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Puerto Rican Heritage in the Twentieth Century

Empire, Statecraft, and Resistance

Lara Leigh Kelland

Introduction

Articulations of heritage are, among other things, rhetorical tools that explain the shape of the past and also plot out particular visions for the future. During “the American Century,” overlapping, intersecting, and conflicting interpretations of the Puerto Rican past have served, at turns, as a justification for US colonialism, as a call to revolutionary arms to overthrow the US government, and as expressions of numerous positions between.¹ But always, narratives of the past reflect the positionality of the individuals and the political vision of the groups and agencies shaping it.

This article provides a brief overview of the ways in which heritage has operated as a body of ideas and practices on the island in the twentieth century. Beginning with the US military occupation of 1898 and throughout the twentieth century, heritage has acted as a contest in which the hearts and minds of the Puerto Rican people have been the prize. A case study of Puerto Rican public history and collective memory provides an example of the ways in which narratives about the past operate within and on colonial power, grassroots movements and resistance, and in the arena of statecraft. This study of Puerto Rico adds to the growing body of scholarship on the role of heritage in the political arena, either in service of policy-making or cultural activism.² This study also, and perhaps most centrally, reveals

¹ César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

² Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015); Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2009); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

the ways in which discourse about the past is inherently political, and illuminates the ways that power flows through our interpretation of history.

In the case of Puerto Rico and the three primary political perspectives engaged here, none of the usual political categories seem sufficient and thus require a bit of definition. When the US invaded the island in 1898, US rhetoric about the relationship between Puerto Rico and the mainland deployed language of both ownership and custodianship, a tension that has lingered throughout the twentieth century. Such tension reflects the American attitude that our democracy should be exported to nation states perceived to be politically immature, and also reveals the imperialist underpinnings of that impulse. Nationalists, however, have often used the unqualified language of colonialism, focusing their rhetoric on self-determination and independence. They also use the tactics of anti-colonialist struggles, bringing international awareness to the Puerto Rican resistance against US colonial authority. The third perspective on status emerges from the more moderate position from policymakers who either aspired to US statehood as a final resolution or embraced the in-between status that has been in place since 1952. Unsurprisingly, it is along these three political lines that the shape of official Puerto Rican heritage narratives is drawn.

Heritage is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a variety of forms and approaches to the shared past. Acknowledging that, I use the term *public history* to mean the intentional, institutionally created public interpretation of the past, a production that is often more visual than textual and generally more collaborative than autorial. I use *collective memory* as a category that is more fluid, as a broadly shared, community-located sense of the past. Less formal than public history, the various forms of collective memory draw on a large array of cultural texts, including film, graffiti, informal exchanges, political rhetoric, fine art, and everyday interactions. Even though collective memory is generally a less direct argument about the past, it nonetheless informs our sense of experiences, periods, and perspectives of that which came before us. Although these categories intersect and overlay with each other, it's helpful to recognize the difference and moves us toward a stronger analysis of how heritage power, to riff on Michel Trouillot's oft-cited term archival power, is mobilized by different institutions and actors.

Although I am in the early stages of writing a book on Puerto Rican heritage, I have already had to reshape my expectations for the project. In *Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth Century U.S. Social Movements and Collective Memory*, I argue that grassroots collective memory activists contributed to the formation of the field of public history as we know it today.³ This project continues in that vein, but the engagement looks different than in the US. In that study, the division between mainstream cultural organizations and oppositional, movement-based collective memory work functioned with neater boundaries. In Puerto Rico and for the Puerto Rican

³ Lara Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth Century U.S. Social Movements and Collective Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

diaspora in the continental United States, I expected to again find a rather clear demarcation between imperialist heritage and grassroots collective memory. Instead, what is emerging is a complex set of actors and institutions deploying heritage in the service of a wide array of goals. One of the defining characteristics of modern Puerto Rican culture is the wide-ranging perspectives on the so-called status question. Since Puerto Ricans hold divergent views on the future of the Puerto Rican state, it follows that they also embrace wide-ranging interpretations of the past. I refer to these respectively as imperialist, statehood, and nationalist forms of memory.

