In Spring 2015, I became the first Puerto Rican-Latinx Salutatorian to graduate from Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY). My major was Puerto Rican and Latino Studies (PRLS) with a minor in Cultural Anthropology and a concentration in Bilingual Education. I enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Connecticut-Storrs’ El Instituto: Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean and Latin American Studies. As part of my graduate work, I conducted extensive research to understand the pioneering vision, goals, and movement that birthed the field of U.S.-based Puerto Rican Studies (PRS), using archival materials and interviews with several of the student activists that contributed to the creation of the Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, one of the first in the nation. Based on these experiences and as a result of my interactions with various sites of inquiry for the field of Puerto Rican Studies, I share the following story with you.

AS A STUDENT

My academic story begins at CUNY’s Eugenio María de Hostos Community College in the Bronx in 2009. I was enrolled in a certificate program
for Youth Studies, and this was my introduction to college. Not only did I like the college experience, it melted away any fears, hesitations, and self-doubts I had about pursuing a college degree. After the certificate program, I jumped between a couple of CUNY institutions and earned an Associate degree from New York City College of Technology before finally being accepted into Brooklyn College (BC).

I began my studies at Brooklyn College in 2012, seeking to become a New York State Certified K-12 Bilingual Education Teacher. When I first looked into programs, BC stood out as one of the few colleges that had a teacher preparation program for aspiring bilingual educators. As a child, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in teaching, often serving as a student teaching assistant in elementary school. My introduction to the Department of PRLS occurred because the School of Education required their courses. Historically, the department created the Bilingual (Spanish-English) Teacher Education program. Co-founded by Professors Carmen Dinos and Sonia Nieto, who developed its specialized courses, the School of Education would focus on pedagogy while the department would focus on bilingual theory, second language acquisition, and social studies content. In addition to courses focused on emergent bilingual students (García 2009; García, Kleifgen and Falchi 2008), we were also required to take several foundational courses in PRLS, building historical knowledge about the Spanish-speaking students we were preparing to teach. One of the first courses I took was a foundational course in theories of bilingualism; it was the first time I had a Puerto Rican woman as an instructor in a college classroom.

It was not until my first semester in fall of 2012 at BC, as an undergraduate student taking PRLS courses, that I realized how many more options were available to me beyond the traditional career trajectory embedded into me as a kid. I remember sitting in the theory of bilingualism course, on the first day, hearing Dr. Vanessa Pérez Rosario introduce herself and identify herself as Puerto Rican. My immediate thoughts were, “You can be a Puerto Rican woman and do this as a job? I want to do that.” At that very moment, I felt my life had taken a new path. Those thoughts still follow me to this day; a realization of how far I have come and a constant reminder of the impact departments like, and courses offered by, PRLS could have on a student.

As a student preparing to become a bilingual educator, I imagined I would only be taking courses about teaching styles and curriculum for Eng-
lish as a Second Language (ESL) students. PRLS completely transformed this simplistic idea. Subsequent courses and extracurricular programs with PRLS enhanced my formation as a critically engaged individual and member of society, while also equipping me with the tools and skills to analyze, critique and understand the rotting system of education in this country. I also learned about the army of educators, community members, and leaders contributing to new ideas, and bodies of work for students of all languages, races, ethnicities, religions, and experiences.

Institutional inequity prevented me from graduating Brooklyn College with the necessary requirements to become a certified bilingual educator. As a working college student, I was not able to afford an entire semester away from my work obligations to comply with and complete the required student teaching component of the degree I initially sought at BC. Although the School of Education offered an internship-style program through the NYC Department of Education (DOE), with a financial benefit, I was too late learning about it and missed the opportunity to apply. Because of this, I decided to change my major from education to PRLS, preparing me even further to pursue a lifelong ambition to join a community of educators committed to reversing the dismal outcome for traditionally marginalized students the system produces. PRLS prepared me to begin my journey in researching and developing my own ideologies, practices and curriculum for the diverse populations of students I would encounter.

