TRES RAZAS: UNA CULTURA LA PUERTORRIQUEÑA
Monuments to Mestizaje and the Commemoration of Racial Democracy in Puerto Rico

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that monuments to mestizaje (miscegenation) in Puerto Rico reaffirm the myth of a harmonious mixture between the White Spaniard, Black African, and Indigenous Taíno. This racial triad, originally conceived in the nineteenth century, was institutionalized in 1956 by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture to legitimize the reformulation of Puerto Rico’s colonial status. It was meant to foster a consensus-driven nation-building project through a depoliticized harmonious mixture of races. I analyze ten monuments to mestizaje that privilege the white European root of Puerto Rican identity and demonstrate how their visual discourse sustains the narratives of racial democracy in Puerto Rico.

KEYWORDS
Puerto Rico, monuments, race, blackness, indigenous

S. Mollá, Tres razas—una cultura—la puertorriqueña (Three races—one culture—Puerto Rican), San Germán, Date unknown. Photo by Rafael V. Capó García. Mosaic showing an Indigenous Taíno, a Spanish woman, and a Black woman with “Three races—one culture—Puerto Rican,” written on the bottom.
In the town square of the Juana Díaz municipality in Puerto Rico, stands a monument dedicated to the Three Kings of the New Testament (Figure 1). Juana Díaz is famous for its yearly celebration of Epiphany, and for the centennial commemoration of this tradition, the municipality commissioned sculptor Naldo de la Loma to create a visual representation of the magi. During the Spanish colonial period, Three Kings Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm and zeal. After the US invasion in 1898, Christmas began to usurp this Catholic tradition, and the Three Kings suddenly became symbols of cultural resistance that emphasized the Spanish and Catholic roots of Puerto Rican identity. In local artisanship, the Black magi known in Cuba and Puerto Rico as Melchior, has traditionally been placed at the center of the three with a white horse, while the other two magi are placed interchangeably on each of his sides (Millán 2001) (Figure 2). For many scholars, Melchior has come to represent the Puerto Rican People, most notably its rural peasantry (López 2008; Quintero 2003). In 1985, de la Loma’s monument to the Three Kings was eventually paraded around various Puerto Rican towns via a cultural caravan, an allegory of the magi’s historical pilgrimage, before eventually arriving at Juana Díaz. Here, the town could finally admire its most beloved tradition but with an interesting twist. De la Loma had turned the Three Kings of the Orient into the Three Kings of Puerto Rican identity which included an Indigenous Taíno, a White Spaniard, and a Black African, the holy trinity of this Caribbean nation.

Puerto Ricans are taught from a young age that they are the product of the mixture of these three groups. The state has promoted this trope primarily through school curricula, cultural institutions, and public art. For instance, anthropologist Isar Godreau et al. found that elementary-level textbooks in Puerto Rico advance the racial triad paradigm. The authors argue that this trope functions as a “maneuver of simplification,” (2008, 119) where teachers and textbooks call upon this triad to bypass more complicated and sensitive conversations about slavery and racism. According to the authors of this study, when students were asked to make a drawing about Puerto Rican history, 69% of them submitted a drawing depicting the racial triad. In a study of thirteen Puerto Rican Social Studies school textbooks, I also found that mestizaje functions as the grand master narrative around which much of the curriculum revolves (Capó García forthcoming). In terms of cultural institutions, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) has been largely responsible for the dissemination of this “blending myth” (Dávila 1997). Regarding public art, there are numerous monuments that depict the three races together and, in most cases, alongside the final product, the

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Monuments to Mestizaje in Puerto Rico

CAPÓ GARCÍA

jíbaro (rural peasant), creole, or Boricua (Puerto Rican). It is precisely these vehicles of nation building that I wish to discuss as I believe they provide fascinating insights into Puerto Rican and Caribbean cultural politics.

In this article, I explore some of the themes that surfaced during my analysis of ten monuments that recreate the blending myth in Puerto Rico. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the local political contexts of each commemoration and the ideologies of their artists and patrons. Instead, I describe how the racial triad paradigm is visually and discursively deployed. First, I share a brief intellectual history of how mestizaje (miscegenation) has been used by Puerto Rican elites. I then present my ethnographic findings, where I argue that the monuments privilege the white European root of the racial triad; deploy Black bodies as complementary pieces that contributed work and culture through their physical prowess; use women’s bodies to highlight the passivity of the Taíno People; normalize and legitimize Christian conquest and celebrate a harmonious mixture that conceals the violence of colonialism and the prevalence of racism in our modern-day society; and exalt the jíbaro and/or criollo (creole) as a white, masculine, firmly rooted, and complete subject.

I am confident that my selection is an exhaustive and definitive sample of every public statue in Puerto Rico that centers around or evokes the racial triad. While the Fuente de las raíces (Fountain of Roots) in San Juan is not specifically about mestizaje, it is appropriately called Raíces (Roots), and...
depicts relevant racial visual elements.² While street murals can potentially advance important counter-narratives to state-sanctioned discourses they lack the longevity of statues and are usually temporary works of public art. This does not diminish their effectiveness as community-driven vehicles of contestation. On the contrary, as I later explain, it creates new possibilities for engagement and participation. Furthermore, I am drawn to monuments because they are, as arts collective

³Fig. 2 Wooden carvings of the Three Kings. Photo by Jack Delano, in Quintero (2003).
Monument Lab aptly puts it, “statement(s) of power and presence in public” (2021, 4) that not only require state approval and public funding but also reveal the sanctioned narratives that the state wants to impose on society.