Heritage on the island has long served as a field on which debates about status are mapped out. Perhaps the most direct example of US-centered heritage are the National Park Service (NPS) sites which work to legitimize the US occupation and colonial relationship with the Puerto Rican government, cultural organizations, and residents. Beyond this colonialist cultural authority, several Puerto Rican state units also contribute to a more direct articulation of heritage that supports the moderate position in favor of the status quo. Although this state-authored heritage doesn't generally take a uniformly critical position on US involvement, it does center Puerto Rican heritage more on its own terms, while also refuting claims to the past that echo nationalism or interpretations that directly challenge US engagement.

In 1952, with the passage of legislation that bequeathed the island with the contested status of "Free Associated State," Puerto Rican elected leaders began to organize an official cultural heritage policy. The first of these two agencies, DIVEDCO (División de Educación de la Comunidad), was created in 1949 as a grassroots educational initiative that took its cues from New Deal programs. In 1955, a few years after the constitution was ratified by general referendum, the newly formed legislature created the Instituto Cultura Puertorriqueña, or ICP, which then assumed the primary responsibility for cultural heritage on the island. For more than a half-century since then, the ICP has overseen heritage sites, historic and archaeological research, and public health education, and has been the institutional manifestation of official *puertorriqueñidad*. Other grassroots efforts at preserving and interpreting resistance movements emerged throughout the second half of the twentieth century, often in response to the perception that ICP reflects only the political perspective of the ruling party. These disparate efforts, which could be together called nationalist collective memory, center a unified set of events that mark the island's resistance, first to Spanish colonial rule, then to US occupation.

Heritage and Imperialism

Two imposing colonial forts, El Morro and San Cristobal, comprise the National Park Service's San Juan National Historic Site, arguably the best-known heritage location on the island. Perched above the striking streets of Old San Juan, the dramatic outcropping of the stone fortress against the Caribbean sky draws cruise

ship crowds and island visitors alike. Through a handful of exhibit rooms, public history interpretations orient visitors to a bird's eye view of the Puerto Rican past that ends in a celebratory tale of the power of American democracy. Beginning in 1493 with first European contact, visitors learn about the significance of the island's location for Atlantic travel and trade. This site explains US engagement on the island through the lens of liberation and independence, stating that "Spain's four century rule at Puerto Rico came to an end when the defenses of San Juan were turned over to the United States" in 1898.⁴ The overarching narrative is that Spain was a colonial force motivated by a desire to dominate the Americas, and that the US presence provided a bridge between European colonialism and the self-determination of a fully realized democracy, a status that many Puerto Ricans would dispute. Cultural heritage here becomes a subtle justification for paternalism on the part of the US, as one of the final panels assures visitors that NPS's role is critical as "park historic preservation staff conserve this world historic and cultural treasure."⁵ Here the exhibit text justifies continued involvement in the island, in this case as the preferred custodians of the built environment. The invocation of global heritage, a laudable goal for any country, serves to create a larger public, both upping the stakes and expanding the cultural ownership of the site.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, boosters (a group often comprising both pro-development Puerto Ricans and US figures) promoted a vision of the island as a former colony enjoying the importation of US democracy. Using a variety of cultural texts, such promoters framed Puerto Rico as a Caribbean playground for US citizens. Touting the recently achieved "complete self-government" as an amalgam of US democratic structures and local cultural flavor, the 1953 English-language film *Fiesta Island* used the Spanish colonial past as a foil for US engagement with the country.⁶ The film's primary purpose was to promote investment and attract tourists, but a side product of that goal was the cultivation of narratives that supported the heavy hand of the US government and promoted Puerto Rico as a modern island that offered all of the promises of the American Dream but in a Caribbean locale. A 1960 article in *Look* magazine performed similar cultural work, calling Puerto Rico an example of "Revolution, American Style." Not too surprisingly, this article even more robustly framed island heritage through the lens of US engagement. Here, *jibaros* (traditional farmers) are "slum dwelling and impoverished cane workers" in need of modernization.⁷ At the same time, Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín employed the figure of *el jíbaro* as a nostalgic figure that reformulated *Puertorriqueñidad* as a coherent and contemporary

4 "San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico" (National Park Service, 1950), <http://npshistory.com/brochures/saju/1950.pdf>.

