

Transfeminist Puerto Rico

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Puerto Rico is an emergent stronghold for transfeminist praxis. Far from being a single-issue identity-based politics, Puerto Rican transfeminism represents a vibrant cultural scene and an intersectional mutual aid ethos. What follows is a brief genealogy of the different points of origin and catalysts for a transfeminist politics in Puerto Rico in the 21st century. Of course, trans cultural production and activism has a much longer history in Puerto Rico that is the foundation for the development of an explicitly transfeminist politics. However, my focus here is on the convergence of feminist and trans politics within a coalitional framework in the past two decades. The student strikes at the University of Puerto Rico in 2005, 2010-11, and 2017 stand out as especially important moments for the emergence of transfeminism as a distinct mode of politics. It was in those periods of heightened coalitional activism that many

present day transfeminists crystalized their theoretical viewpoints, organizing skills, and cultural practices.

In the intervening years a number of explicitly transfeminist organizations emerged and there was a marked increase in the participation of trans people in feminist collectives and events like March 8th International Women's Day. In 2019, feminist, queer, and trans activists played a leading role in the summer protests that led to the resignation of then-governor Ricardo Rosselló in ways that further strengthened transfeminism as a political force. In 2020, the murder of Alexa Negrón was another important catalyst for transfeminist consciousness raising about the prevalence of transfemicide and coalition building to combat it. Lastly, in the past decade queer and transfeminist cultural production has come to fruition in music, literature, and performance art that has profoundly shaped the artistic scene. These and other factors have coalesced into a vibrant transfeminist praxis. This movement has grown parallel to ongoing femicides and transfemicide, an increasingly conservative and transphobic government, and a surge in evangelical anti-gender politics. Rather than represent Puerto Rico as a bastion of gender and sexual liberation, I argue that in the face of political, religious, and social conservatism, transfeminist propose a transformative worldmaking praxis.

Student Strikes at the UPR

Since the mid 2000s the UPR has sustained dramatic budget cuts, tuition increases, and reductions in student financial aid that have steadily reduced its matriculation rates and course offerings. Transfeminism is, by definition, a coalitional movement, a politics of solidarity between people situated differently across axes of power. Given how budget cuts, tuition increases, and the elimination of student aid impacted a wide range of students, the student strikes were an especially fertile environment for political organizing across differences.

In the face of the systematic dismantling of public higher education that impacted a diverse array of students, socialist and pro-independence student organizations offered a political critique of colonialism that resonated with students who had not previously engaged in activism. Feminist, queer, and trans students were integrated within these organizations from early on and articulated demands for gender and sexual equity within the broader anti-austerity struggle. For example, José Enrique García Oquendo (a.k.a. Manuela La Roja) was part of the national committee leading the 2005 strikes that negotiated on behalf of students, noted poet and scholar Roque Salas Rivera led a student assembly in 2005, and in the student strikes of 2010-11 and 2017 queer and trans student activists like Ray Rohena, Dania “Betún” Warhol, Lucca B. Valentín, Inaru Nadia de la Fuente Díaz, Katia Cruz Quintana, wrote manifestos, spoke out at press conferences held peer to peer education workshops, placed gay and trans pride flags all around campus encampments, and demanded changes in the curriculum, administrative policies regarding name changes, and the creation of gender inclusive bathroom facilities. They are part of a longstanding feminist tradition that understands how racial and colonial capitalism depends on the systematic disenfranchisement of women within a heteronormative nuclear family structure. With each student strike there was an ever-greater presence of feminist, queer, and trans student organizations, leadership, and participation that was felt across all eleven UPR campuses, but especially in Río Piedras and Mayagüez. In 2024, the progressive buildup of anti-colonial and pro-independence student mobilizations came to fruition in the coalition between the newly formed Citizen Victory Movement (MVC by its initials in Spanish) and the pro-independence party (PIP), which combined forces and led to the strongest voter turnout the pro-independence party has ever seen for its gubernatorial candidate Juan Dalmau. The MVC does not hold an official position on whether Puerto Rico should become an independent nation as a strategic move to attend to the questions of

governance that are most pressing for Puerto Rico, rather than getting bogged down in the interminable “status” question that does not currently have a path to resolution through Puerto Rican self-determination. However, the MVC’s leaders and membership have posed sharp criticisms to US colonialism and are by far the political party that has most strongly supported trans rights. Marielle de Leon Toledo became the first trans woman to hold public office when she was elected in 2024 to one of two seats in the San Juan municipal assembly under the MVC party.

