Traditional Cultural Properties and Casita Rincón Criollo

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TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PROPERTIES AND CASITA RINCÓN CRIOLLO

A Thesis
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The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
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In Partial Fulfillment
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By
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According to the 1990 bulletin issued by the National Park Service, traditional cultural properties (TCPs) derive their significance from cultural practices or beliefs of living communities. This thesis centers on a case study of the nomination of Casita Rincón Criollo to the National Register of Historic Places as a TCP. The nomination is a collaborative project of Place Matters in New York City and Western Kentucky University, initiated by the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy.

Casita Rincón Criollo has several issues that make nomination to the National Register tricky. Casitas are small “houses,” typically accompanied by gardens, which serve as community gathering places for the Puerto Rican community in New York City. Often built illegally on empty lots, casitas tend to be impermanent structures. Casita Rincón Criollo in the South Bronx is less than 50 years old and has been moved and reconstructed. However, such is the nature of casitas. Building, maintaining, and rallying to save and move the casita makes the Casita Rincón Criollo significant. Further, Casita Rincon Criollo has served as a key influence on traditional forms of Puerto Rican music in the United States. For this reason, the Casita is recognized on City Lore’s grassroots register, Place Matters, and it was also incorporated into the GreenThumb garden movement in NYC.
Folklorists are uniquely poised to recognize cultural groups and communities that might otherwise be overlooked by the National Register of Historic Places. In this thesis, I will discuss methods of research employed in the documentation of Casita Rincón Criollo and examine how folkloristic methods can address gaps in representation. I will contextualize the project within a broader history of heritage designation programs in the United States and world. From ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and more, I will conclude that folklorists offer alternative documentation strategies to supplement those most commonly employed in National Register nominations, as well as a more inclusive definition of cultural groups and tradition.
INTRODUCTION

On the corner of Brook Avenue and 157th Street in the South Bronx of New York City stands a small building, straddling two city lots and tended with love by a community of first and second-generation Puerto Rican immigrants and their family and friends. The building is a casita, or “little house,” and the property is not only included in a network of Green Thumb city gardens, but the site is also listed on City Lore’s Place Matters grassroots register for New York City by virtue of its significance to its small community and the city. Called Casita Rincón Criollo, the musical genres of bomba and plena have flourished at the site, and with countless community events and festivals, Rincón Criollo has not only sparked a flowering of bomba and plena in the United States but has also been a vital part of the Puerto Rican community’s daily life in the South Bronx since the 1970s (Hopkin and Siegel 2014). Naturally, City Lore and the American Folklore Society’s Working Group on Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy wish to see Casita Rincón Criollo nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property (more recently called “traditional cultural place”). As a graduate student on Folk Studies at Western Kentucky University, I have had the pleasure of working on finalizing the National Register nomination on behalf of the Working Group. My involvement on this project began in the Fall of 2013 and I have been working on it since that time. In the summer of 2014, I was able to travel to Casita Rincón Criollo and meet members of the community. This thesis was inspired by and has become a product of that project.
The National Register of Historic Places and Traditional Cultural Properties

The National Register of Historic Places is a list of buildings, objects, and properties that are significant on a local, state, or national level. Created as part of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register was initially recommended in a report published in 1966 and titled *With Heritage So Rich*, the result of a study undertaken by the United States Conference of Mayors in 1964 (Kanefield 1996:3; Tyler 2000:44). In the 1960s, interest in preservation had surged, though preservation efforts had existed for many years prior, in different forms, from the creation of the National Park Service (in 1916), the first historic district (Charleston, South Carolina, 1931), the Historic American Buildings Survey (1934), and National Trust for Historic Preservation (1949) to various private preservation efforts in what Norman Tyler
terms the “George-Washington-Slept-Here” approach (such as the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association founded in 1853) (Tyler 2000:42). The 1964 study by the Conference of Mayors found there was “a growing public interest in preservation and the need for a unified approach to the protection of historic resources” (Kanefield 1996:3). With the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, federal involvement in preservation efforts were expanded and as a result, state and federal offices such as State Historic Preservation Offices and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation were created. Thus, the National Register of Historic Places was born at a time of great expansion in policy making for the field of historic preservation and it was really a period of solidification of the field of historic preservation itself.

The criteria for eligibility of inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places as created in the 1960s remains today: in order to be nominated, a building or site must meet one of four criteria, namely that the site is significant through one of the following:

A. Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history;
B. Association with the lives of persons significant in our past;
C. Embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or has high artistic values; representative of work of a master; possession of high artistic values; representative of a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
D. History of yielding, or potential to yield, information important in prehistory or history. (Parker and King 1990:12-14)

In 1990, the traditional cultural property entered the vocabulary of the National Register of Historic Places with the 1990 publication of the National Park Service’s National Register Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, hereafter referred to as Bulletin 38. According to Bulletin 38, a traditional cultural property (TCP) is “one that is eligible for inclusion in the National
Register because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community’s history and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community” (Parker and King 1990:1).

Written by Thomas King and Patricia Parker, King remembers later that he began drafting the bulletin with the idea “to use persuasive powers of Section 106 to motivate agencies to pay attention to such places [Native American spiritual sites, Micronesian origin places, Poletown, and Amish Country] and the communities that valued them” (King 2003:33). Section 106, it should be noted, is an article of the National Historic Preservation Act that requires that in the event of a federal undertaking affecting properties listed on the National Register (or simply eligible for listing), agencies must “take into account” the effects of their actions and produce a Memorandum of Agreement (Miller 2008:3). While Section 106 is generally procedural rather than substantive in terms of the protection it affords, the act does afford sites protection.

When nominating a traditional cultural property, the nomination process is no different from the standard nomination process. A site or building must still meet one of the above-mentioned four criteria and so the designation of TCP has been referred to as an “overlay.” This does cause one to wonder what the point is in nominating properties as TCPs. The term TCP was coined in Bulletin 38, but traditional cultural properties had already long been included on the register, though not so clearly labeled. The birth of the traditional cultural property (the term proper) was perhaps, then, a shift in perspective, a refreshing way to look at and talk about concepts that, though already built into the National Register, had been either lost in translation or underutilized. Thomas King emphasizes the following points in Bulletin 38:
A place can be eligible for the National Register based on its value in the eyes of a traditional community like an Indian tribe. Such a place need not be anything that’s appreciated, or even perceived as such, by an outsider. Entirely natural places can be eligible as TCPs, as can buildings, structures, archaeological sites, landscapes, and urban neighborhoods. TCPs are identified through consultation with communities. The significance of TCPs must be understood with reference to community perceptions—it’s how the community perceives the places and its significance that matters. (King 2003:34)

For the most part, the term “community” in the above definition and explanations has since been interpreted to mean almost exclusively native tribes and, for that purpose, it has served as a valuable tool for representing native sites of significance. That Native sites account for a significant number of nominations may also be attributed to the fact that in 1992, shortly after Bulletin 38 was published, amendments were made to the National Historic Preservation Act creating Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs). THPOs function as a substitute for the State Historic Preservation Officer on tribal lands and are granted to tribal programs approved by the National Park Service (King 2008:41). Along with Native tribes, communities that have had properties listed as TCPs have typically been easily bounded groups, meaning that the community belongs to a neatly labeled ethnicity or cultural group, such as immigrants from a single home country. This is evidenced by a video produced by the NPS called Through the Generations: Identifying and Protecting Traditional Cultural Places, in which Native American and Amish communities figure prominently (National Park Service, date unknown). The problem with this narrow interpretation of the Bulletin’s definitions may not seem apparent to many if one does not consider the notion of a cultural group, or question the definition. It is important not to discount the good Bulletin 38 has brought Native American tribes and minority groups; however, it is also important to remember
that Bulletin 38 states, “Americans of every ethnic origin have properties to which they ascribe traditional cultural value, and if such properties meet the National Register criteria, they can and should be nominated for inclusion in the National Register” (Parker and King 1990:3). Parker and King meant for communities beyond Native American tribes to be included on the National Register. That this largely did not happen can be attributed to the fact that most nominations are not drafted by the communities themselves, save for those produced by THPOs. I extend the point to say that there are few professionals drafting National Register nominations in significant quantities who are trained to recognize these communities and their traditions. THPOs have the fortune to be able to self-produce nominations from within the tribe. Folklorists could (and are currently working to) fill this gap. Folklorists, with a much more inclusive definition of group and tradition, are uniquely poised to recognize these many properties that are not so easily bounded and described. It should be noted that recently the National Park Service has preferred the term “traditional cultural places” rather than “properties.” Thomas King writes that he and Patricia King chose the word “property” for Bulletin 38 “because the National Historic Preservation Act talks about ‘historic properties’” (King 2003:17). However, he adds that, “Some have objected to ‘properties’ because to them it implies commodities that can be bought and sold” (2003:17). It is not clear if this is the reason why NPS has moved towards a preference for “place,” however as this thesis focuses on the current verbiage of Bulletin 38, the original term in Bulletin 38 (“traditional cultural properties”) will be used throughout.
Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the term cultural conservation, a term familiar to folklorists. Cultural conservation is an umbrella term meant, in practice, to include the many activities that take place to conserve and document our cultural heritage – both tangible and intangible cultural resources. The term evokes a sense of natural conservation and was chosen because it implies a living dynamism, distinct from simply preserving elements of the past. The term was fully introduced in the report *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States*, written by Ormond Loomis, in 1983. The report was mandated as part of the National Historic Preservation Act amendments in 1980. Specifically, section 502 of the act asked that the Secretary of Interior and American Folklife Center produce a report in two years’ time concerning the current policies on heritage management and recommendations for including intangible cultural resources (Loomis 1983:1). The resulting findings were compiled in *Cultural Conservation*. While the term has been slow to affect major changes in policy since the 1980s, the term is still relevant as we continue to have conversations between disciplines about how to effectively collaborate to include intangible cultural resources in surveys, registers, and section 106-type protective measures (discussed prior). Cultural conservation provides an effective way to link concepts of the tangible and intangible.

With a shift towards the study of material culture in the discipline of American folklore in the mid-twentieth century, pioneered by Don Yoder and Warren Roberts, and the move towards the study of cultural conservation in the late 1970s and 1980s, many folklorists have made a career straddling the divide between historic preservation and
folklore. As a result of the underutilization of Bulletin 38, folklorists have recognized the role we might play in the National Register of Historic Places specifically. In the most recent of initiatives undertaken by folklorists within the realm of cultural conservation, the American Folklore Society began a working group on folklore and historic preservation policy in 2011. As Laurie Kay Sommers writes in a resulting white paper published in 2013 and titled “Integrating Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy: Toward a Richer Sense of Place,” “Our [the working group’s] goal was to better position folklorists and folklore methodologies as central forces in historic preservation” (Sommers 2013:1). Working group members included Laurie Kay Sommers, Michael Ann Williams, Varick Chittenden, Tom Carter, Nancy Solomon, John Vlach, Molly Garfinkel, and Jay Edwards. Sommers writes further:

For too long, despite laudable efforts by individual folklorists, the perspectives of our field have been absent from these shaping policies and programs of federal and state historic preservation entities and major non-profit players such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation. We are at a pivotal moment, however, where exciting opportunities exist for folklorists to forge greater and more vital roles for our field. (2013:1)

A collaborative project was initiated as part of the AFS Folklore and Historic Preservation Working Group. In the report, several recommendations and action steps were detailed for the better integration of folklore and historic preservation. The last of these recommendations was to create model TCP nominations that, “expand the range of sites currently included and that can be posted on the National Register website as a case study” (Sommers 2013:22). The primary case study considered in this thesis, the nomination of the Casita Rincón Criollo, is one such model.
Casita Rincón Criollo

As introduced at the beginning of this thesis, Casita Rincón Criollo is a casita and community garden in the South Bronx of New York City. The term “casita” means “little house” and in New York, the earliest recorded examples of Puerto Rican casita creation appear to date from the late 60s and early 70s. The primary areas where casitas were built were the South Bronx, El Barrio and the Lower East Side. In the 1960s and 70s, a combination of different factors (industry relocation, urban renewal, systematic disinvestment and more) meant that property abandonment and arson were on the rise in these areas (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:13). Puerto Rican communities were among those most seriously affected by these economic dislocations. Against this backdrop, the New York Puerto Rican tradition of creating casitas and gardens on vacant city lots began in the late 1970s and 1980s. Puerto Rican casitas have typically been erected as squats on abandoned, litter-filled lands between high-rises, where apartment buildings once stood. Over time, the communities that build the casita add gardens and other recreational amenities to the site. This was the case with Casita Rincón Criollo. Jose “Chema” Soto, the builder and founder of the casita, has shared how the property for their first site was one of the abandoned, trash-filled lots described above (Sciorra 1994:21).

I had the opportunity to participate in the research and National Register of Historic Places nomination process for the Casita Rincón Criollo from the fall of 2013 through the summer of 2014. The model nomination is a collaborative project of City Lore/Place Matters and Western Kentucky University. Dr. Michael Ann Williams and Western Kentucky University students have been working on the project for two years, beginning in 2012, and I am the most recent WKU graduate student to work on the
nomination. Rachel Hopkin, alumnus of Western Kentucky University, laid much of the groundwork and wrote a complete first draft of the nomination in 2012. She also conducted ten interviews with Casita members and scholars on casitas, including Joseph Sciorra, Martha Cooper, and ethnomusicologist Robert Singer. Oftentimes she completed interviews in Spanish, providing a great deal of the oral histories we have incorporated into the nomination. Alumnus Caitlin Coad also contributed to this project through a windshield survey of New York City casitas completed in 2013. Her research was critical in providing comparative data for the nomination. My role in the collaborative project included the revision and expansion of the draft initially written by the aforementioned Rachel Hopkin, incorporating a great deal of new research as well as the comparative data produced by Caitlin Coad. Chapter 3 will focus on the documentation and nomination of Casita Rincón Criollo in great length. I will elaborate not only on the process for both myself and previous researches, but on our key findings as well and how they form the backbone of the traditional cultural property nomination.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The National Park Service is currently pushing for more inclusion of Latino properties on the National Register and list of National Historic Landmarks. In 2013, NPS published a theme study on Latino contributions to the history of the United States (National Park System 2013). Though the casita tradition is not specifically mentioned, Casita Rincón Criollo seems like a perfect fit. However, there are several issues to be addressed. Casita Rincón Criollo, though considered one of the oldest casitas still thriving, is less than fifty years old, often the benchmark for inclusion on the National Register. Further, the site has moved since its creation in the 1970s. However, due to the
precarious nature of building casitas on abandoned lots (part of the New York casita tradition), this should not be surprising. The community that tends this garden and built the house does not own the property. In fact, their little community is squatting on land at risk of property development at any time. However, Rincón Criollo is fortunate in that its community members rallied and found a new location just one block away. Many others, when faced with development, simply folded and closed. There are a few other issues as will be made clear in this study, but the point is clear – nominating Rincón Criollo serves as a challenge.

As if this were too simple, the very definition of traditional cultural properties is frequently challenged as the National Register struggles to understand properties of traditional groups that are not as easily bounded or defined, as discussed earlier. As this is being written, Bulletin 38 is under revision; what will be changed is unclear. However, the traditional cultural property remains an important aspect of the National Register of Historic Places. As discussed, TCPs offer an opportunity for the inclusion of sites that are significant because they are critical to the continuation of living cultural practices, and oftentimes these practices are intangible. Naturally, TCPs are of great importance to folklorists working in historic preservation policy.

Using the Casita Rincón Criollo as my primary case study and as an illustration of many of the issues I will discuss in the thesis, I aim to examine the strengths and weaknesses of heritage designation programs with special emphasis on the National Register of Historic Places. Even more specifically, I examine the National Park Service’s language regarding traditional cultural properties – namely the definition of “group” and “tradition” as outlined (implicitly or explicitly) in Register bulletins and
guidelines and how this language includes or excludes many traditional/cultural groups. Ultimately, the goal is to examine the role folklorists can play in heritage designation programs and the benefits folkloric methodology might offer. With a much more inclusive view of tradition and group, folklorists working in historic preservation offer many traditional and cultural groups the chance to recognize properties, structures or objects of value to them that might otherwise be excluded by the National Register. I hypothesize that a general lack of awareness or understanding of the discipline of folklore on the part of the preservation field is partially to blame for folklore’s absence from a great deal of preservation policy and heritage designation mechanisms. I will aim to examine this further throughout the chapters of the thesis; however, the basis for this claim also derives from my own five years in the preservation field prior to my attendance at Western Kentucky University, during which I had never heard of folklore as a discipline. I further hypothesize that there is incongruence in terminology between the folklore and preservation disciplines, and that if the National Register would more widely accept folkloric terminology, some barriers to fair and more democratic representation on the National Register would be lessened as a result. I believe the terminology and word choice for guidelines is critical because the difference between eligibility and exclusion for a particular resource is often based on the interpretation of key phrases and terms.

**Chapter Outline**

In this thesis, following a brief literature review on heritage designation and cultural conservation, I will begin with a survey of current historic registers and designation programs on the international, national, and grassroots level. While the
largest portion of this research will focus on the National Register, perhaps the most recognized mechanism for heritage designation in the United States, I also address UNESCO’s listing of Intangible Cultural Heritage, as well as grassroots registers such as Place Matters in New York City and Traditional Arts in Upstate New York’s Register of Very Special Places. More specifically, I examine the guidelines and criteria for nominating a property as well as the exclusions that result from these criteria. As an overarching goal, I am interested in policy that benefits properties on register listings (and their owners or communities) and consequently, the implications for those properties that are excluded from certain registers.

Chapter two begins with an examination, in detail, of guidelines of the National Register of Historic Places. The second part of the chapter introduces the concept of the traditional cultural property in more detail, with specific regard to Bulletin 38, published in 1990 by Patricia Parker and Thomas King. Here, I will introduce the specific guidelines put forth in Bulletin 38, as well as a few examples of successful and unsuccessful TCP nominations. In particular, I would like to examine the perceived issues associated with TCP designation and the subsequent proposals many individuals or groups have put forth to better utilize Bulletin 38. Ultimately, I will focus on a recent project of the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy, a pilot nomination of the Casita Rincón Criollo in New York City to the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. As mentioned previously, as a graduate assistant in the Folk Studies program at Western Kentucky University, I have had the opportunity to research the traditional cultural practices of Casita Rincón Criollo and finalize a nomination of the site. This shall be the subject of
chapter three. My involvement in the project offers me a firsthand look at a case study that is attempting to push the boundaries of listing on the National Register. The intricacies of the project will be carefully examined.

Lastly, in chapter four and the conclusion of the thesis, I will use lessons from the Casita Rincón Criollo nomination to draw conclusions for better integration of folklore and historic preservation. This portion of the thesis derives, in part, from my own personal experiences completing research and fieldwork on the Casita. The Casita Rincón Criollo’s involvement with City Lore and Place Matters also allows this particular case study to serve as a touch point for discussing grassroots register listing projects, a solution currently offered by many local and statewide organizations in recognizing those properties not included in the Register. However, grassroots listings do not afford these communities and sites with the same protections provided by listing on the National Register. Nevertheless, I will examine how grassroots registers and other movements are addressing perceived shortcomings of formal designation and register programs throughout this thesis. Perhaps there is a disconnect between the evaluation of significance within formal registers and the evaluation of significance within the traditional cultural groups and communities with resources to be nominated. Further, what is the register or community’s goal? Is it to protect, conserve, or simply recognize buildings and properties? Do these goals align? Ultimately, I believe this research topic to be highly relevant to the many disciplines engaging in historic preservation and place-making agendas throughout the country and world.
REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Many of the sources I have found useful in examining the National Register of Historic Places, I have mentioned or referenced earlier in the introduction. Nevertheless, I will now briefly examine additional relevant scholarship that will inform my research. My research material originates in many disciplines, including folklore, architectural history, ethnomusicology, historic preservation, and history.

Folklore, Cultural Conservation, and Historic Preservation

A great deal of resources directly or indirectly discuss the topic of cultural conservation and folklore. In examining cultural conservation, it is important to begin with Ormond Loomis’s Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States. As mentioned earlier in this proposal, this document introduced cultural conservation as a term in 1983. Further, Cultural Conservation not only delineates the concept and principles of conservation, but also poses suggestions for action at the federal level, and canvases actions that were currently being undertaken by local, state, and federal agencies (Loomis 1983:31,35,490). Thus, the document is a snapshot of preservation policy as it intersected with folklore in 1983. Significant to this thesis, Cultural Conservation does acknowledge that lists such as the National Register are best for artifacts and properties that are static and says further that “the dynamism of living cultural forms effectively limits the usefulness of strategies which depend on listing, honorific or otherwise” (1983:16).

Also of great importance is Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage (1994), edited by Mary Hufford, and arising out of a conference called “Cultural Conservation: Reconfiguring the Cultural Mission,” that was held at the Library of
Congress in May 1990. There are subtle applications of Hufford’s *Conserving Culture* to this thesis, however the more obvious include Steven Zeitlin’s article “Conserving our Cities’ ‘Endangered Spaces,’” which discusses the importance of casitas specifically, as well as the article, “Traditional History and Alternative Conceptions of the Past,” by Alan S. Downer Jr., Alexandra Roberts, Harris Francis, and Klara B. Kelley, which discusses traditional cultural places (Downer et al. 1994; Zeitlin 1994). However, the entirety of *Conserving Culture* provides great insight on issues relevant to this study, the overarching goal to provide specific case studies that challenge divisions commonly made between tangible and intangible heritage. As such, the entire volume serves as an excellent example of multidisciplinary approaches united under the umbrella term, “Cultural Conservation.”

Having mentioned Mary Hufford, I would be remiss if I did not reference her seminal work *One Space, Many Places: Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey’s Pinelands National Reserve Report and Recommendations to the New Jersey Pinelands Commission for Cultural Conservation in the Pinelands National Reserve*. As a model project undertaken by the American Folklife Center, implementing recommendations from the *Cultural Conservation* report, *One Space, Many Places* has several goals. The report strives to serve as an example of an integrated approach to documenting and recognizing places of importance to communities and by documenting these places, the report further hopes that this documentation might affect land-use policy and planning. Interestingly, the report also ends with its own recommendations, including the suggestion for a folklife designation process, an ongoing survey and inventory of folklife that is actually a departure from the original *Cultural Conservation* report. *Cultural*
*Conservation* highlighted concerns about the creation of lists and ultimately took a reactive rather than proactive stance on list-making (Hufford 1986:121; Loomis 1983:16).

Thomas Carter and Carl Fleischhauer’s 1988 report, *The Grouse Creek Cultural Survey: Integrating Folklife and Historic Preservation Field Research* is a model project that also responds to the *Cultural Conservation* report. Quite different from Hufford’s earlier case study, *Grouse Creek* focuses more on a collaborative relationship and integrated approach between folklorists and historic preservationists, asking what folklorists might learn from historic preservation and the idea of the comprehensive survey, an early preservation model. This case study, then, serves as precedence for the American Folklore Society Working Group in Historic Preservation Policy.

I mention several works regarding intangible heritage, if only by name, because it is often intangible aspects of traditional cultural places that make these sites important to the communities that use them and so the topic of intangible heritage will be important to my discussion. In *A Richer Heritage: Historic Preservation in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Robert E. Stipe, Alan Jabbour contributes an article titled “Folklife, Intangible Heritage, and the Promise and Perils of Cultural Cooperation,” providing an overview of the history of the folklore discipline and its convergences and issues of common cause with other disciplines (Jabbour 2003). Richard Kurin has also written an article in *Museum International* called “Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: A Critical Appraisal,” part of a special issue of the journal that focuses on this topic (Kurin 2004). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett contributes an article to *Museum International*, published alongside Kurin’s article just mentioned, titled
“Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s article provides a thorough history and analysis of UNESCO’s intangible heritage initiatives and is discussed further in chapter 1.

Lastly, though not specifically related to preservation practice, I need to mention a volume that will be both explicitly and implicitly woven throughout the entirety of this thesis, *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, edited by Burt Feintuch (2003). The purpose of the volume was to examine words understood as key to the discipline of folklore, namely the words group, art, text, genre, performance, context, tradition, and identity. Of special importance to this thesis, I will draw on Henry Glassie’s discussion of tradition and Dorothy Noyes’ examination of group. Consider, for example, Glassie’s seminal article that begins with the statement: “Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 2003:176). He says shortly after, “History and tradition are comparable in dynamic; they exclude more than they include and so remain open to endless revision. They are functionally congruent in their incorporation of the usable past” (2003:176). Noyes writes of group, “Ideas about group are the most powerful and the most dangerous in folklore studies” (Noyes 2003:7). Noyes critically examines how within the discipline of folklore, arguments have centered on small groups versus big groups and have tended to turn to the notion of community as the best frame and the most natural (2003:7,34). She notes previous thoughts on the word within our discipline, such as Alan Dundes asserting that a folk group could be “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (Noyes 2003:11). Nevertheless, both Noyes and Glassie conclude with rather inclusive definitions and it remains for the
purposes of this thesis that folklorists generally define “tradition” and “group” in much more inclusive terms than the National Register of Historic Places.

*National Register of Historic Places and Traditional Cultural Properties*

Since the creation of Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, there has been a great deal of scholarship on traditional cultural properties and the National Register, and quite interestingly, a large portion of the critical literature has been penned by Thomas King, one of the co-authors of Bulletin 38 itself. As this thesis seeks to examine the role traditional cultural properties might play in creating a more inclusive National Register, it is important to examine criticisms. King’s critique lies with the National Register itself, not the mechanism of traditional cultural property designation. A few key works are nicely bundled together in a 2009 volume of *George Wright Forum*. Noting two articles specifically, the first is titled “Rethinking Traditional Cultural Properties” by Thomas King. In this article, King reaffirms the value in identifying traditional cultural places, however King questions the value of the Register itself, suggesting the only benefit the Register now plays is in the protections it affords through the Section 106 process (mentioned earlier) (King 2009:35). Also within this same issue of *George Wright Forum* is Paul Lusignan’s article “Traditional Cultural Places and the National Register.” Paul Lusignan (who is a nomination reviewer for the National Register) focuses on the positive role the National Register still might play, but like King, acknowledges that it still has not had the impact it should, and as such, discusses that we need to make it better (Lusignan 2009:42-43).

With the same issues at heart, King also discusses traditional cultural properties and the National Register at great length in three additional volumes, including *Thinking*
About Cultural Resource Management: Essays from the Edge (2002) and, published just one year later, Places That Count: Traditional Cultural Properties in Cultural Resource Management (2003). The third is Cultural Resource Laws & Practice (2008). King’s writings in these three works (and his criticisms) will be directly referenced and examined in detail throughout the entirety of this thesis.

Puerto Rican Culture and Casita Rincón Criollo

Casita Rincón Criollo and the tradition of casita building has been studied by architectural historians, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and others. All of their research combines to form the narrative included in the National Register Nomination form for Casita Rincón Criollo, the subject of chapter three. I will mention a few key sources here, however this is by no means exhaustive. For a much more comprehensive list of scholarly research on casitas and Casita Rincón Criollo, it is imperative that one look at the Casita Rincón Criollo model nomination form directly.

In highlighting the work of a select few scholars, it is important to begin with Luis Aponte-Parés. Aponte-Parés is Associate Professor of Community Development and Planning in the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In his article, “What’s Yellow and White and Has Land All Around It?: Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios,” Aponte-Parés discusses the history of the casita in New York, the social and economic conditions that led to their rise, and the architectural antecedents of the casita in Puerto Rico. However, this is just one of many articles that Aponte-Parés has published on the topic and he remains an authoritative source on the origins of casita architecture in Puerto Rico.
Moving away from casita building in general and toward Casita Rincón Criollo specifically, a great wealth of information on Casita Rincón Criollo was provided by César Colón-Montijo whose thesis, titled “The Practices of Plena at Las Casita de Chema: Affect, Music and Everyday Life,” focused on the practice of *plena* at Casita Rincón Criollo (Colón-Montijo 2013). Completed as part of the ethnomusicology program at Columbia University, this work not only shared wonderful descriptions of the appearance and daily activities of the casita, but it also shares the antecedents of the musical genre of *plena*, making the case for the intrinsic role *plena* plays in Casita Rincón Criollo’s community. In part, the practice of plena leads to Casita Rincón Criollo’s designation as a traditional cultural property on the National Register. As such, this research is of special importance.

Lastly, I would like to make mention of a few key individuals studying the traditions and culture of casitas in New York City. A great deal of the research for the nomination for Casita Rincón Criollo, and by extension, this thesis, was conducted by Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra during a survey in 1988. Martha Cooper is a photojournalist and former staff photographer for the *New York Post* as well as the Director of Photography for City Lore in New York. Joseph Sciorra, a professional folklorist, is currently the Director for Academic and Cultural Programs at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at Queens College, City University of New York. Their survey work would prove critical in identifying the rate of survival for casitas contemporary to Rincón Criollo. Further, Joseph Sciorra has published an article titled, “We’re not here just to plant. We have culture.” An Ethnography of the South Bronx Casita Rincón Criollo” in *New York Folklore* in 1994, referenced earlier in this
introduction. In addition to Cooper and Sciorra’s work, Molly Garfinkel has also played a key role in documenting casitas in New York City. Trained in Architectural History at the University of Virginia, Garfinkel is the current director of Place Matters in New York City and has been closely involved in the case study of Rincón Criollo (she was an original member of the AFS Working Group of Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy). Garfinkel has distilled the research and nomination process into a wonderful article, “Preserving a Hometown Corner for Posterity: Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property” (Garfinkel 2014). Further, Steve Zeitlin, founding director of City Lore (from which Place Matters grew), has also extensively written on casitas, even including them in his article “Conserving our Cities’ ‘Endangered Spaces,’” in Mary Hufford’s edited volume titled *Conserving Culture*, previously mentioned in this literature review.

