

Painted Walls: Urban, Public, and Community Art in *El Pueblo Cantor*

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The community mural¹ *El Pueblo Cantor* (A Singing Town, Bronx, 1994), designed and directed by Nuyorican artist María Domínguez, is an urban space of redefined *puertorriqueñidad*. For over twenty-five years, Domínguez has dedicated a great part of her artistic work to public art. To date, she has created twenty-two community murals, most in New York City. This work of art, a showcase of numerous symbols of recognizable Puerto Rican imagery, also functions as an instrument of popular education. *El Pueblo Cantor* rescues and documents collective memory and action while at the same time “dealing with” (*bregando con*) the Puerto Rican colonial reality.

Arguments made by James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) complements Arcadio Díaz Quiñones’ theory of *la brega*. According to Scott, hidden transcripts are a social product, a result of the relationship of power between the dominant elite and subordinate laboring members of society. This discourse does not exist in pure thought, but rather, in the ways it is practiced, articulated, manifested, and disseminated in marginalized spaces. Scott defines hidden transcripts as “offstage” discourses that take place beyond the public transcript, out of the direct observation of powerholders: speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate (4-5). According to Scott, “The meaning of the text, in either case, is rarely straightforward; it is often meant to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders and authorities. [...] we are obliged to search for noninnocent meanings using our cultural knowledge – much in the way an experienced censor might!” (184) Hidden transcripts, then, do not voice direct opposition to the authorized public discourse, but they can and do win public spaces to express an autonomous culture of dissension (Scott 157, 167). While their public manifestations respect the limits of what is permitted on the scene –and, because of this, result in indirect or incomplete embodiments– they place constant pressure on those limits (Scott 196).

In *El arte de bregar* (2001), Díaz Quiñones argues that Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora have developed both an order of knowledge of and a method to navigate through every day life. This is done within restricted margins, based on strategies that approach desired objects by using local and astute tactics without employing a frontal attack.² They have developed hidden transcripts based on local sensibilities:

¹ See E. Cockcroft, Weber, and J. Cockcroft for an insightful analysis on the community-based mural movement.

² “[...] la posibilidad de tomar la palabra, un combate verbal con sucesión de acercamientos y distanciamientos. Exige el diálogo, la seducción del lenguaje, o saber callarse a tiempo, y, a menudo, deslizarse hacia la ficción o el engaño” (Díaz Quiñones 24).

Quien *brega bien*, no posee necesariamente un conjunto articulado de ideas, pero sí inteligencia y técnica, un saber práctico o una gran capacidad de relación dialógica. Es un sistema de decisiones y de indecisiones –un complejo de definiciones, interpretaciones y prohibiciones– que permite actuar sin romper las reglas del juego, esquivar los golpes que propina la vida cotidiana, y, en algunos casos, extraer con astucia las posibilidades favorables de los limitados espacios disponibles. (Díaz Quiñones 47-48, italics in the original)

El Pueblo Cantor can be interpreted as a public work of art that narrates an alternative version of history through a visual voice. The twenty by ninety foot artistic manifestation captures the celebration of a song. The mural questions ideas about identity and offers alternative views of history that has been taught, as it sings a hidden transcript to the rhythm of *plena*.³

Location, Authorship, and Iconography

Location, authorship, and iconography are fundamental in the analysis of this community mural. The location of artwork is significant because a crucial aspect of the message transmitted by public art is its space (de Valle 222, 232). Often, murals are created in spaces where the forces of control, vigilance, or repression cannot reach the communities that intimately know their abuses. These are spaces where one can speak, scream, or paint with freely.

