

## **My Puerto Ricanness: Locating Sovereignty in *La Puerta***

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Reflecting on positionality shook the core pillars of my research. I thought that an essay on positionality would be purely expository. But little by little I started encountering reflections of who I am in my description of my topic. Identifying myself in what I was studying helped me question what I was doing. It helped me discern between truths and how my research will provide explanations of certain truths. More importantly, it aided me in identifying why it should be me who completes this study.

Critical research requires consistent habits of self-examination. It requires scrutiny of “how we know what we know” (Takacs 2002, p. 169). In addition, positionality cautions us to also have awareness of the limits of our criticality. When conducting my research, I must remain connected with my purpose, methodology, research questions and myself. Out of all of them, keeping an eye on the self has been and will prove to be the trickiest. Takacs communicates it perfectly when saying: “Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of our own perspective to be able to identify assumptions that we take as universal truths, but that instead have been crafted by our own unique identity and experiences in the world.” (Takacs 2002, p. 169)

My road to positionality starts here: challenging the assumptions and truths I carry with me and identifying how they can affect my study of political muralism in contemporary Puerto Rico.

### **Puerto Ricanness**

Puerto Rico is an archipelago located between Santo Domingo and the Virgin Islands. In 1520, Baltasar de Castro, a Spanish royal official who collected rents for the Crown, described Puerto Rico as the door to the Indies (Morales Carrión, 1995). Likewise, Collado-Schwarz (2012) recognizes that Puerto Rico is located in a “privileged maritime trade zone.” During my school years, our teachers recited the phrase “*La más grande de las antillas menores y la más pequeña de las antillas mayores*” (“The largest of the Lesser Antilles, the smallest of the Greater Antilles”). All of these descriptions reinforce the significance of our location in the Caribbean. They also shed light on the first element of my positionality.

As a Colombian-born Puerto Rican, this group of islands will always be central in my eyes. I was born in Bogotá, Colombia, and I love being recognized as a South American. However, after moving from Bogotá to Guaynabo in 1999, Puerto Rico became my home. It was a space that turned into a place. I have memories of my first days of school, tears from my days at The University of Puerto

Rico and tan lines from hours I spent waiting for the bus. My “Puerto Ricanness” will be evident in my work. From my point of view, the Puerto Rican political mural I intend to study is highly significant. Its importance to my community and my identity are enormous. Its effects on the Puerto Rican community go far beyond a painting on the wall.

As a fan of Puerto Rican street art, I was surprised by the lack of scholarship on the subject. In addition, a general lack of knowledge about the archipelago means that I constantly find myself explaining Puerto Rico to people. No, the country is not located in South America, and yes, we do speak Spanish. No, currently there is no indigenous population. (1) Yes, our relationship with the United States is highly complex. These questions justify the need for more research on Puerto Rican culture and identity. My work seeks to expand scholarship on the subject and explain both my identity and topic to others. I find myself uniquely positioned to produce research on political muralism in Puerto Rico. Primarily because I recognize, follow and have experienced how the work of urban artist is a meaningful tactic in the changing and fast paced political environment of the island. Additionally, because while in the diaspora I have had the opportunity to revisit this knowledge with a new perspective and contrast it to urban art in other parts of the world.

### **Sovereignty: Of Colonies, Nations and Countries**

Any explanation of my identity and my project must start with a history of Puerto Rico’s long and difficult struggle with sovereignty. Moreover, it requires a critical analysis of that history.

The discovery of pottery on the island confirmed the existence of a native population dating back to 200 BC. The Igneri and Tainos peoples have been studied through the physical remains they left and detailed written records produced by the Spaniards during colonization. The Tainos lived in small groups and delegated tasks to the members of their community. They hunted and used agriculture to cultivate corn, annatto, tobacco, peppers and other medicinal plants. They were politically structured and participated in religious ceremonies (Picó, 1986). The Taino name for the main island was Borikén, a term that has been translated and is commonly used by Puerto Ricans today: Borinquen.

The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1493 defined the beginning of a new era, the colonial period. The Spanish conquest focused primarily in the extraction of gold, and later on agriculture and cattle ranching. The Spaniards relied heavily on slavery for labour. The involuntary African population that entered the island constituted the majority of the Puerto Rican workforce while the Taino population decreased rapidly due to the grating work conditions, changes in their diet, and their low immunity to the diseases brought by the Spaniards (Pico, 1986).

