Joseph Kattou

*Diasporican*

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Thesis Committee: Prof. Emily Puthoff, Prof. Micheal Asbill, Prof. Roberto Velez-Velez
Thesis Abstract

I make Vejigantes, a type of traditional Puerto Rican mask typically made from the outer husks of coconuts. Their devilish visages, horrific amalgams of horns and fangs covered in colors and patterns, were meant by colonists and religious fanatics to strike fear into the Puerto Rican community. Once a symbol of religious oppression and fear, Vejigantes are now a symbol of perseverance and celebration in the Puerto Rican community. Working with archival resins and plastic forming, I create contemporary Vejigantes that represent Puerto Ricans’ resilience in the face of disaster, neo-colonial forces, and corporate beasts. My sculptures personify hardships being overcome, transformed from tools of religious extremism and fear into celebratory heritage objects.

Prologue

In my thesis exhibition entitled Diasporican at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, you enter into the space and see seven figures staring at you, three on each side while one is crucified at the back of the gallery. Each of them wears some sort of ceremonial mask and clothing, each representing a different narrative. Flanking the crucified figure,
two shipping crates overturned spill brightly colored and patterned masks onto the ground. They are all Vejigantes, a Puerto Rican tradition rooted in themes of resistance and anticolonialism. Each mask and suit represents a modern social issue plaguing contemporary Puerto Rico.

“After every hurricane here people die from the negligence of the United States. On purpose... You’d think if they won’t let us go they’d at least... Well, it’s just Americans are supposed to be entitled to a standard of living. ...you would think that they wouldn’t let this happen but they did” -Anonymous Puerto Rican Archaeologist on the United States’ role as a colonizer, interview, August 2022

In Puerto Rico you cannot go anywhere without seeing one of three things: Luxury vacation rentals, ‘authentic’ themed establishments and somber dereliction. In recent years, record droves of tourists propelled by Covid-era international travel restrictions have been searching for that rush, a rush that has famously earned many Americans the disdain of many international hosts. The rush accompanies traveling to a new and ‘exotic’ land and demanding that its people, culture and land feed their appetite to consume them. What once held titles such as colonialism, divine right, and manifest destiny now bears the title of vacation package, all-inclusive resort getaways. Now this is not to denounce the power of travel, of which minds such as famed travel author Anthony Bourdain have said; “…it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind.”

It seems like a very simple and transformative exchange, you give of your curiosity and time and the world gives you back culture and experience. An invaluable process that simply requires you to be humble and open. However, what happens when you insist on changing the destination rather than allowing it to change? What happens to the locals when you berate them for their loud music or their pungent foods while demanding familiarity? Do you really expect them to go quietly into the night? The current political climate of Puerto Rico is where these realities result in clashes between
the people and their would-be colonizers. Where there is colonialism there will always be resistance.

To exist and identify as Puerto Rican in the diaspora is, in itself, already an act of pride and defiance. To be divorced from one's homeland, ancestral or immediately, often feeds the assimilation machine. Assimilation, which was introduced to me at a young age, toutes virtues of a harmonious society and cultural homogeneity. To my developing mind, assimilation was not only the end goal for the diaspora, but truly the only sensible option to live the ever nebulous American Dream. Simply existing in joy and pride as a Puerto Rican becomes a radical act.

In my youth telling people I was Puerto Rican earned me everything from looks of disgust, racist derision and even the occasional death threat. Some of my earliest memories of moving from Queens to Long Island include my youngest brother's peers telling him that it was 'better to be white' and that he should discard his heritage in favor of assimilation. At times it seems like every outside force demanded subtlety and deference to this nebulous idea of whiteness. Puerto Ricans are not ones for subtlety, however. Give us your instruments, we make salsa to bear our souls. Make us serve your dances, we make bomba to resist and mock. Disrupt our food sources and we create fusions. Give us your Catholic rituals and fear mongering masks, we make Vejigantes to celebrate in.

Much of Puerto Rican culture can be traced back to resisting colonial erasure: whether it be Bomba mocking European dance and creating a performed language of resistance, or staple foods such as plantains being directly traceable to our enslaved African ancestors. The language of Puerto
Rican culture is one of pride, resilience, celebration and fusion.

