Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard

ON MIGUEL LUCIANO

Form Interrupting History: Notes on Miguel Luciano's Art Practice

New York-based, Puerto Rican multimedia artist Miguel Luciano's recent untitled sculpture—a pair of cannonballs connected with long bars and fashioned into barbells—encourages viewers to reconsider his body of work. The cannonballs are similar to those found in the Spanish colonial forts of Old San Juan, Castillo de San Cristóbal, and Castillo San Felipe del Morro. Luciano inherited the cannonballs from his grand-uncle. They have been in his family's possession ever since. Last year, Luciano shipped the cannonballs from Puerto Rico to his studio in Brooklyn, New York.

At first glance, the completed work seems to depart from his previous works both in form and process. Yet Luciano creates and uses objects, whether mobile or inert, glossy or matte, to *interrupt*. In his attention to what he calls the histories of "resistance and resilience from the post–Civil Rights era to the post–Hurricane Maria present" in Puerto Rico and its diaspora, his art practice disputes the idea that the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is benevolent.[1]

To interrupt, generally, is to stop a conversation in order to begin another. To shift the mood. To surprise. Visually, interruption becomes a relation between the object and its context. Motionless objects might move, or objects in motion might come to a stop. Everyday objects, or even waste, command attention as art objects. Historic objects, like the cannonballs, seem anachronistic and pull the viewer to another place and time. Colonial histories, in turn, come to bear on the present. In this way, Luciano uses objects to illustrate that the project of Puerto Rican decolonization, like that throughout the region, is incomplete and ongoing. He does so in conversation with his predecessors and contemporaries across the Caribbean and in the Americas.

The Body of Work

Taken together, Luciano's newest work and art practice uses the iconography of Puerto Rico, and of the Caribbean more broadly, to reconsider the history in the present. As anthropologist Arlene Davila insists, "Cultural nationalism . . . is a direct result of the limits imposed by colonialism."[2] Luciano is also in conversation with scholars of Puerto Rico across disciplines who insist on the study of culture in order to understand the political economy of the nation and its diaspora.[3] In this way, Luciano's practice marries formalism and politics.

To interrupt, Luciano appropriates, employing an object for a purpose other than its intended use. For example, the plantain is at the center of *Pure Plantainum* (2006), a series in which he plated the starchy fruits in platinum. Plantains originated in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Africa. Botanists, who accompanied European settlement in the Caribbean, brought the fruits to the region.[4] By using a suffix akin to *-ium* in chemistry, Luciano changes the fruit into an element. As a necklace, as in the now-familiar work *Plátano Pride* (2006), the plantain conjures a tradition of "bling" as adornment (fig. 1). It also conjures dispossession, through agriculture and resource extraction, in the Caribbean.

Figure 1. Miguel Luciano, *Plátano Pride*, 2006; chromogenic print, 40 x 30 in.

Luciano also uses assemblage toward interruption. In his case, this technique cannot be separated from the work of a mechanic. He affixes flags to bicycles, as in his exhibition *Ride or Die* (2017); puts sound and video systems in a *piragua* cart in *Pimp My Piragua* (2009–); and, more recently, in *Studebaker, Plátanos y Machete* (2018–), encases trucks and their cargo in glossy, saturated colors.[5] From familiar vehicles, Luciano creates spectacles. And, in the case of *Pimp My Piragua*, as tracks such as Princess Nokia's "Brujas" echo from the speakers, he broadcasts popular culture as a link between Latinx, Caribbean, and African American communities (fig. 2).[6]

Figure 2. Miguel Luciano, *Pimp My Piragua*, 2009; customized tricycle-pushcart, sound system, video, and LEDs. Photograph by Jason Wyche.

Here, I trace the use of Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic iconography in Miguel Luciano's work of visual interruption. In the end, I meditate on the conceptual questions his practice raises: Who could be said to be "speaking" through taken-for-granted geographies or historical narratives? Who—including and apart from Luciano—or what interjects? For what purpose? In this way, Luciano's entire body of work could be conceived of as a performance of interruption: staging speech acts and scenes only to take them in another direction.

Luciano in Conversation

There are connections between Luciano's art practice and that of his contemporaries across the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora. As Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens write, an archipelagic approach to contemporary Caribbean art, and especially art from the hispano-

phone Caribbean, demands “a logic of analogy, whereby the very strategies, themes, and mediums engaged by contemporary Caribbean visual artists encourage a recognition of unexpected mirrorings and inevitable unities across Caribbean spaces and bodies.”[7] Flores and Stephens’s insights build on the work of anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who advocated for the study of the Caribbean across national borders and language difference.[8]

I present some instances of this “unexpected mirroring” between Luciano’s barbell work and the work of other Puerto Rican and Caribbean artists. The works I place in conversation with Luciano’s barbell work all consider national iconography. In particular, they each address the flag or Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic geographies as key features of nationalisms. They similarly use the techniques of appropriation and assemblage toward what I am calling interruption.

