

Archipelagic Cosmovision:
Exploring transoceanic connections against colonialism

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Abstract

This written thesis addresses a body of art work in which, through the Book Arts field, I explore the vulnerability and displacement of Puerto Ricans. I discuss the socio-political context in which Puerto Ricans' migrations to the United States happen. By describing the geographic, diasporic, and cultural particularities of archipelagic relationships, I explain the importance of liminality and fragmentation in my studio practice. I discuss the use of techniques such as experimental letterpress processes, papermaking, installation art, and the pertinence of sand, paper, tarp, and fabric as materials choices, and their relationship to the visual content and poetic treatment of ideas in my thesis work. I contextualize my work in relation to artists Joiri Minaya, Zilia Sánchez, Pepón Osorio and poet Raquel Salas Rivera. The ideas explored throughout this paper converse with scholars Marta Aponte Alsina, Ed Morales and Sandra Ruiz.

“So here we were, vulnerable in our beautiful brown bodies, at the intersection of mainland and island, of diaspora and isleñidad, and of what is perhaps the ruling dialectic of the late-capitalist world system, debt and crisis.”

—Ed Morales

“Liquidez no tanto en el sentido de Bauman cuando se refiere a la incertidumbre de las sociedades contemporáneas, marcadas por la desaparición o debilitamiento de estructuras e instituciones, sino como arsenal de tácticas ancestrales de supervivencia: mimetismo, astucia, maleabilidad y esa Resistencia al abuso que también arrastran los ríos subterráneos.”

—Marta Aponte Alsina

A la amora y a la mar.
Gracias al perreo y al pitorro.

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Introduction

An island is by definition a piece of land surrounded by water. There are several kinds of islands depending on their size and geographic qualities. However, the word ‘island’ is often thought of as descriptive of a small place. They are ultimately, named in comparison to other pieces of land and imagined as limited by water, sometimes also perceived as far away from continental nations. Considering all this, the image that comes to mind with the word ‘archipelago’ may be an idyllic chain of islands within the scope of the human eye. You may have seen one in a vacation brochure. This is no coincidence; it is the hegemonic exoticizing idea that supports the colonization and exploitation of islands around the globe. I grew up in the central area of an island. I used to see the ocean once a year. I did not see any other islands until I moved to the coast for college and had access to other coastal areas of Puerto Rico.

I am one in the statistics of migrations from Puerto Rico to the United States. I anchor my artistic practice in the philosophy of narrating my personal story as means of empowerment. The body of work that I will discuss in this paper is informed by my history as a subject from a colonized island. Here I will frame it in conversation with the work of scholars, artists and writers who approach related perspectives from several disciplines such as Latinx Studies, Caribbean Studies, Literature, and Journalism.

I began to study the Puerto Rican diaspora once I became part of it. As soon as I arrived in Philadelphia I became interested in how the migration to the United States affects the lives of millions of Puerto Ricans living in exile and those who are still in the islands. I found myself seeking connections between my experiences and those of past and present generations of Ricans who consider leaving the islands indefinitely, Ricans living in the States, Ricans who had been able to return to PR, and Ricans who never left.

121 years and counting

There are innumerable factors behind diasporic scenarios and the decision to migrate. The ones addressed here occur in the context of a complicated 121 year relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. The US military forces invaded the islands during the Spanish-American War in 1898, which lead to PR becoming an “unincorporated territory” after *Downes v. Bidwell*¹ in 1901. After almost 20 years of Americanization measures², the first significant demographic changes in the islands and migrations to New York City started to happen. Then, the Jones Act of 1917 conferred all Puerto Ricans US citizenship. The current circular migrations I reference in the archipelagic imagery of my work are, to some extent, eased by citizenship, but problematically urged by the history I will summarize now.

The mistreatment of Puerto Ricans that unraveled in the century after the Jones Act proved that it offered no benefit for the people inhabiting those lands, but instead, “its geographic location... would provide the United States with a stronghold on the easternmost tip of the Caribbean archipelago” (Morales, “Fantasy Island” 22), in addition to it being a thriving commercial destiny for every other colonizer since 1493. What this second-class citizenship did allow was a welcoming financial paradise to be assembled by several acts throughout the rest of 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st. This was possible because “the Jones Act forbid Puerto Rico from allowing any commercial ships to dock at its ports that were not constructed in the United States and flying the US flag. All imports to the United States from

¹ One of the Insular Cases, which were held by the US Supreme Court discussing the status of the territories acquired during the Spanish–American War.

