**A Moral Muse**

The fine line between inspiration and appropriation

Myles Tallmadge

College of Agricultural Sciences Bioresource Research

“Life is always going to be stranger than fiction, because fiction has to be convincing, and life doesn’t.”

**Neil Gaiman**

**Ideas**

Inspiration is a tricky thing. It’s infuriatingly finicky, and anyone who tells you they’ve found a one-size-fits-all solution is a liar. That being said, one of the best sources of inspiration is the world around us, and the more we experience it, the more we have to draw on. Simply living our lives as energetically as possible provides us with a wealth of sights, sounds, smells, people, and cultures to draw upon. Doing so exposes us to a much wider breadth of humanity than we might ever hope of dreaming up and through them, we can paint a much more vivid (and accurate) picture of the world. Even so, an important and often overlooked duty of the artist is the obligation we have to those people and cultures that influenced us.

“We writers are the raw nerve of the universe. Our job is to go out and feel things for people, then to come back and tell them how it feels to be alive.”

_Ursula le Guin_

**Representation vs Appropriation**

When dealing with a place, culture, or people that aren’t your own, it pays to be mindful of the constructive and destructive power you hold as an artist. Omission isn’t an option, but neither is thoughtless misuse.

- **Intent**
  - What is your intention with the inspiration? Are you solely focused on how it will better your art, or are you also considering how it will serve the community it’s inspired by?

- **Respect and Research**
  - The first and most important step is to abandon your preconceived notions. You are there to learn, so offer your teachers the same respect they’re providing you by teaching you.

- **Execution**
  - Once your research is complete, ensure that you make proper use of what you learned. Allow yourself creative freedom, but don’t abuse the content with mocking caricatures either.

**During the long bus rides, I found myself struck by how the roads wound around the mountains, moving with the earth rather than boring through it like is often seen stateside. While planting trees with Para la Naturaleza, we were treated to a stunning view of Cañón de San Cristóbal, Puerto Rico’s deepest canyon and home to its tallest waterfall. From these, consider a culture that lives alongside their environment rather than demanding it heel. Where steep mountains and lack of stable ground mean they live in the trees, using vines to create their roads.**

**Cañón de San Cristóbal and Castillo San Felipe del Morro**

**Building the garden was much like using inspiration responsibly: it required respect and consideration, but above all, required communication and collaboration to create something that one person could never do alone.**

Special thanks to Dr. Alok Arun, Alexis Morales Vélez, and Dr. Juan Negrón Berrios for welcoming us to their country and their university, Edwin for showing us that a Greyhound can be graceful, and last but not least, Wanda Crannell, Shawn Roe, and the everyone else who made this trip a reality.