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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nonsovereign Racecraft: How Colonialism, Debt, and Disaster are Transforming Puerto Rican Racial Subjectivities

Isar Godreau and Yarimar Bonilla

ABSTRACT Using the concept of “racecraft” to describe the state production of racial subjectivities, we argue that this process has been increasingly compromised in Puerto Rico by a lack of sovereignty and by the current socioeconomic crisis. We argue that the state-sponsored idea that Puerto Rican white and mixed-race identities operate separately from the US racial framework is receding. Based on the unconventional use of an open-ended question for racial identification in a survey administered to over one thousand Puerto Ricans, we found: a reluctance to identify racially, an awareness of a normative “whiteness” that excludes Puerto Ricans, and a tendency to embrace US federal categories such as “Hispanic” and “Latino.” We interpret these results as evidence of a Puerto Rican racial state in decline, arguing that the island’s debt crisis and compounding disasters have not only eroded the political and economic realms of statecraft but the racial one as well. [*census, colonialism, race, identity, statecraft, racial state, Puerto Rico*]

RESUMEN Usamos *racecraft* para describir la producción de subjetividades raciales por parte del estado, argumentando que este proceso se ha visto comprometido en Puerto Rico por su falta de soberanía y por la actual crisis socioeconómica. Argumentamos que el discurso oficial de que las identidades raciales en Puerto Rico operan de manera autóctona y separada del marco racial estadounidense ya no es sostenible. Usando el método poco convencional de administrar una pregunta abierta sobre raza en una encuesta a más de mil puertorriqueños, encontramos una renuencia a identificarse racialmente; la conciencia de una “blancura” normativa que excluye lo puertorriqueño; y la adopción de categorías federales de los EE. UU. como “hispano” y “latino”. Interpretamos estas tendencias como evidencia de un estado racial en deterioro, cuyas crisis de soberanía y deuda no solo han erosionado sus alcances políticos y económicos sino también su capacidad para incidir sobre lo racial (i.e. racecraft). [*censo, colonialismo, identidad racial, estado racial, Puerto Rico*]

“To them [the United States government], we are Black, an inferior race. Even if we are white or blond, we are inferior.” This assertion—which suggests that whiteness in Puerto Rico is always qualified in relation to the empire—was voiced by one of the more than one thousand Puerto Ricans who responded to a 2016 survey that asked them to state their racial identity. The survey was originally designed to recruit participants for a qualitative study led by Yarimar Bonilla on the political impact of the Puerto Rican debt crisis. Race was not the focus of the study, but in the final

demographic section of the survey, Bonilla (in collaboration with Godreau) decided to experiment with posing the question of racial identity in an open-ended format rather than asking participants to select from a predetermined set of racial categories. This decision was partly based on previous critiques about the inappropriate imposition of US federal racial categories onto the Puerto Rican context (Berkowitz 2001). For example, in the US Census of 2000, 81 percent of Puerto Rican residents identified as racially “white.” According to critics, such misleading

results evidenced, among other things, the incompatibility between US racial categories and local notions of racial mixture and whiteness (Duany 2005; Godreau, Lloréns, and Vargas-Ramos 2010; Lloréns, García-Quijano, and Godreau 2017; Vargas-Ramos 2005). Responding to this criticism, the research team used an open-ended question format, prompting respondents for their racial identity. We presumed that this would lead respondents to use culturally specific racial categories, yielding a more nuanced and complex portrait of racial identification.

After analyzing all responses to our open-ended question, we noticed a sharp decrease in the number of participants who identified as white: 20 percent chose this option, as opposed to 81 percent on the 2000 US Census. As for local categories of racial mixture, such as *trigueño*, *jabao*, *col-orao*, or *indio* (see Appendix for definitions), only 10 percent of respondents employed them, even though the use of such color terms has been well documented in everyday conversations in which people draw distinctions based on phenotype (Duany 2005; Godreau 2008; Gravlee 2005). Instead of using local racial terms to distinguish themselves from other Puerto Ricans, the overwhelming majority of respondents (69 percent) gravitated toward US federal categories of race and ethnicity, such as white, Black, Latino/Hispanic, or Puerto Rican.

At first glance, these results might seem attributable to the cultural impact of migration or to the growing support for statehood among Puerto Ricans. After all, people who spend considerable time in the United States or who favor Puerto Rico becoming a state might be more willing to identify with US federal racial categories and to use the United States, rather than Puerto Rico, as their point of reference. Yet, although 46 percent of respondents reported having lived outside Puerto Rico for periods of three years or more, and although 49 percent of those interviewed favored statehood, neither migratory experience nor political orientation was statistically correlated with respondents' use of federal race categories. Understanding why required further interrogation.

An additional set of important findings was yielded by the open-ended question format (often shunned by demographers and pollsters because it poses considerable challenges to quantitative analysis). For example, among those who identified as white, many tended to align themselves with what we call "qualified whiteness," using terms like "white Latino" or "white among Puerto Ricans," indicating an awareness of an "unmarked" normative whiteness against which Puerto Rican whiteness was measured. These kinds of responses would go undocumented in a survey that solely used close-ended questions.

In addition, using an open-ended format allowed us to witness firsthand the apprehension with which Puerto Ricans confronted the question of race. Since the survey was administered by researchers trained to track both verbal and nonverbal responses, we were able to document how, when confronted with the open question of race, many responded

with confusion, silence, stuttering, and even outright resistance to the question, and 16 percent of respondents either refused or were unable to answer the question as it was asked.

Our survey, which was initially designed as a recruitment tool (not as its own source of anthropological data), also pushed us to think more creatively about how to analyze the quantitative results of our experiment with the open question of race. Anthropologists have traditionally shied away from using survey data, but some argue that these methods will become more common in an era of "lockdown anthropology" (Long 2020). More than a mere substitute for practicing ethnography in contexts in which doing so is deemed impractical, survey methods can be critically adapted to the kind of questions anthropologists ask, which differ in both nature, form, and purpose from those of pollsters and quantitative scientists. They also require us to learn how to think and write in a "numerate way" when addressing such questions (Dressler and Oths 2014, 512). Aggregate data can be particularly useful for finding unexpected patterns and relations that we might not have otherwise inquired about or organically observed and to detect shifts that might go otherwise unremarked by our interlocutors (Handwerker and Borgatti 1998, 530).

Our survey data led us to discover several surprising trends and nuances in Puerto Rican racial identification. By running statistical analysis, we were able to ask whether the patterns we observed could be correlated with other social variables, such as gender, class, education level, political party affiliation, migratory history, or geographic location. The analysis and write-up process was challenging and required a great amount of retraining and assistance, but it ultimately led us to new theorizations of Puerto Rico's racial state.

