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ABSTRACT

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*TRANSGENDER EUPHORIA: PUERTO
RICO'S QUEER EXALTATION*

Foster Luís Reynolds-Santiago, M.F.A, 2022

Directed By:

Sarah G. Sharp, Department of Visual Arts

Transgender Euphoria: Puerto Rico's Queer Exaltation is a two-part installation that depicts the spiritual connection between the island of Puerto Rico and its Transgender inhabitants through the visualization of a multi-generational queer narrative. By abstracting Caribbean seascapes, parts of the Flamboyán tree, chest scars left behind by gender-affirming surgery and coquí frogs through an array of mediums, the ecology of Puerto Rico and the Trans body overlap and create a multi-sensory place wherein visitors may witness the euphoria of Transgender Puerto Ricans.

TRANSGENDER EUPHORIA: PUERTO RICO'S QUEER EXALTATION

By

Foster Reynolds-Santiago

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Preface

My family lives in a coral-colored stucco house in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico. My mother brings me here to visit every summer. After leaving the island in her twenties to pursue ambitions on the mainland, my mother feels compelled to come home, driven to make sure her child knows we are *Boricua*.¹ It is because of her that I have never questioned my connection to the island. Up until the age of eighteen, I enjoyed my summers in Puerto Rico with my *abuela* and her three children, my mother, my *tia* Aileen and *tio* Marco. My *abuela* cooks a grand feast and makes sure I eat my fill. *Tio* Marco twirls me around the kitchen while mom laughs from her seat. My *tia* Aileen hugs me tight, and breathes “*Que tal, Boricua? Te amo mi vida*”² into my hair like she’s afraid I’ll disappear. In the morning, we all make the trip up the mountainside to visit family in Naranjito, and as the sky darkens and the dirt road narrows, the *coqui*³ begin to sing. I have never doubted that I am loved.

At age ten I noticed my *tia* Aileen had been more absent, but I’m too young to understand why. She goes away to the other side of the island, La Paurguera, and the family grieves. They mourn Aileen like she has passed, and my mother loses her voice when I ask why. The family is more silent now, but the *coqui* is never quiet. They comfort me with a procession of chirps, and every summer when I come back for a visit, they sound louder than the year before. I feel euphoric.

¹ *Boricua*: a person from Puerto Rico by birth or descent.

² Translation: “How are you, Boricua? I love you, my life”

³ *Coqui*: a singing tree frog (*Eleutherodactylus coqui*), native to Puerto Rico.

I stopped coming back to Puerto Rico when I was eighteen years old. While my family loved me endlessly, it was hard for them to accept me as Transgender. My body had changed in ways that were too hard for them to speak of, and it became too difficult for me to return to the coral house. I feared the silence, even if the coqui were never quiet. It was then that I understood why Aileen had left, and I knew the coqui weren't quiet for her either.

Que tal, Boricua?

Aileen took me to a great big Flamboyán tree, the one in the field by the house she used to live in when the family could not see her. She told me the story of the time she picked a flower from its branch and ate it, before falling asleep in the bed of grass beneath the tangled trunk. Aileen dreamt of petals growing out of her body in bright speckles, the ocean surrounding her home having turned into millions of little doorways lined in seaweed paint, but still the family could not see her. She insisted I pick a flower from the tree and eat it before our trip to La Parguera on the other side of the island. I think she hoped I'd find something that she had only ever caught glimpses of.

In the summer of 2021 at age twenty-six, after years away from the island, I returned to the coral house in Puerto Rico and reunited with Aileen, who had also returned. This is the same home where she began her own transition in 1981— here, it would appear, queer time is cyclical. I arrived at this thesis project through the realization that my and Aileen's memories, stories, and timelines are linked. Together we travelled from San Juan to La Parguera, collecting pieces of Puerto Rico and speaking with other Transgender people along the way about the Island we call home.

Dedication

*For Aileen—your love, memories, and stories are what inspired this thesis.
Thank you for showing me your Puerto Rico.*

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To my cohort – Adam, Alieh, Monique and Sylvia – your support individually and as a group has been invaluable.

To Sarah G. Sharp – my advisor, mentor, and chair – I don't know where I'd be without your reassuring voice and advice on the other end of the countless video chats we've had. Thank you for immediately understanding me as an artist, and for making sure I stayed true to myself, and my studio practice these past three years.

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To Mom – Thank you for never letting me forget my roots, and for nurturing my love for art at an early age.

A special thanks to all the friends and family that have helped me make it here. To Maria, Olivia, Carlie, Tara, Sean, Ari, Erin, and Nico – whether it was physically or emotionally, you all gave me a home in my darkest times, and I would not be where I am today if not for your love and support throughout the years.

And finally, to Aileen. Thank you for spending a whole summer travelling around Puerto with me, and for sharing your personal story. This thesis would quite literally not exist without you, and I can't wait to return to La Parguera and swim together for days on end.

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Chapter 1: Transgender Euphoria

Defining Transgender Euphoria

Transgender Euphoria: the understanding that you are exalted in the form your body takes.

