Nuyorican visionary:
Jorge Soto and the evolution of an Afro-Taíno aesthetic
at Taller Boricua

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ABSTRACT
In this essay, I examine the cross-fertilization between visual and verbal tropes in the works of Jorge Soto. My discussion concentrates on analyzing the visual art produced by Jorge Soto in the mid-1970s to late 1970s, a period when the poets and artists at Taller Boricua and other spaces were most intensely engaged in defining the meaning of the term Nuyorican and determining how their works related to the art and poetry produced on the island. I argue that through reading the poetry of his colleagues, and experimenting with writing poetry on his own, Jorge Soto developed synthetic ways of picturing his bi-cultural background that mirrored the Nuyorican poets’ practice of fusing Spanish and English. I additionally examine the wearing of Afro-Taíno and Santería motifs in Soto’s works. [Key words: Art, Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, Taíno, Jorge Soto]
Foundation in El Barrio, New York, in 1970 by Marcos Dinan, Adrian Garcia, Manuel "Nico" Otis, Martín Rubín, and Antonio Soto. Talleres Boricua's Puerto Rican Workshop ranks among the oldest extant multi-disciplinary artist-run spaces in the United States. Talleres Boricua's current director, Marcos Dinan and Fernando Sánchez, take pride in noting that the workshop has adhered to its mission of using art as a tool for education and community building through sponsoring a wide-range of exhibitions, literary readings, dances, forums, urban planning seminars and free arts classes for over 35 years. The number of visual artists, writers, architects and musicians who have dropped by Talleres Boricua's workshops in El Barrio is legion and luminous. During the heyday of the Nuyorican art and poetry movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, Talleres Boricua's stable of collaborators included the following: Américo Castro, Mátin-Matin, Marcos Dinan, Xandra Maria Echeverri, Gilberto Hernández, Adrián Garcia, José "Pepe" Martínez, José Mirando, Rafael Carbon Martínez, Néstor Otero, Manuel "Nico" Otis, Carlos Osorio, Martín "Tim" Pérez, Pedro Pérez, Xavero Soto, Jorge Soto, Rafael Téllez, Naida Talabás, Fernando Sánchez, Saúteo Sánchez, and Maurillo "Mambo" Vega. Discussing the workshop's ideologías, Marisol Vega once explained to New York Times art critic, Holland Cotter, that Talleres Boricua comprised a "school" that he and other artists followed: "They're the East Harlem School," said Vega. "Essentially historians will get it." As Vega's comment suggests, historians, particularly mainstream art historians, have been slow to acknowledge Talleres Boricua's significance. Short of producing a treatise on the workshop and monographs on its major artists, what can be done to quickly fill some gaps in the scholarship? That question prompted me to consider the following: if Talleres Boricua has served as a school of art, what among its many members can be regarded as the workshop's artistic matrices—the artist whose images illuminates the ideals and accomplishments of Talleres Boricua on the whole? Longstanding members of Talleres Boricua such as Marcos Dinan, Fernando Sánchez, Naida Talabás, José "Pepe" Martínez and Adán García were unanimous in nominating Jorge Soto Sánchez, the workshop's director in the mid-1970s, as an exemplary figure. "Jorge brought me into the Talleres," remarked Fernando Sánchez. "He was my teacher, my brother—the man was intense, una persona intensa." Soto's intellectual ambitions coupled with a dedication to honing his craft made him the most critically acclaimed artist in the Talleres Boricua circle in the late 1970s. In the introduction to Soto's retrospective catalog, Jorge Soto Sánchez: Works on Paper 1974-1979, Jack Agnieszki described Soto's hard-driven work ethic: "If someone were to ask me, ‘Can you see him draw at nightt acros the subway, his hand never stopping?… I saw that the only way to shape these images with quick jottings was to keep going, to keep moving. He never stopped, even when there was nothing to draw…'" But not all of Soto's drawings were pictures. A little examined aspect of Jorge Soto's work is his critical and creative writing. Soto's combined talents as an artist and writer provide us with records of the discourses that artists at Talleres Boricua engaged in. My discussion concentrates on analyzing the visual art and examples of writings produced by Jorge Soto in the mid to late 1970s, a period when the poets and artists at Talleres Boricua were first exploring Puerto Rican African and Taino heritages and determining how they could contribute work that linked their experience as New York-born Puerto Ricans to the legacy of art and literature in Puerto Rico. This essay begins a brief sketch of Jorge Soto's early life in order to place his work in context of the socioeconomic struggles that many New York-born Puerto Rican artists faced growing up in the 1950s and 1960s.

