IS THERE POTENTIAL FOR EDEN ON DIVISION STREET: ANTI-COLONIAL DISCOURSE,
MIGRATION AND THE GOD OF NATIONALISM

By
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of American Studies
May 2012

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:
The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Erika Gisela Abad find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Carol Siegel, Ph.D.
Agradecimientos

To begin to say thank you to all of those who participated in the life and times of this project is difficult, given the countless individuals who have supported the the coming age of these texts, these ideas and the person I have become in the process. It is telling that, in light of the absence of women’s voices that propelled me in to this work, that four women, Wendy Olson, Carol Siegel, Luz Maria Gordillo and Carmen Lugo-Lugo, guided and supported me in the final chapter of this journey. Their wisdom, insight and commitment to the risks I took in this work, in this career, have made me a stronger and more profound writer than I ever imagined myself to be. I would also like to acknowledge those who read earlier drafts of chapters and novellas, especially the following: Josh Erdahl, Natasha Azank, Katherine Olson and Adam Carpinelli. I am grateful to earlier faculty with whom I had worked: Nishant Shahani, Jose Alamillo and especially Victor Villanueva. So much of this process has been more than about writing; I appreciate the friendship, and necessary distractions provided by Cassandra G, Ethiopia, Christine, Bill, Alex, Trevor, St. Andrew’s community, UFC, Martin, Steve, Rachel, and Patrik. Delena: thank you for being my family away from home, our laughter, car rides, and Adele jam sessions kept me human. Those who have been with me since these ideas were a dream especially Natasha N, Marsha, Ciara, Rocio, inspired so much of what kept me rooted. The year spent working with Tom, Pablo, Holy, Gregorio, Sarita, Club Alianza, “las mamas” and “las muchachas” inspired me a great deal. Oscar Lopez Rivera’s permission to use his letters not only charted the course for how this dissertation needed to function. His wisdom, insight and compassion were appreciated in the questions that arose during the intellectual journey, which made their inclusion that much more necessary. His lessons were especially critical throughout the years. Last but not least, my family: you inspire all that I am and all that I am to do. Mom, Melissa, Tia Cynthia and Marga, you are the cornerstones of my success.
ABSTRACT
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In the past few decades, Puerto Rican Cultural Studies have explored divergent subject positions regarding cultural performance and Puerto Ricans’ political and migratory history. Using correspondence with former FALN member Oscar Lopez Rivera, this dissertation explores the cultural heritage debate that emerges as a result of Puerto Rican scholarship that attempts to defend and critique Puerto Ricans’ “national character.” In so doing, this dissertation draws attention to the multiple nationalisms at play.

According to one of the first letters I received from Oscar Lopez Rivera, the “cultural heritage,” debate is not complex because of the myriad forms of access one has to Puerto Rican cultural and political history. That access, as explored by scholars writing on Puerto Rican political organizations of the mid-twentieth century, frames how Puerto Ricans in the United States approach Puerto Rico’s colonial question. Divergent subject positions on the status question—whether or not Puerto Rico is a colony of the US and whether or not statehood, or independence, would be feasible options—allude to the complexity. The disparities between migrant and island-based Puerto Ricans further said complexity because of the inherent negotiations made as a result of social and political marginalization in contrast to relatively greater socio-economic stability. For both communities, the question of contribution and participation arises, resulting from racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized marks of exclusions and silence. Using Chela Sandoval’s Methodology of the Oppressed and Jose Esteban Munoz’s Cruising Utopia, this dissertation argues that the complexities in the cultural and political discourse that addresses said question provide greater avenues of possibility.

Exploring the possibilities of reconfiguring the role of discourse in assigning the value of contribution and participation, this dissertation incorporates Division Street, a novella that functions as a social commentary regarding the discursive and ideological parameters set around participation and contribution. Because the primary figures who model participation and contribution are male—both because of the discourse they produce and how others ideologically construct them—the novella’s female characters function as antagonists to what leaders like Pedro Albizu Campos and Filiberto Ojeda Rios imagine as necessary to critically contribute to the anti-colonial struggle.
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Dedication

If a person chooses to struggle for a better world, it has to be as an act of love.
Oscar Lopez Rivera 3/6/2005

Love for a just and noble cause is not based on courage and valor...as long as I can breath[e], fill my heart with love and compassion and continue trying to be a good person, I’ll be able to continue the struggle. Oscar Lopez Rivera 3/14/2012

This dissertation is dedicated to the most important women in my life, my mother, Aurea, and my sister and best friend, Melissa. I would not have made it this far without your unconditional love and support.
Years after leaving to pursue a graduate career, I return to Division Street, Paseo Boricua—Chicago’s current Puerto Rican cultural enclave—to catch up in person on the news I receive via email, phone conversations and other publications. I also return for my pastelillos and jibaritos. I enjoy catching up with business owners, community organizers, local cultural workers and friends. It’s a place that brings José Esteban Muñoz’s “critical utopia” to mind. It is with Muñoz’s call for the theoretical and political possibilities of “doing” critical utopia that I hope to approach my questions regarding my concerns with and my hopes for Paseo Boricua’s attempts at empowering local Puerto Ricans and Latina/os.

January 2012, weeks after a recent visit, I get word that there is local support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) transitional housing. This is wonderful and exciting news given the years of community leaders’ efforts in advocating for that need to be addressed. Still, I want to ask: what of the others who remain absent and out of place? In 2009, I begin a discussion of this question in “La Voz de Quién,” and, while years after that article a great deal of the community publication and its supervisory organization have changed, the question still remains important. The question of absence—who does not participate; what informs their inability/unwillingness to participate and why—remains significant because the narratives of those whose literal and abstract absence are still not included. Muñoz’s text explains why the question is still being answered. In “Theses on History,” Benjamin argues that one walks backwards towards progress, keeping one’s eyes on progress.” It is not a matter of walking away from history with an ever apprehensive glance towards it, but a matter of looking at history for what it can reveal about the present and the future, as each concurrently occur. Other scholars,
literary figures, and cultural workers have addressed this absence in Puerto Rico, but progress has done little to address the ideological divisions and why their presence unintentionally silences the constituents that leaders argue they serve. To what extent does reflecting over the absent voices and contributors address stateside Puerto Ricans’ political, cultural and psychic subordination? How does this connect to Puerto Rico’s political and economic instability?

To answer those questions, I reference a quote from Pedro Albizu Campos, who will be further discussed in chapter three. In a speech delivered in Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1949, he states, “In an individual’s personality development, the secret power that allows us to discover ourselves…is nothing less than humility.” While he proposes humility in self-discovery, the opening of his speech tells a different narrative. In that narrative, the possibility of humility is politicized given which groups can address what needs. In the political economic context of U.S. and Puerto Rico relations, Albizu Campos is referencing both elected and appointed leaders in Puerto Rico’s government. The greater context of who he is referencing speaks to how, he believes, leaders should address the needs of those who are elected or appointed to represent. Instead, he finds, the opposite is true. Lacking a voting member in U.S. Congress, island-based Puerto Ricans are neither represented by elected or appointed leaders; their needs are not being addressed, among those needs the ability to practice full democratic rights.

Albizu Campos opens this speech, focusing on the state and federal governments’ political inability to address the hunger and poverty that dominates Puerto Rico’s society. Citing the United States’ regime’s inability to address the material needs of Puerto Rico’s physical health, he makes a call for action. Only if and when Puerto Ricans take action, can Puerto Ricans overcome the limitations of U.S.’ self-serving intervention, he argues. Puerto Ricans who work to support U.S. corporate and political intervention are fooling themselves if they think it would
better Puerto Rico’s political economic stability. Further, Albizu Campos argues that such efforts complement the United States’ exploitation of the working poor. Thus Albizu Campos argues that anyone who is not willing to defend Puerto Rico’s independence cannot call himself Puerto Rican.

At the time of his speech, this specific time period, community advocate Antonia Pantoja left Puerto Rico because she could not live in its repressive space. Settling in New York, she dedicated her life to advocating for education and the rights of Puerto Ricans. Despite these efforts and because of the attention given to political leaders, she spent her career avoiding politics. Because she wanted discretion around her personal life, she made a decision that allowed her to advocate for her community without engaging in the public eye to such an extent that the same community would use her personal life to discredit her.

I read Pantoja’s lived experiences against Albizu Campos’s words because as a woman seeking her own independence and as a woman who had romantic relationships with women, Pantoja chose to stay “closeted” most of her life because of how Puerto Rico views any sexuality or gender performance that does not align with dominant repronormative beliefs. I return to Albizu Campos’s speech, however, because of how he defines women’s roles in this speech. The experiences of women like Pantoja and other sexual minorities are not represented in the figure of Albizu Campos. Further, the words he uses to describe the dominant roles of individuals, women and men, in the dedicated struggle of Puerto Rico’s independence are gendered and centered on the repronormative legitimate family. Albizu Campos evokes the image of motherhood when he discusses women’s role and contribution to the nation, “The woman is the depository of our existence, as a mom…that is an honor that cannot be blemished, not even with any thought or belief… she is the nation…the power of a nation’s salvation is in its women”
According to Albizu Campos, women embody the nation as mothers—despite the role women took in the nationalist party—his speeches articulate that motherhood is women’s primary role. Such a patriarchal definition of nationalism is not new. The possibility of women saving the nation because of its connection to their motherhood does not fall in line with the other roles taken by women supporting the independence movement. He cites that nineteenth-century pro-independence advocate, Mariana Bracetti, was imprisoned while pregnant. Such an example demonstrates the many layers of what any Puerto Rican woman can give to the nation. Still, though, as feminist scholars of both the nineteenth and twentieth century treatment of women demonstrate, the role of motherhood and wife are another prison which women are expected to endure for the benefit of the nation. As well-intentioned as Albizu Campos’s example may be, he overlooks that not all women want to be mothers nor that the way women can nurture or save the nation may fall in line with his rhetorical idealization of their repronormative roles.

He does, to a certain extent, address that as he explains that when the man of the house does not defend the honor of the nation that the woman should kick him out of the house. Still, given the political economic possibilities of women’s self-reliance, given the gendered and classed divisions in labor and education, how could a woman kick out the expected bread winner and, given the repronormative expectations of twentieth-century Puerto Rico, how could she respectably support herself? Who else would have the means and the ability to support her? While Albizu Campos’s cites other women who defended the nation, he continuously returns to the image of women’s motherhood as his dominant frame of reference.

I am not the first to cite this sexist rhetoric. When this essentialism is critiqued, however, defenders of Albizu Campos’s note that he values women’s contributions, as evidenced through
his hiring of a female bodyguard and his support of his wife’s medical career. Yet, despite these examples, I wonder why motherhood takes center stage in his discursive frame of women’s contributions. As I read more about who remained absent from nationalist rhetoric, I had to move beyond the question of women’s subordinated role. The question of who was absent in the rhetoric of Puerto Rican cultural and political nationalisms had to go further than the sexist framework I was examining.

I explored that question within the context of a Chicago based Puerto Rican cultural organization with which I had worked for a few years. My 2009 article, “La Voz de Quien,” garnered mixed reviews because of how I approached who was absent from media representations of the community organization’s historical development. Specifically, the media’s printing had gendered representation of organization’s events and historical legacies. Among the reviews, there was concern about the position from which I was writing. I did not see the conditions under which volunteers organized the publication, having written my critique out of state and out of touch with the organizing process. Such an absence and disparity demonstrated, more fully, what I understood as factoring into reasons there was minimal involvement, but which I could not adequately address by continuing to explore the question solely with theoretical and historical reviews of participation. As much as earlier qualitative and cultural theorist efforts provide ample material by which to examine media, to fully engage with a wider audience, I needed to consider another genre. The genre in which I would engage needs to examine the nuances without ignoring the complex human relationships that unintentionally factor into which images are present and/or absent when discussing an organization’s developmental history.
An internal struggle emerged, where I needed to keep in mind why others explained their absence and why those present did not address or name those absences. As a scholar, I needed to be honest and integral in my approach to the questions I wanted to answer, given my ethical responsibility to the work I respected. I wrote as a woman who had stopped volunteering and collaborating with leaders as I continued to explore the political and cultural context of the question and its possible answers, and I needed to think about how best to contribute to the conversation without undermining others’ possibilities. I cite my privilege because I know the privilege I had in being able to leave; I remember the hope and encouragement as well as the frustration former colleagues expressed regarding my departure, so I value being welcomed back and embraced by community members as I continue to return. I return to critical sites where leaders break bread and hold discussion. I return to the festivals and, in this project, I return to the texts recommended by leaders themselves, while incorporating the texts I read as a result of the questions I was posing and the courses I was taking.

So, in this work, I cross lines between genres and languages, intending to participate in an ongoing discussion and explain possible considerations for this question that I still do not know how to answer. I imagine, despite the class struggles in this generation of intellectuals, political leaders and scholars that the question of who remains absent, unaccounted for and not included should still be addressed. Even as this generation seeks to extend and critique the work of earlier generations, it is of no surprise that such critiques and the possibilities they imagine will equally be challenged. In those challenges and critiques, however, there remains hope.

Having recognized hope in what will take place in the future, it is important to note that doing so also entails acknowledging what of the past is useful. The contradictions in Albizu Campos’s speeches introduce the co-existence of absence and possibilities; and, as the work to
address Puerto Rico’s colonialism continues, such efforts still grapple with the complexities of its historic and continued efforts. Albizu Campos makes good points in stating that U.S. intervention did not address the political and the material, let alone the basic human needs of Puerto Rico’s population, yet his rhetoric also excludes. The leaders after him who believed he made good points, who supported the struggle for Puerto Rico’s independence, also leave much more to consider and a great deal on which to reflect. Globalization and the continued economic and ecological exploitation that Puerto Rico suffers have left lasting effects on Puerto Ricans’ physical and emotional health. The human rights’ abuses, stemming from who can speak out against what, demonstrates the lack of democracy, a democracy which is supposedly supported by the United States. While independence leaders are speaking out against the absence of participatory democracy in the United States’ system, who those leaders rhetorically exclude and overlook similarly demonstrates a lack of consideration for who would be able to participate in their nation-building utopic vision.

Still, what Puerto Ricans escape on arriving the United States has not addressed all the material disparity; gentrification, the distant cousin of colonialism, similarly harms its survivors as it fractures communities, organized efforts and lives. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian-American and other immigrant communities continue to be displaced and dispossessed because of political persecution. With this in mind, the call to return to the barrio, to return home, is not as easy as buying property or renting an apartment. Returning home is not a matter of imagining an idealized past to resurrect nor a community without its imperfections. In other words, returning home—either homeland or the barrio in question—continues to be a matter of the extent to which one can return home without sacrificing or hiding any aspect of who they are and what they can do. It continues to be a negotiation of how socio-economic mobility, of how
being raised in stateside conditions informs perception and engagement. Feminists and queer theorists continue to explain that the struggles that one has with the patriarchal character of ethno-nationalist politics still demonstrates psychic and cultural exclusion. Returning to Albizu Campos’s speech, his rhetorical woman and child do not speak and yet are still called to act. Considering their labor conditions, participate in what, when and how are other questions. For this reason, the question of nationalism continues to be about more than cultural production and performance. For starters, more than one nationalism exists. What is more, each nationalism has its material and ideological ends, not all having to do with Puerto Rico’s political status, though wanting to address Puerto Ricans’ lack of self-appreciation. As a belief system and as a practice, political nationalism still needs to address how the collective constructs its narrative as it seeks to continue. To draw upon Albizu Campos’s heavy Roman Catholic influence, its rhetoric still needs to confess its sins. As I write, however, Jose Esteban Muñoz’s critical utopic imagining continues to linger in my head, as does Judith Butler’s relational subjectivity. Because in confessing, what can guarantee forgiveness? Retribution?

That being said, to explore the rhetorical construction of nationalism as a belief and a practice, a kind of religion with its mythologies, prophets, and dissidents, is not enough. Because the leaders had families; they were parents, aunts, uncles. Some of them are considered illegitimate until other communities and other ideological endeavors adopt them. The question of legitimacy is especially important, given the lifestyle choices, the racialized diversity negated, suppressed, or sterilized in Puerto Rico’s cultural narrative. For Negrón-Muntaner, for example, it became important to slap nationalism’s patriarchy in the face with her mixed genre film
As LGBT Puerto Ricans’ voice and publicize struggles against the cultural and psychic heteronormativity that informs their exile and or their distancing from any conversation of political independence, the status of the Puerto Rican Family’s stability is up for questioning. That being said, the African heritage in Puerto Rico still grapples with its representation, and their quotidian struggles. Has the patriarchal Puerto Rican family recovered from the slap, from the division the family asks for in renouncing those they believe are not defending it? That is a question that the present asks of the past and wonders if the future can answer it.

I will turn to Jose Esteban Muñoz’s “Feeling Utopia,” the introduction to Cruising Utopia. In those first pages, he explains, “the anticipatory illumination of art, which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us to see the not-yet-conscious. This not-yet-conscious is knowable, to some extent, as a utopian feeling” (3). I pull from this quote because works of art tend to engage in a larger public than works and productions of traditional academic discourse and production. The not yet conscious of Puerto Rico’s determined status and the possibilities of where Puerto Ricans can overcome the constraints of centuries of colonialism is continuously answered through such mediums. After exploring how key scholars have sought to answer the question I pose and the divergent historical projects that review community organizations’ efforts in disrupting Puerto Ricans’ silence, I map out their highlighted tensions and absences through fiction. I focus on women’s inter- and intragenerational struggles through a bilingual novella titled Division Street. The divisions I first sought to call attention to were not the divisions

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1 Alberto Sandoval made the argument in his essay in None of the Above. In the article, “Imagining Puerto Rican Queer Citizenship: Frances Negron-Muntaner’s Brincando el Charco a Portrait of a Puerto Rican,” he reviews Negron-Muntaner’s queer contribution to calling out patriarchal nationalism’s exclusion of sexual minorities. It was not enough to demonize their repression, he argues, and the slap which the main character of her mixed genre film Brincando el Charco, gives is a clear indication that such violence would not be tolerated.
between community members’ best intentions and visions for their greater ethnic enclave. The project arose around the divergent institutions that sought to police women of color’s sexual desires and socio-economic mobility. Not that I didn’t know of Albizu Campos or Puerto Rico’s colonialism as I was writing what would become *Division* but, despite a childhood in Chicago and an adolescence in Western Massachusetts—hours away from the largest stateside Puerto Rican enclave, I was minimally aware of stateside Puerto Ricans’ historical efforts in establishing political organizations, cultural centers and greater literary movements. The more I learned of those histories, the more I learned of the historical tensions present between the leaders of those efforts and those who chose not to participate; those who chose not to sustain their participation and those whose focus remained in addressing other communities’ repression. The research, community engagement and scholarly work that exposed me to such complexities critically shaped *Division Street* into a work that went far beyond addressing a coming of age young adult piece. *Division Street* hopes to function as a social critique that maps out the effects of silence between generational struggles to make space and better living conditions.

The political negotiations I, along with so many other Latinas with whom I attended high school, have made regarding sexuality were not regionally nor socio-economically static. These negotiations changed relative to our socio-economic position—a position distinct from our mothers because of the decisions our mothers made and the decisions their mothers made. These subject positions between generations of single mothers, working poor women, happily married, happily single and childless, queer women inform the extent to which they and their children could fight for the nation as Albizu Campos calls on women to do, as so many others call on so many of us to do. If the rhetorical woman and child—bringing to mind images of Mary and Jesus—that constituted the nation had the right to kick out those who could not stand up for it,
how were they able to do so? How could the way they provided and defended themselves be imagined if and when such agency was not deemed acceptable? These questions, I learned as I watched Latinos interact with others across class, skin color and gender performance lines, were part of the greater question of whose voices and presence were rhetorically absent. The absence that I wanted to make visible shaped the character developments my own intellectual and ethical engagement with what it meant to finish this work so far away from the community and activism where this question first arose.

The various class markers I have witnessed and explored have influenced how the characters of Division Street debate with, challenge, and engage each other. Conversations with friends, family, colleagues, classmates that educated me on what it was like to be a teen in Chicago high schools are not divorced from the struggles I have and continue to see of younger Latina/os who question how to make meaning of their socio-economic mobility and the possibilities of achieving the livelihoods they hope for and desire. I know complex efforts of constructing a livable life while sustaining cultural authenticity, not solely because I am of Puerto Rican descent, nor because I visited Puerto Rico in the revising of this work, but through participatory observation with individuals whose marginalized experiences, when voiced, are constructed as cultural treachery. The novella opens with a future young woman, Carina, learning of her mother, Cassandra’s short-lived teen pregnancy. The novella starts there because of the tense discussions around Latina sexuality and Latina’s socio-economic mobility as it speaks to how they are imagined as saviors of the nation. That discussion initially began with the question of how women’s desires are legitimated within how they can write it in to what they/we can contribute to the nation. The question of what anyone can legitimately contribute has been limited to parenthood. Yet so much more has been asked of that. And community
members are capable of other familial relations that can equally nurture, and support community members. The political economic conversations of motherhood, of the intergenerational struggles of women seeking to celebrate their bodies, of contributions to their community, interweave with how the debates of legitimacy are undertaken. In these debates of legitimacy, participants question how not to suffer the isolation spoken of earlier generations’ experiences, so as to disrupt and possibly give voice to the disenfranchised classes within any community.

The more I read of masculinity, the more it became apparent as to why so many male leaders unintentionally made the project of nation building their life’s work: the honor they found there heavily contrasts with the criminality of their existence in other spaces and in other political economic relations. In a social-psychological analysis of Puerto Rican gay migrants’ gender performance, “Locas,” Respect and Masculinity,” Marysol Asencio explains, “The need and importance placed on obtaining respect through masculinity is further complicated by Puerto Rico’s colonial status and the racialization of Puerto Ricans” (336). She further explains that, because of the understanding of how men achieve respect with each other to assert individual power, particular aspects of heterosexual masculinity are necessary to assert respect. Any performance or engagement that a man can read as effeminate, then, undermines his ability to exert power or authority, which then translates into how his agency is imagined. This affects others, women and other gender minorities as well, given how their behavior is supposed to complement the assertion of male power and authority. As a result, each still contends to resist internalizing racialized value systems of communication and sexual performance, as well as gender normativity. Those who did not identify as or with cisgender men had limited outlets in

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2 What it Means to be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity; Marysol Asencio’s work on homosexual masculinity was also useful in demonstrating how significant the socialization of respect is among and between men.
which they could speak and where they could engage or support what was understood as internal colonialism.

So, in my third chapter “Who Gets to Speak,” I take issue with the male leaders’ nationalist discourse, a discourse that helped define and frame Puerto Rican Chicago’s dominant nationalist performances. Before I do that, in my first chapter, “Cultural Heritage Debate,” I frame my arguments using Oscar Lopez Rivera’s personal correspondence because, without knowing it, he became a critical advisor for what I needed to internally and relationally engage. I understand and appreciate Puerto Rico/Puerto Ricans’ anti-colonial struggle. As Fanon highlighted in *Wretched of the Earth*, the levels at which the psychic trauma of colonialism permeate the lives and livelihood of its survivors needs its story told. As those who extend Fanon’s work further explain, addressing said traumas begins with speaking. Listening critically is equally important though often overlooked. Still, as Fanon’s contemporary Eduoard Glissant highlights, the audience who listens sparks skepticism and concern. I understand how my class privilege may inform what I may unintentionally romanticize at the same time as I intensely critique and critically question. The not-yet-here of colonialism’s death needs to deliberate on more than land, more than resources, more than relationships, more than the value placement on the aforementioned. The hope of overcoming colonialism and its material and psychic residue needs to contend with the thought produced that gives any one person the right to decide the livelihood of another.

Still, I envision a dream of a homeland that appreciates those who seek to defend and stake a space and a place that fulfills their body, mind and spirit in resistance to what was historically denied them. It is within that frame of reference, especially considering the populations for which such fulfillment has been policed, stolen and restrained, that I approach
the question. How can any one narrative, or a filtered anthology of narratives, that grounds itself in fostering support for Puerto Rico’s independence bear in mind all the relationships that inform why any segment of a stateside community would condone, condemn or remain indifferent to such an endeavor?

This is the guiding question that I explore in the following pages.
CHAPTER ONE
CULTURAL HERITAGE DEBATE

In 2005, I began corresponding with Oscar Lopez Rivera, a FALN member, co-founder of Chicago’s Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center, and one of the then remaining Puerto Rican political prisoners. The Fuerzas Armadas para la Liberacion Nacional had been started by stateside Puertorican born and raised in Chicago. They organized in an effort to support Puerto Rico independence organizational efforts to defend Puerto Rico’s independence. FALN’s work to call attention to the struggle for Puerto Rican independence had found many leaders sentenced under criminal intent of seditious conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. government. Their efforts and the years spent in prison as a result for defending the rights of Puerto Ricans’ self-determination demonstrate how individuals like Oscar Lopez Rivera give voice to island-based and stateside Puerto Ricans’ political struggles. The struggles of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico stem from centuries of colonial rule under Spain and followed by the current United States semi-autonomous government. In an effort to call attention to the effects of Puerto Rico’s suppressed history as a result of colonial narrative filters, I begin to pose my questions and concerns.

I wanted to learn from Lopez because of his historical and current significance in Chicago’s Puerto Rican history. His work and life contribute to foundation for Chicago’s Puerto Rican cultural enclave leaders who committed their lives’ work to addressing and disrupting the

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3 Over decades of Puerto Rican cultural studies scholarship, scholars have coined various terms to identify Puerto Ricans living in the United States. Marysol Asencio noted that the Puerto Ricans primarily discussed as Diasporic are those living in the United States, which theoretically overlooks that there are Diasporic Puerto Ricans not in the United States. She has since used ‘stateside’ Puerto Ricans to name the general population of those living within the United States. Having said that, however, there are regionally specific terms—Nuyoricans, Phila-Ricans, etc.—Diaspo-Ricans was an applied shorter term for the greater population of Puerto Ricans living in all regions of the U.S.
absence of Puerto Rican cultural spaces. As a scholar concerned with the political, economic and
cultural plights within the Puerto Rican community, it was important for me to engage a
historically significant voice to better understand the process of documented community building
work. In such engagement, I wanted to more fully understand how leaders grapple with
addressing the needs that time, material realities and ideological differences presented. In the
first letter I had written him I cited frustration in “grappling with cultural heritage.” Looking
back to that first letter, I recognize I was vague, wary of challenging a history he helped write, a
history that I knew had made it easier for my generation to have access to politically and
culturally affirming spaces and communities. In response to my voiced frustration, he asked,
“Why would the question of understanding our heritage be a complex one?”

Given my subject position as a college student benefiting from the grassroots efforts of
his generation, his question was valid. I have a great deal more access. As an elder in the
political struggles of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans and the access to histories, mentors, and
awareness of political realities Lopez had, in contrast to mine, was extremely more limited.
Within the third or fourth letter of our correspondence, he further explains:

I grew up knowing hardly anything about Puerto Rico or about colonialism. It was
as an adult that I started reading about our history and colonialism, and I had to do
it while inserting myself in the struggle. This happened at a time when there was
little access to written material about Puerto Rico as a people who had knowledge
and could provide me with some guidance. Today, access to anything dealing
with Puerto Rico is just a finger touch away, and access to people who can
provide guidance is not that difficult to find, whether in the diaspora or in Puerto
Rico. (3/6/2005)

His point was clear: I was too surrounded by Puerto Rican scholars, activists, and
community spaces to be confused about Puerto Ricans’ cultural heritage. Because of the work of
activists and students like him, contemporary scholars of Puerto Rican history, politics and
culture have a great deal of material to work with. Also, because of their efforts advocating for greater access to higher education, supportive services and preserved archives, scholars have the means and continue to provide the opportunities to critically inquire about the development, movement, integration and forms of resistance of Puerto Rico’s cultural and political nation/community. Aside from the “finger touch” that can direct anyone with interest and provide access to online websites, the plethora of Puerto Rican intellectual and cultural workers continue to exponentially expand academic, political, and artistic projects. Technological developments have also made the art of preserving historical material easier and more affordable, which then provides access to archival material from which to further develop a comprehensive understanding of Puerto Rico’s cultural and political history. Having been able to enjoy the accomplishments of the works of generations before me, in contrast to Oscar Lopez Rivera’s experience, the complex struggle I have with Puerto Ricans’ cultural heritage debate can be understood as being unable to recognize or appreciate what lay within arms’ reach or a finger touch away.

The scholarship of numerous academics, activists and former community leaders has addressed the absent voices from Puerto Rican and cultural history. As this absence is being addressed, so too are the reasons those voices and their struggles are absent and/or disregarded. Having been academically trained and mentored by some of these workers, as well as having explored their archived material, it is precisely the absence of these voices and the internalized oppression that outlined the aforementioned absence that supports my concern. It is the rhetorical process of exclusion and conditional inclusion in political and cultural narratives of Puerto Ricans’ resistance to colonialism that grounds my reflection over this initial conversation.

4 This list is extensive based not solely on the colonial/imperial exclusions but the exclusions of those seeking to recover and revise those exclusions as well.
This dissertation is framed by the conversation I began with Lopez so many years ago and remains informed by continued engagement with the documentation and representation of Puerto Ricans’ anti-colonial struggles. The struggle for access to cultural heritage is grounded by the greater material and ideological conditions that limit access to histories and policies that maintain the economic and political exploitation of such colonized groups as the Puerto Ricans. Limitations to such access are not solely imposed by colonial erasure and negligence. In particular, I argue limitations are also informed by how the revisionary process of anti-colonial historical recovery is often unintentionally framed by sustaining other disparities.

Addressing Lopez’s question requires the need to call attention to the economic, cultural and political disparities that not only promote accessing the cultural heritage he claims is so accessible. Addressing the cultural heritage question also demands addressing the disparities that validate one’s recognized and encouraged capability to contribute to it. A community member’s capability to contribute to the history of a community parallels with one’s motivation to politically engage in addressing social and economic disparities faced by the Puerto Rican community. The capability to contribute to the historical narratives of a disenfranchised community begins with identification with it—literal as well as figurative. This identification, whether cultural or political, dialectically takes place. As a result of the conversation of political, ideological and or cultural belonging, however, one’s facility to contribute to a community which does not seek to fully identify with them raises a number of concerns. Such practice of belonging, often regarded as a discursive performance, negotiates and contends with what cultural, political, and material rights are sustained in participation. Scholars, activists, artistic producers, and journalists have documented various political and cultural performances that have challenged and revised the parameters of Puerto Rican cultural identity. In so doing, they
continue to revise the parameters by which one can and does contribute as well as transgress the limits of discursive and rhetorical representations of Puerto Rican cultural and political consciousness. These individuals do not always agree, even if and at times because of how they are working towards addressing Puerto Rico’s self-determination. The disagreements were and continue to be based on what the needs of Puerto Ricans are and which relationships could best address them.

Despite community leaders’ efforts, structural inequalities within Puerto Rico and the U.S policies that sought to reform the institutions in which disparities are present inform the continued struggles Puerto Ricans face. Puerto Ricans still grapple with federal parameters imposed on their self-determination and human rights. Among those factors are U.S. practices that have debilitated Puerto Ricans’ and Puerto Rico’s health, U.S. sanctioned experimentation that have been overlooked and ignored, and the continued lack of political representation in U.S. Congress despite the revised status in the mid-twentieth century. Self-determination and human rights, however, are not solely limited by federal or Puerto Rican policy. The endeavors of organizations, collectives, and political leaders who worked to overturn repressive policies often engage in patriarchal and capitalist endeavors that hinder the full inclusion and participation of others. Restrictions on political participation and attempts at establishing socio-economic stability did not solely stem from U.S. or Puerto Rico based policies. They also come from social relations sponsored by rhetorical constructions of Puerto Rico’s underdevelopment and racial inferiority. Various discursive projects seek to define the extent to which Puerto Ricans could financially support themselves and politically represent themselves in the tense and incredibly disparate global market. Addressing parameters endorsed by various ideological policies and normative subordination is necessary in an attempt to recover an all-encompassing
heritage and, from that, to provide the opportunity to be politically engaged in any resistant
effort.

It is the absence of an acknowledgement of these limitations and implications—
something Lopez has since cited in later letters—that informed the frustration in my first letter to
him and my continued concern for Puerto Ricans’ political mobilization around the political
defense of self-determination. These unintentional constrictions have dictated who can
ideologically, materially and politically participate. These limits also mediate what aspects of
relational and individual subjecthood designated leaders validate. Such limits contrast yet
complement the concern anti-colonial leaders have regarding Puerto Rico’s coloniality. Looking
at the differing colonial status of Puerto Rico and stateside Puerto Ricans, then, becomes a matter
of how dominant representation of Puerto Ricans’ anti-colonial struggle addresses each aspect of
material and ideological exploitation. In that representation, who counts defines who can
participate. Participation in this struggle is mediated by who has access to what and to what
extent, something which cultural and political workers of various institutions attempt to explore.
The cultural heritage that Lopez cites is so accessible boils down to the meanings that are being
produced, the ideologies in resistance to and in opposition of the freedom and self-determination
that are being sought—and how each is rhetorically constructed.

In first exploring the aforementioned processes, I began examining various sociological,
rhetorical and historical analyses of articulations towards Puerto Rican cultural distinction and
Puerto Rico’s independence. The more I read, the more history continued to unfold: university
student protests, the death of critical pro-independence (referred to as political nationalist from
hereafter) leaders, and LGBT activists’ greater mobilization in Puerto Rico and within stateside
enclaves. Because access to documentation, response and reflection over these critical turns
takes place in various rhetorical representations, it is important to examine the ideological thread of Puerto Rican nationalism that seeks to interweave these struggles has hindered sustaining a one-dimensional project of Puerto Ricans’ anti-colonial struggle.

The words written about combating the effects of colonialism as “one” struggle by those whose faces and lived experiences represent that struggle become circulated cultural commodities. Because a few faces are selected as the icons and the representatives of ‘the’ movement, the relations that stem from revolutionary efforts or the relations that inform them are often lost because of who can and who is willing to listen. The rhetorical and political construction of leaders has given the ideological parameters around the struggle and what it means to combat it and what overcoming it would look like. The multiple approaches give way to participants’ wavering commitments. Such fluid turns are often misrepresented in discursive constructions of Puerto Rican based oppositional movements against the U.S. federal government and localized policies within stateside Puerto Rican communities and within Puerto Rico. Much like the plentitude of access informs the struggle and frustration of answering Oscar’s question, it is also imperative to consider the political economy of access when framing an answer to his question. The primary response to Oscar’s question will be grounded in theoretical analyses of various forms of historical, sociological and rhetorical analysis and theory. Since discussions around what struggling against colonialism needs to look like are made relevant by where and when the discussion takes place, its continuity is only viable by incorporating various forms of rhetorical engagement that document its complexities. With that in mind, my novella Division Street maps out the debate through each Puerto Rican character imagining the possibilities of what they can contribute based on their willingness to sustain or fissure the relationship with the barrio and, more specifically, with their families and friends in
the barrio.\textsuperscript{5} Because—up until this point—the question of political nationalism depicts the face of its leader as male, I privilege women’s intergenerational struggles because their choice to carry and save the nation varies by age.

To situate the theoretical response to Lopez and my dialog, it is important to critically assess how collective memory and political engagement is addressed. Examining this question requires a critical engagement with how credibility, empathy, and logic intersect at divergent moments of political crises. Consequently, the ways in which knowledge production and distribution of individual and groups of Puerto Ricans take place in moments of recognized contributions will allow for further comprehension of the greater applied ethics surrounding Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans’ self-determination. The cultural heritage debate—that is, the complexity of imagining and constructing Puerto Rican cultural and political consciousness—is mediated by how meaning making processes and arts of persuasion aid and abed the political economy of belonging to the imagined community of Puerto Rico.

**The Puerto Rican Movement(s)**

The complexity of the cultural debate begins with how to imagine the origin of “who” and “what” constitutes Puerto Rico, to use Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of nation as an ‘imagined community’ (1993). Duany’s sociological analysis of Puerto Ricans’ racialization extends the concept of the nation as an imagined community because Puerto Ricans’ sense of national pride is not solely territorial, rather a cultural manifestation (2002). Puerto Rico’s

\textsuperscript{5} These varied perspectives are informed by participatory observation that had taken place during undergraduate research, along with continued participatory observation within the setting since beginning graduate school. The oral history projects that informed the character construction and social dynamic within the novel will be further discussed in chapters three and four. While none of the characters are based on real life figures, the gendered and racialized interaction of youth during this time has been informed by engagement with individuals who were high school students at the time as well as by the continued struggles of young women coming of age in this space.
history as “Puerto Rico” begins with Spanish colonialism and continues under U.S. rule. The political and economic struggles ideologically originate within that moment of Spain’s contact and conquest and what befell the imported African and local indigenous populations thereafter. Collectives and organizations have since mobilized in opposition to aforementioned groups’ exploitation which then informed and complemented limitations on the possibilities of their political participation, to take a stand for their own political, economic and human rights. The duration of Spanish colonialism, in which other colonizing Europeans immigrated to the island, affected multiple layers of Puerto Rico’s cultural, social and material composition as has the United States and the emigration of other communities. As a result of this complex history, Puerto Ricans culturally and politically claim three racialized/regionalized origins—the indigenous, European and African. Those origins are further affected by the policies that have sought to stabilize an economically beneficial social order, which continue privileging those of European descent, and the greater bourgeoisie. How Puerto Ricans repress, celebrate and negotiate their racialized ancestry was complicated by U.S. racial homogenization of the community as well as the political decisions U.S. intervention made in an effort to stabilize Puerto Rico’s economy.

Among the cultural and economic contribution that came with U.S. intervention, Puerto Rico established a local public university system. While the presence of a university system made it possible for more Puerto Ricans to pursue a higher education in a local setting, the university system also opened the doors to resistance to the U.S.’ imposed social order. The university has been a site where critical conversations of Puerto Rico’s status, Puerto Ricans’

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6 Scholars who had written *Puerto Rico in the American Century* cite that Puerto Rico is an archipelago. I debated between using archipelago or island but, given that most scholars and cultural workers refer to Puerto Rico as an island, I will follow such consistency.

7 For the layers of Puerto Rican cultural and political history, Jose Luis Gonzalez’s *The Four Storeyed Country* was used.
economic and political rights take place. Because of integration and participation within U.S. Civil Rights work, Puerto Ricans within the Stateside Puerto Ricans\(^8\) established ethnic enclaves in the urban centers where respectively large migrant populations began to coalesce. These enclaves have sparked the creation and sustenance of organizations, collectives among other institutions in which they could engage in political, cultural work.\(^9\) Along with these changes, too, technology provided more opportunities to recover oral, literal, and material archives.\(^10\) For example, Puerto Ricans engage with each other in establishing, sustaining or re-creating physical, cyber- and cultural communities. In the current examination of where Puerto Ricans are engaging with each other, meso communities are not only created within areas where Puerto Ricans emigrate, but also in various academic disciplines, as well as within social and political networks on the internet and across physical spaces in the U.S. Such tools provide the material to establish credible knowledge regarding Puerto Rico’s current events, such as quantitative and qualitative narratives of lived experiences and political endeavors. Despite this, the question of access and quantity has been addressed, inequalities indirectly and directly tied to the degree to which one can integrate into Puerto Rican communities continues to exist.

Since in the 1960s, stateside Puerto Ricans’ geographical pockets in the U.S. have established Puerto Rican political and social organizations that sought to address economic, social and political disparities. Such organizations and collectives began their attempts in order to address forms of internalized oppression. The cultural and political work of these various stateside Puerto Rican enclaves continue the efforts of cultural and political affirmation all the

\(^8\) ibid i.
\(^9\) It is important to note that while some of these organizations were formulated by Puerto Ricans, other Latinos and nonPuerto Ricans did work alongside Puerto Ricans to address their material and political needs.
\(^10\) Technology, such as the internet, has provided social forums in which Puerto Rican across regions could engage in cultural production, information exchange and narrative revision. Technology, such as digital archive, has allowed for university systems among other institutions, to establish and sustain historical records of Puerto Ricans’ lived experiences within various regions.
while trying to provide tools and opportunities to retain and access Puerto Rican history so that the question of knowledge access and acquisition can continue to be addressed. In spite of this access—which I appreciate as stemming from the efforts of Oscar’s generation of political actors, thinkers and scholars—stateside Puerto Ricans who have stayed or sought/defended integration and assimilation encounter limitations based on regional discrimination, and distribution of wealth, among other factors.

It is duly noted that the more flexible meaning of and opportunities for the incorporation of stateside Puerto Ricans into Puerto Rican/Latino spaces and cultural communities in which their historical lived experience can be affirmed demonstrates the success of the cultural and political work since the efforts and sacrifices of Oscar’s generation and their predecessors. Contemporary discourse seeking to articulate the possibilities of addressing social and economic disparities have followed, however, demonstrate the ideological limitations of earlier generations. The desertion of community, the political economic strain of isolation and despair that necessitates faith and surrender to nationalism as the primary way towards liberation, borrows from the mid-twentieth-century nationalist party discourse. Party leaders, like Pedro Albizu Campos, also relied on the pro-independence intellectuals of the late nineteenth century. The recurring theme is not only that each generation sought to combat their oppression through an anti-colonial frame. The recurring theme starts with an idealized leader, betrayed subordinate and dissident, who have conflicting relationships with the promised land of independence. The intense fissure between self-determination and Puerto Ricans’ coloniality, assimilation and integration has been complicated by divergent readings of leftist and materialist ideologies that have been engaged around community members’ multiple subjecthoods. The various subject positions of collectives, enclaves and organizations intersect and contradict each other. To
discuss Puerto Ricans as one ‘community’ raises the question of how its discontinuous, fractured, fluid, tiered traits are addressed, if at all.

In the anthology *The Puerto Rican Movement*, contributors and organizers share the common belief that community empowerment is associated with preserving and stressing the contributions of Puerto Ricans to U.S. social movements (1998). *The Puerto Rican Movement* is not the only work that discusses stateside efforts to address Puerto Ricans’ colonial reality. *Puerto Rican Jam* approaches the question with the divergent aspects of Puerto Rican culture and politics (1997). Like *The Puerto Rican Movement*, contributors defended what Puerto Ricans are able to provide for themselves; the anthology also does a good job of historicizing the need for a greater conversation regarding where Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the U.S. should focus their energy regarding integration into democratic processes. *The Puerto Rican Movement* speaks to the way in which they gathered—whether in the historical era of the 60s and 70s or in contemporary settings—with other Puerto Ricans to voice the needs, lived experiences and struggles of Puerto Ricans. Despite the goal of collective action and in spite of the reflective discourse that cited the necessity to strategically mobilize, moments of tension and dissolution permeated their work. The contributors cited these instances as one of the influences within the growing decline of their work. Along with institutional pressures, financial constraints and intergenerational divergent approaches, the need for the work that took place within the Puerto Rican movement—as so defined by the series contributors—declined because Puerto Ricans as collective bodies around diasporic pockets within the U.S. focused their attention elsewhere.

In the introduction of *The Puerto Rican Movement*, Andres Torres and Jose E Velasquez cited that the movement’s failure was not solely nor primarily a result of internal tensions and unresolved conflicts (1998). As a number of pieces in the anthology cite, however, which Puerto
Ricans could speak and to what extent contradicted, in practice, the movement leaders sought to sustain. For example, in “Paginas Omitidas” Luis Aponte-Parés and Jorge B. Merced explain that there was a collective effort in New York where out Puerto Rican gay men were silenced, and where leaders remained in the closet to sustain their leadership and further the work of cultural organizations as those Aponte-Parés and Merced listed (1998).\(^{11}\) This is one of many examples where narratives, lived experiences, and material needs that the corpus of political leaders sought not to address and or wrote off as marginal in contrast to the community’s needs.\(^{12}\) For Puerto Rican gays and lesbians in the New York diaspora, so cited by the contributors, their racial identity and sexual orientation set them apart and as insignificant in both ethnic consciousness and in gay liberation collective efforts. Later work further demonstrates Puerto Ricans have multiple power relations to navigate, more than one dance in which to engage.

Unlike José Ramon Sanchez’s argument in *Boricua Power*, however, the limitation of contributors is not solely based on the essentialism of Puerto Ricans participating in the conversation. In the decade between *Puerto Rican Movement* and *Boricua Power*, scholars have examined various diasporic contributions to Puerto Ricans’ cultural and political stability in spite of losses and failures. What is more, Ramon Sanchez’s application of dance theory reinforces the limitations he criticizes in that he overlooks the divergent archives Puerto Ricans are constructing for themselves in their efforts to resist their powerlessness and erasure.

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\(^{11}\) Aponte-Parés and Merced listed a number of organizations whose leaders either remain closeted or silenced LGBT community members’ voices. While the organizations premised the silence on the greater needs of addressing material disparity, such silence sustained fractions within organizational endeavors as the repression of queer voices complemented that repression which the organizations were attempting to address.

