Heritage Sites

Leah Burke

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Heritage Sites

A Thesis Presented

by

Leah Burke

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2019

Department of Art
Heritage Sites

A Thesis Presented by

Leah Burke

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DEDICATION

To my father, Stephen Burke, who I have grown closer to through researching our family history for this project.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With gratitude, I acknowledge the contributions of my thesis committee members, Susan Jahoda, Young Min Moon, and Robin Mandel. Thank you to my parents for always encouraging me to be curious and creative. Finally, sincere thanks to Raul, Judy, Jose, and Patricia Marchand who greatly influenced my research and outlook on this work.
ABSTRACT

HERITAGE SITES

MAY 2019

LEAH BURKE

B.F.A., GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

A written thesis to accompany the M.F.A. Exhibition *Heritage Sites*, in which vignettes of the artist’s personal and familial narratives become a backdrop for examining themes such as global tourism, the notion of universal heritage, and questioning Puerto Rico as a postcolonial place. A two channel short video layers archival imagery with original material to examine the ways Puerto Rico has been represented and misrepresented personally and globally.
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1. LOSS

I’m most intrigued by the stories that have endured. The stories that have been told and retold for years and decades. The stories that outlive the people who experienced them. They are often the most deceptive, because oral histories are modified in their retelling. Timelines blend, events are fragmented, and unconnected stories melt together. People have different reasons for omitting or emphasizing details. Sometimes they just forget.

I often wonder to what extent my perception of the world has been influenced by the family stories that have endured. The narratives of my parents and grandparents have molded my understanding of so many things and, as time passes, I consider to what extent these stories have been shaped or crafted.

*Heritage Sites* investigates the malleability of personal and collective memory by examining the ways in which Puerto Rico has been represented both globally and by my family. In the dimly lit exhibition space, newsprint images of Puerto Rico in the early 80s were wheat pasted directly onto the architecture of the gallery. Like frescos, textured plaster rippled across the surface of the delicate prints as they clung to the walls. The brittle paper contracted as it dried, resulting in occasional hairline cracks. The images lost vibrancy and became yellow as time passed; existing in that space, for those
walls, for the duration of the exhibition. To be removed, they will be saturated with warm water and stripped and scrubbed away.

These images are presented without labels and an author is not identified. Their context and significance is revealed in the two channel looped video, projected onto a three foot tall white screen hung from the ceiling in the center of the gallery. The film follows my yearlong investigation into my family history and the broader environmental and political histories of Puerto Rico.

My interest in Puerto Rico began with my grandmother, Ellie Marquez Burke, and the remarkable stories she would tell me about her life. Her presence was magnetic and she recounted moments from her youth with drama and humor. She described her origin story in Puerto Rico in the 1920s through 40s in a way that sounded cinematic. The setting was romantic and the characters were larger than life. These stories were supplemented with old photographs of Ellie in her youth who looked like a glamorous movie star, fashionable and radiating confidence. The vintage photos of Puerto Rico looked dreamy and serene. I clung tightly to our tender storytelling moments but after Ellie passed away in 2010, the stories and photographs that were shared in my childhood now reminded me of her loss.

When hurricane Maria became national news, it was truly the first time I saw Puerto Rico as a complex and vulnerable place. My previous perception of the island was shaped by the way my grandmother spoke of her
beloved homeland. When I visited at age sixteen the landscape appeared idyllic and my relatives there were kind and jovial. Hurricane news coverage reported on Puerto Rico’s long standing economic, political, and environmental hardships and I was shocked to discover that many of these problems stemmed from events that occurred in the same time period as Ellie’s stories.

This made her life seem mysterious. I struggled to imagine that her narrative ran parallel to Puerto Rico’s fraught, political timeline. I became fixated on filling the blank spaces in and around her narrative and it led me to extend my reach to close and distant relatives.

At the time when I chose to connect with people near and far, Puerto Rico was silent and dark. The entire landscape on the island had shifted. The force of the wind and rain saturated the soil, causing more than forty thousand landslides. The hilly and mountainous terrain slid into structures and across roads. Rapid flooding and moving debris swallowed up vegetation and infrastructure, leaving behind landslide scars. Gashes in the earth emerged as the force of soil and rock slashed across the environment. Aerial photography captured streaks of tan and brown cutting through green foliage.¹

¹ Bessette-Kirton, Erin K, Cerovski-Darriau, Corina, Schulz, William H., Coe, Triggered by Hurricane Maria: Assessment of an Extreme Event in Puerto Rico” The Geological Society of America, (Feb 2019)
Floodwater and debris flowed into buildings and homes. Trees and telephone poles toppled. As the hurricane descended, the internet was flooded with images and videos from people recording the devastation from their cell phones. But in an instant, they were disconnected and all images from the ground ceased. The entire island suffered a blackout, as lashing winds and rain tore apart towers and shredded communication lines. Even Puerto Rico’s emergency radio station did not operate during the hurricane because its license to operate had expired several months earlier.²

In the aftermath, those who could afford generators formed lines as early as 4AM and waited 5 to 8 hours at a time to purchase fuel. Winding queues of cars at gas stations snaked through neighborhoods. Often, the supply ran out before people reached the front of the line. They returned to their dark homes with nothing, planning to return to the line even earlier the next day. The island is heavily reliant on receiving shipments of fuel from the continental U.S. but restrictions at the port inhibited shipments and tanker trucks struggled to navigate the fractured roads.

