

***Tierra Futura:***  
**Submerged Archives of Boricua Futurity**

A thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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by

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## Abstract

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### **Abstract:**

This research studies how the Puerto Rican *jibaro* was constructed as a colonial subject through U.S. funded documentary photography in the 1940s. It proposes ways to understand 1) how art and narrative have been used to craft colonial narratives of Puerto Rican identity that play a significant role in governance strategies for assimilation and U.S. occupation, 2) the challenges this presents to Boricua/Puerto Rican notions of collective identity and decolonial futurity, and 3) how artistic practice can be used to interrupt colonial narratives and create decolonial futurity informed by Black and Indigenous liberatory praxis. This research offers an understanding of how art and creative practice contribute to the creation of narratives of both subjugation and self-determination that define collective identity and notions of futurity; and invites artists to understand and recurrently assess their role in these dynamics, through reflective practice.

**Keywords:** Puerto Rico, Borikén, Boricua, Taino, Art and Design, Art History, Colonial Photography, Photography, Creative Process, Caribbean Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Decolonial Studies, Indigenous Methodologies, Archives, Colonial Archives, Futurity, Planetarity, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Embodiment, Grief, Jíbaro, Criollo, Mestizaje, Placekeeping, Imperialism, Jack Delano, Farm Security Administration, New Deal, Colonization, Taino Culture, Taino Cosmology.

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# Tierra Futura: Submerged Archives of Boricua Futurity

## Introduction

This work is about Borikén -otherwise known as the settlement of Puerto Rico, oldest colony of the United States of America. It is about the difference between Puerto Rico as settlement and Borikén as Indigenous Land<sup>1</sup>. It is about its people, their future and the future of the Land. It is about the role of artists in social change. This work is also about myself.

Taigüey<sup>2</sup>. My name is Shey ‘Rí Acu’ Rivera Ríos (they/them). I am an interdisciplinary artist, cultural worker, and community organizer based in Providence, Rhode Island -occupied and unceded ancestral land of Narragansett, Pequot, Pokanoket, Nipmuc, and Mashpee Wampanoag peoples, and a significant location in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. I was born and raised on the Caribbean archipelago of Borikén, ancestral land of Taino people and Black liberators, and known today as Puerto Rico.

Borikén is Taino Land that was colonized by Spain after First Contact<sup>3</sup> in 1493. Spanish rule placed Borikén (now becoming Puerto Rico) as an active location in the transatlantic slave trade and imposed a caste system as a racial governance strategy. Spanish rule also imposed an agricultural economy that relied on slavery and the extraction of Land as resource, with the imposition of coffee, tobacco, and sugar plantations; and enslaved people as labor. The land workers were mostly Black, Indigenous, and mixed race people. Spain imposed a specific system of labor exploitation known as *Encomiendas*, where the Spanish *hacendados*<sup>4</sup> took on Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> I use Land capitalized to signify Land as entity that is alive and transcends geography to encompass a cultural and significant relationality intertwined with the experience of the Native people; and I use ‘land’ without capitalizing to signify Land that has been objectified and turned into resource by colonization and settlement.

<sup>2</sup> Taino Arawak greeting: “Good sun”.

<sup>3</sup> First Contact is a way of explaining the landing of Europeans in the Caribbean through an Indigenous perspective that challenges and unsettles the colonial narrative of ‘discovery’. This is an act of truth-telling. Source: *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science-Fiction* (2012), Grace Dillon.

<sup>4</sup> Francisco Scarano. *Puerto Rico: Cinco Siglos de Historia (Puerto Rico: Five Centuries of History)*.

people as indentured servants within the same process of theft that granted them land rights by the Spanish crown. In exchange, the *hacendados* were required to assume the care and responsibility for the Indigenous workers and ensure their assimilation into Christianity and Spanish language and customs. In 1517, the Spanish crown approved the importation of West African enslaved people as labor to replace Taino workers who died from illness, worker exploitation, or attempts of resistance during this project of violent settler occupation.

After centuries of Spanish rule, the Spanish American War in 1898 led to the occupation of Borikén by the United States. Under this new regime, Boriken became part of the U.S. imperial strategy for overseas expansion and governance.

The U.S. occupation came with a vast array of settlement projects and tactics for assimilation, including the use of narrative strategies. A significant move to use narrative strategy for nation-building efforts took place during the 1940s, with large documentation projects funded by the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA), under the New Deal. The FSA's largest program was the Photography Unit, which documented the life of rural farmers, mostly poor whites and Black Americans in the south. The Photography Unit also produced the largest visual archive of Puerto Rico's agrarian economy and its transformation through development and urbanization. These iconic photographs constructed the Puerto Rican as a poor, racialized, and disenfranchised colonial actor, who had great potential as a laborer in service to U.S. nation-building efforts. The Land and its people became colonial actors in the massive and ongoing settler colonial project of the United States, articulated through photography and visual narrative<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Important to note, local resistance efforts took place in Puerto Rico at the beginning of the U.S. occupation. What eventually facilitated the success of the occupation was the devastating impact of Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899, which left Puerto Rico in a dire state that needed urgent recovery. This is when the U.S. government swayed Borikén with promises of financial and infrastructure support. This was the true beginning of Disaster Capitalism in the archipelago, which we now see in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and María.

Art and culture are powerful tools for social change and for narrative shift. This I know by witnessing and being part of the work of artists and cultural stewards in communities across geographies, and by witnessing the narrative strategies of oppressive systems and their leaders. People, institutions, and nations can create narratives powerful enough to change truths, even about our very selves. Over decades, I've learned to use my creative practice for shifting narratives. First, to shed light on and break apart the stories that perpetuate the oppression of Black, Indigenous, people of color, and queer and transgender people. And secondly, to create stories that depict possible liberatory futures where our cultural power as people who belong to these cultural and identity groups is celebrated; where we have agency and self determination, and where the harms of colonization are undone.

Through this research, I seek to understand the complexity of the histories of Borikén and its cultural intersections, by analyzing how colonial narratives were crafted to intentionally shape notions of Boricua identity for the purpose of assimilation and governability<sup>6</sup>. And, in turn, how to interrupt, intervene, and shift those narratives to make way for the creation of decolonial Boricua Futurity<sup>7</sup> outside of U.S. occupation. In this work, I will refer to the people of Borikén as Boricua<sup>8</sup>, instead of Puerto Ricans, because this is the name for its people based on the Taino Arawak name of the Land. The use of Boricua honors the Caribbean, Afro-diasporic, and Indigenous-rooted experience that is specific to the archipelago of Borikén and its entangled colonial histories.

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<sup>6</sup> I use 'governability' in relation to Michael Foucault's concept of 'governmentality', which he formulated in a series of lectures held at Collège de France in 1978 and 1979. Governmentality is generally associated with the willing participation of the governed.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the concept of 'Futurity' as an Indigenous framework defined by scholar Laura Harjo (Mvskoke). To move Boricua identity and cultural production toward a decolonial and re-Indigenizing practice.

<sup>8</sup> 'Boricua' is the Taino Arawak word for the original people and residents of Borikén. Borikén is the Indigenous Taino Arawak name for the island-archipelago known as the settlement of Puerto Rico. Borikén means Land of the Noble Lords..

## Approach

This research will analyze a significant visual archive produced by photographer Jack Delano and commissioned by the U.S. Farm Security Administration during the 1940s. The people depicted in these photographs were mostly rural farm workers. They are known as *jibaros*, a word that originates from Taino Arawak language: “jiba” and “iro”, and means “people of the forest”. The *jibaro* is akin to the *campesino*, country folk, rural people, or people from the mountains. They are farmers who tend to the land for self-subsistence, and do so in culturally rooted and ancestral ways. These are my ancestors. They were Indigenous, Black, and mixed race people who had direct lineages to plantation culture and the transatlantic slave trade, although their representations in these photographic archives were intentionally white-washed for the purpose of assimilation.

This work will analyze the figure of the Boricua as a colonial subject through the figure of the *jibaro*, specifically through photography. This will serve as a pathway into understanding how art plays an essential role in crafting narratives of both subjugation and domination, shaping collective identities and notions of the future. This research will build upon the work of Black and Indigenous artists and scholars who engage with and push against colonial archives to create possibilities for liberatory futures through creative practice. While this work centers a specific Land and its people, the goal is to contribute to a better understanding of the role of artistic practice for envisioning self-determination in communities across the world, stories that liberate the children of colonization.

I will approach this research as what Grace Dillon (Anishinabe) calls a Native Slipstream<sup>9</sup>, a journey where past-present-future are intertwined and exist simultaneously. This

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<sup>9</sup> A Native slipstream is a concept coined by Grace Dillon (Anishinabe), who also conceptualized the genre of Indigenous Futurisms in affinity with AfroFuturism. Dillon, Grace. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. University of Arizona Press. 2012.

research poses various questions: How can artists navigate histories of oppression from a place of agency and ownership, rather than urgency and resistance? Is our artistry forever meant to be an entanglement or syncretism of our experience/s of colonization? How can/do Boricua people use art and culture to author a sense of identity and futurity outside of narratives formed by U.S. occupation? What can we learn from Black and Indigenous methodologies and liberatory praxis? And what can we offer them in return? How do we build liberatory practices that can exist outside of anything definable by whiteness and settler colonialism? How can we use art and culture to author self-determination and liberatory futures? How can we release ourselves from colonial archives to entirely redefine who we are? Can we take that leap? Are we brave enough? Will we let ourselves break apart, to reemerge new and unrecognizable?

My research will begin by interrogating archival photographs of rural Puerto Rico in the 1940s, taken by Ukrainian photographer Jack Delano, and commissioned by the U.S. Farm Security Administration during the New Deal era. This archive is housed in the U.S. Library of Congress, at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in Hunter College (CUNY, New York), in the *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* of the *Instituto de Cultura*, and in the Puerto Rican Division of Community Education (DIVEDCO). I will analyze how photographs served to construct colonial narratives of Puerto Rico and the *jibaro* as an actor within these narratives; and will propose how artistic practice can be used to interrogate and interrupt colonial archives to offer possibilities for a decolonial Boricua Futurity. I will use sources that analyze Puerto Rican history and context and the role that photography played in the mapping, militarization, and development of the archipelago.

After interrogating photographs, I will move into analyzing creative practices that approach archives in ways that challenge colonial perspectives of history and create pathways of

interpretation from the experience of people from the margins. This second phase of the research engages with Black and Indigenous frameworks<sup>10</sup> and the creative forms of annotation, critical fabulation, and speculative fiction used by Black and Indigenous artists. Lastly, I will employ my own creative practice as a site for interventions on colonial narratives and make moves toward Boricua Futurity in relationship to Land and landscape. In this way, I will articulate a *liberatory*<sup>11</sup> *creative practice* in alignment with Black and Indigenous liberatory praxis, with the purpose of authoring a Boricua Futurity that can imagine and enact decolonial self-determination, with a genuine understanding of its racial and colonial entanglements. This research asks: *how can a creative practice engage with archives and histories to disrupt colonial notions of Land, people, time and place, to author an emerging Boricua Futurity?*

Kandice Chu<sup>12</sup>'s concept of *illiberal humanism* helps to articulate my research journey, affirming the practice of relationality and human beingness that defines my process of knowledge creation. I engage with sources and ways of knowing that are outside of what is traditionally recognized by Western institutionality. My process is rooted on Indigenous methodologies and cosmologies and it intends to open a portal into nonlinear knowledge creation. This is knowledge that comes from the in-betweenness or liminality of the *jibaro* or mixed race person, or what Lisa Lowe calls “the intimacies” of intersectional lineages.

Considering the role of neoliberalism in the unique colonial context of Puerto Rico, my research

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<sup>10</sup> I will use Black and Indigenous frameworks developed by scholars from the Land known as Turtle Island, or North America. I will use these frameworks because they carry a deep understanding of the United States as a settler colonial project and its practices of racism and assimilation. This directly affects the land and people of Borikén. I propose that we can better understand the experience of colonization of Boricua people by learning from the experience of other communities who have faced similar struggles in relation to the U.S. as an empire.

<sup>11</sup> By ‘liberatory’ I mean to make a direct connection to Black and Indigenous movements for liberation and land sovereignty. Liberatory in this context means a move toward creative practice that envisions a collective identity and future of Boricua people free from U.S. occupation and assimilation.

<sup>12</sup> Chuh, Kandice. “Preface” and “The Difference Aesthetic Makes”. *The difference aesthetics makes: On the humanities “after Man”*. Duke University Press, 2019.

journey engages with and pushes against liberalism and its role in the narrative creation of Puerto Rican or Boricua identity, making an epistemological move toward Chu's *illiberal humanism*.

I create knowledge through my lived experience as a valuable form of research and creative practice. My methodology is grounded on *autotheory*<sup>13</sup> and *survivance*<sup>14</sup> as frameworks, with an understanding of the body as an embodied site of archive and vessel that stores and transmits culturally-rooted knowledge<sup>15</sup>. To further articulate the significance of the use of autotheory, Sharpe quotes Hartman:

“The ‘autobiographical example,’ says Saidiya Hartman, ‘is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it’s not about navel gazing, it’s really about trying to look at historical and social processes, as an example of them (Saunders 2008b,7).’ Like Hartman, I include the personal here, ‘to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction’ (Hartman 2008, 7).” (Sharpe)

My positionality and experiences inform this work and allow me to challenge colonial notions and methods of knowledge creation. I am a Boricua person, born and raised in the archipelago of Borikén, and now part of the diaspora that lives in the United States, unceded Indigenous land in Turtle Island (North America). I am a mixed race person, of Taino Arawak, West African, and Spanish/Portuguese ancestry. My ancestors have called Borikén home for longer than I can trace back, before the U.S. occupation in 1898. I also identify as a nonbinary or gender non-conforming queer person. My body holds collisions of intersections and

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<sup>13</sup> I am using here the definition of autotheory offered by Arianne Zwartjes in the text “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory”, which expands upon the definitions created by Lauren Fournier and Stacey Young. Zwartjes defines autotheory as: “work that engages in thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and peculiarities of one’s lived experiences, as processed through or juxtaposed against theory—or as the basis for theoretical thinking.”

<sup>14</sup> Gerald Vizenor’s concept of Native Survivance. I elaborate on this later on in this paper.

<sup>15</sup> Diana Taylor; the body as site of culturally-rooted knowledge or archive and repertoire. Taylor analyzed forms of embodied wisdom, performance art, and ritual, from Indigenous peoples in Latin America.

contradictions; the wisdom and violences of multiple lineages. I am a descendant of a long lineage of Boricua *jibaros*, people who live/d in deep relation to the Land, its waters, its forests, and non-human kin. These ancestors and family members also lived through the modernization of the archipelago and hold its sociopolitical impact as lived experience. I walk this journey with them.

Both of my grandfathers migrated to Pennsylvania in the 1950s for seasonal work in factories, and were able to return to Borikén<sup>16</sup> to build their homes and their families. My family has -in its majority- adopted a pro-statehood<sup>17</sup> political stance on the status of the island and our relationship to the United States. I grew up within the U.S. occupation and the rapid modernization of Puerto Rico, including the rise of the internet. My childhood education was a process of assimilation. I attended a private American School, where we only spoke English except during our one Spanish class. We wore uniforms, recited the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, and I was exposed to cultural products, mindsets, and doctrines that instilled in me the belief that everything about the United States was better than Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. The predominant mindset was that in order for progress to happen, we must fully become “American”. I studied psychology and sociology at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus, where I better understood the impact of colonialism and the U.S./Puerto Rico relationship. This is where I became radicalized and participated in protests, artistic interventions and other forms of actions in alignment with Puerto Rican sovereignty. A financial crisis bubbled up in the 2000s, caused by a Puerto Rican government administration that created and allowed

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<sup>16</sup> Due to economic pressure and government incentives, Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S. in the 1940s-1960s for factory work in various locations across the nation. Some communities were not able to return due to financial and other limitations, and instead settled in their respective locations, including: Chicago, Holyoke, New York, and other locations across New England.

<sup>17</sup> Puerto Rico has three major political parties: Partido Nuevo Progresista (pro-statehood), Partido Popular Democrático (pro-commonwealth), and Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (pro-Independence). The last decade saw the birth and growth of two additional progressive parties: Puerto Rico Para Todos and Victoria Ciudadana.

extractive policies for economic development that primarily served U.S. corporations. This impacted and limited access to futurity in Borikén for a whole generation of young people. In 2010, I was part of a brain-drain generational wave of Boricuas that migrated to the U.S. in response to the difficulty of accessing or even imagining a future in our homeland. Without effective strategies for sustainable development, the financial crisis worsened and prompted the U.S. Congress to pass a law to establish a Fiscal Control Board<sup>18</sup> in 2016 to restructure the Puerto Rican debt. Following this, Borikén saw the impact of several natural disasters<sup>19</sup>, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political unrest between 2017 and 2023.

My uprooting was a nuanced experience of displacement, but it has also given me access to a deeper way of understanding the Puerto Rican experience in relation to U.S. occupation and colonization, and how it connects with the struggles of other communities in this country. In addition, this work is informed by my family's experience with the unresolved political status of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, as people who inhabit the partiality -half in, half out- of being a colonial territory whose sovereignty remains in a continual state of contestation.

Creating research and engaging in creative practice are both processes that require deep reflection and analysis of self and history. In a sense, it requires a deep dive, or a 'being submerged'. I borrow from Macarena Gómez Barris<sup>20</sup> the term 'submerged perspectives' to anchor this research journey: The challenges, joys, and hunger for exploring the depths of these archives and stories come from my body, my blood, my skin, and my lineage.

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<sup>18</sup> P.R.O.M.E.S.A. Act 2016 established a fiscal control board to restructure the immense debt that resulted from governance and policies that facilitated the extractive relationship of the U.S. with Puerto Rico. The Fiscal Control Board represented various human rights violations and resulted in a large social movement across Puerto Rico and its diaspora to repeal P.R.O.M.E.S.A. and dismantle the Fiscal Control Board.

<sup>19</sup> In 2017, Hurricanes Irma and María hit Borikén back-to-back with severe destructive impact. A year afterwards, a series of earthquakes devastated the southern part of Borikén.

<sup>20</sup>Macarena Gómez Barris. *The Extractive Zone*.

