MEDIATING BLACKNESS
AFRO PUERTO RICAN WOMEN AND POPULAR CULTURE

BY

MARITZA QUIÑONES RIVERA

DISSESSATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communications
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Norman Denzin (Chair)
Associate Professor Isabel Molina Guzmán, Director of Research
Associate Professor Arlene Torres
Professor Angharad Valdivia
ABSTRACT

In my dissertation I discuss how blackness, femaleness and Puerto Ricanness (national identity) is presented in commercial media in Puerto Rico. National identity, no matter how differently defined, is often constructed through claims to heritage, "roots," tradition, and descent. In the western world, these claims, almost inevitably allude to questions of "race." In Puerto Rico, it is the mixture of the Spanish, the Taíno Indian, and the African, which come to epitomize the racial/traditional stock out of which "the nation" is constructed, defended, and naturalized. This mixture is often represented by images, statues, murals across the island that display the three racialized representatives, as the predecessors of the modern, racially mixed Puerto Rican people. In their portrayals of black women, figures as Mama Inés (the mammy) and fritoleras (women who cook and sell codfish fritters), Caribbean Negras (Black Caribbean women) contemporary media draw upon familiar representations to make black women bodies intelligible to Puerto Rican audiences. In this dissertation I argue that black women are challenging these images as sites for mediating blackness, femaleness, and Puerto Ricanness where hegemony and resistance are dialectical. I integrate a text-based analysis of media images with an audience ethnographic study to fully explore these processes of racial and gender representation. Ultimately, my project is to detail the ways in which Black women respond to folklorized representations and mediate their Blackness by adopting the cultural identity of Trigueñidad in order to establish a respectful place for themselves within the Puerto Rican national identity. The contributions from the participants of my audience ethnography, as well as my own experiences as a Trigueña woman, demonstrate how Black women are contesting local representations and practices that have folklorized their bodies. The women who form part of
this study also responded to the pressures of a nation whose official stance is that race and racism do not exist. In addition, I present global and local forces—and in particular commercial media—as means for creating contemporary Black identities that speak to a global economy. By placing media images in dialogue with the lived experiences of Black-Puerto Rican women, my research addresses the multiple ways in which Black identities are (re)constituted vis-à-vis these forces.
A mis hijos Marielle Bianca y Christian Alexander

Con todo mi amor
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is a product of my children Marielle Bianca and Christian Alexander’s love and encouragement. I also owe special thanks to a number of people who supported me through the metamorphosis of this project. Thank you to my sister Glorymar Quiñones Rivera for her supportive role during the most difficult time in the process of my writing and teaching. To my dearest friend and sister María Ileana Jiménez Castro who held my hand from the starting point of this project to the end. Gracias mil, por no dudar en mí y darme la mano en todos estos años. To my dearest friend Daisy Rubiera Castillo who introduced me to the exceptional scholarship of black women in Cuba and who comforted me so many times over emails encouraging me not to quit, that our scholarship against sexism and racism in our Caribbean nations is necessary.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I became acquainted with a brilliant and supportive group of scholars whom I would like to thank. My advisor Isabel Molina Guzmán always provided encouragement and keen criticism. To Norman Denzin for his confidence in my talents and support. I am also grateful to Angharad Valdivia for being a careful reader and enthusiastic listener. To Arlene Torres for her guidance and critical review in my work on Latin America and Caribbean Blackness. It is an honor to have the opportunity to work with you.

At Latino Studies at Indiana University Bloomington for providing the opportunity to gain teaching experiences in a top-notch research university. Special thanks to John Nieto-Phillips, Arlene Díaz, Sylvia Martinez, and Michaela Richterm. Very special thanks to Jose Najar who took over consoling me during special times and for his critical review on race in Latin America. Eternamente agradecida. To my dearest friend and black feminist scholar April
Smith, a true sister of the Diasporas. Government agencies- Municipio Autonomo de Carolina, El Museo Nuestra Raiz Africana, Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe. Special thanks to the staff of La biblioteca del periódico El Nuevo Día for their arduous work and many phone calls. Special thanks to the young and vibrant scholars and friends who supported me in encouraging me to keep writing from a black woman perspective. Thank you, Aisha Durham, Jillian Baez, Celiany Rivera, Alice Filmer, Desiree Yomtoob, Susan Harewood, Rosewell Quinn, Coleman Evans and many many others.

To my father William Quiñones Encarnación who is no longer with us but whose strength, guidance and contagious laughter continue accompanying me. Last but not least I want to thank my mother Mary Gloria Rivera Cruz for her love and strength and source of comfort. I thank you for all your advice, stories, names, dates and archival work for this dissertation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.................................................................................................................................................. x

Chapter 1: “Missing in Action”: Race, Gender and Puerto Rican Commercialized Media:
Research Landscape.................................................................................................................................1

Methodology........................................................................................................................................... 2
Research Time Frame .............................................................................................................................4
Historical Representations of Black Women.............................................................................................10
Race, Gender and the Yaucono Café Company (1950s) .........................................................................13
Race and Gender: Afro Sheen and Soul Train (1960s – 1980s) ..............................................................14
*Las Cacolinas, Las Cacos(as) and Reggaetoneras (1990s – Present)*.......................................................17
Audience Ethnographic Study ................................................................................................................18
A Site of Contestation: The Coastal and Caserios.....................................................................................20
Theoretical Framework............................................................................................................................21
*Lo no definido: Trigueñidad* ...................................................................................................................25
Organizational Structure ........................................................................................................................32
Research Contribution .............................................................................................................................34

Chapter 2: Mapping Discourses of Blackness and Popular Culture in Puerto Rico............................37
Crafting Puerto Ricanness: 1930 – 1940 ..................................................................................................39
Innocent Game: Racism and Sexism .......................................................................................................40
*Poesía Afro-antillana and Poesía negroide* ............................................................................................41
Institutionalizing Puerto Ricanness (1950s) ...........................................................................................43
Racial Meanings: Zenon, González, and Rodríguez Juliá (1980s) ..........................................................46
Chapter 3: “From Trigueñita to Afro-Puerto Rican” Intersections of the Racialized, Gendered, and Sexualized Body in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Mainland

Trigueñita: Race and Racialization in Puerto Rico

La Trigueñita: Making Sense of Blackness

The Meaning of Being Black, Being Female in Puerto Rico

Performing Blackness and Gender

Puerto Rico: “Whitest of the Antilles”

Cruzando el charco: Becoming Afro-Puerto Rican

Chapter 4: Mediating Blackness: Black Women: Articulating and Negotiating Identities

Advertising Labyrinth: Puerto Rico

Advertising “Puerto Rican Culture”

Las Fritoleras and Piñoneras

Racialized Signifiers: Race and Bad Hair

Decoding Blackness: Fritoleras and Citibank Text

Marking Gender, Race and Advertising

Chapter 5: Foreignness of Blackness and Beauty

Race and Beauty: Puerto Rico

Untangling Differences: Pelo Bueno y Pelo Malo

The “N” Word: “Negra”

The Foreignness of Black Beauty
Growing up in Puerto Rico, I witnessed first-hand the lack of Black Puerto Rican women present in the island’s commercial media and television. This notable lack inspired my research on the question of how Black Puerto Rican women mediate Blackness. As an audience member and customer, watching local television, Mexican, Venezuelan and Brazilian telenovelas, or looking at advertising, billboards, and magazines, I noticed with a twinge of pain that beauty, achievement, and success were all associated with hegemonic racial “Whiteness.” Growing up in a family of black female school teachers,¹ I gained cultural capital in the form of a formal education in Catholic school and was exposed to various types of literatures at home. Visiting museums, attending ballet dances at the Teatro Tapia in San Juan, and lunches with my maternal grandmother Mayita at the repostería La Bombonera,² I quickly learned the racial and economic disparity between two racialized terrains (San Juan and Carolina). Significantly, I could feel people’s negative attitudes toward those who look different (darker) from those who live in the metropolitan area of San Juan city. As a trigueña woman, I mediated my black identity between notions of blackness as folkloric (embedded in the notion of the Puerto Rican nation) and the constant transnational flows of people, culture, music, language and processes of racialization. My trigueña identity is partly informed by my upbringing surrounded by a group of progressive professional black women at home. Living in the racialized terrain³ of Carolina, I mediated my

¹ Black female teachers were first hired in Puerto Rico to teach the overwhelmingly illiterate and poor population in black and poor neighborhoods.
² La Bombonera - This family-run bakery and coffee shop was founded in 1902. The atmosphere evokes turn-of-the-20th-century Castille transplanted to the New World.
³ Anthropologist and Caribbeanist scholar Arlene Torres acknowledges that the island maintains a racial geography that is racially and classed coded. Locales are racially mapped with cultural
blackness between a mixture of religions from Catholicism to Santería rituals, from praying my Ave María to paying homage to Changó religion.⁴ No doubt, folklorized images of blackness in popular culture, saints, botánicas,⁵ literature, tourist-oriented commercials, bomba y plena, poesía negrroide, Afro-Latin Jazz and Salsa informed my localized blackness. Personally, Salsa music and dancing offered me then and still now a “symbolic site of liberatory values and freedom,”⁶ a site that contradicts imperialist and “local” internalized colonial structures.⁷ The mediated images of the black body as portrayed from “local” popular culture were constantly in-check with “other” images of blackness—those coming from offshore—United States—African American women. Those images were particularly influential for me as far as fashion, hair, music and dance styles. The notion of “assimilating” to U.S. black culture was viewed with disdain. After all, as Puerto Ricans we have constructed a unique cultural identity that separates us (islanders and Diasporans) from the United States. Moreover, notions of Puerto Ricanness as a uniquely Hispanic culture, still transmitted in education, museums, festivals, television, commercial media, i.e. advertising also informed my understanding of black womanhood.

codes as coastal, urban, metro, developed, underdeveloped nostalgic, historical, sexualized, and so on.

⁴ Changó, the Yoruba deity, god of thunder and lightning, who rules the colors red and white and is symbolized by his double headed axe, which represents swift and balanced justice. Afrocubaweb.com
⁵ The name botánica translates as "botany" or "plant" store, referring to these establishments' function as dispensaries of medicinal herbs.
⁶ Puerto Rican historin Ángel Quintero Rivera
⁷ Scholars Ramón Grosfoguel and Frances Negrón-Muntaner (1997, p.23) introduced Puerto Rico double coloniality of power in discussion of the two forms of power existent in the island. The first one, “metropolis” United States colonial power and the second, “local” colonial power. The latter which is less discussed form of power pertains to the local coloniality of power enforced by the local elites over local hegemonic political, cultural and economic spaces, sometimes under the banner of nationalist ideology. In my dissertation, I use the dual coloniality of power to illustrate how “local” hegemonic political, cultural and economic have constructed gender/race under the banner of nationalist ideology. While, also contesting the global, “U.S./metropolis” as a power form to contest newer images of blackness/gender to challenge localized notions of blackness in Puerto Rico.
At the heart of my discussion, I propose that advertising plays a key role in transmitting folklorized black identity (racialized and classed) in the “selling of Puerto Rican identities” to audiences (Dávila, 1997). Racialized gendered identities are often associated with the Caribbean sugar and coffee plantation economy and represented in the media (Kutzinski , 1993). These kinds of images work in part of the institutionalization of slavery and the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873. In the 19th century racial ideas in sciences and the advent of U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico in 1898 further solidified racial constructs. Since then, photography, books, political cartoonist produced from the colonial, expressed familiar narratives of enslaved and colonial subjects. In addition, the 19th century discourses of race speaks to the formation of the island racialized mapping of space in the island, by which elites wanting to preserve their class and power status they “map” their “space” in the Puerto Rican nation. In doing so, they incorporated “invisible/visible” laws and practices that continue to affect the life chances and opportunities of black women in Puerto Rico. Scholarly discussion of race and sexuality (Suárez Findlay, 1999) discourse of space and race (Martínez-Vergne, 1999; Matos Rodríguez, 1999; and Torres, 1999) give us concrete sociohistorical views of racialized and sexualized practices that took place under colonial rule prior to and following 1898. My dissertation builds on these three scholarly works on race: Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920 (American Encounters/Global Interactions) by Suárez Findlay (1999); Shaping the Discourse on Space: Charity and Its Wards in 19th-Century San Juan, Puerto Rico by Martínez-Vergne and Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations (Blacks in the Diaspora) Volume 2 by Arlene Torres and Norman Whitten  

8 For more information on the representations of black women in Puerto Rico see: Tuning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television (Console-ing Passions)  
9The book Our Peoples and their Islands (1910) portrays the U.S. acquisition of Puerto Ricans and Cubans after the Spanish-American War in 1898.
(1999) and Puerto Rican Women's History: New Perspectives (Perspectives on Latin America and the Caribbean) by Matos Rodríguez (1998). I seek to map out the complicated and inconsistent discourses being played out in the media and women lives themselves. Ultimately, I want to reveal the emergent new black identities that reflect conflicts among the women themselves and how they adopt, deploy, and negotiate their racial identity.