Wealthy residents showered with the water from their swimming pools, the harsh chlorine drying their scalps, making their hair wiry and

straw-like. Those without generators lived in the dark silence. Many lived in the dark for months. Some for over a year. Rainwater seeped through their walls and mold spots pooled and expanded on their ceilings. Plastic tarps intended to serve as temporary protection, became bleached from the sun as many of these homes maintained a ‘pending’ status with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.³

The island was shaken, shredded, and desolated. This shift exposed many things that had been thinly veiled and widely ignored. Fragile infrastructure, the severity of the struggling economy, and neglect from federal and local governments was making it almost impossible to survive. As I sought to place my grandmothers narrative within Puerto Rico’s broader, historical timeline, I researched my family history, Puerto Rico’s political and environmental history, and I traveled to the island.

Figure 1. Installation of *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
I began to aggregate a collection of material and immaterial things that would bring me closer to understanding my family history, as well as Puerto Rico’s expansive history. I gathered oral histories from my father, aunts, uncles, great uncles, and second cousins. I asked them for photographs and formed a collection spanning from the 1920s-1980s. I also researched the island on my own, accumulating books, articles, and knowledge. *Heritage Sites* is an attempt to knit together these disparate elements together, displaying them in juxtaposition with new video footage and still images that I generated myself. The various collected and produced material is layered through editing, repeating in some instances between two screens, or between narration and subtitles.

The images on the walls and many of the images in the video were also drawn from a collection of 81 photographs that were uncovered from a shoebox in my aunt Mary Ann’s attic. The photos were taken when she visited the island for the first time in 1983 and she had them scanned for me.

I poured over this collection, absorbing every detail. Many of the people and landscapes were recognizable to me but the nostalgic pastel tones of the film made each scene appear placid and dreamlike. The photographs were a glimpse into the era detailed by the iconic hairstyles, clothing, and cars of the time. Everything was soaked in soft tropical light.
I asked my aunt if she knew who took these images because something about them seemed more curious and intimate than typical vacation snapshots. There were photographs of all types of terrain. Mountains, cities, beaches, public libraries, shopping mall interiors. The camera was often directed away from my family members, seeming to illustrate the simple gestures of daily life in Puerto Rico. There were also many candid photographs of my relatives spending time together and these images seemed to convey a sense of contentment. My relatives always remained close despite their physical separation and I knew how cherished these visits were.

My grandmother made a point of bringing each of her six children to Puerto Rico over the course the 70s and 80s. During these trips she was able to reconnect with her family members and introduce her sons and daughters to the people and places that were significant to her. Mary Ann couldn't recall who took the photos but wondered if it was her brother Pete's ex wife who might have been on that trip. Something about the framing of the shots seemed like they were taken by someone outside of the family. An observer. Someone appreciative and engaged but removed. When I went to Puerto Rico by myself, five months after hurricane Maria, I was 28 years old. The same age as my Aunt Mary Ann but 36 years later. I travelled to the same scenes that appeared in these photographs, attempting to recreate the tours of my grandmother's homecoming.
The photograph collection is prominent throughout the thirty four minute video. My contemplative narration follows a personal search for knowledge, and archival imagery such as family photographs, a 1950s tourism ad, and amateur videos sourced from YouTube, provide personal and historical context for this narrative. The 1968 Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment*\(^4\) uses archival material to situate a fictional protagonist’s personal reflections within a historical context. The narrative is both intimate and informational, as it follows a wealthy man, Sergio, as he wanders through post revolutionary Havana, recalling personal memories and contemplating Cuba’s political landscape. The documentary approaches and clever editing decisions contribute to an unsettling sense of political and personal tension as the narrative unfolds.

One experimental editing approach in this densely layered film is the use of repetition. In one instance, Sergio recalls a memory of his wife who fled to Miami following the Bay of Pigs invasion. The film cut to a woman gently stepping out of a bathtub and then this five second scene is repeated four more times. The repetitive motion mimics the thoughts of someone who is fixated and longing for a person or moment from the past.

In *Heritage Sites*, repetition is also used to convey longing and the passage of time. However, rather than repeating a single clip, a repetitive

action is performed such as the pasting images to a wall and removing them. Filling a blank wall with idyllic images of Puerto Rico before creating an absence by stripping away and dissolving them.

*Nostalgia*[^5], the 1971 short film by Hollis Frampton, also layers narration over the erasure of images. Photographs are placed over an electric burner. The images slowly catch fire, curl, blacken, and turn to ash as Frampton speaks about why he made the images and the memories that surrounded their creation. The viewers attention shifts between the image that is being destroyed and the images in their head as they follow Frampton’s stories. This action is repeated eighteen times for thirty six minutes and after a while, the viewer realizes that the image being described is not what they are looking at. Frampton is describing the image that will be burned next while showing the image from the previous story. The sequencing becomes predictable and the stories are rambling, but the viewer is forced to both pay attention to what is happening as well as create imagery in their mind. This makes this minimal film complex because of how the viewers mind must focus on the present image while anticipating the next. The word nostalgia has many definitions but Hollis Frampton describes it as “the wounds of returning.”

