January 2012

Painting Puertorriqueñidad: The Jíbaro as a Symbol of Creole Nationalism in Puerto Rican Art before and after 1898

Jeffrey L. Boe
University of South Florida, jboedesign@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, Latin American Studies Commons, and the Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons

Scholar Commons Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Dedication

For my mother, Donna Lynn Goar Boe, whose strength, kindness, and warmth were an inspiration to all who met her.

I wish that we could have seen these paintings together; she would have appreciated both the beauty of the works and the courage of the artists. I am forever in debt to her for her support, encouragement, and love. She is sorely missed.

Special thanks, also, to my father, Bill Boe, for his encouragement throughout my academic career, and for the love of history which he inspired in me from a very early age. Thanks to Yogi and Rosco for their endless entertainment through the writing process, and to my colleagues at work for putting up with postcolonial discourse over lunch from time to time, when they would rather have been talking about the Bucs game.

My deepest gratitude, of course, is reserved for Danielle: the love of my life, my wife, and my best friend, without whom this would certainly not have been possible. For her sacrificial support, for her unending encouragement, and for doing my share of the housework when deadlines loomed, I am so grateful. I am here because you have walked this road with me.
Acknowledgments

Several parties deserve special thanks and recognition for the role that they have played in the development of this work. First, thanks to Professor Fraser for her steady guidance, good advice, and wonderful teaching these last few years. Visionary teachers open new windows into the world; rare is the day when something from her classroom does not affect the way I view events around me. Thanks to Professor Benadusi for helping me understand what it is that historians do, and why. Thanks to Professor Moore for her keen interest in the success of her students, and for agreeing to serve on this committee during her time off.

Special thanks to the staff of the Tampa Library at the University of South Florida. The ILL department has been indispensable, and their courteous staff always goes above and beyond what could reasonably be expected of them. I am grateful to Audrey Powers, the College of The Arts Research Librarian, for helping me find the way out of several research conundrums during this process, and to Jamie Hansen in Special Collections for always making research on the fourth floor a pleasant and productive experience.

Thanks to Wally Wilson for creating an enriching environment in the School of Art and Art History, and to Barton Lee for encouraging my scholarship and being so flexible with my various roles within the College.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... ii

Abstract ................................................................................................................................... iii

Introduction: *Jíbarismo* and Puerto Rican Nationalism ......................................................... 1

Painting Puertorriqueñidad ........................................................................................................ 12  
*Pan Nuestro* ............................................................................................................................ 12
Historicizing the *jíbaro*: Class, Commodity, and Coffee ...................................................... 17
The Multivalent *jíbaro*: *El Velorio* as Social Criticism ......................................................... 31
The Revolutionary *jíbaro*: Puerto Rican Nationalism and the *Grito de Lares* .................... 37
The “Picnic” and the “Battle of Signs”: 1898 and the Beginning of the American Occupation ................................................................................................................................. 40
Heroes and Landscapes: Puerto Rican Artistic Heritage and the Trans-Atlantic Exchange ........................................................................................................................................ 43
Francisco Oller & Manuel E. Jordan: Farm Scenes as *Jíbaro* Imagery ................................. 50
Workers at Home: Puerto Rican Domestic Pride ....................................................................... 57
Colonial Appropriations ............................................................................................................. 62
Employing the *jíbaro*: Utilizing a National Myth Under the New Regime ............................. 66

Conclusion: *jíbaro Nuestro* ...................................................................................................... 69

Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 71

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 78

Appendix A: Figures .................................................................................................................... 80
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Ramón Frade, <em>Pan Nuestro</em></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Francisco Oller, <em>El Velorio</em></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>José Campeche, <em>Portrait of Don Miguel Antonio de Ustariz</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Francisco Oller, <em>Colonel Contreras</em></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Francisco Oller, <em>Hacienda Aurora</em></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Manuel E. Jordan, <em>Ingenio Azucarero</em></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Manuel E. Jordan, <em>Regreso de la Faena</em></td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td><em>Girls Assorting Coffee at Yuaco</em></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td><em>UNCLE SAM to PORTO RICO</em></td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Antonio Colorado, <em>Logo of the Partido Popular Democratico (PPD)</em></td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

In the three decades surrounding the Spanish-American war (1880-1910), three prominent Puerto Rican artists, Francisco Oller (1833-1917), Manuel E. Jordan (1853-1919), and Ramón Frade (1875-1954) created a group of paintings depicting “el jíbaro,” the rural Puerto Rican farm worker, in a way that can be appropriately labeled “nationalistic.” Using a set of motifs involving clothes, customs, domestic architecture and agricultural practices unique to rural Puerto Rico, they contributed to the imagination of a communal identity for creoles at the turn of the century. (“Creole” here refers to individuals of Spanish heritage, born on the island of Puerto Rico.) This set of shared symbols provided a visual dimension to the aspirational nationalism that had been growing within the creole community since the mid-1800s. This creollismo mythified the agrarian laborer as a prototypical icon of Puerto Rican identity. By identifying themselves as jíbaros, Puerto Rican creoles used jíbaro self-fashioning as a way to define their community as unique vis a vis the colonial metropolis (first Spain, later the United States). In this thesis, I will examine works by Oller, Jordan and Frade which employ jíbaro motifs to engage this creollismo. They do so by painting the jíbaro himself, his culture and surroundings, the fields in which he worked, and the bohío hut which was his home. Together, these paintings form a body of jíbaro imagery which I will contextualize, taking into account both the historical circumstances of jíbaro life, as well as the ways in which signifiers of jibarismo began to gain resonance amongst creoles who did not strictly belong to the jíbaro class. The resulting study demonstrates the importance of the mythified jíbaro figure to the project of
imagining Puerto Rican creole society as a nation, and the extent to which visual culture participated in this creative process.
Introduction: Jibarismo and Puerto Rican Nationalism

“...The poor mud-stained laborer degraded by his disease and literally submerged in the monotonous routine of coffee culture, living from hand to mouth...he talked with the jíbaro and found a man who had descended almost if not quite to the level of the beasts... sleeping cold and wet at night...and pro-creating, with no thought... of the future of his sons and daughters, not even a thought of a freer, better life.”

--Dr. Ashford, U.S. Army medical corps, 1908

“...Everyone enjoys the abundance that nature provides for all...who make the land fertile with their work and defend it with their lives.”

--José Martí, 1892

Ramón Frade (1875-1954), painter, traveler and architect, was born in Cayey, Puerto Rico and spent a significant portion of his early life in Spain and on the island of Hispaniola. He kept a studio in Haiti from 1897-1901, after which he returned to his native island, which had been transformed from a Spanish colony to a territorial possession of the United States in his absence. Shortly thereafter, in 1905, he produced Pan Nuestro (“Our Daily Bread,” fig.1, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña), which is widely considered to be his most important and iconic painting. It is a full-figure portrait of an unnamed rural Puerto Rican farmworker who carries a bundle of plátanos (plantains) in his arms. It may seem surprising that this simple genre scene would attract much notice, yet the painting was warmly received shortly after its display by significant Puerto Rican


3 For biographical notes on Ramón Frade, see, University of Puerto Rico, De Oller a los Cuarenta: La pintura en Puerto Rico de 1898 a 1948, (Rio Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1989).
cultural figures who recognized it as a bold expression of Puerto Rican self-identity. Miguel Meléndez Muñoz, an author and fellow Cayey native, took note of details in the composition that identified Frade’s subject as example of a particular Puerto Rican type: sturdy pants, straw hat, machete, and of course plátanos, that ubiquitous Caribbean dietary staple.\(^4\) Francisco Oller (1833-1917), the most renowned Puerto Rican artist at the turn of the century, also took note of the painting, and commented favorably upon it.\(^5\) What did these men relate to in Frade’s composition, and why did they recognize it as a monument of significant cultural value for their society?

*Pan Nuestro* is not a portrait of a famous individual from Puerto Rico’s past (although heroic portraiture had a long tradition in Puerto Rican art), nor is intended to venerate a religious patron (though such icons had their place in the national consciousnesses of other Latin American polities).\(^6\) Instead, it is an idealized image of a particular type of Puerto Rican; Frade emphasized attributes of dress, environment, and visage that signified this identification to his compatriots.\(^7\)

---

\(^4\) Eduardo Forastieri Braschi, “El Pan Nuestro, La mascarada jíbara y los jíbaros de Ramón Frade y de Miguel Mélendez Muñoz,” *Confluencia* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 85–94.


\(^7\) José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico: the Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Postcolonial Latin American scholars frequently turn to visual analysis of cultural icons of *creollismo* to find evidence for burgeoning nationalism in the decades before the various Central and South American independence movements. Images of St. Rose of Lima (Peru) and Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico) have been thoroughly deconstructed through this postcolonial lens. Although Puerto Rico has no post-colonial history, per se, its local iconography can still be explored using the toolset of postcolonial analysis.

Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109-159. I am inspired by Roland Barthes’ approach to semiotics, in my attempt to unpack how the jíbaro functions as a sign. The connections between Puerto Rican history, creole politics, and the jíbaro would have been implicitly understood by Puerto Rican viewers of the paintings discussed herein. The reasons for these understandings—the historical events and cultural components which formed the mental background of creole pride—are at the center of my investigation.
scholarship has a word for this figure: Frade’s farmer is a *jíbaro*; the term means, in this context, a rural farmer from the island’s mountainous interior. There is strong consensus in the literature dealing with Frade’s *Pan Nuestro* that the figure represents the *jíbaro* type. While most scholars agree on this identification, and most concur that *jíbaro* imagery displays a strong current of Puerto Rican *creollismo* (proud creole self-identification), authors differ in the ways in which they locate the historical *jíbaro* in Puerto Rico’s past. *Jibarismo* (*jíbaro* pride) is inherently nostalgic; historicizing the *jíbaro* is critical to understanding his iconology. The term itself has held broad and divergent meanings in Puerto Rican parlance over time; this ambiguity requires historical contextualization.

This research will trace the development of one particular iteration: the myth of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* as a touchstone of civic pride and national identity in Puerto Rican art and literature through the course of the nineteenth century and beyond. By looking carefully at a corpus of paintings by Puerto Rican artists at the cusp of the nineteenth century I will demonstrate how their use of *jibarismo* articulated a burgeoning sense of Puerto Rican nationalism.

These artists were creoles, ethnically European but born in the colony. In their *jíbaro* paintings they asserted a self-identity that was distinct from the Spanish heritage they shared with other Latin Americans. They found ways of expressing creole pride, ways of envisioning a *Puertorriqueñidad* (or Puerto Rican-ness), which could be articulated through assertions of locally

---

8 Key sources for identifying *Pan Nuestro’s jíbaro* motifs include: University of Puerto Rico, *De Oller a los Cuarenta*; Mendoza, “Ramón Frade’s El Pan Nuestro”; and Braschi, “El Pan Nuestro,” cited above.
specific, identifiably unique aspects of their culture.⁹ These communal values provided anchors for the articulation of a common civic pride which can justifiably be identified as nationalistic in nature. That the political fortunes of the island prevented the coalescence of a nation-state around this popular identification does not belie the fact that a strong sense of Puerto Rican nationalism had formed by the end of the nineteenth century. As John Charles Chasteen and Sara Castro-Klarén point out in their assessment of Latin American national identification in the late nineteenth century, in many cases these nationalistic identities remained “aspirational” even after independence was gained.¹⁰ This is certainly true in the case of Puerto Rico, whose (post-) colonial status is the subject of more than a century of ambivalent constitutional questions.

The ultimate result of colonialism in Puerto Rico is still an open question. At the end of this year yet another plebiscite vote will be held to determine the nature of its relationship to the American metropolis. Such referenda were held three times in the twentieth century, and did little to resolve the ambiguities surrounding the status of the commonwealth. While Puerto Rican nationalism may not yet have borne the fruit of state sovereignty, the existence of a widely understood Puerto Rican nationality, taking the form of Boriqueño (“Puerto Rican,” from the indigenous taino) pride, is beyond question.

---

⁹ In this context “creole” refers to persons of Spanish heritage, but born in the colonies. “Peninsulares” were those born in Spain who traveled to the colonies to live and work. “Creollismo,” “creole pride” and “creole nationalism” all refer to the feeling of common cause shared by creoles in a given colonial context, who were often denied certain benefits and opportunities extended to those of identical heritage, but with a Spanish birthplace. A seminal text on Latin American creollismo is: Jacques Lafaye, Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: the Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Or, in the Puerto Rican context:

My project explores the development and deployment of jíbaro iconology in the decades surrounding the transitional events of 1898, and demonstrates ways in which Puerto Rican creollismo took on these nationalistic qualities. *Pan Nuestro* is the best known and most closely examined of these jíbaro paintings, but it is only one example among many around the turn of the century, which included images of jíbaro people, their work, and their homes. As they visually connected creole identity with recognizable aspects of jíbaro culture, Puerto Rican artists were material participants in the formation of this Puerto Rican national identity. Their artistic choices drove the way in which Puerto Rican identity was understood in their society. They gave visual dimension to a nationalistic symbolism that would resonate well into the twentieth century.

This study will establish the connection between Puerto Rican artistic practice and jíbaro myth-making in a few ways. To begin, I will place Frade’s work within a broad context of jíbaro paintings during Puerto Rico’s transitional period, and I will contextualize these instances of jibarismo as the culmination of a centurylong mythification of jíbaro culture which began in the first part of the nineteenth century. While previous studies have examined *Pan Nuestro* in the context of creole nationalism, my research redefines the corpus of jíbaro painting to include images of agrarian labor and rural domestic architecture as well. This broader scope gives a more complete view of the processes by which Puerto Rican creole artists participated in the fashioning of a collective identity around which their aspirational nationalism coalesced.

The use of art historical methods to investigate how Latin American nationalisms become visually manifest has become increasingly common in the last few decades. A significant body of scholarship surrounding the Tepeyac shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe is perhaps the best example. Scholars Stafford Poole, Jacques Lafaye and William B. Taylor all explore the deep connections between this icon as a visual phenomenon and its growth into a nationalist symbol.
around which advocates for Mexican independence were able to rally support for their cause.\textsuperscript{11} In a similar way, studies of St. Rose of Lima’s importance to Peruvian nationalism and the cults of St. Anne and St. Joseph have been recently examined for their important links to creollismo throughout the Spanish American colonial region.\textsuperscript{12} Despite the increased interest in colonial hagiography, few candidates have been put forward as potentially important icons of Puerto Rican national veneration.\textsuperscript{13} Instead, it is the jibaro, and his accompanying imagery, which is most often identified as the locus for an early Puerto Rican national iconology.