5 "El Morro, Protecting a World Treasure," exhibition text, National Park Service San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico.

6 *Fiesta Island* (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Visitor's Bureau, 1953), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?435807-1/fiesta-island>.

7 "Surprising Puerto Rico," *Look*, January 17, 1961.

identity, an understanding put forth in the context of the newly formed Puerto Rican state.⁸

Statehood and Heritage

Upon the establishment of the Estado Liberado Asociado (“Commonwealth” in English) in 1952, Luis Muñoz Marín led his party as the primary architect of the modern Puerto Rican state. Muñoz Marín, elected in 1948 and the first Puerto Rican-born governor, and others of the ruling Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), knew that cultural nationalism was the most effective strategy to cultivate the citizenry envisioned by the party: modern, capitalist, and embracing of their relationship with the United States. In fact, the transformation of *el jíbaro* was central to Muñoz Marín’s strategy.⁹ Riffing off of the agricultural and industrial modernization project Operation Bootstrap, Muñoz Marín put forth an initiative he informally called Operation Serenity, a cultural vision marshalling the island’s traditional values while also unifying the Puerto Rican populace behind the PPD’s vision. Prior to and informing this work, Depression-era relief programs such as Farm Security Administration photography projects had informed the kind of cultural governmental intervention seen here, working to identify peasant living as an impediment to modern economic growth.¹⁰ In 1949, the Puerto Rican government established a unit focused on popular education and economic and social uplift, the División de Educación de la Comunidad. Shortly after, Muñoz Marín oversaw the establishment of the Instituto Cultural Puertorriqueño in 1955 as an official cultural agency of the new state.

Although the ICP was founded a few years later than DIVEDCO and then became more centrally the keeper of the culture, DIVEDCO sponsored a number of initiatives that echoed the PPD’s view of heritage, including films, books, and other arts projects. DIVEDCO sought to educate, and thus create, modern Puerto Rican citizens, and part of this vision was the development of a new national identity based on the past. Together, DIVEDCO and ICP supported this hearts-and-minds campaign in a variety of ways. Working together in the construction of a new political identity, two elements proved most important—the tripartite stool metaphor and the transformation of the archetypal figure of *el jíbaro*. These agencies also helped craft a vision of the Puerto Rican people that was “safe” from the threat of revolution during a time of deep unrest across the Caribbean, with the Cuban revolution, the overthrow of Rafael Trujillo’s regime in the Dominican

8 Carmelo Esterrich, *Concrete and Countryside: The Urban and the Rural in 1950s Puerto Rican Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press).

9 Alex W. Maldonado, *Teodoro Moscoso and Puerto Rico’s Operation Bootstrap* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 76.

10 Oscar E. Vázquez, “A Better Place to Live’: Government Agency Photography and the Transformation of the Puerto Rican *Jíbaro*,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (London: Routledge Press, 2002), 281–84.

Republic, and the establishment of the West Indies Federation as backdrops of anticolonialism and antifascism.

The central task of DIVEDCO's popular education initiatives was to support the transformation of the Puerto Rican citizenry and culture from primarily agricultural to urban, industrialized, and global. Part of this was the production of a transnational heritage that cultivated identification with Taíno heritage. For example, the documentary *La Buena Herencia (The Good Inheritance)*, framed the Puerto Rican present through the Indigenous past. In a slender book intended for a wide readership entitled *Isla y Pueblo*, citizens would learn, in answer to the question posing as a chapter title, "Eran 'Salvajes' Nuestros Indios," or "Were our Indians Savages," that the Taíno civilizations had created complex settlements, communication networks, robust agricultural structures, arts, sports, and medicine.¹¹

