

Interwoven Mesh of Re-existence: Craft Knowledges in Puerto Rico

María Eugenia López

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Program Advisors:
Namita Gupta Wiggers, Program Director
Sara Clugage, Faculty Advisor
Alpesh Kantilal Patel, Mentor

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Para mi isla

"The movement of the beach,
this rhythmic rhetoric of a shore,
do not seem to me gratuitous.
They weave a circularity that
draws me in." Édouard Glissant

This essay is rooted in place specifically in Puerto Rico, where I grew up. From the distance of 15 years of living outside of the archipelago, I attempt to understand how the precarity brought by multiple crises has created a moment when many spaces, efforts, and relations have sprung to help people survive and thrive. In the essay, I reflect on the work of four Puerto Rican artists. These artists are exploring craft knowledges through which they engage and learn about the land and its history while creating a mesh of relations that expand the notions of Puerto Rican identity. Through a close look at their practices, I analyze and think about the dialogue between the state-led projects of modernization of the 1950s and the present situation. This dialogue allows exploration of the connections between craft, crises, colonialism, and ideas of Puerto Rican identity. The intersection of craft's material connection to the land, its connections to government-led cultural narratives, and the diverse ways we engage with it is the lens and entry point through which I think of the work of these artists in relation to the wider context. I also reflect on my own relationship to Puerto Rico through the memories sparked by the artists' works.

The artists whose works I will explore are Javier Orfón, Zaida Goveo Balmaseda, María Lucia (Lulu) Varona Borges, and Jorge González Santos, all of whom are working with craft techniques in Puerto Rico. Three of these artists generously shared their time with me, and our conversations were essential in allowing me to think about the connecting threads between the social and political situation in the island, craft, and their artistic

practices. I also explore the practices of the artists through photos of their works. While I did not interview Jorge González Santos, I analyzed various articles written about him and some videos of one of his projects.¹

Throughout the essay I use the terms “artisan,” “craft,” “craft artist,” and “artisanal.” As I translate from Spanish and think about the words used to refer to these individuals, it is not always adequate to only use the all-encompassing word “craft.” In Spanish, *artesanías* would be used to refer to the objects made by those being cataloged by government agencies. The English translations for this word are “craft” or “handicrafts,” which are not accurate. “Artisanal” is the word I use to refer to the crafts people’s work, as it is closer to the Spanish *artesanal* and to the word *artesanos*, which means “artisans.” Lastly, I refer to the individuals who I interviewed as “artists,” as they move through the contemporary art scene in Puerto Rico and identify as such.

In the essay I move in a nonlinear way, sharing memories and sensory experiences that are essential parts of the process of my analysis. These are intertwined with oral interviews and historical context that present the ways these artists are using the spaces created to critically engage with ideas of the land, social relations, history, and being Puerto Rican. As they explore textiles, ceramics, and straw, they learn and interact with their local environments and communities. They create networks that contribute to building systems that allow them to envision change and a different future, opening the possibilities of plurality of being and the breaking of hierarchies. I define these processes as ones of decoloniality. Decoloniality, as the word is used in Latin America, is a way of thinking. It

¹ All the interviews were conducted in person in September 2021. While I was on the island González Santos was traveling.

is a messy, nonlinear, ongoing process through which different perspectives emerge and coexist. Furthermore, it entails a multiplicity of knowledges, a plurality of being that can eventually displace Western systems and is essential for the creative thinking necessary for imagining possible futures.

Straw Mats, a Van, and Spaces of Learning

Sand-colored strips of straw braided and coiled into squares. Squares joined with squares that together make mats, that make rugs. I imagine sitting on them. Cross legged. The straw marking my thighs and the sides of my legs as I sit for hours on its rough surface. Prickling my feet, making them itch. And as I run across to land on the cold terrazzo floor, its smell surrounds me: the musty, earthy smell of dried grass. And as I imagine the smell, I remember the rickety old swing set in the backyard of my parent's house where I grew up. Where I swung so high the swing set rattled with the small metal slide anchoring me to the ground. And as I swung, and my feet almost touched the clouds, I could almost see beyond. Beyond the basketball court, beyond the condominium behind the house, beyond and into the street and busy intersection.

In that intersection for years, on Saturdays, a white van would always park. The white van with its backdoor opened had straw rugs and mats hanging everywhere. Big circular rugs, small welcome mats, placemats, and hallway runners. Next to the rugs a man with a big straw hat to shield him from the intense sun would sit in a fold out chair. The man and his rugs was such a familiar sight; it was part of our Saturdays to drive by on our way to family lunches, art classes, or to my aunt's apartment down the street. In my aunt's apartment on the third floor, next to her big couch where we could almost do somersaults and binge on cartoons, one of the rugs covered the terrazzo floor. The itchy straw would tickle our feet, and when we sat on it, we would get straw marks on the backs and sides of our legs. Imprints of the design in our skins. As I grew older, I enjoyed looking

at the rugs when I drove by, their constant presence a comforting sign of weekend days. A few years later, the van stopped parking there. I would search for the straw mats at fairs, and anytime I saw white vans parked selling fares I was sure I had found it. I never came that van again, at least not while living on the island.



Photo of Jorge González Santos exhibition 359 días/19 meses in Embajada Gallery in Feb 2017. The straw wall and chair are facing a mirrored wall that makes the straw engulf the room. Photo taken from Embajada Gallery's website. All copyrights belong to Embajada. @copyrights Embajada Gallery

In early 2017, my Instagram feed suddenly flooded with images of friends on the island visiting a gallery in San Juan, the capital city of Puerto Rico and my hometown. Embajada/Embassy Gallery, a new art space in what had been an old strip club where we used to see bands, had an opening for a new exhibition. The small white gallery space was almost all covered in mats. The visual impact, even through the small photos of a post, was strong. The mats covered the floor, and a mirror reflected a wall covered in straw strips, seemingly wrapping the whole room in straw. In the middle of the room was a lone wood chair with a white woven fabric for its seat and back. What caught my attention and made

me stop as I scrolled was that I recognized the mats. They were the same type as the ones from the white van. Seeing them in a gallery setting made me wonder if they were connected to the man in the van. How were they connected to the techniques and artisanal aspect of their creation? And who had made them?

The artist who had made the installation was Jorge González Santos.

In the years since 2017, after first encountering Jorge González Santos' exhibition, *359 días 19 meses/ 359 days 19 months*, at Embajada, he has continued to develop a body of work in which craft knowledges are a key element. In these years Jorge has participated and shown his work in many international settings, as well as offered workshops throughout Puerto Rico. I have continued to be intrigued and curious about his practice. Besides the straw mats he has also explored and engaged with a variety of Puerto Rican craft knowledges, such as hammock-making, ceramics, and lacemaking, among others.² Along with presenting finished examples of pieces he has made together with artisans throughout the island, Jorge's practice combines different aspects that go beyond the gallery or exhibition space. His practice is a layering of diverse ways of knowledges and an attempt to create a space for the sharing and expansion of these knowledges. Curator Michy Marxuach, regarding Jorge's *La nebula en el medio/The Nebula in the Middle* exhibition in Tenerife, Spain, said,

Layers of previous experiences together with fieldwork and manuals form an archive which mixes varied knowledges and temporary spaces. Jorge Gonzalez's *La nebula en el medio* can be described as a work that combines varied worlds of intellectual research and fieldwork with a type of pseudo-

² Craft knowledges is a term I will use throughout the essay and which I later give a robust definition for. It springs from work done in the History and Theory II course with Namita Gupta Wiggers for the MA in Critical Craft Studies in which we worked on identifying and analyzing keywords in craft. I worked with "Multiplicities." This term also is influenced by the term "craftscape," coined by Namita Gupta Wiggers. <https://www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/unearthing-craftscape>, as well as the development of the Warren Wilson College craftscape in which I participated in the Spring of 2021.

artisanal-academic workshop that moves through the territory. His work is both a platform and tool for the recuperation of a marginalized vernacular material culture in an attempt to produce new narratives between the autochthonous, the modern, and opens a pedagogical space under the programming of Escuela de Oficios.³

Marxuach's label of "pseudo artisanal-academic workshop" implies that the Escuela de Oficio/Trade School is a performance piece. Yet the sharing of artisanal knowledges has become a key aspect of Jorge's practice. Inspired by modernist architect Henry Klumb's alternative teaching program by the same name, Escuela de Oficio focuses on learning by doing. The Escuela "folds and unfolds" relationships and began as a collective effort with artist Monica Rodriguez.⁴ Jorge defines this aspect of his practice as "not a physical space but lives out of exchanges and particular manifestations of different scales and times that weave an ongoing creation of a collective learning."⁵

By using Klumb's model of learning, Jorge focuses on the collaborative aspect in which the teacher/student hierarchy seems to be broken, but he doesn't confront the power dynamics existing between Klumb and the Puerto Rican craftspeople in the original Escuela de Oficio.⁶ Klumb's influence in the island can be seen in the many buildings he

³Michy Marxuach. "La nébula en el medio". TEA: Tenerife Espacio de las Artes. Tenerife, Spain. <https://teatenerife.es/obra/la-nebula-en-el-medio/> 2017. November 9, 2019

⁴Enrique Vivoni-Farage. "Modern Puerto Rico and Henry Klumb", Docomomo No.33 September 2005. http://architecturebeyond.eu.humanum.fr/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/Enrique_Vivoni_Farage_Modern_Puerto_Rico.pdf

Henry Klumb was a German architect who arrived on the island as part of the New Deal's Public Works program. Klumb, who had been a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, stayed on the island until his death in 1984. Besides contributing extensively to the island's architecture field, he established a school called Escuela de Oficio, where an exchange of ways of building happened. In this alternative educational space, he taught as well as learned from local craftspeople.

