Artistic Decoloniality as Aesthetic Praxis:

Making and Transforming Imaginations and Communities in NYC

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“…we were actually the ‘New Ricans’…we were so avant-garde…[t]hat we belonged in space…our place was the next space.” –Dina D’Oyen

Scholars have examined the formation and significance of Latine cultural artistic expressions and institutions in many contexts. Few, however, have focused on how Latine artists undertake self-directed actions to challenge both their experiences of social alienation and the dominant art institutions that ignore or overlook their subjectivity and art, rendering them invisible and insignificant according to the mainstream. Such refusal to be unseen and disparaged has often prompted Latina/o/x artists to organize creative spaces of their own.

To explore this phenomenon, this chapter delves into the *artivist* interventions of Puerto Ricans Adál Maldonado, also known as Adál, and Sandra María Esteves at the New Rican Village Cultural Arts and Education Center (NRV), founded in 1976 in Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Loisaida) neighborhood. Both Esteves and Adál were active members of this non-commercial, alternative, community-based arts venue that was home to a large, fluid community of Puerto Rican and Latina/o/x artists. Although their historical involvement with the center differs, their artworks were mutually constituted amidst a liberatory, decolonial, cultural, and socio-historical zeitgeist of sovereignty, community agency, and community-making,
collectively contributing to what I identify as *Bodega Surrealism*. They did so through many kinds of art, but I will focus on two here: Although Esteves is primarily recognized as a poet, she is also a visual artist who designed culturally significant posters for the NRV, and I examine this lesser-known aspect of her artistic oeuvre. I also analyze some of the photographic artwork that Adál created for *El Puerto Rican Embassy*, which eventually morphed into performance art but was originally conceived as an integral part of the NRV.

**Social and Historical Roots of the New Rican Village**

In 1974, concerned about the crises that Puerto Ricans and other Latinas/os/xs confronted, Eduardo (“Eddie”) Figueroa sought social change from within the Latina/o/x community. His vehicle was artistic expression. A New York–born Puerto Rican activist, a New York University theater studies student, and a former member of the New York chapter of the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party, Figueroa viewed politics as a form of theater and saw art as an important avenue for social and political intervention. Together with other Latina/o/x artists active in the Bohemian scene of New York City’s Lower East Side and the neighboring East Village, Figueroa was concerned with economic impoverishment and with the social pathologies long ascribed to Puerto Rican and some Latina/o/x communities. Art became their political vehicle of choice and a conduit for the creation of new social possibilities.

In October 1976, this community of artists responded to the conditions in their community by opening the NRV at 101 Avenue A. Directed by Figueroa, the cultural arts center was an aesthetic laboratory “where the concepts and dreams of a new generation of Puerto Ricans in New York [were] given form in theater, dance, music, the visual arts and poetry.” In a moment marked by new social movements as strategies of resistance, Figueroa and his fellow
Latina/o/x artists were unified in their quest to use art to revitalize and transform dilapidated city neighborhoods and to foster a cultural renaissance molded around new diasporic Boricua and Latine identities. Originally envisioned as both an arts venue and an Embassy (i.e., El Puerto Rican Embassy), the NRV served as a living laboratory for an intersectional exploration of the aesthetic and the artistic, where visual culture, music, poetry, dance, theater, and photography all shaped, informed, and advanced the artists’ collective imaginary.

The NRV was the product of pioneering and visionary artists of the Puerto Rican Diaspora whose socio-economic realities and legacies stemmed from an inheritance of colonialism, extractive capitalism, generational poverty, and the compounding traumas of historical and systemic neglect and disinvestment. As a result of shifting urban policies in the 1970s, New York City was undergoing massive changes, including gentrification, racial succession, urban disinvestment, deindustrialization, and middle- and upper-class white flight; the artists at the NRV were determined to use art as a vanguard response to this neoliberal strategizing. Having directly experienced the harshness of the city’s inhumane redevelopment chaos, the artists at the NRV sought to use culture and cultural practices—among them, visual art—to envision and create an alternative social world through artistic praxis. In this context, art was not an afterthought to supplement other forms of organizing; rather, it was conceived to be at the forefront of inciting alternative, decolonial, social, and imaginative realities in response to the aforementioned processes of neoliberal estrangement. A key ideological perspective that informed their artivist approaches was surrealism.

In both my oral history interviews with NRV artists and my archival research, I found explicit and implicit parallels between the innovative perspectives of surrealism and the artistic visions, imaginations, and generative, art-based community practices that constituted this
cultural center. Constructing themselves as avant-garde, and versed in avant-garde art movements like Surrealism, Impressionism, and Cubism, NRV artists went beyond the realism of the barren, gloomy, wretched “ghetto.” While neo/colonial policies were shaping the “real world,” artists like Esteves, Adál, Pedro Pietri, and Figueroa found decolonial freedom in their imaginations.11

For them, the imagination was a refuge, the source from which an artistic praxis emerged. It was not illusory, and it wasn’t an escape from the neoliberal world they inhabited; rather, it became an extension of the activist, emancipatory practices, visions, and goals that would inform their individual and collective aesthetics.12 In much the same way that Cuban Surrealist Painter Wilfredo Lam characterized his paintings as the articulation and practice of decolonization,13 the various NRV artists held a surrealist mental view that paralleled the decolonial activism of the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, and other liberatory social movements of the post-Civil Rights era. Surrealism, André Breton notes, “hold[s] that the liberation of humanity is the sole condition for the liberation of the mind,” and draws upon the imagination to envision and create a free society and community, allowing for the realization of one’s full potential.14 NRV members regularly practiced what Maxine Greene identified as “releasing of the imagination”15 through their art, as the imagination is fertile ground to envision “what could be” rather than fixate on “what is.”