In Taino Arawak culture, Coabey is the spirit realm, the underworld. It exists underneath the land and takes the physical shape of a complex system of caves, where the spirits of the dead -called *upías*- rest. They come out at night as bats, and they feed on guava fruit. Coabey is stewarded by the Taino *cemí* or spirit, Maquetaurie Guayaba, who is often represented as an anthropomorphized bat, or hybrid creature both bat and human. In Coabey, spirits hang from wet caverns where water is born from springs that quell the thirst of the Land. Coabey, as cave system, offers a conceptual framework for this research. This is a fitting metaphor for what becomes a dive into the in-between and underneath the layers of colonial archives; a ‘submerged perspective’. In Coabey, we can find the root system of knowledge, what’s been left out of colonial archives. Entering this liminal space of this cave system becomes the shadow work required to birth liberatory practice and stories of decolonial futurity. I will lean into it.

## Chapter 1: Visualizing Occupation, Reframing the Jíbaro

“Soy fuerza de cordillera | raíz de sueño sembrado” - Ilé, Contra Todo

I begin this research with a return to Borikén, to visit my family and to think through the entanglements that manifest in this text. I return to Corozal, the rural town where I grew up. I walk behind my father, who is on his way to feed the 40+ geese and other non-human kin he stewards. They make noise upon his arrival: geese, chickens, roosters, sheep. My father wears worn out jeans, a t-shirt with an image of a galaxy, a black panama hat, his round flip-up glasses, two thick silver chains, and his iconic rat tail. He is his most genuine self, fully expressed in his way of being and his choice of attire and decoration. His grin is quick and easy. He is a man of the Land, with knowledge of every corner of the territory he stewards: from where the water flows during heavy rains, to where the *malanga* (taro) and *yautía* plants grow best and when they can be harvested, to when the sheep are ready to give birth and how to assist them. My father is a modern day *jíbaro*, or a person of the mountains; a self-sustaining farmer who tends to the Land in unconventional (or Indigenous-rooted) ways and has decades of experience in animal husbandry. He is not a figure of the past, he is a futurist. He is a *jíbaro* of today.

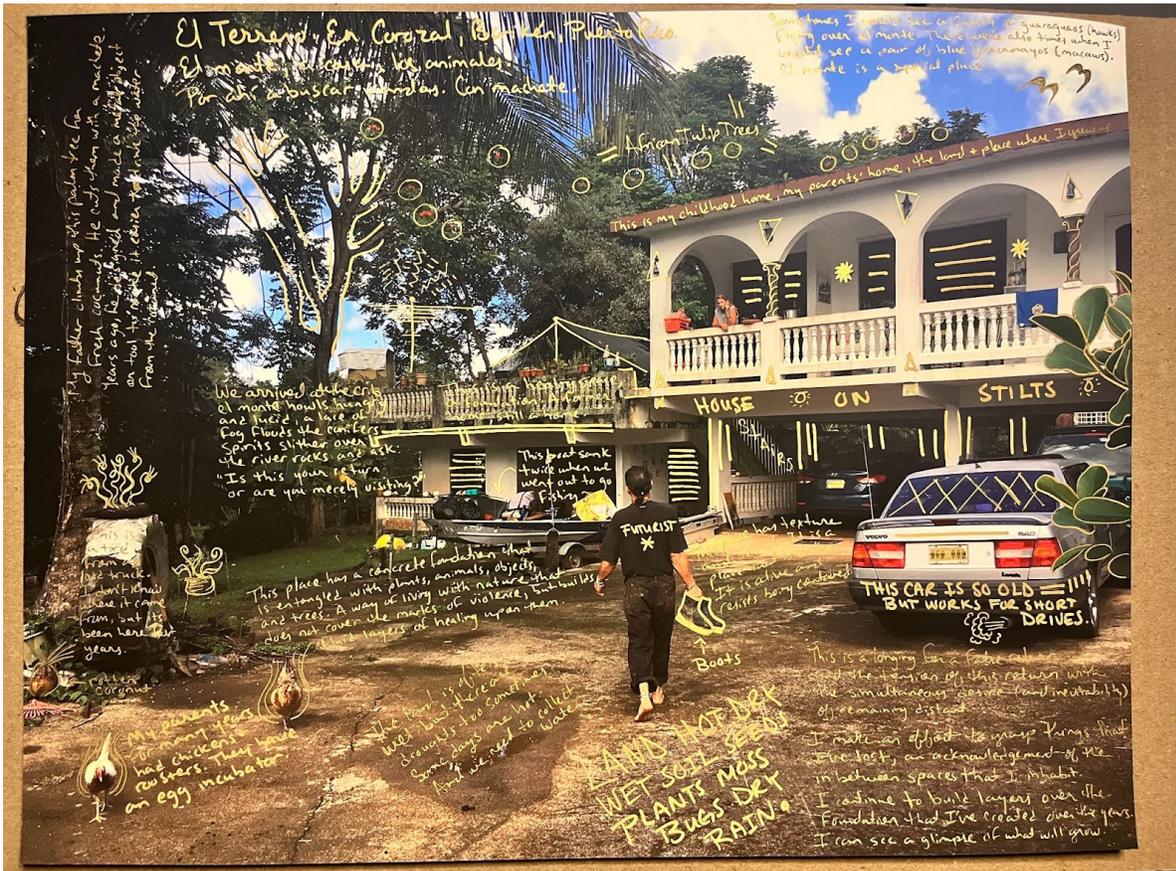
The *jíbaro* is a beloved and contested figure of Boricua identity: a symbol used both in service to Boricua liberation and -in its contradiction- for the U.S. occupation. Some scholars consider the *jíbaro* as an antiquated symbol of national identity. However, I argue that the *jíbaro* still exists today as a strong cultural symbol and has evolved into a multi-layered icon in the collective imaginary of Borikén through a variety of visual and narrative representations. Among these, photography played a significant role in the mythification of the *jíbaro* as cultural icon.



Daily Life in Puerto Rico, c. 1938-1942. Jack Delano, FSA, Library of congress.



Samuel Rivera Chárriez in Levittown Beach. Shey Rivera. Digital photograph, iPhone, 2019.



"Terreno #2", annotated photograph, digital print intervened with gold ink. Shey Rivera Ríos. 2022.

## Delano's Gaze



Family of a farm laborer in Barceloneta, 1941. Photography by Jack Delano. *Puerto Rico Mio*. Photo Courtesy of the Delano Collection at Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt became U.S. President and established the New Deal in response to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. The New Deal<sup>21</sup> was a set of programs, public work projects and financial reforms that expanded the role of the government in the economy and provided economic relief for the U.S. and its people, with a focus on rural farmers, unemployed people, youth, and the elderly. Various agencies were formed under the New Deal, including the Farm Security Administration (FSA)<sup>22</sup>, which was established to provide relief for

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<sup>21</sup> The New Deal was a set of policies enacted in the United States between 1933 and 1939 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

<sup>22</sup> The FSA came out of the Resettlement Administration (1935–1937), an agency created in 1935 with the purpose of relocating struggling urban and rural families to communities planned by the federal government. The FSA ran as a rural development agency between 1937–1942. In 1942, its Photographic Unit became part of the Office of War Information (OWI), which ran during the World Wars until 1945. OWI created radio broadcasts, newspapers, posters, photographs, films and other forms of media, for the purpose of large-scale information and propaganda

rural poverty in the country and was managed by Roy Stryker, an American economist, government official, and photographer. The FSA managed three documentation programs that portrayed the challenges of rural poverty, of which its Photographic Unit was the largest and most impactful, hiring photographers to document the life and struggles of rural farm workers. The other two programs consisted of documentary film and a Southern folks song recording and archiving initiative. The FSA's goal was rural rehabilitation in the country, with the intent of providing relief and support to low income farmers, while also engaging in land purchase and resettlement of some of these farmers.

The FSA Photographic Unit produced what some consider the most iconic documentary photography of American history, including: the impact of the Dust Bowl, the lives of rural white farmers, what might be the first large-scale visual documentation of the lives of African-Americans, and the largest archive of agrarian life and modernization of Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory. This monumental body of images is archived at the Library of Congress. Some of the most notable FSA photographers<sup>23</sup> were: Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, and Jack Delano. Their works made significant contributions to an archive that functioned as a visual imaginary of the nation. In a way, this archive is a monument.

Jack Delano becomes my portal and compass into a practice of intervening in the colonial archives of Puerto Rico. Delano was a Jewish Ukrainian immigrant who worked for two years as an FSA photographer, between 1940 - 1942. Delano first traveled to Puerto Rico in 1941 on a trip that was meant to be short, but extended into a stay of several months when the U.S. issued a declaration of war in reaction to the bombing in Pearl Harbor. Delano's trip to Puerto Rico had

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campaigns. And in 1946, the FSA was replaced by the Farmers Home Administration, which ran until 2006. <https://www.archives.gov/files/atlanta/education/depression-curriculum/section-2.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> List of FSA photographers: Arthur Rothstein (1935), Theodor Jung (1935), Ben Shahn (1935), Walker Evans (1935), Dorothea Lange (1935), Carl Mydans (1935), Russell Lee (1936), Marion Post Wolcott (1936), John Vachon (1936/38), Jack Delano (1940), John Collier (1941), Marjory Collins (1941), Louise Rosskam (1941), Gordon Parks (1942) and Esther Bubley (1942).

such a profound influence on him that in 1946 he decided to settle there permanently with his wife Irene. He used his photography to document four decades of social change in Puerto Rico, with the support of various government entities and foundations. The result was a vast body of work that comprises the single and most important archive of rural people and farm workers in the island. These are my family and my ancestors.

Delano often used a standard press Speed Graphic Graflex<sup>24</sup> camera or a Busch Pressman camera; he is most known for his black and white photography and also used Kodachrome<sup>25</sup> film for his color images. I recognize the vast landscape of work produced by scholars and cultural theorists, like Susan Sontag and Stuart Hall, who analyze the impact of photography, the ways of viewing the image across contexts, and the biases of the gaze, among other topics. This research does not intend to create a comparative analysis of existing cultural theory on photography as a medium, but acknowledges the vastness of the existing cultural studies landscape and opts to build upon it or extend it by focusing on photography that constructed the figure of the Boricua *jibaro* within the specific political context of the people of Borikén.

Delano is celebrated as an artist who created his work in a way that honored the people he photographed and worked with. From his work and life, we can understand that he executed his creative practice with an intention of care. And, as both a Jewish man and immigrant, he likely carried with him a lens and understanding of the impacts of imperialism and the resilience of oppressed people. At the same time, he was an artist employed by the U.S. government to create a body of work in alignment with the goals of the FSA, as the government agency that employed him, and the New Deal as the set of policies that informed the political context of the

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<sup>24</sup> This is the only source I found that identifies a camera used by Delano is: <http://secondat.blogspot.com/2009/10/fsa-cameras.html>, and in this photo he has a Busch Pressman camera: <https://magpiesmagazine.com/2022/05/29/the-photography-of-jack-delano/>

<sup>25</sup> “Jack Delano’s Greatest Photo Assignment”. Arthur H. Bleich. Red River Paper Blog. <https://www.redrivercatalog.com/blog/jack-delanos-greatest-photo-assignment.html>

time. Regardless of his intentions as an artist, his artistic production under the FSA played an important role in supporting U.S. occupation and development in Puerto Rico during a time of imperial expansion overseas. Artistic production under the FSA Photographic Unit helped to inform governance strategies for Puerto Rico as a new territory and contributed to the formation of an assimilated national identity for Puerto Ricans during the occupation.



A worker cuts sugarcane on a plantation. Daily Life in Puerto Rico, c. 1938-1942. Photograph by Jack Delano. *Puerto Rico Mio*. Delano Collection at Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Sugarcane worker in a burned field, Guánica, 1941. Photograph by Jack Delano. *Puerto Rico Mio*. Delano Collection at Rare Book and Manuscript Library

We cannot separate Delano's photography from its client and funder, and the political intentions that guided the work. Similarly, we cannot divorce Delano from his experience and lens as a cis heterosexual white man and not a Boricua with lived experience. These diverging perspectives play a role in his gaze and the aesthetic choices in his body of work.

Delano's photographs provide a meaningful representation of Puerto Ricans rural people and farm workers. Yet his implicit bias is present in how he gravitated to the people, experiences, and aesthetics that felt familiar to him. For example, a focus on lighter skin or white passing Puerto Ricans and their potential as workers. His bias served the goals of the FSA and the U.S. government during the New Deal: to deliver a narrative of Puerto Rican people as poor and working class farmers that had great potential as laborers for the U.S. as a nation, people who were primed and ready to be governed, and who could 'become white'. The Boricua becomes the Puerto Rican farm worker, a subject that is constructed through the photographer's gaze, and the *jibaro* becomes its avatar. The worker is visually constructed as a site of value. Delano uses the photographic aesthetic of the time, or the aesthetic shared by and defined by FSA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange<sup>26</sup>, who created iconic images of the Dust Bowl in service to FSA goals.



*Sugar cane workers resting, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. Jack Delano. 1941. Library of Congress.*

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<sup>26</sup>Dorothea Lange's most iconic photo of the same era is "Migrant Mother". For decades the subject of this photo was thought to be a white, immigrant mother, which appealed to Americans as people with a similar cultural narrative. It was later unearthed that this woman was actually of Cherokee descent, passing as a white European/descendant immigrant/migrant. This is a strategy of visual representation that erases lineage and positions whiteness as the dominant narrative. <https://www.history.com/news/migrant-mother-new-deal-great-depression#> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/lens/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother.html>

Delano's archive of photographs<sup>27</sup> depicts the transformation of Puerto Rican society from a poor, rural, and agrarian one to an urbanized and industrial one with the intent of defining and visualizing progress in relation to U.S. occupation and industrial development. Within this collection, Delano has several photographs that depict the arrival of new technologies, not only farm work machinery, but computers in a mathematics class in a private elementary school in San Juan (Puerto Rico Mio, 163). From needlework, to textile factories, from manual cigar labor to the main control room of an oil refinery in Yabucoa (Puerto Rico Mio, 176-179). The New Deal facilitates investments made by the U.S. government to transform the laborers of the land into factory workers and machinists. Knowledge from the Land is no longer prioritized but replaced with the urgency, push, and promise of machine labor as a new frontier. The laborer is augmented, with the promise of a future of progress, but remains a laborer and partial subject of the occupation, at the mercy of the economic tides created by the U.S. government as it positions its global influence. Through this visualization of progress through the advent of technology and industrialization -shown through the people's apparel, the urbanized landscape, the relationship to machinery, the affluence of a rising middle and upper class,- Delano authors a narrative of progress that gains favor for Puerto Rico's status as Free Associated State (*Estado libre Asociado*), overseen by the U.S. government. This body of work can be understood as a survey or 'impact report' for the occupation: *look at the progress, why would we want anything different?* Without revealing -or, in fact, intentionally hiding- the small print and terms of this colonial relationship.

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<sup>27</sup> The Delano photographs I analyze in this research are all included in the photo book *Puerto Rico Mio: Four Decades of Change*.



“Pledge of allegiance to the flag, in a school in Coroza”. Jack Delano. 1946. Library of Congress.

Another Delano photograph that stands out is titled “Pledge of allegiance to the flag, in a school in Coroza” (1946). This image is black and white, and depicts a little girl, around 6 or 7 years of age, standing in front of a chalkboard in what is identified to be a school in Coroza. The girl is wearing a dress, a ribbon on her hair, and is holding an American flag. Behind her, the chalk board has the name “Ana” written in chalk, and has drawings of what could be several kinds of fruit, flowers, and words. On the chalkboard, there’s a large paper up on the chalkboard, toward the left corner of the photo. It has a drawing of a house and underneath it there are faint words, what seems to be handwritten variations of the same sentence referring to a house or home. This is one of the photos of Delano that I tampered with and intervened. I increased the

contrast to reveal what these sentences say: “La casa, ...pa tiene casa, ...amá tiene casa ...pa no tiene casa, ...pa no tiene casa, ...mimí no tiene casa, ...ío no tiene casa.”



“No Tiene Casa”. Shey Rivera Ríos. 2022. Still image of digital animated collage, intervened photograph. Original photo by Jack Delano. 1946. Library of Congress.

This image becomes an omen that foreshadows the evolution and impact of U.S. occupation in Puerto Rico decades later. Today, 2023, the island/archipelago of Borikén and its people live in a struggle to keep and protect their Land and home amidst rapid displacement and waves of disaster capitalism after Hurricanes Irma and María. This includes land grabs by American entrepreneurs moving into the island for tax breaks (Law 20 & 22), the boom of cryptocurrency alongside climate disaster, local government complicity in positioning the archipelago as a location for block chain driven settlement, and the push to increase tourism which has included the rapid transformation of housing properties into AirBnBs.

As an added layer, this photograph was taken in my hometown of Corozal. This is a rural town that faces disenfranchisement as it struggles to create and maintain infrastructure for its residents. It is also a town in the depths of the mountains where, geographically, the Land has supported a stronger resistance to assimilation. This photograph shows the depth of the strategies of assimilation. It depicts a light skin Puerto Rican child holding an American flag in this deeply rural town, within the context of pledging allegiance to the U.S. nation. The photo represents rurality being ‘tamed’ or ‘civilized’; the Puerto Rican as an innocent little girl that passes as white and is ready to become assimilated. The photograph connects to the context of a law that was passed in 1902 to establish English as the obligatory language of instruction in Puerto Rican schools, and to set English and Spanish as the official languages of the government of Puerto Rico. This photograph also connects to my own childhood experience of assimilation and a family with a predominantly pro-statehood political stance.

Delano’s work took the *jibaro*, the Puerto Rican rural farm worker, and transformed him into an icon of Puerto Rican identity. And this icon had a carefully crafted story of transformation: from disenfranchised rural poverty, into modernization and progress facilitated by U.S. intervention. The Puerto Rican subject is constructed through this visual narrative of progress enforced by the FSA and the New Deal. The *jibaro* as a worker of this new territory has the potential of ‘becoming’<sup>28</sup> and needs development. The colonial narrative justifies intervention. This is a recast of slavery, a recast of labor, and a successful (although unfulfilled) narrative of the American Dream.

Even so, we can understand that Delano sought to create with care and personal investment. Because that is usually what artists attempt to do; they pour their passion and love

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<sup>28</sup> Becoming developed, civilized; becoming ‘white’; becoming labor for the U.S. to strengthen its economic and land development projects.

into what they create. He undoubtedly fell in love with Borikén and its people and committed to a life there. At the same time, his work was tethered with a political agenda that sought to facilitate assimilation, governability, and development. These conflicting truths can and do exist at the same time. In this way, Delano represents a common experience of artists, who create work at the intersection of conflicting interests and systemic structures.