⁵Kadist "Cuando el maguey cae en un río" <https://kadist.org/program/cuando-el-maguey-cae-en-un-rio-when-the-maguey-falls-in-a-river/> November 9, 2019

⁶ Here I use the word "craftsperson" instead of artisans to refer to carpenters, masons, and others in the building trade who were not part of government programs cataloging artisans, which I discuss further in the essay.

constructed, where he implemented his vision of tropical architecture, yet his position within the island, tied to his arrival as a government official, was embedded in the dynamics of his collaborations. Mixing this with the vernacular craft knowledges of the island presents the dynamics of the hybridity of our current culture. But not addressing the complexities that have brought many of the familiar objects we considered part of the Puerto Rican material culture leaves the unequal relationships unquestioned, thus missing an opportunity to deconstruct them.

A video of a workshop during his exhibit, *Cuando el Maguey cae en el río/ When the Agave Falls in the River*, at Kadist Gallery in San Francisco shows people braiding straw while Jorge explains the background and process of his practice. He begins by naming the different artisans with whom he has forged relationships. But what does he achieve by naming the artisans who have taught him? Or by showing this work in a contemporary art space? While his practice is one of sharing knowledges and opening spaces to think and interact with Puerto Rican artisanal culture, by bringing them to a gallery Jorge changes the context, making it a performance piece for the specific audience of gallery and museum goers. In more recent years, Jorge's practice has shifted as he does more place-based pieces in which he collaborates with artisans to create pieces in their communities meanwhile this incursion into the artisanal culture of Puerto Rico has established him as a renowned artist in the contemporary art world.

An aspect that stands out in Jorge's practice is the sourcing of local materials from his immediate environment. He began incorporating this while at a residency at Beta Local, an art space in Puerto Rico that offers a residency as well as a school of sorts inspired by Ivan

Illich's modes of learning.⁷ This space provides educational alternatives since MFA programs are not offered on the island. During his residency at Beta Local, he began participating in a network of artisans who continue craft practices tied to ancestral Indigenous cultures of Puerto Rico. Some of these artisans claim to know they are of Taino descent because of the craft knowledges the family has continued to pass down through generations. As Jorge says, they “claim to be Indigenous through making.”⁸ Knowledge of local materials and of ways to create with them was passed down through generations. While it is hard to corroborate the veracity of these claims, it is as Jorge states, “evidence of a continuous existence of Indigenous practices not how we are taught in the educational system in which we are taught they had become extinct.”⁹

For Jorge this “layering of references from ancient and modern influences” is a way to make visible surviving elements of Puerto Rico’s ancestral past. These local knowledges and cultural elements that are passed down are all intertwined and are evolving ways we interact with the memory of our material culture. According to González Santos, the artisans who shared the knowledge with him are decolonizing themselves with these practices by claiming and sharing knowledge in ways outside of the main narratives of Puerto Rican material culture.

Fernando Torres Flores, the man from the white van, is from the mountain town of Cidra and learned to make the straw mats from his father. At 9 years old in the late 1930s,

⁷ The residency is named “La Práctica” and the school is named La Ivan Illych.

⁸ Kadist “Cuando el maguey cae en un río”

⁹ Ibid- In Puerto Rico we are taught the Taino and Caribe populations had become extinct when worked to death and sickened by the Spanish. Recent studies show that many Puerto Ricans have a significant percentage of Indigenous DNA, especially in the mountain areas where many of these crafts are still practiced. While DNA and percentages are a controversial way of claiming ancestry, in Puerto Rico, where there are few written records of the Tainos still amongst us and narratives have declared them extinct, DNA tests are being used to change the narrative. The Chéveres family transmitted, for generations, the knowledge of their ancestry through their making practices and their oral histories.

he earned 15 cents a day in the field. Making rugs that were then exported to the USA, he and his brother made \$7.15. Torres Flores, now in his nineties, still professes his love for the straw. He has passed on all his knowledge to his son, who continues the trade, and to Jorge González Santos, who has sparked a resurgence of interest in the mats by giving them visibility among young artists. In *359 días 19 meses*, Jorge shared the story of Torres Flores, and as part of Escuela de Oficios he took many art students and artists to Cidra and taught the techniques. In the exhibition beside the mats there was the lone chair, a piece whose wood frame was inspired by a line of modernist furniture produced by Henry Klumb.

By creating a space where relationships and exchange of knowledge are central, Gonzáles Santos' work has the potential of opening spaces where new narratives are possible and that offer alternative ways of interacting with craft, art, knowledge, and time. His fusion of contradictory and fragmented elements from different historical points of Puerto Rican material culture—that are not considered equal and have never been in dialogue but are layers in the Puerto Rican material culture—make visible the continuity of practices thought to have disappeared. But by using Klumb's model of knowledge transmission instead of Torres Flores' familial model, Jorge's work misses the opportunity to engage with the hierarchies and complexities of Puerto Rican material culture.

Jorge González Santos' practice is part of a process that presents a decolonial perspective, one that focuses on the interconnections and relationships that make his work possible. By recuperating the stories and knowledges of communities made invisible by official narratives, he presents parallel alternate stories.¹⁰ However, the use of structures

¹⁰ Adolfo Albán Achinte. "Estéticas de la re-existencia.: ¿Lo político en el arte?" in *Estéticas y opción decolonial*. ed. Pedro Pablo Gómez and Walter Mignolo. Bogotá: UD Editorial, 2012. 287

and institutions where many hierarchies have yet to be dismantled and where not all communities are yet to be acknowledged or given space is evidence that the process of building new narratives is always ongoing and never fully accomplished. But in this ongoing process the mesh keeps expanding, as collaborations and sharing of knowledges interconnects people, places, and their making practices. The process also brings contradictions and complexities where not all hierarchies are dissolved, as these relationships benefit some more than others.

Decoloniality stems from the idea that coloniality refers to the structures and systems built under colonization and that throughout Latin America continue beyond the process of decolonization. With the arrival of Europeans to the Caribbean and the Americas, Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano states, “[the violence of conquest developed new ideas of race as well as structures of labor and exploitation.”¹¹ The colonial system invaded all aspects of life of the conquered; Quijano called this coloniality. Coloniality, as Puerto Rican scholar Nestor Maldonado-Torres points, pervades the lives of us all and the structures in which we live. It is from this premise that decolonial thinking has evolved in Latin America.¹²

Latin American decolonial thinking is interested in relationality and the interdependence of groups and communities where those who live under colonial oppression seek ways to dismantle the systems that exclude them. It doesn’t seek to provide universal answers or one single way of transformation and liberation. Decoloniality is a process. It is ongoing, messy, nonlinear, and full of complexities. As Catherine Walsh states in the first essay of the book *On Decoloniality*, “[decoloniality seeks to make visible,

¹¹ Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2018 4

¹² Yet its history and its praxis are hundreds of years old. For more than 500 years that the Caribbean and Latin America have struggled and resisted the oppression of colonial powers and structures.

open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought.”¹³ Walsh talks of the many thinkers and resistance seekers who refer to the importance of opening cracks as the ways to begin reconfiguring systems of oppression. Influenced by Gloria Anzaldúa, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Zapatista leader Subcomandante Galeano, she questions how the cracks can become fissures that are hard to patch over by dominant systems.¹⁴ For the cracks to become a place of decolonial praxis, she argues that one must reflect on one’s own participation and how we move and act within these dominant systems. And in the process we must think in the plural, with others in a collaborative way that is built on dialogue and where theory is seen as an ongoing practice in which one is constantly unlearning to learn. Through relationality one can question existing structures and go beyond resisting to actively propose and forge new ways of life and to reimagine what could be possible.

In the body of work where Jorge learned about straw and created the exhibition whose photos I encountered, he attempts to bring into conversation knowledges such as Klumb’s educational model and Torres Flores’ straw making techniques. However, does the encounter break the hierarchy inherent in the relationships? Is sharing the knowledge with a specific demographic of artists creating new narratives? Perhaps it slowly ignites reflection and conversations.

But the strength of Jorge’s practice has been his commitment to fostering and intertwining relationships between artisans with whom he has created friendships and young artists wanting to learn and immerse themselves in Puerto Rican craft knowledges

¹³ Mignolo and Walsh. *On Decoloniality* 17

¹⁴ *Ibid* 83

and the communities that mesh. They come together in a loose tangle of relations that is constantly moving, adding connections, stretching, and bundling up once more.

From Afar

There's not much that I remember of the day before September 20, 2017.

Two weeks earlier I had been super vigilant and worried about the potential hit of Hurricane Irma on Puerto Rico. Irma looked huge on the radar and its trajectory seemed like an inevitable collision with the small island. At the last minute, Irma veered and barely grazed the northeast corner of the island, with no major damage occurring in Puerto Rico besides the loss of power in thousands of homes.¹⁵ Puerto Ricans everywhere sighed in relief, and we felt lighter at having missed this near hit. Two weeks later Hurricane Maria sneaked up on us. And when its menacing, powerful, perfect spiral got closer to the island, we looked with anxiety but also with the optimism of Irma's experience. We were sure it would veer and miss the island once more. They almost always did.

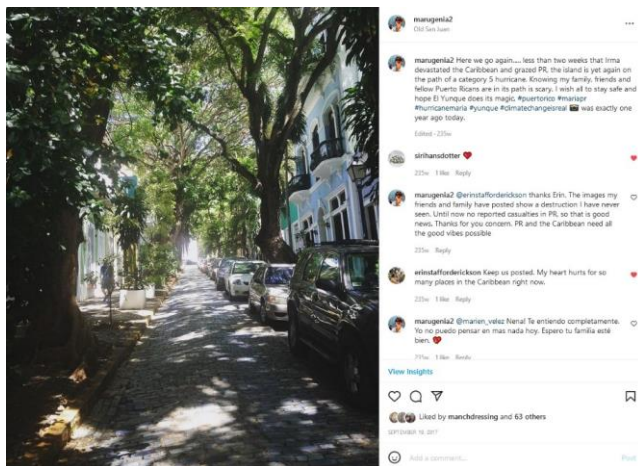


Photo taken on Sept 20, 2019 and posted on my instagram feed a year later on the eve of Hurricane Maria.

