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Reframing resilience as resistance: Situating disaster recovery within colonialism

Gemma Sou^{1,2} 

¹Social and Global Studies Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

²Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Correspondence

Gemma Sou, Social and Global Studies Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne, Vic., Australia.
Email: gemma.sou@rmit.edu.au

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Abstract

This paper challenges resilience literature, which often strips grassroots actors of their political agency and reduces their resilient actions to no more than adapting, mitigating or recovering from an exogenous hazard. I apply an everyday resistance framework to unpack Puerto Ricans' responses to the impacts of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the Caribbean Island in 2017. This methodological approach situates acts of resilience within the colonial relations that characterise the United States–Puerto Rico relationship. First, people's acts of resilience are shown to signify acts of resistance to pursue self-determination and relinquish their dependency on the United States for their everyday lives and disaster recovery. Second, the paper demonstrates how resistance is enacted by women in the domestic space, which challenges masculinist and patriarchal notions of resistance. Third, exploring resilience “from below” is suggested to expose how state-centric conceptualisations of resilience do not fit neatly with how disaster-affected people define and intuitively enact resilience.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Much of the resilience literature myopically focuses on actors' responses to exogenous hazards, implicitly suggesting that resilient actors are merely adapting, mitigating, or recovering from a hazard (Chandler, 2012). This strips actors of their political agency and reduces actions to no more than survival and coping (Bohle et al., 2009). However, recent scholarship has explored the political potential of resilient actors by focusing on the connection between resilience and resistance (see Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018; Penehira et al., 2014; Ryan, 2015; Wandji, 2019). Resilience and resistance are often viewed as opposing and mutually exclusive (see Evans & Reid, 2013). Yet, a small set of work suggests resilience and resistance are engaged in a relation of mutual assistance (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018; Penehira et al., 2014; Ryan, 2015). This work suggests that if populations or specific resistance movements are to withstand shocks, as well as pervasive repression, they must be able to adapt strategies and tactics of resilience in order to maintain resistance over long periods of time.

My paper builds on this work in several ways. First, I empirically and theoretically demonstrate that resilience and resistance are neither irreconcilable nor binary concepts. Second, I reveal how grassroots behaviours, which are routinely labelled “resilient,” can also signify political acts of resistance. This, I argue, becomes clear when one contextualises resilient actions within the broader colonial processes and asymmetrical power relations in which they take place. Third,

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I demonstrate how resistance is enacted by women in the domestic space, which challenges masculinist and patriarchal notions of resistance. Methodologically, I apply an everyday resistance framework, which also allows me to unearth the implicit politics of these actions – the fourth contribution. Finally, I demonstrate that state-centric conceptualisations of resilience do not fit neatly with how disaster-affected people define and intuitively enact resilience.

Findings emerged from a study that explored the recovery of low-income households in Puerto Rico, following the impact of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the Caribbean Island in September 2017 (see Sou et al., 2021). Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States, and as US citizens Puerto Ricans are entitled to federal recovery support. Yet, throughout the 12 months of data collection, the US federal government's response was slow, inadequate and laden with derisive discourse about Puerto Rico. The federal government responded on a larger scale and much quicker to hurricanes Harvey and Irma in Texas and Florida. Yet, the variation in the responses was not commensurate with storm severity and need (Willison et al., 2019). One month after the hurricane, aid had not been approved for Puerto Rico, but it had already been approved for the US Virgin Islands, and it took 10 days to be approved for Texas post Harvey (García-López, 2018). The Trump administration responded to requests for aid from San Juan with reminders of the island's debtor status to the US and rhetoric that Puerto Rico was too dependent on the federal government to solve their problems (Lloréns, 2018). Much public discourse conflated Puerto Rico's debt obligation to the US with the relief effort, which shifted blame to the Puerto Rican government (Willison et al., 2019). Yet, many ordinary Puerto Ricans depended heavily on receiving federal support – material and financial. This is largely because US colonisation has created a long history of structural vulnerability, Puerto Rican debt and forced dependency, which has contributed to the widespread poverty, decrepit infrastructure, and limited domestic capacity to respond and recover from the hurricane (Bonilla, 2020).

Against this background I recognised that a resilience framework was unequipped to acknowledge the political context of Puerto Rico, and the ongoing colonisation of Puerto Rico. Therefore, I began situating people's resilient behaviours within the US–Puerto Rico relationship. This allowed the research to unearth how Puerto Ricans' acts of resilience are significant beyond mitigating, adapting or recovering to Hurricane Maria. Rather, these acts are inherently political as they oppose the negative social, political, and economic influences of US colonisation on their everyday lives and their ability to recover. Through this approach, this paper extends criticisms of resilience thinking as apolitical and ahistorical (e.g., Chandler, 2012; Fainstein, 2015; Schott, 2013). The paper also connects with critical debates on the connections between resilience and resistance (e.g., Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018; Wandji, 2019). The research extends debates on the role of historical and ongoing colonialism in the cause, impacts, and recovery of disasters, particularly those focused on the Caribbean region (e.g., Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Rivera, 2020; Sealey-Huggins, 2017; Serrano-García, 2020) and the role of women and domestic space in anticolonial movements (e.g., Motta, 2013).

