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Memorias de Mi Familia

by

Melissa Zoé Montero

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

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## Abstract

*Memorias de Mi Familia* is an hour-long personal documentary through which I explore the meaning of “home.” I was born and raised in New York to a Puerto Rican mother and Ecuadorian father and lived between two worlds—sometimes more. While on a visit to Puerto Rico with my mother, Sylvia, I search for belonging and explore my family’s story of migration between the island and the United States.

Through interviews, family films, home videos and photographs spanning over 60 years, I examine the revolving migration pattern common to many Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora, a cycle framed and at times burdened by Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States.

## Project Description

*Memorias de Mi Familia*, a personal documentary, examines the sentiments of how being caught in the middle—*ni de aqui, ni de alla* (neither here nor there)—have had an impact on my life. The spine of the film is my first-person narration. I use a visit with my mother to Puerto Rico, and family archives, to explore my cultural identity, my family's story of migration and what home means to me.

The film’s secondary character is my grandparent's house—once the center of our family and nearly abandoned after Hurricane Maria—to weave this story of memory, family, identity, home, colonialism, and loss. Interviews with my mother, father, aunt, and great-aunt provide insight into our family’s story, our relationship to my grandparent’s house, and what being a colony means. I also include old interviews and footage of my deceased grandparents. Quintessential elements used in the recollection of memories and family history are my father’s

extensive collection of super 8 films and my family's photographs and portrait images, which center the importance of the family archive and photo albums throughout the film. Archival films give background on Puerto Rico's colonial status, and recent events that continue to impact the island, but they are used minimally only when needed to create a bridge between the personal narrative and the larger social and political context of the film.

The film begins in my mother's hometown of San German, Puerto Rico. My mother and I are at the cemetery visiting my grandmother's gravesite, where she is buried alongside my grandfather and great-grandparents. My grandmother passed away a month before Hurricane Maria and this is my mother's first time back to Puerto Rico since her death.

Following that scene, my personal narration begins. I introduce myself and the journey I am on. We lived in New York City and generally felt at home with the life we built, but every summer my parents would send me and my siblings to my grandparents' house in Puerto Rico. It gave us the opportunity not only to connect with our relatives, but with Puerto Rico itself. If we weren't hiking to a waterfall, we were at the beach with our friends. Being the youngest, I naturally spent more time with our grandparents, and learned about their childhoods, our family history, and their years in New York City. As I got older, I observed my grandfather's politics. All of this impacted my life deeply. Later in the film, the viewer learns more about my family's migration story, including when my parents moved us all to San German when I was two years old. My mother tells me this story as we visit a plot of land where the house we lived in for that short period once stood. There I have the opportunity to ask my mother why we returned to New York City and if she had any regrets leaving Puerto Rico.

We continue to walk down the hill to my grandparents' house and, along the way, the narrative of my mother's migration to New York City is woven into the film. In this section, as

well as in other sections of the film that include personal testimony, the viewer sees my collection of old family photographs. I introduce my grandparents as well as my grandfather's politics. He was a proud member of the Popular Democratic Party, also known as the "Populares," who believed in the commonwealth of Puerto Rico—the unique political status where the archipelago stays a US territory. My grandfather detested statehood but also rejected independence. To me he was a reflection of what colonialism does to a group of people: makes them believe their own freedom is criminal.

The film then explains my political views. I share my experience as a young college student who became involved with the Puerto Rican independence movement here in the diaspora, something my grandparents would have never approved of. That life changing experience, which molded and deeply influenced my relationship with Puerto Rico, provides the viewer with a sense of the consequences the archipelago has faced being a colony. My mother comes into her own as she understands the impact of Hurricane Maria, expressing her disappointment in the US response and how it shows Puerto Rico is treated less than. As we make our way to my grandparents' house, my mother and I begin to discuss further my grandparent's decision to return from New York City to Puerto Rico in 1971—an event that was hurtful for my mother. The circular migration pattern, common in the Puerto Rican experience, is explained through my family's story. My aunt, Elizabeth Padilla, is introduced. Being the youngest of all my mother's sisters, she returned to Puerto Rico with my grandparents. Eventually the rest of the family returned, except for my parents. My aunt discusses what it was like returning to Puerto Rico as a ten-year-old girl born in New York City and learning to live modestly since my grandparents returned to Puerto Rico with very little. I continue to reflect on the outside forces and colonial practices that my family, and so many others, have been subjected

to.