The island of Puerto Rico, while home to many Transgender⁴ individuals, does not recognize our Transgender glory, socially or politically. There is a crisis facing LGBTQ people in Puerto Rico, as there has been a dramatic escalation of violent killings of Transgender people across the island. In the year 2021 alone, there have been 10 such killings, accompanied by silence from the Puerto Rican government.⁵ This lack of action on the side of police and government systems is rooted in generations of hateful rhetoric from religious fundamentalists and politicians who seek to separate Transgender bodies from the spiritual narrative of Puerto Rico. While the political climate of Puerto Rico does not recognize Transgender people as a thriving community deserving of exaltation, I know that the actual, physical island itself sees and remembers our spirits.

It is vital for Trans Puerto Ricans to be given the opportunity to voice their spiritual connection to Puerto Rico, because as of now, for all the reasons cited above, we are not welcomed citizens. As we continue to be murdered in cold blood, we are

⁴ I capitalize “Transgender” to emphasize the importance of our existence as a group of people and use the term interchangeably with “Trans” throughout this paper.

⁵ C. Brito, “Transgender people in Puerto Rico say they are invisible in the eyes of the island — and it's contributing to a culture of violence,” CBS News (2021), accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-puerto-ricans-violence/>.

also hidden from mainstream conversations surrounding the vibrancy and culture of the island. Therefore, we must create our own conversations that highlight our community's essence and divine connection to this land. We have the right to exist, thrive, and lay claim to our island. I characterize the understanding of Transgender glory and the conversations or objects that illustrate our claim to Puerto Rico as "Transgender Euphoria."⁶ While my work situates this term as it relates to Puerto Rico and personal myth, it can be used culturally, at large, outside of the Caribbean.

For me, an exploration of Transgender Euphoria must take the form of an art installation. As an artist, I know that giving visual representation to an intangible concept of Transgender spirit will allow people to physically see our glory. Visual culture in general is saturated with images pertaining to the horror and mistreatment that Trans people face throughout the world, but there is a dearth of representations of Euphoria. My work subverts this common narrative of Trans suffering by providing ways not only to "see" our glory, innate greatness, and ties to a physical place, but also to hear and feel all those things. The array of mediums I used in my installation – painting, digital projection, tactile materials, and audio – creates a multi-sensory place wherein visitors may, albeit temporarily, experience Euphoria through an array of their bodily senses. The outcome, hopefully, is a new perspective on how to talk about the ostracization of Transgender people and, ideally, a permanent change in that discourse.

⁶ My understanding of the term "Transgender Euphoria" derives from Catherine Squires & Daniel Brouwer's use of the phrase "Gender Euphoria" in their article "In/discernible bodies: the politics of passing in dominant and marginal media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 3 (October 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180216566>.

Que tal, Boricua?

There was a woman who looked after you when I was too young to understand why you couldn't come home. Could we bring her the flowers we picked along the way?

Facets of a euphoric Transgender existence can be embodied through imagery that encompasses vast color combinations, textures, movements, sounds, and found objects. There are many ways in which these fragments of Euphoria are seen, and mine are found through examining the culture, aesthetics, and spirits of Puerto Rico. I hope that through depicting and archiving these moments of textured, bright, abstracted Transgender euphoria, I'm reinventing myself back to an island that at first glance, seems not to remember me.

My experience with Transgender Euphoria is found in physical forms such as the large dinner-plate-size hibiscus flowers that line the streets of Queer San Juan, the orange trees in the Naranjito countryside that are grown and tended to by a closeted Trans woman, and the forgotten stories of queer indigenous Taíno⁷ people that originally roamed the island before colonization. To visualize this spiritual connection between the island of Puerto Rico and its Transgender inhabitants, it was necessary that I travel to the island in search of Transgender Euphoria, as there is power in physically being able to touch, smell, see, and speak upon the land that is rightfully ours. This direct engagement with the flora and fauna of Puerto Rico is an important component of my work, as I often develop textures and other imagery from physically touching the natural environment. Because my own experience as

⁷ Taíno: a member of an Arawak people formerly inhabiting the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas.

Transgender *Boricua* is important to this narrative, I've gathered my own materials related to Transgender Euphoria. The Royal Poinciana flowers that grow from the Flamboyán trees by the coral house are significant to my own moments of Transgender Euphoria because they physically grew along the sides of the home where I first became aware of my need to medically transition, when I first became aware of my own glory.

Que tal, Boricua?

You told me about your first love. One of these days, I'll map out the story in petals.

Chapter 2: Queer Time and Spiritual Activism

Queer Time

Alexis Lothian gives context for the concept of queer time in her book *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (2018). Lothian discusses queer speculation as a sideways projection of the future, an accepting or liberatory future that has roots in the past. As a result, we understand that queer time is non-linear, going against what Elizabeth Freeman has called “chrononormativity.”⁸ From these notions has emerged a form of queer speculation, using the past to build futures filled with “radical possibility.”⁹

Indeed, if Transgender and queer people experience time differently, I look toward stories from the past to expand upon my concept of the future. I can look up and down, left to right, through objects and voices, always encountering moments where a body like mine existed – somewhere. I can see my *tia* Aileen walking along the tree line by our ancestral home in Bayamón at age twenty-three, and she can see me looking at her from a different future. It is *radically possible* for us to draw and link our timelines together in multiple locus points. The presence and depiction of non-linear time is in conversation with Transgender Euphoria as a tool I can use to pinpoint where our stories have met before and will continue to meet forever.

⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,” *Chrononormativity: The Interlocking Temporal Schemes Necessary for Genealogies of Decent and for the Mundane Workings of Domestic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹ Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 254.

During my return trip to Puerto Rico in the summer of 2021, Aileen and I frequently sat at the breakfast table in the coral house. There she told me about eating the bright red petals that bloom alongside the hanging pods of the Flamboyán's branch. As a child I picked them and crushed them to my chest. I would bite them just like she did. We decided to continue this tradition and take a bite of the petal before travelling somewhere for the day. We were partaking in a ritual that had been carried out before by different versions of ourselves, a ritual that was already being performed by those who haven't yet arrived. This action is a manifestation of queer time, which I attempted to represent in my installation *Flamboyán for Breakfast*.

Flamboyán for Breakfast features two chairs at a table that are covered in woodcut abstractions of my chest (more on this shortly) and parts of the Flamboyán tree. I wanted to imagine what Aileen's and my conversations about the tree could look like if all possible iterations came together, much like how our separate life narratives collide across time -- that is, in a non-linear and chaotic manner. Queer time is also represented in the looping video and overlapping audio in my installation *Seaweed Portals*. As visitors move beyond the breakfast scene and into the darkened space, they encounter three canvases framed in knitted yarn. Looping video collages of the island's landscape are projected onto each canvas as viewers listen to Aileen and me speak to each other, as well as to the people with whom Aileen and I spoke in San Juan. Along with the song of the coqui frog, the recorded stories meld together into one narrative that speaks to our collective Euphoria as Transgender Puerto Ricans.

Que tal, Boricua?

I know it hurt you when they couldn't come see you underneath your tree, but you hoped they'd come and see me under mine.

Anzaldúa: Spiritual Activism

Gloria Anzaldúa is a queer Chicana poet and feminist theorist whose work speaks to the marginalization of the Chicana, displacement, spirituality, sexuality, and the loss of Spanish language and identity through processes of assimilation into American society. All these themes are present in her conception of “spiritual activism”, a term that heavily influenced the theoretical notions of my thesis. In her essay, “I am a citizen of the universe,” Analouise Keating examines how Anzaldúa’s scholarship has been affected by academia’s neglect of the spiritual nature of her work, especially how scholars disregard Anzaldúa’s thoughts on spiritual activism. With Anzaldúa’s insistence that the “inward-looking” spiritual, as well as activism or “outward-directed interaction with the material world,” are unquestionably interwoven, Keating comes to define spiritual activism as “spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform oneself and one's worlds.” I interpret this neglect of Anzaldúa’s spirituality as coming from a place of racism and fear, a fear of the “invisible” or of marginalized groups that have been rendered invisible. But there's another facet of this fear, having to do with generative structural change and its power to challenge existing norms. Those who hold such fears see -- and perhaps feel threatened by -- the rich outcomes of applying concepts of spirituality or indigenous knowledge to the

creation of new frameworks for expression. Not only do formerly invisible peoples become visible, so do their seemingly intangible beliefs, as well as the frameworks for expressing them. Moreover, these frameworks create a structural foundation on which others can build, generating forms of spiritual activism in the present that look to the future, as they build on the flawed past. I appreciate Keating's pronouncement that spiritual activism is reparative work done by and for marginalized communities, and I am in love with the belief that art is the perfect realm in which people can produce the spiritual activist practices that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* and *Light in the Dark*.¹⁰

Christopher D. Tirres, a professor of Religious Studies and director of DePaul's Center for Religion, Culture and Community, examines what he sees as Anzaldúa's "conflicting stances" on spiritual realism before and after *Light in the Dark* was published,¹¹ to gain a better understanding of how she defines spiritual activism throughout her career. Tirres argues that "she appears most often to subscribe to one of two positions: a realist position (which assumes that spirits are indeed real) and a pluralist position (which affirms that spirits are both literally and imaginably present)."¹² Tirres ultimately comes to the conclusion that while the way Anzaldúa speaks on spirits as real entities shifts pre and post publication of *Light in the Dark*, her perspective on spiritual activism practices is consistently rooted in

¹⁰ AnaLouise Keating, "'I am a citizen of the universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2008). Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light In The Dark* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹² Christopher Tirres, "Spiritual Activism and Praxis: Gloria Anzaldúa's Mature Spirituality," *The Pluralist* 14, no. 1 (2019): 120.

“whether or not the spiritual journey makes positive changes in a person’s life.”¹³

After reading Tirres’s analysis of *Light in the Dark*, I reflected on how he gravitates toward moments in the book where Anzaldúa references the body, and her insistence that the body, not just the mind, contains a multitude of dreams, personal mythologies, and feelings that can be tapped into for the construction of social change. This notion of bodily knowledge being used for social change brought me to thoughts on generational healing as a product of and a defining factor of spiritual activism.