Vejigantes are a tradition that reflects the cruelty and mindset of the original Spanish colonial force in Puerto Rico. These twisted visages were meant to not only mock the Muslim Moors, but to guilt and terrify the Spanish public into devout unquestioned faith in God above, lest they fall prey to the hideous creatures. This tradition doesn't translate well if you don't know who God with a capital “G” is and why the eternal wrath and damnation his faith professes should be your problem. What did translate are the masks. Big, elaborate, colorful masks were certainly of interest to the people of Boriken as they were colonized into Puerto Rico. With the arrival of the kidnapped and enslaved African population a new tradition would soon transform out of this archaic Spanish fearmongering.

Chapter 1: Fuck LUMA
In 2021, the US government sold control of the embattled Puerto Rican power grid to a Canadian private energy company called LUMA. In no uncertain terms, the consensus of the average Puerto Rican is as follows: *Fuck LUMA!* Constant blackouts were already common before LUMA took over for the government-run PREPA company. In their first seven months of ownership, the average Puerto Rican saw a rise in the cost of power every single month until the cost was roughly triple the national average of the mainland United States. Power outages have become more frequent, longer and more damaging to the most vulnerable communities. Many diabetics reported spoiled insulin from 5 day outages that they could not afford to replace. Countless businesses had to close and lose revenue and stock due to the high cost of the gas generators required to keep their shops open. Most outrageous was seeing many on life support and respirators in hospitals, such as at the Mayaguez Municipal Hospital, enter critical condition after losing power and struggling to keep the generators running for an extended 5 day blackout in 2021.

When peaceful anti-LUMA protests began, the Governor's office, one of the largest neo-colonialist forces in line with decades of tradition, ordered the police to attack the demonstrators with tear gas and physical violence, even arresting journalists on the scene who attempted to cover the attacks. These protests in conjunction with additional protests surrounding leaked text conversations with Governor Rossello lead to his resignation in shame by the end of July 2019. However, this immensely important social accomplishment did little to nothing to rein in LUMA or the negative impact their practices have on the island.

Even efforts to interview locals are often interrupted by the very outages they are discussing. At the time of writing this paper, on one typical day there are 4,908 Puerto Rican homes and businesses currently without electricity. This is an issue that LUMA representatives constantly and condescendingly dismiss as ‘not a true blackout’ because 100% of the island is not currently affected. (Hill) These ‘not blackouts’ typically tend to have harsher effects on majority black and indigenous municipalities such as Loiza, one of the centers of the Vejigante tradition. In fact, the longest blackout in American history, the second longest in the world, was in Puerto Rico, in which residents of rural or impoverished areas went without power for 328 days, roughly 11
months in 2017 due to the intentional delay of aid by the Trump administration. During this time the suicide rate spiked, despair ran rampant, the elderly and medicated died and all that was offered in return were condescending smiles and averted eyes.

In response, I created LUMApagon, a Vejigante with LUMA’s own symbol gouged into the leering sneer of the sculpted form. The radial horns are made from 3D-printed replica power and telephone towers, infrastructure that LUMA is responsible for maintaining that has fallen into disrepair. In this sculpture, I referenced the Vejigante style produced in Loiza, typically made from head-sized coconuts and radial horns made from sharpened branches. The LUMA Vejigante is carved in an artificial manner with horns produced by machine, an aesthetic referencing tradition and a process completely divorced from it. The sneering toothsome smile stares at you from blind eyes, not truly seeing you and not willing to offer any humanity outside of a preapproved corporate smile. The suit it is paired with is a typical example of a Vejigante suit, a clownlike suit with ruffles and wings. However, in reference to the electrical company, the suit has been rubberized with a black liquid rubber. The Vejigante stands in a lively and reactive pose, a juxtaposition of the LUMA power companies lack of responsiveness to the communities they are intended to be serving.