Given their academic training Esteves, Adál, and Figueroa16 were all fully aware of theories of the avant-garde. Adál famously noted that surrealists found him, not the other way around, noting that many European-based avant-garde surrealists drew their artistic ideas from ethnographic encounters while visiting countries located in what was once identified as the “Third World.”17 For NRV artists, however, the act of dreaming of possibilities, engaging in
experimentation, and tapping into *their own* cultural histories—while also using humor, parody, metaphor, satire, simulation, absurdity, shock, collage, and other treatments—became an extension of their decolonial subjectivities through art, as well as a strategy for disorienting hegemonic ways of being. Undertaking these approaches, they drew from a repertoire of intentional inversion from the social realities they navigated. They sought to make interventions to mentally liberate both themselves and their communities. In the process, their art and mental perspectives would become synchronized, bringing forth an unrestrained aesthetic social activism.

In the desolate landscape of 1970s Loisaida, the South Bronx, and a host of other New York City neighborhoods, such visions of decolonial emancipation, personal and collective well-being, humor, and everyday community conversations occurred in bodegas—some of the only remaining institutions that doubled as community spaces. As community-based, commercial institutions that mostly exist on street corners, bodegas \(^{18}\) are situated in places of convergence where multiple encounters between disparate community members cross and interact and make possible face-to-face socio-juxtapositions where people talk, laugh, gossip, and share “la brega” (challenges/hardships/hustles) of survival, while also disclosing future aspirations. The bodega is thus a layered crossroads of intersectional elements of possibilities that bring together spiritual, social, psychic, and cultural contact zones of nuanced realities that belie surface-level analysis. In this context, an organic, natural surrealism—or “Bodega Surrealism”—could unfold.

Surrealism more generally was and remains an action, a viewpoint, and a series of social *and* aesthetic practices and perspectives rooted in reversal, contradiction, and revolt; it is a relentless attack on capitalism (among other ideologies) and its dehumanizing characteristics, including the shortcomings and rejections of the overlapping socially constructed philosophies
working in concert with it. Surrealism intentionally defies and transcends the “logical” strategies of survival and aims to be a revolutionary movement seeking emancipation from all forms of subjugation, both material and ideological. The artists at the NRV converted the subjugation of the real or, in this case, of their depressed communities, and transcended above and through them; the “ghetto” was the material force through which their imaginations constructed a decolonial surrealism in the everyday spaces of their community, including in the few spaces that remained after buildings were abandoned, firebombed, and/or demolished.19

By placing surrealism into this context of the bodega and its barrio aesthetic, the NRV artists used the accessibility and expansiveness of the bodega to challenge a priori assumptions of Eurocentric surrealist visual language (e.g., a melting clock vs. tropical palm trees within urban landscapes). In this vein, the surrealist, visually-based practices that emerge take on a different artistic sensibility than the works of acclaimed Spanish surrealists Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali, among others; instead, they draw upon, engage with, and depart from these well-known canonical artworks. Bodega Surrealism suggests that the quotidian, working-class aesthetics of this everyday space warrants reexamination, pushing us to go beyond the “real” and grasping the juxtaposition of social realities in the storefront itself and in this movement’s own practices. That is, Bodega Surrealism engages everyday material aesthetics to articulate working-class ways of thinking, as well as blue-collar strategies of survival.

Aesthetics in general, Janet Wolff observes, “originate and are practiced [under] particular conditions, [while also] bar[ing] the mark of those conditions.”20 These Latine artists both embodied and usurped/transcended their social conditions to advance an alternative reality, or surreality, of community and social change through art. This surrealist expression and vision transcended visuality and framed the other artistic practices at the New Rican Village. The
dynamic, intersectional aesthetic synergy nurtured at the NRV allowed for artistic exploration of new possibilities whereby artists across different forms pushed each other in productive ways to develop new aesthetic frameworks.21

Along the visual art plane, Esteves and Adál did this work by exploring and transcending the “real” world of disparity and alienation that constituted the everyday lives of their neighborhoods; they sought instead, in the spirit of surrealists before them, to bring a social surrealism into being. They created a quotidian world that went beyond the real and understood it as a socio, spatial, and cultural arena of belonging, public debate, artistic utterances, place-making, and on-the-ground decolonial re-making. They insisted on seeing themselves as whole, complex beings and as full participants in and agents of the world(s) they created, including those beyond this terrestrial realm.

To implement this vision, they created an artistic refuge divorced from commercialism, exploitation, and all forms of inequality. As noted by Dina D’Oyen, one of the arts administrators I interviewed for this project, “The New Rican Village was a space for the New Ricans…we were so avant-garde…that we belonged in space.”22 Residing within this other galaxy—this other space—required a formal institutional unit of representation and political control. The various arts activities and installations that were part of the NRV, including El Puerto Rican Embassy and the Spirit Republic physical art installations, were conceived to serve that function.

Together, the shared aspirations of the NRV artists invoked socio-aesthetic practices and decolonial dreams to re-envision and transform neighborhood places through social, spatial, political, and aesthetic interventions. This cadre of organizers, cultural producers, and artists were simultaneously avant-garde aesthetic innovators, arts administrators, arts educators,
grassroots activists, and artivists. Members of this vanguard generation did what came naturally to them. Their expansive imaginations and identities transcended more than just the page, the stage, and canvases: they shared a commitment to create, modify, and transform energy/space/hearts/minds, to generate a realm of new possibilities. That is, they constructed a transnational decolonized world through arts-based civic praxis and engagement.