¹⁵That was not the case on some of the eastern Caribbean islands. Antigua and Barbuda were severely impacted by Irma, as were St. Kitts and Nevis.

In my Instagram feed, I posted a picture of a street in Old San Juan taken exactly a year before during my yearly visit to see family and friends.¹⁶ In it I expressed my worry, but also my optimism, that the popular myth of El Yunque would once more seem real. That Juracán would change course as it met Yukiyu on the mountain.¹⁷ It did not. Hurricane Maria crossed Puerto Rico from the southeast corner to the northwest with Category 5 winds on September 20, 2017. And as I, from the diaspora, watched the decimation that was occurring, I lost communication with my parents, family, and friends. In the days that followed, as the unbelievable destruction became visible, as the number of deaths kept rising, as I struggled to get word from my loved ones, something in me shifted. Something in many of us, in many Puerto Ricans, shifted in the multiple places we stood. This shift was not only because of the rampant climate destruction—a clear sign of the climate changes occurring worldwide—but in the ways we deepen our thinking on the elements that have brought us to this point of such precarity and uncertainty.

Poet Raquel Salas Rivera, in his book While They Sleep (Under the Bed is Another Country), writes

“the time we existed / because we were dying.”¹⁸

¹⁶<https://www.instagram.com/marugenia2/>

¹⁷ Through the years a local Taino legend has morphed into the story of Yukiyu, a male fertility deity who is said to live in the mountain of el Yunque. El Yunque, which is a tall mountain on the northeast corner of PR, and Yukiyu control the powers of the deity Guabanex, goddess of the wind and the one whose fury destroys everything whose chaotic power was the creation of storms called *juracan*. The Spanish confused the names and Guabanex passed onto history as Juracan. The mountain of el Yunque does allow for a change in winds that veers many storms as they reach the area between the Virgin Islands and PR. For more information on this

¹⁸Raquel Rivera Salas, *While They Sleep*¹ (Under the Bed is Another Country), Minneapolis, New York, Raleigh: Birds, 2019. 19

In the weeks that followed Maria, images of a decimated island circulated widely. As aid was slow to arrive, many in the media implored the U.S. to help Puerto Ricans because we were American. And they kept repeating that little-known fact as the reason people should care. But it was precisely that relationship that the media highlighted why aid was slow to arrive and one of the reasons for the precarity that became visible as the wind blew away the verdant green landscapes that hid reality.

We are American because we are a colony.

We are one of the United States' colonies.

Puerto Rico and its colonial situation are not widely studied. In the book How to Hide an Empire: a History of the Greater United States, historian Daniel Immerwahr talks about how even though so much has been studied of the United States' imperial encroachments in other countries, not much attention is given to the several countries deemed territories of the USA.¹⁹ Immerwahr states, "Empire might be hard to make out from the mainland, but from the sites of colonial themselves, it is impossible to miss."²⁰ People living in the territories are immersed in the everyday reality that the unbalanced relationship with the mainland produces. The days after Hurricane Maria, the media kept repeating Puerto Ricans were Americans as a sort of climate destruction fascination.

*"the weeks after the hurricane, the months, what I dreaded
most was this newfound awareness that we existed. I knew that
no matter how loud I screamed, the knowledge I had acquired*

¹⁹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, NY: Picador. 2019.

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²⁰ Ibid

*through love and death meant nothing to these ex-colonized
colonizer.”²¹*

*What shifted for me that day was the certainty that I wanted to share what
was happening on the island. I wanted to tell others of our complicated history
and relationship with the USA. I wanted to shout about its colonial status. Thus
began my trek to once again study my country, this time with the factor of
distance, exploring the changes happening and some of the craft expressions that
have emerged.*

²¹ Rivera Salas, 87

Empty promise, illegitimate debt, and decoloniality

The last decade has been one of ongoing crises that all sprout from Puerto Rico's colonial status. In the foreword of the book *Aftershock of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, scholar Arcadio Díaz Quiñones points out that “long before Hurricane Maria, the fiscal and political crisis had invested all things Puerto Rican with increasing urgency.”²² Many claimed that the hurricane laid bare the reality that had been pulsating under the green, exuberant landscapes, yet most Puerto Ricans have been witness to the slow but steady collapse of a system that has been based on an unequal colonial reality.

When Hurricane Maria passed, it had been two years since President Barack Obama had approved the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, known ironically in Puerto Rico by its acronym, PROMESA, which translates to “promise.” According to PROMESA, which was passed in June of 2016 by the U.S. government, “under the doctrine of plenary powers regarding their territories—imposed a Fiscal Control Board over Puerto Rico.”²³ The Fiscal Board, known as “La Junta” by Puerto Ricans, was to make sure that the government of Puerto Rico made the necessary budget adjustments to repay a debt of 74 billion dollars. This “illegitimate debt,” as human rights lawyer Ariadna Godreau Aubert has labeled it, is owned in great part by vulture hedge funds, which some of the Junta members are said to have ties to.²⁴

²²Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, *Foreword to Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, Ed. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, Chicago: Haymarket Books. 2019. ix

²³Adriana Godreau Aubert, *Las Propias: Apuntes para una pedagogía de las endeudadas*, Cabo Rojo: Ediciones Emergentes. 2018. 55

All translation from Spanish texts throughout the essay are my own unless otherwise noted

²⁴ Ibid 64

The Junta is a seven-member body appointed by Congress with no participation from the Puerto Rican people. Thus, the Junta has in the last five years made extreme cuts to public pensions, demanded the privatization of public services, and has closed and defunded public schools, as well as some of the regional campuses of the University of Puerto Rico. These austerity measures have affected those living on the island and forced many to migrate. As Godreau Aubert states, “A debt is illegitimate when human rights are denied or limited by giving priority to the payment and not the people.”²⁵

The multiple crises have brought widespread precarity, leaving the island ripe for what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism.” In her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Klein elaborates on the concepts of disaster capitalism and shock doctrine. She states that in moments of crises, such as natural disasters, unpopular political and economic agendas—privatization and cuts to public services, the elimination of social services, the selling of public land—are passed while people are still in a state of shock and disorientation as they deal with the crisis.²⁶ In Puerto Rico, the shocks have been ongoing. The crises and subsequent shocks to Puerto Ricans, in particular Hurricane Maria, have brought “new visibility to a powerful and racist imperial state.”²⁷ This visibility and the recognition of neoliberal colonial capitalism, austerity measures implemented by La Junta, the precarity from years of colonialism, and the threat of displacement as land and properties are bought up by rich investors are the multiple contexts from which the artists analyzed here create and think. It is also the framework and context within which I think of them.

²⁵ Ibid 59

²⁶ Naomi Klein *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*

²⁷ Diaz Quiñones, x

In 2018, Klein was invited to Puerto Rico by a group called JunteGente/People Gathered.²⁸ The purpose of her visit was to give attention to the exploitation and rampant neoliberal policies implemented in the aftermath of the hurricane. During her visit, as JunteGente took her around the island, Klein noticed that while people struggled to get basic necessities, there was also a parallel world forming, a world where people were organizing to give the support the government was not providing. They were coming together to cook in communal kitchens, charge electronics around solar batteries, create programming for kids, talk, and be together. They were coming together to try, as she states, to build “their future world in miniature, on those islands of sovereignty hidden throughout the territory.”²⁹

Crises have the potential of creating spaces where people begin questioning existing structures and reimagining the multiple possibilities that the future can hold.³⁰ The aftermath of the storm brought, out of necessity, the creation of new systems of support. These systems, which continue to provide food, power, and a place to gather, are in some cases filled with the making of crafts. These informal gatherings brought a diversity of new approaches to craft knowledges, as techniques and materials were shared, as multigenerational friendships were forged, and as people shared knowledge.

To understand these interconnections and situate the work of these four contemporary artists, I give context and historical background regarding established

²⁸ Junte Gente is a collective of scholars that aims to create space for organizations to come together and think of ways to resist neoliberal capitalism to create a more sustainable and just Puerto Rico.

²⁹ Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on Disaster Capitalism*. Chicago: Haymart Books. 2018. 54

³⁰ Nestor Maldonado Torres, *Afterword to Foreword to Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, Ed. Yarimar Bonilla, and Marisol LeBrón. Chicago: Haymart Books. 2019. 332-340

government narratives concerning culture and craft³¹. The artists are interacting, questioning, and expanding notions regarding Puerto Rican craft and its relation to ideas of Puerto Rico. For some of these artists, the interconnections and creation of collaborative spaces are of great importance. Yet the sharing of knowledge is not a full solution to the economic and environmental precarity, as they continue living on an island with an uncertain future. The relations and collaborative learning are also not the same experience for all, which was made clear in the last conversation with textile artist Lulu Varona. These different views allow for a diversity of approaches that expand the process of creating spaces where resistance gives way to ways of life. Plurality and multiplicity are essential in the ongoing process of creating decolonial practices.

³¹ Here I refer to craft and its connections to government initiatives in the 1950s with craft being associated with ideas of tradition and authenticity tied to idealized visions tying it to the rural. For more of this *The Culture of Craft* edited by Peter Dormer has several essays addressing definitions and conceptions of craft.