On many occasions, the location of a mural facilitates the understanding of the aesthetic substance of the work of art; at times, its location may even be the most important factor in defining it. Therefore, it is plausible that the space where a mural is painted may provide a catalyst and the energy to unite diverse elements that create exceptional meaning (Pocock 8). *El Pueblo Cantor* is located in the South Bronx on the corner of Prospect and East Tremont streets. It was financed by *Banco Popular* of Puerto Rico and is painted on the wall of one of their branch offices. To a certain extent, the style of the mural coincides with the Christmas videos that *Banco Popular* produces and sells annually, celebrating *puertorriqueñidad* with music and dance.⁴ Banco Popular's use of popular culture as a marketing strategy facilitates the creation of a mural that empowers the Puerto Ricans in the Bronx. This public work of art pushes the limits of *puertorriqueñidad* to embrace New York City Puerto Rican's reality as part of what Puerto Rican culture.

³ The music genre *plena* originated in Southern Puerto Rico, in the city of Ponce, during World War I. Known for the ease with which it narrates history, it is described as an "anecdotal song" (Leymarie 103).

⁴ In 1993, for its 100th Anniversary celebration, *Banco Popular* gathered a group of famous Latin-American musicians and create a musical televised show. After the large success of this venture, the company began to produce annual live Christmas concerts and television specials with various Puerto Rican and international singers and artists. The concerts and specials are aired on local television stations and then released on CDs and DVDs. The titles of the musicals are: *Un Pueblo que Canta* (1993); *El Espíritu de un Pueblo* (1994); *Somos un Solo Pueblo* (1995); *Al Compás de un Sentimiento* (1996); *Siempre Piel Canela* (1997); *Romance del Cumbanchero* (1998); *Con la Música por Dentro* (1999); *Guitarra Mía, Un Tributo a Jose Feliciano* (2000); *Raíces* (2001); *Encuentro* (2002); *Ocho Puertas* (2003); *En Mi País* (2004); *Queridos Reyes Magos* (2005); *Viva Navidad* (2006); y *Lo Mejor de Nuestra Música* (2007).

Authorship must also be considered if one wishes to understand the meaning of a community mural. Scott explains the dynamics of hidden transcripts in spaces such as murals:

The elaboration of hidden transcripts depends not only on the creation of relatively unmonitored physical locations and free time but also on active human agents who create and disseminate them. The carriers are likely to be as socially marginal as the places where they gather. (123)

Neighborhood participation in the creation process of murals is fundamental when the goal is to create artwork of and for the community. María Domínguez defines herself as a visual narrator, a “documenter.” She is a member of and participant in the Puerto Rican community in New York City.⁵ The community murals she helps to create are collective works of art. She creates a space where community members produce a mural in their own environment. Domínguez utilizes techniques that embolden people who do not consider themselves artists to imagine, create, and communicate in a visual language. This process results in the collective ownership of the artwork.

The objective of the mural *El Pueblo Cantor* was to create an anti-graffiti wall with students from Intermediate School 193 (I.S. 193).⁶ The students, who were studying Puerto Rican culture, drew images that they wanted to include in the mural. Domínguez created her design for the mural based on those drawings and on the numerous conversations that she held with the students, who actively participated in the creation process of the mural. They created a work of art for a local audience based on themes that they were interested in, using art as a medium to express their voice, the voice of the community (E. Crockcroft, Weber and J. Cockcroft 30-31). After the mural was designed, the seventh and eighth graders helped paint its base and create the grid. There was minimal participation of the I.S. 193 middle school students in painting the mural because of a lack of funds to pay them during summer vacation when school was closed. Domínguez and her art assistant, Renee Piechocki, painted the mural (Domínguez, María. Personal Interview. 4 March. 2007).

Lastly, the iconography in community art is fundamental to understand what a mural wishes to say. In each mural that Domínguez helps to create, her goal is for the art to make an impact, that it be a work of art for the members of the community where it is created and that it engage and maintain a dialogue with that community. There are multiple strategies that can be used to introduce hidden transcripts, or (disguised) resistance into public discourse. The iconography used in *El Pueblo Cantor* directly

⁵ Domínguez moved from Cataño, Puerto Rico to the Lower East Side at the age of 5 and spent 30 years of her life residing in the Lower East Side. She began her artistic career as a muralist with the organization Cityarts in 1982, as assistant for the mural *Avenue C Mural* (Lower East Side, 1982). This first experience with public art showed her the true philosophy of creating art with the community: “[...] community art is conceived as a collective thought, created through a collective process and concludes with collective ownership” (Domínguez 1).

