

## Convergences

### FRANZ BOAS'S AND JOHN ALDEN MASON'S ORAL FOLKLORE PROJECT IN PUERTO RICO (1914-1915): JIBARO FOLK TALES AND LESSONS

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After the signing of the Treaty of Paris on August 12, 1898, which marked the end of the Spanish American War and the ceding of Puerto Rico to the United States, U.S. American travelers flocked to the island for voyeuristic explorations, and U.S. academic institutions performed extensive scientific field research projects. Beginning in 1913, the New York Academy of Sciences, co-hosted by the Puerto Rican government, developed the *Scientific Survey of Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, a comprehensive assessment of the islands' geology, paleontology, botany, zoology and anthropology (Britton 2). The findings were published in a series of volumes from 1919 until 1941.

*Scientific Survey of Porto Rico* included complex anthropological and oral folklore components collected under the direction of Franz Boas. A preeminent scholar in the developing fields of anthropology and folklore studies (Zumwalt 69), Boas's goals on the island were two-fold. He intended to perform an anthropological exploration of the physical remains of the indigenous Taíno and conduct an anthropometric documentation of a population of boys and men from various geographical locations. John Alden Mason, an emerging scholar, served as Boas's assistant on the island, and he was also in charge of gathering an extensive collection of oral folklore, mainly riddles, Christmas carols, poetry, songs, stories, and legends. Arriving early December 1914, Mason traveled extensively throughout the island in preparation for Boas's arrival at an undetermined date in late May 1915. Boas remained in Puerto Rico for just a month.

Although Mason's mechanical recordings of cultural informants from around the island are relatively well known, hundreds of oral samples captured in writing remain unexplored. The writers of these samples were men, reputedly skilled storytellers, whose performances were welcomed at popular public and private events. That school children were trained by their teachers to write down oral folklore samples is an even lesser known aspect of this research. Indeed, as the large correspondence with Boas indicates, Mason busily traveled around the island while training teachers in the public school system on best practices in instructing their students on completing folktale assignments.<sup>1</sup> The children were also encouraged to identify elders who could provide them with ostensibly older oral folk material.

This article highlights Mason's field research practices while overseeing the documentation of a "Porto Rican" folk story collection. In particular, I will trace two key decisions that characterize the actual processes that led to an extraordinary number of oral samples. First, I will underscore the significant role of Mason's cultural informants: men and children inhabiting rural areas, known as *Jíbaros*, as peasants are widely known in Puerto Rico. The decision to highlight only *Jíbaro* oral folklore, as I will argue, was noteworthy. Boas and Mason had also performed extensive oral folklore and anthropometric field research in Loíza, a coastal town well-known for a strong African-descendant culture, both in terms of musical and oral traditions. My conclusion underscores selected types of rural folk tales and legends that stand out as striking narrative genres reflective of *Jíbaro* characters and curious, rural-informed plot lines.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the correspondence between Boas and Mason are letters held in the Franz Boas Collection at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.

Jíbaro oral folk stories have retained a strong appeal, continuing to serve today as an inspiration for both Puerto Rican writers on the island and in the United States.

### **The Oral Folklore Project: Collection Practices in the Field**

Upon his arrival on the island in early December 1914, Mason immediately began writing detailed reports to Boas about his busy schedule. Field work included his mechanical recordings of representative Puerto Rican folk songs using an Edison cylinder recorder on wax rolls. On January 5, 1915, Mason proudly shared with Boas that he had located his first two musical informants, described as “very good singers who are eager to sing (for a slight compensation).” The songs, to be played on a small Gem Edison phonograph, are among the first such modern recordings from the early part of the twentieth century produced in Puerto Rico for the purpose of a linguistic investigation.<sup>2</sup> Mason also provided Boas with rather detailed reports about Puerto Rican oral grammar patterns, including pronunciation traits. However, that linguistic data was never published, nor was the reason for abandoning this aspect of the project ever discussed.<sup>3</sup>

The core of Mason's field work was documenting the largest possible amount of geographically diverse oral folklore stories through means faster than individually, mechanically recording cultural informants. Although he traveled extensively throughout the island, as he underscored in his 1916 introduction to the first issue published (on folk riddles), two geographical areas in particular--“Old Loíza,” a former runaway slave settlement, and Utuado, at the heart of a strong peasant culture--yielded an unstated

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of the types of musical genres that Mason recorded, refer to Hugo Viera Vargas.