The representations of black women in commercial media institution (programming and advertising produced on the island) have made very slow progress. Black women are depicted as economically exploited, marginalized and folklorized. The black woman body has been constructed as both “authentic” body that represent “folklorized” body representing society’s preponderance for obfuscating race and racial discrimination based on a folkloric identity (origins in nationalist discourses). The depiction of black women as folklorized can be traced as early as 19th century literature and later in the poesía afroantillana or negroíde in the late 1930’s and 1940’s. The poesía afroantillana or negroíde, though, is a celebration of the African component of the Puerto Rican nation. Yet, as a black woman myself, when reading a great majority of those poems, I cannot ignore the fact that the black female body is highly objectified and sexualized. Depiction of the black female body include its, its rhythms’ and its curves, as is celebrated by male scholars (Palés Matos and Vizcarrondo y Coronado, etc.). However, I am not suggesting that a folkloric representation of the island African heritage can only be interpretative as negative; to the contrary, it serves as a site of celebration of blackness, heritage, and part of the Puerto Rican “nation”. What becomes problematic is the medley of values, perceptions, assumptions and historical meanings associated throughout the “local” characteristics of black

---

10 Folklorized black identities relates to the representation of black women in the area of folklore/dance exclusively.
female bodies, which ultimately affect black women’s opportunities and equal access in relation to others.

How we can come to understand how black women mediate blackness in Puerto Rico is the central question of this dissertation. Race is not at the level of a biological division, but rather socio-cultural division based on cultural concepts about race and color. I propose the race is viewed in Puerto Rico based on honor/sexuality (Suárez-Findlay, 1999); racialized terrains (Torres, 1999), and processes that encompass ideas of ancestry as well as phenotypic expression (Elson Simmons, 2008; Godreau, 2008; and Quiñones, 2006). Moreover, transnational moves, including U.S. black cultural forms are influential for the participants in the study who strategically mediate their blackness. The twin forces of the ‘local’ and ‘global’ offers newer black identities as black women reflect upon their lives. The contradictory terms by which black women bodies are marked as folklorized and contemporary are precisely the concerns in this dissertation.

Representation of the “folklorized” black women thrives in contemporary “local” popular culture from music to advertising campaigns. This “folklorized” representation is in relation and contradiction with contemporary U.S. mainstream popular culture in both the representation of African American and Latina women. In the island, the black female body has been paradoxically constructed as a “folkloric” desexualized body that represent the island past (slavery, sugar plantation, laborers, etc.) to more progressive and contemporary representations of African American women. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example: iconic figure of Yaucono café, Mama Inés in Puerto Rico coincide with images of the commercial representation of the mammy and Aunt Jemima in the United States, each with their own socio and historical reality grounded in free labor throughout slavery. In each instance, the figure is typically a fat, dark-
skinned woman whose uniform includes an apron and a bandana-covered head. Their bodies are
design to be desexualized, as they do not conform to the (white) norm of idealized
womanhood.11 Another representation of black female body is the fritoleras (that appear in the
case study of the Citibank advertisement in this dissertation) or in the past television show the
Kiosko Budweiser which was first developed as part of Budweiser’s advertising campaign in
1990.12 These women are kiokos owners who sell fried-foods in the coastal area of Piñones,
Loíza, Luquillo, etc. female servants, cooks, and laundresses that appear in various
advertisements. These “folklorized” or mammy figures remain the primary representation of
Black women within commercialized media, and consequently are the primary image provided
to audiences for interpreting Black women today.

The focus of this work will not be on whether these folklorized representations of Black
Puerto Rican women are positive or negative. This dissertation is an attempt to begin
understanding meaning-making of contemporary representations of black women within the
context of the history of underrepresentation of black women in the “local” production and
writing of “folklorized” images and discourses of the female body in media and advertising.
Furthermore, rewriting the conceptualization of Black women as "Tembandumba de la
Quimbamba"13 in the local commercialized media and culture is, I argue, an essential move for
developing greater racial equality within Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico. Davila describes Susa as the innocent, uneducated yet sagacious fritolera
(friedfood cook), who is mostly shown frying away behind the kiosko, was similarly modeled on
members of the actress’s family. She describes the character she has created as one of many
Susas on the island. She could be a housewife or a school housekeeper; she is a "humble,
hardworking,and innocent" woman who never went to school. P.458
13 From “Majestad Negra” by Palés Matos.
My argument accordingly considers the complex, intersecting patterns of race and gender stratification and the monolithic representation of female blacks as folklorized. I seek to understand, too, how Black Puerto Rican women interpret such commercial messages in opposition and relation to everyday lived experiences. I recognize that individuals and societies bring diverse meanings to messages and media that are dependent upon such varying factors as gender, race, class, education, and occupation as audience studies scholars have already established (Bobo, 1995; Livingstone, 1998, 1999 and 2003; Meyers, 1999 and Morley; 1993). Working with this intersectional model, I aim to answer my key question: how do contemporary Black Puerto Rican women mediate Blackness? My dissertation reveals how Black Puerto Rican women often posit radical rearticulations of Black identity from an interstitial audience position that involves oppositional readings of advertisements. These rearticulations can be seen as a part of a project of forging new Black identities that take into consideration African diasporic communities, and of constructing a Black self that works to expand current racial definitions of Puerto Ricanness.
CHAPTER 1
“MISSING IN ACTION”
RACE, GENDER AND PUERTO RICAN COMMERCIALIZ MEDIA
RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

Media and popular culture are powerful venues in which women assert and communicate national and social identities. In this light, I contend that Black Puerto Rican women mediate their Blackness by challenging folklorized representations of themselves that are perpetuated in local commercial media and advertising. In the face of a society whose media presents “race” as part of the nation’s past, a folkloric identity, many women adopt a new language of Trigueñidad in order to find a place for themselves within the national landscape. Before I begin this line of research, it is vital to first review representations of race and gender in commercial television and other media in the island.

The representations provided by media come to form a part of our everyday life: we draw upon and discuss these images in order to conceptualize our own identities and those of others. The methodology used in my dissertation (auto-ethnography and ethnography) is centrally concerned with understanding how media discourses, and in particular those involving race and gender, translate into everyday life. Essentially, I am interested in investigating where “text and body meet,” or where tensions between representation and lived experiences arise. To examine the commodification of the black female body in popular culture and its relation to “Black” agency and identity formation, my research will seek to determine how contemporary black women mediate blackness in Puerto Rico. At the heart of this research is a effort to understand

1 See hooks, 1992; Mankekar; Monhanty; and Rivero, 2003.
how black women embody, negotiate and/or reject various discourses and related practices. How are they disciplined by these discourses? How do they negotiate folklorized black identity? Are they resistant to or in compliance with hegemonic ideas of race? What avenues are available in which they might enact their agency?

**Methodology**

Media scholars have closely examined how individuals construct their social identities, and specifically how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latina/o, gay or straight—“even rural or urban” (Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, 2006, p.297). This process, they note, is influenced by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender (p.297). In the case of Puerto Rico these commodified texts are produced by U.S.-based Spanish-speaking media networks and U.S. cable networks in addition to a handful local Puerto Rican programming (newscasts, comedies and radio shows). Yeidy Rivero (2005) notes the potentially problematic nature of imported media, and asks communication and media scholars to consider the repercussions of programming that does not speak to local and national debates nor to racial, ethnic, and sociopolitical borders.

as well to the work of these scholars on the constructions of the Latina body in popular culture and its implications for Latinas/os in the United States (Báez, 2009, p.11).

My focus on audience research draws from and adds to the growing ethnographic field of Latina/o audience studies, which considers how Latino/as read and interpret representations of themselves in popular culture (Báez, 2006, 2009; Mayer, 2004a, 2003b; L. Vargas, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2008b). This sub-field of Latina/o media studies aids my understanding of the discursive constructions of the Latina body and adds further complication to contemporary conceptualizations of race, gender, class, and beauty.

Afro Puerto Rican women in Puerto Rico, just as with Latinas and Black women in the United States, constitute a marginalized audience in media studies (Bobo, 1995; Valdivia, 2000, 2004a). My dissertation utilizes auto- and audience ethnographic research within the subfield of Latina/o media studies to rectify this marginalization by focusing on African diaspora communities. As Chicana and Latina scholars have noted, Latina/o is a racially heterogeneous group within which ethnicity, race, class, and migration experiences define and distinguish various groups. In recent years, Latina/o media studies have brought attention to the importance of the Black experience within Latina/o and Latin American groups (See: Negrón-Muntaner, 1997; Quiñones, 2006).

The tendency of Latino/a audience studies to offer transnational readings of texts, specifically with regards to the consumption of Spanish and English-language media (Mayer, 2003 and L. Vargas, 2006, 2008a, 2008b), positions my study closer to Latina/o media discussions. My work also draws, however, from African-American media scholar Jacqueline

---

2 Puerto Rico, as U.S. Commonwealth and its political, social and economic ‘in-betweeness’. I aim to locate my scholarship within the field of U.S. Latino/a and Latin America.
Bobo (1995). Bobo recommends that scholars “read through the text,” that is, that they reconstruct meaning from audience members’ individual perspectives and understand the world in relation to their lived experiences (Bobo, 273).³ Bobo recommends audience ethnography as a long-term, in-depth practice that can provide an understanding of how media images are received and interpreted by marginalized audiences, as well as additional insights otherwise impossible to attain.⁴ Audience ethnography is thus a helpful method of engagement for apprehending the complex dynamic that evolves between consumers, researchers, and cultural products. Bobo provides a complex framework for approaching marginalized audiences as interpretative communities and for answering questions of agency. Her work has led to reception studies in marginalized audiences that reveal women of color (Black and Latinas) to be adept cultural readers (Bobo, 1995; La Pastina, 2005; Rivero 2003; and Rojas 2003, 2004).

I agree with Bobo that the study of marginalized audiences is necessary in order to understand the relationship between their lived experiences and the text. Significantly, my ethnographic audience analysis approaches the implications of living in a society where asserting black identity is frowned upon and racial silence predominates. If race and racism are cast as non-existent issues in Puerto Rico, how do black women audiences deal with the representations of themselves in contemporary media? What types of representations of black women are produced in a supposedly racially democratic island?

Research Time Frame

This dissertation employs ethnographic data from intermittent fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2006 with Black Puerto Rican women, who were asked to address issues of

³ Media scholars have stressed the meaning of “texts” in the construction of identity and how individuals understand the world (Jally, 1999).
⁴ See Bobo; La Pastina, 2005; and Mankekar.
race and racism in media and society at large. The fieldwork brought to light the dark reality of the island's problematic racial constructs and race relations. It also providentially coincided with the popularity of a Black Rap/Reggaetón artist named Tego Calderón. Calderón’s racial and political agenda centered on creating racial consciousness in Loíza, his hometown, and its adjacent villages. The local media (including radio, television, blogs, and magazines) perceived Tego's attempts as a means to "fix" an existing problem, and contended that finding a solution for these problems was the responsibility of the victims. To provide more opportunities for young blacks in the fields of media and popular culture, Calderón provides employment opportunities and exposes the conditions of "blackness" on the island. Calderón not only opened the doors for young black women, but his music illuminates the beauty of blackness to his audiences so that they in turn can learn about black communities. Calderón’s movement deserves critical scholarly attention, particularly as new black identities continue to emerge in relation to the constant circulatory flows of people, language, music, and fashion, all of which inform discourses on race relations and black identity.

The consumer culture, language, and race relations of the United States have impacted Puerto Ricans more than those of any other country in the western hemisphere, though they have also been strongly influenced by Latin American and Caribbean flows of people (migrants and exiles), culture, and language. These international influences and circulatory flows are in competition with the island’s collective identity and its nationally-constructed sense of Puerto Ricanness. Today, following 113 years of American political influence and the effects of transnational cultural flows, the hegemonic social classes have definitively defined “true” Puerto Ricans as white, middleclass consumers of U.S.-based middleclass values and race standards.
Lo “negro,” by contrast, lives in the “basement,” to paraphrase José Luis González’s analysis of the Puerto Rican nation.⁵

During my fieldwork, I searched for images of Black Puerto Rican women in television commercials, billboards, magazines, and daily newspapers, and found them to be largely unrepresented. When Black women do appear in advertisements, they are presented as folklorized images of Blackness. It was almost impossible to escape from these depictions of Black Puerto Rican women. On 17 August 2004, I found an advertisement for Citibank and MasterCard that featured a street vendor of fried fish, commonly known as a fritolera, that was published in the island’s leading newspaper, El Nuevo Día.⁶ Not surprisingly, this ad used folklorized images and related discourses to represent Black Puerto Rican women even though the immediate objective was to sell a credit card.

---

⁵ *El país de los cuatro pisos.*

⁶ The half-page color advertisement provides a detailed listing of Citi® services including Citi® Photo card with Citi® Identity Theft Solutions. In Puerto Rico, images and advertisements from Citi® Groups campaigns are found everywhere, including bus stops, billboards, newspapers, television, and online.
What caught my attention about this advertisement was the familiar depiction of the Piñones kiosks and the fritolera selling codfish-fritters along the roadside. An ancestral Maroon⁷

⁷Ahora puedes eliminar de tu lista algo que creías improbable. (Original text of advertisement in Spanish.)
community that has been fighting the expropriation of their lands for more than 400 years populates the Piñones area. Local developers and government authorities have long disputed the Black population’s claims to ownership, though they have failed to effectively privatize the coastal territories they occupy. The U.S. federal government has often had to step in to protect the Piñones community from efforts designed to displace them, an ironic turn of events given that the United States is often cast as a bastion of racism by numerous Puerto Ricans. Today, the Piñones culture has become an object of consumption as a result of the rise of tourism in coastal regions. As one of the participants of my study asserts, “tourists arrive in bulk in order to consume Puerto Rican African culinary delights . . . and of course women.” Resonating with this analysis, the fritolera in the advertisement laughs as she helps another customer. The fritoleras interviewed in this study detail how selling frituras became a form of employment for successive generations of women in their families. Many of these fritoleras are self-employed entrepreneurs who sell at their kioskos in order to supplement family incomes, though for some selling frituras is their only source of earnings. The kioskos located on the shores generally lack electricity, water, and/or access to public transit. Cash, not credit, is the way to conduct business in such areas lacking a basic infrastructure.