⁶ An important part of the artwork is a long list of the names of artists and participants of the mural that highlights the following students: Sammy Gil, Gabriel Sarmiento, Tito Robles, Lizbeth López, Esther Marqués, Esmeralda Pagán, Maurios Allen, Jerry Figueroa, Javette McCoy, Damian Thompson, Kedwin Díaz, Cathy Alberti, Ruby Rivadeneira, Amy Smith, Nicole Garsen, Creighton Isaac, Orlando Franco, Melinda Pagan and Thelma .

expresses dignity and indirectly facilitates self-affirmation in the environment of public discourse. It is a work of art filled with symbols that encourages interpretation by the spectator⁷; its iconography facilitates ideological discussion on issues of justice and dignity for the Puerto Rican community of the Bronx.

Analysis of *El Pueblo Cantor*

The mural *El Pueblo Cantor* transports the spectator from a gritty, gray New York City street to a colorful voyage through the Caribbean Sea, the tropical rain forest *El Yunque*, a rural mountain town, and the colonial city of Old San Juan. The mural, filled with *joie de vivre*, draws the viewer in as he or she becomes a participant in sentiments of pride and celebration of Puerto Rican culture.⁸

The incredibly realistic image of a *vejigante*—a carnival personality descended from the devil figure of medieval religious dramas, and a combination of traditional theater and the interpretations of Muslims and Christians (Ramírez 56)—dominates the mural. This figure is part of the patron saint celebration of Saint James in Loíza on the northeast coast of Puerto Rico. Its mask, made from a coconut shell, is painted in the traditional colors, yellow and red:

*El vejigante está pintaó
de amarillo y coloraó⁹*

The *vejigante's* clothing, though, breaks with traditions. Instead of a tunic in two contrasting colors that divides the body in half, the *vejigante* in *El Pueblo Cantor* wears a black patterned tunic, which clearly reflects the figure's movement. This *vejigante* is ready to leap off the wall and dance through the streets, playing pranks and hitting people with a *vejiga*¹⁰ full of water, celebrating life.

Nevertheless, the *vejigante* painted by Domínguez is more than a *jeu d'esprit*. A simplistic analysis of the carnival figure it represents explains it as a security valve that allows potentially dangerous tensions in the colonial societies of masters and slave to be blown off inoffensively. Yet carnival is the ritual site of numerous forms of social

⁷The word spectator is used in relationship to the work of art because “[...] la relación nunca es colectiva – salvo en un cierto grado de abstracción– sino individual, hasta el punto de que, en algún sentido, la obra de arte es el resultado de la creación por parte del artista y su contemplación por cada uno de los espectadores, ya que es en ese encuentro individualizado en el que la obra de arte se completa cada vez; incluso podría decirse que cabría individualizar no sólo al espectador sino el acto mismo de la contemplación” (Alcina Franch, 74).

⁸ “La emoción que el goce desencadena es un claro índice de esa vivencia de los valores. Las emociones irrumpen al interpretar hechos y experiencias complejos cuya significación deriva de la especial relación que tiene con los objetivos y planes de la vida, no solo con lo inmediato, sino con la trayectoria vital” (Sanmartín, 103).

⁹ The medieval devils, like the buffoons, used the colors red and yellow (Ramírez 57).

