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Introduction: Thinking Sovereignty, Forging Communities

This special issue of *Voces del Caribe* is a follow-up to a series of panels presented in Spring 2021 at the Northeast Modern Language Association, which brought together faculty and graduate students from a broad array of disciplines with the aim of fostering collaborative research and activism. Our collective tasks were to identify and explore new paradigms for understanding “sovereignties” across and beyond the Caribbean archipelago, and to construct new cartographies of cultural creation and circulation beyond the confines of modern nation-states. This brief introduction will lay the groundwork for conceptualizing sovereign acts and imaginations. It will subsequently review our authors’ contributions to these in three sections: (1) Sovereignty and Spaciality, (2) Performing Vulnerability, and (3) Poetry, Community, and Liberation.

In their collection *Sovereignty in Fragments*, Keng Halmo and Quentin Skinner review the fraught nature of “sovereign bodies.” They claim that any emancipatory potential of this concept is “not only riddled by vicious ambivalence, but also masks the crudely egotistical motives of nation-states.” They write that sovereignty in its origins



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expressed that there exists an absolute authority in the political community (3). This is, indeed, an outmoded definition—as we currently occupy, as they argue, a “fragmented era;” that is, we live in a time of unprecedented migrations, forced displacements, and transnational movements. To account for this, James Tully has written that sovereignty, in a non-absolute sense, represents the “authority of a culturally diverse people or association of peoples to govern themselves by their own laws and ways free from external subordination” (Halmo, Skinner 7). But, we still must ask: what is the nature of the authority invoked in the name of sovereignty? Is it legal, political, or cultural? To answer these questions, the contributors of this collection have concluded that sovereignty is not something that can be analyzed in the abstract; it cannot be separated from the multiple historical contexts in which it is invoked, nor can it wholly be separated from the political environment in which it is conceived.

In this way, to approach the concept it may be more fruitful to consider its “uses” rather than definitions that have produced tense disagreement. To consider sovereign formations, one must first consider a reality in which political subjects come together, form bonds, create emotional ties, resist, and move. Frances Negrón-Muntaner proposes



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a series of questions regarding the practice of sovereignty in a plural sense, one that is necessarily untethered from political and legal statehood: “Is it possible to engage in sovereign acts without ‘having’ (or being indifferent to, or even rejecting) state sovereignty? Can sovereignty be thought of as less of a thing that one ‘has’ and more as a tension between control and resistance, an argument over power? If so, under what conditions and through which practices do people and peoples affirm themselves as sovereign above other possibilities?” (6) In this light, following Negrón-Muntaer, sovereignty also represents an epistemological and ontological concept; an affirmation of “other” political traditions and governance systems and a critique of power that has converted (legal) acts of dispossession into “acts of resistance, creativity, and/or refusal” (15). Sovereignty as an argument over power, then, involves a corporal dimension. In its critique of power, sovereignty cannot only manifest itself as a macro framework of action, but also as a daily micro-performance engaging the body of the individual, as well as the bodies that surround them. In the same way that sovereignty cannot be contemplated in a vacuum, separated from its historical and political contexts, sovereignty also needs to be conceived as an inherently relational practice.



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In this way, sovereignty always involves other bodies that—in the historical and political context of the Caribbean—inhabit a space of vulnerability. The colonial project in the Caribbean has strategically employed this vulnerability, becoming in turn the cause of its materialization. As Guillermina de Ferrari states in her book *Vulnerable States*, the tendency among contemporary authors to underscore the literal and figurative vulnerability of the Caribbean body is an effective strategy for affective decolonization (3). She writes: "In this way, the vulnerable body becomes a trope that creates the conditions of possibility for reviewing the formations of colonial identities and contesting their essentialism" (25) The vulnerability of the Caribbean body, recreated in the cultural and artistic products that the authors of the volume examine in their respective works, becomes a site of contestation, resistance and reconstruction. Specifically, Emily Sterk and Katrina Barrientos engage in this discourse of vulnerability in order to critically examine the corporal space of Black women and mothers in the Dominican diaspora.