Both *Nostalgia* and *Memories of Underdevelopment* use word and image to replicate the feeling of reflecting, longing, grappling, letting go, or hanging on. Layered imagery and editing techniques cause the viewers’ mind to jump back and forth between present and past; sometimes confusing the two.
Figure 2. Installation of *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
Beyond a personal narrative, *Heritage Sites* explores how, over time, Caribbean landscapes have been misrepresented. My voice, in English, follows my own lived experience, and a voice actor in Spanish narrates the ways in which colonial explorers, multinational tourism companies, and historic preservationists have misrepresented the island’s histories. These narratives show an idyllic paradise, which is meant to commodify the landscape as well as conceal fraught and unsettling truths.

*Los Angeles Plays Itself* is another film which examines a place that is often mythologized through the use of primarily found footage of cinematic depictions of Los Angeles. Thom Anderson compares film clips with historical information to reveal the contradictions and misrepresentations that contribute to a global conception of the city. A single narrator examines the representations of landmarks, architecture, and urban geography before peeling back layers to reveal unsettling truths such as racism, police brutality, and housing discrimination. The script reads like an essay and the narrator's subdued cadence juxtaposes the quick, flashy, and fantastical movie clips.

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As I began trying to learn of the many ways the Caribbean has been represented throughout time, I discovered that it had been represented as a fantasy as early as the 15th century.

The first widely distributed images came from the imaginations of colonial cartographers. With their pens, these explorers claimed mastery of terrain and asserted their conquest of environmental memories. These lines recorded lands of abundance, blank slates for development, fertile earth, and the possibility for a new position of power within an expanding Atlantic world.

The explorers’ lines wrapped the island’s shores, tracing the craggy borders between land and ocean. They outlined harbors and peninsulas, narrowing to form thin streams that flowed into islands’ interiors. Forestland was represented through a pattern of evenly spaced tree illustrations, dotting the island in ordered staccato markings. These maps were a blending of research and imagination, meant to satisfy the gaze of colonial powers. Landscapes were conveyed to appear prosperous and docile, omitting any indication of unruly rainforests, volatile weather, and defiant indigenous populations.

Rulers who would never travel to the Caribbean could unfurl these maps, trace the plotted earth and dream of ways to mold these landscapes. From afar they were able to envision war and devise trade routes. The
meandering ink lines guided the eager gaze of the conqueror along a gentle bend of a road, the slope of a hill, or a forking river, suggesting the possibility for the construction of fortifications, the cultivation of farmland, and the development of cities. Even blank spaces between lines beckoned these men to fill them with their aspirations. Simple marks and negative spaces were containers for desire.

Most of these lines were applied through delicate, thin, marks- Except for the coastlines, which were drawn with thick, inky lines that appear unfocused and almost clumsy⁷. Coastlines are essential for the cartographers to define geographic space and connect distant bodies to one another, but these lines are fictitious. Waves extending from ocean to land are infinitely folded, fractal, and animated. Their unending motion cannot be contained by the cartographers’ single static line. The environment resists this calculated portrayal.

For centuries, most depictions of the Caribbean have remained unchanged, portraying an idyllic, docile, and desirable space. The proliferation of images has accelerated through technological advancement and its scope has extended to a global reach. Still, the majority of images continue to illustrate a tame and exotic fantasy.

The tropical landscape can be volatile and destructive, despite its allure, and as Caribbean space continues to be molded into profitable narratives for consumption, nature continues to push against these singular definitions and imagined utopias.
Figure 3. Right channel still from *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2019
4. DECAY / PRESERVE

The collaging of past and present imagery, languages, and timelines in the work drew inspiration from the layered architectural landscape in Puerto Rico. Like many other Caribbean spaces, Puerto Rico’s built environment is made up of a series of imposed attachments. Changes in colonial powers, military occupations, and economies, is evident in the combination of various architectural styles which is the result of centuries of forced contact. Traditional Spanish styles, art deco, international style, and many imported European styles often occupy the same block. Sometimes multiple styles are combined in the same structure due to expansions. Today, under Puerto Rico’s massive debt crisis, even the island’s most iconic architecture sits in various states of conservation, preservation, abandon, and decay.

Shuffling through my collection of photographs of Puerto Rico in 1983, I focus on a particular image. It was taken in the late afternoon when the sun was low. Mary Ann and my great aunt Silvia stood together in front of a looming stone wall of Castillo de San Felipe del Morro. The wall cast a dense shadow behind them and their bodies were soaked in golden sunlight. The fabric of Mary Ann's skirt rippled from a breeze.

