

“ . . . IN THE BORDERLANDS YOU ARE THE BATTLEGROUND . . . ”:¹ JUNE 12 AND THE PULSE OF THE SACRED

STEPHANIE RIVERA BERRUZ
Marquette University

“Maybe your Ma blessed you on the way out the door. Maybe she wrapped a plate for you in the fridge so you don’t come home and mess up her kitchen with your hunger. Maybe your Tia dropped you off, gave you cab money home. Maybe you had to get a sitter. Maybe you’ve yet to come out to your family at all, or maybe your family kicked you out years ago. Forget it, you survived. Maybe your boo stayed home, wasn’t feeling it, but is blowing up your phone with sweet texts, trying to make sure you don’t stray. Maybe you’re allowed to stray. Maybe you’re flush, maybe you’re broke as nothing, and angling your pretty face barside, hoping someone might buy you a drink. Maybe your half-Latin-ass doesn’t even speak Spanish; maybe you barely speak English. Maybe you’re undocumented.”

—Justin Torres, “In Praise of Latin Night at the Club”¹

On June 12, 2016, the world witnessed one of the deadliest single shooter massacres in U.S. history. Fifty persons were killed and fifty-three were critically injured. Of those fifty, twenty-three were Puerto Rican; 90% of those killed were Latinx. Their faces spanned the racial kaleidoscope of the African, Latinx, and Indigenous diaspora. Most of them were working class and extremely young (Ochoa 2016). However, these particularities went largely omitted from the coverage of the event that swept the nation under the label of an LGBTQ hate crime. The ubiquity of death of color in the U.S. cannot be overstated. Indeed, many pulses have been lost outside of Pulse nightclub. To many, June 12 may seem like a day among many, lost to the memorials of death no one really wants to remember. In this paper I explore June 12 as we turn the page on its sixth year of remembrance. I make the case for a reading of June 12 as more than an LGBTQ hate crime, but rather as emblematic of a battleground of a sacred space (Latin night at the gay bar) for queer bodies of color. The project establishes a more complex framework for understanding what

¹ The title is a direct reference to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987): “To live in the borderlands means you” (216).

took place on June 12 that can appreciate the ethno-racial, spiritual, and queer dimensions that foregrounded the event. I maintain that the method of analysis necessitates a different model of theorizing, one that can crystalize the sexuality of terrorism, the whiteness of homonationalism, and thereby the importance of creating sacred space for Latinx queer subjects, many of whom, in the context of June 12, form part of the Puerto Rican diaspora.

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

The aftermath of June 12 saw an outpour of reporting much of which sparked discussions around the sacredness of nightclub spaces for the queer community. Pulse nightclub was readily described as a sacred place or a sacred space by news reporters, bloggers, and academics alike. For instance, Christina Aguilar (2016), a young queer Latina, reported: “These spaces were rare and sacred. They gave me slivers of time where I could be my whole self that frankly did not exist most of the time.” Michael Barbaro (2016), writing for the *New York Times*, described gay night clubs as sacred spaces insofar as they act as refuge for the LGBTQ community. In discussion with fellow activists, he reflects on the Pulse mass shooting event as comparable to a gunman going into a church and shooting people. The owner of the nightclub, Barbara Poma, described Pulse as a “sacred place” as she considered selling the club to the city for the construction of the memorial (Shah and Almasry 2016). Marcia Ochoa (2016), professor at UC Santa Cruz, described bars and nightclubs as sacred spaces, “places to worship and learn.” The sacred emerged as a way to describe that which was interrupted by the massacre. More specifically, the violence enacted upon the queer of color community at Pulse was understood as a disruption of sacred space.

The sacred is generally defined as that which is precious, fragile, in need of protection, and often contrasted with the profane. However, theories of the sacred can be found across disciplinary conversations in philosophy, anthropology, religious studies, and literature (Bloesch 2016, 112). Context is key to understanding how the sacred is interpolated. Sarah Bloesch describes the sacred within three general identifiable contexts. The first context involves articulations of how people handle the sacred and the profane. Generally, these discussions revolve around considerations of why spaces, rituals, and/or objects assume the characteristics that they do. The second context, philosophical and theological, aims to make assertions about the categories in relation to physicality. Finally, there is the context which seeks to theorize the secular (112). Those who try to theorize the secular argue that we cannot neatly separate the sphere of spiritual life from the secular as the rise of secularism did not seal spiritual/religious practices from public life. To this effect, the sacred and the profane need to be understood and for the purposes of this exploration are understood as active forces read up against social-cultural interpretations of gender, race, and sexuality as well as, importantly, the status of personhood (113).

