work in the licit sector due to the ubiquity of the abuse of power, the Mayor is, at turns, distraught with regard to maintaining the position he has as a school janitor. Upon his most recent release from prison, the Mayor has been required to wait five years until he can apply for a clean record of conduct. In the interim he has been unable to procure licit work because of his record and therefore,

I had to lie in order to even enter the company I [am] in, I had to gain entrance by using another name, another social security number that actually wasn’t mine because—because I had filled out [other applications] with my name and had explained my situation—that I was an ex-con and whatever—and well, I never received a single call. But when I lied and said that I was another person, that I had all the documents, well then rapidly they called me, and I started to work under that other name. But since I cannot lie, I don’t know, I at the end of the day I ended up telling the supervisor that I wasn’t that person, that I was someone who once had a problem with authority and that because of a *malea* I was locked up and it wrecked my record of good conduct. So as I told you, I explained my situation to him and, well, he said he was going to help me.
I have the best disposition towards work. In the time that I have been working there they have seen that I am not irresponsible, I do not arrive late, I never miss work. How many times do I go and am told, “Do this” and I do it, understand? Or, I told [my supervisor], you can ask the principal and all of my fellow employees if I really work. And he told me that yes, he already knew because he had asked them and they had told him.

In all of the schools that I have worked in, I have never had any type of problem. On the contrary, they have always congratulated me because I am a responsible person, who, in the twenty some years during which I have been working in schools, in classrooms: I clean [everything well]: the bathrooms, the cafeteria, the lobby…

Here the Mayor carefully constructs his reputation as a conscientious laborer to offset the criminal record which looms over and threatens to define him. By using someone else’s identity, he risks being fired (or potentially further incarceration), yet remains confident that through the integrity of his work ethic and his winsome persuasion, he will encounter mercy and continued opportunities.

Yet obstacles remain. Everyone is honing in on the Mayor’s description of abuses he is enduring at work. He details how toilets that have not functioned in years are still used by people who ignore the “Out of Order” sign and break in to use them—leaving behind unimaginable disasters. He speaks of teachers who turn off their classrooms’ air conditioning as soon as he enters to clean. He mentions a principal who disallows him—on the few occasions he has borrowed a car in order to get to work—to park in the parking lot because he is “only a janitor.” With the mounting stress from the micro-aggressions the Mayor is desperate to be transferred to another school.

The very same teachers from that school say to me, “Since you came it’s obvious how clean this school has become.” What does that mean? Damn it! It means that I work!!! When you see me [there], you’re going to see me with the dustpan in this f*****g hand and the broom in the other: bam, bam, bam (feigns vigorous sweeping) and with the Walkman (tilts head and hums).
In part, his indignation arises from the knowledge that some of his co-workers do not share this intense dedication towards their labor. By contrast, he is aware of his actual value in the market as a consistently and reliably productive individual.

Tonight there is a marked freneticism in his manner as he shares this cascade of indignities with us while pacing around the interior of *la fogata’s* circle. Growing increasingly agitated, then enraged as he enumerates the injustices, he makes eye contact with each one of us, consecutively, intensely, scanning for our corroboration, our validation. The crescendo of his outrage occurs when he recalls, “Oh, and the worst f****g part: That I ride my bike there during the height of the noonday sun! Imagine this woman’s insolence!”

Once he sits down he commences a stymied effort to reimagine his positioning vis-à-vis a soul-crushing hierarchy:

But look, Lord help me, it’s that I—
Honestly, it’s that I—
I don’t know.
I would like to be… Honestly, damn it…
But…
I don’t know why the hell
I didn’t study [to be] a lawyer or something like that!

Pensive, he pauses a moment and regains his composure, “And if they throw my client in jail, I’d be in a bad way, in a bad way. I’d be there defending my client in court and instead of throwing my client in jail, they would throw me in jail for arguing with the judge: ‘No, because my client…!’” At this he feigns kicking a chair over and jumping over the banister separating the defendant’s table from the judge’s bench. Vivid re-

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201 Fieldnotes, 3.2014.
imaginings. Upon conjuring this scene, he laughs heartily, thereby diffusing a modicum of angst.

Girl, if I had been—honestly, it’s that this daughter of a whore—if I had been writing her up [for all of her infractions] so that I’d screw her up. If she’s f*****g with my job, I’m going to f**k with her job. You are wronging me and I’m going to stay here with my arms crossed? Are you crazy? We’re going to kill each other, then, to see who wins. Either you demolish me or I demolish you! [thrusting his shoulder forward] And what?

Power dynamics on the Island can be particularly stultifying. This afterhours processing is an attempt to mitigate the oppression, to ameliorate the sting. Quis concludes the topic by reiterating that such indignities are precisely the reason why he elects not to work in the licit sector. The young men in our midst, listening and nodding, take mental notes.

Just four days later I am in the school parking lot chatting with a colleague and preparing to leave. Riding by on his way home from work, the Mayor calls out to me and then stops. After introducing him to my colleague, I talk with him for forty minutes, rehashing the situation in light of no new developments. At one juncture he stops me abruptly when I mention the predicament given that it is the principal who is paying his salary. With his hand slicing into the air horizontally, he corrects me, “She doesn’t pay me. It’s the sweat from my brow that pays me.” Upon declaring this twice, he leans forward to a ninety degree angle away from his bike, takes his first two fingers of both hands and sweeps them from the middle of his forehead to his temples, precipitating a cascade of sweat droplets onto the macadam below.

“You’re right, you’re right,” I realize aloud. His jaw is tight, his breathing is rapid, shallow. He owns—and will always own—the dignity of his labor. His personhood is not on offer. Yet our subsequent brainstorming session devolves into a Spirograph of endlessly intersecting circles, twirling us toward a vanishing point vacant of viable
solutions. We had no way of knowing it at the time, but all of our circuitous conversations, all of our focused strategizing sessions were, ultimately, in vain. For after the academic year ended, the company’s contract with the school district was not renewed. Subsequently all of their employees were let go—not just the Mayor, but everyone lost their jobs due to Island-wide fiscal cutbacks.
CHAPTER 5 Endless Rounds of Whack-A-Mole

The Impact of Illicit Flows Islandside

The country continues to believe that its problem is drugs and criminality, and not the social conflicts, [which are the] fruit of racial discrimination and inequality of opportunities.202

—Fernando Picó, Vivir en Caimito (1987:14, translated)

The Narcotics Paradox:

202 “[E]l país sigue creyendo que su problema son las drogas y la criminalidad, y no los conflictos sociales, fruto de la discriminación racial y la desigualdad de oportunidades.”
La foga in High Contrast

Rewinding six months, it is late afternoon and la fogata is still a flurry of activity. Melquisedec forgot his chair. Or else didn’t bother to get it out of the truck. So instead we sit side by side on the curb, which hurts his back. Many folks are milling around, some chew on Nutella flavored limbers while younger kids spit out most of the seed along with the sunflower shells upon which they are snacking. The police in Puerto Rico, he shares—in addition to their nightstick, Tasers, and guns—will soon be carrying scales with them. As he says this, I picture the toga wrapped, blindfolded Lady Justice holding up the scales with one hand. I could not be further afield. He directs the manda’o Romi to retrieve one in order to show me. The black square of plastic is about the size of a half dollar, no bigger than the pocket size collapsible cup I had as a kid. Asking Romi for a bellón, Quis then demonstrates that it comes out to 5.0 grams. Personal use, he explains, must be under eleven grams, otherwise—like in Denver—they will fine you. Legalizing marijuana for personal use, he muses unconcerned, will not hurt my business much.

Quis is quiet for a few moments before tilting his head downward toward the concrete to communicate with me more privately. He lowers his voice:

When I was locked up in federal prison the best advice I received was to learn about all the other inmates’ cultures: Arabs, Americans, Italians—everyone. In that way I could learn how to interact well with everyone. The Italians took me for one of their own—changed my last name and everything. But I’m going to tell you something about my culture: here no one knows how to be grateful. When I die everyone here is going to be weeping, “Oh, Melquisedec, we miss him so much!” And I am a criminal. A criminal. And they love me. I am someone who, if I don’t get the money that is owed me, I will order someone to break that person’s face open. But for a good person who dies, a person who helps the community like you, the people here will not think much about it. They won’t care. It is nothing to them.

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Limbers are homemade frozen confections ostensibly named for Charles Lindbergh after his 1927 visit to the Island.
He leans back, raises his hand into the air, and tosses out a dismissive wave of indifference. “This is my culture,” he explains, “I know how people are here, I know how they think.” Although he is amused by residents’ affection for him, he appears agitated by the disjuncture in treatment. He adds the caveat that even though they “appreciate” him, once incarcerated none will concern themselves with his sustenance. It is Melquisedec’s consistent, calibrated advising which ensures I retain no illusions as to the social realities in Alelí.

A week later I stop by Mamá Amada’s and she invites me up for dinner. Clearing bottles of perfume from her micro-enterprise off of the table, she elbows me good-naturedly in the ribs and urges me to try her homemade escabeche of green bananas. We feast on chicken, rice, and beans as well while she fills me in on community news. With a satisfied nod and slight smile she squeezes her eyes almost completely shut as she concludes by noting that Melquisedec listens to me. Her observation gives me slight pause; it must be that during the evenings she formulates these assessments through the louvered slats of her adjacent bedroom windows.

From Sky to Sea: Precarious Arrivals

*It used to be so easy, back in those days there was no FURA, there was no Coast Guard, you could just drive your boat right up to the shore in Loiza drop off 500 pounds of marijuana and no one would ever know.*

—Former transnational trafficker, transnational ex-con, & gunsmith

*Narcotics trafficking is what inflates artificial breath into the economy of gasping Puerto Rico.*

—Santiago Medina (2016)

Rising to outline for me FURA’s jurisdiction on the map which takes up the entire wall beside his desk, Teniente Ángel Garcia highlights that their territory extends to a small cay referred to as Sail Island—beyond which the US Virgin Islands assumes
jurisdiction. He elaborates that directly to the east on the Island of Mona the Department of Natural Resources (DRNC) helps to monitor the border and goes on to clarify that, in his day to day experience, illicit shipments from Venezuela have been non-existent during his tenure over the past decade. Instead, the cocaine which they intercept during their maritime patrols is inevitably from Colombia.

Although they do not provide percentages, the federal government, still seems to include Venezuela in this network. According to postulations of Vito Salvatore Guarino, the head of the DEA in Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Colombia ship more than 220,000 pounds (100 metric tons) of cocaine through the Caribbean on a daily basis: 55,115 pounds (25 metric tons) of which arrive in Puerto Rico and 88,154 pounds (40 metric tons) of which arrive in the Dominican Republic (Cobián 2015d). Guarino describes the chain of value assigned to a kilo increases the further it gets from its point of origin (e.g., Colombia $4-5,000→ Puerto Rico $20-25,000→Australia $125,000). Luis Romero of Basta Ya emphasizes that it is not helpful that illicit drugs are so accessible on the Island, nor that they often sell for less than half the street price they garner in the States. As of August 2014, the metro area prices for controlled substances are as follows:

- yerba (marijuana) = $5-6/bolsa & $25/Cripi (higher potency)
- diablillo = marijuana with cocaine
- heroin = $90,000 - $100,000/kilo
- heroin with Xylazine = $13/syringe
- crack (tapas) = $3/tube
- cocaine = $8-10/baggie & anywhere from $10,000 - $22,000/kilo
- Percoset (la pelco) = $7/each ($1.25 recetada)
- Fioricet = $1/each
- Xanax (el pali) = $3/each (0.80 recetada)
- Tramadol = $1/each (0.25 recetada)
- Oxycodone (el osito) = $6-10/pill
Another recent development is that transnational DTOs have become more holistic in their negotiations, with distributors no longer hiring separate entities to transport the narcotics but taking charge of it themselves—preferring frequent shipments of lower quantities (Cobián 2015d). In 2013 Arturo Carrión estimated that 51% of sales are carried out in cash, a great part of which, undoubtedly, are a product of the narcotics trade. The reality is that we have an underground economy that spends, that receives services, but that does not contribute…the informal economy is $17 billion, is 27% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (Santiago Medina 2016, translated)

Stories surface detailing how, unable to launder the money as quickly as they make it, traffickers store the packs of bills in boxes. But whereas banks are climate-controlled, the stacks of bills recovered in one raid had become moldy in the tropical humidity. Prior to the 1980’s the Island had a crime profile which mirrored that of the United States, however, once Colombian drug cartels infiltrated the Island with narcotics, the statistics began to reflect that incursion. By 1994 the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) classified Puerto Rico as a “High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area” (hereafter HIDTA). In order to provide a bit of context as to the present state of narcotics trafficking in the waters surrounding Puerto Rico, since mid-January 2014 until February 2015 (a little over a year), the Coast Guard has intercepted “15,104 kilograms of cocaine and 5,320 pounds of marijuana during 14 counter-drug interdictions as part of Operation Unified Resolve… [of which t]he wholesale value…is worth more than $508 million” (DEA 2015). The significant uptick in the utilization of Caribbean routes for narcotics trafficking was catalyzed in 2009 when the US federal government began to tighten controls on the Mexican border. The summary of the past two years as shown below reveals that seizures of illegal prescription pills have almost doubled.
DEA Seizures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015*</th>
<th>n/a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>345,918</td>
<td>345,918</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>24,337</td>
<td>25,967</td>
<td>+1,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>+77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription Pills</td>
<td>18,538</td>
<td>32,206</td>
<td>+13,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrests</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>-332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DEA, [www.dea.gov](http://www.dea.gov)

* As of June 30, 2015; fiscal year ends September 30. Therefore 2015 data reflects only the first nine (9) months of the year.

The absence of methamphetamine in the above chart is conspicuous; my speculation is that the only reason Puerto Rico began receiving meth (sources vary as to when meth was first documented on the Island by federal agents—whether in December 2013 or August 2014) is due to its transformation from a backyard make-it-yourself substance heretofore limited to rural areas in the United States to that of a high mass production industry based in Mexico and finding its way into urban venues throughout the United States and beyond. In 2015 an Airb&b owner in an upscale neighborhood in Santurce had authorities forcibly extricate a customer of only three days who had set up a meth lab onsite; use of meth has been gaining a steadier foothold. As of 2017 both Fentanilo, o fentanyl, and the vastly more potent cousin of Xylazine, la etorfína, or Etorphine (also known as elephant tranquilizer), have also become part of the drug buffet available on the Island (Pérez Méndez 2017).

Some examples of substantive operatives from the past five years include:
### Selected Federal Operatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Residencial (Public Housing)</th>
<th>#Arrested/#Agents</th>
<th>Forfeiture Allegation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Monte Hatillo, SJ</td>
<td>105/700</td>
<td>$82 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Turabo Heights, Caguas</td>
<td>139/n/a</td>
<td>$45 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Various, Bayamón</td>
<td>110/350+</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Various, Mayaguez</td>
<td>158/500+</td>
<td>$263 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Vista Hermosa, Guaynabo</td>
<td>132/n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: [www.dea.gov](http://www.dea.gov)*

### Selected Caribbean Sea Interdictions Near Puerto Rico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>400 &amp; 929 kilos</td>
<td>$44.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$29 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>42 bales</td>
<td>$30.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>247 bales</td>
<td>$13 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>3,500 lbs.</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$37 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>2 tons</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Oxycodone</td>
<td>44 kilos</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: [www.dea.gov](http://www.dea.gov)*

What is not well reflected within these charts is the heroin and prescription drug use, both endemic on the Island and both of which represent different challenges in their discovery and confiscation as compared to marijuana and cocaine. Currently
the vast majority of seizures which occur in Puerto Rico are maritime (most arrive in “go fast” boats via a 24 hour journey from South America) as there has been far less smuggling through aerial routes in recent years.

Neither the Toilet Nor the Trash:
We are authorized by the DEA to receive medicine and dispose of them
Punta Las Marias

Within Alelí there is no formal “chutín,” or shooting gallery for injection heroin users, as there are sprinkled throughout the metro area—twelve total (one location hosts four;\(^{204}\) the rest—whether residencial or barriada have one). Instead those needing to shoot up simply duck into a darkened hallway or step behind a closed metal building door. This lack of chutins is precisely due to the fact that Alelí is a community that distributes and consumes crack, primarily, and not heroin. There is enough stigma attached to injecting in Alelí that any syringes are kept stringently from littering the ground and potentially getting

\(^{204}\) In reference to this heroin saturated community, one police officer tiredly relays, “I don’t think the government has any plan to do anything with this community, to lift it out of its situation.”
in the hands of small children. Hunting Park, North Philadelphia\textsuperscript{205} it is not; visitors from the Island attest to their shock when arriving stateside and witnessing the haphazard disposal of syringes in public parks and play areas where children could be harmed.

In neighboring St. Croix, the demographics are quite different. In contrast to Puerto Rico, St. Croix has no wholesale distribution of heroin, but only “retail-level heroin distribution [which] is confined to a small Hispanic community” (NDIC 2003). So whereas Crucians avoid the entanglements of heroin, this demographic reflects the stronghold of heroin upon those who have transplanted themselves there from Puerto Rico.

With regard to broader associations made colloquially within the Latin American trafficking networks, Puerto Rico borrows nomenclature rather selectively: primarily from the Middle East and South America. Regardless of actual present and former trafficking ties, there seems to be a level of contempt directed towards other traffickers hailing from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or Central America. As a result, it is far more rare that those in Island networks borrow from them. Hence, names like Osama, La Farc (pronounced “La Fal”) and social media references to Griselda Blanco and Pablo Escobar far outnumber, for example, any made to el Chapo, los Zetas, or the Sinaloa cartel.

\textbf{Los feos vs. Tío Fed: How the Federal Presence is Felt}

\textit{“Los feos tienen mi foto”}\textsuperscript{206}

—Anuel A. A. in Bryant Myers’ \textit{Esclava} (Remix)

Those sympathetic to the federal presence of the United States—primarily for the role they play in providing accountability—refer to them as \textit{los federicos} (the Fredericks) or the even more affectionate, \textit{Tío Fed} (Uncle Fred, as opposed to Uncle Sam). A more

\textsuperscript{205} Interview, 11.2016 and personal experience.
\textsuperscript{206} The ugly [ones] have my photo.
neutral term used to reference the federal agency is “los tres letras,” or the three letters (FBI, CIA, DEA, ICE, etc.). When there are federal raids on corruption, the online media is flooded with those lauding the federal presence. One online commentator, identified only as “Guest,” composed the following prayer directed towards United States Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico, the Honorable Rosa Emilia Rodríguez:

Let us pray:
Emilia, Mother of Protection…
We request that you intercede for us.
Free us from the corruption and corrupt people.
Throw in jail those who fail us and do not have compassion on them.
In the name of the President, the Congress,
and the Supreme Court of the United States.
They are three branches but one single Federal Government.
Don’t question it, it is a Mystery.
Imagine if we did not have them!
Amen.²⁰⁷

As she works in conjunction with and presides over all of the federal operatives, she is credited with providing a level of accountability otherwise implausible.

Those who resent the federal presence, however, refer to them as los feos—“the ugly ones.” Prior to the Junta imposed by the federal government in 2016, there was notably less anti-fed (most often: “los federales son asesinos” or “the feds are assassins”) graffiti now than in decades past (perhaps in response to the uptick of the drug war), the anti-federal sentiment can be most evident in towns outside the metro area. As evidenced

²⁰⁷ Oremos:
Emilia, Madre Protectora...
Te pedimos que intercedas por nosotros.
Libranos de la corrupción y de los corruptos.
Mete preso a los que nos fallan y no les tengas compasión.
En el Nombre del Presidente, del Congreso y del Tribunal Supremo de EU.
Son tres Ramas pero un solo Gobierno Federal.
No lo cuestiones, es un Misterio.
¡Imagínate si no los tuviéramos!
Amén (“Carrión defiende,” 2016)
below, one resident in the town of Yauco utilizes its property’s curbside fence as a platform for free speech for political disgruntlement.

The signs read as follows (R-L):
FBI TERRORISTS; FBI: WHORES, SNOOPS, CRIMINALS, COWARDS, ASSASSINS, ABUSERS, CHICKENS;
BLINDNESS: A SICKNESS INDUCED BY THE FBI IN THE FAMILY OF THIS HOUSE;
Electrician 787.XXX.XXXX

The front of a house; the flag under the sign reads: FBI ABUSERS COWARDS.
Yauco
Some complain that the feds only show their faces when there is an operative. But as they conduct many operatives—in agencies as far flung as the water department, the education department, the justice department, and also are responsible to field all vessels one mile or more off of the coast—there is a bit of irony in that complaint. Regardless of how they are perceived, however, it is the federal agents who are on the forefront of the anti-narcotics missions throughout the Island and beyond. Given that some countries in Latin America are beginning to resist the strong arm tactics of the US propelled “War on Drugs,” an interesting question is how Puerto Rico as a Latino country (albeit sovereign in name only) will engage US drug policy in coming years (see Neuman & Romero 2015)

Puerto Rico “apest a balas”,

The Unrelenting Ubiquity of the Bullet in la vida lutidiana

“Violence in Puerto Rico is like alcapurrias and moonshine, something that is part of normal, everyday life.”

—Federal Judge José A. Fusté (Cobián 2015a, translated)

“Señora, we are no longer in the times of Toño Bicicleta.”

—Online commentator “Julio Ángel Lanausse” in response to a comment that the news of an individual being shot 137 times had to be an exaggeration. (“Asesinan a hombre,” 2016)

Se supone que las balas no tienen nombre...pues, ahora sí.

Conventional wisdom asserts that “bullets have no names.” That’s no longer true.

Photo credit www.elvocero.com

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208 “Puerto Rico reeks with bullets.” Attribution unknown.
209 Daily mourning life—a play on the words luto and cotidiana.
210 Green banana fritters
211 From the late 60s to the mid-90s, Toño Bicicleta was the Island’s most notorious fugitive wanted for murder, kidnapping, and rape. For his crimes, he used a machete.
With two bags of *chinas pa’ chupar*\(^{212}\) in my hand and late for a meeting at a nearby school, I am immersed in conversation with Pepe alongside the highway’s *marginal*. I’ve given him nothing other than handfruit, yet he still needs to collect $60 today to make enough in order to “cure” himself with heroin every three hours. Even so, he gives me almost a half hour of his time. Still gripping a white paper donation cup, he speaks in flawless English about his dislike of methadone; we discuss other options. He reminds me that it is not only “H” with which he is battling, but also a former Island stand-by, “*anesthesia*” (Xylazine, a horse tranquilizer). Two weeks prior he had entered a metro rehab on a Friday, but by Monday the magnitude of the pain of detoxing had gotten the best of him.

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212 Juice oranges, also referred to as “*chinas mondadas*,” or peeled oranges.
Presently the *puntos* eschew selling anesthesia due to wiser business practices. Only a few years ago a large variety of substances were cut in to the decks of heroin in order to increase profit margins, but this strategy ultimately backfired as it was those substances which made the users ill. These days they only sell the pure heroin, the pure cocaine without additives. As one agent explains the macabre dynamic in more exact detail,

[You], as the drug vendor, want to sell to your client every day...and [while] the other chemicals (like Xylazine) are used to augment the effects of the drugs [and economize], they [also] end up killing the person—and for that reason it is not to the *puntos*’ advantage in the long term. [Further,] that client becomes a public disturbance. The person who was once your client, now at any given moment you are going to lose him because hunks of his flesh are falling off of his body—and it is a situation where you are causing him too much damage. So those who run the *puntos* have modified their strategy: Now when [I as the drug vendor] do not want you around anymore, instead of killing you, I just begin to sell you the [narcotics with the] Xylazine or other additives cut into it in order to screw you over, so that you begin dying little by little.\(^{213}\)

Further, the use of Xylazine produced highly visible nodding effects, where users would lose consciousness while still standing (a phenomenon referred to as creating “zombies”).\(^{214}\) Such after effects caused an *estorbo*, or public nuisance, bringing negative attention to the *puntos* (*calentandolos*, or attracting police attention) and for that reason as well are no longer utilized.

Out of her car window a bright faced girl extends to Pepe a *guineito* and a sandwich bag of Oreos. We thank her and he tells me the number of his building in Alelí. Making a visual map in order to locate where he means, I then tell him which *alelianos* can get a hold of me quickly. Thirty feet from us a fight breaks out: a man approaches a van, opens the driver side door and begins punching its occupant. The *revendón* from

\(^{213}\) Interview, 11.2016.  
\(^{214}\) See the National Geographic’s sensationalized documentary *Zombie Island.*
whom I just purchased the fruit comes over and shaking his head, mutters, “It’s like this every day here.” Such assaults tend to be viewed as incidental skirmishes and rarely make the news.

**From Renovation to Relocation:**
**Shifts in Spacialization of Authority and Violence**

![Baby Hedgehog at Gas Station in Domingo Ruiz, Arecibo](image)

Whereas in prior decades *bichotes* were known to renovate their apartments within public housing through ostentatious displays of wealth (e.g., the installation of marble floors and walls), these days the indication of success is to move to an undisclosed location in the countryside—sometimes with ample land and a bevy of exotic animals procured through the black market. Luxuries such as Disney cruises and private schooling for the children, along with lavish birthday parties, flag these ascents on the socio-economic ladder. Prior, extensive modifications\(^\text{216}\) were made to government buildings and leadership remained on-site. Now leadership tends to be exceedingly less visible, less accessible—appearing only when there is a conflict to be settled or for a brief time to *janguear* with local traffickers.

\(^{215}\) Fieldnotes, 3.2016.

\(^{216}\) In one instance, sections of entire walls were removed in one government housing building in order to transform the floor into an indoor shooting range.
Carjackings and the Shift from Residential to Roadway Assassinations

In 1992 the city of San Juan lead the nation in per capita carjackings (3,192); the Island as a whole finished 1992 with 8,669 carjackings. As a result, carjacking became a federal crime, after which that number dropped precipitously—almost in half—to 4,522 in 1993. Those numbers continued to drop until more recently. Presently, however, there has been a notable uptick in occurrences—for which the FBI recently created a 25 member carjacking task force. In May 2012, as part of the Save Our Streets campaign, the decision for the FBI to take jurisdiction over all carjackings, not just ones involving violent or lethal force, was made public.

Yet, irony of ironies, just as the number of carjackings once again had begun rising precipitously after a more than two decade lull, the local government installs cameras throughout the metropolitan area in order to fine motorists for traffic violations. The only problem with this? Their installation would capture traffic crimes which—at least on the law books—do not constitute crimes. The Traffic Lights Puerto Rico Law #22 of Jan. 7, 2000, Article 8.02(b)(6) reads: “Vehicles traveling on public highways between twelve (12) midnight and five (5) o'clock in the morning, when facing a red light, shall stop and then continue driving, provided due precautions are taken.” That is to say, for all intents and purposes, drivers are to treat a red light as if it were a stop sign. Why? Because too many were losing their lives due to late night or early morning carjackings. Governance is at times maddeningly counterintuitive, and not surprisingly the citizenry was displeased; little time was lost before the first camera was vandalized.

217 Other than that Island citizens are already taxed higher, at 11.5%, than any US state.
218 Pasada las 12:00 de la medianoche hasta las 5:00 de la mañana puede pasar la luz roja, luego de detenerse y tomar las debidas precauciones.
Yet occasionally there are redemptive moments: in the spring of 2015, mere months following its installation and after a sizable financial investment, this system of fines was revoked and uninstalled.

While residential drive-by shootings have decreased in the metro area, there’s been an uptick in those which occur on the highways. In recent years carjackings, a phenomenon which, as mentioned above, had largely diminished after federal laws were instituted to combat them in 1992 (Navarro 1994), began to increase again. This uptick has largely been isolated to the metro area, with San Juan, Bayamón, and Carolina coming in with exponentially higher occurrences than the Island’s remaining ten police regions. With the exceptions of Humacao and Arecibo, the rest of the more rural regions do not even reach double digits for their annual carjacking incidents. That said, the peak for this second wave of Islandwide carjackings occurred in 2015 and only reached 486, which is one eighteenth of the total reached in 1992.

The ostensible appeal of carjackings currently is that they provide a vehicle by which to subsequently commit the aforementioned car to car assassinations (referred to as: autos en marcha) which, by correlation, also are increasing. This relocation of violence from residential areas to the Island’s highways is reflected in the mid-year figures for 2015 (as of 7/27/2015), which detail the location where homicides have been committed:

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219 Working document furnished by the Puerto Rico Police Department not intended to be considered as official statistics.
As evidenced above, almost three quarters of killings are now occurring on public streets. The more centralized authority of a DTO now disseminating stricter commands and a tighter control on violence has undoubtedly contributed to this shift. As such, crime scenes are dislocated from points where narcotics transactions occur (primarily residential areas) and transposed onto public thoroughfares. In this democratization of violence (Kruijt and Koonings 1999:11), public spaces become the new scenes of detonation and locutionary vessels aid in the obfuscation of culpability. Given that clearance rates are already much lower for those homicides committed by firearm (as opposed to a knife or other object), the addition of a stolen getaway car only serves to augment the challenge. But given that the act of homicide has been relocated, a potential

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220 Retrieved from http://policia.pr.gov/informe-preliminar-de-asesinatos/#sthash.TdeNJH3q.dpuf
perpetrator now needs not only a firearm but a vehicle—untraceable to his identity—by which to commit the crime. This geographical shift has caused the number of carjackings on the Island to skyrocket once more.

Caymans, Quicksand, & Forensic Futilities: The Evanescence of Cadavers

Water but Not Windproof: Propping Open the Folded Danger Sign

Beyond Pinchos & Pastelillos de Caimán221: The Less Exotic Role of Puerto Rico’s Imported Caymans

Conveniently located next to Laguna Tortuguera in Barrio Guarico of Vega Baja, one can find a rich repast of cayman fritters and cayman skewers prepared by the wife of a lifelong cayman hunter. Non-native to the Island, caymans first were introduced in the 1960s from Woolworths pet stores when released by their owners into the wild (Coto 2012) and can be a menace when there is flooding after heavy rains. The combination of

221 Cayman skewers and cayman meat patty fritters.
citizens transforming into extemporaneous hunters and cayman meat transforming into a
gastronomic delicacy, then, has served to temper the degree of their infiltration into
populated areas. But caymans serve a more insidious purpose on the Island as well.

In April of 2015 a teen is kidnapped in front of his junior high prior to the
beginning of his school day. With no sign of him, a few days later a prayer meeting for
the disappeared teen is announced on social media: we meet at the ballpark. Folks are
quiet, some holding hands. About two women for every man, we walk a half block to the
basketball court on which he used to play. The sixty or so of us present are asked to hold
hands in a circle, the bereft parents hold onto one another in the center. One woman in
majestically draped folds of fabric raises a book in her right hand as she preaches, its
title: Bible for Fishermen. She walks in a circle around the weeping family in the center
as she begins to preach to the outer circle, calling out orders for bended knees. Midway
through two uniformed (so ostensibly on-duty) police officers are asked to join the circle,
asked to pray. They join in and not soon thereafter one is pulled into the tighter prayer
circle in the center. The pastora keeps repeating that we must believe. That we must rend
our heart for real this time. Months later and miles away, a community elder in Aleli tells
me that the young man was cut into pieces and thrown into the lagoon. Ostensibly for
being a satélite.

As mentioned previously, in Puerto Rico being kidnapped is almost invariably
synonymous with being killed. Some platforms on social media further elucidate the most
probable reasons as to why this is the case. The following comments were posted online
in response to the aforementioned teen’s disappearance, the teen whose parents were

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222 The public imaginary, in this case, dictates that either through caymans or the mysterious sucking silt of the
mangrove quicksand or canal bottoms, his corpse will be wrought evanescent.
hoping against hope to find him alive. But when it comes to kidnapping—unless it involves a gunpoint ATH cash dispensing machine robbery—the idea in Puerto Rico is not so much “catch and release,” but rather “catch and kill.” Or as one commenter succinctly expressed:

Well, in Puerto Rico [when] they kidnap you, the plan is to kill you quickly.

Another commenter simplifies the protocol as follows:

They kidnap you, get the information out of you, kill you, tie an old car transmission to you, and dump you in the lagoon.

The following is offered as an explanation:

Here in Puerto Rico all of those gangsters are starving to death. They hardly have enough to eat themselves. [What they have] they spend on drugs—imagine if they were to have a kidnapped person [in their custody]. They prefer to spend their money on drugs for themselves than to maintain someone who they kidnapped. We aren’t in Mexico where the kingpins definitely have money to maintain someone they’ve kidnapped—even [someone like] the President.

The expectation, then, is that the number of kidnappings will continue to rise in the metro area given this transformation of protocol vis-à-vis how offending members are murdered. These “cleaner eliminations” are closely monitored and by large do not occur without permission. Thus, over and above the intra-case peace agreement made in January 2013, a new mentality has become prominent as pertains to inter-case violence: The peace must be maintained at all costs.

During the time of (relative) peace, the peace—or at least its appearance—is maintained primarily through a relocation of violence (in another sense of the phrase) and also through the disappearance of cadavers. As one great grandmother explains, “These days you cannot break the peace. And so that the peace will continue, well, when they want to kill someone now they have to either kidnap them (and take them outside of
the community to do it), or wait until they leave the community and *then* kill them.”

Another former slinger confirms:

> Maintenance of the peace is what is most convenient for the transnational traffickers. First of all, ammunition—to use a lot wastes money, using less ammunition you have less expenses. Second, when there is peace the police don’t come around as much, they don’t heat up all the drug points, they don’t conduct as many raids wherein they seize all of the contraband (drugs, arms, cash). So that’s why there aren’t as many losses and they can maintain a higher profit margin. As well as they are able to avoid that innocent people are killed, as has happened so often in the past.

For that reason, no one can just walk around *guerrereando* (looking to make war) anymore… because if you do, well, they order your death, they kidnap you and they kill you. Afterwards those guys cut your chest open, fill you up with sand, and they throw you in the lagoon. There you are not going to float up and those caymans will eat you. Those caymans eat you and you disappear and cannot be found.

This theme of caymans also resurfaced at a talk given by Dr. Lilian Bobea (2016) wherein she reported the findings from focus groups she had conducted in Caimito, a part of San Juan’s metro area. Given that the urban legend has some tenable roots, I wanted to know what the authorities could corroborate.

> “Caymans?” Thoroughly confused by my question, *Teniente* Ángel García, the head of FURA’s nautical arm, leans forwards from behind his desk and repeats in order to clarify, “Caymans?” Pausing a moment, his expression almost indignant, he then states definitively, “No, we have never had any cadavers with reports of cayman bites. [In the open sea] sharks, yes. But not caymans.” He then calls Ricardo Rodriguez of the “*Rescate*” team into his office to corroborate. Rodriguez adds that most of the decomposition of cadavers occurs through bites from small fish.

223 Informal conversation, 9.2015.
224 Informal conversation, 4.2015.
225 Interview, 6.7.2016.
categorical dismissal of this possibility, questions linger within the public imaginary given that caymans are increasingly identified as threats and have been linked to cadavers in Florida.\(^{226}\)

**Under the Reigns of a DTO**

Although it is not entirely clear the degree to which micro-management occurs from the upper echelons of the narcotics pyramids, the moratorium legislated against *guerrereando*, or randomly starting gunfire battles with other *bandos*, within the metro area undoubtedly contributes to the lower homicide rate.\(^{227}\) All murders must receive prior clearances. No more *a lo loco*\(^ {228}\) will be tolerated. As such, there has arisen a phenomenon to which I refer as “anemic hits”—or hits put out against the life of a person, which ultimately amounts either to a beat down of the targeted individual or nothing at all. Such anemic hits may originate from a fit of rage by a person who heretofore was authorized to speak violence into reality but, given the restructured centralization of the DTO presently is unauthorized to declare one. The result is that personal vendettas over petty issues are no longer culminating in homicide. Although speculation necessarily disallows for precision, this recently instituted “clearinghouse concept” for homicide arguably has contributed at least in part to the reduction in homicides, particularly in the greater metropolitan area in 2014 (down to 681 from 1164 in 2011).

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\(^{226}\) There have also been reports of alligator sightings on the Island.

\(^{227}\) However, it has not plummeted as the governor would have citizens believe. Rather, there has been a sizable increase in the number of deaths categorized as “indeterminado” (cause of death not determined), which is a convenient, if trite loophole to keep homicide rates artificially lower. If the online commentary sections of the local periodicals are any indication, few citizens are persuaded by the cheery body counts published routinely by the media.

\(^{228}\) Random, off the cuff.
Presently, peace also connotes that there are no longer stringently enforced territorial boundaries between gangs. One of the first things that happened after the pact was that entire extended families would be mounted on bikes, riding in a group up and down the main artery in the community. Vehicular traffic was brought to a standstill, but there was almost a giddiness which accompanied the new freedom of traversing the formerly off-limits boundaries. The levity was unmistakable. With the pact there was also a relaxing of the terms for exiting a gang. While the process of leaving a gang on the Island tends to be less lethal than in many other Latin American contexts, there is no one protocol which is followed. As a result of the peace pact, according to one former trafficker, “No longer does leaving a gang mean leaving the country. Now one can remain and walk wherever one pleases, uninhibited. Prior to the pact one could not, one could not walk through certain areas because the other gangs would still associate you with your gang of origin [regardless of your current status].”

On Being (and Not Being) Surveilled

Any form of surveillance can immediately bring to mind Orwellian overtones (Benjamin 2002), but the absence thereof has its own implications. Consider the story as recounted to me by Quis about the functionality of hermetic insularity within his community:

I know how to conduct myself and I try to frequent restaurants undetected; in [public] spaces I interact with people… [People] think that I am from Condado or from Guaynabo229 because of my appearance (plucking the fabric of his shirt), as I don’t wear gold chains; I’m more understated in my appearance. That is what has brought me problems because show-offs from the street see me like this and they want to sign up (i.e., challenge me to a fight), until I say to them, “Well now, that’s fine. Look, here’s what we’re going to do, since you want to start something”—and I have done this a few times, “Since you want to start

229 Wealthy areas in the metropolitan region.
something in front of your buddies and there are cameras here such that if you leave here they capture you…Go to Alelí and let’s see if you kill me, then you kill me, over there nobody is going to say a thing.”230

So, while the community has never had cameras peering from the corner of every building, acoustic surveillance is not a new concept for Islanders. Some worry about the implications for federal agents overhearing everyday dialogue of residents—locations were not announced and ostensibly remain a secret. Just in the fall of 2013 it came to light that the state issued GPS ankle bracelets worn by parolees not only were monitoring their location, but illegally recording their conversations as well (Cobas Quevedo 2013). While the aforementioned eavesdropping scheme was unsanctioned and quickly extinguished, the new technology of Shotspotter was not only sanctioned, but publicly announced.

Originally designed for warfare in Iraq, Shotspotter is an acoustical gunfire locator system which, through hidden sensors, triangulates the location and details of gunfire incidents in order to assist law enforcement in the apprehension of armed perpetrators. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not the 2013 advent of Shotspotter (hereafter SST) in Puerto Rico will initiate a new chapter for law enforcement. While the deadly pastime of celebratory gunfire at New Year’s Eve has all but been eliminated in recent years, the cessation occurred primarily due to pressure from community groups and social media—not due to technological innovation. It is not clear how or whether patterns of day to day detonations have been directly impacted as yet.

230 Interview, 5.2014.
Whereas some cities choose their coverage areas for political reasons, San Juan—to its credit—opted to be data driven, electing sites directly in relation to the density of gunfire. Further, Puerto Rico has been more focused in their use of

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231 Phone interview conducted on 7.26.2016 with Scott Beisner, Doris Cohen, & Lester Wollman.
Shotspotter and in their implementation of the technology have devoted a team which strictly addresses gunfire reports. Shotspotter technology provides the longitude and latitude of detonations; trajectory of bullets is outside the scope of their capacity to track. They look for the “acoustic signature,” which can be detected at both supersonic and subsonic levels. For folks at SST, counter-sniper tactics which detect the “crack” of the bullet as opposed to the muzzle blast are sub-optimal; SST detects instead the muzzle blasts through four separate sensors in order to determine its exact locale. Muzzle blasts are between 120 & 140 decibels and appear sonically as impulsive, concentric rings. Subsequently, detailed forensic reports allow for a pulsed analysis, to reveal veracity of, for example, whether the perpetrator is correct that the officer fired first (they record every round fired, not just the first shot fired), or to reveal commonly named “false hotspots” such as hospitals and police stations.\(^{232}\) Stateside, technicians assign 16-20 sensors per square mile; in Puerto Rico that density is raised to 20-25 per square mile because site surveys (conducted to test gunfire and subsequently calibrate their system) determined that because of higher average community noise, the level had to be raised.

\[^{232}\text{Often survivors of firearm injuries may be reluctant to identify the geographical location of where they were shot and, instead, select an area nearby where they seek respite.}\]
When giving a demonstration of SST’s functioning to an audience, Scott Beisner, the Senior Manager of Public Safety and Designer of Coverage Areas for Shotspotter knows that, without fail, if he accesses the Island’s data—and particularly San Juan’s region—that he will be able to show the audience an example of fully automatic gunfire. He knows that when he accesses the city’s top five incidences from the last 30 days, he is certain to encounter multiple instances wherein the shelling consists of twenty rounds or more. “Three of those instances,” Beisner explains, “will likely be from fully automatic weapons, two from semi-automatics. And that is not something that we see in the States, like Oakland, for example.” Here too, Puerto Rico is an outlier. Whereas the preponderance of Chicago’s guns come from Indiana, Puerto Rico’s guns predominantly hail from Florida.
According to the Shotspotter, the Caribbean region distinguishes itself from continental patterns in the following ways:

- Of nine geographical regions tested, the Caribbean averaged significantly more rounds fired than any other (2013 National Gunfire Index 2013:22).
- Thus far, gunfire incident frequency in the Caribbean has proven impervious to technological interventions successful in the US. Of the five regions using Shotspotter (four in the continental US, one in the Caribbean), the Caribbean’s gunfire proved most intractable: compared with the Northeast US’s decrease of 39.1%, the Caribbean’s detonations barely budged—declining only by 5.2% per square mile (2013 National Gunfire Index). A year later the reduction by 6.4 incidents is not more encouraging. For the sake of comparison, the West had a reduction of 43.7.
- Although rates for the Caribbean region are not available as per the number of gunfire incidents per homicide (stateside is 126:1), one could hypothesize that the ratio of gunfire incidents will be much higher in the Caribbean given the frequency with which gunfire is used in lieu of communication (2013 National Gunfire Index).

These regional anomalies highlight the need for technological apparatuses to be contextually situated to the setting in which they are implemented and for cultural implications to be considered with foresight.

While Shotspotter is aware of the issue of utilitarian shelling (see reference to recreational shelling in following section), it is not clear how their recordings of such shelling factors into their analyses, nor their implications for best practices. Such “test firing” occurs when gun owners try out their new guns or simply “play” with them. The folks at SST report that on the Island much of this type of shelling occurs in areas such as ravines and wooded groves, as well as off of bridges. Specifically, in San Juan significant gunfire is recorded along the Caña Martin Peña and along the shorelines of la laguna San José, just east of San Juan. In Alelí, however, folks do not even bother to shift to a more remote location for utilitarian shelling, rather they conduct their testing from within the
community. As yet there is no reason, no disincentive to do otherwise. A more vigorous, or even consistent, State response to the SST technology would have to occur in order for any shift in such cultural practices. If homicide, as the detective asserts, is the only thing which draws police attention to a geographical locale, then we may expect continued—if not increasing—recreational shelling in communities such as Alelí.

**CRUDE Recreational Shelling: Bullets as Proxy for Voice—and other Sundry Uses**

*In light of the scarcity and lack of education, the type of communication which reigns [here]... is that of bullets of varying calibers flying from one side of the highway to the other.*

—Resident of government housing (Quintero 2015, translated)

*Ya no se habla, toda comunicación es a tiro limpio.*

—Online comment from username “C. C. Rivera” (7.9.2016)

Muteness is just part and parcel of the implicit contract when one is an ethnographer here. But one evening I did speak. I did make that, “Come get your cousins,” phone call. Just after nine on a breezy spring weeknight while leaving the Mayor’s home by car, I spot a young man walking quickly. Instantly this indicates a problem. Something is not right. He pivots and sprints in front of my car, then changes direction, and heads up along the sidewalk. Even before seeing his face, I recognize his stature. About six feet from me he begins firing a TEC 9 vertically into the air. About twelve rounds. A second blast of rounds sounds off behind me as I turn the corner. These were not celebratory detonations, but dialogic. Indicating presence, indicating threat.

And although I kept that phone call to seven syllables, it was enough to stir his grandmother from a stupor of sleep. Enough to propel her from the bed to the pavement.

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233 “No one talks anymore. Now all communication is strictly shooting to kill.”

For those in our lineage—no matter their age, no matter the formalities of custodial arrangements—never cease to be our children.

Even beyond the unsanctioned New Year’s Eve celebratory gunfire, detonations have been used historically for a variety of reasons across the Island’s housing projects. Locals distinguish between two types of shots fired, those which are killing bullets, balas de matanza, and those which are fired vertically into the air, balas al aire—which, clearly, also can be fatal but are not discharged with that intent. The latter is what I refer to as recreational shelling: any discharge of firearms which is not conducted with the explicit intention to kill.

While the Center for Disease Control classifies detonations in the categories of either simply “celebratory” or “non-celebratory” (CDC 2013), there are notable distinctions beyond this bifurcation which serve to elaborate further its operative forms. As such, the intention is not simply to isolate some additional forms of “fine-grain nuance” (Healy 2015), but to identify and plumb variations in functionality as per shelling practices amidst simultaneous innovations in acoustical surveillance.

I utilize the acronym CRUDE in order to distinguish between the various kinds of recreational shelling which I have observed in Alelí. In this instance, I operationalize CRUDE not in the sense of vulgar, but as in how the act of shelling, or detonating firearms, transforms into a “rudimentary,” “makeshift,” or “rough-hewn” speech. CRUDE stands for celebratory shelling, ritualized shelling, utilitarian shelling, dialogic shelling, and entertainment shelling.

Celebratory shelling is common on the Island during New Year’s Eve festivities and in response to sports victories, such as boxer Miguel Cotto’s win over Mexico’s
Antonio Margarito in December of 2011 or more recently in 2016 when the Chicago Cubs won the World Series. These bullets are discharged vertically into the air and such practices occur throughout the globe for celebratory purposes. Ritualized shelling is engaged in when, for example, a *bichote* dies and the community members fire their guns vertically in homage and commemoration to the deceased. The above practices are differentiated from “utilitarian shelling,” which refers to the routine discharge of weapons when shooting bullets into the ground or into a lidded bucket filled with sand in order to verify that a new or previously repaired firearm is functioning properly.

Quite often recreational shelling is done simply to communicate, wherein the bullets serve as a proxy for voice. In the instance that it is harnessed as an alternative modality for communication, I refer to it as “dialogic shelling.” Consider it akin to translanguaging with lead. Just as Goldstein (2012:8) refers to Bolivia’s lynching phenomenon as “an instrument of public communication,” so too detonations from firearms have transformed into a proxy for dialogue, which allow armed actors to enforce security within their own territory. Some examples of dialogic shelling which I have recorded include when news of a fellow gang member’s murder reaches his gang, detonations will ring out as an aural promissory note, signaling a promise of reprisal for his death. At other times detonations are fired in order to chase the police away when they are conducting a raid—or at least expedite their departure. On other occasions they are fired just as the authorities depart in order to tease them or simply to display their comparatively greater firepower. Another instantiation of dialogic shelling is when women from another sector enter the gang’s territory to fight local women, and the traffickers working on *el punto*, in lieu of verbal close range confrontation, employ
detonations instrumentally to communicate with them. In this instance, the traffickers use dialogic shelling as a vehicle of peacemaking, signaling both that the crowd must disperse and that such instigation from outsiders will not be tolerated. In last case the bullets are discharged for the promotion of social order, declaring an authoritative and swift denouement of the skirmish.

The final category to emerge with relation to recreational shelling is “entertainment shelling,” which arises from the reality of micro-trafficking as an often boring, tedious endeavor. If there do not happen to be any attacks from the State or competing fellow traffickers, there’s a lot of “hurry up and wait”—akin to the military dynamic. In fact, some even relish the skirmishes between bandos for the excitement and adrenaline which they entail. It is a break from the endless ennui. Sometimes while we sit at la fogata and the gunfire starts up again the stand-in bichote’s sister rolls her eyes and spits out her brother’s name in a tired voice, sighing an epithet.

Trajectory Matters

Shotspotter refers to celebratory gunfire as having “benign intent,” and therefore elides it from its annual statistical calculations of gunfire (Lester Wollman personal correspondence 11.7.2016). Nevertheless, while Shotspotter claims a forty percent reduction of celebratory gunfire, it does not address other forms of recreational shelling (e.g., ritualized, utilitarian, dialogic, and entertainment shelling). Therefore, one of the major limitations of Shotspotter is that although it can pinpoint the origin of the detonation and even the time elapsed between detonations—allowing for a swift determination to be made as to whether the shooter is on foot or in a vehicle—it cannot detect the bullets’ trajectories. Admittedly, stray bullets do not present the same level of
risk in low-income areas in Puerto Rico as they would in other parts of Latin America, since all those residing in public government housing and Plan 8 (Section 8) do so under roofs of concrete. Further, the percentage of the population in Puerto Rico that resides in wooden homes with tin roofs is considerably less than neighboring countries, which does make Islanders less vulnerable. In the end, trajectory matters tremendously with regard to public health risk: entertainment shelling and utilitarian shelling pose the least risk to the populace; dialogic the greatest, as it is often done reactively whether with or without aggressive overtones. Ritualized and celebratory shelling fall somewhere in between. Until the implementation of Shotspotter addresses the specific cultural nuances of shelling regionally, we can expect the intractability of the Caribbean’s gunfire index to remain firm.

On that May evening of 2016, for example, when I crossed paths with the teen and his rapid-fire TEC 9, did law enforcement respond? No. It seems that despite the “aural presence” of Shotspotter, the same tradition prevails: nothing is newsworthy unless there is an injury or fatality. This instance illustrates that without action there is no benefit of acoustic surveillance. Instead impunity still reigns, the community is still a free-for-all—with no subsequent investigations and no community outcry. Unless it’s New Year’s and thereby occurring in “non-designated” sites where those unfamiliar or unaccustomed to the consequences of stray bullets are present and injured or killed as a result, shooting up into the air has never been much of an “event.” In Aleli, just as in some of the other impenetrable government housing projects, artillery is already an integral and not aberrant component of the soundscape. As one aleliano elder chuckles,
“Many people say that they really cannot sleep well at night if there are not at least a few shots fired.”

What remains unclear is the degree to which authorities will now respond pro-actively to scenes of detonations even when neither homicides nor grave injuries occur. Until citizens see an immediate reaction to all shelling, regardless of the stripe, confidence will not be restored in the police and their ability to provide security. For regardless of how normalized such peripheral shelling has become, it remains vital to reign it in due to the atmosphere it foments and the manner in which it incarcerates residents of such government housing projects within their own homes. It is unclear how, if at all, corruption enters into this equation. Yet in 2011 ten percent of the Island’s police force (the second largest municipal force in the US) was arrested by federal agents for various corruption related charges. Still to this day, conflicts between traffickers and police at times are resolved through bribes of money, narcotics, or arms. At that rate, Shotspotter is a zero sum game.

But to talk with the agents on the ground, that is to say those assigned to the “Shotspotter team,” a more favorable and fully orbed picture emerges. As one current member of the Shotspotter team explains, the former system was very circuitous and cumbersome, basically dependent on a citizen phoning in the report of gunshots to 9-1-1 and then from there the comandancia would have to get in touch with the proper regional headquarters to respond.235 Now the alerts come directly to the most proximal officers who will be deployed to address the situation and they are able to arrive in minutes after the detonations occur. The end result? Well, in 2013 [at the surveillance’s initiation] due

235 Interview, 11.2016.
to the surprise factor, they were able to commandeer a much greater number of arms and narcotics because the *bajomundo* was not yet accustomed to the rapid responses of authorities. Now they are more likely to happen upon abandoned narcotics at a scene, but those shelling and their weapons often evaporate prior to their arrival. Before they would just arrive blindly, not knowing exactly where the incident occurred. Now, even though the system is not always infallibly precise, they have a much better idea. So while the incidents of shelling continue (albeit somewhat abated; the figures were not available), they are supposedly more attenuated. That is to say, the advent of Shotspotter has not eclipsed recreational shelling by a long shot, but to be fair, that was never one of its claims. What it has done is shortened the *vacilón* of those engaged in the shelling. Hence, not so much impunity eradicated, as impunity curtailed.

While heartened by the field officers’ praise of the program in facilitating their work on the streets, I cannot entirely escape a level of inquietude regarding 1) why there are still incidences since 2013 wherein the police do not appear after detonations and 2) why there are at times sharp discrepancies between details of shootings in media and on police reports versus the data produced by Shotspotter.

With regard to the former, “non-arrivals” may be due, at least in part, to inadequate staffing. To better cover shifts the police have been asked to take twelve hour shifts, which has not helped with regard to morale. As it stands, the state officers already report suffering from substantial sleep deprivation, some staying in police dorms during their work week because their commute is too long. Everyone knows, says one officer, that practically all of the state police are “*de la Isla*” or from the Island, so to speak, because “*el area metro no da.*” Or the metro area doesn’t produce [them]. In fact, as one
recent cadet shares, in his 2014 nine month training for induction into state police service, of the 311 cadets who graduated, only 11 were from the metro area. The rest drive in from locations all over the Island—some more than two hours away. Hence, for state officers serving on the metropolitan Police Force in San Juan is more akin to short term military duty than a regular job. Many, having been recruited from such far flung towns as Lajas or Moca, are forced to abandon their spouses and children for the work week and bunk in group dormitories located at the regional cuartele—as if the sacrifice they are being asked to make in this vocation were not enough. Frankly, it is difficult to determine which population is more underappreciated on the Island: the police force, the public school teachers, or the medical professionals. The Island desperately needs to dignify the labor of its civil servants by a substantial restructuring of their pay scales and benefits so that they are proportionate to the steep cost of living.

Additionally, with regard to police response times in the San Juan metro area, it seems a bit impractical for only one regional cuartel to be assigned with responding to the Shotspotter detected detonations. Given the sprawl of the metro area and its endless clusters of near-impenetrable barriadas (that is to say: one way in, one way out) and natural boundaries of lagoons and canals, lapses in response time should surprise no one. San Juan is not swiftly traversed. But would it not be more pragmatic if those in the General Headquarters of Hato Rey were to dispatch officers in accordance with their immediate proximity to the detonations instead of exclusively from the cuartel where the SST technology is housed? It is unclear to me why arrivals at such gunfire events could not be made less cumbersome geographically through more pointed delegation—particularly since shooters can “evaporate” within moments of their detonations. Further,
the use of the Teodoro Moscoso Bridge is critical component to officers’ viability. Depending on the time of day, getting to the northern tip of the city by crossing the lagoon can shave off up to a half an hour of transit time. The bridge, however, is operated by a private company and charges almost seven dollars round trip. For a cash strapped department, it would be better to see some sort of good faith negotiation offered towards the Island’s public servants by AutoExpreso. If, ultimately, Shotspotter can help with officer response times across the Metro area, then there is some merit to its deployment.

With regard to the latter, the data discrepancies between sources, in one instance it appears that the recorded number of detonations was off by more than one hundred bullets (“Asesinan a hombre,” 2016). How is this possible? Perhaps it is the recovered shell casings which ultimately tell the clearest story. Yet why would the audio count run so far afield from reality? Could at least some of the disparity be attributed to the utilization of silencers? In that case, would the efficacy of Shotspotter be utterly castrated? If not, what are the missing variables that may still be going overlooked?

In some encouraging news, and in stark contrast to instances wherein the Department of Education works directly at cross purposes with the Department of the Family, the Department of Vivienda (Public Housing) and Puerto Rico’s Police Force have allied to share federal funding. The surprise is that Vivienda foots the bill for Shotspotter. For this reason, Shotspotter is located throughout geographical areas which contain a high density of public housing communities. Then by default, the communities in between them are then covered by the acoustical surveillance system as well. This is one reason why an area such as Loiza—a municipality with a high homicide rate—is not

\[236\] See Chapter 9.
covered. Its geography is more rural in nature, set on the coast and replete with mangrove forests, making the necessary triangulation of the sensors much more challenging. But it does not end there: Vivienda also furnished one cuartel, or police headquarters, with five new SUVs. It is said that if the funds are not spent, they are forfeited. As such, with these two arms of the State working in concert, everyone benefits.

A more profound and multi-faceted understanding of the aforementioned nuances and their implications for security on the Island must be developed before an objective, critically informed assessment can be made. Further, all of these aforementioned factors come into play when considering potential interventions as per lowering the homicide rate and avoiding minors’ participation in assassinations associated with the business that is narcotics and arms trafficking.
Aphonic Interlude V: Accolades Amidst Workforce Alienation

There are two bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label—one empty, one just opened, padrinos of soda littering the pavement, a stack of plastic cups and a portable sound system. No sign of a cake. I was late though; subsequent Facebook photos prove otherwise. My car hadn’t been working; no other option but to slip on running shoes and jog over, in hopes of arriving before they sang. Today is the Mayor’s thirty-something birthday. He comments that he wasn’t expecting to still be alive, that he feels the loss of most all his peers.

Later that week I tell the Mayor I have a birthday present for him. “My birthday was three days ago,” he objects. I proceed to share with him the words of a young man whom I interviewed who remembers the Mayor from his job. He laughs quietly and smiles as he holds my phone to his ear. Maité is there and leans in to hear as well, but the speaker is too weak:

He works really hard. We always called him Mr. Headphones because he always wore headphones. As a worker, he was excellent. He is one of the best janitors that I have seen there because regardless of what was happening around him, he was always cleaning—he’d put on his headphones and clean the whole school...take out the trash, dust with notable efficiency. He does everything really quickly—super fast—and everyone was really happy when he was there because he did everything well. He didn’t talk with anyone, just cleaned the whole school. Well, he did interact a bit: he was real cool with us, the boys. He’d joke around with us. When we were eating he’d grab some of our food and ask, “I’ll throw this out?” and he was just goofing off because none of us had finished eating.

People really liked how he worked, and it surprised us when he wasn’t there the following year. My friends comment that the other janitors—since they spend the whole day chatting and hardly ever clean, well, we say to one another, “Man, if that Black guy237 with the headphones were here, he would clean this place in an hour!” The difference is huge: he worked really hard. He’s one of the best janitors I’ve

237 Although the student himself is considerably darker than the Mayor, he casually refers to the Mayor as Black. As if everyone implicitly agrees that the one who has less money is the one who is Black. Or at least Blacker. This is another instance of money—or perhaps more precisely in this case, the exclusivity of academic prestige—as a “whitening agent.” See Chapter 6 for further discussions on race.
seen there. Really amazing. He did the work of two people. He used to work alone; now there are two who work in his area. I would bring him [to this elementary school] also because here, according to what they tell me, here they hardly clean either.

But the stellar work ethic and the impeccable conscientiousness of the Mayor were not enough to keep him gainfully employed. In the end, Mr. Headphones embodies dispensability. A man who’s told, never asked. And aside from his ludic interactions with select (read: safe) students, the Mayor’s presence in the San Juan workforce was as fleeting as it was aphonic.

Thinking aloud one afternoon, the Mayor asks me if we could have a church service. “I want it to be,” he said without hesitating, “just like the group therapy we had in

*If you want to be a complete man, put all of the strength of your soul into all of the actions of your life.* —Eugenio María de Hostos

*Abandoned High School, Arecibo*
prison. Where we all can share what is going on in our lives.” A few weeks later we gather in a nearby living room: the Mayor is the first to share. Almost immediately tears coat his cheeks as he entreats those in attendance to pray for him as he battles a deep economic pressure to return to his former illicit employment:

I am not complaining to the Lord, because understand, I cannot demand anything from the Lord. Because the Lord has freed me a million times from death, He has freed me from forty thousand problems, He has freed me from eighty thousand [court] cases so that I could be here today, so that right now I could know you. I could have had a sentence of twenty years, but the Lord has liberated me from all of that, you understand, and I have faith in Him. And I believe in Him, but I am passing through a test at this time.\(^{238}\)

His testimony reveals the inner battle waged vis-à-vis how unemployment pushes people into precarity, into circumstances which then become a double-bind for their conscience.

\(^{238}\) Informal conversation, 10.2014.
CHAPTER 6 Excess in the Face of Extinction

Given Puerto Rico’s now customary New Year’s Eve phenomenon of vertical sprays of automatic gunfire, how, operationally, does one cheat death when celebrating the holiday? Often by sheltering in the makeshift bunker of windowless hallways. So while some celebrate in the streets, others cower in closets. This ritualized but unsanctioned recreational shelling\textsuperscript{239} is synecdoche for the broader historical moment of my research site in Puerto Rico. Is this island community transitioning into a Narco-colony? What are the various moralities and subjectivities in the midst of this upheaval? In the midst of a greater Caribbean tourbillion of violence with less than 3.5 million residents and dwindling, the exodus continues in the face of a worsening recession.\textsuperscript{240}

\begin{center}
\textbf{“I’m not giving up”}
\end{center}
\begin{center}
Hato Rey
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{239} I use this term to denote any discharge of firearms which is not conducted with the explicit intention of killing.

\textsuperscript{240} In recent years it is estimated that we lose 54,000 people annually; for example, Florida alone gains a net 7,300 Puerto Ricans annually (Nasser 2012).
As Dr. Vargas Vidot expounds,

[Migration from the Island] is not a question of patriotism, it’s common sense. I can stay because I work at a ton of different sites in order to sustain myself: I am a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, I am a professor at the School of Medicine, the School of Pharmacy and I that’s how I spend my life, in twenty things. And you have no idea the amount of consultations I do free of charge because I believe in this country. The government gives Walmart a 20 million dollar incentive to create 261 jobs; we, the NGOs, produce 151,000 jobs, making up 16% of the Puerto Rican labor force and they are taking money away from us. I pay commercial prices for electricity. I pay commercial prices for water. I receive a subsidy for nothing. But then it is we who do much more work than those who are spending the money. I think that all of this is just “exhaustion politics.”

