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**Destabilizing Racialized Geographies:
The Temporality of Blackness in Puerto Rico**

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The Temporality of Blackness in Puerto Rico**

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the community of Loíza, Puerto Rico for their resilience, beauty, continuation of the ancestral practices passed on to the next generation, knowledge and enduring ties to the ancestral homeland. Thank you especially to the mujeres of the Loíza public library for welcoming me with open arms and always with a smile. Without your help, and the resources you provided as well as the friendships, this would not be possible. Thank you for helping me to find my home and myself.

This thesis is also dedicated to my sisters and brothers in the diaspora trying to find their way home.

And finally, I dedicate this thesis to Joaquin Miguel, my inspiration and the light of my life. Never forget who you are or where you come from. Con mucho amor, Mommy.

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**Destabilizing Racialized Geographies:
The Temporality of Blackness in Puerto Rico**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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In this thesis I analyze the way in which the de-colonial construction of Puerto Rico, and subsequent acquisition by the US as a territory, came to inform and create a whitened identity through the confinement, historicization of African influence, and erasure of Puerto Rico's Black population/heritage component via the narrative of mestizaje and mulataje. I look specifically at Loíza; Loíza is a city celebrated by Puerto Rico as a site of authentic Blackness and exemplifies efforts by the state to commodify and restrict the movements of Black Bodies. It is in these marginalized and racialized spaces that I explore the possibility of self-making and Black identity in Loíza, Puerto Rico.

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INTRODUCTION

I came to this topic through personal experiences with others about Blackness and its assumed mutual exclusivity to Latinidad. In this research I am forced to examine the ways in which my Blackness takes root in both the United States and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean; in the former, I am black before all else, the “one drop” rule of hypodescent serving as the blue print for my place and role in society, while in the latter, I could accede to the laws of pigmentocracy¹ (social hierarchies based on skin color) and assume a slightly more elevated position in society due to my light skin. I must examine the ways in which I am privileged and disadvantaged; and also recognize racial struggle in one place and race-class struggle in the other. But is this double consciousness--the phrase coined by W.E.B. DuBois to explain the sensation or experience of a person whose identity is divided in many different facets--or something more? I am privileged in that I am a light skinned woman and mainlander. I am disadvantaged in that I am still considered lower-class because of my visibly African features and female gender.

I have always found it difficult to relate to Latinos, especially non-Black Latinos born outside of the US. Due to living in a country where the first principality of Blackness seems to be based on shared oppression due to race, I found it impossible to relate to Black Latinos not born in the US because in many ways, depending on skin tone, they are not forced to recognize and exist within their Blackness. This is not to say that

¹ (Lipshütz, 1944)

Blackness is a constriction in essence, but in American society, it feels as such. This failure to recognize their own Blackness, in my opinion, allows them to navigate a tolerable middle ground--they are not white, but they are not stigmatized and penalized as Black and therefore, what burdens the Black population does not concern them, and there is not always solidarity or a common identity linked to race.

Although race has been seen as a social construct, it is imperative to note that the racialization of people and places has very real implications, whether they be negative or positive. These implications arise as a culmination of cultural representations, social norms, and state policies—all of which play a crucial role in the production and dissemination of ideas regarding place and its relationship to racial and national identities (Rivera-Rideau 2013). As evidenced in many Latin American countries, the discourse around national identity encompasses that country's specific history, culture, politics, and demographic. While the tendency of Latin American countries is to present the image of a post racial, racism free nation as a result of copious miscegenation, scholars have come to reveal otherwise. Within this myth of racial democracy, Latin American countries promote racial and color specific hierarchies in which whiteness is privileged (Rivera-Rideau 2013, Jimenez Roman 2007).

The case of Puerto Rico is particularly revealing when it dealing with the myth of racial democracy. The Puerto Rican government maintains that it is a post racial democracy, promoting a paradise utopian image of a racially mixed and more so, white society. Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898, when it was

obtained from Spain. As motivated by the colonial status acquired from the US, Puerto Rican national identity emerged in the early twentieth century as the result of island elites' efforts to "distinguish themselves from the US while maintaining ties to whiteness via Spain" (River-Rideau 2013, 617). The way in which Puerto Rico emphasizes its claims to Spain and by extension, whiteness, also informs how Puerto Ricans identify on the national census. Increasingly, Puerto Ricans identify as "white" which reifies the national narrative of whiteness and create a serious issue regarding the validity of the census as a tool to measure racial identities.

The following research focuses on the configurations of Blackness in Puerto Rico, specifically in areas racialized as Black. I examine the ways in which Blackness is viewed and constructed in Puerto Rican society within "Black" spaces and compare them to the national discourse of Puerto Rico. I define Black identity as a sense of community based on African heritage, shared cultural and social activities, collective memories and shared oppression due to African heritage and/or phenotype. I focus on Loíza, Puerto Rico as it is known for its establishment as a Black maroon colony. I am especially interested in how it is that a space can be racialized as Black and "traditionally authentic" of Blackness against a national discourse that states Puerto Rico is racially mixed and more so, white. I will explore the following themes: what occurs within a space already racialized as Black; is there a specific performativity of Blackness; how Blackness is articulated and experienced by Black Puerto Ricans; whether or not this performance then leads to or constitute a coherent and cohesive Black identity.

As it pertains specifically to racial composition itself in Puerto Rico, the notion of “pure” Blackness is a thing of the past as the country has an extensive history of miscegenation (also a form of sexual and structural violence) and blanqueamiento (a political move that encouraged immigrants perceived as “white” to migrate to Puerto Rico and “improve” the racial mixture by breeding out Blackness and indigeneity). Children are taught early on a sanitized version of the history of conquest and it is impressed upon them that they are all “mixed.” Even while interviewing educated Puerto Ricans that have a strong sense of Black identity, I was surprised to find that many strongly believe in the mixed nation rhetoric but do not understand the racism that underlies it. Researching Black identity and mestizaje in Puerto Rico led me to a city called Loíza, a city the nation has named “the Capital of Tradition” and is one of the



“few” sites of “authentic Blackness.” How is it possible that only one city is the capital of tradition? This indicates a localization of Blackness that is static. How can a racial identity be called a “tradition”? The

definition of tradition is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way, and while it is true that Loiceños pass on intergenerational knowledge, the framing of Black culture in this way gives the appearance that it is ephemeral and clinging to a distant past. It is through Loíza as a site

of Black “authenticity” that I hope to make an intervention on race and identity in Puerto Rico by examining race and place in the Latin American context using a critical feminist geography framework, anthropology, and critical race theory by both US and Puerto Rican scholars.

Over the summer of 2015, I attempted to broach a subject deeply steeped in silence, both familial and national, via different processes. I interviewed and informally spoke with Loiceños and residents of San Juan and Rio Piedras, via digital recording and participated in “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) by immersing myself as much as possible within the communities on an informal level. My residence was in the Rio Piedras area, close to the University and major transportation and commuted to specific sites. In addition to personal interaction, I also engaged my research from the point of view of an Afro Puerto Rican, light-skinned woman in dialogue with US and Caribbean diaspora theory and critical race theory.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SPATIAL HISTORY OF LOÍZA

I stand in line outside a popular club, telling jokes to a female friend and casually flirting with two Black American basketball players from the Puerto Rican team, Capitanes. I'm wearing a tube top shirt that exposes my shoulders and upper arms. I feel someone grab my left arm and trace the tattoo there. I turn suddenly, looking for the person that has violated my personal space. I see a brown skinned man, who asks me in Spanish, "Veo la bandera Puertorriqueña...y...este es Africa, no? ?Por qué la tienes adentro de África?" I see the Puerto Rican flag...and...this is Africa, right? Why do you have it inside of Africa? Years ago, I would have been irritated by the ignorance of his question, especially given that he is definitely a visibly Black man. However, I smiled mischievously, lifted my hand and caressed his cheek all while saying, "Tu sabes." You know. I don't believe I have ever seen anyone so visibly upset (except for the times I challenged colorism in the Dominican Republic). With much animation, he huffed and said, "No, I don't" and sulked away. My friends and I looked at each other extremely amused and began to laugh uncontrollably. There was no need to exchange words; we all shared a tacit understanding of the absurdity of denying easily recognizable Blackness.

My body is read in many ways by many people. In this case, I was read in a way that seemed to be unaligned with either Blackness or the Puerto Rican narrative of Mestizaje. I can only speculate the reason why my tattoo and comment offended the man that grabbed me, however, his reaction indicated to me that he did not want align himself with

either Blackness or Africa. This is not the first time people have been offended or upset that I openly identify as Black; this also happened to me regularly when studying in the Dominican Republic. From what I gather, it seems to me as if, due to my color, it is expected that I deny my African heritage and try to pass for as white as possible.