Artist Guadalupe Maravilla explores spiritual activism and the activation of personal mythology in his 2021 installation *Seven Ancestral Stomachs*,¹⁴ which features seven sculptures, each comprising misshapen and perishable gourds that represent the seven stomachs of his ancestors, as he reflects on his own healing from stomach cancer. The gourds, with their long winding stems and tangled forms, sit nestled in ripped fabric shaped into *retablos*.¹⁵ Each sculpture has talons affixed like appendages, extending from the twisting gourd vines like arms outstretched for an embrace. There is a magic to the *retablos*’ shape as Maravilla combines them with the personal mythology of his ancestors, a knowledge not written down, only known via the body – not unlike the embodied experience of queer time, though in Guadalupe’s

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Maravilla Guadalupe. “Seven Ancestral Stomachs,” Sculpture Installation, 2021, P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

¹⁵ Mexican *retablos* are small, colorful oil paintings, generally made on tin. The term *retablo*, from the Latin *retro tabula*, or “behind the altar,” originally referred to the large paintings depicting saints, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary that hung behind altars in Catholic churches.

case more linear (albeit as chaotic) in its chronology from the ancestral past to the present.



Figs. 1–2: Guadalupe Maravilla, *Seven Ancestral Stomachs*, 2021

I feel that my own work has been moving toward these same conversations. I found great comfort in discovering conversations about spiritual activism, because I have been subconsciously working through this type of healing act through installation art. With *Transgender Euphoria: Puerto Rico's Queer Exaltation*, I seek to expand on personal myth and the material world as an act of healing for myself, my family, and the ostracized community of Transgender Puerto Ricans.

Sueños de Iguana (2020)

In February of 2019, I dreamt of an iguana lying on a rock, soaking up the sun. Pleasant, peaceful, surrounded by abstracted landscapes of Puerto Rico. I was walking around the island with bright and verdant friends, basking in the sunlight that knew me intimately, remembering that these blooming hillsides were gifts given to me in the hopes that I would understand my own glory. The friends who walked with me looked remarkably like abstracted and undulating petals of the Flamboyán tree. I would return to this dream often when I slept. A week later, my mother called me in a panic. She

tells me she had a dream that I was a baby iguana she couldn't take care of. Despite it being a dream, she could not shake how real it felt. In her sleep, I had grown scales that poked holes in the clothes she had knitted for me, and she cried as my scaled body went limp in her arms. My dream, glorified in light, stood in contrast to hers, in which the sun beat down on me not to warm my being, but to accuse, to pull me out of the shadows like a grim spotlight illuminating what we had been dancing around for a decade. It was clear to me that our two dreams acted as a language to interpret what was unsaid about my post-transitioned body. Again, in keeping with queer time, these two dreams had spoken to each other as if they were a singular living entity. I wished to walk through the portal that led to those loving landscapes and see if I could catch a glimpse of where her dream met mine. Maybe then we could come together and speak in a way that the island would not allow.

Thus began *Sueños de Iguana*, a multimedia installation that reflects where my family's shared Iguana dreams go to converse and create form. I spent the fall of 2020 covering my studio in paint, knitting, and felting shapes that stuck out from my dream world of Puerto Rico, and repeatedly drawing iguana scales on the wall. I needed to turn the space into a place where I could go speak with my mother about the things that have gone unsaid about my transition, and do so in language created from texture and color. Toward this end, the walls in my installation are covered in abstractions of foliage found in Puerto Rico, paintings that depict the color palette of my re-imaged island, and audio-reactive videos projected onto shapes within the installation.



Figs. 3–5: Foster Reynolds-Santiago, *Sueños de Iguana*, 2020

Que tal Boricua?

I saw a friend who was pink. He told me he knew where he was going. There is a house beyond the big red trees that he could live in. Mother cried so much that a river came out of her eyes and swept her into the trees. I heard her call, so I went to her. I was still happy. My mother would love to know that the roof was red like the trees. I heard her call, so I went to her. I was still happy. My scales are so bright that they create new shapes outside of my body. My feet leave marks on the ground that look like little windows. I have long green spikes on my back that poke holes in my clothes and touch the tops of mountains. My mother takes me to the mountains to visit our family. I think everyone sees the patterns on my scales. She worked hard on the clothes. I'm sorry my body put holes in the clothes. I hope you know that I love you. I'm still happy.

Chapter 3: Trans Euphoric Ecology

The Flamboyán Tree

Representations of the Flamboyán tree, coqui frogs, and the scars on my chest left behind by gender-affirming surgery are key elements in my personal Transgender Euphoria, as they each have witnessed or represented a part of my story, specifically moments where it was undeniable that the island loved me just as much as I loved getting to exist in this body.

The Flamboyán tree has a beautiful explosion of tropical flowers, which sit atop an entangled trunk of roots, limbs, and leaves. Also known as the Royal Poinciana, or by its scientific name *Delonix Regia*, this vibrant tree symbolizes Caribbean delight. My *tia* Aileen would drive us around the island, I'd sit in the back seat and stare at the blooms passing by in a rush of blurred bright red while my mother spoke Spanish with Aileen, her sister, in a quick-paced tone. I would listen to them conversing while I stared out at the trees that dotted the mountainside like little fires, imagining I was jumping from bloom to bloom just as quickly as they spoke. As I jumped from tree to tree, the seed pods would fall from the branches, rattling to the ground and splitting in a wonderful bit of percussion. Flamboyán seeds live inside long flat pods that hang from the trees. They are green and pliant when fresh but turn brown and stiff over time, falling to the ground and cracking open into halves, revealing shallow grooves that house the seeds. The seedpods, some of which are as

long as a person's arm, often stay hanging from the tree for several growing seasons. As a kid, I liked to think they were just waiting for me to pick them from the branches. I would run my fingers down the pod as if it were a *guiro*,¹⁶ making a beat with the scratching sound, and press the bright red petals to my arms, stomach, and legs. I found comfort in imagining that my body housed these parts of the Flamboyán permanently. Sometimes Aileen would look back at me through the rearview mirror with a knowing gaze, as if she could see me jumping from tree to tree, too.

