

**Critical reflections on and in “the field”: The Study of ‘Religion’ and the methodology of
true (reflexive) praxis in Puerto Rico**

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Abstract

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Through a close look at the current debates in the study of religion and a critical analysis of my experiences as a researcher in (neo) colonial Puerto Rico, I illustrate the importance of true reflexive praxis as methodology. I argue that critical scholars focus on praxis in the field itself to see how knowledge (formed and re-formed) might serve to perpetuate or challenge forms of oppression and domination. I also share some of the unique methodological challenges that arose during my own fieldwork in la Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna in Nagüabo, Puerto Rico. I offer this to show the indispensability of the methodological praxis for scholarship, for the researcher in the field, and the people being studied. This thesis centers on the development of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis through an analysis of its application to the (living) field and beyond. My hope is that by examining praxis in the field, scholars can see how they might be contributing to oppressive processes that harm the people whom we hope our work might help.

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Chapter 1

FROM, IN, AND INTO THE FIELD:

Puerto Rico, The Church, and “The War on Drugs”: The Personal is Political

The sun had finally relented. Soon after, the moon’s arrival brought with it the baptism of sacred breezes; and like many of the barrio’s former *bichotes* (drug kingpins), the night was born-again. I found myself perched up on the wall of the *malecón*, my back to the wind and waves, talking with my friend Raul. We were trying to escape the heat of a long day; to dry up the sweat and achieve a much needed cool-down. Caribbean breezes have a way of mopping up what the Caribbean sun spilled during her long day’s work.

We were not the only ones perched on that seaside wall; there were others worshipping the winds that night. *That night*, along with the sacred, moonlit breezes, every star in the universe opened her eyes, gazed upon us, and brought with them just about everyone who ever gazed upon them. That night, the *malecón* was filled to capacity; Puerto Rican tourists, tourists in Puerto Rico, and the local *playeros* who saw them all as tourists, came together just to *hangear*.

There were young parents with their small children, old parents with their children who, themselves, were young parents, young men and young women who might soon be parents—and all were smiles. All were ‘chillin’ that night. Salsa music was pumping from the makeshift speakers outside of Rafi’s liquor store, and young people showed through their perfectly coordinated dance moves that just because Reggaeton was *afuego*, it didn’t mean Salsa was dead. It was around 9pm, when I heard Hector Lavoe’s classic “Calle Luna, Calle Sol” creep out the speakers and three motorcycles creep up the street. They revved their engines and drowned out

the music; the smoke from the ground grinding their tires stung our eyes and grinded the dancing to a sudden, nervous, halt.

By that time, fear busted through all the smiles like the bullets that busted out of their burning, smoky shells, and through that smoke-filled rush of smile-crushing-fear came the flashes, then the popping. Instinctively, we all crumpled to the ground as if the ground could never be low enough. At my side was a toddler, being sandwiched by concrete on one side and dread on the other; his father had crawled to him and smothered him with a frantic embrace. The motorcycles revved again. Then we saw them scream away, saddled by boys in baseball caps—boys—with AK-47's wildly shooting at the stars as if they wanted them to fall along with all the fathers and mothers on top of their sons and daughters; but, the stars stayed so as to shine their light upon the one who hit the ground but did not get back up. There he lay, 24-years old, head exploded, eye pouring out of his skull, with his girlfriend lying next to him trying to pour it back in. "It's not real," she shrieked in desperate, short, stolen breaths. It was as if she hadn't enough air to keep up with the pain. We hung on every breath and as she gasped between those shrieks, we all suffocated. Some of us thought it could get no worse...We thought this until his mother arrived. *Her* shrieks twisted the stomachs of the most hard-core of killers in attendance. *Her* torment turned them away in excruciating shame and sent them home wet-eyed and human. Someone shouted, "Let them kill each other!" The mother's shrieks turned to sobs as she slowly buried her head into her son's punctured chest, but her sobbing was muffled just enough to unmask the frantic wailing advancing on us from behind. The gunmen were not the best of marksmen and left lead reminders of their rampage buried in the bloody thighs of two teenage girls. The girls writhed in agony on the concrete like cats that had been struck by a speeding car. Eventually their bodies took mercy on them, and they just passed out. A few minutes later, some

brave soul stealthily collected their brown, petite, bloodstained bodies, hastily stuffed them into a small Toyota, and brought them (presumably) to the hospital.

Two hours later, the Puerto Rican police showed up along with “Operaciones Tácticas” (Tactical Operations). The homicide division created a perimeter around the body. There was no need for this; no one would dare move towards the man lying there for fear that the gunmen had scouts at the scene watching them. They didn’t want to be next. It wasn’t long before the police began to raid homes in the poor section of town and interrogate the community about the murder. Before long, the National Guard was seen side-by-side in Puerto Rican police patrol cars. The state’s policy of “La Mano Dura” (The Firm Hand) was flexing its grip, and the whole community was caught up in it. It was “just another day in paradise.”

Jorge Rodriguez-Beruff (2000), focusing on the Puerto Rican state’s discourse surrounding the “drug-related violence”, has written on the role and function of the “War on Drugs” in defining and “re-organizing” the macro-political structure of Puerto Rican society (Rodriguez-Beruff, 2000, p.162). He carefully analyzes the way in which the state constructs the illegal drug problem through an examination of discursive strategies employed to legitimize the state’s enforcement policies to the public. Rodriguez-Beruff, does well to not only to see how the “War on Drugs” shapes the macro-political structure of the island toward a more authoritarian trajectory, but also how the state-owned language of “security” is used to accomplish this.

However, the state is not the only institution that ‘owns’, shapes, and names the violence typically associated with illegal drug trafficking. The Pentecostal church, which has recently gained significant political and cultural influence in Puerto Rico has also become a significant responder--sometimes competing with the state in defining the problems/issues associated with

illegal drug trafficking--especially in poor communities (Hansen, 2006; Martinez-Ramirez, 2005). One important study specifically focuses on the church's discourse surrounding addiction and illicit drug use through ethnographic studies of Pentecostal rehabilitation clinics in Puerto Rico (Hansen, 2006, p. 433). In her article "Isla Evangelista: A Story of Church and State: Puerto Rico's Faith-Based Initiatives In Drug Treatment," Hansen demonstrates the level of influence the Pentecostal church wields in shaping the drug discourse. Through the analysis of Pentecostal and competing discourses surrounding 'addiction' (to illegal substances), she discusses how the church was able to change the very definition of addiction from a mental health 'problem' to a spiritual/social issue (Hansen, 2006).

While the treatment strategies offered by Evangelical churches might differ from and be more 'successful' than other institutions (i.e., bio-medical, correctional, mental health, etc.), as Hansen points out, the church's response may still serve to constrain alternatives to the way the crisis is constructed as a problem in much the same way as the state. That is, literature that focuses on addiction and treatment does not focus on the social-political and economic implications of the cultural logic of that treatment/addiction; it does not concern itself with the systemic function of that logic. Thus, while Hansen's work is valuable in showing a shared ownership of the drug problem between the state, biomedical, and church discourse, as well as revealing some benefits for drug addicts in the reimagining of 'addiction' by the church, it does not question (nor does it intend to) the church's possible role in reproducing the social and economic conditions associated with drug trafficking and drug-related violence (directly or indirectly) through the cultural logic of its discourse. Rather, her work (and others like it) focuses on 'addiction' and the Pentecostal churches' role in combating it, but doesn't address the systemic and structural implications and potential impact of both the way that these churches

understand drug trafficking and drug violence, as well as what understanding what this discourse precludes.

El problema de las drogas (the drug crisis) in Puerto Rico (and elsewhere) is a multifaceted construction, involving not only addiction, but also economic activity (trafficking) and violence (especially murder). Yet, not enough research focused on the role the Pentecostal churches might play in reinforcing some of the tacit ideological assumptions (and their function) underlying the state-owned discourse as well as the implications of this. In other words,, more research is needed to investigate the potential and real impact of the way Pentecostal churches discourse shape the understanding church members have of social issues such as the “War on Drugs”.

If, in fact, Pentecostal discourse shapes the populations’ perceptions of the crisis in a similar way to the state’s discourse in the alternatives that it precludes, then it, like the state, could play a role in constraining similar alternatives to addressing this crisis. And if Rodriguez-Beruff (2000) is correct in his contention that the impact of the “War on Drugs” (and its supporting discursive mechanisms) reorganizes the state in an authoritarian fashion while simultaneously maintaining colonial processes and protecting neoliberal economic interests, then the Evangelical churches could be functionally serving the same economic interests that, according to writers like Griffith (2000), have helped produce the ‘drug crisis’ in the first place. In other words, the necessity of exploring the impact of Evangelical religious discourse on (neo)colonial processes cannot be ignored. However, this research must be done in such a way so as not to replicate colonial processes that concern us and stay as true to the people we are trying to help.

Salvation or Repression?: On Researching the Pentecostal Church, the “War on Drugs” and Poor Communities in Puerto Rico

Concerns with positionality and author/authority deeply impacted my research in Puerto Rico. This was true through all aspects of the research process where the potential to replicate colonial/oppressive dynamics through my interactions in the living-field (and beyond) were continually present. Asad (1993) warns that “in modern and modernizing societies, inscribed records have a great power to shape, to reform, selves and institutions...In the long run, therefore, it is not the personal authority of the ethnographer, but the social authority of his ethnography that matters” (p.197). Given this, I needed to be especially conscious of the social authority that I embodied under shifting circumstances and through various phases of the process, from fieldwork to analysis to presentation. My goals were to make sense both of the suffering I had witnessed during the years I had lived in Puerto Rico as well as the measures undertaken to alleviate this suffering.

In other words, I wanted to know how evangelical church discourse might shape the way people in Puerto Rico, especially in Nagüabo, understood the *el problema de las drogas*. My research question was as follows: How does Pentecostal Church discourse in *Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna* impact the way in which church/community members perceive and understand Puerto Rico’s drug crisis? Clearly, this question could be approached through a variety of research methods, through multiple strategies of inquiry, and through various approaches to examining discourse. But, given my concerns with social justice, with colonialism, positionality and with my role as author/authority, I needed to approach this question in such a way so as not to reproduce colonial practices through my fieldwork and authorship. That is, I needed to respect the praxis of the church members at every phase. I wanted to make sure that my

interactions did not impinge on the praxis of people with whom I spoke, and when it came time to analyze those interactions, I needed to do so in light of how they were produced, under what conditions, and within what context. Unlike other qualitative research approaches that emphasize context in the abstract, e.g., structural forces, etc. (Strauss & Corbin year; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Russell & Ryan, 2010), I needed to know how structural forces were manifested through specific interaction--of which I was an integral part--that occurred in the field. To me, it was not enough to consider the political-economic, social and cultural context of fieldwork, but also to consider how that that context manifested through not just the field, but all phases of research; My concern was with the power dynamics of the production of data and the authoring of analysis.

As I explain below, because human beings “are praxis,” methods that alienate¹, constrain or instrumentalize their praxis not only dehumanize them, but also fail to offer us a more genuine² understanding of the experiences of the people we claim to serve. Given this, my method of inquiry and my methodology needed to be (reflexively) *dialogical* and committed to praxis.

This thesis was inspired by fieldwork conducted in a Pentecostal Church in Nagüabo, Puerto Rico. What follows is not an ethnographic study, but a methodological one. It is the result of my reflections on my transcription of ten interviews, field notes, and the extreme discomfort I experienced with the standard processes of coding, analyzing, and the extension of

¹ This is not to be confused with Marx’s usage of the term wherein he describes the process and the impact of human beings’ separation from their work, human specificity etc.... Instead, “alienation” refers here to the process where the praxis of the research subject is decontextualized through the various phases of the research process. Since it is context that provides text with meaning, when the researcher extracts the text of the researched without

² “Genuine” understanding refers to an understanding of the world of the ‘subject’ by the researcher that emerges when praxis of the subject is respected (discussed below) and when the interactive context through which that praxis emerged is accounted for.

theory rooted in the coding and analysis of empirical material devoid of context. Particularly, in terms of context, I was deeply concerned about the tendencies to separate the researcher from the research--particularly the ‘data’-- and the axiological, epistemological, and ontological roots of these tendencies.

My concerns emanate from ontological premises that formed the basis of my own worldview, premises that guided my thinking throughout my early life and what drew me to the works of Marx, Gramsci, Sartre and Freire as a university student later on. My discomfort with the way the researcher is situated in much of qualitative research, particularly (post)positivist research, emanates from a concern with oppression and, by extension, reflexivity. However, “reflexivity” must be understood *relationally* and as *process*—as implied and reflected through the writings and the logical progression of ideas from Marx, Gramsci, Sartre through Freire. As a result, I needed to think deeply about the role of (true) dialog and praxis in engaging in reflexivity throughout the whole of the research process. In the following sections, I describe and explain the importance of reflexivity, dialog and praxis for researchers concerned with colonization and whose work is geared toward social justice.

RESEARCH, COLONIALISM AND THE NEED FOR TRUE (REFLEXIVE) DIALOG

If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process.

- Paulo Freire (2000[1970], p.126)

Freire (2000 [1970]) defines “praxis” as the human activity that changes and transforms the world through the dialectic of reflection and action. Yet, for Freire, praxis is also an ontological given. That is, the ability to reflect-act upon and change the world is a specifically and uniquely human quality. Praxis, therefore, is a marker of human specificity; people don’t merely *engage* in praxis, they “*are* praxis” (Freire, 2000[1970], p. 100).

However, praxis can work both to build and destroy, to liberate and oppress. According to Freire (2000[1970]), there is both “revolutionary praxis (true praxis)” and the “praxis of domination” (p.126-7). That is, although praxis is an ontological given (i.e. human beings are praxis), the nature of that praxis is socially determined. This ontological reality has a special methodological significance for qualitative research that is driven by commitments to social justice: Namely, if human beings “are praxis,” research methods that alienate or constrain the development of genuine³ praxis deny the humanity of those they study. Research that doesn’t strive in all of its phases to respect, cultivate and root itself in the praxis of those it studies, research that is not dialogical and that does not recognize “the researched” as living breathing praxis, instrumentalizes the researched in the interests of the power relations embodied by the researcher.

Thus, the importance of dialog and for scholarly research praxis--especially for researchers concerned with colonial domination and other forms of oppression-- cannot be overstated. The power and utility of theory itself--its usefulness in challenging various forms of oppression (rather than reproducing them)-- depends on its healthy dialectical and dialogical progression with the practice that it helps to inform, and which, in turn, informs and shapes

³ By “genuine” I mean that the praxis being described is operating in a way that is less encumbered by the narratives and ideological frames of the researcher and is closer to the kind of praxis where the power dynamics of interaction are more reversible rather than static.

theory. Yet, this dialectic is conditioned by complex processes: research praxis is not simply ‘theory’ and ‘practice’-- abstractions that simply ‘relate’ to one another--but a process that evolves through real, flesh-and-blood, historical human beings that apply theory, observe practice, re-evaluate theory in light of practice, and re-observe practice in light of reevaluated theory. In the next section, I describe more fully “true praxis,” “the praxis of domination,” and “dialog.” In addition, I discuss the importance of cultivating dialogical conditions in the field and in all phases of the research process for qualitative researchers concerned with colonialism and/or social justice.

True praxis, the praxis of domination, and the importance of dialog

“True praxis” is praxis that is directed at transforming structures of oppression or the transformation of the reality by which the oppressed are oppressed (Freire, 2000[1970]). It is the praxis that aims toward creating un-alienating/non-oppressive conditions. True praxis involves the ability of the people to “say their own words and think their own thoughts” (Freire, 2000[1970], p. 126). Yet, in order to say their own words and think their own thoughts, the oppressed must be able to critically reflect and act on their world. When this reflection-action exists and functions for the other, this is not possible. Capital, hegemonic discourse, certain forms of discipline and socialization, and violence all function to alienate the praxis of the oppressed (Freire, 2000 [1970]; Gramsci 2003 [1972], p. 245; Marx, 1959[1844]). The production of praxis for another under oppressive conditions is what Freire calls “the praxis of domination” (Freire, 2000[1970], p. 126-7).

In contrast to true praxis, this praxis of domination engages the oppressed not as beings of praxis with whom (together) they can name the world, but as *objects* to be reflected-acted *upon*. Under the praxis of domination, the praxis of the oppressor instrumentalizes the praxis of

the oppressed, which functions to secure the oppressor's position as agent of oppression. This instrumentalization of the praxis of the oppressed can, then, become praxis-for-the oppressor (or for oppression) because the oppressed can only reflect-act on their conditions uncritically and through the interests of their oppressors. That is, in conditions wherein the praxis of the oppressed becomes reflection through the eyes of the oppressor, the resultant action becomes action in the interests of oppression, and hence further reproduces the conditions of oppression and the praxis of domination. Therefore, the praxis of domination involves alienating the praxis of the oppressed in the interests of the oppressor.

Not only does the praxis of domination amount to a denial of the people's *true* praxis, but it also corrupts the praxis of the oppressor; it denies him the ability to critically reflect on his own world. Since reality is 'objective' intersubjectivity (Gramsci, 2003[1972], p. 444-49), and therefore, inseparable from the human beings that produce it, to alienate the reflective-action of the oppressed is, therefore, to deny reality itself. This is true because the oppressed's praxis--albeit under alienating conditions and in alienated form--produces the world. While much attention in qualitative research has been focused on voice, in this thesis and in my methodology, I focused on praxis.

Interpretive Research: Salvation or Repression?

The mere act of displaying voices does not translate into allowing people to speak. Interpretive research that engages in the praxis of domination cannot "say a true word" (Freire 2000[1970]) about the people they study. It is possible for researchers as individuals to be ethically (but, not methodologically) committed to true praxis, but the methods they might employ--the impact these methods might have--can still serve the praxis of domination. Clearly, research methods must derive from the research question, and certain methods are, by their very

nature, non-dialogical. And although non-dialogical methods may be employed in order to justify dialogical approaches, interpretive research concerned with social justice, colonialism, and oppression should always pay attention to the kind of praxis that occurs at all stages of the research process. If our goal is to understand the world of the oppressed so as to play a role in changing this world, we must focus ourselves on the kind of praxis that produced that understanding. We must be ethically and methodologically committed to true praxis.