² The US government established the Public School System and the University of Puerto Rico, imparting all English classes, and attempting to spread American culture through textbooks that censored the pre-existing sociocultural realities of PR.

Puerto Rico became duty-free, which benefited American consumers” (30). This is still in force today.

Between the decades of 1920 to 1940, PR’s economy shifted from family-owned agricultural based industry to export-production factories. Along with that, the rapid urbanization of several areas of the islands triggered local migrations to the metropolitan area, which by the mid 1940’s escalated to what is considered the first large migration of Puerto Ricans to the US. Eventually, PR became a fiscal paradise for foreign corporations including the pharmaceutical, manufacturing, and tourism industries. A set of industrial incentives called Operation Bootstrap came into effect in 1947, eliminating corporate tax. In 1952, the *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico*³ was established. Although the Constitution of Puerto Rico was created by Puerto Rican politicians, it was subject to the approval of the US Congress. In terms of autonomy, similarly to the case of the states, federal law supersedes the Constitution of Puerto Rico. The ELA did not change the “unincorporated territory” status of the island, but created an apparent sense of sovereignty with the requirement of local elections every 4 years. By then, PR had a whole colonial government system in operation, and its “manufacturing and tourist/service economy” (50) only grew during the second half of the 20th century. Present day consequences of these events in the conception of the Puerto Rican subject are addressed from a personal perspective in my book *Something about* to be discussed later.

Repressed uprisings, successive bipartisan politics, and inconsequential status referendums are a quick summary of the political scenario that led into the 21st century. During this period, the local government jeopardized the island’s capital by borrowing from hedge funds. At the same time, additional incentives were provided to foreign investors. This

³ Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (from now on referred to as ELA).

corruption was enabled by the Jones Act, because in the long term, it provided a “triple-tax exemption from the sale of government bonds that helped create the current debt crisis” (30). All of this came to light with the recession of 2008. In the midst of delaying a bankruptcy declaration, Acts 20 and 22 were passed in 2012. Act 20 is a tax incentive for foreign companies to establish or expand exportations from the island, while Act 22 is a total tax exemption for new residents intended to result in real estate investments and injections in the banking sector, among other sectors.

In 2015 it was revealed that the Puerto Rican government has a debt for which it does not have sufficient funds to repay. After the “unpayable” nature of the \$72 million debt was made public, in 2016 the Congress enacted PROMESA⁴. It created the Oversight Board which, in order to guarantee that the debt is repaid, introduced austerity measures such as federal funding cuts and budget reductions for all departments. All of this so far has resulted in the closings of schools and health centers, and the increase of unemployment and poverty rates. The debt has not been audited, but the people of PR, who, according to the US Census Bureau, 44.9 percent of whom lives under the poverty level, carry the burden of repaying it.

The implementation of the 2016 austerity measures and foreign investments accelerated displacement and migration to the States because the austere conditions in the islands became unlivable for many, and the future does not seem promising either. Migrations from PR to the US had already expanded to all states although they are still highly concentrated in the East Coast. A constant stream of migrations became part of most, if not all, Puerto Rican family histories.

When Hurricanes Irma and María hit the islands in 2017, the climate disaster only uncovered the

⁴ Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. It established an Oversight Board which purpose is to supervise the government of PR in managing the public finances; they approve the fiscal plans of every government department, and also have duties on debt restructuring and issuance.

corrupt governmental system and poor infrastructural conditions in which Puerto Ricans had been living for decades. As I will expand on later in this paper, in my book *Remains* I explore the infrastructural decay alongside the coastal erosion in Loíza⁵; both occur framed within this context. A significant migration to the southeastern states was noted right after the emergency, leaving many without a roof over their heads, and susceptible for months without access to electric power, water, health services, and essential needs. The materiality of the blue tarp roofs plays a crucial role in my book *Remains*, as it does in the displacement of thousands. According to Data USA, “between 2017 and 2018 the population of Puerto Rico declined from 3.34M to 3.2M”. Nevertheless, it is still challenging to accurately document, as in the era of professional services, freelancing and unstable employment, many are living and working between PR and the States.

As mentioned before, each individual or household has its own reasons and experiences regarding diaspora. Everybody has a different relationship to home. During all these years of coloniality, diverse and rich cultural expressions came to be. Music, language, literature, and every other aspect of culture and identity intersected politics, whether these were the politics in effect or the resistance movements. My work is informed by my own relationship to this intersection and my goal to understand its potential collective outcome as an archipelagic culture.