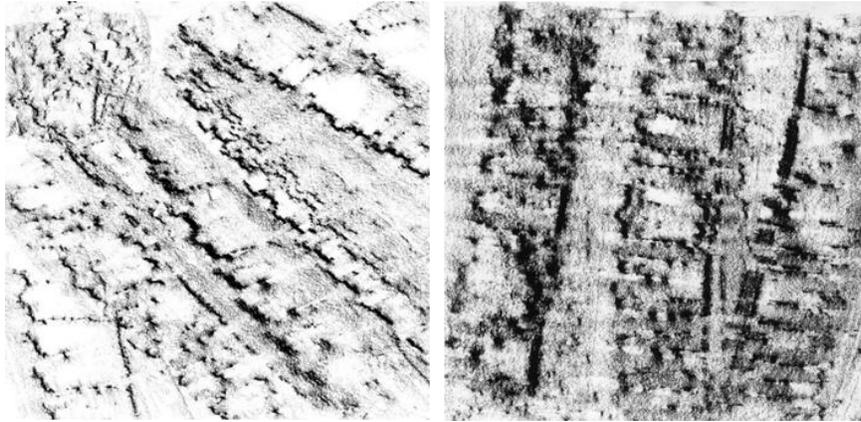
We gathered fallen pods from the Flamboyán tree as we drove around the island. I'd point to a tree and she'd stop along the side of the road so I could pick up the fallen halves of pod bark. I wanted to collect as many as I could, even though I knew we wouldn't be able to bring them all back to the mainland. Aileen humored me by pointing to pods she thought I'd like to keep, and the pile kept growing.



Fig. 6: The Flamboyán Tree

¹⁶ *Guiro*: a musical instrument with a serrated surface that gives a rasping sound when scraped with a stick, originally made from an elongated gourd, and used in Latin American music.

Knowing I would be leaving Puerto Rico again come summer's end, it saddened me that I couldn't bring my growing pile of pods with me. I began making rubbings of the pods' shape with charcoal and conté crayon, committing the grooves to paper because I needed to remember their texture.



Figs. 7-8: *Flamboyán Seed Pod Charcoal Rubbings #1-2*, 2021

Since I couldn't bring them all back with me, I would just have to replicate them. I traced the contour lines of a small pod and created a vector file, which could be laser cut into plywood. Mimicking the never-ending pile of pods Aileen and I lovingly collected, I fabricated versions into wood with a laser cutter. The plywood pods feel just as special to me as the ones we gathered across the island. Perhaps this is because the routine of creating a new batch of pods every week feels more like a continuation of our growing collection than a new project.



Fig. 17: *Plywood Flamboyán Seed Pods*, 2021

Que tal, boricua?

We'll make our homes from the seed pods that fall to the ground, we'll split them lengthwise and create roads from each half.

On my chest, two scars protrude from my skin as an excess of collagen heals to form an uneven path of tissue. Beginning at my sternum, the two mirrored lines horizontally extend and widen toward my underarms like roots. The form reminds me of all the ways my body has changed for me to continue existing; remembering this is euphoric. They are jagged and lined with an uneven layer of raised skin that sits stark against my chest. If I look closely, I can see where the collagen gathered in surplus, creating dips and hatched lines. I look upon my scars lovingly. It is in these marks on my body I find contour lines that must be replicated. I have seen their shape before. Like the furrows that mark the Flamboyán pods, on my chest there are spaces between abundant collagen that carry worlds. Just as I can pick a pod from a flowered branch and run my fingers across its grooves like an instrument, I can spread both palms flat against each scar and remember the moment when my body began to sing along with the worlds reflected in each wrinkle of skin. It is these experiences and parts of my body that I represent in the woodcut abstractions on the table in *Flamboyán for Breakfast*.

Coqui Frogs

As each day comes to an end, a chorus of tiny tree frogs can be heard across the island of Puerto Rico, rising in volume as the night draws nearer.

“Co-kee!” “Co-kee!”

The Coqui fills the land with its loud chirp, lulling Puerto Ricans to sleep with a symphony of-

“Co-KEE!” “Co-KEE!”

The *Eleutherodactylus coqui*'s length ranges from 15mm to 80mm, and comes in varying shades of brown, green, and yellow with occasional dorsolateral stripes. The official name -- *Eleutherodactylus* -- means free toes. The coqui has pads on the tips of their toes to help them adhere to surfaces, like moistened leaves. While there were once many species of coqui, due to deforestation, only 17 species remain. The coqui is a cultural symbol of Puerto Rico. Since the time of the native Taíno, their shapes have been etched into the land.