<sup>3</sup> A rather large collection is currently available at Indiana University Online Media: [https://media.dlib.indiana.edu/media\\_objects/dj52wp041/section/dv140b74](https://media.dlib.indiana.edu/media_objects/dj52wp041/section/dv140b74).

number of oral folk samples. The bi-racial components were initially of great interest to Mason. Loíza is an outstanding source of an African-Puerto Rican musical tradition, known as *bomba*, while Utuado, at the heart of a Jíbaro geography, is dominated by the Spanish tradition of *décimas*, at the core of a *música jíbara*, or country music.

**Loíza's "Negro Culture": An Abandoned Field Research Finding**

Cultura es todo lo que se hace en Loíza: baile de bomba, saber explicar lo que es parte de la cultura loíceña, la comida y mantener las raíces de nuestra cultura. Tú le preguntas a cualquier persona de otro pueblo que es lo típico de tu pueblo y muchos no saben explicarte. Aquí en Loíza todo el mundo sabe explicarte lo que es de aquí.”; Culture is what makes Loíza: bomba dance, our ability to explain what Loíza culture is, the food and keeping the roots of our culture. If you ask any person from other towns what's typical of their hometowns, many would not be able to tell you. Here in Loíza everyone is able to tell you what's ours.

*(Plan estratégico jóvenes de Loíza, 2016)*

Loíza, a fishing village located on the northeastern coast of the island, was predominantly inhabited by formerly enslaved individuals and cimarrones; runaway slaves (“Por qué”).<sup>4</sup> Known today as Loíza Aldea, it is recognized as an important repository of hybrid African-Puerto Rican cultural traditions, of which the *bomba* occupies a central cultural performative role. Indeed, *bomba* is synonymous with Loíza's unique Black folklore closely related to locals' strong desire to “[keep] the culture alive

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<sup>4</sup> Loíza is often a center of racial and political manifestations. On June 1, 2020 Loíza was the stage for a massive demonstration in reaction to the killing of George Floyd. Among the first of such political events celebrated in Latin America, protestors gathered “defender y afirmar el derecho de los negros a vivir libremente”; to defend and affirm the right of Black people to live in peace (Ortiz Blanes).

and making their ancestors proud” (Ortiz).<sup>5</sup> Mason described Loíza’s folklore to Boas as “Negro culture” in his comments and in his field notations about his conversations with an old man, whom he identified as Melitón Congo. Plainly described as “a former slave born in Africa,” Melitón Congo served as Mason’s cultural informant regarding black religious beliefs and Loíza locals’ use of home made natural remedies. He also spoke to Mason about enslaved customs that had survived after the abolition of slavery in 1873. The reference to “Congo” remained unexplained, however, nor did Mason offer any physical descriptions of Melitón.<sup>6</sup>

As part of his interviews with Melitón Congo, Mason documented a list of African words, or what he labeled as a “Congo vocabulary.” Mason mentioned to Boas that many words in Loíza “seem to be of native origin.” A significant number of those African words related to religious practices, written down as a glossary titled “Materia Médica and Witchcraft.” References to “hechicero” (male witch), prophet, medicine man, “maestro de brujo” (master sorcerer), and “bruja” (witch) point to the presence of individuals involved with African-based religious ceremonies in Loíza. Given that Melitón Congo was a man, and perhaps an hechichero (based on his in-depth knowledge of Black ceremonies), it is striking that there is only one mention of a female religious performer. Traditionally, women would have been in charge of concocting the so-called natural remedies that Melitón Congo also mentioned as popular alternatives to mainstream medicine.