Artists often inhabit a contentious space between creative practice, political agendas, and funding structures (or the market). To create from these disjunctures requires developing a reflective practice to carry alongside our process of creating. This means approaching our work with awareness and intention, so that we may create in ways that respond intentionally to our context as artists, that align with the agendas that we wish to support, and so that we can understand and foresee the impacts of our work. This reflective practice prompts us to continuously ask how our artistic production can be used to cause good or to cause harm, how can it be used in ways that align or don't align with our visions of liberation, and how art in fact has a significant impact on people's lives and the structures that impact our futures. This is the urgent challenge of all artists and designers: a call for awareness of the systemic structures that impact our work and of the power of our creative intention. In a way, we are all Delano.

### Jíbaros in Other Art Forms

Delano was not the only artist shaping the profile of the *jibaro*. This figure became mythified through the arts in various ways.

The iconic paintings “El Velorio” by Francisco Oller (1893) and “Pan Nuestro” by Ramón Frade (1905), are significant artworks that fed the collective imaginary and shaped a national identity of *Puertorriqueñidad* during the transition period of the occupation (pre and post Spanish American War)<sup>29</sup>. This aligned with the rise of a new social class of Puerto Ricans called *criollos*, who were of Spanish descent, born in the archipelago, and sought to build a sense of identity outside of imperial rule. In their rebellion and search for identity beyond the empire, they resorted to the culture and iconography of working class people of color in the archipelago. They romanticized the poor and working class *jibaro*, gave him light skin in all representations, and used him as a symbol of national pride and resistance. As Puerto Rican art historian Jeffrey Boe, has argued:

“This set of shared symbols provided a visual dimension to the aspirational nationalism that had been growing within the creole community since the mid- 1800s. This *criollismo* mythified the agrarian laborer as a prototypical icon of Puerto Rican identity. By identifying themselves as *jibaros*, Puerto Rican creoles used *jibaro* self-fashioning as a way to define their community as unique vis a vis the colonial metropolis (first Spain, later the United States).” (Boe)

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<sup>29</sup> Boe, Jeffrey L. “Painting Puertorriqueñidad: The Jíbaro as a Symbol of Creole Nationalism in Puerto Rican Art before and after 1898”.

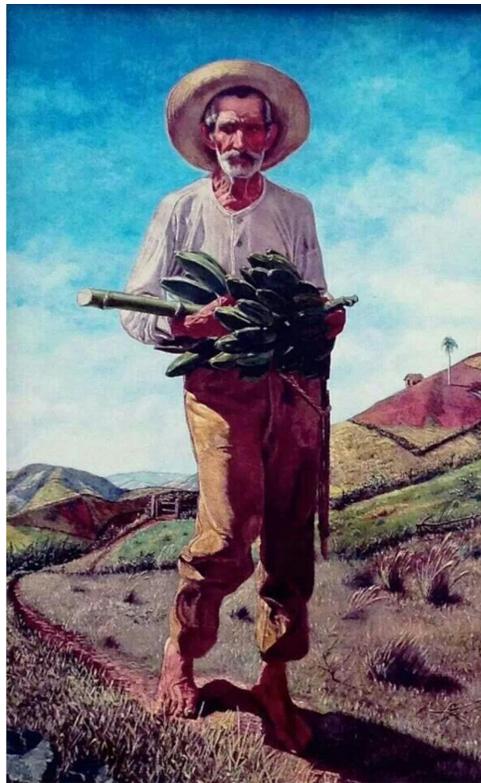


*El velorio*. Oil on canvas, 8 x 13 ft. Museum of History, Anthropology, and Art, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus. Francisco Oller. 1893.

Oller was a criollo and educated in Spain. He represented an elite class that looked toward rural regionalism as a site of national identity, while existing in the contradiction of not belonging to the class or racial groups of the people he was representing in his artwork. In contrast to many other representations of rural Puerto Rican life, his iconic painting *El velorio* doesn't shy from depicting and emphasizing the racial diversity of Boricuas and the African and Indigenous cultural presence within *jibaro* culture and its people. This is one of the many reasons this painting is considered a masterpiece of massive significance to Puerto Rican history and culture, with vast cultural analysis around it.

In 1945, another criollo, Manuel Alonso Pacheco, made significant contributions to the *jibaro* as a symbol of Puerto Rican national identity. Alonso Pacheco was a soldier, doctor, writer and journalist. He was part of the Liberal Reform Movement, which formed in 1870 following

the Grito de Lares and was the first political party to be established in Puerto Rico. Alonso managed the party's journal *El Agente*, as part of their organizing in support of Puerto Rico moving away from Spanish control. And he wrote and published *El Jibaro*, a notable work of literature that attempted at collecting and representing the cultural practices and lives of rural people in Borikén, but does so from a criollo perspective that, according to some critiques<sup>30</sup>, portrays the jíbaro through a lens of whiteness.



*Pan Nuestro. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 in. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Ramón Frade. 1905.*

These were all expressions of an artistic movement called Regionalism, or *criollismo* in the Caribbean and South American context. It articulated a Western understanding of landscape through literature and painting that offered depictions of rural life. Doña Barbara, by Venezuelan

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/459897/In\\_His\\_Image\\_and\\_Likeness\\_The\\_Puerto\\_Rican\\_Jibaro\\_As\\_Political\\_Icon](https://www.academia.edu/459897/In_His_Image_and_Likeness_The_Puerto_Rican_Jibaro_As_Political_Icon)

novelist Rómulo Gallegos was a canon literary work of the times. This novel depicted the Land as barbaric and undeveloped landscape in need of domestication by the white civilized man -or the *criollo*, a descendant of European people who was often the head of the farm/plantation. The story follows Doña Barbara, a strong woman with deep ties to the Land, who becomes a representation of the ‘wilderness’ and ‘barbaric’ nature of the Land. Doña Barbara is woman intertwined with wilderness as site of both resistance and vulnerability to patriarchal conquest. This is a novel about the plantation, farmland, farm workers, and colonization in practice. It is a romanticisation of colonization through the lens of civilization and progress. The Land, women, and people of color, are depicted as potential for development and generators of wealth for white elite men, in this case *criollos*. In becoming the antithesis of ‘civilized’ society, they are used as narrative tools to cement the identity of the *criollo*. These constructions of a ‘barbaric’ landscape and its social actors are narrative strategies specific to the Caribbean and South America, that contribute to a matrix of domination<sup>31</sup> that builds settler futurity, erases Indigenous people, white-washes a history of plantation culture and slavery, and severs essential ties to Land, history, and ancestral legacies.

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<sup>31</sup> The Matrix of Domination is a concept developed by Black Feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins. Specifically in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

### **Criollo Perspectives 1930s**

In analyzing photographs from the 1930s and 40s, we must consider the cultural theory that fed the political context of the time in Borikén. *Insularismo* (Pereira, 1934) and *Prontuario de Puerto Rico* (Blanco, 1935) are two significant works that theorize Puerto Rican identity and society. Pereira and Blanco are part of the celebrated *Generación de los 30s* (Generation of the 30s). During this time, Puerto Rican scholars and artists -mostly those of primarily Spanish descent and lineage, theorized about national identity in relation to U.S. occupation, but from a perspective that was shaped by their relationship to Spanish ancestry and largely influenced by their class upbringing.

Blanco was directly influenced by Pereira's work, and Blanco was a friend and collaborator of Jack Delano and his wife Irene. While Blanco and Pereira made significant contributions to theorizing on Puerto Rican identity, they missed important pieces that would help define a decolonial identity for Boricua: they lacked an alignment with Black and Indigenous frameworks and analysis on colonialism, race, and identity. This is significant because Taino and African heritage make up a significant part of Boricua culture and identity, and these lineages have been marginalized, erased, denied, or assimilated into a *mestize* identity that was articulated in relation to whiteness precisely by criollos and settlers. There is no liberation when we seek to replicate our colonizer, and when we continue the hierarchies that serve to uphold white supremacy.

There are five things that have been historically challenging to reconcile and uproot in the attempts to decolonize Puerto Rican cultural identity and cultural narratives toward Boricua Futurity:

1) The Doctrine of Discovery: The colonization of Turtle Island included the carefully crafted Doctrine of Discovery as a tale of victory that was branded as the ‘beginning’ of the cultural identity of people across the two continents, including ‘Americans’ and Puerto Ricans. As many Black and Indigenous scholars and culture bearers can attest, this was not a cultural achievement, but rather a series of events rooted in violence, slavery, land theft, and erasure. This is not the story of Boricua people, yet it has been fed to us as if it were and ,for centuries, our people have been celebrating our colonizers as if we were them. But we are not the ‘victors’ of colonization and we do not belong to that story. Many Boricua people align with this narrative because of the hegemonic power that Spain and the U.S. have had over Boricua culture for decades. This narrative is used as political propaganda and a tool of assimilation<sup>32</sup>. The seductive quality of colonial narratives plays off the people’s desire to be part of something big and spectacular, eroding the truths of our lineages. Narrative warfare is tactical and seductive; it recruits, erases, weaponizes, and positions itself in power.

2) Unlearning the myth of the extinction of the Taino people. We exist. We exist in the same ways that our other Indigenous kin exist in Turtle Island (North America). We exist between lineages and in mixed bloodlines, but we exist. Our cultural connections to our Land and our waters and our ancestors are still alive. It has been a long and strong settler colonial project to erase Taino people and lineage. This is intentional and is a common strategy of colonization used across the United States of America: the intentional efforts (albeit unsuccessful) to erase Indigenous peoples in order to make the settler become Indigenous -in other words, to legitimize the settler’s claim to Land. This colonial

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<sup>32</sup> A powerful text on this topic is by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, titled “Good Day, Columbus: Silences, Power, and Public History (1492–1892)”. From the book *Trouillot Remixed*.

technology was used in the Caribbean, including Borikén. It is hard, many people still believe that our own people are extinct. We were schooled out of ourselves. But Taino people exist, we are descendants and we are alive. And another important truth is that not all Puerto Ricans can lay claim to this cultural heritage, because there are European descendants who maintained power and control and intermarried to preserve lineages of whiteness. Their children and grandchildren continue to study in the most elite Puerto Rican schools. These groups, in their majority, are not Black nor Taino descendants. Most of the Black and Taino descendants continue to be part of the working classes, due to the rigid system of racial hierarchy inherited from the Spanish caste system. This important to note because this elite class of Puerto Ricans with inherited wealth has historically coopted working class narratives of oppression in the face of U.S. occupation.

3) The erasure or whitewashing of the history of enslavement in the Caribbean:

Plantation culture had and still has a profound impact in the narratives of *Puertorriqueñidad*, and is often unaddressed or whitewashed to uphold narratives of innocence and mestizaje. Anti-Blackness is a technology of colonization that is still deeply rooted in notions of Puerto Rican identity. There is vast research that offers deeper and contemporary analysis on this topic.

3) Spanish as ‘mother tongue’: Spanish is a language imposed onto Boricua people through colonization. It is not ours. This is a hard truth to grapple with, considering the long legacy of protecting Spanish as the national language of Puerto Rico in the face of U.S. occupation. Many -if not most- Puerto Rican scholars of the 1900s anchored their cultural analysis on Spanish language as a signifier of Puerto Rican identity and culture. That is true, and yet, incomplete. It’s not possible to fully understand or claim a Boricua

cultural identity without understanding the hegemonic power of Spanish as a colonial language that was imposed by Spain during their occupation. Similarly, it's important to acknowledge the significant presence of Taino Arawak and West African languages and cultural practices that create and live within Boricua culture. Even if most Boricua people are not fully fluent, a significant number of Arawak and West African words and cultural expressions are still used today and characterize the specific form of Spanish spoken by Boricua people, and shape our culture and world view. This is important because the main story is that these lineages do not exist or do not have much significance in our culture. This colonial narrative is a misconception that does not reflect our truth and is an intentional part of the project of assimilation and whiteness. Our mother tongue is Arawak, is Yoruba, is the Land.

4) The role of Latinidad and mestizaje in racial governance systems that perpetuate Indigenous erasure and anti-Blackness. This will be discussed in Chapter 2, in the section titled *Jibaro Consciousness*.

Blanco states, “This work is still relevant today because the main issue around Puerto Rican identity has not been resolved: *Who are we as a people, beyond the influence of colonialism and the empires that occupy/ied us?*”. Their contributions helped lay the foundation for studies on Puerto Rican national identity and formulated key questions that are still of great relevance today. However, they lacked a sophisticated analysis of race, class, and gender that is necessary in order to understand the entanglements of the Puerto Rican/Boricua context.

Now in 2023, almost 90 years after Blanco and Pereira, my work grapples with their questions and continues to push the analysis. Our identity has been historically shaped and assigned to us by empires with immense power; an identity crafted to benefit the settler rather

than to ground and center our own people. There is great potential and great risk in attempting to untangle the enmeshment. And the potential lies in how Boricua people and Land are both sites of collisions of multiple lineages, or what Lisa Lowe calls the *intimacies of four continents*. We are the physical and embodied existence of these collisions. We are the evidence. It is in our bodies. And if we examine our entanglements, we can shed light on how the journeys of both struggle and liberation across cultural groups are intertwined and how we are implicated in collective struggles for liberation. The words of Fannie Lou Hammer bloom between these rifts in the colonial archives: “We will never be free if all of us aren’t free”.

## Our Island and the Imperial Gaze

Sociologist Lanny Thompson<sup>33</sup> dedicated years to researching how photography was used to represent Puerto Ricans in ways that favored the colonial agendas of domination and conquest<sup>34</sup>. He identified this as a significant strategy of imperialism, called “civilizing missions”. Thompson looks at historical documentation of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 and unpacks the racial and socio-historical context of the Puerto Rican people, how they were depicted and by who, and how the use and proliferation of photographs of the time served the goals of occupation and governance.

A significant ideology of the so-called American<sup>35</sup> nation in 1898 was that “most of the peoples of the world were not able to create efficient, democratic and prosperous governments”. This was accompanied by the belief that U.S. economic, political and cultural institutions were globally superior, which served to justify the colonization of other peoples and lands. The U.S. imperial agenda of this time was founded upon the industry of slavery and focused on creating greater economic, geographical and commercial growth, which in turn granted license to forced dominance and occupation.

This was intrinsically connected to the notion of racial superiority. The studies and cultural expressions of the time served to promote racial hierarchy by making distinctions between ‘the civilized and ‘the primitive’. As it relates to Puerto Ricans, the cultural relations

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<sup>33</sup> Lanny Thompson is a sociologist and now retired professor of Social Sciences from my previous alma matter, the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus. He is based in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was consulted as part of this research.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, Lanny. "Nuestra isla y su gente: la construcción del otro." *Our Islands and Their People. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales y Departamento de Historia de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* (1995).

<sup>35</sup> The continued use of the terms ‘America’ and ‘American’ to refer to the U.S. and its people has been contested by many scholars, specifically Global South and South American thinkers. The main arguments that the use of this language erases the geo-political expansiveness of two continents, and linguistically serves the imperial agenda of crafting an imaginary of the U.S. as a global power and owning hegemony over the 34 additional countries that comprise the Americas. This is a linguistic strategy of the U.S. as a settler colonial project.

practiced by the U.S. were based on domination-exploitation, clashes between two great civilizations (Anglo-Saxon versus Spanish) and the mission of “civilizing primitive people”. Under this imperialist cultural relationship, the Puerto Rican ‘other’ is created and the colonial relationship between the American nation and Puerto Rico develops.

Thompson quotes writings by José de Olivares, which emphasize the Eden-like state of the natural world of Indigenous peoples, the negative aspects of the conquest, and the horror of enslavement and genocide. Photography played a key role and was used as a tool for conquest. Through the lens of the colonizer, a power game ensues and creates an essential binary: a carefully crafted visual division between Puerto Ricans and Spaniards, operationalized by a caste system of race and class.

Photography was employed to create narratives of social class and racial *mestizaje* by using visual cues such as the clothing and physical characteristics of the individuals photographed. The colonial gaze of photographers of the time focused on capturing the lives of impoverished Puerto Rican people. An absence of the middle and upper classes is intentional, to eliminate the presence of a more complex system of social classes in the narratives of the island. This reinforced colonial dichotomies between native Puerto Ricans and Spaniards. It also suggested the urgency and need for U.S. government intervention, which gave an entry point to justify the invasion of the island.

The Puerto Rican people were represented as incapable of self-governance and autonomy, and instead were represented as having the ability to learn and assimilate well to other cultures, especially “the customs and “good habits” of the Americans. The native was seen as an innocent and happy person “in ignorance of the obligations of morality”. They were considered “amoral beings but not immoral or corrupt by evil”, the “wild nobleman” or *bon sauvage*. This was part

of the marketing plan to sell to a people -perceived as vulnerable and primitive- the need for a nation that will civilize and train, guide and subdue.

The Puerto Rican was seen as an infant child, the wild-child of Itard. (Itard was a scientist who tried to tame and civilize the 'wild child' Vincent to further the science of human development.) "Among the connotations of childhood are immaturity, dependence and the need for mentoring and supervision. But childhood could also connote innocence, loyalty and educational potential" (Itard). This birthed the oppressive concept of "imperial pediatrics": to "give food to hungry children, cure them of diseases and Americanize them in public schools." Thompson talks about a "pediatric and tutorial" imperialism that sees the Puerto Rican people as dependent possessions in need of training.

In the photographs that Thompson analyzes, the Puerto Rican is depicted as a racially ambiguous subject. The racial triangle of *mestizaje* is emphasized: the displacement of Blackness, the erasure of Indigenous lineage, and the whitening (physical, psychological, and political) of the population. *Mestizaje* resulted in great variation in the physical characteristics of the Puerto Rican population. Miscegenation did not eliminate racial prejudice but rather reaffirmed and operationalized it through the implementation of the Spanish caste system.

Olivares speaks of "acculturation through the whitening of the population" and questions the possibility of creating a "better kind of humanity." The criticism of Olivares concludes by exposing the idea that the Puerto Rican was seen as "a 'primitive mulatto,' – but not so mulatto or so primitive – that one could not whiten and civilize" and that Puerto Ricans were "primitive beings accustomed to wage labor regime ". The U.S. regime breaks the Puerto Rican patriarchal authority, undermining and defeating it. The negative representations granted the authority to

U.S. soldiers to dispense with Puerto Ricans as they wanted, especially with women, who were favorite victims of exploitation and were often used as images of negative national stereotypes.

