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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Deciphering the notion of a raceless nation: Racial harmony and discrimination in Puerto Rican society

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Abstract

This article critiques the idea of Puerto Rico as a raceless nation by tracing its sources and looking at the discourses of intellectual and political elites during the "nation-building" process in the first half of the twentieth century, discourses in which race was generally either distorted or overlooked. I first analyze three incidents in which black Puerto Ricans were denied entrance to elite social clubs in San Juan because of their race. These events suggest that the racelessness idea was intertwined with actual discriminatory practices and a broad structural racism. Second, I examine the role of academic and cultural institutions such as the University of Puerto Rico, the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, and the División de Educación para la Comunidad in promoting the notion of racelessness. That can be seen as part of a broad denial of racial discrimination in the attempt to forge Puerto Rico as a white nation.

Keywords Puerto Rico · Nation-building · Modernity · Race · Racial discrimination

Descifrando la noción de una nación sin razas: Armonía racial y discriminación en la sociedad puertorriqueña

Resumen

En este artículo criticamos la idea de que Puerto Rico es una nación sin razas rastreando las fuentes y examinando los discursos de las elites intelectuales y políticas durante el proceso de "construcción de nación" en la primera mitad del siglo XX: discursos en los que generalmente se distorsionaba o se omitía la raza. Primero analizamos tres incidentes en los que a unos puertorriqueños se les negó entrada a clubs sociales de la elite en San Juan por ser negros. Estos eventos sugieren que la idea de la nación sin razas estaba ligada a prácticas discriminatorias concretas y un racismo

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estructural abarcador. En segundo lugar examinamos el papel desempeñado por las instituciones académicas y culturales como la Universidad de Puerto Rico, el Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña y la División de Educación para la Comunidad en la promoción de dicha idea, lo que puede verse como parte de una negación generalizada de la discriminación racial con el fin de crear una visión falsa de Puerto Rico como nación blanca.

Palabras clave Puerto Rico · Construcción de nación · Modernidad · Raza · Discriminación racial

"Todo depende del cristal con que se mira": Articulating race and racial discrimination

Puerto Rican society has a very complicated relationship with race. This article tackles the perception of a nation without race. The argument also explores how, by creating a raceless nation, the Puerto Rican political and intellectual elites are overlooking a problem of exclusion and discrimination. The article analyzes three incidents in which black Puerto Ricans were denied entrance to elite social clubs in San Juan because of their race. These events suggest that the racelessness idea is intertwined with actual discriminatory practices and widespread structural racism. Second, the article examines the pivotal role of the University of Puerto Rico, the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, and the División de Educación para la Comunidad in promoting the notion of racelessness. These examples demonstrate that there was a concerted attempt to showcase Puerto Rico as a white nation, which was comparable to similar practices in the hemisphere.

In Puerto Rico, as in other Caribbean and Latin American societies where the population's racial composition has historically been a concern, the hegemonic elite has addressed the subject of race through literature and mass propaganda. On the island, these views were closely associated with the historical reality of an enslaved population that, back then, outnumbered the Spanish and Creoles. The political instability following the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and the wars of independence from Spain throughout Latin America resulted in new measures being taken to control the physical mobility of the enslaved and free black populations (Baralt 1981, pp. 156–157). Both historical events created tensions between white and blacks. In the Puerto Rican social imaginary, the notions of being "black" or of "African ancestry" were associated with pessimism, disruption, and otherness. During the modernization processes in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rhetoric of many leading intellectuals articulated an identity dilemma thought faced by the society. Intellectuals highlighted their cultural heritage by advocating *hispanismo* (ideology or school of thought centered on Spanish heritage), *indigenismo* (advocating a central political and social role to Latin American Indians), or multiculturalism and diversity. In some cases, such as in Argentina and Brazil, laws encouraged white migration

and supported the intermixing of European and Indian racialized groups as a way of addressing racial problems. In Cuba, the elites simply ostracized people of African ancestry and blocked their access to power.

In Puerto Rico, the social construction of a racially harmonious society took root as Puerto Rican political elites engaged in discussions on race in the nineteenth century, joined by black intellectuals in the twentieth. One important example is black Puerto Rican political and pro-annexation leader Dr. José C. Barbosa, who in 1909 wrote in leading newspapers and whose writings I examine closely. He argued that, if Puerto Ricans allowed them to, Americans would import their own brand of racism to the island, disrupting its social order. According to Barbosa, Puerto Rican notions of "racial democracy" and "racial harmony" came to be considered politically correct during a time of massive racial violence, including lynching, in the United States (Barbosa de Rosario 1984, p. 35). The historian Miriam Jiménez-Román contends that Barbosa issued contradictory messages, as he praised African Americans for their achievements, but "warns Blacks in Puerto Rico against any race-based approach to equality" (1996, p. 19). Jiménez-Román adds that Barbosa's views are "consistent with the elitist class perspective, [as] Barbosa is convinced that, in the final analysis 'class' will prevail and that having demonstrated their intelligence, cultural refinement, and ability, Blacks will be recognized as equal by similarly intelligent, cultured and able whites." Furthermore, notes Jiménez-Román, Barbosa assumes a posture of caution when he warns black youth who have, like him, studied in the US not to become polluted with racial discrimination. This suggests that racism in Puerto Rico is something external that can be avoided. Barbosa adds a note of caution to the ideology of "racial harmony," with its reconciliatory language that he shares with many of his contemporaries. The anthropologist Hilda Lloréns (2018), who has written extensively on this topic, argues that there have been three "master narratives" on race and racism in Puerto Rican society. The first, which she calls "fugitive blackness," considers Puerto Rican black identity as "external" to the society and essentially absent from it, other than as belonging to the historical past and associated with slavery. The second master narrative held that slavery on the island was benevolent, meaning less harsh in comparison to that in other slave societies. The third involved taking pride in blackness but, like the first narrative, held racial discrimination to be something alien that came only from without.