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<sup>5</sup> For a short introduction to bomba, including a live recording of un baile de bomba, refer to Ortiz’s article, “A Duel of Love and Culture.”

<sup>6</sup> Melitón was extremely well known in Loíza. One of the surviving recorded bomba songs mentions him by name.

Mason extensively documented Loíza's oral folk stories that he labeled as "cuentos negros"; black stories. He described to Boas having documented "cuentos cantados" (sung stories) that he simply defined as "stories in which part of the dialogue was sung." That musical component did not impress Mason much, either: "The melody is generally very simple and does not have the auditory impression of Spanish music." Unfortunately, Mason did not indicate the identity of his cultural informant for these *cuentos cantados*.

Although Mason's field project would have been groundbreaking, none of Loíza's so-called "Negro culture" material--as Melitón Congo described it--was ever published. The omission of a Puerto Rican slave-based culture, as Jorge Duany has observed, was common among the earliest U.S. American anthropologists, who limited their explorations of African components in Puerto Rican culture in an open attempt to "whiten' the Island's population" (62).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as I argue next, Mason rendered Puerto Rican oral folk culture only through examples of Jíbaro ways of rural living while ignoring the extensive data of a booming "Negro culture" that had survived in Loíza.

### **Jíbaro Oral Folklore as Representative of a "Porto Rican" Cultural Identity**

Boas and Mason came to know about rural Jíbaro cultural practices through their extensive archeological and anthropometric field work in Utuado. Located in the Cordillera Central mountain range, Utuado was also an important agricultural center and home to numerous Jíbaro cultural practices. Mason and Boas's most significant archeological finding was their digging and mapping of "the ancient village site at Capá,"

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<sup>7</sup> Boas might have recognized his error in not exploring Afro-Puerto Rican culture. In 1927, he served as Zora Neale Hurston's mentor, supervising her oral African-American folklore documentation in Florida.

known today as the Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Caguana, among the largest Taíno ceremonial ballparks in the Caribbean. Boas recognized the archeological importance of Capá, and before leaving Puerto Rico he recommended the Puerto Rican government turn the area into an educational park. His recommendation remained unrealized until 1956, under the administration of Luis Muñoz Marín, the first Puerto Rican governor elected by popular vote.<sup>8</sup>

Mason clearly preferred his work with Jíbaros from Utuado. Jíbaros, as White-presenting individuals, are descendants of immigrants from the Spanish Canary Islands, a rather large group that has been described as “la base principal de la población campesina puertorriqueña”; the foundation of the Puerto Rican peasant population (“Los canarios”). Their close attachment to ancestral Spanish traditions adapted to the island’s rural setting created a vibrant, agrarian-based culture that even today is seen as the “heart” of the Puerto Rican nation.

Mason proudly described to Boas the richness of Utuado’s folklore: “In about ten days of work in Utuado I got 198 pages of dialectic text and I can probably get several times as much more if I stay there long enough.” The peasants of this area were of “the lower class [...] better workers than in Mexico and willing to tell stories all day for half a dollar.” Mason seemed to have found no problem in locating “a surplus of informants and have left some men quite disappointed because I didn’t have time to work with everybody.” He offered Boas little information about these kinds of Jíbaros other than that they were “illiterate persons who have learned [the stories] from others.” His

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<sup>8</sup> Caguana has become of foundational importance to modern pro-indigenous groups that have claimed this socio-religious space as their ancestral home.

compilation process moved along fairly quickly. By January 5, 1915, Mason wrote to Boas that his “taking stories in text” in Utuado was almost complete: “My informants are beginning to have to wrack their brains for stories [...] and many of the stories I have in several versions.” His instructions had become more specific: “They all understand that stories de memoria [from memory] only are desired and I have not yet found any of suspicious provenence [sic]” (emphasis in original text). In an isolated comment, Mason explained the means by which Jíbaros came to know these stories: “Most of them [stories] are learned at “velorios,” ‘wakes’ held over the dead. The assembled company tell [sic] stories all night to keep awake and those with good reputations as storytellers take pain to increase their repertoire.”

