Puerto Rico: art and identity policies

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In the context of representing and meaning identity, culture and political art in Puerto Rico can assert a poignant reflection on the subject. This paper will examine works and artistic practices that expose the mechanisms of power and point to events and nationalistic discourses that, probably and paradoxically, support the colonial condition, contributing to rethink Puerto Rican art and cultural identity. I will present the cultural forms that do not answer to the typical political structures and dominant practices that have been constructed around the idea of “Puerto Ricaness.” Re-vindicating the place of the Diaspora as a counter field and determinant in the reaffirmation of identity and as a politically relevant space outside the island’s hegemonic structures. In order to do that, a brief critical analysis of usual notions of art and Puerto Rican culture, agencies and traditional works, will be necessary to see what meaning and utility can have to preserve these models in the presence of evident symptoms of cultural revitalization, result of the migratory processes, the colonial condition vis-à-vis the USA, the access to the information and new discussions on interculturalism and hybridity. I intend to analyze three contemporary artists who, by some means or another, have attended to these discussions and who better approach these topics, and in their artistic practices foment a renovation of social and cultural discourses. I am not trying to construct an antagonist canon of practices nor regulate what must be or for what must serve Puerto Rican political art, but to underline those works that cope with dissonances and elements inherent to a very complex cultural process, inside and outside the Island. These processes point to possible spaces of reflection and social evolution that can facilitate the reconstruction of a wider cultural and public sphere and provoke new ways of narrating Puerto Rican art and identity.

Keywords: Puerto Ricaness, colonialism, political art, identity, Diaspora, interculturalism, hybridity, cultural policies.

In Puerto Rico, the notion of national identity appears in a suggestive and poignant way, and let’s say, rather distant from the illusion of a unique ethnic identity, engine of the most despotic totalitarianisms. In spite of this, the national identity is the driving force that keeps Island ascribed to a certain colonizing mystification. Devoid of a serious political agenda, without an integral knowledge of our own history and with a divided society because of a fixed cultural identity, which is not homogeneous but basically binary, the
horizon of the Puerto Rican society does not appear much clearer than 100 years before, around the time of the USA invasion. However, the notion of national identity has played an important role in the configuration of the contemporary Puerto Rican society and cultural autonomy of the Island.

Art and politics have always had a contingent relation in Puerto Rico, and that relation has operated in a systematic way since the late forties, cherishing the idea that the preservation of a fixed tradition, is the only way to confront the colonial system and maintain our true cultural and national identity. I suppose there is no need to make clear how mistaken this position can be. But the truth is that the strategies articulated within the political and cultural discourses to construct and preserve a “national cultural identity” emerged as a result of a very real “recognition” of our particularity. Nowadays, this particularity explores new territories, due to an important Puerto Rican Diaspora community in the USA, which plays a significant role in the identity discussion. I will try to give a glimpse of how the artistic productions and artists in the Diaspora cope with these notions, stressing the hegemonic discourses and provoking new ways of understanding the Puerto Ricaness.

To begin it is important to reconsider some of the questions that the Puerto Rican essayist José Luis González asked himself almost 40 years ago, regarding the evolution of the Puerto Rican society since the USA invasion in 1898. What kind of society existed in that moment? What does that identity involve? And how it has evolved until now? I will try to answer in a summary way these questions, which are essential to understand the cultural practices that gave place to the “differentiation” that lead the construction of our national identity as we understand it today.

Parting from the 1979 essay, The Four-Storey Country by Jose Luis Gonzalez we can configure an idea of the racial and socio-economic aspects that characterize Puerto Rican society in 1898, and how it develops from that moment on. This text will serve me as referential frame to analyze and legitimate the new ways of depicting Puerto Ricaness from the Diaspora.

The society in the moment of the North American invasion, according to Eugenio Maria de Hostos was: “a society in a primary degree of national formation and suffering from enormous social ills...” According to Gonzalez: “what Puerto Rico was in 1898 only can be defined, mythologies apart, as a nation in formation. This way Hostos saw it, and saw it well.”