The praxis of domination cannot speak critically or truthfully about the world while simultaneously denying the world of the other; the agent of oppression can only ‘lie’ about his or her world because his world rests upon and is dependent on the world of that other. Given this, I argue, it is not possible for scholarship that is rooted in the praxis of domination and which studies colonized or oppressed peoples to “speak a true word” about them or their world: This is true for both theory and practice, for the theoretical and the empirical. If research praxis involves theory derived from empirical work that was not rooted in dialogical conditions and committed to the true praxis of the people it studied, that theory can only reflect the dominant ideologies, assumptions, values and the modes of production they support (and that support them) rather than explaining the practices of the people being studied in a useful way.⁴ (This has been argued in debates about the study of religion, which I write about below.) That is, scholarship rooted in oppressive praxis can only, at best, reflect the assumptions and values that function to ‘secure’ further oppression.

Moreover, Freire (2000[1970]) argues that “no one can say a true word alone” (p. 88) which clearly reflects the need for the cultivation of what he calls ‘dialog,’ and what I will refer

⁴ By ‘useful theory’ I refer to theory that aids researchers in effectively cultivating dialogical praxis within the discipline and without. Therefore useful theory must be theory that is decolonizing and does not cultivate the praxis of domination; it must conceptualize the world in dialog with the oppressed so that it can challenge oppression.

to as ‘true (reflexive) dialog’ throughout the rest of this thesis. According to Freire (2000[1970]):

Dialog is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence dialog cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming--between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them (p.88).

Critically reflecting-acting on the world is a *dialogical* process; thus, true praxis must be dialogical. Therefore, without true (reflexive) dialog, there can be no *true* praxis (or what I will refer to in the rest of this thesis as ‘true (reflexive) praxis’); there can only be the praxis of domination. The praxis of domination is non-dialogical in its functioning. Since “no one can say a true word alone,” I argue that research that does not dialogically and reflexively engage the praxis of the people cannot speak truly about the people’s world (or their own), and worse, contribute through the denial of the people’s praxis, to the praxis of domination. Following this line of thought, I argue that it is crucial that scholars concerned with colonial domination and the impact of their theories on colonial structures be aware of *which* praxis occurs in the field and *why* -- for in order to properly critique and assess our theories, we must also be critical of the data and/or empirical material that informs them.

In this thesis, I argue that we must also continually pay attention to the fact that we researchers are real, historical human beings who perform this praxis under very specific social, political, and economic conditions, and we produce and are produced by historical-cultural forces that ceaselessly shape and are shaped by the direction and nature of this praxis. I argue

that we must look at *which* praxis informs the way the ‘data’ is ‘generated’ and/or ‘empirical material’ ‘gathered.’ In the next section, I begin by discussing the importance of fieldwork praxis and (reflexive) dialog for the production of theory, especially for those scholars concerned with social justice.

Scholarship, Reflexivity, and the Production of Theory and Practice: Producing more useful theory.

Scholars and researchers concerned with social justice must be concerned with speaking ‘true words.’ For their work to be useful to other scholars and researchers as well as the communities about which they are concerned, it must strive to be rooted in (reflexive) dialog as much as possible; it must strive to root itself in the people’s praxis.

As stated above, scholars committed to social justice and against colonialism and oppression should strive to pay attention to the kind of praxis that occurs at all stages of the research process. However, there are moments in the research process where scholars are looking to theorize, and they must reflect on the fieldwork of other researchers. Within these moments, scholars/researchers must concern themselves with the conditions under which the fieldwork that has been authored by other researchers was produced. That is, scholars reflecting on the fieldwork of other scholars must inquire as to whether this fieldwork emerged under truly *reflexive* and, therefore, *dialogical* conditions. Thus, the scholarship that looks at fieldwork when constructing theory must favor writing available that was more dialogically inspired.

Furthermore, in looking at the results of authored fieldwork, the scholar must also be able to critically examine whether the ‘data’ produced was, in fact, the product of (reflexive) dialog. In other words, scholars concerned with social justice must always read previous scholarship as closely as possible, paying special attention to how the scholar collected and analyzed his/her

data, so as to discern the conditions through which this research was produced. Looking at research in this way is especially important when evaluating research/scholarship that purports to advance social justice, particularly research that ‘writes up’ and ‘names’ or ‘gives voice’ to the people and practices of ‘the oppressed’ and/ or colonized.

Ideally, the production of theory should be in healthy dialog with the practice it hopes to explain. That said, for theory that aims toward liberation, the relationship between theory and practice must be dialogical; research praxis must be dialogical praxis. If theory is rooted in non-dialogically inspired practice, it cannot theorize liberation because it is rooted in domination. Theories that relate to non-dialogically inspired practice end up telling researchers and scholars more about the power-relations that produce them (as researchers) than about the people that are being researched. When research is the result of the praxis of domination, it means that the acquisition of knowledge from the field is a result of the instrumentalization of the researched in the interests of the researcher and the society he represents. For example, as discussed in the next chapter, Asad (1993) and others (see volume by Orsi, 2012) have shown that theories of religion (and other social scientific concepts)--particularly theories generated prior to the post-colonial shift--reflect rootedness in the unreflexive and non-dialogical fieldwork of anthropologists (and other social scientists) who through their work, embodied, reflected, and perpetuated Western colonial domination (Asad, 1993; Smith, 1999).

Yet, how do we as scholars know if the conditions wherein which these studies were produced are dialogical? The answer is that we cannot be certain. To name them wholly dialogical without entering our writings into dialog with the people who contributed to being written about would itself be an act of oppression. On the other hand, there are some indicators of probable dialog.

What I am suggesting here is that the interactive dynamics--the nature of praxis itself--forms part of the 'data' being analyzed and, thus, should be presented in such a way to reflect this. Unfortunately, it usually isn't. Because of this, I argue that by offering interactive dynamics (i.e. the kind of praxis that occurs) as part of data, we can evaluate our work and teach ourselves more effectively how we view what counts for dialog and dialogical praxis. Constructing and presenting data in this way allows other scholars and researchers to look at interactive conditions (the part of the data most often ignored) that were analyzed to produce the results of the research they are studying. I will discuss this in more depth in the description of my own fieldwork later in this thesis.

In sum, reflexive scholarship needs to occur in and out of the field. In addition to reflecting on our assumptions and how they affect scholarly praxis, we must also look at the dynamics through which we conduct our research--the praxis in the field itself--in order to see how theory is formed and reformed and how it might serve to perpetuate or challenge forms of oppression and domination. Without a simultaneous understanding of the real, concrete conditions of the researcher, his social location and shifting positionality--as it occurs situationally--we cannot understand the nature of this praxis (whether or not this 'practice' is produced through an instrumentalization of praxis by the researcher (the praxis of domination)). Without an understanding of the interactive dynamics (i.e. the nature of praxis), we as researchers concerned with qualitatively understanding the world of the oppressed and colonized cannot determine whether the knowledge we attain in the field is genuine and useful.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 2, through a brief look at the current debates in the study of religion, as well as a critical analysis of my experiences as a researcher in (neo)colonial Puerto Rico, I illustrate the

importance of true (reflexive) praxis as methodology. I begin by showing that understanding how power and history shape our chosen methods and methodologies as ethnographers studying religion and how understanding field-as-process (i.e., the concrete and ‘living’ conditions for praxis in the field) and the kind of praxis that occurs in the field and beyond can help us more effectively critique key theories as well as properly evaluate authored fieldwork.

Then, in chapters 3 and 4, based on my experiences in the field, I argue that looking at the development of praxis in the fieldwork phase of research can help us develop useful research praxis and, hence, more *useful theory*. Reflecting on our chosen methods and methodologies can help us understand a critical moment during fieldwork praxis as well as the research process in general--the moment where the researcher as a social-historical and cultural being engages with the very phenomena he will ‘name’—and, thus, through his author-authority, create. After all, it is this ‘creation’ that informs, influences, and advances or challenges theory. What I suggest here is that an analysis of one’s research methodology-in-action offers valuable insight not just into the social production of key theoretical categories, but the social production of authored and observed practice as well. Understanding how practice (in my case, religious practice) is produced by the ethnographer *and* the field and *as* the field offers a key vantage point in which to fully comprehend the nature of a particular theory as well as the opportunity to advance its usefulness.

Throughout chapters 5, 6, and 7, in order to illustrate the importance of true (reflexive) praxis as methodology, I focus on some of the unique methodological challenges that arose during my own fieldwork in la Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna located in Nagüabo, Puerto Rico. I offer this to show not only the importance of reflexivity for ethnography, but also the indispensability of true praxis as a guiding principle for the flesh-and-blood researcher on the

ground, those researchers who are concerned with useful theory, and the people whose world is being studied. Specifically, I discuss how my ethical commitment to social justice, and my unique positionality as a mixed-ethnicity diasporic Puerto Rican born and raised in New York, former resident of Nagüabo, Puerto Rico, and current university graduate student resulted in *the field entering me*. I focus on how my commitment shaped my choice of methods, and how my positionality and personal biography presented challenges and influenced the research I conducted as well as how I conducted it. In addition, I show how my field interactions guided by a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis helped me navigate those methodological challenges and further shaped my research process.

Last, I will offer some suggestions as to the importance of this *methodology of true (reflexive) praxis* for the generation of useful theory and the broader dialectic of research praxis within disciplines in the social sciences. My hope is that by examining praxis in the field, scholars can see how they might be contributing to oppressive processes that harm the people who we hope our work might help. Further, I hope that by aiming for true (reflexive) praxis--in the field and beyond--we as scholars can try to challenge those processes

Chapter 2

SITUATING THEORY AND PRACTICE VIA PRAXIS:

The Study of Religion, Colonialism, Reflexivity, and Fieldwork

On the Reflexive Study of Religion

The study of religion is facing a period of deep critical reflection, a period of deconstruction and self-examination. Recently, much of its key concepts, its methods--its very subject matter--has found itself under the scrutiny of various social scientific fields as they attempt to achieve some agreement on what exactly they are studying (Lewis, 2012; Taves, 2012; Orsi, 2012; Asad, 1993; Cadge, Levitt & Smilde, 2013). According to most scholars of religion, the postcolonial shift in the social sciences, especially in anthropology and religious studies marked the genesis of the deconstruction of certain key categories, among the more important of these being 'religion' itself (Asad 1993; Orsi, 2011).

Yet, while many of the long-held modernist assumptions about 'religion' (and how they affect the conception and construction of the religious field) are undergoing a period of deconstruction at a theoretical level (Lewis, 2012; Taves, 2012; Orsi, 2012; Asad, 1993), not enough is understood about how these modernist assumptions affect the fieldwork of social scientists (Smith, 1999; Uperesa, 2010) including those who study religion; how and in what ways fieldwork affects these assumptions; and what can be done to address this. In particular, it is important to understand how the problematic power relations that historically produced these modernist assumptions about religion have affected these scholars' research (Smith, 1999). In other words, not enough has been said regarding the implications of this period of reflexivity for ethnographers in the field (Asad, 1993; Orsi, 2012).

Furthermore, not enough has been said regarding the relevance that understanding the role of praxis in the field has for understanding these implications. Thus, it is equally important to ask “What takes place during the fieldwork phase – wherein the researcher is (co)producing the practice that will later inform theory? What can be done so that the authoring of this practice doesn’t reinforce the problematic power relations that undergird modernist assumptions about religion, and continue to politically, economically, socially, and culturally dominate and oppress the human beings that concern those researchers with a social conscience? How can we begin to do all this while being cognizant of our authority (especially those ethnographers from colonizing nations) to ‘name’ religion either ‘salvation’ or ‘repression’ (or both)? A brief discussion of Talal Asad’s (1993) work helps address some of these questions.

Religion, (Post)Coloniality, and Power

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad (1993) addressed the issues of power and history as they relate to the ethnographic study of religion. Specifically, he argued that the study of ‘religion’ has been, and continues to be, influenced by certain epistemological and ontological assumptions rooted in the modern Western historical project. Asad (1993) explains that the search for a universal definition of religion invites scholars to see it as a distinctive “space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other” and that “theoretical search for the essence (which is itself a reflection of modern Western assumptions) of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power” (p. 29). In addition, Asad (1993) traces the origins of this tendency to separate ‘religion’ from power by linking it to Western assumptions about the separation of church and state as well as Western biases pertaining to the inherent irrationality of religion itself (Asad, 1993).

Significantly, Asad shows that ‘religion’ is a modern historical construct forged in the West and one which provided both the contrast and the basis (along with the West’s colonial contact with other non-Western cultures) through which ‘The West’ came to define itself. In other words, the origins of Western modernity itself are intimately intertwined with the construction of a universal category of religion. It is also worth mentioning that the social scientific category of religion itself was heavily influenced by anthropological investigations—within colonial contexts and for colonial interests—and conducted through research practices rooted in epistemology and methodology bereft of reflexivity (Asad, 1993; Asad, Fernandez, Herzfield, Lass, Rogers, Schneider & Verdery, 1997; Gunn, 2009; Lewis, 1973; Tapper, 1995; Orsi, 2012). These research conditions were not conducive to any reflexive dialogical approach by the researchers gathering information, and reflected a consistent alienation of the praxis of the people whose world they claimed to want to understand.

It is no wonder that studying the social scientific concept of religion tells us more about the West than it does about those it set out to study (Asad 1993). That said, cognizance of the power relations, as well as their historicity, is indispensable to an understanding of ‘religion’ and the development of theories that aim to conceptualize it. Asad stresses the importance of linking ethnography to the development of theory: According to Asad (1993), the student and researcher must also be conscious of his or her own positionality, particularly his or her position within the *web of the power relations* that produce the ‘religion’ being studied.

The Power To Name

Asad (1993) makes clear the importance for students of religion to properly historicize the object of their study and be aware of their position in the power relations, which have produced that historical category. This is equally true, in general, for ethnographers ‘within’ the

field—and outside of it—who must come to terms with how the very boundaries of the field itself are generated through relations of power. Bibler & Hirsch (1998), argue that ethnographic writing is inextricable from the power relations within which it operates and, thus, advocate more explicit attention to how anthropologists negotiate their positions during fieldwork as well as how they reposition themselves through their writing. Specifically, these authors were concerned with the implications of naming “resistance” in their ethnographic writing based in fieldwork that occurred in highly politically charged environments. According to Bibler & Hirsch (1998), the naming of “resistance” could carry with it very real consequences, not just for those named, but also those doing the naming.

The case of the study of religion is no different. The naming of ‘religion’ or what counts for religion, as well as the social function/impact that religion may be said to serve (by social scientists and political actors alike), can have very real and significant consequences. How religion is defined and how it is perceived to function affects the way dominant power interests relate to it and those who practice it (Asad, 2012). Furthermore, for the ethnographer whose biography and genealogical roots tie him/her to the community or place wherein the ethnographic study is centered, the need to navigate the complexities of this positionality is especially significant (Uperesa, 2010).

On Reflexivity as True Praxis: Problematizing Boundaries in “the field”

Uperesa (2010) reminds us that being both rooted in academia and in the communities that we are studying--especially if those communities are colonized--presents complex challenges for ethnography as it can also bring with it a “different weight of responsibility” (p. 291). For Uperesa, ethnographers who are concerned with social justice, and are writing about their communities beneath their gaze, can be forced to “work harder and under closer scrutiny

and with higher expectations” (p. 291). In a sense, ethnographers such as Uperesa are caught between different worlds – different competing yet interconnected allegiances and interests. Yet as Uperesa (2010) and Bibler & Hirsch (1998) argue, ethnographers must be careful to place these boundaries under scrutiny as well.

According to these and other authors, the boundary between fieldwork and academic writing isn't as clearly drawn as it might seem; instead, our writing should reflect the challenges of the shifting positionality and political contexts that marked the fieldwork experience (Asad, 1993; Bibler & Hirsch, 1998; Uperesa, 2010; Vidal-Ortiz, 2010). These authors remind us that, as much as we might want to believe that the academy is separate from the field, it is not. On the contrary, it is part and parcel of the complex power-relations that constitute the fieldwork phase (Bibler & Hirsch 1998, Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Uperesa 2010; Vidal-Ortiz, 2010).

With this recognition comes responsibility. Asad (1993) states, “in modern and modernizing societies, inscribed records have a great power to shape, to reform, selves and institutions...In the long run, therefore, it is not the personal authority of the ethnographer, but the social authority of his ethnography that matters” (p.197). For Asad, “this authority is inscribed in the institutionalized forces of industrial capitalist society, which are constantly tending to push the meanings of various Third World societies in a single direction” (Asad, 1993, p.197).

When cognizant of such realities, ethnographers concerned with social justice—who also do their fieldwork in (neo)colonized countries—are presented with especially unique ethical-methodological challenges which require a deep awareness of one's shifting positionality and shifting identity as it relates to the shifting social reality of the field itself (Vidal-Ortiz, 2010). Drawing on these lessons above, I argue that understanding the role of reflexivity in the field –

true *reflexivity committed to true (reflexive) praxis* -- is essential to practicing useful praxis at all levels of the research process. In addition, I argue that the practicing of true (reflexive) praxis as methodology is indispensable for research designs that aim to represent the voices of oppressed people and play a role in changing their conditions.

Chapter 3

TRUE (REFLEXIVE PRAXIS) AS METHODOLOGY:

Theory, Theory Development, and Reflexivity: Praxis and “the Researcher”

As stated above, currently, the study of religion is passing through a period of deep reflexivity. Due to the post-colonial shift in the study of religion, much of its key theories and assumptions are being reexamined and reformulated (see volume edited by Orsi, 2012). By far, most of this critical examination has focused on the major epistemological and theoretical assumptions by tracing their genealogies back to Western colonialism and the project of Modernity in general. In addition, some scholars have also stressed the importance of how these historical legacies have shaped the way that scholars conceive of (religious) practice in the field (Bender, 2012). Yet, while examining these genealogies and the conceptions of practice that they shape is a crucial strategy for decolonizing all scholarship, I argue that we must go further.

