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Black Amerinquen

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BLACK AMERINQUEN

by

KAYLA MARIE RODRIGUEZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of
New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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by

Kayla Marie Rodriguez

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When did the racial categories of ‘Black’ and ‘Puerto Rican’ appear? In the history of colonization and imperialism, how did these categories and the communities come to form? What memories come to Black and Puerto Rican identity? How does ‘passing’, or movement between spaces, come to impact these categories? How does language, the word we use and the stories we tell come to define racial categories? This work is about how racial categories come to happen through history, memory, movement, and language.

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INTRODUCTION

African Americans and Puerto Ricans have a long history side by side in the United States in combatting systemic oppressions. Many Puerto Ricans in the United States highlight the way Puerto Rican identity was only joined by a Black political identity when living in the United States. So how does the question, “Are you Black or Puerto Rican?” continue to come about? As a Black Puerto Rican, this is a question I’m often confronted with. Before accepting the truth of what is, and not what could be, or what was determined in the past, I struggled to find the term for *what* I was. What was the appropriate word to describe what I was? With an African American mother and a Puerto Rican father who fits the phenotypical traits most associated with Blackness, I became curious as to what mechanisms make one person Black and not the other. Was my father not racialized as Black because he spoke Spanish? Was it some unspoken rule that the only Blacks who could exist in the world were African Americans? If African American is to Black, as Puerto Rican is to Non-Black, then my existence created a conundrum to the conceptualizations of race. Black was what could be seen on me, Puerto Rican was the something in me that made me ‘exotic.’

If you were to Google “Afro-Puerto Ricans” or “Black Puerto Ricans” you would find many links to testimonies and info of individuals who are ethnically Puerto Rican, and have descendants of Africa whether by direct knowledge of a Black family member or a hear-say narrative of a distant Black grandparent. As Black identity has shaped not only a lineage but what can be physically seen, the indirect way are the visible traits most understood as Black phenotypical traits. In this Google search, you may also find yourself among random links of the seeming difficulty in racial distinction in the United States. You may come across someone who identifies as Puerto Rican but is constantly mistaken for ‘white.’ You may stumble across someone who has varying percentages of white or non-white ancestry, and in effect, they don’t trouble themselves with labels. They’re merely

“human.” You may next arrive at a narrative similar to mine: a person of African American and Puerto Rican parents, where one is racialized as Black, while the other isn’t.

There are multiple questions that drive this work. The first, is the significance of ‘blood’ in terms of identity. How is ‘blood’ given significant weight in determining a “truth” when it comes to racial and ethnic identity? How does this impact your place in the world? The second is the experience of Puerto Ricans who look like my father, Afro-Puerto Ricans in the United States who are received as Black Americans until their culture or tongue functions as a way to prove otherwise. This racial process may be one unique to the United States, of maintaining a particular kind of whiteness. The United States possession of Puerto Rico made all its inhabitants a monolithic racial other, where the only history and identity that matters is the status of ‘other.’ As a property of the United States, and therefore a property of Whiteness, Puerto Rico is then placed in terms of opposite. Puerto Rico loses its autonomy as a nation.

I also want to challenge the idea of a Black and White binary other ethnic groups are forced to succumb to. Instead, I want to suggest something more of a scale between Whiteness and Blackness, where proximity and distance to each determine your place in the world. I believe this scale is of the basic necessity for capitalist and hegemonic conceptions of identity. Race is commonly understood as a social construct, but one with very real consequences. Race shifted from meaning a particular body of people, to a particular body of people prescribed by color. The specifics of this suggestion are really about Black possibility, and the limitations given by Whitenessⁱ to shape and re-shape the conditions which make one Black. But this does a disservice to the complex nature of Whiteness, and its function at not only a literal level, but a figurative one. If we were to consider ‘White’ as not some anthropological given, but a combination of systemic ownership, privilege and wealth, then perhaps, when questions like “Are you Black or Puerto Rican?” are asked, we understand them as systemic affirmations, not innocent curiosities. The greater discourse is to move past a discussion of

‘either/or’ and towards a re-thinking of how nations and the racialized communities they produce come to challenge the definitions of Blackness.

What I am most interested in this work is how racial identity can be defined between two racialized groups. In Puerto Rico, it is in many cases easier to see the influence of indigenous African practices embedded in the cultural practice. Taino *is* Puerto Rico. Africa *is* Puerto Rico. Spanish *is* Puerto Rico. All at once. An ancestral genealogy for African Americans is not as easy. Many take parts in a genealogical test, such as *Ancestry.com*. This is most often not to tell them where their ancestors would have been slaves, but where their ancestor’s ancestors had lived prior to colonialism. African American is not as embedded in a national conception of ‘American.’