To unpack the religious/spiritual dimensions of the event of June 12, we must appreciate the fact that the massacre was framed through the religious/spiritual dimensions of life. Notably, the length of the reporting was cloaked in the language of religion. The shooter,

Omar Mateen, identified himself as “a soldier of God,” as he pledged his allegiance to a Sunni militant jihadist group: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, more commonly referred to in the United States as ISIL (Doornbos 2016). Religion was a further salient feature, as it framed how people discussed Mateen’s motivations. In fact, as a subject, Mateen was entirely interpellated through the lens of religious fanaticism, leaving little room for understanding June 12 as anything other than an attack on the nation. June 12 became a national massacre memorialized without much attention to the lives lost—lives that the nation would otherwise consider disposable. Religion framed the violent disruption of sanctuary through the identification of Latin night at gay clubs as sacred space. However, the massacre took place on what most of us would identify as secular grounds: a gay Latin night at a club. So, we might ask, in what ways was Pulse Nightclub sacred space? . . . And for whom?

The history of LGBTQ people in the U.S. is imbued with violence, a point emphatically central to the coverage of the massacre. *The Atlantic* ran an article on June 12 titled, “The Extraordinarily Common Violence Against LGBT People in America,” which aimed to expose the prevalence of violence in the LGBT community (Green 2016). But in providing evidence for its claims, the article fragmented identities by separating sexuality from race, ethnicity, and religion. Citing the Southern Poverty Law Center, the article asserted that hate-crimes against LGBT people are twice as likely as violence against Black or Jewish people. A few days later, the *New York Times* released an article, arguing along similar lines, that LGBT people are more likely to be targets of violent attack over African Americans (Park and Mykhyalyshyn 2016).

The reporting notably overlooked two vital pieces of information: most of the people injured or murdered on June 12 spanned the Latinx diaspora, and it was Latin night. At stake in the Pulse Nightclub shooting was not merely the desecration of a queer space, but a racialized, queer space. Here, I am drawing attention to the fact that all spaces are racialized, even if unnamed as such. In this instance, one key omission revolved around the intersections between race/ethnicity and sexuality, thus, naming queerness as normatively white and folding the event into the homonormativity of our times. That is to say, the event was largely understood as a queer hate crime that could render intelligible the lives lost as lives worthy of mourning only if they could be framed through a national narrative of queerness that was centered around the sexual norms of whiteness. The confluence between “American” sexuality and national politics often goes overlooked, particularly in the wake of such tragedies. However, the crossings between nationalism and sexuality provide the framework for understanding the discussions that transpired in the wake of June 12. Cited as a *national* event both in its magnitude and tragedy, June 12 was normatively folded into national rhetoric that quickly elevated the status of LGBTQ folks to the spotlight. However, the coverage came at a deep cost as the image of the LGBTQ community that drew most attention pitted race and ethnicity against sexuality, inviting viewers to segment sexual orientation from racial, ethnic, migratory, or religious/spiritual identity. The move to sever sexuality and highlight its exceptional status confirms that only certain queer subjects can subjects of the nation and thus subjects of mourning.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir K. Puar (2007) argues that the collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism generates a national discourse of patriotic homonormative inclusion that is anchored in the exclusion of racialized and sexualized “others,” most notably the “terrorist” of the American imagination (39). The national recognition of homosexuality “is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others” (2). The dynamic that produces the dichotomy between the possibilities of the “liberated” nation and “liberated” queer subjects (white-gay-lesbian liberal subjects) rests upon the contradistinction with those racial-sexual disavowed others whose identity cannot be folded into the nation: the undocumented, the terrorist, the queer of color, the trans person of color. The result is the production of the “terrorist” and “citizen” through the deployment of national gay politics. Thus, Puar argues that a regulatory narrative is promulgated, which understands racial and religious communities as “more homophobic than white mainstream queer communities,” no matter how racist they might be (15). She claims, “[c]ollectively . . . [these processes] extend the project of U.S. nationalism and imperial expansion endemic to the war on terror” (2). Hence, the severing of race from sexuality serves to justify the mechanisms of terror that uphold sovereignty and U.S. exceptionalism through the production of the citizen subject which *can be* non-heterosexual so long as they uphold white moral citizenship.