While I envision that I will always be involved in some way or another teaching in different settings, my experience in PRLS solidified my interest in also pursuing a career conducting research and producing new bodies of knowledge. The bilingualism courses developed my understanding of the intersectionalities of systems of education while other PRLS courses revealed layers of the world that had been hidden from me. Prior to PRLS, I had no idea a Ph.D. even existed; at the time I thought the only type of doctor was the medical one. That first semester at BC also introduced me to another Puerto Rican professor, Dr. Miranda Martínez. Her course, “Latin@ Diasporas,” exposed me to the fields of sociology and anthropology. When she introduced her own body of research and taught from the book she wrote, *Power at the Roots: Gentrification, Community Gardens, and the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side* (2010), I imagined a blueprint for the type of
goals and career I wanted to pursue. It took me a couple of weeks to develop the courage to approach her and ask about the difference between the two fields. I was apprehensive and, quite frankly, embarrassed to be a college student—specifically at BC, the place that denied me admission twice—who did not know the difference between the disciplines. She explained it to me, and I decided to take courses in Cultural Anthropology, which is how I ended up graduating with a minor in the field.

It is hard to believe that my life could have changed any further after profound self-realizations those first couple of weeks during my first semester, but it did. This time the department became a major influence. In 2013, the PRLS/María E. Sánchez Center for Latino Studies Undergraduate Research Assistantship sponsored by the CUNY Diversity Projects Development Fund was announced, and the department was accepting applications. I vividly remember reading what it would entail, and I was very interested, almost excited. But, I was no scholar. I had just learned what a Ph.D. was a few weeks before and had fought so hard to get to where I was; in my mind, there was no way I was prepared or qualified to apply to such an amazing program. I saved the flyer with the announcement and promised myself to pursue something similar during graduate school. After all, I thought the assistantship read like graduate level work. Not more than two weeks went by when Dr. Martínez asked me to stay after class one day; she had something she wanted to discuss with me. She expressed her belief that I would be a strong candidate for a research assistantship opportunity being offered by the department. I had not moved beyond my own self-doubts; I remember feeling my face turn warm as she kept describing the details and I thought to myself, “I can’t believe what I am hearing...well, if she feels I am qualified, then I will pursue it.” I decided to apply and successfully completed the undergraduate research assistantship. I gained an understanding about the process of conducting research and the experience informed me that I was able to do this kind of work. I had discovered an interest in academic research that I could pursue throughout my life. Dr. Alan Aja exposed me to the significance of conducting interviews as part of the research process while understanding how his research eventually became a published book, *Miami’s Forgotten Cubans: Race, Racialization, and the Miami Afro-Cuban Experience* (2016). It was transformative to learn that as a result of this assis-
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tanship, I would soon see my name somewhere within the pages of a book that could be found in bookstores. Not long after I completed the assistantship, Dr. María E. Pérez y González informed me about the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation initiative to increase diversity in the faculty ranks of institutions of higher learning. I applied, was accepted, and engaged in a rigorous scholar-in-training program during my last semesters at BC. These experiences greatly influenced my decision to pursue ethnographic research methods in graduate school.

Immediately after graduating from BC, I began my graduate studies at the University of Connecticut-Storrs (UConn). In this program, I chose to assess the development of the field of Latino Studies, which eventually led me to the story of student-led activism at one of the first PRS departments within CUNY—Brooklyn College, among the epicenters birthing the later field of Latino Studies. Prior to arriving at UConn, I started to learn about the history of PRLS at BC because it was sustained by intergenerational conversations and dialogues embedded throughout the curriculum, teaching practices of PRLS faculty, and interactions with department staff. I was also fortunate to have been one of the last students to take courses and work alongside one of the former pioneering student-activists, Professor Antonio O. Nadal, the longest-serving faculty member of the department before he retired after 43 years. As a result of my time as an undergraduate student in the department, I became keenly aware of how much was still unknown and missing from scholarship and archives regarding this particular history at CUNY as other campuses took prominence as the center of this bi-coastal movement for transformation, inclusion, and Ethnic Studies. My research at UConn further exposed this glaring omittance from scholarship. I acquired my Master of Arts in International Studies from UConn’s El Instituto: Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean and Latin American Studies in 2019.