In placing my own experiences as an Afro-Latina woman into this thesis, I seek to contextualize and theorize the way in which my body and identity, as Claudia Milian states in *Latining America*, “enables a continuum of Latin interventions and acquires a Latinity that ceases to be durably brown in the U.S. Latinidad sense that entraps the fixity of the Latino and Latina body” (61). In the U.S. context, my Latinidad is only acknowledged in certain spaces, mainly, those spaces occupied and/or frequented by Caribbean Latinos. Outside of these spaces, I walk in the world a recognizably Black woman with kinky-curly afro, full lips, and honey hues skin. I am considered “high yellow” and “light skinned.” In spaces where there is no contact with Afro-Latinos, my Latinidad is erased. Even when I “perform” my Latinidad linguistically, it is assumed that I am “mixed” with a Latino ethnic group (usually Mexican) or learned the language in school. My experiences of Latinidad in the U.S. differ from those in Latin American countries and demonstrate how my “blackness-cum-brownness is not reducible to brownness-not-blackness. Blackness and brownness are mutually encoded and in close company with each other” in the Latin American context.²

² (Milian, 2013, pp. 60-61)

The negotiation of Latino spaces does necessitate an “active passing” and performativity of Latinidad within the U.S. According to Mary Bucholtz, passing is “the active construction of how the self is perceived when one’s ethnicity is ambiguous to others.”³ She further details that “an individual may in certain contexts pass as a member of her ‘own’ biographical ethnic group by insisting on an identity that others may deny her. Furthermore, passing of this kind is not passive. Individuals of ambiguous ethnicity patrol their own borders, using the tools of language and self-representation to determine how the boundaries of ethnic categories are drawn upon their own bodies” (1995: 352–53). Part of this active passing is the marking of my body with an ethnic signifier: a tattoo of the Puerto Rican flag inside of the form Africa and the usage of Spanish. Although I am not racially or ethnically ambiguous, I am not read in the USA as “Latina” because of my visible Blackness.

However, Latinoness and Latinidad do not solely rely on ambiguity, but an essentialization of itself, part of which is through visual and linguistic markers. Within the U.S., language and other forms of self-representation are crucial in being identified or recognized as Latina, especially when present in areas that are not accustomed to Afro-Latinas. My Blackness, my body, and my specific performativity of Latinidad are “maneuver[s] that und[o] what has passed as static and monolithic for far too long: the meanings of Latino, Latina, and Latin as devoid of blackness.”⁴ It is through the ethnoracial codification of my body in two separate contexts that I analyze my

³ (Bucholtz, 1995)

⁴ (Milian, 2013, p. 61)

experiences of race and speaking about race with Puerto Ricans. These interventions come in varying forms as evidenced by the short vignettes I share at the beginning of each chapter. It is visible how I am perceived as Afro-Latina and racially “in the know” or “insider” to certain topics, while at other times, it is inconceivable that I should openly embrace and even celebrate my Blackness thereby totally negating the myth of *mestizaje*.

Afro-Latinidad in the US occupies a liminal space, a specific subjectivity that interweaves religion, sexuality, gender and racial identity in a transnational setting. But are Afro-Latinos always transnational subjects? How can we apply notions of Black feminist thought to racialized bodies that defy essentialized notions of Blackness and Latinidad? Race operates differently in Puerto Rico than it does in mainland United States. Whereas in the US one drop of Black blood confers one the status of “Black,” in Puerto Rico, the reverse is true: Puerto Ricans play up claims to whiteness in order to distance themselves from Blackness, in hopes of being able to easily traverse social stigmas and status. Claiming whiteness works to afford social mobility. Being of mixed race does not altogether negate one’s Blackness, but it does work to disassociate and dislodge Blackness. However, the fact that Puerto Rico has over 20 unofficial categories for Blackness based upon one’s combination facial features, hair texture, and skin tone, serves as a strong reminder that racial and color hierarchies, also known as “pigmentocracies” (coined by Chilean Anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz in 1944), still exist and are very much influential socially. Within Loiza, and even in most of Puerto Rico, I was recognized as a Black Puerto Rican.

Puerto Rico prides itself as a post-racial nation, devoid of racism due to the extensive mixing between the three races that came into contact during colonization: the (white) Spaniard, the Taino Indian, and the African slave. However, as seen in the example above, there is a stigma attached to Blackness that results in individuals distancing themselves from being called or perceived as Black. In Puerto Rico, as in the US, Blackness is perceived as inferior and is subjected to various forms of violence: structural, physical, cultural and sexual. Blackness has been rendered invisible on the island outside of cultural celebration of the national heritage--it is only allowed to exist as the folkloric emblem of a mixed race society. This chapter will deal with the spatial history of Blackness, and how Loíza has come to symbolize a “pure” and isolated space for Blackness. By examining critical race theory and geography, I will recount how it is that this space is possible.

Loíza is racialized as an “authentic” Black space but in a folkloric sense. This “folklorization” consigns Blackness to a limited element in Puerto Rico’s racial mixture thereby creating a Puerto Rican identity that elevates whiteness and reiterates “problematic tropes that depict [B]lackness as ‘primitive’ and ‘pre-modern’” (Rivera-Rideau 2013, 618; Godreau 2002, 2006). Along with the racialization of these spaces comes the hypersexualization, criminalization and violence, casting Blackness as a “counterpoint” to Puerto Rican identity (Rivera-Rideau 2013). This extends to *caseríos* (project housing) as places inhabited by Black Puerto Ricans. In this way, urban Black spaces are also negatively racialized. I argue that the relegation of Blackness to specific

sites is ultimately the relegation of Blackness to the societal margins; historicizing Blackness as a part of the nation's past as folkloric tradition and culture prevents Blackness from ever entering the present and influencing the nation's culture as well as perfunctorily negates Black citizen contribution to society. The compartmentalization of Blackness ignores the presence of Black communities elsewhere, especially urban areas. This spatial racialization also contributes to societal notions of inclusion, exclusion, citizenship and Black absence (McKittrick 2006). This marginalization leads to state resource neglect and also hypersurveillance by police. However, I intend to demonstrate that even within these marginal spaces exist everyday acts of resistance and self-fashioning of identity. From the margins, Blackness emerges as a symbol of resilience by being a consciously black space in a nation of mestizaje.

BINDING BLACKNESS

Extending one's reach, one's proximity to whiteness, is done through the literal and figurative confinement and containment of Blackness. This binding of Blackness to a specific locale prevents the contamination of a racially white and whitened society, thereby furthering the national narrative of a white nation with a Black past. This promulgates the notion that society can transcend Blackness even as it celebrates its "historic" influence. The positioning of Blackness in specific areas creates the image of an "authentic" site of "traditional" or folkloric Blackness (Allen 2011) that lends to the erasure of Blackness elsewhere in Latin American countries. The myth of racial democracy, or a society that is free of crippling racial inequities that affect the socio-

economic and political lives of non-white peoples (Freyre, 1933), is transmitted through the association of spaces with Blackness in that this location performs a sort of sanitizing function. Blackness becomes bound to a specific space thereby containing and isolating it from the rest of the mixed and white population. What is more, this binding establishes these sites as representative of the nation's Black population while simultaneously creating spaces understood as "Blackless" (Rivera-Rideau, 2012).

The binding of Loíza began at its inception. Loíza is a town in Puerto Rico best known for its seemingly unadulterated African traditions which are best represented by the festival of Santiago Apostol (Saint James). It is located 15 miles from the capitol of San Juan, on the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico. In 2006, Loíza had a mostly rural population consisting of approximately 30,000 (Hernandez Hiraldo, 2006). Originally a Taino Arawak settlement, Indian labor was replaced by slave labor in the 1600s. These slaves originated from the west coast of Africa. Later on, Loíza was settled by fugitive Puerto Rican slaves, then slaves from other Caribbean islands. After the Haitian Revolution, fugitive Black Haitians also settled in Loíza. Through the use of slaves and wage laborers in some municipalities, Loíza became one of the most important regions in Puerto Rico for sugar production. This economic stimulus prompted Loíza to become an official town in 1719. Even though the Puerto Rican economy was built upon the backs of enslaved Black people and their labor, Blackness does not adequately figure into the national identity.

Having the largest Black population in Puerto Rico is another reason Loíza is seen to be representative of Puerto Rico's Black component (Hiraldo 2006). Loíza has become racialized as an “authentic” Black space but in a folkloric sense. This “folklorization” consigns Blackness to a limited element in Puerto Rico’s racial mixture thereby creating a Puerto Rican identity that elevates whiteness and reiterates “problematic tropes that depict [B]lackness as ‘primitive’ and pre-modern” (Rivera-Rideau 2012, 618; Godreau 2002, 2006). For instance, Bomba is a well-known African influenced dance and song specific to Loíza. It has been adopted in places like Ponce, San Juan and other locales on the island. As Rivera-Rideau points out, “the emphasis on *Loiceños* 'inherent' ability to dance Bomba speaks to the important role that they have played in the maintenance of Bomba traditions.” However, she finds that this can also be problematic as it tends to reinforce “stereotypes of an intrinsic musicality of blackness” that lend themselves to the pervasive hegemonic notion of a folkloric Blackness and negates the current influence Black Puerto Ricans have on society while it simultaneously limits Black influence to song, music, dance, spirituality and food (Rivera-Rideau, 2012, 622). Along with the racialization of these spaces comes the hypersexualization, criminalization and violence, casting Blackness as a “counterpoint” to Puerto Rican identity (Rivera-Rideau 2012). This extends to *caseríos* (project housing) as places inhabited by Black Puerto Ricans. In this way, urban Black spaces are also negatively racialized.