A man who “talks muy bruto [very ignorant]” (emphasis in the original) was another of Mason’s favorite informants. Although Mason made no translation of “very brute,” he meant peasants who lived in remote rural areas, whom he described as “backward about coming to town.” Adult story tellers, well-known in their rural communities as “echadores de cuentos”; storytellers with a popular reputation, also wrote for Mason. These individuals worked hard for him. As he reported to Boas on January 12, 1915, they took great pride in “making a real effort not to duplicate material.” Mason was ultimately satisfied with the work done: “The material on the whole is very well written, both as regards style and orthography.” Mason did not offer other types of basic information of his Jíbaro informants, such as age or level of academic education.

### **The Role of Adult Story Tellers and Children as Writers of Oral Samples**

The authentication of the largest possible number of samples was Mason’s goal, as part of an extensive process that had the support of the administrators of the Puerto



Rican public school system. Through them, Mason gained access to numerous rural schoolchildren who were asked to write down oral folklore pieces. Mason traveled extensively throughout the island, training teachers on best practices to instruct children on documentation techniques. Indeed, Boas himself understood the significance that Jíbaro school children had written a considerable number of these oral samples. Upon his return from Puerto Rico in early July 1915, he briefly described at a New York Academy of Sciences Board meeting Mason's oral collection as "many hundreds of folk tales, riddles, rhymes, ballads, songs, [that] . . . will give us a clear insight into the traditional literature of the island." Boas was hopeful that the stories would have a utilitarian value. While referring to the role of the Puerto Rican Department of Education as an important agent in the actual collection of the oral folklore pieces, he revealed his expectation that this material could "furnish reading matter for the rural schools, attractive and interesting to the children."<sup>9</sup>

Edward M. Bainter, commissioner of the Porto Rican Department of Education (1912-1915), fully supported Mason's project. Bainter, who had been appointed as Commissioner of Education in 1912, was a specialist in vocational and prevocational education (Osuna 226). His impact upon the curriculum of public schools has been described as "the first real impetus to manual training, home economics and agriculture as subjects in the regular curriculum" (Osuna 226). Nonetheless, teachers repudiated his managerial methods, especially his imposed use of English as the official language of the public school system. Bainter insisted that the overwhelming majority of Puerto Rican

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<sup>9</sup> I have yet not found evidence that the Puerto Rican Department of Education ever published selected stories for teaching purposes.

teachers, who were native Spanish-speakers, must acquire English skills in order to maintain their teaching licenses. A vocal teachers' opposition supported by political parties in public protests forced Bainter to resign his post one year short of concluding his term (Negrón de Montilla 154, 161).

Bainter had a central role in providing Mason access to public schools across the island. On January 30, 1915, Mason was elated to report that the circular letter of an unidentified school commissioner, perhaps of Utuado, had brought forward the best written examples produced by children: "They grasped exactly what was wanted and wrote a very fine collection of stories, practically all different and traditional. They are very well written, in many cases the source of the story is given and in a few cases the pupils have even used the dialectic forms of their words. Many of them end the story with a customary couplet or saying."

In spite of Mason's carefully documented letter-reports to Boas about his recompilation process, his short introductions to the published volumes are murky at best. There is conflicting information about the sources of the original stories--whether adults or children wrote them or whether they were Mason's own transcriptions of stories told to him. All stories were published without identification of their geographical origin and without any personal information about their cultural informants.

More significantly, even though Mason had dealt with various officers of the re-named "Porto Rican" government, in his various introductions to the stories there was no attempt to comment on the current political scene, an aspect of Puerto Rican life upon which even the most common of U.S. American travelers to the island felt obliged to report. Indeed, even during his short one-month stay, Boas would have also witnessed the

convoluted state of Puerto Rican politics as heated discussions continued to frame the vague political conditions that provided Puerto Ricans a partial citizenship under the Organic Law of the Foraker Law (1900). Indeed, in 1914, after general elections, the top two political parties drafted a communication to the U.S. Congress documenting their concerns about the ways in which the Foraker Act significantly limited Puerto Rico's right to self-governance. The document boldly requested "more fundamental changes to the Foraker Act," especially sovereignty in the handling of internal legal issues (Trías Monge 71). Public discontent was often taken to the streets in political rallies and as part of workers' and teachers' strikes (García & Quintero Rivera 61).