A recent article by Ilenia Colon Mendoza includes a strong visual analysis of Frade’s Pan Nuestro which contextualizes the painting in this manner, and the research of Dolly Maria Hernández links certain works by Francisco Oller to themes of creollismo. A systematic analysis of the component parts of jibaro iconology and their relationship to jibarismo as an expression of nationalistic sentiment, however, has yet to be accomplished.\textsuperscript{14} By closely studying a wide range of jibaro images, and historicizing them in the context of Puerto Rican economic and cultural history, I

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize


\textsuperscript{13}Andrew Connors, “José Campeche’s ‘San Juan Nepomuceno,’” American Art 11, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 136–140. San Juan Nepomuceno is posited occasionally as an important early figure, but Campeche’s portrait predates the Age of Revolution. As such it represents an expression of regional patronage, not nationalism, as is the case with Guadalupe or St. Rose.

\textsuperscript{14} Mendoza, “Ramón Frade’s El Pan Nuestro.” I am indebted to Ilenia Colon Mendoza for her adept deconstruction of the nationalistic potential of Pan Nuestro, as well as her linkage of this work to the iconology of the PPD party logo. Dolly Marie Hernández, “Francisco Oller and His Painting El Velorio,” (thesis, Michigan State University, 1995). Dolly Marie Hernández’s in-depth analysis of Fransico Oller’s El Velorio is equally useful in its contextualization of one of the works at the center of its inquiry.

6
will endeavor to bridge this gap in the scholarship, as I map the emergence of a truly nationalistic movement within the Puerto Rican artistic community at the turn of the century.

My method involves the unification and expansion of preexisting analyses of disparate examples of jíbaro mythification while bringing to light additional works with thematic similarities. This research has led me to consider important images by a third artist, Manuel E. Jordan (1853-1919), which exhibit similar traits to those by Oller and Frade that have garnered more attention in the scholarship to date. Jordan’s oeuvre contains several images of rural homes; these paintings in particular deserve more scholarly attention than they have yet received. These works, taken alongside those of Frade and Oller, add to a corpus of jíbaro painting which collectively demonstrates the jibarismo component of Puerto Rican nationalism by the beginning of the twentieth century. This survey allows me to put forward a corpus of visual material that demonstrates the extent to which Puerto Rican nationalists heroized the rural farmworker to further a sense of community amongst various segments of the Puerto Rican social strata.

Nationalism itself is not a static idea. As E. J. Hobsbawm points out, the nationalist movements which resulted in the independence of Mexico and Peru in the early nineteenth century had a slightly different character from those occurring at the end of the century, when Puerto Rico briefly enjoyed a measure of autonomy from Spain. Globally speaking, early nationalist movements focused on the regional unification of ethnically or linguistically similar peoples. This is the sort of nationalism that saw several small city-states coalesce into a unified Italian nation-state, for instance. Late nineteenth century nationalism involved formalizing cohesion around historically based political boundaries (even if this tradition of historical autonomy required some “invention” on the part of
those seeking its culmination in state sovereignty). My examination of the evolution of Puerto Rican *jibarismo* will explore several ways in which Hobsbawm’s definition of nationalisms provides an interpretive framework for exploring the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding creole hegemony in Puerto Rico during this period. It should be noted that while Puerto Rico’s case is little commented-upon in scholarship of this sort, Latin American nationalisms have become the subject of increased attention in recent years.

Latin American scholars often seek to nuance Benedict Anderson’s formulation of nations as “imagined communities” of people, cognitively interrelated around a common sense of invented belonging. Anderson focuses on the creative process of mentally associating oneself with a large group of people to whom one feels a strong association. Chasteen, Castro-Klaren and others point out that in the case of Latin American states, nationalism was one of several possible grounds upon which social groupings could form. Affinities of ethnicity, class, regional heritage, and economic interest provided intersecting and overlapping possibilities for corporate identification. That multiple, sometimes contrasting nationalisms could develop within a given polity should come as no surprise. *Jibarismo*, then, is but one way in which Puerto Rican national identity could be articulated, and this identification with an idealized rural way of life was itself complicated by its

---

15 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Hobsbawm lays out his definitions of the different historical periods of nationalism in this work. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). His earlier text examines ways in which cultural traditions were “invented” in the service of nationalist ideals in order to serve political means. This theory is highly applicable to Puerto Rican *jibarismo*.


17 Chasteen and Castro-Klaren, *Beyond Imagined Communities*
adoption by urban intellectuals as a symbolic “masquerade.” Francisco Scarano’s term helps to explain the process by which urban painters, far removed from agrarian life, employed these motifs of rural labor to express their nationalistic sentiments.

While Jordan grew up in circumstances similar to those experiences by rural jíbaro laborers, Oller and Frade led lives far removed from these experiences. The jíbaro, to these men, could have become an “other” to be looked down upon and mocked from the comfort of their urban domiciles. Instead, however, these artists consciously chose to don aspects of rural identity, painting jíbaro people in a style which exuded familiarity and commonality, and obscured their own distance from the experience of agrarian life. I will argue that jíbaro imagery, for all three men, was an expression of creole loyalty, nascent nationalism, and symbolic identification with a perceived Puerto Rican ideal. In order to postulate about these artists’ reasons for employing jíbaro imagery at the end of the century, I must first investigate how the myth of the jíbaro came to have such firm roots in the creole collective imagination.

The story of jibarismo is linked to historical issues of economic turmoil, demographic shifts, and the gradual elevation of rural cultural practices to mythologized and universalized tropes of nationalistic rhetoric. Puerto Ricans shared a knowledge of their history which provided a flexible set of signifiers that could be deployed in the assertion of communal belonging. Indigenous Puerto Rican society died out very early in the Spanish colonial era, and subsequent waves of immigration from around the Spanish empire led to a population dominated by creoles. Puerto Rico never possessed a

---


19 It is important to remember that creollismo, Puerto Rican nationalism, and perceptions of jíbaro culture were ever-changing matters in the nineteenth century. They developed in phases, and each new formulation was necessarily retrospective.
large slave population, and during the nineteenth century it was primarily peninsular Spanish interests which threatened creole hegemony on the island. Creole group-identification grew throughout the nineteenth century as island-born Puerto Ricans began to envision themselves as a cohesive social and political unit. Still, creollismo was not inevitable, and its development progressed organically, and in phases.

Unpacking the possible meanings that jíbaro imagery might have had for creole society at the end of the nineteenth century requires an exploration of the relationship between jíbaro identification and mythification and the diverse referential components of this evolving national mythology. What might a creole viewer have been thinking about when he or she first encountered Pan Nuestro hanging in a gallery in San Juan? How might this reaction have differed from that of an American colonial official, and why? It only by investigating the intellectual, political and economic contexts in which Frade practiced his craft that the symbolic operation of jibarismo can be properly apprehended. As the colony experienced demographic and economic transformations over the course of the century, the mythic figure through which Puerto Ricans reflected their self-image was transformed as well. Historical events provided the raw material for the construction of symbolism.

An eminently flexible signifier, the jíbaro was at various times a symbol of pride, an emblem of degeneracy, and a representation of revolutionary fervor. Frade, in particular, painting a jíbaro at the beginning of twentieth century, tapped into this trove of multivalent memories to create a fresh meaning for the jíbaro in the context of the new American colonial administration. Through the recycling of signs, each incarnation of the jíbaro referred to and reshaped previous formulations. Paintings by these artists bore the traces of this heritage in their iconographic details and each canvas provided referential material for later iterations as well.
To understand the operation of this visual mythology, I will begin with a close viewing of *Pan Nuestro*, the most famous of all the *jibaro* paintings; I will use its iconology as a roadmap to uncover the layers of associations which built up around the myth of the *jibaro* during the nineteenth century. Then I will examine the broad set of *jibaro* images, looking for clues to how paintings of sugar fields, farm workers, and country homes were used to express nationalistic sentiments at the turn of the century. Finally, I will look to visual culture in the first few decades of the twentieth century and observe the reverberations of this creative communal self-fashioning. By doing so, I will demonstrate how the humble Puerto Rican *jibaro* became the visual icon of Puerto Rican creole nationalism, allowing a perpetually subjugated people to articulate their own sense of group identity in the face of two separate colonial regimes.
Painting Puertorriqueñidad

Pan Nuestro

Ramón Frade’s Pan Nuestro is a bold composition. A full-figure, imposing portrait of a peasant farmer striding across his tropical landscape, Frade’s canvas is immediately legible as a genre painting of rural agriculture. The rustic figure of the farmer, with his gnarled bare feet, leathery skin and simple clothes occupies almost the entirety of the canvas. He carries a newly hewn bundle of plátanos in his arms; the green skin of the fruit, alternately shining in the sun and blending into the shadowy embrace of the farmer’s arms, appears to be of the same substance as the man, his clothes and the landscape. Frade contrasts the texture of smooth fruit, sturdy clothes and worn skin with the scruffy brown grass growing beside the heavily trodden red clay footpath that the farmer seems to have walked many times before. He does not need to watch his step; rather, his gaze assertively engages the viewer’s eye. Indeed, the farmer, from the top of the five-foot canvas, looks down from above the observer. His straw pava hat does not even shade his eyes; Frade allows nothing to interrupt the man’s bold and assertive stare.

The landscape in the background recedes quickly from the farmer, who is poised arresting close to the picture-plane and is drawn in hierarchic scale. The man’s next step will surely bring him into the gallery space; his forward-cast shadow is cropped by the edge of the canvas— it has already escaped the scene. The path that he treads is out of scale with his feet, too small for his overly large form. Frade uses proportional relationships here to create a visual tension; one looks alternately at
the farmer and at the landscape, but the perspectival scheme will not coalesce into a single-point recession--the horizon is too low for the man to be contained by his environment, giving him an iconic quality. In the distant background, perched on the side of a hill, we see his homestead, a thatch-roofed wooden *bohío* house, typical of the Puerto Rican farming class (“*bohío*” refers to a hut or shack of this design). A single palm tree beside the house attests to the tropical setting. The brilliant blue sky and thin, speckled clouds, together with the hard shadow cast by the farmer, testify to the blazing heat of the scene. This man has performed hard work in the bright sun to merit his armful of sustaining “bread;” his ennoblingly-erect carriage and his direct gaze positively command respect.

While it is tempting to posit an ethnographic explanation -- some of Frade’s works have been described as belonging to the “costumbrista” tradition of painting (depicting local customs and lifeways in a documentary fashion) -- the scale of the canvas and certain iconological features speak to a deeper and more political charge.\(^{20}\) Unpacking these elements requires the employment of special tools of visual analysis; Frade’s composition is well-suited to an iconological reading, which will uncover key signifiers upon which symbolism rich in aspirational nationalism is constructed.

*Pan Nuestro* was painted in 1905, the beginning of a new century, seven short years after the recolonization of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898. Appearing as it did during a period of drastic social, civic and economic change, the work’s uneasy assertiveness seems to speak to an underlying political charge. Even the title “*our* daily bread” is conspicuous in its use of the possessive first person. Frade submitted the painting to the colonial government in hopes of earning a financial prize (a travel stipend). While it was favorably approved by the Chamber of Delegates, the local

\(^{20}\) Mendoza, “Ramón Frade’s El Pan Nuestro.” Braschi, “El Pan Nuestro.” Mendoza gives a nice summary of *Pan Nuestro*’s nationalistic implications, and offers salient details about the background of the image’s creation and immediate reception. As mentioned above, Braschi shares this assertion.
governing body made up of creole officials, the American auditor reversed this decision and denied Frade his reward. Something about this painting provoked a difference of opinion between its Puerto Rican and American viewers.

Understanding why it might have had this effect, however, requires an examination of the painting's artistic and historical context. Frade’s plátano-carrying farmer is, of course, an embodiment of the Puerto Rican jíbaro, a prototypical creole possessing a dense mythology (with historical roots) whose semiotic potential was hotly contested at the turn of the twentieth century. This was not the first time, however, that he appeared in Puerto Rican art and literature. The potential for jíbaro iconography to evoke political connotations had roots at least as far back as the 1820s; the implications themselves evolved throughout the nineteenth century. A careful contextualization of this mythic heritage allows some of these meanings to become legible. For inspiration in how this might be accomplished, I take my cue from a rising tide of Latin American art history.

In recent decades a new wave of regionally focused art historians have begun unpacking the nationalistic iconology of religious figures and artistic traditions from colonial Central and South America. They trace ways in which the attributes of old-world saints were transposed, modified, and reinstalled in images of new-world religious figures. This unpacking involves intensive contextualization; historians must search for diverse referents that, taken collectively, form a fabric of understandings that certain images might have elicited in the minds of their original viewers.

One such scholar, Jaime Cuadriello, follows in the footsteps of the late art historian and theorist Erwin Panofsky in his own analysis of religious paintings commissioned in Colonial Mexico.\(^2\)

In Cuadriello’s reformulation of iconological analysis, the historian’s task in reading a picture is to move from formal analysis (viewing an image for shapes, lines and brushstrokes) through iconography (symbolic forms) and on to iconology, the realm of social meaning and instinctual understanding. Accessing these deep meanings, which Panofsky termed the realm of “iconographical synthesis,” requires a careful investigation of the historical circumstances surrounding a particular image.\(^\text{22}\)

Many viewers have gazed upon Frade’s painting over the course of its existence, and its potential meanings have fluctuated with time. But even now, more than a hundred years removed from its creation, one can ascertain something of its probable meaning to turn of the century Puerto Ricans by uncovering aspects of the “mental set” of its probable viewers. For E. H. Gombrich, who coined the term, this involves reconstructing the historical background in which specific nuances of style became popular.\(^\text{23}\) In the context of twenty-first century regional art history, these concepts can help explain the layered, multiple and historically contingent referents to which a given set of signifiers might have appealed.

To use the example of Frade’s painting, the farmer’s pava hat points to the fact that he is a jíbaro; his bold gaze, huge size, and authoritative bearing signal that he might function as an icon of national identity. In this way, the jíbaro is made into a myth, to borrow a term from Roland Barthes. The operation of the jíbaro as a complex and mythic symbol relies upon a set of underlying, readily


understood referents which would have been implicitly understood by Frade’s viewers.24 These associations allow Frade to transform the simple image of a farmer carrying fruit into a signifier of nationalistic ideals by employing visual shorthand to stand for a whole corpus of ideas and meanings. While the reading is not closed (a reformist colonial administrator might view the work as a call for education and industrialization in rural Puerto Rico, for instance), by comparing the work to other Puerto Rican jíbaro paintings in the context of their social and historical background, one can locate the potential for nationalistic content within the subject of the painting and in the artist’s treatment. For a certain kind of Puerto Rican viewer, cognizant of jibarismo and actively identifying with the implied creole politics, this reading of Pan Nuestro would have been instinctual.

An analysis of the jíbaro as a myth and an icon are essential to an understanding the meanings provoked by this body of turn-of-the-century imagery. This set of significations can only be understood in a very specific socio-historical context (the jíbaro’s historical background). As Claude Levi-Straus might say, the jíbaro is “good to think with” while endeavoring to unpack the art and history of a Puerto Rico in transition.25 Jibarismo gathered associations as the century wore on; the figure of the rural farmworker was used as a symbol of self-sufficiency, independence and pride in local cultural heritage. Before the mythification of the jíbaro in Puerto Rican national consciousness can be explored, it is necessary to better define the historical circumstances that gave rise to jíbaro culture as an “invented tradition” through which this Puerto Rican nationalism could be enacted.