The racialization of sites like Loíza speaks critically to the ways in which bodies are orientated around whiteness and the ways in which the nation of Puerto Rico itself,

both through national narrative and socio-economic segregation, has been racialized and reserved for whiteness (Ahmed 2006). These localized spaces of Blackness and the bodies contained within serve to orientate the nation of Puerto Rico in the determination of its proximity to whiteness. These *authentic* sites of African cultural survivals and *Blackness* (Blackness and African-ness in the primitive sense) represent *purity*, or a Blackness that is untouched and has not transitioned into modern society. The binding of Blackness to these sites emphasizes the perceived primordial nature of African culture and Puerto Rico's efforts to cleanse the nation of its Black ancestry as segregation hinders Black ability to affect or even more so “infect” the whiter populace. Sara Ahmed describes the orientation around whiteness as how “[r]ace becomes...a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with (126).” If access and the ability to perceive and do things are only granted to whites, then Blacks become hindered and immobile. In order to gain mobility, Blacks must “be orientated around something...be taken up by something, such that one might even become what it is that is 'around'” (Ahmed 2006, 116).

Ahmed engages with Fanon as well as other critical race theorists to examine “racism as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space” (Ahmed 2006, 111). In Puerto Rico, others' bodies, but more specifically skin color, facial features and hair texture, serve as orientation devices for white bodies while simultaneously furthering the reach of white bodies (Ahmed 2006). When Black bodies are orientated around whiteness, they are

taken up by whiteness, even as whiteness remains central to their positionality. Being taken up by whiteness (bound to specific towns) and extending the white body's reach by proximity further reinscribes the notion of Puerto Rico being reserved for whiteness (Ahmed 2006).

When speaking on how Blackness and geography have a historic connection, I refer to Katherine McKittrick. She writes “the relationship between black populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic”; however, in the case of Puerto Rico, Blackness is very much spatialized, rendered knowable, and displaced from contemporary society—Blackness is *contained* (McKittrick 2006, x). It is imperative to understand that “if prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually, and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing 'difference'” (McKittrick 2006, xv). Blackness is placed within an ideological order and these “practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong” (McKittrick 2006, xv). Loíza is one such site naturalized as Black, inferior, and primitive; this naturalization of a space as “just is” that places subaltern bodies in spatial binaries unknowingly works in tandem with Loíza's socio-historic and geographic history based on slavery, marronage and subversion (McKittrick 2006; Rivera-Rideau 2012).

These spatial binaries and geographic domination work to determine what bodies belong in which spaces—Puerto Rico's narrative of Loíza being the “Capital of Tradition” serves to solidify racial boundaries as Blackness is an attribute linked old African tradition, culture and performativity (irrespective of the blatant antiblackness in Puerto Rican society).

CHAPTER TWO: RACE TALK AND STATE CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS OF BLACKNESS

The disavowal of Blackness is the role of mestizaje in that the mestizaje paradigm is an expression of a desire for whiteness and absence of Blackness. It is the desire for all things considered the antithesis of Blackness. I seek to question and examine the ways in which we can examine Loíza as a space in tension with the narrative of Mestizaje and with Puerto Rican identity. I am interested in the societal tensions that result from affirming Loíza as a Black space rather than a Mestizo space, even as the government encourages the narrative of "pure" Blackness. I hope to demonstrate how it is possible understand these sites as simultaneously sites of resistance, reclamation, and liberation as well as understand how the performativity of race can also reinforce harmful stereotypes and various forms of violence produced by the state. This chapter discusses the state's stakes in the production of race and specifically its construction of Blackness.

RACIAL IDEOLOGIES

In order to further understand the concept of whitening and the Ibero-American race, I draw from Jafari Allen's ethnography *!Venceremos?: the erotics of black self-making in Cuba*. Overall Allen argues that "gendered, raced, and sexed self-making in Cuba is impelled not only by interaction with foreigners and global discourses but most

pointedly by individual and group desire for a larger freedom” (2). Further, he posits that, “small practices of self-making through erotic subjectivity... are *political*, in the sense that these actions challenge the allocation of social and material capital, and look toward improving the individual’s felt and lived experience. These practices potentially instantiate socially transformative returns to personhood, which theorists of black resistance must recognize” (Allen, 2011, 14). It is also the concept of “self-making” in these Black spaces that interests me. In chapter two of his book, Allen explores the ways in which race and gender are articulated through, as well as inform, sexuality and by extension, nation. This is done via the “genealogical inquiry into the co-construction and interarticulation of race, sex and gender in Cuba” (Allen, 2011, 44). He analyzes Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* and Fernando Coronil who writes the intro for the new edition of the book. *Cuban Counterpoint* reinscribes the polarities of Blackness and whiteness as well as the feminine and masculine through its narrative of “transculturation” which Ortiz describes as a “civilizing project” (Allen, 2011, 46) or more accurately termed by Allen as a “(neo)colonial project” (Allen, 2011, 47). Allen states that Transculturation was responsible for “reinforce[d] notions of a fixed polarity” (44) in that it involved the following process:

1. Deculturation, which is the loss of the groups’ (African, Indigenous) original culture.
2. Neoculturation, which is the creation of a new culture that is born out of contact with other cultures.

3. Mestizaje/Mulataje, the promotion of a new “race” or identity that centers whiteness or the efforts to *transcend* all that is categorized as *backward* or *primitive*.

Transculturation, according to Allen, served as a way to bring Latin American countries, but especially Caribbean countries, into modernity and away from the periphery of international political participation. This mixing allows Caribbean countries the opportunity to socially climb into white European ranks. This could only be achieved through European civilization according to Ortiz. Allen states that “Ortiz cannot valorize African culture in Cuba for its music and languages and religions without, in the same fell swoop, preferring European refinement and reason. His alternative conception of Latin American development revalorizes popular and regional cultures but maintains an evolutionary framework that finds African cultures backward and Western European cultures the height of civilization” (Allen, 2011, 47).

As in Cuba, Puerto Rican elite seek to situate Europe at the center, in order to enter into modernity. It is to this center that Puerto Rico, Cuba, and many other Afro-Caribbean Latino countries wish to return, this process of return involving the erasure of Black and Brown bodies. White Europeans did not anticipate this interracialization as disruption to the narrative of white hegemony. Race is determined relative to whiteness but the ambiguity of racial identification as well as the varied physical expression of race complicates the ability to regulate race in order to establish social hierarchies. In Puerto

Rico, there exist over 19 unofficial categories of defining someone based on skin color, phenotype, and hair texture—as a tool of classification in a racially mixed society.

Western discourse has been responsible for naturalizing race and place. Kobayashi and Peake provide a critical analysis of the naturalization of social constructs and posit that by focusing on a critical analysis of this naturalization and by applying what they term “unnatural discourse” they will be able to destabilize that which has been normalized and rendered natural. They state that race and gender have been constructed as natural phenomena instead of cultural and state that Western geography has been complicit in this naturalization as it draws from enduring discourse on Enlightenment and its aim to place “the world within an ideological order, creating environments according to socially constructed and naturalized categories...transforming the surface of the earth ‘in the image of a man’” (227). This has led to “dualistic thinking,” a process that organizes the world according to binaries which serve to maintain political power and privilege of one thing over the other (227). The spatial organization encouraged by Enlightenment created notions of who owns what or whom and also what bodies belong in what spaces. This naturalized concepts of public and private, gendered separation, and geographic separation. Clearly these are cultural notions, but they have been naturalized, subsequently informing social hierarchy (228).

SILENCES IN HISTORICAL PRODUCTION

The production of knowledge is a social creation. It then holds true that "[t]he kind of knowledge that emerges from a discipline depends very much upon who produces that knowledge..." (Monk and Hanson, 34). In the case of Puerto Rico, history has been whitewashed to gloss over the narrative of slavery and portray Puerto Rico as a nation that has transcended its ugly past, and in the process, transcended Blackness by integrating Blacks into society and racially mixing Blacks into whiteness. What then, would be the advantages of a nation creating a narrative that excludes a sizable portion of its population? What does Puerto Rico gain from the exclusion of Blackness as an identity?

Blackness in Puerto Rico is silenced several key ways: the promulgation of Puerto Rico as a "mixed-race" nation, the historization and folklorization of Blackness, and the binding of Blackness to specific sites such as Loíza. The relegation of Blackness to a folkloric and historicized presence in Puerto Rico, only to be found in specific locations and located through dance, music, and food, is an effective act of denying a contemporary presence and contribution of Blackness to Puerto Rican society. In Puerto Rico, the national discourse emphasizes a post-racial society (no longer focusing on the history of chattel slavery that made Puerto Rico wealthy or the wholesale decimation of the indigenous Taino population) that prides itself on the notion that it is comprised of three races: Spanish (white), Indigenous, and African. Underlying this, however, is also

the political emphasis on whiteness stemming from Puerto Rico's negotiation of its political status as colonial territory to the US.

