

La Casita: Home, Streets and Empowerment

by

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Introduction

“Todos los seres humanos, aunque no usen drogas, tienen sus propias adicciones. Lo importante es cómo cada cual salimos de la nuestra.”

“All human beings, even if they don’t use drugs, have their own addictions. The important thing is how each one of us overcomes them.”

-Raquel

Female drug users who practice street-based sex work¹ occupy one of the most marginalized positions in Puerto Rican society. They are ostracized by their families, stigmatized by society and neglected by the state. Despite the adverse circumstances that they encounter every day, they struggle incessantly to survive in a society that claims to have no place for them. Some make the choice to seek help from religious or non-profit organizations that attempt to fill the void left by the state and some even manage to recuperate² themselves and maintain a drug-free lifestyle. However, the will-power that drives them towards self-empowerment and the steps they take to better their conditions are often thwarted by the larger social, political and economic structures that depend on the women’s subordination for their longevity.

Through an examination of a specific group of Puerto Rican female drug users/sex workers and their relationship with a non-profit organization that aims to better their condition, and with the state, I wish to illustrate how they negotiate with

¹ I use the concept of “sex work” throughout this thesis to bring attention to the practice of prostitution as an income-generating activity and as labor (Kempadoo 1999: 59; O’Connell Davidson 2006: 86-7).

² See Chapter Two for a discussion on recuperation, rehabilitation and empowerment.

the colonialist, capitalist and state fostered social inequalities in which they are embedded. This project is based on three months of fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2009 in La Casita. La Casita is a female drug user/sex workers' outreach program that forms part of Iniciativa Comunitaria or IC, a non-profit organization located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The women who visit IC are perceived as willful deviants, carriers of disease (AIDS) and unfit mothers by the state and society at large. They experience intense stigmatization derived from unrealistic colonial notions of female respectability imposed by the Spanish and U.S. governments and reinforced by the Puerto Rican state. They are seen as in need of disciplining as they embody the opposite values as those embodied by the ideal female citizen.

Government officials cast out this group of women by humiliating them or restricting them from the public services offered. This is not to say that resistance from the women's part does not exist. In this thesis, I show how these women constantly contest these repressive cultural ideologies and exert agency as they negotiate adverse circumstances. Echoing Michael F. Brown, I want to illustrate that "once the personal is redefined as political, the every day survival strategies of our interlocutors can be reconstituted as subtle forms of subaltern rebellion" (1996: 729).

I argue that the greater structural constraints and the social stigmatization, both legacies of colonialism and development, limit the women's access to basic services and undermine the drug recuperation and self-empowerment processes that are facilitated by their participation in IC's programs, primarily La Casita. As a result of their position in society and their modes of survival, the women both contest and reinforce the multiple forces of oppression that affect them. However, the majority of

their efforts—to subvert, resist and change their lives—remain at the most localized micro sphere of daily human interaction, causing little change to the larger structural forces that shape their position in Puerto Rican society.

Fieldwork Site and Ethnographic Methods

IC is a non-profit organization founded in 1990 by Dr. José Vargas Vidot. It began as a health-oriented organization that offered services to individuals infected with HIV/AIDS that were neglected by public health services during a time when the HIV infection rate in Puerto Rico was on the rise.³ It has expanded and now offers health, educational and preventative services to homeless individuals, female and male drug users, inner-city youth, female sex workers and HIV/AIDS patients. It encompasses four departments, which, together, oversee seven programs, two detox centers, and a health clinic.⁴

IC currently administers the Kamaria program, whose objective is to offer health and social services to female drug users/sex workers in the San Juan Metropolitan Area.⁵ It offers a variety of services: Health and harm reduction⁶ education, community outreach, case management, a rest area, and hygiene services.

³ For more on Dr. Vargas Vidot's decision to create IC, see Chapter Two.

⁴ IC administers Punto Fijo, the only needle exchange program on the island. It is significant because the majority of HIV cases in Puerto Rico are infected through needle sharing (Collie 2001).

⁵ It was the only program on the island that directed its efforts towards the female sex worker populations before a similar program was established in the southwest city of Ponce.

⁶ Harm reduction is a method that derives from the ecological model, discussed in Chapter One. Harm reduction is based on the premise that individuals do not need to stop drug use entirely to be re-inserted into society. By taking control of their health, through small, gradual changes—needle exchange and condom usage—health risks associated to drug use and sex work are greatly reduced (Rekart 2005: 2123)

The most important feature of the Kamaria program is La Casita. It is the locale where outreach strategies are conducted and the majority of the services are offered. It is a daytime, female-only rest area where the women can come to shower, eat, sleep and check-in with the case manager, as well as to receive prevention kits⁷ and information about HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections.⁸

From June to August, 2009, I conducted my fieldwork at La Casita. I volunteered Monday through Fridays during its hours of operation from 8:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M., helping the case manager and the outreach workers with a series of tasks that ranged from folding clothes and putting together prevention kits to helping the women pick out outfits and offering them snacks. I spoke extensively with them as they rested or waited to receive any combination of the services offered. This laid back environment enabled me to easily conduct participant-observation, informal and formal interviews, and to write fieldnotes. IC's employees and the women, who regularly visited La Casita, knew about the project I was carrying out. I walked around with my notebook and took detailed notes during interviews and throughout the day. Occasionally, it was difficult to interview some of the women over long periods of time because the drugs they took would sometimes cause them to fall asleep or prevent them from staying still for long.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was aware of my positionality as a young, middle-class, Puerto Rican female educated at an American university. My

⁷ Preventive kits were part of La Casita's harm reduction strategy. They were small Ziploc bags that contained a number of condoms, lubricants and information about the Kamaria program, which were handed out to the participants as a way of reducing their risks of HIV contagion.

⁸ A detailed description of the space of La Casita is included in Chapter One.

motivation to practice native anthropology was furthered by my desire to better understand my country and its perils in hopes of someday advancing change. I decided to focus on female drug users/sex workers as a way of de-familiarizing myself with the symptoms of poverty in my own society, symptoms which had become normalized through their continual presence in the surrounding neighborhoods where I grew up in. I share a national identity with the participants, but I recognize that my lived experiences on the island have been different from theirs. Therefore, I undertake this thesis with caution, respect and solidarity.

The employees and the women of La Casita were very vocal about their perception of me, during my fieldwork.⁹ It was a dynamic, dialogical setting characterized by constant exchange between employees, the women and me. My ethnographic encounters were nonetheless riddled with power hierarchies. To reduce antagonism, I approached my fieldwork with humility and honesty. My purpose was to gain a certain degree of mutual understanding that could eventually evolve into solidarity. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty states: “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis” (1991:58). This thesis, in part, is my attempt to understand the difficulties and possibilities that arise from exchanges between women with different histories. I do not claim to speak for the women I write about. My aim is to center their

⁹ For example, Raquel, a former addict and a current outreach worker, identified me as “la nena” (“the little girl”) and was very protective of me. The women who visited La Casita would constantly guess my age, speculating that I was anywhere between thirteen and seventeen. They were always surprised when I admitted to being twenty years old and afterwards, they would still refer to me as “la nena buena” (“the good girl”).

narratives and experiences as a way of disseminating their stories, which often go unheard.

Theoretical Undertakings

Alice Colón-Warren and Idsa Alegría-Ortega state that feminist studies in Puerto Rico have been mostly limited to broad studies of sexist ideologies in Puerto Rican culture, inequality in education and occupational opportunities, and gender imbalances in political participation. They also state that “gender violence” in interpersonal relations has been the most emblematic issue studied in academia and discussed in the political arena (2003: 667). Sex work and drug use have been largely relegated to a peripheral position in both intellectual and public spheres in Puerto Rico, even though drug use and mental illness are significant problems in the region (Hansen, Alegría, Cabán, Peña, Lai and Shrout 2004: 1117); this is primarily because of the strong cultural taboos towards female sexuality, AIDS and drug use. I aim to fill this gap of knowledge, however partially, by focusing on the daily lives and struggles of a section of female drug users and sex workers who participated in IC’s programs, during the summer of 2009.

As part of a feminist-centered project, I discuss the life experiences and issues that the women shared with me and deemed as important in their everyday lives. This strategy is meant to counteract dominant, Western feminists’ continual exclusion and homogenization of the experiences of women of color. Mohanty characterizes this as a “...suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (1991: 52). Women in the Third World have been represented as homogenous and

monolithic subjects in the Western development and feminist discourses (51). Possibilities of coalition formation among women are, thus, undermined by dominant feminists' appropriation of a specific set of problematic issues as *the* most important. Often, women of color do not perceive their oppression in the same manner, nor do they experience the same limitations and obstacles. Their strategies of survival and challenges also differ. For this reason, it is important to shed light on the multiple exploitations that many women encounter and the agency they enact, to understand how power and oppression work in different settings.

I hope to deconstruct the image of the Third World woman, specifically the Puerto Rican female drug user/sex worker, and to reconstruct a more fluid and heterogeneous representation of this group of women. When I began this project, I wanted to engage in a feminist praxis that would enable me to take part in a discussion with and about a group of Puerto Rican women who have been marginalized by society. This thesis is the result of that political commitment. I do not claim to fully understand the lives and experiences of the women I spent time with, nor do I want to construct a static, generalized portrait of them. Rather, I wish to put forth my perception of their interactions in the space of La Casita as well as their experiences in the streets and government agencies, which they shared with me on a daily basis.

From this point on, I will refer to the women who I spent time with as “participants” to reduce the possibility of further otherization and homogenization. My attempt, therefore, is not to continue the tendency of representing a “singular

‘third world woman,’”, but, following Mohanty, to illustrate the heterogeneous experiences that the participants articulated.

It is, indeed, difficult to develop a term that encompasses each person’s specificities, while at the same time representing the aggregate nature of the group. Therefore, to decrease the possibility of an essentialist representation, I will appropriate the term “participants,” which IC uses to refer to them collectively. In addition, I use pseudonyms to refer to individuals to protect their identities.

Historical Context: Colonialism and Development

Puerto Rico lies in the interstices between the binary frameworks of nation/colony and First World/Third World. It takes up a unique, ambiguous and liminal position as a result of its political status, which ties it to the United States.¹⁰ This ambiguity is characterized by the simultaneity of the processes of colonialism and development, which have characterized the island’s history. Arturo Escobar discusses how, in the post-colonial era, development has come to substitute colonialism as a form of social control and exploitation (1995: 9). It relies specifically on the rearticulation of the poor into “objects of knowledge and management” (23). Much like colonialism, it relies on government interventions into the private lives of citizens to discipline them and mold them into economically productive individuals

¹⁰ In 1952, the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA) (Associated Free State) was formed, which granted Puerto Rico commonwealth status. This status conceals its colonized position as it served to remove Puerto Rico from the United Nations list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1953. Despite this removal, Puerto Rico still maintains strong dependent ties to the United States. It has no congressional representation; its citizens cannot participate in U.S. presidential elections and it still remains under territorial clause (Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner and Georas 1997: 12).

that can sustain the capitalist system of exchange. Even though Puerto Rico has not gained independence, it still has followed similar trajectories—historical, economic, political, and social—to other Third World countries:

Puerto Rico offers a rich field for analysis for the contemporary world-political situation because most of the processes we associate with globalization and the intellectual moves that constitute its analysis—the fundamental instability of racial categories; the importance of U.S. imperial politics; the importance and ultimately insignificance of the state (at least the Puerto Rican state); the permeability of national cultures; and the prominence of diasporic labor migration—began sooner and have lasted longer on the island and among its population overseas than in most other places. (Briggs 2002: 195)

Also similar to other Third World countries, women in Puerto Rico have historically bore the brunt of both colonial and developmentalist policies (Cabezas 1999: 94). The Spanish colonial government instituted racist, classist and sexist hierarchies as forms of social differentiation to order the newly formed multi-racial society primarily composed of descendents of the Taíno population, slaves and white, Spanish colonizers. Eileen J. Suárez Findlay argues, in *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920s*, that race, class and gender are mutually constitutive dimensions as they “...come into existence in and through relation to each other” (1999: 6). The symbiotic relationship between these terms of identity regulated the construction of social and political order as the colonial government attempted to imagine a nation through processes of inclusion and exclusion based on these categories (12).

The concepts of morality and honor became intricately tied to the categories of race, class and gender during the Spanish colonial period. One’s honor, i.e., worth,

was determined by one's lineage, wealth and perceived racial identity such that "...the whiter and wealthier, the more honorable an individual" (22). For women, respectability functioned as an indicator of honor. Women who maintained good reputations were considered more honorable. Those who deviated, even slightly, from the female norms of respectability or had a different racial identity were seen as morally inferior. Thus, as Suárez Findlay states: "Women of African descent...were believed to be inherently disreputable" (25). This marks the origin of the Puerto Rican state's current stigmatization and marginalization of female drug users and sex workers. The state continues to limit La Casita's participants' access to basic public services on the basis of their "inherent" moral inferiority.

The U.S. invasion in 1898 and the subsequent economic re-structuring continued the pattern of social differentiation that the Spaniards put in place. However, a new dimension was added. Notions of hygiene were introduced to justify greater state surveillance and control over female sex workers. They were perceived as the main source of venereal diseases (Vázquez 2008: 196). The hygiene dimension intensified the stigma against female sex workers because they were seen as sources of contagion as well as morally inferior. Escobar states that these types of interventions were common to developmentalists strategies of control:

...the management of poverty called for the intervention in education, health, hygiene, morality, and employment and the instillment of good habits of association, savings, child rearing, and so on. The result was a panoply of interventions that accounted for the creation of a domain that several researchers have termed "the social." (1995: 23)

In 1947, the U.S. colonial government implemented the industrialization program known as Operation Bootstrap. This program was one of industrialization by invitation where U.S. capital investment benefited from tax exemption for industrial development and the availability of cheap labor. The industrialization program was justified as a way of “improving” the Puerto Rican population and modernizing the region. The United States quickly began to promote Puerto Rico worldwide as the Shining Star of the Caribbean and a showcase of economic progress stimulated by U.S. intervention (Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner and Georas 1997:13).

However, Helen Safa (2003) quotes James Dietz to argue that Operation Bootstrap, instead of spearheading a process of independence from the colonial power through economic development, “laid ‘the foundation for increased dominance by U.S. capital from the 1950s to the present’” (18). It was considered ineffective by the 1960s as wages rose and U.S. industries relocated to other countries in search of cheaper labor (Cotto 1993: 123). The departure of these companies produced greater unemployment and migration to the U.S. mainland.¹¹ More importantly, it revealed the island’s strong trade dependency on the U.S. market and the greater public and private debts¹² it had developed, which still affect Puerto Rico today (Safa 18).

¹¹ The Puerto Rican government considered emigration as a possible solution to the high levels of unemployment and developed incentives for individuals to move to the mainland. Robert A. Martínez states that emigration was facilitated as early as 1948 by the contract workers’ program, which secured jobs for potential emigrants to the U.S. and by the low air fares between San Juan and New York that were permitted in 1953 by the Federal Aviation Administration at the request of Luis Muñoz Marín’s Popular Democratic Government (1984: 55).

¹² A budget deficit of \$3.2 billion and a public debt of \$60 billion were reported in *El Nuevo Día* on January 4, 2009 (Vacas 2009).

Puerto Rico's history and the liminal political space it occupies, shape the formation of Puerto Rican national identities. However, to speak of a singular Puerto Rican identity, state or culture is to immerse one's self in a century-long debate. Ramón Grosfoguel, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, and Chloé S. Georas discuss how Puerto Ricans do not perceive the central political contradiction to be between colonizer/colonized, but rather to be between national issues of class/race/gender that are manifested both on the island and on the mainland (6).¹³ More specifically: "...the national often refers to ethnic culture and solidarity strategies, and rarely does it entail a mass demand to administer the chaos left behind by five hundred years of colonial and neocolonial relations" (3). This focus could be considered one of the main obstacles that aggravate the government's ineffectiveness in providing for its citizens. Instead of looking outwards, towards the global economic and political forces that maintain Puerto Rico in a dependent position, politicians and citizens alike fix their gaze inwards. As Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas state: "This illusion hinders the creation of a public political sphere where a discussion (beyond nationalism) is able to articulate a politically effective critique of world political and economic dynamics as they affect the lives of Puerto Ricans" (13). Therefore, I follow their approach that an awareness of unequal power relations between the United States and Puerto Rico and of the economic absorption of the island into the

¹³ Puerto Ricans embody ambiguous racial identities and cannot be fixed into a single racial category, such as white or black. Instead, as Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, Georas state, "Puerto Ricans became *new* racialized subjects (Spanish-speaking, racially hybrid), different from Whites and Blacks, but sharing with the latter a subordinate position to the former" (21).

mainland is “a more productive premise from which to map out the future political interventions than the illusion of autonomy” (14).

However, the discussion of Puerto Rican national identity is beyond the scope of this thesis and I have chosen to briefly discuss the impact of colonialism and development on the island because I understand that they are significant historical processes, which have undeniably shaped the culture, politics, and citizens of Puerto Rico.

Current Political-Economic Context

On November 4, 2008, Luis Fortuño was elected governor of Puerto Rico. He was described in a *New York Times* articles as a “dapper dresser partial to cufflinks” and “a member of the island’s wealthy elite” (Cave 2008). He had a strict neoliberal economic plan, which he attempted to introduce during his first year in office (Cortés Chico 2009a). However, his options for economic growth were limited as his administration attempted to grapple with Puerto Rico’s \$3.2 billion budget deficit (Vacas 2010). He supported the creation of the Ley Especial Declarando Estado de Emergencia Fiscal y Estableciendo Plan Integral de Estabilización Fiscal para Salvar el Crédito de Puerto Rico (Special Law that Declares a State of Fiscal Emergency and Establishes an Integrated Plan for the Fiscal Stabilization to Save Puerto Rico’s Credit), also known as the Ley 7, which was approved on March 6, 2009. This law was used to justify the firing of 24,000 government employees, which ignited a series of organized rallies and protests (Sánchez Fournier 2009b). Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans voiced their opposition to the government’s aims.

Amárilis Pagán, a member of the Movimiento Amplio de Mujeres de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico's Broad-Based Women's Movement) criticized Fortuño's neoliberal policies in an article: "No es un gobierno legítimo si no representa los intereses del pueblo. Este gobierno procura solo un sector: el de los adinerados." ("It is not a legitimate government if it does not represent the interests of the people. This government only looks after one sector: that of the rich.") (Cortés Chico 2009a)

The firing of government employees was followed by government downsizing and privatization characterized by the dismantling of government agencies or their integration into other larger agencies. The Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres (Office of the Women's Advocate) was one of the first agencies to be affected by these new measures. It was created in 2001 to promote women's rights and to advocate for gender equality and the elimination of discrimination and violence directed at women. It was the only government agency that directed its efforts solely to women's issues and from 2007-2009 it provided funding for the Kamaria program. On October 2009, it lost 75% of its personnel and was fused into the Departamento de la Familia (Family Department) signaling the lack of importance for a women-centered government initiative (Associated Press 2009).

