

Kin Work from the Ashes: Repair and Re/Memory in Christopher López's *The Fires: Hoboken's History of Gentrification & Arsons for Profit* (selections)

By Jaden A. Morales

Christopher López (b. 1984, Bronx, NY) is an award-winning Puerto Rican lens-based artist, educator, and public historian. Since 2005, he has worked as a visual artist with many of his works centered on historical figures and cultural events across Puerto Rico. Exploring obscured and fading histories, López uses photography to reckon with the past as a means to confront the complex conditions underlying contemporary forms of identity and place for Puerto Rican peoples.

The photographs and objects in *Coastal Relations* are part of López's current project *The Fires: Hoboken's History of Gentrification & Arsons for Profit*. This visual archive meditates on the entanglements between displacement and estrangement; re/memory and mourning; and historical reckoning and affective reparations.¹ Comprised of intimate portraits, a memorial t-shirt, and building blueprints, López calls for us to bear witness to how survivors and their descendants continue to reconcile with enduring loss, grief, and erasure (re)produced by the abject violence of gentrification and displacement nearly five decades later. Spanning from the 1970s through the 1980s, Hoboken, New Jersey suffered hundreds of arson fires, which killed 56 people and dislocated hundreds of working-class families. These fires served to vacate tenants from their buildings and deliver the properties to developers and buyers, which systematically replaced rent-controlled residents with higher-paying tenants. Official narratives, however, contend that the source of this chain of catastrophes remains unknown at best, and self-inflicted by the Puerto Rican community at worst. Between official state records and the living memory of survivors and their descendants, López indexes the struggles for historical redress and emotional repair that families and community members, notably Puerto Rican women, have undertaken against the state and its economy of erasure.

López's project offers a visual counter-narrative to U.S. racial discourse, such as Oscar Lewis' study *La Vida* (1966), which charged Puerto Rican mothers and the matriarchal family structure as the source of intergenerational poverty. Such logic reduced families to refuse, rendering their lives a hindrance to urban renewal and disposable for slum clearance. Whereas this pathologizing discourse denigrated Puerto Rican women's "kin work," López shows how women have served as enduring healers, caregivers, witnesses, and memory stewards.² The photograph "Francisca" (2022) features a hand-painted portrait of Francisca Vázquez, one of twelve people who died in the 1982 Pinter Hotel fire, placed on a mantle alongside portraits of the women and girls who have descended from her. Passed on by her grandmother in Puerto Rico, Francisca's daughter Janet

¹ I use the phrase 're/memory' to account for memory as noun and verb. As verb, I draw from Toni Morrison's notion of "rememory" as an intersubjective and relational process of remembering and memory making that recollects fragments of the past that arrange present individual and collective identities and experiences to repair and "reassembl[e] the members of the body, the family, the population of the past." Toni Morrison, "I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free: an essay by Toni Morrison." *The Guardian*, 18 Aug. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay>.

² By 'kin work,' I refer to what anthropologist Gina Pérez describes as the labor of care undertaken by archipelagic and diasporic Puerto Rican women to sustain their families and communities amidst various forms of dispossession and across scales of relation. *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families* (University of California Press, 2004), 18-19.

Ayala, a survivor of the fires, now cares for the portrait as one of the few images of her mother to exist after the fire. This photograph is a dual reminder of the time stolen from Francisca and her descendants and Janet's desire to honor Francisca's memory.

Among the many family members that Janet lost, the fires and their impact stole the precious lives of her four-year-old nephew Charlie Serrano (1978-1982) and her sister Naomi Vázquez (1960-2020). The memorial t-shirt in "Anniversary" (2023) is imprinted with an image of the two with Janet's surviving niece, Maria Feliz. Above the image, reads "In Loving Memory" and is framed by two rose offerings, and the names and dates marking their lifespan. In the long wake of the fires, Naomi carried an unbearable weight of sorrow from the loss of her mother and son, leading to a life of substance use. Observing Charlie's immediate death in the fire alongside the slow, thirty-eight-year-extinguishing of life for Naomi resulting from grief, reframes the arson not as an event but as a condition that haunts across time. To mourn publicly then is to confront and expose the terror of state erasure. The t-shirt, however, is also a celebration and memorialization of life, adorned to keep the presence of loved ones alive even in their absence. Annually, Maria organizes a balloon release ceremony, portrayed in "Letting Go" (2023), to commemorate her mother's birthday—demonstrating how rituals of remembrance aid the passage of healing amidst irreparable loss. Together, Janet and Maria exemplify the ways in which Puerto Rican women have practiced what scholar Christina Sharpe describes as "wake work"—the rituals of grief and re/memory that attend to the dead and dying in the wake of colonialism, empire, and dispossession.³

By addressing the shrouded histories of the fires, López's project helped rekindle the relationship between Janet and her niece Maria. Naomi's substance use resulted in the state removing Maria from her household at the age of eight and placing her under her grandparents' custody. Years of separation and silence surrounding the fires strained Janet and Maria's relationship. In "Janet & Maria" (2023), Janet is seen wiping the tears from Maria's face upon seeing her reaction to an archival exhibit recounting the fires at the Hoboken Historical Museum. The image highlights how the intertwined processes of public mourning and historical reckoning can serve as a conduit for repair.

As anthropologist Hilda Lloréns has argued, the anti-black logics demonizing Black women's kinship during chattel slavery framed 20th-century U.S. discourses denigrating Puerto Rican mothers and matriarchal-led households.⁴ In my encounter with López's project, I was struck by how pronounced the "afterlife of slavery" could be felt across the visual archive.⁵ The building schematics in "Police Board 1-3," for instance, appeared as a spatialized ledger accounting for the victims: survivors, deaths, and injuries from those who jumped the burning structures. Property owners appraised these lives as disposable to securitize their speculated profits. From my interview with López, it became clear that his use of collaborative portraiture mobilizes an ethics of care premised on intersubjective relationality and solidarity. His project unsettles the imperial gaze that effaces Puerto Rican women's kin work through re/memory. Memory, as Caribbean feminist

³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 17

⁴ Hilda Lloréns, *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice*. (University of Washington Press, 2021), 34-36.

⁵ Historian Saidiya Hartman uses the term "afterlife of slavery" to describe the ongoing forms of violence inaugurated through chattel slavery that continue to structure and condition the precarization of black(ened) life. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.

scholar M. Jacqui Alexander writes, offers “an antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that domination produces.”⁶ The chasm between official state accounts and victims’ living memories serve as a productive site to enact a historical audit of state-sanctioned violence and, through various forms of remembrance, offer a passage toward spiritual, emotional, and familial repair. Together, his images vividly portray the arduous and laborious tasks shouldered by Puerto Rican women to continue building and repairing generative life/worlds and relations amidst and beyond the enclosures and catastrophes of gendered racial capitalism.

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⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Duke University Press, 2005) 14.