Soto's early years 1947–1971

Jorge Soto was born in El Barrio in 1947 and raised in a Spanish-speaking household. At the age of five, his family moved to the South Bronx, an area that was transitioning from being a white ethnic enclave for working-class Italians, Irish and Jews to a “ghetto” for African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. According to Patricia Wilson, who interviewed Soto in the early 1980s, Soto described himself as an unattended child who did not speak English well and took refuge in art. Soto's elementary school teachers recognized his talent and he received a scholarship to Saks Fifth Avenue Department Stores to take drawing classes in composition and human anatomy. The anatomy classes that he took at age 10 had a lasting impact; a distinctive feature of Soto's manner is work is the representation of figures inside out. But we cannot ignore the fact that Soto's many renderings of broken bodies and fascination with the grotesque relates back to scenes that he saw outside of art class. In the poignant autobiographical timeline excerpted below, Soto charts the development of his aesthetic perspective amidst distressed surroundings:

1951: Playing in abandoned lots, rusty cans, broken bricks, dead cats being devoured by hundred of worms, dead rats, olor de podrido, decaying matter.
1952: Watching my mother on fire, girts, illanta. My mother's flesh is on fire (the center of our universe).
1953: Summer: Richie, close childhood friend drowned in East River. Industrial area of South Bronx became and was an exploration throughout my childhood, here I would be exposed to an abundance of manmade objects.
1955: Scribbling on wooden desk, tracing the groove of wood onto paper. Bored to death while taking spelling test. Fantasize flying out to sky like a bird (freely).
1957: Find aesthetic pleasure in the form and shapes of boiler's and steam pipes on roof tops...Would experience/witness, Puerto Ricans that I hav known from early childhood turn into human parasites, sculptural forms in deep sleep (and pain). Heroin addicts.
1958: Walking across St. Mary's Park (in the South Bronx) imagine landscape composition out of the natural formation of the park... Rafael and I formed a pigeon coop and flew them. Here my fetish of birds would climax and have a permanent engraved image of them, as a metaphor.
1959: Observing my mother crochet a bedspread for months (watching how good she is with her hands)... Would experience/witness Puerto Ricans brutally [sic] destroy each other (gang fights).
Soto’s recollections reveal that art became a way for him to process the traumatic incidents that he witnessed during his childhood. Perhaps to give Soto a respite from the escalating violence in the South Bronx, Soto’s parents sent him to Puerto Rico for an extended stay in 1965. Returning to New York in 1966, Soto attended two years of high school while working part-time in a knitting factory. In 1968, he dropped out of high school and enlisted in the army.

joined United States Army as some illusory way to escape the disorientation and alienation that I was living (feeling). To find institutionalized abuse (more alienation). Lasted 10 months, spent five months in West Germany, did studies, drawings of the country landscapes.*

Released from the Army in 1969, Soto returned to New York and determined to become an artist. Between 1969 and 1973, Soto established a pattern of working for six months to a year in a manual job and then going on unemployment to devote himself full-time to art. His first art history books were a pocket book primer entitled Enjoying Modern Art and John Berger’s *The Successes and Failures of Picasso*. He also began reading art magazines like *Art in America* and *Art News* and visiting museums and galleries on a regular basis. He credits the French Surrealists and the British Expressionist painter, Francis Bacon, as influences on his work at that time.

In 1970, Soto had his first one-person exhibition at Studio 506, a storefront gallery/studio space in the West Bronx. Soto met drumming/visional artist Martin “Tito” Pérez, and they became close friends and artistic collaborators.

*Soto’s Years at Taller Boricua 1971–1973*

In the fall of 1971, Soto saw an announcement in the Village Voice about an upcoming exhibition at Taller Boricua and went to investigate. At Taller Boricua he met Carlos Osorio, Ninfa Buitrago, Marcos Dimas, Jimmy Dennis, Adrian García, Manuel “Noico” Otero, Armando Soto (no relation), and felt instant kinship. “They [the Boricuan Students Unión] were dedicating a whole year to someone’s art and the community.” Osorio, Buitrago, and Dimas instilled in Soto a deep respect for the Puerto Rican and Boricuan culture and community. Osorio’s ideas and approach to art led to Soto’s ideas on culture and the idea that culture is an art form in itself. Osorio’s notion that culture precedes language and that culture is the infrastructure of the human experience. Osorio taught Soto to see himself as a cultural historian and an artist.

For Soto, the symbol of Boricua identity was the vejigante, the masked figure that appears in Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean communities. The vejigante was a powerful symbol of resistance and liberation for the community. In his early work, Soto was inspired by the vejigante and created his own vejigante figure, which he called “the Puerto Rican Superman.” Soto’s vejigante figure was a combination of traditional Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean imagery. The figure was muscular and powerful, with a large head and a body that seemed to be made of stone. Soto’s vejigante figure was a powerful symbol of resistance and liberation for the community.

In 1973, Soto was invited to work at Taller Boricua for a year. During this time, Soto developed a strong connection to the community and the people who lived there. He saw Taller Boricua as a place where he could explore his ideas about culture and identity. Soto’s work during this time was marked by a sense of urgency and a desire to connect with the people who lived in the community.