¹⁰ The name *vejigante* comes from the word *vejiga* (bladder) because traditionally he or she would carry an inflated cow or pig bladder filled with water, and hit people on the head with it. The bladder can also be taken as a phallic symbol, similar to the scepter used by buffoons (Ramírez 57). There is also scholarship by the anthropologists Ricardo Alegría, Fernando Ortiz, and Melville K. Herskovits, among others, that supports the Fiestas of Santiago Apóstol as a syncretic representation of the Yoruba god Shango.

conflict and symbolic manipulation that vary among cultural and historic circumstances, serving many functions for its participants (Scott 178). During carnival, due to its ritual structure and anonymity, there is a privileged space for speech and aggression that is usually repressed: an inversion of the world. According to Scott:

It is why actual rebels mimic carnival –they dress as women or mask themselves when breaking machinery or making political demands; their threats use the figures and symbolism of carnival; they exhort cash and employment concessions in the manner of crowds expecting gifts during carnival; they use the ritual planning and assembly of the carnival or fair to conceal their intentions. Are they playing or are they in earnest? It is in their interest to exploit this opportune ambiguity to the fullest. (181-182)

Embodied in a mask, the *vejigante* in this mural represents the vibrant Nuyorican community. He or she has the freedom to question social, political, and religious order to the rhythm of *plena*, a musical genre often referred to as the sung “newspaper” of the people. This shared construction comes to life in *El Pueblo Cantor*, articulating communication as the base for their cultural community.

In the center of the artwork, blacks, whites, mulattos, and *mestizos* sing and dance. Domínguez brings into play a wide spectrum of race and racial mixtures to show that a Puerto Rican can be many things, deconstructing pre-conceived notions of a “fixed” Puerto Rican identity based on certain physical characteristics, skin color, or hair texture. She also mixes contemporary and traditional clothing, blurring the lines that define a specific time.

The group celebrates in the middle of a colonial street in Old San Juan. Perhaps they are going up Calle de Cristo to celebrate a *bombazo*¹¹ in the Plaza San José, only a short distance from the Institute of Culture (ICP). There are two “typical” dancers: a *jibarita*¹² in a blue skirt with Puerto Rico’s national flower, an *amapola*, in her hair, and a black woman in the traditional clothes of a *bomba* dancer. Both are typical symbols in that they reinforce the ICP vision of two of the three races of the Puerto Rican people: Spanish and African. The official seal of the ICP (Lorenzo Homar, 1956 and 1961) has a Spaniard in the center with a Taíno to his right and an African to his left. But the third female dancer in the mural, a *mulatta* in traditional dress, does not conform to ICP’s image of the third, indigenous race. Instead of a taína, Domínguez incorporates a contemporary Nuyorican into the mural, who celebrates her African heritage by participating in an Afro-Puerto Rican dance.

¹¹ A *bombazo* or *baile de bomba* is a communal celebration that requires the participation of all who assist; they become dancers, musicians and singers. For a detailed explication of *baile de bomba* and a description of the different types of *bomba* dances, see Álvarez Nazario, 303-320.

¹² The term *jibaro* is used to describe a “white” farmer, of Spanish decent, from the mountains. Isabelo Zenón Cruz, José Luis González, and Peter Roberts, among others, have developed arguments that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the *jibaro* was recreated to function as a link between Puerto Rico and a white, Spanish peon. “In terms of race, the *chibárali* midway in the 17th century was half-Indian and half-Black; a hundred years later the *givero* had become a little less Indian, a little less black and a little white; and the *jibaro* at the beginning of the 20th century had become white and virtually Spanish” (Roberts 56).

The images of the musicians also question the iconographic “Three Races” of the ICP. In the background, a *jíbaro*, formally dressed in a *guayabera* and white hat, plays the *cuatro*, the national instrument of Puerto Rico. To the right of the mulatta, a *mestizo* scratches the *güiro*, his head covered with a *pava*,¹³ his long sleeves rolled up, giving him the casual look of a day laborer. To his right, a mulatto dressed in contemporary clothing plays the *bongos*. In the front, a black man, dressed in stylish urban youth fashion of the 90s, plays the *pandereta*. Together, the musicians compose a new rhythm for a new social and cultural reality: the mountains, the coast, and the diaspora united in the capital city of San Juan playing and singing a *plena*.¹⁴

