Volumen 13, Número 1 **Spring/Primavera 2022**

Before Painting the Flag Black: Establishing Puerto Rican Cultural Nationalism as Resistance in Early 21st century Puerto Rican Murals in Paseo Boricua, Chicago

Introduction

Since the US invasion in 1898 and the over a century of US colonial rule, Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora have utilized visual expressions of cultural nationalism, alongside other sociocultural and political methods, to resist colonial dominance and strengthen their community. This article will investigate how a strong and consistent network of community-based and centered murals established a sense of belonging while also resisting US imperialism. As Puerto Rican community-based murals and street art constitute a prolific, diverse body of work that spans decades, the scope of this article will focus on a few key murals primarily in Chicago produced in the early 21st century prior to when Hurricane María devasted the island in 2017. In addition, I will mostly highlight murals that represent or center around the Puerto Rican

flag in order to understand how cultural nationalism functions as anti-colonial resistance or reterritorialization.[1]

Puerto Rican cultural nationalism in its current form traces back to 19th century independence movements and the 1952 establishment of the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA), the constitutional commonwealth government, and the 1955 establishment of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP). The current diasporic and community-based expressions of cultural nationalism are a direct result of the mid 20th century projects of the Muñoz Marín government, Operation Bootstrap and Operation Serenity. While Operation Bootstrap had the dual effect of industrializing Puerto Rico based on a US economic model while also spurring migration to cities like New York and Chicago, Operation Serenity promoted Puerto Rican cultural nationalism as distinctly Hispanic, folkloric and in opposition to the dominant Anglo-American culture. In *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*, Jorge Duany explains how Governor Muñoz Marín "used the

[1] For a history of artistic movements on Paseo Boricua and an analysis of the space as a Deleuzian reterritorialization See Lazú, Jacqueline. "Poeta En El Paseo: Tato Laviera's Chicago Plays." *Latino Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2013, pp. 527–546.

expression Operation Serenity to describe the government's effort to rescue the Island's traditional culture, as a counterpart to Operation Bootstrap, which promoted the Island's industrialization" (123). The long-lasting dual effect of both Operation Bootstrap and Operation Serenity was the creation of a diaspora actively engaged in cultural expressions of Puerto Rican nationalism. Operation Bootstrap spurred Puerto Ricans into migration to mainland city centers by strengthening economic ties with the US empire, while Operation Serenity, in part through the ICP, also fostered strong community ties focused on expressions of cultural nationalism.

Over time, the Puerto Rican cultural nationalism became more revolutionary as independence fighters and political prisoners gained prominence across the diaspora. This fomented a particularly diasporic, migratory, and archipelagic cultural nationalism. This specific expression of Puerto Rican nationalism is cultural because it does not align directly with a state

or government and manifests itself primarily in the cultural production of a colonized diasporic community imagining itself as a nation.[2]

The omnipresence of the Puerto Rican flag in diaspora communities became the most salient example of the importance and extent of expressions of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. In *La nación en vaivén*, Duany details how the first legislative act of the ELA was to official adopt the "monoestrellada" flag of the old 19th century independence movement as the national flag of Puerto Rico and the ELA government. Ironically, this official adoption of the flag occurred in the backdrop of the suppression of the 20th century independence movements, most notably through the Ley de mordaza or Gag Law (1948-1957) that outlaw the display of the Puerto Rican flag and any actions in support of independence. It was a "law [that] made it a felony to own or display a Puerto Rican flag (even

[2] Within the scope of this article, I focus primarily on the diasporic specificity of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism as it concerns anti-colonial resistance from the Puerto Rican people directly against dominant US colonialism. There are a multitude of manners in which Puerto Rican cultural nationalism intersects broader decolonial projects and solidarities such as Latinx and Afro-Latinx movements, the support for Elvira Arellano, Taíno linguistic and cultural revival, and other Caribbean or Antillean conceptions of transnational or diasporic identities. See Alaí Reyes-Santos (2015) on "transcolonial kinship narratives," Ileana Rodríguez Silva (2012) on "silencing race" in late 19th century and early 20th century Puerto Rico political discourse, Jossianna Arroyo (2013) on "radical brotherhood" and José F. Buscaglia-Salgado (2003) on *mulataje*.

in one's home); to speak in favor of Puerto Rican independence; to print, publish, sell, or exhibit any material that might undermine the insular government; and to organize any society, group, or assembly of people with a similar intent" (Denis 104). Thus, throughout continued colonial rule by the US, the Puerto Rican flag has remained an enduring symbol of the Puerto Rican nation, beyond any notion of a nation state or any full and identifiable form of sovereignty. Duany explains, "La bandera constituye uno de los pocos íconos de unidad entre todos los boricuas. Quizás de ahí surge la necesidad de sacar la bandera en cualquier oportunidad que sea posible: para reafirmar los lazos de solidaridad y el imaginario colectivo que identifican a un pueblo, con o sin soberanía" (31). The repetitive insistence on displaying and flying the flag, on placing it on any number of personal items, and painting it on the walls of the community, forms an infrastructure of solidarity across the diaspora and is the enduring bedrock symbol of its cultural nationalism. I argue that Puerto Rican cultural nationalism as exemplified in community-based murals resist precarity and US colonialism and inspire unity through affective bonds of love, laying the groundwork for a diasporic reenvisioning of what constitutes a nation.

