

REMEMBERING THE ISLAND OF ENCHANTMENT

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Abstract

“Remembering the Island of Enchantment” examines the curatorial representation of Puerto Rico as an idyllic paradise in post-Hurricane María (2017) exhibitions across the archipelago and U.S. diaspora. Grounded in Juan Flores’ “state of enchantment” concept, this study delves into memory construction within museum exhibitions at San Juan, New York City, and Chicago. Comprising three chapters, it addresses challenges faced by Puerto Ricans, establishes the theoretical foundation of the “state of enchantment,” and presents case studies analyzing curators’ depictions of the archipelago’s imagery. Emphasizing Puerto Rican resilience amidst economic and colonial challenges, this paper reveals the symbolic use of green and blue hues representing the archipelago, contributing to narratives of memory, identity, and diasporic belonging. The study also explores challenges to paradisiacal portrayals through the repurposing of tourism images and extends beyond visual art by intertwining historical narratives, activism, and cultural symbols to create a compelling state of enchantment.

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Dedicated to
the De Jesús family,
los de aquí y los de allá
and to abuelito Conce,
may your parrandas and stories never die.

Introduction

*Allá abajo en el hueco, en el boquete
Nacen flores por ramillete'
Casitas de colores con la ventana abierta
Vecinas de la playa, puerta con puerta
Aquí yo tengo de to' no me falta na',
tengo la noche que me sirve de sábana
Tengo los mejores paisajes del cielo
Tengo una neverita repleta de cerveza con hielo.¹*

The imagery of Puerto Rico as a paradise, as “one of the best landscapes of the sky,” has been the theme of numerous tourism advertisements, creative literature, songs, and works of visual arts.² In line with this perception, scholar Juan Flores introduced the concept “state of enchantment” in his work “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao’: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.” found in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (1993). This research paper delves into the construction and influence of memory and state of enchantment theory within art museum exhibitions in three study cases from the cities San Juan, New York City, and Chicago. The principal research question explores: After the passing of Hurricane María in 2017, how do curators visually depict the imagery of Puerto Rico as an idyllic paradise through Puerto Rican art by artists from both the archipelago and diaspora?

It is crucial to recognize that as the author, I approach this topic from the perspective of a Puerto Rican art historian and museum worker residing in NYC. With a commitment to embrace criticism and nuanced forms of remembering and re-telling, this paper aims to historicize and legitimize the identity and memory of Puerto Rican people, a minority in U.S. history and visual

¹ Excerpt of Calle 13 ft. Rubén Blades, La Chilinga, “La Perla”, track 7 on *Los de atrás vienen conmigo*, Sony BMG, 2009. Spanish for “Down there in the hollow, in the hole, in the gap, flowers are born in bunches. Colored house with open window, Neighbors on the beach door to door, Here I have everything, I don't lack anything, I have the night that serves me as a blanket, I have the best landscapes in the sky, I've got a cooler full of beer on ice.” Translated by author.

² Calle 13 ft. Rubén Blades, La Chilinga, “La Perla”, track 7 on *Los de atrás vienen conmigo*, Sony BMG, 2009.

arts, often subjected to tokenization.³ Organized into three chapters, this paper includes a historical and artistic discussion of the first two decades of the millennium in Puerto Rico, an analysis of the “state of enchantment” theory and, lastly, a series of three case studies of exhibitions through a curatorial lens.

The moniker of “island of enchantment,” when referring to Puerto Rico as a nation, is politically and geographically incorrect. The archipelago is comprised of the so-called main island and smaller ones like Vieques, Culebra, and Mona. Titling this research using a biased term was a conscious and purposeful decision for emphasizing historical advertising and branding as well as providing a linguistic parallel with the term “state of enchantment.” Therefore, the term used when referring to the nation will be archipelago.

“Chapter 1: Puerto Rican Background: Archipelago & Diaspora in the U.S.” explores the challenges faced by Puerto Ricans, pre- and post-Hurricane María, revealing economic stagnation, colonial ties, and corruption. PROMESA and “La Junta” fiscal control board amplify external control, while scholars like Marina Reyes Franco and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones provide generative perspectives. The first chapter highlights Puerto Rican resilience, exemplified in the #RickyRenuncia protests, and a lasting state of crisis beyond physical devastation. The Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States, particularly in cities like NYC and Chicago, emerges as a powerful force in addressing critical issues. Visual artists produce expressions of socio-political landscapes, and cultural institutions like El Museo del Barrio play pivotal roles in preserving identity. The chapter's purpose is acknowledging the intricate dynamics of cultural authenticity

³ Understanding Puerto Rican subjects as part of the discourse of U.S. subjects requires the recognition of the political and historical colonial status of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory of the United States.

within the diaspora, portraying it as a vibrant and evolving extension of the “nation on the move.”⁴

Building on Flores’ concept, “Chapter 2: State of Enchantment Theory” establishes the theoretical foundation of this study. It draws on Stuart Hall’s insights on cultural identity and diaspora, Wanda Ramos Baquero’s exploration of (re)inventing memory, and Aleida Assmann’s study of monumental memories. By translating Flores’ term from creative literature to curatorial practice, this chapter aims to analyze how the “state of enchantment” manifests in visual art discourses.

“Chapter 3: Iconographical Case Studies,” offers a deeper understanding of how curators from Puerto Rico and diaspora engage with the imagery of the archipelago as a paradise and how these representations evolved in the aftermath of events like Hurricane María, specifically conducting a curatorial and iconographical analysis of around two artworks from: “No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María” curated by Marcela Guerrero at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC (November 23, 2022 - April 23, 2023); “Entre horizontes: Art and Activism Between Chicago and Puerto Rico,” curated by Carla Acevedo-Yates at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Chicago (April 19, 2023 - May 05, 2024), and “Arrivals and Departures: Migration Experiences in Contemporary Puerto Rican Art” curated by Laura Bravo López at the Museum of History, Anthropology and Art (MHAA), University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus (UPRRP), San Juan (February – September 2017, December 2017 - 2018).

⁴ Jorge Duany. “Introduction,” *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2002, p. 1-11.

Chapter 1: Puerto Rican Background

Archipelago

Puerto Rico's economic and social challenges predate the catastrophic Hurricane María on September 20, 2017. The archipelago grappled with a myriad of issues including a stagnant economy, a colonial status under the United States, and pervasive corruption. A tax provision, which expired in 2006, triggered an economic decline leading to a substantial governmental bond debt. Austerity measures enforced included massive layoffs and school closures. In 2016, the U.S. Congress enacted PROMESA, a law establishing a fiscal control board known as "La Junta" with overly extensive powers over Puerto Rico's finances and governmental decisions.⁵ Since, scholars from diverse disciplines have critiqued the state in which Puerto Rico exists.

A ground-breaking voice is that of Marina Reyes Franco, curator at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (MAC), which opened in 1984, in the capital San Juan. Her essay "Atlas San Juan: Tropical Depression" illuminates the crucial role of the art community in crisis response, drawing parallels between activism in 1999 and the post-Hurricane María era.⁶ Reyes Franco states that various art spaces have emerged since the 2000's contributing to the internationalization of Puerto Rico's art scene.⁷ The hurricane had severe impacts on the arts, damaging institutions like the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP), founded in 1955, and raising concerns about sustained governmental support. She underscores the post-María period as a perpetual state of crisis, examining the enduring impact of international media and tourism. She also popularized the visitor economy concept in the cultural and artistic scene through the

⁵ The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama on June 30, 2016, to allow Puerto Rico to restructure its debt and achieve fiscal responsibility. Read more at Financial Oversight & Management Board for Puerto Rico, Frequently Asked Questions," accessed on January 6, 2023. <https://oversightboard.pr.gov/faq/>.

