

ABSTRACT

My thesis research examines the complex relationships between place, land, power, and space for the community of Los Filtros in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. Los Filtros was founded in the 1920s as one of the communities that emerged from massive rural to urban migration in Puerto Rico. As Guaynabo became modernized during the last two decades of the 20th century, urban sprawl and land commodification pressures trapped Los Filtros and other informalized communities in the municipio inside a context of socioeconomic inequity. In an effort to homogenize Guaynabo's population by socioeconomic class through strongly supporting upscale gated communities and privatizing space, Guaynabo's municipal government has actively sought to expropriate Los Filtros' residents since 2001. However, Los Filtros remains in place today. Despite Guaynabo's municipal government's power and intense outside economic pressures that foster displacement, Los Filtros community members have resisted and fought long-sustained expropriation efforts for two decades. To understand Los Filtros' long-standing *lucha* (fight) and strategies for remaining in place, I investigate the scope of municipal government-led expropriation efforts in Los Filtros and the broader context of inequity that intensified such efforts. I draw upon two primary methods to advance my research, namely semi-structured interviews that I held with nine Los Filtros community members and nine non-community members in the summer of 2021 and research in three different archives. Based on my data, I argue that in a context where land privatization and spatial homogenization are predominant pressures, Los Filtros community members' strong place attachment has sustained their resistance to Guaynabo's municipal government's neoliberal practices, driven their efforts to claim a right to the city, and compelled their advocacy for equitable development. My research offers an analysis of Los Filtros' fight that centers people-place connections as a basis for understanding activism at large. Los Filtros community members engaged in social activism that challenged the elite's imposition of spatial order by reasserting their right to determine their community's future and, more generally, their right to the city. Therefore, this case study of Los Filtros contributes to important discussions about who is valuable in the city and how social justice is practiced at the urban scale.

**Fighting for the Right to Remain in Los Filtros:
Place Attachment and Expropriation Efforts in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico**

By:
Carola Oliveras-Rodríguez '22

Department of Geology and Geography at Mount Holyoke College
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Advised by Professor Serin Houston
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CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE SCENE: CONTEXT, KEY CONCEPTS, AND METHODS

Even though I had passed by Road 833 on the edge of Los Filtros thousands of times before, it was not until summer 2021 when I embarked on my thesis research due to a profound curiosity with people and their connections with place that I really saw, engaged with, and understood Los Filtros. Since I had usually zoomed along the curvy narrow road on my way to and from high school, dodging cars coming from the opposite direction, I had only noticed about ten houses situated on the edge of the road. I never knew what was behind. However, I understood that in the 400-foot green-covered hill in urbanized Guaynabo, where I live, luxurious buildings with glass balconies and gated communities with imposing gates and freshly painted cement walls were not the only residential settings. I knew Los Filtros was there too—I had just never seen the full community. So, when I took a peek for the first time, I was struck by the number of decaying wooden houses scattered precariously across the sloping hillside. They were hidden between the greenness of tall trees that invited a refreshing breeze. The houses were characterized by unstable cement block columns sustaining the bulk of the structure (See Appendix A).

Laura,¹ a lifelong resident of Los Filtros, became immediately committed to showing me around after I let her know of my interest to learn about the community. As we walked down one of the main stairways to enter Los Filtros, she recited the history of her community with great attention to detail while pointing to important places (See Appendix B). I was looking down to

¹ To preserve interviewees' confidentiality, all names throughout this thesis, including this one, are pseudonyms.

watch my step as we continued through the asymmetrical, spider-web like paths of interconnected stairways when I realized, had I not followed Laura down these paths, I would have never witnessed Los Filtros' scenery, vibrancy, uniqueness, or decay. Driving on Road 833, the abundance of vegetation and luxury housing hides Los Filtros well. The community's history of informalization, however, conceals its greatness far more.

Los Filtros is one of hundreds of marginalized communities across the island of Puerto Rico that fits the description of informal urban form and paradoxically remains in place despite accelerated urban development elsewhere. It is an economically marginalized community of approximately 50 homes, located in Barrio Frailes, at the center of Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. It was founded in the 1920s, primarily by people who worked in the construction of the Los Filtros water filtration plant in Guaynabo. The Autoridad de Fuentes Fluviales (now called Autoridad de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (AAA²) [Authority of Aqueducts and Sewers]) was the entity responsible for this project. According to interviewees Juan and Herminia (2021), the AAA "ceded their terrains" and "allowed" workers to build their houses in fair proximity to the filtration plant (See Appendix C). This common story is corroborated in academic research (see Morales-Cruz, 2012a; Vázquez, 2012) and local popular press. Correspondingly, there are different narrated versions about the community's origins, such as newspaper Primera Hora [First Hour]'s claim, "[The Authority of] Aqueducts [and Sewers] let them improvise their little huts here" ("Los Filtros", 2009, para. 9). Within the Los Filtros community, there were nearly seven acres owned by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey (USCGS) and used for the San Juan Magnetic Observatory, which launched its operations in 1926 as one of five Magnetic Observatories in the world (Wilson, 1947) (See Appendix D). Both the water filtration plant and

² See Appendix E for list of all acronyms.

the Magnetic Observatory were structures that many residents in Los Filtros remember as crucial in the formation of the community and collective memories.

The exponential population growth following the community's formation was due to patterns of migration from the inland, as workers arrived in Guaynabo in search of farm work. Indeed, scholars who address Puerto Rican urbanism tend to identify the development of *arrabales* with Puerto Rico's industrialization boom of 1940-1970 (Sepúlveda, 1997; Vázquez, 2018).³ *Arrabal*, which translates into *slum*, is a term that was predominantly used in the twentieth century referring to peripheral low income and socio-economically marginalized communities that emerged as a result of exponential growth in spontaneous urbanization processes (Vázquez, 2018, p. 60). The wave of internal rural to urban migration from the inland towards metropolitan San Juan in search of jobs during this period of industrialization prompted irregular uses of land that resulted in the configuration of spatially precarious communities (*ibid.*). This internal migration precipitated growth in Los Filtros to the extent that the community reached approximately 129 families near the 1950s. However, in 2009, there were about 90 families in Los Filtros (Franco, 2009), and in 2021, there are about 40 to 50. This drastic depopulation, along with other changes in the physical environment and the community's profile, has resulted from various external factors, such as economic and political pressures. In my research, I mainly focus on struggles over land and the right to remain in place.

Roberto, who goes up and down the stairs in Los Filtros on a daily basis, but who I usually saw sitting on the edge of Road 833 with the newspaper in his hands, was proudly born, raised, and currently resides in Los Filtros. "I rather stay here. I like it here. I was born and raised

³ There have been three main time periods that characterize the island's economic development: 1) the sugar industry's boom from the 1900s-1930s; 2) the manufacturing and industrialization from the 1940s-1970s; and 3) the service industry expansion from the 1970s to the present (Sepúlveda, 1997).

here”, he proclaimed (Roberto, *Interview*. June 15, 2021). This was the third time Roberto mentioned that he was born and raised in Los Filtros when I interviewed him. On the one hand, being born and raised there was not only one identity he considered of significant value, but also it was his reason for never wanting to leave his place. He has grown attached to Los Filtros’ history, environment, lifestyles, and sense of belonging in the community. On the other hand, Norma, another interviewee, also highlighted her emotional bond with the place she was born and raised in, while simultaneously noting, “There [comes] a time that if you did not do it with time, you [cannot stay] there, even if you have lived and been born in that place” (*Interview*. June 14, 2021). Norma speaks to the strict Puerto Rican inheritance laws by pointing out that if a resident in Los Filtros does not make timely arrangements to transfer land title to their children, they run the risk of losing the property. Being born and raised in Los Filtros as well, she emphasized the importance of obtaining one’s property title because “being born and raised in a place does not grant you the right to stay” (Norma, *Interview*. June 14, 2021). Whether talking about their time residing in Los Filtros, sense of community, times of hardship, or reasons to resist displacement, community members emphasized being born and raised in the neighborhood as the most significant factor that fueled their resistance to municipal-led expropriation. Indeed, my research adopts a geographic perspective to show that Los Filtros community members’ strong sense of attachment to place has compelled the fight for equitable development and sustained the resistance to expropriation for the past two decades. Accordingly, my thesis grapples with the meaning of place, who gets to be considered part of the urban landscape or not, and the tension interviewees voiced as they considered to what extent being born and raised in a place ensures one’s ability to remain there.⁴

⁴ There are diverse mechanisms for claiming land in Puerto Rico, through longevity or official property titles. The complexity of these processes was a theme that emerged in my research and which I discuss in following chapters.

Questions arise about the changing nature of urbanism specifically regarding how informal settlements built 70 years ago fit in today's environment and how outsiders perceive these communities many decades later on an island where the suburbanization boom erased all other forms of housing from the visual urban landscape. Moreover, issues of gentrification and urban regeneration intensify and produce challenges for the organization of space that reflect the debate around land ownership. My research highlights Los Filtros residents' spatial awareness and perceptions about upscale development around them. More specifically, I study the role of their attachment to place as a motivator for claiming their right to stay and for resisting the challenges of geographically uneven development. Los Filtros is currently surrounded by high income housing developments and gated communities⁵ which have made the area attractive in terms of the land's use and exchange value (See Appendix F). Hence, the community's physical and figurative location in a place surrounded by upper class residential development within a municipio⁶ that has historically promoted an urban landscape of prestige is characteristic of a particular socio-spatial context. Taking this into consideration, my research centers upon three core research questions:

1. How do the characteristics of Los Filtros' socio-spatial context produce, resist, and perpetuate structural and systemic inequality?
2. What were the primary expropriation threats to Los Filtros, and how do imaginative geographies expose these threats?

⁵ Gated communities have varying definitions across national settings. Here, I refer to gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros using Ed Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder's (1997) definition: "Gated communities are residential areas ...with designated perimeters, usually walls or fences, and controlled entrances that are intended to prevent penetration by non-residents" (p. 2).

⁶ "Puerto Rico is divided in 78 Municipios. The United States Census Bureau do[es] not translate this legal units as Municipality because the Municipios are a smaller territorial unit similar [but not totally equivalent] to the U.S. County" (Díaz-Garayúa & Guilbe-López, 2020, p. 353).

3. How has the spatial awareness and place attachment of Los Filtros community members influenced their fight to remain in place and claim their right to the city?

I answer these questions by using a geographic lens that focuses on the forces of spatial homogeneity and land privatization,⁷ imaginative geographies, attachment to place, and equitable development. With this approach, I discuss the relationship between social inequality and space and, in response to it, Los Filtros' fight to claim their right to the city. Through analyzing my data and in response to my research questions, I argue that in a context where land privatization and spatial homogenization are predominant pressures, it is the Los Filtros community members' strong sense of place attachment that has sustained their resistance to Guaynabo's municipal government's neoliberal practices, driven their efforts to claim the right to the city, and compelled their fight for equitable development over the past two decades. This is the case even though members of gated communities are aware of economic spatial unevenness, recognize Los Filtros' right to remain, and oppose the community's expropriation. Put differently, I am compelled by Los Filtros' persistence as an informalized community in affluent suburban Guaynabo. The paradox between the community's endurance and a context that strives for its disappearance pertains to sustained issues concerning space, land, power, and the "right to place," meaning the ability to live and remain where one currently resides.

For studying the interrelationship between these issues, I focus on the expropriation threat to Los Filtros as a neoliberal practice and the community's reaction to such a threat. Expropriation is a process by which the government dispossesses someone of their property in the name of the public good. It is often interchangeable with the term "eminent domain" or

⁷ In this case, I write about land privatization to describe processes through which municipal governments and developers exert pressure to commodify land for the benefit of the real estate industry. While land privatization preceded the 1980s, I associate it with neoliberalism's drive to maximize corporate gains. In this thesis, I discuss land privatization as the cause for the displacement of the working class in order to benefit the elite.

described as “domestic land grabbing,” but to underscore the power dynamics at play, I primarily use the word “expropriation” in my work. The municipal government of Guaynabo has threatened and carried out efforts to expropriate Los Filtros over the past two decades. Alongside these expropriation threats, national level legislation for the investment in and protection of *barrios*⁸ against expropriation became an important tool to enable the Los Filtros community control over their place, mainly through the Special Communities Act, which I will discuss in depth in Chapter Three.

The profile of Guaynabo’s municipal government demonstrates how neoliberalism influences the drive to expropriate certain *barrios* in the municipio, Los Filtros in particular. Neoliberalism is the theory initiated in the 1970s which supports the role of states in assuming political economic practices that center “individual entrepreneurial freedoms” through endorsing the free market (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). It is characterized by the state’s inclination towards privatization and deregulation. However, paradoxically, through adopting a neoliberal framework, states often enforce market-driven policies that involve regulating land and space. For instance, city governments within neoliberal regimes frequently work to benefit the private sector, specifically real estate developers, in an effort to expand their tax base, thus implementing policies that exacerbate inequality and render the working class at a disadvantage. Expropriation is one such land-regulation tool that governments use to aid the private sector as they carry out market-driven displacements. Thus, exercising the right to remain in place is specifically challenging for communities like Los Filtros that are historically associated with land invasion, face ongoing structural decay, and located in a municipio that has struggled to embrace the existence of *barrios* for their geographical space. *Barrios* are communities that

⁸ In this context, “barrio” is a substitute for the pejorative words “arrabales” and “slum.” “Barrio” is also the word for the primary legal subdivision within “municipios” in Puerto Rico.

originated long before the rest of Puerto Rico's metropolitan areas were urbanized, which is thus the root of their uneven geographical development.

Los Filtros was originally deemed an “improvised” and “irregular” settlement. Although there is debate around the word “invasion,” and it is unclear how the land was acquired, Los Filtros' form and configuration lead to its categorization as an informal settlement. The most common characteristics of an informal settlement that scholars and international agencies tend to highlight are: “lack of basic infrastructure, poor housing, illegal dwelling, non-secure tenure, high urban density, lack of sanitation, poverty, and exclusion” (Samper et al., 2020, p. 4). From its founding days in the 1920s through the mid-1970s, Los Filtros displayed many of these characteristics. However, many members of the Los Filtros community obtained title for their properties in 1979, which officially categorized them as “legal” dwellers and pulled them away from the “informal” classification. Thus, in my thesis, I refer to Los Filtros not as an “informal settlement,” but as an “informalized settlement.” This language reflects Los Filtros' position as an informal settlement produced by “outsiders,” meaning non-residents of Los Filtros given their perception of the *barrio*. While some might describe the community's origins as unauthorized land invasion, it is clear that the government had an important role. Yet, outsiders have informalized the community because the government's intervention in granting land plots is less recognized and the predominant narrative portrays Los Filtros' founders as “land invaders.” Besides, other factors such as neighborhood disinvestment contribute to ongoing processes of informalization.

Even though Los Filtros is an informalized rather than informal settlement, it shares some characteristics with informal urbanization. Specifically in the context of Latin America and the so-called “Global South,” informal urbanization is a term commonly used across academia to

refer to certain neighborhoods that emerge under dubious legal circumstances and lack essential resources that other communities have access to. For instance, Fran Tonkiss (2019, p. 17) frames informality as the physical production of “self-help” urbanism to meet human needs in a place that the state has abandoned and disregarded. This is certainly the case in Los Filtros. Tonkiss (2019) also associates informal settlements with impermanence, meaning that a group of people occupy or adopt a vacant space with temporary use intentions. Thus, from an urban design standpoint, and taking into consideration the conditions of self-help and temporariness for informal settlements, informality entails a “provisional nature” related to poverty and lack of economic resources (Tonkiss, 2019, p. 20). In the context of Los Filtros, the push to expropriate conveys an assumption of temporariness, even though the community of Los Filtros has been in continuous existence for about 100 years.

Another way to understand informality is to define it as the opposite of urban formality (Samper et al., 2020). Considering the features of the formal city, such as, accessible clean water and sanitation, permanent construction, adequate living space, and “access to secure tenure,” urban settlements would be informal if they lack one or most of those characteristics (Samper et al., 2020, p. 4). Through informalization, Los Filtros lacks adequate sanitation systems and stable housing. In short, informal settlements are mostly spatial productions of populations with limited economic resources and often related to “poor world” urbanism. Although 70% of Los Filtros residents obtained titleship for their homes in 1979, Guaynabo’s municipal government has disinvested in the community throughout the years, thus reproducing decay and perpetuating its informalization.

In stark contrast to Los Filtros are the surrounding gated communities. The emergence of gated communities close to Los Filtros is part of an island-wide process of suburbanization. As

the transition from the agricultural to industrial-based economy shaped Puerto Rico, the state government advanced a process of land holding decentralization (Suárez-Carrasquillo, 2009, p. 80). Particularly, in 1968, the state granted full ownership of subplots to qualifying individuals thus redistributing the land that was once owned by agricultural developers. Simultaneously, the federal government led initiatives to eliminate informal settlements, then recognized as “arrabales,” and construct public housing. Some authors, such as Melissa Fernández-Arrigoitia (2014), Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores (2017), and José R. Díaz-Garayúa and Carlos J. Guilbe-López (2020), emphasize that the movement was principally from *arrabales* to public housing in the mid-twentieth century. Carlos A. Suárez-Carrasquillo (2009), however, argues that people who lived in *arrabales* at that time had the option to move to tract housing developments as well. Because the government extensively supported the construction industry and Puerto Ricans were starting to adopt a strong land ownership culture in the 1960s, the exponential increase in tract housing in the Metropolitan Area⁹ contributed to what many call urban sprawl.

The popularization and rise in the construction of gated communities later became vital to ongoing urban sprawl processes across the metropolitan area. They reflected the characteristics of a pre-established consumerist culture, which in this case, entailed the commodification and consumption of privacy. The expansion of gated communities was further enhanced when the Puerto Rican state government approved Act 21 of 1987, which allowed homeowners associations to close some of their streets and control car and walking access to their communities. This was the result of public unrest focused on the rapidly growing crime rates in the 1980s. Therefore, people’s aspiration to move into prestige communities coupled with state-

⁹ Metropolitan Area is a non-official but conventional term, also called the Área Metro, and refers to the San Juan metropolitan area, the extended urban area surrounding San Juan which includes the Municipios of Bayamón, Carolina, Cataño, Guaynabo, and Trujillo Alto (See Appendix G).

level support for security-based infrastructures, led to an increase in the construction and development of gated communities across the San Juan metropolitan area. This process was evident around Los Filtros. Remarkably, the construction of prestige communities and apartment buildings across and around Los Filtros significantly influenced the socio-spatial context that produce(d) the community's informalization.

So far, in this chapter, I have introduced my topic of study, listed my research questions, defined terminology, and articulated my main argument. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework that supports my research analysis, describe the research methods I used, reflect on my researcher positionality, and outline the content for the rest of my thesis.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on geographic thought, I designed a research framework based on my analysis of spatial relations. Human geography offers tools to study people-place interactions and issues that generate over space. Thus, the importance of spatial analysis is related to explaining how the space one is in and the place(s) one occupies affect one's life. Furthermore, I developed my work based on an understanding that the relationship between society and space is mutually constitutive. Through analyzing the construction of the spatial, I study Los Filtros as a place that people created and continue to shape within a space that simultaneously affects them. I approach Los Filtros as a contested place where community members face a geographical challenge that they are inevitably involved in just by residing in the place. Expropriation, which represents contestation over land, is a geographical issue concerning the regulation, control, construction, and ownership of place, that has critical and real-life repercussions. Considering this reality as

one in which residents are challenged to defend their place, I seek to explain two opposite forces framing the issue: expropriation threats and residents' reaction to them.

In examining “why expropriate” and “why resist” logics, I animate my discussion using three core geographic concepts: space, imaginative geographies, and place. Theories of space provide the framework for discussing the implications of the socio-spatial context in which the expropriation issue occurs. “Imaginative geographies” helps me evaluate and understand the different ways in which people approach the expropriation issue. “Place” as a lens combines both the meaning of Los Filtros' socio-spatial context and the implications of imaginative geographies about the community. Essentially, I study Los Filtros to illustrate the contestation over place as a consequence of a socio-spatial context and imaginative geographies that have real life ramifications.

While many scholars, such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1990; 2001), and Yi-Fu Tuan (1997), write about and study spatial relations, I principally rely upon the work of geographer Doreen Massey (2005). Massey argues that space can be understood as the “simultaneity of stories” and “trajectories” and provides a series of ideas that illuminate this notion (2005, p. 9). I draw on these ideas to understand the socio-spatial context of Los Filtros. Massey theorizes space as open and entailing human construction and alteration. She describes space as a product of conflicting and unequal social relations, as negotiated and socially regulated, and an object of our “continuing responsibility” (2005, p. 180). For my analysis of Los Filtros, I engage with all these facets of space with a special focus on conflicting and unequal social relations. I also use Massey's description of space as a “meeting up of stories,” which she illustrates with the encounter between Indigenous Peoples and European colonizers who arrived in the American continent (2005, p. 120). Applied to a drastically different context, I look at the

history of Los Filtros as the meeting up of two stories, those of the people who migrated from the inner Puerto Rican mountains and established Los Filtros and those of landowners who were proximate to Los Filtros at the time in the 1920s as each group already had “its own spaces and geographies” (Massey, 2005, p. 120).

My central emphasis, however, is on analyzing the suburban development of late 20th century/early 2000s around Los Filtros as another “meeting up of stories.” The arrival of hundreds of residents to gated communities and high-rise developments surrounding Los Filtros represented a clash of stories that resulted in conflict for land and translated into expropriation threats. Related, Massey (2005) emphasizes that conceptualizing and viewing space as a static dimension that no processes can alter or affect leads to fixing the meaning of a given place. Attending to Massey’s concern that the representation of space as a surface “lead[s] to the stabilization of others [and] their deprivation of a history,” I center my discussion on the development of high-end gated communities in the Los Filtros area as a process that fixed Los Filtros’ history and identity (2005, p. 122). In other words, thinking of the spatial as fixed for the context of Los Filtros means disregarding endless stories, social relationships, failures, successes, and events that have shaped and continue to shape the community throughout time. Accordingly, I apply Massey’s argument that we “rob others of their histories [and] we hold them still for our own purposes, while we do the moving” to the municipal government’s actions and threat to Los Filtros (2005, p. 122). Massey makes such a claim when referring to the European conquest era in which representing the “other” as a surface (in writing, maps, diagrams, etc.), meant conceptualizing them as lacking a history/trajectory, in order to move forward with and legitimize conquering land. Similarly, as Guaynabo’s municipal government fixates on building a municipio for the elite, it overlooks the histories of informalized

communities such as Los Filtros and renders them obsolete. The municipal government then promotes policies that largely neglect and further marginalize the residents of Los Filtros.

Based on the idea that space and society are recursively constructed, I advance my analysis of the forces of development and urbanization that influence the spatial context of Los Filtros. Los Filtros is located within a space where most land is privatized, where there are multiple symbols of residential luxury surrounding Los Filtros, and where aims for future commodification of land are pressing. Therefore, I present diverse ways in which residents and outsiders construct Los Filtros' space, mostly connected to economic and political dynamics at the neighborhood and municipal scale. However, I also consider social relationships in Los Filtros at the individual scale. For instance, residents from different class backgrounds, namely Los Filtros community members and residents of adjacent gated communities, share a long-established domestic work system. These relationships, as well as other social dynamics that occur in Los Filtros, alter spatial relations on a daily basis. I explore these dynamics based on interview data in order to analyze the recurring production of spatial inequality in Los Filtros.

Adding to Massey's conceptualization of space, I draw upon the theory of spatial justice, founded on geographical thought, to explore collective action as resistance to expropriation threats. Accordingly, I place spatial justice within the broader umbrella of social justice, as it offers one pathway to understand processes that produce or tackle social inequity. Urbanist and geographer Edward Soja, who theorizes spatial justice, shares a similar understanding of geographical space as the one Massey provides. He argues space is "filled with politics, ideology, and other [competing and conflicting] forces shaping our lives and challenging us to engage in struggles over geography" (Soja, 2010, p. 19). Just as Massey suggests that humans construct space, Soja refers to the action of "constructing our geographies" for a similar

meaning. Accordingly, there are different sets of actors that play roles in constructing space and in constructing their own and other's geographies. This dynamic underpins the focus of spatial justice. Indeed, spatial justice takes shape as individuals accept the "challenge to engage in struggles over geography" (Soja, 2010, p. 19). The struggle, Soja argues, is a result of "lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage," or geographically uneven development (2010, p. 20). Furthermore, engaging in the fight for greater spatial justice is associated with exercising the "right to the city," which is a "political response to capitalism's efforts to create geographies suited to its fundamental interests" (Soja, 2010, p. 97). Initially presented by Lefebvre, the right to the city involves the "right to difference," which means "challenging the controlling forces of homogenization, fragmentation, and uneven development" that both the public and the private sector impose (Soja, 2010, p. 99). While recognizing that Guaynabo's municipal government strives to implement policies that produce class homogenization, community members in Los Filtros react to expropriation threats and reassert their right to the city in multiple ways. Being aware of the striking difference between the community's urban form and other communities surrounding them, they engage in social action that highlights their right to remain despite the pressing forces of private development in the area. In further discussion, I dig into Los Filtros residents' ways of translating their understanding of more just spatialities into social mobilization.

Taken together, Massey's analysis of space and Soja's articulation of spatial justice provide an invitation to an "imaginative self-positioning in the world which opens up to the full recognition of the spatial" (Massey, 2005, p. 193). Likewise, recognizing the spatial entails facing and addressing the challenges of our interrelatedness and contemporaneity as city dwellers (Massey, 2005, p. 148). I seek to understand how residents of Los Filtros and of gated

communities adjacent to Los Filtros recognize spatial relations, how they understand their interrelatedness, and what implications such interrelatedness holds for land contestation. Since there are deeply entrenched power imbalances between residents in gated communities and residents in Los Filtros, I unpack the foundation and perpetuation of material inequities through a spatial justice lens. For instance, I analyze the role of gated communities' residents in maintaining a domestic work economy that furthers the "othering" of Los Filtros' residents. Simultaneously, I delve into how these groups, and other actors, imagine spatial relations now and how they should be. To do so, I draw on theories about imaginative geographies.

"Imaginative geographies" are "representations of place, space, and landscape that structure people's understandings of the world, and in turn, help to shape their actions" (Driver, 2014, p. 246). It is a concept originally coined by Edward Said in 1978 in his book *Orientalism*, where he explains the repercussions of a "Western" perception of the "East" that results in the exoticization of places and people. Later, geographers have continued to use the term "imaginative geographies" to refer to ideas, imaginations, and representations of places that affect their construction and the people who purportedly "belong" in such places. These representations and their effects are often found in concrete multimedia, such as images and text, but also are embedded in material landscapes shaped by housing developments, private and public spaces, and the natural environment, among others (Driver, 2014, p. 247). The critical and fundamental aspect of imaginative geographies for my analysis pertains to the actors who advance discourses and actions influenced by their "imaginative geographies." Put differently, I identify and examine the latent "imaginative geographies" of Guaynabo's municipal government, and specifically former Mayor Héctor O'Neill, to understand efforts to expropriate Los Filtros. Felix Driver argues that interpreting imaginative geographies entails understanding

the “ideas, values and relationships” of those who produce representations of places (2014, p. 247). I extend my interpretation of imaginative geographies beyond the perspective of those who produce representations of place, namely the state and real estate developer companies in this case, to that of individuals who actually experience place on a daily basis. I contrast Los Filtros residents’ and their neighbors’ imaginative geographies and those of people who have significantly more power to construct space and alter places to demonstrate how divergent perceptions of people, place, land, and value underpin the interpretations of how best to utilize the area known as Los Filtros.

Frequently, city government actors translate their “imaginative geographies” into discourse and concrete actions. This can lead to the contestation, alteration, and disruption of a place. Thus, the third critical component of my conceptual framework is the geographic concept of place. Place is a more concrete term than space. It “refers to both objective location and subjective meanings attached to it” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 251). Additionally, there are three main components to place: 1) location, referring to the “where”; 2) locale, referring to the “material setting for social relations;” and 3) sense of place, referring to the emotional bond between people and place (Cresswell, 2015, p. 13). Taking these elements of place into consideration, I study how place meanings affect their contestation and disruption. More specifically, I focus on how sense of place and place attachment are connected to a particular location. Essentially, places are filled with the complexities of human experience and social relationships, as well as entrenched with political, sociological, and psychological matters that influence their value. I consider Los Filtros as a location to which different groups of people ascribe diverse meanings. Using interviewees’ accounts, I interpret Los Filtros’ significance for members of its community, but I also look into its significance for “outsiders.” In other words, I analyze the geographical

perception of non-residents of the Los Filtros community to understand how imaginative geographies, which attribute meaning to places, translate into action.