The Puerto Rican people have often used artistic representations of cultural nationalism to mobilize through solidarity on the island and across the diaspora. When in 2016 the PROMESA Act established a Junta to oversee the Puerto Rican government's debt, a group of artists named "Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia" painted black the red and blue parts of a landmark mural of the Puerto Rico flag on a door in Viejo San Juan. In part of their official statement the artists explained that resistance and hope were at the heart of their action:

Las leyes, los gobernantes y los tribunales, hasta este momento, no han servido a los intereses del pueblo. Reemplazar con color negro (que es la ausencia de LUZ) crea nuevas lecturas. La nuestra es una propuesta de RESISTENCIA, no es pesimista, al contrario, habla sobre la muerte de estos poderes tal cual los conocemos, pero la esperanza sigue ahí representadas en las franjas blancas que simbolizan la libertad del individuo y su capacidad para reclamar y hacer valer sus derechos.[3]

In the wake of the devastation of Hurricane María, the black flag came to represent ever more readily mourning, loss, and starting anew from a point of revolutionary fervor. Now post-María the black flags move and live in harmony with all the historic flags that have always represented Puerto Rico's prideful

[3] See the following for the full statement and a translation to English: https://es.globalvoices.org/2016/07/19/bandera-de-puerto-rico-esta-negra-y-de-luto-por-junta-de-control-impuesta-por-estados-unidos/

resistance to colonial rule and its national self-determination in the face of imperialist forces. In this article, I am seeking to analyze how Puerto Rican cultural nationalism laid the groundwork for future and ongoing solidarity and a way to see how early 21st Puerto Rican cultural nationalism functioned as celebratory resistance "before painting the flag black."

The Puerto Rican flag as an ever-present signifier clearly represents the crystallization and circulation of the central values of Puerto Rican culture. The insistence on the flag and similar symbols seeks to defend, root, and claim specific spaces as distinctly Puerto Rican in the face of imperialist regimes of precarity under US colonial rule. The insistence on the flag constitutes a representation of diasporic spatiality, an all-encompassing space of *puertorriqueñidad* that unites the diaspora and the island/archipelago. It offers also a position from which to contest dominant epistemologies of Puerto Rico's status and take a strong anti-colonial stance that resists any standard notions of the state. Furthermore, it has an affective tone of love that binds the community across the diaspora and inspires cultural production imbedded in a sense of communal unity.

Precarity and Affect

A focus on the precarious art-forms of public community-based murals and street art demonstrates how the popular in popular culture, especially what may be termed low brow or public culture, facilitates and builds a counter epistemology. Caribbean popular culture has an outsized global impact and the investigation of Caribbean popular cultural production and its richness affords a valuable site for understand transnational and intercultural dialogues: "The Caribbean popular arts…ha[ve] historically provided a space for social and political critique, the performance of visibility and also articulations of temporal emancipatory ethos…[and] ha[ve] over time contributed to contemporary understandings of global and diasporic cultures,…dynamics of intercultural encounters" (Hume and Kamugisha xvii). I would place the Puerto Rican murals within a broader notion of Caribbean popular culture as they emerge from a community-based expression within the diaspora. The connection between the murals as a form of popular culture and a broader expressions of Puerto Rican popular culture can be seen in the music videos that prominently feature the murals. The video for "We Are" (2012) by Reyes, a Chicago native a Chi-Rican

(Chicano and Puerto Rican) poet, educator, and activist prominently features the murals of Paseo Boricua and "Bellacoso" (2019) by Residente and Bad Bunny a Reggaetón/Dembow hit song, that became the anthem of the 2019 protests on the island that sought and caused the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló, feature the murals and street art of Santurce including "Loíza Brinca" by Abey Charrón. Similarly in "Afilando cuchillos" another 2019 protest song by Residente and Bad Bunny, they mention "las paredes" as a space of political expression such as in the line "Con todo lo que han roba'o estos politiqueros/Pintamos las paredes del Caribe entero."

Furthermore, intentionally thinking about the ongoing crisis of precarity Puerto Ricans have faced, necessitates a serious reflection on the notion of precarity itself. The threat of precarity that Puerto Ricans face manifests predominately in the dominance of finance capital, urban gentrification, and colonial legal apparatuses.[4] Using a public art form that is constantly under

[4] In particular the 1920 Merchant Marine Act also known as the Jones Act, a protectionist US law which requires the transport of goods between two US ports to be carried out only by a ship built in the US and operated primarily by US citizens or permanent residents and the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability (PROMESA) Act, which installed the financial oversight board, referred to as La Junta, to restructure government debt that continues to exist despite massive protest movements and calls to abolish it.

threat, and requires maintenance, constant engagement, proliferation, and renewal, speaks to the necessity of resistance as a survival impulse. Nevertheless, public art cannot exist as mere representation, it needs insistence and community to thrive, to become politically viable as a concrete response to US imperialism. It inspires an affective impulse brought on by the space and context of the public art and the community that creates it.