**Theoretical Framework**

My analysis is grounded in the work of Martinican poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant. In *Poetics of Relation* (2010), Glissant uses the concept of relationality to refer to the unpredictable nature of French Caribbean identity. Rejecting the idea of a root identity—as seen in Aime Cesaire’s *negritude* movement which situated Blackness as the primary source of a pan-African identity—Glissant critiques this form of atavism for its tendency to be founded on filial violence that links itself to the origin story of a people and justifies its subsequent imposition on the lands and territories it seeks to claim as its own through the use of force. Counter to this, Glissant proposes the idea of relation identity which “is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures...(and) is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation” (2010, 44). For Glissant, relationality embraces the entanglement of identity through a process of creolization that has numerous relations with no root, but rather with many possible starting points. Here Glissant draws on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s rhizomatic framework where thinking and being have no fixed origin, but rather multiple entries and crossings. In the Caribbean, this metaphor is beautifully represented by the native mangrove, a richly entangled and interconnected ecosystem that informs my analysis.

**The ICP and the Politics of Mestizaje in Puerto Rico**

While prominent 19th-century intellectual elites in Puerto Rico such as Daniel Rivera (2005), Eugenio María de Hostos (1979), and Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1986) invoked romanticized versions of the Indigenous Taínos to allegorize their resistance to Spanish colonialism, Black identity was hardly ever used for such means. Salvador Brau, Puerto Rico’s second official historian under US rule, is one of the first Puerto Ricans to invoke the racial triad, claiming in 1882 that Puerto Ricans inherited indolence, taciturnity, disinterest, and hospitality from Indigenous Peoples; resistance, vigorous sensuality, superstition, and fatalism from Africans; and chivalry, haughtiness, festiveness, austere devotion, constancy under adversity, and love for country and independence from Spaniards (1882, 3).
For Brau, Spaniards possessed the germinating prowess of intellectual culture (1882, 3). Brau had read the work of Spanish friar Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra (1866) who visited the island in the 18th century, and whose chronicles were published by Brau’s esteemed colleague, José Julián y Acosta in 1866. Abbad y Lasierra is arguably the first to introduce the racial triad, yet, like Brau, he does not characterize Puerto Rico as a utopian racial democracy. That narrative was solidified later with Brau’s successor as official historian, Cayetano Coll y Toste (1891), who I believe is the scholar who popularized not only the myth of harmonious mestizaje but the foundational narratives that have sustained the racial democracy thesis in Puerto Rico. For example, the idea that mestizaje was conceived consensually (Dávila 1997), that slavery was benevolent and softer in Puerto Rico (Godreau et al. 2008) and that racism, inexistent on the island, is a foreign phenomenon (Lloréns 2018). Many other scholars followed suit and further developed these narratives throughout the twentieth century.

It was not until the founding of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) in 1955 that the racial triad trope was officially canonized as the metanarrative of Puerto Rican identity. The ICP, the archipelago’s main cultural institution, was founded by Puerto Rico’s Popular Democratic Party (PPD) in 1955. The nascent Estado Libre Asociado (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) needed to balance and legitimize its newly founded autonomous political relationship with the United States through a consensus-driven nation-building project that depoliticized the past to create the illusion of a harmonious present and future. The ICP was established to develop the symbols of the young Commonwealth and proliferate the narratives that would solidify Puerto Rico’s first-elected governor Luis Muñoz Marín’s cultural and political project. Historian María M. Flores Collazo (2004, 53) reminds us that the law that created the ICP established July 25 as its foundational date. This day had a special meaning for Muñoz Marín and the PPD because it marked the Commonwealth’s initial establishment in 1952. In this sense, the date both consequentially and intentionally marked the erasure of the wound caused by the US invasion of the island on that very same date in 1898.

Anthropologist Arlene Dávila argues that “since its inception, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture served as the main disseminator of the blending myth in Puerto Rico” (1997, 69). In 1955, anthropologist Ricardo Alegría Gallardo, considered to be one of the primary architects of Puerto Rico’s racial triad paradigm, became the ICP’s first director. In his official biography, Alegría discusses the establishment of the ICP and its controversial stance on racial identity:
Mucha gente se burló, por primera vez veían al negro equiparado a las otras dos razas; llamó mucho la atención en esos años. En Puerto Rico se hablaba siempre de la herencia hispánica, se olvidaban los otros dos ingredientes. Pero yo tenía una formación antropológica y lo veía de otra manera. Nuestra nacionalidad es producto de un mestizaje de cinco siglos entre el indio, el español blanco y el negro. Cada uno contribuye. La huella del indio es menor, de índole biológica y cultural; el negro aporta la riqueza con su trabajo y el español una cultura más compleja y elaborada. Los tres se integran armoniosamente. Un puertorriqueño puede ser rubio y blanco, pero su cultura tiene también una raíz africana. (Hernández 2002, 171)

Many people scoffed, for the first time they saw the Black man on equal footing with the other two races: it turned many heads during those years. In Puerto Rico, people always talk about Spanish heritage, but they forget the other two ingredients. But I had an anthropological formation and saw it a different way. Our nationality is a product of a five-century-long mestizaje between the Indian, the white Spanish, and the Black man. Each one contributes. The mark of the Indian is minor, biological, and cultural in nature; the Black man contributes richness with his work, and the Spaniard has a more complex and elaborate culture. All three integrate harmoniously. A Puerto Rican can be blonde and white, but his culture also has an African root.5

While now we might look at this statement and critique its evident Eurocentrism, reminding Puerto Ricans of their Blackness in the 1950s was a subversively progressive act. Considering that the United States was still dealing with Jim Crow laws and separate but equal policies, Europe was reeling from the aftermath of the Holocaust, and Puerto Rico’s neighbor, the Dominican Republic, was governed by an anti-Haitian and anti-Black genocidal dictator (García-Peña 2016), this triad was, for its time, a breakthrough. Nonetheless, Dávila sustains that the ICP sought to equate national unity “with racial miscegenation, hiding the ideology of blanqueamiento while unequally associating contributions and moral characteristics with the different components” (1997, 69). Blanqueamiento refers to the politics of whitening which was achieved biologically by mejorando la raza
(improving the race) through intermarriage, but it also occurred semiotically when national symbols of racial mixture amalgamated and diluted into predominantly white and Eurocentric symbols.