The current “Politics of Exhaustion” can push the citizenry beyond their threshold for coping: suicides rates—especially amongst the elderly—are much higher as, in light of skyrocketing utility rates and sales tax, citizens struggle to maintain solvency.

The audible outrage over “lost” bullet fatalities, the energy of communities Islandwide unifying in parades and processions… this tapestry of characters embedded in conflicted worlds serve the purpose of concientización, or raising consciousness—the

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241 Formal Interview.
242 Lost or stray bullets refer to bullets discharged aimlessly or those that miss their target, hence contributing a haphazard or random nature to lethal or injurious violence.
rather distraught trope of images with emblazoned staying power—one witnesses a small child riding atop the casket as if he were cavorting at an amusement park. How might images indict such a cathexed yet easy fraternity with death? Or how might this “levity response” continue evolving? How might images interrupt our naturally self-focused insularity and push us toward a more lucid comprehension of those outside of our increasingly circumscribed social worlds?

As citizens attempt to make sense of and theorize this self-destructive, dangerous phenomenon of celebratory New Year’s gunfire (of which some justifiably live in fear), their vernacular theories of causality and their ability to retain a sense of humor and threads of hope shine through. Hence, the convoluted matrix of tensions and customs, inconsistencies and foibles, dilemmas, affections, and heartaches all serve to illuminate this watershed moment. Likewise, the varying strains of violence with which any work on the Island is necessarily both entangled and inter-animated.

**Writing Against the Culture of Poverty**

*At this point to ask ourselves “What’s happening to us, Puerto Rico?” is plainly ridiculous because we know what’s happening. We know that bullets don’t issue forth from guns, they are merely shot from them. The bullets issue forth from the spirit’s loneliness, from the shutdown home-life, from the heart sown with hatred, from the absent caress, from the present insult, from the arrested maturity, and the accelerated childhood. The bullets which are lost in the air [emanate from] the empty home, the school that challenges no one, and the church with no message...*

—José “Chaco” Vargas Vidot

From a methodological perspective with regard to violence, Stack (1974) advocates for the procurement of a more emic perspective and, in order to attend to this chasm between researcher and subject, offers the strategy of “attempting to reduce the distance between the model outsiders used to explain social order and the explanations employed by those studied” (xv). To this end, Thomas (2011) urges a reorientation
“away from the rubric of comparison and explanation and toward a deeper engagement with history, political economy and practice” (4).

The ritual of New Year’s gunplay and all of the discourse around it point towards the concretization of the cultural dynamics of post-colonialism, slavery, and oppression which all coalesce to produce this moment of excess. Within the historical arc of colonization, according to Jaffe et al (2008), Puerto Rico “functioned as a ‘model colony’ where the US could demonstrate the success of its civilizing and modernizing mission” (16). That it would one day become consumed by the violences of narco-war, was not, ostensibly, part of the plan. Helpfully, both Bataille and Taussig theorize in ways which subvert the “culture of poverty” perspective.

The New Year’s Eve Gunfire as Unproductive Expenditure

Power is exercised by those who expend. As dreadful as it is, human poverty has never had a strong enough hold on societies to cause the concern for conservation...to dominate the concern for unproductive expenditure.

—Georges Bataille 1985:120

Lack or excess, it hardly matters.

—Deleuze & Guatari, 2011:115

Violence on the Island has become normative and, in some ways, is supposed to be accepted as part of life. This annual New Year’s Eve custom is just one example of Puerto Rico’s oversaturated climate of violence. “Potlatch,” writes Bataille, “can never be separated from a festival” (121). One form of potlatch is the “spectacular destruction of wealth” (121). Any given Shotspotter audio clip from the Island will reveal the seemingly endless and overlapping concatenations of the outright waste of celebratory munitions. In The Gift, Mauss (1990) explains how one can destroy things in the service

\[243\] See Chapter 5.
of producing one’s status, of demonstrating one’s position. When shots are fired vertically into the air, an unspoken seniority is enacted which demonstrates a discipline, a capacity for power. Bataille, as a critical Marxist, addresses all that is produced by capital that is excessive: all that is within our human capacity to expend, excrete, or overproduce. This moment of celebratory merrymaking, of guns being fired up into the air and the resulting projectiles falling back down to kill bystanders or uninvolved neighbors, is just such an act of unmitigated superfluousness.

Such rituals may look absurd and appear not to be in the perpetrator’s self-interest. Yet these expenditures are not intended to be pragmatic. Rather, the pyre of potlatch, like the rifle discharges, serves as evidence that the “big men” can just burn up their resources, expending, destroying and wasting objects that would be of utility to others. As Bataille (1985:119) argues,

> [U]nproductive expenditure can be linked… to great competitive spectacles, just as elements moving separately are caught up in a mightier whirlwind. Thus horse races are associated with the sumptuary process of social classification… and the ostentatious display of the latest luxurious fashions.

This mightier whirlwind, of course, is the lavish social world and networks of the *capos*.

On the other hand, the skyward gunfire that erupted immediately upon the receipt of the news of a fellow trafficker’s murder represents, as Bataille conceptualizes, another form of expenditure (a mourning form as opposed to a celebratory form) “offered openly and done with the goal of humiliating, defying and obligating a rival” (121). This expulsive barrage of bullets indexes an aggressive defiance in the face of their rivals’ temporary triumph and can be “associated… with the intention of stunning,” in order to
reinforce a hierarchical rank (122). Within the categories of recreational shelling, such detonations would be categorized as ritualized.\textsuperscript{244}

Laidlaw (2002) shifts the conventional source of enquiry from that of agency to that of freedom. As Laidlaw posits, freedom is that of degree; it is always constrained by a certain context. Consider the multifaceted contextual constraints through which “electively” unschooled children are forced to navigate: how are we to think about their degree of “freedom” vis-à-vis their Foucauldian “technologies of the self” in the midst of this narcostate?

So we move to an equation of faith bound to the obsessing presence of the invisible crowd…the crowds of modernity into whom the power of the dead is transmitted—especially posterity in the form of the children, that perennially other crowd of starlings and protoplasmic creaturely potential in whose evocation so much state policy is justified. (Taussig 1997:114)

Compared with the states of many other regions, our state is comparatively silent, but nonetheless unequivocally implicated. While it poses as innocuous and ineffectual, the arm of the state is clearly evidenced through deployment of the military and the hyper-aggression of the police. Criminality has pervaded the entire bureaucratic system: corrupt police officers are not outliers, but rather constitute a solid ten percent of the force; administrators within the department of education are carted off by federal agents for fraud and money laundering; politicians are perennially ensconced in financial scandals. The effect, ultimately, is that the state is enacting little more than a performance: going through the motions of a three ring circus with a scandalously thin façade to cover up or distract from the control which they do not, in actuality, possess

\textsuperscript{244} See Chapter 5.
(see Piot 2010). Regularly resorting to the National Guard for security indisputably corroborates this…

Roadside Billboard: “President of the Youth” Jason Román, Aguada 2014
Bradley Feliciano, Vice President

The Violence of Distance: States of Exception

[Space is fundamental in any exercise of power.
—Foucault, The Foucault Reader, 2010/1984:252

[The time has come to explore the space which separates the victim from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand... Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is, it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures whom it is indispensable to know...
—Primo Levi, The Drowned and the Saved 1988:40

Space is never neutral, as Foucault (2010) asserts, “architecture…ensures a certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations” (253). Inversions of traditional state authority are also part and parcel of the process by which “states of exception” are created. With a nod toward Agamben (1998; 2005), Penglase (2009) asserts that “drug gangs deliberately create (in)security…by abrogating to themselves the power not only to institute normative systems but also to violate the systems that they themselves create…they are the force that can declare the state of exception.” (Penglase 2009:53). Hence, it is no
longer the state wielding this power through making these determinations. Regardless, however, of the party wielding the power (be it state or non-state), this phenomenon creates an instability which in and of itself is coercive through its threatening volatility. As Bourdieu (2000) clarifies, “Absolute power is the power to make oneself unpredictable and to deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in uncertainty by offering no scope to their capacity to predict” (228).

**The Geopolitical Implications of Schmitt in Puerto Rico: Are We Merely Just Another *European Elsewhere*?**

*We must expect not only new camps, but always new and more lunatic regulative definitions of the inscription of life in the city. The camp, which is now securely lodged within the city’s interior, is the new biopolitical nomos of the planet.*

—Agamben, 1998:176

*[Increasingly public acts of violence] destroy the imaginary conception that the narcotics dealers will just kill one another and that the rest of the population can remain calm. It used to be thought that violence occurred in the ghettos, in isolated geographical zones, [but] suddenly the 100 x 35 is being constructed into a giant ghetto.*

—Alfredo Carrasquillo, University of Puerto Rico sociologist

The observation offered by Carrasquillo intimates that with the growing “democratization of violence” (Kruijt and Koonings 1999:11) and an increasingly underclass majority, it will no longer suffice to use the ubiquitous online commentators’ dismissal of *¡Que se maten entre sí!* but that, in fact, a more fully-orbed approach would be in order. Gone are the days—one can almost hear the sigh—when the caseríos were “simply” self-annihilating and left the rest of the Island alone…

Tyrrell (2008:73) reminds us that “[t]hroughout the 1930s, the New Dealers saw Puerto Rico through a kaleidoscope of identities including as a strategic location, as

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245 Taussig (1997:8).
246 “Impregnada la violencia” (2011).
247 Let them kill one another off!
impoverished, as a tourist destination, and as dark-skinned, all of which coloured each aspect of policy.” And undoubtedly, the “Culture of Poverty” perspective also reinforces and encourages arguments for “geographical containment and increased law enforcement” (Fusté 2010:53).

Arguably, from one vantage point, caseríos are clearly a planned warehousing and concentration of poverty—engineered spatial failures in the tradition of failed modernist housing projects—which ultimately did not serve needs as much as they concentrated suffering. Originally intended as transitional housing, caseríos have only rarely served in that capacity. The disturbing irony is that this housing initiative of the 1950s, having wrest people from their shantytown kin networks and having arrested their mobility through relocation to isolated regions, ended up promoting dependency on the government, and not being a step in the staircase to home ownership as planned (Tyrrell 2008:81,83; Dinzey-Flores 2008:469).

Yet through statistical analysis and extensive interviewing, Dinzey-Flores (2007) establishes that “residents live long-term and intergenerational lives in public housing and that these lives are often lived there by ‘choice’” (482). Further, it appears that the bureaucracy now confirms this. In a letter declining my request for residency within the caserío Alelí, the deputy administrator for HUD writes the following, “The Federal and State regulations do not authorize temporary or seasonal accommodation in any public housing project. Our units provide housing for permanent residency” (emphasis added). This evidences a dramatic shift in how the purpose of said government housing is being both conceptualized and actualized.

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248 See Appendix B.
The current state of caseríos, just like the massive government housing projects built stateside, evidences the failure of the modernist, state engineered utopian war on poverty (Venkatesh 2000). Fusté (2010) cites newspaper articles from the period of transition (mid 1950s) that express horror that despite being given clean concrete structures in which to live, the residents of the new government housing quickly built kiosks outside from the very same materials their shantytowns had been constructed. Suffice it to say this entrepreneurial endeavor was not received as innovation, but as the re-creation of an eyesore. In fact, within a mere decade of its inception, one caserío was “declared a ‘social error’ and a ‘giant glorified shantytown’” (Fusté 2010:52). Later, enclosing the “unassimilables” behind the wrap-around walls served as a virtual “urban condom,” as an attempt to protect the rest of the “upstanding” the citizenry from risk of contact or contamination (Sennett 1994:209).

Like prisons or mental hospitals, caseríos gave people the impression that there was something wrong with those who lived in them. As media representations began to stigmatize these communities as nuclei of social pathologies, the place identities of caserío residents—especially the most notorious ones…became markers of social degeneracy. (Fusté 2010:56)

Certainly the brutality of flagrantly inescapable classism on the Island constitutes its own violence, its own state of exception. Referencing Foucault, Fusté (2010) argues that caseríos can be viewed as “institutional ‘power blocks’: physical and discursive places where pre-designated activities, communication of what those places are, and designated hierarchical power relations constitute a concerted institutional whole” (56). Within the broader Island community, then, imaginaries of these caserío enclaves began to serve as a mnemonic for eschewal.
The Violence of Invisibility: Racial Subjugation as Daily Fare

They killed the full lipped black man, whom everyone loved.
And when the police arrived they arrested the murderer
And one of the policemen was [also] full lipped
Because of bad luck it was his turn to conduct the investigation
He asked the murderer why he did it, what was his reason
And the murderer answered, “I killed him for being so full lipped”
And the policeman hid his lip and told him, “That is no reason.”

—Ismael “Maelo” Rivera “Negro Bembón”

Monument to African heritage buried in rural Caguas

Issues of color can be more insidious and less straightforward on the Island. It is segregation by class and not race, however, which evidences the most dramatic social cleavage on the Island (Denton & Villarrubia 2007). Much like in Brazil, “money whitens,” and as Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1998) clarify: “there are no (social) ‘whites’ in a favela, and all street children are ‘black,’ that is: socially blackened by their marginality and distance from ‘white’ and ‘polite’ Brazilian society” (385). Indeed, the immediate and seamless criminalization of the Island’s poor as well as the non-contestation of blanket racializations of entire housing projects as “Black” in some ways mirrors the Brazilian social climate. Likewise, there can be the same timeworn lamination
of Blackness with poverty, deviance and violence alongside a valorization of things related to Indigenous or European roots. Nonetheless, there is a decided celebration of Bomba and Plena dances originating from African culture. These undercurrents, at times subconscious, remain in tension.

**The Violence of Negation: Idolizing the Image While Annihilating the Actual**

Image, and not substance, has taken the throne. Its ascendancy is revealed, for example, in the continual need to have a recent haircut, which retains, in very concrete ways, “prestige value” (Scheper-Hughes 1992) and is operationalized in decisive contrast with those considered *pelua* (hair in need of a shape-up), unkempt, and too poor (or disregarded) to afford one.249 Ironically, just across the street in one of the Island’s more exclusive enclaves, long hair on boys is a signifier of privilege. Also, as in Brazil, there is the sense that the moral is somehow tied closely to the hygienic (Edmonds 2010:197).

¡Evoluciona! Evolve!

The bestialization of body hair
The body as topographical site to be swept clean of anything “uncivilized”

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249 A common phrase is “Los tres P,” meaning: Pelao, pelua, y pidiendo—or the three P’s: broke, unkempt, & begging.
But what is the exchange on *aleliano* soil? What birthright are we forfeiting for this ostensible bowl of pottage known as image? The sexual “favors” of a younger student for the price of a haircut: the supremacy—or dictatorship even—of the image in place of the actual. This emphasis on image at times feels as if it were a death match against the genuine fear—and often the reality—of invisibility. Some grandmothers go so far as to utilize prostitution as supplementary income to fuel the continual felt need for preschool grandchildren to be *vestido de Yordan* (duly outfitted in Air Jordan brand clothing). In what might be read as a mimetic positioning with the State then, some within Aleli have fallen prey to allotting primacy to the image over the actual as well.

Predictably, in defiance of conventional respectability norms vis-à-vis image, the youth flout such norms with flourish. Upon spotting two pre-adolescent boxers heading off to the basketball court, my advisor asks why they wear their t-shirts as a donut around their necks. I offer that here going without a shirt in public carries with it a level of stigma. Shirtless, one is seen as ill-mannered, as uncared for, as unkempt, as indiscrete, as vain, as overly *fresco*—or perhaps some combination thereof. The donning of tees as if

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250 See Chapter 9.
251 Titillating.
they were colorful cotton/poly blend neck warmers, then, is the younger boys’ dalliance with appropriateness coupled with a conciliatory nod towards all the community mothers, grandmothers, and godmothers who demand a modicum of decorum once an individual sets foot outside their apartment. The difference between being in one’s living room and in the streets usually is located in a few accoutrements. *Para bajarse,* or to go out, men reach for a t-shirt, and sometimes a ballcap or chain as well. Even a baby outside the threshold of his apartment wearing just a diaper is viewed as inappropriate, disgraceful, and low-class.

![Image](image-url)

At home with me on his second visit to the Island in 2013, my nephew imitates the older boys he spends time with in Alelí.

**Papi, tengo torta: How Trafficking Preserves the Perception of Dignity**

*Misi* Aurora opens the box’s lid to show me: all coins. Plastic gray and brown coins. The first time it happened, she explains, “I actually cried. I just couldn’t believe it—it overwhelmed me with sadness because I knew why.” Her students had stolen all of the paper play money from her banking unit once again. She assesses that they continue to do this because it is a way to negotiate their lack of capital. “By taking these fake bills they can pretend, can fantasize about what it is like to have “*la torta,*” or a big pile of cash. In an illustration of the colloquial street usage of the term—which in broader Island
parlance refers to a rich dessert, Benicio swaggers by boasting, “Papí tengo torta,” with a brief flexing of his right hand at mid-thigh level.²⁵²

**Thanapolitical Realities, the Obliteration of Place Value & the Moral Economy of Loss**

*There were certain deaths that no amount of ritual could appease, and violent death was among them.*

Taussig, 1997:160

The grief process that is being replicated in seemingly endless permutations across the Island in the wake of this current epoch’s crescendo of violence. Inherent in this new “moral economy of loss,” then, is the sobering process of regressive or subtractive peopling: defining oneself and one’s family by how many remain, by fractional portions, ratios of terrestrial to celestial and a blurring of those boundaries in everyday discourses on presence. We are considered to be in the presence of the dead; Facebook posts declare the departed present. Amidst this continual hemorrhaging loss of loved ones, these frequent declaratives interspersed throughout the arcs of everyday interactions serve simultaneously as consolations and presence markers: If I conjure you, then you are here. It is one way of spitting in the face of death and upending customary views of presence.

*Balas perdidas (Stray Bullets) as a Public Secret*

*Authority is not founded on open discussion and consensus but on the deliberate construction and manipulation of secrecy and ambiguity.*

—Penglase 2009:53

A public secret is “that which is generally known but cannot be articulated” and which grow out of “situations in which people dared not speak the obvious, thus outlining it…with the spectral radiance of the unsaid” (Taussig 1999:5,6). Apparently, given that

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²⁵² Fieldnotes, 3.2016.
the global community is not supposed to find out about the Island’s New Year’s Eve recklessness, one may wonder what other atrocities are being obfuscated (e.g., truancy rates, drop-out trends, etc.). For “[t]he point in keeping the secret is not simply denying… ‘reality,’ but of marking oneself part of a shared community of people united by ‘knowing what they shouldn’t know’” (Penglase 2009:59). This New Year’s Eve phenomenon was, apparently, perceived to be an Islandwide public secret intended to be kept in-house, so to speak. But then clips are posted virally, airing the Island’s dirty laundry for all the watching world to see. The real crime, then, is located in the divulging, in the unveiling, and not in the customary discharging of barrages of automatic artillery. More than anything, the real crime lies in tarnishing the Island’s image.

Yet something cannot be a “public secret” one might argue, if, every December, there is an onslaught of bold public service announcements, insistent parades and desperate rallies focused precisely on averting said event. Fair enough. But this form of housekeeping, quite evidently, was to be kept intra-Island. As Penglase clarifies, “The public secret functions much like the ‘hidden’ truth of complex and conflict-ridden family relationships that are often systematically denied when speaking to non-kin” (2009:59). Non-kin, in this instance then, would be anyone outside of the Island’s perimeter and/or diaspora.

One primary facet to the phenomenon of a public secret is the concept of “‘longknownness’…. [or] knowing what not to know…many times even in our acknowledging it, in striving to extricate ourselves from its sticky embrace, we fall into even better-laid traps of our own making” (Taussig 1999:6). Taussig (1999) explains that “the labor of the negative… [occurs] when it is pointed out that something may be
obvious, but needs pointing out in order to be obvious” (6). This is precisely the offense inherent in any documentation of the New Year’s Eve tradition. Cue outrage. Cue violation.

Leeds (1996) argues that in the absence of state protection, gangs move in to provide security for residents (see also Goldstein 2003; Penglase 2009). An entrepreneurial great grandmother interviewed at her roadside stand “reverses the moral valence” on gang membership within her community citing how they offer her the protection which the authorities fail to provide (Bourgois 2009: 45). As Penglase (2009) observes, “in exchange for providing local security and enforcing social norms, traffickers have demanded the complicity and silence of favela residents” (47). It seems that on the Island, this secret extends far beyond the caseríos. It seems that within our community we are far beyond the stage of “shaking our heads but acquiescing” (Levi 1988:68)—on the contrary, a humble great grandmother can smile broadly with the satisfaction that the “maleantes,” (drug traffickers) as she refers to them, aggressively and proactively protect her. Such gestures are received by her as an honor or delight as much as a relief. It could not be more clear wherein her confidence lies.

Expended/able Children: The Un-schooled as Everyday Balas Perdidas

Reversing the Valence of Deviance:
Desertion as Response to Institutional Violence against “Untouchables”

The child…rendered invisible by childhood… [inhabits] a fascinating epistemic position—part licensed eavesdropper, part idiot, part fairy…

—Taussig 1997:115

Even Miss Puerto Rico, bedecked in the requisite ostentation of her declarative sash, reminds the Island in a public service announcement that all bullets, “not only have

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253 Stray bullets.
first names, but last names as well”—as if this revelation might encourage someone to re-holster their firearm. These and many other ads are flouted year in and year out: the ritual, unabated, continues. As Penglase (2011:435) elaborates,

Lost bullets anchor an unstable set of representations: they “unfix” representations of urban violence because they defy order. Lost bullets mark an “excess,” a surplus value of violence which ruptures normative structures of exchange and produces deep anxieties about the value of life, the inviolability of the home and body, and the difficulty of maintaining a sense of ontological security.

As Penglase intimates, lost bullets have no targets. They are expenditure for the sake of expenditure, or as Bataille writes, such displays exhibit the “need for limitless loss” (1985), and the “destructive orgiastic drive” (Stoekl 1985:xvi). In Puerto Rico as in Brazil, “What is occurring… is a local manifestation of a larger global context of insecurity where economic flows are connecting with forms of violence. This process highlights concerns about the state’s monopoly over legitimate forms of violence…” (Penglase 2011:434).

The latter are ready, well-practiced exegetes of the hermeneutics of exclusion. “No me quieren” (They don’t want me), a first grade drop-out quietly confides to me before placing his thumb back in his mouth.254 The consistent presence of elementary school children hustling under bridges (school) day in and (school) day out instantiates this: they are pursued neither by school officials nor family nor fictive kin. Durkheim (1974:65) continues with a damning dexterity, “The principle of rebellion is the same as that of conformity. It is the true nature of society that is conformed to when nature is obeyed, and yet it is also the true nature of society which is being conformed to when the same morality is flouted…”

254 Fieldnotes, 3.2010.
What are the ways in which these children are themselves *balas perdidas* (stray or “lost” bullets), aimlessly discharged and unconscionably expended into society? These expert exegetes of exclusion, of expendability, pass their days in the streets, intermittently rocking back and forth as their hands and arms hold on to the refuge of one another. Dishearteningly, the insistent, incessant vagaries of the street and the tangles of enacting the role of an “adultified” day laborer invariably lead to alienation even amidst their ostensible or assumed fraternity. As Levi (1988) muses, “The enemy was all around, but also inside, the ‘we’ lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused perhaps innumerable frontiers which stretched between each of us” (38). How are these confluences of manifold arterial violences navigated by Alelí’s overlooked “leftover” children?

Over the past few decades there has been an indisputable connection between the academic performance and criminal life trajectories of our Island’s youth (Nevárez 1990, Silvestrini 1980). More than ninety percent of incarcerated juveniles on the Island were

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255 Here, with what appears to be intentional irony, the verb “to know” is conjugated as if it were a regular verb.
drop-outs prior to their adjudication (Vales, Santiago, Rivera, Flores, & Morrell 2002). Additionally, nine out of ten of these adjudicated youth also had a history of at least one retention—with sixty percent of those having experienced multiple retentions (Vales, et al 2002). But the most significant factor as per the project at hand is that 44% of youth in custody of the state never even graduated from elementary school.

Now what if society’s monocular perception of such deviance is inaccurate? That is to say, what if perceived recalcitrance (e.g., in this instance dropping out) is, in reality, not always actual deviance but rather, at times, singular clear-sightedness? Durkheim (1974) clarifies that, “[t]he individual can free himself partially from the rules of society if he feels the disparity between them and society as it is, and not as it appears to be—that is if he desires a morality which corresponds to the actual state of the society and not to an outmoded condition” (emphasis added) (65). The Island has some functional public schools (NCLB scores attest, albeit dismally, to this). Yet while there are a handful of students annually who excel in these institutions, others are forced to make an evaluation—a keen, decisive evaluation that neither is the school for them nor is their presence desired there. The latter children, extruded like balas perdidas, make their way in the unforgiving reality of San Juan’s sun-baked streets.

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256 Rumberger (1995) determined that the retention of a student (whether during elementary or middle school years) increases their risk of dropping out of high school fourfold.
The Antagonisms of Abundance

In acknowledgement of the sweetness of these community children, these shots were particularly difficult to obtain given the children’s insistence upon making the *Aventura* (a Dominican bachata group) heart sign for the camera with their hands—representing an effusive love—instead of demonstrating the process.

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San Juan Snowmakers

[Image description: Children holding and manipulating objects that resemble snow or ice, with a heart shape being made with their hands.]
Like elsewhere, children in Alelí equate the arrival of a new appliance with hours of fun entangled in packaging materials—the box transforming swiftly into a fort, a slide, a shield amidst other sundry uses. It is the Styrofoam, however, which is the true scene stealer: youngsters run out onto the grass, raise their arms above their heads, and rub two chunks against each other to “make it snow” over themselves as if they were “pa’ llá fuera.” Hence the delivery of one appliance is a source of ample entertainment. When I inquire as to the subsequent clean-up, a mother becomes stern with me, intoning, “I pay rent here; my rent money pays for Vivienda to clean that up! They will come tomorrow to clean it.”

Rents in Alelí range from $7 a month to about $300 per month.\(^{258}\) A recent *New York Times* article (Walsh 2016) revealed a loophole wherein some residents of public housing on the Island actually receive “negative rent”—that is to say, due to federal subsidies of their utilities, they are paid monthly to live there.

\[<\text{Image of packaging material on ground}>\]

*Change in Forecast: Light Flurries in San Juan*\(^{259}\)

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\(^{258}\) I am told that in other locales they can run as high as $600, but as yet have not been able to verify this.

\(^{259}\) Although the Island receives sporadic hailstorms—occasionally even with hunks of ice the size of grapefruits hurtling down from the heavens—it does not get snowstorms. Those have to be manufactured.
For some adults the acquisition of a new appliance can mean engaging a custom which may seem counterintuitive. The proper disposal of the former—albeit likely quite functional—appliance consists of damaging it in such a manner as to render it beyond further utility. This is done usually through throwing it onto the ground in order to make it irreparable so that no one else will be able to use it. Sometimes this is accomplished by tossing it from a stairwell window a floor or two above ground level. In the course of casual conversation, two beauticians from different metro area housing projects agree that this is the only correct response to neighbors who do not choose to work. “¡Que se jodan como yo trabajando para tenerla!” Let them bust their asses like I do working in order to have one! Or as one online commentator who refers to herself as “Velero De La Noche” states simply, “Qué doblen lomo y suden patria” Bend your back and sweat for your homeland. (HC Admin 2016a). A resident of Alelí confirms that such people are known as “gente mala fe”—or folks of bad faith. Yet such people are also reacting to those who ridicule them for working. Whether intentionally incendiary or not, one commenter writes online:

I get food stamps and free government medical coverage and I don’t do anything in the projects. The government robs me, I rob the government as well. In the end, the workers pay for all that. Let them kill themselves working, I enjoy myself stretched out, relaxed in the projects.

—online commenter F. S. Alejandro 12.2015

The main point of contention is that these women in the labor force, licit or not, do not receive but earn their wages, theirs is “chavo suda’o,” money [for which one] sweat. They thereby claim a position of superiority as compared to their neighbors who are known as “cuponeros” (“food stampers”) or “mantenido/as,” those maintained by the government. As one teacher encapsulates this latter population’s procurement of income:
“Ni lo sudan, ni lo sufran.” They neither work nor suffer for it. Thus, in an effort to keep this distinction not only clear but also well delineated, the destruction of property is required. This destruction also demonstrates a public eschewal of the potential income which selling the former appliance could garner. Therefore, instead of selling it as secondhand, it is altogether cast off. Hence, what appears to be counterintuitive destruction of property, is actually a reifying of social status: my refuse is of higher quality than what you currently possess.

As exhibited by the aforementioned phenomenon of Bataillian superfluous expenditure, for those who work, whether in the licit or illicit sector, at times tremendous resentment is harbored against those who do not. Quis theorizes about the country’s downfall,

[Anymore], no one knows how to sacrifice because no one has to go through any necessity whatsoever, everything is given to them for free. So there is no need to be productive. That is why everyone just sits around all day and gossips. What really gets to me is that some [here] think that they are better than others because—what do I know—[let’s say] they have a nicer lamp than the other one. But it makes no sense: they all live in the same residencial and are thereby subjected to the same shoot-outs as each other. They all have to “live scared.”

As such, productivity and expenditure occur in other ways—not only in the cornucopia of shelling, but also in the grandiosity of rumor—and as just demonstrated—in the destruction of functionality. Herein, the excessive and superfluous become overlapping rhizomes of expenditure.

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260 An excerpt from Fieldnotes, 10.2016: Misi Raquel explains that we are living in an era of decadence, that the whole focus of the community is on obtaining money. As a result, now parents look for any way to sue the school. Another example of decadent expenditure is the alellino custom of throwing lavish, over-the-top “cincoañeras,” catered and DJ’ed birthday celebrations for the community’s five-year-olds. When compared to the traditional quinceañeras, these cincoañeros are essentially replicas of their older counterparts—replete with Cinderella style ballgowns. At a cumple to which I was invited for a one-year-old, Jovani Vázquez, a local (fallen from grace) pop star, sang and posed for photos.
Poetic Parallelism: Street Warriors as Gaming Combatants

_The warrior is, in his being, a being-for-death._

—Clastre 2010:311

Years later, even while occupying a gurney from the ambulance to the ER, a warrior’s quest for hegemony is not stanched. Even amidst the trauma, with his body a riddled pincushion of bullets, there is no white flag. White flags are the things of parades, school children, and an altogether different style of dogmatism, apparently. No, instead, there appears to be a tenacious white knuckled grip on usurpation, on triumph, on alpha masculinity. His is an intractably forward momentum; no quick gasp of neutrality and unequivocally no vocabulary, no affect for retreat. Thus, it seems the unknown threshold demarcating the finality of this life presently becomes, simply, all the more inviting. Does this vignette illustrate the “myopic desire for any power whatsoever” of which Levi writes (1998:43)? A determined death march into the abyss? It’s not clear if, at some point in the future from a wheelchair, this warrior will succeed in meeting his purportedly “desired” end.

**Resting Atop Reservoirs: Cuéntanos un cuento de silencio**

On the opposite end of the spectrum, twelve-year-old Malaquías’ transition into a _gatillero_ occurs without fanfare. No splashy initiation rites, no new swagger. Just the halting acquisition of a handgun. And maybe, for the first time in his life, consistent meals. The transition is understated. Unremarkable. If anything, he just seems exhausted. His eyes glassy more often now, his mind distant, somewhere else… more soberly reticent than he ever was prior.

261 Tell us a story of silence.
One night after swimming, he lays rather listlessly on his friends’ couch, detached and quiet amidst our general chaos: we are asking our favorite storyteller, the Pastor, to ply his wares, but are meeting with some resistance. Finally, Malaquías assumes a leadership role by declaring that the Pastor is “contandonos un cuento de silencio.” Telling us a story of silence. His implicit directive is that those requesting and pleading should cease and desist. That the Pastor’s silence is his answer. Malaquías himself is familiar with that story. It is the same one he tells every day.

Back in Alelí, Malaquías can be found gaming in the living room of a friend during his downtime. This is not to imply causality, but to highlight the uncanny seamlessness in this: from shooting actually to shooting metaphorically, or virtually—the recursiveness of work and play coinciding, overlapping. As Clastre (2010) expounds, “There is no alternative for the warrior: a single outcome for him, death. His is an infinite task…the warrior is never a warrior except at the end of his task, when, accomplishing his extreme exploit, he wins death along with absolute glory” (311). This non-exceptional fatalism amidst gatilleros exhibits a “disdain for danger” which seemingly is “ceaselessly testing the limits of the risks confronted and forging ahead for prestige” (Clastre 309, 310-1).

“Vanquished, that is, captured, [he] ceases… to exist socially in the eyes of his own people: an ambiguous nomad, he will henceforth wander between life and death…” (311). Our mainstay vehicle of vanquishing today, of course, is the carceral death. That is our liminal space hovering between life and death. For some it is virtual death: a young Puerto Rican drug trafficker jailed in the Dominican Republic has had no contact from his family in Puerto Rico for the entire year that he has been behind bars. His is both a
psychic and a physical exile. Given the primacy accorded to the phenomenon of familism in the Hispanophone Caribbean, his existence is one of the “living dead” to whom Mbembe (2003) refers. In actual physical death, however, greater value is attributed to the “warrior.”

For those who have not survived, there has been the plague of spectacularization. Kligerman (2007:193) writes that “Passive consumption of images is broken [when the spectator] becomes conscious of the act of looking.” The appearance of exploitative photos represents the young men’s simultaneous debut y despedida, or debut and dismissal. From a thanatopolitical standpoint, it causes one to wonder from a societal perspective: does his death amount to merely the “production of yet another corpse” (Arendt) or is it the loss of a person? Is his “decease debased into a matter of serial production?” On the Island as elsewhere, the delineations in this degradation of death is most often formulated stringently along lines of class—and subsequently color. Or color—and subsequently class.

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262 The host from the funeral home pops open the casket lid momentarily for any who might have missed the viewing. Time elapsed between casket arrival and excavator’s dirt filling of hole: less than five minutes.
Inverted Empathy

Sadly, dehumanization is fomented not only across classes but also within them. One of the uglier sentiments to if not arise from, at least gain solid footing from narco-cultura is that of “inverted empathy,” or the mentality that: “¿Pa’ qué llora la mía? ¡Que llore la otra!” or “For what reason should my people cry? Let it be the other [person] who cries!” It is this defensiveness born of self-preservation which has become almost automatic and unscrutinized. It is in line with the common declarations shouted from social media platforms that, “If you weren’t there [e.g., at a party], we didn’t miss you!” This sentiment also is echoed by an inmate in the maximum security prison Las Cucharas in Ponce with regard to his most recent murder conviction:

Interviewer: And right now you don’t think about the person you killed? Inmate: Sincerely? No. Interviewer: And the family of that person? Inmate: No, because if I would have died, it would have been my mom suffering. And what [reason] should [my family] bring flowers [for my grave]? Let them take flowers for [his].263

Is this underbelly of empathy borne out of a shameless survivialist mentality?

From Kapos to Capos: The Viral Battle for Hegemony & Acoustic Forensics

Man’s capacity to play a role is not unlimited.
—Primo Levi 1986:68

A sixteen-year-old student announces his own arrival home; he signs off of Facebook touting tongue in cheek his perceived role: el capo se llegó al apartamento

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263 Homar & Baez (2009).
The term *capo*—as was Kapo—is used Islandwide within trafficking circles to connote those wielding the power. In the response of a ski-masked capo indignantly defending his community’s “non-bullet-firing” righteousness on New Year’s Eve, we witness the ensuing battle for hegemony between the authorities of the State versus the local *corillo* (or gang). Although perhaps in this instance the maskedness of the *capo* does not engender mystique as such (which it did for the Zapatistas’ movement), it does enable what would otherwise be an unlikely public forum. For Taussig (1999), the “masked rebels” serve as a foil to the “faceless bureaucrats” (239) whose integrity has never been intact. Heretofore, viral video responses to perceived public defamation have been rare in the narco context on the Island. Far more often the public is left to wonder what the voice of our own “militarized masculinity” sounds like (Hoffman 2011:xix).

The unblinking *gatilleros*, embedded as they are in the gray zone, at times seem mere pawns, mere cogs in the wheel of the almighty narco-machine (Levi 1988:58). Not unlike most regimes, the motor for Puerto Rico’s is dehumanization:

> The police of Puerto Rico estimate that the Island’s 107 gangs control approximately 1,225 drug distribution points. It is common knowledge that the leaders of these criminal organizations speak of the children [involved] as disposable objects, as when one is killed (literally, “knocked down”), they have two or three more to take his place.

(Vales et al 2002:90, translated)

At this juncture, I can only echo the biting irony of the questions with which Deleuze wrestles, “What makes social collectives work so hard for their own oppression—and what fissures might be opened that would allow new collectives to mobilize and escape”

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264 “the bossman arrived at [his] apartment my people...”
265 “El Capo” is also a television series out of Colombia which began airing in 2009.
266 A “zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness” (Levi 1988:58)
(Hoffman 2011:6)? As Levi (1988:53) solemnly submits, “You mustn’t think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy.”

**Death Worlds: “Que se maten entre sí”**

*The corpse is a powerful site of abjection and taboo, a sacred power, morbid and ambivalent tilted...towards evil, harbinger of a reflux, maybe, the reflux of beneficient power but certainly charged like a spring compressed...*

—Taussig 1997:167

In terms of Latin America more broadly, this recurrently circulated phrase, “*Que se maten entre sí,*” reflects our less extreme version of *limpieza social* (social cleansing); that is to say, if they kill one another off, it accomplishing the same purpose yet in a more “acceptable” and hands-off way. It’s as if we’re operating in a context wherein the state and the population do not see it. There seems to be a generalized plausible deniability: where people are saying, “it’s none of my business,” “it’s not something I need to pay attention to,” or “those people deserve it....” So the stiff-arming blindness becomes normalized and something upon which all can agree.

Mbembe (2003) suggests that “in our contemporary world... [there are now] the creation of death-worlds [which are] new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40). When our grade school children stockpile failed suicide attempts, one has to wonder if this threshold of liminality is not one which many more community members, in various ways, also inhabit. In the ubiquitous scenes of *tiroteo* (gunfights) are not our *gatilleros* conceivably a version of suicide bomber? Does a young man ever feel in any way relieved to have survived a barrage of bullets? What are ways in which our

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267 See the work of Javier Trevino-Rangel on tropes of denial within the Mexican communities besieged by narcotics violence.
youngest *gatilleros* constitute a version of child soldier? Why are the decimation of some youth’s lives available as media spectacle? Why is this indignity reserved only for those residents of *caserios*, when a photo of them embracing their children would have been readily available upon request?

Somehow, through calculated restraint, through editorial discretion, through basic courtesy the local media has historically refrained from publishing graphic photos of the corpses of middle and upper-class victims. How is it possible for gradations of worth to be assigned to human life? Apparently, social outcry, public campaigns, and hashtags belong rather strictly to the realm of those with resources. Yet as Sontag cautions, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (2003:7).

*Nos matamos entre nosotros:* The In-Network Quarantine of Violence

Yet to further complexify the moral underpinnings of this phenomenon, Quis provides another perspective from which to consider the contemptuous jibe, “*Que se maten entre sí.*” Quis evaluates the less rigorous investigations of murders pertaining to narcotics linked violence as a reflection of the reality that, customarily, upon the committal of a murder there is a window of three or four days following its occurrence during which the expected reprisals occur (usually anywhere from 1 to 3); as such, the feuds are informally considered to be self-extinguishing. Given that he is viewing the issue from a business perspective, Quis evaluates that the State’s more lackadaisical approach to narcotics related violence is a matter of common sense. *Nos matamos entre*

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268 A few of the other more publicized murders of that era include those of the following Islanders: José Enrique el *publicista*, Carmen Paredes, Lorenzo Gonzalez Cacho, el *estilista* de Moca, Milton Medina Morales...

269 We kill each other between ourselves.
nosotros, he states matter of factly. He argues that there is a stark distinction between those who work in the illicit economy formally and those whose actions injure those uninvolved in the illicit economy.

He cites the case of the fiscal who was murdered in a carjacking as an example of an “abuse” which should not occur. “There is no reason someone needs to die in a carjacking,” he reasons, annoyed. In this instance, the fact that one of the five accused “canta”270 is not technically viewed as “choteando”271 because the crime itself was “out of bounds” from the beginning. The young man cooperating with authorities, who beforehand allegedly instructed no shots to be fired, is therefore vindicated socially in the underworld because of the “gentlemen’s agreement” that uninvolved civilians not be harmed. Quis raises his eyebrows as he points out that normally a carjacking is automatically under federal jurisdiction, but in this case the Island took full control and ownership of the court proceedings.272 This switch is due to the crime being viewed as a frontal attack on the Island’s justice system: the fiscal was one of their own.273 This case highlights the fluidity with which the designations of state and federal jurisdictions can change.

Pranks versus Crimes:
The inherent violence in the false dichotomization of youth

*My fear of the other* is transformed into the notion that the *other is fearsome.*
—Das 2007:134

In twenty years such justifications—which presently serve as glosses to enforce the carceral continuum—will be read as barbaric. Who will still lose their life due to an

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270 Literally: “Sings.” Or talks to the authorities instead of maintaining silence.
271 Snitching.
273 Her status was likely unknown to the perpetrators. That is to say, reports cite that their interest was in the Mini Cooper. It does not appear that they had any knowledge as to her profession.
exchange of substances? Vitality flows will trump economic ones. Umbrage will be invoked; Black Lives Matter will grow increasingly transnational. And yet presently it is still far too often that our projections feel real. And more than that, they feel justified. Our propensity to ascribe traits to others in concert with our set worldview is second nature. Yet it is to everyone’s collective detriment if we proceed forward uncritical of our own lenses—particularly given our present circumstances on the Island. Das (2007) plies trenchantly, “zones of emergency…void the other of all subjectivity, and [initiate a] peopling of the world with a phantasmagoria of shadows” (134). Such a demarcation, then, divides those of “substance” from those of “ether.”

Wacquant (2004) argues adroitly that the ghetto is a “social prison,” part of a “single carceral continuum” (318; 322), serving the purpose of “enclosing a stigmatized population so as to neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat that it poses for the broader society from which it has been extruded” (318). Thus, these landscapes are the handmaidens of political utility, serving the whimsical desires (read: demands) of the State. Modern day states of exception, tragically, continue to lead to the dehumanization and deaths of those deemed ineligible for “full” citizenship. And locally, this exclusion from full citizenship is manifest very early in the case of children who are not required to attend school, even elementary school.

The concept of access to full citizenship does not appear to enter into the reasoning evidenced in one Island resident’s response to a young trafficker’s death:

*To die in one’s twenties [sic] is something terrible. But remember that these youth began [in their trajectory of] delinquency very, very early. That is to say, what counsel and opportunities have they had [?] Those are not typical little boys from the neighborhood doing pranks, they are a threat to the security of everyone and sadly they chose to live like that. They also show zero sensitivity to their*
neighbors and seem to be irrational beings, beasts, more than human beings [who are] thoughtful with regard to their conduct.

Here again, there’s an inherent violence occurring in the false dichotomization of youth: one group is capable only of pranks whilst the other is engaged in the perpetration of crimes. Further, the commentator’s baseline understanding of agency is strikingly lopsided—as if the dearth of resources at this youth’s disposal (which he acknowledges) becomes somehow irrelevant when evaluating his elective life trajectory.

Regrettably, the sentiment of “I’m threatened” quickly becomes a community ethic; we fail to recognize that distancing oneself from anybody in the community is actually part of the disease. Bryan Stevenson (2012) reminds us that, “The politics of fear and anger have made us believe that these are problems that are not our problems… [yet] the character of a society [is judged] by how they treat the poor, the condemned, and the incarcerated because, ultimately, our humanity depends on everyone’s humanity...” To our global detriment, we cling to the delusion that we are quantifiably different from such individuals and thereby deny our shared humanity. Our natural inclination is to downplay our own capacity for violence, to sublimate it into an inconceivable impossibility. Yet within the Judeo-Christian tradition, “transgressions which human beings often regard as petty and small are sometimes great in the eyes of God who searches the heart and tries the reins… [while those] which a merciless world regards as disgraceful, are judged very differently by Him who knows all circumstances and conditions” (Bavinck 1977:504). In this spirit, we can approach graciously the foreboding challenges inherent in the present epoch of narcotics violence.

With unwavering luminescence, the emergency medicine physician John Rich (2009) fervently contends that it is precisely the safety of this “fearsome other” upon
which we must focus— “the very people we have blamed for making the community unsafe” (201). For, in the end, “we are only as safe as they are. The same safety that we desire, they desire…” (201). But it is clear many have given up the possibility of such a hope; adolescent *alelianos* observe soberly over social media:

> “Why fear dying if, for you, it’s the only sure thing for you?” (13 años)

> “To die tomorrow is just as good as dying any other day.” (14 años)

From some perspectives, just surviving the day is *ganancia*, is getting ahead. Despite the substantial psychological detritus which remains strewn about following traumatic events, aftercare for those with which addresses mental health is almost unheard of on the Island. And yet it is “[t]he experience of being shot, stabbed, or assaulted [which actually drives] many of these young men back to violent injury, not through the pathways that we usually assume *but through the hazy fog of trauma*” (emphasis added) (Rich 2009:4). It is the experience of trauma which leads to elevated serum cortisol and “reset[s] the arousal response to a higher, more sensitive level” and which presents an “inability to regulate” once triggered (Scaer 2005:210). 274 Hence we are ill-advised to believe that such issues will quietly resolve themselves. It requires a relatively dramatic level of naïveté to imagine that without intervention an adolescent shot multiple times, and released from the hospital in less than 24 hours will emerge seamlessly as an unscathed and productive member of his community. Yet this appears to be the (albeit default) expectation of an absent State. Far too often such unilateral criminalization of one population distracts us from the more veiled—and often more insidious—criminality of others. It should remain

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274 This gives new import to the implementation of de-escalation.
unsurprising that youth perseverate on lyrics which contemplate frank questions regarding demise.

Agamben (1998) refers to the concept of homo sacer, or sacred man, as the one who can be killed without having it be considered a homicide. Such a person represents “bare life” and can thereby be “exterminated…as Hitler had announced as [if he were] ‘lice’” (114). Agamben isolates Nazism as “the first radically biopolitical state” (143), contending that every state determines “the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant” (139). This valuation, then, creates a situation in which certain populations—demarcated as “sacred men”—will be deemed expendable. Biehl (2005) implements the neologism “ex-human” to denote those discarded by society, those left to die but who are not yet dead. Essentially, those persons “deemed unassimilable” by nature of their estimable non-productivity.

Yet as Biehl (2005) observes, there exists a “wakefulness that accompanies social death” evident in those who have been cordoned off as disposable populations (42). The “socially authorized languishing” of such rejected populations, then, is not terribly surprising given that “all forms of social and economic exclusion promote mental suffering” (38; 133). In such a scenario what would restitution of citizenship look like? When the “bounding of normalcy” occurs within a society—within, even, a school milieu—what happens to those displaced, to those relegated to spaces decidedly “out of bounds” (23)? Such extruded children hustle in the streets for pocket change in their own unsanctioned version of special education classes on economics under the highway: independent of any hierarchy, free of strictures. The diesel fumes may incite watering eyes and occasional coughs, but joviality is also interspersed with the pensively
entrepreneurial task at hand. And there is a plethora of kinesic self-comforting techniques on exhibit between them, most centered around touch.\(^{275}\)

**Thank You for Surviving: The Troubled Dialectics of Gratitude**

Yet amidst tremendous upheaval there are still abundant reasons for gratitude—some a bit more ironic than others. When a mother makes it through childbirth in rural Bundibugyo,\(^{276}\) Uganda, loved ones shower appreciation by exclaiming *Wabele kwejuna!* or, “Thank you for surviving!” in the local language, Lubwisí (Dickenson & Dickenson 2006). The continued concatenation of life is never assumed. Likewise, circulating within a community such as Alelí, one never quite loses the lump in one’s throat. Nor the daily cascade of relief upon one’s first daily glimpse of these youth still, somehow, corporeally intact. These are moments of spontaneous thanks: *Wabele kwejuna a los que nos quedan.*\(^{277}\) Thank you for surviving to those who remain.

“Thank you for surviving” also serves as a decisively corrective inversion of the too popular phrase “*Que se maten entre sí.*” On the online pages of the Island’s largest periodical one commenter writes: *Killing the people who live in the housing projects would be equivalent to running over an iguana on the expressway, nothing.*\(^{278}\) In the streams of radio propaganda flooding Rwandan airwaves prior to and during the genocide, the Tutsis were systematically referred to as cockroaches. This respective “reptilification” and “insectification” (directly indexing infestation) of humans requires a counter-operative to *rehumanize* them. That is to say, the reflexive bi-directionally

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\(^{275}\) Such behavior is not unexpected given the impact of sex trafficking on children’s emotional modulation vis-à-vis touch.

\(^{276}\) Literally, “where the road ends.”

\(^{277}\) Thanks for surviving to those who remain.

\(^{278}\) By username “53muffin 2000” on 3.6.2012.
accretive dehumanization\textsuperscript{279} which we are presently fomenting must be replaced with the suggestion that hostility is elective. For,

To the extent that we maintain the idea that these young men are unreasonable, we can fear them. But when we understand that out of their collective trauma and the conditions of the social environment in which they live there emerges an underlying logic of physical and emotional survival, it can change us…[For i]t should not be only their transformation that we seek, but our own.

—Rich 2009

\textsuperscript{279} Bi-directionally Accretive Dehumanization (BAD) is how I refer to the phenomenon which occurs between social classes between whom customarily there exists no mutually edifying interaction, and between whom any communication can thereby default into resentment and/or hostility. One example of this is instantiated through the event of a carjacking wherein two actors (one armed) swiftly arrive at a communicative impasse, encountering one another to be mutually unintelligible (Alegre Barrios 2013).
Aphonic Interlude VI: An Exegesis of Drug Point Discourse

The Intricacies Inherent in _Perdonándome a Mamá_

Claudia\(^{280}\) and Sidestepping _la mala pata\(^{281}\)

As a way of introducing the intricacies of Aphonic Ethnography, I offer the following transcript\(^{282}\) as an example of how—even for adults—linguistic repertoires inevitably are shaped and molded by the context within which they are executed. A close examination of a fleeting interaction and the subsequent debriefing session which follows it raise the following questions: Is there such a thing as narco-normativity when it comes to speech? How is affect accounted for within narco-normative dialogue? What are the functionalities inherent in the constriction of speech? And how is urgency demarcated?

Along with the singular demands they confront moment by moment, managers of micro-trafficking enterprises must also maintain plans for tactical dilemmas which arise. They are running a business, yet may only market their wares to known clientele. One’s heart sinks to picture the frenetic physiological orchestra of telomeres shrinking, cortisol levels spiking, and any potential variety of chemical cocktails diffused into the bloodstream—whether enabling, incapacitating or some intermingling of the two. At a phenomenological level, the _traficantes_ are required to be alternately present or absent depending upon the vacillating demands of any given situation. Hence the space of the point which they inhabit is liminal by nature, a space at once defined and demarcated by the intersecting trajectories of detonations and their concomitant entailments. Within these parameters, then, the unwritten rule is that everyone is supposed to function as if we

\(^{280}\) Asking Mama Claudia’s Forgiveness
\(^{281}\) Bad luck
\(^{282}\) Informal Conversation, 11.2014.
have no knowledge that the drug point is a drug point. Its existence is to be yet another secreto a voces. So while some residents are persuaded that the traficantes desire to be feared, it appears that vis-à-vis outsiders they actually prefer not even to be noticed. But noticing can be inadvertent: the permanent line of chairs adorning three sides of the building; the open air pool table; the daily congregation of men slugging through the noon to 2am shift. So if outsiders simply are expected not to know, it is insiders who are expected not to draw attention towards the fluttering business hub.

It is within this context, then, that a dilemma arises when a former trafficker who I am friends with passes by and, seeing me there, becomes alarmed as to my safety. A normally loquacious guy, he distills all of his thoughts and feelings into a clipped yet decisively intense five words: “What are you doing here?” From this pithy yet ostensibly “casual” query I (and preferably I alone) am to understand that he does not want me there, that I am to change coordinates as quickly as possible. The reality, as he elucidates below, is that in order to get me out of there he must concoct and deliver a question which would not be flagged as condemning by the traficantes within earshot: something clear to me but obscure to them; something completely unassailable; something for which he could not be indicted after the fact.

The reason I was at the point on this occasion was to talk with Mamá Claudia about my failure to keep my word about coming by to loan her my cell phone to her talk with her grandson in New York City. While I am there, the former trafficker drives by and, given that he’d never before seen me there at night, he makes a point of

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283 Public secret
After a brief interval he approaches, engrossed in his own cell conversation. He kisses me in greeting, but then instead of continuing on his way, asks the person on the line for a moment’s respite. Then after a half pirouette, he turns his back on the traficantes and the grandmother inserting himself between us. Tilting his head and narrowing his eyes, he inquires, “What are you doing here?” Five words. Five words which, although articulated denotationally as a question, are intended propositionally as an imperative (see Agha 2007). Staring at me intently, he says nothing more.

Although I understood, even initially, that his question was rhetorical and never suspected he desired an answer, I keep up the façade and answer him literally: that I was asking Mamá Claudia’s forgiveness. However, rather than commenting upon my response, he widens his eyes markedly, leans in, touches my wrist and pensively concedes, “Ok, but when you finish you’ll come by la fogata so we can talk?” Once I agree, he appears satisfied—though sober—and continues on his way, weaving through a consortium of 8 traficantes. Apart from his eyes—which were not visible to anyone but me—his was an almost flawless demonstration of an affective flatline, and his presentation of self (Goffman 1959) was low key throughout. However, the eight aphonie red flags which indicate his inquietude are:

1) He interrupts his own cell phone call to speak to me directly, signaling an event

2) He interrupts my conversation to speak with me instead of greeting me with a kiss and continuing on his way, as would be customary.

Finding out what’s going on/being newsy or nosy. One joke on the Island is that there is a bird known as the “averiguao,” or a play on words with the term for eagle, the “guaraguao.”
3) Simply for the intended purpose of engaging me, he walks *through* and not around the point

4) He is serious, and cocking his head to the side almost violently as he asks the question.

5) While imagining that his question to be rhetorical, I also play along and answer, though by his subsequent non-response to my reply it becomes clear that he is simply waiting for me to finish my explanation.

6) He asks me to come talk with him afterwards: an explicit, direct request as opposed to allowing for it to be understood implicitly

7) His typical salutary reception of me which usually includes a theatrical, performativity and levity is absent, replaced by an affective flatline.

8) He turns his back on my interlocutor, ignoring her altogether.

**CODING KEY:**
- Implied but unspoken
- Repetition
- Ethnopoetic Device
- Ellipses (indicating implied end of thought) *** followed by EXACTO/CLARO…. They/We are enabling one another (or me) not to have to say it (whatever affectively challenging thing it is to say) either through cutting one another off or completing the other’s stuttering.
- Pronoun Overload
- Critical Data

**W1 = Wela (Grandmother)**
**W2 = Wela (Grandmother)**
**FT = Former Trafficker**
**Á = Áurea**
**NNR = Non-Narcotics Involved Resident**

FT: Estaba en el punto. [announcing to everyone within earshot; like 12 people]

*She was at the drug point.*

W1: ¿Quién?

*Who?*

FT: ¡Ella! Salte. Por la noche los otros días… En los Cumbres…

*Her! Step back! During the nighttime a few days ago. In los Cumbres…*

W2: ¿Qué? ¿Allí metida?

*What? Back in there? (one building, or ~65 feet, to the west of where we were sitting)*
FT: Con los maleantes estabas. Yo dije, “¡Áurea Winpenny ahora es maleante!”
She was with the maleantes. I said, “Now Áurea Winpenny is a maleante!”
W1: ¡Qué rayo!
What the hell!
FT: No, esa es vacilando.
No, I’m just joking around.

Pero está peligroso porque después se pueden meter los enemigos de ellos
But it’s dangerous because at some point their enemies could infiltrate
y les están tirando tiros
and they are shooting bullets
y tú estás allí
and you’re there
y te te te dan pal de tiros a tí
and they shoot you you you with a couple bullets
y te {matan} [silba de dos sílabas (de tono alto a tono bajo) mientras hace el
señal de cortar el cuello]
and you {are killed by them} [whistles two syllables (from ascending to
descending) while drawing his index finger across his throat]
[laughter from the two Welas]
FT: De veras.
Seriously.
NNR: Las balas no tienen nombre.
The bullets don’t have names on them.
FT: No.
No.
Á: Lo sé... Ni apellido.
I know... Or last names.
FT: [Las balas] No te van a decir: “¡Permiso, Áurea!” No te van a decir:
“The bullets] are not going to say to you: “Excuse me, Áurea!” They are not
going to say to you, “Excuse me, scoot! I want to hit this guy!”
Á: Entonces tú me estuviste diciendo, “¡Dale, dale, saltes de allí!”
So then you were saying to me, “C’mon, c’mon, get out of there!”
FT: Sí, que te movieras de allí.
Yes, [I wanted] that you would get out of there.
Á: Sí, pero yo entendí eso, es lo que quiero de decir, porque me dijiste, “¿Qué tú
haces por acá?”
Yes, but I understood that, is what I am trying to say, because you asked me,
“What are you doing here?”
FT: Sí, te mira así.
Yes, I looked at you like this.
Á: Es que le conté a tu hermana que estuviste así (intense eyes, make face cocked
to side) ¿[Y eso fue] porque te sorprendiste encontrarme por allí?
It’s that I told your sister that you were like this (intense eyes, make face cocked to side) [And that was because you were surprised to find me over there?]

FT: [Sí] Pues porque eso no es una área buena para ti. [Yes] Well, because that’s not a good area for you.

Á: ¿No es?

Á: Yo sabía que aunque no me estuviste diciendolo claro, lo que quisiste decir fue: “Dale, véte de allá.” ¿Verdad?

Á: ¿No es?

FT: Nada bueno. Nothing good about it.

Á: ¿No es?

Á: Yo sabía que aunque no me estuviste diciendolo claro, lo que quisiste decir fue: “Dale, véte de allá.” ¿Verdad?

Á: ¿No es?

FT: Pues claro porque allí un punto de drogas: venden drogas, venden do—venden de to,’ se pasan los maleantes con pistolas, vienen los enemigos, los tirotean y tú en el medio: ¿Qué tú vas a hacer? ¡Tú no vas a saber pa’ donde correr! Y te traen un tiro a ti. Y tu imaginás—imagine eso, que te den dos o tres tiros por—(hace gestiones/mociones hacia su pecho, hombros y barriga). Es como que tú está allí hablando con ellos, tú está allí hablando con ellos y vienen los enemigos, se metieron a matar a los con que tú está hablando y te dierán a ti, te matarán a ti.

Á: Entonces tú cogiste como, como…

Á: ¿Eso es lo que tú haces?

FT: Pues claro. Que tú movieras de allí; ¡eso no es sitio para ir! Si tú vas a ir para allá, vas a saludar, preach to them a little Word of God for a bit, and leave.

Á: [laughter]

FT: De verdad. [con cara indignada, seria] Seriously. [with an indignant, serious face]

Á: ¿Es eso lo que tú haces?

FT: Bueno, yo me vivo allí y no me paso allí.
Hey, I live there and I don’t hang out there.

Á: Pero ¿por qué tu no podías hablarme más claro a mí en ese momento?

But why couldn't you speak clearly to me [about that] in that moment?

FT: Porque después

1. me lo van a escuchar
2. y me dicen dos o tres a mí
3. y les digo tres,
   cuatro, cinco, seis…
4. ellos se quedan con diez
5. y yo me quedo con veinte
6. y se forman un revolú.

Because afterwards
they are going to hear it
and tell me two or three
and I tell them three, four, five, six
and they settle on ten
and I settle on twenty
and chaos is created.

FT to NNR: Ella me dijo ¿por qué no le dije que, que

She asked me, “Why didn’t I tell her that she should leave there? And I told her that if those guys hear me they are going to say tell me two or three things, that they’re going to insult me.

NNR: Exacto. Que se van a discutir con él.

Exactly. They are going to argue with him.

Á: ¿Por decírmelo?

For him telling me that?

FT: Pues claro: ¿por qué yo te estoy diciendo que te muevas? le, le, le… Pero entonces yo no voy a quedarme callado.

Well clearly. Why is it that I am telling you to get out of there? Blah, blah, blah… But then [on the other hand] I’m not staying shut.

Á: Tampoco.

[Right, you’re not going to do that] either.

FT: ¡¡¡¡¡Ea!!!!! ¿¿¿¿Cómo????

Yeah right!!!! In what world????

Á: Pero ni quieres discutir con ellos.

But you also don’t want to fight with them.

FT: No, para evitar problemas.

No, to avoid problems.

Á: Pa evitar problemas me hablaste así como…

[So] to avoid problems you spoke to me like that…

FT: No sé. Me van a insultar. Me van a decir cosas que no me voy a gustar…

I don’t know. They are going to insult me. They are going to say things to me that I won’t like.
NRN: Te van a decir un montón de cosas que tú no vas a gustar.

They're going to say a ton of things that you're not going to like.

Á: ¿Cómo una tiraera?

Like verbal sparring?

NRN: Exacto. Como “Ah, canto de cabrón, ¿Por qué tú estás haciendo eso? ¡Tú no tienes que estar haciendo eso aquí!”

Exactly. Like, “Ah, piece of *%^$, why are you doing that? You don’t have to be doing that here!”

Á: Pero ¿por qué eso sea una ofensa? Ellos mismos saben lo que pasa ¿y pa decirselo es una ofensa?

But why is that an offense? They themselves know what happens there; and to say it is an offense?

NRN: Porque no lo van a ver así.

Because they’re not going to look at it that way.

FT: No lo van a ver de la manera en la que yo estoy haciendo. Lo van a ver de la manera como yo voy a llamar a los enemigos de ellos para que los tirotean o whatever, ¿entiendes?

They are not going to look at it in the way that I am intending it. They are going to look at it in the way that I am going to call their enemies so that they can come and shoot them or whatever, you follow?

Á: Ah, como que tú quieres quitarme a mí de allá pa que—

Ah, as if you want to get me out of there so that—

NRN: Pa que vienen los malos.

So that the bad guys can come in.

Á: ¿Tú supieras de eso?

You would know about that [i.e., surprise attacks]?