To further examine Los Filtros' meaning, I discuss some of the elements that have contributed to its importance. For example, I analyze how residents of Los Filtros have engaged in placemaking activities such as the construction of the "Rosa E. Rivera" Community Center and the community-based management of the Bosque Urbano Los Filtros [Urban Forest Los Filtros]. I also examine the different aspects that shape community members of Los Filtros' sense of place mainly referring to elements of the past, such as family-owned streetside markets, historical elements of the natural environment, and the Los Filtros water filtration plant. Jennifer Adams (2013) defines "sense of place" as "the lens through which people experience and make meaning of their experiences in and with place" (p. 47). I contextualize these people-place experiences and question how they are interwoven with the residents' resistance to place disruption. Given that expropriation is a process that causes displacement, expropriation threats become a challenge to people's sense of place. Taking this into consideration, I use the theory of place attachment to analyze Los Filtros community members' reaction and resistance to said threats.

Place attachment is defined as "an affective bond between people and places" (Altman & Low, 1992, as quoted in Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 337). It is a concept rooted in environmental psychology and stems from ideas of human psychological attitudes, such as that of children's attachment to their parents. There are multiple factors that shape the study of place attachment as a phenomenon, all encompassed under the categories of human emotion and the characteristics of the attachment figure. On one side, human emotion is perceived in feelings of belonging and proximity to place. On the other side, characteristics of the attachment figure, environmental

psychologists argue, are a critical determinant for the type of attachment one feels towards a place. Furthermore, “place attachment has a temporal dimension: it implies the continuity of the relationship with the attachment object, connects its present to its past, with the hope that this relationship will continue in the future” (Lewicka, 2014, p. 51). It is important to highlight that place attachment is not constant, but multifaceted in that it entails different reasons for attachment, assorted ways in which people experience and express attachment, and varied place outcomes as a result of attachment. For instance, there are different factors that determine people’s attachment to a certain place. Length of residency is the most common one.

Likewise, there are two predominant types of attachment: “traditional” and “active.” Maria Lewicka explains (2014, p. 55), “The traditionally attached ... expect that their emotional ties are mostly due to their autobiographical rootedness in the place and to the procedural form of memory – as a function of residence length.” Conversely, Lewicka notes (2014, p. 55), active attachment “depends on other factors, including declarative memory- a product of expressed interest in their family history and the history of the residence place.” To an extent, the traditional type of attachment correlates to the notion of mobility as a disruption to place attachment. It used to be the case that emotional bonds with place were perceived as positive, whereas mobility was associated with “uprootedness” and “disassociation” (Gustafson, 2014, p. 38). As mobility increases and continues to shape the world, scholars now recognize that mobility is not opposite to place attachment. They argue that mobile individuals can still be deeply emotionally connected to a certain place regardless of their living situation or proximity to it. However, for studying Los Filtros, I consider mobility as one source of social disintegration since it is a theme that emerged from interviewees with whom I discussed the critical aspects of remaining in place. Thus, I examine traditional attachment as a force for remaining in place and

moving to another place as a force that causes spatial discontinuity and disturbs place attachment.

Place attachment also explains the separation distress that occurs as a result of disruption. I advance my argument while exploring the meaning of disruptive events to place, which could include, “changes to place that are perceived threatening... potential separation... and actual separation” (Gifford & Scannell, 2014, p. 27). Particularly following the threat-response logic of my analysis, I engage with place attachment theory while understanding expropriation threats (perceived and material) as a disruption to place attachment. Simultaneously, I examine community resistance strategies to such threats as stemming from a deep sense of collective place attachment. Nikolay Mihaylov and Douglas D. Perkins (2014) demonstrate community place attachment’s importance as a “precondition for the development of a sense of community” and potentially for community participation (p. 68). Drawing on this idea of transforming emotional attachment into collective action, I underscore Los Filtros’ resistance to expropriation threats as a community.

The case of Los Filtros is one where residents’ struggle over space and place fundamentally translates into the struggle over the right to remain. It is a competition over who gets to construct the community’s geographies: the municipal government of Guaynabo, residents of adjacent gated communities, Los Filtros community members, or a combination of all these groups. From a critical standpoint, I study Los Filtros as a community in a space characterized by class and social inequality and assess how its residents assert their “right to difference,” thus challenging political and economic forces that lead to their marginalization and disinvestment. Facilitating my analysis are the geographic concepts of space, imaginative geographies, and place. Together they help me study Los Filtros’ challenge against expropriation

as a process of contestation over space and place. In particular, these concepts inform my analysis of community members' geographical perceptions of their space parallel to outside pressures to displace them as I argue that Los Filtros residents' attachment to place has been the greatest factor mobilizing their fight to remain and to claim a right to the city.

Research Methods

I used qualitative methods for the design and development of my research. As defined by John W. Creswell (2014, p. 4), "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." It is also how "the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants" (Creswell, 2014, p. 19). As I am studying socially-produced geographies and issues that involve complicated social structures, actors, and dynamics, I chose to employ methods that would allow me to approach and examine such issues in a holistic manner. I was interested in posing open-ended questions to participants that could allow them to delve into their understandings of spatial configurations and issues so that I could carry out a broader analysis. Thus, qualitative methods were an appropriate way to gather data to answer my research questions and to achieve my research goals.

I primarily drew upon two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and archival research. A semi-structured interview allows for "some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant" (Dunn, 2010, p. 80). I considered semi-structured interviews appropriate to my research as it was very important for me to highlight interviewees' ideas in the way that they addressed them and not through a predetermined strict question/answer structure. I conducted 18 interviews in total, the majority of

which I held during the months of June and July of 2021. I conducted the final three interviews in September and October 2021. I conducted all interviews in Spanish and recorded and transcribed the audio. Interviews lasted about 40 minutes on average, and 13 were in person and five were over the phone. I manually transcribed all interviews and followed an inductive coding model allowing for themes to emerge from the data per-se without using any pre-established structures.

I recruited voluntary research participants from three main groups: residents in Los Filtros (9), residents in gated communities around Los Filtros (7), and individuals representing a private architecture/development firm and Guaynabo's Land Use and Planning office (2) (See Appendix H). Interviewees were all adults, 11 women and 7 men, ranging from the ages of 40-90. The wide majority of participants from all three different groups pertained to the same race (white). However, there were significant gaps in their socioeconomic status. Community members of Los Filtros who I interviewed mainly have low-income jobs, those who are not retired. Meanwhile, residents in gated communities represent a different demographic. Even though most of them are retirees, they come from rather wealthier backgrounds. Additionally, both interviewees from Los Filtros and from adjacent gated communities have been long-time residents in their respective neighborhoods. The majority of Los Filtros residents have lived there since the 1950s while most of gated communities' residents have lived there during the past three decades. These interviewees, by no means, are representative of every resident in Los Filtros or in adjacent gated communities. Nevertheless, my work seeks to center their views and connections to Los Filtros as primary and vital sources of evidence.

I started the process of recruiting residents of Los Filtros by reaching out to the president of the community's board and letting him know of my interest in interviewing residents. As he

suggested other community leaders for me to talk to, I used the snowball sampling technique to recruit other participants. Snowball sampling is “using one contact to help you recruit another contact, who in turn can put you in touch with someone else” (Valentine, 2005, p. 117). This technique was particularly useful for me since there are strong networks among members of the Los Filtros community which facilitated the process of recruiting. For recruiting residents of gated communities in the area, I started by contacting my closest neighbors and they also directed me to people they knew who lived in other gated communities nearby. Outside of residents of Los Filtros and neighboring communities, I interviewed a representative from the architecture firm that built two of the gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros. I also interviewed one of the planners working for Guaynabo’s Land Use and Planning, who I asked questions about the municipio’s relationship with Special Communities, land use/titles policies, and goals for local economic growth. I contacted both persons directly through email. From these three groups of interviewees, I gained relevant insight about differing geographical perceptions of space in relation to Los Filtros, understandings of land value, and analyses of expropriation threats as a land contestation issue specifically in Los Filtros.

For my archival research, I visited in person the “Biblioteca y Hemeroteca Puertorriqueña” [Puerto Rican Newspaper and Periodicals Library] and the “Archivo de Arquitectura y Construcción de la Universidad de Puerto Rico” [Architecture and Construction Archive of the University of Puerto Rico] at the Río Piedras Campus in San Juan P.R. to gather historical documents and newspaper articles. I also collected similar documents from the “Archivo General de Puerto Rico” [General Archive of Puerto Rico]’s online catalog. My search for documentation in both the University of Puerto Rico’s libraries and in the General Archive’s online catalog was centered around the following topics: the history of the US Geological Survey

Magnetic Observatory located in Los Filtros; the water filtration plant located in the same area; and Guaynabo's communities across different *barrios*. I was interested in searching for information on the Observatory and the Los Filtros water filtration plant because both structures are important to the history of Los Filtros and its formation. I was also looking to understand the history of Guaynabo for both informalized and formal communities. Though these were themes discussed in my interviews, my search for additional documentation was in anticipation that they would offer further background information.

Additionally, I obtained scans of newspaper articles that are stored in the Rosa E. Rivera Community Center at Los Filtros and which a community leader shared with me. These articles mainly cover stories about Special Communities and Los Filtros' activism against threats of expropriation. These articles and the documentation from the University of Puerto Rico's library were both essential for my research as they informed my knowledge about the context in which Los Filtros originated and about its activism in the 2000s. Like other documents I gathered, these provided information that both augments interviewees' accounts and offers another perspective different from that of residents.

Through these methods, I collected data that supports my discussion of Los Filtros as a community resistant to expropriation threats while primarily considering community members' experiences. Likewise, the data analysis derived from interviews with participants outside of Los Filtros and from archival documentation actively drives my engagement with questions of "the right to place," attachment to place, and equitable development.

Researcher positionality

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, reflecting on my positionality as a researcher became fundamental. Acknowledging one's positionality means recognizing that one is "not separate from the social processes they study" and that their "social-historical-political location... influences their orientations" (Gary & Holmes, 2020, p. 3). In my case, my physical location automatically revealed the connection I have to the processes I studied. Having lived in a gated community adjacent to Los Filtros for the past decade, I have developed assumptions about both Los Filtros and the communities that surround it. Additionally, being a resident of one of the gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros represented a large part of my identity when engaging with research participants. It not only made reaching out to residents of privatized communities more feasible than it otherwise could have been, but also it influenced how residents of Los Filtros saw me as a researcher. Los Filtros residents recognized our difference in class status as soon as I told them where I lived. They would respond with an "Ohhh you live up there?" because many of them know about my house, the original owners, and the impact they had in the community during the twentieth century. They would also be curious about why I was interested in studying a marginalized community when I was living in a rather privileged place.

I wanted to study Los Filtros as a way to transition from critiquing myself and my own occupation of space as distant from Los Filtros to learning about it and becoming more conscious about the communities with which I coexist. The way my research is oriented follows the understanding that our perception of space and understanding of our role in it paves the way for constructing more just spatialities. I designed my research rooted in the belief that residents' view of their own space is of great importance for understanding the landscape and its uses.

Thus, understanding my own positionality as a gated community resident shaped the input I brought to my own research.

While recognizing the critiques and debates that exist on the insider-outsider positionalities in academic research (Gary & Holmes, 2020; Mercer, 2007), I identify myself as sharing both the insider and outsider perspective. Essentially, my geographic location as being raised in a gated community proximate to Los Filtros and to other adjacent gated communities suggest a degree of “insidedness” to my positionality. I am familiar with the culture and lived experiences of gated communities’ residents as well as those of Los Filtros’ residents. However, by virtue of my education level and affiliation with a university as well as my socioeconomic status, my identity as an outsider in relation to Los Filtros becomes evident. Such a positionality proved rather advantageous for my research as Los Filtros residents were confident that I, as an outsider, valued their knowledge and at the same time they trusted that I understood their stories, ideas, and concerns because I live in close proximity to them.

Similarly, my research positionality also affected how I was able to access interviewees. For instance, my college education based in Massachusetts was a relevant aspect that identified me and influenced how participants perceived me as a researcher. For residents in Puerto Rico, going to college in the United States is (unfortunately) seen as superior to studying in the island and a degree of validity is entrenched with it. Some of the interviewees I reached out to emphasized knowing the difficulty of writing a thesis and were truly sympathetic and available to me as research participants. Likewise, some of the community leaders I connected with had previously welcomed college students to do research work in Los Filtros and saw me as another student who they were responsible for helping out.

My communication with interviewees was also feasible because Spanish is both my own and their native language. The absence of a language barrier allowed conversation in which interviewees could express themselves freely and use typical sayings that I was able to follow because of my familiarity with the local jargon and colloquial forms of speech. I see my identity as a 20-year-old influencing the flow of my research as well. At moments where interviews could have evolved more in depth, the extent of the questions and answers were rather affected by my lack of knowledge about historical events with which I was unfamiliar. Interviewees recognized my naivete and had to spend time explaining certain contextual aspects rather than delving into their own perspectives or response to events, processes, and significant changes. In sum, there were a variety of aspects that influenced my identity as researcher. Being a first-time researcher, resident in a wealthy gated community, native Spanish speaker, and adolescent college student certainly affected the research process and outcomes. Shaped by my personal identities, the perspective I bring to the study of Los Filtros as an informalized community is unique and has its own ramifications for the production of knowledge.

Contributions

Although there is extensive literature addressing informal housing, expropriation, displacement, and community-based mobilization in Puerto Rico from sociological and anthropological perspectives (Caldieron, 2011; Morales-Cruz, 2012b; Vázquez, 2012), few studies have examined informalized settlements in relation to their surrounding communities, environment, and/or their natural characteristics. My research speaks to this gap as I study Los Filtros while grounded in the historical and present processes, circumstances, and social interactions embedded in space that have led to and sustain the community's informalization.

Moreover, no past research has explicitly examined Los Filtros in the English language and through a geographic perspective that focuses on the broader socio-spatial context. Thus, by centering Los Filtros residents' voices, their thoughts and concerns about power dynamics, land rights, and uneven development, my research addresses these silences. Moreover, I add to the literature about community-based empowerment and activism, not only by focusing on Los Filtros residents' resistance to state-led displacement, but also on their collective place attachment as driving their persistent efforts to reassert their right to the city and challenge spatial homogenization. Simultaneously, I juxtapose and analyze Los Filtros' infrastructural vulnerability and challenging topography with residents' wish to remain in place. These sets of elements make up a multilayered spatial study of Los Filtros that adds another perspective to scholarship about community-based collective action. Since I am driven by the belief that place awareness is vital in the path to social equity, my research highlights people's awareness of their own occupation of space as a first step towards working for justice.

Thesis Outline

In the next chapter, I analyze the socio-spatial context in which Los Filtros is situated. For that, I first offer a detailed overview of the community's history, mainly highlighting the stories of interviewees. I then evaluate Guaynabo's profile as a growth-driven and prestige-seeking municipio to analyze its role in reinforcing Los Filtros' informalization. The production of informality in Los Filtros suggests that expropriation threats are a form of land regulation through which the local government establishes who has the right to the city.

Having established this context, in Chapter Three, through the lens of imaginative geographies I discuss the threats to expropriate Los Filtros. I explore the characteristics of former

Mayor Héctor O'Neill's administration and its role in branding Guaynabo as a high-class municipio, homogenizing space, and displacing informalized communities. I discuss the timeline for expropriation threats to Los Filtros, as well as the concrete actions that the municipal government carried out to expropriate community members through judicial proceedings. I specifically examine the construction of Jardines de Los Filtros, a public housing development built next to the community, as a tool for advancing displacement.

Taking into consideration these events as contributing to the disruption of place, Chapter Four studies Los Filtros residents' reaction to expropriation threats. Drawing on theories of place attachment and equitable development, I analyze Los Filtros' resistance to expropriation as opposing neoliberal practices and challenging power imbalances at the decision-making processes of urbanization. Accordingly, I claim that Los Filtros residents' place attachment presented an enormous challenge to government actors who have worked to expropriate the community as they have engaged in long-standing activist movements to claim the right to the city and to foster equitable development.

My final and concluding chapter draws together all the elements that I study in Chapters Two through Four, including the socio-spatial context in Los Filtros, the persistent threats to expropriate the community, and residents' fight to remain as significantly driven by their attachment to place. In the final chapter, I also review the answers to my research questions and signal the contributions of my work to contemporary geographic scholarship. Together, these chapters offer a detailed analysis of the socio-spatial and socio-political processes and interactions that make Los Filtros a contested place. Having examined the complexities of uneven development, spatial inequality, homogenization, competing land values, and place

attachment, I conclude this thesis by discussing what spatial justice requires and what it would mean for an informalized community like Los Filtros.

Conclusion

Los Filtros is a dynamic, vibrant, and contested place. Its residents are proud of its history and have engaged in endless discussions, practices, and activities to reassert their right to remain living where they were born and raised. Despite the consistent and strong political, economic, and ideological pressures to displace the community and privatize the land in Los Filtros, community members have resisted and defended their place for many years. Such a story holds tremendous importance for the making of more just spatialities that are also reflected in stories of community empowerment, collective action, and resistance to processes of gentrification, expropriation, and displacement currently unfolding across many cities in the United States and the world. While city governments replicate neoliberal regimes that reproduce social inequality, city dwellers of marginalized communities remain aware of their role in mobilizing and advocating for citizen participation. Los Filtros directly exemplifies that through two decades of community organizing, planning, and strategizing. Thus, in this chapter, I laid out the context in which my research evolved, the research questions and argument I pose, the theoretical framework I use, the research methods I drew upon, my research positionality, the relevance of this work, and the structure of my thesis. In the next chapter, I delve into the characteristics of Los Filtros' uneven geographical development in order to examine its socio-spatial context.

CHAPTER TWO

100 YEARS OF HISTORY, 100 YEARS OF INFORMALIZATION: LOS FILTROS' SOCIO-SPATIAL CONTEXT

Although Los Filtros residents started to face direct expropriation threats in 2001, several socioeconomic and political elements that go beyond Guaynabo's municipal government's intentions have historically contributed to its contestation. In this chapter, I focus on my first research question by examining the socio-spatial context of Los Filtros and relating it to the persistence of unjust geographies for the community. Particularly relevant to my main argument, Los Filtros' resistance to a process that displaces them and, thus, denies them the right to the city, has been especially challenging given their coexistence with higher income communities in a municipio that has fundamentally supported gated communities significantly more than it has supported *barrios*. Taking that into consideration, I analyze the unfolding of expropriation pressures in relation to the spatial heterogeneities and conjunctions in Los Filtros that are evidenced by the social and physical landscape. Drawing on Massey's (2005, p. 55) framework for space as an "open ongoing production," I define socio-spatial context as the entanglement of the social, meaning the social conditions and situations constructing and altering everyday life, and the spatial, meaning the geographically inflected flows, processes, and relationships that shape the quotidian. To undertake this analysis, I begin by describing the relevance and influence of rural to urban migration patterns during the transition from an agrarian to industrial economy in Puerto Rico to the origins of Los Filtros. I especially examine the construction of a water filtration plant in Guaynabo as the major factor for the formation of Los Filtros and discuss the significance of such a project in revealing the position of disadvantage and precarity for Los

Filtros' community founders. This production of precarity persists to the present, thus it is instructive to analyze how it got established and developed.

Another element of the socio-spatial context that I analyze is the relationship between Los Filtros and its neighboring landowners. As there is a large wealth gap between both groups, unequal and harmful power relationships that manifest in myriad forms have remained in place since the founding of Los Filtros. For a long time, Los Filtros' distinction in terms of socioeconomic status from that of neighboring landowners was primarily evidenced by employer-employee power relationships and stark differences between the size of their homes. However, my main focus on spatial inequality regards the development of gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros as part of an island-wide "gating" movement from the 1980s. It was during this period when the state government became an active supporter of privatizing space through restricting access to tract housing developments. To illustrate the relevance of gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros in a broader context, I draw on Suárez-Carrasquillo's (2011) studies of city branding, which discuss Guaynabo's municipal government's role in building a prestigious reputation by homogenizing the population and attracting upper income residents to the municipio. Examining such social processes across spatial scales, namely the neighborhood and the municipio, I argue that Los Filtros' informalization is substantially pronounced in this context where its surrounding environment is comparably prosperous and where the broader landscape reflects homogeneity with private communities for the affluent. Therefore, Los Filtros' precarity makes the fight against expropriation particularly difficult since it exists next to other communities that fit the wealthy and luxurious landscape that Guaynabo's municipal government strives to create. Similarly, outsiders further informalize and marginalize Los Filtros because its housing, residents' lifestyle, and social standing is "inferior" when compared with its immediate

surroundings and measured within conventional social mobility expectancies. Thus, Los Filtros residents' ability to claim their right to place becomes a greater challenge. Throughout this chapter, I examine these class-based inequalities entrenched within space to evaluate their repercussions for Los Filtros' land contestation issues. In particular, I use interview data to demonstrate how present-day interactions between Los Filtros residents and neighbors of adjacent gated communities help sustain an environment which reinforces a perception of Los Filtros residents as inferior.

Through analyzing the place-based inequalities rooted in long-standing power relationships, the conditions of precarity under which Los Filtros community founders built their homes, and Guaynabo's efforts for homogenizing its population, I uncover the complexities of a socio-spatial context where the fight against the expropriation of Los Filtros is particularly challenging. To illuminate these points, I next give a broad overview of the history of Los Filtros as a way of situating its informality. Then, I describe the daily difficulties that the community's infrastructure presents to its residents and examine how the upscale development surrounding Los Filtros contributes to the external perception of the community as an "informal settlement." Essentially, I look at the different actors and processes that have contributed to the production of socio-spatial relationships for Los Filtros over the past century. Overall, the context of Los Filtros, from its origins to the present day, includes a series of socio-spatial and economic disparities that fundamentally contribute to the community's informalization and reinforce outside pressures for its expropriation. Yet, Los Filtros residents, rooted in their attachment to place, engaged in a two-decade fight against the municipal government's materialized threats and have successfully defended their right to remain.

Brief History of Los Filtros

Understanding Los Filtros community members' resistance to expropriation threats requires unpacking the community origins and its development and changes across time. It needs contextualizing in the broader history of early twentieth century poverty and the production of uneven development through Puerto Rican urbanism. With this in mind, I now turn to a brief discussion of the founding and development of Los Filtros.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, the founders of Los Filtros originally arrived in this area of Guaynabo in the 1920s to work in the construction and further maintenance of the Los Filtros water filtration plant. The earliest record I found about said plant is the *Filtration Plant and Reservoirs Project for the New Aqueduct in San Juan, P.R.*, a location plan from 1923 authored by architect Carlos del Valle.¹⁰ Del Valle was a distinguished architect in Puerto Rico who designed important municipal buildings, residences of well-known families, and a large portion of public works including, roads, railways, bridges, irrigation systems, drains, and sewers (Marrero, n.d., para. 8.). In his book about water filtration systems in Puerto Rico, del Valle (1923) explains the development and international popularity of purification technologies towards the beginning of the twentieth century and places Puerto Rico as one of the first countries in the Caribbean to install such a modern water filtration plant. Building a water filtration plant in the area that became known as Los Filtros was crucial to the provision of safe water to thousands of people and to the development of an image of Puerto Rico as on the cutting edge. Significantly, the water purification system at Los Filtros was a central part of the entire aqueduct system in Puerto Rico, which distributed water to nearly 20,000 families in the

¹⁰ Los Filtros' Water Filtration Plant is, indeed, located in Guaynabo even though documents regarding its construction indicate "San Juan." Using San Juan as a point of reference for important places was a common practice in the 20th century.

Metropolitan Area in the 1950s (Baraño, 1956, p. 37) and 256,000 people by 2011 (Real Tech, 2019). This plant was significant for the urbanization of Guaynabo as it became the only source of purified water serving neighborhoods and gated communities in the area. Yet, despite the salience of the purification plant, Los Filtros residents recall obtaining water from two wells inside the community and not always having access to clean water when they were younger. This reveals a profound paradox, one that underscores the socio-spatial injustices that accompanied the founding of the Los Filtros community. Indeed, Los Filtros community founders contributed to the Guaynabo's development through their work in the construction and maintenance of a water filtration plant, yet they were subject to unsafe and unhealthy living conditions through limited access to potable water.

Additional sources suggest that construction work at the Los Filtros water filtration plant continued after its installation date in 1921. For instance, one advertisement in the *Revista de Obras Públicas de Puerto Rico* [Puerto Rico Public Works Magazine] from 1934 announces a bid to help cover the cost of repairs to the water filtration plant that year (Benítez-Cataño, 1934, p. 646). As the water plant required years of construction and updating, the formation of the community of Los Filtros also evolved over time. Los Filtros especially grew in the decades following the 1920s. Since some interviewees suggest different start dates for the construction of the filtration plant, it is possible that they remember seeing construction work near their homes and associate it with the beginnings of the plant. Sara, for instance, who was born in 1950, recalls that her family was forced to move in order for AAA to expand their work in the plant. She asserted that this agency gave her dad a new land plot with “no title deed or anything” (Sara, *interview*, June 29, 2021).

Regardless of the minor date discrepancies in what interviewees like Sara remember about the date of the water filtration plant's construction, these accounts demonstrate residents' awareness of a project that had a great influence on the formation of Los Filtros. The continuous work on the facilities had geographical impacts in their own lives, such as being moved from one land plot to another. Families like Sara's had to be accommodating and build their living space based on the AAA's needs and regulations.

According to interviewees and various press articles, the AAA owned the land where workers started constructing their houses. However, the framing of this change in land use varies across informants. Different sources state that the land became available to Los Filtros' community members as the AAA either "offered housing," "ceded their terrains," or "allowed them [workers] to build there." Gloria Ruiz-Kuilan (2006), for example, suggests, "these lands belonged to [AAA] which was looking for workers to build a filtration plant. It offered the workers housing on the farm, and that is how the neighborhood emerged" (para. 3). Other accounts, such as Myrta Morales-Cruz's (2012a), explain why people arrived in Los Filtros but do not expand on how the designation of land unfolded. Morales-Cruz (2012a) states, "People started arriving in the community as construction workers for a water filtering plant that is located at the very top of the community" (p. 11). Interviewees' accounts also reflect this ambiguity. For example, Juan described the founders of Los Filtros as, "Those who left the countryside and came to the city ... in search of work and for a place where they could build their house without anyone questioning them. Since there was so much land, there was no need for so many [land] struggles like today" (Juan, *interview*, June 15). In Juan's account, he illustrates how the community formation process took place without clarifying whether the AAA ceded their terrain or formally allowed workers to build in what became Los Filtros.

Importantly, Juan's depiction mirrors how many Puerto Ricans view the rural to urban migration process of the industrial period. The predominant narrative suggests that there was a surplus of land plots because the bulk of the Puerto Rican population did not live in the San Juan Metropolitan Area yet. As Juan notes, struggles for land could have been minimal given the expansive perceived availability of land. However, the concept of land struggle perhaps had a different connotation during the pre-industrial period. The implications of contestation over space were possibly not as critical as today because state regulations were less. Norma spoke to this point: "Well, according to my parents, that was a vacant lot that supposedly belonged to the Aqueducts and Sewers Authority, and they invaded little by little, different families" (Norma, *interview*, June 14). Norma's phrasing of Los Filtros' history is different from others' narratives. She understands it as if individuals who worked in the construction of the water filtration plant slowly invaded land owned by the AAA. While this contrasts with descriptions of the AAA ceding terrain, the perception of Los Filtros as a product of land invasion becomes relevant to the expropriation issue. The lack of knowledge and uncertainty about AAA's land transferring method, coupled with the common understanding that the state government did not regulate urbanization processes stemming from rural to urban migration in the 1920s-40s, means outsiders may identify Los Filtros' residents as "land invaders," thus, perpetuating their informalization. Los Filtros residents' titleship status is a central factor that people consider to evaluate their right to remain in place.