The ICP’s insignia (Figure 3) pays tribute to Puerto Rico’s three races and was conceived by Ricardo Alegría and created by renowned visual artist Lorenzo Homar in 1956. The Spaniard, Taíno, and African stand together, holding objects of their respective cultures. The Spaniard is at the center holding the Nebrija dictionary which reads Gramática de la lengua Española (Grammar of the Spanish language) and represents the Spanish contribution of language to Puerto Rican culture. Behind him are three ships which symbolize the vessels used in Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas. The Taíno to the left wears a necklace with a coquí (endemic tree frog) pendant and holds a cemi (religious idol) and is surrounded by numerous corn crops; his contributions are rooted in the land. The African holds a machete and a drum with a vejigante (Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric festival character) mask beside him; his contributions are related to labor and folklore. They are all clearly men and stand together at the same height. Alegría based the ICP logo on the tympanum found at the entrance of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago (Hernández 2002) (Figure 4). This relief is titled East Teaching the West and depicts an Egyptian scribe surrounded by leaders of the ancient world “teaching” the principles of civilization to Western Europe and the United States. In the same vein,
Alegría’s insignia for the ICP simplifies the unequal power relations between these three races and situates the other as a contribution to a predominantly white and European society. It was eventually re-designed (Figure 5), yet it preserved the same visual narratives of the original.

The ICP’s emblem was not always centered around the racial triad. Thanks to the University of Puerto Rico’s recent digitalization of the newspaper El Mundo, I was able to discover an early insignia that the ICP used in the early days before they institutionalized the racial triad. On April 25, 1956, the ICP started publishing an emblem that depicted a Spaniard and Taíno with no African in sight (Figure 6). The emblem shows a tree with branches that hold a map of the island of Puerto Rico, minus its two island municipalities of Vieques and Culebra. At its root, a crouched Taíno and a Spanish man exchange an ineligible object with a cemí at their feet. On the Taíno’s side, we can observe bohíos (huts) and a palm tree, while on the Spaniard’s side stands a Church and house made of stone with a sail ship on the horizon. It seems to have been used for roughly a year and by June 15, 1957, Lorenzo Homar’s emblem appeared for
This finding is extremely revealing as it strengthens the critiques of scholars who have argued that the ICP’s cultural programming has traditionally privileged the Taíno and Spanish roots of Puerto Rican identity while neglecting its African heritage (Dávila 1997; Godreau 2015).

The exchange between the two groups downplays the violent encounter of colonial conquest. It also ignores Puerto Rico’s island municipalities who at the time were dealing with a violently displacing military occupation at the hands of the US Navy, and to this day are still marginalized within Puerto Rico.

**FIG. 5** Lorenzo Homar, Re-edition of the Emblem of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, San Juan, Date unknown.

**FIG. 6** Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Emblem in newspaper *El Mundo*, San Juan, April 25, 1956. Photo by Rafael V. Capó García.
While the ICP’s racial triad narrative was constructed in the context of the mid-1950s, it continues to be deployed not only in school curricula but also in commemorative works of public art that seek to remind Puerto Ricans of a shared national identity. Commemorations constitute a type of anamnesis that combats its opposite, amnesia, as commemorators construct and impose their perceptions of history and identity upon their fellow citizens (Viala 2014). Peter Seixas and Penney Clark (2004) argue that commemorations should be analyzed within three temporal moments: the history of who or what is being commemorated; the historical and social context of when the commemoration was established; and the contemporary moment when we often interpret monuments through a different set of values than those surrounding the impetus to first create them. A brief exploration of the history of the ICP provides us with a glimpse into the first two temporalities. I will now proceed to address the third by discussing the themes that arose during my research.

I look to build upon and add to anthropologists Hilda Llorén’s and Rosa Carrasquillo’s (2008) brilliant scholarship on sculptural representations of Blackness in the town of Caguas, published in Visual Anthropology Review. They argue that the two sculptures they analyzed “maintain the folklorizing strategy that works to sustain the Puerto Rican myth of a racial democracy and of the creole nation” while relegating black bodies to the realm of the cultural, thus “[impeding] the possibility of a just engagement with what it means to live as a black person in Puerto Rico’s racial democracy today” (2008, 115).

The “cult of mestizaje” (Grace Miller 2004) is by no means limited to Puerto Rico or the Hispanic Caribbean. It has been used throughout Latin America as a nation-building narrative, primarily in countries with sizable Afro-ancestral populations such as Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia (Grace Miller 2004; Helg 2022). In 1925, José Vasconcelos (1997) wrote The Cosmic Race which celebrated Latin American mestizaje as the key to the region’s and the world’s future. Vasconcelos developed his theory within a white-Eurocentric framework that accepted that “the superior ideals of the whites” (1997, 25) would prevail as the new fifth race. Later in 1933, Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1956) published The Masters and the Slaves, considered to be a foundational text that engendered the idea of racial democracy in Latin America (Helg 2022). Little more than a decade later in 1946, Frank Tannenbaum published Slave and Citizen (1992) which proliferated the view that slavery in the Spanish colonies was somehow more “benign” than in other parts of the region. These scholars
posited that despite histories of colonial conquest and enslavement, the former Portuguese and Spanish colonies had experienced larger degrees of racial tolerance that resulted in consensual and peaceful racial mixture, a stark contrast to the hemisphere’s former British colonies where puritanism had engendered violent labor regimes. By the end of the 20th century, many scholars had come to reject these comparative frameworks and critiqued the discourse of mestizaje for homogenizing difference and concealing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous nation-building politics (Applebaum, Macpherson, and Rosemblatt 2003; Helg 2022).