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4 Ibid, p. 16.
that are put in top of the other, Gonzalez emphasises the popular culture – and till then ignored within the official discourse –, as the ground on which the current Puerto Rican society is built. While, the USA invasion burst into the national identity formation process, according to Gonzalez its corollary allows the emerged of popular culture, which displaces some of the values of the dominant class. Is in this third stage of the construction, that are develop and established the dynamics and nationalistic enterprises that governed the standards of Puerto Rican identity that still continue to be in force nowadays. As a result, a strong cultural nationalism will emerge and will bring with it one of the biggest issues and relevant characteristics of Puerto Ricaness: *assimilation without adhesion*. This can explain Puerto Rico’s social, political and cultural evolution across the 20th century.

When we assess the implications of our colonial history -one riddle with previous and present inequalities – beyond leading to a “reactionary culture”, unlike other Latin-American nations, our way of understanding nationality was forged, indeed, around our Hispanic inherited traditions, but also in a particular opposition of Puerto Rican vs North American identity. Given that in the moment of the invasion Puerto Rican culture was not, far from it, a homogeneous block, therefore the recognition of a “unique Puerto Rican identity” was not possible. Consequently, the claim of independence at that moment sited its basis, more than in the political in-viability of colonialism, in the struggle for preserving “national identity”. It is here that we are faced with a complex paradox. Along with the inevitable imposition of the Anglo-Saxon culture, the Puerto Ricans manages to strengthen under these conditions a feeling of “national cultural identity” in opposition to the impossibility (at least immediate) of a politically sovereign nation. I think it is in this condition of possibility of a “national cultural identity”, where lies the interesting and singularity case of Puerto Rico. As Gonzalez indicates:

> No Spanish-American country had come to national independence in the 19th century as result of the culmination of a process of national formation, but for the need of be provided with a political and juridical instrument that would assure and encourage the development of that process.  

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This construction of the national identity began as part of the modernist campaign, in the decades of the forties and fifties in the last century. Puerto Rico experienced a dramatic socio-economic transformation and art played a significant role as an educational tool in the venture of creating Puerto Rico’s cultural identity. The educational system and cultural institutions intervened decisively in the construction of cultural associations and identities matching the hegemonic class/culture of that time. Which was dictated from the cultural and social reminiscences of the former Hispanic Empire. Instead of reaffirming

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the hybrid character of the Puerto Ricans, as any other colonial discourse, it is fixed on the valuation and identification of racial elements under the trope of racial mixture. Consequently, the ambassador of the Puerto Rican identity will be the peasant, a characterization of the miscegenation as the white rural man. This caused the segregation of those who did not fit into the official stereotype of national identity, which was the majority of the population of the Island.

The means used by the cultural and political enterprises to prioritize this ideal of national identity was, as I state before, the visual arts, especially through Printmaking. This technique facilitated, because of its multi-exemplary nature, the diffusion of this ideology to a population mostly illiterate. A group of artists known as the “Fifties Generation” and endorsed by government initiatives lead an artistic generation characterized by a strong sense of nationalism. They transformed the propagandistic use of posters, to an educational tool and as a testimony of Puerto Rico’s political and social transformations. However, the social realism praised by this generation extends to the end of the seventies and positioned itself in an irreconcilable way in relation to other international movements like that of abstraction, minimalism, conceptual art and installation. Nevertheless, the ideological polarization of these years is seen to diminish with the new social forms, due to the emerging middle class of the eighties and the depletion of the social problems that in a beginning supposed the creation of the mentioned institutions. Now the posters are the graphic testimony of an economic, political and social project, whose results in its moment were real and are easily proven. But, as was to be expected from a project built on the basis of a colonial ideology, it could only end in the demolishment of the populist and archaic ideas of a nostalgic society, established by the Free Associate State or Commonwealth, as Gonzalez warned:

...— after having caused, essentially to satisfy the expansionist needs of development of the metropolis, a series of transformations that determined a very real modernization-in-to-dependence of the Puerto Rican society – now it is only capable of pushing this society to a blind alley and to a general chaos which symptoms precisely alarming we all have at sight: massive unemployment and marginalization, demoralizing dependence of a false foreign welfare, an uncontrollable increase of delinquency and criminality to a great extent imported, depoliticizing and civic irresponsibility induced by institutionalized demagoguery and a whole queue of diseases...7

In the presence of such socio-cultural realities and other factors like: the hegemony of the popular speech in the Puerto Rican society, multi-positioning in front of the presence of USA government and culture, overcrowding of national symbols and the reappearance of conservative slant discourses bias towards the national vs diaspora, it is time to reformed the building and add another floor to

7 Ibid, p. 38.
accommodate the new forms of Puerto Ricaness and recognize the necessity of new definitions or concepts in the process of narrating Puerto Rico cultural identity.

The main two concepts that I will use to analyze this issues in relation with the work of three Puerto Rican artists working in the Diaspora are the comprehension of identity, according to Homi Bhabha, as a renegotiation of tradition that validates the hybridity produced by the social interstices and identity as a construct and rhizome, in opposition to a unique root, took from the notion of Relation of the Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant. The Diaspora appears as a space to articulate a “possible” identity, which escapes from traditional narratives and proposes new forms of meaning and understanding of Puerto Ricaness or “puertorriqueñidad”. This new forms do not limit themselves to a particular geographical place, but expands towards new places where the need to rethink identity is urgent, considering the new forms of migration and the recent postcolonial history of the world.

In the case of Puerto Rico, the articulation of identity from the periphery makes the constitutive heterogeneity of national identity more evident, as well as the interdependence between both places. I will present three works of art, which to me better exemplify these dynamics of restaging the identity, by reinventing the national imagery. The artists, in my opinion, have achieved to strategically re-formulate the traditional representations of national identity. They highlight the identity discourses and mechanisms of power that have contributed to the idealization – it is worth saying misrepresentation – of the values of a colonial past, questioning its legitimacy in the presence of the current social dynamics.

The fist artist is Pepón Osorio. His work is an evident example of the anxious need of the reaffirmation of the identity in the Diaspora. Through the exaggeration, the hyperbole and the excess of ornaments the work reflects the adoption of a particular aesthetics by the Puerto Rican community in New York, which functions like a subversive mechanism. Osorio has employed the kitsch aesthetics as a way to explore the Puerto Rico’s cultural identity, while at the same time disguising a severe political message. So, in the spectacular delight of the aesthetic disdain, he conforms in the pastiche the social realities of a poor and marginalized society. Behind the pastiche underlie the metaphor of richness, at least from the identity reaffirmation. The appearance of abundance shelters a history of deprivations and constant fear of recession; witch is the reality of a considerable part of Puerto Rican minority within the United States. His aesthetic is a hyperbole of those dark anxieties for the reaffirmation of the tradition and the belonging to a particular place, encapsulating their lifestyle in a nostalgic vision of the fifties migration, which culturally distinguishes them.

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both from the islanders and from the society to whom “they” “belong” in the actuality. The anxiety of identity, especially ethno-national, the threat of dissolution that is in the habit of hovering over proscribed national discourses, unites an excess of identity affirmation that is a basic characteristic of “Puerto Rican aesthetics”\(^\text{10}\). Arturo Torrecilla points out that “national issue” is the compound that comes to refill an empty space inside of a presumable original national identity, with historicist and populist devices. The anxiety that provokes to be consolidated in a spiritual principle\(^\text{11}\), and:

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The best materialization of this situation is depicted in the piece that he presented for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*. The work is a recreation of the interior of a “typical” Puerto Rican house where apparently a crime has occurred. The spectator immediately succumbs to the first intention of the artist, associate the scene with the typical domestic violence crime. However, this perception changes in the view of the welcome rug that had inscribed this phrase: “Only if you can understand that it has taken years of pain to gather into our homes our most valuable possessions; but the greater pain is to see how in the movies others make fun of the way we live.” This phrase alludes to the discriminated constructs that are pre-formed in the American culture on the Puerto Ricans. His work is inscribed in the “in-between” space that Bhabha proposes as the encounter of the past and the present, which represents a new state where interstice becomes part of the need, not the nostalgia, of living\(^\text{12}\).