Organizing New Avant-Garde Spaces

In the 1970s climate of civic activism and Civil Rights, the work of many artists became an extension of social activism, departing from the elitist practices of modernism in favor of alternative forms of aesthetic agency. They no longer aspired to apply the paradigms and pretensions of high art and its institutions. Instead, they harnessed their organizing talent and an array of resources to build new, autonomous institutions to redefine the artistic template that had excluded their artwork and misunderstood and undervalued their vision. Together in this world they built, artists found ways to assert themselves and operate within constructed aesthetic paradigms—frameworks of their own making.

Because aesthetic practices were perceived as extensions of personal and collective identities—many of which were considered too hostile or were unwanted in dominant art spaces—these practices became synonymous with a form of political activism. Figueroa and the other artists at the NRV understood this sentiment.23 “Artists of Puerto Rican descent were,” as art scholar Yasmin Ramírez notes, “at the forefront of what is known today as the New York Alternative Art Space Movement.”24 These renegade artists were embedded in a New York City artworld and cultural landscape that required them to navigate the interlocking cultural, social, economic, and political machinations of the city. Embroiled in a labyrinthine political web, they
used their artistic/creative energies, visions, and grassroots know-how to embed themselves within a mise-en-scène such that, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, “there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art.” This process of being innovators while navigating the overlapping bureaucracies that constituted all aspects of New York City life contributed to the emergence of a *Latina/o/x Cultural Left*.

This pioneering generation opened cultural arts organizations; planned public arts activities; organized and conducted art education workshops; collaborated with others; and aesthetically amended various art forms. They understood the power of cultural organizing as part of an activism that cultivated community-building, and they understood that artistic agency was consistent with the power to (re)define, (re)frame, and (re)signify themselves and their attendant communities through art and cultural practices. As such, they sought to transform and push back against dominant and alienating narratives of ethno-racial and gendered otherness and acknowledged the importance of arts-based community making to empower, liberate, and transform individuals and communities. By engaging in creative practices rooted in Puerto Rican and Latine history(ies), art had the cognitive ability to empower individuals and communities to understand their histories and challenge the fatalism and the “culture of poverty” that were forced upon them by dominant discourses and frameworks. It would also advance awareness, pride, and cultural awareness to liberate and push against an internalized, colonized mindset of individual and collective self-degradation. Said perspective would become an essential component of the zeitgeist of Latine cultural expression, including the forms that were practiced by the artists—like Sandra María Esteves and Adál Maldonado—at the New Rican Village.
Sandra María Esteves and the Making and (Re)envisioning of Community: Visual Emancipations and Disruptions

The New Rican Village pioneered a radical free space where artists could expand their individual and collective praxis. Esteves, a founding member of the NRV and longstanding leader of the Nuyorican poetry scene, drew on her visual artistic training to create some of the most prominent and iconic posters that reflected and articulated the Center’s radical vision. The same posters that hung from telephone booths, bodega storefronts, telephone poles, the facades of abandoned buildings, and other available surfaces became the quickest and most efficient means of advertising future events and disseminating information at a moment when Latinas/os/xs had minimal media access and when ubiquitous internet and social media use were decades still in the future. These posters offered an honest reflection of how the community viewed itself and, more importantly, offered a pointed counternarrative to the dominant culture’s deficit, victim, and marginal narratives that suffocated those living in what were then deemed “blighted” urban spaces, such as the Lower East Side. Her work invokes surrealist aesthetics as she juxtaposes disparate elements on the page, reflecting a new surrealist world that she’s envisioning and in alignment with the sociopolitical goals of the Young Lords.

As public and aesthetic interventions, her posters—rooted in a feminist perspective—centered “love in action” by transcending hyper-individuality and depicting people as central to the vibrancy of community, with images promoting holistic, inclusive social realities. These images added to a quotidian culture and the raw “aesthetic sphere” of the community, thus recasting public spaces as forums for dramatic performance, playful display, and a carnivalesque, non-linguistic dimension of political participation in collective action.²⁷ Moreover, Esteves’s poster art serves as an articulation of these kinds of aesthetic politics: they provide dramatic
images and a kind of street performance to draw attention to the role of their culture and history as foundational to acts of solidarity, resistance, and survival; to prefigure a possible future, and to provide a visual, feminist framing from which community members could envision a new society. In these surrealist images, the street is the nexus of community and a performative stage: a site of festival, debate, art, decoration, and celebration. By holding space and redefining these everyday landscapes as part of the collective artistic imaginary, artistivists like Esteves and others in the NRV community proactively leveraged mutuality for an inclusive, public solidarity, thereby belying the stereotypical notion of these communities as criminal, alien, and isolated. Esteves disrupts the neoliberal landscape by invoking the unimaginable (such as palm trees and joyful brown bodies at leisure on the streets of New York City, in contrast with the public perception that those streets are places of danger and fear) and hence decolonizes the imagination as well as seeking to transform on-the-ground cityscapes.

This commitment as well as aesthetic and collective sensibility is represented in some of the graphic artwork that Esteves designed. Take, for example, her “August 1977 Arts Festival” poster (see Figure X.1). Created almost a year after the center’s opening, Esteves’s poster highlights the reconstruction of urban community through the arts, embodying the “iconography, idealism, and imagination” of the NRV. Inscribing or, more accurately, envisioning themselves within the landscape of Loisaida, Esteves’s poster lays the groundwork for a community imagining its presence not only on the Lower East Side but also within the global city.