Many leading present-day transfeminist and queer activists first began organizing when they were students in the UPR in groups like the Committee Against Homophobia, Mafaldas, the Gender Studies Working Group, and the Trans Youth Coalition. Especially during the 2017 strike, students dedicated significant efforts towards developing an engaging educational curriculum and cultural offering within the university campus encampments while classes were cancelled. For example, Ray Rohena of the Trans Youth Coalition had already developed sensitivity training workshops for professors and students in the fields of law and medicine, which he was able to pivot into the peer-to-peer teaching that was a central ethos of the student strikes. Since 2017, there has been a flourishing of transfeminist organizations that operate outside of the university and do a wide range of work, including education through social media and workshops, policy advocacy, community and arts centers, informal case management, as well as editorial, graphics, and other media production. There is a growing number of transfeminist and queer organizations, such as Espicy Nipples, Sombrilla Cuir, El Hangar, La Casa del Joseo, Entre Putxs, Casa Cuna Editorial, and Borivogue, as well as feminist organizations like La Coalición del 8 de Marzo, Todas PR, Aborto Libre, La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (La Cole), La Impresora, and Taller Salud, that are also taking on trans politics with a serious commitment.

Transfeminism and Sex Worker Empowerment

Another important point of origin for transfeminist organizing is the work of trans women activists like Karina Torres and Ivana Fred who have been active since the 1990s in HIV prevention and care services and doing public advocacy for trans rights. Both have served as important mentors for a new generation of trans activists and remain active as organizers and spokespersons. Given the labor discrimination and sexual objectification that often pigeonholes trans women into sex work, HIV prevention and labor rights for trans people goes hand in hand with sex worker empowerment. The 2014 documentary film *Mala Mala* by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickels brought this dynamic into public view by featuring a number of trans sex workers in their day to day lives as well as their organizing efforts for increased labor rights. The more recent formation of the transfeminist sex worker collective *Entre Putxs* came out of a need to develop mutual aid strategies in the face of ongoing climate disasters and later COVID-19 lockdowns that closed clubs and severely worsened labor conditions for sex workers. This is a central feature of transfeminism, it does not glorify sex work but it refuses the stigmatization of sex workers and understands that it is an important source of income for many (Garriga-López 2019). In contrast to traditional feminist politics that treat sex workers as victims in need of rescue, or of sex work as an inherently oppressive and sexist, transfeminism advocates for the decriminalization of sex work and a sex positive approach that embraces sexual liberation.

Transfeminism as an emergent praxis does not shy away from promiscuity and sex work, substance use, and even violence within a broader struggle for social justice. For instance, the summer 2019 protests often repurposed sexually explicit lyrics from reggaeton songs like “En La Cama” into chants, a practice first developed by students during the UPR student strikes. Furthermore, heavy drinking and weed smoking out in public were prevalent throughout those weeks of protests. While most of the protests were peaceful, there were

also nightly confrontations between protesters and police that served to lay bare the violence of the state. Rather than a hindrance to coherent political organizing, these practices helped to sustain and strengthen the protests that were in many ways a cathartic release from the trauma of the administration's criminal neglect and incompetence following hurricane María.