The kiosk in the advertisement thus appears to be self-made and in poor condition. Plantains hang in a corner as pots stand ready to fry the next batch of fritters. Behind the fritolera in the ad, a sign that reads “Frituras Fat-Free” can potentially be read as mocking her outdated and detrimental dietary habits of cooking fried food. On the other hand, the sign might be a

---

8 When runaway slaves banded together and subsisted independently they were called Maroons.
9 Cotto, Cándida, A Rare Happy Ending: Piñones Versus the Developer. Vol. 40 • November 2007 • N
10 Similarly, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is designed to police racist hiring policies in the island.
symbol of how the new; more fat-conscious dietary culture of the U.S. has impacted Puerto Ricans and helped to Americanize the codfish-fritter, bacalaito. Either way, the “Frituras Fat-Free” sign implies the backwardness of the cultural ways of Black Puerto Rican people. The ad thus raises the question of how the fritolera can become a “modern” individual. Is it by obtaining a MasterCard, or by changing her traditional dietary habits? Does the ad suggest that Black Puerto Rican women can now obtain credit and thereby gain a citizenship equal to that of the rest of our Puerto Rican sisters? What is the place, it asks most broadly, of Black women in contemporary Puerto Rican society?

To contextualize the “Fritoleras and Citibank” text in my study, I first examine the discourses of blackness within wider Latin American and Spanish Caribbean contexts. Angela McRobbie suggests that ethnographic work is the best way to gain an understanding of “the social conditions and experiences, which play a role in constituting subjectivities and identities” (McRobbie, 1994: 193). I then use multiple analytic methods, including the aforementioned ethnography and autoethnographic research, to approach Black Puerto Rican women’s responses to the ad from within the culture of racial silence facilitated by Puerto Rican society. Indeed, when I was a little girl I learned not to speak of differences. In Puerto Rico, Blackness is unspoken and this inability to assert Black identity and report racism has become part of the island’s oppressive system of hegemonic racial silence. In counterpoint to this imposed muteness, I wish to use autoethnography primarily to voice my own experiences of mediating blackness in a nation that practices racism while claiming racial democracy. I begin with my own story as a neocolonial subject, autoethnographically charting my quest for agency and an independent voice. This process of self-reflexivity allows me in turn to understand and respect the opinions of other Puerto Rican women in my study. It also allows me to examine how issues
of race, gender, and class pass through systematic social relations of oppression and privilege to allow black women to form an identity.

**Historical Representations of Black Women**

The nineteenth century European discourse on race and sexuality had an enormous influence on the ways Puerto Rican intellectuals defined black and mulatto female bodies in relation to the construction of the Puerto Rican nation during the *Generación de los Trientas* (the 1930s Generation). This term refers to the historical cultural nationalist project which contextualized the hacienda world of the nineteenth century and the sweeping changes of modernization of the twentieth century (Roy-Fèquiére 2004). The *Generación de los Treintas* also imagined a rigid gender order whereby the white elite would maintain their privileges over mulatto women and women of the black working classes by claiming a direct link to “*la madre partria,*” or the Spanish motherland, as well as its culture, values, religion, language, and history (Roy-Fèquiére, 2004). In expressing this Hispanophilia, the Puerto Rican *criollo* or white intellectual elite from that era attempted to evoke the intellectual tradition and the ideals of womanhood, honor, and decency of a Europeanized culture in order to resist the cultural and social pressures of U.S. imperialism. The literary work of the *Generación de los Trientas* is key to understanding the relation between its push for an independent Puerto Rican cultural nationalism and its parallel policies of racial and gendered order. It is equally crucial to understand the nineteenth century discourses these orders draw upon as mapping relations of race, gender, and sexuality as well as practices for controlling “deviant” and “uncivilized” racialized bodies, a phenomenon which I will discussed in length in chapter 2.

The historical work engaging in nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses of race calls attention to the way black women’s presence and image was presented in Puerto Rican
society, and accordingly this scholarship helps me contextualize a historical view of the discourses, popular expressions, and practices by which black women were culturally imagined. The images of Mama Inés, laundresses, domestic workers and/or fritoleras are created in relation to a dual colonial history that is unique to the island. Martínez-Vergne (1999) notes that depictions of the political and intellectual elite present the island as spatially segregated in the nineteenth century, with middle class groups dwelling in different locations and socializing in different public venues. She writes that San Juan’s middle class began to define themselves in the midst of rapid social and economic change due to the rapid migration of populations from coastal and mountainous regions of the island. Space (divided along lines of public/private or center/periphery) was consequently critically guarded by San Juan’s middle class, which implemented legal codes in order to police certain areas and maintain separation from the deviant, the poor, and the racialized gendered bodies. Matos Rodríguez charts the development and historical evolutions of domestic workers in nineteenth century, and ultimately argues for the direct relation between the impact of urban slavery (prior to abolition) and domestic labor (after abolition) and the socio-economic development of San Juan during this century. Matos Rodríguez states that in urban enclaves such as San Juan, domestic laborers and slave women did similar domestic chores, serving as laundresses, nannies, and maids (p.63). His work on domestic laborers is in conversation with my dissertation because the image of la fritolera analyzed in my audience study speaks to the formal and informal economies that occurred before and after the abolition of slavery, which heavily impacted black women’s experiences in the

---

11 Matos Rodríguez acknowledges that San Juan during “the first two-thirds of the nineteenth-century . . . was one of the most important political, intellectual and economic centers. At the time of abolition, San Juan was the city with the highest number of domestic laborers” (1998, p. 63).
Caribbean. In the context of black female bodies in the nineteenth century in the city of Ponce, Puerto Rico, Súarez-Findlay (1999) discusses how popular conceptualizations of honor, gender, and race helped to control of female bodies. She explores how women, especially women of color, found their bodies encoded through racialized and gendered precepts of morality and honor via institutions such as the church and the state. Discourses imbuing women of color with immorality and hypersexuality classified them as failed members of society and called for the state to monitor these bodies.

Turning to the twentieth century, Cuban poetry, fiction, and visual art as well as the Poesía negròide movement in Puerto Rico heavily influenced the development of such stereotypical cultural icons as Mama Inés or la mulata cubana. These problematic representations of black women spread throughout the island through such popular media as Cuban radio and telenovelas and popular music, and these media often worked to associate black women with the Caribbean sugar and coffee economy. Other works have highlighted this tendency of racialized images of women to become associated with products of the plantation economy at this time, among them Vera M. Kutzinski’s Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism (1993) and Verena Stolcke’s Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society (1989).

---

12 Ponce is the island’s second largest city after San Juan.
13 Mama Inés became a popular due to a 1930s song by the renowned musical figure Ignacio Jacinto Villas, who was known as "Bola de Nieve" (Snow Ball). His lyrics drew upon the work of the famous Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, some of which—"Ay Mama Inés, Ay Mama Inés todos los negros tomamos café"—became an advertising jingle for the Yaucono Café Company in Puerto Rico. Mama Inés has been the symbol of Café Yaucono since 1963.
Race, Gender and the Yaucono Café Company (1950s)

Stereotypical representations of Black women in commercial media became increasingly prevalent and available to viewers with the advent of television in Puerto Rico. This is not to say that negative imagery did not circulate via other means, but with the increased presence of the television in Puerto Rican living rooms, stereotypical imaginings of Black women were greatly reinforced. Crucially, too, television entered Puerto Rican culture during a period of economic upheaval and local political uncertainty. Modernization, industrialization, and massive Puerto Rican migration to the United States occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1950s also marked Puerto Rico’s transformation into a U.S. Commonwealth, a somewhat ambiguous political status that allows for local governmental sovereignty but which maintains the island’s complete socio-economic dependency on the U.S. mainland. Puerto Rican cultural identity became institutionalized in response to these upheavals, and stereotypical images of black women consequently became central to this newly refined concept of national culture.

One of the first images of Black women on commercial television during this period, for example, was presented by the Yaucono Café Company. Utilizing television commercials, advertisements, and marketing promotions, the company embarked upon an advertising campaign that featured the iconic figure of Mama Inés. The company produced a television commercial wherein Mama Inés is portrayed by a local Black actress, Carmen Belén Richardson, who wears a maid’s uniform and a white head bandana similar to that worn by mammy figures in the U.S. Richardson is shown singing the Yaucono coffee jingle and serving coffee to a white Puerto Rican couple. Richardson’s portrayal of a mammy figure symbolizes Black women’s generally low socio-economic condition following the common experience of slavery in the

---

14 Don Tommy Muñiz, a famous Puerto Rican actor, played a role in this same commercial.
U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean. My comparison between Mama Inés and mammies in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean will serve primarily to note the similarities in the early representations of Black women in advertising in the 1950s, though the history of the commercialization of Black Caribbean women as mammies and/or Mama Inés’ remains a fruitful area of research. The Yaucono commercial’s depiction of race and gender from television’s earliest days also suggests the degree to which Puerto Rican society was already operating along a number of problematic conceptualizations of gender and race.¹⁵

**Race and Gender: Afro Sheen and Soul Train (1960s – 1980s)**

In the 1960s, the impact of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and its corresponding outpouring of Black culture were becoming increasingly visible in Puerto Rico. Black Puerto Ricans on the island began to wear the “fro,” to use Strawberry Afro Sheen (a strawberry essence hairspray used to add shine to the afro hair style), and to watch such U.S. television shows such as *Julia*, which were dubbed in Spanish. The show *Soul Train* offered Puerto Ricans a mediated, U.S.-influenced Black cultural space that provided audiences with a comparative lens with which to view other aspects of Blackness from around the globe. *Soul Train* helped popularize the afro as well, which was sported by persons in my high school, *las plazas*, and the discos. The performance of Blackness was fashionable in Puerto Rico, yet its cultural and consumer products were disassociated from the monumental social and racial accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In Puerto Rico, Blackness was reduced to the consumption of U.S. Black popular culture, whether in the form of hairdos or sporting “urban-ghetto” fashions.

¹⁵ Depictions of Puerto Rican racial hierarchies in mainstream media include "*Lirio Blanco,*" a funny, extremely tall girl (played by the black actress Carmen Belén Richardson) who could open her eyes extremely wide in amazement, in *El colegio de la alegría*; and Susa Cruz, a *fritolera* in the television show *El kiosko budweiser,* played by the actress Magaly Nydia Velázquez.
In addition, while the popularity of Black culture from the U.S. was accepted in some Black and non-black communities on the island, it was mocked by other sectors of Puerto Rican society. For one, the *roqueros*, Puerto Ricans who consume U.S. rock music, tended to devalue Black culture (see Aparicio, 1999; Báez, 2006; and Giovannetti, 2003). Rivero notes, too, the uproar that resulted from the superstar singer Lucecita Benítez going “natural” by wearing her hair in an afro on television (Rivero, 2005, p.67-85).

*Soul Train, Cleopatra Jones, Shaq,* and many other Black shows and films produced in the U.S. became available to Puerto Ricans during the 1970s and 1980s, yet very little has been written about the ways that U.S. Black culture influenced Black Puerto Rican women. This is quite surprising given the heavy attention Black feminist media scholars have paid to Black women’s objectification in the media. It is important to remember that the power of Black representation in one locale has the potential to impact other Black communities. In a global and highly visual culture, we cannot ignore the significant ways in which the U.S. media has disseminated images of Blacks and women, or the ways in which such images have heavily influenced neocolonial subjects.

By contrast, television stations in the island during the late twentieth century continued to present stereotypical and racist imagery. A number of female Black face characters, for instance, continued to be part and parcel of Puerto Rican television well into the 1970s. The most famous of there were Chianita and Panchita, two Black *negra* housemaid characters in the popular show *El Hijo de Angela María* in 1973 (Rivero, 2005, p.91). As white actresses painted in blackface continued to enter Puerto Rican living rooms, audiences were encouraged to mediate Blackness

---

16 The American black power movement, for instance, influenced such black Puerto Rican activists as Carmen Belén Richardson and Sylvia del Villar in the fight against stereotypical representations of black women in local television. (See: Rivero, 2005).
through clichéd representations of Caribbean *negras*. Moreover, these characterizations of Caribbean *negras* subtly connected blackness with the history of the institution of slavery and sugar plantations in Puerto Rico. I argue that portrayals of Caribbean *negras* in Puerto Rico opened avenues for critical discourse because they challenged the traditional regimes of representation. Caribbean *negras* were portrayed as foreign and “Caribbeanesque.” This maneuver does not exclusively distance blackness from the composition of Puerto Rican national identity. Despite proclaimed ideologies and popular myths, I propose that the embodiment of black women in portrayals of Caribbean *negras*, at the time where American black rights movement was working to posit a ‘place’ for black women, questioned the institutionalized representations of women and allowed them to exercise agency. Particularly, the stereotypical representation of black bodies as shown in telenovelas and television programs in the 1960s and 1970s were in conflict with the more assertive production of black arts, literature, and music that took place in the United States and Latin America.