First, we must analyze how these genealogies--these epistemological, theoretical and ideological legacies--affect the researcher in the field given his specific social location within the web of power relations wherein he is situated (Asad, 1993; Bibler & Hirsch, 1998; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Smith, 1999; Uperesa 2010; Vidal-Ortiz, 2010). Once the researcher enters the (living) field (or the living field enters him), the power and history he embodies will – in one way or another – help to transform this field. That is, this is the crucial moment where the researcher brings with him the knowledge – and the power that undergirds it – into direct contact with the people whose world he is studying. This is the moment where he will either engage in true (reflexive) dialog guided by a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis or in the praxis of domination. Second, and equally necessary, is an analysis of the complex and shifting positionalities produced throughout the fieldwork process wherein praxis is continuously

generated under shifting field conditions (and boundaries) and, thus, at any moment, could change its direction.

While much attention has been paid to the importance of reflexivity for ethnographers (Anderson, 1989; Asad, 1993; Bibler & Hirsh, 1998; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Twyman, Morrison & Sporton, 1999; Uperesa 2010; Vidal-Ortiz, 2010; Kahn, 2011) as well as the importance of critically historicizing the concept of ‘the field’ itself (Berger, 1993), not enough has been said about the impact both the former and the latter have had on the evolution of theory and knowledge production in general (Asad, 1993; Twyman, Morrison & Sporton, 1999). To put it another way, to generate useful theory, we must look at all the moments of its cultivation – not just its historical genealogy in the abstract, but through the real, concrete experiences in the field and how the field, itself, generates and is generated by this theory-as-historical-product.

In other words, I agree that scholarly disciplines that pass through a period of deep reflexivity can benefit from reflecting on the historical roots of its key theories and concepts, but they should also reflect on the way in which the object of research is *approached* (what I refer to as the *interactional dynamics of fieldwork*), under what conditions (i.e., historical, economic, social, political, etc.) and how this phase of the research process has re-informed the theory under scrutiny.

Methods, Methodology, and Reflexivity: Self-Reflexivity vs. True Reflexivity

The way in which we articulate our methodologies and the methods we choose are deeply influenced not only by pre-existing knowledge and training but also by the conditions in the field as well as the positionalities and identities occupied by the researcher. For ethnographers concerned with social justice, in order to truly understand the impact of our scholarship, we need to understand the relationship between power, history and our fieldwork. We need to know how

power and history relate not only to our chosen research questions (i.e., how and why we problemize them), but also how power and history shape our chosen methods for pursuing that research.

I argue that understanding the concrete practices that constitute the field and fieldwork as they relate to the generation of ‘data’ and/or gathering of empirical material is indispensable toward understanding the kind of praxis that occurs at that moment and that identifying this praxis is crucial for an understanding how theory develops. Further, I argue that for ethnographers concerned with social justice, a *commitment* to true (reflexive) praxis should be present at all possible moments – not just mid-fieldwork and pre-fieldwork – but post-fieldwork and writing as well. For it is through the praxis of the ethnographer that the field becomes “the field” in the first place, and if the praxis is truly and reflexively dialogical, the (living) field will be more available for him to further engage in dialogical – hence more useful – praxis throughout all phases of the research process.

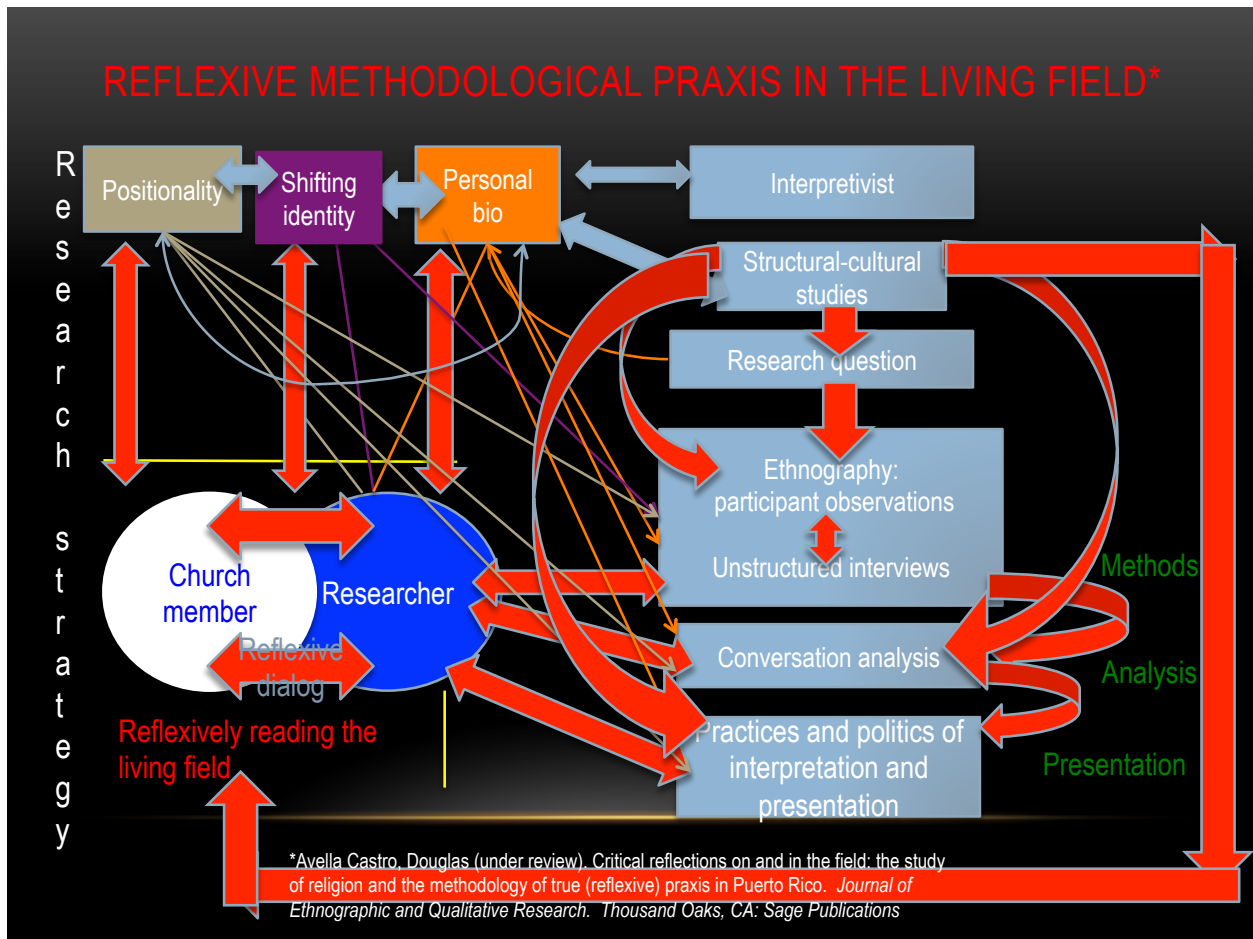
When it comes to generating useful research praxis, understanding the complex power relations inscribed not only in our chosen methods but also our methodology matters. For researchers concerned with social justice, true (reflexive) methodology must reflect a commitment to true praxis, and true praxis can only happen through true (reflexive) methodology. Furthermore, I suggest that true (reflexive) methodology must and can only arrive through true (reflexive) dialog (guided by a commitment to true [reflexive] praxis) because true reflexivity cannot deny the other (or his praxis) in order to be truly reflexive. The relationship is dialectical and internally related; there is no ‘self’ without the ‘other.’ True reflexivity requires the other’s praxis in order to be reflexive, as true praxis requires the true praxis of the other to be true. The researcher must attempt to apprehend his self in that moment and through all moments

– as he exists in the intersubjective reality he shares *with* the other and as he exists *for* the other—not in order to control or dominate his existence for the other (which is impossible), but in order to be truly reflexive, in order to understand. As such, reflexive methodology that does not arise from true (reflexive) dialog guided by a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis is not actually reflexive because it misapprehends the self as *separate* from the other.

Reflexivity and the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis

As mentioned above, there is a difference between being self-reflective and truly reflexive. Self reflection is rooted in a more individualistic ontological conception and involves the researcher thinking about what they felt or experienced through the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). On the other hand, *true reflexivity* is rooted in a reflection of self through the eyes of the other. In fact, this kind of reflexivity is inextricably tied to the other’s subjectivity and is reflected in what Sartre referred to as “the look” (Sartre, 1992 [1956]). To clarify, *true reflexivity* is the self-reflection that is rooted in being seen and reflected upon by and through the other. This kind of reflexivity, *true reflexivity*, must be dialogically mediated.

Thus, my concerns with author/authority and my commitment to praxis at all phases of the research process organically resulted in a commitment to true (reflexive) dialog. However, this dialog had to occur and be pursued within an awareness of my shifting identity and my body-as-text, as this related to my shifting positionality. Further, I needed to simultaneously relate this material to the shifting requirements of the ‘living field.’ To navigate dialogically through such complex and mobile terrain, a guiding methodological principle is necessary, for this reason, I developed the *methodology of true (reflexive) praxis* (Avella-Castro, 2014, under review). The following is a diagram depicting this methodology:



Methods and True (Reflexive) Praxis

The same collection methods could be used in conjunction with varying methodologies. The same is true for strategies of inquiry. Like many other studies that look at the impact of religious discourse on specific communities, my project involved an ethnographic strategy of inquiry aimed at systematic investigation of the role of Pentecostal churches in helping alleviate the effects of various social issues facing these communities. In many respects, my project is in line with various scholars (see for example, Hansen (2006) who have investigated the increasing presence – and role – of Evangelical Churches and/or U.S. missionaries in helping communities in Latin America. However, the unique challenge for my research methods (and research

process in general) was to pursue this strategy of inquiry given my methodological commitments: to allow for my epistemological, ontological and ethical predilections to actualize through the collection of empirical material and its analysis.

In my project, I aimed to analyze a Pentecostal church's membership and leaderships' understanding of issues that affect the communities within which they operate. I attempted to develop this understanding through conducting participant observations through attending daily church services and events. In addition, I obtained ten unstructured interviews based on snowball sampling. Church members were asked to participate in the study as they were encountered and through the existing networks I had within this community. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for textual analysis in accordance with the principles of my methodology and method of inquiry. Their identities have been kept confidential and all names are pseudonyms.

As stated earlier, one of my chief concerns pertaining to my role as researcher was author/authority. With regard to analysis, I was specifically concerned with the imposition of my authority on the words of church members. I was concerned that their words and actions could be written in such a way that meaning would be imposed on them from without rather than arrived at through dialogical means. In other words, I needed to understand how their utterances were produced in relation to my utterances and under what conditions. It was not enough to understand what was said, but how and why it was said: I needed to understand the context and subtext of what was said as it was produced. This was a crucial step toward understanding the impact of church discourse on its members.

Bakhtin's (1981) understanding of heteroglossia (i.e., the importance of context over text), intertextuality (relation between utterances) and Psathas's (1995) method of instances in

conversation analysis was especially useful in guiding my analytical method. Furthermore, in keeping with the methodology of true praxis, all coding and analysis was done by me and a second researcher who shared the same paradigm and theoretical perspective and who was guided by the same methodology using the same method of analysis. The purpose of this was to have the second researcher (an intercoder) analyze the impact of church discourse – as well as the interaction with it and other discourses – on both me and the church member as we both produced (interactionally) the subtext and context of our utterances. She coded and analyzed the impact of discourse by coding and analyzing the subtext and context as it was produced through and within our conversation. Having this second researcher code and analyze was an important part of the analytical phase because it allowed me to be reflexive about the coding and analysis itself through dialog with her. This helped ensure that a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis remained present in the coding and analytical phase of the research process.

‘Intercoder’ dialog: Dialectic of Dynamics

As my research will show, the importance of context and subtext over text is critical. Yet the subtexts of the researcher and how this becomes context for the analysis of empirical material (in this case, exchanges in an unstructured interview) can only emerge through true (reflexive) dialog wherein the intercoder can see them in operation as such. How the assumptions and subtext of the researcher and the researched interact to form a context for the emergence (and later analysis) of themes can be thought of as the interactional dynamics/ interactive ‘moments’ of the interview. These dynamics can only be constructed through a dialogical process that involves the interaction of the researcher with an intercoder who, through dialogical means, can help dislodge the researcher’s subtexts (and assumptions).

Illumination of subtext is key to the development of themes and this is key to honoring the words of the researched: We must not only know what was said, we must try and understand why it was said, when it was said and how it was said. We must also attempt to understand each utterance within its interactional context as it was uttered; this involves an understanding not only of the subtexts at play, but also of the dynamics between the researched and researcher and how the subtexts (of both researcher and researched) and assumptions impact those dynamics.

(Post)positivist approaches to research (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 2003; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) that emphasize the importance of text over context or misapprehend the role of the researcher in constructing ‘data’ are at significantly greater risk of imposing their subtexts and assumptions on the coding and analysis phases of the research. In fact, there were key moments in both the initial coding and intercoding phases of my own research where the critical importance of context, subtext and interactional dynamics manifested while naming themes. Here the lack of attention paid to context – not just social, political, economic and historical context but to interactional context in which this context manifests and which involves the dynamic process of researcher and the researched constructing empirical material, would have resulted in the naming of radically different themes. Moreover, the analysis of the impact of these themes on the way that church members understand social problems affecting them would be significantly corrupted as well.

It is imperative that we as researchers (and scholars who read other research) understand the dynamics that produce the utterances we code and analyze. For example, it pays to know whether a particular utterance emerged with a defensive tone. Understanding why the utterance emerged defensively might clue us in to the significance of that utterance and tell us something about the dynamics of the interview that turns out to be crucial for the naming of themes and

subsequent analysis: It might reveal the impact on the dialogical process of a researcher's assumption and that the utterance should be understood as it emerged with the utterance preceding it. In other words, part of understanding the impact of discourse is to understand how it impacts the interview – under what conditions the utterance emerged and when and how was it deployed. As we all know, the same sentence can have drastically different meanings depending on context and, in fact, many times this meaning can be contradictory. In cases such as these, it is indispensable for the researcher to have a thorough understanding of context and all that it entails.

Nevertheless, we as ethnographers concerned with social justice do strive to understand more than just our own assumptions, biographies, identities, positionalities and the way in which they impact our research. And, while it is useful to understand the way in which we impact the research process, the object of our efforts is to know about those whom we research. There is no way to accomplish this other than attempting to “name the world together” (Freire, 2000 [1970]). (Post)positivist and positivist qualitative research that attempts to detach the researcher from the construction of the ‘data’ fails to apprehend the concrete realities of human inter-action. These forms of qualitative analysis, if they are concerned with understanding the way others understand their worlds, can only truly speak about the social, political, economic, cultural and institutional systems of power that they reflect. In so doing, they deny the other and cannot speak with him, only *for* him.

On the other hand, research that is committed to a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis does not deny the other through ‘controlling bias’ or striving for objectivity; it embraces the ontological realities of data ‘collection’ by revealing the interactional and contingent dynamics

of the process. Here, other researchers can see the interactional contexts from which key themes and analysis emerge; they can consider the context from which our conclusions arise.

Practicing True Praxis: Modernity, Religion, and (Neo)Colonial Relationships

The need for dialogically inspired reflexivity is especially important for the study of religion in that ‘religion’ as a social scientific category is, in and of itself, a product of the Western, modern historical project which includes the colonization of various non-Western peoples (Asad, 1993). Given that the category of religion emerges with and through Western colonialism and defined in its power interests, scholars who study religion must be especially careful not to contribute to defining, naming and creating practice that reinforces colonial processes. So, apart from understanding the genealogy of those categories, we must also look at our research process and fieldwork to see how they challenge or uphold problematic categories. In other words, when it comes to the study of religion in colonized societies (or anywhere), it is not only necessary to engage in true (reflexive) praxis as methodology, but also to position these ethnographies – along with the genealogies of our most fundamental concepts – beneath our critical gaze. Thus, we must turn our analysis to the very production of praxis in the field.

true (reflexive) dialog in one of the U.S.'s Last Remaining Colonies

As stated earlier, when challenging the colonial roots of our most crucial epistemological constructions, it is not enough to focus on the historical production of ideas, but also on the flesh-and-blood ‘authors’ of these ideas (and the people they author) within the contexts of their production in the field and beyond. Knowing how these ideas were produced and under what conditions and through what fieldwork dynamics is critical for the continual development of useful research praxis.

Furthermore an examination of how these colonial-modernist assumptions relate to fieldwork in colonized countries and how this impacts theory can be especially illustrative of the importance of dialogical fieldwork praxis for theory. Because of these colonial-modernist assumptions, it is the fieldwork within colonized countries that requires us to pay the most attention to reflexivity and praxis. These particular places are significantly more vulnerable to be shaped, named, and defined by relations of power that are well beyond the control of the people who they most impact.

Given this, these researchers, whether they know it or not, shoulder a heavy responsibility. This is even more true for researchers whose biographies and genealogies are linked to the colonized countries in that it is assumed that their connections to the colonized country allow them a certain insider authority that could, itself, serve to authorize more deeply, the naming, defining, and authoring that marks the praxis of domination. Nothing is more effective for the purposes of domination than to use the dominated to achieve that end (Fanon, 2004 [1963]).

Because of Puerto Rico's unique colonial political-economic status, as well as the complexity of my own positionality, my fieldwork on the island illustrates the importance of true (reflexive) praxis as methodology as well as the importance of critically assessing methodology for a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis. In the next section, I address the development of my methodology as a function of the navigation of my own complex positionality as a University of Washington Tacoma graduate student from the colonizing country and member of the community where I did my fieldwork. In addition, I discuss the role of my own complex biography and multiple identities as a student from the colonizing society, son of a colonized mother, and how these identities shifted in importance and usefulness through the changing

dynamics of the field itself. Most importantly, I discuss how the use of true praxis and reflexive methodology allowed me to navigate the complex dynamics of this particular fieldwork context effectively and respectfully so that I did not disregard the role power played in how I ‘authored’ the people I observed and interviewed. In Chapter 4, I describe true (reflexive) praxis as methodology in practice. I do this by locating the research process within its ontological, epistemological and ontological dimensions as well as rooting those dimensions in my personal biography.