The gaze of the viewer

During my graduate studies, I am mostly immersed in a white American environment. In this marginal experience, I questioned where the huge Philly Rican⁶ community was that I had expected to encounter in Philadelphia. Around 15% of the population in Philadelphia is Hispanic, and more than 50% of those are Puerto Ricans. According to a census issued in 2016

⁵ Coastal town located in the north of Puerto Rico.

⁶ The term refers to members of the Puerto Rican diaspora living in Philadelphia, or their descendants.

by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies of Hunter College, only around 16% of the over 5 million Puerto Ricans in the US complete a higher education degree. Although Philadelphia is considered a sanctuary city, immigrant communities are highly segregated to the geographical and social peripheries. Based on these findings, I published a one page book with similar data written in Spanish. It included a poster on the other side featuring a phrase in English, but written with accents (see fig. 1). It was printed in offset lithography, and included letterpress printed accented metal type as decorative elements throughout the page. Some viewers pointedly dismissed the booklet when they realized it was written in Spanish; unaware that the big typeface poster featured the title: *you ignore it if you don't understand it*. The project was then spread through several library collections in the city as giveaway booklets, with the hope to spark some consciousness or curiosity regarding the topic.

Before migrating to the US, I wrote poetry, predominantly in Spanish. Part of my diasporic experience has been to exercise the power which bilingualism can hold, even when English is an imposed language on all Puerto Ricans. Through the above-mentioned offset project, I learned that using both languages, or Spanglish, was not only a portrayal of Puerto Rican experiences, but a tool to reveal and/or conceal information, to provoke, to challenge the viewers.

When I perform my bilingual skills in the written aspects of my art, “I’m affirming my own existence while at the same time demystifying the mainstream, distancing myself from the monocultural other” (Morales, “Living in Spanglish” 7). I am empowered when I navigate an English dominant culture by flowing outside and inside of it through language. Because “the prevailing discourse identifies *us* (and others) as the other” (7), these experiences contextualize my home country’s historical colonial reality and my experience as part of the Puerto Rican

diaspora. To these means, my work is informed by Ed Morales' concept of the Spanglish phenomenon, which he defines literally as "a survival mechanism, a way of importing the tongue of the adopted country while retaining the mindset of the old one" (97). My writing is also influenced by poets who work bilingually, such as Pedro Pietri, Urayoán Noel and Raquel Salas Rivera. Their poetry stretches monolingual linguistics and phonetics by either mixing Spanish and English, or by publishing their texts in both languages.

Much of my thesis work includes bilingual text. In this way, my work is in dialogue with Raquel Salas Rivera's. His poetry is mostly published in Spanish alongside English; although these are self-translations, Salas considers both equal and original elements of the work. One of his most recent books *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* is written using both languages without translating. The writing goes back and forth between languages in order to perform a different voice and conceal information from monolingual readers. According to Kaja Rae Lucas, regarding Salas' book "the shift from English to Spanish to create balance — a balance of the worlds, a balance of the lived experience." In my work I alternate between the languages without translation as a means to reveal and conceal information. I ultimately disrupt the monolingual readers' binary understanding of the text while alluding to the fluid performance of Puerto Rican diaspora's language.

Something about is a pamphlet in which I include a poem that alternates between Spanish and English. The text is letterpress printed on both sides of translucent tissue paper. Some lines in the stanzas are printed on the back side of the paper and appear reversed when read from the other sides, forcing the reader to turn the page repeatedly in order to read them all (see fig. 2). This mirrors the action of moving between languages, but also between places and cultures, and its relation to the liminality of migratory experiences. The poem addresses ideas of being defined

by the other, therefore isolated under a colonial understanding of self. In the lines “We are told to— / ahogamos tus planes / Somos las tierras que somos / Nuestra”, I portray resistance to being told what to do, what to be or where to stay, as in an effort to reclaim ownership of land. This speaks to the lack of control that PR has over its frontiers and ports. The lines “fuimos arena mañana / scattered / present at any front / en cada una de tus pesadillas” establish the intertidal zone and the archipelagic qualities as metaphor for the unstable situation a diaspora can be, while defying the colonizer.