The economic recession combined with mass firing and government restructuring set the social tone for 2009. Puerto Rico's annual income per person was around \$16,000 in 2008, less than half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the United States. Almost two million residents (48%) live below the poverty line and the poverty rate is more than twice as high as in poor states such as Mississippi, Louisiana and New Mexico (The Economist 2010). It was reported in *El Nuevo Día*

on December 22 that 2009 had been the third most violent year in Puerto Rican history, after 1993 and 1994. Close to nine hundred people were murdered this past year (Colón Dávila 2009). Furthermore, the cost of crime for the island was \$6.5 billion and funding for criminal processing and security related agencies took away 10.7% from Puerto Rico's GDP in 2008 (Cortés Chico 2009b).

Lowering crime rates became a top priority for Fortuño and his administration as problems of health, housing and other social services fell to the wayside: “Para mí, lo más importante es la seguridad, tanto la seguridad física como la seguridad económica” (“For me, security is the most important thing, physical security as well as economic security”) (López Alicea 2009).¹⁴ Fortuño's administration mirrored the anticrime policy of *Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* (Strong Hand Against Crime) implemented by the PNP¹⁵ governor, Pedro Roselló, between 1992 and 2000. This policy emerged from the ideological standpoint that poor youths were a threat to society and strong measures had to be taken to ensure safety for the rest of the citizens. Policy makers never considered the lifetime of violence and marginalization these youths experience and the social limitations imposed upon them, which constrict their life choices (Rivera 243). This policy increased police and U.S. National Guard presence and repression in public housing complexes, raised jail time for those found guilty of infractions and decreased prevention and rehabilitation options for those in jail (Díaz Román 2009a). In a similar way, the current

¹⁴ The funds relegated to security-related issues are greater than those assigned to the Health Department. It is a vicious cycle that promotes the incarceration of more individuals with drug-related offenses, while simultaneously raising the costs to maintain these individuals in jail (Albizu-García, Negrón Velásquez, González and Santiago-Negrón 2006: 1090).

¹⁵ Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party). It is the pro-statehood party.

administration began to aggressively target youths by regularly raiding drug points inside and outside public housing complexes through police interventions (Sánchez Fournier 2009b; Cortés Chico 2009).¹⁶ El Guano was one of the many *megapuntos* (mega drug points) that the police targeted multiple times during the summer of 2009. It was a drug point that functioned twenty-four hours a day located underneath the highway bridge, which crosses over the Martín Peña Canal. It was an area where several of IC's participants spent significant amounts of time, injecting, smoking, sleeping, working or just "hanging out."

The Puerto Rican criminologist Dr. Dora Nevares-Muñiz explained in an article that the current criminals, whose ages range from eighteen to thirty, are "hijos de la mano dura" ("children of the strong hand"). She explains that those who participate in crime today are more violent than past generations (Díaz Román 2009a). Their codes of behavior are different from those individuals targeted by Roselló's anti-crime policy, which undermines the policy's effectiveness in lowering crime. Furthermore, Fortuño's government also fails to provide low-income communities with alternative employment options that can compete with the profits made in drug trafficking and distribution. As unemployment levels rise, individuals seek to enter into the underground economy.

She explains that the government's ignorance is aggravated by the inability of "organisms of socialization" such as the family, the school and the communities to counteract street violence by promoting other methods of conflict-resolution. This

¹⁶ On February 1, 2010 Fortuño gave a speech to announce that he was going to send out 1,000 members of the National Guard into public housing complexes, while new police officers were trained.

failure is due, in part, to the government's ineffectiveness in managing the state agencies that provide services and support to these institutions (e.g. Departamento de la Familia, Departamento de Educación, Departamento de la Vivienda, etc.)

I discuss the current political and economic trends to outline the macro forces that affect the participants' positionality in Puerto Rican society. Soon after Fortuño implemented the Ley 7, economists and academics warned that a higher unemployment rate¹⁷ was going to be detrimental to primarily single-mothers, heads of households, from the lower-middle class and the lower class (Rivera Marrero 2009). They also predicted that participation in the underground economy was going to increase as jobs in the legal economy became scarce. Fortuño's re-implementation of the Mano Dura policy reiterated the government's view of low-income individuals as naturally criminal. The state, once again, ignored the social and economic circumstances that prompted individuals, such as the participants of La Casita, to enter into the underground economy. The state perceives the criminal individual as being apart from her environment, thus, state discipline and punishment are considered appropriate measures to mold the individual into a well-behaved citizen.

AIDS and Drug Policy in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico, after Haiti, has the second largest incidence of HIV/AIDS infection in the Caribbean, which in turn has the highest prevalence of infection in the world after Sub-Saharan Africa (Varas-Díaz, Toro-Alfonso and Serrano-García 2005:

¹⁷ An unemployment rate of 15.9% was reported on October 2009. It was 3.2 percent more than that reported for October 2008 (Rivera Santana 2010).

126). Exact statistics of infection and drug use in Puerto Rico are hard to find, as a result of a lack of available data. The United States has continually left out HIV/AIDS data for Puerto Rico from national surveys, which, if included, would raise the U.S. national rate (Dewan 2008). Varas-Díaz, Toro-Alfonso and Serrano-García state that HIV cases were not reported in Puerto Rico until 1999, a significant factor which contributed to the lack of accurate data regarding HIV/AIDS rates on the island.

The Open Society Institute and the International Harm Reduction Development Program reported in 2009 that Puerto Rico has the highest injection drug user (IDU) population in the region and that the spread of HIV/AIDS occurs mainly through the sharing of needles, in contrast to the rest of the region where infection is mainly spread through sexual contact (112-3).¹⁸ It is estimated that there are 15,000 IDUs in Puerto Rico. The majority of them (13,500) reside in the San Juan Metropolitan Area.

Drug use, HIV/AIDS and sex work are issues that correlate and need to be assessed in relation to each other. For the majority of the female participants of IC, drug use is supported by sex work, which places the women at a higher risk of infection through the sharing of needles and unprotected sexual contact.

The U.S. War on Drugs has greatly influenced Puerto Rico's approach towards drug-related issues. Albizu-García, Negrón-Velásquez, González and Santiago-Negrón (2006) discuss how the local government has adopted a

¹⁸ Here lies the significance of Punto Fijo, IC's needle-exchange program. It is the only one of its kind on the island.

prohibitionist approach, where the focus lies on attempting to reduce the supply through police interventions in drug points and extended jail-sentences for those caught distributing or using (Albizu-García, Negrón-Velásquez, González and Santiago-Negrón 1079). Higher rates of incarceration are one of the results of this prohibitionist model, which conceptualizes the use of certain drugs as a consequence of moral debility (1074). This model is based on the premise that penalization of drug use maintains the social order and dissuades consumption. For example, in 1997, the Ley de Sustancias Controladas (Law of Controlled Substances) was amended to criminalize syringes and any paraphernalia used for injection (Albizu-García 2000: 7). This amendment further criminalized drug users as it justified state punishment regardless of the actual possession of illegal substances.

Albizu-García, Negrón-Velásquez, González and Santiago-Negrón argue in favor of a public health model as an alternative to the morally dictated prohibitionist model. Instead of focusing on the individual, the public health model focuses on the population as a whole and the greater circumstances that affect it. A public health policy is grounded on the ecological model, which is also La Casita's theoretical framework. The authors discuss that an individual's health is a product of multiple factors. These factors interact through complex relations on differing levels. These include an individual's personal characteristics as well as the social, natural, economic, political factors that surround her (1075). As I will show in Chapter One, La Casita is based on the same premise.

Theoretical Framework

I consider the notion that the participants in this study are affected by and negotiate with a multiplicity of macro and micro forces of power. Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes the workings of power in a way that I find useful. She explains that power works through a matrix of domination, in which individuals are located (2000: 274). This matrix consists of structural, disciplinarian, hegemonic and interpersonal domains. Hill Collins states that all domains are interrelated and work in tandem: “The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experiences and the individual consciousness that ensues” (276). I situate my project within this larger conception of power and its mechanism to illustrate the multiple levels at which participants manage, subvert and, at times, reinforce the oppressive forces that impact their daily lives.

In considering the multiple power hierarchies—national, racial, class—in which the participants are embedded and how they engage with social norms and stigmas, I use Foucault. Foucault sees bodies as objects of power, which are disciplined through “small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious...” (1977: 139).

Foucault introduces the concept of *biopower* and defined it as the power exerted over life, through state and social institutions, that is organized around the disciplining of the body and the regulation of the population (1978:139). He explains that this *biopower* was an indispensable element in the development of capitalism (140). The state aided this development by penetrating into all social spheres to

discipline and regulate people, and to maintain the unequal relations of production that formed the basis of capitalism.

To ensure the full functioning of the capitalist system, efficiency and organization became key components of society. Docility emerged as a mechanism through which bodies could be subjected, transformed and improved as objects of control and as disciplinary subjects (Foucault 1977: 136). However, Foucault alludes to the ability of individuals to resist this discipline and surveillance: “It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (1978: 143). I frame my discussion on the detrimental effects of colonial notions of female respectability and the ways in which the state intervenes in the lives of the participants, within this relationship of power, bodies and discipline.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, informs my discussion of the participants’ interpersonal negotiations with the streets environment, the organization and the state. He defines *habitus* as the “schemes of perception, thought and action” internalized by individuals (Bourdieu 1989; 14). He argues that individuals belonging to different classes internalize different sets of dispositions, which are embedded in their social environments and which guide their practices. In general, the participants I worked with embodied a lower-class *habitus* characterized by the practice of the code of the streets. This embodiment was beneficial for them in the space of the streets of Puerto Rico, whereas it proved to be detrimental in other home-like/workplace environments and state agencies. La Casita was a place where this *habitus* was mediated and participants were encouraged to suppress the code of the streets and adopt a more disciplined and controlled behavior.

Habitus is associated with the amount and forms of capital an individual possesses. Capital can be economic, cultural, social and symbolic, and can be either accumulated in material form or internalized and embodied through practices (Bourdieu 1989: 17). In the space of the streets, each exchange constitutes a possible loss or gain of social capital. Thus, participants remain constantly alert and follow the code of the streets as naturally as possible to reduce their chances of loss. Symbolic capital, or prestige, is highly sought after in the world of the streets. Individuals with a violent reputation are those that embody greater symbolic capital and may also be those that are challenged more frequently.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, I trace how the historical conditions of Spanish and U.S. colonialism (re)produced an ideal Puerto Rican female identity based on respectability and monogamy, which continues to function as an unrealistic standard for Puerto Rican women. The women who do not embody the desired femininity, such as the participants of La Casita, are otherized and invisibilized through state practices and media representations. Thus, female drug users/sex workers, who, in most cases, grow up in poverty, are further marginalized because of their deviant behavior. I counter the imagined homogenous identity of female drug users/sex workers by portraying a “thick” description of the experiences and motivations the participants of La Casita shared with me. Also, I describe the space of La Casita to situate the reader in my fieldwork setting, to discuss the theoretical framework upon which its interventions are based and to discuss the most common services offered.

La Casita, as well as IC as a whole, becomes an alternative space where the participants can access services and information that they are unable to obtain from the state.

In Chapter Two, I continue my examination of La Casita with a detailed discussion of the ways in which it is constructed as a safe haven that provides the participants with a break from the violent environment of the streets. I illuminate the permeability of this space by discussing the behaviors common to the streets that the participants also enact inside La Casita. When exhibited, the employees discouraged these behaviors by emphasizing the need for structure, discipline and self-control. Thus, the ability of code-switching from a code of the streets to a code appropriate to a home-like/workplace environment was highly supported and cultivated.

Through a comparative analysis of the drug recuperation processes of Angelita and Raquel, two former participants of IC and current employees of La Casita, I will show the difficulties participants encounter in suppressing their normalized behaviors. I argue that the ability of code-switching is, indeed, beneficial for the participants as it facilitates their movements through state agencies and workplaces. However, this newly acquired ability is not enough to give the participants full entry into other social and political realms. Thus, I engage with the questions: What happens to a participant who adopts a drug free lifestyle, but still remains in a marginalized position in society? How is code-switching related to empowerment? I will also present Dr. Vargas Vidot, IC's founder's, views on the processes of recuperation, rehabilitation and empowerment to reveal the larger implication of the disciplining practices that are promoted in La Casita.

In Chapter Three, I will focus on the participants' relationship with the state. I build on Wendy Brown's standpoint that imagines the state as a masculinist terrain, which systematically locates and maintains women in a subordinate position. First, I will discuss the participants' experiences with the police and the ways in which they have influenced the participants' perception of the state. Then, I will analyze the specific encounters of Ana, Kiki and Gloria with the Health Department, Family Department and Housing Department, respectively. They all encountered some degree of difficulty in accessing the services they desired, even though their experiences were different. I argue that despite the participants' involvement with La Casita and despite their code-switching abilities, they still confront the larger structural constraints that have marginalized them all of their lives.

Chapter One

The Participants and *La Casita*: Imagined Colonial Identities and the Heterogeneous Reality

In this chapter my purpose is threefold. First, I discuss how colonial notions of female respectability were introduced and disseminated in Puerto Rican society through colonial state policy. Through a comparison of the media representation of two female murders—one a participant of La Casita, the other an upper-class young woman—I wish to illustrate how colonial notions of proper female sexuality still hold sway in current Puerto Rican society. Second, I draw a “thick” profile of the female participants who visited La Casita during the summer of 2009 to complicate and question the state’s perception of them as immoral and contaminated subjects. Last, I describe the physical space of La Casita and discuss the ecological model upon which it is theoretically based.

Through a discussion of the multiple experiences that the participants shared with me, I wish to illustrate the heterogeneity of identities, practices and experiences of the female participants of La Casita in opposition to the homogenous image constructed by the state and society at large. My intention, following Mohanty (1991: 51), is to counter the discursive colonization of the participants’ identities and to position them as social agents that live and navigate multiple oppressions on a daily basis.

La Casita served as a communal space for the participants and it fostered constant discussion. Storytelling was continual as participants exchanged stories about the previous night. These stories were often detailed and personal and gave

insight into the participants' daily lives. Brenda Roche, Alan Neaigus and Maureen Miller, in *Street Smart and Urban Myths: Women, Sex Work, and the Role of Storytelling in Risk Reduction and Rationalization*, examine patterns of storytelling among a sample of drug-using women in New York City, who engage in street-based sex work. They examine two types of story formats: "street smarts" and "urban myths." They define street smarts as stories of survival, and urban myths as compilations of street legends spread by word of mouth (2005: 150). The stories are meaningful because they reveal the multiple obstacles and risks that female drug users encounter in their life on the streets. La Casita's participants mostly narrated street-smarts stories and I examine some throughout this project. Since I conducted fieldwork at La Casita only, their stories gave me insight into their daily routines and enabled me to understand in some degree the interactions they had with people and places outside La Casita.

Rebecca's Murder

One afternoon, I was sitting in the living room in La Casita when there was a knock on the screen door; standing outside was a tall, thin woman wearing an oversized black T-shirt and a pair of dirty black leggings. Her waist-length wavy hair was blond with dark roots, and she had tied it in a high ponytail. She could hardly keep her eyes open as she gently swayed from side to side. She looked exhausted. Raquel, a LC employee, opened the door and invited her in, but the woman refused and asked for some water. When Raquel gave her a cup of water, she drank it in one gulp. Raquel insisted that she come in, take a shower and rest for a while, but the woman said she did not want to. I was amazed at how young she appeared and thought to myself how attractive she would look after a quick shower and a change of clothes. The woman asked for one more cup of water and then left after promising that she would come by next week. As she walked away, I

asked Raquel who she was. Raquel told me her name was Rebecca.
(Field note 06/15/09)

Two weeks later, an article titled *Asesinatos en Santurce y Cidra (Murders in Santurce and Cidra)* from *El Nuevo Día*¹⁹ reported that Rebecca's body was found in an empty lot behind a gas station²⁰ in Santurce.²¹ The police determined it was a homicide. The article stated that Rebecca was a woman of *raza negra*, of black race, and that the only article of clothing she had on was her bra, which was lifted towards her shoulders, leaving her breasts uncovered. It also stated that she was homeless, and that multiple syringes had been found at her side. Her body had been covered by a bed sheet and then buried in a pile of garbage. She had died as a result of a head injury. Her body had been decomposing for about three to four days. There was no mention of an ongoing investigation to find Rebecca's murderer.

I was stricken with sadness and a sense of hopelessness by the circumstances of Rebecca's death. I imagined how she might have occupied her time in the days prior to her passing. Although, I saw her only once while I was conducting my fieldwork at La Casita, the employees mentioned that she would often come to La Casita for food, clothing and to shower. I could tell by her sleep-like demeanor that day that she was under the influence of drugs, most likely heroin, and that she had stopped by, as other participants do, to take a short break from walking long-distances in the smoldering Puerto Rican summer heat.

¹⁹ Most widely read Spanish-language newspaper in Puerto Rico, with 1.1 million daily readers. (http://www.elnuevodia.net/nuestro_mercado.html).

²⁰ This particular gas station was a well-known spot where drug users and homeless individuals lived and hung out.

²¹ Santurce is a neighborhood in San Juan that has a history of racial and class segregation (Duany 1997: 189)

Three days after the above newspaper article was published, another young woman was murdered. Patricia Hernández was accidentally caught in the crossfire between a juvenile assassin and his target in the historic area of Old San Juan. She had been shot multiple times and died a few hours later in the hospital. Her death was documented in print and television news for months. The media closely followed every new development that was uncovered. She was identified as an innocent victim who had gotten swept away by the wave of violence that had over taken the island.²²

The initial article about Patricia's murder mentioned how she had graduated from a prestigious, private, Catholic, all girls high school. At the time of her death, she was in her third year of college at the University of Puerto Rico, studying Pre-Med (Rivera Vargas 2009). She had a long-term boyfriend, who was with her at the time of the shooting. He expressed the love he had had for her in various interviews. The newspaper articles described how this young woman with a promising future died as she waited for an ambulance on a busy sidewalk (Díaz Román 2009a). Some journalists implied that her death could have been avoided if not for the narrow Seventeenth Century cobblestone streets that made transportation into the historic area difficult (Rivera Vargas 2009). Her death was portrayed as a national loss and moved many citizens to join in a collective call for justice heard throughout the island (Rosario 2009). Rebecca's loss, however, was only mourned among the participants and employees of La Casita.

Patricia's murder was given the highest degree of attention and was discussed as a national tragedy, while Rebecca's death was given limited attention and forgotten

²² See Introduction.

immediately. Rebecca's name reappeared in the news only after two other homeless, female drug users were found murdered under the same conditions. The police suggested that there was a pattern to these murders (Díaz Román 2009b).

The murder of a female homeless drug user is not a surprise to anyone because her lifestyle is thought to be solely the result of a personal choice: to choose the street over the home is to immerse oneself in a masculine world of drugs, sex and violence that will eventually kill you. Rebecca thus represented a “wasted” life, which deserved death. The lack of media representation and any subsequent discussion is a result of the belief that if Rebecca had chosen the correct path—higher education, drug-free lifestyle, involvement in a monogamous relationship—then, she would have never died in such bleak circumstances. Her death was not newsworthy because it was a logical consequence to her lifestyle. By the same reasoning, Patricia's death was a shock because she was on the right track to fulfilling the accepted roles of an adult female in Puerto Rican society. She had ostensibly made the right life choices. However, she fell victim to a world she had no part in. Patricia's story, therefore, became emblematic of the innocent lives lost to crime and violence.