Chapter 2: AirBNBeast. Use the offer Code COLONIZER for 100% off your next stay!
In the months following Hurricane Maria, when the residents of the island were most vulnerable, publicly available housing data shows that short-term rentals, such as AirBNB, caused a “10% increase in short-term rental density in relation to the total number of housing units, led to a 7% increase in median rents and a 23% jump in housing unit prices.” (Grupocne) Homelessness and flight from the island was fueled by these short-term rentals replacing and making scarce the availability of long-term family rentals. The average reported host on the island owns approximately 2.5 homes solely for AirBNB usage. Of those hosts, 92% self-report to be living on the island, yet the locals say that those purchasing their buildings are people moving from the states and evicting them. These evictions are becoming so commonplace that the 30-day eviction notices are referred to as “infamous”. The investors that do so often boldly assert that they are being removed to make way for a more lucrative investment opportunity on the eviction notice. While the governor asserts that denying people the right to benefit from policies like Law 22 is akin to racism or xenophobia, he also fails to mention that his
daughter-in-law manages a high-end real estate company on the island and that his son manages the company that runs and owns the most AirBnBs in Puerto Rico.

Over the past decades locals have seen the demolition of low income housing, typically concentrated in majority Black Boricua neighborhoods displacing generations of families who often struggle to find another place to live. Some report that they have seen their former apartments listed on AirBNB where a two-night stay is equal to their former monthly rent (Aqui vive Gente). Thanks to ‘Ley 22’ or Law 22 in English, those that move to Puerto Rico from the mainland do not pay any capital gains taxes on things such as stocks, cryptocurrency and of course, real estate. With a local poverty rate of 40.5% and a median income of $21,967 or roughly 32% less than the Mainland United States average, it is staggering and insulting to many that these incentives prioritize the finances of foreign-born non-Puerto Rican residents. Law 22 easily accounts for the 92% of AirBNB ‘Hosts’ who self-identify as residents of the island for tax haven purposes. Beneficiaries of Law 22 cannot by definition be locals of the island, fueling a wave of real estate colonization. For example, since 2018, one individual, Chaim Meir Hazan, purchased 15 high-density properties in one neighborhood alone. He and 7 others ended up owning 28 properties in the waterfront community of Puerta de Tierra since the law took effect in 2018. 600 public schools have been purchased and closed in the past 10 years to be converted into luxury rentals. AirBNB and similar rental companies, such as Vrbo, have done quantifiable and blatant damage to communities across the world. Many see evictions, rent increases and unrenewed leases as the insatiable rental industry continues to consume.

The Vejigante I produced, entitled AirBNBeast, is in the style of Ponce, a famous spot for tourism, often called La Perla del Sur or in English, The Pearl of the South. This city is famous for its high concentration of museums and
for tourism, but locally, it is also known as the site of a massacre in which unarmed locals were fired upon by American-run police and slain for their ties to nationalists who supported independence. The Ponce-style Vejigante is distinct from the rest of the island as it is the most animalistic of the art styles. The Ponce Vejigante has a long beak-like snout with rows of sharpened teeth, the horns are formed from the horns of cattle and the mask is typically all paper mache, a technique popularly used by the original European colonizers.

The mask I created takes this traditional form with the logo and colors of AirBNB incorporated into the creature’s face, undeniably linking the company to the visage of this insatiable and grotesque beast. By implicating the AirBnB through direct use of their logo, I do not pull my punches in placing the blame on them for being a monster that consumes the community. By leveraging the style of the Ponce mask, I left little room for interpretation beyond a negative connotation.

The material I used was not traditional, rather I utilized silicone casting techniques and 3D printing to produce the components which are not easily accessible to me in the diaspora. And by using this material, the work speaks to the longevity of the damage done by companies such as Airbnb. This Vejigante will, even without care, last for centuries as the artificial resins and plastics refuse to degrade or let the viewer ever forget about the neo-colonization by rental companies like AirBNB. The suit the Vejigante wears references the traditional style of the Ponce suit. Looser, yet still frilled, this suit is made from mass-produced bed sheets from another corporate supplier, Amazon. The Vejigante is a ravenous beast ready with razor sharp teeth and horns to fight and destroy to consume whatever it feels entitled to in its predatory stance with arms outstretched and hands grasping through red rose petals, a symbol of sensuality at odds with the violence and aggression of the masks content.