Ben Anderson describes precarity as an affective mode, a particular "structure of feeling" that is experienced both spatially and through time as an ongoing mood. Anderson builds off Raymond William's historicizing aesthetic category of the "structure of feeling," combining Marxist and affect theories to understand how affect functions on various levels and in different societal contexts, the state of precarity being one area of investigation. He writes,

> Precarity is at once intimate and extended across the spaces and times…precarity as a mood that pressures and limits is related to economic worlds in which 'instability is meant to be normal'…Precarity is not a temporary aberration. It is a generalised affective condition…Existence is made precarious in the sense that it is always on the *verge* of falling apart as specific dangers intensify from and become part of a diffuse affective condition. (126-130, emphasis in the original)

From Anderson, we understand that precarity is an ongoing state, a mood, and a structure of feeling that results from instability and has become normalized in a

space and extended as an affective experience over time. It is a constant on-the-vergeness that has an affect with a structure. In the case of community based public art, the affect is both outward facing as an express resistance to precarity and inward facing as a feeling of love that joins the community together.

Chicago as Canvas: The Diasporic Node of Paseo Boricua

Understanding the social geography of the Chicago neighborhood ethos and its development is fundamental to understanding the development of Puerto Rican Chicago and how it links both into the diasporic Puerto Rican archipelago nation, its subsequent identity formation and political struggle, and also interconnected relation to US Latinx communities more broadly. The sense of the Midwest as a crossroads and hub for transport, commerce, and development aligns with patterns and sensibilities of Puerto Rican migration and community development. It is centralized but not central, its "Third Coast" status cements it as an important urban metro area that is neither as dominant as the East or West Coast nor in any way peripheral. It is within these interstices that the Puerto Rican vaivén can thrive, similar to how Orlando, FL serves as a rapidly growing

hub for Puerto Rican migrants rather than more prominent locations such as Miami.

In the specific case of Puerto Ricans in Chicago, it is important to understand that these place imaginaries have a particular history tied to the Humboldt Park neighborhood. David A. Badillo traces the shifting migratory patterns over time in the neighborhood, which also directly corresponds to Community Area 23. He explains how the park itself and the statues built there correspond to the changing demographics of the previous immigrant communities that called the neighborhood home, from the Germans to Scandinavians (primarily Norwegian and Danish) to Poles. Beginning in the 1950s, these European ethnic groups as well as some of the Italian Americans and Russian Jews that had also settled there began moving out of the neighborhood and Puerto Ricans began to move in, due to gentrifying forces pushing them West away from Lake Michigan. Badillo explains also how throughout the strengthening and growth of the Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park within the framework of Chicago's socially determined neighborhood urban community system, they formed a "symbolic nucleus." He states how in the

aftermath of the 1966 Division Street riots, Puerto Ricans clashing with police, growing tensions among young Puerto Ricans and Polish Americans, all led to the current Puerto Rican community's claim to and ongoing strong identification with the Humboldt Park neighborhood:

For Puerto Ricans the Division Street area (*La División*, in local parlance)…has anchored settlement since the 1960s. Humboldt Park still remains the symbolic nucleus of Puerto Rican Chicago. Park thoroughfares have been renamed in honor of [notable Puerto Ricans]…reflecting abiding concerns for the homeland not unlike those displayed by earlier groups. (175)

What he names as *La División*, is also known as Paseo Boricua and represents the symbolic core of Puerto Rican Chicago. As Badillo details, this symbolic core serves as an anchor to the community. The metaphor of the anchor is apt considering Puerto Rico is a Caribbean nation and its islands are all surrounded by water and that metaphorically Puerto Rican migrants have struggled against the tides of discrimination, gentrification, police brutality, and US colonial administration. Although I agree that the historical pattern of an "abiding concern for the homeland" is consistent among all the groups that have established themselves in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, I would argue also that Puerto Ricans have a distinct set of relations to the notion of "homeland."

Puerto Ricans both do and do not have a homeland because they lack an independent nation state and are living as migrants, not immigrants and are even born in their "homeland" as colonized citizens of the United States. The Puerto Rican nation is not an independent nation state and through its open-ended status as a commonwealth or Estado Libre Asociado, the cultural, migratory, and diasporic aspects of the nation opens up the notion of the "homeland." The diaspora as much as the island/archipelago is the homeland.