This nationalist project concerning racial identity operates because of and through the social stigma attached to Blackness, resulting from the creation of race and the ideologies used to justify the enslavement of African peoples. It is through the analysis of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History" and critical race theory interventions that I examine historical and contemporary production of the silencing of Blackness in Puerto Rico. Specifically, I explore what Trouillot cites as "the interplay between inequalities in the historical process and inequalities in the historical narrative" and his case study of the Haitian Revolution and the "three faces of Sans Souci" to expose the deafening silence of Black identity erasure in Puerto Rico (44). Through an analysis of this site as it goes from maroon colonies to sugar cane production centers, along with the political history of Puerto Rico, I will identify various moments of silencing.

SLAVERY AND POLITICS IN PUERTO RICO

While examining Blackness in Puerto Rico, I have come across the following moments of silencing: the industrialization of maroon colonies, the post-racial narrative of mestizaje/mulataje, the folkloricization and historicization of blackness, as well as the binding of Blackness to specific sites. I will also explore the naturalization of race

through geography as ways to preserve whiteness for socio-economic and political purposes through nationalized, strategic identity politics, and subsequently destabilize this perceived “naturalness” by examining the ways in which whiteness is taken up, negotiated, conferred, and used as a method of self-orientation. I will also explore the role slavery itself played in the formation of the political, economic, and social organization of the island (Rodriguez-Silva 2012, 28).

The struggle for Puerto Ricans to define their national and cultural identity has led to societal tensions since the arrival of the US. Puerto Rico maintains that it is a post racial democracy, promoting a paradise or utopian image of a racially mixed and white society. This idealization of *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, has functioned as a tool of democratization in that it promotes the image of a nation devoid of racism, color-blind, and racially unified. More so, *mestizaje* has been used to suppress opposition to white supremacy. Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898, when it was annexed from Spain. As motivated by the colonial status acquired from the US, Puerto Rican national identity emerged in the early twentieth century as the result of island elites’ efforts to “distinguish themselves from the US while maintaining ties to whiteness via Spain” (Rivera-Rideau 2013, 617). This admixture of Spanish blood with Taino and African is not seen so much as a dilution of Spanish blood, but rather a subsuming or erasure of non-white blood.

During the early 1900's, two Puerto Rican political parties (the Union Party and the Independence party) capitalized on this notion of superior whiteness. These two

parties created a language through labor, a language that would allow Puerto Rico to be in dialogue with their new colonial authorities concerning race and social mobility. According to Ileana M. Rodríguez-Silva, in her book *Silencing race: disentangling Blackness, colonialism, and national identities in Puerto Rico*, this notion of racial harmony was fraught with underlying sociopolitical discourse revolving around race. Rodríguez-Silva explains that most literature before the 1970's present abolition as the "opposite of slavery: it was the eradication of the last obstacle, forced labor, in the path to progress and modernity, and the transition from slavery to freedom was a peaceful period" that led this heterogeneous society to come together as a "harmonious society" (28). However, more recent studies critique the notion of harmony in that it ignores the very crucial role slavery held in the political, economic, and social organization of the island (28). Rodríguez-Silva argues that "abolition was indeed a foundational moment in island history: it signified the undoing of one form of racialized domination and the rearticulation of nuanced modalities of racial subjection" (28). In order to make an intervention in this notion of a "harmonious society," Rodríguez-Silva highlights racial struggles that stemmed from "defining the appropriate role of the state in the economy, the relationship between the state and the individual, and what constituted moral and sociopolitical progress" as dependent upon the question of slavery and liberation (28).

These questions were seen to be answered vis-à-vis the "Apprenticeship system." Conservative elites sought to regulate slaves by enforcing a labor system that would create "disciplined" workers while Liberals desired "future citizens at the service of the

Spanish Crown” or members of the Puerto Rican Independent State, depending upon their political leanings (28-29). Both sides had agendas that centered the sociopolitical control of Blacks in this “new” society. While conservatives did not believe that Black slaves were capable of becoming productive members of society, Liberals believed in their integration but only on marginalized terms: they were excluded from direct power and subjected to liberal “mentorship” (29). Liberals saw the potential for former slaves to “reproduce, the economic and social hierarchies that secured local elites’ power in the colony” (29). It is apparent that the elite class sought to foster a “work ethic of compliance and reliability” amongst the freedmen and to utilize the system to “discipline freedwomen into domesticity and moral decency,” a regulation of the body and sexual agency (29). Despite the labor that freedwomen obligatorily performed, they were not considered legitimate workers by the elite class. In a “new” society grounded on the notion of labor and productivity as a method of sociopolitical incorporation for former slaves, women were not afforded the same guarantees and opportunities as men (even to gain a marginalized notion of economic and social agency) and were now more marginalized and invisible than ever (29).

IBERO-AMERICANS AND RACIAL TRANSCENDENCE

This “language of labor” helped island elites establish Puerto Rico as part of a Spanish and Latin-American race—the Ibero-American race—by explaining that this “new race” contained European as well as Indigenous and African elements. However, it

was emphatically emphasized that “European whiteness overrode any negative trait inherited from those supposedly racially inferior groups” (Rodríguez-Silva 2012, 187). This notion of “mestizaje” was meant not only to align Puerto Rico with Spain, but also as a way to negotiate the US's social hierarchy and imperialism. Increasingly, Puerto Ricans identify as “white” which reifies the silencing of Blackness and creates a serious issue regarding the validity of the census as a tool to measure racial identities. Puerto Rican elite created a symbol of this mestizaje: the jibaro. This urban peasant was embraced by the Creole elite as the “embodiment of the nation and its plights” (Rodríguez-Silva 2012, 190). Traditionally, the jibaro was mulatto, from which it was transformed into a white symbol in the early 20th century. This transformation underscored the notion that Ibero-American race could transcend or erase its African component (Rodríguez-Silva 2012). In this it is apparent that the transformation of the jibaro from mulatto to white—the erasure of blackness—serves to approximate whiteness.

RACE AND ORIENTATING WHITENESS

White supremacy has constructed race to be impermeable, rigid, and definitive of social hierarchy. Racialization is produced as a means to preserve white supremacy—power, privilege, and access--by restricting them to whites only. However, this supposed rigidity of race does not account for the ways in which race easily defies and escapes

these visual markers meant to be its boundary, or the way in which it simply does not coincide with these markers (passing as white in society). Race, as it is applied to those deemed “non-white,” cannot concretely be used to approximate whiteness due to the ambiguity of phenotype and the occasional lack of visual markers that would denote non-whiteness.

The orientation around whiteness is described as how “[r]ace becomes...a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with.”¹ Sarah Ahmed uses Fanon and other Critical Race Theorists to probe “racism as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space.”² Others bodies serve as orientation devices for white bodies and also furthers the reach of white bodies.³ When Black bodies are orientated around whiteness, they are taken up by whiteness, even as whiteness remains central to their positionality.⁴ Being taken up by whiteness, and extending the white body's reach by proximity further reinscribes the notion of certain spaces being reserved for whiteness. In the case of Loíza, Blackness is easily recognized and located, and serves as a counterpoint to the rest of the country's whiteness and approximation of whiteness.

In order to understand how spaces are controlled, racialized and exclusionary, I turn to *The Homeless Body* by Samira Kawash. Kawash illustrates the ways in which the body and space are controlled and also the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. She examines and expounds upon such questions as who is the public, who has access to public space, and who controls how that public space is used and for whose interests⁵?

Another major argument is that the homeless are imagined/presented as a body apart from the public, as a threat to the public and public space (they are seen as trespassers in that public space) and also seen as a homogeneous group. This work is relevant to the notion that race is seen as a construct that confers access and privilege to some, but can also be exclusionary. By this view, it can be argued that the public is racialized as white, and those presented as a body apart from the public would be non-white people of color, but specifically, Black people.

Kawash also touches on the fact that the public does not connect prevalent issues like urban renewal and gentrification of impoverished areas to homelessness, and many times, the homeless are viewed as having caused their own homelessness—they are viewed as a homogenous group instead of a complex group that has experienced homelessness for varying reasons. I include this statement to illustrate how urban renewal and gentrification are forms of racializing spaces for whiteness and how this racialization both displaces Black bodies and orientates them around whiteness. I am reminded of the ways in which the Puerto Rican government infringes upon Loíza because of its beautiful coastal location. One can find an exclusive Trump Golf Club in Loíza, but definitely not utilized by Loiceños. Following this, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* by Nirmal Puwar, discusses how all bodies are representative of something, especially racialized bodies, and that representation dictates who belongs in a specific space. This text relates to the orientation of non-whites to whiteness—how race determines who has access to specific spaces and how specific spaces can be racialized as

well as gendered. She writes about how one can be “of and in a space, while at the same time not quite belonging to it.”⁶ Bodies that are deemed “out of place” cause disorientation to those that are considered the norm in that space. When areas both public and private are racialized as white, the introduction of Black bodies to these spaces causes what Nirmal Puwar names, *disorientation*. This disorientation is experienced on behalf of those that are considered the norm in that space. Puwar is very clear in that the “norm” is represented as the white masculine body.⁷

White Europeans (Spaniards) in the Caribbean did not anticipate this interracialization as disruption to the narrative of white hegemony. On the contrary, miscegenation was encouraged in order to dilute the Black and Indigenous populations. Race is determined relative to whiteness but the ambiguity of racial identification as well as the varied physical expression of race complicates the ability to regulate race in order to establish social hierarchies. So in the case of Puerto Rico in particular, a political move was undertaken to both placate Puerto-Ricans of color and to explain to the USA why Puerto Rico should still be considered a white colony, and not another brown “uncivilized” colony in comparison to the Philippines, Samoa, and Hawaii. Puerto Rican politicians decided to create a narrative of a mixed race nation, one in which Spaniard (white) blood would overwhelm savage blood.