Despite the fact that some Los Filtros residents obtained property titles for their land in 1979, the question of "who did the land belong to" becomes pertinent to land ownership debates. When I asked Blanca, a planner working for the Guaynabo's Land Use and Planning Office, how she thought people from Los Filtros acquired their space, she said, "At that time, it could have

been many things. It may be that people made their little houses, come on, without intention of invading, because people did not have the knowledge, or the supervisors told them, ‘Look, yes, you can make your little house there.’ There are many probabilities” (*interview*, Sept. 24, 2021). Blanca’s emphasis on the community founders’ lack of explicit invading intentions, matched with her incredulous tone and romanticization of the situation, reveals her interpretation that the founders were, in fact, unlawfully occupying the land. Yet, she noted that perhaps it was justified because land regulations were not well known by migrants from the countryside. She also suggested that perhaps AAA officials offered them space to construct their houses. Overall, this comment indicates that the combination of demands for labor to build the filtration plant, uncertain land regulations, and government department actions set the stage for the founding of Los Filtros. Simultaneously, these elements were critical factors for the past and ongoing informalization of Los Filtros. Unlike with residents in gated communities in the area, outsiders wrongfully perceive residents in Los Filtros as land invaders.

Los Filtros’ informalization initially took place with a series of events during its community beginnings, but continue through decades of uncertainty about their right to land. In 1979, some Los Filtros residents obtained property titles. Even though around 70% of residents of Los Filtros have ownership of their land and homes now, the process of gaining land tenure occurred in a fairly haphazard and informalized manner, further entrenching disparities and precarity within the socio-spatial context of Los Filtros. Interviewees described the event in 1979 as very politicized. “There were some people who did not get them, like my neighbor ... since he was ‘popular,’ he did not get the property’s title ... but there was another ‘popular’ [neighbor] ... that one was more clever than the other, he got his property title,” Luis said (*Interview*, June 15, 2021). “Popular” is the word used in Puerto Rico for supporters of the Popular Democratic Party

(PPD), the all-time rival of the New Progressive Party (PNP), which was in power at the time, and which has always been the dominating political party in Guaynabo. Actually, many residents who I spoke with mentioned the emergence of land titles and other issues in the community as stemming from political friction among residents and municipal officials because of their affiliation with different political parties. Like Luis pointed out, some residents in Los Filtros were left without titleship to their homes and land because of the politicized nature of the situation.

I realized how much weight political matters had in Los Filtros' land contestation (even prior to the commencement of expropriation threats) as interviewees referred to and often repeated mayors' names when talking about events related to their communities' development. For example, Juan indicated, "Since Aqueducts did not need it [the land], Mayor Junior Cruz got us the property titles for a dollar" (*Interview*, June 15, 2021). According to Laura, another long-time resident of Los Filtros, former Mayor Alejandro 'Junior' Cruz (1979-1993) advanced the property titles effort because when he took office, he heard rumors at the municipal level that the previous mayor wanted to use the land for another project (*Interview*, June 5, 2021). Further, Laura explained,

Junior Cruz came to the neighborhood, [and] arranged a meeting with us. They distributed a flyer and he arranged to meet us in Jenar Ortega's house, who lived down there. [He] brought us a sheet of paper that said that he was going to grant the property title to the inhabitants here [in Los Filtros]. Many people ignored it because they were 'popular.' They said, 'Aagh that's politics, they will not do anything' ... [and] didn't come to the meeting. And when they arranged to meet us in the park... we went to get the property title ... Those who did not go were left without the title (Laura, *interview*, June 5, 2021).

Laura's account signals the importance of the event where only some residents obtained their property titles. From a legal standpoint, such an act represents secure tenure and distanced Los Filtros from the features of an "informal settlement." Nonetheless, many community members

experienced it as a politically motivated act that limited access to land tenure to a one-day event. Furthermore, even if it was more than just a political act, it appeared as an event that did not dramatically counter the preexisting informalization in the community. Indeed, not everyone gained land title in the event that former Mayor Junior Cruz hosted and the motivation for granting land tenure was largely due to broader political debates. It has been difficult, at times impossible, to secure land tenure subsequently. This all demonstrates how the socio-spatial context of Los Filtros emerges through and in tandem with profound precarity and disinvestment. Although some Los Filtros' residents are no longer "illegally" occupying land, as many outsiders perceive, the characteristics and conditions of the community still reflect informality.

Los Filtros' emergence as a community formed in the context of irregular and deregulated land use during the 1920s is the primary cause for it to be associated with "land invasion." Even though length of residency and titleship to land have become significant factors for Los Filtros residents to defend their right to stay, political actors and outsiders may often question their "legal occupation," which offsets the positive elements about their community's history, growth, and permanence. This, coupled with the view of poor infrastructure in the community, suggests that those who would advocate for the community's displacement designate Los Filtros as "unworthy" or "undeserving" to reinforce the idea that expropriation is a fair option.

Infrastructural Precarity in Los Filtros

The precarious conditions under which home construction took place in Los Filtros show a settlement that lacks the features of urban formality. To this point, Los Filtros was built and is currently located on a steep hillside, or *risco* [cliff] as people in Puerto Rico would call it. Those

who came from inner places of the island to work at the water filtration plant drew upon scarce resources to build their houses in a site with uneven topographical features. Like the majority of all migrants who arrived at the city, they had to rely on self-help and needed to improvise in order to construct a place to live. However, unlike other communities who located in flat terrains, those who created Los Filtros were conditioned to occupy the only vacant site available at the time, a rocky and risky hill.

Some of my interviewees, such as Francisco, described the characteristics of Los Filtros' poor means for housing construction. He pointed to a house and said, "That was my uncle's. It used to be only the ground [floor] in cement ... a small roof there in zinc but the structure above was not there, that was later ... What [my uncle] had there was a little cement ranch" (Francisco, *interview*, June 16, 2021).¹¹ Francisco described his uncle's house which currently looks in optimal conditions. However, he remembers when it was a small single room house with a zinc roof that did not cover the entire structure. Zinc rooftops are very common in informalized settlements. It is a construction material that symbolizes precarity and improvisation, which defines the conditions under which Los Filtros emerged. The contrast between the housing in Los Filtros and in the nearby gated communities is nothing short of striking. The stark disparities contribute to public rationales for why the community should be dispersed and the land used differently.

The reality of poor infrastructure is not only characteristic of twentieth century-Los Filtros. For instance, when I spoke to Norma, she said, "Right now, my house is cracking, the soil keeps descending, you cannot put much pressure on it. That is why they did not put in the cement ceiling, because it does not bear the weight" (*Interview*. June 14, 2021). Norma was

¹¹ "Zinc roofs" is a term equivalent for corrugated aluminum roofs. It is a popular term in Puerto Rico for referring to that type of roofing.

referring to the obstacles to the reconstruction of her house's roof after some parts were blown off during Hurricane María in 2017. Natural hazards present great risk for disinvested communities in Puerto Rico like Los Filtros. Throughout the island, thousands of wood homes with zinc rooftops have been destroyed due to natural disasters, especially during Hurricane María, which is one of the reasons why residents of Los Filtros fear for their own property and weigh the options of staying in the community or moving out. I examine this dynamic more deeply in the following chapter as I delve into the rationales offered for expropriation.

The difficulties of living in such a steep location offer additional dimensions of difference to the socio-spatial context. Norma, for example, pointed out the challenges in Los Filtros for dealing with ill family members. She noted, “We liked it there, but as years go by the stairs make it hard for you ... I have been in the news like five times because of my dad, due to his health, and having to take him out of there, it was with an ambulance plus rescuers” (Norma, *interview*, June 14, 2021). It is not uncommon for local news in Puerto Rico to highlight the stories of families who experience harsh living conditions. Norma's despair is reflected in her actions to seek immediate help and to reach out to the press as a way to denounce the challenging nature of her home environment. Her house is not only cracking, but the process to transport her dad to the hospital when he needed it was chaotic.

Other residents I interviewed also referred to the stairs as a main obstacle to well-being in the community. For example, Roberto expressed, “Well, it is hard for one to go up and right now the way my feet are, it's difficult for me” (*interview*, June 15, 2021). His difficulty walking and swollen feet were evident at first glance. Even so, he leaves his house every morning and goes up the steps to get to the main road. Similarly, when I encountered Laura for the first time, she was fatigued by going up the stairs and told me to have been recently diagnosed with high blood

pressure, which made going up so many stairs potentially dangerous for her. Another interviewee mentioned the long stair steps as she explained why she applied to move to public housing. “I was applying because I had a heart [condition]. I had stents placed, plus I was a cancer survivor, and it was hard for me to go down to the little house that was way down where I had the washing and drying machines,” she said (Aida, *interview*, June 18, 2021). These realities reveal that Los Filtros residents are subject to insecure housing construction and difficult living conditions. This situation illustrates the striking divergences between the landscapes of abundance and relative wealth in the gated communities and the landscape of reduced access to wealth and public services in Los Filtros.

Teresa Caldeira (2017, p. 3), who writes about peripheral urbanization in developing countries, argues that autoconstructors, or makers of informal settlements, produce their residential spaces under the leading logics of market capitalism and state regulation. With regard to state regulation, she emphasizes that states are “responsible for the creation and recreation of irregularity and illegality ... [and for] making the irregular into the regular and vice versa” (2017, p. 8). Los Filtros illustrates these patterns as the AAA helped facilitate the irregular founding of the community. Later, the municipal government of Guayanabo “legalized” 70% of Los Filtros residents’ ownership of their land in 1979 in a politicized event that did not signify tenure security for every family in the community and, rather, symbolized a one-time occasion. Nowadays, Guayanabo’s municipal government’s neglect of Los Filtros’ infrastructure reproduces precarious living conditions in respect to accessibility and safety. These circumstances, past and present, produce(d) regularity and irregularity, thereby placing the residents of Los Filtros in tenuous positions and perpetuating informality.

Since the late 1980s, the pressures of the real estate market and the municipal government's ambition for a larger tax base have led to an inclination towards maximizing profits through privatized land use. These changes underpin the powerful expropriation threats advanced by the municipal government and private developers against Los Filtros. Because the municipal government of Guaynabo advocates market-driven policies, the possibility of population displacement has been a constant concern in Los Filtros. In short, Los Filtros' precarity is due not only to the community's formation history, but also to sustained informalization by the state. The marked contrast between Los Filtros and neighboring communities evince the socio-spatial divides evident in this part of Guaynabo and provide an important foundation for expropriation efforts.

Socioeconomic Contexts

Los Filtros' precarious condition stands in sharp juxtaposition to the surrounding environment. Indeed, Los Filtros is within walking distance from some of the most expensive housing developments in Guaynabo. In fact, the high value of land around Los Filtros dates back to the 1930s as well. As a way of describing the community's origins and telling their own childhood memories of Los Filtros, community members who I interviewed repeatedly mentioned the names of neighboring families who owned large plots of land adjacent to Los Filtros. Herminia, in particular, referred to these families as "businesspeople." She said, "All those people had businesses in San Juan. People who had money. All those people who lived in that area. The Miró(s), the Benítez(s) ... People of money was all that. The Zegrí(s), all those people were of money, they [had] antique houses" (*interview*, June 15). Other interviewees recalled other family names and pointed to where they lived around Los Filtros. For instance,

Juan remarked, “Mr. Hettinger lived in that corner and Dr. Bernard lived next door. I mean, wealthy people lived here. The Morgans lived on this large curve where the Alta Vista building is” (*interview*, June 15). He highlighted the economic power of adjacent landowners. Similarly, Laura, who spoke about her uncle’s relationship with affluent neighbors, said, “They offered him a job here with Sr. Juan Enrique Geiger ... people who used to come and go, they were people of power” (*interview*, June 5). Aida echoed these sentiments and commented, “The San Miguel family lived before arriving at your house, [by] La Colina, there was a fortune there” (*interview*, June 18).

As all these quotes demonstrate, Los Filtros residents mark the class distinctions that have existed since the community’s origins. They note their neighbors’ wealth and associate it with the large plots of land and iconic houses they owned. They also emphasize the personal relationships that existed between their own family members and the wealthier neighbors. Whether it was Herminia’s father, who worked for Mr. Hettinger, Laura’s uncle, who worked with Geiger, or Juan’s father who worked at the Ortiz Toro farm, the close employer-employee relationship was key to an economy based on residential proximity. These work dynamics have changed over time as most of the wealthy families that interviewees repeatedly mentioned by their last names no longer live in the area. Still, many women, such as Norma and Laura, perform domestic work in gated communities that are adjacent to Los Filtros, just as their aunts and mothers did in the past. This domestic work culture has prevailed in Los Filtros for decades and remains deeply entrenched in the lives of residents within and beyond the community. Simultaneously, these two groups of different socioeconomic classes have internalized and normalized the spatialized realities of this class disparity. In fact, several times I listened interviewees say two phrases that went hand in hand: “Ellos allí, nosotros acá,” “No nos

molestamos.”¹² Los Filtros community members’ understanding of their relationship with their neighbors in gated communities, and vice-versa, implies the notion that sustaining both residential niches and remaining segregated is normal and that not bothering each other is a plus. However, these relationships have negative repercussions for Los Filtros. They lead to alienation and the “othering” and stereotyping of Los Filtros community members. As outsiders share a common perception that Los Filtros residents are unskilled workers,¹³ such a generalization perpetuates stereotypes about the community’s social capital and economic potential. This contributes to the further labelling of Los Filtros residents as less valued in the public sphere than other Guaynabo residents. Thus, people who would support expropriating the community do so by adopting erroneous labels for Los Filtros residents and simultaneously classifying the community as an informalized settlement.

While some elements of the socio-spatial context around Los Filtros have remained constant, such as the domestic work-based relationships between neighbors and the persistent class disparities, other aspects have changed over time. For instance, interviewees mentioned that many of them attended an elementary school inside the community called Marcelino San Miguel. According to Laura, former Mayor Alejandro “Junior” Cruz removed the school from Los Filtros during his time in office (1979-1993). Allegedly due to low enrolment, he moved it to Santa Rosa III, a *barrio* nearly three kilometers away from Los Filtros (*interview*, June 5, 2021). Though the relocation of one school does not equal the destruction of the entire community, it is one factor that contributed to its slow decay. Removing a school from any neighborhood, in this

¹² These phrases roughly translate into “them over there and us over here” and “we do not bother each other” respectively.

¹³ Low paying jobs such as domestic work have been traditionally labelled as “unskilled” even though they often require complex skills that are not necessarily acquired by virtue of completing a college degree or extensive training.

case, Los Filtros, has implications involving social and cultural loss, thus, (re)producing the informalization of the community. Often, municipal actors who carry out this type of actions argue that institutions like a school are not vital to the community. Nevertheless, the elimination of the Marcelino San Miguel school was one of several changes that occurred in Los Filtros and adversely affected the community's social and economic capital.

Los Filtros also had around five streetside markets which community members remember for their popularity and the vibrancy they gave to the neighborhood. There are only two of these small businesses left and according to community residents, the *barrio* does not feel as “alive” as it did a few decades ago. Some of the shops that are no longer in Los Filtros disappeared since the municipal government, led by former Mayor O’Neill, crafted favorable policies and negotiations to encourage movement outside of Los Filtros in recent years. Sara, for instance, mentioned her uncle’s past business. “My uncle had a shop there that used to be my grandfather’s [and] it would give life to the *barrio*” (*interview*, June 29, 2021). When I asked what happened to her uncle’s shop, she answered, “Well, when they expropriated ... they knocked it down because ... the soil was eroding and if they stayed there, they [the store], would fall to the other side. Then, I remember that Mayor Héctor O’Neill gave my uncle a two-story house over there by Canta Gallo” (*interview*, June 29, 2021).¹⁴

Both the relocation of the school out of Los Filtros and the expropriation of various shops, such as the one Sara’s uncle owned, led to the fostering of precarity in the community. Similar to acts of disinvestment, eliminating important buildings and points of social gathering were actions that, while O’Neill justified them with concerns about public safety, residents in Los Filtros associate with his motivation to “empty” the community. These displacements had

¹⁴ Canta Gallo is another barrio to the south of Los Filtros where Guaynabo residents that have been displaced from other communities have presumably been moved to throughout the years.

significant impacts as community members share deep nostalgia for the livelihood and vibrancy that historically characterized Los Filtros. The knocking down of shops, principally, entailed the disruption of interpersonal bonds and social configuration that shaped the community. Mindy Thompson Fullilove (2016) describes the implications of such fissures with the term “root shock.” In the neighborhood context, root shock is the stress and anxiety-inducing traumatic reaction that the rupture of relationships and resources in a community can generate in its residents (Fullilove, 2016, p. 14). Guaynabo’s municipal government’s elimination of aspects that characterized Los Filtros clearly reflected its purpose to disintegrate and disempower Los Filtros even before threatening to expropriate residents. Its intentions for Los Filtros relate to a socio-spatial context where the community’s informalization set the stage for intense displacement pressures.

The spatial and social configuration of Los Filtros has changed as its structures are built, rebuilt, and destroyed and as some residents move away either due to their own necessity or to O’Neill’s policies. Again, while any community can suffer significant changes with the passage of time, for Los Filtros, these changes were a consequence of disinvestment and neglect that paved the way for greater efforts to expropriate the community. Here, specifically, O’Neill’s administration role in disrupting a *barrio* like Los Filtros with goals for investing in road infrastructure for better access to upscale gated communities signals the deep disparities that shape the socio-spatial context.

The Rise of Gated Communities

The area surrounding Los Filtros primarily consists of gated communities including, La Lomita, Chalets de Alta Vista, Villa Rita, La Colina, La Villa Garden, and La Villa de Torrimar

(see Appendix F).¹⁵ Together these complexes shape the urban development of the area along with prominent apartment buildings, such as La Cima de Torrimar and Plaza del Prado, which are emblematic of upmarket and prestigious architectural housing endeavors in Puerto Rico. A current resident in La Villa de Torrimar illustrated the economic prestige that some houses in these gated communities hold as he spoke about his parents' purchase in 1986. "My parents bought [a house] in La Colina for \$236,000," he noted (Marcos, *interview*, August 14, 2021). For context, the average price for a house in Puerto Rico in 2021 is around \$160,000 to \$200,000. Thus, a house that cost more than \$200,000 30 years ago reveals the kind of neighborhood that was being marketed around Los Filtros at the time. "Today those houses are easily \$600,000" (Fernando, *interview*, Sept. 20, 2021). Fernando, who works for the firm that developed La Villa de Torrimar, asserted that houses in that gated community are much more expensive than the average price of any other house in Puerto Rico. He also indicated, "My father was the forefather here making houses more high-end for the middle-upper class" (*Interview*, Sept. 20, 2021). To put it bluntly, La Villa de Torrimar, one of the few gated communities that pioneered the market for exclusive and comparably expensive homes in Puerto Rico, is only a few steps away from Los Filtros, thereby etching class differentiation into the socio-spatial context. It is nearly impossible not to notice the vast disparities in housing stock and associated lifestyle opportunities when traveling through the area.

La Colina, located across from Los Filtros, was built around the same time as La Villa de Torrimar and targeted a similar population. It offers an exclusive private community with luxurious homes and amenities, such as pools, fitness centers, tennis courts, clubhouses, and

¹⁵ Only La Colina, La Villa Garden, and La Villa de Torrimar are large housing developments of more than fifty units. La Lomita, Chalets de Alta Vista, and Villa Rita are smaller communities of five to ten housing units each that were not originally private but installed gates during the 2000s.

more. The contrast of the fragile and debilitated homes and structures in Los Filtros with La Colina is striking. People struggling to make ends meet live within walking distance of houses owned by individuals at the highest level in the socio-economic strata. Essentially, the income gap between both populations is extremely wide and it is reflected in the properties they own. Therefore, the comparison of the built environment in Los Filtros and the surrounding communities emphasizes the informalization of the neighborhood.

In addition to this contrast, La Colina, La Villa de Torrimar, and other private housing complexes close to Los Filtros are characterized by their imposing gating and fencing infrastructure. With the central government's support for controlling access to private neighborhoods through Act 21-1987, these communities installed gates quickly after construction work ended to secure their space due to the fear of crime arising from Los Filtros. Urban geographer C.P. Pow (2013) describes this process as a product of anxious urbanism, when higher class individuals consume security amenities because of fear and privilege. They do so when moving to a gated community with defensive architectural features, such as high walls, fences, and gates, and surveillance artifacts, including cameras and guardhouses. According to Pow (2013), this results in the "social construction" of those who live outside of private developments as "dangerous criminal others" and thus establishes physical and social boundaries between higher-class residents and "fearful outsiders" (p. 191). The commodification of security as a form of creating a "safe-haven" enclosed from outside "problematic behavior" is displayed in all gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros. When I asked the one of the architects of La Villa de Torrimar if the development firm feared that houses in their projects would not sell due to being close to Los Filtros, he responded,

Umm, yes, there were problems at first and it was a very hot area when we started developing [La Villa de Torrimar]. It was a very hot area and there was even murder and

all things in the *barrio* sometimes ... So, my father made the community with security guards, guard houses, and that gave a lot of confidence to people living there, because there was indeed intense policing ... while my dad was constructing. As soon as the first houses were done, there were people moving already and they were worried, but felt safe because there was a good security [system] (Fernando, *interview*, Sept. 20, 2021).

Fernando quickly emphasized Los Filtros' profile as one characterized by crime. Interestingly, the development of these gated communities took place during the same years that the municipal government started threatening to expropriate Los Filtros and around the same time that the crime scene in the community was intense, or as Fernando said, "hot."

Both the emphasis on "safety" and the differences in structural conditions between Los Filtros and the adjacent gated communities indicate the priorities of the municipio's governance. In particular, the administration of former Mayor O'Neill relentlessly focused on collaborating with the private sector and promoting prestigious gated communities and upscale suburbanization throughout Guaynabo. While the consequences of these priorities are numerous, I focus specifically on how such stated goals at the municipio level further entrench disparities at the neighborhood scale of Los Filtros.

Suárez-Carrasquillo (2009; 2011) particularly studies the role of the government in supporting the rise of gated communities and argues that the situation in Guaynabo differs from that of other municipios in Puerto Rico. Due to their greater fiscal capacity, Guaynabo's municipal government is among the few with the most autonomy on the island, which grants them more power to implement planning policy. Consequently, soon after the central government began to support the construction of gated communities after approving Law 21 in 1987, Guaynabo started to undertake a city marketing campaign in the early 1990s.¹⁶ The strategy, led by former Mayor Héctor O'Neill, was to invest in the development of a brand,

¹⁶ City marketing is "a tool that cities use to market themselves to a particular group or groups of people in order to attract investors and to promote interest in the city" (Suárez, 2011, 446).

“Guaynabo City.”¹⁷ Suárez-Carrasquillo details how the municipal government was able to make such a brand emblematic and signals the direct correlation between it and the rise of gated communities in Guaynabo. He points out that prestige and security-zone communities in Guaynabo, which are the most common type of gated communities in the municipio, doubled their value in less than a decade. People started to move to newly developed communities as the O’Neill administration began to construct a municipio that catered to the middle and upper classes. Indeed, among the three main policies that Guaynabo prioritized under the O’Neill administration, good public services, adoption of the English language, and attracting high income residents by supporting the construction of gated communities, the last one had an incredible effect on the urban morphology of the municipio. The return on infrastructural investment is undoubted. Guaynabo’s municipal government’s income increased by 49% from 1993-1997 due to the collection of property taxes (Suárez-Carrasquillo, 2009).

Laura directly spoke to the production of Guaynabo as an elite space: “O’Neill once gave a speech where he said that he wanted to make a metropolis out of Guaynabo and that... [it] could not have poor people. And that meant that in all of Guaynabo zones, he would force people [into] public housing in order to develop [housing] for wealthy people” (*interview*, June 5, 2021). Having been an active community leader in Los Filtros, Laura shared a common sentiment among Los Filtros residents as they realized that former Mayor O’Neill attempted to homogenize space in Guaynabo so that it excluded its low-income dwellers and denied them the right to the city. Los Filtros residents knew that O’Neill planned to expropriate land in Los Filtros as well as in other low-income, informalized communities in Guaynabo. Displacing low-income residents

¹⁷ “Guaynabo City” branding included several elements such as the implementation of English language in signs and building names across the municipio, increased policing, and the construction of roundabouts, museums, and public sculptures.

and relocating them into container housing, in this case public housing buildings, in order to have greater availability of land for the affluent signals a political agenda that promotes and perpetuates social injustice.

Suárez-Carrasquillo (2011) uses a broader analysis of how O'Neill's policies foster class homogenization in Guaynabo to make his case for gated communities. He specifically emphasizes the municipal government's success in attracting elite home developers to the municipio to form public-private partnerships (P3s) and build gated communities. Even at times when the construction industry was not as successful state-wide, Suárez-Carrasquillo argues, the Guaynabo government "paved the way for the real estate business to boom" (2011, p. 447). By way of example, when "a developer claimed they were having difficulties selling their luxury villas within a golf community because of the narrow road that led to the development," O'Neill commanded the municipal government "to invest approximately \$42 million to revamp the road" (Suárez-Carrasquillo, 2011, p. 449).

In a related example, Fernando from the architecture firm noted, "Well, La Villa [de Torrimar] for my dad was the turning point, that is when the company took off [economically] and that success led to the building of subsequent gated communities" (*interview*, Sept. 20, 2021). Of particular relevance to my research, one of the most popularly heard reasons that O'Neill gave for needing to expropriate the entire community of Los Filtros was to widen Road 833. This is the main road passing in front of Los Filtros and leads to the gated communities La Villa de Torrimar, La Villa Garden, and Baldwin Park. Hence, the P3s and the drive for expanded luxury landscapes positioned Los Filtros as a spatial impediment. Former Mayor O'Neill sought to get rid of this named hindrance through expropriation. Such a perspective and plan blatantly illustrates where the priorities of the Guaynabo municipal government lay. While

efforts to support an ease of access to upper income neighborhoods took precedent, residents of Los Filtros contended with infrastructural precarity and the threat of complete displacement.

La Villa de Torrimar represents another interesting dynamic between private developers and public authorities. This gated community extends across more than 200 *cuerdas*¹⁸ with more than 400 units (single-family homes) and is located just behind the Los Filtros' water filtration plant (see Appendix F). Because of the proximity to the plant, the AAA has historically been meticulous with construction matters in this location. Most notably, one resident in La Villa de Torrimar recalled a past accident entailing damaged pipelines and floodings. He remarked, "A tube [from the] Los Filtros [water plant] broke and all the water ran down through Luis Street ... so the last house on the street was almost washed away" (Marcos, *Interview*, August 14, 2021). Having heard of the negative consequences of La Villa de Torrimar's gated community on the water filtration infrastructure, I asked Fernando from the development firm if the company had to engage in any kind of negotiation with the AAA to avoid disrupting the plant's infrastructure. His simple response revealed that the location of La Villa de Torrimar did not apparently present an issue. He explained, "Basically, there are a lot of pipes that pass by La Villa de Torrimar ... so there was a right-of-way for those pipes that has been left clear. My dad allowed rights-of-way through the whole project, so [we] never built on top of a pipeline" (*interview*, September 20, 2021). Fernando asserted that minding the right-of-ways was the only issue that they encountered with the AAA. In contrast, in the 1930s the AAA "destroyed" many wood houses that were located in the same hillside where La Villa de Torrimar currently stands purportedly because of the proximity to the filtration plant. As Herminia narrated the arrival of workers to Los Filtros, she noted that the AAA gave subplots to some workers and "sent [others] to Santa Rosa ...

¹⁸ One *cuerda* is equivalent to 0.971 acres.

because they did not want houses in that area of the plant” due to safety concerns (*Interview*, June 15, 2021).

This account reveals the AAA’s initial concern about housing units that were close to the water filtration plant. They displaced part of a community due to these concerns. However, 40 to 50 years later, private developers were able to build La Villa de Torrimar, a gated community of more than 400 units located in the same area. The municipio’s intention to support the construction of gated communities that could build up its “Guaynabo City” brand seemingly took priority over previously stated safety considerations, which shows a pattern of selective land regulation. Evidently, state and municipal officials in Guaynabo have reproduced disparities between residents in gated communities and residents in informalized settlements through unevenly applied policies and direct actions. Their use of power in determining who can be where has intensified pre-existing social and class inequalities between both groups of residents and makes plain the prioritizing of the affluent sector’s right to place.