Murals as method

Similar to the initial vision of 20th century Mexican *muralismo*, 21st century Puerto Rican *muralismo* and street art prioritizes a democratic expression of grassroots solidarity and communal expression rather than a top-down state funded and mandated imposition of cultural nationalism and its presumed narratives. Beyond the examples I focus on here, there are many more 21st century mural based public arts movements in Puerto Rico and across the diaspora that all follow the model of bottom-up community engagement and political empowerment such as the Arte Sanador projects, the Color Caribe and

Santurce es Ley festivals, Yaucromatic Urban Art Project and various artist collectives such as the all women Colectivo Moriviví.

Ironically, these community focused and led mural projects were the eventual result of the initial investment of the ELA's Operation Serenity. Public spending on cultural production was prioritized to strengthen the project of the ELA as the herald of puertorriqueñidad. Even so, over the decades the diaspora took on the spirit of Operation Serenity and utilized it to strengthen the community roots beyond the island, albeit ultimately with a form of cultural nationalism arising more so from the revolutionary vision of independence fighters like Pedro Albizu Campos, Lolita Lebrón, and Oscar López Rivera.

The murals of Paseo Boricua in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago are the result of and a reaction to the ongoing process of socioeconomic gentrification that has pushed the Puerto Rican community from the east side Lincoln Park neighborhood near Lake Michigan to the west side Humboldt Park neighborhood. Together with the iconic 59-foot-tall steel Puerto Rican flags, the murals mark Paseo Boricua, stretching for approximately seven blocks on

Division Street between Western Avenue and Mozart St, as the claimed territory of Chicago's Puerto Rican community.[5]

Figure 1: Paseo Boricua Steel Flag. Personal Photo. (2013)

[5] See ABC7 Chicago News Report "Puerto Rican steel flags stand strong in Chicago's Humboldt Park after 25 years" for a history of the steel flags. (https://abc7chicago.com/puerto-rican-flags-humboldt-park-chicago-billy-ocasio/10990870/)

These bold symbols of cultural heritage defy the continued threat of gentrification and resist the troubled past of urban displacement and police brutality as well as the long history of imperialism and racism.[6]

In utilizing public space (brick walls, posts, sidewalks, store fronts, etc.) for community centered cultural production, the Puerto Rican diaspora of Chicago enacts a spatially anchored sense of belonging that resists the destabilization and further encroachment of gentrifying forces. As such, the murals could be categorized as contemporary expressions of cultural production that are inevitably temporary and palimpsestic. It is precisely this status of flux and uncertainty, of shifting and endangered physical presence, of raw vulnerability, that manifests two interpretative moods for the murals' existence: one of sheer urgency, an almost panic of literally losing cultural ground to dominant forces and secondly, that of performative precarity, of physically manifesting the precise contours of a political project, namely reclaiming

[6] Today, the importance of the murals continues to resonate with the intensification of precarity during the aftermath of Hurricane María, the deplorable and delayed response of the US federal government, as well as subsequent earthquakes and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

community space as part of a broader notion of Puerto Rico, beyond political boundaries or adherence to strict legal definitions of citizenship.

There are two important elements in the community's strategy that have been working against outside threats that seek to incorporate or eliminate the Paseo. First off, the businesses in the neighborhood and, most of all, those on the Paseo have banded together and organized under the auspices of the Division Street Business Development Association linked directly into the City of Chicago's commerce bureaucracy infrastructure. As capital is the language of US imperialist power and the driver of gentrification, it is within that same system that the Paseo must resist and exist against a dominant current that has historically and forcefully displaced Puerto Ricans from their original settlement on the East side of the city. Similarly, the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture was established in 2000 in the center of Humboldt Park itself in the historic Humboldt Park Receptory and Stable Building anchoring and centering the community around the arts and culture.

In a similar vein, there is an ongoing grassroots campaign that has successfully mobilized the community into resisting further gentrification of

Humboldt Park. It is aptly named "¡Humboldt Park NO SE VENDE!" and it was established in 2004 as part of a series of community organizing projects by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago. The campaign continues to have a presence in the Paseo, fighting against gentrification and assisting working class renters and homeowners.[7] More than just a sea of flags, the Paseo is also covered in NO SE VENDE signs declaring, over and over, the Puerto Rican community's historical claim to the neighborhood. The insistence and repetition are necessary to the political project, both in terms of defining, framing, and claiming space as well as resisting oppositional outside forces.[8]

In spirit of the precarious and palimpsest, I would like to focus on a few particular aspects of the mural memoralizing the 1966 Division street riots the northwest corner of Division Street and Washtenaw Avenue first painted by

[7] For more on the No Se Vende campaign See García, Ivis. "No Se Vende (Not for sale). An anti-gentrification grassroots campaign of Puerto Ricans in Chicago". América Crítica 3(2): 35-61. 2019. ISSN: 2532-6724, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13125/americacritica/3886.