Puerto Rico mainly exported sugar, leather, tobacco and ginger, but the more transited docks on nearby islands and high costs of production challenged the establishment of a stable economy. Another obstacle in the development of a healthy Puerto Rican economy was the lack of jurisdiction. The monarchs of Spain dictated who governed overseas territories. Spain mandated from afar and the claims and requests of Puerto Ricans were ignored.

It was not until the Spanish Constitutions of 1812 that Puerto Ricans began to experience participation in political life. The Royal Decree of Graces of 1815 permitted free commerce with the surrounding Antilles and opened the door to legal trade with the United States of America. As Spanish control over its colonies in the Americas deteriorated throughout the 1800s, the United States began to assert its influence in the region. This influence was solidified with the Treaty of Paris which was signed at the culmination of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Spain ceded its territories in the Caribbean to the United States, and Puerto Rico started its second colonial period.

The North American mandate brought many reforms. The American dollar became the official currency. The Foraker Act of 1900 structured the Puerto Rican government in three branches of power. The executive body was composed of eleven members and a governor. The judicial branch relied on the authority of the governor to nominate judges. The legislative body was composed of 35 members, elected by the Puerto Ricans. Ultimately, the governor and the members of his cabinet would be elected by the president and ratified by the North American Senate. Although Puerto Ricans were given the right to vote for representation, the decisions taken by the legislature could be vetoed by the non-elected governor and the U.S. senate. The Foraker Act also established cabotage laws that regulate shipping and trade in Puerto Rico. The regulations required that trade must take place with U.S. flagged ships exclusively, and additionally the ships must be owned and manufactured in the U.S. For an archipelago, the access and control of its ports is pivotal to its survival. It's not only a necessary economic tool but a means to connect with neighbouring countries. Limiting the sea that surrounds the archipelago also limits opportunities for its development. As a result, local political and economic institutions continued to remain weak.

It was not until 1917 with the Jones Act that locals were able to vote for representation in a local Senate. The Jones Act superseded the Foraker Act and granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. The governor was still chosen by U.S. officials until a 1947 amendment granted Puerto Ricans the chance to vote for their first elected governor. Finally, in 1952 the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State) was approved by a Puerto Rican referendum and later on by Congress. This constitution established that Puerto Rico would have a government with self-governing concepts, while also agreeing to a junction with the United States of America. It bound the two countries in a commonwealth relationship that gave Puerto Rico the status of unincorporated territory.

The establishment of the *Estado Libre Asociado* also shaped how the international community perceived Puerto Rico. In a letter written to the then president of the United Nations Trygve Lie, U.S. representative Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. argued that the new constitution proved Puerto Rico was not a colony. Given that the *Estado Libre Asociado* established self-government through a relationship of mutual agreement, Puerto Rico was determined to be an autonomous political entity. In 1953 the General Assembly of the UN approved Resolution 748 and Puerto Rico was no longer deemed a colony by this organization.

But while Puerto Rico may not officially be a colony, that does not mean it is a sovereign territory. The archipelago has never obtained total sovereignty. The town of Lares was independent for 24 hours during the revolt known as *El Grito de Lares* (Lares' Cry) in 1868. Apart from this uprising, Puerto Rico has remained under the continuous domain of either Spain or The United States. Alt-

though we gained the right to vote for our governor, our decisions have always been subject to approval by the government of The United States.

Our history is essential to an analysis on the current status of the island. To understand our present situation, it is necessary to reflect on how we got here. In the presented sequence of events, a common protagonist is not the archipelago itself, but either Spain or the U.S. These external actors are relevant to our history because their interference in Puerto Rican affairs illustrate the lack of sovereignty of the archipelago. With the excuse of acting in Puerto Rico's best interests, these outsiders have restricted the development of a history of and on our own. I argue that our history can only be ours when we become the sole actor and protagonist.

I am aware that my selection of historical events reflects my positionality; that my positionality materializes in the compilation I have created. I focus on events that illustrate Puerto Rico's lack of sovereignty and my views about Puerto Rico's colonized status. They also support the argument that the present status of our archipelago is not only our fault but the fault of all the other actors that have meddled with and detrimentally impacted our development. I do not intend to portray Puerto Rico as a victim, because I firmly believe that nobody has failed Puerto Ricans more than ourselves. We have consistently voted corrupt leaders into office and have permitted the development of an economy of dependence. Which brings us to Puerto Rico as we have it today, a country in debt with a minimal agriculture and a heavy reliance on imports. And a country that continues to experience colonial status, as demonstrated by the recent the implementation of PROMESA. This is the event that precipitated the mural that I am studying.