Chapter 4

TRUE (REFLEXIVE) PRAXIS AS METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE:

Reflections on and from the Living Field

The Field Enters the Researcher

Not long ago, I was still living in the small, coastal city of Nagüabo, Puerto Rico – a city known to Puerto Ricans for its boardwalk and nightlife, perhaps less so as the birthplace of fallen revolutionary, ‘Machetero’ Filiberto Ojeda Rios and perhaps infamous for what the state and some academic disciplines refer to as ‘drug-related homicides.’ My community was particularly infamous in the latter regard, sometimes losing three young men in a day to gunfire, some of whom were intended victims, many who were not. For me, the proximity of this violence was closer than I would like to discuss, but it suffices to say that it deeply shaped my thinking and affected my daily life significantly. In fact, my preoccupation with it, the people it impacts, as well as its social causes and implications were - and continue to be - the inspiration for my research: In a way, I did not enter the field, but the field entered me.

Ironically, my concern for the level of violence in my community was simultaneously the reason for my leaving and the reason for my return as a researcher. Initially, my decision to apply to graduate school was motivated by my desire to leave a situation that I felt was dangerous and held no healthy prospects for my family. To this day, I can remember studying for the GRE on the floor so as to avoid any *balas perdidas* (stray bullets) that escaped the gun battle happening outside. At the time, living without that stress was my number one priority.

Yet, after I arrived in Washington State to attend graduate school, my nights were spent awake thinking of all the young men’s bullet-pierced bodies I had seen lying on the streets for

the past few years. There were too many memories of tear-soaked, grieving mothers' faces standing over their lifeless sons, shrieking that they did "all they could to save them, but couldn't." And then there were the memories of the churches who promised those grieving mothers salvation: that there was hope for them, for those boys who hadn't fallen yet – for all of us – as long as we took 'El Señor' into our hearts. I remembered how strong the church's message was, how ubiquitous and persistent. I remember wanting to believe, but being skeptical. I needed to know if the salvation for Puerto Rico's youth resided *en la palabra*, in the word of God. Soon enough, my research topic found me.

The questions that drove my research seemed simple: What was the impact of *la iglesia's* interventions in this community? Were they 'saving souls' or in some way? Were they contributing to the long process of domination set in motion in 1898? Yet, I learned quickly, that these questions were far from simple. In fact, there was nothing simple about Puerto Rico's situation, its complex relationship with the United States, not to mention my own complex relationship with both countries – all of which made my research that much more challenging. In order to understand these challenges, a brief overview of Puerto Rican history is necessary.

Locating Self in Power-Structure: Puerto Rico's colonial context

Although Puerto Rico was invaded by the United States in 1898, it was under the Foraker law of 1900 that its colonial status became official. Puerto Rico was to be defined as "an unincorporated territory belonging to, but not part of the United States" (Santana, 1998, p. 124). Later, under the Jones Act of 1917, Puerto Ricans technically became U.S. citizens, but not until 1947. Soon after, through an amendment to the Jones Act, they were permitted to elect their own governor. Yet, much of the substance of the Foraker law remained intact: the island would continue to remain under political and economic control of the United States.

For decades, Puerto Rico imports substantial amounts of food from the U.S. and receives large amounts of Federal Aid to support its ailing economy (Dietz, 1982). In fact, since at least 2010, half the population has been considered eligible or receives some form of food assistance in the form of *cupones* or ‘PAN’ (Programa Asistencia Nutricional) from the Federal government (Millan, 2010). With high unemployment and the illicit drug trade being partially redirected from the Mexican-U.S. border, Puerto Rico has become a hotspot for drug trafficking and use, so much so, that the drug trade has become a significant part of the Puerto Rican economy (Rodriguez-Beruff, 2000).

Given the island’s long history of colonial repression and domination and its current tenuous situation, I had to, and continue to remain mindful of this power-dynamic throughout the research process. It was through embracing my role as authority, through locating myself in the power structure, and being honest about where I am situated, that I was able to better navigate the shifting requirements of the field.

Embracing Author/Authority: In the Field

In order to engage in true (reflexive) dialog in the field, we must embrace our author/authority. To not embrace one’s author/authority serves as, and is generated by, a misapprehension of the power relations that constitute that authority and, therefore, the fields of power, which in turn support those relations. This misapprehension of power relations is a theoretical flattening of social structure itself, allowing for its practical reproduction – hence, the author/authority’s inability to apprehend his participation in the reproduction of oppression.

The misapprehension of structure is also a misapprehension of structural violence because, especially in (neo)colonial societies, structure *is* violence. For ethnographers working in colonized countries, in order to engage in useful praxis, the people whose world we wish to

study must be able to engage in (unalienated) praxis as well. In other words, the relationship of the ethnographer to the people must be (reflexively) dialogical. They must be able to engage in a critical analysis of their reality (Freire, 2000 [1970], p. 128) in the field and as the field.

Since the researcher is part of that (living) field as *process*, those whose world he studies must be able to reflectively act in relation to him in the same way that he must reflectively act in relation to his own reality – not only as researcher but through all the shifting positionalities he occupies through various moments – so as to engage those in the field dialogically. Thus, to misapprehend our positionalities – or to efface them – is to deceive those we are studying because it limits their ability to critically reflect on their environment (of which we as ethnographers are a part) which, in turn, limits our ability to speak truly about their world. That is, by misapprehending (or effacing) our positionality, we manipulate those we study by objectifying them through their instrumentalization for our interests as researchers and, by extension, the interests of the institutional power relations that we embody and express.

In short, as researchers, the awareness of our shifting positionality, identity, and social location in ever-shifting field-contexts is a pre-requirement for true reflexivity as true reflexivity is a requirement (and a product of) of the cultivation of true dialog and later true (reflexive) praxis. True reflective-action requires reflexivity and the latter requires and reflects dialog. As Freire (2000 [1970]) makes clear, to deny (or limit) praxis – which is a uniquely human quality – is to dehumanize; it is to engage in the “praxis of domination.” Reflecting on our positionality, identity (how we are identified), what significance is attached to our bodies-as-texts – and how these things change with the changing field – is crucial for the development of true dialog. Knowing what needs to be emphasized in the field and under what conditions is crucial. The guiding criteria (and the means) for this is the attainment of true (reflexive) praxis,

which means that we must emphasize in each moment those parts of our identity and positionality that encourage and engage the praxis of the people whose world we study and wish to serve. A methodology of true, reflexive praxis involves the active participation not just of the observer/participant but also of the participant/observer wherein the researcher and those being studied, in dialectical movement together, develop the field, methodology, and methods.

The Methodology of True (Reflexive) Praxis as Methodology of the Oppressed: Some Considerations

As stated earlier, my research question was as follows: “How does Pentecostal Church discourse (at Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna) impact the way in which church/community members perceive and understand Puerto Rico’s drug crisis?” Given my concerns as a researcher, the importance of locating myself in the research process was a critical step toward answering this question. According to Denzin (2005), qualitative researchers are guided by specific and abstract ontological and epistemological premises that shape how he/she “sees the world and acts in it” (p.19). For me, my focus on emancipation and praxis reflected a critical-interpretivist paradigm and, although exploratory research questions (such as mine) can be answered through a variety of strategies and methods of inquiry, my method of inquiry (which centers on dialog and praxis) further reflected this paradigm and the influence of Freirean (2000 [1970]) conceptualizations of emancipatory pedagogy, dialog, and praxis. In addition to the critical-interpretivist paradigm, my approach to the research question also revealed a concern with the impact on my research with what Denzin (2005) refers to as the “the structural and material determinants and effects of experience” (p.20) revealing a Marxist, structural-cultural studies theoretical perspective (p.20).

From interpretive paradigm to author/authority

Critical interpretivist paradigms involve a lack of commitment to, and belief in, objectivity in research. Further, a fundamental assumption of this paradigm is that the researcher's gaze is filtered through language, gender, class, race and (shifting) positionality and that "observations are socially and contextually situated between observer-observed (Denzin, 2005, p.21). In addition, within this paradigm and permeating my theoretical perspective, there are ontological assumptions that involve conceptions of the self and other as inseparable entities. In turn, these conceptions involve and shape a specific ethics and politics of research that values social justice and is anti-oppressive (Denzin, 2005, p. 20). My approach to investigating my research question—my method of inquiry—was driven and informed by my theoretical perspective (i.e., structural-cultural studies) and my axiology which evaluated the utility of every aspect of the research process based on its emancipatory potential (Denzin, 2005, p.23). Since I would be interacting with others in the field, emancipatory potential was evaluated through the research process' ability to remain dialogical and respect the praxis of those being studied (and praxis in general).

Given my paradigm, the epistemological and ontological assumptions that constitute it, my theoretical perspective and the ethical and political commitments it implies, certain methodological questions began to emerge, namely:

- How could I interact in the field with church members in such a way so as to not impinge on their praxis, or engage in what Paulo Freire (2000 [1970]) referred to as the "praxis of domination" (pp.126-7)?
- How could I evaluate the meaning of their utterances and actions given my own role and presence in shaping and being shaped by those utterances and actions?

In other words, how could I account for my (shifting) positionality and my author/authority while performing research inside a colonial context?

Asad (1993) reminds us that the authority involved in this kind of research “is inscribed in the institutionalized forces of industrial capitalist society, which are constantly tending to push the meanings of various Third World societies in a single direction” (Asad, 1993 p.197). Considering that my author/authority would permeate all aspects of my inquiry, I needed to think about how my positionality, identity, and personal biography might shape what I chose to label either ‘salvation’ or ‘repression,’ and under what (shifting) conditions and contexts would I choose each label. In other words, I needed to engage the issue of reflexivity, but in a very specific way, one that was guided by ontological premises that assumed the inextricability of self and other (problematizing ‘the individual’) and epistemological premises where “the knower and the known interact and shape one another” (Denzin, 2005, p.21).

On Oppositional and Differential Consciousness

Being conscious of the way my own biography – as well as being conscious of how my own physical body – is perceived and is situated was a skill I began developing growing up in New York and one that I would need to employ during my research. I was born to a brown-skinned Puerto Rican mother and a fair-skinned Southern Italian-American father in a hospital in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Ever since I can remember, I was always trying to negotiate boundaries: I learned to recognize how I identify, how I am identified, and under what circumstances my identity and, hence, my role change. In my past, these boundary negotiations were about survival in a tough, racially charged, New York world; they were about protecting myself and the ones for whom I loved and cared. I learned to embrace my fair skin, even though

some of my friends and family stuck me with the name “Casper.” I embraced it because in certain situations, I used it to protect them. Once I began to link my family’s (and my own) survival with the struggle of those of my ancestors and others like us, I began to develop a strong ethic of social justice and a profound distaste of oppressions of any kind.

That said, in many ways, I still felt stuck between two worlds, but with time, I learned how to embrace my fragmentation and use it strategically. Because I never quite fit in either side of my family, I never understood what it felt to be whole, but I did learn quickly how to see myself through the other’s eyes. At times, growing up, I felt ashamed of my Puerto Rican-ness but, later, I became enraged over that shame. In fact, it wasn’t until I read Chela Sandoval’s (2000) book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, that I found the language through which to think about my oppositional and later “differential consciousness.” Sandoval references Gloria Anzaldúa when writing about the theory and method of oppositional consciousness:

This is the consciousness of ‘mixed blood’ born of life lived in the ‘crossroads.’ Between races, nations, languages, genders, sexualities and cultures, an acquired subjectivity formed out of transformation and relocation, movement guided by ‘la facultad’ the learned capacity to read, renovate and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed (Anzaldúa quoted in Sandoval, p.60)

Sandoval’s definition of the differential consciousness is one that understands the politics of identity so as to use them strategically – as means to an end – and that end is the liberation of all oppressed people (Sandoval, 2000). Her differential consciousness knows how to shape-shift because it knows how its body-as-text is perceived, under what circumstances, and why. Yet, for reflexive ethnographers, negotiating how one identifies and how they are identified can be tricky.

The key is not just to be reflexive, but also to know one's place given the demands of true (reflexive) praxis. To put it another way, how does Sandoval's differential consciousness know how its body-as-text is perceived? Is it simply a question of reading what the power formations require? Is it a question of strategy? Undoubtedly, outside the field where reading the power formations so as to shift accordingly could be the means to survival, Sandoval's differential consciousness is indispensable. However, when engaged in fieldwork where the praxis of the people we study is indispensable, we may run the risk of essentializing and, thus, oppressing them. In the field, we are not building coalitions, but understandings.

How do we as reflexive ethnographers concerned with social justice know whether our shape shifting is appropriate for the given situation? According to Freire (2000 [1970]), liberation cannot occur without true praxis. But liberation is also a process of true praxis. Thus, "true praxis" is not just an objective but also a means to achieve that objective; it is, simultaneously, both a means *and* an end. In other words, our shape shifting doesn't use the politics of identity strategically. Rather, it is the praxis of those whose world we study--which we see by engaging in dialogical praxis with them -- that 'chooses' our identities, that shifts our shape. It is not just our ethics that should guide us, nor is it strategy, but an *ethical commitment* to true (reflexive) praxis. Following this line of thought, true praxis reflects on whether or not oppositional consciousness *is* oppositional consciousness and differential consciousness *is* differential consciousness (E.N. Ignacio, personal communication November 1, 2013). Having an ethical commitment to reflexive true praxis as a methodology acts as a compass in a complex, dynamic, and ever-shifting field.

In addition, true (reflexive) praxis as a methodology allows us to avoid essentializing the people we study, ourselves as researchers, as well as the field itself. This is because our praxis is

not only informed by us, but by the living field itself. When we think in terms of Sandoval's (2000) "reading of power formations"— i.e., when the responsibility to decide how to 'shape shift' lies solely with the researcher and is uninformed through the praxis of 'the oppressed'—we run the risk of essentializing the oppressed. That is, without engaging in true dialog, as reflexive ethnographers guided by a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, we can cut ourselves off from the necessary conditions (i.e., the praxis of the living field) that inform and maintains our praxis, and which we hope will work to develop true (reflexive) praxis. As the conditions – the boundaries of the field – shift, so do the conditions for the identities, positionality, as well as the methods we must embrace. True (reflexive) praxis as methodology allows reflexive ethnography the criteria and guidance necessary to navigate these complexities.

When Freire (2000[1970]) discusses the investigative phase of 'problem-posing education' (pp.104-112), he speaks about the crucial importance of reflection performed by the investigators themselves through the reflections of the people and vice-versa (p.110). He warns against the investigators imposing their values on the 'thematic investigation' and stresses the importance of true dialog to ensure that the investigators' understanding of thematics is produced through constant dialogical reconsideration with other investigators both professional and of the people (p.110).

However, Freire's work doesn't address the importance of the maintenance of reflexive dialog through a living field and shifting, ever-changing, contexts which threaten at every turn to stifle this dialog. In fact, the researcher's very access to the field is itself constantly shifting, as are the requirements of the researcher to meet the demands of this changing access. Reflexive dialog implies an understanding by the researcher of the shifting conditions of this dialog: It implies an understanding of the field through his shifting positionality, his identity, his body as

text in all its significance and the words he speaks as they all are apprehended through various moments and various situations. The researcher must be aware of the shifting dynamics in the field and, when looking at the empirical material collected, he must have the specificity of the moment in mind. This is the difference between *reflective* dialog and *reflexive* dialog, and it is what is necessary to cultivate true (reflexive) praxis. In other words, in order for praxis to be true it must be reflexive and guided by a commitment to itself as methodology. Without reflexivity, praxis cannot see if it is denying the praxis of the other and engaging in the praxis of domination. Without true reflexivity, praxis cannot determine if it is true. However, this is not to say that differential consciousness has no place.

On one occasion, when I was confused for a ‘defense attorney’ from San Juan by the Puerto Rican police who were about to smash the heads of some of my darker skin neighbors on the corner, I tried to be the best defense attorney I could be. I realized that my fair skin, under those circumstances was a protective shield. Here, it was because of my “reading of the formations of power” (Sandoval, 2000) that I was able to embrace the importance of my skin color and act appropriately. The key is to know when to step in and when to step back. For Sandoval (2000):

Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility and strength: enough strength to commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year, and enough flexibility to self consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if the readings of power formations require it (p. 60).

Yet, in the field, differential consciousness requires more than “grace, flexibility and strength”; it requires true (reflexive) praxis. In the field, differential consciousness requires true (reflexive) dialog to know itself as ‘differential.’ In a way, true (reflexive) ethnographers are like obedient (to true praxis) leaders, ones who understand that different oppressions need to be prioritized and that a leader’s duty is defined by the needs of others expressed through the requirements of true (reflexive) praxis. In my research, I learned--through striving for true (reflexive) praxis--that my social positioning and privilege, whether it be connected to my skin color or my citizenship in the colonizing country, needed to be embraced and used tactically--not guided by an abstract ethical principle of social justice--but guided by requirements for true praxis to emerge in each moment.

True (reflexive) praxis in the field

How did this all manifest in my research? Being aware of my positioning, my role and my body-as-text was of crucial importance, not just in the fieldwork phase, but also throughout the entire process. That said, I needed to contend with my role as author/authority, not just when analyzing empirical material or writing, but also when collecting this material, while conducting interviews—throughout my whole research process.

According to Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2010), when a researcher is or has already been a member of the community wherein he does his research, the conventional anthropological notions of ‘entering’ and ‘exiting’ the field begin to break down (p. 201). Yet, for Vidal-Ortiz, being a member of a community – like the field itself – is constantly in flux; it is always shifting, depending on various factors and conditions:

I explore how the line between the field and the non-field was blurred as I lived in New York City, making the field more known than home itself. Being born and

raised in Puerto Rico, but having lived more than 15 years in the U.S., home became an illusory place... (p. 211)

My awareness of my shifting insider-outsider status, as well as the limits of both, allowed me more access to the field at times and less at others. It also allowed me to protect myself as well as those in the field. Yet it was not just an “awareness” of my shifting status that allowed me access, but a movement guided by the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis toward true dialog. For example, when trying to find the site for the ethnography, I needed to decide with which church to work. If I wanted to get empirical material for the sake of collecting empirical material, I probably could have gone to any Pentecostal church. Yet, I wanted to see where the people most affected by the drug crisis were attending and, in order to do that, I needed to go to places where my safety and the safety of others could, in some way, be compromised.