24 Barthes, “Myth Today.” The jíbaro can be understood as a myth because it functions as a sign which obscures its own referential scheme. The slippage from identifying clues (clothes, farm implements, etc.) to the identification as a particular type (jíbaro) to associations with political meanings could occur without the viewer’s conscious effort. Uncovering the operation of these transferrals of meaning involves re-historicizing the jíbaro, stating the connections that the myth leaves unspoken.

Historicizing the Jíbaro:  
Class, Commodity and Coffee

Who was the historical Puerto Rican jíbaro? Was he just an emblem, like Uncle Sam in the United States, or Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, or does this rhetorical type represent an actual class of individuals living at a particular time in Puerto Rico’s history? Where does the term come from, and how was it understood by Puerto Ricans in Frade’s day? A survey of the agrarian history of Puerto Rico during the nineteenth century will provide insight into these matters.

During the colonial period, the term jíbaro had different meanings in different parts of the Spanish world. In Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela the term referred to a group of indigenous people who were notoriously difficult for the Spanish to control. In Cuba and Santo Domingo, the term denoted wildness, as in “jíbaro dog.”\(^{26}\) For Puerto Ricans, however, it was used to describe the people living in the mountains: itinerant laborers who followed the coffee harvest and poor farmers who owned no land, or very little.\(^{27}\) Here, “jíbaro” as an adjective could also refer to a distinct corpus of cultural expressions, especially the décima (ten-lined) form of lyric poetry, which would be sung by a jíbaro “trovador,” (troubadour) accompanying himself with music from his small “cuatro” (four-stringed) guitar.\(^{28}\) Used most loosely, jíbaros were rural Puerto Ricans involved in agricultural labor. More specifically, the label could be applied to landless workers who, due to a variety of legal and economic forces, by the end of the nineteenth century constituted a group whose

\(^{26}\)Scarano, “The Jíbaro Masquerade.” Francisco Scarano’s text provides a good geographical breakdown for the use of this term across colonial Spanish America.

Laird Bergad, a prominent agricultural and economic historian who studies nineteenth century Puerto Rico, points to two contrasting definitions of the jíbaro used by Puerto Ricans during the late nineteenth century. In one scheme, “jíbaro” referred to any rural resident of the highlands; this use was a cultural referent. Alternately, “jíbaro” could refer to small independent farmers, in contrast with “agregados” and “journaleros,” which will be discussed, below. In this use, “jíbaro” refers to a socio-economic group. The cultural and economic definitions are overlapping and interlocking.

labor was heavily commodified, first by immigrant coffee and sugar planters, and eventually by large sugar *centrales* (mills), fueled by the new influx of American capital.  

29 Jíbaros were from the mountains, specifically, from the *Cordillero Central*, the island’s hilly backbone. Eduardo Forastieri Braschi postulates that the word “jíbaro” may have been derived from the indigenous term for “mountain” or “rock.” This association of the *jíbaro* with the interior highlands would be reinforced as the century wore on and demographic shifts and important events in Puerto Rican agrarian history strengthened these territorial connections. The *jíbaro* was neither a city dweller nor a sugar farmer; in fact urbanity and coastal sugar production were often contrasted with the *jíbaro* lifestyle. *Pan Nuestro* and other examples of *jíbaro* imagery from the turn of the century exploit such key signifiers as mountains, farm implements, distinctive dress, and native flora appropriate for farmers from the hill country, thereby identify figures as members of the *jíbaro* class. Recognizing these visual cues is an important part of the search for traces of *jibarismo* in Puerto Rican visual culture during Frade’s time. By looking more closely at the history of Puerto Rican agriculture over the course of the nineteenth century, the importance of these signifiers becomes


apparent, as does their integral relationship within the mentality of creole nationalists who used the 
jíbaro as a symbolic representative of their cause. Independence, self-sufficiency, creole heritage, and 
local customs were all values which could be articulated through manifestations of jíbarismo. 
Visual celebrations of this communal identity offered one way for Puerto Rican artists to express their 
civic pride at a time of tumultuous regional politics.

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Puerto Rico 
was subjected to significant sovereign instability. Passed over by the “Age of Revolution” which saw 
many of its Latin American neighbors break away from Spanish colonial control, Puerto Rico instead 
endured a back-and-forth struggle with Spain for constitutionally endowed measures of increased 
sovereignty.31 Less than a year after this slow process towards independent recognition had reached 
some measure of culmination in the Carta Autonómica (Charter of Autonomy) of 1897, the island 
was recolonized by the United States in the Spanish American War.

If nationalism functions as an expression of communal belonging in contrast to some other 
possible identification, Puerto Rican nationalism is complicated by its fruition at a time of transitive 
colonization. Is jíbarismo best understood as an assertion of local specificity in contrast to a more 
generic Latin American belonging to the Spanish Empire, or was it an expression of Spanish heritage 
in the face of anglophone assimilation into the new North American metropolis? Expressions of 
creole identity after 1898 (such as self-identification as a jíbaro or jíbara) must be read with an eye 
for both contexts. Jíbarismo, like nationalism, could take multiple meanings depending upon the 
situation. These meanings built upon one another over time.

31 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7. 
Trías Monge, Puerto Rico, 9-15.
It is best to begin, then, with the older of the contexts against which Puerto Rican creoles exerted their claim to a distinctive *jíbaro* culture. In what ways was *jíbaro* identity emphatically not-Spanish? For most of its colonial history, Puerto Rico was strategically important, but economically insignificant to the Spanish colonial project. From the foundation of the Spanish administration in 1493 until the growth of the tourism industry in the twentieth century, agriculture was virtually the only component of the Puerto Rican economy. Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo refers to the Spanish colonial system as a “machine:” a complicated (but extremely efficient) construct which funneled resources and profits mechanically from the New World to the Old. In this machine Puerto Rico was the watchtower, the guard station, but not the goldmine.\(^{32}\) The port of San Juan was a key military outpost for defending the sea routes taken by Spanish treasure-ships. Prior to the nineteenth century, most of the island’s production was centered on subsistence farming, and much of its trade consisted of illegal smuggling through the southern ports. The colonial administration was funded in large part by a government subsidy derived from Mexican mining profits.\(^{33}\) After the Napoleonic Wars, when Spain began losing its hold on its more profitable colonies in Central and South America, the need for an economically self-sufficient Puerto Rico became increasingly apparent.

The demographics of Puerto Rican agriculture changed drastically in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1800, the population of Puerto Rico numbered barely more than 150,000 people. Their sustenance was derived in large part from agricultural activity taking place in the flatlands around the perimeter of the island.\(^{34}\) This land was easier to cultivate, and more accessible


from the coastal ports. As Puerto Rico’s population was not large, there was no need to settle the more mettlesome uplands. This was perceived by the colonial officials as an inefficient use of land, and in 1815 the Spanish administration issued a “Cédula de Gracias” under which Catholics from anywhere in the world were encouraged to settle in Puerto Rico, on the condition that they brought with them sufficient capital to establish sizable farms. They would be granted land and would be free from tax obligations for five years, and from tithe requirements for fifteen. Furthermore, they could import farm machinery without a tariff, and they could export their crops wherever they chose.35

This fiat increased immigration to Puerto Rico from other parts of the Spanish empire, France, Louisiana, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. As the century wore on, larger sugar plantations began consuming the coastal land, driving small-scale (creole) farmers inland and uphill. This demographic shift marks the beginning of the jíbaro’s association with Puerto Rico’s mountainous interior.36 If it were not for Cédula de Gracias, one would not expect to see hills in the background of Frade’s landscape, and the pan itself might very well have been sugarcane, not plátanos. The possibility for a contrast between creole farming families in the uplands and newly immigrated planters along the coast began during these first decades of the nineteenth century.

The newcomers were not Puerto Ricans, and were seen as outsiders by those whose families had an established local history. Some creoles who remained on the edges of the island identified with jíbarismo on a cultural level, though they did not follow the migration themselves. This marks one early example of creole consciousness in the Puerto Rican context; as new immigrants moved in and gained power, established creole families began using their existing cultural heritage as a marker of authenticity which the new immigrants could not assert. Not all Puerto Rican farmers were poor


By 1820, the term jíbaro was being used in print to refer to rural Puerto Rican creole farmworkers.
*jíbaros*, but all *jíbaros* were creoles. *Jíbaro* self-identification was used as a metonymy for creole status.

Farming practices distinct to mountain farming would provide signifiers for asserting this identity; artists like Frade would use the specifics of *jíbaro* agrarian practice to communicate a nationalist subtext in their works. How might the reception of Frade’s painting have differed if he had heroicized a sugar *bacendado* (landowner) from the coastal plains? Such a painting would still have been a celebration of the Puerto Rican economy, but for a creole viewer, it would have lacked the clear self-reflexive quality that lies at the heart of *Pan Nuestro*. Coastal sugar farming was the domain of creoles and new immigrants alike, and thus ambivalent as a signifier of Puerto Rican communal identity. Frade’s painting ties into a “mental set” of associations made possible by a commonly understood connection between the hill county and *jibarismo*’s implicitly creole implications.\(^{37}\)

This reading of Frade’s painting in the context of the *jíbaro* myth relies on the associations of *jíbaro* society with the hill country, subsistence food farming, and creole status. These attributes aid in the understanding of *Pan Nuestro* as a *jíbaro* picture. The *jíbaro*’s role in the historical moment of the *Cédula de Gracias*, one of the most vividly remembered early conflicts between Spanish interests and those of Puerto Rican-born creoles, is one of the earliest connections that can be drawn between *jibarismo* and the formation of a creole consciousness in opposition to Spanish heritage. This Spanish/creole dichotomy provided the foundation upon which Puerto Rican nationalism began to coalesce. The *jíbaro* communal identity was, by the first few decades of the nineteenth century, beginning to be discernible as a unique subset of the Puerto Rican agrarian community. Frade’s viewers would have known these details of Puerto Rican history without thinking about them. This

natural slippage from signifier to iconological background is what makes the visual symbolism so effective, and subsequent changes to the *jibaro*’s social status would add additional layers to the myth of the *jibaro*.

As they moved uphill, Puerto Rican creole farmers were forced to change their farming practices. The mountainous terrain of the *cordillera* is not well-suited for sugar production. It is heavily forested, difficult to access, and the sun is not as strong here as it is along the coast. These are all ideal conditions, however, for the growing of coffee using the technique known as shade farming. This method uses the existing tree canopy of an old-growth forest to shade young coffee plants and modulate their sun exposure. The crop yield per acre is not high, but shade coffee can be easily combined with the subsistence farming of foodstuffs such as *plátanos*, citrus, or avocado. The coffee plant grows as a shrub underneath the forest or food trees. This technique does not lead to soil exhaustion, and supports a large range of biodiversity. In short, it is sustainable at the small to medium-scale farming level.\(^\text{38}\) For the poor *jibaro* families who moved to the *cordillera* in the 1820s, this method of agriculture was a perfect fit; they could grow plenty of food while also producing for the market. Farming in the shade of the mountains was “akin to gardening;” hand-clippers were frequently used, and this method required virtually no outlay of capital investment.\(^\text{39}\)

Shade coffee was such a natural supplement to subsistence farming that in the first half of the nineteenth century, virtually no farmer failed to grow at least a small amount of coffee or tobacco for market. Still, by 1830, 70% of Puerto Rico’s agricultural production was still being consumed on the island itself.\(^\text{40}\) The few cash crops were produced in what some considered an outmoded, labor-


intensive fashion. Puerto Rican agricultural profits were hampered by the persistent lack of capital. William Haas, an American agricultural historian writing in the 1930s, noted that at the beginning of the century before, modern sugar mills with iron machinery were still outnumbered four-to-one by those of antiquated wooden construction. He credited government incentives for the capitalization of the agriculture industry with some improvements as the century wore on, but even in his own time he called for increased investment to modernize the island’s agricultural enterprises. Shade farming in the first half of the nineteenth century provided small-scale farmers an opportunity to continue the subsistence agriculture that they had practiced along the coast prior to the Cédula de Gracias. It did not, however, provide export crops on the scale that the colonial administrators desired.

As the century wore on the call for efficiency and increased production that drove the jíbaros into the mountains began to threaten their farming practices there as well. The lifestyle of the jíbaro farmer, now firmly associated with the mountainous interior, was in the 1840s also associated with a backwardness of techniques and culture. As coastal agricultural was increasingly capitalized between 1815 and 1849, small-scale, independent subsistence agriculture became synonymous with mountain coffee farming. As coffee prices rose toward the middle of the century, however, the potential for increased production could not be ignored, and the hunger for export expansion again threatened the independence of the jíbaro farming class. This time, however, there was no vacant land for them to retreat to.

The need for capital to modernize the agricultural sector was a persistent problem which drove Puerto Rican economic policy throughout the nineteenth century, beginning with the Cédula de Gracias. The colonial administration saw the jíbaro workforce as a labor commodity which was inefficiently employed by the backwards baccienda system of farming. The baccienda system, which

---

dominated Puerto Rican agriculture during the first half of the nineteenth century, was controlled by planters with large landholdings. These landowners, mostly creoles, formed an elite upper class, and often maintained homes in San Juan when not engaged in their farm work. The haciendas allowed for the centralization of regional agricultural production around a great house, which was usually surrounded by workshops, barns, and mills (or drying equipment, in the case of coffee). These haciendas could exist alongside small-scale farms, and farmers with modest landholdings often worked on a task-by-task basis on the haciendas to supplement their own income.  

_Hacienda_ life carried strong associations with creole hegemony, and images of the great houses and their environs were frequently commissioned from the island’s leading artists. A few of these paintings will be more closely examined in subsequent pages. These hacienda pictures offer an additional window into multiple strata of creole life; creole society was not economically homogeneous, and _jíbaro_ self-identification offered like-minded creoles from various classes a means of creatively ignoring these socioeconomic gaps. As stratification increased in the second half of the century, this intentional obfuscation of social difference took on nostalgic implications. When wealthy creoles spoke of creole unity through _jibarismo_ late in the century, they were manufacturing a memory of a time when hacendados and landless _jíbaros_ had worked side by side on the hacienda. While these visions of a more unified past obscured very real inequalities within mid-century creole society, they were based in part on a real system of agrarian commerce which had all but ended by the end of the century.

Before 1849, those workers who did not own land were permitted to coexist with the planters and small landholders in a variety of relationships. During this time, the _jíbaro_ title referred variously to small landholders and to landless farmers who made their living in various ways under

---

the flexible bacienda system. One such arrangement involved an agregado relationship, in which a farmer could work a plot of land he did not own on the condition that a portion of the harvest would be turned over to the landowner at the end of the season. Alternately, he could be a journalero, or wage worker, for one or more planters. The agregados enjoyed greater economic benefits, however, and this was the preferred relationship from the workers’ point of view. For the planters, however, the supply of journalero labor was insufficient to keep up with market demands; wage rates and labor scarcity stood as obstacles to increased exports and maximized profits. It must be remembered that Puerto Rican farmers were not large-scale slaveowners like their Jamaican and Cuban neighbors. While some Puerto Ricans owned African slaves, these constituted less than 15% of the island’s population at any given time.