⁶ Marina Reyes Franco, "Atlas San Juan: Tropical Depression," October 1, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/atlas-san-juan-tropical-depression-63555/>.

⁷ See also Pablo León de la Barra, "San Juan," *Art Cities of the Future: 21st-Century Avant-Gardes*. London ; Phaidon Press, 2013, p. 198-212.

exhibition “Tropical Is Political: Caribbean Art Under the Visitor Economy Regime” at the Americas Society (2022) and later at MAC (2023).⁸ The term “visitor economy” will be later discussed in New York City’s case study of Chapter 3. Reyes Franco discusses the self-management by Puerto Rican artists and challenges the representation of the country as an earthly paradise.⁹ Throughout this paper, we will notice the attempt to maintain a paradisiacal ideal of Puerto Rico, while recognizing, particularly after Hurricane María, that it is a romanticized memory as well as an unattainable goal.

Another thought-provoking essay is Arcadio Díaz Quiñones’ “Foreword” in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Like Reyes Franco, he provides a historical backdrop emphasizing the longstanding economic challenges faced by the archipelago. He states that the colonial relationship with the United States, marked by unequal power dynamics and limited autonomy, laid the groundwork for understanding the exacerbated challenges brought to light after Hurricane María. The aftermath of the hurricane, referred to as “aftershocks,” extend beyond physical devastation to reveal ongoing challenges in infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Díaz Quiñones’ exploration in the “Foreword” suggests that the aftermath is not merely a recovery phase but an ongoing state of crisis highlighting the lasting consequences of the hurricane. Amidst the daunting challenges faced by Boricuas, a remarkable resilience and capacity for resistance has emerged within the community.¹⁰ This is vividly demonstrated as people from different backgrounds unite, engage in activism, and creatively navigate oppressive

⁸ Marina Reyes Franco, “Tropical Is Political: Caribbean Art Under the Visitor Economy Regime,” *AS/COA*, Accessed on December 12, 2023, <https://www.as-coa.org/exhibitions/tropical-political-caribbean-art-under-visitor-economy-regime> .

⁹ Artist run alternative spaces and galleries include, among others, Galería Yemayá (2001), Área: lugar de proyectos (2005), Pitiirre Proyectos (2010), Recinto Cerra (2012), Matadero (2014), KM 0.2 (2015), Embajada (2015), El Lobi (2016), Casa Silvana (2021).

¹⁰ Boricua is a demonym that refers to Puerto Ricans. Its origin comes from Borinquén, the indigenous Taíno name for Puerto Rico. It is often used as a poetic or historical term to refer to Puerto Rico, reflecting the island's indigenous heritage and culture.

conditions.¹¹ For example, massive protests known by the hashtag “#RickyRenuncia” successfully ordered then-governor, Ricardo Rosselló Nevares, to resign on July 24, 2019. The protests were ignited by the content of messages in a leaked chat, but also reflected broader frustrations with issues such as government corruption, economic challenges, and dissatisfaction with the political establishment.¹²

I seek to reveal the intricate challenges faced by Puerto Ricans, both predating and exacerbated by Hurricane María, as explored by scholars Reyes Franco and Díaz Quiñones. Economic stagnation, U.S. colonial ties, amplified external control by PROMESA and “La Junta,” and pervasive corruption have created a backdrop for the prolonged state of crisis. Reyes Franco's insights on the art community's response and the internationalization of Puerto Rico's art scene add a refined layer to the narrative. While Díaz Quiñones' historical analysis emphasizes the unequal power dynamics that laid the groundwork for the challenges brought to light post-Hurricane María. Despite these hurdles, Puerto Ricans' resilience, particularly in collective activism such as the #RickyRenuncia protests, highlights a determined spirit in the face of adversity. I argue that the lasting consequences extend beyond physical devastation, warranting ongoing exploration in subsequent chapters. Art manifests not only as a reflection of the aftershocks, but as an active practice of creativity and hope production.

¹¹ On the aftershocks of the multiple disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes and pandemic), also read Sebastián Meltz-Collazo, “In Puerto Rico, Artists and Art Spaces Are Coming Together to Rebuild Following a Series of Disasters,” *ArtNews*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/puerto-rico-artists-art-spaces-rebuild-hurricane-fiona-earthquakes-1234664794/>.

¹² The protests were ignited by leaked private messages by Rosselló and other political figures from the Partido Nuevo Progresista, the political party that advocates for statehood in the U.S. context. The chat included sexist, derogatory, and homophobic language as well as mockery of the aftermath deaths of Hurricane María. Read more at Valentín Ortíz, Luis J. and Carla Minet. “Las 889 páginas de Telegram entre Rosselló Nevares y sus allegados.” *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*, July 13, 2019. <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/las-889-paginas-de-telegram-entre-rossello-nevares-y-sus-allegados/>

Diaspora in the U.S.

The spirit of solidarity intensified among Puerto Ricans in the United States with cities like NYC and Chicago developing into epicenters of activism after Hurricane María. These communities focused on critical issues such as disaster relief, political representation, and social justice. Vast migration of Puerto Ricans to NYC dates to the mid-20th century. Economic challenges and the allure of job opportunities attracted a significant Puerto Rican population to the cold city. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a substantial urbanization trend as Boricuas settled in specific neighborhoods, particularly Loisaida, South Bronx, and El Barrio.¹³ While the number of Puerto Ricans living in this city peaked in 1970 at 895,300, it has gradually declined to 668,623 in 2020.¹⁴

Within these concentrated communities, visual artists actively engaged with themes of identity, diaspora, and the intricate interplay between their Puerto Rican heritage and the urban experience. Their work became a powerful expression of the socio-political landscape. They delved into discussions on Puerto Rico's political status and broader social justice issues. Artists employed their creations as potent forms of political commentary and addressed complex topics such as colonialism, displacement, and activism. However, the gentrification of traditional Puerto Rican neighborhoods in NYC presented challenges to the visual arts community. Artists and activists passionately worked to safeguard the cultural character of these neighborhoods while navigating the ever-evolving urban landscape. Cultural preservation initiatives including

¹³ The Lower East Side is known as Loisaida by the Puerto Rican community. The term may be a phonetically translation of the name to Spanish. It can also refer to Loíza, a town on the east coast of Puerto Rico. While East Harlem is known as El Barrio or Spanish Harlem because of the historical development of this neighborhood which has a large Spanish speaking population.

¹⁴ Laird W. Bergad, "The Puerto Rican Population of the New York Metropolitan Region, 1970-2020," New York, NY: Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center, 2022. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/clacls_pubs/112/

mentorship programs, educational outreach, and documentation of artistic heritage were, and continue to be, instrumental in preserving and promoting Puerto Rican visual arts traditions.