FT: {No.} Es que la gente es ignorante.

{No.} But it’s that people are ignorant.

NRN: Y si da la mala pata, que pasa así van a pensar que…*** él les había dicho/tuvo una parte en el masacre

And if you have bad luck and it actually goes down like that they’re going to think that…*** he had told them (something)/had a part in the massacre

FT: Exacto. Y si por mala pata… yo no lo estoy haciendo con esa intención entonces yo vengo y te lo digo a ti para que te muevas, te moviste y en esos mismos momentos llegan los que—

Exactly. And if for bad luck… I am not doing it with that intention then I come and I tell you so that you get outta there, you move outta there and at that exact time arrive those who—

Á: Y van a conectarlo comoquiera

And they are going to make the connection regardless285

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285 Here again Taussig’s words are fitting: “In the state of emergency… every possibility is a fact” (1992:34).
FT: Y van a pensar que yo los llamé o whatever y…
{buscarán/lastimarán/matarán a mí para vengarlo}
   And they are going to think that I called them or whatever and… {will look for a way to avenge it by looking for/hurting/killing me}
NNR: [Y se lo pasará peor] porque él sabía que venían.
[Indecipherable] [And it will go even worse for him] because he knew that they were coming
Á: Ahhh, wow. ¿Que se le van a buscar más gente para luchar?
   Ahhh, wow. So they are going to look for more people to fight?
NNR: Sí.
Á: ¿Pero no es posible que ellos veian que él me está tratando de proteger?
   But isn’t it possible that they would see that he is trying to protect me?
FT: No lo van a ver como protección hacia tí.
   They are not going to see it as protection towards you.
NNR: No, no lo van a ver de ese lado.
   No, they are not going to see it from that angle.
Á: Pero antes ¿tú eras—?
   But didn’t you used to be [a gatillero]?
FT: Sí pero no llegó a eso.
   Yeah, but it didn’t get to that point [where I became a full-fledged287 gatillero.]
   No hay confianza… Siempre hay alguien que… va a meter la pata o va a hablar mierda o whatever… ¿entiendes? O como ahora son un montón de gente nueva que no me conocen; no saben la trayectoria de uno, pues…
   There is no trust… There’s always someone who is going to stick their nose into things or who’s going to talk shit or whatever…. You understand? Or now that there’s a ton of new guys who don’t know me; who don’t know a person’s [past] trajectory, so…

Discussion

So the context of an indefatigable narcotics war demands that the prospect of the worst case scenario reigns. Further, all communications must be calibrated accordingly, so as to not incite suspicion. This vignette highlights the indispensability of kinesics and paralinguistics and the facility with which one learns to use concision in situations of

286 Note that the former trafficker (FT) does not take offense at this question. Rather he graciously understands that my decontextualized, neophyte use of the term “gatillero” is a sloppy generalization meaning anyone employed by trafficking circles. Instead of correcting me directly, he clarifies that his own participation did not involve anything beyond slinging.
287 Read: armed.
duress. It also showcases an example of one citizen’s linguistic strategy, which he implements in order to avoid a skirmish with the coercive—but not sovereign—presence of the traficantes. The former trafficker (FT) averts a machismo showdown by preemptively selecting a “low stakes” form of resistance in order to accomplish his goal of removing me from that physical location. His physical intervention, of placing himself bodily between his potential aggressors and me, also formed a new plane of isolation, creating a space of relative privacy in a highly trafficked and public space.

Aphonic Ethnography also attends to linguistic encryptions, which are simply coded semantics that in another context could be read in an entirely neutral manner. Unlike the former trafficker’s question, “What are you doing here?” which was highly context dependent and original, many linguistic encryptions are utilized ad nauseum so that there remains no doubt nor uncertainty to their audience as to their connotation. Yet again, the phenomenon of direct speech is eschewed. For instance, a bichote does not say Mátale a fulano or “Kill so-and-so,” instead he says, “Móntate y llégale” or “Dale pa’ abajo.” Further, common parlance within narcotics dominated circles is constituted by the utilization of “simplified materialisms.” Just as stateside a prisoner may say that he is doing time for “body,” which is to say murder, on the Island a person who kills over the loss of their female significant other to another man is known as “una falda.”

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288 That is to say it is unlikely that his choices, though ostensibly they could be conceived of as rude towards Mama Claudia and the traficantes, would be read as threatening.

289 Interview, 10.2016. The latter expression’s significance varies widely depending upon the context wherein it is operationalized. In reference to narcotics violence, “Lo di pa’ bajo” means the matón or gatillero killed the subject; in reference to a sexual conquest, one might say “Lo di pa’ bajo” in order to indicate that one had relations with the individual; in reference to a car, saying “Lo di pa’ bajo” signifies that one abused the car by driving it past normal limits; in reference to food, one could say, “Lo di pa’ bajo” to tell how one polished off an entire pizza in one sitting.

290 A skirt.
CHAPTER 7 Luminescence is an Evasive Trope

Aphonic Ethnography

Residential Zone/Maintain Silence/Order of the Public Code
Villa Palmera

The Silences of Our Smallest Soldiers:
How Constellations of Violence Defy Acoustical Apprehension

There are things of which one never speaks, things one never says
But we all ask ourselves the same question,
“Where will I end up?” and “When will be my final hour?”
Will I die alone in the hospital?
Or will they kill me in front of a bunch of people?”
I have asked myself a thousand times: when I’m missing,
who will take care of my loved ones?
There are so many things that I have thought about.
I am not scared to die.
I am scared of being forgotten.
—“El tiempo corre y corre” by Farruko, Oneill, & Kendo (translated)

It is said that because Nael was seen as the most docile of those involved in the assassination, he became the focus. He was, after all, by far the youngest of the five who were snatched. The noun circulating which was used to describe him, however, connotes that he was the most cowardly, and potentially the easiest from whom to extricate the details of the homicide in which he allegedly participated. But they could not have been
more mistaken: Nael was a steel trap. It is said that so stalwart was Nael’s commitment not to speak, that in order to force a response, the kidnappers resorted to piercing the ligaments of his knees with a long-pronged carving fork.

**Silence as Starting Block**

“There you go with that damn nodding thing again…”

—Kevin commenting on Chiron’s longstanding eschewal of vocalizations (Romanski, Gardner, & Kleiner 2016)

“There is no greater crime than that of speaking… a straw in the wind.”

—Zizek 2008:168

**University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras**

Wrought with seemingly endless potentialities, silence within many circles maintains a conflicted status. The seminal work of Basso (1972) with the Western Apache determined that silence is utilized in response to ambiguity or uncertainty as per the social relationship and context. From the standpoint of positionality, Spence (1982) argues that silence is our baseline, and therefore more accurate and closer to the truth than any production of speech. O’Connor, (2003) made the case that within the carceral
state—and arguably within communities plagued by narcotics violence—the phenomenon of self-silencing merits examination. MacKendrick (2001) posits that silence is criminalized and disallowed, and conceived of as indicative of an assumption of guilt, while Kurzon (1998) highlights how it is constructed in deficit terms, as if it were “dysfluency.” In contrast, Blommaert (2006) emphasizes its various volitional components, attributing to it untold depths. Within academic or institutional contexts, Schultz (2003) draws our attention to the need to attend, pedagogically, to the acts of silencing occurring in our midst. Perhaps less conventionally, is the consideration of silence across modalities (Kwiatkowski 1997): Edgar (1997) addresses its function within music; others address the visual silences inherent in monochrome colors laid atop one another or an unvocalized scream (Hafif 1997, Withers 1997, Jaworski 1997); Kwiatkowska (1997) explores tactile silence—the lack or presence of which can be more readily absorbed visually.

![The visual silence of a monochromatic stop sign, bleached by the sun. Trujillo Alto](image)
The theorizing of silence is replete with opposing binaries. Burbules (2004) highlights the distinction between being elective or coerced; Clair (1998) explores the phenomenon as alternately destructive or protective; Sobkowiak (1997:43, 46) emphasizes acoustic versus pragmatic categorizations and silence as a vehicle for either cohesion or division; vis-à-vis politically charged issues such as LGBTQ sexuality on high school campuses, Woolley (2012) makes a distinction between silences which are either “uncomfortable or too comfortable” and “scripted silences” of nonintervention. Further, even in her methodology, she privileges silence over speech, coding of her data with four categorizations: three demarcating forms of silence (as a verb, noun, or moment) while one delineates vocalized discourse. Yet these seemingly inexhaustible pairings become less persuasive when one considers how Foucault collapses any binary between the vocalized and the non-vocalized; he writes, “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1990:27). As such, where articulations cease, the strategic field endeavor of aphonic ethnography commences.

**Fairtrade Silence: Insulation from the Masses & Cartographies of Quietude**

In his explanation of the resurgence in popularity of float tanks (invented by neuroscientist John Lilly in 1954), Owen (2015) writes, “Virtually everywhere else in modern life, opportunities to expend one’s leisure time are based on the promise of sensory stimulation.” Yet in recent years—perhaps unsurprisingly—there has been a backlash to this trend:

[T]he free market, at once mirror and engine of our desires… offers us an abundance of sensory distractions [which don’t] quite satisfy. On some level we are all binge consumers, who will all eventually push ourselves to nausea. At which point we want the opposite of stuff. And just as it can sell us diet pills
having already sold us doughnuts, the market can sell us nothing…even as it sold us too much something.

(Owen 2015)

 Accordingly, just as one can purchase a dark, sensory-numbing float experience, one may likewise purchase John Cage’s 4’33” on iTunes (Schama 2014). With unparalleled irony, this coy musical stunt was a harbinger of the demands of a now burgeoning market: quality of life and prosperity as calibrated through one’s access to rarefied soundscapes. It is the more recent “commodification of silence” (Schama 2014) featured in luxury sedans and quiet cars on the daily rail commute which places a premium price tag on one’s personal sonic field…Or, in quantifiable terms, how much is “peace” worth to the consumer? Such tidy parceling up of “silence for purchase” connotes a willingness on the part of the citizenry to kowtow to yet another delusion of exclusivity.

Yet the well-heeled have no monopoly on the market. Both those categorized as the upper and the lower echelons of society place a premium on silence. It is the mutually preferred entity—though in disparate ways and for divergent reasons. In narcotics dominated contexts silence is purchased differently, e.g., through threat (as in a neighborhood graffiti warning, “La chota muere,” the snitch dies291). It is also executed differently, as revealed by its machinations of power. Proper nouns of direct address are used exclusively with underlings such as curriers and mules. No one shouts the name of the bichote (the druglord) at all decibels. Yet no one seems to hedge at the frequent vocal summonings of an under-aged runner. With status, then, comes a privatization of

291 This is no longer only the expected outcome for the chota, or snitch, but also for the “satelite” who acts as a dish which bounces confidential information from one person to another (or the “llega y trae”; one who arrives & brings).
personhood, a prescribed perimeter of silence. Without disregarding the continual jockeying for power and the aggressions and counter-aggressions inherent in the coveted position of \textit{bichote}, such disregard for the personhood of the \textit{traficantes} also highlights their perceived expendability.

In accordance with a customary saying, “One is a slave to what one says and an owner of what one conceals” (\textit{uno es esclavo de lo que dice y amo de lo que calla}) the locus of power is understood to abide with the one who restrains his commentaries. Amongst the young men there is a standing social critique of those who talk excessively; power is confined to those who say little. When I head over to \textit{el punto} and in my rather aloof manner ask a random (yet personally pertinent) question to no one in particular, it is never the \textit{bichote} (head druglord) who answers me. Power observes and evaluates, but rarely speaks. Power is shown, not spoken. Even their vehicles, mammoth and dramatically elevated, embody this visual presence.

Conversely, contexts of safety (both bodily & psychological) are signaled by the occurrence of more conversation and activated affects. When Das (2007:201) organizes a summer camp for children traumatized by violence, there is an implicit sense that the established emotional tethering between she and the children matters and that language production and affective states are intrinsically, inherently connected. It was there, within a space of safety, that those who were customarily mute “suddenly found language pouring out of their mouths.” This study is based on the premise that knowledge production vis-à-vis trauma and violence is inherently relational.

\footnote{In fact, during the school day I was once taken aside emphatically by a concerned community bystander when she overheard two students attempting to get me to translate a local \textit{bichote’s} first names into English. The girls had a crush on him and, ostensibly, wanted to impress him with their English. But in recognition of the unnecessary precarity such an action would introduce, the community member put a swift end to the preadolescents’ mission. Simply to have the \textit{bichote’s} name heard coming from my mouth would be \textit{buscando problemas de gratis} (to look for problems for free).}
Reticence Unfurled: Aphonic Ethnography in the Interstices of Narcowar

*Silence is argument carried out by other means.*

—Che Guevera

Aphonic epistemology, or aphonemology, is constituted through ways of knowing predicated upon ascertaining that which goes unsaid, that which occupies the negative spaces of a transcript. Aphonemological ethnography, then, attends to the undercurrents or subtexts of conversation and positions the researcher to focus not only on productive but also on receptive silences, as well as paralinguistic phenomena such as visual or tactile noise. Given that entire cultures can be based around an axiomatic acceptance of silence (whether for the purpose of survival or otherwise), there is value of studying silences in their variegated forms. Methodologically, AE allows for a more multi-modal approach to data and is particularly pertinent with regard to narcotics dominated communities. Therein, the deployment of an aphonemological lens in urban ethnography can be particularly elucidating within contexts dominated by illicit or covert activity because it prioritizes connotations as opposed to denotations, subterrains to terrains, structure to surface, musculature to epidermis.

“War masks” (Theidon 2009), though tiresome, are part of the community algorithm of learned stoicism. In such locales, residents are necessarily adept at contra-conventional expression. That is to say, that which appears explicit may simply be code for an understood implicit meaning. As such, AE also can illuminate heretofore less examined aspects of settings or interactions wherein there is the potential for gross asymmetrical power distributions or misrecognitions due to class difference.

Further, within violent settings nonverbal information becomes far more vital than discourse (van der Kolk, 2009). Studies have shown that when the senses are confronted
with “discrepant information… vision is the victor” (Marks 1978), and loquacity is transformed into an impediment. Yet with regard to community members this reign of silence can flourish in both protective and insidious ways.

Schooling as Sacred Sanctuary

My implementation of Aphonic Ethnography began in the academic context. One might imagine that given the instability of an area besieged by narcotics and arms trafficking, school campuses would serve as a refuge. And for some, it does. There is a smattering of children born in the window of 2008-2012 whose tongues—as if by some cruel joke—seem fixed in position; they vocalize wordstrings, but struggle mightily to articulate them as discrete identifiable units. Like florescent blue crazy string shot from an aerosol can, their words arc and squiggle through the air with the same levity of their peers but without corners. Like smooth pebbles dropping into a creek, all of their words are round.

Amidst a cluster of girls after school, I note one such child, Aisha, kneeling down to equip all of our feet with skates, carefully pulling up a transparency of leather over our respective sandals and Mary Janes. Upon finishing she invites us all, with an insistent wave of her hand, to “come skate.” Glancing pragmatically out over the dustbowl of grit, I assess the subsequent hours such skating would require—removing embedded silt from beneath toenails—and shamelessly remain seated. Yet at the seven-year-old’s continued urging, the older girls follow her onto the rink, dutifully sliding their shoes through the powdery dirt—like mini-snowplows each shoe leaving a wake of powdery rivulets on either side.
But soon wispy arms lengthen even further as if flowering robles bending to accommodate the wind, wrists follow the gracious undulations of an unseen melody, and pleated polyester skirts flare into spinning tea saucers: the multi-axle pirouettes have begun. It is only then that I realize that Aisha has adorned our feet with steel blades and not wheels. That it is ice upon which they skate, ice upon which they encounter a brief reprieve. With the mercury reading ninety degrees a mere two weeks before Christmas I find myself with box seats for our very own dazzling rendition of the Nutcracker a la criolla. For such children with physical impediments, the school grounds can and often do, indeed, serve as a refuge and safe space.

No Refuge for the Electively Silent

Particularly for children whose more formal communicative repertoires rely heavily on the production of seemingly impenetrable silences, however, the institution of the school can serve as just one more violence in a smorgasbord of violences. Due to challenges with affect regulation, traumatized children frequently produce silences (or actions) that are misread as defiance or decisive disengagement and are punished accordingly (Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Cicchetti & White, 1990; Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000). This, consequently, only serves to exacerbate the cleavage in communication. In actuality, however, the children’s seemingly aberrant behaviors are aimed purposefully towards the immediate amelioration of perceived threat and the vitiation of mental anguish (Pynoos et al 1987). For the children for whom community or other violences have had a severe impact Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) brain scans reveal that under perceived threat, “only one channel activates—(the lower road) the amygdale awakens the ….survival brain, while the higher neocortical
brain activity that can think and reason lies dormant” (340). The day to day implications of this neurological adaptation, then, are not only sobering, but far-reaching.

Accordingly, while beneficially adaptive in certain regards, over the long haul the vigilant silences these children guard can prove destructive. For it is through the production of language that children consciously organize their experience and the absence of which that hinders both neural growth and neural integration (Cozolino 2006; Bruner 1990). The attention yanking clamor of schoolyard fistfights can easily overshadow the more frequent yet lower decibel affective collisions in which already alienated students are regularly thwarted in academic endeavors. Administrators and teachers can routinely misrecognize students’ trauma responses—as if silence were an inappropriate or “inarticulate” response (Scarry 1985)—and then react punitively. The aftermath of enough such discursive affective collisions is that such children opt out of school, taking refuge in various day labor opportunities in the web of surrounding streets.

Last Ditch Efforts at Classroom Management: …La Madre del que TOQUE
“[I shit on] The Mother of whoever TOUCHES [the items on this bookshelf]”
Unheard Decibels: Why Aphonic Ethnography?

If a child is suffering in that quiet invisible way children really do suffer...I simply won't be turned away. I watch for the smallest sign of communication and respond with a small sign, too, and then I wait for the next sign, hoping I can read it when it comes.

—Rogers 2006:38

Hoping I can read it when it comes. As a late teen I worked in a lively narcotics dominated neighborhood stateside, wherein lay the confluence of three cultures: African American, Puerto Rican and Anglo. This subsidized urban day camp in the micro-megalopolis of Lancaster City served as a vortex of alternating racial tension and racial syncronicity. One muggy afternoon as the older youth and I sit in an arc of inverted red milk crates drinking in the shade the cinderblock shed provides, the conversation veers into the annoyance of being subjected to salsa blaring continuously from one rowhome’s window across the street. Twirling the green cord of my lifeguard whistle around two fingers and without much thought, I nod casually. Yet just as I begin to vocalize my agreement, I feel a firm, insistent pressure from the sole of a sneaker onto the side of my calf: the lone Puerto Rican (and also the youngest and a first generation immigrant) youth present is “voicing” his noiseless objection. Is appealing to me as the lone “authority figure.” Is telling me no. No, you cannot concur. No, you cannot stand against what is a synecdoche for who I am. No, it doesn’t matter that hip-hop is my music, this is mami’s music, this is abu’s music. No, it doesn’t matter that at some objective level the music could be considered “loud.” Right now that music—at any volume—is me. All of this communicated through one swift, publicly undetected swivel of his foot. One deft stealth maneuver. Recognizing my infraction mid-syllable, then, my voice breaks off abruptly.

Shifting out of the separatist mentality, I suggest that perhaps the music is best enjoyed at such volumes… Even now the urgency, the immediacy of his request, and the
personal cost to him were I not to have received it as intended are not lost on me. As stewards of society’s youth we miss a lot. We miss far too much. And what’s worse is that we allow our youth to lose hope that we are even paying attention. Aphonic Ethnography (hereafter AE) is, at last in part, a concrete attempt to address our often unwitting eradication of the cathected subjectivities of those who already are most vulnerable to erasure.

Almost two decades later I find myself in Puerto Rico where the juvenile homicide rate is exponentially higher than for minors stateside (Allison & MacEwan 2004). When I began volunteering at a local elementary school in San Juan in 2008, the ratio of boys to girls in our third-grade classroom was equal. Less than three years later at their sixth-grade graduation, however, the ratio was one to five. Those boys who never crossed the threshold into junior high and whose absence at what should have been their graduation enact a thunderous silence, as it were. Arguably, as Saunders (1985:175) asserts, “Silence is more complicated than noise.” Through AE, then, my work aims to find a way to hear and understand those who are otherwise silenced and invisible, to acknowledge and attempt to loosen the affective strait jacket by which they are at times constrained. For if it is true that “narratives determine fate” (Blommaert 2006:181), then those whose narratives are silenced, misinterpreted or never vocalized at all are conscripted to intractable condemnation.

In his seminal work, Dell Hymes (1996), the father of ethnopoetics, asserts that differences across communicative repertoires should not translate into inequality. Yet this is precisely what most often happens: difference is evaluated from a deficit perspective and found lacking. That is to say, the “unfamiliar pattern may be taken to be absence of
pattern” (1996:174). Hence, due to the rejections of these “unfamiliar patterns,” presently some school children are not even attempting narrative because of having become fully acclimated to the milieu of unilateral rejection, to understanding that their narratives will be summarily construed as illegitimate, abortive or deformed. As such, this project initiates a corrective toward this unique form of narrativizing which so often is intermingled with the phenomenon of silence production. This approach to discourse analysis asserts that the children’s narratives—when voiced—are not deformed but, on the contrary, quite cogently and conscientiously re-formulated so that subject matter which, by its very nature ostensibly resists conveyance, at last might be conveyed.

While there is an “unspeakability”(84,607),(333,642) associated with suffering (Blommaert 2005:95), through ethnopoetic analysis it can be ascertained what linguistic markers or paralinguistic cues an individual employs (largely subconsciously) are given that will provide a window on the coherence and logics within their narrative. With reference to James Scott’s work on resistance to hegemony, Blommaert (2005) advises that very often, people will “st[ï]ck to the codes of the hidden transcript, to the orders of indexicality of [their] subculture,” which may disallow for fairness in an outsider’s topical analysis thereof (95). Hence, despite the affective strait jacket by which they may encounter themselves partially immobilized, the children tend to utilize hidden transcripts (Scott 1992), as opposed to conventional, publicly recognizable transcripts to communicate. And while one might note in their affect, for example, “the absence of explicit suffering markers,” such an absence within their community can serve beneficially to identify them as a warrior instead of a victim (Blommaert 2005:95).
Silence Management as Cultural Capital

Within the realm of aphonemological research, one standing presupposition is that silence as stance is not merely a default mode but also a coercive force. As such, it is frequently volitional and a decisive and at times pivotal act. Often this is seen more vividly on the streets than in the classrooms: a silent reception is its own variation on a social death sentence. The razor-sharp leering silence that follows an inappropriate query exacts a mighty, conversation-severing blow: with a single swift action the speaker is dethroned. This is silence as aggression, as hierarchical realignment, a staking of territorial claim over unnecessary or bothersome articulations. As per local social mores and the tradition of bravado and machismo (Ramírez 1999), it is understood that through the abstention from speech, one exhibits not merely a more seasoned maturity, but also what is understood as representing a more heightened masculinity. Reticence in this context, then, also can emerge as a gendered entity.

Within this context, consequently, the management of silence emerges as its own form of cultural capital. Therein, aphonemological ethnography is a tool which allows us to examine the manifold ways in which such capital is executed in a given setting. Through the judicious management of silence, status can be built and maintained—wherein a 14-year-old boy can command a man twice his age to take a bath or scold him for talking too much. The former has elected to embody the larger narco-community norms while the latter has not. While certainly not the only factors at play, power and prestige are consistently brokered along the fault lines of silence management. This interpersonal vignette displays the social worth of careful, precise navigation of
articulation. Public silence, then, becomes conceived of as normative, while an increasing priority is given to guarding the impermeable chrysalis of private consultation.

**Approaching Aphonicity**

*In parts of the world where so much rests on the ability to keep quiet, silence can be one of the hardest things to learn.*

—Begley 2009

To become more effective in thinking aphonemologically, I first simply had to stop talking. Nothing is more alienating—or red flag waving—than being overly inquisitive (Duneier 1994; Theidon 2001:28). I consider it progress the afternoon we are all gathered near *la fogata* and an aunt observes aloud that I “didn’t talk much...” Then, however, she squints her eyes at me and appears to begin rethinking her evaluation of me.

**Everyday Aphonics & Ideologies of Self/Other-Directed Harm**

*I decided I would not speak again until someone said something at least intelligent enough for me to try to answer.*

—Rogers 2006:8

Foucault collapses any potential binary between the vocalized and the non-vocalized; he writes, “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1990:27). Within the classroom AE could be constituted by looking not at the child’s “academic performance,” as much as his “anti-performance,” i.e., at what is taking place in lieu of the expected/desired activity. As per the anthropology of education, such decisions often display forms of “resistance” to and rejection of mainstream classroom expectations.
The ¡No te quites! Campaign: Aphonic Evanescence

It’s our ontological vocation to narrativize. What happens when somebody commits suicide is, they can no longer generate a narrative. The narrative suddenly becomes a terminus: a thing that ends. It’s our endlessly regenerative ability to narrativize that keeps us going…

—Junot Diaz (Scarano 2012)

Far too often young men and adolescent boys grappling with the prospect of taking their own lives do not confide these ruminations to anyone. On the contrary, they are prone to wage such battles internally. According to Jacqueline Grupp-Phelan, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center’s director of research for the division of emergency medicine, “Boys in crisis aren’t usually forthcoming… [t]hey just kill themselves” (Vaccariello 2014). As such, there is a public health precedent for the employment of aphonemological ethnography. Medical researchers such as John Pestian, who are using multiple modalities to address risk, corroborate the need for these angles to be more fully developed. So whether it be directed toward the prevention of self or other directed harm, the implementation of AE can serve simultaneously to excavate and illuminate at least in part how youth in narcotics dominated settings are processing their contexts and potential traumas internally. In my decade in Aleli the youngest student with whom an intervention was conducted after he attempted to take his life was eleven.

Slalomspeak: Aphonic Ethnography in Action

Ich bin hier geneigt gegen Windmühlen zu kämpfen, weil ich das noch nicht sagen kann was ich eigentlich sagen will.294

—Wittgenstein in On Certainty 1969:51

Visible or not, all silences have a subtext. This is particularly true for child school deserters in communities awash in chronic violence who spend the vast preponderance of
their time in places where it is not safe to express their feelings. Given this reality, often they adapt by tamping down any affect, any emotion, whether negative or positive. This learned stoicism, evidenced through behavior and discourse styles, is a coping mechanism which allows them to lessen feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness and also attempts to blunt the effects of trauma. These youth, then, operationalize variegated forms of silence to construct narrative.

Just as in the rather compromised functionality of this traffic sign, the communication of some children is present—it just isn’t immediately accessible. Agha talks about one’s communication as being denotational or propositional (2007). As we cannot decipher even a single letter, denotationally, this corner communicates no traffic commands. Yet propositionally we are given some other visual cues: 1) there is a vertical steel rod protruding rather indelicately from the ground; 2) there is decidedly less luminescence emitted behind the leaves and a circular opacity is vaguely evidenced as well; 3) the yellow curb veers off to the right, indicating the presence of a corner; 4) upon close inspection, patches of red are visible through the foliage. So does one take a
machete to the foliage? Or does one recognize that the foliage may serve a vital purpose and seek other manners by which an alternate form of mutual correspondence might be achieved?

Prior to my fieldwork I noted and informally categorized distinctions between how youth would operationalize various forms of silence in their daily extemporaneous discourse. Paying attention to their infrequent articulations revealed patterns of “variant silencing,” or tactical linguistic maneuvers which obscure, or silence, the very information ostensibly relayed. Through the lens of Blommaertian ethnopoetics, a form of narrative analysis which uncovers coherence in non-mainstream style discourses, such children’s narratives can be analyzed on the occasions when the sanctity of silence, even if only momentarily, is suspended.

There are key structural aspects to the manner in which narco-involved youth utilize silence and construct narratives amidst unstable contexts. Further, within the realm of Aphonic Ethnography, there emerged many forms of variant silencing in the youths’ discourses. The emergent modalities of narco-narrativizing that I discovered during that preliminary investigation were:

**Pre-Climactic Elision**: Incomplete story, sentence or phrase, truncated prior to expression of critical, incriminating or confidential information.

**Slalomspeak**: Any content expressed indirectly, potentially due to any myriad of social restraints or self-modulation of affect. Statements (poles) ancillary to the point are made, and the child zigzags from statement (pole) to statement (pole) while remaining silent about his unspeakable point.

**Concession**: Any, even if incremental, acknowledgement of reality (more rare because involves risk).

**False Negative/Positive Contrarian**: Also perceived as lies, these are contrarian statements indicating the opposite of what is true; often, a tactical move to redirect focus of conversation.
Culpability Dispersion: A deflection of guilt away from oneself and onto others. Akin to blamedshifting but more diffuse. Most often done with an absence of malice, at times playfully.

Elaboration Eschewal: A stalwart insistence upon and commitment to brevity & concision.

Invocation: Petition (whether sincere or sardonic) directed towards or in deference to God’s sovereignty (Briggs).

Of those which I identified and categorized, one example is Slalomspeak, or their communication through the creation of slaloming arcs around that which is unspeakable.

Given the prematurely abortive, inconsistent academic histories of these electively unschooled children, their latent narratives consistently have not only gone misrecognized, but also unheard and summarily rejected. Although perhaps unconventional in form, the communicative repertoires of these young men are constructed in systematic, purposeful, and important ways. Studying these patterns informally laid the foundation for further explorations in aphonicity within other spheres and institutions within Alelí.

Like anyone else, they relay events in their lives, but their narrations of these events do not always look like standard, canonical stories with a beginning middle and end. Rather, their narratives parallel a pattern interventionist researcher Jan Blommaert (2005) has identified in his quest to make trauma survivors’ accounts legible to a leery, evidence seeking public and judicial system. Survivors of trauma often can talk about the incident only up to a certain point. That is to say, a rape survivor may recount: he touched my hand, my back— and then just stop. Wherein trauma is present, there is often an inability to name things— particularly those things which most closely invoke the memory of the incident. Hence it becomes incumbent to study apparent “stylistic features” (and their “distribution”) that occur throughout the transcription in “nonrandom
ways,” such as pitch changes, hedges, repetitions, or refrains (Blommaert 2005:88). These seemingly inconsequential yet trackable details often are just what enable the ethnographer to “visualize the particular ways—often deviant from hegemonic norms—in which [in this instance, electively non-attending students] produce meanings” and communicate emotions (Blommaert 2006c:240). As elaborated above, their unconventional manner of communicating leads to their “disqualification, dismissal, and erasure” (Blommaert 2006c:242) within academic settings, as their resources are ill-matched with “institutional expectations” (Blommaert 2006b:184).

Like those of the aforementioned rape survivors, these children’s narratives are often truncated just prior to the climax or revelation of the critical information. This proclivity for elliptical narration, or slalomspeak then, necessarily delegates to the interlocutor the task of pulling the final fraying strands of narrative (and their implications) back together. This assignment also assumes, or rather requires, gracious intent toward the child as it endeavors to eradicate some of the opacity inherent in communication between interlocutors with differing repertoires. Poignantly, however, on an Island fraught with hostile class tensions and cleavages, where such children are referred to as creatures of infestation (rats, iguanas, fleas and worse), where citizens are calling for separate body counts—those for traficantes and those for “decent” human beings—I began to wonder how this impasse in perceptions could be dissolved. How the dehumanization that accompanies the children’s muteness might be reversed through the translation of their singular narratives to those outside their social spheres. It seemed that analysis not of the denotational but of the propositional aspects of their narrativizing (Agha 2007) would be most critical: asking not “what did they say?” but “what did they
mean by what they said?” and, simultaneously, “what role are their calibrated elisions playing?” In part, then, the work is to examine how and when they risk rupturing silence, how they sidestep it, and proceed to trace those gold veins of selective articulations produced amidst the ever-encroaching gangue of trauma.

To this end, then, Aphonic Ethnography primarily asks the question, *How do we listen to what is not being said?* How do we attend to the inaudible, the covert, the subterranean landscapes which surround us? Consider the example which catalyzed my contemplations as to aphonemenological dynamics. Josepa (age 15), distraught, seeks to confide in me that his friend Nemesio’s (or Neme) (age 13) recent transition from a school deserter into a *gatillero* (triggerman) poses an increased risk and heretofore unprecedented danger to not only himself, but now also to anyone who spends time in his presence.

The catch is, however, that the very thing which prompts Josepa—a customarily reticent teen—to speak *cannot be said.* Such news would be deemed highly culturally inappropriate subject matter for a youth to share with an outsider such as myself. So the child—at once compelled and restrained—is caught in a space of linguistic liminality. He wants to warn me, but social constraints dictate otherwise. As a consequence, his entire raison d’être for the topic itself becomes a “speech non-event.” Accordingly, Josepa instead cites decidedly ancillary characteristics of a *gatillero* which are accurate, but not the definitive one that reflects his primordial concern: that *gatilleros* by definition both target others for violence as well as are targeted by others for violence. Or more simply:

[^295]: I am thankful to Utpal Sandesara for this term.
from here onward, Neme will be assigned to kill just as others from rival bandos will be assigned to kill him.

Such slaloming, or slalomspeak, around poles of signification allows Josepa to retain his integrity within the rigorous social mores of confidentiality required by narcotics trafficking circles while at once edging me closer to his concern. Without asking directly, he is asking that I put the pieces together. And Aphonic Ethnography is poised to do just that. Aphonic Ethnography zeros in on the subtext, on the implicit, on the unspeakable—and then seeks to make the hidden plain.

Further, during the entire conversation the teen’s affect is flat, his prosody and inflections steady. At no point does his countenance betray any degree of distress, let alone terror. The face as carapace must remain intact. Yet this child, like many of the boys, typically neither initiates nor outwardly invites dialogue. As per applied ethnopoetics, his repetitions are for emphasis, not detail; they are an insistence, an encoded emergency update. Rightly understood, then, his articulations signal heightened anguish and distress. Stalled in a semantic holding pattern, he can hover above the foreboding wreckage but he cannot land, as the sanctity of silence—at least at some level—always must be maintained.

Borrowed Chords: Ventriloquizations as Interwoven Levity and Power Plays

By assuming an alter ego or an alternate persona, children can try on different characters and experiment in ways which, while embodying their own identity, would not be possible. By incorporating elements of humor and performativity, children channel their creativity into ventriloquizations that afford them an affective amplitude which otherwise would be conventionally absent from the array of masculinities availed to them on a daily basis. Further, it is within the school context that marginalized students
frequently adopt the role of entertainer or minstrel as a coping mechanism. Yet this skill set also can be used as a vehicle through which they address serious issues in a humorous vein. How, then, are humorous ventriloquizations used to communicate serious concerns—concerns which students may not be comfortable conveying directly in their normal register—more safely?

The modality of ventriloquization, then, appears to be infinitely safer—and more accessible to children—than using their own voice. For example, even when, upon being prompted with a question, a child declines to comment in his own voice about a given topic, moments later he may appropriate another’s voice in order to engage the same question which, just moments prior, he elided answering. As exemplified in the examples below, when utilizing non-mass mediated ventriloquizations, of particular interest is that the boys most often choose to ventriloquize the reprimanding voice of an older female (and arguably rather eccentric) authority figure. For mass mediated ventriloquizations, however, they elect the words of men—not famous athletes (as might be more common stateside), but specifically men from the music industry of reguetón (those often indexing a form of protest masculinity or hyper-canalized masculinity).

Opening Spaces for Narrative to Appear:
A Critique of Parenting Patterns in Pantomime

Akin to play therapy where psychologists observe the roles a child bestows on particular dolls and how that child acts out scenarios with those dolls, traumatized students sometimes create their own interpersonal biomes with adults they trust. One child, through her anthropomorphism of my right hand, reenacted lengthy dialogues of

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296 Protest masculinity is a form of masculinity wherein a lack of confidence is compensated for through hyperbolically belligerent behavior, intended as a display of strength (see Connell 2006).
the sort that one imagines might occur within her home. In this case, her waging finger
was the maternal figure, while my hand was her as the child. This psychic distance
provides insulation from the injuries of the previously lived events, allowing a
spontaneous catharsis to occur. In this instance, the child utilized these transactions to
replay unpredictable or confusing discipline patterns which she experiences or witnesses
from caretakers. Her simultaneous monitoring of my reaction indicates that, at some
level, she is seeking a response on my part as well.

It is worth noting, as well, that this is a transactional ventriloquization: my hand is
recruited as a character in the unfolding tale: mute, passive, essentially inert. It seems that
here the child uses my hand as a sign post to point to herself. What agency does a child
possess in a household where she is overpowered by adults? Herein, a child who
normally bathes in long extended cavernous silences becomes at once animated, electric
and effusive in her expression. The inhibitions evaporate. Now she can recede into the
backstage of the production and avoid the direct spotlight, or gaze. In her staging of a role
reversal of what appear to be the power brokers of her household with herself, she
extemporaneously creates a space wherein she is free from the constraints of enacting
only her own role and can try on the “shoes” of another. Insodoing, she displays an
almost sordid delight in executing punishments against herself—through the
representational object of my defenseless hand.

In as far as I was able, I sought to use these “light-hearted’ conversations as a way
to address my concerns with regard to the children’s involvement in illicit activities (e.g.,
the theft of prize fighting roosters), revisiting with them the dangers inherent in such
potentially fatal habits. Their own fantastical storytelling, then, became the conduit
through which discussion could begin on subjects which conventionally would be veiled in aphonicity due to their illegal nature. Through the implementation of multiple forms of variant silencing, the storyteller sin qua non, Dario, is enabled to share his real life events in a format such that his revelation catalyzes an opportunity for him (and his listening peer group) to process a bit more critically—albeit informally—the potentially grave implications of such an adrenaline-inducing pastime.

Polletta (2012:239) reminds us that “stories are both normative (they make a point) and allusive (the point they make is rarely obvious).” Through Dario’s fanciful accounts of his adventures, he provides a glimpse into one of multiple life-threatening activities in which the post-schooled children often participate. Hence, what commences as an entertaining—albeit confessional—tale becomes, through collaborative narration, a platform for serious reflection and an opportunity to receive a bit of guidance and nurture from an outsider (myself). These conversations can only happen in contexts where the everyday demand for an affective flatline is absent. Why? Because the context is a private as opposed to a public space: wherein all present feel safe to express themselves.

Further in-depth study on this topic could include exploration of the following: What are the ways in which shifts in footing between the children’s own voices and their ventriloquized voice become demarcated? What semantic patterns or tipping points might be identifiable therein? What purposes might such shifts serve? How does this codeswitching vis-à-vis performativity inject a metanarrative into the discourse? How

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297 Were I not there, I would not label this genre of storytelling as “confessional.” My presence makes it confessional, as would the presence of any elder (such as grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, mothers, etc.) who opposes the children’s participation in potentially dangerous activities.
does the children’s collaborative narrativizing furnish us with a subtext of entrees through which they safely can come out of hiding? Why are the voices they elect to utilize consistently those of female authority figures? Are male authority figures less vocal in their administration of authority or are there simply less men in the ecological spheres of such children? Might specific insights be wrought from a comparative assessment of tonalities? How does discourse analysis presently account for affect and what are the ways in which such accounting could be improved or standardized?

The Ventriloquization of Mass Mediated Personas: Masculine Constructs and Emblems of Identity from Puerto Rican Reggaetón

Two Emblems of “Reggaetón” Identity

Reggaetón lays claim to the urban landscape as its territory. Dinzey-Flores (2008:48) expounds this topography as being a “highly novel, ultramasculine, violently imagined, racially qualified and typically antipodal space of redemption and contamination, utopia and dystopia, heaven and hell.” Two reggaetóneros, Arcangel and Coscuella, both have widely circulating emblems of personhood. An example of two decontextualizable emblems of Puerto Rican reggaetón identity which the boys in Alelí utilize are the following: the expressions “na nau,” and “prrrra.”

Outlets for identity formation have often been aligned with or attributed to musical subcultures, and the history, representations, and implications of reggaetón exemplify this complicated relationship. Although Panama and Puerto Rico come to mind as the respective birthplace and incubator of reggaetón, in reality this musical genre defies a tidy, linear trajectory. In fact, reggaetón might be conceived of most accurately as a “trans-Caribbean genre whose history and aesthetics do(es) not abide by nation and language as chief organizing principles” (Rivera, Marshall, & Hernandez 2009).
Masculinity is often "structured on the on the basis of asymmetrical relationships between genders...and articulated in shows of strength and games of power" (Ramírez 1999). Within the genre of reggaetón, and even more specifically "tiraera" (lyrical battling), originating in Puerto Rico, how do the expectations and enactments of masculinity impact the potentialities of gender construction in Latino youth? What might be the constraints and affordances of such constructions? And how does the exportation and reproduction of this genre contribute to reggaetón’s particular style of masculinity? Given the “complex and multidirectional circuitry of musical production and dissemination” of reggaetón, its global impact should not be underestimated (Rivera, Marshall, & Hernandez 2009). What are the implications of the various portrayals of masculinity in reggaetón for the socialization of youth Islandwide?

Recontextualization of Emblems

According to Agha (2007:235), an emblem is “a thing to which a social persona is attached;” the three elements that are involved in an emblem, then, are, “a perceivable thing, or diacritic, a social persona, [and] someone for whom it is an emblem.” Cultural emblems circulate widely through mass media. We can understand what emblems mean culturally by how they get re-embedded. The social import of these emblems is that by carrying these reggaetón personas, they are doing interactional work as they get recontextualized. Certainly, when they get recontextualized, they are not exact replicas. How might they be recontextualized in subsequent performance? How might they be taken up with a new twist? With regard to their referential and non-referential indexicality, how closely do the recontextualized emblems reflect what they originally indexed? Do the rigid class tensions and cleavages indexed by ¡Prrrrra! on the Island get
carried along as part of their emblems’ history as they circulate into the diaspora and beyond? This does not appear to be the case. The caustic class polemized entailments of ¡Prrrrra! seem to be left behind along with other localized aspersions such as “cafre” and “cejicorta’o.” Which “histories” accompany the emblems in the transformation and which are jettisoned? These are questions I ask as I trace these semiotic chains.

Process of Recontextualization

Given that decontextualization and recontextualization are “transformational,” Bauman and Briggs (1990:75) assert that it can be helpful to “determine what the recontextualized [emblem] brings with it from its earlier context(s), and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered.” As we examine the recontextualizations of these emblems some of these shifts are more subtle than others.

We want to ask how emblems such as these are embedded in new contexts, and how they function differently across varied contexts. What is the new work they are now doing? How are they read differently? Furthermore, how these two emblems get recirculated in other communities. And not unlike when hardcore urban hip-hop appears in exurbia, how are the emblems bleached of what they originally indexed? Are these emblems still maintaining their role as resources for social identity? Clearly, they stay alive as cultural emblems because people keep taking them up.

¡Prrrrra!

Perhaps it is not surprising that on an island where occasions of automatic gunfire historically have served a spectrum of purposes beyond that of assault, the sound and

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298 Street, low-class.
299 Literally, “cut eyebrow,” a physiological marker of aficionados the reggaetón genre
300 See Chapter 5.
accompanying gesture of machine gun artillery have made their way onto the musical landscape. When the emblem of gunfire within musical genres got recontextualized in Puerto Rico the “rr” became onomatopoeic. The requisite trilling in the pronunciation of “Prrrrra” contributes to the distinct Latinization of this version of (gunfire)—as opposed to, for example, the Jamaican version “pram.” This Spanish extended “rr,” then, exists as an emblem within an emblem. Both, however, are emblematic of the iconic sound of an automatic weapon. This sound, “Prrrrra!” also invokes the visual images which accompany it.301

When embroiled in social media feuds, some alelianos use written menacing threats to their adversaries, punctuating their warnings with a recontextualization of “Prrrrra!”—one version, of many (¡prrrrrum!, plaka plaka, etc.), which indexes automatic gunfire used most notably in his music by the reggaetón artist Arcangel. The various capacities and venues in which this emblem gets “taken up” demonstrate how widespread its use has become. Young men on social media use the phrase, more often than not as an exclamation point. That is to say, for emphasis. It most often indexes “coolness,” victory, or dominance, and potency—as well as violence.

The emblem ¡Prrrrrrra! is continually being recycled, recontextualized and reembedded in transnational media discourses. While there were some exceptions, arguably, the transnational, mass-mediated version of Prrrra!’s association with artillery

301 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsEgt_Ga8Dg&NR=1 (3:52-59)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YePXZiOX_1Q (3:19-3:25)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bJ6mV4z9k&feature=related (4:02-4:19)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3ZGry0x0tw (57-1:06)
http://www.youtube.com/user/arcangeloofficialtube?blend=1&ob=4&ip=0 (0:10-0:30)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPKlsKHD8_w&feature=fvw (32-40 Prrrrra!!!
once it leaves the Island context is likely faint at best. Presently on social media in Puerto Rico, the ¡Prrra! emblem is being replaced by the cartoon icon of a handgun. This indicates that, at least on the Island, the use of this emblem is less diluted and very often is indexing actual artillery use.

Another trend I note is the children adopt mass mediated identities in order to deflect serious conversation. The 2009 release of Cosculluela’s song, “Na Nau,” introduces a new way of saying “no.” This version of “no” is considered non-standard Spanish, akin perhaps to something like “Aiiiiight” in African American Vernacular English. Certainly, we might imagine that the then Governor Fortuño was not answering questions in this register. But the same cannot be said for local students, who have indeed taken up the recontextualization of this mass-mediated version of “no,” and are using it in their everyday speech and interactions. Bakhtin asserts that, “Our mouths are filled with the words of others…” (1986:89). In accordance with Silverstein and Urban (1996), we can recognize that any media moment is part of a speech chain… that no stretch of discourse flies un-tethered to those which precede it and those which it follows. Unequivocally, “performance potentiates decontextualization” (Bauman & Briggs 1990:73) and it is “[t]he performance forms of a society” Bauman emphasizes [which] “tend to be among the most markedly entextualized, memorable, and repeatable forms of discourse in its communicative economy” (Bauman in Silverstein & Urban, 1996:301).

According to Bauman, the processes of decontextualizing and recontextualizing is “extracting ready-made discourse from one context and fitting it into another. Students can deftly utilize emblem as a clever equivocations in order to take control of

302 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERku4czYWZk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERku4czYWZk) (0:33-1:10)
interactions. For example, when pressed to acknowledge past events which they find too embarrassing to recount, they may take refuge in performativity. Wrenching the spotlight from the content of the personal stories, they shift it onto their dramatic adoption of a mass-mediated persona, rescuing themselves through the utilization of a reguetonero’s trademark emblem.

**Implications**

Like many other musical genres, Reggaetón can be viewed as a pastiche (borrowed from other sources) art form, and therefore a particularly effective way to spread culture. Just as no word is “virginal,” (Bakhtin 1981:278) but derived, so too these two emblems do not locate their point of origin in these two artists—the semiotics trace from other shores—literally. There exists seemingly infinite regress (Bauman and Briggs 1990:68), as evidenced by traveling westward across the Antilles to Jamaica where the use of artillery emblems in dancehall preceded that of Reggaetón. As Cooper (1994:434-5) asserts, “...in many instances gunfire is meant to be purely symbolic. In Jamaican dancehalls literal gunfire has, in the past, been used as a symbolic salute to the verbal skill of the heroic DJ/singer.” Evidence of this style of artillery discharge is seen clearly in a *tiraera* (lyrical battling) of Arcangel targeting Polaco: the eruption of gunfire, not unlike a laugh track, incites vigorous applause and heightened emotion in the audience.

Furthermore, Cooper elucidates that “[t]he expression “pram, pram!” a verbal rendering of simulated gunshots, becomes a generic sign of approval of verbal skill *beyond* the domain of the dancehall” (1994:435). In an endnote she shares that a student reported that

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303 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIfoZUXaIjQ&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIfoZUXaIjQ&feature=related) (1:09-1:17)
in an Easter Sunday sermon a preacher invoked divine gunshots: ‘Jesus Christ is risen, pram pram!’” (1994:446).

There is no singular message conveyed by an emblem such as “¡Prrra!” What has its origins in an indexing of automatic gunfire does not axiomatically nor incontrovertibly result in the glorification of violence. Rather, such an emblem often may get generalized into indexing a form of *latinidad*, a version of masculinity, an exhibition of potency, or simply a celebratory stance—where interlocutors may not even be associating it with Reggaetón or a vocal artist at all. There are infinite ways in which people decontextualize and recontextualize emblems from popular culture. Emblems such as the two discussed here can take on a life of their own. Through analysis of such emblems, we can trace the effects of a semiotic chain and better understand how and why children use mass mediated emblems as part of their linguistic repertoires.

In this chapter, by way of introducing the methodology of Aphonic Ethnography, the functionality of silence is explored along with a panoply of ways in which youth engage their surroundings in not so spontaneous but inventive manners. Silence can be conceived as a garment as well, cloaking and covering. A protection from inquiry, from those towards whom unnecessary release of intel may prove deleterious or even fatal.
Aphonic Interlude VII: The Sufficiency of Mutual Gaze Transaction

I arrive parched from organizing games at la Flamboyan’s noonday recess; Castiel calls down for the Mayor to get me a bottled water. Midstride below, the Mayor changes direction and yells, “Nuni, ¡un agua!” Almost instantaneously a blue bucket attached to a clothesline is tossed over a third floor balcony of the adjacent building. The Mayor deposits a dollar bill, the blue vessel shuttles upward, tips over the balcony railing, and then descends just moments later with an ice cold water inside. In Alelí buckets deliver anything from diabetes medicine and insulin syringes to plates of cooked food, from illicit narcotics to packs of candy. Often they are key vehicles of monetary exchange, expediting what would be a more onerous process of using the stairs. More agile youth, however, find greater efficacy in scaling the buildings from the outside, alternately lifting or dropping themselves from one encased porch to the next, skimming the concrete with their torsos—the noiseless speed with which they scale and descend invoking astonished stares from outsiders.

Back inside minutes later, the Mayor is preparing to go out. The mirror his biggest critic, he checks under his arms for residue, does a few 80s aftershave commercial slaps to the sides of his face, and then presses his shoulder blades back. He proceeds to dart around the house brushing his hair while a stationary Castiel explains, in significant detail, a situation which requires them to make a decision for the upcoming week. Though occupied, the Mayor listens closely, throwing Castiel occasional eye contact. Then as he is about to leave, he pauses in the doorway for the summation. Upon entertaining Castiel’s concluding remarks, he turns and leaves.
As the door slams behind him, I conjecture, “Let me guess—his answer was: Not a yes, nor a no. But rather that he doesn’t have strong feelings, and it’s fine if you decide for both of you depending on what your preference happens to be… How’d I do?”

With a laugh Castiel agrees, “Así mismo es,” before rolling his eyes.

Later that afternoon the Mayor collapses. Loses consciousness and strikes his head, his back on the concrete. Etiology unknown. Now I am making him stand under the living room light fixture to examine his pupils; he tells me mine are overly dilated. “It’s congenital; they always are,” I return. Since I can’t make out any problems and he refuses to have labs done, I thank the nurse on the other end of my phone for her time and, sighing, hang up.

Returning to the kitchen, the Mayor holds the Frisbee sized caldero a few inches below his nose and concludes that it still smells smoky. Although he’s added spiral after spiral of Vidalia onion to eliminate the odor and salvage the meal, he remains unconvinced. Sipping some clay colored caldo from a cooking spoon, he declares, “This isn’t right,” and pulls his face into an up-do of disgust. “Taste this,” he extends the next spoonful to me. Leaning forward to try it, I offer, “Not too off.” But we are interrupted: from the driveway below, the neighborhood children are petitioning for an audience with the Mayor. Casting his gastronomic endeavors aside at once, he dips onto his balcony to receive them. Una curita, they announce. Someone—it’s not clear who—needs a Band-Aid.

Dinner is silent; everyone enrobed in their respective thoughts. The Mayor’s plate holds the equivalent of four cups of rice. No room for anything else, yet he fits corned

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304 Yup.
beef hash and beans on top while apologetically acknowledging the absence of avocado. Due to a childhood marbled with food insecurity, the Mayor adopted the custom of eating rapidly, which he retains to this day. “You have to eat very fast or else you will feel full and be unable to eat as much,” he explains. “The idea is to ingest as much as possible, as quickly as possible before your body can realize the great volume which it has received and reject it.”

Once finished, his jaw remains as taut as a new drumhead: clenching. He wears his tenseness like a warning. Mute, mute, mute. Tonight holds a twelve hour shift which must be worked alone—Castiel is not well. Gripping his abdomen, Castiel rocks in his chair, articulating the fear that he will not be able to keep down even those few spoonfuls he attempted. When he declines my second offer to take him to the hospital, I ask him to bundle up, and we send him back to bed. Because of the current epidemic, we think it is influenza. We learn later that, in fact, it is pneumonia.

From the dining room table, the Mayor waves two dollars in the air, requesting that his neighbor Nando haul the 35 gallon trashcan down the stairs. For no other reason than that we were raised to make ourselves useful—in short, to serve—I interject and offer to do it instead. Without even turning his head towards me, the Mayor creases his forehead briefly, declining. He offers no further elucidation. Accordingly, Nando, who wears a trademark peseta flat against the inside of his ear, attaches a cord from his belt to the trashcan’s handle and begins the cumbersome trek down to the dumpster. It is not clear why my participation is disallowed—whether it is due to rigid ideologies vis-à-vis class or whether it is concerns as to my strength. Likely a conflation of both.
But in this instance, the Mayor’s operationalization of what is perhaps the most common variegated silence communitywide, elaboration eschewal, stands as a reminder that Alelí is not a democracy. There is never much space (nor time) allotted for disagreement. As such, everyday disagreement is conveyed as aphonically and expeditiously as possible.\(^{305}\) Simply by staring at me and widening his eyes, the Mayor signals that I am to reconsider.\(^{306}\) In such moments, he does not break his gaze until I become “more reasonable.” There is no discussion. When he warns me not to leave my wallet unattended in the presence of another cousin, any subsequent objections on my part are met with a stalwart case of “ethnographer deafness.”

A few weeks later, once Castiel is better, we grab lunch in between errands. Despite that it comes with far more than the three of us could reasonably need, Kentucky’s “family meal” is what we order. It’s the Mayor’s treat. No one has said as much, but when I offer to pick up the tab,\(^{307}\) he turns his face away from me a full 180 degrees. And keeps it there. In aphonic punctuation. Returning to the table I notice that beyond a cornucopia of sides, we have a few padrinos\(^{308}\) as well as cups for fountain soda, and two (not the allotted one) Pepperidge Farm cakes. Before we leave, the Mayor rises to go warm up the SUV and reminds Castiel to get the third Pepperidge Farm cake on his way out. Removing the straw from his mouth, Castiel places his cup on the table and shrugs off what might be discomfort. “It’s a big corporation,” he appends—perhaps to himself, perhaps to me. Perhaps to no one in particular.

\(^{305}\) Not just disagreement, but many emotional subjects are broached simply through mutual gaze transaction. See Chapter 10 for an aphonic transaction of forgiveness.

\(^{306}\) Marshall Islanders, I’m told, convey disagreement by raising their eyebrows as they smile.

\(^{307}\) This was an amateur’s mistake—one I should not have made after so many years of embeddedness. It was the Mayor’s idea to get lunch and it was the Mayor who transported me there. \textit{Quien invita paga}. He who invites pays. This is true throughout the Island: here there is no last minute scramble to fight over who can pay the bill first.

\(^{308}\) 2 liter soda bottles
Aperture of Phonicity II: Seamless Departures

Schooling as Stagnation

“Chaco” Vargas Vidot
Community Activist

Melquisedec
Trafficker

Misí Magda
Elementary Teacher

If they leave school, mamí doesn’t do anything, neither does pops. So the kids, [nobody] puts the brakes on them. The State cannot make itself in charge of everyone. The State is there to do some things and the parents have to do others.

They leave and no one cares that they leave.

The academic curriculum is not one designed to retain a student in the school, I don’t believe it is made to retain anyone in the school, no one. What I utilize day to day in my classroom is not what they tell me that I have to use. Right now the Department of Education could come in tomorrow and with certainty they will kick me out of the school because I obey practically nothing. I use my common sense, my intuition, my love for the children, and my knowledge that I have developed about each individual student’s particular needs.

What happens today is that the kids have no one to direct them. If a young drug slinger were a son of mine if he lived under my roof he would not be selling there on the point. Why? Because I’m going to demand that he be responsible: “You want a privilege? You want to buy this
that and the next thing? Well then, you have to meet these three goals that I set for you. *Es un trato.* The kids of today no one gives them any incentives.

Desertion is a military term, and the most dirty of all; it implies you will lose your life for your betrayal: they kill you if you desert in the army, it is a death sentence. [Yet] the one who has deserted is the school. If the child abandons the school it is because he decided that the school doesn’t work for him.

Sometimes I have an overwhelming feeling of impotence because I say to myself, my God, there’s so much beauty, so much beauty that surrounds us in the universe, everything that I myself enjoy but then I feel impotent I say, *My God, how is it that my students do not appreciate that beauty?* And truthfully, at times it has even made me want to weep because the marvels of the planets, of the universe. And yet there’s no motivation, nothing that [seems to] move them.

Those [children] that we had here had the same symptoms of PTSD as the children with whom I worked in Nicaragua after the war. The exact same symptoms.

The children who walk around the classrooms, who stand up, who move around—the answer always is you have to medicate

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309 In the metro area of San Juan
them or send them to special education. But watch carefully, learn. Be observant: perhaps what you have is a child who needs to be challenged, who needs different things in life because that child looks into the future and he can’t endure staying seated at a desk and you have to give him a break so that he can move his body.

The Island has been wrecked
And in that I include myself
And in that I include myself
And in that I include myself

The children have no desire
to live past 25
and to die through violence
implies honor
If I die for this point,
I have died well and that reveals
the society stopped trusting in that sector
it took away their reason to live,
the school lost any reason to teach,
the children lost any reason to attend.

If you don’t have family support, you wake up in the morning and it’s like nothing just another day. There is no one there to ask God’s blessing upon you, no one who says Get over here and give me a kiss!
then, understand, you don’t have those fundamental things that in all likelihood another child in a household with different circumstances does have. You are not going to finish school.
The State doesn’t respect you, the community doesn’t respect you, the parents don’t respect you. Teachers [here] we are orphans, orphans. The State abandoned us. If those at the top do not respect us, neither will the people. And part of maintaining poverty—[the government housing residents] will always be poor because the system wants them to stay poor—is keeping them ignorant. In other words, school is a load of crap.

Crime does not begin on the drug point, rather that is where it is expressed. Crime begins in the withheld hug, in the ignored crib, in the unread book, in the silence of the hearts. It is a complex phenomenon because it takes a photograph of our insides. Crime is the terminal effect of a wound that never has healed.

Our children are not motivated and so the great question we teachers have is: How are we going to motivate children who have not received stimuli? Or the correct stimuli because they [do] have stimuli, but many are quite ugly.

I asked myself what sustained me and it was the hugs you understand the school that interested me to feel every day that I could arrive and for 6 or 7 hours I was away from the screaming of my house I was going to be at a place where I felt that I was important
you understand
I had a book; I had something
to do
every child looks
for validation;
the drug point
validates our children

What’s going to be the easiest
thing for you? The drug point. Expose
your life. The price that you will pay
on a point selling drugs? Your life.
Your life. And it’s your life that’s right there.
[It’s your only resource]. So the mentality
of the young men, they toss
good people to the side and the bad person
is the one they greet, the one
they support—they wash my car. They are on alert
as to how they can make money
how to get money

Some teachers say
well this is just
how it is here. But
I will never become used to this.
Never. I refuse.
I refuse.
CHAPTER 8 Teaching through the Trauma in Puerto Rico’s Public Schools

How Silence, Trauma, (In)security, and Faith Intertwine

Education makes us nonconformist, agitated and insubordinate before the retrograde and anti-liberal forces which grow more [and more] from one day to the next in this country.
—Marxuach 2013 (translated)

I didn’t call him a “m**ón,” I called him a “m**a’ó!”
—an elementary school student protesting an administrator’s rebuke

Penetrating Walls/ Penetrando paredes

I had only been in the community a few years when a fourth grader brought two guns to school; the student’s teacher contacted me, and I’d arrived as swiftly as I could. The teachers were fed up; police had been called, the regular circus ensued. I arrive only to intercept another grievance: Misi Raquel recounts to me:

I sat with him one-on-one and explained everything [about the in-class assignment] and then asked him, ‘Do you understand?’ and he said nothing. I asked him again and again—multiple times, but he continued to say nothing. Nothing! Not a yes. Not a no. Nothing. He just looked at me, completely expressionless.

Then, with a rather paradoxical loss for words, she throws her hands up in exasperation, turns on her heel, and strides away from me.

Speak with Discretion: Family Setting
Sign at Pionono II, a Seaside Kiosk and Bar, Barceloneta
Just as in other places in Latin America, narco-trafficking and its concurrent violence in Puerto Rico are often heavily concentrated in socioeconomically marginalized communities and disproportionally effect children in the public schools. This chapter specifically addresses how the insecurity inherent in such narco-dominated settings both directly and indirectly impacts the public school environment for staff, students, and their respective families and examines ways in which schools may interrupt or, alternately, perpetuate the continuum of violence—along with its customary companion trauma. At times classes are suspended and schools closed altogether for federal and state operatives targeting a given community’s illicit enterprises. Armed with dozens of arrest warrants for narcotics and arms trafficking, federal agents conduct sweeps which catalyze an instantaneous and community wide realignment of kinship structures, thereby leaving significant upheaval in their wake; the idea of aftercare appears entirely absent from the State’s imaginary.

Further, this chapter explores the paradoxical role of silence, which can serve both to create a sense of security and also to undermine the actual preservation of security. Together, such considerations shed light on mechanisms utilized by teachers to address the daily repercussions of emotional trauma in the classroom and how, in turn, we might begin to imagine schools as more effectives sites of informal trauma care, as a refuge for psychological triage, as loci wherein the very design and structure of the curriculum is crafted to illuminate the breadth and scope of students’ immediate reality. In a parallel manner, I consider how staff members fight against the personal toll community trauma takes on their own lives and those intersections they share with students wherein mutual
healing could—and sometimes does—occur. That is to say, how might the resilience spawned by the adults’ trials serve to undergird the students’ present experiences?

