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Whalen Symposium Abstract
Puerto Rico De-Colonization

Imagine an entire nation of people, a nation of immense culture, a nation of rich history, but that nation could not even decide its own fate. No, you're not reading about a British or French colony from the 18th century, you're reading about Puerto Rico and the devastation the United States has created for the nation and its people. Between the Spanish and the United States, Puerto Rico has been under colonial rule for over 500 years. Throughout this time, especially under the United States, Puerto Rico has experienced economic turmoil, loss of culture, and a population that continues to migrate to the mainland. Many of the people from the island who are well educated wind up in the mainland United States due to the lack of investment and opportunity on the island. This can be traced back to the policies put forth by the United States Congress over the last 100 years, and yes, the United States Congress creates the laws and policies of Puerto Rico and no, Puerto Rico does not get a vote when those decisions are made. To bring even more of a reason to feel so passionately about this issue, think about this: Mississippi is by far the poorest state in the country in terms of median household income. Puerto Rico falls behind Mississippi by over \$10,000 per household. Before the Hurricane there was a crisis, now it is do or die.

How can we make Puerto Rico less reliant on the United States? How can we create prosperity when the route of navigation is constantly blocked by the colonial power? How can Puerto Rico find a way to empower themselves? How can we find a route to leave the United States? These are all of the essential and most complex questions one can ask but they must be addressed. Luckily for Puerto Rico there is hope to start the decolonization process by going back in time and reconnecting with its cultural roots: agriculture and environmental sustainability.

Despite being an agricultural paradise, Puerto Rico imports 80% of its food. Farms were destroyed in the wake of Hurricane Maria, which led to further food scarcity and economic turmoil for the entire island. While it is certainly an uphill climb, there have been a number of incredible groups and individuals that have birthed a new food and farming movement on the island. Led by young people, artists, and farmers, a new sustainable localized food system in Puerto Rico can one day flourish. Strengthening the food system to become more resilient and self reliant will lead to a healthier society, make Puerto Rico less dependent on the its colonial ruler, and create an economic engine. It will also help them adapt to the threats of Climate Change. Part of my presentation will include field work from a trip with my peers on farms on the island. We will be documenting, interviewing, and digesting the information and

observations we have during our week there. It is vital that we have on the ground experience to fully understand the scope of this food justice movement.

By studying colonialism in Puerto Rico and how it relates to agriculture and sustainability, my work can help uncover the keys to a self sustaining independent Puerto Rico. While a lot of people on the national political stage call for Puerto Rico to become a state, I for one am proposing a way to leave the United States entirely. It is crucial that Puerto Rico pave its own path and gain the respect and self empowerment it has deserved for the last 500 years, and the way we do that is by going back to the land creating a food system that the rest of the world can emulate.