The notable omission of the ethnicity and race from the coverage of June 12 should be further juxtaposed with the overwhelming attention garnered by Omar Mateen’s status as a Muslim terrorist. Much of the coverage of the event swallowed Mateen’s narrative into the national rhetoric using his repressed or perverse sexuality as justification for the massacre, and this fact should not be all that surprising. As Puar notes, “the invocation of the terrorist as a queer, non-national, perversely racialized other has become part of the normative script of the U.S. war on terror” (37). By constructing Mateen as sexually deviant, he was quarantined into a terrorist body and labored in the service of enforcing the terms of U.S. patriotism as a subject whose death did not even rise to the level of counting as part of the death toll on June 12. “The emasculated terrorist is not merely an other” that sits outside of the citizenry of the nation, but is further “a barometer of ab/normality involved in disciplinary apparatuses” of nationalism (38). As such, the focus on Mateen’s terrorist status simultaneously consolidated a base of normalized LGBTQ subjects that could be appropriately attended to by national politics and whose “unique” status with respect to violence could be covered by national media and invoked by candlelight vigil.

The framework of the coverage deployed an either/or mechanism that split racial/ethnic/religious/spiritual others from the status of LGBTQ subjects. Hence, the massacre could rise to the level of national concern without disrupting American patriotic sentiments about terrorism. The disaggregation of identity required to achieve this result necessitated the collusion between a normative homosexuality and American nationalism or, as Puar has called it, homo-nationalism, that relegated the racialized queer dimensions of the subjects and the space on June 12 outside of the folds of national concern.

As a result, the average political imaginative geography that tells a narrative of the immigrant stealing jobs, the Muslim terrorist that is trying to kill us all, the lazy Puerto Rican who is living off the system, or the immigrant that refuses to assimilate, remained

undisrupted. At the same time, the U.S. could collectively declare June 12 a national tragedy. Read against this backdrop, the response of queer Latinx folks stating that Latin night at the gay club was and is sacred should not be read as a small or trivial claim. In light of the many excluded dimensions from attention and analysis, to call upon the sacred here is to summon something much more powerful: the intimacies, proximities, and intersubjectivities of erotic life that are made possible by Latin night at the gay club.

ARTICULATING THE SACRED: QUEER BODIES OF COLOR

In the context of Pulse, Latin night at the gay club emerges as a space that can reconcile the clashes of identity engendered through the homonormative political framework discussed in the previous section. The space/place becomes meaningful precisely because the social and political fabric of queer politics in the U.S. painfully severs sexuality from race/ethnicity. As a result, events like Latin night at the gay club are sacred because they act as portals to a time and place where the experience of identity is not wounded. Recalling Christina Aguilar's (2016) reflections, what makes Latin night unique and sacred is tied to the experience of the self and temporality. For Aguilar, Latin night at the gay club created slivers of time where she could be her whole self in the world. Noting that she did not feel embraced by the LGBTQ community because of her *Latinidad*, Latin night at the gay club functions as a space where her race/ethnicity is not at odds with her sexuality. For Justin Torres (2016), the sacredness of "Latin Night at the Queer Club" is articulated through the freedom to be inviolable. Torres closes his essay with imaginings of dance and freedom as he reminds his readers that Latin night at the gay club operates as a refuge for life-giving and affirming practices that transform the spirit when the body feels safe.

Latin night at the gay club gives collective clearance for the possibilities of a harmonious articulation of ethno-race,² sexuality, and the immigrant experience of the Latinx community through the conditions of corporeal proximity and intimacy. It is an experience of intimate contact created through the contours of dance, rhythms, and beats that insist the body move toward, up, against, and away from the many others collectively sharing the space.

Latin night is not one night among many. From the outside looking in, Latin night might simply exemplify the ethnic "flair" that many welcome with the growth of a tolerant, multicultural society. However, Latin night is unique for those whose relationship to their ethnic, racial, and sexual identity is colored by migratory experiences that not only disconnect them from their home place, but also from the normative expectations that dancing salsa, reggaeton, cumbia, merengue, or popular Latin music is for those who are appropriately sexually dimorphic and heterosexual. To dance salsa in queer Latinx space is to transcend the clashes of diasporic identities, which dictate that to be a person of color,

² I use the term ethno-race in this context because the term Latinx picks out both ethnicity and race in the U.S. context. I am not making an argument in support of its frequent use, but rather find it useful for capturing what it means to be Latinx in the U.S. today.

queer, and an immigrant, is simply incommensurable. The corporeal collectivity of Latin night at the gay bar creates an intersubjective experience of community that is profoundly intimate and political.