It is critical to inquire as to the reason this 4th grade gunslinger is persistently reticent with Misi Raquel. Sometimes silence is the only weapon left in the arsenal—and for those students whose families are involved in narcotics or arms trafficking, it is even more appealing. During my preliminary research it became clear that the attention yanking clamor of schoolyard fistfights easily overshadowed the more frequent yet lower decibel affective collisions in which already alienated students were regularly being further marginalized. An interactional pattern emerged: administrators and teachers were routinely misrecognizing students’ trauma responses (most often manifested through the production of silence) as defiance or as decisive disengagement and then responding punitively.

Almost four years later I ask Misi Raquel to reflect upon her interactions with the aforementioned child:

You never knew if he was assimilating what you were saying to him, if he was processing it, or if it mattered a little bit to him, if it didn’t matter at all, or if it mattered a lot because he always wore a poker face, with no type of expression, with no type of emotion...and although it was difficult, I didn’t stop talking to him. Yet it never ceased to be frustrating since you are talking to a wall because he’s not answering you...But I know he’s not a wall, he’s a human being who’s listening...  

Condemning a child’s silence is counterintuitive when so often it is their very silence, ese mismo hermetismo, which has proven critical to their survival. They have learned early that, “the best word is the one that goes unsaid.” Further, if one does speak unwisely, it

310 Fieldnotes, 5.2014.
311 That very same hermeticism
312 “La mejor palabra es la que no se dice.”
is widely understood that: “O te matan o te matan” (Either they kill you or they kill you).
Recently a child playing a cellphone video game was standing on his balcony when a murder took place. Fearful that he may have video recorded the incident, the *gatilleros* involved interrogated the child mercilessly. His life was spared. Yet the incident serves as a sobering reminder that, as Taussig (1992:34) so warily reminds us, “in the state of emergency which is not the exception but the rule, *every possibility is a fact*” (emphasis added).

As such, it is not surprising that teachers venture into the community only quite selectively, if at all. “I entered Alelí one sole time,” one teacher recalls, holding her index finger high in the air, “and I will never enter again.” She proceeds to recount how one day she entered in order to obtain a parent’s signature for a form that was due. But when she drove in to find the apartment she ended up in a dead-end. “It’s like a labyrinth in there. If you don’t know where you are going, you will get very confused.” She parked and called the mother to come down to her car. While she waited in the car a young man on a bicycle approached and began riding in tight circles around her car. Five times, six times. She started to panic and called the mother, asking her to hurry. When the mother arrived, the young man witnessed their interaction and realized that she was a person of “*confianza,*” so went back to his business, grabbing a bag of drugs out of a nearby car. For her this transition into “accepted outsider” mode was even more distressing: she feared the implications for witnessing anything illicit. Eyebrows aloft, she states that nothing could make her return there.
Education as Afterthought: Academics amidst an Exodus

Just prior to opening of the academic year 2014-2015, with more than a quarter of classroom space sitting empty across the Island’s 1,460 remaining public schools, the Secretary of Education, Rafael Román, announces in that they would be closing 100 schools—an move predicted to save the district an expenditure of 27 million. The declining student population is mostly due to 450,000 Islanders having departed for the contiguous United States in the past decade alone. While in 2013 the matriculation was 423,000 (159,000 of whom are purportedly special education students), the projected enrollment for 2020 is just 317,000. By 2050 it is projected that only three million residents will remain on the Island.

Concurso: Buscando la forma/Contest: Looking for a Way (Suprascript: Cristian [is] gay)

313 Ultimately only 76 were closed in the 2014-2015 academic year.
When the academic year of 2015-2016 arrives, the situation is increasingly bleak: 59 more schools have been closed (for a total of 135 and leaving just 1,330 open) (Lopéz and Caquías 2015), the student population has decreased by 31,132—an 8% decrease from May 2015 (Ruiz Kuilan 2015), and 359 of the schools are affected by the Island’s rationing of water due to severe drought. One direct implication of the lack of water is that schools will have to operate according to an abbreviated schedule: only Monday through Thursday and instead of 8am - 6pm. Hence, the hours of the school day are cut in half to 8-1:15pm (Lopéz and Caquías 2015). To compound matters, there are 700 teaching positions which remain unfilled. It is understood colloquially that the endless bureaucratic red tape which leads to the annual “delay” in hiring is intentional, that the vacancies represent salaries which go unpaid and, in the meantime, such resources can be diverted toward other ends. Such blatant abdication occurs with impunity year after year. Indeed, what can be “accidental” about a phenomenon which occurs chronically at the onset of every academic year? Yet this abdication of responsibility for delivering quality consistent education to our youngest citizens appears to carry no legal ramifications.

314 After school tutoring, or “tutoría,” traditionally runs from 3-6 pm. Funds for this program, however, were subsequently cut and the schools have not been able to offer it for the past two years. This presents a problem particularly for those students who prefer to stay on school grounds instead of returning home.
Former School Courtyard
Former Classrooms
Variegated Versions of Security: ¿Mejor tapados por las paredes o por los padres?315

How security is understood within our community varies depending on whether you talk with school staff or a community member. Rymes (2003:124) asserts that “utterances are indexical…their meaning…is tied to context.” In a video seeking to highlight the strengths of one of the Island’s narcotics war battered housing projects, a young community leader, Diego, finds himself forced to restructure the traditional definition of peace. In so doing, he indexes the various connotations or expectations it carries amidst different social groups:

I grew up surrounded by a lot of love—and that’s something that, perhaps could appear difficult for people who aren’t from here to believe.

I can say that I had an upbringing filled with love, filled with peace—that is to say—peace (gestures quotation marks) in the sense that, that, that

315 Better Protected from Concrete Walls or from Parents?
[I was] surrounded by family, surrounded by people who loved me, surrounded by people whom I loved. And for me, [that’s] peace: the people who surround you. My environment was very… peaceful.\(^{316}\)

Merritt (1994) argues that repetition “can always be seen as a response to a situational demand, thereby assuming a situational function” (27). Here, the repetitions of Diego seem to reveal that he encounters himself in a rather delicate position. Often indicative of discomfort, these repetitions reveal a self-monitoring vigilance on the part of the speaker to articulate a message that will be well received by both insiders and outsiders. Many of the “immediate repetitions” (i.e., when a unit is uttered and then immediately uttered again—as compared to “displaced repetitions” which usually serve the purpose of “textual cohesion” (Johnstone 1994:14)) signal that what will be forthcoming is highly significant, whether because 1) it’s difficult emotionally to express or 2) it’s difficult for the speaker to feel assured that the audience will understand the high degree to which what he/she is saying is true. Additionally, as Johnstone (1994:7) points out, “When you’re thinking of something to say, you repeat yourself…[r]epetition always gives you more time in conversation, whether that’s the intent or not, and it fills space in many cases.” Likewise, repetition can be used as a way of “forestalling events or situations that people are afraid of, like silence or ambiguity or chaos or sense of formlessness. Repetition can be a very basic ordering principle that can be reassuring” (Johnstone 1994:10).

His repeated use of “surrounded” implies that security or stability and peace reside in being in the presence of loved ones. At no point does he negate the reality of the location’s inherent danger (given that it is a narcotics distribution hub). Here, the

\(^{316}\) See Appendix D for more detailed linguistic analysis.
discourse marker “o sea” (or “that is to say”) serves as a hinge in the narrative. One can literally see Diego catching himself mid-sentence to qualify his statement, pausing and then repeating “peace” but gesturing with his fingers that he means peace “entre comillas” (in quotation marks). A substantial concession on his part. When Diego uses this phrase “o sea” to qualify his statement about his peaceful upbringing, it is evidence of self-repair through self-monitoring. This hesitation highlights a palpable awareness of having a dual audience (an acknowledgement that no outsider would believe he was raised in peaceful surroundings), and his desire to address both audiences with authenticity and integrity. He is filtering his words simultaneously through both the worldview of those inside the community and those outside the community. While he is trying to persuade outsiders to reconsider their assessment of the community, he also appears cognizant of the fact that his friends and family will not look kindly upon any kowtowing to “the powers that be.” He speaks, then, in a manner which esteems, honors and brings dignity to “his people” and to challenge the deeply held prejudices of the Island towards his community.

I highlight this clip in order to introduce the way in which those in the school versus those in the community reconceptualize conventional notions of security—as emic and etic notions vary considerably. When there’s a shooting, customarily the parents immediately come to pick up their children at the school. Yet for some teachers this custom is counterintuitive:

They do it for reasons of security, right? And where was the shooting? It was right there where they are going to pass when they come for the children. Do they come by car? No, they come on foot. They walk right alongside where the shooting occurred and then return the same way with their children. How is that security when I have my children there? How? I believe that where the children are safe is in the school, otherwise they’re just exposing themselves [to more violence]. The
parents understand that to be protection, but when you think rationally about the situation, it shows you the lack of structure that they have… I don’t know what their definition of security is; I haven’t been able to understand it. The dead person is already dead, and if it’s not one of my family members, I’d let my child finish their classes. Then at the end of the school day, I’d come get them and return home with them by another route.317

A teacher who had been raised in the community clarifies the parents’ stance, however, by explaining that security is found in being in each other’s presence, being surrounded by loved ones. Her elaboration is akin to how Diego understands security as a fluid, organic, and most importantly, a *relational* entity. When I verify with the former *aleliana* that the students’ parents conceptualize security as being present with their child, her response is swift and adamant, “Of course that is what security is! It is protection, protection. To ensure nothing happens to them!” “But,” I challenge her, “Is there no trust that the teachers will protect them?” She shakes her head, “There really isn’t, there really isn’t. We [as teachers] are not prepared in the event of a gunfight erupting on school property.”318

The parents here, their reasoning is that even if there are bullets flying in all directions, [the parent] is going to go out into the street, walk over here to the school and pass by the same place where the violence is occurring and expose [themselves to it] because many times, well, one is not thinking in the moment, so one is not reacting the right way. That can happen. But it’s also likely that they are going crazy calling [the school] while they are waiting… Because it’s not the mere fact that the parents are unaware or reckless but that they are overprotective of their children. And being overprotective, they prefer to expose their own lives instead of the lives of their children. And for me also, for me also [security is found through being alongside my children]. In my case, were you to ask me as an employee of our country’s public school system: If shots are fired close to the school of my sons? I would leave the assistant in charge of my students, request authorization to leave school grounds, and go to my sons’ school to see that they are okay.319

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317 Interview, 5.2014.
318 Interview, 5.2014.
319 Interview, 5.2014.
Further, she shares that when it comes to a gunfight in the community, the parents don’t trust the teachers to keep their children safe—largely because parents perceive the school grounds as a perfect hiding place or refuge for an assassin on the run.

Elaborating further, she admits that parents do not have confidence in the teachers, reiterating, “We are not prepared. The schools in Puerto Rico are not prepared for when a shooting occurs, wherein we can exit in an orderly fashion and protect our children.” She goes on to explain that the basis for the parents’ fear is also grounded in the reality of a high propensity for stray bullets due to the nature of local gunfights.

A person who has training in shooting [a firearm], fires in this manner [demonstrates]: if someone comes to attack you, well, you react with precision, stabilizing yourself… the firearm emits force, you shoot and it lifts upward, right? How it flies upward depends on where you are shooting from because a person who is running is not going to be aiming his shots with precision, or the bullets where they are going to land. As a result, stray bullets are more likely to occur because this type of person [a gatillero], the majority don’t have effective training in the handling and use of firearms. They don’t have it because it is not permitted here. It’s not like in the US where you may own a firearm, but you must go through a process as to how to handle them.

Here in Puerto Rico they don’t offer that. So the delinquent is not taking firearm safety courses, instead the delinquent learns to kill completely by the seat of his pants. They can take a firearm just helter-skelter and need only to have a heart to kill, need only to feel the adrenaline surge to kill, need only to not care about life whatsoever to kill. As a result, such people are not going to care about children. They are not going to care if someone tells them, “He went in there.” Well, he is going to go in there, too. And if there are children present [it doesn’t matter]. For him, the important thing is to find who he wants to kill, right? [So] if his target ducks into the school? Well, then [he is] going to go into the school, not caring whether or not there are children there. For this reason the parents don’t feel secure. Because the teachers, we aren’t prepared one hundred percent. It’s [just] what our instinct tells us.320

320 Interview, 5.2014.
Yet other teachers with whom I speak share countless stories of how, in fact, they regularly do protect their students—even down to how they arrange the furniture of their classrooms. One veteran teacher rises from her desk to demonstrate to me the most probable trajectory of bullets into her classroom: they enter almost exclusively from the east. Accordingly, she keeps all the student desks safely behind the concrete wall, while her desk and the space from which she leads the class is in front of the open door, reflecting a conscious decision to expose herself to the potential danger. Some teachers also share stories of having to physically prevent children from leaving the classroom because they are so eager to go back into the community to learn the details of the shootings. Another primary teacher describes leading the children in songs such as Sapo, sapo (Froggy, froggy) as they all huddle under their respective desks during the shelling.\textsuperscript{321}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{321} Interview, 5.2014.
Security as Celestially Derived

In a parallel fashion, most community members understand security as a celestially determined phenomenon as well. This belief in a transcendent reality extends equally to the Satanists in our midst. Yet regardless of faith orientation, there seems to be no contestation as to the immanence of the spiritual realm in daily life. Verbal invocations of deity, particularly with the older folks, are daily and numerous.

Prayers will not be of any use to you
Sect 666

322 That is to say, I have not yet met any for whom this does not apply.
“God left and I remained waiting”

On the other hand, another school staff member shares that she feels more protected by the traffickers in the community than the police because when there is going to be a gunfight, the traffickers come to the school to alert the staff ahead of time. However, when the police conduct their raids—wherein situations can become just as precarious with bullets flying in all directions—the school is not forewarned. \[323\]

**Teachers’ Strategies at Ground Zero**

By exhibiting traits parallel to those displayed by local narcotics leadership, some teachers attempt to command a parallel response of compliance. Historically there was a

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\[323\] Interview 3.2015. While this staff member’s felt sentiment is that the *gatilleros* offer more protection than police, not all school staff share this view. The ethical questions raised by this scenario are multiple and cathedect. First, if the *gatilleros* alert the school, does the school then face the conundrum of a subsequent obligation to alert the authorities? Second, if the State raids are predicated upon the element of surprise, would it not be a security breach to alert the school? Perhaps a compromise could be reached wherein only the school’s administrator is told. These are not new scenarios, but they may represent further examples of the default mode of simply dealing aphonically vis-à-vis all narcotics-related issues. Keeping things, “in-house,” as it were, bypasses inherent and potentially far-reaching complications of State involvement. This is aphonicity in motion. Such functional and discretionary aphony at work within the everyday mechanics of a school day is considered commonplace.
baseline of respect shown towards those in the teaching profession, however, many professional educators now feel that those days are irrevocably in the past. Those with such perspectives tend to believe that indulging a child’s silence is counterproductive. Yet tolerance towards students’ use of silence varies widely. Some teachers are increasingly open to student silence, viewing it as a waiting game wherein the teacher accepts the student’s customary “non-participation” yet remains ever vigilant for a shift in affect which might signal a more likely predisposition to work. “I bring them the coffee every day,” Miś Raquel jokes. “That is to say, I put the work on their desk every day, even if I know they are not going to attempt it. When I see that they arrive one day with a softer affect, I suggest that there are a few make-up exams that we could dig into. And in that way we make some level of progress.” She relates that sometimes it feels like they are trying to kill you with “cuchilladitas de palo” or a million tiny stabs, but she strives not to get discouraged.

Still others operate from a standpoint of contrast, desirous of making the sharpest distinction possible between the students’ home lives and school experiences. Such teachers admit to being very directive as to student expression: if students begin to speak of any potentially illicit event from their home life one teacher emphasizes that she will cut them off quickly—disallowing any classroom discourse because she is persuaded that any such knowledge puts her and any others present at risk. She tells them, “I don’t want to know,” and then changes the subject. Another allows such discourse but has legislated that stories may only be shared if names are not used. She reports that students have begun to use third person when speaking about difficult situations; such mandated

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324 Interview, 5.2014.
anonymity provides a buffer of neutrality which allows students to receive support or explore potential avenues of engagement with the issue at hand without exposing themselves or unnecessarily identifying others. One veteran teacher asserted emphatically that she did not want her classroom to become “simply another tentacle of the housing projects,” but rather strives to keep the worlds separate in as much as possible.

Still others intervene as to the children’s word choice: Misí Raquel recounts how the students routinely repeat expressions used in the street without understanding the weight of their words, such as: “I’m going to blow you up!” or “I’m going to cut you in half!” She rebukes them with:

\begin{quote}
Look here, those are really strong words!” And I bring them to the to the graphic reality of their words by describing how blowing someone up is to break them into pieces, that the consequences of an explosion are their heart goes over here, other parts over there, and they stand there looking at me and say, “¡Ave Maria, Misí!” and I tell them, “Well that’s the word you’re using!” And they clarify that, no they meant they simply were going to hit the classmate. I tell them, “Well, you need to be careful because hitting is also not good, but the expression you’re using is very strong and we’re going to become more conscious of the manner in which we speak.
\end{quote}

This effort to interrupt the status quo, to interrogate implications of everyday speech is not standard fare, but the teachers who do intentionally address such issues do so partly in order to suggest that there are contexts beyond the community walls where such jargon is not daily fare.

One younger teacher, Natalia, compares her time working within a public housing community to working in a blue collar barriada, where residents owned their homes and observes that within the blue collar community there is more respect towards teachers and that the narcotics involved parents hid their jobs from their children, reflecting a mentality

\footnote{Interview, 5.2014.}
of, “This is what I did with my life because I didn’t have any options, but…you, as a child, can achieve more than I did.” In contrast, the drug points in Aleli are passed down as an inheritance from one generation to the next, and the children grow up knowing that they will carry on the dynasty.\textsuperscript{326} Already in elementary school such “heir apparents” are accustomed to being the ones who give the orders and are served by the rest.\textsuperscript{327} Consequently, when teachers challenge them to study they respond that they have no use for the subject matter as they will be a druglord—their future position is already secure. Teachers find themselves desperate to make connections between classroom subject matter and the students. At times they even compromise their principles in attempts to contextualize the material and thereby engage the child’s attention. One teacher, \textit{Misi} Natalia, found herself saying to a future heir who saw no need for math, “How then, are you going to know what a kilo is? How are you going to know how to measure? How are you going to know how much to put in the bag?” Musing over this experience years later she reflects,

You end up saying to yourself: What happened to all my studies? All my preparation and my methodology for teaching? And what if someone catches me here saying that? I can’t believe that I had to stoop to that level, so that [he] would be interested in math, [but] I had to use that language because they were not understanding my language.\textsuperscript{328}

\textit{Misi} Natalia’s moment of crisis throws into sharp relief the everyday struggle to effectively engage a population which, increasingly has come to view schooling as obsolete. Often with inconsistent institutional support and little leverage at their disposal

\textsuperscript{326} Miguelito, “\textit{el heredero},” or heir, is the son of a famous \textit{reguetonero}. The idea of dynasty springs from this meme.

\textsuperscript{327} Interview 5.2015.

\textsuperscript{328} Interview, 3.2015.
save the bare persuasiveness of their individual personalities, some novice teachers find themselves inordinately taxed by the day’s end:

In another school at which I taught I had sixteen-year-olds in sixth grade, and they would not even enter the classroom. When they did, what they would do is completely boycott the class. What are you supposed to do as a teacher? [laughs] You can only give the class and that’s it. Just the same, you try: You spend all night thinking what in the world am I going to do tomorrow, so that these children do not boycott class? And you arrive at work the next day with another tool or another idea and regardless they boycott your class again. You return home very stressed.329

The lack of leverage available to classroom teachers is perhaps most apparent in the system’s far too frequent inability to maintain students physically present in the classrooms. This libertinaje330 of the student body—which some faculty openly bemoan (see Marrero 2015)—proves a challenge to redress and is explored further in the discussion of the porosity of school perimeters in the following chapter. But all of this contributes to the at times palpable exhaustion which can envelop the teachers weary of the battle. One sixth grade teaching veteran became so overcome by the despair she witnessed in her former students’ scholastic trajectories that she requested to return to a younger grade, a grade wherein she would not have to face the annual heartache of watching beloved students become entangled into the illicit snares of the streets.

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329 Informal Conversation, 5.2015.
330 License.
Putting Feet on Faith: Boycotting the Residual Colonialisms

Yo nunca, nunca, nunca he dicho una mentira
Pues quiero imitar a Jorge Washington
Que fue el más de los hombres
Que es un gran hombre y un gran sabio.
Marchaba por las calles cual soldado
¡Que viva Jorge Washington! ¡Que viva!331

—Misi Aurora recalling fragments of lyrics from a song from public elementary school during the early 1960s in San Juan

DO NOT ENTER: Colonial Lynchings
Arecibo

331 I have never, never, never told a lie/Since I want to imitate George Washington/Who was the greatest of all men/Who is a great man and a great sage/He marched through the streets as a soldier/Long live George Washington! Long life to him!
The homeroom Christmas parties—replete with heaping tinfoil containers of *arroz con gandules, pernil, ensalada de papas, tembleque*—are winding down and folks’ eyes are a bit glazed over as the food comas set in. *Misi* Aurora, visibly exhausted from the semester, stares across the table at one of the few students who showed up, “Elias, don’t you have any other shirts you could wear?” He stares back, not tracking. Brushing her bangs out of her eyes, *Misi* Aurora tries again, “Like don’t you have any shirts at your house that have a Puerto Rican flag?” He looks down at his shirt: a faded medley of red and white stripes, an inset of navy blue with white stars. I think he shrugs.\(^{332}\)

![Santa Muerte with the United States flag as tunic](image)

*Santa Muerte\(^{333}\) with the United States flag as tunic
Sagrado Corazón*

When I read it the first time, I think it must be a joke. As in: did I read that properly? Who named a *caserío* “Columbus Landing”? But there it is in black and white, right there in Mayaguez. On an Island where the populace is coming under tight fiscal oversight of

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\(^{332}\) Fieldnotes, 12.2015.

\(^{333}\) Santa Muerte is often adopted as the patron saint of the drug cartels.
the United States, where people apologize for having the last name of Colón, and yet where the municipality of Arecibo is still in the process of erecting a statue to honor his legacy, it appears that colonialism is well and thriving.

Construction of the Columbus Statue in Arecibo
There is, however, a wide disparity between how the various political parties interpret this relationship. As my Tío Pedro shares,

Tío: What hurts you more: that your own brother, your own cousin, some family member of yours robs you? Or that a foreigner or someone far away does?
Áurea: My brother.
Tío: Right? Doesn’t that hurt a lot? Well, it’s the same thing here. It hurts me more that folks here rob us than if another from somewhere else comes along and does it. Because the folks here are the ones who rob all the time. Now the Junta is coming. That is Federal. And that—they are not coming to steal. So, we are going to be better off—unless they get the idea to rob us as well. [laughs]

He who has the most wants more. He who has power, has the power to steal as well. [Former Governor] Roselló sold the La Telefónica to the Mexicans. That was ours. We built that, we were proud of that. But their true colors come out eventually; afterwards they leave [their elected posts extremely] wealthy.334

With that he raises his eyebrows and returns to finishing his dinner. Tío is no blind fanatic of the United States. Having lived amongst Continentals for a few decades, in casual conversation he still revisits the sting of monikers such as “Puerto Rican pork chop” that were hurled at him throughout the work day in New Jersey. No, he is happy to be back in his own country. But this dis-ease with one’s own paisano335 which he expresses, is substantiated in various manners throughout the Island.

334 Informal Conversation, 6.2016.
335 Fellow countryman.
One brutal manifestation is evidenced in the homeowners’ crisis in Ceiba on the eastern coast of the Island. When an entire road collapses in the new development Las Lomas and renders most of the properties not only uninhabitable but irreparable, Scotia Bank (which has is based out of Canada), gives owners the option to hand over their homes, losing rights to the property but becoming free from the debt. In contrast, the local flagship bank, Banco Popular, which bilks non-members on the Island a fee of six dollars to withdraw money from its ATHs (or ATMs), has refused to dismiss residents’ mortgages. Instead, they have issued three moratoria for those whose homes have been irreversibly condemned (Vázquez Colón 2016).
Within public education one surprising phenomenon of residual colonialisms is the fervency with which teachers baldly declare that they will incorporate their faith into their teaching at any cost. The idea of the separation of church and state is predominantly viewed as a vestige of colonial occupation in the form of federal laws infiltrating the Island’s administration of public education—a very small minority “trying to ruin it for the rest.” There is a decided resentment towards the laws restricting the utilization of faith in schooling contexts. One teacher, Misí Liana, who taught a few decades in the Bronx states flatly that her preference is to teach on the Island where referencing the Creator to students is seen as common practice—even part and parcel of her responsibility.

Yes, the separation of church and state is very tough [in the mainland US], very tough, and I experienced it because I worked there and, and, and I suffered through it. Here in Puerto Rico the same thing exists but [si se da] this phenomenon that the majority of the residents of Puerto Rico, the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the majority is Christian already, religion matters that is true—both professing and practicing, they are Christian. And you have seen that in our school prior to beginning any activity there will always be an invocation—you must have noticed that—whether sung or a prayer—There’s always an invocation to request that God’s guidance of our day, and that He would take control of the activity. That’s what they do for all of our activities.

So the place of the Lord, “Father help us, direct our work,” ah, well it was done under—or rather through—the modality of a song. Today a song was sung. Other times they have done a pantomime, praise music, hymns from the church but represented through pantomime—but always prior to an activity in our school, an invocation is done. And I have seen it in many schools. That’s why one would not suppose that there is a separation of church and state, nonetheless there is an understanding within the school community and the neighborhood itself, right, of those who participate from our school that they do that. No one has complained. No one has filed a formal complaint because everyone is Christian. You go to the United States and there, there are a diversity of religions that are not Christian. You have the Jewish person, you have the Muslim person, you have the Hindu person, I mean and there’s more… There, other religions predominate so then for that reason there is the separation since one has to respect the beliefs of all of those people and as one cannot practice the beliefs of all of them, well, the two are kept separate.
But here it’s different. Although recently I have seen, because look I saw the other day an article or news that there’s a police station I’m not sure where at which they pray in the mornings, they have a prayer circle and pray together but amongst them are atheists—of those who work there, there are atheists. So then they demand that the rest of the officers desist from the practice of prayer circles because, because it offended their beliefs. And that is new. Because I have never seen anything like that in Puerto Rico—that a minority group rises up like that and makes those demands because they don’t believe in God. You see and what happens is that since it is stipulated that there is this separation of church and state, well, they win. And that is the problem: that we have removed God from the schools, at least in the United States they removed God from the schools and that’s where the problem lies.

Peñón de Afuera, Camuy

And well no, I do not remove Him from my classroom—and I know that these words are being recorded—I do not remove Him from my classroom because every time that I can—and obviously I am a teacher of math, and my job is to teach math, but as the students are integral beings, you know, they are not children who come in to learn a subject, they are human beings who have beliefs, who have dreams... If I can I support their lives in various manners, as I do when we discuss values, when we talk about respecting life, and when we talk about the creation—because whenever I talk about respect for life, I always go in the direction of creation, that God created us and I mention God because I believe in God.

One cannot pull a person apart completely, neither their beliefs nor their values. And while you cannot forget what your job is—what your duties are and carry them out, yet you are also in front of a human being who has a need and you are not going to treat him or her with coldness. One has to know also, right, when to apply, when to be humane—although we are losing this because the selfsame institutions, the rules, the political pressure—and I’m not talking about political
parties… But sometimes by pleasing a minority group that may have some political muscle, they institute some norms, they eliminate some things that are necessary for a human being because there are, there are greater forces at play. The problem here is that when they eliminate things like prayer in schools, what is behind it is political pressure from groups that want to dominate, you follow me? Then the government is responding to these minorities because it suits them, it’s the preference of a small piece of the population that has power, political power, who have power at the social level and are the ones who orchestrate everything from the top.

Well, what happens is it goes against the essence of a human being. They don’t realize it, but it goes against the very essence of a human being. All those things that they eliminate is part of our very being, of our very constitution as human beings. It goes against our very selves, the core of who we are as individuals. For that reason things are the way they are.

Beyond the separation of church and state, I am talking about social groups that are dominating and making changes to the society which do not suit the society morally because when we lose morality, we see what we have now: a puddle, stagnant water. There’s no progress, and even more so with regard to spiritual progress.
On walls near the employee timeclock are displayed two prayers at one elementary school: “The Teacher’s Prayer” (left) and “When You Enter Your Workplace” (right).

The case of such teachers is strengthened by the fact that public schools are patronized almost exclusively by the Island’s poor (the exception being a handful of magnet schools which attract a student populace across socio-economic levels) who almost unilaterally ascribe to the basic tenets of the Christian faith—if not functionally, then at least theoretically. Therefore, the homogeneity of faith shared between the staff and the families they serve is assumed and very often takes on an implicit as well as explicit role in the daily machinations of the institutions.

Further, because the affective component of insecurity and its varied entailments are not always dealt with directly within the community, some teachers feel that the onus is on them to provide that outlet for their students. More often than not, this incorporates a religious thread into the school day. During his tenure as Secretary of the Department of Education from 1994-2000, Victor Fajardo instituted a daily period of reflection in the public schools. One primary teacher, Misí Rosa, shares how this routine changes the tenor of her classroom and allows students to transition more smoothly into their school day:

Here we don’t teach religion, that is to say, that one has to be Catholic or Pentecostal or anything like that. Those distinctions are respected. But we do teach that there is a very powerful Being, who if they call to him, he will respond to them, that he’s not going to be deaf, he’s not going to fail them, he loves them very much—and that gives the children security.\footnote{Interview, 8.2013.}

As Misí Rosa indicates, it is clear that most controversy on the subject is related to denominational allegiances. For example, one student announced to his classmates that
“all Catholics are of the devil”\textsuperscript{337} An intermediate teacher, who did not volunteer to share how her own homeroom reflection period is spent, is a bit more skeptical:

When the Secretary of Education Victor Fajardo arrived in office, he introduced this period of reflection which no one understood [laughs] because then each person interpreted it differently, implementing it as they understood it—whether reading little quotes on wisdom or having a prayer… but since no one understood it, they eliminated it. Then just recently they reinstated it, but again, there was no follow-up, no specific instructions—with the teachers not knowing clearly what to do for the ten minutes of reflection: what material to use, what themes they may touch upon, those they may not… And because that has never been clarified, each teacher does what she wants. There’s one teacher who prays with her students and then sings church choruses…

But many teachers maintain this routine to begin their day—some use a dialogue table, others sing songs. One favorite in primary reportedly is \textit{Calles de oro}, or “Streets of Gold”:

\begin{quote}
\textit{No one can get inside my heart  
because it has a lock and Jesus has the key  
How beautiful you are Jerusalem! Streets of gold and crystal sea  
I am going to walk through those streets  
We are having a party with Jesus; we want to go to heaven  
We are gathered around the table; it is Christ who comes to serve.  
Powerful is our God. He heals, He saves. Powerful is our God!  
He baptizes, He’s coming. Powerful is our God!}\textsuperscript{338}
\end{quote}

The homeroom teacher cites the students’ interest in the images of gold in the song as one of the reasons for their preference of this tune.

During national exams, \textit{las Pruebas Puertorriqueñas}, in addition to those demanding silence, signs are posted at the entrance to the classrooms that read: \textit{Oramos}.

\textsuperscript{337} Fieldnotes, 2.2016.  
\textsuperscript{338} Translation mine: Dentro de mi corazón no puede meter a nadie// Porque tiene un candidato y Jesús tiene la llave// Jerusalén que bonita eres //Jerusalén que bonita eres  
Calles de oro, mar de cristal//Por esas calles yo voy a caminar  
Estamos de fiesta con Jesús al cielo queremos ir,  
Estamos reunidos en la mesa, él es Cristo quien va a servir.  
[Coro:] Poderoso es nuestro Dios (4x)  
El sana, El salva, poderoso es nuestro Dios.  
Bautiza, El viene, poderoso es nuestro Dios.
Por TÍ, or “We are praying for YOU.” Given the opportunity to reflect upon the posting of this sign Misi Alexandra reflects:

Misi Alexandra: A student could feel happy that someone thought of them and someone is wishing them the best…and some—you might not believe this—many of them feel loved by that and feel like, “Wow, it’s true that they worry about me.” Then others look at it and see it just as they would any other sign. But there are some who, yes, it does touch them.

Áurea: That would be illegal in the United States?

Misi Alexandra: [Her eyes dance as she suggests a rhyming play on words:] Illegal or ideal? [laughs] Because a lot of times what is ideal is illegal, lamentably.

Maité is sucking her teeth and scowling at me. Usually I get one or the other. But today this Catholic elder is vexed beyond comprehension simply by the nature of my question. I inquired as to her opinion regarding the appropriateness of the integration of faith in daily institutional machinations at the local elementary school. With a sternly furrowed brow Maité rebukes me, “If it is God who wakes the children up in the morning? If it God who gives the children breath in their lungs? If it is God who provides the children with everything?” She pauses to suck her teeth again and glare at me. “How can you not include Him in the school?” The scowl upon her countenance does not dissolve at the close of her vituperation, rather it tarries as if an ellipsis, as if a cloud of consternation, indicting me for proposing such an elision. The mere suggestion of the embedded God being extricated as a distillate from the context that He not only inhabits but pervades, is not only viscerally agitating for her, but understood as inherently heretical. As such, what may be indisputably clear to federal Supreme Court Justices can be downright nonsensical, even repugnant to some Islanders.

Public opinion within the government housing projects unequivocally leans towards the acknowledgement of divinity. As one baseball coach and former community
elder states stalwartly, “We are a Catholic country.” And this is a baseline orientation which they do not expect their colonizers to understand. For some, their expressions of faith become, in and of themselves, a form of conscientious objection to the colonizer’s demand for a disaggregation which feels entirely unnatural.

For others there is a fluidity between their faith and their daily duties that is seamless. While one principal jumps aboard any bus embarking upon a field trip from his school campus in order to christen the adventure with prayer prior to departure, others take a more behind the scenes approach. One metro area principal describes his administration of the school exclusively in terms of his relationship with God. He even attributes his ability to persevere in the position despite tremendous challenges solely due to his reliance on this spiritual anchor:

…You can do an excellent job for ten years here and when you make one mistake, both the Department of Education and the community itself will drown you in a minute. It is a very difficult position to occupy. When you are an administrator you have security in nothing. You have the security that God is with you as a powerful giant and nothing more. A powerful giant… inside you and outside of you, protecting you. I am not alone here. Well, the one who directs this school is not me, it’s Him. [Sometimes] I would like to run away from this place… ¡Diantre! in whatever moment, you know… and [yet] He maintains me here.

[But] whoever enters here, enters with the confidence that God is here and God is the One who is in charge. I do nothing—if He does not authorize me [to do it], if I do not feel it. Because I do not have to be like, “Hello, this and that, I’m going to help you”—no. I [have to] feel it. It’s like the air. And I, when I have a difficult situation, I cry out to Him and He responds and directs me. The One who directs this school is Him.339

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339 Interview, 1.2016.
None of this faith rooted orientation, however, is visibly apparent upon meeting him. Like many others, although his faith provides not only a structural backbone but a compelling and sustaining motivation for his work, it is not explicitly expressed.

Another male teacher shares that his faith is the reason he donates his lunch hour every day. He uses it to organize competitions on the playground—at times engaging more than fifty students at once—with the intention of keeping the children from fighting, from boredom, from idleness. He also sits with them in the cafeteria in order to model manhood. “I sit up straight and keep one hand on my lap while using the other to eat. I tell them to eat their vegetables and not to play with or waste their food. I want them to know that a man can be a teacher, a friend. I want them to know that one does not have to be a *matón* to be a man.” All this he does *sigilosamente*, confidentially, without mentioning his faith. Another staff member confides, “When I came to this community, when they transferred me here from another school, I didn’t want to be here. I cried every day. [But afterwards] I saw the need, [and] I said, ‘If here is where God sent me, then here is where I am going to be.’”

A Christian singer, songwriter, and lifetime resident of a government housing project composed the song, “We Won’t Kick God Out of School” (Vasquez 2015), which mirrors these visceral sentiments and emphasizes the unavoidably affective nature of this debate. Vasquez’ words highlight the felt presence of God for students: “I spoke with Him this morning; He ate breakfast with me/Like the sun, His love shines upon me.” He goes as far as to assert that “It is dangerous to close the door and leave Him outside.”

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While it is difficult to speculate as to the demographics of its circulation, his YouTube video has less than four thousand views over two months after its initial posting.

When I inquire as to the seven bulletin boards bursting with various Scriptures surrounded by spring flowers, another teacher explains that they were erected for the month of April in honor of Semana Santa (Holy Week) and meditation; she reminds me that, “in a locale with so much aggression, it’s important to ‘encaminarlos’ or train the children in something positive.”

Some of the Department of Education’s teachers with backgrounds in psychology are intentional in their approaches towards the context in which the children reside. As Gourevitch (1998:196) writes, perhaps “…[P]eople aren’t wired to resist assimilating too much horror. Even as we look at atrocity, we find ways to regard it as unreal, and the more we look, the more we become inured to—not informed by—what we are seeing.” In keeping with this premise, Misi Raquel elaborates that

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341 Interview, 5.5.2014.
amidst the tourbillon of violence, she understands her goal in part as one of re-sensitizing the students to the sacred nature of all life:

Although they are overly accustomed to seeing a body full of bullets, [I try to help them retain] their sensitivity and understand that [such things] are not [supposed to be] normal…When the children look at the cadaver as, “Okay, one more,” they are losing their sensitivity. For that reason I work with them towards respecting life, all life—even what might be to them the most insignificant form of life, a plant, for example, I make them see that it has life, it has grown, it’s green because it has life.

My mission with the animals is that they respect this living being, and I always make the connection with creation because I cannot fail to do that: “You were created by who, by God. And just as he loves you, he loves this little creature; we don’t have the right to take the life of anyone” …because the problem is that they begin to hurt the animals; they don’t feel compassion for the animal; they enjoy seeing it suffer or jump because they threw something at it, or hit it with something, or whatever sort of barbarity they might do to it. Studies suggest that murderers begin [developmentally] by harming animals, and that’s how the children lose sensitivity, how they lose respect for life. Later on they can kill a person, and after killing the first one, can kill [many] more…*342

So it might be said that they are looking to reverse the spiral, are working to interrupt the desensitization which can occur by default given their habitation within a context which, at any given time, can be saturated with a panoply of violences. As the Reverend Dr. Harvie Maitland Conn (1986) writes, “All theology is necessarily partisan, it starts where the pain is.”

*342 Interview, 5.9.2014.
Affective Triumphs amidst Pyrrhic Victories

One veteran teacher, Misi Raquel, reflects, “We are [a people] of hugs and kisses,” and then proceeds to share an event which marked a turning point for one of her more troubled students:

I had a student who was my adoration; he was “mi niño de los abrazos.” He didn’t like a lot of contact, he was very hyperactive and would run out of class a lot. But one morning he came in early at 7:30 in the morning as I was sitting at my desk and we began talking and I don’t know how it came up or why it occurred to me but I said to him, “I think you really need a hug!” And he exclaims, “Acho, Misi, You’re crazy!” (¡Tú estás loca!). And I replied, “You’re right. The one who needs the hug is me.” So I stood up and he was standing there immobile, rigid, with his arms straight against his sides—but even so, I gave him a hug.

The next day at 7 in the morning he showed up again. I said, “My God, what are you doing here again so early?” He spit out, “Ay, Misi, you’re looking for a hug, ¡Acho! knock it off, come here and give me a hug.” And I gave him a hug. And every day that went by he came until one day he began to loosen up and was able to come to look for a hug from me. Years later he introduced me to his friend as “the teacher who taught me to hug.”

This same teacher, however, grieved alone when at 20 years old this student was gunned down in the streets. His death was viewed by the school community as “deserved” given his narcotics involvement. Given that it was they, the gatilleros who had “provoked the incident—they cease to be considered victims.” Further, as he had been the target of the rival gang’s fusillade, he—rather than the shooters—was deemed responsible for the death of a non-narcotics involved community member, a teenage girl. In other words, it was understood that causally, it was his proximity to her which provoked her death. Through tears, Misi Raquel recounts that even attending his funeral was out of the question because the school community (and sectors of the caserío) had

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343 Interview 5.9.2014.
344 “My child of hugs” or “My hugging child.”
345 Interview 5.9.2014.
already conscribed to him the role of villain. So she mourned his loss in private, “I cried alone,” she said, “I suffered alone…I didn’t dare to share it; my colleagues had to know I was suffering because they knew how much I loved him. But his loss was not suffered, it was not demonstrated by anyone else here.” So she attended the funeral of the girl alongside everyone else from the school community. The tension between the expectation of her colleagues and how she personally needed to grieve still haunts her. Perhaps one of the greatest traumas for teachers is their impotence, ultimately, to impact these former students’ life trajectories. Theirs are then, in a sense, brief Pyrrhic victories—interspersed with (as mentioned previously) occasional threats to their life or bodily harm.

Condado

As exhibited in this chapter, issues of community security become tightly interwoven with deeply held tenets of faith. In the face of inexplicably graphic violence, faith is at once an anchor and a buoy. It provides moorings for the struggles and an insistence that, somehow, there is always hope. The teachers, even the Deists among them, are all inevitably confronted with the affective stress of consoling children in the face of truncated life cycles and premature demise. Yet the weapons they guard in their
arsenal are non-negotiables. God is *a priori*. Any suggestion to the contrary is met with a fierce indignation and a swift rebuke of the hubris of secular and soulless mentality of the colonizer. With no small amount of pride, Islandside faculty distance themselves from what they perceive as the cold secularism of the United States. Remember *Misi* Raquel’s words, “We are a people of hugs and kisses.” With this warm but firm insistence she distinguishes herself and her Islandside colleagues from the cold secularism of her former continental colleagues on the eastern seaboard. For she knows full well that, ostensibly, such daily cultural expressions of affection are prohibited within the dispassionate, antiseptic public school system of the colonizer—and, as such, she has no desire to return.

**Imaginaries and Their Affects**

Teller: You work with children? Aw, how cute! Where?  
Audrey: A public school here in the metro area.  
—conversation with a teller at a metro utilities office

The Island’s public educators are profoundly demoralized. Far too often it seems that the public imaginary with regard to public schools perceives them as the Island’s “dumping grounds.” *Misi* Magda could not make any plainer that affectively faculty and staff feel as though they are isolated and entirely on their own. As the school-aged population continues to shrink and schools continue to close, morale has seemed to follow suit.

Although I am certain there are many additional initiatives about which I am as yet unfamiliar, some bright spots (both progressive and conservative) on the Island’s educational horizon which target youth who have not benefitted from conventional

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346 Fieldnotes, 1.2013.
approaches include: *Nuestra Escuela* (y *Nuestra Escuelita*), Puerto Rico Youth Challenge Academy, the Ricky Martin Foundation’s *centro Tau, Jóvenes en Riesgo*, and a network of Montessori-based schools throughout the Island. According to Census data, almost a fifth of the Island’s youth between the ages of 16 and 24 neither study nor work.\(^{347}\) Across Latin America such youth are referred to as *Ninis (ni estudian, ni trabajan)*.\(^{348}\) My primary concern, however, remains with the “under the radar” *ninis*, those younger than sixteen, or as I have referred to them, elementary school dropouts.

\(^{347}\) *Nota #23*, Centro de Información Censal (CIC), Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto Cayey.

\(^{348}\) See de Hoyos, Rogers, & Székely (2015).
Aphonic Interlude VIII: Reinforcing Silence’s Sovereignty

Somehow, I had misunderstood him. And now I am unilaterally failing to process Nefti’s unwillingness to talk. The welfare of a childhood friend is at stake, but the Mayor’s cousin just stares at me. The culturally requisite silence of alelianos dictates his non-participation in granting an interview with an out of town legal team. Somehow, I am utterly derailed by this refusal. With words composed more of air than vibration, I attempt to reframe my obvious dismay—but only slivers of sound escape, “I just hoped,” then haltingly, “your words,” then my voice shredding entirely, “could have had an impact.” Then I make my life’s most indelicate exit.

I am already on the second landing of their stairwell when I hear a clear, firm directive: “Áurea” vaulting from above. I stop. Somehow the first two times she called had not penetrated my sonic field. But the third one arrived, insistent. Virando I head tentatively back up the steps. Crestfallen, I stand in the threshold and await her next command. I would not, could not disregard this matriarch sage. Prior to this moment I had never before witnessed her raise her voice. Then, from her place at a card table crowded with adult granddaughters, she inquires almost quietly—as if confused, “Do you not know that the Mayor is in the side room?”

I did not. There are few fieldwork moments I can look back on wherein I have felt more loved. At once stately, stoic, and yet soft, her sky blue gaze never leaves mine. “Toca,” she insists, as she nods toward the door down the hallway. Like a sweatered sentinel on distant shoreline, she beckons me back in to a space of known-ness. If everyone else was thrown off-kilter by the confusing visit, the octogenarian matriarch
never wavered. In accordance with her directive, a relative rises, unsummoned, to knock on my behalf.

Then, within the rare sanctuary of a door-closed room, the Mayor and Castiel wait for the syncopated story to tumble out. As becomes immediately obvious, I am the only one surprised. They have no trouble imagining the blanket aversion to raised right hands, to Continental lawyers who fly in with their flattops, wingtips, broad shoulders, and bored expressions; to the invasive barrage of video cameras, stenographers and translators with digital pens poised. It took the Mayor’s cousin five years to talk to me—and yet somehow I envisioned him casually agreeing to a sworn statement. My imaginary was just that: imaginary.

But in the spirit of encouragement, the Mayor agrees to take me to another potential childhood peer, a woman whom I have met only once prior. Jetting out of the room, around the corner, and down the steps—the Mayor’s Usain Bolt impression is likely aimed at eclipsing any unsolicited or incendiary remarks from his family about this decidedly odd friend of his, who’s trailing behind clumsily, lugging a bulging briefcase of dog-eared case files and a half-functional laptop. Once I start my car, I watch the Mayor drive his SUV in reverse down the entire driveway until his vehicle aligns immediately parallel to mine. *Un detalle bello,*\(^{349}\) it’s his way of “picking me up,” as well as ensuring that I am directly behind him as we depart. Without lowering his window, he waits for eye contact, nods slightly in verification, and then rockets forward to deliver me to his friend.

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\(^{349}\) A sweet gesture.
Two weeks before

And I said to him,
Did the rats eat your tongue
And he smiled
Because he didn’t dare talk to me
Because he didn’t want to lie
He didn’t say a word
He didn’t say a word
And even still they killed him
They burned him alive in a car

But he didn’t say anything
He didn’t say anything
I said to him,
How are you my love
And How have things been going
He was like this [curls shoulders]
And I—
The rats ate your tongue
¡Caramba!
He didn’t talk
Because he knew that he was doing things
Already
If this is my teacher
It is better for me to stay quiet
I will say nothing
So that I will not lie
So that I do not have to lie
So that I do not deceive the teacher

Because maybe you think
That he did something
That he is doing well
And it’s completely the opposite
And that is where he says it’s better
That I don’t say anything
So that I do not deceive
And that I do not deceive myself
That they could teach me good things
And I am doing bad things
He came two weeks before
They were going to kill him
Beautiful, so beautiful
But what a gorgeous boy
He was clean
And just as he—
Because he was precious
Then I said to him
No,
He said to me,
Teacher!
And I Oh, my love!
And I got out of my car
Because I was leaving in my car
Then I stopped to watch him come over
He said Teacher
And I got out of the car
And he hugged me
We hug each other
And he says Teacher, how good to see you
And I said to him Are you playing baseball
And he told me, Ah, a little
And I told him Don’t quit playing baseball
Because I saw talent in him
I told him don’t stop playing baseball
Because I know that could save his life

It was not the same
It appears that he had already done that act
He had a different gaze

He was not the same
Already
He was not the same
He had—
No, with me—
No, with me—
But his gaze,
His essence was not the same
He was already damaged
Two weeks before

350 There was speculation that Nael’s death was a reprisal.
CHAPTER 9: When the State Fails

Porous Perimeters, Early Desertion, & Child Grooms

“Was he still alive when they burned him?” That was Misi Aurora’s first question to me when we saw one another in private. Her face sallow, her mouth remaining open slightly—as if the question weighed too much, as if bracing to absorb an unthinkable response. She sat immobilized, her eyes staring so far into me it was as if I were no longer there. She sat immobilized, awaiting an answer I could not give.

Listen to how trauma talks: in the repetitions, in the hesitations, in the circlings back, in the wrestling, the incredulity. Listen to the loss. Misi Aurora paints the scene over and over in her mind, alighting upon each priceless detail once and again—she is forcing her mind to get it right, to paint it properly. Notice how trauma mobilizes, how it arrests. Note how different this version is from that with which we began. And yet both true in an utter and absolute sense.

Eye witnesses are notoriously lousy in court: our minds as helpful as so many sieves retaining rationed water. Yet Misi Aurora’s plodding emotional resonance is wrought with impossible accuracy. Did he speak? Of course. Did he not speak? Of course. It is the mind trying to heal and hold on all at once. The theme park’s mechanical swings lowering and rising in one imperceptible motion. Undulations on repeat. She tucks her hair behind her ear and mid-sentence self-corrects: it is important to get this right. Nothing is more important than getting this right. There is no re-scripting of that last moment together. Loss files and sharpens the blunt edges of the mind. Loss demands a keepsake, a memento. We remain yoked to a haunting scramble of trajectories,
outcomes, interventions, feasibility—our gaze ever set on the counterfactual of what might have been set in motion two weeks before.

The Island’s periodicals mentioned next to nothing about Nael’s passing. Simply that charred remains of two as yet unidentified individuals were found in the trunk of a burned car. No one outside the community and homicide investigators would ever even have had any way of knowing his age. There were no marches. No speeches. No demands for change. Privately a cluster of alelianos gathered to light candles, staring at their feet or his picture, for a time of remembrance. But no funeral. No service. The school sent no flowers. Nael’s was an endlessly delicate indelicate death. It was said that the family blamed the school. That the community blamed the parent. That the traffickers blamed the child. Culpability on rotation. But no one blamed the structural blueprint of a society wherein this type of death is possible. No one except Misi Aurora. Upon receiving the fateful phone call that evening Misi Aurora recounts that she let out a primal scream within the four walls of her apartment: ¡MALDITA ES EL SISTEMA! Now when she recalls their last encounter, her thoughts tumble out in fettered, fraying wordstrings: twisted, overlapping, doubling back. Two weeks before elicits verbal snapshots of a love far too fleetingly loaned.

Early desertion kills. If not always the body, then more often than not the spirit. There is an unspoken weight of failure which accompanies such children, as if they wore millstones of incompetence about their necks. Quick to duck their gaze, slow to speak their mind, they rarely approach unbidden. The voice they retain for select spheres grows calcified with disuse. Aphonicity settles in. Aphonicity gets comfortable.

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³⁵¹ Cursed is the system!
Like many preceding and following him, Nael walked out. Without ever receiving the small dignity which a sixth grade graduation ceremony affords, Nael walked out. He walked out of elementary school at the age of twelve and never came back. Walked out and never matriculated anywhere else. Or rather, walked out and matriculated himself at el punto. If walking out is a decision, as Vargas Vidot propounds, it is also a protest against an educational system which is regarded, largely, as irrelevant amidst a social context with scant options.

Although perhaps unique in her candor, Misi Aurora is not alone. Only a handful of her colleagues deny the phenomenon of early desertion—even though its often grim consequences can be denied by no one. Yet despite the sporadic infiltration of narcotics culture into the everyday machinations of the school, from the teachers’ side there seems to be an impermeable forcefield which precludes that the sphere of the school and the sphere of the community intersect in any meaningful way.\(^{352}\) Instead, the work seems to be largely compartmentalized, focused strictly upon that which remains under their control: that which occurs during school hours.\(^{353}\)

**The Failure Behind the Failure: White Collar Corruption**

They arrest the skinny chopitas\(^{354}\) from the poor neighborhoods and the white collar fat fish Mafioso—where the devil is he? The earth swallowed him?

——online comment by username: W. Figueroa\(^{355}\) (translated)

\(^{352}\) One exception to this is the utilization of school social workers by community women seeking refuge from IPV.

\(^{353}\) See Chapter 8 for a discussion of resistance against this tendency.

\(^{354}\) This reference to chopitas flacas could be derisive, but either way it references street level dealers who are just scraping by and, as such, don’t get enough to eat: a fair enough picture of the drug scene. It is not uncommon that those on los puntos appear malnourished. A subsequent conversation with an orocoveño who is a bare-handed river fisherman—despite the threat presented by buruquena (fresh water crabs)—revealed that chopas are small, non-native fresh water fish (although most are the size of one’s hand, less commonly they can weigh over five pounds).

\(^{355}\) “Golpe a millonaria organización,” 2016.
When my friend’s no-longer-a-minor son is locked up and looking at anywhere from two to twenty years for kidnapping and other charges, he receives a curt phone call from a lawyer: We can take care of all this for you. Fifteen thousand dollars and your son walks. My friend works in the licit economy; he doesn’t even make fifteen thousand a year. Basta Ya’s Luis Romero suggests that one clear indicator that progress is being made in the War on Drugs is when the white collar component of the trafficking rings (lawyers, judges, etc.) are brought to justice—something which prior to the alliance with the federal government in 2011 was a much less common occurrence. Ultimately, narcotics corruption is but one—albeit highly networked—piece of the corruption crumb pie. Someone is pulling the strings of the many and varied marionettes so that the “show” can go on; for the right price someone is arranging for the “correct” judge to hear the pre-paid case.

Ultimately, at a systemic, structural level lies the negligence of the State in its failure to protect children’s lives. And while the State acts as a silent impassive backdrop for these losses, James Scott (1998) emphasizes the inability of a “prostate civil society” to effectively resist destructive forces of the State. Its thinly cloaked failure is perhaps most evidenced by the escalated level at which federal interventions occur: “Of the 56 national offices of FBI, San Juan is the only city which has three (3) squadrons dedicated exclusively to public corruption” (Cobián 2015c translated). Corruption on the Island is so pervasive that at times significant swathes of infrastructure and the baseline functioning of institutions are paralyzed.

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356 Interview, 4.2015.
357 For a discussion of narcotics related corruption within the arm of the State during the late 1990s, see Rodríguez Beruff (1999).
Snickers: How does Puerto Rico get when it’s hungry? “Turned off”
“El Apagón,” or 36 hour black-out of September 2016
caused by decades of fiscal corruption at the government run AEE. 358

Neutrogena: Rationing of make-up? Never.
“La sequía,” or the drought of 2015
caused by mismanagement
of the government run system of AAA.

358 Autoridad Energía Eléctrica
And while the majority of online commenters seem to cheer the unending stream of federal interventions against white collar corruption, it is clear that stemming this tide is only a stop-gap measure and that, by and large, the federal presence in recent years has not been effective in the construction of a sturdier and more consistently functional State. Hence, as long as the overarching concern remains, “How quickly can we fill our own pockets?” rather than “How might we better serve our citizenry?” there is faint hope that the scales might tip back towards the interests of the people.

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359 Aqueductos

360 One dramatic exception to this is the transformation of the AIJ (Agencia para Instituciones Juveniles), which after federal sanctions in 1994 has achieved an about face, becoming one of the most exemplary and productive state institutions on the Island—as attested to by stellar scores on the College Board alone. I was unable to procure these figures, however, after multiple attempts.
One of the most streamlined ways to commit tax evasion is to run a “cash-only” business.\textsuperscript{361}

The failure of a state institution, the public school system, is implicated causally as it serves as the mechanism whereby a steady stream of labor is provided directly to the flourishing narco-industry in the form of the Island's ubiquitous elementary school deserters; such children are targeted and swiftly employed by local traffickers (Vales et al 2002:89, 107). Further, the public school system employs neither truant officers nor substitute teachers—so children may not have school for weeks or even months if their misi is sick or is caring for a relative. In my early years volunteering in the public schools I learned that some teachers did not bother to take attendance, and the laws and protocols in place regarding excessive absences are rarely enforced—are mere leyes muertas. Further, when I request enrollment statistics from 2000 onward I am told that the most recent available is from 2012—from the databank SIE, the direct result of a federal mandate requiring for the first time that records be kept.\textsuperscript{362} This sizeable omission serves

\textsuperscript{361}Up until the inception of a new law in May 2016, the Islandwide monopoly Caribbean Cinemas disallowed any payment other than cash for its non-elite theater locales. The two metro area “Fine Arts” cinemas in Hato Rey and Miramar which serve wine and antipasto to the “well-heeled,” however, accept plastic.

\textsuperscript{362}Interview, 1.2016.
to instantiate once more how the State fumbles its responsibility for the education of its citizenry.

So while education is theoretically “compulsory” for those aged 5-17, the reality is that attendance becomes highly—if not entirely—discretionary. Yet to the extent that children are not matriculated, engaged in and consistently attending the public schools, to that same extent we are fomenting and fostering our own insecurity internally. More than nine percent of the Island’s school deserters leave prior to completing elementary school. This is particularly worrisome because some assert that it is the youngest who are assigned some of the gang’s grizzliest tasks.

Accordingly, the failure of the public school system is implicated causally because it serves as the mechanism whereby a steady stream of labor is provided directly to the flourishing narco-industry in the form of the Island's ubiquitous elementary school deserters; such children are targeted and swiftly employed by local traffickers (Vales et al 2002:89, 107). Even as they spend school day after school day in the street, they are pursued neither by school officials, nor civil servants, nor family, nor fictive kin. Then, for boys with less supervision, far too often their truncated life trajectory follows a pattern of hyper-canalized masculinities:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{school desertion} & \rightarrow \text{deployment as youth narco-soldier} \rightarrow \text{premature demise} \\
\text{or} & \\
\text{school desertion} & \rightarrow \text{transnational departure/intra-Island relocation} \rightarrow \text{increased likelihood of survival}
\end{align*}
\]

\[363\] It is common, teachers at la Flamboyán report, that students miss the first two weeks of the academic year in August because they do not want to attend school without their new Jordans [sneakers]. If they wear sneakers that are not brand name, they will be told their footwear is “china” as in “Made in China,” or cheap. Since the Jordans are so expensive, the students need to wait until their parents receive their cupones which they then can exchange for cash.

\[364\] I define hyper-canalized masculinities as social inertia which propels young men along a streamlined trajectory with slim chance of deviation.
So while the head turning machine gun blasts grab Puerto Rico’s media headlines, it is the school day silhouettes of children slipping noiselessly into nonattendance which go disregarded, inciting neither disruption nor alarm. Yet such youngsters transition swiftly into unblinking child soldiers. It is thus the State’s active *disinvestment* in its public school students, then, which inevitably marks these potential deserters as an “expendable population,” (Butler) propelling them into the streets with no marketable licit skills, and consequently by default, too often towards a lifetime trajectory of violence.

Yet what is the actual price being paid by Island residents for what are, in some cases, anemic, disinterested elementary schools within a bureaucratically bloated public education system? How is that loss calculated? How is it measured? For a failed institution is not *merely* a failed institution: it is a mechanism by which the populace has been directly, forcefully, and chronically denigrated and exploited—whether or not the offenses are immediately visible. As Nixon (2011:14, 13) plies, “our rhetorical conventions for bracketing violence routinely ignore ongoing, belated casualties” along with threats to social welfare which are “incremental, exponential, and far less sensationally visible.” As such, we are left with no other option but to become better at connecting these dots retrospectively, at tracing these trajectories backwards.

How might we best pinpoint patterns in which public school children from government housing alternately remain matriculated or fall from the rolls with little to no interventions or repercussions on the part of the State? How has ostensibly “mandatory schooling” become largely elective? What are the contributing factors from the community, the family unit, and the school which contribute to this phenomenon? What
stop gap measures could be instituted in order to stem the tide of desertion? How do two institutional arms of the State, *el Departamento de Educación* and *el Departamento de la Familia*, work in concert to address this crisis and where could better communication be facilitated?

¿Tan Alegre Vengo?[^365]

I was in Wendy’s at lunch hour and in the parking lot there were some boys, like ten or eleven years old begging for money. So my colleague and I asked them why they weren’t in school since they were so young and they replied, “For what? If it’s not worth it because we know that we’re going to die young; we’re not going to even make it to our twenties.” They knew, well, that their lives weren’t going to last. So they weren’t going to waste any time in school because they were already destined to work with drugs and knew that was quite dangerous and they would be killed at a very young age.[^366]

—citizen in the metro area

Particularly over the past decade, gross abdication on the part of the Department of Education has reinforced this caste system *al estilo criollo narcótico*. The age old troubadour inspired custom of clapping or knocking together two sticks to keep time while singing seasonal *villancicos* (Christmas lullabies) in the streets to idling traffic at stoplights for spare change has morphed into a mere stepping-stone for the children to hustle their own bodies to indiscriminate commuters passing by. From a longitudinal angle, this could also serve as just one more stepping-stone away from the lifestyle of the adult addicts hustling on the other side of the bridge, one hand gripping an open wound, the other shaking loose coins in a tattered McDonald’s cup. What, after all, are the state’s biopolitical obligations to these children?

There is a discourse on school grounds wherein, on occasion, a teacher will comment directly to children vis-à-vis their projected future success or failure—a rather

[^365]: Title of a traditional *villancico* sung at Christmas time, “Happily I Arrive.”
[^366]: Informal Conversation, 7.2014.
amorphous prediction, but nonetheless effectively “prophesying” a given child’s educational trajectory. Predictably, the coddled favorites beam, while the condemned títeres (lit., puppets, marionettes; colloquially, gangsters) escape to the roof. Unsurprisingly then, their responses are read as confirmation. The State must begin to assign value to the lives of those children who, once extruded from the public school system, elect one of the manifold unsavory exit chutes at their “disposal.” There may be merit in further exploration of the following: How do the dynamics within current institutional structures conspire with community trends to perpetuate this abandonment? What could be gleaned from following the paper trails of these former students backwards? How are families contributing to problematic scholastic fossilizations of identity development? Have we entered into a regressive state, wherein formal schooling is meeting a partial eclipse if not a full demise?

A Return to Agrarian Era Education Levels?