On July 1st, 2016, the Puerto Rican government found itself unable to pay the first \$2 million payment of its \$70 billion debt. This event demonstrated the government's economic crisis and its profound deficit. As a result, the U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives and President Barack Obama approved Bill H.R. 5278, better known as the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. Its acronym, PROMESA means promise in Spanish. The bill was created to address Puerto Rico's economic crisis by establishing a Financial Oversight and Management Board of seven members. These members were to be selected by the President and the power of this board surpasses that of all elected officials in Puerto Rico's local government. Once again, the solution for the problems in the island was to be determined by outsiders. Because nobody knows better about Puerto Rican than three Democrats and four Republicans. This board is commonly known as La Junta from its name in Spanish *La Junta de Control Fiscal*.

I reiterate that all of us Puerto Ricans are responsible for the state of our country. We are responsible for being too comfortable, for halting the incessant fight for a better country that requires day to day action. Nobody has failed us more than our corrupt politicians who have perpetuated a state of debt. But we are all to blame because our claims of pride for our flag and country remained superficial and did not materialize into a concrete fight for a country of our own.

### **The Trajectory of a Mural: From *Grabadores por Grabadores* to *La Puerta***

My research tries to locate and identify a story of Puerto Rico as told and experienced by Puerto Ricans. My study of a political mural tracks an artistic response to a historical event that evidences our lack of jurisdiction. An interesting element of history is its recurrence. My study of how the mural *Grabadores por Grabadores* (Printmakers for Printmakers) turned into *La Puerta* focuses on a novel artistic technique that seeks to disrupt the colonial status and mentality that have kept Puerto Ricans chained, and led us to our current crisis.

The mural *Grabadores por Grabadores* was developed for the *Trienal Poligráfica de San Juan y el Caribe* (Poly/Graphic Triennial of San Juan and the Caribbean). It is located on San José Street and was created by students from the University of Plastic Arts in San Juan under the guidance of Rosenda Alvarez. The title references the wheat paste posters that can be found alongside the mural. The posters portrayed eight important Puerto Rican wood block print printmakers. In the centre of the mural the Puerto Rican flag was painted over a door. The blue triangle of the flag was painted in light blue to represent the flag used by the Puerto Rican independence movement, in contrast to the dark blue of the official flag. The mural was an instant success. Both locals and tourists could be seen on the street taking pictures with it.

The mural changed drastically on the night of July 4, 2016, three days after the enactment of PROMESA. An act initially catalogued as vandalism caught the attention of local papers. The artists added and re-pasted new posters portraying additional printmakers, and the red and blue colours of the flag were repainted in black. On July 7, a letter was published in *80 Grados* (a digital newspaper in Puerto Rico) by a group called *Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia* (Artists in Solidarity and Resistance). In their open letter, the group acknowledged responsibility for the overlay of the flag. They claim they want to provoke discussion about the social, economic and political crisis the country is experiencing. Ultimately, they want to generate a new reading of a flag and more importantly present a message of resistance. In their interpretation, by re-painting the flag black, they portrayed an absence of light, not a pessimistic message.

The new mural was a topic of discussion for weeks and it provoked a wave of street art. A Facebook Page called *La Puerta* (The Door) follows the discussion, via those murals, graffiti, paintings and other pieces of urban art appearing across the islands which promote a message of resistance. Subsequent murals made by the same artistic group are marked with the black Puerto Rican flag in the right-hand corner. The black Puerto Rican flag is now commonly used by activists during protests against PROMESA and other environmental and political causes. Of the eleven subsequent murals, two have been painted in locations outside the archipelago: one in New York and another one in Florida. The biggest wall that *Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia* has painted is located in De Diego Avenue. This wall has been repainted three times with different messages. The first one read: "The resistance has no fear," the second one read: "Neither red, blue nor board," and relates to the two main political parties in Puerto Rico, who use red and blue as their colours. Lastly the third message read: "The only ashes we want are those of the board," supporting an environmental movement that seeks to cease the burning of coal and the deposit of ashes in the town of Guayama. The second version of the mural *Grabadores por Grabadores*, commonly known as *La Puerta* has additionally been vandalized with an anarchy logo and decorated with candles to represent a vigil. These acts

demonstrate how active the group *Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia* is. Additionally, they constitute a direct citizen response to the mural and the message it aims to deliver.