Chapter 3: I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Sick Coconuts
Across the world tourism boards spend millions upon millions annually to try to convince you that their little Slice of Heaven is the one that you should spend your hard earned money at. The Puerto Rican tourism board is no exception, knowing that a good portion of Puerto Rico's income relies on the function of the tourism industry organizations, like the Puerto Rican Tourism Board, work tirelessly to distill a culture and an island into a fantasy. The ultimate fantasy of Caribbean vacation evokes certain imagery: warm white sand beaches; technicolor streets and vibrant parties thrown just for you; eternally beautiful, mostly caucasian couples being doted on by ethnically diverse locals; and cocktails served in a coconut shell always close at hand. Or, at least that's what most tourism board videos and campaigns insist you should believe.

Those who grew up in the island or within the diaspora are immediately familiar with the borderline folkloric 'Jibaro', the hardworking, tradition-upholding, self-sustaining
steward of the natural beauties of the land. Jibaro is a term derived from a derogatory Spaniard word for peasant or hillbilly. “Gibaros”, the Jibaro Puertorriqueno, was and is a class of farming and self-sustaining people. A people whom the supporters of ‘operation bootstrap’ introduced by Colonist sympathizers such as emerging ‘Criollo elite’ attempted to eliminate during their 1947 initiative architected by Teodoro Moscoso and supported by the first Governor Luiz Muñoz Marín. The initiative promoted industrialization on a mass scale with little regulation.

Within years, the damaging, monocropping sugar plantations were replaced with sprawling and high polluting factories. As a result, roughly half-a-million Puerto Ricans were forced to emigrate from the island after the elimination of the agricultural sector and a shift to reliance on imports rather than the Jibaro farmers. This began harsh anti-farming and pro-industry and tourism movements, even incorporating the infamous ‘Operacion’ in which 35% of Puerto Rican women were sterilized in an effort to cull the populations of ‘undesirable’ Puerto Ricans and keep young people focused on labor and freeing space for American colonists to settle and tour the island.

Decades of these policies increased a reliance on imported foods and kept Jibaro farmers up in the mountains living comparatively traditional lifestyles on land less affected by poorly regulated industry. These effects are felt in daily life of the islanders where once the islanders were estimated to consume a diet of 85% local crops are now reliant on importing 85% of their consumed produce.(ecowatch) Those farmers who fought for food sovereignty saw an estimated 80% of their crops decimated from Hurricane Maria alone, and with the increase of extreme weather compounded with decades of toxic industry, the plants recover less and less each time.

Raul Ayala, prolific Vejigante artisan, noted in an interview with me in the summer of 2022 that crop health was impacting traditional craftspeople in unexpected ways. He told me that coconuts have grown back smaller and less healthy after each hurricane. I took this conversation to heart in producing the Vejigante, “Buncha(sick) Coconuts” . I utilized small coconut shells (ones I could find) and created silicone molds to create eternal plantains, another staple crop whose trees suffer the effects of climate. The form is the most amorphous of all the masks produced signifying the ubiquity of the harm and
risks that food insecurity poses to the whole island, with all communities feeling the strain of climate and industry induced food insecurity.

The amorphous form of the mask evokes many emotional reactions with many viewers equating it to cancer or other disease. Indeed this mask is a departure from the traditional styles in terms of form; however, as much as its form changes it is still the most closely related to the tradition in terms of material, asking the viewer to consider: What makes a traditional craft traditionalist it the material or is it the form? one must consider their personal perception on the adherence to traditional Aesthetics and materials And at what point Is the artist allowed to take authorship of their own cultural experience. The suit the Vejigante figure wears is adorned with coconut coir and shipping wrap in reference to the traditional material and its inability to be shipped outside of the island, unless it is already been carved and made into a mask per USDA regulations.(USDA) Its pose is the most stable, with arms firmly at their side, to evoke the stability and resilience of the trees these crops come from.

Chapter 4: Oye Maria
When one thinks of the religion of the Caribbean or Latin America, even briefly, they would most likely picture devout Catholic worshipers and Spanish style churches and halls of worship. Even if one were to think of other practices such as Santeria or voodoo, it would likely still be in the context of its relation to Catholicism as a dominant religious entity. Santeria, which to many is considered a folk religious practice, is an adaptation of indigenous ritual forcibly put through the lens of Christian Saints.