Barbosa presents a good example of the third master narrative. He was a black Puerto Rican man whose experiences in the US motivated him to draw comparisons between being black in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Comments Lloréns, "This narrative produces a view of race in Puerto Rico as distinct from that of the United States; as a country where everyone is equally Puerto Rican and thus where there is no need to imitate U.S.-styled 'race based' activism or policies" (2018, p. 8). As noted, this was Barbosa's position. His seemingly paradoxical views can perhaps be explained by considering his more "integrated" experience in Michigan. There he witnessed African American black leadership "in action"—something that would have been exceptional in Puerto Rico. Inspired by America's Republican Party, which would retain the post-slavery-era allegiance of most blacks until after FDR's election in 1932, he created a Republican Party in Puerto Rico in 1899, perhaps hoping to avoid confrontations with the new colonial establishment (Pedreira

1990). Receiving the support of American governors, he was elected to the Senate. He remains today an iconic figure for the pro-statehood movement, known for having articulated an alternative view on the evolution on the island of national identity and politics.

Deciphering its complexities, cultural critic José Luis González's seminal 1980 study, *The Four-Storeyed Country* (González 1993), examines the genesis of Puerto Rican national identity discourse. He notes that the Cédula de Gracias (Royal Decree of Graces) of 1815, promoting the migration of white Spaniards, was intended "to level out a certain *disequilibrium* in the island's population" (1993, p. 34), a leveling that he claims was not quantitative but qualitative. That is, the massive migration of white Spanish nationals to the island was meant to increase the white population, which blacks were outnumbering. Black Puerto Ricans were seen, in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, as jeopardizing the nation-building project, and strategies were developed to neutralize their presence. González also connects these historical developments with the emergence of Creole literature, characterized by its nationalist tone, while at the same time the whites and *jíbaros* (farmers) came to be seen as representing the essence of Puerto Rican national identity. The debates about the national identity were further developed during the first three decades of the US occupation (1898–1930s). However, the period that is the focus of this article spans until the 1960s.

It is interesting to connect the argument of the Cédula of 1815 with a development that took place almost 100 years later, which has to do with racial classification in the census. The social scientists Jorge Duany (2002), and Mara Loveman and Jerónimo Muñiz (2007) note that there was a decrease in the number of Puerto Ricans choosing to classify themselves as "black" in the 1920 census, after a new racial classification, based on the centrality to the national identity of whiteness, was implemented. In the supposedly raceless nation under construction by Puerto Rico's intellectual and political elites, it was common for those involved in gathering race-related data to describe their subjects based on phenotype. The category of "mulatto," which interestingly was eliminated in the US Census in 1920, was an option for those who were racially mixed. Puerto Ricans would use "mulatto" interchangeably with *trigueño(a)*, which meant a relatively light shade of black (Vargas-Ramos 2005; Godreau 2008). The historian Ileana Rodríguez-Silva (2012) observes that the working class, which tended to consider themselves "mulattoes," were excluded by new racial nomenclature, which created a misleading picture of Puerto Rican society, as it required racially mixed people to choose between being exclusively black or white. There were also people, like the schoolteachers studied by historian Solsiree del Moral (2013), members of the "colored class," who contested the imposition of racial and cultural agendas during the Americanization of the educational system, while others became agents of Americanization.

Those in power, under strong US influence, used mostly racial ideology and appeals to the bureaucracy to justify the population's racial hierarchy. At the same time, the strong opposition expressed by the *generación del treinta* (generation of 1930) provided the ideological foundation for the restructuring of the Puerto Rican nation. This group, active in the 1930s as its name suggests, sought solutions to the island's persistent colonialism, referring to the continuing colonial rule, from the

Spanish to the Americans, and the lack of militancy against it by Puerto Ricans. Among the main exponents of the movement were Antonio S. Pedreira, Concha Meléndez, Emilio S. Belaval, María Teresa Babín, Tomás Blanco, and Luis Palés Matos. In the scholarly community, there is a consensus that the work of the *generación del treinta* was influential in reflecting the ideology of the Puerto Rican upper class (Díaz Quiñones 1985; Flores 1979; González 1993; López-Baralt 2001; Zenón Cruz 1974). Their discussions seem apologetic, often filled with proposals on how to fix what was perceived as social decay.

The concepts of racial democracy, racial harmony, and the nation as the great Puerto Rican family were integral parts of the social discourse, particularly under the new US colonial regime (Godreau 2015; Lloréns 2014; Rodríguez-Silva 2012; Torres 1998). These social constructs are all ambiguous and promote a false sense of race relations and national identity. The notion of the creation of a great family is deeply rooted in Puerto Rican society. The myth of racial democracy or harmony is based on the idea that, in Puerto Rico, racial diversity has created an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance. Elsewhere, this meant a glorification of *mestizaje* (Indian-Spanish heritage); in the Puerto Rican context, it indicated a mixed African-Iberian heritage. It also implied that because of the coexistence of the two racial groups and a lack of segregation, Puerto Ricans broadly had developed a sense of racial tolerance and harmonious coexistence.

The other idea was that of Puerto Rico as a raceless or non-racist society. This was introduced in 1942 with the publication of *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* by Blanco (1985). Lloréns (2014) claims that Puerto Rican society developed patterns of geographical and cultural segregation that involved assigning certain groups to specific geographical areas. For instance, blacks were supposed to live in the coastal areas, such as Loíza, Canóvanas, or Guayama, whereas whites were found in the interior, in towns like Barranquitas, Utuado, and San Germán (pp. 81–82), though she adds that in this process "class eclipses race" (p. 81). Such discourses made it a challenge to establish racial discrimination as exists in some other countries, like the United States.

Violent racist practices in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century prompted the Puerto Rican upper class to argue that racial prejudice in Puerto Rico was slight and had few repercussions in comparison to societies in other countries such as in the United States or Brazil (Blanco 1985). In 1940, Puerto Rican politics underwent a dramatic change, initiated by the electoral triumph of the Popular Democratic Party (Partido Popular Democrático, PPD), which allowed party members—also known as *populares*—to enter the local Senate and House of Representatives. Among the influential new elites to rise to power was Luis Muñoz Marín, a politician and poet who became the island's first elected governor, and under whose leadership contemporaries from the *generación del treinta* attained influential positions. As former president of the Senate, Muñoz Marín was a key leader in the political arena who paved the way for reconstruction and modernization projects, which the intellectual class construed as having a character both Hispanic and white. The political stance of the *populares* was opposed by members of the Nationalist Party, led by Pedro Albizu Campos. According to Santiago-Valles (2007), Pedro Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party had invoked the Iberian past

as the only weapon or counternarrative with which US colonial oppression could be fought. The idea of modernization was embedded in the nation-building project as well as in the broader economic development initiative in the mid-1940s. It coincided with the evolution of the intellectual class, which promoted its views through literature.