2 | RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Resilience now underpins many frameworks for integrating climate change adaptation, as well as disasters, political fragility, or urban inequity, with development planning and programming (Cutter, 2016). Individuals, households, communities, or even whole societies are often expected to strive for resilience (Béné et al., 2018). Despite great contestation (Smirnova et al., 2021), one of the most widely adopted definitions views resilience as a system's capacity to absorb disturbance and reorganise into a fully functioning system (Rose, 2004). As such, resilience refers to the level of resources and ability to use these resources to deal with adverse consequences of a hazard (Billing & Madengruber 2006). Political ecology and global environmental change research also incorporate the idea of adaptive capacity, which is the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances during a disruption to withstand and recover from the disruption (ODI, 2017). Therefore, resilience is not simply about reducing the physical vulnerability of infrastructure and the built environment (Folke, 2006). For instance, a socioecological system should not only re-establish its livelihood, physical assets and patterns of access, but also reduce, respond, and recover from the impacts of future hazards (Blaikie et al., 2004).

However, within resilience scholarship, the “external problems or threats” (Chandler, 2012, p. 17) are commonly viewed as exogenous disruptions or events like earthquakes or armed conflicts, which are based on naturalistic assumptions and metaphors imported from “hard” sciences. This is an apolitical and ahistorical conceptualisation of what constitute threats and how vulnerabilities are produced because it does not fully comprehend how social, political, and/or economic processes shape disaster risk over time (Pelling, 2011). This leads to apolitical solutions rooted in technology and markets, cementing rather than challenging the status quo that may be causing vulnerability in the first place (Gillard et al., 2016). Reflecting this line of thinking, Reid (2012) argues that resilient subjects cannot be political or

resisting because they are forced to put all efforts into mere survival. This approach obscures power relations (Fainstein, 2015) and implies resilient subjects must accept their fate as vulnerable subjects in the social world, and upon whom resilience is imposed by the state (Evans & Reid, 2013).

In response to critiques that resilience renders actors apolitical, Bourbeau suggests that contextualising and politicising the notion of adversity ought to be central to resilience thinking (2013). Indigenous academics (e.g., McGuire–Kishebakabaykwe, 2010) highlight the importance of contextualising Indigenous people's resilience in their shared histories of colonisation. This includes the racism and oppression that have shaped the vulnerability of indigenous populations and required them to be resilient (Penehira et al., 2014). This kind of analysis tells us that there have indeed been circumstances in which indigenous peoples have had little option but to "bounce back" or resile from things which may have been out of their control. Similarly, Wandji (2019, p. 299) reconfigures the ontological basis and scrutinises one of resilience's key components: disruption. He argues that colonialism ought to be reconceptualised as a "silent and slow" disruption which shapes risk over time, rather than focusing heavily on natural hazards such as hurricanes.

Acknowledgement of colonialism, and the associated asymmetrical power relations that shape vulnerability and necessitate resilience, opens up an opportunity to potentially reinterpret resilient behaviours as resistance. For example, when investigating Palestinian women living in occupied Palestine, Bourbeau and Ryan (2018) propose the notion of "resilient resistance" – a tactic of everyday resistance that relies on qualities of resilience such as getting by and adapting to shocks. Resilient resistance entails an effort to adapt, make do, get on, or work with what is at hand. Actions must challenge the conditions that are experienced by finding a way to get on with daily life without acquiescing to the prevailing political, economic, or social situation (Ryan, 2015). Examples are not easily seen from a top-down or state-centric view, which conceptualises resilience as something that is brought about by the state. As such, Bourbeau and Ryan (2018) suggest that if one looks for resilience "from below" as a method or strategy used intuitively by populations, it becomes possible to see that these actions are more common than the current literature implies, and to unearth how people define resilience themselves.

Bourbeau and Ryan (2018) draw on everyday resistance to reveal the ways in which resistance and resilience are reconcilable in a context of conflict and occupation. Everyday resistance is not as easily recognised and visible as rebellions, riots, or demonstrations, or other such organised, collective, or conventional political articulations of resistance (Scott, 1985). Acts are small scale, relatively safe, and carried out by individuals or small groupings (Jenkins, 2017). Everyday resistance is about the mundane, ordinary, or otherwise seemingly invisible acts that can be interpreted as activity with opposition to power (Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020), which contrasts to Bhabha's (1994) "spectacular" acts of resistance. Everyday resistance cannot be determined without a power analysis that is situated in a context, a historic tradition, a certain place, and/or social space. This is not only necessary in order to detect what is resistance, but in order to understand the ways in which resistance operates, how it is connected to power, and in what sense it is partly autonomous or intertwined with power (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016).

Everyday resistance does not require explicit political motivations or to be sustained by formal organisations (Riessman, 2000). Actors may not necessarily regard their actions as resistance at all, rather a normal part and way of their life, personality, culture, or tradition (Gupta, 2001). Yet not everything within everyday politics is resistance, since things might be political or expressions of claims without being resistance. Therefore, it is necessary on the one hand to talk about acts as being resistance when they may undermine power even if only temporarily (Baaz et al., 2017); and on the other hand, acts that are part of the ordinary everyday life. As such, we have both aspects covered – the everyday and the resistance.

Against this background, this paper draws on everyday resistance to demonstrate how so-called apolitical acts of resilience can represent political acts of resistance. I focus on low-income household responses to the impacts of Hurricane Maria, which caused widespread damage in Puerto Rico in 2017.