Founding director of the ICP, Ricardo Alegría, led the organization through its formative years by establishing a wide array of cultural initiatives that established Puerto Rican public history and collective memory. The ICP used a wide variety of forms, including films, public art, archaeological research, and historic sites, all which served to enshrine a nationalist narrative built upon the three-legged stool metaphor: modern Puerto Rican culture drew equally on Spanish Colonial, Indigenous Taíno, and African cultural traditions. Scholars have critiqued the ICP for asserting this uncomplicated triad while also giving short shrift to African cultural influences, an omission easily seen by the eighteen historic sites and museums maintained by ICP, only one of which was dedicated to interpreting African heritage and which has been shuttered in the past few years. Taíno heritage, although well-researched and documented, is kept safely in the past, while African influences, generally conscribed to food, music, and dance, are "the last to arrive and [seen as] having the least to contribute."¹² Instead, ICP heritage is primarily based in European influence, and has engaged only moderately with Taíno influences and even more sparingly with African heritage.

Nationalist Memory

The long arc of efforts towards political self-rule in Puerto Rico is built upon a number of different parties and traditions. The main organization is the Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico (PNPR), founded in 1922. The PNPR gained momentum until a number of actions in the early 1950s led to the imprisonment of most of its members and the demise of the party structure, although nationalists still today claim its legacy.

¹¹ *Isla y Pueblo* (División de Educación de la Comunidad, 1968), available on issue: https://issuu.com/coleccionpuertorriquena/docs/isla_y_pueblo-rftz

¹² Arlene Davila, *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 70.

One of the earliest events claimed by nationalists is the Ponce Massacre of 1937, an especially egregious moment of US brutality against Puerto Ricans. What started as a peaceful march to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of slavery culminated in the US-appointed governor sending out American military forces to quash the event. After opening fire on the unarmed citizens, the Puerto Rican Insular Police injured at least 235 Puerto Ricans and killed twenty one. No military members were prosecuted or censured for their actions, and the event served to create more contentious feelings towards the US on the island. Somewhat remarkably, el Museo de la Masacre de Ponce, the local museum and ICP outpost interpreting the event, takes a sharply critical position of the unnecessary violence from the colonizing US. This demonstrates how ICP strikes a middle ground between imperialist interpretation and nationalist sentiments among the Puerto Rican people. Although most ICP projects shy away from direct criticism of the US, the Ponce Massacre was significant enough to warrant a more critical interpretation. It also merits mentioning, however, that in 2018 one could not visit the museum without prior approval, as the agency had shuttered a number of museum sites, citing budgetary concerns. Although the decision could certainly be entirely fiscal, it is noteworthy that this more critical interpretation is now shut off to visitors while historic houses with less radical interpretive scopes remain open.

Another modest public history initiative flanks the city cemetery in Ponce, a space which was reclaimed as the Museo del Autonomismo Puertorriqueño. Here a small museum space interprets the history of nationalism from the Spanish Colonial era through the mid-twentieth century. The museum is positioned in the old city cemetery, a space in which some curious commemoration also takes place, as half of the cemetery is in utter disrepair and features hollowed out gravesites, while a newer section features a revamped commemorative space. According to the security staff at the cemetery, the burial grounds became unfashionable in the mid-twentieth century, and a number of families reinterred their loved ones at the newer cemetery. Only the forgotten and impoverished remain, and they lingered there until a group of nationalists organized part of the cemetery as el Panteón Nacional Román Baldorioty de Castor, a burial space where nationalist heroes were reinterred from across the island. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when these initiatives appeared, such acts of commemoration sought to resuscitate the memory of the nationalist movement with the hopes of also reviving a nationalist view of the future.

