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The Reclamation: Stories from the Margins and the LGBTQIA+ communities in El Salvador

ABSTRACT

Historically, colonialism in Central America imposed a strict gender binary in indigenous cultures that was previously centered around more fluid notions of gender (Harding, 2017). This rigid gender hierarchy deeply ingrained itself into the culture of Central America and subsequently in political, economic, and social institutions. As a result, people whose gender and sexuality did not conform to these imposed notions suffered and continue to suffer under the legacy of colonialism creating an environment where LGBTQIA+ and/or gender non-conforming individuals are marginalized, targeted, and silenced (Martinez, 2002). Narratives about these marginalized groups are often constructed for them, not by them. This project will consist of exploring networks of solidarity and identity among members of this community to use story-telling as a restorative practice, allowing them to reclaim their agency in a society that functions based on their exclusion.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Growing up, my identity had always been a huge factor in my life. Being an African-American gay woman, I cannot recall a time that I was not always thinking about who I was and how I was perceived in different spaces. While I believe these identities made me more aware and intentional in my personal exploration, I was no stranger to hostility and oppression due to who I was. Those experiences of discrimination galvanized me to create spaces where people who shared my identity could feel empowered and allowed me to serve my community in a way that encouraged healing and solidarity. During my four years of high school, many of the initiatives I started involved leading civic engagement campaigns and LGBTQIA+ advocacy initiatives. At Elon, I continue these roles through being a student assistant at the Gender and LGBTQIA+ Center and participating in workshops with my Leadership Fellows Cohort.

These roles, as well as my other academic obligations, have encouraged me to continue cultivating my curiosity about the world around me and gain access to knowledge that allows me to integrate theoretical frameworks about identity into my own life. In the words of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King quoted by Anita Hill upon her visit to Elon, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We are all linked by institutional

and structural systems of power, dominance, and oppression. Too often, I am reminded when we do not recognize this garment of destiny we fail each other and we fail ourselves. Educating myself about these systems through post-colonial, feminist, and critical race theory was like seeing the garment of destiny come to light before my very eyes and I could truly make sense of the world around me, especially concerning the impact that colonization has on ethnic and gender minorities such as myself. When I was closer to this area of inquiry, my intellectual curiosity blossomed and it became one of my main areas of motivation and purpose, not only as a budding scholar but as a human being who wants liberation and human rights for all.

In my endless pursuit of knowledge, however, I rarely find answers, just more questions. This is the beauty of inquiry and knowledge, not simply knowledge for knowledge's sake. We ask questions so that we can ask more questions and hopefully - somewhere along the line we find the answers together and take tangible steps, weaving this garment of destiny collectively - each of us individual threads sewn together by interconnectedness. I believe the pursuit of this knowledge and exploration of the nuance can lead me, and everyone else, into advocating for a more equitable, just world - for all. Through the Lumen prize, I want to continue advancing my knowledge of systems of oppression and how they relate to the world around me, growing my knowledge as a scholar but also giving me invaluable experience to prepare me for a career in social research and cultural competency to work with Spanish-speaking populations abroad and in the United States. Through this project, I hope to, first and foremost, positively impact the LGBTQIA+ communities in El Salvador to facilitate the reclamation of their agency. My thread in the garment of destiny connects to my values, fostering and supporting strong communities where social change and empowerment is possible.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Focus

European colonization of the Americas is deeply rooted in control of gender identity and gender roles - among other things. Many Latin American societies pre-colonization were much more flexible in their perspectives on gender binarism, the notion that there are only two, mutually exclusive genders - male and female (Harding, 2017). However, once European dominance was asserted on indigenous people, the gender binary became increasingly more prevalent and rigid. The gender binary is also directly linked to compulsory heterosexuality, as the sole purpose of the construction of a strict "male" and "female" binary is procreation, preserving not only heteronormativity, the stance that heterosexuality is the norm, but cisnormativity as well, the belief that gender binarism is the norm (Butler, 2006). Any deviation from this norm resulted in vulnerability to ostracization and/or violence, affecting trans and gender non-conforming people (Martinez, 2002). These ideologies - used primarily to subjugate and oppress native people - created a paradigm of intelligible and unintelligible genders. People who have intelligible genders adhering to binary gender expectations are less likely to be victims of violence, discrimination than their cisgender or heterosexual peers (Butler, 2006). Even today, people whose gender remains unintelligible, not being performed in a socially acceptable way, are victim to epidemic levels of violence, stigma, and discrimination. 78% of all homicides of transgender people - from January 2008 to September 2019 - are concentrated in Latin America due to the harmful ramifications of homophobia, and subsequently transphobia (Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide, 2019).