Puerto Rico is undergoing a wave of artistic and cultural production led by sex workers that is explicitly transfeminist. Leading the way is an organization called *Entre Putxs*, a mutual support and empowerment network of pole dancers, aerialists, strippers, and other sex workers. Since its inception *Entre Putxs* has worked towards creating a queer and trans inclusive and sex-affirming space for audience members, clients, and sex workers alike. The group was initially conceived in the post-hurricane María period. In the immediate aftermath of the storm and for months after, most clubs closed, there were military-enforced curfews, and the population as a whole had very limited access to electricity and other basic needs. All of which left sex workers in a vulnerable economic, social, and legal position. With the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic, sex workers once again faced a sharp and immediate decline in income, as well as added social stigmatization as “super spreaders” of coronavirus. Furthermore, sex workers were explicitly and systematically excluded from coronavirus relief funds designated towards small businesses under the CARES Act. In the face of cascading climate and public health disasters *Entre Putxs* formed organically as a mutual support network. Leading members of the *Espicy Nipplez Transfeminist Media Network* and *Entre Putxs* created clandestine pop-up strip clubs, which was an important source of income for those sex workers who did not have the means to move their work to an online platform or to generate sufficient income on digital content alone. My first time seeing early iterations of this group was in the summer of 2021 when I attended the first annual “*Jayaera Combativa*” (combative joy/self-actualization) day festival organized by *El Hangar*, another important

transfeminist organization. It was held on the same weekend as the Puerto Rico LGBT pride march and was billed as a refusal of homonormative respectability politics that pride events have come to represent for many. I did not know in advance that there would be a pole dance and strip show at this event, which was held in a public park across the street from a small plot of land and plane hangar of “El Hangar.” Around two in the afternoon on a Sunday, in full view of passersby, a group of five pole dancers set up their equipment and performed a half hour routine that included the predetermined audience participation of two trans men as the recipients of lap dances. I had never seen anything like this on so many levels, the unabashed sexual takeover of public space, the seamless integration of trans men into their routine, the high production value of their presentation, the sheer number of performers that took the stage. All these factors signaled a cohesive and empowered network of sex workers who are in community and coalition with trans people. Since then, Entre Putxs has organized three pop-up strip club nights in La Respuesta that have catered explicitly to an LGBT audience.

Because transfeminism attends to the material conditions of trans people’s everyday lives, the work that transfeminists activists and organizations do is as varied as the needs and interests of the members who make up these organizations. Since hurricane María, Puerto Rican trans, queer, and feminist coalitions like the Trans Youth Coalition and Espicy Nipplez have taken on questions of environmental justice and organized brigades to attend to people’s material needs in the most impacted communities, while also providing gender-affirming care to trans and gender non-binary individuals. They have also secured housing and emergency funds for trans and gender non-binary people affected by climate disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment and the overall lack of affordable housing. Groups like Espicy Nipplez, Sombrilla Cuir, La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción and Entrx Putes have strong Black leadership and a sustained anti-racist emphasis in their work.

Transfeminists Resistance in the Streets

Feminist, queer, and trans activists were also highly active in the summer of 2019 uprising (Cruz Malavé 2022) that led to the resignation of the Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his entire administrative cabinet (Alvarado León 2019). Like the student strikes, the summer 2019 protests were a space for coalition building across differences. Versatile and experienced feminist, queer, and trans activists and cultural producers participated actively in the protests, which in turn prompted a broad recognition of their leadership and a greater acceptance of transfeminist politics. While Bad Bunny had engaged in public debates related to gender and sexuality before the summer of 2019 protests, his participation in this historic event was a direct point of contact with transfeminist activists that marked a turn towards a much more sustained engagement with gender and sexual politics.

Following the leak of the Telegram chat of Rosselló's administrative cabinet that revealed their corruption and crass disregard for human suffering, Bad Bunny responded angrily to accusations that he was allied with Rosselló. These accusations stemmed from his late-night drunken visit, along with the Puerto Rican rapper Residente, to the governor's mansion in January 2019. He canceled four concert dates in Spain to join the protests in person and collaborated with Residente and the Puerto Rican singer Ilé to release the protest anthem "Afilando los Cuchillos." Evidently, both Bad Bunny and Residente felt a need to denounce Rosselló given how their meeting with him on the night of January 20th 2019 was turned into a photo-op for the governor. Bad Bunny's transfeminist interventions are rarely explicitly stated as such, so one pay close attention to recognize the relevance of his gestures. Their decision to meet with Rosselló was prompted by their concern over the prevalence of gun violence that the day before had taken the life of Kevin Fret, known as the first queer trap artist (Lawrence La Fountain, 2021). Fret's murder underscores the extent to which reggaeton, and trap are genres where gender fluidity and

queer sexual expression carry a real risk of violence.