I respond to this scholarship, both local and foreign, by demonstrating how these tropes of mestizaje and racial democracy have been deployed in Puerto Rico through public sculptural art. My analysis confirms that commemorations of mestizaje throughout the Puerto Rican Archipelago undermine Blackness while privileging white European civilization, casting Black bodies through a Eurocentric gaze that dilutes their contributions as fading relics of the past. I further add that the tendency to erect a fourth statue depicting the final product of the racial equation turns Puerto Rican identity into a static finished masculine product, deterministically constituted of fading non-white elements. I finish by suggesting ways of decentering Western monolithic interpretations of identity to embrace more open and relational forms of conceiving our collective selves.

Monuments to Mestizaje and Whiteness

Monuments to mestizaje privilege the white European portion of the racial triad by presenting Tainos and Africans as complementary roots that contribute to the predominantly Spanish trunk of Puerto Rican identity. This critique is in line with scholarship on cultural politics in Puerto Rico (Capó García forthcoming; Dávila 1997; Godreau 2015; Godreau et al. 2008; Jiménez Román 2019; Lloréns and Carrasquillo 2008). One of the five statues located in visual artist José Buscaglia Guillermetty’s breathtaking sculptural group the Plaza de la Herencia de las Américas (Plaza of the Heritage of the Americas) is called La Herencia Social (Social Heritage) which consists of an Iberian priestess who is described as the symbolic mother of the New World and is presenting her white creole son alongside a Spanish conquistador who appears to be the father (Figure 7). This Iberian priestess, which I will return to shortly, is meant to tie Puerto Rican racial identity to the Iberian Peninsula’s ancient pre-Romanic period. Fittingly, the artist translates the name of this statue on his official website to
“Hispanic Heritage” instead of literally translating it to social heritage (Buscaglia 2007). In front of this statue is La Herencia de la Sangre (Blood Heritage), which shows the Spanish conquistador of Puerto Rico, Juan Ponce de León, together with a female Taína and a small black child (Figure 8). Ponce de León is the only figure who is given a name and is clearly the focus of the woman’s and child’s attention. He is pointing to La Herencia Social, signaling that while Puerto Rico is biologically a mixture of the racial triad, culturally it is fundamentally Hispanic. Two other monuments located in this space, La Herencia de la Fe (Heritage of Faith) and La Herencia de la Libertad (Heritage of Liberty), celebrate European ideologies: the first the imposition of Christianity and the second the values of the Enlightenment. These monuments provide a fascinating window into the Island’s relationship with Hispanic heritage as four out of the five statues clearly commemorate European Occidental civilization as the centerpiece of Puerto Rican civilization.

In the Altar de la Patria (Altar of the Nation; Figure 9), which was also sculpted by Buscaglia Guillermety, the Spanish root stands in the middle with her arms wrapped around a Taína and an African woman, thereby literally and figuratively holding together the triad in a somewhat forceful and authoritative manner. Behind the statue there is a didactic relief sculpture, a spectacular work of art that narrates the history of Puerto Rico starting with the Taínos and ending with Ricardo Alegria and the ICP. The plaque situates around 14 Taínos and
17 Spaniards at the forefront of the first half of the Archipelago’s history. Three enslaved black men are also included in this male-dominant plaque. In the second half of this relief sculpture, we see well-known black and Afro-descendent men such as painter José Campeche, teacher Rafael Cordero, revolutionary writer and doctor Ramón Emeterio Betances, and Africana scholar, activist, and collector Arturo Schomburg. At the end of the relief, we can see a man and a woman holding a child (Figure 10). Their lips are thicker and their hair is not as wavy as
the rest. Given this, I believe Buscaglia sought to portray them as Puerto Rico’s modern-day mixed family. Also, Buscaglia positions Ricardo Alegría at the very end of the plaque holding the ICP’s racial triad insignia, a sort of culmination of Puerto Rican history and culture. At the end of the monument’s descriptive text, Buscaglia states the following:

*With the creation of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in 1955, headed by Ricardo Alegría, Puerto*
Rican culture, which has its roots in the 19th century, flourished and became manifest in painting, sculpting, music, literature, and history. Our future is yet to be built.¹⁴

In Bayamón, the Evolución de la Raza’s (Evolution of the Race) (Figure 11) depiction of a creole who is meant to represent the Puerto Rican People is much more similar to the Spanish statue in size than the African and the Taíno and they both
possess the same horse. The plaque reads that the Spanish already knew the concept of civilization, thereby implying their superiority over the Taínos. Similarly, in Mayagüez’s Monumento al Descubrimiento (Monument to Discovery) the statues of two Spaniards stand alone with the monument’s summative plaque below it (Figure 12), separated from the Jíbaro, Taíno, and African individuals, who are all lumped together (Figure 13).

Monuments to Mestizaje and Black Bodies

As argued by scholars (Dávila 1997; Géliga, Rosas, and Delgado 2007; Godreau 2015; Jiménez Román 2019; Lloréns and Carrasquillo 2008), Africans’ contribution to Puerto Rican identity has predominantly been conceptualized around their labor and their role as entertainers. In Manatí’s La Formación del Pueblo Puertorriqueño (The Formation of the Puerto Rican People), there is a statue of an African man holding a shovel, much like in the insignia of the ICP where he holds a machete (Figure 14). In Dorado’s Monumento a las Raíces Puertorriqueñas (Monument to Puerto Rican Roots) (Figure 15) and Corozal’s Homenaje a las Razas (Homage to the Races) (Figure 16), the African man is in chains, which highlights his struggle but also his role as a worker, in this case as an enslaved man. The plaque in Bayamón states that while the Spanish conquistadores introduced civilization, it was enslaved Africans and Taínos who built it. The plaque goes on to state that conquistadores brought thousands
of enslaved Africans to carry out the more strenuous jobs since they were more resistant to the tiring labor of construction and agriculture. Black bodies are fetishized for their strength, yet the Spaniards are represented as those who introduced civilization. We can also see black people in their role as entertainers in Caguas (Figure 17), where the monument depicts a drummer and two dancers, and in Raíces in San Juan, where an unidentified female mulatto dances to the beat of the music being played by the evidently white native jíbaro (Figure 18). These renditions are all in line with the ICP’s depiction of African roots as culturally connected to objects like a drum, vejigante mask, and sugar cane. In Buscaglia Guillermety’s Herencia de la Sangre (Figure 8), the African contribution to Puerto Rican identity is communicated through the figure of a child clinging to Juan Ponce de León’s hip, thereby reproducing the idea of the posterior “third root” and advancing the notion that African contributions to Puerto Rican identity are somewhat less important and rooted in a less-developed culture.

