

ART AGAINST COLONIALISM

An Ethnographic Study of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Puerto Rico



Photo by Ricardo Alcaraz

What is the issue?

Historical and contemporary forms of colonialism, as well as ongoing exclusionary policies, have led to the collective disenfranchisement and displacement of many Puerto Ricans. This case study explores how the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, or MAC) contributes to anti-colonial and racial justice struggles through its varied programmatic and community interventions.

What is the research context?

The MAC was founded as a nonprofit institution in 1984. The museum collects, documents, preserves, promotes, and studies art produced since the mid-20th century in Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, Latin America, and their diasporas. The museum plays a critical role as a convenor of the local community, an educational institution, and a catalyst for social justice, activism, and community well-being.

What are the research findings?

The MAC grapples with contemporary forms of colonization of Puerto Rico through its curation practices,

Research Approach

Researcher Claudia Sofía Garriga-López conducted a year of ethnographic research at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (MAC) in San Juan. The researcher spent a year viewing exhibits and events at the MAC almost weekly, as well as attending and observing community cultural and pedagogical events organized by MAC staff.

exhibitions, and commissioned works. The art at the museum tackles issues such as the racialized experiences of Puerto Ricans who migrate to the continental United States, the gentrification impacts of significant tax incentives to wealthy foreign investors, and the impact of the tourist economy that includes dispossession of land, racial segregation, economic precarity, sex-work tourism, and ecological harm.

Anti-racist and Black empowerment initiatives are

Brief based on *Built to Last, Born to Fight: Enduring Colonialism at the MAC*, written by Claudia Sofía Garriga-López, Ph.D., at California State University

central to the MAC's work and values. A yearlong exhibit, for example, featured 38 Black Puerto Rican artists and a comprehensive anti-racist workshop series for educators developed through the MAC Educa (MAC Educates). Under the leadership of Marianne Ramirez Aponte, the MAC has advocated for the visibility for Black/Afro-descendant artists, anti-racist political education training, gender and sexual diversity, equity and inclusion, and cultural policies that protect vulnerable communities and cultural heritage.

The researcher's ethnographic work focused on the MAC's program, MAC en el Barrio (MAC in the Neighborhood), a community-centered initiative that, over the last ten years, has engaged artists and the local community to develop over 80 artistic projects across 20 different locations in Puerto Rico. As the program's creator, Marianne Ramírez, MAC's executive director and chief curator, developed its cumulative methodology, which integrates artistic commissions, cultural and historical education, ethical cultural documentation, and sustained partnerships with community organizations

and public institutions. Building on the legacy of Windy M. Cosme Rosario, a Black queer Puerto Rican historian who served as the project first coordinator, the projects represent a Black cultural resurgence that preserves cultural and geographic memories, strengthens intergenerational bonds, and turns artists into educators (and vice versa) in historically underserved communities. MAC en el Barrio is a deeply collaborative endeavor, and a model of community engagement that seeks to foster trust, prevent extractive practices, and enable artists and community members to build networks of support and collective power for advancing their goals.

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Why does this matter?

Arts organizations can serve as powerful community coordinators and allies in the face of the enduring effects of colonialism and ongoing disenfranchisement on marginalized communities. Funders can support arts organizations rooted in communities of color as a way of directly supporting communities. Funders should consider:

- Committing to long-term, flexible funding that aligns with community timelines and supports relationship-based cultural work.
- Supporting artist-led, community co-designed models that prioritize skill-sharing, public presentation, and sustainability for creative works.
- Ensuring artists, cultural organizations, and scholars are equitably resourced, supported, and acknowledged to undertake research and documentation efforts.
- Funding community partnerships and infrastructure, including collaborations with grassroots organizations, local governments, and human service providers.

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