Further, to call Latin night at the gay club sacred intimates the way in which the *cruces* between racialized erotic life can be folded into spiritual life. The sacredness of Latin night at the gay club is forged precisely because outside of the event there is a world that does not value your existence—a world that “is murderous to you and your kind” (Torres 2016). The imperative, as Torres invokes it for his readers, is to live, to be transformed and transfigured through a radical self-affirmation of racialized erotic subjectivity that is too dangerous to exist in most spaces.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explores the ways in which racial, cultural, and ethnic crosspollination yields the possibilities of the *mestiza*, and thus demonstrates how the multi-dimensionality of identity often rests on clashes or *choques* between those dimensions. The clash between the varying dimensions of identity often results in internal strife and psychic restlessness: “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un *choque*, a cultural collision” (78). In order to navigate through the world, the *mestiza* must create her own consciousness, which can tolerate ambiguity and contradictions. Hence, Anzaldúa describes the intersecting dimensions of ethnicity, race, and culture through identification with a plural personality that has no choice but to operate through a pluralistic mode. There is no other option. “Rigidity means death” (79). Identity is an *amasamiento*—“kneading . . . uniting and joining” the dimensions of the self even if they show up as incompatible (81).

Yet, as many of us know, the kneading of identity is not an easy process. Reflecting on sexuality, Anzaldúa notes that for queer women of color, the ultimate rebellion is found through the articulation of desire. She clashes up against two prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality (19). She resists the trope that women are not sexual beings—a position which is part of the epistemic heirloom of the Spanish colonial encounter saturated by Catholicism. Normative femininity is subsequently rooted in its ability to participate in heterosexuality through the formation of the family vis-à-vis marriage. The queer woman of color cannot be normatively assimilated into these paradigms because her sexuality by definition is incommensurable with the norms of femininity. The production of the normative family through marriage is not at her disposal. Her sexual behavior is already framed through the prohibition of same gender desire, which makes her relation to home one coiled in fear. Furthermore, in this context, normative masculinity is rooted in articulations of the *macho*, which takes the flight from the feminine as its orienting force and in doing so distorts masculinity (41–43). Masculinity is experienced in negation of the feminine. To be appropriately masculine entails distancing from articulations of femininity already constructed through ethno-racial conditioning. Hence, homophobia emerges as a possibility framed around distancing from racialized femininity. As a result, homophobia is anchored in ethno-racial dimensions of identity as well as in articulations of gender.

Although homophobia is often discussed as an oriented fear toward queer bodies, Anzaldúa stretches this account to talk about homophobia as the fear of going home. She describes it with the following words:

[F]ear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. . . . The world is not a safe place to live in. (Anzaldúa 1987, 20)

The crossroads of identity or *intersticios*, as Anzaldúa names them, can be very crippling as they are forged from the violent hemorrhaging of incommensurable dimensions of identity grating against each other. But the crossroads is home to many. Its inhabitants are *atravesados*: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (3). In other words, the crossroads is home to the racial/sexual others described in Puar’s account, who find sanctuary in, among other places, at Latin nights like the one at the Pulse Nightclub.

At the intersection between race/ethnicity and sexuality is a path of knowing and learning that requires balancing and mitigating duality. It is from the place of “in between” or *nepantla* that radical consciousness is forged. In a later essay, Anzaldúa describes *nepantla* as “the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures.” *Nepantla*, she tells her readers, is numinous. Evoking a distinction between the sacred and the profane, Anzaldúa identifies *nepantla* as the point where the mundane and the numinous converge, and harmony, albeit momentary, is possible. It is a point of contact where the body can be witnessed inspired (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002, 549).

In light of the lens provided by Anzaldúa, we can forge an understanding of the Latin night at the gay bar as a point of contact for the *atravesados*. In the context of June 12, Latin night at the gay bar meant the momentary forging of a home-place for queer Latinx bodies, many of which were male identified. As such, Latin night at the gay bar operates as a space/time that can suspend the quotidian life of racism and homophobia, even if only momentarily. At the crux between the numinous and the mundane, Latin night at the gay club transforms into sacred offering glimpses into the possibilities of equilibrium where “you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it” (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002, 549). Returning to Torres (2016) at length is helpful as this moment makes use of the inside-outside distinction to demarcate the sacredness of Latin night at a queer club as he describes the inside as a place of transformation by evoking *mariposas* (butterflies), love, and the possibilities of life in the face of an outside world replete with violence:

Outside, there’s a world that politicizes every aspect of your identity. There are preachers, of multiple faiths, mostly self-identified Christians, condemning you to hell. Outside, they call you an abomination. Outside, there is a news media that acts as if there are two sides to a debate over trans people using public bathrooms. Outside, there is a presidential

candidate who has built a platform on erecting a wall between the United States and Mexico—and not only do people believe that crap is possible, they believe it is necessary. Outside, Puerto Rico is still a colony, being allowed to drown in debt, to suffer, without the right to file for bankruptcy, to protect itself. Outside, there are more than 100 bills targeting you, your choices, your people, pending in various states. . . . But inside, it is loud and sexy and on. . . . You know what the opposite of Latin Night at the Queer Club is? Another Day in Straight White America. So when you walk into the club, if you're lucky, it feels expansive. "Safe space" is a cliché, overused and exhausted in our discourse, but the fact remains that a sense of safety transforms the body, transforms the spirit. So many of us walk through the world without it. So when you walk through the door and it's a salsa beat, and brown bodies, queer bodies, all writhing in some fake smoke and strobing lights, no matter how cool, how detached, how over-it you think you are, Latin Night at the Queer Club breaks your cool. You can't help but smile, this is for you, for us.

Outside, tomorrow, hangovers, regrets, the grind. Outside, tomorrow, the struggle to effect change. But inside, tonight, none of that matters. Inside, tonight, the only imperative is to love. Lap the bar, out for a smoke, back inside, the ammonia and sweat and the floor slightly tacky, another drink, the imperative is to get loose, get down, find religion, lose it, find your hips locked into another's, break, dance on your own for a while—but you didn't come here to be a nun—find your lips pressed against another's, break, find your friends, dance. The only imperative is to be transformed, transfigured in the disco light. To lighten, loosen, see yourself reflected in the beauty of others. You didn't come here to be a martyr, you came to live, papi. To live, mamacita. To live, hijos. To live, mariposas. (Torres 2016)

In the space of Latin night at the queer club, the sacred extends beyond the mere capitalistic communion of bodies and emerges through practices of quotidian intimacy found through dance, movement, and the transformative experiences of the senses (affective life) as hips lock, beats drop, and bodies sweat as they move with one another. In other words, the sacred is engendered through the proximity of bodies sharing in erotic subjectivity that produces a quotidian intimacy of spirituality that otherwise, outside, has little license to exist. As Torres notes in his words, the imperative is to love, if only momentarily. The violence of the world outside cannot be overlooked as it is precisely that outside that imbues Latin night at the gay bar with so much meaning. Hence, it is not the space per se that is sacred, but rather the *inter*-subjectivities that make up the sacred (Gill 2012, 288).

I want to invoke Lyndon K. Gill's (2012) concept of erotic subjectivity here in understanding the inter-relationalities at stake in the production of the sacred. Gill understands erotic subjectivity to be an epistemic intervention that captures an interpretative lens (epistemic) and a driving force (spiritual) that brings people together. He cuts against

the grain of thinking of erotic life and subjectivity as apolitical, secular, and passionless (279). Rather, erotic subjectivity as an epistemological position links the political-sensual-spiritual that orients our social political and spiritual consciousness. As a mode of reading and being in the world, erotic subjectivity interrupts the colonial heirloom that sees political, sensual, and spiritual concerns as purely exclusive realms (279–80). Thinking from this position, Gill maintains that the clearance for the sacred is created on, through, and in-between collective relationships not necessarily moored in any religious doctrine, but rather in the quotidian subjective experience of erotic life (Gill 2012, 289).

June 12 witnessed the disruption of sacred space cleared through the articulations of erotic subjectivity that for many served to rattle *cruces* of identity in line with each other creating the possibilities of transformation. Latin night at the queer club participates in the creation of a space that is sacred precisely because its practices give clearance to the articulation of erotic subjectivity to bodies that might not (for the most part) be rendered subjectivity in the first place, both in the body politic and the spiritual landscape. In fact, sacred bodies have historically been white bodies, which were identified as capable of participating in the temporality of Judeo-Christian progress (Bloesch 2016, 117). Hence, Latin night at the queer club further materializes as a space that is constitutively outside of the dominant domains of subjectivity and personhood, giving the floor to articulations of erotic subjectivity, and thus, has the potential of operating as a site of resistance and transformation. To some, the logic of a Latin night at a queer bar is incomprehensible, and to the extent that this is the case, it can be argued that Latin night at the queer club is threatening and dangerous because it is constituted on the fringes of social and political subjectivity. After all, the sacred in many capacities exceeds intelligibility and is thus posed as a threat to “normal” life, the very same “normal” life that is exceeded by the *atravesados* of the borderlands.