Ultimately, the choice of the *Jíbaro* as a representative of Puerto Rican culture not only determined the scope of the oral project, but it also shaped the ways in which Mason uncovered the folk material. Mason's processes for identifying a "Porto Rican" folklore clearly favored popular traditions of *Jíbaro* rural ways of living, while completely omitting "Negro" samples collected in the Black-dominated coastal village of Loíza. The preferred choice of *Jíbaros* as cultural informants predisposed certain types of characters, themes, and plotlines. Although numerous *Jíbaro* traditions are closely highlighted in many of these "Porto Rican" folk stories, a lack of political contextualization failed to remark on the highly-charged ideological discourse that had propelled the *Jíbaro* to stand out as a sole representative of a highly-developed Puerto Rican cultural identity.

One noticeable absence in Mason's letters to Boas was his documentation of the prospective impact of their folk collection upon ongoing local politics. Indeed, at the time of Mason's field research in Puerto Rico, folklorists, literary writers, political analysts, and politicians were simultaneously engaged with a pronationalist project. In the early

part of the twentieth century, when U.S. federal laws began imposing political control over Puerto Rico--such as the imposition of English as the language of instruction in the public school system--compilations of representative Puerto Rican folktales started appearing on the island. Documentation of certain types of Puerto Rican folk characters, such as Juan Bobo--the know-it-all pretending to be a fool, or a mischievous child character--had become synonymous with the ingenuity needed to survive the island's harsh rural socioeconomic conditions. In fact, Juan Bobo's stories are still the most frequently published in English translations in the United States as representative of a well-defined Puerto Rican cultural identity. Juan Bobo's stories continue to function as a reflection of a tenacious rural identity, which first had opposed mainstream, mainly urban cultural practices, and lately has celebrated the natural wit of Jíbaros, often pitted against the U.S. American practices intended to Americanize the island.

Mason's oral folklore project was published in *The Journal of American Folklore*, a renowned publication of which Boas served as editor. Whether *The Survey of Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands* came to see this collection as outside its scientific purview is not known. The thousands of oral folk samples, which even today stand out as among the largest such collections from any Latin American country or Spanish-speaking territory, failed, however, to attract much attention either in Puerto Rico or in the United States. In Mason's short introductions to the various published materials, he ignored the highly contested socio-economic conditions that his informants were enduring under a United States-controlled government. Indeed, from his conversations with Jíbaros, Mason came to learn about their struggles to achieve workers' rights. He would have witnessed the impact of drastic changes in agricultural production, such as the installation of American-

owned sugar cane plantations and refining centers that had started to dominate the rural landscape. These immense factories negatively impacted the very social fabric of peasant culture that Mason often referred to in his letters to Boas.

***Folk Stories from the Hills of Puerto Rico/Cuentos folklóricos de las montañas de Puerto Rico: A Representative Sample of Jibaro Oral Folklore***

In 1916, the *Journal of American Folklore* began the publication of Mason's compiled folk material. Aurelio Espinosa, who was also a folklorist and an associate of Boas in previous publication projects, edited all the story samples. Writing to Boas on October 9, 1916, Espinosa emphasized his goal to provide clean texts "in [as] correct Castilian as possible." He also standardized the vocabulary of the agrarian practices of Jibaro storytellers while providing alternative terms that were easily understood by international Spanish speakers. Regrettably, the original texts did not survive; today there is no way to perform a comparative analysis of Espinosa's editing processes—turning the Jibaros' grammatical structures into "correct Castilian"—or to review his methodology of sanitizing the rather colorful vocabulary of the Puerto Rican countryside.