3 | THE COLONISATION OF PUERTO RICO

Natural hazards such as droughts, floods, and hurricanes shape the national poverty and vulnerability levels of Puerto Rico. The island was hit by two major hurricanes in 2017 – Irma on 7 September and Maria on 21 September. These hurricanes, particularly Maria, caused major devastation to the fragile infrastructure and economic activity, and economic damages were estimated to be US\$31.5 billion (FEMA, 2017). However, the effects of the storm are best understood as the compounded results of a longstanding colonial history (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019). Five centuries of colonialism (Spanish, then US since 1898) and a history of structural vulnerability and forced dependency created the widespread poverty, unemployment, and decrepit infrastructure, which enabled Maria to have such devastating impacts (Bonilla, 2020). Policies

and practices imposed by the US have diluted national Puerto Rican sovereignty. “Sovereignty” here not only refers to Puerto Ricans’ ability to make their own decisions regarding the future of the island, but also over their everyday lives.

Puerto Rico was annexed in 1898 under the US congressional doctrine of territorial unincorporation. It was thereby considered as belonging to, but not a part of, the US. The *Estado Libre Asociado* (Associated Free State) of Puerto Rico was created in 1952 under federal law. Obligated to the US Constitution, the Puerto Rican Constitution did not create a new polity, but merely established political structures for limited self-governance (Ayala & Bernabe, 2009). Puerto Rico’s status as an “unincorporated territory” positions the island within state governance but not as far as to be encompassed within the 50 states themselves (Rivera, 2020). Citizens of Puerto Rico cannot vote in US elections for Congress or the Presidency, but they are subject to the US laws and regulations (Ayala & Bernabe, 2009).

US policy has focused on extractivism of Puerto Rico’s natural and renewable resources, which has been labelled *colonialismo ambiental* or environmental colonialism. For example, the selling of Puerto Rican land to private interests and stripping farmers of their livelihoods has also resulted in widespread environmental degradation and toxic wastes polluting Puerto Rican air, water, and soil (Morris et al., 2018). US policy favours and encourages private investors and corporations to buy up land to create businesses. For instance, since 2012 investors have benefited from not needing to pay taxes on their dividends in Puerto Rico. Yet, Puerto Rican residents, “are not only excluded from these programs, but they also pay very high local taxes” (Klein, 2018, p. 19) and are held responsible for paying 785%–1000% in interest rates on Puerto Rico’s debt to the US. Currently, Puerto Rico owes more than \$100 billion in bonds and unpaid pension debts. This represents nearly 70% of the territory’s gross domestic product. In 2016, the US Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stimulus Act, known as PROMESA, which established a Fiscal Control Board that limits government spending and has budgetary veto power over all locally elected governmental representatives. PROMESA was designed to restore Puerto Rico to financial solvency by imposing austerity measures, which stripped Puerto Rico of the limited sovereignty the federal government had allowed (Garriga-López, 2019). This has resulted in adverse direct impacts on the island and everyday lives of ordinary Puerto Ricans. For instance, under its austerity budget, the Puerto Rican government has already established several measures, including increases in taxes and cuts in public services, to ensure debt obligations see payment. US policy also reduced the minimum wage to US\$4.25/hour for workers under the age of 25, closed 340 schools, shut down many government entities, laid off 17,000 public sector workers, among other austerity cuts, while US corporations continue to receive tax benefits (Klein, 2018).

Failing and precarious produce crops in Puerto Rico have primarily been used for trade instead of domestic consumption. As such, Puerto Ricans did not have access to the foods they grew, but instead depended on substandard consumables provided by the US government (Carro-Figueroa, 2002). Since the 1950s, Puerto Rico has been highly dependent on the US for goods –85% are imported from the US (Garriga-López, 2020). Imported goods must arrive on ships from the US with US crews – a process agreed under The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, also known as the Jones Act. This Act established that the maritime waters and ports of Puerto Rico are controlled by US agencies (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). This limits the capacity of non-US vessels and crews to engage in commercial trade with Puerto Rico. This undermines international trade competition, making commodities slow to arrive, limited in availability, and often higher than on the mainland US (Rivera, 2020). In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the Jones Act prevented foreign aid immediately reaching the island, despite countries like Venezuela offering aid (Rivera, 2020). After much pressure, it was waived, but only for 10 days (Cortés 2018).

The dependency on importing food from the US trickles down and restricts the self-determination of ordinary Puerto Ricans to determine their diets and access to nutritious and affordable consumables. Puerto Rico is seen as food insecure because there is a reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, but there is no reduced intake (Ginzburg, 2021). Puerto Ricans often consume prepackaged canned, frozen, or preserved foods that is not truly “fresh” and has high pesticide content (García-López, 2018). Consumption of locally produced staples such as root vegetables dropped from 56% in the 1980s to 33% in the 1990s (Díaz & Hunsberger, 2018). US policy also overtaxes fresh produce and high poverty rates result in people prioritising paying bills before healthy food (Ginzburg, 2021). This helps explain why only 14.5% of Puerto Rican adults consume five fruits and vegetables daily (Colón-López et al., 2013). This shift in consumption patterns also cemented supermarkets as sites of food transactions.

