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Domino/Dominó

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Domino/Dominó is a body of work in which I attempt to record and discuss my process of acculturation as a Puerto Rican who has now lived in the United States almost as much time as I lived in the Island, where I was born and raised. To acculturate means, "to modify one's own cultural parameters through the prolonged and continuous interaction, involving intercultural exchange and borrowing, with a different culture." To assimilate is "to take into the mind and thoroughly comprehend or to absorb into another cultural tradition". While I may acculturate, I resist assimilation.

Because the matching of the game is inherent to the domino game, a favorite pastime in Puerto Rico, it came to mind as an interesting structure that would allow me to "play-out" my analysis and redrawing of the fine line between acculturation and assimilation. Woven through my "game" are congruent and contrasting images from the history, literature and popular iconography of both Puerto Rico and the United States that I have accessed from a variety of sources; from observation, from popular advertising media and from archival sources. The mixing of styles and medium as well as the strategic placement of each image within the domino piece and its domino game context, are important to the conceptual reading of the installation since it is through these that I tried to emphasize the matching possibility, difficulty and perhaps the impossibility of actually making a match.

Given the tremendous racial and cultural hybridity in Puerto Rico and the colonial relationship that exists between the Island and the United States, the question of how much acculturation (or assimilation) has formed the character of Puerto Ricans, is a constant in our communities and one that produces much angst and conflict. What makes us distinctively Puerto Rican is the central question in defining our cultural identity. The reason this question becomes a quandary is that such a definition is inextricably tied to the Island's colonial status since Columbus arrived in 1493 and to recurrent conditions of loss and absence that are always present in our consciousness. The extermination of the indigenous people of Puerto Rico (the Taínos) and the importation and enslavement of Africans in the Island left a sense of rupture and displacement that could not be healed by our colonialized embrace of Spanish culture. Then came the 1898 Hispanic-American War and the subsequent invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States. This brought a different language and set of cultural values that further confused us, but to which we reluctantly adapted. To this date, and after debating our political status in three recent plebiscites, what constitutes Puerto Rican culture is ostensibly tied to whether we choose to continue our adaptation to U.S. culture or move away from it by embracing a new construction of our Spanish past.

Given this history one could possibly conclude that what characterizes Puerto Rican culture is not simply the mixture in us of four different cultures and three races, but moreover, the sense of loss for the nonexistent "original" Puerto Rican and the fluxing tangent among politics and culture that prevents us from defining us as just one something. As long as we are unable to fully debate, articulate and establish a self-determined status for the Island, what is to be Puerto Rican will remain in process.

As we reflect this year on the centennial of the U.S. invasion and takeover of Puerto Rico after the Hispanic American War (July 25, 1898), I hope these works will add to the debate over our cultural existence and survival as Puerto Ricans both in the United States and in the Island.