Conclusion

Guaynabo’s role in promoting the construction of high-end residential developments to attract higher-income families to the municipio is crucial for the shaping of Los Filtros’ socio-spatial context. The municipal government’s particular actions in producing spatial homogeneity result in a society that prioritizes the needs and desires of elites. Essentially, Los Filtros is located in a municipio where the largest investments in infrastructure benefit real-estate developers and not the longtime residents of Guaynabo’s *barrios* who live in inadequate housing conditions. More specifically, Los Filtros is located in an area that explicitly reflects the aim for land privatization and Guaynabo’s image as the municipio with the wealthiest population. As I

discussed, it is an area where gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros are significant indicators of economic gains for the private sector and prominent images of luxury housing that reinforce Los Filtros' image and experience as an informalized settlement.

The actions through which the Guaynabo municipal government has addressed such "informality" surfaces in the granting of property titles to some of Los Filtros residents. However, this action was solely an immediate response from the then mayor of Guaynabo, which led into an impromptu event filled with politicized ideologies. Guaynabo did not fully address Los Filtros' informality with the granting of property titles. Instead, it reproduced irregular tenure as the process of acquiring property titles has been significantly challenging for residents in Los Filtros after that event in 1979. Though the socio-spatial context of Los Filtros is deeply rooted in its historical formation, social and political dynamics that have emerged during subsequent decades have continuously affected it. Los Filtros' informalization has involved the actions of different groups that have influenced its physical, visual, and imaginary construction as a community. Together, these sets of elements created a situation of vulnerability for Los Filtros as an economically marginalized community in the middle of prosperous Guaynabo. Yet, Los Filtros residents are attached to their community, their history, and the sense of collectivity, which has favored their resistance to and fight against expropriation efforts. Through a variety of methods, they have reasserted their right to the city while being aware of the spatial circumstances implicated within their lives.

In the following chapter, I delve into the complex threats to expropriate Los Filtros while examining the imaginative geographies of community members, neighboring residents of gated communities, and state actors. In doing so, I illustrate a significant discrepancy between how outsiders think about the use of space in Los Filtros and community members' actual goals for

their space. Specifically, I will analyze how non-Los Filtros residents' imaginative geographies about Guaynabo and Los Filtros have translated into concrete efforts for displacing the community. Importantly, examining the particularities of expropriation threats based on the socio-spatial context that I have discussed in this chapter reveals the magnitude of issues involving potential displacement in Los Filtros and community members' reaction to such pressures.

CHAPTER THREE

IMAGINING GUAYNABO:

EXPROPRIATION AND RELOCATION PRESSURES IN LOS FILTROS

To fully understand Los Filtros residents' resistance to expropriation, it is vital to delve into the multifaceted municipal pressures exerted upon informalized communities in Guaynabo. In particular, the anti-poor sociopolitical context in Guaynabo produced several factors that encouraged Los Filtros residents to abandon their homes. Even more significantly, the municipal government exacerbated such pressure by carrying out the most critical and targeted efforts to displace Los Filtros community members through two key tactics. With this in mind, this chapter speaks to my second research question as I argue that Guaynabo's municipal government sustained threats of expropriation against Los Filtros for 15 years through two main endeavors: judicial proceedings and the construction of Jardines de los Filtros, a public housing building meant to serve as the relocation destination for Los Filtros residents. Simultaneously, these threats were part of a larger scale, municipal government-led effort to expropriate informalized communities in Guaynabo, which reflects the impact of imaginative geographies about the municipio's modern and wealthy profile. Imaginative geographies, as a geographic concept, thus help uncover municipal government officials' and Guaynabo's residents' diverse views about Los Filtros. Because some of these views are filled with prejudice and discrimination, Los Filtros faces harmful implications.

The ways in which Guaynabo's municipal government carried out expropriation efforts entail a number of factors that each helped facilitate processes of potential displacement. These factors include: the use and exchange value of land in Los Filtros; the alleged lack of

developable space in Guaynabo; O'Neill's power and its role in counteracting community-based development efforts and expropriating several informalized communities in Guaynabo; and economic disinvestment in Los Filtros, which has led to infrastructural decay prone to natural disasters. As I argue in this chapter, the decade-long judicial proceedings and the public housing project were the strongest and most tangible actions undertaken to cause significant emotional distress by disrupting deeply rooted people-place relationships. Still, the factors aforementioned underscore the logics and significance of such expropriation threats in Los Filtros. In addition, Los Filtros residents' place attachment was so strong that it fueled their resistance to all manner of expropriation threats. Consequently, the municipal government engaged with court-level actions and built a public housing development to advance expropriation.

This chapter consists of three sections each of which stresses the intensity of expropriation. First, I provide a broader understanding of the context that situates the expropriation issue in Los Filtros in order to highlight the significance of the judicial proceedings. Next, I discuss the timeline of events for the judicial proceedings that put Los Filtros' legal protection against expropriation at stake. Finally, I evaluate the public housing project in Los Filtros as an expropriation tool and claim that its presence cut at the integrity of the community and contributed to further disinvestment.

Prominent Threats

Although I discussed former Mayor O'Neill's power position in Chapter Two, this section provides concrete examples of his neoliberal governance actions and how they impacted a particular place. For instance, I evaluate the combination of factors, such as the lack of developable space, Los Filtros' potential exchange value in one of Guaynabo's most attractive

areas, and O'Neill's focus on eliminating informalized communities, that contributed to fears of expropriation. Throughout the section, I also discuss the forces of disinvestment in Los Filtros, which advanced the precarity of the community and its susceptibility to natural disasters. Together, these aspects shape the broader context and help situate the two most powerful expropriation threats that I discuss in the following two sections.

When I asked upper class residents from gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros, what they thought about Los Filtros' potential expropriation over the past two decades, they all agreed that displacing the community would be unfair for its residents. Likewise, many of them associated expropriation threats with the municipio's intention to build luxury housing where Los Filtros sits today. For example, Marcos noted that he was fully against Los Filtros' expropriation and claimed, "I know that they offered them some walkups that they did down there and everything so that they would leave ... but I do not have the slightest doubt that the intention was to expropriate in order to build luxury houses and those kinds of things around the area" (*interview*, August 14, 2021). Diana also made such an assumption: "To expropriate to make... expensive houses there, I do not agree with that. I believe that they live there, and it is their home, and they have every right to be there," and added, "the Guaynabo area and this area in particular is an area that attracts people who pay well for their houses, and so that means that the municipio receives more, because it earns CRIM" (*interview*, June 13, 2021).¹⁹ Both Marcos and Diana emphasized that Guaynabo's municipal government would expropriate homes in Los Filtros in order to build high-end housing developments and increase its municipal tax revenue. This is common in cities that follow neoliberal agendas and strive to increase the exchange value

¹⁹ CRIM stands for "Centro de Recaudación de Ingresos Municipales" [Center for the Collection of Municipal Revenue]. People in Puerto Rico generally use the abbreviation when referring to property taxes that municipios collect.

in neighborhoods while disregarding their use value. O'Neill's vision for Guaynabo is not an exception, especially since the broader landscape reflects such money-driven uses of space.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, O'Neill is known for his political and economic power and his "anti-poor" identity. Specifically, he demonstrated a deep investment in an imaginative geography of Guaynabo as wealthy. His past projects illustrate his commitment to producing spaces that depict the municipio's wealth. Juan, the president of the Comité Cívico de Los Filtros,²⁰ suggested where O'Neill's imaginative geographies come from and connects them to the idea of making a city for the wealthy:

"Guaynabo City" was nonsense that he invented. He got on a plane and looked from above when he was going through Orlando, Florida and he saw all that and the cities and the roundabouts and he wanted to impose it [in Guaynabo]. So yes. He eliminated factories because it was the factory where the poor came to work ... you take out the factories, you take out this whole thing of giving people jobs and people have to leave, and it becomes a city of rich people. That was not a joke ... That was embedded in creating a society, a city for the rich. He said it himself and I have it somewhere in the newspapers where he says, 'Guaynabo does not need factories because it lives on [property tax revenues]' (Juan, *interview*, June 15, 2021).

Juan implied that O'Neill's imaginative geographies entailed a strong association between a particular kind of residential space and a high-class demographic. As factories were replaced by roundabouts and "anti-poor" rhetoric increased, Guaynabo's residents, including those in Los Filtros, became keenly aware of the municipal government's priorities in supporting the development of private communities with large and expensive houses in order to collect higher property-based tax revenues. Ángel, who lives in a single-road gated community of six homes in between Los Filtros and Plaza del Prado (a 12-story apartment building built in 2006) (see Appendix F), told the story of the building's construction, which became a concrete example of O'Neill's governance priorities.

²⁰ Comité Cívico de Los Filtros is the name of Los Filtros' community board consisting of 13 community leaders. I further expand on the formation of this group in Chapter Four.

[Plaza del] Prado was interesting because... the neighbors wanted to buy [the land plot] and make a park, but Mayor O'Neill was opposed to that because the money he earned [from an apartment building] was much more. ... there were never any hearings for the construction of the building. It was all planned that they were going to make a building, I think, but they could not. The area did not allow them to make a building of that size. And then from there on, I do not know what happened, but I imagine there was a shenanigan, like those that happen here in Puerto Rico, and they built the building (Ángel, *interview*, July 15, 2021).

The obstacles with available land space preventing Plaza del Prado's development versus the allegedly illegal arrangements, the "shenanigan" that Ángel mentioned, that private developers and municipal officials made in order to follow-up with its construction reasserts what O'Neill's political power entailed in Guaynabo. Even while facing structural security constraints, private developers constructed Plaza del Prado, presumably with active support from the municipal government. The construction of Plaza del Prado signals what kind of housing O'Neill foresaw for the Los Filtros area as well. Just around the time that people started moving to the newly installed luxury apartments in 2006, Guaynabo's municipal government was preparing to take the Los Filtros situation to court.

O'Neill's government inculcated certain imaginative geographies about Guaynabo and the particular area where Los Filtros is located to residents in Los Filtros as well as outsiders. In addition to Fernando, who spoke about his firm's accomplishment with La Villa de Torrimar and stated that Los Filtros "looked ugly," a former resident of Los Filtros suggested, "If this community makes these people that we live [with] so ugly, between schools and millionaires, and prosperity, if you have to expropriate two or three houses, why not, at least, make roads, so the firefighters or an ambulance can come through if there is a fire?" (Aida, *interview*, June 18, 2021). Although the main point that Aida wanted to communicate was to think of positive outcomes that could come out of expropriating a couple of houses, she made it clear that the idea of Los Filtros' "ugliness" has been ingrained in Los Filtros residents as well. This comparison

between Los Filtros' image set against adjacent gated communities' attractiveness served as a rationale for the necessity of expropriation. Thus, it has large consequences for the menace of displacement.

Mainly in gated communities surrounding Los Filtros, residents and outsiders associate land value with large homes, extensive lawns, and panoramic views. Moreover, interviewees like Ángel, Susana, Diana, and Sandra, all said they love the “campo-ciudad” [rural-urban] feeling of their neighborhoods, meaning the fact that they live in an elevated area with much vegetation while everything elsewhere is highly urbanized, noisy, and hot (*interviews*, June 2021). Thus, they give much value to their gated communities “tremendous” locations, the cooler weather due to the abundance of trees, and the view from their homes. Susana, who also said she was against Los Filtros' expropriation, claimed, “That’s why I did not want them [Los Filtros' residents] expropriated. Because what they were going to do was buildings... [which was] fatal because they [would] take my view away. They put buildings in front of me in the hole that is there, because that is a hole, then you know that I will lose my view and everyone up here [too]” (*interview*, June 23, 2021). Susana was against the municipal government expropriating residents in Los Filtros because, alternatively, tall apartment buildings there would ruin her view. While this demonstrates an interesting way of valuing land and defending the Los Filtros' community, it also reflects what most residents in Los Filtros have been pointing to for years; there is great interest in their place. *Guaynabeños* who do not live in the area, and private developers in particular, share a strong desire to develop housing projects in the same space that Los Filtros currently occupies.²¹

²¹ Guaynabeños is the demonym for the residents of Guaynabo.

Land values in the hill where Los Filtros coexists with various gated communities are sufficient cause to expect gentrifying forces. Furthermore, due to the lack of developable space in Guaynabo and in other municipios surrounding San Juan, developers (and government officials) would prefer eliminating a community that does not generate much revenue in order to build housing where people would pay higher taxes. Just as architect Edwin Quiles signposted in a 2006 event for informalized communities, “[Displacement] has the potential to affect a lot of people. There are many communities that are close to urban centers and, as development progresses and land runs out, people look towards those places” (as quoted in Rivera-Marrero, 2006, para. 5). Thus, the reality of Los Filtros’ locational attractiveness, coupled with the lack of developable space in Guaynabo, illustrates why the potential for expropriation is real and pressing. These elements show the smaller but daily and sustained pressures that result from Los Filtros’ location and socio-spatial context. However, efforts to expropriate this community went beyond land values and available urban space. Guaynabo’s municipal government has furthered the precarity of the community perhaps as a way to hasten an assumed eventual redevelopment of the place.

Indeed, Los Filtros has borne the effects of persistent disinvestment and neglect. Juan spoke to this point, as quoted by Alba Muñiz-García (2010): “They have taken services from us in order to expropriate us. The embellishment, the maintenance of the sidewalks, we have to do it with the little [money] we collect” (para. 5). Juan further argued that O’Neill would purposefully not take care of common areas in Los Filtros in order to take pictures of its abandoned appearance and use them as “evidence” of the community’s decaying status. Beyond these actions for the production of decay, Guaynabo’s municipal government has never inspected homes’ structural safety other than for assessing purposes in order to pay a resident to leave. This

shows that municipal officials' recognition for the existing type of construction and use of space in Los Filtros has been little to nonexistent. By showing little respect for Los Filtros residents' perception of space as inhabitable, municipal officials, and O'Neill in particular, neglect others' right to remain.

The infrastructural decay in Los Filtros is concerning. Due to the irregular topography of the area (see Appendix I), natural hazards increase residents' risk of losing their homes. In fact, several residents have already had to move out due to the detrimental impact that Hurricanes Irma and María had on their homes (see Appendix J). Interviewees like Sara, Norma, and Aida stressed the severity of this problem by referring to the possibility of landslide. For instance, Sara recalled, "I remember that I worked in the municipal [government] and the one who was mayor, Junior Cruz, ordered a land study down there [in Los Filtros] ... in '92, because they thought it was going to go down like Mameyes [community]" (Sara, *interview*, June 29, 2021). Similarly, Norma noted, "Yes, this terrain is susceptible to landslide. There has not been a tragedy like Mameyes because ... God is miraculous and great, but that land is not good for building... everyone here built *a la cañona*, like I say, *a la cañona* ... me, when a thing [hurricane] comes, I do not stay, never" (Norma, *interview*, June 14, 2021).²² Both interviewees' mention of the Mameyes community is crucial. The Mameyes tragedy occurred in 1985 in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Due to intense rainfall, a landslide destroyed nearly 400 homes and killed more than 100 people. The possibility of a landslide accident similar to Mameyes happening in Los Filtros is frightening for residents like Norma, who always leaves her home when the national weather service announces a potential storm. Government officials from Guaynabo and other municipios constantly use the natural disaster susceptibility rationale to discourage residents from staying in

²² "A la cañona" is a Puerto Rican saying with no literal translation to English. It could mean to have built "with strong imposition" and "against all odds."

their respective communities. This illustrates imaginative geographies that strictly label informalized communities as unsafe because of the precarious situation under which community founders built their homes. Simultaneously, these imaginative geographies classify cement houses or buildings in flat surfaces as the only safe structures for living, and consequently, lead the municipal government to avoid any type of investment in strengthening homes in informalized communities.

Due to their homes' infrastructural fragility and Guaynabo's municipal government's further production of such precarity, Los Filtros residents are aware of the community's increased susceptibility to landslide and see it as antithetical to the possibility for progress. For instance, Aida brought up the discontinuation of projects in Los Filtros since 2005. She stated, "Everything was stagnant... after the [community] center was made... because they went there and offered terrain tests and terrain tests that, girl, were not going to pass, because here the waters run down. If a rainy day comes, you get scared because those are currents" (*interview*, June 18, 2021). Los Filtros' community center "Rosa E. Rivera" was built in 2004. Although it required various landslide susceptibility tests, its construction was viable because it lies in a flatter area adjacent to Road 833 unlike other houses in Los Filtros that are located on a steeper slope (See Appendix K). However, as Aida points out, there were high chances of failed terrain tests that would prevent construction in other areas of Los Filtros.

On the one hand, municipal officials' arguments in favor of expropriating could have been well-grounded on the fact that infrastructure upgrades would not be worth it if there were real landslide risks. On the other hand, Juan emphasized his belief that improvements and rebuilding in Los Filtros is possible. He claimed,

They tell me, they have told me, 'nothing can be done there.' And I tell them, 'if you look now, close your eyes and suddenly open them, is there anything done?' They say, 'yes.'

Well, of course. I mean, don't tell me that you can't do anything, because you can, and without machinery and without money, without technology. People here dragged the poles when it came down to installing electricity, they dragged the poles with rope and the holes were made by hand, and between six people they took a pole of those and put it up and extended [electricity] lines (Juan, *interview*, June 15, 2021).

Indeed, Juan is aware of the Los Filtros' infrastructural weaknesses and fragility to confront natural hazards. However, he insisted Los Filtros has potential without needing to relocate families. For him, the presence of homes scattered across the hillside is evidence that the space is inhabitable. Moreover, he argued that community founders of Los Filtros built their homes with very scarce resources; thus, new improvements to the community while using the technology available nowadays would be undoubtedly possible. However, municipal officials stress the realities of danger in communities like Los Filtros and convey the "no other alternative" narrative. Therefore, residents in Los Filtros feel the impact of living in precarious infrastructural conditions coupled with Guaynabo's municipal government's pressure in categorizing informalized communities as a disruption to local budgetary goals.

So far in this chapter, I have discussed factors that contribute to persistent expropriation threats for Los Filtros, such as the lack of developable space in Guaynabo, use and exchange values for land in Los Filtros, patterns of disinvestment in the community, and threatening natural hazards. Together, these elements are tied to imaginative geographies for Guaynabo that exclude informalized communities from its space. From this context, the municipal government's power in challenging pro-community development national legislation in order to expropriate residents of informalized communities grew. Guaynabo's municipal government did not advance expropriation efforts solely at the local level. In contrast, the goal to convert Los Filtros into public housing was part of an island-level political issue where Guaynabo's municipal government tried to repeal informalized communities' legal protection against

expropriation and, thus, take away their right to place. It is to these contested court cases that I now turn.

Judicial Proceedings

The large scope of opposition to the prevalence of informalized communities in Guaynabo revealed a friction between autonomous municipios and Puerto Rico's state government, evidenced in the various attempts to repeal Act 1 of 2001, the Puerto Rico Special Communities Integral Development Act. With this Act, former Governor Sila María Calderón (2001-2005) sought to address Puerto Rico's long-established and failing centralized planning system by promoting community-based planning (Díaz-Garayúa and Guilbe-López, 2020, p. 35). The fostering of community empowerment would take place through the designation of 686 Special Communities across the island. By virtue of the law, it would be the state government's responsibility to "act as a trainer, promoter, facilitator and collaborator, [in] establishing incentives and creating conditions and mechanisms necessary for these communities to successfully assume their personal and community development" ("Municipio de Guaynabo", 2016, p. 20). Furthermore, Act 1 included the creation of the "Oficina de Comunidades Especiales" (OCE) [Special Communities Office], which would collaborate with municipal governments to identify which communities met the requirements to be designated as a "Special Community."²³ While the OCE initially designated 686 communities, by 2008 there were 742 Special Communities. Evidently, there are many communities in Puerto Rico where people under

²³ Among the identification criteria were high percentage of families below the poverty level, the need for education and health services, infrastructure problems, lack of lighting, flooding problems, lack of electrical energy or aqueducts issues, overcrowding, and low-quality housing ("Municipio de Guaynabo," 2016, p. 15).

the poverty threshold live in precarious conditions that warrant a significant level of economic investment in order to thrive.

Although the designation of Special Communities had great significance for many of these *barrios* in 2001, it was 2004's Act 232 that gave Los Filtros greater stability. This Act was meant to amend Article 4 of Act 1-2001 and establishes that,

In cases where municipal plans contemplate the expropriation of land and housing within the communities recognized as "Special" according to this Act, a Joint Resolution of the Legislative Assembly authorizing such action is required; that has been the subject of study and consideration through public hearings in both legislative bodies, to which municipios and community leaders concerned have been invited, and such Joint Resolution shall certify that the [OCE] has conducted a community consultation in which seventy-five (75) percent of those who exercise their right to vote, endorse the expropriations and that this consultation was also carried out in accordance with the process established by that Office ("Municipio de Guaynabo," 2016, p. 25).

In summary, Act 232 of 2004, which was a product of Los Filtros residents' activism, disempowered municipios that sought to expropriate Special Communities by requiring the active participation and consent of community's residents in order to expropriate land.

Consequently, this Act sparked the main issue between municipal governments like Guaynabo and the state government. The Act gave Los Filtros and 15 other informalized communities in Guaynabo legal protection against municipal-led expropriation.

Since expropriation was the main tool Guaynabo's municipal government could use to eliminate neighborhoods that did not fit within the landscape it sought to produce, former Mayor O'Neill openly expressed his opposition to the Special Communities Law. He engaged in endless lobbying activities to repeal Act 232, first at the Puerto Rican Senate and House of Representatives, and then in Puerto Rico's Court of First Instance, claiming it prevented the completion of public housing projects to relocate residents of informalized communities. O'Neill used Los Filtros as evidence to argue that, "the state government has postponed [projects] in the

marginalized sectors of the city” (López Alicea, 2007, para. 4). He expressed that because the OCE prevented a public housing project in Los Filtros, the community’s residents still live in “subhuman conditions” (López Alicea, 2007, para. 4). Guaynabo’s municipal government and O’Neill justified the relevance and necessity for public housing by referring to the inadequate housing situation that they had, ironically, helped to produce. By making this argument, the municipal government officials sought to communicate Los Filtros’ “unworthiness” and provide a generally accepted reason to relocate families. Nevertheless, making these allegations in public media would not help them attain their goal for the expropriation of several communities in Guaynabo. Therefore, in 2007, Guaynabo’s municipal government took their case to Puerto Rico’s Court of First Instance to sue the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the OCE, and Puerto Rico’s Department of Justice.

Represented by O’Neill, Guaynabo’s municipal government presented a case in Puerto Rico’s Court of First Instance on November 20, 2007 (see Appendix L for full timeline). They were, 1) requesting the trial court to declare null and void the designations of Special Communities in Guaynabo, 2) requesting to prevent the OCE from continuing Act 1’s provisions, and 3) “alleging that the situation had caused serious damage to the municipio and the communities since it interfered with: the municipio’s powers, faculties, [and] obligations to provide the communities with the economic and social development they require and the execution of projects for their benefit” (“Municipio de Guaynabo,” 2016, p. 2). These requests presented a serious threat to Special Communities in Guaynabo. Essentially, both O’Neill and

Guaynabo's municipal government sought to recreate the possibility for expropriation to be justified by law.²⁴

While O'Neill denied that his interest in expropriating informalized communities was in order to build luxury housing and reiterated that the reasoning behind expropriation efforts across Guaynabo included the lack of adequate housing, landslide and flooding risks, and needs for better road infrastructure (Rosario, 2006, para. 3), these logics were not central to the judicial proceedings he advanced. Instead, O'Neill's main concern in the court cases was that the inability to complete "social development projects," namely public housing, led the municipio to lose millions of dollars. He argued that, "the only municipio that is doing the work to give houses to the poor is Guaynabo" and cited the investment of \$9 million in nine communities across Guaynabo as evidence (O'Neill, as in Rosario, 2006, para. 2; "Héctor O'Neill arremete," 2010). Although he insisted on communicating his care for the social development of informalized communities in Guaynabo, O'Neill's emphasis on Guaynabo's budget issues reflect imaginative geographies that portray economically marginalized communities as barriers to economic success by costing money and contributing little. O'Neill's financial narrative drew support and signified great ideological pressure on Los Filtros residents and community members of other informalized communities in Guaynabo. Parlaying this pressure into legal proceedings constituted a significant threat to Los Filtros' existence.

The Court of First Instance tabled the 2007 lawsuit due to legal technicalities and because more than three years had passed since the designation of Special Communities in Guaynabo. Due to the possibility of this case persisting, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and six Special

²⁴ Act 81 of 1991, the Autonomous Municipalities Act, granted municipal governments with the power of eminent domain. In 2004, however, multiple Special Communities across the island lobbied for the passage of Act 232, which amended article 4 of Act 1 of 2001 and largely limited a municipal government's power to expropriate.

Communities in Guaynabo, which were two different parties in the case, presented various petitions in 2008 to dismiss the lawsuit. The petitions were successful. The complex nature of judicial cases, with parties drawing on multiple resources to defend their position, caused the process to last nearly three years, until the Court of First Instance dismissed the case on December 1st, 2010. However, Guaynabo's municipal government appealed the decision on June 16th, 2011, and Puerto Rico's Appellate Court subsequently ordered the continuation of the case and the holding of a hearing. In sum, Guaynabo's municipal government exhausted all legal resources in two levels of courts in Puerto Rico to try and prevail in the removal of residents by judicial means. Guaynabo's municipal government's determination to pursue this court case even though lower courts of law dismissed the case in 2010 reflects sustained pressure on reducing the rights of residents of Special Communities in Guaynabo. The time between 2007 and 2011 represents a critical period of uncertainty for Los Filtros residents due to these legal proceedings. Additionally, they saw next to their homes the completion of the public housing development's first phase. The threat of being displaced felt real and present.

Four years after Puerto Rico's Appellate Court ordered the continuation of the case, the Court of First Instance held a trial on March 18th, 2015, where O'Neill advanced additional claims to diminish the power of Special Communities. This time he argued that the OCE did not consult him prior to the appointment of Special Communities in Guaynabo. The court determined that "only in the absence of such a consultation, the municipality could have suffered damage" and found that consultation did not happen ("Municipio de Guaynabo," 2016, p. 4). This judicial case depicts a scenario where the state seemingly disregards the validity of the legally pre-established criteria for informalized communities to be labelled as "Special" because of pressure from a municipal government. In other words, the persistence and categorization of

these communities as “Special” would only be valid with the municipio mayor’s permission and not because they met the requirements established by the OCE. Under such circumstances, the mayor’s imaginative geographies about Guaynabo would restrict these Special Communities designations to who the mayor thought belonged and did not belong in the municipio.

Additionally, the court’s role in determining whether the Guaynabo’s municipal government’s budget suffered from Act 1’s legislation objectifies Special Communities as impediments to the municipio’s financial goals and dehumanizes the lives of people who live in these places. Given these factors, it is not surprising that residents of Los Filtros expressed concern about their longevity in the community. They were particularly tired of O’Neill’s persecution, as they called it, and responded with statements as, “I mean, I don’t tell O’Neill how he should live, where he should live, and under what conditions he should live” (Juan, *interview*, June 15, 2021).

Community members’ distress emerged from fearing this mayor and what he could do with his political power.