Ahmed writes, “[i]f the mixed-race body wishes to be white (in the sense of being orientated ‘around’ whiteness), it is also orientated toward whiteness as the object of desire (146).” The pigmentation of one’s skin orients one toward and around whiteness,

conferring or excluding privilege, conferring social status. Orientating one's self toward whiteness is and was not only about gaining access to the power and privilege whiteness conveys, but at the very least, it is about survival. Pigmentation, and by extension pigmentocracy (Lipschutz, 1944), is a visible marker of otherness. If whiteness is unmarked and the thing to which all others are compared and to which they must aspire, then Blackness will always possess a hypervisibility in white spaces and will always extend and emphasize whiteness by its proximity. But as mentioned before, race as a category cannot serve to orientate whiteness due to ever-changing notions of identity, identity politics, and phenotypic ambiguity. These are not concrete, nor are they static. In this way, the identification of phenotype and class function as an orientation device by quantifying non-whiteness, by making corporeal a scale by which to measure proximity to whiteness, and identify who does and does not belong to a space.

Currently, the government helps shape the image of Loíza as a black space via the various ways of cultural tourism promotion. According Hernandez Hiraldo, the government's interest in promoting the town as the "Capital of Tradition" is the "hope that the development of tourism will rescue it from financial crisis, unemployment, and even a high crime rate" (74), a sentiment also expressed by local artist Samuel Lind and Bomba instructor, Raul Ayala. When asked if there is a fear about the government's promotion of Loíza resulting in corporate gentrification (i.e. the Trump golf course in Loíza), there were a mixture of responses to the question: yes, due to Loíza being a site of beautiful beachfronts, and property would be cheap enough to easily buy out; no, because

the residents have established such deep and strong roots here, they would not be easily pushed out of their ancestral lands.

However, the emphasis of the African culture comes at a price: it must be promoted with all the other cultural elements of Puerto Rico in order to be "effective" and well-received by the general public. During the 1970's crisis, the island's cultural market boomed (Hernandez Hiraldo, 73) and according to Francisco Scarano (1993: 815-816), many Puerto Ricans survived this period by participating in an informal economy related to popular culture and folklore. Hernandez Hiraldo states that it was through folklorization that the "recognition of the African tradition, and town's folklore had been portrayed in the media as both a source of pride and a means of survival" (74). And how poignant that this means of survival is peddling culture born and nurtured in flight *to a place of physical survival* to the society that they fled in the first place, the society that keeps them isolated and impoverished? It is only through this historicizing and romanticizing of mestizaje that African tradition is readily received and celebrated. The cultural identity has been exoticized while exhibited in showcases for mostly white, affluent towns like Guaynabo that emphasized the African traditions to highlight the difference.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The state also produces Loíza as a site of Blackness through structural violence. In order to explore the effects and conditions of structural violence in Loíza, I turn to Johan

Galtung and Paul Farmer's theories of violence. According to the scholarship of Johan Galtung in "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," a pioneer in peace studies, peace is the absence or reduction of violence. Galtung defines the various types of violence: "structural violence" is an extremely subtle, very unacknowledged form of violence that deals with the quotidian functions of institutions and policies of society. "Cultural violence" is similarly defined and is sometimes indistinguishable, yet equally subtle. Cultural violence includes racism, sexism, homophobia and the denigration of particular groups and cultures of people. "Direct violence" describes any deliberate attempt to harm a person's physical or psychological integrity through brutality, homicide, imprisonment, forced labor, or, any unsafe or poorly paid labor performed by individuals with no other options.

Structural violence can and does encompass, as well as lead to, cultural and direct violence. He claims that the opposite of peace is not war but, rather, violence and proposes a much broader concept of violence to include that which violates basic needs, rights and the individual's intrinsic dignity as enumerated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. According to Galtung, the opposite of peace is violence, and violence always begets more violence. Galtung's intervention on the broader definition of violence is extremely necessary, however, it also minimizes the extent to which those in authoritative positions influence and create power dynamics through institutions. He mistakenly naturalizes structural violence by doing so as he does not account for the ways in which the legacies of colonialism and white supremacy have

created these hierarchies of people and power that are mutually reinforced through said institutions. For Paul Farmer, structural violence encompasses the systematic ways that social structures harm and disadvantage individuals and populations via the macro structural processes derived from the establishment of neoliberalism doctrines. He defines structural violence as suffering that is “structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire to constrain agency” (Farmer, 2005, 40). Within this theoretical framework, those who experience poverty are seen as “experts” in structural violence and he asserts that human rights abuses are best understood from the point of view of the poor.

In Loíza, structural violence is found in the isolation of Loíza from the rest of the island due to virtually non-existent public transportation, the cultural appropriation of “authentic Blackness,” the lack of funding for the town’s infrastructure, especially housing, schools and medical care; the cultural violence that stems from the folklorization of Loíza and the very real gang violence that results due to the impoverished conditions with no opportunities for employment. The continued isolation of Loíza by enveloping it in the perception of the nostalgic and primitive forces Loiceños to perform a specific type of non-threatening Blackness. Acting in a way that does not fit this acceptable Blackness increases the stigma faced by Blacks, which leads to hypersurveillance and physical violence by police.

CHAPTER 3: LOCAL PRODUCTIONS OF RACE AND BLACK PERFORMATIVITY

The day before my birthday, I decided I wanted to straighten my hair. It is naturally very kinky-curly and I wear it in an Afro. For me, straightening my own hair can take two or three hours. I found a salon close to the house where I was renting a room. I lived less than a mile from UPR in Rio Piedras. In this area are many Dominican immigrants and many Dominican salons. On occasion, while walking near the Rio Piedras campus to the train station, Dominican women shop-owners would call out to me about "arreglando ese pajón" (fixing my afro). The particular salon I visited was a few blocks from the house on a main street. As soon as I sat in her chair, she began to tug at my hair with a wide-tooth combed. I told her in Spanish that it would be much easier to comb if she wet it and used conditioner. She looked at me and said you can't wet hair before you straighten it because the chemical won't take. I asked, what chemical? She looks at me puzzled and says "relaxer." This is when I realized there was a miscommunication.

Her understanding of the word "to straighten" as "alisar" was different from my own...where I mean " alisar as in a blow dry and flat iron combination. She immediately and seriously corrected me by saying that I should make sure to say "blowout." From there, the conversation turned into how I have "So much hair" and why I would choose

to wear my "pajón" (afro). She also told me that there are no Puerto Rican salons that would willingly touch my hair unless they charged me exorbitant prices. She stated "Puerto Ricans hate this type of hair texture, but Dominicans know how to deal with it." I told her frankly, as she began to insult my hair in various "friendly" ways, that I love my curls. I told her it took me many years to stop relaxing my hair and embrace whatever grew underneath. I had been relaxed since age of eleven and never knew I had curly hair. I told her it was a journey both in self discovery and self-affirmation...all of which she easily shrugged off and began to talk about her hair. "Why don't you put a texturizer in it to loosen the curl? Look at my hair; I put one in and made it this wavy texture. The men love it, especially white men. And I can straighten it easily." I told her point-blank, period, I wear my hair for no one, LEAST of all white men. This too she laughed off. I would have left the salon, but the ethnographer in me said "this is great material..."

That woman in question moved from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico when she was 15 years old. My analysis of her commentary revealed two things: the notions of "good hair" and appealing to white men (society) are not ideals only carried over from the Dominican Republic (a place I studied in for 5 months and experienced extreme racism, sexism, and police brutality) but also point to her understanding and negotiation of race in Puerto Rico. This hair talk is actually "race talk" and highlights how Black women understand how race and sexuality affect how they navigate their environment. She casually informs me that my hair is considered bad and unattractive, and once it is finally straightened, she marvels at how "easily" it straightens.

How can I read this in terms of how "easily" I can assimilate to whiteness or the white aesthetic? How easy would it be to permanently change my texture and as a result, change my class or even the way I am read racially? Would I be a more "acceptable" mulata, or read as indigenous?