[8] Some current victories are the upcoming construction of the Nancy Y. Franco Maldonado Paseo Boricua Arts Building, a mixed-use affordable housing development and arts center and the official designation of Paseo Boricua as "Puerto Rico Town," making it a protected cultural district. See https://blockclubchicago.org/2021/05/20/developer-breaks-ground-on-long-planned-affordable-housing-arts-building-on-humboldt-parks-paseo-boricua/ and https://blockclubchicago.org/2021/10/15/heart-of-humboldt-parks-puerto-rican-community-will-become-puerto-rico-town-under-state-bill/

Martin Soto in 2006 that was repainted into a different mural by Cristian J. Roldán in 2016.[9] I have chosen to focus on this mural because it remains a fundamental example of the project of the Paseo Boricua and emblematic of the cultural nationalist project that began in interest in 1995 with the building of the 59 ft steel flags. It is worth taking a palimpsestic peak to get a sense of the crucial history of the Paseo as the community established it at the turn of the 21st century.

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[9] See *Riot and Remembrance: Puerto Rican Chicago and the Politics of Interruption* Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz for a brief analysis of the Roldán mural and for an integrated history of the 1966 Division Street Riots.

Figure 2: Close up 1 of mural. Personal Photo. (2013)

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Figure 3: Close up 2 of mural. Personal Photo. (2013)

I would like to focus specifically on two parts of the mural, one which blends various landmarks from the Paseo and the city with the message "Cultura Nuestra" and "Presencia Puertorriqueña" and another which shows an image of the Young Lords activist group along with an elaboration of their motto: "Tengo a Puerto Rico siempre en mi corazón".

In the first portion, a Taíno symbol painted in a Puerto Rican flag curves alongside the famous Picasso sculpture from Daily Plaza. These images are intermixed with the metal flag and the Albizu Campos memorial casita.

The Albizu Campos memorial casita is a central feature of the Paseo and it contains a courtyard, garden, and a statue commemorating the work of independence fighter and political prisoner Pedro Albizu Campos. The statue was originally meant to go in the actual park of Humboldt Park but there was resistance to it on the part of the city due to Albizu Campos's controversial work. The Puetro Rican Cultural Center eventually was able to create a separate space for it.[10]

Like in the majority of the murals, these symbols are highly self-referential and performatively engaged with re-representing the lived and shared spaces of the city. In this manner, they enact a link between the community and artists that painted them, the city, and Puerto Rico, reinforcing and reasserting the broader contours of a diasporically linked sense of national identity.

There is an openness toward the divergent horizons that compose this identity and through a focus on landmark symbols, they resist any notions of a state-based or conceptual modern nation. Furthermore, there are multiple claims

[10] See Chapter 6 of *National Performances* by Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas for a detailed history of the statue and the many racial and political issues surrounding the conceptualization of Albizu Campos as "Christ" or "terrorist."

being established here, first to the right of culture - "Cultura Nuestra" and to right of inhabiting - "Presencia Puertorriqueña". These unifying claims are interrelated and come together in the blended iconographies presented within the mural. Ownership and belonging through sustained, cultivated presence in the face of harsh opposition is not only imagined but also implemented through cultural expression.

The Taíno symbol curves along the Picasso sculpture, positioned between the written phrases that emphasize the link between culture and location, highlighting Chicago as an important node in the diasporic vaivén of the Puerto Rican nation. Again adhering to the self-referential motifs of the murals on the Paseo, strongly linking the historical development of modern Puerto Rican identity to its current communal expression and newfound rootedness in Chicago. It is another iconographic expression of what diaspora means and how it is formed over time.

The Taíno symbol represents an important piece of iconographic literacy for viewers familiar with contemporary efforts to revive the indigenous roots of *puertorriqueñidad* and in many cases to re-envision Taíno identity in the

contemporary moment. The symbol is a ritual object and material representation of an ancient spiritual belief system called cemí. The cemí is a small hand carved stone object or drawing that usually represent anthropomorphic figures, varying in size from tiny to very large while encompassing a variety of routine functions, such as being used as pipes or tools, in addition to their ritual uses. The archaeological heritage of the *cemí* is widespread throughout the Caribbean and continues to appear in the practices of the people, especially in traditional rural contexts. "Haiti's archaeological heritage, and particularly the pre-Columbian artifacts that had been the object of [Jacques Roumain's] ethnological studies abroad and that he saw as the national patrimony…the sculpted Taíno ax heads, called pyè-tonnè…formed part of the sacred relics in many ounfò" (Ramsey 213). The cemí continues to be major part of newer murals and emerging street art as the movement to revive Taíno cultural heritage grows across the Caribbean and throughout the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Even so, beyond its visual and utilitarian scope the cemí is much more than a simple physical object, being the embodiment and manifestation of ancestral ties, spiritual energy, and realms beyond the visible and the material:

…the Taíno-language term cemí refers not to an artifact or object but to an immaterial, numinous, and vital force. Under particular conditions, beings, things, and other phenomena in nature can be imbued with cemí. Cemí is, therefore, a condition of being, not a thing. It is a numinous power, a driving or vital force that compels action; it is the power to cause, to effect, and also denotes a condition or state of being. (Oliver 59)