El Museo del Barrio in Spanish Harlem has played a pivotal role since its establishment in 1969. The museum is dedicated to preserving and showcasing the art and culture of, originally Puerto Ricans, and later, all Latin Americans in the United States.¹⁵ Functioning as a bridge connecting the past and present, the museum provides a platform for artistic expressions and fosters a sense of pride and community. Through its exhibits, programs, and community engagement efforts, El Museo del Barrio continues to be a key cultural institution promoting inclusivity and understanding.¹⁶

This dedication to promoting cultural understanding becomes evident when we consider the evocation of an image of rural Puerto Rico within the city. Highlighted by the *Casitas* project, initiated in 1978 and founded by José “Chema” Soto, the 65 casitas became a compelling embodiment of community resilience and cultural expression.¹⁷ The *casitas*, particularly centered around *La Casita de Chema* and the communal space known as the *Rincón Criollo*, served as vital community spaces reminiscent of the traditional Puerto Rican domestic landscape.¹⁸ The *Casitas* project symbolized a connection to the rural ambiance with roosters roaming among plantings, echoing a past Caribbean lifestyle. The symbols, such as the Puerto Rican flag

¹⁵ El Museo del Barrio, “History & Mission,” accessed on January 7, 2023, <https://www.elmuseo.org/about/history-mission/>.

¹⁶ Yasmin Ramirez, “The Activist Legacy of Puerto Rican Artists in New York and ‘The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico,’” *ICAA Documents Project Working Papers: The Publication Series for Documents of 20th Century Latin American and Latino Art*, no. 1 (September 2007): 46–53.

¹⁷ Joseph T. Sciorra, “I feel like I’m in my Country: Puerto Rican Casitas in New York City,” *TDR* (1988-) 34, no. 4 (1990): 156–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146049>.

¹⁸ Nathan Kensinger, “Inside the Casitas of the South Bronx’s Community Gardens,” *Curbed New York*, October 1, 2015, <https://ny.curbed.com/2015/10/1/9915402/inside-the-casitas-of-the-south-bronxs-community-gardens>.

decorating the casitas, became visual representations of cultural identity and resilience against the backdrop of gentrification.¹⁹

Among other arts and culture projects are the public art initiatives. In 1978, Hope Community (1968) commissioned a mural that featured local residents engaging in everyday activities.²⁰ “Spirit of East Harlem” was created by Hank Prussing and later restored in the mid-1990’s by Manny Vega.²¹ In 2006, Vega unveiled the mosaic mural “Remembering Julia,” which honored Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos. Another artist who focuses on honoring cultural leaders, like Pedro Pietri, is James De la Vega. Walking up Lexington Avenue multiple corners showcase his murals. More recently, Kevin Quiles Bonilla and Zaq Landsberg created the sculpture “For centuries, and ... (anticipated completion).”²² Seen from November 1, 2022 to October 31, 2023 at the Harlem Art Park, the *garita* brings the colonial architecture and landscape from Old San Juan to Spanish Harlem. Winking at colonialism and displacement processes that connect both geographies and people.

Chicago also represents another cold city known for its urban landscape and being a home to Boricuas. Tracing back to the mid-1940s, rural Puerto Rican farmers, recruited after WWII, were brought to states like New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut to work in agriculture in slave-like conditions. Escaping these circumstances, they migrated to Western towns such as Bethlehem, Allentown, Pittsburgh, Loraine, Cleveland, and Chicago.²³ Over the decades, Chicago witnessed

¹⁹ Elena Martínez, “¡Que Bonita Bandera!: Place, Space, and Identity as Expressed with the Puerto Rican Flag,” *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and Ritualesque*, University Press of Colorado, 2017, p. 113–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1z27gz3.9>.

²⁰ Hope Community, Inc. is a community based non-profit affordable housing organization in East Harlem.

²¹ Elizabeth Harball. “How a Mural Captured a Community: “The Spirit of East Harlem” Remembered.” *The Uptowner*, December 30, 2011. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150802070047/http://archives.jrn.columbia.edu/2012-2013/theuptowner.org/2011/12/30/how-a-mural-captured-a-community-the-spirit-of-east-harlem-remembered/index.html>

²² NYC Parks. “Kevin Quiles Bonilla and Zaq Landsberg, For centuries, and ... (anticipated completion).” *Art in the Parks*, accessed on February 4, 2024. <https://www.nycgovparks.org/art/art1024>

²³ Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, “Talk | José E. López and Carla Acevedo-Yates,” *Events*. Accessed on February 1, 2024. <https://visit.meachicago.org/events/talk-jose-e-lopez-carla-acevedo-yates/>.

a substantial growth in its Boricua population, earning it the moniker of "the second city" in relation to its Puerto Rican community. However, a pivotal moment in 2010 marked a transformative shift when Philadelphia surpassed Chicago in Puerto Rican population, reshaping the demographic dynamics of the community.²⁴ In 2020, Chicago's estimated Boricua population lowered to an estimate of 94,900.²⁵

As Puerto Ricans dispersed across Chicago, community organizations and cultural institutions were created and underwent adaptive changes. The *Puerto Rican Arts Alliance* (1998) and *Segundo Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center* (1971) physically relocated further west from their original Humboldt Park and West Town locations. This geographical shift symbolized the organic expansion of the community reaching new corners of the city. Non-profit organizations such as *AfriCaribe* (2000) and emerging collectives like *Bomba con Buya* (2009) have been significant contributors, particularly in the preservation of *bomba* and *plena* music. Humboldt Park, now home to the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture (NMPRAC), founded in 2001, stands as a central space showcasing both local and Puerto Rican artists. Collaborations between Puerto Rican and African American organizations, exemplified by the partnership between the NMPRAC and the DuSable Museum, reflect a commitment to addressing shared struggles, celebrating racial heritages, and promoting cultural traditions. This collaborative spirit signifies a broader trend toward inclusivity and the celebration of diversity within the Puerto Rican community.

²⁴ Toro-Morn, Maura, Ivis Garcia Zambrana, and Marixsa Alicea. "De Bandera a Bandera (From Flag to Flag): New Scholarship about the Puerto Rican Diaspora in Chicago." *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 28, no. 2 (2016), accessed on February 15, 2024.

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A474766917/AONE?u=nysl_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=bb30fd3f.

²⁵ US Census Bureau. "Explore Census Data." Accessed on February 4, 2024.

https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5YSPT2021.B01003?t=402:4038&g=050XX00US17031_060XX00US1703114000.

In highlighting the collaborative spirit and trend towards inclusivity and diversity within the Puerto Rican community, it is essential to recognize the intricate dynamics of cultural identities among Boricuas in the diaspora. This complexity unveils an interplay between expressions of identity and the perceptions held by individuals navigating the multifaceted landscape of cultural representation. The vibrant use of cultural symbols, ranging from waving and wearing the Puerto Rican flag to engaging with barrio-themed salsa music, active participation in Puerto Rican Day parades, and the celebration of folkloric figures like the *jibaro*, Taíno, or Afro-Caribbean *vejigante*, collectively contribute to the construction of a unique cultural identity among Puerto Ricans residing outside their homeland.

The diaspora's enthusiastic embrace of cultural symbols and folkloric expressions transcends a mere nostalgic yearning for a bygone era; it represents a deliberate act of asserting and preserving a distinct Boricua identity in a foreign context.²⁶ The resulting tension from divergent views within the Puerto Rican community itself reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity and authenticity, ultimately highlighting the richness and diversity of experiences and perspectives within the diaspora.²⁷ While the back-and-forth migration from Puerto Rico to the United States suggests the unsteady conditions for Puerto Rican people. Cultural theorist Jorge Duany uses the term “nation on the move” to explain these hybrid and fluid identities. He redefines the nation “not as a well-bounded, sovereign state but as a translocal community based on a collective consciousness of a shared history, language, and culture.”²⁸ My purpose is to encourage an understanding of the Puerto Rican diaspora, not as a separate community from the archipelago’s,

²⁶ Juan Flores, “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.” *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993, p.189.