Yet, there is a long and diverse history of Puerto Rican anticolonial movements. The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party was founded in 1922 with a mandate to end US rule and reintegrate with former Spanish colonies across Latin America that shared a common language, history, and culture. However, the contemporary nationalist movement lacks a single organisation or unifying goal. Rather, the movement brings together “environmental issues, demands for women’s and LGBT rights, and anti-racism” (Power, 2020). These are heavily enmeshed with movements for independence because of their common vision for sovereign politics, land, and resources (Atilés-Osoria, 2014). As such, Puerto Rican resistance to

US domination has evolved greatly, though for many it still represents a liberatory movement to end colonial domination and assert Puerto Ricans positive identity and dignity (Lecours & Vézina, 2017).

4 | CASE SITE AND METHODS

Data were collected in Ingenio, a peri-urban, coastal community in Toa Baja municipality, which was extensively affected by Hurricane Maria (Figure 1). Ingenio is 13.5 km from the capital San Juan and lies in a floodplain of La Plata River in an area surrounded by farmland, predominantly for sugarcane cultivation. The settlement of low-lying households in environmentally hazardous areas has occurred in many places across the island and is a result of poor land-use planning coupled with low-income families settling in risky areas as they cannot afford land prices in more geophysically secure areas (González, 2015)

Data collection began on 16 October 2017 (27 days after Hurricane Maria) and concluded on 13 September 2018. Participant observation, repeat visits, and formal and informal interviews were adopted. Data were collected through five visits that were equally spaced throughout the period (Table 1). I conducted all interviews and conversations in Spanish, alongside an experienced Puerto Rican translator. He accompanied me on every visit and was often needed to help me to decipher the Boricua Spanish. Twenty households initially participated, however this number reduced as five households migrated to the US,¹ two households withdrew, and one household comprised a single occupant who passed away. Households differed by the physical damage sustained by the hurricane (partial or total collapse of walls, loss of roof, and/or levels of flooding) and the social profile of households (Table 2); for example, number of household members, ages, gender ratio, income, number of dependents, land title, home ownership, proximity to relief aid distribution.

I also conducted interviews with municipal and national government officials and NGOs, plus extensive direct observation and visual methods (i.e., photography and videos). Other data included observed changes in the neighbourhood (e.g., routines, social interactions, changes in the built environment, and physical artefacts) and informal spontaneous conversations within Ingenio. The study went through full ethical review at the author's university.

With the informed consent of participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed by the translator. Questions broadly focused on how people experienced the impacts of the hurricane; experiences of recovery; how they perceived the responsibility and impact of other actors on their family's recovery; strategies to recover; the reasons for adopting certain recovery behaviours; and perceptions of the effectiveness of their recovery strategies. The data were analysed using thematic analysis whereby I generated initial codes such as “commodity price hikes,” “growing vegetables,” “people miss routine food,” “slow state support,” “unequal access to federal financial support.” I then grouped these into four broader themes: Access to recovery support beyond the household; Recognising how the state shapes



FIGURE 1 Ingenio community located in the Puerto Rico context. Source: Google 2021

TABLE 1 Visit descriptions

Time elapsed since Hurricane Maria	Month 1	Month 3	Month 6	Month 9	Month 12
Dates	16–30 October 2017	14–22 December 2017	23–31 March 2018	6–15 June 2018	3–13 September 2018
Duration	15 days	9 days	9 days	10 days	11 days
Number of households	20	16	13	12	12

Source: Authors.

everyday life and recovery; Recovery acts beyond state support; Seeking “normality.” This allowed me to start drawing conclusions for the case neighbourhood and situating my analysis within the resilience and resistance literature, which I discuss below.

5 | RECLAIMING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

After the hurricane, the island did not have sufficient levels of its own consumables to help mitigate the impacts of the hurricane (Iglesias, 2018). Therefore, Ingenio residents and Puerto Ricans more broadly became vulnerable to the depletion of food on the island, shifts in the prices of consumables, and the whims of outside food producers. This prompted spontaneous household level initiatives, which aimed to reclaim the control of food supply and implicitly resist the colonial dependency on US imports.

For the initial six weeks after the hurricane, households’ access to consumables depleted rapidly for three reasons. Puerto Rico’s lack of food reserves, the island’s import dependency on the US, and the federal government’s focus on importing disaster aid (Sou & Webber, 2019). Thus, the Puerto Rican population – including many families in Ingenio – became highly reliant on relief aid. Many complained that aid was “bland,” unvaried, and was far below nutritional standards. I was shown several boxes of relief aid, which were “full of chips and candy” and canned vegetables that were “salty” and “unhealthy.” Between 6 weeks and 6 months after the hurricane, food began to be imported, but at a lower rate than pre-hurricane standards, given the precedence placed on materials needed to reconstruct homes (Kim & Bui, 2019). Local food retailers responded by increasing prices to mitigate their losses. Data show that, on average, the cost of everyday food items rose by 35% between month 2 and month 8 after the hurricane, which is significant given how the Jones Act already inflated commodity prices prior to the hurricane:

It [the price of food] has definitely gone up, and the gas too. I said to the woman in the shop that they should not be doing this [increasing prices] now, when we are all working to get better, bit-by-bit after Maria. But it was no use. She said, “I have to increase prices because there is less to sell now.” (57-year-old woman)