Two figures, in the center of the mural, observe but do not participate in either the song or the dance: a snow cone vendor or *piragüero* and a cock fight rooster or *gallo de pelea*. The *piragüero*, painted gray and white, standing behind the street party, is either a ghost or a memory, but not a living being. It is possible that he symbolizes the rural emigration to the city and the loss of oneself due to the process of integration or assimilation: one becomes a part of the urban reality and begins to disappear.¹⁵ Another interpretation is that the figure is a witness of the celebration of a new (un-official) concept of the “Three Races”: the mountains, the coast, and the diaspora. The other figure, the *gallo de pelea*, looks down upon the festivities. Painted the colors of the Puerto Rican flag, he is a symbol of Puerto Rican pride. Although only a wooden carving, the *gallo de pelea* is ready to defend his right to cultural affirmation and above all, to fight if this right is questioned or threatened.

The *piragüero*, the *gallo de pelea*, the Nuyorican mulatta dancer, the *pandereta* musician, and the *vejigante* are elements of *El Pueblo Cantor*'s social critique. They urge one not only to sing with the community, but also to remember the past and prepare oneself for an insecure future that will most likely involve a fight for space and identity.¹⁶

¹³ A *pava* is a straw, wide brimmed hat typically used by cane cutters on the coast and agricultural workers in the mountains of Puerto Rico. The *pava* was adopted by the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) as its symbol in 1940. Regarding the political connotation of the *pava*, see Córdova pp. 170-191.

¹⁴ To read a study on *plena* music and its relationship with migration in general and migration to New York City in particular, see Flores pp. 16-25.

¹⁵ Icken Safa studies the migration from rural Puerto Rico to San Juan in the 1940s and explains that the migration to the city began during the Great Depression and has continued to the present due to the stagnation of the agriculture and the growth of the urban center.

¹⁶ This article comes from a larger work that studies *El Pueblo Cantor* and two other community murals directed by Domínguez, *Baile Bomba* (Lower East Side, 1983) and *Nuestro Barrio* (El Barrio, 1998). *Baile Bomba* was created in conjunction with the Clinton Street Revitalization Project as part of a community based movement against gentrification. The mural stood for two years: one day the two buildings that the mural was painted on fell, supposedly due to the violations of structural regulations during their rehabilitation. Where the murals once stood now there are luxury condominiums. *Nuestro Barrio* was painted on the front of the building that original housed El Museo del Barrio's Education Department in the heart of El Barrio (Lexington Avenue and 104th Street). Currently El Museo del Barrio, including the Education Department, is located on 5th Avenue.

It is a work of art that urges the spectator to question his or her relationship with the mural. Ricardo Sanmartín explains such activity and its results:

El desconcierto inicial ante la opacidad del significante es la condición estratégica para impedir que el usuario se apoye en un modo de llevarle ante la experiencia de la obra como una primicia, forzando el uso de todas sus energías tras percibir más hondamente la plenitud de una pregunta. Así también, su respuesta, intentando un cierre y acabamiento de la obra, tendrá que implicar todo su ser personal, su memoria y sus convicciones. (103)

El Pueblo Cantor incorporates a piece of New York City into the island reality it presents. It reaffirms *puertorriqueñidad* while sharing hidden transcripts that question both the political order and the mythologized definitions of Puerto Rican culture.¹⁷ The mural captures the celebration of a song where Puerto Ricans of the diaspora are active participants in its creation, instead of just listeners. Like the *vejigante*, the Puerto Ricans in the diaspora are ready to jump off the wall and play actively, vibrantly, and proudly in their community, carrying on traditions of oral history, regional festivals, and shared spaces with every symbolic step forward.

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¹⁷ "Bregar quizás sea el agente secreto, o el agente doble, de la cultura política puertorriqueña" (Díaz Quiñones 26).

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