Sobre la Marcha:

The Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, Puerto Rico

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by

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Abstract

The annual Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol is the most significant religious festival in Loíza, Puerto Rico. This dissertation examines this religious ritual applying an indigenous methodological approach I call sobre la marcha, meaning “on the move.” Sobre la marcha places at the center the voices and the stories of the people of Loíza. Focusing on people’s everyday lives, or lo cotidiano, I bring to the forefront people’s lived experiences, their individual perspectives, and their indigenous ways of being. This ethnographic approach is known as ethnographies of the particular, privileging the people’s own stories, their feelings, sufferings, contradictions, aspirations, hopes, etc.

Beginning with the lived experiences of a limited number of people who identify as Loiceños (natives of Loíza), their voices illuminate the complex movements great and small that are part of their quotidian experiences, lo cotidiano. This includes testimonies from a local artist and an Espiritista practitioner, who speak about the presence of the ancestors and the rituals that maintain a relationship between the living and the dead. The people known as Mantenedores, or keepers of the image of Santiago Apóstol, also share their stories of the miraculous apparition of Santiago Apóstol and how the Santiago came to live among the people of Loíza. Through the stories of the Mantenedores we get a glimpse of what it means to be a
Mantenedor/a, their responsibilities, how the processions are organized, and how the people of Loíza express their devotion to Santiago Apóstol. Finally, I include a discussion about rescate de terrenos (land rescues) within the context of the gentrification of Loíza and the impact upon the people’s every day lives. As a coastal town, Loíza faces constant threat of indiscriminate tourism expansion. Gentrification displaces individuals and tears apart entire communities who risk losing their homes and their communally held cultural and religious rituals.

In summary, this thesis examines The Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, Espiritismo, and rescates de terreno (land rescues) in Loíza, Puerto Rico, through the oral testimonies of a limited number of people. Applying ethnographies of the particular, these oral testimonies show lo cotidiano, the day-to-day movements by the people and their connection to the movements within the processions of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, the healing rituals of Espiritismo, and the rescates de terreno (land rescues). All of these movements come together sobre la marcha, on the move, and are filled with potentiality for transformation in the face of multiple oppressions.
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Dedication

To my mother Ida Lily and my son Erick Christopher,

for loving me sobre la marcha
Prologue

Yo pisaré las calles nuevamente de los que fué Santiago ensangrentada y en una plaza liberada me pondré a llorar por los ausentes.

I will walk those streets again, the streets of what was once Santiago bleeding, and in a liberated plaza I will weep for the absent ones.

—Pablo Milanés

I’ve walked the dusty streets of my grandmother’s birthplace in the mining town of Copiapó. I’ve walked the silent, bloody streets of Santiago de Chile tracing the footsteps of the disappeared. I’ve walked the frozen streets of New York City as an alien ghost without a name y sin papeles, perfecting the art of becoming invisible. I’ve walked the streets of Loíza, Puerto Rico, in the heat of July with hundreds of others praying for healing. I’ve walked the streets of
Cambridge, a *deambulante* and Harvard graduate student caught in the *vaivén* of the intersecting borders of my gender, class, race, age, and immigration status. At night, I try to do homework at Andover library, but instead I stare across to Rockefeller Hall, to the window where my dorm used to be. I lived there for four years, became part of a community, called this place home. One day we were evicted and were told our dorms were being turned into offices. We had to scramble to find affordable housing.

After my third year, my stipend stopped and no one would rent to me without proof of regular income. Being homeless, I spent a lot of time trying to hide this reality from my colleagues, from my students, and my professors. I could never tell my mother. It would break her heart. I would stay in the library until closing time at 11 pm and then head over to the hotel where I worked as a maid. If I was lucky, there would be an empty room, the cheap ones with a shared bathroom. I’d have to be out by 4:30 am and wait somewhere for the coffee shops to open so I could finish my homework. I prepared for class by rummaging through my bags. My bags were my point of reference to living in Harvard’s parallel universe as a *deambulante*. In the summer I returned to walk Puerto Rico and recognized myself in every homeless person I encountered at the MCC church *Cristo Sanador*/Healing Christ in Río Piedras. In July, I walked the streets of Loíza under the hot sun for three days to pay back the saint that saved my life: Santiago.

In Santiago de Chile, the blood has dried, has become part of the road. It has now been how many years since 1973? *Chile your rivers ran red*. In 2003 I went on a pilgrimage that took me to Santiago de Chile, to El *Museo de la Memoria*/The museum of Memory where they had replicas of the torture chambers and concentration camps. I was the absent daughter. I had
returned. I sat down at the cemetery in front of the huge wall with the names carved into the rock. The disappeared. The absent ones. I sat down and cried. Homeless in so many ways. On a pilgrimage to remember, to retrace my steps, to let the land know, that I was back. Weeping on the road, walking to experience movement, to prove that I was alive, that I had survived, that I remembered. Why go back? Why do we need a museum of the memory? Who would forget? It was their absence, their silence, their unknown destination, their interrupted caminata that would not let me forget. How does walking, retracing steps, being part of a crowd, processing with strangers, feeling invisible and yet part of a larger body bring us closer to ourselves?

Pilgrim without a map, without a route, with thirty years of being absent, thirty years of living away from home, which now is no more, will never be again . . . no soy de aquí ni soy de allá/I am neither from here nor from there . . . always the pilgrim, always in between, always sobre la marcha/on the move. Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar/Pilgrim there is no road the road is made by you as you walk.” My grandmother taught me that todo se aprende sobre la marcha/”we learn everything on the road.” On the road we find another voice, another story of ourselves, another opportunity to heal. On the streets, without a home, I have a different rhythm, my steps no longer guide me to the certainty of an address; deambular is to wander and to roam; deambulantes are the homeless, like Fabiola, who slept under bridges, and who found a home in the Healing Christ Church of Río Piedras. She calls Río Piedras her city, her home. For years she has been homeless dwelling at the crossroads of hopelessness and depression. She yearns for a little corner where she can rest and sew sequins on her gowns. Fabiola and Río Piedras know the meaning of a hard night, of the closed roads, of the gift of improvisation and the reimagining of home in her dreams. In her daily imaginings she
transforms the garbage filled underpass into a luminous porch facing the turquoise ocean. She calls this church. She talks with God here. Facing the ocean, arms stretched out to the sky, she reclaims the pieces of herself that were stolen by the streets. Fabiola calls herself transformista which literally means “transformer.” She prefers the term transformista to “transvestite”. She also calls herself a walking archive of the history of Rio Piedras. She spends hours at the library reading about her city, the city where she is invisible, one more nameless deambulante reimagining garbage piles into emerald green mountains.

In Loísa, La Reina sparkles in her light green gown and fake diamond tiara. She struts down the sweltering streets while the other beauty queens ride on the floats and don’t even break a sweat. The parades during the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza gathers the Hijos Ausentes/The Absent Children, Las Locas, the masked Vejigantes, the devotees of Santiago Apóstol, the tourists, the kids from Villa Cañona on their bikes, the bomba dancers and singers, the young mothers pushing strollers, the batuteras/majorettes from the local middle school, and La Reina. The parade lasts only a couple of hours but the preparations take all year. For those two hours La Reina walks proudly, elegantly, offering a beautiful smile and a delicate hand gesture that produces cheers from the adoring crowd. Soon the parade will end and the same streets that sparkled and reverberated with joy will become the means streets that take away one’s ánimo, one’s spirit every time they call her pato or maricón. The only ones who will be safe are the clowns, the locas, men who cross dress as a joke . . . but for the beauty queen, La Reina, the transgender person who lives everyday as a transgender person, these streets will not be home.

What is the meaning of home? What is the meaning of movement that results in losing
your home and your roots? How does one write about home after being homeless? What is the role of memory in these processions? What is the experience of walking alone/surrounded by strangers? How do we build home in our imagination? Loiza houses the three Santiagos, the Mantenedores keep them safe, give them a home, protect them from homelessness. Who protects the Mantenedores? Who protected Adolfinas Villanueva from the bullets of the firing squad? Adolfinas is now a mantenedora of memory, of history, of family, of home. A home built on an island. Land is important when you live on an island. Bridges are important when you live between two waters. The stories of the people are important. Their stories are Loiza’s living museo de la memoria/museum of memory. In Loiza the streets are reclaimed and made holy with each procession for Santiago and with each new step of La Reina in all her glory in her seven-inch golden heels transforming fear into fierceness, dislocation into relocation, and hopelessness into ánimo/spirit.
Fig. 2. La Reina, Loíza 2005.
Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
Figure 3. Yuisa, the Taina Cacica. Painting by Samuel Lind. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa, 2014.
Figure 4. Santiago de los Niños, Loíza 2008. Photograph by Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
Figure 5. Meeting of Two Waters: The Río Grande meets the Ocean in Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.

Figure 6. The Bridge connecting Loiza to San Juan, 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
Río Grande de Loíza by Julia de Burgos

Río Grande de Loíza, alárgate en mi espíritu!
para sentirte mío por un breve momento,
y esconderte del mundo y en ti mismo esconderte,
y oír voces de asombro en la boca del viento.
Apéate un instante del lomo de la tierra,
y busca de mis ansias el íntimo secreto;
confúndete en el vuelo de mi ave fantasía,
y déjame una rosa de agua en mis ensueños.
¡Río Grande de Loíza! . . . Mi manantial, mi río,
desde que alzome al mundo el péptalo materno;
contigo se bajaron desde las rudas cuestas,
a buscar nuevos surcos, mis pálidos anhelos;
y mi niñez fue toda un poema en el río,
y un río en el poema de mis primeros sueños. Llegó la adolescencia. Me sorprendió la vida prendida en lo más ancho de tu viajar eterno; y fui tuya mil veces, y en un bello romance me despertaste el alma y me besaste el cuerpo.

¿A dónde te llevaste las aguas que bañaron mis formas, en espiga de sol recién abierto? ¡Quién sabe en qué remoto país mediterráneo algún fauno en la playa me estará poseyendo!

¡Quién sabe en qué aguacero de qué tierra lejana me estaré derramando para abrir surcos nuevos; o si acaso, cansada de morder corazones, me estaré congelando en cristales de hielo! ¡Río Grande de Loíza! . . . Azul. Moreno. Rojo.

Espejo azul, caído pedazo azul de cielo; desnuda carne blanca que se te vuelve negra cada vez que la noche se te mete en el lecho; roja franja de sangre, cuando bajo la lluvia a torrentes su barro te vomitan los cerros.

Río hombre, pero hombre con pureza de río, porque das tu azul alma cuando das tu azul beso. Muy señor río mío. Río hombre. único hombre que ha besado mi alma al besar en mi cuerpo.

¡Río Grande de Loíza! . . . Río grande. Llanto grande. El más grande de todos nuestros llantos isleños, si no fuera más grande el que de mí se sale por los ojos del alma para mi esclavo pueblo.

Translation by Jack Agüeros

Río Grande de Loíza! . . . Elongate yourself in my spirit and let my soul lose itself in your rivulets, finding the fountain that robbed you as a child and in a crazed impulse returned you to the path.

Coil yourself upon my lips and let me drink you,

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to feel you mine for a brief moment,
to hide you from the world and hide you in yourself,
to hear astonished voices in the mouth of the wind.

Dismount for a moment from the loin of the earth,
and search for the intimate secret in my desires;
confuse yourself in the flight of my bird fantasy,
and leave a rose of water in my dreams.
Río Grande de Loíza! . . . My wellspring, my river
since the maternal petal lifted me to the world;
my pale desires came down in you from the craggy hills
to find new furrows;
and my childhood was all a poem in the river,
and a river in the poem of my first dreams.

Adolescence arrived. Life surprised me
pinned to the widest part of your eternal voyage;
and I was yours a thousand times, and in a beautiful romance
you awoke my soul and kissed my body.
Where did you take the waters that bathed
my body in a sun blossom recently opened?
Who knows on what remote Mediterranean shore
some faun shall be possessing me!

Who knows in what rainfall of what far land
I shall be spilling to open new furrows;
or perhaps, tired of biting hearts
I shall be freezing in icicles!
Blue mirror, fallen piece of blue sky;
naked white flesh that turns black
each time the night enters your bed;
red stripe of blood, when the rain falls
in torrents and the hills vomit their mud.

Man river, but man with the purity of river,
because you give your blue soul when you give your blue kiss.
Most sovereign river mine. Man river.
The only man who has kissed my soul upon kissing my body.
The greatest of all our island’s tears
save those greater that come from the eyes
of my soul for my enslaved people.
Introduction

*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*
*Pilgrim, there is no road — you make the road by walking.*
—Antonio Machado

Figure 8. *Sobre la Marcha*: Procession. Loíza 2014.
Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.

This dissertation is about the annual *Fiesta* of Santiago Apóstol (St. James) celebrated annually in July 25-28 in the Afro-Puerto Rican town of Loíza, Puerto Rico. It is both a study of a religious celebration and an *ofrenda*, an offering with spiritual dimensions, of the stories of the people of Loíza. It is a narrative about the devotion of a people who hold deep reverence for Santiago Apóstol, their ancestors, and Loíza, their ancestral home. It focuses on the religious
processions that are part of the *fiesta*, their meanings as rituals of religious devotions, and their subversive power as collective movements of resistance against multiple oppressions. During the processions, the devotees of Santiago Apóstol walk upon ancestral lands, following traditional routes through the heart of their community, now under constant threat of gentrification and government expropriation. Carrying their beloved saint on their shoulders, the people walk the streets of Loíza retracing the faithful steps of their ancestors towards the cork tree, the site of the miraculous apparition of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza. The procession is at once a holy pilgrimage and a collective reclamation of Loíza as their home. With Santiago as their guide, the processions become infused with the powerful spiritual force of their protector, the spirit of the ancestors, and the faith of his devotees.

This work emerges from the ethnographic research I conducted in Loíza as participant-observer of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza between the years 2008 and 2014. I returned to Loíza after completing my fieldwork in 2007 for my Master’s thesis on the *Baquiné*, a funerary rite for children with Afro-Puerto Rican roots. In the process of conducting interviews in the town of Loíza, I became aware of the complex socio-political realities and the richness of their religious experiences. I was invited by several community leaders to return in 2008 to explore more deeply the lived religious experiences of the people of Loíza, including their participation in the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol and the practice of *Espiritismo*. Thus, I returned to learn more about Loíza and how community movements to resist gentrification intersected with their religious rituals and cultural traditions. As a participant, I also returned to pay my *promesas* (promises) to *Santiago de los Niños*. During my ethnographic research, I interviewed a small number of people who identify as Loiceños and who are community
leaders with deeply held religious beliefs and ritual practices. The voices of the people and their interpretation of their every day experiences are at the center of this thesis. In addition to their narratives and my comments, this thesis also includes my own photography as another way to share the world my informants have created. The images support and illustrate the central theme of this thesis when the written word fails. I hope to address the initial questions that brought me to this study and also that some of my questions might have changed, or remain unanswered, in the true spirit of a methodology I call sobre la marcha (on the move).

My work is located within contested spaces where the people of Loíza move on a daily basis and where they express their ways of knowing, meaning making, and self-determination: their homes, their streets, and their temples. It includes reflections about oppressive socio economic conditions that have caused great suffering and the many ways people have resisted. Thus, my examination of the celebration of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol as a religious celebration includes people’s stories about Loíza and their own experiences as a center from which liberatory movements emerge. This means taking into account lo cotidiano, the quotidian, meaning people’s day to day movements including storytelling, sharing of their ways of being and seeing the world, participating in religious processions and healing rituals, tending to home altars, creating artistic expressions of their spiritual landscapes, preparing community meals, caring for the image of Santiago Apóstol in their homes as Mantenedores (keepers of the saint), processing with the saint in the streets, marching, and being involved in (or bearing witness to) evictions and rescates de terreno (land rescues).

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2 Lo Cotidiano is Spanish for “the quotidian.” It is a term used by Theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz to describe Mujerista theology. This theology privileges the every day experiences of poor and marginalized women taking into account their suffering as a direct result of socio-economic, political, and religious oppressions.
Loíza is home to Santiago Apóstol, a beloved saint who is believed to have appeared to a *cimarrón*, a runaway slave. No one knows the exact date in which the Feast of Santiago Apóstol began to be celebrated in Loíza, Puerto Rico. Most people agree that it dates back to the 1600s during the Spanish colonization period. Today the *Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol* is recognized as one of the most important and popular Afro-Puerto Rican cultural and religious rituals celebrated in Puerto Rico. There are many versions of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol. Some say he appeared to a woman, some say he appeared to a Black fisherman. Some say he appeared inside the trunk of a cork tree. And all of them say that Santiago did not want to live inside the Catholic Church. Every time Santiago was brought to the church, he kept running away and going back to Loíza, to the tree trunk by the ocean, into the hands of the woman or fisherman. After three times of running away and reappearing, the woman or the fisherman took the image of Santiago inside their home in Loíza. Once in the home of the people who would become his *Mantenedores*, Santiago stayed and stopped running away. He found his home among the people of Loíza. In gratitude for the loving care received by the family who became his *Mantenedores*, Santiago now protects the people of Loíza. The *Mantenedores* begin an annual tradition of processing the saints through the streets of the town of Loíza, bringing the three images on three separate days to revisit the place of the original apparition, a place still known today as *el árbol de corcho* or the “cork tree”. Although the tree has been long gone, the people still refer to the place as *el árbol de corcho* in the present tense as in “we are going to process the image of Santiago to the árbol de corcho. When the images of the Santiagos encounter each other while being processed, there are elaborate banner rituals that take place at el *árbol de corcho*. People talk about meeting at el
árbol de corcho and never describe that place in the past tense, or as where the árbol de corcho used to be. It is significant to mention this because it shows how the people of Loíza choose to reclaim and maintain sacred space. In the people’s imagination and spiritual landscapes, el árbol de corcho is still there marking the spot of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol.

The original image found inside the cork tree is believed to be Santiago de los Niños, Santiago of the Children. Santiago de los Niños is also known as Chaguito, an endearing diminutive form of the name Santiago. His image is smaller than the other two Santiagos and made of wood. His childlike expression is not at all the one of a warrior going into battle. Rather he appears more like a child playing dress with a thin moustache drawn on his child-like face, dressed up in a soldier’s uniform, a tin pot on his head as a helmet, and mounted on a toy horse. His little sword is barely visible, not held high, and usually hidden by the colorful ribbons that people tie around the image as they say their prayers and make their promesas (vows). In contrast the images of the other two Santiagos: Santiago de los Hombres (Santiago of the Men) and Santiago de las Mujeres (Santiago of the Women) are larger and made of gesso or ceramic. The image of Santiago de los Hombres shows him in action, riding his horse in battle, wearing a solid soldier’s helmet and dark clothing, his sword raised and ready to come down in a menacing gesture. The image of Santiago de las Mujeres shows him on horseback, with a sword, but wearing light pastel colors, with a gaze that could be described as gentle, and his head turned sideways as if listening. Santiago de las Mujeres is also known by his feminine name, Santa Ana. No one knows exactly when the two other images of
Santiago de las Mujeres and Santiago de los Hombres arrived in Loíza. Today, each image is cared for by a different family of Mantenedores in their homes.

Each Santiago is honored in the month of July with his own novena and procession. Some believe that the existence of three Santiagos represent all the people of Loíza, and some believe that these representations are connected to the African roots of the cult to Santiago. With a rich tradition that spans centuries, the people of the coastal community of Loíza gather in the month of July to honor their beloved Santiago Apóstol and commemorate his miraculous apparition in Loíza. The “Fiesta” as it is known, is famous including deeply religious rituals such as novenas, Catholic masses, and processions. It is also popular for its beauty pageants, Bomba dance performances, kiddie rides, parades with floats, colorful masked Vejigantes and other characters such as Locas, Caballeros, and Viejos. The Fiesta

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3 Bomba is an Afro-Puerto Rican dance form involving drums and characterized by improvisational call and response. There are different Bomba rhythms depending on the geographical location. But although there are variances, Bomba everywhere in Puerto Rico is a communal dance performance which is not necessarily done in pairs. There is no set choreography, and people of all ages and abilities can jump in front of the drummer and dance, changing the beat. Bomba is a challenge between the dancer and the drummer. It is unique in that the dancer sets the rhythm thus leading the drummer. Thus, it is the drummer who attempts to follow the dancer, and not the more traditional form of the dancer following the drummer. Bomba is the musical precursor of the popular Salsa that emerged within the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York in the 60s and 70s.

4 Vejigante: The word literally comes from vejiga=bladder. In Loíza, people of all ages dress up as Vejigantes. They are bat-like characters who wear horned masks made of coconut and bright costumes and who participate and animate the processions and parades during the annual Feast of Santiago Apóstol which lasts for a week, beginning July 24th. Vejigantes interact with the crowd as they walk and dance and respond to choruses such as: “Toco-toco-toco vejigante come coco”; “Vejigante a la olla! pan y cebolla!” In olden times, the Vejigante chased screaming children with a stick that had an actual animal bladder on the end, filled with water. Now the Vejigante just walks or dances as part of the procession.

5 Locas: Literally crazy women. Locas are men who cross dress as women donning exaggerated breasts and derrieres. Some Locas act as clowns and enjoy making the people laugh. Other Locas have a more ritualistic role within the religious processions of Santiago Apóstol. They clean and open the road before the saint is carried throughout the town on a pilgrimage to the sacred site of the original apparition of the saint inside a cork tree in the neighborhood of Las Carreras. La Loco has a broom and a tin can and goes around cleaning the road and also performing ritual cleansings on spectators. These ritual cleansings are known as despojos and are well known within the practice of both Espiritismo and Santeria to rid people and spaces of evil spirits.
includes three religious processions of the devotees of Santiago Apóstol who walk nine miles in three days, carrying the image of Santiago Apóstol on their shoulders in the tropical heat of Puerto Rico in the month of July.

The fiesta is also a tourist attraction for its parades with elaborately decorated floats carrying beauty queens from all the municipalities of the island wearing their finest regalia, followed by *comparsas* of musicians playing lively *bomba* music and troupes of masked *veigantes* and *caballeros* dressed in shiny colorful satin costumes and dancing to the beat of the bomba rhythm. Loíza is also home to *Espiritismo*, a religion with deep African roots and great respect for the ancestors. The practice of *Espiritismo* connects the living and the dead and is present in home altars, spirit possession, ritual cleansings, healing ceremonies, divinations, and musical traditions such as *Bomba*.

The Feast of Santiago Apóstol takes place in a contested space where gentrification is a real and an imminent threat to the people of Loíza and their ancestral homes. This reality makes Loíza a community *sobre la marcha* (“on the move”), caught in the tension between rapid and indiscriminate tourism expansion and the people’s struggle to defend their coastal lands and homes.

Unlike the traditional understanding of pilgrimage as an act of moving away from familiar spaces, routines, responsibilities, times, geographies, and emotional landscapes, in the search for the divine, the Feast of Santiago Apóstol offers an understanding of the feast

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6 *Viejos*=Old men. These characters wear masks that make them appear to have white hair, wrinkled faces, and they usually hobble about aided by a walking stick. Before the popular use of plastic masks, the *viejos* wore a paper bag over their heads with openings for the eyes and mouth.
that mirrors Puerto Rican identity as a dynamic communal “vaiven”\textsuperscript{7} or a rhythmic coming and
going towards ancestral homes.

Every year during the Feast of Santiago Apóstol the people of Loíza process together through their neighborhoods to and from the site of the miraculous apparition of the saint. This movement is a retracing of the saint’s \textit{cimarronaje} (running away from slavery) route that tells the story of a runaway saint, who chose to live among the people of Loíza rather than be housed inside the Catholic church. In this way, the people reaffirm and reclaim Loíza as the home of the saint and as their own home. The processions involved in the Feast of Santiago Apóstol resonates with the work of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones\textsuperscript{8} whose work on pilgrimage proposes that movements, big and small, are possibilities for resistance against multiple oppressions.

In Spanish, the expression \textit{sobre la marcha} is used to describe a state of being while on the road, on the move, or doing while moving. It is understood as a sign of resiliency, ingenuity, and courage in the face of impossible situations. In Puerto Rico, people refer to liberation movements and spontaneous community social justice actions as having been forged \textit{sobre la marcha}. Both pilgrims and homeless people require quick strategizing “\textit{sobre la marcha}” in order to survive. They both face dilemmas with respect to the occupation of public spaces and the dangers faced on the road.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Vaivén} is literally the joining of two words: \textit{va and ven} go and come; a word that also means a rhythmic pendulous motion such as the rocking of a boat, the movement of people on crowded streets, the migratory patterns of birds and people.

\textsuperscript{8} Maria Lugones, \textit{Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions} (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD., 2003).
The expression *sobre la marcha* means “on the march” in English, or “on the move,” and is widely used in Latin America to denote creating something new while moving forward. When someone uses *sobre la marcha* to explain how they learned something, we conjure up an image of a body in motion, a dynamic force, and a person being propelled forward by a powerful internal force. Someone who learns and creates *sobre la marcha* doesn’t have a ready-made formula and does not look for a set of instructions. In fact, they cannot rely on old maps if they are to reach new destinations. To learn and create *sobre la marcha* is to embark on a journey where the road is being made as we walk. *Sobre la marcha* also has connotations of courage, wisdom, and faith. When fueled by a sense of urgency, when home and life depends on it, one does not stop to theorize. One is propelled forward by this energy, this spirit, this dream that takes us out of spaces and situations that deny our inherent worth and dignity. Embodying *sobre la marcha* we take this energy with us, we take the spirits of our ancestors with us, and we move forward. When we are denied our humanity, we move forward, when we are told we are less than others, we move forward, when we are made invisible, we move forward, when our homes and families are threatened, we move forward, when we are oppressed by economic and political conditions, we move forward, when we are silenced and imprisoned for demanding justice, we move forward, when our religious rituals and ceremonies are labeled demonic, we move forward, when our sacred spaces are invaded and desecrated, we move forward, when everything that we consider sacred is denied and invalidated, we move forward, when we cannot bear to witness one more person killed while defending their home and family, we move forward.
We move forward and sobre la marcha we strategize, organize, resist, challenge authority, spark revolutions, and experience tremendous spiritual transformations and a sense of empowerment derived from self determination and the freedom to define and express ourselves. To embody sobre la marcha in Puerto Rico, a United States territory, adds extra layers of complexities in the creation of liberation movements. Sylvia Calzada, founder and leader of the Puerto Rican LGBT\textsuperscript{10} Liberation Movement illustrates the courage, creativity, and community building strategies that characterize sobre la marcha:

Here in Puerto Rico we have always worked in coalition all the time. The identity of a person is not the identity of just one thing. In other words, I am a lesbian, I’m a daughter, a sister, I grew up as espiritista, I believe in Buddhism I am independentista. You realize one is not only one thing. One is many things. I had always been a feminist and participated in all the activities of the left of Puerto Rico, always supporting the lost causes [laughs] but never as an organizer... Everything we learned, we learned sobre la marcha. And our movement just grew... from being nothing to being activists. . . from one moment to another. . . we participated and kept talking, talking, and walking and suddenly we were the group of people making a movement in Puerto Rico! We were in it 100%.

This example is marvelous. I’m going to tell you! I love this example of how we managed to always support becoming more and more visible. Always empowering ourselves from feeling that we had nothing to being able to live happier lives. Because if you are not empowered in life, you are miserable! You screw up your life si tu no sabes bregar (“if you don’t know how to deal”) [laughs] Well . . . our most marvelous experience, I think it was the first time we participated in the pride march in Puerto Rico, we said ‘we have to go to the march!’ And one of the women said: ‘Oh but . . . I’m not going to go because you know’ . . . We were in the closet . . . We could lose our jobs, our children. ‘So what are we going to do?’ ‘We will make a closet and walk inside the closet! So we made a closet. We got a refrigerator box and we made a closet. We spent the entire night painting the closet to take to the march. But that day, sobre la marcha, the person who

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9 Puerto Rico is officially known in Spanish as Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State) and in English as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. It was originally named Borinken by the indigenous Taino peoples. In 1493 Christopher Columbus claimed Puerto Rico as a Spanish colony. In 1898, as a result of the Spanish American War, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States under the Treaty of Paris.

10 LGBT= Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.
was supposed to walk inside the closet decided right there and then not to walk inside the closet! [laughter] Instead, we all marched carrying the empty closet... So that is extraordinary! That sense of empowerment! We are always dealing with how to do something? What can we do? ‘Oh well, I don’t think I can’ or ‘I’m not brave enough’ no me atrevo (“I don’t dare”), ‘We can’t go beyond’ . . . And then when we realized the same people that were afraid were the first ones that would give us the lesson! They were more prepared than us! And that was so chevere! (“awesome”) I have learned sobre la marcha and in the process with others, that there is always movement... When you go, you go! And [even when] you are deathly afraid and you’re not going to participate, or you remain on the margin en la orillita that moment comes and you see that even with all the panic that you might have, you end up being the protagonist of something . . . And from then on life, your life, continues to change . . . Life continues to bring you to another level and another level. The experience was incredible because we became leaders not only in Puerto Rico and among Latin@s in the US, but in all of Latin America. We really empowered ourselves! We were in the middle of the whole movement! The whole Latin-American movement! I went from “please help me I need to know what I’m doing with my life” to being leader of a movement that was powerful . . . Very, very powerful! I believe that the great value of the organization was how personal and how motivational it was. It emerged from a real genuine need and it was inevitable. I mean we either did something or we exploded! And we knew that... and it was something that marked us and until today we are doing the work! We were scared to death and we are still scared, we are never going to lose the fear because we didn’t know anything nos tiramos de pecho (“we jumped right in”) and I surprised myself at how we did the things we did and how sobre la marcha we became the internationally known Lesbian Mothers of Puerto Rico. . .

Sylvia’s story illustrates some of the characteristics of sobre la marcha: collective creativity, a sense of empowerment, individual and community movement, transformation, becoming the protagonist of your own life, always becoming more and more visible, and the realization of our intersectional subjectivities. These characteristics also apply to the myth of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol11 in Loíza,12 the processions his devotees engage in to honor

[11] Santiago Apóstol is the protective patron saint of Spain. His remains are believed to be in the city of Santiago de Compostela, a world-renowned pilgrimage site with a route known as El Camino de Santiago, or The Road of Santiago. Today, Santiago is celebrated in Spain and many Latin American countries, including Puerto Rico, in the month of July with festivals, processions, special masses, novenas, banner parades, etc.
him, the community organizations struggling against gentrification and evictions, and the
practice of Espiritismo in Loíza, Puerto Rico. All are liberation movements encouraging
community building, resistance, and experiences that stretch people’s notions of what is
possible. Sobre la marcha is a spontaneous movement that brings people together. It is energy,
power, and a practice that opens up potential for transformation. Amidst repressive forces that
threaten people’s lives, homes, and sacred spaces, the people continue to move forward.
Whether they carry a closet, a saint, a banner, or the faith in their hearts, the people of Loíza
are on the move to create and defend spaces of liberation. Within the historical context of the
colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, these are contested spaces. As
such, it is important to keep in mind the complex and intersecting dynamics of an occupied
territory with a particular history that results in different expressions of resistance and
liberation.

Sylvia’s story is evocative of the work by anthropologist Maria Lugones. For Lugones, the
creation and participation in liberatory movements, or “pilgrimages,” helps us in our search for
meaning, brings like-minded people together in solidarity, and encourages us to connect with
one another. Some movements, she writes, are deemed more obviously political than others.

12 Loíza is located in the northeast coast of Puerto Rico. It is believed that the word Loíza derives from ”Yuisa”
an indigenous Taino female Cacica (Chief) that governed the area at the time of the Spanish invasion in 1493. Loíza
is located to the west of the river Río Grande and the Atlantic Ocean. The Río Grande is significant in the history of
Loíza in that it separated Loíza from the rest of the island for centuries, until the building of a bridge in recent
decades, connecting Loíza to San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. This separation is said to account for Loíza’s
unique cultural traditions rooted in its rich African ancestry. In fact, Loíza is officially known in Puerto Rico as The
Capital of Tradition. One of these unique traditions is the celebration of the annual feast of Santiago Apóstol in the
month of July.
But even subtle ways of resisting, interrupting, or even bearing witness, can constitute political action:

Sometimes you are stuck in a chair and the tiny movements in your hands are a level of intense resistance that requires a closeness of understanding to sense tactually the forcefulness of the motility. Sometimes you walk miles in a closeness of people giving birth to an intention that was not in any of us alone, with banners and other crafted signs of our impudence. Everyone in the crowd sensing in the sounds coming out of our bodies and our feet hitting the ground, and the bumping into each other, the carrying of the signs still fresh or used over and over, but made from our own cloth, the forcefulness and largeness of our motility. . .

Figure 9. Praying to Santiaguito before the Procession at Tamara’s House. Loíza, 2014. Photo by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.

\[\text{Lugones, 2.}\]
Lugones recognizes the importance and potential for transformation of even those movements that are not labeled political. This resonates with the processions in honor of Santiago Apóstol, the participation in the healing ceremonies of Espiritismo, as well as the more openly political acts of occupying land by disenfranchised people, and the many small but effective spontaneous actions by people resisting evictions and displacement from their ancestral homes. There is power in the sensing, in the feelings, in the prayers, in the chants, in expressions that do not necessarily follow a logic or strategic linear thinking. In Sylvia’s words, sobre la marcha emerges from a real genuine need to do something. Moving forward together in the midst of repressive circumstances, sobre la marcha offers an extraordinary sense of empowerment. It propels people who thought they were stuck and could not do anything to change their situation, towards the possibility of change and liberation. Ultimately, it is this realization of the possibility of freedom from suffering, despair, illness, homelessness, displacement, and multiple oppressions, that make sobre la marcha a theoretical and methodological approach rooted in indigenous ways of knowing. These ways of knowing differ from traditional mainstream academic presuppositions and expectations of how knowledge is produced and shared. Thus, knowledge production while sobre la marcha is inclusive of sensing, feeling, marching, praying, processing, singing, dancing, cooking, painting, altar making, sweeping, carrying banners, remembering, storytelling, dreaming, and virtually every expression of our human condition. It is knowledge production rooted in a liberatory praxis evocative of Latin American Liberation Theology.\textsuperscript{14} This theological approach inherently affirms

\textsuperscript{14} Liberation Theology is known as an interpretation of the Christian faith that calls for a praxis in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. The term Liberation Theology was coined in 1971 by Peruvian Theologian Gustavo
Sobre la marcha as it demands: “Which side are you on?” and calls us to make a move towards exercising a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. This move is simultaneously an internal one as well as an external journey, a political movement as well as a religious practice.

In other words, to participate in a religious procession or in a healing ceremony within the context of Espiritismo can be a political act, a strand of resistance against oppression. It is a manifestation of a community building strategy that makes visible the invisible forces of the ancestors of a people struggling to be seen, to be treated as equals, to be recognized within a nation state that insists on denying their inherent worth and dignity as Afro-Puerto Rican people. Likewise, to participate in a protest march against gentrification, evictions, and the privatization of Loíza’s coastline can be an experience with profound spiritual and religious meanings. Being heard, being seen, being part of a larger movement, moving together, marching in solidarity, building community, and connecting people in search of social justice. Sobre la marcha helps us to see how all these different movements in some way blur the borders between what is considered political and religious, private and public, internal and external, and sacred and ordinary spaces.

Gutiérrez, author of A Theology of Liberation. Within the Latin American context, Liberation Theology emerged in the 1960s as a form of resistance to poverty, oppression, and social injustice. The driving force behind Liberation Theology is to construct a theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. It is a moral challenge that asks “Which side are you on?” It is a call to action to realize Jesus Christ’s mission by siding with the poor and the oppressed. Gutiérrez also made popular the expression “preferential option for the poor” which is at the heart of Liberation Theology, asserting that God is revealed on the side of those deemed by society to be “insignificant”, “marginalized,” “unimportant,” “needy,” “despised,” and “defenseless.” Gutiérrez interprets “the poor” in scripture to have social and economic connotations. He writes: "Preference implies the universality of God’s love, which excludes no one."
We have seen examples of great political movements propelled by profound spiritual and religious beliefs and vice versa in the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King\textsuperscript{15} and the farmworkers union movement led by Cesar Chávez\textsuperscript{16} and Dolores Huerta\textsuperscript{17} Both movements emerged \textit{sobre la marcha} and employed marching as strategy of resistance. \textit{Sobre la marcha} recognizes the theological implications of the oppressed denouncing the inhumanity of racism and demanding to be seen and heard while walking on the land, making contact with mother earth, claiming space, in the fields of California or the streets of Selma, while carrying a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe or a placard reading \textit{I am a Man}. In the same way, every year in July the people of Loíza take to the streets and walk the land of their ancestors while facing the threat of eviction from their homes. They carry the image of Santiago Apóstol on their shoulders and wave banners with his image while processing through the streets of their neighborhoods reclaiming that land as their ancestral home. Many lacking official property titles, lay a moral claim to their homes and communal coastal spaces through the intercession of Santiago Apóstol and the manifestations of their own devotion to the saint. Participating in the processions becomes a strategy of resistance \textit{sobre la marcha}. All the different elements

\textsuperscript{15} The Civil Rights Movement was a social movement in the United States led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in the 50s and 60s. The goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination against African American people. Many of the strategic meetings of the Civil Rights Movements took place in churches, giving the Civil Rights Movement a religious and moral context. Important achievements were: The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in employment practices and ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, at the workplace, and by public accommodations; the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which restored and protected voting rights; and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing.