However, higher-income households were better able to afford the inflated prices than their lower-income neighbours, as one woman commented, “we live with my husband’s social security check, but with the increase in food prices, it is not enough.” Three months after the hurricane, seven women from across four Ingenio-based households responded to the lack of fresh foods by collectivising and growing their own produce in the garden of an abandoned house:

A group of us have started growing our own vegetables. Some peas, okra, and green beans. We have some chickens too. Now, we are seven from different families, and it’s going very good. It’s in the garden of one of the houses that was abandoned after Maria – we know they are not coming back. (34-year-old woman)

This was a spontaneous initiative, catalysed by the hurricane as none of these women grew their own vegetables or raised chickens prior to the hurricane. The women told me that they were friends prior to the hurricane, and they would routinely chat on the street and in each other’s front yards. The children across the four households often played together, which also strengthened the connections across the households. As such, the women drew on their social capital to establish the garden. I identify three reasons why women and not men initiated the garden. First, the women spent more time in Ingenio because they ran home-based businesses and/or were responsible for domestic duties given the gendered divisions of labour and heteronormativity across Puerto Rico. Second, as the women were responsible for food preparation and cooking, they were more aware and affected by the decline in food quality than men. Third, the women told me that they had knowledge of the

TABLE 2 Household profiles

Household	Number of household members	Household members (sex, age, and pre-hurricane income sources)	Land title	Home ownership	Location in neighbourhood (measured by distance from the main road where relief aid was distributed)	Month interviewed (from Table 1) and reason for leaving study (if applicable)
1	6	FAPH; MAE; FC; FC; MC	No	Yes	Moderate	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
2	5	FAPH; MAP; FAE; MAE; MC	Yes	Yes	Far	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
3	2	MAP	No	Yes	Close	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
4	3	FAPH; MAP	Yes	Yes	Close	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
5	1	MAPH	No	Yes	Far	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
6	1	FAE	Yes	Yes	Close	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
7	2	FAP; MAP	No	Yes	Moderate	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
8	2	FAE; MAE	Yes	Yes	Moderate	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
9	4	FAP; MAE; MC; MC	Yes	Yes	Far	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
10	3	FMPH; MMP; FC	No	No	Far	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
11	3	FAE; FAE; FC	Yes	Yes	Moderate	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
12	2	FAE; MC	No	Yes	Moderate	1, 3, 6, 9, 12
13	2	FAE; MAE	Yes	Yes	Close	1, 3, 6, then migrated
14	5	FAE; MAE; FC; MC; MC	Yes	No	Moderate	1, 3, then migrated
15	3	FAPR; MAR; FC	No	No	Close	1, 3, then migrated
16	4	FAE; FC; MC; MC	Yes	No	Close	1, 3, then opted to withdraw
17	1	FAP	Yes	Yes	Moderate	1, then passed away
18	4	FAPH; MAP; MC; MC	No	No	Moderate	1, then opted to withdraw
19	4	MAE; FMP; FC; FC	No	No	Far	1, then migrated
20	2	FAP; MAP	No	Yes	Far	1, then migrated

Key: [F]female; [M]male; [A]adult; [C]child; [E]employed; [P]public financial assistance; [H]home-based business; [R]emittances (e.g., from row 20: FAP = female, adult, supported by public financial assistance).

Source: Author.

vegetables native to Puerto Rico and/or that grew well, which reflects how traditional ecological knowledge is often gendered (Turner et al., 2020).

The vegetables and eggs were shared out based on “how many people [are] in the family.” The produce was not enough to replace reliance on retail produce as one of the women explained, “between us it is not a lot, but it makes a difference ... it can make the dinner a little better.” However, it supplemented their household’s diet with renewable and nutritious ingredients and fresh produce, which they valued after relying heavily on relief aid for the initial months. This initiative was maintained throughout the following 9 months of research, and the women indicated their ambitions to maintain their collective venture in the long-term,² “it is going well, and we are enjoying it, we each do a little bit and the plan is to do more, maybe different vegetables.”

The garden ensures household members have access to food that can maintain their health and nutrition so that members may continue to engage in income earning opportunities and other recovery activities. The garden also helped households to offset their expenditure so that they could invest more in housing reconstruction (Steenbergen et al., 2020). From this analytical perspective, the women’s garden represents a creative grassroots strategy to adapt to, mitigate and recover from the impacts of the hurricane, fitting within resilience vernacular and analytical frameworks. However, a resilience reading obscures the inherently political nature of the garden. In line with Scott’s notion of everyday resistance, the women did not frame their garden initiative as a political activity or an act of resistance to US colonialism. Yet, I suggest it is inherently political in its attempts to undermine US power over their everyday lives (Baaz et al., 2017). The women’s actions represent an attempt to reclaim abandoned land to take back some control of their food supply, diet, culinary experience, and tastescape. Their initiative has an implicit resistance mandate that aims to decolonise their food supply and resist the US domination of their access to and experiences of food. The women challenged the status quo as colonised subjects by seeking greater self-determination to make decisions that are independent of the systems, laws, and policies imposed by the US (Penehira et al., 2014). The emphasis on establishing locally owned and renewable food supply also has clear ties with struggles for environmental justice, which centre on notions of autonomy, direct democracy, and sustainability (Atilés-Osoria, 2014).