Sovereign acts, therefore, are subject to the (symbolic and materially vulnerable) bodies that perform them. Negrón Muntaner examines the theatrical nature of these



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sovereign acts but warns about the different means and ends they manifest depending on who performs them. Thus, while for the state, "spectacular actions of violence and acts of negation are often required because state power is 'always more fragile than it appears,' for other political actors, sovereign acts, understood as freedom to act and imagine in excess of an imposed law, order, or norm, may be capable of opening up other ways of being in the world...these acts allow subjects to realize that 'we are much freer than we feel,' in Foucault's words" (NM 24-5). As the articles collected here demonstrate, the theatricality of sovereign acts conceived as an excess of a given law or norm in the Caribbean context at hand is not only directly linked to the power of imagining, but also to counter-hegemonic imaginaries embedded in Afro-Caribbean and Taino cultures and traditions. This is precisely the site of sovereign resistance that Ann Cerminaro-Costanzi underscores in her approximation of the works of Federico García Lorca and Lydia Cabrera. In uncovering the rebellious spirit of these writers through religious and cultural traditions of Blackness, Cerminaro-Costanzi effectively links the counter-spaces of *duende* and *monte* in order to propose that liberation is something that one intimately must feel and perform, while engaging deep histories of coloniality, enslavement, and plantation era politics.



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The discussion on sovereignty in the Caribbean space also implies looking at the archipelago within a colonial matrix founded on slave exploitation and the plantation system. Seemingly, the political and economic interference of the United States and other North-Atlantic powers have transformed Caribbean territories not only into tax havens and all-inclusive complexes for tourist and cultural exploitation in a global market, but also into laboratories for economic, scientific, and military experimentation. The Caribbean, as we imagine and understand it today, embodies in its spatiality colonial, neocolonial and neoliberal projects that have shaped the impact of the different and most recent disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. Even, as Mimi Sheller reminds us in her book *Island Futures*, the catastrophes of climate change-which in turn exacerbates the frequency and intensity of hurricanes, for example-and those of coloniality are intimately intertwined (6).

Underscoring the "uneven mobilities of people, capital and culture" within the Caribbean space itself, Sheller also recalls spatial fragmentation in terms of a false perception of plural sovereignties: "Emancipation struggles in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reshaped Caribbean geographies, politics and ecologies, as did



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subsequent decolonization and independence movements in the twentieth century, leaving a highly fragmented mosaic of independent and non-independent territories, often depicted as a flattened archipelago of variegated sovereignties, as if each were an equal territorial object (9). The articles included in this collection not only reflect on the limits of nationhood and national belonging within these territories and their diasporas, but they also examine the transformation of urban spaces as part and parcel of sovereign practices. Alongside Sheller, each author highlights radical alternatives to the ubiquitous histories of neocolonialism, imperial domination, and racial capitalism that have contributed to this fragmentation, as well as to what she terms the “coloniality of climate.” This is taken up specifically in Samuel Ginsburg’s essay, where he critically examines the failures of Puerto Rican recovery efforts in the wake of Hurricane María and techno-colonial futures of neglect.

As we have seen, sovereign imaginations in the Caribbean have a long history that has shaped the development of political and ideological movements as well as the publication of a range of literary writings across the archipelago. Yet, when considering



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discussions about the intersection of politics, literature, and decolonization, the discourse has not been as diverse as it could have been. As guest editors, we considered how we could focus on alternative notions of sovereign being; that is, emotional, physical, and imaginative acts alerting readers to the urgent ways in which bodies push back against the detritus and sedimentation of colonial structures and plantation logics. For us, it was not only imperative to find unique voices to feature in our collection, but to also include pieces that make thoughtful contributions as they relate to themes of space, vulnerability, community formation, and liberation. Thus, this special issue examines how contemporary aesthetics have played a crucial role in thinking about how bodies stake their claim to real and imagined geographies.

Sovereignty and Spaciality

The first three essays included in this special issue address the relationship between sovereignty and spaciality in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and their diasporas. In *“It Ain’t Easy Being a Robot in the Caribbean”*: Resisting Utopian Visions of Puerto Rican Techno-Colonialism through Street Art”, Samuel Ginsburg examines



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Shittyrobots, a street art and virtual project started in San Juan in 2012 by an anonymous Puerto Rican artist. In the face of persistent narratives of progress, efficiency, and productivity that veil extractive and violent measures, *Shittyrobots* showcases human-like machines that dare to be unproductive. Featuring images of robots stealing from ATM machines, tagging walls, partaking in recreational drug-use, and napping, *Shittyrobots* satirizes robotics' supposed potential to revolutionize labor and challenges the colonizing structures that link technological advancements with economic and social progress. By critiquing how the military industrial complex uses viral videos to acclimate the public to future war machines, or by referencing the failures of the recovery effort and the US's cruel response in the months following Hurricanes María and Irma, for example, *Shittyrobots* points out the dark realities surrounding robotics and other new technologies. Ginburg's article analyzes the art project itself and its corresponding Instagram account to look how it maps techno-colonialism and resistance onto both urban and digital landscapes. In this way, *Shittyrobots* makes visible the underside of technological development and creates a space for critical engagement and alternate understandings of human-machine relations.