In what follows we make sense of these findings by analyzing the shifting role of Puerto Rico's nonsovereign racial state apparatus. We begin from the anthropological insight that "the state" is not an ontological reality but a bundle of relationships, practices, and processes (Abrams 1988; Aretxaga 2003; Trouillot 2001). The state is thus perceivable only through its "effects," which include the production of racial, ethnic, and national identities. As Ruth Gilmore and Craig Gilmore (2008, 144) argue, the production of racial categories is a key function of statecraft. "Racist ideological and material practices," they write, "are infrastructure that needs to be updated, upgraded, and modernized periodically: this is what is meant by racialization." This production of racial identities, which we describe as the project of "racecraft," is thus one way that the state produces and reproduces both its subjects and itself.

We thus use "racecraft" to refer to the processes, bureaucracies, policies, and ideologies that support racialized state practices in modern nation-states. Racecraft can be funded by public or para-governmental private entities that partake, with the support of state agencies and governmental entities, in constructing and portraying the nation as a bounded

collectivity with specific racial characteristics. Its identity effects are part and parcel of how race becomes institutionalized via the nation-state, but also of the subjectivities state-sanctioned practices legitimize and make culturally legible for people, since the state is both a political and cultural form (Loveman 2014).

Taking seriously the notion that the production of racial subjectivities is a critical function of the state (Goldberg 2002; Omi and Winant 2014), and that the production of “race” is inextricably tied to imperial projects, we begin by examining the particularities of Puerto Rico as a nonsovereign racial state, one whose capacity for race-making has always been compromised by its lack of sovereignty, but never more so than in the context of its current economic and political crisis.

Puerto Rico’s compounding and intersecting crises—which thread colonial governance with austerity politics and disaster capitalism—have weakened the local state’s ability to reproduce its usual racial “scripts” (Godreau 2015). The political and economic crisis of the last decade, combined with the ongoing “aftershocks” of recent disasters (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019), has transformed local understandings of how Puerto Rico fits within the larger racio-imperial formation of the United States (Bonilla 2020). As a result, the island’s current political and economic bankruptcy is evident not only in financial indicators and the loss of political autonomy but also in the weakening of the local state’s racial project, as evidenced by our survey findings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PUERTO RICAN RACIAL STATE

Initially a colony of Spain, Puerto Rico came under US jurisdiction in 1898 during the Spanish–American War. Its acquisition occurred as the United States sought to assert itself as an imperial power on the world stage by acquiring territories as disparate as the Philippines, Guam, and American Samoa. This expansionist project posed complex legal, economic, and social challenges as the United States was forced to reckon with the political realities of incorporating colonial subjects who were deemed racially and culturally inferior (Rivera-Ramos 2001). To justify the exclusion of territorial residents from the constitutional protections of a purportedly democratic nation, the US Supreme Court established the legal category of “unincorporated territories”—which could be acquired without the intent of full incorporation into the nation and held indefinitely in a de facto colonial status (Burnett et al. 2001; Sparrow 2006). Political imagery of the time reveals how the acquired territories were depicted as racially inferior and as foreign to the domestic body of the United States (see Figure 1).

Transformations ushered in by World War II in the 1940s—such as the need to maintain domestic peace and gain access to cheap labor—combined with local and international pressures to change the overtly colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. This led to the drafting of a constitution in 1952, ratifying the is-

FIGURE 1. 1898 cartoon from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of Uncle Sam holding up the newly acquired possessions of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Philippines, and Ladrone (Mariana Islands). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

land’s political status as a US commonwealth. The new status became known as the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State, or ELA)—a euphemistic and contradictory term that obfuscates Puerto Rico’s status as an enduring colonial state (Torres-Ríos 2018). Under the ELA arrangement, Puerto Ricans can elect their own governor and other local public officials, but they cannot vote for US president or practice self-determination to challenge their subordinate political status. Currency, defense, external relations, communications, the postal service, social security, and interstate commerce remained under the jurisdiction of the US federal government.

The newly founded ELA enjoyed considerable support from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, which implemented health, education, labor, and land reforms in Puerto Rico through an interventionist and well-funded state policy. A key feature of the ELA project was the notion that Puerto Rico could manage and exercise autonomy over its internal affairs despite its lack of formal sovereignty. Another key idea was that Puerto Rico had a distinct cultural patrimony and an autochthonous “Puerto Rican identity,” which veiled Puerto Rico’s colonial subjugation to the United States (Álvarez-Curbelo 1993, 16; Dávila 1997; Kennerley 2003).

During the 1940s and 1950s, ELA-supporting intellectuals and ideologues such as the anthropologist Ricardo Alegría (1978) officially conceptualized the racial substance out of which this autochthonous national identity was to be constructed as a harmonious mixture of Spaniards, Taíno Indians, and Africans. When implemented through the state, this conception, which resembled discourses of *mestizaje* developed in Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba, marginalized Blackness and exalted Hispanic ancestry as a positive influence. At the same time, local ideologues often silenced or disregarded the problem of racism, casting it as a “foreign” US issue and representing Puerto Ricans as mere spectators of the United States’ “color problem” (e.g., Barbosa 1937; Blanco 1942).

During Puerto Rico’s political transformations in the 1950s, the task of developing the island’s discourse of racial nationalism fell on the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP), a local government institution. Founded in 1955, the ICP provided an integrated vision of the foundational racial triad for Puerto Rico. More than “living ancestors” representing different “ethnic groups” (Segal 1994), “Spanish,” “Taino Indian,” and “African” were developed by the ICP and other ELA government institutions as distant heritages that blended the biological and cultural makeup of all Puerto Ricans.

Over time, the ICP’s narrative about the three racial roots and their corresponding cultural contributions and harmonious blending was disseminated through cultural programs, festivals, museums, and school curricula, gaining island-wide acceptance (Godreau 2015). In this framework, “race” and “culture” became relevant primarily as part of a national origin story that pre-dated US intervention. Puerto Rico’s national culture was represented as racially harmonious, made up of subjects who could lay claim to all three racial heritages but who were also assumed to have whitened over time through mixture.