**Concurrent Work in the Architectural History, History, and Preservation Disciplines**

In making the case for the significant role folklore can play in preservation policy, it is especially important to acknowledge and understand that other disciplines are examining similar issues with the National Register and publishing scholarship on broader notions of place-making much akin to the idea of “one space, many places” (Hufford 1986). In a recent volume titled *World Heritage and National Registers: Stewardship in Perspective*, editors Thomas Gensheimer and Celeste Guichard, both architectural historians and professors at Savannah College of Art and Design, present eighteen essays examining the politics of identity in heritage designation. Gensheimer writes in his Introduction, “Heritage designation, both globally and nationally, is an inherently contested issue. As evidenced in the chapters of this volume, the concerns of
politics and identity, the criteria for designation, the impacts on communities and sites, and the challenges to management planning are central to our understanding of the process by which heritage sites are created, interpreted, and maintained” (Gensheimer and Guichard 2014:XIII). He says further, “The issue of selection is further complicated by the indeterminate nature of the criteria for evaluating potential heritage designation. The criteria used to determine ‘universal value’ for the World Heritage List or what constitutes ‘contribution to our country’s history and heritage’ for the National Register is culturally and temporally bound, reflecting our biases, prejudices, and concerns at any one point in time” (Gensheimer and Guichard 2014:XIV-XV). The volume contains several articles written by historic preservationists, including professors and those working for preservation non-profits. Highly diverse, the volume also features voices from China and Egypt, to name a few. Of great pertinence to this thesis, one section of the volume is dedicated to “calls for the revamping of the criteria for designation” (Gensheimer and Guichard 2014:x). It is interesting to note that a specific article, written by Keith S. Hébert of the University of West Georgia and titled “The Psychedelic Assisi in the Southern Pines: Pasaquan, Visionary-Art Environments, and the National Register of Historic Places,” though written from the perspective of a historian, references the idea of “folk art,” all the while addressing many issues relevant to folklorists. His article hints at the issue of communal versus individual creation, which has long been the root of an ongoing debate regarding the origins of folklore within the discipline of folklore itself (Hébert 2014:12). Further, he touches on many of the same issues that confront the AFS Working Group’s own model nomination, including perceptions of integrity, writing:

This paucity of listings [of visionary-art environments] derives from several factors, including a general lack of understanding about these works of art and the
perceived loss of integrity among many examples…Part of that process [of helping preservationists to better identify, evaluate, and conserve such sites] involves convincing larger audiences that although artists such as Eddie Owens Martin lived on the periphery of acceptable norms, their outdoor art environments reflect the work of masters whose visions reveal a lot about twentieth-century American culture (Hébert 2014:3-4).

While the community members of Casita Rincón Criollo are not building landscapes of visionary art, Hébert’s concerns parallel our own—there needs to be a growth in understanding of integrity and significance. Hébert uses quotes from creators of visionary landscapes to buttress his argument. Though quotes do not necessarily equate to the ethnographic work that we will use in our nomination of the Casita, the method of using the voices of creators to account for the significance of a relatively recent site parallels what we hope to accomplish with the Casita Rincón Criollo nomination.

I found the research by Bradley Keefer, also a historian, to be great interest to my thesis. A professor of history at Kent State University in Ashtabula, Ohio, Keefer has recently published a book called *Conflicting Memories on the “River of Death”: The Chickamauga Battlefield and the Spanish-American War, 1863-1933*. Keefer discusses the development of a collective memory promoted by both the veterans and communities affected and represented in the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. The primary concern of *Conflicting Memories* is much akin to Mary Hufford’s idea of “one space, many places,” in fact, so much so, that I scoured the bibliography for references to folklorists (Hufford 1986). To both my surprise and my equally powerful hunch, there were no folklorists referenced (that I could identify). While the Spanish-American War is well beyond the subject matter of the primary case study of this thesis, I do hypothesize that a general lack of knowledge about the field of folklore outside the discipline is a leading cause for a further lack of understanding about folklore concepts.
like tradition and group. Keefer’s book is firm evidence of the fact that other disciplines, like history, are writing about many of the same issues as folklorists, without any apparent recognition of this double scholarship. This is all to say that I believe there needs to be a greater visibility of folkloristic principles in our fellow fields, especially in relation to preservation and place-making (though I am only joining an on-going cry that folklorists have been making for years). In an attempt to bridge the divide, the idea that preservationists and historians need to be as aware of us as we are of them is an underlying theme of this thesis.
CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Heritage Designation

As briefly detailed in the introduction, the 1960s is widely considered the tipping point for historic preservation in both policymaking and professionalization of the field. Certainly, this was not the beginning of the preservation movement in the United States, especially in considering the wider timeline of United States governmental cultural resource management. What follows in this chapter is a truncated timeline of preservation legislation as it relates to historic designation and registers with emphasis on preservation policy during and following the 1960s. It should be noted that there are several comprehensive timelines worth consulting that contain a much more complete, nuanced look at preservation policy in the United States (King 2008; Loomis 1983; Tyler 1994). As Thomas King points out in Cultural Resource Laws and Practice, the U.S. government began managing cultural resources with the creation of the Library of Congress in 1800 (2008:16). It was at this same time that France began developing a list of preservation-worthy buildings in response to the French Revolution’s destructive attitudes towards monarchy-associated structures (King 2008:16). The United States did not systematically begin saving sites, however, until the Civil War had ended and the War Department started acquiring battlefields. In the mid-nineteenth century, various private efforts were also made to protect buildings, including Mount Vernon, saved by Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, founded in 1853 (Tyler 2000:33).

In the early twentieth century, preservation efforts gained momentum with the passage of several acts that the 1960s legislation would later build on. In 1906, the Antiquities Act was established to prohibit excavation of antiquities from public land
without permission from the Secretary of the Interior. Section two of the Act gave the president the power to declare national monuments. Just a decade later, the National Park Service was created through the Organic Act of 1916. From its founding, the National Park Service’s mission was clear: “...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (NPS, Organic Act). Building on the Antiquities Act, the Organic Act created the mechanism for managing sites designated before or after the Antiquities Act and further signaled an increasing recognition of the need for preservation.

In 1934, following the depression relief work of the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration, the Historic Sites Act authorized the formalization of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) as a program under the National Park Service. HABS had been created in 1933 to employ out-of-work historians and architects and through their efforts, many buildings and structures were documented through measured drawings and written narratives. At this same time, there was also a need to document structures threatened by the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority. In the agreement made as part of the formation of HABS, the American Institute of Architects, the Library of Congress and the National Park Service stated that “a comprehensive and continuous national survey is the logical concern of the Federal Government” (NPS 2013). In 1934, President Roosevelt authorized HABS. The following year, with the passage of the Historic Sites Act, HABS became an official program of the National Park Service.
With the recognition of the importance of surveys, perhaps the most significant outcome of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 is simply that the Federal government recognized it was good policy to care about historic resources. And, in a move that would become critical in the 1960s, the Historic Sites Act also authorized the Secretary of the Interior to designate sites as nationally significant. Curiously, though, despite the statement of support for site designation, it was not until 1960 that the National Historic Landmarks program was instituted. It was the 1960s that really gave birth to the nation’s federal designation programs. National Historic Landmarks, as stated in the National Register bulletin *How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations*, are “cultural properties designated by the Secretary of the Interior as being nationally significant. Acknowledged as among the nation’s most significant historic places, these buildings, sites, districts, structures, and objects possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture” (NPS 1999:9). It was with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, though, that the federal government instituted the designation program perhaps best known by the American public, the National Register of Historic Places.

*The National Register of Historic Places*

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) is widely regarded as one of the most influential pieces of preservation legislation passed by the United States government. In 1965, a comprehensive report, *With Heritage So Rich*, initiated by the United States Conference of Mayors, recommended the creation of a national preservation program and further mapped out how this program might look (Kanefield 1996:3; King 2008:18). Within the following year, the recommendations were turned
into legislation. Among the fruits of the NHPA, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation was created, as was the office of the State Historic Preservation Officer at the state level. However, pertinent to this thesis, the National Historic Preservation Act authorized the Secretary of the Interior to “expand and maintain National Register of Historic Places composed of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture” (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 2009).

This National Register, very much alive today, features 90,540 listings as of this writing, including 1,752,995 contributing resources (building, sites, structures, objects), and in the fiscal year of 2014 alone, 1,030 properties were listed (National Register of Historic Places website as of February 5, 2015). The nomination process, which will be discussed in great length in the following chapter, can be initiated by anyone willing to draft the nomination form, and the nomination undergoes several levels of review at the state level (or tribal) and the federal level. If the resource is located in a Certified Local Government (CLG), the nominated building, site, or object must undergo review on the local level prior to state review as well. The criteria for eligibility of inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places is deceptively simple: in order to be nominated, a building or site must meet one of four criteria as previously outlined on page 3. Paraphrasing those points here, the nominee must be associated with either events that have contributed to the broad patterns of history, the lives of significant persons, embody distinctive architectural characteristics/methods of construction, or have the potential to yield archaeological information (Parker and King 1990:12-14). While these four criteria are rather broad, there are also “criteria considerations” to be examined as well, namely
whether the nominated resource is a cemetery, birthplace/grave of a historical figure, owned or used by religious institutions, moved or reconstructed, primarily commemorative in nature and/or significant within the past fifty years (National Park Service 1997a:25). Cemeteries, birthplaces, graves, religiously owned institutions, etc., are generally ineligible, unless qualifying as the following:

a. a religious property deriving primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance; or
b. a building or structure removed from its original location but which is significant primarily for architectural value, or which is the surviving structure most importantly associated with a historic person or event; or
c. a birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance if there is no appropriate site or building directly associated with his or her productive life; or
d. a cemetery which derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, from association with historic events; or
e. a reconstructed building when accurately executed in a suitable environment and presented in a dignified manner as part of a restoration master plan, and when no other building or structure with the same association has survived; or
f. a property primarily commemorative in intent if design, age, tradition, or symbolic value has invested it with its own exceptional significance; or,
g. a property achieving significance within the past 50 years if it is of exceptional importance. (National Park Service 1997a:25)

The “criteria for evaluation” and the “criteria considerations” give just a brief understanding of the nomination process for the program; there are additional guidelines for determining integrity and a specific period of significance must be determined (see chapter two for this discussion and for a further look at the criteria considerations).

Despite the seemingly wide berth of significance the criteria for evaluation allows, however, in the decades following the creation of the program, it became apparent that the National Register of Historic Places program had some major gaps in representation.
Folklorists have been involved in historic preservation efforts throughout the preservation movement in the United States. In the 1960s and 70s, when the preservation movement was really solidified through federal programs such as those created under the National Historic Preservation Act, folklorists were expanding their scope of study to include material culture studies and vernacular architecture within the purview of the discipline of folklore. By the late 70s and early 1980s, folklorists increasingly participated in comprehensive surveys, National Register nominations, environmental impact assessments, and other forms of documentation work (Sommers 2013; Sommers et al 1994).

In 1976, Congress enacted the American Folklife Preservation Act. The Act defined “folklife” as “the traditional expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional” (Loomis 1983:iii). Ultimately, the Act established the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, however in listing the findings leading to this decision, the Act declared, in part:

- that it is appropriate and necessary for the Federal Government to support research and scholarship in American folklife in order to contribute to an understanding of the complex problems of the basic desires, beliefs, and values of the American people in both rural and urban areas;
- that the encouragement and support of American folklife, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, is also an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal Government; and
- that it is in the interest of the general welfare of the Nation to preserve, support, revitalize, and disseminate American folklife traditions and arts. (American Folklife Center 2014)

In 1980, an amendment was made to the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 502, specifically, asked the Secretary of Interior and the American Folklife Center to produce a report in two years’ time concerning the current policies on heritage
management as well as recommendations for including intangible cultural resources (Loomis 1983:1). The resulting findings were published in a 1983 report entitled *Cultural Conservation*, written by Ormond Loomis. As is evidenced by the title, the report proposed a new term, cultural conservation, as an umbrella term to represent the many activities that take place to conserve and document both tangible and intangible cultural resources. The term meant that, in lieu of distinguishing between tangible and intangible resources, all were worthy of preservation efforts. The Executive Summary of the report begins: “In amending the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the 96th Congress realized that the existing Historic Preservation Program fails to provide clear coverage for the full range of cultural resources in the United States. Historic properties are the sole type of resource specified for protection and benefits. When not embodied in a structure or site, intangible elements of our cultural heritage fall outside the scope of this law” (Loomis 1983:iii). It says further that the definition of folklife, as given by the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976, “encompasses the areas of community life and values omitted by historic preservation. These areas involve the living heritage of a people. A closer coordination of work in folklife and historic preservation seems appropriate” (Loomis 1983:iii).

Ultimately, *Cultural Conservation* would lead to several collaborative initiatives between folklorists and historic preservationists in the 1980s (cf. Carter and Fleischhauer 1988; Hufford 1986). However, the collaborative spirit of the 1980s would fizzle and though cultural conservation would continue to be embraced as a term, folklorists’ role in historic preservation policy would stall. As Laurie Sommers writes in a white paper for the American Folklore Society Working Group in Historic Preservation and Folklore
Policy, “In that time [the thirty years since the amendment of NHPA], much constructive work has emerged in the broader area of cultural conservation, most of it under the auspices of arts and humanities organizations in the form of exhibits, festivals, documentation, apprenticeship programs and the like, and in the emergence of national heritage areas. Far less energy has been devoted to historic preservation per se, as state arts councils and folk arts projects became the fulcrum for much applied work” (Sommers 2013). As noted in the literature review at the beginning of this thesis, while Cultural Conservation expressed reservations about the creation of lists and ultimately took a reactive rather than proactive stance on list-making, Mary Hufford’s One Space, Many Places report on the New Jersey Pinelands created in response to Cultural Conservation ended instead with the suggestion for a folklife designation process, an ongoing survey and inventory of folklife (Hufford 1986:121; Loomis 1983:16).

Alternative and Grassroots Registers in the United States

In 1990, Patricia Parker and Thomas King published National Register Bulletin 38: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties. Bulletin 38, which is discussed in the next chapter, held great promise for folklorists because it declared a traditional cultural property as “one that is eligible for inclusion in the National Register because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community’s history and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community” (Parker and King 1990:1). In short, the bulletin served an opportunity to expand the National Register of Historic Places to include intangible cultural heritage, albeit that tied to tangible sites, buildings, or objects. This, however, largely did not happen. However, in the wake of increasing
recognition that the National Register might never be fully democratic, even with Bulletin 38 in place, many non-profits and organizations began to create lists or registers of their own. Regarding New York City’s grassroots register Place Matters, Varick Chittenden writes, “In a city where some of the world’s great architectural achievements are celebrated, however, ‘landmark’ status for most people did not include the likes of ethnic social clubs, pool halls, bakeries, dance pavilions, bath houses, or bodegas” (Chittenden 2006:48).

Place Matters began as a collaborative project between the nonprofit City Lore and the Municipal Art Society in New York City in 1998, growing from a project started by City Lore a decade earlier called “Endangered Spaces” (Garfinkel 2014). In the mid-1990s, the Municipal Arts Society formed a taskforce on “encouraging protection for places that are vital to New York City’s history and traditions but not necessarily architecturally distinguished,” or in other words, to expand preservation beyond architectural significance and explore ways to better support cultural landmarks (Place Matters; Garfinkel 2014). City Lore was part of this taskforce. After jointly holding a “History Happened Here” conference in 1996, discussions generated at the conference led to the collaborative project. The name “Endangered Places” (originally chosen because the organizers were concerned about the rapid disappearance of so many resources) was later changed to Place Matters (Chittenden 2006:48; Garfinkel 2014).

The mechanism for listing sites on Place Matters’s register is simple and accessible to any New Yorker interested in sharing places they think matter and why. Anyone may access the short nomination form and easily complete it in one sitting.
detailing the name, address, borough, and neighborhood for the site, the remaining question prompts include the following:

- Please describe your place and why it matters.
- Do the physical details of the place matter? If it were to change, what features would you miss and why?
- Are you aware of any plans that may affect the future of this place?
- Can you recommend a person, organization, or website with more information or stories about this place? (Place Matters, Nominate)

All nominations to Place Matters are posted to an online “Census of Places that Matter” and when possible, Place Matters creates longer profiles of many of the sites complete with photographs. The influence of the Place Matters project has been far-reaching. As Place Matters’ website details:

The nominations are driving the creation of a citywide inventory of places that warrant attention and caretaking. They also prompt promotion and advocacy. Initiatives spawned by Place Matter include: the book *Hidden New York: A Guide to Places that Matter*; film *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, documenting the South Bronx in the making of Latin music; historical sign project *Your Guide to the Lower East Side*, virtual tour *Marking Time on the Bowery* (www.placematters.net); advocacy for the first labor landmark (for the Triangle Shirtwaist fire) and the first National Register listing associated with Puerto Rican migration (Casa Amadeo); support for numerous preservation campaigns, regular "Place of the Month" emails; and public talks and workshops across the city and the U.S.

In New Orleans [sic], the Cornerstones project is using our survey methodology to indentify [sic] places that matter; in Banff, Canada, the weekly newspaper highlighted special places modeled on our biweekly emails; the Great Lakes Urban Exchange studied our website to foster urbanism, regionalism, and quality storytelling in their area; and in upstate Canton, NY, the Registry of Very Special Places (RSVP) [sic], modeled on Place Matters, is thriving. The National Trust for Historic Preservation adopted Place Matters as a theme. (Place Matters, History)

Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), as mentioned by City Lore, directly attributes the idea for their Register of Very Special Places (RVSP) to Place Matters. In an article detailing the evolution of the project, Varick Chittenden details
how Martha Cooper, a photographer for Place Matters, brought City Lore’s project to his attention and shares the planning process undertaken by Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY) to create a similar initiative (Chittenden 2006:48).

The nomination process, like that of Place Matters, is purposefully simple and accessible for community members, though a bit more involved. Rather than operating as a census, the process emphasizes documentation of the site. There are three steps in the process of nomination: the first step is a three-page nomination form that, in addition to requesting contact information, site details, and other interested researchers, asks the following questions:

- What makes this place important to your community?
- When you visit this place, what physical features help you or your community to remember its history or to want to preserve its traditions?
- Do you know of any threats to, or plans for, this place, such as real estate development plans, or community revitalization plans? Are there other local issues–economic, social, political–that might make your place’s future precarious?
- Are you willing to provide or find documentation about this place, like photographs or memorabilia? (TAUNY, Nominate)

Criteria for selection include a long list of examples, including statements like “a place where vital community events still take place” and “a place that’s a source of or repository of local beliefs, customs or stories” (TAUNY 2005).

Step two involves the collection of documentation including photographs, sketches, a narrative description of the site, and even narratives concerning use and value. In many ways, the documentation is similar to that collected by the National Register of Historic Places though questions are posed in a much friendlier format with explanations and guidance provided throughout the form. Most significantly, though, the RVSP form encourages (but does not require) researchers to conduct interviews and oral histories.
with community members. As will be discussed with Casita Rincón Criollo in chapter two and three, oral histories are a valuable resource that can add a great deal of strength to a register nomination and serve as the best means to document the importance a site holds for community members in the present day. Last, step three of the Register of Very Special Places nomination form is the review of the nomination form by the RVSP advisory committee and then its listing on the website, as well as the award of a slate plaque to the community.

These are just two of many local and regional registers created throughout the United States. As noted by City Lore, even the National Trust for Historic Preservation enacted a grassroots imitative called the “This Place Matters” Campaign, soliciting members of the public to take pictures of places important to them and submit them to the National Trust. While the project is ultimately a photo contest without regard for intangible cultural heritage associated with the sites, an article in Preservation in 2010 quoted Dolores McDonagh, vice president of membership at the National Trust to say that “the campaign is proving to be a simple yet powerful way to explain the importance of historic preservation to a wider audience. ‘We are hoping to inspire people to start a conversation in their communities about what places matter to them’” (National Trust for Historic Preservation 2010).

**National Heritage Areas**

While many nonprofits and organizations have sought to create their own local registers of significant or historic sites to complement or remedy the National Register of Historic Places, in 1984, the National Park Service created a new designation program that should be noted as it has been entirely successful in recognizing intangible cultural
heritage. In 1984, the National Heritage Area program was created to designate places “by Congress as places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape” (National Park Service 2014:1). A document on completing feasibility studies for National Heritage designation provides the full definition as outlined by the National Park Service to the House Resources Committee on October 26, 1999:

A National Heritage Area is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. Continued use of National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their significance. (National Park Service 2003:2)

Martha Raymond, National Coordinator for Heritage Areas, prefers to describe National Heritage Areas (NHAs) as “living landscapes” (Interview, January 21, 2015). Since 1984, there have been forty-nine NHAs designated and these sites have ranged in size from a National Heritage Area less than one square mile (Augusta Canal in Augusta, Georgia) to NHAs spanning several states (the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor spans portions of Florida, Georgia, and North and South Carolina).

The designation process for NHAs is quite different from that for the National Register of Historic Places. As stated in the definition above, National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress through enabling legislation that is unique for each NHA. There are four requirements that must be met before the Department of the Interior will make recommendations to Congress for designation:

1. Completion of a suitability/feasibility study;
2. Public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study;
3. Demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation; and
4. Commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry. (National Park Service 2003:4)

The feasibility study is the first step in the process and the remaining steps occur concurrently or after the study is completed. The feasibility study is key because this serves as the opportunity for communities within a potential NHA to share those aspects of their region that they find important, including both tangible and intangible resources.

A resource on feasibility studies for NHAs, titled “National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Process Frequently Asked Questions” defines feasibility studies by stating:

National Heritage Area (NHA) designation begins with a grassroots, community-centered process called a ‘feasibility study,’ rather than with an application or a questionnaire . . . A feasibility study is a report that documents the processes undertaken by the residents of a region to determine whether their landscape has the distinctive resources and local capacity necessary for designation as a National Heritage Area. It examines whether authorization as a NHA is an appropriate strategy for achieving a region’s resource conservation and economic development goals. (1-2)

The “National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Process Frequently Asked Questions” document goes on to list several questions that residents of a region must consider for the study:

1. What is distinctive about our region and how do [we] want to share our unique history, culture and landscape with others?
2. Are other groups in the region working on a similar idea and how might we pool our resources?
3. What stories, themes or places unite the region?
4. Is National Heritage Area designation the right strategy to achieve the goals and outcomes desired by residents?
5. Are we ready to begin exploring the feasibility of seeking the national heritage designation for our region?
6. Is it realistic at this point to seek designation – do we have or can we obtain the local support, funding, et cetera to carry out the responsibilities associated with designation? (National Park Service:1)
In short, National Heritage Areas not only work with community members to designate both tangible and intangible resources, but further, the program strives to promote active cultural conservation rather than simply designate for honorific purposes. As Alan Jabbour writes in “Folklife, Intangible Heritage, and the Promise and Perils of Cultural Cooperation,” “The [National Heritage Area] movement accomplished organically some of the deeper underlying recommendations of the Cultural Conservation report” (Jabbour 2003:441).

International Heritage Designation

On the international level, heritage designation programs are quite different from that of the United States. While the case study in this thesis will ultimately focus on the National Register, I would also like to briefly note UNESCO’s listing of World Heritage Sites, intangible cultural heritage, and recently, the “Creative Cities” network as several different forms of register listing on the international level. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization has produced several cultural conventions since the 1950s and in 1972, the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (commonly referred to as the World Heritage Convention) created the World Heritage List. The 1972 Convention asked that, “Every State Party to this Convention shall, in so far as possible, submit to the World Heritage Committee an inventory of property forming part of the cultural and natural heritage, situated in its territory and suitable for inclusion in the list provided for in paragraph 2 of this Article. This inventory, which shall not be considered exhaustive, shall include documentation about the location of the property in question and its significance” (UNESCO 1972:6). It is important that the World Heritage List recognizes both cultural
and natural heritage and that “cultural heritage” is defined as monuments, groups of buildings, and sites (UNESCO 1972:2).

In 2003, UNESCO enacted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage “considering the deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage,” and defining intangible cultural heritage as:

…the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity that “certain places on Earth are of ‘outstanding universal value’ and should form part of the common heritage of humankind (UNESCO 2003:1-2).

Article 12 of the 2003 Convention concerns inventories and requires that State Parties to the Convention draw up one or more inventories of their intangible cultural heritage and then regularly update the list (2003:6). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provides a thorough history and analysis of UNESCO’s intangible heritage initiatives in her article “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production” (2004). The 2003 Convention was actually preceded by the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore and the 2001 Report on the Preliminary Study on the Advisability of Regulating Internationally, through a New Standard-setting Instrument, the Protection of Traditional Culture and Folklore. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that the 2001 report focused on sustaining traditions not by supporting folklore institutions in documentation but rather by supporting tradition bearers themselves (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004:53). Therefore in 2001, UNESCO announced a “Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett questions the benefits of lists, but the fact remains that list making often results in conventions such as these (2004:55). Dorothy Noyes, in discussing the implications of policy implemented by both UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), further questions how judges will recognized authentic guardians of tradition and further, argues that declaring traditions through honorific processes and then leaving the management to the community undermines “one of the most important uses of local tradition, the collective negotiation of conflict” (Noyes 2006:28). While the United States never ratified the 2003 Convention, it should be noted that the Japanese Living National Treasures Program also provided much of the inspiration behind the National Endowment for the Arts’ National Heritage Fellowship program in the United States which recognizes traditional artists while providing a one-time stipend. The Japanese program offers an annual stipend to “Holders of the Most Important Intangible Cultural Properties” with the expectation that the individual will pass their tradition on to others (Williams 1990:15-6). Michael Ann Williams notes that the Japanese program also specifically designates the arts or skills in addition to their “holders” and further, that this designation is one of many programs offered by the Japanese Government regarding intangible cultural heritage (1990:15-16). Bess Lomax Hawes details in the introduction of American Folk Masters: The National Heritage Fellows the many obstacles that impeded the United States from developing an equivalent system and provides a history of how the NEA’s National Heritage Fellowship awards came to be in their present form (Siporin 1992:14-21). The National Heritage Fellowship awards were first given out in 1982; the program continues today.
Lastly, in illustrating the diversity of UNESCO’s initiatives, I want to note a more recent convention, the “Creative Cities Network.” While the Network technically consists of member cities appointed to the network, the Network effectively functions as a register of cities recognized in the areas of craft and folk arts, literature, media arts, music, and gastronomy. There are currently 69 member cities and, notably, Paducah, Kentucky, was appointed to the network in 2013 for the category of “crafts and folk arts” (the only other U.S. city in this category is Santa Fe, New Mexico). The designation, partly honorific, also serves as a vehicle for creating partnerships between the various cities throughout the world.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to provide a wide-ranging look at heritage designation in both the United States and globally, and both tangible and intangible resources. It should be noted that this survey is by no means exhaustive. As is evident, though, the range of heritage designation programs and registers vary. The National Register of Historic Places remains, nevertheless, the most widely recognized heritage designation program in the United States, especially in regards to the tangible built environment. The National Register of Historic Places is more than honorific – listing or declaration of eligibility for inclusion on the National Register affords sites a certain degree of protection from federal undertakings. As such, though there may be other registers that are more appropriate and ultimately more desirable than National Register listing, it is still important that folklorists learn to work within the parameters of the National Register because it is a system that will remain. Many critique the National Register (as will be examined in the next chapter), however others are seeking not to abolish the
system but to broaden the types of historic sites considered eligible for listing. This is one of the aims of the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy. Laying the context, this chapter provided a brief survey of many heritage designation programs both locally, nationally, and internationally, situating the National Register of Historic Places within this continuum of designation methods. The remainder of this thesis will focus solely on the National Register of Historic Places, beginning with a more in-depth look at the mechanics of the Register in chapter two.
CHAPTER 2
The National Register and Traditional Cultural Places

While the mechanics of the National Register of Historic Places have been briefly outlined both in the introduction of this thesis, as well as chapter one, chapter two will discuss the designation program in great length, examining specifically Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*. As previously discussed, the National Register of Historic Places was created with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (1966) which authorized the Secretary of the Interior to “expand and maintain National Register of Historic Places composed of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture” (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 2009). The National Register program accepts properties to the Register based on three concepts that are addressed in the nomination form: historic significance, historic integrity, and historic context. A series of bulletins were published to help nomination writers complete the form and address these key concepts in great length, including Bulletin 15: *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (1997) and Bulletin 16A: *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form* (1997). These bulletins are a writer’s primary source of information for interpreting the lengthy form and the concepts discussed in this chapter.

Turning to the three concepts, the first is historic significance, achieved through one of four categories (the criteria for evaluation), discussed previously on pages 3 and 29. These ask that the property or objects have: association with events, activities, or patterns; association with important persons; distinctive physical characteristics of design, construction, or form; or last, potential to yield important information (National
While these four criteria are rather broad, there are also criteria considerations to be examined (exclusions to listing on the Register). Generally speaking, a cemetery or a specific birthplace or grave of an important person is not considered eligible, nor are resources that are primarily commemorative. Additionally, a property owned or used by religious institutions is ineligible (as per separation of church and state). Lastly, and key to this thesis, properties that have been reconstructed and moved, or resources that are less than fifty years old are generally considered ineligible as well. However, there are exceptions and these are sites falling into the long list of categories that may be found on page 30 (or see National Park Service 1997a:25).

Checking off criteria boxes on the nomination form is just the beginning of the nomination process for the National Register. Nomination forms include narrative descriptions of the site, building, and/or object, and the criteria selected must be justified in a separate narrative of significance that addresses the aforementioned criteria considerations, as well as issues of integrity. As such, the nomination form is quite lengthy as is the research process.

In addition to historic significance, a second key concept is integrity, defined by the National Register Bulletin 16A as, “the authenticity of a property’s historic identity, evidenced by the survival of physical characteristics that existed during the property’s prehistoric or historic period,” the “composite” of seven qualities: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association (National Park Service 1997b:4). A property does not have to have all seven qualities of integrity and National Register bulletins do not quantify the appropriate number required, however the Bulletin
16A does say, rather vaguely, that not all are qualities required so long as “the overall sense of past time and place is evident” (National Park Service 1997b:4).

The third key concept for National Register nomination is historic context. Historic contexts are “information about historic trends and properties grouped by an important theme in the prehistory or history of a community, State [sic], or the nation during a particular period of time” (National Park Service 1997b:4). In short, contexts for nominations include a theme, place, and time. The nomination writer must decide what the historic context for the site is and then spend a significant portion of the narrative of significance situating the nominated property within this historic context. As is apparent, then, the nomination writer must complete a great deal of research in order to determine the historic significance, integrity, and context of a property. In addition to visiting the site and documenting the structure in its present form, Bulletin 16A recommends first and foremost consulting sources such as wills, deeds, newspapers, maps, city directories, and similar records (National Park Service 1997b:4). The Bulletin also suggests several sources for gathering contextual information, including published histories, previous studies of historic resources, and historic contexts already developed for similar nomination forms (National Park Service 1997b:4). Primary sources such as interviews and oral histories are noticeably absent from the brief overview in Bulletin 16A, though there is an entire separate bulletin, Researching a Historic Property, with many more suggestions to help writers conduct research.