From the first interactions between the Spanish colonists and the Indigenous Taino, it was abundantly clear that the Catholic church had no intention of allowing the Taino to worship anything other than the Christian God. This is why they brought the tradition of the Veijigantes to the Caribbean in the first place. While espousing sermons of equality, peace, and morals, the Spanish donned mocking masks to attempt to frighten and intimidate the indigenous people into attending church sermons, a tradition that had long worked in places like Barcelona in keeping the population devout. To a great degree, it was successful.
The majority of people in Puerto Rico would consider themselves Christian, aligning their beliefs and opinions on numerous social issues with that of the position of the Church. It is such that the violence enacted against trans women and gay men on the island is very often tied back to hate speech from community church leaders and politicians, such as in the murders of five trans women within two months in the year 2020. (reuters)

This is not to say that the indigenous people accepted the Church without any resistance, fighting back socially and oftentimes through armed conflict. Hatuey, a Taíno Cacique (leader) reportedly said of the Spanish conquistadors religion;

“Here is the God the Spaniards worship (referring to gems and gold). For these they fight and kill; for these they persecute us and that is why we have to throw them into the sea... They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves. They speak to us of an immortal soul and of their eternal rewards and punishments, and yet they rob our belongings, seduce our women, violate our daughters. Incapable of matching us in valor, these cowards cover themselves with iron that our weapons cannot break...” (Las Casas)

Hatuey reportedly and famously said moments before his execution that he would rather not repent and be sent to hell than be trapped in Heaven for an eternity with people as cruel as the Spanish.

Through this act of defiance I took inspiration and created Ave Maria, a Vejigante sculpted to reference reliquaries and statues of the Holy Virgin Mary, specifically taken from reference images of churches in Puerto Rico and Barcelona that I collected on research excursions. The Ave Maria Mask is intended to be grotesque and zombified, clinging to life well beyond its natural expiration. I utilized
traditional catholic imagery, the veil and rosary, in the face of the mask. I referenced the Puerto Rican tradition from Loiza by giving the Vejigante mask buck teeth and outstretched tongues, painting the tongue silver in reference to the adage of liars and deceivers having silver tongues. The horns on the Ave Maria Mask are the most spindly and caged-like of all the horns produced for these masks. When standing in front of her the viewer is made to feel as if they are outstretching or trapping them, forcing them into a locked stair with the grotesque face of the undead Holy virgin.

The costume I created is similarly loaded in terms of theme. I utilized and modified commercial monk and nun costumes, and adorned the costume with ruffles and additions that make reference to the traditional suit. I used sheer fabric in the wings of the suit, a fabric that would surely be considered immoral for a holy man or woman to adorn themselves with.

**Chapter 5 - Just a Little Prick**
When I visit my grandmother in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico I must drive the length of the island far out of the intended bounds for the average tourist. For years, other than the breathtaking views of natural splendor, the one thing that has stood out to me most on these drives has been the medical supply manufacturing plant owned by Johnson & Johnson somewhere near Caguas on the highway. The large and well fortified facility always stood in stark contrast to the small tight quartered homes of the locals surrounding the factory. Sites like these are so common that one of Puerto Rico's largest and most important exports has become medical equipment manufactured on the island. Ironically, it is medical equipment that would go largely unused by the droves of tourists desperate to travel and feel vacation normalcy at the expense of Puerto Rico during the global Covid-19 pandemic.

While the rest of the country was experiencing a severe dip in tourism numbers, Puerto Rico was still seeing a steady stream of tourists, and these tourists were not willing to follow Covid restrictions according to many of the residents and business owners in popular locations like Old San Juan. In fact, 2022 was one of Puerto Rico's best tourism years on record, but also saw an increased number of crimes being committed by tourists such as street fighting and sexual assault and during the height of Covid, a complete refusal to follow any masking, social distancing or curfew mandates on the island. This abusive and disrespectful behavior is indicative of a colonial mindset.