\(^{12}\) I addressed an example of problematic representation in “La Voz de Quien,” (2008); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes cites the examples of closeted community leaders such as Antonia Pantoja and writers in his text *Queer Ricans* (2009).
While current theoretical and political mobilization efforts are giving space and time to LGBT struggles within Puerto Rico, their exclusion imitates earlier examples of exclusion and silencing that took place in earlier mobilization efforts. Those who are excluded or whose political contributions were marginalized are excluded under the first wave essentialist frame of unintentional separatism. Leaders decide which aspects of multi-human rights’ negligence to address based on what they believe best. For obvious reasons, such value placement and hierarchical understanding imitates the institutional framework that has kept Puerto Ricans from fully being able to participate in their own self-governance. These exclusions foster tensions and divisions that hinder sustainability of any collective movement. Because of the hindrance and short lived stability of organizations and efforts, the work minimally recovered from the exclusionary and hierarchical socialization such essentialism employed. Arguably, prior to diasporic efforts, such exclusion and essentialism, borrowed from Puerto Rican nationalist independence movements, speaks to the dilution of the efforts of independence work precisely because of what material conditions those with enough social and economic capital deemed necessary. The cultural heritage debate is then fostered by the role of essentialism and how freedom and self-determination for a community is enacted with consideration for the internal practices of a community that has had a history of sustaining hierarchies—despite ideologically materialist discourse and anti-racist public performances.

**Oppositional consciousness fractured**

Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* reviews the limitations of post-modernist ideology by discussing what can be learned from women’s oppositional consciousness. The movement seeking to address the limitations within the anti-colonial movement can similarly learn from Third World feminist contributions to anti-oppressive struggles. What the Puerto
Rican struggle for self-determination can learn from such struggles is how to resist the capitalist, one-dimensional and laddered efforts of advocating for human rights without internalized hierarchies of significance. Sandoval explains that, for oppositional consciousness to be sustained and successful, its intent and work against superstructure and the ideological constraints of the current social order must be fluid. For Sandoval, Third World U.S. feminists apply four types of opposition—equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist and separatist—against capitalist production. These forms are useful in understanding what was useful and limiting in Puerto Ricans’ earlier and current efforts against U.S. capitalist production and imperial rule. The primary limitation continues to be how they do not work with each other, something that, Sandoval argues, is necessary for the capitalist mode of production to be fully challenged and no longer sustainable. Ideologically engaging in these forms of opposition as separate and competitive has hindered the progress and efforts of movements that seek to eradicate forms of oppression.

For example, it is not enough to advocate for equal rights if and when such work comes at a psychological cost of loss because denial, repression and grief are difficult to overcome. That loss cannot solely be addressed by acceptance into dominant culture, not if such acceptance presumes an inevitable self-hate or denial of history. Others argue that assimilation and full integration would lead to statehood (Grosfoguel). Still others would argue that integration and assimilation would lead to statehood, and not address the continued economic and medical exploitation of Puerto Ricans and of Puerto Rico’s labor force (Melendez). The most recent case of Vieques is a clear indication—while the United States had taken out the Navy, the radioactive residue was not cleared; the medical needs and after effects on the residents were not addressed (McCaffrey).
Sandoval explains that the revolutionary form “identifies, legitimizes, claims, and intensifies [a community’s] differences” from dominant society (56). Such an ideological form, which can be seen as present in the works of the Nationalist Party of the early 20th century, was successful in seeking to restructure the meanings of difference. Because of how such restructuring was proposed and who was excluded from restructuring, the revolutionary form of oppositional consciousness could not be sustained. It was revolutionary for a select few and, in some instances, based on the centralization of power, leaned towards a supremacist form of oppositional consciousness. Supremacists assert that “their differences have provided them access to a higher evolutionary level than that attained by those who hold social power” (57). Such an ideological positioning and praxis continues to sustain divisions within the community as a result of impermeable ideology. Such a fixed frame, a political nationalist determinism, then sets parameters around inclusion and participation such a way that the question of self-determination can only be answered by those who consent to exist with the parameters. Such restraints counter the intent of defending self-determination.

Separatism is different than both the revolutionary and supremacist form in that it works to “nurture the differences…by separating from the dominant social order” (57). Arguably, the commonwealth status engages in this by seeking to remain not fully integrated into the United States while simultaneously condoning the relationship with the United States. The cultural nationalist ethos that argues such a relationship is best for the material realities Puerto Rico defines begs the greater question of how those material realities came to exist. Those who accept the commonwealth status are not completely against the possibility of independence. Rather, it can be argued that they see that cultural distinction that can be sustained through relatively
greater economic stability than third world counterparts, as a freedom and independence that they would not otherwise be able to sustain.

Remaining fixed in any position without recognizing how they could be used to most critically challenge the current social order Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans face, negatively affects the endeavor of coalescing a group into a collective front against an oppressive force. Sustaining community relations within collective struggles becomes near impossible if only one audience is presumed as viable and/or necessary. With the introduction to his translation of *Caribbean Discourse*, Michael Dash references Glissant’s take on the foreign audience. Within its pages, Dash states that Glissant precisely cites the limitations of the audience accessed: that often, intellectual elite revolutionaries write with the discourse and within genres not accessible to the communities for which they intend to speak. As a result, Glissant explains in the essay, the critical contributions of revolutionary rhetoric minimally engage those whom such projects seek to address (xliv). Both Glissant ‘s *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation* insist that one need to keep in mind the intended, expected and actual audience as well as the implications of those audiences given what who the rhetoric is intended to serve.

The community itself is as important, if not more important, an audience as the repressive forces seeking to be overturned. The fluidity Sandoval proposes can be further enhanced taking into consideration who or what is being opposed. Sometimes the “what” being opposed has less to do with individuals than discourse suggests and yet is premised on the “who” more than necessary. The fluidity of oppositional consciousness needs to take place in a way that does not remain solely fixed on ideology as discourse but also within considering how discourse and performance function as the other. Integration of discourse, ideology and practice as permeable by how they relate to one another would allow for the question of self-determination to address
material realities and needs more than ideological positioning. The value of those who have sought to engage and sustain such a process, however, has been minimally acknowledged and esteemed, which results in the limitations of sustaining the movement’s intent in constructing one uniform collective consciousness.

Sandoval’s explanation, however, is not enough given the limited representation of the communities she seeks to engage as well as the relationships that inform the necessity of fluidity. Jose Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, better explains why. Muñoz re-examines the ideological and cultural function of utopia, engaging in a queer reading and application of Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*. Muñoz explains that “relationality is not pretty, but the option of simply opting out of it, or describing it as something that has never been available to us, is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix.” (94). Relationality, the understanding that relationships inform the political and economic engagement one practices and sustains. In the multiplicity takes place, fluidity is primarily based on recognizing that it is more than one political, economic, cultural relation that grounds the better future imagined as possible. Muñoz explains in the introduction of his text that “the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (20). In other words, it becomes important, when imagining the possibility of a better future, to engage in the full complexities of relationships because the present is not enough, as the past reminds us of what is absent today and what can be possible tomorrow. Such possibilities are not solely defined by time, as Muñoz adamantly presses, by the formation or sustenance of a nation-state. Muñoz explains that, while such is necessary, living without constraint, though cognizant of relationality, the need for recognition and belonging requires a critical utopia that is not constrained by straight time.
The implications of this, when discussing the methodology of oppositional consciousness, suggest that it is important to appreciate the inevitability of belonging, but in such appreciation, to disrupt normative power dynamics that function to construct belonging as a fixed static state. The construction of a narrative that attempts to disrupt the psychic, material and political restraints of colonialism requires an acknowledgement of how best to address the material limitations of those who cannot and or are not allowed to speak. Often, if and when privileging one narrative or performance, the isolation that Muñoz critiques, resistance to oppression and, in the case of Puerto Rico, anti-colonial struggles, become more difficult to overcome.

In this vein, as cited by critics of Sandoval’s limitations, it becomes important to recognize the historical restraints Puerto Ricans have imposed on each other. In so doing, it makes sense to read them for what is useful, but also for what absences they call out in their projects. While Sandoval excels in highlighting what is useful from several dominant strategies, she does so by examining the descendants of third world women who live in the first world. The experiences of women of color and poor women in the first world are not without its material and psychic repression. Still, though, it becomes important to recognize that, in the ongoing debate between stateside diasporic narratives and the struggles of homelands, the global market consumes us and allows us to consume differently; how we relate to each other through that market, what relations’ messiness are acknowledged, informs the complexity of the cultural heritage debate given how the future is imagined and for whom when there remains a great deal of silenced and criminalized voices.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) As critical as the idea of oppositional consciousness is, in later chapters, I will argue that those claiming to operate from that frame have a great deal to learn from those within their home communities, regarding the political philosophies they can contribute to their efforts. Still, though, Stateside voices need to critically engage in how they
Constructing collective consciousness

The response to Oscar’s question about understanding the complexity of Puerto Rico’s history of anti-colonial struggles, then, is grounded in the lack of uniformity that is perceived. This hinders the foregrounding of a cultural heritage that could sustain the struggle for Puerto Rico’s possibility of independence which, for many leaders would be the ideal result of the exercise of self-determination. The concept of self-determination, or the right for a minoritized ethnic group to choose their form of governance, is meant to articulate the continued colonial reality small communities, like Puerto Rico, still faced as a result of their political relationship with larger entities (Kirgis Jr. 1994). The necessity of the concept is premised on a community’s politically independent ability to define how they can sustain access to material and ecological needs of and at times within their geographic space. A long history of inaccess as a result of colonialism, such as the case of Puerto Rico, results in divergent and contesting interpretation of history and current political realities. As a result, conversations and debates regarding the status are more often than not based on policed and restricted information regarding short and long term implications. Self-determination, extended as the right to determine control over land, labor material needs and commodities, some pro-independence leaders have argued, would allow Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico to have greater confidence in their ability to self-govern.  

intend to relate to their home communities in contrast to their constrained position at the center of empire. Such an argument will permeate through this work, especially given the many constructions and variations of nationalism at work.

The primary figures and historical reviews to be examined in this question of self-determination are those who are advocating for Puerto Rico’s independence. The focus is premised on how these figures’ efforts sustain cultural nationalism and celebrate cultural separatism as the foundation of resisting racism in the U.S. The focus on independence leaders, then, is to center that the question of Puerto Rico’s rights is more than a question of racism; rather it is rooted in the centuries of colonial suppression under Spain, and the United States. The practices, policies and economic relations that sustain Puerto Rico as co-dependent on the United States has not been fixed by revisionist policies or performative federal engagement with Puerto Rico’s political tensions. A great deal more around the issue of colonialism has to be addressed, especially given how globalization and its discontents are interrelated with Puerto Rico’s Third World in the First World political economic status.
The discussion around self-determination does not directly lead to independence. In the decades in which plebiscites have taken place, the vote for independence has remained low. Puerto Ricans’ defense and celebration of cultural distinction has continued to grow as Puerto Ricans move stateside. Texts like Soto-Crespo’s *Mainland Passage* argue that commonwealth is Puerto Rican defined and defended, while many will disagree at its finality. The complexity of cultural heritage lies in how the interpretation of Puerto Rico’s historical and current political definition has provided Puerto Ricans venues to address those needs. Scholars continue to take on either question because the focus remains on separating external forces and Puerto Ricans, as though the question of their political and economic resources are solely based on the relationship between the state and the greater population. The ability to engage in the debate over how authority is practiced, affects how others, later generations and disenfranchised contemporaries of leading scholars and activists, can contribute. In this process, hierarchies of ideological inheritance come into play, particularly hierarchies based on how one’s subject position is politically and economically defined in their Puerto Rican community.

Caribbean scholars and political thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire, have weighed in on one’s intellectual and economic ability to advocate for democratic process based on who is served by their ideological positioning. Despite critical defense of the intellectual elite, Edouard Glissant’s extension of intellectual elite’s contribution is useful in what he articulates about the audience. In the introduction to Edouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, translator Michael Dash writes, “the erosion of the economic base, the division of the working class…and the suppression of local self-supporting productivity [makes] the disintegration of a collective identity and creative sterility inevitable” (xviii). This disintegration comes against the conceptualization of community as the idealized end result. The collective identity of which
Dash speaks in this quote is rooted in the struggle for political autonomy that disintegrates as a result of self-supporting productivity being measured against each other instead of as possibly complementary. Sanchez’s *Boricua Power*, for example, uses dance theory to examine U.S. Puerto Ricans’ limited power as being informed by who is interested in dancing with the other. The limitation therein lies in whose interest is being sought and sustained—the local audience or the foreign audience who seeks to sustain authority. While Glissant’s theoretical texts’ focus on Martinique, the strain it has suffered under French colonialism is not much different than what Puerto Rico has undergone. The disintegration of collective pro-independence nationalist identity among Puerto Ricans has suffered similar class divisions and lack of inter-related local support. The divisions that have been historically cited by feminists, Marxists, anti-racists, and queer scholars and activists are used to justify why and how United States’ intervention and continued relationship is in Puerto Rico’s best interest. Looking at how U.S. policy has done little, outside of self-interest, to stabilize Puerto Rico’s economy, the creative possibilities of political participation remain informed by economic strain and the psychic ramifications that have resulted because of centuries of repression.

Puerto Rico’s independence and greater struggle for self-determination remains fractured and discontinuous for numerous reasons. Firstly, creative possibilities Puerto Ricans have exercised in resistance to their limitations remain measured by foreign audiences. Secondly, if their efforts do not fall in line with the nationalist determinist thought, those imaginings are considered resulting from foreign influence. How much of who they imagine they can be, even amongst them, is continuously suspect. It’s not enough that they can imagine if what they conceive is permeable and unfixed. As a result, while organizations re-emerge in times of crisis, they are minimally sustained by a select few, as the U.S.’s superficial generosity gains stronger
credibility in light of larger global economic factors such as idealized lifestyles, relations and living conditions. Capacity and possibility do not have to work in tandem, given what U.S. financial support falsely provides and supports.

One of the primary reasons intellectual discussions teeter on the status question results from how the global economy would greatly affect any decision that leaves Puerto Rico’s economic interests at the mercy of its supply and demand. In other words, because Puerto Rico’s protected and governed by the United States, its unstable economy guarantees relative economic privilege in comparison to other Caribbean islands, such as Haiti. Growing up, among statehood and/or the commonwealth supporters, I often heard them ask, do Puerto Ricans want to be another Cuba or another Haiti? While Haiti’s conditions are dire given its lack of resources and Cuba has currently begun to loosen its tension with the United States, the conditions presumed post-independence have not been fully addressed because aside from gaining independence, a post-independence Puerto Rico’s possibility of surviving the global market has not been explained or planned. As a result, the support for Puerto Rico’s divergent status options divides the ethno-nation both in Puerto Rico and in the U.S., often across class and Stateside lines precisely because of the freedom each imagine as possible and what each intend to contribute to the efforts for freedom and ideal democratic participation. The intent of contribution, along with the measured value of said desired contribution, also frames the complexity of the cultural heritage debate and how it can be used to bring Puerto Ricans into a united front.

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15 In 2008, Puerto Rico Univision news reported that Cuba had more water per capita than Puerto Rico. Part of the lack of water Puerto Rico had had was due to the heavy toll urbanization had taken on shrinking its national rainforest and on decreasing the total area of green space. Less forestry, trees, etc., led to Puerto Rico’s hot temperatures and decreased water supply. While the comparison was not too drastic, that Cuba had more water despite its Third World status speaks to one of the factors often not considered when drawing comparisons.
The ideological divisions among Puerto Ricans also speak to the limited collective processes within political participation in the broader discussion of self-determination. The primary concern is the economic reality that Puerto Rico would face when no longer under the protection of the United States. That the United States has historically used Puerto Rico to model the structural adjustment programs implemented in other countries factors little in how solidarity with similarly positioned communities can take precedence because being a U.S. territory has privileged Puerto Rico’s economic position in the global economy. While their revised relationship has permitted better labor and environmental policies, one of the primary fears that remain is that without the United States, Puerto Rico will not be able to recover from what U.S. historical practices have done to its environment, to its residents, and their economic stability.

Still, however, in the presumed and expected achievements of independence, as historical reviews of key figures have demonstrated, there were historical and rhetorical absences from those who engaged in the struggle. Whether the absence is gendered, classed, or raced, those whose contributions gain historical notoriety and those who are privileged with either local or foreign audiences are the intellectual elite who have enough economic resources to be visible and to engage within political systems. Therein lies the foundation of sustaining collective consciousness, as consciousness itself remain classed. The call to participate minimally considers the political economy of contribution. In other words, the call to participate is based on what one knows and the time one has to engage.

The value one puts on or understands of their time is mediated between working hours that often involved addressing material needs and human needs outside of the greater call of independence. Calling nationalism courage and sacrifice, as Albizu Campos had, did not have one face, all the while many leaders operated under the premise that it did. As a continued result,
this precise lack of consideration continues to affect participation not only in the struggle for independence but in constructing and affirming a dominant national narrative. As necessary as such projects are and the extent to which constraints such as abused labor practices are part of the rhetorical strategy implemented to garner support, leadership within organizations around the Puerto Rican movement often focused on individual iconic examples. The monotony of the narrative of resistance, anti-colonial struggle sustains an either/or theoretical starting point for praxis that hinders the extent to which one can engage. Because of a lack of fluidity in social roles, a select few could redefine how they existed within a space without extreme retribution. Those few who could have desires that could be manipulated to benefit a greater population or their socialized privilege within the community grants them immunity from greater critiques. Because of how those few acknowledged and appreciated participants were desired or because of the images, metaphors and discourse they use in constructing what they desired for others, their relative power could remain.

**A question of desire**

José Ramón Sanchez’s employment of dance theory as an understanding of the pull and push of the power Puerto Ricans are trying to establish is useful in understanding the limitations of individualizing the work of a collective to a leader because he boils down the efforts of many to institutional positions—an unwilling with a willing partner. He reinforces the need of Puerto Ricans to sustain the interests of the dominant partner of U.S. politics, however, such limitation reinforces that desire solely exists between two parties, undermining the resistant efforts of constructing and imagining other possibilities. Ramon Sanchez makes a good point. José Esteban Muñoz’s take on dance, however, will be useful here in demonstrating the divergent contexts in which dances of power take place.
On first reading, that Ramon Sanchez applies dance theory to Puerto Rico’s political struggles overlooks the practice of dancing with more than one partner. Not solely because Puerto Rican cultural dances oftentimes take place in circles or that even the practice of salsa has a choreographed *rued’* as among its moves but, more specifically because of what Muñoz explains about dance. In “Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance,” Muñoz discusses vogueing as a performance of racial survival and of becoming (80). Further, he connects “dance to the notion of a vanishing point: dance exists as a perpetual vanishing point. At the moment of its creation it is gone…No other art is so hard to catch, so impossible” (80).

The power dynamic between the United States and Puerto Rico, between the United States and stateside Puerto Ricans, is similarly difficult to catch. Not only because of the extent to which the United States has invested in Puerto Rico’s residents’ political and material needs (to be discussed in chapters 3 and 4), but also because Puerto Ricans—stateside and in Puerto Rico—vary in political, cultural and material interests based on what they need as well as on what they desire. Power, then, is disrupting the relational understanding of how it works and, more specifically, recognizing the dance, because power constantly moves. Various genres of dance engage multiple partners because of the numerous relations Puerto Ricans have with Puerto Rico, the United States, the global market and each other.

Puerto Ricans have not lost power, as Sanchez claims in the conclusion of his text. Rather, the manifestation of where their power lies is fixed by how their movement is presuming that they are only willing and able to dance with partners just like them. Returning to Oscar’s letters here is useful because of how he has reflected over the ‘dances’ and/or strategies of resistance he and his comrades have employed. He notes that there is a great deal current and future defendants of Puerto Rico’s self-determination and or independence can learn from the
mistakes and limitations of those who preceded him. By extension, he admits there is a great deal he and others have learned from their own mistakes, and the failed attempts of current endeavors. In this call to learn from earlier mistakes, in the hope that the work towards defending self-determination and, more specifically, independence, there is the expectation that it will continue. The continued efforts of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and in stateside enclaves in the United States point specifically to how and why those efforts will continue. In the continuation of this work and in continued reflection over what has been done in the past, the fluidity Sandoval proposed, the resistance to creative sterility Glissant and Dash propose highlight a common thread between all their ideological defenses. The common thread is that of Christianity’s determinism in political nationalism’s rhetorical appeals. Nationalism as practiced and written within strains of Puerto Rican anti-colonial efforts seeks to provide for its members what God, in Christian mythology, provides for followers. A nation that functions like a Christian God can be critical and only those in light with that god’s discourse can lead, let alone participate in the community. I will explain how in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO
DISCOURSE THE GOD(S) OF NATIONALISM

To define: to create

Further reflection on Oscar’s question about why anyone would grapple with the cultural heritage of Puerto Rico’s anti-colonial struggle requires a review of the discourse that seeks to represent the struggle against colonialism. The struggle against colonialism, in Puerto Rico’s case, has been against the influence of 400 years of Spanish rule followed by the United States’ current sovereignty over Puerto Rico. Transition from Spanish to U.S. sovereignty did not alter Puerto Rico’s colonial status, despite policy turns in the mid-twentieth century to do so. At first, the late-twentieth century diasporic struggle engages with how Puerto Rican identity informs Puerto Ricans’ lack of political representation, cultural spaces and continued exploitation. As the political pursuits to address diasporic Puerto Ricans’ limited access developed, intellectual, political and cultural leaders began to ground their efforts in the colonial legacy that Puerto Rico’s leaders and intellectuals had worked to overcome.

Whether working to address Puerto Rico’s living conditions or Puerto Ricans’ economic limitations in the U.S. mainland, leaders struggle with rewriting and reimagining the lack of possibility presumed of Puerto Ricans by Puerto Ricans. This debate is grounded in what Puerto Ricans imagined they could do for themselves and for each other given their political economic position in the global market still operating within the hierarchies set by earlier centuries of colonialism. This material struggle and the possibilities of addressing it, per the cultural heritage debate’s conflicting turns, made story building for communities as small as Puerto Rico is difficult given who the audience would be. Michael Dash explains that Glissant’s *Malemort* demonstrates how, with colonial contexts, local community members “are still less receptive to [a] message [of cultural and political consciousness] than the foreign audience” (xvli). Dash
explains that, for Glissant, the reasons for a local audience’s lack of reception remain in material codependency on external regimes, and a lack of local leadership. The foreign audience that can receive the message does so because their material and cultural possibilities are governed neither by the demands of colonial entities nor the cultural repercussions that arise as a result.

The mouse click that allows one to find more resources on Puerto Rican history, cultural legacy and political possibilities, has become a new form of technology that, while making heritage more accessible, like earlier technologies, still has material and cultural parameters set around its access. Limitations such as time, the price of a computer, and internet access also inform what may factor in to members’ participation in the conversation about their community.

The mediation of their participation can then inform how necessary participation is, given how external forces seek to mediate and control it. Foucault argues in his essay “Order of Discourse” that an individual is regulated and controlled through discourse. Institutions justify its control over others’ participation. Such control does not, however, guarantee one’s capability. Guaranteeing the possibilities within said participation, a possible participant may not necessarily consent to the parameters set around the discourse and value placement of said participation. As such, Foucault’s theory of discourse is useful for analyzing the deterministic undertones in Puerto Rican political nationalism’s rhetoric.

Discourse sets the parameters of whose efforts to address oppression are rhetorically connected to the anti-colonial struggle as defined by the intellectual and cultural leaders who have been written as defining the movement. The ‘nation’ as a ‘community’ is rhetorically constructed through the institutions in which the discourses around it are mediated. The process of “creating the nation” through discourse determines who and what constitutes the nation. How individuals define a community as an institution to then be liberated from and/or by another,
such as Puerto Rico from the United States, raises question about the function of community and of discourse itself.

The function of discourse as a mode of classification is best explained in *Language as Ideology* by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge. The authors write, “Classification imposes order on what is classified…[it] is an instrument of control in two directions: control over the flux of experience of physical and social reality, in a ‘science’; and society’s control over conceptions of that reality” (63). The anti-colonial narrative that is sought to inform the necessity of the struggle against colonialism can unintentionally use existing systems of oppression controlling the social and physical experience of colonialism. Also, there are moments in which the narrative overlooks the complexity of addressing material and psychic needs, creating a hierarchy of struggle and trauma. For example, historical narratives of Puerto Ricans’ struggles to overcome slavery, Spanish colonialism and the political repression suffered in those centuries. There were counternarratives, however, that defended Spanish intervention. Similarly, U.S. and Puerto Rico’s relationship has been rhetorically represented in a multitude of ways like the colonial relationship between Spain and Puerto Rico. Those who write against U.S. intervention and those who write of those who worked to challenge U.S. rule over Puerto Rico, though, still have yet to fully engage the diverse and complex forms of political and economic repression experienced by Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico. While labor and student movements have widened the population of who can access institutions foundational to democratic participation, not all those who participated are fully represented. Within the racialized hierarchy of the anti-colonial struggle, for example, there is still a question of the extent to which Afro-Puerto Ricans
are represented. Too, Queer Puerto Ricans’ contributions to independence movements in the twentieth century are not yet fully accounted.¹⁶

The colonized who struggle to define such a perception of their social reality as colonized and/or oppressed work against societies and institutions which seek to define their living conditions as relative to space, time and capacity, thereby inciting tension around discussions of human rights and the capability to self-govern. Still, though, it is not solely one’s perception that Puerto Rico is a colony or that Puerto Rico should be independent that provides the tension over how Puerto Rican reality is classified. It is also a matter of how said classification relates to other communities and the definitions of their conditions. The process of classification and reclassification is done so against other comparable regions particularly attempting to describe the extent to which the conditions under which one exists are, in fact, inhumane and/or oppressed.

These examples can best be highlighted in how, on contact, nineteenth-century officials of the Spanish crown defined their intent in contrast to the living conditions they found in the regions they ‘discovered.’ Further, the role of writing in said classification extends such projects given the meanings produced and sustained by which forms of writing were distributed and validated. The journals, letters, and other data collected by those initial decades of contact set up how the indigenous, the African, and later the European elite residing in colonies would be treated. The relationship between documentation efforts and lived realities then, operated as a tool of control. Current debates around a community’s living conditions and the extent to which their livelihood is valid and humane, extend these historical projects even as they try to resist

¹⁶ As cited in The Puerto Rican Movement, some leaders remained closeted to maintain their leadership in community organizations. LaFountain Stokes, in Queer Ricans, expounds on silenced leaders, articulating that they silenced their sexual orientation to best serve their community. The silence was not always a choice, rather, for some, a perceived necessity to participate in community building efforts, as though, their sexual orientation and/or expression would undermine their ability to contribute.
them because of which texts are given credibility because of where they are produced, who produced them and which institutions validated their reputability.

Classification becomes a ‘god’ of sorts in that it becomes an instrument of control. This analogy is further elaborated by Harvey Cox’s analysis of the market. In an essay titled “The Market as God,” he explains that because of what the market controls, the market’s ceremonies, and the redeeming rhetoric the market uses, social constructions of the market give it ‘god like’ qualities in that the market is constructed as all knowing, all powerful, and everywhere. In the greater discourse of Puerto Ricans’ struggle against political repression under Spain and then under the United States, the ‘nation’ emerged as the entity with which to defend and later transformed into the authority to which members had to answer. This is similar to Cox’s claim that the market controls aspects of reality as it assigns values consumers follow. Such a reading of the market as godlike parallels nationalism. The nation, as an institution as well as a belief system, assigns values, expecting its participants to follow, and questioning of such a process—much like resistance to capitalism—is met as a presumed lack of loyalty to what the system itself is aiming to provide: a better quality of life. Nationalist discourse, then, engages in processes of knowledge production and distribution that seek to perpetuate the intent of such values. The significance of the nation as a god then becomes how present its process of classification is to the presumed ends at which the nation seeks to arrive. The godlike function is found not only in the nation’s ideological omnipresence, omnipotence, or omniscience, but also in its ability to guarantee—in resistance to colonialism, in the case of Puerto Rico, for example—a frame by which one’s repression can be addressed. The process of classification, an extension of the god of the nation’s power, is the practice is its omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient force because of how it functions to decide what is distributed and publicized through the value
systems set in place and how. Even as the process discursively proposes changes, how those changes are made are ideologically constructed to be grounded in the flexibility of the god of nationalism, which cannot be questioned.

The cultural debate introduced in this chapter exists because of the power dynamic in flux between those who assign values to objects, relations, and processes that serve the ‘nation.’ The development of resistant projects find tension within the process of recording knowledge and memory as the containment and record of knowledge and memory because of which relations, forces, and dynamics are perceived as a result of internal power struggles or as a result of the evitable influence of external institutions, thought processes and ideologies.

In discussions of nationalism, discursive efforts define what the nation is, who creates it, and how it is formed. Such a function of language parallels the role of discourse in the beginning of biblical mythology. Like with those who critiqued the Bible, though, any who sought to question the function of using nationalist discourse as an extension of the nation’s intent to be paradise, were subordinated—if not banished—because of what challenges were presumed to represent. Obviously, the apparent tension, and exile that began to take shape is not that different to the tensions between colonizer and colonized in conquest.

During the conquest of the Americas, the ideological state apparatuses of the church and government mediated how territories were ‘defined’ when encountered, holding regard for localized definitions of self, space and place that could cater to colonial monarchies’ desired ends. Because of such definitions, tensions began to mount between the indigenous and the colonizers as well as between the merchant and religious elite who sought to defend their own interests on arriving in the Americas. On contact with the Americas, European countries sought to establish extensions of their authority, much like the god of the bible used Adam to function as
an extension of god’s power. The weight of the written word transferred to acting as creator of colonies, within the letters and journals of Columbus, among other conquistadores, because their words sought to create a reality that would financially benefit their continued pursuits as well as the goals of the states they served. Despite the centuries since those moments of contact, nation building—even in the name of overcoming colonialism and oppression—rhetorically function in similar manners. The discursive self-representation of those they encountered had no value—like Adam had named animals in the bible’s creation myth, so too did the colonizers name those they encountered. The naming process began to change when they encountered communities perceived to either be their equal or when the communities themselves found avenues to resist the restraints of colonialism.

**Taking the Power to define or naming as ordained by...**

I will begin with the rhetorical development and whitening of the jíbaro (the male peasant, the country man) to fully demonstrate how the rhetorical projects of contact are imitated in criollo elite’s attempt to dissent against Spanish, later U.S. colonialism. In comparison and with respect to Puerto Rican nationalist discourse, the discourse of the jíbaro becomes an important tool of resistance to Spanish colonialism. The intellectual elite employs what it perceives as noble savage trope to rationalize the secondary status imposed on them by Peninsular elite (Scarano). A “double falsity” (Ong), however, is employed by these intellectual elites: as much as they write in the supposed language of the jíbaro, their efforts do not consider how to address the jíbaro’s living conditions. Posing to represent a community which they do not inhabit, members of the elites did not deeply consider the class implications nor class disparities in their discussion. They want to be as omnipotent as the creator, without wanting to change the status of others around them. And those around them were the jíbaros, which is the
biggest irony of it all. With them, the jíbaro stopped being a person and became a symbol, a shield. The goal of nineteenth-century intellectual elite narratives was to challenge their secondary status in relation to Spaniards in creating a different character, like the jíbaro (to be discussed in a later chapter). Serving as an analogy, this mythological character was distinct from but equal to the peninsular elite. Unfortunately, the narrative also functions to reinscribe the peninsular and criollo elite intellectual superiority. The language of the jíbaro was presumed to be less refined than that of the ‘pure Spaniard’ (Scarano). The ongoing circulation of the cultural myth worked to create a barrier that reified the hierarchy, which is why Francisco Scarano, in his analysis of the deployment of the jíbaro, called it a masquerade (1398). Writing itself, the dissemination of a jíbaro narrative, was predicated on eurosupremacy, even in resisting how the Spanish continued to politically define the Puerto Rican.

Colonial endeavors learn from each other so as to better practice repression control and manufacture the consent of exploited classes. In their article on the experimentation of colonialism on islands, Feyre and Sacerdote argue that, in the first centuries of European colonialism of the Americas, Asia and other territories, time and colonizer affect the lack of progress within the colonies, historically as well as with respect to the islands’ contemporary limitations (2009). In the case of Puerto Rico, by the nineteenth century, the colony was of little economic interest to Spain, save for its strategic military position. Its size and need, despite being economically draining, also garnered it as one of the last remnants of Spanish colonial grandeur which had been difficult for the colonizer to relinquish (Schmidt-Nowara 2006). In the nineteenth century, members of the colonized elite, such as those who used what they believed to be jíbaro language to ideologically critique Spanish colonialism, engage in an attempt at imitating both the nobility of the savage they exploit and the modernist intellectuals of colonial
and imperial centers of the west (Scarano 1996; Schmidt-Nowara 2006). How, in the continuation of this project, and in solidarity of the effort to not perpetuate the negative habit, does a scholar navigate both their expected discourse and a language that could be more accessible to the audience? While these intellectual men are imitating the colonial intellectual elite by using their locality to define their own authenticity, they did so by silencing those whose discourse they borrowed. Such a practice is not unlike the practices of empire leaders nor hegemonic institutions. This speech and this discourse, what Puerto Rican Studies scholar Francisco Scarano called the ‘jíbaro masquerade,’ speak in service of the empire by maintaining the image of the jíbaro as uneducated while trying to consciously employ the noble savage’s wisdom and self-awareness. Their consciousness and self-awareness is mediated by how they are being constructed by others—the empire as well as liberated colonies.

The political economy of discourse affects the tension between addressing how any discourse seeking to address Puerto Rico’s colonial reality can be liberatory. In “Imperialist Rhetorics,” I reviewed historical analyses of the jíbaro masquerade and its role in speaking out against the Spanish empire. In the nineteenth century, as the Spanish Empire declined in the face of its larger land mass colonies gaining independence, the criollo elite based in smaller colonies like Puerto Rico sought to similarly defend their need for greater autonomy and independence. The literate and upper class of Puerto Rico appropriated jíbaro language to frame what they perceived as Puerto Rico’s colonial plight, all the while access to literacy and socio-economic mobility remained limited to those they represented. While these individuals used their literate position to write and publish against Spain’s regime, they did so from a privileged position of colonial and material repression that they then further extended to those they sought to imitate. Such political economic divides manipulate for a desired end were not solely practiced or
engaged in the advent of nineteenth-century nationalism. In “Imperialist Rhetoric’s” further development I argue that, while Albizu Campos spoke out against all Puerto Ricans’ political repression, labor rights and the rights of women were not as extensive as a number of his contemporaries would have preferred. The questions regarding the historical discursive representations of anti-colonial struggles in Puerto Rico extend to diasporic efforts and the conversation they attempt to have with Puerto Rico. Engaging in those questions, though, requires historicizing the political economy of divergent time periods’–late Spanish vs. current U.S. colonialism respectively—effects on how Puerto Ricans imagined the possibilities of what could best address the colonial limitations of either relationship.

Much like limited access to literacy had informed the performative discourse used to articulate anti-colonial relationship with Spain, literacy—more specifically, formalized education—had a critical role in the development of whose leadership counted and to what extent. The extent to which members of the nation could access education and saw the possibilities in challenging what was written about their existence, informed how they constructed its value.

In Women, Creole Identity, and Intellectual Life in Early Twentieth Century Puerto Rico, Magali Roy-Féquiére examines the effects Puerto Rico’s early twentieth-century intellectual elite’s effects on the construction of cultural and political nationalism in resistance to U.S. intervention. What she argues about how Puerto Ricans reviewed each other’s literary contributions and how they discussed racialized subjects speaks to the political economy of access and literacy. In the introduction of the text, she writes that intellectual Puerto Ricans of the early twentieth century sought “[to] counter the all-encompassing sense of social and cultural dislocation,” stemming from U.S.’ sovereignty, “to discover anew Puerto Rico’s “national
character” in order to affirm the existence of the nation and to provide the discourse that would buttress new political projects” (1). The writers she mentions, such as Antonio Pedreira, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Margot Arce, did not all respond to U.S. intervention equally. Not all of them opposed U.S. sovereignty, nor did all of them perceive the racialized depictions of the national character as counter to what was worthy of defending. Nationalism was not solely a political response to U.S. sovereignty. Not all forms of nationalism addressed sought to condemn the influence of external forces. Addressing the national character attempted to defend cultural distinction while sustaining selective integration that would, for some, maintain a status quo that would benefit their own position.

Fequiere’s focus on literary projects is significant in that she states, “Young Creole intellectuals…interpreted [the] societal and economic upheaval of [the 1930’s] as a crisis of representation, demanding discursive remedies” (13). The limitations of those remedies, however, were the extent to which the writers themselves could critically engage the effects of U.S.’ colonialism capitalism while simultaneously addressing the colonial residue of Spanish colonialism. How resistance to U.S. intervention was written or imagined, however, was not solely centered on addressing the effects of colonialism. Albizu himself preferred Spain’s cultural influence despite Spanish colonialism’s influence on racialized and gendered hierarchies within Puerto Rico. Efforts of resistance, then, as they were recorded, created Adam’s, or representative origin points, that often isolated collective efforts into the individual. Quality of libratory life differs for Puerto Ricans not only because of what technologies they access, but also because of the divergent relations to space, people that inform how they assign value to technologies, each other, space and place.
These tensions and continuous effects of technology in rewriting and containing divergent narratives of a community are organized to rhetorically sustain colonial repression. The rhetorical strategies of writers, producers, narrators who participate at each level of narrative building participate in this by way of the audiences they intentionally engage and, often times, construct. These questions will be explored in this chapter, taking into consideration the role of movement, migration, external influences, and the evolving perception of knowledge, myth, and national narrative itself.

Ong writes, “Literacy can be used to reconstruct for ourselves the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all” (1988; 15). What tropes have been used to define the literacy of a community’s national character, minimally revises itself to construct specific aspects of dominant members’ consciousness as pristine. Feminist, anti-racist efforts to revise the grand narratives of Puerto Ricans’ national character has remained marginal despite continued efforts to examine the rich multiplicity of these tropes and local factions’ efforts to combat the cultural, political and economic effects of U.S. intervention (Fequiere 2004; Bernabe 2007; Janer 2006). Evidentiary support for a community’s viable existence is not solely mediated by what members can access but, as demonstrated by contemporary material strains on the system of education, the time one has to access it. That time, because of the economic underfunding of public education, along with the unlivable wage which many Puerto Ricans make, negatively factors in to why portions of any population cannot access information on their communities’ histories. Such limitations are continued residue resulting from conquest and colonization’s role in preserving a pristine human consciousness that reasserted their dominance. In other words, colonialism premised sustaining their hegemonic power through privatizing universities to serve their progeny and not a public good, which, despite movements and policy changes has done
very little to alter the disparities that keep the intellectual class fairly small. The Creole elite of Puerto Rico followed in asserting themselves as an extension of Spain—even some twentieth century nationalist moves privileged Spain’s cultural influence—only including the narrative experiences of romanticized indigenous past and African past cultural influence when it could employ greater support from Afro-Puerto Ricans and the poor. Intergenerational efforts to address the limitations of earlier intellectual and political endeavors to represent Puerto Rico’s repression under Spanish, later U.S. colonialism, remain limited by the extent to which groups sought to defend their ideological and/or material privileged position.

Feyrer and Sacerdote (2009) argue that inexperience as much as location informed various colonial practices. During the era of European colonialism, monarchical authorities perfected the practice of their authority, which they would then take to other colonies. The rise of nationalism with the decline of colonial empires did little to change the disparate economic authority, as independence did not guarantee economic autonomy. Nationalism in various rising nation-states intended to sustain ideological commitment from their constituents while privileging the philosophical and ethical ideals of the nation’s from which they gained their independence. As a result, cultural nationalism formed alongside the political project of nation building. The two primary forms of nationalism developed in the mid-twentieth century—political separation and cultural distinction—rhetorically construct themselves as either needing to extend Spanish cultural prestige in resistance to U.S. intervention or more able to advance as a community because of U.S. intervention. Pulling from Christian ideological influence, each set to determine the possibilities of man by imagining itself as god over the colony of Puerto Rico. Contemporary discussions in resistance to said work, such as Raymond William’s “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” explain how Marxist thought understood such
limitations, and as such provides a useful frame understanding resistance. Focusing on the rhetorical intent of the word ‘determines,’ Williams writes:

The language of determination and even more of determinism was inherited from idealist and especially theological accounts of the world and man. It is significant that it is in one of [Marx’s] familiar inversions, his contradictions of received propositions, that Marx uses the word ‘determines’. He is opposing an ideology that had been insistent on the power of certain forces outside man, or, in its secular version, on an abstract determining consciousness. Marx’s own proposition explicitly denies this, and puts the origin of determination in men’s own activities. Nevertheless, the particular history and continuity of the term serves to remind us that there are, within ordinary use-----and this is true of most of the major European languages-----quite different possible meanings and implications of the word ‘determine’. There is, on the one hand, from its theological inheritance, the notion of an external cause which totally predicts or prefigures, indeed totally controls a subsequent activity. But there is also, from the experience of social practice, a notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures. (2)

By positioning themselves as, in Christian ideological terms, inheriting the obligation to set parameters and by exerting pressures in resistance to foreign populations, the intellectual elite class (divided between descendants of the hacendado class or the small land owning elite) effected a kind of determinism that served to maintain an economic structure that privileged their own standing. Extending earlier Creole and colonizers’ projects of nationalist determinism, the divided elite of the twentieth century revised nineteenth-century constructions of what constituted national character which imposed values on the working poor. Aware that the material needs were not central to the political discussions taking place in the government,
generations of organizers established a proletarian movement in which their mobilization efforts centered on addressing material needs and limitations, instead of buying in to the construction of a national character. Over time, little has been done to bridge the gap.

**Cycles of community building**

In the first half of the twentieth century, the collective struggles of the organized working class moved beyond the question of Puerto Rico’s political status. Scholars and political leaders have constructed bridges and connections that political leaders and labor organizers had not attended to in their efforts to address political repression and economic exploitation. Such efforts, however, have been fully discussed as separate precisely because of how each camp perceived the other and, more specifically because the extent to which they had perceived their struggles as complementary. In other words, the class struggle was not, in the first decades of the twentieth century, fully integrated in the struggle for independence. These struggles were premised on addressing Puerto Ricans’ material needs and citing the political practices that sustained economic disparities. Such efforts were not ‘nationalist,’ in that they sought to speak for or to cultural purity or political independence as constructed by the intellectual elite. Rather, the union organizing and political protests sought to address how practices and policies were not encouraging economic mobility, let alone economic stability, for the majority of Puerto Ricans. At the onset of the twentieth century, it mattered more that Puerto Ricans could live better and be treated better in living better, than whether or not that treatment was framed in a particular fashion, precisely because of what Puerto Ricans had to endure. Global responses to political and economic exploitation framed how the conversation changed during the second half (to be more fully discussed in chapter 3).

**What changed; what stayed the same**
The ideological divisions that arose in response to U.S. intervention further indicate how nationalism, particularly Puerto Rican nationalism, heavily relies on its Christian cultural roots. The transition from one colonial regime to another did not change the ideological function of how the ruling elite sought to use nature and divine rights to frame how they each imagined the function of the nation state. What changed, though, was how a ruling ideology as an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omnipresent force—a god—was imagined and constructed. In other words, while the face of god and what was god-like changed, how god functioned stayed the same—from a Spanish inherited ‘god’ to a U.S. democratic ‘god.’ Consequently, the movements that were not framed as tied to territory but tied to address the basic needs of dignified living were perceived as countering what leaders imagined as best.

This Christian ideological influence can best be seen in the following passage from the Old Testament. The passage is a warning against a king’s rule. Samuel, the leader speaking, explains that a king:

[would] claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 12 Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 16 Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle, and donkeys he
will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. (1 Samuel 8:1-16)¹⁷

This passage’s connection to the concept of nationalism, as understood by its critics, is that it asks, much like this king, a great deal, without providing much. In response to these warnings, the masses asking for a king contend they want to have one like other nations. Despite believing his style of leadership is ideal, as a result of having God’s back, Samuel cedes to the desires of the mass. The layers within this passage, however, and how it speaks to the material realities of Puerto Ricans, is more than how some perceive any nation asking a great deal and providing very little. More specifically, within the context of political independence in resistance to the United States, having asked this of Puerto Ricans, Puerto Rican cultural and political critique grounds that the few economically stable leaders of the independence movement have done and will continue to ask a great deal while providing very little. The little they provide will primarily result from the little to which they have access. In both scenarios—a nation without autonomy or self-determination results.