Movement, Fluidity, and Operation Serenity

Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos Febres, talking about the Caribbean region, points to the fact that there is more water than land in our region, bringing with it fluidity and constant movement to the notions and cultures of the islands.³² With this fluidity comes multiplicity and nonlinear narratives in which multiple ways of being emerge, and within this plurality come the ongoing possibilities of reimagining, relating, and interacting. This fluidity is an apt metaphor for the constant and fluid migrations of Puerto Ricans who move back and forth from the United States. This is explored in various essays by anthropologist Jorge Duany, who studies how Puerto Rican diasporic experiences are tied with the notions of nation and identity. Puerto Rico, according to Duany, “has a peculiar status among the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.”³³ Having been under Spanish colonial power longer than most nations and being passed on to the United States as war bounty in 1898, Puerto Rico is the oldest colony in the region. Yet Duany states that “[a]fter more than one hundred years of US colonialism, the Island remains a Spanish-speaking Afro-Hispanic-Caribbean nation.”³⁴ This unique colonial status has brought other particularities to the island and its population. Since the 1940s, a circularity of movement began with many people coming and going from the “mainland” USA. This “transient and pendulous

³² University of Maryland Baltimore County. “Mayra Santos Febres: The Fractal Caribbean: New Literatures in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.” www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tFILkUSr84. Sept 12, 2019

³³ Jorge Duany. *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island*. The University of North Carolina Press. 2002 . 1

³⁴ Jorge Duany. *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*. 1

flow”³⁵ gives title to Duany’s 2002 book, *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*.

The massive migration of the 1940s and 1950s was in part due to an active government campaign, which exhorted Puerto Ricans to look for the many opportunities available to them there. The move to the States, according to Duany, although easy in the sense that Puerto Ricans do not cross international borders and thus are not policed by border controls, is in a sense a foreign move due to the differences in cultures. These differences, and Puerto Ricans’ sense of cultural nationalism, make the move “a dual process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.”³⁶ The sense of displacement people feel with the change of language and cultural norms leads to an affirmation of their ties to their ideas of the place left behind. This reconfiguration of what constitutes their national identities brings about certain elements that are seen in other diasporic communities; however, unique elements exist due to the circular migration of Puerto Ricans. One such aspect is the influence on the development of the ideas of Puerto Ricanness. Duany states that the emergence of cultural nationalism in the 1950s is directly tied to the growing diaspora.³⁷ A parallel characteristic to the strong national identity is the hybrid identities created by the Puerto Rican diaspora’s constant fluctuations. With these movements come ways of creating and interacting with culture and its objects, craft being one of them. The

³⁵ Jorge Duany. *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*. 2

³⁶ Jorge Duany. “Nation, Migration, Identity: The Case of Puerto Ricans” *Latino Studies* v.1 issue 3 (2003). 433 <http://search.proquest.com/docview/222648085/abstract/A12DAA17E3B045BCPQ/1>

³⁷ Duany, “The Case of Puerto Ricans” 426. I don’t completely agree with Duany’s thesis, as my view is that the emergence of Cultural Nationalism was part of the government’s platform to convince the population to vote for the Commonwealth status and the new constitution. However, I do think that the diaspora was essential in how these ideas continued developing until the present.

reaffirmation of certain aspects of what was believed to be Puerto Rican identity was an essential part of rapid changes and transformations that occurred on the island in the 1950s.

In 1948, Puerto Rico elected a governor for the first time.³⁸ With an overwhelming majority, Luis Muñoz Marín and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) introduced a firm platform to modernize and decolonize Puerto Rico. A constitution was ratified in 1952, and with it came the *Estado Libre Asociado* and its misleading English translation of “Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.”³⁹ This supposedly transitory state—which would soon lead to either statehood or independence—brought with it two main government programs that would transform the landscape of the island at lightning speed: *Operación Manos a la Obra*/Operation Bootstrap and *Operación Serenidad*/Operation Serenity. Operation Bootstrap enabled the rapid industrialization of the island by giving tax exemptions to companies from the United States and allotting government funds to the development of factories, hotels, and other projects. The changing landscape and the new political status, at a moment when independence was favored by many, propelled the PPD to conceive of Operation Serenity. According to Duany, it was an “effort to rescue the island’s traditional culture, as counterpart to Operation Bootstrap,” as Muñoz Marín expressed in 1959 at the Godkin Lectures at Harvard University.⁴⁰ Ideas of tradition were tied closely to the rural mountains where the figure of the *jíbaro* resided. The *jíbaro* was seen as wise and resourceful, yet downtrodden and naïve. The official narrative created a

³⁸ Governors had been appointed first by Spain and then the USA. Many were military appointees with a few exceptions, especially starting in the 1940s. The last appointed governor in 1946 was the first Puerto Rican and predecessor to Luis Muñoz Marín’s election.

³⁹ *Estado Libre Asociado* would translate directly to Associate Free State, but declaring it the Commonwealth allowed the United Nations to take Puerto Rico out of the list of existing colonies, thus erasing the reality of the relation.

⁴⁰ Duany. *Puerto Rican Nation*. 123

vision of a people of mostly Spanish descent whose resourcefulness had taken them to create all sorts of beautiful functional objects, such as straw baskets, textiles, and wooden saints to worship. Yet for this rescue to take place, the PPD had to determine what this so-called traditional culture was. Thus, already established discourses of the perfect blend of races became part of the construction of a project of cultural nationalism.⁴¹

The project of cultural nationalism, which began even before 1952, was part of Muñoz Marín's platform. According to Puerto Rican historian Carlos Pabón, "There could be a nation without a national state and there could be cultural nationalism without independence, even if the island was economically integrated to the United States."⁴² By emphasizing the unique elements of history, culture, and language, and "commemorating heritage, celebrating rituals, rescuing traditions, and educating the public," the PPD managed to gain support for their Commonwealth status, assuring Puerto Ricans that the essence of their identity would remain unchanged. This Puerto Rican personality that Muñoz Marín envisioned was tied to Hispanic heritage and denied the complexities and multiplicities embedded in Puerto Rican culture.

A key part of Operación Serenidad was the establishment of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña/Puerto Rican Institute of Culture (ICP) in 1955. One of the first initiatives of the ICP was a proposal to create a Cultural Center for Art and Craft. By the early 1960s the project had gained shape and ICP officials were traveling through the island looking

⁴¹ The narrative taught in school in Puerto Rico to this today is that Puerto Ricans are the perfect mix of Spanish, Taíno (indigenous people), and African, without a critical or in-depth look at the hierarchies and violent reasons of why certain aspects are more prominent, why we believe the indigenous is in the past or the African is just in certain regions of the island. Giving prominence to the Spanish ancestry is part of that narrative, with many on the island still referring to Spain as the mother country.

⁴² Carlos Pabón. *Nación Postmortem: Ensayos sobre los tiempos de insoportable ambigüedad*. San Juan, PR: Ediciones Callejón. 2002. 39

for artisans making crafts to include in the first center in Old San Juan. A list found amongst the correspondence of ICP director Ricardo Alegría sheds light on some of the contacted artisans: Herminio Cardona, a mortar and spoon carver from Aguada in the west of the island; Ventura Pérez, a hammock weaver from the mountain town of San Sebastián; Marina González, a textile maker from Manatí in the north coast; Radi Bernardi, who made cuatros—a small Puerto Rican guitar with 4 strings—Oscar Ortiz Fernández, who worked with clay; and Amparo Fuentes de Badillo, a lace maker in the mountains. The list goes on for some pages.⁴³ . As the ICP looked for funds from other government agency and catalogued lists of crafts for the center they stressed the importance of this center.⁴⁴ The ICP tried contacting artisans throughout the island. In the correspondence between Ricardo E Alegría, the director of the ICP and several figures we see him asking for references of artisans in different areas of the island. Amongst the letter is a report sent by Alegría to the director of another agency where he states,

this project has been discussed for several years between the Governor's wife and Teodoro Moscoso. The project would consist of a place where our main artists and artisans can establish workshops and have a center to sell their wares. The place could have a restaurant, other stores and an inn⁴⁵

As San Juan became a tourist destination, they believed the crafts had a potential market in the tourists, strolling the colonial city, and that this could help the economic transformation taking place. In the correspondence it is clear that ICP had a great

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⁴³ *List of Artisans*, Box 6, Folder: Popular Arts: Crafts 1956-1962, Collection: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Section: Office of the Executive Director, Series: General Correspondence Executive Director. Archivo General de Puerto Rico. San Juan, PR.

⁴⁴ Crafts here I use to refer to the artisanal objects catalogued by the ICP. The crafts they were looking for where quien habla de este tipo de craft

⁴⁵ Report, October 16, 1962 Folder: Popular Arts: Crafts 1956-1962, Collection: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Section: Office of the Executive Director, Series: General Correspondence Executive Director. Archivo General de Puerto Rico. San Juan, PR.

appreciation for the crafts, yet beyond the choice of artisans, the ideas behind the selections are not stated. It would take several years for a craft program to take form as part of the ICP's mission. By the 1970s their efforts to catalogue and organize artisans offered a membership program with opportunities of economic development, classes, fair participation, and, most importantly, the label of "artisan" of the ICP.⁴⁶ Besides all of the opportunities within the ICP, the label offered a prestige that was marketable. A newsletter that the ICP began circulating in the 1970s reads,

that traditions are created through repetition, acceptance, enjoyment, and delight of the customs of people. It is everything that is characteristic and impossible to take away or negotiate. It belongs to nature like the rain, the sun, the air, and is necessary to man for his existence and identification⁴⁷

And with these associations they proceed to give examples of "the most important expressions" in Puerto Rican craft.⁴⁸ Straw wares, wood carvings, lace making, and coconut masks were, and still are, considered the most emblematic of traditional crafts on the island. Anthropologist Alanna Cant in her essay, "Who Authors Crafts? Producing Woodcarvings and Authorship in Oaxaca, Mexico," explores how objects deemed traditional are usually associated with a place, ideas of skill, and cultural identity. With these associations, traditional crafts are thought to be more personal and produced in small, quaint workshops where production is limited and unique.⁴⁹ These ideas erase the actual complex dynamics of the multiple persons making these objects, objects that many times

⁴⁶ Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. "Boletín Populares: Num.1, junio 1977" <https://www.archivoicp.com/boletn-de-artes-populares-nm-1> . 4-5

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Alanna Cant. "Who Authors Craft? Producing Woodcarving and Authorship in Oaxaca, Mexico." *Critical Craft: Technology, Globalization, and Capitalism*. Ed. Clare M Wilkinson-Weber and Alicia Ory DeNicola, New York: Routledge. 2020 21

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do not have long histories and whose aesthetics are not uniquely from one place.⁵⁰ The constructed narratives equating crafts with the idyllic conceptions of nature left many artisanal practices out, while also playing a key role in the cultural nationalist narratives of what it was to be Puerto Rican.