In 1974, Soto left Taller Boricua to pursue his own art career. However, the experience at Taller Boricua had a profound impact on Soto’s work and his understanding of culture and identity.

Soto became known for his use of everyday objects and materials to create his art. He often used things like plastic bags, cardboard boxes, and other discarded items to create his sculptures. Soto was interested in the way that these materials could be used to create a sense of place and to comment on the way that people live and work in the community.

Soto’s work has always been present in our ambience, linking within our aura, and appearing in the language, mood, stance, and posture, as well as the physical appearance of the people. That mythical being—that phantasm—was being resurrected at the center of evolution and change.**

Marcos Dimas’s insignia is an early example of the Afro-Taino imagery that the artists developed at Taller Boricua. Designed in 1972, it depicts an anthropomorphic figure holding a Taino stone carving known as a cron. The creature has some resemblance to Puerto Rico’s tree frog, the coqui, and appears a large leafed plant from its head. The plant leaves are stamped with Taino symbols and Puerto Rican icons, notably the nationalflag of Luces and Afro-Caribbean musical instruments such as the pandereta drum and maracas. Dimas’s insignia became the Taller Boricua logo in the mid-1970s and appears on many of the workshop’s paraphernalia, e.g., letterhead, posters, and invitations. Among the messages that Dimas’s logo declares about Taller Boricua’s ethos is that the artists were guided by a consciousness of Puerto Rico’s mixed racial heritage and merged linguistic and musical influences.

The aesthetic project that the artists initiated at Taller Boricua was fraught with limitations. In contrast to the Nayarían poets, who primarily saw themselves as creating “a new language” and were not interested in finding precedents for their poetry among the island’s writers, the artists at Taller Boricua aspired to work out of a gestaltizing of the “primordial,” Puerto Rican racial and traditional heritage. However, there were relatively few examples of Afro-Puerto Rican and Taino art in New York to examine for source material. In terms of establishing a direct artistic influence on the way that the Taller artists created their Afro-Taino aesthetic, one must acknowledge the work of Rafael Talán. Rafael Talán was part of the founding circle of Taller Boricua and worked closely with the artists in El Barrio between 1970 and 1975. Rafael Talán’s images of abaca and pijaos musicians, masked vejigante students and staples, Afro-Puerto Rican women from Luís Aibonito, became icons that supplied the younger generation with their primary images of Afro-Puerto Rican identity. Manuel “Noico” Otero’s books and reproductions of Taino art called from publications issued by the Instituto Puertorriqueño de Cultura were visual resources the artists consulted in the early years of the Taller. The artists also frequented the Museo de la Ciudad, the city’s cultural resources, and setting them for hours.
looking at photographs, sculptures and other things and making drawings—we did it because it was important in terms of our identity,” stated Núria Tirado. “We still don’t have that much about the arts in Puerto Rico, we don’t have many books, movies or videos. So it is even more important for us to record our history and send to schools for people to study.”

The exhibitions and visual art workshops that Taller Boricua Artists organized during the 1970s were acts of political pedagogy at intervention in a city that had little information or appreciation of Taino and Afro-Puerto Rican artifacts. Jorge Soto’s poster announcing an exhibit at Taller Boricua in 1974 demonstrates the multi-cultural direction that he took in his imagery. The poster depicts a vaquita canutillo mask from Loíza Aftica beside a Taino stone carving and is embellished by several examples of Taino photographs throughout the poster’s upper zone.

For viewers familiar with the Puerto Rican poster tradition, Soto’s work invites an imaginative exchange of graphics rendered by the island’s native printmakers. Rafael Téllez, Lorenzo Hierán and Carlos Rafael Rivera. But the script on the bottom half of the poster is uniquely New York Rican and articulates Soto’s appreciation of the outline typography favored by subway graffiti artists who populated “bubble style” letters in New York. Undecorating the graffiti elements, Soto merged the “IT” in Boricua as though it was a subway column with the name of Taino Cuque Urayán, who led the first uprising against the Spanish in Puerto Rico. He also integrated symbols associated with other racial groups into his bubble letters. In addition, to the Love day utilized by members of the Puerto Rican independence movement, Soto depicted a star and crescent moon in the left hand corner of the poster, a Muslim symbol often seen in newspapers circulated by followers of Black nationalist leaders like Malcolm X. Far from being folkloric, or even purely “Puerto Rican,” Soto’s poster presents Taller Boricua as an artist’s space whose members were aligned a multitude of vanguard political and aesthetic movements that operated above and below ground in the 1970s.

From Afro-Taino to Shamen/Santés: Santería aesthetics in the works of Jorge Soto

The artists who worked at Taller Boricua were informed by knowledge gleaned from living among Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean peoples in New York. The totality of this experience generated an understanding of Puerto Rican identity that was cosmopolitan and transnational. One of the strategies that the Taller artists adopted to surpass the visual clichés of representing Afro-Puerto Rican heritage with well-worn tropes such as vaquita masks and bota桶 drums was to incorporate motifs in their work that quoted from iconography related to the Afro-Caribbean practice of Santería.