When I stood in that place, the humid breeze caught in the strands of my long hair, the wind smelted of saltwater. I looked around the expansive
lawn that would have extended beyond the frame of Mary Ann's photo, I faced the direction they would have been facing. The trimmed grass separated the military structure from the city of San Juan and was filled with tourists who marveled at the colonial fortress and took photographs just like this one. I knew this preserved site was emblematic of Puerto Rico but it didn’t tell me anything about my grandmother.

One year after Mary Ann and Silvia posed for this photograph, Castillo de San Felipe del Morro and the city of San Juan were declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites and today they appear frozen in the 18th century. El Morro is the most promoted and populated tourist destination on the island and images of its distinctively shaped watchtowers are printed on t-shirts, shot glasses, and beach towels sold in the countless souvenir shops across the island.

The walls are the first glimpse of the port city for the millions of cruise line passengers who have passed over the powerful waves of the Atlantic. When the fort was first built, the Spanish design was intended to appear solemn and menacing, as it was the first glimpse for the invaders and pirates who approached the shores. It was always meant to be seen from the outside, directed at groups of people who have travelled from afar.

This structure that was built to protect, exclude, and facilitate battle is now flooded with vacationers, street vendors, and tour guides. The site maintains visiting hours and charges an admission fee. Hundreds of people
file through the barracks, dungeons, vaults, and guard towers, wearing colorful clothing over damp bathing suits with cameras around their necks. As they stroll through, the aged walls are lined with informational plaques offering easily digestible paragraphs, maps, and diagrams laminated between pieces of clear plastic. Centuries of history have been formatted into hour long guided tours administered by park rangers concluding in a gift shop. Deemed as an important part of universal heritage, this coastal zone is one of the most well preserved sites in the new world.

Land and architectural ownership is a topic explored by many artists who study and live in Puerto Rico. Throughout history writing, artwork, and music have been used to voice concerns directed towards territorial access and environmental exploitation. Specifically, the island of Vieques has been the subject of several recent contemporary works by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and the collaborative work of Allora & Calzadilla.

Between 1941 and 1950, two thirds of the island of Vieques was purchased by the U.S. Navy for military testing. They began using the land to test weapons to be used in World War II but justified continuing to use Vieques in testing during the Cold War. The land was considered a non-site or neutral space where war combat could be simulated. They used the sky,

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8 Muñoz, Beatriz Santiago. 2016. Beach/Horse/Camp/The Dead/Forces. Single channel silent, 16mm, (8:00 min) fabricainutil.com/index.php/project/blackbeachhorsecampthe-deadforces
oceans, beaches, and forests as neutral terrain in which to engage in live fire war practice, a bombing range, combat simulation, parachute drops, and shooting big artillery shells. The island served as a space to test a variety of combat scenarios and practice war on a variety of terrains. The land was used as a place of exception which the military described as a “realistic multidimensional training” space.\textsuperscript{9} They also sculpted the earth for their needs. Military roadways were created, many of the mangrove forests and coconut groves were removed, weapon storage was built, and chemicals were disposed of on the island. Disposal practices in the late 1970s, early 80s consisted of dumping lead-based paints, solvents for cleaning airplanes and vehicles, and industrial strength lubricants.

Those who used this space were unconcerned with damaging the environment, damaging local cultures, homes, and populations, and people who have lived and worked on the island before and throughout the time of military occupation. This had been an agricultural area for a very long time where people made their living from the natural resources. Over the years, the population decreased with the discovery that the earth had become toxic as a result of tests and bombing. The U.S. Navy owned land on the west end

where they stored weapons, and on the east end where they practiced live fire
war practice. A strip in the middle of the island is where residents lived.\textsuperscript{10}

*Under Discussion*\textsuperscript{11}, is a long term, multi phase project involving
photographs, installation, collaborative design, and videos by Allora &
Calzadilla. The work addresses the condition of Vieques after these events. In
*Land Mark*\textsuperscript{12}, the artists trespassed onto the United States Navy bombing
range in Vieques wearing customized soles on their shoes. The shoes were
embossed with words and images which voiced their opinions, messages, and
grievances. The silent, yet assertive artwork links presence and absence,
inscription and erasure, preservation and destruction.

Another piece in this series is called *Returning a Sound*\textsuperscript{13} which is a
video that shows a man on a moped with a trumpet attached to the motor. He
navigates land in Vieques which had been recently opened up to the public
after sixty years of military operation. The trumpet was attached to the
muffler and the loud sound wavered as the moped accelerated and passed

\textsuperscript{10} Arbona, Javier. "Vieques, Puerto Rico: From Devastation to Conservation and

Video Projection with Sound (6:14min) Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (France)

\textsuperscript{12} Allora, Jennifer, Caldazillo Guillermo. 2001-02. *Land Marks*. Chromogenic prints
from digital files each: 46 x 60.5 cm. (18 1/8 x 23 13/16 in.) Museum purchase,
Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund 2009-147 a-l

Channel Video Projection with Sound (5:42 min)
over bumps. This created a score which became an anthem for the opening of this land. This somewhat absurd act became a scream, a cry, a celebration, or an expression of anger.

Many of these works and their materials are ephemeral and site specific. The statements, discussions, and actions were made for and about a particular place or moment and whether these messages are loud or silent, they respond to the needs of the site.