In NAFSA’s\textsuperscript{367} 2013 report on education in Puerto Rico, the level of compulsory education is cited officially as ninth grade. It reads, “Intermediate school comprises grades seven through nine and completes compulsory education. A junior high diploma may be issued.” Is this, then, an undisturbed relic from a former epoch, like summer vacation as a time for harvesting crops, which somehow has not evolved along with the modern era? Across the US year round schooling certainly has not replaced an extended summer recess; are there similar reasons the majority urban population of Puerto Rico retains this law?

\textsuperscript{367} National Association of Foreign Student Advisors.
Historically in a more agrarian setting, an eighth or ninth grade level of education was the norm. For instance when a sizable Puerto Rican population moved to Lancaster City, Pennsylvania in the 1970s to work, primarily, within the poultry industry a new custom accompanied them: lavish graduations and proms from the city’s junior high’s ensued. Yet locals confused by this jubilation would not have had to look far in order to understand the logic: the County’s local Amish population attends their 150 one room schoolhouses only until eighth grade as well. But in light of a post-modern economy, what are the societal implications for the Island of Puerto Rico if we provide only an education which terminates even prior to the completion of either junior high or elementary school?

As Arendt (1993:196) asserts with well-muscled conviction, the realm of education should be that wherein:
[W]e decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices nor strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the chance of renewing a common world.

And precisely what, we might reasonably ask, would renewal look like for street children in a society on the cusp of transitioning into a full bloomed narcostate? This is perhaps the first question to be tackled in the process of unpacking the constellations of violence in the youth soldiers’ lives.

Aguadilla

Life, Delimited: Hyper-canalized Masculinities and the Utility of Being Unschooled

Although he, too, was a student of special education, Radamés walked out years prior to Nael. At present his world has become even smaller: from start to finish, the
entire route encompasses less than 500 feet. Down one driveway, crossing the community’s east/west arterial, then rocketing down another perpendicular driveway. Radamés then turns around and traces the same path back. Allegedly, this is the only loop he traverses on his motorcycle—a motorcycle notably nicer than any other in the community. He has made known publicly, ¡Qué me maten aquí! Qué sea en mi hábitat que me maten. A more circumscribed life is difficult to conjure; Radamés, an acting bichote, is only twenty and change.

Paradoxically, at an outdoor revival less than five years ago Radamés magnetized the attention of the preacher, who proceeded to prophesize over him. The man of the cloth asserted that the Lord had placed a hedge around Radamés, that nothing would harm him, that he would be free from all attacks, and that—in the end—he would be set apart for the work of God. Neighbors sometimes comment on the veracity of this prophesy, on the extent to which it has been fulfilled “hasta el sol de hoy.” That is to say, although involved in a stream of tiroteos, Radamés emerges untouched, though incarcerated, he leaves unharmed. Not entirely unlike the “bulletproof” magic performed by talismans and other sorcery in Sierra Leone and Liberia, this aura he now embodies serves as evidence of a mystical force (Hoffman 2011). And while there appears little speculation or doubt as to when the second part of the prophecy will be fulfilled, his loved ones simply are waiting.

In the meantime, I am walking down the long breezeway at the school on my way to my car when an older teacher with whom I have never interacted prior approaches me

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368 Let them kill me here! Let it be in my habitus that they kill me!
369 Acting bichotes are the on-site stand-in druglords who act in the stead of the formal, shot-calling bichote (who is off premises for security reasons, preference, or due to incarceration). Those incarcerated receive weekly stipends of pre-designated amounts from the profits of el punto directly to their accounts at their respective penal institutions.
and inquires about my work. I explain briefly. She presses me a bit regarding issues of safety; I share a bit but largely demur. Very tentatively she asks if I know Radamés. I nod slightly. She wants to know, “How is he?” Well, that’s a tough one; I don’t know how to answer her. Retaining a static affect, I put my palm out, fingers upwards and perpendicular to my wrist, then close it into a loose fist. The gesture is neutral. It is not common that school staff inquire as to the welfare of former students. Perhaps because far too often it would feel like prying the lid off of something meant to stay sealed. In the rare event that they do, their tentativeness is palpable: no one ever grows accustomed to death and its infinite permutations.

Ascertaining my reluctance, the teacher extends her hand as if it were a stop sign to assuage my reservations. “I taught him for years. Everyone tells me that he is a bichote now,” she probes, “Is that true?” I purse my lips and reflexively my gaze travels diagonally upwards to the breezeway’s ceiling. Again she reads my reticence as confirmation. I force myself to return her eye contact. Shifting gears, I ask her, “May I share with him that you asked for him? It would mean a lot him, I think.” At this she begins to back away from me, “No. I have three daughters,” she informs me. “You don’t have any children, but I have three daughters.” So even that small encouragement—that a teacher still thinks of you, that to this day a teacher still remembers you fondly—even that, even that is withheld. Across this institutional/community breach, fear strangles to asphyxiation any potential extensions toward the one who finds himself to be “other.”
The Obsolescence of Schooling in a Narcotics Dominated Economy

Look, all the little kids you started out working with ten years ago, they all grew up to be a bunch of charlatans. You did what you could. People would have accepted you more if you showed up handing out [Michael] Jordan clothing, Jordan shoes. That’s what they care about. The schools? Look at them, they’re empty. Nobody cares about that.

—Quis

If I get pregnant at 15, you give me EVERYTHING.
If I want to study and work, you take EVERYTHING away.

—sign held by a protester at May 1, 2017 Paro Nacional

Ask a coca farmer in the hills of Colombia what value he places on academic preparation. Chances are, it is the illicit coca farming itself which allows his children to receive an education. Ask a low-level trafficker in the metropolitan area of the Caribbean and the answer will likely differ tremendously. For some, sitting in classrooms all day is no longer viewed as pragmatic: it represents nothing more than diminishing returns. Yes, they will attend if court-ordered, but apart from that? For those with their sights set on participation in the narcotics trade, attendance after—or even during—junior high in particular feels counterintuitive.

Whereas in past decades school desertion was a phenomenon exhibited more often in junior and senior high, increasingly the completion of even sixth grade is regarded as irrelevant: from the perspective of many students, there is dramatically little connection between academic success and real world benefits. With far greater facility, one can become an armed actor with a respectable income—even as an adolescent. Not surprisingly then, students’ participation in child labor also can serve as a precursor to early desertion. In such instances, the children learn early the reward of an immediate pay-off and subsequently encounter it difficult to relinquish.
Child labor in Puerto Rico has a long history, not all of it unpleasant. In the 1940s, as the mother of Maelo\textsuperscript{370} recounts, her son:

\textit{[S]hone shoes and went to the obras—back then there were many obras—and he filled the sacks of cement with pieces of wood and then sold them for a nickel. He would bring me 40 to 50 cents—which was really good in those days. Man, for a half dollar that would make rice, beans, a steak, fried bananas, and everything.}\textsuperscript{371}

Today on the Island, however, child labor—although very often not unpleasant in and of itself—generally symbolizes something different. Early participation in street hustles such as shoe-shining at a nearby farmer’s market, panhandling while singing \textit{villancicos} to motorists at convoluted intersections, bagging groceries, etc. more often than not flags a level of abdication on the part of the guardian—whether in the form of supervision or provision. Such pastimes also indicate a likelihood of deprivation (i.e., insufficient or inconsistent provision for the child and/or siblings within the household).

True to their self-ascribed \textit{bueneante} stripes, however, Quis and Abdiel are exceptions to this mentality. Quis rewards his three nieces monetarily for scholastic achievements and funds their private schooling. Ask Abdiel and his response is as meditative as it is humble: he’s thoughtful for a moment. Then the sides of his eyes crinkle up as he asks,

\begin{quote}
Have you seen how sometimes people here post pictures of themselves at some hotel pool on Facebook with the caption: \textit{“Los que pueden, pueden.”} Or “Those who got it like that, got it like that.” And the whole reason they are even there, are even able to afford that, is that they are using money from their children’s drug sales.
\end{quote}

I’ll be straight with you, at one point or another all of us have been \textit{jodedores}—all of us hustled. But am I going to be \textit{roncando} (boasting) that my kids sell drugs and then use that income to go to the pool? No. Not even if my kids invited me just to go out to eat with that money. I wouldn’t go. On the contrary, I would

\textsuperscript{370} Ismael Rivera, a famous \textit{salsero} from Santurce.

\textsuperscript{371} From documentary.
boast about my child becoming a doctor, or because my child earned good grades in school.372

As a bueneante Abdiel wants his children to avoid the footsteps of his former life. Income does not turn his head. Materialism does not turn his head. He dresses simply and works two or three jobs without complaint. Never leaving a job without ensuring that he has another established, he tells me that you can’t jump at every new opportunity and cites the closing of the Island’s three Sports Authority stores. “Look, those guys got to work in air conditioning, a cushy atmosphere, nice hours—but look at them now: unemployed.” His current trajectory is whistle clean and focused; his happiest moments his attendance at his children’s academic events.

For some “la perse,”373 or the ever-present, unshakeable sense of psychological persecution that follows one throughout the day and night, is the only reason they avoid participation in trafficking circles. So not the threat of capture, nor the potential sentencing prospects, but the gnawing discomfort of conscience is the sole deterrent traficantes cite—particularly those who have also worked in either the licit or illicit labor sectors.

“What I’m trying to say,” Abdiel clarifies, “is that there were times that because of an unexpected financial necessity, I would work a shift or two on el punto. But that’s how it was: make the money I needed and then skate. I never spent any extra time there, was never part of el jangueo374 that you see happening there.” Abdiel differentiates his involvement from those whose lifestyle revolves around local distribution dynamics and skirmishes, those who participate as much for the fraternity as for the income. During his

373 Alternately, I’ve heard it referred to as “la persee.”
374 The hanging out.
younger years, *el punto* was more of a stop-gap measure, *un resuelve*. For those facing an emergency, such instantaneous employment can serve the purpose of a temporary solution. This fluidity between participation and non-participation in trafficking circles depends upon longstanding community or familial ties with leadership: given such *confianza* one can both enter and leave at will—unburdened by obligations nor contingencies. As such, for some *el punto* occupies the space of a peripheral, laidback hustle with no strings attached. A last option.

But in Sión’s case, things were very different. The first time I ask how long he stayed in formal schooling he gave me a grade level dramatically misaligned with his age at the time. Upon revisiting it with him later, Sión conceded that, in fact, it may have been fourth and not sixth when he and the school parted ways. Our memories, given leeway, lean toward dignity. Dates, it seems, can subconsciously recalibrate over time. The vulnerable 4th grade disappearance can slide into a more respectable 6th grade deserter. Either way, from the beginning he shared that he had never received his sixth grade diploma. Balling his hand into a fist, he extends his thumb towards his mouth and pours a make believe beverage down his throat. “Mamí was an alcoholic,” Sión clarifies, “No one was *pendiente.*”
“Classroom Norms: 1.) We attend every day.”
A Montessori Elementary Public School Classroom, San Juan

Not dissimilar to the case of Sión, most teachers cite affective reasons for non-attendance:

[Many of the less supported students] don’t even make it to seventh grade because on one occasion or another the student has a difficult or frustrating situation with a teacher or even a staff member and what they decide is: well, I’m not going to continue attending school anymore.

Not all of the teachers [are willing] to work with students like them—either they find it unattractive or quite simply they are just plain scared of them. Then if such students are not reasonable, if they do not respect their own lives or the lives of others, you know, they do not respect the teacher and they leave. They leave because they do not want to follow the school’s rules.

Here there’s no one who goes and looks for them, who goes to their house and tells them, “You have to be in the school now, let’s go!” The school can call the mother and she says, “Ay, I cannot do it. Ay, that boy I cannot handle him anymore.” Or they call the mother and she says, “I am working.”

375 Interview, 2.2016.
Those children who do attempt to stick with it, often are not rewarded anyway.

The Mayor’s cousin Nefti finishes fixing a leaking pipe under my kitchen sink. “You’re not going to believe this,” he looks up at me from the tiled floor, “but I was held back in second grade four times.” This is a man whose jawline is anodized steel, a man who does not speak. A man who stands for hours on a Saturday alongside the canopy of Holy Row leaning against a pole with a sweating Medalla in one hand and a deadpan gaze alternately aimed at the ground or the horizon. What does that level of institutionalized rejection wreak on the psyche of a small child? On his sense of self-worth and value within the context of his community?

One pattern occurs wherein community members are intentionally abandoning academic trajectories at the completion of sixth grade with the plan of enrolling in one of a plethora of alternative to the GED programs at the age of sixteen (the age at which they are first eligible to enroll). This creates a few challenges which impact the overall welfare and security of the commonwealth: 1) The average age of a sixth grade graduate is eleven years old. Unless the student has failed several times or has participated in Special Education (which does not educate students as related to their age), this leaves a gap of up to five (5) years wherein the child is out of school (and potentially in the streets) 2) The quality of such local alternatives to the GED is known to be very poor. Further, it is dramatically unclear what, if any, licensing requirements such programs possess and if anyone is in charge of monitoring the quality and/or requirements of their curricula (some appear to be for profit while others appear to be government sponsored non-profits). 3) Even when there are the best intentions to participate in the latter programs, it is often the case that such plans do not come to fruition. 4) It appears that even though both young
men and young women enroll in these programs, it is the young women who are more likely to complete these programs, which means they obtain a credential which their male peers do not. 5) Employment prospects are dismal for this population, but they are exacerbated by the reality that few employers hire anyone prior to their 18th birthday. 6) This sobering reality contributes to the general malaise and loss of hope as to gainful employment prospects, thereby propelling more youth into the lucrative economies of the illicit underworld.


It has become evident that one of the greatest administrative challenges facing the Island’s Department of Education which has gone unaddressed up until the present is the failure to provide follow up to “bajos,” or departures of students throughout the academic year. Most often this designation is assigned to those students who fail to attend. A protocol must be instated wherein any bajo trips a system wide alert and immediate and long-term follow-up is initiated and sustained. Additionally, when students are “wait-listed” due to classrooms being at capacity, there is no one responsible to ensure that the student encounters a slot elsewhere.

Admittedly, the morass involved in matriculating a student is daunting—particularly when the student has a custodial parent or guardian who is ill-disposed toward supporting their progeny’s education. There are no less than ten (10) requirements for a student’s matriculation (see below). Further, as matriculation may only be initiated and completed by the student’s “father, mother, or legal guardian,” it is this final hurdle

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376 Sometimes this is due to serving alcohol at an establishment; drinking age here is 18; but it has become generalized and in an economy where the unemployment is at 11.7% (much improved from the high of 16.9 years prior) and the Labor Participation Rate is 40.6% it means there is little hope that this will shift to allow sixteen and seventeen-year-olds into the labor force (Chappatta 2016).
which can prove the most insurmountable. As one teenager shares, “I asked my mom every week when we could go to the school for me to get registered and every week she told me, ‘Next week.’ I just got tired of asking.”

This phenomenon of non-matriculation is far more common than I initially suspected; it can occur just as often with all progeny of a family or with only the less favored progeny within a family. Once the child is out of elementary school, the State appears to be entirely laissez faire in its approach, leaving children who desire to be enrolled, but lacking in parental support, without recourse to obtain a matriculated status.

The ten (10) requirements for matriculation: copy of birth certificate, copy of social security card, record of vaccinations, transcript of credits, two (2) letters of recommendation, a passport sized photo, evidence of residency, results of standardized testing from the previous school year, ten dollar contribution, current IEP (Individual Evaluation Plan) if student is registered as Special Education. Further, matriculation may only be initiated and completed by the student’s “father, mother, or legal guardian (evidence required).”

As such, unless court-ordered, most often children will desist in attendance when transferred to more distant schools (as is sometimes required when schools in the

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Informal conversation, 4.2016.
immediate vicinity cannot address a student’s special education requirements). These schools, although perhaps geographically within perhaps a three mile radius of the child’s residence, are often considered worlds away ideologically by either the student’s family and/or the child himself. Identifying and taking measures to remediate what I refer to as “sinker schools”—schools to whom high risk students are assigned and matriculated, but then subsequently never attend—will prove vital to rejuvenating the junior high schools.

On paper these schools have a full roster and are correspondingly eligible for federal funding according to per capita services rendered. The daily reality, however, is that an inordinate percentage of their student body is not functionally present. As in past decades, so in the present there is a dire need for community-based alternative education for boys between the ages of ten and fifteen. Further a K-8 system would halve the number of transitions students would need to make during their educational trajectory and thereby provide more reinforcement on the affective continuum.

One afternoon while reflecting with us upon the impact of a field trip to a local theater to see the children’s celebrity “El Trotamundos,” Alarcón admits,

Today, today the man onstage gave a hug to every child present in the auditorium…and I wanted so badly to jump up there and give him a hug—I really needed one, [expletive]. I need it right now. And I cried, man how I cried. I cried like Mary Magdalene. Those children are so in need of that. Of “Tell me that you love me.” Of “Tell me that you respect me,” right? “Although [this man on stage] might not understand, he pays attention to me…”

Alarcón is shaking his head and looking down at his desk. All told, the faculty and staff of our public schools are just as much in need of support and appreciation as the student population they often strive so sacrificially to serve. As one veteran teacher recounts,

Alarcón does not simply mitigate against potential interventions with the Department of
the Family but also against potential charges being brought against unruly parents or guardians of the students:

Supposedly those entering school grounds should know how to conduct themselves. If there were a different principal here, we would have had forty parents locked up already—with the attitudes they bring in here and the way they talk to him. In other schools the principal may become aggressive or won’t budge an inch. But Alarcón is very accommodating, he is not someone who quickly calls the police and throws someone in jail to apply the rule of law. No, he offers many opportunities to people, he talks with them.

We have had cases which could have ended up in court, with police involvement, charging students’ parents with the violation of Law 30 but Alarcón has been able to grapple with those problems. From experience we know that to call in the police, to go to court—the case will be suspended over and over again and won’t amount to anything. And in the midst of this morass, the student is out of school the parents are angry and will not bring him, and the one who ends up injured is the student.378

To extend such grace amidst the daily vagaries and vicissitudes of public service, one must absorb many blows. And as Misi Magda insists, not just the administrators but, “The teachers we are orphans, we are orphans.” After a teacher faces criminal charges and is deposed from his post due to losing his temper by swearing at a student who swore at him, the Island unequivocally backs the teacher. This taps into the angst which commonly accompanies this position. One commenter goes as far as to equate the teacher’s role to that of Christ’s:

378 Interview, 2015.
PROVOCATION: the daily bread of the PUERTO RICAN TEACHER. Isolated within the four walls of a classroom, set apart, alone, unprotected. THEY LIVE THEIR LIVES DAY BY DAY. Like SOLDIERS IN A WAR, stalked by the enemy: youth WITH NEITHER THE DISCIPLINE NOR THE WILLINGNESS TO LEARN, who provoke at every occasion. Suffering from crossfire from other enemies, the political and inept supervisors, and one even much greater: the community of FOODSTAMPERS, [who are] HOSTILE towards them. If you want to know all about the SOCIAL AND MORAL DETERIORATION that is devouring us, ask a teacher and don’t pay attention to the political opportunists. To be a TEACHER is to be THE HAND OF GOD, the Father of the teacher Jesus. Our first TEACHER who once lost his patience in a temple, he who served as our REDEEMER and was CRUCIFIED. Any resemblance to our colleague, the teacher [who was deposed]? The TEACHERS, from now on, are not going to be so invested in their work of educating, [now] they will work with a concern in their minds, that upon crossing the threshold of their classrooms every morning to begin their daily tasks with the sword of Damocles in their hand [they will be] asking, “Perhaps today it will be my turn?”

—Online commentary from username “J. Mari” (“La explosión 2016)

The Infiltration of Narcotics Culture into Scholastic Spaces
Porosity of the Perimeters: Ebb

“When they told me they were transferring me to Alelía, I cried.”

—Misi Carmen

More than a year later, Misi Aurora still asks me—but only when we are alone—if I know anything of Nael’s family, if I’ve seen or talked with them. Today when she asks I am giving her a ride home. We pass the corner where it was that he “did that act” and she repeats the chronological rundown of logistics mechanically. We overlap one another’s sentences, filling in the parts the other leaves out. It all seems rehearsed, our words on auto-pilot. No matter how much time elapses, we both keep telling one another the story, we both keep staring straight ahead.

The school teachers with whom I had the privilege of talking unanimously agreed that there was a lack of venues through which they can receive emotional support for the

379 Interview, 8.2013.
daily reality of working in what can at times be a veritable war zone. There were an
infinite number of stray bullet stories—of close calls and near misses. Interfering in any
of the local power structures of the illicit economy has its consequences. Teachers are no
strangers to vandalism—particularly of their vehicles. Such problematic dynamics have
been cited since as far back as the 90s when the narcotics trade exploded on the Island.
Although it is unclear how widespread such dilemmas are, they do occur outside of the
metro areas and are decidedly not new. Discussions of self-care are lacking amongst
school staff and many more than I anticipated battle chronic health issues. But the added
psychological burdens inherent in navigating our frequently volatile setting exacts its
own less visible, yet no less tangible toll. As one teacher summarizes:

There are so many things that one sees in a school about which a child does not
dare inform you. But you realize it, you realize a lot of things. There are many
teachers who keep quiet, who don’t say anything about it…because to say it, one
then has to officially declare it, testify about it. Because sometimes, sadly, you
have no protection: you will be seen in court and [the residents from the
community] will already know that it was you who opened your mouth. Now your
life is threatened, or maybe—may God not permit it—the life of your family. We
[teachers] run tremendous risk here in the schools…and there is no support.\footnote{Informal Conversation, 5.2015.}

So, in the end, reticence is rewarded for teachers as well. Other teachers cite their
paradoxical position vis-à-vis the school social worker who requests information from
them, but then is not legally permitted to enlighten the teacher as per the student’s
situation. And worse, when litigation arises between two parties, a teacher can end up
feeling completely alienated. It is unsurprising then, that there is at times an aura of
impotence, of resignation. Six months later, I alert Misi Aurora to my addition of one of
her current students, Benjamín, onto my list of children whose scholastic tethering was
tenuous at best, who was in need of some form of intervention.\textsuperscript{381} She studies my face. With one open palm extended towards her I ask, “Where do you think he will be two years from now?” Misi Aurora does not answer; it is as if she does not hear me. I press her again, repeating the question. She blinks and begins to talk about something else.

But a week later, while talking with me after school in her classroom, Misi Aurora shares that her students are raving about a party—\textit{Una fiesta, no, Misi. Un PARTY!}\textsuperscript{382} they correct her—thrown within their residencial over the weekend. During their group conversation she makes a point to ask with whom they attended this celebration and what time they returned home. All except one student share that they went alone. The earliest any returned home was three in the morning, the latest was six. Misi Aurora’s eyes widen as she relays their stories, “I asked how they got back inside their homes: some have keys, others knocked—awakening their sleeping mothers.” Here she links their autonomy to a correlative risk of premature demise, “At twelve Nael was going to a street festival [ten miles from home] until all hours with no adults. At fourteen he was dead.”

\textbf{Tides of Transformation}\n
There is a wooden door in Old San Juan which, of late, has served as synecdoche for the Island’s affective state. Originally painted in the traditional colors of the \textit{monoestrella},\textsuperscript{383} once the recession hit hard and the prospect of being governed by a non-elected, U.S. based \textit{Junta} threatened, it was repainted black and white in protest. This flag has been adopted by various movements (\textit{Campamento Contra la Junta} and \textit{No Más Promesas}) and used during protests. Once the Island’s tennis champion Monica Puig

\textsuperscript{381} See Chapter 12 for further discussion of this unaccounted for segment of the population.
\textsuperscript{382} The distinction the students are making here, ostensibly, is that a “party” is of much greater size and import than a “fiesta.”
\textsuperscript{383} “The single star,” or the Puerto Rican flag.
dazzled everyone in the Olympics, however, those colors were transformed into a victorious white and gold. Her victory catalyzed a new up tempo, a positive fervor that seems to linger.\textsuperscript{384}

\textbf{Villa Palmera}

\textbf{Luís Muñoz Marín Airport}

\textsuperscript{384} When Caraballo-Cueto (2015:130) refers to the country’s “self-propelled phenomenon” of homicide incidence, he is highlighting the tendency for “past homicides to induce more homicides in the following periods.” This nod towards a deleterious normalization of violence suggests that a re-stigmatization of homicide, however operationalized, may retain some merit. Both during Monica Puig’s Olympic victory in 2016 and Puerto Rico’s National Baseball team’s string of six consecutive wins in the 2017 World Baseball Classic (a four day span with no homicides), media outlets were swift to correlate a drastic reduction in homicides with the Island’s celebratory and unifying—albeit rather momentary—shift in focus. Could upbeat distractions have statistical impact? What are ways in which we may have overlooked more affectively based components to homicide trends? Parenthetically, however, the National Baseball Team’s catcher and team captain Yadier Molina’s public acknowledgement of this brief hiatus in homicides proved a flashpoint for ridicule amongst online commenters on www.espn.com. Sadly, while Molina expressed serious gratitude regarding “the breather” the games provided for the Island, some non-Islanders took it as an opportunity to be pejorative towards the Island’s present challenges.
So too, within the sphere of education there have been encouraging strides. For one, an effort to create safer spaces within schools has been noticeable. From 2013 onward there have been notable, concrete changes taken by the Department of Education. One transformation is in regard to porosity: additional fencing has been added to school grounds for security from the outside and in order to literally cordon off of areas in which students formerly played, but which pose a safety risk as they are outside the scope of possible supervision. Additionally, such alterations to the physical plant have been made on some school properties in the metro area in order to avert the risk of students leaving the property without permission. While patrolling elementary school perimeters more tightly may sound draconian, the reality is that a porous perimeter poses a far greater risk to the student body at large. One veteran teacher relayed that decades earlier, elementary school students in the metro area were utilized as drug mules; one was even killed by traffickers on school property.385

One would imagine that a child should be safe within school grounds, during school hours. And yet this is not an assumption that has proven true given the infiltration of the street economies into these formerly sacrosanct arenas. Another teacher, Misi Damaris, shares her experience at a public high school in a rural setting wherein, on a daily basis, one student managed a “mobile drug point” from a stash of material he kept hidden in his backpack. She hearkens back to share her naiveté towards the system and the degree to which some students’ lives are so centered on trafficking that school becomes primarily a business venue—and the academic component less an obstacle than merely incidental.

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385 Informal Conversation, 5.2015.
I had a tenth grader who never cut my class, he was very faithful, but he would always wear his backpack. When I would encourage him to take it off so that he would be comfortable, he would tell me that he was comfortable like that. And since I was naïve, I kept asking him every day to take it off until another student in the class told me privately that there was a drug point in the school and that this student is the one who runs it, storing the drugs in his backpack. When I told the security and the principal everyone already knew.\(^{386}\)

Then one day before class the same student confided in me that he was armed. So I taught the class with him sitting in the first row, armed. Sweat was pouring off of me because I thought to myself, Wow, if suddenly something happens and the boy gets annoyed and loses control, we are all sunk—and what am I going to do? The sensation was horrible. When the whole class left, I told him that I needed to speak with him and so he stayed. And I do not know where I found the strength—because I analyze it now and think My God I was insane—but I told him, “Let this be the first and last time that you come to my class armed.” He had sunglasses on [and when I said this] he took them off and asked, “How do you know?” And I told him, “The others told me. Now, I believe that I have been rather good with you. I believe that I have never disrespected you, I have never spoken to you badly—whereas there are many teachers here who have been disrespectful towards you as a human being, who have spoken contemptuously of you and I have never done that… You know why? Because I love my profession and I have said that it doesn’t matter the circumstances through which a student arrives in my classroom, I am going to demonstrate that inside every human being there is love. So please let this be the first and last time that we go through this difficulty. Even though I haven’t done anything, inside I am scared to death. And if I am here admitting that to you, likewise please listen to me.

He left the school running and went into the mountain behind [the school] and threw the gun there. Then by two in the afternoon the school was full of police. The whole car ride home I was sobbing. When I told my husband, he said that because he knows that I love my profession he has never interfered, but now he felt that I had to resign [or] create a space between the school and our home. [But] when I look in the eyes of my son I see the life that he is living, but what also comes to my mind are the eyes of my students.\(^{387}\)

This incident highlights the prevalence of public secrets and the corresponding paralysis they cause in the face of the narcotics world’s encroachment into public sectors.

\(^{386}\) Here the teacher acknowledges what Taussig refers to as a public secret.

\(^{387}\) Interview 3.2015.
“The power of the public secret is...[that] it provides a set of culturally familiar, and convincing, tropes to help people navigate the ordered disorder of their lives” (Penglase 2009:59). Misi Damaris’ response is just one example of citizens—but particularly civil servants—who are being forced to rely upon and implement their own ingenuity and resources in the face of the State’s absence. When it does react, the State is often slow to take action. Reflecting back on that day, Misi Damaris wonders aloud what could have happened if the student had opened fire, given that it had taken almost two hours for the police to arrive. This pervasive isolation, this grating everyday alienation from the protection of the State also contributes to and promotes an “in-house” handling of many issues.

Misi Raquel shares an analogous incident from her first year of teaching in San Juan almost three decades ago. As the eighth graders are filing into the classroom, one sits down and after removing his books from his bookbag, places a handgun on his desktop as well. She observes this without reacting outwardly and proceeds to distribute the day’s worksheets to her students in her usual manner. When she comes down his row, she bends down and mentions to him with an even keel, “That really isn’t science related, so you need to put it away,” and keeps walking. The student “le hace caso” and tucks it back into his bag. She proceeds to teach the class as she would normally, and only after class does she leave to advise the administration. Intuitively she knew that she should show no emotion. Again, one teacher’s psychological insight and composure ensure that an otherwise compromised classroom remains safe. In neighborhoods where the plumb

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388 See Chapter 4 for a homicide police officer’s explanation of the State’s abdication of care for witnesses of crime.
389 It has been said that at times even sexual incidents between minors occurring on school property have been handled without the involvement of authorities.
line, more often than not, is determined through brute force, Misi Raquel’s affective dexterity highlights her sagacity.

**Porosity of the Perimeter: Flow**

A former elementary school deserter who spent a year and a half on the streets before returning to a different school (only to graduate from sixth grade on the cusp of turning fifteen and consequently transform into a youth narco-soldier) shared with me that the primary reason that he preferred his new elementary school was that, “They don’t let us leave.” On the Island there is tremendous variability in the porosity of schools’ perimeters; some principals lament their inability to prevent students’ unsanctioned departures, others don’t seem to notice. How, then, do we conceptualize security if the children’s attendance is largely discretionary? One elementary school teacher shares that her students tend to leave the premises

In order to look for an iguana or [to buy] a snack, some candy... In the case of our school, there is no gate that’s locked, but I think that even if the gate were locked they would jump the fence regardless because the school is in their community; the place where the school is located makes it easier for them [to leave without permission]. They know that when they jump the fence they are already home. So for them, it’s not something bad to leave the school.

*Misi* Aurora’s assertion that at school they are “already home” is foundational to understanding the custom of fluid boundaries and an indifference to adherence to the regular timeline of a school day. Yet their departures are not always so idyllic in nature. Over the years stories circulated that there were also various children fielding calls on their cell phones while in class from a known pedophile, then leaving school grounds to rendezvous with him at the parking lot of a nearby shopping center. When I spoke at

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390 Field notes, 10.2013.
391 Interview, 6.2014.
length with the children about the dangers inherent in accompanying him, they would object that they needed $10 for a haircut. When I approached parents with the concern, I discover that they are already cognizant of the problem. One living room discussion, however, leads to a stepfather getting dressed (adding a t shirt, chain, and ball cap to his former ensemble) and heading off to clarify the issue with the local bichote. Upon returning, he reports that the pedophile had been beaten up multiple times, but that now since he was soliciting the boys outside of the community walls there was not much else to be done. If the children chose to respond to his proposals, there was nothing the traffickers could do to prevent such interactions as it was outside of their jurisdiction.

Chagrinned, I stand up to leave and his girlfriend (the child’s mother) fiercely admonishes me, “¡No busques problemas!” I immediately object to her angle—how is seeking to protect the children looking for problems? Locking eyes with me, she remains firm in her stance. After denying her own son’s involvement, she emphasizes that she can’t worry about other people’s children (implying that the same was true for me). Her face set like flint as she walks with me to the door, she repeats, “¡No busques problemas!” and I finally realize that her concern is for my safety—were I to pursue the issue any further.

No more than three days later, after a light dinner of pollo frito, amarillos, and arroz con habichuelas, I sit immobilized by a carbohydrate stupor at the kitchen table with family in the foothills of Juncos. As the coquis begin to launch into their evening chorus, I listen soberly as Tío Pedro, incredulous at my naïveté, rebukes me: ¡Chacha!

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392 See Chapter 5 for a discussion on the weighted import ascribed to the maintenance of image (i.e., image viewed as paramount whereas personal safety is regarded as irrelevant).

393 Neither my mother’s nor my father’s sibling, “Tío” Pedro is, rather, my first cousin’s deceased common law husband’s older half-sister’s second husband.
“¡Aquí no hay ley! Aquí se matan por un aguacate. Ya tenemos casi 300 homicidios este año y solamente estamos en el principio de marzo. Te digo que te matan. ¡Te matan!”

He is angry: Eyes flashing as he yells and bangs the table with his fist. He is adamant that I not go to the authorities about a rumored “voluntary” sex trafficking ring that was occurring amongst some of the unschooled youth. Tío Pedro explains that trafficking rings rarely operate in isolation. Yet out of fear that a child could be abducted or worse, it was the only occasion in more than eight years in the community that I contacted the FBI. Indirectly. Though a spouse. I was supposed to hear back, but never did. Months later I was told that when the FBI attempted to press charges, no one would speak: neither parents nor children. An impenetrable wall of aphoncity.

Nonetheless, the issue of porous perimeters is a longstanding one across the Island and there is great variability between schools as to how closely students’ daily trajectories are monitored. One junior high student complained to me that her new principal, in an attempt to clamp down, began disallowing the students to leave the school premises to buy fast food during lunchtime. This change was received with much resistance and resentment on the part of the student body. The loss of liberty is rarely well received. Yet the tightening and monitoring of perimeters has invaluable merit, particularly given the volatility of narcotics infused surroundings and the dangers which accompany it. At a nearby middle school just miles from that of the disgruntled teen, a fifteen-year-old boy was kidnapped just after having been dropped off for school by a

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394 “Girl! Here there is no law. Here they kill over [something as insignificant as] an avocado. We’ve had almost 300 murders here already this year and March has only just begun! I’m telling you: they will kill you. They will kill you!”
parent. Though officially the case remains unsolved, all subsequent indicators point to not only an abduction of the student, but to his subsequent torture and murder as well.

Curiously, I am unaware of any case wherein the institution of the school has been held liable for the unaccounted absence of a student. While there are stories which circulate as to students’ unsanctioned adventures both on and off school property, generally speaking, the parent populace does not seem to respond with litigation. More recently there have been court cases of institutional abuse with regard to physical “discipline” administered by teachers, but none addressing neglect, nor other issues related to omissions.

Change in this vein is not well received, but a necessary adjustment in order to reconfigure the focus of schools in the public school system. As one administrator explains with marked resignation,

Since the students are accustomed to being free, it’s ‘if I come, I come; if I don’t come, I don’t come; if I leave and don’t return, no one says anything…in my house they’re not going to say anything to me so it doesn’t matter: I get dressed, come to school, stay playing in the courtyard and do not even enter the classroom because… I don’t want to.’

The children have free will and sometimes the parents don’t even know about it, and if they find out they often don’t place any importance on it, or take any measures so that the child would stop [skipping school or cutting classes].

In an interview I was also able to corroborate that the Department of the Family is anemic with regard to enforcing the so-called “compulsory” school attendance:

Dept. of Family Admin.: A child’s attendance at school [after sixth grade] is voluntary, right? If, in the end, the child does not want to go—in spite of what his parents [may want] and all of the efforts have been made to persuade the child, well there’s no other way, right? The Department of the Family does not have a

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395 Interview, 6.2013.
mechanism by which it can pick up a minor and oblige the child to attend school—because the child has not committed a “falta”

Audrey: Until one commits a crime?
DF: Exactly. [Then] the court is going to obligate [the minor to attend].
Audrey: Or they put the minor in jail?
DF: Exactly.396

Until the minor commits a crime, then, all else remains in a holding pattern. Hence, the only manner by which student attendance can be ensured is through the justice system.

Once a ward of the department of justice (Ley 88) a minor ostensibly will be required to attend classes—either at a local school or a GED equivalency granting institution. Failure to attend, then, can become grounds for a probation violation. Yet even this protocol is not consistently applied, as there appears to be little oversight as to the quality of educational opportunities for adjudicated youth in programs of desvio. On the other hand, when Demetrio is later incarcerated for Ley 54 (intimate partner violence), he surprises himself by earning his high school equivalency. When home on a pass, he shows me the diploma, confessing that he never imagined it possible that he would achieve such a benchmark.

To compound this open-ended approach to school attendance, Puerto Rico, historically, had the global distinction of celebrating the most national holidays (due in part to colonialism). In fact, in light of the present deficit, some legislators proposed a budgetary reform which would slice the number of holidays by two thirds and save 500 million annually in “lost productivity and interruption in services” (Coto 2014). Correspondingly, following a discussion about some students’ proclivity for falling asleep in class, one teacher observed, “There are no days here. Here all the days are a

396 Interview, 11.2014.
party, let’s put it like that. For [the residents in government housing], all the days [of the week] could have an event that must be celebrated. Here the students are just as likely to go to bed in the early morning hours on a Wednesday as on a Friday or Saturday.” And as the number of permanent school closures continue to mount, it seems an ironic twist that the old school buses are being repurposed into “party buses.”

Due to bureaucratic webs, the exam of "ubicación" (or where the child would be best suited vis-a-vis placement) is not administered in a timely fashion (it is offered twice a year) and as a result, children remain in grade levels ill-suited to their developmental, emotional, psychological and academic needs. It is not uncommon that a fourteen-year-old is in sixth grade for an entire year, or a thirteen-year-old is in fourth grade. Certainly, the social awkwardness and indignity of these placements contribute to a student's proclivity to leave school prematurely. Beyond this, school transfers, both voluntary and involuntary (due to disciplinary measures) or being disallowed to re-matriculate in a former school once having left all signal a critical disruption to the child’s educational trajectory, one which in far too many cases eventually proves insurmountable. Like repeated grade retentions, transfers are far too often a death knell to students’ educational trajectories. Just as there is statistically less attrition in schools serving kindergarten through eighth versus the compartmentalization of elementary, junior high and high as discrete entities.

Additionally, on the affective front, some children are precluded from attending their graduation ceremonies (whether from sixth grade or high school) due to economic restraints. For the regalia and later celebration on the “party bus,” graduates from sixth grade.
grades are required to pay $100. Though they may seem to take these exclusions in stride, they nonetheless miss out on the rite of passage with their peers—and it becomes yet another form of social isolation as well.

Although offered in Spanish, the GED exam is not an option many deserters elect. Far more often an alternate “fourth year” (i.e., twelfth grade) programs are elected. A proliferation of private, largely for-profit such degree completion schools have sprouted up across the Island, and their curricula are not standardized (and furthermore, neither are they rigorous nor remotely compatible with the requisites of the GED). One junior high guidance counselor refers to them as nothing more than “fast food degrees.” Even still, they do allow those who earn them the satisfaction and dignity of accomplishment. However, such exams’ contribution to the adult population’s marketable skills appear to be almost entirely negligible.

Another concern is with the lack of oversight or accountability. While accelerated, weekend, or evening alternative educational programs technically fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education, there appears to be few resources dedicated to monitoring the quality or consistency of their performance. So who regulates the spin-offs? Apparently there is what is referred to as “Un Consejo Escolar de Educación” or a board that, at least theoretically, is supposed to oversee the functioning of these alternative programs. But as another principal comments, the board essentially

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399 Some without cost are offered by Vivienda, the for-profit housing authority that runs the Island’s government public housing.
400 Informal Conversation, 5.2013.
401 The Island is not alone in its transition towards questionably credentialed “credit mills” (Vevea & Karp 2015).
operates in name only, as it is rumored to be composed of a handful of retired teachers who work minimal hours and yet are supposed to cover the entire Island. He did, however, cite three (Aspira, Dante, and Casa) as non-traditional schools which, to his mind, offer legitimate curricula.

This seems readily remedied by mandating that all programs desirous of being certified by the Department of Education comply with the Spanish version of the GED. Such a change in legislation would eliminate unilaterally any discrepancies in content and evaluation. There would be an objective, standardized instrument of measurement whereby attainment of the diploma would be commensurable. For herein language is not the obstacle, preparation is. Despite being available in Spanish, the GED is not utilized with much frequency in Puerto Rico. Beyond the rigor of its content, the next stumbling block it presents is that the student must be 18 years old to take the exam (this is not to say that preparation could not take place beforehand, but for alternative programs on the Island the minimum age is only 16); the third is that the student must have completed, at a minimum, eighth grade. It would be worth petitioning the GED board to consider lowering the Island’s minimum age to 16 as well. But such action would not address those students who exit their scholastic trajectory prior to the completion of eighth grade, which, as has already been established, is substantial.

One principal concedes that formerly he was opposed to such alternative schooling because it has the potential to impact his student matriculation. But now he has reconciled himself to their utility, signaling their benefit to someone like his school’s fifty-something-year-old custodian who had only a sixth grade diploma prior to attending such a program a few years ago.
I understand that there are people who critique these accelerated programs, but they have to exist—and what I am saying goes against my best interests here because if they didn’t exist, I would have a greater number of students matriculated because they wouldn’t have any other option—but now we are living in a globalized world and it is not like before where your parents tell you, “You have to do this, and you may not leave this place.” Now you have options, now there is competition. Like cell phone carriers—before there was only Claro, which dominated the Island market. Now you can choose.

I myself have even suggested it to [my own] students; I tell them, “Hey instead of ending up in the streets, let’s get you enrolled in an accelerated graduation program in a nearby town.” And I remember going specially, personally with a student to one. And they could not believe that a public high school principal would come there. I asked them, “Why not?” and they said, “Because the public school principals critique us and dislike us and want us to be shut down.”

But education is a business. And you should sell your business. How I understand it, every institution should sell the program that they have effectively. The problem is not the accelerated programs, the problem is that there are no accompanying apprenticeships linked to them. So when the students who are less than eighteen years old complete them, what other option do they have? They are just going to stay at home sleeping (because no one will hire them).

In addition to classes for a high school equivalency, there are free classes in Conversational English, American Citizenship, and Literacy.

Regardless of a student’s age, attendance is primarily an affective phenomenon.

“If I were to run for the Mayor of San Juan, I could win easily—for as many people who know me here. In fact,” he adds parenthetically, “More know me here than even those in
my home municipality.” In 2007 he came to the high school where he currently works at a juncture wherein the Department of Education was about to close it due to a low enrollment of only 89 students. From there he built up the numbers through active recruitment in the community: by 2008 he had 239 students, by 2009 he retained 340. By 2010 the numbers began to fall again but he has been able to maintain the student population above 200 since his first year at the post.\footnote{Subsequent annual enrollments were as follows: 289 in 2010; 201 in 2012; 239 in 2013; 269 in 2014; 290 in 2015. When he left for two years (in 2010-2011) matriculation dipped again.}

There was wild variance between school institutions’ record keeping. In many ways, the lack of a paper trail is in and of itself its own indictment. Yet equivocation is a delicate art: I was told things as diverse as “a burglar broke into my office and stole all my paperwork” to the more blunt, “that faculty member does not keep documentation.” Ever. Which calls into the question the occurrence (or absence?) of audits. In one instance, the Department of Justice requested a former student’s file: after having gone through all their archives to no avail, the school staff simply offered that it was “missing.” At a neighboring school, however, this same student’s file (and those of his peers) were more than an inch thick.\footnote{I was amazed to see that this student’s file even contained a photocopy of a handwritten letter from 2009 wherein the student’s mother cites me as authorized to access the child’s immunization records in order to register him for summer basketball camp.} The system SIE (Sistema de Información Estudiantil), which was implemented in 2008 in order to have a data base across school districts across the Island, was intended to be a formal corrective to this inconsistency, yet clearly is not being utilized in the same manner nor to the same degree unilaterally on all sites. As a result, site-based decision-making has had unanticipated consequences vis-à-vis retention of possible student school deserters as well.
The institutional arm of the Department of the Family is perceived to be inept and untrustworthy and therefore irrelevant in offering any support or accountability to families (children placed in foster care often reside in more than twenty placements in a year; in 2013 DF failed to investigate over 42,000 cases of negligence and abuse Islandwide (Rivera Quiñones 2013). Consequently, the school faculty aligns itself with families in order to dodge severe consequences (e.g., removal of children from the home). This informal alliance indicates that State perpetrated violence is recognized as a greater evil than that of familial dysfunction.

With a mop, soap, and bucket in one hand and a few bags of groceries in the other, one principal is known to show up at students’ homes prior to sanctions being carried out against them by the Department of Family. When asked about his motivation for transforming such apartments into livable conditions, he responded that:

At times circumstances occur when we have lent a helping hand to students’ families by going to their homes and addressing everything from hygiene issues to economic issues, so that the interventions [carried out by the State] would be less intensive and more directed toward dealing with the relational dynamics of the family more than whether or not their refrigerator is empty or whether or not the child is dressed adequately. And so, although a student’s home life may be far from ideal, at the hands of the State the child is expected to fare far worse. Such alliances between schools and families, which result in one state institution pitting itself against another instead of working symphonically alongside one another, highlight not only the lack of coherence in policy and praxis at a state level but also the well-earned mistrust with which various arms of the state perceive and act in opposition to one another.

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For citizens, then, protecting oneself from the missteps of the State is regarded as most wise, even when requiring drastic measures. Even children recognize the heightened threat precipitated by interventions of the State, as exemplified by one thirteen-year-old elementary school drop-out who took matters into his own hands. When he hears that his family is going to be evicted from their apartment, he wolfs down a handful of psychotropic pills to bolster his courage, and meets the Department of Family representatives at the threshold of his apartment with a gun, announcing that they would neither be evicting his family nor taking any of his siblings away. For as Theidon (2009:20) astutely delineates, “while [such young men] stoically accepted the possibility of their own deaths, they were not stoic when considering possible murder [or harm directed towards their] partners, parents, or children.” For, with regard to themselves, young street warriors admit to little pain—refer to the sites where their bodies have been perforated by bullets as “nothing.”

Even the most abject pain is confronted with the identical crushing silence. It cannot be voiced but is reflexively squelched, diminished, effaced—as if it were, in fact, nothing.

And yet it is this very aspect of youth narco-soldiers which in political commentaries, in the media often goes overlooked: their selflessness in the face of loved ones’ need. Their willingness to take the nails in their wrists and feet, to climb up on that veritable cross and sacrifice themselves for the sake of their family. Even though they themselves are frequently bereft of basic care and nurture, these children become the propitiation—ungrudgingly transforming themselves into the heads of their own households, and in the process often jeopardizing their own welfare for the benefit of the

405 Not even as evidence of valor or seniority in the streets, as someone like rapper 50 Cent has done.
rest. Therein Hecht (1998) makes the distinction between “parented” street children and “parenting” street children; the roles which children assume in households where the adult is not available for parenting functions are not unilaterally predictable.

**Child Grooms**

Since 2000 the Island’s homicide rate has been highest for men in their early twenties (See Zavala-Zegarra, López-Charneco, García-Rivera, Concha-Eastman, Rodriguez, Conte-Miller 2012). The resulting paucity of partners for women coupled with the footloose autonomy of *los amanecidos*\(^{406}\) spawned the phenomenon of child grooms. In Alelí the phenomenon of child grooms is not a rare occurrence. It does, however, signal flagrant negligence on the part of the immediate family and passivity on the part of the extended family. Co-habitating with significantly older *esposas*, or wives, such boys leave the residence of their kin during pre or early adolescence. Boys as young as twelve leave home.

\(^{406}\) *Dawnbreakers*: children who stay on the street from the evening into the next day without sleeping and, at times, without eating.
and encounter a bevy of problematic asymmetrical power dynamics along with undue pressure to be breadwinners.\textsuperscript{407} Thus, unstable shelter also contributes to early desertion. Such additional stresses swiftly displace any potential role schooling might have had. In the time between his departure from school and his death—just under two years—I am told that Nael had three (consecutive, not concurrent) wives. I am told because I do not know: I knew Nael faintly at best. Whether his place of residence changed in each instance, or at all, is likewise unclear. Local sources indicate the affirmative. Such arrangements are almost always determined by the “wife.” And the “wife” in such scenarios is someone whom community consensus would deem, “una mujer hecha y derecha,” or one who is considered a mature woman—in the sense that she is no longer young or young-minded. This status is determined more by her state of mind and extended experience in childbearing than strictly through her age. The aforementioned notwithstanding, however, it is not uncommon for her to have progeny close in age to her child groom.

One teacher shares that she knew of such a pairing, but that she did not have the heart to take any action against it because, for her, it seemed that this older woman was all the boy had—and she did not want to take even that away from him.\textsuperscript{408} This is a student she was close to, a student she knew very well; she goes on to relate the many trials and tumults he had survived in his short life and concludes by raising both her hands into a “What can you do?” gesture. For her, the idea that the child found comfort and refuge somewhere overrides any other concern. Although she does not view the situation as ideal, she accepts it. In the end, it is difficult to find a teacher or administrator

\textsuperscript{407} See Chapter 10 “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is mine.”
\textsuperscript{408} Informal Conversation, 5.2013.
who favors intervention on the part of the State, irrespective of the matter at hand. For most faculty and staff, the children are understood to be safest remaining within the context of their community—regardless of their housing or familial status.

As it stands, communities need safe and reliable alternative arrangements for those youth who, as *amanecidos*, or dawnbreakers, are unsupervised and neglected; presently the predominant sentiment is that the alternatives are neither. At a minimum, stability in housing and responsible supervision are the missing baseline which must be reinstated in order to encourage youth’s continued participation in a scholastic trajectory. Desertion would get far less traction with children in possession of supervision and an adequate home.

But, as it stands, what happens once an *amanecido* grows up? What does an *amanecido* do once he ages out of shining shoes in the local plaza? What marketable skills does he possess? Of course, these are rhetorical questions, but the hard truth is that youth soldiering is not only accessible, but boasts on-site training, requires no previous experience, is free of (immediate) cost, and provides a social network as broad as it is deep. Alternately, some work in construction, or as a handyman, in “off the books” cleaning capacities, or in the trafficking of rummaged\(^{469}\) goods… but the work, and consequently the income, is sporadic and “catch as catch can.” For an elementary school non-completer, non-narcotics related labor options are scant. And when in pursuit of brighter options, to not even be able to produce a sixth grade diploma remains a continual and acerbic humiliation.

\(^{469}\) Items of unknown origin (i.e., they may be alternately found or stolen).
Aphonic Interlude IX: Eyelashes Webbed with Water

The Unlikely Refuge of Backhoes and Basketball Courts

Around dusk I stop to chat with a public elementary school security guard about how the basketball court provides safety for our youngsters. Bullets, unless shot vertically, are less likely to penetrate the courtyard due to the surrounding concrete perimeter of classrooms. Electing compassion over liability, members of the administration allow students on the property after hours. The security guard, herself a resident of the neighboring caserío, explains that the little ones come every day, staying from three in the afternoon until about ten at night.

The children we neglect to care for today become targets for the narco-industrial complex tomorrow. While on paper all children here technically have a roof over their heads, Puerto Rico has its own variant of street children. Some teachers refer to them as los amanecidos or the dawnbreakers. They are those who may not return home to sleep at night and for whom access to meals is sporadic, those who frequently sleep through the school day and who refuse to leave school grounds even after hours. They engage in verbal sparring matches as to which of them has gone the longest without sleeping and which of them is able to exhibit the least visible signs of fatigue. The crowning accomplishment is to be tough enough to go straight through two days without showing the weakness of needing rest. Perhaps it goes without saying, but an affect of slate is baseline in this endeavor. On any given weeknight, well after dusk these same children cavort unsupervised in the streets. If day labor availed itself, they may be found perched atop idle backhoes guarding their canastas of chicken from circling pit bulls’ jaws.

Tonight there are eight of them, all ages—but all boys. Amongst the knot of silent players is one of my fourth graders, wearing long white cartoon-stamped pajama bottoms and no shirt. We watch them play through the persistent rain: eyelashes webbed with water, they play as if the rain were not drenching them to their core; they play as if nobody had mentioned to them it was raining. My mind wanders to dinners and bedtimes, to breakfasts, alarm clocks, and the laundering of uniforms...
As referenced in the previous chapter, the Department of Family, with its egregious failure to investigate over 42,000 cases of child abuse (Familia anuncia sanciones… 2013) in 2012, has long lost its integrity in the eyes of the populace. Yet in Puerto Rico when a minor is charged with a crime, the guardian also faces separate charges from the Department of Family for negligence. From its inception, this close pairing of the Department of Justice with the Department of Family has sabotaged efforts to provide substantive support to families in low-grade, chronic crisis. Hence, perceived as the enemy, social workers face a severe disadvantage: although at times relying on secret “community informants” (read by the community as chotas or snitches) they often lack intimate, working knowledge of clients’ kin networks—those relatives predisposed and available to provide secure, temporary parenting. This lack of propinquity with clients frequently results in a lack of community buy-in, thereby ensuring that state efforts are likely to founder—if not fail altogether. Were a reciprocally interpersonal relationship established, the historical paradigm of “the State versus the poor” could be inverted. Presently, however, the unfortunate conflation of family services with criminal justice translates into a community who views anyone with a clipboard or file folder in their hands as a threat.

Perhaps the best way to end a tug-of-war is to build a bridge. Given the inordinate incidence of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to which children removed from their homes are routinely subjected, a concilio comunitario should be appointed within each residencial (or geographical region) wherein potential foster families are screened not solely by the government, but also by those most invested in the welfare of such children:

410 Ley 246: All minors have to be under the supervision of a legal guardian.
their own community elders. Who better to assess potential parenting competence than those amongst whom they daily live?

Fundamentally, the Department of Family lacks an emic perspective to inform their placement decisions. To date the results have been disastrous. It is to our collective detriment if we insist upon ignoring the potential contributions our elders could make. A dramatic shift away from “childcare for profit” and towards “childcare for nurturance” is overdue. For too long the community has been powerless to prevent harm committed against its children at the hands of the State. Such longstanding impotence serves only to foment and stagnate increasing distrust, distance, and resentment. Exasperated, one grandmother scoffs, “los verdaderos abusadores son los del Departamento de la Familia…” 411 We must cede the podium to those who have a personal stake in ascertaining the viability of the children’s future caregivers.

Although it would take some reconfiguration of resources and personnel, the Department of the Family also could institute a second shift (2-10 pm) in order to conduct preventative rounds instead of simply responding to emergencies at such hours. Such proactive vigilance would pay swift dividends in revealing which households could benefit from additional support. Far from a “patrol,” however, social workers conducting such turnos crepusculares would need to establish themselves as an invested presence that offers a hand—and not a (court) summons. Likewise, the community would need to receive them as such. Given the institution’s history, this may prove a formidable obstacle. 412 Yet just as homicide detectives offer transactional immunity to ensure that

411 The real abusers are the Department of the Family.
412 Within the community almost all are aware of the family units wherein negligence predominates, and while often community members do not get involved directly, they would support intervention on behalf of protecting such children. Community support with regard to the issue of abuse, however, becomes less clear given that some are in
witnesses evade the looming specter of narcotics charges, so too, this task force must necessarily take a blindered approach, focusing singularly on the welfare of this vulnerable population.

Seated at a student desk under the hallway canopy, the security guard shares that this job suits her well because it allows her to provide shelter for the children. Resting her cheek on her palm and lost in thought, she pauses. Then, without removing her gaze from the little ones, she relays that her own twenty-five-year-old son was shot and killed within the community last year: for trespassing on the wrong turf.

Given that almost ten percent of the Island’s public schoolchildren drop out of elementary school, many children are at risk for stepping into this dizzying spiral. Yet procuring attentive, safe temporary homes for los amanecidos before they elect the career trajectory of a youth narco-soldier is not impossible. It would, however, require systemic change of the Department of Family’s current modus operandi. It also would require that we, as a society, ascribe to their lives the same value to which we ascribe the children in our own homes.

Telling me to wait, the security guard dashes to her car. She returns, clutching a three inch thick Bible to her chest. A flutter of onion skin pages later and she hands me the photo: a young man with her exact eyes, her exact nose.

Draped by the weight of loss, we watch, mesmerized, as eight not-yet-shot boys make tireless lay-ups beneath pummeling filaments of silver light.

favor of corporal punishment (“una pela bien dada…”); ascertaining the community’s emic distinctions between what constitutes discipline versus abuse would be a critical point of dialogue (e.g., with a nod toward the desire to delimit violence as reflected in the Ancient Near Eastern mandate of Exodus 21:24, one grandmother explains her distaste for foster care this way: “Servicios sociales se les quita los hijos de las familias para darselos a otra familia para que los maltrate. ¿Para qué un p------ de la calle les va a pegar? ¡Mejor que le de una pela yo!”).
CHAPTER 10: Here the Women Call the Shots

Female Druglords & Pentecostal Prayer Warriors

WHAT’S UP, MEN
Condado

“...Tú eres la que manda”\textsuperscript{413}

“Obsesionado,” Farruko 2015

“Aquí los guapos son las mujeres, no los hombres.”\textsuperscript{414}

—Recently arrived female resident of Alelí

Mother of One, Mother of Many

Across the street a group of twelve girls, ranging from three to eight years old—travel back and forth across the various driveways congregating sporadically. Observing from her curbside sentinel, Mamá Amada comments on the lack of supervision. A moment later we hear a glass bottle breaking. That’s it: Mama Amadá arises and, one hand on her hip, the other pointing, demands, ¿Quién tiró esa botella? Who threw that

\textsuperscript{413} You are the one (feminine) who has the authority/gives the orders/calls the shots.

\textsuperscript{414} “Here the smart-assed troublemakers are the women, not the men.” Informal conversation, 5.2016.
bottle? The little ones freeze and stare from across the street at her. She repeats her question, but they maintain their wordless desistance. Her countenance as steel, she maintains their returned gazes in razored gridlock.

Belatedly I realize her question is intended rhetorically. Mamá Amada is not awaiting an answer, but rather is issuing a moratorium on their galavanting and requiring that their reign of anonymity be deposed by their ownership. After a prolonged pause, she begins waving her arms with the pronounced precision of a band director, “Marielis, Daniela, get back over to the front of your building…” But little girls remain fixed like cake toppers as if pondering the likelihood that Mamá Amada might actually cross the street. Firm, unmoving, she repeats her command, adding, “Go on, now.” Slowly, then, a few of the girls exit towards the direction she’s assigned them. Nodding, satisfied, she lowers hand from hip, turns back to me and declares, “You see? That’s obedience.” Then she calls back over her shoulder to Maité, “Where are the mothers? Where. Are. The. Mothers.” Maité lifts a conciliatory eyebrow, raising her cane in tribute, “It’s true, it’s true.” Mama Amada shakes her head repeatedly and takes a deep breath. “And when there’s a corre,415 all the mothers come running hysterically screaming, ‘Where are my daughters? Where are my daughters?’”416

When a mother responds that her child is “por allí,” or “around,” when asked as to her progeny’s location, is that trust or neglect? If the understanding is that there is a collective supervision which happens under the watchful eye of all residents, then it is the former. In some families the children may do as they please and go where they will—as long as they do not leave the confines of the enclosed community. As one grandmother

415 A headlong, mad dash/scramble of neighbors due to an unannounced gunfight. Also referred to as a “corre y corre.” 416 Fieldnotes, 5.2015.
observes, children under five are instructed not to walk on the outside of the *caserio*’s fence that parallels a busy city street because there they can be spotted by the Department of the Family and taken away for being unaccompanied. On the contrary, social media postings serve as a vessel through which to sound an alarm when the absence of a child continues longer than more four or five hours and there is the suspicion that the child has exited the premises of the residencial. Such is the case when children leave to chase after an iguana, lizard, or rooster. Therein, it is the bodily *location* of the children and not the content of their activities which is the primary focus when concern arises.

**Business is as Business Does**

“How long is this going to take?” Nazarena, who is known as a *bichota*, asks me through my car window. We’ve known each other for years, but have never interacted much. Today she is doing Maité a favor by talking to me because time is money and talking to me doesn’t pay anything. She wants to know before she gets in the car. I’m idling in front of the site where a group of runners hang out waiting for “drive thru” customers, so things are popping. One *bichote*’s little brother looks over, momentarily concerned until he recognizes me. He smiles and continues on his way. I am rarely in this sector of Alelí, *Robles*, so I stay to the main arterials and do not venture into the side byways unless I am on foot. As a pedestrian one can minimize the appearance of threat, increase one’s visibility, and demonstrate the absence of arms quite readily. In a vehicle, however, that checklist proves somewhat more difficult.

Though I have been to Nazarena’s home various times before, I wanted to expedite my time with her and so I pick her up where she normally spends the day. Pretty
soon she forgets about her to-do list and relaxes. As a businesswoman, she shares her perspective on gender dynamics in Puerto Rico—the straight, undistilled version:

In the majority of the cases, the women call the shots. We are now at a point where you cannot let yourself go. Already the woman who devotes herself to depending on a man, without depending on food stamps, she doesn’t feel like a human being. Really she doesn’t. Because one needs to innovate—all women, we need to be innovative and one needs to be innovative in life and try to personally fulfill oneself and make—we, the women, have to be innovative because… It’s that the man, all he does is work. And then they come home and lounge around like a soft, flattened mass: they stay there and that is where they stay. After work they bathe, throw themselves onto the bed, and stay there like a soft, flattened blob—not doing one thing more. So and so: bring me some water, So and so: my dinner, So and so... Then that is what they do: give orders. We women can have a job, we have to tend to the house, we have to clean, to straighten things up, to watch the kids, to attend to our spouse, and then finally to ourselves. So the man goes through life complaining about everything, goes through life complaining about every little thing.417

As Nazarena explains, in part due to federal assistance programs, men are no longer necessary. In fact, they often prove to be more of an annoyance, a hindrance. While there is great appreciation extended towards those men who involve themselves emotionally in the lives of their children, it is at times apparent that their income is just as vital as their bodily presence. Given that consumerism is one of the favorite pastimes—be it in the form of shopping or bingo—the accomplishment is to “dejar el viejo pela’o”—or to “leave your old man broke,” as it were.