As the god within Christian ideology provides intermediaries who have to contend with the fluctuating expectations of the community governed, such intermediaries do not always agree with what the collective requests. Further, the logic behind the desire for an external ruler, imitating other communities and/or being set apart recurs in each generation’s negotiation with each’s political economic reality. These realities vary precisely because of what earlier generations were able to address and what they perceived as necessary to address. The political economic value of place and people were rhetorically constructed and practiced, keeping in mind the ends and means they sought most benefited them. Concessions were made, much like the

¹⁷ This excerpt, New International Version, was taken from http://BibleGateway.com, New http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+8&version=NIV
granting of a king, to sustain fidelity—and while such concessions failed, leaders employed divine right, external forces, or the sought desertion sparking such loss. Because those who could record such efforts and complexities remained few and far between as a result of the political economic access to technology, it grew difficult to highlight the nuances that informed limitations, the xenophobic frame of reference that framed the rhetorical construction of benevolence. The economic policies that informed decisions and policed the extent to which living conditions could grow better beyond mortality rates and labor unions, then, were minimal because of what, despite intellectual and material privilege, leaders could foresee. Those that could, though, were often solely recognized posthumously, if at all.

The problem with Eden/Promised Land

How these absences manifest within Puerto Rican anti-colonial resistance can be best seen in the nation’s historical treatment of women and descendants of slaves as well as in the continued material disparities the disenfranchised and minoritized groups within Puerto Rico are rhetorically constructed. Internalized disparities are as much colonial residue as aspects of the intersection of social norms between divergent communities, something minimally acknowledged.  

Those who have been included because of resistance, however, site the moment of ideological and cultural inclusion as the promise of what could be overcome. Yet, all the while, what has been lost and the marginality at which they are kept is not addressed. The omnipresence and omniscience of nationalism, which is set up to function as a better god than

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18 While Taínos were not a patriarchal society, the West African cultural influence’s socialized norms were not necessarily the same as either Spanish or Taíno. Still, in varied indigenous communities colonized by the Americas, gender and what we now understand as ethnic disparities were present pre-conquest. The various pre-Columbian social norms speak to the contradiction of nationalism that relies on a nostalgic past as better socially constructed as the colonial and neo-colonial present of their communities. Power disparities between groups is not just a result of Western colonialism, remedying the residue of any and all forms of social control should not rely on the naming of an institution to destroy, rather the examination of the parameters set around institutions and or beliefs that then create them.
colonialism, has not begun to fully imagine its possibility because the relationship between that
god and what it seeks to create is still perceived as being as determined. As a result, what Puerto
Ricans write about the nation comes up against what Puerto Ricans say about the concept of a
nation because, much like the word ‘determine,’ there are various avenues which the nation as a
thought, as a place, and as an idea can travel.

Each subject whose image does not reflect the image of nationalism, then, is written as a
creature over which those who are created in the image of the nation can carry dominion and a
subject whose livelihood can be determined by those who are an extension of said nation.

Northrop Frye’s coding of the biblical narrative –the desertion, bondage, and redemption cycle
that each smaller myth contributes to the larger myth—because the redefinition of subjecthood
and god-like image between paradigm shifts functions similarly. Transitioning from religious
authority to monarchical authority to the authority of the nation state still presumes the
construction of an external authority that, ideally, should not be subject to change—either of
belief system, practice or physical image. The changes that do erupt between the shifts, and
within the greater rhetorical incorporation of which subjects can be extensions of the nation state,
are so done to maintain the rhetorical necessity of an external force to determine one’s
livelihood. It is questionable if such rhetorical strategies do anything to change the function of
the relations between subjects and between the external force and subjects.

Elements of Puerto Rican nationalism, for example, were primarily Eurocentric; African
and indigenous elements have been minimal. Jose Luis Gonzalez, in his text *Four Storeyed
Country*, argued for four levels of development much like six days of creation in Christian text,
however, for the sake of validation from colonial superiors, what was gleaned depended heavily
on what superiors themselves thought useful. The first story, much like the first days of what was
created, did not set precedent over how other factors would be perceived and would be the foundation—the indigenous were a mythical backdrop with limited value. The arrival of the European can be equated to, according to dominant narratives, the beginning of the story of Puerto Rico. All before the European set the stage for the European as god like. The construction and perception of non-Europeans, how they were perceived, pended more on conquistadors and priests’ need to validate invasion, subordination and conversion. The implications of this way of defining by writing, as well as writing’s relationship with hegemonic states, social interactions and the development and use of divergent forms of technology in the construction of a people’s cultural narrative, are key as they seek to evolve into a ‘nation.’ Much like the god in the Christian’s origin myth creates Eden, the idealized nation, before the nation’s members are envisioned as an extension of creator itself, nationalism’s determinism similarly frames its ‘origin’ and ‘mythologizing’ of members of its community. Because the rhetorical construction of nation seeks to set parameters, it is not enough to engage in said process by replacing aforementioned institutions’ determinism. Rather, resisting colonialist determinism requires focusing on how to transgress the parameters of the intent by engaging in a discourse that is not exclusionary.

One’s ability to participate and contribute does not engage with the political economic realities that inform the political economy of narrative preservation. With each developed technology arose a new political economic barrier to incorporating the diverse lived experiences of a community.

Documentation validated as worthy of preserving may have made the humanity of populations destroyed and/or debased by colonization, more tangible and easier to recover. The limitation of it not being recorded demonstrates the divergent value systems, given the
technological and ideological means and ends of intellectual and cultural workers. What was written is not to recognize the value of the other, despite it being of the other, but to re-inscribe the superiority and infallibility of who sought to record which lived experiences and trends as history and/or culture.

Contemporary scholars of Puerto Rico’s Spanish, then U.S. cultural, colonialism continue to grapple with how historic and contemporary racism and Eurocentrism have set constraints around Puerto Ricans’ full cultural development and literary works. Such work, however, imagines recovery of the silenced and absent past as possible, necessitating discussions of such recovery projects. The extent to which a past can be recovered or imagined as evidence remains up for debate as the evidence is slippery for reasons that extend beyond the lack of material evidence. Such recovery must consider how one perceives themselves as the desired, expected, and/or actual audience.

**Political Economy of the Audience**

As discussed, the audience that often consumes what is being and what can be recovered may not be the desired audience. Particularly, for the intellectual elite, the issue lies within the audience’s perception of the intent of those who recover what’s been erased. Their perception of the means and intent of inclusion, also plays in to the ‘editing’ and/or ‘revising’ process given the intent. Fequiere, for example, reviews *la generacion del treinta*—the first generation of Puerto Rico’s intellectual and literary figures to have fully grown up under U.S. rule. This generation took on the national character question, earlier discussed, based on the audience they imagined and, in particular, the audience they sought to sustain. Prior to this, Puerto Rico’s university system was nonexistent, and those who pursued more than secondary education,
during Spain’s colonial rule, had to go abroad. In other words, the first audience of Puerto Rico’s intellectual class had been written to by, and for, foreigners. The conflicting relationship—as a result of lived experiences and formal intellectual training—could arguably inform the audience that would be sustained. *La generacion del treinta*, while creating avenues—publications, publishers, in which Puerto Ricans could engage with each other without an external/non-Puerto Rican filter—did so with gendered and racialized filters extending from Spanish colonialist ideology. The right to choose an audience, and to have one, is not solely a matter of participating in dominant systems of education. It is a matter of how one understands the dynamic between the speaker and the audience, particularly the conditions under which one can/has time to listen.

Colonial subjects, like Puerto Ricans, see this dynamic in how colonial forces, like Spain and later the United States, respond to leaders’ call for greater democratic rights and material stability. They sought to engage how the dynamic constructs and/or addresses the ethical discourses of democratic rights. Responses, as earlier discussed, contend with perceived economic benefits of the privileged on local, regional, and even at transnational levels. For example, Ayala and Bernabe argue that the Foraker and Jones Act, democratically speaking, sustains and supports a leaning towards statehood, despite United States’ historic indifference to plebiscites demonstrates an obvious lack of investment.¹⁹

**What informs the story –**

Still, the lack of investment is grounded on how each community understands the other’s conceptualization and practice of power. Jose Ramon Sanchez, in the introduction to *Boricua Power*, explains that understanding power emerges from a ‘dance’ between agents. Still,

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¹⁹ Puerto Rican leaders would use this in the most recent 1998, and future plebiscite propaganda.
important to his study, especially given his reference to Foucault, is Butler’s contribution to the topic, not only from her text *The Psychic Life of Power*, but also, more recently, * Undoing Gender*. In both, she too contends that power arises out of relationality and how each agent engages in the meaning making processes of the other. Still, however, because she engages with Foucault more in depth, her analysis of power becomes more critical in this conversation. Butler provides a more critical understanding by acknowledging that, when it comes to an agent’s negotiation for pursuing needs and desires, various relations come in to play. Because of the multiple relationships at play, it becomes more than a question of what Puerto Ricans own or what enduring documented influence Puerto Ricans have, as Sanchez articulates. The power in question is one in which the quality of life can be addressed from Puerto Ricans’ multiple subject positions.

The various relationships that intersect, overlap, and come in conflict within Puerto Rico’s and Puerto Ricans’ daily life as well as historical struggle are more than about whether or not the United States is willing to engage. The power dynamic is the position from which Puerto Ricans are seeking to engage an audience, and from which point they seek to construct their struggle. Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans have political economic relationships with others, not only indicative of where they emigrate to in the United States, among other countries, but also because of the other diasporic communities they come in contact with, whether in the United States or in Puerto Rico. As a result, then, it becomes important to consider what audiences they could access and how that could reconceptualize the power they have. The political economic translation of this power becomes important to consider, given how Sanchez frames Puerto Ricans’ lack of influence in contrast to Puerto Ricans who recognize the dialectic between anti-colonial struggles—stateside, within their region, and in other colonized spaces. In her essay
“Transitions as Translations,” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, “[r]ecent cultural theorists have argued that ‘translation’ better refers to a necessarily faithless appropriation, a rewriting of a text in which new meanings are always forged.”

This argument is important because new meanings that are forged in rewriting and revising are plentiful, especially given the role that origin stories play for certain communities and their developments. Tsing’s article references how historical interactions between Europeans and local indigenous translated the meanings of indigenous knowledge to economically and ideologically privilege the colonizing empire. The transition, then, from accessible remedies to commodified medicines, within an environmental context, translated into fewer rights for the colonized indigenous. Similarly, unbeknownst to Puerto Rican leaders at the turn of the century, the transition from Spain to the United States translated into the commodification of their labor and translated into disrupting the parameters of their cultural formation. The transition, for some like Sanchez, translated into better opportunities. Tsing’s quote, however, is important because the localized short term privileges garnered by semi-incorporation into the United States, rewrote the meaning of exploitation and free trade that was translated into other regions. These translations, such as NAFTA, then affected Puerto Rico’s formal and informal economy as well as Puerto Ricans’ labor in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Tsing’s argument is even more critical because of the faithlessness of those that translate to erase an original or, in translating, co-opt. Her argument, along with Butler’s, weakens Sanchez’s theoretical application to power dynamics because of the intent he privileges and the intents he overlooks.

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21 Tsing, focuses on how a Portuguese doctor appropriated indigenous knowledge for his economic benefit (255-6)
Knowledge production and distribution, and systems of education as ideological state apparati mediate the extent to which symbols are sustained to create universal truths about authority, participation, and what stability could look like. Power dynamics, and the interest desired, though, can be reimagined. Reimagining can focus on acquiring whatever needs can be addressed to best rearticulate the function of collectivity, acknowledging its limitations by not overlooking them. Furthermore, as Sanchez explains in Boricua Power’s conclusion, “The monster is not such a monster…It is not omnipotent or always prepared for the dance of power,” though its lack of preparation may be because the dance is more than about the desire to influence. As Butler’s articulates in Undoing Gender, any critical work must move beyond to answering the question of what humans need to live well. The answers may change over time; and practicing the answer necessitates, more often than not transgressing presumed limits. Still, asking such questions and acting on the answer succeeds in demonstrating that while relationality may not be clean, it remains necessary at the core of critical intellectual endeavors.

**Reimagining the intellectual elite**

Sanchez acknowledges that the cigar strike of the early twentieth century and the Young Lords’ mid-twentieth-century efforts saw success in gaining the attention of the United States. What is important about the movement, however, is that, like Muñoz argues about dance, it vanishes. Such moments as gaining attention and then losing it, become vanishing points, even as Sanchez earlier discusses, because the attention cannot be kept. Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia, however, privileges the instability because of what it provides those wanting to dance—because of the alternate functions of dance.

The dance of discourse then, especially when addressing the colonial condition of Puerto Rico, is continuously debated, requires a return to those who rhetorically construct the
documented significance: the literate. In this sense, I am discussing the formally literate who write, read, and revise the narratives of Puerto Rico’s culture and politics, given the divergent forms they engage with each other. Within the Latin American and Caribbean context, those with letters dance with power precisely because the dissemination of their letters presupposes and sustains an audience, given the channels they have navigated. Whether they support, resist, redefine, or negotiate the power dynamics of discourse and divergent technologies, can the complexity of their role still be re-imagined beyond the power dynamic continuously recirculated?

To answer this question, as it pertains to the cultural heritage debate, I will turn to a Latin American scholar who has reviewed the political economic function of intellectual centers in Spanish colonies. In *The Lettered City*, Angel Rama argues that the intellectual elite during Spanish colonial rule of the Americas were slaves and masters of power (1996). While access to education had opened to divergent populations such as women, for the working poor and non-creoles such access was premised on the belief that through participating within said institution, disenfranchised aspects of a community would become more could one afford to challenge the system of knowledge production and distribution. The works of scholars who perpetuated xenophobic, Eurocentric ideologies of colonialism demonstrate how, whether they perceive themselves as such or not, it can be argued that their positions of intellectual and published privilege maintain the status quo. They sustain an audience because they are repeating a revised version of the same message. Still, there are scholars who counter the status quo, even as they participate within institutions of power, because of where the relational centers of power exist for them. Not all power exists in the written word precisely because of the formal written word’s origin—which is always suspect because of how it has historically functioned.
Further, participation in intellectual centers does not guarantee full political and cultural integration. The literate still needed to operate in service to the supplies and demands of the institutionalization of knowledge production and distribution. What’s more, not each educated perceived their socio-economic mobility resulting from their formal training as a reason to consent to the dominant social order. Education has and still demonstrates the need to question dominant social order’s and one—especially, the intellectuals’ role—in it. While dissident intellectuals may have remained in the minority, they still found spaces to transgress the limitations of what could be spoken and taught. Whatever the intellectual elite produce and/or negate from their position as intellectuals, remains mediated by the state. If their words, acts of resistance, are accepted it is because the state perceives that form of resistance as beneficial to solidifying its authority. Resistance, then, becomes another way in which the state can imagine itself as ‘evolved’ without ever changing. Education becomes a rites of passage to consent to state, social and structural systems of domination and control. Arguably, access to knowledge and the possibility of contributing to and/or challenging it, are perceived as a form of liberation, which Rama complicates given its historical function. Althusser further explains that for educators, however, participating in this system can be a form of consent. Still, Muñoz’s call to reconceptualize the intent of act and performance to find the possibilities in them, becomes useful—not to romanticize an idealized past nor a particular position but to critically demand its possibilities through divergent performances and critical (re)readings. Because of what is kept absent, the cultural heritage narrative should not be ignored, nor should it be translated without critique. Rather, the cultural heritage narrative should be engaged as a piece of material without parameters. Doing so provides the possibility of a critical conversation that is not understood as ended with one success or failure. Because both success and failure, in retrospect, can be re-read.
The development of cultural heritage has been reread, trying to critically find use of the idea of origin as myth, making use of such stories are necessary and, in so doing, considering the parallels and intersections with other communities. Such rereadings could, then, as movements based on addressing the concerns of only a select few, make better living conditions more possible.

**How to reread**

Critical to the conversation of rereading how to approach the cultural heritage debate and its possible function, is the work of Jalil Sued-Badillo. Sued-Badillo has engaged in critical work to uncover Puerto Rico’s indigenous past. He has written and discussed its function extensively. In a Plenary Session held at the Fifty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology—Rethinking the Quincenntial: Consequences for Past and Present, Jalil Sued-Badillo explains:

The Caribbean people are searching anxiously to extol symbols of identity as much as they are searching to prove the falsehood of colonial myths that have devaluated their human worth as well as that of their lands. The indigenous past of the Caribbean—where ironically the native islanders have for the most part been gone for centuries—is one of the most cultivated and most jealously treasured symbols of popular identity (Hulme 1987, 1990; Sued-Badillo 1978). There are obvious reasons for this, because in that precolonial past the Caribbean people expect to encounter the confirmations of their social worth and the confidence to persevere as nations in the future (Sued-Badillo 605).

Here, Sued-Badillo is arguing that recovery projects are tied to one’s social worth. Still, though, what recovering the past demonstrates is that more than social worth is recovered
through recognizing the past that has been silenced. To recover the past is not to recover its value because it has been taken by others. Rather it is to conserve the present as a past. The Puerto Rican national community remains on the move, in part because of how the more uncovered leads to greater debates. These debates’ factors multiply the wider and more complex the narrative becomes as a result of histories and mythologies being uncovered The dance for power over the narrative no longer needs external powers, such as the United States. Because of the complexities resulting in recovered histories, the dance for power calls for partners who are similarly disenfranchised, as their similar struggles can alter what can vanish as the choreographed and improvised dance for power continues. Sued-Badillo is calling for indigenous descendants’ confidence to persevere as nations in the future, persevere not for others to define or validate because of how historical silence and erasure affected their population. Examining the intent of recovery, it comes easily apparent to find a romanticism within Sued-Badillo’s words and his career’s greater intent.

Sued-Badillo’s discussion on the significance of recovering indigenous roots foments the notion of an idealized past. So little is known and, despite DNA tests, recovering indigenous heritage is more than about the right to claim what science can prove. Recovery projects such as these can produce other possibilities, however, and through their mythologies provide tools of political possibility. Here is where Jose Esteban Muñoz becomes useful again. Muñoz calls for re-examining the past because it exists concurrently with the present and future. Its recovery cannot be romanticized as perfect because it wasn’t. What the past can demonstrate, however, is what is absent in the present, why the dance vanishes after so much planning and choreography. Part of its vanishing is because what is imagined as real is often imagined as infallible.
In her review of David Boyle’s *Authenticity* (2006), Heynen asks what happens when definitions of the real contradict each other. The discourse of nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-century Puerto Rican nationalists suffers this dilemma because of the critical mythologies they overlook. Most specifically, they draw on myths that privilege their ideology without seeking to practice what the myths call for: to better the conditions of life for more than a few. A readdressing of Puerto Rico’s history of oppression needs to explore the definition of Puerto Ricanness and what characteristics are immortalized through discursive practices that seek to imagine one sole origin to be imitated or a possible re-imagined as liberatory. What specifically can be re-imagined or reconfigured for the sake of a desired authentic representation, if and when one representation is insufficient? To answer that question, leaders who sought to speak of and for Puerto Rico’s independence will be examined next. How they wrote the struggle, and how they were written becomes important in taking into consideration what can be and still needs to be reimagined to make sure the struggle addresses more than the needs of a few.
To begin discussing who gets to speak for Puerto Ricans’ cultural affirmation, I will return to Jalil Sued-Badillo and a recent interview he had regarding his book, *Agüeybaná el Bravo, la Recuperación de un símbolo*. In the interview, he discusses the cultural and political significance of recovering cultural myths. He explains, “In my past, in my ancestral past, which is not a mythical phenomenon they were a grand community…and while we may not be like that now, we can be like that again…so that, indigenous nostalgia is converted into a political agenda…”

Sued-Badillo, in his interview, is arguing and advocating for a community’s right to their ideological myths, as those myths empower said community. He draws comparisons between the Romans and the Greeks, explaining that while a lot has changed since their romanticized past, they still pull a great deal from it. What is even more telling in his interview is that he contends that recovering Taíno mythology is as important for Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico as it for Puerto Ricans in the United States. His tenure advocating for the recovery of indigenous mythologies and heroic figures is grounded in the recognition that such a recovery can foster positive self-image with a disenfranchised community. Given the political economic reality of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and in the United States, such work can foster a great understanding of Puerto Ricans’ capabilities.

Sued-Badillo’s work regarding the role of recovering Puerto Rico’s indigenous history has continued because of greater historical and cultural investment in the recovery process. For him, though, uncovering remnants of Puerto Rico’s indigenous history is also rooted in recovering heroes. What Sued-Badillo argues regarding the recovery of indigenous myths can be

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22 This interview took place online and was posted both on youtube.com and on the social network website, lostTaïnotribe.com [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww1ciuusT94](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww1ciuusT94)
especially useful in how stateside Puerto Ricans recover and reclaim the myths of earlier independence leaders. The recovery of these leaders equally support the culturally affirming possibilities of recovering indigenous mythical heroes because, arguably, the records and lived experiences of said heroes are more visibly accessible. While Puerto Ricans’ support of independence has decreased extensively over the years, these leaders’ contribute to culturally affirming narratives that seek to defend Puerto Ricans’ ability to govern each other, support themselves and address their material and political needs.

Before I explain how and why, however, I will briefly discuss the significance of a recent discussion around the plebiscite. I start with the plebiscite discussion because of what it demonstrates regarding how political leaders imagine Puerto Rico’s political relationship as addressing cultural and communal affirmation. This discussion, by extension, is especially significant, given how heroes have been and continue to be imagined as connected to the status debate and what it culturally suggests. For many critical of United States’ relationship with Puerto Rico and the resulting codependency, it is the imagined resolution of the status question that has both constructed heroes and heroic endeavors in defense of Puerto Ricans’ liveliness.

In April 2011, at the urging of current Governor Fortuno, Congress had passed a resolution to support a plebiscite in Puerto Rico,. Governor Fortuno, member of the New Progressive Party (PNP), felt it pertinent to Puerto Rico’s political stability to revisit the question of Puerto Rico’s political relationship with the United States. The significance of this plebiscite lies in the United States’ current political economic crisis, its effect on Puerto Rico’s material stability as well as in the geographic distribution between stateside and island based Puerto Ricans.
In the fall of 2011, leaders from Puerto Rico’s three main political parties—New Progressive (PNP), Popular Democratic (PDP) and Independence (PIP) parties—took on the question of whether or not stateside Puerto Ricans should vote in the plebiscite. Jose E. Delgado, of prominent Puerto Rican newspaper *El Nuevo Día*, reviewed the discussion, highlighting its main points. His article title frames the discussion, in that the majority of Puerto Rico’s Congress agreed: stateside Puerto Ricans should not participate in a plebiscite vote.

I incorporate this conversation into the conversation of heroes because of each party’s representative’s reasons for not condoning stateside Puerto Rican population. The Secretary of State and member of Puerto Rico’s National Progressive Party (PNP) claimed that Puerto Ricans in the U.S., in choosing to leave, have more political power in the U.S. Senator Eduardo Bhatia (PPD) claimed that each person with Puerto Rican residency should be able to vote in the election, whether on site or by mail. The representative from the Puerto Rican independence party argued that every Puerto Rican has to participate in the self-determination process, regardless of where they reside, save for recent immigrants to Puerto Rico (Delgado).

As Eduardo Bhatia, current PPD Senator and former Puerto Rican Federal Affairs Administration (PRFAA) executive director stated, island based Puerto Ricans are more concerned with improving their material living conditions. The current concern, which extends concerns and preoccupations with 1998’s plebiscite sentiment, is that those conditions will not be addressed in the conversation of the status question. That last plebiscite was framed by the devastation of a hurricane. The material status of poor Puerto Ricans’ livelihood took precedent among the greater public. The question of whether or not the status would address material and political instability, coupled with heavy media campaigning, fueled a majority vote for none of the above.

23 PNP is the prostatehood party; PDP is the popular democratic party, which supports the commonwealth status.
Puerto Rico’s current cultural and political climate demonstrates Puerto Ricans’ greater concern with their livelihood and their human rights. In the past few years, Puerto Rican students protested against the privatization of their university. Political corruption has tainted the credibility of numerous political leaders; Puerto Rican independence organization leaders have been detained and released. Furthermore, Puerto Rico’s government has suffered bankruptcy—in 2008, the government shut down because of lack of funds. In sum, storms of political mobilization, unrest and calls for human rights’ defenses will play into how Puerto Ricans will and can imagine the status question addressing their political and material needs.

Stateside Puerto Ricans’ solidarity with various movements, such as the student movement, political prisoner amnesty, and economic instability play into the status debate because of how they imagine themselves as part of the conversation and why. Unlike earlier decades where stateside Puerto Rican political and cultural organizations represented a minority of Puerto Ricans, Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States outnumber those in Puerto Rico. In the political leaders’ quotes from which Delgado pulls, this distribution does not factor into how they imagine how stateside Puerto Ricans’ lived experiences can affect the conversation. Secretary McClintock, though, does claim that Puerto Ricans in the U.S. have greater political power. How stateside Puerto Ricans imagine that power, and how they speak from it, however, sustains a relationship to the status question.

Stateside Puerto Ricans imagine the possibility of returning for a number of reasons. Imagining the potentiality of return is complemented by the financial, political and cultural investments they make in Puerto Rico. What they imagine, arguably, is a space untainted by the dangers of their urban enclaves or development and yet this imagining, and the potentials such an image has, frames the solidarity they practice and, more specifically the conversation they can
have with Puerto Rico’s status. In this conversation, and in what they can imagine, the narrative of return relates to the status debate because of how Puerto Rico’s political definition continues to speak to how Puerto Ricans relate to each other and to other nonwhite groups in the United States.

It is in these relations that earlier Puerto Rican leaders begin to configure a discourse regarding what Puerto Rico’s idealized status would be. In particular, independence leaders who spent time in the United States, relate the racism of other groups to Puerto Rico’s political economic exploitation. Puerto Rico’s status has been historically linked to their racialization—not only in how the United States’ ideological benevolence to their docility, but also in how Puerto Ricans racialized their community’s political possibilities. Even if and when Puerto Rico’s independence movement has few organizations and even lesser support, a great deal can be gleaned from how they imagine what could be possible for Puerto Rico. More specifically, how they speak of what Puerto Ricans can do for themselves foments their power. For stateside Puerto Ricans, though, the discourse of independence leaders has provided them a frame of analysis and discursive action. Regardless of whether or not they participate in the plebiscite, they contribute to the conversation because of the voices they imagine speaking for Puerto Ricans’ political potentiality in the United States as well as in Puerto Rico. Here, I want to discuss how leaders, like Oscar Lopez Rivera, pull from Puerto Rico political leaders to sustain a conversation of whose contributions to community building and empowerment are necessary. In so doing, I want to explain how the status debate rhetorically constructs cultural heroes while simultaneously setting parameters around participation. While these parameters are unintentional, they frame how and why Puerto Ricans leave Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican enclaves. While many Puerto Ricans migrate to address material needs, those in search of safer
spaces to live at times leave enclaves, neighborhood and barrios because of who attempts to speak for them. How does who speaks for them demonstrate the reasons Puerto Ricans leave? As with the current discussion around Puerto Rico’s pending plebiscite, familial affiliation, residency, lived experience and material depravity interweave through Puerto Rican political nationalist discourse. The significance of how the threads in the particularities of the roles Puerto Ricans are expected to take in this conversation and greater move towards Puerto Ricans’ political and cultural affirmation.

**Power relations**

Stateside Puerto Ricans’ engagement with Puerto Rico’s political and economic instability remains as classed as Puerto Ricans’ possibility of moving between both the United States and Puerto Rico. Stateside Puerto Ricans’ temporary or permanent return and their perception of Puerto Rico’s Eden-like political economic mythology further the complication because of what filters their exposure to Puerto Rico’s current reality. In *Near Northwest Side Story*, for example, Gina Perez explains that the stateside Puerto Ricans she interviewed perceive returning to Puerto Rico as culturally necessary to both evade urban violence as well as sustain cultural ties. A number of her responses claimed they wanted to avoid becoming Americanized. From both her experience as well as the experience of returnees and visitors with whom she engaged during her ethnographic work, however, Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico politically and culturally noted the distinctions between the two. In the transnational dynamics she reviews and discusses, stateside and island-based Puerto Ricans are beginning to construct themselves as

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24 Maria Acosta Cruz presented the argument regarding Puerto Rican independence leaders’ positive contribution to Puerto Rico’s cultural affirmation at PRSA’s 2010 meeting. She is currently working on a manuscript in which she will explain this in further detail.
relatively foreign. In spite of being foreign to each other, however, familial relations frame the possibility of familiarity.

Relational dynamics between stateside and island-based Puerto Ricans, then, are fluid and unstable because of how they culturally and politically imagine the potentiality of the other. The status question parallels with the question of cultural authenticity in that a definitive status can require a more permanent state that psychically affects how Puerto Ricans relate to their histories, as well as how they imagine what said histories can provide to/for posterity. Who Puerto Ricans in both the United States and in Puerto Rico understand can speak for them, then, remains grounded in how the speakers/representatives imagine them and their possibilities.

Here, I will return to Oscar Lopez Rivera’s letters. While he has written extensively on how Puerto Ricans imagine possibilities for themselves and each other, I center my rhetorical analysis on his letters because of how he intimately reflects on why he believes Puerto Ricans’ best exercise for self-determination is independence. In his letters, he addresses more than the aforementioned questions. His letters also highlight the turns of migration, failed integration, economic depravity and political repression that frame earlier leaders’ and contemporary island-based independence activists’ imagining for Puerto Rico’s right to resist and combat US colonialism. His historical legacy as a member of the FALN—Fuerzas Armadas para la Liberacion Nacional—sought to complement the efforts of clandestine organizations that were their contemporaries like Los Macheteros, among other political groups.25 Lopez

25 For the purpose of specificity and brevity, I only cite los Macheteros because I will be comparing Ojeda Rios to Oscar Lopez Rivera. They were each other’s contemporaries, which Lopez cites, and Ojeda Rios’ murder demonstrate the political repression and brutality Puerto Ricans have and continue to suffer. Juan Mari Bras, among other intellectual and political leaders are significant, though, those reviewed in this chapter are those that call for armed struggle. I intent to examine the discourses of all 20th century leaders in later projects because of the profound call they make to address political repression and also because of the complex masculinities present in their discourse as well as in the rhetorical construction of their heroism.
Rivera explains that his political outrage at the inhumane treatment first generations of migrant Puerto Ricans experienced at schools, at work, with housing and health care spark his historical and continued critique at the United States’ political power. His experiences as a Vietnam veteran, community organizer and young Puerto Rican, trying to live with dignity in a community that considered him and his contemporaries as less than human, demonstrate the need to address more than what Puerto Ricans in his neighborhood suffered. It is a question of finding Puerto Ricans who countered negative stereotypes but also provided ample material that could allow Puerto Ricans to imagine themselves differently than dominant society sees them. The desire for wanting to historicize Puerto Ricans’ political potential had him turning to Puerto Rican political leaders like Juan Mari Bras, Filiberto Ojeda Rios and Pedro Albizu Campos.

In Puerto Rican Chicago cultural and political politics, Albizu Campos is emblematic not only of grounding Puerto Ricans’ potentiality but also of how Puerto Rican cultural organizations’ such as the one Lopez Rivera co-founded, contextualize both their political and cultural efforts. Pedro Albizu Campos’s rhetorically constructed heroism is grounded in how his discourse affirmed Puerto Ricans’ possibility to defend themselves but also because of the obstacles he achieved despite racialized and material setbacks. Further, especially in the case of Chicago’s Puerto Rican community, honoring his cultural significance was tied to the community’s political and cultural authority to claim and defend their historical ethnic enclave. How the speeches for which he was arrested during his political tenure frame Puerto Ricans, however, as influential as they may be, define how Puerto Ricans can defend their community—

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26 I primarily reference Oscar Lopez Rivera as ‘Oscar’ because I imagine this dissertation as continuing the conversation we had begun when I first started writing him in November 2004.
27 I had originally intended to include Juan Mari Bras, former president of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. As a result of space and time, however, I only focus on the parallels between Albizu Campos, Ojeda Rios and Oscar Lopez Rivera. I do hope to return to analyzing male pro-independence leaders across class and party lines because of the greater question of revolutionary masculinity.
nation, in his frame of reference. In so doing, the social roles valued in his discourse leave much to consider.

Los Macheteros leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, a contemporary of López Rivera, maintains the call and practice for Puerto Ricans’ armed struggle against U.S. colonial rule. While the narrative he espouses regarding how Puerto Ricans should defend their rights complements Albizu Campos, so too does his rhetorical limitations. The material and social disparities among Puerto Ricans he does not address—present in Los Macheteros unstable political mobilization failures—equally leave a great deal to ponder regarding how he imagines Puerto Ricans’ political contributions to each other and Puerto Rico’s liberty.

López Rivera’s case, pending advocacy for his release from prison and the narratives still being written regarding his political and cultural significance, extend the aforementioned leaders’ work but from a stateside subject position. López Rivera not only speaks out against United States’ human rights abuses against Puerto Ricans and other colonized groups from the United States, he does so having spent most of his life here. In other words, he speaks of the status, of Puerto Rico’s colonialism as a political prisoner who worked in defense of Puerto Rico’s independence. His heroism, all the while, equally serves United States and Puerto Rico. Because, in the nature of our correspondence, I shared my reflection over social relations within Puerto Rican political mobilization efforts, he addresses said disparities. In so reflecting on how he speaks, though, I will historically contextualize his responses in the aforementioned leaders because of their influence over his discourse and how that demonstrates the relationship between cultural authenticity and political autonomy.
The limits of discourse

To explain the discursive limitations regarding how cultural authenticity is framed with how Puerto Ricans construct each other’s political possibility I will return to McClintock’s claim that Puerto Ricans in the United States have greater political power. His claim is significant because of how he imagines Puerto Ricans in the United States and how he politically understands what can frame Puerto Rico’s potential—greater power comes with affiliation to the United States. Stateside Puerto Ricans’ continued racialization, displacement from established communities, however, demonstrate how that greater power does not translate into greater stability. Stateside Puerto Ricans imagine returns because of the type of power they imagine possible for themselves and for their kin. The desire for power, though, privileges a particular relational frame that is neither universal nor fully encapsulating of Puerto Ricans’ political and cultural potential.

To contextualize how, Foucault’s analysis on the role of language in its complicity to repression will be useful to start. In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault states that institutions insist that participants: “have nothing to fear from launching out [into the world of discourse]; we’re here to show you discourse is within the established order of things…if [discourse] is to have a certain power, then it is we, and we alone, who give it that power” (216). The power institutions, such as Puerto Rican cultural and political nationalisms, imagine they can give to Puerto Ricans is through discursive attempts at affirming their particular possibilities. In the case of McClintock, the possibility for Puerto Ricans’ power lay in full incorporation into the United States. As a man educated in prestigious stateside universities and who operates from a position of political and cultural privilege, relative to racially subordinated counterparts, the
power he gives is presupposed by the power he believes he has gained in participating within U.S. dominant institutions.

Returning to Gina Perez’s ethnographic study, however, such participation is materially informed. The potential relationship McClintock envisions for Puerto Rico is based on his experience, overlooking the poverty and material instability that continues to shape how Puerto Ricans leave Puerto Rico and/or the United States. While Puerto Ricans will eventually choose one place or another, Puerto Ricans’ economic possibilities inform where they could end up living. Federal taxation, which would come with statehood, would more economically constrain Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico who barely make a living wage. Furthermore, United States economic interests continue to exploit natural and material resources in ways that further devastate Puerto Ricans’ living conditions and physical health. Integration into the United States would not alter said practices, as recent pipelines in Native American communities clearly demonstrate: United States political and economic practices will continue to benefit those who control financial assets.

It is in response to the United States’ disregard for Puerto Ricans’ livelihood that independence leaders like Albizu Campos speak out against United States’ abuses. To further explain, I will pull from one of Albizu Campos’s speeches. “No Yankee has been born that can attempt our enslavement who can say that he can govern us at his will; they say they can rule our sky, that they can determine how and when we can fly in our skies and use our sea, just because.”28 (69). In this statement, Pedro Albizu Campos generalizes how Yankees, U.S. North Americans, established an order regarding their self-imposed authority to govern Puerto Ricans’ existence in Puerto Rico. The sea and sky function as a critical image of freedom and liberty that

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28 In the original text, the stenographer transcribed: No ha nacido el yanqui que pretenda nuestra esclavitud que pueda decir que puede disponer de nosotros porque sí; ellos dice que son los que pueden disponer de nuestro cielo, que son ellos los que determinan que podemos volar en nuestro cielo y usar de nuestro mar, porque sí
Albizu Campos argues Yankees believe they can provide for Puerto Ricans. Already, he is explaining that Yankees believe they have the right to give Puerto Ricans what Albizu Campos argues already belongs to them. The significance of this speech lies in more than how he criticizes U.S. colonial intervention and control over Puerto Rico’s access to their environment and greater natural resources, which he later discusses.

As much as his words frame the United States’ disregard for Puerto Ricans’ right to space and people, his romanticization of Puerto Rico’s earlier relationship with Spain overlooks the extension of dominion and control that the United States represents. His discourse dilutes Spanish historical colonialism in resistance to the effects of US intervention. Albizu argues Spain, in their earlier efforts, respected Puerto Rico’s right to independence. To frame the absolute evil that the United States represents in Puerto Rico, he rhetorically empathizes with and appreciates Spain’s benevolence. He provides an answer that imagines an idealized relationship with Spain to frame the bondage and political repression suffered as a result of the United States’ colonialism. He defines the possibility of power as what Spain had granted, overlooking the culturally repressive policies so many Puerto Ricans had to overcome under Spanish colonialism. Further, his discourse neglects Spain’s disregard for Puerto Rico’s economic possibility. Such a discursive turn, though, ideologically overlooks Spain’s history of slavery and Puerto Ricans’ second-class citizenship in that colonial frame. The limitations also result from Albizu Campos’ taking for granted what structural disparity is critical to address in the greater project of anti-colonial struggle. Before discussing, that, however, how Spain had viewed Puerto Rico during their decline will be used to further contextualized Albizu Campos’ discursive limitations.
In *The Conquest of History*, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara historically analyzes the political economic relationship Spain had had with its last colonies—Cuba, Philippines, and Puerto Rico—before they were annexed by the United States and freed. In the specific discussion he has with historical Spanish and Puerto Rican leaders’ testimonies regarding that politically turbulent time, Nowara finds that Spain saw it had more to gain in losing Puerto Rico than it had in keeping it as a possession. Between Puerto Rico’s size and the cost of investment in contrast to the net worth of its exports, Puerto Rico cost more than it could provide to Spain. In the remaining years of Spain’s attempt to keep its last remaining colonies, then, had been to preserve the myth of its empire more than out of any desire to recognize Puerto Rico’s inhabitants as worthy of Spanish affiliation. Spanish leaders, in the decline of the Spanish empire, saw Puerto Rico as an economic backwater—Puerto Rico’s autonomy and independence would benefit Spain because the nation would not lose on its investment. Spain’s historical perspective regarding Puerto Rico’s capabilities and Puerto Ricans’ humanity is not that much different than the United States’ historic and continued perception of Puerto Rico. It is for this reason that no matter what heroism and affirmation Albizu Campos’ discourse provides for Puerto Ricans’ political possibility, it is important to examine where he is imagining power coming from and how he defines allies’ support and respect for Puerto Rico’s sovereignty.

The greater context of this speech, its possibilities and limitations, connect to the aforementioned plebiscite debate because of this greater question of power and authority imagined as coming from or being granted by an external force. The relationship I am more specifically highlighting is the one between McClintock’s claim and how he similarly imagines power as existing in relation to external entities. McClintock may support the United States’ benevolent support and respect for Puerto Ricans, arguing that Puerto Ricans in the United States
have greater power, however, he does so in the same rhetorical vein that Albizu Campos frames Spain’s recognition of Puerto Rico’s sovereignty. The United States’ perception and treatment of Puerto Ricans in the mainland, however, leaves much to further extrapolate given not only Albizu Campos’ historical experience in Puerto Rico but also Puerto Ricans’ continued interaction with public services, local government and with U.S. society. These relations are an extension of what Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico encountered with Spain, furthering the very profound parallel between two figures whom imagine divergent ends for what would be best for Puerto Rico.

Still, Albizu Campos’ greater discursive projects and ends contrast more heavily with McClintock because of Albizu Campos’ primary argument and intention lay in persuading Puerto Ricans they can defend and support themselves. The heroism espoused on his image stems from the power he recognizes Puerto Ricans are capable of exercising. He calls Puerto Ricans to support one another in way that counter McClintock’s thought that power solely remains in one’s relationship with the United States.

Albizu Campos’ significance in Puerto Rico’s history and politics, as well as his continued legacy in Puerto Ricans’ cultural and political affirmation in light of the United States’ repressive and exploitative rule, has and continues to be extensively covered. While the breadth and depth of such work have been produced in chapters, articles, books, and film29—I will review three who contend with the effectiveness of his discourse and the significance of its political and cultural legacy. Each of them take on the criminality of his discourse, his romanticization of the nation and such efforts continued inspiring efforts across generations.

29 Over the past few years, scholars and cultural workers have been raising funds to make a docudrama regarding the life and legacy of Albizu Campos. http://www.whoisalbizu.com/. His daughter has also written a biography and prior to that, other biographic works have been produced.
Ideological Inheritance

Ivonne Acosta, in *Palabra Como Delito*, gathers twelve of the speeches for which he was arrested. The speeches she gathers are later on his political career, after the fall of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, and prior to the extensive amount of time he would spend in jail as a result. She collects these speeches, citing the specific discourse for which he was arrested for sedition. She highlights the specific words in her introduction, stating that his critiques of U.S. imperialism, U.S. policies and economic practices exploitation of Puerto Rico’s labor force, working poor and women were among the charges for which he was arrested. Neither the length of the speech, nor the site at which they were delivered factor in as much as the injustices his rhetoric highlights. Because he appeals to Puerto Ricans acknowledging the manners in which United States’ benevolent colonialism continues to degrade and dehumanize them, his words and ideas are criminalized because of what he does and how he fails to adhere to Law 53, which makes it illegal to speak against the United States (1993).

In “Colonial Research, Colonial Memory,” Victor Villanueva cites Acosta’s anthology expounds on her arguments from the more specific subject position of a stateside Puerto Rican scholar who finds cultural affirmation and personal struggle in the ability to recover Puerto Rican cultural and political legacies. As the son of Puerto Ricans who emigrated as a result of being unable to financially stabilize themselves in Puerto Rico, Villanueva’s article grapples with the privilege of what he is able to recover as an academic, as well as what the ability to recover said history means in light of his geographic and cultural distance.

Juan Manuel Carrion, who compares Albizu Campos’ Puerto Rican nationalist legacy with Marcus Garvey’s legacy on Black Nationalism, highlights the effectiveness of Albizu Campos’ rhetorical legacy as stemming from his ability to culturally affirm the political possibilities of Puerto Ricans which imagines the political opportunities in self-governance. Each
Villanueva contributes to the rhetorical and political significance of Albizu Campos’ discourse by articulating the audience to which he speaks. He writes, “though he spoke for the worker and the peasant, his appeal was limited to the middle class when time came for votes. For all his speaking, for all his attracting of audiences, ballots told of a remarkably small following” (85). Rhetorically, because he focuses on gaining the votes of the few, despite the working class of which he spoke, it was important for him to center his rhetorical appeal as romanticizing Spain’s influence. Their material realities were more negatively affected by U.S. intervention than that of the working poor because the working poor were equally exploited under Spanish and U.S. colonial rule. The middle and upper class, under both colonial governments, were exploited and undermined under both.

Juan Manuel Carrion’s article uses biographical data and historic context to frame Albizu Campos’ continued legacy Carrion complements Villanueva’s claim regarding Albizu Campos’ intended audience when he explains:

A type of economic nationalism was also party of Albizu’s ideology…For Albizu the nation had an indispensable “material” component in that the nation seeks to control its economic resources” The comprehension of what is a nationality” requires us to understand that it is “not only the ethnic, cultural and religious unity of human society, but also the community of its material interests upon a determined territory, in which its own sons should be lords and masters” (Albizu Campos [1930] 1975a: 144). (41)

Essential to Albizu Campos’ economic nationalism was a sharp indictment of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. This indictment, which he had begun to make in the U.S. Depression, is premised on United States’ devastation and mass commercialization of Puerto Rico’s agricultural
economy. As a result of mass commercialization, small middle class farmers could no longer be their own lords and masters. What is also especially significant within this quote is his reference to what unity entails—an ideological similarity and consensus that, even as Carrion argues that Albizu Campos’ Hispanofilia was not racist but rather a critical resistance to U.S. cultural and political degradation. However, as discussed in chapter two, building one’s national character under the guise of unity whether under a religion, ethnicity or cultural practice, undermines the historic legacy of how cultural modes of production and performance, interracial and interethnic relations in Puerto Rico created social and material hierarchies that still persist on the island and have, to some degree, permeated through stateside social relations. In other words, as strategic as his call for unity and multiculturalism is, especially considering the time in which he is speaking, it is a multiculturalism that unintentionally erases and overlooks the cultural degradation of anyone who does not adhere to cultural and religious belief systems. Such ideological limitations continue to explain and justify why Puerto Ricans who leave as a result of economic need are wary of return because of how their lifestyles and cultural engagement are affirmed in the places they occupy.