Afro-Caribbean Santería arose during the 16th century, when Yoruba slaves from Nigeria were brought to work in the sugar cane fields and exacerbated their ancestral duties (e.g., with Catholic saints’ names). Santería’s rich tradition of music, dance, art and regalia spread throughout the Caribbean and United States with the flow of migrants to and from Cuba and the spread of Afro-Cuban music. As Armanto Lindsay notes in Olorun: Living Gods in Contemporary Latin Art, Santería art became an important archetype for artists seeking viable examples of African traditions in Latin American culture. “For Latin artists, particularly those of Caribbean ancestry, Santería aesthetics represent a strong and resilient Afro-Caribbean resonance that has survived and flourished with [that] which they can identify and claim as their own as they too experience the intensified process of acculturation in North America,” writes Lindsay. “These shifts in the art world, occurring at the fertile cultural crossroads where Santería aesthetics, Afrocentricism and postmodernism meet, have gained Latino artists the necessary currency to create a recognizable new genre of art that has been dispelling erroneous misconceptions of African religious traditions by opening a window through which the world can witness the [true] [power] of the haita.”

Allusions to Santería are evident in works by Marcos Dimas, Adrián García, Rafael Colín Morales, José Morales, Núria Tirado, Jorge Soto and Manuel Vega. In fact, when we examine Dimas’ logo for Taller Boricua created in 1974 through an “afro-centric” perspective, we see that it is much Yoruba as it is Taino. The large curvilinear plant-like headress that animates the figure, for example, is atypical in Taino art. Instead, such headdresses are found in Yoruba and Afro-Cuban Shango figures, whose heads sport double akas. Dimas’ creature also has large almond-shaped eyes and a high-hipped expression that is characteristic in Yoruba artifacts. Shango, the god of war, thunder and lightning is among the most popular orishas in the Afro-Cuban pantheon. Shango’s many attributes include being the guardian of drums, an instrument that Dimas began playing when he was 11 years old.

The appearance of Santería motifs in Dimas’ works and that of other artists in the Taller such as José Morales and Rafael Colín Morales in a consequence of the shared expectation of Afro-Caribbean music and does not necessarily reflect the artist’s religious affiliations. Drums play a vital role in Santería rituals. Every major orisha has an assigned drumstick, chant and dance. As rituals called bembés, drumming, singing and dancing are used to beckon the orishas to impart their wisdom and blessings on the party by [temporarily] possessing the spirit of one or more of the gatherers. Puerto Rican drummers such as Tío Puentes and El Barretón customarily include a song or two in their albums that honor Shango as well as Ochimaw, the deity of creation and inspiration. Other well-represented orishas in Latin music are Elegua, the guardian of the crossroads, Obum, the god of thunder here, and Yemayá, the goddess of maternal love. The close-overs of Santería music into Latin popular music made learning the dances of the orishas a standard element of musical training and the names of major orishas familiar in Puerto Rican households.

Jorge Soto’s attitude towards Santería iconography went beyond formal appreciation for its music and regalia. He studied, if not practiced, the rituals and mythology of the Yoruba and other enslaved African and Native American peoples. Soto’s scholarly engagement and Santería iconography enabled his work to attain an intellectual richness and a polychromatic hue that remains unmatched among the poets.

The key to understanding Soto’s images from 1974 onward is that they are poetic transcriptions of his ideas about Puerto Rican identity that make use of allegory, metaphors and myth. In Soto’s drawing, El martirio de los indios y Changuí (c. 1975), Taino and Yoruba deities serve as allegorical figures that relay the history of co-mingling of African and Taino peoples in Puerto Rico as a merger of two great civilizations whose combined experiences of conquest and colonization birthed the Puerto Rican nation. The Yoruba/Santería deity Shango is depicted nursing the Taino fertility goddess Asabuya. He reaches to remove a child from Asabuya’s vagina while another child suckles at her breast. Their limbs stretch out and merge with each other’s bodies, and motifs from each art heritage are fused. Tainos faces emerge from Shango’s double face and his body resembles a Taino tomato pole. Soto employs Picasso’s cubist strategy of simultaneously depicting figures facing front and in
I felt (at the Taller) like the ugly duckling who returned to its pond and realized he was a beautiful swan.... I found out that my roots stretched from Borinquen through the Caribbean into the Americas, Latin America, Native North America, the continent of Africa, through Asia into Oceania and back to Méjico and to Borinquen.... When you examine your cultural roots a lot of you comes together and you feel strong and proud of what you are, and no other culture can make you feel humiliated, inferior and a lesser human. You realize that you belong to a big family of people because it’s not just Puerto Rico, it’s Cuba, Santo Domingo, Haiti, Méjico and Venezuela because we all share the same historical development, oppressed by the same imperialism, first Spain and now the United States. In our roots beside America Latina we as Puerto Ricans have an extended arm to our sister continent Africa, which connects us to all the Africans in the Americas besides Africa itself. This is a bondage (sic) of blood as well as cultural and historical heritage.

profile to depict Atabeya’s double identity. Facing front, Atabeya has a skeletal face with large round eyes and bared teeth, features that are typical in Taíno art. Her face in profile, however, is visibly black and resembles the female figures with almond-shaped eyes, tight-lipped smiles and full breasts that the Yoruba sculpt in dedication to Shango.