The black arts movements, such as the *Movimento negro* in Brazil, brought growing awareness to the need to assertion a sense of black identity in the island. As Michael Mitchell writes

> Afro-Brazilians as well have contributed to this growing awareness through forceful assertions of their collective racial identity. They have used various means available to them to challenge entrenched notions of racial democracy, the presumed benign effects of the process of miscegenation, and the subordination of racial interests to interests of class

---

17 Caribbean *Negras*, or *Negras Caribeñas*, were the most popular characterizations of black women in Cuban and Puerto Rican radio and television telenovelas. Ethnically ambiguous, their origins located somewhere in the Caribbean, these characters were depicted as “classic” *negra* women. (Rivero, 2005, p.91).
in movements of mass insurgency. The range of this expression, in newspapers, poetry, popular songs, and scholarly monographs Afro-Brazilians have asserted their identity as people of African identity on the one hand, and as Brazilians with special claims to make on Brazilian society for the inequities suffered as a consequence of slavery's legacies (1992, p. 17).

The significance of the American black movement of the 1960s brought a broad agreement on the meaning of the modern African diaspora. Michael Hanchard acknowledges that during movimento negro in the 1990s, the Brazilian black public sphere expanded in reach and complexity as Black artists and activists explored linkages with other African diaspora communities. Nevertheless, black women in the public imaginary continue to fight for their “place” in Brazilian society.

*Las Cacolinas, Las Cacos(as) and Reggaetoneras (1990s – Present)*

A short-lived contemporary representation of Black Puerto Rican women in the media was manifested within the cultural phenomenon of Reggaetón, a hybrid musical genre combining reggae, hip-hop, and rap that became popular in the island starting in the 2000s. While the Reggaetón fad eschewed denigrating folkloric depictions of Black women, it also facilitated newer representations of *reggaetoneras, cacolinas*, and *las cacas*. These terms, which are used in a denigrating fashion to refer to female Reggaetóneras consumers, remain problematic.

For those like me who grew up listening and dancing to salsa music in Puerto Rico, the term *cocola* was a sexually charged and negative slur, depending on who said it, in what context, and where (Aparicio, 1998, p. 69) As I realized during my research, newer terms such as *reggaetoneras, cacolinas*, or *las cacas* have replaced *cocola*. Just like their predecessors, however, the newer terms remain charged with connotations surrounding race, gender, class, and
morality. What has changed is the music that the younger audiences who use these terms prefer, as well as the fact that the dances that accompany the newer genres of music are thought to be more provocative and sexualized than salsa. The Reggaetón musical genre became a global phenomenon, and as it became commercialized and mainstreamed the presence of Black artists and dancers became “unpopular,” particularly with American Spanish-speaking media, advertising, and marketing companies (Báez, 2006; Dávila, 2001; and Rivera, 1996).

On the island today, advertising and media firms continue to present folklorized depictions of race and gender. Blacks are often depicted as living in undeveloped coastal or urban locations, for instance, including such municipalities as Loíza, Carolina, and Ponce. The northeast region of the island in particular has been cast as a wellspring of pre-modern culture and portrayed as a living vestige of the past. In short, blackness is affiliated with a bygone era and ascribed to specific geographic locales. As a whole, within Puerto Rican popular culture and media Blackness is predominantly associated with slavery, inferiority, backwardness, ignorance, comic entertainment, hypersexuality, and an underprivileged socioeconomic status. Blackness is seldom acknowledged, praised, or used as a concept to empower people in the island. To address that grave imbalance, my research is designed to support Black Puerto Rican women’s efforts to resist and subvert the hegemonic racial and gender stereotypes circulating in the media and society at large.

**Audience Ethnographic Study**

Following my autoethnography, I examine audience readings of the “Fritoleras and Citibank” text. In order to understand the ways in which women, and in particular Black Puerto Rican women, deal with folklorized images in the media, I conducted one focus group in the La 26 community in Carolina. I interviewed 20 women, whose occupations ranged from Fritoleras
in Piñones to school teachers in Carolina, and whose ages ranged from 18 to 40, regarding their thoughts about the ad. The levels of education achieved by these women ranged from high school diplomas to college degrees. In terms of the racial breakdown of my interviewees, eight dark-skinned women who live in Piñones identified themselves as Black Puerto Rican women; two Puerto Rican/Colombian women self-identified as Black; and one Dominican/Puerto Rican along with nine other women identified themselves as Trigueñas, a local cultural and racial term often used as an alternative for the term negra to describe a person with wheat-hued or medium brown skin color. As a researcher and a self-proclaimed Trigueña woman, I knew my racial currency would help me approach the difficult discussions of race and racism. Sharing in the experiences of my participants was crucial for understanding the way local, subtle forms of racism effect Black women in the island. My position as a researcher did bring my place within the community into question because I am a college educated woman who lives “afuera” on the U.S. mainland. Nevertheless, my Trigueña or negra identity significantly helped me relate to the reality of living as a Black woman in Puerto Rico and to understand how Black women conceive of their own identities. What was challenging as an interviewer was to note the degree of anger, or perhaps even rage, many of my participants felt concerning their representation in media.

In addition to this focus group, I interviewed two commercial media professionals from Puerto Rico, both of whom were non-Blacks. In doing so, I wanted to find out how media producers view Black women, and how they go about identifying and catering to this population’s consumer needs. I also conducted participant observation as part of my ethnography by immersing myself in a number of locations throughout Puerto Rico, including the Piñones kioskos, beauty salons, corner stores, bars, and malls. My aim was to observe how Black women respond to the representation of blackness in media and advertisements at a daily level.
A Site of Contestation: The Coastal and Caseríos

In Puerto Rico the opposition between the coast and the interior and between the coastal/urban and rural laborer positions are subsumed by the tripartite classification of \textit{el negro}, \textit{el blanco}, and \textit{el jíbaro} in society. . . . A mythico-historical figure called a \textit{jíbaro} . . . has become the bearer of a nascent Puerto Rican identity and symbolically represents blacks who are marginalized (Whitten and Torres, 1998: 289).

As mentioned, the Piñones district along Puerto Rico’s coastline is home to a number of Black \textit{fritoleras} and Maroon communities. Known for their large percentages of Black residents, Piñones and the urban city of Carolina help to contextualize the racialized terrains of the nation in my study. Specifically, \textit{El Centro}, or the downtown area, of Carolina as well as the community of \textit{Severo Quiñones}—also known as \textit{La’ 26, Las Veintiséis Casitas}, and the La 26 residential community—will serve as loci for examining Puerto Rico’s Black residents.

According to the 2006 American Community Survey, Carolina is home to 187,578 people, approximately 16.5\% of whom are Black/African-American, while 53.1\% are White.\textsuperscript{18} The demographic distribution of Carolina stands out starkly when compared to data from the 2000 U.S. census, which found that 80\% of Puerto Ricans identify themselves as White, and only 8\% as Black or African-American.\textsuperscript{19} Despite, or perhaps because of, its extensive Black population and its wealth of Black culture, Carolina is largely ignored among scholars. In any case, what makes Carolina a fascinating place of study alongside Piñones is its population, which is socially

\textsuperscript{18} www.census.gov/acs/www/SCensusFlyerPR.htm
\textsuperscript{19} http://factfinder.census.gov
stratified along racial and class lines. Economic expansion in the Carolina municipality was facilitated by its proximity to Puerto Rico’s capital, San Juan, as well as by the growth of pharmaceutical industries in the 1960s and 1970s. While these developments brought profits to U.S. corporations and local White, upper class members of society, they also generally failed to aid a large population of poor Black laborers in the area. These communities have concentrated in Carolina and nearby coastal towns such as Guayama, Loíza, and Rio Grande, among others. They were driven there by the region’s two major industries: sugar production and, later, manufacturing. A legacy of these industries as well as earlier colonial plantations, Carolina’s racialized urban terrain and stratified labor economy represent—literally and figuratively—the marginalization of Blacks in Puerto Rico. This long history of economic disenfranchisement and spatial dislocation has helped develop, among other stereotypes, the notion that all Blacks are poor and live on the coast. I will discuss later how this coastal discourse is part of the folklorization of Blackness that keeps Blacks at the periphery of the idealized, homogenous Puerto Rican “nation.”

**Theoretical Framework**

Overall, the process of mediating blackness in Puerto Rico is one caught in the dual tensions between the local media’s inscriptions of black women as folklorized on the one hand, and the influences of U.S. popular culture and additional transnational media on the other. What is crucial here is the understanding that media messages and their representations do not work in a vacuum but form part of a broader social and cultural network, and that media itself is not a monolithic body that operates as a single, unified, controlling entity. Instead, media compose a complex set of production and consumption practices. In the case of Puerto Rico from 2003 to 2006, for instance, the influence of localized media began to dwindle following their purchase by
American media conglomerates. A vast majority of television programming now comes from off-shore corporations (for example, telenovelas produced in Latin America) and U.S.-based, Spanish language commercial media. In spite of this narrowing of diversity, it is important to compare Black women’s representation in one media to racial and gender representations in another. Approaching media from this standpoint allows me to critically combine elements of existing theories in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between various media, Puerto Rican cultural identity, and black identity at the collective and individual levels. More specifically, my work is centrally interested in advertising and the way black women are represented in the Citibank advertisement mentioned above. It will be crucial not to examine advertising in insolation, however, but to also explore the representations of black women in different mass media forms, such as newspapers, television, radio, and Internet. The images of advertisements operate in a system of sign that can never work in isolation from other signs or cultural factors.

Mediating blackness is also a process that necessarily interacts with the commonly-held beliefs and daily practices of racially mixed populations in Puerto Rico and other Latin American and Caribbean countries. My dissertation thus explores the production, representation, and consumption of media by populations, and incorporates academic arguments on the shifting roles and boundaries of media in daily life. My central discussion of media accordingly draws upon several fields of academic inquiry, among them media studies, black feminism, body politics, and the study of racial blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean, though it is ultimately grounded in cultural studies approaches to media studies.

Among these common conceptions that must be addressed is the dominant notion of Puerto Rico as a culturally unified nation that has produced a racially mixed, democratic society.
Representations of this unified Puerto Rican culture are presented in such institutions as museums, the government, the education system and other “official” cultural sites. In response to this collective Puerto Rican cultural identity, forming a racial identity is often a struggle for some non-white Puerto Ricans (See: my autoethnography in Chapter 3), especially when Puerto Rican blackness is represented as folklorized, and when racism is a tacit component of official culture (Warren-Colón, 2003, p.664). Scholars have given only minimal attention to this phenomenon, and to the dismissive or stereotypical treatment of black women’s bodies through their folklorized representations in popular culture and other media.

The need to pursue this kind of investigation of media representations is reinforced by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, who contends that Black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images about their bodies and their culture. The media’s portrayal of Black women as fritoleras, mammies, las cacas, mulatonas, “negra penepes, “ and “pro-statehood welfare recipients” reflect the oppression of Black Puerto Rican women in society at large. As Hill Collins (1990) asserts, challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme of Black feminist thought (p.69). Similarly, Latinas and third world feminists have brought to light the U.S. media’s long history of obsessively objectifying brown bodies. This brand of body politics was first used in 1970s during the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States, and it originally involved speaking out against the objectification of the female body and violence against women and girls, and promoting reproductive rights for women, regardless of their race (Triechler, 1996). Today, Black and Women of Color (WOC) feminist and media scholars are making significant contributions to the fields of media and cultural studies by developing new methods for combating ideologies of gender that promote sexist representations of women as well as ideologies of race that utilize biased representations of people of color and
other minority groups (Dines and Humez, 2003, p. 11). Drawing upon these precedents, the theoretical framework of body politics in my dissertation will refer to the practices and policies through which powers internal and external to Puerto Rican society cooperate to regulate racialized and gendered bodies, as well as the various struggles between the individual and the social over control of the body.

In order to better understand how my work draws upon theories of body politics, it is important to note that the island’s dual colonial experiences under the rule of Spain and, later, the United States have profoundly shaped the way Puerto Ricans view themselves. In an effort to define themselves apart from their colonial rulers, Puerto Rican nationalists’ discourses drew on a generalized ideology of racial mixture (mestizaje) that encouraged citizens to categorize themselves by their nationality first and then by color. Peter Wade (1995) notes a similar policy of ignoring racial difference in his study of blackness in Choco, Columbia. The desire to define their society and its values as a unified whole led local government elites in Puerto Rico to manipulate ideas about nationhood as well as about femaleness and Blackness, however. In Puerto Rico they did so, and continue to do so, by exploiting already existing symbols in the media. As Hill Collins (2000) contends these representations do not necessarily reflect a reality but rather “function as a disguise, a mystification of objective social relations” (p.69). What is at play in body politics on the island thus includes disciplinary practices designed to reinforce widely-circulated conceptions of morality, respectability, and honor by regulating the deviant racial body (Martínez-Vergne, 1999 and Suárez Findlay, 1999). As Ann Stoler (1995) contends, nineteenth century discourses of sexuality did more than prescribe behavior; they also denoted how a fundamentally bourgeois identity was tied to notions of sex, European culture, and racial whiteness. Similarly, in their construction of a sense of Puerto Ricanness the island’s elites
adopted attitudes and values through which Black Puerto Rican women were positioned as outsiders, and thereby as points from which other (white, Hispanic-descent) women were able to define their sexual, racial, and cultural normality. The elites used media images to define Black women as counterpoints to ideals about sexuality as well as ideologies of gender that involved issues of morality and honor. The manipulation of media images has historically been designed, in short, to define a “normal” Puerto Ricanness against Black Puerto Rican women, and to make sexism, racism, and economic imbalance appear naturalized, “common sense,” and inevitable parts of life.

In Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, issues involving race and racism are handled both by a mechanism of denial and by an official celebration of the racial mixture of the population. Many scholars have already written about the exclusionary practices of mestizaje, Puerto Rico’s official racial policy wherein colorblindness is lauded despite its discrimination against blacks and other minority populations. I will discuss the true impact of mestizaje below, but suffice it to say at this point that Black women must mediate their Blackness in a society wherein mestizaje, unofficial racism, and policies of blanqueamiento (whitening) all coexist. This latter term refers to a practice of diluting “inferior” racial stock by marrying Whites in order to obtain more desirable physical characteristics and cultural ties. I demonstrate Trigueñidad to be a more recent response among Blacks on the island to such racist policies, the lack of contemporary media representations of Blackness, and the obscured narratives of Black heritage.

**Lo no definido: Trigueñidad**

“I am a Trigueña woman,” says Rocío. “No, you are a Black Puerto Rican woman,” counters Hilda, Rocío’s mother. For Hilda, “Trigueña is ‘lo no definido,’” that is, an open-ended

---

term (from interview, 2005). This mother-and-daughter dialogue dramatizes the simultaneous existence and extinction of Black identity within the Puerto Rican mestizaje ideology of “no racism.” For many women on the island, Trigueñidad is a helpful response to this ideology, one that intersects with and responds to issues involving representations of gender and class as well.

In her discussion of the poetry of the Puerto Rican mulata writer Carmen María Colón Pellot (b. 1911), Gladys M. Jiménez-Muñoz describes how Puerto Rican women made sense of their gendered and racialized positions within interwar society. Jiménez-Muñoz argues that Colón Pellot had to renounce her own mulata identity in order to enter the national dialogue surrounding race. She was forced to adopt a language that would identify her as "Creole;" only in doing so could she be recognized as a legitimate voice at the national level. She could not, in short, identify herself racially beyond what defined Puerto Ricanness (Jiménez-Muñoz, 79).

Much as Colón Pellot negotiated racial politics through the use of the term Creole, I propose that Black women use Trigueña to make sense of their gendered, classed, and racialized positions within contemporary Puerto Rican society.

“Black and White racial identifiers are already defined,” Hilda asserted in one of our discussions. While Whiteness is equated with privilege, status, entitlement, decency, and power in Puerto Rico, Blackness represents disenfranchisement, backwardness, the primitive, the hypersexual, poverty, and indecency.21 In Puerto Rico Black women must fight racism in a culture of silenced hegemony wherein racism is officially non-existent. They must wrangle with a nationalist ideology that opposes dominant American colonialist discourses by suggesting that racism is an external problem located only within the United States. I refer specifically here to

---

21 See Jiménez-Muñoz, Roy-Féquière, and Suárez Findlay.
the previously mentioned “mestiza family” ideology, a concept that has silently disguised racial hierarchy under the official stance of “racial democracy.”

The notion of racial democracy forwarded by the Puerto Rican elite is a myth, and the status quo is begging for a paradigm shift to facilitate social and racial justice. The concept of “mestizaje” provides a double shot of oppression by allowing state-sanctioned racism to join the sexism that is rampant in contemporary Puerto Rican society. Black women accordingly must mediate Blackness within a conceived nation that has never acknowledges them as full citizens. Fighting for their rights, striving for equality, and/or asserting a Black identity are acts that have historically been punishable through the “hegemony of silence” over race. Indeed, such acts are viewed as a betrayal to the Puerto Rican “mestiza family.” If Puerto Ricans are to transform their “nation” into a truly democracia racial (racial democracy) then nuanced analysis, conceptualizations, and negotiations of everyday racism among non-elites is required.

Rivero has written extensively about the role of media and television in the representation of Blackness in Puerto Rico under the reign of the mestiza ideology. She notes that Lucecita Benítez, an internationally-acclaimed Puerto Rican singer during the 1970s and 1980s, lost her contracts with television, media, and sponsor companies such as Toyota when she refused to change her Afro hairstyle. What is more, angry audiences wrote to television stations and magazines about Benítez’s “African look,” and many interpreted her hairstyle as an expression of African culture (Rivero, 2005, 75). These perturbed audiences suggest that in Puerto Rico dominant narratives depict “Blackness” and “African” culture as primitive and uncivilized as well as a disruption of the mestizaje racial ideology.

__________

The gendered and racialized body is thus under constant surveillance and is regularly juxtaposed with Western and European concepts of civilization, culture, and standards of beauty considered the norm by mainstream Puerto Rican society. Throughout their lives, Black women must witness the pervasive yet silenced configurations of White supremacy and racial inequality as they are manifested in both the public and private spheres.

Throughout this work, I argue that Black Puerto Rican women are adopting a Trigueña identity in response to this background of silenced inequality and hegemonic racial policies. By providing them with a voice and a language, a Trigueña identity allows Black women to navigate a perverse system of racial domination founded upon the pretense of antiracist ideals. Recognizing the undeniable social and economic privileges of Puerto Rican Whiteness, the open-ended term Trigueña gives Black women an approximation of “virtual Whiteness” and a way to mediate their invisibility within a complex society that is stratified by race and class (Nascimento, 2004). Indeed, as Magali Roy-Féquière asserts, the status of Black women in Puerto Rico has historically been mediated by a strict hierarchy of social class as well as color. Trigueñidad thus offers an identity that intrinsically addresses problems surrounding issues of gender, race, class, and patriarchy all at once.

Trigueña has recently become a common racial and cultural denominator within the contemporary Puerto Rican argot. Carlos Vargas Ramos (2005) argues that the term is a shifting racial identifier, a “modal category—a fluid term in Puerto Rico’s racial lexicon” (Ramos 270). In his study, Ramos uses Trigueña/o to refer to a White person’s tanned complexion. As a Trigueña woman, I suggest that brown and dark-skinned Puerto Ricans can use the term as well. I argue that Trigueñidad helps Blacks and Black women, in particular, to escape the biological

---

23 Roy-Féquière. 2004
assumptions involving race that are steeped in the conceptualization of a racially mixed Puerto Rican nation.

As their first-person narratives will show, Trigueñidad provides a conceptual lens, language, and voice for my interviewees with which to mediate old and new gendered and racialized identities. Trigueñidad provides elasticity that a brown- or dark-skinned woman can use to fit into a racially hierarchical society that privileges Whiteness. Moreover, Trigueñidad provides a place to negotiate a Black self-identity in opposition to concepts of Blackness controlled by dominant ideologies. Indeed, a Black self-identity can be mediated and redefined in the process of affirming a Trigueña racial identity.

Anthropologists and, more recently, media scholars have discussed the need to dismantle stereotypes surrounding race and gender as they relate to dichotomized ideas of self and other within Puerto Rican society. Specifically, Black women embody and must mediate many fields of “otherness” that stand in contrast to the normalized Puerto Ricanness. They are the “other” within fields of gender, race, and ethnic identity, as well as with regards to the issue of legal/illegal citizenship. This latter othering takes form in the island’s hostile attitudes towards the Dominican migrant population currently living in Puerto Rico, many of whom are dark skinned. Categorizing oneself as Trigueña thus appears to be another process of “blanquiamento.” These visibly “Black” women choose to identify themselves in a manner that is politically assertive on an island that condemns Blackness. The question is, do Trigueñas define themselves in a category of their own? Is Trigueña an identity apart from blackness?

On the island, race ranges along a continuum from White to Black, running through a variety of categories related to the presence of particular phenotypical traits, such as mulatto,
trigueño, and grifo (tight, curly hair), through which racial identification is evaded while maintaining white as superior (Jorge, 1986 and Quiñones, 2006).

Black Puerto Rican women are adopting a Trigueña identity in order to become political actors in a struggle for belonging. Preliminary observations among younger and older Black women in Carolina and Piñones suggest that younger generations prefer to be racially identified as Trigueñas. In contrast, older generations self-identified themselves as Negras, or Blacks. Trigueñidad is thereby not just situational but generational as well. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that older generations maintained a closer association with historical events and stories tied to Blackness as a result of growing up in Maroons communities such as Piñones or sugar plantation communities in Carolina, while younger generations lack these historical and community ties. This generational shift to Trigueña identity thereby reflects a response to dramatic changes in the social, economic, and political forces that have shaped and reshaped conceptual categories of identity over time on the island.

Gendered hegemonies throughout the world have privileged men with better opportunities and dominant positions in the social and economic realms, and Latin America and Caribbean societies have been no exception to this rule. In Puerto Rico economic opportunities are tied not only to race but to gender and class as well. However, dominant discourses of race in the island have combined with a lack of statistical figures regarding the racial stratification of labor in order to maintain the popular mantra that racism is non-existent in the economy. Consequently, those at the bottom of the class strata—predominantly the Black population, and Black women in particular—are described as victims of their own “natural” inability to progress rather than explicit racist, classist, and sexist practices (Ríos González and Alegría Ortega, 2005).
The political, cultural, and social matrices in Puerto Rico have also led to the silencing of discussions of women’s sexuality and sexual health, delaying feminist studies around these issues and making it difficult for women to organize in their defense. The country’s strong Catholic tradition and powerful clergy, which continue to hold influence in spite of the prevailing separation of church and state, have caused society at large to ignore controversial issues involving women’s sexuality unless they are forced into an open discussion. Since the 1990s, these debates have only occurred whenever arch-conservative groups have promoted measures that would undermine women’s access to abortion, or when activists have demand to end discriminatory legislation against gay, lesbian, transsexual, or transgendered persons. Race has only recently become a more salient issue of general social mobilization among feminists on the island, even though many come from poorer origins and are phenotypically Trigueños, mulattoes, or Black. As with many feminist organizations, the attention to race and sexuality are growing, however, and scholarly analyses of the differences and intersections of these crucial issues are much in need.

Particularly in the areas of gender and women’s studies, discussions of the interactions of gender, race, and labor within Puerto Rico have recently produced fruitful insights. Such scholarship highlights the implicit racism and sexism that have become long-standing traditions within the economic realm. In particular, gendered analyses of race have brought to light the color lines that crossed women’s employment in Puerto Rico between 1899 and 1930. By using census data as primary sources, both Crespo and Matos Rodríguez note that the economic opportunities available for Black women were primarily limited to working as domestic laborers, fritoleras, mondongueras—women who prepare mondongo, a tripe soup (Crespo, 1996)—or as lavanderas, or laundresses. As a result, servants and cooks were widely considered to be of both
a lower class and to hold a lesser racial status. To some degree the abolition of slavery tempered the stigmas surrounding the labor and class positions affiliated with Black women. Nevertheless, these ideas and related media images continue to reinforce common conceptions of menial labor as affiliated with poor, indecent, destitute Black women and to reify class-based differences along racial lines (Crespo, 1996).

Organizational Structure

The following is a brief overview of the major chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 2 examines the interdisciplinary discourses of race and nation in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean in relation to the construction of the Black female body within literature and popular culture. I describe how the Puerto Rican elite and certain academics began crafting a sense of Puerto Ricanness by asserting an ethnically and racially homogeneous nation in the 1930s and 1940s. This assertion was then challenged by a group of scholars contesting the “homogeneous” and racially-mixed nature of Puerto Rico’s mestiza family given its obfuscation of black citizens and culture. The literary movement known as Poesía Afro-antillana or Poesía negroide which flourished in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Dominican Republic around mid-century contested the work of earlier cultural elitists by confirming the presence of a black culture. I note how, in response, local governments institutionalized Puerto Ricanness in the 1950s by romanticizing by the preservation of the figure white creole el jíbaro. Intellectuals in the 1980s responded in kind by re-affirming the existence and resiliency of a black culture and black communities in Puerto Rico. By examining the racialized terminology applied in the 2000 U.S. census, I note that this struggle to find a place for blackness in a Puerto Rican society that continues to present itself as “mixed” is present still today.

24 Suárez Findlay.
My third chapter contains an autoethnographic essay which opens a dialogue with existent Puerto Rican literature concerning Black women’s experiences in asserting a Black identity in a society that castigates those who demand recognition of their race. Specifically, I discuss my efforts to assert a Black identity as a Trigueñita during my upbringing in Puerto Rico, known as the “Whitest of the Antilles” due to its notorious marginalization of black—and especially poor black—populations. The chapter ends with my experiences as an Afro-Puerto Rican coming to the United States to attend college, and contrasts the racialization processes I experienced in Puerto Rico and the mainland.

Chapter 4 provides analysis of Black women’s responses to the “Fritoleras and Citibank” advertisement and explores the relationship between content, production, and consumption in relation to audience responses to the text. The chapter goes on to articulate the manner in which racial identities are not understood to be fixed by my audience of fritoleras and Piñoneras. They present the racial mixture of Puerto Rican society as allowing a sort of “elasticity” and freedom to articulate and negotiate Black identities through processes such as Trigueñidad. Also included in this chapter are interviews with media and advertising professionals, who reveal the racially-biased hiring practices of Puerto Rican advertising firms.

The relationship between blackness and beauty in the discourses of gender and Puerto Ricanness is explored in Chapter 5. My analysis describes the ways in which black women address questions of womanhood and examines the media’s influence over what defines a woman, and specifically a beautiful woman, in contemporary Puerto Rican society. The black women responses to the way the black community deals with the untangling differences: Pelo Bueno y Pelo Malo (Good/Bad Hair) in the consumption of Whiteness and the replication of the process of blanqueamiento (Whitening) for the black community. I go on to note the impact of
American commercial products and popular culture, which transmit more contemporary, useful notions of blackness to Puerto Rican women. The chapter closes with a discussion of the “N” word (*negra*) as a contested racial term, the use of which is generational and situational. Younger black women, I argue, are increasingly rejecting the term in preference for *Trigueña*.