<Figure X.1 about here>

Esteves was also undeterred by the period’s racial hysteria and deindustrialization in poor and working-class communities of color. For example, she uses collage as an artistic strategy to resist the exclusion of Puerto Rican and Latine artists in the diaspora. Her poster for a “Benefit
Concert & Poetry Reading” (see Figure X.2) intentionally disrupts “conventional meanings by an act of recontextualization, that juxtaposes seemingly incongruent objects, images, ideas, or performative acts within a conceptual aesthetic construct.”

This transfer of objects, or “the radical juxtaposition of meaning” in a new, distinct context, is a purposeful surrealist intervention. Esteves’s decision to use collage fostered “new possibilities of signification” for Puerto Ricans and the emergence of a distinctive working-class community of avant-garde artists. Equally significant is the insertion of “tropical” images into the northern city, a visual trope repeated by Esteves and other Center artists.

<Figure X.2 about here>

Collage allows for many such insertions and resignifications. In this one, Esteves raises alternative accounts of artistic hegemony in the East Village and, specifically, the longstanding construction of that space as a home for bohemian and avant-garde artists. Such dominant conceptions obscured the hostility that artists of color often faced in this artistic corridor. In reference to its bohemian community, as Christine Stansell reminds us, “For anyone black who sought admission, bohemia offered scant hospitality.”

Such adversity extended to many Boricuas and Latine artists, too, as Esteves confirms. Racial and ethnic exclusion, then, contextualizes her insertion of a Latine artistic collective into the viewer’s imagination, staking claim for and with the growing Latina/o/x community and its emerging artistic influence.

Esteves’s collage is more than an insertion of bodies into public art; it represents an extension of the NRV’s social goals. Here she transcends the dominant linear narrative of avant-gardism while destabilizing a hegemonic narrative of racial exclusivity in New York City’s dominant arts scene.
Collage is an aesthetic of conscious dissonance at multiple levels and as a result is often employed by surrealists, and this collage in particular has profound implications. Through dissidence and rearticulation of dominant narratives of power, collage becomes not only a style but also a metaphoric tool with which to lay the groundwork for a surrealist, counternarrative vision at the artistic core of the New Rican Village. Its possibilities mirror the artistic intentions of European Surrealists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, two globally prominent artists and masters of the genre (who, notably, were in the mainstream art world in contrast with the NRV artivists, who worked on the margins). The goal of collage is to disrupt the perspective and spatial cues of art on the page and intentionally bring about a visual revolution. This intent to disrupt operates between the real and the imagined, where Esteves seeks to counter the silence associated with invisibility. Choreographing a story within fractured spaces, the work also seeks to raise the hopes of this working-class collective.

Following the artistic direction of Cubism, in which fragments became fractured social realities, Esteves created images along artistic fault lines, identifying these cracks as spaces where the Nuyorican community could assert agency to transform collective despair. This transformation entailed uprooting a fatalistic discourse and transplanting new elements into New York’s cultural geography. The uprooted palm trees placed on the city’s landscape thus intentionally reverses this fatalism. But in the tradition of Cubist collage, they also resignify the city’s semiotics with tropical images as markers of Puerto Rican otherness.

Representing palm trees alongside othered bodies in artistic motion signifies a semiotic reinscription of the city. Esteves’s poster represents community-based art making, but it also expresses “a form of art-based community making,” which sought to foster a welcoming community at the New Rican Village, in the Lower East Side, and in New York City overall.
Esteves’s posters also transcend the property and function of a medium whose sole purpose is perceived to be disseminating information for a future event. She surpasses the poster’s surface utility and imbues her designs with dramatic gaiety, action, community movement, and vitality. Equally significant are the working-class, urban, tropical aesthetics and impressionism that emanate from her pieces. Whether intentional or not, her work markedly departs from the French, middle-class tradition, with its depiction of the city’s bourgeois classes’ fleeting encounters of shopping, vacationing, and strolling. Esteves instead offers instances of everyday life, thereby highlighting and reconfiguring urban cityscapes into surrealist landscapes of leisure and joy (see Figure X.2). Here, she articulates a visually based Bodega Surrealism—that is, she merges an imaginary state with the gritty world of marginalized, ostracized communities to portray possible ways of living for those who refuse to see themselves only as victims and who welcome opportunities to unleash their spirits. The visual semiotics Esteves expresses thus disrupt the “chains of social realism and rationality,” transforming them into a leisure mode of exultation.

The manifold realities of segregation did not deter Esteves from imagining varied dimensions and spatial possibilities in her poster art. Such social conditions called for alternative strategies to create community during a critical period of imposed neo-liberal estrangement. The “arts congregations” conceived by the NRV and artistically translated by Esteves constituted an informal, on-the-ground network as the NRV pushed for and created new aesthetic practices. The congregations that formed at and through the New Rican, whose concept developed domestically, was ironically on account of the hostility that many Latine artists encountered within established arts institutions and urban neighborhoods. Despite these institutional barriers, these artists engaged a sense of both self and community to transform urban neighborhoods. As
the next section will explore, Adál’s Auto-Portraits as well as his “In and Out of Focus”
Nuyorican portraits do this work as well.