Monuments to Mestizaje and Women

While statues of combatant male Taíno caciques (chiefs) can be found in Mayagüez, Canóvanas, Luquillo, Ponce, Yauco, and other municipalities in Puerto Rico, monuments to mestizaje predominantly depict Taínos as peaceful and submissive women. As previously described, La Herencia de la Sangre
shows Juan Ponce de León, conqueror of the Island, with a Taínos woman referred to as Agueybaná’s sister and a Black child, who clutches Ponce de León’s hip while he holds up her dress (Figure 8). According to early chroniclers, the nameless Taínos woman was given to Juan Ponce de León during a ceremonial exchange between the Indigenous chief and the Spanish Conquistador. She represents the union between conquistadors, almost exclusively men, and the Indigenous women of the lands they conquered.

In *Herencia de la Libertad* (Heritage of Liberty), we can see a woman who represents freedom despite the fact that she is “steered and accompanied by man, symbol of the will of people” (Buscaglia Guillermety 2007). This will and direction is determined by masculine identity. In Dorado’s *Monumento a las Raíces Puertorriqueñas*, the plaque labels Taínos as peaceful yet firm in their defense of the land against the Spanish invaders. In Bayamón, the plaque also describes the Taínos as an uncivilized and peaceful community. In Caguas, the Taína stands at the entrance of the Puente de las Damas (The Ladies’ Bridge). While there are no female depictions of this community’s Spanish roots and African women rarely appear, Taínos are predominantly portrayed as women in Puerto Rican monuments to mestizaje. In Manatí’s *La Formación del Pueblo Puertorriqueño*, a plaque highlights the lack of European women during the early colonial period, which suggests that Spaniards most likely married Taína women. While historical documents point to
the veracity of this phenomenon, it nonetheless functions as a misleading statement where conquest, genocide, pillaging, and rape are hidden beneath the harmonious intermarriage between the first and second racial roots. This leads us to the following theme.

Monuments to Mestizaje and Colonial Conquest

Many monuments deploy various aesthetic and narrative techniques that suggest that conquest and colonization were unavoidable and legitimate, and that racial mixture was harmoniously achieved. Raíces in San Juan uses dolphins that represent friendship, intelligence, kindness, and gentleness, all typical characterizations of the trope of mestizaje. The dolphins are accompanied by a goddess meant to greet with garlands and delicacies those who come from distant seas and foreign lands. In Evolución de la Raza in Bayamón, the monument’s plaque starts off with the following statement, Traditionally since man was created by God, he has had the necessity to expand in order to conquer and organize his own dominion. The plaque suggests that violent expansion and colonization are natural historical processes and that Spanish conquest is simply another episode of this narrative. The affirmation of Christian creationism also reaffirms this Eurocentric assertion. In La Formación del Pueblo Puertorriqueño in Manati, the plaque is worded in a similar way, suggesting that the formation of the Puerto Rican identity is the result of a mixture of races that started in pre-Columbian times and extends to the
present. Spanish conquest of Puerto Rico is nothing more than a link in a chain of events that includes Tainos mixing with the Igneris and the Igneris mixing with the Archaics; it represents historical continuity. In the Monumento a los Reyes Magos, a Spaniard holds a bible in his hand and is, according to
municipal officials, convincing the other two sculptural characters of his god’s strength and peacefulness (Rosario Ramos 2022; Figure 1). In renouncing their gods through their offerings, the figures representing Taíno and African communities embrace the Spaniards’ god as their King and ultimate spiritual leader (Rosario Ramos 2022).

In Monumento al Descubrimiento, the plaque titled Origen del Español en Puerto Rico (Origin of the Spaniard in Puerto Rico) states that In actuality there exists no conceptual difference in the legal classification between whites and non-whites. It has been proclaimed by the divine law of humanity that all human beings are equal in dignity. The same plaque critically depicts the events of colonial conquest by highlighting the voracity and unmeasured exploitation of colonization. However, in the name of objectivity, the plaque also mentions that diverse historians describe the conquest of America as a marvelous deed worthy of praise that brought modernism and prosperity to this part of the world. With this text, the plaque motivates the viewer to entertain and debate these two perspectives, yet ironically the monument is clearly named Monumento al Descubrimiento (Monument to Discovery) thus commemorating the events of exploration and empire from a purely European perspective. Additionally, the plaque below the African states that for centuries Black people had been the victims of mistreatment and injustice, a situation that in many occasions propelled them to rebel, obtaining great conquests until they achieved their emancipation and equality. The monument gives the impression that racial mixture has healed the wound of racism and that inequality is finally no more.
Monuments to Mestizaje and the Result of the Mixture

Six of the nine monuments analyzed depict a jíbaro/criollo/Boricua statue to synthesize the mixtures of the three races. These statues only depict men, and they are presented as the
result of a racial equation: Taíno + Spanish + African = Puerto Rican. In *Evolución de la Raza*, the criollo is dressed in cowboy attire, an homage to the town’s basketball team, the Vaqueros (Cowboys). This has some interesting implications considering that the monument was erected by a pro-statehood mayor while the vaquero identity in Bayamón is rooted in the fact that the team’s owner owns a milk company. The plaque states that *the result of this racial and cultural mixture constitutes what we are today; Puerto Ricans with our own identity, with a rich and particular culture*. Similarly, the monument in Mayagüez also alludes to the idea that *all the races that have transformed us into the people we are today, with our own identity and our Puertoricanness*. All the themes previously discussed converge here: the racial triad equation not only privileges European identity but also does so through an exclusively male-dominant figure that renders Blackness and Indigeneity as complimentary pieces that blend into Puerto Rico’s predominantly white identity.

