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## The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Evaluating Constructions of Race and Ethnicity

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The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Evaluating Constructions of Race and Ethnicity

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## **Introduction**

The Spanish first colonized Puerto Rico in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The implementation of slavery shaped cultural traditions, agricultural practices, and established a socio-racial hierarchy. When Puerto Rico was acquired by the United States, legal and economic changes intensified race relations and classism. These global powers established notions of race and ethnicity which continue to dominate diasporic and identity discourse. Nearly a century later, the lasting effects of imperialism have converged with two decades of recurrent calamities, resulting in mass migration off the island and growing Puerto Rican communities within the U.S., notably in New York and Florida. By tracing the roots of racial and ethnic construction and application in Puerto Rico, persisting complexities in identity studies can be best understood. Further, this analysis provides a basis for future intersectional approaches to identity studies that combat negative historical conceptions of race and ethnicity.

## **Historiography**

Much of the Puerto Rican identity scholarship concentrates on the early twentieth century when global power structures began to breakdown and transform, cultivating new fields of study across international borders. The growing interest in Pan-Africanism is reflected in the literary and oratory contributions of Puerto Rican scholars and political leaders. Kelvin Santiago-Valles explored the construction and deployment of racial identity by Albizu Campos in his article, "Our Race Today is the Only Hope for the World." In "Are Puerto Ricans Really Americans?" Charles Venator-Santiago provided a historical analysis of Puerto Rico's legal barriers to statehood and equal citizenship rights. Jorge Duany has published multiple works, including "The Rough Edges of Puerto Rican Identities," a review of other Puerto Rican studies on race,

gender, and transnationalism, as well as *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*, about the circular migration and cultural continuities between the island and mainland. Extensive historiography exists on colonial and post-colonial constructions of race and identity, but little scholarship has been produced following the economic collapse. Of the recent scholarship is Isar Godreau's *Scripts of Blackness*, detailing the strategic racialization that took place under colonial powers. Robert McGreevey examined the intersections of U.S. colonization and early migration to the metropole in *Borderline Citizens*. Other authors have provided updated versions of their earlier works, such as Petra R. Rivera-Rideau in her reevaluation of the impacts of Reggaetón on forging links across the African diaspora and overcoming marginalized blackness in *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico*. In *The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico: Revisited*, Amílcar Antonio Barreto reassessed the Puerto Rican government's 1991 attempt to protect Puerto Rican culture from bilingualism. Perhaps the most relevant to understanding the Puerto Rican identity as it exists today is Ricia Anne Chansky's "Both Here and There." Chansky, a professor of Anglophone Caribbean literature at the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez, describes the challenge of using literature to encourage personal reflection on identity in a time of social and economic turmoil. Using these sources, a brief but comprehensive history of Puerto Rico can be constructed and help to identify opportunities for contemporary identity studies.

## **Methodology**

Identity studies focus on a variety of factors, such as politics, language, race, ethnicity, culture, and historical context. Through the examination of extensive scholarship, past constructions of race and ethnicity are compared with modern focuses and interpretations. Scholarship from before and after the economic collapse are compared, showing continuities in the discourse as

well as new directions in identity studies. Additionally, an analysis of 2020 census data identifies the inadequacy of using qualitative methods to measure race and ethnicity as it acts as a barrier to a more fluid and culturally comprehensive understanding of Puerto Rican identity.

## **Initial Diaspora**

African slaves were first brought to Puerto Rico during the sixteenth century to carry out the Spanish goldmining ventures. When the gold ran out, the slaves were used to build fortifications on the island, making it a Spanish garrison. To populate the island, the Spanish recruited *maroons* (free Africans) from neighboring non-Spanish islands. Intermixing with what remained of the indigenous *Taino* peoples, an ethnically variegated *mestizo* population was produced, constituting a sizeable free African-descended population. “The Royal Decree of Graces of 1789” enabled subjects to participate in the Caribbean slave trade, bringing another wave of slaves to the island. The initial wave was taken from West Africa, but the newcomers were predominately from the Gold Coast and Guinea coast.<sup>1</sup> Spanish refugees flocked to the island following ongoing civil unrest on Hispaniola during the early 1800’s, further diversifying the population. In 1815, a new decree offered free land to any Europeans that would revive slave driven agriculture, turning Puerto Rico into one of Spain’s leading producers of sugar and coffee.