The perpetual legacy of colonialism as connected to discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people is reflected in Latin American policy today. There is little to no enforceable legislation that protects the rights and lives of LGBTQIA+ people in Latin America. There have been “at least 1,300 LGBT+ people murdered in the region in the past five years,” with 90% of those deaths being concentrated in Colombia, Mexico, and Honduras (Moloney, 2019). Within these figures, trans populations are particularly vulnerable due to their super minority status - super minority referring to their identity not conforming to notions of gender and sexuality. This is further reflected on a policy level as, “trans interests are usually treated as secondary” (Longaker and Haider-Markel, 2014). In Central America specifically, there is a severe lack of policy that protects trans individuals. Out of all seven countries in Central America, four of them have no legal protection against discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation and also no legal means for people to change their sex and legal name on official legal documents (Longaker and Haider-Markel, 2014). Lack of legal protection leads to the replication of colonial paradigms, in which social, political, and economic systems do not make space for trans individuals leading to violence, and lack of economic opportunity and social mobility.

Due to this marginalized status, they are silenced by the dominant culture - their lives, their experiences, and their stories are not only seen as unimportant but non-existing, erasing them from the collective socio-political and cultural consciousness. Borderlands theory states that because of their social location or identities(s) some individuals are marginalized - existing outside of the margins of society: “the queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual’s tribe’s fear: being different, being other, and therefore less than” (Martinez, 2002). Trans individuals in Latin and Central America live on the fringes, unprotected by their legislators and ostracized by a dominant culture that perpetually states that LGBTQIA+ people are less than and unworthy of dignity, respect, or human rights. LGBTQIA+ Central Americans have been negatively affected by a dominant narrative that they don’t have the political agency to combat.

There is a lack of research - both empirical and otherwise - that sheds light on these experiences and how these individuals are situated within social systems - particularly about narratives that are created for them, not by them. This project will not only draw attention to how policy and ideology affect sexual and gender minorities but also make this information accessible to a Western audience through collaborative efforts with grass-roots advocacy organizations. "The Reclamation: Stories from the Margins and LGBTQIA+ communities in El Salvador," will amplify the power of storytelling as a reclamation of agency through a series of qualitative interviews with LGBTQIA+ El Salvadorians. The interviews will be in a variety of different formats and highlight the lived experiences of the participants, including how they have been affected by harmful ideologies perpetuated by colonialism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity.

Scholarly Process

Since this project is centered around the reclaiming of agency, employing a research ideology that prioritizes the community and the participants is crucial in maintaining the tenant of empowerment. Therefore, my methodology for this project centers around Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), a research methodology “focusing on social, structural, and physical environmental inequities through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process” (Holkup, Tripp-Reimer, Salois, & Weinert, 2004). LGBTQIA+ Central Americans are not only LGBTQIA+ and Central American - they share a myriad of other identities that

affect the way they move throughout social systems such as social class, skin color, ethnicity, disability status, and education level. The CBPR model allows me to put the needs of the community members first, keeping in mind that the population I will be studying is highly vulnerable and complex.

To contextualize the qualitative data gathered by the CBPR model, the Ecological systems theory will help me complete a thorough examination of this issue on a mezzo - community - and macro - societal - level (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). This theory examines the influences of a variety of different social, economic, and political systems on individuals or social groups. Many systems are interacting with each other, contributing to the life chances of LGBTQIA+ Central Americans, both historically and now. Using this theory, I will be able to effectively and efficiently comprehend the forces that shape these individuals' lives and how their presence, visibility, or lack thereof, impacts the society in which they live.

For almost an entire year, I have been networking with different organizations abroad and in Central America. From these conversations, I have employed the snowball technique often used in social research which is, "sampling in which sample elements are selected as they are identified by successive informants or interviewees"(Schutt, 2020). Therefore, based on the numerous conversations with different organizations and representatives in the target county and locally, I was able to narrow down a partner. With the help of Jeanne Rikers, a representative from Foundation Cristosal, we were able to identify community needs and how this project could meet those needs in some way. Foundation Cristosal has agreed to work with me through their internship structure during Summer 2021 to use the snowball technique to interact with LGBTQIA+ identifying El Salvadorians and then to co-create a safe and public mechanism for them to share their stories.

Through networking, collaboration with different organizations, usage of the CBPR model, ecological systems theory, and snowball sampling frameworks, this project will use narrative, story-telling structures to assist LGBTQIA+ identifying El Salvadorians in reclaiming their agency and constructing their narrative while also spreading awareness of the conditions they face there. This approach is central to the CBPR model as it prioritizes the agency and the needs of the community, creating a platform for individuals to share their life experiences on their own terms and explain how their lives have been shaped by the systems around them.

Proposed products

Proposed Products for the target community

- n=30 Interviews from LGBTQIA+ El Salvadorians
- A co-created project with Foundation Cristosal for the target community
- Website/archive created for stories

Proposed Products for Elon Community

- Presentation at SURF and UCLC at Elon 2022
- Photo Exhibition at Elon through Department of World Language and Cultures
- Open Mic Night for Written testimonials through collaboration with Department of World Languages, and Cultures, Latin Hispanic Union, Witness for Peace Southeast, El Centro, Gender and LGBTQIA+ Center

FEASIBILITY

My Lumen project would be a scaled-up version of a project for my Women and Gender Studies course, therefore, I feel confident that it will be feasible. I collected and shared the experiences of LGBTQIA+ young adults who had grown up in the South. I interviewed 10 of my peers, 5 of which were 20-30 minute audio interviews that I transcribed individually, and compiled the interviews into a booklet format distributing to participants and other LGBTQIA+ organizations in the area.