I end my work by reviewing how media can provide a useful framework for analyzing the overlaps of race, gender, and popular culture in Puerto Rico, and highlight proposals for future research into the ways in which localized and racialized identities are influenced by global media. Specifically, I argue that more research is needed to examine how black identities are negotiated and influenced by contemporary American and African American culture in black diaspora populations in Puerto Rico, Latin America, and the Spanish Caribbean. This research is particularly vital in countries such as Puerto Rico, wherein prevalent representations of race and gender too often rely upon folklorized stereotypes. Lastly, I demonstrate how my research should influence public policies and facilitate an awareness of existent U.S. policies in the island that could make a positive change to the living conditions of and opportunities available to black Puerto Rican women.

**Research Contribution**

The last few years have seen an extraordinary flowering of Black consciousness in Latin American and Puerto Rican academic debates. The particulars of examining the Puerto Rican “Other” have occupied the central focus of studies in cultural anthropology, history, and television audience studies, and have drawn attention from critical and Black Puerto Rican women scholars.\(^{25}\) Intellectuals and artists have organized around questions pertaining to the

\(^{25}\) For specific resources in cultural anthropology, see Dávila, 1999; Godreau, 1995 and 2008; and Torres, 1999 and 2006; in history, see Guerra, 1999; in television studies, see Báez, 2006
Black condition and racial identity in Puerto Rico, and have sought to examine what it means to be Black in contemporary Puerto Rican society. My research contributes to this expanding field, as well as to a new wave of feminist scholarship that seeks to examine gendered and racialized bodies in Puerto Rico and the Spanish-speaking Americas. I also hope to contribute to the study of media and culture through a feminist lens by introducing a female audience that is literally not counted by local and transnational media research companies and to impact Puerto Rican studies by conceptualizing the social and racial category Trigueñidad as a way to mediate Black identities. Recent studies of global culture, transnational movements, popular culture, and the myriad formations of new Black identities specific to this moment have offered key theoretical insights that have allowed me to intervene in these discussions surrounding the interactions of race, gender, and media in the island.

My aim here is to provide a glimpse of the complex issues surrounding identity that are contained within the Black Puerto Rican self. It is also to underline the significance of including gender issues in the discussion of how Black identities are presented in media, as little research has been conducted—whether in cultural, media, gender, or Latin American studies departments—that forwards the importance of gender considerations in this area. Perhaps above all, my intention is to encourage a debate on what I believe is a pervasive and absolute misrepresentation of Puerto Rico, a nation that claims to be more respectful of social equality and more tolerant of racial difference than on-the-ground experiences and certain media would suggest. This misguided representation of the nation is a reflection of the absence of critical

and Rivero, 2005. Puerto Rican scholars and artists of note engaged in this discussion include Isda E. Alegría Ortega, Palmira Ríos Gonzáles, Franco Ortíz, Quiñones Hernández, Carmen Rivera Lassén, and Mayra Santos-Febrés.
analysis and sincere, open political debate on the issues surrounding media, race, and gender in Puerto Rico and Latin America.
CHAPTER 2
MAPPING DISCOURSES OF BLACKNESS AND POPULAR CULTURE IN PUERTO RICO

Blanqueamiento (Whitening), mestizaje (Racial mixture), racial democracy, Trigueñidad and other concepts of racial and cultural mixing have played central roles in official, dominant notions of national identity in countries throughout Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean since the nineteenth century. These ideologies have generally downplayed the prevalence of contemporary racism by proclaiming a myth of racial democracy. Puerto Rico is no exception to this rule, as its nationalist discourse—which promotes the claim of Puerto Rico’s unique cultural and ethnic identity—homogenizes the country’s racial composition by erasing Blacks and other marginalized populations.

Unlike other independent Latin American and Caribbean nations, though, Puerto Rico has unique political and economic relations with the United States as a result of its Commonwealth status. These relations impose an additional colonialist discourse that dominates discussions of cultural politics in the island. The colonialist discourse argues that issues of race and racism are simply the outcome of U.S. colonialism and consequently are not part of the Puerto Rican racial paradise. Racism—so goes this line of reasoning—should not be discussed in Puerto Rico because, as people say, “aquí no somos racistas” (“here we are not racists”) like in the U.S.

Puerto Rico has been a colony for some 600 years, having been controlled first by Spain beginning in 1492 before it was ceded to the United States in 1898. Despite more than a century of U.S. sovereignty over the island, a distinct Puerto Rican identity is nonetheless well inscribed in the collective imaginary. Symbols such as the Puerto Rican flag, the national anthem,
professional sports leagues, and representatives in U.S. beauty pageants and the Olympic Games have helped to solidify the concept that the island is a unique nation.26

Indeed, nationalist discourses that have long prevailed among the island’s intellectual elite generally define a Puerto Rican identity in opposition to the U.S. and its colonial rule. Markers such as language, race, heritage, culture, values, space, locality, and economics are used to establish a nationalized and commercialized sense of Puerto Ricanness that is completely separate from Americanness. Regarding the contemporary formation of identity in Puerto Rican society, Scholar Efrén Rivera Ramos (2001) states that legal constructs and governing norms help shape a Puerto Rican identity that claims rights to United States citizenship while simultaneously asserting a separate cultural identity. He argues that the formation of Puerto Rican identity today is also informed by such factors as political party affiliations, place of birth and residence (whether on the island or the U.S. mainland), and even musical taste (whether Reggaetón or American Rock).

What follows is a preliminary discussion of the positions regarding race and race relations taken by Puerto Rican intellectuals and artists in the twentieth century as they sculpted a sense of Puerto Rican nationhood. This chapter is chronologically organized beginning in the 1930s, and will pay particular attention to the position these intellectuals and artists have taken concerning Black Puerto Rican women. The discourse surrounding Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean will provide an inter-disciplinary background for this discussion of the mapping, construction, and representation of national identity and its relationship with Blackness in Puerto Rico.

26 See Duany, 2002.
**Crafting Puerto Ricanness: 1930 – 1940**

Antonio S. Pedreira’s classic and pioneering work on Puerto Rican identity entitled *Insularismo* (1934) marked the beginning of the discussion among intellectuals in the island concerning the definition of the nation. The question of “Què somos y cómo somos?” (“Who are we as Puerto Ricans?”), became Pedreira’s preoccupation during the height of U.S. colonial rule. Pedreira strove to craft a national identity that was distinct from U.S.-based culture, morals, and values. As a result, he argued that the island’s Spanish colonial heritage might form the basis of Puerto Rican identity.

In his work, Pedreira asserts that the island was ethnically and culturally mixed by the 1930s, and was composed of a seamless fusion of Spanish, Indigenous, and African populations. The inevitable outcome of such a fusion, he contends, is the dilution of African blood within the superior blood of those of Spanish descent. Against the inferior African populations who dwelt in coastal areas, Pedreira asserts the cultural supremacy of the figure of the pale-skinned, mountain-dwelling *jíbaro*, who would become the backbone of Puerto Rican culture. 27 Pedreira’s nationalist ideas are the product of an era marked by scientific racism and pervasive White supremacy, as well as the outcome of a long-standing history of racism against Africans and indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. At its core the *mestizaje* ideology upon which Pedreira based his ideas was not unique to Puerto Rico, but rather it shared much of the blatant racism that he, along with numerous other intellectuals and politicians, attempted to cast as problematic only within the United States.

27 “A donde viven los negros” has become a popular phrase that indicates the marginal geographic sectors, usually along the coast, that are comprised predominantly of Black populations. Even today, coastal towns such as Loíza, Piñones, Carolina, and Ponce are associated with Black Puerto Ricans.
Innocent Game: Racism and Sexism

In El Prejuicio Racial en Puerto Rico (1940) (Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico), Tomás Blanco asserts that “el racismo es un inocente juego de niño,” that is, “racism is an innocent child’s game” on the island. He insists that racial miscegenation has led to racial equality and is thereby a form of “immunity against racism” (Jiménez Román, 1996, 19). Blanco looks closely at the ways in which racism is a “child’s game” by explaining how Puerto Rican culture maneuvers around issues of race and racism in everyday life, a process that continues today.

Euphemistic expressions, for instance, are used to simultaneously mask race, provide a measure of respectability, and/or paint a picture of neutrality in the face of discriminatory practices (Dulitzky, 2004, p. 4).

In order to elide the racist aspects of certain governmental policies and hiring practices, a variety of seemingly neutral terms are used to describe acts, which in fact are highly racially motivated. These ostensibly “gentle” practices include “customer screening or selection” (selección de clientes), "reservation of rights to refuse admission" (reserva de admisión), "proper attire" (buena presencia), and requiring photographs as part of job applications. Each of these practices allows employers to legally discriminate based upon skin tone and race.

Similarly, euphemistic expressions are used regularly to refer to Blacks, and particularly Black women. These include such terms of endearment as Negrita (“little Black”), Negra fina (“fine Black”), and the phrase “es negra pero inteligente” (“she is Black but intelligent”). The term Negra rubia, meaning “Black and blonde,” is used by Puerto Ricans to connote particularly attractive Trigueñas and dark-skinned women. Though they are ostensibly flattering, these terms are used to dismiss Blackness by suggesting that women can be attractive or intelligent in spite of their race. They emphasize the traits of attractiveness, beauty, and acceptability postulated by
Whites and males on the island (Guerra, 1994: 234). These terms also continue a tradition of reducing Blackness to the body that began in the 1930s and 1940s. These decades marked the rise of primitivism and sexualized ideologies of the racial “Other” that essentialized the Black female body into a locus of sexuality. Jiménez Muñoz (1996) states that the "authentic“ Puerto Rican self that emerged within the social sciences and humanities is ultimately European in origin and thereby devoid of any markers of African otherness.

Pedreira and Blanco were not alone in their interests in race, Puerto Rican identity, and nationhood. A debate over national identity occurred in the 1930s and 1940s that mobilized members of political parties as well as intellectuals on the island. The struggle to define the nation and attempts, like that of Pedreira, to isolate the cultural bedrock as “Hispanidad” became topics of discussion for historians, politicians, and artists alike. This latter group often contested the exclusion of Black populations and Black heritage from the construction of the Puerto Rican nation, and included authors such as Luis Palés Matos, Julio Vizcarrondo Coronado, and other poets who wrote in the so-called negroide vein and discussed Black Puerto Rican themes (Giusti-Cordero, 1996: 58).

**Poesía Afro-antillana and Poesía negroide**

Emerging in the 1920s and continuing through the 1960s, works in the genre of la poesía Afro-antillana or la poesía negroide²⁸ often speak explicitly of those excluded from the Puerto Rican nation’s imagined boundaries of both race and gender. The poets of la poesía negroide emphasized the African dimensions of Puerto Rico’s heritage, culture, vocabulary, and

²⁸ *La poesía negroide* is a genre that took form in the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba, during the early twentieth century (See: Guillén). Giusti-Cordero observes that Palés Matos’s poetry is full of onomatopoetic plays on Caribbean or African geography, and Afro-Puerto Rican words. Vizcarrondo’s poetry similarly draws heavily on Afro-Puerto Rican speech (59).
landscape, and they worked to idealize the traditional and rustic lifestyle of *los Negros de la costa*, that is, Black populations who live along the Puerto Rican coastlines. *La poesía negroide* questioned the official, dominant notions of Puerto Rican national identity that downplayed the prevalence of non-Hispanic races and racism in the island. The poems’ lyrics set to the pace of African drumming, focus on coastal primitivism, and use of Black vocabulary challenged the cultural bedrock of *Hispanidad* by pronouncing marginalized racial populations to be part of the Puerto Rican nation. In doing so they fought against such figures as linguist Manuel Alvarez Nazario, who proclaimed the “minor quantitative and qualitative importance of words of African or Afro-American roots to Hispanic-Puerto Rican vocabulary” (Nazario 229). In short, these poems re-centered Blackness when a Puerto Rican identity based upon Hispanic heritage was strongly promoted by the social elite and public intellectuals.

*La poesía negroide* has been characterized as celebrating such concerns as sensual and fluid body movements; cultural forms involving upbeat music and rhythms; Puerto Rico’s coastal landscape; and the culinary tastes of its inhabitants.\(^{29}\) Significantly the poems also celebrate *Mulata, Negra,* and *Trigueña* beauty, though they often present this beauty via descriptions of caricatured curvaceous bodies filled with primitive sensuality. Poems such as “*Que negrita condená,*” “*La mulata antillana,*” and “*Majestad Negra*” (“Black Majesty”) are a few examples of work that simultaneously celebrate and mock or trivialize curvaceous Black bodies.\(^{30}\)

More recently, these simplistic characterizations have been translated into the contemporary Puerto Rican imaginary as acceptable cultural images for understanding Black

---

\(^{29}\) Giusti, 1996.

women. Thus written predominantly by White and Mulattos, even la poesía negrőide fails to completely address the dual oppression of racism and sexism suffer by black women within the Puerto Rican imaginary.\textsuperscript{31} The poesía negrőide literary work posits Black women and their bodies as folkloric rather than as part of the ethnically and racially homogenized Puerto Rican national identity.\textsuperscript{32} The early literary representation of folklorized identity involves portraying the Black woman as a sensual, coastal, who is content, even happy to be a slave, laundress, or domestic worker, a portrayal which easily translates into a rationalization for economic as well as racial and sexual discrimination. Though Godreau suggests that representations of Blackness as folkloric are evidence of the celebration of African heritage, this representation actually serves the political, social, and economic interests of dominant Puerto Rican culture. This is not to say that Black women today are not contesting such representations, however, as they recognize that media and Puerto Rican culture have always objectified them as the “other.” Race, gender, and class are nonetheless used with the ideological intent to represent Blacks as separate from the White ideal. Representations such as those offered with some regularity in la poesía negrőide are used by power structures in the island, including media and advertising, to simultaneously maintain White hegemony and the myth of racial equality.