In *La Herencia Social* (Figure 7), Buscaglia Guillermety presents the creole-child—born in the Americas—as the son of a conquistador and an Iberian priestess to the world. While on one side of the plaza, we can appreciate the *La Herencia de la Sangre* (Figure 8) with its representation of mestizaje dominated by the figure of Ponce de León, *La Herencia Social*—or Hispanic Heritage as Buscaglia translates it—abandons
the harmonious mixture all together and defines the creole as a white male Spanish descendant (Buscaglia 2007). While Puerto Ricans are depicted as a cultural mixture, racially they are descendants of Spain. The priestess depicted in the monument is undoubtedly influenced by the Dama de Elche, a fourth-century sculpture of the Iberian People who inhabited the peninsula before the Roman conquest. The utilization of this important pre-Romanic and pre-Christian Spanish symbol suggests Puerto Rican’s roots extend far beyond 1492, the Catholic Kings, Al-Ándalus, and even the Visigoths. In this sense, as Buscaglia Guillermety argues, the monument La Herencia de la Libertad celebrates an ancestral legacy that commences in ancient times and reaches the Enlightenment (Buscaglia 2007). In doing so, it represents democratic freedom and the flourishment of the liberal ideas of the European age of Enlightenment on American soil. In this representation, Puerto Ricans share the same filial origins as Spaniards and are an extension and continuation of their civilization on the other side of the world.

Discussion and Implications

Anthropologists Hilda Lloréns and Roda Carrasquillo astutely remark that “Puerto Rican representations of Blackness are either of a happy entertainer or of a worker, refusing altogether images of resistance” (2008, 107). Similarly, Isar Godreau et al. maintain “that national ideologies of mestizaje in Latin America, and particularly in the Hispanic Caribbean, are sustained by dominant politics of public representation that silence, trivialize, and simplify the history of slavery and its contemporary effects” (2008, 116). They argue that “representations of the three ‘ethnic roots’ of Puerto Rican culture serve to reinforce ideologies of blanqueamiento (whitening) by simplifying the legacies of each cultural group and placing these within a social hierarchy” (2008, 118). My findings are in line with these studies. The privileging of European civilization is evidenced through aesthetic strategies and narrative discourses that depict the African and Taíno parts of our identity as merely complementary. While Puerto Rican monuments to mestizaje clearly acknowledge and recognize a collective African ancestry, they do so underwhelmingly in contrast to the exaltation of European heritage. The enslaved African man or the performing Black musician signal to maneuvers of simplification that have the overall effect “of distancing Blackness from Puerto Rican identity and silencing racism while upholding racial mixture and blanqueamiento as a
social value” (Godreau et al. 2008, 119). The erection of a final statue, the amalgamation of the triad, is an exclusive maneuver that renders deviations from this equation incompatible and solidifies the dilution of Puerto Rican identity into whiteness. The findings of my research open up various avenues for further exploration, which I now discuss.

**Purpose over Content**

Depictions of Black bodies will always carry with them legitimate critiques. The life and history of enslaved Africans and their journey through the Middle Passage are marked and made complicated by numerous temporal interruptions. Deciding what to remember and how to commemorate will always be met with critical alternatives and counterarguments. If a statue of an enslaved African is erected, some will argue that the state is promoting a submissive depiction of Puerto Rico’s third root. Breaking the chains and displaying a triumphant and combatant maroon, on the other hand, might provoke accusations that a monument is promoting the conflation of Blackness with slavery, or concealing and sugar-coating the atrocities and sufferings of enslavement. Celebrating the life of baseball hall of famer and humanitarian Roberto Clemente or salsa pioneer Rafael Cortijo might produce an interpretation that the monument in question reproduces the cultural script that equates Blackness with entertainment and sport. Every portrayal of a Black body carries its own ideological weight. Consequently, we must continue to foster multisectoral and intersectional dialogue from within Black communities that addresses these fissures in order to improve upon present-day curricular and commemorative narratives of identity. Furthermore, we must be careful not to automatically deem artistic, musical, and kinetic representations of Blackness as superficial and folkloric. These cultural manifestations can also be intimate political statements that signal to a profound relationship with African spirituality and ancestry. Yet given the centrality of whiteness and the tendency to portray Puerto Rico’s other two roots as complementary pieces in a deterministic racial equation, these elements end up reinforcing the racial triad trope that relegates Blackness to a complementary, posterior, and foreign contribution from the past (Lloréns 2018). That is, a contribution that is no longer present or compatible with modern-day society.

For instance, the depiction of Black women as dancers in *Fuente de las Raíces* in San Juan (Figure 18), together with the *Herencia Taína* and *Herencia Africana* (African Heritage)
in Caguas—where women are depicted with large breasts or buttocks—can be interpreted as a form of “cultural resistance that challenge(s) the place traditionally assigned to white women as the symbols of beauty par excellence” (Godreau 2015, 193). In my opinion, they can also be viewed as contestations to the conservative and prudish concealment of naked bodies in Christian societies. On the other hand, anthropologist Isar Godreau argues that these oversexualized depictions can “seep insidiously into people’s daily lives, informing actions and limiting real-life opportunities on the basis of prejudice” (2015, 194).