In this work, I’ll do my best to separate the terms ‘Black’ and ‘African American.’ This is not easy, as both terms are interchangeable in the conscious vernacular. This difficulty will also be explored most in depth in my description of words. Words take on great meaning in how communities come to identify themselves. The vocabulary in the Puerto Rican and American vernacular show variations in how race is described. Words also impact how one is oriented around a particular identity. In this sense, I want to explore how the identity of ‘Black’ is not a given, and neither is ‘Puerto Rican’, but conditioned categories developed over time. And in some cases, at convenience. This is also not to take for granted the important and unique history to Puerto Rican Americans and African Americans, but rather to explore the category of what Blackness comes to be and oriented around. My personal stake in this is being a child of African American and Puerto Rican parents. This brought me to a place of considering how those whose parents are both ethnically Puerto Rican may racially understand themselves as Black or otherwise. Would the experience of identity be different? How does this understanding come to be and why? The resources on Afro Puerto Rican primarily rest on those whose parents are ethnically of the same place. And in that sense, I can’t answer the question of how those of two ethnically diverse, but racially same, positions come to

understand themselves. Maybe it's a question, as well, of why identities come to matter. In what ways does identity come to matter? Or maybe it doesn't matter. But when you're Black, what does matter is distinction between subject and object, being and non-being, life and death. When I encounter the question of whether I'm Black or Puerto Rican, or whether Puerto Ricans can be Black, it's hard not to consider the question as being of place or of thing.

HISTORY

“I looked at him and wondered which nationality to pick. And one of his friends said,

“Ah, Rocky, he’s black enuff to be a nigger. Ain’t that what you is, kid?”

My voice was almost shy in anger. “I’m Puerto Rican, I said. “I was born here.”

(Thomas, 1997)

Before getting into the shaping of racial categories, I find it necessary to give a historical context to the varying ethnic groups that became co-opted into the colonial and national development of both the United States and Puerto Rico. This is necessary to understand how a racialized being comes to exist in those two spaces, even if I will be focusing specifically on how Black populations come to exist. The United States is, obviously, spatially bigger than Puerto Rico. But the racial history and narrative I reference are those I believe had the greatest impact on the creation of a ‘Black’ identity in the United States. How did the Puerto Rican and the African American come to be? How is the Afro-Puerto Rican positioned in this? In these questions, it is very important to not only address the colonial reference to how nations and identities are created, but how the populations intruded upon engaged with these newly formed identities.

Various ethnicities and regional descendants have been present in Africa for centuries. At the time of European imperial and colonial expansion, no one particular ethnicity was in a single area. All were scattered so connection was not always lost. Africa is often characterized as a monolithic place. In this characterization, all parts of Africa suffered the Atlantic Slave Trade. As of the about the 15th century, human trade did not occur in massive numbers. It was only as the economic demand within colonialism grew, that the inflation of humans and property presumed. But this was not enough to satisfy the needs of the Spaniards. The indigenous population became enslaved and forced to labor in the gold mines. Puerto Rico happens to mean “rich port.” Colonial solutions to the stress

of forced labor of the indigenous was the encouragement of marriage between the indigenous and the enslaved African populations. Slaves from Africa began to make up for the decreasing numbers of useful labor in 1519. The ethnic group in particular was most likely the Wolof of West Africa, primarily Mali or Angola. (Hall 2005) Mali is further inland, while parts of Angola are on the coast. Those taken from Mali may have lived in Senegal or the Angola Coast, but migrated further inward as trade of humans increased. (This location/migration relationship took up greater speed and numbers in 1650 when the Dutch, English, and French trade became established.) (Hall 2005) As African slave labor market began to prove more useful, The Council of Indies (the name Spain gave to its territories) granted Freedom in Hispaniola (present day Haiti and Dominican Republic) and Puerto Rico. This transition depended on African slaves for their labor.

For some time prior to, Christopher Columbus' arrival to the Caribbean islands, empires had engaged in migration and systems of enslavement for centuries. In 1610, slavery began in the Americas with Puerto Rico. Slaves had, in some circumstances, the opportunity to convert to Christianity in order to obtain freedom. Preceding the increase in slaves from Africa, indigenous labor proved more economically prosperous. This was the case in Puerto Rico. The island of *Borinquen/Boriken* became Puerto Rico with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1493. In the beginning of contact between the two representatives, Taíno and Spain, the relationship between the two was cordial. Spanish conquistadors worked in tangent with indigenous population to "explore" other areas of the Caribbean. On the island of *Borinquen/Boriken* at the time of 1493, several ethnic groups were inhabiting the island. These included Taino, Locono or Arawak, and Arhuaco. The most common of this group is the Taino, who to this day are one of the associations to Puerto Rican identity. Columbus' lieutenant, Juan Ponce de Leon was met by the *cacique* Agüeybana. Colonial interpretations set *caciques* as equivalent to king. Instead, however, a *cacique* was responsible for communal leadership in matters such as tribute collection or maintaining order (Garrett 2008).

Agüeybana himself was a *cacique* over several other regional caciques on the island. Agüeybana became the first “governor” (in the colonial sense) of the island. His mother was also converted to Christianity, which aligns with the Spanish imperial tradition of negating ownership. In Taíno tradition, roles were passed down through the mother. This conversion potentially made it possible for indigenous tradition to fuse with colonial tradition.