The Center for Craft and Art envisioned opened its doors in 1963 as The Center of Popular Arts. Nestled in a small cobblestone street in Old San Juan the ICP sold pieces created by artisans and occasionally showcased artisans at work. Straw mats covered the floor but don't seem to be on the shelves to be sold. Photo from the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Colección de Imágenes, Carpeta Centro Artes Populares

⁵⁰ Ibid. 25



Artisan Norberto Cedeño carving saints in the courtyard of the Center of Popular Arts. The way he was placed as well as the photographs taken put Cedeño on display almost like the objects that were being sold. Photo from the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Colección de Imágenes, Carpeta Centro Artes Populares



People gathered for the inaugural celebration at the Center of Popular Arts. Coconut masks, wooden roosters and figures can be seen on the shelves. Photo from the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Colección de Imágenes, Carpeta Centro Artes Populares

The crumbling infrastructure and precarity of the last decade has also brought the slow dissolution of many ideas that were established during the modernization projects of the 1950s. Ideas, as Arcadio Díaz-Quinones in an interview states, that used to legitimize the colony.⁵¹ The study and understanding of these official discourses is essential “to glean the cultural nourishment that can assist us in preparing a political and cultural counteroffensive against the regressive institutions and ideas spawned by advanced monopoly capitalism”, as Angela Davis says in her essay “Art on the Frontline: Mandate for a People’s Culture”.⁵² And as these ideas and discourses crumble with the multiple crises a number of artists on Puerto Rico have immersed themselves in the learning of craft knowledges, and in the process included many left out of these narratives, expanding what it means to be Puerto Rican while also creating spaces where more than craft is shared.

Craft expressions don’t have to be overtly political to awaken a sensitivity that has the potential of bringing social change. One such way is the creation of spaces where relations and communities can grow. Davis in the essay talks of how “Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance”⁵³ The music under conditions of slavery might have not been direct actions toward freedom but they allowed for the shaping of a consciousness that maintain the dream of freedom. While the colonial condition of Puerto Rico cannot be equated to being enslaved the power of an aesthetic community is necessary to imagine a different future.

⁵¹Magdalena López y María Teresa Vera, “El Caribe como resistencia: entrevista a Arcadio Díaz-Quinones.” *Cuadernos de Literatura*, vol. 23, no. 45, 2019 18
<https://arcadiodiazquinones.com/portfolio/el-caribe-como-resistencia-2017/>

⁵²Angela Davis, “Art on the Frontline: Mandate for a People’s Culture” in *Women, Culture, Politics*. NY: Vintage Books Edition. 1990.199

⁵³Ibid. 201

Another key aspect of the fluidity described by Caribbean writers is what Martinican poet Édouard Glissant talks of in his book *Poetics of Relation*. Relation, a space where multiple syncretic forms of being coexist sharing knowledge and opening new ways of imagining and sensing the world. Imagination, like the aesthetic communities Davis discusses, cannot enact social or political change in itself. Yet it also has a power, as Glissant states “imagination changes mentalities, however slowly it may go about this”⁵⁴

All the artists whose work I delved into approach their relationship to craft and to Puerto Rico differently allowing for a diversity of ideas to come to view. Yet there is one key aspect that they share and is the web of relations in which they are enmeshed. The communities that they participate in. Jorge Gonzalez Santos whose work was the first that sparked in me the curiosity that has led me to this investigation is a key figure in the creation of this spaces that intertwine both Javier Orfón and Zaida Goveo Balmaseda in the sharing of knowledges.

⁵⁴ Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.1990. 183

Clay, Caves, and Re-existence

Organic forms in a mixture of colors. Earth colors. Like the red mud where we used to camp almost always under the rain. And we would splash around. Mud would cover and cake our clothing. Beiges like the sandy rocky terrains of the north coast where what once were reefs and canyons are now caves and jagged coastlines. That slice your feet if you're barefoot and the splashing waves nearby mist you on a sunny day, reminding you of their power. Rustling of leaves. Rough textures that invite the touch. And you can almost smell the dampness of the caves, you can almost feel it on your skin like dense mist. You can imagine the echoes of the walls, hear the soft buzzing of insects, the clicking of bats. The crack of light from the entrance.

Recently on a rainy night I drove 45 minutes to visit the studio of artist Javier Orfón. I had encountered his work in 2018 on Instagram, but it was last year with his exhibition *El Ojo de la Arcilla/The Clay's Eye* that I stopped to look closely at his work. The exhibition, shown at Hidrante, a small art space in the Santurce sector of San Juan, consisted of three installations done through three years of experimentation with native clays and sand. Hidrante is situated in a former residence from the 1950s, its domestic spaces filled with terrazzo tile floors, ochre tile walls, and pink and violet hues serving as the perfect setting to enter in conversation with Orfón's ceramic pieces.⁵⁵ His work is an

⁵⁵ The iconic architecture of private homes in Santurce is from the 1950s. This type of architecture has a blend of architectural influences, such as Spanish revival terracotta shingles, arcs and decorative floor tiles, and elements not used widely before the modernization projects, such as cement and Miami windows, which are aluminum louver awning windows.

amalgam of personal narrative, experiences, and intuitions, with the shared knowledge of those he considers his community. In this space he displayed the organic shapes with their mixture of influences and ties to the land, placing them in conversation with the architectural elements of Hidrante. This conversation presents the tension between an era of false certainties and the uncertain precarity of today.



Javier Orfón's body of work *Diamante Azul* in the exhibition *Ojo de Arcilla* at Hidrante in Santurce, Puerto Rico. Here the kitchen tiles and Miami windows come into dialogue with the root vegetable inspired clay shapes and the breezeway blocks and ornate architectural recreations. @copyright Javier Orfón

The three bodies of work in *Ojo de Arcilla*—*Tratado de Cuevas/Treaty of Caves*, *Globo de Tierra/Earth Globe*, and *Diamante Azul/Blue Diamond*— were created between 2017-2020. *Tratado de Cuevas* was the result of Javier's involvement with Taller Cabachuelas in the mountain town of Morovis, Puerto Rico. He was invited to Cabachuelas by artist Jorge González Santos in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. There he began his explorations in clay and created this body of work in which he explores not only the materiality of the clay of the Natural Reserve of Cabachuelas but also the ancestral

knowledge shared through conversations.⁵⁶ In his process he claims to “have learned the importance of oral histories, the transmission of knowledge through the words of popular thought and micro-histories.”⁵⁷ *Globo de Tierra* expands his exploration into his surroundings and the cosmology of the Taino. His contemporary reinterpretation of the aesthetics of Taino pottery allows him to continue using pottery for the transmission of knowledge about the land and the different clays that come from the island. This work is filled with cave-like clay pieces which you can peer into. Alongside lay objects left behind by people in the caves or brought by the waters of underground rivers.

The third body of work in the exhibition is *Diamante Azul*, which is his most personal. In these works, he abstracts shapes inspired by the roots and vegetables farmed in the sector of Las Piedras where he grew up, *Diamante Azul*. These shapes are juxtaposed with architectural wooden pieces that bring popular elements of houses in Puerto Rico and that he produced in collaboration with a woodshop called Taller Los Artesanos/ The Artisans Workshop, run by his cousin. The bulbous, vegetable-like pieces next to these elements are recognizable to Puerto Ricans, bringing into conversation two formative styles that are rarely seen as related, yet are distinct parts of the everyday aesthetic vocabulary of many on the island. In the *Diamante Azul* pieces, Javier evokes the familiarity of these forms and elements of Puerto Rican material culture, inviting the viewer to stop and look closely to explore the textured ochre-colored pieces.

When I entered Area Lugar Proyectos during my visit to his studio, the smell of leaves and clay engulfed me. In a square office room under bright fluorescent lights, leaves

⁵⁶The Natural Reserve of Cabachuelas consists of a deep tropical forest filled with caves that are part of a wide cave system in the northern region of the island and where underground rivers flow.

⁵⁷Hidrante, *El Ojo de la Arcilla: Javier Orfón 10/07-14/08 2020*, SJ: Hidrante. 2020. 3

from the Cupey tree—an autochthonous tree from the archipelago of Puerto Rico—were spread on the floor as if they had fallen from the tree. Some of the leaves had carvings, which were most prominent on leaves still somewhat green and fresh. These are part of Javier’s latest body of work, of which some pieces were on display in the room where he received me to talk about his practice.



Photo of where Javier and I talked in Area Lugar Proyectos. The space had works in process, Cupey leaves and some smaller works Javier was experimenting with. Photo taken by me.