Hair texture is tied to beauty and also desirability. Interestingly enough, she suggests white men as my intended love interests, and how they like hair that resembles their own. How then, do I read this against the various encounters I had in different parts of Puerto Rico where old, white men have marveled at my hair and often softly remarked (what seemed more like thinking out loud) "que preciosa" in a way that felt like the utmost objectification of my body and simultaneously, fetishizing, and exotifying? I of course informed her that white supremacy does push Eurocentric standards of beauty onto bodies of color, however, this is something I resist along with anyone that would have me conform. She looked at me as if to say "silly girl" and I saw pity and disbelief in her eyes. As she sees it, she is just offering friendly advice to help me advance in society and give any possible offspring. This is just an example of how black citizens themselves police black bodies, attempt to assimilate as a way to circumvent, as well as simultaneously reinscribe and maintain hierarchies of color, race, and antiblackness. This conversation demonstrates how Blackness is also integral to the production of space in that her active identity formation reflects how "social practices create landscapes and contribute to how we organize, build, and imagine our surroundings."⁵ According to

⁵ (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiv)

McKittrick, Black subjects “are not indifferent to these practices and landscapes” as they are “connected to them due to crude racial-sexual hierarchies and due to their (often unacknowledged) status as geographic beings who have a stake in the production of space.”⁶ As will be visible in this chapter, the residents of Loíza undoubtedly co-author the production of Blackness in that space and have great reason to.

INTO LOÍZA

Every morning, I walked a half of a mile to the main bus station, a few blocks south of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus. I walk past middle class neighborhoods, and as I get closer to the bus station, the neighborhoods become less affluent, more run-down. The main street of the bus station intersects with the street called Calle Robles, a street populated mostly by Dominican store owners. I get to the bus terminal before 9am because I can never be certain when the bus will arrive, I just know that it usually passes around 9am; I also know that if I want to be in Loíza by noon, this is the time to ride. I am told by other passengers that buses come and go when they feel like they have enough customers to make a worthwhile trip. I am told that public transportation in Puerto Rico is absolutely appalling, and only poorer people take buses or the unofficial “taxis” known as carros públicos or just públicos for short. The number

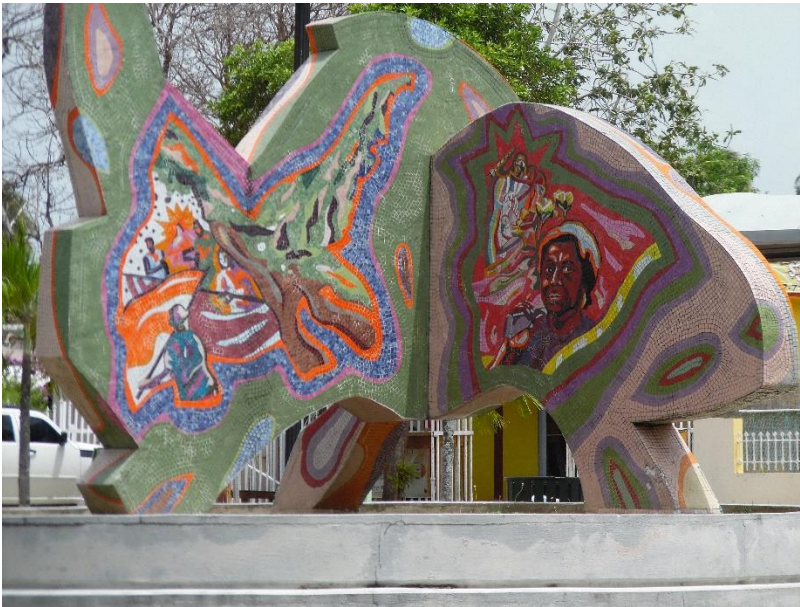
⁶ (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiv)

40 bus arrives and I ride it to Isla Verde, a popular tourist area right near the San Juan airport. It stops outside a Denny's restaurant.

At this transfer point, it was normal to wait up to two hours for the bus to Loíza, however, not every 45 that advertised Loíza on its marquee was actually headed for Loíza. I was told to always ask before boarding. I was nervous catching the bus in a place I've never been, to another place I've never been, but a cab would cost at least \$45 one way and I could not afford to pay high prices. I'd stick to 75 cents a ride. As I sit at the transfer point, I see two well-dressed women in their mid to late 30's. I assumed they were dressed for work. We had been waiting at least an hour for the bus when they struck up a conversation. The caramel complexioned woman began to complain about the bus being unreliable, forcing them to leave extremely early to get anywhere on time and the mahogany skinned woman agreed, adding "es racismo" (it's racism), and then abruptly going silent as if this statement was axiomatic.

After boarding the 45 to Loíza, I sat near the front so that I could take in my surroundings. The commercialized area of hotels and restaurants in Isla Verde promptly gave way to a jungle of green palms and dirt roads. The bus route revealed stunning views of the beach as it wound around the coast; I could see azure water to my left through large palm trees and beach houses, and small restaurants owned by varying tones of Black people to my right. Piñones was a colorful beachside town for tourists, with local shops owned by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Haitians. After 25 minutes of driving through Piñones, we rode over a cement bridge into Loíza. I was informed on my

second trip to Loíza aldea that the bridge was only a few decades old; previously, people had to take small boats from Piñones to Loíza or a different road altogether. After the bridge, I was greeted by the sign “Loíza, Capital de la Tradición. Loíza, Capital of Tradition.” As we pull into the final stop, to the left I see statues and artwork in the middle of the sidewalk representing the African heritage of Puerto Rico.



For me, Loíza instantly feels like home. The people are welcoming; even as they stare with open curiosity, they smile. The women in the public library of Loíza go out of their way to make me feel comfortable; they help me find any information on the history of Loíza and even give me the names and addresses of people they feel will be helpful to my research. They send me to the mayor's office, local cultural sites, artists' workshops. The one thing I find curious, though, is how they point me to other people that they feel are more knowledgeable on the subject of Blackness in Loíza. I try to re-explain that anything they say is also useful; after all, they are Black women, and they are literally the

keepers of knowledge. What is the gender dynamic at play here? They suggest I speak to the administrator of the library and they proudly talk about how intelligent and well-versed he is on the subject of Loíza. They are correct. I feel extremely privileged to have been welcomed into a beautiful community that, due to their vulnerability, is not always trusting of strangers. They have every reason to be cautious and guarded.

My trip to and experience in Loíza force me to think about Black geographies. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick explores how Black women uniquely experience space and place as well as how they resist and reinterpret those spaces by analyzing the various ways in which critical human geography, women's studies, black literature and cultural studies intersect. The intersection of race and space can also be applied to Loíza. As previously mentioned, Loíza was a maroon community home to various fugitive slaves from different parts of the Caribbean. Loíza has now become a space that the state is co-opting for its potential ethno-tourism capabilities, not only within the island but outside of it. In this way, it is somewhat comparable to the idea that Black women's geographies are public geographies that can be marked and known. In this case, it is Black people's space and racial performativity that is public. McKittrick writes "[o]nce the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable..." challenging this notion was and is punishable—Loíza is marked as Black, confined and territorialized, and now touted out for the commodification of Blackness; it is “knowable” in that it is subjected to hypersurveillance police due to criminal activity caused by poverty (45). It is rendered

knowable via the intrusive ways in which the forms for event registration are scrutinized before approval. It is knowable in that the only time tourists regularly visit Loíza Aldea is during festivals. And it is during these festivals that police presence is greatly increased and Black citizens are subject to random searches.

McKittrick locates the diaspora within this phrase and also sets the tone for the reconfiguration of spaces as well as locating Blackness, and subsequently naturalizing it within the margins: “these vessels also expose a very meaningful struggle for freedom *in place*...while materially and ideologically enclosing black subjects...also contribute to the formation of an oppositional geography: the ship as a location of black subjectivity and human terror, black resistance, and in some cases, black possession” (x-xi). In this case, Loíza has become a site for the struggle of freedom “in place,” a site of black subjectivity and resistance while the vessel of transportation can be seen as the cultural traditions that give visibility to the Black population. But even more so, literally, are the material vessels of transportation that delineate and form sites of Blackness. As seen with public transportation such as the bus, Loiceños are systemically isolated from the rest of the island due to lack of reliable transportation and there being only two roads into Loíza. We must also return to the ship as a location of subjectivity and resistance; the formation of Loíza as a site of Black freedom (even as it now has become a space for unfreedom) resulted not only from Africans and Tainos, but from Haitians that took small boats braving the dangerous ocean during the Haitian Revolution, and then later, and currently, Dominicans and Haitians escaping Trujillo and contemporary socioeconomic instability.

These waves of transnational Black migration throughout different periods of time have informed different notions of “freedom in place” -- freedom from persecution, massacre, a gained self-autonomy and economic stability. These varying groups brought with them their cultural knowledges and ways of being to inform a unique Blackness in Loíza.

In Puerto Rico, the “periphery and margin positions locate the way in which identity and subjectivity can politicize absences, erasures, and oppressions. This politicization, while often cast as 'talking back' or metaphoric, occurs in place, within and through dominant discourses and social systems” (McKittrick 2006, 55-56). This periphery is the relegation of Blackness to specific sites like Loíza, and the politicization refers to the types of Black performativity in those spaces...namely, the creation of “authentic” African culture—the actual resistance of the enslaved to the total annihilation of their culture and identity. Politicization and performativity also go hand-in-hand as Loiceños seek ways to navigate their cultural exploitation; they know that they will receive funding for cultural festivities from the government, but are often turned away when requesting aid for Loíza’s infrastructure. However, the performativity of Blackness in Loíza occurs because it is passed down from generation to generation in order to keep the culture alive. This act resists the erasure of culture that colonialism and slavery mandated.