Intersectionalities of race and class in the era of modernity

The sociopolitical scenario discussed above, characterized by the US presence on the island and growing societal conflicts, along with the intellectual rearticulation of a national identity, added a new chapter to Puerto Rico's modernization process. A good example of how national identity manifested itself at this time was in the effort to boost the island's tourist industry. Tourism became a solution to the depressed sugar-based economy after the Great Depression began in 1929. This initiative gave rise to the establishment of upscale Puerto Rican-owned restaurants, hotels, and entertainment businesses. They became settings in which locals developed and enforced new codes of social behavior.

Despite these flourishing signs of modernity, racial discrimination persisted, as shown in three incidents covered in the local press. The first took place on 14 August 1943, when three Puerto Rican men—two wearing military uniforms—arrived accompanied by their wives at the trendy middle-class Club Esquife. The doorman denied them access to the facilities, saying that the establishment did not allow "people of color" (Muriel v. Suazo 1951, p. 2). According to the legal brief filed on their behalf, First Lieutenant Rafael Muriel and his wife Paula Olavarría, Captain Rafael Pérez-García and his wife Juanita Velázquez, and their friend Jorge Haddock and his wife Delia Cordero were shocked by the treatment. They then went to the upper level, where a party was taking place. At the entrance there, another employee denied them access, stating that "people of color" were not allowed at the club. The three friends started arguing with the doorman and demanded to speak with the club owner, Salvador Suazo, who arrived promptly and simply reiterated what his employees had said. Lieutenant Muriel warned Suazo that he was violating the law, to which Suazo responded that, as the club's owner, he was entitled to do whatever he wanted.

The second and third incidents took place on 7 April 1949. According to an article published in the newspaper *El Mundo*, Carlos Vizcarrondo, the owner of Club Zero, and two of his employees denied Dr. Thomas B. Jones, Mario Urdaneta, Evelyn Price, and Irene Hayman "entry and equal treatment" because they "did not make reservations" (Nieves Rivera 1949, p. 7). The following day, the same group visited Club Esquife, where they were denied entry on the same grounds. Jones filed lawsuits against both Vizcarrondo and Suazo. Details provided in the newspaper revealed that the witnesses supported the facts claimed by the plaintiffs, and also noted that the club had several tables available at the time. Antonio J. Bennazar, the judge in the case, acquitted Vizcarrondo, while Judge José M. Calderón ruled against Suazo and his employees, who paid a bail of $300 each. In the two cases, which went to trial within a week of each other in September 1949, the two judges

ruled differently despite the similarities in the accusations (Editorial 1949, p. 5). Judge Bennazar did not find sufficient evidence to support the accusations against Vizcarrondo and his staff, and thus acquitted them. The claims of racial discrimination were regarded as problematic in both cases because the owners of both clubs were Puerto Ricans. One might assume that since, supposedly, racial discrimination did not exist on the island, such practices would have been expected only from external people. Furthermore, this incident reveals that racial prejudice existed. Connecting this fact to Dr. Barbosa, mentioned earlier in the article, the judge cautioned that Puerto Ricans should be careful to not allow American racism to make its way to the island, although the club's episodes proves the contrary.

Muriel and his friends filed a lawsuit against Suazo for racial discrimination, seeking compensation for mental anguish suffered. When the case was submitted to the Puerto Rican Supreme Court on 14 April 1950, the judge in charge, Rafael Cordovés Arana, was inclined to rule against Suazo. Suazo's attorney responded that he should not pay compensation for "mental anguish because it was not physical" (Muriel v. Suazo 1951, p. 5). Judge Cordovés concluded that Muriel and the other plaintiffs had endured pain and suffering, in what was the first case in Puerto Rico of its kind. Suazo was ordered to pay Muriel and his friends $3300 and cover their legal fees.

The outcome of Lieutenant Muriel's case suggested that an army uniform would not necessarily give a black Puerto Rican any special consideration that would be denied to others of his race. Lieutenant Muriel had waited patiently to exercise his rights and see justice served. His middle-class status, army officer rank, and position as a public-school teacher may have been decisive. The seeming arbitrariness of justice, with opposite verdicts reached in similar cases, suggests proving racial discrimination at the time was difficult, and the idea controversial. This was not unexpected, given that at the time people of color were not welcomed in locally owned businesses. These cases suggest that class was not decisive when race was a factor. They also illustrate how deeply embedded racial discrimination was, as indeed it still is, in the Puerto Rican social fabric. Even though racial discrimination was against the law, finding people liable for it was rare. In Puerto Rico, these cases were treated as civil cases.

These examples can be compared to what sociologists Omi and Winant call racial formation on a macro level. They added, "We may notice someone's race, but we cannot act upon that awareness" (1996, p. 57). Thus, racial discrimination can be observed without sanctions resulting. As Omi and Winant insist, the state "cannot suddenly declare itself 'color-blind' without in fact perpetuating the same type of differential racist treatment. Thus, race continues to signify difference and structure inequality" (p. 57). In this context, *Muriel v. Suazo* proved to be a landmark case for its progressive approach to this problem. In this ruling, the state assumed responsibility for ending the perpetuation of the discriminatory practices that formed a pattern of structural racism and compensated the plaintiffs for it. Furthermore, the Court recognized that racial discrimination can cause mental anguish and suffering (Muriel v. Suazo 1951, p. 1).

In his provocatively titled book, *Justicia negra. Casos y cosas* (Black Justice: Problems and Cases) (2001), the prominent Afro-Puerto Rican attorney and activist

Marcos Rivera Ortíz has compiled recent stories and newspapers articles, from the late 1980s and 1990s, focusing on civil and criminal cases involving black Puerto Ricans. Rivera Ortíz describes the different ways in which the island's judicial system handles cases involving race, racism, or discrimination. He finds that proving racial discrimination in Puerto Rico is a difficult task. It may be best understood in terms not of individual wrongs so much as "structural racism." A 2004 study by the Aspen Institute defines it as.