The barbell work is at the center of the analysis. I also spend time with *’51* (*Se acabaron las promesas*) [*The Promises Are Over*] (2012–17) and an in-progress installation involving New York City bike racks. I place his body of work in conversation with works by two Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic artists: Christopher Cozier, a Trinidadian cultural worker and mixed-media artist, and Hiram Maristany, a New York–based photographer and former member of the Young Lords. In particular, Cozier’s mixed-media work questions symbols of nationalism, while Maristany’s photography uses moments of tenderness to intervene in the built environment of 1970s Puerto Rican New York. Beyond an archipelagic approach, insists historian Harvey Neptune, it is important to “recognize the entire New World, the United States included, as available as sites (and cites) for our scholarly enterprise.”[9] Luciano’s art practice enables such connections.

Even as Luciano’s barbell work sits in the studio, its composition evokes its journey throughout the New World. Its weights—the cannonballs—gesture to the history of the United States and its Commonwealth, too. Puerto Rico, as an unincorporated territory of the United States, is legally “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense.” The island is on the geographic and constitutional margins of the nation-state.[10] Yet as an art object, Luciano can ship the cannonballs across the boundary between Puerto Rico and the so-called US mainland. Just as Puerto Ricans travel throughout the Caribbean and back and forth from the US mainland, so too can this object travel throughout the island’s sphere of influence.[11] As they travel, the cannonballs are no longer “foreign in a domestic sense.” They become incorporated into the barbell, an everyday and familiar object (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Luciano’s cannonball barbells in his studio, 2019. Photograph by the artist.

The cannonballs appear light, belying their true weight. Might Luciano have created these spheres out of plaster and left them hollow? Painted them unevenly to mimic rust? But for both the bar and the cannonballs, their true composite materials determine color and surface. The bar is custom fabricated to mimic a standard regulation weightlifting bar and, as such, is matte carbon steel. Only from a distance does it reflect ambient light. The cannonballs were once matte, in a similar fashion to the bar; over hundreds of years, however, rust has accumulated on them. The bar fits into to the openings of the cannonballs, as though the projectiles themselves were made for this particular purpose:

bespoke barbells. But they are solid. Once meant for loading into cannons, the balls are now inert as part of the barbell work. They rest on a studio floor and, one day, will rest on an exhibition floor.

While the work is not figurative, it gestures to the body. As makeshift barbells, the sculpture could conceivably be lifted, in simple or complex movements: with arms in front, or behind the neck and over the shoulders, or overhead. Or they could roll from the sides. But Luciano's effort—in lifting the balls, one hundred pounds each, and affixing them to the bar—is the final physical exercise to be performed with these barbells. Any exercise, from this point on, must be conceptual. And the lifter, who would grow stronger through this exercise, is absent. The sculpture invites anyone to contemplate the weight; the weight of its history is all of ours. The barbell work might be understood, then, as a window to the work of interruption throughout Luciano's practice—and in Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora art broadly.

Figure 4. Miguel Luciano, *'51 (Se acabaron las promesas)* [*The Promises Are Over*], 2012–17; 1951 Schwinn Hornet, custom platform, LEDs, and flags.

Throughout Luciano's work, the Puerto Rican flag is an omnipresent yet fraught national symbol. It uses and inverts the red, white, and blue of the flag of the United States of America as well as of the Cuban flag. It signals the struggle of Puerto Rico and Cuba against Spanish colonialism; it also visualizes that Puerto Rico is "foreign" to the United States "in a domestic sense." In contemporary Puerto Rican art practice, as Michelle Joan Wilkinson writes, artist Juan Sanchez uses the Puerto Rican flag as "evidence" of nationalism in progress.[12] Similarly, Luciano uses hue and assemblage in *'51 (Se acabaron las promesas)* to contest political sovereignty through the Puerto Rican flag (fig. 4).

Here, the Puerto Rican flag appears in black and white, instead of the characteristic red, white, and blue. Relatedly, Max Haiven notes how members of Moriviví, an art collective founded by young Puerto Rican women, use a black-and-white Puerto Rican flag as part of their austere palette.[13] Luciano has also rotated the flag ninety degrees. From the top, the white five-pointed star leads into the black-and-white stripes. While the Puerto Rican flag would normally fly alongside the US flag, it stands alone here.[14]

Interrupting the bottom third of the flag is a 1951 Schwinn Hornet, placed perpendicular to the viewer. The bicycle is a glossy black and enamel white, featuring horns, lights, and brakes. On the back are several small Puerto Rican flags, matching the bicycle's palette. With this bicycle, Luciano references the history of Puerto Rican bike clubs on the island and in New York City. While this is a functional bike, it is mounted and made static in the exhibition space. It sits on a glossy black platform in the shape of the island of Puerto Rico. Underneath the platform is a soft blue LED light that suggests Mosquito

Bay, a bioluminescent bay. Here, Luciano carries the natural features and iconography of Puerto Rico into the exhibition space.