\textsuperscript{16} César Chávez was a Mexican American farm worker, civil rights activist, and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union, UFW. Supporters of the UFW were known to march through the streets carrying signs, crucifixes, and banners with Our Lady of Guadalupe.

\textsuperscript{17} Dolores Huerta was co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union with César Chávez.
that go into the celebration of the feast of Santiago Apostol become paths with liberatory potential because they strengthen community ties and foster a sense of belonging.

Community-building activities include Novenas held in the Mantenedores’ homes, fundraising events to pay the musicians, preparation of community meals to be distributed free of cost to those participating in the processions, being on the sidelines and bearing witness while the procession go by, leaving the sidelines as observer and joining the procession, impromptu bomba dancing in the streets, tying colorful ribbons to the image of the saint and praying for healing, sweeping the streets to clear the way for the saint and his devotees, all contribute to community building sobre la marcha during the feast of Santiago Apóstol.

Sobre la marcha evokes the work of María Lugones on pilgrimage as a movement, theoretical framework, and way of thinking about resistance:

I chose “pilgrimage” as the way of movement because of Victor Turner’s understanding of pilgrimages as movements of people that loosen the hold of institutional, structural descriptions in the creation of liminal spaces (Turner 1974). The possibilities of antistructural understandings of selves, relations, and realities became important to me, not as a temporary passing experience, but as a way to think of resisters to structural, institutionalized oppressions. I think of anti structural selves, relations, and practices as constituting space and time away from linear, univocal, and cohesive constructions of the social.18

I chose sobre la marcha because it helps me to understand the feast of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and the struggle against gentrification in Loíza, Puerto Rico, as ways of constructing the self that involve movements in community building and offer possibilities for self determination. I propose that sobre la marcha is an indigenous approach offering a decolonizing perspective rooted in Liberation Theology. Sobre la marcha helps me to

18 Lugones, 8.
examine the feast of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, the processions, the stories of the
*Mantenedores*, the practice of *Espiritismo* in Loíza, and the popular movement against the
gentrification of Loíza as manifestations of the lived religious experience and political resistance
of the people of Loíza against institutionalized oppressions. In the spirit of Lugones, I am
concerned with the many intersecting ways that people fashion complex and multivalent
strategies of resistance, rather than with linear thinking that force false dichotomies between
understandings of the religious and the political. It is important for me that the voices of the
people, their lived experiences, their beliefs, and every day lives are recognized as valid
embodiments of resistance and manifestations of self-determination. Thus, I move away from
academic tensions attempting to define nation, culture, race, private, public, and what might or
might not constitute a “legitimate” religious experience, or what is considered purely political.
*Sobre la marcha* embraces intersectionality, complexity, messiness, ambiguity, hybridity, multi-
vocal storytelling, relationship, and by definition is ever changing and always on the verge of
transformation. *Sobre la marcha* allows for the validation of memory, dreams, spirit possession,
ancestor worship, altar making, and the mixing of healing herbs in the *Espiritismo* religious
context as liberatory practices that “loosen the hold” of oppressive situations in the every day
lives of the people. While *sobre la marcha* implies doing while moving without a map, it is
important to recognize that there are “maps” in legal systems and institutional power
structures that aim to govern and restrict people’s movements on various levels. Lugones refers
to these “maps” demarcating the spaces one can or cannot occupy and their effects on the
human condition:
Visualize, remember, and sense a map that has been drawn by power in its many guises and directions and where there is a spot for you. All the roads and places are marked as places you may, must, or cannot occupy. Your life is spatially mapped by power. Your spot lies at the intersection of all the spatial nevus where you may, must, or cannot live or move. Those intersections also spatialize your relations and your condition with respect to the asymmetries of power that constitute those relations.¹⁹

The right and freedom to occupy space is expressed by the people of Loíza moving via the processions on the feast of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and organizing to protest gentrification and displacement in Loíza. Sobre la marcha fashions a road made by walking, a route made by the people that super imposes itself over old maps made by institutions to control the people. In Liberation Theology terms, this new road is made by the praxis, the every day practice of exercising a preference for the poor and oppressed. In Loíza, this liberatory practice is embodied and expressed by the people through the processions during the feast of Santiago Apóstol, the ongoing practice of Espiritismo, and the popular resistance movement against the gentrification of Loíza. Within the context of religious experience, sobre la marcha offers an indigenous and decolonizing way of being that is always on the move. Sobre la marcha is akin to cimarronaje (the act of running away from slavery) that employs community-building strategies in the search for liberation that is both intimate and communal. The mythological framework of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol affirms sobre la marcha as successful cimarronaje utilizing a community building strategy that leads the saint into the heart of the community and into the center of the home of the Mantenedores.

In the myth of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol, the saint has suffered imprisonment, persecution, and endured much suffering. One day, he appears inside a cork tree by the beach

¹⁹ Lugones, 8.
in Loíza to a humble Black fisherman. The fisherman takes the saint to the Catholic church, but the saint keeps running away from the church, appearing and disappearing, running away from this religious institution, away from its building and the structures that would govern and control the saint’s movements. These movements of repeatedly running away, hiding, appearing and reappearing, inverting power dynamics, and ultimately defeating and rejecting a powerful institution created to govern and control one’s body and soul, are liberating movements. They are spontaneous movements, big and small expressions of resistance sobre la marcha that recognize Santiago Apóstol as cimarrón (runaway slave) and the ultimate trickster.

The myth of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza sets the stage for the saint to become known as one of the people, someone who shares a history of persecution, suffering, resistance, and who finds a home in Loíza among the people. During the feast of Santiago Apostol in Loíza in the month of July, the people process carrying Santiago on their shoulders, literally becoming his feet and reenacting his cimarronaje which becomes simultaneously a reenactment of the cimarronaje of their ancestors.

The chapters in this dissertation invite the reader to allow sobre la marcha to illuminate spaces, intersections, and relations that are contested, multi-vocal, and important in the lives of the people of Loíza. Sobre la marcha places the lived experience of the people of Loíza at the center of my work. These experiences include their roles as devotees and Mantenedores of Santiago Apóstol, processing with the saint, participating in communal healing rituals in Espiritismo, storytelling, organizing and marching in protest of the privatization of communal spaces, taking back the land, honoring the ancestors, altar making, producing indigenous art, and remembering and keeping alive the memory of community members who died in the
struggle. In each chapter, *sobre la marcha* becomes an act of *cimarronaje* in the storytelling of the people. As an indigenous way of being, *sobre la marcha* embodies and expresses the lived experience of the Mantenedores (keepers of the saint), the devotional religious rituals to honor Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and the ongoing struggle to protect Loíza from gentrification. *Sobre la marcha* is a ribbon that runs through each chapter weaving the stories of the people of Loíza: Their devotion to Santiago Apóstol, to their African ancestors, and to their home: Loíza.

At its core, The Feast of Santiago Apostol celebrates the triumph of a Black man, a humble fisherman and *cimarrón/runaway slave*\(^{20}\) in Loíza who finds the tiny image of Santiago Apostol inside a cork tree in the neighborhood of Las Carreras and who is chosen over and over again by the saint over the Catholic priest. The saint chooses to live in the home of the humble fisherman, a Black family who brings him to live with them and who become the saint’s caretakers, or Mantenedores. The pilgrimage embodies and reincorporates the route from outskirts to inland and back three times, from hiding to the safety of home as sanctuary, the rejection and running away of a trickster Santiago from the hands of the Catholic priest, who now multiplies himself and exists in three different places. He takes the saint to the Catholic Church and gives it to the priest. Like the saint, the ancestors of the people of Loíza were also *cimarrones* who arrived on Loiza in search of freedom and there built their homes. Today, coastal communities in Puerto Rico, including Loiza are facing gentrification and threats of evictions, producing tension and conflict between residents, building companies,

\(^{20}\) *Cimarrón=* runaway slave.
and law enforcement. At times these encounters have turned extremely violent and resulted in people being killed by the police. One of the victims was Adolfina Villanueva, a Black woman, mother of six children, descendant of *cimarrones* and sharecroppers, who was killed by the police in the process of a violent eviction from her ancestral home in Loiza. As neighborhoods in Loiza face gentrification, they are creating social justice movements *sobre la marcha* to resist land speculators and the privatization of the seashore.

I conducted my ethnographic work in the streets of Loiza, in the homes of the *Mantenedores* who are the guardians of the three images of Santiago Apóstol, and the *Espiritista* Temple in the neighborhood of Las Cuevas. As a participant observer, I contribute my own narratives as experienced during the rituals of the Feast of Santiago Apóstol and participating in the *Espiritista* temple sessions in Las Cuevas. At the heart of my dissertation are the stories of some of the people of Loiza who shared their lived experience and their devotion to Santiago Apóstol. Their voices, memories, and religious imaginations guide my work and offer an understanding of Loiza as a site of deep knowledge production, complex constructions of cultural and religious identities, and contested “homeplace” for pilgrims, the saint(s), the *Mantenedores*, the participants in the processions, the masked *Vejigante* and *La Loca/Crazy Woman*, the practitioners of the religious tradition *Espiritismo*, and the living memory of Adolfina Villanueva.

This dissertation engages with religious phenomenology to explore the lived experience of contemporary Loiceños expressing their devotion to Santiago Apóstol. What are the responsibilities of the *Mantenedoras* in keeping the saint? How are the homes of the *Mantenedoras* connected to the pilgrimage sites? How do Loiceños experience the rapidly
increasing building of the tourist industry encroaching on their community and the threat of gentrification, dislocation, displacement, forced migration, and even death? How does the religious festival of Santiago provide a platform for public transgressive cultural and religious performances?

The celebration of the Feast of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, the devotion expressed by the people in caring for the saint and during the processions, the communal nature of the Fiesta, and the reincorporation of the Loiceños\textsuperscript{21} Ausentes/Absent Loiceños into the life of the community, the connections between the living and the dead through the practice of Espiritismo, and the struggle against gentrification all offer a glimpse into the lived experience of a community and their beloved saint.

I will examine “movements” of people sobre la marcha/“on the move” within contested spaces that are evocative of communal memories filled with potential for transformation. The movement of people through these contested spaces serve to re-locate the experience of the people of Loíza within larger debates about Afro-Puerto Rican identity. By locating the discussion in Puerto Rico, I propose a decolonizing approach that recognizes Loíza as a site of knowledge production. As such, dynamics of power and their implications will be explored to address how they impact the emergence of new articulations of self and nation. The selection of Loíza highlights the importance of the understanding of margins as sites of oppression and resistance and their relation to the construction of identity in public spaces and within the homes of the Mantenedores. In addition, the art of Samuel Lind, a local

\textsuperscript{21} Loiceño=Person from Loíza
native resident of Loíza, artist, and community activist, serves to illustrate the importance of indigenous aesthetics and the ubiquitous nature of home altars in Loíza as fields of knowledge production themselves.

I call this a study *sobre la marcha* because it privileges people’s movements, the movements that take place intimately within people’s spiritual landscapes and homes, as well as the movements that take place in the open spaces of the streets of Loíza. It is as much a study about the annual Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol within the larger socio-political and economic context of Puerto Rico as a colony of both Spain and the United States, as it is a study about individual stories that illumine people’s every day lives struggles against poverty, racism, and marginalization. It is a study of movement, of Black bodies in movement, which in itself has been deemed a threat to the status quo supporting institutionalized racism. Referring to Black bodies in motion, Wallace Best writes:

> Historically black bodies in motion in this country have always spelled danger to the white power structures. . . As a scholar of the Great Migration, I have spent most of my career trying to understand the multiple meanings of black bodies in motion. If I’ve learned anything from my explorations, it is that a black body in motion is never without consequence. It is always a signifier of something, scripted and coded. And for the most part, throughout our history black bodies in motion have been deemed a threat. . . This irrational fear of black bodies is deeply ingrained in our national psyche and has at times received the full support of most structures of our society, including our religious institutions. During the slave era, for example, the threat of insurrection prompted a series of oppressive restrictions on black assembly and black movement for slaves and free blacks. Some churches either fully embraced or turned a blind eye to Jim Crow discrimination, terrified at the prospect of interracial worship. Anti-loitering laws in this country were steeped in racial bias with the overt implication that a group of black men congregating—with seemingly no “purpose”—constituted a “gang.” The legacy of this is that there is no such thing as a singular black body. Patricia Williams calls this the “massed, multiple others,” where one is many; two is a mob; and all are threats.²²

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Best reminds us that any writing and analysis about the movements of Black bodies must recognize the significance within a historical continuum of relentless repression, suppression, invisibilization, policing, and criminalization of Black people’s movements (great and small) by social institutions, including the church. It is well documented that in Puerto Rico, in the aftermath of the successful slave rebellions in Haiti, drumming, dancing, and gatherings of Black people, including free Black people, were outlawed and punishable with harsh measures. In 1982, Baralt and Ayorinde documented how slaves in Puerto Rico rebelled frequently and organized themselves to take control of the towns and even the entire island. While the exact number of these rebellions is not known, there are 40 recorded in the history books plus hundreds of individual escapes.  

In the period between 1795 and 1848 slaves in Puerto Rico collectively manifested their repudiation of the slavery system in two ways: by directly confronting the system and by running away. . . slave escapes in Puerto Rico also represented rejection [of the slavery system] . . . Individual escapes were more common than conspiracies . . . escapes in groups led to the formation of maroons or runaway slaves . . . These maroon communities needed to be formed immediately after the escape. . . .”

In my research I heard some people describe themselves as Loiceños and as proud people whose ancestors were cimarrones (runaway slaves). This is also important as we consider the mythological origin of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza to a Black fisherman who tries to return the image to the Catholic Church, but Santiago keeps running away from the church and finally ends up in a safe home, being protected and cared for by the

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24 Baralt and Ayorinde, 133.
people of Loíza. In this way, Santiago Apóstol can be regarded as a *cimarrón/a* runaway maroon. That being said, this is not a study about slavery in Puerto Rico. It is a study of the people’s movements expressed in their creativity an agency via building communal movements of resistance and transformation in the face of oppression and repression. Black bodies in movement expressing their devotion to and participation in the annual processions of the religious cult of Santiago Apóstol, their ongoing faith in the ritual healing practices of *Espiritismo*, and their engagement in marches against the gentrification of their home, Loíza, are included and valued as expressions of the people’s self-determination.

![Figure 10. La Loca Opens the Road with Broom, Loíza 2014. Photograph by Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.](image)

By privileging the voices of the people, their stories, and their reflections about the meaning of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of *Espiritismo*, and their engagement in community actions against gentrification, the study of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol becomes a
movement itself, opening a path towards a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of
the day to day lives of the people of Loíza, lo cotidiano, while sobre la marcha. In other words,
my dissertation proposes that in order to understand the context and significance of the Fiesta
of Santiago Apóstol, we also need to understand the lives of the people who participate in it:
the ones who walk the walk, make a way out of no way, and retrace ancestral steps to reclaim
Loíza as their home every single day in a variety of ways.

Every year the celebration of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol makes Loíza come alive in
the month of July with parades, processions, singing and dancing, and a variety of cultural
performances and “dramatic expressions.”25 The preparations for the next fiesta begin even
before the current fiesta ends, and engage the people in many different preparatory activities
including fundraising, designing and making ornate floats and carnival costumes, gatherings at
Mantenedores’ homes to pray novenas, purchasing and storing supplies, making posters,
banners, and flyers, beautification and replenishing of ofrendas in home altars, and a wide array
of other preparations. These preparations culminate with three processions in honor of
Santiago Apóstol on July 26th, 27th, and 28th. Adding to the complexity of the fiesta, there are
three Santiagos: Santiago of the Men, Santiago of the Women, and Santiago of the Children. It
is also equally important to mention that although there are differences among the three
statues because they are made of different materials and are of different sizes and age, each of
the images of Santiago depict the saint as a Spanish warrior, with one arm raised over his head
wielding a sword, mounted on horseback, the horse trampling over the dismembered and

25 Lowell Fiet, Caballeros, Veijigantes, Locas y Viejos: Santiago Apóstol y los Performeros Afropuertorriqueños (San Juan: Terranova, 2007), 16.
beheaded brown and black bodies of the Moor. This is why Santiago Apóstol is also known as *Santiago Matamoros* (Santiago, killer of Moors). This prompted me to wonder: Why would a community of people who identify as Afro-Puerto Ricans and whose ancestors suffered the horrible conditions of slavery, express such devotion to Santiago, a White Spanish warrior shown killing brown and black people? How do the people of Loíza, and *Mantenedores* in particular, understand Santiago? How is this an expression of their lived experiences? The people’s stories about their lived experiences will address these questions.

Each image of Santiago lives in Loíza in a different home, with a different family of *Mantenedores*. Each Santiago requires his own novenas and procession. The first to process on July 26th is Santiago of the Men, followed by Santiago of the Women on the 27th, and last but certainly not least, by Santiago of the Children, lovingly referred to by the people of Loíza as *Chaguito*, an endearing diminutive of the name Santiago, whose procession culminates the fiesta on July 28th. The celebration of the fiesta has been known to last for three days, in keeping with the three processions for the three Santiagos, but lately it has been stretched to last for an entire week to include the parade of returning *Hijos Ausentes de Loíza* (Loiza’s Absent Children).26 The return of the absent children of Loíza brings together the year-round residents of Loíza with those who identify as *Loiceños* (natives of Loíza) and living within the US/Puerto Rican diaspora most notably from New York City, New Haven, Chicago, and Orlando. The *Hijos Ausentes* bring with them their own children to witness and participate in the fiesta of

26 During the celebration of the Feast of Santiago Apóstol, there is a parade where the returning “children of Loíza” (people with ties to Loíza who have been living outside Puerto Rico as part of the US/Puerto Rican diaspora) participate. The group elects a representative or grand-marshall, who wears his title on a sash across his chest and who usually rides in a convertible car, greeting the people.
Santiago Apóstol in the hopes that they too will develop bonds of respect and pride with the people, the culture, and the religious rituals of Loíza. This is facilitated by the fact that during the month of July most students are on school vacation and parents, especially those who are teachers, can plan their summer vacation around the fiesta. Within the context of the US/Puerto Rican diaspora, it is important to note that Loiceños have also been celebrating their own version of the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in the streets of New York and New Haven for over three decades. For Loiceños who cannot get time off from work, who cannot afford the cost of traveling to Loíza, or whose health prevents them from traveling, having a celebration of Santiago Apóstol in their own city is a way to connect to their religious and cultural traditions. These fiestas in the city of New York and New Haven have become popular not just among people who have direct familial ties to Loíza, but also among Puerto Ricans in general, and within the wider Latin American urban immigrant population.

Puerto Rican archeologist and anthropologist Ricardo Alegría was the first to publish a study about the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in 1956. This original study inspired others to document the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol. Most of these studies touch upon the economic and social history of Loíza, Afro Puerto Rican identity, the fiesta as a cultural phenomenon, and the performance and carnivalesque aspects of the celebrations, particularly the ubiquitous


Vejigantes, Viejos, Caballeros, and Locas. My study also touches the surface of the above mentioned areas, but aims to deepen understandings of the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol by placing at the center the lived experiences of the people of Loíza, their stories, beliefs, perspectives, ways of being, knowledge production, devotions, relationships, and every day rituals: lo cotidiano. It is a study of motions that draws breath from indigenous ways of knowing recognizing and elevating oral history and testimonies as knowledge production rich in meaning within movements great and small. Guided by the people’s devotion to the three Santiagos, I use a comprehensive triptych approach to illumine three intersecting movements: The fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and the resistance movement against the gentrification of Loíza. Together, these movements provide a multi-vocal entrance point into the lives of the people of Loíza. They emerge as dynamic, liberatory movements, filled with potential for transformation, created sobre la marcha (on the move). Although evocative of Latin American Liberation theology, this approach refrains from theological references or debates about the Catholic Church as a religious institution, precisely because the origin of the cult of Santiago Apóstol is his cimarronaje, his insistence on running away from the church over and over again, towards the streets and homes of Loíza to make his home. Thus, this dissertation is concerned with religious phenomenology and the lived experiences of the people of Loíza that include the cult of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and their occupation of contested spaces in Loíza. Some might label this a study of “popular religion” because it includes a dizzying mixture of masquerades, beauty pageants, religious novenas,

29 Cimarronaje is Spanish for the act of running away from slavery.
processions, masses inside the Catholic Church, healing rituals in Espiritista temples, “feeding”
the ancestors in home altars, protest marches against evictions, artistic representations of the
every day lives of the people of Loíza, and other practices deemed to be part of “folk” tradition.

To be sure, the lived experiences of the people of Loíza include all of the above, yet this study is much more than that. It is only recently that scholarship referring to Religion and
Puerto Rico has begun intentionally to take into account the Afro-Puerto Rican experience
employing ethnographical methodologies that privilege the individual’s own voice and
narrative. Very few studies concerning the Afro-Puerto Rican religious experience in Loíza
include the voices and perspectives of Afro-Puerto Ricans. For too long the lived religious and
spiritual experience of Afro-Puerto Ricans, the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, and the practice of
Espiritismo in particular, have been labeled “exotic” and dismissed as idolatry, paganism, and
witchcraft, relegating it to “folkloric” practices. With very few exceptions, the written accounts
about the people of Loíza tend to essentialize the people and make generalizations about their
behaviors, ways of being, perspectives, and self-identification. In an effort not to stumble into
those patterns, my study begins and ends with the stories of the people.

These stories show people’s lives as complex, in flux, embracing ambiguity, and rejecting
presuppositions about race, religion, and culture. For example, one of the Mantenedores, Rosa
Julia, talks about herself as someone who inhabits two worlds: one as a member of an
established religion recognized as “legitimate” and another as the Mantenedora of the image of
Santiago of the Children. People from her church look down upon her and approach on the
street to tell her that she is an idolater and judge her as “pagan.” Rosa Julia maintains a calm
composed attitude towards these people and reaffirms the importance and pride of her role as
*Mantenedora*, a place of honor in the community of Loíza, and a beloved legacy inherited from her Tía Julia. Her daughter Rosalie chimes in during Rosa Julia’s story, to ask: ‘What does it say about us as people if we hide, if we don’t continue with the celebration of the fiesta?’ Rosalie, in her early twenties, makes an important point about visibility, about the significance of going out into the streets and participating in the processions of Santiago Apóstol as an affirmation of identity. For Rosalie, hiding goes against a long trajectory of proud and hard working *Mantenedores* having the responsibility of keeping the tradition of Santiago Apóstol alive.

Another example is found in Sylnic Cruz’s testimony. Sylnic is the *Mantenedor* of Santiago of the Women. When speaking about the number of people who participate in the processions, he mentions that today many people have converted to religions that frowned upon and even prohibit their congregants from attending the celebrations of Santiago Apóstol. At the same time that Sylnic recognizes that the number of people actually walking in the processions has gone down in recent years, he also acknowledges that those same people are present in the audience as onlookers, standing at a distance, or sitting comfortably in lounge chairs in front of their houses, under the protection of the shade of a *flamboyán* tree, waiting to see the processions go by. For Sylnic, they might not participate in the actual walking, but they are participating “whether they want to acknowledge it or not.” Both Rosa Julia and Sylnic are members of churches that are considered mainstream, and yet they both participate in the cult of Santiago Apóstol. Likewise, Doña Mello, like many people in Loíza, identify as Catholic and attends mass on Sunday mornings. But, come Monday evening she along with many of the people that attended mass the day before, will be on their way to the *Espiritista* temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza, to participate in the seven o’clock healing rituals of “the white table” where the
mediunidades\textsuperscript{30} will conjure the African and Taíno spirits to come down on them and bring healing to those in need. Many of the participants will never share that they visit the temple for fear of “el que dirán” (gossip).

This dissertation places at the center the stories of Loíza’s religious devotion, ritual practices, and community building strategies. These are the stories of a people whose ancestors endured the inhumanities of slavery, of people who continue to suffer ongoing marginalization and racism, and yet defy labels as “the poor,” “the oppressed,” or “the descendants of slaves.” The ways in which people decide to tell their stories and express their beliefs, religious devotions, commitment to social justice, and how they describe themselves in their own words builds a space filled with potentiality for transformation. When I was interviewing Sylnic Cruz, Mantenedor of Santiago of the women, I made some references to the people of Loíza and slavery. He redirected the conversation and told this story:

There was a Spanish ship from Africa. The people on the ship were sick and weak from the difficult journey. Many had died on the way. The captain of the ship took a detour from the place where he was supposed to bring the people. Instead, he brought the ship to the coast of Loíza. When the ship reached the shore, the people stepped out of the ship, and their feet touched the waters of Loíza. They took their first steps on the land of Loíza as free people. I am a descendant of those people. My ancestors were always free. Therefore, I have always been free!

In telling this story, Sylnic re-writes the “official story” asserting his right to determine his lineage and rejecting the label “descendant of slaves.” In fact, the term “slave” is not even

\textsuperscript{30} Mediunidades are the mediums who practice Espiritismo and conjure the spirits to come down. The mediunidades have the facultad (knowledge and wisdom) to make la obra (the sacred works) and they embody the spirits through spirit possession. In the temple, the mediunidades sit around a “white table” where one person presides over the session, allowing for the spirits to lead him to the person who needs healing. Upon summoning the person to approach the table, the person tells his/her story, shares what is making her/him suffer, and asks for help. As the person is speaking, one or more of the spirits will come down on the mediunidades and will approach the person to provide healing words and guidance. The president of the table will also offer recipes for different healing herbs and rituals to get rid of evil, illness, and to summon good health, prosperity, and well-being.
part of his narrative. Sylnic’s story illustrates a way of being that affirms his agency and self-determination to tell his own history. It is a story that conveys a way of being affirming his freedom to interpret and articulate his own reality. What is important for Sylnic is not that his story be chronologically or factually “true.” What is important for Sylnic is to be seen and understood as an individual who defines himself as “always free.” This story was a great lesson in ethnographies of the particular. It is what guided me back to people’s stories as both theory and method.

Letting go of my old scripts and presuppositions, I learned to listen deeply. I came back full circle to my own indigenous ways of storytelling and ways of being. I returned to spaces long abandoned to the abstract world of academia to once again embrace the oral tradition of storytelling as knowledge and knowledge production. Sylnic’s story had a tremendous impact on me. It helped me to remember that as an indigenous scholar, I too have the right to assert myself in deciding to draw my own maps, to refuse to fit into prescribed labels, and to begin and end with the people’s stories. In this way, this dissertation is being created sobre la marcha, on the move. Beginning with the stories of the people offers a first person account of individual’s feelings, beliefs, and perspectives.

These moving stories tell of the Mantenedores’ pride and sense of responsibility of taking care of the saint. They tell of the people’s devotion and sacrifices when processing to “pay” the saint for the miracles of healing, repaired relationships, work, and well being. The stories also talk about locas31 sweeping the streets before the procession of the saint and

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31 Locas in Spanish means crazy women. During the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol men cross dress as women and are called locas. Some locas play the role of carnival buffoons and clowns, while others have a spiritual role
people tying colored ribbons to the image of Santiago while praying for a miracle. Some stories weave in and out of space and time to invoke the memory of friends and neighbors long gone but not forgotten, such as Adolfiná Villanueva. Adolfiná was an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in her early 30s, mother of six, living in her ancestral home, who was fatally shot in front of her husband and children, during a violent eviction carried out by the police on February 6, 1980, in the Tocones neighborhood of Loíza. Samuel Lind, a local Loíza artist and Rosa Julia, Mantenedora of Santiago of the Children, remember Adolfiná and the way she was killed. Both shed tears when they recall the day when Adolfiná was shot defending her home in Loíza.

Samuel keeps a window from Adolfiná’s house that shows a bullet hole. Samuel and Rosa Julia affirm that Adolfiná’s spirit lives on and continues to inspire the liberation movements of new generations of Loiceños struggling to defend Loíza: their home.

**Sobre la Marcha: A Methodology On The Move**

I have been visiting Puerto Rico on a regular basis since 1982. From 1999 until 2006 I lived in Puerto Rico. In 2005 and 2006 I conducted research and fieldwork in Loíza in connection with my Master’s thesis about a funeral rite with African roots, known as the Baquiné. Since 2005, I have been visiting Loíza to conduct research and to participate in the various events that take place during the Feast of Santiago Apóstol in the month of July. These visits have allowed me to network with local residents and establish involving sweeping the streets before the procession of the saint begins. During the procession, they might go up to unsuspecting people and perform a “limpia” or ritual cleansing.
connections with community members and devotees involved in the planning and implementation of the events in honor of Santiago Apóstol.

My fieldwork was conducted in the streets, in the homes of the families that are charged with caring for the images of the saints known as Mantenedores, and in the Espiritista Temple in the neighborhood of Las Cuevas in Loíza. I was both an observer and a participant in the processions, novenas, visits to the homes of the saints, community meetings, parades, and visits to the Espiritista Temple. I also conducted archival research at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras in order to explore further the history of Puerto Rico in general and Loíza’s history and religious traditions in particular. I recorded life stories from members of the religious communities specified above as a way of capturing the metaphors, vernacular images, everyday experiences and critical events that will enable me to flesh out and deepen my phenomenological understanding of the social events and socially constructed realities that form the general framework of my thesis.

My work is guided by sobre la marcha, a methodology that emerged during the process of writing this thesis. After struggling to make my work fit into mainstream academic theoretical and methodological frameworks, sobre la marcha revealed itself as both theory and method in the words of the people I interviewed. Their stories helped me to understand and validate their every day experiences and their articulation of their own realities as knowledge and knowledge production. Sobre la marcha helped me find a path to a theoretical framework and methodological approach that privileges people’s own narratives and perspectives about their own every day lives.
Inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod’s work on *ethnographies of the particular*, my work is less concerned with “rules,” “fixicity,” or “discreteness,” and more focused on openness to the particularities of the lives of individuals, their relationship to community, and the people’s own interpretations and narratives about their every day lives. Ethnographies of the particular is an approach that allows for narratives that include poems, songs, prayers, photographs, dances, food, memories, ritual ceremonies, and a variety of day to day life experiences that flow from people’s own stories instead of remote sociological theories.

Abu-Lughod lifts up alternative modes of fieldwork and ethnographic research. She values the production of field work that takes a detour from academic conventions and that is more open, less concerned with scientific authority, and more focused on the particular individuals and their families.  

When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discreet, bounded entity, like the “the Neur”, “the Balinese,” and “the Awlad’Ali Bedouin” who do this or that and believe such-and-such. . . people contest interpretations of what is happening, strategize, feel pain, and live their lives. . . the difference here would be that one would be seeking textual means of representing how this happens rather than simply making theoretical assertions that it does. . . By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness.

Like ethnographies of the particular, *sobre la marcha* is located within personal experience, articulated and shaped by the individual person asserting their agency to tell their own story, and to recount historical events in their own words. This makes *sobre la marcha*
multi-vocal, inclusive of contradictions, and embracing notions of time and space that are outside the presuppositions dictated by official accounts recorded in history books. It is encouraging for me as an indigenous and feminist scholar to find a path towards research that does not bring us back to problematic essentialism, generalizations, and homogenization. To go down that route would be to re-inscribe the colonization experience.

Another source of inspiration and guidance is Linda Tuhiway Smith (1999), who offers important observations about research involving indigenous peoples and proposes alternative decolonizing methodologies that problematize mainstream notions about knowledge and knowledge production:

Many critiques of research have centered around the theory of knowledge known as empiricism and the scientific paradigm of positivism which is derived from empiricism. Positivism takes a position that applies views about how the natural world can be examined and understood to the social world of human beings and human societies. Understanding is viewed akin to measuring. As the ways we try to understand the world are reduced to issues of measurement, the focus of understanding becomes more concerned with procedural problems. The challenge then for understanding the social world becomes one developing operational definitions of phenomena which are reliable and valid.... From an indigenous perspective Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power.34

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34 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press, 1999), 42.
Bringing into focus an indigenous perspective that values people’s every day experiences, or lo cotidiano, also helps me to stay away from abstract academic debates that present dichotomies between what is considered public and private, political and religious, or sacred and profane. I chose instead, to focus on the words that the people themselves use to describe their activities and experiences as they were telling the story. This is another way that I attempt to put in practice sobre la marcha as a decolonizing methodology.

Storytelling sobre la marcha does not live in a pre-fabricated, static, pre-scripted, revisionist location, but in a dynamic, multi-vocal, multivalent, intersecting space and time that the speaker creates according to their own memories, cadence, and ways of expressing themselves. In Puerto Rico, this includes the well-known practice of everyone speaking at the same time. This is a cultural norm that defies linear thinking and challenges the outsider to develop awareness akin to switching from a zoom lens to a panoramic view, while keeping the individual voices in focus. This rhythmic way of speaking is illustrative of Puerto Rican identity itself, which has been described as “always on the move” and the people of Puerto Rico as engaged in a constant movement, or vaivén.

Within some academic circles, oral histories are finally being elevated to the level of academic theory and methodology. In Puerto Rico, a group of scholars: Jocelyn A. Géliga Vargas, Irmaris Rosas Nazario, and Tania Delgado Hernández are using oral history seeking new

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35 Lo cotidiano, meaning the every day, the quotidien. A term used by Mujerista Theologian Ada María Isasi Díaz to validate people’s day to day activities, especially those activities performed by women that often go unseen or are devalued by society precisely because they are performed by women.

ways to conduct ethnographic research that privileges the oral testimonies of Afro-Puerto Ricans. The expression *La Tercera Raíz* (third root) and *Raíz Africana* (African root) are sometimes used by people in Puerto Rico to refer to the Afro-Puerto Rican identity, or the “African element” within the Puerto Rican identity. While the use of “the third root” remains popular within discourses about race and cultural identity in Puerto Rico, narratives about race and cultural identity seem to be moving away from notions of a “melting pot” or *mestizaje*.

Today’s discourses also include perspectives that are more nuanced and more intentional about teasing out and lifting up Puerto Rico’s African ancestry. During the years I lived in Puerto Rico, it was common to hear people refer to themselves as *mehclao* (mixed), *somoh un mogollo* (we are a sticky mess), *somos de tó* (we are everything) suggesting an understanding beyond discreet categories and more of a hybrid experience *mezcla* (mixture) of racial and cultural identity. That being said, notions of *mestizaje* and *mezcla* tend to resemble the melting pot metaphor that invariably leaves out the African experience. In the academic world, the term “the third root” was deployed to become synonymous with African ancestry within the context of racial hybridity.

The metaphor of roots, being underground, unseen, entangled with the other two: Taíno and Spanish, to produce and nurture one tree has become a dominant way of understanding Puerto Rican racial and cultural identity. The notion of the third root has been hailed as a breakthrough to give visibility to the African “element.” Thus, the use of *La Tercera Raíz* became ubiquitous wherever there was a museum exhibit, conference, book signing, or

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theatre production that had something to do with Puerto Rico’s African heritage. *La Tercera Raíz* to a large extent is still considered as advancement in opening up spaces for discourses about race, racial identity, and the concept of nation and nationality within the Puerto Rican context. For many, including the *La Tercera Raíz* as a descriptor of their identity, became a way for people to be specific about expressing their pride in being Black and in doing so, breaking the silence that *mestizaje*, or *mezcla* imposes. But even the beautiful image of a tree with many roots, still conveyed the formation of one solid body or trunk.