Over time, the Spanish conquistadors betrayed the hospitality of the indigenous on the island. The indigenous populations began to be enslaved, with many dying from revolting or the ill treatment of slavery. To “remedy” the situation, the Spanish empire began ending indigenous slavery but also allowed Spaniards to marry the natives. This allowed a greater possibility to assimilate the indigenous population into the nation of Puerto Rico, but also level the riots. In 1513, African slaves were introduced to the labor economy. This lasted until the slavery ended on the island in 1873. (Slavery in the United States ended 10 years earlier.) In Puerto Rico is the city of Loiza, named after the cacique allegedly inhabiting the island of Boriken when the Spanish arrived in 1493. To explore the history of this city is to come across the varied cultural influences of the populations that thrived and were then forced to survive colonial rule. The colonial impact of this history means that the history of the city, and the island itself, center around two major influences: African and indigenous. These two influences are condensed in ways which allow it to be co-opted into the colonial project of Puerto Rico, named for being a “rich port.” The African influence and presence on the island can come from two areas. The first, is those Africans or *libertos* who arrived on the island with the Spanish. In the beginnings of colonizing the America’s, enslaved persons weren’t transported from Africa in large numbers. The first Africans to arrive in this space are also said to have been free Africans who came in similar positions as the Spanish to conquest the land.

The process of racialization differed in the Spanish and Portuguese colonial developments. Although African slaves were introduced into the sugar economy, they were given some semblance

of rights through what was called the *El Codigo Negro* or 'Black Code.' Africans and their descendants were able to marry freely, and have the potential to work their way out of the slave condition. Earning enough money could buy their freedom. Mulattoes, those mixed with African and European ancestry, were in a class of their own. This allowed them to move freely in social positions. This has a significant impact in how race and discrimination can be conceptualized in the context of Puerto Rico, as other Spanish and Portuguese colonialities. Because of the complex racial positions, issues of race appear in more subversive way. Subversive, in that, racial distinction isn't made as explicitly as it is in the United States. The first revolt against Spanish rule in Puerto Rico was in 1868 in the city of Lares. Those fighting wanting political and economic freedom. This would mean better opportunities but also an economy not reliant on slaves. Puerto Rico ended slavery 10 years after slavery was ended in the United States. The economy relied deeply on sugar cane production.

The colonies started by the Dutch, English, and French in the Northern American system of slavery grew at a slower pace, growing some decades behind Spain and Portugal in their colonial power. What was called 'The Carolinas', meant the area of present day North and South Carolina (as of 1670) (Gallay, 2002) The Dutch and English took a similar advantage of human capital. This meant the indigenous populations of those areas were forced to labor first, before Africans became of primary use. The Amerindians continued to survive, but their use in the colonial narrative was to have their land stolen and their communities disappear (Lawrence and Dua, 2005) (Wolfe and Kanuani, 2012). Louisiana was a French occupation until 1803. Given the different imperial ownerships of areas in the northern Americas, slave codes and racial conditions varied differently. In the beginnings of enslaved persons being introduced, those from Africa were brought in smaller numbers. As this did not threaten the economy of Whiteness, the Dutch passed a code which allowed 'half slaves.' This meant that those enslaved could eventually earn their freedom (Harris 2003). The French considered Louisiana as a second France, and similarly to the Spanish in Puerto Rico, enacted

slave codes which allowed Blacks to marry freely, protect spouses and children, and placed some restriction.

It is more difficult to note concisely what particular ethnic groups were brought to the Dutch and English colonies. These groups were scattered in varying areas at different lengths of distributions. These include but are not limited to Mina, Mahua, Wolof, Kongo, and Upper Guinea (For more see Hall 2005, map 2.2 showing African ethnicities prominent in North America and the Caribbean, 1500-1900). This difficulty to narrow down the numbers is the massive space being spread out through land. Another is also the general difficulty to get exact numbers because not all lines of trade were directly officiated, many were possibly exchanged through illegal means.

The flourishing of Northern American colonies relied on not only outsourced labor but support from their home nations. The South struggled with limited settlers being introduced to the colonies and also the lack of community (Gallay 2002, see difference between New England Puritan and the South). The Haitian Revolution created an impact which caused fear in other slave holding economies. The revolution occurred between 1791 and 1804, with roughly 1300 refugees coming to America during this period. These included French expatriates and their slaves. Homer Plessy, of the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* case which re-affirmed racial segregation, was the grandson of one of these expatriates. Up until the Haitian Revolution, although enslavement existed, colonial powers gave some freedoms to the enslaved. The Haitian Revolution caused a fear in other slave holding countries that their own would revolt. In the Northern Americas specifically, restrictions became greater on enslaved populations. In 1790, the U.S. banned entry of Blacks from the French West Indies to ensure protection of their profits. Spain governed Louisiana between 1763 and 1800. Florida was Juan Ponce de Leon's second stop.

When slavery ended in the United States in 1863, newly freed Blacks were forced to make a life and identity not defined by the status of 'slave'. During this period, 'negro' and 'slave' were

interchangeable. It was not possible to be one without the other. As complex as human beings are, the initiatives and goals for Black citizenship and humanity came from multiple angles, with many figures involved. Frederick Douglass fought for the right of Negroes to be considered American citizens. Maybe never “equal” to the white man, but a citizen nonetheless. Booker T. Washington placed emphasis on the importance of education for non-White communities. W.E.B. DuBois helped shape the Black American middle class and performed some of the first sociological studies of the Black population. This was done not only in the United States, but transnationally as well. Although DuBois had some suggestions for the advancement of the Black community shrouded in respectability politics, he also forged extensive thought into the ideology and global impact of Whiteness of Black communities.