“Co-kee!” “Co-kee!”

Aileen and I drove to La Parguera to stay in the tiny apartment she kept there as her sanctuary. It takes the whole day to drive there, because the roads are long, winding, and extremely narrow. I think it's inevitable to collide with the oncoming traffic, but Aileen knows we won't. I reach my hand out the window, trying to snag a leaf or two for every hour that passes, listening to the great rush of wind as we roll down the dirt road. It's getting darker as we reach La Parguera, and the coqui begin to sing. The wind becomes speckled with a chirp or two, until eventually the air is heavy with a chorus of-

“Co-kee!” “Co-kee!”

reverberating through the trees. I think they were waiting for us to arrive.

We recorded the sound of the coqui in every place to which Aileen and I travelled. I collected their chirp sounds in Carolina, Toa Baja, Bayamon, Isla Verde,

Dorado, Gozalandia, Barceloneta, Arecibo, Rincón, Mayaguez, Cabo Rojo and La Parguera. As I spoke with other Transgender Puerto Ricans about their lives on the island, it felt like the coqui were wishing us well.

Que tal, boricua?

“I started coming here to this bar at the beginning of my transition. Before that, I lived with my father in Toa Baja until I started taking hormones. He was so unhappy with me because of this... He did not want to look at me anymore, but I was happy, so I did not care. Or I pretended I did not care. But if I am being truthful, I really cared a lot...I chose to come here where I knew someone who could help me get hormones until I could afford to do it legally. It was not easy to start transitioning back then. It is not easy today either. They love me here. There are other Transgender women like me that come here, some of them helped me start transitioning. We get together and make our own family...so this is my favorite place to go in San Juan. It's just so...pink and warm and happy. I'm always scared that this place is going to disappear though... There's a couple more queer friendly places in San Juan if you look hard enough, but this one is special. Like I said, it's just so pink, so happy. You can feel it can't you? I love coming here and feeling pink and happy too.”

-Marisol

Chapter 4: Transgender Euphoria: Puerto Rico's Queer Exaltation

My thesis exhibition combines two distinct works into one single installation, which comprises painting, fiber sculpture, video projection, and audio recordings from my visit to Puerto Rico in 2021. In the CADVC gallery, viewers first encounter *Flamboyán for Breakfast*, before entering the darkroom where *Seaweed Portals* are hung on the walls and draped onto the floor.

Flamboyán for Breakfast (2022)

Aileen took me to a great big Flamboyán tree, the one in the field by the house she used to live in when the family could not *see* her. She told me the story of the time she picked a flower from its branch and ate it, before falling asleep in the bed of grass beneath the tangled trunk. Aileen dreamt of petals growing out of her body in bright speckles, the ocean surrounding her home turned into millions of little doorways lined in seaweed paint, but still the family could not *see* her. She insisted I pick a flower from the tree and eat it before our trip to La Parguera on the other side of the island. I think she hoped I'd find something she only ever caught glimpses of.

Flamboyán for Breakfast (2021) is an installation that represents this story she told me, as well as the moment when she shared it with me. Viewers approach a wooden table and chairs, colorfully painted with abstractions of the Flamboyán's petals as intuitive marks in conté crayon and acrylic paint. Each mark was made

while listening to audio recordings of Aileen telling me about her tree and are repeated on the canvas positioned underneath the breakfast setting.

The Flamboyán's long seed pods, replicated in woodcuts, are scattered on the table along with inscriptions of shapes reminiscent of my post-transition body, highlighting the similarity between the shape of the pods and my gender-affirming surgery scars. These same scar-pod shapes appear on a mural that depicts my chest and is positioned on the wall behind the table and chairs, serving as a kind of backdrop. As viewers walk around the space, they hear ambient coqui frog audio. Hanging from above the breakfast scene is a chandelier made of long yarn ropes, each knitted to mimic the dense seaweed that Aileen and I often parsed as we swam during



Fig. 19: Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb*, 2017

our oceanside stops throughout our travels. The ropes are finger knitted, a process wherein a chain of yarn is looped between the fingers of one hand continuously until a cord forms down the knitter's wrist. As I knit between my fingers, the cord gets longer, touching the ground and making a tangled pile on the floor. In making these ropes, I was influenced by Cecilia Vicuña's installation *Quipu Womb*,¹⁷ in which she employs ropes of knotted wool

¹⁷ Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb*, 2017, Dyed Wool Installation, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; "Poetry in Wool," last modified May 23, 2017, <https://www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/wool-wins-at-documenta>.

as modes of storytelling. The work features a circular apparatus covered in a system of long skeins of wool that are dyed a deep red, extending from the ceiling in what looks like large washes of blood reaching down toward the ground. Each rope of wool is knotted to form a *quipu*,¹⁸ and turns Vicuña's poetry into visual form.



Figs. 11–13: Foster Reynolds-Santiago, *Flamboyán for Breakfast*, 2022

¹⁸ Quipu: an ancient Inca device for recording information, consisting of variously colored threads knotted in different ways.