Due to the extreme vulnerability of my target population, I have taken into account how much sensitivity and cultural competency is needed to work with LGBTQIA+ El Salvadorians - especially as an individual who does not share their cultural identity or nationality. Therefore, to assist with qualitative interviewing techniques, I am enrolled in research methods HSS 285 and I have received my CITI Certification. Additionally, I have taken several Spanish classes with a focus on public policy and inequality which have added to my body of knowledge of the colonialist paradigms and political variability that exist in Latin America. To address any safety concerns that may arise for the participants and myself, I would conduct interviews via Skype, Whatsapp, or an anonymous hotline to protect anonymity, which would be at the discretion of the participants. Through my experiences gaining knowledge and expertise about said population, the submission of my IRB proposal, and the collaborations I have formed and will continue to form, I will prioritize the agency and protection of participants and others involved.

Although, I am not a native Spanish speaker I have been a Spanish student for seven years, including my time as a Spanish major at Elon, and am confident in my ability to retain information and communicate with participants. Nevertheless, to address any potential language and cultural miscommunications, Foundation Cristosal is willing to provide an interpreter for each interview. Furthermore, in preparation for beginning my research, I have an internship with Witness for Peace Southeast this summer and will be part of a delegation in Honduras to study the effects of US policy on migration - another opportunity for me to further enhance my speaking skills. I will also be studying abroad in the Dominican Republic Spring of 2021 as a requirement for my Spanish major.

TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE US

PROPOSED TRAVEL: El Salvador

June-July 2021: Internship in El Salvador, qualitative interviews taking place

Fall 2021: Visit to Foundation Cristosal in El Salvador, meetings with representatives

Winter 2022: Visit to Foundation Cristosal in El Salvador, meeting with representatives

BUDGET

First Summer Term 2020

- Tuition
- Fall 2020-Spring 2021 \$5,425

- Fall 2021-Spring 2022 \$5,425
- Total: \$10,850
- Travel
- Summer 2021 -Summer in El Salvador through Foundation Cristosal Internship
- Internship Expenses \$3,500
- Housing accommodations through *Summer Intern program
- Living Expenses \$800
- Total: \$4,300
- Fall 2021- Fall Break Visit to Foundation Cristosal - co-creation of project
- Plane Ticket \$870
- Food and other expenses \$250
- *Housing Accommodations with Foundation Cristosal
- Total: \$1,120
- Winter 2022 -Travel to El Salvador -rolling out project to the community
- Airfare \$700
- Other expenses \$100
- Total: \$800
- Data Collection
- n=30 Transcription Costs (avg. 30 minutes per interview) \$900
- Translation Costs \$900
- Website Domain \$80
- Total: \$1,880
- Equipment
- Canon Powershot Camera \$350
- Photographs and stories printed \$500
- Photographs carrier/luggage fee \$250
- Total: \$1,050
- Total: \$ 9,150

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2020	-Delegation to Honduras through Witness for Peace South East -Online meetings with Foundation Cristosal to establish protocol for qualitative data collection	-Formal review of 2019 research report published by Foundation Cristosal
Fall 2020	-Online meetings with Foundation Cristosal to establish protocol for qualitative data collection	-IRB Proposal

Winter 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Continuing online meetings with Foundation Cristosal to establish protocol for qualitative data collection -Meeting with LHU, El Centro, Spanish, and English Department representatives to pitch open mic night - where individuals can read out individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Summer Internship Application with Foundation Cristosal submitted -Organizational matrix of story-telling and qualitative data collection verified -Website to facilitate data collection
Spring 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Study Abroad in the Dominican Republic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Estimated sample n=15 online stories collected using snowball method -Filter through website responses
Summer 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Internship with Foundation Cristosal -In-person interviews on the ground in El Salvador 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Estimated sample n=30 using snowball method for in person interviews -Filter through website responses -Gather ideas about potential products for target community
Fall 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Fall Break visit with Foundation Cristosal in El Salvador -Finalizing partnerships and consolidating funding allocation for exhibition at Elon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Verify organizational matrix of grouping, organizing, and sorting stories -All interviews should be recorded, transcribed, and or translated -Finalized report to present to representatives of Foundation Cristosal to get feedback -Preliminary d
Winter 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Travel to El Salvador 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Rolling out of project to the community in El Salvador
Spring 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Presenting findings at SURF and UCLC Conferences at Elon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Photo and story exhibition at Elon (Partnership with WGSS, History Department, Human Services) -Open Mic with reading of stories - available to all of the student body/community members (possible partnership with El Centro, GLC, Gender and Sexuality LLC, LHU, other related orgs) -Newsletter to share proposed products with local and international organizations (gather from networking LGBTQIA+ activists/agencies)

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