There is not a single way of remedying the problematic visual depictions of Black bodies. Lloréns and Carrasquillo argue that,

> rather than celebrating notions of ‘happy enslavement,’ the focus should be shifted to the celebration of the enslaved person’s resilience and to the development of an active agenda to combat Puerto Rican racism... It is not the drum playing (Caguas) that is problematic, however it is rather that instead of a half-naked, wild-looking man the artist could have produced a dressed and dignified drummer. Moreover, there are surely more representations of Black-Puerto Ricans besides drummer, dancer, athlete, and sugar cane worker (representations which tend to be highly masculine). (2008, 114–115)

These authors argue that these folkloric representations “impede the possibility of a just engagement with what it means to live as a Black person in Puerto Rico’s racial democracy” (2008, 15). While I do not disagree with these statements, nor with Godreau et al.’s (2008) extension of this view in their analysis of textbook imagery, I believe that alternative depictions, especially those carried out through monuments, also carry with them their own ideological maneuvers, though admittedly from a much more desirable social justice perspective. Wouldn’t “the celebration of the enslaved persons’ resilience” (Lloréns and Carrasquillo 2008, 114–115) continue to privilege the enslaved aspects of Black identity, or on the contrary, would it conceal the violence of its history and assuage its interpretation to avoid threatening white fragility.

Philosopher Edouard Glissant (2001) argues that the history of the Caribbean is the history of the maroons who resisted through flight as well as those who stayed and resisted in their own ways. The celebration of non-folkloric Black-Puerto
Ricans, such as 19th-century teacher Rafael Cordero and the politician Ernesto Ramos Antonini, have still largely served to highlight the racial democracy of Puerto Rico’s foundational autonomist creole elites and the PPD respectively. There are undoubtedly better ways of representing Blackness than for instance Victor Cott’s kneeling liberated slave in Ponce (Figure 19)\(^{25}\) or Rafael Tufiño’s bourgeois aggrandizing portrayal of the abolition of slavery in the Capitol building’s dome in San Juan (Figure 20).\(^{26}\) However, at the same time, there will always be validity in a critique of how resisting one thing reproduces another form of domination that fails to resist something else (Brown 1996). Nonetheless, the lack of statues of Black men and especially women is troubling. In my cartographic research, I have not located or identified a single bronze public sculpture of a historical Black female figure in Puerto Rico.\(^{27}\) This signals to the idea “that mestizaje can never be fully achieved because nonblacks do not accept the fact that negros, mulatos, trigueños, jabaos are all truly members of the nation” (Torres 1998, 299–300). For these reasons, it is important to advance a participatory memory culture that allows communities to determine how they want to portray their people.

**Participatory Memory**

Monuments are long-lasting statements of power and historical memory. Governments, both local and national, invest thousands of taxpayers’ money into projects that reflect their own individual interpretations of history. We are at the mercy of mayors and their simplistic reconstructions of the past, which, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, are a series of silences where “something is always left out while something else is recorded” (2015, 49). Thus, not only are these monuments acts of simplification but also acts of silence that work to create an easily palatable and digestible version of history, a synthesis referred to colloquially as en arroz con habichuelas (in rice with beans). The narratives they advance are neither false nor true; rather, they are oversimplifications that obscure the entangled richness of history and its right to opacity (Glissant 2010). When political officials erect monuments, they selfishly colonize public spaces and hold them hostage to their own versions of historical memory. This is pedagogically significant if, as Barnaby Nemko argues, we wish “to avoid bringing back coachloads of historical tourists who refuse to think critically about what they have just seen” (2009, 38). In this scenario, we must urge students to contextualize heritage sites.
in place, space, and time. The individual agency of teachers plays an important role in this process, but we must also advance toward a curriculum that complicates these discussions and pushes back against the monopolization of collective historical memory. A possible remedy to this issue is to move towards what Ekaterina Haskins and Thomas Benson (2015) call a “participatory memory culture,” where communities are actively involved in choosing what or who they wish to commemorate. Allowing communities to choose

FIG. 19
Victor Cott, Monumento a la Abolición de la Esclavitud (Monument to the Abolition of Slavery), Ponce, 1956. Photo by Rafael V. Capó García.
their commemorations will not necessarily solve all these issues, but at the very least it will reduce the state’s ideological stranglehold from the equation.

I would further add that a participatory memory culture should include the ability to interact with works of art. While at the beginning of this article, I clarified that the focus of my research was on sculptural art, I am aware that counternarratives to these statements of power are more easily accessible and achieved through mural paintings. A great example of this is feminist art collective Colectivo Morivivi’s *Paz Para la Mujer* (Peace for Women) (Figure 21), originally finished in 2015 to commemorate the Day for Eradicating Violence Against Women in San Juan. This mural was the product of a collaboration with Coordinadora Paz Para la Mujer, a coalition of 38 organizations and shelters dedicated to supporting women and combating domestic violence and sexual aggression (Paz Para las Mujeres 2023). The mural shows two Black women with butterflies, “sprouting from the earth’s fertility to fill our world with life” (Colectivo Morivivi 2021). According to the artists, “in their nudity they seize their freedom and reveal themselves to the judgment of
others,” thus connecting and equating women with nature. While Puerto Rico Art News categorized the incident as a vandalism (Puerto Rico Art News 2015), the members of Colectivo Morivivi framed the incident as an “intervention.” Their use of this term seems to suggest that they are conscious of how their street art is part of the public realm where competing interpretations and narratives are free to converse with one another.

After this event, a group of women protested the act as a form of censorship and collectively removed their tops to defiantly reveal their naked bodies. Their goal was to generate “much needed conversation around the control exerted over women’s bodies and the different forms violence takes” (Colectivo Morivivi 2021). Instead of repainting the mural, the collective decided to “re-intervene” the mural by adding a photomontage of the protesters in the breast area of one of the women in the work of art. In 2021, the mural, severely faded and decayed, was once again re-intervened by adding the names of the 2021 victims of feminicide in Puerto Rico. These numerous re-interventions show how the medium of public art, specifically murals, has the potential to include numerous voices and coalitions in a collaborative collective project; to showcase a plurality of opinions and contestations in organic ways; and to counter dominant and hegemonic perspectives of the state and elites who use costly monuments...
as statements of power. The conversations around commemorative public art should perhaps take a cue from Colectivo Morivivi and their experience with *Paz Para la Mujer*. Monuments should be sites of interrogation and unsettling, where multiple actors can engage in debate through artistic expression. Instead, they are enshrined as places of heritage with all the legal protections this entails. By transferring these works of art into the public domain they become the property of all yet remain untouchable. This eschews desires to live in a city where people can engage with monuments as interactive pieces of art that community members are free to contest and celebrate, alter and preserve, praise or simply ignore.