Returning to the economic nationalism question Carrion defends, however, especially as it pertains to the aforementioned argument regarding inclusion, the discursive turn to have one be lords and masters can, arguably, undermine the historical legacy of his illegitimacy and the orphaned state of his childhood. Carrion summarizes Albizu Campos’ childhood as one in which his mother died young and his aunt raised him. When he speaks of being recognized by his biological father, however, Carrion sites that Albizu Campos was not recognized until he was 23. While Albizu Campos carries his father’s name with pride, what is telling of this aspect of his history is the historical illegitimacy of mulatto and other mixed race children that, more often
than not, had dire economic and social effects on their livelihoods. That residue from Spanish socialization has been extensively discussed. The greater significance of that illegitimacy is the role and burden women like his mother and his aunt had to carry in not only raising children without a father in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Puerto Rico, but also experiencing the greater economic and social strain that meant for them. Women’s autonomy was racialized and class and, in the role of motherhood, especially out of wedlock, their struggles were more than Albizu Campos depicted. I will discuss the complexities of motherhood in the next chapter, but it is important to cite as a critical example how, despite his best intents at inclusion and multiculturalism, his rhetoric clearly overlooks a great deal of how to best foment and sustain support. He himself does not support the complex struggles of his compatriots, watering down Puerto Ricans’ lack of support resulting from consenting to U.S. intervention, overlooking the historic racism, sexism and classism that so many had to overcome.

Still, his legacy remains because, despite these discursive limitations and absences, the overarching message of cultural affirmation and defense of Puerto Rico’s right to self-govern and ability to self-care permeate through various leaders and are exported into the U.S. by those leaders who sought to sustain the efforts to bring attention to Puerto Rico’s colonial reality and offer, as a needed response, the island-nation’s independence. What scholars and, more specifically, activists draw from Albizu Campos’ speeches and the greater example of his life and legacy is the desire to rhetorically defend Puerto Ricans’ possibilities at defining their own existence in relation to resistance the greater repression that surrounds their era.

While many leaders in Puerto Rico and in many Puerto Ricans in the United States draw from Albizu Campos’ political and cultural significance, I will focus primary on leaders whose discourse and life examples answer the call for armed struggle. While various collectives in the
United States and Puerto Rico worked and wrote in defense of Puerto Rico’s independence from US colonialism, I will only focus on a few. Filiberto Ojeda Rios and Oscar Lopez Rivera’s critical significance lay in how they carried on Albizu’s rhetorical romanticized past and idealized future. They similarly carried on this vision all the while suffering similar forms of brutality and abuse from the US government.

**Establishing Connections**

Filiberto Ojeda Rios’ life and legacy is centered on his tenure with Boricua Popular Army Los Macheteros and the decades he lived underground, a fugitive of the law. He was escaping the law because the FBI wanted him for his involvement in the organization’s seven million dollar theft from Wells Fargo Bank. The army, among its other attacks against US government property and corporate investment, defended its acts as attacks against a colonial government and its greater defense of Puerto Rico’s independence. In the context of this work, Ojeda’s words defended Puerto Ricans’ right to bear arms against U.S. colonial and economic exploitation and Latin America’s greater project to defend the democratic ideals and dreams of earlier leaders.

Among the leaders whose visions he mentions are Albizu Campos and earlier independence leaders such as Ramon Emeterio Betances. The decision to reference his work in the context of earlier generations’ efforts establishes his credibility in relation to these leaders’ earlier efforts. These references work to contextualize the continued struggle and to, more

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30 I focus on key leaders’ whose inhumane treatment under US law enforcement and in US prison because how such inhumane treatment is incorporated as intersecting with stateside Puerto Ricans’ regional criminalization and social as well as political marginalization.

31 The collection Ojeda’s speeches and writings titled, “Comandante Filiberto Speaks,” was compiled and independently published by Ricanstruction, a New York based new Nuyorican grassroots collective and punk band. Because of the difficulty in obtaining original documents and more specific translations of transcribed text, I am making note that I will have altered a number of the original text’s words, aware of the contextual limitations I had found within the greater text. As Acosta had noted in her own compilation of Albizu’s speeches in *Palabra Como Delito*, I do hope that a greater and more extensive compilation will exist in the future as such would more adequately provide the greater public with the depth and breadth of Ojeda’s insights and observations. Still,
specifically, establish credibility based on the longevity of the struggle for Puerto Rico’s independence. With these references, Ojeda specifically calls attention to Puerto Ricans’ desire and ability to recognize that their political relationship with the United States, among other territories, has denied them specific rights.

Ojeda himself makes these connections during his time in New York. His mother brought him and his family to New York when Ojeda was eleven years old (Ojeda, 6). From 1944 to 1947, he lived in New York and while there, he explains, he was “confronted, for the first time in [his] life, with all the elements of racism, social discrimination and social oppression that characterized the life of Puerto Ricans emigres” (6). Like Albizu Campos explains in his speeches, the racism encountered on immigrating to the United States’ mainland set Ojeda’s ideological foundation regarding the US government’s consideration for the livelihood of Puerto Ricans.

Ojeda’s influence not only stems from the ill treatment Puerto Ricans suffered in New York but also because of earlier family ties. Prior to immigrating to the United States, Ojeda cites his father’s position as a Cadet of the Republic, which worked to recruit volunteers for a Puerto Rican Army, as informative of the socio-political context of Puerto Rico’s condition. Like Albizu Campos, he cites educators’ disdain for the imposition of the English language as a method of resisting U.S. imposed government and rule. Though Ojeda’s childhood education was primarily framed by an education the U.S. governed and controlled, the efforts of his family and arguably his teachers critically engaged him in imagining another relationship with the United States and with the current global climate of his era (6-7).

collaboration with former political prisoners and the collective’s solidarity efforts with Ojeda and his family after his murder, warrant the credibility and use of this compilation.

32 Here, I inserted the quote just as the translator had typed it in the publication.
While in his youth, his generation grew up with the rise and fall of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, Ojeda credits his work as an extension of such efforts. In his youth, adolescence and young adulthood, he witnessed firsthand not only teachers’ disdain for U.S. involvement in their pedagogy but also the United States’ inhumane and exploitative treatment of Puerto Rican migrants and other non-Anglos. His experiences in the labor force, working in U.S. factories in the 1950s furthered his understanding of the depth and breadth of colonial exploitation. He explains, “It was this contact with [fellow] Puerto Ricans in the factories which finally helped me understand the true nature of exploitation, racism and colonialism…I was able to establish the connection between workers’ exploitation and the predominating economic system, including colonialism” (6). In this reflection over his adulthood working in New York, he witnessed the ghettoization of Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans’ economic plight was tied to their material exploitation which furthered the project of Puerto Rico’s colonialism to Puerto Rican migrants. On leaving Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans would encounter another form of exploitation and isolation.

Ojeda’s connections demonstrate how migration and stateside living did very little to provide Puerto Ricans more opportunities. In the mid-fifties, however, Ojeda joined Puerto Rican independence efforts, later joining Movimiento Libertador de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rican Liberation Movement) to further his education regarding Puerto Rico’s history and politics (7). Critical engagement with Puerto Rico’s history and politics further establishes his credibility and the turn to education also extends the greater significance of what is required for heroism. The connection between the daily plights he witnessed as a factory worker and his ability to join a movement in which he obtained more education demonstrates the role of a consciousness-raised
framework. The firsthand exploitation he witnessed needed a greater historical contextualization because of the movement he joined.

The role of education, as he Ojeda explains it, returns us to Sued-Badillo’s interview regarding the preservation of history and the strategic tools of cultural affirmation and dignity recovery in light of social negligence and political repression. When explaining why Taíno myths are so important, he explains that those recovering that past are trying to build a history that could then reflect the type of community the myth makers want it to be. Such a claim connects to the role of education in Ojeda’s consciousness raising efforts because of what limited knowledge Puerto Ricans had had, especially in the mid-twentieth century, to their historical collective mobilizations to address and attempt overcome economic and political exploitation. For Ojeda and for Sued-Badillo, as he later explained in his interview, it was a matter of not inventing a new narrative or framework for addressing exploitation. Rather, it was a matter of working with what critical history and examples were already present in Puerto Rico’s history.

Sued-Badillo acknowledges the need for continued debate regarding indigenous history and memory, which extends Ojeda’s project of education and critical consciousness because both myth making and history recovery lay at the groundwork of a community’s collective mobilization. The heroism and affirmation that remains absent in the daily lives of Puerto Ricans, to be present in histories that dominant society overlooks and disregards, becomes a profound catalyst for framing the defense of an independence movement. Ojeda, like Albizu Campos, urged Puerto Ricans to stake claim to their rights to have a say over their bodies, their livelihoods and their worth because such worth does not have to be an imagined possibility. That worth has been defended since and before the myths Puerto Ricans seek to make and recover regarding where they come from and where—economically and politically—they imagine
themselves. How they imagine it and how they write that, however, still leaves more questions than answers, especially considering the geographic distribution of Puerto Ricans and the continued instability resulting from the current state of global economic affairs.

Focusing on the question of discourse and its attempt to create heroes, though, the muddied line between revising mythologies with what is present and who remains continues to permeate the greater conversation regarding independence. More than access to history, it is access to the actual treatment and interaction between Puerto Ricans and the United States’ government. Ojeda’s death is a clear example in that, a year after his murder, the Department of Justice reported that snipers assigned to arrest Ojeda had seen that “someone had ‘goose-necked’ a pistol from a door on the left interior side of the hallway” of Ojeda’s residence (15). In a recent article, summarizing the findings of the Puerto Rican Civil Rights Commission, further investigation demonstrates that Ojeda was playing the trumpet when he was shot (PRCDC 119). When Ojeda did take up defenses, the report found that “Ojeda opened fire…in self-defense against an assault group which fired over a hundred rifle rounds within two minutes” (15). Of further significance in the Department of Justice’s 2006 report, Ojeda’s wife informed media that the FBI had fired first (DOJ xxiii).

Ojeda’s tragic end, the United States’ government’s feeble attempt at covering it up, and Ojeda’s greater ideological frame demonstrate that not only the greater message of what experiences were necessary to frame a specific understanding regarding United States’ exploitation of Puerto Ricans. Ojeda’s example also clearly identifies the complexity of the struggle because of who records history, to what end and for whose benefit. Still, further, Ojeda’s wife’s narrative through media in contrast to her refusal to allow the Department of Justice to interview her, demonstrates that who collects said history and how that history is used
and or manipulated for benefit is something with which Puerto Ricans still grapples. The poorly, publicly supported defense for independence continues because all attempts at sustaining ideological critiques against the United States and its practices continue to meet violent ends for those who would critique it.

Ojeda’s narrative demonstrates, however, that struggle moves across stateside and Puerto Rico borders. Political mobilizations for Puerto Rico’s independence did not solely take place in Puerto Rico. To further explain Puerto Ricans’ daily struggles in the United States and how Puerto Ricans living and working in the United States contribute to the defense of Puerto Rico’s independence, I will turn to Oscar’s letters and how he articulates his inspirations. Lopez’s narrative is important given what he endures as a current Puerto Rican political prisoner who served in the U.S. army, received a U.S. education and, more specifically, advocates for Puerto Rico’s independence from the United States mainland.

**En Resistencia y Lucha**

Oscar Lopez Rivera was arrested for seditious conspiracy to overthrow a government because of his involvement with the FALN and the accusations brought against the armed collective front. His tenure in prison is not solely a result from the charge, but also because of the historic treatment of his contemporaries. Despite being granted clemency in 1999, alongside eleven of the other FALN members, he refused to accept it because his comrade, Carlos Alberto Torres, had not been granted the same clemency. Within the greater historical trajectory of

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33 In the tenure of our correspondence (2004-2010), Oscar signs with this phrase, which translates into in “resistance and struggle.” While I continue to write Oscar, although sporadically pending on where I am in my work/dissertation, I last received a letter from him in October 2010. The letters reviewed are the ones I have been able to preserve despite the extensive moving I have done. I believe some have gotten lost in transit and, if possible, I hope to recover them for future work and the larger project I hope to pursue regarding archiving all of the current and former political prisoners’ correspondence with family, friends, advocates and allies.
Puerto Rican armed fronts, the FALN’s armed struggle came shortly after Los Macheteros’ work.

In the years of our correspondence, we have both bore witness to Puerto Ricans’ continued efforts to address the economic and political repression that Ojeda and Albizu both cited as framing their desires for Puerto Rico’s independence. Lopez’s contribution to the greater conversation is the manner in which he explains that Puerto Ricans’ struggle against colonialism is not solely one that takes place in Puerto Rico. Lopez explains:

As Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, we still don’t have the strong institutions required for us to be a healthy and vibrant community. Our economic base is weak and the level of education is low. We are mired by an overwhelming amount of problems. It’s going to take time and lots of work to overcome the obstacles we face. But experience has taught us that with patience and commitment we can move ahead and make our contribution to the struggle for a better world. We know we have the will and spirit to struggle. We know our people have a profound sense of compassion and are intolerant towards injustice.

(Lopez 8 January 2005)

An excerpt from the second letter he sent me, his words echo the concerns and frustrations Albizu Campos cites in his speeches. His initial letters carry on the message of setting up a historical and political contextualization necessitating the struggle against oppression. He is explaining why and how stateside Puerto Rican cultural organizations, like the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center, work to address these disparities. Like Albizu, he recognizes that Puerto Ricans’ compassion and desire for justice will frame their continued efforts to address their needs and the greater injustices that surround them. Like Ojeda, he cites how economic instability continues to hinder the development of strong institutions Puerto
Ricans need in order to establish a healthy and vibrant community. The work that needs to be done, he is making clear, can neither be done alone nor without critically compassionate intent.

Within the greater contextual frame of what Puerto Ricans have witnessed over the years, his words extend the project of fallen heroes and lost political leaders. They resonate with an audience who understands the continued struggles of Puerto Ricans but, more specifically, with those who construct stateside enclaves as extension of Puerto Rico rather than as a separate entity whose livelihood would not be affected by the greater status debate. The status affects Puerto Ricans in the United States for a number of reasons, yet, among those reasons, it is important to keep in mind that Puerto Ricans’ marginalization of each other continues to take place within these enclaves.

The divisive nature within the enclaves is grounded in community members’ intent and relation to each other. Lopez discusses this in how he articulates the economic and political divisions resulting from education and socio-economic mobility. In two letters, he addresses the issue. In the first, he writes that “The struggle for me was never against systems of oppression which were or had been beneficial to us. if it was a system that was oppressing people then it couldn’t have been of benefit to us” (Lopez 6 March 2005). He cites examples of slumlords and exploitative employers, narratives of the gruesome living and working conditions Puerto Ricans faced on arriving and settling in the US mainland. These examples further highlight Ojeda’s ideological reference to Puerto Ricans’ ghettoization on arriving to the United States. This example can also be a localized manifestation of Albizu Campos’ argument against Puerto Rican leaders who supported US intervention and investment. Because the nature of the investment exploited Puerto Ricans’ right to land and livable wages, Albizu Campos critiqued these leaders as overlooking the systemic oppression of their counterparts.
In the later letter, written in December 2005, Lopez critiques the intent of education and the ideological function of academic credentials as it relates to socio-economic mobility. He argues that academic credentials cannot guarantee anything more than formalized education and that “[a] Latina(o) or black person can attend the best university in the nation. As long as that person serves the interest of the ruling elite he or she is “GOOD” –like a good dog, when the domesticated dog does what his master tells him to do.” With this, he is explaining that assimilation does not work if a person’s intent with assimilation is to serve the institution they believe gives them power. He is blatantly critiquing that power can come from formalized institutions even though, in earlier letters, he cites the necessity of institutions for a healthy and vibrant community. The inherent contradiction stems from where the institution he suggests are, and necessary arise from, and where institutions like that of federal housing and employer authority come. The complexity of who gets to speak and decide which institutions are necessary permeates through the discourse of these leaders because they are defending Puerto Ricans’ right to create their own institutions. Each of these leaders are trying to explain that if Puerto Ricans create their own efforts and their own community institutions, such as a political nation, they will be able to adequately address the limitations of not being included in larger ones, such as the United States’ government. The question then arises, given the manner of their critiques and the political repression that so evidently necessitates them, how are Puerto Ricans within these enclaves choosing and imagining their leadership?

**Biting the Apple/Creando Una Voz**

In conclusion of this chapter, I will answer that question with a heated debate that took place in 2009. Because former Alderman Ocasio was leaving the 26th Ward, the historical cultural and political concentration of Puerto Ricans in Chicago, replacing his leadership was
crucial in the community’s continued struggle against Puerto Ricans’ displacement and gentrification. To better explain, I turn to an editorial response to PRCC supported alderman candidate, Pastor de Jesus. In “Fíjate– Those Who Opposed Pastor De Jesús Just Didn’t Get It,” Xavier Luis Burgos explains what concerned cultural critics with Pastor De Jesús’ religious beliefs and how that would affect his leadership of the 26th Ward. Because Pastor De Jesús, in his role as pastor, spoke out against homosexuality, these critics were wary of how effective he would have been in justly advocating for their needs. The connections between De Jesús’ support, his supporters’ stance, his critics’ concerns, Burgos’ defense, and the greater question of participation and contribution, are ideologically framed by what earlier leaders have discussed.

Pastor De Jesús had been a critical candidate, according to the organization, because of the extent to which he promoted voter registration, supported the struggle against gentrification, and promised to align himself with efforts to be inclusive to the LGBTQ community. The argument regarding his leadership stemmed from Latina/o leaders’ concerns that his Christian beliefs which condemn homosexuality would deter from the quality of his leadership. Burgos contended that, however, those who spoke out against De Jesús’ leadership, in neither living in the area, nor attending community events, had little credibility when speaking out against De Jesús’ possible leadership and his ideological position. Further, he explained,

Another point to consider is that, for those who live and work in the 26th Ward would know that a great and visionary Alderman like Billy Ocasio would never choose a replacement who would not work for and support the diverse experiences of his residents and the major initiatives of this community. Sadly, some have eaten the apple and have abandoned his legacy and vision (Burgos).
Such a statement not only speaks to the continued legacy of expecting leaders to pick those who would extend their work but, more specifically, to the assumption that those who reside in a community should trust those who the former leadership supported. During Ocasio’s tenure as alderman, he had worked extensively with PRCC leadership and supported the efforts they exercised to be a more inclusive community. In other words, because Ocasio’s legacy speaks for itself, who he supports should equally demonstrate the extent to which this person’s credibility is viable. Burgos’ statement claim that those who do not live in the neighborhood should not speak for it parallels with political leaders’ claims regarding the extent to which stateside Puerto Ricans should speak on the status issue.

The ideological inheritance Burgos proposes, alongside the greater practical support De Jesús offers regarding supporting policies of inclusion and support for LGBTQ Puerto Ricans, ideologically falls in line with the greater tension of the status debate. As with the status debate, the question of Puerto Rico’s colonialism is one regarding whether policies that intend to be inclusive or supporting Puerto Ricans are actually beneficial to Puerto Ricans. The question of who a community’s leader should be equally needs to take this question of inclusion into account. The historical struggles regarding who writes Puerto Ricans’ history, which represents their best interests and what status would best address their needs, is precisely a question of which form of leadership would take all of their needs into account. Among these needs, most critically, is the right to be treated with respect, with dignity and to not have one’s way of life and one’s choices deemed inhuman because of larger institutional belief systems.

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35 *La Voz de Paseo Boricua,* as a former organizer and research assistant, who had worked with other Latino based community organizations, I witnessed some of his efforts as well as his greater city-based support for working class and Latino needs. He regularly attended events sponsored by the PRCC as well as supported policies and incentives to keep Puerto Ricans and Latinos in his ward.
While the support for De Jesús stems from the leaders’ support of community efforts to empower community members to vote, to evade being displaced and to provide transitional housing for LGTBIQ youth is the act of his support more credible than the right to sexual choice he promotes in his other institutional affiliations? The external critics who are raising concerns of Pastor De Jesús religious beliefs, arguably are no different than Puerto Rican leaders in Puerto Rico and in the United States who denounced what the United States provided to Puerto Ricans given the beliefs behind what was being provided.

In the greater conversation of earlier leaders who propose Puerto Ricans’ collaboration with each other in combating the external enemy of colonial and political oppression, those who critique De Jesús’ affiliation, arguably, are doing so in recognizing the injustice of treating homosexuality as a sin. Further, Albizu Campos, Ojeda, and Lopez Rivera equally advocate for the compassionate and sense of injustice that will inevitably bring Puerto Ricans together, but how can they be brought together if and when the leadership does not fully recognize the humanity of all its members? The practices and policies Albizu Campos, Ojeda and Lopez denounce and critique are grounded in the humanity that the United States’ government, corporations and dominant citizens do not recognize Puerto Ricans and nonwhites as having. Their leadership and their cultural contributions are premised on how they acknowledge Puerto Ricans’ right to defend themselves, take care of each other and, more than anything, validate their right to govern their value in contrast to any entity or institution that would deem them less than human. This, for many of these leaders’ writings, is more than a question of policy and practice; this question of leadership and governance is a question of the intent of those who govern.
As a result, Burgos’ defense of De Jesús is exemplary of the tensions within the greater question of who participates in a community and whose leadership is an exemplary model for participation and contribution. Such tensions, and the ways in which Puerto Ricans in the U.S. support leaders and ways of community building, provide still further questions of inclusion and participation. In so doing, the question of effective critique for greater collaboration and anti-colonial struggle remains. This is the question with which I approach the next chapter, particularly focusing on addressing the call to participate as one of return and what it means for different Puerto Ricans as a result of how leadership, such as those reviewed, is written and imagined.
I told her I was listening to her

The tensions within Burgos’ commentary highlight the continued anti-homophobic, feminist and anti-racist tensions present among Puerto Ricans. Culturally and politically, the question of who listens and whose voice matters in community building efforts and in the greater projects of building narratives that are culturally affirming. What Burgos’ writing demonstrates is the question of which relationships to place, people and ideas are privileged in the construction of a narrative and how it can be used to empower a community, whether that be a neighborhood, a region or an ethno-nation.

With that in mind, it becomes equally important to examine the intent of the venue in which Burgos published this commentary, _La Voz de Paseo Boricua_. Celebrating its ninth year of publication, the grassroots community paper has functioned to provide a voice that is politically and culturally relevant to the neighborhood it serves and the greater Puerto Rican/Latino community it seeks to represent. The community publication sought to provide a voice because of the venues in which Puerto Ricans and Latinos were not heard. As an extended project of the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center, _La Voz_ functioned as its primary outlet.

In the past few years, along with continued advocacy for political prisoners, cultural projects and community empowerment endeavors, the PRCC has sustained a movement which encourages Puerto Ricans to return to El Barrio, their home. For this reason, the question of leadership had been so pertinent, given the desire to have a leader who would support the political project of sustaining the twenty-sixth ward as the cultural and political center that served Puerto Ricans and Latinos in Chicago. Because of continued efforts to displace Puerto
Ricans, organizers and community leaders establish projects and community outlets such as *La Voz*, which provides news and information pertaining to such efforts as well as other cultural productions and performances. Urban displacement as a result of urban renewal has been a historical reality earlier established Puerto Rican Chicago enclaves experienced. The ideological frame encouraging movement and regional migration—even across and between neighborhoods—reflects a similar narrative formulation as the political economic reasons that explain why Puerto Ricans have left and continue to leave Puerto Rico.

In both the narrative of returning home to El Barrio or to Puerto Rican, the role of who listens needs to be revisited. I concluded the last chapter interrogating how one is expected to return to a community who does not listen to them because that question not only pertains to the dissemination of the cultural narrative Puerto Rican cultural workers want to preserve but also because of how it demonstrates the greater imagined or real opportunity that would result from returning.

The reasons for local community organizing are numerous, especially considering the continued legacy of United States’ disregard for Puerto Ricans’ basic human rights. The history of Puerto Rican organizers in Chicago, IL, further demonstrates how and what collective mobilization could support community members, given not only the history of displacement but also that of discrimination in schools, in the office, among other institutions. As earlier discussed, Oscar Lopez proposed Puerto Ricans establish their own institutions to address their historic economic, political and social marginalization. Arguably, the PRCC’s efforts and forty year history clearly demonstrate the possibilities provided in establishing such an institution. Why then should the question of how external critics of their work and the leaders they support be pertinent given how they address those needs and the possibilities in grassroots community
empowerment? They provide the answers themselves because of the desire to have community members return ‘home.’ Before addressing how home is defined and imagined as an affirming possibility, the need to listen will be discussed, especially as it pertains to the institution making that Lopez Rivera earlier describes as necessary.

In a letter he wrote to in 2006, Oscar reflects on a critical conversation in which collaboration helped fuel continued efforts in critical consciousness. His letter responds to both a question I had asked regarding the choice of his profession. His words frame a call to think critically regarding how to approach education and institutional—university affiliation. He calls for critical thinking because of how he frames the best way to support and encourage community members. Reflecting over conversations in his first efforts at community organizing, Oscar writes:

When I started trying to organize in the community, a Puerto Rican woman asked me, “who listens to poor Puerto Ricans?” I didn’t have a readymade answer for her, so I chose to tell her what I had in my heart. I told her I was listening to her and that maybe other poor Puerto Ricans would listen to the two of us. If we were able to get others in the community to listen to us then we could make ourselves be heard. Little by little more and more people were listening and then we took our voices and our bodies to those who had the power to address the issues we were raising. We achieved a...of success. Some of the issues we raised have helped the Puerto Rican and other Latino communities to continue struggling. (Lopez 28 March 2006)

The woman’s question, which asked who would listen to “poor Puerto Ricans,” and Oscar’s response, demonstrate that success as an organizer is premised on how his or her
communication took place. Like earlier leaders who base their work on what they saw and heard taking place within their local communities, Lopez and this woman similarly start working together within that relational collaboration. A mutual understanding and desire brings them together and, what is more, fosters further outreach to build momentum to address the disparities that face them.

Within this excerpt, Lopez Rivera uses ‘listen’ five times. Both the use and the act suggest its significance to the need for critical dialog to sustain and foster support and collaboration. It is for that reason this chapter seeks to address what informs how that does not take place, given where we left off at the last chapter and the greater debate that informs this work. More than asking what listening looks like, I instead choose to address what is often overlooked because of what remains privileged.

Returning to Burgos’ argument regarding Pastor De Jesús, key elements of his defense—the apple, the institutional support and the justification behind why De Jesús was worthy of support—suggest the parameters that often unintentionally work to strain the possibilities of return and collaboration. While earlier leaders call out the United States government, multinational corporations, racist police and employers for devaluing Puerto Ricans’ integrity and political agency, despite policy changes, Burgos’ statement runs the risk of doing the same. As the woman with whom Lopez Rivera organized stated, who will “listen to us poor Puerto Ricans”? Lopez answers the question in how he responds and engages with her but, for many, that question may be answered by a non-Puerto Rican, if at all.
Lopez Rivera’s heartfelt response and repeated phrasing of ‘poor Puerto Ricans’ establishes critical empathy from which he works and further, which he argues remains necessary in any effort to address social injustice.36

Burgos’ rhetorical example, framed by Oscar and his colleague’s response, are neither unique. Their significance, aside from the manners in which they contrast, also lay in the gendered conversation between the speaker and the audience. The treachery of De Jesús’ critics—as metaphorically represented by ‘biting the apple,’ and the women’s concern of who would listen to ‘poor Puerto Ricans’ suggest a gendering of silence and subordination given both letter’s intended and actual audience. Burgos privileges heterosexual male leadership and voices because of what their acts represent while Lopez’s women presumes that Puerto Ricans’ racialized and impoverished reality frames their probable insignificance.

These pieces also reflect the greater gendering of listening and silence that permeates critical conversations around cultural and political nationalism. Feminist and queer critics cite ethnic nationalism’s fallibility in both giving them voice and critically engaging their political possibilities. Because patriarchy undermines both their desire and their autonomy, subordinated members of an ethnic community seek out alternative political and cultural mobilization efforts in an attempt to frame what could be best for Puerto Ricans. In so doing, they continue to rewrite and re-imagine nationalism, as an ideological project and cultural performance, and what possibilities lay in its discourse and in its practice.

Frances Negrón-Muntaner, throughout her scholarly work, critiques the political economic project of cultural and political nationalism, given its ill treatment of gender and

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36 For Lopez Rivera, critical and humble compassion needs to ground intentional intervention to address social injustices. Whether the injustice be local or global, intervention, solidarity and support, for Lopez, should be done because it is the right thing to do.
sexual minorities as well as its disregard for Puerto Ricans’ material needs. In *None of the Above*, and in her contribution to *Puerto Rican Jam*, and *Boricua Pop* she critiques nationalist endeavors that seek to construct an idealized past and a blameless victim hood. Throughout these texts she develops a strong critique of Puerto Rican cultural essentialism that ignores both Puerto Ricans’ prevalent suspicion of various celebrated political and cultural representations. In *Puerto Rican Jam*, she and co-editor Grosfoguel argue for a rereading of Puerto Rico’s democratic possibility through statehood, given that full incorporation into the United States would grant Puerto Ricans greater opportunity for political participation. In the anthology, *None of the Above*, which discussed ‘None of the Above’ in 1998’s plebiscite, Negrón-Muntaner discusses how that year’s status discussion had greater concern with the ideological debate than Puerto Ricans’ greater material needs. While politicians’ manipulated ‘none of the above’ to demonstrate the greater need for United States’ intervention and conversation, she argues that the choice, as manipulated as its possibility and opportunity was, demonstrates how little the status question is understood to address Puerto Rico’s needs. The introduction to *Boricua Pop* argues that mythologizing Puerto Rican leaders’ retaliation and disdain for United States’ contact in 1898 overlooks the real trauma of their historic indifference, if not encouragement of United States’ intervention. Rewriting that moment in history did little for Puerto Rican history and politics, given what changed for the better with the United States’ arrival.

Negrón’s significance to this discuss goes beyond her feminist and queer critique of political and cultural nationalist discourse, but also because her work highlights which voices are silenced and to what ends. Negrón’s arguments stem from a greater concern regarding what cultural representations are imagined as useful and possibly affirming for Puerto Ricans given either their fallibility or how the narratives and political acts adequately represent, let alone,
affirm Puerto Ricans’ interests. Read against Burgos’ commentary and Lopez Rivera’s letter, she provides another alternative of how to read and listen to Puerto Ricans’ concern with the status question, their material needs and their gendered and sexualized subordination. If Puerto Rican leaders want to rewrite and reimagine the poverty and the limited leadership within their communities, they need to consider how not to subordinate classes within their community nor rewrite history in a manner that benefits their ideological projects.

Sued-Badillo, on discussing the significance of archaeological investigation and narrative recovery agrees. Puerto Ricans do not need to mythologize their historical leaders. In the interview earlier cited, he explains that when archaeologists, anthropologists do not give the town a historical cacique, they invent one, resulting in more historical caciques than their had actually been in the region’s history. While he argues that such projects extend cultural affirmation, he also explains that such projects are not necessary. All Puerto Ricans need to do is build the institutions and support projects that can adequately document and preserve the remnants of their history.

The project of preservation and return, then, are intertwined, seeing as how what is preserved, and for whom, affects who imagines a return. Who listens and how in the call for return and in the call for community building and what the audience is willing to preserve and incorporate, then, sets up the possibility of cohesion and full integration into the greater community. Whether that community be a small group of people working to address an injustice, a larger regional enclave attempting to establish a political and cultural bloc, or a larger community trying to write the best project of democratic participation and cultural affirmation, listening provides the possibility of continued relation.
Although fairly dated, Eduoard Glissant’s work in *Poetics of Relation* can provide a useful lens with which to approach relation, history preservation and community building. In his text, Glissant urges for a reconsideration of both the work of meaning making and the relationship communities on the move, such as Puerto Ricans, imagine their relationship to place and people. Particularly useful here, is the excerpt titled, “Errantry and Exile,” because of how Glissant describes movement, migration and the connection to space. The overarching argument privileges intent over act, given what those who migrate are attempting to address.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Eduoard Glissant discusses the intent and function of various forms of migration. In “Errantry, Exile,” he begins with defining two types of nomadism to center on how invaders’ migration ideologically functions differently than the working class, the impoverished and the displaced. According to Glissant, the circular nomad moves as a result of need whereas the invaders’ nomadism stems from a desire to change and shape history. More than about addressing material needs, the “arrow-like” nomad moves to extend his ideology and his way of life. Reading Glissant’s theorizing regarding circular and arrow-like nomadism can be used to re-imagine the ideological and cultural tensions across Puerto Rican enclaves and communities. The valor and sacrifice that Albizu Campos claims is necessary for one to call themselves a true Puerto Rican carries a legacy that is predominantly represented by those who have the means and the social justification of engaging in such forms of sacrifice and valor. Migration does not provide each individual seeking better opportunities the opportunity to be affirmed by their diasporic community and, as a result, migrants seek other venues in which their civil and social participation are neither repressed nor undermined. For this reason, I employ Glissant’s definition of nomadism to articulate that, for stateside Puerto Ricans, the choice to participate and contribute to community empowerment results in what happens when they move
to address a need. Particularly, given the discursive representations of pro-independence and pro-community building leaders earlier mentioned, how are those who ‘eat of the apple’ being taken into consideration? How are their critiques being valued in the greater conversation to address their collective and interpersonal internalized oppression?

Glissant writes that in circular nomads migration, “daring or aggression play no part,” their movement, which is important to read against Puerto Ricans’ migration (1). The examples he uses, such as those in the circus, the Arawak and migrant farmers, further demonstrate why he will be useful. The geographic distance between enclaves, specifically comparing stateside diasporic communities and island-based Puerto Ricans is informed by how Puerto Ricans address their needs. Puerto Ricans’ migration between neighborhoods and regions only ‘dares’ by attempting to seek better economic stability in foreign places. Such daring, however, is not what Glissant means in Errantry, Exile. Glissant uses daring and aggression to better frame the projects of nomadism that end in settling and, the communities that establish themselves—not out of need but out of desire to extend their history—are daring and aggressive in the manner they impose themselves and their histories on to a new space. Those who exercise aggression in their nomadism, Glissant defines as arrow-like nomads (12).

While, at first, Puerto Ricans in the United States moved to the United States and across the United States because of a specific need to move, for many, their needs required them to stay. Still, Puerto Ricans held onto the possibility of movement, of return whether temporary or permanent if the possibility or need would ever arise. Contemporary discussions regarding the divide often overlook that, for the settled Puerto Ricans, the meaning of migration and movement moves beyond what Glissant proposes here.
Glissant focuses on the binary of the colonized, the circular nomad, and the colonizer, the arrow like nomad. What Glissant explains regarding the arrow like nomad is useful because of how stateside Puerto Ricans’ desire for settlement. Glissant explains that “arrow like nomadism spares on effect” (12). Footnoting this claim, he further reflects that. “The idea that [devastated desire for settlement] can turn history around in a positive manner,” is not his concern. It is of concern to this argument because of the critical moment that Puerto Ricans speaking to each other can be. The devastating desire for settlement which characterizes the arrow-like nomad compares to circular nomads in that the former desires and informs history whereas the latter lacks one. Because of the absence of history, Puerto Ricans often turn to the circular nomadic ideal of first generation migrants, because those earlier movements desired to address a need, not to devastate their community. Reading the lived experiences of stateside Puerto Ricans in that vein, then, extends the significance of that disparity within Glissant’s frame of the foreign audience. The desire for history is the desire for a speaker whose discourse and practice does not desire devastation but that, more so, works to address a need. In the disparity between stateside and island-based Puerto Ricans, how they speak to each across the presumed and real definitions of their movement and settlement can inform what possibilities there may be to imagine a history that exists without trying to devastate.

Sued-Badillo’s proposal of preserving history and where that preservation can and should take place, though, overlooks the material strains present in Puerto Rican communities. He calls for preservation in museums, through formalized education and other institutions that, in the greater political economic strain present within Puerto Rican communities, necessitates time and investment that so often comes in conflict with the daily struggles they face in attempting to meet basic material needs. This is not to say that museums and formalized documentation do not have
their warrant, but, again, what time and resources facilitate communication in those spaces? Further, given the mythological projects’ intent, what ways can their fiction be made useful in making sure that such projects of documentary preservation and archiving are possible?

Answering these questions, I return to Glissant and how he positions the role of memory as well as the limitations with historical endeavors. On returning to Glissant, however, I pull both from *Caribbean Discourse* and his later work *Poetics of Relation*, given how what he highlights regarding both historic projects and the function of discourse. In “History--Histories--Stories,” Glissant discusses the difficulty in writing history, especially for communities as dislocated and dispossessed as those in the Caribbean. As a Martinician, his home nation remains his point of reference but, given the political economic similarities between Martinique and Puerto Rico, his ideas are useful. He writes, “The problem faced by a collective consciousness makes a creative approach necessary” (61). He explains the necessity of creative approaches because of the epistemological limitations history as a discipline has in forging a connection between a people’s surroundings and their experiences.

For Glissant, the disconnect results from the limitations of a global consciousness, given the particularity and diversity of communities’ lived experiences and material surroundings. Puerto Ricans’ quotidian reality is no different, given their diverse experiences and the complex relationships they have with the places they define as home and homeland. Home and homeland are not necessarily the same and, neither place is necessarily as pristine or idyllic as historical projects claim. Negrón’s work and Burgos’ example cite the absent link as the former’s scholarly endeavor critiques the disregard for nationalism’s self-imposed traumas and the latter privileging acts over beliefs.
Creative approaches can, in a way find useful parallels between the two who seemingly
defend divergent positions, especially considering how both projects remain invested in seeking
what can be best for the communities for which they advocate and which they seek to represent.

Their relationship lays rooted in their shared desire to critique the limitations of projects
that would lead Puerto Rican communities into spaces and sites where they have minimal power
and authority over their livelihoods and their relationship to place. Here, it will be useful to turn
to Glissant’s “A Rooted Errantry,” from *Poetics of Relation*. In this chapter, Glissant calls for the
reinterpretation of how the obliterated instant can be connected to the drive for duration across
divergent genres of writing, primarily that of the poem in contrast with the story. He reviews the
work of Saint-John Perse to define a poetics of relation, which easily parallels Jose Muñoz’s
theoretical framing of the need to re-imagine how to imagine and do utopia through creative
work and political efforts. Glissant, in his parallel with Muñoz become useful seeing as how both
imagine the function of time in literary and cultural works. Both theoretical projects call for
reconciling interactions between memory and place to serve the greater needs of a collective.
Because one does not exist without relations to time, place or people, they both find it important
to revisit the use of memory in how history is written, to better consider the possibilities for the
future. The reconciliation takes place in critically recovering history and in allowing what
remained absent in its possibilities to write a greater possibility for the future.

For this reason, both of these scholars are useful in bridging the common intentionality
between those, like Negrón who critique nationalist projects for who they exclude and those, like
Burgos, who are calling for community members to choose representation that will support all
their self-sustaining endeavors.
Approaching this intellectually, however, considering who is served by intellectual discursive projects, I turned to both Muñoz and Glissant’s defense of the need for creative approaches to complete this project. In the fictional novella following this theoretical discussion, I attempt to highlight the possible sites of commentary regarding the possibilities in failed nationalist endeavors, specifically focusing on how, as Muñoz explained it, the desire for politics exists alongside the politics of desire (48). The novella, Division Street, tries to highlight the possibilities within the tense relationships between divergent belief systems, cultural practices and political negotiations that desire community building and empowerment, even as their inherent contradictions presume the improbability of collaboration.

**Beginning with the future**

The story begins in the not yet here to best highlight the critique of the past Muñoz calls for in Cruising Utopia. In the book’s chapter, “Cruising the Toilet,” Muñoz discusses how one should critically approach the past. He writes that, according to Bloch, “the past, even a willfully idealized one such as the one I rehearse in this chapter, tells us something about the present. It tells us something is missing, or something is not yet here” (86). Because returning and reviewing the past allows one to see what is absent in the present, starting in a possible future calls out what is missing in the present of the text more explicitly. To start in the future, though, also requires the reflection of a person not yet in existence—the main character’s daughter, Carina, poses a call to address what remains absent. The absence she cites from her recollection are the reasons that could justify or explain her mother’s departure from her. She reads her mother’s migration to Puerto Rico as a departure, whereas her mother will later depict it as a return. The divergent approaches to the reading of Cassandra’s migration, its intents and its
possibilities have an origin. Said origin, for Carina’s community—built through Cassandra’s family and childhood friends—lies in her coming of age her senior year.

Returning to Muñoz, what remains absent from that year and why it re-emerges will be explained in the greater context of what possibilities lie in critiquing the past to better understand how to address what and who is absent in the present. By so doing, therein lies the possibility of imagining a future where the question of addressing the material needs of a community is not solely the question of addressing one’s own individual needs. Such a frame of mind is missing from Carina’s narrative, as she continuously returns to her personal reasons and her local investment in her family. This family, as much as it represents the repronormative ties such as siblings, father and mother, also engages with community members who Cassandra maintains in her network long past adolescence.

The significance here, returning to Perez’s discussion on the significance of gendered kin networks, is that Cassandra maintains familial ties as a result of obligation and interdependence which, despite experience, her daughter does not fully engage. Carina’s primary concern is with the disillusionment of her connection with her idealized past—that past of her functional family—and trying to find the fault that could explain its disillusion. The explanation lies in the past because of what Carina’s reflection is missing; the explanation requires a return to past to demystify Carina’s perfection of its memory. Writing Carina’s relationship with the past in such a manner, suggests a possible way to engage with the future and the past without romanticizing nor demonizing either. Carina’s reflexive frustration represents tensions that contain many possibilities. Carina is one of those possibilities and yet, she cannot see that quite yet. The resolution she represents also requires an access to what she represents as resolving. Carina’s letter, simultaneously attempts to provide the reader a glimpse into the history Carina is trying to
recover. In so providing one perspective and tension with that recovered, as Carina’s narrative suggests, another tension arises. The attempt here, in so convoluting time—straying away from straight time’s limitations—is to disrupt the ideological parameters set around resolving continued tensions as one that requires an idealized past and a possible future. Muñoz’s work highlights the need to understand how queerness can do utopia because the idealized possibilities are not yet here. Their absence, then, allows for one, if not many to engage in the possibilities of doing utopia, instead of disconnecting from past, present or future because utopia remains impossible.

Such an examination and use of time, then, can create opportunities to listen to the past and recover its failures and traumas without Carina’s lament, or entitled frustration. Frustration results from presuming that one option or one turn can be enough to resolve social disparities; frustration equally stems from the presumption that what doing utopia looks like has one or few possibilities or practices. That plays out in this fictitious text in how Carina’s refusal to understand her mother’s emigration to Puerto Rico as it does it her curiosity regarding what could frame its justification or reasoning. Carina’s investigation, pulls from various individuals’ narratives about the critical turn in Cassandra’s history, because the resolution of recovering the past’s complexities and possibilities lies in garnering and reflecting on the divergent readings of said past. Her father, Jared’s explanations are not enough because he does not fully understand Cassandra’s reasons. History cannot be recovered from one marginalized voice alone nor can one frame of marginalization or repression engage that which is absent. Far more relationships inspire the conflicts and contradictions of addressing needs, not all of which are basic material needs.
Yet, Carina’s reflexive critique suggests that her mother had met those emotional and psychic needs. Carina’s judicious lens is one that presumes it has fully engaged with the complex reasons that ground how any one person, especially a woman, especially a mother, can commit to her community and to her family. She reads her mother like Albizu Campos reads the woman as the nation—as one who represents it, one who can embody it and one whose sacrifice is necessary for the survival of its community. Unlike Carina, or Albizu Campos’ rendering of the woman, however, Cassandra suggests the possibility of queering gendered relations with the nation by how she returns. This return, however, begins with how she maintains the relationships with her childhood community, from which Carina’s greater narrative—the rest of the novella—begins. Because of the gendered relations between families and generations and what mothers and daughters are supposed to provide each other and until when, the dynamic between Carina and Cassandra and later Cassandra and her mother Caro, provide the avenue to reconsider how inter-generational tensions try to create alternate readings of belonging, narrative rewriting and future possibilities of agency, fluidity and relation. In that discussion, the audience plays a part, what the speaker presumes the audience knows and how the construction of the audience’s indifference or reaction is understood. Because of the gendered representation of leadership, dissidence and treachery, the following questions provide the framework for the rest of this discussion. How does one, especially a woman who refuses to engage in sexual and gender performance according to the nationalist determinism that stems before her, maintaining community ties? How does she maintain ties and critical solidarity to the social welfare she may not experience but is still of interest to her, all the while pursuing her own ambitions?
Division Street

Answering the aforementioned questions connect to the greater intent of this chapter: to explore the dynamics between how a foreign and local audience is perceived and engaged. The earlier questions I began this chapter with require more than the construction of a theoretical argument.