> a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. (Lawrence and Keleher 2004, p. 2).

The legal scholar Tanya K. Hernández finds that in Puerto Rico, despite the existence of a legal framework for addressing racial discrimination cases, very few such cases had been filed in the period from the 1940s to 2001 (2002, p. 1145). No consensus exists among the courts on how to deal with cases of a racial discrimination whose existence is still largely denied.

In 1947, President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights initiated an investigation of racial discrimination, including in US possessions and territories. Officials relied on America's own yardsticks in racial matters for gauging the racial situation on the island. In the report of the Committee on Civil Rights, the committee's executive secretary Robert K. Carr concluded that "there is no legal or political discrimination against Negroes in Puerto Rico. Intermarriage is acceptable" (Carr 1947, p. 7). He also warns that "social discrimination" has increased in public spaces, hotels, and restaurants, for which the local government enacted a law in 1943 to protect black Puerto Ricans against discrimination. Carr pointed out that at least one observer mentioned that this law is not enforced (p. 8). The newspapers in the colony, having followed the results of the investigation, refuted the report on their front pages. In *El Mundo*, William Dorvillier summarized the findings of the study, adding that, despite the considerable number of blacks on the island, whites occupied most of the important positions (Dorvillier 1947, p. 1). The opinion piece at *El Mundo* seems to support the civil rights commission's report accurately concerning the fact that black Puerto Ricans did not have access to good paying jobs. It also reiterates that publishing such views in the press is a validation to Puerto Ricans who believe that discrimination is based on class rather than race.

Enforcing civil rights was a priority for the Truman administration, and it sought to extend this doctrine internationally, to places where US companies operated. The local press in Puerto Rico pushed for the implementation of recent laws on civil rights and desegregation of the military. In reporting on the committee's findings, newspaper commentators sought to highlight discriminatory practices, particularly in workplaces and in public spaces. The colonial government did nothing in response. The local media coverage of the lawsuit against the owners of the private clubs was a new development, suggesting in Puerto Rican society a new attitude

of self-criticism and a willingness to seriously consider racial issues. Of course, it took more than two decades to implement civil rights for blacks in the United States and its overseas possessions, but the ample discussion in newspapers and the public sphere of the civil rights report showed that both the federal and insular establishments were making some effort to address the problem.

The local and federal governments both undertook to investigate the sources of the problems (Garver and Fincher 1945, p. 35). International social scientists were invited to study Puerto Rican culture and society. Among them was the Caribbean intellectual and first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams. In an article addressing race relations in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, Williams wrote about racial discrimination within the Puerto Rican government, the tourist industry, and the University of Puerto Rico (Williams 1945, pp. 314–315). He stated that progress had been made to include colored people in the new economy, but the interracial mixing that the ruling elite was promoting did not manage to "whiten" the island as many had claimed. His recommendations were as follows:

> The Administration must try to formulate policy and practice in accordance with the history and patterns of the area, and not allow itself to be influenced by the national traditions of the interests, which it represents. Given the history and social sentiments of the island, it is not at all impossible for the United States Administration in Puerto Rico to strike blows at race prejudice and to try to develop an official attitude toward race relations in harmony with the aspirations and practice of the colonial areas. (Williams 1945, p. 317)

Williams claimed that the situation in Puerto Rico reflected a pattern of discrimination in the region that was clearly incompatible with the changes and democratic values promoted by the United States. The previously described incidents in which Puerto Ricans were denied entry to locally owned night clubs provided cases in point. Nonetheless, many observers and visitors were optimistic and saw in Puerto Rican society a model of racial harmony. The problem of racial discrimination at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) is well documented and was particularly acute in the 1940s. A study conducted by sociologists José Colombán and Justina Carrión in 1940 revealed that black Puerto Ricans were excluded from teaching and administrative positions in the University of Puerto Rico. Literary critic Isabelo Zenón Cruz pointed out in 1974 that racism at the UPR extended to both the faculty and student fraternities.

"We the Puerto Rican people": Recovering from racial stereotypes

Since its founding in 1903, the University of Puerto Rico has initiated many important projects aiming to address a wide range of educational issues and promote Puerto Rican culture, including studies by faculty seeking to improve living conditions for the Puerto Rican people. Exchanges among intellectual elites from the United States, Latin America, and Puerto Rico brought about a new national identity discourse. For instance, in the 1930s, some Puerto Rican intellectuals argued that the national identity was informed by the two major influences of Hispanicization

and Americanization, with the former generally holding the greater appeal. However, English was established as the language of teaching in public schools and of use in the courts and government, and this trend held roughly between 1900 and the 1940s. This drive encountered both resistance and acceptance, depending on the political affiliation of those involved. Republicans and those who supported the island's annexation to the United States considered Americanization as a step toward statehood. Nationalists and PPD sympathizers sought to have the project of making Puerto Rico a state of the union rejected. The use of English in the public schools was abolished in the 1940s, while its use in the courts and government was retained. An effort at the time for Hispanic pride that involved intellectual and political leftists may have played a role in ending English language in public schools.

Some cultural activities at the UPR focused on poverty and its connection to race, including studies aimed at evaluating social conditions in Puerto Rico. The census held the following year (1899), after US occupation, revealed the existence of terrible economic and social conditions including poor housing, low literacy, health issues, and low salaries. Almost twenty years later, in 1917, Fred K. Fleagle, former dean of the University of Puerto Rico, found further evidence of a high level of illiteracy among the Puerto Rican people. According to Fleagle's findings, the overpopulation was the consequence of "the mixture of races in family life" (1975, p. 35). This was used to design a plan to export Puerto Ricans to the US mainland and to implement a birth control program (Briggs 2002; Meléndez 2017). Locally, the responsibility for addressing concerns about supposed race mixing was delegated to the UPR, where Americans, international intellectuals, and locals including members of the *generación del treinta* expressed their views on matters of national identity and modernity. In various collaborations with UPR scholars over the years, American social scientists tended to stress that the island's mixed-race society must be considered an obstacle to incorporating it into the United States as a state of the union.