**Relational Identity**

Perhaps most concerning of all are the statues that depict creole or *Boricua* identity as the literal product of racial mixture. The idea that somehow Puerto Rican identity, or any identity, is complete and fully formed is an oppressive and limiting conceptualization. Taíno and African roots are commonly portrayed as fleeting and fading elements that dilute into a predominantly white male figure. Here I once again echo Glissant and his views on identity. Glissant prefers to use the term creolization as opposed to hybridization or *metissage* (*miscegenation*), because the latter refers to a somewhat repeatable, predictable, and complete product, whereas the former suggests a random, unforeseeable, and ongoing process of relation. Glissant critiques the deterministic conception of a single-root identity and its arboreal metaphor (Figure 22). He argues that “most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power, the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other” (2010, 14).

Glissant’s use of the Deleuzian rhizome provides us with a metaphor for thinking about relational identity. The rhizome has no clear source and entangles itself into an indiscernible amalgamation of relations. There is no clear starting point, no single identifiable root that gave birth to the rest; rhizomes grow nodes that continue to extend into the ground and over the water, intersecting with others. In the Botanical Gardens of the Caguas municipality in Puerto Rico, there is a statue of a Black man rooted in a mangrove called *Osain*. For Lloréns and Carrasquillo his “use of the mangrove root in particular might point to the birth of a new icon in the representation of Puerto Rican Blackness” (2008, 110). Yet “the metaphor of the mangrove swamp has a long history in Antillean literature” (Price and Price 1997, 23). For Glissant, it points to “the fundamentally rhizomic (rather than
single-rooted) character of creolite-submarine roots: that is, free-floating, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions of our world through its network of branches” (Price and Price 1997, 23). The mangrove has enabled intellectuals to highlight “the French Caribbean’s multiple origins and the impossibility of a single, all-encompassing historical root” (Thomas 2013, 5). By conjuring the imagery of “interlocking roots and dense coastal thickets” (Thomas 2013, 6), authors challenged the rigid essentialization of Caribbean identity and essentialized truths.

Concluding Remarks

Even though the racial triad paradigm appears to challenge the single-root metaphor, in Puerto Rico these roots are still the life source of the same monolithic tree; they do not entangle nor intersect with the Caribbean or the rest of the world. The obsession with control remains, and it rigidly and exclusively defines identity through a systematic form of thinking reminiscent of nationalism and its exclusionary discourse. Metaphors and narratives are wonderful literary devices, but they can end up oversimplifying history unless we demonstrate our willingness to stretch and entangle them with one another. I embrace the mangrove and its convoluted, unpredictable, and entangled chaos where opacity is a way of life. I wonder if apart from toppling or historizing statues of conquistadores, we might want to re-think the monument itself, especially those that are meant
to represent our collective being as concrete finished products. Abstract art is an interesting alternative, but over the years it has not garnered much institutional support in Puerto Rico. Arlene Dávila argues that this might be because “abstract art often involves battles to assert the right to produce work free of imposed expectations, constraints, or assumptions” (1997, 109). The ICP, for instance, has traditionally gravitated more towards literal, rigid, and explicit representations of culture and national identity rather than cultivating a sense of opacity. Art historian and curator Abdiel Segarra agrees and believes that abstract art has the potential “to transgress historical notions of national identification...that depend on the continuity of the linear Western model of seeing and writing history” (Forthcoming, 3).

Thus, in order to unsettle our public spaces and commemorative practices, we might need to move away from our anthropomorphic obsession with the human body and incorporate not just abstract representations of concepts and ideas, but also zoomorphic and phytomorphic figurations that embody important traits, behaviors, and connections that are easily found in the natural environment that we seem so eager to destroy. Maybe somewhere there is an empty pedestal pointing to the impossibility of capturing a fixed identity, or maybe a national monument that is not only androgynous and opaque but intentionally and infinitely unfinished, eternally open to intervention.

Endnotes

1. Naldo de la Loma, Monumeneto a los Reyes (Monument to the Kings), Juana Díaz, 1985.
2. There are other monuments dedicated to Puerto Rican identity, as well as various murals, mosaics, and relief sculptures that depict all the members of the racial triad, but I chose not to include these because I am interested specifically in sculptural forms of art.
3. My doctoral dissertation further explores the intellectual history of racial democracy in Puerto Rico.
4. See, for example, the following foundational texts: Tomás Blanco, El Prejuicio Racial en Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 2003 [1938]). Luis Díaz Soler, Historia de la esclavitud negra en Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial Universitaria, 1953). María Teresa Babín, Panorama de la cultura puertorriqueña (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1958).
5. All translations are my own.
8. José Buscaglia Guillermety, La Herencia Social (Social Heritage), in Plaza de la Herencia de las Américas (Plaza of the Heritage of the Americas), San Juan, 1976.


14. All passages from monument plaques have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.


22. The Archaics are Indigenous Peoples from Central and North America who are believed to have been the first inhabitants of Puerto Rico, and who eventually mixed with the Igneris who migrated from South America. These mixtures eventually produced the Taíno people, Puerto Rico’s inhabitants at the time of colonial conquest.

23. Each of these concepts refers to different social manifestations of Puerto Ricanness.


27. See Memoria Decolonial’s Decolonial Cartography for a cartographic visualization of colonial monuments in Puerto Rico, including the ten monuments analyzed in this paper. http://www.memoriadecolonial.com


29. S. Mollá, *Tres razas—una cultura—la puertorriqueña* (Three races—one culture—Puerto Rican), San Germán, Date unknown.

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