²⁷ Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, “Implicit Social Knowledge, Cultural Capital, and ‘Authenticity’ among Puerto Ricans in Chicago,” *Latin American Perspectives* 31, no. 5 (2004): 34–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3185115> .

²⁸ Jorge Duany. “Introduction,” *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2002, p. 1-11.

but one with multiple layers of connection. The “nation on the move” represents all Boricuas in different stages and geographies; for the purpose of this research, may it be living in the States, in the archipelago, or in between.

Chapter 2: State of Enchantment Theory

The term "island of enchantment" is a popular epithet for Puerto Rico often used to evoke the captivating beauty, rich culture, and alluring qualities of the archipelago. Its origin can be traced back to the early 20th century when the phrase was used as a slogan in a marketing campaign to promote tourism and attract visitors to Puerto Rico. A travel guide article published by then Governor, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. in 1938 was titled “Island of Enchantment” selling the archipelago’s lush landscapes, vibrant traditions, and cultural influences that shape its identity.²⁹ It was written as an expedition journal and included monochromatic genre scenes and landscapes photographs. The moniker gained popularity and became widely associated with Puerto Rico's image. Over the years, it has been embraced by both locals and outsiders as a poetic and evocative description.³⁰ While the term has positive connotations and is often used in a promotional context, it's essential to note that Puerto Rico, like any place, has a complex history that includes social, economic, and political challenges.

Within the context of discussing Puerto Rican identity, migration, and cultural consciousness, the “island of enchantment” may evoke a sense of nostalgia and pride serving as a symbolic anchor for those who have left the archipelago but carry its memory with them. It can also be explored in scholarly and literary works, such as Juan Flores’ discussion of the “state of

²⁹ Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., “Island of Enchantment,” *House & Garden* 1938-03: Vol. 73, Issue 3, p. 49 https://archive.org/details/sim_house-garden_1938-03_73_3/page/48/mode/2up .

³⁰ A quick Google search on “Puerto Rico” describes: “Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island and unincorporated U.S. territory with a landscape of mountains, waterfalls and the El Yunque tropical rainforest.” See Google, “Puerto Rico,” *About*, Accessed on January 24, 2024.

enchantment” in the context of Nuyorican cultural consciousness. Flores, renowned for his contributions to Latin American Studies and as a trailblazer in Nuyorican culture, wrote a series of essays between 1979 to 1991 compiled in the book *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* published in 1993.³¹ In chapter, “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimila’o: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” he offers a compelling perspective on Puerto Ricans migrating to New York City, emphasizing a transformative process beyond assimilation.

Flores outlines four interconnected stages in the awakening of Nuyorican cultural consciousness.³² The first stage, he labels “state of abandon,” unfolds in contemporary NYC portraying the initial experiences of migrating Boricuas who grappled with desperation and misery. The second stage explores a nostalgic remembrance, termed the “state of enchantment,” and rooted in spiritual and psychological connections to homeland, Puerto Rico; where memories and familial reflections are romanticized and idealized. The third stage, the “state of duality,” unfolds as individuals return to NYC, navigating a complex cultural recovery process.³³ In its final stage, “state of pluralism,” individuals undergo an integration process rather than assimilation within various cultural identities including African Americans and an array of Caribbean and Latin American communities.³⁴ The term “pluralism” encapsulates the idea of coexistence and mutual influence, emphasizing the unique contributions of each cultural identity while fostering interconnectedness within the broader diasporic community.

For a comprehensive understanding of the cultural consciousness described by Flores, it is imperative to establish a clear definition of two key terms: identity and memory. Relying on

³¹ The term Nuyorican refers to an individual of Puerto Rican descent who resides in New York. Juan Flores, “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimila’o: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.” *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993, p.182-195.

³² Flores directly names two of the four stages in the chapter: the state of abandon and the state of enchantment. For easier identification, I suggested “state of duality” and “state of pluralism” for the remaining two.

³³ As seen in the *Casitas* project.

³⁴ As seen in the partnership between the NMPRAC and the DuSable Museum.

Stuart Hall's insights, cultural identity is seen as a product constantly shaped by retelling, and remembering, the past and influencing our perceptions of future possibilities.³⁵ Particularly relevant in the context of colonization, he posits identity serving as a means of self-naming within the paradigm of 'otherness' imposed by dominant regimes. Therefore, identity, "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth," rejects a binary representation.³⁶ He adds, "crucially, such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas," which are formulated through hybridity and continual transformation.³⁷ Hall's emphasis on cultural identity as a product shaped by the retelling and remembering of the past aligns with Flores' exploration of the stages, especially as individuals grapple with memories of their homeland and navigate their cultural recovery in the urban environment. The rejection of a binary representation of identity is particularly relevant in the context of forced diasporas and the complexities of navigating multiple cultural influences.

In a parallel notion Wanda E. Ramos Baquero, who specializes in Academic Research Psychology, delves into the concept of memory in her 1995 dissertation at the Graduate School of Psychology, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. "La (re)invención de la memoria" explains that experienced events are memorized according to transforming and organic priorities.³⁸ Our memories, intricately shaped by context, emotions, and consciousness, strive to make the objects of recollection tangible. This transformative process turns memories into personalized experiences. Beyond the binary judgment of truth or falsehood, a pivotal discourse emerges, emphasizing the recognition of narration as a foundational yet imperfect process. This

³⁵ Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity*, 1990, p. 224.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 226.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 224, 235.

³⁸ La (re)invención de la memoria (Spanish for The (Re)invention of Memory). Translated by the author.

perspective suggests that lived experiences go beyond mere preservation; they continually undergo adjustments and reinterpretations influenced by new events and evolving perspectives. The dynamic, personalized nature of this memory process, as highlighted by Ramos Baquero, enriches the analysis by emphasizing the inherent fluidity in personal and collective recollections. The text accentuates the significance of autobiography as a vital tool for both preserving and reshaping memories, contributing to an ongoing negotiation between the past and the ever-changing present.

Historian Aleida Assmann researches Cultural Anthropology and Cultural and Communicative Memory. In “Plunging into Nothingness: The Politics of Cultural Memory” from *Moment to Monument: The Making and Unmaking of Cultural Significance* she explores the creation of “monumental memories” drawing on Nietzsche’s “monumental history.”³⁹ Assmann’s framework outlines the progression of an event into a monument and subsequently into a “monumental memory.” The process involves selecting and extracting the event from its original context, translating it from a small to a larger scale, and ultimately transforming it from the specific to the general. Integrating Assmann’s insights on “monumental memories” enriches the exploration, emphasizing the transformative journey an event takes to become a lasting “cultural monument.”⁴⁰

Flores’ four-stage framework for the awakening of Nuyorican cultural consciousness provides a detailed understanding of the multifaceted journey of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. The outlined stages—abandon, enchantment, duality, and pluralism—underscore the dynamic

³⁹ Nietzsche’s monumental history must be seen from the perspective of the reception of works of art, ideas, human beings, and events of the past. Bezzola Lambert, Ladina and Andrea Ochsner. *Moment to monument: the making and unmaking of cultural significance*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4348432>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and evolving nature of identity formation amid migration and urban life. Returning to the state of enchantment from another voice, Hall comments:

Who can ever forget, when once seen rising up out of that blue-green Caribbean, those islands of enchantment? Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past? And yet, this ‘return to the beginning’ is like the imaginary in Lacan - it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery - in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.⁴¹

The “state of enchantment” is characterized by a profound and often idealized attachment to the cultural and familial aspects of Puerto Rican life. Memories during this stage take on a romanticized quality, and individuals may yearn for a return to the perceived simplicity, authenticity, and cultural richness of their origins. The intriguing facet of the Puerto Rican diaspora lies in the complexity that many individuals, despite never setting foot in the archipelago, experience a genuine longing for their so-called home. The term “enchantment” –the state of being under a spell– implies a sense of magic or allure associated with the memories of Puerto Rico. In the broader context of Flores’ framework, it suggests navigating a cultural recovery from their past. His evocative commentary on the “return to the beginning” and the symbolic nature of this journey resonates with the surge of nostalgia for the “island of enchantment;” the collective recollection of Puerto Rico as a shared wellspring of desire, memory, and myth aligning with Hall’s analysis discussed above.