Whereas back in NY, I was a Puerto Rican, a member of the diaspora, who spoke Spanish and knew how to better negotiate that terrain, here I could be *gente de afuera* – at best a Nuyorican, at worst a gringo. And even if I passed as a ‘native’, walking into the *caseros* (public housing), in an area that is mostly populated by darker-skinned people, my fair skin could be a sign that I am from out of town and possibly policia or worse *la DEA*. However, this wasn’t always the case and could change depending on to whom I was talking to and within what context. I needed to engage in constant dialogue as well as listen and watch for signals based on the field’s reading of me. The methodology of true (reflexive) praxis requires that we learn to read the (living) field but, in order to do so, we need to allow ourselves to be read by it. For dialogical purposes, there is no separation between reading the field and being read by it; one side of the relation produces and is internally related to the other.

When in the *caserios*, my specific situation called for me to shrink down my authority, to defer to theirs, to shorten up my physical stature, at times to literally crouch so as not to be too present, and to respect the wishes of those in the (living) field. Conscious of this, I knew that some people could be in danger for talking to me, so I needed to tell them that although I was a university student, I just wanted to listen and learn – whatever they felt like sharing. Through all this, reflexivity remained key – not as a process of self-reflection – but as dialog guided by a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis. Reflexivity was – and must be – a social process. Informed by the reflexive action of the living field, my own reflexivity was tied to it.

Every human being’s consciousness—its very existence—is tied to its fellow creature’s. We, as humans, can either misapprehend this unity – and engage in the praxis of domination – or we can embrace this unity by engaging in true (reflexive) dialog. So it is with research, where the future impact of our work will either participate in the further domination or work toward the future liberation of oppressed peoples. Whether we do the former or the latter will depend on whether we apprehend the inextricability of our fates with those whom we aim to serve.

METHODOLOGY OF, BY, AND FOR THE OPPRESSED(?): Using the Methodology of True (Reflexive) Praxis to Better Understand Modernity, Religion, and (Neo)Colonial Relationships

Through reflecting on my own assumptions about evangelicalism, before even walking into *Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna* in Nagüabo, I had to work out, within myself, some of the ambivalence I felt toward Pentecostalism and religion in general. Much of the skepticism and mistrust I harbored for these churches was undoubtedly a product of my modern Western upbringing, yet was complicated by the experiences of my Puerto Rican family members where Pentecostalism played a significant and transformative role in their lives.

As far as my modernist, Western prejudices went, I knew the congregation would immediately pick this up in the way I stood and spoke. In meeting with many people from my community, I was able to see that they held the church in high esteem and that in some way it was helping them through difficult times. Listening to them allowed me to form the inspiration for my own reflexivity: I needed to remind myself that the most important thing was that something was being done to help these people, to alleviate the suffering, and if this church was doing that, then I needed to tell that story as honestly as I possibly could. Through the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, I was able to reflect on my own knowledge in such a way so as to become more trusted by the church membership and eventually permitted to engage in further reflexive dialogical praxis (whenever possible). For me, at this point, humility equaled access and this humility was not strategic nor could humility ever be.

Sandoval (2000) reminds us how the methodology of the oppressed approaches ideologies in a tactical sort of way, so as not to divide, but to use them as means toward building coalitions that seek to challenge and eliminate oppression. Yet, as ethnographers, looking at ideologies in a tactical sort of way might run the risk of instrumentalizing those that espouse them and, without constant commitment to true (reflexive) praxis, it most likely will. This does not mean that there are not moments within the fieldwork process that require differential consciousness. However, again, our goal here is to understand, not to build coalitions.

Only through a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis can we be reflexive in the sort of way that allows us to see past ‘tactics’ and ‘strategy’ and harness the (self) reflexive action-analysis of those we study. Understanding my research in this way allowed me to see the church differently, to be more open and considerate of their ideologies, practices, and methods. With time, I let the needs of true (reflexive) dialog reshape the premises of my further reflexivity; I

allowed it to inform my ideas, my choices of methods, and even my approaches to the research process in general. This process persisted. I believe that church members and officials in turn read this attitude off my body and through my words, and it increased their level of comfort with me; it made them amenable to doing interviews, and they appeared relaxed and enthusiastic while doing them.

Moreover, while trying get these interviews, I was very conscious of my gender and the way female members of the church responded to me. Many of them were not comfortable speaking alone to a stranger, particularly a male researcher. I realized that this was something I needed to respect and that I could not get anything of value from persisting in trying to interview them. Trying to do so, I thought, was disrespectful and might actually jeopardize the chance for true (reflexive) dialog to continue. The one female member I did interview came out of a relationship that I cultivated with her by arriving early and making simple, but thoughtful conversation.

“Mari” approached me first, and asked me if there was anything she could do to help me understand the church better. And she did just that. Getting to know her, like getting to know all the other members I interviewed, seemed like a privilege, as is any time someone is willing to share their life with someone else. Again, because I approached the church with an open mind, the congregation gave me a certain amount of *confianza* in that they genuinely believed that I wanted to learn and to help. I believe it was my commitment to true (reflexive) praxis that resulted in the body language, the kind of dialogue etc. that allowed all this to take place.

In addition, because I understood my role as that of a ‘student,’ those members I interviewed began to see themselves as my teachers, and this freed them up to really show me what they thought, discuss their beliefs, their personal biographies and sometimes their most

personal thoughts--some quite critical--regarding the church and the social problems surrounding and permeating it. To maintain true dialog, I chose unstructured interviews. For the church members, having the freedom to reflectively analyze their situations rather than be confined to imposed frameworks of meanings from me (and the power and history that I embodied), allowed them to speak more 'freely.'

In addition, I was concerned that my imposing a rigid structure on the interviews might reflect my prejudices connected to the church's role in this community and evangelicalism in general. I knew that if my research were to have any value, to function so as to challenge oppression, I had to listen first, and then speak. Anything to the contrary could be a reproduction of oppressive dynamics/structure. For this reason, most of my questions only involved clarifications or explanations of things they had said. Again, for research to challenge oppression, it cannot borrow any techniques from it; research must always emerge through true dialog guided by a methodology of true (reflexive) praxis and--above all--it must serve it.

Further, when it came to my interviews, I had to be reflexive about more than just my body-as-text, but also with the sounds I produced (or didn't produce), how they might be interpreted, and how this might either limit or expand my access to dialog in the living field. In this regard, one of my biggest concerns was with my proficiency in Spanish, especially since my family that grew up on the island always teased me about it. However, during the interviews, instead of trying to strategize my questions in such a way so as not to reveal my weaknesses, I told them about how my family made fun of me when I was a kid, and since the people I talked with already felt comfortable in their teacher role, they had no issue with working with my Spanglish slips. In other words, through understanding fieldwork as pedagogical, and the need of true praxis for liberatory pedagogy (and vice-versa) (Freire 2000 [1970]), I was able to shift to

my role as student and be taught while in the interstices of each moment shifting to my role as researcher. These positionality shifts are described in more detail in later chapters, wherein I focus on the interactional dynamics of the interview.

In order to understand my community, my precarious membership in it, my shifting identity, that of the field, as well as the needs and hearts of the people that taught me – in order to even consider contributing something worthwhile – I needed to engage in constant true (reflexive) dialog. Without true reflexivity – without true (reflexive) dialog in the field – none of this is possible.

It is through embracing my role as author/authority, through locating myself in the power structure – through striving for true (reflexive) dialog guided by the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis – that I was able to perceive the need for me to be both student of the church and my community which motivated me to listen, rather than speak. To illustrate application of this methodology in-action, in the next few chapters, I provide excerpts from an intercoded unstructured interview with “Geronimo” accompanied by explanations of the methodological significance of each exchange.

Chapter 5 INTERCODING AND INTERACTIONAL DYNAMICS:

On the Importance of Context

Intercoding the Interview with “Geronimo”

In Chapters 6 and 7, I discuss the intercoding of my interview with Geronimo, one of the church members I interviewed. In this chapter, I discuss intercoding to illustrate the importance of interactional dynamics in contextualizing the exchanges throughout the interview. Although I describe the emergence of themes throughout the discussion, they are not the focus of any of the chapters and are mentioned only to demonstrate the contextual dynamics that produced them. The description of the intercoding process in no way reflects the chronology of the actual process, but is meant only to emphasize the crucial importance of interactional dynamics, shifting positionality, and identity for contextualizing the researcher’s role in the production of empirical material and the significance this has for analysis and presentation. However, first a little background on the interview is necessary.

“Yes. I am-I am the ‘fruit’ of public housing, I am the fruit of prison, I am the fruit of crime, of evil, I was in prison for a long time and I am the fruit of a change of heart brought about by God. These people treated me as if my past never happened in my life, they might not even know—I mentioned it to two or three times, but to them my past doesn’t matter, what matters to them is my present, what I do here and now.”

-Geronimo

Church member,

Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna, Nagüabo, Puerto Rico

I first saw “Benjamín” sitting alone in the back row of the church. He was wearing long denim shorts, an extra-large white t-shirt with a white do-rag loosely draped over his caramel colored, shaved head. He sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, hands together with fingers interlocked, and he appeared relaxed, yet focused. “Geronimo,” as he sometimes referred to himself, had intense black eyes – eyes that had seen the street and where the street leads, but eyes that had also put the street behind him and had given his heart to seek something else, something better. I wanted to know why he sat alone, and how he came to sit here, in this particular church, at this particular point in his life. I imagined that at some point he found God the same way my abuelo did – after a life of ‘sin,’ he wanted to be reborn, forgiven, and shown a pathway to paradise. Yet, at the same time, how I imagined my grandfather's ‘conversion’ was not without its own baggage, much of which was rooted in modernist prejudices involving a reductionist view of religion as well as a tendency to essentialize religion and its various forms, institutional or otherwise. For me, Puerto Rican Pentecostalism wasn’t something that I sought out – it was something that was always there, something that entered my consciousness when it became part of my abuelo but was always filtered through my mistrust of Protestant institutions.

Part of the way I imagined my grandfather’s conversion (and by extension Geronimo’s) was rooted in the prejudices that colored my thoughts about Pentecostalism since I was a boy. To me, those who found God, after living what some might consider an immoral life, did so because they feared what awaited them beyond *this* life and wanted to negotiate a deal for the salvation of their soul. This was also my abuelo’s story as it was revealed to me through my mother's hard-won secular assumptions. This is not to say that I hadn't spoken to and hadn't known people throughout my life that did in fact express their own epiphanies in these terms (or at least, I heard them in these terms).

In addition, I had always harbored a mistrust for Pentecostal pastors. For the most part, I saw them as people who took advantage of the poor and suffering by offering them hope and healing in exchange for a percentage of their salary and the sense of power that comes with shepherding a flock. In addition, I had long tried to convince myself – for fear of being seen as irrational – of the deeply modern assumption that ‘religion’ was an irrational way of life, that it was residue from a pre-secular (and hence ‘irrational’) existence, and that those who followed it were themselves irrational.

While living in Puerto Rico, and surrounded by all the violence, I often thought to myself that, if only people would get out of the churches, they would find a way to confront the country’s problems in a more productive way. For me, Pentecostal churches were a place to hide from the grave political and economic realities that were hanging over the island like a suffocating haze. For better or worse, I didn’t see religion in Puerto Rico – in terms of function – as much different than the illegal drugs that poured into its streets and through the veins of its children.

However, contempt is never a good way to begin a conversation – especially if your goal is to play some role in making that world that one shares with the other less oppressive. What’s more, Geronimo’s eyes told me he could read contempt through concrete walls, so I needed to find a way to hold my contempt in contempt. In a way, it was *through* Geronimo’s many glances in my direction that I began to feel contempt for my assumptions about the church and its members. It was at moments like this when my commitment to true praxis revealed itself. It was moments like this – and in all moments ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the field – when this commitment to true praxis needed to guide my every decision.

A commitment to true (reflexive) praxis as methodology requires knowing how not to ignore our most contemptuous feelings, but to understand how they might threaten dialog, how they might rob us of those crucial, fleeting moments – in an otherwise oppressive context – wherein true dialog, albeit precariously, can be nurtured. My most important task when interviewing Geronimo was not only to reflect on my contempt, but reflect on my commitment to true (reflexive) praxis in order to do so. This was not possible without a commitment to not only reflexivity, but reflexivity that was guided by a commitment to true praxis and informed by true (reflexive) dialog. Seeing my self outside myself, through the look of the other, was necessary for true reflexivity; Geronimo helped me see my contempt because my commitment to true praxis required it. For researchers concerned with social justice, a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis is both a means and an end. I needed to remind myself what ‘the end’ was and let that end guide my means.

I had arrived at this church because I wanted to understand why people flock to it, what it offered them, and what role it might play in the future of a struggling community. Yet, I wanted to know these things because I wanted to see the violence end in my community, and the church was the only institution addressing this issue. However, for some reason, I thought I already knew the answers to these questions; I thought I knew the church’s role in the suffering of my community. In fact, part of me entered the church expecting not to be surprised by what I saw and what I heard. How could I possibly know what drove people to this church without listening to them? How could I truly listen to them if I already heard their words before they said them? What sort of questions would I ask given that I already thought I knew the answers? What would my grandfather think, if he were still alive, about what I was doing?

I needed to remind myself throughout the entire process – at every moment – of why I was doing this research in the first place. I needed to continually re-present to myself that I wanted – through my research – to contribute to clarifying the causes of this/my community’s struggles and somehow play a part in the cultivation of true praxis and by extension, an end to oppressive practices. I wanted to help explain why little Miguel, 14 years old, was taken by a stray bullet while walking alongside his father during a weekend family outing at *el malecón*. I needed to put the Miguelitos and Geronimos first. I needed to listen to them in order to understand their world because in order for me to help build a true clarification, I had to clarify things for them as well as me, and this depended on their ability to clarify it in my presence.

Yet, I could play no role in a clarifying anything alone: There could be no clarification that was not a clarification derived from the hopes, dreams, and perspectives of those most impacted by the suffering that needed clarification. In order to clarify the struggles of my/this community, I needed to flush out my own assumptions, and I could not do this without seeing them next to those of the person I was interviewing. However, I realized that in order for the people I interviewed to teach me about their world, I had to make sure that I was not interfering with their reflections. Respect for the praxis of the people I spoke with needed to guide my every move; it was the most important commitment I could make. Not respecting the people’s praxis was tantamount to not caring about what happens to the Miguelitos of the world (and their fathers) and would amount to a betrayal of myself and all those fathers and mothers who walk their sons and daughters along *el malecón*.

Thinking about these things in this way, I felt my heart drop. I thought of the times when I walked with my sons hand-in-hand on the same patches of concrete where Miguelito’s father had carefully collected pieces of his son’s bloody scalp. For researchers concerned with social

justice – especially those connected to the colonized communities wherein they do their research – a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis as methodology is not a choice, but an imperative.

For Geronimo’s interview (which was my first in the church), I found myself a bit lost. In some ways, I saw his interview as my asking for directions. For this reason, his and all the interviews I did were unstructured. When Geronimo offered his perspective, I used it to direct my next question, always careful to honor his position and reflections as the basis for that following question. In a certain sense, I needed to see his perspective and his analysis of issues I raised as ‘true.’ In other words, when he spoke them, I treated them as if they were ‘facts’ – because given the context that involved my attempt to understand Geronimo’s world, they *were* and *are* ‘facts’ as much as my own assumptions relating to the same issues were and are ‘facts’ in that both our perspectives reflect the power arrangements that shape us and which we, as scholars concerned with social justice, hope to challenge. My talk with Geronimo was guided at and between every moment by the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis and, because of this, certain interactional themes organically emerged from our interactional dynamics. The following is a discussion of those interactional themes, which were rooted in my fieldwork and coding as they emerged through the intercoding phase of my research.

Interactional themes

Throughout the coding and intercoder dialog, interactional themes and patterns emerged which reflect the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis in action. Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate and analyze this methodology-in-action as it strives, through the researcher, to cultivate dialogic moments where the voice of ‘the oppressed’ can hopefully be heard. For many (post)positivist researchers, remaining as ‘objective’ as possible during interviews is crucial. Researchers should ‘collect’ data, and as social scientists – as authorities – they should organize the data using their

expertise and training and, finally, author it. Yet, what are they authoring? The ‘data collection’ and subsequent analysis does not offer a glimpse into the world of the ‘subject’ as he lives his life, for example, as a church member. It offers a glimpse of the church member as he/she relates to the authority of the researcher, under very specific conditions, situational dynamics, and at a particular historical moment.

Maintaining this researcher authority – and only this researcher authority – at all moments and in-between reveals the specificity that the researcher and researched positionalities offer. It reveals knowledge about static roles and the desire to maintain them as such as well as the power relations and historical process that undergird/maintain such a desire. The very notion of objectivity not only presupposes very specific ontological premises – it presupposes the power to impose such premises on reality and, in this case, on the ‘reality’ of the ‘subject.’ In this case, the words spoken by the ‘subject’ are artificially removed from the constituent relations from which they emerged and are inserted into the theoretical perspective of the researcher, which is, itself, a function of his own axiology, positivist interpretive paradigm, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that support them. In other words, the text ‘belongs’ to the ‘subject,’ but its meaning belongs to the researcher and his/her world.

Under these conditions, reflexivity cannot be dialogical; it cannot be truly reflexive, because it does not engage the other as a relation of self. Non-dialogical ‘reflexivity’ involves an inward look that denies the social production of the self and that the self is a social product. To be truly reflexive, one must engage the self, and since the self is immediately other (that emerges in a social world), one must engage the other to know the self. The act of self-reflection cannot be truly reflexive because it denies the self as a social entity. In this sense, what (post)positivist and positivist qualitative research deems ‘reflexivity’ can be nothing more than decontextualized

‘meditations’ because they do not constantly engage in reflexive action with the other. They cannot understand how and when their authority and assumptions interfere, under what conditions this occurs, and to what degree they mute or impose meaning on the speech of their subjects.

Furthermore, for (post)positivist researchers, concerns with researcher objectivity also emanate from a concern with ‘over-sympathizing’ with the position of the research ‘subject,’ and, thus, compromising one’s scientific authority and expertise (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Yet, this is predicated on the dichotomous assumption that a researcher in the field can either occupy one positionality or the other, instead of embracing the reality that researchers move between various positionalities moment-to-moment and between these moments throughout the research process. In addition, as stated earlier, researchers should always regard the words of the researched as ‘true.’ However, treating these words as ‘true’ does not require sympathy, but rather an understanding that word choice always reveals something about the power arrangements that shape the interaction.