The second artist, whose work depicts the dynamics and “interstitials” of a new period, is Miguel Luciano. With a highly social and political conscience, Luciano achieves, through the appropriation of religious images, popular and commercial iconography, to create a very incisive commentary that reconstructs and establishes new hierarchies that redefine the Puerto Rican paradigm. From cereal packages and comic strips, to publicity labels and historical and political icons, all form part of the extensive and complex array of visual references, which he utilizes to represent the shrillness and complexity of the socio-political

\(^{10}\) Puerto Rican understood aesthetics not as a distinction between the manners of “doing”, but as a distinction between the manners of “being”. See *Sobre políticas estéticas* of JAQUES RANCÉRE.

\(^{11}\) It comes from Ernest Renan’s definition of nation as “… a spiritual principle, resultant of the deep historical complications; is a spiritual family, not a group determined by the configuration of the soil”.


processes that had taken place in the Puerto Rican history. I propose to understand his visual strategy as an example of what a “minor aesthetic” could be. I know this proposition deserves a much more detailed analysis, but for what I would like to state, this concept of a “minor aesthetic” abstracted from the idea of a “minor literature” of Deleuze and Guattari, serves me to expose the main characteristics shared by this concept and the work of this artist. The deterritorialization, the political and the collective enunciation lies in the absurd and anachronistic confrontation of icons and symbols created by Luciano, which are humoristic in appearance, but openly violent. As Puerto Rican, he produces and presents his work in United States, also as an outsider to the Island he tries to dismantle the myths and hegemonic discourses while working directly with the community in the Diaspora and reaffirming the popular aesthetic. In his work he also reveals the colonial symptoms, stated by Gonzalez, that have taken the Puerto Rican society to the demoralizing dependence of the false social and economic well-being under the North American government.

The photograph, Platano Pride, forms part of the titled series Pure Plantainum, which consists of a series of platinum plantain sculptures. The plantain is a referential symbol of a labor and exploitation history between the banana colonies of the Caribbean. In Puerto Rico, the plantain is imbued with local references of race and class. The plantain stain has been converted into a euphemism that refers not only to the blackness, but also to the belonging to a culture and a particular geographic space. What was before a pejorative stigma of the cultural heritage, has transformed into a colloquial assertion of the Afro-Antillean past. In Platano Pride, there is a direct reference to consumerism and the reggaeton culture, to which nowadays is identified with the Puerto Ricans. The “bling-bling” of platinum, a piece of pristine jewelry that covers the real plantain that is inside. The artist used real plantains to cover with the noble metal. Beyond its evident connotation towards fetishist materialism and consumerism, that according to the artist was what inspired the series, it seems to me really interesting how the work opens itself towards more reflection in a hermeneutic way. At the same time that the “bling-bling” connotes the social realities of a marginal society, it extols its history. The recognition of the plantain stain cancels the distance with our past, restoring the Afro-Antillean character of the identity. This recognition symbolizes our power and, at the same time, our alienation. For Fanon, one of the more relevant aspects of the colonial context is the difference or the recognition of a different race. The impugnation of the violence with which the supremacy of foreign values has been imposed, is the threat of the recognition of a dignity that has been until now beaten down by domination. His work keeps a narrow relation with

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14 GILLES DELEUZE, FÉLIX GUATTARI, Kafka, por una literatura menor, México, Era, 1978, pp. 28-44.
Osorio’s work, for both artists emphasize the access and the community participation as a priority in their work. Compromising their work to the celebration, exaltation, reflection and critical public awareness of the Latin community in the United States.