Though research for properties is divided into the three concepts of significance, integrity, and historic context, it is important to note that the nomination form features its own organization and is not divided equally into these three areas. Though the form is
not officially divided in this manner, it is helpful to mentally divide the nomination form into two broader sections, first, a description of the physical characteristics of the site, and second, a description of the significance and historic context of the site. Looking at this first part, nomination forms begin first with a straightforward form that asks for basic information such as name of property, location, and classification. The first few pages of the form do not give space for lengthy sentences, but asks the writer to select the category of property (building, district, site, structure, object), tally the number of contributing or noncontributing resources on the site, and indicate the historic and current functions for the site. Further, this portion of the nomination form asks the writer to name the architectural style of the structure (if known) and list of materials found in structures on the property. Directly following these brief descriptions, the nomination then asks for a narrative description of the property that details the historic and current physical appearance of contributing resources for the property. The writer begins with a summary paragraph outlining location, setting, size, and significant features, and then elaborates on the summary paragraph in the narrative description which can be as short or long as appropriate for the property. It is important to note that a discussion of the integrity of site is never officially prompted on the form and the writer must weave it into the nomination narrative. As will be seen in the case study in chapter three, I chose to include an analysis of integrity directly within the narrative description of the site, near the end of the narrative.

The second part of the nomination form, after the physical characteristics have been established in narrative form, is an evaluation of the significance of the property. Like the physical description, prior to drafting a narrative, a series of check-boxes and
fill-in questions must be answered, including the applicable National Register criteria, any criteria considerations (if applicable), and areas of significance (chosen from categories given in the instructions). Additionally, a period of significance must be declared, and if known, significant dates, significant associated persons, cultural affiliations, and the architect/builder should also be indicated. Directly following these fill-in-the-blanks, the writer is given the opportunity to provide a brief paragraph justifying the period of significance chosen, as well as the criteria considerations. After these justifications are made, the lengthiest part of the nomination form commences. The writer drafts a statement of significance summary paragraph in which he or she indicates the level of significance (national, state, or local), the historic context, and applicable criteria. The summary paragraph is then followed by a narrative statement of significance that provides the primary venue for outlining the writer’s argument for eligibility. Here, the scores of research are condensed into a persuasive narrative that places the property in its historic context, followed by any additional developmental history as needed. This portion concludes with a section for bibliographic sources and the entire form culminates with a section requesting geographic information (GIS and maps), drawings and photographs.

Benefits of National Register Eligibility and Listing

There are many benefits to National Register listing, beyond simply the honor of having a site officially recognized. National Register property owners may be eligible for federal and state historic tax credits for the rehabilitation and maintenance of historic properties. Further, National Register listing (or determination of eligibility of listing) affords modest protections to the property from federal action. The National Historic
Preservation Act, Section 106, requires that in the event of a federal undertaking affecting properties listed on the National Register (or those simply eligible), agencies must “take into account” the effects of their actions and produce a Memorandum of Agreement (Miller 2008:3). “Take into account” means that Section 106 is procedural rather than substantive in terms of the protection it affords and ultimately a federal agency may still choose to build a highway over the property, as an example. However, the cumbersome process of producing a Memorandum of Agreement often means that it is more efficient and desirable for the federal agencies involved to find an alternative route or plan. In other words, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act uses the National Register not as an honorific list, but as an inventory of properties that federal agencies must be aware of when making plans.

The National Historic Preservation Act is not the only law that uses the National Register for this purpose. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 mandates that federal agencies “include in every recommendation or report on proposals for legislation and other major federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, a detailed statement . . . on the environmental impact of the proposed action” and this includes both natural and cultural resources, including sites on the National Register of Historic Places (Miller 2008:5). As Julia Miller points out in A Layperson’s Guide to Historic Preservation Law, often the statutory protections under NEPA and NHPA overlap, though not always (2008:5). Lastly, Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 affords even stronger protections than NHPA and NEPA. Section 4(f) prohibits federal approval (or funding) of any transportation project that requires “the ‘use’ of any historic site, public park, recreation area, or wildlife
refuge, unless (1) there is ‘no feasible and prudent alternative to the project,’ and (2) the project includes ‘all possible planning to minimize harm to the project’” (Miller 2008:6).

It is important to note, though, that only Section 106 specifically benefits “eligible” sites in addition to those included on the Register. In all, there is a very significant benefit to National Register of Historic Places listing beyond the honor of recognition.

*Traditional Cultural Properties*

The nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places does not have a check box for traditional cultural properties and a nomination writer does not have to consider the category if he or she chooses not to. In fact, many State Historic Preservation Offices tend to view the notion of the traditional cultural property as an unnecessary additional step in the writing process and will often remove the justification for the status of a TCP from a nomination form if they feel it can be nominated just as easily to the Register without the TCP status. What, then, is a traditional cultural property and why do many nomination writers feel it is a necessary as a tool? Thomas King and Patricia Parker define a traditional cultural property (TCP) as “one that is eligible for inclusion in the National Register because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community’s history and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community” (Parker and King 1990:1). Understanding the value in traditional cultural status as well as the benefits of National Register eligibility and listing is important because with this knowledge, one will understand the importance of the Register as a tool for the proper documentation and protection of sites. As quoted in the introduction, part of Thomas King’s motivation in drafting Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting*
*Traditional Cultural Properties,* was “to use persuasive powers of Section 106 to motivate agencies to pay attention to such places [Native American spiritual sites, Micronesian origin places, Poletown, and Amish Country] and the communities that valued them” (King 2003:33). However, properly identifying sites as traditional cultural properties also enriches the historical record. Nominating a site for a past period of significance and failing to take into account its current importance to a living community does not record the full picture of the site. Traditional cultural properties make it acceptable to nominate a site not for its “pastness” alone, but for the value it brings to a living community today. This means that the period of significance for nominated TCPs can extend to the present day and, presumably, the community can continue to use and evolve the site to fit its practices, whereas previously, the period of significance was required to be a finite period of time in the past (ideally more than 50 years ago).

If the nomination process for a traditional cultural property requires the same form, then, how are traditional cultural properties indicated on the form? As previously stated, a TCP must still meet one of the four Register criteria and maintain appropriate integrity. For lack of a better description, then, the designation of TCP is sometimes called an “overlay.” However, perhaps a better way to conceptually understand TCPs is to remember that a National Register site is expected to have historic or cultural significance. Someone chooses, then, to nominate a TCP because they have traditional cultural significance “derived from the role the property plays in a community’s historically rooted beliefs, customs, and practices” (Parker and King 1990:1). In a way, traditional culture properties can be defined as properties evaluated through a particular “type” of significance.
Bulletin 38 spells out the steps needed to determine eligibility for TCPs and as might be expected, the steps look very much like that of Bulletin 16A, except they have been tailored to the TCP designation process. First and what would seem the most obvious, it is important to ensure that when nominating a traditional cultural property, the entity is in fact a property. As the Bulletin observes, “Because the cultural practices or beliefs that give a traditional cultural property its significance are typically still observed in some form at the time the property is evaluated, it is sometimes perceived that the intangible practices or beliefs themselves, not the property, constitute the subject of evaluation . . . it should be clearly recognized at the outset that the National Register does not include intangible resources themselves” (Parker and King 1990:11). In short, in a community that decorates cemetery markers, as in the case of the North Shore Cemetery for which folklorist Alan Jabbour drafted an environmental impact statement, it is not the decoration process that would be nominated, but the cemetery as an important venue tied to the decoration process (Jabbour and Coyle 2005).

The second step in identifying traditional cultural properties is considering the property’s integrity. While the Register asks that the sites have integrity in location, design, setting, workmanship, feeling, and association, Bulletin 38 gives two aspects of integrity fundamental to TCPs: integrity of relationship and condition. Integrity of relationship means that the property being nominating must be integrally related to the traditional cultural practices or beliefs of the community. Integrity of condition is examined because significant alterations to a traditional cultural property can cause the site to lose its significance; however, Bulletin 38 notes that a property may retain significance despite alterations due to the dynamism of cultural values and practice.
For this reason Parker and King affirm a notion woven throughout Bulletin 38: ethnographic research is critical in identifying and documenting traditional cultural properties. The bulletin states, “...the integrity of a possible traditional cultural property must be considered with reference to the views of traditional practitioners; if its integrity has not been lost in their eyes, it probably has sufficient integrity to justify further evaluation” (Parker and King 1990:12). This point will be critical to the case study in the following chapter.

Step three (after ensuring the property is indeed a property and considering integrity) is evaluating the property in regards to the National Register’s four criteria described above, as well as the criteria considerations. To summarize Bulletin 38’s notes for each of the criteria would be a lengthy process, suffice to say that the bulletin provides specific examples of how traditional cultural properties might fit into each of the four criteria. An example of how the criteria might be applied to a TCP, criterion B, Association with the lives or persons significant in our past, might be interpreted to include persons who figure in the myths of a group. Bulletin 38 provides the example of Tahquitz Canyon which was listed on the Register because of its association with Tahquitz, a Cahuilla Indian demigod, who, according to the tribe’s tradition, occupies a cave in the canyon (1990:13). In examining each criteria, the Bulletin is careful to note that in statements such as “Association with the lives or persons significant in our past,” the word “our” refers to the people to whom the property is considered traditionally important.

The fourth and last step in determining eligibility for a traditional cultural place is to examine the criteria considerations to see if any makes the property ineligible. TCPs,
in some cases, might require a shift in perspective. For example, the Bulletin points out that in some cultural groups, like Native American tribes, there is no distinction between culture and religion and as such, to exclude sites used for religious purposes takes an ethnocentric view of the culture (i.e. consideration A: ownership by a religious institution or use for religious purposes). The Bulletin writes, “applying the ‘religious’ exclusion’ without careful and sympathetic consideration to properties of significance to a traditional cultural group can result in discriminating against the group by effectively denying the legitimacy of its history and culture” (1990:15). Pertinent to chapter three of this thesis, though, I wish to summarize a portion of Bulletin 38’s key points as they relate to the case study that will be discussed. First, in regards to consideration B, relocated properties, Bulletin 38 states that, “where a property is intrinsically portable, however, moving it does not destroy its significance, provided it remains ‘located in a historically appropriate setting’ . . . A property may also retain its significance if it has been moved historically” (1990:15-16). This point is critical to the casitas of New York City as will be demonstrated in the following chapter. Secondly, Bulletin 38 makes the statement that, in regards to consideration G, significance achieved within the past 50 years cannot be considered traditional. The case study of Casita Rincón Criollo will challenge this consideration but I will save the discussion for chapter three.

In concluding the discussion on Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, it is important to turn to the introduction of the bulletin, in which Thomas King and Patricia Parker preface the discussion by acknowledging difficulties in recognizing traditional cultural properties (1990:2). In recalling the directives of *Cultural Conservation* report of 1983, this bulletin was
produced, in part, to help the National Park Service implement the recommendations of
*Cultural Conservation*. Properties that could be termed traditional cultural properties had
already long been included on the register, though not so clearly labeled. Bulletin 38 was
prepared to help assist in identifying intangible cultural resources, albeit those tied to
physical, tangible properties. In reflecting on Bulletin 38 over a decade later, Thomas
King emphasized the following points in *Places That Count: Traditional Cultural
Properties in Cultural Resource Management* (repeated from the thesis introduction):

- A place can be eligible for the National Register based on its value in the
eyes of a traditional community like an Indian tribe.
- Such a place need not be anything that’s appreciated, or even perceived as
such, by an outsider.
- Entirely natural places can be eligible as TCPs, as can buildings,
structures, archaeological sites, landscapes, and urban neighborhoods.
- TCPs are identified through consultation with communities.
- The significance of TCPs must be understood with reference to
community perceptions—it’s how the community perceives the places and
its significance that matters. (King 2003:34)

For the interested scholar, King’s *Places That Count* is a must-read in the discussion of
traditional cultural properties. Like all publications read and quoted by others, Bulletin
38 took on a life of its own after Thomas King and Patricia Parker wrote it and in the last
decade, Bulletin 38 has not necessarily been interpreted or used in the manner with which
the original authors intended. As an example illustrated earlier in this thesis, the term
“community” is used, in practice, to refer almost exclusively to Native American tribes.
The Bulletin did acknowledge the special significance it would have for Native
representation on the National Register, but it followed that:

The fact that this Bulletin gives special emphasis to Native American properties
should not be taken to imply that only Native Americans ascribe traditional
cultural value to historic properties, or that such ascription is common only to
ethnic minority groups in general. Americans of every ethnic origin have
properties to which they ascribe traditional cultural value, and if such properties
meet the National Register criteria, they can and should be nominated for inclusion in the National Register. (Parker and King 1990:3)

The Bulletin has not been utilized to its full potential—communities that have had properties listed as TCPs have typically been easily described cultural groups, belonging to a neatly labeled ethnicity or likewise, such as the Greek (i.e. the Tarpon Springs Greektown Historic District/TCP, prepared by folklorist Tina Bucuvalas and listed in 2014). It is important not to discount the good Bulletin 38 has brought Native American tribes, however this narrow interpretation is a problem, especially in the eyes of folklorists who have a much broader understanding of “tradition” and “group.” However, anyone revisiting Bulletin 38 cannot deny that Parker and King meant for communities beyond Native American tribes to be included on the National Register. The reality, though, is the Bulletin 38 is a guide and is not legally binding by any stretch of the imagination. Despite the recommendations and advice contained within the Bulletin, the National Park Service does not have to abide by the guidelines. In regards to TCPs, the history of successful TCP nominations has functioned more akin to case law—those that are successful today are generally successful in regards to a narrow interpretation of TCPs based on past precedent.

The narrow interpretation of tradition and group, and by extension, eligible TCPs, is rooted in the fact that most nominations are not drafted by the communities themselves (save for THPOs, as discussed in the introduction). The authors of nomination forms, too, are informed by several decades of established historic preservation research methodology. As one will recall, Bulletin 16A recommends consulting secondary sources, and primary sources such as oral histories are noticeably absent in the list of suggested research sources (National Park Service 1997b:4). Preservationists are
traditionally not trained as ethnographers. While Bulletin 38 takes great care to emphasize the importance of speaking with traditional groups and conducting ethnographic research, it is my assumption that the recommendation is not taken as seriously as it should be (Parker and King 1990:4). While nomination writers may conduct ethnographic research upon deciding to write a traditional cultural property nomination form, some TCPs may not be as easily identified until after ethnographic research has already begun. This is where folkloristic training is of critical benefit in identifying traditional cultural properties. Folklorists are currently working to address the inequities of the National Register and traditional cultural places. Folklorists, with a much more inclusive definition of group and tradition, are best equipped to widen the representation of traditional groups on the National Register and if folklorists continue to produce TCP nominations (as they have and are working to do right now), the precedence for TCP eligibility will come to align more closely with Bulletin 38’s original intention. This is the express intention of the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy. Thomas King once criticized folklorists for their noticeable avoidance of participation in the “rough-and-tumble” Section 106 review process in regards to the withdrawal of the American Folklife Center from the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Project (King 2003:32). The AFS Working Group is taking a proactive stance today recognizing that past absences from preservation policy has meant that folkloristic perspectives, which could offer much improvement to the National Register nomination process, have also been absent.

1 King is referring to the withdrawal of the American Folklife Center from the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Project in the face of opposition from a number of folklorists. More than a decade later, Peggy Bulger, the second director of the American Folklife Center, concluded that in the decision “folklorists missed an opportunity to be central to the work of cultural conservation and the environmental survey work that is still going on today (Bulger 2013).
CHAPTER 3

The American Folklore Society and the Casita Rincón Criollo: A Case Study

Folklorists working in the realm of historic preservation saw an exciting, long-awaited opportunity in Bulletin 38 *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties* when it was published. The very same year, the American Folklife Center had hosted a conference at the Library of Congress entitled “Cultural Conservation: Reconfiguring the Cultural Mission,” which brought together folklorists, anthropologists, archaeologists, preservationists, urban planners and others to engage in a larger dialogue on heritage protection in the United States. Papers from the Cultural Conservation conference were later published in an edited volume, *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (Hufford 1994). The tone of the early 1990s was hopeful. Bulletin 38, as discussed in previous chapter, meant that places that derive significance from cultural practices or the beliefs of living communities could be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and thus, the bulletin was an advancement in integrating the protection of both tangible and intangible cultural resources, the express hope of the 1983 *Cultural Conservation* report. Unfortunately, the promise of the early 1990s soon faded. As detailed in chapter two, National Register coordinators at the state level often held the position that TCPs were meant to be used exclusively for Native American properties and so, in practice, the statement in Bulletin 38 that said “Americans of every ethnic origin have properties to which they ascribe traditional cultural value” was ignored, and the potential of the Bulletin left to waste (Parker and King 1990:3).
As detailed in chapter one, public folklorists interested in the preservation of traditional places instead turned to the model of grassroots registers, with significant examples being those previously discussed (City Lore’s Place Matters, TAUNY’s Register of Very Special Places). However, despite the success of these grassroots methods in recognizing places important to the communities, alternative and grassroots registers did not afford the protections of federal law (substantive or procedural).

Further, folklorists working with national preservation policy declined in numbers, and those individual folklorists who continued to work in preservation did so separately and without any formalized venue for communication and collaboration. It was significant, then, when in 2010, the American Folklore Society authorized a working group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy to address the folklorist’s role in preservation. The Working Group was led by co-chairs Laurie Kay Sommers, an independent folklorist, and Michael Ann Williams, chair of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology at Western Kentucky University.

**AFS Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation**

The Working Group first met in July 2011 at the Library of Congress for a two-day meeting and among those in attendance were co-chairs Laurie Kay Sommers and Michael Ann Williams, representatives from City Lore in New York City and TAUNY’s Register of Very Special Places, and Paul Lusignan of the National Register of Historic Places (Lusignan attended as a guest for one of the sessions). Awarded a policy initiative grant, the 2011-2012 Working Group held the goal to “better position folklorists and folklore methodologies as central forces in historic preservation” (Sommers 2013:1). Members of the Working Group included Steve Zeitlin and Molly Garfinkel from City
Lore and Place Matters, Jill Breit (and later, Varick Chittenden) from TAUNY’s Register of Very Special Places, folklorist Tom Carter of the University of Utah, Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions, John Vlach of George Washington University, and Jay Edwards of Louisiana State University. In brainstorming projects for the Working Group, Michael Ann Williams suggested that the group pursue model TCP nominations based on properties already listed in the grassroots registers of Place Matters and Register of Very Special Places. Shortly after, Williams secured funding from Western Kentucky University to support graduate students in the research, which would ultimately lead to my involvement in the project. It is important to note that Western Kentucky University is the only graduate program in folklore with a designated historic preservation track and so it was appropriate that WKU students become involved in the research.

_Issues to be Addressed in the AFS Working Group Model TCP Project_

At the time of the Working Group’s first meeting in July 2011, it was rumored that the National Park Service was looking to rework Bulletin 38. Naturally, then, the Working Group sought to bring folklorists into the fold of the on-going discussion of TCPs and a model TCP nomination project would become the vehicle. Framing the model nomination project were several specific on-going issues that folklorists had with the current interpretation of traditional cultural properties. The bulk of the discussion regarding TCPs at that time (and today—the Bulletin is still under revision) was focused on defining “traditional group,” a term that is more readily understood by professional folklorists working in preservation but remains seemingly vague and difficult for National Register folks. That is not to say that folklorists have a unified definition—words understood as key to the discipline of folklore, including “tradition” and “group,”
have been questioned at great length, as in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, edited by Burt Feintuch (2003) (See the literature review). However, when considering traditional groups apart from Native tribes, the National Park Service has tended toward ethnicity as a primary factor in defining traditional communities. Folklorists, however, can easily envision the term “traditional group” to mean much more. For instance, folklorists have also long studied the traditions of occupational groups. Traditional occupations are often jeopardized in development and land use planning projects (such as an interstate interrupting a cattle trail). When the working group began its project, the National Park Service was reluctant to acknowledge that occupation groups were traditional groups and no examples of TCPs based on occupation could be found. Important strides have been made to this end in the last few years, though. The Green River Drift Trail in Wyoming, arguing for ranching as a traditional occupation, was listed in 2013 and in 2014, the Tarpon Springs Greektown Historic District (mentioned earlier) was listed, a TCP that features the context of ethnicity, but also maritime occupational culture (Nowlin 2013; Bucuvalas 2014).

However it is not simply the notion of “traditional group” that the Working Group found problematic. The fifty-year rule of thumb that guides National Register practice also poses issues for the nomination of traditional cultural places, especially when Bulletin 38 reads, “A significance ascribed to a property only in the past 50 years cannot be considered traditional” (Parker and King 1990:17). If TCP nominations place the practice and beliefs of living communities at the heart of the nomination, it is natural that the period of significance needs to be extended to the present. However, as stated in the Bulletin 38, practices must be fifty years or older. In other words, the Bulletin defines
tradition as something that endures over great length of time, a notion that folklorists
rejected in the mid to late twentieth century. Henry Glassie writes in *Eight Words for the
Study of Expressive Culture* that, “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past,”
and further, “Tradition, a key to historical knowledge, is to be understood as a process of
cultural construction” (Glassie 2003:176,179). Folklorists have examined tradition as a
verb, a process, and as a form of performance (to “traditionalize,” Hymes 1975). In
short, as Michael Ann Williams wrote succinctly for a presentation on the AFS Working
Group, “traditionality is ascribed by a community and tradition continually reinvents
itself anew. Virtually no contemporary folklorist believes that cultural practices have to
be of a certain age to be defined as ‘traditional’” (Siegel and Williams 2015).

*Selecting the Model TCP Site*

When the AFS Working Group began the process of identifying individual
properties to be nominated, sites already nominated to the grassroots registers of City
Lore and the Register of Very Special Places were of prime interest. In selecting the site,
the Working Group wanted to push the envelope yet refrain from challenges that had
little chance of being nominated to the Register. The goal was to not only push the
envelope, but to also achieve successful nomination and create precedence. Therefore,
the Working Group looked for sites with a relatively conservative notion of traditional
community. Several students of Western Kentucky University spearheaded this research
under the direction of Michael Ann Williams, including Sarah McCartt-Jackson, Katie
Wynn, and Caitlin Coad. Surprisingly, the selection of a property for the model
nomination proved quite difficult. Several roadblocks impeded the selection, the first
being that some individuals and communities did not wanted to be listed on the National
Register for varying reasons. As an example, early in the selection process the Working Group and research team considered the nomination of a matzo factory in New York City, of great importance to the Jewish community there. While the owner was interested, the family expressed reservations. When the selection was narrowed down to four places, yet another property was withdrawn from consideration by the community holders as well—the community in this instance feared the potential federal scrutiny.

The two final properties for consideration were chosen from the Place Matters register in New York City. One was the Nom Wah, the earliest known dim sum restaurant in New York. Ultimately, Now Wah was eliminated when it was discovered that the building was already included in the Chinatown district nomination, although virtually no information on Nom Wah was included in the nomination. The Working Group could have pursued the Nom Wah all the same and added research on the property to the nomination form. This would have been a worthwhile exercise, contributing information to the historical record. However, in the end, the Working Group decided to focus on the other New York City property as the most promising as a model nomination.

Casita Rincón Criollo

Casita Rincón Criollo, the site selected for the Working Groups’ model TCP nomination, is a Puerto Rican casita and community garden in the South Bronx known most significantly for its role as an important incubator of the musical genres of bomba and plena in the region and nation. As introduced in the beginning of this thesis, the word “casita” means “little house” and, in New York, the earliest recorded examples of Puerto Rican casita creation appear to date from the early 1970s. In the 1960s and 70s, a combination of different factors (including industry relocation and urban renewal) had
brought much devastation to many parts of the city. It was against this backdrop that the New York Puerto Rican tradition of creating casitas and gardens on vacant city lots began. Casitas tended to be built as impermanent structures because community members often erected them illegally on abandoned, litter-filled lots. Further, casitas were designed to physically evoke the environment of Puerto Rico and over time, gardens and other recreational amenities were added (See Hughes 2009). This was the case with Casita Rincón Criollo, built and founded by Jose “Chema” Soto around 1970 and located on a double lot on the southwest corner of Brook Avenue and 157th Street in the Melrose neighborhood of South Bronx. Rincón Criollo is an excellent example of a traditional cultural property with significant practices tied to the structures and site, namely the musical traditions of bomba and plena, but also other practices such as Puerto Rican festival celebrations, gardening, and games. Though Casita Rincón Criollo is one of the city’s oldest and best-known casitas, the site is just one of many that dot the landscape of greater New York City.

When choosing a site for the model nomination, the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy felt that Casita Rincón Criollo would serve as an ideal candidate for several reasons. First, the site had already been listed on City Lore’s Place Matters, and second, as a result of City Lore’s work, the Puerto Rican community that had built the site was experienced and open to working with outside researchers. In short, key primary sources had already been identified and contact made. Perhaps most important, though, was the fact that the community would greatly benefit from inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. Casitas are by nature transitory structures at constant threat of
demolition and National Register listing would help ensure the casita’s survival. However most pertinent to the AFS Working Group’s goal were several problematic factors that served as interesting challenges for the Working Group. Casita Rincón Criollo’s main structure and gardens had been moved to a new location in 2006 and, more problematic, the casita was built less than fifty years ago. The AFS Working Group on Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy had set out to push the boundaries of what could be considered eligible on the National Register of Historic Places and Casita Rincón Criollo would certainly push these boundaries.

Having secured funding from Western Kentucky University, students in the MA Folk Studies program at WKU, under the guidance of Michael Ann Williams, have been involved in the Model TCP project from the beginning and the research process has been a collaborative project between Place Matters and Western Kentucky University. Research on Casita Rincón Criollo began in 2011. Before discussing the research process for Casita Rincón Criollo, though, it is perhaps helpful to include first the current draft of the Narrative Description summary paragraph of the site so that a proper visual of the site may be achieved (see Figure 1 in the Introduction as well as Figure 2 and 3 in the Appendix for photographs and drawings):

The Casita Rincón Criollo is a Puerto Rican style casita (“little house”) and community garden in the South Bronx. It stands on a double lot on the southwest corner of Brook Avenue and 157th Street in the South Bronx, and has been at this location since 2006. Previously, the Casita Rincón Criollo was situated one block north at the northwest corner of Brook Avenue and 158th Street, and this is where it had been since it was first created in the early 1970s. The exact date that work began on the property is unknown since, as with most Puerto Rican style gardens and casitas in New York City, the creation of the Casita Rincón Criollo took place unofficially and no records were kept relating to its construction. In its present form, the contributing resources of the Casita Rincón Criollo include the site on which it stands, a wooden casita structure, and a wooden stage structure. While
not all casitas in New York City have the same features, these features are all significant to Casita Rincón Criollo as this particular casita is known for its contributions to the musical forms of bomba and plena. The site consists of a community garden complete with fruit trees, shrubs, grape vines, flowers, and vegetable and herb plots, along with courtyard areas (known as bateys). The casita is centrally placed within the site and is a one story, two room, enclosed wooden structure with a veranda. It is painted a bright aquamarine color and is built in a style typical of New York Puerto Rican casitas, which in turn recalls the historic vernacular architecture of the Puerto Rican countryside. The small open wooden stage is towards the rear northwest corner of the site and serves as a performance area. The Casita Rincón Criollo is one of the oldest surviving, if not the oldest surviving, Puerto Rican community casita and garden within the South Bronx. (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:3)

As per the AFS Working Group’s vision, WKU students have sought from the beginning to incorporate folklore methodology into the research process for Casita Rincón Criollo. Oral history interviews and face-to-face conversations, as espoused by Bulletin 38, are fundamental to folklore methodology. Written sources would not be enough, especially when the site was so important to a community that is still actively using the casita. Graduate student Rachel Hopkin pioneered the first stages of the nomination process from 2011 to 2012. Fluent in Spanish, Hopkin not only compiled existing scholarship on Rincón Criollo and casitas in general, but also visited New York City in person to conduct oral history interviews with many casita members and scholars. Her interviewees included casita founder Jose “Chema” Soto and his son Carlos Soto. Hopkin also interviewed casita members who attribute the Rincón with the fostering of the musical genres of bomba and plena, among them Juan Gutiérrez, National Heritage Award Fellow and founder of the highly successful musical group Los Pleneros de la 21 and Matthew Gonzalez, an up-and-coming musician who grew up at the Casita. In addition to casita members, Hopkin interviewed many scholars who had completed earlier research on the site as well, including ethnomusicologist Roberta Singer,
photographer Martha Cooper, and folklorist Joseph Sciorra. The interviews, both of
casita members and scholars, proved especially important and many quotes from the
interview were woven throughout the body of the nomination. As an example, Juan
Gutiérrez recalled:

   Well, to tell you a little bit more about it, you know, the group that we put
together, now it’s an organization Los Pleneros de la 21. It was formed there in la
casita. And we—I met most of the original founders of the group, you know,
there, in la casita. They used to hang out there. There was a time when I was
there every single day. (Gutiérrez 2012)

Most importantly, though, the interviews were primary source material for the types of
daily activities that take place at the Casita Rincón Criollo and their evaluation by those
that partake in these activities.