Additionally, the cemí served as migratory object of exchange, both in the material as well as the spiritual sense, in Taíno society: "In short, the cemí icons shared the center stage in human interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Together with human beings, cemís (as objectified forms), artifacts, goods, information, knowledge, and so on are the "things" that circulated or were transported throughout the web's pathways, whether by sea, land, or both" (Oliver 45). It is not merely a simple representation of god or the divine, it is deep connection to ancestry and to the spiritual responsibility to the communal whole of the Taíno people. The cemí is equally a material form, a ritual object, a cultural coin in the market of community building. It is a communitarian and ancestral icon binding together the adherents and practitioners identifying with it, whether on a spiritual or cultural level or both. It has its own migratory history, and circulates within the known community as an artifact in motion. It is in all ways the energy and material embodiment of the community. It also serves

as a conduit between realms, linking the living to their ancestors' spirits and the full spiritual legacy of the tradition, shared not only across generations but also geographical space. In these ways, as a representational spiritual and social artifact, it reflects the journeys and ambitions of Puerto Ricans, who often out of dire necessity must migrate within the colonial circuits and neoliberal flows of the US empire.

In this manner, having a cemí curved together with the Picasso sculpture, a Chicago landmark, as if almost blending the two into one, exaggerates performatively the interdependent connection between Chicago and the Puerto Rican diaspora. Furthermore, the Puerto Rican flag painted on the cemí cements its symbolic weight, bringing the oft-erased indigenous roots front and center into the cultural nationalist kaleidoscope of the Paseo Boricua murals. Almost anachronistically, the ancient becomes contemporary and the contemporary ancient. Through such a representation, the deep spiritual significance of the cemí becomes woven into the larger tapestry of Puerto Rican culture and its search for the notion of a nation beyond the island/archipelago.

The other portion of the mural is a celebration of the legacy and central role in the community of the Young Lords Organization, a youth gang turned national political organization for civil rights, inspired by their contemporaries, the Black Panthers.

Figure 3: Close up 2 of mural. Personal Photo. (2013)

The image is a reminder and a celebration of the role that the Young Lords played in making the Paseo a possibility. They stand as a model of what organized resistance and community organizing can accomplish, even against all odds. Moreover, their history continues to be memorialized and engaged with by the community through the work of DePaul University professor Jacqueline Lazú. Her research, teaching, and community activism have been central to preserving the Young Lords' legacy in Chicago. Her play "The Block/El Bloque",

tells the history of the Young Lords' activism. It follows their community organizing and their struggle against police brutality, specifically the story of Manuel Ramos, a member of the YLO, shot and killed by an off-duty police officer and then culminates with the election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first African-American mayor, who the Young Lords had vigorously campaigned for.

Her play performatively engages with the link between community, public art, and political activism by including two writer characters, one who is a historian trying to investigate the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and the other who is a teen that is experiencing the displacement. The characters serve not only as foils to each other within the internal narrative of the play but also as parallel figures to those living out the struggles of the community, both in the past as well as the present. The writers often break the fourth wall, speaking to the audience, to each other across time and space, about the community and the experience of writing history versus experiencing it and reacting to it. Throughout the play, Writer 2 tags graffiti and eventually paints a mural. The message is clear, the murals are inextricably tied to the process of

memorialization and communal self-expression, a coming to terms with lived experience and its memory. The play has been performed throughout the city and in Humboldt Park with actors from the community and the Batey Urbano.[11] In this way, the play allows for the process of memorialization to be experienced as lived embodiment, as much by the actors as by the audience. This work is just one example of how the precarity of memory, the danger of forgetting, can be resisted through memorialization via performed embodiment and participatory historicizing.

The message on the mural beneath the image of the Young Lords, "Tengo a Puerto Rico siempre en mi corazón", based on their motto and logo, exemplifies the affective aspect of spatial formation via performative public art. Their original motto is “Tengo Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon” which appears over their official logo, a yellow arm clutching a rifle over a green silhouette of the island between the letters “YL.” The combination of a deep affective connection to

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[11] The Batey Urbano is located at 2620 W. Division St. Their official motto is: “Providing Chicago’s Puerto Rican/Latin@ youth with an outlet for cultural expression and community action!” The Batey Urbano is a space for the youth to use studio, radio, and digital lab equipment to create theatrical and musical performances ranging from spoken word to hip-hop to bomba y plena and much more.

diasporic nationalism together with bold, youthful militancy is accentuated by the framing of the image and the motto itself. The capitalization, lack of accent marks, and the personal a, on one level mark their grammar as a diasporic variation but also emphasize a deeper intimacy. Without the personal a, a more direct possessive and affective link is established. The mural's variation is thus an elaborated and standardized version of the original and could also be echoing the 1971 Pepe y Flora album "Tengo Puerto Rico en Mi Corazón."[12]

Figure 4: Young Lords Logo.