I do not wish undermine the seriousness of Patricia's death. Her death was as tragic as those of other women in Puerto Rico who have suffered the same violent fate. Rebecca was iconic of the many women who have multiple marginalized identities—drug user, sex worker, AIDS patient and homeless—and, who are continually ignored, silenced and deemed disposable by the state and the media. Female drug users are seen as second-class citizens, who do not embody the ideal imposed on Puerto Rican women. Their deaths provoke few uproars and little concern

because their deaths are seen by dominant society and the state as an inevitable and almost legitimate—a deserved punishment for the illegal lifestyles they have chosen. I attribute the disparity in worth ascribed to the lives of these two young women to the culturally-driven ideal as to what constitutes the ideal female identity within Puerto Rican society. This ideal is a historical consequence of Puerto Rico's colonization by two foreign sovereigns, the Spaniards and more recently, the United States.

Newspapers, such as *El Nuevo Día*, were complicit with the state in the construction of deviant female identities. The printed media became more significant after the U.S. occupation as the government encouraged its citizens to denounce women who were considered “loose” (Vázquez Lazo 265). A sense of moral crisis was developed through daily publications of images and names of women who deviated from the desired norm of respectability. This air of moral instability justified state repression against female sex workers (126) A trend developed where even women who did not practice sex work were publicly condemned by other community members for engaging in “unladylike” behaviors: “El solo hecho de que apareciera un nombre de mujer acompañado de ‘escándalos,’ ‘bailes obscenos’ o ‘pelea,’ era *de facto*, sinónimo de prostituta” (“The mere fact that a woman’s name would be published along side ‘scandalous,’ ‘obscene dancing’ or ‘fight,’ was *de facto*, synonymous with prostitute.”) (127) These public denunciations justified the state’s intervention into the private sphere of sexual practices and family life as a way of “civilizing” the Puerto Rican population and disciplining citizens, specifically women (262). I argue that the positioning of sex workers as dishonorable during the Spanish

and U.S. colonial governments still continues to influence the state's imagining of female drug users and sex workers as corrupted women in need of proper regulations and surveillance.²³

Colonial Notions

Nieve de los Ángles Vázquez Lazo in *Meretrices: La prostitución en Puerto Rico de 1876-1917*, discusses how both the Spanish and U.S. colonial states were deeply implicated in the construction of female respectability. Both governments focused on the private realm of the home to promote bourgeois virtues and values related to notions of “proper” masculinity and femininity (51). Female respectability was based on virginity and sexual fidelity in marriage (Suárez Findlay 1999: 20). In 1899, Puerto Rico's attorney general, A.C. Sharpe expressed that “family life is the recognized basis of true civilization,” promoting the formation of nuclear families among the poor of Puerto Rico (Briggs 2003: 61). Women were understood to belong to the realm of the home, and women who practiced a different type of femininity, outside the home, or maintained an unmarried status for long periods of time, such as sex workers, were thought to be ignoring their household duties and obligations, while undermining the national “civilizing” process.

Both the Spanish and American states focused on the politics of female prostitution as the battleground for the negotiations over acceptable femininity. Under the Spanish state, debates were centered on how to regulate, not eradicate, prostitution. Female sex workers had to register in each municipality; submit to

²³ See Chapter Three

mandatory gynecological exams; carry identification and had limited mobility as they were restricted from walking around certain streets during designated hours (Vázquez Lazo 57; Kempadoo 2004: 169).

On the other hand, after the U.S. invasion in 1898, the U.S. state imagined female sex workers as degenerate, criminal and primitive (Vázquez Lazo 51). It conceptualized prostitution as a crime and began to implement repressive measures to eliminate it from the cities. There was increased vigilance by the state and brothels were shut down (251). When World War I began in 1917, the repression intensified. Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship to facilitate their entrance into the war as U.S. soldiers (Briggs 2002: 46). The value on men's bodies increased and sex workers were seen as the sole carriers of venereal diseases that could potentially weaken the armed forces (Vázquez Lazo 256; Flores Ramos 24).²⁴ Debates on prostitution expanded from narrow issues of morality to those concerning hygiene (Vázquez Lazo 73).

Prostitution underwent a conceptual shift: From a necessary wrong under the Spanish state, to a form of treason under the U.S. government (257). This notion of sex workers and drug users as contaminated citizens, who threaten the security of the nation, still persists today. Drug use may leave physical marks on the body. These physical attributes function as embodied reminders of their purportedly blemished characters. Drug users are also associated with HIV/AIDS. They are perceived as highly contagious and as a risk for the rest of society.

²⁴ Male clients were not seen as carriers. According to Vázquez Lazo, during the nineteenth century, reported cases of syphilis were more common among married women, who were infected by their husbands (103).

The imagining of sex workers as polluted, undisciplined and “problem” individuals and the government policies that differentiate them from the rest of society are part of the “medicalization of the masses,” which Arturo Escobar states is characteristic of developmentalist thinking (1995: 30). It is a way of positioning a group of people on the savage/civilized continuum to justify foreign and governmental intervention into their politics and the social arena. U.S. officials described Puerto Rico as “one of the dirtiest, filthiest, and most unsanitary of countries,” in which citizens’ “utter ignorant disregard for the simplest rules of hygiene and sanitation had made the island a menace to human health, life, and comfort (Briggs 2003: 60).

I wish to connect this history to the present-day perception of female drug users and sex workers as disposable and unworthy citizens. They continue to be thought of as willful non-conformists, as women who have abandoned their lives as mothers and wives to adopt a selfish lifestyle of drug use and promiscuity, which has morally and physically contaminated them and which puts the nation at risk.

Participants’ Profile

The participants who visited La Casita during the summer of 2009 ranged from the ages of 23 to 56. Most grew up in the surrounding neighborhoods,²⁵ while others came from towns located around the island. They belonged to lower middle-class and lower-classes and varied racial backgrounds.

²⁵ Las Monjas, Barrio Obrero, Santurce, Israel-Bitumul, Río Piedras, among others.

The most common drugs they use are heroin and crack. Heroin use is primarily intravenous, while crack is usually smoked. They have all levels of addiction; some are occasional or frequent drug users, while others have chronic addictions. Some of the older participants still come by La Casita, even though they no longer use drugs. They have mostly been using on and off throughout their life, or have gotten clean at some point. Many have been unable to find stable housing and, consequently, find the services offered at La Casita useful.

The underground economy regulates the creation and administration of drug points, shooting galleries, public housing complexes and individual family homes. These spheres are embedded in the sub-culture of the streets, which I will discuss in Chapter Two. Participants move through these spaces and often experience different types of oppressive forces, which they constantly resist and reproduce. Their identities not only as women, but also as drug users and sex workers place them in one of the most subordinated positions within Puerto Rican culture. They are not only marginalized in myriad ways from state services and social spaces, but they also experience repeated exploitation within the low-income communities they visit to either buy or use drugs.

Raquel explained this discrimination when she told me that the *bichotes* (drug point owners), the *tiradores* (retail sellers) and even the *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) would often go on vacation and completely forget about their addicted customers, who needed their daily fixes: “Ellos no se meten drogas así que no les importa” (“They don’t use drugs so they don’t care.”) The customers undergo withdrawal, as drugs become scarce. This indicates that even the people who occupy

a lower class position similar to the participants exploit their addictions for their own monetary gain. The participants' well being is considered by no one, even when the money they spend to buy drugs supports the livelihoods of the drug point owners, the sellers, the runners, their families, and the entire drug trade. The prejudice against female drug users and sex workers is transparent.²⁶ Some participants even experienced overt violence directed at them from the men who worked at the drug points when buying drugs.

On one occasion, Mariela, a participant, came up to me while I was folding the clothes in the armoire of La Casita. She lifted up her shirt and asked me to look at her back. She had several scratches and bruises and I asked her what had happened. She explained that when she and her *marido* (husband) recently visited a drug point, one of the *tiradores* confused Mariela with another woman, who had burglarized his neighbor's house. She tried to explain to him that he was mistaken, but he started hitting her with a stick. She screamed "¡Si robara no estaría pará' en la esquina!" ("If I robbed, I wouldn't be standing on a street corner!") She begged him to seek clarification from his neighbor, but the *tirador* refused and continued to beat her. Finally, the owner of the drug point, an older woman, interfered and prohibited the *tirador* from hitting Mariela again. The older woman called him an *abusador* (abuser) and told him he had no right to hit her since he had refused to corroborate the burglary story with the old man, who had been robbed.

²⁶ After overcoming addiction, female drug users encounter greater difficulties than male drugs users when attempting to reintegrate themselves into their community as a result of the intense social stigma that surrounds female drug use and sex work. Society seems to forgive men more easily than women for their entrance into the underground economy of drugs (Rodríguez-Burns 2009).

Many participants shared similar instances. They were victims of violence in the communities they visited. They were not only marginalized from greater Puerto Rican society, but they were also looked down upon by members of the poorest economic class who profited from the same underground market that they, as drug users, sustained. In Mariela's case, the *tirador* felt entitled to hit her, because she was a female drug user, a sex worker and, in his eyes, a burglar.

The participants also shared experiences of the sexual violence they had suffered. They related violent episodes with strangers, clients and lovers. For example, one afternoon, Victoria, a regular participant, came into La Casita looking very tired. She told us a man wanted to have sexual relations with her the night before in El Guano. When she refused him, he attacked her and pushed her to the ground. She managed to get away with only scratches on her back, but she explained that this encounter had made her reach a breaking point. After she got away from the man, she noticed another man throwing out a bottle with prescription pills into the trash. She went up to him and asked him for them. She took the whole bottle, she admitted, in the hope of dying. She was incredibly disappointed when she woke up hours later and realized she was still alive. With the same calmness that she narrated this horrible episode to us, she asked Raquel for a cigarette and went outside to smoke as she waited for the shower to become available. Later on, she showered, got dressed and asked me for some anti-bacterial cleanser. She opened up the package and began to shine her shoes with it. She mentioned: "El día que me recoja forenses, que me recojan bonita" ("The day that forensic picks me up let them pick me up looking

pretty.”) Jenny told her not to say that and Victoria responded: “Yo sé cómo es la calle” (“I know how the streets are.”)

These are the realities that many female participants shared with us on a daily basis. As a result of their addictions, they have been ostracized from their families and the rest of society. They are homeless. They have no support and are left to struggle for themselves. Dr. Vargas Vidot, the executive director of IC, in an article published in *Primera Hora*, commented that: “El final de muchas de las mujeres es la muerte. He tenido que identificar los cadáveres de más mujeres que de hombres en lo que llevo de experiencia en la calle...Mueren en la soledad” (“Death is the end for many of these women. I have had to identify more female corpses than male during my time and experience in the streets...They die in solitude”) (Rodríguez-Burns 2009). When street life and homelessness become too much, they consider suicide, or elect to undergo detox or rehabilitation as temporary or permanent exit strategies.

Participants support their drug use through illegal activities such as sex work, shoplifting and car stealing. Sex work and shoplifting are the two most common sources of income for the female drug users that visit La Casita. Some do one or the other, while others do both. In an interview with Angelita, a former participant and current employee of La Casita, she explained to me why, before she met her *marido*, she preferred to practice sex work: “Me vuelvo un ocho. Me pongo nerviosa y to, no, no no. Me cojen y entonces...Yo pa’ eso [robar] no sirvo...y no era trabajo de la calle. Yo tenía ya mis amistades que iban a mi casa todos los días. No me fallaban.” (“I get flustered. I get nervous and everything, no, no no. I get caught and then...I’m not made for that [stealing]...and it wasn’t street work either. I already had my

“friends” that came to my house every day. They were very consistent.”) Angelita’s drug use was not as chronic as that of some of the other participants. She prioritized paying her bills and she put acquiring personal necessities over her desire to purchase drugs. She was fortunate enough to have an apartment in a public housing complex that enabled her to conduct her sex work from the privacy of her home. She avoided street corners. This greatly diminished the risk of being assaulted. She had regular clients whom she called *amigos* (friends).

She explained that she would charge up to \$100 which she would use “pa’ pagar mi luz, mis necesidades y lo otro lo gastaba [en drogas]” (“to pay my electricity bill, my necessities and the rest I spent [on drugs].”) This spending habit was echoed by Kiki, who clarified the common misconception that all the money earned by drug users, through stealing, hustling, sex work, bargaining and begging is spent solely on drugs:

La gente piensa que nosotros conseguimos chavos pa’ fumar na’ más. Yo no he fumao en tres días y necesito mis pastillas pa’l azúcar. Me tomo una al día y pago \$6 por tres. Normalmente cuestan \$12 pero, en la farmacia me las dan a mitad de precio.

[People think that we get money to smoke and that’s it. I haven’t smoked in three days and I need my pills to maintain my sugar levels. I take one pill a day and I pay \$6 for three. Normally, they cost \$12, but the pharmacy gives them to me at half price.]²⁷

Even though Angelita and Kiki are older than many of the other participants and have significantly reduced their drug use throughout their lifetime, they represent

²⁷ Kiki is referring to one specific pharmacy, but never explicitly states it. She illegally buys her medications, since she does not have a prescription, from a near by neighborhood pharmacy, which generously gives her the pills at half price.

the diversity existent in the Puerto Rican drug community, which is often envisioned as homogenously “bad” and irresponsible. Their illegal sources of income not only support their drug habit, but also enable them to provide for their basic necessities, which the state does not ensure.

Participants and Their Clients

The participants who regularly visited La Casita would arrive early in the morning to shower and rest before lunchtime. They would often tell stories about the clients they spent time with the previous night. Some encounters were positive, while others were negative.

Nicole was a regular visitor at La Casita. She had gotten out of jail during my second week of fieldwork and had returned to using crack, practicing sex work and shoplifting. She had a mix of one-time *pargos* (clients) who she met on the streets and regular *maripargos* (husband-clients), as Nicole jokingly described them, whom she spent consistent time with and got to know well.²⁸ One particular week, Nicole did not visit La Casita for several days. We speculated that she may have been staying with one of her *maripargos*. However, she arrived one morning exhausted, wearing the same outfit she had worn during her last visit to La Casita. She told us that a new client had picked her up a couple of days before. He took her to his house in Cayey, a rural mountain town in central Puerto Rico, and left her stranded there after not

²⁸ On one occasion, Nicole described to me an emotional encounter she had with a *maripargo*. The client had gone to New York for a few weeks. When he came back to Puerto Rico, he looked for her on the streets. When he found her, they embraced and cried. At that moment, he told her he would leave everything for her if she stopped using drugs. I asked her if she would and she quickly responded: “Si no lo hago por mis hijos, que lo voy a hacer por él?” (If I wouldn’t do it for my own children, why would I do it for him?)

paying her. She described that she spent three days disoriented and *enferma*.²⁹ She asked strangers for rides and asked for quarters to take public buses back to San Juan. After arriving in La Casita she collapsed on one of the chairs in the living room and told us to wake her up at lunchtime.

Nicole never uttered a serious complaint about this experience. She narrated it as a minor inconvenience or as a situation, which she had experienced before. Even though she was left alone and without money or drugs, she managed to travel back to San Juan by her own initiative. Her story and the many stories that were told in the space of La Casita were those of survival and street smarts: “These stories are more than tales of hardship and endurance or war stories: they vividly express agency in dire circumstances, but they also openly highlight episodes of poor judgment and miscalculation of risk” (Roche, Neaigus and Miller 2005: 151).

On another day, Nicole came into La Casita excited because she had some money left over from the night before. She asked us: “¿Quieren escuchar algo gracioso?” (“You want to hear something funny?”) She explained to us that a client had offered her \$30 to record her performing oral sex³⁰ on him with the video camera on his cell phone. She agreed and asked for the money in advance. She began performing the act but his cell phone could not record. As a result, she stopped and told him: “Too bad.” She left the car and walked away happy and satisfied because

²⁹ Term used to express the mental and physical response to the lack of drugs. In an interview, Raquel, a former drug addict, described some of the common symptoms: cold sweats, shivers, anxiety, diarrhea and nausea. She stated: “El ser humano adicto, bajo los efectos y síntomas de retirada, es capaz de llegar a cualquier extremo para tratar de calmar los síntomas.” (The addicted individual, under the effect and symptoms of withdrawal, is capable of reaching any extreme in the hope of relieving the symptoms.)

³⁰ Oral sex usually is priced between \$10-\$20.

she had gotten her money in advance and did not need to fulfill the determined agreement.

I occasionally gave some of the participants rides to the apartments where they were staying at the time. Lisa would ask me to drop her off at Marco's house. He was her steady *pargo* and he would occasionally pick her up at the organization. She would sometimes sleep at his house for several days at a time. I was driving her to his house, one afternoon. As I exited the highway, she pointed out that in 2007 a client, on this very exit, had stabbed her. She explained that she had gotten into his car and she had agreed to perform oral sex. As she was doing this, she noticed his wallet on the floor of the car. She attempted to grab it, but he noticed her *movida* (move) and got angry. He tried to attack her, but she took a knife out and forced it against his throat. She managed to get out of the car, but, as she explained, forgot to keep her eyes on him. As she turned her back on him, he grabbed a rusted screwdriver from the back seat and stabbed her multiple times. She said it was the worst pain she had ever felt, worse than getting shot. She was in the hospital for three months after the incident due to internal bleeding and a stomach infection caused by the oxidized screwdriver.

Experiences such as Nicole and Lisa's reveal the different types of exchanges and relationships they have with clients. Some are one-time violent encounters, while others are more consistent, reciprocal and are more materially and personally gratifying for the participants. Overall, however, exchanges are all laden with gender and class inequalities, which sustain the economic capitalist system. Participants who engage in sex work both embody and produce a sexual service that is "exploited for

profit or gain by the self and others” (Kempadoo 2004: 63). The agency they enact is revealed by their initial choice to engage with a client and by their “practical” cunning behavior throughout the encounter.

La Casita

La Casita’s floor is covered with checkered tiles and the walls are painted pink with a few circular designs in green and purple. The space is set up to resemble a small living room that includes two chairs, a coffee table and a love seat. In one corner, there is a small TV that does not work and in another, a large armoire filled with donated clothes, shoes, bed sheets and towels. In the center of the ground floor there is a small office that has a large plastic window cut out of the plaster walls that allows the case manager and other employees to privately meet with participants, while observing what goes on in La Casita. A bulletin board hangs next to the window where health brochures, participants’ artwork and flyers are put up for everyone to see. There is only one additional room with two sets of bunk beds and a small bathroom with a shower.

Every day women come in and out to receive any combination of the services available. Some shower, change, sleep and meet with the case manager every day, while others just come in for a glass of water or to sit down and rest after a long, hard night. Most of them are chronic drug users and experience varying degrees of withdrawal symptoms or are under the influence of one or a combination of drugs. Those who use heroin experience intense drowsiness, which often leads them to

slowly fall asleep, while those who combine drugs or use crack usually become very alert.