The materials and gestures in *Heritage Sites* are also impermanent which is meant to convey the malleability of both landscapes and memory. In 1998 Allora & Calzadilla made large sticks of chalk\(^{14}\) for a peaceful protest in front of the capitol. These were offered to citizens of Peru to express their dissatisfactions with the government. The performative project was the first iteration; it later travelled to other countries and populations. My own decision to use non-archival materials was influenced by other artists whose work is affected by weather, time, sunlight, and air.

Figure 4. Installation of *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
My father invited me to cook with him for the first time when I visited him in Michigan last winter. He had the kitchen set up with a big pot on the stove. Jars, cans, and fresh vegetables were arranged neatly on the kitchen counter. It was the first time I saw the recipe for my grandmother’s arroz con pollo printed on crisp, white copy paper. It was placed on the kitchen table next to two cans of Busch beer, one for each of us. Ellie had made the dish from memory but once she turned 90 years old, my uncles and cousins had started watching her and jotting down notes. My dad continues to recreate this meal during our holiday gatherings.

As he cracked open his beer, he warned me that this might not be interesting to watch since most of the cooking involves dumping ingredients into a pot and letting them simmer for a long time.

We started by making a traditional Spanish sofrito, combining chopped green peppers, onions, and green olives. Additionally, the recipe calls for capers and pimentos which is standard in Caribbean sofrito adaptations. We added some of the liquid from the jars and poured in several spice packets of Sazon Goya, which added vibrant orange swirls into the chunky green mixture.
When I asked my dad if he knew the recipe’s origin, he said that Ellie learned to make it from her mother but he couldn’t tell me if it existed prior to that. He said that many of the family recipes were altered when my grandmother moved from Puerto Rico to the states. He witnessed her struggle to adapt her recipes to the products available in Michigan grocery stores and winced recalling a time she substituted bananas for plantains in a Puerto Rican omelet.

I knew the reason my dad and I don’t speak Spanish is because my grandmother was intent on assimilating. Otherwise, no one spoke about any clumsy or challenging aspects of her move. Ellie loved describing her migration story to us and told it in a way that seemed effortless.

Ellie first landed in Washington D.C. in 1939 and began a career in government. She was a talented translator, charismatic, and charming, which quickly landed her a job at the Paraguayan Embassy as private secretary to the ambassador. Next she worked at the Pan-American Union before transferring to the Inter-American Defense Board. This was where she met her husband Bill who had been recently discharged from the Navy. They exchanged glances across a shared bustling cafeteria until Bill eventually introduced himself at a bus stop. Their first conversation was about classical music. Together they moved to New York City where Bill attended Columbia University for a PhD in English and Ellie became the first person to hold the
title: Chief of Spanish Verbatim Reporter for the United Nations. Eventually they moved from Long Island to a sleepy suburb of Kalamazoo, Michigan where Bill was a professor and Ellie maintained an abundant garden and raised their six children.

She displayed pictures of her and Bill during this time on a set of built-in shelves in her living room. One of the largest frames was a portrait of Bill in his navy uniform with a stoic expression on his face. Many depicted Ellie in her twenties, lounging and posed with her legs crossed, wearing stilettos, and a dress that cinched her tiny waist. Her hair was styled into round, shiny curls that rested on her shoulders, framing a wide smile. She wore dark lipstick and a glimmer in her eye. One of the most valued photographs was taken during the first National Assembly in New York in 1946. Ellie can be spotted within a crowd of diplomats and reporters facing president Harry Truman.

My dad explained how the arroz con pollo recipe eventually incorporated post war era convenience products. My great grandmother would have made stock from a chicken carcass, my grandmother used bouillon cubes, my father uses a different product endorsed by a celebrity chef. My great grandmother would have spiced the dish with culantro for flavor and annatto seeds for color. The seasoning packets my grandmother suggested to use are produced in a facility in New Jersey and its brilliant
orange color comes from a combination of Yellow 5 and Red 40. I rarely cook but I considered how I might make this dish one day. Perhaps some of the ingredients that weren’t available in the Post War Midwest would now be stocked at Whole Foods. I could easily search the internet for instructions on how to make my own chicken stock. Regardless of my efforts, it wouldn’t be the same. While Ellie and her recipes adapted to many changes, Puerto Rico was undergoing one of the most significant changes in the island’s history.

In 1940 the United States implemented an initiative called Operation Bootstrap, transforming the economy from agrarian to industrial. This transformation caused a mass exodus of Puerto Rican people from the island to the continental U.S., and brought a boom of vacationers from the mainland to the island. Unrestricted access to travel created a bilateral flow and the concept of nationality was no longer tied to geography for many Puerto Ricans.¹⁵

For vacationers Puerto Rico was a glamorous Cold War paradise. Representing a safe and familiar part of an expanding American empire. Tourism was a critical pillar in this new economic model and the U.S. government constructed, packaged, and marketed the island’s landscape to appeal to the U.S. consumer. Modern architecture was introduced in the form

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of glamorous beachfront resorts along the northern and southern coasts. The landscape was molded to suit the desires of the many U.S. vacationers who benefited from a rise in affordable air travel, easily available credit, and employee vacation benefits.\(^{16}\) The resorts were designed in the Cold War image of luxury, technology, and modernism as symbols of abundance.