The title, *'51*, refers to the year of the Schwinn bike in the work but also to the 1951 referendum in which voters passed Public Law 600 "for the organization of a constitutional government by the people of Puerto Rico."[15] The installation also, however, calls up the economic austerity measures that curtailed Puerto Rican self-government. In 2016, the US Congress enacted PROMESA (the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), which allowed the oversight board to make economic decisions for Puerto Rico unilaterally. The subtitle of the work doubles as the name of a Puerto Rican activist organization, Se Acabaron las Promesas, which has used civil disobedience to protest the federal law.

In another part of the region, Christopher Cozier illustrates the alienation at the heart of nation building in Trinidad and Tobago. In his *Attack of the Sandwich Men* (2004), the sandwiches, wrapped identically, recall schoolchildren sitting dutifully in rows (fig. 5). The new state does not fully cast off the "sound colonial education"[16]; its "regimentation" remains.[17] The past in the present. Schoolchildren themselves become a product not unlike the commercial sandwiches they sometimes eat, reminiscent of US consumer goods. Or, in line with the title's *attack*, the sandwiches suggest a military force. Entering the global economy and political landscape requires mass production and fortification.

Figure 5. Christopher Cozier, *Attack of the Sandwich Men*, 2004; installation, rows of packaged sandwiches in wax paper, flags on toothpicks. Courtesy of the artist.

But by staging this "regimentation," Cozier can unveil the fetish of nationalism. While the black-and-white Puerto Rican flag in Luciano's *'51* insists on Puerto Rican nationalism, even as the island remains an unincorporated US territory, Cozier's flags in *Attack of the Sandwich Men* are part of a critique of both British colonial rule and US influence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Like its flag, Puerto Rico and its diasporic geographies are terrains of struggle. And New York City was the site of collaborations between African Americans and Puerto Ricans: from strategy around the war on poverty to the breakfast programs that both the Young Lords and the Black Panthers employed. Luciano and Maristany use and reuse objects to illustrate the imprint of Puerto Ricans, other Caribbean peoples, and African Americans on US cities.

In *Young Man with Roses* (1971), Maristany represents a moment of tenderness on 111th Street, in the peak years of the Puerto Rican presence in New York.[18] This moment disrupts the dispossessed or "socially afflicted" city. The subject sits

on a railing, and the image recalls and riffs on Nicholas Hilliard's painting *Young Man among Roses*; Maristany's photograph not only interrupts the city but also an art historical tradition of representing lovesick young men. The location of Maristany's subject and his manner of sitting, knees open, suggest a familiar kind of New York black masculinity.

But the young man holds the roses between his knees. He seems vulnerable: he relaxes his shoulder, such that his shirt slips down. His thoughts are not in the moment, but rather, perhaps, with the person for whom the roses are intended. This is a moment of rest. His lightly muscled arms, together with his corduroys, worn in the knees, suggest that he is otherwise playing or doing physical labor—or both. An older man sits close to him, bisected by the left frame. He looks across the young man's gaze and seems to have an object or subject in focus. In addition to the intimacy that the roses suggest, the young man and his companion are contemplative.

Figure 6. One of Luciano's New York bike rack installations, 2018. Photograph by the artist.

A planned work of public art continues Luciano's work in interruption and is in line with his commitment to community engagement. In his current installations, Luciano modifies a bike rack (fig. 6). Through a mechanical relationship—by literally locking onto the bike rack—the work brings a multivalent Puerto Rican figure into the abstract infrastructure of New York. It suggests an indigenous sun symbol from the ancient petroglyphs of the Tainos, the indigenous people of Puerto Rico. In another way, it calls up the work of Taller Boricua, a New York–based art collective active in the 1960s and 1970s that foregrounded the likenesses of Taino and Yoruba deities in figurative drawings. Yasmin Ramirez cogently argues that member Jorge Soto's drawing *El matrimonio de Atabeya y Changó* (circa 1975) can be "understood as an allegory of the Puerto Rican migration to New York and the birth of 'Afro-Taíno' consciousness among his fellow artists at the Taller."[19] Luciano builds on this practice to comment on contemporary urban development.

In order to use the rack, a rider must now engage with its new shape. With more material on the rack, it expands and even blooms. The work is a nod to the Taino and broader indigenous lands on which the settler colonial project of the United States and the gentrification of New York City—culminating with the displacement of Puerto Ricans, Caribbean peoples, and African Americans—are based.