As Freire (2000 [1970]) makes clear, in the world of education, teachers must always be simultaneously students and vice-versa. Qualitative research is no different. Positionalities in the field must and do shift moment-to-moment, and researchers committed to true praxis do better to embrace this reality rather than deny it. As such, researchers committed to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis must reflect on the reflections of our different positionalities moment-to-moment. In the field, in the church, there were some things I experienced as a quasi-church member, as a community member, as a father, as a friend while simultaneously reflecting on my reflections as I embodied those other positionalities from my positionality as a researcher.

As qualitative researchers, we cannot deny our multiple and shifting positionalities (not to mention our shifting identities and the changing significance of our biographies). We need them, and we need to reflect on them as we occupy them and reflect on those reflections from our positionality as researcher. Since our most important goal is to understand the world of ‘the oppressed,’ we must work toward the ideal conditions – dialogical conditions – where the researched and researcher can most freely reflect on each other's worlds and act toward “naming the world together.” As a researcher interested in the impact the church discourse at Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna had on the way members framed and conceived social problems affecting their communities, I could not merely feign objectivity lest I could only talk about how church members framed social problems in relation to my feigned objectivity, and I would not be able to talk about how they were framed under conditions of trust, sharing, and dialog. I could not talk about this framing from the vantage point of different positionalities and how the church members responses varied under these shifting circumstances.

In order to have trust, there must be dialog and, for dialog to emerge, there must be trust. Coming from a place where the commitment to true (reflexive) praxis is the guiding principle and methodology, the researcher must read the moments in accordance with that principle. He must understand what is called for so that true (reflexive) dialog is cultivated and the reflection-action of both participants is respected. After all, the word “interview” comes from the French word, which means “to see each other,” and to see each other requires each to be seen by the other. In order to be seen by the other, we cannot show our research face and hide our multiple others lest we run the risk of only seeing the research ‘subject’ and not the complex, whole, and living being who we claim to want to understand. In so doing, we do not run the risk of losing

ourselves anymore than the subject runs the risk of becoming the researcher. We only run the risk of knowing the other and ourselves as we relate in a given historical moment.

Chapter 6

METHODOLOGY-IN-ACTION:

Analyzing the Role of the Methodology of True (Reflexive) Praxis in (Co)Constructing and (Inter)coding the Data

Interactional Themes/Moments: Authority, (shifting) positionality, stabilization and dialog

On “Data” and “Data Analysis”: A Note on Presentation

This chapter and chapter 7 contain both descriptions of the inter-coded ‘data’ and an analysis of these descriptions in order to illuminate the application of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis. What follows the descriptions of inter-coded ‘data’ is an analysis of the *process* of ‘data’ construction. In other words, what is analyzed below is the role and application of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis in the construction of the ‘data.’

Given my method of inquiry (true dialog) and the commitment to my methodology and chosen method of analysis, the utterances present in the interview could not be understood outside of the interactive (and sometimes dialogical) context within which they emerged. The ‘data’ in the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis is interactively produced through attempts to engage in true dialog between the researcher and the researched. In this process, the researcher attempts to name the world with the researched through the mutual cultivation of consent.

Yet, it is important to note that naming the world does *not* require that we *accept* the world we co-name, but that we do justice to the naming process as much as possible by acknowledging our role in naming it. Naming the world, thus, is an *interactive process* that does not require agreement of the researcher anymore than data ‘collected’ by (post)positivist and positivist researchers must ‘agree’ with them. In the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, the

naming-as-interactive-process *is* the ‘data.’ Given this, the interactive context along with the utterances in relation to other utterances and with the exchanges understood in relation to other exchanges, must be understood as the ‘data.’

Commitment to true praxis, therefore, involves and requires that we respect and honor the praxis of the other, but it does not require us to agree with or accept what it might produce. After all even though we may not be alienating the praxis of the researched, his praxis (as well as ours) is the historical-social product of capitalism and colonization and will inevitably bear these scars. However, it does require that we honestly and sincerely depict the utterances, and this requires us to account for our part in the production of these utterances. Thus, ‘data’ is not collected, but (co)constructed between the researcher and the living field and the researcher as living field through his reflexive interactions with it. That is, the researcher reflects on his self as he exists for the living field and becomes part of the field that is reflected upon through the reflective action of the other. ‘Data’ and researcher are inseparable and any attempt at separation is artificial and an affront to true dialog as well as an impediment to the development of true praxis and, therefore, an impediment to more genuine understanding.

Below, the ‘data’ described is the product of a coding and intercoding process that understood the utterances to be inextricably rooted in the intertextual and reflexive- interactive contexts from which they emerged. The commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis is reflected both in the attempt of the researcher to cultivate dialogical conditions so as to avoid alienating the interviewee’s praxis (so his world could be named more genuinely), but also by virtue of the fact that the reflexive-interactive context is understood as part of the data itself. Reflexive-interactive dynamics understood as part of the data rather than separate from it allows for scholars and researchers to better contextualize and situate analytical findings within the

power dynamics within which they were created, hence better enabling them to gauge its usefulness for whatever project in which they are engaged.

The organization of the following presentation aims to communicate and explain the intercoding process not as it actually occurred, but in a way that highlights its most important methodological elements in a readable, more linear way. (The actual process was dialectical and dialogical). The bullet points below reflect the presentation of (inter)coded data and the analysis of its construction in chapters 6 and 7:

- **Exchange and Description of Dynamics:** to highlight the methodology-in-action, for each Interactional Moment, I first describe two things: (1) the ‘data’ which includes all utterances (by interviewer and interviewed) and the interactive context within which the utterances emerged, and; (2) the subtexts and discursive themes that emerged during the intercoding process. All of this information is contained under the headings “ Exchange and Description of Dynamics”
- **Analysis of Description of Dynamics:** Because this is a methodological thesis, under this section, I analyze the role of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis in (co)constructing and (inter)coding the ‘data.’ Here, the readers will see the emergence of interactive themes or ‘moments’ which characterize the interactive contexts that contain the utterances and discursive themes mentioned above.

To reiterate, the discursive themes should be understood within the context of the interactional themes within which they emerged. These interactional themes should be understood as interactive ‘moments’ that contain the emerging discursive themes that both impact and are impacted by those themes. The utterances, the moments, and the interactive context they encapsulate as well as the discursive themes they produced must be understood

relationally and as inextricable elements that, along with the utterances, comprise the ‘data.’ I begin first with the “procedural feel” interactive moment.

Moment: PROCEDURAL FEEL

Upon getting to know Geronimo, I became concerned with carrying the institutional norms (procedure, etc.) as well as the significance of such institutions (like the university) might have for him. There were certain markers on Geronimo that suggested that he may have had previous negative experiences with state institutions and that the tone, demeanor and stance of a ‘researcher’ might resemble other institutional agents that may have been problematic in his past. On the other hand, I had an ethical commitment to begin with a conversation about the nature of the interview, university policy, etc. Yet, this was not merely a commitment to research ethics; it was a commitment to true praxis. It was also indispensable to the cultivation of trust and, hopefully, dialog. To begin without establishing my positionality as researcher would have been dishonest and strategic and an act of the praxis of domination. Not allowing him to know when the formal interview began could be considered an attempt at manipulation through effacing my positionality and, further, could have run the risk of being read by Geronimo as deception. To put it another way, in order to trust me, Geronimo had to know who I was and what I represented. Below is a description of the "procedural/authoritative" interactive dynamics – one of the interactive moments – that contextualized our utterances and constitutes the ‘data.’ What follows is an analysis not of the utterances themselves, but of the application of the methodology of true reflexive praxis in action.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

Q0) Me: Let’s begin with your name.

A0) Geronimo: Benjamín Castro Reyes???

Q1) Me: Benjamín, how long have you been with this church?

A more informal conversation preceded this interview (and the above exchanges), but the shift in positionality from a less formal dynamic (marked by typical exchanges of pleasantries seen among church members and asking about each others weekends and families) is marked by the change in pitch (which was more dull and matter-of-fact) as well as a change in tone (which sounded routinized). In this simple exchange, the procedural tone of my question was formal, detached, and more expressionless than usual. Geronimo responds in kind, which indicated a researcher-researched positionality and dynamic.

Moreover, because of the prior conversations I had with him, I was acutely aware of how the procedural tone (expressionless; dull; unemotional) accompanied by my male, fair-skinned body possibly associated with a higher socioeconomic status and professional level employment such as social workers, lawyers etc. (Denton & Villarrubia, 2007), and the visible presence of my voice recorder could evoke memories of institutional settings that constituted a difficult part of Geronimo's past experiences. In this instance, I was cognizant that I might be replicating an institutional dynamic that he may have been negatively experienced in his past; I 'looked like' authority and ran the risk of bringing in whatever reactions and assumptions that Geronimo may have had in relation to this. Given this, and my concern with the needs of true dialog, in Q1 I changed my body language and began to look up at him while I lowered my body as well as changed my tone to be less assertive and more vulnerable. This time, I began with his first name and asked the question as if I was lost and needed directions:

Q1) Me: Benjamín, How long have you been with this church?

A1) Geronimo (Benjamín): Well...don't know exactly, but it is more than five years

The purpose of taking a more curious and vulnerable tone--one I would describe as 'lost' (partly because I *was* lost)-- and using a more vulnerable and deferent body language (i.e., widening of the eyes so as to intensely listen with them, raising of the eyebrows, and looking up from a lowered position) was to signal to him that I wanted to be guided a bit and that I wanted to shift roles (or positionalities) into something less formal. In Q2, the drawing out of the word "or" and the pauses in the beginning signal to Geronimo that I want to be guided, but I do not attempt to push the less formal dynamic, thus giving him the space to reflect-act:

Q2) Me: More than five years... uhhhhhh...Before coming to this church, in the past you went to others? Orrrrr=

A2) Geronimo: =Yes, I have gone to others.

Geronimo's tone in A2 became more relaxed than he was when we were in a more routinized interaction (Q0-A1), but not relaxed to the point that he was ready to move into a more informal phase. Staying aware of Geronimo's comfort relative to his positionality was a moment-to-moment process.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

My chosen utterances and interactive behavior should not be understood as strategic. There was a genuine positionality of church newcomer emerging here emanating, not only from a commitment to the methodology, but from the ontological and axiological foundations that

guide this commitment. My desire to learn from him emanates from an assumption that he can teach me – a presupposition involving the acknowledgement and necessity of his unalienated praxis for the development of mine – and the new emerging positionality is a function and result of this assumption. According to Freire, “without this faith in people, dialog is a farce which inevitably generates into paternalistic manipulation” (Freire, 1990: p.91). The usage of the word “faith” should not be understood in the modernist sense of ‘belief,’ but rather as grounds for ‘belief’ itself.

Moment: MENTORSHIP/ORIENTATION

In this section, I describe the interactive dynamics from Q3 to A3, where given the needs of dialog and true (reflexive) praxis, I attempted to gain permission to shift out of the researcher positionality into a more church newcomer positionality. As we will see, the shifting out of procedure is not driven by the needs of gaining access, but rather by the needs of true dialog.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

In Q3, I attempted to ask about the sort of church that he had been to, and his response still seemed to reflect a more procedural pitch (described in the previous section) as he drew out the word “methodist,” the way someone might read off a checklist in a routinized sort of way:

Q3) Me: What kind of church was it? Evangelical?

A3) Geronimo: Evangelical, Method:::ist, all different denominations.

It was a bit more sing-songy and relaxed than before, but this routinized/listing way he answered made me think that he still did not give me the permission to shift out of the procedural role. In addition, it was during the intercoding process where an important subtext emerged from this exchange. Here, the notion that it is common in Puerto Rico for people to experiment with different churches seemed to be shared by both of us. The sharing of this subtext is significant because it seemed to play a role in the shifting of our positionalities (and because it becomes part of the context for the utterances and, hence, the ‘data’) and roles in the next exchange.

Yet, arriving at this shared subtext (not seen as such until the intercoding phase) cannot be understood outside of the context wherein there was an attempt to cultivate true dialog. Furthermore, if the movement toward dialog produced an instance of shared experiences, the subtext of those shared experiences then becomes the condition from which further movement toward true dialog occurs.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

In Q3-A3, Geronimo’s tone reflected a reluctance to shift out of the procedural dynamic. Gaining his permission is indispensable here because true dialog requires not only that he reflect-act upon my actions and utterances, but also that, if he were to give me permission to shift out of this procedural dynamic, it would be the product of his unalienated reflective-action: Each utterance must be predicated on a previous utterance which was the product of unalienated praxis. The same is true with the shifting of positionalities: to be true dialog, each shift in positionality throughout the interaction must be the product of true dialog (or true dialog becoming) and must be the result of unalienated reflective-action.

Permission to move from Formal to Informal

Because of Geronimo's negative experiences with state institutions, and the possible associations of those institutions with certain racial and class markers, I felt it might be necessary to shift my positionality to something less formal and less reflective of state institutional power. It was my sense that Geronimo might have been less likely to comfortably reflect-act on my question in a more formal interactive context; it may have actually represented the praxis of domination to him. The following description demonstrates the movement to a less formal, teacher/guide-church newcomer kind of dynamic.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

With respect to cultivating dialog, my tone and word choice are in Q4 are significant. The formal use of "you" in Spanish is combined with an informal, more familiar tone, reflecting an uncertainty with my positionality and role and that I was waiting for it to be further defined through Geronimo's response. In his response (A4), his tone changed; it became a bit nostalgic, and he cracked a small smile. His eyes engaged mine as if to say "you remember, right?":

Q4). Me: And when, well... Were you (formal use) always Christian?

A4) Geronimo: Yes, since I was little, this all was around me. I always used to go, since I was little.

I read this to mean that the informal shift might be welcome, thus resulting in my next question (Q5) where I shifted into the informal version of "you" in Spanish:

Q5) Me: Were your (informal use) parents Christian then?

I did this to see his response and to gain his permission to shift positionalities to something else, where I could be oriented and he could be my guide, but it was also moved by a subtext where I deferred to him a bit because he was a church elder.

The permission to move informally emerged through the next exchange (A5-A6) where he affirms my question about his parents being Christian and later affirms my question about his parents showing him how to be Christian without having me finish the question. The subtext of shared experiences along with the nostalgic tone and the smile along with the eye contact all seemed to open the door to a positionality shift.

A5) Geronimo: Yes.

Q6) Me: So, then your parents showed[

A6) Geronimo: Yes]

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

In these exchanges, a trust and mutual understanding emerges between us. Yet this nascent trust must be understood as arriving through the process of trying to cultivate true dialog. That is, the emerging mutual understanding and trust is a product of a dialogical movement towards becoming dialog. The movement from formal to informal is a cautious interactive process wherein I try to encourage Geronimo to reflect-act through the use of my own reflexivity as a tool to serve true dialog. Each interactive product that is passed from me to him becomes an object to be reflected upon as he experiences and reflect-acts upon it. This process allows for the shift from formal to informal to take place dialogically.

At the end of the exchange, there was a growing shared nostalgic turn where, for a moment, I felt as if we were two people reminiscing on a stoop about our childhoods. The subtexts involving church experimentation during childhood and shared church experiences involving parents all seem to come together here as it becomes increasingly clear that there is an emerging shift in both our positionalities. What the shift entailed was not entirely clear at that moment, but what was clear is that we were accomplishing it together. The positionality shift being negotiated through careful reflection upon each other's advances and retreats, through careful attention to the crucial importance of Geronimo's acceptance of the shift (for the purposes of dialog), through unalienated praxis at all of these moments, along with the desire to shift to a set of positionalities where Geronimo's reflection-action was most likely able to flourish, was a result of a commitment to true dialog and the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis.

Moment: BREAK FROM PROCEDURAL FEEL

The description of the exchange that follows can be characterized by the establishing of new roles and thus new positionalities. Because this break from procedure occurs through dialogical means (where we reflectively interact in unalienated form), the establishment of this break from procedure can also be understood as honoring the dialogical process. The description below should be understood not only as a moment marking the shift in positionalities, but also as a product of dialog that becomes the premise for the next exchange while, simultaneously, serving as the context of the utterances contained within it.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

Following A6, the interview shifted to a more informal feel, and in Q7 my extension of the syllables accompanied by the continued lowering of my body position as well as my looking up invite Geronimo to guide further. At this point, I am looking around the church, and with my body language, I ask to be further oriented in the hopes that he will continue to embrace a more guiding role:

Q7). ME: An:::d, u::h, How did you come to know this church?

A7) Geronimo: I came to know it through its fame. Everyone was saying good things about it. That they treated everyone well, and with love. I said to myself “let’s try this out” and when I came, I liked how they treated me. I said to myself, “this is the perfect place.” I go to another one, but my preferred place is this one. I go to another, but this one here, here, here, HERE? This is my favorite place=

Geronimo’s emphasis in A7 on treatment at la Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna and the emphatic tone he uses which suggests that the importance of treatment for a positive church experience is something obvious is particularly noteworthy. Good “treatment” is something that is valued (and, perhaps, expected) by church members; the fact that it is promulgated through word-of-mouth and the role it plays in membership growth and retention at the church is a significant subtext (that, for the purpose of coding the data, becomes context) that emerged from this exchange.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

My researcher positionality must be in dialog with my commitment to true (reflexive) praxis. That is, my shifting positionality must always be communicating with the needs of true dialog in that the positions that I embody at each moment must be those that allow for true dialog to be maintained. Clearly, I must remain true to the demands of my research question, but in order to truly understand the impact of church discourse on the way church members perceive and construct social issues as problems in their community, these church members have to be able to reflect-act under unalienating conditions. To reflect-act under alienating (anti-dialogical) conditions would, in contrast, only allow for reflection to occur within and through the imposed narrative/ideological frames of the researcher and would, hence, speak on behalf of the power relations/interests embodied by that researcher.