This is why I created the A Family Company mask in the fashion that I did. Utilizing a real n95 in the sculpt and gouging the Johnson & Johnson logo into the forehead of the mask. Also giving it a radial horn set made out of functional syringes. This mask can be read in multiple ways depending on the audience's knowledge and frame of reference of Puerto Rican society. Most straightforwardly, it can be read as a statement on Covid tourism by those who are
unaware of the Puerto Rican medical manufacturing industry, as Johnson & Johnson is a manufacturer of one of the readily available Covid-19 vaccines. The presence of face masks and needles in the design, the hazmat suit it wears is also adorned by protective gloves. However, this work can also be approached from the perspective of somebody aware of the medical industry in the island and how much space it takes up socially and visually. The hazmat suit could be protective for another industry purpose, the Johnson & Johnson logo has been seen on the side of delivery trucks on the island and the wings on the suit being made of moving blankets into an industrial purpose rather than a touristic one. Either way the work is read by the audience; they see an unapproachable and sterile being, the most devoid of facial expression and features of any of the masks produced, an anonymous, corporately branded entity that is clearly too dangerous to get too close to.

Chapter 6-¡Sol Y Playa!
In Puerto Rico all beaches are public by law, you cannot own privately a beach as they are seen as the right of the people to occupy and enjoy. But this has not stopped droves of developers and foreign residents from attempting to create the illusion of private beaches. A tactic seen in many places around the island is purchasing the land directly in front of the beach and putting up signs that it is private property in hopes that residents will be confused by the signage and assume the beach is privatized. While in reality, the signs typically indicate that the strip of land it is situated on is private property, or perhaps the structure it is affixed to is privately owned rather than indicating the beach's status. Some individuals simply place private property signs on the beaches they feel entitled to, and are willing to confront local beachgoers with vitriolic aggression that typically ends up filmed and on social media. While these barriers and signs are technically not legal as well, many of the developers who put them up have donated large sums to politicians involved in Puerto Rican lawmaking or believe their large and expensive home purchases also purchase immunity from the law.

One of the most notable examples is the Sol y Playa Condominiums pool construction controversy in Rincón. The developers of this condominium erected an illegal wall around the beach directly across from their building with the intent of installing a pool over endangered turtle nesting grounds. One would assume such a blatant act of illegal occupation would be immediately dealt with by the government, but it was revealed that Walter Pierluisi, cousin of the current governor, Pedro Pierluisi, was on the board of the condominium making these decisions with seeming impunity.

The mask, Sol y Playa, was constructed in response to these events, Using a simplistic silhouette and carving technique with my usual resin casting and 3D printing method, I created a mask that was then coated in sand to give the impression of a sandcastle-like structure. The costume is made from another familiar sight to Puerto Ricans, tarp.
The tarp is a ubiquitous material showing up in construction sites and family homes, quite literally anywhere you can think to look on the island. Starting as a temporary solution to damages that never get fixed, the tarp is a symbol of Puerto Rican resilience as well as ongoing construction. Leveraging a material such as tarp into a suit was a great challenge. Much like the companies that employ tarps in construction and the people that use them to patch their homes, it is material that resists permanence, even when being fashioned into a suit various sewing and adhesive methods had to be employed to keep this in one piece.

Chapter 7- Repurposing Crucifixion

The black and white resistance flag, also known as the 'Muerto Rico' flag got its start in 2019 when an iconic door in Old San Juan with the independence flag painted on it was 'defaced' to make it black and white. The draining of color was controversial,
but that controversy was short lived. The flag was quickly adopted by the nationalist movement and other protesters in the following protests later in 2019, cementing the flag as an iconic symbol of resistance and protest.

While I did not necessarily grow up a practicing Catholic, the crucifixion was a staple around my home and around the homes of my family. Jesus on a cross would stare down at me whenever I wanted to get a snack or use the restroom in my parents house from a nearly hidden perch. While at my grandmother’s house, his gaze was everywhere, omnipresent and unavoidable. One of the few places I did not feel the gaze and judgment of Christ was at my uncle's home, which is not to say that Christ was not present, because he certainly was, it was more so that my gaze was fixed on the hollow eyes and beak of an orange and purple Ponce-style Vejigante.