One by one they pick their outfits and shower, while others wait in the living room and discuss the most recent night's occurrences. Every other day, former participants come back to La Casita to either say hello to friends and employees or to just check in with the case manager to update them on their treatment process. On one such day, María, a young *trigueña* (of mixed race) with shoulder length brown hair came by to talk to the case manager. She had decided to stop using drugs and detoxed at Compromiso de Vida I, Iniciativa Comunitaria's female detox program. She had recently begun to use clinically administered methadone and explained to me how it worked to cut cravings. As we chatted, Claudia came in and sat down in the living room with us as she waited her turn to shower:

Claudia told us she had been injecting for ten years, while María did it for only three or four. María mentioned that she had been clean for a couple of months. She said she was on methadone (50 doses) and Claudia also said she had been on methadone. I asked them if they felt anything when they took it. Claudia explained that it works with the brain's neurons to reduce the cravings. She complained that using methadone was a strict process, just like drugs, because you had to take it every day. They both agreed that the withdrawal symptoms from methadone were worse than those from narcotic drugs. Claudia fell slowly asleep as a result of her recent drug use and I kept talking to María. (Fieldnote 8/4/2009)

María explained to me how she started using drugs: "Por ignorancia" ("Out of ignorance.") She told me that drugs were not worth it: "No vale la pena" and pointed towards Claudia and said: "Así me quedaba yo, dormida mientras la realidad me pasaba por delante" ("That's how I used to be, asleep while reality passed me by.")

Fridays and Mondays are the days with the highest visiting rates as they mark the beginning and end of the weekend. During the morning hours before lunch, the armoire becomes a focal point of the room as participants surround it. They try on shoes and wait for their turn to pick their outfits as employees select articles of clothing one by one and hold them up for the participant to accept or reject. I recorded my impression of one of these mornings:

The atmosphere was a bit hectic as the girls all asked for panties, bras and socks at the same time. The problem was that there were hardly enough for all of them and the few articles that we had, they didn't like. Sofia also came in asking for socks and got really frustrated because I was being more attentive to the other girls that were in line first. (Fieldnote 6/24/2009)

Each participant had a different style and we attempted to reconcile their particular stylistic and functional preferences with what was available in the donations that we received. For example, whenever La Casita received donated shoes, the participants would always try on high heels and joke about going on dates with rich men. They would always place them back in the armoire as they commented that they could not run in high heels or walk through El Guano because of the gravel. In addition to that, those that used drugs continually would lose significant amounts of weight making it difficult for us to find clothing that fit them properly for long periods of time. Gabriela was one of the participants with this problem throughout and she would often grow frustrated with us and lash out.

On one occasion, she inquired about a pair of jeans she had been wearing the day before. She was visibly under the influence of drugs as she was *kikiando*.³¹ When I told her that they might not have been washed yet, she got upset and complained

³¹ *Kikiando* is the Spanish slang word for swaying side to side in a heroin slumber.

that we never washed clothes like we said we would. She told me she did not have any clothes, grabbing the sides of the jean skirt she had on and shaking it furiously: “See? See? Esta cosa fea” (“This ugly thing.”)³² She told us she had made no money last night as a result of her appearance. I checked the washer to look for her jeans and saw that Angelita had forgotten to transfer them to the dryer. I put them to dry and walked back to La Casita to find Carl, an outreach worker, picking out more clothes for Gabriela, but she rejected everything. Gabriela commented to Claudia, who was sitting in one of the chairs across from the armoire, that her own body gave her *asco* (disgusted her). She said she hated taking off her clothes when working because her body was too disgusting. She looked at Carl and I and told us: “!Ustedes me hacen pasar verguenza en la calle!” (“You guys embarrass me in the streets!”) She implied that the clothes we gave her made her look silly and significantly limited her income as it was harder for her to compete with other street workers. She finally found a skirt she liked and she paired it with a bright red Betty Boop spaghetti strap shirt. She went into the shower and minutes afterwards we could hear her belting Barney’s “I Love You” and made up songs about Santa Claus.

Such bursts of anger were fairly common in La Casita due to the different stages of withdrawal and drug influence the participants found themselves in when they arrived. But Gabriela’s reaction to the lack of suitable clothing also indicates how important clothing is for those participants; who conduct sex work. During our interview, Raquel explained that some participants felt obligated to come to La Casita to better their appearance in order to attract more clients: “Es un requisito que estén

³² Gabriela, as well as many other participants, lived part of her life in New York City and would often speak in Spanglish.

limpias y lo más parecidas a una persona normal para que ellas se puedan acercar a sus clientes.” (“It is mandatory for them to be clean and to look as similar as possible to a normal person, in order for them to approach their clients.”) They depend on the donated clothes to create the femininity that will provide them with greater amounts of money. For Gabriela, her poor self-image stemmed from her physical deterioration due to her severe drug use, which was exacerbated by our inability to provide appropriate clothing, which would help her gain more money.

The Ecological Model

Employees of various social backgrounds, local and international volunteers, female and male participants, as well as donors, all move through La Casita on a daily basis. Esteban, Kamaria’s program coordinator, defines La Casita as follows: “...it is a center that offers outpatient services where we emphasize conduct modification for women who exercise survival sex work, homeless women that live with HIV and women drug users.” La Casita serves as an outreach strategy that functions as part of the Kamaria program, which offers women “the opportunity to access [social and recuperation] services through case management, shower and hygiene areas, [and] a rest area where articles [for disease] prevention and hygiene are offered.”³³ He further specifies how La Casita receives these women “raw, with the onslaught of the streets” and how the organization is “grounded on the basis of respect that enables us to understand sex work as an occupation and drug use as a disease.”

³³ Esteban also explained that interventions through group discussions and creative and psycho-educational workshops were beginning at the end of August 2009.

La Casita is conceptualized from the standpoint of an ecological model that stresses the influence of the environment over the individual. Esteban explained that the ecological model is one that stipulates how individuals "...have the capacity to simultaneously influence and be influenced by multiple environmental factors." These include social institutions such as the nuclear and extended family and the community where one is raised. Furthermore, he explains how La Casita is constructed as a space that protects women from adverse environmental factors: "This model allows us to [construct] a space where, for whatever amount of time they are in La Casita, they are protected from the environmental influences and where they receive a positive counter-influence." For example, he mentions how most of the girls have street names that are substituted by their names of birth once the women enter La Casita:

One of the things that we do...we have the ladies' street names on file, but we never use those names in La Casita because they are part of the environmental influence. We are not going to call you by what they call you in the streets. We are going to call you by your name of birth and, in that way, we counteract the influence from the environment...

Another strategy the employees use to counter the negative influences is to enforce the rules of La Casita. Multiple times a day the employees would often interrupt a participant in mid sentence and say: "¡La cuatro!" ("Number four!") This is the fourth rule that enforces good behavior and prohibits the use of curse words:

4. Observar buenos modales, hablar en voz moderada, usar vocabulario apropiado (no decir palabras obscenas) y comportarse de manera respetuosa en todo momento con sus compañeras, el personal y los/las visitantes de "La Casita."

4. Practice good manners, speak in a moderate tone, use appropriate vocabulary (do not use obscene language) and behave yourself in a respectful

manner at all times with your peers, the personnel and the visitors of La Casita.

These approaches may serve as small steps towards unlearning the street culture that the women have internalized through their exposure to a variety of factors, such as violence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to delineate the factors that influenced the construction of the image of the Puerto Rican female sex worker during Spanish and U.S. colonialism. I traced their current marginalization as a consequence of this social construct. I wanted to emphasize the acute marginalization the participants experience during their lifetime (and death) in the different environments they move through: the street corners, drug points, clients' homes, clients' cars, public housing complexes, La Casita etc. Kempadoo argues that women and men in the Caribbean, who occupy marginal positions, "resist and sometimes rebel, against gendered and sexual regimes that privilege masculine heterosexual needs and desires, and actively work against dominant ideologies and practices that seek to deny their existence" (2004: 4). I wanted to illustrate instances that the participants shared with me during which they resisted and contested the seemingly stable identities imposed on them by society and the state. However, I also wanted to simultaneously illustrate the difficulty they encountered in occupying a strictly oppositional position, as a result of their lifestyles, which depend on illegal activity and sex work. They support their drug habit by

reproducing the femininity that their male clients desire and reinforce the unequal relationships of power between men and women in Puerto Rico.

I gave an overview of La Casita as a space where participants were perceived, not as morally degenerate and criminal individuals, but as women who have been affected by circumstances of violence and discrimination. These circumstances have made them more susceptible to use drugs as a temporary escape from the adverse society that surrounds them. Thus, as Dr. Vargas Vidot states in an article: “La adicción, que mueve la economía de las drogas, es un problema de salud mental, no uno de índole criminal” (“Addiction, which drives the drug economy, is a mental health issue, not a criminal issue.”) (Cortés Chico 2009) They described life outside La Casita as a constant battle that required them to always be alert and wary of other people. I will discuss the interaction of life on the streets and the space of La Casita in the following chapter.

Chapter Two

Code-Switching: Possibilities, Limitations and Implications for Empowerment

“Si ella es una hija ‘e puta, yo soy más hija ‘e puta. Si el Diablo es malo, yo soy más mala.”

“If she’s a motherfucker, I’m a bigger motherfucker. If the Devil is bad, I’m worse.”

-Kiki

In this chapter, I will deepen the discussion of La Casita introduced in Chapter One. I will examine how the female participants of La Casita embody Elijah Anderson’s “code of the streets” and how this code is perceived in La Casita. I will illustrate how the Kamaria program constructs La Casita as an alternative space, a safe haven, from the outside world of the streets. It is a permeable place, however, and cannot be constructed in complete opposition to the streets. Therefore, La Casita can also be understood as a hybrid arena that functions simultaneously as a home-like environment (for the participants) and a workplace (for the employees), where some practices common to the street environment permeate as the participants occupy the space.

La Casita is a structured environment guided by rules of conduct enforced by employees through disciplinary practices. Participants are expected to follow the stipulated guidelines in order to access the services they desire. Employees discourage the aggressive and violent behavior that characterizes the code of the streets. Thus, the participants’ ability to switch from a code of the streets to a code

appropriate for a home-like/workplace environment is a highly sought after goal by La Casita employees.

However, this ability needs to be cultivated and it is sometimes harder for individuals who embody the code of the streets as *habitus* (Bourdieu 1989) to control the behaviors and practices they most commonly manifest. I will discuss the drug recuperation stories of Angelita and Raquel, two former participants and current employees of La Casita, to illustrate the difficulty and implications of code-switching. I argue that the practice of code-switching does, indeed, benefit the participants as it enables them to more effectively navigate disciplined environments, such as work places and government agencies. However, some questions emerge: What happens to a participant who adopts a drug free lifestyle, but still remains at a marginal position in society? In what way is code-switching related to empowerment? I will link the practice of code-switching to Dr. Vargas Vidot's views on the processes of women's rehabilitation, recuperation and empowerment. This will reveal the larger implications of the disciplining practices that are performed in the space of La Casita.

The Code of the Streets

One morning, several participants, some of the employees and I were sitting in the living room in La Casita, chatting. Isabel, a participant, had just finished narrating a story about the previous night. Angelita commented "...es que así es la calle. Hay mucho listo" ("...that's just how it is in the streets. There are a lot of sly people.") Sofía agreed, stood up and animatedly began to reenact an instance where she beat up another female drug user. Sofía explained that the woman "le fronteó" (got in her

face) and she began hitting her until the woman started screaming ¡Guardias! (Police!) A couple of police officers on bicycles arrived and Sofia quickly told them: “Esto es entre dos usuarias. ¿Qué pajo?” (“This is between two drug users. What’s the problem?”) The officers just told them to break it up and walked away. As they turned their backs, the woman tried to hit Sofia, but she tripped her and began kicking her. Sofia walked away from the woman as she lay on the ground. She ended the story by saying: “Yo estaba feliz” (“I was happy.”)

In the context of low-income, urban neighborhoods in Puerto Rico, the code of the streets can be understood as a means to acquire what Bourdieu (1989) refers to as symbolic capital. According to Elijah Anderson: “The code of the streets is... a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system- and in others who would champion one’s personal security” (1999: 34). It is a code structured as a set of rules that govern interpersonal public behavior, including violence, in a socially approved manner (Anderson 1999: 2). It is based on notions of respect and manhood, even though it is practiced by all genders. Those community members who feel most alienated from mainstream society feel deep distrust of state institutions and follow the code of the streets as a way to ensure a standard of safety and order for their community. Anderson also states that the code of the streets can serve as a means to obtain respect on the streets, which may be viewed as “...a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when various other forms of capital [economic] have been denied or are unavailable” (1999: 66).

For example, local street hustlers who deal drugs may not acquire enough economic capital in their lifetime to move from one socio-economic class to another,

but through their continual exposure to the streets, they develop a repertoire of social skills that may include the instinctual perception of danger, which enables them to act or retaliate violently before any significant harm is done to them. This ability to properly assess individuals and situations facilitates their survival in the violent world of the streets. As competitors are killed because they incorrectly assess the danger they face, their longevity in the drug market provides them with greater social and symbolic capital, which gives them a respected position in their communities. They can be seen as street-smart, physically stronger and as people with greater inclinations towards violent behavior; individuals you would not like to “mess” with. However, the code of the streets may not translate to other environment, such as the workplace or the office of a state agency, where a different code of conduct—discipline—is required. In fact, the embodiment of the code of the streets in these spaces may be perceived as an outward expression of a lower-class *habitus*, manifested through violence and a lack of self-control.

These examples of what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital are woven into Elijah Anderson’s concept of the code of the streets. Anderson, in the context of a specific urban black community in the United States, discusses a binary code of conduct—decent/streets--that emerges out of the development of the oppositional, inner-city culture of the streets.³⁴ The “decent” culture primarily develops in households committed to the maintenance and reproduction of middle-class values. It also encompasses the more conventional world of legitimate jobs (1999: 285).

Alienated community members feel deep distrust towards mainstream society and

³⁴ Anderson appropriates the term “decent,” which his informers used to refer to the space of the home characterized by middle-class values. (Anderson 1999: 2).

have adopted the code of the streets as a guide for their interactions: “These two orientations—decent and street—organize the community socially, and the way they coexist and interact has important consequences for its residents...” (Anderson 1994: 33). Some community members are socialized into both realms and adopt the ability to code-switch when deemed necessary. For other low-income families, the differences between their home environment and the streets are minimal, and they adopt more fully the code of the streets in all aspects of their lives. Individuals who only embody the code of the streets have greater difficulty navigating mainstream social spaces, such as a workplace environment:

Those strongly associated with the street, who have less exposure to the wider society, may have difficulty code-switching; imbued with the code of the streets, they either don’t know the rules for decent behavior or may see little value in displaying such knowledge. (Anderson 1999: 36)

Those who adopt a middle-class system of values may further develop the skill of code-switching, which enables them to better function in both the decent and streets environment. The members that code-switch understand that middle-class notions carry no weight in determining their position in street society. They quickly learn what is acceptable behavior in the home versus in the streets and they cultivate self-control to modify their behavior according to their environment.

Sofía exemplified the code of the streets during her violent encounter. A woman challenged Sofia by “getting in her face,” and Sofia felt obligated to reciprocate violently to protect herself and to maintain her social standing in the streets. The woman screamed for police ostensibly to get Sofia in trouble with the state and possibly arrested. The manner in which Sofia addressed the police officers

reveals her own awareness of her positionality in society as a drug user and, also how police presence is perceived as an unwanted incursion into the space of the streets; they are neither welcome nor is their help needed. She quickly explained to them what was going on (“This is between two drug users. What’s the problem?”) and the officers voluntarily decided to leave the women to settle their differences. The police officers’ disinterestedness in helping to resolve their altercation illustrates how the state neglects certain citizens and shows little concerns for their wellbeing. Thus, as Anderson states: “The code of the streets...emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin” (1999: 34). Since the state in Puerto Rico has historically disregarded low-income individuals, some have adopted the code of the streets to regulate dangerous exchanges. Instances where the police voluntarily involves itself in these situations are so rare that individuals, like Sofia, are distrustful of their intentions. Sofia’s “victory” over a street competitor made her happy as it represented an increase in her status or social capital, which was acquired and maintained through “a whole set of instituting acts...enacted and so maintained and reinforced, in [an] exchange” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). This exchange was characterized by Sofia’s ability to successfully negotiate street encounters, which implies a gain of social capital among low-income individuals.

La Casita: Keeping the Streets Out

La Casita (The Little House) physically mimics a small house. It has a large iron gate with a heavy lock that covers a thin screen door, which is in front of a thick

white metal door that has an additional lock, but no doorknob. These multiple gates and locks reveal the necessity for increased security from the surrounding neighborhoods that have a high incidence of crime. They also further the notion of the home (La Casita) as a safe place protected by clear metal boundaries. A large poster titled “Guías para la sana convivencia en La Casita” (Guidelines for a healthy communal living in La Casita) hangs on the main door and lists nineteen rules that all participants must follow to receive the services offered. A small paragraph introduces their purpose:

Las presentes guías son para el beneficio, seguridad y protección de todas ustedes. Recuerden que “La Casita” es SU casa y es el lugar donde se le brinda el apoyo que ustedes se merecen. Es por esto que le exhortamos a seguir estas guías diseñadas para promover una sana convivencia y poder proveerles un servicio más efectivo.

[The following guidelines are for the benefit, security and protection of you all. Remember that “La Casita” is YOUR house and it is the place where the support you deserve is given. As a result, we urge you to follow these guidelines designed to promote healthy communal living and to enable us to provide a more effective service.]

There is an emphasis on “security” and “protection,” which indicates the possibilities of danger that may arise with the participants’ entrance into La Casita; they are potentially bringing the street mentality with them. The guidelines vary from rules of conduct to the stipulation of punishments. Those concerning conduct state the need for good manners and the avoidance of obscene language, as well as the prohibition on opening file cabinets, desks, drawers, the armoire and even the refrigerator door. If a participant needs something, she has to ask an employee to get it for her. Also, participants are obligated to hand over any backpacks, bags and purses, if they wish

to use the shower and beds to prevent drug use in La Casita. All types of weapons and drug paraphernalia the participant may be carrying must also be handed to the employee in charge of La Casita to be given back to the participant when she leaves:

11. Hacer entrega de toda arma blanca (navajas, cuchillos, botellas rotas, etc.), alcohol, drogas, o parafernalia para su consumo, (pipas, cápsulas, jeringuillas, cucharas, “cookers”, tubos de cristal) a la persona encargada de “La Casita,” previo a hacer uso de los servicios que aquí se ofrecen. Bajo ningún concepto se permitirá el uso o portación de armas blancas, drogas or parafernalia para el consumo de ésta, dentro de las facilidades de “La Casita,” so pena de una suspensión indefinida de servicios.

11. Hand in all weapons (blades, knives, broken bottles, etc.), alcohol, drugs, or paraphernalia for consumption, (pipes, capsules, needles, spoons, cookers, crystal tubes) to the person in charge of “La Casita” before using any of the services offered. Under no circumstances will weapons, drugs or paraphernalia will be permitted inside “La Casita,” or you will risk an indefinite suspension of the services.