In the case of the previous exchange, given the dynamics and conditions of the fieldwork-interview moment, the affirmation of my role as learner (by both sides of the exchange) was necessary not for ‘gaining access,’ but for cultivating true dialog. ‘Gaining access’ does not require true dialog and having access does not guarantee that the praxis of domination will not occur. To put it another way, law enforcement infiltration strategies are about gaining access, but not about promoting true dialog. The choice to shift positionalities is based on the needs of true dialog (and the commitment to true praxis) given the research question.

In addition, affirmation of these new roles and positionalities is particularly important given that it has emerged through dialogical means: Geronimo had reflected on my attempts to shift and affirmed them and, through so doing, the dialogical dynamics (that constitute the ‘data’) that led to the shift (also constituting ‘data’) is also affirmed. On the surface, it might look like I might be “humoring him,” but the needs of true (reflexive) praxis do not allow for humoring.

They recognize that Geronimo's perceptions are true in that they speak for his experiences and the conditions from which they emerge (including the exchange itself) and that these particular positionalities were necessary for him to reflect-act (in unalienated form) upon my utterances.

Moment: STABILIZING THROUGH HONORING POSITIONALITY SHIFT

Immediately following A7, Q8 is an attempt to root my question within his previous answer. Clearly, as a researcher, and within that positionality, I want him to elaborate on the reasons why he prefers Iglesia Ciudad de La Luz Eterna over other churches to give me a better understanding of what keeps him (and perhaps others) retained and comfortable.

Simultaneously, as a community member concerned with the impact of violence and drug addiction, I want to know what the church is offering that might help people avoid these problems.

Furthermore, in order to truly understand the way Geronimo understands social problems and the role of the church in the community, I needed to co-create the kind of dialogical conditions that allow for enough trust to exist where he is guiding me and reflectively-acting through the interview exchanges. In this sense, my role must be as learner, as 'newcomer,' even if I am simultaneously 'researcher.'

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

My response in Q8 must be understood as it emerged within the positionality shift and role change that occurred with it; it must be understood in its proper context. It is not just an attempt at eliciting an elaboration, but also an attempt to stabilize through honoring the shift in positionality and roles that emerged dialogically. In honoring the process, we honor those we hope to serve; it is about moving toward "naming the world together."

Q8) Me: = And what do you like about this church more[

A8) Geronimo: The][

Q9) Me: compared to the other[s

A9) Geronimo: The treat:::ment by the pastor[, the brothers, that we see the fruit of the *diezmo*, the offerings. We have nice seats and air conditioning. You know?

You can see that the church uses the monetary contributions for us?? If you eat in Burger King you're not going to pay in McDonald's. You eat here, so you pay here.

Geronimo's tone and pace in A9 are didactic and suggest that he believed that I was open to being taught. This seems even clearer when considering the discussion of subtext and shifting positionalities above. Furthermore, in A9 the treatment is mentioned again and then elaborated upon. This elaboration reveals another subtext for Geronimo: that there is a concern for where the “fruit of the *diezmo*” is going and that it should be returned to the people.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

Having Geronimo speak to me from this positionality (as teacher-guide) and in this way is crucial for his ability to reflectively-act. If I honor the most basic assumption--that he is an expert in what he believes and that his words are valued by virtue of his humanity--he can find the space to guide me and be that expert. As a researcher guided by the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, assuming a learner role here rather than an expert one is a critical shift for the further cultivation of my own expertise, not to mention an understanding that could potentially challenge oppressive practices in some way. In addition, “treatment” is emerging as a theme

(discursive) here and emerges in the context of joining and retention in the church and through the dynamics of teacher-learner, specifically through church guide-newcomer. This emerging theme cannot be extricated from the interactive and intertextual context from which it emerges, and the theme along with the interactive dynamics and intertextual relationality must be understood all as part of the (intercoded) data.

However, this is not to say that the dynamics of dialog once established cannot disintegrate or threaten to do so. It takes a constant commitment to the process to maintain it, and, as we will see, the negotiating of skepticism, mistrust, and the rooting out of assumptions together are complex and necessary moments of the overall process. The methodology of true (reflexive) praxis acts as our guide, so that when our assumptions as researchers threaten dialog in the field or during other phases of the research process, we can stay faithful to true praxis, to ourselves, and to the other. Through a further analysis of intercoding, the following chapter illustrates the power of the methodology to navigate difficult moments in the field – moments where the power relations and the assumptions with which they are intertwined and which we represent and embody – threaten to destabilize dialog and, possibly, engage in oppressive praxis.

Chapter 7

LIMITS AS OPPORTUNITIES:

Reflexivity and the maintenance of dialog

The authenticity of dialog can be measured by the ability of the participants to be truly reflexive. Unfortunately, the nature of ethnography does not usually allow us to know the reflexivity of the people we study. On the other hand, if through the interactive moments of the exchanges, we as researchers find ourselves with enough space to confront our most deeply rooted assumptions, this is significant. First, it suggests that we are open to learn from those we study, but also that the praxis of the other is healthy enough to create the necessary tension that is the prerequisite to deeper understanding and growth. In the praxis of domination, the other's praxis exists for the oppressor; the other's reflection-action functions to serve the praxis of the dominator. However, if there is tension between the two actors that results in reflexivity, but not submission, dialogical conditions most likely exist. If the researcher has space for reflexivity, then he is not being dominated, and if the researched is asserting his world up against that of the researcher without imposing it (evidenced by the capacity of the researcher to be reflexive), then he too – in that instance – is not being dominated by the researcher's praxis. Understanding the implications of these moments of tension are crucial because it may illuminate questions that highlight how the powerful institutions that the researchers embody can impact “data collection.”

In this chapter, I describe the tension that arose when my assumptions clashed with Geronimo's as well as the role of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis in navigating those moments dialogically. I offer this description to illustrate that a commitment to true dialog (and true (reflexive) praxis) does not require researchers to accept the narrative of the researched, but

also to elucidate how reflexivity must operate dialogically. I also offer this section to demonstrate the importance of true dialog for revealing the impact of the power relations researchers embody in each instance – in each moment of the exchange – in order to assert the indispensability of true dialog and a commitment to true (reflexive) praxis for the fieldwork phase of research (and all other phases).

Moment: DEFENSIVENESS(?)

In this part of the exchange, I began to read what I perceived to be defensiveness coming from Geronimo. This is not to say that he was being ‘defensive’ per se, but that there was some tension that I perceived as defensiveness. However, many times defensiveness is the result of being offended. Given the requirements of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, the perception of defensiveness should be understood as an indicator that true dialog might be threatened as well as yet another opportunity for deeper reflexivity of the part of the researcher. What follows is a description of the exchange that was characterized by defensive-offensive interactive dynamics.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

A9) Geronimo: The treatment by the pastor, the brothers, that we see the fruit of the diezmo, the offerings. We have nice seats and air conditioning. You know? You can see that the church uses the monetary contributions for us?? If you eat in Burger King you’re not going to pay in McDonalds. You eat here, so you pay here.

Q9a) Me: Uh huh=

A9a) Geronimo: =But here you eat the word of life, then its obvious—natural—uh(.3) that you pay here. Understand that it comes from your heart, what you want to contribute, your *diezmo*, your offerings, this is voluntary, here no one asks for anything;

Somewhere between A9 and A9a there was a shift in Geronimo's tone and his body language. He seemed (to me) to become a bit more defensive. My response to A9 was simple enough, but my body language seemed to reflect a bit of confusion and perhaps mistrust. For me, the moment was best described as skeptical: skeptical of what Geronimo was saying, but also skeptical about my own assumptions. In A9a, he feels the need to reiterate and make the point that contribution is voluntary, and judging by the shift in tone and change in body position, this may have been because he thought that I was skeptical of the *diezmo* process or that I questioned whether it was something coercive. (As described in the next section, in A9b, he makes sure I understand that I know that the contribution is voluntary.)

It is possible that I read his reaction as defensive because I myself harbored assumptions and beliefs about the *diezmo*, most of which were to some degree negative and which, since I was a boy, did involve a long held belief in the opportunism, disingenuousness, and corruption of Pentecostal churches. In addition, I also harbored a sort of modernist assumption about the gullibility and/or spiritual weakness of Pentecostal church members.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

However, in listening to Geronimo in A9 and A9a, and experiencing this skeptical dissonance, I immediately became skeptical of myself. This skepticism partly came from my realization that my skepticism of what he was telling me – in terms of the need for praxis – made

no sense because whether or not I believed what he was saying was not as important as the fact that he believed it. And more importantly, the fact that his words came from a guiding and mentoring role toward my more newcomer role presupposed a bit of trust between us that my modernist assumptions might threaten, and by doing so might threaten the prospect of continuing true (reflexive) dialog as well as threaten to destabilize the new roles that dialog established. This is not to say that something couldn't be learned from a shift back to researcher-researched roles, especially if the context in which this took place is accounted for – or that momentary shifts in positionality to researcher rather than newcomer didn't occur throughout the process. Rather, it is to say that the needs of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis required that I listen and try and see myself through his responses.

Moment: NEGOTIATING MISTRUST: MEETING THE NEEDS OF TRUE DIALOG THROUGH REINFORCING POSITIONALITIES

In this exchange, my commitment to the methodology was crucial. I did not want to lose the trust we had built nor the positionalities and roles that were established dialogically. Here, rather than problematizing Geronimo's mistrust, the needs for true (reflexive) dialog required that I reflect on how I might be impacting the interaction in such a way so as to put Geronimo on the defensive and create tension. As stated earlier, in order to be truly reflexive, one must do so dialogically; one must know oneself through the other. For this reason, I needed to reinforce Geronimo's positionality and role as guide thus allowing the nature of his guidance to form the basis of my reflexivity. In so doing, I was also honoring the dialogical process that established the positionalities themselves.

Eventually, this process allows me to identify the specific assumptions I harbored that were impacting the interaction detrimentally. Yet, by allowing him to guide – a decision routed

in the commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis – I was eventually able to identify the assumptions while still maintaining dialogical interactions. Furthermore, the identification of assumptions qua assumptions and my willingness to identify them as such created further conditions for further dialog to progress. That is, the tension was resolved through dialogical means: the opposing forces were synthesized resulting in a higher level of understanding and trust, and this higher level became the condition for further dialogical (and dialectical) progression.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

Although my response in Q9b is textually identical to that of Q9a, the tone is different and purposeful:

Q9b) Me: uh huh=

A9b) Geronimo: =the pastor doesn't ask for anything. Everything comes from the heart and what God puts in your heart. What you might give=

Instead of moving back with a question that challenges his assertion, I chose to remain in a listening posture (i.e., looking up while taking notes). I needed to hear more. I needed Geronimo's help in understanding my own mistrust, and I know at this moment his guidance was necessary.

In A9b, his tone softens but, as stated above, the subtext of concerns with church corruption emerges. Either way, whether it was from him reading mistrust off my body language or responding to another discourse through our conversation, this exchange revealed another subtext: that there is a pervasive mistrust of the *diezmo* practice (which emerges as theme:

coercion vs. voluntary) and that this is a point of contention for many would be and dedicated church members in Puerto Rico. The mistrust that was read off me may have been interpreted as a mistrust of the *diezmo* practice, and since I never had explicitly referred to this as an issue, his response was significant. In Q10, I am careful to acknowledge his role as guide:

Q10) Me: =So here one doesn't have to pa- pay a *diezmo* here..or something like that=?

Here, there is an attempt to ask about the *diezmo* in a way that would not be too disrespectful. Instead of asking if there was a need to pay or asking “don't you have to pay a *diezmo*?,” I opted to ask it in a way that might reflect my deeper interest in the church (which was genuine), but not in a way that could make him feel attacked. In addition, I am also revealing my false assumption about coercion and the church here both to myself and to Geronimo along with a willingness to learn. The tone is curious and genuine, reflecting the role of learner and newcomer and reinforcing Geronimo's positionality and role as guide/teacher.

The stuttering on both sides of this exchange suggests there is still tension rooted in the corruption/coercion subtexts and manifested in the “voluntary vs. coercion theme”. Yet, the repetition of “no” in A10 twice suggests Geronimo is both guiding and drawing boundaries--indicating dialogical conditions and space for reflection--and indicating that he is not being carried by the researcher here and is reflectively acting (within the moments of this exchange):

A10) Geronimo: =No, no. Just now I came in, and if you noticed, the first thing I did over there was to thro(.2)- throw our(.2)- made my offering=

By doing so, he is clarifying my assumption qua assumption as he counters it. As a researcher, I am not necessarily convinced of my assumptions as false in this moment, but I am aware of the impact they are having on interactive dynamics of the interview. Both of us are reflectively acting on each other, but neither of us is being carried by the other.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

This exchange illustrates some of the indicators of dialogical interaction. The drawing of boundaries, but in a way that is not imposing suggests a certain amount of available ‘space’ for more genuine reflection-action. When considering that Geronimo draws this boundary in relation to my assumptions, it suggests the reflective space necessary for him to study *me*; that the interactional power dynamics are not static, but *reversible*. Furthermore, these reversible power dynamics reflected in the guide-new member positionalities not only suggest dialogical conditions, but the result of this interaction is the revelation of my problematic assumption.

However, it must be said that dislodging one’s assumption as a researcher in no way suggests that the researcher has accepted the analysis or frame of the researched as his own: what matters is that Geronimo believes that the *diezmo* is not coerced and that my assumption about its coercive nature was getting in the way. Without a commitment to true (reflexive) dialog and praxis, we most likely don't arrive at a point where we as researchers can be encouraged to challenge our own misconceptions about the people we study. Questioning our misconceptions presupposes humility and trust between the two actors engaged in dialog. When this questioning occurs, as it did in the exchange above, and when it does not necessarily involve the abandonment of these assumptions, it suggests there is enough space for genuine (in the moment) reflection-action on the part of the researcher.

Moment: OFFSETTING MISTRUST

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

My response in Q10b is an affirmation of both the impact of my assumption and the reinforcement of Geronimo in the teaching/guiding role:

Q10b) Me: =ok::=

A10b) Geronimo: =no one told me I needed to make it. No one said to me “you have to give it,” no one obligates me to make offerings or give *diezmo* nothing like that, nothing. You do it because when you read the bible, you learn that the *diezmo*::: , that you don’t give to God (1.0) I put money there and God multiplies it for me. (Rising tone) It’s not because the pastor says “you have to give money”, nor anyone else in the church says I have to give money--It comes from my heart and the teaching that God has given me to give *diezmo* and to make offerings, but that’s what God taught me, not the pastor or nobody else. No obligation. Its about whether I have it, and I want to give it, and I can. It is a voluntary act that I do.

A new theme begins to emerge in A10b (the separation of church and God/spirit) as does a repetition of “voluntary vs. coerced” along with the previously mentioned subtexts involving church corruption. Through the intercoder dialog, a new subtext emerged that both Geronimo and I shared: the idea that “judgmental” and “legalistic” churches are pervasive in Puerto Rico and that members might look for a relief from this when changing to a new church. Geronimo is revealing this within his role as guide and teacher; the themes emerge within these roles as he himself draws boundaries and rejects (both implicitly and explicitly) my assumptions about

Pentecostal churches further indicating that the researcher is not carrying him or that he is “telling me what I want to hear.”

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

Geronimo’s drawing of boundaries, coupled with my growing awareness of the impact of my own assumptions on the interactive dynamics – along with my continuing skepticism about “the *diezmo*” – is significant. As stated throughout, the ability to be truly reflexive requires true dialogical conditions. In addition, the ability to reflectively act more genuinely is also an indicator of true dialogical conditions. Furthermore, the drawing of boundaries by Geronimo coincides with the emergence of my assumptions as the object of my own reflective action; the two indicators of dialogical conditions are themselves interrelated and produced co-terminously, further suggesting the existence of true (reflexive) dialog.

The tension that arose due to the impact of my assumptions was both a product of, and a limit-to-be-surmounted for dialog. This tension threatened to destabilize the trust and new roles we had established together. However, through a commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, I was able – with the help of Geronimo – to negate that negation and move (dialectically) to a higher level of dialogical progression.

Moment: OFFSET MISTRUST THROUGH SOLIDIFYING CREDIBILITY/GUIDE

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

During the above exchange, I felt myself relating to him in the way we understood the separation of church and God. Yet, I also sensed that he sensed in me reluctance to the church. I read this as him reading the doubt on me and also personalizing my questions a bit. I wanted to move this away from here by asking him something that would acknowledge his expertise and

reinforce that I trusted him; I thought he may have read my questions about *diezmo* as condescending especially given my university status as well as my skin tone. I didn't intend for them to be condescending, but recognized that they, given the context, probably were. (I was aware of this potential condescension mid-sentence and between interactions.) What was clear to me though, was the fact that my thoughts were condescending regardless of my intentions, but that this condescension was partially offset by my reflexivity (in seeing myself through his expressive responses combined with my own awareness of my body etc.) Moving the conversation to his opinion of others (below) was my way of checking myself and letting him know I trusted him even though I was being somewhat condescending:

Q11) Me: Ok (I understand)... Do you think that the attraction that the church has for you is the same for other members of the community who attend—here in Nagüabo?(2.) That are members of this church(.2), or?

A11) Geronimo: Yes:::, Here it is different; it's the style. You see me in short pants right now, comfortable, I like to take off my sneakers, there are people who do their hair this way and the other, with cell phones.. there is-there is no[.

The “ok” I begin with in Q11 allowed me to affirm the positionality where Geronimo can continue to guide. My word choice is an attempt to offset possible mistrust through solidifying his credibility and asking for his guidance as well as affirming his positionality as guide. This question reflects my awareness that the assumptions are not only made aware, but an awareness that they are impacting dialog in a way that may be creating tension or contributing to mistrust. This question suggests the earlier commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis throughout mistrustful moments was successful. This was done through a wording that involved

my request of his expertise and, in so doing, affirming the trust I had for him as well as the willingness to learn from him. Now that he moved into a teaching role, I affirmed and stabilized this role by accepting the student role with this question; in a sense I consented to his authority.