The first international style building to ever be built in Puerto Rico was one of these hotels, called La Caribe, owned by the Hilton Corporation. Conrad Hilton funded seventeen hotels in seventeen countries around the world between 1949 and 1966 and in most of these instances, the buildings were the first examples of modern architecture. Following a shift in the global tourism industry and the post-war U.S. economy, Hilton built hotels in exotic destinations such as Berlin, Istanbul, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Rome, and Jerusalem. These hotels and their locations were meant to specifically cater to continental U.S. vacationers. The hotels were modern, American utopias, large, international style, machine like, and stark white. They frequently contrasted with the surrounding landscapes, like towering ocean liners in a sea of traditional architecture.

The hotels were designed to make visitors feel safe in a familiar architectural style, while simultaneously immersed in another culture. Each building was similar in style from exterior to interior but the interiors were

decorated to reflect particular aspects of the places in which they were built. These location specific cultural motifs were integrated into the international style design and emphasized the alluring aspect of travel within the recognizable architectural language of modernism.¹⁷

A defining feature of these hotels was the extensive use of plate glass. Each hotel included large windows that were intended to frame the environment and surrounding landscape. Visitors were able to see from the many vantage points provided by balconies, windows, and courtyards from the safe haven of the sterile, rectilinear hotels. Annabel Jane Wharton wrote extensively about these hotels in her book *Building the Cold War* and describes the function of this plate glass. “The Hilton was a machine for viewing. In the foreground that it framed, was the body of the guest; in the background was the immediate source of the patron’s status, the foreign panorama. The extended vista opened through the plate glass windows, offering visual control of an alien urban landscape from an entirely secure site of observation.”¹⁸

Puerto Rico was a particularly appealing destination for vacationers from the continental United States because of its accessibility and location. A Puerto Rican Tourism Bureau office opened in Rockefeller plaza, which

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¹⁸ Wharton, Annabel Jane. Building the Cold War. 120.
propagated glossy magazine ads picturing the resorts. The ads were bold and saturated, featuring tan women in bikinis lounging next to hotel pools. Their backdrop was the glimmering ocean and distant pale blue mountains. Eastern Air Lines encouraged vacationers to “Discover the new glamour of San Juan Puerto Rico” advertising flights from New York to San Juan for $180 round trip. “Cast your cares to the trade winds in Puerto Rico” suggested travel companies, promising clubs, casinos, rum, and sailing. Magazines such as Life and Time wrote about the resorts and hotels, praising them as modernist icons.

By the 1960s the number of American tourists reached 500,000 annually, second only to Mexico in Latin America. The construction of mega hotels, restaurants, resorts, and casinos accelerated along the coasts to accommodate the drastic influx of visitors. These areas were quickly becoming overbuilt and congested, crime increased, and the environmental impact was a looming concern. Cultural imperialism echoed throughout the island as residents felt alienated from their landscape.

By the 1980s and 90s tourism began to decline rapidly but the heavy resort construction remained. Many of the formerly glamorous hotels had

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fallen into disrepair and were abandoned. Beaches were polluted, wages were low. The shining vision of a tropical post-war utopia had become tarnished.
Figure 5. Installation of *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
6. BELONGING

It’s an unspoken, but honored, custom that any of Ellie’s relatives who travel to Puerto Rico must journey to the municipality of Humacao and visit the empty plot of land where the Marquez house once stood. Humacao is located on the eastern coast far from any populated, tourist dense city centers. When my grandmother grew up in the 20s and 30s, Humacao was a wealthy place in which several prominent sugar barons lived in luxurious mansions. Today the houses and businesses in the quiet residential community are modest.

When I made this journey in February of 2018, a cloudless blue sky hung over empty neighborhood streets. I drove my rental car along narrow roads that curled around each other ending in cul-de-sacs. Colorful rectangular houses with well maintained lawns had basketball hoops in their driveways, and minivans parked on the road. But the more time I spent there, it became evident that interspersed with the ordinary fixtures of suburban life were signs of trauma. The air carried a weighted silence.

The only sound came from the occasional crinkle of plastic as tarps rustled from a soft breeze. Many of the houses had these bright blue tarps strapped around damaged roofs and windows as a form of temporary protection. Bulbs in the traffic lights were dark, evidence that the
surrounding houses were approaching five months without electricity. Many of the telephone poles stuck out of the earth at crooked angles, their snapped wires were draped onto the road and dangled above sidewalks.

When my relatives visited Humacao they knew that the best way to locate the Marquez lot was to search for the address of Ellie’s father’s former grocery store. Today that address belongs to a building marked “Humacao X-Ray Imaging Center” and the empty lot is across the street. Over the years I’ve seen many versions of the same image from separate relatives who had traveled to this place. The nearly identical photographs appeared unremarkable but they were shared as evidence that Ellie’s childhood home continues to be recognized, remembered, and honored.