Soto’s drawing can also be understood as an allegory of the Puerto Rican migration to New York and the birth of “Négrito-Taíno” consciousness among his fellow artists at the Taller. In the artist’s statement cited below, Soto describes the relationship between Puerto Rico and Africa as a “bondage of blood” that has enabled Puerto Ricans to claim kinship with African, Caribbean, Latin American and Native peoples across the globe.
In Soto’s drawing, the mingling between Nativos and African peoples is celebrated as the union of two great civilizations, but there is a social subtext to this image. In Puerto Rico, a popular response to someone who claims to be racially pure is to pose the following question: ¿Qué absuelves con esto? (1961) simultaneously, “I used to knock out every time I passed by my grandmother’s room because of the Sameita things she kept and the Sameita things she occasionally practiced,” recalled Soto. As an adult, Soto came to understand that African and native peoples were not only physically but psychologically oppressed by a culture that emphasized their healing rituals as well. “My so-called religious sense does not spring out of any religious inclination but out of my preoccupation with human well-being, a preoccupation for the essence of a life with dignity, the essence of our being,” stated Soto. “Africa comes to New York via the Caribbean. We New York Puerto Ricans always had huts where herbs and religious images were sold. When I use (religious) signs in my work I simply reflect a part of New York Puerto Rican experience. I hope to feel them better and with my other signs as I go along experimenting as an artist and a human being.”

Soto’s quest to uncover his ancestral roots took him back to Puerto Rico in 1975 during which time he made initial studies of Taíno artifacts and works of canonical Puerto Rican artists like José Campeche and Francisco Oller. In 1977 Soto had his first solo exhibition in Puerto Rico at Galería Tainan in Arecibo, and his works continued to be displayed at several prestigious institutions on the island throughout the 1970s, including El Museo de la Universidad de Puerto Rico (1974), Museo de Ponce (1976), Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (1975 and 1979), and Centro Nacional de la Artes (1979). The institutional support that Soto’s works received in Puerto Rico did not absolve him from being seen as a “Nuyorican” artist, and his experience of class and racial prejudices on his visits to this island. “He was very critical of the bourgeois sector of the island,” stated Juan Flores. “He did not have any illusions about being treated equal, and he bitterly resisted that.”

Tests authored by Jorge Soto contained in his artist file at El Museo del Barrio indicate that he paid attention to the scholarly debates concerning the viability of the term Nuyorican and that he experimented with writing poetry, aphorisms and prose. As a close friend of Pedro Pietri, Populús Mulind, Sandra María Estévez and Tito Lebario, Soto sympathized with the anger that the poets voiced at being rejected by their racial roots. In response to this, Soto did not fully consolidate the position articulated by Agüero and other Nuyorican poets that Puerto Ricans in New York were forming a new and somewhat separate cultural entity from the island.

Soto’s poem entitled “Puerto Rican Ideology/Con qué se comienza” (1976–83) suggests that he was dissatisfied with the proliferation of slang aliments that the Nuyorican poets had invented or inspired in the 1970s. What purpose did these labels serve? In what name were they being coined? The poem lists 35 names that play on the word Rican and allude a summary of the types of cultural producers that comprised the Nuyorican art community. The poem concludes with Soto repeating the term, Puerto Rican, three times to emphasize that in the end the community was one and the same.


Soto’s writings and art demonstrate a sincere, albeit ruthless, commitment to uncover the ideology myths about race, language and nationality that keep Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland apart. His employment of an Afro-Taino visual language was a purposeful attack on the racial and social racial traditions that overshadowed the “nativist” schools of Puerto Rican painting in the modern era, modes of representation that celebrated the distinctness of Puerto Rican heritage but also fetished racial and national differences among the Puerto Rican nations that modernization and cultural migration were rapidly eroding.

In the mid-1970s, Soto created a series of prints and paintings that transformed Puerto Rican nationalist images into a means to re-imagine and change among Puerto Ricans on both sides of the Atlantic. Soto’s Remembrances of Frances Oller’s El velorio (1951) and Homer’s seal of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (1956) simultaneously expose the biases that underlie these images and assert that the racial, linguistic, and cultural hybridity that Puerto Ricans were experiencing as a result of transmigration was part of a historical continuum that unmasked back to the Spanish conquest.