How, then, could the politically influential, elite creole planters create a freer supply of wage laborers? Their answer was the Journalero Law of 1849. This act changed the composition of Puerto Rican society by altering social and economic relationships between rural landowners and laborers; it also changed the way in which Puerto Ricans conceived of jíbaro culture.

The journalero law is viewed by historians as an ideological turning point in Puerto Rican agrarian commerce. Under this statute, anyone who was not an artisan, landowner, nor in possession of sufficient capital to supply for his own needs must become a journalero (so named for the journal, or book of papers that one was required to carry to prove gainful employment at the hands of a larger landowner). In short, the law dismantled the agregado system entirely, forcing former sharecroppers to either become arrendatarios (tenants), working someone else’s land for a fixed rent (which was prohibitive), or to become wage workers. While many laborers found ways to avoid carrying the journalero—negotiating nuances of their social and economic circumstances to their

43 Bergad, “Grito de Lares,” 632-634
benefit—this historical moment signaled a change in the way the hacienda system functioned. There was a shift towards fewer, larger landholdings rather than myriad subsistence stakes. Along with a simultaneous tightening of documentary practices to prove land ownership, the journalero law had its desired effect, at least in part. The number of journaleros in the labor market increased, and agregados were all but eliminated.

The move towards a quasi-capitalist market economy, however, had unexpected results for the creole coffee planters. As their farms grew, the large-scale farmers of the cordillero depended increasingly on merchants to transport, market, and sell their coffee off-island. This resulted in an increase in the influence of these coffee merchant intermediaries. By the 1850s and 1860s, most coffee farmers did not sell their crops directly to exporters on the coast. Instead, they relied on a distribution system in which wealthy merchants (most of whom were new immigrants from Peninsular Spain) bought these crops for a fixed price, transported them to coastal ports, and resold the coffee for a significant profit. These merchants could also buy a crop on speculation for an even lower rate, in exchange for an advance payment at the beginning of the season. For medium-sized farming establishments, this represented one of the only mechanisms by which credit could be acquired for capital outlays in advance of the growing season.

The reliance on outside capital bred resentment on the part of creole families towards immigrant merchants. Prior to the 1850s, creole pulperos (medium-scale coffee farmers) dominated the coffee industry in the highlands. By the late 1860s, they had been almost entirely supplanted by the newly arrived merchant class. The resulting ill-feeling would create social and political tension as the century progressed, adding to the perceived division between creoles and Spanish immigrants, or

---

peninsulares. As this gulf grew wider, differences within the creole community began to appear less significant, in comparison to the idealogical gap between Puerto Rican islanders and those newly immigrated from Spain.

Creoles began to selectively ignore internal differences as they sought to put on a unified front in opposition to peninsular interests. They found that expressions of pride in the *jíbaro* culture with which they identified furnished a means for expressing solidarity and common cause. The creole community began to rally around an “imagined community” for which identification with *jíbaro* culture served as a mark of membership. Popular rhetoric derided the *journalero* law as bad for the *jíbaro*, a thinly veiled commentary on creole frustration with an invasion of peninsular interests into the local economy. In this way, seemingly innocuous expressions of pride in *jíbaro* culture gave voice to creoles as they rallied around a common cause. Not all creoles were *jíbaros*, but by mid-century, Puerto Rican creoles from various backgrounds and areas of the island were finding it effective to rhetorically position themselves as members of this group.

As demographic and economic shifts in Puerto Rico redefined what it meant to be a rural farmer, creole rhetoric increased the prominence of the *jíbaro* within the collective consciousness. Specific references to rural culture in local literature increased, the term *jíbaro* became more prevalent in these writings, and these authors began to codify specific aspects of local life as a monolithic folk culture. *Jíbaro* tradition, as such, was being invented (to borrow from Hobsbawm), as century-old social and cultural practices were described, recorded, and referred to as aspects of a shared creole heritage.

Of particular importance to the development of Puerto Rican *jíbaro* mythology was the printing of Manuel A. Alonso’s *costumbrista* text, *El Gibaro: Cuadro de costumbres de la isla de* 

---

46 Bergad, “Grito de Lares.”
Puerto Rico (The Jíbaro: A Description of the Customs of the Island of Puerto Rico), which described the rural lifestyle, customs, dress, and cultural forms of the island’s rural mountain-dwellers for the first time in monograph form. Alonso authored the text under the pen name of "El Gibaro de Caguas." In this text Alonso speaks in the guise of a jíbaro, while actually speaking for him. This transposition, while subtle, is but one example of an elite non-jíbaro creole adopting the role of jíbaro identity to present himself as a part of the culturally homogenized “imagined community” of creole society.

While Alonso was, in fact, a resident of Caguas in the eastern cordillera (and so, undeniably, a rural mountain dweller), he was an educated intellectual and a writer, not a jíbaro farmer. He appropriated the title of the people whom he eulogized, adopting it as a pseudonym. His description of jíbaro society is also somewhat ambivalent. While much of the text celebrates what he describes as laudatory homegrown culture, at times it also patronizes, taking a condescending tone towards the jíbaros’ resistance to education, modernization, and progress. Both El Gibaro and the journalero laws helped fuel the myth of the jíbaro as an untamed force in need of reform; a rural anachronism to be reigned in and transformed into a culturally and economically fruitful citizen of the modern age. While Alonso recounts popular dances and songs which he allegedly gathered from the highlands, in other parts of the text he makes the jíbaro out to be a creative fellow who probably had too much time on his hands if he could spend so much of it dancing. This negative twist on what had been a largely positive cultural expression marked a change in the jíbaro dialogue. Alonso’s text focuses extensively on jíbaro leisure time and recreation, delivering careful description

47 Manuel A. Alonso, El Gibaro: Cuadro de costumbres de la isla de Puerto Rico, (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1974).

of musical styles, poetry, and rural customs. The subtext here is that the *jíbaro* is all play and no work. Alonso, a Puerto Rican creole of a heightened social status, is here engaged in the very same criticism of subsistence agriculture that was the driving force behind the *journalero* law.

In his description of the *jíbaro* Alonso celebrates the poor man’s culture while arguing for the elimination of his way of life. From one perspective, Alonso assumed the role of “el gibaro,” and used tropes of self-representation to articulate a distinct cultural identity. Viewed another way, the text was an (perhaps inadvertent) assault on the very free-spirited *jíbaro* independence that it eulogized. Circulating as it did amongst the creole well-to-do, *El Gibaro* served both as a cultural exhortation and a call for social reform. In its emphasis on idleness and rural recreation, the book articulated a typical mid-century understanding of the *jíbaro* class. This text represents one of the first instances where distinctly Puerto Rican cultural forms (music, dress, poetry) were associated with a particular (prototypical) originator, the rural farmhand, in whose communities these cultural forms thrived. It also stands as a primary source in which urban creole society can be seen expressing its anxiety about the perceived inefficiency of the rural working class.

While *jibarismo* could bring together creole interests, it could also draw attention to divisions within creole society. Group identifications are always multiple, and often contradictory. It should be no surprise that the creole elite could metaphorically don the *pava* hat of the *jíbaro* to oppose peninsular interference with their economic affairs while also condemning *jíbaro* laziness as an obstacle to their profits. The *journalero* law and *El Gibaro de Caguas* are two sides of the same coin. Both responded to the changing social landscape by defining relationships through the fashioning of imaginary social groupings.

Did nineteenth century Puerto Rican artists create a similar tension in their visual representations of the *jíbaro* class? Does the 1905 *Pan Nuestro* engage either of these mid-century
conceptions of the Puerto Rican jíbaro, or does Frade’s farmer more closely resemble the rural mountain man as he existed in the 1820s? To be sure, Frade’s canvas avoids Alonso’s critique of jíbaro cultural excess by eschewing a depiction of the jíbaro engaged in leisure activities. Frade’s painting asks its creole viewers to engage self-reflexively, recognizing the valorous work ethic of the honest farmer in their own daily toils. There is no peninsular here to act as an “other,” nor is there any hint of denigration towards its subject. This is a painting which seeks to unite a creole “us.” Alonso’s text, by contrast, uses its costumbrista style to keep jíbaro identification at arm’s length. No person views his own attire as a costume.

**The Multivalent Jíbaro: El Velorio as Social Criticism**

About a decade before Ramón Frade painted his iconic jíbaro portrait, another large-scale scene of rural life of the island elicited critical response from Havana to Paris. Francisco Oller’s *El Velorio (The Wake, 1893* -fig. 2, Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras) displays a vivid cross section of jíbaro customs. These are the sorts of musical, gustatorial, and religious activities described by Alonso’s mid-century work. Details of jíbaro dress, architecture, relationships, and activities explode forth from the composition. Ephemera of rural life burst from every corner of the little cottage in the painting: cats leap, food spills, belongings teeter precariously from the rafters. Here Oller visually alludes to the mid-century ethnographic tradition which posed the jíbaro as the object of an observational gaze.

*El Velorio* is sometimes described in critical literature with the same “costumbrista” label as Alonso’s book.⁴⁹ While the political implications of this are not immediately apparent, Hobsbawm

---

⁴⁹ Mendoza, “Ramón Frade’s Pan Nuestro,” 78.
can be of service here. In his text, he describes the way in which nationalist movements historicize themselves. One way in which national groups justify their right to statehood is by asserting a claim to a longstanding and unique cultural heritage. Especially in instances where ethnicity or linguistic customs fail to distinguish a given community from its metropolis or its regional neighbors, “traditional” culture can act as a means of demarcation.\(^50\) By visualizing the jíbaro with exacting and historicizing detail, Oller (and Frade) dressed his creollismo in the trappings of long precedent. He paid close attention to specific attributes of rural life long associated with the jíbaro: clothing (pava hat, dungarees), ritual (velorio), domestic settings (bobío), etc. The connection between these specific signifiers and the jíbaro label had been an established part of the Puerto Rican literary and cultural tradition since the publication of Alonso’s book decades prior. By making his turn-of-the-century conflation of jibarismo with Puerto Rican nationalism seem old, Oller gave his patriotism an air of inevitability. A closer examination of El Velorio reveals this principle at work.

Oller painted this work in the seaside town of Carolina between 1890 and 1893. Along with Frade’s Pan Nuestro, it is one of the most significant cultural treasures of the island. Oller created the painting for submission to the Salon of 1895, exhibiting it in San Juan and in Havana on his way to France, where it was seen by Pissarro, and other members of the Parisian artistic elite.\(^51\) While the work was somewhat misunderstood by its Parisian audience, the Cuban press hailed Oller for his authentic expression of Caribbean culture and his modern technique.\(^52\) In Oller’s own writings it

---


Hernández, “Francisco Oller and His Painting El Velorio,” 17

becomes clear that he considered this to be one of his most important works, and it remained in his own collection for quite some time before he donated it to the Escuela Normal (now the University of Puerto Rico). The subject of a monograph and numerous scholarly articles, El Velorio is the most thoroughly documented, most carefully analyzed and best-researched of Oller’s surviving works. It has been hailed as evidence of ethnographically unique funerary rituals, analyzed as a metaphor for the loss of Puerto Rico’s autonomous status, and scoured for insight into race relations after the abolition of slavery.  

While it is not often labeled as a “jibaro” painting, it adds measurably to the discourse of creole nationalism in Puerto Rican visual culture.

The painting’s subject is a baquiné, a rural Puerto Rican tradition still in practice at the end of the nineteenth century. When a small child died, it was believed that the child’s soul went straight to heaven to become a new angel, and that this was cause for celebration. Music, dancing, and feasting were common at these wakes, as it was thought that tears would “dampen the wings” of the little angels. The origins of this tradition are in dispute, but it is possible that they were rooted in traditional African practices. For Oller, the baquiné represented the backwardness of jibaro superstition, and the need for social progress and cultural modernization. Such criticisms would be echoed in a less nuanced fashion under the American administration, but unlike these patronizing

---


54 Hernández, “Francisco Oller and His Painting El Velorio,” 22.

dismissals of Puerto Rican culture, Oller’s composition is intricately ambivalent in its treatment of rural ritual practice. It is as much a celebration of Puerto Rican dignity as a call for progress. This is not the strategy employed in the colonializing texts and images that would be produced just a few years later after the American reconquest; it is more akin to the subtly critical exploration practiced by Alonso in *El Gibaro*. Oller’s criticism of rural Puerto Ricans is different from Alonso’s, however. Oller faults the *jíbaros* for their superstition rather than their laziness; the painting presents another example of *jíbaro* imagery being used to simultaneously celebrate and criticize the supposedly typical lifestyle of the island’s rural citizens. A closer look at *El Velorio* is needed to reveal further implications of this dialectical approach to the *jíbaro* myth.

Oller’s painting, measuring about two feet by four, is a crowded composition. Situated within the thatch-roofed *bohío* of a poor country family, the single room, with its open-shuttered doors and uncovered windows, is full to bursting with all the trappings of rural Puerto Rican life. *Plátanos* hang in a bundle from the roughhewn roof-beams, along with ears of dried corn, the family’s usual foodstuffs. On first glance it is easy to forget that Oller’s scene involves anything so sombre as a recently deceased child. This is a crowded, chaotic interior scene in which the family’s neighbors play music, dance, chase animals, embrace each other, drink alcohol and cavort merrily. A *cuatro* playing *jíbaro trovador* lounges in the doorway, while behind him a black man plays the *carrachó* (a gourd-based rhythm instrument which is scraped to the beat of the music). The openmouthed woman with the scarf on her head could very well be a *cantora*, or folk singer, rounding out a musical ensemble hired by the family to celebrate the occasion of the *baquiné*.57

56 Dr. Ashford’s comments, quoted at the beginning of this paper, are typical of the sentiments expressed in the American press concerning *jíbaro* life in Puerto Rico at the time of American intervention. He dismisses the entire Puerto Rican working class as nothing more than “degraded laborer[s].”

57 This ensemble is exactly what Prisco Hernández would expect to find at a *jíbaro* celebration.
*Jibaro* music in a *jibaro* home. In the upper left corner farming tools hang crazily from the wall: a pair of baskets and an upraised machete, similar to the one carried by Frade’s *jibaro* worker. Oller piles signifiers of rural life one on top of the other to set his scene.

The rough architecture contrasts with the matching black lacquered chair and table, which boasts an intricate lace-trimmed tablecloth above its delicate turned legs. While the residents of this home may have led a mean existence, they were not incapable of appreciating finished furniture and fine textiles. They clearly could not afford the latest city fashions, but they furnished their simple home with a few well-designed pieces, and filled out the rest with objects of functional, solid construction. Even the wallboards, roughhewn though they may be, have been cleanly painted in contrasting white and green and are well cared for, with no sign of flaking or fading.