In recent years, the concept of *La Tercera Raíz* and *Puertorriqueñidad* as *mestizaje* has been interrogated and challenged by Puerto Rican scholars writing about race and the Afro-Puerto Rican identity. Jocelyn Géliga Vargas, Irmaris Rosas Nazario, and Tania Delgado Hernández are pioneer social researchers conducting oral history projects within Afro-Puerto Rican communities, akin to Abu-Lughod’s ethnographies of the particular.\(^{38}\) Géliga Vargas, Rosas Nazario, and Delgado Hernández state that:

> The official discourse about race in Puerto Rico vehemently attempts to mute the voices and disavow the experiences that challenge the myth of a unitary national identity. The authors continue to discuss and denounce the impact of an essentialist “myth” that portrays *mestizaje* as harmonious, romanticizes Spanish and Taíno indigenous heritage, and views “Africa” as a monolithic “element.” To illustrate their point, the authors mention the

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emblem of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (Institute of Puerto Rican Culture),\textsuperscript{39} and whose institutional purpose is to define the cultural policies of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

The emblem shows the image of the three Spanish ships, or carabelas, which brought Columbus to America: La Pinta, La Niña, and La Santa María. The ships occupy the highest point in the image, the biggest one with swollen sails showing the Christian Cross in the middle and appear to be hovering above the heads of three men: the one on the left shows a Taino with short cropped hair and protruding bones, holding a cemi\textsuperscript{40} and flanked by corn, tobacco, and manioc plants; the one in the middle shows a Spanish nobleman, or caballero, dressed in elegant clothes, holding a thick grammar book, and the one on the right, representing the African heritage, shows the black man with chiseled musculature, holding a machete and a drum, and next to him a Vejigante mask and plantain leaves. In the author’s estimation, this image does more than convey the existence of the three races or roots that make up Puertorriqueñidad. The image painfully conveys a message filled with “racist and reductionist undertones of the Puerto Rican myth of racial harmony.”

\textsuperscript{39} Don Ricardo Alegría was a Puerto Rican archeologist and anthropologist who, among many other accomplishments, was the first to document the Feast of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, Puerto Rico. He was the founder of the ICP, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña.

\textsuperscript{40} In Taino religion, the Cemi or Zemi is a stone sculpture within which deities and ancestral spirits dwelled. Cemis could incorporate bones or skulls as reliquary urns. Ancestral remains in the Cemis were housed in shrines and offered food as offerings.
When it comes to portraying the “African” in Puerto Rico, there is abundant production of images that reduce the Black experience to “folklore” and “primitivism” which occlude the horrific experiences of both the Spanish conquest and the institution of slavery. In addition, the fact that the emblem leaves women out completely, expos an additional layer of invisibility and silence based on gender:

The ICP... veers off from any consideration of the intersections of race and gender, advancing a patriarchal historical narrative that disregards the role of women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post (?) Colonial Puerto Rico. This gender blindness deliberately eclipses the fact that the “making of the Puerto Rican nation” has been historically predicated on efforts to possess, control, and subjugate (Taíno, African, Spanish, European, Puerto Rican) women.\(^{41}\)

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I consider these observations regarding race and gender important to my understanding of Afro-Puerto Rican racial and cultural identity. The recognition of the systematic efforts by patriarchal institutions to control and subjugate women is important when considering the narratives of the keepers of the saints who identify as Afro-Puerto Ricans and express devotion to Santiago Apóstol, a White Spanish Saint associated with the *Reconquista*[^42] and the killing of Moors. It is also important to examine notions of racial and cultural identity and how the lived experience of being Afro-Puerto Rican affects Loíza and its people. How do the people of Loíza, a town known as “the capital of tradition” with deep African roots, express their religious devotion and beliefs? How do the people of Loíza strive to make meaning of a government sponsored process of gentrification and violent evictions that has already resulted in the death of those resisting and defending their homes? How does the religious imagination of the people of Loíza shape their storytelling and the way they share their lived experiences through oral history?

It is helpful to recognize that behind the commercial branding of *La Tercera Raíz* there is another type of branding that is evocative of real Black bodies and whose descendants continue to refuse to be branded, possessed, controlled, and subjugated. *Sobre la marcha* is a methodology that privileges the individual’s own lived experience and meaning making. It is similar to a radical model for conducting ethnographic research designed by a collective of university professors, university students, and community leaders in Puerto Rico. This new model aims to break down essentialist presuppositions about the Afro-Puerto Rican experience.

[^42]: The *Reconquista* is the name given to a long series of wars and battles between the Christian Kingdoms and the Muslim Moors for control of the Iberian Peninsula. It lasted for a good portion of the Middle Ages from 718 to 1492.
by problematizing official notions of tradition connected to African heritage and revealing new ways to locate and articulate narratives of resistance. This model privileges oral history and recognizes storytelling as a source of power and a catalyst to spark self-reflection about contemporary Afro-Puerto Rican identities and experiences. This ethnographic model encourages registering multivalent voices and in doing so, challenges official narratives of a homogenous Afro-Puertoricanness seen only as traditional or folkloric. This methodology, like sobre la marcha, is the exercise of self-determination and the freedom of the narrator to move and carve out a space for the production of their own self-representation without outside intervention. My work documents the particular quotidian experiences and memories of Afro-Puerto Ricans who identify as the Mantenedores (keepers of the saint), local artists, and community activists of Loíza. These new narratives are a movement that actively rejects the marginalization of the lived experience of the Afro-Puerto Rican people of Loíza. The testimonies are richly textured and expressed in deeply moving testimonies of faith and love for the saint, the ancestors, and Loíza, their home.

Finally, the work of Chela Sandoval on Methodologies of the Oppressed (2000) reaffirms my own struggles as a feminist, indigenous scholar, and ordained minister committed to social justice confronting theories and methods that fail to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person43 and that lack feminist, indigenous, and communal approaches to research. Sandoval offers a method grounded in the power and the love of los de abajo (those at the bottom). It is a method rooted in Sandoval’s own activism and her belief in collective action.

43 “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” is the First Unitarian Universalist principle.
against oppressive economic conditions. It is a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination and congruent with the principles of Liberation Theology. It is a call to be actively engaged in acts of resistance and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed that might bring about fundamental changes to systems of economic and societal oppression.

As such, it supports my own approach to understanding the potential of storytelling as a decolonizing strategy. Sandoval’s method insists on solidarity, resistance, and a decolonizing theoretical approach. Angela Davis describes Sandoval’s Methodology of the Oppressed as transformative resistance and a source of solidarity among scholars committed to social justice:

Methodology of the Oppressed is concerned with creating a place for significant interventions in the social world; it can be described as a prolegomenon that critically examines the conditions and possibilities for contemporary radical movements in this era of global capitalism. Emerging scholars who want to link their work to pursuits for social justice will be inspired by the way Chela Sandoval refuses to abandon her belief in the possibility of revolutionary resistance. As this book troubles traditional ways of thinking about social activism, it simultaneously subverts the idea of the social passivity of theory. By focusing on prospects for psychic emancipation, Sandoval summons a new subject capable of love, hope, and transformative resistance.44

My work as a scholar and as a minister is guided by the call to constantly look for liberating narratives to create spaces that might offer love, hope, and the potential for transformation. I believe that this potential for transformation is the spirit of sobre la marcha. It is what moves the devotees of Santiago Apóstol to process each year and to honor their ancestors; it is what moves the practitioners of Espiritismo to gather at the temple to offer healing ceremonies; and it is what moves the people of Loíza to come together as a community to resist gentrification. This potential for transformation is also what moves me as an

44 Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2000, xii-xiii.
indigenous scholar to embrace _sobre la marcha_ as an alternative, decolonizing approach. Originating in people’s consciousness, ingenuity, courage, and faith, this transformative power is inherently present in _sobre la marcha_ as an ongoing source of potential for change and transformation. This transformative power is found in the voices of the storytellers from Loíza sharing their own unique experiences as _Mantenedores_ (keepers of the saint), participants in the processions, devotees of Santiago Apóstol, practitioners of _Espiritismo_, artists, and community activists.

**Contributions**

Vital to this study is the consideration of how the religious ritual and communal nature of the Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol in Loíza have informed Afro-Puerto Rican social and political identities. As an ethnographic study, the narratives themselves offer a critical and variegated perspective of what it means to be Puerto Rican. This dissertation will fill a gap in the fields of anthropology and religious phenomenology in particular, by: 1) Documenting the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, Puerto Rico via oral histories; 2) Studying the healing rituals of _Espiritismo_; 3) Recording the oral histories of Afro-Puerto Rican people from Loíza, Puerto Rico; 4) Exploring the history of housing and popular resistance movement against gentrification in Puerto Rico.

Chapter I, “The Lived history of Loíza Aldea,” will consider the lived history of Loíza through the study of healing rituals in _Espiritismo_ and the artistic productions of Samuel Lind.
Chapter II, “Opening the Road: The Runaway Saint at Home in Loíza,” will discuss the Mantenedores of the saints, the custody of them, the symbolic character of them, narratives about them, and the role of religion in everyday life.

Chapter III: The Festival de Santiago Apóstol: This chapter will focus on the description of the three processions that take place during the annual Feast of Santiago Apóstol.

Chapter IV: Desalambrando/Undoing the Barbwire: This chapter will address Puerto Rico’s history as a nation shaped by colonization, land invasions, and resistance by the people in their participation in rescates de terreno/land rescues.
Chapter I

The Lived History of Loíza, Puerto Rico
Samuel Lind: Feeling the Ancestors

Lo que somos tiene unas bases negras africanas. . . mi madre, las curanderas del barrio, los espiritistas, los bailes de bomba, las fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, la música de los Ayala, la comunidad de Loíza. . . mi ambiente cotidiano es místico... mis vivencias... lo que me rodea. . . la madre naturaleza, ese espacio verde es mi segunda madre...cuando yo pongo los pies sobre la tierra es cómo sentir a los ancestros que me tocan... hay algo que fluye...haya una fuerza grande que mueve a uno. . . esos ancestros se están manifestando en todo lo que yo expreso. . .

—Samuel Lind

Who we are has strong black and African foundations... mother, the healers of the neighborhood, the Espiritistas, the bomba dances, the fiestas of Santiago Apostol, the music of the Ayalas, the community of Loíza. . . my day to day environment is mystical... my experiences... what I am surrounded by... mother nature, that green space is my second mother. . . when I put my feet upon the earth is like feeling the ancestors touching me... something flows... there is a great force that moves me... those ancestors are manifesting themselves in everything I express. —Samuel Lind

Figure 12. Nzambi and Samuel Lind, Loíza 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
I lived in Puerto Rico from the year 2000 to 2006. While living there, I attended the Symposium on African Spiritual and Cultural Traditions in the Caribbean and Latin America, which took place in Loíza in July of 2005, where I first met Samuel Lind. At the time, I was completing my Masters in Divinity degree and conducting fieldwork for my thesis on the Afro-Puerto Rican funerary rite known as Baquiné and he granted me an interview. In 2008, 2012, and 2014 I returned to his home/studio in Loíza to do fieldwork now as a doctoral student working on my dissertation on the Feast of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza.

Samuel Lind is well known for being an artist, for his devotion to Santiago Apóstol, and a body of work expressing what he calls “La Raíz Africana” (the African root). Every year, he produces most of the posters and printed programs for the Feast of Santiago Apóstol. He painted all the three official flags corresponding to the three images of Santiago Apóstol. These flags are very important and are cared for together with the image of the saint by the keepers of the saint, known as Monten edores. During the processions, the flag bearers go in front of the Saint and when the Saints encounter each other at certain points along the pilgrimage route, the flag bearers salute each other ceremoniously waving the flag three times in a “figure eight” shape, while the palanquin carrying the image of the Saint is lowered to make contact with the ground. Each time, the flag bearers kneel so that they too touch the ground that is considered sacred for being the place where the miraculous apparition of Santiago took place. In Samuel Lind’s testimony, he refers to his feet touching the ground and feeling the energy flow of the ancestors. For him, this energy gives him strength and moves him to share his work, which he considers an important spiritual process.
To enter Samuel Lind’s home, which is also his studio, is to enter a place where the image of Santiago Apóstol is ubiquitous and where home altars are found in every corner along with sculptures of bomba dancers and nature spirits, giant murals of earth goddesses, Vejigante masks, Black Jesus and Black Madonna’s, plaster statues of La Madama (the spirit who possesses the knowledge of healing herbs), Taíno icons made of coconuts, in addition to the hundreds of paintings he has created over the years:

We are in my art studio. My sculptures reflect a sense of freedom. I am speaking in a spiritual sense. To be able to express myself is spiritual. It is my spiritual dimension. I surround myself with the things I create. People need to be in their own environment to have a sense of belonging and wellbeing. I believe that as artists we can see beyond the obvious. I paint my reality and mother nature is my teacher. My art is the space where I move more freely. It is very deep. You see beyond. For me art is always spiritual. My artistic expression is from soul. This spirituality carries an impulse, a movement. For example, this sculpture is Osain. I was inspired by my African roots, (literally and figuratively because the sculpture is of a man with tree limbs and mangrove roots for arms and legs) this character, Osain, is a tree that becomes human. Osain is not born, he is made. He represents African roots. Osain is a saint, a botanist. He is powerful. He is the saint of medicine. My art has a lot of mysticism. I believe that art is necessary.

Samuel Lind’s narrative recognizes both ancestor worship and the forces of nature as key elements in his artistic production:

For me, nature. I see it as a great being that me cobija (it envelopes me). It is a space where I comulgo (take communion). This green space is like my second mother. It is important to make this known. The ancestors are manifesting themselves in all of this. The ancestors are coming out!

Samuel is very generous with his time and allows one to ask questions, approach paintings, touch sculptures, while he is making sure that his visitors are comfortable, have cool water to drink, especially in the heat of July. He is used to having a full house during the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol, including reporters, school children, and the Hijos Ausentes and their families.

Although I had visited his home studio many times, I had never been invited to see the original
painting *Nzambi*. I had only seen small reproductions in posters and brochures. So when he invited me to see the painting, I was grateful and felt that we had established a connection. The painting *Nzambi* is a monumental mural over 6 feet tall. It is located in Samuel and his wife’s bedroom, above many small home altars. Samuel indicates that this is a very private and sacred space for him and his wife and that the spirit and power of *Nzambi* watched over them when his wife was pregnant. As we contemplate the painting, his son now almost five years old, comes running in to give him a hug. They laugh. I express my gratitude and respect and remain quiet while he describes the painting and delineates its shape with his fingers. *Nzambi* is a nature goddess embodying the mangroves of Loíza. The vibrant green and turquoise colors reflect the lush landscapes of Loíza in the round shapes of a woman’s body. For Samuel, nature spirits are real and alive. He feels their presence every day moving within him, guiding his steps, giving him strength, and inspiration. Identifying himself as a son of Loíza, Samuel describes his beginnings as an artist:

I am proud to be a son of Loíza. I am the smallest and very humble, but Loíza is a land of great and noble people, a people who are open. My first drawings were of bomba dances and people’s every day lives. I grew up next to the Ayas with Don Castor Ayala who always communicated his pride of being Loiceño. (The Ayas are famous for being an artistic family, masters of vejigante mask making and superb bomba dancers). I connected with that pride. I connected with the vejigante who opens the road for the saint, for Santiago. Santiago is an identity, a connection with our ancestors.

Our devotion is real. That mystical sensation envelopes you and the fiestas in Loíza exude that devotion of the people towards Santiago, to the cult of Santiago, it is something mystical that touches me profoundly to know that a Spanish *patrón* is relying on the Black people [for his survival] that there is a spiritual commitment on the part of the people of Loíza, that needs to be expressed.

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45 *Patrón* in Spanish can mean boss, landlord, and used to denote a “patron” saint.
My art is nourished by the people of Loíza and by their expressions as they go about their daily lives. It is convivencia cotidiana (a daily sharing) of the people, which is also reflected in the drama of the streets during the fiesta. I also paint signs and placards that say “No mas destrucción (no more destruction).” I do what I can. It is sad to see how neglected, how forgotten the area of Tocones is (Tocones is where Samuel lives and where Adolfo Villanueva was killed). In Loíza’s quotidian life there is all of this. The neglected community of Tocones, the palm trees, people walk around united by the landscape, one with nature, moved by nature, through the natural roads of Loíza, the people move, the palm trees move.

Through time, the lands in Loíza and their inhabitants have experienced profound transformations: From being part of the only Taíno Cacicado/Chiefdom ruled by Yuisa, a female Taína Cacica, to living as sharecroppers on the lands owned by the European plantation owners, to being the descendants of agregados/sharecroppers who today may or may not have legal title to their land. It should be noted that being coastal peoples, the people of Loíza have a strong connection to the ocean and the river Río Grande. Thus, Loíza being the locus of the Feast of Santiago Apóstol, is a site of convergences and contestations, complex cultural identities, and multivocal religious practices.

In a public interview given by Samuel as part of the Symposium mentioned above, he describes himself, his art, and his community as a manifestation of his African roots. He believes that the Black African foundations must be clearly talked about, unmasked, sacar a la luz/to bring into the light. He is aware that he has been described as costumbrista/traditionalist and that many see him as part of an effort to reify “official” notions of “tradition” and “folklore.” But he makes no apologies for his deep sense of belonging to the place where he was born and where he received the gift of being an artist:

Mi pueblo siempre está presente (“my pueblo is always present”). I am very proud of my African roots...since the moment I opened my eyes I could see the Ayala’s patio, no? right there they would put on the bomba dances during the fiestas de Santiago
Apóstol... it was something mystical. . . it was my everyday life. . . sometimes I am described as too “regional” or too “costumbrista”/traditional, but I understand that art is a lived experience, it’s your surroundings. . . when I put my feet on the ground it’s like feeling the ancestors touching me... you can feel something that comes over you. . . something that flows. . . there is a great force moving me. I feel that art has a mission to communicate and to touch and to bring people that energy, that thing that moves you, one tries to project that. Within this creative process the spiritual is very important [the spiritual] is implicit in oneself, it’s in the air. During my childhood I was influenced by my mother, the healers of the barrio, the Espiritistas. My work. . . my intention is to make all of that visible. . . to take away the mask that we sometimes place over the African root... to manifest that [African root] in a Puerto Rican being.

It is important to mention the role that art plays in people’s lives. Poetry, music, theater, film, painting, sculpture, dance, mask making, sewing carnival costumes, making parade floats, photography, home altars, are all artistic productions that individually and as a whole, constitute knowledge and knowledge production reflecting the religious rituals and spiritual landscapes of the people of Loíza. As such, they are an important part of the every day movements that animate the environment of the people of Loíza. They are also part of an aesthetic continuum within particular historical and cultural contexts that informs people’s sense of self and their world vision. These artistic expressions, as mundane or sublime as they may appear, are part of the religious dimensions of people’s every day lives. They bring to life in concrete ways the invisible world of the spirits. They are part of a narrative that encompasses the world of the spirits, the ancestors, and nature. For Samuel, who he is as a person and as an artist is strongly rooted in his Blackness, his Africanness, in being a Loiceño, and part of a particular family, community, and natural environment:
When I opened my eyes I saw the Ayala’s backyard and there I saw the bomba dances during the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol. For me that was mystical. My every day life is a mystical experience. My art is my every day life, what surrounds me: the quotidian. My mother, the healers of the neighborhood, the Espiritistas, the bomba dances, the fiestas of Santiago Apóstol, the music of the Ayalas, the community of Loíza, my day-to-day environment is mystical. My experiences, what I am surrounded by, mother nature, that green space is my second mother. When I put my feet upon the earth it’s like feeling the ancestors touching me. Something flows. There is a great force that moves me. Those ancestors are manifesting themselves in everything I express.

Another example of Samuel Lind’s art as an expression of his spiritual landscape is his description of his painting *El Encuentro* (the encounter):

I painted this scene of Santiago Apóstol of this person, this fisherman, who while working with his [fishing] nets, in that precise moment, this person who is a “Liberto”/Free Black, descendant of a free African, looks at the tree and in the trunk he finds the image of Santiago. It’s like an encounter, an apparition, a miracle. They say that Santiago was brought here by the ocean. That he came to Loíza, drank coconut water [laughs], and stayed with us to suffer and enjoy with us. He [Santiago] is the most celebrated person in Loíza. I paint this person and when the nets fall [from his hands] something begins to encircle him “se le carga el ambiente”/the atmosphere becomes charged. There is something spiritual surrounding him and he looks towards the tree. I place Santiago inside this sphere, it’s like he is descending, it’s like the creator putting something in the trunk of the tree, no? I wanted to give it a mysterious tonality with a blue hue. I made the scene to [take place] in the evening, at night. When I paint this I am thinking about the Mantenedoras of the saint and how they tell the story with such a sense of reality, that it was so. This is a reflection of who I am, of who my community is. The African root is very strong and it is our best resource. It is our strength. This connection with the earth, with our ancestors, has a lot of power. Feel their touch!
Figure 13. *El Encuentro* by Samuel Lind, Loíza, 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis.
Samuel’s Afro-Puerto Rican identity guides his reflections about the meaning of Vejigante and La Loca who have been described devil and clown respectively, and reinterprets the miracle of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol. With his art, he re-writes the official scripture to present a Vejigante who is a Black angel, who is good, and who is a protector and a “Loca” as an Espiritista, a healer, who performs an impromptu “despojo” during the procession of Santiago Apóstol and who sweeps up of the evil, all the bad things in people’s homes and from the streets of Loíza. In his painting El Encuentro, he paints a Santiago who is not “Matamoros”/killer of Moors, but a divine presence whom the creator has sent to Loíza sent to share joys and sorrows of everyday life. When Samuel speaks about his painting El Encuentro he reiterates the mystical qualities of his work and the importance of expressing outwardly what he feels spiritually. He description of the painting is also an opportunity for the retelling of the story of the apparition of Santiago:

Santiago in that precise moment knows that this person, this fisherman, is a cimarrón, a run away slave, African, who is now free. It is a miraculous apparition. In that moment the fisherman is startled and he drops his nets “cuando se le carga el ambiente” (when his environment becomes “charged” with the spirit) and then he looks inside the cork tree and sees. I personified Santiago inside this sphere, inside the tree. The dark blue colors I used represent evening, shadows, darkness, the mysterious and the mystical.

The cult of Santiago is about the cimarrón, the liberto, the run away slave who has his African religion and who goes free. The road of Santiago is a religious one. Along the procession, the people stop to tie ribbons around him as they make their promesas (promises). They say that Santiago was brought to Loíza by coconut water and that he staid with us to share our joys and sufferings. El encuentro depicting the apparition of Santiago Apóstol and Osain (the sculpture of the saint of the forest) are both born within this space, born of the need to give expression to our African roots. Generally people think about slavery and the suffering of that generation and see only slaves, but that generation was great and more light is needed to illumine that generation of African mystics who held the wisdom of the healing herbs and found in the forests and mangroves spiritual energies.
Here in Puerto Rico the African presence includes Osain and the *cimarrones*, the run away slaves who found refuge in the mangroves, they found power in the mangroves, they found freedom in the mangroves that protected them. When you go to the mangroves you can feel that energy, that spirit of the forest there. That is power! That is creative vision! That is energy from the creator illuminating you! Illuminating me! What I am, who my community is, sending us a message filled with pride about our history and our African roots. Our African roots “tienen mucha fuerza!” (they have a lot of strength!) They are our greatest resource, our connection with mother earth, and our connection with our ancestors.

Samuel Lind’s testimony highlights the presence of the ancestors in his daily life, in his artistic productions as a force that he can feel and as a light illuminating him and his community. Samuel uses the word “mysticism” to describe the presence of the African ancestors manifested in nature and in his paintings and sculptures. In his retelling of the story of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol, Samuel reaffirms his own identity as Loiceño and Afro Puerto Rican. He also underscores the need to shed light onto the lived experienced of the African ancestors. He believes they should be recognized as strong people, resilient, and great. He resists the label of “suffering slaves” and complicates the subjectivity of those ancestors by making visible their other aspects as people of strength and wisdom who continue to be present and are felt by the people through prayer, ritual, communing with nature. He refers to his ancestors as mystical *cimarrones* who find in the mangrove forests the spiritual energies to change their situation and light the way towards liberation.
The Healing Practice of Espiritismo in Loíza

In Puerto Rico in Black communities like Loíza Aldea the realm of the Espiritistas (diviners and spiritual healers) use herbs as well as a variety of psycho-spiritual techniques for healing on many levels. . . the importance of water in attending the ancestors is also witnessed in the setting up of a bóveda—a personal ancestor table—in the homes of the Puerto Rican community. Glasses of water are set on a small table and are dedicated to spirits who have made their transition into the heavens. Each glass is dedicated to protector spirits which include Kongo ancestors. The ancestor table in the homes is an indication that the spirits have a constant presence in the lives of practitioners.46

Espiritismo has two different origins and practices in Puerto Rico. One is known as “scientific” spiritism made popular by French philosopher Allan Kardec. This kind of Espiritismo

became popular among Puerto Rican intellectuals and liberals who desired a political change in Puerto Rico. Arriving in Puerto Rico during the second half of the nineteenth century, the philosophy of Espiritismo resonated with those who believed that a change was necessary to liberate them from Spanish rule. Kardec’s philosophy spoke about individual transformation leading to community transformation. The Spiritist Foundation of Puerto Rico was founded in 1903. When this form of Espiritismo came to Puerto Rico, there was already an indigenous healing tradition or “curanderismo” that used herbal medicines, massage, prayers, poultices, and other healing practices. Some of these neighborhood curanderos specialized in “Santiguos” (massages with coconut oil) to cure empachos (colic), setting bones, or curing mal de ojo (evil eye). In addition to curanderismo, there was a strong Espiritismo healing practice rooted in the healing powers of the African ancestor spirits that had existed for centuries.

This other type of Espiritismo arrived in Puerto Rico with the African ancestors that reached the shores of the island beginning in the 1530’s until the latter part of the 1800’s. As the ancestors stepped off the ships, they brought with them their beliefs, religious practices, and protective spirits. In the case of the Yoruba ancestors, they brought with them their deities known as Orishas and their religion known as Santería. It was the Kongo ancestors who brought the religious beliefs and practices known as Espiritismo, or sance as it is known in Loíza. The foundation of Kongo Espiritismo is the belief in a spirit world that is always interacting with the living. Communication between the spirits and the living is not only possible, but necessary for a life in balance, with good health, fertility, good crops, and prosperity. This communication includes prayers, songs, special ceremonies, tending of altars with special foods and ofrendas (offerings), and calling the spirits to “come down” and perform healing on those who need it. In
turn, the spirits manifest themselves through dreams, divinations, and spirit possession. It is believed that those descendants who neglect the ancestors risk sickness and some form of misfortune.

While doing my fieldwork in Loíza, I learned about Espiritismo from Doña Mello, a practitioner who was born in an Espiritista family and whose father had “the gift” and was “Presidente de Mesa” (president of the table) until his death. Doña Mello allowed me to interview her and she also invited me to the Espiritista temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza, where I witnessed the healing ceremonies that take place every Monday evening at 7:00 p.m. I also learned about Espiritismo from the writings of Puerto Rican scholar Marta Moreno Vega who presented at several conferences and symposia about Religions in Puerto Rico that I attended. Moreno Vega has written extensively about Espiritismo and in particular about the Kongo presence in Puerto Rico and its manifestation in the practice of Espiritismo:

The belief in ancestors has continued to thrive in Puerto Rico and other African diaspora communities creating New World identities, families, and communities. Evident in the communities of marrones runaways the recreation of the philosophical, cosmological, sociological worldview was part of the transformation of Africans in the diaspora... in the case of Puerto Rico... [there were] innumerable acts of rebellions and individual conspiracies and practices of marronaje. [Baralt (1981)] documents the use of religious celebrations by Africans to organize rebellions. Africans used Catholic saints and festivals which they transformed and identified with African gods to camouflage their conspiracies indicating that their religious beliefs continued to be a central part of their lives. . . In the Americas, African religions with their history of adaptation became aggressive systems of resistance, affirmation, and a visionary cultural process of identity. Using passive and aggressive actions Africans were able to define their world rejecting the oppressive worldview of the Europeans.47

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Moreno Vega’s analysis is evocative of the story of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol to a fisherman believed to be a runaway cimarrón and Santiago’s own fame as a run away, as a form of resistance. Her description of African religions adapting, camouflaging themselves, and becoming spaces of resistance also resonates with the way Espiritismo evolved in Puerto Rico. At first forced underground in order to escape policing and punishment when gatherings by Black people were suspect and thought to be inspired by the Haitian revolution (which some were) Espiritismo has survived as a religion, as an accessible and popular community healing practice, and as form of resistance against constant attacks by mainstream religious institutions, the media, and those who dismiss it as “witchcraft.” Today Espiritismo continues to be misunderstood and maligned, but as more and more scholarship is generated about Espiritismo, its power as an effective healing practice and as a collective movement of resistance is being recognized and valued.

After centuries of being persecuted as evil and being vilified as superstitious and primitive, Puerto Rican popular Spiritists, self-defined brujos (witch-healers), have freed themselves from having to resort to all kinds of euphemisms (at least among insiders) to label their practices through defensive mechanisms inherited from colonial times (such as the commonly known syncretism) to camouflage their African-based ritual practices... Under the new politics of multiculturalism, brujos, rather than having to hide their trade, can now operate in a spiritual laissez-faire context as spiritual entrepreneurs facilitated by political and economic large-scale changes. Instead of being ashamed of or threatened by past stereotypes that labeled them as either heretics or charlatans (Romberg 2003a), brujos are increasingly able to acknowledge their spiritual work as stemming from the magic and healing powers of African orishas or deities. More importantly though, these ritual sources, which only a couple of decades ago carried very negative connotations, have acquired a unique positive aura: they are considered the most honored, potent spiritual energies of all.48

As the practice becomes more mainstream and less stigmatized, it also faces internal conflict. Doña Mello expressed her concern about the new generation of young practitioners, mediunidades, and even Presidentes de mesa around the mesa blanca who don’t observe the same protocols and who are transforming the practice into something the old people can’t relate to any longer. One of the most important things Doña Mello’s father taught her was that “the gift” is a responsibility and a healing gift from God that is always offered free of cost. Doña Mello asserts that she can tell a “fake” Espiritista when they charge someone money, or if they are “feeding recipes” to certain botánicas (shops that sell a variety of supplies associated with “prescriptions” given during a healing ritual). She expressed sadness and concern after observing someone adopt attitudes that she considers arrogant and disrespectful to the elders during the sance. At almost 90 years of age, Doña Mello has seen Espiritismo in Loíza experience a great change. She misses the presence of “los grandes” (the great ones) like Toño Lacén, who had the “gift” to heal so many people and attracted not only the locals for the Monday night sances. Doña Mello remembers a time when people would travel from all over the island and even from the US (she remembers people coming from Philadelphia and New York City) to attend the healing ceremonies in Loíza.
Espiritismo in Temple/Homes: La Madama Sweeps Loíza

It is significant that in Samuel Lind’s narrative he includes the spiritual influences of his mother, the healers of his neighborhood, and the Espiritistas. Although there are many religious traditions being practiced in Loíza, Espiritismo has been part of Loíza’s history and religious traditions. There is a temple in Loíza in the neighborhood of Las Cuevas, where every Monday night at seven o’clock, the “veladas”/sessions take place. The small building used to be made of wood and has now been rebuilt with cement. It is part of a compound connected to and comprised of five homes where the Lacén family has lived for centuries.
When Doña Mello (María Remedios Lacén Ramos), agreed to be interviewed by me, she also extended an invitation to attend the veladas/sessions. I conducted the interview in Doña Mello’s home while we were waiting for the parade of the Hijos Ausentes de Loíza/Absent Children of Loíza to begin. This is a parade part of the Festival de Santiago Apóstol in which people who are living in the US return to Loíza to honor Santiago Apóstol and the land where their parents and grandparents live(d). When we finished the interview, we enjoyed watching the parade together with her nieces and neighbors. Doña Mello invited me to return on a Monday at seven o’clock to participate in a velada/Espiritismo session in the temple in Las Cuevas.
Doña Mello: “Here I am! I prepare the herbs and sweep the temple”

My name is María Remedios Lacén Ramos. I live in Loíza, Barrio Las Cuevas. I was born on October 12, 1924 at 8:00 o’clock in the morning in front of the plaza in Loíza. There was a medicine man who asked my mother to name me María Remedios. He said I would bring healing and many gifts to the people, so they named me María Remedios and here I am! My father had the gift and from the time he was little he started working and consulting. As children we learned from him. Here in Loíza many people have the gift. The spirits are here. The guardian spirits are present. They watch over us and purify people. Everyone has a guardian angel! From the moment you are born you cry out “AYYYYYYYYY!!!! You catch the spirit! At home most of the children had the gift. It was in our veins. I always keep the [consultation] room very nice. During the veladas we give
people *despojos*. If you had pain you laid down and your stomach would be rubbed, you would drink tea and you would come out feeling good! And that’s the true *Espiritismo*

I have to sweep the temple, clean the table, change the waters, give the temple a *despojo*. Outside [the temple] we place a bucket of ice water for people to immerse their hands before coming inside the temple. When a person is given a *despojo* a bowl of water is placed in front of them to pass the spirit. People place their hand over the water and one can see everything they carry. . . all the negative things. . . look, last night a young woman stood up and put her hands over the bowl and everything she was carrying fell inside the bowl. All the negative things she was carrying broke up, so the bowl broke too! She was carrying a big burden and was liberated!

*Afterwards I give myself a despojo with the alcoholado that I make. I take Alcoholado Superior Santa Ana and I add herbs: mint, marjoram, basil, polea blossoms, well. . . I use lots of plants. . . That alcoholado has a very peculiar scent. We use it before the veladas to make sure no one is carrying any spirits with them. They are cleansed and no one takes anything with them and that’s done here in Loiza today, yesterday, last night, all the time! I live with the rosary in my hands. We have learned from our elders. In the Lacén family we have a gift, we have a legacy. We have the opportunity to help people, to serve as guides and protectors. If you have a problem, if you are stuck in a corner, we pray, we work with that person, we perform a cleansing. And that is liberation!* 

*Doña Mello’s testimony offers us a rich and multi-layered narrative about Espiritismo that rejects stereotypical and derogatory descriptions of this religious practice. Her story is about a woman born into an Espiritista family, inheriting “the gift” and dedicating her life to healing. She holds the secret of the healing herbs and she cleanses the sacred space that is the temple in Las Cuevas. She embodies La Madama, a strong Kongo spirit who holds the power of healing through herbs and ritual *despojos* (spiritual cleansings). La Madama comes down and makes the floorboards tremble with her presence. Similar to La Madama who dresses humbly and engages in domestic chores, some might mistake Doña Mello with a submissive woman relegated to sweeping the temple and changing the water in the ritual bowls. On the contrary, she has the power to cortar la corriente and redirect evil spirits with each sweep of her broom*
as she cleans the space of bad energies clearing the path for the ancestors to come down. Doña Mello also protects the temple making sure that visitors observe strict protocols of immersing their hands in ice water before entering the temple and even during the sanse, if she detects evil spirits attempting to take possession of someone. She makes sure that no one leaves the temple with any bad energies or evil spirits that might be brought home. Being close to Doña Mello was a very moving experience for me. At first when I was interviewing her at her daughter’s house, she was very calm, contemplative, and soft spoken (perhaps trying to read my intentions.) But once she entered the temple her energy changed and she became very animated as she pointed to different things and images and explained their meaning. This was her space, the space she had created, and the space she governs and maintains on behalf of the ancestors for the benefit of the community. Her story spans nine decades of Espiritismo in Loíza and her conocimientos/knowledge are part of the cultural and religious traditions of Loíza. In many ways, she reminded me of my grandmother Charito who was a curandera in a different tradition, but similarly respected and loved by the community. My grandmother was a curandera and also a devout Catholic who lived with her rosary in her hands. Doña Mello uses her gift to liberate people from pain and suffering. She also has the healing power that emanates from her own hands to heal and protect herself. Healing is not restricted to physical ailments, but also encompasses what she describes as situations where you “feel stuck in a corner.” Her despojos can effectively liberate people from feeling afraid, depressed, or hopeless about their life circumstances. She opens up the way to liberation through her prayers and the power of her herbal mixture of “alcoholado.” Doña Mello’s story unmasks Espiritismo in Loíza as a powerful source of conocimientos that offers possibilities to get unstuck from difficult
situations, experience healing, and liberate oneself from suffering. Her story lifts up the experience of a Loiceña woman, an Afro-Puerto Rican woman, who at almost 90 years old, continues offering her healing gift to the community of Loíza. This is also a story of a woman with power, knowledge, and pride whose potent movements sweep away evil spirits and reject demeaning stereotypes. With her movements, big and small, she becomes a resister and a direct point of encounter between the ancestors and the people of Loíza. Her conocimientos become a conduit, an ancestral path towards liberation.

Figure 17. Doña Mello in the Temple. Las Cuevas, Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
My Visit to the Temple: La Madama Comes Down and a Mother Reclaims Her Home

The spirits communicate through the possession of a medium who is generally the central figure in a circle of mediums seated around a table, covered with a white table cloth-mesa blanca-to attract superior spirits. The use of white clay or white in Kongo cultures is an important ingredient in successfully performing rituals as it is in the Americas among African descendants.