This ideology of a whitened mixture went hand in hand with the government’s denial of racism and “racial identity” as a matter of public policy worth documenting or addressing. As a result, the ELA government shunned the federal census procedure of eliciting information on race and developed its own local census apparatus that excluded the race question. Hence, from 1960 to 2000, Puerto Ricans were not hailed into this compulsory bureaucratic ritual of racial identification. During this period, the local state apparatus did not formalize “race” into “bureaucratic identities.” Although the idea that Puerto Ricans were a mixture of three races was promoted in educational materials, local media, and tourism ads, this idea was not applied to a state-sanctioned classification theme. Local terms for denoting degrees of darkness or lightness along the continuum of mixture (such as *trigueño*, *jabao*, *colorao*, *prieto*, *mulato*, *mezcla*, *café con leche*; see Appendix) prevailed in the arena of interpersonal interactions but were not part of state practices of identification (Duany 2005; Godreau 2008; Gravlee 2005).

When race was formalized as a bureaucratic identity, it was usually within contexts such as military inscription, federal work, or financial aid applications. Only in these moments would federal categories of race trump the ELA’s local discourse of racial irrelevance, as locals were recruited into adopting the federal government’s racial categories.

This began to change in 2000, when the local government—under a pro-statehood administration—requested that the federal government institute the same procedures, questions, and categories used in the continental US Census in Puerto Rico. Far from being a move to document racial inequality, the request was made by the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) in support of its efforts to make Puerto Rico the fifty-first state of the union. Since its inception in 1967, the pro-statehood PNP has challenged the ELA for failing to guarantee the equal treatment of Puerto Ricans as US citizens. In line with that ideology, government officials requested that, for administrative purposes, Puerto Rico be treated as a state by the federal government, using the same census questionnaire as the fifty states. The rationale was that this would pave the way for Puerto Rico’s eventual admission to the union, achieving what Godreau and others have described as “statistical statehood” (Godreau, Lloréns, and Vargas-Ramos 2010).

The year 2000 thus marked the first time in fifty years that Puerto Ricans were asked about their race on the census. The change, which was not complemented with educational materials or information about its rationale, was met with a great deal of apprehension and mistrust because it clashed with previous color-blind state policies. In fact, two studies commissioned by the US Census Bureau found that only 53 percent of households returned their census questionnaire by mail and that the race question was an important factor in nonresponse (Berkowitz 2001, 16).

In 2000, an election landslide gave control of the local state apparatus to the opposing political party, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), which supports the ELA status. With that victory, the PPD administration had the opportunity to reverse its predecessor’s decision to use federal census procedures, but it did not. We suspect that this was because the local state could no longer afford its own census project, due to the developing fiscal crisis.

This inability to finance an independent census fits within the larger dismantling of the ELA state’s cultural arm, which had enjoyed abundant financing during the 1940s–1960s to shape the racial representation of its citizens as a color-blind, non-Black, racially mixed population, distinct from that of the United States. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, that was no longer the case. The cultural and educational programming previously sponsored by the ELA was far from sustainable, as seen in drastic budget cuts to agencies such as the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, the headquarters for which is now slated to become a hotel (Meléndez García 2019); the public television network WIPR, which is up for privatization (Hernández Mercado 2020); and the public school system, battered by

the closure of more than four hundred schools, which is roughly a third of the schools Puerto Rico had before 2016 (Brusi 2020). With the declaration of the debt crisis in 2016, this debilitated cultural apparatus began to collapse, along with local roadways, the electric grid, and other forms of infrastructure, thus making undeniable Puerto Rico's colonial status and subordinate racial position (Ficek 2018; Lloréns and Stanchich 2019).

PUERTO RICO'S BANKRUPT RACIAL STATE

The survey discussed here took place from the summer to the fall of 2016, a tumultuous time in which Puerto Rico's debt crisis was heavily debated in the public sphere. In October of that year, then-governor Alejandro Padilla declared that the island was in a financial "death spiral" and that its debts were unpayable (Williams 2016). Having the legal status of neither a state nor an independent nation, Puerto Rico could neither refinance nor default on its debt. The US Congress barred Puerto Rico from declaring bankruptcy or receiving any kind of financial bailout. Instead, Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which established an unelected seven-member Fiscal Oversight Management Board to oversee local finances and negotiate directly with creditors.

PROMESA cemented the idea that Puerto Rico had entered into a new era of governance characterized by a more overt colonial relationship with the United States (Goldstein 2016), no longer veiled by the mask of the commonwealth status and its promise of offering locals the "best of both worlds." These developments coincided with two US Supreme Court rulings in which the US government *itself* argued that Puerto Rico wasn't really sovereign after all (Stern 2016).

This realization marked a shift in the public sphere in which Puerto Rico was suddenly referred to explicitly as a colony. In a previous era, Puerto Rico's colonial status was asserted only in leftist independence circles, but during the 2016 televised gubernatorial debates, all the candidates were asked *how* they would resolve Puerto Rico's colonial status rather than *whether* they thought decolonization was still necessary. Notably, 68 percent of those who participated in our survey said they considered Puerto Rico a colony. As evidence of that colonial condition, many pointed directly to media coverage of the debt crisis and to the imposition of PROMESA and the fiscal board.

As Puerto Rico's colonial and bankrupt status came sharply into view, many began to proclaim that the ELA was officially "dead" (Primera Hora 2016). Demonstrators held performative funerals in which they carried the ELA in an empty coffin, and artists began depicting the national flag in black and white instead of the usual red, white, and blue (see Figures 2 and 3).

During the survey period, Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States also became increasingly visible in popular media and public discourse. For example,

¿DONDE LO DEJAMOS?

NO SÉ. NO HAY DINERO
PARA PAGAR EL FUNERAL.

FIGURE 2. Local cartoon depicting the "Death of the ELA." Caption reads: "Where will we bury it? I don't know, there's no money for the funeral." (Image courtesy of Kike Estrada) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

FIGURE 3. Mural of Puerto Rican flag in San Juan that was changed to black and white after the declaration of the "death of the ELA." (Image courtesy of author) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

in a popular cartoon by local artist De La Nada (2017; see Figures 4 and 5), Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States was visually likened to that of a master and a slave. In the cartoon, Puerto Rico is represented as a dark-skinned slave chained to a wooden post with a sign reading "Colony." He is whipped by a light-skinned master. The slave asks to be granted the same rights as the other fifty states. The American master warns him that this will not necessarily result in freedom or the right to decide for himself, since he would then be subject to the desires of fifty other "equal states." The Puerto Rican figure responds that he is sure he will have much in common with the other states. Then the video pans out to a representation of the slave as the sole brown figure within a community of fifty other white masters.

FIGURE 4. Screen shots of “De La Nada - Estadidad e Igualdad” video. (Image courtesy of Rangely García Colón) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

FIGURE 5. Screen shots of “De La Nada - Estadidad e Igualdad” video. (Image courtesy of Rangely García Colón) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

In representing Puerto Rico’s racialized place in the US political fabric, this cartoon challenges the previous model of racial mixture and color-blindness promoted by the ELA. It makes evident that Puerto Ricans are not mere “spectators” of the US color problem, and that they are not located outside the US empire’s racial formation.