**Institutionalizing Puerto Ricanness (1950s)**

Developing a Puerto Rican identity based upon Hispanic elements became the official nationalist project following the public debate of the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{33} During the 1950s, the political sphere made concerted efforts to produce unified, national standards for representing

\textsuperscript{31} These poems narrate a specific time and space of the reality of black women, divisions of labor and the sexual power involved in the coast – by bodies, food, and rhythm
\textsuperscript{32} Godreau, 2009.
\textsuperscript{33} Dávila, 1997; Morris, 1995; and Duany, 2002.
Puerto Rican culture. Luis Muñoz Marín, who won the first free popular election for the governorship of Puerto Rico in 1948, and was later reelected in 1952 and 1956, led this project.

A resourceful and energetic early supporter of independence for Puerto Rico, Muñoz Marín later became a key figure in establishing the island as a Free Associated State or Commonwealth, in Spanish “Estado libre asociado.” The island retains this political and economic status to this day. As a result of becoming an Associated State, Puerto Rico was granted sovereignty over its internal affairs with the exception of areas wherein U.S. law is involved, such as public health, the armed forces, and the environment. The Puerto Rican government’s project of cultural nationalism subsequently established official policies, standards, and cultural platforms for representing Puerto Rican national identity. Muñoz Marín, his fellow leaders, and island intellectuals became the organizers and watchdogs of a state-sanctioned Puerto Rican culture that often romanticized Hispanidad and the legacy of the Spanish colonizers.\(^{34}\) For Blacks on the island this was a troubling development, as the colonial legacy had brought slavery and exclusionary practices that still affect much of the population to this day.

The result of this populist and patriarchal construction of Puerto Rican identity was the characterization of the nation as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous blend of Spanish, Indigenous, and African races. Following in the tradition of Pedreira, Muñoz Marín’s PPD party sought to recognize the jíbaro Puertorriqueño as the national symbol of Puertorriqueñidad.\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) The prevalence of Hispanidad marks the impact that issues of Hispanophilia and Afrophobia have had on national discourses in Puerto Rico. Hispanophilia embraces anything Hispanic (language, religion, traditions, and values), as well as Eurocentrism and blanqueamiento, while Afrophobia distances African heritage from the nation-building project while simultaneously rejecting the U.S. colonial regime and its racial polarization.

\(^{35}\) Dávila, 1995; Morris, 1995; and Torres, 1999.
Despite their claims for a racially blended society, championing the *paliducho* (pale-skinned) *jibaro* allowed Muñoz Marín and others to downplay the impact of Black Puerto Ricans on the newly-minted national identity. This cultural marginalization of Blacks deserves further study, for—as Arlene Torres’s anthropological fieldwork on the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico has suggested—communities of African descent in Puerto Rico yearn for recognition. Against a collective cultural identity that primarily emphasizes Spanish heritage and secondarily that of indigenous Caribbean populations; the impact of individuals of African descent has historically been underrepresented (Torres, 1998, 290).

During his governorship, Muñoz Marín created *El Instituto de la Cultura Puertorriqueña* (The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture), a governmental entity charged with defining and guarding “*la cultura Puertorriqueña*.” Consequently, some elements of popular culture were nationalized, such as the musical genres of *la plena* and *la danza*, two central forms of Puerto Rican popular music. Conflicts subsequently arose between the dominant *cultura Puertorriqueña* and aspects of Black culture. At best, Black culture was represented as folkloric and was associated with representations of enslavement and primitivism. The Institute helped promote the notion that Blacks were simple, emotional, hypersexual, and superstitious, among other characteristics. It also helped set Blacks in opposition to the humble, White, uneducated, mountain-dwelling, “true” Puerto Rican (Hernández Hiraldo, 2006).

Cultural nationalism permeated many sectors of Puerto Rican society beyond just music, including media and television, education and governmental institutions, and marketing and

---

36 Torres, 1999.
tourism. The interpretation of Puerto Rican culture as Hispanic continued with the arrival of the “TV box” in 1954. Even though the U.S.-based Federal Communications Commission (FCC) controls television as well as radio broadcasts and other communication operations in Puerto Rico, Rivero asserts that television became a central site for confirming the White ideal along with myths of racial equality. It was particularly influential for affirming the mestizaje ideology (Rivero, 2005, 104). Television programming became an ideological apparatus that presented narratives of national identity that allowed racist ideologies and practices to permeate Puerto Rican society (Rivero, 2005, 104). In all, during the 1950s Muñoz Marín and his colleagues used a variety of cultural platforms to create a distinctly Puerto Rican identity that, despite outward appearances of equality, either ignored or directly opposed Black cultural and ethnic influences. This constructed identity was essential to his government’s efforts to produce an ostensibly unified and racially democratic island that was distinct from the openly-racist United States.

**Racial Meanings: Zenon, González, and Rodríguez Juliá (1980s)**

*Narciso Descubre su Trasero (1974)*

"Narcissus Discovers his Rear"

The Antillanismo and Afro-Antillanismo movement of the 1970s and 1980s began to reassert the place of Black culture in Puerto Rico. Though this movement shared several components with *la poesía negroide*, in historical and political terms it differed markedly as it viewed African culture in a more holistic light. Moreover, many of the later advocates of Antillanismo viewed Black culture as the strongest element shaping Puerto Rico’s sense of nationhood (Giusti-Cordero, 63). Isabelo Zenón Cruz’s self-published *Narciso Descubre su*...

---

Trasero (1974) marked the beginnings of the movement and was followed by such works as El País de los Cuatro Pisos y Otros Ensayos (The Four Storied Country and Other Essays) by José Luis González (1980) and El Entierro de Cortijo (Cortijo’s Wake) by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (1983).

By the 1970s perceptions of Puerto Rican identity as primarily Hispanic were well inscribed in the nation’s imaginary. Racial inequality was becoming visible in the segregated public housing Residenciales, Barriadas, and Caseríos Públicos, where Blacks and poor members of society were boxed together.  

Similarly, by the 1970s the industrialized economy of the 1950s had stymied, resulting in high rates of unemployment and criminality as well as racial and social conflicts. Antillanismo began to study these increasingly apparent sites of racial tension and exclusion. Zenón Cruz’s groundbreaking study on race relations in Puerto Rico focuses, for instance, on the marginalization of representations of Blackness in the collective Puerto Rican imaginary within literature. Zenón Cruz highlights the inaccuracies of a wide variety of assumptions that essentialized and discriminated against Black Puerto Ricans.

Zenón Cruz found that throughout Puerto Rican literature there were prevalent symbolic meanings that promoted racist viewpoints by which Blackness became “the mirror of what is inferior”. “Lo negro” is viewed as a set of racist beliefs from the elite and islands’ scholars, which is also in direct opposition to the white, Hispanic-descent Puerto Rican. For all his work, Zenón Cruz’s views on race and racism were often mis-understood and have gone largely unrecognized. His ideas were castigated as disrupting the island’s harmonious racial democracy because he tackled the paternalistic framework and nationalist discourses that were used by

---

40 Rodríguez Juliá, 1982; Dinzey-Flores, 2008; and Santiago Vallés, 1996.
Puerto Rican literary scholars to create the myth of a racially equal society. Ultimately this criticism condemned Zenón Cruz to silence, though not to the self-imposed silence that scholar Juan A. Giusti-Cordero has suggested (66). Rather, Zenón Cruz experienced the widespread silencing imposed by those with power and resources upon those who contest the problem of racism in the island. This silencing effectively trivializes legitimate concerns about the racial discrimination inherent to officially recognize Puerto Rican culture.

The Four Storied Country

In The Four Storied Country, González builds on Zenón Cruz’s argumentation by trivializing the utopian images of a Puerto Rican identity intimately related with Hispanophilia. As a counterpoint, González argues that Black culture is the strongest element shaping Puerto Ricanness. He states that the first ‘true’ Puerto Rican was el Puertorriqueño Negro, echoing Torres’s declaration that the Puerto Rican family is “prieta de belda” (“really, really Black”) (Torres, 1998). González claims that Puerto Rico is critically divided between “la cultura élite” and “la cultura popular.” Using el jíbaro, he argues, as a valid symbol of Puerto Rican culture allows those in power to erase the social and racial differences that characterize daily life in the island. El jíbaro is thus “an anachronistic cultural production of the old elite, who are conservative and openly or insidiously racist” (37). González accordingly abandoned the jíbaro as the “true representative” of a collective Puerto Rican identity and replaced it with the working class figure of lo negro.

The assertion of Black identity in Puerto Rican culture marked by the Antillanismo movement coincided with the Período de la Nueva Historia (New History era) in Puerto Rico. During this period in the 1980s, historians added much-needed depth to conceptions and depictions of slavery in the island and of slave subjectivity. These scholars revealed instances of
slave resistance and marooning by sorting through governmental and municipal records. The work produced during the New History era confronted head-on the prickly history of slavery in Puerto Rico and served to counteract distorted views of slaves as passive, docile, and happy. Nor were historians alone in this recasting of Puerto Rico’s history and culture. Giusti-Cordero states that Antillanismo encapsulates the concerted efforts across academic disciplines and various artistic media to reframe Puerto Rico as an Afro-Antillean space, and to thereby link Puerto Rico to the rest of the Caribbean.

Antillanismo as a movement was also often interested in generating new approaches to understanding the connections between race and nation by examining the relationship between cultural production and political struggle. It investigated the cultural, literary, and artistic output of Black and working class Puerto Ricans, including such musical forms such as bomba, plena, and salsa. In this vein, in Cortijo’s Wake Rodríguez Juliá discusses the well-known Black Puerto Rican musician Rafael Cortijo Verdejo, who gave the bomba and plena traditions of Puerto Rico's barriadas (slums) respectability through his music. His band "modernized" the traditional vernacular forms of bomba and plena and forcefully reestablished their African and working class roots. Rodríguez Juliá records his personal experiences as he, a light-skinned, middle-class writer, confronts the world of poor Black Puerto Ricans while he attends Cortijo’s wake. The critical divides between el caserío (urban ghettos) and gated communities; cafre (vulgar) and proper language; indecent and decent bodies; and acceptable and unacceptable social codes are distinctly marked in Rodríguez Juliá’s description of the Black communities who accompanied him throughout the streets of Barriada Shangai. As Rodríguez Juliá records,

44 Flores, 1993 and Giusti-Cordero, 1996.
the funeral of Rafael Cortijo became a space where popular and dominant culture met with conflicting results. Specifically, there was an uproar when a rumor began that the island’s Centros de Bellas Artes would be renamed The Rafael Cortijo Fine Arts Institute. In response to the rumor, the island’s intellectuals, elites, and cultural guardians defended the new center of fine arts by firmly stating that Cortijo’s status as a Black musician of working class background prohibited him from representing la cultura Puertorriqueña. By their reasoning, lo negro, along with the bomba and plena in their popular African forms, all have their place only on the periphery of the nation’s culture.

**Merging Gendered and Racialized Identities**

At the same time as public awareness of Antillanismo and the problematic of race began to expand, the latent sexism of Puerto Rican society also gained recognition. Since the advent of second wave feminism in the 1970s, a handful of feminist groups began to bring issues such as sexism in education and the media, sex-based discrimination, women’s health and reproductive rights, and even violence against women to the forefront of public discussion in Puerto Rico. These are notable achievements, as many of these issues remain relatively untouched in other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Among other measures, feminist activists helped place a ban against sex-based discrimination in the Puerto Rican Constitution in the 1950s, which

---

45 Colón Warren (2002) has written “among other measures, a ban on sex discrimination in the Puerto Rican Constitution in the 1950s, still pending in the United States at that level, was followed in the 1970s and thereafter by laws against employment discrimination, reforms in family law equalizing marital partners, laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence, and the creation of the Commission for Women’s Affairs, presently called the Office of the Women’s Advocate (Alegria Ortega 2003; Colón Warren 2002). The legalization of abortion, achieved through the Roe v. Wade decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, also received the support of the then budding Puerto Rican feminist groups (Colón et al. 1999; Crespo Kebler 2001b)” (1) While race and racism takes a back seat in the gender analysis during the 1970’s).

46 At the time, a similar ban was still pending in the United States.
was followed in the 1970s and thereafter by laws against employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic violence; reforms in family law equalizing marital partners; and the creation of the Commission for Women’s Affairs, presently called the Women’s Advocate Office.⁴⁷ The legalization of abortion, achieved through the *Roe v. Wade* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, also received the support of Puerto Rican feminist groups.⁴⁸ Drawing upon interdisciplinary theoretical methods in their analyses of Puerto Rican society, Black women intellectuals of the 1980s—chief among them Angela Jorge and Marie Rosado—took impetus from these achievements to reveal how the convergence of race, gender, and class issues place Black Puerto Rican women under severe oppression within Puerto Rican society.

In her thought-provoking autobiographical essay “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society” (1986), Jorge analyzes her personal experiences in order to record the trauma that a young Black girl like herself feels when she is cursed—even by other Black Puerto Ricans—for her pelo malo (kinky hair), for her bembá (hanging lower-lip), or for playing with "darker" children. Jorge concludes that this oppressive treatment is an expression of racism on the part of Black Puerto Rican families who have internalized the idea of adelantar la raza (whitening the race), a concept grounded in the Spanish caste system of pigmentocracy that was bequeathed to Puerto Rican society.