Chilean social scientist Jorge Larraín (2001), focusing on the nation-building period in Latin America from 1810 to the 1950s, contends that in these societies national identity embodied two poles of culture and existed on two fronts. On the one hand, there was a public forum in which intellectuals and research centers were given the task of articulating the discourse of racial harmony. On the other hand, there were the groups that he calls the "social base," which became advocates and defenders of a version of their culture, which "sometimes are not represented in public versions of identity" (p. 34). Consequently, there was a clear struggle for dominance between these two versions and interpretations. The first was more aligned with the views of the elite, including the political establishment; the second was more associated with the intellectual elite and their ideals on modernity.

Among the distinguished thinkers sponsored by the UPR was Mexican writer José Vasconcelos, who was invited to present seven lectures in the cities of San Juan, Mayagüez, and Ponce. He later documented his impressions about the visit in the prologue of his *Indología* (1927), which he also dedicates to the UPR. Vasconcelos concluded that the Puerto Ricans were an oppressed people. His writings pinpointed how the Spanish language and Catholicism could be used to confront US colonialism, and appeared to endorse the Puerto Rican elite's Hispanophile

tendencies. Vasconcelos is well known for his work *La raza cósmica*, published in 1925, in which he forecasts the arrival of a new aesthetic era in which creativity, joy, and love would prevail over rationalism. This was in a context of debates about ethnicity, beauty, and family ties—issues considered in many Latin American societies as problematic and an obstacle to creating a more modern society. Vasconcelos also posited that a new "cosmic race" would replace what was then in existence in Mexico, and in Latin America as a whole. Vasconcelos' views on race and national identity represent a trend among the intellectual elite of the Latin America, and Puerto Ricans counterparts took note of it.

Vasconcelos also compared the Puerto Rican nationalist movement to that of Mexico, particularly to that of Veracruz, characterized by the historical coexistence of indigenous groups and people of African origin. At the same time, he noted that patriotic sentiment in Veracruz was devoid of racial accommodation and tolerance. In this regard, he was impressed with Albizu Campos, whom he met when visiting the city of Ponce. He wrote, "he impressed me, and still he does." Then he added: "very few men have taught me as Albizu did in one day"…. "I am certain," he said, "that one day this ungrateful American continent will recognize him as one of her heroes" (Vasconcelos 1927, p. xxiv). This statement suggests that Vasconcelos was aware of Albizu's leadership and recognized it: had he not been impressed, he would not have commented.

Vasconcelos's impressions of Albizu were almost overshadowed by the comment of a member of the Nationalist Party, who pointed out Albizu's mixed racial background. The Mexican writer was appalled, remarking that it was "as if to be a mulatto was not the more illustrious document of citizenship in America! I believe that Bolívar was a mulatto too" (p. xxv). Vasconcelos was aware of Albizu's racial background. He compared the Nationalist movement with Veracruz. He expressed admiration for Albizu without pointing out his race. What seems strange from the entire situation is that the one who alerted Vasconcelos about Albizu's race was a fellow *nacionalista*. The political platform of the Nationalist Party is based on rejecting US imperialism, which involves oppression and racism. Ironically, the nationalist's comment represents some of the contradictions of the Nationalist Party itself. While on the one hand, they reject US colonialism, they engage in Hispanic rhetoric that undermines the African ancestry. This is an excellent example of what Lloréns (2018, p. 8) calls the three master narratives discussed earlier in this article. In this context, the "fugitive blackness" master narrative, which considers black identity as external, could be applied to this case. In this particular incident, the nationalist who forewarned Vasconcelos about Albizu's race, saw Albizu's blackness as unusual and external. He felt the need to point it out to Vasconcelos without realizing that he was expressing his prejudices.

While Vasconcelos was celebrating *mestizaje*, along with many of his Latin American contemporaries during this period, one may posit that, with the exception of Puerto Rican writer Luis Palés Matos in his 1937 book of poems *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1993), the literature of the period acknowledged African heritage from either an organic or a cultural perspective, meaning that it existed and was underrated. It is, however, important to point out that the work that emanated from the

generación del trienta reflected the currents of the period and aligned with that of Vasconcelos and other Latin American intellectuals.

Vasconcelos visited the southern city of Ponce for a second time to speak at the Nationalist Party headquarters. Demographically speaking, Ponce was a town of predominantly mixed racial groups. According to the event's organizers, the lecture was cancelled because of strong local opposition. Already aware of racial and political tensions, Vasconcelos was not surprised by the cancellation. He acknowledged that the organizers were afraid that his speech would "encourage the hope of the colored races" (Vasconcelos 1927, p. xxxi).

UPR's invitation to Vasconcelos served to illustrate the powerful influence this state institution had over the organization of national events of cultural significance. On the one hand, bringing Vasconcelos to the island showcased the Puerto Rican intellectual community's inclusion and welcoming of the avant-garde. They probably did not anticipate that Vasconcelos, regardless of his celebratory tone toward *mestizaje*, would express admiration for Pedro Albizu Campos. He certainly did not share the political system's views of the nationalist movement. However, Vasconcelos's visit reaffirmed one of the poles of cultural identity described in Larraín's assessments on Latin American elites and their strategies to validate themselves as Iberians and Europeans. His visit resulted in the consolidation of the Department of Hispanic Studies, founded in 1927 and chaired by Antonio S. Pedreira. The Department attracted a new generation of scholars and intellectuals well versed in the culture of the Hispanicist doctrine, which promoted a Spanish heritage.

The Popular Democratic Party (PPD) administration that came to power in the elections of 1940 engaged in a more aggressive political campaign to address the question of national identity. The key players in this period were Vicente Géigel Polanco, Luis Muñoz Marín, and Jaime Benítez. The creation of the Forum of the 1940s, intended to reconcile views about the racial and national identity of Puerto Rican society, served as an opportunity to legitimize the UPR as the island's premier institution of higher education. It became a good example of collaborative effort between the state and a higher education institution in fostering modernization that relied on a racial and cultural prism.