In 1834, the Spanish held an official census, identifying the population as consisting of 42,000 African slaves, 25,000 free people of color, 189,000 individuals who self-identified as white, and about 100,000 deemed to be of mixed ethnicity. The colonial government sought to control individuals of color regardless of their freedom status. Archaic laws reinforced a racial

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<sup>1</sup> “Afro-Puerto Ricans,” Minority Rights Group, June 19, 2015, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-puerto-ricans/>. Minority Rights Group is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that has a consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The group heads global initiatives to identify and support minority and indigenous peoples.

hierarchy that devalued African attributes.<sup>2</sup> Plantation agriculture was so lucrative that slavery persisted for nearly fifty years after it was abolished on most other Caribbean islands, finally ending in 1873. Abolition Day, commemorating the end of slavery, is now celebrated as a national holiday in Puerto Rico.

### **Constructions of Race and Ethnicity**

“Race” is generally linked to biology and physical characteristics, whereas “ethnicity” is tied to culture and individual identification. Historically, “race” has been used to contrive biological superiority and serve as a justification for slavery and colonialism, making race inextricable from economics. Ethnicity provides individuals with a degree of freedom in their associations. In some ways, ethnicity is more important to identity studies because it encompasses nationality, culture, religion, and language, allowing individuals to selectively assume multiple identities. As is the case with Puerto Rico, individuals have chosen to incorporate certain aspects of race and ethnicity into their identity while denying other identifiers. These fabrications have been utilized throughout Puerto Rican history, varying based on socio-political factors and geographic location. Though the historic implications of race degrade and reduce targeted populations, it also allows for racial reclamation and subversion towards the oppressor. Similarly, ethnicity provided additional means of prejudice against seemingly distinct populations, while simultaneously opening new means of identification that transcend traditionally held beliefs. Though these constructions can be damaging, they are instrumental in the empowerment and mobilization of minority groups.

### **Brief Legal History**

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<sup>2</sup> “Afro-Puerto Ricans.”

Puerto Rico was acquired by the United States in 1898 when Spain was defeated in the Spanish-American War. The Supreme Court ruled in 1904 that annexed territories with predominately nonwhite inhabitants would be governed as “unincorporated territories,” and the inhabitants were classified as being between alien and citizen.<sup>3</sup> The legal implications of *Downes v. Bidwell* defined which territories were intended to become states, gave Congress the power to enact legislation with only the guarantee of fundamental constitutional rights, and the ability of Congress to legally treat Puerto Rico as a foreign country, effectively creating a legal and Constitutional barrier to statehood.<sup>4</sup> Additional complications around citizenship arose with the passage of the Foraker Act. Those living on the island that were born in Spain (*peninsulares*) could retain Spanish citizenship or acquire American or Puerto Rican citizenship. Those born on the island (creole) were forced to renounce their Spanish citizenship and accept Puerto Rican citizenship, though the naturalization process required individuals to renounce allegiance to their sovereign to gain U.S. citizenship. Given the contradiction, island-born Puerto Ricans were unable to naturalize until 1906, when Congress waived the renunciation stipulation.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, labor conditions on the island were deplorable in the early 1900's. With the help of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), numerous strikes were organized, though they were often met with brutal suppression. The rising cost of living was exacerbated by the official ban on unions, low wages, and lack of representation in government. The workers called for the right to strike and asked that the protection of the constitution followed the flag. President Wilson was prompted to react, and congress held a series of hearing between 1915 and 1917.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens: The United States, Puerto Rico, and the Politics of Colonial Migration [e-Book]*, The United States in the World (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Venator-Santiago and University of Connecticut, “Are Puerto Ricans Really American Citizens?” *University Wire*, March 2, 2017, sec. News, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1873493793/abstract/B45A4282B9044356PQ/1>.

<sup>5</sup> Venator-Santiago and Connecticut, “Are Puerto Ricans Really American Citizens?”