The film continues to move between my personal struggle living between two worlds, and my journey with my mother to my grandparents' home in 2019. I visit old spaces as a way to reconnect with what feels familiar. Finally, my mother and I arrive at the house. This is my mother's first time at the home since she left Puerto Rico two years prior. She was living in Puerto Rico the last year and half before my grandmother's death. She was her primary caretaker and saw her through her last moments. We enter the house and go from room to room. We see how it has deteriorated since Hurricane Maria, especially the kitchen. It smells of bat and mice waste. My mother expresses her sadness, and we see flashbacks of her and my grandmother and aunt in the kitchen. We learn that the house was approved for repairs by a FEMA funded program, Tu Hogar Renace (Your Home Is Reborn), now known as a problematic program that wasted and abused funds. They did a poor job on the house which only worsened the damage. As these challenges come to light, my personal narration expresses the struggles I'm having letting go of the house. It is my connection to my family, my grandparents, and my identity.

As the documentary progresses to its last section, the narrative begins highlighting my interest in the family album, portrait images, photographs and film. I developed an interest in the family album through the summer visits to my grandparents' home. Learning about my relatives and their stories gave me a sense of belonging. In this section, I introduce my father and his Ecuadorian parents' story. The viewer learns that the super 8 films included in the documentary belonged to my father. He filmed birthdays, family parties, vacations and much more. My father was the unofficial archivist of the family and is now handing that role over to me.

As the film's narrative comes to a close, we meet my grandfather's sister, my great aunt Tia Alba. She is one of the last living members in my family of the generation who experienced

lots of transitions in Puerto Rico. Contrary to most of her siblings, though, she never left the island. During my visit, I ask her about the status of my grandparents' house, and she encourages me to keep it in the family. After the visit, I meet with my aunt, Elizabeth, and we discuss the damage Hurricane Maria did to the house. Through the visit, I learn that my aunt wants me to take ownership of the home. Overcome with tears, my aunt expresses her pain at the great loss of my grandparents and the house. By the end of the film, I answer my opening question of what home means to me and decide to take on the task of buying the house. My hopes are to build new memories and a home my future family, and my nieces and nephew, can return to.

### **Personal Background**

I was born in New York City to a Puerto Rican mother and Ecuadorian father and raised in Queens, New York. When I was two and a half years old, my parents decided to move our family to San German, Puerto Rico to join the rest of my relatives who had moved back to the island. My grandparents took care of me, building a foundational lifelong bond. During this period, Puerto Rico was in a recession and my father was having difficulty finding employment. As a result, by 1985 when I was five years old, we moved back to New York City. I didn't fully understand what was happening, and I was overcome with fear and fell ill. I experienced what I recall as my first anxiety attack. I was physically sick from the moment we got into the car until we arrived in New York City. It wasn't until I was an adult that I was able to understand that this childhood experience was my first introduction to colonization and the revolving migration pattern so common in the Puerto Rican experience.

In the mid-1940s my great uncle, Tio Anibal Lugo, emigrated with his young family to the Murray Hill section in New York City. Slowly more relatives migrated to other parts of the

country such as Chicago. However, the largest influx of Puerto Ricans did not occur until the 1950s. In that decade alone close to a million Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States. In 1956, my grandparents migrated to New York City. They first settled in Murray Hill on 27th Street and 2nd Avenue where there were other Puerto Ricans living and then several years later, they moved down to the East Village on 2nd Avenue between 4th and 5th Street. My mother was ten years old. Some other extended family on my mother's side migrated to Chicago as well. My father immigrated to New York City in 1963 but had previously visited with his mother, my grandmother Flor Maria Castillo, as a teen. His father, Alejandro Montero, my grandfather, immigrated in 1948. Eventually most of my extended family, except my parents, returned to their homelands.

By the time I was in college, I was interested in social justice work and became an activist. It was during that time that I learned about the historical struggle for Puerto Rican independence, how the movement was criminalized by the United States government, and much more. Strongly moved by the hidden repressive history of Puerto Rico and other US interventions of Latin America, I began to see the archipelago in a different way: it was a colony, and we were all colonized people. I was filled with purpose as I learned about this movement that was not openly embraced. I had the opportunity to meet several Puerto Rican prisoners released from US prisons in 1999, as well as some of the Nationalists released in 1979 such as Don Rafael Cancel Miranda and Lolita Lebron. All these people greatly influenced my life. I also met elders such as Don Toñito and Isabel Rosado Morales from the Nationalist Party, a political party whose primary goal was to obtain independence.