Such rules construct the streets as unsafe; they connote a danger and an ethos that must be kept out. The employees ask the participants to hand in their belongings to avoid theft, drug use and the possible use of weapons. These guidelines limit participants’ access to certain spaces of La Casita. On the one hand, it is constructed as a place where the participants can come to feel at home, relax and receive the basic services of food and clothing (“... ‘La Casita’ is YOUR house...”), but on the other it is a highly structured space with clear rules and regulations that, if broken, suspend the services for that participant. In other words, there is a strong emphasis on structure and discipline. IC’s employees, from different programs and departments, agree that such practices are key factors for recuperation and empowerment.

Leticia, the head of the Direct Services Department, explained to me the importance of La Casita for the participants, and discussed the benefits of structure and discipline for a successful recuperation process:

La reducción de daño es bien importante para cualquier proceso de rehabilitación porque empieza a enseñarle a la persona a desarrollar una estructura, una disciplina en su vida. En la Casita empiezan a bañarse diariamente, empiezan a descansar en un sitio mutuo, compartido porque es un sitio en donde hay cuatro camas. Empiezan a estabilizar sus procesos de alimentación, a buscar los manejos de caso, pasar por entrevistas, etc.

[...]

Cuando tu empiezas a darles reglas de juego al participante, empiezan a hacer cambios aunque sean pequeños, pero empiezan a disciplinarse y todo eso lo ayudan en su proceso, luego, de rehabilitación.

[Harm reduction is really important for any recuperation process because you begin to teach the person some structure, some discipline in their life. In La Casita they begin to shower daily, they begin to rest in common, shared places where there are four beds. They begin to stabilize their eating patterns, they begin to seek out case managers, they go through interviews, etc.]

(...)

[When you start giving them the rules of the game, they begin to make changes, even small changes, they begin to discipline themselves and all of this helps them during their recuperation process, later on.]

The harm reduction model, then, enables the participant to develop a different, healthier routine that gives them a new skill set (“...the rules of the game...”) that can facilitate a process of recuperation and of subsequent re-insertion into society. In the context of La Casita, the participants may change certain patterns of risky behavior, after information is given to them about sexually transmitted diseases or the dangers of sharing needles. The structure and discipline they obtain from a greater awareness of their health can be transferred on to other life experiences such as recuperation, and employment at a more formal workplace.

On one occasion, Victoria opened the underwear drawer and found a black nightgown that she liked. She held it up and commented to me how sexy it was and how she was going to take it. Carl reprimanded her for opening the drawer without permission. He told her she needed to ask before taking anything and she got upset and put it back. She grabbed her bag to leave, told us she was not going to come back, took the first belt that she saw and put it in her bag, and left.

This instance exemplifies the common micro, disciplining practices that occurred in La Casita on a daily basis. Impulsive actions are discouraged, while thought out, controlled practices are preferred. Carl would have not disciplined Victoria if she had asked permission to look through the underwear drawer beforehand. Some participants would often take articles of clothing and accessories they saw lying around, without permission. While, certain participants took the reprimands in stride, apologized and continued to receive the services, others, like Victoria, would get upset and complain. In general, some rules were enforced more than others and no participant was punished unless caught. Even though, these rules are not permanently enforced, they still function as standards of conduct and behavior for the participants.

Angelita

Angelita, a short, dark-skinned, woman has been involved with IC for fourteen years. Initially as a participant and, later on, as an employee. Her small oval face is always topped with a high ponytail that curls itself into a small black spiral. She walks with a slight limp due to an accident she had when she was hit by a car

while crossing the street and was left there as the car fled the scene. She did not have enough money to cover her full recovery and one of her feet remains slightly bent.

Her smile brightens the room and her infectious laugh can be heard miles away.

Angelita was a former resident of Las Gladiolas³⁵ and was forced to move to Quintana, another public housing complex, after the buildings were inspected and deemed unlivable. She began coming to IC to receive free lunch and soon after became a kitchen employee. She has been using crack for about a decade and has been in a monogamous relationship with Mario, her *marido*, who is also a drug user;³⁶ however, she explained to me during an interview that she does not consider herself a drug addict since she does not experience any withdrawal symptoms after long periods without crack. She was offered a cleaning job at La Casita under the condition that she undergo a detox treatment. When I interviewed her initially, she stated that she went to detox “...porque me conocen por tanto tiempo los mismos empleados y las necesidades que tengo” (“...because the employees have known me for so long, they know the needs that I have.”) She then stated that she went to detox out of personal choice and “pa’ ver si obligaba a mi marido tambien a ingresar en un detox” (“to see if I could also make my husband go into detox.”)³⁷ She completed the detox and began working at La Casita three days a week.

³⁵ A public housing complex located directly adjacent to IC.

³⁶ His drug of choice is a speedball, a mix of heroin and cocaine.

³⁷ Participants detox for many different reasons. Some female participants, as Angelita, detoxed, in part, because they wanted their partners to do the same. Jenny, the case manager, explained to me that participants also see detox as an escape from street life: “Ellas hacen cosas en la calle que no deben de estar haciendo y ellas lo saben. Por eso, ven el detox como un escape; se van [de la calle] por treinta días” (“They are doing things on the streets that they should not be doing and they know that. This is why they see detox as an escape; they leave [the streets] for thirty days.”)

Every other day, she would share with me her stories about the previous night, discussing in detail what she drank and smoked and with whom she spent her time. Occasionally other employees from La Casita learned about her partying tendencies and would remind her that she was an employee and could not use drugs anymore. Other higher-up employees had a hunch that she was still abusing substances and would sometimes half-jokingly mention to her that they were going to give her a drug test.

One day, after work, Angelita went straight to a nearby cantina and drank her usual Palo Viejo rum. She later explained that she had run into an old male friend who paid for all her drinks. For one reason or another, she decided to walk back to IC, instead of going straight home. Little did she know that the executive director, the heads of the departments and the program coordinators had gotten together to have their usual monthly meeting. She arrived just as the meeting had ended and approached them as they walked towards their cars to go home. From what I heard the next day at La Casita, Angelita was visibly drunk and slurred her words as she went over to Dr. Vargas Vidot and gave him many hugs. Later in the day, Linda, the head of the Prevention Department came by La Casita to talk to Angelita. She told her she had seen her drunk the day before and that consequently, they were reconsidering renewing her contract:

Linda: No vas a progresar sino pones de tu parte. (You will not progress unless you put in some effort).

Angelita: Disculpe, missy. (I'm sorry, missy).

[...]

Linda: Yo quiero ver objetivos cumplidos. No es para mí, es para tí. (I want to see some goals met. Not for me, but for yourself).

Angelita was very embarrassed about the situation and made a promise to Linda: “Missy, pero de verdad, no voy a beber más porque una cosa trae la otra” (“Missy, but really, I am not going to drink anymore because one thing always leads to another.”) By drinking, Angelita displayed a loss of self-control and her judgment was viewed as impaired. She was unable to recognize that intoxication in the workplace was not proper behavior. As a result of this incident, employees became more alert about Angelita’s behavior and they began to suspect that she was coming to work under the influence of drugs.

A week later, Angelita entered La Castia looking visibly sad after meeting with Esteban, the head of La Casita. I approached her to find out what was wrong and gave her a hug. She pushed me away and speculated: “Missy³⁸, me van a botar.” (“Missy, they’re going to fire me.”) Before I could respond, Jenny came out of her office and informed Angelita that she, along with Esteban, was going to drive her home after work. Angelita became flustered as she suspected that Jenny was going to inspect her apartment. She mentioned that her apartment was a *reguero* (mess) and that Mario had her keys and she did not know where he was. Unfortunately, Angelita had forgotten that her house keys were hanging from her front jean pocket. Raquel pointed them out to her and Angelita quickly changed the subject.

The day came to an end and the participants slowly left La Casita. Only a few employees and I remained inside and Jenny locked the door to prevent anyone else from coming in. However, we heard a knock on the door and it was Lisa and Gloria.³⁹

³⁸ Angelita referred to some individuals as “missy” and “mister” as a sign of respect. These words serve as evidence of U.S. trends of signification.

³⁹ Lisa and Gloria are two participants of La Casita.

They were giggling and they told us that they had seen Angelita hand her keys to Mario and demand that he hurry up and run back to the apartment to move “the stuff” that was on their bed before she arrived with Esteban and Jenny. Raquel informed Esteban about what Angelita had told Mario. Consequently, a race ensued between the employees and Mario to see who arrived at the apartment first.

They all arrived at the same time and Esteban and Jenny inspected Angelita’s apartment. Jenny came back to La Casita shortly after and described to us what she had found. She said the bathroom, closets and drawers were completely empty, with the exception of two bras and a T-shirt. There was aluminum foil thrown all over the floor and on the dining room table. They only had some hot dogs and a box of pancake mix in the refrigerator, while the pantry only contained a can of tomato sauce and half a bag of rice. There was a mattress with no bed sheets thrown on their bedroom floor and a big TV. Esteban interrogated both of them about their drug use, and they finally admitted to it. Esteban explained to Angelita that he was going to reduce her hours until she decided to change her attitude and drug use.

I gave Raquel a ride home that afternoon and we discussed the incident. Raquel commented that Angelita should have been farther along in her recuperation process. She said it was unfortunate that Angelita was not taking advantage of the opportunities she was given, while individuals like Gloria, who was not a drug user, were trying everything to find a roof over their heads and to seek services to rehabilitate themselves.⁴⁰ She said the Kamaria program ran the risk of being

⁴⁰ Gloria was a regular participant at La Casita, but she was neither a drug user nor a sex worker. She had lost her house in a fire and was homeless, living in El Guano, which the other participants often frequented. Her story will be discussed in Chapter Three.

perceived by other drug users as undisciplined because of Angelita's behavior: "Aquí (Kamaria) se le dan oportunidades a las que siguen en las malas." ("Here (Kamaria) opportunities are given to those who remain in bad times.") Raquel implied that the Kamaria program risked losing legitimacy as a site that encourages drug recuperation. Thus, she alludes to the necessity of a certain degree of continual employee discipline in order for the process of recuperation to be long lasting.

Angelita's inability to properly assess her work environment and to modify her behavior accordingly is an example of the difficulties encountered in the practice of code-switching. Employment at La Casita provided Angelita with a steady income and made it easier for her to maintain continual access to the social and health services she used when she was a participant. It also offered her an opportunity to develop discipline, structure and skills that could be used in other work environments. The employees were aware that she continued to drink and use drugs, but were lenient, as they understood that the process of recuperation was never linear.

However, Angelita's recuperation process seemed to stagnate as she began to exhibit less self-control. Angelita's lack of will-power to stop using drugs and her failure to commit to the goals expected of her, are indicative of her possible backtracking. Thus, the employees understood it was necessary to penetrate into Angelita's most private space in order to assess the effectiveness of the opportunities they had offered her. They wanted to examine if Angelita was following the goals she had set for herself during her recuperation process and if her employment discipline translated into her home. Also, following the framework of an ecological model, the employees entrance into her home gave them a better understanding of the

circumstantial forces that affected Angelita's recuperation process. For example, she continued to live in a public housing complex with Mario, her unemployed *marido*, who used drugs. He depended on Angelita for food, money and shelter and would often bring drugs into the apartment they shared.

For many of the participants, their relationships with their partners or family members greatly affected their recuperation process. Participants attempted to change themselves, but the circumstances, which influenced them to use drugs in the first place or sustained their use throughout, were still present in their lives. The majority tends to living in low-income communities because that is the only thing they can afford and, as a result, experience the streets environment on a daily basis. Thus, the question can be raised: What happens to a participant when, after their drug recuperation process, they remain in the same socially marginalized position, even though they are drug free? This is not to say that Angelita was not trying to get better, but the difficulties of recuperation may shed light on the structural and institutionalized forms of oppression that continue to affect them, even when drug free. The oppression can be pervasive and the participants may lose hope in overcoming poverty and marginalization.

A possible solution could be a paradigm shift, a complete re-conceptualization of what it is to be human and to live in society. In more practical terms; however, sometimes what is most needed is a greater amount of personal will-power, which can motivate a participant to distance themselves as much as possible from the circumstances that adversely affect them.

Raquel

Raquel's drug recuperation has been more successful than Angelita's. Raquel, in contrast to Angelita, managed to develop the ability to successfully switch between the code of the streets she embodied for twenty years and a new code of civility, which she adopted during her recuperation process. I interviewed Raquel one afternoon and she spoke in depth about her past drug use, her recuperation process and her current drug free lifestyle. Throughout my fieldwork, I considered Raquel somewhat of a translator. When the participants exhibited certain attitudes and behaviors that I did not quite understand, she would always explain the situations to me from an addict's point of view.⁴¹

Raquel was born in Las Monjas, the low-income neighborhood that surrounds IC. When she was a toddler, she moved with her family to Las Gladiolas, shortly after its inauguration. She began using drugs when she was eighteen years old and tried different types of drugs such as: acid, pills, hashish, marijuana and cocaine. She began snorting heroin with one of her girlfriends every now and then, but her use became a full-blown addiction and she advanced to speedballing, injecting a mix of cocaine and heroin. She had a life-long interest in forensic studies and wanted to work with corpses for a living. However, she explained to me that somewhere along the line she encountered some very difficult circumstances, which, looking back, she needed professional help to deal with: "Pasaron unas circunstancias bien difíciles que probablemente necesitaba ayuda profesional para poder entender y entonces buscar

⁴¹ Participants had a harder time expressing themselves as eloquently as Raquel, when under the effects of drugs. Raquel had "been there and back" and she was more able to share with me some common experiences and thoughts.

alternativas, sugerencias, u otras vías de escape que no fueran la adicción.” (“Some really difficult circumstances arose, which I probably needed professional help to understand, and to look for alternatives, suggestions or other modes of escape that were not addiction.”)⁴²

She spent twenty years of her life between jail and the streets. She describes herself as a chronic addict, which she defined as someone who has a high tolerance for their drug of choice. Despite living in misery and pain, as she described it, she managed to rehabilitate herself and was offered a job in La Casita, as an outreach worker, to help other drug users in their addictions.

I began by asking Raquel what her days were like during her years of addiction. She spoke in depth about her thoughts and actions as an addict:

La adicción es la que maneja al individuo. Yo nunca pude manejar mi adicción. El adicto no tiene control sobre sí mismo, sobre sus días, sus circunstancias, y menos sus responsabilidades. La persona vive solamente con todo su pensamiento centrado en cómo adquirir la próxima dosis.

[An individual is guided by his or her addiction. I was never able to manage my addiction. The addict does not have control over herself or himself, over her or his days, her or his circumstances, and much less, her or his responsibilities. The person lives only with their thoughts centered on how to obtain the next dosage.]

I asked her when and how she made the decision to stop using drugs. She began her answer by explaining the ways in which addicts experience time:

Lo que sucede es que el tiempo transcurre dentro de la adicción sin la persona darse cuenta. Es como si el tiempo se detuviera. La persona vive un impulso

⁴² Raquel explained that she once heard a proverb, which she never forgot: “Yo soy yo y mis circunstancias, sino salgo de mis circunstancias no me salvo a mí mismo.” (“I am I plus my circumstances, if I do not leave my circumstances, I will not save myself.”) This outlook aided her throughout her recuperation process. She identified those circumstances that could have driven her to relapse and avoided them.

que va más allá de su propio vicio que no puede controlar. La persona siente todo el tiempo en su mente y su cuerpo: la droga, la droga, la droga.

[...]

El adicto piensa: ¿Se calló el mundo? ¿Y? ¿Dónde está la droga? Mira, explotaron las torres gemelas, pobre gente. Dame una peseta. ¿Viene un huracán? Vamos a buscar chavos. Se pierde sentido de la propia vida, de la propia perspectiva y la visión de lo que es el ser humano.

[What happens is that, during addiction, time goes by without the person being aware. It's as if time stood still. The person lives by an impulse, which goes beyond their own vice, they cannot control. The person always feels in their body and in their mind: drugs, drugs, drugs.]

(...)

[The addict thinks: The world ended? And? Where are the drugs? Look, the twin towers exploded, poor people. Give me a quarter. There's a hurricane coming? Let's get some money. You lose awareness of your own life and of your own perspective and vision on what a human being is.]

She defined the addict as someone who lacks control over themselves and their lives. Raquel expressed that a chronic drug addict's mind is consumed by their drug use, to such an extent, that they become detached from the world around them. Acquiring drugs becomes a priority over one's well-being and subsequently "...you lose awareness of your own life." In her view the moment one chooses to stop using drugs is characterized by a fatalistic realization, which makes one feel as if the day one is living may be one's last. The feelings and thoughts that arise from this realization is what prompts one to take control over one's life:

...hay cosas muy difícil de explicarlas y cada cual lo hace en su propio lenguaje pero, hay cosas universales, espirituales que surgen en un sentimiento profundo propio que pasa cuando la persona siente que es su último día...la persona adquiere ese control cuando se da cuenta que es suficiente todo lo que ha hecho. Sin embargo es muy difícil llegar a este punto. Para mí suficiente fueron veinte años, para otros, lamentablemente, suficiente es nunca. La persona se da cuenta y dice: "¡Mire, yo estoy harto de esta basura! ¿Hasta dónde llega la miseria?"

[...there are things that are very difficult to explain and each person does it in their own language, but there are universal, spiritual things that develop in a

profound and personal feeling that emerges when the person feels that it is their last day...A person gains that control when the person realizes that everything she or he has done is enough. However, it is very difficult to reach this point. For me, twenty years was enough, unfortunately for others, never is enough. The person becomes aware and says: "Look, I am sick of this trash! When does the misery stop?]

Thus, recuperation begins the moment a addicts hits rock bottom and recognize that the life of the streets, characterized by drugs, sex and violence, no longer has anything to offer them. Raquel clarifies that some addicts may never experience such a low and may continue to use drugs until their last days. Raquel has been drug free for the past four years. She explained to me, however, that her recuperation is an infinite, ongoing process: "Mi proceso de recuperación va a ser toda la vida pero, cada día que pasa es un triunfo para mí." ("Mi recuperation process is going to last all of my life, but every day that goes by is a victory for me.")

Raquel was never a participant of La Casita *per se*. She claims that her addiction was too chronic and that she had no use for the services offered because she did not practice sex work to sustain her habit. Dr. Vargas Vidot personally aided her through her process and was able to offer her the support and guidance she needed.