The spiritual sessions generally have a large round bowl filled with cool water placed at the center of the table. In the Kongo tradition, the importance of water and round shape refers to the circular cosmography dividing the secular and spirit world. In the new world spiritual session the water becomes a conduit for the attraction of positive spirits to manifest and assist their journey back to the spirit world, understanding the circular journey that is the meaning of life. Similar to its Kongo origin, Espiritismo acknowledges that one never dies, that the spirit continues and will return incarnated. The importance of medicinal herbal healing and the use of herbal magic preparations to protect practitioners in the system of Espiritismo is similar to that of the Bakongos, Called Nkisi in the Bakongo communities of Africa in Puerto Rico, they become spiritual medicinal healing remedies. Nkisi is defined as ‘the name of the thing we use to help a

Figure 18. La Mesa Blanca at the Temple. Las Cuevas, Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health’ The name refers to leaves as medicines combined together.49

I came to the temple wearing white clothing (per Dona Mello’s instructions) and before entering the temple, I was told to wash my hands by submerging them in a bucket of ice cold water to cortar la corriente (cut the current) in case a spirit tries to come down on you. The temple was originally a wooden shack that has now been replaced by a cement structure. The temple is part of a family compound where different generations of the Lacén family reside. Toño Lacén was the most well-known and beloved Espiritistas Loiza ever had. The walls of the temple are covered with pictures and plaster statues of saints, Madonnas, as well as other elements such as ears of dry corn, pieces of wood with color ribbons, and brooms tied with blue and red ribbons. There are a few small shelves nailed to the wall supporting plaster images of La Madama and the Infant of Prague side by side, who seem to be looking down at the action below. To the left of the entrance, a round transparent glass bowl filled with water sits atop a high table. In a corner, a chair holds the image of Our Lady of Lourdes and a plastic bottle of “alcoholado,” an herbal infusion used to perform the ritual cleansings known as despojos. The main feature of the temple is a long table known as the “white table” with seven chairs around it, where the seven “mediunidades” sit. At the head of the table sits the President of the Table, who directs the meeting, and three mediunidades sit on each side of the table facing each other. On top of the table there are two clear glass bowls filled with water. The president directs the opening prayers and then gives instructions as to what will take place. Next, the

president looks around the room in silence and invites individual people by calling them forth to present their testimony before “the white table”. When the person is called, they are instructed to place their hands over one of the bowls of water. The president proceeds to ask specific questions about the situation that brings them to the temple. At this point some mediunidades might experience spirit possession.

Figure 19. La Madama at The Temple. Las Cuevas, Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
During the Espiritista healing ceremonies I witnessed at the temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza, I was privileged to see the spirit of *La Madama* “come down” and take possession of a *mediunidad* (medium). *La Madama* is the keeper of the knowledge about medicinal plants. She has great healing power and is often seen at the temple interacting with people who are suffering and who are going through a difficult time. She tends to both physical and psychological ailments. Her image is sometimes taken to be the stereotypical “mammie” or *Aunt Jemima* the kitchen servant because she is heavy set, wears an apron, and a headscarf. But nothing could be further from the truth. When *La Madama* comes down, there is nothing servile about her. She has tremendous healing powers and is believed to be the one to deliver
when all else fails. The spirit of *La Madama* is one of the Kongo spirits, the embodiment of the Kongo ancestors who were brought to the shores of Puerto Rico late in the 19th century.

Every spirit has a characteristic manifestation in the way they talk, walk, and address the person in need of their help. Spirit possession or “coming down” can occur regardless of the *mediunidad*’s gender. Thus, the female spirit of *La Madama* can possess a male *mediunidad*.

One of the strongest African spirits associated with the mystery and power of healing herbs is *La Madama*. To someone unfamiliar with *Espiritismo*, *La Madama* might appear as the stereotypical Hollywood caricatures known as “mammies” or “Aunt Jemimas”: A very dark, heavy set woman, wearing an apron and a head scarf. In the tradition of *Espiritismo*, *La Madama* is no Aunt Jemima relegated to menial kitchen chores or a “mammie” who is forced to sacrifice looking after her children in order to earn a living caring for someone else’s children.

*La Madama* is one of the nature spirits venerated by the Bakongo (people from present day Kinshasa), thousands of whom arrived to the coasts of Puerto Rico on Spanish slave ships bringing with them their religious imagination and cultural practices. In recent years, scholars have explored and reinvented the image of Aunt Jemima restoring her body and spirit to its rightful sacred place and esteem. Carol Duncan writes of Aunty Jemima, who is known in Puerto Rico as *La Madama*:

[i]t is necessary to consider alternative ways of seeing that emerge from Black people’s experiences of interpreting symbols associated with blackness—even those that have a long history of negative associations. . . the clothing—long skirt and dresses, aprons and head ties—provide a tangible link between the world of the spirit and the world of the living. . . Aunt Jemima’s attire, including her headdress, neck scarf, apron and long skirt, and her large body size receive an entirely different interpretation than the dominant one of servility and inferiority when they are positioned as signs of black feminine power. . . Aunt Jemima’s clothing is representative of ancestral black women whose attire included both European and African elements: from Europe, the long full skirt,
p Petticoats and apron and, from Africa, the neck scarf or *fula* and the headtie. We also see this image in the creole woman attire in a Caribbean context. . . The image of Aunt Jemima is an ambivalent symbolic entry point for a discussion of the experiences of black Caribbean women. . . it is the dominant image of the presence of black women as workers. . . and yet. . . a subversive rereading of the image is the symbolic point of entry for another status, ‘mother of the home’ one which is valued and cherished within the church community. . . through her presence in the church Aunt Jemima, this most ‘profane’ and devalued of stereotypic representations of black womanhood, is made ‘sacred’ and brought ‘home.’ This transformation is achieved through her imagined possibilities based on the lives of both historical and contemporary black women who performed the work of mothering in domestic service but also in a variety of black community contexts. 50

Duncan’s analysis is an invitation to take a second look at Aunty Jemima, or La Madama, and see beyond the stereotypical of the “mammie” character made popular by Hollywood images. We are invited to engage in a subversive reading of her as powerful ‘mother of the church’, nurse, healer, and protector. This subversive reading is and understanding guided my own experience while attending a healing ritual in the Espiritista temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza. Without this ‘double consciousness’ I would have been tempted to apply the only cultural reference I had: the image of Aunt Jemima on a Quaker Oats box as a servant. I could not have understood Dona Mello’s reverence to La Madama and the place of honor that La Madama occupies at the White Table when she comes down making the *Mediunidades* tremble with her deep and resonant voice and making the floor boards shake as she rises in regal posture, her proud head thrown back, walking arms akimbo, her apron pockets heavy with healing herbs and poultices. When La Madama comes down in the temple, you know you are not before a servant. You are before a powerful and wise matriarch whose cotton kerchief is a crown fit for a queen, a goddess.

On one occasion, I witnessed La Madama “coming down” or “passing through” a male mediunidad. The president called a woman forth and she was visibly shaken and weeping, telling the story of how her teenage son had been murdered right in front of their home. The mother could feel that her son’s spirit was not at peace and that his spirit was stuck outside the gate of the house, unable to come inside. Knowing that her son’s spirit was not at peace made the mother suffer. She found it impossible to eat, sleep, and live in her own home. She had no choice about moving because she could not afford it financially and she did not want to leave her home and her neighborhood. During her testimony she was weeping and her body began to tremble. When she was done giving her testimony, she was shaking and fell to the ground. At that moment, three people rose from the table to tend to the woman. One person stroked her hair gently, another refreshed her brow with alcoholado a liquid mixture of various healing herbs, and another lit a white candle and held it in place next to the mother’s head. They all prayed. While this was going on, one of the male mediunidades stood up. He walked slowly towards the woman, arms akimbo, swaying from side to side, and speaking in a deep voice. Someone whispered: “La Madama had come down.” La Madama spoke with a deep husky voice giving the mother instructions for healing rituals and to drink herbal teas and take bitter/sweet herbal baths for three/seven days. La Madama also instructed the woman to perform a ritual cleansing of her house by placing a white candle by the gate to her house, to build a home altar for her son, and to pray. La Madama told the mother that the spot where her son had been murdered was now clean and free of any evil spirits. La Madama performed a despojo so that the mother would be cleansed of any evil spirits and so that she could re-enter her home with her body and spirit having been cleansed from fear and any evil spirits. La
Madama reassured the mother that her son’s spirit was now at peace and that it would be good for her to make an altar for him so he could feel welcome in the home. The mother began to breathe with more ease and stopped shaking. La Madama helped her to get up and gave her a receta/recipe with a list of medicinal herbs and other elements/ingredients for the mother to cleanse the spot where her son was killed, build an altar for her son, and surround herself with protective elements. The mother expressed relief and gratitude and returned to her seat, still crying.

The spirit of La Madama came down to intervene and with her directions and power to cleanse away fear and evil spirits, she allowed this grieving mother not only to reclaim her home and a sense of belonging, but also to symbolically open the gates of her home, tearing down the borders between the living and the dead, to be reunited in spirit with her beloved son. La Madama, a strong African female spirit who holds the knowledge of healing herbs and who opens the road, performs rituals cleansings, or despojos, and sweeps away evil. Like Santiago Apóstol, she intercedes between the spirit world and the living.

Similarly, during the procession of Santiago Apóstol, La Loca/Crazy Woman “comes down” to perform despojos on unsuspecting bystanders. La Loca is usually embodied by a Black male, painted with black soot, wearing a pillow under her skirts to exaggerate her derriere, padding to simulate big breasts, wearing a head scarf, carrying a broom and sweeping the streets, and depositing all evil into a tin can, which she is said to empty into the ocean. While La Loca elicits laughter and jocosity among the participants and spectators during the procession of Santiago Apóstol, within the context of the religious practice of Espiritismo, she emerges as an avatar of La Madama, a healing spirit. The procession cannot begin without La Loca
performing a ritual cleansing which involves the sprinkling of fresh water on the dirt road. Only then can Santiago move forward, thus propitiating the ultimate role reversal of the African female spirit ruling over the male Spanish Catholic saint.

Figure 21. La Loca Praying. Loíza, 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
Chapter II

Santiago, The Runaway Saint, at Home in Loíza
Rosa Julia Calcaño: *Mantenedora del Santo* (Keeper of the Saint)

*Mantener* is the Spanish verb *to keep*. *Mantener* can also mean preserve, maintain, sustain, or guard. *Mantenedora* refers to a female and *Mantenedor* refers to the male. To be a *Mantenedor/a* in Loíza is to be the guardian of one of the three images of Santiago Apóstol: *Santiago de los Niños* (Santiago of the Children), *Santiago de los Hombres* (Santiago of the Men), and *Santiago de las Mujeres* (Santiago od the Women). To be a Mantenedor/a in Loíza is to occupy a place of respect, distinction, honor, and much responsibility in the community. There are three families who are *Mantenedores* in Loíza, charged with the responsibility of housing the three images of the Saint Santiago Apóstol.
In September of 2008 I visited two of the Mantenedores: Rosa Julia Calcaño (Mantenedora of Santiago de los Niños) and Sylnic Cruz and his mother Sylvia Cruz (Mantenedores of Santiago de las Mujeres). I was not able to interview the Mantenedora of Santiago de los Hombres due to health reasons.

Fig. 23. Santiago de los Hombres spends the night at the Church of St. Patrick in Loíza, 2008.
Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
When I visited Rosa Julia, she and her daughter Rosalie welcomed us into their home and invited us to visit with the saint. In the heart of her home, the image of the saint occupies a place of honor and is adorned with ribbons and metal figures shaped like hearts, legs, arms, wings, and a variety of other figures representing the individual prayers and petitions of the saint’s devotees. This particular image of Santiago is smaller than the other two, dons a tiny round metal cap, and even though it has a moustache and a little beard, his facial features are that of a child. He is referred to as “Santiaguito” or “Chaguito,” the Spanish diminutives to indicate his young age and small size. In Spanish, it is also a term of endearment to use diminutives to refer to loved ones.

Rosa Julia is used to visitors curious about her role as Mantenedora in Loíza Aldea. She welcomes the opportunity to speak about Loíza and often punctuates her narrative with laughter. As a teacher, she is comfortable in her role as educator and answers our questions with ease. The interview begins with Rosa Julia telling the story of the apparition of the Saint inside a cork tree near the neighborhood of Las Carreras:

We call him “Santiaguito” and “Chaguito” because he is so little. In fact it is Santiago of the Children, the one who was found inside a cork tree near Las Carreras. So it is about 200 or 300 years old. We are coastal people, fishing people. He was going fishing when there was a rain storm and the cork tree was so big, like a cave, that he took refuge there inside the cork and he finds him! [the saint] That was like finding a treasure! In those days there was no church in Mediania, only St. Patrick’s church. Well, he took him [the saint] and they put him inside the church but he didn’t stay there. When they went looking for him the next day they said “My God! He disappeared! Someone stole him!” And they couldn’t find him [the saint] anywhere and when they went to the cork tree again well he was there! [Rosa Julia laughs] This happened two or three times. Well, then it was determined that he [the saint] wanted to be with the people of Mediania, he wanted to live among the fishing people and since then a religious procession was organized and that was the beginning of what we have today. We process on July 28th. This place is full of people, there’s hardly any room! [she laughs] So we have continued the tradition for centuries. One year, there is a legend . . . they say that no one took the
saint out. . . there was no one responsible for the procession and there was a deluge! people say it rained upside down because there were so many floods and the people began to shout “we have to take him out!” we have to take him out!” and the rain stopped. The calm returned.

She identified herself and her community as costera or “of the coast” and the people of Loíza as fishing people. She delights in highlighting that when the image of the saint was brought to the church, the saint kept running away and going back into hiding inside the cork tree by the sea, to be found again and again by the humble fisherman. Finally, they realize that the saint does not want to reside in the church, but wants to live among the humble people of Medianía. The word medianía in Spanish means “half,” or “the state of being halved.”

Historically, its origins are directly linked to the times when freed runaway slaves were sharecroppers on that land. Given that many of the owners of sugar plantations along the coast of Puerto Rico were of Irish and English origin, it seems significant that the saint chose to dwell among the people of Medianía, where there was no church, instead of inside the Catholic church whose patron Saint is St. Patrick.

During the interview, Rosa Julia and Rosalie, her daughter, sing the devotional song of Santiago Apóstol asking for his protection, recognizing his suffering as a slave for six years, and promising devotion. The song is illustrative of the many ways Santiago is associated with Loiza’s history, a history of slavery and marginalization, as well as deep devotion expressed through the annual pilgrimage and processions in honor of Santiago Apóstol during the month of July:

A Jesús buen soberano pedidle con eficacia que nos conceda su gracia pues está todo en su mano el se hizo nuestro hermano para ser nuestro protector. . . Todo el que con santo ceño y fervorosa oración implora su intersección le llena de gran consuelo vos le alcanzais desde el cielo tan señalado favor. . . La oración y penitencia era todo nuestro anhelo para conservar con ceño y si tan sublime esencia alcanzaréis del Señor. . . Con resignacion
sufriste la mas dura esclavitud de paciencia y de virtud bellos ejemplos les distes seis anos asi viviste siempre sumiso al creador. . . Que dicha nos esperaremos de voz que nuestros favores nos dispenséis los mejores siempre a voz recurriremos por Santiago tendremos Salud, consuelo y valor. . . Pues tan especial favor el cielo El quiso darnos y de todo mal librarnos y sed nuestro protector...

English translation:

To Jesus good and sovereign ask with efficacy that he grant us his grace for everything is in his hands. He became our brother to become our protector. All who implore with prayers and holy fervor for his intercession is filled with great consolation. Your petitions can reach Him there in Heaven. Our prayers and penitence are our aspirations for maintaining your sublime essence that it may reach our Lord. With resignation you suffered the most harsh enslavement for six years and with patience and virtue you gave a beautiful example, living always submissive to the Creator. What joy is awaiting us when you grant us our petitions, always the best. We will always come to you. Because of Santiago we will have health, consolation, and courage. Heaven wanted us to have a special gift and we have you to save us from all evil and to be our protector.

Rosa Julia estimates that the image of Santiaguito is between 200 and 300 years old; she affirms that he is the most loved because he is the “original” one. She inherited her role of Mantenedora from her aunt, Dona Julia Calcaño approximately 15 years ago, but she describes herself as always being in the process of preparation along with many other “aspirants.” When Dona Julia, on her deathbed, identified Rosa Julia as the one, Rosa Julia was proud to have inherited the role of Mantenedora of the Saint, to participate in keeping this tradition alive for the entire community of Loíza Aldea, and to leave this legacy to her children. As Rosa Julia looks at the image of the Santiaguito she exclaims “Precioso!” meaning “Precious”! She reaches over to the Saint and gently touches the ribbons and metal figures. She explains that the ribbons and metal figures adorning him are the devotion of the people in gratitude for prayers answered:
Santiago intercedes He is one of Jesus’ most beloved apostles. Here we have figures in the shape of legs, hearts, wings. The wings were brought by a young man who was in Irak and when he returned he placed the wings on Chaguito for returning alive. The ribbons are the different petitions for health, harmony, peace. Now he has few [ribbons] but during the procession you can hardly see his [the saints’] little helmet. People fill him with ribbons!

Rosa Julia states that the fervor and devotion towards Santiago is worthy of admiration. She states that Santiaguito belongs to the people of Medianía and that she believes that through Santiago’s devotion people in other places, other countries even, have gotten to know her people, the people of Medianía. As a Mantenedora, she feels a shared palpable emotion with other Mantenedores with whom she maintains a shared level of harmony and desire to maintain the tradition alive for generations to come:

We work to keep the tradition of our people alive. . . to also leave roots, for the seeds to take roots. . . in us. This is why I have followed my aunt Julia Calcaño from whom I inherited this responsibility...[laughs] and my daughters are prepared to take up la batuta [the baton] when I am no longer here.
When asked whether the Saint has moved around she responds in the affirmative and recalls a time when the Saint lived with her grandfather and with the family of Don Domingo Cutú.

During the procession, when fireworks explode, people shout *Arriba Cutú!* in remembrance of Don Domingo. It is interesting to point out that when Rosa Julia refers to “inheritance” and “family” she is not necessarily referring to a direct bloodline. Rosa Julia’s aunt, Dona Julia, inherited the *Mantenedora* role from Don Domingo Cutú. Don Domingo’s granddaughter, Tamara, is also considered to have inherited the role of *Mantenedora* of the saint from her grandfather. Rosa Julia and Tamara share the responsibility for the Saint and both Tamara and Rosa Julia’s children are preparing themselves to inherit the responsibility. The Saint lives with Rosa Julia during the year and during the Festivities in July, he goes to live in Tamara’s home,
where the procession begins. Yet Rosa Julia wishes to assert her title as Mantenedora and
explains that even though there were many young women being prepared by Doña Julia to
become Mantenedores, Rosa Julia was chosen by her aunt Doña Julia, who on her deathbed,
said to her: You are the one.

She says that at the end of the procession there are always always lots of fireworks,
which is when the people shout “Arriba Cutú!” The fireworks are also representative of
Santiago’s strong side “le decían el dios del trueno” [they called him the god of thunder].
Without directly alluding to it, Rosa Julia brings up an issue that has been part of the debate
among anthropologists in Puerto Rico since the early 50s. Don Ricardo Alegria was the first to
study the Festival of Santiago Apóstol. A Harvard graduate and renowned archeologist and
anthropologist, Founder of the Instituto de Estudios de Cultura Puertorriqueña (Institute for the
Study of Puerto Rican Culture), he influenced the academic discourse in the field of
Anthropology for over five decades. His seminal work in Loíza Aldea posited that Santiago
Apóstol was loved and celebrated in a syncretic expression of both Catholic and Yoruba
religious traditions. He identified Santiago Apóstol with the Yoruba Orisha who is god of
thunder and often depicted riding a horse.51 Don Ricardo’s idea of Santiago representing
Shangó has permeated popular culture and remains in Loíza as a story that is often referred to.
Perhaps this is why Rosa Julia associates Santiago with Shangó. It is also interesting to note that
during the procession of Santiago Apóstol there are encounter points when one of the three
Santiagos meets another Santiago. At the point of encounter, at the crossroads, people on

51 Harris, “Masking the Site,” 359.
horseback carrying banners will salute each other. These salutes are made with strong gestures and with banner poles at times being used as swords that cross each other in the air. The people on horseback seem to embody a representation of Santiago Apóstol on horseback.

As to her responsibilities as Mantenedora, Rosa Julia tells me that her duties are year-round. To be sure, the activities before and during the Festival of Santiago Apóstol are the busiest time, such as the novenas, nine days preceding the processions beginning July 16th, followed by three days of processions on July 26, 27, and 28. When asked whether her house is more public than private, she laughs and responds in the affirmative. She tells the story of being all dirty from working in the garden when a big group of university students showed up to ask her about the saint. She kept telling them not to take her picture [she laughs]. . . Another aspect of Rosa Julia’s life emerges as she describes herself working in the garden and her connection with agriculture: “I love being in the dirt, I love working in my garden. My father was an agricultor and so I love to feel the earth.” This love for the earth, for gardening, for growing things, will emerge later on as we discuss the issue of gentrification and the nascent resistance movement against the ever present threat of evictions faced by the most vulnerable generation without land titles who descend from freed/runaway slaves and who were sharecroppers who stayed on the land after the price of sugar plummeted and the plantation owners returned to Europe in the late 1800s.

Returning to the description of the everyday responsibilities of caring for the saint, Rosa Julia describes the saint as someone who is humble, very humble. She also stresses that although she is the Mantenedora, the saint belongs to the people. She explains that there is a sense of communal responsibility for the saint:
He is of the people always! We teach our children that he is our responsibility but he belongs to the people and if by chance someone sees the saint ‘going out’ of the house, not in the month of July, they will immediately question “And what is Santiago doing outside?” and so the people are also responsible and they are watchful, they care what happens to Santiaguito. He is public.

The Mantenedores house becomes a public place where people throughout the year come to pray, to bring ribbons, and other offerings. Most people will wait until the procession to approach the saint, who will be lowered from his palanquin, so that people can pray and tie their ribbons. However, there are many who also come to the Mantenedores’ house to pray and bring their ribbons. If anyone needs to visit the saint during the year, the Mantenedora must make the Saint available and open the door to those seeking the Saint’s protection and intercession. For Rosa Julia, that is the biggest responsibility, to maintain a tradition of open doors and welcome everyone. Many times the Mantenedora will offer coffee, some rice and beans, or biscuits to those who come to pray to Santiaguito. Sometimes she has offered people a place to sleep, even if it’s in a hammock. At the heart of the Mantenedores’ duties is hospitality.

Rosalie, Rosa Julia’s daughter, interjects that she [Rosalie] has been helping her mother since “she was in the womb.” Rosa Julia adds that it is the next generation who will be Mantenedores of the tradition and exhorts them to enjoy it now before they have the big responsibility. Rosa Julia is a teacher and so are her two daughters. She gets two months off in the summer, including July. She believes that if she had another job she would not be able to meet all her responsibilities as Mantenedora. Being Mantenedora also comes with financial costs, especially on the days of the novenas and processions when hundreds of people come to
the house and they have to serve them food and refreshments. The community sometimes makes contributions, but for Rosa Julia, the most important thing is for people to show up, to attend the celebrations, and to show their support by being a good friend and accompanying her especially during the novenas and the processions:

We have to have faith and He [God] provides so that we can continue to do this because it’s not easy because it costs money but always the good people come by and even if they don’t have money, the fact that they show up and as a friend say ‘I am here!’ well that is so important. Thank God that this year everything went well. It’s not easy to have thousands of people congregated in a small space here, crowds of people. They all arrive here and we receive them with open arms because that is what we are here for.

Here Rosa Julia pauses the interview so that she can introduce herself more formally. She also retells how she inherited the Saint and role of Mantenedora and highlights the importance of hospitality:

My name is Rosa Julia Calcaño a Loiceña, Puertorriqueña of pure breed [laughs] I give you my most cordial welcome. I present to you Santiago of the Children, our Santiago whom we call lovingly Santiaguito or Chaguito. [daughter Rosalie brings out the red flag depicting the Saint. The flag will accompany the Saint in the procession. When the procession crosses paths with another procession of the other two Santiagos, a representative of the Mantenedora family on horseback, will “cross” flags with the other representative also holding their flag ] . . . over the years we prepared ourselves with Tamara Tapia, granddaughter of Don Cutú and together with my grandfather Domingo Calcaño because they were the Mantenedores from decades ago, same as we are doing with our children Rosalie, Anali, Victor Junior and Tamara with Cherie and Junito. They are the safe refuge, they will continue with this work . . . we have a responsibility. . . we are one family and we keep a tradition of our people . . . we feel very proud because through Santiago we can embrace history and be known.

The devotion [of the people] is admirable may he [Santiago] intercede before God on our behalf to alleviate sadness, ailments, and the burdens of the people. We are a humble, humble people and we are welcoming here in Loíza if you say you are hungry you can go to any house and you will be fed some rice. We have been marginalized but we have demonstrated through our festivals and traditions that we are a people who continue giving life to our people, our elders, who are buried, those old people still live today inside of us because they left seeds of love and the love for our land for our culture for our traditions. We are a people who live! Who live!
We may have been marginalized but at the same time we have been given the strength to go on. We live in an area far from progress but here we [people from Loíza] are known and we are known outside of Puerto Rico. I invite you to come to my house, my house is your house, my family is your family, people come here from far away seeking refuge and here we give them a place where they can rest. Dona Sylvia (Sylnc Cruz’s mother) gives them food and Tamara in her house opens up a corner so they can sleep... if you come here you will not be sorry. We are here July 26, 27 and 28. We are fishing people with the soul of fishing people good people and everyone who comes with good intentions is welcome!

When I ask about the different religious traditions in Loíza, Rosa Julia mentions that there are many practices and traditions. That there are people who maintain altars to honor their ancestors and have gatherings. She also mentions Evangelicals and Pentecostals who are still “pulled in” by Santiago because he has the power of transformation. Most Evangelicals and Pentecostals, she says, hide in their homes and don’t come out during the processions and festivities of Santiago because their norms don’t allow them to join in. Yet Rosa Julia believes that they are still part of “it” even if they are observing from afar and hiding.

When I ask about Espiritismo, [the belief that the spirits of the departed can be conjured and manifest themselves by “coming down” on a medium] she says that there are many people who believe in Espiritismo and still practice it and also go to church. In her estimation, Espiritismo is considered very common in Loíza, but the most beloved and well-known Espiritistas have left this world and so there are not many left any more. She tries to recall the names and remembers Don Toño Lacén, the most famous and whose house many people visited. But she adds that even those people who visited Espiritistas are then heard spreading negative things about Espiritismo and criticizing Loíza for being a place where “those things” are practiced. Here she punctuates her words to indicate that as far as she knows, to visit the home
of an Espiritista doesn’t mean that you practice it [Espiritismo]. . . While she asserts that the tradition [Espiritismo] is maintained in Puerto Rico, she points out that today being labeled Espiritista can have a negative connotation and being devoted to the saint Santiago can be used to accuse people of being idolaters. This accusation hurts even more when it comes from people of her own community, her own neighborhood:

People say a heap of things about me because I believe in a saint. The churches criticize us and they say we are idolaters and one has to face all that. . . and they are everyday people of our same community. But the best response is to be loving and kind and they say things and you pay them with a smile. That happened to me not long ago. . . ‘Ay! You look so elegant! Where are you going?’ [the person asked] ‘To the mass for Santiago’ [Rosa Julia responded] ‘you and your idolatry!’ [the person retorted] and I just left with a smile and the next day I went and bought his bread because I don’t fault people for their beliefs. Look my best neighbor is a person who does not share our traditions but we are like [finger]nail and flesh [very close] and we love each other and we respect each other and respect has to prevail.

Rosa Julia moves away from the subject of religious traditions and focuses on values and how people are motivated to come out to join the festivities during the Feasts of Santiago Apóstol.

In her community, Rosa Julia is known and respected as a Mantenedora as well as a teacher.

She recognizes the violence affecting her community and with sadness points out how many youth are “walking the wrong path” away from respect, from values, from harmony:

Because of the fact that we are Puerto Rican and Loiceños, this is what unites a people and throws them out into the streets. That is what gives us most satisfaction to see people who never go out going out into the streets and enjoying themselves. We feel so happy. . . sadly our youth are killing each other but this year I stumbled upon many of them. . . that is the advantage of being a teacher! and I know them since they were coming up and now they are. . . [laughs and signifies that she is repressing the urge to say a “bad” word] “sinverguenzas!”/shameless! [laughs] In the streets [the students call out to her] ‘Missy! Missy!’ [It is customary for school children to call their female teachers “Missy” a Puerto Rican pronunciation of the English “Mrs.”] and I say back to them ‘Let’s see what you are going to do!’ and that is so us! They can be doing and undoing but on those days they unite with us and they are part [of the festivities]
because that is something that comes into our whole bodies and comes up to the surface [laughs]. . .

I had heard about gentrification happening in Loíza and about the killing of Adolfina Villanueva by the police during a forced eviction. When I asked Rosa Julia about it she said that it was about greed and that economically there is no benefit to the people. While she begins her response tentatively and with very positive comments about the individuals who are residing in the newly built luxury condominiums, her narrative eventually moves to a place of concern for the environment, the youth she teaches, and towards the end she becomes visibly upset when she remembers her friend and neighbor Adolfina:

The people who reside in these condos that have been built have access control. . . they live a life. . . they are delighted because they have come to know us. . . they have arrived. . . and many people. . . we have had the experience [of meeting the residents of the condominiums] at the very church someone was making a negative comment about Loíza and they [the new residents of the condos] said ‘Those are not the Loiceños that I know!’ he said we were humble people who had welcomed him and that they were basically unknown strangers. . . and that person spoke. . . that is. . . what better witness?

We have marched. . . there was a building development nearby in Parcelas Suárez and we marched and our march stopped everything [the construction of the Costa Serena building] In the future we know that money and politics will move [construction will resume] We are encouraging the truth to come out. I saw in the news a little while ago about a group sitting in front of the plaza in Rio Piedras because they are cutting down the trees. This is a situation that needs to be controlled. In my school room there is control. I still have trees because that is what will give us life and will be our security in the future. . . they are the seeds. . . you are the seeds. . . you are the seeds who will change what we have done and will correct it. That is what I encourage. We are working hard on that because we are struggling with a bureaucracy, an immense power, but when the people are united well you can achieve a lot. A lot! It’s tough. . . and we will see these warriors, my warriors [she looks at her daughter]. . . I hope that when I die they continue the work.

[There is some cross conversation about street violence and her daughter Rosalie interjects]
People say: ‘But how can you celebrate and participate in these festivities [the Feast of Santiago Apóstol] when there is so much crime here in Loíza?’ . . . but our opinion is that if we hide what will we leave for Loíza? If we stop celebrating the feast? If we hide, we are giving up space, we are giving up freedom. . . we will never surrender!

Rosalie’s heartfelt comments open up a space for a different conversation. A painful conversation about the death of Adolfina Villanueva, a neighbor and friend who was killed by the police while defending her home and resisting eviction. Adolfina is an example of what in Puerto Rico is known as dar la cara meaning to show up, to be seen, to dare confront those who threaten and abuse you, to be out in the open. Rosalie’s words about not hiding seem to evoke this movement of “dar la cara” as a way to resist and subvert the oppressive forces threatening the homes of the people of Loíza. Rosalie’s words go to the heart of the matter: Keeping the annual tradition of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol is dar la cara, is to come out of hiding, is not to give up space, is not to give up freedom, is to never surrender, is to be brave.

The conversation urn to Adolfina and Rosa Julia begins to weep as she tells the story:

Adolfina was my friend, my neighbor, a Loiceña who had the courage to confront the eviction. We are suffering [street] violence. . . este. . . Our land is being sold and our environment is being. Adolfina was well known and we knew her and she was brave. . . she was brave! She defended what was hers, that’s what she did. . . she paid with her life and she died. . . but she didn’t die. She continues in our memory and she is part of the history of Loíza. Those who came to execute the order [of eviction] were also Puerto Ricans and they came to do their job. . . So the situation is very sad. . . Adolfina’s family, her children found protection, they had the community and people se desbordaron/overflowed like an ocean wave [with generosity]. . . her death was not in vain. What happened is so lamentable, so sad because the people involved were people we knew and loved and they saw us grow up.

Rosa Julia takes a deep breath before she continues telling the story. She recalls the owner of the parcel of land and how after everything happened, he left Puerto Rico and his family had to
deal with the aftermath and *dar la cara* (to show your face in public). She points to the back of her house as she remembers the day Adolfina was shot:

> It was right here, behind the pharmacy, it happened behind the pharmacy in that parcel of land that was the path we all took to go to the beach because we all walk to the beach [Weeping and smiling with her hand over her heart]. . . how can we not feel? But that is a death like a soldier’s death. . . soldiers die to give liberty to others. . . there is a reward. . . we loved her . . . we did not want them to kill her. . . it was so sad. . . but I say that her death was not in vain! Later on we contacted her husband and her children. . . they had a new house . . . but she was not there . . . she was not there. . . there was so much suffering. . . people in need of a home and being forced out. . . we have to pray a lot because we are in a very difficult situation.

After we take a break, I ask Rosa Julia if there is anything else she would like to add and she expresses her hope that this work [my interview] would be utilized to present a positive image of Loíza and encourage people to visit and enjoy Loíza’s many treasured gifts:

> I hope people can see how beautiful Loíza is! We still have beaches, very lovely beaches and good food... we come from tradition. We are Indian, we are African, we are Spanish, we are Puerto Rican. A race that is alive! A race that is alive! That despite the color of our skin being a little bit light, inside we carry the African blood. . . . the Bomba [A type of music with strong African roots native to Loíza] “se te mete” [meaning that the music goes inside of you]. . . when you hear the drum and you step out to dance even if you don’t know how. . . estee. . . we have everything here and we can feel proud of our Indian roots. . . we still have *casaba*, and make *tortillas* and plant yucca, we shred it, we know how to make everything. . . [We make] *alcapurrias* like Doña Sylvia* (*Sylnic Cruz’s mother) and all the traditional dishes like *jueyes*. . . that is. . . we are rich! [Laughs] like Puerto Rico we are rich. . . we invite you. . . even if there is no room. . . we’ll make room. . . look at us. . . we will love you and take care of you. . . our job is not only to maintain the tradition. . . we also work with all who are in need. . . the children and the old ones. . . we are working to keep Centro Esperanza/Hope Center open to welcome all who are in need, especially those with very little resources.

Rosa Julia described Loíza as beautiful and its people of as “rich” rejecting stereotypes and labels that portray the people of Loíza as poor. When she says She is not denying the economic realities that affect the people of Loíza, but she is deciding to characterize the people as rich in spirit and creativity and generosity. One of the many ways that people in Loíza show
Generosity and engage in community building is sharing meals. Offering food to visitors and during special events is an important cultural component of people’s identity as Loicenos. It is also an important part of the religious celebration of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol. Whether it is providing a little “merienda” (snack) to someone who has come to the Mantenedores house to visit and pray to Santiago, having refreshments for people who participate in the novenas, or preparing huge communal meals that are distributed free of cost to anyone who wishes to partake before the processions, food is an expression of hospitality and generosity. Within Espiritismo, food is very important in the ritual ofrendas/offers to the ancestors placed on home altars. This special food is ceremoniously prepared and intended to strengthen the relationship and communication between the ancestor spirits and the living. According to Rosa Julia, hospitality is always offered: “even if there is no room, we’ll make room!”

Like Samuel Lind and Dona Mello, Rosa Julia’s narrative transforms the negative rhetoric about Loíza being poor into an affirmation of abundance: “We have everything here. We know how to make everything. We are rich! Look at us. We will love you and take care of you” Her narrative directs our attention to generosity an abundance, not scarcity. She invites us to look at the people with different eyes and transform our mental image of Loíza into something beautiful, generous, loving, kind, and creative. With her words, Rosa Julia guides us towards a different way of seeing her town, her community, her family, and herself. Her narrative resists the prevailing stereotypes about her town and her people. With the loving words of a skilled Mantenedora, Rosa Julia transforms negative media portrayals of her beloved Loíza into beauty and plenty.
Earlier she addressed these negative portrayals that label Loíza and her people as “marginalized.” Rosa Julia says that “they might have been marginalized before” but no longer. Despite evidence that the government continues to neglect the well being of the people of Loíza and does not allocate enough resources for effecting meaningful change in the town’s socio economic status, Rosa Julia uses the past tense and separates the people from the label marginados/marginalized. She rejects this segregation and marginalization and with her words reincorporates the people as a resourceful, loving, vibrant community that is alive with the spirit of generosity, a community that has everything. Rosa Julia’s words are movements that transform the way we look at Loíza and Rosa Julia herself. Similar to Samuel Lind’s transformative testimony about the ancestors being much more than suffering slaves and Sylnic’s assertion that the people might have been considered enslaved “for a moment” Rosa Julia rejects the label marginados/marginalized and instead deploys her words to illuminate Loíza’s beauty, strength, and loving kindness.