The negative image that was created of the Puerto Rican woman became -to the colonizers- the maximum representation of the Puerto Rican people: depicted as a submissive and vulnerable people, ready to prey on the providing father (the American civilization) and be assimilated, domesticated and civilized under the regime of American “good habits.”

In his trajectory, Thompson analyzes the significant historical book *Our Islands and Their People*, and points out “la aguda crítica acerca de los límites de usar un libro ‘pintoresco’ y hasta fantasioso como fuente única de análisis histórico” (“the sharp critique about the limits of using a ‘picturesque’ and even fantastical book as sole source of historical analysis”). According to Thompson, *Our Island and Their People* served as a highly influential historic document in creating the narratives about the U.S. territories for U.S. audiences. And when he wrote his analysis of it, he received a critique pointing out that this book was based in the fantasy and misinformed perspectives of colonial travelers and should not be considered a serious historical account. Thompson made a second edition of his book and addressed this point. While we can question the validity of *Our Island and Their People* as a formal historical document, it still served a notable role in defining a narrative -or an imaginary- of the territories for a U.S. national audience that hungered for updates of its burgeoning empire. This book is an example of how story creates narrative, and -in turn- how narrative gains enough power to influence governance and policy.

The journals of explorers are compelling narratives. And so are their photographs, which -in combination with narrative accounts and captions- create these ‘new’ worlds, primed for conquest, extraction, and development. The Land and its people ready to be put to work (or to

produce) in service of the empire. In *Imperial Archipelago*<sup>36</sup> Thompson traces the direct impact that these narratives and imaginaries end up having in governance and policy at a bigger scale.

“The narrative representations constituted the means of evaluating the particular local conditions, understanding the unfolding state of affairs, recommending a course of action, implementing governance, and justifying forms of political dominion”. (Thompson, 9)

Thompson understands the role that story, narrative, and -more specifically- artistic production have as means to disseminate and anchor narratives on a national scale, not just in an abstract and conceptual way -but as having direct and practical impact on strategies of governance and policy. And he brings up the importance of not looking at Puerto Rico in a silo, but in relation to a broader strategic agenda of U.S. expansion across territories overseas. I acknowledge the importance of analyzing at that scale. However, for the purpose of this research, I will focus on Puerto Rico and welcome future comparative media studies that can focus on the U.S. expansion across territories.

For this research, I started off focusing on the photographic contribution of Jack Delano during the 1940s, and -after speaking with Thompson and digging into his work-, I decided to include his research and analysis of the mapping of Puerto Rico conducted by lieutenant and cartographer William Armstrong<sup>37</sup> in collaboration with photographer Walter Townsend. I will elaborate on this in Chapter 3, Decolonial Storytelling, in the section titled Mano de Obra.

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<sup>36</sup> Thompson, Lanny. *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under US dominion after 1898*. University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Villanueva, Joaquín. "The Cartographic Journey of Lieutenant William H. Armstrong / El viaje cartográfico del teniente William H. Armstrong, 1908–1912 , by Lanny Thompson & María Dolores Luque (eds.)". *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 96.3-4 (2022): 405-406.

## **Chapter 2: Theorizing Partiality**

### **Portal to the Cave**

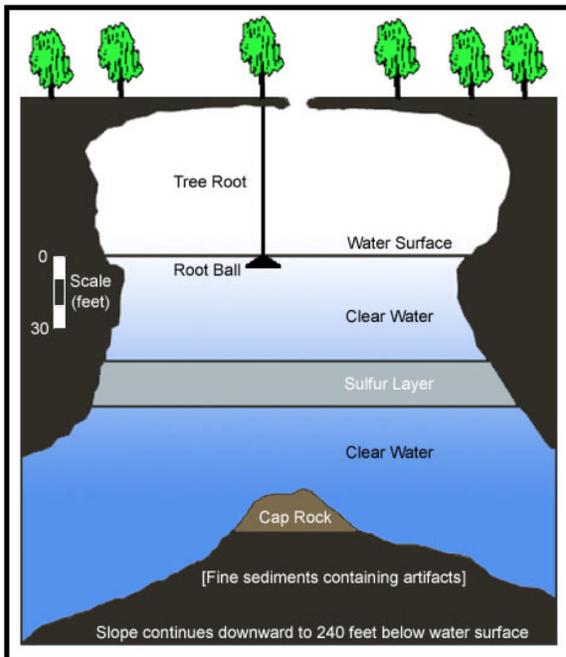
Coabey or the cave can be interpreted as being submerged in what is not visible or that which we cannot ‘see’; or a ‘sitting with’ partial knowledge. It requires un-programming the colonial layers of how we are taught to experience and relate to the world. It requires a ‘becoming bat’, merging with the cave and using other ways of mapping our journey through these systems of knowledge and history: sound, heart space, collectivity, embodiment. By doing so, we can come closer to a land-based and non-human intimacy with knowledge, or what Spivak calls ‘planetarity’.

Cuban conceptual and performance artist Ana Mendieta converses with these ideas through her performance photography, where her body is intertwined with the Land. Mendieta’s artwork turns the body into vessel for resistance to violence, in a global context of systemic violence, exploitation of lands and bodies, and incoming climate crisis and techno-apocalypse. This work is rooted in grief; it points toward burial and a return to the land in recognition of the violence of living. If Mendieta prompts us to return to ‘the source’, then what is ‘the source’ now? Is it information data technologies, collective social media platforms, mapped and digitized versions of what ‘land’ is, virtual landscapes? What will be the tombstones and commemorations of human life in the future? Especially in a colonial context where Indigenous people’s demands for rematriation<sup>38</sup> of ancestral remains is so contested. We return to Coabey, the network of underground caves, the womb of the Land, where our collective spirit lives.

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<sup>38</sup> Rematriation is “Indigenous women-led work to restore sacred relationships between Indigenous people and our ancestral land, honoring our matrilineal societies, and in opposition to patriarchal violence and dynamics.” Rematriation is “restoring a living culture to its rightful place on Mother Earth” and “to restore a people to a spiritual way of life, in sacred relationship with their ancestral lands without external interference.” Steven Newcomb, Indigenous Law Institute.

<https://ywcampis.org/all-our-voices-blog/awareness-and-recognition-of-indigenous-land/>



Cross section of Manantial de La Aleta, underground spring in the cave system of La Aleta, in Dominican Republic, considered one of the Taino doorways into Coabey. Illustration from *Journal of Caribbean Anthropology*, 2002.



Intact *potiza* bottle, Taino Arawak water vessel, found in Cueva del Chico in Dominican Republic. Photo from *Journal of Caribbean Anthropology*, 2002.

Everything has a haunting of what it is not, as it defines itself, or as we define it. A shadow, what is hidden, what lies underneath the surface, its Coabey, or underground caves. Navigating the shadow requires and creates a submerged perspective. Photography relies on light, the burning a negative to construct a version of reality. Burning a portal across the surface so that we may enter the shadow. The imprint, the mark. The reflections and refractions of what we believe to be real. A portal that is a womb, is a wound, is a scar.

Derrida tells us that the archive has a space (or place), that it has an inside and an outside. There is a separation. It makes the claim of existing in a specific place. Now that it exists, it means something, a commandment. An archive is a compilation of documents, objects,

narratives. Archives are catalogs with intentional sequencing established by a system of power. Archives presume a system. The Archive is partial, but claims wholeness<sup>39</sup>.

We collect objects and information because we are organizing the world, to understand the world and imagine ourselves in it. The Archive is a longing. Ariel's cave, in Disney's rendition of *The Little Mermaid*. Archives organize our sense of the past and the future, yet this is a colonial model, with theological origins. Social order is established through the Archive. And governance is designed from the Archive. There is no law without Archive. The archive replicates itself. It also asks us to recognize that possibility. Our sense of self is changing, and this change happens in relation to the Archive.

Beyond the colonial desire to control, we may collect objects and information as a means for protection and preservation. My parents do. They store preserved foods, materials, clothes, amenities, equipment, and decorative objects. A compulsion to collect that must come from the anxieties from colonial rule, climate disaster, unstable infrastructure and the call to survive outside of government or institutional support, scarcity as fear that looms over their home. Maybe it is evidence of a deep understanding of what it means to endure, what it requires, and the need to prepare, to brace oneself, to survive. I remember vividly the blue flame of the camping lantern that my dad would light up at night when the hurricanes would take down the electricity for weeks. It always struck me that it was blue fire. That lamp felt like hope, like we were being tended to while being forgotten by the rest of the world during the slow recovery efforts. It made us feel safe, as we lay on the hammock in the balcony, staring at a clear night time sky. My parents collect objects to survive. The Archive is also a means to produce ourselves. The Archive produces the 'world' as an environment of proliferating desires and we become its side effects.

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Photography fits in nicely within this idea: a photograph is an attempt at a capture of desires, a mirror. Desire manifests as an urge to obsessively collect objects to validate a sense of self that we are threatened to lose. For colonized peoples, this becomes survival. Fetish is the fear of losing power. But desire is something that cannot be archived. It is insatiable, there's always more of it. In this sense, Derrida proposes that desire is the anti-archive, a haunting or force that creates the *death drive*.

The colonial Archive extracts from the world objects and knowledge that once existed outside of the Archive as culturally active and alive 'vibrant matter'<sup>40</sup>. The Archive exerts a linear organizing force that drains life, creates the object, and excludes other kinds of organizing: Indigenous, Black, nonlinear, feminist, immigrant, disabled, transgender. To claim that the Archive is historical memory, is to place in a position of power a specific view of what history and memory are. This power dynamic controls the rhythm and timing of sequence and narrative.

While the world is spontaneous and memory malleable, the Archive exerts power and form. In contrast, Derrida's *death drive* is a sense of memory not wanting to leave a record. Unarchiving is the haunting of the Archive. The Archive identifies this as a threat; it produces its own devils and excludes them. This is the death drive.

A linear world is masculinist. Men in law were synonymous with Archive. In a way, Archive was seen as feminized, held in house arrest and domesticity. It is a site of reproduction and is controlled and managed by men. Similarly, within the context of colonization, Land is also feminized: Land is to be occupied, domesticated, tamed, worked, made to produce, and stewarded by the labor of men. The colonial process of mapping, photographing, and documenting new territories is a process of creating archives, to capture and operationalize Land,

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<sup>40</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. United Kingdom, Duke University Press, 2010.

people, and culture, so that they may be employed, preserved, and stewarded by the U.S. government. This is an operationalized act of colonization.

The Archive is an anchor through which the world exists. The Archive produces the Man. The Archive produces gender and race. Man is given more authority. The Archive produces the idea of who can guard the Archive and interpret the past, the law, and power. Can the Archive be itself an Archive of its own violence? In theorizing the Archive, we must consider the role of inheritance and legacy.

Today, Archives or collections of memory are directly tied to the creation of backup storage, databases of memory, algorithms, replications. We can look at this as a way in which we are composting the human, or composting the *jibaro*. Weaponizing the *jibaro* across time, then rescuing him as we plan for our extinction, as we imagine our transition into becoming one with the death drive. We imagine composting the human body and uploading its consciousness into the cloud, becoming ethereal, becoming post-human, becoming AI<sup>41</sup>. Technology changes our understanding of the archive. How we remember our past and how we envision our future, changes. How do we memorialize stories today? And what do they become, now and into the future?

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<sup>41</sup> I recall the intergalactic world of Rintaro's Japanese animated film and series *Ginga Tetsudō 999* (1979), where elite human classes abandon their human bodies for upgraded and immortal robotic ones.

## Jíbaro in the Cave

Psychoanalysis was born and gained popularity around the same time of the Spanish-American War and the U.S. occupation of new territories, including Puerto Rico. Psychoanalysis is the science of imagining yourself, and to do this you need an archive. It is not a science, it is the model of science. Psychoanalysis opens up interiority as a site to explore, occupy, colonize. Photography becomes more than surface, becomes alive through the process of psychoanalysis. Photography is the act of capturing an outside that then becomes interiority. The interiority of the photographer, how he/she/they experience a moment, an outside. And the interiority of a spectator, who generates narratives, interpretations and fills in the blanks of the edges of the photograph's limits<sup>42</sup>.

In "Phenomenology of the Spirit"<sup>43</sup> Hegel establishes several triads, and one of them is: abstract-negative-concrete. Lacan offers a similar triad with: imaginary-symbolic-real. These triads can be useful when looking to understand the process of how narratives of representation are created: The *jíbaro* is a figure that gives form to an abstract concept of representation. Its creation as a figure relies on its antithesis or negative, what it stands in opposition to: the Spaniard, the plantation owner, the elite criollo. The *jíbaro* was adopted as a symbol of national identity that established difference from the imperial powers (Spain and U.S.). What is concrete is the photograph, the medium through which the *jíbaro* becomes icon.

In Delanos' photographs, the people seem almost suspended in place. They are there but not quite there, unmoored or ungrounded by the gaze. This 'being there but not being there' is a move of dislocation. It expresses an incomplete socialization of the people. It proposes that Land and its people have potential, they are not fully developed; they are partial subjects. And their

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<sup>42</sup>In making these connections, I reference Akira Mizuta Lippit's *Atomic Light: Shadow Optics*.

<sup>43</sup>Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. United Kingdom, S. Sonnenschein, 1910.

partiality is what will become capital for the empire. The photographs look like a promise of becoming developed, of moving toward progress. In fact, Delano photographed four decades of Puerto Rican life, depicting the move from a mostly agricultural society into the modernity of industrialization, factory work, and urban development. The Puerto Rican worker kept as a partial subject across time. In the process of so-called modernizing Puerto Rican society, there are hidden costs. And these costs get passed onto its people, the trap of partiality. This narrative is weaponized and used for governance strategies. It is an assimilation project that never became fully complete, because it was never intended to be completed in the first place. The Land and its people remain not fully assimilated, and in a state of suspension. This is a partial assimilation for the purpose of mobilizing the cultural value of the in-between space, or the dislocation, of the Puerto Rican. And the resistance efforts against assimilation -by both the people and the Land- are erased in the images, existing outside the Archive.



*Daily Life in Puerto Rico, c. 1938-1942, by Jack Delano, FSA, A family in a slum in Yauco.* is a painting by Celestial Images which was uploaded on March 30th, 2018.

Half in, half out -like the people who hang from the windows in Delano's photographs, or the houses on stilts, never fully grounded. This is a carefully crafted state: the subject, the land, the landscape. This is an aesthetic of dislocation, with suspended houses, half developed Land, and the mash up of folk and modern clothing of the laborers. The landscape is shown between emergence and being lost. The narrative of colonial Borikén -or Puerto Rico- is constructed as a temporary state -and a place where United Statesians can come, build their investments, and leave. We can compare this with the cartographic photographs of William Armstrong that we will discuss in Chapter 3, where the focus was on the land instead of the people, specifically for military deployment, and later for economic development through agriculture and the sugar industry. Armstrong's annotated photographs prime the land for development, extraction, and military strategy.

In this landscape, the *jibaro* becomes a post-human figure, with a body that is codified as not human by historic hegemonic structures of power. The *jibaro* is laborer, half-civilized and racialized, an in-between and a non-citizen. His connection with animals and the Land position him as half-human under a racist system of governance.

Visualizing partial subjects and partially developed land, also represents an incomplete genocide. For centuries, Spanish and *criollo* elites who controlled political power, research, and documentation, weaved an effective narrative of extinction of Taino peoples. This intentional erasure was a tactic of colonization, but Taino people and their descendants survived and continue to exist today within our modern society<sup>44</sup>. In 2018, Hannes Schroeder<sup>45</sup>, an ancient DNA researcher at the Natural History Museum of Denmark analyzed skeletal remains found in

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<sup>44</sup> Poole, Robert M. "Who Were the Taino, the Original Inhabitants of Columbus's Island?", Smithsonian Magazine. Originally published 2011, updated 2023.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-were-taino-original-inhabitants-columbus-island-73824867/>.

<sup>45</sup> Wade, Lizzie. "Genes of Extinct Caribbean Islanders Found in Living People." American Association for the Advancement of Science. Science.org. Feb 2018.

<https://www.science.org/content/article/genes-extinct-caribbean-islanders-found-living-people>.

the Preacher's Cave on an island in the Bahamas. He conducted DNA analysis that reconstructed a complete genetic picture of a precontact Taino individual, which in turn allowed for analysis that confirms the existence of Taino DNA in the people of the Caribbean today. While the existence of Taino descendants should not require Western scientific forms of evidence as proof, this finding served to further legitimize Taino revival movements that gained traction in the 70s.

Today, the Taino revival movement has gained strength as more people across the Caribbean and its diasporas continue to unlearn colonial narratives of identity, recenter their Indigenous and Black lineages, and the colonial project of whitening these populations starts to reverse. It is no coincidence that this knowledge was found within ancestral remains inside a cave: the key is found within the cave, inside Coabey, and it is linked with ancestral practices of burial and transition between realms.

The *jibaro* imaginary has never disappeared, but went into crisis in the early neoliberal period (1970s on). Yet, due to multiple transformations caused by neoliberal coloniality (e.g., climate change and mass migration, among others), it's had a strong re-emergence in popular culture. Some examples are the use of machetes as symbols of resistance during post-Hurricane María manifestations and the #RickyRenuncia<sup>46</sup> uprisings in 2019, a recent photo shoot by the notoriously iconic reggaetón artist Bad Bunny (2023), a large-scale *jibaro* sculpture at Burning Man in 2023, and the recent release of the Puerto Rican film *Érase una vez en el Caribe* (2023).

This revival of the *jibaro* as a symbol of resistance, cultural pride, and connection is fueled by food justice and land sovereignty movements in Borikén. Through these movements,

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<sup>46</sup> #RickyRenuncia was a massive uprising and series of large scale manifestations in Puerto Rico in 2019 where the population demanded (and succeeded in achieving) the resignation of Governor Ricardo Roselló, after the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo leaked a transcription of chats by the governor and his officials where they vilified the people of Puerto Rico and joked about the deaths during and post-Hurricane María, among other atrocities. These deaths were in fact caused by government negligence and ineffective disaster recovery efforts. The gargantuan grief and outrage of the population of Puerto Rico led to a massive movement against the government administration of the time.

the *jibaro* becomes symbol of Boricua cultural-rootedness in relation to the Land in the face of U.S. occupation, colonization, climate crisis, and the so-called Anthropocene. Granting the *jibaro* a resilient power and significance as a figure in Boricua identity.