I stood on the sidewalk facing the plot of land, trying to fill the vacant space with imagery of my grandmother’s life. I concentrated on memories that didn’t belong to me; attempting to project my own interpretations of the past onto this tangible space. This is where the pink house with swirling wrought iron railings would have stood. My grandmother and her four sisters would be wearing dresses with full skirts and bows in their hair and my great grandmother would have sat in a wooden rocking chair shaded by the roofs narrow awning. Ellie’s nephews would play around a palm tree with fan-like branches that extended toward the sky.
The longer I stood there, the more somber and hollow this family ritual seemed to me. This was the most palpable instance of my failure to bridge the past and present. It felt foolish to conflate imagery of a seemingly idyllic past with the tangible reality that stood before me. An empty lot. A road where most of the storefront windows were covered up with sun bleached newspaper. A municipality with no power. I didn’t belong here, and this place never belonged to me.

Standing alone on the sidewalk, I expected to feel something profound but, instead, felt nothing. Perhaps I felt disappointment. This was the moment I considered that this endeavor was a failure, or at least, one fraught with contradictions. The straps of my backpack weighed heavy on my shoulders and I cradled the DSLR camera and audio recorder that I had rented from my university. The recorder picked up sounds of wind and the occasional car radio passing by. The photographs were banal. It took months before I was able to articulate what happened in this moment but I knew I was unable to fill this profound sense of emptiness with family stories, library books, old photographs, or travel.

In Heritage Sites, this moment is expressed by wheat pasting outdoors onto the side of a brick building. The images were six enlarged photographs that must have been taken throughout the 1930s or earlier. I was able to identify many of the people in the photographs but I had only met several. I
did not recognize the settings, I did not know the context, and I could not identify the photographer.

Earlier in the video, the process of pasting and removing images was slow, careful, and took place indoors, on white walls. In this shot, I did not take time to smooth out creases and air bubbles. One after another, the images were saturated and layered overtop of one other. The rapid pace did not allow for meditation or reflection on each image, rather they were quickly and somewhat carelessly stacked over one another. Before the images dried, I began peeling them away. The removal of long strips revealed fragments of the images behind it and the strips were thrown into a pile on the cement until the wall was blank again. I took a moment to look at the blank wall before walking away. My mark, my action, my imagery did not belong there.

Street and graffiti artists have historically used wheat pasting in public to make their message and presence visible. This gesture is particularly powerful in places such as Puerto Rico because much of the architectural vernacular was imported from colonizers. Altering urban space without permission is an act of reclaiming the visual language of the landscapes in which those who feel disempowered live. Marking space is an assertion of resistance.

The anonymous group of Puerto Rican printmakers who go by, La Puerta, use paint and wheat past to create protest art. Their message is
meant to inspire action, focusing on debt crisis, minimal agriculture, heavy reliance on imports, and a lack of representation in congress. La Puerta seeks to both disrupt their colonial status and alter the mentality of fear of colonized people. In 2016 the group created a series of wheat paste images of significant Puerto Rican printmakers. In the middle of these images is a door painted with the Puerto Rican flag on top of it. The bright blue triangle at the top of the flag was replaced by a pale blue color. This color scheme is a symbol of the independent party. The mural was widely considered successful because many tourists and locals could be seen taking pictures in front of it.

A few weeks later The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) was enacted. This federal law was put in place as a means of debt relief and brought with it a fiscal oversight board comprised of several U.S.-appointed members. La Junta, as the board is called locally, were not elected by Puerto Ricans and their budget reducing measures included labor reforms, limiting sick and vacation days, overtime pay, and holiday bonuses. They also put in motion the privatization of the islands electrical authority. Further, 200 public schools have closed and the University of Puerto Rico has seen significant cuts.

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La Puerta responded by painting the flag black as a gesture of mourning. Initially thought to be vandalism, this modification caught the attention of the local media who reported on it. The group acknowledged their alteration stating that painting the flag black was intended to be an act of protest. It went on to be appropriated by others to protest environmental and political issues such as the burning of coal and the deposit of coal ash in the town of Guayama. The appearance of the black Puerto Rican flag began appearing in other cities such as New York and Florida. Ultimately redressing the flag generated a political conversation about the future of Puerto Rico and PROMESA. The group stated that messages of fear were being circulated around the idea of independence but they wanted to inspire a new message of action and resilience.

22 Mikael-Debass, Milena. “These anonymous street artists want an independent Puerto Rico” Vice News (June 2017).
Figure 6. Left channel still from *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
Before I landed in Puerto Rico I wondered if I would recognize Patricia’s face. I was still uncertain if she remembered me at all. It had been over ten years since I was a quiet sixteen year old visiting the island with my parents and meeting my Puerto Rican relatives for the first time.

My first glimpse of Puerto Rico contained every shade of Caribbean blue. It wasn't until the plane circled closer that I realized one of these shades came from hundreds of blue tarps that specked the island’s surface. Whole clusters of buildings were enveloped in plastic, billowing and flapping in the wind. As the plane brought us closer I noticed thick palm trees that had snapped in half and toppled to the ground. I imagined the immense force it would take to crack and uproot such a mighty trunk.