I am interested in printing processes that allow for fluid imagery to be created. In *Something about* I combine experimental letterpress processes such as pressure printing and sandragraph to create textured imagery of abstracted aerial views of reefs and intertidal zones in the islands. I am interested in working with materials that relate to the conditions and place my work addresses. On one hand, pressure printing provides a wide range of possibilities for manipulating ink consistency, overprinting, and platemaking. It allows me to prepare the plates with easily attainable, found, or used materials such as cotton, sand and paper cut-outs.⁷ By overprinting multiple layers of pressure prints I create textured imagery resembling an atmospheric sense of the light aquamarine views of the reefs and intertidal zones of the islands of PR. On the other hand, the sandragraph plates can also be prepared with any textured material or object that can be flattened to some extent. I prepare the sandragraph plates with sand because it allows me greater control of the ink and results in a tangible impression of the sand grains.

The visual texture of the imagery in combination with the tactile quality of the sandragraph prints are then enhanced by the translucency and thinness of the tissue paper on which they are printed. In this way the book requires delicacy and intimacy from the viewer in its

⁷ This speaks to the scarce conditions in which artists in Puerto Rico work.

material handling as in the conceptual matter. Utilizing the closeness of the book media I am interested in presenting a personal story that deals with vulnerability and resilience.

I utilize bilingualism and materiality in this book to activate the viewers' interaction with the media, the content and to challenge their gaze. Joiri Minaya's work addresses the otherness experienced by immigrants of color in the global North and "the performativity of the tropical identity as product" (Minaya). Her interdisciplinary work teases the gaze of those viewers who other her (see fig 3). Her work pretends to fulfill their gaze expectations in order to sabotage them by regaining agency. My pamphlet *Something about* is a 7 1/4" x 4" book which aims to attract the gaze of the viewer to Spanish and English combined text and intertidal textural imagery. Thus, some viewers will have to negotiate their privileged understanding in order to engage with it. I align my intentions with Minaya's in stressing the quandary of "how one day we will be able to gauge when we have achieved that crucial, intertwined change in cultural awareness and socio-cultural status: when an immigrant doesn't have to do this work anymore" (Rodney).

In the pamphlet I used light blue-green to create the atmospheric sense, and browns for the text and the depth of the textures. I use a consistent palette throughout the body of thesis work. The use of a cream to brown palette suggests sand and land, whereas the blue palette not only is associated with the ocean, but also with the triangle in the Puerto Rican flag, and the blue tarp that is roof to thousands of houses in the islands after the 2017 hurricanes.

PR houses a variety of blue tonalities throughout its coasts. The Caribbean Sea coasts located in the southern areas are most likely to showcase lighter blue and blue-green tonalities due to warmer currents that provoke a higher presence of coral bleaching. Whereas in the

Northwest area of the island is located the second deepest trench in the globe, therefore it exhibits darker tones of blue.

The triangle in the Puerto Rican flag is surrounded by a long-time controversy that questions which of three tonalities of blue is the appropriate one (see fig. 4). Debates circle around *azul celeste* (sky blue), *azul turquí* (royal blue) and navy blue. Historically, the flag was designed during the late 19th century by pro-independence exiles in New York who were in close contact with Cuban patriots. It was supposedly conceived as a color inversion of the Cuban flag, reflecting the efforts to strengthen relationships among the Caribbean Antilles. According to this, the original blue should have been *azul turquí*, but there are no written sources to confirm it and the photographs are monochromatic.

Any attempt to show the flag was illegal until 1952, when it became the official emblem of the ELA. In 1968, when the pro-statehood party first won the elections in the island, they changed the triangle of the flag to the navy blue of the US flag. Since then, the popular controversy about the blue of the flag has persevered and polarized. Each time the party sympathizer of the status-quo wins the elections, they change the flag in the official buildings to one with a royal blue tone. In my installation *Ser isla* I reference the transoceanic migrations happening to the northern waters with a darker tone of blue, which also nods to the navy blue of the flag.

Independents are affiliated with an *azul celeste* triangle in the flag, reclaiming the symbolism of liberty associated with the blue of a previous flag that was used in the *Grito de Lares*, a significant uprising documented in PR back in 1868, when a Republic of Puerto Rico was briefly declared. When I create imagery alluding to an intertidal landscape I mostly think about the *azul celeste*, the light blue I can see standing by the shore at the beach I have most

frequented since I can remember. It is a gradient that merges the oceanic horizon with the sky. Additionally, it merges with the symbolism of my political ideologies regarding my home country. These are the blues that inspired *Something about*.