Chapter 3: Curatorial Case Studies

An artistic odyssey takes flight, ignited by the enchanting allure of Puerto Rican cultural nostalgia. Migrant artists find themselves immersed in the evocative settings of the diaspora. This experience deepens their connection to Puerto Rican heritage, fostering a profound sense of

⁴¹ Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Identity*, 1990, p. 236.

identity and belonging. The reduced number of Fine Arts degrees on a graduate level at the archipelago constitutes a significant reason for artists to attend U.S.-based academic programs.⁴² The Pratt Institute was home to Puerto Rican artists since c. 1935 with José A. Torres Martinó and María Luisa Penne del Castillo. Other alumni include Jaime Carrero (1957), Awilda Sterling (1979), Martín García Rivera (1988), Rafael Rivera Rosa (1990), Aaron Salabarrías Valle (1997), Enoc Pérez (1990), Olga Charneco (1991), and Pricilla Vázquez (2009). Similarly, The School of Art Institute, Chicago (SAIC) has been a welcoming center for artists such as alumni Angel Otero (2009), Marisol Plard Narvárez (2011), Luis Rodríguez Rosario (2016), Omar Velázquez (2016) and Isabela Mellado (2023). Others had ties with SAIC in the role of professors such as Cándida Álvarez and José Lerma.

Concurrently with the surge in students' artistic pursuits, there has been a longstanding U.S. interest in exhibitions featuring Puerto Rican artists.⁴³ The aftermath of Hurricane María also broadened the scope of showcasing Boricua art. Some highlight exhibitions are “Constant Storm: Art from Puerto Rico and the Diaspora” (2021) at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Florida; “Temporal: Puerto Rican Resistance” (2020) at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; “Rafael Villamil: Paradise Has No Memory” (2019) at Taller Puertorriqueño, Philadelphia; and “Puerto Rico: Defying Darkness” (2018) at 516 ARTS, New Mexico.⁴⁴ The trope of Hurricane María in U.S. art serves as a dual exploration, with some using their platforms for commentary on the catastrophe's impact, reflecting on resilience, environmental concerns, displacement, identity, and political commentary. Simultaneously, others exploit the tragedy for financial gain. I raise ethical concerns about the commodification

⁴² Only two universities, the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico and the Pontificia Universidad Católica, both private and religious institutions, offer an MA in Fine Arts.

⁴³ See Marimar Benítez “The Special Case of Puerto Rico” in *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States 1920-1970* (1988).

⁴⁴

of tragedy and the exploitation of human suffering for monetary gain. This complex interplay highlights the ethical considerations within the intersection of art, tragedy, and commerce.

The ascendance of Puerto Rican curators in the U.S.-based museums signifies a notable and impactful trend within the realm of arts and curation. Several prominent individuals have assumed key roles in prestigious institutions; among them Mari Carmen Ramírez, María Elena Ortíz, Taína Caragol, Marcela Guerrero, Carla Acevedo-Yates, Iberia Pérez González, and Dalina A. Perdomo Álvarez.⁴⁵ The increase in exhibitions has been expanded in scholarly research like Caragol’s dissertation “Boom and Dust: The Rise of Latin American and Latino Art in New York Exhibition Venues and Auction Houses, 1970s–1980s” (2013) and Edward J. Sullivan’s “Displaying the Caribbean: Thirty Years of Exhibitions Collecting in The United States” in *Caribbean Art at the Crossroads of the World* (2012).⁴⁶

The trend has also been documented in other mediums such as the online publication *Intervenxions* by The Latinx Project (TLP) (2018) at New York University.⁴⁷ Published exhibition reviews in 2023 included, among others, “Mi corazón latiente: Pepón Osorio at the New Museum” by Sebastián Meltz Collazo and “Loíza is Universal: The Old Griot Tells an Afro-Indigenous World Story” by Carlos Rivera Santana on artist Daniel Lind. The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (1973) at Hunter College, CUNY, known as Centro, is devoted to documenting the Puerto Rican diaspora experience. In 2022, it launched the *Diasporican Art in Motion* initiative. This digital archive and community mapping project seeks to document the

⁴⁵ Ramírez currently works at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX since 2001; Ortíz, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX, since 2022; Caragol, National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C., since 2013; Guerrero, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, since 2018; Acevedo-Yates, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL, since 2019; Pérez González, Pérez Art Museum in Miami, FL, since 2020; and Perdomo Álvarez, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, since 2021.

⁴⁶Edward J. Sullivan, “Displaying the Caribbean: Thirty Years of Exhibitions Collecting in The United States.” *Caribbean Art at the Crossroads of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. p. 358-365.

⁴⁷ TLP was founded by anthropologist and professor Arlene Dávila. See The Latinx Project, “Intervenxions,” *New York University*, accessed on January 2, 2023. <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/tag/Puerto+Rico>.

impact of migration on Puerto Rican visual culture and community-building through in-depth profiles of contemporary diasporic Puerto Rican visual artists.⁴⁸

As exemplified before, NYC and Chicago were principal destinations for the U.S. Diasporicans since the 1950's.⁴⁹ The increase in opportunities for studying and working, as well as creating art pieces, had a direct effect on Boricua visual artists on the move. After decades of migration, second and third-generation Puerto Rican artists have become essential for transcultural dialogues around identity. Remembering the archipelago's artists also constitutes an essential task when mapping Puerto Rican art. San Juan, as a characteristic location, is included in this work.

Case Study 1: San Juan

“Arrivals and Departures: Migration Experiences in Contemporary Puerto Rican Art” began as an exhibition at the Museum of History, Anthropology and Art, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus, San Juan. Opening on February 28, 2017, it was temporarily closed after Hurricane María struck. It reopened in December and closed on February 28, 2018. Curated by art historian and professor Laura Bravo López and assistant curator Donald Rivera Escudero.⁵⁰

Nineteen artists provided unique perspectives on the displacement of people and portrayed their autobiographical experiences with migration to the United States and/or other countries.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Centro, “Diasporican Art in Motion,” accessed January 1, 2024, <https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/artists/>.

⁴⁹ César J. Ayala, “Puerto Rico and its Diaspora,” *UCLA Latin American Institute*, October 27, 2021. <https://www.international.ucla.edu/lai/article/248568>.

⁵⁰ The exhibition traveled to the Taller Puertorriqueño in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from October 14, 2022, until March 4, 2023. “Arrivals and Departures” was then on view at the East Harlem Gallery of Hunter College, CUNY, NYC from March 31, 2023, through December 16, 2023. At this last venue, the exhibition was sponsored by CENTRO.