As I culminated my Master of Arts degree, I realized I still had much more to research, uncover, and write regarding the historical, socio-economic, and political roles departments like PRLS have imprinted within the canon, further fueling my interest to pursue a doctoral degree. Motivated by the existence of the CUNY Digital History Archives, I decided to apply to the CUNY Graduate Center’s Urban Education program with the expectation to further develop my Master of Arts thesis and body of research. I applied, was accepted, and in
the fall of 2020 commenced my first semester as a doctoral student, a dream I would not have imagined had I not encountered the PRLS Department.

**EARLY CAREER**

During my transition from undergraduate to graduate studies, I worked for the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños/Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro) at Hunter College-CUNY as a research assistant, oral historian, and in various capacities on several special projects. My experience at Centro solidified my interest in further developing my skills as an academic while exposing me to a very distinct institution of Puerto Rican Studies. I became acquainted with Puerto Rican history in new ways, often through intimate glimpses into the lives of historical figures; reading and seeing archival materials such as the handwritten work of pioneers like Dr. Antonia Pantoja gave me a new perspective about the history of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans and the process women like Pantoja endured while affecting change on a national scale. I conducted oral history interviews with New York-based Puerto Ricans who have contributed to sustainable institutional transformation, such as Luis Garden Acosta and Elba Montalvo—visionaries for Williamsburg, Brooklyn’s El Puente organization and El Puente Academy for Leadership and Justice, and The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc., respectively; both continued to expand the production of knowledge for the field and also preserved stories of victories and possibilities for authentic social change. My community experience resulting from my work with Centro taught me about the enormous responsibility institutions, such as a public university, have for and in partnership with the communities they represent. My work with Centro expanded into the New England area through programming and initiatives, such as the New England Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans Summit, and the Puerto Rican Heritage Cultural Ambassadors Program, established to extend and teach about the history and culture of Puerto Ricans both in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

As an adjunct at CUNY since 2018, I have worked for the Department of Latin American and Latino Studies (formerly Latin American, Latino, and Puerto Rican Studies) at Lehman College, PRLS at Brooklyn College, and for the College Now Program, a collaboration between the NYC Department of Education and CUNY for high school students to earn college credits while
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also preparing for the transition to the university. Through these experiences, I have gained a deeper understanding, appreciation, and intensified motivation to advocate for the expansion and sustainability of the field of Ethnic Studies, particularly Puerto Rican and Latinx Studies. Each teaching experience has been distinct at each campus, primarily because of the unique high school and post-secondary demographic differences of the student populations. What has remained consistent is the vast amount of unknown aspects of history regarding Puerto Ricans and Latinx peoples that students bring to the classroom. It is a delicate balance at the end of the semester between an appreciation that students communicate about how much they have learned and grown in skill set for the many aspects of their lives, and the painful realization that our school systems and curriculums are not yet teaching about these particular historical contributions and their impact on global societies.