Archipelagos: expansive connections

Caribbean Studies scholar and writer Marta Aponte, has written about the relation of the islander to the island. Within the context of the Caribbean archipelago, all nations share a history of colonization. Even so, each individual may experience a different and/or ambivalent relationship to their land. Aponte says: “the island and its marine horizon, which draws an invisible border, propose a constant invitation to escape. However, it could also consider the opposite. The small island close to our human scale, it exerts an endearing impulse to stay” (38). Her words informed my ideas for *Something about*, but also for the whole body of work of this thesis.

Aponte proposes connections, diversity, and horizontality as means of subverting the colonized cultural canon. She references the work of Puerto Rican writers in relation to the work of other Caribbean thinkers and the diasporas. By doing so, Aponte acknowledges particularities and commonalities among the archipelagic experiences, depending on where their work comes from. These ideas promote fair understanding of our shared colonial contexts, which allows for new ways of thinking about our cultural production. Throughout my work, I use archipelagos as signifiers for the people who call them home. I am interested in the relations developed among these pieces of lands scattered across water bodies; in the literal and metaphorical sense, thinking about how moving waters and peoples connect them. In the print *connections or disruptions* I explored the ideas of archipelagic relations specifically. The 22” x 30” etching print features an archipelago made with several shaped copper plates (see fig. 5). One print of each plate was

made in blue on white paper, while multiple were printed white on white mulberry paper and then collaged into the final piece.

“Ideological and demographic dispersion seems to be the sign of the present” (26), declares Aponte about contemporary migrations in the archipelago. Despite the negative tone that could be attributed to “ideological dispersion”, she urges us to remember that uproot migrations in the Caribbean context could also count “as a tradition”. Following the idea of dispersion of land in a map when looking at an archipelago, I arranged the island-shaped blue prints dispersed throughout the paper. These form a contrast against the white paper and seem to be the only image when seen from distance. As the viewer looks closely, the overlaid white collages become noticeable, providing depth and movement to the image. In lower sea level areas, like keys, it becomes evident that under the water all land is connected. In a similar way I envision the constant migrations occurring between PR and the US ambiguously connecting or disrupting a cultural flow that is at the intersection of geography, politics and identities.

Latinx Studies scholar Sandra Ruiz names Puerto Rican subjectivity as *Ricanness*, and discusses how it is “marked by a common ongoing endurance and death” (2). Via anticolonial and postcolonial theory, philosophy and other study fields, she narrates how the Rican body endures colonialism through performance aesthetics in nonlinear temporalities. At the core of her arguments lies duality between excess time and no time, life and death, violence and aesthetics, all of which are informed by a subjectivity that does not respond solely to a geographic space rather to its colonial history. The examples she uses either happened or were done by artists/activists at the intersection of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Multiple cultural expressions in disciplines such as music, literature and arts in general result from these conditions. Another Latinx Studies scholar, Juan Flores, wrote about cultural remittances rather than economic

remittances, referring to the culture that migrants have created and imported/exported when circular migration happens between their home and host countries. The fluid and ever transforming ways of living both scholars refer to resonate with my own migration experience and inform my thesis work.

To me cultural remittances are synonymous with cultural connections, as those values do not stay “back home”, they are constantly fed by the intersection of dominant and non-dominant cultures. Being displaced into the conjuncture of cultures, in my experience, brings a sense of isolation. Considering the particular political context of PR, I compare the Puerto Rican subject to the idea of island, similar to examples found in literature, performance and visual arts. Cuban artist Zilia Sánchez has lived in PR for over 40 years after living in New York during the 1960’s. She calls herself ‘an island’ and to some extent uses islands as metaphors for bodies/subjects in her work. Her pieces blur the line between paintings and sculpture while they reference the female body through minimalist topologies (see fig 6). In my installation *Ser isla* I suggest islands through paper sculptures that were originally casted as body parts. The process involved making imprints with my own body on a beach in PR, then pouring recycled pulp into those. For me it was important to utilize sand from home, but the idea was transformed as technical challenges arose. Due to time limitation the paper pieces were not completely dry when removed from site, and during shipping lost the volume casted at the beach. Nonetheless, the textured materiality of the pieces speaks about place and communicates an experience foreign to the gallery space.