The interview comes to an end but Rosa Julia and her daughter Rosalie continue to talk about Santiaguito and break out in song:

We will always come to you. Because of Santiago we will have health, consolation, and courage. Heaven wanted us to have a special gift and we have you to save us from all evil and to be our protector. . . Amén!
**Sylnic Cruz: Mantenedor of Santiago de las Mujeres**

Sylnic Cruz and his mother, Sylvia, are *Mantenedores* of the image of Santiago Apóstol de las Mujeres/of the Women. During this interview, Dona Sylvia was busy working in their restaurant (which is attached to their home), so although she was present she indicated that she preferred that Sylnic spoke with me while she continued to cook.

Sylnic’s personality is animated and enthusiastic, thus providing a rich and lively cadence to his narrative. He is also someone who has a great sense of humor and punctuates his sentences with laughter. Sylnic is in his early 30’s and works for the municipality of Loíza as an engineer. As a member of a family of *Mantenedores*, he makes regular visits to local schools to talk about the significance of Santiago Apóstol. He is very proud of his role as *Mantenedor* and he engages with ease in conversation about the saint and the religious rituals to honor him:

My name is Sylnic Cruz. I am an engineer from here from the municipality of Loíza and one of the Mantenedores of one of the images of the saint which is celebrated in the Fiestas in honor of Santiago Apóstol. Well, to be Mantenedor is a privilege and an honor. It came to my hands through my father because it’s from generation to generation but it’s been in my family for about 80 years because someone else had it but something happened among his family and well they could not celebrate the fiestas any longer and so then my grandmother retakes it and then it is passed to my aunt, my grandmother’s sister, from my grandmother’s sister it passes to my grandmother’s other sister, and from my grandmother’s other sister it passes to my father and there it arrives to this person right here [points to himself and smiles].
Fig. 25. Sylnic Cruz, *Mantenedor* of Santiago de las Mujeres, Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
When asked about the story about how Santiago came to Loíza, he is quick to point out that there are many stories emerging and changing over time as they are with passed from person to person. He mentions anthropologist Ricardo Alegría, who first published the narratives of the celebration of the Feast of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, and he points out that not even Alegría knows the exact date when the Feast began. Sylnic responds that he heard it from his father, who heard it from his grandmother, who heard it from her grandmother, etc. He says that the many stories about the “origins” of the apparition of Santiago in Loíza are like the game “telephone” where one person whispers something into another’s ear, and that person whispers what they heard into the next person’s ear, and so on, until the last person tells the story and they compare it to the story that the first person told: “We [people from Loíza] say: I’m telling you like so and so told me [who heard it from so and so]’” This is an important observation that allows for many stories to be told in different voices and to focus not on finding the “true” or “original” story, but to appreciate the multivocal and multivalent spaces that are opened when many voices are invited to offer their story.

Sylnic is not concerned with knowing every single detail, or remembering the name of the fisherman who finds the image of Santiago. He continues to tell the story in a very relaxed manner and sprinkling his words with laughter at every turn. He makes a distinction between the story of Santiago as a Spanish soldier killing Moors, calling that “another story from Spain” and focusing his attention and giving more validity to the story of Santiago in Loíza and the meaning of Santiago as healer and miracle worker for his devotees:

The story is always different because there are different versions from the time that the image was found... pues the story is lost if it is not written down and it’s like that
dynamic we do when one whispers a secret in the ear of another persons and it continues to be passed on person to person and it’s never going to be the same and that’s what happens with this story and it’s a true story even though we tell it to different people from different angles we will always arrive to the same specific point because you say [to yourself] ‘there is something here!’ Even Ricardo Alegría himself who is a great historian of Loíza does not know specifically how it was but he makes his story based on the gatherings [of stories] that he could do with people at that time but we say: ‘I am telling [you] what they say’ [laughs].

The small image that we know as Santiago de los Niños [of the Children] is the miracle one the one that appears because my grandmother told my father and my father told me porque cuenta mi abuela que le contó a mi papá y mi papá me lo contó a mí/ My grandmother says that my father said and my father told me that a fisherman by the name of... I don’t remember now... he was going on about his daily chores and passed by a place that we now know as Las Carreras... there was a giant cork tree and its roots made the shape of a cave and they say that inside there he found this unique tiny image of Santiago Apóstol mounted on a horse with a sword in his hand which is another religious story from Spain... pues he finds that image and becomes curious and takes it home and goes back to his chores and goes back the same way and finds him for the second time now with fear tells his wife what happened and pues the wife says that it is ok to let him [the saint] stay again in their home but like everyone who is afraid of the unknown he takes a different road but that road again takes him to the cork tree and for the third time he finds him [the saint] and what happens? This time he takes it to the Saint Patrick church here in town and tells the priest what happened and the priest blesses the image, which goes home with the fisherman and así por el estilo [and so on and so forth]. It [the image] has not disappeared hasta el sol de hoy [until today’s sun]. That is where the story begins about the ritual honoring Santiago Apóstol.

Sylnic is a seasoned storyteller who uses questions like “and what happens?” in the middle of the story to keep the listener engaged and on the same path. He also ends a section of the story with “and this is how the story begins” which brings the audience back to the beginning. In this next part of the story, Sylnic talks about “the polemic within ourselves” when describing the differences between Santiago and the Patron Saint of Loíza, St. Patrick. He points out that Santiago is not the official Patron Saint of Loíza, but that this lack of “official title” does
not stand in the way of the people regarding with high honor and devotion which they show with several days of public celebrations.

Santiago enjoys the trust and love of the people of Loíza for his miraculous healing powers and is accessible year-round when people go to see him in the house of the Mantenedores, whose doors are always open for anyone needing to see the Santiago. Going “to see” the Saint is an important ritual in itself, part of the promesas/petitions that people make when asking for a favor, or when “paying a promise” when their petitions have been granted. Sylnic’s mention of the differences between St. Patrick and Santiago brings to light memories connecting Loiza’s past as a site of sugar plantations owned by Irish landlords and the distance between the people of Loíza and the Catholic church. While the image of Loiza’s official patron saint remains in the church located in the middle of town and only open during certain hours, the image of Santiago dwells among the people in the house of Mantenedores such as Sylnic and his mother, who keep the doors of their home open to all who need to see the Saint.

For Sylnic, the preference and devotion of the people for Santiago and his rejecting the Catholic Church and choosing to dwell in the homes of the Mantenedores is about freedom. When I ask Sylnic to say more about freedom, he states that for him Loíza has always been free. He locates the ancestors of Afro-Puerto Ricans on a Spanish ship whose captain decided to leave the people he had brought over from Africa on the northeastern shores of Puerto Rico. According to Sylnic, it was no coincidence, but rather providential and “grandiose” that the captain sets the people free on the lands that are now Loíza and so for Sylnic, the people touched land as free persons. Sylnic recognizes that the people might have been considered
enslaved “for a moment” but for him the important fact is that the people arrived on the shores of Loíza as free people. This memory is important to him because it brings to light a counter narrative against the official story of Loíza labeling its residents as descendants from slaves. Sylnic mentions that even Santiago had been a slave at some point but he still “came down” to Loíza as a free person.

It is important for Sylnic to describe Loíza as “sacred space” and to repeat that the people of Loíza are free and that one can feel this freedom “as soon as you enter” and when you see the people enjoying themselves in the streets: “we are free... we are free...and one grows up free and with freedom to think. . . they might label us, but you come to Loíza and you can feel freedom as soon as you enter.”

But he [Santiago] is not our patron saint, our patron saint is Saint Patrick and it is surprising that we celebrate Santiago Apóstol with such great fiestas and not Saint Patrick but that is a polemic within our own selves among Loiceños (natives of Loíza) and moreover we can’t celebrate Saint Patrick so much because Saint Patrick’s day falls during Holy Week and in order to show respect for Holy Week [Lent] pues we don’t give him a big celebration instead there is a small one in the plaza which is prepared by the Saint Patrick church here in town but in the Summer. . . being the image that was found and with the most history about how it got here, about how many people he [the saint] has healed, being this revolution about what the image itself is a revolutionary [image] mounted on a horse just like us Loiceños. Pues I believe that is the energy that calls us to celebrate en grande [big time] to celebrate and honor Santiago Apóstol and it is a privilege to have her [the image is referred to in the feminine because the gender of the Spanish word for image is female]. . . it is work to have her. . . it is dedication. . . it is effort to maintain her. . . because it is not only [about] celebrating the fiesta and it is finished but [it’s about] each year people not losing the idea that we are not. . . that it is not a carnival, it is not a fiesta just to have a fiesta they are religious fiestas that are celebrated with devotion to a saint who walked with Jesus Christ a disciple of Jesus Christ. . . that he has a sword in his hand. . . that he has the heads of Moors chopped up in the same image. . . pues that is the story told about Spain but they are religious fiestas where we sing to him religious songs we sing salves we pray to him we make [celebrate] a mass for him to celebrate his day the day of Santiago Apóstol not Santiago Matamoros [the one who kills Moors] no, the disciple of Jesus Christ.”
I ask Sylvic to say more about Santiago Apóstol living not in a church but among the people and he says:

*Pues mira, estoo... [“Well, look uhmmm”]. . . the Santiago Apóstol church located in Medianía was the second church built here in Loíza in 1972 it is a young church. Medianía is the town with most population. It [the church] is called Santiago Apóstol because the images are there in that neighborhood. . . I was baptized in that church.*

The first image that was found and who would not stay with the priest would not stay in the church [Saint Patrick’s church] and who lives in a home in that *barrio* {the neighborhood of Medianía} is there the other two images arrived sent by two students from Spain they independently sent the two images when they learned about what happened here in Puerto Rico, in Loíza [the apparition of Santiago Apóstol in the cork tree and the subsequent celebration of the *fiestas*] they are also images of Santiago Apóstol mounted on a horse with sword in hand. . . How did the images arrive here? I could not tell you. . . but they arrive in our town and the celebrations begin. . . who came up with the idea to go out [into the streets] and have a procession? I don’t know but I know that it was a good idea, a very good idea.

And to have the honor of having him at home and not in a church I believe it is more open because to go to a church and not to have him protected there. I think it is about freedom. I think everyone appreciates that my home is never closed if you want to see the image you go and you see it and you touch it and you ask for the favors that you want to ask for and you bring him whatever you want to bring. . . we don’t have an altar he is only in a corner, not as a decoration but as one more family member, you know? He can’t eat or dance and things like that, but he is there and each time a person speaks with him they come into my home and they have the honor of speaking with him they have the honor of sitting with him and take pictures with him.

He [the saint] is such an artist! a genius I call him. . . estoo. . . and I believe that is the essence of our town. We could have him [the image of the saint] in church but you lose the tradition, the tradition of the people to have him in a home *pues* is something familiar it is to see him as one more member of the family because people ask “*mira* [hey!] Where is Santiago?” and I [respond] “come in through here. . . here he is, home” and they come in and see him and caress him and I as *Mantenedor* every day that a person comes to see him is a new day for me because it is not the same story repeated that’s not it. . . it is a new day for me. . . the person takes with them a message brings a message for other people and other towns.

Many see him [the saint] on the 25th, 26th, 27th, on television or the newspaper [the say] ‘Ahhhh! The *fiestas* in Loíza!’ but no one sees the process itself, the novenas, the
sung prayers, the credos, the sung prayers to the Virgin Mary, and to Santiago himself so that he prays for us before God. We do that nine nights before the start of the fiesta on July 25th... many people say that on July 25th we celebrate the Hijos Ausentes de Loíza [the absent children of Loiza] on that day July 25th Santiago is celebrated in Loíza, in Spain, in Aguadilla, in Fajardo which all have Santiago as patron saint. It is the most important day for our people and on that day the Loiceños Ausentes [absent] are [also] celebrated. It is to recognize the people who are outside [who do not live in Loíza]. . . but it is not only a procession out there in the street with everyone behind the saint singing and dancing, no. . . one must see it as a procession which is a blessing. . . from the pueblo [pueblo can mean town as well the people/the masses] to the last barrio [neighborhood] where Santiago recorre [to walk around again] on horseback the entire pueblo blessing it. We bring music, we bring dance. . . it is a way to celebrate. He is blessing the pueblo. Three days of the year is not enough! He continues to bless the barrio Medianía Alta, Medianía Baja, he continues to bless the entire pueblo and he is found in different points of the barrio. He walks around again and we meet at 187 [road] then down further you find the other [saint] and we meet. We meet in town. We re-encounter ourselves at the end and each time it is a blessing and so to have him in a church. . . no se. . . cómo que no le entra! [I don’t know... it just doesn’t fit! literally: “it does not come in” laughs]

I notice that Sylnic uses the term “freedom” and I remember Doña Mello, Rosa Julia, and Rosalie using the term freedom as well. Doña Mello speaks about freedom in terms of healing, lifting the burden of suffering, being able to win a battle again forces that would keep one down. Rosa Julia refers to the soil, to gardening and having direct access to the land as freedom. Rosalie interprets the annual celebration of the Fiesta de Santiago Apostol and processing through the streets as freedom. I am curious about what Sylnic means, so I ask him to say a bit more about the concept of freedom:

There is a connection. It’s no coincidence. Santiago comes down and helps the war. . . Santiago at one point was a slave. . . but Loíza for me has always been free. . . has always been free. The Spanish [slave ship captain] who was passing by and he did not want the Black [people] because he could not sell them at a high price because the people had some defects. . . he let them go nearby. . . it was grandiose because they let them go instead of selling them into slavery. . . we were slaves in one moment [in time] but we are free. . . you come to Loíza and you can feel freedom as soon as you enter Piñones! [laughs] and one grows up free and with freedom to think. . . they might label
us, but come to Loíza and get to know its people who are always in the street. . .

enjoying. We are people of culture and tradition. We are very rooted in our culture and

religion. . . the mystery. . . there is a mystery, a religious mystery and a spiritual mystery.

. . there are Espiritistas here there are santeros here, we have them. . . we have

everything! It is a mystical pueblo.

The fiestas of Santiago Apóstol arrive in this way and if they call it a carnival. Pues. . .
sorry! [In English] they are very religious fiestas we have a faith foundation. The pueblo

of Loíza overflows. We still believe in God who through images of saints and through his

beautiful mother he guides us to continue growing as human beings. This is sacred
territory. People say Loíza is a forgotten pueblo. . . which is true. . . Loíza was not always

such a small pueblo like it is now. Loíza was Canóvanas, part of the airport, Loíza Street,

which was Loíza, part of Río Grande, Coco Beach east Loíza. What happened? Pues, Río

Grande needed land to become [officially incorporated as] a town and asked Loíza to

borrow [land] and Loíza loaned him the land and now [Río Grande] even has El Yunque
[the rainforest]. . . we separated from Canóvanas. I don’t know whose idea it was. . . we

separated from Canóvanas and Canóvanas kept its part [of land]. At a given moment

when we did not archive our planning memories we lose the airport and we lose Isla
 Verde and Carolina grabs everything and we are left as a pueblo encerrado [enclosed
town] between the various town that used to be ours and the sea. The sea signifies

immensity and signifies protection and that protection is the foundation of our faith. To

have lost that land is to have lost part of our foundation because it is taking away

something. . . something was taken away from us. . . we lost. . . we lost many

opportunities. . . we lost great opportunities to be great. . . to demonstrate valuable

things. . . to bring our culture and our religion beyond. . .

Here Sylnic mentions that there are 174 churches in Loíza (with a population of

approximately 32,500 people) and describes the religious diversity in Loíza and calls people of
different faiths “separated siblings.” As Mantenedora Rosa Julia did before in her interview,

Sylnic recognizes that for some people the participation in the rituals of the Feast of Santiago
are prohibited by their religions. Sylnic mentions Catholicism, Protestantism, Espiritismo, and
Santeria as religious traditions that are practice in Loíza. Sylnic grew up Catholic and was
baptized in the Santiago Apóstol church in the barrio Medianía of Loíza. There are two Catholic
churches in Loíza, Santiago Apóstol in Medianía and St. Patrick’s in the center of town. As he
talks about religious diversity in Loíza, he expresses an attitude open to all religions traditions
and reaffirms his faith in God, infusing him with ánimo/high spirits to continue fighting for his pueblo [Loíza].

Despite dwindling numbers of participants in the religious novenas, rosary prayers, and processions (as compared to high attendance during the music concerts and bomba dances) Sylnic says that there is a strong [religious] foundation and that religion is not being lost in Loíza as long as people continue to gather, to sing with high spirits, and to walk about the pueblo retracing the route to the place of the miraculous apparition of Santiago: “Because Jesus said ‘Wherever there are two or more he would be there...’ and faith can never be lost while I see a person singing with ánimo [high spirits] and walking about the pueblo toMedianía on the three days... that gives me faith.” Sylnic describes having faith as directly connected to taking care of Santiago as part of his family. He describes taking care of Santiago as an act of love and reaffirms the Saint being a part of the family by jokingly saying that Santiago’s last name is Cruz.

For Sylnic and Mantenedora Rosa Julia, Santiago belongs to the pueblo, to the people of Loíza, not just the families who are Mantenedores. This sense of communal holding is important because it is connected to the people having access to the saint which is made possible by having access to the Mantenedores’ house, which is considered a community space, not an individual residence:

Why do I say religion? Because Loíza is not only Catholic or Protestant or “separated siblings” as we say. Estoooo. . . we have Santeria, which is a religion, and we have Espiritistas but we all believe in God. Some might call it Shangó or Jehovah. . . whatever! God is one and we believe in him and it saddens me [the lost opportunities] but it doesn’t take away my ánimo [the energy to do something] to continue being Loiceños and to continue struggling for my pueblo, you understand me? My ánimo is not taken away to keep believing in my religious foundations given to me by my father and my mother, to have the image in our house and celebrate his fiestas and open the doors to the people so that people may continue to know about the fiestas in that way. I am
Loiceño. Estoooo. . . but I believe that today we still have that foundation to struggle. They say that religion is being lost in our pueblo. No, no, it is not being lost! [Here we digress and Sylnic begins to talk about death, gang violence, having witnessed the funeral rite for children known as Baquiné. Eventually, we return to talking about the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol]

Here in Loíza there are 174 churches. . . 174 churches even if you don’t believe it. Here in such a small pueblo with a population of 32,587, there are 174 churches. . . so you know. . . and they are all different they all have their rules and ways. . . and so we say that all points lead to God. . . all churches go out every year on the first Saturday of May asking for a stop to violence. . . all the churches get together Catholic, Baptist, Protestant, and we are one. . . but afterwards we go back to the same circle. . . so you can see that in a given moment on that unique day we can be united and protest and we could do that every day. I respect your beliefs and you respect mine. . . I am Catholic and I grew up Catholic and my mother and father never told me that I had to be Catholic they gave me free choice and I visit different churches. I go and help out at the Evangelical church. . . I have a Catholic foundation but that does not take away from my learning. We are going to learn about everything. [Pause]

The traditional fiestas have changed, the religious part has changed. The attendance of believers has changed. . . it has changed. . . it has diminished. I don’t know why I can’t tell you, right? But attendance. . . the presence. . . since I have knowledge. . . since my mother and I have been celebrating I have seen it [the attendance] diminished. . . there is a part called the salve which we offer Santiago we come down the day before the official procession at 5 in the afternoon to bring him to the church and there the people sing to him in the church. Before the number of people who processed daily from the town to Medianía was more than a thousand more than a thousand five hundred and in the salve 200 or 300 you could notice the salve because it is the most tranquil [contemplative] part of the fiesta with the priest and the monaguillo [acolyte] we went and sang and prayed and in the 80s, one of the best epochs, you could see this process. People wore their best clothes, very elegant, they brought their rosaries and they went on praising and the church would fill up for the salve. Now in 2008 the only people that went were my family not more than 15 people and some people from afuera [outside of Loíza and usually meaning from the US] and the musicians. . . we did not even reach 50. What is happening? I am now 35 and many of the people who used to go with me I don’t see them any more. . . maybe they lost interest. . . maybe they don’t believe. . . but I cannot say lack of belief because if they stop even for a moment during the procession pues that part is a moment of belief.

When I ask Sylnic whether he thinks people who are religious would fear being seen participating in the procession because their religious tenets do not allow them to participate
and would refrain from participating in the processions, he interrupts me before I finish to respond:

No! No! That’s not the way it is here. Here, that is not a “detente”; it’s not a stop. . . here people might say “don’t go” but no one says “don’t look” you always see people of other religions sitting in front of their houses from their balconies you can see them having this unique moment of celebration. Some might say ‘Oh! Look, they are following an image’ [rather than God]. . . but they are watching and they are believing because here that is not a problem they take a chair and sit and say ‘I can’t walk the saint, but I can look at him!’ that does not take away from anything. One must search beyond. . . what is happening here in Loíza, they might say that the streets are bad [dangerous] that there are killings. . . that can be. . . but. . . it [the feast of Santiago Apóstol] has lost strength because you can see it in the processions of the 26th [of July] it was a day that did not matter that it was a weekday. . . estoo [Uhmmm]. . . the procession of the first saint brought people... now you can see the distance [gaps] between the music truck and the saint. We are losing people but perhaps not the hope and not the faith. What makes me feel proud is to see even 100 or 200 people because Jesus said ‘Wherever there are two or more he would be there’ and faith can never be lost while I see a person singing with ánimo [soulful energy] and walking about the pueblo to Medianía on the three days that gives me faith and I will continue with more pride with more faith and speaking with people like you so that you can take this to other places. That gives me faith and hope . . . and to see people who come to my house to make their promesas [petitions] with their ribbons. . .

Sylnic has grown up in a house which functions as a temple. The house is always open and he and his mother make themselves available to greet visitors and spend time sitting with people who come to pray to Santiago. Sylnic expresses sadness at the dwindling numbers of people who participate in the processions nowadays and is concerned about the way Loíza is portrayed by the media as a violent place. But he also expresses his joy at seeing someone singing with ánimo (lots of spirit). Sylnic’s hope is renewed each year when the processions begin and the people once again walk the streets of Loíza with great faith. Since he was a child, he has witnessed the people coming to his house to see the saint and to pray with deep devotion. The people bring ribbons to tie around the saint as they pray. Sylnic bears witness to
prayers being answered and people expressing their gratitude. For Sylnic, it’s about having faith:

I know a muchacha [young woman] who has been going to my house since I was 10 years old bringing 10 yards of pink colored ribbon I have never asked about her promesa because sometimes that is private. . . sometimes they tell you and sometimes they don’t... but she goes. . . she is older now. . . she goes with her 10 ribbons. . . she kneels before the image, prays, says thank you, so it [the petition] has been granted. I know a person who studied the history of Loíza, the history of Black people in Loíza, religion, the fiestas, and he came asking only one wish: that his wife could have a child and he gave him two! And year after year he has been here. . . year after year he is one who faithfully helps with all the processions and year after year he documents the fiestas he has an older son, the only thing is that it is with another wife, that son is a professional photographer and every year he is here, why? Because [the saint] granted his father his wish to have a child with the current wife. Now the child is no longer a child he is 18 and imagine then how many years he [the father] has been here more than 20, 25 years because I remember him from when I was little. It’s something to see that and say ‘Wow!’ and in that image. . . you can see. . . especially Santiago de los Niños [of the Children] which has pieces [in the shape of] arms, torsos, legs, in silver. . . they are [from] people who ask for promesas to help them and to heal those parts. How many people who have brought thousands of those pieces have had their promesa granted? It’s about having faith. . . it’s having faith. That is why we take care of him with that closeness, we take care of him with that love, we keep him in our home. He is part of our family his last name is Cruz. His name is Santiago Cruz! [laughs] and it is an honor to teach the five year olds why we do these fiestas, why we celebrate him, why we care so much. . . estoooo. . . We [the Mantenedores] have to sit with the people who start weeping... there are people with more problems than you! So why do you complain every day? [laughs] [laughs]

We have to take him out for a paseo [stroll] but the image never leaves. . . well yes, he has gone out twice, but he almost never leaves Loíza. . . estelee [uhmmm]. . . he went out once for repairs because it is an image made of gesso which is deteriorating because it’s made from gesso, wood, crystal, and gold and pues we took him on referral made by Victor Marrero of Puerto Rico who came to my house to see the image and saw that it had some broken parts. I know something about sculpture but I don’t dare! [laughs] estoooo and he told me about this lady who dedicated herself to this [repairs] and I went with my father, my father was alive when that happened. . . and we went first to see. . . and then we had to think how we were going to take him out of our pueblo? So imagine . . . and we took her [the image] and the lady said “put him on that huge table because you have given me Loíza in my hands and I don’t want any problems with Loíza” so she took care of him she treated him she painted him and then we went to look for him. He
had never been outside of Loíza [not even] to Rio Grande or Canóvanas and this year this past year he went out. He took a little trip to Caguas [laughs]. . . and then I told mami that there was a church in Caguas asking us to bring the image because they wanted to offer the saint an aguinaldo mass [a musical service with native instruments during Christmas time] and mami says what?????!!!! [laughs]. . . mami [says] it’s for a church. . . let’s take her [the image] we only had three days to think about it! [laughs] it! so we dressed him in all his finest and we brought him and also Rosa Julia Calcaño brought Santiago of the children but they never go out they don’t go out because what if something happens? It’s the responsibility of the whole pueblo because the image. Just because we have her [the image] in our house, we are the Mantenedores, that is what we are called, it does not mean that he is ours, he belongs to the whole pueblo, you know? It belongs to the people because the people began the fiestas and they [the pueblo] give us the guardianship for our family to keep him which is an honor to take care of him, to offer him prayers, to welcome the families, it is something very intimate, very close [in English] something chévere [good, sweet, neat] and pues. . . estooo. . . that is how we see it.

This story illustrates the great responsibility that the Mantenedores must bear. The Mantenedores are accountable to the entire community for any harm that might fall upon the image of the saint. Even when the image of the saint requires emergency “surgery” the Mantenedores must be cautious and make sure that the person who will perform the procedure is qualified and worthy of having the saint in their hands. The fear of something happening to the image of the saint is real and shows an aspect of the duties of being Mantenedores that is quite daunting. Being responsible for the well being of the saint includes protecting the material body of the saint, which is quite old and fragile at this point.

Sylnic’s story of how he had to convince Doña Sylvia, his mother, that it was necessary to bring the image to Caguas to be repaired is told in a very upbeat and humorous manner. But jokes aside, Sylnic’s narrative conveys the fear and deep sense of responsibility he and his mother felt. He also tells us that he and his mother dressed the image in his finest regalia for his journey to Caguas, as if they were dressing a child for a very special ceremony. When they
arrive in Caguas, the person who will make the repairs understands how precious the image is and reassures them that Santiago is in good hands. The Mantenedores have a great responsibility because while the image resides in their home, the saint “belongs” to the town, to the people of Loíza. The Mantenedores are the guardians and responsible for making sure that the next generation inherits the santo in good condition.

Sylnic now continues to describe the atmosphere during the Fiesta and talks extensively about the character of la loca (the mad woman) and the vejigantes. He distinguishes between locas who act more like clowns and buffoons and locas who go around sweeping and performing ritual cleansings or despojos to pick up and carry away any negative energies. He recalls growing up hearing that the vejigante represented the devil, but later he learned from his art teacher, Samuel Lind, to appreciate the vejigante in a more positive light, as something linked to spirituality and the Afro-Puerto Rican identity and world vision.

When we go to celebrate we are saddened because there are not as many people as before, the multitudes who came to celebrate him. They would come and stay with us to celebrate each day. If you know the saint you know that there are three images one is the saint for the children, the saint for the men, and the saint for the women. . . estooo . . . and each day pues 26, 27, 28 pues there is a different celebration for each one in each of the Mantenedores house. We feel very proud to open the doors of our house well we would like to fit 1000 people here, right? [laughs and makes gestures of opening his arms] we are able to make a big celebration offering music, refreshments, food, as part of the celebration dedicated to Santiago Apóstol. . . so it is not only that one day because we are preparing ourselves during the whole year to be able to celebrate with honor the image of Santiago we have in our home.

La Loca has evolved in a very different way! What happens with the traditional Loca, the true one, not the one [you see] today because today what they try to do is make fun of homosexuals and transvestites, that is not our Loca. The traditional Loca is a man, wearing a dress, using pillows, wears a headscarf, she paints herself black completely, [holds] a cigar, carries a tin can and higuero [tree branches] and you can see that she is crazy, that she has lost her mind, the way she looks at you, stares at you, and so what
that traditional *Loca* from our *pueblo* does is to clean up all evil from your house, she *does a despojo* [spiritual cleansing], right? She does a despojo and puts everything into the tin can and she goes around and picks up everything and puts it in the tin can, she sweeps up with the *higueru* branches and she will beat you, she will beat you [during a *despojo* the person being healed is “beaten” all over their body with bunches of herbs].

She will look at you and tell you if there is something evil which needs to come out and she begins with the tobacco and will go to cleanse your house to sweep up the bad things [makes sweeping motions] she will come in through the gate and she will clean and will take her little can with her. Before people would give her money, but it’s not necessary. The only people who do it [the role of Locas] are only about four. . . *estoo* to bring back again that tradition. . . that is what they do. . . it is a spiritual symbol of the *fiestas* because they pick up, they sweep up the bad spirits, bad things, bad intentions, she gathers them up and keeps them in that tin... she is like a witch [laughs]. . . it’s the interpretation. . . people who can’t see say ‘Look those *Vejigantes* [character dressed in bright colors wearing a coconut mask with many horns] signify evil, they are the Moors’ but then you grow up and you see, you learn and you are *empapando* [drenching/soaking yourself in knowledge] about what the fiestas really are and then you change your way of thinking. . . and that is the essential touch of Samuel Lind, *Loiceños*, my art teacher, he is a painter who dedicates himself exclusively to painting our Black spirit and to give it shape on canvas. . . there are many people who have different interpretations of the Vejigante. . . [laughs] when you see his painting [Samuel Lind’s] when you see his house his magical world his spiritual world because when you enter there you feel something mystical something filled with mystery. . . something outside of the common [experiences] . . . in each painting, in each sculpture.

The interview is coming to an end and I ask Slyníc if he wants to add anything else. Here Slyníc takes the opportunity to speak from his heart, allowing his thoughts to wander. As the wonderful storyteller that he is, as we come to the end of the interview and is asked whether he wants to say any last words, he takes us to a place of beginnings and retraces historical paths by introducing Loíza as a Taíno indigenous Chiefdom ruled by the only female Cacica named Yuisa. This memory again connects the past with the present and shows Slyníc’s amazing ability to weave significant historical information that gives historical context to the name of the town which evolved from Yuisa to Loíza, and which highlights Loiza’s rich and variegated cultural and religious heritage into his narrative:
I have always said. . . my mother says that I don’t keep anything hidden in my heart. . . we have to see life. . . how can I explain? One has to see that which is different. We have the gift of thinking and to be able to communicate, to speak, to embrace and in that way we have the possibility to grow and learn from others. . . it is delicious to learn from others from other cultures from other religions. I know that air exists not because I can see it but because I feel it. . . there are so many things I would like to mention! I can’t because there’s not enough tape! [laughs] a thousand thanks. . . truly. . . for giving me the opportunity to express myself. . . to be part of your thesis. . . I hope it goes well and I hope that more people like you care about us, about Loíza.

We learn from each other, I have learned from your questions. Even when we greet someone and say “Good morning!” we learn from each other. People are not placed in front of you by a mere coincidence of life but because we have to learn a new way a new way of expressing yourself, a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing voices, perhaps they are angels and I don’t know it because the world is so mysterious. . . but each day must be lived with a smile. . . we are alive, we are going forward. . . smiling and embracing is what keep us alive and give us opportunities to continue growing and to see that you are not alone, that there is always going to be someone [extends his hand to me] with a hand, five fingers, and if they don’t have them [the five fingers] then with the stump [makes gesture above his elbow] and so on. . . the person will have their body to support you. . . so give yourself without fear. . . that is a beautiful thing!

Loíza is found. . . Loíza is a small pueblo surrounded by other pueblos and the last wall is the sea. . . you can arrive via the Atlantic ocean, the Caribbean Sea, from the small British islands, and you arrive at a clear point, Puerto Rico, a little island, but big in knowledge. . . you have to pass by la 187 [highway] to get to Loíza and when you are on the 187 you know you are in Loíza you have to take number 3 to get to Loiza because it is the only pueblo that has one entrance and one exit, so you can’t get lost! When you see person laughing, a person who is in the street, sitting in a chair and you say to yourself, diache! [Expression of surprise like “damn!”] What is that person doing sitting in that chair in the street? Right there with this unique moña [high hairdo] if it’s a woman [laughs] or this unique man sitting holding a beer in his hand, I’m not going to say what brand, [laughs] marking the rhythm of the drum.

When you see people laughing and enjoying [themselves] you have arrived in Loíza, you have arrived in a pueblo that is going to welcome you, a pueblo that defends itself, a pueblo that has suffered a lot, a pueblo that was never slave and was always liberal a pueblo where you can come and stay and you will always be welcome and you will always have a home where you can eat and enjoy sharing cultural traditions. You are going to be able to walk [the pueblo] from one end to the other because it is easy to walk about. You are going to have the opportunity to see beyond what people are. You can get here anyway you want by boat, by yola [makeshift raft] but the important thing is that you never stop thinking about a pueblo whose name comes from a Cacica [Taína
woman Chief] the only Cacica in Puerto Rico! [Sylnic clicks his tongue, gives two thumbs up, and laughs] we have the honor to carry her name which has evolved from Yuisa to Loíza. You have arrived in Loíza, a pueblo with only 5 letters, but which is so much bigger than that! [laughs]

As Sylnic’s story comes to an end, he brings us back to the beginning: to Yuisa, the Taína Chief and the origin of the name Loíza embodied in a powerful indigenous woman. He brings us back to the encounter between the Spanish and the Taíno, to the so-called decimation of the Taíno population and tells us a different story: “We are alive!” He rejects separation and segregation and brings together his Taíno and African heritages. He tells us that we need to learn a new way of seeing, a new way of listening, and a new way of being that recognizes the mystical presence of the spirits. Before we have even left, he invites us back and gives us detailed traveling directions for our return. Returning to Loíza, he says, is easy. He says we will recognize Loíza when we see people laughing in a pueblo that has known much suffering. We will recognize Loíza by how welcoming people are. And we will recognize Loíza as a pueblo that defends itself. As we walk from one end of the pueblo to the other, he says we will have the opportunity to see beyond. Beyond labels, stereotypes, history books, and presuppositions about Loíza and her people. Sylnic raises the possibility of change, of transformation, of a different vision of Loíza and her people that celebrates life, honors the ancestors, loves their santos, and keeps on moving.
Fig. 26. *Santiago de las Mujeres*, Loíza 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
Chapter III

The Festival de Santiago Apóstol
Fig. 27. The Procession stops at the cemetery in Loíza to salute the ancestors. Loíza, 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.

Each year on July 25th the Apostle James, or Santiago Apóstol as he is known in Spain and Latin America, is commemorated. The most famous celebration of Santiago Apóstol is the pilgrimage on the Road to Santiago that brings devotees to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where the saint’s burial site is located. Santiago Apóstol is believed to have appeared as leader of the Spanish army during the Spanish Reconquista in the year 844 at the battle of Clavijo where 70,000 Moors were killed. It was here that the battle cry “Adjuva nos Deus et Jacobe”/“God and James help us” was heard for the first time. The Spaniards would utter this
same battle cry as they lay claim to the lands of the Taíno Indians, planting their flags emblazoned with the cross and invoking the name of Santiago Apóstol.\textsuperscript{52}

In Puerto Rico, there is an ancient tradition of celebrating the Feasts of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, every year beginning on July 25th. This date also happens to be a National holiday celebrating the day of the Puerto Rican Constitution and the establishment of Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth of the US. July 25th is also a day when many Puerto Ricans go to Guánica Bay, the site of the US invasion in 1898, calling for independence and an end to Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the US.

It is a curious thing for a town such as Loíza with deep African ancestral roots to be famous for their devotion to a Spanish saint known for killing Moors. It is also interesting that the official patron saint of the town of Loíza is Saint Patrick. When asked why Santiago Apóstol is so beloved by the people of Loíza, they will not refer to Santiago the warrior, Santiago the Spanish conquistador, or Santiago Matamoros/"Moor killer." The people of Loíza will say that Santiago suffered like them, was held captive like them, struggled like them for freedom, and is their everyday protector capable of extraordinary healing miracles. They believe that the apparition of Santiago in Loíza demonstrates that the Saint chose them, that the Saint prefers to dwell among the people, and that housing Santiago in their homes creates a sacred place filled with potential for healing and transformation.