In conclusion, it is essential to look at the mural *Grabadores por Grabadores* as a discursive piece of art: a mural that created and maintained a discussion about the current situation of Puerto Rico. Redressing the flag aroused a dialogue. It generated political conversations about what PROMESA meant for the future of Puerto Rico. However, an important element to take into account is how to study these processes from outside of the country. How can I study Puerto Rico from Canada? How can I study a topic from 3,787 miles away?

Because of its close relationship with the United States, many Puerto Ricans live in the exterior. How can I account for Puerto Ricans who do not know Spanish and might never have been to the island? Who defines Puerto Ricanness? How can a Colombian-born person know what it is to be Puerto Rican? How does my current location in Canada shape my perspective and my positionality? I am no longer in the midst of it all and sadly I cannot participate in the marches and strikes. My opinions on how these urban artworks affect citizens are blurred by the distance between us. I can follow the media publications about the subject. I can see my friends' posts about the pickets. I can follow hashtags on social media. But I cannot be in front of the mural and see people's direct reactions on the street in San José. All of these questions help me reflect about my positionality and shape my methodology.

My study is transnational in the sense that I look at Puerto Rico from Canada. However, identity knows no boundaries. I have never felt more Puerto Rican than when living outside of the islands. Being part of the diaspora means missing the weather, the *coquís*, the beaches, the food but remaining Puerto Rican. Although my physical location is not in the Caribbean, my values, culture, traditions and relationships with Puerto Rico remain strong. My Puerto Ricanness has endured while living in Canada. It has helped me distinguish the characteristics that make me Puerto Rican, like noticing how loud I speak and how I can't help but dance whenever I hear music. Additionally, studying this topic from afar has proven to be both a benefit and a curse. Not being able to participate in the protests gives me nostalgia, and a certain type of guilt for not being there fighting for a better Puerto Rico. On the other hand, it has strengthened my abilities to explain the situation and my perspective has developed from exploring the topic from afar. My studies abroad have given me the tools to produce critical work that evaluates a Puerto Rican response to the issue of sovereignty.

My particular interest in urban art was essential in the selection of my topic. Where others see paintings and scribbles on walls, I see relevant expressions with value and meaning. The location of these works in a public setting is key to their value. They are available to everyone who passes by or sees images and videos of them. I argue that *La Puerta* illustrates the concept of the public sphere since it promotes discussion, dialogue and reflection about what is going on in Puerto Rico. The story of this mural not only needs to be collected because it is a powerful political instrument but also because it has become a measure of local response. It needs to be studied as an instance when Puerto Ricans made history by reacting, writing and exploring their version of the story. I see meaningful resistance in the mural, and a critical response, which is why this work is extremely significant to me. As a Puerto Rican, I not only want to study the mural, but feel that it is my respon-

sibility to study it. I want my work to capture the history of Puerto Ricans as told by Puerto Ricans, whether they are inside or outside the archipelago. My goal is to collect reactions to *La Puerta* in order to understand some of its effects. As I mentioned before, when discussing positionality keeping an eye on the self proves to be the biggest challenge. For me, this topic is important because from my position the mural can be the beginning of a change that I would very much like to see happen.

### **Positionality & Social Justice**

Our experiences affect how we approach our topics of study. Who I am and how I see the world is part of my positionality and has an impact on the realities I perceive. My biases are part of my voice and authority as a researcher. When researching I should remain aware of my responsibilities; I must present the voices of my participants reliably and credibly. Beyond just adhering to ethical guidelines, I should also produce knowledge that advances social justice. Knowledge production with the mere goal of publishing is not what I am interested in. The value of my topic lies in how these art forms that reside in the urban fabric have an impact on how we live in society. Recording the effects of these marginalized voices is more than an interest or a leisure pursuit; it is part of how I wish to bring justice into the world. By studying the trajectory of the mural *Grabadores por Grabadores* I will let others know about the present situation in Puerto Rico. Additionally, I want to distinguish how artists are using the methods they know best to start a much-needed debate on how are we going to start a change.

### **Notes**

1. The Tainos, native to the island, were exterminated during Spanish colonization. Picó explains that the African population surpassed the Tainos (Picó, 1986).

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