Labor leader Samuel Gompers likened the conditions to having “converted the country into a factory worked by slaves and peons,” in his address to Congress in 1915. The commission was made aware of the economic and political crisis resulting from economic privation and political statelessness.<sup>6</sup> Following the hearings amid WWI, Wilson passed the Jones Act to preserve America’s image as defenders of democracy. The Jones Act of 1917 overturned the original citizenship stipulations that barred Puerto Ricans from citizenship. Rather, it provided a “blood right” to U.S. citizenship for those born on the island, though they still lacked political representation. The Nationality Act of 1940 amended the previous legislation, granting citizenship to those born on the island as a “right of soil,” and claiming Puerto Rico as part of the United States, but only as citizens.<sup>7</sup> In 1950, Congress approved Public Law 600 (Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act) granted Puerto Rico the right to organize a domestic government and two years later, it adopted a constitution and became a commonwealth of the United States.<sup>8</sup> The prevailing status of Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory allows it to be governed as separate and unequal to the states.

### **Transition From Spanish to American Colonialism**

Peninsulares occupied the highest positions in the colonial Puerto Rican government. Labor policies kept the working-class dependent on elites. Resistance resulted in torture by Spanish officials, as was the case in 1887 with Black artisans. Outraged, Sotero Figueroa, an outspoken Black leader, relocated to New York, where he fought for independence alongside José Martí.<sup>9</sup> In 1896, the Puerto Rican Autonomist Party organized to promote home rule within the declining

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<sup>6</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 110-113.

<sup>7</sup> Venator-Santiago and Connecticut, “Are Puerto Ricans Really American Citizens?”

<sup>8</sup> “Puerto Rico in Crisis Timeline | Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.”

<sup>9</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 14.

Spanish empire. Led by wealthy island-born creole, Luis Muñoz Rivera, the liberal party believed that Spain would comply with their desired reforms because Puerto Rico had not launched an anticolonial rebellion as much of the other Caribbean colonies had. Efforts towards autonomy dismayed conservative *peninsulares* because it would reduce their influence on the island. The Spanish parliament voted in favor of the liberal agenda, granting Cuba and Puerto Rico home rule. The passage of the Autonomy Charter gave Puerto Ricans greater control over tariffs and trade, granted Puerto Ricans Spanish citizenship, and expanded male suffrage. The new Creole elite did little to improve conditions for the Black working class and upheld the strict ban on labor unions. Partnered with the high cost of living, the working class remained destitute and oppressed. Much as their peninsular predecessors had, the Creole elite feared worker radicalism and suppressed organization efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Rivera welcomed U.S. military occupation as he felt that the island would quickly gain statehood and enjoy the benefits of the American federal system. Urban artisans hoped that the new democratic power would improve their efforts at unionization. In 1898, urban artisans formed the first labor federation and pressured the military governor, General Guy Henry, to institute an eight-hour workday. He complied, and workers seized the opportunity to form new unions and hold strikes when employers failed to recognize the reform.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the dismal economic situation was only exacerbated. Spanish colonialism was nothing short of brutal, but free laborers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century had enough land to sustain themselves, despite having no legal ownership over it. The Americans implemented high tariffs, resulting in unprecedented levels of famine. Tariff policies specifically targeted food staples, such as rice, beans, and beef.

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<sup>10</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 17.

Further, the new administration reduced independent grounds that much of the population had used for personal provisions, leaving the local laboring population malnourished and unemployed. The Spanish tradition of “the land” is also translated to “motherland,” making the displacement especially insulting.<sup>12</sup>

### **Race, Class, and Politics from 1900 to 1950**

Puerto Rico was subject to Spanish colonialism for four hundred years. In that time, a racial hierarchy emerged with white and Creole individuals as the island's elite. A former sugar colony, the Black peasants constituted the destitute working class. In the early 1900's, island elites aligned with the Unionist party, which opposed corporate taxes and the expansion of public education. While the Unionists would not accept citizenship without statehood, most of the laboring class merely wanted citizenship to better their odds of finding work on the mainland.<sup>13</sup> By 1924, discursive ideas emerged around racial boundaries, with white and creole elites pressing for moderate independence on the island and the primarily dark-skinned Nationalists' militant efforts to drive out all imperialist influence.<sup>14</sup> To effectively exploit the newly acquired land and subjects, American agricultural corporations monopolized the island, leading to large scale socio-economic dispossession of the islanders. The global agriculture depression following the first world war destroyed the coffee hacienda system, displacing both rural wealthy and laboring populations to the cities. Sugar production persisted, providing low-paying jobs to half the island's inhabitants in the first half of the century. Sugar production on the island was nearly identical to slavery, resulting in various general strikes organized by the AFL.<sup>15</sup> Both the

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<sup>12</sup> Santiago-Valles, “Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World.” 114.