Francisco Oller’s El velorio (1855) ranks among the great works of nineteenth-century realist art and touches on the subject of infant death and folk rituals in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican folk belief holds that a child’s death is a cause for celebration because he or she is freed from original sin and will therefore ascend to heaven. Oller’s painting depicts a multiracial group of Puerto Rican peasants and clergy holding a eucharistic wake in a rural log known as a bohío. El velorio contrasts an innocent child being dead on a kitchen table with the elderly adults who dressed horns and seals of food and drink. Despite its gruesome theme, El velorio is admired for its realistic portrayal of rural life and customs in Puerto Rico and is considered a national icon. Jorge Soto’s engraving, El velorio al Oller en Nueva Orleas (1957), mimics Oller’s masterpiece to re-imagine and change among Puerto Ricans living in New York at the last quarter of the romantic century. Like Oller, Soto portrays a group of mourners at a wake’s wake. The first had no instrument when Soto’s figures stand for Puer Ricans in New York and are considered a national icon. When Soto’s figures stand for Puer Ricans in New York and are considered a national icon. When Soto’s figures stand for Puer Ricans in New York and are considered a national icon. When Soto’s figures stand for Puer Ricans in New York and are considered a national icon.
Indian, a Spanish collective and an African slave. The Indian holds a stone carving; the Spanish holds a book and the African holds a drum to signify the cultural contribution that each race brought to the island. While the three races are presented on equal footing, the Spaniard’s central position on the seal and the logocentric framework of Puerto Rican national identity over-determines that Spanish language and heritage appear as the demons that underlie Puerto Rican civil society. Although Homar designed the emblem in 1977, it excluded the United States as an agent of social change in Puerto Rico, an omission that rendered his image of Puerto Rican culture obsolete for its time.

Homar’s redesign of Homar’s emblem updates the historical forces that structured Puerto Rican culture in the 18th century. The Spanish caballero re-appears in the center as a skeleton holding a skull wearing Uncle Sam’s top hat. Here Spain and the United States are depicted not only as entities that brought death and destruction to the island, but also as representatives of the patriarchal culture of “dead white males” who pro-dominate in Euro-American renditions of history.

In contrast to Homar’s patriarchal depiction of Puerto Rican heritage, Setú’s redesign reflects the island’s indigenous culture. It is joined by a crested round-head female whose right breast is covered by a crescent moon shape and whose left breast and fertile womb are exposed. Setú’s bound facial movement, and though he rendered many remarkable images of women, provocative female deities, and the merging of male and female bodies to express universal harmony as a balance of male and female forces are prominent motifs in his works. Thus, here the female is joined at the hip to a male figure with huge round eyes that bears resemblance to representations of Yeku Ha, the Tainos god of life force. However, another figure is purely Taino. Bird-beaded figures, for example, are prevalent in West African, Oceanic, and Native American artistry, sources that Soto had been integrating into his visual language for several years.

Soto’s twin-faced African male is a composite of Yoruba and Kongo iconography. Although his head is crowned by the double axe headdress that distinguishes a Taino, it is decorated with a pair of Taino female hands, a symbol of peace that Soto has reintroduced in his fatherland. His own traditional hooked staff, a symbol of procreative female goddesses and the elements that unify Puerto Rican culture, is updated by a crescent moon shape and whose left breast and fertile womb are exposed. Setú’s bound facial movement, and though he rendered many remarkable images of women, provocative female deities, and the merging of male and female bodies to express universal harmony as a balance of male and female forces are prominent motifs in his works. Thus, here the female is joined at the hip to a male figure with huge round eyes that bears resemblance to representations of Yeku Ha, the Tainos god of life force. However, another figure is purely Taino. Bird-beaded figures, for example, are prevalent in West African, Oceanic, and Native American artistry, sources that Soto had been integrating into his visual language for several years.
that Homer depicted in the original ICP seal, the African holds a skull in his right hand and carries a rapture in the left to reflect his Congo ancestry. Like the Yoruba, the Kongo people were brought to the Caribbean during the slave trade. Kongo spiritual beliefs are grounded in ancestor worship and aspects of their ritual practices survive in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Palo and Puerto Rican Esprituism. Indeed, the efficacy of Kongo rituals are so renowned in the Caribbean that Puerto Rican Esprituism, which largely derives from the writings of the French spiritmedium Allan Kardec, recognizes an African spiritual guide known as "El Congo" who is called upon to locate dead relatives.  

In Soto's image, the African male becomes the only figure capable of bridging this collective version of Puerto Rico's past heritages with the present. In this context, the skull and rapture refer to instruments used in Vodou, Palo and Esprituismo ceremonies, all of which involve contacting ancestors and spirits for guidance and retribution. The rapture may be pounded against a drum or the ground to wake up ancestors and is also used to create symbols that empower the spirits or record what they say. Soto's replacement of the Congo drum with a skull is perhaps the most significant element in his appropriation of the ICP seal because it reveals the spiritual "truth" that Bonilla and other forms of drumming and dancing charged with Puerto Rican, Puerto Rican and other African-PLicano peoples. The skull is a memento symbol of the drum's capacity to connect individuales to minds of their ancestors, to sing, dance and worship as they once did: "The process of reclaiming, recontextualizing and reifying our context made it clear that the depth of racial and cultural experiences we embody needed a new aesthetic construct," writes María Manchana Vigo about Nuyorican movement of the 1970s. "We understood what our ancestors understood that dance was more than dance, song was more than song—we understood that like the drum, these forms were a system of communication, unification and transformation, developing linkages between our sacred and secular experiences."  