Moreover, this post-PROMESA imagery restages a previous era of imperial representation in which the US colonial relationship was depicted as one of patronizing contact with nonwhites. Representations of the United States as a white figure charged with disciplining unruly Black children were common during the early nineteenth century, often drawing from the symbolic repertoires of minstrelsy. This “pick-aninny aesthetic” was commonly used to depict US policy toward the Caribbean and Latin America in the wake of the Spanish–American War in 1898 (see Figure 6). It repeatedly cast colonial subjects as dark-skinned children in need of an avuncular authority so as to justify US intervention, military occupation, and even outright acquisition (Pérez 2008).

This trope persists. In interviews conducted as part of the larger research project discussed here, Bonilla repeatedly found narratives of the island’s debt crisis that made use of family metaphors, describing Puerto Rico as a misbehaving child and the United States as a disciplining paternal figure. Some participants compared the United States to a parent who gave their child a credit card that had been maxed out

and then had to be cut up into pieces. Others described Puerto Rico as a teenager who had crashed their parent’s car, with the United States representing the parent who had to take the keys away.

Such infantilizing and imperial representations of Puerto Ricans were also embedded in responses to our survey’s open question on race. These representations index a shift away from the ELA racial regime in which Puerto Ricans were told that they could lay claim to autonomous formulations of mixture and whiteness, outside of the US racial framework. The following survey findings illustrate the identity effects of these shifts.

METHOD AND CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY

The data analyzed in this article were obtained through a survey administered during the summer and fall of 2016 to a convenience sample of 1,055 participants across nine municipalities in Puerto Rico: Aguadilla, Mayagüez, Arecibo, Ponce, Barranquitas, San Juan, Trujillo Alto, Fajardo, and Vieques. The research team was composed of five undergraduate students from the University of Puerto Rico.¹

Surveys were conducted in public places, such as shopping centers and town plazas; in government offices, such as the local DMV (Centro de Servicios al Conductor); and as part of an exit poll at electoral events (during the 2016 primaries and general elections). These sites were chosen not only to achieve geographic distribution but also to bring together residents from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and political ideologies. In addition, we found that respondents were more willing to participate in a survey when approached in these spaces than in spaces of leisure (such as shopping malls and public plazas), where many people declined to participate, preferring instead to enjoy their free time uninterrupted. At both government offices and electoral events, participants were already engaged in a civic role and seemed more willing to answer questions related to government and politics.

Survey questions included the following: Have you felt impacted by the financial crisis? Have you considered moving outside Puerto Rico? What do you think of the proposed (at the time) fiscal control board? What political status do you favor for Puerto Rico? Do you think Puerto Rico is a colony? A short final section asked for basic demographic information (age, gender, education level, and racial identity). Placing the open question for racial identification in the final demographic section of the survey facilitated respondents thinking about “race” in the context of previous questions about the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.²

Most participants were employed (45 percent) or retired (33 percent), a slight majority were male (53 percent), and most were aged thirty-five to sixty-four (62 percent). Almost half (49 percent) favored statehood, while others favored the commonwealth status (19 percent) or independence (14 percent). (see Table 1 for full details on participants’ demographic profile.)

CUTTING A SWITCH FOR A BAD BOY,
1910: "THERE IS NOTHING THESE
PEOPLE RESPECT AND FOLLOW LIKE
POWER."

FIGURE 6. 1910 *Uncle Sam* cartoon.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Finding 1: Resistance to the Race Question

Our survey's first finding was that many respondents were taken aback by the fact that the question of race was being posed at all. When asked for their racial identity, most requested clarification or responded with a long pause. Students administering the survey were instructed to not interrupt the pauses or provide explanations and to simply repeat the question as written, indicating that they were unable to provide further context. During the pilot test of the survey, student researchers quickly noted the most common reactions to the question, which included prolonged silence but also nonverbal responses, such as rubbing or touching the skin of their forearm (a common gesture in Puerto Rico to indicate race), stuttering and tripping over a response (from respondents who had not stuttered at any previous point in the survey), and repeated requests for further instructions or guidance. For example, respondents would ask to see the options available, and when told there were no boxes to check off, they would ask the student researchers to provide them with the correct answer. Student researchers developed a coding system to facilitate the tracking of this metadata (see Table 2).

A considerable number ($n = 46$) found it impossible to respond to the question of race or simply refused to answer it (for similar findings, see Duany 2005; Santory-Jorge et al. 2009). These participants either asked the interviewer to leave the race question blank ($n = 21$) or said they did

not know the answer to the question ($n = 25$). In addition, a large number of respondents ($n = 117$) offered answers that challenged the question's premise and its intent of categorizing people into groups. When asked for their racial identity, many responded that they were members of "the human race," that they were "normal," or that they "get along with everyone" (*me llevo con todo el mundo*). Some of these respondents seemed to interpret the question itself as divisive and racist (see Table 3 for more examples). In the end, 164 people, or 16 percent of the overall sample, were either unable to answer or resisted the question.

We interpret this finding as a legacy of a color-blind ideology produced by the ELA state, which for decades encouraged Puerto Ricans to avoid, deflect, or disengage with questions of race. As others have argued, racial identity has often been considered taboo or uncomfortable in a context in which people are encouraged to ignore the issue (Duany 2005). Also, since there are no affirmative action policies and no justification is provided for the question, some people fear that the question's purpose is to discriminate against them (Berkowitz and Brudvig 2001).

Moreover, because race was eliminated as a category of government administration for fifty years, Puerto Ricans are unaccustomed to being asked about their racial identity in this manner. In contrast, people in the fifty states are routinely asked to identify their race on everything from government forms to loan applications and patient-intake forms at the doctor's office. The fact that in Puerto Rico

TABLE 1. *Demographic profile of survey participants*

Gender	n	%	Employment	Number	%
male	536	53%	employed	454	45%
female	481	47%	unemployed	213	21%
missing	1		retired	333	33%
Age			Lived in the US		
Age 18-24	56	5.5%	Yes	459	45%
25-34	98	9.7%	No	489	48%
35-44	183	18.0%	Come and go	50	5%
45-54	212	20.9%	Missing	20	2%
55-64	231	22.8%			
65-74	163	16.1%	Bilingual		
75+	71	7.0%	Yes	490	48%
			No	354	35%
			Missing	174	17%
Education			Status preference		
Less than High School	116	11.9%	Statehood	506	49%
High-school	272	27.8%	ELA	189	19%
Technical Degree	130	13.3%	Independence	141	14%
BA	359	36.7%	Other	116	11%
Graduate Studies	100	10.2%	Don't know	55	5%
			Missing	11	1%

Total number of participants who were asked the question of race: 1,018

TABLE 2. *Coding system for nonverbal responses*

?	Asked clarification on the question
→	Asked for guidance or options from which to choose.
TU	Stuttered
GE	Bodily gestures (rubbing or touching the body)
SI	Prolonged silence

race is seldom asked about in encounters with the local state apparatus or tracked in most institutions poses a significant challenge in assessing the role of racism as a determinant factor in economic opportunities, health outcomes, or housing discrimination. For example, there are currently no reliable statistics on whether the racial disparities of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been well documented in the United States, extend to Puerto Rico, since there is no racial data on COVID-19 testing, hospitalizations, or fatalities.