Stashed in nooks and crannies across the home are the trappings of daily life: a spoon, a teacup, a rope, a bottle. In his depiction of a traditional rural home, Oller provides ample indicators of an ordinary family’s living situation. He gives a sample of their food, their design choices and even their religious practice, with a small crucifix mounted over the door and rosary beads dangling from the wall to its left. While Oller’s scene takes place in the bright, strong light of day, it is clear that, like almost all Puerto Rican homes at the end of the century, the *bohío* relies on candles fixed to the walls and hanging from the rafters for what little light it can get at night. Sturdy hurricane lamps shield the tapers from the drafty winds that would surely have pierced the thin board walls. The viewer can even view the family’s pets: a spotted cat lounges in the rafters, while beneath the feet of a smiling little boy two dogs chase one another rambunctiously, disturbing a bowl of flowers and various pieces of furniture.

---

José Trías Monge points out that at the time of the reconquest, only three cities in Puerto Rico were fitted with the utility infrastructure necessary for interior lighting, gas or electric. The rural *bohíos* at the time lacked both plumbing and power. Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico*. 

35
The animals are not the only contributors to the sense of imbalance within the scene. They provide a sense of movement and dynamism which, along with the crying children in the lower left corner of the canvas, lends an immediate impression of unease to the composition. It is jíbaro religion, however, embodied many times over by the baquiné celebrants, that lies at the heart of Oller’s social critique. And no one is indicted more harshly than the rural priest.

Oller’s criticism of the rural clergy is easy to discern. The priest should be comforting the mother of the dead child (she is the smiling figure with bandaged head on the right), but he is more interested in the roasted pig which has just been brought into the room by a cheerful young man. The roasting spit forms a cross with the ceiling beam, and the hog mimics the crucified Christ above the door, giving the celebration a distinctly irreligious tone. Nearby, the cat in the ceiling has been burdened by at least one scholar with satanic implications. Only the poor, barefooted black man gazes at the dead child with consideration and respect. Everyone else in the room appears to be distracted by the festivities. To emphasize the importance of the connection between the black man and the child, Oller paints two beams of light which stream through the wallboards to fall on the pair, guiding our gaze to the forgotten grief at the center of the moment. The spatial and emotional contrasts—calm at the center with chaos all around—provide El Velorio with its emotional charge and social implications.

Oller participates in the construction of the jíbaro myth by simultaneously recognizing familiar aspects of a distinctly creole cultural existence and criticizing its more retrograde social tendencies. He does not dismiss the jíbaros out of hand as immoral or evil people. The black man is

---


60Boime, “Image of Black People.” Albert Boime identifies this man as a “natural Christian,” who understands the nature of the Christina faith instinctively, and more truly than the hungry clergyman at his left.
as much a jíbaro as the trovador or the drunken fellow who hangs from the rafters waving his pava hat. Oller recognizes the romance, musicality, dignity, and hard-work ethic at the core of this rural laboring class. He does not, however, ignore its desperate need for better education and liberation from what Oller views as a tragically superstitious past. Oller himself, who considered this to be one of his most significant compositions, described it as “a criticism of a custom” rather than a caricature of a class.⁶¹

Oller’s measured stance reveals the intricacies of group identification at the end of the century. Oller’s painting is like a first-person narrative, painted from the intimate view of an invited guest. For Oller, a well-born creole intellectual from a wealthy San Juan family, identifying himself as a member of the rural working class was a conscious choice. The critical distance visible in the painting makes this clear. And yet Oller-the-Puerto-Rican (if not Oller-of-San Juan) is clearly associating himself with the creole culture which he paints. Oller’s economic station, his educational status and his occupation resist his identification with the jíbaro class, yet by painting of El Velorio in this way, he participates in the construction of a nationalistic jíbaro myth through which he can claim affinity with this community. This self-imagining was an assertive, creative act which would have been clearly legible to Oller’s creole peers, who shared a common knowledge of their own history which facilitated this understanding.

The Revolutionary Jíbaro: Puerto Rican Nationalism and the Grito de Lares

As the nineteenth century progressed, new features were added to the mental set of meanings which came to be be associated with the Puerto Rican jíbaro way of life. After the Cédula de Gracias, this label was applied to rural creole farmers dwelling in the central mountains,

contrasting them with newly arrived sugar planters settling on the coast. After the journalero law was passed in 1849, jibarismo was used with greater specificity. Now wageworkers in this region were considered jíbaros, but coffee merchants from the Iberian peninsula were not. It was during the middle of the century that Miguel Alonso’s costumbrista text, El Gibaro de Caguas, described jíbaro society using specific cultural identifiers. The mythology of the jíbaro was a layered affair, with each new demographic development adding to the potential for collective imagination; each phase of communal identification built upon the one that came before. By the end of the 1860s jibarismo was one of several communal identifications available to Puerto Ricans. Like creole status, political affiliation or municipal residency it could be asserted in order to align oneself with a specific set of commonalities and interests.

During one important moment of civil unrest, jibarismo would serve as a rallying point for rural creole farmers who found their livelihoods curtailed by what they perceived as foreign economic pressures. This event, the Grito de Lares (literally, “shout” or “cry” of Lares) offers the clearest view to date of the potential for expressions of aspirational nationalism to stem from a collective identification with jíbaro identity. The Grito was a brief rebellion in 1868 in which creole farmers declared their region of the western mountains an independent republic, free from Spanish dominion. While it was short-lived, the movement gave visibility to social rifts which had been forming within rural Puerto Rican society for quite some time.

As subsistence farming (with a little coffee production on the side) gave way to a full-bore market economy in the 1850s-60s, the merchant class played an ever more important role in the cycle of commerce. Credit, always tight on the island, began to flow in from the continent as wealthy Spaniards established trading firms in Puerto Rico. It was typical for these to be family establishments, run by young men for the benefit of their older relatives, who stayed behind in Spain. After a decade
or so in Puerto Rico, these merchants would themselves retire to Spain, and send their sons to work in their place. Flush with the profits made from exporting high-quality Puerto Rican coffee (it was in great demand in Europe for its superior flavor), they could extend credit to the smaller-scale creole landholders and *pulperos*, who now represented the highest ranks of locally born agrarians. The creoles, for their part, felt displaced and resented this debt entrapment to the continental interlopers. It was no coincidence that during the *Grito de Lares*, the first thing burned by the creole farmers and *journaleros* were the credit books of the Peninsular merchants.  

As Roberto Márquez puts it, the *Grito de Lares* was “akin to a Declaration of Puerto Rican Independence ... mark[ing] the decisive preeminence and political consolidation of the island’s aspirants to creole hegemony.” The creole coffee farmers, who had been firmly in control of political and economic forces in the interior a few decades before, resented their loss of power and status, and fought against the imposition of foreign power in creole affairs. Still, their rebellion failed to take hold, and immigrant capital was not going away. What began with the *Cédula de Gracias* as an invitation for investment had, from the perspective of the creole planters, turned into a hostile takeover by intrusive outsiders. There was a growing need for a distinct creole identity vis a vis the Spanish, Venezuelan and American newcomers. The *jíbaro*, with his distinct clothes, rural accent, local songs, and homegrown diet, was becoming the emblem through which nationalistic ideals could be expressed. In the decades following the *Grito*, Puerto Ricans expanded the role of the mythic *jíbaro*, with all of his layered associations, as a representative of this national identity.

By the turn of the century, the *jíbaro* would come to stand for Puerto Rican-ness in common parlance and visual culture. Even those outside of the traditional *jíbaro* community--writers, thinkers,

---

62 Bergad, “Grito de Lares.”

sugar farmers, residents of San Juan—began identifying themselves as participants in this culture, although their lives were lived outside of the jíbaro economy. To be born into the Puerto Rican way of life was to be jíbaro, whether one lived in the mountains or on the coast, and whether or not one tilled the soil for a living. Jíbaro identity was a role that could be assumed; as Scarano puts it, “creole politics” had become a “jíbaro masquerade.”64 The “jíbaro” adjective was a label that could be applied to oneself even if the traditional socioeconomic demographic did not apply. This end-of-the-century appropriation was not a new phenomenon, but it became more common as the century drew to a close, its manifestations becoming ever more numerous.

With this well-developed nationalistic mentality in mind, one might expect that by 1867 the Grito de Lares would have led to a larger rebellion, and ultimately an island-wide independence movement. Puerto Rico, however, lacked Mexico’s Miguel Hidalgo, and Ramón Betances, the Puerto Rican rebellion’s leader, was unable to maintain his hold on the small mountain town. Spanish forces prevailed, and unlike its Central American neighbor, Puerto Rico did not gain sovereignty shortly after developing a national consciousness.65 While the island did attain some loosening of Spanish control in the final years of the nineteenth century, independence as such was aborted by the American invasion of 1898.

The “Picnic” and the “Battle of Signs”: 1898 and the Beginning of the American Occupation

The gradual shift towards Puerto Rican autonomy took a leap forward on November 25, 1897, when Spain granted the island home-rule under the authority of the Carta Autonómica.

64 Scarano, “Jíbaro Masquerade.”
Though it was still technically a Spanish possession, this would be the closest Puerto Rico would come to achieving sovereignty. Seven months later (to the day), on July 25, 1898, United States troops from the U.S.S. Gloucester landed at Guánica on the southern coast of the island. The ensuing conflict lasted only 19 days, and was largely bloodless; America newspapers referred to the entire operation as “the picnic,” a reference to the hospitality supposedly extended to the American troops by many of the Puerto Rican people.\(^66\)

Military historians have begun to question the traditional narratives of the conflict, going so far as to propose more accurate labels for the war itself. Thomas Paterson, for example, suggests that the events of 1898 might be better remembered as the “Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War.”\(^67\) Even in this contemporary reassessment, the Puerto Rican portion of the conflict is completely ignored. For Puerto Ricans, however, the loss of autonomy was a matter of real significance. Did American intervention on the island, then, represent a liberation from Spanish domination, or was it a reassertion of imperialism under a new flag? Would the newly Americanized commonwealth be assimilated as the newest state admitted to the Union, or would it remain an occupied territory indefinitely?

From the perspective of the Puerto Ricans, whose supposed enthusiasm for the American colonial project was key to the success of the initial military campaign, the path forward was anything but clear. Ambiguities and uncertainties were inescapable in the aftermath of 1898, and the negotiation of these issues in everyday life constituted what Silvia Alvarez Curbelo refers to as “the

---


In this article, Emma Davila-Cox questions the traditional narrative of the Spanish-American War.

This cultural intersection of Spanish traditions, Puerto Rican creole customs, and the changes advocated by the American administration involved a “battle of signs” -- the transposition of presidents' birthdays for saints days in the political calendar, the establishment of a Protestant religious presence, even the respelling of the island's name to the Anglicized ‘P-O-R-T-O.’ Cultural historians studying the period speak of this historical moment as a struggle for the definition of the Puerto Rican people.

In the aftermath of the recolonization, the jíbaro myth would become the subject of rhetorical contestation as the American administration attempted to appropriate the label. When used in American discourse, “jíbaro” was transformed into a moniker of denigration and ridicule. At the same time, Puerto Rican creoles continued to use jibarismo as a rallying point around which they conceptualized their group identity despite their re-subjugation. Self-reflexive painting was one way in which Puerto Ricans attempted to recuperate their own voice, defining their corporate identity on their own terms. Jíbaro painting as self-portraiture, as seen in Frade’s Pan Nuestro, was as an assertive act of emphatic self-definition.

Pan Nuestro is legible, then, in at least two overlapping historical contexts: it speaks to the century-old tradition of asserting a shared understanding of jíbaro culture to declare commonality amongst Puerto Rican creoles (as a potentially sovereign populous, independent of the Spanish empire) and it functions as a declaration of the same self-definition in the face of American recolonization. This self-historicizing mythology functions by referring back to previous iterations of

---


69 In addition to Alvarez Curbelo’s text, see also: Fernando Picó, 1898: La guerra después de la guerra, (Rio Piedras: Huracán, 1998).
jibarismo. Frade’s figure wears the costume described by Alonso in 1849; he walks across a landscape which he began to inhabit after the Cédula de Gracias. His assertive authority harkens back to the short-lived rebellion of Lares. This simple composition combines referents to all of these shared memories, while proclaiming the jíbaro’s claim to his land, his crops and his independent way of life.

Jíbaro imagery in Puerto Rican art was not, however, restricted to simple portraits like Frade’s Pan Nuestro and genre scenes like Oller’s El Velorio. Other artists emphasized different signifiers to access the jíbaro’s potential for expressing creole nationalism. Puerto Rican landscapes, often interspersed with images of rural domesticity, were also in abundance. A few examples will demonstrate the flexibility and semiotic range of the jíbaro myth in the Puerto Rican context.

Heroes and Landscapes:
Puerto Rican Artistic Heritage and the Trans-Atlantic Exchange

“Puerto Rico! Beloved homeland, with your flowered fields full of light and verdure, with your radiant sun and exquisite sky. The homeland which is never forgotten and the memory of my first dreams absolutely demands my brightest artistic focus. I return with overflowing enthusiasm and cherished, encouraging hopes.”

- Francisco Oller, 1901

Jíbaro landscapes are important objects of Puerto Rican heritage because of their subject matter, and also because of their manner of their execution. Oller’s style of painting, especially, displays a hybridity which mirror’s Puerto Rico’s position as a cultural crossroads at the turn of the century. His Impressionist landscapes, in particular, draw on a deep history of Puerto Rican artistic heritage while engaging with European artistic discourse as well. Edward J. Sullivan and Max Antonio

---

70 “Puerto Rico! La patria querida, con sus floridos campos llenos de luz y verdor, con su sol radiante y su cielo esplendoroso. La patria nunca olvidada y el recuerdo de mis primeros ensueños requerían con requiemientos imperiosos mi exaltada mente de artista, y volvi reboseando entusiasmo y alentando consoladoras esperanzas.”
Translation, mine.
Francisco Oller, Academia dibujo y pintura dirigida por Oller (San Juan, 1901), 45-46; reprinted in: Delgado Mercado, Tragedia y glorificación, 42.
Mischler have termed this dialectic “transatlantic visuality.”\(^{71}\) This label emphasizes Oller’s unique position as an artist who produced and exhibited in Madrid, Paris, and San Juan, a painter whose prolific mentorship of younger artists ensured that his ideas would resonate in local practice for decades after his death. More than just an artistic innovator, Oller was an emphatic educator. He established several art academies in San Juan during his career, and was responsible for training the first generation of painters who were active under the American administration. The corpus of works created by these artists during the early years of the twentieth century are treasures of Puerto Rican patrimony. The extent to which their works employ *jibaro* imagery is further evidence of *jibarosimo’s* import to a people in transition, seeking to fabricate a corporate identity for themselves in a time of severe political instability.