Jorge Soto's last years 1979–1987  
Soto's last major exhibition was held at El Museo del Barrio in 1979 and displayed his appreciation for art from all parts of the world. Among the drawings he exhibited were his Afro-Taino recreations of European masterpieces such as Titian's Nudo and studies into Asian art with Ayuerto's transformation on two pieces: c. 1526–1610. Carmona Bumho's perspective catalog essay describes Soto's work as being the outcome of the artist's "moving to New York City's visual backdrop and "springing" it in our transformed into his own image. "These drawings are bulletins from the front that testify to the ongoing cultural warfare that the artist is engaged in," writes Bumho. "All are a record of the inner city of the mind, a mind that is purposefully ethnic and Puerto Rican in its assimilation of diverse sources."  

Soto's Baroque Self-Portrait (1979), which depicts his face undergoing a metamorphosis, is an example of his work at its peak. He saw a variety of techniques to give the drawing the carved quality of an etching. Lines that are not straight or cross-hatched are rendered in small dots which lend the surface depth and variety
foundations of seedlings, water rotted rainforest
pushed to hysterical insanity
by that loose backbone of ambivalence
like hunger sick hawks
building nests between stone mentalities
fighting the continuous turbulence of disco
like a voracious reader

In interviews regarding the significance of Soto’s work, artists and scholars such as Espinosa Marull, Sandra María Encarnación, and Juan Flores have all described Soto as a “reconstructionist.” “The concept of laying bare is essential to his work—he was a deconstructor,” stated Flores. “He was a progenitor of Puerto Rican and Nuyorican reality. He took people’s clothes off, their skin off, he did magical dissections on reality to get to the inner core of it and get underneath its façade.”

However, Soto did more than deconstruct objects and the ideological meanings in his works. Soto employed mythic figures to destroy myths that marginalized the Puerto Rican community in New York. Roland Barthes’s Mythologies was among the most influential texts in the 1970s, and its ideas were widely discussed in the New York art world. Soto was a voracious reader, and though I cannot prove that he read Mythologies, his Afro-Santo Rican reinterpretation of Puerto Rican icons echo Barthes definition of a critical (anti-mythological) text. Truth to tell, the four weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in turn, and to produce an archetypical text, “wrote Barthes.” As Juan Flores observes in “país de paí: Popular culture in time,” “re-presentations of national identity and traditions by migrant or immigrant groups are newer wholehearted transcriptions. The preservation and re-emergence of national traditions is most active at the moment of contemporary transnational formations, at the point of implosion and re-solidifying characteristic of diasporic conditions and migratory peoples, where an appeal to those traditions helps to provide a sense of grounding in place and time” stresses Flores. “The particularity characteristic of popular cultural practices is now present not so much in some presumed untapped lineages of native heritage as the very hybridization itself, in the blurring and juxtaposition of seeming disparate elements of diverse traditions and practices.”

Latin American and Caribbean peoples come from nations that are the product of contact of colonized conqueror and whose populations are the products of racial mixing. As a result, constructions of national identity in the Caribbean and Latin American societies are inherently plural, based on class, ethnic and racial hierarchies, and are subject to change over time and space as people move in and out. Taking into account the myth of political, social and economic factors that weigh into the representation of national identity among migrant groups, disjunctions are found to exist between the values, customs and traditions that migrant groups maintain as “their” national identity and the national identity promoted by the migrant’s country of origin.

Throughout the norteño, Nuyorican artists, poets, photographers, dancers and musicians evolved a discourse about Puerto Rican national identity that re-ordered its traditional racial hierarchies. In contrast to the island, where Spanish heritage is held in high esteem, Nuyorican privileged Puerto Rico’s Taino and African legacies, extra-dispotic forms of expression based on Afro-Puerto Rican mas and dance traditions such as Bomba, Plena and Salsa enabled the Nuyorican community to engage in cultural activities that affirmed their ties to the island while simultaneously establishing that Puerto Ricans shared a common ancestry with their African diasporic neighbors in New York.

The diasporic construction of Puerto Rican national identity mobilized the Nuyorican arts community to claim rights, space and place within multiple sectors and institutions in New York. However, neither the Nuyorican nor the island-based construction of Puerto Rican national identity is unique or more authentic. National identities are social constructions that are subject to change over time—what matters are the multicultural forces that render certain aspects of national identity salient and/or necessary at a given moment in history.