She described how Dr. Vargas Vidot helped her throughout her life and became the person she chose to ask for help during her recuperation process: "El me vio en mi más absoluta miseria por muchos años y al que le pedí ayuda fue a él porque su mentalidad científica me llamó la atención." ("He saw me in my most absolute misery for many years and I decided to ask him for help because his scientific mentality intrigued me.") She contrasted Dr. Vargas Vidot's scientific mentality with that of some Christian recuperation programs in Puerto Rico: "Mi

adicción era tan crónica que no podía ir a otros programas cristianos, que no voy a nombrar nombres, porque eran muy punitivos y yo decía: ‘Me van a castigar por haberme metido drogas.’” (“My addiction was so chronic that I could not go to other Christian programs, which I’m not going to name names, because they were very punitive and I would say: ‘They are going to punish me for using drugs.’”)⁴³

Dr. Vargas Vidot knew about Raquel’s life-long interests in forensic studies and would often comment during the early stages of her recuperation process “Tu no estás para trabajar con los muertos, tu estás para trabajar con los vivos” (“You are not made to work with the dead, you are made to work with the living.”) He gave her a job as an outreach worker and sent her out to the streets. Raquel explained that initially she was surprised that he did not keep her around the organization, but she later understood why:

Todavía habían algunas cosas que no estaban cambiadas. Mi carácter no estaba cambiado, estaba empezando a trabajar mi impulsividad y sigo trabajándola con mi carácter. Yo era una persona bien impulsiva. Es una característica de todos los adictos.

[There were still some things that had not been changed. My attitude had not changed, I was beginning to work on my impulsiveness and I am still working on my attitude. I was a very impulsive person. It’s a common characteristic among all addicts.]

According to Raquel, impulsiveness and a lack of control over one’s self seems to characterize drug users’ practices. In the world of the streets, impulsiveness can sometimes work in one’s favor, such as the case with Sofía, where she initiated, almost instinctually, a violent encounter; she prevailed, and was able to maintain her

⁴³ Many participants spoke about the punitive treatment they received at other Christian and secular recuperation programs. Some programs did not administer any medication during the detox process, which made it harder to tolerate.

symbolic capital. Raquel had embodied the code of the streets to such an extent that Dr. Vargas Vidot thought best to gradually incorporate Raquel into the organization until she had developed the ability to exert greater self-control.

She described the many hardships she encountered throughout her recuperation process. The first obstacle she overcame was to accept that she had a disease. She explained that in order for an addict's recuperation process to be successful, mental health professionals had to turn the addict inside out during the recuperation process. She grabbed a jean skirt lying on the sofa, turned it inside out, showed it to me indicating what is supposed to happen to an addict. She said that professionals should guide a process of introspection to show the addict what had happened throughout her life and why.

She explained that after her first four months of recuperation, she suffered a deep depression. She realized that the drug-free world and the mainstream society she had imagined to encounter was very different from the world she was in:

Cuando salí de la adicción, yo pensaba que iba a ser un mundo fantástico, de que todas las personas iban a estar llenas de compasión, de profesionalismo y de amor... Yo decía: "Qué es esto? Esto es la sociedad? Esto es vida? Esto es el mundo de los despiertos, de los que no son zombies, de los que se bañan todos los días, de los que comen comida caliente? Esto es más miseria de lo que yo viví." Y eso me causó una profunda tristeza.

[When I overcame my addiction, I thought it was going to be a perfect world, that everyone was going to be filled with compassion, professionalism and love... I said to myself: "What is this? This is society? This is life? This is the world of the awake, of those who are not zombies, of those who shower every day, of those who eat warm food? This is more misery than what I lived through." And that caused me profound sadness.]

Raquel was disappointed when the reality she had imagined, filled with love and compassion, revealed itself to be a mere fantasy. Raquel managed to transform herself interiorly, but the society around her was still antagonistic towards her. Raquel courageously accepted her circumstances (the only viable option), learned to navigate them and helped other drug users to do the same:

Yo pude comprender en mi propio idioma algo completamente sencillo y algo que siempre le enseño a todas las participantes y más a las que están en la calle o en un proceso de pre-contemplación de rehabilitación. ¿Qué es lo más importante? Que no vas a salir de un mundo miserable a un mundo de fantasía en donde todo el mundo ama. Tu vas a salir a otro campo de guerra, a otro campo minado en donde tienes que tener sumo cuidado y ser bien meticuloso en donde pizas; que tienes que aprender otras herramientas. Por veinte años tuve que batallar viviendo en las drogas y en la calle. Es básicamente vivir como un animal en la selva. Yo creo que es peor porque los animals por lo menos respetan su habitat.

[I was able to comprehend in my own language something completely simple and something that I teach to all the participants, even more so to the ones who are out in the streets or going through a process of contemplating recuperation. What is most important? That you will not exit a miserable world to enter a fantasy world where everyone loves. You are going to another war zone, to another minefield where you have to be extremely careful and very meticulous about where you step; that you have to learn new tools. For twenty years, I had to fight living with drugs and on the streets. It is basically to live as an animal in the jungle. I think it's worse because at least the animals respect their habitat.]

Her process of recuperation was not about leaving the code of the streets behind and abandoning all worries, it was about learning an additional code and a new set of tools that enabled her to better navigate through an equally antagonistic mainstream society. She regained a sense of personhood, which was lost during her years of addiction, and she solidified her position as a member of society:

Me puse mi uniforme de guerra y le dije al mundo: ¿Sabes qué? Yo no voy a correr de vuelta pa'l zafacón. Aquí estoy, aquí me tienen y aquí voy a estar. Yo soy parte de esta sociedad y soy parte de esta vida. En algún punto desvíe

mi vida hacia un mundo oscuro, de dolor y miseria pero, yo siempre he pertenecido aquí y porque tu quieras, yo no me voy de aquí porque este es *mi* mundo y aquí yo pertenezco. Voy a ayudar a otras personas a bregar con gente como tu, cuando salgan de la oscuridad.

[I put on my war uniform and I told the world: You know what? I'm not running back to the trashcan.⁴⁴ I am here, you have me here and I will be here. I am part of this society and I am a part of this life. There was a point in my life where I detoured into a dark world of pain and misery, but I have always belonged here and just because you want me to, I will not leave because this is *my* world and I belong here. I am going to help other people deal with people like you, when they leave the darkness.]

Raquel speaks of her process as a war between her and the society that has continually marginalized her. She admits to have made bad choices during her lifetime, but asserts that regardless of the choices she made, she is still a member of society. Raquel used her inner strength and willpower to overcome her addiction and to find a new voice. This personal strength is an example of the change in outlook that Anderson discusses as key for a successful entry into conventional society. He discusses the importance of a new outlook based the case study of John, a former street hustler who attempted to enter the mainstream job market:

My experience with John suggests that simply providing opportunities is not enough. Young people must also be encouraged to adopt an outlook that allows them to invest their considerable personal resources in available opportunities. In such more positive circumstances, they can be expected to leave behind the attitudes, values, and behavior that work to block their advancement into the mainstream. (1999: 289).

Raquel made a conscious choice to confront and overcome her unfavorable circumstances to gain a position in society. She assessed the opportunities that were offered to her throughout her process of recuperation and empowerment and accepted those she perceived to be beneficial. More so than abandoning the code of the streets,

⁴⁴ Raquel lived in a dumpster for many years.

which regulated her conduct for a long period in her life, she has disciplined herself into suppressing her impulsive behavior and attitude. Raquel continues to reside in a public housing complex and still maintains a lower-class position in society.

However, she has a newly acquired set of skills that enable her to code-switch and to navigate government spaces that were inaccessible to her before.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Raquel still maintained the respect she acquired through her life in the streets and often reminded stubborn and disrespectful participants that she still had the capacity to instinctually enact the code of the streets: “Cuidado, que me vuelvo participante enseguida.” (“Watch out, ‘cause I can turn back into a participant real quick.”)

Empowerment, Rehabilitation and Recuperation

Empowerment, rehabilitation and recuperation are all significant transformative processes that are experienced by some of IC’s participants. I interviewed Dr. Vargas Vidot one afternoon and asked him to share with me his views on these processes. He defined empowerment as a process of self-enablement: “un proceso de concientización que reside en la voluntad de quien se quiera empoderar y no en la capacidad de empoderar a alguien.” (“a consciousness raising process that resides in the will of whoever wishes to empower themselves, not in the capacity to empower another.”) He discussed his vision of how IC and its employees were involved in participants’ empowerment: “Actuamos como facilitadores para que las personas puedan contemplar libremente las incongruencias de su entorno o de sus vidas. El verdadero empoderamiento exige que el que interviene, no espere.” (We

⁴⁵ See Conclusion for a discussion on Raquel’s participation in a political forum.

function as facilitators in order for people to freely contemplate the contradictions that exist in their environment or in their lives. True empowerment requires that whoever intervenes must not wait.”) Empowerment, in the context of IC, is, thus, defined as a highly individualized process, primarily guided by personal will. The employees may work to create a fertile environment that encourages participants’ self-awareness and contemplation, and recognize that their interventions are not the driving force behind individual empowerment processes. He explained that empowerment is impossible to measure, since it is a highly subjective process and the parameters reside only in the individual that makes the choice to empower her or his self.

I asked him to define rehabilitation, to, which he responded: “No soporto esa palabra. Se recuperan. Se rehacen. Se reinventa. Es un proceso de domesticación en donde se le da la oportunidad a un ser humano de parecerse a los otros.” (I can’t stand that word. They recuperate themselves. They remake themselves. They reinvent themselves. [Rehabilitation] is a process of domestication where the opportunity is given to a human being to be like the rest.”) He mentions that rehabilitation is a utilitarian term derived out of notions of individual value based on productivity. It is a measure of how useful an individual citizen may be for the rest of society. In contrast, he defined recuperation as “la oportunidad que tiene un ser humano de poder estar en su condición óptima para poder lograr lo que quiere lograr en su vida.” (“the opportunity that a human being has to be in their optimal condition to accomplish whatever she or he wants to accomplish in their life.”) Thus, as Dr. Vargas Vidot states, “una persona recuperada no necesariamente está rehabilitada pero, sí

empoderada, ya que cuando tu te apoderas, de deshabilitas.” (“a recuperated person is not necessarily rehabilitated, but could be empowered because when you empower yourself, you lose utility.”) Empowerment is imagined as a self-reflexive and self-gratifying process that is not necessarily dictated by an individual’s inclusion into the political sphere. For this reason, a drug-free, recuperated individual may feel empowered without embodying the state’s ideal of an economically independent and productive citizen.

Raquel, for example, after her recuperation, discovered that mainstream society could be as hostile and morally deficient as the world of the streets. She chose to confront these circumstances and she developed the strength necessary to overcome them and demand a place in the society (“...this is *my* world and I belong here.”)

Conclusion

The participants of La Casita embody Anderson’s code of the streets to better navigate through this predatory space. The code of the streets becomes a guideline of socially accepted practices that the participant develops as she adapts to her environment. La Casita is constructed as an alternative space where the participants can take a break from the high-risk routines of drug use and sex work under the agreement that they adopt greater discipline and self-control. Consequently, the practice of the code of the streets inside this space is highly discouraged. Employees emphasize structure and discipline because they consider that a more structured

lifestyle may facilitate entry into a detox program and may be useful during a recuperation process.

Angelita and Raquel both serve as examples of past participants that have undergone stages of recuperation and have gained employment, as a result of their supposed drug-free lifestyle. I discussed their stories to contrast the different obstacles they encountered throughout their processes and the hurdles they continue to face during their employment at La Casita. For Angelita, the adverse circumstances that surrounded her made her process much more difficult. Raquel also experienced difficulties, but managed to cultivate an inner strength and a different outlook that enabled her to surpass her obstacles and position herself in society. As Raquel states, these processes of recuperation and empowerment are ongoing and unstable. At times, participants may encounter certain circumstances that drive them to relapse and they may fall back into unhealthy and risky behavior.

IC does not consider code-switching a measure of empowerment, since individuals may skillfully switch their behaviors upon entering different environments, while still retaining an inner sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction with the overall lifestyle they continue to carry. Nonetheless, it is an important and useful skill that permits the participants to practice discipline and self-control.

La Casita, as well as the organization as a whole, can be seen as a site that promotes empowerment, but does not directly guide or interfere with individual processes of empowerment. As Aradhana Sharma states, in *Logics of Empowerment*, empowerment “has an ambiguous and open-ended quality that manifests in multiple and conflicted ways in women’s lives” (2008: 197). Despite Angelita and Raquel’s

similarities—they are both middle-aged women, they lived in the same public housing complex, they both used drugs, they engaged (and still do) with a process of recuperation and they were both offered employment at La Casita—their processes have been characterized by different obstacles and circumstances, which influence the possibilities of empowerment.

Chapter Three

Health, Family and Housing: Participants, the State and its “Staggering Bureaucracy”

“La política pública de este país es moralista. Si el gobierno pudiese le pegaría fuego a todos los adictos”

“This country’s public policy is moralist. If the government could, it would set fire to all the addicts”.

-Raquel

In this chapter, I will examine the participants’ relationship with the state. I depart from the standpoint, put forth by Wendy Brown, that the state encompasses masculinist features “that signify, enact, sustain and represent masculine power as a form of dominance” (1995:188). In the context of Puerto Rico, women are depoliticized as a result of the monopolistic dominance of male politicians in the political arena, as well as the dominance exerted by men upon women throughout the society (Ostolaza Bey 1989: 135). First, I will discuss some of the disciplinary and abusive experiences participants had with police. I will demonstrate how these encounters have shaped the participants’ perceptions of, not only the police, but also the local government. I will, then, analyze the specific encounters of Ana, Kiki and Gloria with state officials in three government agencies, respectively: Health Department, Family Department and Housing Department. Their experiences were varied, but they all encountered difficulties in navigating through the bureaucratic system and in obtaining the services they sought. I argue that despite the skills of self-discipline and self-control the participants cultivate in La Casita and despite the

efforts of resistance they practice in state agencies, the participants continue to fall victim to the greater structural constraints and the social stigmatization that marginalize them in the first place.

Following Wendy Brown, I imagine the state as an “...unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules, and practices, cohabiting in limited, tension-ridden, often contradictory relations with one another” (1995: 191). I use Foucault’s notion of bodies as objects of power to illustrate how the police and government agencies practice techniques of power to discipline the participants (1978: 141). These techniques function as “small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious...or petty forms of coercion” (Foucault 1977: 139). Participants resist these forces through public displays of anger, as in the case of Kiki, or by acquiring the knowledge necessary to maneuver around the bureaucratic system. However, their resistance often does not work in their favor or remains at such an interpersonal level that no structural changes take place and participants continue to encounter the same obstacles—refusal of services and an antagonistic bureaucracy—when seeking the services they need.

As previously discussed, Puerto Rico’s drug policy is currently based on the prohibitionist model. This model considers the use of drugs as a direct result of a moral debility or a lack of will-power and it assumes that state punishment will discourage use and promote social order (Albizu-García, Negrón Velásquez, González, Santiago-Negrón 2006: 1074).⁴⁶ It maintains that drug use is strictly the

⁴⁶ See Introduction.

result of individual agency and it ignores the social, economic, political and physical factors that create the adverse circumstances, which make an individual more inclined towards addiction (1075). The government perceives addiction as a personal choice and disassociates from the drug using population. Drug users, in turn, become discouraged with state services and fail to voice their opposition because they fear state punishment in return.

State Discipline

During my first week at La Casita I met Sarah. She was a twenty-seven year-old heroin user, who had traveled back and forth between New York City and San Juan all her life. I only saw her a couple of times during my fieldwork because she was arrested for shoplifting at a nearby pharmacy, shortly after we met. Gloria, a non-drug user participant was with her at the time of the arrest and she was able to relate their experience the next day in La Casita.

Gloria and Sarah had paired up to steal whatever they could find at the pharmacy to sell for money. An employee noticed them and alerted the manager. He called the police. When the police arrived, Sarah became agitated while Gloria calmly sat on the curb. Gloria explained that Sarah was arrested because of her “loud mouth.”⁴⁷ She was charged with aggression and was taken to the women’s prison in Vega Alta, a coastal town an hour away from San Juan. A female police officer approached Gloria and asked her if she used drugs. Gloria responded that she did not

⁴⁷ It was later discussed in La Casita that she had two previous criminal charges, which had prompted police to send her to jail.

and the police officer asked her why she was stealing if she was young and did not use drugs. Gloria simply stated that she was homeless and hungry. The female police officer was sympathetic, gave her a warning and let her go.

The police serve as the government's most visible extension of authority. They physically penetrate public places. As discussed in Chapter Two, low-income individuals may feel deep distrust of the police and the judicial system and may adopt a code of the streets as a way of protecting themselves. La Casita's participants experienced direct police discipline and abuse, which led them to adopt this antagonistic view of state institutions. In the case of Sarah and Gloria, the police enforced different degrees of discipline. Sarah suffered incarceration as a result of her lack of verbal self-restraint, while Gloria who was calm and only spoke when addressed, was let off with a warning. The government manipulates the life of its citizens. By punishing Sarah and letting Gloria off with a warning, the government made clear to them and the rest of society what type of citizen it preferred: the well-behaved and obedient citizen. Sarah was perceived to be in need of harsher discipline because of her unruly and disrespectful behavior, characteristic of the code of the streets.⁴⁸ Gloria's passive behavior was deemed to be more appropriate, hence, she was disciplined in a more lenient way.

According to Leticia,⁴⁹ the police not only disciplined the participants of La Casita, but also abused them. Some participants were victims of police brutality. They

⁴⁸ See Chapter Two.

⁴⁹ Head of the Direct Services Department

never filed complaints, however, in fear that their voices would be ignored because of the illegal lifestyles they carried:

Muchas de las mujeres se quejaban porque los mismos policías abusaban de ellas y nosotros le decíamos: “Mira, vamos a ir a hacer una querrela en el cuartel.” Ellas decían: ¿Pero, cómo vamos a ir a hacer una querrela si nosotras nos estamos prostituyendo? Eso es un delito. La que va a salir mal soy yo.” Mi enfoque era: “Hay que hacer una querrela independientemente porque eso [prostitución] no les da derecho a ellos a abusar de ustedes y hay que crear precedentes. Tal vez, hoy no podamos hacer algo, pero si ya creamos un precedente de estos abusos y hay ya las querellas suficientes, pues tal vez se pueda legislar por cosas, tu sabes?”

[A lot of the women would complain because police officers abused them and we would tell them: “Look, let’s go file a complaint at the police station.” They would say: “But, how are we going to file a complaint? We are prostituting ourselves. That’s a crime. I am the one that is going to be punished.” My focus was: “We have to file a complaint independently because that [prostitution] does not give them the right to abuse you and we have to create precedents. Perhaps, we won’t be able to do anything today, but if we create a precedent about these abuses and there are enough complaints, then, maybe issues can be legislated, you know?”

Leticia attempted to persuade them to file formal complaints in order to have proof that these abuses took place. She considered the long-term positive effect that these complaints could have if brought to the political forefront. She also encouraged the participants to use bureaucratic practices in their favor. Nonetheless, the participants expressed their awareness of the state’s perception of them as criminal, unworthy citizens, guided by illegality and deserving of punishment. This awareness discouraged them from publicly denouncing any abusive treatments to avoid state punishment for their engagement in sexual work. La Casita’s participants continually shared similar sentiments of distrust for government agencies and officials.