**Adál and El Embassy: Auto-Portraits and Out of Focus Nuyoricans**

Described by *El Diario/La Prensa* newspaper as “the most brilliant art collective in all of New York City,” El Puerto Rican Embassy captured considerable attention within the Puerto Rican and Latine art community. In a communiqué issued on April 8, 1994, Adál Maldonado and El Reverendo Pedro Pietri, the acclaimed Nuyorican surrealist poet and original member of the New Rican Village, announced its inauguration at a reception, held at the Kenkeleba Gallery. El Embassy, the letter described, “will serve as a forum for the meeting of our most creative minds. We represent a new generation of Puerto Rican artists working within the mainstream—as well as on the margin of established art movements—who take risks [to] illuminate contemporary issues and question established cultural aesthetics and dominant political issues. The Puerto Rican Embassy will spread its artistic and cultural message by appointing Ambassadors of the Arts whose achievements in their artistic fields will reflect the mission of The Puerto Rican Embassy.”

El Embassy is both a name adopted for the collective that established it and a designation of an imagined sovereign space, “a forum for the meeting of our most creative minds” that would sometimes materialize in galleries, videos, and performances.

Created in response to U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico (which started in 1898), this imagined sovereign state has accompanying state-authorized institutions, documents, symbols, proclamations, and political structures, including a national anthem, currency, secular religious iconography and saints, an aerospace program (called “Coconauts in Space”), and even underground resistance fighters known as “Bodega Bombers”—and, of course, an embassy.
At El Embassy’s inaugural ceremony, El Reverendo Pedro Pietri and Adál issued “conceptual passports,displayed the Embassy’s “Manifesto,” and sang its Spanglish National Anthem. Years later, the circulation of El Spirit Republic’s passports was accompanied by Nuyorican baptisms performed in the “Church of Our Mother of Los Tomates,” the spurious religious institution sanctioned by the conceptual state.

The home of this Republic is New York City, although its management offices are specifically located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the New Rican Village’s original neighborhood, with a central tenet of the “immediate decolonization of each citizen’s brain” (Figure X.3), among other inventive political and performative culturally expansive allegories. These public and interactive performance pieces, all acts of freedom and liberation, took hold of the collective imaginary among members of Puerto Rican Diaspora and their allies, within a futuristic realm: “the Hybrid State of NuYol in the Sovereign State of Mind of El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico.”

The process of decolonization, they argue, first occurs in the imagination, for “the liberation of the imagination is a precondition of revolution.” The pursuit of a multi-media decolonial artivist praxis thus becomes essential for this transformation because “language, representation, and perception are all means of production that must be seized if emancipation is to be won.” El Embassy does exactly this: Instead of waiting for the colonial U.S. administration to declare the end of the occupation in Puerto Rico, El Embassy assumes that responsibility and declares its own freedom. Its actions follow the tradition of subversive mimicry, which consists of mockery, parody, resemblance, and menace, while also demonstrating the limitations of the authority of colonial discourse.
The art world fashioned in El Embassy and Spirit Republic challenges marginalization; it collectively fashions a particular form of citizenship that operates both within and outside of questions of participation in political life. The public constructed by/as El Embassy is a subaltern\textsuperscript{44} site of belonging that contests the neo-colonial Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and its imperial management by the United States.

Yet engaging in the public sphere presumes a kind of political sovereignty not externally granted to El Spirit Republic. Thus, what we see developing in the work of El Embassy is an art (re)public that cultivates (an)other social imaginary through “playful dimensions.”\textsuperscript{45} It invites marginalized diasporic subjects to participate by staking claims to belonging, to a place of their own making, and within and between the various national projects (i.e., U.S. and Puerto Rico) that exclude or marginalize them. It calls upon the dominant colonial power structure of the U.S. to recognize them by simultaneously imitating, appropriating, and playfully mocking its signifiers of authority (i.e., embassies, ambassadors, and passports). The artists/cultural ambassadors of El Embassy thereby conjure an imaginary nation that would have a place for them, a free Spirit Republic. This vision is more than surrealist banter of a “cuchifrito”\textsuperscript{46} and “chevere civilization”: it is an example of marginalized avant-garde artists engaging multiple publics while also constructing one (or several) of their own, despite lacking the sovereignty typically required to participate in such political discourse.

Adál’s account of surrealism is one such vision; it begins in the everyday world of peripheral subjects like himself. It is an interpretation of working-class surrealism, of everyday magical worlds and imaginations that operate in the transnational and Nuyorican barrios and in local spaces like bodegas (corner store grocery stores). Here, Bodega Surrealism deploys in art the same blue-collar strategies used to cobble together a living amidst the struggles of capitalism
and exploitation, thereby giving way to a Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean, and Latina/o/x “aesthetic sancocho,” or making do with whatever is at hand. Like Esteves, Adál makes these points forcefully in the artifacts of the Spirit Republic.

In another example of Bodega Surrealism, Adál’s auto-portraits reverse the gaze, turning the camera’s attention onto himself to mock surrealist artists. As a marginal subject who is consistently “in focus” through the surveillance camera but on the margins otherwise, Adál flips that marginality on its head, taking on a central position in the photos. “Papa not Dada” refers to surrealism but with a _differance_—a difference of meaning or, in this case, a difference in the surrealist script, as well as a deferral from the past to the transhistorical present. Adál is both stepping into and displacing/replacing the central subject of the images that fall victim to his parody (in this case, Magritte’s “Man in a Bowler Hat”). Whereas the parodied artists are not highlighted in their own work, Adál’s camera takes on a double refraction—in his work, they become _present by their absence through his presence_. That is, their absence is made visible by his presence.