Oller’s creative background was both geographically and stylistically diverse. Born to an influential Creole family in San Juan, Oller was exposed as a child to the works of his eighteenth-century predecessor, José Campeche (1751-1809). Campeche, the son of a freed slave, had been the official portrait painter for the colony for much of the preceding century, receiving significant commissions from churches and institutions across the island. Campeche’s works belong to a Puerto Rican variant of the Spanish Rococo. Some of his portraits have been examined in recent scholarship as evidence of early proto-nationalist Puerto Rican painting. This line of interpretation emphasizes Campeche’s skill and his choice of subjects which were important to local beliefs and institutions (saints whose patronage was significant to the colonies, for instance). Still, Campeche’s works are easily understood within the context of the Spanish colonial hegemony.\(^{72}\) Artists from this time who

---


\(^{72}\) Connors, “San Juan Nepomuceno,” 136–140.
Also, Soto-Crespo, “Pains of Memory.”
were active in Mexico or Peru, for instance, were also working in the dominant Rococo style, painting similar images of saints important to their own regional institutions, or of local colonial officials.

In Campeche’s portrait of Don Miguel Antonio de Ustariz (fig. 3, 1790, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña), for example, Campeche depicts the colonial governor, in power from 1789-1792, in much the same way that one would expect a European noble to appear in an eighteenth century portrait from peninsular Spain. He is well-dressed, situated in a lushly furnished interior (very much the exception, rather than the norm for Puerto Rico at this time), and stands before an open window with a sweeping vista of his urbanized colonial dominion. Campeche depicts a Puerto Rico which is endowed with benevolent leadership, a stable social order, and economic prosperity. Valorization of the colony is achieved through a flattering depiction of the Spanish dignitary appointed to preside over it.

The interior furnishings are imported, and so is the style of dress. A few key pieces of furniture are featured in the composition, in much the same way that Oller emphasized the black lacquer table in El Velorio. In Campeche’s painting, however, the trappings are lavish, and spill out of the composition. Rich purple drapes, trimmed with gold fringe, frame Ustariz’ person, who holds a walking stick in his right hand while he pages through architectural drawings with his left. Behind him, two frames appear in the background, an oil painting of a wild landscape, and a picture-window through which Campeche displays the freshly paved streets of San Juan, one of the signature accomplishments of Ustariz’ administration. Oller employs a similar framing device in El Velorio, where the windows of the jíbaro cottage present self-contained landscape views of the pastoral Puerto Rican hill country.

Both artists employ windows to situate the viewer’s experience of Puerto Rican land. In Campeche’s case, the colonial administration moderates this visual interaction; for Oller, jíbaro
cultural practice serves as the lens through which Puerto Rican terrestriality is understood. If there is anything essentially Puerto Rican in Campeche’s portrait, it is the view of the island itself, but even this is a cityscape of San Juan, which, like the interior of the room, is dominated by Neoclassical buildings and decorative motifs imported from the metropole of Spain. Only in the far background can the rolling mountains and turquoise waters that indicate specifically Puerto Rican geographical features be seen. It is this aspect, the use of landscape as a signifier of local distinction, which would come to dominate Puerto Rican painting in the late nineteenth century. Like the mythology surrounding the jíbaro figure, the iconological function of Puerto Rican geography would shift over the course of the nineteenth century as landscape painting grew in prestige within Puerto Rican artistic practice.

As the Impressionistic landscape emerged in the latter half of the century as a mode for interpreting modern life in the Industrial Age, Oller and others in his cadre of Puerto Rican artists embraced the semiotic potential of tropical foliage, jíbaro houses, and local topography to express notions of creollismo and aspirational nationalism. These expressions were rooted in local artistic traditions and articulated through an adaptation of imported European techniques. Linda Nochlin articulates the connection between Oller’s French training (and his use of the Realist idiom, as well) to express social commentary relevant to his society. Nochlin emphasizes the importance of landscape in Oller’s practice, and in French painting of the same period, comparing Oller’s use of rural, terrestrial imagery to that of his teacher, Gustave Courbet. It is his reinterpretation of the European artistic idiom, fine-tuned to local tastes and traditions, that makes Oller a truly “transatlantic” painter.

Oller went to Spain at an early age to further his artistic training, having exhausted the pedagogical resources available on the island. Oller studied at the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid before moving to Paris and working under the tutelage of Thomas Couture. It was during this visit that he established acquaintances with Paul Cézanne and Camille Pisarro. Oller returned to Puerto Rico in 1865, after exhibiting work in the Salon of that year. Once home, he established the first of his schools for drawing and painting. Oller returned to Europe soon after, working in France and Spain between 1873 and 1884. During this time Oller mounted a major exposition in Madrid, when several of his works were added to the royal collection there. While in Europe, Oller materially participated in the development of Impressionism and internalized many of the lessons of Realism as well. As El Velorio demonstrates, Oller was adept at painting in both modes, employing them separately and in combination to achieve various artistic ends. He painted in the prevailing styles of his day while working at home and Europe.

This transatlantic fluency resists a relegation of his work to the colonial margins of nineteenth-century artistic discourse. As letters between Oller, Pisarro and Cézanne testify, these men saw each other as colleagues and co-participants in the exploration of new artistic methods at the end of the century. From the perspective of Puerto Rican painting practice, Oller’s oeuvre represents a synthesis of local tradition (inherited from Campeche and others) with European ideas shared by his peers in France.

From the very beginning of his career, Oller’s works spoke to Puerto Ricans using a recognizable visual vocabulary which drew from local cultural heritage. The works of Campeche were all around the young, artistically inclined young man as he grew up in the small city of San Juan.

---

74 Benítez Rojo, “Grand Manner.”
Oller’s grandfather, a prominent San Juan physician, once sat for a portrait by Campeche.\textsuperscript{75} Important religious works hung in many of the churches that Oller would have visited as a child. Much of Oller’s early work consisted of copies from Campeche’s paintings. On more than one occasion, Oller adapted Campeche’s composition of a government hero overlooking a landscape. Oller freely adapted this form, however, placing renewed emphasis on his treatment of the land.

\textit{Colonel Contreras} (1880-nfig. 4, Museo de Arte de Ponce) was painted by Oller in Spain during his third stay in Europe. It was featured in Oller’s Madrid exhibition in 1883, alongside several other works which garnered positive reviews from their Spanish audience.\textsuperscript{76} The canvas depicts the hero of the Battle of Trevino (a historically significant skirmish in the third Carlist War of Succession in Spain), who was a friend of the artist. Contreras is shown in full military regalia, on a hilltop which overlooks a swirling hillside of foliage beneath a warm blue sky. Oller painted four canvases of Contreras’ key battle; this portrait, like the battle scenes, seeks to eulogize Contreras’ military exploits.\textsuperscript{77} The technique for doing so, however, is more akin to Oller’s later works valorizing the ordinary citizens of his native island than it is to Campeche’s colonial portraiture.

The painting stands at an intermediate point in Puerto Rican art and in Oller’s own practice. This is heroic portraiture in the old style, inheriting its basic compositional qualities from Campeche, but there is more to it than that. Contreras, like Ustariz, is surrounded by the signifiers of his profession. The helmet, sword and decorated uniform point to his status as a soldier, but the

\textsuperscript{75}Bernard Christenson, “Spanish Royal Philanthropic Expedition and Smallpox Vaccination,” \textit{Clinical Infectious Diseases} 42, no. 5 (March 1, 2006): 731.

Campeche’s portrait of Dr. Francisco Oller, who began a program of smallpox vaccinations on the island in 1803, was copied by Oller in 1847. Dr. Oller was a prominent citizen of San Juan, provided medical advice to the governor’s family, and could afford to commission a portrait from Puerto Rico’s best painter of the day. This is the social circle into which Francisco Oller, the painter, was born.

\textsuperscript{76} Hartup, “Grand Manner,” 13.

binoculars serve another purpose. Contreras is a colonel with a command of the landscape; it is this knowledge of terrain and tactics that facilitated his military success. Oller emphasizes Contreras’ connection with the land by virtue of his close physical vicinity to the earth (he is leaning on a grassy hillock), and the binoculars, which emphasize the surveying gaze of this military commander.  

While Campeche’s Governor Ustariz grasped a map of San Juan in his outstretched hand to indicate his dominion, Oller’s hero is physically present in the terrain that he commands. The landscape itself is rendered in the modern, Impressionist style, a painting technique which Oller uses for landscapes in particular, reserving his more polished, invisible brushstrokes for still lifes, genre scenes, and studio portraits. This emphasis on terrestriality, and its association with loose brushwork, would play a key role in Oller’s practice back in Puerto Rico.

Because of Oller’s prolific activities as both an artist and a teacher, this tradition would find currency in subsequent generations of Puerto Rican artists as well. Engagement with—rather than isolation from—contemporary artistic practices would be a trademark of Puerto Rican painting in the early twentieth century. Oller operated within multiple idioms of visual culture. His works engaged in a centurylong tradition of equating Puerto Rican identity with terrestriality and Caribbean-specific attributes, while using current, European-style artistic modes to do so. This hybridity allowed his art to resonate at home while gaining acclaim in Havana and Europe, drawing attention to social issues within his own culture and expressing local pride to an international audience. Francisco Oller was not an isolated figure; Ramón Frade’s works functioned in a similar fashion, and the paintings of Oller’s closest follower, Manuel E. Jordan, shared many of these traits as well. An artistic movement was forming in Puerto Rico at the turn of the century, drawing from traditions of local practice and

---

78 Nochlin, “Courbet, Oller.”

imported technique; paintings from this time were rich in jíbaro imagery with nationalistic implications.

**Francisco Oller & Manuel E. Jordan:**
**Farm Scenes as Jíbaro Imagery**

In 1868, a young man named Manuel E. Jordan (1853-1910) enrolled in Oller’s free school for drawing and painting. Jordan’s family was less well-off than Oller’s, but they, too, were longtime San Juan residents. Jordan’s father had moved to Puerto Rico from Venezuela sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century and worked as a tailor in the city. Jordan and Oller would develop a close relationship over the following decades. This relationship would lead to new threads of jíbaro imagery, as both men undertook a series of landscape paintings which would add a fresh dimension to the visual heritage of the jíbaro myth. Jordan adopted many of Oller’s landscape techniques, adapting them to his own brighter palette. He also displayed a familiarity with Oller’s teachings on the social value of art produced in the Realist mode. The two men are known to have worked together on commissions; they displayed paintings in the same exhibitions, and they shared a love for performing music. Several of their paintings display striking similarities in strategy and technique, and form a large part of the corpus of jíbaro painting which is the subject of this thesis.

Ramón Frade’s *Pan Nuestro* and Oller’s *El Velorio* have already been explored in some depth; attention should now be paid to the breadth of material in which jíbaro signifiers appeared around the turn of the century. An exploration of farm scenes by Oller and Jordan is a good place to

---

José Francisco Orlando, “Apuntes biográficos de Manuel E. Jordan (Un maestro de nuestra pintura injustamente ignorado),” in *Homenaje a Manuel E. Jordan*, (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1984).

Puerto Rican music was generally a part-time affair for men engaged in other professions. Just as the jíbaro trovador would farm for his living and play guitar on the side, so too did Jordan and Oller engage in both music and painting during their professional careers. Jordan, it should be noted, was acclaimed more as a musician than as a painter during his own lifetime.
start. These paintings, which depict the setting and circumstances of agrarian commerce and domestic life, have been insufficiently examined for their role in jíbaro myth-making.

Oller’s *Hacienda Aurora* (1898-99—fig. 5, Museo de Arte de Ponce) and Jordan’s *Ingenio Azucarero* (“Sugar Mill,” fig. 6, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña) both depict sugar mills from the bacienda period. While “ingenio” can be translated as “device” or “machine,” in the context of sugar production, it refers to a certain kind of mill or sugar refinery in which a mechanized factory was surrounded by a batey (or open area), which was itself the center of the bacienda. The ingenios replaced the ox-powered trapiche mills of the previous century, but as American interests began infiltrating the Puerto Rican sugar economy, the ingenio mills would be abandoned in favor of a third generation of yet more efficient machinery, the central. By 1898, the ingenio was already something of an antique; the artists seem to have chosen imagery from this era of Puerto Rican agrarian commerce in order to appeal to a certain sense of remembered stability. Recall that at the beginning of the nineteenth century jíbaro status was defined through an association with coffee farming in the hill country, and in opposition to sugar farming on the coast, which was the domain of wealthier immigrants from other regions of the Spanish colonies, many of whom arrived as a result of the Cédula de Gracias. By the end of the century, however, subsequent generations of these sugar families were now Puerto Rican creoles themselves. New generations of peninsulares, and now the American military regime, constituted the outside forces which threatened Puerto Rican creole hegemony. *Jibarismo* had broadened to encompass some of those whom it once excluded.

We can see from these examples that images of local landscape features and agricultural commerce could effectively elicit the same patriotic response as a genre painting of local folk culture.

81 Jordan did not date his works, and there has been insufficient scholarship to establish a chronology.

The sugar *bacienda* represented the high point of Puerto Rican creole power, commerce, and esteem. Oller and Jordan drew a connection between the creole *hacendados* and their obsolete *ingenios*, and used this association to metonymically paint creole nostalgia into their plantation pictures. Anachronisms of machinery had become signifiers of *creollismo* which constituted a new motif of *jibaro* imagery.

It is probable that Oller painted *Hacienda Aurora* for the owners of this plantation, the Saldana family of Carolina, a small town northeast of San Juan where Oller took refuge during the hostilities of 1898.\textsuperscript{83} The painting was owned by several generations of the Saldaña family, before being donated to the Museo de Arte.\textsuperscript{84} It is an image of a functional sugar mill and its immediate environs--and a depiction of the coastal Puerto Rican creole economy in action. At the end of the century, sugar production was still the primary economic interest of the island’s coastal well-to-do. While farmers in the mountains were enjoying the coffee boom of the 1880s-1890s, growing shade coffee alongside their subsistence foodstuffs, sugar production was the domain of the elite creoles living in San Juan and the other coastal towns.

The sugar *bacienda*, like the plantation in the United States, functioned as a unit of land, labor organization and domesticity. Typically owned by creole families with large landholdings, the sugar *bacienda* was a complete production unit involving fields, a mill (the *ingenio* -- the structure with the smokestacks in the painting) and support industries of all types. This was the domain of the rural elite, many of whom also owned town-homes and exerted influence in San Juan. After the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873, the *baciendas* began to give way to *centrales*. These large, highly mechanized sugar production facilities were extremely expensive to build. The move to

\textsuperscript{83} Benítez Rojo, “Grand Manner,” 17.

\textsuperscript{84} Benítez, “Catalogue,” 200.
company-controlled, capital-intensive sugar production represented a rupture in the coastal agricultural system, much as the journalero law had disrupted coffee production in the uplands a few decades before.