For this reason, photographs of money fans, or bills spread out in spiral arrangements to accentuate the quantity therein418 are not atypical on social media. Evidence of cash flow, the more ostentacious the better, is the intention. Accordingly, one of the worst insults by which a woman can malign another is to accuse her of being with a man who is “nothing more than a phallus,” implying that he has no economic

417 Interview, 2014.
418 Usually the monetary value amounts to less than one thousand dollars (the average being between $350 and $600).
solvency—arguably the most sought after trait. A “good” man provides: the implicit (or baldly stated) understanding is that “what he earns is hers and what she earns (or receives in government assistance) is hers,” or “lo suyo es mío y lo mío es mío.” The focus is money—and thereby power. On payday a wife may brag on social media that her husband hands everything over to her—an indication that it is she who reigns in the relationship.

The authority women routinely wield may be attributed, at least in part, to the reality that it is their name on the housing contract with Vivienda. The heads of household in government housing on the Island are predominantly female and (at least on paper) single (Dinzey Flores 2013:130). As such, a man’s position is tenuous: he can be ejected from an apartment at any juncture (by either the State or his partner). For in order to maintain rent payments as low as possible, his presence cannot be formally acknowledged on government paperwork. Even if by default, then, the women retain power by maintaining the status of the male presence as one of “perpetual guest.” Sometimes such humiliations do not sit well with the ego, with the traditions of machismo. Another blow to the “conventional male psyche” is how the very premise of government housing situates residents as receivers and not producers, as passive and not as contributors: even home repairs are seen as the responsibility of the State—depriving the men of what formerly provided for them a functional purpose (Dinzey Flores 2013:185).
IPV Awareness Posters, Hato Rey

It’s an early summer evening when an unhelmeted teen who I’d taught only a few years earlier, hops off the motorcycle to greet me before opening the back compartment and presenting Mamá Amada with two boxes. After handing him a few bills, she invites me to share bacon topped pizza. Suddenly it comes back to me: his name is Ale. Five years prior, while I was teaching a creative writing class focusing on the students’ dreams and futures, Ale raises his hand to declare his goal is to be “un abusador.” An abuser. While the other fourth graders explode in a flurry of laughter, I reroute the discussion to address the grave reality of intimate partner violence on the Island for the remainder of the class. It’s encouraging to see he is gainfully employed.

Cashing in on Intimate Partner Violence: Lawyers for Law 54
Bayamón
The Gray Zone of the Family

What happens when leadership in underground economies shift from exclusively patriarchal to include matriarchal leadership as well? What are the implications for the community and potential impacts on family structures? Increasingly in Puerto Rico women are taking leadership roles within narcotics and arms trafficking networks. What are the implications for motherhood inherent in this transformation from traditional roles? The participation of women in the ranks of leadership within violent trafficking networks has direct implications for household structure and, consequently, society. It is not uncommon for a woman invested in illicit flows to tend to run a more loosely configured household than a woman who works in the private sector. For the latter there is often the benefit of a work schedule with set hours. For the former hours can be inconsistent and unpredictable. Without a set schedule, mothers in illicit trafficking rings often have to be in the streets during evening or weekend hours. Hence, meals may be sporadic at best, curfews and bedtimes often nonexistent. This, in turn, tends to propel their children into the streets even earlier.

“This IS JUST THE BEGINNING”
As a case in point: although in Puerto Rico kindergarten is mandatory, Nazarena did not register her youngest child for school until third grade.419 She is, however, cognizant of her abdication of these and other areas. She confides, “Parents [here], at times we don’t cooperate [with the school and its faculty]. It’s true, and you have to admit that reality.”420 Yet perhaps even more glaring is the failure of the State even to notice these children are absent from the rolls. Studies show that it is negligence—even more than physical abuse—which is more destructive for children (Fantuzzo). As such, in the face of neglect, children may feel propelled in search of companionship and remuneration into street hustles such as narcotics soldiering, wherein “violence as labor” (Bourgois 2009) becomes standard.

Hecht (1998) isolates the common denominator for children “electing” life on the streets as their individual relationship with their mothers (i.e., the level of nurturing proffered or, as the case may be, declined). That is to say, while more favored siblings may remain in the household of origin, other progeny may understand their options as more limited. These then are those most predisposed to become youth narco-soldiers and child grooms. Further, it is actually negligence (Fantuzzo et al) which—far more frequently than abuse—more often propels children into labor hustles on the streets as they seek to provide for themselves.

When entering the milieu of the youth narco-soldiers, not all of the “economies of affection” at play in their lives are immediately visible (Hyden 1983). Yet an inculcated adherence to traditions of familism (Zayas & Palleja 1988) and other sacrosanct

419 I have noted a pattern wherein the youngest children are often kept home longer. This trend occurs more often in narcotics involved families than non-narcotics involved families.
420 Interview 6.2014.
ideologies of maternal allegiance (Hecht 1998, Kovats-Bonat 2006) at times constrain the children into schizophrenic double binds (Bateson 2000) which can supplant even their own efforts towards self-preservation.

If we concur with Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ observation that “the family is one of the most violent of social institutions” (2004:3), then it seems most wise to devote significant attention to the ecological sphere of the home. Further, exploring the dynamic she observes in children’s responses to mothers’ rejection in her classic Death Without Weeping (1992:471) points toward the phenomenon Hecht (1998) later elaborates: the primary cause of children “defecting” from traditional home and school life is that of felt “maternal rejection” (55). How, then, does emotional tethering between the mother-child dyad (or lack thereof) impact the child’s educational trajectory? What are the potentially conflicted implications of interventions which initiate localized kin version of rematriation? How does Hecht’s understanding of street children as taking on the role of “nurturing” or “nurtured” in some ways eclipse and in other ways instantiate this distinction?

Most of the youth narco-soldiers’ social networks are composed primarily of non-parental kin and fictive kin; the most common denominator amongst them was maternal absence (whether physical or emotional). This corresponds to Hecht’s (1998) finding that the trait children who end up in the streets most often share is a strained relationship with their mother.421 In all cases mothers were physically present in the community (though often not residing in the same home with their offspring) but otherwise absent from most

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421 It is uncommon for biological fathers to be physically present in the children’s home: the majority are deceased. Some, however, leave for treatment facilities in the states, begin new families, and never return—often simply swapping one open-air drug scene for another (see Fairbanks 2009). Having a local step-father is more common, but cohabiting with him is often more the exception than the rule.
if not all other traditionally parental obligations (food, shelter, health care, scholastic concerns, emotional nurture, etc.). The reasons for this were various: some mothers battle substance abuse; some are heavily involved in illicit trafficking (narcotics, arms, or sex); some prioritize their social lives or making money “dancing” *en el tubo* (club/strip club) and are thereby accused of being “*más mujer que madre,*” or more concerned with being a woman than with the responsibilities of being a mother; others simply defer to the phenomenon of what I term “interval parenting”: delegating the nurture of their children to their own mothers or aunts in a tacit—and at times resentful—exchange for having raised their siblings in their own mother’s absence during their own childhoods.

*Isla Verde*

Building on Hecht’s work with children in the streets, I have found that the children of women in the illicit economy are more likely to become narco-soldiers than children whose fathers are involved therein. Fathers are more likely to shelter their children from such activities, and where possible seek to provide them with a “life apart.”
However, mothers in leadership—predominantly through omission—almost seem to welcome their offspring’s involvement in the street economy. So while the phenomenon of preadolescents engaging in narcotics soldiering can be traced to the State’s abdication on the educational front, it very often combines momentum with paternal absence and maternal distraction to produce a crop of children ripe for the streets.

Building on the work of Elaine Carey’s (2014) work documenting women traffickers in Mexico, I identify an emerging pattern in my fieldwork: the introduction of women into leadership roles within the trafficking communities has exerted substantial influence over the community fabric, both at a micro and macro level. Women in these positions stereotypically are conceived of as (the improper and derogatory but commonly used moniker) “Macho Marys,” a reference to a woman who is regarded as “more masculine” and emotionally “seca,” or heartless, without emotion (literally, dry). It can also refer to a non-binary or non-heteronormative orientation, but not necessarily. This generalization is ultimately unhelpful as leadership is exercised in an infinite array of styles—including those who are hyper feminine and demure.

Within the narcotics trafficking community, the term seteadora refers to the woman who sets up hits—often under the guise of romantic intentions. Some focus on child grooms, thereby exponentially escalating the vulnerability of such children. Unlike the Chicago women in Ralph’s Renegade Dreams (2014) who, although “necessary to the operation…seldom share in the spoils” (149), very often aleliana women are roundly

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422 “Mari machos.” This term is considered derisive and insulting.
423 In casual, joking terms, a woman at a bar who accepts many drinks from a stranger but has no intention of gratifying any subsequent romantic overtures may also be referred to as a seteadora (through the lens of machismo). Yet the stranger attempting to intoxicate her to the point where he may be able to have his way with her “romantically” is a different version of a seteador. Both are attempting to “get over” on the other. In this usage of the word, a synonym might be “cacheter@” or “poner@” (the latter specifically for one who cops rides for free).
compensated for their roles in trafficking rings. The particularly well-paid post of a seteadora means that such women, as a result, can afford to travel to the States rather often to obtain plastic surgery. If one discounts the high risk of facing homicide herself, a seteadora can ensure better job security and relevance through maintaining her own sex appeal long-term: being “hecha” by purchasing a surgically designed “cuerpazo.”

A selection of some of the signs used in the community parade to honor mothers in the school. Clockwise: UNIQUE, SENSIBLE, MATERNAL, SPIRITUAL, ORGANIZED.

Aleli’s women leaders exercise keen discernment in standing against the traditional machismo divisions of labor and regard women as stronger and more responsible. Given Nazarena’s aformentioned description of how unequally household responsibilities are divided, one could conclude that men serve little purpose. Yet although amongst the items which she enumerates as her responsibility includes her children, the parenting aspect seems to get sidelined by a determination to be “innovative” in business endeavors. Her care for her children, then, appears to refer predominantly to her provision for their physical needs—clothing and sporadic meals, but perhaps not much more. Even, as mentioned previously, something as mundane as school registration and matriculation can be neglected or foregone entirely.
Whereas male leaders within illicit trafficking rings tend to support their children’s school participation, women leaders tend to have a more laissez faire approach with their offspring, which contributes to their children having greater and earlier attrition scholastically. Particularly during their earlier years (elementary school), children are more inclined to join their mothers in the streets than their fathers. There are clear exceptions to this, most notably amongst women with smaller scale enterprises who are more apt to supervise their child’s schooling than the higher ranking *bichotas*. It appears that the more invested a mother is in the trafficking game, the less time and energy she has to pour into domestic responsibilities—and very often there is no one who steps in to take up the slack.

Although there are circumstances wherein male traffickers are unable to enter their children’s school grounds because the perimeter abuts another *bando*’s territory, teachers report far greater responsiveness on the part of fathers. As one teacher who was raised in the community relates, the male traffickers, on school ground, are exemplary parents: “They come and we talk as if it were nothing. With great respect they attend the events of their children and are very quiet and polite; they are neither rude nor arrogant, but are humble, peaceful, reserved… they are the most helpful, the most cooperative parents.”424 She emphasizes that this sentiment holds true even in the case of parent-teacher meetings wherein rival gang members are both in attendance: “Out of respect, they didn’t do anything in the moment, out of respect for the surroundings. When they

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424 Interview 5.2014.
are outside the school property they can kill one another, but [here on school grounds] there is still some respect—very little, but there is respect."\textsuperscript{425}

One indirect result of more women at the helm of the daily operations of the underground economy is a deepening of the commodification of relationships. It is no longer so much an era of the Godfather inspired, \textit{One repays a favor with a favor}\textsuperscript{426}—regardless of how dastardly—as much as cash in hand has become the catalyst for action.

Ten dollars to massage an ankle after surgery. One dollar to take the trash out. Two dollars to bring back sodas from a nearby \textit{kiosko}. A plate of food is still sometimes bartered, but far less often offered. After all, the new creed is that, \textit{“un amigo es un peso en la bolsilla.”} Or, a friend is the dollar in your pocket. With leadership demands of business, little room is left for nurturance. In Alelí it is said that even friendship runs on a cash economy—that nothing comes without a price tag. Some charge their elderly mothers for a ride to the doctor or to the grocery store (Díaz Rolón 2017). In this sense, everything has a price. \textit{Manda’os}, or non-narcotics related couriers, are at the ready to anticipate and comply with a patron’s wishes. The paid courier, then, is steadily replacing the conventional notion of the “good neighbor.”

If good neighbors are in increasingly short supply, then is the opposite also true that the Island’s public housing are just one gigantic free-for-all? For, one might ask, what are the Island’s public housing projects more known for than regular viral episodes of women engaged in fisticuffs? Yet as an ethnographer such events are what I least care to record in my fieldnotes: more material in service to stereotype reinforcement. Yes, fights occur, but their occurrence is not in any way commonplace. And yet as the media

\textsuperscript{425} Interview 5.2014.
\textsuperscript{426} \textit{El favor con favor se paga}. Fieldnotes, 6.2014.
retains tremendous sway over the highly impressionable public imaginary, this reputation prevails. While there are well over three hundred public housing complexes on the Island, perhaps twenty fights between women will go viral on any given year. Those twenty odd fights, then, whitewash over the dramatic majority of mundane evenings, or sleepy afternoons wherein contentment, joy, or boredom are far more predominant affective realities.

As such, my research reflects this everyday reality: Aphonicity is not littered with brawls because alelianas seldom fight. So I argue, it is simply because they fight at all that they are represented as bellicose in the Island’s public imaginary. Simply because fighting is one of the accepted options on the table—whereas in other echelons of society it is not. It is due to this infrequency, in part, that I have elected to include neither contexts nor descriptions of such violent exchanges. But more importantly, in ten years I have not witnessed one. Not one. Like the rare occurrence of a “wave of gatilleros,”427 the prevailing caricature of “women in dubis428 fighting” is far closer to an outsider’s perception than to an insider’s reality. Must women be prepared to fight if necessary? Yes. And everyone knows who possesses the skillset to administer a solid catimba and who does not. But is it a common, everyday practice? Hardly. Are these brawls a defining characteristic of Alelí? Well, as in most areas of life, that depends upon who is constructing the definitions. Here again, we need a “restaging” (Ralph 2014) of the actors.

When women do fight one another, however, there tends to be an element of theatre involved. There seems to be an unspoken consensus that no lasting harm should

427 That is to say, a large group of armed, trafficking mercenaries.
428 Doo-rags.
result from them; most end with the distribution of superficial injuries, at worst a broken bone. As in the fragmentedly narrated description that follows, such fights are seen as events, almost akin to a local pay-per-view, with “Facebook live” now serving as the vessel for its play by play transmission. What the greater public does know of such fights within Aleli is that they are gendered; this is due to the fact that the men privilege bullets over fists and so “palizas” or beatdowns administered by those on el punto generally are not spectacleized, they are pragmatic. As such, it is the fights between women which tend to become transmitted virally.

In these instances, the performativity of such events aborts all otherwise imperative inclinations towards aphonicity. In fact, just as in the students’ utilization of ventriloquization,\textsuperscript{429} performativity supersedes any momentary need for sub-sonicity. Instead, herein, we witness the Mayor dressed in the adrenaline of hyper-engagement, taking the stage with an intent to dazzle—all eyes on him. The diaspora tunes in; folks want to know what’s wrong with the volume. Technical difficulties. But soon enough the pre-fight propaganda is broadcasting. In an online attempt to attract all of the community fight aficionados,\textsuperscript{430} the Mayor intones:

\begin{quote}
You’re going to see a fight.
Look, here we have the boxer Lanila; she’s preparing \textit{la cartelera}...
…You know that I am bold, NotiUno, [singing] \textit{Radio Bemba}  
[The other participant] doesn’t want to come out. Let’s go, let’s go.
I don’t know. Stay tuned.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Look, everyone, listen. I am the referee.
Please I need you to stay behind the line. Those who are filming, go to the front. Behind the line, behind the line.
Look, I’m the referee, so I need to be in the middle of the boxers.
Here we are ready, \textit{¡activa’o}! 
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{429} See Chapter 7.
\textsuperscript{430} At last count there were well over 200 views.
I need a narrator who can narrate what is happening.

[Approaching the contender’s house]
No one knows if she is going to come out or not. She’s applying pomades, arranging her hair into a “donut,” and putting on her sneakers. It appears that the other [boxer] is getting ready and it is a long process.

Live, my people we are live, ¡puñeta! ...

The theatricality of these opening lines in reference to an upcoming fight highlight the degree to which such “events” are sometimes a bit staged—and as a result may be less about “score settling” than the result of social pressure to either force a concession towards a stronger neighbor\(^\text{431}\) or to reinstantiate a current yet weakened social hierarchy.

More often than not, young women who fight adhere to agreed upon terms. One of the most common is that neither woman will jump the other if either of their children are present. All parties understand that to do so would endanger their custodial rights and that as a result El Departamento de la Familia could have their children swiftly removed from their homes. Consequently, the less skilled fighter will often refrain from “ bajando” or going out, without having her children in tow. This “children as insurance” motif does not extend to the stronger fighter as much because she is not concerned about the fight. On the contrary, she is confident of her skills as a pugilist and may welcome it to settle an otherwise festering score.\(^\text{432}\) With a shrug of her shoulders, one reserved and usually mild mannered young woman views it as predictable: Se lo buscó.\(^\text{433}\) That is to say, if you interfere in another’s relationship, you are asking for consequences. To fail to mete out these consequences to the other woman is to become publicly regarded as a “ pendeja,” or someone towards whom others can easily take advantage. Herein, the State’s presence is

\(^{431}\) Either stronger physically or stronger in terms of cultural capital (i.e., wider social network, more abundant financial resources, etc.)

\(^{432}\) The majority of the fights between women are in relation to hierarchy vis-à-vis a boyfriend or spouse.

\(^{433}\) “She looked for [the fight].”
not actual, yet still dominates the public imaginary, instilling a concrete fear of repercussions. Insofar as this “present absence” (Stewart 1996) of the State delimits, at least somewhat, the physical violence to which small children are exposed, I argue that it is beneficial.

Despite (or because of?) the fanfare, on that evening of the Mayor’s livestreaming video footage, no fight takes place. Not that evening, nor any evening subsequent to it. When I return Islandside less than a week later and inquire about his role in the spectaclization of the skirmish, he deftly skirts my question, stressing that his purpose as a self-appointed referee is to delimit violence, to ensure that no one is unduly harmed. “As soon as one of the girls hits the ground,” he reassures me, “I end it.” Then, upon completing a series of elaborately choreographed verbal apologetics, he channels the potencies of aphonicity: his final appeal executed through an extended, intense series of conciliatory facial expressions. This conciliatory-aimed mutual gaze transaction is more prolonged than usual; I receive it.

Almost always there are implicit, active demands behind aphonicity. Whether they are for shared aphonicity or for compliance as to a specific, contextualized response, expectations are invariably present. This transactional repartee of forgiveness as performed by the Mayor—these symphonic blends of overly softened expressions, intermittent eyebrow raises, and meek neck retractions—become a preferred modality to speech for adults and children alike. And it is herein that aphonicity humanizes. Herein that it calls out simplicity from verbiage. Aphonicity is, in short, the distillate for which we have been waiting.

434 The second woman never leaves her home.
For Good or Evil:
Non-State Armed Actors as Source of Pentecostal Indignation

“Friendly” road rage reminder on school bus in Santurce:
“Remember… that Jehovah will fight on my side and I will beat you.”

Forget the “Prince of Peace.” On the Island religion is all about “la batalla,” or the battle. It would not be an overstatement to assert that within Alelí God is understood predominantly as a warrior (Longman, Reid, & Van Gemeren 1995), and His followers correspondingly as “guerreros” as well. So whereas when the Old Order Amish anticipate the arrival of a baby with the joke that another “woodchopper” or another “dishwasher” has made the scene (Kraybill, Johnson Weiner, & Nolt 2013:193), in Alelí the announcement would be closer to, “¡Vamos a tener una guerrera!” or, “We’re having a warrior!”
Not all view the local traffickers as a source (albeit sporadic) of succor. A Pentecostal mother of seven, Sagrario, explains that outwardly, she does not entirely eschew interaction with the *traficantes* in accordance with her faith, but there remains the obstacle of contamination whose specter does not fade.
When someone on the drug point asks me for water I give it to them, no problem. Sometimes they ask for water, sometimes they ask for sugar, salt, or *Would you give me a packet of rice?* Me, if I have it, I give it to them. If I don’t have it, I tell them I don’t have it and that’s it. One of them will say to me, *It’s that I have the kids upstairs and they haven’t eaten.* Or cooking oil. I give it to them if I have it... I try not to give anything out in a glass, I give it to them in the packet or they themselves bring down a glass for the milk, or sugar, or oil. I mean, when they ask me for something outside [at the point], I grab a plastic cup and if they return it to me I throw it away because I am not thinking about me, I am thinking about my girls. I mean, I don’t think that [their germs] are going to contaminate me, but the girls do. I mean, you say that that other person is sick and for as much as you might wash that cup [it will never be clean again]—that is my way of thinking about it anyway—I always try to put it in a plastic cup, if I have one. If I don’t have one of the disposable ones, then I give them one of the ones that they don’t have to give back to me. I also don’t wash them in front of their faces, so that they would feel badly. Neither do I throw it out in front of them [when later they return it to me]. No, but I accept it back from them and then I throw it out [later]. I wait until the person leaves and then I throw it out—not in front of them which would make them feel badly. But they almost always bring a little bottle or container for you to fill up. They know, they know, many times they know. They know that no one would risk giving them a glass so that they would [make the debt to] return it even bigger. Here they ask for water, but almost always they bring with them a little disposable empty water bottle. One says to you, *Ay, I want a little water in here.*

Some non-narcotics involved residents have shared that the traffickers sometimes even test them, to see how they will be received. I asked her why they don’t ask for water from those at the stash house nearby.

I don’t know. I mean none of them... instead, those from the point ask me all the way over here, jajaja. It doesn’t make sense, but well, what am I going to do? Many times they are testing you. I mean, they test your feelings to see if you are going to deny them.

In contrast to Celeste, the aforementioned non-narcotics involved matriarch from whom her children and health have been stripped, Sagrario entertains no imaginary of the traffickers’ helpfulness. While there is some interdependence here—in that they both need to cooperate with one another—it is predominantly unidirectional. Her

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435 Interview 5.2014.
understanding of herself as a member of the ultra-righteous and as a person with power
(emanating from her faith and status as a believer) predisposes her to maintain a far more
distanced stance with the gang members:

When the police show up unexpectedly, los gatilleros hide their weapons… [and
after the police leave, they search for them]. That’s what happened to me; they hid
their weapon on my terrace. Then they were confused—remember [that the way
the apartment buildings are constructed], there are two terraces side by side. So
they got confused. [One gatillero] believed that he had thrown it onto my next
door neighbor’s terrace. That’s what he thought, so he knocks on my door. He
yells, “Mamá,”436 to ask me my neighbor’s name, which I told him. [But just
then] my daughter looks at the ground and calls out to me: Oh, my nerves when I
saw what my daughter was pointing to! Mami, she asks me, Isn’t that it? When I
see the gun, I don’t stay quiet, I call out [to him]… because he is not looking for it
at my house, he is looking for it at the house next door. [So] I tell him, Look here,
is this what you’re looking for?

She goes on to explain that there is no moral dilemma in her interactions with the gang
members because it is simply a matter of survival.

In the long term if they find out that it was in my balcony that they hid it in, and I
don’t hand it over to them? Poor me! Poor me, because they could do anything to
me for not returning their belongings to them. You have to hand it over. If you don’t
you are a dead woman, believe me… I was only437 handing over to them what was
theirs, what according to them is “for their self-defense.”438 But they themselves
[end up] killing one another…that’s the reality.

I’m not going to open the door, I tell him. Just as you threw that gun there, that
same way you’re going to get it back. It’s that they should understand, they should
know that a person [like me] who is not involved in their way of life, in their

436 The gatillero addresses Sagrario intimately yet respectfully. His word choice reflects a deference to her personhood.
In contrast, were he to have addressed her with a depersonalized, “¡Mera!” (a colloquial version of Mira, look), the
entire interaction would have been cast in an anonymizing tone.
437 The semantic tiptoeing herein creates a concession statement, revealing her discomfort yet subsequent justification
of her actions. She is distancing herself from any volition as per the unlawful nature of the possession of the firearm.
She did not help to supply a gatillero with a firearm, rather she simply was instrumental in returning a missing object to
its rightful owner. This is an example of the ethical acrobatics in which a faithful servant must engage in order to keep
her testimony pure in her own mind.
438 This is a standard mantra amongst the gatilleros, particularly the younger ones (an older one would likely not deign
to comment let alone seek an excuse). Their repeated use of this may serve as a buffer against feeling any personal
conviction for this choice. By characterizing their posture as exclusively defensive, they obfuscate any moral liability
tied to volition—in the event that they “are forced” to discharge their firearm. They are here defining themselves not as
armed actors but as acted upon actors who end up having to be armed by default. The arming of children, then, is
framed as accommodation. This concessionary stance performs a synecdoche for their relationship with the community
at large. It is as if to say, “Kindly allow us this one concession, this one indiscretion… we realize it may be mildly
distasteful.” By taking this stance, they are enacting a worldview wherein they are strictly passive and vigilant. For
further discussion of firearm politics see Chapter 2.
activities, or any of that—they don’t have a base from which to demand anything of me.\textsuperscript{439} Because I didn’t open my door for him when he threw the gun on my terrace, did I? I didn’t, right? So then he needs to get that mess back himself! Jajaja!

So I tell him, \textit{Just as you put it there, you need to use your hand to retrieve it. I’m not going to touch it, not even to move it with my foot, I told him, I’m not touching it. You were the one who threw it in here, you figure out how to extract it!} The boy had to get it himself because my nerves [me dio]. \textit{No, I said, you get it out, you put it there, you get it out.} [Then] he reached his arm through the [partition between the two concrete slabs] in my balcony and pulled it out.

He didn’t answer me, he didn’t look at me. I didn’t notice who it was… because if you ask me who it was, I don’t know.\textsuperscript{440} He didn’t enter the door of my house; he had to reach in through the opening in my terrace to get it because I’m not going to touch it.\textsuperscript{441} And remember: I have small children. What really bothered me was that [it was] my young daughter [who] showed it to me. If she hadn’t shown it to me and had picked it up and begun to play with it… you understand! It made me nervous.

It’s my choice/fault [la parte mia] if I hand it over to the police, they kill me… that is to say, I’m going to hand it over to [the gatilleros] unless the policeman is there checking and says, \textit{Look open your door, there’s something on your terrace.} Then it is my place to open the door. I’m not going to tell the policeman no, ¿ah? Because [in that instance] they (the community, including los chamos) have [witnessed what happened].\textsuperscript{442}

There are two layers of interaction occurring here simultaneously. The first, and ostensibly the most obvious, is the one in which she is asserting her authority as a non-narcotics involved “righteous” community member and an elder matriarchal head of household. At an interpersonal level she is calling the shots, from erecting firm boundaries to dictating the explicit manner by which his re-acquisition of the firearm will be accomplished. Yet at another, albeit aphonc level, she is affectively cognizant of the

\textsuperscript{439} Unlike some other community members, she does not view herself as benfitting in any way from their presence.

\textsuperscript{440} This is an example of what I refer to as “learned anonymity,” wherein functionally, residents un-know anything they might otherwise know that is in any way potentially incriminating.

\textsuperscript{441} Not only is this a weapon which could potentially discharge and cause injury, but the object is seen as inherently unclean and here again there is a contamination she stringently wishes to avoid. For “What does light have in common with the darkness?” Her response also echoes that of the Deuteronomic laws on purity and the stark contrast between cleanliness and contagion.

\textsuperscript{442} Interview, 5.2014. i.e., that it was not by her initiation.
implicit threat whereby her cooperation is, in fact, non-negotiable; there is an unspoken understanding that her options are circumscribed. Stylistically, she may execute the return of the weapon as she desires, but she nonetheless must execute its return. The degree to which she facilitates it, however, she clearly deigns elective. So while unseen community infrastructures mandate her cooperation, she is also capable of retaining her personhood and dignity by staunchly asserting herself as to the parameters by which said weapon retrieval will occur.

Part of the reasoning behind how Sagrario enacts boundaries emanates from her evaluation of that to which she is entitled: “they cannot mess with me because I don’t mess with them.” Puerto Rico may be unique in its maintenance of civil interactions amongst the citizenry and armed actors: amongst the gatilleros there are still bowed heads and lowered eyes in deference to non-narcotics involved elders, there are still daily requests to receive la bendición, there are still—albeit brief—small spaces for reflection interspersed throughout the day. Perhaps this is correlated with a slowed economy and slower drug trade. For even in a densely packed urban space, it seems as if we are still at heart, more like campesinos, rural by nature. This sentiment is most evident in residents’ widespread desire to be known and perceived as “humilde” or humble.
Pentecostal Parameters: Thresholds & the Sacrilization of Spaces

While Sagrario and the *gatilleros* maintain primarily divergent trajectories, their geographies inevitably overlap. It is evident that their presence and her location near their high traffic distribution point significantly impact her lifestyle. “I have never given them a reason to come to my house, ever. That’s why it makes me angry—since I don’t bother anyone there, I hardly even ever go out!” Her ostensibly elective self-enclosure is still a relational response. She cordons off her family’s residence as sacrosanct (if not unassailable) just as the teachers who disallow the “tenacle” of the housing projects that wraps itself around the school from entering “*mi salón,*” (my classroom) and the pastors who insist that conduct within that the house of God be on a par with that of a courtroom (anything less fails to show respect for God; no slouching, no gum chewing, etc.). Such hyper-regulation and micro-management of bodies in space appears to serve multiple purposes. Within these domains, consequently, there is a greater sense of control, while outside such perimeters lurks the spectre—if not reality—of imminent demise. An unstaunched desire for linearity amidst the chaos—which can lead to overcorrection—is evident in such settings. In the at times unnerving chaos of a narco-state, the predictability and circumscribed nature of stringent rule-keeping appears to provide a proxy for the structure lacking at a broader societal level.

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*I requested permission to take a photograph of this list of more than twenty behavior related rules that were posted in the sanctuary, but it was declined.*
To be “apartado/a” means to have fallen away from the Lord (not on the path, as it were). But the same word also is used to describe the Island’s prescription for Pentecostal Christian believers: Salmo 34:14 “Apártate del mal y haz el bien; Busca la paz y siguela.” “Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and continue in it.” Like the mother of seven, they are to have no dealings with those of the bajomundo, (underworld) but rather to keep themselves “apart” or “separate.” As such, Sagrario provides an example of erecting and insisting upon stalwart parameters with these armed young men, demonstrating how Pentecostal women can interact with the gatilleros according to their own prerogative. And although there certainly are exceptions, generally throughout the Island traffickers exhibit a functional level of respect towards citizens’ faith and convictions. A common phrase on the streets is, “I don’t mess with the things of God,” meaning that there is a protective clause for folks who seek to follow the Lord—as they are seen as belonging to Him and not the world.

Advocacy & Redefining Narco-Normativity: When Personality Traits Qualify you for Special Ed

In 2014 it was announced that 37% of Puerto Rico’s public education students (159,000 children) are labeled as requiring Special Education. This is a direct result of hiring consultants who earn a profit for diagnosing students with a disorder. Yet while everyone is alarmed by the percentage of children impacted, not everyone is in a position (or of the proper disposition) to resist the schools. Interestingly, Nazarena found herself in a battle with the school. Balancing the business side of trafficking with parenting can mean that some mothers prefer to stay on the margins and distance themselves from

444 Yo no me meto con las cosas de Dios.
school activities. Others channel the authority they wield in the streets toward seeking the ends they desire vis-à-vis the school. While she may not do it perfectly, the bichota Nazarena advocates for her children. She gauges the nuances with which her children approach the world and tries to stand in the gap when misunderstandings occur. And although many within the school context may not appreciate her style of confrontation, it is in part her very abrasiveness which gets results. On this occasion, it is the silent paralysis of one of her sons which causes a rift. There is some irony in that her children’s affect was nurtured in such a way as to protect the family trade which is likely occasioned by her vocation,

Look, so that you see how the teachers here function: my younger son doesn’t talk. If [you think] my older son doesn’t talk, the younger one is worse. He doesn’t talk to you. Noooo. He’s really calm, really reserved… and doesn’t talk. He is very, very quiet. Well, the teacher got into it with him because she said that he had to stand up. But if I am explaining to you that he is a shy kid, then instead of screaming at him, try to gain his confidence, so that you motivate him so that he could stand up in front of the class. But she told me, “I’m not here for all of that.” That’s what she explained to me.

The principal a while ago told me, “Hey, I’m going to refer your son [for special education].” I say to him, “Why? Why are you going to refer him? Right? Because it’s not going to be like that, unfortunately. Each individual is how he wants to be. The principal wants my son to be spontaneous, as suits their preference, right? But [just because he is not], that doesn’t mean that he needs to be in a contained classroom. [So I tell him.] You, sir, are very mistaken. It’s clear that now [special education] is for everybody: here everybody has a problem. And you, sir, when are you going to be referred? Just hold on a moment.” And I told him, “And when are you going to go over there and enroll yourself [in special education]?” Because imagine! “Matriculate yourself first and then, afterwards, matriculate my son.” And [from that point onward] he never brought it up again.

Here Nazarena disallows the pathologizing of her son’s reticence, her son’s personal parameters. And while she is not opposed to him being challenged, she also understands that a brusque approach will not bring the desired goal to fruition.
For them to label the children, for them that’s a solution because they give them medicine and then they aren’t disruptive and that’s the end of it. Well, the referral idea was because the teacher told him that she commanded my son to stand at the front of the classroom and, well, because he didn’t stand at the front of the classroom, she went to tell the principal that he must have a problem. [But] in what rulebook does it say that it is obligatory that one has to stand up in the front?

Nazarena’s frustration with the system is evident in her ambivalence towards the school as an institution. Her aforementioned decisions reflect her suspicion that the education available serves no ultimate purpose for her family, particularly in economic terms.

Allowing her children to fade out of attendance upon entering seventh grade appears to be a decision made by default. That is to say, if her child found value in attending she would not oppose it. The irony is that Nazarena earned her GED shortly after she dropped out of school in ninth grade. So there is a level at which she values education, but she will not be coerced into matriculating her children in special education, nor be persuaded that medication would enhance their experience there.

**Full Circle: Reinforcements from la fogata**

Around *la fogata* one evening the Mayor concurs with Nazarena’s sentiments towards medicating children:

I don’t see [medication for children] as a solution, that as soon as you feel depressed, “Quick, take this pill!” For what? What’s the pill going to do? Now that you’ve taken the pill, your problem doesn’t exist? No.

At my house my mother used drugs, she used drugs and abused me. Every time that she came in high, well, without saying anything, she would just hit me. My brothers hit me all the time, and I cried a lot. I, I had pediatric depression. Yeah, just recently I discovered that because I hadn’t known that such a thing existed. I was watching a documentary and they talked about pediatric depression. Ever since I was really young, everything always gave me the urge to cry, everything made me feel really sentimental. I would see someone smiling, happy with their siblings and I would be overcome with melancholy, like,

“Why is it
That the world could be like this? And
Why couldn’t I
Be like that with my siblings, happy
In my house?
Why couldn’t it be that my mother loved
And wanted me, or that my father loved
And wanted me?”

They gave me medication and I didn’t like it because…that doesn’t help anything. That is just what causes you to form an addiction. It makes you an addict to the pills because, alright, you swallowed the pill and all so that you won’t think about your problems and you lay down and go to sleep. [But the problem is still there]… Maybe I didn’t become addicted to pills because [although] they gave me Paxil or Wellbutrin, tons of different types of pills for depression during my childhood, I never took them. I would take them the first five days, but then I was always [spaced out] and I myself said, “What are these pills helping with? With what?” Because I didn’t see any improvement with them.445

“The School Owes Us”:
The Underworld’s Version of Eminent Domain

El listo se vive del más pendejo y allí se lo dejo.446
——Catalina

Here in Alelí there is no such thing as a “good person.”
I’m telling you, for us a good person doesn’t exist
because that kind of person is considered a pendejo.
You know, someone you can get over on.447
——Abdiel

As I speak with her grandmother, the child leans forward and observes, “You have one green eye and one blue!” At this Catalina, another bichota, turns to her, exasperated, “And you will have two black ones if you don’t allow us to talk!” We are discussing whether or not her grandchild should accept diagnostic testing for special education. Years earlier, Catalina would not have even considered the possibility. These days, however, Catalina is taking small steps toward healthier engagement with the

446 The clever person lives off of the weak one and I’ll leave it at that.
447 Informal Conversation, 10.2016.
school community. Her memory, however, is still seared with an incident which had a significant ripple effect in the community and tested her mettle as a bichota.

While historically there was a great deal more, there is still a delicate respect proffered to las Misis, or teachers, on the part of the community; by and large their authority and longevity is esteemed. Conflicts of interest arise, however, when school issues disrupt the sacrosanct operation of the local open air drug market. One teacher reported an adolescent for beating a smaller child on school grounds and police were called. As the offending teen left the premises prior to their arrival, the police formed a caravan to speak with the child’s mother at their home. Allegedly, however, the residence of this family, however, was being utilized as a stash house for both narcotics and arms, so the intrusion of police threw the traffickers into a frenzy—“un paniqueo”\(^{448}\)—whereby they quickly began discarding their drugs and arms. Consequently, the mother of the adolescent raced to the school to protest the summoning of police and to fight the teacher. The teacher, Misi Porfidia, was told that the head druglord and all of the triggermen were upset with her, that she was abusive. The real offense? Calentando el punto. “Heating up” the drug distribution site with the police’s presence. The following two accounts present the incident from the perspective of the alleged perpetrator’s mother, Catalina, a bichota in charge of the open air drug point and the teacher, Misi Porfidia, who initially reported the fight, respectively.

**Catalina’s Version**

When I arrive, I see all the patrol cars…and the issue is that the guys on el punto called me (because I was not there, I was getting my little one vaccinated). They said to me, Look, Catalina, here is the situation: your son was punching somebody at the school; he was defending another child—a child who was being beaten up by a bigger child. Then, well, your son stepped in to defend the smaller child.

\(^{448}\) A panic.
Well then that principal there told him to leave the school grounds, to go resolve the problem outside of school property.” And from there, you already know that [my son] doesn’t talk,\(^{449}\) but if you disrespect him, he likewise will disrespect you, understand? But the issue is that I told the guy from el punto, “Look, I’m not coming so that they can resolve this situation that they have over there outside of here. Because if I were another kind of person, I would tell them, “Come on in, do what you want.” Because they are the ones who called the police on him. And the cops themselves said to the guys on el punto, “Teacher so and so and social worker thus and such ordered me over here.” Ten patrol cars for a simple fight. Ten patrol cars. Why didn’t they send just one? And that’s exactly what the guys on el punto explained, “Look if it’s a fight between children, what the staff at the school has to do is rebuke them and that’s it. Why did they have to send ten patrol cars to your house?”

Then, those on el punto were there in the hallway where I live (because those working at el punto resided there on the first floor during that time), and the one guy had his material outside. They had to throw away their material and all the other cops who were there picked up the guys’ material. So then they told me, “Well, then, you are going to take this issue to the school—before we go over there to confront them—and you tell them that we want our money [reimbursed] [i.e., that the school owes them the money they lost as a result of the police visit]. That they tell them that they had to pay them for the loss of property which the police took from them. The police found drugs, then they picked them up and took the drugs with them.

When the cops picked up the drugs, one of the cops talked to one of the guys from el punto and said, "Aaaah, we didn’t come to intervene with you guys, we came because of a fight that the school called us about—that there was a fight between some children, minors. And the guy from el punto says to him, “But if that’s the case, if it’s for a fight between children that you are here, why did they send ten patrol cars?” And the cop told him, “Well, this teacher,” and he shows him the paper, “This teacher named so and so and another named so and so, they were the ones who called the police. It’s that we have to do our job because they said that the boy was aggressive.”

Look, a person knows what kind of child they have, and I know that [my son] is quite difficult. But it is the same thing as, you know, it’s like the logic that right now if you ma’am see an abuse, you ma’am are going to stop it, and you’re going to want to stop it, you understand? Well, that’s what my son did. He had to hit the other children so that they would let go of the poor little kid because they were hitting him. So what happened: no [school staff member] did anything. They see what’s happening and they act like they didn’t see it: “Oh, I didn’t see him…”

\(^{449}\) Such aphonitic as her son exhibits is representative of and not exceptional for progeny of those whose families are heavily involved in illicit trafficking. A talkative son in Aleli is less common; reticence—especially for boys is more normative.
When I went to the school and explained to them the situation, then the principal told me “No, I am going to give him a transfer to another school” and that’s how I addressed it. They sent him to another school. And that [other] school never called me [with regard to my son’s behavior] not even one single time, not even one single time, not even one single time, not even one single time, not even one single time. So now you see, ma’am. Not even one single time.

Now according to Catalina’s account no arrests were made. The pageantry of the officers was simply to provide follow up and give the student and his family a verbal reprimand.

Yet the arrival of so many patrol cars gave the impression of quite a different turn of events.

**Misi Porfidia’s Version**

It was an afternoon that the kids had been in *tutoria* (after school programming), I was finishing caring for the animals and when I went to the basketball court I see this child who was in our school but he would already have been like 13 years old—he was repeating a grade but because the principal had already talked to his mom and told her it was best for him to move to another school, he was at another school when it happened. But then I guess he was not attending. So I see that he grabs the other little boy in third grade while another even younger child kicks him. He grabbed him by the neck, pulled him down so that he could reach and kick him in the face, that’s where I intervene. He was never a disrespectful child with me so when I go there, that caught my attention that he was disrespectful and then sat with a mood like challenging me. So I entered the office and made a formal report to the social worker and the secretary. The social worker did the right thing: she called the police. Then the police came, but by the time they came, he was gone. After the police take all the information down, since he is a minor, they had to then visit the home and orient the mother as to what was going on. The next day I learned that because I supposedly—until today I do not know which version of the dispute is true—but I’m told that there were many, many, many patrols that arrived. There are two situations with these families that I do not I know for sure, but it is said that they keep things, um, weapons, drugs, in that house. When the police arrive, the sharpshooters allegedly began tossing their drugs. So then, where was mom and what not?

When [his] mom came to school the next day to fight and claim that I had called the police, that it is all because of me: [that is to say,] what’s good is bad and what’s bad is good.⁴⁵⁰ They want to show that I am, that I did something wrong done ... But the social worker says, "She was not the one who called, that the one who called was me because that is my duty as a social worker when a situation

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⁴⁵⁰ Referencing Isaiah 5:20 “What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter.” (NLT)
like this arises in school. But then she began to criticize me. Through all of this, the mother spoke with the social worker, she did not speak with me, she didn’t talk to me. Then I find out that her eldest son (who was also a student of mine) told me that the druglords and gunmen were upset with me. The eldest son had come [to the school one day] since he was, he was a security guard and had come to visit the security guard who was here. He had not come to see me. We crossed paths and then he asked me, ‘Chacho, Misi… everyone in there [was] in a paniqueo because you called the police and then they came with 20—dramatically exaggerated—patrol cars, and the guys then began throwing away all their drugs and we are blaming you because you’re an abuser, an abuser who messes with children,’ right? and that’s when I said, ‘I do what I have to do.’ I said, “I already spoke with my spouse, my family, and my lawyer and they all know what happened, so if something were to happen to me they would know where to go and who to look for. The message that I want you to give to your mother and the druglords is that I am not moving from this school. I am not afraid of anyone because I know why I’m here, I’m here because God put me in this school, I have a mission in this school [and] I did what I had to do, and if I have to do it again I’ll do it, and if I have to lose my life for the sake of justice, I will lose it.

He stood there looking at me and I tell him,

And I want you to give them this message. And I’m not going to leave this school, I’m going to continue working and leaving at the [late] hour that I leave, and I’m not going to avoid being in this school because I’m not scared because I know why I am here because God put me in this school, If something happens to me, well then I die. If I die, then I die for the sake of justice. But let your mother and the druglords know if something were to happen to me everyone would know where to go and who to look for.

And I left it at that. He remained quiet—very, very quiet. I am not going to run from this situation and leave the country in the hands of the criminals. [After that, when] the mother sees me she passes me by without even looking at me. Even to this day she doesn’t look at me. And that happened over three years ago. But nothing [bad] has happened to me because I made myself be respected. I didn’t run away or hide from them; I didn’t show any fear. I demonstrated that I am a person who is just and if I have to do it again I’ll do it and I will continue doing it because if you show them fear, you’ve handed the victory over to them. But they [need to understand that they] are coming up against a person who, who knows what she knows and is very clear about it.

**What Words Cannot Fix**

Months later when I am checking back in with Catalina, as an aside it occurs to me to ask her exactly how much in damages the traficantes were seeking that day they
wanted to “reclamar.” But she shrugs and admits that since she was not there at the time of the intervention she is not exactly sure how much was confiscated by the officers. Some quick mental math, however, would suggest the damages were in the range of $200 to $400. The guns, she hearkens back, likely were not apprehended by the officers since—unlike the substances—the *gatilleros* maintain those on their bodies. When I ask her to clarify how it is that the *traficantes* thought the school would compensate them for their losses, she clarifies that the *traficantes* wanted the damages covered by the specific teacher and social worker involved in addressing the altercation. She highlights that the police officers were unprofessional to release the names of the school personnel to the *traficantes*. But then, throwing her left hand up into the air, she doubles back, “Well, the school’s just as unprofessional—throwing everyone’s private business out into the public—so what’s the difference?”

But there is a difference, as the infractions on the part of the school do not usually incur concomitant threats of violence. When Alarcón determines to go over to the point himself and attempt to repair the breach, he is told that under no uncertain circumstances would he be received. On the contrary, if he were to approach them he would “*recibir un cantazo*.” Not the world’s greatest threat, but enough to quell his pacifistic fervor. In response to their warning, he did not pursue it further. “Not everything can be fixed with words,” Catalina emphasizes, “With words you cannot compensate them for their lost money. It’s as simple as that.”

So in place of words, time and distance serve as awkward wound binders. Though there may be residual silences and perhaps an element of underlying mutual contempt,

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451 There are usually twenty small baggies of cocaine (at ten dollars apiece) in one larger bag. Whereas a baggie of marijuana goes for five dollars and crack for three.
the uneasy marriage, or coexistence continues. When I ask Catalina to consider utilizing any of the other various nearby elementary schools, she demurs. For a reason she does not share, she prefers to keep her subsequent generations at the school at which Alarcón is at the helm. I press her on this a bit, pointing out potential advantages of making the switch. Yet whereas “faint praise” is seen as damning in some contexts, in Alelí the pastime of complaining can be a dissimulation for mild affection. Misi Porfidia, however, views Catalina’s attitude as one of defiance, speculating that Catalina maintains her family members enrolled in the school so that the school faculty will be forced to “deal with her.” After a moment of reflection Misi Porfidia wonders aloud, “When her kids end up in jail at the age of fifteen, doesn’t it occur to her that she didn’t do a good job as a parent? That maybe she should change something about her approach? It seems like such thoughts don’t even occur to her.”

In the end, the incident resulted in greater clarity for both parties. From the community’s standpoint the grievance was that police involvement should be limited geographically to within the schoolyard perimeter so as not to knock the bread out of the mouths of others. And from the school’s standpoint the unwavering tenacity of the educators (above and beyond academic obligations) in their endeavor to inculcate a moral sensitivity in their students will not—under any circumstances—be derailed by intimidation and threats of violence. This uneasy crossroads is instantiated hundreds of ways throughout the school year. It’s a dance of crushed toes and stilted steps. A dance wherein both partners keep peeling themselves from the wall to meet on the floor and attempt once again, however haltingly, to make the movements flow. As the ever-aphonic State looks on, it is woman facing woman, strength facing strength.
Aphonic Interlude X: Public Relations amidst “Bulletproofing” & Bellicosity

The Ironies Inherent in Harm Reduction

On an average Wednesday afternoon in January I have just arrived back to the Island and the Mayor is showing me videos he shot of concerts at this winter’s Sanse festival. Spontaneously an informal fogata springs up and I find myself in the midst of it. After someone kindly offers me a blunt, the Mayor interrupts the proceedings to make formal introductions. Then sidling his body across the top of a makeshift bench, he faces all of us and issues a crowning pronouncement: *if anyone touches Áurea I will cut up their mother.*

Not the addendum I anticipated. Everyone is quiet—and then almost simultaneously turns to look at me. Confused by the hyperbolic and graphic nature of his words, I study his face: he has to mean this metaphorically. The woman seated next to me regards me carefully, then gingerly lifts and brushes a piece of my hair out from in front of my face; she is known in the community as someone who turns tricks for scant remuneration. While it’s clear the Mayor has their attention, I am at a loss as to why he constructs this high contrast dichotomy. Maybe some of these folks just moved in, but at least one is a prior acquaintance from a neighboring barrio. Revealed soon enough, the pronouncement is a preamble to news brought to me by his cousin Nefti later that night.

“Listen, there’s something you should know,” posits Nefti as he leans back into his family couch. Understanding the unspoken concerns and motivations of those surrounding me in Alelí has been akin to constructing a 40,000 piece puzzle with all but two of the pieces in absentia—and I am now about to be handed those two critical pieces.

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452 I don’t challenge him publicly; when I broach the subject in private, his wordless response is to continue cleaning. Aphonicity as obstruction.
Removing his ball cap, Nefti begins twirling sections of his bangs into makeshift twists. More often than making eye contact, he gazes at the wall behind me, “My brother has made it known that if anyone so much as scratches you, so much as lays a finger on you, *se muere.*” He pauses. Then, releasing his bangs, he leans forward and pinches his first two fingers against his thumb. Holding them there, suspended in the air, he repeats himself, “Se muere.” This time his eyes, unblinking, penetrate mine. Unwilling to sit back again until I nod some sort of acceptance, Nefti seems concerned I do not fully understand.

In ways which remain largely opaque to me, my friendship with the Mayor has been as much a liability as a protection. That recurring *aleliano* trope never ceases to resurface: loving someone is equated with a willingness to fight for them. Even though Nefti’s desire is to reassure me, a fitting response escapes me. Why is any of this necessary? If the overarching premise of my work is to examine ways in which the homicide rate could be lowered—? It is clear that the Mayor is not taking any chances, yet I refuse to be the reason another person is harmed. In a moment of exhaustion, I ask myself: could it even have been possible, in ten embedded years, *not* to have become inscribed in these endless interlocking and overlapping circles of violence within *aleliano* social networks? Possible to maintain oneself entirely separate and yet integrated? For a moment I lose myself in the tautologies of counterfactuals. But there is no doubling back. No retracing every detail. In the end the most dangerous, most disturbing dynamics in Alelí have little to do with Mickeys and *metralletas.*

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453 *Dies.*

454 Round dual drum magazines whose combined shape is reminiscent of the Disney mouse’s ears and submachine guns. See Chapter 11 for further discussion.
Both brothers demonstrate concern for my welfare. Yet instead of addressing the issue of threat directly, in true *aleliano* style and grace they speak to my immutable safety. We operate within an economy of words as protective talismans, of *logos* as divine utterance—as if once spoken, an irrevocable fulfillment will follow. It is Aleli’s form of “bulletproofing” (Hoffman 2011) someone, and, to an extent, it works. The declarations emanating from the Mayor somehow are worn on my person. Somehow are written above me, like a cartoon speaking bubble, legible to everyone but me. Just as the airport TSA security codes demarcate the current level of threat through a spectrum of colors, the Mayor’s public pronouncements of protection over me transform from general to pointed in accordance with the ascertained threat level. When threat camps out closer, the Mayor no longer declares harm to a potential perpetrator, but harm to a potential perpetrator’s *mother*. And for once Nefti, in a stirring departure from personal and community convention, opens his mouth.
CHAPTER 11 Accommodation & Resistance:

Community & Bureaucratic Responses to NarcoWar

_Fogata Dreams_

Back at _la fogata_ Quis announces that he is searching for a girlfriend to travel with him to Indonesia for a month. The next hour is dedicated to descriptions of overflowing platters of seafood delicacies, open-air massages, crystalline lagoons. He daydreams aloud in front of us about surfing, napping, freshly picked fruit— _la vida buena_. Then he segues into descriptions of the contents of his wealthy childhood friends’ refrigerators, how different they were from his own: all the vegetables. Every kind of vegetable. He gestures towards me, “I want to see what is in your refrigerator—I bet it is just like that. You even talk like my friend’s mom—she was _una americana_ as well.”

When I suggest the Bahamas, due to proximity and airfare considerations, he dismisses them instantly given their poor quality of waves. Yet even during fantasyspeak455 the macabre trails close behind: Quis visualizes himself as a _carabela_456 hanging, arms outstretched cruciform, from the side of a tree. His body decomposed, or perhaps eaten away—he plucks at his cheekbone with his fingers squeezed together as if a clamp—and a suicide note in his hip pocket dated 2016. He proposes that no one would encounter the corpse until 2030.

I cannot recall my exact words, but twenty minutes later I inadvertently incite panic. I may have mentioned that I took some siblings of an incarcerated youth to find their displaced mother. I may have mentioned that I was so fortunate to run into the

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455 As Hoffman (2011:251) postulates, “[I]t is impossible in any cultural context to confront the problem of violence without recourse to magical thinking.”

456 Skeleton.
brothers, given that I was looking for their mother. I may have said any number of things. But whatever those specific words were catalyze an immediate panic. In an instant, Abdiel slides over two body widths down the curb to be shoulder to shoulder with me, and Quis drags his beach chair forward until his knees almost knock into mine.

Now an infinitely tighter triad, we are so close as to appear to be a splinter group, and no longer *la fogata*—open, welcoming. Instinctively, no one approaches us. In low tones Quis and Abdiel bring me up to date on what happened the past weekend I was away: a hit\textsuperscript{457} had been put out on the aforementioned older brother. I am not to allow him in my car anymore—for any reason, under any circumstance. They then proceed to grill me as to who else I have transported in recent months; the list is lengthy. One by one, they debate amongst themselves whether to approve or reject each passenger according to their partially verbalized, partially nebulous criteria. When the scrutiny is over Quis stands up and pushes his chair back. Hands on his hips, he tucks his chin into his neck and then looking over at me sighs. “Remember,” he imparts soberly, “We only see the face, we don’t know the heart.”\textsuperscript{458}

Not long thereafter, while the Mayor plucks a few freshly fallen yellow flowerlets out of my hair, Quis offers us his unofficial denouement of the evening, “The country has become damaged.” Pausing, he lifts his gaze upwards toward the velvet drape of sky and adds in a quietly trailing off voice, “And in that, I include myself. I include myself. I include myself.”\textsuperscript{459} If he tears up, in the low light I am unable to tell. But looking back over at me, he blinks as if his eyelids were lead-plated. As if they were set to the slowest

\textsuperscript{457} Given that the aforementioned young man is still walking around, I realized that in this case the “hit” ultimately was an unsanctioned or unauthorized hit—which renders it “anemic.”

\textsuperscript{458} “*La cara vemos, el corazón no sabemos*”

\textsuperscript{459} Informal Conversation 6.2015.
shutter speed. Chronic illness is an acrimonious houseguest. A foxhole of endless mud spatter and unrelenting fatigue. A war with no white flags. With a hand on his wrist I ask if he is okay to drive home and make a mental note to number our nights.\textsuperscript{460}

As they say, \textit{el diablo no es sabio por ser el diablo, es por viejo}. Or, the devil is wise not because he’s the devil, but because he’s old. Departing, Quis offers me a fist pump and tells me not to worry. As if reconsidering, he pauses mid-step and turns back to me, confiding, “When they come for me I will bow my head and offer my hands to them.” His tidy micro dreadlocks falling forward, he dips his head downward and extends his forearms towards me with the bases of his palms resting together in silent demonstration. A posture of resignation—it catches me off balance. For as many romanticized and “colorful” Colombian cartel scenes as he has painted for us over the years, tonight he is removing himself from the screenplay, handing over the script and planting both of his \textit{chanclas} down onto this humid, invariably pot-holed \textit{brea} of reality. Nothing could feel more incongruous. Yet as Rodgers and Jones (2009:15) allude, Quis has “outlived his social role”—by some estimates by more than two decades. In the case of low-level micro-trafficking, however, defying statistics is neither ideal nor necessarily rewarding. On the contrary, this subsistence produces a tedious, grinding ennui. Before me stands no brazen, bullet riddled twenty-something \textit{gatillero} riding a gurney with his middle fingers punctuating the air for the voracious consumption of ogling media reels. No. No, the routine endgame here is only grave or cell—whichever comes first. Aside from conversion experiences, there’s no extra liminal space for any deviations, for those who were never meant to make it that far in the first place.

\textsuperscript{460} Psalm 90:12.
Community Organizing Amidst the Centralization of DTO Authority

There is no public policy about how to defend, how to promote, how to preserve that fragile entity known as a community. A mangrove? That we already know how to protect, but a community? Not yet.

—Fernando Picó (Coss & Colón Montijo 2008, translated)

In contexts of instability institutions are forced to function in compromised and adaptive manners. The challenge, then is both to reevaluate and re-conceptualize how conventional purposes, protocols, and assumptions of affected institutions may impede or preclude necessary innovations. That is to say, thinking too narrowly about the scope of an institution’s reach and impact can stifle latent potentialities. This chapter addresses the dilemmas of instability through the adoption of a bioactive, organic, and holistic approach to community—an approach which rejects the comfort and familiarity of traditional boundary demarcations (bureaucratic, legal, formal, or otherwise) and offers a battle cry to interrupt the standing binaries and to interpenetrate heretofore separate territories between the public and private, the formal and intimate, the regulated and unregulated, highly surveilled and the discarded. Hence, the events which follow demonstrate departures from the harried yet resigned baseline mentality which accepts the insecurity of narco-war as insurmountable and which rejects the insecurity of narco-war as an everyday yoke to which we servilely must lower our necks every morning.

In the late 80s and early 90s CEOs, CIOs, and CFOs began receiving stock options as bonuses in order to coerce them to care about the concerns of shareholders. Management, as a result, became more invested in stock price: growing revenue and keeping labor costs low. Therein, workers lost—and have been losing ever since. Strikingly, the illicit economy appears to mirror this trend. As income inequality increases and wealth becomes increasingly concentrated in the upper echelons of society,
so too, in the illicit economy wages have tumbled for those managing negotiations on the ground. Profits have become concentrated more dramatically in the top tier of the hierarchy. The fact that bundles upon bundles of money are literally rotting in the ubiquitously humid Island air does not only point to a severe lack of expediency with regard to money laundering, but also to a grotesquely skewed distribution of profits. Quis explains how this translates into reality for those, like himself, who are closer to the bottom of the labor tier:

There isn’t much money, like there was before. Now just one group has money and no one else. Besides them, no one else has money. It’s just not like it was before. Before you saw Porsches, sports cars, all that in the community. That was back in my time\textsuperscript{461} though.\textsuperscript{462}

These days those with power \textit{within} the community utilize luxury SUVs—big and shiny, but not six figure sports cars. Even at that, there are some who habitually struggle to make their car payments. These days non-local DTOs retain the lion’s share of the profits and a tight rein on the \textit{residenciales’} inner machinations. Corresponding implications for the potential impact of community organizing, at first glance, would seem irreversible and far-reaching. For if the “ultimate” authority now resides \textit{outside} of the perimeters of the \textit{residencial}, those accessible \textit{within} may be impotent to effect systemic change as historically they had license. Yet, thus far, this has not been entirely the case. The renewal of the peace pact which follows below serves as an encouraging example that the moorings to the local community still do matter, still can exert a palpable force—even in the face of transnational billion dollar DTOs.

\textsuperscript{461} The 1990s. \\
\textsuperscript{462} Interview 6.2014.
Bureaucratic Interventions

In light of the ubiquity of high-powered assault rifles and seemingly endless stockpiles of munitions, authorities began investing in Shotspotter, mass monitoring acoustical surveillance technology, in December 2013 and as of July 2015 have continued to expand its territorial reach. Further, new tactical approaches include increased aerial occupation of public housing by the fast action response team (FURA) or federal forces. The at times oppressive deployment patterns (figure eights for a few hours on consecutive days) suggest a stratagem of exhaustion. Such recent security measures may appear piecemeal and scattered—but are they effective in ameliorating homicide by firearm?

When Security Becomes Performative: Aerial Occupation and the Three Legged Action Figure

Puerto Rico’s Forces United for Rapid Action, or FURA, presently has a fleet of nine helicopters which they utilize primarily for chases, raids, searches, operatives, and riots. Back during Mano Dura, the government landed its helicopters on rooftops of public housing in order to conduct surprise extractions of wanted felons. On the website for the Puerto Rico Police Department a proud banner announces their Bell 429 helicopter has garnered a prize for the world’s best law enforcement livery in 2015—that is to say, the “world’s best looking law enforcement helicopter” due purportedly to its “attention grabbing black paint.” While it is an honor to have an attractive fleet, let’s hope this recognition is not an unfortunate synecdoche for the greater Island’s approach to policing—of posturing and image over and against substantive, community-based

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463 Current regions of coverage include: Bayamón, Caguas, Carolina, Cayey, San Juan and Trujillo Alto.
464 “Mano Dura Contra el Crimen” was an anti-crime campaign led by Pedro Roselló from 1993-2000.
presence. Or peacocks over foot patrols. Yet, in the example which follows, it is not the State mobilized FURA dominating the skies, but the United States Federal forces who are occupying the airspace.

What might most often be referred to as “hard security” (see O’Neill 2013), in Puerto Rico might better be referred to as “Hollywood security.” Though relatively exceptional, there does appear to be an element of performativity engaged in by the federal forces in their aerial presence. As such, one late April afternoon we find ourselves in the midst of a brief, if cacophonous, riot—apparently aimed at deposing a local bichote of his territory. My cellphone vibrates with a cascade of texts from Maité, a few blocks away, all urging me to leave. She has no way of knowing that during the uprising various school staff and I become trapped within the school grounds. Alongside a handful of students whose parents had yet to retrieve them, we are inadvertently barricaded within one wing of the school building. A line of state police, arms folded, are just outside our gates observing the melee. We hear the commotion outside, but can see very little.