Seaweed Portals (2022)

There's a small beach on the way to La Parguera where Aileen and I stopped to stretch our legs. We walked through a grove of tangled trees, the branches bending to meet each other, creating a tunnel of green for us to walk through. An iguana quickly scaled a trunk to avoid our path, its claws making a resounding scratch that joined the sound where the tide rushed to greet the white sand. The water was covered in a dense blanket of seaweed. I liked to watch it softly undulate, allowing for tiny glimpses of cyan between the shifting masses of kelp. Aileen led me to where the algae parted the ocean, creating an opening, a portal, through which we could wade. She said she came here to think. Sitting in this opening of water lined in seaweed, we were able to put words to things that needed utterance. She told me why she left our family's coral house, and I told her why I came back to it. Her body couldn't be seen back then, and mine had to be seen now.

By sharing this special spot of clear water surrounded by dense kelp, I think she hoped to heal parts of her past and protect parts of my future. She held my hand, and we looked beneath our floating shapes, and imagined countless other portals just like this one that we could share and travel through together. While we swam in the seaweed portal, I kept thinking about the story Aileen told me about the time she picked a flower from the Flamboyán branch and ate it, before falling asleep in the bed of grass beneath the tangled trunk. I wanted to tell her that I had dreams about the Flamboyán tree too. That I dreamt of petals growing out of my chest in bright speckles, lifting off my skin and pointing me toward those glimpses of cyan between

the kelp. How much strength would it take for me to part the quilting of algae until a new portal was made? Could I grab at the floating plants and weave them along the edges of the water like a binding? If I did this, could I open these shapes like shutters on a window, revealing more spaces where Aileen and I could sit and talk? More reflections of an Island that could truly *see* me. An Island that I know loves its Transgender citizens.



Fig. 27: Guadalupe Maravilla, *Portals*, 2019

A portal acts as an entryway to another place or time. Metaphorically and literally, portals are doorways to other worlds. In Maravilla Guadalupe’s 2019 installation *Portals*,¹⁹ which features a series of vibrationally charged sculptures composed of headdresses, the concept of a portal is used to signify gateways for

¹⁹ Guadalupe Maravilla, *Portals*, Sculpture Installation, 2020, Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, Florida; “Symbiotically Aligned: Disease and Healing in Guadalupe Maravilla’s Performances,” last modified May 27, 2020, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/nbspsymbiotically-aligned-disease-and-healing-in-guadalupe-maravillas-performances>.

healing generational trauma. He speaks to a generation of undocumented children and to the healing of border trauma by tapping into personal dimensions. Guadalupe believes that wounds passed down through time can be cleansed via the activation of sound exchanged between his sculptures. In this installation, each sculpture acts as a door to someone's healing.

For my installation *Seaweed Portals*, I cut canvas to serve as portals, lining them with wool and knitted yarn to symbolize tangled seaweed. Viewers first encounter a “breakfast” of Flamboyán pods in the daylight, and then pass through into a darkened room where three canvases cut into shapes reminiscent of those in which Aileen and I swam are hung on the walls and strewn about the floor. Each portal represents a person with whom we spoke about their experiences as Transgender Puerto Ricans, including Aileen and myself. The portals contain video collages of various Puerto Rican seascapes, waterfalls, flowers, and places that Aileen shared with me.