[12] The album is featured in the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings collection. (https://folkways.si.edu/pepe-y-flora/tengo-puerto-rico-en-mi-corazon/caribbean-historical-song-latin-world/music/album/smithsonian)

The metaphoric link to a larger concept of diasporic belonging starts in the "heart", at the emotional and sentimental level. On the one hand, this may appear to be a romantic idealization of a distant island nation, one that most of the Young Lords had not even visited when they formed in the 60s, yet it nevertheless serves the purpose of uniting the community into an affective bond that can be utilized to inspire and inform creative political action.

As always, for all these multifaceted and colorful signifiers, the referent is Puerto Rico and it serves as a cultural anchoring, as a central gathering point of affective energy, which fuels and propels the broader space of something beyond the nation and state. To ignore the affective dimension of the process is to ignore what drives the cultural production and sociopolitical space it represents. The emotional dimension is the glue that binds the community together and propels the ongoing resistance represented in the art.

On the northwestern corner of the intersection of Division Ave and Campbell Ave one finds The Sea of Flags mural. According to the inscription,

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Gamaliel Ramírez, his assistants, the youth, and the community painted the mural during the 11th annual "Fiesta Boricua" in 2004.[13]

[13] The inscription of the mural, which is painted alongside it, reads: Sea of Flags (red, white, and light blue letters set on a green background in the shape of the island of Puerto Rico a.k.a. Borinquen) This mural was painted as part of the 11th annual "Fiesta Boricua" 2004, and dedicated to Lolita Lebrón. "A bead from Lolita's rosary polished by her prayers for the homeland." Designed and painted by Gamaliel Ramírez, assistance by Star Padilla, Luis Ortiz Moncho, Melissa Cintron, members of the community and the youth on the corner of Division and Campbell. This project was sponsored by Gamaliel Ramírez Studio, Near Northwest Neighborhood Network, Batey Urbano, and Actu-Treasure. (white letters on a light blue background)

Figure 5: Sea of Flags Mural. Personal Photo. (2013)

Here again, the performative, transformative, and self-assertive expression of community arts rises to the foreground. The mural is a dramatically colorful painting of the Paseo bursting with the diversity of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. The mural is a painting of a sea of Puerto Rican flags waving under the metallic archway of the giant steel Paseo entrance flags. Most importantly, we see very clearly the faces, expressions, and actions of the crowd. The holders of the flags are not anonymous or generic faces but instead, the recognizable faces of community members and leaders. For example, Lolita Lebrón, independence fighter and former political prisoner, is clearly visible in the center of the mural, waving the flag of Lares, her regional home on the island. Those visible in the crowd are the very same people who painted themselves into the mural. This collective self-portraiture is a ritual of celebration, pride, and community building. Furthermore, the performative self-referential loop of The Sea of Flags mural also speaks to the affective weight of the flag and its centrality as a loaded signifier of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. The overabundant proliferation of the flag might lend itself to a

facile reading as either a kitsch symbol of late capitalist postmodernity or an over-exuberant expression of nationalist fervor. Such readings would gloss over the important historical factors that led to the consolidation of the flag as a symbol of resilience, resistance, and pride, by which only an ecstatic performative reiteration could allow it to maintain its ethos and, most of all, its pathos. Such readings would not only ignore the site-specific history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and the continued colonialism of the island but also the aptly-named Gag Law [*Ley de la mordaza*] (1948-1957) which made the display of the Puerto Rican flag a punishable offense. It is clear then how such a strict imposition would make the flag an ever more charged symbol of anti-colonial and anti-state resistance. Yet as it became ever more incorporated into the dynamic of cultural and diasporic cultural nationalism through its abundant use in artistic and literary expressions, it gained an increasingly powerful affective charge. In a student film by Wade Rodgers and Naomi Ezquivel (née Kothbauer), María Vásquez, a longtime resident of the community says, when discussing the significance of the steel flags, "Those flags, they mean a lot. They mean culture.

They mean history! They mean love."[14] The flags hold an affective charge or spark an affective response, inspiring love. Their function as spatial markers and easily readable repeated icons allow diasporic Puerto Ricans to strongly identify through a love of community as nation and culture. Puerto Rico is in their hearts in the shape of a flag.

Across the street from The Sea of Flags mural there is another mural which represents the official Paseo Boricua flag by artist John Vergara.

[14] The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZAtyR3YD3c

Figure 6: Paseo Boricua Flag Mural. Personal Photo. (2013)

It simply reads "Paseo Boricua" and "Humboldt Park" on a coat of arms. The image contains a Taíno man, his child, and an African woman. The Taíno man uses a spear to point to a representation of the giant metal Paseo flag, looming over the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan. The third mythical racial origin of Puerto Rico, the European, is conspicuously and I presume, strategically missing. The only subtle reference to the Spanish legacy is the castle border around the image which represents the architectural features of the Spanish military constructions still standing today in Viejo San Juan. The background of the image is a simple red, white, and blue painted out in thick diagonal stripes, a deconstruction of any possible flag. The colors obviously correspond, again, to the Puerto Rican flag but resist any recognizable configuration.. These colors could as easily refer to the Lares flag or even the flag of Chicago, especially as it is the revolutionary light blue of the Lares flag on which the original flag of Puerto Rico was based, and which just so happens to also be similar to the blue used in the Chicago flag. The central image of the metal flag invokes the specific

space of the Paseo and these background colors open up a possible reimagining of how a nation or even national boundaries could be represented, again establishing the flag as an affective symbol of communal love, as represented by the mythic family on the mural.