EL PULSO DE PUERTO RICO

The intersections between identity, subjectivity, and erotic life must further be read up against colonial histories that generate the conditions of confluence that make Latinx identity possible in the U.S. context. It cannot be overlooked that half of the lives lost on June 12 were Puerto Rican. Over the last decade, Orlando, Florida has become a landing ground for many Puerto Ricans as they flee social and economic deprivations set in motion by its status as a colony of the U.S. Hence, we must also be witness to the fact that colonial diasporic migrations are largely responsible for the very terms from which we come to understand June 12. What kind of a “national” tragedy was June 12 if the very same nation is simultaneously responsible for the occupation and violent disruption of Puerto Rico? Similarly, what kind of national tragedy was June 12 if the normative rhetoric ensures that U.S. politics be read as exceptional in the face of a terrorist Islamist agenda rather than outgrowth of “homegrown homophobic terrorism” states (Torres 2016)?

Taking Puerto Rico as one point of departure for analysis implies situating Puerto Rico as a node of colonial rule and has been under U.S. colonial rule since 1898 as a result of the

Spanish-American war.³ The Puerto Rican economy has been in recession for well over a decade and is banned from declaring bankruptcy by the United States legislature and Supreme Court (La-Fountain Stokes 2016). The body of Puerto Rico—its land, people, and resources—have continually been used by the United States. From the bodies of women in trials for birth control, to the use of its land for bomb testing, to the use of Puerto Rico’s men in the draft during world wars, Puerto Rico has been and continues to be a resource, a pulse one might even say, that feeds U.S. imperial power. Given the economic and political instability of Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans have readily emigrated to the United States accounting for the first U.S. airborne migration. In the last decade Orlando, Florida has been a prominent landing ground for many young Puerto Ricans, echoing earlier Puerto Rican migrations to New York City. According to the Pew Research Center, the population of Puerto Ricans in Florida has been rapidly growing and only accelerated in the wake of Hurricane María. The decade witnessed an unprecedented migration of Puerto Ricans out of Puerto Rico, leaving the island with a population deficit. For the first time in the island’s history, there are more Puerto Ricans living outside of Puerto Rico than on the island (Cohn et al. 2014). Amongst those that have left are LGBTQ youth. Puerto Ricans cross oceans to arrive on the shores of “better opportunities” in the belly of its occupier and exploiter fleeing conditions engendered by the afterlife of occupation and colonization: violence, poverty, and lack of life opportunity.

There is a settler-colonial empire building project that sustains the backbone of the contemporary U.S. social order and informs how June 12 was framed and memorialized. To this effect, Ochoa (2016) has aptly accounted for June 12 as a manifestation of colonial terror rooted in toxic masculinity that makes rape and violence the avenues for the articulation of domination. It is a masculinity that is colonial in origin. For instance, Ochoa calls forth the conquistador Vasco Nuñez de Balboa who set his dogs on 40 to 60 people who existed in a “gender” category that he did not comprehend. They would later come to be called “putos” or “sodomites,” but they were shredded to pieces because the cross-roads of their identities were very much a battleground for colonization. The U.S. continues to breed normative masculinity steeped in militarization that glorifies weaponry and sexual violence most often on bodies of color, and on June 12 it was predominantly Latinx queer bodies. June 12 demonstrates the intimate relationship between colonial violence, racialized queerness, and the construction of gender. As a result, there was very little wiggle room for understanding Omar Mateen’s actions outside of a narrative of violent sexual repression that could only materialize through militarized violence. The national narrative ensured we would encapsulate the event as a national tragedy, as exceptional or aberrational, when it is part of a larger webbed history of violence and terror that brought people together at Pulse in Orlando, Florida on the night of June 12.

³ For an in depth philosophical and economic analysis of the situation of Puerto Rico, see Rocío Zambrana (2021).

The failures to see the conditions that make an event like June 12 possible feeds the homonationalism of our times that folds queer people of color out of the nation while simultaneously maintaining the status of U.S. exceptionalism that also frames the relationship with Puerto Rico. Following Elvia Mendoza (2017) in her reflections on violence and queer undocumented peoples in the U.S., we see that state violence is not temporal or episodic, but ubiquitous, internalized, and part of the fabric of everyday life. It is for this reason that the memory of June 12 continues to matter deeply for how we think about queer Latinx life in the U.S. more broadly.

Pulse Nightclub has since been turned into a memorial that seeks to create a space of sanctuary to honor the lives lost. The memorial, as can be seen in figures 1-5, weaves around the nightclub space and mosaics images from the social activism that erupted in its wake. The images are powerful and incite a sense of continuity between June 12 and the dominant framing narrative of an LGBTQ national tragedy.



figure 1.



figure 2.



figure 3.



figure 4.



figure 5.