In 2012, Rachel Hopkin finished the first full rough draft of the nomination with
the research she had, focusing on the role the casita played in the dissemination of Puerto
Rican folk culture with just a small section on the musical practices of bomba and plena.
The site would be nominated under Criteria A, a property associated with events that
have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history and the criteria
considerations to be addressed included the fact that the property had been moved and
secondly, the property was less than fifty years old. Hopkin’s Statement of Significance
Summary Paragraph read as follows:

   The Casita Rincón Criollo in the South Bronx is a traditional cultural property
which was created around 1970. It is an exceptional example of a New York
Puerto Rican casita and garden, as it is one of the city’s oldest and it is linked to
particularly enduring and vibrant community of first, second and now third
generation Puerto Rican migrants. As is typical with this type of property,
community members created the Casita Rincón Criollo on a vacant city lot in a
troubled inner city area as a form of collective response to their need for a place to
gather and find refuge from the often harsh outside world. Over time, the lot was
converted into a landscaped site containing a casita structure surrounded by bateys
(courtyard areas) and gardens. The site of the Casita Rincón Criollo was deliberately developed to physically evoke the environment of Puerto Rico and over the years it has offered community members a place where they can come together to pass time on a daily basis, garden, take part in recreational activities, celebrate traditional community events, mark important calendar days, and learn about and disseminate Puerto Rican folk culture. The Casita Rincón Criollo is particularly associated with the emergence onto the US cultural landscape of the indigenous Puerto Rican musical forms of bomba and plena as expressive forces to be reckoned with. Although the Casita Rincón Criollo is less than 50 years old, the traditions that underpin it are far older. Moreover, New York Puerto Rican casitas and gardens are by nature fragile and temporary, not least because they are established on land that does not belong to their creators and therefore exist under constant threat of demolition. In 2006, this almost came to pass for the Casita Rincón Criollo when its original site was reclaimed by the city for a building project. However, rather than lose their casita, the community members moved it to a new location one block away and recreated the old environment on the new site. The Casita Rincón Criollo meets the National Register Criterion A as it associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history: namely Puerto Rican migration to the US, the Puerto Rican experience of life within the US and the development of culture that is unique to the Puerto Rican American experience in the US. In addition, it is being nominated as a Traditional Cultural Property as it is associated with cultural practices of a living Puerto Rican migrant community that are both rooted in the community’s history and are important to maintain its continuing cultural identity. (Hopkin 2012:7-8)

It should be noted that desired summary paragraphs lengths differ between states and some State Historic Preservation Offices prefer short, succinct paragraphs (as with Kentucky). The New York SHPO, on the other hand, prefers lengthy detailed summary paragraphs as is illustrated by Hopkin’s example. Returning to the thesis of her nomination draft, though, Hopkin laid the foundation for the nomination’s fundamental message: the age of Casita Rincón Criollo and 2006 relocation does not threaten the integrity of the site nor disqualify it for eligibility on the Register, but in fact defines what a casita is and forms the backbone of why Casita Rincón Criollo stands out among other casitas. Casitas are by their very nature impermanent. Further, when many casitas were
being demolished or forced out by the landowners for redevelopment, Rincón Criollo’s members rallied behind their site and successfully found a new site, just one block from the original site. As Hopkin’s interviews confirmed, casita members painstakingly saved what they could, including a treasured apple tree and much of the architectural fabric of the original casita house, and recreated their environment on their new lot (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:5).

While Hopkin’s draft was effective in demonstrating the importance of Casita Rincón Criollo to the community members who use it, it became apparent that there needed to be a stronger argument for why this particular casita stood out among other extant casitas. Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra had completed the last full survey of casitas in 1988 (in collaboration with anthropologist Susan Slymovics and aforementioned Luis Aponte-Parés) (Garfinkel 2014). Nancy Solomon (an AFS Working Group member) also worked with them to complete some measured drawings as well. However, since 1988, researchers did not know which casitas had quietly survived, been demolished, or were no longer actively used. For instance, some surviving casitas have been gentrified through their incorporation into the New York City GreenThumb park system. Casita Rincón Criollo is also a GreenThumb garden, however it remains under the control and guidance of its original founders and founder’s children. Before the Casita Rincón Criollo could be nominated as the exemplary casita, there needed to be a survey of the other remaining casitas. Kathleen LeFrank, the New York National Register Coordinator, requested that a comparative study be added to the nomination form and the task was no simple feat. In 2013, Caitlin Coad took over Hopkin’s work and became the second Western Kentucky University graduate student to assist the AFS
Working Group in the model nomination project. In the summer of 2013, Coad traveled to New York City to sort through Cooper’s and Sciorra’s records and complete a windshield survey of the sites they had surveyed in 1988. She visited each site and recorded what was lost and what survived. In what was certainly a laborious task, she also looked for new casita sites. Summarizing her data, Coad found 9 casitas in the Bronx where there had been 35 in 1988 (see Table 1 and 2 in Appendix). Five of these casitas were not included in the 1988 survey. Coad surveyed five sites in Harlem where there had been 20 originally and one of these casitas was not included in the 1988 survey. In Brooklyn, Coad found one casita where there had been six in 1988 and this single casita was not in the original 1988 survey. Lastly, Caitlin Coad found one casita in the Lower East Side where there had been two in the 1988 survey and this surveyed casita was not in the original 1988 survey. Based on this evidence, she found that casita sites appear to have had the highest survival rate in the Bronx and that most of the casitas in existence today are much newer than the Casita Rincón Criollo (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:32). Indeed, Coad’s data suggests that casitas are an endangered typology, to which I agree with Molly Garfinkel who adds that it “makes it especially appropriate for inclusion in the National and State Registers at this time” (Garfinkel 2014). To supplement the oral histories and published sources Hopkin had gathered, Coad compiled this information into a detailed chart and handed the information off to me. I would later simplify the chart into a simplified and more easily understood format for inclusion in the additional historic context section of the National Register nomination form (see Table 3 in Appendix).
In 2013, I was tasked with finalizing Rachel Hopkin’s draft of the nomination form by using Caitlin Coad’s comparative data as well as some new scholarship that had recently been completed on Rincón Criollo’s tradition of musical performance. César Colón-Montijo, a Rincón Criollo member, had shared with the nomination research team his thesis work and ethnographic research on the musical performance of *plena* at Rincón Criollo (Colón-Montijo 2013). Through his scholarship and Caitlin Coad’s survey of the remaining casitas, it became clear that the previous draft of the nomination had understated the importance of Casita Rincón Criollo’s musical tradition and that this information would further distinguish the casita from other surviving casitas in New York City. Rincón’s musical tradition was perhaps the most important reason for the nomination of Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property. As a result, I rewrote the nomination taking this new information into account, including Colón-Montijo’s own personal communication with Juan Gutiérrez in which he quotes Gutiérrez as saying that traditional *plena* is “a song-driven musical genre that takes its dynamics responding to the circumstances where and when it is performed” (Colón-Montijo 2012:17). I found that this new insight would become a key component of the second draft’s statement of significance because, as I would then write in the nomination, if “*plena* responds to its environment, the physical experience of the casita has therefore played a critical role in the manifestation of the genre today” (Hopkin and Siegel 2014, 16). Both *bomba* and *plena* are practiced at the casita on a daily basis as well as performed on special occasions and for special events. Additionally, several leading musical ensembles grew out of musical relationships formed at the Casita Rincón Criollo, including
nationally regarded Los Pleneros de la 21, Conjunto Cimarrón, Cumbalaya, and Los Instantaneos de la Plena (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:17; Los Pleneros de la 21 2013).

Ethnomusicologist Roberta Singer specifically credits Casita Rincón Criollo with the flowering of *bomba* and *plena* in the United States and in an interview with Rachel Hopkin said, “I think that the real importance of the casita is not it in and of itself as it is the impact it’s had on this renaissance. And it’s helped younger Puerto Ricans feel connected if they wanted to feel connected” (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:18; Singer 2012). In fact, in addition to founding Los Pleneros de la 21, Juan Gutierrez is a founder of BomPlenazo, a biennial celebration of *bomba* and *plena* hosted at the Hostos Center for Arts and Culture in the Bronx. BomPlenazo attracts performers and audiences from across the United States and the festival features four days of concerts, exhibitions, workshops, film screenings, and panel discussions. In testament to the importance of the Casita Rincón Criollo to the local and national musical scenes of *bomba* and *plena*, the 2012 BomPlenazo was held in honor of Casita Rincón Criollo, and as a press release for Hostos Community Colleges states, “BomPlenazo 2012 will also take the opportunity to celebrate important anniversaries of three institutions which have been instrumental in the renaissance of Afro-Puerto Rican culture in the United States . . . The second is Centro Cultural Rincón Criollo, affectionately known as *La Casita de Chema*, which for four decades has served as the most important incubator of *bomba* and *plena* practitioners on the East coast” (Hostos Community College 2012). The press release says further:

The Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture accordingly dedicates BomPlenazo 2012 to José “Chema” Soto, including the countless musicians of renown who have been associated with *La Casita*, and to Juan “Juango” Gutiérrez and all the great musicians and dancers who have joined forces with him over the years. Significantly, all three institutions – Hostos, La Casita and Los Pleneros de la 21 –
emerged in the South Bronx at a time of struggle during which its existence as a viable urban community was in danger. They not only endured to celebrate these anniversaries; they made invaluable contributions to this historically important community which today is experiencing a remarkable renaissance. (2012)

With this new information in mind, I altered the Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph to its current (still rather long) form:

Created around 1970, the Casita Rincón Criollo in the South Bronx is an exceptional example of a New York Puerto Rican casita and garden. As one of the city’s oldest casitas, it is linked to an enduring and vibrant community of first, second and now third generation Puerto Rican migrants. This casita stands out among other extant casitas through its association with the introduction and increased popularity of indigenous Puerto Rican musical forms of bomba and plena on the US cultural landscape. Because the communal musical performance of bomba and plena, both rooted in the community’s history, is important to maintaining the community’s continuing cultural identity, the Casita Rincón Criollo is nominated as a traditional cultural property. As such, the Casita Rincón Criollo meets the National Register Criterion A as it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history: namely the education and dissemination of the musical genres of bomba and plena, significant on a national level (Areas of significance: education and performing arts). Intrinsically linked, the casita is also significant in the areas of Hispanic ethnic heritage and social history as the casita is part of the Puerto Rican migration experience and the development of culture that is unique to the Puerto Rican American experience in the US. Community members created the Casita Rincón Criollo on a vacant city lot in an inner city area in response to their need for a place to gather and find refuge from the often harsh urban environment. The site of the Casita Rincón Criollo was deliberately developed to physically evoke the environment of Puerto Rico and over the years it has offered community members a place where they can come together to pass time on a daily basis, garden, and learn about and disseminate Puerto Rican folk culture. Although the Casita Rincón Criollo is less than 50 years old, the traditions that underpin it are far older, including the architectural style of the main structure and the musical forms performed. The casita has been relocated, however, New York Puerto Rican casitas and gardens are by nature impermanent; they are established on land that does not belong to their creators and therefore exist under constant threat of demolition. In 2006, the Casita Rincón Criollo’s original site was reclaimed by the city for a building project. Rather than lose the casita, the community members moved it to a new location one block away and recreated the old
environment on the new site, thus maintaining the integrity of the casita. As it is associated with cultural practices of a living Puerto Rican migrant community, the period of significance for Casita Rincón Criollo spans 1970 to the present day. (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:11-12)

In June of 2014, I traveled to New York City, and accompanied by Molly Garfinkel of City Lore and Place Matters, measured and created detailed drawings of the casita house and gardens (see Appendix). I was rewarded by discovering that the site was as every bit as compelling as I had imagined it would be. Casita Rincón Criollo has one contributing building, the casita house, one contributing site, and one contributing structure (a small performance stage) as well as a non-contributing structure (a small storage shed). With this data, I created a drawing of the site plan and floor plans for both the casita and stage and then reworked large portions of the architectural description, based on these sketches and photographs from the site visit. Using known historic photographs of the casita before its move to the new site, as well as descriptions of the site provided in Hopkin’s oral history interviews, I also expanded the narrative description of the site to discuss and contrast the original casita structure with the reconstruction of the structure after the 2006 relocation.

In addition to expanding the architectural description, the trip to New York City proved advantageous as it helped me to include a lengthy analysis of the integrity of the Casita Rincón Criollo, an integral section that had been missing in the first draft. As evidenced by the casita’s relocation, it was important to address these issues of integrity directly in the nomination form. The newly added section made the case for integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association based on the nature of the casita as a temporary and transitory structure. Because the structure had only been moved one block and great care was taken to recycle materials, I concluded that the
Casita Rincón Criollo met, perhaps surprisingly to the reader, six of the National Register’s seven aspects of integrity, lacking only integrity of location (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:20). In regards to integrity of location and setting, I wrote that:

The Casita Rincón Criollo does not meet the requirements for integrity of location because the casita has been moved since its initial construction. However, the casita form, by nature is temporary and transitory . . . Today, the Casita Rincón Criollo has no intention of moving locations, however location as an evaluation of integrity remains in direct contradiction to the nature of the casita form.

However, while the casita does not have integrity of location, it does maintain integrity of setting, as the casita has been moved just one block away from its original site, remaining a fixture within its original neighborhood and community. As is crucial to integrity of setting, the casita maintains its relationship to its surroundings. Further, the physical features of the setting (the urban environment and surrounding high-rise architecture) remain the same. As time passes, it is not the architectural style of the surrounding buildings that is important, rather the form and relationship (in function and scale) to the casita. (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:19)

I concluded the section on integrity with the point that, “the community at Casita Rincón Criollo continues their traditional cultural practices at this location. As demonstrated in the statement of significance and by the site’s continued use, the community believes the structure and site maintain their integrity, a key component when considering integrity for traditional cultural properties” (Hopkin and Siegel 2014:20). It was because of the combined tactics of oral history interviews, physical recording of the structure, comparative data, and written documentation and scholarship that these conclusions could be drawn. Further, by visiting the site after Hopkin’s interviews had been completed, I was able to ask Carlos Soto questions about anything that had been unclear to me while reading Hopkin’s draft of the nomination and then make the appropriate revisions to the draft.
In the end, the comparative data was a final tool in our belt for our argument for the significance of Casita Rincón Criollo over other remaining casitas. In addition to added information on bomba and plena, the expanded architectural description, and the added section on integrity, the final portion of the nomination form includes brief narratives of additional known casitas in the South Bronx and Caitlin Code’s data would critically reveal whether these known casitas were still in use. Unfortunately, comparable casitas were either no longer in use, or a diminished form of their past life. The last paragraph of the entire nomination form reads:

There are multiple reasons for nominating Casita Rincón Criollo above other existing casitas to the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. As the statement of significance demonstrates, Casita Rincón Criollo is unique among existing and past casitas through its unique contributions to the revival of the musical genres of bomba and plena. Traditional musical practices aside, the Casita Rincón Criollo also remains one of the oldest casitas to have survived relocations and demolitions. As is demonstrated in the comparative data above, few casitas remain today and a large number of those that stand are newer casitas, sanitized and incorporated into the New York City park system through non-profits such as the New York Park Restoration project. Casita Rincón Criollo, on the other hand, though partners with the GreenThumb park movement, remains under the control and guidance of its original founders and founder’s children. Of the casitas surveyed in 1988, Casita Rincon Criollo is the most documented and researched casita remaining, and as such, serves as an exemplary example of casita architecture in New York City and the United States. (Hopkin and Siegel 2012:39).

Chapter Conclusion

The nomination process for Casita Rincón Criollo is still ongoing. The second draft of the nomination currently stands at 45 pages total with a diverse range of source materials and data to support the nomination and is close to submission. I presented a progress report on the project to the American Folklore Society during the organization’s annual meeting in November 2014. Those involved in the Working Group and project
feel a measure of success in the research methodology and current nomination draft though the process is not finished. The American Folklore Society Working Group on Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy and Western Kentucky University are passing the draft on to Place Matters and the New York National Preservation Office with the hope that the nomination will lead ultimately to the listing for the Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property.
CHAPTER 4

Lessons from Casita Rincón Criollo: What We Have Learned So Far

Imagine if no one had ever taken the time to talk to the community members of Casita Rincón Criollo. The importance of the musical traditions of *bomba* and *plena* might never have been made apparent. The feelings and associations the site evokes for casita members might never have been explained. Evaluating the integrity of the site would be difficult. Only in talking with community members can one get an accurate picture of the level of care that members put into creating and building the site. Only in recording their oral histories will one hear how the site Casita Rincón Criollo with its structures and gardens reminds them of Puerto Rico. Only in their own evaluation of the integrity of the site can one appropriately examine all aspects of integrity. In short, without talking to people, the nomination form for the site would read a lot differently.

So what are the major lessons of Casita Rincón Criollo as a case study? As the nomination has not yet been accepted, many questions remain unanswered. Will our argument for integrity and significance be successful? Perhaps if any lessons may be drawn at this juncture, I think the most apparent is the compelling case made for ethnographic research, coupled with the traditional National Register primary and secondary sources (city directories, maps, diaries, etc.). In Casita Rincón Criollo’s case, even secondary sources were based on ethnographic research and without it, proper documentation of the site would not only have been different, it would have been impossible. Regardless, if a living community utilizes or is otherwise associated with a property being nominated, especially a traditional cultural property, it is important to talk with the community members. You never know what you may find and often, significant
traditions belonging to a community are so ingrained in their everyday life that they may not think to share them without the ethnographer’s prompting to do so.

_Folklore Methods in Preservation Practice_

Ethnographic research is the bread and butter of the folklorist. The case study of Casita Rincón Criollo reveals what folklorists working in preservation knew all along: folklorists should be involved in identifying and nominating traditional cultural properties. However, as discussed in chapter three, this is not the only reason folklorists should be involved—folklorists should contribute to the dialogue on traditional cultural properties because folklorists have an expanded understanding of “group” and “tradition.” As it stands, the National Register of Historic Places’ notion of traditional groups fails to account for many communities with resources that folklorists would easily classify as traditional cultural properties. As an example, when the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy was in the process of selecting properties for the model TCP project, the Group seriously considered several properties on TAUNY’s Register of Very Special Places. These properties, though, are important to rural, predominately white, communities. While certainly traditional cultural places in folklorists’ eyes (and certainly perceived as a folk group), the lack of ethnic or religious qualifiers make it difficult for Register officials on the state and local level to perceive the sites as traditional cultural properties. Unfortunately, the Casita Rincón Criollo case study does not break boundaries in this regard. Casita Rincón Criollo is home to a vibrant Puerto Rican community, superficially at least an easily identifiable and bounded ethnic group. The National Register of Historic Places’ notion of traditional community remains rooted in a concept of otherness.
At the cost of focusing on “group,” the AFS Working Group’s project was nevertheless successful in questioning many of the criteria considerations laid out for the National Register, namely the relocation of the site and its period of significance, less than fifty years old (though nearing that age with every year). Despite the initial challenge, demonstrating the relocation of Casita Rincón Criollo as an aspect of the traditional cultural practice turned out to be crucial in the argument for Rincón Criollo’s significance. Because a TCP, by definition, has a period of significance extending to the present, changes made to the site were easier to deal with because they were made within the period of significance, which the Register generally exempts. However, when I first began the project, I thought that this was the most important fight the AFS Working Group had in nominating the site. In reviewing the language of Bulletin 38, though, I have come to see the 50-year rule of thumb as the more important battle. Bulletin 38 itself has declared the 50-year rule an apt one, despite breaking down boundaries in many regards. The idea that a cultural practice cannot be traditional in less than 50 years is unthinkable, at least in the eyes of a folklorist. The case study of Casita Rincón Criollo serves to combat this by documenting a traditional cultural practice that, though rooted in centuries old traditions, remains a very recent manifestation in New York City. In writing about the North Shore cemetery decoration tradition, Alan Jabbour and Philip Coyle, draw a similar conclusion. “Decoration Day” in its present form was a revitalization of a practice that had been absent in North Shore between 1944 and 1978 (Jabbour and Coyle 2005:82). In the eyes of NPS, it could be said that the integrity of the site was compromised as the original practice was discontinued or, further, the site could not be listed as a TCP today because the practice in its present form is younger than 50
years. However, in interviewing community members, it became clear that the community never regarded the practice as having been lost, but rather on a temporary hiatus as access to the North Shore area had been restricted by the Park Service during this period (Jabbour and Coyle 2005:82). Both these examples (the North Shore Decoration Day and Casita Rincón Criollo) recall the statement made earlier in this thesis, the idea that “traditionality is ascribed by a community and tradition continually reinvents itself anew” (see chapter three for the initial reference of the quote). Both the tradition of building the casita structure itself, as well as the musical genres of bomba and plena, are traditional forms that have found new life on new soil in the United States mainland, but that have roots stretching back decades prior to the creation of the site.

Though mentioned briefly previously in this thesis, it is important to note the important work of folklorists who have spearheaded other successful traditional cultural property nominations. Tina Bucuvalas presented at the 2014 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting on a successful TCP nomination she had drafted for the Tarpon Springs Greektown Historic District and Traditional Cultural Property in Tarpon Springs, Florida (Bucuvalas 2014). Her presentation discussed the nomination process, but further, focused on the logistics of city planning when a traditional cultural property is involved. As she demonstrated, there is a fine balance between promoting a site as a National Register historic site for tourism purposes and conserving the culture of the community and site that made the property a traditional cultural property in the first place. Interestingly, had Tarpon Spring been nominated without TCP status, redevelopment plans for the area would have likely emphasized a degree of “pastness.” The TCP
designation, however, meant that redevelopment plans would have to consider the current occupational and cultural practices of the community.

Also mentioned previously, the recently listed Green River Drift Trail Traditional Cultural Property in Wyoming, nominated by Laura Nowlin and Jonita Sommers, was presented at the 2014 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting by Beth King, Western Kentucky University Alumnus and Wyoming SHPO employee. The Green River Drift Trail, as she detailed, featured a boundary description for a seasonal cattle trail that, though challenging and difficult to define, was fairly typical for linear/landscape nominations (Personal Communication, April 8, 2015). However, conserving the trail, including two bridges, helps ensure the safe and successful journey of the cattle. This nomination was groundbreaking not necessarily because of the boundary description, but because it hinged on occupational tradition, like Tarpon Springs. King noted that some National Park Service reviewers had been initially hesitant to recognize ranchers as a traditional group, though folklorists have studied cowboys and related groups as such for a century.

There are other successful nominations that have preceded these including the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Staten Island, New York. All are important because each contributes to the conversation in its own way. Lastly, I wish to mention Bohemian Hall in Astoria, Queens, listed as a TCP in 2001. As Molly Garfinkel of Place Matters observes, Bohemian Hall is perhaps the most analogous to Casita Rincón Criollo (Garfinkel 2014). Bohemian Hall, “is an assemblage of three buildings—a Czech social club, performance hall and beer garden. Each of these were (and are) still being used by the Czech and
Slovak communities, thanks, in part, to structural alterations made over time to accommodate the continuation of traditional sokol (Czech gymnastics) practices that take place there” (Garfinkel 2014).

Unfortunately, the National Park Service has kept no official records of the number of properties nominated as TCPs, and further, often sites that are traditional cultural properties were edited by state and federal officials in a manner that eliminates the TCP designation, the officials often deeming it unnecessary added information when the site could qualify otherwise. Therefore it is difficult to assess when and how often the designation was used and further, the historical record is incomplete in many nominations that fail to fully account for their continuing importance to living communities’ traditions.

*Revisiting the National Register and Traditional Cultural Properties*

If the National Register is meant to serve more as an efficient tool for listing sites so that they might be afforded protection rather than as a means to document, to the fullest extent, properties of significance for the benefit of future generations, is the National Register in its present form really necessary or successful? This was the question posed by Thomas King in an article “Rethinking Traditional Cultural Properties,” published in the George Wright Forum as part of the National Park Service Centennial Essay Series. The issue of the journal, volume 26, was dedicated to the topic of rethinking TCPs. King frankly criticized the National Park Service as having sacrificed many traditional cultural properties’ eligibility on the basis of “professionalism.” King writes, “If a place wasn’t something a “professional” could appreciate, it wasn’t eligible” (King 2009:28). King says of the significance of TCPs, “it
may not even be possible to talk about significance; it may simply have to be felt by those who are able, and taken on faith by everyone else” and further “there is nothing for us to rethink about the significance of TCPs themselves; such places simply are significant, period. They are significant regardless of what government or technical experts say and do about them. They are significant because people regard them as such” (2009:29-30). With this line of thought established, King goes on to detail his thesis and current philosophy on the National Register of Historic Places. To King, the entirety of the National Register needs rethinking, not simply the notion of TCPs. To what purpose was the Register created? Is it to list sites to be preserved in all perpetuity? King notes this would then have to be a small list, otherwise “our land use would become fossilized” (2009:30). The alternative would be to have a more flexible list for the purpose of planning considerations. King notes that in the U.S., we try to use the Register for both, too often contradictory results: “Are we honoring a place by listing it, or merely alerting planners to its existence” (King 2009:30)? In short, King’s thesis is thus, that the whole National Register system is compromised by conflicting agendas, arbitrary standards, and a crippling desire for “professionalism” in the approval process. Many of the Register’s purported roles, such as education, King says, might be better served at state and local register level.

We wrote the National Register Bulletin 38 to level the playing field of Section 106 review—to give ordinary citizens and communities access to the same protective tools enjoyed by architectural historians, archaeologists, and other preservation professionals. What we failed to consider was how deeply compromised the Register was by its penchant for “professionalism” and its own institutional history. By exposing TCPs to the Register’s technical standards and biases, we opened the door to outrageous abuses and ridiculous waste. . .
... The things that trouble the identification and management of TCPs—and many other kinds of historic places—all too often are the products only of the Register’s arbitrary standards and unconsidered assumptions. (King 2009:35)

The special issue of George Wright Forum included a separate article by Paul Lusignan, a reviewer at the National Register who provided, as to be expected, a quite different opinion of the National Register. Lusignan acknowledges, “the concept of TCPs as a viable property type worthy of listing in the National Register of Historic Places has actually had little appreciable impact to date on the official rolls of the National Register” (Lusignan 2009:38). Lusignan notes that only a handful of TCP nominations have actually come before the Keeper of the Register but states the reason for this is instead because groups, particularly Native American groups, retain relative if not complete secrecy regarding their traditional practices as well as a general wariness to share necessary information thus rendering it difficult to nominate sites. Lusignan goes on to list several perceived impediments, failures and successes of the Register. Of the impediments, he notes the inconsistency of National Register guideline interpretations in Section 106 review but instead attributes this to decisions made outside the Keeper’s purview. Lusignan also notes the discrepancy in focus on areas west of the Mississippi River as well, stating that “western state historic preservation officers (SHPOs), cultural resource management (CRM) specialists, federal land managers, and tribes have developed an increasingly stronger understanding of TCP identification and documentation strategies” (Lusignan 2009:40).

However, most pertinent to this thesis, Lusignan portions a section of his paper to the topic “Native American TCPs versus Euroamerican sites” (2009:41). Acknowledging that Bulletin 38 intended TCPs to be used by any cultural group, he notes the prevalence
of Native TCPs and attributes this more to the fact that Native sites are a “poor fit for the conventional National Register documentation procedures” and further, “historic sites associated with Euroamerican and other non-native cultural groups have historically been able to rely on more conventional methodologies for documentation and evaluation” (2009:41-2). Having the experience that members of the AFS Working Group have had TCP designation, it becomes clear that this statement hints at the rationale behind the frustrating practice of state and federal officials removing TCP information from a nomination when it could just as easily be nominated without it. Lusignan states:

In recent years, a few different non-native American groups have sought to use the TCP concept to protect sites of interest. Among the difficulties faced by these efforts is reconciling the nature of the represented “traditional community” or cultural group, which remains an as yet undefined term. Where familiarity with the longstanding cultural communities formed by Native American traditionalists poses little debate, the nature of more modern or fluid communities raises intriguing questions. Work on developing better guidance on how non-Native American groups can also make use of the TCP concept appears to be a priority. (Lusignan 2009:42)

Such is the mission of the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy. To his credit, Lusignan acknowledges many of the issues addressed in this thesis: research methodologies, the need to better understand boundaries, considerations of integrity, and defining traditional groups. Lusignan notes the positive involvement of folklorists and ethnographers as well, and writes, “The vital role of oral history, listening and gathering information from the traditional community—those best situated to know about the particular values and practices that may be associated with a particular place—has taken it [sic] rightful, central place in most good efforts” (41). Ultimately, though, Lusignan’s view of the National Register of Historic Places remains a positive one and speaking on behalf of the National Park Service, he
writes that NPS “remains optimistic of the ability of our programs to bridge the gap” that currently stands between current Register practices and the many sites that might otherwise be declared traditional cultural properties (43).

This dialogue between the differing opinions of Thomas King and Paul Lusignan is not necessarily provided in this thesis so that the reader might choose one over the other. Both make valid and valuable contributions to the discussion on traditional cultural places. It is important to know what discussions are occurring regarding TCPs. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that the National Register of Historic Places is here to stay, and with that in mind, it does little good to bemoan its ills without working to improve it from the inside. This is the role folklorists can play—fighting for fairer inclusion on the National Register through TCP nominations creates precedence and, step by step, the Register might grow to be more inclusive of underrepresented cultural groups in the United States.

_Benefitting the Community of Casita Rincón Criollo_

I want to end this chapter, and thus this thesis on the most important note of all, the reminder that this project’s aim is to not only widen the representation of communities on the National Register of Historic Places, a broad and far-reaching goal, but to also benefit the community of Casita Rincón Criollo in a very local way as well. This is the most important lesson for me, the author. I have spent a great deal of time on this project and yet, I find I become easily lost in the theoretical underpinnings and philosophical arguments for nominating the site—to open door for others, for the benefit of future generations to come. However, it is important to remember (and I have aimed to never forget) that the case study presented in this thesis is not a pilot project of
unwitting participants who allow us to use their site for our own professional aims. I am thankful to Rincón Criollo because it is with trust and kindness that they allow researchers such as myself to visit and document the site. Rincón Criollo stands to gain much from this project, and as Molly Garfinkel shares, “The casita’s interest in participating in the TCP nomination project, which might otherwise seem like outsider influence, is based largely on the relationship cultivated through work with Dr. Roberta Singer, an ethnomusicologist and City Lore co-founder. Ethnographic research, including casita members’ insights and testimonies, will be essential for demonstrating Rincón Criollo’s long-standing significance and suitability for listing as a Traditional Cultural Property” (2014). Taking this statement further, I believe that using community members’ testimonies can be seen as not only a strategy for documenting the site, but quite simply, as the most responsible way of ensuring that Casita Rincón Criollo is documented in the way that Casita members would like it to be preserved on paper.