Later, we can catch glimpses through partitions in a concrete wall as we shuttle between the office and a nearby classroom: Small in stature but grandiose in assumed authority, a lone bichota is outside strolling around in the driveway, arms akimbo. Most residents, however, watch from their balconies. Occasionally we can hear them, but for now the young men are nowhere to be seen.

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465 Hoffman (2011) discovered that the “balcony [serves] as a liminal space from which [residents] could participate in or observe the communal everyday [of the barracks] at once involved and slightly removed” (212). So too, in Aleli the balconies “afford a privileged point of view” from which “one could engage directly…or maintain a discreet but attentive distance” (212).
Meanwhile Misi Magda is caught in the midst of the uprising, attempting to pass through a street clogged with the young men. For this riot, many gang members simply armed themselves with golf clubs and metal tubes. It is unclear whether or not this is occurred as a result of the intended nature of the attack. That is to say, there are occasions when the death of an individual is not sought, rather the intent is to darle una pela pa’ ‘rriba y pa’ ‘bajo. The next day Misi Magda decries the innocuous presence of the state police. She reenacts their posture during the riot by folding her arms and staring straight ahead, her affect completely flat: “The police—all of them—were like this. SUPER relaxed. While all the young guys are forming this riot and yelling, waving their weapons in the air.”

Only once Alarcón arrives at the school and shuffles the last students out with him, are we free to go. I drive outside the gates, park my car under a tree, and fix my gaze on the deafening chopper. With his two feet hanging above the landing skid and his assault rifle at the ready between his legs, the federal sharpshooter looks like a three

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466 Administer a thorough beat-down.
legged action figure magnetically clipped to the side of the helicopter. From the ground I can make out little more.

As Adey (2010:58) writes, “Verticality implies security from the insecurities below.” Reality, of course, is far different. Exposed snipers signal to residents a desire to forestall gunfire from the ground. Yet the federal gunman’s seeming precarity is at odds with the oppressively redundant nature of their flight pattern. The chopper circles interminably doing figure eights about a story above the highest buildings (about the equivalent of a fifth floor). There is no stationary hovering as, understandably, that would make them an easier target. But is it significantly high enough to avoid any lateral threats? I’m not persuaded. This is the third consecutive day that the feds have done aerial sweeps in Alelí. Today they stay for less than two hours.

The perched and visible gunman is likely a preemptive act to dissuade anyone from an armed attempt to down the helicopter—as has occurred on another occasion. But even still, it seems odd. I instant message a military contact, who responds:

Sharpshooting from helicopters is at best just risky. It looks cool because Hollywood made it look cool, but you can't aim from a helicopter that is vibrating—at least not very well: he would be as accurate as a blind man firing a shot gun while on a helicopter. It works much better in the movies than real life—unless you don't care who you shoot. Sharpshooters from helicopters aren't common practice anywhere as far as I know. [It’s] risky to the police, risky to the people on the ground. And tactically stupid. It's the sort of thing that sounds great to the guy behind the desk, and to the inexperienced operator that doesn't know better… [But it would be] better to have the helicopter observe and walk a sharpshooter on foot to the target.

467 After a traffic stop leads to a vehicular chase during the evening of May 4, 2010 in Rio Piedras, a helicopter is deployed to provide illumination and help in tracking the suspect (at 300 ft. AGL). Shortly thereafter, 31 shots are fired from an AK-47 rifle, forcing the helicopter to make an emergency landing because the transmission was hit. The co-pilot was killed and one officer was shot in the back. Given that firing upon a plane is a federal offense, the convicted shooter is eligible for the death penalty.
Usually someone armed and standing on the skid is preparing to be placed by the helicopter on a roof or very near the objective. He is standing on the skid so that he can run off quickly. In war that same person might shoot at a large crowd if he didn't care who he was going to shoot. This has no real practical advantage in law enforcement EXCEPT for “herding,” [that is to say] if they wanted to be intimidating and were trying to scare the suspects into moving toward ground forces, as in “hounds to the hunters” wherein hounds chase the foxes to the hunters.

I think [the mounting of a sharpshooter in the helicopter’s doorway] is probably an intimidation thing…and dangerous for the police. That kind of behavior [tends to] cause more problems than it solves. It doesn't breed trust or respect. At best it only breeds fear of the police, but usually it breeds hate. Like Ferguson. Especially if they make a mistake. [Further] if everyone [there] has guns, why are the police bringing bigger guns? Their tactics don't make much sense, and no, it doesn't sound like the sort of thing you would see anywhere stateside.

So why do the tropics invoke more splashy displays of force? My contact’s analysis confirms my visceral reaction—even the almost choreographed nature of the occupation: the display of the sharpshooter’s corporeal preparedness belies the actuality of what is a tactical conundrum. Yet it was the image of power, a visual demonstration of force combined with the sonic dominance which can be operative as intimidation—and after a few hours, as oppression. I would like to better understand how AUF (Airborne Use of Force) is conceptualized and implemented on the Island—primarily as pacification or intimidation strategies? Or if there are tactical intentions beyond those two endeavors? As a result, I submit a FOIA\(^6\) in order to obtain the statistics as per FURA’s deployment of helicopters from 2000 to 2016. Though broadly used to subdue and counteract nautical

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\(^6\) Questions submitted: Dates and times of deployment (including the length of time of deployment)
Geographical region and destination of deployment
The AGL (Above Ground Level) of individual deployments
Number of FURA individuals aboard each flight
The respective reasons for deployment
Use of artillery during deployment
Instances of artillery being fired
Incidents of return fire (threatened or actual)
narcotics incursions, aerial gunnery is neither a common, nor readily mastered skillset. Further, such shelling occurs with the Coast Guard soldier within the body of the helicopter, not exposed.469

The FOIA expired and I never received any data. What I did receive was a phone interview from an agent inquiring as to my intentions and a reply that the information which I requested is too dangerous to divulge. Months later, however, upon advice from a sergeant in the Hato Rey office, I visit FURA headquarters where I am received and given on-the-spot interviews by the heads of both the nautical and aerial teams without even an appointment.

Con la boca es un mamey:470
Alternately Floundering or Aggressive Security Efforts

As a result of more than three years of utilizing Shotspotter and an observed471 uptick in aerial surveillance, what are Puerto Rico’s “Best Practices”? Well, the technical answer is that those data are not public. However, given the standing tradition and recent history of police brutality, it is even more critical to initiate a counter-narrative and provide law enforcement agents with vehicles by which they can begin to rebuild trust and, at some level, win back the community’s respect. As Kreye (2009) reveals, the utilization of helicopters in executing a strategy of aerial occupation and exhaustion transforms earthbound residents into a landscape “populated only by officers and suspects.” This stark bifurcation of humanity, then, highlights a need to push back against

469 US Coast Guard’s MH-68As are armed with mounted M-16 rifles and M240 machine guns, as well as laser-sighted 50 caliber precision rifles (to take out the engines of go-fast boats)(Neubecker 2004).
470 Easier said than done.
471 Observed, but not verified (nor verifiable), as I was not given access to those statistics as per deployments.
the popular *Tierra de nadie* or “No Man’s Land” tropes in order to rehumanize the landscapes of public housing.

One of the statistics Shotspotter is fond of quoting is the 20% citizen report rate for gunfire, clearly indicating that the vast majority goes unreported. Until recently, this would have been true in Puerto Rico as well. But in response to this concern, Luis Romero, who lost his son to violent crime, spearheaded an initiative *Basta Ya*, a cell phone app which aims to eliminate the social distance between citizens and police. It creates an anonymous way for Islanders to report crimes—both those perpetrated by fellow citizens as well as those perpetrated by officers—without fear of being traced afterwards. As such, the demographics of its users are unknown, however since its inauguration in November of 2011 it has been downloaded by about 5% of the Island’s population and an average of ten messages are submitted daily. Romero affirms that “the mere fact that a person downloads the app is a subliminal affirmation that they want to be part of the solution, that they want to help.”

Given the intractability of gunfire frequency in the Caribbean region the past three years, the apparent inability of law enforcement to increase their arrival times, and the reality that most homicides are presently occurring on public highways or as a result of carjackings, is Shotspotter essentially without value in Puerto Rico? Is the investment in Shotspotter an example of misfiring? Are the intense and heavy-handed helicopter displays inadvertently self-defeating? While residents admit that aerial occupation is the only way by which authorities can effectively “parar el punto,” or shut down the point, it

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472 Given the history of corruption amongst the Island’s police force, the app provides a manner by which *el código azul* (blue wall) can be circumvented and increases the likelihood that professionals’ misbehavior will be held responsible for misconduct.

473 Interview, 4.2015.
is not clear that over the long term such visitations have any significant impact. Tactically it is not uncommon for an early morning hour raid operative to include 90 officials from federal agencies in order to execute as few as five arrest warrants (Figueroa Cancel 2016). Like a landing flare, they are a burst of force which proves chimerical with the arrival of the dawn’s first beams. Ultimately, the aerial occupation of helicopters mirrors these hyper-penetrations (Adey 2010) of the State which dissolve rapidly, leaving behind nothing more than an ephemeral afterglow of absence.

Once again, we are left with peacocks triumphing over presence. Yet to be fair, a fast action response team is just that: emergency activated. What we seem to lack is a strategy which is systematic, strategy which would address such emergencies more preemptively.

Rehumanizing the Landscape

One step towards rehumanizing the landscape might include the implementation of new protocols. Consider the situation in one historically Black town on the Island. Although it has a high homicide rate, the municipality has no ambulances. Instead they must rely on a neighboring municipality to supply them as the need arises. Yet this proves to be a dismal plan, as privatization has changed even the delivery of healthcare. As one elder resident of this town reports:

When everything calms down [the ambulance and EMT crew] arrive, like an hour or an hour and a half later. On Tuesday a teenager was shot at the bus stop. He was alive, he was alive. He was breathing... he opened his eyes, but no one dared to put him in their car and take him to the hospital. After about a half an hour he died. No one dares to [transport a victim] because of fear. There’s a law where you cannot mount a person in your car. There are no paramedics to work in the ambulances. [Then] there are [also] no ambulances ready to go. One has to call

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474 I am not certain as to which law this citizen is referencing, but there is a “Good Samaritan Law” which allows citizens to help without fear of unsavory repercussions.
them. Then they arrive late... When they arrive the person is already dead. An hour, an hour and a half later.475

Equally troubling are stories which indicate that medical staff at the local hospital are at times threatened by the entrance of still armed perpetrators commanding, “¡No lo toquen!”476 in a coercive effort to preclude the victim from receiving any emergency care. Such dynamics defy easy responses in public policy. A cursory assessment of the Island may conclude that a formalized version of the Black Lives Matter Movement, or Las Vidas Negras, has been slow to manifest itself transnationally in Puerto Rico. However, since477 the Island’s abolition of slavery in 1873, the Island has had its own iterations of liberation movements (Bowen & Legros 2107). How might the country’s historic and current liberation trajectory continue to pave innovative pathways?

Utilized in Camden, New Jersey, "Scoop and Go," is a “best practice” developed in order to accelerate the process by which gunshot victims receive medical attention by being transported to the hospital by police officers (Charles Daily, 5.2016, personal conversation). They report that it shaves four to six minutes off of the time between the police arrival and that of the EMTs. Collaboration between various arms of the State, in this case between medical and law enforcement is sorely needed. Increasing the survival rates of shooting incident victims would show good faith on the part of law enforcement. Yet the problem in Puerto Rico is that not only do the EMTs take a while to arrive but too often law enforcement does as well—even, as is the case in the aforementioned town—when the police station is sometimes within blocks of the crime scene. Some residents report delays of over forty minutes. As such, it appears that Shotspotter could

475 Interview, 3.2016.
476 “Don’t touch him!”
477 And prior, as in the establishment of maroon colonies.
be helpful to the Island were it to address basic issues such as law enforcement response time, as it has with other cities.

**Widening the Avenues of Engagement:**
**Brokering the Peace—Only to Broker it Once Again**

“¡Que se enfrie!”—plea from social media post regarding current lack of peace

In Alelí a peace pact was enacted January 2012 and renewed the following January. The rallying verse which community members—as well as Christians Islandwide—consistently cite as the proof text for the pact is an Old Testament scripture from II Chronicles 7:14, *Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.* In fact banners with this scripture are draped on overpasses. But definitions are not always straightforward. And the term “peace,” like security, is wont to be interpreted in wildly disparate manners.

**Kneel Your Hearts:** The Counterinsurgency & Renewed Peace Talks

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478 Let it cool down!
479 Arrodilla tu corazón/Dobla tu corazón

*Fight Like A Man!*
Clasificados Online Headquarters, San Juan
Less than a week after the riot we are told to wear white t-shirts, to be at the plaza by five. There is a sense of urgency: the recent riot which flared broke out quickly and many were still nursing rancor about what were understood to be unjustified killing of community youth. By six most had arrived but the aura is heavy, somber—entirely different from that of the original peace covenant more than two years prior. Tonight everyone stands apart from one another in tightly enclosed corpuscles of seven or eight. Wagons circled. Even when the organizers urge community members to press in closer, no one does. The plaza remains vacant, with onlookers dispersed around the perimeter, tucked into the shadows. It is as if we are standing on the outskirts of our own heart. Like the week prior to an eviction, hope is nowhere visible. Yet it must be hiding out in the crevices: it means something to pull a shirt on and show up. For tonight that is enough, for tonight that is the most we can ask.

After the Master of Ceremonies, a local Christian rapper, welcomes everyone with a mix of pleasantries and Scripture references, Alarcón is summoned to the mic, “The sector of los Cumbres is less represented [at this peace rally] today for reasons that everyone already is aware of…” Mute, mute, mute. Without actually saying it, Alarcón says what no one else could, what no one else would. Sometimes public secrets serve as a social force for cohesion. Not only in narcotics dominated contexts but in all social spheres there are cloaked words, there are discrete elisions. Opacities serve a vital socio-political purpose. Opacities preserve decorum and promote insularity, promote intimacy. Opacities soften realities that might otherwise crush us. Continuing on, Alarcón is keeping it short, he is keeping it simple:

This is a community that has decided to raise itself up through the pain. Everyone present here in one way or another we here have had a moment when a family
member has disappeared because of an act of violence. Me, too. Nevertheless, God—for those of us who believe in the world of Christianity—we recognize that forgiveness is the best quality that human beings possess. Today is a good day to give thanks to God for being alive and for requesting forgiveness for those who are not capable of recognizing when they make mistakes…

The idea is that we are to pray until the narcotics leadership reaches a decision. So we pray, some of us on our knees with foreheads pressed against the warmth and grit of concrete. We sing endless rounds of Tercer Cielo’s “Creeré” (I Will Believe). We talk quietly amongst ourselves, compare notes. The mood is tense. Two and a half hours pass.

**We are a People Who Cry Out:**

**Unifying Semantics and the Absence of Polarized Language**

All at once a local stand-up comedienne takes the mic:

I’m not going to point any fingers, I’m not going to judge, I’m not going to ask why. Because it is simply our turn to continue with what was begun [at the original peace pact] two years, three months, twenty-two hours and four seconds and fifty-eight milliseconds ago… So my people, it’s up to you, it’s up to you, it’s up to you, it’s up to me: Alelí is in our hands. We were the example for all of Puerto Rico. A church came here and demarcated this spot where [the peace covenant] all began and declared that Alelí was for Christ.

And let me be clear with you: I don’t go to any church and everyone here knows it, right. I do stand-up comedy, and [so] people are going to say: “Either you serve God or you serve the devil,” but I believe in God, and on that night God spoke and He said, “The war is over.” So don’t let yourselves be deceived! We’re going to respect one another. Don’t fall into the snare. Continue with your lives, with your daily tasks. We are going to request from them, every time we see them, decency. And we respect what they are doing because I respect their lives, but also we are asking that they respect our lives as well. We are requesting this, we are not demanding this. We are requesting that they respect our lives. So how are we, Alelí?

The response is thunderous: ¡En Victoria! ¡En Victoria! ¡En Victoria! She continues:

“Alelí is a great nation. Alelí is a great people. Alelí is Puerto Rico. Let’s demonstrate to them that we can and will achieve continuing peace.”

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480 Pubic rally, 5.2015.
481 Pubic rally, 5.2015.
“Los buenos somos más” or “There are more of us good ones (than those bad ones)” is a very commonly used expression on the Island which is often utilized by conventionally law abiding citizens to rally the spirits of those crestfallen in contrast to the criminal element within a given neighborhood on the Island. Yet what is particularly noteworthy about this peace renewal ceremony is that those who utilize such polarizing language are in the distinct minority. Such language, while not absent, was overwhelmingly overshadowed by intentionally inclusionary language of our shared humanity. Thus, given that the overwhelming majority were for parity—the element of enmity was eviscerated and the energy of hatred was transferred onto the plane of a spiritual battlefield. Not man against man, therefore, but man appealing to man. One example of this persuasive speech is evident in the following word choice: “We are requesting this, we are not demanding this.” And later the comedienne says, “The housing project belongs to us, and it belongs to them too.” This parity serves as an equalizer of all residents coming to the table. And apparently, while no one dare reclamar a Dios, we are still free to reclamar one another.

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482 ...And a bit less self-congratulatory than the “de los buenos somos pocos” or “There are few of us good ones left”
483 “El residencial nos pertenece y les pertenece a ellos también.”
484 Take God to task.
Less Al garete than Before: Schooling as Anchor

Another hour labors by. Only two of the three bandos are ready. The remaining one cannot reach consensus. Three separate times the local elementary school principal Alarcón goes to the stalled bando’s leadership to mediate: amongst them there is one leader who remains resistant, unyielding. He is resolute, his jaw clenched. Between trips back and forth Alarcón tells me who, but gets his name wrong. This young man is one of the few Alarcón does not know. It presents a significant challenge. A trained mediator, Alarcón summons everything he knows in order to be persuasive:

Look, this is not an agreement that we feel peace, or that we are at peace, or that things are resolved, or that the wound is healed. No. It is simply a “Time Out.” It’s simply that we’re going to take a little break and we’re going to think and breathe and after that we are going to continue to talk.487

At one point he gestures directly at a young man in leadership who lost his mother at a young age: Yo tampoco tengo madre.488 “El Mister” is reaching, reaching to identify with

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485 Adrift.

486 The accordion like metal hurricane storm shutters are called tormenteras. Thus, when the students prepare for the worst emotionally, they tend to shut down and become “atormenterado.” Emotional tethering between students and classroom teachers or school staff can help tremendously to help them break free from this affective state when it feels safe for them to do so. Ideally, an effective school experience can anchor children emotionally. It can be a safe place to express themselves, to be less atormenterado.

487 “No es que estamos en paz. No es que ya nos sentimos bien. No es que ya la herida está sanada. Es, sencillamente que vamos a tomar un brequecito y vamos a pensar y respirar y después seguiremos hablando…."

488 “I don’t have a mother either.”
them on as many levels as he can. “Right now the community is waiting for your response. What are we going to tell them? They want to know that their children are going to be safe. Can we tell them that?” His question hangs in the air like marijuana haze in an unventilated room. Aphonicity reigns. With his plea stated clearly, Alarcón bows his head. He then dismisses himself from their meeting to return to those of us gathered waiting in the plaza. Back on the mic, the comedienne is knee deep in supplication: “Here in Alelí there is a people who cry out. We are going to cry out to the only One who can get into that apartment, Aleluya, where [the young men] are meeting together right now…”

One more hour passes. Then finally it comes. An encouraging update that some young men from the resistant bando have left their headquarters with white tee shirts on; the downside is that they have not yet mobilized to join us in the plaza. They still cannot agree. Back at the plaza he rocks from one foot to another: agitated. Again, all we can do is wait.

Then the Christian rapper receives a text requesting that Alarcón not return again. That they love and respect him but now they need to talk amongst themselves. That Alarcón tocó la fibra. Caló hondo. His words struck a chord with them. They feel vulnerable. After all, when a bichote is devising tactical decisions vis-à-vis his enemies, the last person he hopes to see is his father, principal, or priest. For them Alarcón is a bit of each. The shared sentiment among them is something akin to, ¡Coño! ¡Llegó el Mister!\(^{489}\) Because the reality is, as much as you might respect him, you don’t always want him around.

\(^{489}\) Damn it! The principal just got here!
With a commanding presence a Pentecostal woman receives the mic and directs the crowd,

Take the hand of the person next to you please. Right now raise your hands in the air [together] and say after me: Lord, this evening we are here united to recognize that only You can give us the peace that no man can give. We ask that Your peace, that Your love that surpasses any understanding, inundate the four corners of this residencial. And that together we would continue to proclaim the peace for our children and our families and all of our loved ones.

The Performativity of Peace: A Public Demonstration

Then, just after ten thirty, like an inaudible swath of white seafoam slipping over the rocks at high tide, the young men flow in. From the east, the west, the south: spilling from the streets to the sidewalks, scores of silent, identity-cloaked young men. As the gang members’ arrival becomes noticed, those congregating along the perimeter erupt in cheers and applause. They, too, wear white t-shirts—though theirs are tied tightly around their heads and necks, covering their faces and leaving only an open slit across the bridge of their noses and eyes. The foam converges in the middle of the plaza and the groups convene in a tight knot, the nucleus of which contains the leaders. As they begin to converse, one pulls off a translucent grey stocking cap from his face. I hear him say—about five inches from another leader’s face—“If it were just you and me, then let’s go, let’s kill each other right here.”

Alarcón later expressed concern that the children were watching their community applaud the traffickers, wondering how to reconcile their violence as livelihood with the pursuit of harmonious community relations.

The proposal of death matches is relatively common and somewhat tongue in cheek parlance. The Mayor (12.2013) is accustomed to explaining his modus operandi as follows: If I see that [the issue] cannot be talked through, well then, “Let’s go, whichever way you want it” because I’m not going to let someone take advantage of me or hit me. You can never let your guard down because someone always comes along who wants to be crazy. And well then, if you’re crazy then I’m crazy too. Two nuts. The two of us can kill each other… If I have to kill you by fighting, well then I kill you by fighting (laughs). But that attitude of mine is a consequence of the abuse that occurred in my home—where all of the time they would hit. They would hit me constantly, they would hit me constantly. That made me rebellious; I felt rage. That rage is what I carry inside of me. I don’t know, perhaps I need a psychologist to express to him what I am expressing to you, and then he can tell me, “Well, look when you go through those moments what you should do is this, or that, or the other. Breathe or count, go to the beach, walk, go to your room and scream, cry. You understand. Things like therapy—breathing, yoga, whatever. I would consider that here in Alelí some ninety percent of the people need a psychologist, including me. Sagrario (5.2014) shared “I don’t get into it with anybody. I don’t go around saying
at some nearby little ones] We have to keep the kids' safety first.” More than a few onlookers press in, holding up phones like periscopes straining to capture it on video.

Organizers promptly grab the microphone to announce the need for

Okay, my people, the boys are asking for zero cell phones. We are going to listen. They are here for a reclamo that we made towards them, so accordingly we are going to listen to the boys’ request: zero cell phones so that the boys would be at ease, okay? Zero cell phones, my people. We are going to comply; they complied for our sake, we are going to comply for their sake.\footnote{Compliance\(^493\) is immediate, if staggered. Even the television cameraman from WAPA puts his camera down. As their discussion comes to a close, Alarcón offers a benediction:

\begin{quote}
A community that is united is always better. A united community is always better. We want Puerto Rico to see: the people [here] communicate with one another, the people [here] understand one another, the people [here] want to care about one another.
\end{quote}

Then, projecting forcefully with his right arm extended into the air as if to provide a shielding canopy over the gathered multitude of young men he proclaims, “We love you, boys. We love all of you. Let’s have some applause!”

Weeks later when Alarcón describes that moment to his colleagues, he highlights the moral dilemma occasioned by the peace treaty:

\begin{quote}
At 10:40 the objective that we had delineated occurred. And then you had to have seen the shining eyes of the littles ones because those sharpshooters were receiving the applause. The heroes of that night were those guys.

How can one work with those children so that they don’t pursue that message? And then quickly they had to save face in front of the other hooded ones and then they all went off to one corner talked over there for another half an hour, then they came back and then we prayed.
\end{quote}

\footnote{\begin{quote}
“Yes, no, that if you this or that.” No, I don’t get close to those in the streets because I get all tangled up: I am no good at arguing. No, instead we are going to fight because I don’t know how to argue: either you hit me or I hit you. But nope, no way am I going to argue that “if your husband this or that.” No, I would die. No, you are going to have to hit me. I have no problem with that part.
\end{quote}\footnote{Here again, note the selection of language defined by mutuality, by an exceedingly intentional parity.\footnote{ Whereas there is a habitual, studied non-compliance which reigns in contexts wherein the authorial voice commanding it is not recognized as authoritative (e.g., the government, etc.), in this instance the authorial voice is recognized as legitimate and the customary resistance stratagem (see Scott 1992) are elided altogether.}}
But [the sharpshooters] were the heroes of the night. And everyone looking up at them with respect and “How wonderful” and… but look, it left the message with the child, [with] the little ones so that they are confused, one gets really confused because they are not receiving this reinforcement from their parents and their community, the little reinforcement that they do get for good behavior, is from us—the little that they receive… There are few people there who dare to say, “No, that’s poorly done.” “No, don’t do that.” Very few, very few, very few. There are people who do it; they [tend to] do it injuriously (reproachfully). But the grand majority is accepting and that is the huge problem that we have, that the people are acquiescent. Everyone remained enchanted….

Back at the plaza, his cheeks ruddy, Alarcón takes a deep breath and sends forth his final exhortation:

Construct peace in your hearts. Construct happiness in your family. Let everyone be filled with hope of the opportunity that it is possible to change. The community needs it. Puerto Rico does, too. Another Alelú is possible. We all know it.

The words of Alarcón reverberate through my mind: Los queremos muchachos. We love you, boys. I have to wonder how many of them could believe him. How, after all, would they conceptualize love through the medium of an administrative arm? Were his declarations seen as just words? Did they scrutinize his affect? Whether spoken as a petition, a reminder, or a promise, in that moment I found myself repeating his words after him. Like prayers. It is difficult to sense whether the young men are absorbing these words as well. After he steps away from the microphone, however, he looks over and confides “They themselves recognize that this is not yet resolved.” Soon after, they peel off into a far corner of the neighborhood about fifty yards from the plaza to continue the discussion more privately.

Throughout the event, commands for applause are given—even beyond those directed towards the young men. Additionally, the media, the state police (between seven
or eight who are lined up along the edge alongside their motorcycles), and God are all acknowledged for their presence this evening. All receive a separate, lengthy applause.

**Requesting, Not Demanding:**

Pushing the Boundaries of Soft Security

Alarcón’s parting words to the Christian rapper spearheading the event are that our next step should be a retreat: to continue the dialogue between the *bandos*. So now there’s a retreat to plan—with no time to plan it and potentially no participants to attend it—if we don’t play our cards right. Fundamentally, a retreat would provide the context for the young men to not only establish a firmer reconciliation, but for them to begin a conversation about reinstituting codes. As Alarcón laments, “Now there is no longer a code or anything of the sort; these days the trafficking is regulated strictly by hormones and without forethought.” While this is less true now than prior to the original peace treaty (as a result of the oversight provided by the region’s transnational DTO), there is clear legitimacy in his desire to keep the local tensions at a minimum.

There is a reason that some of the elementary school students inevitably put on a long sleeve button down shirt and tie to dress up as “*El Mister*” for Halloween. It is the same reason that Alan Iverson was “The Answer” for Philadelphia: the community recognizes his heart. Alarcón’s self-effacing interventions provide the Island with an alternative conception of what it means to be an administrator in narcotics constrained communities. For Alarcón it is indisputable that the school assume a role in such community interactions, “In any given moment we have to control the violence, so at any given moment the school is a powerful force” through which to do just that. It is possible to underestimate the influence of fond childhood memories which the sharpshooters

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494 *Pidiendo no exigiendo.*
retain. As Misí Raquel muses, “They look back fondly on their years here. It was a simpler time for them, a time when they did not have all the problems that they now face as teenagers and young adults.” This emotional tethering which ties them into the local elementary school affectively should not be squandered; every positive memory which they retain from those days is emotional “money in the bank” as it were.

For even with all of the legitimate criticisms which, in fairness, could be leveled against the public schools, most every student experiences warmth and care from faculty and staff as well. For this reason, it is not uncommon to see former and current deserters on school grounds, for this reason many amanecidos spend as many of their waking hours there as possible. As imperfect as it may be, therefore, the school represents a fixture of refuge and safety within the community. Thereby, a psychological component of emotional tethering serves as a powerful mnemonic, a channel through which teachers and administrators become authorized to make their appeals to conscience in these young men. Even years of life in the streets cannot snap those heart chords of affection which tie someone to a specific place, to a certain face. Those heart chords that can reorient them, tug them back home, remind them of who they are—or once were—when life was far simpler.

Further, there is hope that this type of direct involvement of school representatives with those on the frontlines of narcotics and arms trafficking could become a widening trend. Another school employee at a neighboring residencial, a middle school teacher who reports having buried over two hundred students during his tenure, is also working alongside residents to rally for peace (Vecinos de Monte Hatillo, 2015). When the outbreak of narco-war reoccurred there as it sporadically does, new
community conversations were spawned. One conclusion they reached together is that, “They consider that the violence is impossible to eradicate, but the request is simple: that everything returns to normalcy: to the tense calm, to the relative tranquility… The youth who assumed control of the drug points\textsuperscript{495} are requesting help for everything to return to normal” Quintero (2015c).

As such, it is not precisely peace, then, which the novice traffickers are seeking, so much as a minimization or more precise application of the violence which will inevitably occur. Quite similar to that which happened in Alelí in that residents did not address the trafficking itself, but its concomitant violence. Here too it seems that it is not only the youth who are resigned to the intransigence of the narcotics trade and its concurrent brutality: their community leaders express that, “If [the youth] have to kill [someone] to defend their business that is their problem, but let them leave the community completely tranquil.” Quintero (2015c). The request appears to be one made to keep the violence contained. So akin to the arrangements in Alelí, there is an understanding that the narcotics trafficking is a non-negotiable. The suggestion that the points be closed down does not enter into the discussion.

However, in past years through non-confrontational approaches, there have been instances wherein closures have been accomplished in other more rural towns. Luis Romero shares that in one public housing project outside of the metro area where the point was located at the basketball court, retired men of the community would come out there every evening and set up a card table to play dominoes. He adds that another community effort on the western part of the Island relocated four drug points within one

\textsuperscript{495} Following the arrest of 105 traffickers after a federal raid of their residencial.
neighborhood over the course of about a year through the renovation and revitalization of a community center and providing resources and activities for the youth who were without structure daily from early afternoon until late evening. So the possibility remains that illicit businesses can pack up and move elsewhere, but such a prospect is might prove less likely in a dense urban environment than that of a more rural context. The subsequent question, then, is what does relocation accomplish? These geographical relocations of violence and distribution points only serve to scramble or diffuse the components of the trafficking game. Resolutions, along with decriminalization, seem much further off.

**Back to the Drawing Table**

Alarcón is a walking tornado. Even still, I manage to snag him, requesting the names of the potential retreat locales so that I can go ahead with the arrangements. And at one point, somehow, he even sits down at the office table with me. After explaining to him some of the structural dynamics of the community to which he was not privy—and which he *needs* to understand—I listen to his thoughts. Not wanting to interrupt to ask if I can record him (well knowing the answer invariably would be no—the material is too fraught), I take notes feverishly as he talks. I’d dug through my wallet and scrounged up a palm sized receipt upon which to write, but I am rapidly running out of room, cramming words into the margins. Pausing midsentence, he reaches across the table, gently lifts the scrap of paper from under my hand and begins to scribble very slowly over top of my writing. “Áurea,” he warns, “Anytime you write down a proper noun you must always remember to block it out afterwards, so that no one can read it.”

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496 Interview, 4.2015.
chains of tight blue ink spirals across the previous day’s lunch receipt, he proceeds to obliterate all the perpetrating words before handing it back to me. Then, raising his gaze to meet mine, he waits for my nod of compliance.

Bear in mind, this isn’t our problem to solve; it is their problem. Además, Dios es el arbitro. Más nada. We can only provide a setting, an ambiance in which they will be comfortable to share. And encouragement: we need to let them know that we are proud of them. We are going to send out flyers, telling the whole community that they have been doing an excellent job in talking things through. After that, we make up very nice written invitations and ask them to attend the retreat.

He pauses for a moment to mention parenthetically that their arsenal of heavy machine guns is heart-stopping, “A ton of metralletas, AR-15s—with chambers like this,” he puts his hands in semi-circles across from one another as if holding a volleyball… “I know, I know,” I shake my head, tired: “They have that and more at their disposal. As long as I’ve been here, it’s always been like that.”

In that same vein, Abdiel, who neither deals with firearms, nor has any interest in them, proposes a hypothetical scenario to me one night:

If you find a gun, you would take it to the police, right. Me, I would sell it quickly [within the community], just ask like 500 dollars for it. Make it a real bargain in order to sell it fast. Normally, AK-47s and AR-15 go for about the same, depending what condition they are in: anywhere between $1,800 and $2,600—but with a chip to transform it into a fully automatic machine gun, you’d need to add another $200 to $300 (and the automatic federal charge if you’re caught with it); a 380 goes for about $800; Magnums go for anywhere from $300 to $600, depending on whether or not they have a short or long cañon; for peines [or cartridges] you have the chiquito, the guineo, the redondo, and the Mickey—which is a redondo doble [or double round] and resembles the famous cartoon’s ears, hence the name. Then if any of the firearms “tiene muertes,” their value is automatically drops. If you get caught with a gun like that, they can put you away for a long time.

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497 “And what’s more, it is God who is the referee here. No one else.”
498 Such a gun is referred to in the streets as “una arma chipeada.”
499 If the gun was used to murder anyone prior.
The common knowledge many _alelianos_—even small children—possess as per firearms’ differing characteristics and capacities is staggering to a novice such as myself. But such expertise is contextually relevant: within Aleli and its surrounding communities there is no shortage of firearms.

Presently, the submachine guns of choice, or “_metras,_”\(^{501}\) on the Island are styles that are considerably more compact than their predecessors, like the FN P90. In the underground economy they are sold for between seven and eight thousand a piece. Newer to the market, they also serve as a status symbol. Because they are so compact—still rectangular but almost edging toward square—submachine guns such as the FN P90 are typically worn almost imperceptibly against the chest under a sweatshirt, hanging from a sling around the neck of its owner. Its bullets, 5.7 by 28 caliber, are thin and known as the “_cop killers_” for their ability to penetrate Kevlar. Other favored _metras_ include the compact AK-47, the Colt M4, HK MP5 Uzzies, Intratechs, and Ingrams. _Metras_ are less often recovered in raids because they are highly valued and tend to be stored more carefully.

Of all the pistols, Glocks are most favored on the Island primarily because their composed of material that does not overheat: polymer and Arma-lite.\(^{502}\) They are also dependable and are not known to not jam up. In the first half of 2016, pistols were the firearm most frequently confiscated in the narcotics raids, followed—by a wide margin of almost two thirds less—by revolvers. Of the revolvers, the most popular is the Magnum 307; due to the size of its bullets, revolvers are considered more powerful than Glocks—

\(^{501}\) Short for “metralleta,” or ametalladora.
\(^{502}\) As opposed to, for example, a metal Smith & Wesson.
even though they cannot be altered. On the other hand, rifles such as AR 15s and AK 47s are altered with frequency as are Glocks.

In terms of efficacy, however, the aforementioned distinctions between *matones* and *gatilleros* versus *sicarios* determine the firearm selected. For *matones* or *gatilleros*, who tend to possess relatively better skills and therefore precision vis-à-vis firearm usage than their exclusively selling peers, preferences lean towards *escopetas* or revolvers because they can do extensive damage with fewer bullets and can be used to dismember a person. Generally speaking, their intent is to do the work of ending the life as swiftly as possible and subsequently depart undetected, avoiding any vestige of spectacle. On the contrary, a *sicario* tends to prefer a rifle such as a 223 AR 15 or an M16 because within a perspective of necromania, more pleasure is derived in shooting a blinding flurry of bullets than in shooting only one or two. Hence, in order to “maximize” their enjoyment, they may use the above referenced *tambor doble* or a “Mickey,” which can hold two hundred bullets.  

Given that the out-weaponization of the State is not exceptional here, but baseline, I am slightly intrigued that the proliferation of arms and munitions distracts Alarcón. That which is kept largely out of sight is not absent. Stockpiles and stashes abound. And this is no recent development. In 2008 during one of my first weeks in the community a kindergartener pointed out one of the apartments where weaponry was stored; I discretely suggested she lower her finger.

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503 See Aphonic Interlude I and Chapter 2.
504 Magazines over ten rounds are considered high capacity and prohibited in some states.
505 Now out-weaponization of the feds is another story. But the feds, as one activist explains, “Only show their faces for sting operatives”; their presence is highly selective and not considered daily fare.
Knowledge as liability stirs momentarily from its ever present slumber, and raising its head, cracks one eyelid open just a sliver before settling back down into its dreamscape. I exhale. And think back on that same child’s casual pantomime of the differences in how machine guns are loaded—depending on whether the given firearm’s ammunition is stored in a magazine or drum. Here in Alelí the job of an outsider is not to know. Even—or maybe especially—when it’s one’s job to know. As one homicide cop relays,

The beat cops who are assigned to police the government housing communities are subjected to a lot of chastisement. They become numb in the face of events that occur because they prefer to maintain their own safety. So they overlook crimes like a person doing drugs or using a firearm—all to avoid getting involved and risking their own security. As long as a violent situation doesn’t happen, that they don’t kill anybody, the rest is ignored. They are only there to prevent murder [since,] at a statistical level, the government prefers that no murders occur.\(^506\)

Knowledge as liability is the daily bread of the beat cop. One relays that a small child approached him, boasting that his father’s rifle was much bigger than the officer’s. His immediate response was to laugh and tell the child that his father’s gun is just a toy; he then swiftly cut the conversation short. Intel is no asset. Intel means you may not make it home for dinner. Or you may not make it home at all. Frequently, for any outsider, intel is death wishing.

The parenthetical surprise behind him, Alarcón refocuses on the support structure we need to put in place for the retreat: “We need to have one representative from every community organization—but no government agencies. No government agencies.” He repeats it as if trying to console himself. He served time in federal prison after protesting

\(^{506}\) Interview, 4.2015.
the US military occupation of Vieques, has scars on the back of his calf from having been dragged over barbed wire. He lists the three potential retreat sites off the top of his head. The third is a training base for the US armed forces on the Island’s west coast—at which point I ask him if he’s lost his mind. He grabs my wrist and reassures me, “They have a nice facility.” “Alarcón,” I raise my voice, “It’s a military base. We are not taking them there.” He raises one eyebrow and an accompanying shoulder in concession. So instead I select the most rural and sleepy option of the remaining two; he agrees.

His cell buzzes; he begins to tell the person on the other end of our plans to create a context for a diálogo sustenido. The gentleman proceeds to offer to drive a bus, tells him a bus is the best way to transport everyone: together. And just as Alarcon told me earlier, he repeats to our newly contracted volunteer bus driver, “No arms,” leveling his hand through the air each time he ticks off another item, “And no drugs and no cellphones. They are going to disconnect from everything.”

Initial preparations had begun; the following is an excerpt from a text which I sent Alarcón later that day:

Some of our suggestions as per goals to include during the dialogue would be:

1) Establish a code of ethics as they used to have in prior decades
2) Establish a fixed meeting time between the multiple factions (perhaps monthly) so that they remain in communication
3) Foment brotherhood between them through various activities
4) Request that a minimum age be agreed upon which would exclude those below it from participating in violent activities

From that day onward we remain, expectantly and humbly, at their behest. As it turns out, the young men were able to resolve the issues amongst themselves and there was no

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507 The US Navy occupied the Island of Vieques from 1941 to 2003 when the protesters won (in 2001 operations ended). Some attribute the subsequent heavy increase in narcotics a result of the losing military presence.  
508 Sustained dialogue.
longer a pressing need\textsuperscript{509} (in their mind) for the retreat. One encouraging result, however, was that as the word traveled throughout the gang members, there were a respectable number who liked the idea and demonstrated interest in attending. A good number also declined. We have tabled the proposition for now, but have made clear that it remains a standing offer. We want to be a resource for the benefit of the community. As Father’s Day approached, we felt it important to acknowledge their openness and cooperation. We print up 300 flyers to hand out and thank men whose paths we cross along the way.

Alarcón revises my original message significantly,\textsuperscript{510} but the sentiment remains the same:

\textbf{Happy Father’s Day!}

The community of Alelí wants to congratulate our fathers, grandfathers, and father figures for their valiant efforts in daily life. Many make tremendous sacrifices in order to sustain their families. Additionally, they offer affection and respect to their loved ones. We want to tell them that we are very proud of them for responding to the community’s entreaty. Thanks to each one of you for valuing the community and rescuing the spaces of peace for everyone.

\textbf{Fathers who are 100%!}

\textit{¡Besito!}\textsuperscript{511} demands the preschooler, squeezing his cheek between two \textit{rejas} of his family’s enclosed first floor patio. It was a non-negotiable. Once obliged, he dives into a mini monologue, whizzing alongside us in his own verbal sidecar while his mother and I chat. I have stopped by to verify permission for her two elder children to accompany me in the communitywide distribution of the leaflets. While the eldest briefly litigates with his mother about maximizing the opportunity to sell his fundraising candy, the effervescent preschooler scoots up the \textit{rejas} until he is just above me. Irrepressibly compelled to corral my flyaway \textit{greñas}, those corkscrew baby hairs which bloom

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{509} In our mind there is still the concern that no code has been implemented as to delimiting violence and the lack of protection for minors.

\textsuperscript{510} rewording my crass appreciation for their response of exchanging bullets for words

\textsuperscript{511} A salutation in the form of an air kiss just below the cheekbone.
\end{footnotesize}
fervently in this popsicle stick humidity, the child reaches both his hands through the *rejas*. Then, as if flattening out a slab of raw pizza dough on a countertop, he starts from the middle of my hairline and presses both hands firmly outward. And repeat. Unruly hair flags otherness. His is a heroic—yet ultimately fruitless—effort to press the recalcitrant halo of frizz back down into some semblance of respectably controlled coif—like that of his mother. She shakes her head, chuckling at his persistence. But soon enough we are on our way.

Most business owners we engage generously offer to place a short stack on their check-out countertops for patrons to pick up and read for themselves. Overall, the reception is one of warmth. Like an old-fashioned huckster at the ballpark, the eldest brother strolls next to me with the box of candy open at chest level, as if suspended from an invisible strap around his neck. I observe that it doesn’t look too comfortable. But with calculated business acumen he explains almost too patiently that customers are more apt to make a purchase if the wares are *visible*. Upon approaching a postage stamp sized cinder block building, both boys stop in their tracks. Neither dare enter the barbershop. I shrug, step in front of them, and: immediately see their point. Our reception is not even mildly lukewarm. But the men come around, if haltingly, and accept a stack for the shop. We allow for a few divergences to the tune of escaped chartreuse lizards or brief visits to cousins’ homes, but we cover almost the entire community in less than two hours. When we have just one left I ask the owner of a billiards bar if he would tape it to the bulletproof plastic which protects his cashier and the bottles of liquor. He agrees but his coworker suggests posting it on the front door. Even better.
By the time we pass out three hundred flyers and sell more than half of the fundraising candy, it is well after five and not a soul is left in the schoolyard. They had left the gate shut with chain twisting it closed but with the padlock open. When my car refuses to start, I grab the padlock and my briefcase and head back on foot toward the *los Cumbres* sector of Alelí. The Mayor is otherwise occupied—working a shift that would not finish until almost midnight. So I continue onward to Holy Row…

As a result of these spring 2015 peace talks, the ceasefire lasts for one hundred and twelve days.\(^{512}\) Just shy of four months. A formal declaration of war accompanies the murder of a young man. The next morning, while stateside caring for my father, I receive a crestfallen text from Maité: *God Bless You I request prayer for our housing project, for our children and elderly here. It has once again exploded into war here and it is always the innocent ones who pay. Please let us pray for this. Thank you. God Bless You. Again, folks are kneeling their hearts. Again, children are being enclosed behind four concrete bulletproof walls. Again, overtures are being extended towards those in command. We can do no other than anticipate that both the community and the school’s role, if not determinative, may still wield a significant heft in bending the narrative arc back towards our shared, if far too short-lived, humanity.*

\(^{512}\) In this instance, the eruption of war was occasioned by the release of a former *bichote* from prison who promptly executed a swift, well-orchestrated takeover wherein all present leadership was deposed unilaterally and new factions were brought in from other *residenciales* (from alliances built during the period of his incarceration). Upon his arrival, the declaration of war was made public as were his intentions to overtake the entire *residencial*. It is unclear precisely how the DTO figures into this transition, but there must be some level of support or else it would not have been permitted. Less than three months after his release, he himself was killed.
Mundane Moments & La fogata meditativa:

Recalibrating Networks, Recalibrating Time

His cheekbones frighteningly sharp, the Mayor has not yet shaved after almost a week in the hospital. Just days ago he had struggled even to sit up. Head tossed backwards, mouth open, and teeth clamped together in grimaces of aphanic pain, he remained mostly still. But when we prayed at the end of the most alarming evening, he sought that closeness and willed himself forward. From above our bodies on his hospital bed form a tight Celtic triangle, each forearm holding another’s, each forehead resting on another’s back. Overlapping whilst undergirding. Interlacing and threading through. The following morning, in triumphant proclamation, Castiel cites the prayer as pivotal. Medically speaking: our patient’s turned the corner.

Now back home, the Mayor feeds a load of darks into the washing machine while Castiel flips a breakfast of tostados lined with ham and butter over the burner. Everyone’s still in pajamas. It’s my lunch break and I just stopped by to drop off some restorative foods, but they ask what could be so important in my schedule that I have to leave so quickly. When I hesitate, Castiel looks at me sardonically, “Dale, Áurea, improvisando...” and begins to laugh. Just as I give in and agree to stay, someone yells for the Mayor from below—it seems someone always is yelling for the Mayor from below—today it is Doña Silvia.

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513 The Bonfire of Meditation
514 “Go ahead, Aurea, make something up...”
515 With regard to proximal intimacies for house visitation, I have observed in ascending order (of acquaintance to family member) to be 1) Calling: the target of the visit is summoned vocally from the parking lot 2) Knocking: the door or window is approached but the threshold is not breached, and 3) Entering: by this stage one usually is expected to enter without any vocal assent. The vast majority of people are engaged outside in the public space of the parking lot or grassy areas. See Appendix F for further elaboration of spaciality of intimacies and the sanctity of thresholds.
Grabbing a tank top, he bounds down six flights of stairs to receive her. A few moments later Castiel holds a serving spoon parallel to his mouth and, with his best stage whisper, beckons me to join him on the balcony. Together we peer between alternating pairs of wet, newly hung jean shorts: the community elder is weeping. Weeping because she had just found out about his hospitalization; she wanted to come right over and check on him. The Mayor cradles her hands in his as, chatting away, she gazes up at him. His level of emotional attunement makes Richard Simmons look indifferent. Ten minutes later when I lean out the landing window to request his keys, la Doña looks up at me, beaming with gratitude at his restored health. I thank her for worrying, for taking time out, for coming by. She closes her eyes, bowing her head slightly: more than a few of us had feared the worst.

Later at la fogata the mood is playful. “If it was God who made my eyes, and it was God who made the marvel that are women, why shouldn’t I use my eyes to enjoy the wonders of this creation?” Abdiel is grinning widely, his eyes dancing as he polishes the apologetics of his treatise. Piquantly contrarian, I ask him how his wife is doing. Historically polyamorous, but not publicly so, Abdiel demurs. As yet unwilling to relinquish his customary air of charm, however, he tilts his head to the side, “Well, you know Quis is single; he can just go to the beach and take his pick.” He accompanies this proposition with a magnanimous sweep of his hand across an imagined beach. Just earlier Quis suggested un día playero, a day at the beach, to those gathered. From that point onward la fogata is crackling.

Quis insists I take his number. After more than three years, I relent. But I remind him that even as we speak we could be under any of a variety of modalities of
surveillance. Is this actual recklessness or mere paranoia on my part? I am never sure. But the unspoken weight between us just got heavier.\textsuperscript{516} Abdiel breaks into my thought stupor, “You already have my number, right?” I nod. “Here, I’ll call you,” he suggests, scrolling through his contacts. When my phone lights up, he glances at the screen and retracts his neck in surprise, “¿Abdiel?” he contorts his face, “Just use my real name!” He deems my choice of pseudonym pathetic. I don’t ask what the name conjures up for him, but, at his insistence, change it to one of his nicknames. He nods, satisfied.

After all this time, Abdiel still apologizes for lighting up in front of me. Insofar as it has been possible, customarily I have encouraged folks to just be themselves in front of me, but a colleague challenges me: “Maybe you should let him be respectful of you…” Tonight he is decked out in the slacks, tie and dress shirt from his son’s graduation. Still beaming with pride he moves with an uncharacteristic lightness, yet with a restrained joy—as if not wanting his affect to spill over into a more effusive category.

“I never conduct business over the phone,” insists Quis, waving his phone at me in an attempt to be reassuring. Then he elaborates, “For one drug transaction made over the phone you can be incarcerated for time served up to four years. Four years. I should be a federal lawyer, I know all the laws so well.” I ask if he’d be interested in reading about the historical construction of illegality vis-à-vis narcotics, and mention Isaac Campos’ treatise on marijuana, \textit{Home Grown} and Froylan Enciso’s \textit{Nuestra historia narcótica}. But almost immediately Quis waxes doubtful, “I only ever really read books in jail. Now all my reading is on here,” again waving his cell. His sentiments echo those of

\textsuperscript{516} Communication can be rife with ethical dilemmas. For another ethnographic example of this, see Ralph 2014:110.
the Mayor. Local identity politics appear to dictate that most of the urban bookworms rock out in the church and not at the point.

Not infrequently Quis twirls a lollipop between his fingers or clenches one between his front teeth. Reminded of this, I palm a box of See’s at the airport in the City of Brotherly Love to pass around at *la fogata*. But Marcos happens upon us in the process, skeptically eyes our handfuls of foil-wrapped sweets, and warns me, “Don’t give all those to Quis or you could kill him.” Appearing deflated, Quis looks over at me but says nothing. “How about just taking one of each flavor,” I compromise—and he brightens a bit. Yet even poring over the labels, none of us can read them because it’s long since grown dark and the writing is too small. We are all getting too old for this. Exasperated, I prop my glasses atop my head and try again. The youngest in our presence, Marcos finally reads the first two syllables of “butterscotch” but gives up midway when he realizes that it is in English. And that flavor is not one of the innumerable English words that pole-vaulted across the *charco* into everyday Island parlance—never mind the added confusion because I’d referred to it earlier as *dulce de leche*.

Quis sticks his arm out the window of his truck’s window; he wants the empty box, but it’s not clear why. I pass it to the *manda’o*. Tonight I arrived so late that I didn’t even bother to get out of the car. Quis then suggests going with me to the States; I don’t oppose it. Later I entertain inviting him to attend my defense—were to hold any appeal. Maybe the Mayor would join him, too. Previously I had told my committee that some community folks might populate the audience. Even still, I view the prospect as improbable.
Sterilizing his stomach with a swab, Quis then walks around the truck to shoot up his insulin. A guy who is not around much nudges me, “You don’t like needles.” When I ask why, he observes, “Well, you look away when he shoots up.” I shrug, “I’m not a nurse.” Then, holding the used needle out to his *manda'o* Quis directs him to throw it into the dumpster, leaving the toppled orange cap to adorn the hood of his truck. Somewhere along the line, the *manda'o* has learned to agree with everything—which has sometimes incited problems. Like the time he escorted two strangers in to the point to purchase narcotics. As compensation for his services, he received two dollars. The angry buzz on everyone’s lips was: *two dollars in exchange for life in prison*. One ex-slinger rebuked him publicly. Romi’s decision was, everyone agreed, wreckless and unnecessary endangerment.

His eyebrows suspended in the air and his left arm extended as testimony, Quis declares, “If I die, I’m screwed: I don’t know where I’m going. I really don’t know.” Thinking back I cannot recall the context for this declaration’s origin. Furthermore, neither can I verify it given that Quis has long since forbidden me to record our conversations. Or take notes. He abhors paper—of any sort. It is the sight of paper which transports him back into that stifling swelter of interrogation room deep in the underbelly of the Manhattan precinct, the sight of paper which conjures memories of lawyers and signatures and binding statutes and limitations. So as per chronicity, the visual of the opening lines of his soliloquy is the first image my mind retained.

I ask for clarification. Wiping his hand across his forehead, he obliges me, “I don’t know if I’ll go with Led Zeppelin to heaven or with AC-DC to hell.”

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517 References to the hit rock songs from the 1970s “Stairway to Heaven” and “Highway to Hell,” respectively.
folks at *la fogata* become animated: Abdiel explains that as a child he was told if he was bad Satan would snatch him; he ends up corroborating Quis’ sentiments. “Yeah, I have my good attributes and my bad attributes,” he muses, weighing his right hand up against his left, “So I don’t know where I’ll end up either.” The subject of death comes up often; here there is a well-honed skillset surrounding demise. What elsewhere might be a tired topic, here serves to enliven discussion: death as diversionary.

When I corroborate their belief that no one is perfect, Quis lowers the tinted electronic window and vaults his voice from inside his truck, “*Somos*—revealing his *eyes*—*todos*—revealing his nose—*falibles*—revealing his chin. We are all fallible. *Falibles*, he repeats to me, “You know what that means, right?” I nod and again confirm that we agree. He then invites me to the annual Christmas party, telling me there will be a jumping castle for the kids, music, plenty of food… *un jangueo FULL*. Envisioning all this he is smiling; the celebration is one of the highlights of his year. But I will be in the States. I ask if he would be bankrolling the entire bash; he responds that many people contribute towards the cause.

Compared to some other caseríos’ Christmas parties, this event will be low key, even modest. The shot-calling *bichote* of *los Cumbres* neither hosts nor sponsors community parties. At times there are off-site soirées, but they are strictly by invitation only. On the contrary, in Aleli it is the campaigning politicians who underwrite the splashiest and most grandiose of bashes: the *aleliano* vote is seen as critical to buy. Some *bichotes* do, however, finance above ground pools in the summer in order to provide the children with a recreational outlet. The erection of such pools is controversial as it violates the rules of *Vivienda*, or the privatized company which manages public housing,
but it is not often that the State moves in to dismantle them. The water consumption
required to fill them, however, is still viewed publicly as scandalous—as highlighted by
the media outlets who take aerial photos of the blue orbs punctuating *caserío* landscapes
during the summer.\textsuperscript{518}

Although the metro area boasts one of the best pools in the Caribbean, the
Natatorium in Parque Central, it is a covered facility utilized primarily for serious
sporting competitions and training. Whereas all of the Island’s approximately 1,200
beaches are supposed to be accessible to all (or “*playas sin rejas*” as the slogan goes),\textsuperscript{519}
public pools are not standard on the Island; if one desires to spend the day poolside, one
must visit a hotel or know someone who works at one. That is to say, access is class-
based and swimming as a sport can be prohibitively expensive even for some middle
class families. Hence Abdiel’s critique of the parents in Alelí who capitalize on their
children’s drug point profits by “*aparentando y roncando*” poolside confirms that for
folks who earn an “honest wage” such experiences are considered luxuries and far more
rare.\textsuperscript{520}

I can’t say why tonight Quis has ceased to rehearse his narrative about the house
on the west coast of the Island, of *la vida tranquila*\textsuperscript{521} which awaits him. Maybe it’s hard
to talk about finalities, hard to stare our physical frailty dead in the eye. Maybe a simple
box of lollipops augurs sentimentality. Nonetheless, Abdiel retains the post of guardian
and night watchman. Faithful and vigilant, he grips the ledge of Quis’ open truck window

\textsuperscript{518} But these class-based complaints only differ in detail: as Brusi (2014:263) cites, “Before the pools, it was Wi-Fi. Before Wi-Fi, it was satellite dishes, cable, Christmas lights, x-boxes, bicycles and whatever other middle-class symbols were spotted within the *caserio* landscape.”

\textsuperscript{519} See [www.PlayaParaTodos.wordpress.com](http://www.PlayaParaTodos.wordpress.com) for current or past violations of this law.

\textsuperscript{520} When I took neighborhood children to a pool at an urbanización, they would sometimes take selfies and cite their location as “at a hotel” as the latter locale boasts greater cultural capital than the former.

\textsuperscript{521} “The calm life.”
and directs him, “¡Arranca!” It is almost two hours later than Quis’ usual departure time—everyone stayed later to catch up with me after an extended absence. But as the evening hours lengthen, the sense of vulnerability heightens. Accordingly then, as if with the evanescent celadon luminosity of fireflies, we disperse across the inky canvas of ever encompassing night.
Aphonic Interlude XI: *Cada gatillero tiene wela*522

Sub-sonic Gratitude & the Solemnities of Survival

“Over there,” he’s pointing, but I can’t see it. “That’s where the bush was that the grandma chopped down. The *gatilleros* were lying in wait for Lito there, partially camouflaged by the foliage, and the grandma noticed it,” the neighbor explains, “so she took away their hiding place.” Lito, it turns out, became a wanted man for having proffered protection to a fellow gang member who was the target of a hit. Mute, mute, mute.

“This is entirely preventable,” I impugn. He shrugs, raising both palms briefly and tilting his head, “But it’s what people are used to, it’s how things work. *O sea, normal.* ”

Now the *gatilleros* come several times a day on their motorcycles, hoping to catch him off guard. But Lito intends to outwait them. He stays inside the fourth floor walk-up with metal bars reinforcing his front door; they would provide some resistance against a battering ram or simply the sheer force that can emanate from furor. But metal bars are a rather flimsy hope in the face of an assassin’s doggedness.

The absence of a bush no deterrent, the *gatilleros* return on their motorcycles every day like clockwork, usually three times. Hoping for a sighting. It’s a fluid stake-out. A liquid ambush.523 It highlights the ever-present challenge facing hyperactive snipers: the banality of homicide. It is not clear what holds them back.

I have never spoken with Lito, nor even had eye contact with him. This may be primarily because it is not uncommon for men in the Guaraguao sector to demonstrate respectfulness towards their spouses by avoiding contact with women who are not family

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522 Every Gunman’s Got a Grandma.

members. Yet after having occupied the same space with him countless evenings, countless weekends over the past year, I can verify that Lito does not look for problems, that he bows his head to elders, that he requests la bendición—all signs of a humildón. With regard to Lito, I offer assistance because I am familiar with his disposition, have seen how he conducts himself.

Here again, this eruption of intel as liability, of intel as death wishing.

Unprecedented access presents as a double-edged sword in ways I fail to anticipate: often it means precarity stares at me quizzically. For precarity, in the end, is less exclamatory than interrogatory. Hence, once it is determined whose lives are in the balance, all that remains is to figure out what can be done. The homicide rate, after all, does not systematically lower itself. Although none of our homespun homicide interventions have gone particularly well to date, I am always open to try again. One feels compelled, constrained almost, to run interference. Throw up some obstacles. Diffuse whatever might be diffusible. These “announced murders,” so to speak, should be the “easy” ones to circumvent: they are intel parading as public secret. Dancing down the street as if in Mardi Gras: this list of pending reprisals taunts, arms akimbo, for all to see.

But once more that ever elusive pipedream of privacy eludes me. I find out the work schedule of Lito’s wife in order to talk with her alone. Night shift. Gas station. Her break will be at 3 or 4 am. Enclosing ourselves in a car would create a sonic, but not visual barrier—and the reversed panopticon is always taking notes. Better yet, is somewhere we won’t be observed. I try another approach and camp out in her prima’s

524 There is also a taboo of men changing the diaper of their progeny of the opposite sex. Such actions are understood as inappropriate, as they are rife with potential for misinterpretation given a heightened awareness of incidences reported throughout the Island of child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetrated against infants. It could be argued that in this instance the prevailing public imaginary plays a beneficial role.

525 An initiative we refer to as “El tren sub.”
bedroom, convinced that she will visit her three nephews sooner or later. Jackpot. We sit side by side on the bed and, amidst the squeals and hiccups of little ones, find an unmarked moment to discuss options.

If she is surprised, she does not show it. Yet neither is “face as blank canvas” uncommon in Alelí. It would not be an insurmountable risk to smuggle him out on the floor of the backseat of the car after dark. She and the kids could follow later on, to avoid any unnecessary endangerment. “Obviously, no plan is foolproof—but it’s an option,” I muse. Pausing for a moment, I then add, “Folks around here are used to seeing me; I don’t imagine it would raise any suspicion.” She nods and then explains that it is she who does not want to leave for a relative’s safe house in the countryside. It is she who does not want to be uprooted. I point to the recent death of their friend: the wife, the children left behind to take on the stultifying new categories of widow and orphans. Lito, *que Dios no lo permita*, would leave behind four. I emphasize how unnecessary the killings are, how avoidable. After the fact and superfluous by any definition, these are ancillary killings. She nods again. But he doesn’t want to be separated from them, she explains further, so he stays despite the danger. Loggerheads. If the door does not hold, they could all die together. And yet that is her decision; I bow my head in acquiescence. We will wait the *gatilleros* out. How ever long it takes. We will pray, and we will wait.

And then, after almost five weeks, it happens. I am humming my godson to sleep in a timeworn teal cushioned rocking chair out under the stars, with all the usual cast of

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526 More for sport, bravado, and face saving than an unwavering propulsion towards vengeance. At this point in the chronology of events, as the original target has already been annihilated, what Lito stirs in his fellow *gatilleros* is a residual, not primary indignance.

527 While serious efforts customarily are made to avoid killing children and non-involved parties, there are instances wherein even young children’s lives are at risk. By and large, these calculations of risk are done intuitively; no one, of whom I’m aware, intentionally endangers children.
characters milling about, when my gaze alights upon a broad-shouldered figure in the shadows. Lito is propped against the ledge of an empty above ground pool just adjacent from me. The crushing tedium of four walls has gotten the best of him. *Ha baja’o*.\textsuperscript{528}

Then, as undetectably as he arrived, he slips away. But just before he departs, he looks directly at me for a dilated moment. And blinks. Aphonic recognition. I’d have to guess he wanted to be seen—or I wouldn’t have seen him. After more than a month of hyper-vigilance on his family’s behalf mutual gaze transaction feels like a gift.