Building off previous exchanges, and in his guiding role – less professorial, but more familiar – Geronimo in A11 seems to relax his defensiveness here. He is directing me to look around; he orients me with his speech and his eyes, pointing me in the ‘right’ direction. This seems to affirm my role now as learner and has the effect of affirming my previous affirmation of his teaching role by my willingness to take student role. Now we have the beginning of stabilization once again after the exposure of my problematic assumptions and the fact that they were impacting the dialog. We, together also seemed to surmount the defensiveness and dissonance. This might reflect Geronimo’s trust that my role is that of learner and that questions might now be coming from genuine curiosity.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

Geronimo’s word usage in A11, and my response following in Q12, particularly the word *estilo* refers to the way the church relates to its members and emerges in the intercoder dialog as an important subtext. While both Geronimo and I both understood *estilo* to be broad enough to encompass the way people relate to others (similar to the way in English we talk about a boxer’s “style” in the sense that it is the “way” he fights), this was not obvious to the intercoder and needed to be made explicit for the contextual role it plays with regard to the meaning of the utterance. The intercoder understood *estilo* to mean something more superficial, something more material rather than interactive. This is an important distinction and is precisely the purpose of the intercoder dialog: There are aspects of reflexivity, when there are shared subtexts that cannot be successfully practiced between the researcher and the researched. Dialog with one who does

not share the same subtexts is necessary for proper contextualization of the utterance and is an organic consequence of the commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis.

The coding and intercoder dialog reveals not only a subtext that now becomes context for the exchange; it reveals this in relation to a specific interactive moment, further contextualizing the utterance. If we had still been in researcher-researched roles, would the outcome have been different? Most certainly, and although we can never know what the outcome would have been, we do know to a large degree the context for the outcomes that did emerge. Geronimo's utterances in these exchanges are asserted, not conceded; understanding the interactive context here is critical. The same utterances under different interactive conditions, while they might be textually identical, could be, in terms of meaning, radically different (Bahktin, 1981), not just because of the context created by previous exchanges, but the interactive dynamics that produced them. A commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis can help us determine more clearly which of these meanings are closest to Geronimo's meaning.

Moment: HONORING THROUGH CLARIFICATION

The next exchange reflects the theme of treatment/acceptance discussed earlier, but in terms of interactional dynamics and reflexivity, it contains the beginnings not only of the researcher's assumptions being made explicit, but also moments where these assumptions are challenged or seriously scrutinized.

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

A11) Geronimo: Yes:::, Here it is different; it's the style. You see me in short pants right now, comfortable, I like to take off my sneakers, there are people who do their hair this way and the other, with cell phones.. there is-there is no[.

Q12) Me: So here, they don't judge]

A 12) Geronimo: No, he] re

Q13) Me: for superficial things[like that]...

Here (Q12), I use clarification that builds off previous claims from A11 in order to honor his position about the church not being judgmental. This also allows for his positionality (which has shifted to guide/teacher) to remain. This is simultaneously an establishment of a premise, but also a question. Furthermore, this question is also aimed inward and reflects doubt on my part. My body language here involves me looking up for approval when I ask the question; my tone also reveals my self-skepticism. A mistrust of self is here--not an abandoning of my assumption, but an understanding that there is an assumption that has become unstable and possibly problematic. Geronimo first affirms (through the "no") my "non-judgmental" question-- which was established by him originally-- and is indicative of further guidance. They are also reflective of a willingness to confront my assumptions with Geronimo and through Geronimo, that they became assumptions through this process, and also that I trusted Geronimo to clarify them after he had identified them.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

This process requires reflection-action on my part, but reflection-action that engaged the reflection-action on Geronimo's part that led to the dislodging of my assumptions. This is the researcher confronting his own "limit situation" (Freire, 2000 [1970], p.120)" through the

researched and this is only possible under dialogic conditions. While the theme of “the voluntary inspiring loyalty” emerges from this exchange, it is worth mentioning that it emerges through a heavily reflexive moment where the researcher is confronting his assumptions about why people join Pentecostal churches.

In other words, the emergence of this theme is the product not just of the interactional dynamics of the interview itself, but of the intercoder dialog sessions wherein the subtext shared (*estilo superficial* = legalistic church = further from the spirit) by both Geronimo and myself are revealed and become the context through which to understand the significance of Geronimo's utterances focusing on “treatment” of the membership and the expectations churchgoers might have about a church experience. Without this attention paid to *heteroglossia* (Bahktin, 1981) and *intertextuality*, further contextualized through interactive dynamics/themes (derived from the needs the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis), a deeper understanding of Geronimo's words would be missed.

Moment: STABILIZATION

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

In Q13, my tone and text is confirmatory and predicated on his assertions from the previous exchange as well as rooted in the dialogically established roles that generated those assertions. Q13 is also rooted in the shared subtexts of “superficial” mentioned above and must be understood in this light. Evidence of this shared subtext (and later context) emerges within the intercoding sessions, especially when looking at Q13 and A13 side by side wherein the existence of the subtext is confirmed and elaborated in Geronimo’s response:

Q 13) Me: for superficial things like that]

A 13) Geronimo: Nah, here you could have a man dressed as a woman, sitting over there and no one can say anything. What changes you is God,(.5)in your heart. No one can-No one's going to tell you God doesn't like you in shorts, that's phony. What God looks at is what's inside.

In A13, the theme of “separation of God/spirit from church re-emerges” and is reflected in his distinction from what Church leadership might say and what God actually wants, along with and related to the preliminary emergence of the theme of “equality through community/leveling of social classes” reflected in his reference to the unimportance (for God) of social class and gender and the acceptance of all, regardless of these markers. In addition, A13 further reinforces the subtexts identified in the previous exchanges by reflecting the values and themes of community, voluntarism and equality up against subtexts of fragmentation (not identified as of yet), coercion, and discrimination.

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

At this point, through these dialogically established roles, I have begun to scrutinize my assumptions about coercion and gullibility a bit more. But as a researcher, a newcomer and learner, I am continuing to check my own understandings with Geronimo's for guidance. The requirements of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis are such that I must pose an understanding I have – pose myself through my words – to be seen by the other so as to be reflectively acted upon and responded to. In fact, the interactive process up to this point can be characterized as a mutual offering of one participant to the other so as to be reflected and acted upon in such a way so as to develop an understanding of Geromimo's world (and, by extension, my own). Now, for me at least, there is a sense of togetherness in the learning process here and

through my learner role and his role of guide, I began to feel a certain “insider” in as much as a newcomer/new member can feel this (since the researcher is, ultimately, *always* an outsider). Either way, the nascent understanding emerged in a dialogical fashion and is reflected in Q14 (analyzed below) by the choice of the words “we can say” when attempting to clarify and ask for Geronimo’s approval for my clarification of his assertions from the past exchange.

Nascent Understanding: Moving Towards Stabilization

Exchange and Description of Dynamics

It is important to remember that assumptions of the gullibility of church members as well as the coercive nature of the *diezmo* process colored the way I internalized Geronimo's responses throughout the interactive moments described in this chapter. Moreover, being aware of these assumptions didn't necessarily eradicate them (at least not early on). Although conscious of them, I continued to struggle with these assumptions throughout the exchanges described above (and beyond). Q14 reflects a simultaneous questioning of my own assumptions (an acknowledgement of Geronimo' praxis) while still reflecting an incredulity:

Q14) Me : So then, we can say that here the spiritual is more important than the exterior++[

Even though I remained skeptical of Geronimo's assertions, I also remained skeptical of my own. However, the crucial point reflected in Q14 is that the formulation of the question – the tone and word choice – honors the preexisting and dialogically produced positionalities that allowed for my reflexivity in the first place. The “we can say” refers to the church guide-church newcomer positionality and offers a proposed statement to be confirmed by Geronimo without

confirming it. What *is* confirmed and honored are his praxis (as well as my own) as well as the positionalities that formed the conditions and context for this praxis to develop. The methodology of true (reflexive) praxis requires that we honor the praxis of the other even if we don't agree with its product.

In A14, once again, Geronimo affirms the product of my reflection and clarification of his own utterances:

Q14) Me: So then, we can say that here the spiritual is more important than the exterior[

A14) Geronimo: For sure]=

Q15) Me: =or superficial things--

The result of all these affirmations and clarifications situated in the proper interactive and intertextual contexts is the emergence of new themes and the understanding of the context provided for this emergence. Without the commitment to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis and, the proper corresponding method of analysis (given the research question), these themes may never have emerged and what would have emerged might have reflected the researcher's unreflexive framing of the researched's utterances (which is more of a reflection of the researcher's world than that of the researched).

Analysis of Description of Dynamics

Acknowledging the product of Geronimo's reflections which emerged from a role and positionality establishment that was itself a result of dialogical means is a form of not only reflecting Geronimo's praxis, but the dialogical process itself. Each time the product of

reflection-action becomes the premise for the next exchange, an honoring of the process takes place and/or is renewed. In this process, the researcher attempts to name the world with the researched through and with his consent. However, naming the world does not require that we accept the world we co-name, but that we do justice to the naming process as much as possible. Naming is process that does not require agreement of the researcher. As a researcher (and as the researched), we come from a specific theoretical perspective, axiologies and interpretive paradigms.

Commitment to true praxis involves and requires that we respect and honor the praxis of the other, but it does not require us to agree or accept it. It does require that we honestly and sincerely depict the utterances, and this requires us to account for our part in the production of these utterances: 'Data' is not collected, but co-constructed between the researcher and the living field and the researcher as living field through his reflexive interactions with it. That is, the researcher reflects on himself as he exists for the living field and becomes part of the field that is reflected upon through the praxis of the other. To reiterate, 'data' and researcher are inseparable and any attempt at separation is artificial and an affront to true dialog and an impediment to the development of true praxis.

Furthermore, space for reflexivity emerges under dialogical conditions: The fact that I was able to determine through Geronimo's revelation of my assumptions the impact of those assumptions suggests a certain amount of reflexive space. This space for reflexivity emerges through the commitment to true (reflexive) praxis, which allowed the role/positionality shifting that organically took place and which helped to build the kind of trust and cooperation necessary to learn about Geronimo's world. The shifting into these new positionalities comes from the methodology and this shifting allowed for the continued dialogical space to be truly reflexive.

Without this process, it would have been difficult to dislodge my assumptions because I would have cut off Geronimo's ability to reflect on mine as they filtered through my words. In other words, Geronimo needed to be accepted and to have assumed the teaching-guiding role in order for me to have my assumptions revealed to me. He needed to be able to reflect and refuse in order for me to reflect on that refusal and my role in creating it. I would not be able to see my words in his eyes and we would not be able to name together (Freire 2000[1970], p.89) without his constant consent—rooted in more genuine reflection-action--under dialogical conditions.

According to Freire (2000[1970]), dialog cannot be “reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it be a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants (p.89). Our struggles with authorship and reflexivity cannot be encapsulated within objectivity vs. subjectivity binaries either. As the above description and analysis shows, real interaction is neither one nor the other, but an interrelated, intersubjective process where subjectivity itself implies that of the other and calls into question the very ontological premises of objectivity. And although constructing and understanding the data as described in the previous two chapters allows us to enrich the contextual fabric of our research findings (and thus better evaluate their usefulness), it is not without its difficulties and limitations. That said, while there are many limitations to the application of this methodology, the opportunities it offers researchers to learn from their research, improve their methods and justify a need to eradicate the structural impediments to dialog and eventually true praxis outweigh those limitations.

CONCLUSION:

Lessons learned in the field and beyond

Asad (1993), when writing about anthropologists writing up “their people” reminds us that they must do so “in the conventions of representation already circumscribed (already written around, bounded) by their discipline, institutional life and wider society” (p.193). Undoubtedly, the problems of author-authority go well beyond the author, and despite the best intentions, despite the most dedicated commitment to true praxis, the structural and cultural realities of authorship in the academy (and in the wider society) will inevitably shape the meanings of our findings.

In addition, the pervasive and hegemonic obligation to empirical science (Clough, 1992), its standards of evidence, and criteria of evaluation threatens at every moment to challenge our commitment to and application of the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis. These hegemonic standards, the structural realities, and disciplinary discourses that help to cultivate our obligations to those standards, simultaneously, cultivate a set of practices and assumptions about the people we study and hope to serve. “Data collection methods” and methods of analysis that strive for generalizability necessarily decontextualize the utterances of people they are designed to study; they pull these utterances from the specific, concrete realities from which they emerged for the purpose of saying something that is generally applicable and, hence, ‘legitimate science’. Such methods separate these utterances from the people that produce them and, in so doing, these methods *leave the people behind*. Not only are the people and their real concrete living situations that vivify them and their words swept aside, but these methods encourage the researchers to view the people merely as potential ‘data’ - to-be-analyzed.

Viewing the people in this way has significant implications for our potential to develop a commitment to, and the successful application of, the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis. In other words, we cannot learn from those who we do not consider capable of teaching us. We cannot listen to ‘data’ because data cannot reflect and act, it must be reflected and acted *upon*. What’s more, a commitment to true (reflexive) practice cannot be reduced to paternalistic condescension that involves having ‘confidence’ in the people’s ability to speak. On the contrary, the people’s ability to speak must be and *is* an ontological given that must form the foundational operating assumption of our research approach. In a word, the people “*are praxis*”(Freire, 2000 [1970]).

Those of us who manage to stay true to the methodology and manage to reach the coding, analysis and authoring phase of the research process will inevitably face the reality that the dialog with the researched has ended. This is a cold hard fact not only for those who commit themselves to the methodology of true (reflexive) praxis, but to all ethnographers and practitioners of qualitative data analysis (though it might not necessarily be a concern for them). The difference here, I hope, is that, through our commitment, we can show our influence at every step of the process from before entering the field, to fieldwork, and then to authorship. This requires a new kind of reflexivity, one that not only locates the researcher in the process, but accounts for his reflexivity through and with the shifting dynamics of his interaction with and through the field and understands this reflexivity as part of the ‘data.’ In this way, the findings of the researcher can be seen within the process of producing them. Furthermore, during the authoring phase of research, the author becomes an integral part of the rich context that frame the ‘data’ being presented.

Integrating the author into the context of the exchanges changes the meaning of authorship somewhat. This becomes an exercise in reflexivity at every stage of the process where the ‘data collection’ and authorship, itself, is part of the context for the presentation of ‘findings.’ This allows the author’s utterances to be the focus of investigation, not just those of the ‘subjects’ and also allows further evaluation of not just the particular research project, but a broader evaluation of the limits and strengths of ethnographic studies in general.

Application of this methodology required constant dedication and commitment to true (reflexive) praxis at every moment. There arose moments in the intercoding process where I needed to confront complex and difficult realities about my ‘self’, my beliefs, and my values. I needed to do so because the requirements of the methodology dictated it. Furthermore, this kind of coding and analysis required a tremendous amount of rigor and time. Building a complex context around every exchange in such a way so as to honor the words and lives of the people I interviewed was no easy task and was both emotionally and intellectually draining at times. In retrospect, although cognizant of the limitations and impact of the presence of video cameras on the dynamics and content of interviews, I would have liked to have had access to video along with the field notes and reflections I did while in the field. Having this access to video footage might allow us to study the body language interaction more thoroughly and to more deeply situate the utterance within these bodily forms of communication.

Listening In Order to Speak and Speaking In Order to Listen

Looking for and cultivating true (reflexive) dialog throughout the research process, understanding whether dialogical conditions existed within and around a particular exchange helps contextualize the power dynamics of that exchange in a way that is useful to researchers.

Cultivating true reflexivity is key toward understanding not only ourselves as we exist in the research process, but also for understanding those we study. When our ‘subjects’ speak from a place of dialog, their words are more authentic in that they are less our words. The subaltern do speak (Spivak, 1988), but what they are saying is rooted in the power dynamics and context in which it was said and enters into a world of oppressive power-relations the minute it is authored. For this reason, as researchers, we need to do our best to provide that context: We need to provide a glimpse into the interactive dynamics that involve the researcher, the researched, and each of their worlds as they both produce the text which will be represented. So when it is read, it can be read within the context it was produced and be evaluated on this basis.

Paulo Freire (2000[1970]), reminds us, “leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis” (p. 126). As ethnographers concerned with social justice, we are simultaneously teachers and students: We are students of the people whose world we study, and teachers (as well as students) to the field of scholarship where we operate. We can only teach through being taught; the relationship is dialogical (Freire, 2000 [1970]). Yet, if the researcher is not reflexive in the field, and does not recognize how his body, his words, and his positionality might repress those voices that can teach him what he needs to know in order to best serve the people that use them, he cannot properly inform theory. Worse, he can become an agent of oppression himself. Without true (reflexive) dialog in the field, there is no useful research praxis in the discipline. When researchers produce empirical material in the field as a function of the praxis of domination, that research can be used to inform the development of theory within that academic discipline-at-large which will then impact future researchers in the field. This praxis of domination in research need be disrupted and transformed and this begins through true (reflexive) dialog.

For scholars concerned with social justice, cultivating dialogical praxis in the field is a prerequisite to the development of theories that promote the liberation from, rather than the reproduction of, structures of domination. Yet, what this also means is that when the key concepts in scholarly discourse are under heavy criticism and new ones are being evaluated, this critical gaze must extend to more than just the theories and the historical assumptions behind them, but also the ethnographic fieldwork practices and methodologies that continue to reproduce them. The latter is essential to the cultivation of true praxis (including, but not limited to, the study of religion) and is one important step in challenging the legacy and continuance of colonialism.

Vidal-Ortiz (2010), suggests that fieldwork “sites should not be reduced to observations, but should also be studied for their impact outside traditional boundaries” (p. 213). He carefully points out that by opening up fieldwork sites, by re-imagining their boundaries, we might be able to explain how they impact researchers as well as better analyze the sites themselves (Vidal-Ortiz, 2010, p.213). My argument here is, by re-imagining the field, how it impacts the researcher, whether or not the researcher engages in true (reflexive) dialog – with and within the living field – and why he chooses to do so or not, we can begin to create more useful theory. What’s more, we can begin to name more genuine practice and, through it, more useful theory.

Asad (1993) and others have warned us about the importance of the role of power in ethnography and the generation of knowledge (such as the study of religion). The first step in heeding this warning is to embrace the role and significance of pedagogy and praxis in the field for our research and areas of study. We must understand not only the role of true praxis in our theories, methods, and methodologies, but also the role of the praxis of domination. However, in

order to do this, we must first commit ourselves to a true (reflexive) methodology, one guided by the needs of true praxis both as a means and an end. With this as our guide, we must learn when to speak and when to listen.

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