Thinking of the *jibaro* as the figure in the cave of Coabey allows us to see what has been erased: the racial and cultural lineages of Boricua people and the history of settlement, Indigenous displacement, and slavery that define the Boricua cultural context. We must acknowledge the use of the *jibaro* as a figure that facilitated political agendas of assimilation, while also acknowledging this figure as a significant avatar for narratives of Boricua resistance. Through the *jibaro*, we can understand: 1) the role of art in creating cultural narratives that feed into agendas of occupation through labor and economic development; and 2) the intrinsic connection that native Boricua people have to the Land and what it represents in relation to collective identity and Futurity.

The *jibaro* as symbol of resistance and Futurity makes sense, but only if rooted in a genuine awareness of itself as evidence of a colonized identity that once served a role in occupation and now seeks liberation. The *jibaro* can ground on a nuanced understanding of his connection to Land, the interwoven racial lineages and liberation struggles he carries in his body, and the cultural erasure that was enacted on his behalf. Only then can the *jibaro* move toward undoing the harms of colonization done in his name and truly become a representation of resistance and liberation. We are the *jibaro*. His journey is the journey of Boricua people, of understanding our role in the larger projects of occupation that shape our lives. It is a journey of unlearning colonial narratives and a commitment to stewarding truth-telling; a journey of grief and reconciliation, so that we may define a Boricua Futurity where we can find ourselves outside of occupation and within liberated futures.

## El Duho and Taino Liminality

In 2018, I visited Paris. It was my first time in Europe. I walked the streets of a city that felt like an idyllic dream: opulent architecture, clean streets, people outside reading books and taking walks, classical sculptures, large and fantastical fountains. I visited the Louvre and walked through rooms that held hundreds of Classic and Renaissance paintings. I looked for the wings with art from the Americas. To my surprise, there I found a Taino *duho*; a ceremonial chair used by Taino *behike* (shamans) during the *cohoba* (plant medicine) ceremonies to receive visions and deliver them to the *yukayeke* (the town, or community). I remember encountering this sacred relic and becoming full of awe and anger. I've never seen such an important piece of Taino culture, especially not while living in Borikén.

It's now been four years since encountering the *duho*. And I searched for it again, this time in the digital archives of museums. I didn't find it in the Louvre's archives. I found it in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The description reads:

“This small seat in the form of a reptilian figure, perhaps a turtle, might have functioned as a portable bench. Composed of valuable greenstone and featuring a mythological reference encoded in the geometric designs, it would have been an important symbol of political power.”  
Duho (Ceremonial Seat), 11th-15th century. The Met Museum, Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.

As a colonial institution, the museum's function is to create objects. Inside the institutional stomach, the *duho* is stripped of its meaning and drained of its life and purpose. The museum cannot hold the depth of knowledge carried by something as sacred as a *duho*. No matter how much knowledge is produced in the archive, the objectification of the *duho* cannot explain the *duho*. The *duho* is uprooted to become a floating relic in an ocean of floating relics. In her writings, Gloria Anzaldúa addresses the impact of this erasure: “In trying to become

‘objective’, Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence.” (Anzaldúa).



Duho. Taíno Ceremonial Seat. 11th–15th century. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [LINK](#).

While considering the *duho* within this collection, I kept only seeing the *duho* as an object in relation to institutionality. I was quick to assume a posture of repatriation and institutional critique. And I fell into the same pitfall I meant to criticize: I was using the *duho*'s objectification to grant more power to systems of oppression. An advisor helped me see this pitfall and I pivoted. Instead, I will attempt an approximation of “re-planting” the duho in its original context. I will do this by analyzing it in relation to a Taíno cosmology that offers a rich way of understanding humanity in direct relation to the land and the planet.

The *duho* is a ceremonial seat. It is also a portal. This is a physical sculpture meant to hold a body. Not just any body, but a *behike*<sup>47</sup> body. It is an incline, the *behike* is not standing or lying down, but held at an in-between space. The *duho* holds the body at an incline that allows the body to be with the Land and outside of the Land, positioned toward the celestial. At this incline, the *behike* enters ritual with the *cohoba* plant medicine, to access a portal between the physical and spiritual realms, and deliver the knowledge back to the collective of the *yucayeke*<sup>48</sup>.

The incline is also used in Freudian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis interprets the mind as a portal, to which the incline is the bridge. In order to access the mind, or the consciousness, the body must be inclined. However, Freudian psychoanalysis is grounded on the colonial separation of mind and body, and it reveals the shadow of the inaccessible body. Colonial frameworks don't understand the body, in the same way that they do not understand the Land. And the body is connected to Land. If we consider this, then the *duho* challenges the border between materiality and 'Other'. Spivak could call this aspect of the *duho* its planetarity.

This particular *duho* is carved in the shape resembling a reptile. According to Taino cosmology<sup>49</sup>, a *cemí* or deity named Macoel was the guardian of the cave from which the first Taino people emerged. Macoel is a reptile. This reptile carving could be a reference to Macoel, which can help us imagine the *behike*'s journey -through plant medicine at the incline of the *duho*- as a journey into the cave of origin.

In Taino cosmology, the world of the spirits or the dead, is called *Coaybey*. And *Coabey* is a system of caves in the Caribbean, guarded by *Maquetaurie Guayaba*, a deity or *cemí* that

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<sup>47</sup> A *behike* is a Taino Arawak medicine person who leads spiritual ceremony in the Areytos, travels to the spirit realm Coabey via the *cohoba* ritual -ingesting *cohoba* (plant medicine) and laying down on the *duho*- to receive messages from the *cemí* and deliver them back to the tribe.

<sup>48</sup> Taino word for the tribe or community.

<sup>49</sup> James A. Doyle, "Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 77, no. 3 (Winter, 2020).

[http://resources.metmuseum.org/resources/metpublications/pdf/Arte\\_del\\_mar\\_Art\\_of\\_the\\_Early\\_Caribbean.pdf](http://resources.metmuseum.org/resources/metpublications/pdf/Arte_del_mar_Art_of_the_Early_Caribbean.pdf)

resembles a bat. There are various locations or entry points into *Coabey* as identified by Taino elders. Taino cosmology also says that spirits of the dead leave *Coabey* (the caves) as bats in the evening, to feed on the *guayaba* (guava) fruit.

If we consider all of this, perhaps we can also consider Spivak's 'planetarity'<sup>50</sup> and feminist reading of Plato's Cave or the dream of reason in relation to Taino cosmology. Although there is an inversion of the purpose of the cave to how Plato explained it: the cave being the womb, place of origin, and the realm of spirit. And the *behike* is the traveler between the womb of origin and the outside world, through paraphragmatic screens. The *behike* is activated through ceremony and freed from the physical realm to access knowledge from a direct source and bring it back to the collective so they can continue to expand the cosmology, as well as the practices of ritual, fertility of the land, and medicine for the people. This is embodied knowledge that is beyond linguistic expression and is shared via ritual and ceremony. This practice of spiritual travel in the Taino cosmology points to an alterity that lives outside of us as humans and does not center on us. It is Spivak's planetarity. And it involves a "crossing-over" or a journey between layers.

The museum cannot contain any of this, because the *duho* and everything about it, blurs the boundary between object and subject. The museum is the antithesis, separates them, creates the object. The *duho* resists. It casts a shadow of what the museum cannot contain.

So when considering the rifts in the Archive, the instability of what is truth, how do we understand this experience of discontinuity and instability?

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<sup>50</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "'Planetarity' (Box 4, WELT)." *Paragraph*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 290–92. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44016381>.

## Jíbaro Consciousness

“This is my home | this thin edge of | barb wire.” - Anzaldúa

Hartman marks the pace when she states, “Loss gives rise to longing”. These words become a key into the submerged work of colonial archives that have defined Boricua identity. In considering the *jíbaro*, we must address the role this figure played as an actor of *mestizaje* with a specific role in the project of colonization and imposition of racial hierarchies. We can approach this from multiple angles, let’s dive deep.

Lisa Lowe<sup>51</sup> writes about the intricate systems of racial governance that were created by the empires and imposed on their colonies so that they could be ruled remotely. These racial governance structures of colonialism organized people into labor groups based on skin tone, *mestizaje*, and proximity to whiteness. An example of this is the Spanish *Casta* system<sup>52</sup>, created by the Spanish during the conquest of the Caribbean and Latin America to establish racial dominance in the colonies. The Spanish *Casta* system codified *mestizaje* to produce racial hierarchy between Spanish, Indigenous, and African people. This became a matrix of domination with a lasting legacy of violence that communities across geographies are still unpacking today.

Within this colonial structure, people of mixed race and lighter skin tones were often subjected to roles of gatekeeping and policing. The *mestize* is deployed as an agent of governance and enforcement by white supremacy, to carry out roles and missions that required the ability to move between the two (or three) cultural realms they inhabited. These roles were often to police people of darker skin tones, serve as a gatekeeper of power, and protect the

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<sup>51</sup> Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> The Spanish *Casta* or caste system was a structure for racial hierarchy created by the Spanish during the conquest of Indigenous lands and people in the Caribbean and Latin America. It was created to explain racial mixing in the colonies and serves to establish the racial superiority of the Spanish.

property of whiteness. We can further complicate this by pulling in Donna Haraway's cyborg to articulate the role of the *mestize* in the colonial project: the *mestize* as weapon.

Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos held the belief that the *mestize*<sup>53</sup> was a “cosmic race, la raza cosmica, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world”<sup>54</sup>. While this narrative grants empowerment to a people who experience oppression in a variety of ways, it risks replicating the same colonial racial hierarchies that it intends to challenge. The risk lies in the lack of (or resistance to) understanding how anti-Blackness operates across racial boundaries, the erasure of Blackness and Indigeneity within Latinidad, and how it can affirm the colonial projects of race and assimilation rather than challenge them. This narrative also whitewashes or avoids reconciling the role that light skin, mixed race people play/ed in settler colonial projects across contexts, often benefiting from proximity to whiteness and maintained as subordinates of the colonizers.

I pose with these challenges because they are urgent ones and are often left out of cultural studies analysis. Within the U.S. context, the identity categories of Hispanic, Latino, and Latinidad, have played a role in projects of assimilation. There are many critiques of Latinidad, which I won't delve into here, but I will note a few significant points: 1) Latinidad was born from the specific context and experience of Latin American people who live in and identify as belonging to the United States as a nation, 2) Latinidad centers whiteness and creates identity in relation to Spanish culture and language, 3) this identifier produces the problematic ‘melting-pot’ that merges and flattens a complex and vast array of cultural contexts and people from over 32 countries.

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<sup>53</sup> I use *mestize* instead of *mestiza*, to recognize people whose experiences are outside the colonial gender binary, and to include women and other gender identities.

<sup>54</sup> Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1979.

While Latinidad served to provide unity in important ways that allowed for representation and political organizing for labor and human rights in the United States, it has also been employed toward the exclusion and erasure of Afro-Latine and Indigenous peoples. It has also been exported out into the world as a technology of colonization and infrastructure of *mestizaje*.

Considering this, we need ways to unflatten identity and unpack the murky middle spaces within the spectrum of race. We must analyze the *mestize*: our positionality in the world, our psyche, our purpose, our grief, and our role in liberatory struggles. Here, we can make a connection between the *mestize* and the *duho*, and consider the potential of the *mestize* body as a portal to access knowledge from a liminal space of disjunctures and intimacies, entanglements and transitions. This portal -or opening- is a wound of belonging.

Gloria Anzaldúa defines a borderland as “an open wound” (*una herida abierta*), “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary”. And it is Anzaldúa who first introduces the *mestiza* as a cultural actor in the performance of racial borders. She identifies those who live in the borderland as “*los atravesados*”, or the ones who have been crossed over, fragmented, turned into margin. The *mestize* is born from and lives in this in-between space. The *mestize* is the *atravezade*, the body that is the borderland. We can pull in the figure of the Boricua *jibaro*, who similarly lives in an in-between space of racial identity, relationship to Land and development, and is half-citizen under the U.S. occupation.

Anzaldúa gives the *mestize* an interiority of racial and spiritual self-awareness. She does this as a person who identifies as *mestiza* and can speak to her own experience in response to colonization. She does what Puerto Rican *criollos* of the 1930s avoided in their rush to align with whiteness and create cultural theory from the lens of identifying as Spanish-descended people. By unraveling her intersectional experience as Mexican, of both Spanish and Indigenous descent,

and as a queer person, Anzaldúa instead creates a portal into a more nuanced understanding of identity and knowledge-creation from the space of existing at a disjuncture. She names the *mestize* as a subject who lives at the borders of race, and offers this as her own experience (autotheory) and integration of marginality. She unravels a *mestize* interiority, interwoven with cultural influences, that creates an opening into understanding the liminal and racialized experience of the *mestize*. The *mestize* as the multiple ‘other’ who lives in-between intersections and holding contradictions, entangled intimacies, and collisions of histories that turn into mixed codes within the body. The *mestize* carries a *wound of belonging* that can only heal by acknowledging the histories of violence, displacement, and uprooting that are held within the body. Anzaldúa offers words as medicine, reminding us of our agency to seek liberation in the same way that the borderland can heal by becoming a *place* instead of a *non-place*. She calls us in, with love and affirmation.

Here, we interlace the *jibaro*, with their Caribbean *mestizaje* that not only includes Indigenous and Spanish ancestry, but a strong West African lineage. The *jibaro* as a *mestize* body is a living archive of cultural memory. This is a body that holds the interwoven journeys of humanity; the networks and collisions of violence, intimacies, and cultural exchanges that form our entangled world today. In this way, the *mestize* body is a living map of ancestral memory and a more honest and meaningful vessel than colonial archives. As a figure of *mestizaje*, the journey of the *jibaro*, as avatar of Boricua people, is to help us find liberation from a legacy of dominance held in our bodies and inherited by colonialism.

As *mestize* people, we can learn to access and cultivate these intersections and collisions held in our bodies and see them as valuable knowledge. We can challenge the tyranny of disembodied colonial archives, open their wounds, and let them scar, wearing them as marks of

histories that should not be forgotten. The *mestize* reimagined as the hermit arcana, becoming an embodied map for crossing the shadows of colonialism. Wearing gilded scars and holding a lantern that points to the pathways of abolition and liberation created by our Indigenous and Black ancestors.

As a society, we need to become people who can develop a deep understanding of how systems of oppression live in us, how they have been rooted, and understand the practices of healing that are needed in community, so we can build liberatory structures. Our communities across the world need this. We need scholars, artists, designers, and policy-makers who can build a deep understanding of colonial violence and its impacts, so that we can move toward futures of equity and collectivity where the body and the Land have space to heal. We need this so we can be in right relation to each other and with the Land and our non human kin. We need this in community organizing and in the work of building movements and coalitions across cultures and contexts. We need this in design processes to build better cities and communities, opting for non-exploitative structures of governance. And we can learn from the *duho* and Coabey that this is collective knowledge and practice that cannot be contained by colonial archives. It is Derridá's death drive: it undoes, composts, and decomposes systems, so that new structures can emerge.

## **Chapter 3: Decolonial Storytelling and Futurity**

### **Power of Narrative**

Art and culture are powerful tools for social change and for narrative shift. This I know by being part of intersectional communities of artists and cultural stewards, as well as by witnessing the narrative strategies that oppressive systems and their leaders wield. People, communities, institutions, and nations can create narratives powerful enough to shape truths, even about our very selves. And they do it by creating and maintaining archives. When we are free to tell our own stories, we wield power, we create knowledge, and we co-create our future alongside the lineages we've inherited. In this way, we enact self-determination. Story is power. Story is weapon and archive is its armory. And, as many cultural stewards will tell you, Story is also medicine<sup>55</sup>. And the archive could be its healing cabinet; it depends on how you use it.

This is why, as an artist and social practitioner, I've opted to learn the importance of using creative practice for shaping or shifting narratives. First, to shed light on and break apart the stories that perpetuate the oppression of colonized people. And secondly, to create stories of liberatory futures where the cultural power of oppressed people is instead celebrated; where we have agency and self determination, and where the harms of colonization are undone.

By examining how colonial archives have constructed the *jibaro* as a Puerto Rican colonial subject, I look at how art plays a role in shaping the narratives -of both subjugation and self determination- that define collective identity and notions of Futurity. I learn from artists and scholars who approach colonial forms of representation and engage with histories of colonization and systemic violence to, in turn, create possibilities for liberatory futures and self-determination. I look at how artistic practice has the power to shape notions of collective

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<sup>55</sup> Loprinzi, Siena E. "Story as Medicine: Indigenous Storytelling as a Path to Resilience." (2022).

identity that can impact worldbuilding practices like public policy, land development, and justice-based activism. And how it can help to reestablish affective relationships with the world around us as an essential step toward building decolonial and liberatory futures.

I propose a pathway for authoring decolonial Boricua Futurity by interweaving several creative methods and applying them toward Boricua storytelling: 1) annotation (Red Star), 2) autotheory (Zwartjes), and 3) critical fabulation (Hartman) and speculative fiction (Dillon). This weaving of practice is deepened by layering the following frameworks: Indigenous Futurity (Harjo), and Native Survivance (Vizenor), and Griefwork (Hartman/Sharpe). The result is a multifaceted *liberatory creative practice* that employs themes of Land, ancestors, non-human kin, and griefwork into narratives of self determination.

When applied to the specific political and social context of Boricua people, this *liberatory creative practice* can author Boricua Futurity outside of assimilation and occupation. One of the ways it can do so is by transforming the Boricua *jibaro* into a decolonial actor in service to liberation, or from weapon to liberation. This reconfigured *jibaro* sheds their colonial skin, becomes a plurality of genders<sup>56</sup>, and visibly wears their wound of belonging. This is a *jibaro* that reckons with and undoes their role in projects of colonization and *mestizaje*, embodies their Blackness, moves toward re-Indigenizing, and anchors their identity on their strong ties to Land, water, and non human kin. This transformation of the *jibaro* -as both ancestor and descendant- can offer alternative narratives to those of the ‘Anthropocene’ and the white apocalypse of settler colonization and climate crisis<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> This is a linguistic and conceptual move away from a masculinized construction of the *jibaro*, and into recognition of a plurality of genders that carry the experience and lineage of the *jibaro* within them. I shift from using *he/him* pronouns for the *jibaro* and instead use *they/them* to articulate the *jibaro* experience as multi-gendered, plural, and collective. A queering of the *jibaro*, who -regardless of gender- I propose is inherently a queer icon if we consider them as container of marginality, liminality, tension, and resistance, as we’ve discussed throughout this text.