When race is asked about in Puerto Rico, it is mostly in the context of people's dealings with the federal bureaucracy, such as requests for federal aid or the census. In these and other bureaucratic rituals, racial and ethnic categories are often conflated, and at times "Puerto Rican," "Hispanic," or "Latino" appear as racial categories, while at other times

racial identity is requested in addition to identification as Latino.

Puerto Ricans must thus straddle different systems of classification that variously privilege hypodescent, national belonging, or phenotypic color in different situations and contexts (Duany 2005; Gravlee 2005; Roth 2012). As a result, "race" comes to be perceived as shifting, context-specific, or unknown (Santory-Jorge et al. 2009). This shifting understanding was evidenced by respondents' repeated requests to see the options from which they could choose an identity and by responses such as "I am Black, but I put Caucasian on those types of forms."

Hesitation with the question of racial identity must also be analyzed in the context of previous colonial practices. The US Census and other federal forms have long been recognized as instruments of biopower and

TABLE 3. *Examples of responses classified as “resisting the question”*

Everybody is a son of God	I am always the same, look at the racism they have in the USA
I am not racist, I have a husband and sons of color	I don't identify, I appreciate everybody, I don't appreciate injustice
Neutral	Neither white nor Black
Evangelical, I am not racist	I don't have any problems with whites or Blacks
For me, my race is the best, I am not a racist and I feel fine	Races are the same everywhere, there are bad people of all races
Human (2 instances)	All, I don't have a race, Puerto Rican, American, Black, Indian, of everything!
I am a Pacifist	I am of all races
Everybody is the same	I am not racist
I get along with everybody, we are all human	I don't have one, nobody is different
I am boricua, that is not a “race” that is a sentiment	For them, we are Black, an inferior race. Even if we are white or blond, we are inferior.
I am of everything, trigueña, white, of everything . . . even Chinese, in any case. I love everybody from the heart	All except Yankee
BeautifulNormal	Here what we have is a horrible racism

governmentality—that is, as instruments that discipline people into subjectivities that are comprehensible to US colonial administrators. Puerto Ricans have continually resisted such racially subordinate subjectivities (Duany 2005; Rodríguez 2000), even when this means redefining racial boundaries to claim whiteness (Loveman and Muniz 2007). Hence, we interpret the uneasiness with the question of race not only as an indication of people's lack of practice with bureaucratic racial rituals in Puerto Rico but also as indicating respondents' struggle to find where they fit within a North American system of racial classification—one that is not so much “foreign” as it is disturbingly familiar.

Finding 2: Qualified Whiteness and Unhesitant Blackness

As noted above, 16 percent of survey respondents struggled to state their racial identity. The remaining respondents provided answers that fell into the following five broad categories: Puerto Rican, 16 percent; Latino/ Hispanic, 23 percent; white, 20 percent; Black, 10 percent; and mixed race, 10 percent. A smaller category of “other” (5 percent) includes answers that were uncommon outliers (e.g., “Dominican,” “Spanish,” and “Viequense”; see Figure 7.)

From these results, the second major finding was the low percentage of people who in our survey chose to identify as “white” or a variant of white (e.g., *jincha*, *blanca hispana*, *clara*)—20 percent as compared to the 81 percent and 76 percent registered in the 2000 and 2010 US censuses, respectively. A similar tendency has been found in recent stud-

ies (Santory-Jorge et al. 2009; Vargas-Ramos 2005).³ This downward trend seems evident even in the official census results, in which respondents are limited to a narrow set of categories. The rate of Puerto Ricans identifying as white in the 2000 census declined from 80.5 to 69 percent in the Puerto Rico Community Survey for the period 2012–2016, then further down to 66 percent for the period 2015–2019.⁴

Scholars have pointed to the importance of migration in the production of these shifts in racial identity (Roth 2012; Vargas-Ramos 2014). Migration is not, however, a new phenomenon for Puerto Ricans, who have been migrating to and from the United States since the 1920s, and with increasing frequency since the 1940s and 1950s. But this has not caused the number of people who identify as “white” in Puerto Rico to decline. Quite the contrary. The percentage of people choosing “white” gradually increased in Puerto Rico: 64.5 percent in 1910, 73.3 percent in 1930, 76 percent in 1940, 79 percent in 1950, and finally 81 percent in 2000 (Vargas-Ramos 2005, 268). The trend started to change downward only in 2010, with 75.8 percent identifying as white, shortly after the economic recession began in 2006 (Caraballo-Cueto and Lara 2018; Mora, Dávila, and Rodríguez 2017).

Thus, migration alone does not explain tendencies in our results. Rather than interpreting it as a root cause, we believe migration is better understood as a corollary effect of a debilitated state and public-service infrastructure that fails to meet the needs of its population, forcing them to move elsewhere. In this new context of state bankruptcy, the decline in the number of “whites” must also be linked to

FIGURE 7. Main results distribution. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

the ELA's death and the island's increasingly evident colonial status. This, in turn, jeopardizes local notions of whiteness as a legitimate category for people in a vulnerable political and economic situation.

In fact, those who chose to describe themselves as "white" in our survey (only 20 percent) did so with a great deal of hesitation. Almost half those who identified as white (44 percent) voiced what we describe as a "qualified whiteness," stating, for example, that they were "white Latinos," "mixed whites," or "whites from *here* [Puerto Rico]." These common qualifications suggest an awareness of another, competing kind of Anglo-whiteness, implicitly constructed as normative and not so distant. Some of the most frequent examples voiced by people in this group were "white Hispanic," "white Latina," and "white Puerto Rican." We also, however, came across other, less standard formulations, such as "white, but I am mixed," "white *trigueño*," and "burnt white." Other statements included "I am brown [*trigueño*], but one puts white on these things [i.e., survey forms/government forms]"; "White, but I defend Blackness to the end. I don't believe in that issue of racism"; and "White Puerto Rican, although I like Black men."