In “Plantation Futures,” McKittrick discusses her theory of plantation futures, which she defines as, “a conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sections, and consequently, highlights

the ways that the plantation is an “ongoing locus of anti-black violence and death” (2-3). She re-examines the plantation as a means to discuss black *life* within the context of contemporary global cities and futures (5). McKittrick envisions a decolonial future and works through this discussion by concentrating on racial geographies—sites where race and space intersect and are assigned value based on who inhabits them. She also explores the geographic language of racial condemnation and exploitation. Loíza is one such site in that it is simultaneously celebrated as a historic cultural component and stereotyped as a place full of violent, primitive, impoverished Blacks. Even when speaking with Black members of “progressive” antiracist groups from San Juan, I was warned about the dangers of going to Loíza and how people there “would not openly speak with a stranger” while noting that the person giving me advice did not contextualize their statements; in what ways is Loíza more dangerous than San Juan? Are Loiceños not openly vocal about their situation as a precaution for their own safety or from the mistrust due to past exploitations? McKittrick stresses how these racial geographies still continue on into the present, organizing our “contemporary geographic assignments” (6). To “talk back to” this, Loiceños organize cultural events to address criminal activity in the community and steer the youth away from criminal behavior (which is a result of poverty). The negative stereotypes of Loíza affect its youth; the older members of the community recognize this and fill the need to supply positive black images through many workshops held at the Loíza Public Library. They emphasize the need to improve the self-esteem of the youth as a major way to combat apathy, violence, and internalized racism.

According to McKittrick, the “colonial enactment of geographic knowledge mapped a 'normal way of life'” (6-7). How can we analyze the afterlife of marronage and the plantation that is Loíza's legacy? Marronage was to be a space of freedom within a slave society and it was co-opted for its sugar cane production potential, undoing the original intention of a site of liberation. This site of resistance was corrupted by the violence and exploitation of the plantation. After the end of the plantation economy in Puerto Rico, Loíza was just another city, with a concentration of Afro Puerto Ricans—marginalized because of its population and poverty. How is the trauma in this space reconciled in a way that allows humanness to be brought into this space? It is through the experience and passing down of Afro-Puerto Rican culture that resistance and life are generated. Through customs only acknowledged in a temporal and historic sense, Afro-Puerto Ricans redefine their own identity in the diaspora and resist silencing. It is in this racialized space that individuals are able to relate to one another on communal terms, as autonomous and self-identified. What is more, the contemporary, informal economy of ethno-tourism in this space (Loíza and Piñones) continues a legacy of self-determination by slaves in their generation of income by participating in ventures outside of their slave tasks (often clandestine, sometimes not) that require their skill. These spaces of reclamation are sites like Pinones, kiosks set up for ethno-tourism where residents and tourists alike can enjoy “authentic” Afro Puerto Rican cuisine and buy trinkets representing Afro Puerto Rican culture. The resistance by these venders to state gentrification is another way in which this space is maintained as a Black space.

INTERVIEWS

I was led around the community by Luis Urbano Ortiz Ferrer, known in the community as “Bany.” He greeted me as I stepped off the bus. Seeing that I was a new face, and obviously trying to catch my bearings, he approached me and asked me if I was looking for any place in particular. He escorted me around the city, showing me different sites. This tourism was not free, and I understood this perfectly. It was thanks to Bany that I was able to meet the informants below.

NORA PLAZA, PUBLIC RELATIONS

Nora was the first person I interviewed in Loíza. She is a medium brown-skinned woman with shoulder length, straightened hair. Nora works in the Mayor’s office as the director of Public Relations. She was extremely patient with me as I worked through my nerves and asked questions regarding race in Loíza. Nora was raised in Loíza and speaks of how she was raised with African traditions and how the community continues this practice with the youth. She stresses how important it is that the youth don’t lose their culture. When Loíza puts on their signature cultural festivals, the children are included in these in order to expose them first hand. When I asked about race in Loíza, Nora stated “somos negros y orgullo” (We are Black and proud). She states that within Loíza “abunda el color negro” (there is an abundance of Blackness).

She acknowledges the notion of *mestizaje*, drawing on the history of Loíza as a site of *marronage*, she says that the culture of Loíza reflects “*esclavos junto con los indios*” (slaves together with Indians). She stated that for her, acknowledging *mestizaje* doesn’t mean to erase Blackness. She feels that it cannot be erased as there are large populations in Ponce, Carolina, and Guayama. She expresses the need to educate the youth (“*hay que educar a la gente*”) so that they don’t express antiblack sentiment. It was interesting how she spoke about the musicality of Black Puerto Ricans, *Loiceños* in particular, as if drumming is in their bones, and performing comes natural to them. I thought this was interesting because it reflects the rhetoric the state uses to situate Blackness. When I asked about problems of colorism, Nora seemed confused and answered that there is no colorism in Loíza. Other researchers like Hernandez Hiraldo disagree, stating that colorism as well as classism and an affinity for the indigenous, all exist. Being a public relations coordinator, I wondered how much this influenced her opinion of racial issues. Overall, she was extremely adamant about ensuring that the culture is passed down to each generation and that this will help to improve the conditions of violence in Loíza.

LUIS DANIEL PIZARRO

Known as Dany by his colleagues and friends, he is the administrator of the Loíza Public Library. He is instrumental in organizing the cultural, informational, and historical-based activities and events in the library. He is light brown in skin tone (deep caramel) and identifies as a Black man and because Loíza is always utilized as a source

of knowledge, it has been a labor of love for Luis and the library to search for more information on the history of Loíza. He says "como parte de mi trabajo, servimos como un centro de información para estudiantes, investigadores, y turistas, que vienen a buscar información histórica y cultural sobre Loíza. As part of my job, we serve as a center of information for students, researchers, and tourists, that come to look for historical and cultural information on Loíza."

There are very few sources of historical information, according to Luis Daniel. Working with a university group at UPR that deals with the Afro-descendant movement to eradicate racism in Puerto Rico and inform students of the African heritage and racial component. They have worked to transform the library into a place for community meetings and events dealing with the effects of systemic racism. Half way through the interview, we switched from Spanish to English...I found it difficult at times, struggling with what I perceived as a lack of language, to express my questions about race.

Dany spoke about the fact that "in the education department, and in other aspects, there is a strong source of racism." Luis expresses his mixed feelings toward speaking with academics that are what he calls "so-called experts" on the subject of racism faced by Loiceños and other visibly Black people. I told him that it had been difficult to get people to talk about racism in Puerto Rico and that many believed that it was nonexistent or they would use the infamous *I heard from a friend of a friend*. It was always distanced from their being. Dany says, "this is a very accurate perception. As a matter of fact, I used to say the same thing. The truth is that, since I had the opportunity to travel, it was

probably a little bit more obvious for me to see it somewhere else. I'd been in the mid-states and the way that racial problems are a bit more evident, against all sorts of races...make me believe that, we had it good in Puerto Rico. They have been teaching us since we were little that this is a beautiful, harmonious mix of three races, they all live together, kumbaya. Nothing could be farther from the truth." He also states that since the U.S. colonized Puerto Rico, they have lost the "sense of fight and resistance that could have made [them] more aware of the second-class citizenship." They have been subjected to miseducation by the Spaniard colonizers and the U.S. to believe that the white race is superior. He believes that it wasn't until "educated people returned to the country and decided to fight for that equality, that [they] began to realize that unless [they] all have the same rights, the struggle will still be far. And that persists to this day." The education of Afro-descendants on their rich history is an important step toward gaining equality.⁷

SAMUEL LIND, ARTIST

After meeting with Luis-Daniel, I was taken to meet with Samuel Lind, a very influential Afro Puerto Rican artist that resides in Loíza. His home doubles as his art workshop and also a public community museum of sorts, where the door is always open and visitors are always welcome. He is very warm and informal with guests, giving impromptu tours of his art. He is a slim, caramel colored man, with short, loose, greying

⁷ More can be found about the library at BibliotecapublicadeLoíza.blogspot.com

curls. He relays the history behind his art pieces effortlessly, and in the most engaging way. I found myself laughing and instantly comfortable enough to ask what would be considered "personal" questions about race in his life and work. He answered candidly, and when he noticed that I did not mince words, he was even more open about the issues in the community. Linds' art engages with history, folklore, and nature as it connects to African and indigenous descendants, however, he stated that he does not consider his artwork of the genre "Negroide" because this is another form of separating Blackness from art in a way that makes it seem irregular or out of place.

It was to Lind's workshop that I returned, almost daily. He has a magnetic personality, realistic optimism and pleasant sense of humor when speaking on the past and future of Loíza. Lind's artwork showcases the mixture of races in Puerto Rico while emphasizing Blackness. In his commentary, he also refers to the folkloric in his work—paintings and masks of the Veijigante decorate his home workshop. According to Lind, the Veijigante is the embodiment of Loíza in that it is the African essence of Loíza, battling the white, Catholicism forced onto the Black population. Of course it is characterized as a demon, reflective of the way in which African spiritual and religious practices were and continue to be viewed by some. But for Lind, it is a symbol worth celebrating, a symbol of Loíza and its people that endures.