Food sovereignty is broadly defined as, “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Nyéléni Forum, 2007, p. 7). Within Puerto Rico, the food sovereignty movement pre-existed hurricane Maria, but broadened its grassroots participation in the aftermath (Garriga-López, 2019). Prior to the hurricane, there were many “community kitchens,” which support small-scale farming, and decentralised, local food projects, often providing free food to low-income people. They support food sovereignty through shared resources, exchange of labour and knowledge, and food in all its forms. These grassroots initiatives often have a clear political mandate, aligning themselves with the independentista (pro-independence) and anticolonial movements (Roberto, 2019). In establishing the garden initiative, the women in Ingenio tacitly became part of this larger island movement for food sovereignty. Although none of the women referred to this Puerto Rican movement, and I cannot say if they were even aware of this movement, their initiative still reflects an intention to develop a sense of sovereignty over their access to food and diet.

If one only interprets the garden through the vernacular and analytical framework of resilience, the political significance of the women’s initiative will be missed. A resilience framework erases how the garden is a response to US policy that undermines people’s access to nutritious and affordable food before and after the hurricane. And how the garden symbolises a grassroots form of resistance to US colonisation of their diets, rather than merely an instrumental and apolitical act to cope after the hurricane. Thus, resilience is a reductive frame of reference for the women’s initiative because it erases the impacts of colonialism on Puerto Ricans’ everyday lives. Resilience is analytically unequipped to recognise the political agency and the transformative potential of resilient acts that take place within ongoing colonialism.

The role of women in food sovereignty has been largely overlooked (Turner et al., 2020). However, the women’s garden initiative presents tentative findings about how daily life is fundamental to sustaining localised food systems. More broadly, the women’s initiative reveals a feminisation of resistance, whereby the nature, meaning, and subjects of political resistance are reconfigured and reimagined. That is, resistance enacted by women challenges the dominant masculinist conceptualisations of political and social transformation which excludes women and all that is represented by femininity and women’s bodies (Sargisson, 2002). Recognition of women’s role in resistance is crucial to avoid reproducing and reifying the historical masking and delegitimisation of women’s role at the heart of revolutionary and popular struggle (Dalla Costa & James, 1972, p. 13). This is significant in Puerto Rico, where anticolonialism has often been framed through a patriarchal perspective in which the role of women has typically been limited to the role as guardians of Puerto Rican culture as they bring citizens into the world (Briggs, 2003).

6 | BEYOND COPING: RESISTING DEPENDENCE

After the hurricane, the federal government's inadequate recovery programme, and the US control of Puerto Rican imports undermined Ingenio residents' ability to recover. Nevertheless, households engaged in many acts of resilience to recover from the hurricane. In this section, I argue that these acts revealed the capacity of households to engage in alternative ways of living beyond dependency on the US. Through the lens of everyday resistance these behaviours are exposed not as mere acts of coping/survival, but as acts of self-determination that temporarily challenged Puerto Ricans' dependence on the US.

After the hurricane, many families explained that federal financial assistance was vital for them to recover – particularly via housing construction. Yet, 28% of case households waited 2–3 months; 22% waited 4–6 months; and 50% of household applications were rejected. Data suggest that 50%–79% of those seeking aid across the island were denied it, and the amounts received fell far below the amounts needed to recover houses, lives, and livelihoods (NBC, 2018). The cost of materials needed to reconstruct houses also increased after the hurricane (Sou & Cei Douglas, 2019). This was because materials were not entering the island quickly enough (e.g., “three months for non-standard products”), resulting in localised price hikes as demand outstripped supply. Limited materials were largely caused by the island's limited reserves as most products are exported to the US, and because the Jones Act prevented countries other than the US from directly shipping goods to Puerto Rico. During the initial 3 months after Maria, many people were also unable to access routine income streams such as public financial assistance, for example, pensions and employment, as one woman illustrates: “[I] used to work at a chemist but I have not gone back to work as it is still closed.” And without FEMA's financial assistance many households lacked the ability to recover, as one woman told me: “We need money now ... we live with my husband's public financial assistance check but, with the increase in food prices, it is not enough.” In response, residents engaged in activities to adapt to, mitigate, and circumvent the federal government's insufficient support and the inflated market prices; that is, people took many and diverse actions to recover without the support of the US and in spite of the adverse impacts that US policy has on their lives. They did not passively wait for the federal government to help them.

For instance, during the first 6 months after the hurricane, 42% of households received support from neighbours, clearing debris, collecting aid, providing resources such as psychological help, food, water, mosquito nets, materials, and free labour for housing construction. Some households drew on their social capital to source free items such as “tin for the roof” and “pipes,” and one woman told me how she received “a donation for the roof ... the windows ... but now I am knocking on other doors to get help with the walls and the flooring.” To save financially whilst remaining in their neighbourhood, 90% of case households temporarily lived with kin-based households within Ingenio.³ This ensured people did not have to remain living in structurally precarious housing and allowed these restructured and expanded households to pool resources and share living costs, as one woman shared with me, “we help each other and [say] ‘family, I need this’, ‘I need that’ ... the relationship is good.”