<sup>13</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Kelvin Santiago-Valles, “‘Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World’: An African Spaniard as Chieftain of the Struggle against ‘Sugar Slavery’ in Puerto Rico, 1926-1934,” *Caribbean Studies* 35, no. 1 (2007): 107–110.

<sup>15</sup> Santiago-Valles, “Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World,” 118.

Americans and the creole elite deployed race, to assert their elevated social position. Creole elite rejected their Black ancestry, disseminating the same racialized notions imparted on them by white society onto their darker countrymen.

Puerto Rican diaspora scholars of the time took great pride in their African heritage and felt that Africa was the mother of Western civilization. Given the ongoing imperialism, these discourses were overlooked by White supremacist theories.<sup>16</sup> Albizu Campos, a leading voice in Nationalist discourse, rejected the scientific racism, and distinguished the Hispanic Race from all others. He highlighted the Puerto Ricans courage, Catholic ideals of morality and nobility, and historic precedence that encourages Hispanics to find one another. Even within the Nationalist party, Albizu faced intense scrutiny for his White-Creole heritage and despite his light-skin, was derogatorily referred to as “Black” or “Negro.”<sup>17</sup> Campos's construction of Puerto Rican identity overlooked hierarchical differences and presented the Puerto Rican people as homogenous in biology, ethnicity, sentiment, culture and spirit, combining both the rough “edges” (racial, ethnic, and diasporic locations) and hard “cores” (language, religion, and island-based culture).<sup>18</sup> Rather, he otherized the ruling class, making the island’s elite a separate entity entirely. His “from-below” approach to racial democracy challenged existing notions of Hispanicity which focused on Social Darwinism, eugenics, or “from-above” democracy.<sup>19</sup> Prior to American colonization, Albizu asserted that ethnic and economic homogeneity existed as all social classes were working for the perpetuation of the nation. With a solid cultural and racial-national foundation, American

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<sup>16</sup> Santiago-Valles, “Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World,” 115.

<sup>17</sup> Santiago-Valles, “Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World,” 117.

<sup>18</sup> Jorge Duany, “The Rough Edges of Puerto Rican Identities: Race, Gender, and Transnationalism,” *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 177–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2005.0043>. Duany first defined “rough edges” and soft “cores” in his 1998 article “On Borders and Boundaries: Contemporary Thinking on Cultural Identities.”

<sup>19</sup> Santiago-Valles, “Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World,” 121.

imperialism was only able to reduce Puerto Rican identity, rather than displace it. Campos' rhetoric was superseded by political populists who were able to mobilize the working poor during WWII and force local representatives of the colonial government to compromise.<sup>20</sup>

### **Impact of Space and Place on Racialization**

Following the passage of the Jones Act, the US Department of Labor recruited Puerto Ricans to staff army camps on the mainland. With the war causing high demand for cheap labor, mainland employers looked to sites of US imperialism. Given the cyclical nature of sugar planting, there was an abundance of able-bodied men to heed the call. Upon arrival at the camps, the Puerto Ricans were subject to intense discrimination. Considered inferior to mainland workers, they were segregated from both Black and white populations. Influenza ravaged the Puerto Rican workers, solidifying white officers racialized presumptions of Puerto Rican inferiority. At the conclusion of the war, Puerto Ricans were terminated from their positions to create job opportunities for those returning from the war.<sup>21</sup> During the war, those in the process of naturalization were subject to the draft despite being unable to exercise the citizenship rights outlined in the Jones Act. In 1920, the Bureau of Insular Affairs responded with an ambiguous broadside outlining citizenship as constrained to "inhabitants of Porto Rico."<sup>22</sup> The intentionally vague broadside reasserted the contradictory citizenship status of Puerto Ricans.