The pride flags, the slogans about love and unity throughout the space, occlude the occasional image that reminds of the fact that the lives remembered are LGBTQ people of color.



figure 6.

However, upon closer inspection, there are occasional images that bring the intersection between race/ethnicity and sexuality to the surface. For instance, figure 7 quickly reminds the viewer that the pulses lost on June 12 were those of people of color.



figure 7.

Similarly, figure 8 calls attention to Muslims and Arabic communities and works against the construction of the terrorist envisioned by homonationalism. The memorial, as a space, is further complicated by the occasional presence of Puerto Rican and Mexican flags left as part of floating memorials and altars for loved ones alongside the bi-lingual translation of the rules of conduct and intention of the memorial (see figure 9). Hence, even in the space that produces and reproduces memory, the appreciation of the complexities of June 12 is painfully eclipsed. I wondered, as I stood in front of the names of the lives lost on June 12 (see figure 10), if the U.S. would have cared about their deaths if they died trying to cross the border, if the U.S. would care if they died protesting the corruption engendered by the colonial status of Puerto Rico, if the U.S. would care if they died actively resisting the impact of U.S. imperial power, if the U.S. would care if they had died of exhaustion laboring in agricultural fields or in the streets of Disney's empire . . . no, they would not. Their memory in the national imaginary is only made possible through the materialization of a homonationalist narrative that continues to understand the U.S. as a place of exception, much in line with President Biden's declaration of Pulse as a site of national memorial with an open-air museum, a reflecting pool, an education center with gardens, and a public plaza soon to come.

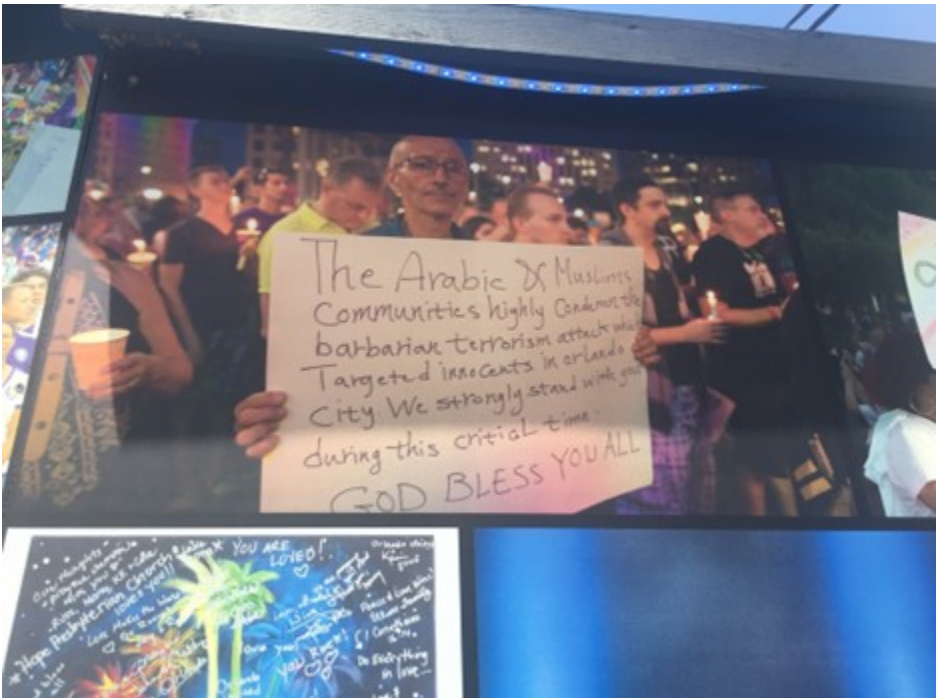


figure 8.



figure 9.



figure 10.

Returning to Puerto Rico, it is important to remember that the political and economic crisis of Puerto Rico has ruptured many pulses. Yet this has been a crisis many years in the making for an island nation that has never known independence and for the past 121 years has functioned as a resource for the construction of the U.S. as an imperial power, notably through the development of the military industrial complex. On June 12, the confluence between the outcomes of the U.S. appropriation of Puerto Rico (diasporic migrations) and

the continued development of U.S. militarization molded into U.S. nationalism became a collision. So, in thinking through the event of June 12, I simply advocate that we also attend to the complicated picture that brought the lives of folks like Javier Jorge Reyes, Akyra Monet Murray, Mercedes M. Flores, Alejandro Barrios Martinez, and Omar Mateen together in the first place.