Many households diversified income, with overseas family members sending monthly economic remittances of approximately US\$100–200. Once electricity was restored 6 months after the hurricane, 42% of case households began using the house as an income earning asset running female-led home-based enterprises or renting out rooms. Before the hurricane, only 30% of the case households used the house as an income earning asset. Informal loans and gifts from friends or family were also observed, as one woman received “luggage for my belongings and US\$700” from a friend; another received “furniture.” Households also modified consumption patterns by reducing expenditure on consumables by “staying in more,” improvising items such as diapers and baby food, and buying alternative cheaper foods and ingredients. One woman living in a restructured household explained:

Asopao (a traditional Puerto Rican dish) is the dish we have here ... Chicken, spices, ham, peppers, I use whatever vegetables I have, but it's very good with chile peppers. Sausage too ... Now we're not buying all of that. We make it with peas instead because it costs a lot to get meat for eleven mouths (41-year-old woman).

Many of these strategies have been observed in disaster recovery research (e.g., Lindell, 2019). Indeed, these actions represent “resilience” through their incorporation of social connectedness, economic development and social capital to adapt to, mitigate, and recover from the hurricane (Yabe et al., 2020). Critical resilience literature would suggest that shifting responsibility to recover towards affected populations is a form of neoliberal environmental governance, which absolves the state of responsibility (Joseph, 2013). However, Ingenio residents' recovery strategies do not imply removing the state's responsibility to guarantee recovery support. Rather, they represent what Serrano Garcia (2019, p. 13) calls “sovereign acts,” whereby people

recognise that “the system in which they find themselves can be organised differently and implement ideas and practices that vary from those that are currently in place” in order to recover. People comprehended the material, political, and ideological conditions created by the US that shape (and undermine) their capacity to recover. On several occasions people asked me “do you know about the Jones Act?” and then detail how this US policy was responsible for the sluggish arrival of goods and the price inflations. Indeed, people were “angry” that federal support was slow and inadequate, precisely because they recognise that the US has a responsibility to them.

In response they engaged in strategies of self-determination to recover, and when support was needed, they looked to local actors in their “chain of solidarity” (Serrano-García, 2020). In this way, Puerto Ricans implicitly asserted their sovereignty over their everyday lives and engaged in recovery despite the adverse conditions caused by US colonialism. I am not arguing that behaviours such as restructuring households, modifying consumption patterns, or depending on neighbours and kin are desirable for Ingenio residents. Indeed, many of the residents expressed discomfort about the strategies outlined above and it is important to highlight this to avoid romanticising the behaviours of colonised people. Yet, everyday resistance can encompass intent to survive, fix a practical problem, or to meet immediate needs. For example, Bourbeau and Ryan (2018) show how Palestinian women enact everyday resistance through their attempts to make life under occupation “normal” despite the struggle. They argue that one’s ability to cope with living under occupation may not change the reality of the occupation, but it certainly changes how occupation is experienced. In situations where the threat is framed as a threat to coping itself, resilience may represent resistance when it challenges the coloniser’s attempts to make the idea of remaining in one area so intolerable that people have no other choice but to leave the area. Staying and seeking to maintain a “normal” life is a mode of resistance (Bourbeau and Ryan, 2018).

Drawing on this notion, Ingenio residents’ pursuit of “normality” and to remain living in the neighbourhood reflects resistance. Their resistance is shaped by the difficult material and social conditions of the post-disaster context – which are shaped by US colonialism – and their need to adapt and maintain a sense of “normal” life. As Johansson and Vinthagen (2016, p. 20) argue, “Why should resistance have to be pure? Why is it not allowed to be ‘contaminated’ with other motives or effects?” One might argue perhaps that even such practical resistance amounts to nothing more than inconsequential coping that cannot affect the overall situation of domination. Yet, this is irrelevant because political actions assume “unspectacular” forms when power does not allow for overt forms of resistance, and where people may not be politically conscious. Solely labelling Ingenio residents’ recovery strategies as mere acts of resilience does not acknowledge people’s comprehension that US domination undermines their disaster recovery. Second, it erases how US colonialism renders these behaviours politically significant. As Aquino asserted when discussing the response of Puerto Ricans to hurricane Maria, “As a quality, resilience is positive. It is toughness, the ability to recover quickly from difficulties” (Aquino, 2017).

People in Ingenio were not acting with an explicit anticolonial sentiment. Yet, conscious political will is not a prerequisite for everyday resistance (Riessman, 2000). Gupta (2001) teaches us how resisting actions can symbolise both necessary parts of everyday life, yet still challenge the domination of colonial powers. This latter point is critical because Puerto Ricans’ actions can be borne from necessity – that is, due to the lack of federal support in the current case – but can simultaneously carve out new ways for households to function beyond the control and dependence on the US.