The editing process was rather lengthy, ending in 1929 with a total of nine issues. With two of the issues dedicated to riddles, poetry (décimas), and popular songs (Christmas Carols and nursery rhymes), folk tales clearly dominate: seven issues are dedicated folktales, fairy tales, and legends; three of the volumes are grouped thematically as cuentos picarescos (picaresque stories), cuentos de animales (animal stories), and cuentos puertorriqueños (Puerto Rican stories).

My edited anthology, *Folk Stories from the Hills of Puerto Rico/Cuentos de las montañas de Puerto Rico*, which serves as a companion to *Race and Nation in Puerto*

*Rican Folklore: Franz Boas and John Alden Mason in Porto Rico*, a critical study of Boas's and Mason's field work in Puerto Rico, underscores two types of oral folk stories. First, there are re-adaptations of well-known international fairy tales: ingenious examples of redeveloped plot lines and adaptations of characters to fit the needs of a rural Puerto Rican audience. Tales of adventure follow the traditional pattern of presenting extraordinarily brave children or young people involved in supernatural events, who appealed to rural Puerto Rican children because of their similar plights in growth and development.

Other folk tales are solidly grounded in popular rural cultural practices; often they provide the background for exciting plotlines and iconic characters. *El campo*, the lush countryside at the heart of native Puerto Rican popular cultures, is often the preferred stage. The hinterlands, also referred to as *el monte*, can also be a dangerous place, as the second type of native character fully reflects. Anecdotes about notable bandits, such as the infamous historic pirate Roberto Cofresí, were widely known throughout the island at the time of Mason's visit. Legends featuring Cofresí-like adventurers, often feared bandoleros or bandits, were a popular literary genre on the island.

Adaptations of the popular international fairy tales Snow White and Cinderella are striking examples of clever deviations from the original stories, including re-characterizations of secondary characters. The Puerto Rican versions of traditional fairy tales stress the inherent warning tone so characteristic of traditional folktales that involve children who come in contact with strangers. One version of Snow White highlights the figure of the stepmother--although she is characterized as a witch, her attempts to kill Snow White are not of a supernatural nature. Three times she hires help to poison Snow

White, whose flaw is precisely that she ignores the many warnings by the dwarfs to avoid strangers. In another version, the deviations of the plot and character development are more evident, including a plot line that connects similar plights of Snow White with those that Cinderella experiences as a defenseless orphan. Another curious alteration is the repurposing of the dwarfs; although they remain nameless, they acquire a slightly more active role in the plot.

A native version of Snow White, “Blanca Flor,” White Flower, highlights a different type of warning common in such themed “stories about the family.” Blanca Flor’s own mother, who is jealous of her daughter’s outstanding beauty, attempts to kill her daughter three times. Her impersonation of a female traveling merchant, a *quincallera*, reflects a popular figure in the countryside whose exotic inventory (brooches and ornamental Spanish combs) were highly sought out. Their merchandise was often the only purchasing option within easy reach, other than plantation stores owned by the landowners or by traveling to the pueblo, a city’s downtown. Stores on plantations forced workers to purchase articles at high prices, with salaries frequently replaced by vouchers to be used only in their stores. Thus, in her impersonation of a traveling merchant, Blanca Flor’s mother was assured that she would not be seen as a threat, rather as a welcomed opportunity to view an exotic world as represented by the apple, a U.S. import so far removed from Blanca Flor’s rustic countryside environment that it literally served as her prison.

The Puerto Rican Cinderella is renamed Cenizosa, a more descriptive nickname for a pitiful orphan girl covered in cenizas (ashes). She is also presented as a kind-hearted Jíbara girl whose real name is María or Rosa. A notable change is the re-characterization

of the fairy godmothers, who are introduced as *encantadas*, or humans who had succumbed to the spells of evil characters. The plot line is very similar to the original story. Cenizosa, in spite of her father's warnings, seals her own fate when she convinces her father to marry an evil old woman. The stepmother subjects Cenizosa to perform the dirtiest household chores; however, this is a rural household. Cleaning tripe beside the river as the first step in preparation for cooking *mondongo* (tripe stew) allows Cenizosa to unknowingly prove her kind heart to four *encantadas*. After cleaning their extremely soiled house, the *encantadas*' generous gifts to Cenizosa include a magical wand, known as *la varita de la virtud*, a fantastic object that appears in other supernatural stories as a way to complete impossible deeds. Another curious re-characterization gives the stepsister a more prominent place, though she remains an antagonist of Cenizosa. There is a lesson to be learned even for the evil stepsister who, after attempting to fool *las encantadas*, is cursed with spells that radically change her outlook on life.

