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Natalia Lassalle-Morillo and Her Mother Confront Puerto Rico's History

In Venice's main exhibition, the artist collaborates with her parent to explore the island's identity as shaped by colonial histories



BY EVA DÍAZ IN OPINION | 29 APR 26

women here are raised to be mothers

*This article appears in the columns section of frieze 259, **'Next Generation'***

Operating at the intersection of biography, re-enactment and fiction, Natalia Lassalle-Morillo's films and live performances explore the complexity of Puerto Rican identity by re-evaluating its imbrication in colonial histories. For many projects, the artist works closely with her mother, Gloria María Morillo; the intergenerational collaboration allows them to process the pains of political disenfranchisement, economic inequality and geographical displacement that have characterized the lives of Puerto Ricans since the US invaded the island in 1898, converting it from a *de jure* Spanish colony to a *de facto* US one.

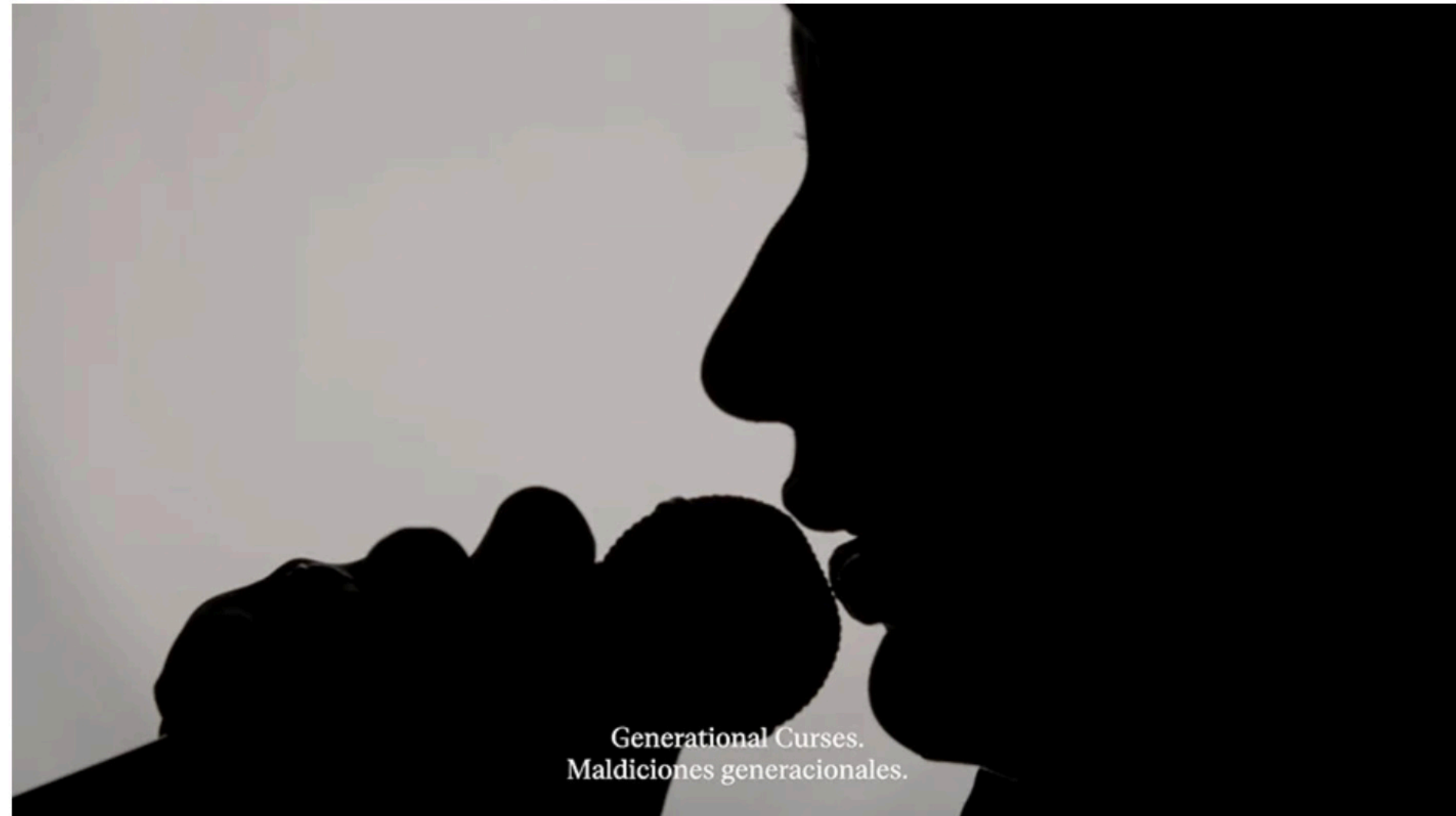


Natalia Lassalle-Morillo, *Retiro*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Combining years of interviews and conversations, Lassalle-Morillo's 2019 film *Retiro* (meaning 'withdrawal' or 'retirement') overlays the condition of diasporic rootlessness onto Gloria's story of returning to live at her parents' home, following the collapse of her first marriage at age 21. Shown as a three-channel installation, the 40-minute work depicts interviews that Lassalle-Morillo conducted with her mother; recreations of Gloria's stories, in which Lassalle-Morillo plays the lead; rushes of the film-within-a-film as it is created; and footage of Gloria, formerly employed by a pharmaceutical company and more recently a stay-at-home mother, around Puerto Rico – swimming in the ocean, walking in the mountains. At times, Gloria observes that she increasingly resembles her own mother – an idea that becomes a recurrent motif in the scenes featuring Lassalle-Morillo. Gloria's stories touch on memory, ageing, regret and death, while also connecting the oppressive forces of religion and patriarchy to the lack of political and economic autonomy endured by Puerto Rico.

This month, Lassalle-Morillo and her mother will participate in the Venice Biennale's main exhibition and bring together works that exemplify their collaborations. The open form of *Retiro* – its juxtapositions of documentary interviews and re-enactment, scripted narrative and behind-the-scenes footage – returns in Lassalle-Morillo's three-channel film *En Parábola/Conversations on Tragedy (Part I)* (In Parable, 2024). Though her mother is not physically present in this work, Gloria appeared in a live performance of an early version that took place after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017. Lassalle-Morillo tells me how 'every Puerto Rican in diaspora was freaking out after Maria. Mom said, "Now is a great time to read Greek tragedy because what's happening in Puerto Rico at the moment is a tragedy.'" And so, Lassalle-Morillo turned to Sophocles's play *Antigone* (c.442 BCE) as a source of inspiration.