The nations by which African Americans and Afro Puerto Ricans are often characterized as having mutually exclusive racial histories. Instead, the colonial processes executed similar goals in affirming marginalized populations. African Americans and Afro-Puerto Ricans have unique histories in terms of the processes of racialization. As not all Americans are Black, neither are all Puerto Ricans. In order to understand how Puerto Ricans and African Americans can be conceptualized as opposite one another in the space of Blackness, what is necessary is to first understand how both came to be in their respective spaces. In my research, I have found Puerto Rico and the United States have articulated similar processes of racialization. Many describe race in Puerto Rico as non-existent, everyone is Puerto Rican. The country’s racial politics are often positioned in contrast to the “Black and White” binary of the United States. Although the United States has never boasted a ‘racial democracy’, or an image of the American as having no color, it’s national development is only different in the legally explicit ways in which race has been demarcated and made systemic. A majority of Puerto Rican migrants in the United States have a strong Afro-descendent history. This is in part of Puerto Rico’s own history in the development of a sovereign

nation and identity. Discourses in regard to race vary when it comes to the country's racial makeup. Some claim 'race' is non-existent, instead everyone is Puerto Rican. Others call this out as a blatant denial of the ways in which Black populations and African descendent history are ignored, with their cultural aspects co-opted for the greater project of Puerto Rican nationalism (Cruz-Janzen, 2003) (Oropesa and Landale, 2002) (Roman and Flores, 2009).

The most pivotal point for African American and Puerto Rican proximity in the United States, could arguably be in the early to mid 19th century. With urbanization came more opportunities for jobs in the North than in the South. Therefore, many African Americans migrated. Varying works were produced in the periods of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement. Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* was published in 1967, documenting his experience as a Puerto Rican racialized as Black and coming to understand himself in that way. Jesus Colon wrote *A Puerto Rican in New York* to describe his experience as being recognized as Black when he first migrated from Puerto Rico. The Harlem Renaissance boasts the period of the conceptualization of 'The New Negro', and Afro-Puerto Rican Arturo Schomburg took great part in this. Having been received as Black, he became interested in the history of African descendants across the globe. This made him one of the most important agents in developing a conceptualization of Black Studies. Melville Herskovits is a Jewish American anthropologist who among many works, composed a racial study called *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*. The manner in which the study is conducted, and the answers received from participations reveals a categorization based on either guesses or firsthand knowledge of a Non-Black relative. Herskovits played a key role in the development of an African American studies. Within the United States, specifically in the major northern cities, Puerto Ricans and African Americans have lived and been characterized in close proximity to each other. Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory since 1898, and with that colonial control came limited opportunities for marginalized populations in Puerto Rico. This meant many afro-descendent Puerto

Ricans traveling to the U.S. for better opportunities. As described in not only literature, but political theory, and media, the Puerto Rican experience shows a major trend in a Black characterization. This sparked an endeavor to understand where these Black Puerto Ricans came from, literally, and how they came to be, figuratively. Given not only African American history, but literary trends as well, how Puerto Ricans in the United States come to understand themselves racially is parallel to an understanding of Blackness in the African American consciousness. Black diasporic history is a matter of movement. In the displacement from one land to another, from one body of cultural memory and knowledge to another, the human beings that become racialized as Black carry with them the memory of past, present, and future.

MEMORY

“There’s a move afoot to divide us. It’s being done by Afro Saxons and coconuts. People who would have us believe that there’s a separate gulf between two nations: Black and Latino...I’m telling you there’s no difference between Beaufort South Carolina and Ponce, Puerto Rico. Ya hear me? Too many of us grew up in the projects and did bids in the joint together to have anyone divide us on the basis of language. Mambo is Black. *Merengue* is Black. R&B is Black. *Jorombo* is Black... *Flamenco* is Black... Be careful, they will come to you and say be careful with those Spanish people. Fuck them.” (Luciano, 2002ⁱⁱ)

In order to conceptualized how a Black identity can be understood between the Afro Puerto Rican and African American populations in the United States, what must be understood is not only how a population comes to be, but what they remember. In the racial discourse of Black communities, Puerto Ricans exist in this kind of ambiguous space. When and at what time you arrive in a particular space depends on a variety of factors that can change in almost any moment. The identification with Black or White is often dictated as a solely U.S. based construct. But this this scale of desirability between one space and another come to exist in other ways.