The first official U.S. census of Puerto Rico was conducted in 1950 and measured changes since 1940. The report defined color as the group designated as "nonwhite," which consisted of "Negroes, persons of mixed white and Negro blood, and the small number of persons of other

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<sup>20</sup> Santiago-Valles, "Our Race Today [Is] the Only Hope for the World," 128-130.

<sup>21</sup> McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> "Porto Ricans are American Citizens." Broadside issued by the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Department, October 12, 1920. This broadside was provided by Robert McGreevey in his book, *Borderline Citizens*.

nonwhite races...”<sup>23</sup> The population experienced significant growth as the birthrate accelerated, but the number of nonwhite persons continued its decline since 1899. The campaign for universal education by insular authorities resulted in both increased enrollment and a sharp increase in literacy rates among the younger generation. Literacy was measured by the ability to read and write any language, though 25.4% of the population was able to speak English.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. government drove urbanization efforts on the island as the economy transitioned from monocultural sugar plantations to export-production in factories, effectively modernizing the island. The comprehensive privatization initiatives of 1947 became known as Operation Bootstrap. Job availability could not keep up with the rapidly increasing population, bolstering migration off the island.<sup>25</sup>

The second half of the 1900’s saw a shift in ideology, focusing on the marginal “fringes” of identity rather than a national homogeneity. The new emphasis transitioned away from race as the main determinant of diaspora and incorporated the critical intersections allowed by ethnicity. Puerto Ricans in germinated stateside communities experienced daily competition between their race and ethnicity as they attempted to carve out a cultural space in their new home. Diaspora scholars Juan Flores and Raquel Rivera had a personal stake in their studies; originally from the island, they relocated to New York City in the 1970s, immersing themselves in the “Nuyorican” identity. They credited the emergence of hip hop in the South Bronx and Spanish Harlem to interactions between Puerto Ricans and African Americans, as the two social groups overcame

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<sup>23</sup> Roy Peel, “Characteristics of the Population of Puerto Rico: April 1,1950,” Preliminary Reports, 1950 Census of Population (Washington, D.C., U.S.A.: Bureau of the Census, May 27, 1951), U.S. Department of Commerce.

<sup>24</sup> Peel, “Characteristics of the Population of Puerto Rico: April 1,1950.”

<sup>25</sup> “Puerto Rican Emigration: Why the 1950s?” Puerto Rican Migration in the 1950s, n.d., <https://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm>. The CUNY Lehman College has provided an encyclopedic database of Puerto Rican scholarship.

diasporic boundaries and forged new cultural identities.<sup>26</sup> For many Puerto Ricans moving to a stateside city, becoming American equated to becoming Black.<sup>27</sup> In Puerto Rico, housing and urban policies institutionalized class and race distinctions through strategic zoning laws, gating, and police surveillance, contributing to the negative stereotypes surrounding blackness and urban settings.<sup>28</sup>

### **Puerto Rico in the Twenty-First Century**

The Puerto Rican economy began its steep decline well before the Great Recession. The industrial incentives from Operation Bootstrap were dismantled, ending the system of tax breaks and privatization incentives, resulting in an exodus of pharmaceutical manufacturers from the island and a dramatic increase in unemployment. By 2009, Governor Luis Fortuño declared a State of Fiscal Emergency and the government was forced to default on various bonds, plunging the island deeper in debt.<sup>29</sup> In 2017, the island was ravaged by Hurricane Irma and Maria, category five and category four respectively, within the span of two weeks. Two major disaster declarations were issued, qualifying all of Puerto Rico's seventy-eight municipalities for Public Assistance and Individual Assistance from FEMA. The widespread destruction was catastrophic, leaving 95% of the population without drinkable water, 97% of roads impassable, complete loss of power, and nearly 3,000 deaths.<sup>30</sup> As of 2020, the total population of Puerto Rico stands at

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<sup>26</sup> Jorge Duany, "The Rough Edges of Puerto Rican Identities: Race, Gender, and Transnationalism," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 179-180.

<sup>27</sup> Isar Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico*, Global Studies of the United States (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> "Puerto Rico in Crisis Timeline | Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños," accessed December 3, 2021, <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/education/puerto-rico-crisis-timeline>. This source is a compilation of contemporary research generated by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at CUNY, making it a valuable asset in understanding research taking place in germinated stateside communities.