Additionally, Adál’s work executes a double displacement by transforming the art from image to real—that is, toward himself, a “Pre-Post Nuyorican Modern Primitive.” His smirk in the Da Vinci auto-portrait suggests that he aims not to be seen as the Mona Lisa but rather to smile and say, “She is like me.” In all these portraits, he attempts to be modern while also engaging in jibaro existentialism, drawing upon a repertoire of signifiers that derive from Puerto Rican diasporic memories and everyday life absurdity.

Often playful, Adál’s version of surrealism plays on and usurps the public’s fascination with and desire for tropical desirability onto one’s body and identity. Surely, he is also cognizant of the intersections between photography, anthropology, and colonialism, where anthropologists
used the advent of photography to “construct and disseminate persuasively real representations of otherness” while also using it as a technology of surveillance. Adál’s pictures seem to challenge those uses and serve as an intentional departure from the exotic or demonized tropes that “transfixed difference, rendering [colonial subjects] as inert, passive, and powerless.”

Indeed, Adál’s surrealist photography is anything but passive, and it is grounded in the imaginative possibilities of dreams and the unconscious—an artistic mode well established within avant-garde communities. Rather than relying on realist approaches, Adál’s style suggests a social utopia of possibilities “not yet won.” His is a photography of surrealist alterity; it departs from and suspends “rational” discourse. This is reflected in the “Spirit” (versus the “spirit”) part of the Spirit Republic, which refers to the liberated psychic zone or utopia of a decolonial understanding of the post-colonial Boricua trans-nation. As claimed in the Spirit Republic Manifesto, “the imagination has always been an independent country.” Essential to this utopic decolonial vision is the vision itself, the space of the mind to embark upon a non-colonized vision of possibilities. “We are not a government in exile!” claims the Manifesto. “This is where we live!”

The cultural nationalism that emerges, which El Embassy both articulates and departs from, highlights how inessential a recognized state apparatus is in generating national and transnational identity(ies). National, transnational, and even post-national visions of a Puerto Rican community exist despite the territory and its people having lived under colonial rule for more than 500 years. El Embassy offers a different path to conceiving liberation, one that includes an opportunity to examine how the imagination remains a space of decolonial revelations and possibilities. This opportunity is attained through an ideology that parallels
surrealist principles and departs from a traditional nationalist discourse that conceives of political independence as the gateway to national and cultural distinction.

Adál’s auto-portraits, as well as the other creative artwork of El Embassy, demonstrate some of the new semiotic possibilities that resist and bypass social realism through surrealism and mimesis: whereas realism is understood to be loaded with hegemonic ideology, mimesis creatively unMASKs and counters the underlying but prevailing hegemonic logics and representations of colonialism. By employing non-realist, transcultural surrealist aesthetics, Adál proposes an alternative political decolonial discourse of liberation that encompasses a post-Nuyorican aesthetics of resistance.

As an act of disalienation with the intention of intervening in the impact of colonial ideology on the brain and psyche (which include feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and belonging nowhere), Adál conceived of the surrealist Spirit Republic as a decolonized space where everything is in “focus.” The “Spirit” of this Republic consists of a state of mind, a conceptual, underground “schizophrenic” resistance (“of coming into and out of focus”) that fosters a collective unity of emancipatory existence. As part of this work, Adál created the *In and Out of Focus* passport portraits.

For artists like Adál and Pietri, there is an inverse reasoning to such portraits (Figure X.4). To be “In Focus” entails existing outside of a subjugated/colonized state structure, while an “Out of Focus” portrait exemplifies an existence within a colonial state structure. In essence, Adál applies the mechanical principle that informs the optical code for cameras toward the social power dynamics that relegate one to the role of marginalized state subject. The camera obscura inverts images from their natural state: an upright image is naturally horizontal, and a horizontal image is vertical. One can also conclude that a blurred portrait of a subject is naturally clear or
“in focus.” Adál pushes it further by perceiving the mechanical principle of a camera—through camera obscura—as socially transforming or falsely representing the natural state of its subjects. And while the camera aims to capture an accurate historical reflection of a subject, it does so under colonial conditions. And this creates the “Out of Focus Puerto Rican.”

Writer, philosopher, and activist Susan Sontag asserts that photographs illustrate memories and events. While photography holds the capacity to certify past experiences, it is also a way of refusing them. Photographs can be a conduit through which one converts ephemeral experiences into a seemingly tangible image. As one actively observes, interprets, and reflects on an image, this process also allows for interventionist opportunities. In reading Adal’s work, the camera can be an instrument of future social interventions and visions, not simply a tool that captures what happened in the past to confirm one’s presence. Following the logic of camera obscura, if subjects are “out of focus” or colonized, when were they “in focus” or decolonized? For Adál, Pietri, Figueroa, Oyen, Esteves, and others involved at the NRV and El Embassy, the “in focus” decolonized Boricua is captured in a surrealist future. And the NRV and El Embassy is where the “focused” subject comes into being, embracing the full decolonial reality of the Spirit Republic. Thus, Adál’s conceptual photography imagines and projects into the future and opens a door for multiple abstract contemporary readings and interpretations. Although his blurred portraits may signify historical alienation within a specific space and time, these headshots prompt viewers to transpose them into their clear, natural, surrealist state and, thus, re-envision an imminent liberated social existence.