Puerto Rican and Latinx Studies as Praxis

My PRLS background was essential when I began working at a middle school with a predominantly Puerto Rican and Latino/a student body in New England, which was vastly different from any classroom in New York City I had experienced as either a student or Department of Education employee. The school made me feel like I was transported to the 1970s and ‘80s, when the majority of Spanish-speaking students in NYC public schools were Puerto Rican. It reminded me of the school environments I read about in books and articles by educators like Dr. Sonia Nieto and Dr. Luis Reyes. I was grateful PRLS exposed me to that particular aspect of American history because it informed my interactions with the students. The majority of students came from different pueblos (towns) in Puerto Rico, and some were second-generation Puerto Ricans. There were also several other nations represented, including the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras. Most of these students, including several from Puerto Rico, were recent arrivals to the United States. My studies with PRLS prepared me to understand the differences not only among the Puerto Rican student population, but also the students from other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. I was equipped with the knowledge, understanding, and pedagogical tools to engage students while also facilitating their own placement and consciousness within history and society, for the present time and their future.
One particular example of how my PRLS experience became helpful with this population of students was during a math class. One of my responsibilities was to work with the math teacher and the emergent bilingual students in her class. Language varieties matter, and I quickly picked up on the different ways of discussing math in Spanish because the students would teach me the vocabulary they knew from their native pueblos (towns). Even though the school policy was to rely on Google Translate as an attempt to bridge the linguistic divide between the majority of staff and students, the translations did not reflect the many variations of Spanish and Indigenous languages spoken by the youth, often stifling student content learning. I remember working with a student from Guatemala: her answers to the math problems were always correct. The issue was the work she produced. Her method of solving math was not the same method the teacher used during the lesson; it was one she learned at school in Guatemala. Although she was reaching the correct answer, systemic pressures forced her to learn the method taught by the math teacher because of the institutional goal of preparing her for the state exams she would have to take in a few years. These exams require you to show your work and are graded based on the method used to solve the problem. This is also an example of how cultural and historic knowledge from non-European methodologies in the United States are often erased and devalued to fit into a system reproducing outcomes primarily benefiting a socio-economic structure designed to make profit for a slim percentage of people harboring wealth resulting from what is often referred to as the “hidden curriculum of work” within systems of education (Anyon 1980). Anyon’s study found that students from different social classes are taught differently based on a hidden, often subconscious, curriculum producing occupational goals for a future workforce.

A major takeaway from PRLS courses was how much history and stories of people have been erased from spaces of learning, balanced with the knowledge of agency that multi-ethnic and multi-racial people and their communities possess in enacting authentic, action-based transformative change. Although I was born a Camuyana in Puerto Rico, and grew up in New York City with a vibrant Puerto Rican identity, it was not until my undergraduate tenure with PRLS that I began to learn about Puerto Rico, the Island, its history, its people, and the many facets of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Learning about this
particular history enabled me to process and understand my own realities, and those of the communities I am a part of, fortifying stronger bonds and more equitable collaborations. In addition to expanding my understanding of public education, bilingual education and the theories, pedagogies, and ideologies surrounding such topics, I was also exposed to the intersectionality between gender, class, immigration, and social movements.

Learning about the student movement at Brooklyn College during the 1960s and ‘70s transformed my understanding of what it means to be alive. Inspired by the actions of demonstrations, office takeovers, and organizing within the college and surrounding communities, I became more conscious of my own actions, critically analyzing the ways I had decided to live up until that point in my life. I became more involved on campus and with community initiatives to address systemic inequities and contribute to community building and empowerment. My role as a student and maturing scholar evolved into acts of resistance. As a PRLS student, I learned about theorists and visionaries such as Antonia Pantoja, Paulo Freire, and Gloria Anzaldúa, who continue to inform various aspects of my life, both personally and academically. My research is inextricably linked to this personal growth and development because of the academic gaze used as a tool to research and learn through. As a self-identified community-engaged scholar, I make every effort to be inclusive of and to sustain the groups I choose to work with; my aim is to avoid any academic exploitation of peoples, their communities, intelligence, and assets.

It was because of PRLS courses that I learned about my undocumented, and DACAmented hermanas and hermanos (sisters and brothers). For instance, as a person born in Puerto Rico, I was not aware of my own citizenship privilege until the day I was in conversation with a friend and impassively responded to their excited announcement that they obtained their green card. My experiences never forced me to question my own constitutional rights, let alone the rights of others who risked their lives for a better and new opportunity in this world. Through PRLS courses and interactions with peers and friends, the enormity of that moment my friend so candidly shared was revealed to me. PRLS also enabled me to learn about my own linguistic biases, an essential mirror to acknowledge and confront as an educator. For instance, prior to my experience in PRLS, I never questioned my use of the term Amer-
ican, as a subconscious, monolithic label, ignoring the nations, peoples, and histories north and south of the United States who are also Americans.