When abstracting forms, Zilia Sánchez substitutes embodied spaces by minimal formal qualities on her topological and erotic sculpture/paintings. Her work is informed by her experiences as islander, exile, lesbian and the spaces she inhabited. It suggests forms, islands or

female body parts, and how all of these can relate to each other. According to Acevedo-Yates “the substitution occurs on the level of the signifier, which shifts and changes according to the viewer’s subjective positioning, thereby destabilizing fixed meaning and challenging binary positions” (62). Throughout this body of work I take into consideration the sensual experience of the viewer; from the texture of the prints on paper to the multiple stimuli that can be achieved through the materials that make up the work.

Communicating vulnerability and displacement

I am interested in disrupting the pleasing experience that a viewer might expect from Book Arts renditions by utilizing installation art. I agree with Pepón Osorio’s words after his first major installation piece at the Whitney Museum Biennial in 1993: “the experience implicit in museum and gallery exhibition has not been one to which Puerto Rican people have been historically welcomed, especially for the contextualization of their culture” (González 3). With this in mind I brought sand from PR to be spread on the gallery floor. In this way I suggest colonialism, displacement, and impermanence of the original place of the object/material. The installation includes a sound piece in which two other Puerto Ricans and myself recite my poem, *Ser isla*. It contains a non-linear narrative without sentence structures, going back and forth between Spanish and English, with the multiple voices overlaid. By these means I connect my voice to other voices metaphorically enunciating Puerto Rican experiences of resistance and agency beyond geographical place.

The title of the poem and installation ‘*Ser isla*’ or ‘to be an island’ inevitably speaks to what defines those pieces of land: water. I insist in the fluidity of water as metaphor of the displacement and migrations resulting from the vulnerable context of many Puerto Ricans. I propose the transoceanic movement of these objects/subjects as potential resistance vehicle. In

this piece, sound and gravity grant agency to the islands, that is to say that the viewer is confronted with an inversed perspective in which islands are above and suggest that these grow to occupying the space (see fig. 7). The installation visually consists of several pieces of fabric forms with loose pulp and the paper pieces mentioned above attached to them, hanging in the gallery space. Fabric is a malleable material that allows for a sense of movement and weight to be incorporated into the work. I choose a deep blue fabric that has a wrinkle pattern and is reflective of light to reference water qualities. On the floor underneath the forms is sand. Viewers interact with sound, light in the room and its reflection in the fabric, and the visual and tactile components of the piece in the space (see fig. 8). The installation provides room for individual interpretations of the viewer's experience that I hope can result in a conversation with the associations the piece stimulates.

Color and texture are as essential to that piece as they are on the last one I will discuss here. The blue tarps that suddenly proliferated in the domestic landscape of most Puerto Ricans on roofs after the hurricane in 2017 are a very specific tone of blue that could be seen in the daily commute or from a plane while leaving the island or traveling back. They are still the roof of thousands. Climate catastrophe is the latest catalyst for massive emigrations of Puerto Ricans. In the book *Remains* I appeal to the tactile and auditory senses of the viewers, through the creation of imagery with materials related to the erosion of coasts in the archipelago. This experiential book addresses the long-term impact of coastal erosion in the residential infrastructure of beachfront communities that were also devastated by major hurricanes. It mainly suggests associations through smashed, pulverized cement and remnant pieces of blue tarp.

The process of making the book involved the destruction of the materials. The exercise of destroying the tarp reiterated the perishable quality of these temporary roofs that more than two

years after are still there in poor condition. I treat the material with the roughness of rocks, the pressure of sand, the heat of an iron and I un-weave them by hand. I additionally collected pieces of cement from the streets of Kensington⁸ and smashed them with a hammer. The remains are laminated between handmade abaca paper (see fig. 9). This adds heaviness and thus vulnerability to the pages of the book. The different sizes of cement and the unique arrangement of these throughout the spreads provide rich textures.

I am interested in the tactility of paper when used as material rather than just substrate, I use textured organic looking paper to provide a rich experience to the viewer. Most of the pages cast the presence of different pieces of cement, providing a varied tactile experience. A few pages of the book have the thin and smooth quality of overbeaten abaca sheets and some contain pockets of pulverized cement that when the pages are turned (see fig. 10), make a sizzling sound along with the crackle of the abaca paper in which it is laminated. In this book I also explore the potential of the translucency of the paper by overlaying several images created by the interaction of tarp, cement and pulp painting. The pulp painted areas are layered among themselves, on top or behind the cement and/or tarp. This book is meant to evoke impermanence, vulnerability and fragmentation inspired by the specific context of coastal erosion in Loíza, but that echoes similar issues elsewhere.