I was 24 when I befriended 97-year-old elder Isabel. She was not this hardened revolutionary I had imagined. Instead, I found her to be a charismatic, humorous, and tender old

woman. Because of her age, I began interviewing her right away. One interview in 2004 grew to ten years' worth of interviews. I created a short film about Isabel's life and my journey as our friendship evolved. Isabel's life showed me the important role women play in social movements and she encouraged me to find my voice as a Puerto Rican raised in the diaspora. The more I learned about Puerto Rico, the more I understood the impact colonialism had on Puerto Rican identity.

Not only did Isabel's life impact me greatly, but so did the time I spent with the elders in my family. Since I could remember, I'd go through old family albums at my grandparents' house and would sit for hours listening to my grandmother's stories about our family. At home, my parents had their own collection of albums that included photographs of family and friends in New York City, Puerto Rico and Ecuador. Through many conversations, I was able to learn a great deal about all my grandparents on both sides of my family. Between my activism and creative projects, my work has centered on Puerto Rico's struggle for independence, family, and identity. The culmination of this work also led me to further explore my family's personal story of migration and immigration to the United States.

### **Historical Background**

With nearly four hundred years of Spanish domination and 124 years of US colonial rule, Puerto Rico stands as one of the oldest colonies in the world. It became a possession of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American war of 1898. My own great-great grandfather, Jesus Irizarry, a Spanish born soldier, served in the war. My family lore is that my great-grandmother, Carmen de la Monseratte Irizarry, also affectionately known as "Ita," and her

siblings were told to hide under the table at home when US troops invaded our family's hometown, San German.



Fig. 1. US Cavalry passing through San German, Puerto Rico.  
“<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/spanwar9.htm>” Accessed 16 Apr. 2022.

Establishing a new civil government on the island, US Congress passed the Jones Act of 1917. Aside from creating the first administrative cabinet, it also imposed US citizenship on Puerto Ricans, immediately sending some 20,000 Puerto Rican males to serve in WWI. The island's distinctive character has had to evolve under the wings of the United States. Today, the Island's very status remains unresolved, a point driven home by a Supreme Court's ruling in 2016 that Puerto Rico was not a sovereign nation. And immediately following Hurricane Maria,

the US federal government's inadequate response to millions of Puerto Ricans only highlighted the true colonial relationship Puerto Rico has with the United States.

In 2015, as a result of a 73-billion-dollar debt, Puerto Rico began experiencing a mass exodus to the US mainland. After Hurricane Maria that number has grown astronomically as hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have left the island. Today there are a little over 2.8 million Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico, a large decline from 3.8 million in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Along with the aftermath of the hurricane and debt crisis, exploitative policies continue to create hard living conditions for Puerto Ricans on the island. And exploitation has paved the way for foreigners to move in and buy up land and property, creating home vacation rentals that benefit from tax exemptions not offered to native Puerto Ricans living on the island.

In my experience, Americans know very little about Puerto Rico's relationship to the US and the implications it has had on the island's history, identity, and existence. In 2019, after weeks of intense protesting, Puerto Ricans on the island pressured Governor Ricky Rosello to resign. The resignation was the culmination of events during a time of social and political upheaval. Earlier that year, groups like *Collectiva Feminista*, were camping out in front of the Governor's palace to demand a state of emergency due to the increasing violence women in Puerto Rico were facing. Another group, *Se Acabaron las Promesas*, were holding frequent protests denouncing the fiscal control board established by the Obama administration to restructure the debt by cutting funds to social services, education, and retirement plans for Puerto Ricans and prioritizing payments to vulture hedge funds.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See "Puerto Rico Population 2022 (Live)" for a population graph as well as population projection and decline.

<sup>2</sup> See Aronoff, for more information on how vulture hedge funds are being prioritized and benefitting from Puerto Rico's fiscal crisis post Hurricane Maria.

By July, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, an independent, non-profit investigative news and journalism organization, begins releasing controversial leaked chats between Governor Ricky Rosello, his administration and other elected officials where they cruelly joked about Hurricane Maria survivors, openly discussed the misuse of funds, and insensitively dismissed the issues that had catapulted Puerto Rico into crisis (*Faure*). Along with rightful frustration and anger at the situation in Puerto Rico, and at these newly leaked chats, weeks of protests began growing. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans marched on July 22, and by July 24th Governor Rosello announced his resignation. Since then, there have been two more governors in place and similar issues are still ongoing.