CONCLUSION

And yet, in spite of the violence, in spite of the hate, in spite of the death, “Churches of *Joteria*,” as Ochoa (2016) terms them, continue to exist. Racialized queerness continues to emerge with a praxis of resistance that demands, in Omise’eke Tinsely’s (2008) words,

connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was not supposed to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living death. (199)

We must set our theory and praxis in an understanding of racialized queerness that does not anchor itself in a global imperial project, but rather fashioned concomitantly through the cross-currents of traumatic dislocations, and reveal themselves with possibilities of active resistance (193). In this context, it has entailed bringing to mind the cross-currents that give erotic subjectivity clearance to continue to forge sacred space for a harmonious articulation, if brief, of racialized queer identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing never happens in a vacuum and given the deeply personal nature of this article it has taken me a long time to release it into the world. There are many pulses that need to be acknowledged and honored, including those lost along the way. I offer you my words and I acknowledge your existence, your life, the best way I can.

A very special thank you to the intellectual spaces of Philosophy Born of Struggle, Latina/x Feminisms Roundtable, and the Latinx Philosophers Conference for being supportive of the development of the ideas in this piece. Eric Steinhart, my dear friend, thank you for pushing me to write about things that bring me to tears. Jamilett Aguirre, thank you your support as we processed this tragedy together having been in Orlando 48 hours before the event happened. Joe Martinez thank you for the fresh eyes you gave my writing. Finally, Angel Y. Montoya, thank you for sharing your space for creativity and dialogue, mil gracias!

REFERENCES

- Aguilar, Christina. 2016. "What a Nightclub Like Pulse Means to a Young Queer Latina." *Cosmopolitan*, June 17. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/news/a60077/orlando-shootings-pulse-nightclub/>.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria and AnaLouise Keating (eds.) 2002. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Barbaro, Michael. 2016. "It's Sacred: A Gay Refuge, Turned into a War Zone." *The New York Times*, June 13. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/gay-bars-history.html>.
- Bloesch, Sarah J. 2016. "Embodying the Sacred and Profane: How Temporal Empires, Narratives of Salvation, and the Prison Regime Value Bodies in the United States." *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 17 (1): 109–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2016.1165270>.
- Cohn, D'Vera, Patten, Eileen, and Lopez, Mark H. 2014. "Puerto Rican Population Declines on Island, Grows on U.S. Mainland." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2014/08/11/puerto-rican-population-declines-on-island-grows-on-u-s-mainland/>.
- Doornbos, Caitlin. 2016. "Transcripts of 911 Calls Reveal Pulse Shooter's Terrorist Motives." *Orlando Sentinel*, September 23. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-911-calls-released-orlando-shooting-20170922-story.html>.
- Gill, Lyndon K. 2012. "Chatting Back an Epidemic: Caribbean Gay Men, HIV/AIDS, and the Uses of Erotic Subjectivity." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 18 (2-3): 277-95. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1472899>.
- Green, Emma. 2016. "The Extraordinarily Common Violence Against LGBT People in America." *The Atlantic*, June 12. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/the-extraordinarily-common-violence-against-lgbt-people-in-america/486722/>.
- La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence. 2016. "Queer Puerto Ricans and the Burden of Violence." *Latino USA*, June 21. <https://www.latinousa.org/2016/06/21/opinion-queer-puerto-ricans-burden-violence/>.

- Mendoza, Elvia. 2017. "Queer Narratives of Migration and Sobrevivencia in the 'Ordinariness' of State Violence." *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe*. 33 (4): 60–75. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A603632205/LitRC?u=anon~e184de9&sid=-googleScholar&xid=ed068f50>.
- Ochoa, Marcia. 2016. "Toxic Masculinity and the Orlando Pulse Shooting" in "Countering Hate with Knowledge, Fury, and Protest: Three Latina/o Studies Scholars Respond to Orlando Massacre." *Mujeres Talk*, June 28. <https://mujerestalk.org/2016/06/28/countering-hate-with-love-latinao-scholars-respond-to-orlando-massacre/>.
- Park, Haeyoun and Mykhyalyshyn, Iaryna. 2016. "L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group." *The New York Times*, June 16. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html>.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shah, Khushbu and Steve Almasy. 2016. "Orlando Wants to Buy Pulse Nightclub, Turn it Into a Memorial." *CNN*, August 4. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/03/us/orlando-pulse-memorial/index.html>.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke N. 2008. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14 (2–3):191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030>.
- Torres, Justin. 2016. "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club." *Washington Post*, June 13. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-praise-of-latin-night-at-the-queer-club/2016/06/13/e841867e-317b-11e6-95c0-2a6873031302_story.html.
- Zambrana, Rocío. 2021. *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.