It is crucial to note here that government institutions played an essential role in reinforcing these debates. In 1946, the Venezuelan historian Mariano Picón Salas served as the keynote speaker at UPR's forty-second commencement. His lecture, titled "Defense of the Small Nation," was a critique of powerful nations that—because of their geographical size and military power—considered themselves entitled to dominate the world. The speech was also the first of a series of remarks in which Picón Salas suggested to Puerto Ricans that, even though small in size, the island could have great accomplishments as a nation. He encouraged Puerto Ricans to take the first step in this direction in their use of natural resources and setting the island on the path to industrialization (Picón Salas 1946, p. 20). The scholar provided a historical account of small Western nations, particularly Greece, as the cradle of Western civilization. He urged Puerto Ricans not to feel intimidated by the fanfare of military supremacy of neighboring countries, especially the United States.

The speech, as its title implies, was meant to serve as an apology. Indeed, Picón Salas was acting as an advocate on behalf of Puerto Rico, as a small island that

could be inspired by what other small countries, such as Greece and Crete, had represented: the bases of great civilizations and conquests (p. 9). Acknowledging that economic conditions had forced thousands of Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States, he talked about the struggle of people in the Puerto Rican diaspora, whose hearts—despite being in a cold-weather land—burned with love for their island and resisted assimilation (p. 4).

Using a metaphorical language of praise in describing Puerto Rico, while critical of the current political situation on the island, Picón Salas argued that societies like Puerto Rico trigger a constant demand among their people to showcase their modernity and capabilities, a demand that could be channeled in different ways. As previously discussed, as the elites struggled to demonstrate their cultural preeminence in a racially mixed and tolerant society, they perpetuated the myth of racial harmony. Although the debates of the *generación del treinta* created the foundation for that new national identity, during the 1940s other developments clashed with this foundation and posited the counternarrative of an apparently homogeneous upper class. While those embracing their Spanish heritage were growing in number, so were those wishing to embrace both Spanish heritage and US citizenship. The latter were particularly outspoken in their political views, advocating reconciliation with America. The intellectual group known as Foro del 1940 (Forum of the 1940s; discussed further below) was particularly prominent in this regard. In this sense, Picón Salas' speech shed light on the new tensions between the intellectual and political elites during the period.

The historian Alejandro de la Fuente (1999), whose seminal work traces the evolution of Cuban national identity, examines the efforts through which white Cuban intellectual elites created a unique formula encompassing the racial diversity of Cuban society. He notes that the white elites "were prisoners of their own ideological creation," while their efforts were focused on delegitimizing black Cubans (De la Fuente 1999, p. 43). Although the white Puerto Rican elite did not engage in an openly contested relation with blacks, as white Cuban elites did, Puerto Ricans felt in constant need of proving the modern nature of their culture by using institutional power to reinforce a so-called cultural supremacy. The need for proving themselves to Americans was a result of the constant criticism the island was subjected to as a whole. It was labeled as inferior and the people were racialized. The reaction to the critics has been demonstrated by the different approaches aimed at affirming a hegemonic discourse focused on emphasizing European ancestry, such as the literature from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Another frequently used strategy was the manipulation of the arts and applied sciences to celebrate the island's racial mixture or heritage.

The cultural dominance of one particular group, in this case the Spanish-European/white, was very apparent in this period. The UPR would become the boxing ring of the ideological fight. Literary critic María E. Rodríguez Castro's article about the Forum of the 1940s shows that the ideological tensions between political and intellectual leaders were central in the way that the PPD and university staff positioned themselves as individuals committed to promoting the modernizing agenda through a reconciliation between academia and official politics. PPD members revealed their cross-party ideologies when Jaime Benítez, the UPR's provost, and

Vicente Géigel Polanco—a former Nationalist Party sympathizer—crossed party lines to associate with Luis Muñoz Marín in his new populist ideological project. These developments also highlight two different approaches to what was considered an exclusive nationalist ideal, as formulated by the *generación del treinta*. The notion of "the great Puerto Rican family" served as the creed of the old discourse. According to Rodríguez-Castro, ideological tensions arose between *criollismo* and *hispanismo*, two notions that both found advocates in elites through the interconnections between state and cultural institutions.

The University of Puerto Rico represented a part of the intelligentsia involved in competing for who was more capable of articulating nationhood. Although to a certain degree anti-American, the UPR and its intellectuals led the crusade to showcase the island as more European and to some degree whiter that the other islands in the Caribbean. The state introduced public policies intended to legitimize the official culture and facilitate its implementation. The Forum of the 1940s epitomized, as Rodríguez Castro pointed out, "the national integration of the defense of democracy and culture" (1993, p. 73). The state's leading institution of higher education took the primary role in producing a new breed of professionals whose mission was the modernization of the society. At the same time, these scholars and professionals were supportive of modern cultural ideals. Thus, the UPR needed to include in its curricula new courses, and visits by prominent scholars who were aligned with this vision. In this context, Picón Salas was instrumental not only in his intellectual capacity, but also as the precursor of these ideals. His speech served as a validation for all the students who attended the ceremony.

Rodríguez Castro claimed that the paths taken by the parties involved in this initiative diverged. On the one hand, the UPR, under Jaime Benítez as the main proponent, continued its Euro-American-oriented approach and secured the institution's position in such. Here the UPR's decision reflected the debate between the essentialist Hispanicist posture and the universalism promoted by members of the political class. On the other hand, Muñoz-Marín and the PPD continued supporting national projects. Still, Muñoz-Marín distanced himself from "the great Puerto Rican family" and racial harmony discourses and embraced a populist approach, which worked quite well. In other words, what was apparently a new, more universal claim implied that, regardless of how advanced and progressive these strategies might appear, they were conceived on the premise that the sociopolitical climate in Puerto Rico needed an overhaul and a high dose of Western culture in order to enable a modern society to emerge. The beliefs of the Puerto Rican elite were marred by contradictions. Those who strongly supported economic ties to the United States believed that they would result in prosperity and capital development. However, to achieve a higher level of modernization, they would have to adhere to policies aimed at controlling the population, suppressing cultural identity, restricting labor rights (labeled flawed by American social scientists), and continue the research that had been started on the island in the 1940s.