### **Research Analysis**

My research for this film did not begin when I started thesis. Instead, it feels like it was a long time coming. While the project developed and took shape in thesis class, I began scanning family images and digitizing my father's super 8 film a few years earlier. I also filmed and interviewed my grandparents, especially my grandmother, over the years when I had the chance. The research on Puerto Rican history is something I began out of personal interest while in college. Since then, most of my projects have centered around my cultural heritage and experience within that. I would say that my time on the Isabel Rosado documentary most prepared me to make this film. And that work brought me to this moment.

When I began thinking closely about my own family's migration experience, it was one year after Hurricane Maria. At that time there was a massive exodus of Puerto Ricans that reminded me of how social and political conditions continue to control the migration narrative for Puerto Ricans. It took a hurricane in the 21st century for Americans to begin understanding

the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, even though Puerto Ricans have been migrating to the US as early as the late 20th century. And while I do not include details about the early Puerto Rican communities in the US due to lack of time, I think it's important to share in this paper that around the time of WWI small enclaves of Puerto Ricans had already begun to form throughout New York City. Puerto Rican pioneer Bernardo Vega describes this in *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega*:

We set out for the neighborhood where the bulk of the cigar workers then lived: the blocks along Third Avenue, between 64th and 106th streets. Spread out over this large area were a lot of Puerto Ricans... After Manhattan, the borough with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans was Brooklyn, in the Boro Hall area, especially on Sand, Adams and Pearl streets and over near the Navy Yard...In 1916 the Puerto Rican colony in New York amounted to about six thousand people, mostly tabaqueros and their families (12).

In the film I do provide some historical context for Puerto Rico's unique colonial status, but I do not explain in detail that US citizenship was imposed on Puerto Ricans, eliminating barriers and making travel without a visa possible. This made the revolving migrant trajectory possible. It is how my family was able to travel so easily back and forth. In the 1930s some of my extended family, such my great-grandmother's siblings who were as young as 12 and 13 years of age, migrated alone by ship to establish themselves in the Bronx. By the end of WWII, the enclaves, also known as *colonias* in New York City, grew into communities with a population of 135,000 Puerto Ricans (Gonzalez 81).

During production, I already had in mind that the cinema verité scenes with my mother would act as a narrative thread, and that I'd only use a small percentage of my mother's formal interviews. However, I thought it was important to discuss a variety of topics such as what discrimination may have felt like to her. She did not pinpoint any specific situations, but she did talk in general about situations that made her uncomfortable, and it was through these conversations that I was able to help her notice the belittlement she and my grandmother experienced. My mother would often accompany my grandmother as her translator and on one particular outing, as a requirement to get on public assistance, my grandmother had to visit a doctor for a medical check up. While translating, my mother noticed the doctor was making passes at my grandmother. The doctor went as far as asking my grandmother to take off all her clothes. When my grandmother caught on to what the doctor was saying, she was humiliated, and they left right away. Even though this story does not make it into the film, I think sharing these intimate stories helped my mother open up and made the process of storytelling easier.

During this interview process with my mother, and overall, in making this film, I often turned to Juan Gonzalez's book *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, which discusses the Latino experience in the US. Gonzalez speaks in depth about Puerto Rico's colonial status and the harmful and invisible conditions it's created for Puerto Ricans. Being US citizens yet at the same time colonial subjects, and being treated as foreigners, makes the Puerto Rican experience unique. As Gonzalez writes,

The contradiction of being at once citizens and foreigners, when joined with the reality that ours was a racially mixed population has made the Puerto Rican migrant experience in America profoundly schizophrenic,

more similar in some ways to that of African Americans or Native Americans than to any other Latino group (82).

During the first few decades of US colonial rule, the island experienced extreme poverty. The economic conditions worsened and political repression across the island grew. The United States was critiqued on the state of affairs of their colonial possession that American capital was then invested into Puerto Rico (Ayala 8-9). And by post World War II, Puerto Rico began to experience what is called Operation Bootstrap, the transformation from an agricultural economy to an industrialized one. US firms began moving to Puerto Rico for the tax benefits, and their new industrial plants that manufactured consumer goods led to employment. New infrastructure and communications systems were also built.

Along with this economic transformation came the creation of the Puerto Rican middle class. But for this economic experiment to work, people had to leave the island. As Alana Casanova-Burgess says in episode two of the podcast *La Brega: Levittown, Where The Good Life Begins*, “For local technocrats, the problem was that there was no way to create enough jobs to employ everyone. There were too many people on the island to create a middle class and that idea led to some horrible policies.” Women were sterilized as a way for population control and campaigns of mass migration to the US were strongly pushed. That is when the mass exodus known as the Great Migration took place in the 1950s.