Ultimately, Paseo Boricua represents a diasporic alternative to the state and its colonial apparatus. Even in what may appear to be a naïve demonstration of nationalism, it refuses any facile classification of a nation or national territory. Although it constantly refers back to Puerto Rico as an ur-home, it nevertheless inverts the dominant narrative of US imperialist nationalism. It claims or reclaims a part of Chicago for Puerto Rico and by doing so destabilizes any colonial hierarchy that would wish to claim everything for the US.

Link to Santurce

In this vein, looking at some street art and murals in San Juan, in particular in the historical Santurce district, provides rich examples of the interdependency and circulation of ideas between the diaspora and Puerto Rico. Not only is it critical to make this link but it also should be constantly

emphasized. It can be a starting point for imagining a space beyond national, territorial, or political boundaries.

One example is a mural in the Santurce neighborhood, which depicts the star off the Puerto Rican flag being handed from one child to another.

Figure 7: Abey Charrón Mural 1.

Source: http://abeycharron.com/portfolio/walls/

It is created by the muralist and photographer Abey Charrón. With the Puerto Rican flag painted vertically on the building, the mural depicts two children. On the left, there is a small boy appearing to be mostly of European

descent and wearing dark overalls. On the right, there is a small girl appearing to be mostly of African descent and wearing a white lace dress. The boy is reaching for the star off the flag and attempting to hand it over to the girl. Again, the artist employs symmetry and contrast to frame and draw attention to the central message of the mural. The clothes and the subjects wearing them contrast with each other and they are aligned symmetrically on opposite ends of the Puerto Rican flag.

Focusing on the star, as the main "object" of exchange within the painting, allows the artist to condense notions of hope for the future within the iconic parameters of the Puerto Rican flag. The insistence on the flag, precisely on the star, emphasizes still the theme of revolutionary cultural nationalism and a rootedness to Puerto Rican identity for all Puerto Ricans. Here also, the light blue version of the flag is used, which is an allusion to the Grito de Lares flag. The light blue also ties it to the Caribbean Sea itself and the other murals on Paseo Boricua that also reference the color for its deeper revolutionary meaning in the history of the Puerto Rican independence movement. Furthermore, the fact that the boy is handing off the star, demonstrates a tone of unity, progress, and a

hope for the future and the promise of youth. These children hold the hope of the future symbolized by the star, as a shining point of guiding light, but also that they will share their responsibility under the light of its glory and beauty.

Another prominent mural by the same artist, Abey Charrón, is entitled "Loíza brinca" and it is located at the corner of Calle Loíza and Calle Parq. Calle Loíza is one of the most active areas of Santurce, renowned for its dining and cultural arts scenes.

Figure 8: Abey Charrón Mural 2.

Source: http://abeycharron.com/portfolio/walls/

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Loíza is also the name of a town in Puerto Rico with a historical majority of Afro-descendent Puerto Ricans. Thus, the young Afro-Boricua girls here embody the joyous jump of their heritage and, by being painted on a large scale in a highly public manner, represent an assertion of their presence and agency. Charrón is intentionally bringing the marginalized into the foreground in the most dynamic, performative, and visible way possible. In this mural, space and movement unite to reassert Afro-Boricua pride and presence. As such, this mural also fits into the style and mode of those on Paseo Boricua.

These murals and many others are produced during the annual arts festival, Santurce es Ley. The recent burgeoning of the festival demonstrates that the links between the island and the diaspora, which has a visible history of community based mural painting, is now able to grow through a feedback loop of artistic collaboration and community engagement. The site of Santurce now, much like Paseo Boricua in Chicago, is becoming more established as a space for public art and community focused murals, further promoting the goals of the Puerto Rican resistance to the dominant colonial power.

As a concluding thought, I want to reiterate that this diasporic conception of Puerto Rican identity is in constant danger and often under attack. The risk of gentrification and further consolidation of US power persistently looms. This reality is ever more palpable in the wake of the devastation experienced after Hurricane María, the ongoing oppression under the PROMESA act appointed Junta, and the many diverse ecological and public health crises including the current COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government's failure to respond as needed, with real care and interest in its citizens, further underscores the dire message painted into these murals. In this context, the public art medium of the mural serves as a reminder and a catalyst to anti-colonial and anti-state resistance. These murals represent a community anchored public arts project that reimagine new modes of being and the potential for national formations beyond any state or colonial structure.

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