During this time, Garver and Fincher published their influential report *Puerto Rico: Unsolved Problem* (1945), which emphasized the racial composition of the Puerto Rican population and its socioeconomic conditions. First, they compared the *jíbaros*, or white peasants, with the Appalachian people in the United States (p. 23).

Second, they claimed that since "many 'white' Puerto Ricans have Negro blood, thus racial discrimination becomes virtually impossible" because of the racial intermixing (p. 21). However, they were not able to explain why, in terms of socioeconomic attainment, most Puerto Ricans lived in circumstances of economic depression, "but the most conspicuous are the Negroes" (p. 23). Finally, they stressed the need for Puerto Rico to continue its political and economic relationship with the United States, because that would lead it on a strong path to economic development and the eventual elimination of its social problems (pp. 100–103).

The society's flaws and negative features needed to be addressed to make way for the forthcoming American capital and tourist businesses. Local authorities collaborated with the American empire builders by engaging in massive social transformation of the island. As early as 1898, Puerto Rico became a convenient site for multinational corporations. The insular government established agencies such as the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) in 1946, under which a film and graphics unit was created. According to the cultural anthropologist Lloréns, this agency facilitated the film and documentary industry's promotion of tourism and Puerto Rican folklore (2014, p. 92). Lloréns analyzed some of the film and photographic production from the mid-1940s to the 1950s, including the works of Jack and Irene Delano, who promoted the arts and education, and important Puerto Rican artists such as Lorenzo Homar, José Torres Martinó, and Rafael Tufiño, who were also active participants in this era. She describes an anecdote about Jack Delano making a documentary about Jesús T. Piñero, the first appointed governor of Puerto Rico (1946–1949), taking footage from his plantation in the municipality of Carolina and the people working on it, who were blacks. According to Lloréns, discussing Delano's memoirs, when Delano was editing the documentary, the secretary of Parks and Recreation asked why he had so many "ugly people" in the film. Surprised by such comments, Delano considered whether or not to leave the images of blacks in the film. The director of the agency, Julio Monagas, whom Delano described as an "intelligent, tall and handsome black man," left the decision up to Delano, saying "Do what you think is right" (Lloréns 2014, p. 97). This anecdote could be interpreted in two ways. First, Delano, as an American, may have expected a more defensive response. Second, by deferring to the director of Parks and Recreation, Delano may have believed that he did not have the right to make such a decision. Would Delano take the blame for leaving blacks in the film?

The film and documentary productions were intended to educate illiterate people. Themes about health, hygiene, the environment, and family featured in the films and booklets created by the Division of Community Education (División de Educación para la Comunidad, DIVEDCO). Although DIVEDCO would be taking the lead in this initiative (as discussed further below), the UPR also played a role in similar projects. UPR representatives joined members of the Hotel Association and the Office of the Governor to draft a proposal for a documentary film about the people of Puerto Rico. Correspondence dated 25 April and 31 July 1947 among high-ranking UPR officials, special aides to Governor Piñero, and Teodoro Moscoso, who was president of the Industrial Development Company (better known as Fomento), described a plan to film a documentary based on two of Enrique Laguerre's novels: *La llamarada* (1935) and *Solar Montoya* (1941) (Archivo General 1947). Both

works deal with the lives of Puerto Rican workers in the cane fields. The protagonists of both novels were selected to represent the *jíbaros*, or white peasants. Efforts to market Puerto Rican culture as essentially Spanish and European were introduced in the 1930s. The literary scholar Richard Rosa explores the parallel development of this industry along with politics and national identity. It involved the marketing of Puerto Rico as a destination, with government campaigns, aided by magazines such as *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, being responsible for creating an image of Puerto Rico as an essentially European destination (2001, p. 459). In addition to being designated as the foundation of Puerto Rican society, the *jíbaros* were used by Muñoz Marín and the PPD as an emblem of their party, with intellectuals following this in their literary works. The *jíbaro* as a character was introduced in nineteenth-century literature through *criollismo*, specifically in the novel *El gíbaro* (1849) by Manuel Alonso. Interestingly, Laguerre was of African ancestry, and his works critiqued the ideology of the era.

The negotiations for the film project directly involved the president of Twentieth Century Fox studios, Spyros Skouras, who also visited the Virgin Islands to carry out a similar project there. In fact, René Marqués, another contemporary Puerto Rican writer and a leading writer for DIVEDCO, sent a letter to Governor Piñero supporting the documentary. According to Marqués, it was an excellent opportunity to promote a positive image of the island. He added, "*La llamarada* embodies the ideal of social justice achieved under the current government" (Archivo General 1947). This idea was perceived as the preliminary test for large-scale initiatives established by DIVEDCO, which was created by the government in May 1949, with its director, Fred Wale, in charge of implementing a massive educational program for the rural and lower classes. Inspired by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (1935–1943), DIVEDCO arranged for writers, artists, social scientists, and documentarians to use their talents to convey a message of social justice, economic progress, and protection of the people's right to work, with the idea that these culture workers would thereby play a key role in the island's social improvement. This program was very influential and is a good example of how this sort of message was disseminated to the masses. A member of the 1950s generation, Marqués was a short story writer and playwright. His works *La carreta* (The Oxcart) (1953) and *El puertorriqueño dócil* (The Docile Puerto Rican) (1960) articulated pessimistic views about colonialism. In *El puertorriqueño dócil*, Marqués describes the inability of Puerto Ricans to deal with it. Interestingly, almost three decades earlier, Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo* (1934) had presented similar apologetic views of Puerto Rican society. What these literary works had in common was the writers' concern about the negative impact of colonization, presenting the matter from a racial perspective. Directly or indirectly, these works denounced the racial mixture of Puerto Rican society, which in their view rendered Puerto Ricans incapable of challenging US colonial apparatus. In this context, for intellectual responses to social problems, including the obstacles to modernization, the state relied on cultural institutions. The films considered for the Twentieth Century Fox project represent another example of addressing social concerns.

At DIVEDCO, which was later incorporated into the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP), many of the films and documentaries reflected this social discourse.