<sup>57</sup>Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson challenge the ‘Anthropocene’ as a concept created by white settler colonialism. Nelson Alvarez Febles offers a glimpse of these possibilities for the *jibaro* in his essay “Lo jíbaro como metáfora del futuro agroecológico” (The *jibaro* as metaphor of an agroecological future). 80grados.

To define a *liberatory creative practice* for Boricua Futurity, I lean into the work of Black feminist scholars who interrupt colonial archives toward liberatory praxis: Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. These scholars examine the power dynamics in narratives of colonial archives, identify the silences and gaps, and construct robust and visionary historical landscapes that center the experiences of the people who are silenced by these archives, specifically Black women. They employ autotheory, critical fabulation, and speculative fiction to create new layers of narrative atop incomplete historical interpretations that intentionally flatten the experience of violence. By using autotheory, as articulated by Arianne Zwartjes, the personal and family narratives of the researcher are employed as essential material to unlock depth and complexity within histories and archives that are limited by colonial biases. In her short story “Evidence”, Gumb positions lived experience as valid evidence<sup>58</sup>. Hartman and Sharpe articulate grief and mourning as anchors for the creative process, with Hartman’s concept of “the open casket” as key to understanding the experience of ‘looking’ into the violence.

The work of these artists and scholars sheds light on edges and horizons of artistic practice and historical analysis. They provide models for how to approach histories of violence, how to select methods and aesthetics that can unravel and deepen those stories, and to understand the implications of those choices. They call for the necessity of holding a parallel reflective practice as we navigate the archive, to enter its caves with intention and integrity. This is a practice that manifests as a set of questions for understanding our positionality, limits, and desires when submerged in collective historical narratives that are intertwined with our personal journeys. Their questions become our sky map into the archives.

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<sup>58</sup> Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. “Evidence”. Thomas, Sheree Renee. *Octavia's brood: Science fiction stories from social justice movements*. AK Press, 2015.

### *Duelo en Borikén, Art as Griefwork*

During this research, I was able to finally experience Francisco Oller's painting *El velorio*<sup>59</sup> in person. This masterpiece of Puerto Rican art is held in *La Galería de Arte* of my alma mater, the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus -the place that shaped me as a scholar and activist. It's been an artwork that for decades now has influenced my work, yet until this moment I had only engaged with it as a digital image. The in-person experience was profound.

*El velorio* depicts the picturesque scene of the wake of a small child in a rural farm worker community in Borikén. This is an artistic documentation of “*el velorio del angelito*”, the rural cultural practice of holding a joyful wake for a child who has passed away. The wake held space for grief and joy at the same time, as a celebration rooted on the Christian belief that children who died were innocent souls that would return directly to heaven to become angels. The painting depicts the wake taking place in a small wooden rural house with a multiracial group of people smiling, celebrating, and/or grieving. Some appear to be singing or playing music; a child is playing with two dogs; a couple of priests are in the space; and plantain, corn, and meat are hanging from the ceiling. A Taino *duho*<sup>60</sup> sits in the room, which signals the presence of Taino people and culture in this festivity.

Francisco Oller, of Spanish ancestry, is considered the first Puerto Rican Impressionist artist and revered as a master painter. Oller is often seen as an abolitionist and chose to depict what some critics consider the realities of subjugation and racism. But I question his positionality as a Puerto Rican man of Spanish descent who often represented scenes of violence upon Black bodies. Oppressors inflict violence by replicating scenes of subjugation through artistic

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<sup>59</sup> <https://smarthistory.org/francisco-oller-the-wake/>

<sup>60</sup> As we previously discussed, a *duho* is a ceremonial chair used by Taino *behike* or medicine people.

expression and I see a problem in how some art critics interpret these depictions as an alignment with racial justice. It seems important to name this. However, I don't intend an analysis of Oller's positionality in this paper. I will instead focus on how grief becomes catalyst for creative process. Or as Christina Sharpe puts it, creative practice as *griefwork*.

*El velorio* depicts an experience of grief that characterizes the rural Boricua experience: the death of the child generates an entanglement of pain, anger, joy, and energy in the collective. Through this artwork, we can pose several questions: how representations of culture and identity are crafted, which ones gain power and traction and why, who gets to shape and tell the stories of collective identity, the importance of interrogating the stories and authors of our past, and how grief and ritual have a strong presence within cultural practice and hold power within the creative process.

Grief can serve as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of oppression and often makes collective action inevitable. Through grief, a sense of loss and injustice is felt, embodied, and understood through a physical and lived experience, rather than through formal education, theoretical thinking, or sermon. If we consider this, we can understand how the coupling of grief and joy that is depicted in *El velorio* -and that is specific to the Boricua context- is not a passive remembrance, but a call for future-making. The artwork creates a speculative space for communal mourning, for cultural practice rooted in place, and shows how these are essential to building community and collective power.

Saidiya Hartman becomes a death doula in our journey through colonial archives, offering us direction for navigating the cave. In "Venus in Two Acts", Hartman articulates the significance of grief and the importance of layering a reflective practice upon the research, to temper the desire to transform and rescue people and histories. This becomes a process of

transmutation. Hartman dives into the bowels of colonial violence and returns with significant questions for artists and scholars who wish to take on this difficult journey of historical inquiry that becomes ancestral work: 1) “How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?”, 2) “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? [how can we attempt to] resurrect lives from the ruins?”, 3) “What do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?”, 4) “How and why does one write a history of violence?”, and 5) “Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?”

A powerful offering is Hartman’s metaphor of the ‘open casket’, through which she articulates what it feels like to take the dive into colonial archives of violence: by looking into the archive, we are looking upon an open casket of violence. “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? Is the ‘terrible beauty’ that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy?”. This metaphor helps us confront and accept that this dive into colonial archives is a dive into death and violence, and prompts us to continue questioning ourselves as researchers. Christina Sharpe articulates this as a continual part of the Black experience, or the ongoing experience of “living in the wake” of the impacts of slavery and colonization. This journey is a wake, an open casket, a reckoning with the ongoing impacts of colonization. This is the journey into and through Coabey, the spirit realm, the cave system, the death drive.

Hartman reminds us that our positionality and personal experience affect this search. She prompts herself -and us- to ask important questions in this journey: What is our intention in this

journey? What impact do we seek? Who are we doing this for? How will it impact them -both the dead and the living?

Our desires become powerful creatures pulling us toward fantasies and projections. To look into the archive, we must also consider this “traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence”. How are our desires at play? Are we aware of our limitations? Hartman warns us: “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed.” And as Derridá reminds us, desire is the death drive.

Hartman defines the concept of *narrative restraint* as an active practice of refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure. She sees it as an imperative to respect *black noise*. In “Venus in Two Acts”, she shares: “I chose not to tell a story about Venus because to do so would have trespassed the boundaries of the archive.” She clarifies that the “intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death —social and corporeal death— and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance.”

Narrative restraint entails a recognition of how the incomplete and fragmented histories of colonial violence are “an unrecoverable past”. This is griefwork. Hartman urges us as researchers and artists to be aware of and make known our own desires and limitations so that we do not become swept away in our attempts to reconstruct stories that favor hope and erase the harms. She also offers hope: “The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair, must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.”

We can apply this to the attempt at recovering the *jibaro* and uncover that: 1) the current construction of the *jibaro* points to an unrecoverable past, 2) *jibaro* as an identity narrative was not authored by Boricua people, but created in a context of conquest and occupation, 3) by sitting with what is unknowable, we can consider that what is left out of colonial archives -the outside or in-between space of these structures of narrative- is the evidence that decolonial narratives can exist. This is where a Boricua Futurity can be seeded and become forest.

Here, I land back into the unique experience of Boricua people and consider the current sociopolitical context of Borikén. Since 2015, Boricua people in the archipelago<sup>61</sup> have experienced a domino effect of uprisings against the P.R.O.M.E.S.A Act<sup>62</sup>, several climate disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and multiple waves of protests that accomplished the resignation of former Governor Ricardo Roselló<sup>63</sup> in 2019. These events became part of a new, powerful, and intersectional movement for sovereignty and self-determination in Borikén, evolving from prior movements against U.S. occupation. Its manifestations include everything from acts of resistance and protest, to a strong rise in mutual aid and food justice initiatives, racial and gender justice activism and policies, and growing land and energy sovereignty efforts. This was all fueled by *duelo*, a uniquely Boricua expression of grief that emerged during this time and is tethered with collective action. *Duelo*, as a word and feeling, articulates the particular combination of grief, sense of loss, and resistance that has become integral to the Boricua experience post-Hurricane María. *Duelo* is both rage and love, tied to a sense of deep connection

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<sup>61</sup> It's important to specify here the people born and raised in the island/archipelago of Borikén hold a specific experience that differs from Puerto Ricans born and raised in the United States.

<sup>62</sup> The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability (P.R.O.M.E.S.A.) Act was passed by U.S. Congress in 2016 to establish a fiscal control board over the archipelago, to restructure the Puerto Rican government debt crisis. Many understand that the Puerto Rican debt crisis was caused by exploitative policies that favored U.S. corporations over public infrastructure and the wellbeing of Boricua people. This policy sparked an era of general manifestations and protests against the PROMESA Act and the fiscal control board in Borikén, as many understood this governance move to be in violation of the human rights and self determination of the people of Borikén.

<sup>63</sup> #RickyRenuncia uprisings 2019

to Borikén as a territory and homeland, and an intimate understanding of the impacts of disaster capitalism and colonization.

*Duelo* was born from the compounding impacts of historic systemic oppression in Borikén and aggravated by the fiscal crisis, the impacts of Hurricanes Irma and María, and the inept disaster response and government neglect that led to thousands of deaths during this crisis. This was followed by a string of earthquakes and consistent government negligence that led to more deaths, displacement, and disenfranchisement on a massive scale. The Puerto Rican colonial government and the U.S. government are both complicit in this human-made and multi-layered disaster. The Puerto Rican government -headed by Puerto Rican elites with corporate interests- tried effortlessly to cover up the number of deaths and the urgency of this humanitarian crisis. Its leaders mocked the grief of the people and their disregard was made public when in 2019 government chats were leaked<sup>64</sup> by the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo. Outrage awakened the largest and longest wave of uprisings and protests in the archipelago and its diasporas. Boricua people took to the streets, flooded the capital, and demanded justice with a #RickyRenuncia movement that sustained for months. Collective grief led this movement and marked a significant break from people's capacity to tolerate the abuse. It interrupted injustice and broke the ceiling for what is possible when the people collectively self-organize to fight for their dignity and Futurity. During that time, town meetings where residents convened in plazas or community spaces to dream up new versions of democracy were popping up across the archipelago. These meetings and interventions were not coordinated by one single group, but were instead a manifestation of collective power and connectedness.

Although these grassroots efforts were not sustained, they offered a glimpse of what it could look like to redesign democracy from the bottom up and toward more justice-based

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<sup>64</sup> <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/the-889-pages-of-the-telegram-chat-between-rossello-nevares-and-his-closest-aides>

governance models. While the system of governance in the island archipelago unfortunately stayed the same, this marked a moment of powerful collective imagination that has energized and continues to nourish self-determination efforts on the ground. And it has manifested as stronger and more initiatives for Land and energy sovereignty, food and climate justice, gender and racial equity, and more. Grief became a conduit for transformation.

Through Hartman and Sharpe, we understand that grief plays a significant role across journeys of identity, cultural trauma, and healing. It shows up in the artistic process and propels social movements and community organizing. Grief is interwoven with our personal and collective narratives. It becomes an essential part of the healing work that can allow us to understand the interconnectedness of journeys of oppression and liberation across cultural contexts. In contrast to rage, indignation, or retribution as energies that can fuel social action, grief offers us space to acknowledge the weight of colonial violence and structural oppression. It creates an opening to understand the need for collective healing, and allows us to witness ourselves -as individuals and communities who continue to live with the impacts of systemic violence. Here there is kinship with Sharpe's "living in the wake of slavery". Boricua people live in this wake.

In connecting through shared grief, we can understand how the liberation of all people is intertwined with Black liberation. Black artists, scholars, and thinkers set the pace and make great strides in articulating the many convoluted layers and impacts of colonization that we are all impacted by and complicit with. If we can better understand the grief we carry, its role, and how to develop or engage grief-based practices in our processes of artistry and community, we may find that this same grief can help lay the foundation for enabling liberation and Futurity in more impactful and long-lasting ways.

## Rearranging the Archive

Colonial archives silence the very people who are represented within its borders. They craft narratives on our behalf and feed them back to us as what should be our collective identity, based on agendas of power and dominance. In response to this, I've honed my own creative practice as a way to create cultural rootedness and recover histories, rituals, and ancestral knowledge from a fragmented past for the purpose of creating decolonial Futurity.

I consider creative practice as a form of transmutation and repair. By intervening photographs of the U.S. occupation of Borikén, I layer my own familial and childhood stories over a visual history of my ancestors that has trapped the Boricua under the gaze of colonial rule. These rituals pull from the images to recover stories outside the borders of the archive; what is hidden underneath, tucked in its cracks, between its layers, growing in its liminal spaces. The creative act of placing marks upon colonial narratives unveils and commemorates the histories that exist there, unseen, and that we must not forget. The open rifts invite expanded possibilities for a more nuanced representation of rural Boricua people, and becomes evidence that -through creative rituals- we can subvert colonial narratives and author self-determination.

I've created my own 'archive': a collection of annotated photographs of the Land that raised me, my childhood home, and my returns to Borikén since I left to become *diáspora*. These annotated photographs become vessels for memories of lineage and Land, for stories of Boricua Futurity. They are part of my world-building practice that maps out speculative futures where Boricua people live in symbiotic relationship to Land and non-human kin, practice a variety of ways to resist evolved forms of colonial rule, and have bodies that represent a spectrum of human/Land/technology hybridity. These are stories held in the clay water vessels that *behike* would keep within the belly of Coabey, at the mouth of its springs.

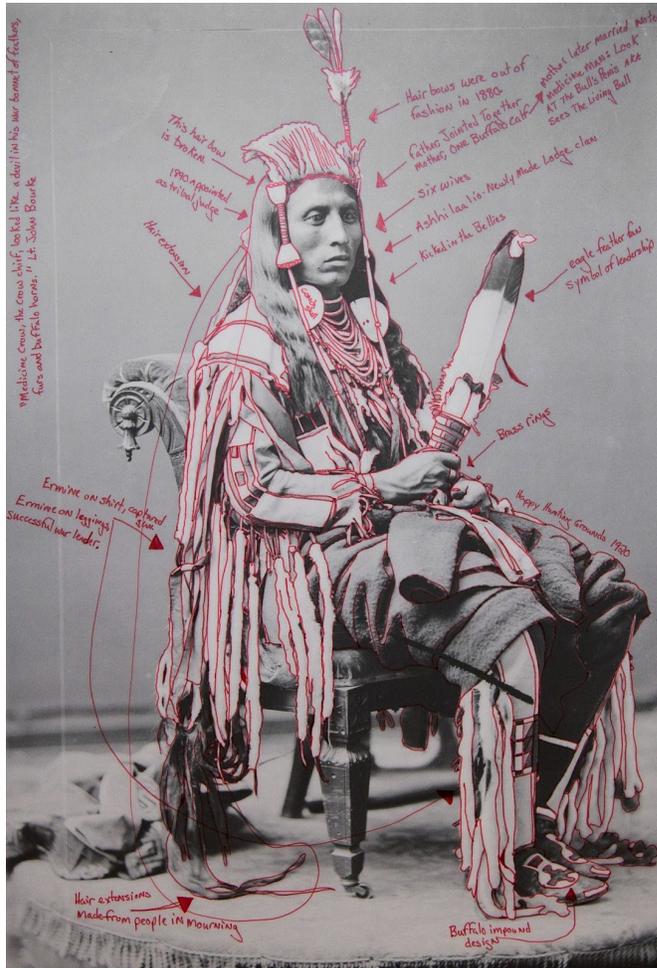
## Red Star's Annotations

An artist with whom I share affinity is Wendy Red Star (*Apsáalooke* or Crow Tribe of Montana), an interdisciplinary artist born and raised on the Crow Reservation in Billings, Montana. Red Star disrupts and remixes visual archives of her Indigenous ancestors who have been documented as part of colonial occupation projects; and highlights the life of present-day kin who's Futurity is erased by colonial archives but who actively celebrate culture today. Red Star is most well known for intervening historic photographs of the Crow Tribe, the people she belongs to, with annotations in red ink. We both have a practice of annotation with similar intentions.

Red Star specifically focuses on the colonial representations of the Crow people who were part of the negotiations for the present-day boundaries of their tribal lands. She used archival photographs from the National Anthropological Archives to create two notable series of works: *1880 Crow Peace Delegation* (2014) and *1873 Crow Peace Delegation* (2017). Red Star interrupts these photographs of Crow leaders taken by white Americans to impose her own personal observations and historical facts about the Crow Delegation, imposing a layer of her handwritten notes on red ink<sup>65</sup>. The annotations become ornament, context, narrative, and connection. The red ink points to lineage and bloodline, or life line. In these annotations she catalogs the attire of these leaders, decoding the meaning of every item worn by them in the photographs, adding cultural context, and revealing layers that are flattened by colonial archives and erased by the white gaze. She uses annotation as a practice of personal reflection, repair, and renewal. This is also art-based research.

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<sup>65</sup> *Wendy Red Star: A Scratch on the Earth - Past Exhibition* | San Antonio Museum of Art. [www.samuseum.org/artwork/exhibition/wendy-red-star-a-scratch-on-the-earth](http://www.samuseum.org/artwork/exhibition/wendy-red-star-a-scratch-on-the-earth).



*Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)*, 2014, from the series *1880 Crow Peace Delegation*. Pigment print on paper, from digitally reproduced and artist-manipulated photographs by C.M. (Charles Milton) Bell, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, 25 × 17 in. Brooklyn Museum. © Wendy Red Star.

Red Star and I share a similar approach and intention in creating a relationship with and interruptions to a colonial archive of a familial or cultural history that has been fragmented, flattened, or erased. These are histories that are not told by the people depicted in the images, so the archive beckons intervention and reappropriation by the descendants of the people who belong to that history. This results in the creation of a layered aesthetic of resistance that inevitably comments on the borders or margins of a collective identity and how its narratives are created.