In asserting qualified whiteness, respondents often hesitated, suggesting an awareness that this identity should not be confused with a normative and unmarked form of whiteness. Furthermore, we found that most of those who described themselves as "white" in an unqualified way tended to be older adults. In a regional study of seventeen Latin American countries, Telles and Flores (2013, 443–44)

also found that older Latin Americans tend to be more likely to identify as white compared to their younger conationals. They speculate young people are more influenced by multiculturalism and by popular culture's impact in valuing Black, Indigenous, or mixed-race identities, especially because of their greater exposure to the internet and new technologies. Even though Puerto Rico was not included in the study, we concur with their speculation. However, our emphasis on the role of the racial state also leads us to consider that less exposure to ELA cultural programs and racial discourses is a key factor for understanding why "white" is an identity in decline among the younger generation (twenty-four years or younger) in Puerto Rico (see Figure 8).

Meanwhile, we observed a different pattern among those who answered "Black" to the question of race. Unlike with the white category, the percentage of participants who identified as Black did not differ drastically from census results of previous decades. Participants who said they were Black constituted 10 percent of our general sample, which is somewhat comparable to the 8 percent and 12 percent of people who identified as Black in the 2000 and 2010 censuses. Another difference is that we did not find a significant correlation between age and identification with Blackness. Furthermore, some respondents who described themselves as Black qualified their responses with statements such as "*hispana negra*," "Black mixed," "Black, as they say," or "Black *trigueño*," but this happened less frequently than with "whites" (44 percent of whites vs. 19 percent of Blacks). In addition, interviewers commented that people who said they

FIGURE 8. Racial identification as “White” adjusted by age group. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

were Black answered with more self-assertiveness than other participants, did not struggle as much with the question, and were less likely to respond with long pauses, hesitation, stutters, or requests for further instruction.⁵

We interpret this pattern of “unhesitant Blackness” as evidence of how—even in a purportedly color-blind society where rituals of racial identification have not been routinized by state agencies—Black residents lack the privilege of “not seeing” or thinking about racial difference. Moreover, in a society that has long celebrated ideologies of mixture and *blanqueamiento* (state-sponsored “whitening”), asserting a Black identity requires a conscious rejection of the status quo (Lloréns 2018). As Hilda Lloréns (2019) argues, Afro–Puerto Rican communities have affirmed their Blackness in the face of adversity for centuries.

Finding 3: From *Mestizaje* to *Latinidad*

Our third major finding was the absence of terminology indexing the idea of mixture among our respondents. Only 10 percent of respondents identified with the traditional state-sponsored ideologies of racial mixture or employed local color terminology that signals mixture (e.g., *una mezcla*, *mulato*, *jabao*, *mestizo*, *trigueño*, and so on). In addition, about a third of all instances in which people alluded to mixture used this idea as a modifier or qualifier of mainstream racial or ethnic labels: “negro mezclado,” “blanca, pero mezclada,” “Latina multicolor,” among others. Moreover, a number of people said they were a mixture of two races (Black and white), not the three races that have traditionally been represented as the pillars of Puerto Rican identity. A few ($n = 6$) asserted that one could belong only to one of these two categories, ignoring the idea of racial mixture altogether. For example, a woman from Aguadilla said, “White because I am not Black,” and another from Fajardo said, “Black because I

am not white.” Two men from Ponce responded, “I guess Black . . . you are either white or Black.”

While ELA-era racial ideologies of mixture were surprisingly absent, the category that respondents most widely deployed as a racial identity was “Latino” or “Hispanic,” which is how 23 percent of the general sample responded. In fact, almost half (42 percent) of participants answered the open question of race using frameworks of ethnicity or nationality (i.e., Puertorriqueño, Boricua, Latino, Hispano, Americano, etc.), the most common being pan-national identities such as Latino or Hispanic. Thus, instead of using local racial terms such as *blanco*, *trigueño*, or *negro* to differentiate themselves racially vis-à-vis other Puerto Ricans, respondents used US national frameworks as their broader point of reference when stating their ethno-racial identity.

This trend contrasts with previous findings that document the use of Latino/Hispanic primarily among Puerto Ricans based in the continental United States, but with less frequency in Puerto Rico (Landale and Oropesa 2002, 249; Roth 2012, 113). In fact, previous studies that document the use of a wide repertoire of race/color terminology in Puerto Rico make no mention of people using terms like “Latino” or “Hispanic” as part of that racial repertoire (Duany 2005; Godreau 2008; Gravlee 2005; Santory-Jorge et al. 2009). Some might attribute the shift to a Latino/Hispanic identity to the experience of migration, yet we did not find the labels “Hispanic” or “Latino,” or any other racial label for that matter, to correlate with residence in the United States or with an experience of migration among survey participants (for similar findings among nonmigrant Puerto Ricans, see Roth 2012, 101). We did, however, find that age was an important variable. While those who identified as “white” tended to be older, the Latino/Hispanic label was used mostly by those under the age of twenty-five (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. Racial identification as “White” and “Latino” adjusted by age group. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

This suggests that “Latino” is an identity on the rise and that new generations of Puerto Ricans (whether they are in the United States or in Puerto Rico) are viewing themselves within the US racial formation and its pan-ethnic categories. Different factors support this trend. Younger Puerto Ricans are less likely to be influenced by the ELA’s officialized ideology of a Puerto Rican cultural identity unaffected by US colonial intervention. In addition, as the debt crisis pushed budget cuts to the public agencies once in charge of reproducing these official racial scripts (such as the Instituto de Cultura, public television and radio, and other cultural agencies), the bankrupt racial state has fewer sites in which to reproduce officialized racial identities and discourses. Meanwhile, local media have been increasingly replaced by “canned programming” from conglomerates such as Univision and Telemundo, which both cater to and simultaneously reproduce a growing population construed as “Latino” or “Hispanic” (Roth 2012, 106).

The shift from *mestizaje* to *Latinidad* is also facilitated by how *Latinidad* functions as a proxy for race in the United States. As Jonathan Rosa (2019) argues, *Latinidad* traffics in “spectrum-based racial logics” that position Latinos in an intermediary terrain between Blackness and whiteness. In fact, the very same ideologies of racial nonrecognition, Indigenous erasure, and anti-Blackness that underpinned the ELA racial state also underpin the racial project of *Latinidad* (cf. Candelario 2011; Jiménez Román 2011).⁶ All these factors facilitated the movement of participants, especially young ones, away from a terminology aligned with *mestizaje* toward a more US-centered logic of *Latinidad*. As noted, only a small number of our survey respondents used terms signaling *mestizaje* as an identity category.