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“Puerto Rican Cultural Nationalism as Resistance: Sovereignty and Representation in Puerto Rican Murals and Street Art in Paseo Boricua, Chicago and Santurce, San Juan” examines street art and murals from US and Puertorrican geographies. Using theories of space, iconography, and affect, David Dulceany explores how popular resistance movements throughout the Puerto Rican diaspora have effectively used and repurposed symbols of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism to reimagine the boundaries of nationhood and national belonging. The murals of Paseo Boricua and their rootedness to the local community reterritorialized Chicago as Puerto Rico (Lazú 2013). Dulceany argues that the long tradition of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism in public art and its *vaivén* migratory nature defines Puerto Rican communities everywhere as nation state dismantling resisters. The article examines the links between the murals and street art of Paseo Boricua and Santurce as well as the transformations of the Puerto Rican flag to an all black version, which began as a protest against the US imposed financial *junta* and gained new meaning in the aftermath of Hurricane María.

The third article included in this section, Michel McGowan’s “The House that Diaspora Built: Enacted Environments in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)”,



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analyzes how the diasporic subjects portrayed in Junot Díaz's novel influence and enact their environments in the Dominican Republic and the United States. In previous studies of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, the Dominican diaspora has often been considered in relation to individual subjectivities, with particular attention given to the intersection(s) of gender and race. When the spaces within the novel have been discussed, the focus has been on their relationship to national discourses or how these spaces have impacted the characters who inhabit them. McGowan argues that the consequences of the diaspora are reflected by urban development and housing practices in both nations. Drawing on the work of Sarah Lynn Lopez and Raúl Villa, the author explores the effects of remittances, flows of capital, and infrastructure on the diasporic community in New York and Santo Domingo as well as their respective peripheries of Paterson and Baní. Through migrations and exchanges, the novel portrays how neighborhoods in the United States are configured to become *barrios*, while *barrios* in the Dominican Republic are configured to become neighborhoods. Furthermore, as the article shows, Díaz highlights the unevenness of modernization and demonstrates how complex processes



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and relationships have led to geospatial transformations, which in turn create and define these post-diasporic spaces.

Performing Vulnerability

The next set of essays explores the vulnerability of the body as a type of corporal battleground. Like the essays that come before, Emily Sterk considers how body politics, especially vulnerable bodies, can help to facilitate and uncover new social models in “‘I am no longer the child my mother shipped’: The Achievement of Erotic Sovereignty in Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana*.” Set in the 1960s amid the civil rights movement and the emerging second wave of feminism, Angie Cruz’s *Dominicana* recounts the expedited coming-of-age story of fifteen-year-old Ana as a forced migration subject from the Dominican Republic to New York City. In her article, Sterk analyzes the presence of the erotic and highlights the ways in which the protagonist uses the erotic to challenge machista ideals and develop her own sense of a body sovereignty. Specifically, Sterk engages with the radical works of Chela Sandoval and Carolyn Ureña, which provide a conducive theoretical framework for this article. Their call for “decolonial love” and their acknowledgement of a “third meaning of love”



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allows for colonial subjects like Cruz's protagonist to heal from the wounds of coloniality and unleash the transformative power of love. This article also incorporates Audre Lorde's generative work on the erotic to demonstrate the ways in which Cruz's protagonist uses the erotic both as a social practice and as a technique of the self. Sterk argues that this use of the erotic extends beyond the patriarchal constraints of U.S. and Dominican cultures and institutions and not only offers the possibility to forge a new identity, but ultimately offers a reclamation of the protagonist's own trafficked body.

The politics and poetics of vulnerability is a common thread in this special collection, weaving together Sterk's findings with Katrina Barriento's focus on maternity and Black sexual politics. As Barriento notes in "Womb to Tomb: Mothers' Bodies and Colonial Traumas in Select Afro-Hispanic Caribbean Feminist Poetry," "enslaved Black mothers in the colonial era suffered the particular pain of separation from their children, or witnessing their offspring's death, or both." By examining the free verse poetry of Afro-Cuban poets Nancy Morejón and Georgina Herrera against Afro-Dominican Aida Cartagena Portalatín and Afro-Puerto Rican Lourdes Vázquez, Barriento traces the inheritance of bodily and emotional pain from enslaved Black mothers to their emancipated or freeborn descendants who yet suffer from racism and



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hate crimes. Barrientos argues that the violence committed against the children's Black bodies is therefore an extension of the culture of violence enacted against and embedded in the mother's own Black body, both in the postcolonial Caribbean and across the ocean in the US. In support of these arguments, this paper refers to the cultural writings of Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, M. Jacqui Alexander, Judith Butler, and Ginetta Candelario, and draws on theories of pain, memory, and recovery of Black female bodies in the Caribbean context. This poetry, then, becomes a vulnerable archive capable of storing alternative origin stories and reworking the ways in which we understand these bodies in relation to the nation-state.