RAUL AYALA, BOMBA PERFORMER/INSTRUCTOR

The Ayala family is internationally known for Bomba. The family has been involved in Bomba for over 57 years, the group was started by Castor Ayala. After being featured on the Telemundo show "Showtime," the group was launched to stardom. In the 50's and 60's, there were no other groups dedicated to Bomba; on the contrary, there had been a decline in Bomba and the Ayala's brought about a resurgence of the practice. After Castor put his children in the group, it was called "Los Hermanos Ayala" and they emphasized it as "baile folklórico" which is meant to identify Loíza culturally. After speaking with Raul, it was extremely apparent that he was not only a cultural producer, but a culture bearer. The ease and fluidity with which he narrates how Bomba became a symbol of Loíza, and how Bomba is extremely significant in terms of cultural and community ties, held me entranced. It was like listening to a respected family member telling the family history through a series of stories. He was very aware of the issues in Loíza, the poverty, crime, and lack of state resources. When asked if bringing fame to Loíza might also mean structural development and displacement of the community, he was adamant that Loíza is a strong and firm community; it would not be displaced or gentrified. His optimism regarding Bomba as a way to reinvigorate Loíza was admirable. According to Ayala, the issue with racism and black Puerto Ricans not identifying with their Blackness, is that "el colonizado, pues, quiere verse, quiere identificarse con el colonizador." *The colonized, well, wants to see himself, wants to identify with the colonizer.*

Our conversation took many turns, all related to the condition of Blackness in Puerto Rico. It felt less like an interview than a casual, yet detailed conversation one has with an older, wiser family member. Should I attribute this to the supposed comraderie of Blackness or Latinidad? Is this an example of the ways in which people of African descent relate to one another? Does this demonstrate the ways in which we discuss insider knowledge? Such is his dedication to Loíza, that he told me plainly, "yo continuo trabajando en la artesanía porque tengo un compromiso con mi padre, Castor Ayala, que era artesano, y con el pueblo de Loíza, y con Puerto Rico...porque el trabajo que yo hago identifica a nuestro pueblo de Loíza e identifica Puerto Rico. Por eso yo mantengo trabajando..." Raul speaks about his promise to his father, his community and his nation. He has a duty to maintain Black culture. Raul's story speaks to the larger discourses surrounding the preservation and continuation of ancestral knowledge within Black diasporan communities in order to undermine the colonial project of erasing African heritage to create a docile, disconnected non-citizen. These processes of recuperation of identity work to reshape histories and forge personhood. They are undertaken by those whose subjectivities lie in liminal spaces of history and identity.

Christen Smith, in her book *Afro Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*, analyzes embodied Blackness to uncover the subtle discourses of racism and specifically state-sponsored antiblackness. It is in this way that racism is rendered more legible—a way to decode the scripts and idioms used to talk about race that don't specifically mention race. Summarily, "Afro-paradise is a choreographed, theatrical

performance between the state's celebration of black culture and the state's routine killing of the black body" (3). Smith explores performance as a possible "path toward effecting social change" amidst state violence against black bodies (25). Blackness in Puerto Rico is also celebrated by the state while its Black citizens are not. The performativity of Blackness in Loíza and other areas of the island serve to satisfy the narrative of racial mixing and harmony. This performativity is also a form of resistance to the loss of cultural knowledges and pride in African heritage. It is a way to destabilize the negativity of the narrative of the dominated, primitive, past-life African.

When theorizing spaces of resistance, I turn to McKittrick and how she explores a "meaningful struggle for freedom in place" by examining slave vessels as "technologies of transportation" that "while materially and ideologically enclosing black subjects...also contributes to the formation of an oppositional geography; the ships as a location of black subjectivity and human terror, black resistance, and in some cases, black possession" (x-xi). We have seen how this is the case with Loíza. The municipality of Loíza also represents the struggle for "freedom in place" as its residents are simultaneously confined to a space literally founded on the basis of freedom and which later became a site of exploitation and oppression by the state. The people of Loíza are stigmatized, have access to few resources to help them thrive, and face hostility from police due to the violence and drug activity that are a result of poverty. Despite this, Loíza continues to be a site of resistance and self-making. Loiceños utilize the folklorization of their culture to generate revenue for the city, although funding rarely comes outside the scope of festivals and

cultural activities approved by the state. Loiceños use their history and culture to turn youth away from dangerous and negative activities and also use their culture as a platform for visibility.

Loiza Public Library

The Loiza Public library functions as a space of reclamation within a space of marginalization. Libraries are generally perceived as spaces of knowledge and intellectualism, attributes that have been negated to Black people for centuries. However, the Loiza library contests this narrative and the narrative that Black spaces are frozen in the past by their creation of new knowledges within this space. Events focusing on Black history, notable and influential Black Puerto Ricans like the historian Arturo Schomburg, and events to celebrate and instill Black cultural pride all make this a space of radical Black intellectualism. Apart from this, the library holds weekly classes for the older patrons to learn computer and other technological issues as well as financial literacy classes. The multifaceted use of this space reflects diasporan patterns of resistance to the lack of access to basic and essential resources as well as the recuperation of lost knowledges and histories.

This is truly a site in contestation with the national discourse of a stagnant Blackness and imposed marginalization. It is a fountain of knowledge, a source of knowledge production, and a space in tension with the colonial narrative as the library seeks to reaffirm Blackness politically, culturally, socially and economically. The workshops held for the community exhibit the library as a communal cultural space and

demonstrate their efforts to contest national discourses centered on their erasure from present history. It also seeks to address the negative stereotypes about the violence and ignorance in Loíza, to dispel myths that they are primitive and superstitious people. This space demonstrates the awareness Loiceños have regarding how the nation perceives them and is part of the way they navigate the spatialization of Blackness as well as the folklorization of their community. Gaining permission to utilize the library as a basis of operations for interviews and meeting influential community members operated in tandem with what the library was created to do—bring together the community and share knowledge between people that will eventually benefit the community.

CONCLUSION

After speaking with members of the community that are very involved in the traditions of Loíza, I have come to the conclusion that mestizaje and mulataje, although a famed narrative that is disseminated even amongst Loiceños—is not utilized as a way to distance themselves from their Blackness but merely an acknowledgement of the cultures that inform their group identity and Loíza's historic identity as maroon colony and center of African tradition. I found that the community views the practice and performance of African influenced traditions to be one major way of healing the community. They believe that the instilling of cultural pride provides an outlet for the youth. There is definitely a reclamation and reformation of the Black identity occurring in Loíza not only through culture but a rebranding of Loíza in general. Loiceños are working strategically in their communities by employing their identity and cultural traditions in ways that will bring notoriety and economic opportunities to the municipality. One way this is done is with the annual festivals celebrating the African and Indigenous presence of Loíza and also through the resurgence of Bomba on the island and in the USA. The community members I spoke with are extremely involved in different efforts to better the social and economic situation of Loíza...of course the Puerto Rican economy presents a tremendous challenge.

To conclude, in decolonizing Latin American societies many wars were waged under the notion of forging a new national identity in which race had no place and liberty

was granted to all; this, however, was not the reality peoples of color were subjected to. Although many Black and Indigenous people fought for emancipation and economic as well as political autonomy, just as many allied with whites to form new nations in which both races could co-exist and cooperate in a society devoid of race. However, in Puerto Rico, the yearning for a “post-racial society” was overshadowed by the creation of a society devoid of people of color through the encouragement of miscegenation, suppression of Black visibility, and Black segregation.

The relegation of Blackness to specific sites is ultimately the relegation of Blackness to the societal margins. Historicizing Blackness as a part of the nation’s past and folkloric tradition and culture prevents Blackness from ever entering the present and influencing the nation’s culture as well as perfunctorily negates Black citizen contribution to society. The compartmentalization of Blackness ignores the presence of Black communities elsewhere, especially urban areas. This spatial racialization also contributes to societal notions of inclusion, exclusion, citizenship and Black absence (McKittrick 2006). This marginalization leads to state resource neglect, hypersurveillance, and many other forms of structural violence that in turn lead to direct violence. I am also invested in the notion that marginality is more than a site of deprivation, the margins are also sites of radical possibilities for subaltern groups. It was in these margins that my ethnographic research allowed me to see and experience the actualization of self-making and radical possibility through the negotiation of Black identity, race and place.

As Smith states in her introduction to *Afro-Paradise*, "[b]lack inclusion into the national fabric follows a logic of permissibility that allows only those black bodies and spaces marked as acceptable to participate in the national project, and leaves the black masses at the margins" (Smith, 2016: 6). It is in this way that Black culture is coopted and its symbolism used to promote the rhetoric of racial democracy while silencing, erasing, and violating black bodies. It is through the performativity of Blackness and essentially the folklorization of Blackness, that the state's narrative of multiculturalism is maintained. These spaces marked and contained as "Black" are produced by state violence against Black bodies as well as performances of gender and race. These spaces are both visual economies of Black suffering as well as Black resistance. However, it is also through such performativity of Blackness that the Loíza community sees a possibility of effecting social change.

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