Meanwhile, across Latin America we also find a turn away from national discourses of *mestizaje* and toward other forms of pluralism. In the late 1980s, there was a drastic turn in forms of governance and constitutional amendments

in which various Latin American states recognized their societies not as homogenous entities of *mestizo* citizens but as pluri-ethnic. This meant that Indigenous and Black communities could claim a specific collective cultural identity and the rights attached to this identity. Scholars have underscored that this turn from *mestizaje* to multiculturalism occurred in tandem with neoliberal development strategies that increased inequality and weakened the state’s capacity to maintain control over its territory. According to Charles Hale (2002), the weakened state paved the way for neoliberal legislation that, while granting ethnic autonomy, left Indigenous and Black communities to fend for themselves. Tianna Paschel (2016) further notes that this weakened neoliberal state also prompted the incursion of parastate international players into the work of governance (e.g., the United Nations, International Labour Organization, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, NGOs, transnational human rights organizations, development specialists). These organizations upheld ideas of democracy and multiculturalism that were largely compatible with Black activists’ demands and with critiques of the state’s homogenizing discourse of *mestizaje* (Paschel 2016).

There are significant differences between Puerto Rico and the aforementioned challenges to *mestizaje* as a national ideology across Latin America. For example, our survey in Puerto Rico was not preceded by international and national Black sociopolitical movements, such as those in Colombia, Brazil, Honduras, and other Latin American countries, nor by multicultural legislation or constitutional amendments produced as a result of that militancy. Moreover, the influence of what Paschel (2016) calls the “global political field” in this US territory is limited by international actors that fall under the US government’s purview. Nevertheless, in Puerto Rico, as in the rest of Latin America, we find links between a weakened neoliberal state, the diminished prominence of discourses of *mestizaje*, and people’s increasing

tendency to adopt transnational ethno-racial identities that undermine those previously assumed under national state discourses of harmonious mixture.

Throughout, we find the incursion of external, transnational actors working alongside a weak neoliberal state that once upheld *mestizaje* and racial exceptionalism but no longer has a firm grip over citizens' racial subjectivities. The persistence of this common denominator in two very different social contexts underscores the impact that a debilitated, bankrupt state has for racecraft and the construction of racial identities.

CONCLUSION

This research project began as an experiment to see how Puerto Ricans would identify racially when the question of race was posed to them in an open format. We recognized the widespread consensus among scholars that survey instruments such as the federal census are inappropriate for the Puerto Rican context because they do not allow for the use of culturally specific categories salient to daily life on the archipelago. At the same time, we took the challenge of analyzing a large sample of qualitative answers to our open question of race, using statistical correlations to detect general response patterns, something uncommon in anthropological research. This unconventional approach uncovered a trend of steep decline in the number of respondents who identified as "white," many of whom were careful to qualify that identity. We also discovered that a significant number of respondents were unable to answer the question and that an overwhelming majority opted for federal (as opposed to local) categories of race and ethnicity.

We interpret these results as evidence of a nonsovereign racial state in which federal rituals of racialization override local ideologies of mixture and color blindness. In other words, when Puerto Ricans encounter the racial state, they also encounter the empire. When asked to identify racially, their tendency is to look within the larger racial-imperial formation of the United States—despite prevailing ideologies of mixture or how they might individually imagine their place in the local pigmentocracy.

Notably, 68 percent of our survey respondents asserted that they considered Puerto Rico a colony, many of them citing the debt crisis and US denials of aid as evidence of that colonial relationship. Such colonial subjectivities also include an awareness of being part of a racial-imperial formation. We argue this awareness also points to a local racial state in decline, one that is ever more unable to shape racial subjectivities or veil its colonial nature.

We predict that these trends will only continue, given the many "aftershocks" experienced in the wake of Hurricane María (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). After then-president Donald Trump minimized the island's devastation, denied aid to victims, and sought to repurpose disaster funds from the island to the construction of a wall along the Mexican border, Puerto Rico's place within the imperial racial formation became hard to deny. In addition, in the wake of the debt

FIGURE 10. 2018 political cartoon of Trump throwing paper towels to Puerto Ricans. (Image courtesy of Clay Jones) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

crisis, the botched hurricane recovery, and the more recent earthquake "swarm" that has caused hundreds of tremors along the southern part of the island, migration to the United States has soared, placing Puerto Ricans in greater contact with United Statesians who interpret their linguistic and cultural practices as nonwhite.

Puerto Ricans are well aware of this heightened imperial gaze. After Hurricane María, those involved in rescue efforts reported racism as an obstacle for adequate emergency response (Rodríguez-Díaz and Lewellen-Williams 2020). The prolonged collapse of infrastructure and other basic services in Puerto Rico after María also revealed, in an embodied way, the racialization of Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects (Ficek 2018, 102). When Trump threw paper towels into a crowd during his visit to hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico, a caricature of a white, blond president and a dark-skinned Puerto Rican was used to represent the appalling incident (see Figure 10).

Our prediction that Puerto Ricans will increasingly understand themselves as nonwhite within the US schema does not mean, however, that enduring racial inequalities will disappear. We predict that whiteness will continue to be valued and protected locally in myriad ways. In fact, as Marisol LeBrón (2019) argues, racial segregation is reinforced by state repression, which is most aggressively deployed when state's strategies of economic development fail and create extreme racial and economic inequality.

Before the hurricanes, neoliberal policies had already impoverished racialized communities, making Puerto Rico one of the societies with the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world (Caraballo-Cueto and Lara 2018; IEPR 2018, 185). In 2016, after the hurricanes, the American Community Survey revealed considerable disparities between Puerto Ricans who identified as "Black" and "white" in terms of household income (\$16,961 vs. \$24,076), the percentage of those lacking medical insurance (9 vs. 6 percent), and the percentage of those living in poverty (46 vs.

44 percent) (Cortés-Chico 2018). Given the racial dimensions of class inequality and the depletion of public services, we expect such indexes to worsen for communities racialized as Black, whether they are US citizens or migrants, evidencing the dramatically uneven nature of the so-called recovery.