⁵¹ The exhibition “Arrivals and Departures” included works by Abdiel Segarra Ríos, Adál Maldonado, Anabel Vázquez Rodríguez, Anaida Hernández, Antonio Martorell, Brenda Cruz, Carlos Ruiz Valarino, Edra Soto, John Betancourt, José Ortiz Pagán, Máximo Colón, Marta Mabel Pérez, Mónica Félix, Nayda Collazo Llorens, Norma Vila Rivero, Osvaldo Budet Meléndez, Pedro Vélez, Quintín Rivera Toro, Víctor Vázquez.

Their 53 artworks, created between 1996 and 2017, serve as visual reflections on the causes, consequences, and vicissitudes of migration. They are positioned in the following sub-themes: “A risky adventure,” “A dismal triangle: political, economic, and social crisis,” “Intermediate spaces between geography and memory,” “In constant displacement,” and “Displaced identities.”

The exhibition's title nods to the recurring nature of departure and return journeys taking Duany's “nation on the move” as its theoretical foundation. His essay “The Contemporary Puerto Rican Exodus,” included in the exhibition catalog, follows the line of thought by Reyes Franco and Díaz Quiñones while emphasizing the absence of reliable records on the number of people who depart from and arrive in the (archipelago) Island.⁵²

Through “Arrivals and Departures” certain symbols are recurrent such as the use of the color green. It may be seen as a visual representation of the Puerto Rican archipelago and its significance in conveying the state of enchantment and a cultural identity tied to its lush vegetation as initiated by Roosevelt, Jr.'s article in 1938 mentioned in Chapter 2. Two specific artworks, “The Grass Was Greener” by Quintín Rivera Toro and Edra Soto's series *Tropicalamerican*, perfectly illustrate this theme. In **Fig. 1** “The Grass Was Greener” (2017), Rivera Toro uses a square of vibrant, artificial green grass enclosed by a white wooden corral to comment on the popular expression “the grass is greener on the other side.”⁵³

The artist's selection of the color conjures Puerto Rico's mountains and vegetation in the collective memory of emigrants. However, the artist's deliberate choice of artificial green grass confined within a corral introduces a layer of symbolism suggesting an absence of realism, fertility, and freedom challenging conventional notions of paradise. The question arises: Does the

⁵² Jorge Duany, “The Contemporary Puerto Rican Exodus,” *Arrivals and Departures*, Philadelphia: Taller Puertorriqueño, 2023, p.27-38.

⁵³ During the showcasing of the exhibition at the MHAA, the installation was presented in the interior garden. Versions of “Arrivals and Departures” presented afterwards included a photograph of the work as seen in San Juan.

greener grass symbolize the archipelago or the diaspora? Is one perceived as superior, or is the allure of the other contingent on its presence here or there? The juxtaposition invites contemplation on the subjective nature of paradisiacal ideals and their complex interplay between origin and destination.

Edra Soto's series *Tropicalamerican* (2014), **Fig. 2**, features imaginary flags in green tones, sometimes adorned with gold highlights, inspired by the flags of Puerto Rico, the United States, and Chicago. The creation of flags parallels the creation of a nation. The geometric figures can be interpreted as symbols of nature. The triangles may represent mountains, larger ones evoke waves or a river's course, and golden stars symbolize the sun's movement throughout the day. This series explores the visual language of flags and their connection to the natural landscape, emphasizing the artist's cultural and national identity. They can also suggest a creation of a new land, a meeting point for those “on the move.”

Flores's theory emphasizes the emotional and cultural connections that individuals maintain with their homeland, fostering a sense of enchantment even when physically distant. In “Arrivals and Departures,” the color green, particularly evident in “The Grass Was Greener” by Quintín Rivera Toro and Edra Soto's series *Tropicalamerican*, becomes a visual conduit for memories, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging in the context of the Puerto Rican archipelago.

Case Study 2: New York City

“No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María” took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC from November 23, 2022 to April 23, 2022.⁵⁴ In accordance with Assman's theory of monumental memory, the exhibition curated by

⁵⁴ Other sections not analyzed in this research are “Processing, Grieving and Reflecting” and “Resistance and Protest.” The curator was able to acquire some of the artworks for the Museum, such as Danielle De Jesús' *Google the Ponce Massacre* (2021) and Gabriella N. Báez' *Ojalá Nos Encontremos En El Mar* (2018-). Whitney Museum

Marcela Guerrero, assisted by fellows Angelica Arbelaez and Sofia Silva, transforms the memory of Hurricane María. Geographically shifting from Puerto Rico to NYC, it transcends local audiences and understanding, reaching an international scope. The exhibition delves into the post-hurricane incidents, refraining from isolating the atmospheric event and instead providing a comprehensive exploration of its aftermath. The exhibition explores how more than 15 artists from Puerto Rico and the diaspora have responded to the transformative years since the hurricane.⁵⁵ The intergenerational group included over fifty artworks from 2017 to 2022.

Organized into five sections, the exhibition features a segment titled "Critiques of Tourism," serving as a response to issues such as gentrification, foreign investment, the visitor economy, the dichotomy of tax havens versus local dispossession, and relocation.⁵⁶ The video collage "B-Roll" (2017), **Fig. 3-4**, created by Sofia Gallisá Muriente, was included in this section. The artist appropriated content from promotional videos produced by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company and the Department of Economic Development and Commerce of Puerto Rico. These are "remixed to highlight the visual tropes recurrent in the marketing of the archipelago for foreign investors and tourists."⁵⁷ Most of the visuals represent the paradisiacal imagery of the archipelago: sunsets, mountains, beaches, and palm trees. Unlike the other artworks discussed in this paper, this one appropriates and reassembles images intended to appeal to a distant, "other," audience. Instead of repeating "the island of enchantment" concept as intrinsic to the Puerto

of American Art, "No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María," accessed on November 1, 2022. <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/no-existe#exhibition-artists>.

⁵⁵ The artists are Candida Alvarez, Gabriella N. Báez, Rogelio Báez Vega, Sofia Córdova, Danielle De Jesus, Frances Gallardo, Sofia Gallisá Muriente, Miguel Luciano, Javier Orfón, Elle Pérez, Gamaliel Rodríguez, Raquel Salas Rivera, Gabriela Salazar, Armig Santos, Garvin Sierra Vega, Edra Soto, Awilda Sterling-Duprey, Yiyo Tirado Rivera, Gabriella Torres-Ferrer and Lulu Varona.

⁵⁶ According to Reyes Franco in "Atlas San Juan: Tropical Depression," the term "visitor economy" denotes the economic activity— goods consumed and services rendered—by people who visit a place. Prioritizing the visitor economy can affect practically all aspects of life, transforming a society to serve the visitor.

⁵⁷ Sofia Gallisá Muriente, "B-Roll," *Trabajo/Work*, accessed on January 7, 2023, <https://sofiagallisa.com/B-Roll-2>.

Rican culture and population, this work returns to the roots of the phrase: a tourism advertisement.

“Fractured Infrastructures” included works exploring what Guererro defined as a man-made disaster. Sofía Córdova’s “dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta” (2018) is a two-channel video that reflects on the hardships of the aftershocks of Hurricane María. Of the 105 minutes, the still seen in **Fig. 5** wisely encloses the state of enchantment, particularly for the family who has emigrated to the U.S. to escape the horrendous destruction of Puerto Rico’s paradise. A labyrinth of branches and green vines trap the natural path. After a careful look, you can see two horses that continue their way. Glints of sunlight wink through the few empty spaces. The subtitles read: “Puerto Rico is a blessed earth.”