In 1948, after WWII, Gag Law 53, also known as “*la ley de la mordaza*” was created by the pre-commonwealth Puerto Rican legislature and abetted by Puerto Rico’s Governor, Luis Munoz Marin, leader of the Popular Democratic Party, as a preemptive measure to silence the popular Puerto Rican independence movement. It outlawed the use of the Puerto Rican flag and

prohibited meetings, the printing and or distribution of literature, and exhibition of any material in favor of independence. It also “made it a crime to publicly advocate violent opposition to the U.S. occupation” (Gonzalez 296). This campaign of terror targeted not only those supported independence, but anyone who sympathized with those in the movement as well. The persecution and surveillance of Puerto Ricans in support of independence by the US government and the colonial government continued for decades.

In the film I include a brief narration explaining how I learned about this history, but because of time constraints, I did not dive deeper into the historical background. I do make a reference in the narration to my grandfather getting upset when, as a late teen, I asked him why Puerto Rico was not independent. He yelled, “I do not want any Nationalists in my home!” I did not know what or who he was talking about, or about this dark hidden history of political repression on the island. Whenever I was exposed to any Puerto Rican history growing up, the part where there was a popular movement among the poor working class that defended independence with armed struggle was left out.

When Puerto Rico was removed from the list of colonies at the United Nations and Law 600, the law that granted the Puerto Rican colonial government the right to form its own constitution under US authority, was passed, it led to further political upheaval. The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, one of the most repressed groups that supported independence, and opposed any relationship and or annexation with the United States, felt this perpetuated Puerto Rico’s colonial status (Trías Monge 113). As noted by Jose Trías Monge, the late lawyer, constitutional jurist, and former Judge in Puerto Rico in his book *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*:

On October 30, 1950, bands of nationalists attacked seven towns and captured one of them, Jayuya. On the same day five men unsuccessfully tried to force their way into the Governor's official residence to kill Munoz Marin. (14) On November 1, two nationalists tried to assassinate President Harry Truman at Blair House in Washington D.C. More than 4,000 National guard soldiers and officers had to be mobilized in Puerto Rico. In all, twenty-eight people, including nine nationalists, were killed, and forty-nine people were wounded in the island (113-114).

With several iterations of the bill being reviewed in Puerto Rico's legislature and a final referendum on Law 600 taking place on June 4, 1951, the bill was passed setting the precedent to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, also known as the "Estado Libre Asociado (ELA)", which was formed officially on July 27, 1952. The campaign to vote in favor for the referendum led by the ruling colonial government, terrorized voters by telling them that if they did not vote in favor of, they would be supporting communism (Acosta Lespier 154-155). Munoz Marin believed this path would lead to the eventual decolonization of the island, and until this day, the United States has not shown otherwise (The End of the Promises, 2022). My maternal grandfather, Jorge Padilla Rodriguez, and his family were believers of the ELA and members of the Popular Democratic Party, also known as the "Populares", led by Munoz Marin. It is said that on that side of my family that Munoz Marin gave a speech on the balcony of my great-grandparent's home in San German, Puerto Rico, where I interviewed my Grandaunt, Alba Padilla for this film.



(Fig. 2.) Nationalists Rounded Up, Nov. 4, 1950. Associated Press Photo.



(Fig. 3) Women believed to be nationalists rounded up by authorities. Nov 8, 1950. *Periodico El Mundo*.

These larger outside forces such as an involuntary mass migration, economic instability and political unrest (all a result of colonialism), deeply shaped Puerto Rico's relationship to the US, and life in the archipelago for decades to come. Because it was easier for Puerto Ricans to come and go in the *area guagua*—the aerial bus—by the 1970s there was a wave of Puerto Ricans returning to the island. Whether they were Puerto Ricans or Nuyorican's, many wanted to return to a Puerto Rico they yearned for but that was no longer the same (Levittown, *Where the Good Life Begins*, 2022). The return migrant like some of my working-class family re-established themselves back in Puerto Rico and bought homes with their savings. While my grandparents bought a modest house a few years after returning to Puerto Rico, the island faced high unemployment during that decade and my grandparents struggled financially. The circular migration of Puerto Ricans continued uniquely characterizing the population as it expanded greatly in the diaspora. Theorist Jorge Duany, in his article *Nation, Migration, Identity: The Case of Puerto Ricans*, describes:

Over the past few decades, Puerto Rico has become a nation on the move through the relocation of almost half of its population to the United States and the continuing flow of people between the Island and the mainland.

Contrary to other population movements, much of the Puerto Rican exodus entails a restless movement between multiple places of origin and destination (431).