What do African Americans remember? As a child, there were images and memories in my mind that were tied to a “Black” history. Black history was the Black National Anthem that we would never learn in our state schools. Black history was the story of Nat Turner, Alex Haley’s *Roots*, and *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. But what stood out the most in history, and my memory, was the trauma immortalized in Baltimore’s Black in Wax Museum. Before the displays of waxed inventors, historians, musicians, and churches, sits the large bow of a slave ship. Its hallway is dark. The ship takes up the entirety of the museum’s wall. As you walk inside, the sounds within museum grow smaller and are replaced with automated cries. On the bottom floor, is the lynching exhibit where

you have to be a certain age to view. Down a winding staircase, are memories behind glass of those who lost their lives to any reason Whiteness could find. Given this history, I began to consider how does Black memory exist in other contexts.

What do Puerto Ricans remember? In Puerto Rico, there is a saying: “*Aqui el que no tiene inga mandinga. El que no tiene congo, tiene carabali. ¿Y pa* los que no saben na, abuela a ' onde está?*” This saying translates to: *Here those who don't have Inga have Mandinga. Those who don't have Congo, have Carabali. For those who claim to not know, where grandma at?* (Cruz-Janzen 2003) The implications of this saying are that African and indigenous cultures are what make a Puerto Rican, whether one wishes to acknowledge it or not. In the United States, there is no similar saying. Maybe it's in part because of the vastness of the United States in comparison to Puerto Rico. Maybe it's the illusion created by the hegemonic powers to create a uniform American identity. Even if this identity doesn't hold the same truth for everybody. Puerto Rican activist and poet Pedro Pietri wrote “The Puerto Rican Obituary.” The ways we remember what is lost to us, how we loved another, what we should remember, are best written in the obituaries.

Here lies Juan

Here lies Miguel

Here lies Milagros

Here lies Olga

Here lies Manuel

who died yesterday today

and will die again tomorrow

Always broke

Always owing

Never knowing
that they are beautiful people
Never knowing
the geography of their complexion.
(Pietri, 2015)

The words that stick out most are *here lies/who died/will die again/never knowing/the geography of their complexion*. In the memory of what Blackness means, the great ship in the museum represents the proximity to death. Not only is there beauty, and moments to be proud of, but there are also great periods of loss that cannot be forgotten. What does my *abuela* remember? To be Puerto Rican, to be African American, to be Black, means to be an assemblageⁱⁱⁱ of parts. The story of how a group of people comes to be is not always linear, the path to one, doesn't always lead to the same place. It can change either intentionally or unintentionally.

MOVEMENT

“I wonder what she would have thought if I’d told her I was colored, or half-colored--that my old man was white, but you weren’t? But I guess I won’t go into that. Since I’ve made up my mind to live in the white world, and have found my place in it (a good place), why think about race anymore? I’m glad I don’t have to, I know that much.” (Hughes, 1990)

“I’m black, and it don’t make no difference whether I say good-bye or adios—it means the same.” (Thomas, 1997)

As a Black Puerto Rican, I began to ask which community does myself and others belong to. How does ‘looking’ Black or being ‘mistaken’ for Black come to impact your positionality in life? What histories do individuals and communities begin to suffer by being oriented around a particular racial category? In “Whiteness as Property”, Cheryl L. Harris describes the foundational development of Whiteness as not only an ideological category but one given physical value in the racial development in the United States. Harris characterizes Black people as property, as defined by the colonialists of the period in the beginnings of slavery. The Whites were obtainers, curators and owners. Because obtainment, curation, and ownerships *necessitated* property, in that fact that one would not exist without the other, in this way, Whiteness became valuable only at the devalue of Blackness. According the Harris, race and property were contingent upon each other. Black equated to slaves, equating to something to own. In this way, belonging(s) functions in terms of possessions, an object in the hands of the creator. This not only gives value to ownership but the possession as well. This point of property, belonging, and possession is useful in the conceptualization of how Blackness comes to be given as ‘belonging’. Both Harris’ assessment and contemporary questions

around Puerto Rican identity and Blackness, aid in this conversation of where one belongs and in what way they can be valued as such.

In the above I have two excerpts that I find representative on the subject of movement between racial categories, or a similarity to 'passing'. The first is from the semblance of short stories by Langston Hughes, titled *The Ways of White Folks*. In the excerpt I have above, a young man is writing to his mother about how the two had passed each other in the street recently but weren't able to speak. In order to assume his life as a white man, he can't show an idea that he is actually of a Black community. The second excerpt is from Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, where he confronts his father about where he belongs as a Puerto Rican who is racialized as Black. This subject of passing through language is something I find similar to abilities represented in Hughes' work. In another passage of Thomas' work, Piri is able to "pass" as a Non-Black in the South in spite of his complexion. This is by taking the advice of a Mexican he meets who insists he speak only in Spanish in order to protect his life and identity. In regard to passing, Harris cites Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* and notes passing as the ability to be deceptive of White people "with whom the passer comes to associate and by a conspiracy of silence on the part of other Negroes who might not know about it." (Harris, 1993) For the subject in Hughes' work, he is able to complete this deception of the community he is now a part of along with the silent conspiracy of his mother. This silence also creates a loss. In the obtainment for a better life, he must sacrifice the relation to those he holds most dear. For Piri in *Down these Mean Streets*, he leaves his family who is unable to understand his racial dilemma. He heads to the South with a Black American friend in order to understand the treatment he receives up North.