As Patricia drove us from the airport to her home she pointed out noticeable hurricane damage and expressed her frustration with the increase in crime and poverty that followed the island wide trauma. She mentioned all the business that were closing- the Marshalls, the K Mart, and many other multinational companies that were unable to sustain in the Puerto Rican economy. She pointed out a large highway sign that was nearly folded in half and told me how hazardous it had been to drive without functioning traffic lights.
We were virtually strangers but our discussion quickly shifted from polite small talk to the immediacy and seriousness of the hurricane’s aftermath. It had only been several months since I called her husband José, my second cousin, out of the blue and expressed that I wanted to meet them. José invited me to stay in their spare bedroom after the mention of Ellie’s name.

I hoisted my plastic suitcase over their porch steps and followed behind Patricia as she unlocked a pair of heavy wrought iron gates. I was instantly taken aback by the sight of her living room; every surface and object glimmered. Sparkling chandeliers hung overhead and collections of glass figurines were clustered in display cases and lined up on counter tops. The walls were hardly visible behind an array of differently shaped picture frames that were arranged in careful relation to one other. Amongst the frames hung groupings of like objects such as a collection of old keys that formed a grid over the sofa. A framed print of the Mona Lisa was positioned above a tarnished brass phonograph horn which sat next to a chest containing dozens of ceramic bells covered in delicate blue brushstrokes. A gold tassel hung from every door handle. Each blown glass flower arrangement, candle stick, and tiny crystal dish sat upon a silk table runner or behind a protective glass door.

Sunlight streamed through windows and skylights, bouncing around the vibrant objects and reflective polished surfaces. It felt as though any
movement of my body would disrupt the harmony and orderliness of the
space. I told Patricia that I thought her home was incredible.

Without hesitation she led me to her favorite spots in the house and
told me the stories behind her most treasured collections. Many of the objects
were family heirlooms that had been passed down or recovered from deceased
relatives. These heirlooms inspired Patricia to search in antique shops and
vintage stores for complementary objects resulting in her multitude of
intricate displays. The home was like an archive, or a time capsule, or a
museum or, a cabinet of curiosities. All of these objects had a lineage and she
told me the stories of the places they had come from and the hands they had
had passed through.

Her tone changed when she said that her son and daughter were not
interested in the prospect of inheriting these objects and Patricia was unsure
of what would happen to her collections in the distant future. She had also
been imagining what it would be like to move away from Puerto Rico,
replacing her remarkably decorated home with a dwelling more suited to a
couple whose children had grown and moved away.

Perhaps she would live closer to her grandson. Perhaps there would
come a time when she no longer had to fear an impending hurricane season.
Surrounded by her fragile relics, Patricia’s eyes seemed weary but she looked
at me with gentle kindness. I was overcome with admiration for her strength
and resilience and touched that she welcomed me into her home during such
a sensitive time of recovery. A time when the future seems so uncertain.
When so many are forced to confront the impossibility of preserving the past.

This story has a clear and well-documented beginning, 9-20-2017, 06:15 AM. But in Heritage Sites, the script ends with another beginning. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that although the script stops, the story does not end. Many of my initial questions remain unanswered and I still ask myself what I had been hoping to achieve. Although I have gained knowledge and experiences making this video has confirmed the painful truth that many of the things I have most longed to know and experience, have been lost with the passage of time.

Even the stories that endure are distortions of what one was. However imperfect, looking to past events and lived experiences can reveal patterns that are critical to inform our present and future. Understanding the sites of our heritage and those who have come before us could help bridge vast separations that exist today.
Figure 7. Right channel still from *Heritage Sites* by Leah Burke. Photograph by the artist May 7th, 2019
Heritage Sites
Two channel video projected on stretched PVC screen and stapled around a wooden frame. The duration of the video is 34 minutes. The dimension of the screen is ten feet by three feet. Audio is narration of a script by the artist, read in part by the artist in English. Read in part in Spanish and translated by Andres Molano.

Heritage Sites, Prints 1-5
Inkjet on newsprint paper. The images have been adhered directly onto the gallery walls with homemade wheat paste. Paste ingredients are water and flour. The dimensions of each print is 51 inches by 35 inches.
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ARTIST AT WORK
1. *Heritage Sites*
Media: Two channel video projected on stretched PVC screen over wood frame
Duration: 34 minutes
Dimensions: 10 feet by 3 feet
2019

2. *Heritage Sites, Print 1*
Media: Inkjet on newsprint
Dimensions: 51 inches by 35
2019
3. *Heritage Sites, Print 2*
Media: Inkjet on newsprint
Dimensions: 51 inches by 35
2019

4. *Heritage Sites, Print 3*
Media: Inkjet on newsprint
Dimensions: 51 inches by 35
2019
5. *Heritage Sites, Print 4*
Media: Inkjet on newsprint
Dimensions: 51 inches by 35
2019

6. *Heritage Sites, Print 5*
Media: Inkjet on newsprint
Dimensions: 51 inches by 35
2019