The recovery strategies elaborate how aspects of Puerto Ricans’ everyday lives could look in the absence of US control. In this manner, the households’ acts of resilient resistance are inherently transformative as they are not about maintaining the status quo during disaster recovery, but about considering an alternative political arrangement with diluted US control – even if temporarily (Scott, 1985). The alternate social system and everyday lives that Ingenio residents entered into in the aftermath of Maria may not be the social system that they desire, nevertheless it exposes Ingenio residents’ dissatisfaction and critique of how the US state controls their lives.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

I argued that if resilience is to claim its political potential, a framing of resilient acts as signifying resistance is possible and necessary. The Puerto Rico case demonstrates how resilience and resistance are complimentary, rather than competitive and mutually exclusive. I recognise that there are situations where the two concepts are irreconcilable and where resilience is the only means of survival and resistance is impossible. However, I am arguing for a more positive reading of resilience from a grassroots perspective, which incorporates political and historical contexts. These conclusions were made possible by exploring resilience “from below,” rather than privileging the idea that resilience is something that is defined and imposed by the state. As Kothari and Arnall (2019) suggest, focusing on the everyday can contribute to new understandings

of human/non-human entanglements. This methodology unearths that grassroots acts of resilience are widespread and that state-centric conceptualisations of resilience do not fit neatly with how grassroots actors understand resilience themselves. The neighbourhood garden, which spontaneously developed in Ingenio, demonstrates how Puerto Ricans sought “sovereignty” over their everyday lives – their food supply, diet, cooking, and tastescape. The discussion on “Beyond coping: Resisting dependence,” exposes how Ingenio residents enact resistance by recovering despite colonialism’s adverse impacts on their everyday lives, and also by relinquishing their dependency on the US, even if in the short term. In both instances, people rejected the inadequate and slow state support. They sought self-determination and discarded the idea that their ability to recover and maintain a sense of “normality” depended on the decisions and actions of the US.

It is important that one does not romanticise the how colonised and marginalised populations adapt to and recover from difficult conditions. Yet, what I set out to highlight is that to seek to maintain a “normal” everyday life in the face of a disaster and in the absence of adequate state support is inherently a highly political move. This paper demonstrates how people’s adjustments to difficulties in disaster contexts are potential sites of resistance to the structures, inequalities, or injustices that have necessitated these adjustments. Put differently, in disaster contexts, enacting resilience can mean that you find a way to “get on” with daily life without acquiescing to the state’s inadequate support. As such, in situations that necessitate that people “get on” with daily life and adapt to disaster impacts, and particularly in contexts of ongoing colonialism, actors may engage in resilient strategies that are also resistance – even if in the short term (Ryan, 2015). As Johansson and Vinthagen (2016) argue, resistant actions may have multiple intentions. In the context of colonisation, being resilient or steadfast is not “just coping” – prefacing coping or adapting with “just” obscures how much effort is needed to “get by” or cope in a context where state’s undermine people’s everyday lives before and during disasters (Ryan, 2015, p. 313). Framing resilience as resistance illustrates how communities acting with adaptability and flexibility to unstable conditions can frame their own actions as more than “just” coping – as refusing to let their colonisers decide their fates and refusing to give in. We avoid confusing resilience as acceptance of the status quo if we show it is also complimentary with resistance.

Everyday resistance also allowed me to demonstrate how resilient actors can enact political acts of resistance without being politically conscious. This is critical because if we create a category of action according to the political awareness of the actor, we risk excluding actors who are not politically aware, or who have different motivations for resistance. Resistance should not be a classification for the politically educated. It is how people act, rather than their intention that is most important. Overlooking acts of resistance that do not have legitimate or “appropriate” intentions will prevent conversations about the transformational potential of such acts (de Certeau, 1984).

The site and principal actors of resistance within Ingenio challenges the patriarchal and masculinist perceptions of resistance and reconfigures the political role of women in Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles; that is, revolutionary struggles within Latin American often focus on men and their resistant acts within the workplace, large collective social movements, the party, and representative politics (Motta, 2013). However, Ingenio demonstrates how motherhood, family, and the domestic space are sites of resistance, which transform and reconfigure the everyday realities of resilience and resistance, and the separation between domestic and anticolonial struggles. I suggest there is much more we might learn about resistance if we pay closer and careful attention to the domestic and women’s everyday behaviours. The domestic acts of “resilient resistance” across Ingenio are not enough to generate wide social transformation. This would require coalitions and integrating sectors with similar views on Puerto Rican sovereignty, including political parties, local private enterprises and foundations, universities, the diaspora, and international organisations. However, we should not judge resistance merely on whether it brings widespread social change. In other words, thinking about everyday resistance should not start from the premise that every enactment of everyday resistance will fundamentally alter the conditions in which people live. Yet, that does not mean that everyday resistance achieves nothing (Gilliom & Monahan, 2012).

In sum, it is possible to politicise the recovery/mitigation/adaptation behaviours of grassroots resilient actors when viewed through everyday resistance. Through this lens we can recognise that people’s need to adapt and be resilient has its origins in their placation, exploitation, and colonisation, and that their actions signify potential anticolonial ways of living. The term resistance offers a more solid historicisation of contexts and resonates with the postcolonial tradition of unearthing power struggles and the agency of the “subaltern.” Further empirical studies investigating resilience may uncover how populations framed as “just coping” are in fact engaging in an adaptable, flexible resistance rooted in everyday practices. Such studies must not limit themselves to contexts of colonialism, but could explore responses to poverty or conflict, in contexts where people are systematically marginalised from state support.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Gemma Sou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8434-2723>

ENDNOTES

¹ As US citizens, Puerto Ricans can freely enter the US.

² There are no data to verify whether the neighbourhood garden has been maintained because data collection ended 12 months after the hurricane.

³ Kin provided temporary shelter for 90% of households in month 1, 75% of households by month 6, and 30% of households by month 12.

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