It is important for the community that this nomination be successful. Listing on the National Register could mean a greater sense of security for the community at the site. Listing could remind the city (the owners of the site) that investing in Casita Rincón Criollo by allowing it to remain would be just as worthwhile an investment as developing the land. It could ensure that Casita members never again have to face what they fear and have faced before, relocation. As Place Matters write about Bohemia Hall in Astoria, Queens (mentioned prior),

The Traditional Cultural Property designation has both symbolic and practical implications for Bohemian Hall. By acknowledging the activities, customs, and attitudes of the Czech community who own and operate the Hall, listing on the National Register validates their cultural contributions to New York’s history. Bulletin 38’s culturally-based interpretations of significance, integrity and period of significance validate the Hall’s vernacular design and the need for functional
alterations common to places of long-standing use. (Place Matters, Bohemian Hall)

What happens if the city claims the property and Rincón Criollo is forced to move to a third site after it is listed on the National Register? Will the casita lose its designation? It is an intriguing thought: if the nature of casitas are their impermanent nature and regenerative tradition, does the designation status move with Casita Rincón Criollo if they are forced to move again? I am not sure of this answer but I suspect that Casita Rincón Criollo would have be nominated again at its new site. I personally see no issues with the thought of the designation moving with the site but I understand how others might. It would set dangerous precedent. However, it is interesting notion. Objects listed on the National Register can be moved. Should Rincón Criollo be nominated as an object? Designation as an object would not work because the gardens are so intrinsic to site. Perhaps, if the Casita could be guaranteed to move within a few blocks radius, the nomination’s boundaries could be extended to include both locations they are so close. Regardless, I am not quite sure what the long-term answer would be if the Casita found it needed to move again. However, it is my hope and expectation that Casita Rincón Criollo is here to stay and will not need to face such issues. In the meantime, listing for the present remains the least we can do. While the nomination is not listed yet, I have hope that we have successfully argued for the significance of Casita Rincón Criollo.
CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a literature review of sources both directly referenced in this thesis as well as those important to note for their proximity in subject matter to this thesis (i.e. Gensheimer and Guichard 2014; Keefer 2013). Chapter one examined heritage designation in general, both in the United States, as well as broader patterns globally, most notably UNESCO’s many lists and programs. In discussing a great deal of the legislation behind heritage designation, chapter one also briefly outlined a history of folklore and preservation’s collaborative efforts. Chapter two looked closer at the United States’ most recognized mechanism for heritage designation, the National Register of Historic Places and even more specifically, examined traditional cultural places as an overlay within the nomination process. Chapter three, then, outlined the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy and introduced the key crux of this thesis, the nomination of Casita Rincón Criollo as a case study for folkloristic methodology in traditional cultural property designation. This chapter detailed the AFS Working Group’s project, including the specific types of research carried out and how this research enriched the nomination form for Casita Rincón Criollo. This thesis, then, culminates in a discussion of the lessons learned (thus far) from the nomination for Casita Rincón Criollo. The ruminisms contained therein include the thoughts of my professional peers as well as my own opinions after having participated in the nomination process.

In concluding this thesis, though, the overriding point is that folklorists are uniquely poised to assess and document traditional cultural practices associated with specific places. Through ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories, folklorists (and other ethnographers) offer documentation strategies to supplement those most commonly
employed in National Register nominations. Furthermore, traditional cultural practices and the valuing of place have been at the heart of folklorists’ enterprise. That is not to say that folklorists have this all figured out whereas other disciplines like preservation do not. I have mentioned or hinted throughout this thesis that even folklorists debate issues such as the definitions of “tradition” and “group,” or even whether folklorists should be involved in projects such as section 106 reviews. Though Bulletin 38 author Thomas King has criticized folklorists in the past, it should be noted that he also wrote that part of his inspiration for writing the bulletin had been the efforts of folklorists working in the public domain (King 2000:75-77). While in many ways I think it wise for the National Register to remain wary of rather expansive interpretations of eligibility and definitions of group and tradition, folklorists could invaluably add to the dialog. Having already embraced the notion that traditional cultural properties should be eligible for the National Register, it makes sense that the National Park Service and state historic preservation offices should engage the expertise of those who study traditional cultural practice.

It is the hope of myself and the American Folklore Society Working Group in Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy that the model traditional cultural place nomination project for Casita Rincón Criollo contributes to the dialogue and brings fresh perspectives in interpreting traditional cultural properties. In many ways, I did not set out to write something that members of the AFS Working Group were not already saying, but rather, to pull these thoughts and pieces together and to join the growing call of folklorists to get involved in such work. I have learned that what we stand to gain or lose is great—if the nomination ultimately fails, what happens? I do not necessarily think that sites like Casita Rincón Criollo will disappear, but the burden for recognizing and caring
for these sites of local, state, and national importance will remain squarely on the shoulders of local organizations that cannot necessarily provide the legal benefits that follow National Register listing or eligibility. Equally disheartening, if nominations like that of Casita Rincón Criollo are not listed on the Register, I believe our national record of important sites will remain incomplete and inaccurate, reflecting the thoughts of a few and not necessarily those of the many communities that make up our nation.
REFERENCES CITED


*Traditional Cultural Properties Nomination Forms*


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWS

Rachel Hopkin Interviews


Virginia Siegel Interviews

APPENDIX B: DRAWINGS AND CHARTS

Figure 2. Site Plan of Casita Rincón Criollo. June 2014.
Figure 3. Floorplan of Casita, June 2014.
Maps of casita locations. Numbers in circles indicate casitas in close proximity. As an example, ‘7’ in a circle indicates 7 casita sites in a small concentration of area (though not necessarily the number of structures within each site). Locations are approximate. Exact casita locations are listed in the Developmental Context portion of the National Register of Historic Places nomination form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Location/Address</th>
<th>1988 Surveyor</th>
<th>1988 Floor plan</th>
<th>1988 Photo</th>
<th>2013 Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Remaining in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>179th St. between Honeywell Ave &amp; Mohagon</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciarra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Unpainted wooden casita with front porch and trailer. 2013: Casita on NW corner of Honeywell &amp; 179th, called Daley Avenue Garden. Wooden with porch, painted white and blue. Flaps. 2nd open structure. Bronx Greens Up Community Garden. Green Thumb.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>158th St. &amp; 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciarra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Unpainted platform located on hillside. Stairs to access platform. 2013: No casita, buildings.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>142nd St between Brook Ave. &amp; StAnn's Ave (approx 530 142nd St.)</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciarra</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Called Villa Puerto Rico, Tiny, unpainted wooden structure painted bright blue. Small bolivian m. X. pattern. Shuttered windows with tapered trim. Site features dance floor &amp; stage. 2013: Casita at approximately 530 142nd St. Structure looks to be same from 1988, but different color, Now yellow. Appears unused, fenced off, one window boarded up.</td>
<td>Yes, but appears unused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Portion of chart by Caitlin Coad and Virginia Siegel. See Developmental Context portion of the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the full chart.
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter “N/A” for “not applicable.” For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Name of Property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| historic name        | La Casita Rincón Criollo  
| other names/site number | Centro Cultural Rincón Criollo; La Casita de Chema |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| street & number | 749-753 Brook Avenue  
| city or town    | Bronx  
| state           | New York  
| county          | Bronx County  
| code            | 005  
| zip code        | 10455 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. State/Federal Agency Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,  
| I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.  
| In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:  
| x national       |  
| statewide        |  
| local            |  
|  
| Signature of certifying official/Title | Date |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.  
| Signature of commenting official/Date |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. National Park Service Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I hereby certify that this property is:  
| entered in the National Register | determined eligible for the National Register  
| determined not eligible for the National Register | removed from the National Register  
| other (explain: |  
|  
| Signature of the Keeper | Date of Action |
**5. Classification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ownership of Property</th>
<th>Category of Property</th>
<th>Number of Resources within Property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Check as many boxes as apply.)</td>
<td>(Check only one box.)</td>
<td>(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ private</td>
<td>□ building(s)</td>
<td>Contributing 1 buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ public - Local</td>
<td>□ district</td>
<td>Noncontributing 1 sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ public - State</td>
<td>□ site</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ public - Federal</td>
<td>□ structure</td>
<td>1 structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ object</td>
<td>1 object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 Total</td>
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**Name of related multiple property listing**
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

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**7. Description**

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The Casita Rincón Criollo is a Puerto Rican style casita ("little house") and community garden in the South Bronx. It stands on a double lot in the southwest corner of Brook Avenue and 157th Street in the South Bronx, and has been at this location since 2006. Previously, the Casita Rincón Criollo was situated one block north at the northwest corner of Brook Avenue and 158th Street, and this is where it had been since it was first created in the early 1970s. The exact date that work began on the property is unknown since, as with most Puerto Rican style gardens and casitas in New York City, the creation of the Casita Rincón Criollo took place unofficially and no records were kept relating to its construction. In its present form, the contributing resources of the Casita Rincón Criollo include the site on which it stands, a wooden casita structure, and a wooden stage structure. While not all casitas in New York City have the same features, these features are all significant to Casita Rincón Criollo as this particular casita is known for its contributions to the musical forms of bomba and plena. The site consists of a community garden complete with fruit trees, shrubs, grape vines, flowers, and vegetable and herb plots, along with courtyard areas (known as bateys). The casita is centrally placed within the site and is a one story, two room, enclosed wooden structure with a veranda. It is painted a bright aquamarine color and is built in a style typical of New York Puerto Rican casitas, which in turn recalls the historic vernacular architecture of the Puerto Rican countryside. The small open wooden stage is towards the northwest corner of the site and serves as a performance area. The Casita Rincón Criollo is one of the oldest surviving, if not the oldest surviving, Puerto Rican community casita and garden within the South Bronx.

**Narrative Description**

**OVERVIEW AND SITE CONTEXT**

The Casita Rincón Criollo is situated on a corner lot - actually made up of two city lots - to the southwest of the intersection between Brook Avenue and 157th Street in the South Bronx. Although the Casita Rincón Criollo was originally created in the early 1970s, it has only been at this location since 2006. Its original location was one block north at the northwest corner of the intersection of 3rd Avenue and 158th Street. However, when that space was reclaimed by the city for a building development, community members relocated their casita and garden as close to the original site as possible. The neighborhood in which it stands is urban and the Casita Rincón Criollo is surrounded by high-rise buildings and apartment complexes, many of relatively new construction and in contemporary [???] style. The block that stands between the casita’s original and current location (between 157th and 158th streets) is home to Flynn Playground, a fenced-in playground with basketball courts.

**HISTORIC DESCRIPTION – BEFORE RELOCATION**

The Casita Rincón Criollo moved from its original location at 3rd Avenue and 158th Street in 2006. Several photos exist of the original casita structure, including a photograph taken during a survey by Joe Sciorra and Martha Cooper in 1987-1988. Dr. Luis Aponte-Parés, Associate Professor of Community Development and Planning at University of Massachusetts Boston has also published a number of articles on casita architecture and features a picture of the original Casita Rincón Criollo in an article published in 2000.¹ It is based on these photographs that a description of the original casita is provided below.

The casita house, the main structure on the site, was a wooden structure situated centrally on the lot and surrounded by batey (courtyard space) and garden plots. As will be demonstrated further in this narrative, the front elevation of the structure closely resembles the casita house today in massing, fenestration, and detail, though the original structure

¹Aponte-Parés 2000:106.
Casita Rincón Criollo

Name of Property

Bronx County, New York

County and State

appears to have been smaller than the current. The building was a one story wooden structure supported by a raised foundation. The structure was clad with plywood and featured a front porch/veranda at the front entrance to the casita.

The central massing of the casita building had a gable roof with the gable end serving as the front elevation and main entrance to the building. The front porch/veranda situated at the front of the casita had a shed roof, extending from below the roofline of the gabled roof. Dividing the elevation into two bays, a window sat in the left bay while the front door occupied the right bay. The doorway to the entrance led from the veranda into the main interior room. The window in the left bay was a casement-style window with wooden shutters and no glass. In the eave of the gable, above the shed roof for the porch, there was a second, small square window.

A series of wooden 2x4 beams supported the front porch/veranda and a short flight of wooden steps to the right of the porch provided access. The balustrade surrounding the veranda and ramp was also constructed with 2x4 lumber, the beams arranged in a series of wooden crosses set between vertical slats to create a decorative pattern (the exact pattern used in the present day structure). Typical of casita decoration and matched in the later structure, the window and door trim tapered outwards at the header of the front door and, in the case of the window, at the header and sill.

Glimpsing a portion of the side elevation, the casita house appears to have had at least two windows on one side, a large center window flanked with a smaller window, the smaller window featuring shutters. See the description of the present day casita -- it is likely that the current structure’s window configurations on its north and south elevations mirror the historic structure.

The original casita appears to have been painted different colors at different times. During Martha Cooper and Joe Sciorra’s survey, the structure appears to have been painted a gray color with trim a bright white. A photo on the Casita Rincón Criollo’s own website shows the same structure painted a bright yellow, the trim and balustrade a reddish-brown color. In all pictures, though, decoration adorns the exterior wall, flanking the front door and window. The decoration includes what appears to be prints, paintings, and images. A photograph that appears to be an interior view of the original casita reveals an interior also decorated with images and very similar in feeling to the present day casita.

It must be noted that upon relocating in 2006, several materials from the first structure were salvaged and incorporated into the new structure, including the foundation and floor joists, as well as that the large beams supporting the roof in the main section of the casita house.

The original site, located at the corner of 3rd Avenue and 158th Street in the Bronx, was an abandoned lot turned into a community garden surrounding the casita building. A series of white picket fences surrounded the site and garden plots. Several large trees shaded portions of the site. It is known, based on oral interviews with several longtime members of the casita, that the original site also featured a cherished apple tree that was uprooted and relocated to the current site.

Welcoming visitors, a large, hand painted sign was posted near the front of the site, as captured in a photograph from Martha Cooper. The sign read:

Rincon Criollo
499 E 159 St.
Bronx NY. 10455
Autor Chema

As for setting, the casita remains a fixture within its original neighborhood and community: the setting has not changed from the original location, save for those changes made naturally, as cities grow and architectural styles are updated and evolving over the years. As is crucial to integrity of setting, the casita maintains its relationship to its surroundings. As time passes, the building environment around the site changes (there are apartment buildings where the casita was first built, for example) but it is not the architectural style of the surrounding buildings that is important, rather the form and relationship (in function and scale) to the casita.

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2 Ibid.
Again, it is important to note the extreme similarities between the original structure and the current casita house. When reading the description of the current site as follows, one will note the same features in the present day casita: the location of the front door, the fenestration (both in style and location of windows and doors), form, massing, roof, structure, materials, and trim and balustrade decoration. The essential physical features for New York casitas in general include most of the design elements mentioned above. Further, an essential physical characteristic of a New York City casita is the physical environment, a garden oasis within the urban environment. Casita Rincón Criollo, both at the original site and the current site as will be described below, exhibits all the necessary physical features of a New York City casita structure and property. (See Evaluation of Integrity under Narrative Statement of Significance).

PRESENT DAY SITE - CONTRIBUTING ELEMENTS

Site

The Casita Rincón Criollo’s double lot measures approximately 102 feet on the north side (along 157th Street) by 88 feet 10 inches on the east side (along by Brook Avenue). The lot is not square, the south side measuring at approximately 90 feet and the west side approximately 80 feet. On its north and east sides, the lot is demarcated from the sidewalk by a chain-link fence that is approximately 7 feet 10 inches tall. On its south and west sides, the limits of the lot are largely demarcated by the presence of adjacent buildings. The southern boundary of the property abuts a gated driveway passing between the casita’s lot and the neighboring building. The western boundary of the property abuts the building beside it.

The main entrance to the Casita Rincón Criollo is a gated entryway situated centrally within the eastern perimeter of the lot (adjacent to Brook Avenue). The gate to this pedestrian entrance is not chain link, but metal with thin rails spanning the length of the gate and painted black. To the left and right of this pedestrian entrance there are also large double gates, of the same height and material of adjoining chain link fence, to allow for car-width entry onto the site. To the right of northernmost gate there is a large green sign hanging from the fence wire. The text on this sign states:-

The New York Botanical Garden
Rincón Criollo
This Community Garden Project
is a member of Bronx Green-Up

Upon passing through the pedestrian entrance, one enters an entrance area heavily shaded by trees. The main contributing building on this site, a wooden Puerto Rican style casita, sits facing this pedestrian entrance and is one of the first features to be seen by visitors. Directly adjacent to the entrance area of the site is the ramp leading to the casita house veranda.

Flanking the entrance area to the left is a square garden plot, one of many on the site. To the right of the entrance area and extending throughout the entire northeastern quadrant of the site is an open area, called a batey (courtyard area), filled with chairs, tables, and benches for relaxing and chatting. Near the pedestrian entrance in this section there is a play area for children including a sand pit that is filled with bikes and toys.

In addition to the main casita building, there are two structures on the site, a stage located near the northwestern corner of the site and a storage building located in the southwest corner of the site. The stage structure is situated near a third set of double chain link doors providing access to the site near the northwestern corner. In front of the stage, a large batey extends to the northeastern corner of the site, partially shaded by trees and flanked with benches and seating. The only feature dividing this large batey from the main casita area is a thin string of garden plots demarcated by yellow railed metal fencing.

The storage building, located in the southwest corner of the site, is an ‘L’ shaped building, part closed storage and part an outdoor patio area for cooking. As the casita is angled towards the southwest corner of the site, the rear façade of the casita extends near this area.

As gardening is central to the casita community, there are numerous plots of various shapes and sizes throughout the site and plots are demarcated through a variety of means, including railed metal fences painted yellow, thick, low concrete walls, and loose bricks and stones arranged in rows. The plants contained within them include rose bushes, apple trees,
peach trees, a fig tree, a plantain tree and a species of yam. Many of these have been cultivated to deliberately evoke the flora of Puerto Rico. Around ninety percent of these plants were originally planted on the Casita Rincón Criollo’s first site and were uprooted and transplanted to the current location in 2006. Much of the earth and bricks on the current location were also taken from the original site. One of the transplants, a much-loved apple tree originally planted by the Casita’s founder, Jose “Chema” Soto in 1973, did not survive its relocation. However, the tree remains in the garden, situated in the southeastern corner with several young plants now growing around it. The limbs of the beloved apple tree provide structure for the canopy of vines shading this area.

Surrounding the casita and lined along the southern and western borders of the site stand the greatest concentration of gardening plots. While some garden plots on the site grow flowers, shrubs and trees, this series of square and rectangular plots are used primarily for the cultivation of herbs and vegetables by community members. The plots along the southern side of the site are much larger and there are three, plots sizes ranging from approximately 14 feet square to the smallest, measured at approximately 11 feet square.

Along the western side, abutting the storage area in the southwestern corner and extending to the northern side, behind the stage, are smaller plots, but these are more numerous and concentrated. The plots in this area are generally demarcated by fences consisting of wooden posts and wire netting or by the same yellow-painted railed metal fences mentioned above. However, to access these plots, one must enter through a metal door to the left of the stage in the northeastern corner of the structure. Once through this gate, very narrow pathways allow one to navigate between plots. These narrow pathways are paved with brick and when walking in this area, it feels very much like walking through a garden maze, separate from the rest of the site. Individual plots in this area generally measure about 4 feet by 8 feet and each is individually cultivated by members of the community. Typical plants cultivated include tomatoes, cabbages, lettuces, a range of sweet and hot peppers, as well as mint, sage and other herbs.

Linking all of these various areas, gardening areas, storage structure, stage, and casita are a number pathways which enable easy passage between the different parts of the site and to several smaller bateys in addition to the large batey in the northern area. The pathways are variously covered in astroturf, carpeting, or concrete slab. There are chairs and other forms of seating available in all of the bateys.

An array of decorative and meaningful features are displayed throughout the garden of the Casita Rincón Criollo, evolving as items are added and subtracted. These include traditional icons which indicate belief patterns held by community members, as well as tangible evocations of the island of Puerto Rico. For example, there is a freestanding statue of Madonna positioned near the northeast corner so that the figure of the Virgin can be clearly seen from the street. Around it are arranged a number of flowering potted plants. Nearby, there is a representation of the island of Puerto Rico fashioned out of cement on the ground. It is painted green and its surface is carved with a number of symbols. These symbols were copied by community member, Aurelio Rivera, from a book about Puerto Rico. At least one of these symbols is a reproduction of one found in a cave in Puerto Rico and reputed to have been made by Taíno Indians (the Taínos were the indigenous people of Puerto Rico). Another is a depiction of a coquí frog – a creature very common within Puerto Rico with a distinctive nocturnal call but which reputedly is unable to survive away from the island. Adjacent to this concrete representation of the island stands a small stylized metal copy of a sailing ship which a community member rescued from a nearby garbage can. It represents the migration of the Puerto Rican people to the US mainland. There are numerous Puerto Rican flags throughout the site, affixed to fences, etc., as well as a few U.S. flags. Birdhouses and bird feeders are also common.

The Casita House

The main structure of the site, the casita is situated centrally and prominently within the lot and is surrounded by batey. The building is a one story wooden structure, supported by round wooden posts, 10 inches in diameter, set on the ground that comprise the raised foundation. The building is clad with plywood and features two interior rooms and a front porch/veranda at the front entrance to the casita (east elevation).

The central massing of the building is the location of the largest room in the house. This main room is used as a community space and features a gable roof with the gable end serving as the east elevation and main entrance to the

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building. The second room in the house is formed by a rear addition to the casita, situated on the western side of the building. This addition houses an office and storage area and features a shed roof. The front porch/veranda situated at the front of the casita also has a shed roof, extending from below the roofline of the gabled roof.

The large beams supporting the roof in the main section of the casita house, as well as the posts used in the raised foundation, are original to the first Casita Rincón Criollo. New wood was purchased in 2006 for other components of the house when the building was reconstructed.

East Elevation

The east elevation faces the main entryway to the site and contains the main entrance to the casita building as well. This elevation is roughly 16 feet in width and 9 feet in height. Dividing the east elevation into two bays, a window sits in the left bay while the front door occupies the right bay. The doorway to the entrance leads from the veranda into the main room and the door is a metal stock door with a six over six paneled glass configuration in the upper half of the door. The window in the left bay is a casement window with wooden shutters rather than glass, the opening measuring approximately 30 inches by 35.5 inches.

The front porch/veranda measures approximately 7 feet by 16 feet and the shed roof is supported by a series of wooden 2x4 beams. Access to the veranda is provided by a short flight of wooden steps and by a wooden ramp at the northeast corner of the structure. The balustrade surrounding the veranda and ramp is also constructed with 2x4 lumber, the beams arranged in a series of wooden crosses set between vertical slats to create a decorative pattern. This design is typical of veranda fences on casitas in throughout New York City and in similar structures in Puerto Rico. The flooring of the veranda, as with the walls of the casita, is plywood sheeting that has been painted with exterior paint.

North Elevation

The north elevation, measuring at roughly 30 feet in total, can be divided into three main areas. The first area (left side) contains the front porch and balustrade and measures at 7 feet in length, not including the ramp that extends out from the porch for an additional three feet. The central and largest portion of the north elevation is formed the exterior wall to the main community room of the casita. This portion of the façade is roughly 16 feet in length. The third area of this elevation is the exterior wall to the rear addition to the building, adding an additional 7 feet in length to the elevation.

Returning to the central portion of the north elevation, this section contains a large central window for the community room, measuring at 47 inches by 59 inches. The window features one large fixed pane of plexiglass. Flanking this large window are two smaller windows matching the window on the east elevation. The smaller two windows do not have glass but wooden shutters and both measure at 30x35.5 inches.

The third and far right portion of this elevation contains a second entrance to the casita which is reached via a short flight of wooden steps and an inset porch. The door at this second entrance, like the front door, is also a standard metal door with a six over six glass-paned window in the upper half.

South Elevation

The south elevation mirrors the north and features similar fenestration, however in place of the door there is a fourth window. The three window openings in the central portion of the façade match the north elevation in dimension and material (two shuttered glassless windows flanking one larger fixed plexiglass opening). The fourth window does not have glass either, but unlike the smaller shuttered windows that feature double shutters, this window features one large shutter hinged on the right side.

West Elevation

The west elevation comprises the rear façade of the casita structure and is the backside of the rear addition to the casita. The only feature in this elevation is a single window right of center with a pair of shutters. This window is larger than the other shuttered windows, measuring at approximately 35.5 x 48 inches.
Materials and Colors

As is typical of casita structures, the exterior of the casita at Rincón Criollo is painted a vivid aquamarine color. All of the door and window openings on the exterior of the casita feature white painted trim as well. Also typical of casita decoration, the window and door trim tapers outwards at the header of the doors and, in the case of the windows, at the header and sill. The exterior flooring, steps, and ramp are painted with exterior gray paint, with exception to the front stairs, which are covered in green artificial turf-like carpeting. The underpinning of the structure, covering the raised foundation, is also the same green carpeting. To match the trim, the eaves, soffits, and underside of the porch roof are painted white as well.

The roof is covered with plywood decking and the roofing material is rolled asphalt. In the community room, however, the gabled roof features a square skylight cut in the center of the ceiling and filled with clear fiberglass/plexiglass panels.

There is guttering along the south elevation. According to community member Aurelio Rivera, this guttering and the entrance doors are the only elements that differentiate this structure from a traditional Puerto Rican one. In Puerto Rico, the doors would have been made of plywood.⁷

Decoration

As discussed, the casita’s interior consists of two rooms. The larger room which forms the main part of the structure serves as a community/living room and its walls and ceiling rafters are richly decorated with features meaningful to the people that use it. These include photographs and pictures of community members and depictions of gatherings that have taken place at the Casita Rincón Criollo. There are posters that were created to mark particular events, newspaper articles about the casita, as well as notices of honors awarded to community members, including a number celebrating the work of the Casita’s founder, Jose “Chema” Soto. In rememberence of Puerto Rico, there are also religious images, pictures of the island, and pictures of iconic figures from Puerto Rico, including Rafael Hernández, Ismael Rivera, and Tito Curet.⁸ Additionally, Puerto Rican flags hang in various spots as well as artistic renderings of Puerto Rican island life. Various traditional Puerto Rican craft items are on display including pieces fashioned from gourds and wood, clay bottles, and some musical instruments such as panderetas. During fiestas, this is the room where the majority of the food prepared by community members is served. The back addition houses a room which is known as the “office” but which actually currently functions as a storage room.

Stage Description

The wooden stage stands near the northwest corner of the lot, adjacent to 157th Street and facing west. The stage measures approximately 12 feet by 8 feet and consists of a raised wooden platform, a wooden wall on its rear (west) side and one much lower wall on the south side which slopes down towards the front of the stage. There had been an identical sloping wall on the north side but it has since been removed at some point within the last two years. The east side is open to the audience. The stage is covered with a sloping shed roof, supported by four 4x4 posts of lumber forming columns. A framework of 2x4 pieces of lumber add additional structure in the north, west, and south sides and are also used as rafters for the roof/ceiling. The roof is decked with plywood and roofed with rolled asphalt [CHECK]. The roof extends beyond the platform on the south side but the platform extends beyond the roof on the north side. The entire structure and the underside of the roof are both painted pastel green, with exception to the floor, which is painted a gray color. The light green is a recent change as the stage was painted light blue at the beginning of the research for this nomination. Small patches of light blue may still be seen in the eaves of the roof on the north and south sides. The underpinning for the raised platform is the same green artificial turf-like carpeting used for the casita. Approximately 40% of the wood used to construct this stage was salvaged from structures which stood on the original site of the Casita Rincón Criollo.⁹

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⁸ Colón-Montijo 2012:15.
As with the casita, the stage is also decorated. A large circular painted rendition of the Puerto Rican flag hangs prominently on the central upper portion of the rear wall. There are also images of the Puerto Rico and paintings displayed on or near the back wall.

Immediately to the east of the stage is a clean-swept area, the largest batey on the site, where an audience can gather to watch and listen to the performers (who are typically musicians playing the traditional Puerto Rican musical forms of bomba and plena). Several chairs are placed on the stage for musicians to use. Benches and seating are also found along the sides of the batey for audience members. This batey extends to the eastern border for the property. The ground for this portion of the site is mostly covered with artificial turf. A few areas are laid with brick. This area is shaded by trees and shrubs as well as a number of grape vines that are growing over a substantial wooden trellis.

Additional Structures

Beyond the rear (west) side of the casita there is a third structure, noncontributing, on the site. This wooden storage building, located in the southwest corner of the site, is an 'L' shaped building. The largest portion is a closed storage area with two inner rooms used for the storage of items such as garden tools and cooking implements. The smaller part is an enclosed outdoor patio area for cooking. When fiestas and celebrations take place at the Casita Rincón Criollo, the space between this structure and the casita is converted into a cooking area and a pig roasting on a spit is a common sight on such occasions. The structure is unpainted and roofed with rolled asphalt roofing over the closed storage area. The patio area is covered in clear corrugated roofing panel (likely polycarbonate).
Casita Rincón Criollo

Name of Property

Bronx County, New York

County and State

### 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark “x” in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- [X] A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- [ ] B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- [ ] C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- [ ] D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark “x” in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- [ ] A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- [X] B removed from its original location.
- [ ] C a birthplace or grave.
- [ ] D a cemetery.
- [ ] E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- [ ] F a commemorative property.
- [X] G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- EDUCATION
- ETHNIC HERITAGE: Hispanic
- PERFORMING ARTS
- SOCIAL HISTORY

**Period of Significance**

C. 1970 - Present Day

**Significant Dates**

2006 – Relocation of casita to present-day site.

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Jose “Chema” Soto

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**Period of Significance (justification)**

1970-Present. 1970 is tentatively given as the date marking the early stages of the Casita Rincón Criollo’s creation. The period of significance extends to the present as the Casita Rincón Criollo is a traditional cultural property which remains vital to the ongoing identity and cultural traditions of the Puerto Rican migrant community which uses it.
The Casita Rincón Criollo was created within the past 50 years. However, it complies with several of the stipulations laid out in the National Register bulletin *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, namely:

- That it is a property of “exceptional importance.”
- That it, as already indicated, is “subject to circumstances that destroy [its] integrity before 50 years have elapsed.” As such, the Casita Rincón Criollo is viewed by scholars and by the public as “old” even though it is less than 50 years old. It is regularly described as the oldest surviving New York casita.
- That it is of exceptional importance to a community and provides a “range of resources for which a community has an unusually strong associative attachment.” (Because of this and because the Casita Rincón Criollo is associated with cultural practices of a living Puerto Rican migrant community that are both rooted in the community’s history and are important to maintain its continuing cultural identity, the property is being nominated to the National Register as a traditional cultural property.)
- That it has, therefore, acquired “historical qualities before the passage of 50 years.”

[CHECK - I'm not sure whether the Casita Rincón Criollo in its present site counts as a reconstructed property.]