One of the questions brought up in "Are you Black or Puerto Rican?" is one of ownership. Who does 'Black' belong to? Often when defining belonging, a set of conditions are given that determine this placement. What allows one to be in a particular position in one moment, and not in another? If

Black identity is a space, what are the conditions or restrictions to be in this place? Possible answers may be: (1) one must have descended from Africa, (2) one must have experienced racism, (3) one must 'look' Black, as in have physical traits often understood as African descended traits, or (4) one must be received as Black either socially or systemically. In the United States, African Americans have a close relationship to the identifier 'Black' in such a way that the terms are often used interchangeably. I also want to stray away from the idea of Black as particular set of people, but instead an ideological conception that is articulated, given, and embodied. This is made possible in the expansion transnational narratives of Blackness and in respect to those who may not consider themselves 'Black,' but of the African Diaspora. There is a particular relationship African Americans have to the term Black, and I believe that relationship is one for further analysis in how Puerto Ricans may come to approach this term. There is also the political usage of either terms 'Black' or African American. These are parts to how individuals come to belong and come to claim space. African Americans can never be anything *but* Black. Even in conditions of 'passing' (for White), if the "true" race is discovered, what holds is that this person has always been Black, but in hiding. Aided by the infamous one-drop rule, if an African American even passes as a White person, to have ancestry whether recent or past discovered, would mean the Black identity as the *true* identity.

The similarities are in the process of working with the arbitrary nature of color, it's deepening and/or lightning can change your positionality. There is the matter of language. The ability to speak another language makes you not of 'this place' in the United States. In this process, the determination may be that you look like a Negro but are not "one of them". Afro-Puerto Ricans begin to locate an "origin point" to understand how that came to be in a nation that determines where they can and cannot be, literally and figuratively. In terms of Black American culture, the folkloric practices developed through slavery and the migration from sharecropping to urban areas created a threat to the White conceptions of race. The influx of so many Black persons caused a "threat" to the idea of

‘Negro’ and therefore, to the idea of ‘White. What was culturally being explored in Harlem with artists and writers, was now being considered and studied for a new conceptualization of “the African American” (Herskovits,1928) The dissonance that Afro-Puerto Ricans experience are familiar and parallel to the double-ness Black Americans had culturally experienced for many years. A culture is then, anything lived or experienced in that space of double-ness.

African Americans are an amalgamation of displaced African peoples, European, and indigenous peoples. As enslaved persons, their value was similar to objects of production. Another animal to aid in the farming process or cultivating of land. But then over time, by close proximity to the forced conditions, they developed traditions and practices unique to themselves. No one was a ‘negro’ or ‘slave’, except the negro slave. But over time, with figures advocating for their right to citizenship and humanity, the enslaved negro became a “person.” And as a person, an identity begins to form. And as a collective group of people seek to be seen as equal to white, you begin to form standards and definitions for who or what Black can be. By color, the one-drop rule made it so that if even one Black family member was down the line, then you were Black. But there were ways around this if subversive enough to do so, if you were light enough you could pass. But this comes back to the ambiguous nature of race and these categories created out of a value system. W.E.B Dubois wrote of something similar some centuries later. Negroes began populating Urban areas in the north in greater numbers, to the point where social distinction between race and class became harder to maintain. Negroes then became a “problem.”^{iv} Similar to the complexities of the ethnic groups in Africa, Negroes were not all working class. Although a small class, a middle class was there, with its own particular problems of race. In some sense, as Dubois notes the Black populations would have experiences, not isolated, but reflective of the greater environment as a whole.^v

LANGUAGE

“Here in this country we’ve got something called a nigger. We have invented the nigger.

I know this; and anyone who’s ever tried to live knows this...that what you say about somebody else...reveals you. What I think of you as being is dictated by my own necessity, my own psychology, my own fears, and desires. I didn’t invent him, white people invented him. I’ve always known, I’ve had to know by the time I was 17 years old. What you were describing was not me, what you were afraid of was not me. It had to be something else, it had to be something you were afraid of and invested me with it. I’ve always known, and really always, that’s a part of the agony. I’ve always known that I’m not a nigger. Then if I am not the nigger, and if it’s true that your invention reveals you, then who is the nigger. But you think I gather, that the nigger is necessary. Well he’s unnecessary to me, so it must be necessary to you. I’m going to give you your problem back. You’re the nigger, baby, it isn’t me.” James Baldwin, 1963^{vi}

Some years ago, I came across a video of James Baldwin addressing the question of who, in fact, the ‘nigger’ is. The clip is from a longer documentary he was a part of 1963. In taking San Francisco’s KQED on a tour of Black America in that area, he begins with, “Here in this country we’ve got something called a nigger.” ‘This country’ is the United States. ‘This something’ is the constantly moving terms and definitions given to a particular group of people. An ever-changing group of people given the conditions of its category. ‘Nigger’ is the term every African/Black American knows, whether they want to or not, whether they’ve been called it or not. African American is the word you use to be politically correct. It’s the term you use in front of Non-Black

company. But Black is home. No one can give a single, unchanging, definition of Blackness. No one can point it out. Only that you know it when you see it. When you hear it. When you read of it. Whether affectionately or derogatively, it can be called at almost any time, and no time at all. Grasped in one instance, gone the next. By its many definitions, it continually moves.