This next artist parts from a different place to approach the issue of the identity in his work. In the lack of a reactionary imagery from his political reality, Osvaldo Budet celebrates the will or the desire to form a part of politically charge historical moments. He submerges himself inside the history to expand the imaginary one of the political condition of the Puerto Rican. With an evident passion for the document, his work is inscribed in the film documentary aesthetics. As the saying goes: everything changes with the lens with which is looked, the formal aspects in his work do direct reference to the film material. Through the use of iron oxide, silver painting, aluminum, diamond dust, varnish, etc. … his depictions are produced as the photographic still of personal liberation history. His work is, in effect, like a liberation project. He recognized himself inside the stridencies and current complications of Colonialism and he goes in search of forms of restaging himself inside the painting, but not as active agent in the narrated conflict but as spectator or participant. In this restaging, the artist asserts itself in a humorous way towards his national identity and the desire of a sovereign nation as the engine of his creation.

In some of his works, he portrays the image of the Puerto Rican movement for national liberation like in Because we are all Marcos, still, left behind and tired. In the presence of these symptoms of failure, the artist portrayed a possible reference: we are all Marcos. A direct reference to the Zapatistas\textsuperscript{16} he introduces an unfamiliar Latin American history for the majority of Puerto Ricans. This history that seduces him makes him conscious that the Puerto Rican society will not be able to change its circumstances, without first understanding its own history. This is the motivation behind his work, as a documentary maker he researches, depicts and provides politic information. On the other hand, the mode in which he depicts the information, shrewdly can present the facts and also reflect his convictions, which do not terminate the reflection space.

In Traigo Mazkamba Para El Que Se Lamba, Budet uses the lyrics of a reggaeton song, which speaks on the racism and the social marginalization inside the Puerto Rican society, for the title of the piece. Budet irrupts in one of the most relevant political moments in the fight for Civil Rights in the United States and extend the demands of this historical claim, to the Puerto Ricans, who has been always excluded within the American legal speech. In the famous image in which the President Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King converse, the artist appears not as a mere spectator, he constructs a new

\textsuperscript{16} The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) is an armed (nonviolent and defensive against military) revolutionary group of Mexico. Their main spokesperson is Subcomandante Marcos.
narrative that supplants the original story. Dr. King appears as mediator between the President Johnson and the artist, who by the physical expression or body language seems to be demanding something. It’s not complicated to guess or assume, by his outfit or gestures, even for the obvious political affiliation what could be object of his demands.

At last, though “there are neither functions nor necessary effects of the works of art”\(^\text{17}\), in its multiple forms it can tackle social, political or any kind of matters, which otherwise can be difficult to undertake. The aesthetic experience contributes to the configuration of a common space and produces the necessary distance to prosecute spaces of reflection. These works reflect on the national identity not in the basis of a preference over a particular heritage or set of values, but in the historicity of having a particular recognition towards a cultural identity or towards the definition Puerto Ricaness. For this reason, the works of these artists mull over the common public spheres of reflection, and occupy the place of the dissensions demonstrations of the policy. They propose new formulas that help in the task of revitalization and reconstruction of what until now has been understood monolithically as “national cultural identity”. I agree with Glissant, when he annotates that before this activity, no operation of political, economic or social nature, will be capable of even light to a solution, nor in a slightest way, if the imagery does not re-form and reverberates in the mentalities and sensibilities of the societies, to stimulate them to change positively in their own benefit\(^\text{18}\). This reconfiguration of the imaginary, will allow us to deal in a better way with the affairs and social dissonances of Puerto Rico, provoking an evolution in the discursive forms and revolutionizing the eye and the aesthetic criteria of the cultural nationalism. These works express and cope with ambiguity, not as a pejorative mark of the Puerto Rican array, but rather as the result of particular dynamics. They are the dawn, in my opinion, of a more serious art socially and aesthetically compromised for Puerto Rico.

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