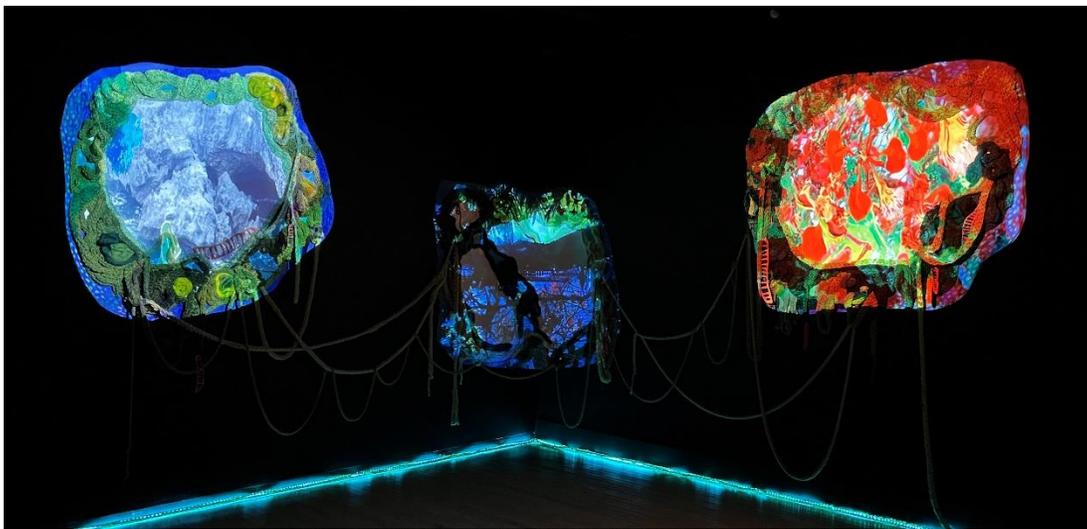
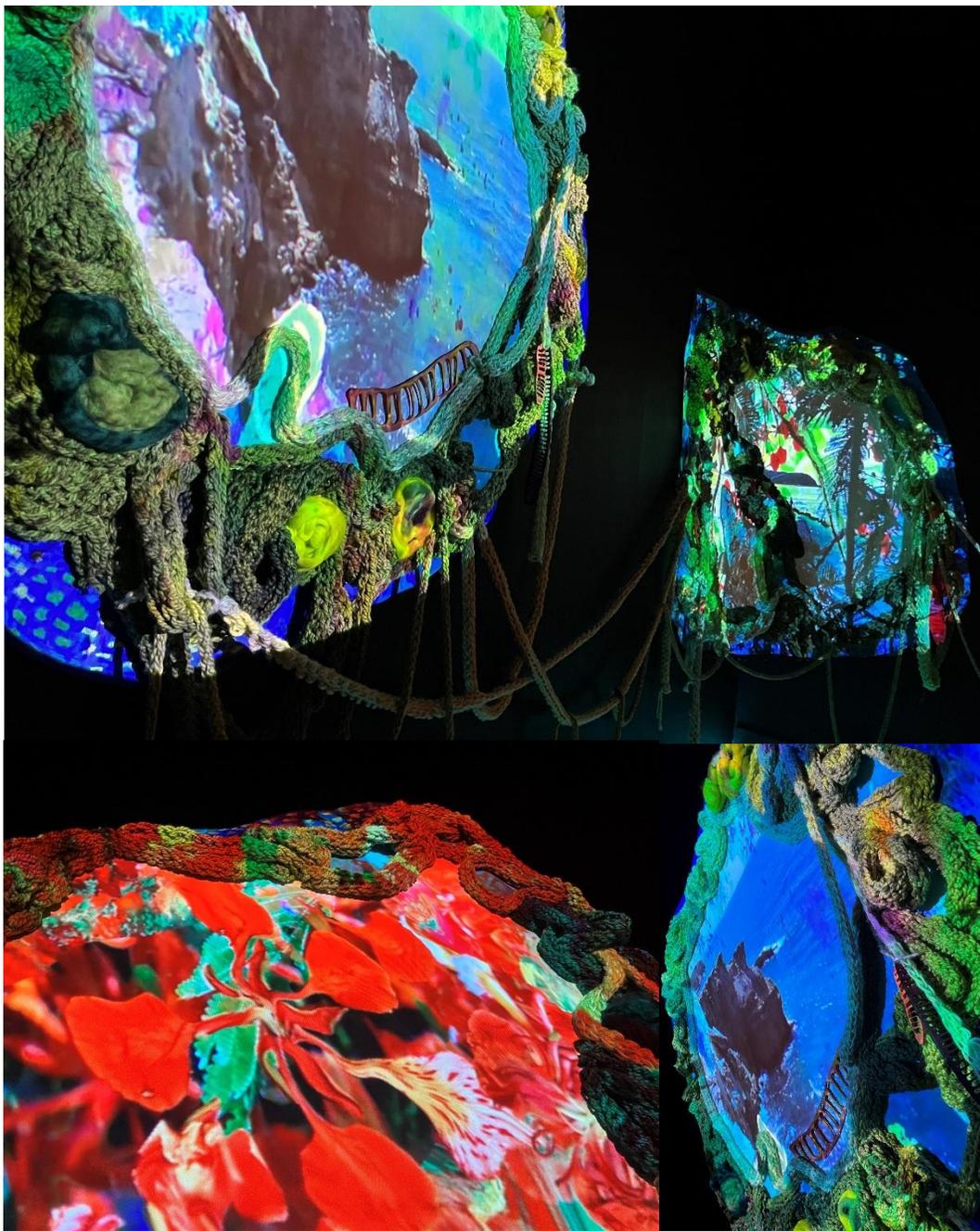


Fig. 29: Foster Reynolds-Santiago, *Seaweed*



Figs. 16–18: Foster Reynolds-Santiago, *Seaweed Portals*, 2022

As viewers walk into the dark room, they will hear my voice as I speak about returning to the island, Aileen’s narration of eating the Flamboyán’s petals, and overlapping accounts from people we spoke with about being Transgender Boricua.

As our voices collectively reverberate around the room, I like to imagine that our stories are speaking to each other, that we are re-claiming the island together with our combined narrative. With this exhibition I represent Transgender Euphoria as it is unique to Aileen, myself, and the island of Puerto Rico, but I don't propose a singular vision or definitive conclusion. The work is a visual process that points to a continuous conversation happening repeatedly throughout time by people of Trans and queer experience, which cannot be confined by any means. However, if this work has solidified one thing for me, it is that acceptance is not enough, exaltation is necessary. As Transgender Puerto Ricans, we are not just accepted by the landscape, but wholeheartedly loved and exalted by it.

Que tal, boricua?

I told you that I wanted to go to a place where water ripples over little rocks, someplace where we could sit and talk while I looked for texture. You took me to Cascada Gozalandia. We climbed down what felt like endless stairs covered in moss. I took my shoes off to feel the squish. The dense green clumps pushed past my toes. I could reach down and feel the moss where it met my feet. You insisted we stop halfway down to the lagoon so I could take the perfect picture of the waterfall. Covered in mud, eyes bright with excitement, you held my back so I wouldn't fall.

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