My commitment to Puerto Rican and Latino/a studies is strong and exists whether or not I decide to pursue a career within these fields. There is a serious need for these particular bodies of knowledge, along with Africana, Asian, and Indigenous Studies, especially today, more than 50 years after their initial adoption into the academy. It is this very institutionalization of the once grassroots movement that creates a specific need for sustainability and a continued assessment of validity for community integration and impact reminiscent of the original vision and goals for such departments, programs, and production of knowledge. Beyond the consistently proven benefits of student identity development (Sleeter 2011), the fields of Puerto Rican and Latino/a Studies inform our collective today and tomorrows. The Latino/a population in the U.S. continues to grow; between 2010 and 2019, Latinos/as in the U.S. increased from 16 percent to 18 percent, accounting for 52 percent of all U.S. population growth (Noe-Bustamante, López and Krogstad 2020). It is imperative that all sectors of society become familiar with and have a deep understanding of the various sources of knowledge within the fields of Puerto Rican and Latino/a Studies in response to this growing demographic. More specifically, sites of inquiry within the field of Puerto Rican Studies are essential to understanding the 2019 uprising in Puerto Rico against Governor Roselló, as well as the complexities of the disaster response after Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017; both events linked to global issues impacting the lives of people. Puerto Rican Studies reveals aspects of history excluded from traditional academic discourse, such as the complexities of colonization and the anti-colonial struggles for unity and inclusion that have prompted people like me to occupy spaces that were not designed for us. Without Puerto Rican or Latino/a Studies, current and future generations will not know what was possible, or worse, what continues to be possible. Historic examples of this includes Open Admissions at CUNY, when any NYC high school graduate interested in attending the public university was eligible to do so as long as they qualified within the merit-based admissions policy for the four-year colleges (Fabricant and Brier 2016; Okechukwu 2019), or California’s AB 2016 bill enabling a model curriculum for Ethnic Studies to be developed and implemented as a graduation requirement for high school students in the state.
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CRITIQUES

While I am firm in my advocacy for the fields of Puerto Rican and Latino/a Studies, I am also critical of its shortcomings, including the academic institutionalization that has stripped it from its original goals of community engagement and student decision-making power. An unfortunate reality is that these community and student empowerment goals, fundamental to the original student-activist demands and for the optimal functioning of departments and programs of Puerto Rican Studies, have too often been diminished due to administrative budget cuts and other inadequate bureaucratic policies that stifle their growth and leave little room for a beneficial Puerto Rican Studies and community partnership. Often, community and student collaborations are in the form of internships lasting one semester, void of much-needed time to build up neighborhood resources and are instead designed to accommodate the academic calendar. For instance, staff at local community-based organizations (CBOs) have to reintroduce new college students to their organization and the role they will play during their internship—often every semester or every other semester—while also taking time away from their already overburdened duties as CBOs, to develop a rapport between the student representing the institution and the network within the CBO, inclusive of its stakeholders.

This process usually takes a couple of weeks, and often does not account for the delayed internship placement period that results in even less time for interactions between the student and CBOs, hindering both the student learning experience and the purpose of the internship objective. Through my own experiences, I have become keenly aware of the powered-down voice and loss of decision-making power students possess, even as they are further embedded into institutional co-optation through institutionally monitored student clubs and programs. This is not to critique the existence of such clubs and programs as part of the college experience, as they do contribute to a unique multi-dimensional learning opportunity for students, but rather to question their effectiveness in developing the next generation of leaders, doers, and thinkers away from the constraints of systemic oppression that academia often recycles.