Participants' Perceptions of the State

They are aware that low-income citizens are systematically made invisible from local policies. They are designated as criminals, who contaminate, corrupt and threaten the rest of society. Policies directed at these populations are antagonistic to their actual needs, disciplinarian and overall detrimental to the well being of these citizens.⁵⁰

Raquel expressed this lack of faith in the government as a source of protection and social welfare while conversing one afternoon with other employees in La Casita. We began talking about several poor communities in Puerto Rico characterized by cramped housing and a labyrinth of unkempt roads. Angelita commented how she was surprised that La Casita's female outreach workers would go into these communities. To this, Raquel responded: "¿Quién más se va a meter ahí? El gobierno no se mete ahí." ("Who else is going to go in there? The government doesn't go in there.") She commented how politicians only visited these communities during election periods. She jokingly mentioned how they would always arrive, protected by "ochenta guardaespaldas pa' tirarte las bolsas y los dulces de lejos" ("eighty bodyguards to throw bags and candy to you from afar.") Raquel alluded to the upper-class' skewed perception of the poor as unpredictably violent and dangerous by joking about the politicians' need for the safety of eighty bodyguards. Politicians' fear of disenfranchised individuals moves them to construct false identities of the poor as inherently deviant in policy agendas. Crime and drug use, in the minds of the

⁵⁰ Mano Dura Contra el Crimen Policy (see Introduction).

policy makers, are understood as manifestations of some innate characteristic of the poor, instead of as symptoms of abandonment and government neglect.

It is a common practice for individuals running for office to bring with them t-shirts, posters and simple gifts such as candy to hand out to the community as a way of raising the poor's expectations that they will represent them, if elected. During the months prior to elections, one can see, when traveling through the main thoroughfares of Puerto Rico, campaign posters with the names of candidates from all the political parties hanging from public housing apartment balconies. Whether or not individuals cast their votes based on these giveaways is unclear, but the purpose of these visits is: Candidates seek to gain additional media coverage throughout the island in printed media and in television broadcasts. Once elected, most of the promises made are ignored and low-income communities are, once again, left to their devices to make ends meet.

These circumstances motivate La Casita's female outreach workers to enter these communities to fill the void, offer services where they simply do not exist. The outreach workers are immersing themselves in the world of the streets of Puerto Rico to compensate for the government's decision to marginalize low-income community members.

Health in Puerto Rico

One afternoon, Raquel, smoking a cigarette by the door, her arm extended outside, began narrating a story about a time when she overdosed and woke up in a hospital bed with tubes up her nose and down her throat. She was shocked, she told

us, and immediately ripped them out. She looked to her side and noticed some X-rays of her lungs on the wall. She jumped out of bed and started pacing back and forth. She said she was *enferma* and all she wanted to do was go to the nearest drug point. As she was pacing, the doctor came into the room and immediately told her to lie back down. He turned on the small lights to illuminate her X-rays. Raquel's lungs were completely white and the doctor explained that she was very sick. However, she was in such need of drugs that she refused to receive any further treatment and asked to be let go.

Raquel talked about other drug user friends' experiences with medical services. She mentioned that some doctors told chronic drug users that they could not detox because their withdrawal symptoms would be too hard on their bodies and that they could possibly die. She compared this to euthanasia and criticized doctors for limiting a person's chances of rehabilitation. She took a drag of her cigarette, looked at me and pointed out: "Debes de hacer un estudio de eso, pa' que to'l mundo lo lea." ("You should do a study of this so everyone can read it.")⁵¹

Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917 and some are eligible to receive federally funded services from the Medicaid program. However, many do not meet the stipulated criteria and continue to remain uninsured. The Medicaid program has been implemented on the island since 1966. It provides the greatest amount of funds for medical services directed at low-income individuals. This program

⁵¹ This vignette demonstrates how former and current participants discussed with me the experiences that they considered important. This is my attempt, following Mohanty, at centering some of the issues that the participants engage with, which may not be widely known.

determines the eligibility requirements that are implemented by federal and municipal governments. The requirements control the delivering of federal services and health programs as well as the Plan de Salud del Gobierno (Government Health Plan), which offers health services to those who are excluded from the Medicaid program.

The United States Congress funds 12% of Medicaid's total funds in Puerto Rico, while the local government funds the remaining 88% (Ramírez García 2008). On February 24, 2010, Pedro Pierluisi, the pro-statehood, resident commissioner for Puerto Rico, criticized the low level of funding the federal government provides for the Medicaid program on the island: "Esto es discriminación—y no es manera de tratar a sus ciudadanos americanos" ("This is discrimination—and this is no way to treat its American citizens") (Delgado 2009). As a result of his position as a pro-statehood party member, he argues on the basis of Puerto Ricans' status as U.S. citizens to advocate for equal treatment and support in the realm of health care. He perceives the U.S. citizenship provided to Puerto Ricans as a meritorious, when, in fact, it was strategically granted to facilitate the entry of Puerto Rican soldiers into the U.S. Army during WWI. Regardless, it is notable that even a pro-statehood politician recognizes the marginalization of the island from federal programs. This discrimination sheds light on Puerto Rico's status as a colony perceived to be not worthy of equal treatment.

The Puerto Rican government administers a state-run program commonly known as La Reforma, targeted at those who do not qualify for the federal programs; the majority of the participants who visit La Casita are supposed to fall under La Reforma. However, qualifying for La Reforma is also difficult for the participants

because they are homeless, lack an identifiable residence, and a steady income. Furthermore, they usually do not have the identity documents such as birth certificates, passports, or Social Security cards that La Reforma requires.

These documents serve as means through which the government exerts discipline and hierarchically position its citizens (Foucault 1977). These official documents allow the government to

...establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. (Foucault 1977: 143)

The state constantly supervises one's income, residence and family members. Participants are judged on the basis of the lifestyles they embody and for that reason they are deemed desirable and unworthy. For example, the government may perceive an unemployed participant as an unproductive individual, ignoring her productivity in the underground market. If the participant is arrested, then their criminal record is what identifies them, in the absence of other identity documents. The state judges the participants on the basis of their unemployed status and their criminal activities. Thus, as Foucault states, "disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the product as of coercive link with the apparatus of production" (1977: 153). In this way, Puerto Rico's neoliberal state determines the value of its citizens as a function of the economic productivity they achieve in the legal economy.

The health system in Puerto Rico is currently composed of many public and private agencies that exchange information to determine eligibility for health

coverage. This exchange is highly bureaucratic. There are prolonged waiting periods to obtain coverage. This semi-privatized structure was introduced in 1993 to offer better quality services at lower costs (Ramírez García 2008). Health coverage involves several agencies and companies: Medicaid, Administración de Seguros de Salud (ASES) (Health Insurance Administration), and individual private health insurance companies such as Humana, SSS, BlueShield, BlueCross and MCS. Medicaid initially determines a person's eligibility and sends this information to ASES, located in the Departamento de Hacienda (the Treasury Department). The information is processed and the person is assigned to a specific insurance company, which provides the individual with a health insurance identification card (Tarjeta del Seguro de Salud). Many analysts criticize this inter-agency relationship by stating that the processes of eligibility and coverage have become unnecessarily complicated. They contend that health services should be supervised by only the local Health Department.

It is especially difficult for chronic drug users to navigate this “staggering bureaucracy” (Collie 2001). Their daily drug use makes movement through the system difficult. Their daily schedules revolve around drug availability and usage. As Raquel's hospital experience illustrates, they are incapable of waiting hours at a time to receive services because their bodies suffer withdrawal symptoms after long periods of time without drugs. Her body experienced such intense physical and mental discomfort from the lack of drugs, that she chose drugs over attending to her health.⁵² Appointments are also hard to keep since drug users' routines are not

⁵² In Chapter Two, Raquel discusses the impulsive behavior that characterized her addiction.

fixed.⁵³ Thus, a bureaucratic system is essentially antagonistic to the needs of these individuals.

Health Department: Ana

On a hot Friday morning, Adriana, a fair-skinned lady, came by La Casita with Laura, her thirteen year-old daughter and Ana a woman on a wheel-chair. Esteban had left Angelita and I in charge of La Casita for the day because of a staff mix-up. Adriana explained that she had gone to the Conversatorio Sobre la Deambulancia en Puerto Rico earlier that week and had learned about Dr. Vargas Vidot, the Executive Director of Iniciativa Comunitaria.⁵⁴ She told me that she periodically visited the *residencial* Luis Lloréns Torres, the largest public housing complex in the Caribbean, to give food and clothing to the drug users who resided there. She went with her church group and met Ana who had a large ulcer that covered the bottom area of her leg, from her ankle, almost to her knee. Adriana convinced Ana to go with her to treat the ulcer at Centro Médico, the largest and most technologically advanced public hospital in Puerto Rico. Despite several visits, however, the doctors refused to treat Ana because of her deteriorated state.

Upon hearing this story, Angelita set up a plastic lawn chair in the shower for Ana. Laura, Adriana's daughter, told us that during the most recent visit to the hospital, the doctor refused to even touch Ana and commented that "ella no necesita un doctor, ella lo que necesita es un veterinario" ("she does not need a doctor, she

⁵³ A participant is less likely to make an early morning appointment if they have been working in the streets all night.

⁵⁴ The Conversatorio de la Deambulancia en Puerto Rico will be discussed in the Conclusion.

needs a veterinarian.”) This comment shocked all of us as it revealed the doctor’s shameless classification of Ana as less than human; as an animal. I called Esteban to tell him about Ana while she showered, and to ask for a referral to our clinic. He quickly came to La Casita and took all three of them across the courtyard to the clinic.

Ana was unable to receive any health services as the doctor refused to treat her. The doctor did not even address her directly and only spoke about her in third person to Adriana and Laura. He further dehumanized her by implying that she was only deserving of veterinarian treatment. It takes incredible inner strength to continue to seek services where one’s humanity and value are continually questioned or ignored.

This is an example of how IC attempts to fill the void caused by the stigmatization and marginalization that government structures promote in Puerto Rico. In an interview with Leticia, she expressed that the basic harm reduction services of health, prevention and hygiene offered throughout the organization can be considered as pillars of the participants’ empowerment. She explained that participants make the initial choice to come to the organization and receive its services. This choice provides IC with an entry point to continue offering more compassionate, understanding and non-judgmental services that help reinforce the participants’ sense of self-worth:

...En Kamaria, como en Nuestra Casa y en Punto Fijo tu empiezas a atender a estos participantes y ellos se sienten que el servicio no solo se lo estan dando porque tienen un problema de adicción, sino que los escuchas, se les da la oportunidad que descansen, lo ayudas a desarrollar su autoestima, empiezan a trabajar sus situaciones sociales con sus familias... Ya todas esas cosas

ayudan y motivan a la gente a empoderarse porque dicen: “Yo no estoy aquí solamente porque soy adicta y por eso nadie me abre la puerta sino porque soy un ser humano porque tengo posibilidades porque creo que tengo una oportunidad de vida diferente.”

[...In Kamaria, as in Nuestra Casa and Punto Fijo⁵⁵, you begin to serve these participants and they feel that the service is being offered not only because they have an addiction problem, but because you listen to them, you give them the opportunity to rest, you help them develop self-esteem, you begin to work their social situations with their families... All those things help and motivate people to empower themselves because they say: “I’m not here only because I’m an addict, that no one opens their door to me, but because I am a human being, I have possibilities, because I believe that I have an opportunity for a different life.]

IC’s empathetic perception of its participants can be contrasted with the discriminatory perception expressed by Ana’s doctor. To him she was a worthless animal; for IC she was a human being worthy of care and compassion. In Leticia’s view, the care that the participants receive not only at La Casita, but also throughout the organization, fosters a development of a new sense of personhood. The participants feel included and cared for, which motivate them to make changes in their lives.

Dr. Vargas Vidot started IC after he perceived the structural difficulties that drug users and AIDS patients encountered when seeking social services, specifically health services. In an interview, he explained the circumstances that prompted him to organize a group of like-minded people that would eventually develop into IC:

Inicialmente, como médico primario era básicamente no dejar a una persona irse con un diagnóstico de muerte, pero empecé a ver a esas personas desde otra perspectiva ... Lo que mediaba era la idea de formar un equipo entre una person y yo y buscar entre los dos alternativas. Entonces me daba cuenta cuan cierto era la falta de acceso, cuan cierto era el discrimen, cuan cierto era el

⁵⁵ Other IC programs.

estigma, cuan cierto era las condiciones que se implicaban para que las personas no accasaran tratamiento.

[...]

Por ejemplo, en mi clínica, cualquier persona que llegara muy flaco o ulcerado no le permitian entrar por la entrada principal del hospital. Tenia que entrar por el estacionamiento. La clinica mia estaba ubicada en el espacio destinado a almacenar los desperdicios biomedicos. Las enfermeras nunca me ayudaron a tomar muestras y todas estas cosas no eran el producto de uso y costumbre, eran las reglas instituidas por la facultad medica del hospital. Asi que eso (discrimen) era un agravante de grandes proporciones.

[Initially, as a primary doctor, [the issue] was not to let a person leave with a diagnosis of death [AIDS] but, I began to see these people from another perspective...What mediated was the idea to form a team between a person and myself to look between the two of us for alternatives. Then, I became aware of how true the lack of access was, how certain discrimination was, how true the stigma was, how true were the conditions that were implicated so that people could not access treatment.

[...]

For example, in my clinic, any person who arrived very skinny or with ulcers was not permitted to enter through the hospital's main entrance. They had to enter through the parking lot. My clinic was located in the space that was designated to store biomedical wastes. The nurses never helped me to take samples and all of these things were not the product of use and customs, they were the rules instituted by the hospital's medical faculty. So, this (discrimination) was an aggravating circumstance of great proportions.]

Dr. Vargas Vidot makes clear the extent to which the stigma has penetrated the government's policies. Through this institutionalization of discrimination through rules that discourage or forbid nurses from serving certain patients, the state promotes norms that define the ideal citizen. When these rules are established, they become harder to combat and participants constantly confront them, for the most part unsuccessfully. He continued to protest this discrimination and began to advocate openly for his patients. His outspokenness made him clash with the Health Department and his colleagues. To rationalize his compassion they deemed him a homosexual:

...el momento en que yo empiezo a protestar por esas condiciones empiezo a tener problemas con la facultad, con la administración, con el Departamento de Salud; Problemas de todas clases. Se me acusó de insubordinación... Para poder tolerar mi defensa al paciente pues los otros médicos decían: lo que pasa es que el es "gay," lo que pasa es que el es esto es aquello. No podían verme como un ser humano cualquiera independientemente de mi preferencia sexual o independientemente de mi estatus o mi posición.

[...the moment I began to protest these conditions, I began to have problems with the faculty, with the administration and with the Department of Health; all types of problems. I was accused of insubordination. To tolerate my defense of the patients, well the other doctors would comment: "What happens is that he's gay, what happens is that he's this or that. They could not see me as an ordinary human being, independent of my sexual preference or independent of my status or my position.]

Male gender norms in Puerto Rico are centered on male virility and physical and sexual prowess (Ramírez 2003: 236). For one man to call another "gay" is a significant insult; it is a direct affront to a man's identity and authority. The doctors' rationalized his defense of AIDS patients and drug users as stemming from an unfounded homosexual identity.

His coworkers' discussion of his sexual orientation is an example of how dominant male gender notions have permeated Puerto Rico's social institutions and have normalized gender inequality. Bourdieu describes how culture is implicated in this process of normalization:

...matters of culture, and in particular the social divisions and hierarchies associated with them, are constituted as such by the actions of the state which, by instituting them both in things and in minds, confers upon the cultural arbitrary all the appearances of the natural. (Bourdieu 1999: 54-5)

However, as Brown argues, the state simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by the society that sustains it. It is masculinist, not because it represents innate

characteristics within men, but because it is a product of those features that “signify, enact, sustain, and represent masculine power as a form of dominance” (188).

Family Department: Kiki

Brown discusses how the bureaucratic domain of the state is characterized by “institutional penetration and fusion of formerly honored boundaries between the domain of political power, the household, and private enterprise” (1995: 200-1). The public and private spheres are simultaneously transgressed by the government’s power and upheld in opposition to each other.⁵⁶ Women who cross over into the public sphere, such as drug users and sex workers, are perceived as in need of disciplining and lose their right to privacy. Men do not tend to experience this invasion into their private affairs because the practices they undertake are not perceived as relevant for their engagement in the public sphere.

Kiki was formerly a wealthy drug point owner who accidentally snorted heroin confusing it for cocaine. She became a chronic drug addict for years. She was born in New York City. She shuffled back and forth from Puerto Rico to Brooklyn for the first fourteen years of her life. She was clean, but homeless at the time I did my fieldwork. She would come by La Casita every other week. She self-identified as a lesbian, but had several children. The first child was born from a willful pregnancy. The second child was the product of a rape in jail. The third child was the product of

⁵⁶ The public/private dichotomy is sustained as a form of social organization that facilitates government control, where each sphere corresponds to a set of gender-based practices. Men are assessed by their participation in the public sphere, while women are relegated to the private sphere and assessed by their capacity to be modest and by keeping their affairs private (Brown 194).

a relationship with a *pargo* (client). She went to jail several times in Lexington, Kentucky and later in the federal prison in Puerto Rico. In an interview, she discussed that as a result of her multiple incarcerations she had not seen her kids in about ten years: “Mi hija sabe que yo me paso presa.” (“My daughter knows I’m always in jail.”) Social services had placed her children in foster homes in Puerto Rico. Kiki was only allowed to visit them on a monthly basis.⁵⁷

On one occasion, Kiki was with her children, sitting in the waiting area of one of the Family Department agencies. Her social worker approached her in front of everyone in the waiting room. She told Kiki that she suspected she had committed sexual acts against her own children. Kiki could not believe that such a claim had been made against her. She had previously spent six months in jail for attacking a man, whom she had seen touching a little girl inappropriately:

...a mi me subieron y me bajaron las orejas, se me pusieron calientes y yo le había llevau una nueces a los nenes porque era tiempo de Navidad y no encontraba el abnueez y llevé un alicate. Yo le dije: ¿Qué usted dice? Agarré el alicate así. ‘Perate un momento que no la oí bien... Y digo: ¿Qué usted dijo, que no la oí bien? La nena me escuchó y viene corriendo y me agarra la mano del alicate y me dice: Mami, por favor, yo no quiero que vayas presa. !Mira si me conoce! Yo le iba a meter, pero era pa’ rajarle la cabeza en cuatro cantos porque es una hija e puta. Ella no se supone que haga eso. Eso es anti-profesional...[la rabia] me bajo y me subió de una manera que yo sentí como si una anaconda me salió por la cabeza y me bajó otra vez. Yo hice seis meses por rajarle la cabeza a un dominicano que cogí sobándole los muslitos a una nena porque yo no voy con eso. Ella viene a decirme a mí que yo tuve actos lascivos con mis hijos. ¿Ella esta loca? ¿Qué es lo que le pasa a ella? Le dije antes de que se desapareciera: Yo te tengo que ver en la calle, linda. Tu no vas a estar en esta oficia metía toda tu vida y Puerto Rico es así de chiquito. Más te vale que te trague la tierra, el día que yo te encuentre.