**Statement of Significance**

(Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

Created around 1970, the Casita Rincón Criollo in the South Bronx is an exceptional example of a New York Puerto Rican casita and garden. As one of the city’s oldest casitas, it is linked to an enduring and vibrant community of first, second and now third generation Puerto Rican migrants. This casita stands out among other extant casitas through its association with the introduction and increased popularity of indigenous Puerto Rican musical forms of *bomba* and *plena* on the US cultural landscape. Because the communal musical performance of *bomba* and *plena*, both rooted in the community’s history, is important to maintaining the community’s continuing cultural identity, the Casita Rincón Criollo is nominated as a Traditional Cultural Property. As such, the Casita Rincón Criollo meets the National Register Criterion A as it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history: namely the education and dissemination of the musical genres of *bomba* and *plena*, significant on a national level (Areas of significance: education and performing arts). Intrinsically linked, the casita is also significant in the areas of Hispanic ethnic heritage and social history as the casita is part of the Puerto Rican migration experience and the development of culture that is unique to the Puerto Rican American experience in the US. Community members created the Casita Rincón Criollo on a vacant city lot in an inner city area in response to their need for a place to gather and find refuge from the often harsh urban environment. The site of the Casita Rincón Criollo was deliberately developed to physically evoke the environment of Puerto Rico and over the years it has offered community members a place where they can come together to pass time on a daily basis, garden, and learn about and disseminate Puerto Rican folk culture. Although the Casita Rincón Criollo is less than 50 years old, the traditions that underpin it are far older, including the architectural style of the main structure and the musical forms performed. The casita has been relocated, however, New York Puerto Rican

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9 Ibid., 5.
10 Ibid., 2.
11 Ibid., 5.
12 The words “Rincón Criollo” directly translate as “Creole Corner” though another common English translation is “Downhome Corner.”
casitas and gardens are by nature impermanent; they are established on land that does not belong to their creators and therefore exist under constant threat of demolition. In 2006 the Casita Rincón Criollo’s original site was reclaimed by the city for a building project. Rather than lose the casita, the community members moved it to a new location one block away and recreated the old environment on the new site, thus maintaining the integrity of the casita. As it is associated with cultural practices of a living Puerto Rican migrant community, the period of significance for Casita Rincón Criollo spans 1970 to the present day.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

**TIMELINE FOR THE CASITA RINCÓN CRIOLLO**

In 1917, Puerto Ricans by law became citizens of the United States of America, allowing migrants to travel freely to the mainland. New York City was a major destination, and in the 1920s and 30s, many settled in El Barrio (East Harlem), the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. In the 1940s, due in part to massive migrations coupled with displacement caused by public housing construction, many Puerto Ricans settled in the South Bronx. In the 1960s and 1970s, the South Bronx, in turn, lay victim to wide spread urban decay and neglect. José Manuel “Chema” Soto, an immigrant of Puerto Rico, and a group of friends and family founded the Casita Rincón Criollo on a vacant lot in the Bronx during the 1970s, amid this backdrop and in response to the devastation he saw around his neighborhood.

The exact date that work began on the property is unknown, as with most Puerto Rican style gardens and casitas started around this time in New York City, because the creation of the Casita Rincón Criollo took place unofficially and no records were kept relating to its construction. Other sources date its inception to 1974, 1976, 1978, or generally the late 1970s. Such discrepancies may be because the creation of Casita Rincón Criollo took place in stages over time.

Apart from the founding of the casita, several dates mark pivotal moments in the formation of the Casita Rincón Criollo we know today. These dates will create a foundation for discussing the ongoing areas of significance for the site. The casita stands apart from others through its strong association with the musical genres of bomba and plena. Of particular note, Los Pleneros de la 21, a musical group and nonprofit organization led by National Heritage Award Fellow Juan Gutiérrez, emerged from Casita Rincón Criollo in 1983. Throughout the last several decades, the casita has continued to foster and inspire a renaissance of bomba and plena. In 1987, the casita joined New York City’s GreenThumb community garden program, affording a sense of official status to the unofficial use of the city property. At that same time, between 1987 and 1988, Joe Sciorra and Martha Cooper began surveying and documenting the casitas of New York, including Rincón Criollo. In 1991, an exhibition on the architecture of the casita, “Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative,” opened at the Smithsonian, featuring Rincón Criollo amongst others.

The same year that the Smithsonian recognized casitas as a vernacular architectural tradition, the site of the Casita Rincón Criollo was identified as a future construction site by the housing authority. A “Salvación Casita” benefit event was held by the casita, featuring musical performances, dance, barbeque, and more, which contributed to the delayed construction. However, in 1996 the site was again identified as one of around half of the GreenThumb gardens slated for auction. Many casitas throughout greater New York City were lost during these auctions, but Rincón Criollo again survived. It was in 2006, that Rincón Criollo was finally forced to vacate their property, now home to a low-income housing development. Unlike many casitas, though, which disbanded upon losing their site, the community of Rincón Criollo rallied and reestablished the casita just one block down from their original site, on city-owned property at 157 Street and Brook Avenue.

**AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Casita Rincón Criollo meets the National Register Criterion A as it associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history: namely the education and dissemination of the musical genres of bomba and plena, which fall under the areas of education and performing arts. The site is significant on the national

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15 Sciorra, Joseph and Martha Cooper, 1994; Hughes, 2009.
18 Garfinkel 2014:5.
level. As mentioned in the Summary Statement of Significance, the Casita Rincón Criollo is also significant in the areas of Hispanic ethnic heritage and social history, intrinsically linked to the practice of bomba and plena. Through these musical genres as well as the daily functions of the site and the sense of community fostered there, Casita Rincón Criollo plays a vital role in the Puerto Rican migration experience and the development of culture that is unique to the Puerto Rican American experience in the US.

Creation of La Casita – Original and Current Locations

To set a backdrop for the full significance the Casita Rincón Criollo’s traditional practice of bomba and plena, one must first understand the setting in which this cultural practice occurs.

People from New Jersey, people from everywhere come here because it reminds them of the houses in Puerto Rico. They say, “My grandmother used to have a house like this.” Ismael Rivera, the great Puerto Rican singer, came out of a house like this. When I grew up, we lived in a little house just like this one. All of us did. This reminds me of my childhood.  

Those are the words of Jose “Chema” Soto, the man credited with founding the Casita Rincón Criollo. Soto is a native of Rio Piedras, San Juan, Puerto Rico, having moved to New York City in 1967. At the time that he set about creating the Casita Rincón Criollo, the South Bronx was an area synonymous with urban decay. Systematic disinvestment, neglect, and arson-fuelled fires were commonplace, as was drug and gang-related crime. Luis Ramos, another founding member of the Casita Rincón Criollo, described South Bronx as resembling “bombed-out Berlin” at the time of the Casita’s creation. The fact that Puerto Ricans were living in such an area is an indication of the difficulties many of them faced on their arrival to the mainland. During the 20th century, Puerto Rican ethnic groups typically suffered greater poverty, alienation and prejudice than any other migrant groups (see historical context below).

It was in this environment of personal disenfranchisement and urban degradation that Puerto Rican migrants appropriated a number of vacant lots in the Bronx, and elsewhere in New York City, for the creation of community casitas and gardens that would serve as places to congregate and would physically resemble the island they had left behind. Soto himself was inspired to start work on the Casita Rincón Criollo after seeing a casita in East Harlem. Recalling that casita many years later, he said: “Era una casa chiquitita pero estaba tan y tan bonita. Fue la primera vez que yo he visto en Nueva York” [It was a tiny little house but it was so, so beautiful. It was the first one that I had seen in New York].

According to Soto’s longtime friend and fellow casita member, Aurelio Rivera, Soto’s original intention was merely to create a space in which people could gather and chat, as people typically do in bus queues in Puerto Rico. The vacant lot that Soto chose as the site for this was one he regularly passed with his daughter on their way to her school. It stood at the northwest corner of the intersection of Brook Avenue and 158th Street. The lot had been previously owned and fenced in by Sts. Peter and Paul Church but had since been abandoned. The site was filled with rubble, garbage, rusting bicycles, abandoned cars and if it was used at all by humans, it was as a place to take drugs.

Soto may have been the catalyst behind the Casita Rincón Criollo but he stresses the actual creation of the place was a collective effort. Friends and fellow residents within the Puerto Rican community and neighborhood surrounding the site aided Soto. He later recalled that “Hasta las esposas de algunos amigos y compañeros han pasado sus nueve meses de preñez aquí [trabajando] y después han parido” [Even the wives of some of our friends spent the nine months of their pregnancies [working] here and then gave birth]. Jose Hernandez was among the helpers. Born in 1962, Hernandez says work began on the Casita Rincón Criollo when he was 8 years old, which suggests that work initially began on the site in 1970. However, various sources cite different dates and, as such, this nomination simply lists the early 1970s. Regardless, the initial stage appears to have been the clearance of enough space within the lot to put out some folding chairs, followed by clearance of the whole lot, the construction of the casita centrally within it, and lastly, the cultivation of the garden around it.

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20 Quoted in Collazzi 2002:19.
22 Ibid., 21.
During the years that the Casita Rincón Criollo remained on its original location, the site saw at least four different regenerations of the casita house, each one created using recycled scrap lumber and other found objects, and each one expanding upon the one that went before it. Such rebuilding is typical of the Puerto Rican casita tradition, as is renewal and transformation\(^23\) (See Historical Context Below – The Casita Tradition). Soto and fellow community members also cultivated fruit trees, flowers and vegetables to deliberately evoke the flora of Puerto Rico. Nancy Solomon, a folklorist who has researched the New York Puerto Rican tradition, observes that all areas of the Casita Rincón Criollo were placed closely together so that it appeared as an integrated dwelling rather than an assortment of unrelated functional spaces and reflecting the ultimate aim of establishing a community stronghold.\(^24\)

For the ensuing three decades or so, the Casita Rincón Criollo flourished on its original location and became a vital and vibrant gathering place for the local Puerto Rican community. However, the fact that it had been created on a vacant city lot without any form of official permission meant that its legal status and right to exist - along with that of hundreds of other similarly communally created gardens within the boundaries of New York City – has always been precarious. For a while, the New York organization “Green Thumb” endeavored to bring these “renegade” gardens under some form of control and the organization’s director, Jane Weissman, was deeply sympathetic to the value such sites had within their respective communities. However, when the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development Department took over responsibility for overseeing use of city land in the South Bronx area during the 1990s, the land the Casita Rincón Criollo occupied became earmarked for development as part of the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Plan. In 2006, the city forced the Casita Rincón Criollo to vacate its original lot.

Many casitas that have met similar fates have simply disappeared (see Historical Context). However, in the case of the Casita Rincón Criollo, the community surrounding it would not accept the demise of their casita. Rincón Criollo was central to their identities and collective existence.\(^25\) Therefore, they transplanted as much as they could to the current site, which is one block away on the southwest corner of 157\(^{th}\) Street and Brook Avenue.

What Goes On Here

The Casita Rincón Criollo has always served as a community gathering place organized by those that use it for those that use it. Since 1987, it has held non-profit status, but no constitution, nor any kind of official rulebook. However, it does have a president, vice-president and treasurer, elected regularly. The casita’s “members” usually obtain their “membership” (for want of better terms, as there is also no official membership) through introduction by existing members, and then through the frequency of their presence in the place, though anyone who wants to spend time at the Casita Rincón Criollo is welcome to do so provided that they abide by the basic tenet of respeto [respect] and refrain from activities such as taking drugs on the premises.\(^26\) Respeto is a word with deep meaning for Puerto Ricans and according to the anthropologist Antonio Lauría, it refers to “proper attention to the requisites of the ceremonial order of behaviour, and to the moral aspects of human activities. This quality is an obligatory self-presentation; no Puerto Rican is considered properly socialised unless he can comport himself with respeto.”\(^27\) As a result, the Casita Rincón Criollo is a place where members are able to congregate with a feeling of safety.

Recreational Activities

Many of its members visit the Casita on a daily basis to take part in practices and pastimes that are central to maintaining their Puerto Rican identities. These practices and pastimes can be as basic as simply chatting in Spanish or playing dominoes and popular cards games that they learned on the island. Additional activities include the fabrication of traditional craft items or making music together. Music, as will be discussed below, is of particular significance to the Casita Rincón Criollo. Indeed, some of the craft items that are created at the casita are the musical instruments needed to perform traditional Puerto Rican music, including bomba drums made from recycled pickle and salt cod barrels and panderetas (a hand held percussive instrument not unlike a tambourine) produced from old cooking pots and goat skins imported from Puerto Rico. In addition to instruments, some members do carvings and others, including Soto, make traditional Puerto Rican kites.

\(^{23}\) Sciorra, Joseph and Martha Cooper, 1994.
\(^{24}\) Solomon 1989.
\(^{27}\) Quoted in Sciorra. [CHECK WHICH ONE]
Gardening

In addition to recreational games and crafting, members may be often found working around the site to maintain and beautify it and/or tending their individual garden plots. As gardening is central to the casita community, there are numerous plots of various shapes and sizes throughout the site (see Narrative Description for description of garden plots). In fact, the Casita Rincón Criollo has long been a center for urban gardening. Everything within its boundaries is grown without the use of chemicals and pesticides. Many of the plants cultivated at the Casita Rincón Criollo have been deliberately chosen to evoke the flora of the island. In the case of the vegetables and herbs, any surplus produce is shared among the casita community and with visitors.

Plants grown on site include rose bushes, grapes, apple trees, peach trees, a fig tree, a plantain tree and a species of yam. Also cultivated are tomatoes, cabbages, lettuces, a range of sweet and hot peppers, as well as mint, sage and other herbs.

Beyond providing aesthetic beauty and produce, gardening often takes an educational purpose at Casita Rincón Criollo. Visitors and passerbys have been known to stop and ask for gardening advice from the seasoned gardeners at the casita. Further, children learn about gardening and plants species in the casita environment, often their only chance to be exposed to such environments while living in New York City.

Bomba and Plena: A Traditional Practice

...in the absence of a traditional context for the transmission of tradition, new contexts are created that become traditional. And that is the casita. That is Rincón Criollo. It has become a traditional context for the transmission of tradition.28 — Roberta Singer, ethnomusicologist

One of the most significant activities shared and practiced among members of the Casita Rincón Criollo is the musical performance of bomba and plena. The practice of these musical genres and the influence the casita has had on these traditional music forms sets this particular casita apart from its contemporary casitas. A love of music unites the community, but it has also extended beyond the casita borders. Casita Rincón Criollo has inspired a revival of bomba and plena within the United States.

Bomba and Plena are separate but related musical traditions. The term bomba is an encompassing term that includes several rhythmic patterns and dance styles brought to Puerto Rico by African slaves in the seventeenth century and cultivated during the early European colonial period.29 As a result of contact between a variety of slave populations from different regions, including the Dutch colonies, Cuba, Santa Domingo, and Haiti, the musical tradition continued to evolve and at present includes upwards of sixteen different rhythms.30 For African slaves, the music served as both a release of emotion as well a vehicle for inspiration and celebration. Dance is integral to the tradition. While lyrics are sung in a call-and-response fashion, there is also constant dialogue between the musicians and dancers. The highest-pitch drum communicates with the dancers and the lead drummer translates movements of the hands or body back into the music.31

Plena, though frequently discussed and referred to in tandem with bomba, is a separate musical tradition that dates to the late nineteenth century, immediately following the military invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898.32 Developed in the southern portion of Puerto Rico, plena was developed from bomba and also features a call-and-response format, however plena differs from bomba in instrumentation, dance steps, rhythm, and structure.33 Plena’s lyrics, in particular, narrate daily life and comment on current events. Most significantly, plena was historically spread by migrating laborers throughout the island and to the United States. Thus, soon after it was born it “become entangled
Casita Rincón Criollo  
Name of Property  
Bronx County, New York  
County and State

within debates about Puerto Rican identity and culture mainly among middle class intellectuals and artists."³⁴ (see Historical Context).

At the Casita Rincón Criollo, both bomba and plena are practiced, from the day-to-day performance between a handful of friends to large cultural festivals featuring many performers. As Matthew Gonzalez, a young musician and casita member, observes: "...a lot of people if they want ... just play plena and bomba just a random day like out of the week or the weekend, they'll come here and just to relax, and this is you know where everybody comes here ... they just come together and just jam."³⁵

When serving as a venue for larger, prearranged events, guests and members of the Casita Rincón Criollo will also enjoy performances of bomba and plena. Events such as personal celebrations, calendar holidays, and holy days are marked. Hundreds of people will come to participate in activities on occasions such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and the birthdays of members.

According to musicologist Roberta Singer, who is one of the organizers of the biennial New York Bomplenazo Festival that celebrates Puerto Rican musical forms, the Puerto Rican migrant community made the Casita Rincón Criollo into a place where their traditional musical culture could be heard and transmitted since the island itself was no longer available to many of them. The enthusiasm of the Casita’s members, and the musical prowess exhibited by many, helped to bring about a flowering of bomba and plena music outside of Puerto Rico, first in New York and then across the United States.

Among the many scholars now studying this musical influence of the casita, including Roberta Singer, is César Colón-Montijo who wrote a thesis focusing on the practice of plena at Rincón Criollo in 2012 for his Master of Arts degree in Ethnomusicology at Columbia University. César Colón-Montijo has had the opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the community and even participates in the musical practice. He writes in his thesis, "Both Benny [Ayala] and Chema basically told me that if I was to write about La Casita and engage with its people I needed to write and sing my own plenas."³⁶

In his thesis, Colón-Montijo states that he focuses on the communal and collective practices of plena, a plena he describes as, "the street-wise plena that characterizes the everydayness of the casita people."³⁷ Colón-Montijo’s aim, he writes, is to examine "ethnographically the practices of plena at La Casita as a way of being in the world, a lifestyle, which is grounded on the immanent [sic] experiences of everyday life and gathers the casita people as a collective."³⁸

Having completed ethnographic research, including interviews with key members, Colón-Montijo details several ways in which music is key to the community. In addition to affording the community a sense of place and family, the lyrics often serve as a vehicle for recounting and commenting on daily life within the neighborhood.³⁹ Further, the "style of plena that is nourished by the people of La Casita affords them to feel a sense of authenticity as pleneros and Puerto Ricans that speaks of a liminality that marks their everydayness."⁴⁰

Juan Gutiérrez, casita member and founder of Los Pleneros de la 21, affirms this notion:

I mean, the thing is that you know, you go to the casita, it’s like, you enter into a different realm, you know what I mean? It’s like you’re in the middle of the city, all of the sudden you feel at home. Because you feel, you are surrounded by things that you associate with your motherland in Puerto Rico, and with the people around you, and with the music that you’re playing there. Everything is, that moment, you know, is being captured in la casita. And that happens all the time, you know. It continues to happen, it doesn’t matter if you’re in plena or not plena, or whatever. As soon as you step in, you feel that. At least I do.⁴¹

³⁴ Ibid., 7.
³⁶ Colón-Montijo 2012:15.
³⁷ Ibid., 4.
³⁸ Ibid., 5.
³⁹ Ibid., 9.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.
In his thesis, Colón-Montijo emphasizes a key feature of the practice of *plena* in particular. *Plena* responds to the environment in which it is played. Quoting Juan Gutiérrez, Colón-Montijo writes that traditional *plena* is “a song-driven musical genre that takes its dynamics responding to the circumstances where and when it is performed.”\(^{42}\) With a renewal of both *plena* and *bomba* throughout the United States and Puerto Rico attributed to the Casita Rincón Criollo, it follows that these musical genres, and *plena* in particular, owe credit to the physical site of the Casita Rincón Criollo in addition to the performances of its members. Because *plena* responds to its environment, the physical experience of the casita has therefore played a critical role in the manifestation of the genre today. As an article in the Smithsonian Folkways magazine succinctly summarizes, “Each generation of *plena* musicians (*pleneros*) produces a new body of work reflecting the events of their day, so that over time, the *plena* has offered a rich portrait of Puerto life, both on the island an in the U.S. diaspora.”\(^{43}\)

According to Roberta Singer, the flowering of *bomba* and *plena* music outside of Puerto Rico has led to the formation of bands as far away as California, such as Bomba Aguacero and Las Bomberas De La Bahia, and inspired a younger generation of musicians. Matthew Gonzalez is one such. Born in 1991, he spent much of his childhood at the Casita Rincón Criollo, learning from those that played there. He is now a much-in-demand musician and the youngest member of Los Pleneros de la 21. According to him, for those in *bomba* and *plena*, the Casita Rincón Criollo is the musical motherlode:

> Even Los Pleneros de la 21, who are located in Manhattan, come here for Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, they always come here to the roots. These are like the roots, because this is where it was started, this is where it was started here in Casita Rincón Criollo that everybody comes and gathers as a family and comes here just like jam, just to have a jam session because this is where it started (...) This is the base, this is the base, this is where everybody comes and sees this is the place that everybody’s been talking about.”\(^{44}\)

Aforementioned Juan Gutierrez is a National Heritage Award winner and credits his musical formation in *plena* to time spent at Casita Rincón Criollo shortly after his arrival in New York City. He had come to the US to study film score composition but after visiting the Casita Rincón Criollo in 1983, he devoted himself to the musical form of his native land (albeit one that he says is increasingly hard to hear in Puerto Rico itself).\(^{45}\) As Gutierrez explains:

> Well, to tell you a little bit more about it, you know, the group that we put together, now it’s an organization Los Pleneros de la 21. It was formed there in la casita. And we-- I met most of the original founders of the group, you know, there, in la casita. They used to hang out there. There was a time when I was there every single day.”\(^{46}\)

In addition to Los Pleneros de la 21, several leading musical ensembles grew out of musical relationships formed at the Casita Rincón Criollo, including Conjunto Cimarrón, Cumbalaya, and Los Instantaneos de la Plena (the name of the latter ensemble clearly alluding to the generally spontaneous nature of the music making within the casita). Los Pleneros de la 21, in particular, is one of the most lauded and notable *bomba* and *plena* groups today. The name denotes both a musical group and non-profit organization and charity, dedicated to the mission of “fostering awareness, appreciation and understanding of the richness and vitality of Puerto Rican artistic traditions of African descent and Creole, as well as to promote their further development.”\(^{47}\) Ethnomusicologist Roberta Singer is a member of the board of directors for the organization.

Since the founding of Los Pleneros de la 21 in 1983, the group has played in Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, as well as countless other venues throughout the United States and abroad.\(^{48}\) They have been featured in the artist spotlight of the Smithsonian Folkways website and held workshops at schools and community

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\(^{42}\) Colón-Montijo 2012:17.


\(^{46}\) Ibid.


events throughout the country. The success of the group has directly contributed to the renaissance of bomba and plena and inspired the emergence of dozens of new groups.

In addition to founding Los Pleneros de la 21, Juan Gutierrez is a founder of BomPlenazo, a biennial celebration of bomba and plena hosted at the Hostos Center for Arts and Culture in the Bronx. BomPlenazo attracts performers and audiences from across the United States, from Los Angeles and San Francisco to Chicago and Boston [CHECK], and even Puerto Rico. The festival features four days of concerts, exhibitions, workshops, film screenings, panel discussions, and ends with a large party. In testament to the importance of the Casita Rincón Criollo to the local and national musical scenes of bomba and plena, the 2012 BomPlenazo was held in honor of the casita, and as a press release for Hostos Community Colleges shows:

BomPlenazo 2012 will also take the opportunity to celebrate important anniversaries of three institutions which have been instrumental in the renaissance of Afro-Puerto Rican culture in the United States . . . The second is Centro Cultural Rincón Criollo, affectionately known as La Casita de Chema, which for four decades has served as the most important incubator of bomba and plena practitioners on the East coast. The third is Los Pleneros de la 21, New York’s beloved bomba and plena ensemble, which was founded thirty years ago by National Heritage Fellow Juan Gutiérrez and the legendary Marcial Reyes.

The press release says further:

The Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture accordingly dedicates BomPlenazo 2012 to José “Chema” Soto, including the countless musicians of renown who have been associated with La Casita, and to Juan “Juango” Gutiérrez and all the great musicians and dancers who have joined forces with him over the years. Significantly, all three institutions – Hostos, La Casita and Los Pleneros de la 21 – emerged in the South Bronx at a time of struggle during which its existence as a viable urban community was in danger. They not only endured to celebrate these anniversaries; they made invaluable contributions to this historically important community which today is experiencing a remarkable renaissance.

Fittingly, the 2012 event ended with a pig roast held at the Casita Rincón Criollo.

It is truly amazing that a community, located in a small lot in the Bronx has played such a large role in renaissance of bomba and plena throughout the United States, a reality that reveals the power of maintaining places for communities to be able to foster their traditional cultural practices. Perhaps more moving, however, is the fact that this renaissance has returned home, to the island of Puerto Rico and the roots of the tradition. César Colón-Montijo notes in his thesis that musical exchange between the island and those stateside have continually increased.

Though in a time of great renewal and revival, some members of the Casita Rincón Criollo worry for the future of their traditional cultural practices as well as the future of their site. Recalling a particular evening, October 6, 2011, César Colón-Montijo recalls witness Benny Ayala’s performance of a song Homenaje a la Plena. He writes:

When the turn came for Benny to sing a couple of his plenas . . . he delivered a spoken word lament about plena and danza portraying them as the two queens of Puerto Rican music but as queens who are weak and endangered musical genres that should be preserved as signifiers of a people.

Though it does not appear that these musical traditions are immediately endangered, it is nonetheless important to address the concerns of the community at Casita Rincón Criollo. The traditional cultural practices of bomba and plena are

49 Ibid.
52 Colón-Montijo 2012:19.
53 Ibid., 33.
intrinsic and important to the community. Listing the property on the National Register of Historic Places may help in protecting and conserving these practices for the enjoyment of generations to come.

“I think that the real importance of the casita is not it in and of itself as it is the impact it’s had on this renaissance. And it’s helped younger Puerto Ricans feel connected if they wanted to feel connected.” – Roberta Singer

EVALUATION OF INTEGRITY

Evaluating the integrity of the property, Casita Rincón Criollo maintains the following aspects of integrity for its period of significance: design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. As the property is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, it is important that the site demonstrate retention of essential physical features that make up its character or appearance during its period of significance.

Comparing Similar Properties

In the case of casita architecture, it is clear that comparison between similar structures and sites is necessary to determine what physical features a casita must possess in the evaluation of integrity. Fortunately, a great deal of scholarly work has been completed on casita architecture, and more importantly, comparative research exists on casita architecture shortly after Casita Rincón Criollo’s construction.

As mentioned above, between 1987 and 1988, Joe Sciorra and Martha Cooper began surveying and documenting the casitas of New York, including Rincón Criollo. Nancy Soloman has also documented several casitas, recording form and floorplans in measured drawings in 1988. In 1991, an exhibition on the architecture of the casita, “Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative,” opened at the Smithsonian, featuring Rincón Criollo amongst others. Dr. Luis Aponte-Parés, Associate Professor of Community Development and Planning at University of Massachusetts Boston has also published a number of articles on casita architecture (and its Puerto Rico antecedents) during the 1990s and 2000s.

As such, the essential physical features of Casita Rincón Criollo can be determined by comparing similar properties throughout New York and abroad. Based on these comparisons (See Developmental Context for full comparison), essential physical features for the casita include several design elements of the casita house: the form, bright colors, shuttered windows, scale, Puerto Rican ornamentation, and salvaged and eclectic materials (often predominately wood). Further, an essential physical characteristic of a New York City casita is the setting, the physical environment, a garden oasis within the urban environment. Casita Rincón Criollo exhibits all the necessary physical features of a New York City casita structure and property.

Design

As design includes the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property, resulting from conscious decisions made during the original conception, the Casita Rincón Criollo clearly demonstrates integrity of design. As mentioned earlier, the property exhibits design elements typical of New York City and Puerto Rican casitas, including the form, colors, scale, ornamentation, and materials (often predominately wood). Though the property was moved and rebuilt on its present location, the new casita is designed with the same design elements in mind as the original. Further, evaluating the structural integrity of the casita house, it should be immediately clear that all changes to the casita over time, including its relocation and many repairs throughout the years, have all been made in response to the functional needs of the community and in an effort to accommodate the traditional practices intrinsic to the community’s identity. As such, these structural changes are not considered to have had a negative impact on the site’s design integrity.

Setting

The Casita Rincón Criollo does not meet the requirements for integrity of location because the casita has been moved since its initial construction. However, the casita form, by nature is temporary and transitory (see Criteria Consideration explanations above for further explanation). As with virtually all casitas and gardens created by Puerto Rican

communities within New York City, the Casita Rincón Criollo was established on land that did not belong to its founders and was built without any kind of official permission. As a result, the Casita’s right to exist was always precarious. The antecedents for casita construction, the pre-1940 rural vernacular architecture of the island of Puerto Rico, were structures that also tended to be temporary. Today, the Casita Rincón Criollo has no intention of moving locations, however location as an evaluation of integrity remains in direct contradiction to the nature of the casita form.

However, while the casita does not have integrity of location, it does maintain integrity of setting, as the casita has been moved just one block away from its original site, remaining a fixture within its original neighborhood and community. As is crucial to integrity of setting, the casita maintains its relationship to its surroundings. Further, the physical features of the setting (the urban environment and surrounding high-rise architecture) remain the same. As time passes, it is not the architectural style of the surrounding buildings that is important, rather the form and relationship (in function and scale) to the casita.

Materials

Because of the ever-evolving nature of casita architecture and a period of significance to the present day, the current materials at Casita Rincón Criollo cannot be seen as separate and less integral to the site than the materials used on the first structure. The site’s period of significance continues to the present day and thus, more recently incorporated materials remain integral to the site’s significant design and appearance (much like how an addition made within a period of significance does not detract from integrity of a property but rather contributes to it).

It must be noted too, that upon relocating in 2006, several materials from the first structure were salvaged and incorporated into the new structure, including the foundation and floor joists, though these materials would not be visible from the exterior of the site.

Workmanship

The casita maintains integrity of workmanship in that the builders of the casita have demonstrated an understanding of vernacular methods of construction and detailing, demonstrating skill in creating a community environment and structure reminiscent of Puerto Rico out of an abandoned, garbage-filled lot in the urban Bronx. The builders of Casita Rincón Criollo likewise demonstrate aesthetic principals of the Puerto Rican community, particularly the aesthetics desired by Puerto Rican immigrants to New York City.

Feeling

In maintaining design, setting, and other physical features intrinsic to the casita house and site, Casita Rincón Criollo retains integrity of feeling from the period of its first construction. In terms of design, the current casita structure closely resembles the original casita structure. The setting, as discussed above, is also similar, adding to the sense of feeling.

Beyond the setting and casita structure itself, though, the site plan contributes to the larger overall feeling. Like the original site, a central casita structure predominates, surrounded by batey and fenced community garden plots. Around ninety percent of the plants located on site were originally planted on the Casita Rincón Criollo’s first site as well and were uprooted and transplanted to the current location during the move. Much of the earth and bricks on the current location were also taken from the original site. Of the plant transplants, a beloved apple tree that had been originally planted by the Casita’s founder, Jose “Chema” Soto, in 1973 now stands in the southeast corner of the site, its limbs providing the structure for a canopy of vines shading this area.

