

Tiffany Lucas

Professor Leila Walker

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A Huracán: A Retelling of “The Tempest”

As a Puerto Rican, I’ve always heard that the native inhabitants of my island, the Taíno, were a peaceful, kind people. They welcomed the Europeans who washed ashore of their island with open arms, not knowing these guests would murder, enslave, and rape its inhabitants, while wiping out the rest of the Taíno people with their sickness and disease. Despite it all, some parts of Taíno culture live on today in our language; in fact, “hurricane” comes from the Taíno word “huracán,” a violent storm. Knowing this, I created a book cover for a retelling of Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” from Sycorax and Caliban’s points of view by renaming it “A Huracán,” with Prospero as a symbol for the European settlers and Sycorax as a symbol for the Taíno people.

The idea for this project came after reading Roberto Fernández Retamar’s “Caliban.” His idea that Caliban mirrors the indigenous people of Latin America’s history resonated with me. People like Prospero came to our land as guests and took what was not theirs, then tried to convince us we were “beasts” being raised to some higher evolution only the white man could oversee. Prior to the events of “The Tempest,” Prospero is the storm that ultimately destroys the island’s way of life. He seizes a land that is not decidedly not his, murders and enslaves its natives, and lives the rest of his life living out his own power fantasy. For this project, I wanted to depict Prospero arriving ashore in his boat as “a huracán,” and Sycorax as a representation of his victims. I wanted to portray a pregnant Sycorax, who Prospero describes as an evil witch, in a more sympathetic light. What we know about her is only what Prospero tells us – that she was a

cruel, vicious witch who trapped Ariel in a tree. He paints himself as some kind of savior for murdering her and for allowing Caliban to live. In this retelling, Sycorax is the native looking on patiently as a ship washes ashore, not knowing what is to come for her and her unborn child. I wanted this scene to mimic the Europeans washing ashore of the indigenous peoples' lands, and the inevitable doom that followed. It would be renamed "Huracán" because I wanted Sycorax to represent the Taíno people, and to show they did not need people like Prospero to teach them language; they already had their own.

I found it difficult voicing all of these sentiments at first by word, so I wanted to depict it with art. I enjoy design and illustration, so I at first wanted to create a poster of the same scene. However, as I worked, I thought the composition would be better suited for a book cover. Like it or not, people do judge books by their covers; a good cover can influence the perception of the story within. At first glance, I wanted the viewer to think the boat washing ashore is the ship that sparks the plot of "The Tempest." When the viewer flips it over, they see Sycorax kneeling and watching the waves. When it's unfolded and the full scene is displayed, the viewer would realize it's not Alonso and his men's ship, but Prospero's. I wanted to play with the viewer's expectations, since traditional covers for "The Tempest" depict the ship lost in the storm at the beginning of the play.

Retelling "The Tempest" from Sycorax's point of view places the power back into her hands. She is a native of the island, and this is her land – I wanted to give her the opportunity to welcome Prospero and his daughter on her own terms. Perhaps the story in this retelling would not be nearly as tragic, and could instead be an opportunity for the kind and welcoming nature of the Taíno to truly flourish.