This nation on the move is the story of my family and that is what I wanted to show with this film. However, immigration for my Ecuadorian side of the family differed from the

experience of my Puerto Rican family members. With the exception of my grandfather, my father and two cousins, the majority of my Ecuadorian relatives have not emigrated to the United States. My paternal grandfather, Alejandro Montero, emigrated to New York City in the mid-1940s at a time when Ecuadorian immigration to the United States was smaller in numbers. As opposed to Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians could not enter the US without a Visa. Ecuador faced political upheaval during several decades of the 20th century, and like many Latin American countries experienced what Eduardo Galeano describes in his book *Open Veins of Latin America*, “The Congressional Record of the United States is replete with irrefutable evidence of interventions in Latin America” (272). Ecuador too experienced US backed coups. Without homogenizing the reasons why Latino immigrants leave their homelands, it can be noted that their story has a commonality, “that U.S. economic and political domination over Latin America has always been--and continues to be--the underlying reason for the massive Latino presence here. Quite simply, our vast Latino population is the unintended harvest of the U.S. empire” (Gonzalez xvii).

After living in Manhattan for several years, my grandfather moved to Elmhurst, Queens as the Ecuadorian community was forming and eventually bought a house. He enjoyed photography and left behind a collection of images I encountered growing up. My grandfather moved back to his homeland for good by 1972. In 1962 at age 23, my father emigrated to New York City where he joined my grandfather. My father also enjoyed taking photos. Between my parents’ and all my grandparents’ photo albums, I spent years learning about my family history. This influenced my appreciation for the family archive, cultural identity, and history.



(Fig 4..) Family friend holding his rooster in Santurce, Puerto Rico. Photo taken by my father, May 1967.

There are several films that inspired me during research and or while editing the film. The first was Cecilia Aldarondo's first documentary feature, *Memories of Penitent Heart*, where Aldarondo uncovers her deceased uncle's past and through interviews, archival photos, footage, and mementos and tells the story of what really happened. She did this so well by intersecting her family's story and politics. I used the film as a reference for how narration, historical context, and the family archive could be interwoven. I also related to the ambiguity that her uncle struggled with at times regarding his Puerto Rican identity, which is a theme in my film as well. Her second film, *Landfall*, a portrait of Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and the current economic crisis, also inspiring for my work. The third film I referenced was Sofia Gallisá Muriente's experimental film, *Celaje (Cloudscape)*, filmed in 16mm and super 8. It is an intimate chronicle that sways between dreams and historical context. The film laments the death of the Estado Libre Asociado and the disasters Puerto Ricans have had to survive. Gallisá

seamlessly uses poetic narration and goes back and forth between beautiful landscape footage, footage of her grandmother, and historical images. While my film is not experimental, it was inspirational material to reference as I also incorporate historical narration into my film while at the same time-sharing personal accounts of my family. The touching images of Gallisá's grandmother moved me deeply, further encouraging me to include additional footage of my grandparents throughout the film.

### **Thesis Production Process**

When I began theorizing about the kind of thesis project I wanted to create, I knew that I wanted it to be centered around my cultural heritage. I had taken a 1-credit class with interdisciplinary artist and filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris on the family archive, where each student in the class had to create a project using family images. I created an old vintage family photo album and a short video with family films and photographs. A year later I was invited to participate in Harris' exhibition, *Mother, Bethel, Harlem, USA*, a collaboration between students in the IMA-MFA program and Harris. My art installation consisted of a large vintage frame and within that frame, there were several smaller vintage picture frames of my family's portraits and archival photographs starting from the 1920s through the 1960s. Underneath the frame stood a white pillar (commonly used in vintage portrait photography) and placed on top was an iPad that played on loop an edited video of old family films in Puerto Rico and New York City. With this art installation, I wanted to honor my family's history in Puerto Rico and New York City.

Many times, we keep photographs put away in albums, boxes and bags without realizing how deep we bury our families' and our own stories. *Memorias de mi Familia* began as an exploration of the family photo album and practices of archiving and grew into an hour-long

personal documentary. My activism primarily on the Puerto Rican left and cultural communities of New York City, as well as visiting Puerto Rico and Ecuador throughout my life, inspired me to create a story about family, identity, memory, migration, loss and what home means.