Language greatly informs how a narrative survives. Narratives in Spanish will translate differently in English. As such, ideas will also shift. Hegemonic powers have the capacity to shift how a narrative is told: what is important and what gets left out. In this way, I've attempted at my best to make use of bilingual texts, but also incorporate works which have been translated from Spanish. I will not attempt to make a conclusion on how race is experienced or embodied in Puerto Rico, but the resources I use are primarily to give context to what's experienced in the United States. Similarly, I wanted to acknowledge the settler colonial construct of race and incorporate the populations co-opted or displaced to create a nation. I do not want to rest on the terms 'African' or 'indigenous' as given facts, but address the complex nature of how those spaces are constructed in the context of U.S. racial distinction. Both of these terms function can easily be used as key words or short cuts for a given narrative, and in that sense, what is produced can be as equally harmful as it is helpful.

In Baldwin's words, there's a separation of self from the modifier given to him and other African Americans historically. He goes on to explain that what anyone would say about you, reveals the one doing the saying; as well as, their own fears, psychology, and desires. A word comes to be created based on a body of fears, psychology, and desires, now embedded as consequences in the body of a people. I want to not only settle on words and conditions created in the United States or Puerto Rico, but the significance of words in their place and time. The Black subject is of many places. As such, the Black person amid varying nations comes to be of many places, and sometimes the same place. In my own experience, African American came to explain my mother's history, but

also my complexion. Given the historical one-drop rule in the United States, my mother's blood would always designate me as Black. Puerto Rican addressed my name, the unseen "exotic" in me, whether I could perform it or not. The Puerto Rican could satisfy an objective desire for me to be Non-Black. Puerto Rican addressed my name that seemed to cause so much confusion. How am I Black but have a name in Spanish? I've begun to consider the question "Are you Black or Puerto Rican?" not as a question of *where* I'm from but *what* I am. Words come into use in describing my background, giving "politically correct" terminology to understand where I am, and to locate my citizenship in the world.^{vii} Language plays an important role in how racial categories are understood and talked about. The words we come to use to understand specifically Black populations change over time. African Americans and Afro Puerto Ricans are significant subjects of this. I want to start with the words put into use, in Spanish or in English, in order for the respective societies to understand their inherent structures. The words I will go on to explain are important in their explanations, because throughout this work I hope to express the transient nature of how identity comes to be defined, and what words are chosen at particular periods of time, and why.

In the American language, the most common terms to relate to a Black person include but are not limited to: Afro American, Colored, Black, Negro, African American, Creole, and Mulatto. Each of these words has a different meaning at a particular time. W.E.B. DuBois has noted the word Negro as first used in "the world's history to tie color to race and blackness to slavery and degradation." (DuBois, 1947) This word was associated with the 'Black' race, and with most all words, came associations to other adjectives. The Black race was dirty, inferior, and stupid. At one point in time, there was a distinction between a capital and lowercase 'n,' in the term 'Negro.' The use of upper and lowercase in the term 'Colored' was also of importance. A lowercase, was derived to objects. An uppercase, was given to subjects, as in human beings. "In 1916, DuBois again stated that *Negro* had been capitalized in the past, but the defense of slavery changed the practice, as one did not

capitalize chattels, such as cow or horse.” (Grant and Grant, 1975) This negotiation of the capital letter follows in line with DuBois insistence that “eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter.” (Du Bois, 1899) DuBois also understood the term Negro to represent all persons of African descent.

To understand the racial category of Puerto Ricans in the United States, I wanted to first understand Puerto Rico’s national development. Most often, figures in power determine the dominant words to use. In Spanish colonial developments, many countries run with a *mestizaje* ideology. This is a racially mixed ideal population of people with European, African, and Indigenous ancestry. Words or terms used in the Spanish language, and varying in Puerto Rico are including but not limited to: *Afro*, *Negro*, *Mestizo*, *Zambo*, *Mulato*, *Requinto*, *Chayote*, *Criollo*, and *Trigueño* (Cruz-Janzen, 2003) (Rivera, 2006). *Mestizaje* is a common term in not only Latin American thought, but Puerto Rican cultural ideology/thought. Loosely, the term relates to the concept of mixing. This concept is often propelled as racially democratic and in opposition to racial politics in the United States. The United States is then categorized as having a Black/White binary, where newly migrant ethnic groups have to make their fit. Instead, both ideologies reaffirm Whiteness and nationalism in opposing/reverse ways. The United States perpetuates a denial of racial mixture historically. Although miscegenation had been happening through slavery, these relationships weren’t publicly or officially acknowledged until the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case, which allow White and Black people to marry. In this way, racial difference is affirmed. Latin America, alternately, boasts racially mixed nations within it. While the realities of social norms include a wide range of terms used to denote Black and Brown identity against lighter favored complexions. These terms are used to socially locate individuals/communities within networks. Both the United States and Latin American systems do the same work of re-affirming Whiteness and demoting Blackness. Although Puerto Rico is closer to the Caribbean, it is racial and national development was very much impacted by Latin

American ideological systems.