But to be “out” also means to be excluded, misunderstood, incomprehensible, or unintelligible; it means being on the fringes of social, economic, and political worlds, as well as
of most ensconced arts institutions and artistic categories and movements. It means that one
doesn’t fit in; that one is shunned, without having a base from which to be located. In their
liberatory praxis, one in which they adamantly defy inflexible and oppositional binaries as well
as imposed boundaries— akin to Queer theory—these artists pushed against mainstream
ideological normativity while simultaneously aiming to subvert the idea of what it means to be in
focus. In the multiverse of NRV artivists, “out” also means a coming together of a community
engaging in subversive collective action and articulating speech acts of multiple kinds,
recognizing in each other that they can engage in numerous activities without asking for
permission. In other words, to be out is also not passive but to be sovereign, and to proactively
harness their agency and right “to be” as they become transformative “subjects for the future.”
With this understanding, they have a vision and want to aggressively work toward it,
affirmatively using the arts as a medium for social action and community building. Therefore, in
this self-fashioned futurism, Adál’s photographs both are and become inverted articulations of a
decolonial existence—past, present, and future.

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1 All scholarship is a dialogical process, and this essay is no different. I’m eternally grateful for
the generosity and support of friends who graciously edited and proofread different versions of
this essay across different moments, as this is a compilation of various excerpts and chapters
from my forthcoming book, Bodega Surrealism: Latina/o/x Artivists in New York City (NYU
Osnowitz, Priscilla Renta, Andrew Rosa, Lauren Rubenzahl, and Michelle J. Wilkinson for their
excellent feedback and editing. They read different parts of the manuscript, which made possible
this edited essay. I am also indebted to and transformed by the dedicated artivists who shared
their radical visions and stories with me. Finally, thank you to editors Arlene Dávila, Yasmin
Ramírez, and Néstor David Pastor for inviting me to contribute to this important anthology.

2 Interview with the Author, March 3, 2002.

3 Latine, Latina/o/x, and Latinx will be used interchangeably. All the terms aim to be gender
neutral and inclusive of all genders. When quoting directly from a source, I will employ the
original language used in that source.

4 A portmanteau for artist and activist. I started using terms like “artivism” and “artivist” while
writing my dissertation, and at the time, such terms were not in vogue. In the early 2000s, I

5 The official name of the center varies in the documents that I’ve located. It ranges from The New Rican Village to the New Rican Village Cultural and Educational Center. Because the names were used interchangeably, I follow this usage. The center is also referenced in everyday usage as “The Rican,” “The New Rican,” or “The NRV.”

6 Boricua is a term used to refer to someone born and raised in Puerto Rico, or a person of Puerto Rican descent who is born and raised outside of the Caribbean island. It is used interchangeably with Puerto Rican. Boricua connotes an awareness and solidarity with indigenous communities native to Puerto Rico. It is also a political identification, an anti-colonial standpoint, and an affirmation of ethnic and national pride that transcends birthplace and residency. It also lends itself to a shared identity of communal struggle and solidarity.

7 Although Eddie Figueroa was the principal director and founder of the New Rican Village, there were other artists who would eventually play instrumental roles in its development at distinct moments. They include Americo Casiano, Sandra María Esteyes, Andy Gonzalez, Jerry Gonzalez, Willie Figueroa, Brenda Feliciano, Adál Maldonado, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, Nestor Otero, Dina D’Oyen, Pedro Pietri, Ana Ramos, Mario Rivera, Steve Turre, Papo Vázquez, Hilton Ruiz, Jorge Dalto, Dave Valentín, Aida del Valle, and Wilfredo Velez, among numerous others.

8 I conducted numerous oral history interviews with various artists active at the New Rican Village. I interviewed musicians, visual artists, poets, cultural organizers, actors, and multidisciplinary artists, among many others. Some that made direct or indirect reference to surrealism include: Dina D’Oyen, Interviewed by Author on March 3, 2002; Ana Ramos, Interviewed by Author on July 23, 2001; Sandra Maria Esteves, Interviewed by Author on August 1, 2001; Pedro Pietri, Interviewed by Author on and Adál Maldonado, Interviewed by Author on October 30, 2007. A more extensive engagement with their perspectives, as well as
with those of the numerous other artists and cultural workers active at the New Rican Village, is showcased in my forthcoming book, *Bodega Surrealism: Latina/o/x Artivists in New York City* (NYU Press).


14 Quoted in Lowy *Morning Star*, 40.

15 See Maxine Greene’s *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

16 Per archival research and oral history interviews, Esteves, Adál, and Figueroa all had formal academic training. Esteves studied graphic arts at Pratt Institute while Adál studied photography at the San Francisco Art Institute; Figueroa was a theatre student at New York University.


18 For a discussion on the historical significance of Bodegas in Puerto Rican Diaspora communities, refer to Virginia Sanchez-Korrol’s, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Néstor David Pastor, “The Legacy of the Puerto Rican Bodega,” [https://centro-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/legacy-puerto-rican-bodega](https://centro-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/legacy-puerto-rican-bodega). Note that there were numerous spaces of political and aesthetic resistance and organizing, as Margarita J. Aguilar notes in her dissertation, including churches, colleges, and universities. See Aguilar, “Traditions and Transformations in the Work of Adál,” 181.


22 Interview with the Author, March 3, 2002.


24 Ramirez, 281.


26 My interpretive lens of a Latina/o/x Cultural Left is inspired by Herman S. Gray’s concept of the “Jazz Left” within the African American community. See Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). The Latine Cultural Left is/was composed of vanguard community artists like Miguel Algarín, Papo Colo (Francisco Colón), Johnny Colón, Miriam Colón, Marcos Dímas, María Dominguez, Frank Espada, Sandra María Esteves, Eduardo “Eddie” Figueroa, Adrian Garcia, Jesús Abraham
“Tato” Laviera, Adál Maldonado, Hiram Maristany, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, Geno Rodriguez, Armando Soto, Nitza Tufiño, and Marta Moreno Vega, among many others.