During 2015’s court hearings, testifiers and informants revealed critical information about events that occurred in the early 2000s, which proved O’Neill’s participation in the process of identifying communities in Guaynabo that qualified to be part of the Special Communities Program. For instance, Ricardo Vaquer-Castrodad, the adviser of the Puerto Rican Commission for Housing and Municipal Affairs from January-July 2001, shared a “Report on Special Communities of the Municipio of Guaynabo,” which he wrote after meeting with O’Neill on March 22, 2001. This report included a list of six Special Communities (Amelia, Camarones, Corea, Juan Domingo, Sabana, and Vietnam) in Guaynabo to specify their main needs, primarily with regards to inadequate housing and infrastructure (See Appendix M). The report, presumably written with much of O’Neill’s input, made it clear that Guaynabo’s municipal government was

providing essential services to residents of the communities listed (“Municipio de Guaynabo”, 2016, p. 12). In general, the report emphasized O’Neill’s awareness of the needs of Guaynabo’s communities and his commitment to addressing them, such that the OCE’s intervention was unnecessary. For example, it mentioned specific cases of communities like Vietnam, where “the mayor states that he is working on a project to relocate these residents because it is a flood area” and “Los Filtros, which consists of about 140 homes [and] is being evaluated for relocation for being in an area susceptible to landslides” (“Municipio de Guaynabo,” 2016, p. 13). As this quote demonstrates, by the time Vaquer-Castrodad wrote the report, O’Neill had already planned to relocate resident families of Los Filtros. While he identified some communities in Guaynabo that met the requirements of Act 1 to be designated as a “Special Community,” he did not include Los Filtros on the list, even though it fit the criteria and was ultimately listed as a “Special Community” in 2002. Instead, he noted plans to relocate the community. This action indicates that O’Neill actively worked to prevent Los Filtros from being a part of the OCE’s program so the municipal government would have greater ability to expropriate the community. The report from Vaquer-Castrodad depicts the possibility for displacement for Los Filtros while showing that O’Neill planned the elimination of the community from the beginning of the 2000s by discarding any possibilities for investment in its renewal.

Testifiers also recalled during the 2015 trial an OCE meeting from May 27th, 2004, where “the mayor said that regardless of what community leaders did, he would continue with the second phase of Jardines de Los Filtros, which consisted of five phases, and which entailed expropriation” (“Municipio de Guaynabo,” 2016, p. 10). The amount of evidence presented during this trial demonstrated that O’Neill had been exerting displacement pressure on Los

Filtros since the start of the 2000s decade and that, counter to the allegations of the municipal government, O'Neill was consulted on matters of Special Communities in Guaynabo.

Despite all this evidence, on June 8th, 2015, the Court of First Instance ruled in favor of the Guaynabo municipal government and found that the designation of nine Special Communities in the municipio had been illegal ("Municipio de Guaynabo," 2016, p. 16). According to one of Los Filtros' residents who participated in the court hearings, the judge who ruled in favor of Guaynabo's municipal government was politically involved in O'Neill's administration, which influenced his biased decision. In fact, as the Appellate Court ordered the continuation of judicial proceedings in 2011, this judge tried to refrain from his role to attend the case precisely due to his connections to O'Neill but was unable to do so. The Court of First Instance's decision, possibly influenced by bribery, made Special Communities completely defenseless in the face of expropriation. Such a decision was the ultimate representation of the power imbalance between Guaynabo's municipal government led by O'Neill and residents of informalized communities like Los Filtros. O'Neill clearly demonstrated that informalized community residents' imaginative geographies about their own space were not valuable and that their resistance and active mobilization were insufficient to challenge his neoliberal spatial desires for land in the city.

The potential of losing their homes increasingly materialized for residents of Special Communities. For instance, one of the residents in *barrio* Vietnam expressed a general feeling of disappointment and discouragement among neighbors after the court's decision to void the designations of Special Communities in Guaynabo. She commented, "The persecution has already begun, this morning out the municipio's staff were already out there offering money to expropriate" (Aida Luz González, as in Parés-Arroyo, 2015, para. 2). The instantaneity of

expropriation efforts in Vietnam right after its designation as “Special Community” became null shows how aggressive and serious Guaynabo’s municipal government was in their intention to eliminate informalized communities. Marga Parés-Arroyo (2015) also highlighted that around 200 families from Vietnam and surrounding communities had already been expropriated, under dubious legal conditions, even though Vietnam was designated as a “Special Community” (para. 4). To see tangible actions of expropriation in another community less than 24 hours after the Court’s decision exacerbated the fear of displacement in Los Filtros.

Though Guaynabo’s Special Communities vulnerability to expropriation heightened due to the Court of First Instance’s ruling, it only took one month for the case to return to the courts. On July 24th, 2015, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico appealed the decision, and the Court of First Instance revoked its ruling in 2016. The Court of First Instance revoked its ruling since it found that, indeed, “the Mayor participated in the process of identifying the ‘Special Communities’ in his municipio for the purposes of Act 1-2001, that he appointed a liaison officer for the coordination of the efforts of the municipio of Guaynabo with the Advisory Council, [and] that he knew about the ‘Special Communities’ list and reported on the particular situations and pending projects” (“Municipio de Guaynabo,” 2016, p. 34). Furthermore, O’Neill recognized in his testimony the difference between the identifying and designating, which according to Act 1, mayors only participate in the process of identifying communities that meet the requirements, but it is Puerto Rico’s executive branch which designates Special Communities in collaboration with the OCE (“Municipio de Guaynabo,” 2016, p. 34). The Court of First Instance’s latest decision reveals that O’Neill was almost certainly aware that his claims about not having been consulted prior to the designation of Special Communities in Guaynabo were false. Still, he exercised his political power in judicial proceedings to pressure residents to a greater extent.

Knowing that place attachment was driving so much grassroots resistance, he challenged Act 1's legislation and for many years kept trying to illegalize the right for informalized communities to stay.

In total, the case of Guaynabo's municipal government challenging the Special Communities legislation in Court lasted almost a decade. Within that span of time, O'Neill's actions had consequences for Los Filtros residents. The sustained effort to revoke Los Filtros' designation as a "Special Community," and, at the same time, the tenuous legal protection against expropriation provoked a liminality to their sense of ownership and sense of place. By engaging in judicial proceedings for many years, Guaynabo's municipal government sought to make land expropriation legal so that they could displace dozens of families. Likewise, the long-lasting characteristic of these processes reflect how negligent governmental agencies were in order to generate a feeling of disposability for communities in Guaynabo, and Los Filtros, specifically. There was no governmental support for community development projects during this time.

Ramifications for Informalized Communities in Puerto Rico

Los Filtros residents underscored the domino effect that taking an expropriation issue to the judicial level could represent. For instance, Juan signaled, "The biggest problem with this [is] that it could open a void and others would take advantage. Then what would the next community to disappear be, who will be the next mayor to sue?" (López-Alicea, 2007, para. 9). Juan's concern reflects that there was genuine fear from what Guaynabo's municipal government's power could have incited in other municipios if the judicial case progressed. In fact, a number of news articles from the time when the municipal government advanced court proceedings

highlighted the stories of communities in Guayanabo, such as Juan Domingo, Mainé, and Vietnam, and outside of Guayanabo, such as Villa Caridad, where municipal governments were relocating dozens of families through expropriation (“Reubican a grupo,” 2008; López-Alicea, 2010; Suárez-Torres, 2013) (See Appendix N). In Villa Caridad, as Keila López-Alicea (2010, para. 7) points out, Carolina’s municipal government bought 20 family homes using funding that the OCE designated for infrastructural upgrades in the community. This example illustrates the conflict between municipal governments and the state government’s community-based planning program, primarily around the use of funds and to what ends. Whereas municipal governments such as Guayanabo’s challenged the validity of certain communities’ designation as “Special” in state courts, they also disrupted the mechanisms and funding for community development and faced no material consequences for misusing the OCE’s budget for infrastructural renovations. Such issues did not hold as much importance as the municipal governments’ concerns did for judicial processes to follow through. These tensions not only show municipal governments’ goals for deciding the future of informalized communities without acknowledging their right to community groundwork, but also they point out that acts of disempowerment by virtue of judicial processes disproportionately affected residents of Special Communities.

Enormous financial challenges within the OCE further exacerbated Special Communities’ fragility in the face of expropriation threats. The Office’s weakening due to lack of funding from the central government not only meant the end of economic investment projects in informalized communities, but also it signified the potential elimination of legalized protection for Special Communities against expropriation. Some residents of communities prone to expropriation at the time voiced this concern. “I do not want to think that in the face of the OCE’s crisis and immobility, the detractors of Act 1 [of 2001] are thinking of using the case of

the municipio of Guaynabo to advance the weakening of the OCE and to finally eliminate the program”, said Wilfredo López, a spokesperson from a “Special Community” in the municipio of Aguas Buenas (Wilfredo López, as cited in López-Alicea, 2007, para. 9). López’s conjecture reveals the extent of Guaynabo’s municipal government’s power. According to him, legislators and lobbyists who were working to derogate Act 1 of 2001 could have taken advantage of the fact that municipal officials in Guaynabo were succeeding at expropriating families to demonstrate the OCE’s inefficiency and further disinvest in informalized communities.

Overall, O’Neill’s dispute against Special Communities revealed a foundational disbelief in the importance and effect of informalized communities’ self-empowerment. Even when Los Filtros residents were able to access outside support and made a plan for revitalizing their community, Guaynabo’s municipal government ignored their contributions and place-based knowledge. When I asked Juan about the term “development” and community investment in Special Communities, he emphasized the importance of community-led democratic processes that do not include expropriation:

Development when it is inclusive, when everyone is in the discussion, we had [that]. We still have plans to develop our community, without anyone leaving. We did it because the [University of Puerto Rico’s] School of Architecture made us some plans to develop the community... [with] electricity, plumbing, architecture, everything. And right here [at the community center,] we had a press conference where we opened all the plans on a board to show the mayor of Guaynabo that we had the opportunity and we also had the right to present a proposal different from the one he wanted, which was none because he never showed it to us. We wanted to counteract, not [only] with protest, but with proposal (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

I asked Juan what happened to the architectural plans, and he responded, “Those plans, I kept them. I have to look for them. The mayor never wanted to see them. We gave them to our representative Antonio Soto ... I do not know if he gave them to him or not, if he gave him a copy and he saw them, but I do not know what he did with them. Those plans, well, they died”

(*interview*, June 15, 2021). After expressing such shame because the community's plans did not prompt any positive changes, Juan emphasized that the designs for revitalization were flexible, dynamic, and open to discussion. He claimed, "they were not set in stone either. They were subject to change. But we wanted a discussion to see if he reacted, but there was no reaction because it was not in his plans to react to anything that would leave us here" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). O'Neill did not even recognize Los Filtros' community members as worthy of a dialogue or conversation. He effectively invisibilized them and ensured these great plans would fail through his disregard. His imaginative geographies of Guaynabo as a wealth icon were the strong impulse to carry out efforts that would homogenize the municipio's population. As I argue in this chapter, Los Filtros faced the pressure from a municipal government that took extreme measures to displace them, principally through sustaining a judicial case that threatened the community for several years and building public housing next to the community. Instead of considering Los Filtros residents' input for the improvement of their residential space, O'Neill proceeded to complete the first phase of Jardines de Los Filtros to offer Los Filtros community members a space in public housing.

Jardines de los Filtros: Relocation as the Plan for (Im)Mobility

Jardines de los Filtros is a public housing development consisting of two three-story buildings, walk-up style, located at the bottom of Los Filtros' hill (see Appendix C and Appendix O). Its first construction phase concluded in 2007, when approximately 35 families from Los Filtros moved to the newly installed apartments. Because people's connections and perceptions of "place" are never constant, Jardines de Los Filtros presented different concerns for community members in Los Filtros. This section particularly addresses ownership,

(in)mobility, and community disintegration as some of the factors that made the public housing development in Los Filtros such a contested imposition and another example of an expropriation threat.

Given the different living situations of Los Filtros residents, their perceptions of public housing were diverse. Perhaps the 35 families that moved to Jardines de Los Filtros were motivated to sell their homes as they saw the possibility for a higher quality of life and safer housing conditions in public housing. However, the selling process was ambiguous. For example, Aida moved to Jardines de Los Filtros in 2017 and claimed that Guaynabo's municipal government did not value her property by taking the entire land plot into consideration. Instead, they only "paid her" for the house. Then, she clarified, "I wasn't paid. The house was valued in \$45,000 and that was deposited to this apartment's mortgage payment" (*interview*, June 18, 2021). Norma further explained the expropriation logistics:

What he [O'Neill] buys from you is the house. For him, it is free because what he pays you for is the house, he does not pay you for the land. Even if you have your property title. He does not pay you for the plots, he pays you for the house's quality. If your house is made of wood and is breaking down, it will not go up to \$30,000 or \$40,000... So then, you give them that as a payment to the apartments that he made. For ten years you cannot negotiate that apartment (*interview*, June 14, 2021).

Solely paying Los Filtros residents for their houses, as opposed to paying for entire properties, is a tool to further disenfranchise community members. Indeed, if Los Filtros residents were gated community residents and sold their homes in the private market, the buyer would have to pay full price for the entirety of the property. The municipal government takes advantage of the financial precarity of Los Filtros community members and pays a sum that might feel significant in the moment yet does not provide stability in the long term. Juan also spoke to these points as he recalled, "for a person who has no money, \$12,000 is a lot of money, but in the market, it [a house and land] is worth much more" (as quoted in Rosario, 2010, para. 7). Juan highlighted the

injustices of a municipal government that offers less than \$20,000 dollars to residents of informalized communities and low-income residents' situation of economic precarity, which obligates them to accept such an underpriced payment for their homes.

Moreover, the money offered for a house does not fully cover the cost of an apartment in the public housing complex. As Norma explained, in order to gain title of the apartment residents had to stay in place for at least a decade, which constrains community members' residential choices. These dynamics suggest a state-based paternalistic and monetary approach to housing that disregards the importance of people-place relationships. Put differently, the process of expropriating families in Los Filtros and moving them to public housing reflects Guaynabo's municipal government's disregard for places as sites filled with emotional, psychological, and social meaning.

Among other factors, the majority of Los Filtros residents' rejection to public housing as an alternative for the development of their community centered upon understandings of home ownership. For instance, Laura stated, "It was because of us having the title deed that O'Neill could not get us out. That was ours. So, we continued in the fight [since] he cannot take away the property title from a person to send them to section 8 or send them to public housing. Because he is taking away something that is from a person to send them somewhere where they have nothing" (*interview*, June 5, 2021). Laura highlighted how unfair it is for Los Filtros residents that own a home to give it up and move to an apartment that they do not own. This resembles other interviewees' concerns, which emphasized their parents' sacrifice in building and constantly upgrading their homes and which hoped to honor such an effort by rejecting expropriation. Roberto shared similar thoughts as he reiterated that if Guaynabo's municipal government wanted to expropriate his home, they would have to resort to violence because he

“was not going to leave” (Roberto, *interview*, June 15, 2021). Immediately, he added, “Look, municipios are the worst thing there is. I’m going to tell you one thing, they tell you ‘we are going to get you out of here, we are going to give you a house’ ... they put them in a house for section 8 and one is living at least 6 or 7 years there, and when you come to see, they kick them away with everything” (Roberto, *interview*, June 15, 2021). Roberto’s argument against the municipal government giving residents the option to relocate and rent a home by section 8 is founded on the lack of secure housing. By “kick them away with everything,” he refers to lenders whose landlords displace them by not renewing their contracts. Such families have to take all of their belongings and face great instability while searching for a new home. Thus, many community members in Los Filtros prefer to fight for the right to remain because they legally own their land and homes.

For the 70% of Los Filtros residents who have a property title, the public housing alternative signified giving up one’s house in order to rent an apartment for an extended time before regaining any type of property title. Such a transition between owning to long-term renting also reflects O’Neill’s role in furthering precarity in Los Filtros as expropriation diminishes the chances for building generational wealth through home ownership. In Puerto Rico, as well as in the United States, individuals perceive and often experience owning a home as essential to such creation of financial opportunity. Guaynabo’s municipal government urban planner Blanca, for instance, spoke about the reasons why officials like former Mayor Alejandro “Junior” Cruz would grant longtime residents of informalized communities their property titles. Even though the event in which he gave 70% of Los Filtros’ residents property titles was a politically motivated activity, it could have been interpreted as a generous motive in response to residents’ economic instability. Thus, Blanca noted,

Another reason is that people, *bendito [with pity]*, they live 30 years in those houses... Often times, so that ... people are able to expand the house, are able to inherit them. There are people who die and their children, well, they have no [other] way to have their little house ... You know, that really everyone, us Puerto Ricans, in our idiosyncrasy, like to have our own house (*interview*, Sept. 24, 2021).

As Blanca remarked, having a property title allows residents in economically marginalized communities to upgrade their homes and have them as significant inheritance. While owning a home has become almost part of the Puerto Rican culture in the island, O'Neill took away such rights and imposed a public housing option with rather insecure ownership status upon Los Filtros residents.

Many residents in Los Filtros also reject the idea of living in public housing due to its “carceral-style” characteristics. For instance, Aida said, “But hey, where I am... they are good neighbors born and raised with me, but this is like living in a desert... each person in their own corner. This is like living in the United States” (*interview*, June 18, 2021). Although Aida emphasized her neighbors’ kindness in Jardines de Los Filtros, she did not deny the isolation feeling that such public housing produces and compares it to the individualistic culture in the United States. Juan also referred to the restrictive nature of public housing by noting,

Those who left regretted it... That remorse is genuine, but there are others who keep it quiet because they left thinking about the promised land. And they put them in a ghetto. Where they live, they have to enter through the same door, they cannot sow anything, they cannot expand the family, where everything is very rigorous, they cannot change anything. Versus here, that right now we sit here or over there wherever we want, we talk... the smells of food, the scents. Not over there, over there, well, there are some restrictions, and it is a very big cultural life change (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Juan remarked on the spatial limitations that public housing imposes on its residents. He points out the controlled lifestyle that Jardines de Los Filtros entails, which ascribes to the reality of carceral geographies. Geographer Rashad Shabazz (2009) specifically delves into the resemblance between housing projects and prisons and argues that the use of carceral techniques,

forms, and devices in residential and working spaces shape the living of Black and low-income populations. This argument is particularly linked to the role of architecture and surveillance features in limiting people's mobility. Thus, governments that build public housing projects for the lower income demographic produce container-like spaces where they exercise great control over residents' freedom. Shabazz's ideas explain much of Los Filtros residents' reaction to the construction of a public housing building next to their homes and Guaynabo's municipal government intention to expropriate families' homes and have them move to walk-ups. Whereas former Mayor O'Neill sought to sell the idea of social development, many community members in Los Filtros were dissuaded by the idea of limited mobility and increased surveillance.

Residents of gated communities adjacent to Los Filtros also identified the idea of relocation to public housing as unreasonable. For example, Ana argues,

to take them all out like that to a cement public housing, when these people have grown up in another environment, it does not seem fair to me either, because that is their land, and as long as there is a group that resists, I believe that land is theirs ... I mean, even if they do not have deeds, due to the years they have been there, they have already acquired rights, [so] that you cannot simply get them out. Besides that, look, they do not bother (Ana, *interview*, June 12, 2021).

Notably, Ana shares an opinion about justice with residents of Los Filtros who claim that it is only fair for Guaynabo's municipal government to allow them to stay. She recognizes factors such as affection to place and residential duration as part of the logic to oppose expropriation efforts. She also claims that Los Filtros' residents cause no trouble to neighboring communities like hers. There is an implicit notion along with this statement that displacing community members of Los Filtros would be just if, alternatively, they displayed different behavior. Diana, another resident of a gated community nearby Los Filtros, implied a similar idea when I asked her about Guaynabo's expropriation efforts. She said, "Look, those are communities established there for many years ... I am one of those who thinks there are two sides to everything ... Most

of them are very good, hard-working, good people. Well, and in recent years a little bit of another population has crept in there that is not the most desirable. But that happens everywhere, that has nothing to do with it being x or y” (*interview*, June 13, 2021).

These two quotes from Ana and Diana reflect a common understanding among residents of gated communities that letting Los Filtros residents stay or forcing them to leave largely depends on “the type of population” that lives in Los Filtros. While they underscore the importance of factors such as residence duration and place attachment, there is an underlying assumption that Los Filtros residents could “belong” to public housing. This way, Los Filtros residents become subjects of discussion in a situation where determining their right to place is strongly tied to understandings of where they “belong,” not to what they wish for or where they want to live.

Finally, it is crucial to distinguish between O’Neill’s purpose for upward mobility and the reality of Los Filtros community members. In the 1950s, public housing acquired popularity in Puerto Rico as spaces where people from *arrabales* could move as a way of transitioning to homeownership. In fact, “Puerto Rican policy makers intentionally placed public housing developments next to well-off communities. The rationale was that the rich would serve as aspirational role models for upwardly mobile experiences” (Dinzey-Flores, 2017, p. 245). Nevertheless, the role of public housing on the island is no longer the same. This housing style is now stigmatized and criminalized so that the “upward mobility” narrative has disappeared. As Fernández-Arrigoitia (2014) contends, “the buildings were now depicted not as a promise of modernity,” but as “cement slums” and as “scenes of abandonment, dirt and apathy” (p. 177). Arguably, O’Neill’s public narrative for relocating Los Filtros residents to public housing is a relic of the past. It imitated the central government’s mobility ideology from the 1950s whereas

the present context in Guaynabo and Puerto Rico is very different. Critically, offering apartments to Los Filtros residents was not meant to be a temporary solution. The bulk of Los Filtros' population is aged, which means that they would move to Jardines de los Filtros and stay for the duration of their lives.

It is important to note that, despite these restrictive characteristics of the public housing development, this option was likely a better option for several families in Los Filtros whose housing infrastructure was fragile and not in optimal conditions. However, public housing as an alternative was still a stigma and an imposition of Guaynabo's municipal government. As I stated earlier in the chapter, the implementation of a public housing development clearly denotes municipal officials' indifference to Los Filtros community members' residential form and, thus, their disregard to any proposal for community improvement in place that the community designed. Likewise, the development of Jardines de Los Filtros created significant divisions within the community. Seen as a "divide and conquer" strategy, O'Neill successfully shifted Los Filtros residents focus from criticizing his power over deciding the community's future to noticing micro-scale issues such as the disruption of community bonds. Norma specifically addressed this impact:

Well, it would be more than unfortunate because it is a place where you grew up. Those who formed their family, raised it there, living, others left, but it is sad, right, that as a community we have already disintegrated. Ever since those who left went down there to those apartments, it is no longer the same. Because already those on the other side think they are more than us despite having been born and raised there and knowing each other for a long time. As if they are from high class (*interview*, June 14, 2021).

Norma stressed that Jardines de Los Filtros had consequences for social division within the community despite an element of residential proximity. She showed another side of public housing, which unlike negative connotations about the apartments' restrictiveness, portrays

Jardines de Los Filtros as superior housing to the infrastructurally debilitated homes in the community. Nonetheless, another resident in Los Filtros expressed her concern about the elderly who moved to Jardines de Los Filtros. As she interestingly pointed out that most of the older population that left their homes to live in public housing have passed away and those who did not move are still alive, she claimed, “they died from grief, I think” (*Field notes*, January 22, 2022). This resident hinted at what could have been one of the largest effects from disruption of place for community members in Los Filtros, especially those who had been living there for their entire lives and were strongly attached to the community.

The construction of public housing in Los Filtros and relocation of several families embodies a deep disruption to residents’ place. Similar to how the elimination of shops that were important to the community were a source of “root shock” (Fullilove, 2016, p. 14), the removal of some residents away from Los Filtros to public housing generated unsettling emotions related to separation distress. It reveals Guaynabo’s municipal government’s lack of respect for Los Filtros residents’ homeownership, their perception of space in the community as inhabitable, their disregard of the community’s input and participatory actions, and the imposition of restrictive spatial forms. The local government in Guaynabo not only took away the homes of Los Filtros residents who moved to Jardines de Los Filtros, but also it restricted them to a confined apartment building, physically, socially, and ideologically. Further, interviewees stress the feeling of a decomposing community, where the separation of neighbors due to the public housing project has led to disintegration. In sum, Jardines de los Filtros has been a potent element contributing to the menacing threat of expropriation in Los Filtros.

Conclusion

Los Filtros residents first heard about former Mayor O'Neill's intention to expropriate their land in 2001. Since that year, Los Filtros was among a few communities in Guaynabo for which O'Neill had discarded the possibility of future community development. Instead, he insisted that their housing conditions were unsafe and vulnerable in the face of natural hazards. For him, there was no possibility, whatsoever, of life in Los Filtros without the relocation of families. However, for Los Filtros residents, permitting expropriation was not an option. Therefore, community members of Los Filtros built up their opposition to O'Neill's expropriation efforts for 15 years. During this time, the political, economic, social, and psychological pressure that Guaynabo's municipal government and outsiders put on Los Filtros consisted of multiple forms of threat that constantly symbolized the potential disruption of place.

At the same time, as Los Filtros community members started materializing their activism with the help of national legislation for the protection of Special Communities, the construction of high-end apartment buildings and gated communities began filling up the space surrounding Los Filtros. This building boom not only emphasized the reality of high exchange values in the area, but also it meant a steady decrease in available space for housing development in Guaynabo's urbanized area. Moreover, Guaynabo's municipal government growth-driven agenda actively supported the continuation of luxury housing construction while also attempting to homogenize the population by class. O'Neill materialized such a preference for "modern" urban forms as he openly attacked the Special Communities program of 2001 and tried to repeal its legislation for ten consecutive years. Both the prolonged duration of judicial proceedings and

the actual relocation of families in Special Communities of Guaynabo like Vietnam demonstrated the force of the threats to expropriate Los Filtros.

The municipal government further carried out strong expropriation efforts with the construction of Jardines de los Filtros. The establishment of public housing next to Los Filtros perfectly represented O'Neill's powerful efforts to dismantle the community. In reality, a public housing project in Los Filtros not only rejected participatory community processes, but also it went against residents' proposal for renovating their space. An action with which O'Neill sought to promise social mobility caused spatial immobility instead. For that matter, many residents in Los Filtros rejected the municipal government's project and refused to sell their homes.

Guaynabo's municipal government's opposition to informalized communities took shape in tangible efforts to displace its residents. Through sustaining judicial proceedings for the span of a decade and dictating spatial order by constructing public housing in Los Filtros, it strongly threatened Los Filtros residents with losing their right to place. Following the argument from this chapter, I turn to analyzing Los Filtros residents' resistance to expropriation in the next chapter. By juxtaposing Guaynabo's municipal government's efforts to expropriate Los Filtros with community members' impetus to fight back, I analyze the complexity of this contestation over place.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOS FILTROS' LUCHA: ATTACHED TO PLACE, ATTACHED TO JUSTICE

In previous chapters, I underscored Los Filtros' origins and informalization as shaped by a socio-spatial context that exacerbates its vulnerability to expropriation. Using imaginative geographies as a geographic tool of analysis, I also claimed that Guaynabo's municipal government and former Mayor Hector O'Neill actively enforced measures to homogenize the municipio by class, thus deepening low-income communities' marginalization. Los Filtros residents were clear about these processes and aware of the inequalities entrenched with their residential space as well as the disenfranchisement of Special Communities in Guaynabo. Thus, the community's resistance involved actions that were equally powerful to counter those of the municipio in order to create just solutions. Los Filtros community members embarked on a social movement to reassert their right to stay and to participate in the development of their own community.

This chapter addresses my third research question by using the concepts of place attachment, right to the city, and equitable development as guiding principles. Drawing on interviewees' accounts about the long-sustained *lucha* [fight], I argue that Los Filtros residents' attachment to place motivated significant opposition to expropriation wherein they claimed their collective power to participate in urban planning. This is particularly notable within a broader context where politicians, private developers, and affluent Guaynabeños assume excessive power to exercise their rights to the city. Hence, in addition to the central claim against expropriation, Los Filtros' *lucha* was about advocating for more inclusive and place-attuned decision-making processes in the city.

To situate my analysis of these relationships, I first offer a few definitions. According to David Harvey (2012), the right to the city entails what people's relationship with others and the environment should look like as well as what different actors value and treasure about their spatialized livelihoods. In recognition of the power imbalances existing between city government actors and city dwellers, the right to the city denotes the right to participate in the political sphere of urbanization and assert one's power in "challenging the controlling forces of homogenization, fragmentation, and uneven development imposed by the state, the market, and the bureaucracy" (Soja, 2010, p. 99). Harvey's (2012) political-economic framework for the right to the city, which emphasizes people's ability to administrate the city's surplus, is tied to the goals for equitable development as well. Efforts to enact equitable development subsequently often become a means for claiming the right to the city. Equitable development is the availability of optimal life conditions for all residents in a given neighborhood, thus requiring "public and private investments, programs, and policies" to meet these needs (Curren et al., 2015, p. 5). From a racial justice perspective, Ryan Curren, Nora Liu, and Dwayne Marsh (2015) describe achieving equitable development as expanding people of color's capabilities to "strengthen their communities and determine their own future and that of their neighborhoods" (p. 5). Thus, as they argue, equitable development first and foremost requires preventing displacement in marginalized neighborhoods. Beyond preventing displacement, equitable development is successful when "all people of color experience the beneficial outcomes from growth as whites do" (Curren et al., 2015, p. 11). Therefore, striving for equitable development as a way of claiming one's right to the city involves promoting democratic processes so that a city's economic growth benefits more than an elite few.