Bad Bunny later admitted that the summer of 2019 was his first time attending a protest, and since then he has become more outspoken and connected to political organizing. The music video and documentary film for “El Apagón” (the blackout) is a potent example of how he uses his global platform to bring attention to Puerto Rico’s colonial plight under US rule. The double entendre of the phrase “Puerto Rico está bien cabrón” in *El Apagón* is that to live in Puerto Rico is to simultaneously experience its powerful natural beauty and rich cultural scene, alongside the deprivations of colonial infrastructure that leaves us quite literally powerless. The music video and documentary film includes archival footage of the “grajeo combativo” dance party protest that was organized by transfeminists on the steps of the San Juan Cathedral and features at least one of the organizers of said protest and other current members of La Borivogue collective, a politicized voguing collective. In this way, Bad Bunny acknowledges the pivotal role of queers and transfeminists in this historic moment. During his televised concert in July of 2022 for the *Un Verano Sin Ti* album, he spotlighted trans artist Villano Antillano and queer artists Rainao and Young Miko by bringing them on stage to perform their own music in the middle of the concert. His decision to share his platform with trans and queer artists created an important opening for each of these artists to expand their audience significantly. Villano Antillano is arguably the most successful and well known trans rapper in the world and is avowedly transfeminist and anti-colonial in her politics. These are just a few examples of how cultural production has been central to the growth of transfeminism in Puerto Rico.

In February 2020, Bad Bunny made his most overt transfeminist intervention when he performed his song “Ignorantes” on Jimmy Fallon’s *Tonight Show*. During the performance, he wore a shirt that bore the message, “They Killed Alexa, not a Man Wearing a Skirt” as a direct response to the police and press

repeated misgendering of a trans woman who had been murdered earlier that month. Alexa's murder was a watershed moment for the Puerto Rican feminist movement. As news of her death became public and the details of her life unfolded, her case stood out as emblematic of the compounding effects of oppression that trans women face and she became a flashpoint for a growing transfeminist consciousness within activist circles and society at large (Garriga-Lopez, 2025). There was widespread recognition of the need to understand transfemicides as a feminist issue. There was a plethora of artistic and political responses by local artists and activists that were also speaking out on Alexa's murder. Feminist and LGBT organizations such as TodasPR, Sombrilla Cuir, and Waves Ahead, continued to demand justice for Alexa in the years to come. Visual artists made depictions of Alexa holding a mirror as a metaphor for how her case reflected the deeply ingrained transphobia in our society that her murder brought to light. In 2021, the Barrileras del 8M collective produced a stunning music video of the iconic feminist anthem *Canción Sin Miedo* (Song Without Fear) that payed homage to Alexa along with many other victims of femicide and transicide. It is a glowing example of how transfeminism has come to fruition in Puerto Rico as a coalitional struggle.

This brief genealogy offers a snapshot of some of the most visible and exciting mobilizations embodying transfeminist politics in Puerto Rico today. There are many more that deserve equal consideration that will be the focus of future research projects. While there are many forces operating against transfeminist politics in Puerto Rico, at least within the feminist movement there is not an organized trans exclusionary wing and trans issues are thoroughly integrated within broader feminist struggles. By that same token, the incorporation of trans politics into feminism has prompted an interrogation of gender essentialism and unexamined transphobia within feminist organizations. Transfeminism emerges out of struggle, one that directly addresses people's material conditions; hence it is a deeply intersectional

project that is at the forefront of efforts to combat colonialism, racism, and environmental degradation. While there is much uncertainty about what the future holds, there is no doubt transfeminists will continue to build towards a more just future.

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