Conclusions

The Afro-Santo Rican motifs that appear in the works of Jorge Soto and other artists who comprised Taller Boricua’s core membership are attributable to the confluence of several factors: (a) a desire among these artists to align their aesthetic agenda back to great antecedent realizations in Africa and Latin America, (b) access to museums that house extensive collections of African, Afro-Diaspora and Native American art; (c) identification with the cultural and social struggles of an array of African, African-American and Afro-Latino and Native peoples across the Americas; (d) exposure to African-Diaspora religious such as Santería, Vodou and Candomblé through popular music and/or direct engagement with these religious practices. As a consequence of all the abovementioned factors, the work of artists that were affiliated with Taller Boricua manifests a broader range of pan-African iconography and a greater tendency to raise African and Santo Rican symbols than island-based Puerto Rican art during from that era.

The work of Jorge Soto paralleled the hybrid structure of Nuyorican writing. His densely coded visual language was informed by several traditions: the evanescence of the pre-Columbian Taino-natives of Puerto Rico, the artifacts of African and African-American peoples, and the visual culture of New York’s barrios. Whereas the Nuyorican poets invoked words that resounded in Spanish and English, Jorge Soto re-presents the island’s pantheon of indigenous deities and naturalized icons in contemporary urban settings, thus allowing these mythic island figures new meanings for Nuyorican audiences. In this respect, Jorge Soto’s approach towards image making is the mirror opposite of the documentary style the Nuyorican poets adopted. The Nuyorican poets strove to make their poetic language reflect the concrete realities of daily life, whereas Jorge Soto strives to represent what he saw on the streets as the stuff of legends and myths. Nevertheless, like the Nuyorican poets whose Spanglish speech is punctuated by the oral delivery of African-American and Afro-Caribbean poets and rapists, the work of Jorge Soto is a visual expression of the hybrid racial consciousnes that distinguished Nuyorican cultural production in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The Nuyorican Movement was immediately visual. Artists, musicians, poets and dancers collaborated across and collaborated in staging cultural events and political actions. The re-imaginations of Afro-Puerto Rican folk art, music, song and dance traditions was understood as enabling contemporary artists to establish a transhistorical connection with the island’s oppressed peoples of color, thus empowering Nuyorican to disrupt logoscentric and Eurocentric constructions of Puerto Rican national identity.
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NOTES

1 Holland Cotter, “A Neighborhood Nurtures Its Vibrant Cultural History,” The New York Times at March 1996, sec. E. 3. 2 The author and artist acknowledge the exceptional contributions that Shifra Goldman and Sacy Sapp have made to Valle Punturo through their essays and lectures.


6 Ibid.


8 Peter A. the Young Lords Organization’s protest program called for “artistic education in Puerto Rico’s Afro-Indian culture.” See Pulso (October 1969), 19.


10 Néstor Téllez, interview by author, 1 March 2003, New York, radio-taping.


13 An important recording that demonstrates the transition of Santurche music into Latin pop is in Perros Pesados (1974), which features Tito Puente with other musicians such as Mongo Santurche and Willie Colon.

14 The integration of hometown music into popular Latin music continues with hip hop, house and tribal music. See La Furia’s recording “River Ocean: Love and Happiness (Simona and Oban)” the Tribal LP (New York: Vinyl Rhythm Records, 1994).

15 Unpublished document found in Jorge Soto’s artist file at El Museo del Barrio.

16 The saying in English can be translated as “Nadie joven mató a su abuela” (author’s translation).


18 Ibid., 112.

19 Ibid., 112.

20 Soto’s blackface imagery can be compared to the work of Carlos Raquel Rivera, whose paintings and poems of the 1940s and 1950s employ allegorical figures and magic realism symbols to comment on contemporary Puerto Rican life.

21 Juan Flores, interview by author, 14 April 2003, New York, N.Y., digital tape recording.

22 Unpublished typed document found in Jorge Soto’s artist file at El Museo del Barrio.


24 Flores and Soto became colleagues during a year-long cultural theory reading group that Flores organized at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in 1976. The participants were drawn from various sectors of the New York art community such as Néstor Otero and Sandra Maria Enzens from Talk Boricua, and Peter Bartosiak, an administrator at the Department of Cultural Affairs who later became the fourth director of El Museo del Barrio in 1986. According to Flores the emphasis of the seminar was on applying Marx, Gramsci, and other leftist cultural theorists to examine Puerto Rican culture.


26 Audrey Indyka Price y Mena, Speaking with the Dead: Development of Afro-Latino Religion Among Puerto Ricans in the United States (New York: AMS Press, 1991). I was also informed by personal experience gained from practicing Bomba, Plena, Yolotl, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian and West African dance traditions and conversations with practitioners of African Diaspora religions.


28 Carmine Robbins, ed. The Drawings of Jorge Soto-Sánchez, 1.

29 Jorge Soto’s exact cause of death has not been disclosed.