At the time of Oller’s painting, both the government and economy of Puerto Rico were in a state of significant flux.\textsuperscript{85} Ingenio paintings, like images of the mountain jíbaros, offered an idealized way to remember the better times which were fading away. Large-scale investment from U.S. sugar companies after recolonization would eventually complete the shift to the central system and spell the end of haciendas forever. The hacienda, then, represented the pinnacle of elite creole power over the local sugar economy, a position that was threatened in 1898. While at first glance Hacienda Aurora and Ingenio Azucarero might resist identification as jíbaro images, upon closer examination they exhibit a similar iconology to that found in Pan Nuestro and El Velorio. While hacendados and journaleros were at opposite ends of the creole economy, they were united by a common birthplace, a shared cultural tradition, and a common opposition to outside interference in local affairs. Jíbarismo was becoming more slippery; what was once a very specific ethnographic label which applied to a specific class of rural workers was being reshaped in popular discourse into a means for imagining a more unified creole populace. These landscape artists, whose canvases closely associated the creole sugar economy with the terrestriality, offer examples of Puerto Rican intellectuals performing creole unity through products of visual culture.

Oller’s painting of the Saldana’s family estate is a tour de force in his mature style. In the foreground, young sugarcane plants sway in a sunny breeze beside a white road which has been well


The U.S. administration places great emphasis on sugar production, at the expense of coffee. Paired with the devastating San Ciriaco hurricane of 1899, which destroyed an entire year’s coffee crop and many of the plants themselves, the policies of the new administration spelled the end for coffee as the agricultural mainstay of Puerto Rican commerce going into the twentieth century.
cleared, smoothed, and it wide enough for heavy ox carts to pass along with ease. In the background, the mountains of Luquillo are rendered as a hazy blue outline. The two women in white cotton dresses walking toward the viewer seem to emerge from the mountains in the distance, their short shadows testifying to the intensity of the midday sun. The high, bright sky, rendered in brilliant azure, is starting to fill with the towering, heavy clouds that promise the daily afternoon rains common on the tropical coastal plain. Oller’s sky is carefully observed, and shares stylistic sensibilities with the one seen in Frade’s *Pan Nuestro*.

*Hacienda Aurora* and *Ingenio Azucarero* two share stylistic traits that testify to their Impressionistic roots. They are much more locally specific than Campeche’s portrait of the colonial governor with its tiny corner of Puerto Rican sky. Oller, whose visual vocabulary included polished, almost invisible brushstrokes as well as the more Impressionistic, painterly ones seen here, was known for using different styles of rendering for different subject matter. Here he is fully engaged in the Impressionist mode, which he generally reserved for landscape works. Recall the looseness of his brushstrokes in the landscape portions of *El Velorio* (the vistas from the windows). These brushstrokes become, for Oller, a signifier of landscape and, by extension, for the land itself, with the implication of creole ownership. There is some iconological hopscotch here; form proceeds directly to mythic content as Impressionistic technique asserts creole terrestriality. Loose brushstrokes evoke ownership of the land, with the signifiers of tropical locality barely necessary for the progression to occur. Oller reserves this treatment for terrestrial forms. In *Hacienda Aurora* the buildings of the sugar farm are rendered in smooth strokes: sharply outlined, and solidly depicted. The surrounding land, by contrast, dissolves into the loose, romantic brushwork of Impressionism.

Color and light play a role as well. The vast, brilliant sky occupies much of the frame and draws the eye into its bright blue expanse. The hazy mountains, made distant through Oller’s use of
aerial perspective, are joined to the sky through his use of color. The farm buildings are shadowy heavy, dimly rendered and unmoving. The workers, by contrast, seem to blow across the canvas like two more white clouds. The style in which Oller paints them is similar to his treatment of their natural surroundings; this makes them seem terrestrial: ruralized, romanticized, descending from the mountainous background from which their mythic identity takes its shape.

Unlike Frade’s jíbaro man, Oller’s workers are dark-skinned. While ethnographic definitions of the jíbaro often classify him as a creole of European descent, the archetype is racially flexible; these fluctuations are sometimes employed to emphasize Puerto Rico’s “multi-mulatto” identity.86 Several of Oller’s hacienda pictures, Aurora included, are a bit puzzling in their ambivalence towards black labor, given that Oller was a pronounced abolitionist and a friend of prominent African American thinkers and residents of San Juan.87 One of Oller’s best-known abolitionist works, Flogged Negro (1868–now lost) has been cited by Albert Boime and Katherine Manthorne as a complement to his hacienda pictures.88 This painting, which was displayed in the 1875 Salon des Refusés, depicted the historical event of a brutal slave beating which took place near Arecibo. Abolition did not occur in Puerto Rico until 1873, five years after Oller produced the painting. Flogged Negro was a politically provocative work that would have placed Oller at odds with many members of his own class and social circles. Like Hacienda Aurora, it was a painting about Puerto Rican sugar production; plantation buildings appeared in the background behind the figure of a beaten slave.

86 Haydee Venegas, “Puerto Rican Art, Identity, Alterity and Travestism,” in Art, Minorities, Majorities (Dakar, 2003). Haydee Venegas offers this useful term in her brief manifesto.


Read in the context of Oller’s earlier painting, his hacienda pictures (of which Hacienda Aurora is a fairly typical example) support two simultaneous readings in their depiction of agrarian laborers. For their patrons, the owners of the great houses, they served as testimonies of an occupied domain—glorifying images of the hacienda system—and as nostalgic images of the profitable dominions of the coastal elite, whose empire was fading at the end of the century. The figures wandering along the road are mere staffage, and secondary to the images of proud ingenio buildings, with their smokestacks in the clouds. For the artist, who is known to have been sympathetic to the cause of exploited laborers, however, the emphasis on the land, the soil and the hard work of those who tilled the fields seems to insist on a valorization of the workers themselves, rather than the hacendados. One must take in the whole composition to understand this effect: while the fields are growing and the workers stroll peacefully along the cart road, the plantation houses are empty shells in the background, rendered in a way that alienates them from the landscape. The curtains have been let out, and no one seems to be at home in the great house. The workers, perhaps taking a deserved rest from their toil, meander down the road in front of the quiet mill. No smoke rises from the stack, no carts of cut cane trundle in for juicing; the hacienda is idle, even though the workers are not.

Jordan’s Ingenio is similarly ambivalent towards the owners of the modest mill it depicts. Jordan seems to be far more interested in the footpaths, the road and the textures of the sugarcane than in the ingenio building. The precisely rendered, neatly outlined mill seems out of place in the composition. Jordan, like Oller, uses a loose painting style in his coloring of the land and sky, reserving more academic brushwork for the hard-edged architectural feature in the center of painting. Jordan’s palette is brighter than Oller’s, and more evenly employed; he creates balanced blocks of bold color: green plants, red mill, blue sky. His composition is simpler, more static, and unpopulated. Jordan’s ingenio seems lonely as it stands silent beside the road.
Both artists use contrasting styles in their treatment of land versus the means of production. It is no coincidence that the workers themselves are rendered in the same fashion as the land they cultivate; they are at home here, an identification that is made possible through the careful use of Impressionist techniques. By associating the jíbaro workers with the land (rather than with the means of commerce) these artists cement the place of the jíbaro in his native environment. The Puerto Rican creole is made of the same stuff as the land he walks across; his claim to the territory is old, deep, and naturalized. The modern mill system, by contrast, is out of place here. The politics of corporate ownership are likewise alien and unnaturally imposed. Impressionism is employed to creatively assert jíbaro nationalism by emphasizing the deep connection between creoles and the land in which they were born. A celebration of their manner of inhabitation was yet another means of articulating this connection, as a few more examples will show.

**Workers at Home:**

**Puerto Rican Domestic Pride**

The Puerto Rican jíbaro possessed a distinct domestic architecture, which has long been recognizable as distinctly Puerto Rican. These small bohío homes appear frequently in turn of the century jíbaro images, and are usually rendered in an affectionate, familiar style. Like the jíbaro himself, the bohío belongs in the Puerto Rican landscape; the way in which Frade, Jordan, and Oller work images of bohío homes into their paintings speaks to the special place of these structures in the mental landscape of the society they inhabited. This can be seen by comparing the rendering of bohíos with the way in which other architectural forms are painted in these works. In contrast to Jordan’s crisp articulation of sugar mill architecture in Ingenio Azucarero, a different feeling

---

89 Nochlin, “Courbet, Oller.”
altogether comes from his paintings of the modest Puerto Rican homes of the rural uplands, a subject that he returned to repeatedly in his work. In *Regreso de la Faena* (“Return from Work,” fig. 7, collection of Sr. Santiago Rodriguez Jordan), a field worker, walking-stick in hand, returns at the end of the day to his simple home beside a winding path.

As Haydee Venegas points out, Jordan uses a higher level of detail in his renderings of working-class homes than he does in paintings of sugar mills or upper-class dwellings (of which *Ingenio Azucarero* is one of the few).90 This is a “vernacular house” (a *bohío*), with a wooden floor raised on posts to escape the seasonal floods of the Puerto Rican highlands. Jordan emphasizes the modesty of the home, visible in its small size and lack of window glass (recall *El Velorio*), but at the same time the yard is neatly trimmed and the path swept clean. The kitchen shed, charcoal pit, and compost heap that would usually accompany a dwelling of this style are carefully cropped out of the view.91 Jordan’s simple houses seem far more livable than their more elaborate counterparts, and more welcoming than his sugar mills. The *Ingenio* buildings, for instance, are separated from the viewer by a tall post-and-wire fence. The sugar mill is isolated, set off from the road, and formally centered in the frame. Jordan’s *bohío*, by contrast, is the pinnacle of approachability. Two steps from the small footpath, the door is open, welcoming the tired worker home from his labor. Tattered curtains hang in the simple square window; another scrap of fabric flutters invitingly in the doorway. Around the corner of the house, one catches a glimpse of a shade tree. To the right, another path, perhaps to a nearby farmstead, veers out of view. There are no fences here, nothing to block the pedestrian flow of neighborly conversation. Life seems simple, familiar. In Frade’s painting the *jíbaro*

---


man walked in a wide landscape with his *bohío* far in the background, a secondary reference to a distant domestic sphere. For Jordan, however, the *jíbaro*’s domestic environment is of central importance.

*Bohíos*, like the one in Jordan’s composition, were simple structures, square or circular in shape, and usually roofed with thatch. This style had been common on the island since Pre-Columbian times. At the end of the nineteenth century, *bohíos* could be found on the outskirts of the larger Puerto Rican cities, as well as out in the countryside. While the ancient *Taino* design had been modified somewhat to fit European tastes, the materials and basic construction methods of the *bohío* had been unchanged for more than 400 years. This was a truly Caribbean architecture, one that could be built from the products of the land and which was distinct to the agrarian commoners of Puerto Rico.

Jordan’s *Ingenio*, by contrast, is a two-story structure built from milled wood, and of a much more elaborate design. Unlike the shady *bohío*, with its breezy air and waving palm fronds in the yard, the *Ingenio* seems stifled on its lonely road and set apart from the land it occupies. It is the rural scene of working-class life that Jordan seems most to understand and celebrate, and it the rural home, rather than the agricultural workplace, which he romanticizes. The emphasis here is on lived space. Unlike Alonso’s book about the *jíbaro* leisure, however, Jordan’s vision of rural repose is earned through hard labor. In the paintings of Oller and Jordan, *jíbaro* people live in *jíbaro* homes; domestic architecture is a key signifier of the Puerto Rican ethos. Local materials fashioned into a form inherited from the immemorial past. By the end of the century the *bohío*, like the *jíbaro* himself, had become one means of expressing an invented corporate identity which held resonance

---

with like-minded Puerto Rican creoles, urban and rural. Viewers would easily have recognized the shape of this structure and immediately understood its implications. A widely understood connection existed between the *bohío* home structure, *jíbaro* culture, and the Puerto Rican national consciousness. Because of these connections, artists were able to use images of *jíbaro* people and settings interchangeably to reference implicitly understood associations with the *jíbaro* myth. This iconology relied on an identification of these specific architectural forms with an understood *bohío* prototype.

Rural agricultural was implicitly connected with the *bohío*. The *bohío* could be (and usually was) a farmstead in and of itself. Few rural homes in Puerto Rico were without small garden plots and, it should be remembered, small-scale coffee growing was easily integrated into domestic subsistence agriculture. This spatial arrangement is hinted at in *Regreso de la Faena*; the open space on the shadowed side of the house is almost certainly a garden plot, in which *plátanos* probably grew, with coffee planted beneath. The small dirt yard outside the *bohío*’s window would typically have been larger than Jordan paints it, and could have been employed for drying small amounts of coffee during certain seasons of the year.93 This familiar domestic environment, known to rural Puerto Ricans from daily experience and to city dwellers from exposure to *costumbrista* texts and trips to the edges of town, provided a set of signifiers of Puerto Rican identity which were employed by Oller, Jordan, and Frade to create a sense of community through their paintings.

The interest of these artists in *bohío* homes as a subject, and the sensitive and often Impressionistic mode in which they painted these structures, reveal ways in which ideas about *workers, land, and home* intersected in the minds of Puerto Ricans at the turn of the century. This

---

mental landscape, inhabited by *jíbaros* and dotted with comfortable *bohío* homes, offered a means for creole artists to assert their ownership of a homeland to which they had a limited political claim. The term *bohío* is most often translated into English as “hut” or “shack.” For Oller, Frade, and Jordan, however, this structure was neither diminutive nor pitiful. It was a matter of pride. Just like the *jíbaro*, who was long the object of scorn in the foreign press, the *bohío* led a dual existence in discourse of the day. To the colonial powers it symbolized a backwards, undeveloped way of life. For creoles, it could be an object of pride: familiar and idealized. Whether decorating the margins of a painting, as it does in *Pan Nuestro*, or boldly positioned as the center of attention, images of *bohíos* were effective at summoning up a whole set of meaningful notions related to *jíbaro* culture with iconological efficiency.

Taken together, images of *jíbaro* workers, cultural practices and domestic architecture formed a web of referents by which creole *jíbaro* culture could be articulated and explored in visual art. These images held rich meaning for Puerto Ricans at the turn of the century, who were actively defining themselves in ways that distinguished their culture from their Spanish background and the newly imposed American hegemony. *Jíbaro*-centered creolism was one of the primary means for expressing these distinctions. But just as the use of *jibarismo* as a technique for blurring distinctions between various, alternate groupings within Puerto Rican society could be a useful tool for imagining a unified Puerto Rican nation, so too could it be used to stereotype creole society as deserving of colonial subjugation. Puerto Rican creoles from San Juan to Cayey found that they could use *jíbaro* culture as a metaphor for a Puerto Rican national identity which could be representative of a broad swath of their society, bridging socioeconomic and ethnic crosscurrents. At the same time, the American administration use the *jíbaro* label to paint Puerto Rican society as a different kind of
monolithic entity, in this case with a pejorative implication not present in the homegrown creole discourse.