Another significant Red Star body of work is *Accession*<sup>66</sup>, a series of prints based on research she conducted while working as the Native Artist-in-Residence at the Denver Art Museum (2016-2017). She intervened hand-painted card catalogs that featured watercolor illustrations of the museum's holdings of Native objects. Using these objects as inspiration, Red Star attended the Crow Nation's annual Crow Fair and took photos of similar items that Crow people were wearing during the parades. By layering images of present-day Crow people using these items, Red Star rescues these objects from a sterile and motionless archive. She breathes life into them, giving them movement and context. This practice also functions as a statement on how Indigenous people (and Indigenous identities) are often articulated or understood in relation to the past and denied expressions of contemporary representation or projection into the future.

Red Star's work challenges those limited and historicised notions of Indigenous identity and instead presents the viewers with an affirmation that Indigenous cultural production continues to evolve. Hers is a practice of re-appropriation and repair in the context of colonized people's cultural production. If we understand repair an act of desire, or the desire to practice freedom<sup>67</sup>, we can understand how Red Star uses her creative practice to return power to Native people and cultural objects by activating and intervening the colonial archives.

In the essay "Colonial Melancholia", Krenak and Fonteles<sup>68</sup> provocatively refer to appropriation as an "anthropophagic" compulsion of colonization, or as hunger and desire to 'eat' indigenous cultural production. They propose:

One of our burning questions is how to escape the anonymity inherited from ethnocentric prejudices in relation to indigenous art, which placed it in the scientific void of

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<sup>66</sup> "Wendy Red Star, *Accession*". *Sargent's Daughters*, [www.sargentsdaughters.com/wendy-red-star-accession](http://www.sargentsdaughters.com/wendy-red-star-accession).

<sup>67</sup> "Colonial Melancholia". *Bauhaus Imaginista*.

<sup>68</sup> "Bauhaus and Indigenous Cultural Production". *Bauhaus Imaginista*.

museology or of the exotic, and labeled it as the production of simple artifacts that express collectivity. These concepts kept indigenous art outside of art history for centuries. (Krenak and Fonteles)

In many ways, Red Star's practice rescues Crow craft, culture, and people from structures of the past created by settler history and held in colonial archives. She challenges museology and the ethnocentric and racist confines of exotification and historicity by turning the archive over itself, creating works -photographs and visual language- that become vessels of collective memory<sup>69</sup>. Through a powerful artistic practice, Red Star unlocks the cultural power of these stories and objects to create a new archive that boldly anchors Crow culture in the present and opens space for imagining Indigenous Futurity. I aim to accomplish the same with my own creative practice of writing and annotation, toward Boricua Futurity.

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<sup>69</sup> In *The Invention of Craft*, Glenn Adamson defines craft as a repository and signifier of collective memory.

## Boricua Trails and Annotations

Through this work, I will share a journey of how creative practice<sup>70</sup> can interrupt colonial archives that are and were used to fabricate the mixed race person, specifically the Boricua, as a racialized historical subject inhabiting the ruins of colonization. The work uses the double mestizaje<sup>71</sup> of Boricua people as a way to understand the *jibaro* as figure and body of both colonial violence and liberatory cultural inheritance. This work seeks to interrupt the narratives of racial governance created by white supremacy during colonization, and proposes the need for repositioning the mixed race Boricua person into a path of liberation that aligns with Blackness and Indigeneity. I will show how creative practice can offer a foundation and recurring practice of healing from historic violence that can help explore the collisions and transform the role of the *jibaro* in social justice work. This is a move to liberate the *jibaro* from site of violence (weapon) to becoming an active agent of collective healing that is better prepared to play a role in liberatory<sup>72</sup> work. Or, from weapon to liberation.

Violence is institutionalized through archives, and archives are disembodied. They erase the body and impose a fabricated continuity over narratives. Archives layer a smooth foundation to hide the discontinuities of stories, experiences, and bodies. But every document is related to a body and the discontinuities push against the archive to show up as ruptures. In the construction of colonial historical narratives, bodies are taken out of context and displaced; an expression of

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<sup>70</sup> I will focus on the creative practices of annotation on archival photographs and the intersections of artistic practice, archives, and research

<sup>71</sup> Peruvian-American Sociologist Sylvanna Falcón coined the term “*mestiza* double consciousness” in her study, “*Mestiza* Double Consciousness: The Voices of Afro-Peruvian Women on Gendered Racism”. Falcón expands upon W.E.B. Du Bois’ idea of double consciousness and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness. Falcón uses this to develop a framework for the experience and positionality of Afro-Peruvian women. This is an important source to acknowledge. I will instead focus my work on light-skin Boricua mestize people whose lineage comprises the trifecta of Indigenous, Spanish/Portuguese, and African descent. This is the identity that I myself own and can speak to.

<sup>72</sup> Liberatory work in this context means: racial, gender, housing, reproductive, and environmental justice work that centers equity and access of the people most impacted by systemic oppression. It takes various forms: community organizing, social services, voting rights, land sovereignty, policy development, systems of governance, and any and all forms of community development.

violence. This violence is held within the body, its geographies, and the Land. This is part of the abundance of truth that exists outside colonial archives.

For the past 8 years, I've had a practice of intervening images with gold ink. I began with a book about Renaissance art. I ripped its pages and chose paintings made by Italian men depicting Christian scenes or iconography. I interrupted these images by drawing vines, ornaments, doodles of insects, esoteric symbols, mustaches, horns, tails, and serpents. I was searching for something, but wasn't sure what. At a moment in my life where I felt my unmooring so intensely, I leaned into this intuitive and voracious practice without a set goal or a horizon. No maps, but leaving trails.

The Renaissance era imposed a tyrannical continuity in the understanding of the world, history, politics, and aesthetics. Renaissance artists set off to create a visual imagery of Europe based on the revival of classical antiquity<sup>73</sup>. As they honed their skills in painting to reach new levels of artistry, they served an imperial goal of depicting white bodies as innocent, continuous, and pure, with a direct connection to divinity. The act of intervening these images became an embodied spell, a frenzy. I wished to rip through the bodies in these images to show their truth, explode the cracks in the archive, and destroy this false continuity that erased deep histories of harm. My anxieties spilled over, requiring embodied actions and rituals. The practice of creating marks upon the images became one of its manifestations. These were marks<sup>74</sup> that could serve as scars, a commemoration of the fissures and the cuts; a ripping through the archive. The Renaissance presented ideals of salvation. But there is no salvation in this visual imaginary, only conquest.

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<sup>73</sup> Classical antiquity is the period of cultural history created by the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome (Greco-Roman World) between the 8th Century BC and the 5th Century AD.

<sup>74</sup> A Freudian impression. "What does "exterior" mean? Is a circumcision, for example, an exterior mark? Is it an archive?". Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

Perhaps the most significant piece I intervened was an image of a painting known as *The Bartolini Tondo*<sup>75</sup> (1452-1453) by Italian painter and Carmelite priest Fra Filippo Lippi. This piece is also known as *Madonna with Child and Scenes from the Life of Saint Anne*. I ripped this work from a large book on Renaissance Art and I intervened it with gold ink, inscribing irreverent and esoteric annotations to create gilded wounds and portals. After intervening the original image, I decided to enlarge this practice. So I scaled up the image as a digital print, I placed an acetate over it, made my markings with a thick, black marker, and had the acetate turned into a screen so that my marks could be screen-printed over the image using gold ink. I made 10 editions of this large, circular print. I designed and commissioned the production of a digitally fabricated altar-like frame made with fiber board and cut with a CNC router. I installed one of the prints upon this sculpture. The final piece is a large-scale altar to the intervention, meant to be hung on the wall and activated as a portal, with space for flowers and candles.

The image has annotations calling in the name of Nana Buruku, the grandmother of the orishas in Santería and Candomblé, spiritual practices in the Caribbean with roots in various cultures of West Africa. During the colonization of the Americas, Black and Indigenous peoples used Christian or Catholic icons as vessels to hide West African or Indigenous spiritual practices. This *spiritual syncretism* is sometimes interpreted as a form of assimilation, but I understand it to be a practice of survival and resistance. Saint Anne is an avatar or vessel used by enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the Caribbean to pay reverence to the West African deity Nana Buruku. Nana Buruku is the supreme being in the West African traditional religion of the Fon people of Benin and the Ewe people of Togo. She is the grandmother of all *orishas*, birthed the deities of the sun and moon, and is the crone and sentinel of death and rebirth.

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<sup>75</sup> The image of this artwork is under the public domain and is accessible in the wikimedia commons database: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartolini\\_Tondo#/media/File:Lippi,\\_tondo\\_bartolini.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartolini_Tondo#/media/File:Lippi,_tondo_bartolini.jpg)



*Nana Buruku*. Silkscreened digital print and digitally fabricated altar. Shey Rivera Rios. 2017.

In a parallel process, descendants of the Aztec used Saint Anne as a vessel to conceal their worship of the deity Toci during the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan. Toci is known as the mother of the gods and heart of the earth, similar to Nana Buruku. And, in Christianity, Saint Anne is mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus. These exemplify syncretism as a practice of layering cultural codes for the purpose of cultural survival.

I grew up with a family that practiced a syncretic entanglement of African spirituality, Catholicism, and some Taino cultural practices. This cultural experience allows me to read Saint Anne as the avatar for Nana Buruku and to see a layer of ancestral codes within her image and representations. My annotations intend to pull out this layer, enough to reveal hidden trails of colonization within the so-called Enlightenment.

Colonization did not just produce assimilation, it created resistance and new ancestral technologies. Syncretism offered a way to use colonial archives as avatars, or containers, to hide, protect, and preserve ancestral knowledge of Indigenous and Black people. As a practice of survival, syncretism taught its descendants and practitioners to see or read the ancestral codes found underneath the colonial archives, and to use the debris of colonization -its ruins- as ways of seeing. These are codes (or marks) for those who know or can look close enough. As I layer marks over this image, it becomes a portal of syncretism and resistance.

To dive further, the colonization of the Caribbean began during the proliferation of the Renaissance era (15th and 16th century), with the landfall of Christopher Columbus in 1492. These connections help me understand my compulsion to intervene images of Renaissance art, as a way to disrupt the colonial archive. Derridá poses: “There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside”. I see my creative practice as a manifestation of the death drive, or a wild desire

to turn the archive inside out, show its underbelly, rip it apart. Through iterative rituals of annotations and disruptions, I seek to create (or expose) a new site, an underworld of truth, a path to Coabey. Not for the sake of novelty, but to program within my body the action of ripping apart the narratives. And to turn this into embodied memory that can be used to heal the violence of colonization within my own body. Not to erase it, but for the wounds to scar and leave marks that become the sacred commemoration of a history that must not be forgotten.

After a while, I exhausted my fixation on Renaissance imagery and I moved on to a more modern archive, the 1940s FSA photographs of Puerto Rico by photographer Jack Delano. It was an inevitable slip, getting me closer to understanding my search. As I look back at my transition between these archives as a sort of migration, I can't help but think of the space between them, what Appadurai calls *disjunctures*<sup>76</sup>. I found disjunctures and I leaned in.

A gold pen traces arms, cotton shirts, spilling gold over the heads of sugar cane workers and gifting them halos and gold hearts. Their machetes harness the motion of their arms against the *cañaveral*, turning their effort into power to reach across time and space to transform our present. They deliver a message, an entanglement of colonization: labor, grief, *mestizaje*, violence, and liberation. Gold spills over musical instruments, mouths that chant stories of the land, in a rare moment of rest and replenishment alongside family. Gold ink as ornament to visualize how strong those songs might've been, casting spells in waves released out into the sugar cane fields. I can hear them clearly. I know what those songs sound like. I keep searching.

By intervening these images commissioned by the U.S. government during a time of U.S. occupation, I pose questions and lay a foundation for reclaiming a narrative. Like Red Star does for the Crow Tribe, I open a rift in the archive to offer decolonial possibilities for the stories and representation of rural Boricua people.

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<sup>76</sup> Appadurai, "Disjunctures and Difference", *Modernity at Large*, p. 33

## Mano de Obra

When you remember a place, what texture does that memory take? What is the first sensory image you think of? Do you remember its scent or how it sounds? Does your skin remember textures like the warmth of sunlight, cool rain, or the tug of the wind? These imprints are the ways in which we remember a place. And they become cultural memories held in the body. These fragments create an imagined place, an anchor to our imagined communities<sup>77</sup>.

When you leave your Land, you are often thrown into the conscious or unconscious activity of recreating it. My uprooting has become intertwined with my artistic practice and so, my next migration between archives is toward my own: photographs of my family Land, my childhood home, and my returns to Borikén since leaving and becoming *diáspora*.

One of the most significant artworks from this collection is titled *Mano de Obra* (2022), a panoramic photo of a raw terrace extending from my parents' house in Borikén. The image is intervened with layers of doodles, notes, and personal memories of the Land and my family, using gold ink<sup>78</sup>. The terrace is the raw foundation of our first home that my parents turned into a space for cultivating medicinal herbs. They use the space for their practice of animal husbandry, caring for newborn domestic fowl until they are big enough to release; and for their own joy, rest, and healing. They sit under the canopy of herbs, orchids, and string lights and look out to the valley. The flowers of the African Tulip trees burn bright orange upon the dark green shades of *el monte*. This is a sacred space; rich, dense, irregular, and untamed. A place with remnants of the former home -a broken toilet, car tires, and buckets that serve as vessels for soil, plants, or water. A robust vanilla vine with bright yellow blossoms climbs up the wall of these ruins. This place has texture and sound. It is a place that breathes, it's alive and resists being contained. This

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<sup>77</sup> Benedict Anderson coined the term *imagined communities*.

<sup>78</sup> This practice shares kinship with the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, or repair of ceramic using gold material. I use a gold ink Sakura Pen-Touch Paint Marker, extra fine.

way of life challenges the nature-culture divide, by centering cooperation and reciprocity instead of dominance. This is Spivak’s planetarity.



Mano de Obra. Digital print, landscape photograph with annotation on gold ink. Shey Rivera Ríos, 2022. 10x40 in.

Appadurai calls on the role of memory and imagination in the construction of ‘place’:

“The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued.” (30).

In relation to this landscape I pull from the colonial archives an image of *Essai sur l'Architecture*, or the Allegory of Architecture, an artwork also known as The Primitive Hut. This is an illustration by Charles Eisen and engraved by Jean-Jacques Aliamet in 1755. It depicts a goddess archetype who leans upon the ruins of the classical order, and points to a hut made with trees. This hut represents building civilization with nature; by taming, cutting, and binding of nature to give shape to a structure, a hut, a culture. The trees are columns, they provide the frame and are rooted to the ground, with its canopy as roof. This structure is alive. A home -or a house- as a living body. Nature plays a role in this structure, but it is still a structure of dominance. This artwork speaks to the nature-culture divide as a colonial inheritance of violence. European colonists viewed the land of the “New World” as desolate and savage. They saw Indigenous

peoples as lazy and wasteful of the land, since their understanding of land use was linked with extraction and exploitation rather than based on Indigenous ways of reciprocity and moderation. Colonists believed the land must be tamed in order for it to be safe and habitable. Land became “Eden” once it was cleared and settled. This dichotomy of ‘civilization’ and ‘primitive’ is rooted in systemic oppression and separates us from our earth ecosystem in harmful and inequitable ways. Even when conceiving new forms, this inherited uprootedness or colonial separation from nature seeps in. Without acknowledging it, we cannot truly dismantle it. This artwork offers a reflection on how we build the world around us, from our home to larger forms of community and structures, through inherited systems of how we understand the world and relate to it.



"Essai sur l'architecture".  
The New York Public Library Digital  
Collections. 1755.

In contrast, *Mano de Obra* honors my parents, their way of living, their home (my childhood home), and the history of the Land and place where they live (where I used to live). It is a concrete foundation entangled with plants, animals, objects, and trees. It represents a way of

living with nature that does not cover the marks of violence, but layers upon them the stories of our *survivance*<sup>79</sup>, becoming an archive of healing. My hand overlays notes and doodles on gold ink over the images, a motion of grief and love that offers an attempt at repair. This is an effort to grasp things that I've lost, an acknowledgement of the in-between space/s that I inhabit, and of the partiality that haunts the colonial experience of the Boricua. It is the everlasting longing for a false return and the tension in this return with the simultaneous desire (and inevitability) of remaining distant. To me, these are sigils of grief and liberation.

This foundation, this terrace, changes over time. Someday, it will not be there, and what it represents will not be there. And perhaps my creative practice is the desperate act to hold onto fractals of memory and belonging; to preserve an ethos of people who live in both tension and harmony with the Land. This is the lineage of the *jibaro*, rural and working class people who understand planetarity<sup>80</sup> in their bones because they've never had the privilege of thinking the world moves around them. They understand that history, power, and the Land are all things that move above and around them, and that these movements happen both with them and without them.

Here, we return to dive into the cartographic journey of Lt. William Armstrong, as analyzed by Lanny Thompson. Armstrong used annotated photographs, or what he called 'photographic maps' to document his cartographic journey across Puerto Rico in 1908-12. We can look at an annotated photograph of the Balboa Bridge in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. It was taken in 1899 by William Townsend the year after the U.S. occupation, and annotated by Lt William Armstrong. The photograph prioritizes the land over the people, with a focus on the bridge and the river, and annotations that provide information on directions of the town and the

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<sup>79</sup> Here I use Gerald Vizenor's concept of Native survivance, which will be unraveled in the next section "Layers of Survivance".

<sup>80</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "'Planetarity' (Box 4, WELT)" in *Paragraph*, June 2015, vo. 38, No. 2 : pp. 290-92.

city, direction of the river, and notes the “usual method of transportation in P.R.”. It does not pay mind to the workers and the animals, what they are doing there. Who are they, where are they going, what is their life like? Where does this river flow from, what is its significance in the local community? There are no cultural indicators, no stories that humanize the subjects captured by the lens. The purpose of this gaze is to position, measure, and prime for deployment.



Balboa Bridge. Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. Photography by William Townsend, 1899.  
Annotations by Lt William Townsend, 1905.

With his annotated photographs, Lt William Armstrong created a cartographic interiority of coloniality. He transformed the landscape of Borikén into a colonial archive, fragmenting the interconnected and relational experience of its people and the Land, into distinct and separate entities for the purpose of militarization and resource development. This cartographic project was a project of colonization, a body of work to be held and archived in U.S. government offices.