Javier’s work is tied closely to the land. His practice has not only led him to create a close-knit community, but to explore the archipelago in a different way. With his hands immersed in the soil, he has a passion to immerse himself in its topography.⁵⁸ In his artist

⁵⁸ Through his involvement with Taller Cabachuelas, Orfón has become a spelunker, exploring caves and underground rivers.

statement he states how his work is tied to the concept of topophilia,⁵⁹ a concept in which the love for the land, and the strong sense a place evokes, is mixed with its cultural identity. And it is this love of place, love for Puerto Rico and its landscapes, that he wants to transmit through his work and “spark an aesthetic experience that envelopes the senses.”⁶⁰ In our conversation Javier recounts how he became immersed in his explorations of Puerto Rico and how that led to a deeper immersion with clay. After studying Fine Arts and specializing in printmaking at the University of Puerto Rico, he began expanding his materials by using pieces of crumbling piers and buildings in the zone of Puerta de Tierra⁶¹. Some years later he decided to expand the scope of the land he was getting to know. “And then in 2017, well that's when I decide to leave my geographical area. And see other places in the Puerto Rican archipelago.”⁶² And as he began his exploration of the archipelago, he found himself in Taller Cabachuelas. This is where Javier learned to work with clay. In the collaborative space of Cabachuelas, Alice Chéveres and her family taught him, alongside others, about Taino pottery, the region, and about clay. Jorge González Santos, who had been collaborating with Chéveres for his Escuela de Oficios, organized a workshop in Taller Cabachuelas a few months after Hurricane Maria. All of them were struggling in diverse ways after the hurricane, and Jorge brought them together to help out, to create community. For Javier it was an important pivot, and it established a relationship that has become familial. And as more workshops took place, together they shared poetry, myths, and talked

⁵⁹ Javier Orfón, Artist Statement. <https://orfonarte.wixsite.com/javierorfon/statement>

⁶⁰ Ibid 3

⁶¹ Puerta de Tierra is a community that developed in the 1800s on the outskirts of the walls of the colonial city of San Juan. Workers, craftsmen, and a population of Black and mestizo people were its inhabitants, and some of their descendants still live there despite governmental and private projects of urban renewal that have displaced many and torn down the many buildings and structures that have been left to crumble in order to justify its demolition.

⁶² Javier Orfón. Interview with author, Caguas, PR, Sept 21, 2021, translations of interviews are all my own unless otherwise noted.

of diverse topics from the personal to the political.⁶³ These diverse knowledges, with the technical and material knowledges, have influenced Javier's work.

One of the focuses of decolonial thought is the production of knowledges and bringing to light how knowledges alongside the land and its people were colonized. In colonization projects, knowledge is managed in ways that silence local knowledges. Through the cataloging and organizing of narratives of what is considered official culture or aspects worth transmitting and teaching, colonial power seeps into multiple layers of life. Knowledge is power, as so many have argued. And with this power it also has the capability of resisting and finding alternative ways of manifesting and continuing, of evolving and morphing into new forms. A similar argument is made by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh in their book *On Decoloniality*. Mignolo and Walsh understand knowledge, theory, and theorizing within the colonial matrix as “the purview of academics and the academy.”⁶⁴ A decolonial praxis can open up the way we understand the production of knowledges and who is involved in it. Walsh states that decoloniality of knowledge is a process that is an “ongoing serpentine movement towards possibilities of other modes of thinking, knowing, sensing, and living: that is, an otherwise in plural.”⁶⁵

The use of the term “craft knowledges” makes emphasis on the plurality that I consider is part of craft. It's a layering of skills, a practice in relation to place and community. It has material knowledge even when it doesn't use local materials due to scarcity or lack of resources. It has self-reflection and critical thinking regarding the practices as well as the ideas and situations that inform it and mold it. Craft knowledges

⁶³Ibid

⁶⁴ Mignolo and Walsh. *On Decoloniality* 28

⁶⁵ Ibid 81

are a form of vernacular learning from established traditions, subverting and reinventing them. And in this reinvention, they expand who and what they encompass.

For Javier immersing himself in his clay work has been a way to connect to ancestral craft knowledges. His work contains the plurality that I see in craft knowledges, alongside the messiness that is the decolonial project with its contradictions and complexities. He related how he immersed himself in Alice Chévere's teachings as she taught him technical skills to form clay, how to look for clays in his surroundings, and how to fire it. She taught him about the land, the region she lives in, and the caves. This pushed him to learn about Taino pottery, and he began relating to the land in a different way as he looked for clay. Talking of his process he told me,

To start I began looking at Antillean pottery. And there is a particular period that fascinates me. It is the most beautiful, the one from the Huecoide and Saladoide in which they used many colors of clay. They played with reds, whites, and yellows, and certain pieces have three colors. And I said, they were already doing it the way that Alice is doing and teaching me! ⁶⁶

This made him decide to start looking for clays from where he had grown up in Las Piedras. With Alice's help he began playing with that clay and going to different points in the island where he and friends would source clay, sand, and other materials. Of his explorations and the body of work it led to, he states

And then this was a way of seeing different places, to go to them differently. Like a kind of archeology, an investigation, inspired by pieces that I had investigated, I made new. A reinterpretation. That installation has a lot to do with so much. With the mythology, the beauty, the poetics of the Antillean ancestral mythology. Using ancestral pottery techniques but in a more contemporary way, as an artist. In another way. ⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Orfán, Interview

⁶⁷ Ibid

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Throughout our conversation, as Javier continued sharing about his different bodies of work, he kept returning to the importance of the things learned in Taller Cabachuelas and the impact Chéveres had on “his way of seeing the world.”⁶⁸ He emphasizes how she taught him and her community with great generosity. Through her teachings, she asserts her Taino identity and shares the knowledge that has been passed down through generations in her family. Javier states, “She knows the power of her work, the power of resistance.”⁶⁹ Alice as well as her sister Naco, have knowledge of the zone and materials, as well as the history of their ancestors that “give them the power of education,” which has inspired Javier to continue “breaking the mold.”⁷⁰



[Taino](#) pottery from pre-Columbian ages, at El Fortín del Conde de Mirasol, [Vieques Island](#). Photo by Jaro Nemcok https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taino_keramika.jpg

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid



Photo of one piece in Orfón's body of work *Tratado de Cuevas* where he was inspired by things found in the caves he explores where amongst bottles, plastics shards of ceramics are also sometimes found. @copyrights Javier Orfón

Due to the colonial situation of the island, Javier firmly believes that “we have to be as creative as possible. To forge a new language that when one is together with others is a way to reaffirm identity. To forge community, to forge country.”⁷¹ As our conversation neared the end, Javier stated,

In Alice's workshop, there when we were in a group, it was almost visceral. We shared what we thought, personal things. I believe that craft mediums can provide that. I like working in community, not that idea of the solitary artist. And clay has taken me to explore, to feel nature.⁷²

And this exploration has led him to experience place differently.

This is love for the land. I read a reference to topophilia. It refers to the perceptions one has of a specific place. Perceptions. As much as to even know with your body when the temperature of the place is about to change. Getting to know it every day more and more. To be more sensible. To be part of the land. Clay has given me that opportunity. To transmit this experience, this knowledge of my country, Puerto Rico. Your country.⁷³

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⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

Javier's practice is a decolonial one. Through the material knowledge he has learned working with clay, he attempts to expand the notion of Puerto Ricanness, inviting others to experience this through his pieces. In his contemporary reinterpretations of popular and Taino elements, in the aesthetics of his work, in his deep exploration and synergy with the land, his conscious desire to collaborate and create networks of shared knowledges he is creating a practice that is relational, plural, and an ongoing process of reinvention. Through his work he is opening spaces that invite others to also question what it is to be Puerto Rican, to re-engage with the land, and to find ways to not just resist but actively look for ways of living through times of precarity. He is finding ways to re-exist.

Re-existence is a term widely used in Latin American decolonial thinking. Coined by Colombian artist and scholar Adolfo Albán Achinte, it comprises,

The mechanisms that human groups implement as a strategy of questioning and making visible the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization, procuring the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the bio-politic that controls, dominates, and commodifies subjects and nature.⁷⁴

In his book *Prácticas creativas de re-existencia: más allá del arte...el mundo de lo sensible*, Albán Achinte compiles several essays where he explores the decoloniality of aesthetics and the concept of re-existence as a form of resistance for marginalized populations. For Albán Achinte, art should be “a permanent reflexive act—not only making artistic objects—but that expands the stages of discussion concerning social exclusion.”⁷⁵ Through this reflexive act art can, according to Albán Achinte, “construct new symbols,

⁷⁴ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality* 18

⁷⁵ Adolfo Albán Achinte, *Prácticas creativas de re-existencia: más allá del arte...el mundo de lo sensible*. Buenos Aires. 23

Commented [3]: creo que los block quotes también deben de estar mas indented, pero again no estoy segura con este estilo

give visibility that puts in evidence the plurality of existence that converge and diverge in contemporary times.”⁷⁶ The project of modernity/coloniality, with its universalizing concepts associated with art and what has been considered beautiful by western canons, has left out communities and people with different trajectories, relegating their cultural production to the past. This act freezes them in premodern conceptions of time; the term “craft” has become vinculated with objects created by these populations and linked to objects produced for the consumption of tourism, as Albán Achinte points out.⁷⁷ The creative act should open space for the silences and the stories erased; it should be a constant act of reflection that “radically reconstructs knowledge, power, and being and thus allowing for conditions where we can construct fairer societies.”⁷⁸

Javier through his exploration of Taino pottery and his collaboration with Alice has managed to create pieces that harken to the familiar aesthetics taught to be part of a population extinct hundreds of years ago. Their material knowledge has continued being transmitted and their different relation to the environment is evident in all Javier is learning. This knowledge is a point of entry for Javier to expand and reflect on how it ties to his own ideas of materials, land, and Puerto Rico. Through this and the personal relationships he has forged, he has found a way to re-exist.