To the untrained eye, one might look at historic photographs and assume that the current site is in fact the original site, now overgrown with vegetation and enlarged to accommodate new generations of community members. Many of the same plants are cultivated today and the site is peppered with tables and chairs, inviting members and visitors to linger and chat. It is a truly vibrant yet peaceful and welcoming atmosphere, just as it was at the former site.
Casita Rincón Criollo  
Bronx County, New York

Association

Most importantly, Casita Rincón Criollo maintains a direct link with the community that founded the site. Many of the original members still figure prominently at the site and new generations actively attending and maintaining the site include the children and grandchildren of many of the original members. Further, the casita still serves the same functions and purposes today as it did at its founding, serving as a site for community events and gatherings and a place to practice and share Puerto Rican culture and traditions, such as gardening and the bomba and plena musical forms.

CONCLUSION

Taken together and keeping in mind its period of significance, Casita Rincón Criollo meets most of the seven aspects of integrity (six of seven), lacking only integrity of location. However, most importantly, the community at Casita Rincón Criollo continues their traditional cultural practices at this location. As demonstrated in the Statement of Significance and by the site’s continued use, the community believes the structure and site maintain their integrity, a key component when considering integrity for traditional cultural properties.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

OVERVIEW OF PUERTO RICAN IMMIGRATION TO THE US

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, Puerto Ricans have been no strangers to migration. Dr. Luis Aponte-Parés, Associate Professor of Community Development and Planning at University of Massachusetts Boston has published a number of articles on Puerto Rican migration and its effect on Puerto Rican casita architecture. His work informs a large portion of this section.

By the twentieth century, Puerto Rico experienced extensive internal migration from the countryside to city in search of jobs, due in part to the collapse of the coffee economy and rise of sugar factories. In 1917, when Puerto Ricans became citizens of the United States, many made the move from island to mainland - again in search of better economic conditions - moving thereafter from one neighborhood to another. It was during the 1920s and 30s that many tobacco workers migrated to New York to work in tobacco factories. Meanwhile in Puerto Rico, surplus labor for sugar factories had pushed many to the urban areas of Puerto Rico and by the 1950s, Puerto Rican migration to the United States and New York City peaked.

New York City has been the major destination of many Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland. By 2000, more than one-third of all Puerto Ricans lived outside of Puerto Rico and New York was home to the largest urban concentration anywhere. During the 20s and 30s specifically, Puerto Rican immigrants typically settled in El Barrio (East Harlem), the Lower East Side, and Brooklyn. From the 1940s onwards, they also began settling in the southern part of the Bronx, in part because there was a boom in new housing construction in that area which included public housing projects. The migration wave of the 1940s and 50s brought working poor, mostly factory workers who moved to these neighborhoods.

In the 1960s and 70s, the neighborhoods in New York City that were home to large Puerto Rican communities - East Harlem, the South Bronx, the Lower East Side - faced particularly severe challenges brought about by a combination of different factors. Industries which had hitherto been the bedrock of these neighborhoods - thanks to the blue collar employment opportunities they offered - were relocating out of the city and moving to the South or overseas, leading the neighborhoods they had deserted into entrenched poverty and unemployment. In addition, the federal program of building highways was obliterating swathes of working-class districts, resulting in the forced relocation of thousands of residents. This relocation was exacerbated by the "slum" clearances. As a result, many communities established by Puerto Ricans on arrival to New York were broken apart, and instead the migrants found themselves living in more isolated

57 Aponte-Parés 2000: 104.
58 Sciorra 1996; Aponte-Parés 1995.
60 Ibid., 105.
61 Ibid., 107.
circumstances in high-rise projects within districts that had hitherto been predominantly white working class. These districts became victim to systematic disinvestment and “white flight.” Landlords who had rental properties on their hands that they could not let, typically abandoned them first by cutting of amenities and then, not infrequently, burning them down in order to claim the insurance. At the same time, drug dealing was on the rise, as was gun crime. The frustration felt by those left living in terrible conditions led to rioting, which in turn contributed to further destruction of the built landscape.  

In sum, for Puerto Ricans during this period, building community “became less an act of settling and shaping neighborhoods into ethnic enclaves and more like a resettlement process of a people being expelled from place to place, by relocation officers of City agencies, unscrupulous landlords, or the heat of the last fire” and the result was a disrupted environmental narrative. The South Bronx was the area that suffered most during this era. It was the location of rampant arson, experiencing an average of 12,000 fires each year by the mid-1970s. According to Carlos Torres “in the burned-out zone that remained, police fought a losing battle against junkies and gangs”.

At the same time, the already low socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans in New York City notably decreased during the 1970s and 80s, both absolutely and in relation to other minority groups. As a result, Puerto Ricans were more seriously affected by economic dislocations than any other group “because marginalized, segregated, central city neighborhoods bear the brunt of the deprivation produced by these processes.” It was against this backdrop of urban decay, the ongoing experience of displacement, and poor standards of living, that the New York Puerto Rican tradition of creating casitas and gardens on vacant city lots began in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The fact that Puerto Ricans are United States citizens means that their experience in New York City has often been distinct to that of other Hispanic groups in the city, but while they ostensibly have no borders to cross, they still facing adapting to a foreign culture. They must use a new language and culture while experiencing prejudice and racism. As mentioned above, the extent to which Puerto Ricans are able to successfully integrate into mainstream US society has been notably lesser than that of other Hispanic ethnic groups. Puerto Ricans suffer higher rates of poverty and unemployment and tend to live in lower-quality housing. At the same time, a great deal of Puerto Rican history has unfolded within New York City. For example, during the late nineteenth century, New York was home to Puerto Rican (and Cuban) radicals struggling for their islands’ independence from Spain. In 1895, the Puerto Rican flag was designed by PR patriots as part of the liberation movement. However, with the above-described dislocation and widespread destruction of many Puerto Rican and immigrant communities through Urban Renewal, gentrification, and private development, most, if not all, markers of Puerto Rican history and contributions to New York City have been erased. As Aponte-Parés writes, “A myriad of early cultural, political, and social institutions was established in many sites in Manhattan and wider New York City. These sites are remembered only in books, and to this day [year 2000] no one has attempted to identify them for preservation.” Casitas remain the most visible mark on the city landscape of the Puerto Rican migration experience over the last hundred years.

OVERVIEW OF BOMBA AND PLENA MUSICAL FORMS

Roots and Tradition

As discussed in the Narrative Statement of Significance, one of the most significant activities practiced at Casita Rincón Criollo is the musical performance of bomba and plena. Casita Rincón Criollo has inspired a revival of bomba and plena within the United States. Bomba and Plena are both musical traditions of Puerto Rico, reflecting the African roots of present day Puerto Rico. However, they are distinct traditions, discussed separately and in more depth from the Narrative Statement of Significance here.
The term *bomba* includes several regional rhythmic patterns and dance styles introduced to Puerto Rico by African slaves in the seventeenth century and cultivated during the early European colonial period. For African slaves, the music served as both a release of emotion as well a vehicle for inspiration and celebration and even rebellion. As a result of contact between a variety of slave populations from different regions, including the Dutch colonies, Cuba, Santa Domingo, and Haiti, the musical tradition has evolved and at present includes upwards of sixteen different rhythms, each rhythm marking the pace of the singing and dancing. While lyrics are sung in a call-and-response fashion, dance is integral and there is constant dialogue between the musicians and dancers. *Bomba* instruments include the *subidor or primo* (barrel shaped drums also called *barriles* and fashioned with goatskin at the head), maracas, a shaken gourd rattle, and the *cuá or fuá*, which are two sticks used on a piece of wood or the barrels. Some casita members will make bomba drums from recycled pickle and salt cod barrels. The highest-pitch drum communicates with the dancers and the lead drummer translates movements of the hands or body back into the music. Thus, *bomba* is a highly participatory genre, relying on both dancers and musicians.

*Plena* dates to the late nineteenth century, immediately following the military invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898. Developed in the southern portion of Puerto Rico, particularly Ponce and Mayagüez, *plena* was developed by urban workers from *bomba* and also features a call-and-response format. However, *Plena* differs from *bomba* in instrumentation, dance steps, rhythm, and structure. The distinctive percussion instruments used in *plena* are the *panderetas*, which are a set of varying sized hand drums with single goatskin heads. The smallest of the *panderetas* is the *requinto*. Unlike *Bomba’s* sixteen rhythms, *plena* features only one rhythm. Further, *plena’s* lyrics are narrative, with a particular marked emphasis on conveying stories about daily life, events, and commenting on current events and political movements. *Plena* musicians are called *pleneros* and due to the nature of the lyrics, each new generation of *pleneros* produce music that reflect the current events of their lives. Thus, “over time, the *plena* has offered a rich portrait of Puerto life, both on the island and in the U.S. diaspora.” In fact, many people, including Tito Matos, leader of the Puerto Rican group Viento de Agua, describe *plena* as “the newspaper” of the people.

**Plena and Identity**

César Colón-Montijo writes extensively on *plena* in his thesis, “The Practices of Plena at Las Casita de Chema: Affect, Music and Everyday Life.” *Plena* was historically spread by migrating laborers throughout the island and to the United States. Thus, soon after it was born it “became entangled within debates about Puerto Rican identity and culture mainly among middle class intellectuals and artists.” Colón-Montijo notes that *plena* was viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and acceptance by elite classes in Puerto Rico after its rise, but that the musical genre was embraced by a group of PR intellectuals called *La Generación del Treinta*, which means “Thirties generation.” This is important to note because *La Generación del Treinta* actively used art to nation-build and instill a sense of harmony amongst Puerto Rican citizens. Thus, the history of *plena* is intermingled with politically charged themes.

Colón-Montijo argues, “*plena* should be understood as one of the various ‘subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1980) that working-class Afro-Caribbean people developed in the early 20th century as heirs of the repressive experiences of slavery and colonialism. Such a type of knowledge coalesces not only in Puerto Rico but also in situations of displacement of its inhabitants.” With this history in mind, it is understandable that for casita people, also experiencing displacement within
the urban environment of New York City, *plena* is a key cultural practice, both rooted in tradition but also vital to the present day health of the community (the “people’s newspaper”).

**Plena and Casita Rincón Criollo**

If *plena*, serving as a newspaper, preserves cultural memory for the community, it follows that to preserve the community’s identity, one must preserve the practice of *plena* in return and the sites where the musical genre is practiced. In the case of Casita Rincón Criollo, one must acknowledge the importance of the site, Casita Rincón Criollo’s home location, to the cultural memory of Puerto Rico in New York, and through its influence on the revival of *bomba* and *plena* in United States, to the nation as a whole.

**ANTECEDENTS OF THE CASITA IN PUERTO RICAN HISTORY**

*This is what casitas looked like in Puerto Rico in the old times. Now they have houses of cement. It's very different. We painted our casita in bright colors, the way they did in the 1930’s in Puerto Rico. - Melagros Lagin of the Los Compadres casita, Lower East Side, Manhattan.*

New York City’s casitas are built in the style of the residential vernacular architecture of Puerto Rico’s working class prior to the 1940s. However the architectural roots go back much farther and may be found in the structures of Puerto Rico’s indigenous Taíno Indians (descended from the Arawak culture), the Spanish Conquistadors (who took over the island in 1493) and African slaves (who were brought in by the Spanish).

The Taíno indians were associated with a type of building known as a *bohio* which was a post and beam hut made out of wood, bamboo and cane, with a thatched gabled roof. The Taíno lived in communities called *yucayeques* which included three typical features: the *caney*, which was the home of the chief (the *cacique*), the *bohio*, and *batey* (a central open plaza). However, the *yucayeques* were destroyed by Spanish conquerors during the early sixteenth century. The *bohio* and *batey* endured as the common dwelling and main cultural space, though now scaled down to the personal and family unit.

After the arrival of the Spanish, verandas and porches began to be added to *bohio*. When an outbreak of small pox devastated the Taíno population, those that survived fled to the mountains where they intermarried with Spanish army deserters and escaped African slaves. The resulting mixed culture became known as the Jíbaro. In the Puerto Rican countryside, the Jíbaro began a pattern of “squatter subsistence farming” and built their casitas with such materials as they could find, becoming experts at salvaging and recycling found materials. Durable woods like ironwood and mahogany were particularly favored for casita construction although their longevity was always questionable. Built without official permission, these casitas were improvisatory and ephemeral and always subject to change, destruction and rebuilding.

Traditionally, the area immediately around the Jíbaro casita was maintained as a clean swept courtyard which was called the *batey*. The *batey* was a social area where people would congregate. Beyond the *batey*, the Jíbaro planted subsistence gardens. Landscape architect Daniel Winterbottom, who began documenting New York’s casitas in 1995, notes that Puerto Ricans today “attribute their love of nature and gardening as well as their ingenious use of found materials in building casitas to their Jíbaro roots”.

The present day casita also owes its current form in part to the introduction of balloon-frame construction as a modern technology for worker housing, built adjacent to sugar factories during the early twentieth century (see “Overview of Puerto Rican Immigration to the US” above). Incorporation of balloon-frame structure into rural housing and casitas meant that the dwelling, Aponte-Parés writes, “was now linked more strongly to the economic forces of the marketplace.

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80 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
81 Sciorra and Cooper 1990: 156.
85 Sciorra 1996; Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
86 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
signaling its transformation from vernacular architecture to an architecture of the poor, both urban and rural." As workers were pushed to urban centers due to economic conditions, casitas were brought into the urban environment as principal forms of shelter for new arrivals to the city. Further, it was during this time that urban gardens became integral to the urban casita, as new arrivals brought farming skills with them.

The wood-based casita remained the primary form of housing for the Puerto Rico’s working classes for centuries, right up to the 1940s. By the 1950s, concrete construction technology was on the rise, as was tract suburban housing. Aponte-Parés writes, “Wooden architecture (in casitas) was further reduced to housing the truly urban poor, the shanty dweller, the working poor in the outlying towns . . .” As Puerto Rico continued to transform into an industrial society, from traditional to modern, casitas acquired a new status in the island’s lore. They became part of the narrative that recalled the destruction of a peasant agricultural society.” In urban areas, dispossessed workers relied once again on the already long established squatter tradition to create shanty towns. Again, they used whatever materials they could lay their hands on and built on marginal public lands situated on city peripheries and as they had been historically, the durability of the resulting casitas was questionable.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF CONTEMPORARY CASITAS AND GARDENS IN NEW YORK

Although today most buildings in Puerto Rico are made from cement, the New York Puerto Rican casita deliberately evokes the wooden/found material casitas of a bygone Puerto Rico. The New York casita creators strive to recreate this earlier Puerto Rican architectural style by drawing on traditional building skills and through creative reinterpreting of traditional patterns of land use. In order to create an accurate description of a typical casita and garden in New York, though, it is clear that comparison between similar structures and sites is necessary to determine what physical features a casita must possess. Fortunately, a great deal of scholarly work has been completed on casita architecture, and more importantly, comparative research exists on casita architecture shortly after Casita Rincón Criollo’s construction. Joe Sciorra and Martha Cooper surveyed and documented the casitas of New York in 1987-1988. Nancy Soloman also documented several casitas, recording form and floorplans in measured drawings in 1988. In 1991, an exhibition on the architecture of the casita, “Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative,” opened at the Smithsonian, featuring Rincón Criollo amongst many others. It is from this data that a general description of the New York casita is derived.

Location and Site Plans

New York casitas vary in visibility and location on plots throughout the city. Some are prominently located on street corner lots, or at least in lots clearly visible from the sidewalk. Others stand hidden behind apartment buildings. The size of lots vary with location – those in the South Bronx tend to be larger than those in Manhattan. Within lots, casita houses are usually situated either prominently within the site, aligned with the entrance gate and entry path, or tucked against the perimeter of the site, flush with buildings on adjacent lots. Fencing usually surrounds the site, or portions of the site where there are gardens or additional privacy needed. Fencing ranges from chain-link to wooden pickets. For larger casitas and especially those with gardens, additional structures may be found on the site, used for storage or more. The ground for many sites is most often earth, gravel, or poured concrete, though a few (like Casita Rincón Criollo), have added artificial turf or brickwork in the surrounding batey (courtyard area and walkways).

Structure and Materials

While New York casita houses range in size and in design, characteristically they are single story structures with raised foundations made of wood, bricks, cinderblocks, or concrete. Many casitas are built with simple 2x4 lumber construction, and most appear clad with wooden plywood, however it is not uncommon to find some clad, at least partially, with other salvaged material. Further, several casitas surveyed in the late 1980s did not have any cladding at all, the basic structure of the casita serving more as an enclosed patio area. For those that are clad, windows are a key feature. Most casitas feature casement-style windows that feature wooden shutters and no glass. Most of the wood used in casitas is often recycled as well.

87 Aponte-Parés 2000: 104.
88 Ibid., 105.
89 Sciorra 1996: 68.
In regards to their roofing, casitas often feature a gabled roof with an entrance on the gable end. Others feature a shed roof, or a combination of the two with shed roofs located over additions to the casita. Roofing materials range from rolled asphalt to wooden substrate and corrugated metal or plastic, among others. A photographic survey by Martha Cooper reveals at least two casitas during the late 1980s outfitted with a second story deck with railings in place of a roof.

**Basic Floorplan**

In terms of floorplan, most casitas contain one to three rooms, with most featuring a single room. Often, a front porch or veranda runs the width of the front façade and is reached via a small flight of steps. It must also be noted that many casitas are built up over time. Built as temporary structures, additions are often made as years pass, members slowly renovating and improving the structure over time. For example, extra rooms or a veranda might be added sometime after the original construction.

**Ornamentation and Colors**

The most typical decorative features found on many casitas include the shutters, trim, and front porch balustrade. Shutters are often very simple, opening as double shutters or as a single shutter hinged at one side. Most windows and doors are also trimmed, several casitas even featuring a tapered, decorative trim at the header of windows and doors (as seen at Casita Rincón Criollo). Perhaps most notably, though, is the wooden balustrade that often accompanies the front porch/veranda of many of the casitas. A typical casita balustrade features ‘X’ shaped pattern between balusters. Joe Sciorra has pointed out that the veranda and the X’s are such an integral part of the “casita’s language and aesthetic that they appear even in the simplest structures.”

Most casitas are painted in a bright Caribbean colors: bright yellows, blues, reds, and greens. White trim also appears fairly common. Several casitas surveyed in the 1980s featured red, white, and blue color schemes as well.

**Amenities and Furnishings**

Some of the casitas enjoy the benefit of certain amenities (although having these amenities is often against code). For example, an electricity supply may be established, perhaps via an arrangement with someone living in a neighboring building or through illegally tapping a nearby lamppost; a gas supply might come from a refillable tank; water might be collected from a rain barrel or nearby faucet. The Casita Rincón Criollo, for example, collects rainwater that is used for washing hands, etc. The water left over from washing hands is caught in buckets then used as water for the gardens.

Folklorist Nancy Soloman, who made a study of casitas in the late 1980s, observed that within the casita buildings themselves, there are clearly defined areas such as for cooking, socializing and so on. These areas are generally marked by appropriate furniture rather than walls. Further, the interior of the casitas are typically decorated in a manner that is meaningful to the community surrounding them. Examples include religious symbols, mementoes, and photographs of Puerto Rican places and important figures, both celebrities and prominent members of the casita community.

At the side or rear of the casita there is often a covered patio, and in the back of the lot there is often an area for work and storage, and outdoor kitchen areas for food preparation. The latter becomes important during celebrations, secular or sacred, held at casitas because food is often the centerpiece of these celebrations and as such, highly anticipated by members and visitors. Some casitas also have an outhouse situated somewhere in the gardens.

**Gardens and Bateys**

As in Puerto Rico, New York casitas are typically surrounded by bateys (courtyards). These bateys, as mentioned earlier, may consist simply of earth or may be paved with gravel, poured concrete, or brick. Further, bateys may be covered with artificial turf or carpeting. Sometimes a combination of some or all of these coverings is used.

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92 Solomon, year.
93 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
For those casitas that garden, fences or stones are often separate garden plots from the *batey*. Further, gardens are often distributed in small, discrete plots around the lot. Again, these gardens draw on Puerto Rican traditions and their antecedents lie in the subsistence gardens of the Jíbaro people. Casita members who oversee these gardens often make efforts to grow plants cultivated on the island including vegetables such as tomatoes, corn, beans and peppers, and medicinal and culinary herbs like parsley, oregano, cilantro, mint, rue and yerba buena. The longer-established casita gardens contain fruit trees, with apple, peach and apricot being common. While the flowers and shrubs grown in the New York gardens are rarely the same as the indigenous flora of Puerto Rico (given the very different climates), some are chosen to at least physically resemble those found on the island, such as ailanthus, weeping willow and hibiscus.\(^{94}\)

Besides vegetation, New York casita gardens typically contain tangible expressions of Catholic faith such as might commonly be found in Puerto Rico. For example, shrines are built to honor the Madonna or a particular saint. Statues of these religious figures might then be housed within brightly colored gabled structures and surrounded by offerings of flowers and candles. Santos are often placed near the front of the garden, thereby transforming the space into a "ceremonial gateway."\(^{95}\)

Other common features found within casita gardens include: assemblages, which are an extension of Puerto Rican folk art and which are constructed out of found objects that are endowed with meaning to their creators; masks, which may be hung from trees or placed within walls and which are often reminiscent of those created for carnival celebrations in Puerto Rico; and murals, which are created by casita members, friends and/or local artists. These murals are often carried out in a graffiti style and typically show idealized views of Puerto Rico, including scenes of the mountains, the sea and particular Puerto Rican landmarks. Another emblem of Puerto Rico that is regularly depicted in casita murals is the coquí, a tree frog that serves as the unofficial symbol of the island. Images of the Puerto Rican flag are also common and in fact, the flag itself tends to be displayed prominently within and around the casitas and their grounds.

At one time, it was not uncommon to find chickens, roosters and cats roaming around the New York Puerto Rican casita, as well as animals like rabbits, doves, pigeons and peacocks in cages. The sound of the roosters crowing and chickens scratching the earth recalled memories of rural Jíbaro gardens. However, the enforcement of New York regulations as well as the ASPCA policy of confiscating animals kept on the lots has brought about a decline in this practice.\(^{96}\)

Landscape architect Daniel Winterbottom, who made a study of New York casitas in the late 1990s, likens the outside area of the New York casitas to a series of outdoor rooms. "Movement through these spaces" he writes "is fluid as it is in Puerto Rico where the tropical climate offers little distinction between inside and outside" (Winterbottom and Feuer 1999)

**THE HISTORY OF THE CASITA IN NYC**

It must first be noted that Puerto Rican migration patterns and the development of urban casitas are fundamentally linked. By building casitas in abandoned portions of the New York City environment, builders are imparting identity on to the landscape by "rescuing images and by alluding to the power of other places that are recognized by everyone, that generate good will among everyone, and that provide a source of identity for everyone."\(^{97}\) As such, the activities that take place in New York City casitas are not unique to Casita Rincón Criollo.

The term “casita” means “little house” and in New York, the earliest recorded examples of Puerto Rican casita creation appear to date from the late 60s and early 70s. From the beginning, these casitas and gardens were brought into being by the “disenfranchised urban poor living in landscapes of pollution, joblessness and violence, increasingly invisible to the rest of society,” namely the South Bronx, El Barrio and the Lower East Side.\(^{98}\)

During the 40s and 50s, Puerto Ricans in New York City had typically formed social clubs based on hometown affiliations, but as the process of urban displacement with the city began during the 60s, it appears there was a need to put in place some new form of creating community rooted in present location.\(^{99}\) In the 1960s and 70s, East Harlem, the South Bronx,
and the Lower East Side, faced particularly severe challenges brought about by a combination of different factors (see Overview of Puerto Rican Immigration to the US). Industries were relocating out of the city and moving south or overseas creating deserted neighborhoods with entrenched poverty and unemployment. Urban Renewal led to the forced relocation of thousands of residents. Relocations were often followed by systematic disinvestment and "white flight" in neighborhoods. Property abandonment and arson was on the rise, as was drug dealing and gun crime. Puerto Ricans were more seriously affected by economic dislocations than any other group "because marginalized, segregated, central city neighborhoods bear the brunt of the deprivation produced by these processes." It was against this backdrop of urban decay, the ongoing experience of displacement, and poor standards of living, that the New York Puerto Rican tradition of creating casitas and gardens on vacant city lots began in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Puerto Rican casitas have typically been erected as squats on abandoned, garbage filled areas where apartment buildings once stood. Then over time, if the casita proves durable, the remainder of the lot is transformed into a garden. Through their creation, dispossessed Puerto Ricans have been able to reshape "landscapes of despair" into ones of hope, and transform pockets of their environment into places rich in community, where enduring bonds can be forged, where values are instilled and upheld, where traditional culture can be passed on and given new life, all while maintaining and bolstering a strong sense of ethnic identity. The assured legal status of Puerto Ricans in the US may be a key factor that involved in their being so strongly associated with casita creation since other migrant groups without the benefit of automatic citizenship would perhaps have been unlikely to have drawn attention to themselves in so visibly illegal a manner, given that most casitas exist or at least began effectively as squats.

THE NEW YORK CASITA TODAY: LEADERSHIP AND USE

Use of Casitas: Events, Activities, and Services

According to Daniel Winterbottom, casitas become "aesthetic, social and spiritual oases in neighborhoods beset by poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, gangs, drugs and crime" and that:

…daily life in the casita has the same extemporaneous quality as life in Puerto Rico. There, a mild climate draws people out of doors, into the yards and the streets. In New York, people stroll in and out of the casitas while others garden, relax and play dominoes. Eating is often a group affair, especially on weekends when family and friends appear with traditional rice and beans for a late afternoon feast.

New York’s Puerto Rican casitas thus offer a tangible symbol of the survival and dynamism of Puerto Rican culture in the city. They provide both a means and a place to partake in a traditional way of life, and tradition - in this context - means something that both draws on the past and which remains vital and constantly renewed in the present. Casitas accordingly serve the Puerto Rican communities in myriad ways. The site offers, first and foremost, a place where members can gather together to find refuge and practice recreational activities. The grounds of the casitas are a place where children can run and play freely (toys are often donated by members) while adults have their own games with the aforementioned dominoes as well as card games being particularly popular. Not surprisingly, gardening is a pastime that many casita members actively engage in.

As mentioned earlier, casita gardens often include flowers, shrubs, and vegetables such as tomatoes, corn, beans and peppers, as well as medicinal and culinary herbs like parsley, oregano, cilantro, mint, rue and yerba buena. Some gardens contain fruit trees, including the apple, peach and apricot trees. For casitas like Rincón Criollo, gardening is not restricted to a select few. Plots are allocated to members of the community so members can each cultivate their own individual plots. The purpose of gardening also has an educational aspect. Children learn about gardening and gardening techniques in the casita environment, often their only chance to learn such skills while living in such a high-density urban environment.

Providing a venue for celebrations that, in Puerto Rico, would take place outdoors is another important casita function. The celebrations may be secular or sacred. Holidays and events typically marked include the birthdays or weddings of community members, Mother’s and Father’s Day, public holidays such as Labor Day, as well as religious festivals and

100 Santiago and Galster 1995:362.
102 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
feast days. In the case of the latter, many New York casitas continue the tradition established in Puerto Rico where each town has a patron saint and the saint’s feast day is marked each year with community celebrations. Regardless, though, of whether a celebration is secular or sacred, on such days the casita “population” may swell many times over as distant family members and guests travel to take part. Typically, a good deal of food (including a roasted pig) is prepared both off and onsite by core casita members and then enjoyed by all, while musicians perform traditional Puerto Rican music. Given the New York climate, most winter festivals are not celebrated at the casitas. Christmas, however, is an exception. Then, the casita members will often set out nativity scenes and hang lights and other decorations.

The performance of music and dance is not just restricted to special days: children are sometimes taught traditional dances and music is part of daily life within many casitas. Most casitas number musicians among their members and they will often sit around playing guitars and conga drums as well as traditional Puerto Rican instruments like panderetas and instruments made from gourds. While a range of Latin music may be played, not least salsa, certain casitas have become organically associated with traditional Puerto Rican musical forms such as bomba and plena. Casita Rincón Criollo stands as an outstanding example (see Narrative Statement of Significance and Overview of Bomba and Plena Musical Forms above). It should be noted though, that in the city, traditional musical forms have not remained static. Instead, they have evolved in such a way that reflect other influences from modern America’s cultural life; rap and break dancing have both had an impact, for example.

In some cases, casitas may provide its members with social services. For example, Villa Puerto Rico, a casita at 142nd Street in the Bronx, has offered counseling on legal rights and civic obligations. Other resources offered might include job referrals, voter registration assistance, help with Medicare and welfare, advice with housing problems, and even ritual healing. Casita Rincón Criollo also offers fruits and vegetables harvested from their garden to any person in need, be they a member or visitor.

New York’s casitas continue to be affected by Puerto Rican migration patterns. Many Puerto Ricans move freely between the island and the mainland not least because air travel is relatively inexpensive. The result is a strong core casita community receives constant refreshment thanks to new arrivals who bring with them fresh images of the homeland. Casitas continue to provide a place that permit for the development of close personal relations and a sense of social solidarity to Puerto Ricans who have lived in the city for decades, for their New York born offspring, and to new arrivals from the island.

**Casita Leadership and Organization**

In Puerto Rico, casitas were residential structures. In New York, while they tend to serve as homes away from home, and are not designed for residential use. Although there have been examples of small casitas created by and for single individuals and perhaps their families, most casitas are created by associations of people who unite, often spontaneously, to make a space where they can spend time involved in activities meaningful to them and whose collective existence then becomes embodied in a vernacular architectural form.

When a casita is or becomes linked with a particular community, it is not uncommon for a formal organizational structure to be established. For example, anthropologist Susan Slyomovics has described the example of the casita “Añoranzas de mi Patria,” located in the Bronx, which had an appointed president, vice-president and a range of officers. Many other casitas have similar organizational arrangements in place, including Casita Rincón Criollo. Those in positions of authority oversee the maintenance of the casita and may organize particular activities within the casita and grounds. They also watch over the behavior of those frequenting their casita: typically the main requirement is that all those using the casita treat others with “respect” and “dignity.” In fact, as Joseph Sciorra points out, casitas “are strictly policed through an appreciation and adherence to community notions of proper behavior.” Certain activities, notably drug taking, are not permitted under any circumstances on casita land.