<sup>30</sup> "Hurricanes Irma and Maria: Impact and Aftermath," accessed December 3, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/hsrd/hsoac/projects/puerto-rico-recovery/hurricanes-irma-and-maria.html>. The RAND

about 3.2 million, with a dramatic decrease of 11.8% from 2010-2020. At 43.5%, nearly half of the population is living in poverty and a mere quarter of the population has received education beyond high school.<sup>31</sup> The unemployment rate peaked at 16.2% in 2011; as of October 2021, the unemployment rate stands at 8%, half of what it was ten years prior.<sup>32</sup>

The U.S. Census Bureau provides data on “race by ethnicity” and “racial and ethnic diversity,” reducing two critical components of identity formation into broad classifications. Respondents choose their race from the six major categories and are given the additional option of selecting their ethnicity. The Office of Management and Budget defines ethnicity as being “Not Hispanic or Latino” or “Hispanic or Latino,” with the latter implying “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or any other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.”<sup>33</sup>

#### **Percentage of Race by Ethnicity of Total Population (2020)**

White, alone	17.1
Black or African American, alone	7
Some Other Race, alone	25.5
Two or More Races	49.8

In comparison, the diversity index measured race and ethnicity, which includes the option to identify as Hispanic or Latino.

#### **Percentage of Racial and Ethnic Diversity of Total Population (2020)**

White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	0.7
Black or African American alone, not Hispanic or Latino	0.1
Some Other Race alone, not Hispanic or Latino	0.1

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Corporation is a research organization committed to developing public policy solutions for struggling communities throughout the world.

<sup>31</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Puerto Rico,” accessed December 4, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/PR#>.

<sup>32</sup> “Puerto Rico Economy at a Glance,” accessed December 4, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.pr.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.” I have excluded statistics on races that are not relevant to this analysis.

Two or More Races, not Hispanic or Latino	0.1
Hispanic or Latino	98.9

Comparison between “race by ethnicity” and “racial and ethnic diversity” reflects the complexity and difficulty in understanding the Puerto Rican identity. Given that nearly the entire population ethnically identifies as Hispanic or Latino, it can be assumed that the group identifies with Hispanic heritage. The marginal percentage of “Black or African, alone,” is likely the result of Dominican migrants, who have been subject to intense stigmatization and discrimination. The legacy of colonialism is reflected in nearly half the population identifying as “Two or More Races,” as new populations were brought to the island, mixing with the indigenous groups and the Spanish alike. The bureau provides no clarification on the quarter of the population that identifies as “Some Other Race, alone,” raising important questions. Does this race represent the indigenous population? How do these individuals understand their identity within an institution that does not recognize their race? The census represents the fundamental inadequacy of measuring race and ethnicity through quantitative measures.

### **Understanding Identity Before and After Puerto Rico’s Decline**

Emphasis on race and ethnicity has varied across time, largely influenced by political, economic, and social factors. The Spanish colonial government emphasized race as a justification for slavery and oppression, effectively using nonwhite populations to generate massive wealth and expand the empire. Similarly, American imperialism brought the promise of democracy to the Puerto Ricans but used race as a means of controlling the Black laboring class. By crafting laws to deny Black Puerto Ricans full citizenship, the imperial power could institute a free agricultural system that closely resembled slavery. Albizu Campos deployed race as a political and cultural unifier, positioning Black Puerto Ricans as the moral elite. Campos's rhetoric reflected the heightened globalism of the 1920’s and an increased interest in diaspora studies.

Transnationalism and pan-African discourse produced a new racial pride that extended beyond geographic boundaries, likely influenced by the post-structuralist rejection of language.

Recently, language has been reevaluated in Puerto Rico's contemporary struggle for statehood. Economic and social mobility is contingent on fluency in the language of the dominant group. In the 1990s, the Puerto Rican government abolished bilingualism, believing that North American influence could be repelled by the Spanish language, preserving a distinct, homogenous Puerto Rican culture. Reemergent notions of ethnocentrism displayed by the election of Donald Trump and the "birther" movement corresponded with the catastrophic aftermath of the hurricanes and economic crisis.<sup>34</sup> Just as racialization targets non-white bodies, it is also applied to aspects of culture, such as language. Puerto Rican political elite represent the whitest segments of society, a luxury that could not persist in a White-dominated Union.