The annual Feast of Santiago Apóstol celebrated in Loíza is a mixture of carnival, festival, religious procession, and spiritual pilgrimage. Anthropologists who have written about the

\textsuperscript{52} Zaragoza, "St. James in the Streets"
Festival of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza find the work of Victor Turner helpful. For Zaragoza⁵³, the “reversals” of social structures present in the Feasts of Santiago Apostol in Loíza illustrate Victor Turner’s notions of *liminality* and *communitas* within the ritual process. While I agree that the processions could be regarded as liminal thresholds filled with potentiality for transformation and reincorporation, the notion of social structure “reversals” does not seem to reflect the lived experience of the people of Loíza during the Feast of Santiago Apóstol.

*Liminality* is generally understood as a temporary and ephemeral state marked by ambiguity and a sense of being in between and in-betwixt. In this liminal space, there is a turning upside down of social order where the powerful become subservient, and at the end of this liminal period, the social structure returns to its original position. But in Loíza it seems to be in reverse, especially with respect to the Catholic Church. Typically, the image of a saint is taken out of the Church to be processed through the neighborhood. This creates a direct connection between the saint and the people without the priest as intermediary. At the end of the procession, the saint is returned to the church building, where people must adhere to a set schedule and protocol in order to see and be seen by the saint. In Loíza, with the exception of Santiago de los Hombres (who is “borrowed” to spend one night inside the church) the saints do not return to the church.

The three Santiagos live in the home of his Mantenedores year round and there is a feeling among the people that although the Mantenedores have the responsibility for caring for the saint and bringing him out into the streets, the saints “belong” to the people. The saints are

⁵³ Zaragoza, “St. James in the Streets.”
not anyone’s property and they will not be deprived of freedom by living locked up in a church
building. Thus, the processions are more of a flaunting of the saints’ freedom and the people’s
power in housing and protecting the saints. It is the people, the community of Loíza and not the
church that is in charge of the planning and realization of the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol. For
three days, the processions offer the people direct contact and communication with the saint
as they return to the site of the apparition of the saint inside the cork tree. This corresponds to
the number of times the saint himself appeared to the humble fisherman and the three times
the saint ran away from the Catholic church. The people and the saint embody a vaivén going
and coming back, intentionally crossing paths, saluting each other with flags, lowering the
palanquin where the saints travels, as if the saints were genuflecting before the people.

The devotion of the people of Loíza for Santiago Apóstol is deeply rooted in their lived
experience as Afro-Puerto Ricans. Their particular experience within social, political, and
religious power structures has been described as “La negritud que nos habita” (the Blackness
that dwells within us.) A state of being or consciousness that is not exclusively about the
Blackness of their skin, but a force that lives within, is expressed through relationships, and is
capable of changing circumstances that are oppressive. These reversals are visible in the
Spanish saint who does not appear to a Catholic priest, but to a humble Black fisherman; the
Catholic Saint who runs away from the Catholic church and chooses the home of runaway
slaves as his home; the Spanish warrior who comes not to kill but to heal; the Spanish
conquistador with the face of a child whose reason for being is to serve and liberate the people
of Loíza from suffering; the participation in the processions of vejigantes wearing horned masks
that for some symbolize evil and for others represent African angels; the Locas, “mad women”
who in reality are men dressed as women; the “mad women” who are feared and yet are the ones in charge of cleansing and opening the road so that no evil can come to the people of Loíza; the Caballeros/Gentlemen who represent Spanish aristocracy mounting half horses made of cardboard, and the Viejos/Old Men who hobble around trying to run after and conquer the heart of the elusive Locas.

Communitas is experienced in the sharing of communal meals, praying, in the gathering and processing together, in a shared devotion and faith in healing miracles, in the reciprocal nature of the relationship with the saint where he cares and protects the people as the people care and protect him, and in the redemptive and salvific act of the people providing hospitality and sanctuary to a runaway saint; a Spanish saint who separates himself from oppressive social structures, refuses the label of Matamoros/“Moor killer” and transforms himself into a servant and protector, a small and fragile image made of old wood and paper maché, whose existence and well being is in the hands of the people of Loíza. In Robert Orsi’s The Madonna of 115th Street, the origin of the people’s devotion to the Madonna is similar to the devotion to Santiago Apostol by the people of Loíza. The Madonna has journeyed with the people, lived among them in their neighborhood, suffered with the people poverty and ostracism, and heard the people’s cry for justice and protection. But whereas Orsi finds in the procession of the Madonna a reversal of social structures where the private is made public through the ritual process of inversion, the processions of the three Santiagos in Loíza serve to highlight the public character
of the Mantenedores’ homes year round. The pilgrimage from and to the Mantenedores’ homes reaffirms the home as shrine, sacred space, and communal property.\textsuperscript{54}

Roberto DaMatta’s notion of “symbolic dislocation” is more closely related to the experience of the Feasts of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza.\textsuperscript{55} In the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol, the direction of the processions is from the homes of the Mantenedores into the streets of Loíza. This can be understood as dislocation because traditionally, religious images are processed from and to the church. The mere existence of three images instead of the one official one allowed by the Catholic Church makes Santiaguito an outlaw and yet he is the most beloved and regarded as sacred by the people. This symbolic dislocation of the original image of a single Santiago able to multiply itself, to incorporate itself into people of different genders and ages, is evocative of the strategies of runaway slaves seeking freedom. Here Santiago becomes the trickster always on the move, always running away from the places where he would be expected to be, a Catholic saint who will not be found in the church, who will risk everything by running away time and time again, who will not be caught by the authorities. He will blend in with the people and once a year will be paraded in front of the very church building where he might have lived in the shadow of the life-size Saint Patrick. A warrior saint on whose diminutive child like face a painted mustache seems like the result of child’s play. A saint who will embody both males and females, and who might be mistaken for being a “mad woman,” an


old man, or a fancy Spanish *Caballero*. Samuel Lind has engraved a description of Santiago on one of his posters:

Lord of war and storms, guardian of the fishermen, the sugar cane cutters, and the coconut farmers. . . harsh with the wicked and protector of the poor, kind to women, and affectionate with children. . . a humble Santiago who came here to Loíza, drank water from the fruit of the palm trees, and remained forever, rejoicing and suffering with us. 

Many find the encounter of the three images of Santiago Apóstol during the processions to be a kind of reincorporation of the community: men, women, and children. These encounters are ceremoniously marked with the crossing of the banners as a way of saluting each other. This is the only time of year when the three Santiagos get to be together all at the same time. The rest of the year each will live in the home of their particular *Mantenedores*. The people will have to go to the three different houses to ask for their favors, attend novenas, and to pay their *promesas*, depending on the nature of their illness or concern.

The people’s movements from one house to the other, weave invisible threads connecting the three Santiagos. Each has a home in the home of the family who cares for them: the *Mantenedores*. Each will be processed through the neighborhoods of Loíza and lead the people on a pilgrimage to the place of the original apparition of the saint inside the cork tree. During each procession, the saint will be carried on the shoulders of their devotees, followed by the people of the town and accompanied by a lively troupe of *Vejigantes*, *Locas*, *Caballeros*, and *Viejos* in their colorful costumes. Each saint has his own day in which he is celebrated with a procession.

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56 Seen while visiting Samuel Lind’s home studio.
The planning of the processions starts in the month of June with each family of Mantenedores celebrating novenas (nine days of prayer) and hosting community gatherings in their home for the devotees and neighbors to pray together, share refreshments, and do fundraising. The Mantenedores also approach local business owners and the office of the Mayor to do fundraising to pay for musicians, food, flowers, and other expenses associated with the processions. This is also a time when the people of the village begin to make and repair the costumes and masks some of them will wear during the processions.

On July 24th beginning at 4:00 am, a “town crier” announces the start of the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol, followed by firecrackers at noon. The first procession carries Santiago de los Hombres from the home of the Mantenedores to the center of town and into the church of Saint Patrick. The doors of the church remain open so that people can come in to see Santiago and pray in his presence. Inside the church, the small statue of Santiago adorned with red and yellow roses and bright colored satin ribbons, is propped up, a spotlight shining on him, and placed in front near the pews so people can easily have access to him. The gold embroidery on the green cape covering the life size statue of Saint Patrick outlines his opaque silhouette against the wall submerged in darkness. No priest or church sexton monitors the steady flow of devotees and curious people entering the church and kneeling before Santiago.

Outside in the plaza, the bomba music is blaring and those who are not dancing enjoy the many entertaining games and rides and of course the taste of local cuisine. The delicious alcapurrias, bacalaitos, and arepas de coco, can be found in humble neighborhood restaurants such as the one owned by the Mantenedores of Santiago de las Mujeres, Sylvia and Sylnic Cruz. But many food vendors set up “shop” along the perimeter of the plaza selling their pinchos.
from a small cooler. The festivities last late into the night. For one night, Santiago remains in
the church, away from his home and family of Mantenedores.

The following morning on July 25th, a mass is celebrated at Saint Patrick’s church. This is
also the day in which the Hijos Ausentes, the absent ones who have been living abroad, return
to Loíza. The Hijos Ausentes elect their representative, who wears a glittery sash and
participates in a parade, or caravan. The caravan is composed of decorated floats fitted with
loudspeakers from which bomba music blares, carrying the beauty queens and princesses in full
regalia. The Hijos Ausentes do not process on foot, but rather ride in their cars, jeeps, pick-up
trucks, buses, boats on wheels, and bicycles. The person elected as representative of the Hijos
Ausentes usually rides in a convertible, donning his sash, offering his royal greeting to the
people lining the streets. Trucks with loudspeakers carrying musicians and people dressed in
traditional Bomba dancing outfits and bright satin costumes and vejigante masks. People follow
the cars and trucks on bicycles and the people lining the streets wave to the Hijos Ausentes
passing through their neighborhood on their way to town. The Hijos Ausentes/Absent Children
have returned and whether it is their first time back or their 30th year, they are welcomed. For
some, being a Hijo Ausente of Loíza is a way of being that adds another layer to the already
complex Puerto Rican identity. There are over 3.5 million Puerto Ricans living in the United
States, part of diaspora community in constant flux and part of the “guagua aérea/airbus.”

The Hijos Ausentes constitute a community “on the move” which reincorporates itself
every year during the Feast of Santiago Apóstol. As they process through the town, they
interact with the townspeople who come out to greet them and welcome them back into the
life of the community. Some may have been born in Loíza, while some may have been born in
the US. Some may still have family and a family home to return to, while others may have lost or sold their family home. Some may have participated in the Feast of Santiago Apóstol celebrated in the US in New York City or New Haven, Connecticut. Some may come to pay their respects and visit their ancestors buried in the cemetery of Loíza. Some Hijos Ausentes have a tradition of bringing their children to the Feast as a way to create and deepen a connection to Loíza and their Afro Puerto Rican identity. Some Hijos Ausentes arrive in Loíza as a Memento Mori on wheels, with their names, birthdates, and death dates painted on the windshields of the vehicles on the move as part of the caravan. The caravan heads towards town, where the Hijos Ausentes gather to eat and join the townspeople in participating in Bomba dance and the various entertainment events offered near the town square until late into the night.

On July 26th the procession for Santiago de los Hombres brings the Saint out of the church and into the streets on its way to Medianía Alta, where the cork tree, the site of the original apparition of the saint, is located. On its way, Santiago de los Hombres will “encounter” Santiago de las Mujeres and Santiago de los Niños. Special salutes with flags and genuflections mark the meeting of the saints as they cross paths. At the end of the procession, each saint is returned to the homes of their Mantenedores. The following day, July 27th, Santiago de las Mujeres/of the women heads the procession with the same route to the árbol de corcho (the cork tree) and “saluting” the other Santiagos whenever they encounter each other. When the procession ends, the Saints are returned to their homes. On July 28th the final and most awaited procession takes place with the bringing out into the streets of the image of Santiago de los Niños/Santiago of the children. Little Santiago is processed while being carried on a palanquin on the shoulders of devotees. His image leaves from the house of Tamara, who
shares Mantenedora responsibilities for Santiago de los Niños with Rosa Julia Calcaño. The 3 mile pilgrimage to the cork tree begins after 1:00 pm and can take up to three or four hours in the sweltering tropical summer heat. In the evening there is a mass in the Saint Patrick church, after which people join in the celebrations and musical performances at the plaza.

**My Experience in The Processions**

Mid-July in Loíza Puerto Rico is hot and humid. Stepping outside into the sweltering streets I am hit by the thickness of the air and I feel the weight of the humidity pushing down on my head. My pores open and I am immediately drenched in sweat. I haven’t even walked a block yet. I am dressed in light cotton clothing that quickly absorbs the humidity and clings to my body. The weight of the camera strap around my neck is already itching me with sunburn. I immediately regret every single item inside my purse that now seems to weigh a ton. I drink an entire bottle of water just to feel a little bit lighter and prepare my body for the journey ahead.

It’s been ten years since I first came to Loíza to participate in the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol. And each year I am inevitably shocked by the intensity of the heat. By now I have become familiar with the schedule of events, the route of the processions, the people who are the Mantenedores of the saints, the musicians, the bomba dancers, the Vejigantes and Locas, the young photographer who still gets annoyed when I get in his way, and the images of the three Santiagos. Even when I am greeted with a warm “Nena! Que bueno verte! Bienvenida!“/Girl! Good to see you! Welcome back! I am still very aware of being a visitor, an observer, and a student. I am still self-conscious and apologetic for carrying the camera everywhere and constantly afraid to be missing an important moment when I spend too much
time looking through the lens to “capture” the moment instead of living it. It has taken me a long time, but I am now more aware of how my own insecurities have driven me to hold on to the camera.

In the past couple of years, I have let go of the need to take so many pictures and allowed myself to be seen, to be free to interact with people, and most importantly to participate in the processions as a devotee and someone asking for a healing miracle and later pagando promesa (paying back the saint for the favor). This switch from being a detached observer accumulating data into being one of the pilgrims, one of the people expressing devotion and faith in the saints, has been a deeply transformative experience. There came a point when I realized that the imaginary line between scholar and devotee had been crossed. I was now walking in a different direction, towards the possibility for a miracle. I was given a place in the procession, a place next to the women I had been observing for years, their children now taller than me and walking with a firm step. I now stood shoulder to shoulder with them, their strong hands gripping firmly the palanquin carrying the saint, the sweat running down our arms mingling. This was not an experience for the eye behind the camera. This was a whole body experience. And my body remembered the first time I walked the route of Santiago to the cork tree and how much energy I had back then. How I had danced for hours after the procession had ended. Now my frail, aching, ailing body tried desperately to keep up with the pace of the procession. Now my body knew about sacrifice and about a sense of collective energy that kept me moving despite the blisters on my tired feet. Now I knew with every breath and every cell in my body how to measure three miles in the heat of July in Loíza. And when we make our first stop at the cemetery, I take solace in the small shadow of the saint whose
silhouette covers my dusty toes. We lower the saint in order to salute the ancestors. The balloons are released by the children and I burst into tears, following with my eyes the balloons as they disappear into the blue sky peeking through the palm trees, carrying our prayers.

Ten years ago I took thousands of pictures of those balloons, of the people processing, of the Vejigantes, of the saint. Today I realize I have been on this journey all along, learning how to trust, reaching out, bearing witness, and ultimately facing my own mortality. Today I realize that through my faith I have been transformed. I feel I am so much more than an observer. I am a pilgrim on the move. I am a small creature, afraid, searching for home. I pray that this road will lead me to freedom from pain and suffering. And so I tie a green ribbon around the tiny hand of Santiago, while the women look on with tears of compassion in their eyes. This ribbon, this knot is my prayer. If granted, I will return next year to walk again among the people of Loíza and together we will process with Chaguito, Santiago de los Niños, in gratitude for all miracles, great and small.

It is July 28th and it does not feel like the procession ever ends. The route on a map might look linear, but in my heart, mind, and body, the movement continues, the expectation of continued movement keeps me in anticipation. On the third day, when the procession ends, we are hardly aware of it because just as we reach the place of the cork tree where Santiago was found, we do not stop, we do not sit down, we do not disband. Instead, we continue moving as a group, and retrace our steps. The Vejigantes have taken off their masks and welcome the breeze on their faces no longer looking at the road from behind the coconut masks. I can see las locas walking, leaning on each other, their high heels and wigs swinging from their overstuffed bags. The music no longer blares from the trucks and the floats are long
gone to be stripped of the glittery butterflies, paper flowers, and strings of yellow, green, and red flags... on the road we have left our sweat, our prayers, our hopes, our fears, our promises, and a little bit of ourselves. Santiaguito is now enjoying a ride home in a jeep and will be returned to the home of Rosa Julia, his Mantenedora. Once again, the three Santiagos will be home, living with their families, marking the beginning of another year of devotion, another year of life in Loíza. Tomorrow, without skipping a beat, the people will once again knock on the door of the Mantenedores to see and be seen by Santiago. Tomorrow there will be new ribbons tied to the image of the saint, there will be new promesas, and the devotees will bring their little silver milagros in the shape of babies, arms, breasts, legs, and hearts to be healed.

As night descends upon Loíza, the road seems to continue to pulsate with the energy of the people whose footsteps still reverberate through the streets of Loíza. The road awaits to be opened and cleansed once again by la loca and the vejigantes who have already begun preparing for next year’s processions. The end is the beginning of a new year in the life of Loíza. In the meantime, Sylnic and Rosa will continue to share the story of the apparition of Santiago with the school children. The vejigantes will begin to sew their bright satin bat-like costumes and will hang their coconut masks in a place of honor. Tamara will begin fundraising to buy the rice and beans and plantains for next year’s communal feast. The flags will be dusted off and hung up near the home altars until it’s time for the first novenas. As we head back home, we pass by the plaza in the center of town. We will walk by the Catholic Church that Santiago ran away from. We know that inside the closed doors, a life-size St. Patrick has been standing very still at the back of the church, cool as can be in his finest green and gold brocade regalia, never breaking a sweat, missing all the action taking place in the dusty sweltering streets of Loíza. We
have paid our promesas, we have walked the ancient route to the árbol de corcho, we have tied the ribbons and prayed for healing, we have seen La Madama and la loca work their magic despojos cleansing us and liberating us from the burdens we carry in our hearts. We have celebrated the three Santiagos and witnessed the people of Loiza sobre la marcha, on the move.

Three Santiagos, three processions in three days, and a sensation of tremendous awe overcomes me as we cross the bridge over the Río Grande and look out into the horizon. The words of Sylnic Cruz return to me from the place where the river meets the ocean: “And they stepped down from the ship, their feet touching the waters of Loiza and then walked upon the land. They took their first steps here in Loiza as free people. We have always been free!”
Chapter IV

*Desalambrando/Undoing the Barbwire*
If we end up on the edges of towns that cannot bear our company will we ever have a home in this place, or will we always be set adrift from the only homes we have ever known?
—Toni Morrison

Yo pregunto a los presentes, si no se han puesto a pensar, que la tierra es de nosotros y no del que tenga más. Yo pregunto si en la tierra nunca habrá pensado ustedes que si las manos son nuestras es nuestro lo que nos dan. A desalambrar! A desalambrar! Que la tierra es nuestra, es tuya y de aquel, de Pedro, María de Juan y José! Si molesto con mi canto a alguien que no quiera oír, de seguro que es un gringo ó un dueño de este país. A desalambrar! A desalambrar!
—Daniel Viglietti

I ask those present here if they haven’t thought about the land being ours and not belonging to those who have more. I am asking if you haven’t thought about the land, about the fact that our hands are ours and therefore everything they produce is ours. Let’s tear down the barbwire! Let’s tear down the barbwire! For the land is ours, it is yours, and it belongs to Pedro, María, Juan, and José! If I bother someone with my song, surely it must be a gringo or a landlord. Let’s take down the barbwire! Let’s take down the barbwire!
—Daniel Viglietti

*Desalambrar* literally means “undo the barbwire [barbed wire].” It is the title that Puerto Rican Sociologist Liliana Cotto Morales chose for her book addressing the history of the social movement carrying out “rescates de terrenos,” or land rescues, in Puerto Rico. According to Cotto Morales, “rescates de terrenos” have always been part of Puerto Rican history and are characterized as a collective, communal, and immediate action, thus creating a “collective
identity of resistance”. Cotto Morales regards these mobilizations of land rescue as embodying and expressing the resistance of poor and marginalized groups by establishing a counter narrative valuing community, demanding social justice and inclusion, and revealing urgencies and insurgencies. In her view, ineffective government policies continue to create multiple social crises met by public policies resulting in increased government harassment against marginalized groups. For Cotto Morales, the history of the struggle of the rescatadores de terreno in Puerto Rico is an important one. She considers this history of land rescues as one that gives voice to social struggles that set the stage for the violent and lethal eviction of Adolfina Villanueva in 1980 in Loíza.

The Other Puerto Rico: Loíza as Site of Encounters and Resistance

Loíza is located on the northeast coast of Puerto Rico. There is only one road that leads to Loíza. Passing through the town of Piñones, a bridge connects Loíza to the rest of the island. From the bridge, one can see where the Río Grande meets the ocean. The meeting of the two waters is a point of convergences and encounters mirroring two worlds separated by a border made of thin undulating ribbons of foam creating a border continuously reshaping itself. Loíza is located only 15 miles from the Capital San Juan, yet it is described as an isolated, disconnected, peripheral, and out of the way place with its back against the ocean. Until the 1960s the only means of transportation across the Río Grande was a manual raft that docked by the meeting of the waters, a place known as “El Ancón.” Some regard this geographical

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57 Liliana Cotto Morales, Desalambrar: Orígenes de los Rescates de Terreno en Puerto Rico y su Pertenencia en los Movimientos Sociales Contemporáneos (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial Tal Cual, 2011).
disconnect as the reason for Loiza’s paradoxical identity as a place famous for its lively Afro-
Puerto Rican cultural and religious traditions and also as a place systematically forgotten when it comes to connecting to social services and resources to respond to the needs of the residents. Samuel Lind describes his town as “A place with strong African roots that separates itself. . . it’s marginalized from the other Puerto Rico and creates its own religious expression. . . Loíza creates its own food, its own way of life, its own Loiceños being, and sees itself as separate.” Yet current government efforts facilitating the building of a tourism industry by private corporations are rapidly bringing “the other Puerto Rico” to Loiza’s coasts. The land that makes up Loiza’s coast was site to sugar plantations where freed and enslaved African people worked. After the sugar industry plummeted and following the emancipation declaration, freed slaves continued to work the land as sharecroppers. In time, the plantation owners left, leaving the sharecroppers to live and work on the land.

Expressing his sorrow and anger at seeing Loíza being broken up by encroaching tourism development, Samuel Lind talks about gentrification as the erasure of Afro-Puerto Rican culture:

Now Loíza is turning into one big condominium and we are being broken up we are broken . . . I believe that I’m one of the few who is still struggling and so I’m getting together uniting with the people of Piñones [a neighborhood at the entrance to Loíza] and you know those projects . . . those condos are not going to represent progress . . . if you could tell me that we have made progress . . . but here after the building of 5 luxury condos, here nobody has sewer system, you know? All these very humble little wooden house . . . that same African root that same spirit that same suffering generation. . . there is a sense of trying to erase that cultural expression. . . sometimes I run into people that say we have to change and leave all that behind. . . they say we have to leave that way of thinking to usher in other things. . . that our mentality is a barrier that has to be removed . . . and I say: “Look, you don’t know yourself! You don’t know your roots!
With coastal areas now acquiring high market value there has been much land speculation, creating a constant threat of eviction for people who lack title to the lands they inherited from their ancestors. As more and more luxury condos and hotels are being built encroaching on existing ancestral communities, tensions grow among residents, developers, construction companies, outsiders, local municipal government, and law enforcement. Gentrification is affecting the most vulnerable residents who are creating a growing resistance movement against building of tourist facilities and struggling to protect themselves from police brutality, displacement, and homelessness.

This reality affects all aspects of the every day lives of the people of Loíza, including their cultural and religious celebrations. Loíza is known as “The capital of tradition” and is site to the miraculous apparition of Santiago Apóstol. People tell of a humble fisherman and Cimarrón/run away slave who found the image of Santiago Apóstol within the roots of a cork tree by the beach. The fisherman goes to town and takes the image to the priest at St. Patrick’s Catholic Church, but the saint rejects the church and runs away. After this happens three times, the fisherman understands that the saint wants to live with him and his family, so he takes him home. Although the official Patron Saint of Loíza is St. Patrick, he does not receive nearly as much attention as Santiago does. Santiago is seen as many things: warrior, runaway slave, child, and healer, who chose to live among the people of Loíza to share their joys and sorrows. There is deep devotion and love for Santiago in Loíza, where people have a tradition of making promesas/petitions and testify to his healing powers. Every July, Loíza celebrates Santiago with novenas, processions, parades, street dancing, music concerts, and masquerades in constant movement creating points of convergences along the routes between past and present, church
and home, insiders and outsiders, religious devotees of Santiago and tourists, residents and visitors from the Puerto Rican US Diaspora. When the processions and parades are over, the saints (there are now three images, each representing a different segment of the population: men, women, and children) return to their homes with the families who are known as Mantenedores and who take care of them year round and consider them another member of the family. It is important to consider Santiago’s dwelling place in the homes of the Mantenedores under threat of gentrification, as well as the saint’s mosaic-like identity as we consider the multivocal cultural and religious identity of the people of Loíza.

Puerto Rico, Meaning “Rich Port” is the name given the island by the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century. Its indigenous Taíno/Arawak name is Boriken, meaning the land of the valiant lord. With the Spanish conquest came the enslavement of the indigenous population mainly to work on the gold mines. By the next century, the gold deposits had been exhausted and agriculture became the main source of export goods. In the 18th century the island produced coffee, sugar, and tobacco, with sugar becoming prominent after the Haitian revolution and making Puerto Rico a thriving new sugar production center based on slave labor.

In 1719 the town of Loíza was incorporated. It is believed that the name “Loíza” comes from “Yuisa,” a Taína woman chief. In 1789 Puerto Rico was granted the right to freely import slaves. By 1815 there were 19,000 slaves on the island. The numbers increased to 32,000 by 1828 and 42,000 in 1834. By the late 1820s Puerto Rico was recognized as a top sugar producer in the world, peaking in 1870. It is said that the history of both slavery and sugar were intimately tied together. The Emancipation Acts of 1870 and 1873 were followed by the sharp
It is estimated that between 1791 and 1805 Puerto Rico was among the top 4 sugar producers. It is estimated that approximately 80,000 African slaves were brought to Puerto Rico up until the late 19th century. To the northeastern shores of Puerto Rico through the post city of Humacao (thirty miles from Loíza) came thousands of men, women, and children forcibly removed from what we know today as Congo Kinshasa, Congo Brazzaville, Guinea Conakry, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon, Southeast Nigeria, and run away slaves from Haiti.

In 1873 the Abolition Laws were approved ordering that freed slaves or libertos, enter immediately into forced labor contracts for a period of three years. Once the three-year period had expired, many libertos entered into share cropping arrangements known as “medias” hence the name of Loiza’s towns “Medianía Alta” and “Medianía Baja”. As sugar production declined, owners of plantations abandoned them, leaving the libertos as “agregados” who remained on the land.

Spanish, Irish, and English plantation owners found in Loíza cheap labor, cheap land, and reaped the benefits of the horrific institution of slavery. Once the sugar industry fell, they abandoned the land. The local sharecroppers remained on the land, never receiving title to their land. Recently, this has become an issue as local residents are being forcibly evicted from their homes because they are unable to prove ownership of their land.

A municipality since 1971, Loíza covers approximately 25 square miles and is known as The Capital of Tradition with its most famous and popular festival being the Feast of Santiago.

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58 Herbert Klein, African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean (Oxford University Press, 1986), 103-104.
Apóstol celebrated every July 25th. With approximately 39,500 residents, Loíza has become a tourist attraction, with parades, floats, beauty queens, cultural performances of bomba music, and religious processions, pilgrimages, and the iconic vejigantes.

Loíza is the home of the Mantenedores/Keepers of Santiago Apóstol and the land upon which the ritual procession in honor of Santiago takes place every year during the Festival of Santiago Apóstol. The cultural and religious roots and routes are located within a contested space with a long history of encounters between groups with different levels of power.

Claiming the “discovery” of the island in 1493, the Spanish colonizers enslaved and decimated the indigenous Taíno population living on the island. To replace this population, the Spanish instituted slavery importing until late into the 19th century over 80,000 African slaves to work on sugar plantations and general agriculture of tobacco, ginger, yucca, and plantains. As a result of the Spanish American War in 1898, Spain ceded all rights to the island of Puerto Rico to the United States. In 1952, the Congress of the United States ratified Puerto Rico’s status as a “Commonwealth”, or Estado Libre Asociado. Today Puerto Rico is identified as a “territory” of the United States, without being a State. Many recognize this status as a colonial one since Puerto Ricans who live on the island do not have the right to vote in US Presidential elections. All these “encounters” resulted in the construction of what Puerto Rico is today.

Puerto Rico has been described as nation that is hybrid, mestiza, “on the move,” and made up of three roots: Taíno, Spanish, and African, resulting in “La Tercera Raíz”/The Third Root. Historically, coastal communities such as Loíza are places where African people (freed, enslaved, and runaways) left strong cultural and religious living traditions. Loíza is a place of convergence of the Taíno, Spanish, and African heritages. From the Taíno, the people of Loíza
maintain some language, agriculture, and particular cooking methods. The lengthy Spanish invasion and occupation of Puerto Rico left a plethora of “legacies” the most significant being the Spanish language, legal system, and Catholicism. From their African ancestors, the people of Loíza retain many cultural and religious practices that are part of their every day lives, such as language, culinary arts, the musical genre of bomba, the funerary rite for children known as Baquiné, and the religious practice of Espiritismo.

1952: The End of Housing as a Human Right

By the 1940’s the ripple effects of the US depression and the end of the sugar boom in Puerto Rico had resulted in massive migrations to urban peripheries. An Agrarian Reform was promulgated in 1942 accompanied by social service programs and the creation of efforts to promote industrialization. As a consequence, many people migrated to urban centers where these social programs were being offered, and established themselves in arrabales, or marginal slums characterized by lack of sanitary facilities. In order to stop the increasing number of these arrabales, the government prohibited people from repairing their houses and deployed vigilantes to force people to comply. Also in the late 1940s, Puerto Rico made use of federal funds to build public housing, otherwise known as caseríos, or “projects.” Many of the rescatadores/land rescuers refused to move to these caseríos because it meant giving up their right to the possibility of owning their own home and instead becoming a tenant of the government.

The 50s decades marked the launching of Manos a la Obra a government project which between 1940 and 1970, resulted in the exportation of over 40% of the Puerto Rican
population to the US. In addition, with planning and financing from the United States, Manos a la Obra also conducted the forced sterilization of 35% of women between the ages of 20 and 49. Until 1952, Puerto Rico’s Constitution recognized housing as a human right. In 1952, the Congress of the United States officially changed Puerto Rico’s status vis a vis the United States to Estado Libre Asociado. That same year the US Congress eliminated Puerto Rico’s Ley Orgánica, which regarded housing as a right, not a privilege. The failed attempts to “modernize” Puerto Rico via industrialization dependent on US approval and local political schemes resulted in more than 15,000 rescates through the sixties and seventies.

Between 1968 and 1971 the housing deficit increased by almost 70%. The Corporación de Renovación Urbana y Vivienda (CRUV), or Corporation of Urban Renovation and Housing, built about 12,000 housing units and the private sector built about 15,000 units. But people whose salaries were less than $20 per week (agricultural work) or $40 per week (industrial work) could hardly afford to pay the $15,000 required per unit, at a time when 68% of families earn less than $4,00 per year and 39% earn less than $2,000 per year. In 1972 the rescates de terreno were at an all time high, resisting and changing the makeup of peripheral spaces. Some rescatadores in fact prevailed and were able to build permanent homes. For Cotto Morales, their use of strategies outside the norm and in direct opposition to the repressive government tactics, is a valuable contribution to today’s struggle for social justice, dignified housing, and protection of community ties.

Sociologist Liliana Cotto Morales (2011) points out that it would be a mistake to see these rescates as isolated incidents, given that the entire island of Puerto Rico was being affected US neo-colonial hegemonic power structures shaping the market economy. While the
rescates were taking place, the people of Puerto Rico were mobilizing themselves creating a movement in opposition to the draft, the US war in Vietnam, against the US military presence in public universities and the occupation of Culebra island (part of Puerto Rico located adjacent to the mainland to the east) by the US Marines, and in favor of the creation of labor unions and environmental protection.

According to Cotto Morales rescate de terrenos (land rescues) have been part of a strategy of popular resistance and an important part of Puerto Rican history. Today desalojos/evictions continue happening all over the island, particularly affecting coastal communities, including those in northeastern Puerto Rico, where Loíza is located.

The Spiritual Dimensions of Rescates de Terreno/Land Rescues

Like many people in Puerto Rico, and Loíza in particular, Cotto Morales regards the killing of Adolfina Villanueva as one of “the most memorable experiences of a heartless desalojo. Adolfina and her husband were gunned down in front of their children during an eviction process ordered by the courts and executed by two-dozen armed police, resulting in her death and gravely injuring her husband. In addition to the obvious economic factors which do not allow people to buy a house in the private market, families who dare to participate in “rescate de terreno/land rescues reject living in government built caseríos/housing projects. These projects, built with US federal funds, were supposed do away with land rescues and urban arrabales/slums, ushering in public housing modernization. But many people view the caseríos/public housing projects malsanos/unhealthy and they rejected them. This rejection of being forced to live in a US federal government high-rise buildings and their preference for
dwelling among communities in terrenos rescatados /rescued land and building small houses close to the ground, is evocative of Santiago Apóstol, who runs away and rejects living inside the Catholic church building, choosing dwell among the people of Loíza, as part of a family, cared for by a Mantenedora, in a humble house close to the ground.

The struggle by Afro-Puerto Rican coastal communities in Puerto Rico against rapid expansions of tourism encroaching on their spaces are embodied by a new generation of community activists. Employing organic and multivocal and multivalent strategies of resistance, coastal communities are “rescuing” land and protecting their homes. Rejecting US federal housing projects, land rescuers, or rescatadores, in some ways, evoke Santiago Apóstol. The legend of the miracle of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol identifies him as a Cimarrón, a runaway slave, who rejects living in the Catholic Church time and time again, preferring instead to live among the people of Loíza. There, he is housed in the homes of the Mantenedores, the keepers of the saint who care for him as another member of the family. During the year Santiago devotees can go to visit the saint anytime to pray, ask for “favors,” and pay promesas.

One of the most highly regarded forms of paying promesas is to process through the neighborhoods of Loíza, walking along the route to and from the spot where the miracle of the apparition of Santiago took place.

Lester Nurse: Memory and Rituals of Re-Imagining Homeplace

I remember the first time I went to a museum in Puerto Rico in the early 90’s. It was the Museum of Art in San Juan. The giant banners outside depicted colorful vejigantes announcing La Tercera Raíz (The Third Root). In addition to the special exhibits of vejigante masks, vintage
poster art, and contemporary art, there were several tables with glass casings under which there was an assortment of iron chains, shackles, muzzles, collars, and other instruments used to torture enslaved African peoples. Around the tables, one could see framed bills of sale for newborns, pregnant women, and young men, as well as notices of runaway slaves.

I remember not being able to speak for a long time afterwards. The experience of seeing those objects and the objects looking back at me is still haunting and unsettling. I had been visiting Puerto Rico since 1984 and I was familiar with the term La Tercera Raíz used by many Puerto Rican’s to describe their cultural identity race, and even nationality. La Tercera Raíz conjured up benevolent notions of blending, mixture, mestizaje and the third ingredient in the Puerto Rican “melting pot.” This cultural production, the objects used to control Black bodies, evoked more than vestiges of an era gone by. Their material presence became a living memory of Puerto Rico’s history as a twice colonized nation and its connection with slavery under Spanish rule. For some, those chains also had a double meaning as a reminder of Puerto Rico’s current colonial status Vis a Vis the United States.

bell hooks is helpful in framing this approach as “radical cultural criticism.” According to hooks, the aim of this criticism is not only to deconstruct cultural productions, but also to generate alternative and new ways of seeing, thinking, and being. Cultural production as a theoretical framework has helped me to examine the texts addressing the Festival of Santiago Apóstol and the testimonies of the people I interviewed, as roadmaps to the intersections and interconnections between systems of oppression and sites of resistance in every day life. Calling

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on our shared humanity and pointing to the location of our emotional universe, hooks illuminates potentials for building solidarity through cultural productions that encourage us to think deeply and construct new ways of being that aim at dismantling systems of oppression and domination by finding in even the smallest tension or alternate way of seeing, thinking, or being, a counter hegemonic cultural production.  