During the early phase of PRS at Brooklyn College, a childcare center was developed as a solution for community members that needed both a culturally and linguistically relevant and reflective educational environment for their...
families. This childcare center, La Escuelita Bilingüe (The Little Bilingual School), brought together BC students, faculty, staff, and community members as integral agents of change. Other anti-colonial, liberatory strands of PRS engaged students in decision-making processes that impacted policy and practices that directly affected them without having to wait to be invited to some of these select spaces, as is the practice today. Students also helped sustain the department by serving in administrative roles that exposed them to all aspects of the university system, further building their skills set, while also enabling them to make decisions in the best interest of their department.

A Legacy of Achievement
Right before I graduated from Brooklyn College, I learned about a new organization, still in the stage of formation, consisting of many of the pioneering student-activists that were part of the early development of PRS and sister struggles during the 1960s. The Alliance for Puerto Rican Education and Empowerment (APREE) sought to continue the legacy of this action-oriented intergenerational community of people while developing practices and philosophies that further empower and transform the Puerto Rican community. The mission of APREE is to advocate for social transformation through programs focused on education and the advancement of the Puerto Rican community. I dedicated myself to APREE to gain a deeper understanding of the process and intricacies of grassroots community-building, especially because of the more than five decades worth of expertise and experience from the now mostly retired group members.

My commitment to APREE also became a personal endeavor as an opportunity to join the legacy of achievement still growing, as a way to actively give back to the movement that transformed my life. Some of the outcomes APREE has attained include the implementation of a readers theater-style community-building program for NYC high school students; funds for college scholarships; publications focused on asset-based approaches to in-
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form policy and social transformation, and advocacy letters and statements in support of PRLS at BC; hosting cultural events to preserve and celebrate Puerto Rican history and culture; and the production of a short educational film discussing the story about the creation of PRS at BC, *Making the Impossible Possible: The Story of Puerto Rican Studies in Brooklyn College.*

**FIVE DECADES OF PUERTO RICAN AND LATINO STUDIES**

The 50-year commemoration of the Department of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at Brooklyn College is coinciding with a national intensity of civil unrest many say has not been felt or seen since the 1960s. The collective *lucha* (struggle) from the mid-20th century peak never stopped, and the current uprisings of 2020 are proof of this. The Ethnic Studies movement and its acts of resistance over the last five decades in the U.S. gave birth to new forms of thought and inquiry, while also opening up spaces for the voices of those historically silenced and omitted over centuries of colonialism in this hemisphere. All of these movements are intertwined, and the legacy of PRS at BC is one of the many survivors of this intergenerational fight. I share this reflection as testament and acknowledgment that I was able to experience this educational transformation because of the visions and revolutionary struggles of those that were deprived of such an opportunity. My work, academically and personally, is directly impacted by this legacy; I make every effort to do my part in keeping the movement alive, whether it is through my teaching philosophy; dedicating time and effort to grassroots, community-oriented initiatives and programs; or acts of self-love and appreciation for who I am and the intergenerational force I continue to be a part of. It is because of movements like the one for U.S.-based Puerto Rican Studies fifty years ago that public education students have better prepared teachers to understand and value the rich and distinct backgrounds and realities of their students. Advocacy for Ethnic Studies curricula continues to emerge, albeit slowly, and be implemented across the nation, reaching new demographics and populations of people under the yoke of institutional structures still driven by a Euro-colonial mode of operation. As an alumna of PRLS, I invite you to join the movement advocating for the growth and sustainability of the fields of Puerto Rican, Latino/a, and all strands of Ethnic Studies because it strengthens and enlightens us as globally interconnected peoples.
NOTES
1 A more productive, equitable, and asset-based term for English Language Learners.
2 Camuyana is a term used to refer to people from Camuy, Puerto Rico, my hometown and residence as a toddler.
3 A term used by formerly undocumented individuals that qualified for the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, temporarily preventing them from deportation while gaining eligibility for a work permit in the U.S.

REFERENCES