Albán Achinte proposes to break from the western conceptions and to allow that which has been submerged and relegated to be what constructs meaning, and to permit for “emotions to flutter without pre-established limits, for the imaginary to furrow our entrails and for the enigmatic to open the possibilities of peeking at other ways of existing.”⁷⁹ Re-

⁷⁶ Ibid 39

⁷⁷ Ibid 45

⁷⁸ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality* 18

⁷⁹ Albán Achinte, *Prácticas creativas de re-existencia* 35

existence is the search for new forms of representation by populations historically excluded in the making of official canons, and it is linked to a decolonization of aesthetics. Albán Achinte explains that through re-existence, oppressed communities look for knowledges that have been silenced as ways to organize, reinvent life, and transform, thus creating mechanisms that confront the hegemonic project.⁸⁰ “Re-existence references the configuration of ways to exist and not just resist—to re-exist resisting and to resist re-existing—as subjects, to build projects of society and life despite adverse conditions.”⁸¹ This is decoloniality: practices of re-existence, of resistance.



Cueva de las Mulas from the series
Tratado de Muchas Cuevas. @Copyrights
Javier Orfón

⁸⁰ Ibid 41

⁸¹ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality* 95

Lace, Pins, and Relations

Long strips of fabric, white soft threads, and yarns different in thickness. Raw, salvaged edges that remind me of ripping muslin with your hands. The tearing sound of threads breaking as your hands pull the fabric apart. Twigs small and tangled, dried grasses that become threads, leaves that seemed to have accumulated together like a tumbleweed that has traveled miles and has amassed diverse materials, becoming a loose but united entity. I imagine it rough to the hand, smelling of dried leaves freshly raked and assembled in a pile ready to be jumped in, to be rustled by a foot looking to hear the crunch, to feel the light weight of so many leaves together, to check for the ground that lies beneath. Slow meditative pieces that remind me of the prick of pins on your fingers, the feel of soft thread between them. And as you move your fingers, crossing and crisscrossing threads around pins forming shapes, you exhale and slow down.

On a warm cloudless day in September 2021, I traveled to Old San Juan to meet with textile artist Zaida Goveo Balmaseda. Next to the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, the public art and design university, we met in a small park surrounded by trees with views of the San Juan Bay and the colonial fort of El Morro. This hidden enclave had been a secret spot of mine years before when I lived in Old San Juan just out of college. Here I would come to swing as I looked at the bay and let my mind wander. The peaceful meditative

setting was a great location for meeting with Zaida. Steps away she had performed some of the work that had caught my eye on her Instagram feed.

Zaida's textile practice is strongly tied to artisanal techniques to which she has "cultural or familial connection."⁸² Through these connections she strives to convey the possible relationships we forge "with ourselves, our materials, what we create, what we eat, and our environment."⁸³ Her interest in artisanal techniques comes from a childhood immersed amongst women who crafted. Her mom and grandmother, as Zaida recounted in our conversation, did not make crafts for a living or as a profession, but that "at home everything was handmade, there were always projects and there was also always sewing. This was just the way things were done and we weren't taught this way versus that."⁸⁴ The meticulous, everyday sewing inspired Zaida to pursue a career in fashion, which she envisioned as the making of handmade artisanal clothes. With not many opportunities to study fashion on the island, she moved to New York City, where she was slowly confronted with the reality of the fashion industry. Her dissatisfaction quickly had her exploring other ways of making, and she left for Italy to study. Her time in Italy veered her practice as she learned about slow fashion and took in the seemingly slower pace of life in Italy. The strong presence of craft workshops throughout Florence, where she studied, reconnected her with "things handmade and the temporality of slower processes, of smaller scale. Where you could understand how it was made, where the materials were sourced."⁸⁵

Her fashion practice continued morphing as Zaida explored sustainable ways of production in which she could be involved in all aspects of the making of her pieces. Her

⁸² Zaida Goveo Balmaseda, About, <https://zagb.net/about/> accessed 11/13/2020

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Zaida Goveo Balamseda, Interview with author, San Juan, Sept 22, 2021

⁸⁵ Ibid

search was connected to the idealized image of the craftsperson, as someone who makes unique pieces in an intimate and personal way alone in their workshop.⁸⁶ This image, however, doesn't take into consideration the networks in which the craftsperson is enmeshed—who they have learned from, who they collaborate with, who works alongside them. Zaida imagined a practice where she could create personal relationships with her material providers, perhaps even make her own fabrics, and then, after slowly creating one-of-a-kind garments, interact with her customers and make a living doing so. She searched for ways to make this model work, soon realizing the difficulties of the process. With time the explorations took her to a residency at the Textile Art Center (TAC) in NYC, where she found the freedom to break the boundaries of her work. She began incorporating elements of her meditation practice and cultural references to her Cuban-Puerto Rican heritage.⁸⁷ This shift would eventually change not only her work, but also her relationship with the island, as she began the circular migration that would end with her finally returning to Puerto Rico in 2019 after more than a decade away.

The work that attracted me and made me want to delve deeper into Zaida's practice is work that I encountered as I flipped through Instagram in 2018. It was filled with a palette of whites and soft beiges. There were pins and threads on cushions where you could see work in progress. The pieces were lace soles/suns, small rosettes that are made individually and then sewn together into bigger pieces such as bedspreads and curtains. In the ICP lists there are several lace makers included, as mundillo/bobbin lace is considered part of the

⁸⁶ Hughes Jacquet "The Luxury Industry and Excellence in Craftsmanship: Between Animal Laborans and Homo Faber" in *Crafts: Today's Anthology for Tomorrow's Crafts* ed. Fabien Petiot and Chloé Braunstein-Kriegel. Paris 2018 345

⁸⁷*Ibid.* In this 2014 residency she created a piece where she sewed hundreds of beans in concentric circles between layers of white fabric.

traditional artisanal practices still popular today. But soles are not that well known. In another still from her Instagram feed, she was in the process of creating a big piece; around her was a circle of white fabric bundles. In another black and white photo, you see in the distance a circle of people with strips of fabric in their hands, high up in the air as if caught in mid movement while interweaving the fabric with their bodies. The people are in the lawn in between the Escuela de Artes Plásticas and El Morro, near where she and I sat to talk in September 2021.



Here you can see people in the midst of weaving a big sol in Zaida's piece *Soleando Juntos II*. The people have the strip of fabric around their waist and the structure depends on all of them. If one were to decide to move another person would need to tend to the space. In the background is the EAP. @copyrights Zaida Goveo Balmaseda

This piece, *Soleando Juntos II*, was the second in an ongoing series that Zaida began in 2016 as she began to go to the island for more extended periods of time in her quest to learn about lace techniques. She had in 2014 received a grant from Beta Local—the same

art space where Jorge González Santos had done the residency that started his artisanal explorations—on the recommendation of a friend. There she was put in contact with Jorge González Santos. In our conversations she shared with me that “it was like a chain. First I was put in contact with Beta Local. And I arrived there, and they said, oh you should contact this person who is doing research.”⁸⁸ The person was Jorge, who at the time was in the beginning stages of conceiving his project, Escuela de Oficios, and was going around the island learning and establishing relationships with basket weavers and lacemakers. Jorge invited Zaida to go with him to the mountain town of Adjuntas to meet a family of basket weavers. Zaida recalls, “He was very generous and told me—come on, I’m going on this day. And we arrange to meet in the Tren Urbano station. It was Jorge and Nicole Delgado from La Impresora. I said—well I don’t know who they are, I don’t know who I am, so let’s go! We were all in great spirits!”⁸⁹

This first trip turned out to be exciting and would spark new paths for Zaida as well as her work. As she shared,

It was so beautiful to learn together, informally, not like the idea of learning I had. Yes, it was really beautiful. A sharing. And perhaps the reason for getting together is learning but then one learns of life. A multidimensional experience. There’s the trip, and then you arrive. The drive there and the relation between us three in the car. And then another. I don’t know, it’s like points that are added to other points and then another net can emerge. I was like, wow! And after so many years outside it was like finding out other things about this place. It wasn’t the idea I had of Puerto Rico or who I was here before.⁹⁰

The relationship with Beta Local and Jorge led Zaida to a second day of shared learning, this time with lace maker Sandra Rodríguez. She began a relationship with Sandra that has blossomed into a friendship. She felt warmly welcomed, and with her she learned to make

⁸⁸Ibid

⁸⁹Ibid- La Impresora is a small printing press specializing in poetry chapbooks.

⁹⁰Ibid

soles. She then taught sol workshops to others. Meanwhile, her soles grew in size, and she invited people to participate, and the soles broke out of the cushions, the strips of fabrics wove around people's raised arms. *Soleando Juntos* began in 2018, not long after Hurricane Maria. A year later Zaida completed her gradual return to Puerto Rico.

The body of work that Zaida started as she began her return to Puerto Rico not only shifted her work but morphed her ideas of artisanal production. She went from the idealized vision of the sole artisan involved in every aspect to a practice that incorporated collective making and fostered other types of relationships. In her big pieces Zaida manages to integrate various aspects of her everyday life—mediation, slow living, sustainability—and with the reinterpretation of the soles technique she invites others into a relationship of interdependence, where everyone plays a part in sustaining the threads. Through her series *Soleando Juntos* this net she began creating with the learning of artisanal textile knowledges expands and keeps entangling, as it continues interconnecting her with others, including myself.