Thus, in examining the cultural productions emerging from the telling of the miraculous apparition of Santiago to a cimarrón/runaway slave, the Mantenedores’ rituals, the religious practice of Espiritismo, the coming down of the spirit of La Madama, the public performance of La Loca, or the play about the killing of Adolfiná Villanueva, I lift them up as lived experiences and cultural productions that interrupt, oppose, and reject hegemonic discourses that reinforce domination. The play about the Passion and Death of Adolfiná Villanueva is an example of a counter hegemonic cultural production. It is an unmasking and indictment of an oppressive system resulting in evictions, displacement, homelessness, and death. The memory of Adolfiná becomes a cultural production itself, reminding us that there is potentiality for resistance and transformation in the witnessing of her passion and death with compassion and solidarity. Her violent and public execution warns us against “false prophets” announcing “modernity” and “progress” through the rapid expansion of the tourism industry encroaching on coastal communities.

The survival of her memory as a Christ-like figure creates the potential for a shift in values from indiscriminate consumerism and materialism to valuing housing as a human right.

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60 hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. 
and the right of people to control their own destinies. This memory is in direct opposition to some racist media portrayals of Adolfina Villanueva as a crazed, angry, wild, savage, unruly, uppity, violent Black woman. Her survival in the memory and hearts of the people is in direct opposition to the structures of domination and oppression that resulted in her death. The play relocates Adolfina’s subjectivity from victim to redeemer. Likewise, employing hook’s radical visionary cultural criticism, helps to disrupt narratives about Santiago Apóstol that reify Spanish domination and in turn silence the Afro-Puerto Rican religious imagination and knowledge production of new ways of seeing, thinking, and being:

Many academics involved with cultural studies do not see their work as emerging from an oppositional, progressive, cultural politic that seeks to link theory and practice, that has as its most central agenda sharing knowledge and information in ways that transform how we think about our social reality.61

For hooks, thinking about our social reality within a communal context offers us the opportunity to “exercise” ourselves in developing our own voices as an act of resistance. It is in our own voices that we locate what hooks calls “homeplace”:

Homeplace in terms of Black women’s resistance . . . making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects not objects . . . Where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.62

An example of memory as site of resistance and counter hegemonic cultural production is the narrative about the miraculous apparition of Santiago Apóstol. The paradox of a Cimarrón/runaway slave finding an image of a White Spanish Saint on horseback, brandishing a sword, and stepping over the severed heads of the Moors he has just killed during the

61 hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.
62 hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.
Reconquista of Spain. The stories of the apparition of Santiago Apóstol are many and as cultural productions, they offer an invitation to see and think about the religious imagination of the individuals interviewed as complex, intersecting, variegated, rhyzomic, and multivocal locations of resistance. Some people tell the story and highlight the saint’s rejection of the Catholic Church. Some name the identity of the fisherman who found the image as Cimarrón/runaway slave while others emphatically claim that Loiceños have always been free. They see Santiago not as a killer but as a protector, as a child, and someone who chooses to live among the humble people of Loiza, a “homeplace” within which to share their joys and sorrows.

hook’s definition of “homeplace” echoes Lester Nurse’s testimony about Afro-Puerto Ricans’ homes and communities being vulnerable and “always subject to violations and destruction.” When Lester Nurse speaks about the gentrification and government expropriation that forced him and his family to leave their ancestral home in San Mateo de Cangrejos, he remembers the loss of attachments, rituals, bomba music sounds, and the foods that were part of a concrete spatial environment. That destruction of his “homeplace” forces him to experience displacement and the sense of a fragmented self that extends beyond the borders of individual corporality into the US Afro-Puerto Rican Diaspora. For hooks, the experience of the violation and destruction of “homeplace” creates a new fragile and fragmented site of resistance:

Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives . . . a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality frontiers of difference . . . one confronts dispersals and fragmentations as part of the construction of a new world

63 hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.
order that reveals more fully who we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.\textsuperscript{64}

What happens when Afro-Puerto Rican “homeplaces” are destroyed, as was Lester Nurse’s barrio in San Mateo de Cangrejos and Adolfina Villanueva’s house in Loíza? How do the frontiers of difference and fragmentations transform from abstract landscapes to real places and real memories that contain life’s joys and sorrows, struggles, loss and death? Imbedded in the recollections are the sounds, smells, ways of being, and textured feelings evoked by recounting the losses and simultaneously reconfiguring new sites of resistance. Thus, the routes traversing memories of the past connect with new ways of being in the world that create new ways of seeing the margins as centers of resistance. It is here that hooks warns us of thin understandings that reify marginality solely as a site of despair, which places us at risk for “being fully colonized.” In contrast, the act of deep remembrance of “homeplace” houses the potential for re-imagining and relocating our voices and our minds from a place of oppression to a place of resistance and decolonization. It is in the sharing of our stories, memories, and needs that we build “ground for resistance.”

The term “symbolic dislocation”\textsuperscript{65} has been used to describe positive ritual movements of status reversal within the context of a ritual procession. These symbolic dislocations are considered positive because they usually entail a role reversal that places the powerless in a superior position and vice versa, thus empowering the weak and dispossessed. A symbolic reversal during a ritual procession such as the one celebrated every year in honor of Santiago

\textsuperscript{64} hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, 148.

\textsuperscript{65} Zaragoza, St. James in the Streets.
Apóstol, highlights locations of inverted power such as church and home, or home and street. For the Santiago Apóstol procession to retrace the route back to the site of the miraculous apparition to the saint is to re-locate the saint outside of the domain of the church. Likewise, to have Santiago de los Hombres/of the men, who resides year-round in the house of his Mantenedora, spend one night inside St. Patrick’s Catholic church is to highlight that Santiago’s home is not in the church, that he has been moved to a space where he doesn’t belong, but where he will dwell for one night, to be a guest of honor and allowed to “commune” with the other saints, and be visited by the people in the morning. This is a positive meaning of “symbolic dislocation” which affords Santiago the right to reside inside the church building, albeit temporarily, and to be placed in front of the official Patron Saint of Loíza, Saint Patrick.

Outside of the context of the ritual procession of Santiago Apóstol, one can find experiences of dislocation and role reversal that are negative and detrimental to people and communities being forced to move form their homes to places where they don’t normally belong. Such is the experience of communities under siege by the rapidly expanding tourism industry. In the following interview, Lester Nurse narrates his experience as an Afro-Puerto Rican whose neighborhood, San Mateo de Cangrejos, experienced the effects of forced government expropriation of their homes, and dislocation of religious and cultural practices. Nurse shares his sentiments about the break up of his community and the loss of the rituals resulting from the loss of the public and communal spaces conducive to the celebration of important religious and cultural rituals. Nurse makes important connections between Puerto Rico’s political status with respect to the US, which he regards as colonial, and recurrent land expropriations and “population substitutions” affecting the fabric of Afro-Puerto Rican
As Lester Nurse tells the story of the gentrification that resulted in the “disappearance” of his childhood home, Nurse send out a warning that the same thing is happening in Loíza. Yet despite Nurse’s use of terms such as “disappearance,” “loss,” “there is nothing left,” and “break-up” of Afro-Puerto Rican communities and traditions, he also speaks about “reclamation” and “fusion” filled with hope at seeing a resurgence of the Afro-Puerto Rican presence in the re-emergence of the bomba traditional music (which originated in Loíza) being launched by US born Afro-Puerto Ricans who reside in New York, Connecticut, and Chicago.

Nurse identifies bomba music as memory and resistance. Paradoxically, the memory and cultural continuity emerges from those who reside within the Afro-Puerto Rican US Diaspora:

I think that you can have another type of vision about what you are doing [in Loíza] . . . it has to be understood within a cultural context . . . San Mateo de Cangrejos today known as Santurce was the cultural center of the capital of Santurce . . . everything that could be identified as Afro Puerto Rican culture there flourished in terms of culinary arts, in terms of festivities, cultural events like Cruz de Mayo, Baquiné, bomba, food with caldo santo and root vegetables cod fish, all those types of Afro-Puerto Rican characteristics were there . . . the same thing [forced expropriations] happened in San Anton in Ponce from one day to the next there were land expropriations . . . for those people not only their houses disappeared but the community . . . people were relocated in different places . . . that culture was lost and where those people went those things are not celebrated any more . . . the same thing we can see happening in Loíza . . . you have seen the process in Piñones (the Costa Serena building project) . . . they make up building projects against all recommendations of the organizations that protect the environment and they just make up . . . they build a highway and part of the population, the Black population is swept away with that and what was there is substituted.

The defeat of the Costa Serena building project was a victory for the neighboring communities of Piñones and Loíza. It was a victory of a grass roots movement led by Afro-Puerto Ricans. They denounced the Costa Serena building projects as an effort by the local
municipal government of Loíza and the mayor in particular, to erase Loíza’s African cultural heritage by encouraging gentrification and the displacement of Black people. The community activists articulated the connection between the mayor’s office lack of financial support for the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol and the indiscriminate building of luxury hotels and condominiums encroaching on the people of Loíza and Piñones (which used to be part of Loíza and is the entry point to Loíza). It was reported that the mayor of Loíza went as far as to publicly declare that Loíza’s “backwardness” and the obstacles to socio economic progress were directly related to its cultural traditions. One year staff from the office of the mayor of Loíza took down all the flyers and posters announcing the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol from their offices and denied funding for the Vejigante troupe which had always received support in the past. To compound this attack, the mayor sided with Joel Katz, a private contractor who led the Costa Serena (Costa Serena ironically means serene coast in Spanish) building project. A project that would privatize the mangroves of Piñones, privatize the beaches of Piñones and Loíza, and evict whoever was in the way of the building construction. Residents were offered money to leave their homes, but many refused and turned against the developer and became involved in the movement to stop the construction of Costa Serena. Loíza’s mayor Manso made public declarations stating that anyone who opposed the Costa Serena project was racist and wanted the Black people of Loíza living in backwardness, eating alcapurrias and bacalaitos (two of Loíza’s most popular traditional foods). But the people organized themselves and struggled against Katz and the Costa Serena project was not built. The people also organized themselves and provided all the supplies needed for the vejigante troupe to lead the way during the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol. The people from Villa Cañona created “AgitArte” (which is a play on words combining art and to
agitate) and a group of volunteer community members that organized workshops to teach people how to make puppets, masks, cardboard horses, and the colorful vejigante outfits. It is important to highlight this activity as one of resistance and self-determination by a community that was born from the rescates de terreno (land rescues) and which is suffering ongoing police brutality. Neither the mayor nor the wealthy developer could defeat the people’s movement in support of the vejigantes and against Costa Serena. But unfortunately, during the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol in 2009, the clash between the vejigantes, the people from Villa Cañona, and the police turned violent. The police came and arrested the people of Villa Cañona who were part of the vejigante troupe claiming they were drug dealers. They disrupted the fiesta and harassed participants right in the middle of the festivities.

The Costa Serena project had a galvanizing effect for the people Loíza and Piñones and created a strong coalition, of which Samuel Lind was a community leader. The community denounced Costa Serena as a catastrophic project that would expropriate people’s homes, accelerate displacement, and result in homelessness. The project proposed to build in an area that would be subject to constant flooding from the tides of the Río Grande. It also called for the expropriation by eminent domain of numerous residents and business owners so that the highway could be widened to accommodate four lanes. In addition, there would be expropriation and privatization of natural resources. The project proposed the construction of 880 condo-hotels, a casino, and thousands of square meters of commercial areas in public beaches. Margarita Persico,66 author of Saving Ancestral Houses and the Environment,

66 Margarita Persico is a graduate student in Harvard Extension School’s Master in Journalism Program. She is Puerto Rican. (www.margarita.vox.com).
interviewed Maricruz Rivera Clemente, one of the leaders of the movement against Costa Serena. She describes Maricruz as proud of her African heritage and founder of the coalition to educate people about their African heritage “as a weapon to preserve the neighborhood and the environment.” According to Persico, the people of Piñones and Loíza have been struggling to protect their coastline since the 1960’s. As the only undeveloped area close to the airport, it has been an ongoing dispute between the tourism industry and the neighborhood residents. When the proposal for the building of luxury condos and casinos as part of the Costa Serena project became known, the people feared losing their land as a result of government expropriation by eminent domain. It would also mean the destruction of one of Puerto Rico’s largest mangrove forest. Many environmental experts sided with the community coalition against the building of Costa Serena and shared their concerns about the building of structures, parking lots, and highways that could be detrimental to the environment. The project developer, Joel Katz, tried to sell his idea touting Costa Serena as a micro-business development, tourist attraction, and employment source for the “impoverished area.” Community activist and environmentalist Rivera Clemente stated that the land on which Costa Serena was to be built belongs to the residents and that the local Black militia earned ownership of that land in 1797 from the Spanish Crown when the Black militia successfully repelled British attacks and protected Puerto Rico from invasion: “This deep-rooted community dates back to the 1600s, when it served as a safe haven for runaway blacks and Taíno slaves” said Rivera-Clemente. Piñones and Loíza are well known as places where cimarrones sought refuge as far back as 1530. They established themselves and later founded the communities that became the towns of Loíza and Piñones. But these stories are denied and labeled myth by
government officials, including the Governor Acevedo Vilá, disputing the residents’ ownership of the land. In an effort to push the people out, government agencies have denied residents access to water and sewage services forcing residents to get their water from underground springs. One of the ways Katz, the contractor, tried to force people to agree with the project was to make access to water and sewage contingent upon the building of Costa Serena. But the people continued to get their water from the underground springs and refused to move out. Despite the victory of the community in stopping the building of Costa Serena, there have been five luxury condo-hotels built since then, which have resulted in the privatization of the beaches by building tall walls to restrict access to the beach by local residents.

The community continues to resist and to strategize about alternative economic development models like eco-tourism that do not have a negative impact on the community or the environment: “We do not have to destroy natural resources to make money,” says Rivera Clemente. But for people like Lester Nurse who experienced first hand the destruction of his neighborhood San Mateo de Cangrejos, the prognosis for Loíza is alarmingly bleak. Denouncing the tactic of “replacing populations” he talks about what is happening in Loíza in terms of a cultural phenomenon of substitutions and population displacement:

What is happening in Loíza . . . it’s a substitution of a population . . . in Santurce condominiums for people with a lot of money and in Loíza the same thing is happening now . . . in San Antón [Ponce] there is nothing left and the intention is to destroy the cultural roots deeply engrained in the population that manifest themselves in Baquíné bomba dance fiestas cruz . . . all this is lost when populations are dispersed [displaced] things get lost . . . a population essentially Puerto Rican is substituted for one essentially Dominican and our Dominican brothers are being used [to substitute the population] you arrived in Piñones and you used to hear bomba and now you hear bachata [also] in Villa Palmera in Santurce it’s a destruction of those roots.

I believe that this is planned . . . when cultural roots are broken there is less resistance to
introducing foreign cultures and Anglo-Saxon cultural elements braking up the community is a socio political strategy connected to possible annexation of Puerto Rico into the US... and here we enter into a topic that is essentially political. . . if you look at the coast of Loíza what they are building are condos that are prices beginning at $250,000 and up for one housing unit which makes it almost impossible for Loíceños to live there and people begin to show up that have never been part of this community. . . and unfortunately the mayors cooperate with this and take part in the destruction of a whole community . . . of a way of life . . . Just like it happened in Ponce . . . in so many places along the coast. . .

For many people victims of forced and violent desalojos, dislocation can mean loss of home, a sense of belonging, loss of community and family ties, loss of mental health, in some cases result in forced migration (local or to the US), homelessness, incarceration, bodily injury by police brutality, and in the case of Adolfina Villanueva, death. Police brutality against Black people is an ongoing reality for the people of Loíza, especially those who reside in Villa Cañona, Loíza. a la cañona is a popular expression in Puerto Rico used to denote something that had to be forced into existence, when someone has no other choice, and is happening whether it pleases others or not. Villa Cañona is this kind of housing, by people pushed out from their homes, from any type of affordable housing, and creating a villa or village on a plot of land that they transform into a neighborhood, into their homes. Many “villages” have been created as a result of people taking over vacant lots. In an act of individual and communal liberation, the people mobilize themselves and together bring themselves and their families and begin to build their homes without any government intervention. There is usually no running water, no electricity, no sewage system, and because they are considered to be “illegal squatters” on the land, they face daily harassment and violence by the police and other government agents. Police brutality is such a persistent daily occurrence against the people in the villages that the
ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) and has intervened to denounce the violence and demand a stop to police brutality against the people of *Villa Cañona*. In 2010 the ACLU published the video, *The Color of Justice*,\(^67\) to show what the residents of *Villa Cañona* have to deal with on an every day basis. The video describes the community of *Villa Cañona* as “a community within a town with deep African roots dating back hundreds of years to Spanish slavery...” The people describe themselves and their predicament in the following manner:

[Speaker One]: “This is a very loving community. Everyone, each and every one, we have agreed and worked together since we started here in this community...We help each other to prepare our structures, our homes. We did this ourselves we started by installing electricity in our homes and our community...

[Speaker Two]: “Here we have a pattern of abuse by the police... in one month practically every day they came to abuse the people, they came here to beat us up, to shoot at us, we have denounced this publicly and have testified before the civil rights commission and the ACLU...”

[ACLU Speaker]: “the case of Villa Cañona came to us as a result of multiple incidents that happened...a group of police from special units came into the community and randomly targeted members of the community who were subjected to police brutality...”

[Background song by Welmo]:

*La pobreza no es un crimen!*
*Y tú respeta mis derechos!*
*Vienen las macanas!*
*Agúzate!*
*Quítate de la Vía!*
*Te importa mi vida?*
*Se soltaron las bestias en uniforme...*
*Corre por tu vida!*
*Bajan las macanas sobre pieles negras...*
*Marrón la sangre inunda la tierra...*

\(^{67}\) [link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bs4trwwtwtA)
[Translation of song]:

Poverty is not a crime!
Hey You! Respect my rights!
Here come the billy clubs!
Watch Out!
Does my life matter to you?
The beasts in uniform are loose...
Run for your life!
The billy clubs come down on Black skins...
The brown blood inundates the soil...

[Speaker Three]; They [the police] can see that we are poor people without protection without succor without advocates...we are treated worse than other people...police brutality is aimed at people members of communities that are economically depressed and in marginalized social conditions the members of poor and black communities, poor and black like Santurce and Villa Cañona Loíza...

[Speaker Four]: “Two of my students called me at around 11 am and told me that the police has the community surrounded and they won’t let anyone get out... I went there. I identified myself as the school Principal and they took me to an alley and they took my clothes off and they beat me up. They used these words: “negros cabrones” “póngase contra la pared” “Loíza es nuestra” “ustedes son unos puercos” “esto es una basura”

[Translation]: *ucking *iggers/stand against the wall/Loíza is ours/you are pigs/this here is garbage

[Speaker Five]: “They call the police crows because they dress in black and hide their badges and wear masks and they come around beating everybody up they are undercover cops ... people are afraid of the police...There is so much abuse!

[Speaker Six]: “The police believe that everyone who lives here in Villa Cañona is an addict or sells drugs. They don’t think that the people who live here are working people, humble people, responsible and kind with their neighbors and their community…”

[Speaker Seven]: In this community [Villa Cañona] and in Loíza as a whole there is racist persecution against the residents... I have lived here for many years as a father I am afraid for my family... When you live here you are seen as Black and worthless... but we will demonstrate that that is not true. We are Black and we are worthy!

[An older woman sings a song that she has composed]:

“This is a song for the chief of police in Loíza:
Do you think that because you are the law you have the right to humiliate poor people? Here in Villa Cañona we are good people. Watch your words! Do your job as it should be done. We are people of good will as you can see. Watch it! And do your job as it should be done.”

[The video ends with the song “Quién?” by Siloe Andino]:

“Who watches over you?
Who protects you?
Who guides you?
Who blesses your entrance and your exit?
Who governs your existence?
Who helps your family?
Tell me who? Who? Who?
To walk in the street is not safe in these days.
If you are not lucky enough to have it on video history will repeat itself.
The terrible images travel across the entire world.
To walk in the streets is not safe these days.
The 11 o’clock news will say that the dead shot first
And you never carried a gun you were known for being peaceful.
I hope the future of my Puerto Rico changes.
That the police out in the street can protect and not abuse his power by violating human rights.
Trust in government is lacerated when I see an innocent person bleeding to death in the street... They have left a family with enormous grief. . .
Resistance... for my people of Villa Cañona, Solie Andino.68

The experiences of the people of Villa Cañona with police brutality are evocative of the words of Lester Nurse, who denounces governmental attempts to control the population, particularly poor and Black people. He makes connections between racism, marginalization,
isolation, and the impact of systems of oppression that result in the harassment, disruption, and eventual dislocation of poor Black individuals and communities.

Nurse recognizes a pattern of dislocation, of disruption, of intentional and systematic removal of vulnerable, poor, and Black populations similar to the patterns observed during the late 40s and 50s under the Manos a la Obra government campaign to control the population, especially the overcrowded shanty towns on the margins of urban centers which resulted in 40% of the population migrating to the US in search of jobs and better living conditions, and almost 35% of women of child bearing age being forcibly sterilized without their consent.

The people, including his family, were forced out of San Mateo de Cangrejos, which is now Santurce. Rituals such as Las Fiestas de Cruz are no longer celebrated there. Santurce has become an enclave for “hipsters”. The buildings were emptied of Black people; the community of San Mateo was broken. Now the buildings are fancy and expensive restaurants, avant-garde museums, chic boutiques and gourmet restaurants for “foodies” who can eat jueyes otherwise known as cangrejos, perhaps accompanied by bomba music supplied by Afro-Puerto Rican musicians from the US.

Nurse brings to the forefront the values involved in becoming attached to a place and why his attitude towards tourism development in the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico (Piñones and Loíza) matter in understanding the roots and routes of displacement. The issue of “attitude” is one that is often discussed in conversations about the development of the tourism industry in Puerto Rico. Some people believe that the tourism industry will solve many of the social ills affecting the island. They see Puerto Rico’s coast as a commodity, which should be developed in order to, bring “progress” to coastal areas regarded as “backwards” and “stuck in
the past”. A recent survey conducted by Morales López documented the attitudes and feelings of coastal peoples with respect to tourism development. In his findings he asserts that for a positive attitude towards tourism development to exist, “the planning must diminish the negatives disruptions to place attachment and must converge with the values, aspirations, preferences, and knowledge of host communities.”

The work of Morales López is helpful in understanding that Nurse is far from merely conjuring nostalgic memories of his childhood home. For him, attachment to place is part of his values. His attitude against tourism that threatens Black communities is borne out of his own experience of his family being evicted and dislocated as a result of a forced land expropriation by the government. In music, he finds a repository of cultural memory, resistance, liberation, and potential for transformation.

**Lester Nurse: Vivitos y Coleando!/Alive and Shaking our Tails!**

The key element of Lester Nurse’s testimony is his historical and cultural memory of Puerto Rico’s history giving him clarity about what has been lost and the direct link between the disintegration of San Mateo de Cangrejos and San Anton, the gentrification happening in Loíza, Puerto Rico’s colonial status, and the emergence of new patterns of resistance forging cultural resurgence and continuity from *al otro lado del charco*, or the other side of the puddle (the US Afro-Puerto Rican Diaspora). He also makes important connections between the “disappearance” of rituals and public celebrations and the power of music as persistent

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memory and filled with potential for the “on the move” Afro-Puerto Rican roots to re-emerge, be reclaimed, and constantly relocated in ongoing patterns of reversals that signify resistance to being broken and to disappear.

Music has a social function . . . if we listen to songs like Belén, Baquín, Bomba there is a very mystical religious function . . . also these songs were songs of war. Behind the dance there was a communicative process to mask the uprisings of warriors. Bomba had many functions there is a book called rebel slaves esclavos rebeldes where it speaks about bomba playing followed by uprising of slaves it was a way for people to get together . . . many people speak about bomba. . . it is a dance of African roots dating back to the 18th century so 1700s bomba was liberation from slave labor it was moment to enjoy to feel free within that colonial oppression the function of bomba was very important it was a way to recharge psychologically it had a mystical religious dimension sense and sentiment bomba is essentially Black and that’s what makes us different. . . music serves to support people . . . helps them to remember their loved ones . . . music is being revitalized now . . . from the moment that the government begins to expropriate land those cultural elements begin to disappear in the measure that they begin to introduce foreign elements . . .

I blame this destruction of cultural conglomerates of deep African roots on a clear premeditation to break that Africanness so that they can implant new things. That was being done in the 50s, 60s . . . our music was substituted by North American things. In the 80s, 90s we reclaimed bomba and plena and there began a resurgence of musical groups and we began to experience musical fusion utilizing bomba. . . and now bomba is alive and I just came back from Chicago from the first bomba festival in Diaspora I saw Puerto Ricans born and raised in Chicago dancing bomba. . . same in New York, creating groups... their physical separation from the island making them revive their culture. New York has been key in this revival it is nostalgia of not being in their country they have revived cultural elements, not just music . . . other things too . . . yes we are vivitos y coleando! alive and shaking our tails!
Figure 28. Bomba Dancer Outside El Ancón, Loíza, 2008. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa
The writing is on the wall: Loíza is not for sale

Fig. 29. Adolfina and Child, Graffiti in Piñones. 2014. Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.

Parece que no tener plata es un delito. Que vale más la injusticia que un Ay Bendito! Su desahucio todo el mundo lo comentó. Justicia que en asesina se convirtió tronchando la vida humilde de una mujer... Luciendo uniformes de órden y proceso llegó un pelotón de fusilamiento. La sangre inocente nos cubrió de duelo. Los gritos de muerte despertaron a un pueblo. Cuerpo acribillado: qué lección encierras? Para el pobre el cielo p'al rico la tierra. Adolfina vive! Rubén Blades

Translation

It seems that not having money is a crime. That injustice is worth more than Ay Bendito! / Mercy me! Everyone talked about her eviction. Justice turned into an assassin ending the life of a humble woman... dressed in uniforms of order and process the firing squad arrived. The innocent blood covered us with grief. The death screams woke up the pueblo. Body riddled with bullets: What lesson do you hold? Heaven is for the poor. The earth is for the rich. Adolfina lives! Rubén Blades
Adolfina Villanueva is not forgotten. She continues to be a part of Loíza, as attested by the people I interviewed. There are material reminders of Adolfina’s living legacy on the massive murals and graffiti on the walls at the entrance to Loíza showing her now iconic image as a Black Madonna, holding her baby and depicting her haunting gaze next the words Adolfina Villanueva el Pueblo de Piñones no te olvidará Jamás!/Adolfina Villanueva, the pueblo of Piñones will never forget you!” During many rallies and protests against police brutality, desalojos/evictions, building of luxury hotels, people carry the sign “Adolfina Vive!/Adolfina lives! Her memory is not a thing of the past, but a presence that is filled with potentiality for transformation, felt by many of the people involved in the new movements to protect the homes and natural environments of coastal communities.

These contemporary movements, such as the Comité Resistencia y Dignidad de Loíza/Resistance and Dignity of Loíza Committee are working in coalitions that not only aiming to stop the building of luxury condominiums and hotels, but also to protect the natural environment of coastal peoples from destruction by indiscriminate and excessive use resulting from a big push by local government to rapidly expand the tourism industry. This environmental justice movement has gained momentum and is utilizing innovative strategies to maintain and protect communities and their environment. The movement uses a variety of strategies including social media to disseminate their message. Puerto Rico’s independent newspaper Claridad (Clarity) is often credited with giving voice to social justice issues from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed communities. The following is an example of an article published in Claridad reporting a march demanding that the government stop evictions in poor communities:
On October 17, 2009 a day recognized as International Poverty Eradication Day, the communities in Puerto Rico joined the international campaign “zero evictions” and they marched from Plaza Colón towards Fortaleza (governor’s mansion). Shouting slogans such as “housing is a right” and “Villas del Sol will not surrender” hundreds of marchers from the communities of Barrio Bocas, Santurce, Filtros, El Hoyo de Pepe de Ponce, Villas del Sol, Vieques, and Villas sin Miedo, Loíza, among others, demanding that the government respect their right to a home and cease threatening them with evictions. Dozens of grass roots and human rights organizations marched in solidarity expressing their belief that every person has the right to a life with dignity, that economics should not supersede the safety of children, a family’s ability to live in peace, and a community having a sense of belonging.

Community leader, Carmen Villanueva reminded the marchers that this struggle is not new. Poor communities have always been marginalized and there has also always been a collective struggle of the people to bring justice to those communities. She remembered the example of Adolfinia Villanueva and how her courage and sacrifice has inspired other communities who suffer under similar conditions that she suffered in Loíza. Carmen expressed concern at seeing the police blocking their way. She said it was an example of how poverty is criminalized in Puerto Rico. Another community leader, Mirta Colón, addressed the crowd saying: ‘We have shown unity and this gives us the strength that we need to continue in the struggle against forced evictions. This is only the beginning. Our communities are now aware that this is not an isolated problem of individual communities. It is a structural problem and the only way to deal with it is to unite and encourage radical changes not just superficial changes... poverty is not inevitable that we have to accept like a hurricane or an earthquake. It is the result of conscious decisions that promote inequality. It is not always the case that the economic development of a country translates into less poverty. Often, it is the opposite.’

Cotto Morales characterizes current social movements in Puerto Rico involved in the struggle for the protection of coastal communities as “prophetic” in the way they use the power of “the word” to fight against corporations and government forces. These new coalitions are seen as a force that is unmasking repressive forces and carving out a “new face of power,” with a prophetic message of redemption and liberation.

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Samuel Lind and the killing of Adolfinia Villanueva:
“She opened the door and they shot her . . . they shot her!”

[The day I visited Samuel Lind in his home studio, he unrolled a huge mural he had painted on brown paper depicting bulldozers with sharp teeth dripping with blood]. He proceeded to tell me the story of the killing of Adolfinia Villanueva:

Colobó is an African word it’s like saying inside the very, very deep . . . the most profound cave . . . where the Cimarrón/runaway slave hides . . . with everything that is happening in Loiza if you touch me I will go into hiding . . . it’s the cimarrona nature with everything that is happening in Loiza . . . we cannot hide . . . we have to face it . . .

There has been a trend to oust/evict people in a very abusive way . . . here the people are very humble, they are agregados/aggregates they are people that live where the original owners of the plantations would choose a family to take care of that land and they would then go half and half with the owner . . . they lived a medias/half and half with the owner, so that’s where the terms [and names of two of the neighborhood in Loiza] Medianía Alta y Medianía Baja/Upper and Lower Medianía come from . . . they come from this condition . . .[the condition] in the plantations . . .

The evictions and displacement came to be when the people who had inherited that land [the descendants of the plantation owners] those families that now have no commitment with the people of Loiza, because they are legal heirs they are selling the land and so these agregados [sharecroppers] these families that have been living there for centuries working the land they multiplied they turned [it] into whole neighborhoods and in reality actually became and are the true owners of that and the death of Adolfinia Villanueva in the 80s comes from . . . resulted from that . . . from her feeling that she was in her space . . .

And she went to the court and she did everything legally possible but the judge ordered [her] to be evicted and they sent the police and surrounded the house and they screamed at her: ‘Your hour has come! Get out! Get out!’ The owner of the land was standing there looking . . . standing next to the bulldozer and saying ‘Get out!’ and ‘I will destroy your house with everything and everyone inside it!’ and that was seen . . . that happened every week in Loiza . . .

The Villanueva family are from here in the back of my house and when I found out what happened to Adolfinia, I went there and I saw all that destruction and I said ‘Caramba!’ and then . . .[saw] that she had been killed . . . then my [dreams/illusions] were broken. I
mean she was 30 something she died very young and she was killed. . . and that was early in the morning. . . the owner of the land went to the court and bought [bribed] the judge and that judge ordered the eviction and that is happening a lot. . . what happened to Adolfinia is a horrible disgrace. . . a tragedy. . . and that is happening every week. . . that morning they surrounded her house and they screamed at her with that bulldozer there, they screamed, ‘Get out! We’re going to tear down your house! You have no more opportunities!’ . . . And that was so abusive. . . and [they] just rammed that machine into the house of that lady and her husband her children. . . there were other people living there. . .

I remember that palmar/palm trees. . . everything was planted there was yucca and she raised pigs . . . and well . . . she opened the door and they shot her. . . they shot her. . . and there are things about that that will never be spoke. I brought home one of the windows with a bullet hole and they even shot the husband who was running from the bullets. . . he jumped into one of the pig corrals and my father in law went to take him out and he took him to the hospital he was hunted like an animal in the 20th century. . . I mean, humble people. . . Black people of Loíza. . . they didn’t know how to read or write real humble people and they abused them like animals in that moment the environment was. . . I just remember . . . perceiving that silence. . . it was something. . . the whole neighborhood . . . I remember that . . . I remember feeling impotent at us being treated like animals. . .

The Villanueva family, my cousins, my family, the Lind family all [around] where we live [you] just follow down the road until you reach the beach. . . we are talking about the roads. . . the roads. . . this painting I am doing this fishing place these roads and these little wooden houses we’re talking about. Damn! To come and tell us that we have to leave here because this is not progress! It’s not progress to live in a little wooden house and have a little boat. . . we are humble people of Loíza. . . we are humble Puerto Rican people. . . Caramba!

These are the people that should be protected and defended! How are you going to attempt against that? If you are going to build some big project, do it somewhere else! How are you going to remove a community? A community of families! I mean before I couldn’t even talk about it . . . but I had to talk . . . and I had to take this out of me . . . The thing that happened in Tocones [another neighborhood in Loíza] began some years ago but even just the other day people call me they say, ‘Here are the bulldozers trying to destroy the houses and they are abusing us!’ and they call me to tell me . . . in a year they built five luxury projects . . . people no longer have access to the beach . . . they are building a 9 feet tall wall in front of their houses . . . people call the mayor and the media and they don’t touch that stuff . . . they say, ‘There’s nothing we can do because there is a legal owner of the land’. . . but afterwards, we found out that the mayor [of Loíza] owned one of the villas [that it was] part of that luxury building. . . I mean whom are they governing for? That is such abuse!
Adolfina’s tragic death lives in the memory of the people of Loíza. The story is a narrative of resistance inspiring new generations of community organizers defending their coastal homes. But after 35 years, some people believe that it is time for traditional “undeveloped” coastal communities to become part of the “modern” world. Some see the building of luxury condominiums within an area of majority Black poor people as a way of bringing progress. Many consider Loíza to be “backwards” precisely because it has held on to its cultural traditions for centuries. There is a paradox and a tension between Loíza being touted as the “Capital of Tradition” with all its colorful “folklore” and benign Africanness recognized as the distinctive “third root” of Puerto Rican identity [the other two being Taíno and the other Spanish] on the one hand, and on the other hand, being seen as a place stuck in time and blaming this “lack of progress” on the very people who carry out and maintain the much enjoyed cultural traditions uniquely Loiceñas. For coastal communities, having their public paths to the beach closed and privatized means being cut off from their own identity as a people.

As the process of gentrification continues, coastal communities are experiencing gradual break up of community ties, communal historical memory, and the loss of spaces in which to participate in religious and cultural rituals and celebrations.
No one knows the exact date on which the annual tradition of the Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol began in Loíza, Puerto Rico. The people of Loíza say that it dates back to *hace tiempo* (a long time ago) and that they have celebrated the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol *desde siempre* (since always). Santiago Apóstol is the patron saint of Spain and his remains are housed in his shrine in the town of Santiago de Compostela, site of the famous pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, road to Santiago. Santiago Apóstol is remembered as a victorious *Reconquista* warrior invoking Christ’s name in major battles against the Moor. Many countries in Latin America that were colonized by Spain named their capital cities after Santiago Apóstol and celebrate his day on July 25th. The image of Santiago Apóstol depicts him as a warrior, with his sword held above his head, on horseback, trampling over the beheaded bodies of the Moor.

People in Loíza make a distinction between Santiago Matamoros killer of Moors, and Santiago, the gentle Apostle who was beloved by Jesus. They also identify Santiago Apóstol as someone who suffered slavery and captivity. We saw the power of storytelling in the description of the miraculous apparition of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, Puerto Rico, inside el árbol de corcho the cork tree to either a woman, a *cimarrón* (run away slave), or a free Black fisherman depending on who is telling the story. The three images of Santiago Apóstol: *Santiago de los Hombres* (Santiago of the Men), *Santiago de las Mujeres* (Santiago of the Women), and *Santiago de los Niños* (Santiago of the Children) reflect the men, women, and children that make up the community of Loíza. The original image believed to be the one in the
miraculous apparition of Santiago inside the árbol de corcho is the image of Santiago de los Niños, Santiago of the Children.