**Colonial Appropriations**

The terms of the United States’ possession of Puerto Rico were initially quite vague. (The relationship has never completely shed this ambiguity.) Before the events of 1898, the United States had not been an imperial power. Like most of the other nations on the American continents, it had itself been a territorial possession of a foreign land; Americans were conscious and proud of their postcolonial status. The Constitution provides a framework for a government of freely associated states. Government officials at the turn of the century were comfortable with the process of admitting regional territories to the union (the Dakotas, Montana and Washington were on the verge of statehood at the time of Puerto Rico’s annexation, and would be admitted to the Union as states in November 1899), but the prospect of maintaining noncontiguous landholdings, ones that were neither territories nor potential states, was a problem for constitutional experts. Following the premise that “the constitution follows the flag,” Puerto Rico had to be treated like any other territorial claim of the United States government, but the Spanish heritage and cultural differences between mainland America and this small, isolated possession posed obstacles to the prospect of assimilation.94 The first stopgap solution was the Foraker Act of 1900, which established the Doctrine of Incorporation, under which Puerto Rico was granted a semi-assimilated, but restricted status within the union. A nonvoting congressional seat was granted in the United States House, but all

---

three branches of local government were subject to appointment by the American president. This was a relationship of moderated colonialism, under which minimal autonomy was granted.

The terms of this relationship had to be justified to the American public, and in the waning years of the nineteenth century, publications intended for mainland consumption were designed to introduce the existing American family to their new step-siblings to the south. Penned by government officials, military officers, and ethnographic “experts,” these documents varied widely. Some documents, such as Henry K. Carroll’s Report on the Island of Porto Rico, were relatively straightforward and documentary, offering a balanced view of the state of conditions on the island. Among the more sensational texts was Our Islands and Their People, a book full of photos with exoticizing descriptions of Puerto Rican customs and scenery. This document, which has been the subject of extensive reinterpretation and analysis in recent years, examined Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines using the possessive attitude that begins its title.

In images such as Girls Assorting Coffee at Yuaco (fig. 8), the Puerto Rican population is depicted as female, diminutive, and inefficient. Photographs such as this one, depicting female coffee workers sitting idly around their bags of crops, envision coffee production as a rural, unindustrialized economic project. In this assessment, the Puerto Rican coffee industry lacks modern capitalized efficiency and focused management. The island’s commerce was not managed by agricultural

---


96 José de Olivares and William Smith Bryan, Our Islands and Their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil, (St. Louis; Thompson, 1899).
University of Puerto Rico (Río Piedras Campus), and Lanny Thompson, Nuestra isla y su gente: La construcción del “Otro” Puertorriqueño en Our Islands and Their People, (Río Piedras: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales Universidad de Puerto Rico Recinto de Río Piedras, 2007).
Sociologist and anthropologist Lanny Thompson reassesses Our Islands from a contemporary Puerto Rican perspective.
experts, the photo asserts; it was the domain of untrained women. The book serves as a call for
investment and entrepreneurial intervention at the hands of American businessmen. Puerto Rico is
“our island” now, declares the title of the book; the people belong to the island, not the other way
around. In this schema, negative American assumptions about the *jíbaro* were close to the surface
and were deployed as part of a colonial rationalization for intervention. While Puerto Rican creoles
used strong, masculine *jíbaro* imagery to claim ownership of the land and means of production in
which they were born, American colonial officials claimed ownership of people because of their
newfound political dominion. The “our”/“nuestro” dichotomy is a linguistic parallel for the
iconological struggle taking place in visual culture.

Photography was not the only area of print in which images of rural Puerto Rican farm
culture were used to diminish the creoles’ claim to autonomy. Cartoons were also used to similar
effect. In *UNCLE SAM to PORTO RICO*, a political cartoon printed in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*
newspaper in 1905 (fig. 9), Puerto Rico is personified as an ignorant child holding the hand of Uncle
Sam, who guides the boy through the confusing landscape of global affairs. The racial overtones are
inescapable here, and they speak to American perception about the Puerto Rican situation. The
Cuban child in the cartoon is violent, unruly, and very black—associations that speak to the perceived
difficulty of taming the Cuban revolutionary fervor. The Puerto Rican child is docile, amicable, and
easy to control, by contrast. American intervention in Caribbean affairs was a fatherly duty, and some
children were destined to be more cooperative than others. Parenthood and ownership: these were
two of the lenses through which America viewed its relationship to the Puerto Rican people. That
America’s newest subjects might resent forcible adoption was far from the minds of many in the
colonial administration.
Given the multivalent nature of the *jibaro* icon, it is not surprising that authors and photographers from the United States would employ some of its referents to certify the civilizing mission of U.S. intervention. Imagery depicting the *jibaro* as a barefooted rural farmer, indigenous to the mountain regions where paved roads, electric lights, and running water were entirely absent seemed ready-made for appropriation by the American media, which deployed these images in the name of public health, education reform and economic development. These are some of the same causes championed by Puerto Rican reformers in previous decades; Oller’s *El Velorio* was intended to be a social critique of rural culture, and a call for social justice. Unlike Oller’s painting, however, the images produced by the American colonial machine stripped *jibaro* icon of its creole nuances, and replaced its nationalistic overtones with patronizing pity. The collapse of social and economic differences within Puerto Rican society into an excessively simplified *jibaro* typology was a strategy which American discourse borrowed from creole hegemony. The difference in the two iterations lay in the intent behind the rhetoric. A comparison of the Chicago cartoon with Oller’s *El Velorio* will make this distinction clear.

Creole artists and writers employed identification with a prototypical *jibaro* in their calls for social transformation, and as a part of their claim for sovereign nationalism. Their *jibarismo* was a nostalgic celebration of their invented, homegrown cultural tradition. *El Velorio* is the easiest example to use. While the religious practice at the heart of the image was the object of the artist’s scorn, Oller’s sentimental rendering of *jibaro* architecture and musical culture soften the social critique and speak to an insider’s knowledge. The boy from “Porto Rico” in the American cartoon, by contrast, wears a *pava* hat that has been strangely confused with a Mexican sombrero, and he stands beneath a generic palm tree. The signifiers of place which were so lovingly observed and carefully rendered by Jordan, Oller, and Frade here become sloppy signposts of an exotic landscape with
undifferentiated Latino inhabitants. This could be Mexico, Panama, or Venezuela; careless visual shorthand signifies otherness, nothing more.

This reinterpretation of jíbaro signifiers was not the final word on the matter, however. Residents of the new colony would not allow the jíbaro myth to be stolen outright; they reasserted their own jibarismo as a key feature of Puerto Rican identity in the context of the new political situation. Just as jíbaro identifiers had served as common ground for Puerto Ricans creoles in the previous century (understood aspects of a culture that set them apart from Spanish peninsulares), these same elements of creollismo were soon to be reinterpreted as signifiers of difference vis à vis the new colonial power.

**Employing the Jíbaro: Utilizing a National Myth Under the New Regime**

“It is indeed true that God made bread for all. But great corporate interests, positioned against God’s justice, keep that bread from many in order to transform it into gold for their own safeboxes.”

—Luis Muñoz Marín, 1939

Luis Muñoz Marín was the first elected governor of Puerto Rico under the U.S. regime. He served from 1949-1965, representing the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), which he helped form while running for the Puerto Rican Senate in 1938. It was during this period, when the PPD was establishing its identity in island politics, that Antonio Colorado was hired to create an icon for the party (fig. 10). This emblem would appear in various forms on party leaflets, flags, and publications during the election of 1938 and beyond, and still serves as the party’s visual trademark. The logo

---


98 Nathaniel Cordova’s article provides an excellent outline of the development, importance, and iconography of the PPD logo. Mendoza also discusses the PPD logo and Pan Nuestro in her text.
consists of a circular outline of a man’s head, in profile, wearing a pava hat. In many versions the words “pan, tierra, libertad” (bread, land, freedom) appear in a semicircle around the profile. The importance of these three ideas to Puerto Rican nationalism cannot be overstated.

Just as Frade’s jíbaro worker was strikingly juxtaposed against a local landscape which lent him his context and identity, so does the PPD’s emblem offer a verbal reminder of the terrestriality of any viable understanding of Puerto Rican identity. We have seen how a set of images by Frade, Oller, Jordan formed a visual web of jíbaro imagery which was commissioned, written about, and displayed widely in Puerto Rico; these images formed part of a body of imagery which lent legibility to the PPD logo, and provided it with a large measure of its resonance and power. The reference to bread, the common metaphor for daily subsistence, is inescapably toned with both religious and economic undertones. Marín’s party was not insisting on gold and profits for every man, but on basic, necessary sustenance for its constituents. Libertad, to this colonized people, takes the form of bread and land: humble aspirations, made manifest in the person of the jíbaro, remembered from generations past.

The jíbaro, in his landed, independently successful, coffee-growing manifestation from the 1850s possessed little wealth or glamour. He had long been associated with a rural, terrestrial, independent way of life. His culture, his religion, his music and his poetry were all his own. He might be barefoot, but he controlled his land, grew his food, and answered to no authority but his own conscience—or so went the myth. Since even before Alonso’s costumbrista text began to fix some of these associations, the jíbaro seemed to have always already embodied these precepts.

By the time of Marín’s election, his supporters called themselves “jíbaros,” though only some lived in the mountains, and few grew coffee. The jíbaro myth was flexible, changing. In 1938, while the PPD was crafting a platform and searching for a strategy for increased autonomy within the political structures of the U.S. colonial regime, there was no more logical place to look than to the
"jibaro" for a ready-made, potent political icon around which to rally supporters. Bolstered by "jibaro" support, Marín won his election.
Conclusion: *Jíbaro Nuestro*

It is impossible to understand the *jíbaro* as a cultural icon without some regard for the economics, politics, and demographics of the Puerto Rico in which he was made myth. Likewise, even the most thorough statistical analyses of the switch from sugar monoculture to coffee and back again over the same period would be insufficient to explain why a political party in the 1930s would look back to this vaguely defined class of laborers from the previous century for a potent icon to motivate political action. Culture, for this ever-colonial people, seems to be fixed firmly in a sense of self-consciousness borne of resistance. Constantly defined as “other” by each subsequent colonial regime, Puerto Rican artists, authors and politicians from the early nineteenth century to mid twentieth sought to locate a sense of self in the image of an “us” that could be locally defined and nostalgically invoked using an iconology all their own.

Paintings from the turn of the century offer glimpses into various aspects of the “aspirational nationalism” through which Puerto Rican creoles fashioned their collective sense of self. Ramón Frade’s *Pan Nuestro* is an image of “our” bread; the myth of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* was one way in which residents of this island defined *nosotros* (“we”) on their own terms. Like Francisco Oller’s *El Velorio*, it provides a glimpse of who the mythic *jíbaro* was meant to be. Frade’s farmer strides across the land with heroic dignity; Oller’s bereaved family takes comfort in their vibrant culture and strong communal ties. Images of agrarian commerce, such as Manuel E. Jordan’s *Ingenio Azucarero* and Oller’s *Hacienda Aurora* demonstrate the deep connection between the *jíbaro* and the land in which he was born. Painted with an Impressionistic style learned far away, and adapted to the
particularities of the Puerto Rican landscape, these paintings offer affectionate views of the Puerto Rican countryside, painted by men whose heritage sprang forth from land they surveyed. Even the little *bohío* cottages, ever present in the rural landscape, became grounds for emotional connection. Jordan’s *Regreso de la Faena* is one example of this; his oeuvre contains many more too numerous to study here.\(^9\)

E.J. Hobsbawm postulates that ideas of “nation” are multiple, and progressive. “Revolutionary” nationhoods, based upon adopted citizenship, sometimes overlap with “nationalistic” ones, based on ethnicity, language, and communal bonds of culture. These nationalistic concepts rely on a perception of historical precedence to anchor them and give them weight. Only upon this firm foundation of understood inevitability can groups of people who perceive themselves worthy of sovereignty on nationalistic grounds begin to claim this hegemony through their perceived belonging to a *patria* or homeland.\(^{10}\) Creollismo in Puerto Rico by the time of the American takeover had clearly reached this advanced stage.

When cartoons and colonial publications sought to counter creole *jibarismo* with a competing view of rural life which offered it up for ridicule and disparagement in the American metropolis, Puerto Rican creoles would not allow their fond affection for *jibarismo* to be sullied. As self-proclaimed PPD “*jibaros*” found ways to creatively identify with the prototypical rural farmer from an age gone by, they demonstrated the potency of this icon to ground their claim for hegemony within a long tradition of Puerto Rican creollismo.

---

\(^9\) Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, *Homenaje a Manuel E. Jordan*, (San Juan, P.R.: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1984).

Of the 29 paintings and drawings by Jordan reprinted in the catalogue of his most significant retrospective exhibition, 15 of these images feature one or more *bohios* somewhere in the composition.

\(^{10}\) Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 19, 22, 73.
Works Cited


Christenson, Bernard. “Spanish Royal Philanthropic Expedition and Smallpox Vaccination.” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 42, no. 5 (March 1, 2006): 731.


Olivares, José de, and William Smith Bryan. *Our Islands and Their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil*. St. Louis: Thompson, 1899.

Orlando, José Francisco. “Apuntes biográficos de Manuel E. Jordan (Un maestro de nuestra pintura injustamente ignorado).” In *Homenaje a Manuel E. Jordan*. San Juan, P.R.: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1984.


Bibliography


Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1: Ramón Frade, Pan Nuestro, 1905. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Reprinted by permission.
Figure 2: Francisco Oller, El Velorio, 1893. Collection Museum of History, Anthropology and Art, University of Puerto Rico. Reprinted by permission.
Figure 3: José Campeche, Portrait of Don Miguel Antonio de Ustariz, 1790. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Reprinted by permission.
Figure 4: Francisco Oller y Cestero (Puerto Rico, 1833-1917), *Coronel Francisco Enrique Contreras, 1880*. Oil on canvas, 59 5/8 x 41 1/2 in. (151.4 x 105.4). Museo de Arte de Ponce Collection. The Luis A. Ferré Foundation, Inc. 90.1700. Reprinted by permission.
Figure 5: Francisco Oller y Cestero (Puerto Rico, 1833-1917), Hacienda Aurora, 1898–99. Oil on panel, 12 5/8 x 22 in. (32 x 55.9 cm). Bequest of Dolores Forteza, widow of Saldaña, in memory of Victor Saldaña. Museo de Arte de Ponce Collection. The Luis A. Ferré Foundation, Inc. 83.1252
Reprinted by permission.
Figure 6: Manuel E. Jordan, Ingenio Azucarero, No date. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Reprinted by permission.
The author was unable to contact the owner of this image in order to coordinate reprint permission. At this time the author, with the concurrence of his thesis committee, has excluded this material from publication.

**Figure 7:** Manuel E. Jordan, *Regreso de la Faena*, No date. Collection of Sr. Santiago Rodriguez Jordan.
Figure 8: Girls Assorting Coffee at Yuaco. Reprinted from Olivares, José de, and William Smith Bryan. *Our Islands and Their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil* (St. Louis: Thompson, 1899). Work of art in the public domain.
Figure 9: UNCLE SAM to PORTO RICO: “And to think that bad boy came near to being your brother!”  
Chicago Inter Ocean, 1905. Work of art in the public domain.
Figure 10: Antonio Colorado, *Logo of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD)*, 1938. Work of art in the public domain.