The cultural heritage debate of access and knowledge extends beyond the multiplicity of voices and the dividing lines between generations, enclaves. The cultural heritage debate, especially in line with the struggle for self-determination and, more specifically, independence, returns to the question of desire precisely because of daily intents at redefining the determinism of success and solidarity. Thus, the coming of age text takes place in the Puerto Rican neighborhood of Humboldt Park, the site which I first imagined the story taking place and the place which had informed the question I posed on undertaking this theoretical and political conversation.

In so returning, it is a matter of alternating the meaning of a site of consumption—their critical contribution to cultural nationalism, advocacy for political prisoners, and self-determination—for that conversation.37 The majority of earlier literature on colonialism, Puerto Rican history, rhetoric and discourse reviewed is taken from the fields of history, social sciences and humanities, when it comes to Puerto Rican Chicago, the fiction inspired by its history and political economic reality is still being written. Its contribution to creating meaningful dialog around displacement, racism, and migration leaves an open arena. This endeavor is no easy task.

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37 The site of consumption is twofold. In the past few years, Puerto Rican Chicago, because of the self-determination it models on a neighborhood scale, has become a site of critical inquiry for sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, urban studies scholars among scholars in other fields. The other site of consumption is the printed written word whose political economic reality is informed by the supply and demand of what is unique while simultaneously being accessible.
nor do I take it on as the sole project of fiction to be produced, as others have undertaken the task. The reason I approach the questions through fiction stems from an investment in trying to engage a wider audience and, through the lines crossed and restructured, imagine alternate possibilities for stateside Puerto Ricans’ intervention in each other’s and in Puerto Rico’s affairs. If women are the depository of the nation; if they are the nation and the nation’s salvation, it is important to discuss how their historical silence and second-class citizenship be re-imagined to provide an avenue for their return to home or homeland and their contribution.

Reflecting on this, the opportunities in fiction need to be discussed. As imagined and economically constructed as the fiction audience may be, in the further illustration of the tensions between orality, literacy, translation and memory are sites where cultural heritage and its connection to independence, or greater autonomy span across generations and class, among other dividing factors. The mythologies it can engage are neither truth nor false; what informs them is as much as what has been silenced as what is accessible through internet exploration and community engagement. None of the characters are real individuals and yet, how they relate to each other is informed as much by participatory observation within the setting of the novel.

Division Street provides an avenue in which the contemporary realities informed by Puerto Rico’s self-determination efforts and critical moments of intervention in fallible negotiations of community building endeavors. How I do this, when a future person is relating on past not seen, is precisely because of how the character, Carina, gathers her mother, Cassandra’s narrative. She interviews and interrogates her mother’s family and friends. Despite the critical role her father plays in the text, Carina does not obtain the story from him. The absence of his narrative from her collection demonstrates women’s homelessness as a result of family’s rejection, in this case, Carina wants to understand what she imagines as her mother’s
rejection. Her father, Jared, representative of United States’ disinterest, is minor precisely because the debate has little to do with what the United States imagines or desires for Puerto Rico. Instead, the prologue privileges Carina’s desire to reconnect with her mother, with a past she does not understand. This represents the current and future struggles of how and where to place stateside Puerto Ricans when the foreignness of their connection to the United States, complements their disconnect from Puerto Rico. Carina, much like stateside Puerto Ricans, are attempting to write a history from below, from other relationships, recentering the loss of origin. In this case, the origin lost is not ideal but one demonized as a result of the loss: a loss sparked by perceived negligence.

After reading Carina’s prologue, a reflection of mourning and confusion, the novel’s characters negotiate—in their coming of age—the tensions, uncertainties and fears resulting from what they imagine for themselves and each other. The characters, the language in which they engage at divergent sites—school, home with peers, home with family—treads on resisting internalizing others rhetorical construction of their subjecthood while transgressing community-imposed parameters desire to disrupt the historical realities that limit their possibilities. For each character of Puerto Rican descent, more specifically, it is a matter of how they connect to each other, to the nation as a people, and to the nation as a place in their quest to fulfill their expectations of themselves, that nurture the divisions between them. Their relationships remain in flux, much like their possibilities. The political economy of listening within home space, grounds where Carina begins piecing together the reasons her mother, Cassandra, leaves Carina during her adolescence.
Mothers and Daughters

The main character, Cassandra, is divided between the intellectual elite possibilities her mother, Caro, desires and the possibilities she imagines in being able to stay in the barrio. Caro represents the liberal feminist ideology of economic emancipation from cultural restraint and the limitations of staying at home. Caro also represents the disconnection from family and homeland resulting from the unresolved issues of displacement and poverty neither addressed in moving or returning. Her development is grounded in the dominant struggle between assimilation and separatism in the segment of stateside Puerto Ricans still holding on to the American Dream, despite its high improbability. She finds herself attached to cultural separatism but not to the political movement for independence separatist determinism is often times perceived to defend. Caro does not see the economic benefit of staying in her home community nor of defending it, as a result of the violence she has seen. Caro’s own gendered transnational migration speaks to why she does not see the benefit of staying with her home community. Because her character was historically pushed and pulled based on the needs of her brother’s family and her parents’ concern regarding her autonomy—a political economic reality informed by Puerto Rican women’s historic gendered migration patterns—she seeks relationships to place and people that would allow her to serve herself, not others.

Like Puerto Ricans minimally invested in the status question, her primary concern is escaping violence and poverty without losing her ability to move on her town terms. Caro’s positioning connects to how Khader reads Santiago and Morales, albeit Caro’s more greatly concerned with her micro-community, despite tensions and unaddressed misunderstandings between her siblings and even her children. Caro’s ambivalence, lack of awareness regarding her daughter’s struggles demonstrate how the intent of divergent positions are minimally imagined
as complementary, let alone being able to listen to each other. The initial silence between mother and daughter is that they are both invested in the other’s well-being and, as a result, omit their truths, more specifically their lived experiences, from each other.

For Cassandra, however, she understands her mother’s disdain for their home ethnic community arising from an unresolved resentment that she, Cassandra, does not possess. Cassandra does not know the violent history her extended family suffered as a result of riots and, as a result, remains disconnected from her mother’s conceptualization of community and home. The cultural heritage debate between them begins with what they cannot name and, in not naming, cannot resolve. The tensions between these women thread through their relationships with others—friends, family members, significant others—and with place. As the distance between them grows, the meanings of memory, nostalgia, and future possibilities of the community grow more expansive.

Because the conversations are missing—Cassandra does not yet explain the personal and political investment she has in going to Puerto Rico; Caro does not explain to Cassandra the emotional and psychic strain of not being able to choose where she lives—the women do not understand how they are seeking to embody what possibilities lie in the dissidence and/or treachery the younger generation perceives of the older generation’s actions. The conversation begins with Carina because, current and continued conversations of attempting to recover the past, as Sued-Badillo explains, are continuously necessary to imagine and engage in greater future possibilities. As forms of preservation, dialog and memory recovery are reappropriating the possibilities of technology, the mythologies and fictions created as a result create multiple avenues in which many more can participate in cultural and political debates. Still, though, class disparities still frame how many can participate and contribute but, as the intention of what is
myth and how it is useful allows greater cross generational conversation, there is arguably, less resistance to sustaining the past is pristine. In recovering the past, and its failures and limitations, though, what its recovery demonstrates is absent multiplies the types of utopia that can be done. Carina, unlike her mother and grandmother, works to recover not just the past which can explain Carina’s perception of her mother’s future but also the future she can envision for herself and the communities with which she engages and to which she contributes. She has yet to consider how her mother is trying to make sure she has multiple cites…that she—Carina—will not be expected to choose. Carina, and Cassandra, as the novella demonstrates, have to fully realize and appreciate the significance of what their mother’s presumed treachery and dissidence are attempting to do for them—not only in how they can write their bodies into the communities and relationships they desire but also how they distance themselves from serving as passive agents to their daughter’s future. Such tensions and discontinuity between these generations of women seek to represent the complexity of the heritage debate, primarily that of how subordinated subjects resist their subordination and resistance by leaving place without breaking relationships. The tension between mothers and daughters is one where they grapple with how they read the function of each other’s deviance and dissidence. Their tensions suggest how enclave displacement and dispersion becomes treacherous when it pursues the ability to pursue needs beyond the material and the communal.

Livable lives, one that promote a vibrant community and encourage full political participation and disrupt forced displacement, often undermine the isolation and ostracization

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38 It is difficult to explain this here because, in the sequel, Carina begins to understand the multiple spaces her mother, Cassandra, is trying to sustain for her. Because Puerto Rico’s greater status debate threatens multiple sites and runs the risk of rewriting how returning can address psychic as well as material needs. As a result, it has been difficult to map out, considering the constant flux of Puerto Rican populations between Puerto Rico and the US as well as the growing tension regarding how to address Puerto Rico’s economic instability in the current economic recession.
resulting from alternating the meaning of social and moral obligations. In moving to escape subordination, repression and persecution—or finding said release on migration—the intent of migration changes as does the call to return if and when the conditions escaped do not change. Such rewriting of migration and exile, are often overlooked because they are presumed to betray the possibilities of writing a narrative of return and loyalty that do not question the possibilities of the ethno-nation. While such relational subordination and repression exist at various forms of social and material disparities within nationalist narratives, the intersection of gender and sexuality represent the psychic needs, emotional distress often undermined in the preservation of said narrative. The idealized past of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism indirectly alludes to the Eden in their literal and figurative representation of what Puerto Rico was like before conquest. Such an allusion can allow the rhetorical constructions of Eve and the serpent—cultural treachery and political dissidence—to frame how the subordination of gender minorities and the criminalization of dissident sexuality take place in nationalist narratives. Gender and sexuality are also critical in how, as they intersect actively instead of passively, they disrupt the significance of the meanings imposed on what exercising addressing subordinated and silenced needs can provide.

**Deviant Desire**

Given the intergenerational tensions primarily residing in sexual possibilities, the sexual possibilities resulting from cross generational treachery and dissidence has provided later generations more opportunities to engage with their own sexual fluidity. As they engage with greater sexual possibilities, however, they equally must come across the sustained imposed frames of treachery and dissidence among those possibilities. Despite the ever present contradictions in these forms of sexual treachery and dissidence, how such acts are used to define
cultural belonging and loyalty continue to remain prevalent: the diverse reactions to teen pregnancy, homosexuality, chosen virginity continue to weigh in to women’s cultural significance, especially as they attempt to economically sustain themselves and their families. Because, across generations, women rely on each other’s sense of moral and economic obligation to each other—especially mothers on daughters—sexual practices and relations can positive and/or negatively affect how such obligations are met. Readings of sexuality are not solely a question of religious influence; other factors that affect what sexuality can literally and ideologically produce for kin networks are, migration, class and social dynamics. Furthermore, as a Latina with women of color navigating and negotiating their mixed class identities—especially in light of how it can or should serve their ethnic communities—the main character’s sexuality needed to produce the shame, sense of obligation, dissidence and treachery. Pregnancy as a metaphor and as complicated cultural norm, represents what women are forced to carry. Cassandra’s miscarriage, meeting at the intersection of shame, relief and conflicted obligations, attempts to question whether coding her silence around it can act as a barrier to failing her moral and social obligations or as a reason to disconnect from it. She grapples with that conflict throughout the text because of which institutions, communities and ideas try to make meaning of her mythologized inexperience and her secret loss and curiosity. Furthermore, because of the dominant narratives present in various communities, such as this one, it is pertinent to rewrite the possibilities of young women’s economic and intellectual possibilities as not being undermined by their sexual practices.39

39 Informal conversations with community leaders, Paseo Boricua community members and PRCC volunteers along with divergent experiences working with young Latinas complicated the character and relational development of the text. In one critical conversation, there was concern regarding the stereotype Cassandra represented. Still, it was important to complicate how—as community members in Puerto Rican and other Latino communities in the Chicago area normalized in their discourse and social treatment of teen mothers—adolescent women exploring and engaging in sex were imagined as having ruined their lives. Because of institutional resources, pending on the
Young women continue to take on greater agency in exerting their sexual desires (Kamen). The effects of such agency—social stigma and ostracization—are many. Adding the marginalization of race and class, still further complicates how young women can engage in their sexuality without losing sight of their inherent value. Still, the practices of agency do not only privilege having sex early, rather, rewriting the opportunity of what it means to wait and what it could mean to explore other methods of self-inducing pleasure. It becomes important to read Paula Kamen’s argument in *Her Way*, against the cultural heritage debate around women’s sexuality. Primarily, when listening to the conversation women’s sexuality produces, it was evident that privileging the virgin norm would be insufficient. The imagined and presumed poverty connected to women’s sexual agency needed to be challenged.

Still, a sexually experienced heroine maps out the ideological and political weight of deviant desires, even when what they produce remains short lived. These deviant desires are gendered—in that the woman’s guilt is central to the conversation, undermining any attachment the almost father, Toño, would have had—because of which segments of the community carry the guilt and weight of the failures their actions could produce. The trauma of miscarrying that Cassandra relives has more to do with internalizing the guilt of wanting to *not* serve the nation as intended while still hoping to find a way to bridge the person she intends on becoming with the needs the nation requests others serve. Teen pregnancy works to demonstrate that, often, the guilt of interrogating the determinism of success and loyalty can neither be solved by confessing nor by silencing. The guilt produces a shame, which she does not carry alone. She carries it with the other young woman, Juanita who also knows of the miscarriages, because of what emotions—

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community and the complex negotiations of sexuality, desire and curiosity young women navigate, it was important to depict adolescent struggles that alluded to the possibilities in the contradictions, not the limitations of teen pregnancy.
shame, guilt—are gendered and connected to the greater respect, courage and honor former (male) independence leaders deem necessary to ground one’s contribution to the nation. As Cassandra carries the weight of what she lost, only Cassandra carries the mixed guilt and frustration of wanting that loss. The shame thus produced, similarly gendered as the pregnancy, informs the extent to which one can speak and move past it.

Shame

To further explain why and how shame is gendered, I will turn to Lourdes Torres’ reading of two critical Puerto Rican lesbian memoirs, those of Antonia Pantoja and Luisa Lopez Torregosa. In her reviews of the memoirs of Puerto Rican lesbians Antonia Pantoja and Luisa Lopez Torregosa, Lourdes Torres seeks to address the shame surrounding discussion of women’s sexuality within Puerto Rican communities. Of the significance of their memoirs, Torres writes that it is important to examine their narratives because both women’s works, “engage with intersecting issues in the lives of Puerto Rican women, and suggest how shame implicitly and explicitly conditions the articulation of Puerto Rican identity” (2009, 84). In writing of Pantoja, Torres explains that, despite her longstanding contributions through ASPIRA, she had remained closeted most of her life because of the implications being out would have had on her community empowering efforts. While Torres recognizes that the shame both women experienced is, in part, historically contextualized in that they grew up between the 1940s and 1960s, despite the presence of narratives such as the ones Torres cites, shame continues to be present within Latina and Puerto Rican communities. I map this shame out in Division Street in how each Puerto Rican character reflects on or ignores their sexual practices. Despite the kinship they proclaim having for each other, they are anxious about the ideological and political weight of their sexual desires.
Not only of the desires they have for their community members but also of the desires they seek to address beyond the norms they establish for each other.

Returning to Torres, though, I will discuss why despite the conversations they have about sexual experiences, characters seek to not engage in the extent of their experiences. Cassandra, for example, discusses performing oral sex with Geli, though she omits other sexual encounters for fear of referencing the miscarriage. As the novella progresses, it is apparent that Juanita’s insular perception of Cassandra has affected their dynamic—but the triad demonstrates how entities of a community are wary of developing a normalized perception of behavior overlooking its intent. Cassandra’s discretion demonstrates strategic positioning of alliances and intimacy with her friends. What they keep from each other is grounded in the shame that they imagine or recognize could result from disclosure.

Unlike repression, though, the silence becomes strategic in sustaining solidarity, especially in the case of Geli and Cassandra, because silence becomes a critical solidarity of indifference. Because such acts are missed, precisely because of the stigmatized definitions associated with specific acts and practices—such as teen sex and young pregnancy and a miscarriage (even if not an abortion, the emotional desire for its loss says a great deal to Cassandra—the solidarity runs the risk of being unrecognized).

It is because of this silence that Juanita imagines divergent secondary institutions as determining the sustainability of their frustration and, breaking ties of historical struggles and adolescent solidarity and community. Juanita’s insular thinking, characterized by her fear of the other, represents the foreign and local audience both have, given the historic and continued disparities resulting from the political economy of education as a tool of socio-economic mobility. What she fails to understand, in contrast to what Cassandra attempts to negotiate
represents the solidarity with others that may remain possible. Sexuality is equally important here as it acts as a metaphor for what dances of power vanish and re-emerge depending on the relationships produced and normalized. Because of the social pressures in high school and the relative stereotypes Cassandra navigates in that space, how she frames the possible responses to her sexual agency equally inform her willingness to exert its practice.

**Latino youth intellectual elite**

While Cassandra took hold of her sexuality in practicing it, the results of such a practice could have hindered her material and political possibilities--not only hers, but that of her then boyfriend Toño as well. Such guilt over the possibility of losing a dream represents what women of color grapple with in the socio-economic decisions they make regarding education, careers, desired partners and economic independence.

As gender disparities of school retention are beginning to demonstrate Latinas’ higher graduation rates in college and graduate school, it was important to construct a character who was socially aware of that and its implications. Such awareness was neither unique nor commonplace for young people; it depended on the schools they attended and their social relations with students from other schools.\(^40\) Such disparities carry great implications for the construction of local and foreign audiences, as the disparities continue to arise, given current political economic instabilities within Latino communities, such distances will speak to the fissures and possible incommunicability across socio-economic divides. The implications for speaking across regional divides and listening to what is happening in Puerto Rico can equally

\(^40\) The socialized correlation between where one went to high school and then went to college remains prevalent in the thought processes of working class students of color privileged to attend magnet and/or charter schools. More than personal experience as a result of participatory observation with a Chicago based nonprofit that support students’ attendance at prestigious schools across the Chicagoland area and boarding schools across the United States, such narratives permeated through colleagues’ recommendations and often informed why working class individuals and nonwhites moved to the suburbs.
produce difficulties in any efforts of solidarity. For this reason, Toño’s role in what Cassandra loses remains marginal. He has the opportunity to navigate spaces and possibilities of intervention and solidarity Cassandra does not, precisely because of how his sexuality is imagined.

On the other side of the short-lived teen pregnancy, Toño’s character acts as counterpart to Cassandra’s gender commitment to her community without being an antithesis. They are both equally reasonable and academically successful Latino youth because they both—prior to the pregnancy—imagine the possibility of contributing to their community’s ongoing struggle at self-preservation. It is not enough to imagine him as absent as a result of negligence. His absence results as much from the possibilities of what he can imagine once he leaves. His absence stems both from what Carina privileges as she gathers her mother’s story as much as it does from what other alternatives he can imagine for himself. His absence acts as a commentary on the gendered and class divides of the conversation and the extent to which, the expectation of his return, speaks to who can return to their home community after what acts of or inaction frame their departure. Toño’s return to the barrio marks an ability to listen because he has established another possibility for himself; when he returns later in the text it is because he imagines what he can contribute will result from being able to leave and, more specifically, not needing to stay. Returning to Oscar’s initial organizing efforts with the aforementioned women in his quote helps situated the gendered division of community organizing efforts. The gender dynamic between Oscar and the woman who wondered who would listen to poor Puerto Ricans highlights the gendered disparity within nationalist consciousness. It was not solely present as a result of the ideological processes framing the naming of community organizations and institutions (Abad 2008), but also of whose contributions are deemed valuable enough to record. In the retention of
contributors’ efforts, as earlier described, it is not solely Oscar’s maleness that framed the significance of his listening or the subordination of women that explains why the woman wondered who would listen to poor Puerto Ricans. What is significant in this is how the presumed poverty of Puerto Ricans is tiered within the community—that those with relatively less power than their counterparts in the community wonder whether or not they will be heard. The question itself and the context in which she asks it in relation to why Oscar is listening demonstrates a hierarchy of understood authority and the manner by which it can be engaged. In other words, across gendered divisions, the women heard are women who are sought by or seek a male audience. Because, even as they imagine themselves as local to each other, pending on the socialized norms each are supposed to follow, community members may become foreign to each other. Toño becomes foreign, not solely because of his different way of dressing and his long term absences but because he does not imagine that he can sustain relationships with those to whom he was tied as a result of his departure. On returning, though, with some he can start where he left off. In contrast with not reuniting with Cassandra, who privileges his return and appreciates it stems from which members of a community can navigate divergent terrains and why. Even if others—like Cassandra do—their loyalty is gendered and, on gaining audience may often require speaking from a poverty resulting from a lack of local connection.

The woman’s question—from Oscar’s letter--, adds a critical demonstration of the aforementioned statement. The woman suggests that she believes Puerto Ricans are poor and that the need to be heard would not have necessarily met an audience. Feminist scholarship and narratives that interrogate the patriarchy within nationalism, however, are not always considered, especially if and when the ‘poverty’ they presume of their community is the sexism. The base and superstructure disparity within the nationalist movement, however, is not presumed as an
aspect of its ‘poverty,’ although there is an extensive history of individuals who have left communities and regions as a result of how, despite belief in an anti-colonial struggle, they are minimally, if at all, heard. As they construct divergent spaces, however, the question remains as to the extent in which their separation is considered pertinent and complementary to their efforts at empowering Puerto Ricans in the area. As highlighted in earlier chapters, there are individuals who do not believe it is. Still the necessity to be heard and to speak remains even if and when one is not the iconic figure of a movement.

Cassandra has become witness to this in her participation at her high school, in her home community and during her solitary movement between the two. Still, because of what she is attempting to negotiate between how she relates to her peers, her family and the external spaces she occupies are neither stable nor solely within her control. It is precisely because of what she asks and how her actions interrogate the intention of the mobility and movement that the struggles of her home community and the tensions between them are not addressed.

It is more than the example of Oscar’s collaboration that speaks to the poverty Cassandra and her community struggles with; it is also about the political economic reality of how desires are negotiated against the political economic necessity of community building. Desire, in the sense of emotional, psychological and physical wants, are constructed and presumed to challenge the intent of a nationalist consciousness. Despite sexual revolutions and the advent of anti-racist, anti-heterosexist struggles within Puerto Rican communities, the disconnect between generational work demonstrates such efforts have yet to fully disrupt nationalist determinism. Because of what earlier generations believe cannot be spoken, especially in communities of color.

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41 LaFountain on sexiled writers in *Queer Ricans* is useful because in that text, he cites critical literary figures who historically left Puerto Rico because of their social marginalization. Asencio’s work on queer migrants is also useful because her qualitative work quotes migrants who, may have left for other reasons but will unlikely return because of Puerto Rico’s homophobia.
that struggle with socio-economic mobility and resistance to racialization, what can be and is
chosen to be heard depends on how nationalist determinism’s discourse. If the narrative in
question is not imagined as being able to serve the nation because the narrative interrogates
determinism’s constraint when spoken, then, the possibilities of collective consciousness for the
sake of anti-colonial struggles, foster discontents that dilute struggles’ efforts and intents. How
do Cassandra, her family and her friends in the barrio deal with such discontents and the
apparent need to sustain their safe spaces? Their ability to speak, to question is then mediated by
similar strategies that engage, like the woman, with one who would listen and, as Oscar had
done, one willing to validate the rhetorical necessity of such engagement.

The necessity to be heard along with the uncertainty of the value of such a possibility,
frames the expectation that she would not speak because of the tension, secrecy, and sentiments
of silence and betrayal within community building and sustenance among Cassandra’s family
and friends. The poverty they perceived present in the others’ actions and beliefs, despite mutual
respect and affection, demonstrates the reasons they do not listen to each other, let alone speak to
one another about these differences. Such differences, precisely because of what they imagine
for the greater community, impede the possibility of critically necessary collaboration.42

Returning to Oscar’s colleague’s perception of who would hear them, Oscar’s response
and more contemporary reflection reflect the ‘fruitfulness’ behind an intent that is often
demonized. Like Eve had taken of the forbidden fruit, according to the narrative of the Genesis
creation myth, because she saw nothing wrong with it, the actions, perceptions and reflections of
a number of characters seek to redefine the possibilities of alternative modes of agency as
treacherous. The desire to redefine, albeit with the intent of disrupting barriers and limitations of

42 I hope to turn Division Street into a larger project whereby I address the effects of their refusal to communicate; in
so doing, the characters’ silenced perceptions and intended acts will come to light, providing the need for speaking
precisely because silence risks ruining the relationships they value—between each other and with the greater barrio.
agency, is presumed as a problem. Addressing the desire and need to assist in the greater work, though, is informed by perception and process.

**Whose silence/voice is treacherous (Juanita, Caro, Bern)**

Latina feminist scholarship around the concept of speaking addresses the reality that women within ethno-nationalist communities who speak of their resistance to the limitations of cultural and political nationalism are betraying the struggle for the liberation of their community. On this ground, Cassandra’s friends perceive her relationship to Jared and its termination, as a treachery corrected on the grounds of its criminality. Juanita, Caro, and Bern, among others in Cassandra’s home community, frame Cassandra’s brief relationship with Jared as a desire of the dominant other and that negates the value of her own ethnic community. While each proposes and defends socio-economic mobility, each has varied perspectives around integration and what that would look like. Dating a dominant other, aligning oneself in a culturally heterogeneous space, raises a sense anxiety over and fear of cultural, and thereby political, betrayal. The critique of dating across lines of social and political power based on race and citizenship points to, among others, Fanon’s examination of interracial relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed. As a result, the enactment and engagement with it is read is treacherous in a manner that complicates Cassandra’s self-perception.

Juanita, Caro and Bern each represent the varying degrees of how socio-economic mobility factors into the ability to participate in the cultural debate, the debate that exists in an attempt to write and act on what is best for Puerto Ricans. Rather, for each of them, Cassandra’s participation in white spaces such as Lincoln Park is outside of their frame of reference. Juanita only knows the anxiety her otherness had caused Cassandra’s classmates. Cassandra’s mother,
Caro, understands the privilege of taking her daughter out Roberto Clemente, the neighborhood’s public high school, but never fully expects her daughter to integrate into its culture. Bern, having also attended magnet Lincoln Park High School, presumes that his sister’s inability to imitate his behavior—get in, get out, get done—is an indicator of denying who she is. Their relationship is more than familial concern, however; it is the presumption that their authority should matter more than her choice.

Such an interpretation of the power of social relations of a community is significant, not only because of Fanon’s historical interpretation of interracial sexual relationships but also because of the political economic realities of colonized sexualities. To explain how Fanon’s earlier discussion still permeates in the greater discussion of race and sexuality, I will turn to a recent discussion on the role of skin color and Latinas. Christina Gomez discusses the role of skin color and labor, explaining that skin color negatively affected men’s wages, whereas it did not have an effect on women. What Gomez did find in her article, “Brown Outs: The Role of Skin Color and Latinas,” is that skin color factored into heterosexual women’s marriage. The darker the woman, the less likely she was to get married. Such a reading is critical given the overlap still present and, such political economic conditions of Latina sexuality factors in to the pursuit of higher wage earnings. Cassandra’s case suggests how young Latinas strategically navigate desires to overcome racialized stigma while simultaneously not feed into stereotypes of her work and sexual ethic.

*Division Street* alludes to this in how Cassandra performs her eroticism in different settings—how she performs her gender in high school differs than how she engages with her gender and sexuality with her home friends because she is unwilling to adhere to either’s expectations. Partner choice is a political act, her friends’ reactions—both at school and in her
home community—demonstrate how and why. For her mother and brother and Juanita, she desires the dominant other; for her friends at school, who are primarily white, it is this desire that ‘bleaches’ the cultural divide between them. It no longer exists because her desired partner reciprocates. When he changes his mind, their indifference clearly demonstrate the instability of her power and full integration. In turn, such divergent relations, the dance of power that engages with more than one partner, shows how stateside Puerto Ricans’ cultural and political citizenship with their ethnic communities and with others remains in flux. The pursuit of desires not determined as permissible by dominant society or nationalist determinism create violent imbalances that leave those who seek alternatives feeling homeless. This is when her brother’s silence becomes another possibility. It is the silent solidarity of his response to her break up that creates an opportunity of reparative return. Despite her perceived homelessness, however, after the break up, she finds in her brother’s encouragement and compassion, that home can change to address the loss, and, in addressing and consoling that loss, open up the possibility to break the silence and mend the divide.⁴³

Such moments, as the one where Bern consoles his sister, Cassandra, after she argues with Jared, are rare, especially considering the continued gendered expectation of women’s contribution. Despite the economic possibilities now available for women, and the education disparities which demonstrate women’s higher educational status, the idea that a woman leader’s sexual/emotional partner could lead to the disintegration of her community dates to the moments of contact in the Americas. Similarly, however, poor women and nonwhite Puerto Rican

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⁴³ Here I am addressing the scene where her brother, Bern, goes to pick her up from school and sees her talking with Jared, the boy who had dumped her. Instead of intervening, he remains silent, driving around the block, allowing her to address the injustice without intervention. This moment represents the underlying hope and possibility Bern has for Cassandra—rewriting the gendered division of silence and solidarity he earlier presumes. He wanted the best for his sister and, while he recognizes the best is not always what he has in mind, he trusts her to correct her mistakes. Imagining this moment, then, becomes an extended metaphor of how stateside false integration can be more fully addressed.
women’s sexuality had been mediated by the state in that how a woman engaged with it could affect its social and political position. Her relationship and what it produced needed to adhere to social and political norms (Suarez-Findlay). Reading this against Gomez’s findings, against Gomez’s quantitative study on skin color and Latinas, makes evident that race factors into the legitimacy of women’s sexuality with strong implication on women’s socio-economic mobility and fulfillment of their material, emotional and physical needs. One’s partner choice presumes the ability to address these disparities and run away from them while simultaneously expecting such a choice to be determined by what the nation needs.

Such a reading of sexuality and who it is expected to serve speaks to the greater imagination of how sex works within a community especially a colonized one. Beyond the repression and repronormative critiques with which I had begun, the growing question becomes what possibilities can arise from calling out repression and familial—which for many means community’s—expectations? Such possibilities remain uncertain within the national borders because the borders discursively reproduced, even in the name of defending independence and overcoming internalized oppression, privilege not imagining anything beyond its history. What has been imagined beyond its history—the history of idealized past, present bondage and a future that returns to the idealized past—still carries that uncritical utopic frame. Such a frame, does not imagine any other possibility for sexuality as a metaphor for desire and for hope, because the livable life often imagined focuses on survival and not celebration. When it comes to the subordinated bodies within a nation, the bodies expected to listen without question, there remains the expectation that they be mindful that their sexual acts—as that is the superficial tension between Cassandra and her communities—can betray the nation’s expectations even if and when their intention is to neither climb nor assimilate. National determinism does not
imagine that one can exist in both places, as Khader highlights being critical in Santiago’s text, and as a result, a homeless population arises. Still, though, Cassandra and the relationships she is able to repair because of what her generation have learned from earlier generations’ homelessness provides such an opportunity to return and remake home into the possibility it hopes to be.

Here is where Cassandra’s friend Monse, and Monse’s daughter, Aurelia, become critical in the text. They create a home place in the deviance and betrayal their existence rewrites in contrast to the initial rejection Bern, Caro and Juanita practice on Cassandra.

Reimagined Motherhood
Monse, like Cassandra, gets pregnant in high school but, unlike Cassandra, carries the baby to term and raises her daughter while still going to school. She is an important character of possibility, in contrast to their peer Juanita, because she represents the fear, the stigma and how it can be rewritten. In contrast to Juanita, Monse represents how the stigma of treachery and betrayal is not only across generations. Still, Monse represents the possibility of rewriting motherhood and serving the nation because of how she connects with the other young women. Monse goes to school, works with her mom to raise her baby, thereby rewriting the stigma that teen motherhood paralyzes a young woman’s possibilities.

Such a rewriting is necessary because of the roles women are still expected to choose from—much like, as earlier discussed, sexual partner read effects on others—what Monse’s sexuality produced is neither an object of shame or a barrier to independence. Like her peers, her sexuality produces a social role. Unlike them, she navigates the deviant space by way of taking space and opportunity. She demonstrates how she uses such policing in her favor, rewriting its intent and the presumed intent of exploring her sexual curiosity. She is no longer Eve ruining
Eden, nor is she Mary carrying the salvation of her community. Monse represents the refusal of homelessness, complementing Cassandra’s critique on the stigma associated with sexual curiosity and possibility. She becomes critical in the end to map out how Cassandra hopes to reimagine motherhood and social responsibility while simultaneously refusing to choose between one space or the other, more concerned with the best she can provide to her community. The treachery, unlike earlier work, would stem from consenting to norms. Cassandra seeks out Monse because she wants to imagine a home in which her sexuality and the curious possibilities of its fluidity are not questioned. She does not return to her mother because there she believes she will find greater critique and disconnection. The idealized past of the American Dream her mother, Caro, desires does not fall in line with Cassandra. The reasons she leaves her daughter are the reasons she leaves her mother, what they imagine possible for themselves can be made in how the silences of one relationship provide avenues to create others which, in turn, may spark the possibility of a reparative return. Cassandra does not abandon her mother nor does Caro imagine abandoning her daughter, rather each generation considers their decisions in serving a greater need than the one presumed of the person feeling abandoned. Because that is minimally understood across generations and, arguably, across regions, the grief is that much more difficult to overcome. The greater the distance and the greater the refusal to look at the past without trying to find the hope in critiquing what remains absent, does not necessarily provide the opportunity to heal and repair for a greater more inclusive collective consciousness.

**Conclusion**

The tensions mapped out between Cassandra, her peers, her family and the spaces they each occupy attempt to critically comment on how the turning point of education and socio-
economic mobility do not fully address political repression. Further, because of how the intents and practices to pursue goals unintentionally silence and disengage critical relationships, its possibilities only lay within the ability of education to sustain an open ear to what exists beyond the institution. A nationalist determinism that functions to institutionalize a belief runs the risk of not listening and perpetuates the presumed impossibility of Puerto Ricans cannot listen to each other. What makes them poor is not their condition, as the woman from Oscar’s quote presumes, in the inability and/or refusal to listen, it is the consent to silence and the divisions that would result from said silence that would perpetuate their poverty.

For that reason, Cassandra and Toño revisit each other, to remember the reasons they grew apart and to find the possibility of becoming friends despite their differences. Their conversation, which precedes the moment Cassandra looks for Monse, becomes as much about figuring out whether or not they broke up because of the miscarriage, as it provides her an avenue to read her body differently in light of what being sexually active with idealized men, albeit for different reasons, has ‘cost’ her politically/socially. She needs to be heard, and in that telling, have her discourse and her story operate differently than the parameters of repression would permit. Her audience with Toño alternately reads her acts and her ability to define them as not seeking approval but rewriting the negotiations she continuously had to make regarding the desires she pursues.

She hopes to be able to edit out the ‘poor’ in her Puerto Rican subject position. Such a practice is a call to resisting being taken for granted because of her difference; she similarly wants to recognize and remember the possibility they—she and Toño—imagine for each other, despite the revision of recognizing the practice of their desires changed their hopes. Seeing how Toño has changed, while her brother has not, complements her individualized internal reflection
over the function of her body and her desires in the spaces she inhabits and the relationships she pursues.

Toño no longer pursues sex for the reason he had pursued it with Cassandra. In a similar vein, he no longer pursues community building with the same intent that he had had before leaving. The miscarriage not only provided them the opportunity to re-examine their lives and what they owed to each other and their community, but it also afforded them the opportunity to critically examine and engage with who they were. Being able to reflect on such a change, to listen to the other’s rewriting of the past in order to consider a better future, allows for a critical reconciliation that could sustain continued collaboration. They may not date again but, because they recognize that the responsibility they lost allows them to imagine even more possibilities than they, in their relationship, consider being able to achieve.

Their reflection over the situation and its context allows them to parallel the conversation between Oscar and the woman with whom he organized. While Cassandra is reflecting over the imposed poverty of her sexual expression and its function, Toño is reflecting over how exploring greater possibilities for the body—the individual as well as the greater community—will allow freedom and the concept of determining one’s livelihood will not be inhibited as a result of how responsibility had been socialized. While she does not tell him she is contemplating women and he does not tell her he is not being monogamous as they had been, it is through reconfiguring their interpretation of the past that they can find greater possibility for their future.

**Left Unsaid**

Returning to the prologue, where the reader has been told that, at one point, Cassandra and Jared reconcile, demonstrates that, still, a great deal is missing from what Carina can possibly recover to understand her mother’s choices. The failure to incorporate why they
reconcile rests on its insignificance to the greater intergenerational struggles between the female characters. Its absence also negates the relation of political monogamy that characters such as Juanita and, to some degree, Caro, call on Cassandra to undertake in her professional, cultural and even sexual choices. For this reason, the sexual curiosity Cassandra hopes to explore and the women with which she can explore it remain absent and silent within the text.

The purpose of their silence, much like the continued pockets of inconclusiveness and uncertainty of recovering an erased and contradictory past, lies within further demonstrating how recovering the past is more than one project. While theirs—Jared and Cassandra's—is the reconciliation Cassandra’s family and friends do not expect, such an unexpected result is precisely the possibility of queerness as a horizon to meet. It is not yet here and, once it becomes present, what it looks like or how we get there is still a possibility that can be imagined. Carina’s existence represents what neither Cassandra, Jared, nor Cassandra’s community, could ever imagine as possible. Not only because Jared comes back into Cassandra’s life but because of what Carina and Cassandra can retain in the process. Refusing to break relationships, however complex or wounded, as a result of migration or distance.


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Dear Readers,

Before you start reading what I’ve brought together, I wanted to tell you how I came across the story I’m about to tell you and why, as a woman with few worries in the world, it was important for me to tell. Or, why it was important for me to learn. I wanted to know how my parents, Cassandra and Jared, met and fell in love in high school. I wanted to know how they fell in love and why. I needed to know their lives before me. The reasons I needed to know this I can’t tell you right now, I want to tell you about the hopes of getting married, of wanting a family, but I’m nervous. I’m nervous about what it means when I don’t want to do what my mom did—she left, without explanation, without warning. But, as I asked for the story, as I cried outrage, aside from my dad, I was the only one surprised.

I interviewed my tia’s, crazy Yahaira who, like mom, whipped her long dark curls around as she spoke so passionately about that year, the end of a millennium and the beginning of another. My tias from mom’s barrio days: Juanita, Geli and Monse, tight shouldered, all smiles and sharp postured, spoke of how they schemed and dream of staying in the barrio while going to different schools. Even my tia/prima Alejandra told me of how she learned to read as my mom’s dark hands and sweet words moved across the page and she could even mimic how her own pink lips and stubby pale hands followed . Their memories show me the mom that I miss. As they were telling me her stories, how she was with them, I was jealous and still, a little confused.

Nana Caro—she was neither abuela (too old) nor Mama (which was saved for MariLu’s sweet round face)—told me what she remembered and hoped for my mom in
that year. She apologized, of course and, even at 80 was a skinny outspoken Boricua who didn’t agree with my mother’s choices. A pesar de todo, that much had not changed. My mom’s step dad, Abuelo Mickey, with his tall quiet presence sat and listened without interjecting as Nana spoke. Later, with an arm around my humble hockey shoulders, he would tell me of that afternoon, the one you have to hear about at the end, and how he understood why my mom needed to do it. He understood but, he wasn’t her real father to intervene. He told me what he never told my mom or her mom. I knew why, after so long, he could.

It was harder to find my parents’ friends from Lincoln Park. It’s easy to see how and why they grew apart. As I write this story, as I share my parents’ difficult year with you, I am not apologizing for them as they had to me. Allie, the stout, firm diplomat, told her story as though she didn’t do anything. She did smile on being part of the reason they got together. She was happy they were together as long as they were. She said I had my mother’s fire and determination for truth. She filled me in on the others. She showed me Jenna’s stringy hair, Tory’s bouncy stature…I even saw a picture of Cheynne, unthreatening and plain—not because she was white, but because her eyes were looking for something I still can’t figure. Then again, she could never—none of them could ever—love my dad like my mom. My dad didn’t love anyone more. No matter how he tried.

It was hard to write of MariLu and Abuelo Zeke, for Zeke died before I was born and Mama…I can’t even speak of that. Zeke, though, was right out of a telenovela, tall and a gentleman in all his pictures. Dad loved him, there’s even one where they play dominoes together. But I digress. They were my mom’s comfort and refuge. They helped
raise her in her first years, what they taught her of love, of hope, of courage, I still have that in me. I miss them. Even though I never knew Zeke, there’s so much of him in my brother Isaiah, Ezequiel who was born shortly before Zeke’s heart stopped. As though his soul transferred and could never live without giving. My brother was all heart, he was born in a time of grieving and maybe that’s why he always had so much light.

My dad’s high school soccer teammates were harder. The ones that saw and did nothing. Rick, the short striker, died in a car crash before he reached thirty. I am not sure if he and my dad ever made peace after what Rick said about my mom. Tracy, well, she didn’t really know what was going on at the time and I really think she didn’t know what to do. She could be a good outfielder, but in field, there wasn’t enough room for her thick legs to move. Marie and her sprite like tendencies did their best to support my mom; she did her best, in the end, to her intervene. Uncle Nyasi told me that much. She was a good person, confused and torn between who she was and wanting to be popular. That was her struggle at the time. And Nyasi, at my wedding, he smiled, he said he and Greg could have been distant cousins. Probably, but unlike my mom, unlike Tia Coco, there were too many centuries between Greg and his Yoruban ancestry. The bittersweet cost of colonialism.

Tio Alirio’s story, what I was able to pick up from the pictures, the books and Laviera’s plays on the 1966 and 1977 riots, was easy. I could see how he did what my mom’s dad could not in those years. Granmps, though, did his best with us. And Uncle Ernie was always fun in our trips to California. About the stories on the riots, though, my mom had said the original cast had done an amazing job. The pages read offered bits of her history, of my tio’s and grandmother’s history, then again, their lives were something
altogether different. I hope I do my best to explain it. Nana Caro wanted a different and better life for her daughter; Tio Oscar and Tio Alirio knew that could not be done without family. Caro just wanted the American dream; and she wanted an escape from the violence. Still, though, how can anyone avoid destiny and the inevitable struggle of freedom? Still, I wish I had my mother.

My mom’s confusion, her constant movement, between English, Spanish and Spanglish; because of el que diran, what was said of Puerto Ricans and what so many were trying to rewrite, but that’s what I couldn’t get. Why was it so important? That’s what writing this was about. That’s what went in to the years of all the research, trying to find everyone from the pictures, from the yearbook that my tia’s, my abuelas, my primas said were so important.

I could have written this in Spanish, my mom read to me in both and, eventually, so did my dad. And they forced me to take it, no matter how I complained. That’s how I got to play hockey—my father would have preferred soccer, of course, but that belonged to the twins: Jesse and Penelope. While Isaiah understood, Jesse was indifferent and Penelope encouraged avoiding this altogether. Still, I want to know why, after so many happy years, as I was entering in to the hardest part of life, my mom still needed to go back to Puerto Rico.
**El calor del verano**

Pink tiled walls close in. Long, white tub narrows y de nuevo, la regla que se pega a la piel on a Chicago summer like this. For Cassandra, this summer was different. So much is different because, sometimes, la regla traía recuerdos que quisiera olvidar.

Started two Aprils ago—April 1999: locker room solitary showers after track practice and the blood of an unwanted, trapped, wasted, failed life escaped between her legs disguised as a heavy period. *That* shower returned her and her boyfriend Toño back on the path of their dreams of college, success, the Boricua dream of education and the dreams it would bring: Toño’s ingeniero aspirations seguirá de pie; ella se mantendrá en el camino de periodista sin el burden de un bebé. The river of red was the end of a baby that would taint those dreams and all the demands que la gente tenía de esos sueños. Still, as memory worked, the monthly return of thin red lines running down her leg, resurrected questions that weeks of washing had not impeded from returning on to her skin. Lines of relief, of grief, lines of suspicion that didn’t dissolve down the drain. Guilt like splintered wood; culpa was a crown of thorns on the hope returned with such a desired loss. A smart, pretty, dark brown girl like her in a situation like *that*. And a pretty brown boy like Toño off to college should have known better. *That pregnancy scare; baby drama* wasn’t supposed to happen to them. There was Northwestern for her. For him: U of I. Latino power couple, dream team of college possibilities. The scheme of college careers that would let them stay en el barrio was still going to happen, aún, the questions haunted her: Was it for the best? Had they wished that life unwanted away? Had that been why it slipped so easily from between her legs, so that their dreams would not go down the drain? Aún asi, a half hour shower no siempre le quitaba el sentido de sucia.
In August 2000, personal statements and applications filled out; printed, saved on a disk and at so many other computers, el miedo y la culpa began to her skin like a guilty cherry stain. Toño, el barrio’s prized pretty brown boy had not come back to el barrio—not even for vacation—since it happened. It wasn’t the accident; it wasn’t the mistake. Still, with her mom, Caro’s questions, and her brother, Bern’s caffeine high hostile attitude against her since last summer, she wondered if Toño, too, was so tormented by the memory of what they lost that he would miss Fiesta Boricua’s family reunions. What a family to come back to—one that could never have forgiven the sin of what they almost ruined.