After my class with Harris, I knew I wanted the family archive and old family films to be major elements in this personal documentary. And I also knew that I was planning to interview some family members and include my grandparent's house as a central subject. I wasn't sure, however, how I was going to marry all of these elements together. I began filming in August of 2018, a month before the exhibition with Harris and a year after my grandmother's death. On this trip I still was not exactly sure what the story was going to be but since I knew I wanted to include my grandparent's house. I began there and filmed all over the house with my Canon 7D Mark 2 camera. I made sure to get as many shots as I could of interiors and some exteriors. There were family photos we had taken in the house as children growing up as well as home videos that I had in mind, and many of the shots I was filming matched these in composition.

I returned to Puerto Rico in April 2019 and worked with a small crew. This time we filmed with a Sony A7III and an Atomos Ninja V monitor in neutral 4K. We filmed a sit-down interview with my great aunt, Tia Alba, who at that time was 93 years old, as well as a verité scene of us discussing the photos along the walls of her house. We also filmed scenic shots of San German and B-roll of my grandmother's house. In May 2019, I filmed the first interview with my mother, Sylvia, in New Jersey and that August, I brought her with me to Puerto Rico. It was the two-year anniversary of my grandmother's death and the first time my mom was back since her mother's passing and Hurricane Maria. We filmed in San German with a small crew, again in 4K neutral, with a Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema 6K. We filmed verité of my mom and I visiting several places such as the cemetery, the location where we once lived (a house no

longer stands there and it's a hill) and walking through the barrio and at my grandmother's house. We also filmed a second interview with my mom on the balcony of my grandparent's home. It turned out to be a great experience and I am glad I made my mother a part of the film.

Though I knew I wanted my mother's participation in the film, I wasn't sure at first how to include her at first. I didn't want to script the verité scenes. Instead, I wanted them to unfold naturally, and they did. My mother was shy in her first interview in New Jersey, since it was the first time she had ever done a sit-down interview, I was concerned shooting would not go smoothly in Puerto Rico, but it did. The verité scenes and her interview exceeded my expectations. My mother eventually became a natural on camera. Our conversations flowed and she was surprisingly open, which made the process easier.

Since we were staying with my mother's older sister, who doesn't make it into the film, I filmed alone with them the next day. A tropical storm was hitting Puerto Rico that day, two years after Hurricane Maria, and feelings of anxiousness could be felt among my relatives and on the island. There was 24/7 coverage of the storm on the news and people were preparing for days. While I did film verité of my mom and my aunt, it didn't make it into the film. I didn't want this film to focus on natural disasters because there are several good films already made about Hurricane Maria and the devastation that followed. My documentary transcends that and highlights the slower, less visible disaster that we know as US policy and colonialism. Throughout this period, I was also dedicating time to scanning hundreds of photos. While I began this a few years before the thesis work, I was scanning many more images as I began editing scenes. My mother helped me a great deal. We went through more albums, boxes, and bags of photos. But then the pandemic hit and without being able to travel that spring as I had planned, production on the film was delayed. It was such a frightening, almost paralyzing time

that it was challenging to concentrate on the film. I allowed myself to be in that moment and wait until I felt safe to travel again. In October 2020 I returned to Puerto Rico and, with a small crew, filmed my mother's youngest sister, my Aunt Elizabeth, better known as "Titi Lizzy." We used a Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema 4K and filmed in neutral 4K. We shot a sit-down interview on the balcony of my grandparent's house as well as verité of the two of us discussing the hurricane's damage to the house. We also filmed more B-roll of the surrounding *barrio* and drone footage that ultimately, I barely used. On this trip to Puerto Rico, I also met the guitarist that would later make several original tracks for me to use in the film.

By the end of 2020, I had edited several verité scenes and began incorporating my mother's interviews into a cut. I also began writing voiceover and working on a script. While I already had a few films transferred several years ago for a prior film project, I submitted several rolls of old super 8 family films to a post house in Massachusetts that provided a student discount. It took months before I received the digitized footage due to covid delays. But when I saw what was transferred, I knew I had to include it in the film. For months, I had faced challenges streamlining the structure of the film to include a strong component of the family archive. But having this new footage helped tell the story of the family archive visually. I always wanted to make a film that explored my family's story of identity, migration and memory through our family's archive while also moving the story along through verité footage and interviews. Since my father was the person behind most of the super 8 film, I decided to include him in the film so he could explain some of that backstory.

In February 2021 with my Canon DSLR 7D mark 2, I filmed my father and mother in their New Jersey apartment. By this point, I knew to focus on my father's interest in cameras, his early life with my mom and her family, and my parents' decision to send my siblings and I to

Puerto Rico every summer. Although I wanted to ask my father about his mother, my grandmother Flor Maria, it's a sensitive subject and I did not want to see him cry. But while editing his footage into the cut, I was regretful that I did not ask about her. I still wonder how that footage would have impacted the film.