Another aspect that morphed were her views on what can comprise an educational experience and the importance of the encounters for sharing knowledges. Right next to where Zaida and I sat to talk stands the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico (EAP). The school is part of the ICP and the only art school in the island.⁹¹ Here for the last 55 years, the school has trained countless artists in the fine arts, and it continues to do so. The school doesn't offer graduate degrees and for a long time didn't offer many classes beyond painting, sculpture, and printmaking.⁹² Students and artists who want to

⁹¹ The University of Puerto Rico has an art department in the Faculty of Humanities, but the EAP is the only school focusing solely on art. Neither of them offers graduate degrees.

⁹² This has changed over the years with more conceptual classes, performance classes, and more recently a BA in Fashion Design.

expand their academic knowledge about materiality, about craft knowledges, still have to look elsewhere. This gap in formal academic offerings has allowed for the creation of alternative spaces of learning. Beta Local is one of these spaces while also facilitating the creation of other informal spaces where knowledge is transmitted through collaboration and the learning is as much about the techniques and materials being learned as the ways of sharing knowledge. And about all the other things that are shared alongside the techniques people came to learn about.

The lack of formal programs combined with the continued drastic cuts to public education and the financial situation where many cannot consider studying higher degrees outside the island have made the emergence of these spaces crucial. Education scholar Ivan Illich, who lived for some years in Puerto Rico, talks of learning webs in his book *Deschooling Society*. Although in the book Illich is making the case for the necessity of dismantling the institutional banking education system, some of his observations are pertinent in the case of Puerto Rico, whose school system has been slowly dismantled by the neoliberal policies of the Junta. He states that when people are asked about how they have acquired knowledge, they almost always say it is from other environments, not from formal schooling. “Their knowledge of facts, their understanding of life and work come from friendship or love.”⁹³ Illich states that it is in informal settings—in the street, with friends and peers, through apprenticeship, or in chance encounters—that one really learns. In these settings one learns multiple things through dialogue and the sharing of knowledges. I agree that there is much we learn through informal encounters, but formal academic settings can also be spaces of dialogue and rigor where we learn in

⁹³ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*. PDF 1973. 32

multidimensional ways. There is not one sole way of learning, or one that accommodates everyone's needs. In Puerto Rico the informal spaces spring out of the lack of formal educational institutions and out of the necessity of creating systems where other needs beyond educational ones are met. This experience is as Zaida said, "multidimensional."

For Zaida, Javier, and Jorge, the creation of spaces to learn from each other, to teach, to talk have been essential in the last years. Beyond influencing their artistic work, they have created networks that crisscross and intersect, and, in the process, just like Zaida's slow textile works, open a space of contemplation where collaboration is essential to sustain not only the threads but one another. This serves as an apt metaphor for the uncertain times we are living, the times Puerto Ricans have lived through for decades.

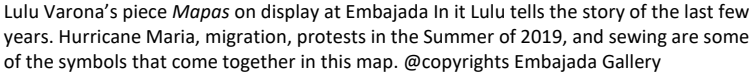


Small sol rosette samples. @copyright Zaida Goveo Balmaseda

Stitches, Pixels, and Recounting Stories

Colorful pixelated scenes in beige textured backgrounds. Strips and scrolls that tell stories. That invite you to imagine, pause, and dream. To remember, to learn more. Taking me to days of video games, days of sitting on those itchy straw rugs in front of the TV. I hear the beeps, pings, and pong sounds of my brother's old Atari console. The rustling of pages of the comics in my oldest cousin's room. Strips and squares full of magical adventures that we couldn't touch with sticky fingers. Colorful threads, tiny crosses, slow meticulous work. Full of reflection, of connections to personal stories and collective histories.

Toward the end of my trip, I went to interview one last artist: textile artist Lulu Varona. A few months before, in the summer of 2021, I had come across a post of some mundillo bookmarks she was selling. Mundillo is bobbin lace, and many sol lace makers also make mundillo. Mundillo is highly sought out for baby christening outfits and sold at fairs. Sometime later, I came across her work once more as she had her first solo exhibition at Embajada Gallery, where Jorge González Santos' straw mats had been on display some years earlier. Her colorful cross stitch works had a whimsical, dream-like quality. They intrigued me. Cross-stitch is not one of those crafts that the ICP considered traditional, but it is quite popular on the island. One piece of Lulu's caught my attention the most; it was a big tapestry-type piece called *Mapas/Maps*. In it I could read the history of the island in the last few years. Planes, protests, and hurricane spirals were among the symbols. As I



López, 53

learning she stated, “There are a few persons who were willing to teach in their house, people who had studied in the States. But the pandemic hit.”⁹⁴



One of Lulu's mundillo pieces in process. She makes bookmarks and strips to fundraise for travel expenses to residencies. Photo was taken by me while visiting her studio in September 2021.

Of all the artists I interviewed, Lulu is still in college finishing an interdisciplinary degree where she is focusing on fine arts and gender studies. This has led her to dive into research of the textile industry in Puerto Rico at the turn of the 20th century. She is particularly fascinated by the labor leaders associated with suffragism and women's rights. Some of the work she has been creating recently are cross-stich pieces telling some of these

⁹⁴ Lulu Varona. Interview with the author. Sept 27, 2021

histories. The quality of the technique allows for her to create graphic novel-style pieces where she explores diverse themes.

When we talked in September of 2021, I didn't understand why she might not have tapped into some of the networks others were creating. Yet as I drove back home, still without power and zero traffic lights working, I thought of my own experience. I left. First to study fashion because at the time the EAP didn't offer it, and later when I became interested in metals I couldn't find where to learn the contemporary approaches I was seeking. This is part of the reality of the educational system in the island, and although informal collaborative spaces are being created, they are not necessarily the right fit for everyone, especially someone seeking to create a foundation to her knowledge and whose interests at the moment are not rooted in Puerto Rican artisanal knowledges. That is not the case with Orfón, Goveo Balmaseda, or González Santos. They have all arrived at these spaces of collaboration with years of experience navigating the creation of their art practices. Their interest in Puerto Rican knowledges has developed at a point in their careers where they merge all they are learning with a myriad of other experiences they bring to the relations they are forging.

Conclusion

The practices of Jorge González Santos, Zaida Goveo Balmaseda, Javier Orfón, and Lulu Varona each present a diverse and unique way of engaging with the intersection of craft and ideas of Puerto Rico. The forging of relationships as Jorge learns different craft knowledges. Javier's deep evolving understanding of the land and its connection to his materials and concepts. Zaida's loose slow weaving of interconnections between people, her changing everyday habits, and her renewed relation to the island. Lulu's meticulous stitches as she explores history and looks for new knowledges. They all present multiple points in the tangle complexities that is Puerto Rico and explore different ways to begin reimagining the futures they would like to inhabit. Their practices bring to mind the concept of the "one that is multiple" from the Santería religion. Mayra Santo-Febres states how the "fluid non-binary nature" of Caribbean culture creates thought and expressions of creativity that move beyond opposites and contradictions to mix, merge and create an array of perspectives, of shades, of rhythms. It creates layers, cacophony, repetitions, and syncretism where reality is "one that is multiple".⁹⁵ This contrasts with the rigidity of the intents at cataloguing and categorizing by the state-led institutions.

I imagine the interwoven mesh of re-existence as a loose fabric that moves fluidly. It unravels in parts and bundles up into knots in others. The mesh is interwoven and strong enough to hold objects, to hold ideas, to hold people. It is porous enough that it allows all the things in it to seep in and to seep out. They are not constraint by the mesh. The artists whose work I have looked closely for this essay are not only part of the mesh but actively create it. The mesh is the way for me to tie the interconnections that I see between their

⁹⁵ University of Maryland Baltimore County. "Mayra Santos Febres". One that is multiple is a concept from Santería religion.

practices and the current and recent history of Puerto Rico. It is an abstract framework while also being the tangible relations that are all points in the network. The net unties and tangles the people, spaces, and institutions in this essay.

These artists present a moment. A moment that might transform into something more defined or it might evaporate as their living environments continue to shift. I see in the different approaches of each one the multiple hybrid complexities that are part of the island. Their practices come with the problematic dynamics that are part of the colonial structures in which we are all embedded. The unequal power hierarchies of relationships, of ideas learned through educational and popular knowledge are present but with their work they open the spaces necessary to begin reflecting and reimagining different collective narratives.

Many of the questionings and reflections these four artists explore are being tackled by other fields in Puerto Rico, with many poets, writers, musicians, other artists, and scholars creating networks that intersect. While these other fields present other interesting ways to engage in these conversations it is craft that allows me to think of the connections between the present situation, the state-led projects of modernization of the 1950s, and the craft pieces that spark my interest. Craft knowledges with its own fluid and multiple possible definitions provides diverse ways of thinking and interacting with our present. It also opens space to connect and imagine new ways of relating to things, to materials, to the environment, and to each other. This takes me to see parallels between the craft field, Caribbean thought, decoloniality, and the work of these artists. The intersections of this fields provides a critical lens that can bring new ways of looking at present situations not only in the Puerto Rican context but beyond.

Through their practices these artists are imagining ways to re-exist. Re-existence is in the creation of spaces where they can create, collaborate and through their works invite others to experience the Puerto Rico they know pulsates in the cracks. There where the oppression of the colonial situation, where the precarity of the crisis upon crisis is held back and they can explore the multiplicities that are being Puerto Rican, the beauty that is Puerto Rico, and the potential that is there. In the creation of decolonial spaces of shared knowledges where they reinterpret and reimagining the craft knowledges they are learning; they don't come with fixed clear views of what is possible. They are exploring. All of them with their practices hope to invite others into experiencing the Puerto Rico they see, the one they feel and sometimes inhabit. And hopefully in that shared view more threads are added to the net of shared knowledges. As its loose multiple threads keep tangling and untangling in an ongoing unlearning to learn what Puerto Rico can be, they imagine the multiple versions of the island that could cohabit to recreate the archipelago.

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