Poetry, Community, and Liberation

The last group of essays each takes on questions of community formation and liberation. Rojo Robles' "Feeling Free: A Poetics of Liberation in Raquel Salas Rivera and Carina del Valle Schorske's Work," makes an important contribution to the field of affect studies and sovereignty through an analysis of the Puerto Rican poet, translator, and editor, Raquel Salas Rivera, and the essayist, editor, and translator, Carina del Valle Schorske. This article specifically looks at the essay "How It Feels to Be Free" published



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in *The New Inquiry*. Cultural lineages, Afro-diasporic and queer poetics, the intersections and clashes between diaspora and empire, the consent to colonial oppression, and media representation during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria are some of the topics intertwined in the letters. Robles argues that in these case studies, the editors and poets subvert notions of political action, time, space, and Boricua aesthetics. Robles argues that by reflecting on natural and socio-political disasters, Salas Rivera, del Valle Schorske, and their collaborators create a fluid and counterhegemonic space of bilingual writing, graphic, and textual translation that promote intimate acts of literary resistance.

Like Robles, Cerminaro-Costanzi also meditates on the production of counter hegemonic spaces produced in the contrapuntal visions of Federico García Lorca and Lydia Cabrera. Cerminaro-Costanzi shows that both writers link the creative task of the artist to an encounter with potent, hidden ancestries or energies whose breakthrough dissolves the tenuous borders between self and other, past and present, here and there, allowing something hybrid, a temporal and meta-geographic to take shape. For Lorca, these are spaces invested with “duende,” which he defines not as places of logic, borders or reason, but rather as openings or wounds through which to channel “un verdadero estilo vivo...de sangre...de viejísima cultura, de creación en acto.” Cabrera



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also speaks of the place and purpose of artistry in similar terms locating it firmly within the hybrid, sacred space of the Afro-Cuban “monte”, a site where dualities coexist and subversive discourses are reinstated and revalued through acts of love and sacrifice. Costanzi demonstrates how each expands, subverts and revitalizes the space and practice of artistic creation so that alternative imaginaries, subaltern voices and the borderless territories of love and acceptance may thrive there.

To round up our exploration of sovereign imaginations in the Caribbean, we conclude with an essay that moves from the Hispanophone to the Anglophone, uncovering often little-studied connections between these. Tejan Green Waszak’s “Una Marson’s Cultivation of Community in her Poetic Works” examines the diasporic experience of Jamaican-born early 20th century poet and activist, Una Marson while in Britain. The author argues that though Marson opens doors and provides foundational tools to contribute to an easier path for black women artists who would follow her, she struggles in her pursuit of building community. Likewise, Waszak asserts that Marson’s openness to exposing individual hardships helps to provide a representational voice for those experiencing similar effects of colonialism and patriarchal societal structures encouraging multiple communities to come together in their desire to resist the



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aforementioned social structures and write themselves into the landscape of what it means to be postcolonial.

In addition to these articles, we also feature two creative pieces that add to our collection of rebellious connections. First, Ángel Rivera's short story "Un bienvenido contagio o el placer de las mil y una noches" revolves around two epidemiologists researching a virus that is transmitted sexually with nefarious consequences—preventing erotic encounters and corporeal pleasures. The short story combines scientific and erotic discourses to address human interactions and solidarities during a time of crisis, and is part of a larger (unpublished) collection of 11 short stories that make reference to elements of virology, pandemic, hunger, social unrest, subjectivities and science fiction. Second, Diego Luis contributes a series of photographs entitled "La doble diáspora." This dossier charts the diasporic experience of Caribbean people living in the United States, and how they must consider the repetitive nature of their migratory trajectories. Through this photographic essay, Luis argues that the histories of slavery and political refuge for Afro-descendants and of the search for opportunities in North America have



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produced double and triple displacements in our hemisphere. This photographic dossier presents a glimpse into these complex processes. The first half features images of Caribbean Latinos in the U.S. in black and white format, expressing a kind of loneliness and isolation, heightened by the current coronavirus crisis. The second half depicts a series of dances and rituals in the Afro-Cuban communities of Matanzas, especially those of Barrio de la Marina and Pueblo Nuevo.

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