Remains is informed by ecological concerns, as well as the effects of it in society's material infrastructure and the lives of communities at risk. I consider this piece to be the microcosm of all my thesis work. It embodies the intersection of my concerns and the content that inform my work.

⁸ A predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood in Philadelphia.

Conclusion

I return to Ruiz's ideas about the Puerto Rican subject, and its definition dictated by endurance and death. When she speaks about timeless endurance, besides the philosophical interpretation, what comes to mind is the collective history of Puerto Ricans. She speaks about "the act of colonialism itself, which is indeed never-ending" (Ruiz 11). My work sits in the idea that the mere existence of a Puerto Rican subject is anticolonial. Being a colony for over five thousand years means that Puerto Ricans endure violence and transculturation despite the tremendous mix of cultural heritages that we perform. Institutionalized colonialism operates as a system that supports the profit of neoliberal investors over the lives of communities at risk. Every intrusion, systemic or internalized, attempts to erase or at least turn the Puerto Rican subject into 'other'. Whereas archipelagos are hegemonically conceived as desirable, their natives are treated as disposable. Hand in hand with displacement occurs circular migration for us, second class American citizens. Yet Puerto Rican culture flows, adapts, reclaims, resists. I am not romanticizing migrations, but instead I extend an invitation to consider the ambiguities of culture as an ongoing expression of history in a colonial society.

Archeology tells us that in the pre-Columbian Caribbean there were relations among communities from all over the archipelago to the continent that were essential to the islanders' life-style. They refer to common mobility routes, and exchange of goods and ideas. The aesthetic exploration I presented here exhibits the ambiguous transoceanic connections that occur in the cultural context of PR since its colonial relation to the US. I understand that by weaving my work with the work of others through our shared history and context, I portray the expansive connections between Puerto Rico's islands and its diasporic peoples.

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Figures List



Figure 1. *you ignore it if you don't understand it*, 2019



Figure 2. *Something about (spread)*, 2019



Figure 3. Joiri Minaya, *The Cloaking of the statues of Ponce de Leon and at the Torch of Friendship and Christopher Columbus behind the Bayfront Park Amphitheater*, 2019. (Photo by Zachary Balber for Hyperallergic)



Figure 4. Puerto Rican flag with the three controversial blue tones from left to right: *azul celeste* (sky blue), *azul turquí* (royal blue), navy blue.



Figure 5. *connections or disruptions*, 2019



Figure 6. Zilia Sánchez, *Troyanas*, 1984. (Photo by Ike Edeani for The New York Times)



Figure 7. *Ser isla* (forms detail), 2020

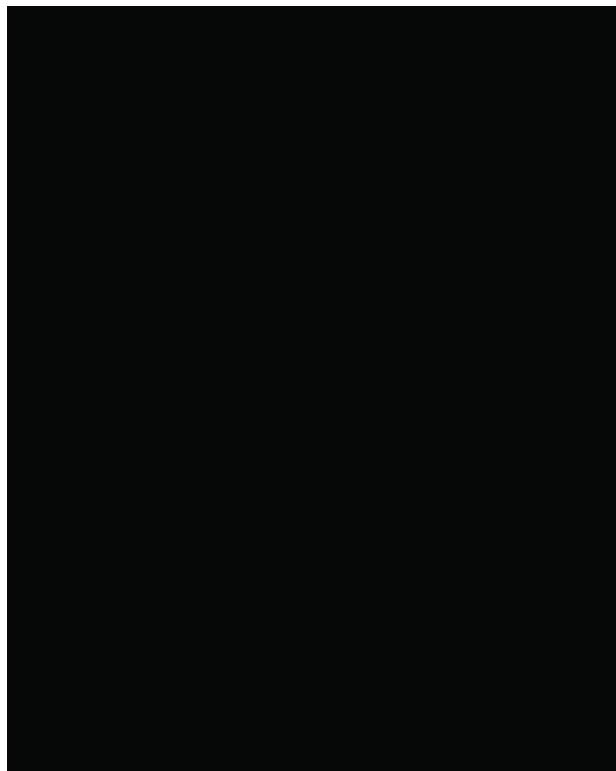


Figure 8. *Ser isla* (room view), 2020



Figure 9. *Remains* (spread), 2020



Figure 10. *Remains* (detail), 2020