Division Street and Mozart Street, two blocks around the corner from tiendas, cafeterias and restaurants, housed columns of brick two flats where fractured Boricua families lived, fractured because of who had to leave; fractured because of those who couldn’t stay; because of those not knowing how or where to return. These families were fractured but not like Cassandra’s whose dad forgot about them with divorce, whose mom, Caro, who didn’t know where else to go, whose brother, Bern, brings the pedacito de patria with him wherever he’d go. Fractured, though not all forgotten because, in those buildings beyond Cassandra’s bathroom, the music started to hum, the garlic and platano wafting in the air, hungry to feed the memories of the fiesta before and still, maybe, this fiesta, with no pregnancy scare, no sex to lie about and dreams on their way, could be better.

There, from Division and Mozart, a few doors down from her uncle’s barbershop, Cassandra’s ears caught hums and whispers, echoes and rhythms of Fiesta Boricua was
well on its way. There, beyond what she feared, what she wanted to forget was a family reunion between steel flags in the ground, claiming ese pedacito de patria que siempre será Puerto Rican. Not too long before that, barrio leaders had organized the first Fiesta Boricua—Division Street’s annual closed street festival of food, music, art and memory, was about to begin. Ay, ya, she tried to convince herself, it’s over. Besides, she thought, her mom would demand the bathroom soon enough—in the rare times Cass makes it to the bathroom before her mom left the house, her mom’s bladder and short temper tries to break itself against the, if not, on the other side of the door.

On the other side of the door, closer than the fiesta, but further from Cassandra, Caro stood waiting. Caro stood waiting on yet another woman with dreams she didn’t understand. Caro heaved, wondering when her daughter would let her do what she needed to do.

Outside, Caro waited, with tight and pinched leg impatience for her daughter’s exit. Caro’s patience was as short lived as Cassandra’s self-perceived perfection. After forty five minutes, Caro wrapped her tiny white hands con una furia de una mujer demandando control. Esta mama, que a veces se comportaba como una roommate, como capitana de casa y de sueños no compartidos, esta mujer llamada Caro, Carolina como el pueblo de sus abuelos, gritaba: “Gorda ¿qué tú haces?”

On hearing her mom’s voice, Cassandra’s feet smoothed the blood of her latest period towards the drain. She then smoothed her hands over her midriff, over her lower back and, lastly, between her legs to make sure the scars of the miscarriage were only on her spirit. Stepping outside the tub, ringing water out of her long, complicated curls, she shouted out “E’ que ehte pelo, Ma”, continuing as she searched for a comb and
cholesterol conditioner, “lo ‘tengo que peinal.” As Cassandra gathered the stray locks that gathered on the wall and tub floor, her mother, Carolina called out:

“Entonce’ me voy pa’ casa de tu tío,” Carolina said grabbing her keys from the kitchen table, “pero, morena, avanza,” she added as her voice trailed down the hall, “que Geli y Eddie are downstairs!”

As Cassandra heard the door close behind her mom, she sighed with relief. Cassandra looked at herself, taking in a deep breath and recited her mantra.

Lamento Borincano started playing from her tio’s first floor apartment, as she got dressed, preparandose para los que quizas quedaban esperandola, a veces su mama le mentía para llevar lo que necesitaba acabo. Pero, al bajar las escaleras del segundo piso, Marc Anthony’s “libertad” booming from her aunt’s open window, she saw que this time, her mom no le mintió. Casi toda su gente menos Monse, estaban esperandola en el stoop.

“Didn’t your mom tell you we were here?”

“Ay, Juanita,” Cassandra dijo wrapping her arm round her secret keeper hermana del alma, guardadora de todos sus secretos, “con mi mai44 una nunca sabe.”

Juanita shrugged in response to Cassandra’s comentario about her mom. Juanita knew Caro to be a woman on the move, saying what she needed to get ahead but, Cassandra shouldn’t be thinking of her mom as a person who shouldn’t be trusted—Caro did what she could for them. Still, Juanita knew what Caro could not and did not know. Juanita knew why she knew when no one else, not even their gente, could ever… Juanita, guardaba secretos pero, under her friend’s shoulder and in between their laughter,

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44 “mai” is an informal term for “mother.”
también guardaba el presentimiento agrio de que Casandra los iba a dejar, no tanto por no compartir el pregnancy scare con todos pero con esos sueños de permanecer en dos mundos y era inevitable que Cassandra escogiera uno, por lo menos así pensaba Juanita. How could Cassandra stay when she made so much of her life in keeping secrets, crossing corners…what about Casandra could stay…From what Juanita could see, the dreams for the barrio and Cassandra’s dreams were no longer the same.

Juanita saw it when scholarships, grades, and parental choices sent them to different high schools—she at Catholic yet thuggish Trinity, Eddie at prison like Clemente, Geli at last generation’s Boricua high Wells, Cassandra at yuppie Lincoln Park High School—secrets kept them safe but distant. College was going to make it worse. Cassandra’s options were getting more yuppie with each graduation. Geli was going far too, but it’s not like she was going anywhere fancy. Juanita was keeping it real with UIC. What was the point of leaving them all behind? Who else would they have? Fiesta Boricua was the beginning of the end, Juanita presentía, and the answer to the plans la otra nena del conjunto asked as they passed Fiesta Boricua’s first stage, set it up even worse. Geli, the unlikely at so many things, started asking Cassandra…Cassandra…about sex advice, something Juanita didn’t think they should be talking about on the street…

Still, Geli who was all about pissing Juanita off and getting Juanita to fall of her high horse, ignored Juanita’s rolling eyes and continued to ask Cassandra, “Can I talk to you about going down on-” when they were far enough from the performance stage to hear each other speak, Geli’s eyes repeated the question when she asked with her words, “What did it feel like—
Cass shrugged because it was a weird conversation to have, given who Geli usually asked. Her cousin Coco, the crazy girl from Philly, from what Geli would explain, knew all about that stuff. She’d brought home a girl, then a guy and Geli was all detailed about family reactions. Cass never got a chance to see her when she came to visit but, based on Geli’s stories of her adventures, wondered what it’d be like to meet a woman who was as engaged with community as they were.

Cass explained her experiences giving Toño blow jobs—in part to amuse her friend and in part to be able to share something, she admitted what Juanita and other girls didn’t tell her: that she almost gagged on Toño’s dick the first few rounds, but, she’d gotten used to the feel it down her throat after about the fifth time. He would have liked this festival, Cassandra thought to herself as she concluded her blow job practices. It was bittersweet that she and Toño never found their way back to being friends, how much of it, she wondered, was because of what they lost instead of how they had cared about each other? This thought had buried itself in Cassandra’s thoughts as she and Geli immersed themselves in a crowd by a stage. The conversation had transitioned in to talking about the following weekend’s plans. School may have been starting, but it didn’t stop their other friends from hanging out, or catching up.

To no surprise to Geli, who understood Cassandra’s ambition to save to go to Puerto Rico the following summer, heard Cassandra, disappointed, say, “I may work, Dana hasn’t told me if she needed me to watch her sons.” También, she would be starting school the upcoming Tuesday and she wanted to keep it open por si algo sucediera allá.
Geli nodded, knowing that Caro no longer wanted to support her daughter’s soul searching trips to the only place Cassandra felt at peace, “That’s cool, yeah, Ricky’s wanted to share some of his mixes\textsuperscript{45} with a bunch of us...”

Geli liked Fiesta Boricua. It was like going to the island but without the expensive plane ticket. She’d be going that following summer too but, at least her dad’s parents, her abuelos still living down there, had said it’d be her high school graduation gift. Having gone for as long as she can remember, it was the only certain thing about boricuas in September, one of the few celebrations boricuas had as theirs, not for anyone else like the parades or June’s festival...Fiesta Boricua was home grown. Fiesta, despite las dramaticas de Juanita itching\textsuperscript{46} to make sure they didn’t lose each other, always brought Boricuas back together. Like the back together that could allow good conversation, good food and food music en casa. Era la fiesta del pueblo.

One of her favorite memories was years ago when they were giggling about Cassandra dating her brother’s best friend. There they were, by some solitary stage in the middle of transition, helado de coco in one hand and plastic spoons in the other. Toño and Bern, among the other guys they rolled with, walked by them and Toño caught Cassandra’s eye. Trying to play it all cool like boys did and, as soon as he was out of ear’s reach, they giggled so hard they almost spit out the helado de coco. One of the best things about summers on Paseo, helado de coco on the corner while checking out the hotties.

\textsuperscript{45} Mixes as in musical tracks he was mixing.

\textsuperscript{46} Anxiously desiring
But the summer was all about festejando—not just because of Fiesta. The Puerto Rican parade began the summer the week before Father’s Day and Fiesta wrapped it up the Sunday before they all had to go back to school. Los desaparecidos returned for the music, the food, the dance groups based out of the park, out of the schools, out of los viejos y los jovenes that wanted to keep the memory of patria alive, apesar de la distancia, put on a good show. Four main stages. The farthest one, closest to Cassandra’s, was on California. One four blocks away, by the other flag, on Western. One on Rockwell Street and another on Campbell. A pesar de la distancia, de los suburbos, de la supuesta violencia, it brought the people together. Going from English to Spanish to, “It’s been so long…they’ve gotten so big…what are you up to these days?” to “What you doin’ later…Fuck school…did you see fulano and how he brought fulana and…I can’t wait to see who goes crazy tonight.” Fiesta (Fiesta Boricua, FB) was a time for reunion, a time to remember the need to forget. Time may pass: jobs, life, and love took old school Boricuas all over pero fiesta, always bring families back together, to remind that, no matter what, amor a la patria, y el anhelo proveía mas que los lamentos de, what would happen in the future? La fiesta always brought el barrio back home. Even when Cass, as a little girl, went to Puerto Rico every summer, she started coming back earlier in the summer for this; she came back for the reasons Boricuas in the suburbs of Aurora, Schiller Park returned. Something tied them together even though, like Juanita, Geli recognized there would be the temptation to grow apart. Iba a suceder sooner or later.

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47 Putting on a good show was both about the abstract performance of aligning themselves with a nation despite distance. The performance was what was happening on the literal stage as well as the stage of diaspora.

48 Fulano/a are a local Spanish equivalent to so-and-so, usually with a negative connotation.
Cassandra y ella empezaron como vecinas, compañeras de la escuela y con eso convivieron el divorcio, la muerte, el peligro de los gangeros, first kisses and summers in Puerto Rico when Geli’s grandparents were still around and before Cassandra’s dad skipped out. She met Juanita through Cassandra and, with Cassandra in another school, having to work and being all involved in yuppie-ville, Juanita y Geli spent more time together.

Despite all these changes, these different directions high school took them, Geli, Juanita, Cassandra and Eddie stuck together because they understood the beat of what was around them, even though they responded to the rhythms by way of how they could play them. Cassandra mellowed out in the hours she spent away from the block. Not being around as much has kept her from being seen as a threat, as much of anything. Eddie called out to her trying not to lose her in the crowd, “Pa’ donde va?”

White t-shirts, blue jean shorts, daisy dukes, halter tops, hip huggers, tattoos and new fades just for one of the biggest events of the summer. Fiesta Boricua. The music, the crowd, the dancing, and art—part family reunion, part resistencia to Boricua laments, the end of a summer, the resurrection of dreams, pedacito de patria en la gente, por la gente, la esperanza de lo que comida, holor y sonido guardaba—Puerto Rico mas alla de la tierra. Fiesta’s activities closed Division Street between California and Western Avenue, but opened the hearts and cariño of many, even the young who were starting to forget a barrio before fiesta.

Cass had spotted a table with coqui earrings, but when she heard Eddie a couple yards behind her, she turned and walked towards him. “They had unas pantallas lo mas linda…anything with coqui’s makes me happy,” she said pointing to the one she just left.
He nodded, but asked, “‘Xcept that shirt that says would you like Puerto Rican in you?’ Eddie liked talking fresh because he knew that, among the girls, he was the only one who could. They knew he meant no harm—not just because he took beatings from both Juanita and Cassandra in sixth grade when he tried to go out with the both of them but because after the girls made up, he made his peace and stuck up for them when another guy from their grade tried to start shit. He could talk shit about other guys because he wasn’t like them but still, jokes like that shirt were funny as hell, especially when Cassandra or Juanita or, because she was harder to mess with, Geli, got heated about it.

Cassandra, though, too chill in the company of her friends, rolled her eyes at his self-serving walk down memory lane as they walked back to las otras nenas standing in front of the Family Dollar, lost in deep conversation about the honeys’ Juanita was checking out.

Geli made a point to watch her boyfriend’s dance group’s performance. They’d started hanging out that May and, the boy had dance moves to match with his charm. He was part of a dance group and would be performing some time in the afternoon. Cassandra wasn’t a big fan of dancing but Ricky wasn’t bad, Cassandra thought. Geli and Ricky had been together all summer and it looked as though it could last into the school year. He was up there dancing bachata, something Cassandra could never get a hold of, no matter what. Geli, though, had it down sin duda. She was dancing to the beat, eyes closed heart all into it. After a while, she did open her eyes, for a minute, but not too long. When the group finished, Geli and Cass went to go find the others. By the time they

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49 Good looking individuals.
all reached the Family Dollar store, none of them had managed to find a schedule of the
stage events. Before they could make any definite plans, they tried to see if they could
find a schedule because, sometimes, Puerto Ricans took the time to print it out—that was
sometimes. When they did get their hands on one, they planned what they were going to
see and at what time. Asistieron a todo juntos.

They went back to California Avenue after a while, but once Michael Stuart was
done, they went to go see what was happening on the Western Ave. stage. No sabía por
qué but that stage didn’t have the largest crowds. Uninterested in the performer, they
went back through the crowd. Foot traffic had its rules: those walking east stayed on the
south side of Division; those walking west towards California Ave, on the north side. The
sun felt good. The crowd’s energy buzzed louder than flies over the sweet aromatic smell
of a piragua de tamarindo. En un año, it’d be Geli and Cassandra returning from Puerto
Rico. Cassandra was taking on as much babysitting and cutting as much clothes and CD
shopping as she could. She was spending less time at home with lights on, to save on the
electricity she was expected to pay. The crowd and energy and life she wanted buzzing in
her ear was the song of the coqui fresh from la guinea, on Tanama in Arecibo, where,
even Geli agreed, the air smelled sweeter, though poorer, the people smiled more even
though they had less, and the earth danced with them instead of trying to keep them.
Juanita, knowing the poverty that sparked her family’s exile, knew that romantic Puerto
Rico was the fairy tale they could tell each other because their families could afford the
return. Cassandra no lo negó, pero Puerto Rico was still her Eden.

Caro, though refused to return to the island of backwardness…the island where
she was forced to return to after a childhood of finding possibilities in the streets of
Chicago… the island of confinement where she was returned after helping her brother and cuñada settle in after his return from war… the island where she reluctantly went back, hiding away from her husband’s mujeriego tendencies… And that’s why, on one single solitary note, she, agreed with Juanita: Puerto Rico was the land of broken dreams and empty promises. The people who loved it so much, those people her brothers and even her daughter said belonged to her were too… stuck in a past that was a lie much like the future that’d never come for Puerto Rico… And soon—unlike her brother, Alirio, who’d had every opportunity to escape the barrio where he lost his family—Caro’d be able to leave the barrio with no need to return.

Though Caro knew she’d always visit for Fiesta and for her brothers. Her brothers were her people. And, as much as her daughter, Cassandra, insisted she’d always live in the barrio, Caro knew better than that. She’d never have to come back for her there. And, God willing, she’d stop talking about trying to be a journalist in Puerto Rico and find a nicer job, better opportunities than that. The Puerto Ricans who wanted opportunity went out and grabbed it, those people were Caro’s people. All this business about staying in the barrio… with the drugs, and the violence, the bochinche, the drama… none of that was Caro’s. That’s why, as soon as Cass was done with school, she and her fiancé, Mickey, agreed: out of the barrio and away from sentimental men all about preservar pedacitos de patria. On her way out the door, she found her oldest brother, Alirio solitarily sitting on the front porch.

She remembered when she came back to help him and his wife out after his stint in the war. Just for a bit. And then his wife and daughter died. And she had to come back. She hated coming back. And then her children’s father decided that he wasn’t the
marrying kind. And then he stopped paying the mortgage. And then he ruined her credit. And then she had to come back. And she hated coming back because, after all that coming and going, there her brother was, like the war never ended, like it was yesterday when he lost everything. And she needed more life in her life than that. Still, for shits and giggles, she asked him, “You aren’t going out there today?” she asked of the man who she felt had forgotten how to smile since the death of his family, “Cass and her friends are there.”

Alirio looked up at his kid sister, running and working out issues he felt she never had. He appreciated her return to el barrio because Cassandra filled in the void of the daughter he’d lost five years before Cassa was born. Carolina may have dressed less and less like the rebellious titerita she tried to be in the 70s, finding a way out of the barrio: the barrio mentality, the barrio poverty she so critiqued yet so needed and the barrio confines she always felt couldn’t contain her.

He shook his head no, little surprise to her, and said, “Tell Mickey I said hello,” grinning up at her painted face. “I left a note for Cassandra,” she called out as her low heels clicked down the stairs, “but I want her to call me when she gets back home.”

Alirio nodded, though Caro was already across the street getting into her car, and let his mind take him back to the dream taken by police, confusion, and the change of wars.

As Alirio went back in time in his head, visitors and Chicago residents used their cars to let Fiesta take them. The crowd on Division Street had tightened like Puerto Ricans crowding into a two door Toyota. Lines of people trailed beyond the booths and carts—a congestion of bodies, strollers, purses, and dangling keys bumping into huddles
of reunited families and friends, blurring the distinction of waiting and landing. Lanky arms and shoulders tower over new baby strollers and foreign girlfriends confused hungry Boricuas for eager prodigal Puerto Ricans. The collection of color, and conversion. It wasn’t until the sky darkened, until only barrio residents and their extended Chicago family remained, that Eddie walked Cassandra and Juanita home. Geli, cell phone in pocket, stuck around her boyfriend.

Cassandra walked up, past her uncle’s door, up the stairs to her and her mom’s second floor apartment, as the phone began to ring she read her mom’s note, Gorda, be back later, as she hurried in to get the phone. Like clockwork, Cassandra thought thinking her mother was already checking in on her.

Fiesta was still going on in the streets on that humid September night, like rising steam from a caldero full of arroz con gandules. She was going to the beach in the morning. “Oh shit, I forgot to ask,” she thought to herself as she plopped herself on her bed. Loosening up the ties of her shoes, she tried to remember if the girls or Eddie told her of their plans for tomorrow. Geli and Eddie both had to work. Maybe Juanita would come. It was almost 10 pm, Juanita couldn’t take calls at this hour, “Damn, I’ll call her in the morning,” she thought out loud scoping out her room.

It was filled with the bureau, the mirror, her bed, a cd player, like any kid from the block would have. Her peluches all huddled up by her pillow, some scattered on the dresser top, others over a bookshelf by the closet. Sliding out of her room filled with former childhood memories and adolescent secrets, walking through the kitchen to the bathroom, she considered what to bring.
A book, of course, hanging with white girls was always different. A towel, duh, no blanket under a tree next to a barbeque grill like when she would go with family and family friends. A cooler of goodies—a small one—it was just a girls thing that day. She hummed one of the jams50 from the afternoon, as she rinsed her toothbrush and placed toothpaste on it…senior year would start in a few days but she could have danced the whole night si no fuera por decirles yes to the beach. Then again, Fiesta Boricua was not something she would invite them to, she thought to herself as she brushed her teeth, it was too sacred to share with just anyone.

Then, as she began to rinse her mouth, the phone rang, “Like clockwork,” she thought out loud as she spit out the rinse. She splashed her face and the stubborn phone sounded again. Mom can just wait, she thought to herself, not wanting to hurry through her night time ritual. Cassandra was too much of a nena linda, a good girl, to be called all the time. One serious boyfriend to date and none on the radar since—what mom needed to be all up on a girl like that? Still, though, that phone ring had the threat of death on the other line, an unspoken test. Walking across the hall to her mom’s room, she barely reached the phone when the voicemail chimed in.

But it wasn’t her mom. And it wasn’t one of her friends from the barrio. It wasn’t even one the girls from tomorrow morning. It was his voice…the soccer captain’s voice. The voice of the boy she’d never be friends with again. It was the voice of the boy that, after dating a boy like Toño, no one should ever look at twice: as appealing as that boy’s

50 Jams- hit song.
Ken doll and CK\textsuperscript{51} features were, his prettiness and player attitude were nothing compared to the caballero amoroso y precioso that Toño was. It was the white boy who had somehow gotten her number and made her his lil pañuelo for the summer. “Pendejo,” she thought to herself, while on the other side of the phone, a young man was beginning to crumble.

As Jared spoke, he took pauses, waiting to see if she’d pick up. It was too near the school year for Cassandra to take a social life seriously, he thought. And, even as he spoke, breaking his rules, Jared Sumner knew he was engaging in a new gesture. Jared was not one for apologies but, as he wouldn’t dare state in his message, he hadn’t realized how used to her voice he’d gotten. Weeks since their dramatic yelling match about his stupid love life debating between Jenna and Tory—his summer flings—and Bryony, his spring love, the girls who had him all confused, he started to realize what he wasn’t listening to in all his talking. He talked so much he didn’t know about her friends, about her dating, save for the first love from her sophomore year. He didn’t know about her goals save that it was Northwestern or bust. He didn’t know if she needed an ear, he didn’t know anything but his own stupid mistakes. “I apologize, al’right,” he surrendered, “there you have it. I’m sorry.”

Hearing those words, his defeated tone perked up Cassandra’s senses. She smoothed the suds on her face, massaging the same blackhead for what felt like hours as she used her other hand to replay the message—he’d gotten rid of the girls; he recognized he fucked her up with all his nonsense; he’d admitted he was an asshole. Like that’s all it would take, like he didn’t know why she was really pissed, then again, despite the smile

\textsuperscript{51} CK – Calvin Klein as in Calvin Klein model.
overcoming her face and the butterfly flutter in her stomach, he was still a pendejo más
que jode.

**La Playa**

Juanita beat Cassandra to the phone that morning but, between getting the bag
together and packing some sándwiches, casi se le olvidó. Pero Juanita fue la que le
preguntó sobre lo que iba a hacer. Al enterarse de que Cassandra ya se estaba preparando
para la otra vida—así lo veía Juanita—decidió que, “No, no, more,” as Juanita
sometimes called her, “I just realized I have some stuff to do for …”Juanita’s rambling
though, could not convince Cassandra because, at every invite to hang with her friends
from Lincoln Park, most of whom were white—she couldn’t help who was in her class—
Juanita always had something to do. They all did, really, that one time…Geli and Juanita
came unannounced…aunque fuera rutina…with Allie and Tracy were lingering after
finishing a school project… Geli and Juanita acted like they had cooties or something.

Cassandra got it. Cassandra felt the same way her first few months and having a
Latino boyfriend who only really hung around with other Latinos, she didn’t have to
think about them until class. And then she wanted to get on the paper. And then she had
to start writing. And then she started meeting other people and yeah, they were weird for
the most part, but they didn’t have cooties. They may not know why Paseo was
important, they couldn’t relate to needing to stay away from the sun or conversations
about what conditioner was best for her curls but, they could talk books….her barrio

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52 “morré” is short for morena
friends could talk books but some of her friends at school could talk the books she didn’t want her friends to know she was reading. That not even her mom knew she was reading.

And that one time they came. That time they took the bus with her instead of staying around school, they didn’t act like they were traveling across the ocean; they didn’t shudder at the narrow stairway up to her mom’s apartment; they didn’t even squirm on the bus. What they couldn’t pick up on, what the sites, smells and sounds did for Cassandra, was okay, because at least they’d meet her where she was.

On the way there, the girls didn’t feel the remnants of the party from the night before; they didn’t pick up on that smell of summer ending that had begun to lift from the labored sidewalks and from in between the parked cars on Division St. Allie, for her end, was thinking about the boy who’d called her while she was in the middle of reading *El Coronel no Tiene Quien le Escriba*. As a smiling Cassandra popped in the back of the car with her beachbag, her cooler and summer ramblings, Allie hoped that the soccer captain that wanted to make amends with her best friend would find something else to do instead of joining them at LaSalle Avenue Beach.

Allie under a hat, cradling a book on her lap, in a beach chair next to Cassandra’s towel, winced as Jared’s intent gaze caught her attention. She immediately returned to her book, embarrassment flooding her face, not knowing how to respond to either. She couldn’t call Jared out but she couldn’t warn her friend: she was going to get in trouble. Allie switched her eyes to Cassandra who reclined with her eyes absorbed in Marques; Jared, from his stroll, was focusing on Cassandra’s bronze legs shining under the sun. He saw Cassandra reach for something next to her as he walked towards them. Allie’s returned gaze let him know that Cassandra had no idea he was feet away from her, still,
they worried over Cassandra who was too engrossed in her book, flipped a page in the Spanish novel, and picked up her hot dog.

In the time it took Cass to put the hot dog in her mouth, Jared plopped himself down next to them, throwing his bag in front of them. Cassandra almost gagged as his leg brushed against hers, startled by his presence. His attempt at a smile seemed to light fire under her feet. Within seconds, she was headed towards the boardwalk. Allie sighed as Jared’s disappointed eyes followed. “I didn’t have time to tell her you were coming,” she explained to his defeated expression.

He took in a deep breath as Allie, in a gesture of diplomacy, tried to make small talk but after a few one word answers and “uh-huhs,” his eyes, then feet, followed the tankini clad aspiring journalist’s long brown legs, as he muttered to Allie,—“don’t worry about it.”

Allie watched him walk away and hoped for the best; from other encounters, she knew Cassandra didn’t forgive easily. Allie watched him walk towards Cassandra, who was at the boardwalk laughing with Tracy.

Tracy, who was sitting with Cass overlooking the lake from the boardwalk, agreed that he was a pretty boy who thought he could have anything. When he started at Lincoln Park as a junior, he ruled the school within a matter of weeks. Tracy and Cass had English and Pre-Calculus with him, watching his quick rise to social royalty. They agreed that he had as much hot air in his head, as others were blowing up his ass. He only started talking to Cass when she caught him getting his heart ripped out by Bryony, in the middle of the lobby outside of their junior prom. And, for some strange reason, he
used her to pour his heart out, still chasing Bryony and fooling around with Jenna, to get over Bryony’s ungettable get. She was his escape from the pressures of a perfect life.

As he plotted to sit down next to her, this time there was less of a way out for her, he had himself convinced it was about not wanting to start Littwin’s English class with her pissed at him. By the time he reached her, Cass and Tracy were trading summer stories.

With his arrival, their laughter departed.

Cassandra looked towards her surroundings for a distraction, a diversion. She looked out over the water, spotted other LPH’ers from their year throwing around a ball, sky scrapers towering in the background, cars zooming on Lake Shore drive expressway. She looked at Tracy who, in Tracy fashion, ignored the awkward air between the three of them.

Tracy was of no use here. She was that ’hey Tracy,’ on one side of Cassandra with the’ oh hi Jared’ on the other. Well-meaning she may be but, sometimes, being that off about Cass’s frustration, was ridiculous. Cassandra tried to say something to intentionally ignore Jared with Tracy’s help but Tracy’s gaze had averted the both of them. Cass watched what as Tracy watched, and followed, having spotted her other sports practice comrades splashing yards in front of her, Tracy ducked herself in the water, chattering her way towards them.

Silence wove Jared and Cassandra closer together as each dared not be the first to say a word. He looked down at his reddening knees. He spotted hers, still slightly damp from the water she’d begun splashing around. As her toes kicked up, he saw she’d had
them painted a red orange color that went well with her skin tone. She’d gotten darker since the last time he saw her, which, despite their almost daily conversations over the summer, was their last exam day. She had a flip flop tan; and as his eyes went from her toes to her ankles, the absence of a sock tanline telling him she didn’t wear socks over the summer. As his hungry eyes scimmaged between her knees to her ankles her vocal outrage ruined the concentration that was leading his eyes above her knees, “What?!”

The projection of her voice caught him off guard, leaning backward and snapping out of the dirty thoughts whirring in his mind, he retorted, “wha-what?”

Partly amused, off guard, though mostly bothered, she announced: “You keep staring!”

Trying to come up with a good lie, he muttered what first came to his head, “I--I don’t think any of us brought sun screen.”

“You keep staring!”

“Really,” she huffed crossing her legs and her arms, “lame…”

“I was looking at your tan and realized I’mna get as red as a lobster—

She leaned back away from him, scooched when a tingle up her spine revealed that their thighs had somehow, begun touching, realizing that his pale skin could do without sunscreen as long as a fish could do without water. “Then you should ask Allie—

“Yeah,” he said and then addressed his fear, “did you get my message?”

She nodded, looking at her feet and ankles twirl like bait in the water.

“And?”

“And what?”

“You know what?”

She shrugged.
“C’mon, I know, I know I fucked up but I’m over it—

She shrugged again.

“Stop being a brat—

“A brat?! Hearing you gripe ALL SUMMER about them was about being friends—

“No, but I said I was sorry—he defended and, with that, he saw her defenses soften.

She tried her best to keep her resolve to be angry with him but the way he wanted to plead with her unintentionally kept her interest, “You know, my brother, my boys from home, they earned the right to talk my ear off, and here you are, asking if you can do that—

“No,” he thought out loud putting a hand on her thigh. “that’s not what I mean,” the realization of goosebumps on her leg in conjunction with the nervousness that overtook his hands set him off course. Crossing his arms, his heart fluttering with an anxiety he didn’t expect, he defended, “I mean,” he concluded trying to regain his cool, “I can be there for you too, you know.”

She looked up sideways from under her eyelids, His biceps were twitching with anticipation, but she wasn’t going to bend; she wasn’t going to let him know all he had to do was look at her with his hazel eyes to melt her. Though, by the end of the day, she was a melted ice cream on the the ground, as he helped them load Tracy’s car.

When the sun darkened to the color of butterscotch, sweetening the sky, trimmed with the pale lavenders, blues and oranges brought on by air pollution, Cassandra breathed in the damage of giving in to him and letting go. As Cassandra and company
walked back, Jared helped them bring their encampment to the car. Despite every attempt to be angry in that first hour, she had failed herself, spending the rest of the day flirting with the white boy, in spite of the pendejo he had been. All he had to do was look at her. With the day drawing to a close, she was looking forward to the distance. She prayed for the distance she didn’t want.

As if reading her thoughts, Jared approached her from behind, fingertips on her hips, asking to take her home. Cassandra’s eyes widened, hoping Tracy no la dejaría desamparada. Tracy, the only witness to Cassandra’s anxiety, shrugged. His hands felt too good, para decírselo que no. Por mucho que quiso, no lo hizo, y lo siguió hacia su coche. Su cuerpo temblaba con el miedo de desearlo y la angustia de querer despertar del rollercoaster que había sido la situación. Le preguntó por donde vivía y por un minuto no le quería responder.

She remained tight in her seat, he brushed a curl from her forehead, she mumbled, “Thanks,” in response, curling her hair behind her ear and turning towards the window so that he wouldn’t see her flushed face. Unable to see her face, he wanted to touch her again. Still, he took sideway glances at her, as she remained silent as the wind not hitting against it as they cruised down Lake Shore Drive. He decided, without asking, not to take her directly home. As she saw them pass the Brywn Mawr exit, she wondered where he was taking her. She knew, via gossip, he lived this far north, but how would that be anywhere near his mind—but she was too intrigued to question.

As if he was reading her question, he pointed his head toward a sea green and pink awning reading Miami Flavors. “Do you mind?” he asked as he looked for parking.

He watched her shrug and smile.
As he was looking for parking, she was looking for a way to speak. Emocionada con todo, por todo y hablar no era suficiente, y sonreír con el miedo y the surrealism of it, tampoco. Y allí andaba al otro lado del coche, abriéndole la puerta.

As they walked the few storefronts, he wondered if he should take her hand. Leaning his right hand toward her left, despite the tingles going through his, he found her unresponsive. He put his hands in his pockets.

She crossed her arms after his hand touched hers.

Her flip flops’ dispersed rhythm, prompted him to say, “Your flip flops fart.”

She jerked her head, befuddled, “What?”

He laughed and said, “Your flip flops make a phht sound when you walk.”

Her mouth opened in amusement and astonishment, and her grin inspired Jared. As they walked in, the bell chimed behind them and the chill of the place produced goose bumps all over her skin. She shook with the shiver. He attempted to warm her arms, to which she smiled, “Aren’t you cold?”

He shook his head no, “I wouldn’t be here if I was.”

“Oh,” she figured, “right.” She looked at the menu without asking what was good. Then she peered through the flavors to see if she could find pistachio, or butter pecan, her favorites. Jared, knowing he wanted a chocolate chip cookie dough sugar cone, watched as Cassandra examined each flavor, eyes skimmings bits and sprinkles of uncovered glass other customers didn’t cover. She peered past their persons to see if they had what she was looking for. Then, she whispered in his ear what she wanted and studied the menu above as he made the order. They ate in the parlor, not wanting their ice cream to melt.
After slurping the dripping cookie dough from either side of the cone, he leaned towards a completely amused Cassandra, joining in her amusement until his lips tried to take in hers. Baffled, she didn’t kiss him back until he tried again. He didn’t know how to take it in; he didn’t know where it started; when it started; he didn’t know how he figured it out; how she did. He only knew he wanted to kiss her again and again and again. She smiled when they broke for air, almost as red as he was. She put her lips back to her ice cream while the butterfly wings in her head were fluttering.

He smiled, taking another lick of ice cream and said, “Tastes good.”

And it begins

So like that, she had to manage and be cautious with this unexpected boyfriend in the world she reluctantly entered at Lincoln Park; this bittersweet suprise would not detract her from what she needed to do in hers. Her mother, Caro, expected the best from her: dinner ready when she arrived; Cass available when she called. Cass knew, since quitting track practice that, aside from the paper, she’d always have to be accountable to Caro.

Cassandra tenía que recordarle de las tardes she had to stay at school late. Caro kept her pride and joy about her daughter’s grades and responsibility and knew Cassandra would do nothing to jeopardize her future: college. Her only way out. Caro knew there could be no boys after Toño; she expected that it’d stay that way till college. Toño was too good to replace with just anyone from el barrio.

Caro never overheard her daughter talking about any other guys anyway. She understood, why the break up made sense, but looking at her daughter’s pictures from
Toño’s proms and how happy they were, how could any other boy take his place? Caro never told Cassandra this, but Cassandra se lo veía in the way her mom lingered over pictures and never asked about boys. Breaking up with Toño was the only change Division Street was ready to see in her before college, she knew that much.

Outside Division Street, like so many other things, another story took place. The magnet school, Lincoln Park High was more than a school. It was a way better. A way stronger to stay; to keep strong in her relationship to the barrio. She’d heard of the suburban schools, had the scholarships and financial aid but Lincoln Park was just as good and closer to home. It was a way to stay grounded. To not leave to come back.

It was a good thing no matter how close her mom was, she never sought out the answer to questions she never asked aloud.

When Junior was around, it was different. Since he’d left, what lay outside el barrio Division Street grew more tempting for him. She hoped Jared wouldn’t change her the same way. She wanted both.

She didn’t want being on the Division Street bus, in that school, holding Jared’s hand, laughing at his smart ass jokes, to mean she was leaving, changing and not coming back. So what Jared’s hands touched on her would not be what he touched with others; what Toño had touched, where Toño had gone with her, what she had touched on Toño, would not be what Jared could touch, where Jared could go with her, or what of Jared she would consider touching. The brown girl virgin they thought she was, she would stay; she’d play but never put out. Especially as kiss and tell as he was—change was possible but he was variety, that rare good grade, does his own work, varsity and if she was a break or a stop in his whoring, then he’d look and not touch; then he’d touch and not go
deep till she got stronger staying; bold and unbound in being rooted. Till she didn’t have
to move to be free.

That afternoon, like the others, demorró en la despedida of kissing, laughing and
she had to run to catch the #8. The ride mapped changes she hoped would keep
themselves away from her block. Starbucks and boutiques lined Halsted St, a mile north
of where the projects were crumbling. The ride home was enough of a reminder of the
reasons to leave and to return. The Halsted bus was slightly packed at rush hour, not
many going south, but enough where she had to wait for a seat. The view from the bus
wasn’t much, not at this part of it.

Still, though, she lifted her eyes above her guarded shoulders and shrunken arms
to take in what was erased: remnants of lives passing replaced by sterile strip malls,
condominium buildings and yuppie stores. Usually, to avoid the resentment, she would
take in a book or listen to her discman, but the change of events detracted her attention
because she began to consider what she got herself into with J. Upscale cafés and stores,
chains of stores owned by desks and suits instead of couples from around the corner or
viejitos who were trying at the American dream. Then, as a reminder of what failure
could look like, she filled her eyes with the empty lots behind the Cabrini Green projects
across the street from where she would transfer to the #70, the Division Street bus. Going
from east to west on Division St, peering through huddled masses, bus windows offered a
view of the real distance from home and school. If the bus, like that afternoon, had a clear
back window, she would catch the wooden boards over stories of openings that used to be
windows; she would catch the fencing around what were supposed to be balconies; she
would catch the police wagon in constant surveillance. She would catch the world Caro
wanted her to leave; the side of Chicago so often seen when the city spoke of dark faces like hers. The fear of paddywagons on the corner, of getting lost in a broken building beyond repair made sense, still, the condos, the chain stores and hipster boutiques wasn’t that much better. What the fuck was she thinking, really? She tried to see if she could crack open the paperback in her hand, the words on a cover and on pages she could not distinguish. Unfamiliar structures and lines and bumps and dots and she wanted the safe, the living, the possible. Within minutes, passing Gold Coast motors, crossing the bridge and riding under the expressway past Boricua-filled Trinity High School, Cassandra considered if such contradictions would ever find their way closer to the barrio. A chill climbed into her heart.

These streets with high rise condos and places with restaurants too pricey to eat in were once like the streets of the barrio. Once, these streets were the barrio, the streets her mom grew up on. Would her barrio suffer the same fate? That’s what happened to other places Puerto Ricans used to live. Like Lincoln Park, how many Puerto Rican families lived there now versus when the Young Lords used to run those streets, taking over DePaul? Would the flags do what they promised and keep the parade there, unlike any other avenue Puerto Ricans used to call theirs. Puerto Ricans did once congregate on Fullerton and Clark. It wasn’t always Division and Campbell or Augusta and Rockwell either. In the 60s it used to be Ashland and Erie, by the Duks fast food place. Like the Duks chain had gone down, so too did the houses and apartment buildings, replaced by condo after condo development. Shiny, metallic and new, but not for Boricuas. There was even a Starbucks in Puerto Rican “Junior” of Logan Square.
Division heading west threatened what the others saw, more yuppie stores like a tanning booth, a hookah bar, a ‘Mediterranean’ restaurant obviously not as authentic as little India on Devon Street just a few miles north. But then, after driving past former Tuley, now Roberto Clemente High’s dark somber building, there stood the iron wrought arch of a safeway gate, in place since her second year at Lincoln Park High.

The flags protected what was behind them; they guarded those who saluted them. They were a gate to Paseo Boricua, el paseo that gave her the best Puerto Rican food outside her family. El paseo wanted a new change: a better Puerto Rican Chicago than what Richard II offered. There were the rumors, the warnings the separations in the Boricua community in Chicago—statehooders, independentistas, status quo, los comunistas, all of that, but when Cassandra crossed under those flags, when she passed la frutería on Rockwell and Division, La Bruquena and the Latin American restaurant, she knew she was safe; she knew she was home.

On walking up the stairs, Cassandra followed her routine. She set her stuff in the kitchen, took out the Goya Adobo from above the stove, the pork chops from the fridge, where she put them to defrost that morning, she fished the rice from the bottom, back corner of the pantry. Then she started the beans, spooned in a couple of tablespoons of sofrito, of tomato sauce and those little Goya envelopes that smelled so good. The beans siempre los hacía primero. They required less time. After seasoning the chops, starting the rice, and putting everything back where it belonged, Cassandra started her homework. She took out all her books to see what she needed to do, then she picked out her history book, a Hi-Liter from the front of her bag, and began reading.
Once she started reading, she started thinking about Nyasi’s history one of the few times they shared a ride on the #8 bus. He lived in the nice part of UIC’s campus, but because he was a big black guy, peeps thought he was from Cabrini, “Ain’t nothing wrong wit’ peeps from CB, but that’s juss’ some shit, Cass,” he’d say their first year. And they talked a lot of smack about being at LPH those days, like most: the low number of their folk in honors’ classes, the way they got looked at when they knew what the fuck they were talking about. Nyasi tried getting with her his first few days at LPH, till he saw Toño. Still, they’d remained friends because she’d appreciated how he’d taken it in stride.

He was one of the sought after black men on campus, admired and respected among his own as well as hated, envied and ‘spit’ on for being one of the few selling out. A great basketball player, good defenseman, but he also took honors classes, and did his homework. The anomaly of intelligent, down for whatever people of color that they were, they had to stick together. They took every class together possible, have another ally in the group, it was her level in Spanish and the paper’s demands that kept them from taking the bulk of their classes together; the school paper was her dream and it was her refuge.

It was the only reason, after quitting track, to stay late on campus. Still, working on the paper incessantly, or developing pictures she had taken that same afternoon, sometimes meant they were each other’s company on the Halsted bus. His company made the ride easier; she wasn’t the only one crossing unwanted lines. She was going to miss the boy who had in their laughter, become like family. And then the rising steam of the rice and popping of the pork chops in the oil brought her back to her mother’s kitchen. “Coño!”
She took them out from their pots and served her mom’s plate, la rutina de siempre.

Her mom walked in, hands full with some grocery bags, cell phone on the nape of her neck, talking to Mickey, “Really, they did that to you? Ay, mi vida, why do you put up--” As Caro rolled her eyes, dropping the groceries on the dining room table, Cassandra picked up the bags, and mouthed your food’s in the kitchen as her mom continued to superficially console Mickey.


Caro kissed the top of her daughter’s head as she picked her plate off the counter, grabbed a fork from the sink and sat herself down to eat. “Comí’té?”

Cassandra nodded as she rearranged stuff in the fridge, there was some stuff she needed to throw out.

“How’s school been?” Caro had missed the first few days, having gone directly to Mickey’s.

Cassandra shrugged.

Caro eyed her silent daughter, “Cat got your tongue?”

Cassandra shook her head no and smiled, “No, just not much to say.”

“Hmm,” Caro said between bites, “that means there’s something you aren’t saying or that you don’t want to tell me. Junior tried to pull that with me.”

Cassandra laughed, “First,” she said to her mom, hands on her hips, “it’s senior year: classes are intense, I’m juggling all the stuff I have to do and trying to do it with a smile on my face,” Cassandra then prosposed, “What d’you wanna know?”
“I just wanna hear how you been,” her mother responded, taking in the distance between them. She added, “Feels like we haven’t talked in a while.”

Because we haven’t, Cassandra thought to herself, and I like it that way, though she gave in to some of her mother’s concessions. Sometimes, it was useful for her mom to feel like Cassandra was still letting her into her life, like she had something she could contribute. “We have new writers for the paper; girls are fine. Geli might come by later, if she doesn’t have a lot of homework. Juanita wants to hang out this weekend and I’m having my college counselor revise my personal statement,” she listed off to her mother, “anything else?”

“Why so much ‘tude?”

Cassandra laughed, when her mom wanted to know how she was doing it was usually because she’d just had a fight with Mickey, which she could witness on the phone… “What did Mickey do this time?”

“Huh--

“Every time,” Cassandra began bending down to look at what needed to be thrown away, “you ask me why I’m being so quiet, it’s because he did something stupid. I pick up on these things…it’s not like there’s no pattern wit y’all.”

“Someone pissed him off at work and I thought he was wrong,” she started as her daughter chucked old habichuelas and pollo guisado into the trash under the sink. Then she realized her daughter was being a smart ass. Sometimes when she got caught up in Mickey pissing her off, she missed her daughter’s curt remarks, “What you mean a pattern?! Sometimes, you’re too smart for your own good--
Cassandra laughed as she washed the Tupperware she just emptied. When done, she told her, “Just like my mommy,” Cassandra said kissing her mom on her forehead.

“You’re daddy!” her mom chided.

After nine years of his voluntary absence, Caro’s low blows about Cassandra’s deadbeat dad lost their weight.