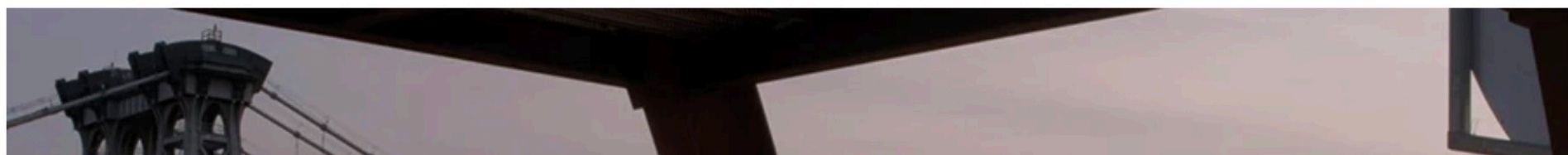
Natalia Lassalle-Morillo, *En Parábola/Conversations on Tragedy (Part I)*, 2024, film still, commissioned by Amant, New York. Courtesy: the artist

En Parábola features the character of Antigone and her myth to underscore the political dependency of Puerto Rico on the US. As a so-called 'commonwealth', Puerto Rico has no representation in the US government; it is an unincorporated territory that is ultimately governed externally, its population subjected to austerity policies for debts it did not directly incur. In Sophocles's telling, Antigone spurns the laws of Thebes when her uncle, the king Creon, forbids the burial of one of her two brothers after they both perished fighting each other in a civil war. In readings of and workshops about the play led by Lassalle-Morillo – which became part of the filmed work – Puerto Rican diasporic participants reflect on the rectitude of

Antigone's civil disobedience in a time when the laws of a land no longer represent the needs or desires of its people.

In the 1990s, following the dismantling of the USSR and the decline of Puerto Rico's strategic importance to the US, there was significant economic disinvestment in the island, triggering mass emigration, in particular to Florida. Emigration continued following infrastructural failures during and after Hurricane Maria, even as the Anglo-American population increased due to US policies favouring external investment. While massive protests in 2019 against governmental corruption unseated then-governor Ricardo Rosselló, widespread resignation soon ensued when it became clear that little structural change would be enacted. The internecine quarrels between pro-US statehood and pro-commonwealth factions continue, yet, as in *Antigone*, the pain of the people is ignored.

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Natalia Lassalle-Morillo, *En Parábola/Conversations on Tragedy (Part I)*, 2024, film still, commissioned by Amant, New York. Courtesy: the artist

En Parábola can perhaps be understood as plotting the effects of cycles of exodus, charting first the migrations of the 1950s, when Puerto Ricans were forced to leave the island to take menial jobs in US urban centres under the federally sponsored Operation Bootstrap. Today, this arc of migration touches down elsewhere – though with similarly estranging outcomes. As Lassalle-Morillo explains, the theatrical form is essentially one of dialogue. She asks: ‘How can I use this form to bring Puerto Ricans on the island and those who have had to migrate into conversation?’ While the longing to return is frequently unrequited, Lassalle-Morillo’s work explores possible means of psychic, economic and legal restitution following the loss of a person’s homeland.

Natalia Lassalle-Morillo's work will be on view at the 61st Venice Biennale, 'In Minor Keys', from 9 May to 22 November, in collaboration with Gloria María Morillo

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Main image: Natalia Lassalle-Morillo, Retiro, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist



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