In this context, it is no coincidence that activist organizations like La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción and the Colectivo Ilé have been increasingly pushing for an intersectional analysis of colonialism, class inequality, homophobia, misogyny, and anti-Black racism (CFC 2017; Colectivo Ilé 2020; Contreras 2019). Lifting the veil of Puerto Rico's colonial status has also created new, albeit modest, spaces for antiracist activism in the form of Afro-descendant organizations, academic panels, antiracist trainings, cultural programs, Black beauty websites, and protests in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. In addition, the University of Puerto Rico recently established its first Afro-Diasporic and Racial Studies Program with support from the Mellon Foundation. All these were invigorated in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and demonstrations against persistent institutional racial violence (Caro González 2020; Weekly Journal 2020). But as issues of racial inequality among Puerto Ricans come to the forefront, those who articulate them are often accused of being oversensitive or *acomplejados* (hung-up) (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Moreover, important media outlets continue to pursue editorial lines that mock or demean Blackness while dismissing charges against racism in Puerto Rico, demonstrating that legacies of the ELA's *blanqueamiento* and color-blind ideology still persist (Abadía Rexach 2020; Toro 2020).

Thus, although recent political shifts have led Puerto Ricans toward a greater understanding of the place they occupy in the US racial-imperial formation, local racial hierarchies remain veiled by color-blind ideologies that persist, making racism difficult to document and denounce. Indeed, the ELA government is still uninterested in collecting information about race to track and mitigate racial discrimination or the disproportionate impacts of recent disasters (or the COVID-19 pandemic) among racialized communities. At the same time, our survey results point to an undermining of the national discourses of Puerto Rican whiteness, *mestizaje*, and racial exceptionality that have supported such inaction for decades.

These and other racialized dynamics forged in the context of overt nonsovereignty and deep-seated colonialism warrant further research.⁷ At this time of retrenched imperialism and state bankruptcy, we must reassess the previously taken-for-granted notion that Puerto Ricans in the archipelago overwhelmingly adopt racial identities and discourses that are distinct from the hegemonic formulations of the North (Duany 2005; Gravlee 2005; Landale and Oropesa 2002; Rodríguez 2000; Vargas-Ramos 2014). Such scrutiny must extend beyond personal identity politics, cultural schemas, and the false consciousness attributed to Black denial in Afro-Latin America. With increased

neoliberalism debilitating public services and local state apparatuses across the globe, understanding the role of the nonsovereign state and its capacity (or lack thereof) for racecraft is crucial for making sense of how racialized differences are understood, conveyed, affirmed, or apprehensively felt in Puerto Rico and across the Americas.

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NOTES

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1. The students involved were part of a six-month NSF-funded research internship organized by Yarimar Bonilla in partnership with the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Puerto Rico-Arecibo. As part of this project, students learned about ethnographic and qualitative research methods, participated in survey design and pilot testing, and carried out focus groups. As part of the training, students were asked to identify their skin color on a scale of 1–6, 1 being the lightest and 6 the darkest. Most rated themselves 2 or 3, while one student classified himself as 4. Bonilla identified as a 3. As part of our data analysis, we searched for correlations between the racial identity of the person administering the survey and the participant's responses, but we could not find statistically significant differences.
2. With this strategy, we followed scholarship that underscores the importance of framing questions about race in relationship to the social contexts where race matters (Krieger 2012).
3. In their open survey conducted in 2003, Santory-Jorge and colleagues found that 46 percent of their respondents identified as white (Santory-Jorge et al. 2009). These authors attributed their results to what they describe as the "observer effect." They suggest that interviewers who conducted their open survey were themselves Puerto Ricans who could question the whiteness of fellow

Puerto Rican participants, thereby inhibiting more people from identifying this way. In contrast, they suggest, people can self-administer the census, so they might overwhelmingly mark “white only” in an attempt to “level the field of discussion” with what they perceive as a distant, powerful, potentially antagonistic, and racist US federal observer. A similar argument has been made by Loveman and colleagues in their examination of census practices in the early 1900s (Loveman et al. 2007). They argue that Puerto Rican census officers drastically “whitened” the population by expanding the social definition of whiteness in response to a precipitous rise in the perceived and actual cost of being seen by Americans as nonwhite. These analyses underscore how methodological choices have an impact on racial data, as well as the extent to which racial identification is influenced by social and political context.

4. US Census Bureau (Table ID DP05, Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race, Puerto Rico American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2012–16 and 2015–19; accessed February 20, 2021), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=ispanic%20or%20Latino%20Origin%20by%20Race%20for%20Puerto%20Rico&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05&hidePreview=false>; US Census Bureau 2002.
5. In our survey we could not track or precisely quantify the difference in reaction time among the different respondents, but this would be a productive analytical exercise for future researchers.
6. Because Latinidad operates as a form of exclusion, many communities across the Americas question its usefulness as a banner of identity. This has led some communities in the United States to call for the “cancellation of Latinidad,” to embrace more politicized terms such as “LatinX,” or to reject ideologies of mixture, turning instead to the centering of blackness and indigeneity (Martínez 2019; Salazar 2019).
7. Although we were able to interview very diverse sectors of the population, future studies using a random sampling method rather than a convenience sample could further confirm response tendencies discussed here. We do not foresee major discrepancies with the application of these more rigorous sampling methods because the general tendencies we have described (the reluctance to racial identification, the declining number of whites, and the use of a Latino Identity among nonmigrants) have been noted in other studies referenced here. Besides the sheer numbers, it was the texture, nuance, and content of the qualitative data we were able to obtain through our open-ended question that led us to new theorizations about Puerto Rico’s racecraft.

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APPENDIX

Race and color terms used in Puerto Rico to denote phenotype distinctions along a continuum of race mixture (based on a list of terms provided by Duany 2005, 238; Lloréns, Quijano, and Godreau 2017, 169).

Examples of responses classified as "resisting the question"

Term	Approximate Meaning
Blanco(a)	White
Blanquito(a)	Literally "little white," figuratively "elitist," "upper class"
Crema/cremita	Literally "cream," beige
Colorao(a)	Redheaded, reddish skin
Rubio(a)	Blond
Cano(a)	Blond, fair-skinned
Jincho(a)	Pale-skinned, sometimes used pejoratively
Blanco(a) con raja	Literally "white with a crack," white with some Black features
Jabao(a)	Fair-skinned with curly hair
Tringueño(a)	Literally "wheat color" or brunette, usually light mulatto
Moreno(a)	Dark-skinned, usually dark mulatto
Mulato(a)	Mixture of Black and white
Mestizo	Mixture of Black, white, and Indian
Mixto	Mixed
Indio(a)	Literally "Indian," brown skin with straight hair
Café con leche	Literally "coffee with milk," tan- or brown-skinned
Piel canela	Literally "cinnamon skinned," tan- or brown-skinned
Prieto(a)	Dark skin, usually derogatory
Grifo(a)	Dark skin with kinky hair, usually derogatory, largely out of use
De color	Euphemism for Black, usually meaning Black
Negro(a)	Black
Negrito(a)	Literally "little Black," often used as a term of endearment