The third key concept in this chapter is place attachment, which refers to an emotional bond between people and place and a response to place disruption that enables community mobilization. Place attachment's significance lies in its power to stimulate activism. Through the acknowledgement and use of such a power and the subsequent transforming of place attachments into group mobilization, communities actually benefit from their affective bond to place (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014, p. 71). Furthermore, place attachment's importance is reflected in David Seamon's acknowledgment that "planning and design most appropriate for a place is most probable if generated by individuals who are attached to and care for the place they hope to make better" (2014, p. 19). In short, place attachment pays attention to the positive outcomes that can result from profound feelings of care for a place even though it is a concept that is commonly taken for granted.

Driven by deep sentiments of attachment to place, Los Filtros community members employed a series of strategies to fight their own displacement and to collectively defend other communities' right to the city. These strategies include establishing a solid community board, lobbying for amendments to the Special Communities Act and combatting bills that would derogate it, doing coalition-building work with other communities, mobilizing marches that directly targeted O'Neill, and defending space from further urbanization through tactics such as agreeing to co-manage an urban forest. Through these efforts, Los Filtros community members emphasized that residents of economically marginalized communities should be able to receive the necessary support to resist displacement forces and outsiders should recognize them as the most capable of planning for their own communities' development. Through catalyzing their place attachment, Los Filtros community members built a sense of agency and potential for the community to equitably develop its own environment and future. Additionally, the residents of

Los Filtros fostered a sense of unity and solidarity as they transformed a local effort into an island-wide opposition movement.

For the rest of the chapter, I will examine these different activist strategies to signal how Los Filtros residents' place attachment was effectively translated into action. To expand the basis of my analysis on place attachment, I now turn to depictions of the multiple forms of place attachment evident in the community. Subsequently, I examine the timeline of efforts and events that comprised Los Filtros residents' long-standing *lucha* as I underscore its importance in claiming the right to the city and promoting unity and equitable development among many marginalized *barrios* in Puerto Rico.

Place Attachment in Los Filtros

Although place attachment as a concept holds incredible significance and seems straightforward, multiple factors play a role in sentimental relationships between people and place. To draw connections between Los Filtros residents' place attachments and their desire to stay and fight for the right to stay, I outlined several factors connected to place attachment, namely residential duration, memory, and mobility, in Chapter One's conceptual framework. These notions illuminate the analysis for this chapter. Not only in the data I gathered from my research, but all throughout archived press articles that narrate Los Filtros' history, residents' autobiographical rootedness stands out as one essential reason to defend their place. The degree of importance given to past personal and collective histories in place cements attachment. In this section, I shed light on the significance of emotional ties between community members and Los Filtros to better understand their impulse to defend their place.

Two preconditions for autobiographical rootedness are length of residency and place-based memories, which define Los Filtros residents' attachment to their community. As Lewicka (2014) explains, living in a place for a long period of time helps to reproduce memories "as 'locus' or as 'place-ballet' routines" to which people get used to and incorporate into their lives and personal identities (p. 52). Therefore, feelings of belonging and a desire to stay close to one's place stem from the abundance of memories, especially from one's childhood or youth, that build up to the creation of place identity and further attachment (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Knez, 2006, as quoted in Lewicka, 2014, p. 53). Los Filtros residents' stories and emphasis on past experiences in their community directly reflect such a relationship. Norma and Aida particularly referred to childhood memories when I asked about the relevance of the AAA's water filtration plant to the community. Norma joyfully recalled, "they threw us parties up there next to the plant ... it was super cool during that time; we threw a party out of anything [laughs]" (*interview*, June 14, 2021). Norma explained that there was a closer connection between Los Filtros community members and affluent landowners who lived around Los Filtros in the 1960s than nowadays to the extent that wealthier neighbors would throw parties in the water filtration plant for the youth in Los Filtros. She also mentioned her own friends and neighbors who, she recalls, fostered a community environment where any small thing became a reason to celebrate.

Aida was also excited to expand on these stories towards the end of our conversation: "The walks they gave us to the aqueduct plant ... That was big for us, we bathed in the ponds ... We went... like around June of '98 more or less ... I brought a pot of spaghetti with meat. We took everything, we spent a whole day" (*interview*, June 18, 2021). Aida's deep cherishing of her memories with her neighbors in Los Filtros is reflected in the amount of detail that she wanted to offer as she spoke to me. Her memory of a specific day down to what food she cooked to share

with others reveals a sentiment of attachment to place that is rooted in excitement, in emotion about what life was like for people in Los Filtros a few decades ago.

The water plant as a special location kept coming up in relation to other memorable experiences in interviewees' accounts. Norma, for example, remembered with deep nostalgia, "When we were young, we also had marathons, we ran from where the court is, we went around up there to where the [water] plant is and came back" (*interview*, June 14, 2021). She added,

It was very cool, we had fairs, the last store [on the road] would do an [event] with old cars. The last one was on a Father's Day. They always did something on Father's Day. They would bring old cars... they threw cockfights. They always did activities there, and they even closed the street. And that is no longer seen. Since many people left, you no longer see that (*interview*, June 14, 2021).

In addition to reiterating how exciting community bonding events were and how much life they would bring to Los Filtros and the contrast to the present day, Norma also signaled what environmental psychologists call place disruption.

Disruptions to a place as a physical location take shape in a variety of forms. They mostly occur when places change as a result of displacement, revitalization, mobility, and other factors that threaten or interfere with relationships among people and with the environment (Alawadi, 2017). As Norma was not the only interviewee to mention the emigration of fellow residents to public housing or other places outside of Los Filtros, it is evident that relocation has had great repercussions in the continuation of community social bonding. This has a significant impact on the well-being of residents who bear such a disruption to place. Just as Los Filtros was no longer the same for people who moved to public housing and possibly encountered a more restrictive lifestyle, it was not the same for those who stayed and noticed the impacts of social disintegration.

As Robert Gifford and Leila Scannell (2014) argue, disruptive events to place include, “changes to place that are perceived threatening... potential separation... and actual separation” (p. 27). Los Filtros community members experienced all three. Throughout the span of a decade, residents in Los Filtros perceived changes in the neighborhood as streetside businesses relocated elsewhere, as they faced constant insecurity about their right to keep their homes, and as they experienced the effects of their neighbors’ relocation and physical distancing. These consecutive elements represent different types of person-place bond disruptions that all added to the production of separation distress. Even though most community members that I interviewed still reside in Los Filtros, the sense of nostalgia and detachment from the typical livelihood previously experienced in the community reflects separation distress.

There are two common responses to place disruption at the community level: collective action or acceptance/denial (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014). Los Filtros is a community that embarked on collective action rather than acceptance of the threats to their place even when social ties were being disrupted by the relocation of numerous families to public housing. As Lewicka (2014, p. 51) explains, place attachments build upon a sense of continuity where individuals strongly associate the present with the past and have hopeful expectations for the future continuation of their affective bond with a place. While community members’ strong sentiments of attachment are anchored in past experiences living in Los Filtros, the wish to return to that place of community bonds and vibrancy is ever-present. Besides, the visible abandonment in some areas of the community not only produces grief, but also a sense of hopelessness for the community’s future. For example, Aida spoke about her experience re-visiting the old Magnetic Observatory’s property and seeing its deterioration: “I went up recently when they cleaned it ... and I, you know, I was astonished because when I was a child, I never went up there, but I went

up to the aqueduct where one would go slide. I have that photo, that was the neighborhood's pool" (*interview*, June 18, 2021). It is clear that Aida's memories are vivid and that it was important for her to communicate the sentiment of sorrow about the community's conditions nowadays. Even though she had to move to Jardines de los Filtros against her will, she treasures memories that reflect her value of place identity as a reason to defend Los Filtros residents right to their place. For that reason, place attachment does not solely imply negative repercussions for grief and disruption. It has other connotations that relate to positive outcomes. Lewicka (2014) particularly highlights the importance of nostalgic autobiographical memories in "help[ing] to overcome spatial discontinuities" (p. 53). Essentially, place attachment becomes all the more powerful when it is translated into social action.

Just as the characteristics of the attachment figure are important particularities to place attachment (Gifford & Scannell, 2014), people have the power to change a place and adjust it to their needs. In fact, as I expressed in this chapter's introduction, those who are attached to and care for a place are likely to be the best producers of their own environment. This relationship pertains to place satisfaction as an indicator or measure of place attachment. As Seamon (2014) also points out, residents' affection towards their home environment, to an extent, requires that the place's features and characteristics "sustain and enhance everyday user needs as well as the ambience and character of the place" (p. 19). There are two parts to said statement, the importance of satisfying residents' needs and the importance of preserving a place's qualities. Arguably, Los Filtros community members' motivation to oppose expropriation involved both factors as they were aware of the challenges entrenched within the community's topography and they wished to preserve the natural environment that characterizes the neighborhood. Thus, their autobiographical memories were a precursor to organizing collective action that challenged the

Guaynabo municipal government's autocratic planning and sought to preserve the existing environment.

Francisco and Norma were two of many interviewees who expressed their love and gratitude for the characteristics of the natural environment in Los Filtros. Norma recalled, "Ah, nosotros nos metíamos por todos esos huecos, todo ese monte que había ahí antes de que hicieran urbanizaciones" (*interview*, June 14, 2021). This statement roughly translates into: "Oh, we would go into all those holes, through all the vegetation that was there before they built gated communities." Norma adds, "To get guavas, mangos, quenepas, ¿what did we not get from there? To fish... there were ravines ... we would go into the mountain and take yam, all those things. We even cooked inside the mountain and everything ... Oh yeah, that was truly, a good childhood" (*interview*, June 14, 2021). She named various fruits that she and her neighbors would gather and activities they would do when they were younger with great excitement and nostalgia about the past. Additionally, Francisco stressed the convenience of his residential space in present times as he pointed to his patio when we spoke about the area's vegetation. He commented, "I have all my animals there. I live well" (Francisco, *interview*, June 16, 2021).

In addition to showing their affection for the environment that surrounds them, Los Filtros community members realized the importance of sustaining their living needs and resisting a public housing alternative that would not replicate their home environment whatsoever. However, as I discussed in the two previous chapters, the unevenness of the terrain, infrastructural precarity, and other physical constraints, represent pressing challenges for Los Filtros' future and its residents' quotidian lives. Given those conditions of decay and other situations of environmental disaster susceptibility in other communities in Guaynabo, the municipal government is usually quick to pinpoint the lack of an alternative other than relocation

for residents in these communities. Los Filtros residents insist on claiming their right to the city, though. They know about the importance of community planning and believe in democratic processes where governmental authorities take their participation into consideration. Their knowledge about Los Filtros and emotional fondness to their place empowers them to produce their own space and strive for more just spatialities.

From Place Attachment to Collective Action

Autobiographical rootedness shapes Los Filtros residents' place attachment and strengthens their place identity, devotion to their place, interpersonal bonds, and hope for the future. Importantly, place attachment can produce both nostalgia and activism. Personal histories and past experiences in Los Filtros have contributed to a sense of spatial awareness of the community's disadvantage relative to the area's uneven development, the increasing privatization of land and development of upscale housing in their surroundings, the lack of investment in Los Filtros, and in turn, the need to produce more just geographies through grassroots participation. Building upon a series of positive outcomes from being attached to place, Los Filtros community members have built strong resistance to the forces of privatization and homogenization in Guaynabo that would lead to their displacement. Through efforts like lobbying, participating in public hearings, and organizing marches, Los Filtros residents have challenged Guaynabo municipal government's intentions across the span of two decades as they strive for equitable development and spatial justice.

Los Filtros' fight against the forces of expropriation is characterized by a complex timeline beginning in May of 2001 when thirteen residents formed the Comité Cívico de Los Filtros [Civic Committee of Los Filtros] (See Appendix P). According to some interviewees this

group had heard about O'Neill's intention to expropriate the community earlier that year and saw no other alternative than to come together as a community organization to oppose such efforts. During the summer of 2001, the Comité Cívico took on a number of tasks. They demanded the House Branch from Puerto Rico's Assembly begin an investigation to look into Guaynabo's municipal government's plans to expropriate and requested the OCE to consider evaluating Los Filtros and designating it a "Special Community" (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 3). Juan particularly remembered the fast-paced process to achieve such designation: "There were 436 [Special Communities] and this one was number 436. The last one in line. And it's funny. Because we were short of time, and we had to run to be included in the Special Communities program... Then I see the need to move fast and ask the OCE to do a socioeconomic study to see if we qualified to be included in the Special Communities program" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Los Filtros residents' reaction to the threat of expropriation was automatically followed by action. In the span of three months, they strengthened their unity as community members and had significant achievements that signaled the effect of potent community attachment. In the anticipation of a place disruption threat, Los Filtros residents' social interactions were not only a source of worry. They were the motivation to launch the *lucha*.

Members of Los Filtros' Comité Cívico engaged in discussions for advancing strategic plans for activism immediately after founding the group in 2001. A year later, Juan recalls going to a meeting in Juan Domingo and reaching out to Lawyer Myrta Morales-Cruz in search for assistance from the University of Puerto Rico's School of Law Legal Aid Clinic (2006, p. 2). The Comité was clearly active in mobilizing and identifying outside resources that could support their fight. This initial communication with Morales-Cruz led to lasting collaboration between Los Filtros' Comité Cívico and the Legal Aid Clinic, which was mainly composed of student-

lawyers. With the Legal Aid Clinic's support, Los Filtros residents prepared for public hearings they had scheduled during the Fall of 2002 (2006, p. 4). Moreover, Los Filtros residents not only took on the challenge of learning to write a presentation for a public hearing. In February of 2003, alongside two other communities in Guaynabo, Juan Domingo and Mainé, and one community in Caguas, Barriada Morales (see Appendix Q), Los Filtros' Comité Cívico formed the Coalición de Comunidades Unidas contra el Atropello y las Expropiaciones (CCUCA) [Coalition of Communities United against Expropriations and Abuse] (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 9). The CCUCA was focused on creating a law that would strengthen the Special Communities Act by preventing municipal governments from exercising their power of eminent domain.

In collaboration with student-lawyers from the Legal Aid Clinic, the CCUCA crafted Bill 3645, which proposed a change to Article 4 of the Special Communities Law to require the following: the holding of public hearings where the leaders of communities at stake would participate in the discussion and authorization of a Joint Resolution; the authorization of this Resolution by both legislative chambers; and the OCE's implementation of a consultation that obtains the endorsement of 75% of communities' residents before permitting land expropriation in Special Communities. Shortly after presenting this bill to Congress, the CCUCA initiated a lobbying campaign that entailed visiting 52 house representatives to present their proposal and seek their support (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 9). These visits to the Capitol lasted nearly six months until the CCUCA and the Legal Aid Clinic managed to have the legislative branch initiate a process of public hearings in July of 2003. Within just two years of establishing the Comité, Los Filtros residents had participated in numerous meetings with other communities at risk of expropriation, obtained legal assistance resources that were vital for their fight, created a large-scale coalition, written a bill to strengthen the Special Communities Act, and given presentations

in several public hearings held by the Legislative chambers. Their place attachment fueled a motivation to preserve Los Filtros and informalized spaces beyond their own. Los Filtros residents' emotional bonds to their community prompted significant activism to protect marginalized neighborhoods against expropriation.

Los Filtros community members' intense lobbying campaign also entailed street activism as they organized press conferences, multiple protests, and went to radio and television broadcasts to expand the reach of their voiced concerns and to advocate for the passage of Bill 3645 (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 9). In fact, interviewees were enthusiastic to share stories that relate to their social demonstrations. For example, Luis remembered a time when community members and other supporters marched a distance of 2.5 miles from Los Filtros to Guaynabo's City Hall to protest O'Neill's efforts to expropriate. "Peoples are the ones who push to put pressure ... And this, I am telling you, this was intense... the lucha, intense. We had a march here from the streetlight down there, walking all the way down to Guaynabo's City Hall when O'Neill was there, and there we went inside," he said (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Luis underscored the residents' power in pressuring municipal and state government actors to enact positive change as he referred to the magnitude of their marches. Laura added,

We went on and on and we went inside during Guaynabo's assembly. We picketed there, in the front. Even people from Guaynabo were afraid of him. A lot of people would come by and say, 'Hey, they will soon call the police. Go away because the police are beating people with the baton. Leave. Do not do that to that mayor, that mayor is bad.' And I was like, 'And you are going to leave ... because he is bad, you are going to let him mess you up? No no no, you have to protest.' And we continued the lucha on a picket line there. Never in history had anyone but the Los Filtros community done that (*interview*, June 5, 2021).

Laura's enthusiasm about the community's activism is striking. She remembered interacting with people who would warn them to discontinue their mobilization and proudly recalls her insistence about the importance of voicing one's concerns about expropriation. The activism empowered

her to believe in her community's agency and deepened her connections to her place. The protests were notable in Puerto Rican history as well; as Laura noted, few communities had stood up to the O'Neill administration in such an extensive and united way and put forth their own legislative solutions. Laura's place attachment, alongside many other residents in Los Filtros, involves both her emotional rootedness to Los Filtros and her feelings of belongingness stemming from the community's activism and collective devotion to place.

The Comité Cívico and other resident activists, along with the CCUCA, further took their *lucha* to the State Senate as they visited each and every senator's office to lobby for the amendment of the Special Communities Act through Bill 3645 (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 12). Even though two of the organizations with the greatest influence in the Legislative branch actively demonstrated against Bill 3645 (the Puerto Rico Mayors Federation and the Mayors Association), the Senate approved the bill in June 2004 and former Governor Sila María Calderón finally signed it into law in August of that same year (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 12). The bill became Act 232 of 2004. Juan fondly remembered this process and final achievement. He specifically offered his side of the story:

Several groups of us community leaders got together throughout this process to work on a project (Bill 3645) that would strengthen the law. They underestimated us, municipios underestimated us. And we continued for a year and a half working on the project... We lobbied at the Capitol, we spent a year and a half lobbying for that project. It is a gem that emerged from the communities, not from the any legislator's thoughts or anything like that. It was sitting down, putting the words together, words, meanings, well, a year and a half. And during Sila's last year, the project was approved in the House and Senate unanimously (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Juan emphasized the hard work that Los Filtros and other communities who were part of the CCUCA put into drafting a bill that would ensure their protection against expropriation. He suggests that outsiders often underestimate bottom-up strategies for protecting and revitalizing

places, which results in the undermining of community-based initiatives. However, Juan stresses what equitable development stands for: residents' right to have their vision for their own space and the ability to work towards such a goal. By noting that Act 232 was the result from his community's efforts in union and solidarity with other marginalized communities and not from the work of state representatives, Juan underscores the power of activism and resistance. The passing of Bill 3645 into Act 232 represents an enormous achievement for residents of informalized communities to assert their right to the city through the prevention of displacement.

Although Los Filtros' collective resistance is mostly characterized by their prominent protests, an 18-month long lobbying campaign for the passage of Bill 3645, and final accomplishments with Act 232 in 2004, the *lucha* had to continue given that "no law is set in stone" (Juan, *interview*, June 15, 2021). Within the span of two years, both mayors' organizations and former governor Anibal Acevedo Vilá (2005-2008) himself had proposed bills to derogate Act 232 in its entirety or in part (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 12). Hence, Los Filtros community members participated in additional public hearings to defend the Act. For instance, Juan remembers the night when the CCUCA entered the capitol on very short notice in order to hold meetings and advocate for the retracting of Bill 911. This Bill was advanced by former Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá's administration during his time in office (2005-2009) to fully eliminate the Special Communities Program while simultaneously repealing the laws that supported it. Juan recalled,

I [was] in St. Thomas and when I come [back], they call me from the legislature, and they tell me ... you have to do something quickly because they approved a project [bill], and the governor will sign it on Monday. That was on Saturday, imagine, I said 'what am I going to do?'

Juan described how the approval for Bill 911 that would diminish the legitimacy of Act 232 had quickly moved through the legislature. Thus, in an effort to prevent the signing of this bill into

law, Juan jumped into action. He explained, “I start calling and calling people. The word was spread. Sunday at 10 am, we were at the capitol, and we went senator by senator, [asking] ‘why you voted for here and why you voted against there?’” (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Once again, Los Filtros community members promptly and strategically responded to counteract tangible efforts that threatened their community. To ensure that legislators would not convert Bill 911 into law, Juan quickly engaged other community leaders to undertake a different type of lobbying campaign. This time, residents of marginalized communities were short on time and had to resort to fast-paced dialogue and interaction with senators to try to convince them to reverse their approval for Bill 911. Juan continued to tell the story with profound excitement:

And so, we went on, we kept going and going. It was 6 p.m., 7 p.m. ... It was 9 o'clock at night, us colluding, the seats always packed... It was 12 am, 1 am, [and] then Fajar Zamora [says] ... ‘I want to reconsider my vote for Bill 911... and vote against it.’ And Sirilo seconds [the motion]. We start [*claps, claps*] and there comes McClinton and says, ‘Bill 911 goes back to municipal affairs.’ And it died right there (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

As reflected in this quote, Juan remembers every detail, every hour passing by, the congregation of numerous activists in the senate room stands, and the exact moment when the then president of the senate withdrew Bill 911.

As with others in Los Filtros, Juan’s account illuminates a deep sense of affection towards Los Filtros that not only stems from autobiographical rootedness, but also from a great emotional connection to Los Filtros community members’ collective action and its positive repercussions. Place attachment both sparks and fuels profound community resistance to expropriation. To conclude the story, Juan added, “We left at 2:30 a.m. on Monday with the victory. Everyone that knows [about the case] says, ‘You guys did what almost no one can do. That a bill that is already approved in both the House and Senate is dismissed. That almost never happens’” (*interview*, June 15, 2021). If the successful creation of Act 232 in 2004 signified a

great deal for Los Filtros' and other economically marginalized communities' empowerment, their achievement in dissolving Bill 911 was equally important. Despite the sustained efforts from powerful mayors and former governors to derogate Act 232, Los Filtros residents challenged state power and succeeded in claiming their right to stay. Largely against all odds, Los Filtros community members secured their space in decision-making processes that directly involved their community's future.

Since public policy plays a crucial role in many aspects of society, the positive outcomes from the creation and protection of Act 232 are traceable and important for the production of just spatialities. Although Act 232 became current legislation in August of 2004, Guaynabo's municipal government proceeded to file expropriation cases in December of that year (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 13). Nonetheless, Los Filtros residents filed claims in state court signaling the municipal government's non-compliance with Act 232 and started to win such cases in May of 2005 (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 13). Notably, CCUCA's accomplishment in drafting Bill 3645, pursuing a lobbying campaign and turning it into current law, and defending it a couple times against attempts to derogate it, had real consequences for Los Filtros residents' protection against expropriation. After demonstrating the importance of preventing displacement before both legislative chambers and the eyes of thousands of Puerto Ricans in the island, Act 232's importance for Special Communities became evident.

In light of Curren et al.'s emphasis that the number one goal on the road to equitable development is to strengthen communities' "stability and resilience in the face of real displacement pressures" (2015, p. 12), Los Filtros' work has great significance. In particular, delving into the complexity of law to ensure protection against expropriation through public policy was a strategy critical to the goal towards community empowerment. Act 232 was an

intrinsic factor that strengthened the Special Communities program as a whole. Since this program prioritized supporting inclusive planning and urbanization by fostering capacity building, Los Filtros' efforts were directly targeted at achieving equitable development. Their constant work to defend Special Communities, primarily through Act 232, had a great impact for the empowerment of communities battling expropriation.

A group of community leaders recognized that accomplishment and foresaw their ability to continue doing such important work and used the outcome of Act 232 as a guiding principle. Los Filtros' Comité Cívico's president, along with other Special Communities' leaders, began forming the Alianza de Líderes Comunitarios de Puerto Rico (ALC) [Puerto Rico Community Leaders Alliance] in 2003 ("Por el fortalecimiento," n.d.). The ALC worked on organizing all Special Communities in Puerto Rico while "using Act 232 as an example of what people can achieve when working together" (Morales-Cruz, 2006, p. 13). The ALC's sense of empowerment covered every facet of their work, including public facing communication, such that popular press would not be the only medium through which outsiders would learn about their work, events, concerns, and success stories. To this end, the ALC created "La Alianza te informa," a blog where they publish numerous articles written by different community leaders across the island and re-share press articles concerning topics related to Special Communities. Likewise, they created an online archive containing a wide range of news articles from 2005 to 2014 about communities' stories of struggle and success. Juan, for instance, referred me to the website for "Alianza te informa" the first time I met him and other times throughout our subsequent interactions. Clearly, he understands and underscores the importance of this self-governed online tool in highlighting issues of community agency in a society that contributes to the constant marginalization of informalized communities. Seen from an activism and community capacity-

building perspective, developing journalism projects like this one is an important source of community empowerment. Indeed, story-telling practices that recognize, support, and enhance the values and salience of place attachment are vital resources in enacting social change.

“La Alianza te informa” is a smaller representation of community leaders’ vital role in protecting their communities and ensuring the adoption of equitable development strategies throughout the years. For Los Filtros in particular, their spatial awareness in relation to their socio-spatial context in wealthy Guaynabo not only motivated the fight against expropriation of their own land, but also it generated a sense of unity and solidarity with other Special Communities at risk of displacement. Luis illustrated this dynamic as he stated, “Our lucha... this was one of the communities that everyone talked about. People came here from [all around] the island, from other towns, [people] who were struggling and who wanted to do the same. You know, it was an abuse what they had in Puerto Rico, taking away poor people’s properties” (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Luis remembered with great satisfaction Los Filtros’ role in setting an example of grassroots organization and activism for many other marginalized communities in Puerto Rico. Juan further spoke to this point as he describes his own perception of Los Filtros as a “*barrio* of great pride” since “people were able to defend [themselves] against strong economic and power interests and prevailed thanks to the struggle of a brave community.” He added, “the work that this community did saved 746 communities across Puerto Rico and today they enjoy that privilege because of Los Filtros’ triumph” (*interview*, June 15, 2021). This quote, in addition to showing the significance of Los Filtros’ successes on other communities on the island, reflects an important aspect of Los Filtros’ resistance in present times. Los Filtros residents’ motivation to protect the community stems not only from their love for the place, but also from their love for the community’s story of resistance and from knowing their social capabilities. Their attachment

to Los Filtros signifies attachment to the community, what it is able to do, and what it has accomplished.

Both Luis' and Juan's comments indicate that Los Filtros carried out efforts against powerful expropriation measures and through this resistance produced a larger collective relationship among numerous Special Communities in Puerto Rico. Their reflections about the *lucha* relate to what Soja (2010) refers to as "community-based regionalism" in his framework for spatial justice. Described as "regionwide coalition building for local community development" (Soja, 2010, p. 46), community-based regionalism underscores that regional politics and economy influence local events. Thus, efforts at community-based development should be fostered through a multi-scalar lens that attends to larger-scale/regional perspectives alongside grassroots ones (Soja, 2010, p. 155). In the context of the place attachment-fueled activism of Los Filtros, community members absolutely advocated across spatial scales as they formed coalitions – such as the CCUCA and the ALC – and worked with individuals within larger structures of power. This social movement fought for spatial justice with the creation and maintenance of anti-expropriation policy.

Without a doubt, Los Filtros community members' *lucha* has been filled with prompt reactions, planning, strategy-making, training, lobbying, coalition formation, and other forms of activism that have all emerged from their affectionate bond to their place. The community's social capital has been developed through processes of interconnected attachments to cherished memories from community bonding events as well as larger-scale events that represented their efforts to claim the right to the city. Without this community-based place attachment, the sense of collective and active resistance was less likely to emerge and persist through so many hurdles and challenges.