In regard to music, I removed the temporary tracks I was using and used guitar tracks a friend composed for the film. Initially I wanted to use the traditional Puerto Rican guitar called *El Cuarto* but I did not have the funds for the composer to hire a cuatrista. When I incorporated all the music the guitarist composed into the cut, I still felt something was missing. I felt the film needed more of a tender and cinematic feel. Around the time that I had been searching for a composer, a graduate music student at Hunter reached out to me and sent me samples of her work. A little over a year later, in May 2021, we reconnected, and she composed a beautiful score of harp music. I ended up using the harp score under most of the voiceovers and throughout the film.

Since the film includes a great deal of old family photographs and super 8 film elements, I incorporated graphic frames that represent vintage photo albums with black pages. A good friend who is a graphics art director did me the favor of creating these elements. The rest of the elements, like the family home videos of my grandparents, I filmed throughout the years. After my grandfather passed away, I began interviewing my grandmother. She was not shy and enjoyed being on camera. Most often, she sang songs from her youth. The crew I worked with in Puerto Rico was a mixture of my cousin and his friends, along with people I worked with on another project. Although I did not have any funding, I was able to pay the crew, albeit at a very discounted price. This is the first time I have edited a film and it has been a difficult yet rewarding journey seeing my work come into fruition. At first, I had no idea how I would be able

to edit a whole film on my own, but it happened. It was important for me to create a film that explored my search for belonging by unburying my family's archive while also sharing their story of home, migration, and memory. Through this film I was also able to shine light on Puerto Rico's colonial status and the harm it's caused and continues to cause. And despite colonialism and how it influenced and even shaped much of the lives of Puerto Ricans in the archipelago and the diaspora, Puerto Ricans remain firm in who they are and where they come from. I am a testament to that.

### **Audience and Exhibition**

*Memorias de Mi Familia* is intended for a national broadcast on public television and will be submitted to national film festivals. It is also well-suited for educational markets and will be of particular interest to students of Latino/Puerto Rican studies, progressive organizations critical of US imperialism, and the Puerto Rican diaspora. The primary target audiences also include all Latinx and all immigrant communities that are underserved in media. But ultimately this film is intended to draw in people like me. You don't even have to be Puerto Rican. Just having an experience of being displaced or growing up between two different worlds will make the film relevant. I have not seen my story reflected in any films and so with this film I hope to fill this void.

Since the documentary includes a good amount of personal archival film and photography and discusses the Puerto Rican migration family experience through the act of documenting and salvaging memories, we hope that the film is of interest to Latinx/Puerto Rican Centers and Museums throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. But also due to Puerto Rico's unique position as a US commonwealth and as a part of the Caribbean and Latin America,

it is very important to continue to share Puerto Rico's story with the global community.

Therefore, I also plan to submit to international film festivals.

I hope to work with several collaborators such as libraries, historical associations, academic institutions, and cultural and civil rights organizations to create opportunities for dialogue and conversations which includes hosting educational screenings. I would like to collaborate with institutions like The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture in Chicago, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College and the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña in Puerto Rico. I hope that through these organizations we will be able to network with other Puerto Rican/Latino communities all over the country and in Puerto Rico and develop specific campaigns that could strengthen their community involvement and work. We will also set up a small screening tour both in the US and Puerto Rico should the film make it on PBS to build support and momentum.

There are several films that have been made about Puerto Rico's colonial relationship to the US, and the consequences that have followed. There are also other films that have been made about the Puerto Rican experience in the US, resisting erasure, and the cultural impact this colonial relationship has had on identity both in the diaspora and the archipelago. Some of these signature films include *Paradise Invaded*, *La Operación*, *Manos a La Obra: The Story of Operation Bootstrap*, *Mi Puerto Rico*, *Brincando El Charco*, *Yo Soy Boricua*, *Pa'Que Tu Lo Sepas*, *Las Carpetas*, *Nuyorican Básquet*, and the most recent, *Landfall*. While these films all address various parts of the complex colonial situation of Puerto Rico, my film *Memorias de Mi Familia* is unique in that it blends a very personal experience with the political history of the island and gives people a different way to think about their families' reasons for going back and forth between the US and Puerto Rico. My hope is that the audience will have a new way to

think about why this happened instead of the commonly imposed trope of the “American Dream.” To reimage, recreate, and reconstruct home is a universal experience, and I hope this film encourages those hard to have conversations with our families as a way to deal with our past, who we are and where we come from.

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