Just a few days later, those intent on Lito’s demise kill another in an unrelated altercation and are subsequently arrested. We all collectively exhale: Lito’s status of *rehén*, or hostage, is indefinitely lifted. Those new mugshots in *El Nuevo Día* become his release papers, signed and stamped.\textsuperscript{529} Weeks later on Christmas Eve,\textsuperscript{530} I escape *el area metro* for a *quinceñera* at the foothills of *el Yunque*. After waiting for more than four hours alongside her relatives for the young woman’s formal entrance, I give up and greet her in the back bedroom, amidst a flurry of make-up brushes and rollers. The family presently resides at the base of the rain forest because their presence in Alelí is disallowed; expulsions from the community occur on an infrequent, “as needed” basis—but when they do, they are not gentle. Vendettas often also extend beyond nuclear families, encroaching their fingers far further into bloodlines than the original infraction ostensibly would seem to merit. Mute, mute, mute. Yet to my great joy, despite the distance, they choose to stay in touch.

\textsuperscript{528} He has come outside.

\textsuperscript{529} I conjecture that if killing Lito would have been considered a primary and not ancillary target, his family’s front door would have been stormed within 48 hours of his friend’s demise.

\textsuperscript{530} Fieldnotes, 12.2015.
Returning to Aleli close to midnight, I find Lito’s whole family gathered in the stairwell: his wife perched upon his lap, his forehead against her back, eyes closed. The children are grabbing a handful of chips in between ever inventive parking lot laps on their bikes. Lito’s sister-in-law hands me a plateful of layered Mexican taco salad and white corn nachos, asking if I want my portion of pernil and arroz con gandules reheated. The evening closes with a simple and restful peace, with a sense of restoration and gratitude—for that which has never been ripped apart, for that which was granted the privilege of remaining intact.
CHAPTER 12 The Moral Economy of Culpability: Restructuring Global Repertoires for COAVs$^{531}$ of Latin America’s Narcotics War

...[F]or the young man shall die a hundred years old.

—Isaiah 65:20b

We are living in the afterlives of slavery, sitting in the room with history, in a lived and undeclared state of emergency.

—Sharpe (2016:100)

What Annihilation Sounds Like: Revisiting Slalomspeak

As it turns out, annihilation itself is often harrowingly quiet. And slalomspeak can serve as the Narco-State’s Morse code. The disquiet encompassing Josepa’s implementation of slalomspeak with me was well grounded: less than two weeks after confiding his fears in me, his gatillero friend Neme is the recipient of a barrage of bullets.

Our sentient-challenged society echoes this youth soldier’s customarily stoic eschewal of pain by labeling his “a life not grievable” (Butler 2004:34). Yet as Biehl and Moran-Thomas (2009:281) assert, “life [which] no longer has any value for society is hardly synonymous with a life that no longer has any value for the person living it,” or, I would add, for those who cherish them dearly. Somehow it has been established, however, that the warrior, as Clastre (2010) reminds us, is a warrior unto death. Perhaps the most disturbing secreto a voces, the dirtiest public secret (Taussig 1999) is that this thirteen-year-old, in fact, wasn’t even supposed to make it. Or that there is arguably even a vested interest in his not making it.

Within the realm of thanatopolitics, a child like Nemesio, an elementary school drop-out originally expelled—and never successfully re-matriculated—from fifth grade, is expected to participate in his own annihilation, along with all other “undesirables” (Biehl 2001:148, Taussig 2012:108, Agamben 1998). And such an annihilation is abetted by the eschewal of one’s right even to own or acknowledge pain. The utilization of Blommaertian ethnopoetics, then, provides the tools to excavate extant affect from those wherein through habituation “appropriate” or rather “expected” affect ostensibly appears to be but is decidedly not absent. Such elucidations will have the potential to reverse the dehumanization inherent in the children’s history of both community and institutional silencing. In the face of soundless annihilation, we need new weaponry. Aphonic Ethnography listens intently to the “nothing” these beloved leave in their seemingly seamless wake—prior to their preventable departure.

**Bringing the New Legislation Home**

Another established pattern was that, within hours of their arrival home from bullet related injuries, most youth narco-soldiers are pursued to be reintegrated into the trafficking circles. In case the experience had incited ambivalence or misgivings of any sort on the part of the wounded, members from the *bando* are there to dispel them. If you arrive at the home, you inevitably cross paths with them. They are bedside. Any desire that the child may have had—for something new, for a change—swiftly becomes undetectable… if not completely obliterated.

As a country, we have *nothing* in place to counteract gang re-recruitment (Rich 2009): no programs of rehabilitation to prepare the former combatants to be reintegrated into society, no disarmament strategies, no protocols of protection for those exiting the
narco-war. Even though our juvenile prisons now may be sparkling and safe, any viable rehabilitation vis-à-vis the specificities of youth narco-soldiering is not daily fare.

While we can appeal to the power brokers within trafficking networks to (re)consider the ages of those they engage, ultimately need can dictate decisions more than conscience. The narcotics game, by definition, plays by its own rules. “The deliberate use of children by armed groups is predicated upon their agility, impressionability and underdeveloped sense of morality; [sic] children bestow strategic and tactical advantages to those commanders willing to use them” (Dallaire & Whitman 2014). As such, children will always be vulnerable accessories to the machinations of the narco-industrial complex—whether in its more gruesome central or rudimentary peripheral tasks (Brenneman 2012:99). So then how do we shift from viewing, as Ríos (2015) asserts, such children as “at risk” to “at promise”?

The afternoon sunlight splashes through the wide panel of glass beside our booth as the homicide detective leans over the table and shrugs one shoulder,

No one is going to stop the drug trade here in Puerto Rico. The majority of the Island’s economy is sustained by illegal money, and it’s for that reason that it does not appeal to the government to completely stop the drug trade. For as many 32 million dollar shipments of drugs that they intercept, how many are they missing? The reality is that in Puerto Rico it is drugs which move the economy.

532 Over the past twenty years the State has overhauled all of its juvenile carceral facilities as the result of a federal lawsuit (94-2080 (CC), United States of America vs. Puerto Rico). Presently Puerto Rico has complied with the vast majority of the requirements and the juveniles now are infinitely safer and are provided with vastly better accommodations than in prior decades; this progress should be not only noted but lauded. Given that there is great variation Islandwide within the alternate institutions known as hogares de desvío, I cannot speak to their services. That to which I am presently referring, however, are the residual traumas that youth narco soldiers retain, the psychological components which, upon their release, can impact the nature of their future interactions with the neighborhood gangs (i.e., belonging, loyalty, identity, etc).

533 It is estimated that “about a third of all earnings in Puerto Rico’s underground economy—an estimated $5 billion—may be related to drug trafficking” (Pachico 2015), whereas 0.8% of the economy comes from agriculture.

534 Interview, 4.2015.
As such, the challenge of armed children will not soon be behind us. What does need to change, however, is the conversation that no one is having. Some youth narco-soldiers, in defiance of all probabilities and statistical odds, are still with us. However, far too many—like Nael—are not.

This chapter revisits the conundrum which the youth narco-soldier presents to the State, the ways in which their categorization—current and prior—has been problematic, and how the layered silences engulfing this populations are at once complicit in their alienation and a refuge in the current sociopolitical dynamic. I argue that the present situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Island is, in many ways, governed as if it were a “State of Exception” with all of the concomitant ethical obfuscations which that entails.

**Ethical Considerations within a “State of Exception”**

“[Social scientists] deal with real people in concrete situations, in which, like gems are inseparable from their gangue, morality and ethics are inextricably mixed with the political, the economic and the social.” —Fassin, 2011b:485

During early morning police raids, aphonic silhouettes emerge onto the balconies under the cover of night, wordlessly scanning just as they themselves are being scanned, helicopters’ searchlights wildly canvassing three and four stories of symmetrical doorways, windows, corners. A frenetic disco tech on mute. SWAT swarming the roofs the stairwells, brigade of cop cars clogging the dusty cul-de-sacs.

Aerial photos of Alelí, it has been observed, eerily resemble concentration camps. For this reason, attending to the philosopher and political theorist Carl Schmitt is warranted, as he birthed the concept “states of exception,” a label originating during World War II in Germany. Just as the origin of the concept of a “moral economy” can be traced back to the now classic piece by E.P. Thompson (1971), the phrase “state of
exception,” which is now bandied about quite freely—and morphing as it goes—can be traced back to Schmitt. For Schmitt, the governance by dictatorship was preferable as it was more streamlined, avoiding the endless idiosyncrasies of bureaucracy. A state of exception, while conceptualized as a temporary and bounded state, quickly can become—particularly under dictatorial regimes—the perceived and accepted status quo. Schmitt roots his thinking in sovereignty (the power to declare exceptionality), arguing that the law can be transcended for the good of the citizenry. States of exception are often accompanied by the institution of martial law, thereby granting even further power and unaccountable authority to the arm of the state and, subsequently, less protection of those targeted.

Although the term “moral economy” has been used since Thompson’s article in a variety of ways, according to Fassin (2011b), when one speaks of a moral economy, what is meant is “the production, circulation, distribution and use of norms and obligations, values and affects” (486). Further, moral economies facilitate the “linking of the microsocial and the macrosocial… [the] articulat[ion] of the local and the global [and] underline the permanent work of adopting, redefining, and contesting norms and values. They analyze the dissemination, appropriation and transformation of sensibilities and sentiments” (Fassin 2011b:486). As such, the moral economy of culpability is one in which responsibility is not only misappropriated, but also misplaced. How, then, could this moral economy of culpability, wherein it is preordained that the youth narco-soldiers absorb it all, be reconfigured?

Agamben (1998) refers to the concept of homo sacer, or sacred man, as the one who can be killed without having it be considered a homicide. Such a person represents
“bare life” and can thereby be “exterminated…as Hitler had announced as [if he were] ‘lice’” (114). Agamben isolates Nazism as “the first radically biopolitical state” (143), contending that every state determines “the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant” (139). This valuation, then, creates a situation in which certain populations—demarcated as “sacred men”—will be deemed expendable. Biehl (2005) implements the neologism “ex-human” to denote those discarded by society, those left to die but who are not yet dead. Essentially, those persons “deemed unassimilable” by nature of their estimable non-productivity (Wacquant 2002; 2004).

**Segregated Ghettoization: A Step toward the Formation of a State of Exception**

That which was built purposely to encourage what Fusté (2010:50) refers to as “place miscegenation” (i.e., intentionally erecting housing for the poor directly adjacent to areas of upper middle and upper income communities), actually resulted in greater separation and alienation: a backlash of more bareta cortante (razor wire), guard dogs, and security systems. This proximity does not even impact something as seemingly mundane as where residents shop for weekly groceries or where they worship. For in a tony section of controlled-access urbanización, where she delegates a portion of every morning to sweeping up the sand on her patio, carting it in her dustpan twenty paces down the street, and depositing it squarely back on the beach, the seventy-something retiree Doña Mirta shares with me that the alelianos are to be treated aparte y con distancia (as separately and with proper distance). She repeated this phrase to herself frequently while relaying various vignettes, as if to seal the admonition more firmly into

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535 The upper class patronize a high-end grocery store a mile away; few shop at the discount grocery, which for most is significantly closer, but directly across from—and patronized by residents of—the caserio.
her subconscious. This form of learned apartheid, though more often unspoken, still seems to hold sway over most of the Island’s jockeying dynamics of social positioning.

**Which War? Whose Soldiers?: Semantics as Equivocation**

If the transnational narcotics war in which much of Latin America finds itself embroiled is just that, a war, then why are the children involved not treated accordingly? What are the specific ways in which we need to redefine and amplify the current term “child soldier”? Who qualifies? Is qualification determined by geographical region and its corresponding level of fatalities? How would unpacking semantic distinctions between homicides and fatalities disrupt such paradigms? By age of entrance into the illicit underworld? By age of exit? At what point is the child no longer considered a child? Is coercion to participate a requisite element? How do we fairly ascertain nuances of coercion when the subject at hand involves minors? If laws protect children from statutory rape and there is a delineated age of consent for sexual intercourse in every state in the US, why do there not exist parallel ages of consent for minors within the context of our domestic narcotics war? One immediate ethical obligation is to pursue changes within the UN and humanitarian aid worlds wherein the definition of child soldier would be expanded to include minors laboring in narcotics trafficking within Latin America. One functional definition utilized is the following:

For the purposes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes, UNICEF defines a child soldier as any child—boy or girl—who is under 18 years of age, who is part of any regular or irregular armed force, or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried weapons

—Cape Town Principles 1997
This definition, to be fair, is quite broad. But given its breadth, one must ask why “armed force” is regarded as a discretely different entity than a DTO?

As such, there exists an acute discrepancy between how children are categorized by the UN globally and the lived reality of many children in Latin American countries plagued by the transnational narcotics war. In the UN’s 2008 report on child soldiers, Colombia was the only Latin American country cited as having child soldiers. To date, all other armed children therein are referred to as COAVs, or “children in organized armed violence.” Yet I propose that this moniker be changed for two pragmatic reasons: 1) Outside of CRIN, the Child’s Rights International Network, there is very little use of the acronym COAV. That is to say, it has not become a household term. Further, in the public forum the use of such terminology is almost completely absent as well. 2) There are few academic pieces which utilize the terminology apart from Dowdney’s own. And while his work is seminal, unfortunately it does not seem to have been taken up by other academics.536

Given that “homicide rates in Latin America are higher than fatality rates in some of the world’s worst war zones” (Garson 2015), a serious reassessment of how definitions of the term “child soldier” are constructed is overdue. Current delineations exclude those children who are not officially participating in a paramilitary or other similarly designated civil militia. Yet, such tunnel vision excludes the hundreds of thousands of children laboring in and for transnational DTOs throughout Latin America—children for whom violence as labor is also daily practice. This blind spot on the part of the UN has

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536 A recent verification on citations of his two seminal pieces, Neither War nor Peace and Children of the Drug War reveal just a trickle of academic dialogue that it spawned. However, this dims in the light of his burgeoning outreach organization, Luta pela Paz, which is under the umbrella of Ashoka, an organization making a global impact in support of children. Ironically, this disjuncture highlights the (needless?) bifurcation between academe and humanitarian interventions.
grave ramifications as per the availability and amount of humanitarian aid proffered and
the application of appropriate justice measures to such children either during or post
combat throughout all of Latin America. Granted, unlike other civil wars, the narcotics
war is never “post-conflict.” This does not imply, however, that the influx and out
departure of populations of participants is static. Further, it is not only wildly
inappropriate, but potentially a human rights violation that youth narco-soldiers, instead
of receiving holistic aftercare for the transition back into civilian life (see exemplary
programs for former child soldiers in West Africa, e.g., Shepler 2015), are placed in
juvenile detention centers as criminals.

Yet when a child is handed a semi-automatic or fully automatic weapon and
“hired” as a matón or gatillero to kill a member of a rival bando there is little need to
debate about whether or not such a child is a youth soldier. Correspondingly, every
teenager who stands out front of his aunt’s house and sells a dime bag of weed does not
need to be categorized as such. The idea, rather, is that there are children whose lives are
at significant, continued risk: those who become gatilleros or matones. Those whose
trajectories will require (and merit) considerable investment and forethought to be re-
routed. These are the youth who fit the definition of youth narco-soldier.

Approaches with these children need to be remedial in nature, not punitive. While
terms like disarmament and demobilization may seem misapplied in this context, the
baseline principles remain applicable; while not identical, the psychological challenges of
these young men are parallel to those fighting for a paramilitary. Yet the State appears to
ignore these needs. Hence, we are left with a scenario wherein the citizen feels a moral
responsibility to prevent the child from falling into the hands of the State\textsuperscript{537} where further violence or re-traumatization are likely to occur.

The current state of affairs reflects a system which refuses to see systemic discrimination against society’s most vulnerable members, the children themselves. Within Latin American countries there remains a failure to recognize their own structural complicity of permitting a society wherein a child can be handed an automatic weapon and, for negligible remuneration, be told to kill. Instead, culpability is unilaterally and asymmetrically distributed, wherein the children are stigmatized and demonized as individuals. The moral failing of the individual, then, becomes the scapegoat by which the moral failing of the society as a whole is at once conveniently obscured and obviated.

As a theoretically “civil” society, it is we who have created a context wherein this is an accepted outcome for children from predetermined sectors of the population. Who, then, will now take responsibility for discontinuance of such scenarios? While it is critical not to dismiss the variable degree of coercion versus agency either present or absent vis-à-vis youth’s decisions to participate in trafficking networks, neither is it fair to locate culpability forcefully and exclusively in the child. Such short-sightedness subsequently results in the administration of punitive measures and reveals a sheer blindness to the less visible mechanisms at play both within and outside of such communities and the Island context of well-established inequality.

Puerto Rico would do well to learn from India, in this case: Nandan Nilekani (2009) speaks of the new private (but sparse) school network which 50% of urban slum

\textsuperscript{537} See Chapter 9.
children (22.4% of rural) now attend for about $10 a month. He explains the exodus to barebones private schooling as such,

Technically, we have free public schooling, and the government schools exist for that. However, in reality, the government schools are dysfunctional: the teachers don’t show up, the schools [lack supplies]… and for many years it really didn’t “matter” because the Indian rich and middle class created a whole chain of high quality schools for themselves so they didn’t have to worry about the government schools…now why does that sound familiar, eh? So they abdicated from the system and the government schools went down the tubes…

In haunting ways, his words parallel the situation on the Island. In fact, while stateside racial segregation (or hyper-segregation as the case may be) is the most strident feature of many cities (Massey & Denton 1993), class segregation reigns on the Island (Denton & Villarrubia 2007).

The UN must reconsider that being a youth soldier comes in many forms. The definition thereof should not be dependent upon participation in a formal paramilitary, nor depend on the political status of the country, but rather upon the lived reality of the vulnerable minors laboring under the aegis of transnational DTOs for whom they are nothing more than readily replaceable cogs in the narco-industrial complex. Therefore, whether the directives are coming from the commander in chief of an unsanctioned paramilitary or the leader of a transnational DTO, the logistics at the bottom of the triangle, underneath all of the socio-political trappings, it matters not the sociopolitical structure above them, or how it is packaged: a child with a machine gun remains a child with a machine gun. The country’s superstructure should not dictate policy decisions for children. Further, the existence of such a bustling underworld economy within communities of limited resources is a vibrant testament to the reality that often labor—in and of itself—is inherently dignifying, regardless of the aegis under which it is
performed. For a discarded population, trafficking foments (amongst other things) purpose, identity, recognition, and income.

If a child is abandoned by the school system prior to completion of elementary school or shortly thereafter, prospects for employment in a sector that predominantly requires a high school equivalency are remarkably dim. Whereas the trauma inherent in surviving frequent near-death experiences can act, socially and psychologically, as a bonding agent amongst the children involved. “[T]heir limited life experience and their limited exposure to members of other groups, coupled with political or religious indoctrination and, in many cases, limited education, can make them more susceptible to leaders’ ideological indoctrination” (Wessells 2006:81).

A disproportionate number of our current narco-soldiers are former students of special education, spewed out roughly around the age of eleven or twelve by a system even more broken than the regular public education system. And, for reasons detailed previously, the phenomena of youth narco-soldiers and child grooms often dovetail. The narco-industrial complex, unlike society at large, provides an avenue wherein they encounter a level of “success.” Have we no better alternatives to offer? Or do we simply acquiesce to the inevitability of their “apparent” disposability?

**Hyperlocality, Soft Security, & the Redirection of Youth Narco-soldiers**

To address the phenomenon of youth narco-soldiers at a local level in Puerto Rico, there are more than a few challenges. First, information about such youth is available most often exclusively through public secrets, which although rather accurate, can only be fully corroborated through a long-term time investment and significant embeddedness within the community. In other words, hyperlocality is indispensably
critical for this work. But therein lies the dilemma: in order to ensure continued efficacy in outreach, proper identification of children is as important as the safeguarding of those identifications. Further, the interactions with the children and their families is not sufficient; there needs to be open, sustained communication with those executing the decisions as to the specific delegations of manpower within and outside of the narco-industrial complex. This requires not only reliance on soldiers’ early tetherings, but also the reassurance that those tied in with hard security (i.e., local, state or federal law enforcement) respect the delicacy of the task and cede the space needed to carry out such endeavors from the inside out. Given that institutionalizing children—whether COAVs or child soldiers— even when done with the best of intentions, has often proven to be more deleterious than working within their context to carve out safer spaces and alternative trajectories. It is from this premise that we continue our work—under the radar, perhaps, but rarely unrewarded.

**Beyond Romanticism or Demolition:**
**Enfolding Activism into the Everyday of Academe**

> Anthropologists are often of two minds when it comes to “doing good” and more comfortable with the stance of critique than that of endorsement.
> —Redfield and Bornstein (2010:21)

**The Intricacies of Evacuation: Homicide as Public Health Concern**

A few months from completing my fieldwork, I arrive at Holy Row with my advisor, John Jackson, in tow. You can almost hear the record scratch. Far off at *la fogata* Quis and various other corpuscles of gathered folks observe us; we do not approach. Instead we await Amado\(^538\) who is busy attending a line of customers at his budding

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\(^{538}\) Amado exemplifies the possibilities for those who leave gang life and tap into the alternative lifestyle available through the church. As Ralph (2014:145) writes, the church “foster[s] an environment that prizes willingness—a willingness to remain faithful, or sober, or loyal…” As such Amado has been able to tap into this new ambiance of
micro-enterprise of *pastelillos*. Eventually Quis departs but not before having his driver stop so that he can call out to me from a lowered window, “Is everything alright?” he wants to know. I wonder if this is code for: *Who is this guy and why did you bring him here?* I answer in the affirmative, rather surprised that he would openly *averiguar.*

However, weeks later Quis tells me that he knew that this stranger was not a Puerto Rican because—at least to his mind—a Puerto Rican would be unwilling even to enter Alelí. Abdiel chimes in, “Right, because aquí pican.” 539 *Pican pica’o, pica’o.*” 540 I look at him. *Pican,* he repeats, as if perhaps I fail to understand, and demonstrates by slicing his hand through the air in multiple iterations.

> You know when you hear on the news that so-and-so has not been seen since last Wednesday? Well, he was a sátiro, some kind of a sexual pervert or pedophile, so they make him disappear: They cut him into pieces with a chainsaw, toss the pieces into a plastic bag, and the trash truck comes and takes it away. Nobody says anything. Remember the one who was serially raping women? He was residing here in Alelí the whole time, but since he was not from here, no one realized he was here. In that case he got lucky: the police got to him first, and his life was spared. But sometimes those here get to the sátiro first.

At this Abdiel shrugs indifferently. “All of our children are running around outside here playing. We cannot jeopardize their safety.” Quis sidles up alongside his friend and, to clarify that Abdiel is not referring to a hand saw, enacts the turning on of a chainsaw. 541 It is a dark moment.

Hence, on the spot Quis assumes the stranger with me was not an Islander and therefore, by default, has to be one of my colleagues from work stateside. “That’s why I

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affirmation, at once flourishing under and capitalizing upon the way in which his career trajectory has been reframed by a newly wrought financial stability.

539 *Here they cut up [people].*

540 *They chop [people] up, into small pieces, tiny pieces.* Note that in both instances Abdiel elides the word “people.”

The object of the chopping is not formally absent, rather it is understood.

541 Historically machetes were used for dismemberment. Currently chainsaws are utilized.
called out to you,” Quis clarifies, “I wanted him to see that you are very well connected in the community, that you know a lot of people, that people seek you out to talk with you. That way you look better to your colleague.” Humbled, I probe further, “So you exposed yourself just to bless me?” Maintaining his gaze fixedly towards the macadam, Quis smiles, “Pues claaaaaro.” By uncovering the intentionality of his kindness, I inadvertently embarrass him.

**The Contested Role of Researcher Intervention: Recalibrating the Academy’s Demands**

*The fact that there exists a hierarchy in equally “sacred” lives represents a sort of anthropological nonsense—a fairly unbearable one.*

—Fassin, 2010:50

As Bourgois (2009:14) posits, “Participant observation has an inherently anti-institutional transgressive potential because…it compels [academics] to violate the boundaries of class and cultural segregation.” But is that enough? Humanitarianism has become somewhat of a dirty word of late (Fassin 2011a). For even in an era wherein catch phrases such as “poverty porn” and “white savior industrial complex” rule the digital highways of online media, Kenya’s new tongue in cheek comedy series “The Samaritans,” reflects the still far too common covert yet misplaced aspiration of humanitarian workers: to be assigned the role of “moral hero”—in its plethora of varying iterations—still abounds (Fassin 2010:51). Although such aspirations may be largely subconscious, it is requisite in order to call the bluff and introduce more honest and less self-congratulatory discourses. One may wonder, were the “high moral ground” of such positions less exalted, less acclaimed, would as many be attracted to them as a calling? Yet could not this ascription of mixed motivations be connected to many other esteemed though non-“altruistic” vocations as well?
If we ask the question “when is risk warranted?” perhaps we have already revealed the shrinking, calculating nature of our own hearts. If, on the other hand, we reason, “If they kill us at least the others will have more time to get away” (as in the article of that title concerning the LRA by Whitmore), are we not then perhaps a bit closer to an anthropology of downward mobility and an eschewal of the elitist trappings availed to us? Perhaps. In his incisive style, Fassin (2010) isolates a functional impasse with regard to self-perception versus reality. He takes great pains to demonstrate that, despite all of the self-glorifying rhetoric, “the symmetrical exposure of lives” to which we may ostensibly—at least intellectually—ascrve is a functional impossibility (45).

As such, how are any dalliance with such self-promoting heroics avoided? Further, what does one do if one authentically does believe one’s life is not more valuable than that of one’s neighbor, regardless of where any given social hierarchy might place an individual? What does that look like functionally? Is any such assertion necessarily false? Cannot one’s personal ideology or faith affirm an unqualified equality of all people and radical sacrifice for the common good? And while there is always, to a degree, a gap between one’s professed and one’s functional ideology: When the international evacuation helicopters come in, is it not impossible to insist, without the accompanying self-applauding martyr mentality, that nationals go instead? Is it not possible to counter and resist the asymmetrical power valuations the world constructs instead of colluding with them? While overly precious self-evaluations are common, must they be the rule?

Meanwhile in Aleli, just after a young lady in junior high ricochets my last name through the early Friday evening air and tackles me with a hug, I hear my first name being sung at a distance. Although I’d know that voice anywhere, I cannot immediately
locate it. Then, as I walk towards the voice I look up through the tilted window slats and see the top two thirds of his head: the Mayor is serenading me from the shower. You can’t make this stuff up. He then proceeds to outline his itinerary for the night and proposes we cross paths at la fogata in a few hours.

How does professional distance get defined? What constitutes enmeshment? How can any of this be done perfectly? If O’Neill’s (2013) answer leans toward the conclusion that not much can be done to impact social suffering, this appears to belie a deeper disavowal: that of any agency on the part of the researcher. When O’Neill discusses hard and soft security, one question that never arises is: What are the researchers’ contributions to regional security? Admittedly, this may seem outside the realm or scope of conventional expectations. Yet how did we arrive at a moral space where somehow we conceptualize ourselves as “above” such questions, as if inhabiting some omniscient space of a higher echelon? As if participating in some perverse ocular-centric version of aerial occupation.

O’Neill (2013) asks: What happens when security becomes a matter of the soul rather than a matter of the state? Yet within the very formulation of this equation, he seems to elide his own. What do interactions with State authorities look like? What freedom can researchers maintain in order to ensure the integrity of their work? If we reject the “genre of demolition,”542 with what would we replace it? And, more importantly, what does it look like on the ground? How does one engage the everyday reality of violences and yet avoid engaging in “cowboy ethnography,” as Contreras (2011) calls it, or “jungle book trope” ethnography, as Ríos (2011) refers to it?

542 My thanks to Jeremy Slack for his delineation of this category of literature, and our subsequent discussions thereof.
If there is an arrogance inherent in desiring to assist, is there not also perhaps an arrogance inherent in merely observing? Effecting systemic change is a mammoth—and at times unrealistic—undertaking. Yet when the exigencies of the academy vis-à-vis production are so far from the concrete day to day machinations of communities under siege, research far too often can feel like an end in itself—and as if a certain level of ambivalence were required. If, however, we reject this premise, the question then becomes: What are the parameters of a researcher’s jurisdiction? How does one act? What is the appropriate positionality as one who is the outsider not only ideologically but in any number of ways? When plane tickets are being purchased should the researcher chip in? Pay half? The entire tab? Then the next question is: with what resources? What if all of your credit cards are maxed out? To whom do you appeal? And further, what happens if the evacuation backfires and the child leaves the Island intact only to be killed weeks later in the continental US? With whom does the unspoken liability lie? What if, upon evacuation, no interventions are attempted with the opposed parties and the venom is just left to percolate in the event that the evacuated party dare set foot on the Island again? At what point does the responsibility of the researcher as civil servant, as neighbor, as “brother in arms” end? Of course, it is much cleaner to live as if it ends at the semester’s last keynote address, at the conference’s last roundtable. But in the field, casualties pierce.

To begin with, as Penglase observes, “most residents are connected to each other through dense and multi-stranded relations of kinship and long-term propinquity” (2009:48). So too, the traficantes in Aleli are usually—if not often—better connected than I. Reality. Most can secure the 50 dollar flights at the drop of a hat because there is a
relative who works at the airport, etc. Sometimes they are gone before I even can offer assistance. The primary concern, then, lies with the young people who, due to addictions or related stressors, by and large have lost those ties. But this begs the question: who can wield the moral authority of deciding which, if any, children should be removed from their context? What criteria matter? For example, what weight, if any, should be ascribed to the potential evacuee’s likelihood of leading a life away from the streets make with regard to his opportunity for evacuation? How do we address the chasm between 1) children who are considered functionally emancipated by nature of their status of living outside their home for more than “x” number of months or years and 2) children with parents who are not currently functional/present, yet may display a serious conflict of interests vis-à-vis the child’s welfare (due to economic interests, etc.). Such issues are endlessly fraught and self-compounding. So, too, are the issues of expansive paternities…

**Mixed Bag Paternities and the Contrast of Aphonic Beneficence**

I recognize my tendency towards idealization with regard to localized trafficking-based paternities. Yet—with some notable exceptions (like coaches)—it is predominantly men like Quis who are not only most visible, but also most accessible to the community’s unsupervised youth. To be fair, however, in as much as Quis represents an expansive paternity, so too he represents a dystopic paternity: his profits spring from a grab bag of violences. On the other hand, it is understandable that the Pentecostal “men of the Book” want to avoid problems. But in avoiding problems, what are they sacrificing? Or whom? Their contrasting absence due to hyper-insularity and hermitage leaves its own vacuum in the community. Holy Row is an exception to this: amanecidos\(^{543}\) know that they can

\(^{543}\) Dawnbreakers.
barter errands for food for their aching stomach, that these brothers will lend a hand. But generally speaking, the brand of Pentecostalism most prevalent in the Island’s government housing projects promotes and reinforces a sharp and almost violent separatism. Again, sheep and goats.

If “love your neighbor,” is the plumb line, then this simultaneous burden and privilege of parenting could be laid at all of our collective feet. The extemporaneous nurture men like Quis and the Mayor engage in contributes to this collaborative mosaic. On the contrary it is hard to locate the Pentecostals. Ethically, commission and omission, that is to say one’s acts and one’s failure to act, are not dissimilar. On the night of the ceasefire after a semblance of peace finally had been achieved, Alarcón raises his left arm forcefully, gesturing towards the tightly shuttered local churches and demands of me: “Where were they tonight? Why doesn’t their theology penetrate through their institutions’ four walls? What are they doing? They never leave from [inside of] those blasted four walls!”

I have no response for “El Mister.” We agree. And just as no one paid Alarcón overtime for his extensive mediation interventions that evening, neither did anyone force him to be there. We were the only two representatives from the school. In fact, to my knowledge we were the only two from the more than five primary feeder schools of the community combined.²⁴⁴ But the salary of the soul has no time clock. Those with “la

²⁴⁴ I ask him why he thinks this is so. He momentarily stops shifting his weight from one foot to the other and tosses a hand in the air, “It’s because no one else has los c****** to be here.” But it is more complicated than that: for one, it is a school night and everyone has to be at work early in the morning. For another, the rally was called together swiftly; we only had about two hours notice before we were supposed to show up. Those with family obligations do not have the same flexibility. Yet, inadvertently or not, the non-attendance of those associated with the institutions of the caserio does send a strong message and accentuates the longstanding and acute social cleavage that remains between them.
llamada” never fully ponchean (punch out). And I am certain that on that night Alarcón would not have wanted to be anywhere else.

To think that “El Mister” can beat out superheroes when it comes to Halloween costume selection time is pretty extraordinary. An inspiration for so many, Alarcón models a masculinity that gives and gives—and not only of his time and attention. He once told me not to give money to anyone who petitions me. “Instead,” he advised, “Give to the one who does not ask, but who has need.” In an example of aphonie beneficence, Alarcón buys mattresses, school supplies, you name it—and no one knows. Mute, mute, mute. I have always found out by mistake. His actions reflect the mandate, “When you give…do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing…”

With his presence, Alarcón embodies an institutionally-rooted paternity that begs emulation. His is a “middle ground masculinity,” standing in that onerous and yet all too common gap between Alelí’s traffickers and Alelí’s Pentecostals. Sometimes, in the endeavor towards peacekeeping, it is the element of surprise which functions best: in Las Vegas there are a “corps of ministers who stand ready for an ‘activation’ by city police commanders or hospitals” (Sagas by the Strip…2015). As one gunshot victim there admits, “I didn’t expect no pastor” (Sagas by the Strip…2015). By his presence and his sense of calm, Alarcón is at once surprising and steadfast to those who occupy trafficking posts in Alelí.

**What Does Civil Disobedience Look Like in 2017?**

Half a century from now, when the slaughter from the narcotics war is over; when the genocide of mass incarceration is over; when the nightmare of racialized subjugation

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545 A calling.
546 Matthew 6:3
is over—what will we look back on and wish we would have done differently? What are the blind spots that even now too many are refusing to see? From a legal standpoint, somewhat analogous to sheltering an undocumented immigrant, taking such children and teens into one’s custody and care potentially could constitute harboring a fugitive. The alternative, however, in many cases is that they will be killed.

Whether the child has warrants may be unknown to those outside of the immediate family, but would be revealed swiftly were an attempt to leave the Island to be made. However, the more likely quandary, the eternal dilemma, occurs in the nebulosity of the situation: given that many of these youth are what I refer to as “shadow offenders,” there really exists no unassailable, verifiable method by which to determine if, in fact, the minor may have committed serious crimes prior to his need for refuge. A lack of warrants is merely that: a lack of warrants. Such a status may have precious little to do with his actual rap sheet. So shall we live by both the letter and the spirit of the law? In Article 38 of the UN-Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted 20 November 1989 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, it states that, "Every child has the right of protection from armed conflicts." How might this become true for the Island’s children as well?

Returning to the theme of the State fomenting its own insecurity internally through the abandonment of entire swaths of the juvenile population, these past decades of radical disinvestment must be reversed. Ultimately, the failure of the State to deal with the issue of children becoming involved at early ages in narcotics networks “points

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547 Shadow offenders are youth who, either due to their young age or luck, have not yet been adjudicated within the criminal justice system, but nonetheless possess a lengthy list of criminal offenses of which community members may or may not be aware. This is the population most vulnerable to annihilation because they are on no one’s radar. They simply abide in the shadows of the systems, dropping from the rolls of academic institutions and not yet flagged by the justice institutions—accountable to absolutely no one.
towards larger, systemic issues… [as in] the breakdown of a country’s social fabric or institutions and implies the long-term, generational aspect of the conflict” (Dallaire & Whitman 2014). Without question, institutions like el Departamento de la Familia have been grossly underfunded since their inception. The burden they face to safeguard vulnerable populations such as minors and the elderly from abuse and negligence far outweighs their manpower and resources. One school principal made an off-handed comment, quoting a social worker who shared that the number of cases reported in Alelí alone was astronomical. This disparity between caseloads and funding is a present reality we continue to ignore at the Island’s peril. Both State and federal funding must be reallocated in such a manner that the welfare of the Island’s most vulnerable citizens is prioritized.

Aside from financial considerations, what approaches should be mobilized to engage this population? Going forward, our frameworks must be recalibrated. Besides the more obvious markers of risk like excessive school absences, issues such as parental non-involvement (due to mental health challenges, addictions, etc.), food insecurity, and an absence of affective tethering to the school are other critical precursors that should be investigated, verified, and followed closely. Undoubtedly, the weakest nodules on the life trajectories of the Island’s youth traffickers are: pre-recruitment, post-injury, and post-trauma (e.g., surviving a kidnapping, loss of a family member, etc.). As such, these three nodules provide the most promising possibilities for prevention and intervention or restoration (demobilization). With the exception of the first, however, the windows of openness may be brief to fleeting. Hence, to be even remotely cognizant of—and consequently respond to—such circumstances, there must be people reliably and
consistently “on the ground.” Leaving the lifestyle, or extrication from the intricate and all-encompassing webs of narcotics trafficking, is an endlessly cathected, yet ultimately worthwhile endeavor.

If the goal is to seek justice for a minor, what does that look like? How do we approach protection in a manner which prioritizes care, yet does not fall into misguided or damaging ideologies of cure (Clare 2017)? On the whole, it is only after repeated and egregious failure by the State, community, and family of origin that a minor encounters himself involved in the various forms of illicit trafficking. Sometimes, however, trafficking is the trajectory encouraged by the child’s family of origin. Income can be a factor. By and large, outreach to younger traffickers is a counter-cultural task; for alelianos, there seems to be a broad assumption and acceptance that a certain proportion of the youth population will dedicate themselves to this endeavor. That they are not so much “cast off,” as they are acclimated to living “al garete” or “adrift” with no anchor. Yet because this trajectory has a tendency to end badly, I saw this acquiescence, this acceptance as integral to the problem. As a moral outrage. But in this sentiment, I was pretty much alone.

The presiding sentiment was that “the meritocracy of the streets” has the final say: signing on to sling means no tears when it doesn’t work out. Quis himself reflects that his own immediate family will not seek the authorities when he passes; as he expresses with a simple shrug, “They know what I do. They know what’s coming.” When approached about this subject, neighbors in Alelí mostly cite their only responsibility as their own children.548 And although some mothers who chose to enforce their children’s school

548 A few women utilize their social media networks to rebuke other unnamed mothers for negligence when they allow their children outside during shoot-outs. They also accuse other mothers of being “vagas” whose children miss school
attendance might occasionally express that seeing another’s child spend all day in the street, “da pena,” even that observation was always followed by a brief shrug. Resignation or acceptance, depending upon one’s perspective. Further, the children themselves do not always object to their election of trafficking. What implications do these factors have on action steps?

Howard (2017) spotlights how interventions in West Africa focused on rescuing youth from child labor are, in fact, counter-productive and can have far-reaching, unintended consequences. Furthermore, he points out how readily an outsider’s perspective may differ from the targeted child’s self-evaluation of his circumstances. Consider life expectancy: the normalization of death in one’s twenties means that such a prospect is not a deterrent; the children look forward to inheriting their family’s drug point. Other than wistfulness towards spectacularity, age of demise does not factor in to their calculations of success. To be fair, being around to “enjoy your grandchildren” is on no youth’s radar. But these are the opposing perspectives vis-à-vis agency inherent to the debate.

I am in a Skype meeting with one of my advisors when his off-handed observation surprises me. “So all of your acercamientos were conducted on an interpersonal level?” A mild note of disappointment in his voices, he wants confirmation. Deflated, I concede that he is correct; I had no success engaging local or continental agencies in this business of homespun homicide reduction, of nocturnal rounds to preempt and discourage school desertion, of community-based, grassroots economic

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549 Approaches.
initiatives. After all, how could any opposition to the War on Drugs be anything but anemic without being accompanied by the initiation and facilitation of access to other viable avenues? As such, with a heavy heart, I concede failure: after a decade, I am leaving the Island without having contributed toward the fomentation of any concrete, systemic change. That challenge remains. The hope is that through the creation of more dignified and longstanding employment opportunities, folks who today remain excluded from the licit sectors may one day have a shot of participating in that presently out-of-reach labor force.

The Corpse Rendered Colander: Reexamining Phonicities

While Silverio Pérez (2016:192) is compelled to note that Puerto Rico “shone by its absence” at Cumbre de las Américas in 2015 and at CARICOM (the Caribbean Community Market\textsuperscript{550}), my lament is the Island’s lack of representation at la Conferencia sobre Calidad de Datos de Homicidio en América Latina y el Caribe\textsuperscript{551} in 2015.\textsuperscript{552} Twelve of twenty countries participated. Participating countries included: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, México, Panamá, Perú, & Venezuela. According to 2015 homicide rates (Gagne 2016), seven of the aforementioned were in the top ten, while five were in the bottom ten. On the other hand, countries with homicide rates in the top ten that were not represented were (in descending order of homicides per capita): Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico.

Despite being wildly overburdened, the Island’s forensics team is exemplary. That reality notwithstanding, however, a standing concern is the artificial suppression of

\textsuperscript{550} CARICOM is composed primarily of fifteen Caribbean countries, with additional countries considered “associates” or “observers.” Not a member, Puerto Rico has “observer” status.

\textsuperscript{551} The Conference on Quality of Homicide Data in Latin America and the Caribbean.

\textsuperscript{552} I could hope that the non-participation was due to the Island’s relatively rigorous statistical records, but I was unable to corroborate this. Either way, however, it would have been beneficial to have been a part of the conversation.
homicide rates. Allegedly there have been incidents wherein groups of individuals were burned to death in their cars (presumably due to trafficking ties); later these deaths are miscategorized purposefully as “highway transit deaths.” Corroborating such allegations would be difficult retrospectively, but going forward Puerto Rico must adopt a policy of non-identifying “micro data of homicides [that are] freely accessible” as well as incorporate anti-corruption measures such as the inclusion of “public servants, academics, and members of civil society” for purposes of cross-referencing and verification of data (Bogotá Protocol 2015). The external pressure to maintain a lower homicide rate means that even if our forensics department is one of the most premiere, efforts at greater transparency at the crime scenes are still needed. Further, while groups such as Alianza Para la Paz Social (ALAPÁS) in Río Piedras rally to support families of victims of violence, I have not encountered any organized movements or initiatives focused directly towards homicide prevention, reduction, or intervention.

Another reason the Island must not indulge any further opacity with regard to homicide statistics is that doing so only compounds the problem. To date, deaths like Nael’s can go completely unaccounted for within the public imaginary. This loss of life should be noted. Needs to be noted. Even if only for the sake of our collective conscience. History will not be kind to these present tenors of ambivalence. As noted previously, no one outside his immediate community even knew a youth had died, let alone the ghastly extent as to how. Our present conundrum is that a misinformed citizenry will not engage in a public outcry.

From the circular arguments at la fogata, the sterling rebukes of Mamá Amada, and Nazarena’s indignation towards the teachers’ resistance against status quo violence,
Alarcón’s offers of mediation, and the grating buzz of intermittent aerial occupation, *Aphonicity* traverses the everyday sociopolitical terrain of youth traffickers. At some point, someone pressed mute. At some point, presence went sub-sonar. And it was then that aphonicity took the reins, subverting conventional vocalities and at once effacing entire swathes of the Island’s population.

Since we have not trained our ears, we train our technology to hear for us. Much as a butterfly net poised in the hand of one intent on capture, Shotspotter is the city-sized mega app that catches our youth’s new-fangled narco-vocalities deeply within its aural netting. Somehow the new phonics became aphonics, became artillery wordstrings spattering crimson articulations across the page: Lead poisoning, ladies and gentlemen, as we have never before known or seen. A veritable showcase of Batillean expenditure: the corpse rendered colander. “Because this,” as our online commentator insists, “is no longer the era of *Toño Bicicleta*.”

An Island op-ed mentions that none of the political candidates for the 2016 election for governor have been pressed to produce a strategic plan with regard to crime, that no one has even so much as made cursory mention of the topic. It seems the endless strands of violence grow increasingly tiresome. The Island has come down with a case of crime fatigue. Puerto Rico has taken off its headphones, has left them lying on the table, has elected to hear nothing more than the residual vacuum, and somehow expects aphonicity to step up and pay the rent.
The Bonfire, Extinguished

After Quis was released from the hospital, it was never the same again. Maybe due to the specter of medical bills on top of his daily insulin doses he realized that the hand-outs had to stop. Perhaps …. In any case, there was no more fogata. Although far less often, he still came to Aleli. Still occasionally stopped outside to chat. But no more glow of embers: the circle that was la fogata had been extinguished. Or at least in public. If they glow at all, those embers now glow behind closed doors.

Since the unceremonious extinguishing of la fogata I rarely see the Mayor. I miss his melodic vaulting of my name through the canopy of trees. Miss the furrowed brow that accompanies his fervent concentration on the discourse at hand. Miss the pinball ricochet of insults, those knives that double as affection. He has invited me to visit him at home, but I am able to go less often than I’d like. Though I catch glimpses of him from a distance, he is not predisposed to stop and chat if I happen to be visiting Holy Row.

One hazy summer afternoon when I do visit his reception is subdued. There is no sidestepping his initial question: he wants dates. Wants to know how long I was gone. Turning his head away from their board game to address me, he has the neck swag of someone who knows he is well within his rights to launch into a verbal blitzkrieg at my expense. “A month,” I admit. “A month?” he repeats, retracting his upper body with gale force momentum. It hadn’t occurred to me that he would care that much. “But you haven’t come by here for much longer than that—” Somehow more than three months had gone by without us touching base.

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553 La fogata se apagó.
He begins to raise his voice, but when I match his volume—telling him that if he wants this to escalate, we can do that—he desists. Similar to siblings. Since the beginning, both of us seem to locate safety within the other. His presence has been an unmitigated gift in what can be a parched setting. On the one hand this brother from another mother would give his life for me; he’s proven that. On the other, well, drywall is more responsive to phone calls. Yet for him the aforementioned dynamic is neither incongruous nor paradoxical. For me, well, I am still learning the choreography of this dance. I lean back into the couch pleasantly surprised—“You missed me?” I am endlessly curious to see if he will admit to any affect. He arches a fierce eyebrow and shoots back, “If you never pass by the house…?”

Almost a year later to the day I first presented it to him for his birthday, the Mayor asks to listen again to the audio recording of the high school student who recognized and expounded upon his exemplary work ethic and unparalleled efficacy. For men like the Mayor, windows of success in the licit sector have been slim and fiercely—even if duplicitously at times—won. His desire to revisit those memories bespeaks a wistfulness hearkening back to the fleeting era when his capital had some weight, when his contribution in the legitimate economy was made in both visible and agentially forceful ways—not only productively as an employee but also interpersonally by his winsome engagement with the students.

What the college bound student whom I interviewed never could have known, and would never have suspected about the Mayor, however, is that those very headphones—the ones from which they derived his affectionate nickname Señor Audífonos—were the

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554 Informal conversation, 8.2016.
vehicle by which the Mayor could continue to function affectively in a setting where he so often felt viscerally marginalized and abused. For where else might the Island’s social ecology be reflected more closely other than within one of its most prestigious high schools? The headphones, then, served a sonic barrier\textsuperscript{555} to the everyday daggers and slights of a society doggedly ensnared by the siren song of prestige, power, and coin. A society wherein sentiments of inadequacy soar during discussions of one’s family yacht having comparably less footage than another’s. In short, when the Mayor’s context was not aphonic, he set about constructing an immediate, proximal sphere of aphonicity through the adoption of technological borders between himself and those whose actions harmed him.

A week later four of us, one on each of the four corners of his bed, are listening to the audio file in the Mayor’s room. Near the end of the seven minute clip, they begin to taunt me: I missed my calling; I should have been a journalist; I should have a show called, \textit{Entérate, Áurea}.\textsuperscript{556} Everyone is laughing—everyone but the Mayor. Contemplative, the Mayor just smiles with his gaze fixed on the bedspread and remains quiet. Hours afterward he cocks his head to one side conjecturing, “By now the interviews you have done with me must number in the thousands…” and breaks into a slow yet gratified grin.

That same week someone newer to the lineup of chairs on Holy Row asks if I live in Alelí; I reply that I don’t but that I often hang out here. Immediately Amado jumps in to correct me with a jovial, “\textit{A vé—ces}.”\textsuperscript{557} Wearing his trademark grin, that grin

\textsuperscript{555} See Young 2016 for discussion of “auditor’s headphone bubble” as protective barrier.
\textsuperscript{556} Get to the bottom of it, Áurea!
\textsuperscript{557} Sooooooo—metimes.
that makes you want to meet his mother, he draws out the second syllable dramatically, as if I were a negligent grandparent who only occasionally shows up with baggies of Sunday sweets. I wonder if he is responding more to my increasingly lengthy absences or to my more intentional withdrawal from the point and the stash house. Either way, his verbal frolic aims at giving me a hard time.

My mind travels back to the sequence of events that led me to spend less time at the point over the past year. In large part I desired to defer to friends like the Mayor who were kind enough to verbalize their discomfort with my presence there. But therein is buried a stifled lament: my absence there contributed to an inability to keep tabs on former students like Nael. And forces me to wonder if care that is ineffectual still counts as care at all. Or if, in the grand kaleidoscope of all things affective, sometimes care by definition is almost necessarily ineffectual. That somehow care might not have anything to do with results.

Since I began my work in Alelí in the spring of 2008, I have occasionally scratched notes and scattered thoughts into a soft covered black booklet. Nothing as formal as fieldnotes (those are typed), simply stream of consciousness concerns, daydreams, alterities. Less than a year ago, I composed therein a list of all the elementary aged boys who had erased themselves from the formal sector, all of those who have the designation “bajo” on their last attended public school. All the boys whom the system could no longer see: the boys who hang off the sides of ice cream trucks as they make their rounds; the boys who save up quarters for bus fare to dive off the bridge upon which a sign reads “No Diving;” the boys who panhandle below highway

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558 This is the list onto which I placed Misti Aurora’s evanescent student Benjamin, as mentioned in Chapter 9.
559 Dropped off the rolls.
underpasses or in front of grocery store entrances; the boys who shine shoes during weekend happy hour in the local plaza; the boys who catch roosters and iguanas and chlamydia and gonorrhea; the boys who pin their shoulders back brazenly in an attempt to market their personal brand of tireless courage to local traffickers...

As if with quiet insistence the thin black satin ribbon saves the place where my thumb last maintained the pages splayed apart for the writing of that list. That list of names that begins with a boy called Nael.

**What Aphonicity Conceals:**
**An Interstitial Scream & the Dilatory Process of Narco-webbing Extrication**

My fieldwork is winding down. Sitting on the side of the bed knee to knee with the Mayor who’s in a chair against the wall, I reason, “If something happens to you, I am going to wonder why I didn’t push you more.” Since I met him five years ago, pursuing a clean juridical record in order to procure licit sector employment has been a theoretical goal. That is to say, he mentions it occasionally. I’m finally asking him to put feet on it.\(^{560}\) Next to me on the bed, Castiel rephrases my point. He does this reflexively, without thinking. These restatements are orchestrated towards making the Mayor’s world softer, less jarring.

As such, Castiel spends his days absorbed in locutionary rewappings—with hopes of increasing receptivity. Hence, there are always two soundtracks running: the event itself and Castiel’s buffering intervention of it. Right now he wants to reassure the Mayor that my firmness emanates from a place of love. The Mayor listens to him

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\(^{560}\) Beyond pursuing legal documents (such as records of good conduct) so that *traficantes* would become eligible to procure employment in the licit sector, I also spent a lot of time over the years attempting to set up job interviews, connecting potential employers with community members, providing recommendations, and other sundry endeavors. For manifold reasons, it was very seldom that any of these ventures bore fruit.
intently: it is not words that Castiel is translating, but affect—and thereby meaning. I
know this signifies that he agrees with me; if not, he would have left me on my own to
permeate the Mayor’s defenses. Until I ask him for a specific day, the Mayor is silent. At
that he covers his face with his hand and closes his eyes. We wait. Removing his hand, he
exhales a concession, “Tuesday.”

Yet one Tuesday rolls into the next until it is more than a month later when my
presence is requested at their house. The Mayor’s wearing a shawl collared sweater with
a duffle button closure, looking as if he just dropped in from a photo shoot in the Scottish
Highlands. “What do you think?” he models. “I think it’s hot for wool!” I reason—
reminding him that we are not going in front of a judge. With relief he peels it off and
buries himself again in his closet. From the looks of it, Castiel has been ready for hours.
But now the Mayor is pulling out a print button down from his birthday, a striped oxford,
a polo, a dressy v-neck tee. But when I approach the row of shirts, he objects in English:
“Take it easy, Áurea!” It’s not every day that the Mayor drops English on me. I retreat in
laughter; a wardrobe consultant is not on his list.

As he continues rummaging through the closet, I broach the topic of my
upcoming dissertation defense in Philadelphia. On a separate occasion I had already
invited Melquisedec. With my accumulated frequent flyer points, I could cover plane
fare. Some have family in the region, but they are also welcome to stay with mine.561
While Quis did not even consider the proposition, the Mayor turns to Castiel and
inquires, “¿Quieres viajar?”562 They, at least, entertain the possibility. Although

561 They know my parents from their visits to the Island.
562 “Do you want to travel?”
language barriers may have proven somewhat formidable, I was disappointed that, ultimately, it did not work out for them to join us. But they were there in spirit.563

We settle on the polo, collared—so as not to be overly casual. As a final touch, the Mayor opens the mini-fridge: revealing a top rack inside the door lined with cologne bottles. After roughly 35 vapor enveloping mistings we are set to go. I only discover later that the Mayor had spent the whole morning cleaning his SUV. Like a flight attendant with a small child just prior to take off, he turns around to instruct me, “So that you can be more comfortable, you can pull down this arm rest.”

Hours later, looking out a rain streaked window, the Mayor is shaking. Here, ricocheting against the marble walls, the air conditioning is forceful; maybe wool would have been better. Abandoning his contemplations, he plants himself next to me on the bench’s armrest. He has made good on his promise: we are all at the courthouse together. While we await our number to be called, the Mayor holds up my briefcase as if he were a prosecutor showcasing evidence: “Look at this.” He raises his eyebrows at me, expectantly. “You think it’s pretty bad? That I should get rid of it?” I ask rhetorically. “If it were mine,” he retorts, “I would have gotten rid of it years ago.”

But on issues of social deviance, I sometimes wonder if we were separated at birth. The Plexi-glass has a round, mouth-level opening through which one can communicate to the court clerk and another rectangular one at hip-level where one can pass and receive documents. The Mayor is bent down at a ninety degree angle talking through the documents slot. I always do that; it is decidedly aberrant behavior. The remaining afternoon is spent funneling through this maze of sleek alabaster walls. We do

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563 Shortly after the defense I received a text from Castiel inquiring as to how it went accompanied by hugs, kisses, and well wishes. Unsolicited communication—always a win.
well: all of the government officials are courteous—at turns even kind, the Mayor reels me in from asking my normative four billion questions, and because apertures of phonicity are relegated exclusively to public stages or private spaces, the Mayor judiciously waits until after we are all safely cocooned in the acoustical vortex of the courthouse’s sealed elevator shaft before releasing his trademark scream.
Appendix A

Silence as Virtue

Callar cuando acusan, es HEROÍSMO
Callar cuando insultan, es AMOR
Callar las propias penas, es SACRIFICIO
Callar de sí mismo, es HUMILIDAD
Callar miserias humanas, es CARIDAD
Callar a tiempo, es PRUDENCIA
Callar en el dolor, es PENITENCIA
Callar palabras inútiles, es VIRTUD
Callar cuando hieren, es SANTIDAD
Callar para defender, es NOBLEZA
Callar defectos ajenos, es BENEVOLENCIA
Callar debiendo hablar, es COBARDÍA

Callar a tiempo es discernimiento.
Callar junto al que sufre es solidaridad.
Callar ante el fuerte es sometimiento.
Callar ante el débil es magnanimidad.
Callar ante una injusticia es complicidad.
Callar en los momentos de dolor es virtud
Callar ante la injuria es fortaleza.
Callar para mejor amar es santidad.

Callar las cualidades propias es humildad.
Callar las buenas obras del prójimo es envidia.
Callar para no herir la susceptibilidad es delicadeza.
Callar cuando te humillan es andar en la verdad.
Callar los defectos propios es prudencia.
Callar los defectos ajenos es caridad.
Callar las palabras inútiles es sabiduría.
Callar para escuchar es educación.
Appendix B

December 13, 2011

Philippe Bourgois
Penn Arts & Sciences Penn Medicine
Departments of Anthropology & Family and
Community Medicine
3260 South Street
Philadelphia PA 19104-6398

Dear Mr. Bourgois:

Our office has received your request for housing permission for your doctoral student, Ms. Aurea Rhette Winpenny, dated November 30, 2011.

The Federal and State Regulations do not authorize the temporary or seasonal accommodation in any public housing project. Our units provide housing for permanent residency. All applicants to the Public Housing Program must go through the complete process of admission.

We wish the best for you and Ms. Winpenny and appreciate your efforts and research in [redacted] Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,

Janice M. Miranda Claudio
Deputy Administrator

cc: Miguel Hernández-Vivoni, Esq.
    Aída Vázquez Santa

606 Barbosa Avenue, Juan C. Cordero Building, Río Piedras, P.O. Box 363188 San Juan, Puerto Rico 00936-3188
Phone (787) 759-9407
Appendix C

Tapping into Residual Colonialisms: Blackness as Threat

Homemade sign by store owner next to the cash register in the metro area.\(^{564}\)

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\(^{564}\) “People think that because I’m trying to get ahead, I don’t give loans. The truth is that since I don’t give loans, I’m getting ahead.” The adoption of an Americanized public imaginary of Blackness co-opted for the purpose of intimidation. Please note the squirt gun and sandwich cookie in the child’s hands. A Black child with a toy in his hands: a story we already know due to Tamir Rice.
Appendix D

Crecí rodeado de mucho amor (.7) —algo que, >a lo mejor, puede parecerle difícil creer< a, a, a gente que no e<> de aquí (.5) ¿Saa?°
Yo puedo decir que yo::↑(.4) tuvo una crianza llena de amor, (.6) llena de paz (1.0)—
o sea (1.0)—paz en el sentido de, de, de, rodeado de familia, rodeado de gente que me quierro, rodeado de gente que yo quiere.
(1.0) Y (.5) >para mí es<> e<> la paz< (.3), ¿no↑? la gente que te rodea. Mi entorno fue bien (.2) pacífico.

Code for Phonetic Deviations from Castellano/Código por los ‘desvios’ fonéticos
开阔 = aféresis (al comienzo de la palabra)/apheresis (a figure in grammar that takes away a letter or syllable from the beginning of a word)
开阔 = apócope (al final de la palabra)/apocopation (a figure, where the last letter or syllable of a word is taken away)
L' = lateralización (cambio de r en l)/final r is exchanged for l
# = síncopa (en el interior de la palabra)/syncope (a contraction of words, by cutting off a part)
开阔 = velarización (o pronunciación gutural) de la erre/ rr pronounced in the throat (as opposed to trilled, as would be considered standard (e.g., car in Puerto Rico is “carro” which in this case would be pronounced, “ca-j:::o)).*

*“De acuerdo con las más recientes encuestas lingüísticas, la pronunciación velar o gutural de la erre, fenómeno peculiar del habla puertorriqueña, es una realización fonética destinada a desaparecer. Similar a la erre francesa y estigmatizada por la mayoría de los hablantes, su realización está principalmente limitada a las generaciones de mayor edad y las áreas rurales” (Nuñez de Ortega 2003:20).
Appendix E

Homicides in Puerto Rico 2000-2012

Number of Homicides

Year


10-14 15-19 20-24 25-29 30-34
Appendix F

The Sanctity of Thresholds & the Spaciality of Intimacies

Understanding that Alelí functions as a reversed panopticon, I aimed for hypervisibility from the beginning. I wanted to be as overt and transparent as possible with regard to the reasons for my presence and my motives for engaging various populations within the community. Aware that everyone was privy to all the conversations in which I engaged, I conducted my days and nights conscious of this everpresent audience and was intentionally frank, and perhaps direct to a fault.

I only learned many years in that it is frowned upon to visit a person’s home without an explicit invitation to do so. Part of this disconnect, however, is attributable to my initial entrance into the community as an informal liaison (read: volunteer) from the school. On the exceedingly rare occasions that someone from the institution does visit a home, it is almost always for a matter of urgency, almost always unexpected. Hence, unbeknownst to me, as my relationship to the community changed to become one that was more social and less associated with the school, the community’s expectations towards me shifted.

For as I became more embedded in local kin networks, they expected my interactions to follow suit. The issue, however, is that I was not initially aware of this other set of unspoken social mores; these unwritten rules were not self-evident. Further, in a context of such heightened aphonicy, the acculturation that I so blatantly lacked no one would dare explain to me. And given that I was slow to catch on, I provided endless entertainment to those watching me blunder through.

Here the racialized and class-based “politics of door knocking” come into play as well (See Dinzey-Flores 2013:133). In retrospect, one would be wise to take note, post-knocking, as to whether or not one is invited in or left to stand in the hallway; if you’re left standing in the hallway, that’s a message. If you’re invited into the living room, that’s another. Once, when discussing proper funeral etiquette with Castiel, he explained to me that their relationship with the Mayor’s recently deceased cousin was not considered close. “Not like you and me,” he contrasts, and then illustrates his comparison by grabbing my bicep and pressing it parallel against his own. “You,” he continues, “Are invited to hang out with us in our bedroom—you know how few people come in here?—that means you are considered family.” This honor sounds more impressive than it is: when one considers that some alelianos easily may have close to fifty family members within Aleli alone, the “exclusivity” of this honor plummets considerably. Yet it was only after this conversation with Castiel that I began to pay more attention to these everyday negotiations vis-a-vis the sanctity of thresholds and the spatiality of intimacies.

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565 Panopticons are deemed such due to their visual layout, but I would ascribe an acoustical component to Aleli’s panopticon as well.
566 See Chapter 7.
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**Discography**


Filmography