This work is the culmination of my feelings on the subject, utilizing the black and white resistance flag as the motif for this suit, I reference the crucifixion of Christ by having the colors of the Puerto Rican flag spilling from its side as the blood and water that poured forth from Christ when his side was pierced by the lance of Longinus. This metaphorical blood and water collects in a shipping crate that acts as the foundation of this crucifixion alongside a Puerto Rican flag, catching the pride and vitality and packaging it up to be shipped to the diaspora on a gilded pallet rather than let it spill forth in a wasted gesture.

The Mask I produced bears reference to the Ponce style, but is more stylized, bearing the motif of the resistance flag and a cast of my own mouth sealed behind rows of jagged teeth. The nails in the palms of Christ were replaced by heavy duty screws used in crate
assembly. Droning from the center, a bomba beat acts as the heartbeat of the crucified Diasporican sculpture. With its droning rhythmic beat evident to Latinx viewers of bomba’s place as a protest medium and to Non-Latinx viewers as something easily identifiable as Caribbean, nonetheless.

The lance which pierces the side of the christ-like figure in reference to the Lance of Longinus is produced via a process of composite assembly. I collaged individual components taken from American flagpole toppers, patriotic Christmas tree toppers, and scans of historical European spearheads found in the Americas on archaeological digs, into a 3D-printed spear. When assembled together, the spear tip emerges from a prideful eagle with outstretched wings as a composed symbol of Americana. Treated with silver and wax to resemble metal, it is affixed to a janitor's broom handle that has been flame treated to look like a more expensive wooden handle. These material choices are deliberate. I took great lengths to transform cheap materials like plastic and mass-produced cleaning implements into a ceremonial object that represents the American influence on Puerto Rican culture and value. The spear is a hollow device devoid of true value, yet it insists that you view it as valuable and effective at conferring and affecting violence.
Chapter 8- Diasporican

Where does the collected pride and identity packaged and ready to ship from the Diasporican work end up? The two overturned crates at the base of the crucifixion strive to answer this question. Spilling forth from each crate are piles of Vejigante masks created by 3D printing a coconut husk, and casting and carving the masks in a method that resembles the traditional Loiza style. The masks were produced in this way due to the unavailability of unhusked coconuts from the Caribbean in the Hudson Valley of New York, where this project was being completed, due to the risk of aphis contamination according to the USDA. This creates a material disparity for diasporic mask makers. It forces them to use papier-mâché or specifically practice the Ponce style, making the Loiza style inaccessible by any means short of a trip to the island. In this artificial production process, I strove to bring the other half of the tradition to the mainland in a replicable fashion. I decorated each mask carefully similar to the Loiza style, demonstrated by traditional mask makers such as the Ayala family. As the masks spill out they represent individuals spilling into the Diaspora with each mask secretly bearing a dedicated inscription on the back where no viewer could possibly see, an invisible act of care and tenderness to strewn objects purely for the artist's own peace of mind.

Within the crates, bubble wrap and coconut coir cradle the masks that have yet to spill from the crates. At the very back of the crates hardly visible unless you were to
enter a kneeling pose, much like an act of worship, are two masks representing indigenous Taino depictions of the Sun and the Moon, considered to be two traveling siblings and children of Atabey, the central ancestral spirit of Taino Cemi worship. When the viewer is able to see these masks, who are certainly outliers to the surrounding masks with their gilded detailing and muted colors, they find themselves in a supplicant position providing overdue deference to those who came before and without choice gave of their lives and culture to birth the modern Puerto Rico.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I make Vejigantes, a type of traditional Puerto Rican mask typically made from the outer husks of coconuts. Their devilish visages, horrific amalgams of horns and fangs covered in colors and patterns, were meant by colonists and religious fanatics to strike fear into the Puerto Rican community, but now are a symbol of pride and joy. Even as I use them to personify modern aggressions and fears made by neocolonialists, my Boricua audience cannot help but feel seen, spoken to and understood with a respect that runs deep.

Where the Spanish colonizers have failed in creating a symbol of fear and the American colonizers have failed in creating a system of oppression, we succeed at creating a language of resistance. *Diasporican* collects moments of this resistance and catalyzes them into a moment where a community feels seen and the rest of the audience comes away feeling educated or perhaps even motivated to understand the information that has been presented to them when viewing the work.
Bibliography


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