Over the last twenty years, Los Filtros community members have continuously defended their place by anticipating displacement threats and implementing resilient strategies that will protect them. Just like various communities in the United States (e.g., Dudley Street Neighborhood in Boston, MA and Fruitvale Neighborhood in Oakland, CA) (Curren et al., 2015, p. 9), Los Filtros residents drew upon place attachment to foster collective action for the protection of land and to challenge place-based injustices. Community members clearly had their own visions of urban development and understood the importance of enacting change for their own community. For instance, Luis stated,

Well, development is good, it's good. Because you improve the [housing] conditions. You see, I lived up here on the edge of the road, but there are other neighbors who live further down, who find it difficult to take groceries to their home. Any person who gets sick has to be carried up here from those houses. So, development is good, you get many things with development, but it has to be fair, you understand me, fair (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Luis highlighted the importance of development in improving people's life conditions, yet he recognized that residents have diverse priorities and needs. His attachment to Los Filtros generates a motivation to fight for equitable development that is rooted beyond his affectionate bond with the place and critically founded on his social interactions and awareness of his neighbors' needs. Juan also added to the community's framework for equity by stating:

I believe in development when you respect the opinion of the main actors in all of this, which are the residents. That is, if the residents here had said 'we do not want to stay here, we want to leave,' then I have to respect that ... But I do believe in development, in participation, [in] discussion, but in participation [with] the distribution of power. Because there are a lot of *colmillús* [wealthy people] here that close the door on poor people with less education (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Emphasizing the need for equitably distributed power in decision-making, Juan pointed out that municipal actors should take residents' wish for their place into utmost consideration. He also illuminates the discrepancy in access to decision-making as a result of discrimination against

community members who lack high-school diplomas or bachelor's degrees and associated inaccurate assumptions that their contribution is less valuable. Additionally, Juan spoke to one of the main goals for equitable development as he reiterates the importance of residents being the main actors in their communities' revitalization process: "So, when I say that I believe in development, it is that kind of development that is inclusive, where people have the opportunity to design, to create, to propose, to be producers and owners of their environment. That it becomes something we could say 'we fought for this, this is ours, this was not an imposition'" (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Los Filtros' *lucha* was about enhancing and protecting the tools that the Special Communities program granted them as a way to promote democratic processes of urbanization. Returning to Curren et al.'s framework of equitable development, it is important to highlight residents of marginalized communities' "capacity for self-determination to create their vision of urban growth" (2015, p. 11). Los Filtros' opposition movement was precisely centered around self-determination. Residents drew upon a strong sense of collectivity and place attachment to voice their right to define their own place's potential and development.

Conclusion

In addition to having been born and raised in Los Filtros, many of its residents have developed a special attachment to the community stemming from particular memories of community bonding events and experiences from their youth. Put differently, they have become attached to the biophysical and human environments of Los Filtros and to social interactions inside the community. These sets of interpersonal relationships have also contributed to growing social capital, which became a motivator for social action. Essentially, Los Filtros residents were

individually and collectively attached to their place, which led to large social mobilization and activism. As they were appreciative of and emotionally connected to their home environment and the lifestyle, they hoped to protect it by defending Los Filtros' homes against expropriation threats. Hence, Los Filtros residents have been actively fighting for their right to place since they united to create the Comité Cívico in 2002. They were quick in reaching out to the University of Puerto Rico's School of Law Legal Aid Clinic to form a coalition, CCUCA, with other communities in threat of displacement, in learning the technicalities of policy making and public hearings to craft a bill that would strengthen the Special Communities Act, in carrying out an extensive and intense lobbying campaign to advocate for the passing of this bill, and in strategizing to defend Act 232 against the efforts for its derogation. In sum, these processes led to repercussions regarding the establishment of networks among hundreds of economically marginalized communities and their community leaders in Puerto Rico, not only based on the belief that strength comes in numbers, but also that the regional and local economies are mutually constitutive and local efforts can result in large-scale outcomes.

Community members' resistance to displacement and work to challenge Guaynabo's municipal government's imposition of spatialities through autocratic planning comprised Los Filtros' *lucha*. Laura recalled how brave and well-organized community members were in the defense of their place when municipal government officials came and try to convince residents to turn over their titles. She shared,

Once, the mayor did not want to come here so we would not see him, [so he] sent them out. They [neighbors] called us from there [saying], 'look, the mayor has four people going up with some books to convince people to sign to take them out.' Then we took the responsibility to call each other, one by one, and in less than 15 minutes, we were facing them. Less than halfway through the path, down at the bottom end, they had only walked 3 houses, nothing more. That whole bunch of people appeared along the way. And they went like [shocked]. [We said] 'No, you cannot come to Los Filtros for nothing, there are

property titles here and this is ours, we are not going to be taken out of here.’ And they had to turn around and leave (*interview*, June 5, 2021).

This story pertains to a day when former Mayor O’Neill apparently sent municipal government workers to Los Filtros in order to begin processes of expropriation by visiting some of the homes. They began walking up one of the paths but were only able to visit three houses because community members quickly identified the threat of their presence in the community and passed the information by word of mouth, as Laura recounts. She particularly remembered the agglomeration of residents that physically stopped the municipal government personnel and confronted them. This was a powerful show of community unity and a stalwart defense of their place and right to be there. Without a doubt, Los Filtros’ collective mobilization to assert their right to their community took place in multiple settings, namely, representatives’ offices, the radio, the streets, and their own community space.

Los Filtros community members resisted spatial homogenization while they also fought the forces of uneven development by promoting the adoption of equitable development initiatives. Their long-sustained campaign to protect a law that would, in turn, protect them, represented their motivation to prevent displacement as a first step towards success. Nevertheless, long-term success in equitable development requires ensuring residents of marginalized communities’ ability to remain living in their place and implementing strategies that enhance their living conditions. Thus, while Los Filtros’ *lucha* has been strikingly powerful to prevent displacement and claim residents’ right to implement their own vision for their communities’ development, governmental neglect continues to be the largest obstacle to fully realizing this goal. Likewise, equitable development exists as a precursor to spatial justice, which means the sustaining of geographies that “can provide advantage and opportunity, stimulate, emancipate, entertain, enchant, enable” (Soja, 2010, p. 104). Indeed, city dwellers who mobilize

to challenge geographically uneven development are directly engaging in a fight for greater spatial justice. Even though Los Filtros residents have collectively carried out efforts to generate geographies of opportunity, there have been major constraints to reaching economic development advantages, which is why their successes relate to, but do not fully achieve, spatial justice.

As Guaynabo's municipal government continues to implement economic development tactics focused on enlarging its tax base, thus promoting the reproduction of upscale development and gated communities, they further disinvest in economically marginalized Special Communities. Los Filtros residents' complaints and concerns about their community's infrastructural precarity and their own homes' decay are direct evidence of such a level of disinvestment. The emigration of families to other places in the city leading to the staggering population decrease in Los Filtros in recent years further reflects the lack of possibilities for healthy living conditions in Los Filtros. Therefore, even though Los Filtros' residents were able to claim their right to the city through advancing a great movement of opposition and activist strategizing rooted in place attachment, the actualizing of equitable development or spatial justice for the community is yet to take shape.

Succeeding Chapter Three, this chapter outlined and thoroughly discussed the characteristics of Los Filtros community members' resistance to strong, tangible, and long-sustained efforts of expropriation. By delving into Los Filtros residents' attachment to their place and their strategic ways of translating such attachments into collective action, I positioned their *lucha* as a powerful counterbalance to state and municipal power. Hence, I insist that place attachment has been the strongest force driving Los Filtros' resistance to expropriation and the broader pressures of land privatization and spatial homogenization. In the next chapter, I offer

concluding statements that will integrate my previous arguments about Los Filtros' informalization, the intensity of Guaynabo municipal government's expropriation efforts, and community members' resistance and claims to place, in order to generate a broader understanding of the community's future vis-à-vis their past.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THEY CAME BACK BUT WERE NEVER ABLE TO WIN:”

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF RESISTANCE IN LOS FILTROS

Los Filtros’ struggle with expropriation did not emerge due to a sudden wave of gentrification as has happened with other communities facing displacement. Its history of informalization and marginalization set the stage for long struggles over land that have been complex rather than simple. This thesis investigated this complexity. In Chapter Two, I explored the factors and processes entrenched with the informalization of Los Filtros, which led to the community’s magnified vulnerability in the face of expropriation pressures. Having analyzed Los Filtros’ socio-spatial context as a producer of inequality, I then examined in Chapter Three Guaynabo’s municipal government’s efforts to expropriate Los Filtros through discussing an extensive timeline of long-sustained threats to the community. Next, in Chapter Four, I delved into Los Filtros’ history of resistance by using place attachment theories to understand residents’ emotional connection to the community as the main driving force motivating their fight against expropriation. In this concluding chapter, I next outline key contributions of my research so as to situate the meaning of Los Filtros’ resistance in the present and within future possibilities. I then review the main points discussed in the thesis. Lastly, I reflect on the importance of using a geographical perspective to study Los Filtros and other informalized communities in and beyond Puerto Rico.

Key Contributions

As detailed above, this thesis offers key insights into the study of Los Filtros' *lucha* within a context of social inequality. In particular, I understand the *lucha* as making plain the power of place-driven activism, as advancing a challenge to structural inequality, as cultivating community-based policy-making, and as illustrating an inspiring example of leadership and empowerment in marginalized neighborhoods. The main force driving the community's resistance against expropriation and enabling the *lucha* was, as I demonstrate through my research, place attachment. Hence, my research underscores that place attachment is a critical tool and resource that can sustain resistance, activism, and collective demands for positive social change. As I highlight the array of accomplishments that Los Filtros residents had during their fight, I call for a recognition of the impact and importance of such successes. Los Filtros community members illuminate the power of collective action undertaken to defend place, home, and community. Their strategies and tactics offer both practical insights to other social movements and animate current scholarship by accenting the salience of place attachment.

In light of these considerations, I emphasize the importance of acknowledging place attachment specifically in the context of urbanization. Urban development strategies, plans, and policies that aim for equitable outcomes ought to be significantly correlated with community-based demands. Thus, acknowledging place attachment is essential to designing a different, more just framework for urbanization and equitable development. Taking place attachment seriously means adopting a more humane approach to urban development that is attuned to the needs of marginalized residents.

Related, this thesis offers a critical evaluation of market-oriented forms of urbanization that disregard people's voices, needs, concerns, and humanity in the name of capital expansion.

Considering that Los Filtros reflects the story of a community where its residents, their strength, strategy, and efforts have been mostly overlooked by the government, private developers, and residents in neighboring communities, I offer a critique of such a system based on class-based discrimination, oppression, and neglect. Lifting up the experiences and perspectives of Los Filtros community members counters the dominant narratives circulating in Puerto Rico that describe the community simply in terms of deficits and as an impediment to necessary urban growth. Outside of Puerto Rico, my thesis extends the opportunities for non-Spanish speakers to learn about Los Filtros' story of informalization, empowerment, resistance, and activism, as no extensive research about Los Filtros has been done in English.

Furthermore, I drew upon a geographic perspective to examine my data and understand the complexities of the *lucha* in Los Filtros. Using core geographic concepts, my research specifically focused on the connections between residents and their place and the spatial circumstances wherein struggles for land in Los Filtros unfolded. Based on that, I provided extensive explanatory context and analysis of expropriation efforts to better understand Los Filtros' resistance. Only through the careful and detailed examination of complex processes of expropriation and displacement like the ones in Los Filtros is it possible to engage with and create spatial justice. While there are other academic studies about Los Filtros, this is the first one that uses a geographic perspective; this is a notable contribution.

Implementing a geographical approach to study expropriation in Los Filtros affords the opportunity to use an array of analytical tools different from those used in other disciplines. For instance, "scale" as a tool of analysis makes visible the overlapping structures that influence socio-spatial processes. Thus, my thesis attends to multiple scales, namely the individual, the urban, and the national, to offer a comprehensive examination of expropriation in Los Filtros. In

other words, while acknowledging that social processes occur across multiple spatial dimensions, I not only consider the political scope of expropriation threats from the municipal government's perspective. Instead, I evaluate residents' reaction to pressing threats (the individual), the interrelatedness between Los Filtros and other informalized communities in the Metropolitan region (the urban), and the broader context of island-level community-based development efforts (the national).

Another geographical concept relevant to my analysis of Los Filtros is "imaginative geographies," which explains individuals' ideas, perceptions, and preconceptions about a given place. This concept is key for understanding geographical issues as it identifies the scope of bias and stereotyping related to place. For example, I discussed how residents in communities next to Los Filtros as well as developers and government officials share certain presumptions about Los Filtros that have a negative impact in the community. This geographical concept also allows for picturing alternate scenarios in relation to imaginative geographies. My thesis advocates for the reshaping of our imaginative geographies, as non-residents of Los Filtros, so that valuing others' place attachment and *lucha* acquires greater significance. Such shifts highlight the possibilities for transforming imaginative geographies that harm into imaginative geographies that benefit and transform.

Lastly, this thesis underscores the importance of incorporating the spatial into questions about social justice. Like other forms of justice, spatial justice provides a unique framework for examining and addressing inequity. In this case, spatial justice is a critical lens that illustrates how expropriation and displacement are part of a broader system of inequities that manifest across different landscapes. Analyzing Los Filtros through accenting spatial relations, highlighting its proximity to affluent communities, and visualizing it as part of the larger system

of neighborhood marginalization in Guaynabo allows for extending the meaning of justice. Put differently, spatial justice conveys particular insights about social justice that result in the envisioning of new opportunities for taking action.

Summary of Key Points

Los Filtros is a community with nearly 100 years of history. It was established during Puerto Rico's sugarcane industry period and expanded in size and population through the industrialization period in the midst of extensive rural to urban migration flows on the island. As dozens of people arrived at Los Filtros and built their homes, the community reached 130 families by the mid-twentieth century. Their occupation of space and forms of construction were informal, but not impermanent. Instead, Los Filtros was a permanent, growing, thriving, *barrio* with many characteristics of an energetic and dynamic community life.

Nonetheless, the 1990s represented the start of shifts and transformations in Los Filtros. For instance, the increase of detrimental criminality related to drug activity resulted in the death of many young residents of the community. Moreover, urban sprawl began to take over Los Filtros' surroundings. In land plots adjacent to Los Filtros, private developers built large, gated communities, like La Colina and La Villa de Torrimar, at the same time as other pre-existing communities gated their residential space in an effort to purportedly secure their safety. In addition to the newly arrived residents of said gated communities, other affluent families, attracted by new high-rise condominiums built around Los Filtros, arrived in the area during the 2000s. Caught in the middle of rapid upscale urbanization, Los Filtros' old structures, wooden homes, and precarity stood out. Just like Los Filtros residents, residents of adjacent gated communities, and daily commuters through the area, city officials and former mayor Héctor

O'Neill noticed these contrasting environments. Consequently, since 2001 Guaynabo's municipal government has tried to eliminate Los Filtros through expropriating its residents.

The built environment distinctions between Los Filtros and its neighboring communities are an example of the obvious disparities between Guaynabo's wealthy and the informalized communities across the municipio. Because Guaynabo significantly grew its property-based income tax during the 1990s, it developed a particular prestige that entailed several aspects. For example, O'Neill and his administration successfully conveyed an image of Guaynabo as a city for the high-class demographic through the favoring of gated community developments. Following a focus on class-homogenization, the municipal government implemented policies in compliance with a neoliberal agenda that centered the privatization of space as the main tool for economic growth. Norma suggested a way of understanding this dynamic: "Well, that is why they wanted to eliminate us. Eliminate us from the panorama, because if the mayor buys all that, there will be a good space left over ... So, what can I tell you? That is the pressure we have from the people around us, because then they call us the *arrabal*" (interview, June 14, 2021). As Norma clearly pinpointed, residents in Los Filtros felt the pressure of displacement threats coming from two sources: Guaynabo municipal government's large tax ambition and the wealth embedded in the space around them. As I discussed in Chapter Three, eliminating *barrios* that "did not fit" Guaynabo's landscape was a goal that O'Neill, evidently, converted from ideology into practice. He used his political power to enforce measures that further marginalized and displaced informalized communities. Thus, Los Filtros community members did not face expropriation in a context where displacement was only a threat. They witnessed the displacement of multiple families across informalized communities in Guaynabo as they worried about their own futures.

Clearly, O'Neill's imaginative geographies of Guaynabo had real effects in the alteration of the municipio's space. His lack of interest in nominating certain informalized communities to be part of the Special Communities Program, his numerous attempts to derogate the Special Communities Act, his persistence through years of judicial proceedings to void Guaynabo's Special Communities' designations, and overall, his critical emphasis on expropriating economically marginalized communities in Guaynabo, reflect powerful, extensive, and intense efforts at imposing his goals of making Guaynabo a city for the elite. For nearly nine years, O'Neill utilized his political power to threaten Los Filtros residents with displacement. Ultimately, the development of Jardines de Los Filtros, a public housing block where 30 families from Los Filtros relocated, also depicts his implementation of neoliberal governance. Even though Los Filtros' Comité Cívico had proposed a community redevelopment plan with the support of scholars from the University of Puerto Rico's School of Architecture, Guaynabo's city officials disregarded the community input and proceeded to transform Los Filtros into public housing. Nevertheless, Los Filtros community members resisted despite the threat of judicial powers and the imposition of public housing. They continued to attend hearings, give presentations, and demonstrate their ongoing opposition.

Recognizing and acting upon their strong attachment to their community, a group of residents in Los Filtros organized a committee to defend their right to place. The formation of this committee led to multiple large-scale sociopolitical engagements and a range of activist pursuits regarding the protection of Special Communities. Significantly, land contestation in Los Filtros became an issue involving two opposing movements: the one advanced by O'Neill and Guaynabo's municipal government and the one advanced by Los Filtros residents in conjunction with other community organizations. The former strived to void the "Special Community"

designations in Guaynabo and to assert the municipal governments' power to forcefully expropriate communities. The latter resisted all sorts of displacement efforts and counteracted state and municipal power through crafting bills, lobbying, and participating in other forms of activism. Los Filtros residents' fight to persist was not simply a collective movement against Guaynabo's municipal government's power. Instead, it advanced a greater challenge to claim their right to place within a larger socio-spatial context of informalization. Against all odds, and in spite of significant political and economic pressures, Los Filtros attained legal protection against expropriation and fostered an island-wide effort for community empowerment.

Los Filtros' Lucha

According to Seamon, "feelings for place can range from disinterest and minimal cognitive awareness to superficial fondness, stronger devotion, or attachment so powerful that people are willing to defend and even sacrifice their lives for a place" (2014, p. 19). Contrary to Guaynabo's city officials, who enforced a non-negotiating, autocratic agenda, while building on disenfranchisement in Los Filtros, members of this community exhibited profound place attachment. They were, as Seamon describes, devoted to defending the place against all odds. Los Filtros residents resisted a powerful regime through mobilizing alongside other communities to counteract all state and municipal efforts at displacing them. Thus, they embarked on a long-standing *lucha*, fight, which was primarily founded on shared sentiments of place attachment. As Juan expressed, "I live proud of my neighborhood. I do not see myself among those who go elsewhere. Maybe I am like the coquí.²⁵ If they take me out of here, I die. I love my

²⁵ The Coquí is a type of frog endemic to Puerto Rico for which habitat loss is a significant threat.

neighborhood.” There are many other residents in Los Filtros that share this deep bond with their place (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

After adopting a series of community empowerment practices and being successful with the writing and passing of Bill 3645 to protect Special Communities against expropriation, Los Filtros residents’ place attachments, which were founded on their length of residency in Los Filtros and emotional bonds with place, were strengthened by their sense of affection for community practices and the social capital that the *lucha* represented. Therefore, they translated place attachments into activism and actions that reflected their care for the community. By way of an example, in 2004, Los Filtros residents inaugurated their community center, “Rosa E. Rivera,” named after one of the community leaders who fought endlessly for the right to land and development in the community (See Appendix K). Before having a community center, the Los Filtros Comité Cívico’s development of Bill 3645, preparation for lobbying campaigns, and plans for community-based activism against expropriation took place in “an abandoned ‘little house’ partially destroyed by Hurricane Georges” in 1998 (Cortés-Chico, 2006a, para. 1). As Ricardo Cortés-Chico (2006a) notes, the lack of a community center represented a great inconvenience for communities engaging with processes of empowerment and ground-up planning (para. 8). Consequently, the Los Filtros community center, “Rosa E. Rivera,” became an essential part of Los Filtros’ economic development strategies. Once built, the center served “as a lounge to celebrate birthdays, weddings and private activities, as well as to house an electronic library, a community tutoring program, and the Comité Cívico’s offices” (Cortés-Chico, 2006b, para. 4). Further, Juan explained, “This versatility expands the capacity we have to develop projects and even brings us economic resources that serve us to maintain our facilities in good conditions and to pay for other projects that we have in mind” (Cortés-Chico, 2006b, para.

6). While O'Neill and other legislators at the state level continued to craft projects that would derogate the Special Communities Act and facilitate expropriation, Los Filtros community members focused on combatting such efforts and implementing positive development methods in their community. Their mobilization was comprised of both making their voice heard in the political sphere and demonstrating the extent of social capacities to foster economic progress in their community.

Los Filtros residents' felt empowered to educate others about the community's struggles as well. For instance, Laura recounted sharing with strangers her learning from her journey with collective activism.

And at that moment, I see two ladies who were talking ... about the communities. And the lady comes and says, 'No because, you see that now they have a war to displace and take away people's properties ... But look, there are some laws, because a book was written ... about the [Special] communities, which says, that a person cannot allow [the municipal government] to expropriate them. There is a law that protects them...' And they kept talking, talking, and I am in line ... the lady did not believe her... and I say, 'Look, I was in that group fighting for the communities. And I was in the group that confronted Guaynabo's mayor, because his predicament and all the power that was taken away from him, it was us. And indeed, that book was written' (*interview*, June 5, 2021).

That is one of Laura's memories about the *lucha* that she shared with great excitement. She recalled overhearing two other people talking about Special Communities while in line at a government's office and interrupting the conversation to talk about her experience. While it may seem superficial, this instance reflects a moment of great pride and satisfaction about Los Filtros' accomplishments. Moreover, it demonstrates the ways in which Los Filtros residents understood the importance of community-based empowerment, which fueled their belief in the necessity for defending their place and participating in the bottom-up planning of future development.

Conversations about Special Communities like the one Laura heard were very recurrent everywhere in Puerto Rico because the rivalry between Guaynabo's municipal government and

Los Filtros were incredibly intense from 2002 to 2005. According to Los Filtros residents and popular press coverage, that time period entailed much commotion, friction between city actors and community leaders in both legislative chambers, and constant activism on the streets. All in all, informalized communities' protection against expropriation was at stake. On this point, Los Filtros resident Luis stressed, "La lucha estuvo, en grande en grande, como hasta el 2005, por ahí, fuerte. Volvieron, pero nunca pudieron ganar. Lo injusto no le da oportunidad" [The fight was super huge up until 2005 more or less, intense. They [Guaynabo's municipal government] came back but were never able to win, the injustice of it gives them no chance] (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Luis recalled a time between 2002 and 2005 when the threat of land expropriation in Los Filtros led to significant disputes between the municipal government and his community. By describing this time as "intense," Luis referred to the multiple public hearings, marches, and press conferences that Los Filtros residents engaged with to fight Guaynabo's strategies. Subsequently, Luis signaled a crucial element about this contestation over land and the municipal government's investment in expropriation – Los Filtros always fought against such efforts. Residents' resistance to expropriation was founded on opposing the municipal government's unjust practices while believing that injustice never wins.

Guaynabo's municipal government had fewer opportunities for expropriating land in Los Filtros precisely because community members knew the importance of fighting the injustice. For many years after the lobbying campaign to amend the Special Communities Act ended, Los Filtros residents continued to implement strategies that would support their collective movement of opposition. Some of these actions were immediate reaction-response tactics undertaken to prevent the forces of urbanization from commandeering Los Filtros' land. For example, in 2015, the president of Los Filtros' Comité Cívico heard about some private developers' intentions to

buy the seven acres of land where the Magnetic Observatory was in order to construct another pair of residential condominiums. “We were concerned that it would turn it into, imagine, two \$900,000 towers,” Juan explained (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Having grown up near the Magnetic Observatory’s facilities, members of the Comité Cívico felt inclined to defend that treasured space and began to assess viable alternatives to private development. In that process, they arranged a meeting with the then president of the AAA, the agency that owns the land, and committed to a community effort to protect said land. In that meeting, Juan recalled, Los Filtros community members and AAA officials “began to see what quick remedy there was, and it was to make a usufruct.”²⁶ They passed it on to Natural Resources in usufruct and we made a management agreement as the Comité Cívico of Los Filtros for 10 years” (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

This achievement was widely highlighted across popular press when the AAA, the Natural Resources Department, and the Los Filtros community organization signed the agreement on Earth Day, April 22nd of 2015. Local journalists particularly emphasized three main facts. First, that the Natural Resources Department categorized these 6 *cuerdas*²⁷ of land as an urban forest because it meets the characteristics of flora and fauna diversity. Second, that the urban forest helps produce water for the Guaynabo river, which supplies fresh water to a great section of the Guaynabo population. And third, that the co-management agreement required both parties to prioritize activities with educational and community empowerment components that also ensure the conservation of natural resources (“Protegen el bosque”, 2015; “Un bosque urbano”, 2015). The development of an urban forest co-managed by members from Los Filtros illustrates how quickly and strategically residents of Los Filtros worked to maintain their

²⁶ Usufruct is the legal right to temporarily use and benefit from another’s property.

²⁷ Refer to footnote 14.

community in the face of development pressures and the shared and abiding commitments to equitable development, which, in turn, reflects Los Filtros' goal for being the owners and producers of the space they occupy.

Importantly, the agreement to co-manage the urban forest and become the protectors of an essential ecosystem inside the Metropolitan area represented both an enormous responsibility and a success in which residents in Los Filtros felt great pride. Juan remembers this accomplishment with special fondness. He said,

Rescuing the forest was I think one of my most desired dreams. When that was signed, I breathed and I said I feel very happy, very happy. The high pressure was removed from my chest because it came true. And it had very good coverage and I had a lot of allies in this. Because nobody imagined that there was an observatory there, nobody imagined that this was where the atmospheric studies were done, the earth tremors ... (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Juan's account reveals that Los Filtros community members' commitment to their community was not only about protecting their own homes against expropriation. Instead, they saw the value of other spaces in the area too. In the face of a threat to the destruction of the natural environment near Los Filtros, community leaders automatically sought to prevent such an invasion. This drive represents appreciation for a place's history, a strong desire to preserve it, and commitment to creating a shared space for conservation and learning. Undoubtedly, Los Filtros community members' *lucha* was possible due to their spatial awareness which led to a variety of actions related to place-protection.

Despite this forward-thinking and fierce attachment to place, in 2017 Juan reached out to the press in order to demand action from Puerto Rico's Natural Resources Department and the AAA in relation to the Bosque Urbano (the Urban Forest). Essentially, community leaders in Los Filtros claimed that the efforts for managing the urban forest had not progressed beyond the signing of the co-management agreement in 2015. Even though the Comité Cívico had been

reaching out to various organizations in order to create allyships for sustaining the work in the urban forest, they faced inaction from the part of the Natural Resources Department and the AAA (Alvarado-León, 2017). For that reason, the property and land restoration efforts as well as other planned projects have not been able to move forward. Almost five years later, the forest and the Magnetic Observatory's structure remains in complete decay (See Appendix R).

However, the efforts from the community's part have not stopped. In fact, I interviewed Juan on a Wednesday afternoon, when he had just come back from a meeting. I asked what the meeting was for and he responded, "Looking for a meeting because the usufruct is already going to expire, and we want to give it more life... the dream has still not come true, because one day I will stay in the dream, I will go in my sleep. But I want others to follow my dream and the dream we have. My desire is that it stays safe in the hands of young people" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Juan actively seeks opportunities for collaboration and investment to initiate significant projects involving the urban forest. Simultaneously, he emphasized the importance of younger people getting involved in the protection and care for this land. Juan added, "One has to be clear, one has to be sincere. And we are already getting on in years here, so it's not for us to [be working] ... But, my dream, and sometimes I say with great regret, is not so much what the people or the youth in my neighborhood can do. It is about what the youth around us can do" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Juan's expression reveals an attachment to place that extends beyond his emotional bond with Los Filtros as a community of people and a place. It shows a profound affection for land, which entails recognizing that protecting it could be in the hands of others, as long as preserving history and conserving nature is a priority.