Indigenous scholar Leslie Marmon Silko<sup>81</sup> (Laguna Pueblo) points out how Western, Anglo, and European perspectives construct the landscape as something to oversee, in relation to the white man, as separate to the human, and as site to be dominated. She calls out and opposes this toxic colonial view of the landscape that extracts meaning and severs the essential connection between people and Land:

“Pueblo potters, creators of petroglyphs and oral narratives, never conceived of removing themselves from the earth and sky. So long as the human consciousness remains within the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky, the term landscape, as it has entered the English language, is misleading. ‘A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view’ does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow outside or separate from the territory she or he surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on.” (Silko, 2)

There is an uncanny resemblance of my annotations with Armstrong’s photographic maps. While Armstrong used photographs and annotations for instructional purposes, his approach divests from emotional meaning. My work seeks to do the opposite: these are not annotated photographs where Land is landscape solely valued for its utilitarian possibilities.

Let’s look at another photographic map, this one featuring Armstrong standing in the landscape of Jayuya in Borikén and pointing toward key directions in the landscape; an iconic pose in the theater of coloniality. Let’s look at it alongside *Mano de Obra*, to soak in their similarities and contrasts:

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<sup>81</sup> Silko, Leslie Marmon. “Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories”. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.



Comparison between photographic map by Lt. William Armstrong, “View of the south coast of P.R. between Cabo Rojo and Guayanilla” 1910. And annotated photograph of parent’s terrace in Corozal, “Mano de Obra” by Shey Rivera Ríos, 2022.

With my practice of writing and annotations, I counter the colonial construction of the Puerto Rican landscape and false interiority created by Armstrong. I re-integrate what has been severed, and instead create a Native interiority based on my and my family’s lived experience as Boricua people. Through this creative practice, I pull from the images, unflatten the stories, and visualize landscape as Land: a rich cultural experience that defines Boricua people, their relationship to their territory, and their Futurity.

This too is an archive, it is Coabey, the cave system. This is an archive of emotional investments, both past and present. A porous archive of ancestral knowledge, memories, and commemorations that exist between its layers. It is not an archive that exhumes ghosts, but welcomes them in to come dance in the faultlines of history<sup>82</sup> (Rivera, 134).

<sup>82</sup> Rivera, Mayra. “Spirits, Memory, and the Holy Ghost”. Moore, Stephen D., and Mayra Rivera, eds. *Planetary loves: Spivak, postcoloniality, and theology*. Fordham Univ Press, 2011. p.134.

## Layers of Survivance

*Mano de Obra* tells stories of when I was a child, and my parents and I lived in a wooden house in Borikén in the mountains. We resisted hurricane winds together, droughts, black outs, rainy seasons. Experiencing cycles of destruction and reconstruction inevitably leads a people to develop practices of rebuilding and recovery. Cut and bruised hands and hearts are evidence of a plural experience of survival in the face of colonialism. Boricuas have been rebuilding for a long time. In this context, memory and permanence take on meanings that are rooted in the Land. This foundation is so strong, it came with me when I left Borikén to settle in the diaspora and it has been with me ever since. This becomes a haunting that is present in my creative work.

The lived experience of Boricua rural communities surviving through hurricanes becomes a *practice* of existing in relationship to environments that we cannot control but must live in harmony with. Not a harmony that drops its shoulders and accepts violence, but a harmony that is adaptive and builds a flexible *permanence* in the face of challenges. This is more than resilience, it is Gerald Vizenor's *survivance*. We see it in how Indigenous people across the world create structures for living in harmony with volatile environments by using culture and Land-based practices that are flexible, reciprocal, and adaptive. Those practices are medicine to the harm created by colonialism.

Alongside *autotheory* as a framework that powers the significance of personal narrative and unflattens the narratives created by colonial archives, we can pull the framework of 'Native survivance as defined by Gerald Vizenor<sup>83</sup>, as another approach to this work. Survivance is defined as a practice that combines survival and endurance. "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories,

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<sup>83</sup>Vizenor, Gerald. "1. Aesthetics of Survivance". *Survivance: Narratives of native presence*. University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

not a mere reaction” (1). This centering of *intentional presence* as resistance rejects narratives of victimry or nihilism. In other words, Vizenor articulates survivance as moving beyond stories of trauma and toward practices of agency, joy, and what Laura Harjo calls ‘Indigenous futurity’<sup>84</sup>. In many ways, Story is our survivance.

This resonates with some of the key questions I hold in this research journey: How do people who have been historically targeted by systems of oppression restore and repair culture and identity beyond the structures of whiteness and settler colonialism? How do we weave together the pieces of us that have been fragmented by colonization? How do we heal together? What are the ancestral practices of Futurity that we have inherited? What is the role of allyship with other cultural groups and how do we hold the complexity of the ways we’ve been complicit with violence and oppression of each other? And what practices do we need to cultivate to embrace grief and enable healing? *Native survivance* offers pathways for us to wrestle with these questions.

In the pull to understand what ‘survivance’ means, I gravitate toward concrete as material in my next artwork. Concrete and cement were used to build the majority of Puerto Rican homes after the U.S. occupation in 1898<sup>85</sup>. And, in the 1990s, my parents replaced our wooden house with a concrete one, anchoring my family in a sturdier home that could withstand hurricane winds. ‘Concrete’ means a physical or real transformation. Using this knowledge, I sought to reflect on *survivance* in relation to a uniquely rural Boricua practice or ethos of *permanence*. This resulted in an installation and performance titled “On Permanence”, with an altar of 38 concrete cinder blocks as its centerpiece. The description reads:

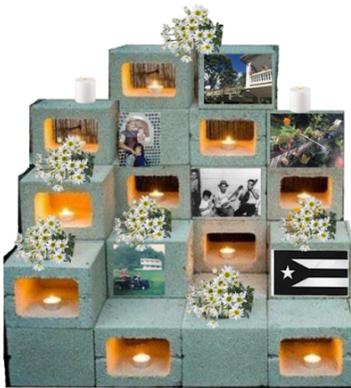
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<sup>84</sup>Harjo, Laura. *Spiral to the Stars: Myskoke Tools of Futurity*. University of Arizona Press, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Rigau, Jorge. "Flotsam, Jetsam and Foreign Cargo: American Architecture and Urbanism in Puerto Rico after 1898." p.99

An activation of altar as ancestral transmitter. From Narragansett land to Taino land - Borikén, from From Taino land - Borikén to Narragansett land. What does it mean to strive for permanence in the face of colonialism and inevitable displacement? What healing do we hope to summon when we utter the word 'home'? While the land storms out against its injustice, we cling, we anchor, we claw into our ancestors with questions. This is an altar as a portal; an assemblage of items imbued with power -from past and present- to reconfigure broken lineages and to ensure continuity. This is a prayer.

**Materials:** rustic wooden chair or stool. 2 speakers and a contact mic. machete and a sugar cane stalk. body. experimental sound piece and two audio poems. cinder block altar as an 'ancestral transmitter' with photographs of my family and offerings (38 cinder blocks representing the age of the artist). bucket with 38 roses (age of the artist). razor blade. laptop.



Three iterations of the "On Permanence" cinder block altar installation. Shey Rivera Ríos, 2022.  
Mock up #1: Lineage. Mock up #2: Land. And photo of in-progress altar installed at Providence Biennial, WaterFire Art Center, Providence, RI. 2022.

Often during my returns to Borikén I try to make my way to the water, specifically to La Pocita beach in Loíza. This is an important place of healing for me. It is one of the sacred places where I release energy, integrate learnings from the past year, and connect with my body and spirit through a practice of gratitude and connection with the Land and its waters. This year, I returned to La Pocita in Borikén, a few days after presenting “On Permanence” in a public exhibit for the first time<sup>86</sup>.

I sat by the water and noticed something that moved me: A cinder block was buried on the sand, sitting right at the edge of the water and caught in an endless loop of waves. It hit me with clarity on what I’ve been desperately attempting to convey through my artwork:

What does resistance mean if not a commitment to a practice of permanence in the face of violence, of climate disaster, or colonialism? Resistance to becoming eroded, resistance to becoming assimilated. A cinder block buried in the sand remains stubborn, anchored, and committed to endure. An endless loop of waves is the endless struggle for survival. The cinder block resists as it erodes from the tide, pushing against the inevitability of perishing. Within the loop of struggle, it is swallowed by the sand, becoming one with the Land and its waters.

This cinder block offers an invitation: Within the endless loop and struggle of survival, we can pan out to understand how our collective resistance relates to the Land and its waters, where we ultimately wish to return to and be held. A reminder that we are not alone, and the Land holds us in our struggle. Its waters offer respite. The cinder block allows itself to erode so that perhaps it can release its rigidity and its form, calling us into release. Releasing the hold that colonial archives have on us, and becoming one with the Land in our journey through memory, survival, legacy, and action. The foundations of our resistance must be created *with* the Land, not

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<sup>86</sup> At the Providence Biennial, WaterFire Arts Center, Providence, RI. 2023.

in opposition to it, so that we can create adaptive and malleable forms of resistance that allow us to thrive. Not by exerting force, but by rolling with the tides, sinking our feet in the sand and becoming entangled. So that we may grow to learn ourselves and our relationship to the planet in deeper ways. Reciprocity, collectivity, and connectedness.



Sequence of video stills from 'On Permanence' video loop.  
Shey Rivera Ríos, 2022.

A new question emerges: *where does the self (we) end and where do we begin? Where does Land end and we begin?* There is grief in the process of holding on, reclaiming, and anchoring onto a Land, a place, a memory, a lineage. Grief in crafting belonging. Grief in salvaging the remnants of colonization. These remnants are our stories, our evidence, us. Through creative practice, *object* becomes evidence and vibrant matter, alive and connected. And *performance* is embodied memory and medicine, through ritual and action that is meant to be witnessed. Allowing Land as collaborator, Land as teacher, is how we can heal the wound of belonging.

## From Creative Placemaking to Placekeeping

Every place has a texture. In Borikén, I was born and raised within textures that were rich, vibrant, and luscious. Not just the nature surrounding my home, but our own house and the houses around us, tucked into the mountain. They all had their own sense of identity and uniqueness, even the ones that forced a modernist aesthetic upon the thick forest. Every place has a sound, has a rhythm, has a pace. This shapes how I experience the world.

Years ago, I left Borikén to pursue a career in arts and culture in the United States. This led me into the intersection of arts, culture, and community development. Although my passion for the arts is strong, it is anchored in a deep desire for decolonial futures, a practice of community organizing, and a commitment to liberation work. This helps me understand the role of art and artists in social justice, interrogating the impact and purpose of their role within community contexts.

Art and culture are essential to creating a sense of ‘place’ and belonging. This discourse is embedded in the arts and culture sector in the United States and used for the purpose of rural and urban development, under the guise of what we know as *community development*. I think about ‘place’, what this means, and how narratives of ‘place’ are tethered to power, policy, and politics. This all points to the need to unpack and problematize how art and culture are used in processes of urban and rural development.

In 2011, I was an emerging arts practitioner through my work at AS220, a renowned art space in Providence, RI. That same year, I was part of a capacity building program for art spaces across the country called NxtGen II Diverse Art Spaces, launched by the Ford Foundation. This was the official beginning of my journey into the world of arts and culture in community development. I met and built relationships with art spaces of all scales and arts practitioners of

all levels of experience, including renowned Black and Indigenous organizations across the nation<sup>87</sup>. The intention of this program<sup>88</sup> was to diversify and build capacity for the arts sector, but it was still a white-centered space influenced and held by Ford Foundation and the Kennedy Center as lead facilitators, conveners, and educators. Yet, this was also a moment in my journey when powerful seeds were planted. Contextually, the arts sector was shifting and articulating its relationship with other sectors, like urban/rural planning, economic development, and real estate. This was the era of *creative placemaking*.

In the prior year, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) commissioned the creation of a white paper called “Creative Placemaking”<sup>89</sup>, which defined *creative placemaking* as a collaboration where “partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities” (Markusen and Gadwa). *Creative placemaking* became an important framework for cities looking to revitalize from depressed economic states, including post industrial and rust-belt cities. It was placed in the context of economic development and created determinants for ‘vibrancy’ and livability of cities. Institutions across the sector bought into this concept and modified their own definition and applications of the term, including The American Planning Association, Americans for the Arts, among many others.

This was also the year when several foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions came together to create ArtPlace America, an entity with a mission to “position arts

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<sup>87</sup> Some of the organizations part of this cohort were: PA’I Foundation (Hawai’i), Wing Luke Museum (Portland, OR), Ashé Cultural Center (New Orleans, LA), Pregones Theatre (NYC), AlternateROOTS (Jackson, MS), Miami Light Project (Miami, FL), International Sonoran Desert Alliance (Ajo, AZ), Nickelodeon Theatre (SC).

<sup>88</sup> The program was led by Roberta Uno, Senior Program Officer for Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation 2002-2015.

<sup>89</sup> Written by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and commissioned by an NEA leadership initiative called the Mayors’ Institute on City Design, in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors and American Architectural Foundation. This white paper became the foundation for the NEA’s Our Town program, which funds partnerships between nonprofit organizations and local governments to create projects at the intersection of arts/culture and urban/rural development.

and culture as a core sector of equitable community planning and development” (ArtPlace.org). ArtPlace was founded in 2010 with a clear timeline of 10 years, and an expected sunseting process for 2020. It had an initial goal of funding the creation, maintenance, or expansion of arts facilities across the nation. But it lacked a full understanding of how art can become complicit in white-washing, gentrifying, and harming communities and neighborhoods, when it aligns with real estate development goals that center the interests of privileged groups.

ArtPlace made mistakes and saw the impact of funding the development of cultural centers that displaced existing residents, erased cultural histories of a place, and/or facilitated aesthetics that caused cultural erasure of local communities. It became clear that the way they understood the role of art and culture in development required an urgent assessment.

Conversations about white-washing and gentrification ran deep and pressured the arts sector to do better. Inevitably, ArtPlace went through various reconfigurations of its mission, goal, and strategies within its lifetime, to better align with their desired impact.

In 2014, cultural activist Roberto Bedoya created a significant ripple in the sector by challenging the notion of *creative placemaking* and shedding light on the harmful assumption that a place needs to *be made* rather than acknowledging that a place already *exists* and is made up by the people who currently live there<sup>90</sup>. He proposed *placekeeping* as a response to *placemaking*. He urged the centering of racial justice in the arts and community development sectors and uplifted the Chicano cultural practice and aesthetics of *rasquachification*<sup>91</sup> as a key example of how art and culture can serve racial justice goals. “Rasquachification messes with the white spatial imaginary and offers up another symbolic culture—combinatory, used and reused” (Bedoya). This became a core element of what is now known today as *spatial justice*.

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<sup>90</sup> Bedoya, Roberto. "Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race and the City." *Creative Time Reports* 15 (2014).

<sup>91</sup> “The scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto describes Rasquache as a Chicano aesthetic with an ‘attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style.’” (Bedoya)

By offering a counter argument and centering cultural practice, Bedoya made a great contribution to a sector that was struggling to figure out how to use arts and culture in service to equitable community goals. The heart of *creative placekeeping* is the understanding that places have histories that must be preserved, and any contribution of the arts sector must acknowledge and be in service to these existing histories and residents of a community. It must combat displacement, celebrate and preserve cultural histories, and build upon the legacies of residents who already have done so much to create a sense of place and belonging while existing at the margins and facing systemic oppression.

Appadurai defines *social practice* as a creative practice where “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agencies and globally defined fields of possibility”<sup>92</sup> (31). With this, I return to Delano and the role of artists in government, policy, and narrative creation. There is an alternative when working in relation to institutions, municipalities, governments and other structures that uphold agendas of domination and governance: we must move away from creating representations, archives, and practices that reproduce colonial narratives and agendas of occupation and assimilation under the guise of modernism. Artists can develop practices to consistently assess the role of creator (and their artworks) in a larger political context, so that it becomes possible to exert agency and self determination in the creation of narratives. We can -and must- intentionally align our creative work with the initiatives and futures we want to see in the world. In doing so, artists can become powerful contributors of liberatory Futurity for their communities and beyond.

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<sup>92</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference”. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Vol. 1. U of Minnesota Press, 1996.

## Closing Reflections

Through this research, I've posed that art and creative practice contribute to the creation of narratives -of both subjugation and self determination- that define collective identity and notions of futurity. This intensity becomes more pronounced when it intersects with the archive. Artists entering the archives -any archives- must challenge notions of individualism and colonization and move with the understanding that we are all part of legacies and practices of both domination and liberation. This intersection reveals that in fact all art is tied to an archive.

For people who have been impacted by the violence of colonial narratives, survival requires interrogating the impacts of these histories and their manifestations in our present and futures. This aligns with what Michel Rolph-Trouillot has identified as a shift in our understanding of history: "The meaning of the word 'history' has unambiguously shifted from the sociohistorical process to our knowledge of that process". The frameworks of 'Native survivance' and 'Indigenous futurity' can be interwoven with the contributions of Hartman and Sharpe to ground creative practice for future-making in relation to Black and Indigenous liberatory praxis. The result is a *liberatory creative practice* through which artists can unlock powerful possibilities for challenging colonial narratives of collective identity and settler futurity.

Art emerges from the archive and the archive is also its final resting place. While there may or may not be art without an audience, there can't be art without an archive. All artistic production is in conversation with the past and draws on actual or imagined archives and collections of disparate precedences assembled in the imagination. They too exume ghost, which interrupts the continuity of the imagined archives. Only then the produced art finds itself a home, an archive to which it desires to return to.

I realize that my search across archives is the search for an *imagined place, a belonging*. A place and body that can acknowledge the violence carried within, move toward healing, and use the past to build liberatory futures. I once thought I was merely intervening colonial archives with no sense of direction, but I've realized that what I've been doing through my creative practice is opening a space of disjunctures, a liminal space where decolonial storytelling can be accessed through a culturally-rooted understanding of Coabey, the spirit realm and cave system.

Creative practice can be a site for rehearsing and seeding decolonial futures in conversation with the past. Artists are called to understand how colonial narratives play a role in our creations and what we must be willing to give up in these processes, so we can move with intention. What is at stake in our assembling of archives is our wellbeing as both individual and collective agents who play a role in authoring the narratives that impact our futures, our interwoven journeys, and our relationship to the Land, the planet, and ourselves. Where do we take it from there? It's up to us to decide.

Medicinal plants can break through concrete and blossom between the cracks of the colonial archives. They can grow roots, push out the edges of rigid structures to make space to bloom into the futurist stories that are ready to emerge; the stories that our ancestors held in their bodies and sang about. Within these cracks, we can grow a plurality of perspectives for the future, with sustainable and liberatory ways of being. The old structures become ruins. Let them become ruins. So that we can witness what is growing underneath, as it becomes a forest.

No idea is novel, no artwork is pure and without bias or politics. All art is political. All art is griefwork.

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