Fairy tales often feature *encantamientos* or spells that generate fantastic plot lines explaining the circumstances surrounding characters under such a spell, or *encantados*. *Encantados* may be turned into animals or plants through a spell by a mean-spirited individual, often a witch or a disappointed parent. Although the length of the curses varies from a long time to an eternity, it can only be lifted through the intervention of kind-hearted individuals. It is not an easy task, though; these individuals must be willing to take on impossible quests through dangerous rural settings or unknown, supernatural geographies. Only after proving their unconditional love (mostly in the case of girl or young women protagonists) or through brave physical acts (including resisting extreme



physical or emotional pain) do they successfully break the terrible spell. Their reward is a handsome prince or a beautiful princess, who, in return, grants them unimaginable riches.

Puerto Rican stories draw on two types of local characters. A popular character is Juan Bobo, grounded in a long Hispanic picaresque literary tradition, who has become synonymous with Puerto Rican ingenuity needed to survive harsh socio-economic conditions. His name has a double connotation: a boy, teenager, or man who, while pretending to be a fool, emerges triumphantly from rather outlandish pranks, many of them with a comical ending. But he is also a bobo (a dummy), a rural nickname for a mental disability that makes him the butt of numerous cruel jokes. These whimsical anecdotes are still frequently reproduced in Puerto Rico as prime readers for schoolchildren or as inspiration for fiction writers.

Another native character underscored as an outstanding Puerto Rican protagonist is the legendary “El Pirata Cofresí.” The most dreaded of thieves, Roberto Cofresí y Ramírez de Arellano (1791–1825) was known as a Robin Hood-like bandit whose deeds make him a popular protagonist of adventure stories. More importantly, Cofresí is always praised for his personal honor and for his pride in his Puerto Rican identity.

Mason's stories are of outstanding historical importance because, for the first time in Puerto Rican literary history, Jíbaros, who were untrained in the literary craft, became writers of their own folk stories and legends. Their re-interpretation of well-known international folktales and fairy tales into stories that appealed to a rural imagination was certainly outstanding. Additionally, their own legends and historic anecdotes fulfilled specific needs, whether as a source of popular entertainment or as a means of celebrating native cultural traditions. Versions of iconic stories, such as Juan Bobo and Cofresí,

continue to appeal to modern readers, reflected in their continued printing, often as part of primers for elementary school children as reading and interpretative tools for basic literary interpretation.

Today, Puerto Rican writers and Puerto Rican writers in the United States have continued highlighting rural folk characters as repositories of a vibrant, distinctive Puerto Rican national, cultural, and racial identity. Indeed, in our email correspondence, Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952-2016) wrote about her “translations of fábulas criollas with lots of poetic license involved.”<sup>10</sup> The ideological significance of a writer of Puerto Rican descent exploring native fables told on the island since the Spanish colonial times and then transported to the United States fascinated Ortiz Cofer. She saw these fables as an illustration of the “popular wisdom” of the Puerto Rican countryside. She intended to preserve their strong didactic element for a new generation of readers: “One of the reasons for these translations is to make wisdom available in a new form.”

For Ortiz Cofer, just as for other Puerto Rican writers on the island, local oral folk stories fully speak about the island's hybrid national and cultural identities. Puerto Rican folk stories fully reflect distinctive elements stemming from a complex Spanish colonial past, including reverberations of a trans-Atlantic slavery trade, and a continued colonial condition resulting from its current political association with the United States.

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<sup>10</sup> Unpublished personal email correspondence.

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