During one period, blackness was depicted in a very patronizing manner. Focusing on DIVEDCO's films and projects addressing blackness, Hilda Lloréns analyzes the documentary films *Las Fiestas de Santiago en Loíza aldea* (The Celebrations of the Village of Loíza) (1949); *Nenén de la ruta mora* (Nenen from the Moor's Route) (1955); *El resplandor* (The Shining) (1962); and *La plena* (1966). These films illustrate what she calls "geographical segregation," as they establish a geographical and cultural construct, in which the coast (in this case Loíza) is contrasted with the mountains. Lloréns also suggests that film production of this time included parallel affirmations of whiteness and blackness (2014, p. 90). All these films were developed under the auspices of the ICP and directed by anthropologist Dr. Ricardo Alegría. Referring specifically to the film *Las fiestas de Santiago*, Lloréns highlights Alegria's unpremeditated aspirations to portray Loíza and Puerto Rico's coastal culture as oriented economically by sugar production, and as isolated and essentially black. She states,

> Alegría's well-intentioned and pioneering research succeeded in casting Loiceños [blacks] as bound to tradition, and non-black Puerto Ricans as participants and makers of the modern world, thereby reinforcing existing narratives of linear evolution and reproducing the alterity of blacks vis-à-vis the non-black Puerto Rican. (2014 p. 124)

In other words, the structural component of the notion of a raceless Puerto Rican nation consisted in developing a folkloric notion of black Puerto Ricans that contributed to the perpetuation of the white/Spanish narrative of Puerto Rican national identity based on harmony (González 1993, pp. 146–147; Dávila 1997, p. 4), while attributing an integral role to rural people in its creation of a social imagery based on kinship (Lauria-Perricelli 1990, p. 93). Puerto Rican identity was constructed as a sociopolitical project sponsored by the state and a divided intellectual elite. In terms of the role of the state in the national project, literature critic Catherine Marsh Kennerly (2009) points out correctly that DIVEDCO can thus be seen as a primary example of the marriage between state and intellectual elite in the creation of a new society (p. 251). Thus, as we have seen, three important state institutions—the UPR, DIVEDCO, and ICP—were involved in producing and promoting a raceless image of Puerto Rican society.

"Tan claro como el agua": Some final considerations

The popular saying "tan claro como el agua" or as clear as water refers to either a fact or a statement that does not require further elaboration. Puerto Rican society dealings with race and racial discrimination seem clear, but as this article demonstrates Puerto Ricans have not wanted to deal with race neither address blackness. This article contributes to the contemporary discussions of race in twentieth-century Puerto Rican society. The self-understanding of a modern society generally includes a consensus among elites on what constitutes the national identity. In the case of Puerto Rico, different strategies evolved in the process. The elaboration of a national/social/racial discourse between the 1930s and the 1950s in Puerto Rico was

the consequence of many dialogues, negotiations, and mutual agreements exercised by the political powers and the intellectual elite. In reaction to US colonization, the intellectual and political elites crafted a national identity discourse that basically exalted Puerto Rico's Spanish heritage and underrated its African heritage. Leaders from the white and black Puerto Rican elite held different definitions of a modern society, without openly addressing race or racial discrimination. On the one hand, at the turn of the century, black political leader Dr. José Celso Barbosa cautioned about the importation of the US brand of racism and placed the responsibility in the hands of Puerto Ricans themselves to avoid the spread of racism. He disregarded, to a certain degree, the fact that racism was already polluting the society and that the importation of Americans' racial ideals may have been inevitably transferred to Puerto Ricans. Therefore, for the island, these racial views added another layer to already existing racism on the island. Barbosa seems to have been part of a trend among the elite in which racial discrimination was attributed to external influences and its practice on the island denied. On the other hand, in the 1930s generation there was a focus on dealing with the new colonial regime by denouncing it openly and/or establishing the *jíbaro* or country folk as constituting the essence of Puerto Rican identity. Its primary aim was to promote the idea that Puerto Rico was a raceless nation.

As demonstrated in the article, racial discrimination was rampant and ignored in Puerto Rican society. The case of *Muriel v. Suazo* sheds lights on the failure of the judicial system to deal with racial discrimination in a consistent manner and establish a legal precedent against it. The raceless nation formula was intrinsic to the idea of modernity supported by state-sponsored events. Clashes over race within the political elite were demonstrated by the incident in which a Nationalist Party follower commented to José Vasconcelos about Pedro Albizu Campos's race. Interestingly, the nationalist saw Albizu's blackness as unusual and external. By pointing out Albizu's race to Vasconcelos the nationalist did not realize that he was expressing his prejudices. At the same time, Albizu Campos himself, who represented the pro-independence nationalist movement, overlooked racism and focused on a class-based Iberian-American rhetoric to contest American colonialism. Along with the political practice of institutions of higher education, such as the UPR, and scholarly groups, such as the Forum of 1940, the latter in particular centered its discussion on Puerto Rico's socioeconomic problems in order to divert attention from the race question.

The local government took the responsibility for the national identity so seriously that it established DIVEDCO in 1949 and founded the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) in 1955. The latter, led by Dr. Ricardo Alegría, played a leading role in the promotion of an "ethnographic approach" to Puerto Rican culture, wherein the mountain people were romanticized and those from the coast were folklorized. This agency became the boxing ring for the cultural war in Puerto Rico under the Luis Muñoz Marín administration and the Popular Party. The ICP also became an agency of pro-independence advocacy that used art to promote Puerto Rican nationalism.

The methods implemented by the intellectual and political leaders became the blueprint for projects intended to reinforce the collaboration between the state and educational institutions, as was the case with DIVEDCO. All these efforts, combined, guaranteed Puerto Rico a strong path toward its rightful place on the world

stage as it showcased a strong democracy and economic development. Also, the film production of DIVEDCO/ICP and the project for developing Enrique Laguerre's novels into promotional films suggest the interest in articulating Puerto Rican national identity. In the end, both agencies fulfilled their goals to produce and sustain the political and intellectual elites' notions of Puerto Rican as a raceless society, without openly addressing racism or race.

Notwithstanding the ideological tensions among the leadership of the intellectual and political classes, exploring the so-called raceless nature of the Puerto Rican social structure is essential, as it helps identify and decipher peculiar practices that served the denial of racial discrimination while forging an image of Puerto Rico as essentially a white, as well as modern and progressive, nation.

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