Section “Ecology and Landscape” focused on documenting and honoring the land often seen through the lens of memory.⁵⁸ Javier Orfón exhibited a series of five works under the title *Bienteveo* (2018-2022). Inspired by diverse animals, flora and natural trails found in Puerto Rico, the photographs document the artist’s interventions on Camuy leaves. As appreciated in **Fig. 6**, Orfón delicately carved a schematic drawing of palm trees. In the Caribbean landscape, these trees are not strictly coastal, they can grow in the mountains of the central zone and around riverbeds. Its iconography is reminiscent of moist and hot climates and conveys to images of iconic landscape paintings in Puerto Rico most notably those by the 19th century painter Francisco Oller. The inclusion of Orfón’s works in the exhibition contributes to an elaborate exploration of the relationship between the environment, personal recollections, and the impact of Hurricane María on the land.

⁵⁸ Whitney Museum of American Art, “No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María,” accessed on November 1, 2022. <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/no-existe#exhibition-artists>.

“No existe un mundo poshuracán” juxtaposes different interpretations of the “enchantment” theories produced around Puerto Rico. It incorporates artworks that challenge paradisiacal images, capture the state of enchantment for those who emigrated, and engage with the natural elements of Puerto Rican ecology while also surveying the post-Hurricane María landscape and its impact on Puerto Rican identity and memory.

Case Study 3: Chicago

Visitors at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago had the chance to experience the exhibition “Entre horizontes: Art and Activism Between Chicago and Puerto Rico” from August 19, 2023 to May 5, 2024.⁵⁹ Curator Carla Acevedo-Yates and curatorial assistant Iris Colburn delve into Chicago's historical significance in fostering national dialogues on Puerto Rican self-determination, highlighting the impact of social movements and community organizations. The exhibition specifically chronicles the city's advocacy for the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners. The title "entre horizontes" not only signifies a link between Lake Michigan and the Caribbean as shared memory sites for Puerto Rican Chicagoans, but also serves as a symbolic bridge connecting visual art, social justice, place, and identity.

Artworks of nineteen Puerto Rican artists who reside in the archipelago, the U.S., or both were part of the exhibition.⁶⁰ The show highlights diverse materials such as historic photographs and ephemera to chronicle the efforts of social movements and community organizations.⁶¹ The

⁵⁹ Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, “Entre horizontes,” *Exhibitions*, Accessed on January 7, 2024. <https://visit.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/entre-horizontes-art-and-activism-between-chicago-and-puerto-rico/>.

⁶⁰ Candida Alvarez, Elizam Escobar, Frank Espada, Rafael Ferrer, Carlos Flores, José Lerma, Ramón Miranda Beltrán, Nora Maité Nieves, Ángel Otero, Nibia Pastrana Santiago with Eduardo Rosario, Marisol Plard Narváez, Edra Soto, Arnaldo Roche Rabell, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Bibiana Suárez, Sebastián Vallejo, and Omar Velázquez collectively offer a diverse range of artistic interpretations, contributing to the exhibition's narrative on migration, identity, and cultural resilience.

⁶¹ At the time of submitting this paper an exhibition catalog has not been published. Therefore, I rely on information found on the official website and informal conversations. A profound research should be conducted further on.

display of both historical and artistic materials, **Fig. 7**, connects through a bright royal blue carpet symbolizing water bodies or skies.

As part of the opening for the exhibition, Nibia Pastrana Santiago, in collaboration with Eduardo F. Rosario, presented a four-hour choreographic event where movement and sound improvisation were the spearhead for reflections on near and far landscapes, of that possible place where water was the sky. The title for this performance, “El agua era el cielo” (Spanish for The Water was the Sky) reinforces the links between the blue water and sky.⁶²

In past case studies, the focus was greatly on the greenery tones. For example, Edra Soto’s *Tropicalamerican* series was also included in this Chicago exhibition. However, in this case, the gaze shifts between green and blue to symbolize the paradisiacal dream. This juxtaposition of colors can be traced to the pioneering article by Roosevelt, Jr.. “The water was sapphire blue, the hills beyond, a brilliant green,” he mentions in the first page and follows in the next, “In the center is a range of rough hills surrounded by a rich coastal plain, and beyond, of course, the blue Caribbean.”⁶³

Another example of the green/blue coexistence in “Entre horizontes” is that of Omar Velázquez’s work. His painting “Caguama” (2020), **Fig. 8**, presents a river between mountains. Animals and vegetables turn slowly into traditional Puerto Rican instruments: the percussion instrument known as a *güiro* holds a bird’s head. A sliced in half pumpkin becomes a guitar or *cuatro* on the top. The green and red background, mountains and sky, is slightly out of focus. The viewer’s full attention concentrates on the turquoise water.

⁶² The title of the performance, “El agua era el cielo,” is taken from the poem by Juan Antonio Corretjer, *Recreaciones Panorámicas* (1957). Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, “Live Arts,” Accessed on January 7, 2024,

<https://visit.mcachicago.org/events/live-arts-nibia-pastrana-santiago-with-eduardo-f-rosario-el-agua-era-el-cielo/>

⁶³ Roosevelt, Jr., Colonel Theodore. “Island of Enchantment.” *House & Garden* 1938-03: Vol. 73, Issue 3, p. 49. https://archive.org/details/sim_house-garden_1938-03_73_3/page/48/mode/2up.

The painting evokes various senses. A viewer with familiarity with Puerto Rican culture can, just by seeing the work, imagine the musical melodies and lived traditions around the instruments. *Caguama* stands for giant turtle in the Taíno language. In resonance with Flores' exploration of the "state of enchantment," the revisitation of Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean subjects emerges as a pivotal factor in the ongoing reconstruction of identity. Velázquez skillfully engages with the memory of Pre-Colonial imagined visions, occupying a space that extends into a dual temporal framework. For the Boricua visitor in Chicago, an in-depth interplay of remembering and imagining unfolds—an invitation to reflect on or envision a bygone era in Puerto Rico, offering a pathway to reimagine a time in Borinquén that resonates deeply with personal and collective narratives.

Conclusion

This research paper presents an overview of the contestation of representing Puerto Rico as an idyllic paradise through Puerto Rican art exhibitions, considering both the archipelago and the diaspora. It explores the transformative influence of migration on Puerto Rican visual artists in the United States, with a focus on New York City and Chicago. It emphasizes the significance of second and third-generation artists in shaping transcultural dialogues around identity while underscoring the diasporic impact on Puerto Rican art. It also highlights scholarly research, institutional initiatives, and recent exhibitions that contribute to the rich tapestry of Puerto Rican artistic expression in the U.S. Throughout the case studies various ways of representing the state of enchantment are defined. For "Arrivals and Departures," the use of the color green in artworks, such as Quintín Rivera Toro's "The Grass Was Greener" and Edra Soto's

Tropicalamerican series, symbolizes the Puerto Rican archipelago, contributing to the visual narrative of memory, identity, and a sense of belonging within the diaspora.

In the case of “No existe un mundo poshuracán,” Sofía Gallisá Muriente's "B-Roll" repurposes images from tourism advertisements to challenge paradisiacal portrayals, that were produced to appeal to a distant audience. Sofía Córdova's video "dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta" reflects on post-Hurricane María hardships, encapsulating the yearning for the state of enchantment for families who emigrated to the U.S. Javier Orfón's *Bienteveo* series, using carved leaves as symbolic representations of Puerto Rican ecology, emphasizes the interconnectedness between nature and memory. The exhibition juxtaposes enchantment theories, exploring how artists engage with the environment, personal recollections, and the aftermath of Hurricane María on the land.