**Negotiations**

On Thursday, Cassandra received a call from Geli, so they could make plans for Saturday. Between senior year, a boyfriend, and taking care of her cousin, Cassandra could only plan on a week by week basis. Too many people to answer to. Geli usually wanted to know when they could go for quesitos at Café Colao or jibaritos at La Boriquen or meet Eddie, among other high school friends at Papa’s Cache for his infamous Pollochón, pork flavored roasted chicken. When she was single or when it was just Toño, she felt it was easier. So much had changed with senior year.

Geli didn’t know why, for Cassandra, senior year was that much harder than the other years in high school. Even the afternoons Cass wasn’t working or the nights she wasn’t babysitting Yahaira, or for the doctors and suits her mom worked for, something would come up last minute. Cassandra was a hard worker, but she wasn’t one for not having time to hang. For all of Cassandra’s mom shit, the woman did appreciate that her daughter needed friends and a social life in the barrio. Their moms were friends, friends strained by divorce, but their daughters’ connection gave them enough reason to be civil. Sometimes, even friendly. Even if other women wronged them by sleeping with their husbands—as was Cassandra’s mom’s situation—there was something in that Caro didn’t want to talk about with other people, like she needed a new life and a new world. And,
for what it was worth, Caro never used that to pull Cassandra out of the world she was
born into, which is why, when all was so good and there was no drama, Cassandra’s
absence started to smell like it.

Then again, Geli knew that all she had to do was think about something and her
question would be answered. One mid-October afternoon while at her madrina’s house
waiting her madrina’s bad ass pastelillos to cool, across the street from Cass’s, Geli saw
her answer. From her madrina’s living room window, where she sat staring out in to the
street, Geli saw a car pull up with a white dude driving. “Oh, shit,” she thought out loud.

Her madrina, walking in from washing the preparation dishes, cleared her throat,
“Una nena no debe hablar así,” she scolded as Geli’s seat squeaked as she turned to face
her godmother.

“Disculpe,” Geli responded, turning read, not knowing what to do with the
bochinche she just got sight of from her madrina’s window. Looked like the white pain
in the ass Cassandra pointed out in her yearbook that past spring. The arrogant
motherfucker Cassandra said she couldn’t stand liking. The boy was pretty but an
arrogant motherfucker, according to Cassandra, who had the world eating out of his hand
like he was Hercules…And Geli, the unlikely, the ball buster she liked to be, the cool one
out of the group of them, had something she couldn’t shake….

And her madrina, her mom’s favorite cousin called her bluff, “ y que pasa, nena?”

As much as she loved her madrina, her favorite aunt, she knew that, after a certain
age, women joined the bochinche alliance, trading gossip like recipes and holding what
they knew about the other’s life over the other’s head like scripture. Gossip was a
commandment of authority and Geli wasn’t about to keep the Sabbath on in confessing…
“E’ que se me olvidó mis asignaciones en la escuela…”so she liked because, really…who gave a fuck that Cassandra may be getting some…Geli didn’t care how easy Cass crossed that line of hate…but Geli didn’t like that Cass was acting like she, Geli of all people, would give a shit…

When Juanita called to plan something for Yahaira’s birthday, Geli kept her mouth shut. Geli smiled and laughed on the inside all the while Juanita waxed on about the need to keep them all together. For Juanita, it was easy, Geli thought, Juanita had lived on the same block, in the same house, all her life. Geli had moved because her parents couldn’t afford to stay in their crib on the east side of the flags—the bitch of gentrification. With divorce, Cassandra had known movement, Eddie and his family too, moved, and known their losses and heartache. They all experienced change that Juanita had seen them go through, that Juanita supported them through but she herself, was unaware of what change really meant. Gentrification wasn’t the only thing that made people move; that separated families; that tore people who loved each other apart. Geli wasn’t bound to Juanita’s fears of other factors walking in to their lives. Juanita, Geli believed, saw what tore her friends’ families and lives apart and was scared of any of that getting near her.

What they saw of violence, happened to friends of friends, never to them. Even teen pregnancies happened to those they grew apart from and those they didn’t really know save for Monse. But Monse, when she started dating the baby’s dad, had stopped being one of them. So, yeah, where they lived and how the streets were so close, there were many people living in a cramped neighborhood. Geli had grown up in Boricua
barrios, in different spots, on different streets: change was inevitable. Fearing it wasn’t going to keep change from happening.

Juanita’s fear, though, came more from losing what she knew not from strangers but in that she felt Cassandra, Geli and Eddie didn’t give a shit. That’s because the change was so common for them, it was something they could accept. What happened to them, what happened around them wasn’t okay—what it cost and why it cost them so much was fucked up—speaking out against what was wrong meant something. Even for those who were arrested because of it; even those still in prison because of it. That’s what the FALN stood for and her family believed in the work they did; in what they stood for and why they stood for it, they didn’t want families to separate; they wanted more for them, for all Boricuas in the hood and their efforts shouldn’t just go up in vain. So what, twelve were freed in 1999, what of Oscar and Carlos Alberto? What of the time they spent, and the struggle they went through to make better neighborhoods, provide better opportunities for Boricuas? What was her generation going to do for them, in honor of them, and so that future Boricuas would not undergo the same bullshit?

Geli knew, however, it wasn’t as simple as Juanita thought—it wasn’t the either/or Juanita kept insisting it needed to be: “Mira, who knows what’s gonna happen; who we’re gonna meet; the opportunities that will come our way… You my girl, and you know that, you know I got you, we got each other, no matter what happens—every time you don’t know where we’re at, you get all worried n shit, like we gonna disappear—“That’s not what I’m afraid of,” Juanita said, “not any of us leaving this place…no…but leaving who we are; forgetting where we come from and why we’re here.”

“None of us,”Geli defended softening her tone, “I promise, will ever do that…”
“Then,” Juanita said, “why don’t she make time for us? She’s bogus! She never had to work hard in school or none o’ that, not even there, somethin’s up…”

Geli sighed because, over the years, no matter what Cass did, Juanita couldn’t get over Cassandra’s opportunity—it was a sellout that was not all Cassandra and Juanita always acted like it was. Cassandra did what her mother expected and worked with what she had—Caro wanted her kids in one school and she wasn’t going to hear anything different. It was easy for Caro to have her kids down the street—keep them out of trouble and be able, at least for a while, take them to school till they opted for the bus and friends. It was a means to an end that Cassandra couldn’t choose….Cassandra took Juanita’s shit because Juanita wasn’t going to stop giving it. Juanita who never had to move; whose dad cleaned up his act; whose mom was a quiet out of the way old school señora, needed to overcompensate for la tranquilidad que le rodeaba…fuck she was good people but she always wanted to charge at something…or someone.

Still, it was Juanita, Juanita who could do whatever she felt she needed to do but always watched others like they owed her something. Like Cassandra would, like Eddie sometimes had, Geli called Juanita out on her bullshit: how many times for whateva’ reason you didn’t share you’d disappear for days, weeks at a time.”

“Bullshit—I may be forgotten about but I never get lost…not on purpose,” Juanita responded. She never disappeared. Someone always knew what was up with her. She never hid anything. Juanita was used to the double standards she was accused of. She’d had her older boyfriends, the ones she didn’t really talk about but that either one of them knew about but, it was different, something in her gut, with the secrets Cassandra liked to keep, told her this was different. It was a secret Juanita knew Cassandra wasn’t telling
her. They were all friends but it was like Geli told Cass everything, Cass told Juanita everything and Eddie divided his shit between the three. And Juanita wasn’t hearing shit from Cass. Still, Juanita insisted, “Cassandra’d never…” Juanita didn’t finish the statement; “Never what,” Geli said thinking it over, “not tell you everything?”

Not that Cassandra acted like anything had really changed in her life. She avoided sitting next to him, sometimes treating him like he wasn’t her boyfriend to get special attention. Jared noticed, and trailing behind her and their fellow classmate, Teddy, as the two talked yearbook, he wanted to share his concern. He wasn’t a PDA\(^53\) guy, but as soon as the bell rang and until later after school, she acted like he wasn’t there.

He tapped her shoulder, and her wide eyes were caught off guard by his attention. Still, she had a twinkle that almost made him forget his question. “Can I talk to you?” he asked as though it was about Littwin’s class.

With Teddy gone, Cass had finally met Jared’s eyes.

Watching him readjust his book bag, she took a step to ensure a foot between them. Sometimes, he got too close for comfort in public places. “Yeah?” She responded to his question, waiting to see if he’d meet her eyes again.

Unsure of how to address her, given that she stepped back like he had mono, he furrowed his eyebrows and asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

Jared saw a look of surprise come over her previously grinning face, “What do you mean?”

\(^53\) Public displays of affection
“Well,” he said taking in a deep breath, “like you don’t make a point to sit by me or look at me unless I’m talking and…I think you stepped on my foot the other day when we were three seats from each other,” he explained watching her demeanor soften, which he took as incentive to continue, “and just now, you took a step back like I did something wrong—what’s with that?” He was confused by her smile, though it took her only minutes to explain.

She shook her head, leaning her head to a side explained, “Littwin’s my favorite teacher and, I love this class. I’ve been dreaming of taking Littwin’s seminar since my brother had told me about it years ago…and if I sit next to you, if I look at you, I won’t be able to concentrate…”

“Oh,” he said caught off guard by the unexpected response.

“I mean,” she continued as they strolled down the hall, “we goof off in class because that’s Littwin talking about politics, elections, school b.s and all that, but,” she added trying to find the words. How to say what he didn’t see without forcing him to see something he didn’t want to see while at the same time allowing him in? She would try her best without making it about the obvious, “it’s not like no one in there is waiting for me to fall flat on my face…I know you got Cam ‘n Pete ‘n Rick from soccer and Nyasi’s an’ I have beeene thick as theives since we took hist…y I dunno, it’s not like everyone’s gotta see us…”

Her last words took him off guard and he stopped in his feet, “…what does that mean…”

“Everyone knows you’re brilliant,” she thought out loud, “I still gotta prove myself—“
“You’re on the editorial staff of the paper, you dominate class conversation—what more do you need—”

His tone of shock was not a surprise for her and she decided it was not a conversation to have right then—he wanted the typical girlfriend and she wanted to make sure being with him wasn’t going to undermine who she was. But she didn’t want to do that at the expense of hurting his feelings—she conceded to holding his hand for the rest of the afternoon and, like most girls with royal boyfriends, loitered by his locker for a bit until he looked satisfied.

Visitas y visitar

For Jared, getting to know Cassandra had been an adventure thus far. She was a good girl, youngest of two kids, older brother who was in school at Savannah. She was close to her family; had lifelong friends; like him, competitive about her dream: journalism. She gave him a run for his money in the classroom, no doubt. But it was weird. He didn’t know what he could ask for, and his friends were different with him when she was around so he had done his best to divide the time between the two. Bringing her to his place, when his parents were out of town, he had one thing on his mind. He felt she wanted it, the way she allowed him to press against her when they were alone, but that first time, she danced around his house like nothing.

Only when the pizza they ordered from Carmen’s Pizzeria had arrived, did she take off her coat—like she wasn’t going to get comfortable in his house no matter what.

“I’ll take you home later,” he insisted as they started on a Hawaiian, “just let me know when you want to go.”
She nodded as she nervously nibbled on her second slice. As much as she wanted to see his bedroom, as much as the idea of him inside of her had started keeping her up at night, she wasn’t going to bend. She ate as slowly as she could, tight seated across from him, laughing at his jokes and trying to maintain an equally light atmosphere. But his parents weren’t there and that was too much like the mistake that had happened less than two years before.

As he put the remnants of the pizza in the fridge, she walked over to the kitchen island, separating them. “I like your house,” she commented, “it’s—it’s a good size. Like the ones in the suburbs.”

He shrugged, his parents’ house in Bartlett had larger rooms. “I don’t know if this is home yet, with me going off to college next year,” he shrugged as he leaned on the island, “It’s not the place I grew up, kicked my first ball, had my first kiss… you know?”

She nodded, “Yeah.” His reflection had her thinking back to what it was like to move from Logan Square to Humboldt Park, leaving her old friends behind. But she wasn’t that old; she met Geli and Monse and within weeks they were thick as thieves; she was seven when her father left, when she moved into el building de Tío Oscar and Alberto. And since she was over there all the time, same people soon enough started moving there, or her mom’s old friends from Wells started moving in from Wicker Park. She couldn’t imagine having to move again; having no Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park, no lo quería imaginar. But she kept those thoughts to herself. Leaving a hometown where some stay is a whole lot of different from leaving a neighborhood that a new group of people might want to take over.
"Where’d you go?" He asked her as he watched her eyes dance out of place and to a tune he could not hear.

She shrugged off her internal distraction and smiled up at the beautiful boy she could kiss whenever she wanted, “I was thinking about the reasons I moved when I was little—and then I remembered your game.”

"What about it?"

“Well,” she began, “what was up with Cam’ anyway, getting on that player like that?”

“Wrong call,” Jared responded, “the forward was out of bounds and harassing him; Cam shouldn’t have went at him as he was going to—

Cass agreed, “Luckily, you stopped him before he could do anything stupid.” She kissed him over the counter after which he added, “Well, that idiot was being a jerk.”

“I know,” She nodded and kissed him again before he could say anything else.

“Don’t go over there,” he began leaning forward to her, as she sat herself on the other side of the counter, “not just yet.“

She laughed as she leaned back away from his urgency.

Luckily, when his mother was walking through the back door, there was enough distance between them to not make it awkward. She had that happen with Toño, where they were lip locked and her mom walked in through the door like nothing. Caro trusted the altar boy, motherless child and youth group leader, raised by a man too respectful of his wife’s struggle and loss to cancer to ever have another woman honor the role she took. At the time, about two years ago, Caro was comfortable with it even after they stopped, she didn’t do to make them feel uncomfortable. Caro hoped Toño would be the
Cassandra immediately introduced herself to Mrs. Nina Sumner without hesitation. The short round woman walked in graciously, appearing flustered and with no intention of interrupting her son and his guest. “Nice to meet you, Cassandra,” she said dropping her bags on the ground. Apparently she had gone grocery shopping.

Jared greeted his mother with a sideways hug, wondering how he had forgotten when she was going away for the weekend.

Patting her son on the back, she explained, “I’m not going to be here for long, I just wanted to make sure you had groceries for this weekend. I’d done an inventory before heading out this mornin’ and I thought I should—but I’ll be out of your way, I have to go upstairs to change anyway—

Cassandra smiled and interjected, “You’re not in the way, Misses Sumner. Thank you so much, for the food. We ordered pizza because Jared didn’t have anything to cook, so we appreciate it.”

Nina laughed, “Jared told you he cooked, what miracle is that?”

He blushed.

“Well,” Cassandra explained trying to defend J, “I offered to cook with him, so we wouldn’t have to order a pizza. As I can probably imagine he orders them often. It isn’t good for him to be eating pizza so much, and I was trying to convince him not to, but—”

“He’s not used to eating—real food—on the weekends,” Mrs. Sumner explained as she reached for the cabinet atop the fridge. Cassandra and Mrs. Sumner chatted like
old friends about the fundraising event Mrs. Sumner would be heading to that night that she was not looking forward to; Cassandra asked in detail about the work she was up to. Jared intervened in assisting with grocery storage, remembering it was his responsibility to help his mom, not Cassandra’s. His mom and Cass’s chemistry caught him off guard. He would take Cassandra home that night without a question and take a cold shower on returning home.

The flutter of birds’ wings on the other side of the window awoke Cassandra and it took her a while to realize where she was. Coño, she thought, no quise quedarme aqui—and yet, there she was, in Jared’s bed, trying to make sense of what she was going to tell him that morning. Que le voy decir a mi mama--a Geli--me van a matar! Mientras reflexionaba sobre lo que pasó, lo que quisiera que hubiera pasado y lo que no pasó, se dio cuenta de que solo ella se había levantado con el sonido de los pájaros y ese cantito de luz que empezaba a entrar por la ventana.

They didn’t wake up at the same time that morning, Cassandra knew that much. She lay there, considering how to sneak out of his bed; how to check on her mother and make sure she wasn’t in trouble for not reporting from Juanita’s house the night before. Because, even though it was another weekend at Mickey’s, Cassandra tenía que tener mas cuidado; coño, she thought to herself, que hago con esta pendeja”? His green hazel eyes and the way his hands grabbed hers; the way they crept up her skin, beyond her clothes; she almost forgot who she was; who they were and it was difficult to leave. She
melted too quickly and forgot about everyone else. Looking at him there, though, switched her thinking, what the fuck do I say to him?

Sex with Toño was as much about curiosity as it was about knowing what it meant for him to be inside her. Being together for as long as they were together, they were each other’s first in every other way but kissing and second base. Toño knew to be discreet about who he told; as she had been. They each had one confidant that took secrets to the grave. Did Jared have one? He had never really asked about how far she’d gone with Toño and, last night, he made presumptions her actions denied. Toño wasn’t a one time deal; the pregnancy wasn’t the first time they had sex and, until she took the test, they’d done it in regularly stolen moments. She’d stopped because she couldn’t take the stress of risking getting pregnant again; that’s why she didn’t date her junior year. The stress of what she lost and finding an honest lie to tell about her and Toño was more than enough work without adding trying to date in to the mix.

Jared wasn’t planned. Jared was avoided at all costs. They had Algebra two together but that was it. She stopped staring. She stopped thinking and writing about him. She stopped talking about her frustration. She stopped until he started talking to her. In the moments from the night before when he pressed against her, she wanted having sex to recover the innocence of adventure. What she found was an urgency that was anything else than appealing. His hands and his body expressed desire for an it more than a who, she feared and while they were hungers and urges she knew, beating hearts provided the rhythm. There was no rhythm in how he moved that night and, as she looked at him that morning, contemplating tracing him with more than her eyes, she could feel the distance
as more than skin deep and yet it was skin that said everything. How could she make it say something different?

He could feel her gaze on him, its intensity was something he was slowly getting used to, of course, he sometimes hungered for it. In this case, the confusion of what was behind it, the way she stopped, broke the rhythm of where he thought they were going, detouring his hands and her hands from what came so easily to others... Had she been with someone as long as she had without going that far? Could a guy have a girl that long and not get any?

He thought he made his intent clear; they were together long enough and she couldn’t have been with someone as long as she was with her ex-boyfriend and not do anything, right, he thought, really, how could any guy? Then again, maybe it was the hot and cold she played that made it easy for him to use distance as an excuse; the way she was complete putty and, at the same time, knew to say no; knew to give but not too much; knew to go there, but not all the way. A tease but not; there was something more, the way her eyes gazed, pierced without touching and yet going deeper than he knew possible. He had never had someone look at him the way she did; the hunger for that gaze was more about what that gaze said; what he wanted that gaze to mean; what it had meant from others. But he turned like he was dreaming; confused about what to say and what to do about the disappointment of the previous night; confused about how to feel about it. Still, even on his bare back, her eyes burned holes through his skin till he too felt her turn around. As he felt her weight leave the bed, and attempt to quietly close the door behind her, he opened his eyes. Looking at the whirring ceiling fan and wondered what the confusion was and yet where he could go because, as he thought to himself, he was more
frustrated because if she had said she hadn’t before, he might have never invited her over-
-he never once thought that lack of experience would be an issue. He never thought
anyone like them would go that far in high school without trying. As her footsteps
creaked more and more quietly down the stairs, probably to make a phone call, he
wondered if she was getting the ride of shame, maybe, to save him the grace of sounding
like an asshole in the morning. That awkward virgin tease thinking she could navigate
uncharted territory. He wondered who she’d call.

She picked up the phone, dialed star sixty-seven and left her mom a voicemail
message, “I’m out of the house for most of the day, Mom,” she began, “I won’ have a
phone on me,” she continued, “sorry,” hanging up the kitchen phone. She felt at ease. She
covered her tracks. She did what she had to do. Sitting there, she wondered what would
happen when her mom heard the message; what her mom would think; and what her
mom would do.

On hearing the message, Caro contemplated what to do. Looking at Mickey over
lunch, she considered what was going on between her and her daughter. Cass was moving
on and making plans. Moments like this, Caro thought, her daughter needed a cell phone
but then, no. Cassandra didn’t need a cell phone just yet and, if she really needed one,
she’d have to get a job that paid more than babysitting. “You know, she’s going to get
more and more like this--doing her own thing; taking care of herself,” Mickey began.

Mickey watched Caro’s face as she considered the message she just heard. The
woman, Caro, had a mind that he respected and she understood her struggles to find
something better than what was around her. She rushed to get married to avoid returning
to the barrio. She rushed to Puerto Rico at the first sign of her first husband’s bullshit. She rushed back with his false promises. She wanted to leave all that pain behind her and yet, the way she treated Cassandra, it’s like she was afraid to move on, he thought, like she didn’t know a life without anywhere to go. But then, she responded to what he just said.

“You know” Caro continued looking at her fiance’s workworn face, “I don’t understand why we would need to wait till she started school.”

“Wait for what?” he asked.

“To get married,” she clarified, taking his hand, “I mean, I’m here all the time; we have enough saved for the house…it would just be a matter of--

While he liked the idea, he also knew the woman, knew that she liked to rush when she was avoiding something. “We waited because she was going to Puerto Rico, remember?” Mickey reminded her, eyebrows furrowed over what his fiancee was planning. This is how she was; this was how she convinced him to pop the question. He loved that about her, the way she could turn anything around but, sometimes, when she plotted, she would forget everything else. She smiled at him, though, “That’s right,” she agreed, “she will be in Puerto Rico…”

Caro, though, found return to Humboldt Park more and more difficult; running to take care of her brother; fix his building; give her daughter family; she wanted to pursue what she needed; what she felt important. She wanted the time to take care of herself; Cass had begun to do the same.

Attending LPH was Caro’s idea. She didn’t want her daughter staying in the neighborhood. The bus ride mattered less than what she would have seen at the other
schools. Magnet school or bust. Her brother hoped for Lane but Lincoln Park High School was convenient because Caro started working by there. He was a boy who liked trouble as much as he was driven by ambition. Caro needed to keep him close. So then, because that’s where Caro was working, that’s where Cass was going to go. It wasn’t a question. She needed to keep an eye on Cass, especially during those years. Dating an older boy was okay, then, because, well, it was Toño, a boy who’d grown up with her son. And, when the boys graduated, there she was but Cass was moving on long before that. Caro felt that and she knew that. Caro made sure of that in what she asked of her daughter. Caro began to realize that as much as she knew her daughter was keeping secrets, she trusted that Cassandra could take care of herself without her. Thinking of where she was at eighteen and where Cassandra was going at 18, she started to forgive herself for the distance. It was no longer necessary to hold onto the reigns.

Relieved to evade lying bold face to her mom on the other line of the phone, Cassandra climbed up the stairs appreciating she had left her book bag down there, wondering how Jared could sleep so late. The anxiety alone had kept her from sleeping. He said it was fine but knew that it wasn’t. What gave her the confidence to move forward was also the same thing that made her feel uncertain about it--about all of it…what was she doing; what made forgetting what was on the online so easy?

As she walked up stairs and opened his bedroom door, she opened the boy’s American dream, American Pie bedroom, grabbed the clothes she was wearing that morning and walked back downstairs. She pulled out Julia deBurgos’ collected works, which was tucked behind Drown, and looked for a distraction in another woman’s words. She snuggled up in the front room, in between a piano Jared never played and a couch
rarely sat upon, taking in verses and letting her imagination and mind go to the places she hoped to traverse that upcoming summer: Puerto Rico.

When Jared walked down the stairs, he was partly surprised to see Cassandra there, a pile of rumpled clothes beside her, lost in a book. He saw her enthralled in pages and, for a minute, forgot about his frustration. He couldn’t read the title and he didn’t recognize the name of what she was reading, but his presence had done very little to get her to look up from the book. He turned on the pot of coffee and lingered in the kitchen, wondering what best to say. Before he could say anything, she called out, “I’mna take a shower since you’re awake. I’ll be right back.”

Familia con secretos

Jared took the opportunity of the rainy day canceling soccer practice to give Cassandra a ride home. Once they’d gotten in the car, she was all chatter, making it difficult to grab her hand and put it on his leg. He’d gotten to see that her chatter was a nervous tick, something he’d forgotten until they’d turned the light at Division and Halsted. She mostly talked about schoolwork during the trip which got him to thinking if she ever really talked in depth about home, her family, and he couldn’t remember. Still, school was an easy subject, it was what they had in common, like their AP Modern European history class.

“Allie was wondering if you’d started your Modern Euro project,” Cassandra asked as they passed the Shell gas station on Damen and Division.

“Nah” Jared answered stopping at the next red light, “I was going to start it when I got home today. It’s not due for a couple weeks. Franklin just wants a prelim outline with sources. I was going to go online and see…”
“Yeah,” she added, “of course Allie already started reading for it, she said she’s just having a difficult time finding ideas.”

“It’s just difficult to write about so much war, you know,” Jared thought out loud catching a glimpse of Cassandra’s face before the light turned green, “how much of the twentieth century involved war?”

Hearing his question, Cassandra considered how much her family had lived through them. Her Tio Alberto and the first day she moved in to his building popped in to her head. She’d remember the stories of how he was when he returned from the war y lo que le pasó cuando otra guerra invadió el barrio. Él compró el edificio al regresar de la guerra en Vietnam. Al contrario de otros de sus compañeros del barrio, eligió el silencio y la soledad como su única compañía. Asistió al colegio de la farmacia pero, a pesar de las amistades y los familiares con que se encontraba en la farmacia, jamás habló a sus clientes. Lo entendieron ya que como otras historias, se convirtió en una leyenda del barrio. Trabajó en la Division, a veces sonriente, a veces serio, pero it was understood he wasn’t a bad person and whatever happened in Vietnam he preferred to guard with the silence that would never again echo in his head.

A pesar del silencio, Alirio knew the building would be a way to take care of his family and, as she saw with her mom, a way for them to take care of him. The loss of his wife and daughter was not an easy one, and if Caro wasn’t moving in and out the way she was, and if Oscar didn’t come to stay, he’d have gotten lost to the pain. Not a drinker. Not a smoker, but he would have faded behind it. All those stories, the ones Juanita and Geli and Eddie had lived with her, that other life of heartache and drama was not what
she wanted to share with Jared, looking at him as he turned on to her street, she wondered if she would ever tell him any of it. What would he understand of violence and loss?

She did tell him, though, that her Uncle Oscar returned to Chicago because of Yahaira’s heart condition. She told him that his daughter’s health came before where he wanted to live. Tío Oscar, Tía Zulema, and Yahaira came to the states when Yahaira was 5, buscando mejores doctores para el corazón de Yahaira ya que el corazón necesitaba mas de lo que podían ofrecerle los doctores de PR. “She’s fine now,” Cassandra said spotting her playing dominoes with Geli and Eddie, “sometimes I forget she’s nine--ten,” she corrected herself trying to remain cool about what she forgot, “At times she acts like she’s sixteen,” she joked to hold her forgetfulness you know, having been through so much.”

Jared nodded as he parked the car up the road and across the street from Cassandra’s family’s building. Seeing the group on the stoop, he wondered who they were. He assumed that the little girl that looked like Cassandra was the girl he’d heard so much about, but wasn’t sure to ask. Walking around to let Cassandra out the door, he waited for an invitation to meet them. As she kissed him good-bye, she explained, “I’mna be in trouble—

“Why,” he asked pulling on one of her curls, “what happened?”

She smiled, face turning beat red she explained, “I was supposed to be here earlier—it’s Yahaira’s birthday…”

“Oh,” he responded looking down and then at the front stoop where the group waited for Cassandra, “well, I guess you should get going then…”
She kissed him one more time and stayed curbside until he drove away, one eye focused on the looming car and the other focused on Juanita’s reluctant posture. Shit, Cassandra thought to herself, this ain’t gon’ be pretty.

Cassandra remained slow crossing the street, watching the scene on her porch, waiting for Juanita to snap: Juanita rose to her feet while Eddie finished the round of dominoes with Yahaira. Juanita eyed Cassandra walking towards them, words and emotions building up in her head. Juanita wasn’t one to walk to a bitch out fest; Cassandra would have to come up to her. She narrowed her eyes on Cassandra who was slow as hell walking towards the house head, oh no you didn’t, Juanita thought to herself, arms on her hips, foot keeping time, hell the fuck no…late because of that one,

From the look on Juanita’s face, Cassandra knew que le venía algo. Feet away, she met Eddie then Yahaira’s eyes, shrugging apology. A Yahaira le hacía igual, then, Yahaira ya sabía lo del rubio Eddie shrugged in response but, as he and Cassandra both turned their eyes to Juanita, whatever life happened didn’t matter.

As soon as Cassandra reached the foot of the stairs, Juanita started down the stairs, questions and rebuttals building up; Eddie and Yahaira continued their dominoes game like nothing. Estas dos siempre pelean, Eddie thought to himself, mejores amigas y peores rivales como las telenovelas.

Every few minutes, Eddie looked up to make sure it had stayed verbal, and while hands flew up in the air, necks jerked around and pitch and volume grew, it wasn’t enough to have to walk down to break them up. Aunque, claro, he knew he’d have some cleaning up to do, like when he and Juanita fought over the fact he had tried marijuana at Clemente—something Cassandra had to clear up before Juanita slapped him silly—and
she’d have slapped him like she was his mom. Not that Cassandra wasn’t the slapping type, but they stopped that a long time ago, when a seventh grader from their class joined the Rockwell boys. Wake up call about what was really fucked up back then. There was more important shit than experiments with weed or missing a birthday date surprise.

But Juanita was pissed as all hell, pointing with all four fingers at the phantom of the car, reminding Cassandra of all the shit she went through since ‘pwb: pretty white boy,’ as Cassandra called him, started talkin’ to her. To see her friend goin’ after a boy only months earlier Cass couldn’t stand left Juanita stupefied, “No wonder you kept so fuckin’ busy-- talked a whole lotta shit about this one,” she stabbed, “the ho and playa he is…. How the hell is it gonna be diff’rent wit’ u,” she warned eyes almost popping out her head, “please, explain that to me.”

Cassandra looked at Juanita’s bulging eyes without a word to say. She couldn’t explain how it was going to be different. “I dunno,” was all Cassandra could come up with, “I dunno why and I wish I did so I could get over it.” Cassandra could have gone on further, could have spoken about the fear, beat herself up for getting involved with him, but she was pissed she spent the afternoon arguing with Juanita instead of playing with Yahaira. True, Yahaira would have more fun making fun of her later, but that’s the way Yahaira wanted to spend her birthday: laughing.

“Please,” Juanita sighed, “do,” Juanita concluded confused and distraught. Ver para creer que her worst fear was coming true: Cassandra forgot about them. How could she,…after all the shit they been through…just leave to Yahaira to tell them she was running late…like they were poca cosa.
Cass had to admit she was silly to leave it in the hands of her cousin, even if her cousin sometimes was capable of more reason than the four of them combined...So, she put up with Juanita’s ranting, knowing how Juanita felt about the whole thing...traiconada, abandonada...it didn’t matter that Juanita’s antics were the reason Cass didn’t tell the girl about her new boyfriend. Juanita wasn’t in the position to hear it. And Juanita, unwilling to call out her fear, unable to allow herself break down like that, fronted like it was the boy...he was to blame for Cassandra’s bullshit and hiding...once satisfied with the way she yelled at Cassandra, she asked Eddie to walk her home. It was only then that she admitted her fears. “It’s like,” she began once they rounded Haddon Street, “it’s getting easier for her to forget who she is; what she’s supposed to be about...”Eddie wrapped his arm around her shoulder for a bit, knowing how much Juanita relied on them to stick together. “I hear you,” was all he could say. “It’s not like he’s the Christian boy Geli dated our freshman year—

“Right, Raúl, was all about respect...not at all the older boy rebeldía Geli thought he could be...

They both laughed, thinking how frustrated Geli was walking around like a nena buena...

“It’s not like you didn’t give her shit either,” Eddie reminded her as they crossed California Avenue.

“Yeah, but you know this is different,” Juanita insisted, “you remember how she used to talk about him las’ spring...”

He laughed out loud, too hard to keep his arm around her, “Like you n Cass talked shit about me for weeks back in the sixth grade...look at where we are now”?
She stopped in her tracks, and tried to explain how it was different but he wouldn’t let her. “It’s like the time I tried weed—I knew it’d be stupid to stick to it, but,” he recollected, turning to face her. As stubborn and pain in the ass as she was, he wasn’t going to let her walk alone. He continued turning and walking towards her, “I just needed to get it out of my system. It was a nice buzz those first few weeks, but there’s no way I was gon’ get hooked on that shit to fuck up my chances at doin what I want,” once her eyes started to soften, he offered her some reason, “You gotta trust Cass is thinking straight…”

But Juanita wasn’t having it, though, “It’s hard enough trying to connect with her when she’s got a whole othe’ life over there. It ain’t about what he is; it’s about where we’re from. And I think she’s forgettin’.”

Within a matter of days, to indirectly remind Cassandra, Juanita called her a ver si iba a la fiesta de Vanessa, otra amiga de grade school. “I had to make sure,” Juanita explained, “to make sure no tenía planes.” When Cassandra agreed to go, Juanita felt better. She knew it was a matter of Cassandra remembering who she was; where she fit. They hadn’t talked about that afternoon or what was really going on between them and that afternoon, but they talked about what to wear and what to bring.

And Cassandra went along with it, knowing what Juanita had on her and that, as much as she didn’t want to admit it, Juanita was right. She hid him like something was wrong because she knew something was. While Juanita might have forgiven her, Cassandra thought, she wasn’t going to forget que Cassandra puso el güerito over them. That’s how Juanita was, she’d bring up something from the second grade como si nada and, she may have said it was cool, but she kept a record book of everyone’s fuck ups. It
went back to the death of her grandmother, porque era pequeña, su papa no se lo había dicho hasta meses después. Era porque el cáncer la mató antes de lo planeado tanto como porque Juanita solo tenía seis años y su papá suponía que Juanita no lo podía entender.

Años después ella y su papa no estaban de acuerdo en nada y por pendejo, ella lo encontró con otra mujer. She allowed their kiss to finish before she acknowledged her presence at his job, embarrassing the shit out of him. While they never told her mom and he has been on good behavior since, that secret allows Juanita to hold her father’s life in her hands. Three years and her dad’s still working on earning her trust and keeping her in his good graces. Juanita got her ‘tude from her mom and Mr. Rúa did love his mandona wife. Secretly, Cassandra gave Mr. Rúa props por aguantarlas but, cheating husbands should be at the mercy of others. And, as much as Cass didn’t see it that way, Cass being off with a white boy and not saying anything was kind of the same thing: she was cheating on her family. Unlike Juanita’s dad, though, Cassandra could soften Juanita up joking about it, “Of course I’ma be there, just because I got a man don’t mean I spend all my fucken time wit’ him.”

“Whateva,” Juanita responded, relieved that Cassandra understood how she fucked up and wondering whether or not to encourage Cass to invite J, “I guess I’ll meet you at your crib about six tomorrow, so we can get there early and help ‘er out?’”

Cassandra agreed and thought about how to tell Jared. If she was going to—because how would she explain yeah, my girl’s having a party but I ain’t bringin you with me because my friends don’t like to mix with people like you—she couldn’t. She’d have to come up with some other excuse. As her mom walked through the door, home
from work, Cassandra contemplated asking her mom. “What would you do if your
friends didn’t like your man, but you wanted to go to their party anyway?”

Caro looked at her youngest, confused because she didn’t know where that was
coming from, “Huh?” she asked.

At that moment, Cassandra’s blood rushed to her face—she hadn’t told her mom
yet. “Umm, I’m dating a guy at school and—

“Who?” Caro interrupted, her keys slipping out of her hands and her purse almost
spilling its content to the floor. Her daughter’s no nonsense way of telling her she was
dating was a bit fucked up.

“It’s new,” Cassandra lied, leaving the dining room table where she was sitting,
picking up her mother’s keys and purse; handing the stuff back to her mom, she
explained, “A white boy named Jared,” Cassandra watched her mom’s face change color.
Shit, Cassandra thought, metí la pata.

Caro eyed her daughter return, backwards walking, back to her seat at the dining
room table, books around her and cordless at her hand.

”Entiendo pero tampoco hay razón para que él se entere. Y’all ain’t that serious,
right?”

Cassandra nodded, not wanting to push her luck. If Jared called to hang out, then
it’d be an issue, otherwise, no need. Luckily, he didn’t and she went to Vanessa’s party
that Saturday sin preocupación ni incomodidad. Because the November chill was hangin’
in the air, she decided to wear the leather she got last Christmas, no hat or gloves because
it wasn’t that serious. When Geli y Juanita rang the bell a little before six, se despidió de
su mamá y se marchó hacia la casa de Vanessa.
Vanessa was one of the few who still lived on Division Street, the actual Paseo Boricua; her parents’ place overlooked la Municipal grocery store and the liquor store on Rockwell and Division, right two blocks from both Western and California. Puerto Rican restaurants, disc shop, y to’o quedaba por allí. All Puerto Rican businesses, that was the plan. Pa’ que se quedara entre la gente, para que permaneciera Boricua. Aunque Damen no era tan yuppified como lo era Division y Ashland y Wood, it was getting there. Trendy with all the new brick buildings, apartments turned condominiums by developers who bought out poor Puerto Ricans and Ukranians keeping it in the family. See, the way it went down—first the barrio was “poor,” that dirt poor that is poor because those with very little are moved into a place where no one gives a shit….and then, then they make due, then more than making due, they start getting better and better together. After that, some artists, and some hippies thinkin living by the Spanish people, eating their food wanting to near the lake or the park come in because it’s so cheap, right? And then some college grads move in thinking it’s nice…thinking that it ain’t as bad as it used to be… But then these yuppies start earning more money…but then their friends start to follow…then their colleagues, and then the little dogs come in the tiny ones that look like mice, that could fit through the keyhole, bugles, pugs, Chihuahua maybe. And then the police start to give a shit about what happens…but el Viejo can’t afford the taxes…retired couple can’t pay the mortgage on top of those property taxes. With college tuition and car payments, couples can’t pay the rent in the three bedroom…so the old house becomes a three story condo building; and the two flat another complex. After the condos…the ‘exotic’ Mediterranean places to eat…the hookah lounges and artsy stage theatres…but that subway train, the one right there at the intersection of Milwaukee,
Division, and Ashland…no one from the neighborhood really rides it anymore. Too busy driving their kias.

But above ground, who could tell there used to be Puerto Ricans? True, rainbow was still around and Payless hinted that poor people still rolled around the streets there, but the cars changed, the face lift had begun to do its work. Starbucks hadn’t hit Division Street directly—down the street on Ashland, across from Jewel Osco, but they also got one on North and Damen—Starbucks was inching its way around Puerto Rican territory. All those artists and hippies and writers and shit down by North, Damn and Milwaukee acting like they poor when mommy and daddy paying their rents. The mommy and daddy living up in Wilmette and Evanston and Lake Forest and maybe even from out East somewhere but still better off than the people who lived there. Still better off than the community they tore apart. Still better off than the families that can’t go across the street to see their abuelas or madrinas that can’t count on Willy’s discount market to get their Café Bustelo.

Willy couldn’t be seen around anymore, dicen que he went back to the island, ya que no tenía nada en Chicago. Cassandra didn’t know him, but she knew of him because MariLu, her grandmother, used to go to his store to get her coffee, when she still lived in Chicago, Cassandra’s first years. Caro would tell stories of Willy still, of those days that were the sofrito of her memory, lo que hizo que todo se probara tan rico aunque, claro, todavía llevaba peso y olor, como Rockwell y Division, the Rockwell boys, to be exact, always getting into it with the Kings or Cobras o no Cassandra no supo que—one of the boys who left St. Mark’s after fifth grade, Armando, got in it with them. Not a year after leaving, too. It was fucked up to see him around sin palabras que decirle. Real fucked up.
Geli still talked to him, though, she talked to most people because that’s who she was. La que amaba a todos. Her heart was as strong as Juanita’s grudges. Like in junior high, when everybody took on parental roles, ella era la tía, amaba a todos demasiado para escoger favorites. “Hola, nenitas,” Vanessa greeted as Geli and Cassandra walked through the door, Juanita behind on her cell, abrazandole a ambas simultaneously, “¡tan temprano!”

Cassandra nodded as Geli explained, “We figured ya que tus fiestas son tan grandes, you would need some help.”

“Ay, no, mi mama me ayudó,” Juanita explained y con eso la Sra. Gonzalez salió de la cocina a saludar a sus favoritas. Maybe because Sr. Gonzalez went to school with their dads and they were the only ones from the neighborhood still around; maybe because she like Caro and Rita were always up in school making sure their girls stayed out of trouble, maybe because Geli and Cassandra were one of the few with manners and still in high school and out of trouble. Maybe because they always came to help set up las fiestas que Juanita andaba teniendo.

But Sra. Gonzalez, remained in between the kitchen and her room while the party continued. She walked in and out to serve pop and chips, but didn’t separate skin tight partners; for her it was kids’ play. Se contentó con que the bedrooms were locked, no había alcohol and the party hadn’t reached more than twenty. Same faces as always, they enjoyed to be kickin’ it\(^\text{54}\) like before high school took them apart. A couple of guys that Cass kicked it with before going with Toño—Omar, Tito, Frank. While they were

\(^{54}\) Kickin it means hanging out; pending on the context, kicking it with friends or with someone who’s more than friends.
friends—kickin it leading to no real mutual feelings—dancing with them awakened in her an urgency Jared hadn’t met. While they played under the sheets, nothing too serious or heated, she couldn’t dance with him the way she danced with them; couldn’t spark the heat they did. He said he had no rhythm but it was more than that for her. When Omar put his hands on her hips she let him pull her against his, and it wasn’t that Omar made her hot like that or that the song was something fierce. But being able to move with him, to dance with a guy who knew who to love with her, to release all that energy without getting naked, without opening those tempting doors—que libertad había en dancing with someone so close, so tight when, if Jared was there, all he would do was watch. That’s what he’d done at the one school dance they went to together…that dance was two weeks ago but still…he didn’t even try… But then, the Lincoln Park parties weren’t like this one where the crowd roared with energy as reggae came on and it was intense as sandwiches formed, girls lowered to their knees with the “cry baby,” among other dance moves…it was like a show, the few she went to…where some tried and failed to dance, others, like Jared, stood like flowers…or like zoo visitors…tourists. That’s what her brother called some of the wallflowers. Though he went to most Gordon Tech parties or the ones that Lane threw.

But Cassandra always liked house parties…less drama and more dancing…and house parties caught her up with other childhood friends, intermingling childhood memories with the possibilities of dreams packed like a Toyota off to a family picnic, the party was tight as all hell, lasting ‘til 3 in the morning because people had work, Saturday classes and younger siblings to take care of the following day.
Omar offered to drive Geli and Cassandra back, an offer they took up, preferring their beds to Vanessa’s couch. Juanita had gone home with her date. In the car, Cassandra jammed to a track coming from the stereo while Geli and Omar bochincharon de lo que was going down at Trinity. As they traded tales of who did what where and the craziness teachers were pulling, Cassandra took in the music on the radio and the lingering sweat on the back of her neck…even though she couldn’t pick up a word they were saying, the way they went from English to Spanish, coupled with the DLG on the radio…she was in heaven.

She kissed them both goo’bye as she slid out of the back of the car and tiptoed up the stairs to the second floor. Caro was still out, ya que acostrumbraba a llegar a las cinco de la manaña. And Cassandra, exhausted from so much dancing, slept through her mom walking through the door to be woken up by Jared calling at 11 in the morning. “Hey, what are you doing today?” he asked, “my game was cancelled and I was thinking…”

“Looking at her calendar and seeing that she had to work a babysitting gig for Dana, she said, “Babe, I gotta work, sorry.”

Disappointed, he asked if she was going to be able to make it to Marie’s party the following week. Again, babysitting for Dana. Shot down, he sighed and said, “I guess we’ll just see each other at school?”

“Sure,” she replied upbeat.

Their conversation didn’t last long, as both had a lot of homework to do that afternoon. And applications, too. She had to finish the SLU and NYU apps, something she had put off having worked on NU’s so diligently. After their conversation ended, she went immediately to her schoolwork, all the while in the back of her hand, doubts were
brewing. In the forefront she was planning on where her babysitting money would be going while the weeks she hadn’t been able to see Jared were adding up.

It had been what felt like years since the night she spent over and while she had done her best to make up for it the next time she spent the night, he felt something was off between them. He felt her holding back. While the workload of a magnet high school senior fall had done its job to keep their hands and minds occupied with preparing for the next step of school, it was strange to find more free time to hang with friends…even Bryony was more open for time. He was starting to feel single again, and he didn’t know if he had the right to feel that way. Seeing Cass at school wasn’t enough; she was everywhere doing everything except him.