Being a racial 'other' is also a category and term of its own. But this term of 'otherness' is also rooted in anti-blackness, where 'other' is another way of saying "non-white." Some theories lead this classification back to enslavement. Where to be Black, meant 'un-free'. Not all Blacks or African descendants were slaves, but it became easy to make the terms interchangeable. In racial otherness establishing a Black population, a classification system then created space and rules of 'origin.' Cheryl Harris insists that even in a color-blind, universal notion of race, there is still distinction made between white and Black. This is rooted in the economic system that first birthed this construct of race. "As the system of chattel slavery came under fire, it was rationalized by an ideology of race that is further differentiated between White and Black." (Harris, 1993) In this racial ideology, the white race is the 'superior' race. In the spirit of opposites, the white race was also understood as 'clean' or 'intelligent', to the 'dirty' and 'unintelligent' Black race. If one was 'mixed', it was viewed as a "failure to civilization" and "the prime cause of degradation" (DuBois, 1947).

This term 'mixed' has always been interesting to me. 'Mixed' is the word if you are of "more than one race." "Racially ambiguous" folks seemed to settle on 'mixed.' I, too, have a relationship to the term. When Black or Puerto Rican didn't work, I settled for 'mixed.' The implication of mixed, is that something is now combined. The fact of what was before, has not intruded on something else. Here we have a new, unintelligible, race. But what's complicated to me is the idea of African American and Puerto Rican as *pure* races, or pure in their formation. In 1928, Jewish American anthropologist Melville Herskovits conducted a study on the American Negro. The study was to determine the variability between the Negro and other races. It was a "study in racial crossing." But where was this cross occurring? The American Negro, as it was called then, had been considered up until that point a population of no past and, inevitably, no future. Miscegenation could not change the one-drop rule conditioned into the racial mind. But the African American is a heavily mixed

group. Herskovits explored the question of how African Americans were considered in opposition to more preferred races. He asks the question, “is it not true that all human groups represent large amounts of mixture?” (Herskovits, 1928) ‘Mixed’ also affirms the concept of being “pure.” But who is a pure race? I’ve always associated purity as a concept derived from White supremacy, the purity of commodity. Like 100% pure sugar. ‘Mixed’ can appear in varying forms. Spanish colonists used a similar term to construct their nations, the concept of “*mestizaje*.” In the Northern Americas, ‘mixed’ can be used by more eloquent terms like *Creole* or *Mulatto*. ‘*Creole*’ and ‘*Mulatto*’ are similarly terms unique to a particular time in history but also region.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this work was to explore the racial category of Afro or Black Puerto Ricans. In contemporary use, Afro-Latinx is the term used in the United States that has come to represent the complexity of Latinx identity. But the curiosity is primarily in how racial categories come to be given new terms to adjust to the given moment. Or do they adjust to the needs of the particular community at the time? One of the driving questions was also, can Puerto Rican's be Black? And what do we mean when we say 'Black'? How is Black defined in this context? Who does it belong to? In the United States, Black Americans have an extensive history and relationship to Blackness. From nigger, to Negro, to Black, to African American, for centuries those born and raised as Black in the US have a close relationship to the word where rarely can it be taken away from bodies that inhabit its definition. Puerto Rican's and African Americans have a long relationship, most concentrated in urban areas. With the two great migrations, African Americans began populating Northern cities as with industrialization came jobs.

This work was not about giving answers but rather exploring questions. There is the process of becoming Black either figuratively or literally, but systems of Whiteness determine it. This was not about forming an argument/meditation on the process of becoming Black, or some metaphysical "I'm Black inside," but rather how a people come to be racialize under Blackness, and using African American experience as context. There is minimal research into the intimate relationship between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in the United States. Much of the research on Afro-Puerto Rican identity rests in urban areas such as Chicago or New York City. As the author, researcher of this work, and as a self-identified Black Puerto Rican, I hope this work continues the questions and curiosity into how Black and Non-White identities and nationalisms are formed. "Are you Black or Puerto Rican?" I am both.

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NOTES

ⁱ I am defining Whiteness by a combination of Sarah Ahmed's *Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007) and Cheryl L. Harris's *Whiteness as Property* (1993).

ⁱⁱ From a *Youtube* excerpt. See references. Transcription is my own.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use 'assemblage' in the terms of Alexander Weheliye.

^{iv} DuBois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899.

^v Melville Herskovits also wrote of this in his anthropological study, *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*. African Americans had anthropologically developed into a unique population with many influences. However, they reflected dominant White American society.

^{vi} Transcription by me from *Youtube* clip, see references.

^{vii} I use citizenship in terms of how racialization is used in proximity to national belonging. I use national belonging similar to the definition used in Nikhil Pal Singh's *Black is A Country*:

"If whiteness became the privileged grounding and metaphor for the empty abstraction of U.S. citizenship, blackness represented an apparent contradiction and a fixed limit against which it was enacted and staged, beginning with the consolidations of a slave regime based on African origins and the codification of racial rules of descent." (Singh, 2004)