Expectations for Los Filtros' Future

During my interviews, Los Filtros residents specifically voiced their concerns regarding the long-term care for their place due to moments of crisis and prolonged precarity. Drawing on my understanding of the community's infrastructural decay and population decline, I asked residents how they pictured Los Filtros in ten or fifteen years. Unsurprisingly, their answers primarily grappled with the consequences of governmental negligence and abandonment trends. By way of example, Roberto expressed, "Right now, you know the earthquakes that have unfolded? How many people are homeless? And the [federal] funds have come in to deal with the homes of those people, yet the government, both of them, have not dealt with that" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). By "both of them," Roberto referred to the two main political parties, PNP and PPD, and their respective administrations, which have failed to efficiently respond to the housing, education, and social needs of thousands of Puerto Ricans in the island. Especially post Hurricanes María and Irma in 2017 and the round of damaging earthquakes in January of 2020, families who have lost their homes have had trouble resettling largely due to the government's inaction and budget misallocations. Roberto continued, "And if this is happening now, 15 years from now? [laughs] Imagine, 15 years from now ... I think this neighborhood will no longer exist" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). Residents like Roberto see the island-wide situation reflected in Los Filtros, expecting that the community's decay will aggravate over time. Luis shares this sentiment as he noted, "Yo pienso que le están dando tiempo al tiempo. 'No, yo no voy a pelear contigo. Deja que tu tengas lo largos brazos para entonces yo bregar contigo'" (*interview*, June 15, 2021). This statement roughly translates into: "I think they [the municipal government] are giving time to time. 'No, I'm not going to fight with you. Let me wait until you have long arms so that I can deal with you.'" This phrase implies that city government officials

disregard residents' capacities and wait for them to "grow up" before paying attention to their demands. Luis spoke directly to Guaynabo's municipal government's indifference about Los Filtros' decline. Such a behavior on the municipal government's part reflects a paternalistic form of governance, where city officials categorize Los Filtros residents as weak, helpless, and impotent and imply that ignoring the community's demands and limiting their autonomy is tolerable. Further, Luis added, "You see, that's one example. That's a strategy. 'Let the main owners keep dying and then the children are not going to claim anything'... they don't claim anything" (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

In addition to the disinvestment in the community, city officials allow further deterioration with the passage of time, making residents opt for moving elsewhere, and waiting for the number of residents to steadily decrease. As a result, it becomes easier to take over land in Los Filtros when the majority of the community members leave, and their families do not have the resources to keep up the homes. Therefore, two main factors influence Los Filtros residents' sense of hopelessness for community progress: the infrastructural decay as a result of municipal abandonment and the drastic population turnover. Aida, for instance, lamented this situation as she said, "Actually, I think I will die, and I am not ever going to see *el barrio* renovated" (*interview*, June 18, 2021). For Luis, it is also hard to picture a positive future for Los Filtros. "This is going to disappear over time. This is like a plant, if you don't water it every day, as usual, the moment comes when it dies, due to lack of maintenance, lack of care. Yes, [here] it is going to happen like that," he stated (*interview*, June 15, 2021).

Regarding the possibilities for Los Filtros residents to engage in efforts for revitalizing the community, interviewees also shared important concerns. For instance, Norma emphasized, "There is almost no youth, and the few young people left are not [involved] in that matter. And

the older, well, you cannot ask much of the elderly.” The age factor in Los Filtros is a source of worry for those who envision positive change and revitalization in the community. Not only in Los Filtros, but in every other neighborhood or environment, community development efforts require the engagement of multiple generations. Given that most residents in Los Filtros are in a later phase of life, when their availability to invest time in collective work is affected by their physical capabilities, sustaining community-driven projects becomes a significant challenge. Furthermore, external forces shapes the emigration of younger community members. In particular, Guaynabo’s municipal government lack of care for Los Filtros equaled a production of decay that threatened to indirectly displace people in the community. Due to inadequate housing conditions, some Los Filtros community members are inclined to find other places to live where daily activities are not a constant challenge.

Norma continued her thoughtful commentary on the challenges to sustaining resistance over the long term. She explained, “Look, we are doing these meetings to see how we improve our community because there are other communities that have done it. Why can’t it be done here? Because no one has an interest. Because we are in a time that everyone lives their life as they want. And they help out if they want, if not, they don’t.” In addition to the implications of Los Filtros’ older adult population, Norma signaled a lack of interest in engaging in community efforts stemming from individualistic lifestyles. Individualism is a dominant ideology emerging from capitalism and neoliberalism which pushes individuals away from engaging in endeavors for collective well-being. Perhaps Guaynabo’s municipal government’s approach to growth through the promotion of private residences has impacted the spread of an individualistic culture that hinders cooperative forms of community work. Norma added, “There are very few of us who want to see the community clean and beautiful. It is only a few of us” (*interview*, June 14,

2021). While Norma underscored the shortage of people who engage in community work as a worrying factor, my research experience with “a few” in Los Filtros exposed their strong persistence. Despite the challenges and small numbers, those with place attachment to Los Filtros continue to share their story, schedule community meetings, and think of potential ways to improve residents’ lives in the community.

Without a doubt, Los Filtros is a place with boundless social capacity. Its residents’ active resistance to powerful forces of expropriation demonstrates vast dedication and devotion to protecting their place. However, as Fullilove (2014) points out, a place’s social capacity, in combination with its physical and economic conditions, do not fully sustain people’s inclination to stay in a declining community. Struck by people’s resilience, Fullilove questions other factors that make residents of a collapsing place want to remain living there. Accordingly, she suggests an answer to the “why stay” question that treats residents’ connection to place as intertwined with “attachment to the place-that-was-and-might-be-again” and with community practices that reflect this duality (2014, p. 142). These practices stem from a sense of fear about the community’s future that incites a “place protective behavior” and are all encompassed under a “community practice of love” (2014, p. 147). With this in mind, Fullilove (2014) identifies several practices that represent residents’ translation of place attachment into action, one of them being uplifting the history of their place and “using it as a guide to future action” (p. 151). Los Filtros community members definitely embody this practice as they avidly welcome students like me to their community. For example, when I first met Laura, I had not mentioned much more than my interest in doing a project about Los Filtros, and she immediately responded, “I’ll give you the tour, can you come tomorrow?” Instead of waiting for me to tell her what I needed, she

quickly saw the need to show me around, to walk through Los Filtros as the first way to learn about the community.

The first day Laura walked me around Los Filtros, she recalled doing the same tour with dozens of students who visited the community at different points in time. She said, “I would walk all this with a line of 20 kids behind me.” Just like her actions from the past, welcoming college students to Los Filtros and stepping into conversations about Special Communities that she overheard to tell her community’s story, setting aside two consecutive Saturdays to give me a tour of Los Filtros reflects her commitment to educating others about Los Filtros. Fullilove (2014) calls these actions “acts of affirmation” (p. 151). They are representative of the fact that residents of a collapsing neighborhood visualize “the place-as-it-was” to work towards repair (Fullilove, 2014, p. 151). While Guaynabo’s municipal government continues to disinvest in Los Filtros, its community members confront the sense of discontinuity and hopelessness with active engagement in community affairs. Fullilove’s (2014) insight around people’s responses to displacement illuminates the ways in which collective practices sustain continuity in a given community. Although the majority of residents in Los Filtros were not forcibly displaced, the drastic population decrease and the ongoing decay has generated a sense of community collapse which current residents continue to combat with actions aimed at re-imagining and rebuilding.

Even though Héctor O’Neill has not been Guaynabo’s mayor since 2017, Los Filtros’ vulnerability in the face of displacement threats remains. As might be expected, community leaders in Los Filtros are constantly on the lookout, foreseeing changes, predicting administrative actions at the municipal level, and interpreting these dynamics in relation to their possible meaning for the community’s future. When I asked Laura about Ángel Pérez, Guaynabo’s mayor at the time of our interview, she responded,

Well, as far as I understand the mayor told Juan that he is not going to push people out of Guaynabo. On the contrary, O'Neill had taken away all small businesses from poor people... And [the current mayor] allows them and gives permission to anyone who wants to put a little business to earn a living ... [O'Neill] didn't do that. He pushed away everyone that had a kiosk. But the one now helps them... It's different. Not all mayors are the same (*interview*, June 5, 2021).

Laura's statement generated a sense of hope in me that I believed must have been true for other community members in Los Filtros as well. In general, it seemed like trends of unequal wealth distribution and informalized communities' marginalization substantially pertained to O'Neill's administration. However, the arrest of Ángel Pérez on December 9, 2021, due to charges for conspiracy, bribery, and extortion, proved this otherwise and took away the little hope that a new administration generated after the end of Héctor O'Neill's term ("Mayor of Guaynabo", 2021). Additionally, as if that was not enough, Héctor O'Neill's son, Edward O'Neill, won municipal elections on January 15, 2022, to become the new mayor of Guaynabo (Rolón-Cintrón, 2022). Clearly, the threat of expropriation in Los Filtros is ever-present. Especially in current times when urban growth and capital accumulation are two increasingly pressing forces, the challenge to claim a place is uphill for residents of declining neighborhoods.

Further Inquiry Through Thinking Geographically

To make sense of my research's relevance, I reiterate Massey's (2005) call for understanding space as an object of our continuing responsibility. That is, Los Filtros is not floating in space, alienated, or disconnected. It exists within a socio-spatial context where its neighboring communities are made up of individuals with socioeconomic power who hold a great degree of responsibility. In fact, gated community residents openly share their support for residents of Los Filtros. For instance, Alma stated, "Those people had lived there all their lives. We were the ones who intruded here. They were here before, I mean, not here, in the *barrio*. But

they have been here all their lives” (*interview*, June 19, 2021). In addition to reflecting on our own occupation of space like Alma did, I find it imperative that other neighbors increase their spatial awareness and recognize Los Filtros’ *lucha*. Instead of waiting for government administrations to implement change in Los Filtros, residents of private communities that coexist with Los Filtros must become essential allies in the revitalization process. Given Los Filtros’ state of decay, forms of investment should come from multiple sources, moving away from the sole reliance on state-level action. The geographic approach I use throughout my thesis primarily serves to highlight the importance of understanding spatial relations as a way to enact positive social change.

Likewise, this study exemplifies the possibilities for research on community-based resistance and social activism in Puerto Rico. Just as I use a geographic lens to analyze Los Filtros, it is important that future studies about land contestation in informalized communities adopt such an approach and consider neighborhoods as part of a wider environment, in coexistence with other communities, and as affected by a broader socio-spatial context. Accordingly, future research may address the experiences of other communities in Guaynabo in facing former Mayor O’Neill’s oppressive administration so as to identify similar or different trends in place attachment, community empowerment, and development.

Recognizing Los Filtros community members’ efforts towards rebuilding entails acknowledging the community’s history of resistance. It means opening up to discussions about the strength of social movements and understanding that informalized communities in Puerto Rico build on great social capital to advance development efforts. More specifically, Los Filtros sets the example for hope in participatory planning and community uplifting in the midst of neoliberal urbanization forces that displace, destroy, marginalize, disenfranchise, and oppress.

Whereas expropriation and disinvestment have led to the ongoing deterioration of Los Filtros, its residents continue to demonstrate the need for claiming the right to the city through recreating regenerative rather than exploitative spaces. Engaging in struggles for spatial justice requires a collective effort, though. Beyond coexisting with Los Filtros, neighboring communities must uplift and become supporters of equitable development efforts that benefit the entire community. As in other neighborhoods, these efforts are multifaceted and varied. However, it is vital for outsiders to identify and sustain any efforts that emerge from the community. The role of neighboring communities in supporting Los Filtros residents' efforts is essential in the production of more just spatialities.

The contrasting landscapes between Los Filtros and adjacent communities is replicated across hundreds of unevenly urbanized spaces in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the world. While some city areas receive enormous investment for economic development, others remain isolated, disinvested, and face constant decline. These relationships have generated important discussions about urban renewal, community revitalization, and more generally, gentrification. My work engages with these debates, particularly the ones that seek to promote socially just development. Thus, the experiences in Los Filtros become evidence that the best actors to produce community change and repair are residents themselves. Los Filtros residents' successes reveal that understandings on how to revitalize land must be founded on the basis of community knowledge. Two decades after the first expropriation threats to Los Filtros, community members keep demonstrating that their attachment to land is not in vain. Los Filtros residents' place attachment is one that protects, imagines, and creates.

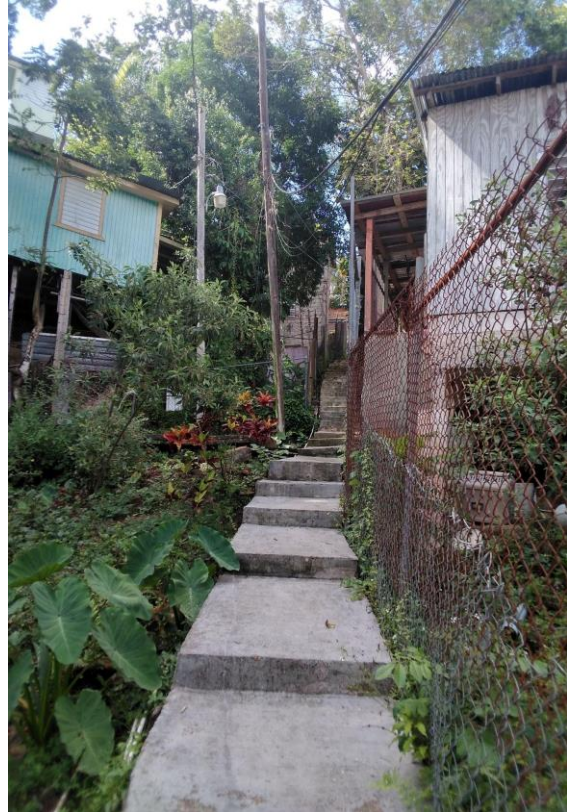
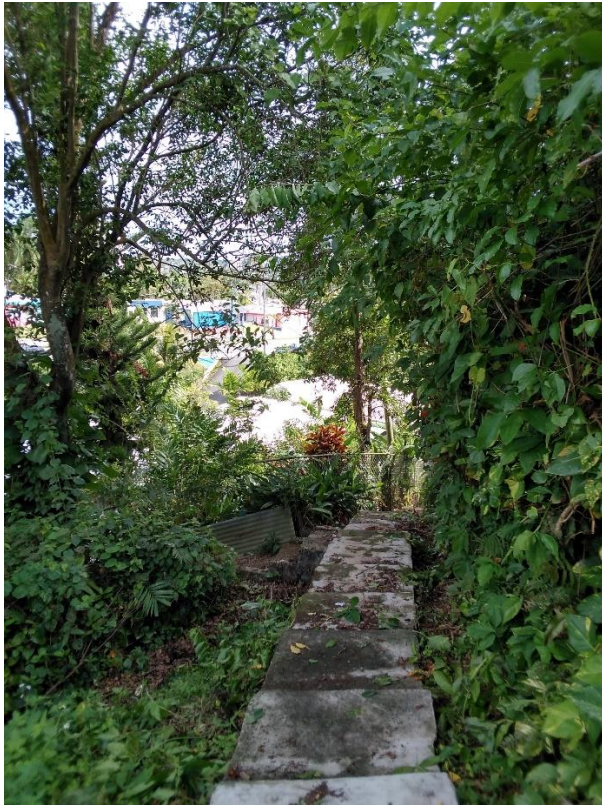
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Houses in Los Filtros sustained by cement block columns



(Photographs by Author, 2022)

Appendix B: View of two main staircases in Los Filtros



(Photographs by Author, 2021)

Appendix C: Los Filtros in relation to Water Plant and USGS Magnetic Observatory



(Map created by Author using ESRI's ArcGIS Pro Software, with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix D: USGS Magnetic Observatory in 1938



WRam. [1938 San Juan Magnetic Observatory]. (n.d.). [Pinterest post]. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/219550550561620858/>

Appendix E: List of acronyms

AAA: Autoridad de Acueductos y Alcantarillados

USCGS: United States Coastal and Geodetic Survey

PNP: Partido Nuevo Progresista

PPD: Partido Popular Democrático

OCE: Oficina de Comunidades Especiales

CCUCA: Coalición de Comunidades Unidas contra el Atropello y las Expropiaciones

ALC: Alianza de Líderes Comunitarios

Appendix F: Gated communities around Los Filtros



(Map created by Author using ESRI's ArcGIS Pro Software, with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix G: Puerto Rico's Metropolitan Area

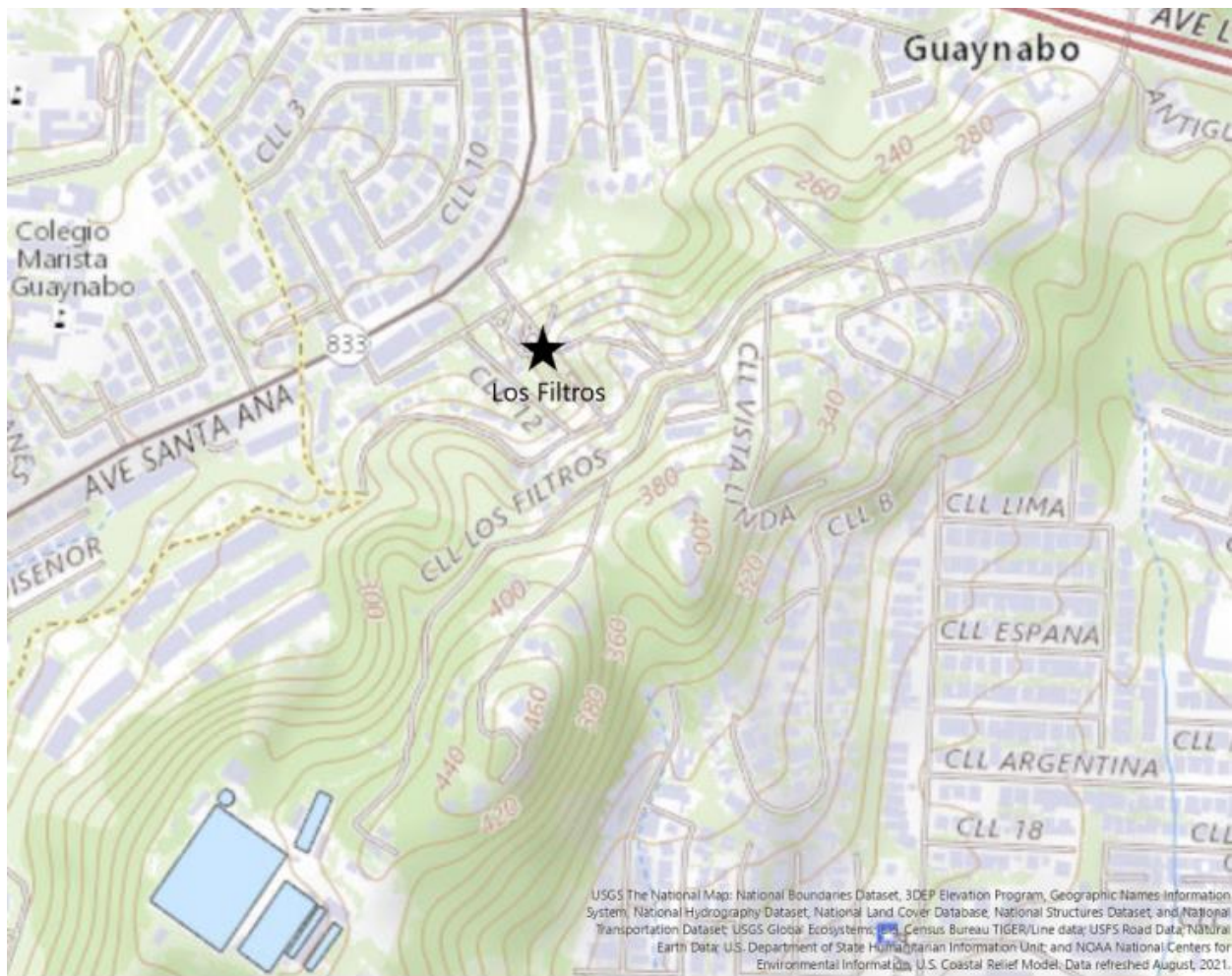


Muñoz-Erickson, T.A. (2014). [Map of Puerto Rico's Metropolitan Area]. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol19/iss3/art2/figure1.html>

Appendix H: List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Description	Date of interview
Aida	Resident in Los Filtros	18 June 2021
Alma	Resident in Gated Community	19 June 2021
Ana	Resident in Gated Community	12 June 2021
Ángel	Resident in Gated Community	15 July 2021
Diana	Resident in Gated Community	13 June 2021
Fernando	Architect for Gated Communities	20 September 2021
Francisco	Resident in Los Filtros	16 June 2021
Herminia	Resident in Los Filtros	15 June 2021
Juan	Resident in Los Filtros	15 June 2021
Laura	Resident in Los Filtros	5 June 2021
Luis	Resident in Los Filtros	15 June 2021
Marcos	Resident in Gated Community	15 August 2021
Norma	Resident in Los Filtros	14 June 2021
Roberto	Resident in Los Filtros	15 June 2021
Blanca	Municipal Planner	24 September 2021
Sandra	Resident in Gated Community	30 June 2021
Sara	Resident in Los Filtros	29 June 2021
Susana	Resident in Gated Community	23 June 2021

Appendix I: Topographic map of hill where Los Filtros is located



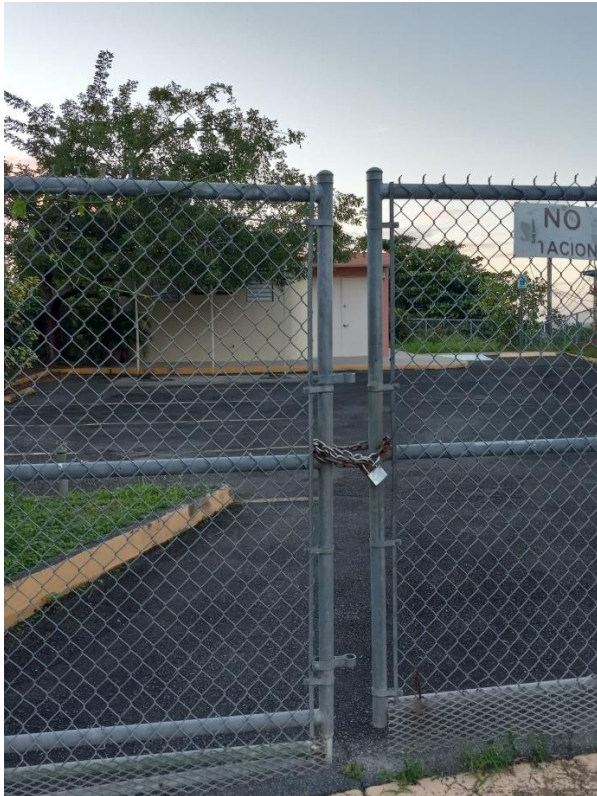
(USGS National Map modified by Author, using ESRI's ArcGIS Pro Software with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix J: Houses in Los Filtros affected by Hurricanes Irma and María



(Photographs by Author, 2022)

Appendix K: Communal Center Rosa E. Rivera



(Photograph by Author, 2022)



Google Maps (2016). [Image of Rosa E. Rivera Community Center in Los Filtros]. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from <https://www.google.com/maps/@18.3803818,-66.1156498,3a,75y,315.81h,77.89t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sDjOo8jQOVQqjqzY6HPv97w!2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

Appendix L: Timeline of Judicial Proceedings Advanced by Guaynabo's Municipal Government

2007	Guaynabo's municipal government files a case in Puerto Rico's Court of First Instance requesting the trial court to void the designations of Special Communities in Guaynabo.
2008-2010	Special Communities Camarones, Corea, Jerusalén, Sabana, Vietnam, and Los Filtros in Guaynabo present petitions to dismiss Guaynabo's municipal government's lawsuit.
2010	Court of First Instance dismisses the case.
2011	Guaynabo's municipal government takes the case to Puerto Rico's Appellate Court.
2011	Appellate Court orders the continuance of the case, which returns to the Court of First Instance.
2015	Court of First Instance holds a trial to determine whether former Mayor Hector O'Neill was consulted for the designation of Special Communities in Guaynabo or not.
2015	Court of First Instance rules in favor of Guaynabo's municipal government thus jeopardizing Guaynabo's Special Communities' designations and protection against expropriation.
2015	Special Communities Camarones, Corea, Jerusalén, Sabana, Vietnam, and Los Filtros in Guaynabo alongside the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico appeal Court of First Instance's decision.
2016	Appellate Court revokes the contested decision and determines that former Mayor Hector O'Neill was consulted for the designation of Special Communities in Guaynabo.

Appendix M: Special Communities in Guaynabo



(Map created by Author using ESRI ArcGIS Pro Software, with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix N: Communities in and outside of Guaynabo where relocation occurred.



(Map created by Author using ESRI ArcGIS Pro Software, with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix O: Jardines de Los Filtros



(Photographs by Author, 2022)

Appendix P: Timeline of events in Los Filtros

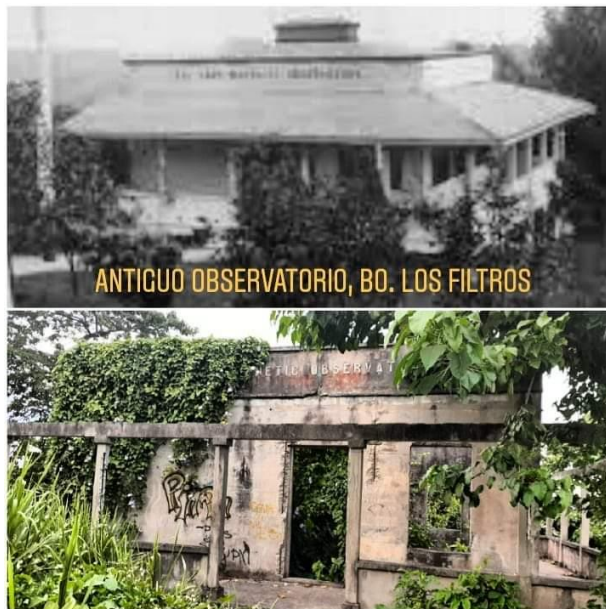
~ 1921-1925	Los Filtros Water Plant and USGS Magnetic Observatory construction
1979	70% of Los Filtros residents obtain property titles
~ 1980-2006	Construction of gated communities around Los Filtros
2001	Passing of Act 1-2001 (known as Special Communities Act) and creation of Special Communities Office
2002	O'Neill advances efforts to expropriate Los Filtros residents for the first time
2002	Los Filtros creates the Comité Cívico de Los Filtros
2002	The Special Communities Office grants Los Filtros "Special Community" designation
2002	Los Filtros, Juan Domingo, Mainé, and Barriada Morales create the Coalición de Comunidades Unidas contra el Atropello y las Expropiaciones (CUCCA)
2002-2004	Los Filtros crafts and lobbies for Bill 3645 alongside other members of the CUCCA and the University of Puerto Rico's School of Law Legal Aid Clinic
2003	Various community leaders including those from Los Filtros create the Alianza de Líderes Comunitarios de Puerto Rico (ALC)
2004	Act 232 is passed for amendment to the Special Communities Act
2004 – 2005	Construction and inauguration of Rosa E. Rivera community center in Los Filtros
2004	Guaynabo's municipal government files expropriation cases against several residents in Los Filtros
2004	Los Filtros residents take these expropriation cases to court and use Act 232 in their defense
2007-2009	Construction and inauguration of Jardines de los Filtros
2007-2016	Judicial proceedings concerning the designation of Special Communities in Guaynabo unfold (see Appendix L for full description of these proceedings)
2015	Los Filtros and Puerto Rico's Natural Resources Department sign agreement to co-manage urban forest
2017	Los Filtros resident denounces inaction from Natural Resources Department related to co-management of urban forest

Appendix Q: Communities who formed the Coalición de Comunidades Unidas contra el Atropello y las Expropiaciones (CUCCA)



(Map created by Author using ESRI ArcGIS Pro Software, with aerial images provided by ESRI, 2022)

Appendix R: Before and after pictures of the USGS Magnetic Observatory's main structure



(Collage image shared with author by interviewee with permission to use in this thesis, 2021)

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