Among the key events in Puerto Rican history, perhaps the most dramatic is the 1950 uprisings, and the public memory of the event is maintained primarily by those with a personal connection. El Museo de Nuestros Mártires is a grassroots tribute to the armed, if scrappy, revolutionaries who sought to amass a small number of pistols and overthrow US rule. It was created in the 1980s by Ernesto Dávila Marin, who returned to his hometown of Jayuya, Puerto Rico, after a few decades in the US army and making a home in Chicago. The museum reflects



One of countless murals commemorating Pedro Albizu Campos, father of the Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico. This one is located in Ponce. (Photo by author)

Dávila Marin's familial links to the Jayuya nationalist movement, one of the key organizational factions of the 1950 uprising, through the display of family photos and artifacts. This exhibit seeks to tell a *longue durée* story of the nationalist party, beginning with Grito de Lares, the 1868 attempt at overthrowing Spanish colonial rule. It then walks visitors through the formation of the Puerto Rican Independence Party in 1922, the ascendancy of its well-loved leader Pedro Albizu Campos, and a number of twentieth-century attempts to refute American rule. Although the party splintered in the aftermath of the state sanctioned violence in the early 1950s and Pedro Albizu Campos' death in 1965, the museum proudly claims to be the keeper of the party's memory and identifies a number of late-twentieth century events as part of its legacy.

Conclusion

Discourses of collective memory are, among other things, rhetorical tools that explain the past and articulate a particular goal for the future. Culture is a powerful rhetorical weapon, both for colonial hegemonic policymakers who seek to legitimate their statecraft efforts, and for subaltern communities engaged in resistance to



Mosaic commemorating the 1950 armed uprising in Jayuya, Puerto Rico. (Photo by author)

dominant structures. It seems that ownership of the Puerto Rican past is a much more complicated mix of interpretive authority and political goals than I first thought.

Part of this mix is, I suspect, a reflection of the complexities of the Puerto Rican sense of place. It is part of Latin America, and shares legacies of various anticolonial struggles there, but it is not exclusively Latin American. It is part of the Caribbean, and, for example, one cannot understand Puerto Rican history without contextualizing it alongside Cuban history especially, but its experiences with US occupation make it more complex than other countries. It is, by statute, part of the US, but other than a smattering of colonized qualities like language, passports, and currencies, it is not typically American, either.

It merits considering further the differences between the formal bounds of the fields of public history and collective memory. In the examples given here, NPS and ICP act as more formal public history sites, with professional standards and a direct, intentional engagement with and argument about the past. Museo de Nuestros Mártires also functions in this way, as a grassroots and oppositional space of interpreting the past. Likewise, DIVEDCO's initiatives and the Ponce Pantheon space serve as more informal expressions of collective memory, at times in service

of statecraft, at times in service of grassroots opposition. While it is beyond the scope of this introductory essay, I intend to keep these issues in mind as I finish my research and continue drafting the book. Our field has a number of books considering the roles of popular culture in collective memory, but we lack a consistent language and a full analysis of how power operates through these various forms, as well as a robust understanding of the role of the public history field in relation to more popularly authored history-making.¹³

The heritage examples engaged here reflect both formal public history work and informal collective memory cultivation during the second half of the twentieth century. As our field of public history professionalized the interpretation of the past in the United States, a variety of actors struggled over similar terrain on the island and in the diaspora using history to justify American colonialism, support the establishment of the Puerto Rican state, or lay claims to political independence and self-determination.¹⁴ It is important that our profession understands the full context in which our field formally emerged and continues to practice. Foundations of public history as we understand it are generally premised on US political and cultural contexts, and the move towards transnational public history is an important one. We owe it to our field, our professional practices, and our place as cultural leaders to engage fully in the practices that have helped to shape our field, as well as understand the power inherent in the work we do.

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¹³ For fine examples of scholarship that engages pop culture's influence our sense of the past and the ways in which nonspecialists engage history, see Tammy S. Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010); Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Malgorzata J. Rymysza-Pawlowska, *History Comes Alive: Public History and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹⁴ In my forthcoming book, I engage a number of examples in the Puerto Rican diaspora, engaging heritage examples in Chicago, New York, Hawaii, Washington, DC, and other places. For the purposes of this essay I chose to focus on the first half of the book's scope.