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103 Ibid.

104 Slyomovics YEAR.


107 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.

Of course, governance of some casitas have changed as casitas have become recognized for their social benefits and incorporated as official city gardens through organizations like Green Thumb. For more information on Green Thumb’s effect on the status of casitas in New York, see the section *The NYC Casita Today: Status and Survival* below.

**Key Individuals and Casita Communities in New York City**

It is hard to pinpoint the first known casita, however the earliest recorded examples of Puerto Rican casita creation appear to date from the late 60s and early 70s. At different points throughout the twentieth century, concentrations of casitas shifted from borough to borough. As discussed in the section on history of Puerto Rican migration, Puerto Rican immigrants typically settled in El Barrio (East Harlem), the Lower East Side, and Brooklyn starting in the 1920s and 1930s. From the 1940s onwards, they also began settling in the southern part of the Bronx.108 It seems from the 1980s onward, the Bronx housed the largest concentration of casitas, as it remains today. Examples of a few known casitas are listed here, though this does not assume these were the largest or most important casitas. Comparative data from several surveys of casitas throughout the years follows in the last portion of this nomination.

**Examples of Prominent Casitas Past:**

**Villa Puerto Rico**
Located at 142rd Street between Brook Avenue and St. Ann’s Avenue in the Bronx, Villa Puerto Rico remains one of the more prominent casitas to have been founded in New York City. Though the date of initial construction is unknown, the casita was built by Jaran Manzanet and friends sometime before the mid-1980s. Villa Puerto Rico has been documented by a number of people and has featured in a number of articles by Dr. Luis Aponte-Parés. The casita was part of a survey completed by Martha Cooper and Joe Sciorro in 1987-1988, and was also recorded in measured drawing by Nancy Solomon in 1988. At the time of the 1988 survey, the casita featured a dance floor and stage on the site. Further, the site has served as a neighborhood gathering place for birthday parties, Puerto Rican Day Parade ceremonies, Thanksgiving dinners, block association meetings, and political rallies.110 Unfortunately, as of today, the casita structure remains, though it appears unused.

**Añoranzas de mi Patria**
Originally located on Eagle Avenue between E. 156th Street and Westchester in the Bronx, Añoranzas de mi Patria was also photographed by Martha Cooper and Joe Sciorra, as well as recorded in measured drawing by Nancy Solomon in 1988. Though this casita is no longer standing, its memory has been preserved in articles by Luis Aponte-Parés and the research of anthropologist Susan Slyomovics. Slyomovics, in fact, noted that at the time of her research, the casita had an appointed president, vice-president and a range of officers.

**El Jardín de la 10**
El Jardín de la 10 was located in the Lower East Side, Manhattan. One of 10 casitas exhibited by Ejlat Feuer and Daniel Winterbottom at an exhibit running November 1998 through February 1999 at El Museo del Barrio, El Jardín de la 10 was cleared for housing prior to the exhibition. As shared by casita member Jose Valentin, El Jardín de la 10 not only gardened, they also encourage others to come and learn how to garden. Further, the casita held celebrations for birthdays, weddings, and holidays like Halloween. Music would also be played for these occasions. Valentin remembers that in the summertime, too, the casita would show movies and lots of people would attend the showings.111

**Los Compadres**
Los Compadres, like El Jardín de la 10, was also located in the Lower East Side, Manhattan. Los Compadres was one of 10 casitas exhibited by Ejlat Feuer and Daniel Winterbottom at an exhibit running November 1998 through February 1999 at El Museo del Barrio. At the time of the exhibition, Winterbottom and Feuer note that Los Compadres’ site was one of several properties slated to be developed into a New York City park. Though there is no date to confirm, it is assumed that the casita no longer exists. In promotional materials for the exhibit, though, Winterbottom and Feuer feature quotes from three separate casita members, reminiscing on Los Compadres. According to casita members, the casita structure was painted red, white, and blue with a fenced surrounding the site. People would visit with children and members would play games like dominos and bingo. Children would work on homework. Medicinal plants were grown. Further, religious

111 Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
celebrations were held in the front yard of the casita, including Rosario de Cruz on May 31. Music was played and pig roasts were also held for special events during the summertime.\textsuperscript{112}

The Enduring Significance of the Casita in NYC

Anthropologist Susan Slyomovics has observed that casitas emerge from "an urbanite existence in which the bonds of extended family are weakened, while at the same time the effects of immigration and urbanization register on Puerto Rican communities and Hispanic expressive culture."\textsuperscript{113} As a result, the New York Puerto Rican casitas were established while drawing on two different notions of community: first, "a traditional community evoked by the architectural form of the casita and second, the creation of an elective community formed by the streets of an American city."\textsuperscript{114} Again and again, those establishing or becoming involved with a casita testify that the association helps mitigate the loneliness and alienation experienced within a foreign city and that the physical appearance of the casita and garden – recalling so clearly the island – helps to ease the yearning for their homeland. Being part of a casita community allows for the physical illusion of being at home in a strange place and also offers a means of creating extended families in which kinship is based on shared experiences rather than blood. The result is that the New York Puerto Rican casitas serve not only to preserve traditional culture but they also to allow the revitalization of said culture as new community groups are created and consolidated.

While the New York casitas are not lived in, they serve as a metaphor for "home." It is through them that Puerto Rican migrants have been able to establish local communities in New York City, and within those communities, to harness traditional Puerto Rican expressive culture as a means of controlling the immediate environment.\textsuperscript{115} The casitas have been the conduit allowing rediscovery and reconnection with cultural heritage and a place to bolster cultural involvement and cultural pride in the present. They have also served to stabilize and revitalize troubled neighborhoods and become havens for community members of all ages. They have, in fact, acted as a means of reclaiming and transforming areas that had been socially, environmentally, and culturally blighted. Planting a garden and erecting a wood structure has often been a means of forcing out less desirable elements of society such as drug taking and other illicit activities. To give one specific example, a casita created by tenants of the block at 411 East 136\textsuperscript{th} Street in the Bronx was deliberately constructed in an effort to rid the lot opposite their building of a drug trafficking.\textsuperscript{116} The resulting casita, like so many others, became a site of recreation, cultivation, performance and celebration, though that particular casita no longer remains today.

Through the appropriation of land and the building of alternative landscapes rich with meaning for their users, casitas have become emblematic of the endurance of Puerto Rican culture in New York. They also become sources of pride and memory in and of themselves.\textsuperscript{117} Scholars and researchers have referred many times over to the sense of empowerment that the casitas provide to their communities. For example, Joseph Sciorra writes that “the cultural production of vernacular horticulture and architecture create local landscapes of empowerment that serve as centers of community action where people engage in modes of expressivity that are alternatives to those imposed from above by the dominant culture. In turn these concerted actions pose a direct challenge to official notions pertaining to the status of public land and its future use.”\textsuperscript{118} Likewise, for Betti-Sue Hertz, who led a research project into the casitas in the late 80s and 90s under the auspices of an initiative of the Bronx Council of the Arts, the casitas are "cultural ‘safe houses’ places where it is possible to regenerate identity on ones own terms . . . within the confines of a spatial frame limited by space and economics."\textsuperscript{119}

THE NYC CASITA TODAY: STATUS AND SURVIVAL

Comparison Context

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Slyomovics YEAR.  Slyomovics was involved with the staging of the Casita exhibit at the Smithsonian in 1991.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Slyomovics YEAR: 5
\item \textsuperscript{115} Sciorra and Cooper 1990. Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Sciorra 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Aponte-Parés 1995: 8.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Sciorra 1996: 63.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Hertz, Betti-Sue. 1991. Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative.  Leaflet accompanying the exhibition held at the Smithsonian Institution Experimental Gallery 2/2/91-6/30/91.
\end{itemize}
In order to understand the current climate in which Casita Rincón Criollo now stands, it’s important to examine similar casitas, their locations, similarities, differences and more, to establish Rincón Criollo as an outstanding example. Fortunately, systematic surveys have been completed on casita architecture several times throughout the last thirty years. Data from two surveys are included below.

**Survey of 1987-1988 by Joe Sciorra, Martha Cooper, Nancy Solomon**

Joe Sciorra and Martha Cooper surveyed and documented the casitas of New York in 1987-1988. Nancy Solomon also documented several casitas, recording form and floorplans in measured drawings in 1988. Their results are compiled here together. To first summarize their data, 30 casitas were found in the Bronx, 19 in Harlem, 6 in Brooklyn, and 2 in the Lower East Side.120

**Survey of 2013 by Caitlin Coad and Western Kentucky University**

In 2013, with support from Western Kentucky University, Folklorist Caitlin Coad completed a survey of casitas in New York City, focusing specifically on the data gathered by Joe Sciorra, Martha Cooper, and Nancy Solomon from 1987 through 1988. Coad’s goal was identifying which casitas from 1988 remained. However, Caitlin did record several casitas not included in the 1987-1988 survey. To summarize Caitlin’s data, Caitlin found 9 casitas in the Bronx (where there are been 35 in 1988) Five of these casitas were not included in the 1988 survey. Caitlin surveyed five sites in Harlem (where there had been 20 originally). One of these casitas was not included in the 1988 survey. Caitlin found one casita in Brooklyn (where there had been 6 in 1988). This casita was not in the original 1988 survey. Lastly, Caitlin Coad found one casita in the Lower East Side (where there had been 2 in the 1988 survey). The surveyed casita was not in the original 1988 survey.

Based on this evidence, casitas have had the highest survival rate in Bronx. With knowledge of Puerto Rican settlement patterns throughout the twentieth century, dislocation and widespread destruction of many Puerto Rican and immigrant communities through Urban Renewal, gentrification, and private development, this is not surprising.

The results of both surveys are compiled into a single chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Location/Address</th>
<th>1988 Surveyor</th>
<th>Floor plan 1988 Photo</th>
<th>2013 Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Remaining in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>179th St. &amp; Washington</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Open structure with 2 shades of blue. The casita was wood with two floors. 2013: No casita, Playground on corner, housing on other corners.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>E 178th St. between Arthur St. &amp; La Fontaine</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Blue wooden house, single room, w/porch, double 'x' pattern on the porch balustrade. 2013: No casita, no empty lots, all developed.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>E 179th St. between Vyse &amp; Daly Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Mauve colored wood house w/porch and shuttered windows. `X' pattern balustrade. 2013: No casita. Empty lot and buildings on block.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>E 179th St. between Vyse &amp; Daly Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Barn red structure that appears housed under a larger shed structure. No porch. 2013: No casita. Empty lot and buildings on block.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

120 See spreadsheet below. Sciorra, Cooper, and Solomon’s research was compiled into a single spreadsheet by Caitlin Coad in 2013.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Location/Address</th>
<th>1988 Surveyor</th>
<th>Floor plan</th>
<th>1988 Photo</th>
<th>2013 Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Remaining in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>NE Corner Honeywell Ave &amp; 178th St.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Blue wooden single room structure with 'x' pattern balustrade on small front porch. Site features yellow parasol and boat. 2013: No casita. Homes.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>179th St. between Honeywell Ave &amp; Mohegan</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Unpainted wooden casita with front porch and trailer. 2013: Casita on NW corner of Honeywell &amp; 179th, called Daley Avenue Garden. Wooden with porch, painted white and blue. Flags. 2nd open structure. Bronx Green Up Community Garden, Green Thumb.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>W.side of Longfellow Ave at Rodman Pl.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Wooden, unpainted platform located on hillside. Stairway to access platform. 2013: No casita, buildings.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>158th St. &amp; 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rincón Criollo’s original site. Current location at corner of 157th Street and Brook Avenue.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>142nd St between Brook Ave. &amp; St.Ann's Ave (approx 530 142nd St.)</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Called Villa Puerto Rico. Two room wooden structure painted bright blue. Small balustrade in 'X' pattern. Shuttered windows with tapered trim. Site features dance floor &amp; stage. 2013: Casita at approximately 530 142nd St. Structure looks to be same from 1988, but different color. Now yellow. Appears unused, fenced off, one window boarded up.</td>
<td>Yes, but appears unused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>139th St. between Brook Ave. &amp; St.Ann’s Ave</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Simple unpainted wooden structure with flat roof. Has chickens. 2013: Similar location as casita at 139th &amp; St.Ann’s Ave. (where Padre Plaza Success Park is now).</td>
<td>No, but see 139th &amp; St.Ann’s Ave. below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>142nd St. between Willis Ave &amp; Brook Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Large casita with striped pattern on outside. Side veranda roofed with blue plastic. Simple railing on front veranda. 2013: No casita.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>135th St. between Brown &amp; Willis Ave</td>
<td>Cooper, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Single room structure with front porch. Above shop. Called La Villa. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Location/Address</td>
<td>1988 Surveyor</td>
<td>Floor plan</td>
<td>1988 Photo</td>
<td>2013 Photo</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Remaining in 2013</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>136th St between Brown &amp; Willis Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Large casita structure composed of a variety of recycled materials. Site features chickens and shrine made of stones. 2013: Not same structure as '88, but possibly same location. Wood beams, unpainted, open structure. High slanted roof. Seating underneath. Wanaqua Garden, a Green Thumb garden adjacent to Jonas Bronck Elementary School.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>149th St. off Brook Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Large, unpainted wooden casita with chain-link fence obscuring front entrance. 2013: No casita that I could find.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>East 149th St &amp; Brook Ave</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Hidden, 2-room unpainted casita. Veranda at front and rear of structure. Front porch featuring 'x' patterned balustrade. Found single family cooking crabs, with three girls. 2013: No casita. Buildings on every corner.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>E 147th St &amp; Brook Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Open air wooden pavilion with PR flag and hammock. 2013: No casita.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>508-10 Brook Ave &amp; East 148th St.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: wooden casita/restaurant under construction. 2013: No casita there. Possibly one at 505?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>E. Tremont &amp; E.177th St.</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No Description. 2013: Bronx Green Up Garden on this block (Drew Gardens, Tremont b/w West Farms Rd &amp; 177th St.) Did not see any casita.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Eagle Ave, between E 156th &amp; Westchester</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Called Anoranzas de mi Patria. Large 2-room wooden casita with veranda surrounding entirety of structure. Painted bright blue with beige trim. Name of casita painted in front gable end in red. 2013: No Casita.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Jennings off Prospect</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Located in backyard. Wooden structure called “La Bala de Plata.” Painted light blue. Roofed with blue plastic. 2013: Could not see casita, but notes say it was in backyard.</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Clinton &amp; Crotona Park North (733 Crotona Park North)</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Large structure with flat roof that fills entire space between adjacent buildings. Wood painted dark blue. 2013: Looks like front yard of 733 Crotona Park North. Same place as previous casita, different structure. Slanted wooden roof, no walls. PR flag hanging from ceiling.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Jackson Ave, Powers &amp; E.142nd St. &amp; St.Mary's</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988 Note: Torn down 8/88. 2013: No Description</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>135th St. between Brook Ave. &amp; Willis Ave.</td>
<td>Cooper, Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Large wooden casita, placed adjacent to neighboring building. Different types of wood used for cladding. 2013: Did not find a casita, but there was a lot on the block boarded/fenced off.</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Location/Address</td>
<td>1988 Surveyor</td>
<td>1988 Floor plan</td>
<td>1988 Photo</td>
<td>2013 Photo</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Remaining in 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Jackson Ave - 138th St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988 Note: &quot;lots of casitas&quot; at Jackson Ave-138th -Tony Rodriguez. 2013: No casitas.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Grant Ave between East 165th &amp; 166th Sts.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Casita-shaped cages that protect street gardens. Each one painted and shape differently with little locks. 2013: Saw a cage over a sidewalk garden, may be similar but no photo to compare.</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>1067 Grant Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No description provided. 2013: No casita. Rowhomes.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Simpson St. &amp; Fox St., 165th St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Dark, unpainted to left. 2013: No casita visible.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>869 Eagle Ave. / Palmas del Caribe Community Garden</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found by Caitlin Coad while surveying, not on 1988 list. Palmas del Caribe Community Garden. Bronx Land Trust/Bronx Green Up garden. Light green structure with windows. Picnic bench and chairs around, flags. Behind fence.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>826-832 Eagle Ave. (approximate)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found by Caitlin Coad while surveying, not on 1988 list. On opposite side of street of El Batey Borincano Garden. Several structures behind fence with garden. One blue wooden with porch and windows, decorated with painted stars, butterflies, suns. Second green wooden structure, and third smaller white structure. Puerto Rico and American flag raised.</td>
<td>Yes, 2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>811-815 Eagle Ave. / El Batey Borincano Garden</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found by Caitlin Coad while surveying, not on 1988 list. El Batey Borincano Garden. Bronx Green Up Garden. Banner of flags hanging at entrance. Open structure, beams with roof, green and white. Shrine in garden.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>927 Falle St.</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not from 1988 survey. Mildred T. Rhodebeck Garden with casita, a NYRP garden.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>1101-1105 East 167th Street (at the corner of Fox St.)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not from 1988 survey. Paradise on Earth Garden, NYRP. Casita, gardens, chickens, picnic table. NYRP site says garden has been there since 1981.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Location/Address</td>
<td>1988 Surveyor</td>
<td>Floor plan</td>
<td>1988 Photo</td>
<td>2013 Photo</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Remaining in 2013</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>115th between Park and Lexington</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Small white casita with small front porch (though porch does not span length of front façade). Porch balustrades feature 'X' pattern. Features garden and reflecting pool. 2013: No casita visible.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Lexington between 117th &amp; 118th</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Green wooden casita with front porch. Porch features 'X' pattern balustrade. Green pick fence. Features a shrine. Called El Borinquen. There is an operation greenthumb sign in 1980s photo. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No, but see H17, similar location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>119th St. between 1st and 2nd Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: 2 casitas (see following entry). Both share lot with large garden area. This one is a single-room wooden casita painted blue. Front porch with 'X' patterned balustrade. Life preserver hung as decoration from front gable. Called OK Corral. 2013: No casitas visible.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>119th St. between 1st and 2nd Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: 2 casitas (see above entry) Both share lot with large garden area. This one is labeled “jail” with a barred window on the door and a noose hanging outside for decoration. OK Corral. 2013: No casitas visible.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>118th St. between 2nd &amp; 3rd Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Open casita, built against adjacent building. There is a painting on the interior wall of the casita (the side of the adjacent building) and a large PR flag also painted on wall. 2013: No casita. Buildings and empty lot on block.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>329 E.112th St, between 1st and 2nd Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Single room wooden casita painted light blue with open windows and white trim. Front porch with 'X' pattern balustrade. 2013: No casita present. High rise apartments here.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>103rd St off Park Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Small wooden casita painted gray and white. Built by Jesus Velasquez. Called Villa Alegre, casita is behind white picket fence in photo. Covered patio area extending from right side. 2013: East 103rd Street Community Garden at 105 E. 103rd St. No casita.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Location/Address</td>
<td>1988 Surveyor</td>
<td>Floor plan</td>
<td>1988 Photo</td>
<td>2013 Photo</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Remaining in 2013</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Madison at 111th</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Small wooden casita with flat shed roof. Unpainted with a front porch. Hammock hangs on small porch. Graffiti found on exterior wall and door. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Lexington Ave, above 103rd St., E side</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Sign on casita in 1980s photo says &quot;The Oldtimers.&quot; Wooden single-room casita painted yellow and blue-green. Features a batey and grass areas. Chain link fences enclosed the lot from the street sidewalk. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>East 119th St. between 2nd &amp; 3rd</td>
<td>Sciorra, Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Open wooden structure with rattan and American flag on top. Unpainted. Fencing surrounds entry pathway. 2013: Two Structures: 1. La Casita community garden at 223 E. 119th St. a NYRP garden. Beige/white casita. 2. Papo's Garden across street at 234 E 119th St. GreenThumb garden with wooden, unpainted, open-air casita. More info email <a href="mailto:info@kitchentablenyc.org">info@kitchentablenyc.org</a></td>
<td>Yes- 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Lexington &amp; 122nd St.</td>
<td>Cooper, Solomon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Open wooden casita with balustrade surrounding. Lots of trees. Table setting out with lots of people gathered there. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Lexington &amp; 122nd St.</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Wooden casita with shed roof. Portions unpainted. From façade painted with red, white, and blue stripes. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Casita Rincón Criollo

#### Name of Property

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Location/Address</th>
<th>1988 Surveyor</th>
<th>Floor plan</th>
<th>1988 Photo</th>
<th>2013 Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Remaining in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>6th Ave between 117th &amp; 118th St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No image or description. 2013: Called El Gallo Social Club. No image or description. 2013: Garden with casita across the street, on SE corner of Lexington and 118th. 2 structures, wooden enclosed, one green, one beige. In use. GreenThumb garden, according to their website, named El Gallo Social Club.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>149 E. 118th St., off Lexington Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1988: Called La Nueva Vida Jardin. No image or description. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>112th St. between Lexington &amp; 2nd Ave</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No image or description. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>105th St. between 2nd &amp; 3rd</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No image or description. 2013: No casita present.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>326 Pleasant Ave</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not from 1988 survey. 2013: Wood open-air casita in Los Amigos Community Garden, a NYRP garden.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Bushwick Ave at Noll &amp; Wilson Sts.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No description or image. 2013: No description or image.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>PR Kiosk Buskwick Ave &amp; Montieth St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No description or image. 2013: No description or image.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Central Ave &amp; Grove St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: No description or image. 2013: No description or image.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Bushwick Ave, Grove St.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Open aired. 2013: No description or image.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Central Ave between Stockholm and Stanhope</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: New greenthumb designed open aired structure, designed by Merrill. 2013: No image or description.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>St. John's between Howard and Buffalo</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Open air. 2013: No image or description.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower East</td>
<td>3rd between 3rd &amp; C Aves</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Called La Buja de Caribe. 2013: No image or description.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower East</td>
<td>Avenue C between 4th and 5th Sts.</td>
<td>Sciorra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1988: Casa Adela, Restaurant. 2013: No image or description.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower East</td>
<td>Suffolk St. bw Stanton and East Houston</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not from 1988 survey. 2013: Dorothy Streslin Memorial Garden, a NYRP garden with casita.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>88 Williams Ave</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not from 1988 survey 2013: Williams Avenue Community Garden with casita. NYRP.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Legal Status of Casitas

While the New York Puerto Rican casitas maybe symbols of empowerment for their communities and a means whereby those communities can forge forceful bonds and strengthen traditional culture, the actual physical nature of the casitas and their gardens remains both fragile and vulnerable. The majority of casitas begin as impromptu squats and their illegal status does not go unnoticed by city officials. During the 1970s, the initial thrust from those in authority was to get rid of them, however, their profusion (as well as that of community gardens more generally) was on such a scale that by 1978, the administration of the then mayor Ed Koch recognized that they needed to find some way to bring them under some kind of regulation. The result was the establishment of GreenThumb, a city wide community gardening program which was set up, according to its website, “in response to the city’s financial crisis of the 1970s, that had led to the abandonment of public and private land. The majority of GreenThumb gardens were derelict vacant lots renovated by volunteers”.¹²¹

GreenThumb

Under GreenThumb, many communities who had created gardens were given yearly leases for a waived peppercorn rent and were supplied with tools, seeds, fencing and guidance. Those that benefitted included Puerto Rican gardens containing casitas, however, the casita structures themselves were forbidden. GreenThumb policy was that there should be no "illegal structures" on city land and some were razed as a result. Yet Puerto Ricans continued to build casitas in response to their personal and community needs.

The situation changed somewhat in 1984, when Jane Weissman took over the directorship of GreenThumb. During her tenure, she became a key figure in ensuring the survival of some casitas despite their dubious status because she recognized the valuable social function they were performing. Under her leadership, a verbal agreement was made that casitas in GreenThumb gardens could remain in situ provided the members actively maintained the garden around it, opened said garden to the wider community at regular specified hours each week, and kept no animals or cars on the lots. In addition, it became a requirement that the casita be opened up so that it became more akin to a gazebo than a little house, yet in reality, a blind eye was often turned to the existence of enclosed casitas provided the other stipulations were fulfilled. This relieved pressure on the casitas for period.¹²²

However, in the 1990s, Mayor Rudolph Guiliani weakened the power of the GreenThumb and tried to do away with many of the community gardens, which by then were thought to number in the region of 700 across New York City’s five boroughs.¹²³ Guiliani’s attempt was stopped in court, due to a lawsuit filed by the then-state attorney general Eliot Spitzer which argued that gardens in existence for 20 or 30 years deserved the same status as city parks, and as a result some of the gardens gained official status. However, not all the casitas gained this official status (DID ANY - CHECK??) and some came under the auspices of the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, a city organization which takes a less benevolent view of their existence. As such, they became more vulnerable to demolition.¹²⁴

As a result, many once-strong casitas have now vanished. For example, of the ten casitas featured in a 1990 article by Joseph Sciorra and Martha Cooper, Sciorra believes that seven are now gone, including Añoranzas de Mi Patria and another - the Casita Rincón Criollo (the subject of this nomination) was forced to relocate. And of the ten casitas featured in the exhibition of El Museo Del Barrio in 1999, two were gone before the exhibit even opened and four more were slated for demolition shortly thereafter.¹²⁵

Fernando Lloveras San Miguel, Executive Director of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, has noted that in the historical preservation world, Puerto Rican properties are particularly underrepresented. New York’s Puerto Rican casitas have featured in exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and at El Museo Del Barrio. They have appeared in documentary films, in scholarly papers and played their part in cultural festivals in the city. They have inspired the establishment of similar casitas outside of the city (for example, those behind La Casita Cultural Center

¹²³ Hansen and Zeitlin 1998.
¹²⁵ Winterbottom and Feuer 1999.
in Syracuse, NY, credit the inspiration behind its establishment to South Bronx casitas). They have played a vital part within the lives of many Puerto Ricans living in New York City and have ensured the maintenance and revitalization of Puerto Rican traditions in the city. And yet despite all this, many casitas exist under constant threat of demolition.

IN CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RINCÓN CRIOLLO AS AN EXAMPLE OF A NEW YORK CASITA

There are multiple reasons for nominating Casita Rincón Criollo above other existing casitas to the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. As the statement of significance demonstrates, Casita Rincón Criollo is unique among existing and past casitas through its the unique contributions to the revival of the musical genres of bomba and plena. Traditional musical practices aside, the Casita Rincón Criollo also remains one of the oldest casitas to have survived relocations and demolitions. As is demonstrated in the comparative data above, few casitas remain today and a large number of those that stand are newer casitas, sanitized and incorporated into the New York City park system through non-profits such as the New York Park Restoration project. Casita Rincón Criollo, on the other hand, though partners with GreenThumb, remains under the control and guidance of its original founders and founder’s children. Of the casitas surveyed in 1988, Casita Rincon Criollo is the most documented and researched casita remaining, and as such, serves as an exemplary example of casita architecture in New York City and the United States.
9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)


Hertz, Betti-Sue. 1991. Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative. Leaflet accompanying the exhibition held at the Smithsonian Institution Experimental Gallery 2/2/91-6/30/91


---. 1994. “‘We’re not here just to plant. We have culture.’ An Ethnography of the South Bronx Casita Rincón Criollo”. New York Folklore, Vol XX 3-4: 19-41.


Slyomovics, Susan. ????. Voluntary Associations and the Puerto Rican Casita.
Casita Rincón Criollo

Name of Property

Bronx County, New York

County and State


INTERVIEWS

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1
Zone
Easting
Northing
3
Zone
Easting
Northing

2
Zone
Easting
Northing
4
Zone
Easting
Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
Casita Rincón Criollo

Name of Property

Bronx County, New York

County and State

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Rachel Hopkin and Virginia Siegel

organization: Western Kentucky University/American Folklore Society

date

street & number: 237 Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center, Potter College of Arts and Letters, Western Kentucky University, 1906 College Heights Blvd. #61029

telephone: 270-745-6549

city or town: Bowling Green

state: KY

zip code: 42101

e-mail: virginiasiegel@gmail.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
  
  A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

- **Continuation Sheets**

- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Casita Rincón Criollo

City or Vicinity: Bronx

County: Bronx County State: New York

Photographer: Molly Garfinkel of City Lore

Date Photographed: June 2, 2014

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

**Photo 1:** Front of Casita Rincón Criollo, northeast corner with north and east facades.

**Photo 2:** Front of Casita Rincón Criollo, southeast corner and south façade.

**Photo 3:** Stage and batey, located in northwest corner of lot.

**Photo 4:** Interior of main room of casita house (facing southwest).

**Photo 5:** Storage building located in southwest of lot (facing southwest).

**Photo 6:** Garden areas lining south wall of lot (storage building in background).

**Photo 7:** Batey space adjacent to casita house. Facing east with north façade of casita visible.

**Photo 8:** Batey in front of stage space. Facing west in this image.
Casita Rincón Criollo
Name of Property

Bronx County, New York
County and State

3 of 8

4 of 8
Casita Rincón Criollo
Name of Property

Bronx County, New York
County and State

5 of 8

6 of 8
Casita Rincón Criollo
Name of Property

Bronx County, New York
County and State

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name

street & number

telephone

city or town

state

zip code

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.
**Map of casita locations.** Numbers in circles indicate casitas in close proximity. As an example, ‘7’ in a circle indicates 7 casita sites in a small concentration of area (though not necessarily the number of structures within each site). Locations are approximate. See list of casita locations in the Developmental Context portion of this nomination for exact addresses.
Casita Rincón Criollo
Name of Property

Bronx County, New York
County and State

GARDEN PLOTS

Note: Measurements are approximate.
Garden plots may not be square as depicted.

STORAGE

STAGE

CASITA

Location of apple tree.

Children's Play Area

Main Entrance

CASITA RINCÓN CRIOLLO

ADDRESS:
749-753 BROOK AVENUE
BRONX, NY 10455

DRAWING TITLE:
SITE PLAN

DRAWING BY:
VIRGINIA SIEGEL
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
Casita Rincón Criollo
Bronx County, New York

Name of Property
County and State

Note: Window locations are approximate.

CASITA RINCÓN CRIOLLO

ADDRESS: 749-753 BROOK AVENUE
BRONX, NY 10455

DRAWING BY: VIRGINIA SIEGEL
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

DRAWING TITLE: CASITA FLOORPLAN
ABBREVIATIONS INDEX

**AFS** – American Folklore Society

**HP** – historic preservation

**NHPA** – National Historic Preservation Act of 1966

**NPS** – National Park Service

**NRHP** – National Register of Historic Places

**PR** – Puerto Rico

**TCP** – traditional cultural property/traditional cultural place