As he passed by the newsroom, he was tempted to walk in and see what she was up to--she had communicated via a note in his locker that she was going to be there all afternoon finishing an edition. A forfeited game and cancelled practice had given him a moment in which he considered passing by and, given the state of the room, he was glad he did. Key articles were framed and printed copies of articles and photos were scattered over a center table, and piled by the two computers in the room. He found a Starbucks cup by a computer. On picking it up and finding it warm, it hadn’t been long since it was ordered. Looking in to find spiced cider without whip cream--Cass’s staple--he figured she would be on her way soon enough. Walking around the room, he caught Cassandra’s name on one of the framed articles. The title read: “Racist speech in the cafeteria.” Given that she wasn’t much to talk about what she did for the paper, he started to read. What she heard and how she explained it caused the blood to draw from his already pale white
skin. When its absence caused him to shudder a little, he turned around to find her frozen staring at him with his hand at the cookie jar. “What are you doing here?!?” she exclaimed. Before he could answer, the twinkle in her eye caught him off guard and he let her throw herself on to him.

Seeing him after such a great weekend, a surprised rush of excitement came over her, “I’m so happy you surprised me!” she said as she squeezed him tighter, “I missed you so much!”

He took her affection by surprise but didn’t stop it; it was good to hold her, it reminded him of something, though he couldn’t put his finger on it. As she stepped away from him, eyes still filled with the curiosity of a rainy sunny day, he answered, “The game was cancelled and coach didn’t keep us for practice--the guys didn’t want to hang out because…

“Oh,” she swallowed, light escaping her eyes temporarily, and here, she thought to herself, I thought you missed me.

“You look good,” he tried to add, as she threw a disk on to the stack of papers by her Starbucks’ cup.

He followed her as she walked around, trying to put the room in order. The hyperness she had walked in with quickly blew out, and he realized he said the wrong thing. Fuck, he thought to himself, I should have told her I missed her. Still, though, he had to admit, that he didn’t. He couldn’t go out the room just like that, he knew that much--when she turned around to look at him, she smirked in an attempt to smile. “I know--I’m sorry I haven’t been free I…”between the questions from Tracy, and Allie’s new found curiosity around her love life, she remembered one of the reasons she had put
distance between them. He was the kiss and tell type. She could have easily forgiven it if he had asked to talk about it to others. Then again, she really didn’t tell him about Juanita’s party and the fun she had there and, what’s worse, she had to work the night of Marie’s. They didn’t have a lot of time together and, while she trusted it was because life happened, his eyes and his shoulders sulking told her that how she felt was a little off, so she tried to find something to say, “I have missed you…”

His heart skipped a beat when she said it and, seeing how fixed her eyes were on him, there was more he wanted to say than he could; he remembered why he left his friends; remembered why he preferred talking to her over the others; he remembered the day on the beach and the way he felt fourteen again. But he wasn’t. And neither was she.

“It sucks you can’t go to Marie’s party,” he groaned, “she was telling me…” he began looking to the side, avoiding her eyes all the while she had stopped what she was doing to focus in on him, she was doing that piercing thing again and…

And she hated it when his body said more than he wanted it to say. She wanted to get on the bus already; she wanted to go home and him being there was a distraction and diversion she didn’t want at that moment, conversations about her going on without her…it was like that. Her heartbeat began to betray her.

“I really do miss you,” he said looking up at her, “I…” and just like that, her eyes melted again, her shoulders relaxed and she walked up closer to him. She took his hand, and he folded his fingers through hers.

Still, that night, when his homework was done, despite the promise to call her, he called Bryony instead.
Costumbres

When Dana called to cancel minutes before she was supposed to leave to baby-sit that early December afternoon, Cassandra dialed Jared’s number to tell him the good news. Frost collecting on the edge of the window, a chill entering through the cracks Tio Oscar still hadn’t fixed, she hung up when no one answered and decided she would surprise him instead. She called Gus, her kindred spirit, to see if he could pick her up. “Claro que sí, nena, give me an hour.” The idea of surprising Jared and Marie, who was begging her to go, filled her with a rush that her brother’s presence couldn’t ruin. Being excited about the turn of events was difficult with her brother around.

Her brother, Bern, had a few chips on his shoulder when it came to his kid sister. First- she had no reason to be dating a white boy. Second- she had no reason to date a white boy after breaking his little brother, Toño’s heart. Third – she was getting too cocky for her own good. Bern knew white boys and the way they acted around school; he knew enough to tell her to make sure she’d be careful and there she was, not being careful…Didn’t she know the white boy could turn any minute; the way the felt about girls like her—the way they treated even guys like him?

A few miles north, at Marie’s, Jared arrived, relieved that Cassandra wasn’t going to be there. The lack of conversations had made what was happening between them perfectly clear. Neither would be the first to say it was over even though, he had to admit, they both knew it was. In the newsroom, if she hadn’t taken his hand so quickly, if she didn’t make his heart skip a beat in the way she looked at him, he might have said it, he might have been the first to let go. Her eyes, her hands, her words of reassurance weren’t enough, there was nothing there to hold on to and moving on seemed like the best idea.
Bryony was there in ways Cass hadn’t been since the school year started. So, when after minutes of arrival, Bryony took him by the hand and lead him up the stairs, he shrugged off Marie’s disapproving eyes and allowed the inevitable happen.

As Marie watched him walk ambivalently up the stairs, she wondered what she should do. She looked to Tracy who had parked herself between Cam and Rick, laughing up a storm. Jenna and Tory were lighting it up in the farther room; the others drinking hard lemonade and Smirnoff’s giggled, “inevitable,” among the other stupid bullshit Bryony’s friends and J’s teammates tended to pull. She was relieved Nyasi and her were still not talking. If he’d have been there, he might have done something, and she wouldn’t have been able to deal with it. And what was going on between them was the uncertainty of future distance—and luckily, he wasn’t like J or Bryony, using distance to screw over what could easily be addressed through honest conversation. Still, she was worried because Gus was coming…would Jared and Bryony be done by then? Could it stay off the radar till Monday—because she just wanted to have a good time with no drama and Gus, Gus would have done something dramatic and over the top. Still, Marie wished he wouldn’t come at all.

Gus, though, as Marie was thinking this, was on his way to pick up Cass whose babysitting was cancelled. He was relieved Cass had had some free time and that she took it upon herself to try to fix what went wrong between her and J. She was going to stop being a workaholic and she was going to surprise him, be all romantic the way she hadn’t been in a while. He walked up the narrow staircase to her apartment, where she found her tall, good-looking, cocky older brother answer the door, “Hey, what’s up, Gus?”

“Not much,” Gus answered, “how’re you?”
Bern grunted as his sister zipped up her jacket, wrapped a scarf around her face and called out, “Tell that lil gringuito I said hellooo.”

Cass shot her brother the finger as she opened the door; Gus, not knowing how to react to the guy who never treated him like shit but obviously had issues, simply followed Cass’s lead. Cass rolled her eyes at her brother’s comment and followed Gus outside the door. He changed the subject to letting her know that Michael had finally called Gus his boyfriend, hoping his good news would detract from her brother’s asshole tendencies. Bern had thought he was a bad ass when he was in high school and, while he was decent to others, he always made a point to pick on his kid sister when her then boyfriend, Toño wasn’t around.

For most of the car ride, Michael and his relationship were the main focus of the conversation, which Gus enjoyed. It felt good to have someone to share his happiness with and someone who he could help be happy, too. “Babe,” he asked as they neared Marie’s street, “do you remember what you were like that first year at LPH?”

She smiled at the turn of subject, trying to think of what would spark such a question. She hadn’t felt that she really changed, which she explained, “Honey,” she said helping him look for parking, “the only thing that has changed is the way I act at LPH. I haven’t changed.”

He smiled at her as he found an empty spot around the corner from Marie’s house; Cassandra needed to stay the same enough to make sense at home—he’d picked up on that much over the years, but he insisted, “You’re not the girl who cursed out the seniors who were harassin’me at my locker freshman year.”
She agreed on that point but added, “It’s a different kind of game is all. It’s still about what you hidin’ and what you gotta protect.”

Marie was calming the crowd when Gus arrived smelling of A&F, looking fierce in his leather jacket, and structure jeans. When Cassandra came from behind him, Marie did her best to keep her cool and take their jackets. Marie allowed Gus to walk like nothing but she did her best to engage Cassandra until she heard a glass break in the distance.

When Marie left her, Cassandra tried to find a place where she wasn’t going to get a secondhand high from the weed. She’d tried the stuff, but the high wasn’t a big deal. The first few times, Cassandra didn’t get the buzz going because of the difficulty she had in trying to smoke it. The last party she went to that had weed, was one of the few times she enjoyed, the buzz kicked in and it was sweet. Smelling it again, no le inspiraba nada. Claro, que era la cosa para la gente around her pero no tenía ninguna ansiedad de hacerlo. When she hadn’t seen Jared among the weed smokers, drinkers, video game players, Cassandra went up the stairs con la esperanza de encontrar un poco de tranquilidad.

With Bryony, Jared’s blood pulsed in his veins with ease. When she walked into the room, there was no way her affection or attentions would catch him off guard. He’d finally gotten in just finding someone who could hear him out, the reason he was drawn to her in the first place. The feelings weren’t the same as before but she fit, she was present. And talking with her about what he thought he could share with Cass, it didn’t seem as miniscule as Cass made it. Soccer was the dream but it would always be there. His plan was simple, or so he thought: Finish LPH. Go off to USC, play soccer and figure
out what to study when he got there. But his father had different plans. And Bryony was the only one who was really listening to him; she provided a distraction from all the pressure. And it wasn’t just about the school stuff; it was about being with Cass, too.

Girls and guys alike getting on him whenever he tried to figure out how to work through the walls she was putting up: “I know she’s not around as much as you need. I can tell,” or comments like, “What, is Cassandra too busy for you now?” Sometimes it was like, “Sorry, now I don’t have time for you,” when they were never really around before Cassandra. Bryony coming back around was a surprise and he was sure it was just because he was taken but she never asked about Cassandra and she never pressed the issue. He didn’t want to talk to Bryony about Cassandra, a mistake he’d made with Cassandra—he just wanted to talk about what was on his head, what he needed to figure out for himself. And that, that Bryony could do, so when she reached over to kiss him, he didn’t stop her. She laid him down, straddled him and ignoring who she was, he allowed four months of frustration be released.

Cassandra had walked in with Gus, face aglow. Marie was excited to see her and after scattered chit chat, said she didn’t know where Jared was. Cassandra caught up with her friends who said they were so excited she was able to look up from her work, for once. But no one knew where he was. She didn’t dare ask his guy friends. But there were rooms. He was there. And, when she made it upstairs, she peaked to see his shoes, see another on top of him, and at hearing her say, “Oh, J,” Cassandra lost all footing, and locked herself in the closest room she could find. Silencing the pain felt like sweet surrender as her knees buckled on the bathroom floor and her bowed head, hot tears
kissed the tiled floor. As the moans in the other room grew louder, her hot tears increased until the pain in her head and the release of her heart lulled her to sleep.

At the sound of a door, Gus, who was lounging with Marie, looked to see where it was coming from. His eyes and ears leaned towards every direction and, like the paradox of hinges, Marie turned him around to be sure Gus’s couldn’t continue searching. She’d discovered the answer with the soft shuffle of feet overhead and the shadows lingering in the hallway. The closet door had creaked open but shut more quietly as Jared and Bryony prepared to go. Jared followed Bryony’s smile swiftly tucking the front door behind them. Still, the break in silence stirred Gus’s curiosity; he began to get up and Marie held him back, asking “where are you going?”

Gus remembered his friend, her purpose and the possibility promised with her surprise. Thinking out loud he asked, “Did he find Cass, because I know she was looking for him,” Gus asked as he saw Jared walk down the hall to the other room.

Marie shrugged knowing Bryony had gone up there following Jared an hour or so earlier, “Don’t worry about it, it’s my party.”

Gus shrugged and sat back down, talking shit with Marie.

In the den, where the playstation had been set up to play, Cam took out his phone and chuckled out loud, “J’s such an asshole—

“What?” Tracy interrupted, putting down her drink, “What did ‘e do?”

Cam looked at Tracy, then at Ty, who was seated next to her, shit, he thought to himself, he couldn’t just say nothing.
Rick, though, who had received the same message, responded as he typed on his phone, “He screwed Bryony and left with ‘er about twenty minutes,” he continued putting his phone back in his jeans like nothing, “whateve, we all saw that one comin’.” Tracy smacked both Rick and Cam upside the head; getting up, she went to go check in with Marie.

When she found Marie giggling with Gus, Jenna and Tory, she cleared her throat. Gus, seeing Cass’s only other good friend at the party asked, “Hey, Trace, have you seen Cass?”

With that, Tracy’s face turned pale, a white that glowed in the dark and caught Gus off guard. “What?” he asked, “Trace, are you okay?”

Tracy, though, was looking dead set at Marie, “Umm, Cass was here?”

It took two minutes for Marie to put two and two together. The other girls got up and checked on the guys, aware that a conversation was going down that they didn’t want to witness. Tory, trying to keep in the chuckle, asked Jenna, “Where’s Bryony?”

Before any of them could hear the answer, Gus got up, “Ooh,” he blurted, “I have to go to the ladies…”

Marie pointed him in the direction of the one under the stairs, relieved he apparently didn’t put two and two together with Jenna and Tory who most likely saw what she had seen. Tracy sat down next to Marie and, when she thought Gus was out of earshot, hurriedly whispered what she’d heard from the boys to see what Marie knew.

Gus wasn’t an idiot, though, so he lingered around a bit, weaving himself like peeled labels between the empty bottles that lay in front of him. He ducked his head in the den for two seconds with less bottles and more undrunk liquor, wondering where his
friend and her boyfriend were. Gus slid up the stairs, sticking his head in each door till he
found Cassandra in the second floor bathroom, passed out.

On feeling foreign hands on top of her, Cassandra awoke with a jump. She wiped
the drool from her face and, looking up at Gus crouching over her, blinked, checked out
the room around her and shuddered. She had fallen asleep with her tears, and ached too
much to move—Gus, helped her up and asked, “Did you find J—”

Looking at her bloodshot eyes, it was all he could to not slap anyone. They both
knew they had to take their time, avoid any extra attention. Not many knew she was
there; not many knew either of them knew and Cassandra pleaded that it stay that way for
as long as it could.

Monday morning after the party, her head still hurt from the crying. She had only
talked to Gus, and with Bern hanging out in the barrio, and her mom still at Mickey’s she
had her time to let it out and figure out how to handle it. But she would see him in class.
Inevitably. She liked her classes too much, especially English, to skip for the rest of the
semester, let alone past Monday. Back in class Tuesday, she took defeat in stride and did
her best to act like he wasn’t there. Besides, he had gotten what he wanted. Who he
wanted.

By that Tuesday, her eyes were no longer puffy, but her voice was hoarse. At
home, she had avoided her brother’s gaze and I told you so attitude. He would be picking
her up that day, incentive to keep their mom’s car to do whatever he wanted.
Contemplating how to best avoid an argument about trying too hard to fit in with white
people, she situated herself between Nyasi and Teddy, shifting her focus between her
notes, the story they were discussing and her assignment notebook. While each minute felt like an hour, all she could do was focus and wait.

Cassandra rarely sat next to Nyasi, as they would spend the class making offhand notes about how ignorant everyone else was. He tried to write a note on her notebook, but she guarded it with both arms—the chill coming from her was enough to stay away. Nyasi wasn’t surprised, though, and he’d done his best to keep his cool about it. Nyasi had heard that Monday morning, Bryony sitting on Jared’s lap at lunch confirming what gossip had already told him. Seeing Cassandra in class, seated next to him, he wanted to offer support, “Hey,” Nyasi whispered in her ear.

Looking up at his big dark brown eyes, she found solidarity so she shrugged in response, unwilling to break her frozen mouth, frightened of the tears that would come. He looked down, frustrated he had not been at that party. He could have done something; he would have done something. He wasn’t the intervening type, especially with LPH folk who didn’t abide by basic rules of respect, but he might have gotten out of character, at least a little bit—called the white boys out on their bullshit; encouraged Marie to end the party. There were too many months between him and leaving the school, he knew that much—he couldn’t imagine what it’d be like for Cassandra.

Then, on the other side of the class, there sat Jared, flustered and bewildered. Served the motherfucker right, Nyasi thought to himself. As they caught each other’s eyes, Jared immediately ducked away out of fear—good that the white boy knew where Nyasi’s loyalty lay.

Cass, on her part, kept her eyes on the clock and when class discussion or note taking didn’t occupy her mind, prayed Hail Marys in her head till the bell rang. She’d
meet Littwin’s eyes every so often, working her damnedest to not veer her gaze to his left, where Jared was sitting. Unlike her routine, too engrossed and respectful of class time, she subtly started packing five minutes before the clock and slipped out before anyone could stop her.

At her locker, which lay between Tracy and Marie’s, she loaded her books quickly. Day two Tracy and Marie were still trying to talk to her. Funny, she thought to herself as she brushed them off, speeding towards Webster Avenue where her brother would most likely be waiting, when the damage was done was when they really wanted to talk to her. She blurred from her locker, down the hall, past greetings of friends, classmates, needing the comfort of the cold snow and wind chill whipping around her. She thought about what would be waiting for her at home; what comforts she did have: Homework. Yahaira. Her friends—but then their reaction to her heartache, to J’s actions—would they be comfort at all? As she walked out of the building, December wintry air whipped at her face. She’d heard her name being called but rushed in the hopes her brother was on time if not early.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t, giving the white boy time to talk to her. She stood on the corner, waiting for a sign of her mother’s beat up Mazda to roll by, she focused on the possibility of its image in an effort to tune out the pleading voice next to her.

Jared took her waiting as a good sign, even though her visible pain hurt more than he thought it would. How did it take so long for anyone to tell him Cassandra had been at the party? Why didn’t anyone tell him straight up? As he pondered these questions, he waited for her eyes to meet his. She wasn’t going to look at him, still waiting to see any sign of her brother. She’d walk around the block if not that Bern was the type of brother
to leave her out and she didn’t have any bus money. She could feel the sleet numbing her nose but the cold couldn’t get to her heart just yet, not when he was still trying to speak. His words were like wasps buzzing bullshit around her ear, searching for a new place to attack. She waited for him to stop so she could kill the noise. The tears were inevitable, as much as she did not want them there. Not then. Not ever in front of him.

He tried to grab her arm, appeal to the logic of why the break up was inevitable. Looking down at his feeble attempt at reason, she barked: “Don’t. Touch. Me!”

She finally had to meet his eyes with all the strength she had had, the anger she had forgotten could exist in her burned out any sadness she could have felt for the moment.

He’d never yell like that; never at her and he backed away, as their eyes still focused on each other. They fixed on the other for what seemed like hours.

Bern eyed the scene as the light turned red on Halsted. He didn’t honk for her attention and he drove around in the hopes of giving her enough time to handle her shit. He usually let a girl know before he was going to kick it to someone and he’d seen too many white boys like Jared—in high school and in college—not give a shit. As much shit as he pulled, he always made sure a girl knew if he was serious…he’d seen enough bullshit from his dad to ever pull that shit with anyone else. He felt for his sister and, for the first time, felt bad he didn’t’ support her and Toño as much as he would have liked. Maybe she wouldn’t be in such a bad fix.

And Cassandra remained fixed in her position, waiting for Jared to leave, waiting for a distant horn to snap her back in to the world she belonged. Even as her body remained still, her mind was going everywhere. What the fuck did he want?
Traffic was crowding north and southbound on Halsted, but she still couldn’t see her brother’s car. Jared was moved by her tears, but she looked happier when she wasn’t with him, he tried to explain, “Cass—c’mon, it wasn’t like this was easy between us—we were barely spending time together, I didn’t know—

He needs these excuses to make him feel better, she thought to herself. He wants me to apologize because of his sex drive and because of my absence; he wants me to apologize for what he was doing...asshole. But, seeing her brother coming from Lincoln and Webster, she asked, “Are we done?”

He looked at her blank expression, and when her eyes bulged for a minute, he reached to cover his neck with the collar of his jacket.

She met his eyes once more before walking past him, his eyes wanted to say more—still, the hicky on his neck was not of her making, purple against his neck reddening in the snow. She’d known the time, the distance, but it’s not because she didn’t care; it’s not because she didn’t want to be there and yet, there he was, like she couldn’t exist for anything or anyone else. And while she’d found the words and the time, there he was, reminding her it hadn’t been enough.

As she continued towards a car with a driver who looked a little like her, with a choke in his throat, Jared called out, “Cass, I—

Cam and Rick found him him, defeated, at his locker;. Seeing their captain more heartbroken than after the loss of a championship, Rick asked, “Dude, what happened?”

Red-eyed, he forced over choked anger, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He slammed his locker and followed them to a study lounge. The last thing he wanted was to go home.
Sitting next to her brother, she was shocked at his silence. Before she could ask why, as though he was reading her mind, he said, “I’m sorry—I saw you with the white boy and I thought you needed the time to curse him out.” When he grabbed her hand, she allowed the last few tears to fall, swallowed to make room for a “Thank you,” and kept her eyes focused on the passing buildings and salt filled sky, waiting for the red and blue that would let her know she was in the place that loved her the most.

Her brother dropped her off and she approached the stairs, trying to avoid recalling the Jared argument she’d had with Juanita weeks earlier, with lists of what she needed to do that afternoon. She found a note at the foot of the stairs as she unlocked her door. It was in Geli’s handwriting, *We waited, I’m at Tía’s so just call me.* Geli had a way of showing up like that, she called and said she’d be there within minutes.

When Cassandra crossed the street, she found Geli sitting with Monse, another friend from St. Marks elementary, in her grandmother’s kitchen. “Y la nena?” Cassandra asked of Monse’s baby.

“Mi abuela la tiene,” Monse responded, “esta de visita.”

“No te hubiera molestado,” Cassandra insisted, “se la’ poca’ vece’ que la ve…”

Monse shook her head, “which means she saves all her comentarios y regaños…at least she’s proud of me for sticking to school y to’o eso. And she loves Alejandrita.”

“Yeah,” Geli added, “la capricha demasia’o.” Noticing the redness around Cassandra’s eyes, le pregunto, “Lo vi’te?”

Cassandra no era una a quien le gustaba caer en el sentido de victima, entonces les dijo, “Por tonta, caprichosa—like I needed the dramatic antics of—noded, “Yo si fui pendeja!””
Geli shook her head, “You were happy, no mientas.”

Cassandra shook her head, the choked sobs coming again, “Juanita was right—what right did I have…After everything…Just so he could go back…

She looked at Monse, remembering Alejandra’s face…it took everything not to cry again. “I almost told him I…with Toño, it was…this—I promised…I promised myself I would never…”*fall in love with a lie, she finished the thought to herself.*

Monse placed her hand on Cassandra’s and said, “It’s okay to be wrong…”

“I can’t afford to be wrong,” she blurted, “I worked too damn hard to—I love myself too much to ever—

“But you,” Geli searched for the words, the memories of last year’s math class, what Cass said between the lines that no one else noticed, “you…”but she couldn’t finish. She didn’t like to see Cassandra in pain, but she would never admit the difference she saw, that she heard in Cassandra. It’d be too much for Cass to admit to herself.

**End of the Millennium**

LPH’s soccer team lost the two last games of the season, much to Jared’s disappointment. No matter what the coach, what his teammates or his friends said, each loss was bullshit. College applications. Bryony’s attention waning on his concentration. Finals. Papers. The silent girl across the desk at English. The silent sweet girl whose smile still made him ache in the stomach. The sweet girl whose scent still lingered on pillow cases he refused to wash. He could have given more at those games, if he’d had his head in the right place.
His mom knew better. “I’m here if you need anything,” she’d say in response to his blank silent stares.

The second day of break, he broke a stare by giving his mom a hug, something neither of them remembered him doing for a long time.

While Jared was contemplating transitioning into his expected life, debating where to put his dreams, Cassandra’s friend, Gus was trying to pull Cassandra out of the barriers of her ambition which made her believe she was independent. Like working as hard as she was outside her friends, with her friends at home and at LPH was giving her any type of anything that was good.

The first Friday of the winter break, Gus llamó a Cassandra para averiguar lo que iba a hacer durante las vacaciones. Por lo caballero que era tenía que dejar a Cassandra sufrir en la soledad que eligió por el momento. Con la esperanza de que lo iba a superar, la dejo llorar por una semana, gritar sola como lo había elegido. Pero, en días iba a darse cuenta de que no muchos sentían igual. A veces, even the best of friends couldn’t let you suffer alone. Allie called him a few days before Christmas and besides inviting him to a get together her parents allowed her to have for New Years, asking for an update on his application status and what his plans were for winter break, she also asked about Cassandra.

Gus was in the middle of cleaning his room when his mom handed him the phone and talking to Allie. He continued working on hanging up and ironing his shirts as her attempt at subtly asking what was up with Cass was frustrating him. Allie, good heart, constantly well-intentioned, but at times demasiado metiche. When he first started coming out, all of a sudden he was cool to talk to…something he realized a little too late.
Always putting her nose everywhere when drama ensued…not as bad as the people who blab it but she insisted that she always had to know everything. No chismosa como Marie a veces lo había sido…pero esas rubias andaban hablando de porque de verdad rompieron la Boricua y el güerito. Like they didn’t see it happen all in front of them. But, because his mom didn’t know that he didn’t want to talk to the girls, like Allie, he had to entertain her.

“I dunno,” he said when she asked about Cassandra’s plans. He lied, friends long enough with Cassandra to know family was priority during the holidays, not even for a day would she break from the barrio. Also, he had talked to Geli and Eddie the other day, and they said she was doing fine, but didn’t want to talk to LPH folk. So he lied, “I don’t know what her deal is; I haven’t talked to her—or anyone for that matter, why you ask?”

“You don’t think she’d stop by New Year’s Eve,” she asked looking down the list she created. Only about ten folks on there, and she’d have half of them agreed so far, pending on who else’d be there; if they could bring someone…

Gus thought of asking who else she’d invited. Allie and Jared knew each other longer than Cassandra; she was behind them being together more than anyone. “Well,” he admitted, “New Year’s is definitely a family thing, so even if you could reach her, the answer’d be no.”

Aun así, se recordaba de la conversación en el apuro de salir de la casa de Marie. The questions about coming out and what it felt like; how he navigated it and how she was starting to think the drama with boys wasn’t worth it anymore. He’d been the first person she told, eso fue lo que le confeso y sabía porque pero aun así, sabía que seeing
everyone like nothing happened, like she hadn’t had her heart ripped out for trying too hard was more than she would bear. Esa noche, dejó de ser la que lo permitía todo.

Allie was quiet on the other side of the phone for a minute. Since the break up, Cassandra had grown more distant. Allie couldn’t put her finger on it at first, until Cassandra stopped sitting next to her in Spanish class; until Cassandra started eating only with Gus and some unknown juniors. She was a fan of keeping her circle small, but to switch circles so quickly, comportandose with such cold-heartedness. “She wasn’t this bad when Antonio left,” Allie confided in Gus.

He agreed, “Then again,” he began, before his buena conciencia told him he knew better and changed the intentions, “I’ll be at your New Year’s party…”

Like Cassandra, he watered down parts of himself for some of the gabachos, porque no todos podían tomar todo de una vez. A matter of self-protection. The brown people didn’t like them for being ‘too smart’ and most white people found them to be spectacles for observation. Not their good friends, but still, they had to be careful. Cassandra, especially, because of the intense politics that formed her ambition. Not just the lousiness of Chicago politics but that of being a proud Puerto Rican who thought she saw Puerto Rico’s status for what it was really. He saw her point but agreed more with Geli who thought, para que dañar algo tan lindo--benefits of being within an imperial force without suffering in extreme Third World conditions, as Cassandra would put it.

Growing up friends with two aspiring independistas, it didn’t matter to Geli. Sisters they were. Between beating boys up together or dishing out about the heifers they had to watch. And sometimes, las mamás were the worst. Like when Geli and her mom,
Beatrice, came over. Beatrice and Caro had known each other since Welles High School but were different kinds of cats. Beatrice, first, was younger than Caro and they had hung out because they lived in the same building, and their friendship came from a common link of I’m a Puerto Rican woman but that don’t mean I’m a ho mentality. The first hospital they worked at, they worked at together until Beatrice got a city job and Caro moved on to Children’s. But then Beatrice wasn’t the type who gave a shit about who dated who and when Caro was all up on Cassandra’s grill about trading a white boy for el amable Toño, she made her attempts to change the subject because it was bogus. Not that Caro came right out and said, “How the hell did my girl trade Toño for this yuppie mother fucker?!”

They worked in indirectas. In the, “I was talking to fulana the other day y me ‘taba contando de como Toño iba a quizá vení a visitar a su apá…” and the look of discomfort and red coming over Cassandra’s face said it all. Tambien, la mirada de Geli porque ella ya sabía que él estaba aquí. He’d come by to visit his madrina and godsister a few days after he’d returned. He’d been gone for a minute, ya que they went to PR last Christmas and he wasn’t around in the summer—because of an internship he’d gotten, comentó su tía, but Cassandra felt different. Her crew felt different. Her crew felt different. Word on the street was that he wanted to come by pa’ el desfile de los Reyes, but Geli thought different. That the bad blood between him and Cass was long over and it wouldn’t matter if they saw each other again. They’d been together for, like, four years, everyone knew they were together, if you didn’t see them at Café Colao or walking in the park or even at Lily’s Record Store checkin out recently arrived LP’s.
And they weren’t even supposed to go out, how the hell you gonna go out with your boy’s kid sister? Unless you were crazy—but then she grew up real quick, in his eyes, and he tapped on her shoulder before realizing she was Cassandra Morales and not some unknown girl. So it was, shit, too late he already asked her to dance. And then they got to talking, and more talking and it turned out he was calling asking for her more than his boy Bern and then he started coming to dinner and then era lo entendido. Just like that.

And just like that he was back. Geli knew but didn’t know if she should tell her recently heartbroken cheated on nena. Donde había fuego cenizas quedaban but which cenizas were more able of being reignited? She watched the exchange between mother and daughter thinking, shit, this must be nuts. At least, though, Cass wasn’t in Coco’s situation—while Coco’s mom did try to tell her who to date, because Coco was thinking outside the box, beyond boy or girl, the fire she was starting was more than the ones Cassandra was trying to control. Geli and Cassandra’s eyes met, as if they were thinking the same thing, get the fuck out now.

“Mom, do you got steaks in the fridge for Mickey?”

With the sudden change of subject, Caro lost her train of thought, “Ay, no sé, nena, you wanna go by La Municipal ‘n get some?”

Cassandra nodded, smiling at Geli, and then told her mom she’d take care of it and headed for the door. Geli returned the smile as she, out of respect, lingered with her mom as they continued over coffee and quesitos talking about some other shit. Geli decided to stay, para que se coincidiera Cass leaving; Geli’s mom sometimes called her out on doing shit like that, and Geli no quería invitar pleitos, Cass had had enough.
But Cassandra knew that she’d run into Toño sooner or later. It would be a strange reunion, not only because of who’d she’d dated, but also because she was more willing to admit maybe it wasn’t a matter of fearing what sex would do for her career, but a desire to try more than was expected. He’d written her weeks ago letting her know that he’d be coming by and that he wanted to catch up with her, “It wasn’t right the way we left it,” he’d explained. As she walked out the door, she spotted her mom’s cell phone on the end table, swiped it up and dialed Toño’s number as she walked down division. “Hey I’m goin to La Municipal, why don’t you meet me there?”

He agreed and caught up to her before she reached Rockwell. It was weird seeing the cat, all decked out in a wool coat, no jeans, hair clean cut, cleaner cut than when he’d left. Clean shaven, no bubble jacket, no tim’s, walking with his head high instead of like he was ready to box. And of course, al verse, they exchanged smiles. Los dos sorprendidos, contentos por el reencuentro que duró demasiado tiempo. “Hey,” they said as they hugged each other, their cold cheeks brief encounter stinging more than warming the other.

He put his arm around hers como siempre and they walked to La Municipal to get steaks for Mickey. Mickey wasn’t going to be coming for another few days but getting them early enough le calmaba a Caro lo suficiente para que Cassandra could use that as a pretext to get out the house. “You know, my mom ain’t over us breakin up?”

“Yeah, I haven’t gone by Oscar’s yet, kinda scared to run into Bern, he hasn’t called me in a minute.”

“For real?”
Toño nodded and he related the bad blood that went on between them since he hadn’t returning for last summer’s parade. Toño and Bern had been friends since their first days at St. Mark’s. Shorties (little ones) playing tag football on the playground, flirting with girl crossing guards as they lingered after school, older girls, younger girls. Signing up to play baseball together at Humboldt Park—and for Bern not to call because Toño was trying to get his was some bullshit for sure. He understood that it was weird, with everything Bern didn’t know, but it was still fucked up, “I mean we were straight until you ‘n me weren’t, and that ain’t right. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was mad at you, or mad at me.”

“I feel you,” Cassandra agreed, “he wouldn’t talk to me when he learned that you ‘n me weren’t you ‘n me anymore. I was like, dude, it ain’t got nothing to do wit’ you but still it was like he couldn’t be cool wit’ you because of me or some stupid shit—and then when I started dating this white boy Jared—then he started getting all up in my grill about it. Like mine weren’t good enough.”

Toño laughed, thinking about the white girls Bern had kicked it to at LPH. It was different, then, and he never took them seriously. None of them he brought home and he always brushed them off like he wasn’t doing anything wrong. And they liked it; liked being the toy, playing it up with the latin lover…not that Bern could do half the shit with them with nenas from el barrio.

Toño didn’t relate this to Cass, not wanting to test the already broken bond. His arm tightened around hers as the cold wind whipped around them as they reached La Municipal parking lot. Cass avoided making contact with the drunks lingering outside and Toño shook his head no to them as he followed her into the store. They went straight
to the back, Cassandra ordering freshly cut steaks and pork chops from the Mexican butcher behind the counter. He was new, without a doubt, because he didn’t know who Toño was. They used to come down here often, the first days Mickey was coming by the house, ordering the steaks and chops the five of them would eat together, talking shit about what was going on around the neighborhood, politics and all that shit, and about each other’s families and how they were doing. Because if you lived on Division Street, if you grew up on Division Street, and worked and played around Humboldt Park, you ran into people long enough to know they were family. And this new younger guy behind the counter, wasn’t there yet, he prepared the cuts real quick, unlike family sometimes tends to do, wrapped them up real nice and handed them over to her.

Toño then went to look at the hot chocolate options in the drink aisle, followed up by debating whether or not he wanted to buy a pack of Maltas. And if you knew Maltas, Malta India was the way to go, the right mix of sweet and goodness, ain’t no playin’ with that, it’s like blasphemy and shit. Malta Goya just didn’t cut it, partly because it wasn’t the stuff they grew up on. And Malta del Sol, not the preferred choice either, it didn’t have the right kick to it. And sometimes, Caro or even MariLu tried to pass them off under Cassandra’s nose, but she knew better. Not only because Malta tastes better in the bottle but because Malta India has a distinct taste, it has memories attached to it; Puerto Rican Fiestas Patronales, bringing a mini cooler as they watched the acts until they were over, so late that when Toño would bring her back home he’d have to walk all the way up the stairs para que Caro los regañara a los dos. Whereas Malta del Sol was the afternoon her dad left her and Bern there alone because he was ‘visiting his family in Caguas.’ Or the Malta Goya he bought before he told them he was going to not be around for a while,
because he had some stuff to take care of—maybe the pregnant girl who came through the door that one night Cassandra was watching from the closet door, or the other woman from weeks before, who was yelling at her mom on the stoop, as she was playing steal the bacon across the street, during a block party. There were the women—not the women that came by wanting to talk to Berto, those were the old girlfriends who wanted to know why he hadn’t gotten married. The girls who wondered what happened to the boy that could have taken them away had he stayed instead of going off to war.

And those girls, like the Maltes that had tried to replace India with la de Goya or del Sol, but the taste wasn’t good enough, sweet enough. And then Toño asked, after Cassandra insisted he not walk her all the way back, “Is Jared Malta India or Goya?”

She shrugged, “He’s not Malta at all, I wouldn’t know how to describe him.”

They agreed to meet at Café Colao’s the following day, ya que they didn’t have enough time to catch up the afternoon before. It wasn’t too crowded when they arrived, partly because the street was pretty dead in the middle of a December day. The cold kept gang members and old women in, gossip and drama was found over the phone, in school hallways and in the stairways of apartment buildings and two-flats. Not that Cassandra and Toño didn’t have their hands full. The miscarriage, the breakup, the silence between them in their time apart. The questions such heartache was at last allowing her to ask herself. The easiest break up in the world with no hate or pain and yet, the silence was never addressed. And it needed to be. Not because the cenizas couldn’t bring anything back but something to live on, but because she still wanted to wake up next to Jared and wanted to know if she had fucked up as badly as she knew she did. She needed to know if she allowed others to love her.
But he viewed sex differently than she did. He hadn’t looked for love and it hadn’t happened for him just yet. His dorm room nightstand drawer had been consistently prepared for any escapades and she avoided anything beyond second base. He wanted to forget what it felt like to not be able to get any. Despite their different approaches to touch and being touched, they understood that the other’s path was inevitable.

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened—if it would have worked out?” he asked as she ordered her second café con leche. He couldn’t help but think about it. It was another life for him and yet, it would have been a good one.

She shook her head no. The miscarriage had spoken for itself, they didn’t want to be together. There was a limit to what they would do for each other and to be relieved of the mistake, was to pursue the lives they wanted. “I know that I loved you, then, and I know that what happened had to happen for a reason. We were together for so long, you know?”

“Yeah,” he answered with slight disappointment. He ended somewhere completely different than expected in those years out of the barrio. Even then with Cassandra right across from him, the shelves of quesitos enclosed in glass doors behind him, he was out of place in the one place he spoke of with such love when he was away. The same images of nacionalistas he missed surrounding him on the walls of the café pero, aun así, se había escapado de ese sitio, de ese ambiente que tanto amaba y anhelaba, y anhelaba aún estando allí con la nena que alguna vez quiso, that had at one point meant so much to him.

“Feels like yesterday was our first day in here, the first time I told you I was scared shitless because you were Bern’s sister.”
She took another sip of coffee, and chuckled, remembering the nena she was, excited to be dating an older guy, her brother’s best friend who’d she’d been crushing on for like ever. “But I wasn’t. He and I, have nothing to do wit’ you n me, never has. And he always thought that it did. Look at us, he don’t even know we’re talking, no one does. And if they did, what’d they say, what’d they think even, that this was it?”

He laughed, changed the subject because nothing more needed to be said. They stayed till closing time: he told her about mechanical engineering, wanting to build cars, even go to Japan and shit, but who knew, who knew where life would take him? And that thought remained in his head, all the way home, down past Potomac where his father was reading the paper, sipping on his tea, ya que his ulcer didn’t allow for coffee, waiting for his son to get back home from being wherever he was.

Once he reached his father’s casita, Toño entered through the back, where he found his father reading the paper. Toño sat alongside him, took the sports section to see how his college teams were doing, a ver if there was something to be hopeful for. There wasn’t. “Bendición, Pa,” he said after finishing the article. He kissed his father’s balding forehead, and asked, “¿Cómo le fue en el trabajo?”

Roberto looked at his son from above the rim of his glasses and replied, “Como siempre hijo, how’s Cassandra?”

Toño contemplated his answer before giving it straight away. He was more worried about what he discovered upon returning than he was about what it was like to see his ex-girlfriend again. “She’s good, pretty sure que va a ir a Northwestern. No he visto a Bern yet, está trabajando mucho con Oscar, ya sabes, pero tan pronto necesite cortarme el pelo, voy pa’lla.”
Roberto nodded his head, and turned the page, knowing very well that his son had more to say. “Sometimes, no sé po’que regresé, no se siente igual—todo h’tá igual pero no yo, yo no. I dunno, pa, I dunno. ¿Qué crees tú?”

“I’ve been here since I arrived. When they finally sold this building, I bought it. But I’m old. And the cold is wearing on my bones, hijo.”

Toño nodded, “It’s the small things that add up, pa, nada cambia, pero nosotros sí, ¿ve?”

His father nodded as Toño got up. He patted his dad on his shoulders and walked towards the phone under the family portrait. Roberto slid his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He took a deep breath, filled the tea kettle with more water, pausing at the picture of his wife on his bedroom door. He could hear that Toño was talking with ‘Bern,’ Carolina’s son; he turned on the television to see que había de noticia. Finding nothing, he sat back at the kitchen table, grabbed another section of the paper, though he really wasn’t reading; he really wasn’t doing much of anything except what he was getting used to doing. Waiting.

Caro, on the other side of the barrio, wasn’t waiting for her daughter’s return. It was enough that she was with Toño, hopefully they’d get in their right senses and get back together. Regardless of what happened, they made sense together and Toño made her happier than anyone else could. When her son walked out the door to meet Toño, she wondered where her daughter was. It wasn’t like her to not come back quickly; it’s not like she had anywhere to go.

Outside, on the front porch, Cassandra was sitting in the cold, considering the conversation she had with Toño and wondering why, in the brief time she was with Jared,
she never brought him up, she never let him take her to the door. She never invited him over; never once thought about it but she was willing to say that she loved him—maybe it was the rush, the need to have both worlds. But her brother coming through the front door detracted her from her thoughts, “Are you an idiot?” he asked out loud finding his red nosed sisters sitting on the front steps—

Looking up at him, she blurted, “No,” shoving her fists more tightly in to her down bubble jacket pockets.

“No?” he asked in response lowering a number of steps so they were eye to eye, “sitting outside in below zero weather, really, idiot—go back inside, before Mom starts worrying.”

Cassandra shrugged in place, preferring the cold of the outside over the cold indifference of her mother inside—she was not being supportive of the break up at all…it was easier for her mom that way…all cheaters were the same… like Cassandra hadn’t done her best to never let him in. After everything, and because there was so much he didn’t understand, she kept him in his world where he couldn’t touch her. Not really.

“I’ll let her know I’m going out for a walk,” she told her brother to avoid talking about how frustrated she was with her mom, “I haven’t seen Monse in a while,” she lied getting up off her seat. The cold rushed past her backside and she regretted for a minute moving for the sake of her brother’s concern. Seeing as it was the middle of the week during the holidays, she, in turn, asked, “Where’re you goin’?”

“Toño and I are going to the movies,” he said nudging her shoulder as she stood next to him, “dude, he was my friend first, remember?”
She fake laughed in response, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, but now we can share him equally—tell him I said hello—

“Will do—and get back inside,” Bern nodded and headed towards their agreed meeting place, last thing you need to do is get sick right now.”

“Uh-huh,” she said walking in a direction opposite him. It was a cold December night as any, days away from the New Year it was true. She’d walk to Monse’s because Monse would let her in like nothing, that’s the way Monse was. Having a kid at a young age, she didn’t have a lot of visitors, a lot of friends who understood. Cassandra wasn’t as far from such a fate; her body couldn’t take it; couldn’t carry a baby to term for whatever reason but Monse did. She remembered the bochinche Eddie told her, how, through the grapevine, abortion, adoption was recommended. But that wasn’t something people did—give up their kids, their family. It wasn’t something anyone did easily, no matter what happened.

By the time she reached Monse’s though, Monse was already outside, como si la estuviera esperando—“Hey, Cassie,” Monse called out, Alexandra bundled up in her hands, “how are you?”

“I’m good,” Cassandra responded to Monse’s favorite nickname for her, “but why did you take la nenita out on such a cold night?”

Cassandra knelt down to greet her as Monse responded, “Mom was at a meeting and there was no milk y, ya sabes, we always need milk,” directing her attention to the two year old, Monse encouraged, “Ale’, porque no saludas a tu tía Cassandra?”
Alejandra smiled up at Cassandra before hiding behind her mother’s jeans. She giggled for a bit, Cassandra being the first to say hello, “Hi nena,” Cass said peering around at the little one. “You remember me, don’t you?”

After a while, in part because the cold started to filter in through her knees, Cassandra arose to Monse’s level. Monse still peered down at her daughter, trying to see if the little one would come around. “Ale, be nice,” Monse insisted.

Cassandra shook it off, “Don’t worry, little ones have good memories but still like the shy approach, especially in the cold.”

“Then come inside, ya que you’re over here, it’ll give us time to catch up,” Monse invited, adjusting the plastic bag in her hand, slowly leading her daughter up the stairs.

Cassandra agreed. She would call her mom when she was inside; let her know she would return when she was ready, maybe her brother would come get her or maybe she’d return in the morning. Either way, she didn’t want to see her just then; didn’t want the encouraging Toño talk or her mom’s false concern about Cass moving forward in her life.

Caro could relax as soon as she heard from her daughter—it wasn’t like Cassandra to not call. As she relaxed at home, her children off with their friends, she realized her life didn’t have to wait for them to return to leave for good. She could start considering it, no questions asked, without them. She didn’t have to be what they came back to—they could do that for themselves.