The role of music in forging links across diasporic spaces has been reassessed in contemporary studies, challenging earlier assertions of reggaetón as the product of transnational migrations. Rather, new music in the genre represents the globalization of popular music as it transcends respective diasporas by communicating shared experiences of racial discrimination and displacement, regardless of geographic location.<sup>35</sup>

In "Both Here and There: Teaching Judith Cofer in Puerto Rico," Ricia Chansky details her personal struggle to teach Caribbean literature in a way that allows students to reflect on their own identity during an economic and humanitarian crisis. Chansky identified Puerto Rico's territory status as the root cause of the crisis and acknowledged "...the in-between-ness of

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<sup>34</sup> Amílcar Antonio Barreto, *The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico: Revisited*, 2nd ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020), 165.

<sup>35</sup> Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 160.

contested and ever-shifting perceptions of national identities.”<sup>36</sup> Her students read about Duany’s circular migrations, Flores’ cultural exchanges, and learned about diasporic constructions of the third space and “imagined communities.” Special attention is paid to a chapter from Ortiz Cofer’s Memoir, “Silent Dancing,” which explores dual identity as illustrated by “...the in-between-ness of belonging created by traversing dichotomous spaces of nation and citizenship.”<sup>37</sup> Cofer demonstrates the ability to live in both Georgia and her native Puerto Rico. Cofer’s experience is reflected in the lives of the students, who, rather than being rewarded for their education, will be forced to leave the island in the hope of finding opportunity elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Chansky includes quotes from her students, which express their melancholy towards leaving the island. Undergraduate student Alanis F. Font Vélez comprehensively expressed the sentiments of the young Puerto Ricans academics; “Culture is not something we can wake up one day and remove entirely from our- selves. It is something that is part of us no matter where we are or how much we try to hide it. I know that as soon as graduation comes closer, I’ll have to make plans to leave my island to look for a better and brighter future due to the lack of opportunities here. But no matter where we are in the world, our culture will always be with us.”<sup>39</sup> Cofer rejects identity as a notion of Puerto Rican unity but acknowledges the growing duality as economic conditions force Puerto Ricans to embrace outward migration.

## **Conclusion**

Modern conceptions of race and ethnicity must be understood as a product of colonial and imperial interactions with subjugated populations. The lasting effects of imperial policy have left

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<sup>36</sup> Ricia Anne Chansky, “Both Here and There: Teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer in Puerto Rico,” *South Atlantic Review* 82, no. 3 (2017): 22.

<sup>37</sup> Chansky, “Both Here and There,” 23.

<sup>38</sup> Chansky, “Both Here and There,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> Chansky, “Both Here and There,” 22.

the island in a precarious state, adding to the complex and everchanging understandings of Puerto Rican identity. Contested discourses have resulted from varying sociopolitical, economic, and cultural climates. Identity studies prior to Puerto Rico's economic collapse tend to focus on colonial and imperial influences, analyzing the conditions that facilitated racial and cultural unity. Early twenty-first century scholarship initiated the shift away from modernist representations, focusing on the hybrid culture and implications of racialization instead. The most recent scholarship focused on the individual as part of the greater diaspora as dismal conditions continually force Puerto Ricans to leave the island and navigate new geographic spaces to exist as both Puerto Ricans and "Diasporicans." While race was a mechanism for controlling populations, it also aided in overcoming stigmatization and reclaiming racial pride in the face of oppression. These contemporary challenges emphasize the importance of race and ethnicity, as it provides a means of maintaining identity across geographic boundaries. United States attempts to quantify race and ethnicity through the census are damaging, as it reduces the full expression of minority groups and should be reformed accordingly. Rather than attempting to deconstruct notions of race and ethnicity, efforts should be made to incorporate these constructions in positive, advantageous discourses that encourage minority groups to reclaim their identities. Future studies should focus on evolving identities within transplanted communities as diasporic peoples carve out cultural spaces in the United States while maintaining that which makes them uniquely Puerto Rican.

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