31 George Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Social Movement,” 181.


33 Building on the work of scholar Earl Lewis where he observes how formal segregation still allowed African Americans to create community, or a sense of “congregation,” within a hostile and unreceptive Jim Crow environment. See Earl Lewis, *In their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).


35 El Puerto Rican Embassy is an ensemble of artistic installations and conceptually conceived when Figueroa and others established the New Rican Village. Adál and Pietri amplified El Embassy and created various related installations. As part of El Embassy is the Spirit Republic, an imaginary conceptual space of decolonial existence. Adál and Pietri also created Blueprints for a Nation, an installation where all the various components of El Embassy and The Spirit Republic are housed. The portraits that make up the “Out of Focus Nuyoricans” are part of this entire constellation. And all these components are intentionally modeled after state and religious institutions, which subversively and conceptually mimic and mock the shortcomings of existing colonial institutions and U.S. imperial hegemony.

36 Letter, El Puerto Rican Embassy—The Spirit Republic of Puerto Rico, April 8, 1994. Pedro Pietri Papers, Center for Puerto Rican Studies Library and Archives, Hunter College, CUNY. There were numerous Ambassadors for El Embassy. The acclaimed Diasporican Poet, María Teresa Fernandez, aka, Mariposa, is the Head of State of the New Hybrid State de Nuyol. See her statement here: [https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/head-of-state.html](https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/head-of-state.html)

37 Letter, El Puerto Rican Embassy.

38 El Puerto Rican Embassy lives virtually online. Many of the artistic references here can be found on its website: [https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/](https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/)

39 Based on interviews conducted with visual artists Nestor Otero and Rodríguez Calero (aka RoCa), the original passport design of El Embassy was conceived by them and later adapted by Adál. Interviews were conducted on June 13, 2015, and March 11, 2022. The first version of the
Puerto Rican passport that circulated at the opening event at the Kenkeleba Gallery was designed by Otero and RoCa. The version that is on El Puerto Rican Embassy website and featured by the Smithsonian and elsewhere was created by Adál. See: https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/el-puerto-rican-passport-el-spirit-republic-de-puerto-rico-adal-maldonado-85117

40 Adál Maldonado’s former Lower East Side apartment was the actual location of the offices for the Spirit Republic.


43 See Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).

44 Although there are varying uses of the term “subaltern,” I am loosely using it as a process describing a historically formed community that is denied structural power.

45 Kenneth H. Tucker, Jr., Workers of the World, Enjoy!, 12.

46 I’m drawing from Brian Parks’s newspaper article here. See Brian Parks, “Out-of-Focus Puerto Ricans: Cuchifrito Nation,” Village Voice, April 2, 1996. In its literal sense, cuchifrito is a general term used to describe Puerto Rican fast-food restaurants that may closely resemble taco fast-food stands or restaurants in U.S. Mexican/Chicano neighborhoods. When used as a signifier in everyday parlance, it may have a class connotation or quality, suggesting “cheap,” “greasy,” or “low quality.” In the context of the argument offered here, it’s related to the quotidian aspect of everyday conversations exchanged by working-class and poor communities occurring in these eating establishments, much like those in the barbershop scene in the Black community. The cuchifrito restaurants, coupled with bodegas, make for interesting spaces where, as argued here, one encounters more than “small talk”: they are vital local institutions that bring about alternative and counter public spheres that operate below the dominant radar of public debate and popular opinion. For a discussion on the historical significance of bodegas in Puerto Rican Diaspora communities, refer to Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 2nd ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Pastor, “The Legacy of the Puerto Rican Bodega,” https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/legacy-puerto-rican-bodega

47 Pietri, “El Manifesto.” The Manifesto and other aspects of El Embassy art project can be found online. See https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/index.html

48 Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (New York: Routledge, 1979). Strauss (21): “Bricolage entails ‘the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa.’ A ‘sancocho’ is like gumbo: it is a soup composed of various food elements, like chicken, red meat, fish, and vegetables, and then slowly stewed in a broth flavored by a range of spices.”
There are too many auto-portrait illustrations to print here, but they can be found online: http://www.latinart.com/exview.cfm?start=1&id=204

See “Papa not Dada: Auto-Portrait after Rene Magritte” online: http://www.latinart.com/artdetail.cfm?img=pr_maldo_10_th.jpg&t=exhibit&tid=204

See http://www.latinart.com/exview.cfm?start=2&id=204


The Out of Focus portraits referred to here can be found virtually. See: https://www.facebook.com/people/Out-of-Focus-Nuyoricans/100069088928965/. They are published and included in an exhibition catalog, too. Adál Maldonado and the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University, Out of Focus Nuyoricans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Images of camera obscura can easily be found online. Here’s one of many: https://www.art-critique.com/en/2020/03/a-lesson-on-the-camera-obscura/


Figure X.1: “August Arts Festival, 1977.” Poster designed by Sandra María Esteves. Part of Artist’s Personal Collection and included here with her permission.

Figure X.2: “NRV Benefit Concert.” Poster Designed by Sandra María Esteves. Part of Artist’s Personal Collection and included here with her permission.

Figure X.3: “La Decolonized Brain” by Adál Maldonado. Image courtesy of “The Estate of Adál Maldonado & Roberto Paradise”

Figure X.4: Out of Focus Portraits by Adál Maldonado. Images courtesy of “The Estate of Adál Maldonado & Roberto Paradise”
Images

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