With Further Interruptions

Through new aesthetic and conceptual approaches, Miguel Luciano's objects propose new answers to the problems of the contemporary Caribbean. While the work of viewing the bike rack sculpture is conceptual, the installation also speaks—as do Luciano's previous works—to ongoing struggles on the island and in the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Luciano turns interruption, a speech event, into a visual phenomenon. He uses familiar techniques like appropriation or assemblage toward interruption. He takes an object out of its context; he joins unlike things to create new objects. To return to earlier questions, Who could be said to be speaking before Luciano's objects intervene? To whom does the weight of the conversation shift?

In conversation with artists in Puerto Rican and in Puerto Rican New York, with artists across the Caribbean, Luciano addresses an ongoing conversation about decolonization and sovereignty in the region.[20] Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States resounds with that of the overseas territories of France and of the Netherlands' territories. One cannot distinguish, however, between those and the seemingly sovereign nation-states of the region. Many of the latter are indebted to institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund or are subject to US interventionism. Luciano's artistic relationship to Puerto Rico and its diaspora, then, sheds light on a common Caribbean condition.

For Luciano, form intervenes in history. Critics of linear progressive time often use grammar. There is the past conditional tense that points to "what could have been."[21] Or the subjunctive "that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities."[22] But if narrative history were a single person speaking, from slavery to freedom, from colonialism to independence—even as that timeline does not hold—another might speak *across* it to create a dialogue. Thus the direction and pace of historical time is not only a question of grammar. It is also visual: moving back and forth or across to dispute taken-for-granted historical narratives. In the aftermath of European settlement and colonialism, slavery, and neocolonial rule, and in conversation with far-flung interlocutors, Luciano interrupts in order to create space. For dispute, for celebration, for ambivalence.

ENDNOTES

1 Miguel Luciano, e-mail to Kaneesha Parsard, 10 April 2018.

2 Arlene M. Dávila, *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 10.

3 See Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). In order to study Puerto Rican migration as part of an "historical system," Grosfoguel refuses the culture-economy dichotomy (14). In a different way, Frances Aparicio analyzes Puerto Rican music forms in order to lay bare race, gender, and class, in *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

4 Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11.

5 See *Small Axe* 57 (November 2018), which features *Pimp My Piragua* on the cover and five sculptures from *Ride or Die* (115–22), including *'51 (Se acabaron las promesas)* [*The Promises Are Over*] (see fig. 4).

6 See Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

7 Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens, "Contemporary Art of the Hispanophone Caribbean Islands in an Archipelagic Framework," *Small Axe*, no. 51 (November 2016): 81.

8 Mintz's commitment to the integrated study of the Caribbean can be found in many of his works. In a conversation with Charles V. Carnegie, "The Anthropology of Ourselves: An Interview with Sidney W. Mintz" (*Small Axe*, no. 19 [February 2006]: 106–79), he reaffirms this commitment.

9 Harvey Neptune, "The Lost New World of Caribbean Studies: Recalling an Un-American Puerto Rico Project," *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 185.

10 Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, "Between the Foreign and the Domestic: The Doctrine of Territorial Incorporation, Invented and Reinvented," in Christina Duffy Burnett, Burke Marshall, and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

11 See Hilda Lloréns, "Dislocated Geographies: A Story of Border Crossings," *Small Axe*, no. 19 (February 2006): 74–93. Lloréns regards the work of crossing the boundaries between literary genres as akin to crossing geopolitical borders. She draws attention to stateside travel from Puerto Rico as well as to interisland Caribbean migration (91–92).

12 Michelle Joan Wilkinson, "Haciendo Patria: The Puerto Rican Flag in the Art of Juan Sánchez," *Small Axe*, no. 16 (September 2004): 66.

13 Max Haiven, “Black Flags and Debt Resistance in America’s Oldest Colony,” *ROAR Magazine*, 2 August 2016, roarmag.org/essays/black-flags-debt-resistance-americas-oldest-colony.

14 See “Uso de las banderas del Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico y de los Estados Unidos,” *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico Policia*, 22 May 2015, policia.pr.gov/orden-general/uso-de-las-banderas-del-estado-libre-asociado-de-puerto-rico-y-de-los-estados-unidos.

15 Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act, 81st Congress, 2nd sess., chap. 446 (30 June 1950), 319–20, www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/81st-congress/session-2/c81s2ch446.pdf.

16 Derek Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*,” in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Baugh (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 128.

17 Sasha Dees, “Christopher Cozier,” Africanah.org, 4 July 2015, africanah.org/chris-cozier.

18 See Hiram Maristany’s *Young Man with Roses*, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, at americanart.si.edu/artwork/young-man-roses-110760.

19 Yasmin Ramírez, “Nuyorican Visionary: Jorge Soto and the Evolution of an Afro-Taíno Aesthetic at Taller Boricua,” *Centro Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 30.

20 See Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

21 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 40.

22 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 11.