In contrast to previous case studies that emphasized green tones, such as Edra Soto's *Tropicalamerican* series, the focus in the last case shifts to the serene blue water as a symbol of the paradisiacal dream. This thematic change is evident in the exhibition's display and Omar Velázquez's “Caguama” further exemplifies this shift. The painting evokes the rich musical melodies and traditions associated with Puerto Rican culture, it masterfully combines memories of Precolonial visions with a double-future perspective, inviting Chicago-based visitors to recall their time in Puerto Rico and reimagine moments in Borinquen.

“Entre horizontes” goes beyond visual art, intertwining historical narratives, activism, archival materials, and cultural symbols to create a state of enchantment. Through deliberate shifts in focus, artistic representations like “Caguama,” and the exploration of Indigenous connections, the exhibition invites viewers to engage with their roots, imagine enchanting landscapes, and contribute to the constant re-creation of Puerto Rican identity. The title and

approach to the color blue itself signifies a connection between Lake Michigan and the Caribbean, acting as shared sites of memory for Puerto Rican Chicagoans. It is also reinforced with the performance “El agua era el cielo” by Pastrana Santiago and Rosario. This act of remembering becomes a way to reimagine a time in Borinquen, fostering a connection between the diasporic experience and the enchanting cultural and natural landscapes of Puerto Rico. The connection symbolizes a bridge between visual art, social justice, place, and identity, creating an atmosphere of interconnectedness and enchantment.

A future version of this paper should include interviews with each curator for personal narratives and opinions on each case study. Artist’s proposals included in exhibition labels, catalogs and interviews should be analyzed. Further research on the destruction of infrastructure and a recovery of natural “paradise” should be conducted taking into account artworks by artists like Rogelio Báez Vega shown in the “No existe un mundo poshuracán” exhibition. Exploring Puerto Rican exhibitions in Florida can also bring new perspectives and nuances on the geography with the largest Boricua population. Another possible examination could review the trope of Hurricane María as well as the encounter between art commercialization and tragedy. The production of Puerto Rican and Caribbean exhibitions around topics of the weather and the ocean is another potential research topic.

Appendix



Fig. 1
 Quintín Rivera Toro
The Grass Was Greener, 2017
 Installation
 48 ½" x 96 ½" x 96 ½"
 Image from exhibition's catalog.



Fig. 2
 Edra Soto
 From the series *Tropicalamerican* (2014)
 Ink printing on synthetic silk, fabric and
 wood borders
 67" x 43"
 Image from exhibition's catalog.

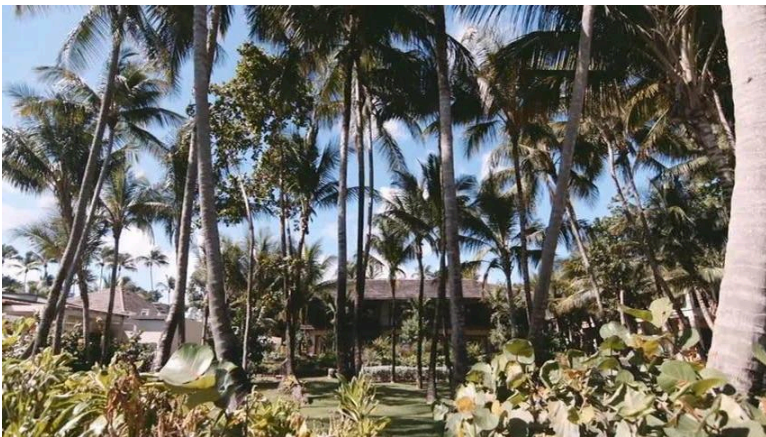


Fig. 3-4

Sofía Gallisá Muriente
 Stills from *B-Roll* (2017)
 Music by Daniel Montes Carro
 Video
 6:44 min.

Images from catalog and artist's website.

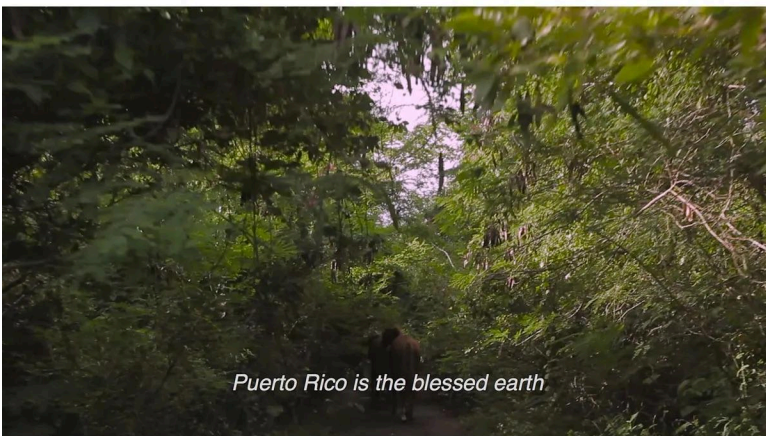


Fig. 5

Sofía Córdova
 Still from *dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta* (2018)
 Two-channel video, color, sound, on unistrut mount
 105 min.

Image from the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, NY



Fig. 6
 Javier Orfón
Palmeras (2018)
 From the series *Bienteveo*
 Inkjet print, ed. 1/5
 16 1/2" x 11"



Fig. 7
 Installation view of "*Entre horizontes*"
 MCA Chicago
 Aug 19, 2023–May 5, 2024
 Photo: Shelby Ragsdale © MCA Chicago

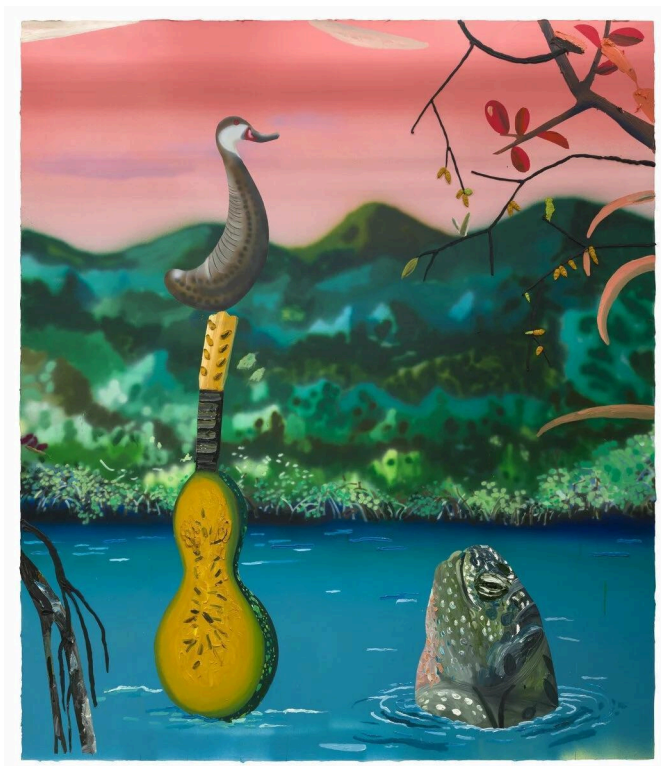


Fig. 8
Omar Velázquez
Caguama (2020)
Oil and acrylic on canva
84 ¼" x 72 ½"
Image from exhibition's website.

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