The Mantenedores shared the stories of the apparition of Santiago in Loíza. In these stories, the person who finds the image of Santiago Apóstol inside the cork tree goes to the Catholic Church and hands over the image to the Catholic priest who brings the image inside the church. But for three consecutive days, the image disappears from the church and reappears inside the árbol de corcho. Santiago Apóstol refuses to stay at the Catholic Church and keeps running away, adopting the characteristics of a cimarrón, a runaway. He finally makes his home among the people of Loíza, where a family of Mantenedores lovingly cares for him year round and considers him a member of the family.

The Mantenedores’ homes become holy shrines that are open and accessible for everyone to come see and be seen by Santiago. The people come to pray before the image of Santiago, tying bright colored ribbons to the image, and placing silver milagros in the shape of breasts, eyes, legs, arms, babies, lungs, and other body parts at the feet of the santo (saint). The Mantenedores share stories about how they inherited the honor and responsibility for becoming Mantenedores. Usually an inherited role from parents to children (Sylnic and his mother both became Mantenedores of Santiago of the Women after Sylnic’s father died), it can also take place between aunts and nieces (Rosa Julia inherited the role from her Aunt Julia Calcaño), and it can even be shared by two different families like Tamara and Rosa Julia, during a specific time of the year (the santo lives with Rosa Julia and her daughter Rosalie during the year, but goes to Tamara’s home on July 28th where the procession for Santiago de los Niños begins.)
The Mantenedores also share their perspectives on local politics, tensions between people who practice religions that frown upon the devotion to Santiago, the devastating story of the killing of Adolfina Villanueva, and their interpretation of Loíza history, especially with respect to slavery. Sylnic in particular, rejects the label “descendant from African slaves” and asserts his identity as someone who comes from a line of people who have always been free. The theme of freedom comes up often in this thesis and is woven throughout the peoples’ stories. One vivid example of this is Rosalie’s interjection during her mother’s testimony. We were talking about the annual processions of Santiago Apóstol, the role of the Mantenedores in keeping the tradition going, and Rosalie asks “What does it say about us as a people if we hide?” and “We will never surrender!” This brings the conversation to the killing of Adolfina Villanueva. Rosa Julia recalls her friend and neighbor and weeps as the memories come flooding in. As a high school teacher in a public school, Rosa Julia knows well the challenges faced by the Afro-Puerto Rican youth of Loíza. Her students tell her of their daily struggles with police harassment. This story is corroborated by numerous testimonies of displaced people and their struggle to make a home in contested spaces. Many people who have been displaced by gentrification have participated in rescate de terrenos (land rescues) where they are trying to build their homes. These spaces are usually called “villas” (as in “Villa Sin Miedo” and “Villa Cañona”) and they are communal spaces where people have organized themselves to “liberate” the space and begin building their little houses risking harassment, arrest, and even death.

When speaking of home, gentrification, and resistance against evictions of poor Afro-Puerto Rican people, the people interviewed agree that an important part of keeping the community together is to continue with their annual religious celebrations of the Fiesta of
Santiago Apóstol. But as we saw, there are tensions between the residents and local politicians about what “progress” means and how to pursue economic growth and sustainability. The effect of indiscriminate construction of luxury hotel-condominiums in Loíza and in the neighboring town of Piñones has resulted in great clashes between community activists and local government officials. The community was victorious in stopping the building of the Costa Serena great hotel-condo complex that would have encroached on the homes of hundreds of residents and would have resulted in the mangroves being destroyed and their homes being expropriated by the government (using the doctrine of eminent domain) to build highways, parking lots, tennis courts, golf courses, and sewage facilities.

Local artist Samuel Lind is famous for his art and also for his community activism against the gentrification of Loíza. Born and raised in Loíza, he is passionate about Loíza and its people. He describes his art as a space where the ancestors are activated and through which the ancestors communicate with him. Samuel’s art is dedicated to documenting the every day life of people of Loíza. One of his main themes is the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol. For Samuel, the ancestors are alive in Loíza as is the memory and presence of Adolfina Villanueva, his friend and neighbor who was killed during a violent eviction. Samuel’s art and his community activism are connected by his spiritual practice of ancestor worship. His participation in the movement against evictions and gentrification in Loíza is his way of honoring and serving the ancestors, including his mother and the community healers known as Espiritistas.

Espiritismo is rooted in the African Kongo ancestor worship religious traditions expressed through healing rituals, spirit possession, ofrendas and keeping of home altars, and honoring the ancestors with special ceremonies. The main premise of Espiritismo is that the
ancestor spirits are constantly interacting and communicating with the living. The ancestors can bring physical and psychological healing, repair relationships, produce positive results in difficult court cases, ensure good crops, and bring overall balance and well being to our lives. Neglecting the ancestors can bring spiritual, physical, and economic ruin. Among many others, the Kongo spirits manifest themselves in La Madama, a strong female Kongo spirit who is the keeper of all healing herbs and the secrets of medicine for despojos (spiritual cleansings). Doña Mello, Espiritista, was born in Loíza in 1928 and grew up in a family of Espiritistas where she learned to mix the healing herbs to administer to people during healing ceremonies. Her father was Presidente de la mesa blanca (president of the white table).

Doña Mello invited me to visit the Espiritista temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza, which holds healing ceremonies (known as sanse) every Monday night at 7:00 p.m. I attended several times and witnessed the spirit of La Madama “coming down” and taking possession of a mediunidad (medium). La Madama is depicted as a heavy set, dark skinned woman, wearing an apron and a headscarf. These characteristics are sometimes confused with the commercial production of the derogative “mammie” character created by Hollywood, or the Aunt Jemima pancake logo. Afro-Caribbean scholars are debunking this servile image and revealing La Madama as a deity and strong African spirit who is able to restore health, sweep away evil, and clear a path towards hope for those suffering.

Before the processions of Santiago Apóstol can begin, La Loca is the one in charge of sweeping the road with her coconut husk broom to remove all evil and provide a clear path. La Loca is also misunderstood as a clown or servile figure when in reality she is a strong spiritual presence who performs despojos (spiritual cleansings) on unsuspecting people during the
processions of Santiago Apóstol. Like the runaway Santiago Apóstol who kept disappearing and reappearing, *La Loca* represents a trickster spirit who is a male dressed as female, a Black person using Black soot to cover her face and body, pretending to be “crazy” to elicit laughter and yet doing her *obra espiritual* (spiritual workings) *sobre la marcha*, on the move.

This study of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza is located within the people’s stories, their ways of being, and their worldviews. Rather than applying linear thinking and chronology, this thesis becomes part of a series of movements and emerges *sobre la marcha*, on the move. *Sobre la marcha* is an expression used in the everyday vernacular language of the people of Puerto Rico. It conveys creativity, courage, faith, and dynamism. It emerges from a real genuine need to do something in the face of oppressive conditions. To do something to reaffirm our inherent worth and dignity and imagine a change in our circumstances. To move even in small gestures contains the possibility of realizing change, transformation, and ultimately liberation. In Loíza the people’s movements against the threat of evictions, displacement, and homelessness is evocative of *sobre la marcha*. These movements, great and small, constitute resistance against multiple oppressions. They may be movements that are great gestures of resistance during a public march, or small gestures within large movements of people, such as someone approaching the saint during the processions to tie a ribbon around the saint, or even the offering of free food before the procession to a community struggling against poverty and marginalization. Theologically, *sobre la marcha* recognizes the individual’s agency and self-determination in expressing themselves, choosing how to identify, exercising their right to articulate their own worldview, and through these acts of self-affirmation, creating a self filled with potential for transformation.
This thesis explored a variety of movements and found potential for change and transformation in acts of faith and religious devotion, as well as in community gatherings and activities that offer them the possibility of freedom from suffering, despair, illness, homelessness, displacement, and multiple oppressions. As a methodological approach, sobre la marcha reaffirmed an approach rooted in indigenous ways of knowing that is located in the rituals, ceremonies, and ánimo/spirit of the people. These ways of knowing differ from traditional mainstream academic presuppositions and expectations of how knowledge is produced and shared. Thus, this thesis presented knowledge production as inclusive of sensing, feeling, marching, praying, processing, singing, dancing, cooking, painting, altar making, sweeping, carrying banners, remembering, storytelling, dreaming, and virtually every expression of our human condition.

These expressions of every day life are present in the stories of Doña Mello, Sylnic, Rosa Julia, Samuel, Lester, and my own testimony. The stories offer an understanding of both religious ritual and political activity as movements within the context of self-determination and liberation. Doña Mello recalls the feeling that one experiences after a despojo (ritual Cleansing) as liberation. For Rosa Julia, being able to dig her hands into the soil of her garden in Loíza is liberation. For Sylnic, liberation is an identifier that he chooses for himself and for his ancestors by refusing to be called “descendant of African slaves”. For the Mantenedores, witnessing the expressions of the people who come to their house to pray and pagar promesas (pay their promises) after being healed by Santiago, is to witness liberation. Likewise, we hear from Samuel Lind that political action can be an experience with profound spiritual and religious meanings. Carrying the memory of Adolfina Villanueva and calling out her name during protest
marches against gentrification is his way of honoring the ancestors. Even after death, Adolfina’s spirit is alive, moving among the people, and giving them ánimo (spirit). Being heard, being seen, being part of a larger movement, moving together, marching in solidarity, building community, and connecting people in search of social justice is participating in acts of faith and liberation.

_Sobre la marcha_ helps us to see how all these different movements converge and intersect, blurring the borders between the political and religious, the private and public, the internal and external, and the sacred and ordinary spaces. Echoing the Civil Rights Movement and the United Farmworkers Union Movement which took to the streets to demand social justice using moral arguments and religious symbols, every year in July the people of Loíza take to the streets and walk the holy route carrying Santiago Apóstol on their shoulder, and invoking his protection and power, reclaiming Loíza as their ancestral home. Even the _Hijos Ausentes_ (the absent children) who return each year from the US Puerto Rican diaspora to process with the Santiago Apóstol, can reclaim the streets of Loíza as their home.

Through the work of María Lugones, this thesis understands the procession of the Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol as movements of people that can potentially “loosen the hold” of oppressive institutions and circumstances. The processions of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol, the healing ceremonies of _Espiritismo_, and the community marches against gentrification are all movements that can potentially “loosen the hold” of oppressive forces. Reclaiming the streets by walking in the processions, alleviating the body from pain and suffering through _despojos_ (ritual cleansings), conjuring the ancestors and tending to home altars, and marching and
demonstrating against gentrification, is creating spaces filled potentiality for transformation and liberation from oppressive institutional and structural oppressions.

Guided also by the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, I located the personal stories of the people at the center of the thesis, illuminating ethnographies of the particular. In addition, I shared my own personal experiences as an observer-participant both during the processions of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol and the healing ceremonies at the Espiritista temple in Las Cuevas, Loíza. I chose sobre la marcha to help me understand the feast of Santiago Apóstol, the practice of Espiritismo, and the struggle against gentrification in Loíza, Puerto Rico, as being part of a whole with different paths towards liberation. In addition, I employed lo cotidiano as both indigenous conocimientos/knowledge and as a theological framework for privileging oral testimonies. As an indigenous person concerned with scholarship that might fall into essentialism or the making of generalizations about indigenous peoples, I believe that the strategic combination of sobre la marcha, lo cotidiano, and ethnographies of the particular, was very helpful in guiding this thesis. Sobre la marcha, lo cotidano and ethnographies of the particular opened the way for an indigenous approach and a decolonizing perspective of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol in Loíza.

At the heart of this thesis we can find the people’s voices and lived experiences: The processions, the stories of the Mantenedores, the practice of Espiritismo in Loíza, the artistic productions inspired by the spirit of the ancestors, and the popular movement against the gentrification of Loíza, all of which together and separately constitute potential for transformation and liberation sobre la marcha, continuously on the move.
The devotion towards Santiago Apóstol is still palpable despite the dwindling numbers of people who participate in the religious processions and the ongoing efforts by local government to market the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol as an exotic product of “La Tercera Raíz” (the third root). The people have adapted to changes in Loíza with respect to religious diversity, the commercialization of their cultural traditions, and even the encroaching presence of luxury condo-hotels. Yet this adaptation also carries within many small movements that convey resistance and strategies for community building. Adaptation is also a strategy of liberation that allows for internal movements to go undetected and to erupt when necessary. It is important to consider all strategies as valid and all movements as potential.

To engage in a discussion about whether the fiesta of Santiago Apóstol today represents the “true” religious ritual, or whether it has devolved into something completely “secular” with only remnants of the original Fiestas, would be to dismiss the people’s complex, dynamic, intersecting, and ever changing ways of being. No one who shared their story used language resembling dogmatic notions of what should be considered holy or not. The people’s faith and sense of the sacred extended beyond the borders of the church, the processions, the novenas, the prayers, into the Espiritista temple, the broom of La Loca, the healing herbs of Doña Mello, the spirit of Adolfina, their home altars, their families, their friends, their streets, their gardens, and their homes.

The people who shared their testimonies in this thesis embody the pride of being Loiceños and consider themselves as mehclao’ (mixture), mogollo (sticky mess), de to’ (everything), as well as Black and Afro-Puerto Rican, among many other names. Their relationship to divine powers from multiple heritages shows the depth of their conocimientos.
(ways of knowing) and is an expression of an ongoing movement against being defined by others. There is power in self-determination and resistance even in assimilation or appropriation of religious symbols that might be conducive to liberation. Assimilation and appropriation are spontaneous movements and valid expressions of resistance sobre la marcha that recognize both Santiago Apóstol and the people of Loíza as the ultimate tricksters who are on the move to subvert and destabilize oppressive structures.

This thesis began with several movements converging sobre la marcha (on the move): The processions of the Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol (St. James), the moving stories of the Mantenedores of Santiago Apóstol, the healing rituals of Espiritismo in the temple of Las Cuevas, Loíza, the dynamic artistic productions of Samuel Lind, and the community movements against evictions and gentrification in Loíza. We looked at Loíza as a center of religious devotion, as a place where the African ancestors are present and in communication with the living, and as a contested space where tourism expansion is threatening the ancestral home Afro-Puerto Rican people in the towns of Loíza and Piñones. All these spaces, and the people who inhabit them, are in flux and intersecting with each other on a daily basis. These are spaces and people sobre la marcha, on the move.

I presented this thesis using sobre la marcha as a methodology to validate indigenous ways of being which value people’s every day lives: lo cotidiano. This way of being privileges peoples’ lived experience and acknowledges that people’s feelings, beliefs, perspectives, interpretations, imaginations, devotions, and worldviews constitute knowledge: conocimientos. These conocimientos are found in the people’s spirit and material productions infused with spirit, or ánimo: memories, ancestors, home altars, prayers, stories, the rhythms and patterns
of their songs and dances, the paintings and sculptures made by Samuel Lind, their storytelling, their community organizing, strategizing and marching together, the coconut masks of the vejigantes, in the broom of La Loca sweeping the streets and opening the road for Santiago Apóstol, the healing herbal infusions of Doña Mello, Tamara’s preparation of traditional foods to be shared communally, rescates de terreno (land rescues) and suffering police brutality, feeding the ancestor and tending of home altars, Rosa Julia’s and Sylnic’s meticulous and dedicated guardianship as Mantenedores of Santiago, Lester Nurse’s memories of the loss of his childhood home in San Mateo de Cangrejos, and the passion and death of Adolfina Villanueva.

Rosa Julia, Rosalie, Sylnic, Samuel, Lester, and Doña Mello affirm their identities as proud Loiceños with a rich ancestral cultural and religious history to share with the new generations. They also model self-determination in storytelling in that they freely depart from my initial questions to offer a rich and variegated account of their own perspectives about life in Loíza. Even when I announce the end of the interview, they create a new road with their storytelling and sobre la marcha continue to create a new path to provide a new introduction of themselves and of their home, Loíza, as a hospitable and generous place. As the masterful storytellers that they are, they turn the ending of the story into a new beginning.

This story is still sobre la marcha and will be told in many other voices, places, and times. It is not the whole story and it does not end here. It will be translated into Spanish and individual printed copies (including a video on dvd) will be presented at a community gathering in Samuel Lind’s home studio to all the people who offered their personal testimonies. This is a way to express my respect and gratitude to each and every person (and their ancestors) who contributed to this project with their voices and spirits. They in turn will have their own stories.
to tell about this process and how their stories have been portrayed. This work will also be an ofrenda (an offering) presented to Santiago de los Niños next July 28th at his altar in Tamara’s house in Loíza before this year’s procession begins to be blessed by La Loca.
Appendix

Pasión y Muerte De Adelfina Villanueva

In 1989, fifty students from the University of Puerto Rico from the *Teatro Deambulante Puertorriqueño* enacted the play “*Pasión y Muerte de Adelfina Villanueva*” “Passion and Death of Adelfina Villanueva.” It is interesting to note that the term *deambulante* is used in Puerto Rico to mean both itinerant and homeless. Puerto Rican Producer Rosa Luisa Marquez produced the play with stage Direction from Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater. Staged in the open air, under palm trees, with people of all ages sitting on the ground, the play was offered as a ritual to commemorate and honor the memory and legacy of Adelfina Villanueva. Giant puppets created by the Bread and Puppet Theater collective embodied Adelfina, her family, lawyers, judges, and the personification of capitalist greed. This play is another illustration of the spiritual dimensions of the killing of Adelfina Villanueva, offering a narrative deeply embedded in the religious imagination of modern day prophets. The play begins with a procession, with people carrying flags, animated by music and the enthusiasm of the spectators. Marching in the procession is a giant Black woman dressed in white, with her arms wide open, stretched towards the heavens, personifying Adelfina. This character represents both Adelfina and her grandmother. A wooden door represents Adelfina’s home. Other giant puppet characters are: The local judge represented by a white hand with a pointing index finger, the US District Court judges represented by several figures resembling George Washington; a few lawyers depicted with back and white suits, big bellies, big heads, and squeaky voices; a huge tall monster made of shredded newspaper with a big mouth and sharp teeth representing colonialism and capitalism (and perhaps the media as well); the spirits of
death who dress as skeletons wearing masks and using palm tree branches to sweep the
ground during Adolfina’s agony and transition into the spirit world. The play shows courtroom
scenes where Adolfina is interrogated about whether she has title to the land where she built
her home, the invasion of her home by the police, and her death not by gunshot, but by
crucifixion. In the interest of time, I have only included the spoken narrative and included
minimal description of the “stage” setting.

It is theologically significant that the playwright decided to end the play not with
Adolfina being shot, but instead, crucified like Jesus Christ. The presence of Judas, a hungry
monster symbolizing the government that betrays her and who washes his hands like Pontius
Pilate, transforms Adolfina into the sacrificial lamb whose death by crucifixion is the ultimate
sacrifice. Similar to the mockery of a judicial system that ruled against Jesus and sentenced him
to death, so too Adolfina’s trial and public execution leave a strong message indicting the very
system that condemned her. Her death by crucifixion becomes a radical political act filled with
redemptive meaning.
Passion and Death of Adolfina Villanueva outdoor theatre performance

*La Pasión y Muerte de Adolfina Villanueva*, a co-production of Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet Theater and the Teatreros Ambulantes, tells the story of Adolfina Villanueva, a woman who was assassinated by the police in the Afro-Puerto Rican town of Loíza while defending her home and family during a forced eviction operative on February 6th, 1980. The piece brings to the forefront issues of human rights and current tensions between impoverished communities and developers of "exclusive" building projects, all issues affecting the Puerto Rican society as a whole: as the piece states, "we are all on the same boat."

Rosa Luisa Márquez (www.marquezmartorell.org) is a Puerto Rican theater artist and pedagogue; she specializes in contemporary theater. Rosa Luisa started her teaching
career at the theater department of the University of Puerto Rico in 1978. She developed the current curriculum of Drama Activities, which she teaches in her workshops at schools, prisons, rehab centers, women's shelters and community centers. Her directing projects include 'Romeo(s) y Julieta(s),' 'Historias para ser Contadas,' 'La Leyenda del Cemí,' 'Procesión,' 'Waiting for Godot,' 'Jardín de Pulpos,' 'Absurdos en Soledad,' 'El León y la Joya,' among others. Published books include 'Brincos y saltos: el juego como disciplina teatral' and 'Historias para ser contadas, montaje de Rosa Luisa Márquez.' She is a member of the board of directors and pedagogical team for the EITALC's International School of Latin American and Caribbean Theater. Ongoing artistic collaborators include Gilda Navarra and Antonio Martorell (Puerto Rico), Grupo Malayerba (Ecuador), Grupo Yuyachkani (Peru), and directors Peter Shumann (Bread & Puppet Theater, U.S.A.) and Augusto Boal (Theater of the Oppressed, Brazil). In conjunction with visual artist Antonio Martorell, she created the concept of 'Teatreros Ambulantes' (Itinerant Performers, 1987-1990), resulting in twelve productions. 'La Pasión y Muerte de Adolfinia Villanueva' is one of these projects. A co-production of Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet Theater and the Teatreros Ambulantes, it tells the story of Adolfinia Villanueva, a woman who was assassinated by the police in the Afro-Puerto Rican town of Loíza while defending her home and family during a forced eviction operative on February 6th, 1980. The piece brings to the forefront issues of human rights and current tensions between impoverished communities and developers of 'exclusive' building projects, all issues affecting the Puerto Rican society as a whole: as the piece states, 'we are all on the same boat.'

A bell rings to signal the beginning of the play. The play opens with people dressed in white bowing and facing the door. A voice is heard inviting everyone to “Come in! Come in!” the door opens and the procession begins with musicians, people dressed in white waving multi-colored flags, and giant puppets dancing and filling the space. Someone starts singing a popular song and the audience chimes in during the chorus which talks about the life of humble people, living without air conditioning, in nature, “living better than a rich man” the singer changes the lyrics and sings “and I live here in Loíza in my house made of wood, without luxuries, and I live here in Loíza, better than a rich man…” The public applauds and after a moment of silence, a little old man wearing a cardboard mask showing wrinkles, a costume similar to the “Viejo” characters which are part of the Santiago Apóstol procession, asks:
Viejo: Who are you?

Adolfina’s Grandmother: I am the grandmother of Adolfina Villanueva, the protagonist of this story.

Viejo: Ahhhhhhh!!!!

AG: What do you want?

Viejo: I am the patron/Master/landlord

AG: You are the Master/landlord????

Viejo: Yesssssss!

AG: But I have lived here for many years!

Viejo: I know!

AG: And I hope that my children and y grandchildren can live here.

Viejo: But this is my land!

AG: But I live on this land.

Viejo: But I am the Patron!

AG: But I need a place to live.

Viejo: I don’t know… you can stay… I am not a monster… I am just the patron.

AG: Can you give me some proof? [of his authorization to allow her to remain on the land]

Viejo: No! That is asking too much!

AG: Thank you!

Viejo: You’re welcome!

AG: Thank you so much!

Viejo: It’s ok. [exits]

Enter the giant with a big mouth and big teeth. A voice asks:

“Who are you?”

Monster: I am Judas.
Voice: What Judas?

Monster: Judas Quiñonez [the name of the man who possessed land title and initiated eviction proceedings against Adolfina]

Voice: Who?????

Monster: You don’t know me???? I am famous!!!! Everyone knows me!

Voice: Nice to meet you Judas, please come in!

(Music accompanies dancing plumed birds with sharp beaks dancing frantically on stilts)

Next scene shows people playing a children’s game in which players make hand gestures while singing: “That does not belong to you; That belongs to me”

The monsters speaks:

Monster: I’m hungry!!!!! I want food!!!!

Someone comes along with a pitchfork and feeds him.

Chorus: Ahhhhhh!!! Numnumnum.....ohhhhhh

Monster: I’m hungry!!!! I’m starving!!!!!

The chorus: This is all we have!

Monster: That’s all????

Chorus: Yes, that’s all.

Monster: Well they don’t call me Judas for nothing! I have a surprise for you!

Chorus: “Ay! Bendito!” (Puerto Rican expression “Oh my goodness!”)

A group of People making military steps and noises rush in with spears and approach Adolfina’s door and try several times to knock it down. Finally, they succeed and surround Adolfina screaming at her.

A whistle is blown and military march commences.

A band processes and the flags follow.

Everyone follows including the monster.

Adolfina marches in the procession with her hands up

They change locations and are met with several people dressed in suits with big bellies (attorneys).
Trumpets sound and giants resembling George Washington come out and they are whirled around on long sticks.

Drum roll and bell.

“All rise!” Everyone stand up.

Adolfina tries to approach but many stand in her way and threaten her with spears

A trumpet “talks” like the Charlie Brown teacher

A giant pointing finger (judge) speaks:

Finger: Are you Adolfina Villanueva?

AV: Si! Mi nombre es Adolfina Villanueva

Finger: do you live in the pueblo of Loíza?

AV: Yes I live in the pueblo of Loíza.

Finger: Since when do you live in Loíza?

AV: I don’t remember... since always!

Finger: Are you the owner of this property?

AV: Of course I am the owner!

Finger: Can you prove it?

AV: Of course I can prove it!

Finger: Hoooooowww?????

AV: Ask my neighbors they will tell you

The finger points down and the people with spears begin to shout loudly...

Then they create a barricade to prevent people from coming into the courtroom:

Finger: Are you the pueblo of Loíza?

Loíza: Yes!

Finger: Do you know Adolfina Villanueva?

Loíza: Yes!

Finger: Has she lived always there?

Loíza: Yes!

Finger: Is she the owner of this property?

Loíza: Yes!
One of the characters dressed in a suit with a big belly comes running and shouting “Mr. judge! Mr. Judge!”

Finger [to Adolfina] Do you have any other proof?

AV: What does that mean?

Finger: Do you have any document?

AV: No I never had it

Finger: You don’t have title to the property?

AV: My mother told me that her mother told her that we could live here all our lives

The lawyer: I don’t know what the grandmother of this lady told her but my client points out that he is the owner of this property and he has the papers to prove it

Judge: show me the title

Lawyer: here it is!

Judge: show it to Adolfina

He shows to Adolfina

AV: it’s just a paper what does it matter? Why is it so important?

Chorus: Constitution of the Estado libre asociado de Puerto Rico... 1952 Section 20, article (c)
“The Right of every person to food, clothing, and housing”

Chorus Pointing to the George Washingtons: “According to Law 144 of the US Congress... 1952”

The lawyers march in front of the George Washingtons and kneel and bow

Voice: All rise! The court has its verdict!

Adolfina waits with open arms; a sound of wind is heard...

Chorus: The Court of First instance in Rio Grande... Adolfina Villanueva...Agustin Carrasquillo (Adolfina’s husband) defendants on the eviction case... Your honor, President of the US...

Cacophonous Chorus: El estado libre asociado...

Finger: Adolfina Villanueva de Puerto Rico Agustin Carrasquillo demandados sala de Rio Grande...repeats...mandamiento a Adolfina...al Marshall de este tribunal por cuanto....vista la moción del demandante, desocupar la propiedad del barrio Medianía Alta poblado de Loíza se ordena el a lanzamiento de la parte demandada de la propiedad por tanto usted Marshall de cumplimiento a la órden hoy dia 6 de febrero de 1980 [having seen the order of
eviction...orders that the marshall ...evict the defendants form the property...marshall must execute this order today February 6, 1980]


Voice: “Signed, Judge Edgardo Marquez”

Drums...everyone leaves...

Monster: I am Judas Quinones and I represent progress of this country I want all Puerto Ricans to live in hotels and to work in the hotels that’s why we need to build 8600 rooms in a complex hotel in Piñones. That’s why we need club med in the middle of the forest in Guánica... I want all Puerto Ricans to have a beach house in Vieques in harmony with the US marines. That’s why we need more land because I believe in our democratic system of life. This woman [Adolfina] will be an example for all those who don’t cooperate with the future of Puerto Rico. Avoid racism and support the hotels! Adolfina Villanueva, do you know what awaits you?

AV: I don’t care!

Monster: And all this for a little piece of land?

Adolfina’s hands are tied

Voice: Adolfina Villanueva said on February 6, 1980 “You will only take me out of here dead!”

Monster: I wash my hands like Pilate. You will get what you asked for

Police with dogs approach and surround Adolfina, the wind blows

Clashing cymbals

The dogs drag Adolfina to a cross where they crucify her while everyone watches

The skeletons representing death approach...wearing masks, the lift palm branches used like brooms to sweep as the drums begin to play... they continue to perform a “despojo” for Adolfina... sweeping the ground with the palm branches...

Adolfina’s head drops to one side and her body rises.

A young Black person points to Adolfina and kneels before her, and then is pushed down by the police. The person is Adolfina’s Child (AC)

AC: “Esta es mi madre?” Is this my mother?

Police: Si.

AC: What happened?
Police: She attacked us!
AC: She attacked you?
Police: Yes! With a machete!
AC: With a machete?
Police: Yes, and her husband with a bomb!
AC: That’s not a bomb! That’s a lantern my father uses to fish for juyeys/crabs!
Where is our house?
Police: What do you mean?
AC: Our house!
Police: Ohhh! That ratty hut?
AC: That was our house!
Police: We tore it down! The bulldozers tore it down!
AC: Explain this to me. You knocked down my house and killed my mother?
The police leave.
AC: lowers his head demonstrating sorrow at the feet of Adolfinas crucified body.
The chorus comes back looking down backs bent arms touching the ground...they rise slowly in slow motion...looking sideways, while the body of Adolfinas hangs from the cross... the chorus lifts their hands...they raise their hands...
They point to the giant monster and set him on fire. (Applause)
The people now build a boat and raise signs saying “we are all in the same boat” and raise a giant flag of the tree of life...a giant white bird circles the ashes of the dying monster...
Text at the end of the video: “Adolfina Villanueva died. She was killed in Loíza during an eviction on February 6, 1980. Her husband Agustin Carrasquillo and her 6 children survived. This play was enacted during holy week (1989) by 50 students from the University of Puerto Rico.”
Fig. 31. Marta Villanueva (center), Adolfina’s sister with Adolfina’s daughter and granddaughter.

Fig. 32. Adolfina Villanueva’s grave.
http://adolfinavillanueva.blogspot.com/2015/02/adolfina-hoy.html
Epilogue

I am the great-granddaughter of Dominga, Granddaughter of Florentina del Rosario and María, Daughter of Lily, Mother of Erick Christopher.

This is how I introduce myself in order to show respect for my elders and ancestors. This is a ritual way of being that always places me on the path with the ancestors, reminding me that I don't walk alone. I come from a long line of women altar makers, santiguadoras, curanderas, espiritistas, singers, dancers, poets, and keepers of the sacred knowledge of healing herbs. . . all of us at some point in our lives were displaced, forced from homeland, and subjected to the suffering and chaotic craziness resulting from forced isolation, physical, mental, and spiritual dislocation. . . all of us at some point finding ourselves far from home and family in a fragmented space. I come from a lineage of relationships that have contributed to my becoming a human being, a part of a web of existence, a network that includes blood relatives, adopted relatives, rivers, rocks, plants, trees, mountains, stars, birds and animals, and the spirit of the ancestors animating everything and everyone. They help me tell my stories, and go with me on my journeys. My story is the story of my relations, the story of many: past, present, and future all present at once in time and space, always moving always changing. All part of the Great Spirit that moves within me: My faith, my ánimo. My story is a seed full of potentiality activated by the breath of the ancestors present in the power of wind, thunder, rock, river, volcano, earth, sun, moon, stars, rain, deer, condor, llama, as well as the hidden “shadow” beings and spirits who are part of the same movement towards balance and beauty. My name and female gender identity are and aren't important. My name is important because
it was given to me in order to honor my grandmother. On the other hand, more important than my name are my roots, my origin: my relations South. My gender as female is important as part of what I do within a communal context and as part of a family. It has everything to do with my participation in ceremony and the spaces I inhabit. My elders have gifted me knowledge in the form of rituals, songs, dances, poems, embroidery, pan dulce (sweet bread), prayers, herbal medicine, dreams, visions, generosity, compassion, respect, and altar making. This knowledge is an extension of them, of their time and space, and of the natural world itself. This knowledge is my breath and is with me as I walk with those whose spirits. This knowledge is medicine for our hearts and minds and our communities.

But this knowledge was not present in the teachings I received in the Catholic school or the Catholic Church where I grew up. Notions of the divine were male and anything related to faith healing and curanderismo was seen as evil and “witchcraft.” I learned to silence that part of me, that proud part of me that regarded my abuelitas/grandmothers and their conocimientos as sacred knowledge. Yet that same Catholic Church defended the human rights of the disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Many Catholic priests and nuns were harassed, persecuted, tortured, and disappeared for denouncing the horrors of the military dictatorship. A great resistance movement emerged in my country that erupted in the streets and in the intimacy of our homes. We found multiple ways to subvert the dictatorship: We buried our books before the soldiers could get their hands on them and burn them; We pasted fake record labels on our LPs with revolutionary songs before the soldiers came to raid our homes; We built underground networks and wrote letters in code to be able to keep in touch with our families in hiding; We reinterpreted church hymns that spoke of liberation,
salvation, sacrifice, and resurrection; We celebrated mass anywhere we could and shared bread with those just released from the torture chambers; We made *arpilleras* (quilts) to tell our stories when speaking was too dangerous; When the state of siege imposed a curfew and we could not walk outside, We gathered inside our homes placing white flowers on our home altars before the image of the Holy Mother Santa María singing softly as we wept:

Mientras recorres la vida, tu nunca sola estás
Contigo por el camino Santa María va.
Ven con nosotros a caminar, Santa María ven
Aunque te digan algunos que nada puede cambiar,
lucha por un mundo nuevo, lucha por la verdad.
Aunque parezcan tus pasos inútil caminar,
tú vas haciendo caminos, otros los seguirán.
Ven con nosotros a caminar, Santa María, ven!
(Letra y música: Juan Antonio Espinosa)

As you walk upon this life,
You are never alone.
With you on the road,
Goes Santa María.
Come walk with us Santa María, come!
Even when they tell you that nothing can change,
Fight for a new world, fight for the truth.
Come walk with us Santa María, come!
Even when your steps seem impossible to walk,
You are making the road, others will follow.
Come walk with us Santa María, come!

These were the movements that shaped my religious being and imagination. These intimate, communal movements transformed our despair and hopelessness into hope and faith. A much needed hope and faith as my grandmother, my mother and I left our beloved Chile and immigrated to the United States. Displaced, isolated, identified as “aliens” and grieving the loss of all that was familiar to us, we focused our energies on *lo cotidiano* the everyday things, to make a new home in a strange land. We built our home altars, said our prayers
out loud to hear ourselves pronounce familiar words, and planted herbs in cans of Café Bustelo that hung outside our fireplace in the Bronx.

Later in life my soul unfolded yet again to reveal another movement, a movement towards expressing myself as Two-Spirit. But in the Catholic Church being “Two-Spirit” was labeled “homosexuality” and a sin. The message I received was that my soul was condemned and separated from the Creator. Once again, I was told that in order to survive, I had to be silent and hide my true self. This time, I ran away from the church. I ran away from the institution and towards community. It was the height of the AIDS epidemic in New York City and I was welcomed within the lesbian gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. I became active as a community organizer and legal advocate struggling to change laws that did not recognize the symptoms of HIV positive women and denied them disability benefits. Wearing our SILENCE=DEATH t-shirts, we marched in the streets of New York and Washington DC demanding justice. We built great community altars to honor our dead. But it was the small movements, the intimate day-to-day moments I spent in the AIDS hospice caring for the dying that allowed my soul to unfold yet again to hear the call to the ministry.

This thesis has moved me back in memory to the Streets of Santiago de Chile and my ancestors. It has moved sobre la marcha to the streets of Loíza, where I found refuge, community, and healing. Sobre la marcha I have reclaimed my indigenous identity and lifted up the conocimientos of my abuelitas. I have walked with the ancestors in the Streets of Santiago de Chile, with Santa María, with Santiago Apóstol, and the people of Loíza. In community, all these movements, great and small, reclaimed my voice, my ancestry, my faith, and the sacred meaning of land. As indigenous peoples, we are always walking upon contested spaces. We
have lost much and yet we continue to resist. Memory and ritual help us to reimagine and reclaim our sacred spaces. Walking upon the land with reverence and faith, feeling the energy of our ancestors in our every day lives, moving together as a community, going back to the places that hold deep conocimientos and potential for healing and transformation while praying, singing, and dancing: This is our story, a story with many voices, of sacred movements sobre la marcha. It is the story of the Mantenedores of Santiago Apóstol during the annual processions; it is the story Doña Mello, La Madama, and La Loca sweeping away negative energy and transforming suffering into hope; it is the story of Samuel Lind and the spiritual landscapes he paints inspired by the mystical presence of the ancestors; it is the story of Adolfina Villanueva and the new generations who remember her legacy of resistance in the rescate de terrenos/land rescues; and it is my story, an ofrenda/an offering of sobre la marcha as an expression of my indigenous conocimientos, my own indigeneity on the move.

Fig. 33. Self Portrait.
Photograph by María Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