[...my ears went up and down, they got hot. I had brought some nuts for the kids because it was Christmas time and I wasn’t able to find the nutcracker so I brought some pliers. I told her: ‘What did you say?’ I grabbed the pliers like

⁵⁷ It is unclear if the visits were supervised or not.

this. 'Wait a minute, I didn't hear you well.' My daughter heard me, grabs the pliers from my hands and says: 'Mom, please, I don't want you to go to jail.' See if she doesn't know me! I was going to hit her so hard I was going to break her head into four pieces because she was a son of a bitch. She was not supposed to do that. That was unprofessional. [The rage] felt like an anaconda had come out of my head and had come back down. I did six months for breaking a Dominican's head whom I caught caressing a little girl's thighs because I don't go with that. She comes over to me to tell me that I have committed lascivious acts against my children. Is she crazy? What's wrong with her? I told her before she disappeared: 'I'm going to have to see you in the streets, sweetie. You're not going to be in your office all your life and Puerto Rico is this (gesturing with her fingers) small. The earth better swallow you up, the day that I find you.']

The social worker publicly penetrated into Kiki's private life. The liberty with which the social worker confronted Kiki stems from the authority she embodied as a government employee. The social worker's accusations about illicit sexual interactions between Kiki and her children is the state's attempt to survey the personal sexual lives of its citizens in order to judge and classify them. The state, thus, through the social worker, penetrates into the most private realm of the family and home.

The social worker's disregard for Kiki's privacy was a direct affront to her dignity, to which Kiki instinctually responded with anger and threats. Kiki was angry at the social worker's unprofessional behavior and resorted back to the code of the streets as a way of positioning herself as a citizen, worthy of respect and privacy. However, her behavior was detrimental as the social worker exploited her position as a government official to prevent Kiki from visiting with her children in the future.

Kiki's threats prompted the social worker to restrict her visits with her children, by making up excuses that the children were either sick or in summer camp. After three months, the social worker quit and wrote in Kiki's file that she had not

attempted to contact her kids in three months, prompting the Family Department to cancel her visits permanently:

[¿Me puedes creer que esa hija e puta, se fue del trabajo?...Antes de irse... se suponía que todos los meses yo llamara pa' saber la fecha exacta de la visita y la llamo: Mira pa' saber la fecha de la visita. Es que no se van a poder bajar, porque no hay guagua. Llámame el mes que viene. Llamo el mes que viene, los nenes están en campamento no se van a poder bajar. Y yo, esta bien, tan gozando. Tercer mes: El nene esta con fatiga y no se va a poder bajar... Tu sabes que? Van tres meses que yo no veo a mis hijos, mira a ver lo que tu haces, invéntatelas, lo que sea, pero yo este mes quiero ver a mis hijos porque vas a pagar. No te preocupes yo hago lo imposible. Cuarto mes llamé, se había ido. Dejó escrito en los archivos que hacía tres meses que yo no llamaba pa' saber de mis hijo, por eso me cancelaron las visitas.

[Can you believe that that son of a bitch left her job?...Before she left...I was supposed to call her every month to obtain the exact visitation date and I called her: 'Just wondering what the visiting date is.' She responded: 'They are not going to be able to come because there is no bus. Call me next month.' I call her the next month: 'The kids are at summer camp, they can't be brought.' I thought to myself: 'OK, they're having fun.' Third month: 'The boy has asthma and cannot be brought down.' I responded: 'You know what? It's been three months and I haven't seen my kids, do what you have to do, make up something, whatever, but this month I want to see my kids or you're going to pay.' She responded: 'Don't worry about it, I'll do the impossible.' I called on the fourth month, she had left. She wrote in my file that it had been three months since I had called to ask about my kids, that's why they cancelled my visits.]

Kiki's reaction to the social worker's unfounded suspicion ultimately severed her ties to her children. The social worker's unprofessional approach combined with Kiki's aggressive reaction created additional obstacles for Kiki to maintain a relationship with her kids. This was an instance where resistance common to the setting of the streets worked against Kiki when effectuated within a state agency. The social worker represented the government, which regulated Kiki's relationship with her children. She had the power to manipulate the situation by writing down false statements in

Kiki's official record. Kiki had no power to access or amend the false statements and the state constructed her as a bad mother, who disregarded her children.

Housing Department: Gloria

Gloria presents an example of an indignant person who was semi-successful in navigating through a state agency. Gloria was a regular visitor at La Casita. She was neither a drug user, nor a sex worker, but she was homeless. She had lost her home in a fire some months before and was still waiting for the Housing Department to assign her a suitable apartment. Her *marido* was a drug user and she was pregnant with her second child. Gloria was struggling to gain back custody of her son by getting a suitable apartment for both of them. She was a non-drug user who lived under a bridge in El Guano, the shooting gallery closest to IC. Kamaria employees were worried that living in a shooting gallery with other drug users was risky. They would comment that she was only one needle away from addiction. She always responded that drugs were not a temptation for her: "Yo soy un mundo aparte. Ya yo soy de Cristo, de más nadie." ("I am in a separate world. I belong to Christ, to no one else.") She would often talk about her first-born son who was living with her brother at the time. He had temporary custody. She continually visited the Departamento de la Vivienda (Housing Department) to request an apartment for her and her son. She would vent her frustration in La Casita, complaining that each visit was unproductive.

On July 7, 2009, I was watching the eleven o'clock news at home when I was surprised to see Gloria being interviewed in front of the Housing Department. She explained her experience with the agency to the reporter. She took the camera crew

down to El Guano to show them her horrible living conditions and mentioned how frustrated she was after months of trying to get an apartment. The next day, I told her that I had seen her in the news and she was happy to hear that. She told me that she had gotten fed up with the agency after spending another long day in their waiting room and after being told she was only waitlisted for an apartment. She decided to go outside and call the local news channel from a pay phone to tell them how ineffective the agency had been. This took the agency officials by surprise. The office manager tried to placate her by immediately attending to her and listening to her story. She was happy that her actions had caused momentary results and explained that all that was keeping her from getting a suitable apartment for her and her son was a recent photograph of them that would corroborate the existence of their relationship. A month later, Gloria was still living under the bridge. Her situation with her son had grown worse as she learned that her brother had handed her son over to social services because he had grown tired of her son misbehaving. Even though, Gloria made the effort to vocalize her frustration in the national news media, the bureaucratic machinery remained stagnant in relation to her needs.

Gloria is a good example of how state marginalization extends over all low-income women, not only female drug users and sex workers. The structural constraints are better illuminated. The loss of her home in a fire positioned her in the volatile world of the streets and made her vulnerable to drugs. The employees expressed concerns because they worried that the unfortunate circumstances that surrounded her were to going to drive her towards addiction. Her case exemplifies the difficulty of achieving full access to all state services despite her numerous visits to

the Family Department agency, as well as her self-asserted call to the local television news media. Gloria still remained homeless throughout all of my fieldwork. Brown explains the reasons for this condition:

Women's subordination is the wide effect of all these modes of control, which is why no single feminists reform—in pay equity, reproductive rights, institutional access, child care arrangements, or sexual freedom—even theoretically topples the whole arrangement. (1995: 194)

A shift on all fronts—social, economic, political and interpersonal— is required for individuals such as Gloria to gain access to services and a position in society.

Conclusion

I examined the relationship between the participants of La Casita and the state to illustrate the multiple difficulties they encountered when attempting to receive the state services they so desperately needed. I began by discussing participants' negative experiences with local police officers to show one of the reasons why low-income individuals, especially female drug users and sex workers, become distrustful of state institutions. They are viewed as objects of power that need to be disciplined and molded to become productive (i.e. valuable) citizens of Puerto Rican society. Their marginal identities and their involvement in the underground economy influence the state's perception of them as unproductive, disposable citizens with nothing to offer the nation.

I examined the individual experiences of stigmatization, surveillance, discipline and the utter disregard for personal needs, which the participants encountered in government agencies. Ana was refused treatment because of her

deteriorated physical state, Kiki was institutionally constructed as a bad mother, and Gloria was lost in the bureaucratic shuffle despite voicing her frustrations in the local news media. These common adverse structural experiences shed light on the multiple deep-seated forms of oppression that affect the participants on a daily basis.

Discriminatory cultural notions penetrate and are reproduced in the domain of the state, producing greater stigmatization and limiting the access to public services. For this reason, participants continue to confront serious obstacles even after processes of recuperation and personal empowerment occur. Resistance at an interpersonal level is not enough to change the matrix of domination in which the participants are embedded (Hill Collins 2000: 274).

Conclusion

On August 5, 2009, my neighborhood friend Filiberto and I arrived at the Capitol building. We were on our way to attend the Taller and Conversatorio Sobre la Deambulancia en Puerto Rico (Workshop and Roundtable Discussion on Homelessness in Puerto Rico). It had been organized with the purpose of bringing together the heads of the departments of Education, Housing, Health, Family, Justice and Security with leaders of religious and non-profit organizations to exchange information, strategies and outlooks in the hope of outlining a path towards more inclusive policies.

We ascended the marble stairs and walked towards the Ernesto Ramos Antonini ballroom, located in the leftwing of the building.⁵⁸ Reporters and photographers congregated in front of the entrance as ushers organized attendees into a long line for registration. Filiberto and I waited in line and explained to the ushers that we were only there as *oyentes* (listeners). They told us to go right ahead and to find a seat in the back of the room. We sat down in the two last available seats and waited for the workshop to begin.

The workshop took place in a large ballroom with a stage at the far end and a small elevated floor on the left side where food and beverages were served. Two projectors stood on the farthest right and left corners of the room replaying a short video composed of images of homeless individuals in Puerto Rico. In the center of

⁵⁸ It functions as the meeting place for the House of Representative during regular sessions.

the room, four long tables formed a large square. There were dozens of placards with the names of religious and non-profit organizations and government departments placed directly in front of each empty chair to designate where each representative would sit.

It was not long until Thomas Rivera Schatz, the PNP⁵⁹ Senate President, swiftly entered the ballroom shaking hands with whoever was sitting near the hallway. He stood next to the podium as representatives slowly trickled in and found their seats. He gave a welcoming address and thanked everyone for attending. The PNP Senate Vice-President, Margarita Nolasco, followed with an address of her own. She explained that this workshop was a product of the efforts of the Comité de Profesionales para el Proyecto de Deambulancia y Salud Mental de Puerto Rico (Committee of Professionals for the Homelessness and Mental Health Project of Puerto Rico) to expand the discussion of these social phenomena. The nature of the committee (of which Dr. Vargas Vidot and Leticia were members) Senator Nolasco explained, was to compile all the public policy related to these issues as well as the results of their implementation up until that day to compare and examine the effects of these public policies and propose legislative changes wherever needed. This workshop on homelessness was part of the committee's initiative, to discuss the most pressing social issues in a large forum.

She ended her speech by giving an explanation of how the day was going to unfold. There were five small, circular "work tables" spread out throughout the ballroom where the representatives were going to sit according to their area of

⁵⁹ Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party) (PNP).

expertise: Family, Health, Housing, Education and Justice and Security. Each table had a member of the committee that served as group leader and a scribe who recorded the discussions to be presented to everyone at the end of the day.

Dr. Vargas Vidot gave the final welcoming address before the activities began. His tone was more assertive and urgent as he discussed the gravity of the problems of homelessness and mental health in Puerto Rico. He discussed how intimately tied they were to problems of drug addiction and encouraged those participating to maintain an open mind. He stated: “Yo creo que es bien importante que entendamos que las calles están llenas de espacios que hemos dejado en blanco y yo creo que hoy es un buen día para llenar esos espacios” (I think that it is really important that we understand that the streets are filled with spaces that we have left blank and I think that today is a good day to fill those spaces.”) He explained the necessity for a new holistic outlook:

La idea de excluir todos los elementos que son tributarios a este fenómeno como son la pobreza, el desempleo, los problemas familiares, la violencia contra las mujeres, la violencia intra-familiar, la violencia contra los niños y niñas, la crisis de nuestra formación, la idea del asistencialismo que ha mantenido a nuestro pueblo inmóvil, vulnerable a todo tipo de crisis social. Todas estas cosas tienen que considerarse cuando se converse sobre lo que es el fenómeno de la deambulancia, sobre todo cuando queremos producir soluciones.

[The idea of excluding the tributary elements of this phenomenon such as poverty, unemployment, family problems, violence against women, intra-family violence, violence against children, excessive reliance on welfare, has maintained in our country a state of immobility and vulnerability to any type of social crisis. All of these things have to be considered when talking about the homelessness phenomenon, especially when trying to find solutions.]

He ended his speech by encouraging representatives to become more enthusiastic about their efforts to develop a more inclusive public policy:

Estamos absolutamente seguros y seguras de que hoy no saldremos con la solución a un problema tan completo pero, sí saldremos con el ánimo y con el entusiasmo y con la capacidad de poder vocalizar nuestros esfuerzos, nuestro trabajo para delinear lo que podría ser una política pública que, hasta este momento, ha estado ausente.

[We are absolutely certain that we will not leave today with a solution to such a comprehensive problem, but we will leave with the spirit, the enthusiasm and the capacity to vocalize our efforts and the type of work that we do to delineate what could be a public policy that, up until this point, has been absent.]

He received a roaring applause and Senator Nolasco gave the order to break up into the designated groups.

Filiberto and I walked over to Dr. Vargas Vidot to say hello. He encouraged us to pick a table and join the discussion. We decided to find a spot at the Education table since, at the time, the head of the department was under scrutiny for mishandling federal funds. We thought it would be interesting to hear what he had to say. As we listened in, I spotted Raquel near the entrance of the ballroom. I ran over to her to say hello and she explained to me that she had been scheduled to speak after Dr. Vargas Vidot, but was late because she had to go to the clinic to get her dose of methadone and the public buses had run late. She mentioned that she had come prepared and was still interested in giving an afternoon address.

Everyone broke for lunch and afterwards reconvened to present each tables findings and possible solutions. Before the presentations began, however, Raquel approached the podium and spoke to the representatives. She described her life story

and explained how she had recuperated herself and was now an employee of Iniciativa Comunitaria. She stated: “Estamos creando adictos todos los días; aceptemos que hay un problema terrible y no esperemos a que nos maten a un niño o nuestro hijo mate a otro para actuar.” (“We are creating addicts every day; lets accept that a terrible problem exists and lets not wait until our child is killed or until our child kills another to act.”) She concluded: “Espero que una vez y por todas se dediquen a hacer algo por esas miles de personas que están en las calles deambulando.” (“I hope once and for all that you dedicate yourselves to do something for the thousands of people who are homeless in the streets.”)

Later that day I contemplated the possibilities that could possibly emerge from such a strategy, which brought together state officials and non-profit leaders. I asked myself: Are these political initiatives enough to eliminate or even relieve these social ills that affect the disenfranchised populations in Puerto Rico, such as the women of La Casita? Phillippe Bourgois in his ethnography of Puerto Rican street-level drug dealers and drug addicts in Harlem, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, is doubtful that isolated policy changes and short-term political reforms can properly address the multifactorial problems of poverty and drug addiction (1995: 318). He explains that the structural oppressions in the United States, such as racism and class segregation, are embedded in society to such an extent that it makes it impossible for strictly legislative initiatives to counteract the larger economic and social forces.

Nevertheless, for the problem of substance abuse, Bourgois does propose some concrete changes that could reduce the number of addicts and the “drug problem” as a whole: the government could reduce the greater economic rewards that

the underground economy provides for low-income individuals by creating more employment opportunities in the legal economy; as well as de-criminalizing drugs, which would reduce violence, crime and incarceration (321). Certainly, these measures would bring positive results, but are they enough?

Wendy Brown characterizes the state as a masculinist entity that works through the unequal relationships of power between men and women to maintain male dominance (Brown 1995: 188). She attributes the state's masculinism, not to some inherently male quality that it promotes, but to the patriarchal and male centered society that simultaneously produces the state and is produced by the state through their symbiotic relationship. Therefore, if the state is embedded in culture and society, how then would state-only initiatives enact long-lasting social change?

Coalition building between the state and religious and non-profit organizations, such as the one promoted in the Taller y Conversatorio de la Deambulancia en Puerto Rico are a positive and innovative step forward. Increased communication between these two spheres is critical to propose effective solutions to the problems that low-income individuals face. Information as basic as the exact number of homeless individuals in Puerto Rico is often lacking from state consideration. For example, the Family Department reported an estimate of 10,000 to 12,000 homeless individuals in Puerto Rico during 2009 (Hopgood Dávila 2009). However, Dr. Vargas Vidot explained that he received 10,000 homeless participants for one program in a year that came from only three municipalities. Therefore, he estimated the homeless population to be around 28,000 to 30,000.

In addition to more accurate information, community organizations experience extended and more intimate contact with disenfranchised populations. These organizations serve as one of the principle arenas where these individuals vocalize their daily life experiences and frustrations with the state and the society that surrounds them. The many stories that were narrated to me by the participants of La Casita proved that this information is crucial for the development of long-lasting, inclusive, effective policy. This belief is what motivated me to share these stories throughout this thesis. Thus, higher degrees of respectful and mutual exchange between the state and the non-profit sector can be beneficial for individuals that are invisibilized by the state. Once again, however: Are more intimate relationships between the state and the non-profit sector enough to mobilize social change? How do individual subjects gain access to greater political and social forums in order to speak for themselves?

Raquel is a good example of a self-empowered individual that has gained access to a political sphere previously not accessible through her involvement with a non-profit organization, Iniciativa Comunitaria. As presented in Chapter Two, after twenty years of chronic drug addiction and incarceration, she made the choice of abandoning drugs and embracing the challenging process of drug recuperation. Despite the multiple obstacles she confronted, such as the harsh realization that the perfect drug-free society she expected to encounter was a complete fallacy and just as difficult to navigate as the world of the streets, she has been clean for four years. A few days after the workshop, Raquel received an offer for a full scholarship to attend the Interamerican University in Puerto Rico for undergraduate studies. I do not wish

to present these facts as measures or standards of empowerment, as means that must be acquired in order to achieve empowerment in society, but as significant advancements in a woman's life, that have provided her with greater opportunities for self-development. Therefore, it can be stated that change at the most personal and individual level must to be coupled with greater structural changes, in order for that self-empowered person to gain access to all spheres to fully express their voice. As Mohanty states: "...feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" (2003: 223). Once the ties between the local and the global become familiar, individuals could grow more confident on the power that lies within them to produce change.

This seems to be the most logical solution for a world strictly divided into social, economic, and political terms. However, what would happen if we transcend these constructed fields and break down the boundaries that require multiple empowerments—self-empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment—for a person to live a free and fulfilling life? It is urgently necessary for us to understand and respect each other on the basis of our common humanity. It is crucial that we not only promote and seek solidarity on the basis of gender, race or national identity, but that we also do it on the basis of the shared commonalities that make us human. As Raquel once stated: "Todos los seres humanos aunque no usen drogas, tienen sus propias adicciones. Lo importante es cómo cada cual salimos de la nuestra." (All human beings, even if they don't use drugs, have their own addictions. The important thing is how each one of us overcomes them.) Our common humanity

is characterized by common human weaknesses. Instead of finding personal strength in other people's weaknesses, sufferings and losses, we should feel compelled to support and aid each other, becoming stronger together.

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