After moving to the United States, Jorge records that she continued to experience this oppression along lines of both race and gender as a mature Black Puerto Rican woman. In her home she is encouraged to marry a light-skinned partner, and outside of her Puerto Rican community she confronts a society that rejects her not only because of her race but also because

---

⁴⁸ See Colón et al. 1999; Crespo Kebler 2001b.
she is a woman. While official mechanisms of denial and celebrations of racial mixture are designed to downplay the problematic nature of race in Puerto Rico, Jorge undercuts the grand narrative of racial homogeneity by exploring the specific problems of exclusion that Black women experience in both the mainland and on the island. By discussing in-depth her various personal experiences, Jorge reveals how racism can exist in an island that claims to be racially democratic.

Other notable contributions from women scholars since the early 1980s include Ramos Rosado’s (2003) pioneering discussion of the depiction of Black women in Puerto Rican literature and the analyses of sexism and racism in language by Picó and Alegría (1983). Jorge (1986) has analyzed how the gradations in Puerto Rican racial categories and the possibility to “mejorar la raza” (improve the race) have provided socioeconomic mobility for those who are able to marry Whites. Such mobility is much less available to those women who are darkest in skin tone, however.

Research published since the 2000s has also shown how gendered beauty norms intersect with race to cause Black girls and women to feel rejection and discrimination due to their physical traits (Alegría Ortega and Ríos González, 2005). Unattractiveness is equated, these studies have shown, with those deemed darkest even amidst intimate family relations (Franco Ortíz and Ortiz Torres, 2004; Franco Ortíz and Quiñones Hernández, 2005). In *Imposing Decency*, Elaine J. Suárez Findlay discusses how class, race, and gender categories are mutually constituted, so that beauty and Blackness are based not only on phenotypical traits but on behavior as well. Women’s conceived respectability, or conversely their preponderance for “acting Black,” operates as integral components of class and racial divisions in Puerto Rico.
Following this pattern of Black women writing to defend and reveal their place within the Puerto Rican nation, historians Teresita Martínez-Vergne (1999) and Felix V. Matos Rodríguez (1999) more recently offered new insights into the overlaps between citizenship, race, and gender in Puerto Rico’s past. Focusing primarily on the nineteenth century, these scholars demonstrate how massive socioeconomic change brought about such developments as the rise of a powerful middle class in cities like San Juan and Ponce. At the heart of their work, however, is a close look at how Black women negotiated this rapid change and the ever-increasing class stratification of political influence and economic power.

Martínez-Vergne shows that the men who comprised the San Juan ayuntamiento (city council) and the city’s board of charity regulated the public discourse on topics such as education, religious orthodoxy, hygiene, and family life, thereby establishing norms for "correct" social behavior and conversely chastising the "deviant" lifestyles of poorer Black women. In comparison, Matos Rodríguez (1999) discusses the plight of urban Black women in Hispanic Puerto Rican society in the late nineteenth century as colonial rule shifted from Spain to the United States. While economic developments began to sweep the island during this period, social mobility for Black women remained difficult if not impossible. Even as the middle class grew, Black women remained the island’s launderesses, cleaning ladies, and cooks. Just as historians such as Martínez-Vergne and Matos Rodríguez regularly scrutinize the representation of Black women in literary texts, popular music, and legal and educational discourses, so some scholars have begun to investigate contemporary popular culture in order to interrogate how the concept of “Blackness” in Puerto Rico interacts with African American cultural forms and the cultural identities of Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. Going forward, scholars will do well to continue analyzing the intersection of gender and race on the island. Such analyses should consider the
particular conditions, relations, and practices that are created by the different gradations of Blackness within Puerto Rican society, and should strive to identify the particular impact of these racial categorizations as they relate to issues involving class and gender.

“Que somos?” Black, White or Puerto Ricans

Cuál es la raza de la Persona 1?
Blanca
Negra o africana americana
India americana o nativa de Alaska.
(U.S. Census – 2000/2010)

In 2000, the United States census was taken in Puerto Rico along with the rest of the U.S. mainland. As in the United States, the question of racial identification was posed to Puerto Ricans, and the choices provided were: Blanco (White); Negro o Africana Americana (Black or African-American); and India Americana o nativa de Alaska (Native American or Alaskan). The distinct Black/white binary assumed by the census did not sit well with the racially mixed population of Puerto Rico; many of whom took issue with the fact that local, cultural, and racial terms such as Trigueñas/os, mestizos, mezclados, and café con leche, were not among the options listed. Santos-Febres (2001) wrote in El Nuevo Día, a leading newspaper in Puerto Rico, that the U.S. census data revealed an alarming disconnect with the realities of Black identity on the island.

In any case, the 2000 census data reveals that roughly 84 percent (3,199,547) of Puerto Ricans identify themselves as Whites, and 10.9 percent (416,296) as Blacks or African American. What this data concerning Puerto Rico’s racial divisions does not reveal is that individuals of African origin tend to be disproportionately located at the bottom of the social,

economic, and political hierarchies. Patterns of stratification based upon skin color are made readily apparent through on-the-ground observation, but these patterns are generally not verifiable within government agencies or by means of statistical instruments such as contractor compliance records. In fact, racial categories had not been used in the U.S. census in Puerto Rico since 1950.

In commemoration of the island’s Emancipation Day, Hemergildo Ortíz, a Black Puerto Rican scholar, was interviewed for *El Nuevo Día* on March 22, 2002. Ortíz discusses the need for reliable data to measure racism in Puerto Rico and proposes a comprehensive analysis of the census figures. Ortíz argues that the “racial factor contributes to the vulnerability of populations, due to the fact that throughout the world and Puerto Rico, Black populations tend to be the poor ones, and the dimension of poverty is an important subject that must be taken care of with urgency” (24). I believe there is a better use of the census data, namely conducting a comparative research study that matches how federal resources are distributed between populations who identify themselves as Black and White. At its core, the census reveals that there is a need to collect data on race in order to document its relationship with socioeconomic disparity and political stratification on the island.

The instrumental roles played by the United States and local governments in the island help to consolidate power in the hands of White males, such that Puerto Rico’s own system of government “is a coloniality of power enforced by the local elites, the ‘blanquitos’ or ‘little whites,’ over local hegemonic, political, cultural, and economic spaces, sometimes under the banner of a nationalist ideology” (Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel, 23). The power structures in Puerto Rico thus make the racialized population, and in particular lower class Blacks, powerless and economically vulnerable.

55
Since the early twentieth century, the denial of race and racism discussed throughout this chapter has served to solidify a homogeneous Puerto Rican identity set in opposition to U.S. culture that nonetheless reproduces racial hierarchies. Efforts to obliterate race in the name of creating an equalized nation is in fact an avoidance of the issue of Blackness, one that not only covers up racist practices but ignores or folklorizes Black identity and culture in order to promote a White definition of Puerto Ricanness. Despite the substantive contributions of recent works on the issue of Blackness and Puerto Rican identity, there is a need to ground this conversation in a broader context of media and culture that considers race as well as gender, and that specifically examines Black women as citizens, audiences, and customer
CHAPTER 3
“FROM TRIGUEÑITA TO AFRO-PUERTO RICAN” INTERSECTIONS OF THE
RACIALIZED, GENDERED, AND SEXUALIZED BODY IN PUERTO RICO AND THE U.S.
MAINLAND

Me quiere hacer pensar
Que soy parte de una trilogía racial
Donde to’ el mundo es igual, sin trato especial
A quién mas
Se le ocurría
Saturar la mente a niños inocentes
Con educación incosistente
Manipulada viciosamente a
Conveniencia del prominente de los pudientes

As a key aspect of social identity, I introduce how race is lived and negotiated in Puerto Rico. This authoethnographic essay reveals my Trigueña identity as a way of making sense of racial and cultural identity, consciousness in Puerto Rico I use the push-pull concept to explain the friction or struggles in the representation of Blackness in Puerto Rico (through the analysis of cultural and commercial popular culture). I argue that the mediation of Blackness and the construction of new Black identities have been always mediated in relation to the dominant Puerto Rican cultural identity, by reify national constructions of Puerto Ricanness. While Blackness, gets mediated throughout old and new transnational black identities away from normative notions of race and gender on the island. In this study, I introduce my transnational experiences in the U.S. mainland, as a form of decolonizing the mind and reassertion of my Afro-Puerto Ricanness.
Mi autoethnography maps out the intersections of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized body that has defined my life across and within Puerto Rico and the United States’ geopolitical borders. It is through the writing of my ‘testimonio’\textsuperscript{50} that I contest and resist patriarchal, racist, homophobic, chauvinist, and class practices on the island. Through personal accounts of my lived experience in both locations, I compare Puerto Rico’s racialization process of mestizaje—an ideology that purports a state of harmonious race relations in which discrimination supposedly does not exist—“From Trigueña to Afro-Puerto Rican” with the racial polarization of the mainland, where the existence of racism is more openly acknowledged.

Initially, I had planned to engage in a rather straightforward comparative analysis of these racializing models. However, by incorporating subaltern voices, I seek to demonstrate how the personal becomes political as feminists of color and transnational feminist scholars contend with racializing practices. As my grandmother used to say, “Dejáte de tapujos!” which translates roughly as “Tell it like it is!” Through this essay, I reflect critically upon my own racial experiences in an effort to give voice to Black Puerto Rican women’s lived experiences, across and within Puerto Rico and U.S. racial and political borders.

\textbf{Trigueña: Race and Racialization in Puerto Rico}

Racialized as a hybrid, mestiza, negra, trigueña, prieta, morena, or mulata woman, an “organic metaphor of the three roots: Taino, Spaniard and African.” (Duany 2002, p.19) I have been situated throughout my life in a complex racial system. Phenotype, hair texture, skin pigmentation, social class status, and heritage and/or genealogy are the defining features of race (Mintz 1974; Wade 1993; Torres and Whitten 1998; Duany 1998; and Rivero 2000. To publicly acknowledge racial differences is a threat to the Island’s class- and colorblindness, where

\textsuperscript{50} Rigoberta Menchu
individuals—regardless of their social, economic, and racial/ethnic background—are ostensibly able to realize their potential and achieve economic and social mobility. In other words, todo el mundo es igual sin trato especial.

For some, this assertion has become a protective shield, diverting attention away from the persistent societal denial of African heritage among Puerto Ricans. Black Puerto Ricans have to negotiate their Blackness silently, while protecting their Puerto Ricaness, their common denominator, in an often antagonistic racial environment. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones-Tomás Blanco (1950) once wrote that Puerto Rico racism “es un inocente juego de niño” (p.15). Indeed, these child games serve to perpetuate a culture of racial silence and “driven the attention away from persistent racial problems in Puerto Rico.” On the Island, the politics of difference are subdued, silenced, and embedded within imaginary nationalist discourses.

One of those discourses involves the idea of mestizaje, or race mixing. An important factor in the discursive construction of a purportedly racially homogeneous Puerto Rican nationality, the ideology of mestizaje tends to omit African or indigenous ethnicity. Frances Aparicio (1998) claims that mestizaje is the sign for Whiteness, the rationale for the denial of pure Blackness (p.40). Along with other racist national ideologies such as blanqueamiento (Whitening), hispanophilia, and Afrophobia, mestizaje serves as a mechanism to reinforce Eurocentrism and thus limit the participation of underrepresented groups in politics, law, media, education, and other fields. Such ideologies are well known and thoroughly documented in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean (Wade 1993; Aparicio 1998; Rivero 2000; and Godreau 2002). Their discursive function is to erase Blackness from the systematic project of nation building.
Dzidzienyo (1979) argues that the real problem for Afro-Latinos is to juggle successfully the desire for a common nationality with the struggle to attain legitimacy for their African identity. A different national ideology is blanqueamiento (Whitening), which refers to the process of becoming “increasingly acceptable to those classified and self-identified which as ‘White’ (Torres and Whitten 1998, p.9). Luis M. Díaz Soler, a historian and specialist on island slavery argues, “Puerto Ricans are Whitening blanqueamiento faster than any other mestizo (hybrid) country (Bliss 1995, p.3). He predicts that in two centuries, there will hardly be any Blacks in Puerto Rico. Bliss states: “Puerto Ricans will ‘bleach away’ many of the physical traces of its African past by the year 2200, with the other Spanish speaking Caribbean following a few centuries later”.

An indicator of the power of racist ideologies such as blanqueamiento is the fact that many citizens on the Island teasingly insist, “Hay que mejorar la raza.” In other words, Black individuals are enjoined to improve the race by marrying and reproducing with lighter-skinned partners. Too many times, I have heard in my own family and among friends the injunction, “Hay que mejorar la raza” and other painful and derogatory terms directed at darker-skinned members of the family. The implicit message is that phenotypically, the dark-skinned body is defective, unattractive, undesirable, but sexually enticing and therefore, a social embarrassment. I recall when I dated a young Black man from Loíza, a prominently African-descent municipality in Puerto Rico, my grandmother was greatly disappointed. Her words continue to resonate in my ears even today… Esa gente que viven después del puente de Carolina hacia Loíza, eso todo es un atraso(anything passing the border [bridge] between these cities [Carolina and Loíza] is a step backward). When I brought home my first White boyfriend, everybody in the family worshiped him. Ironically, my experiences as a Trigueñita with his family went quite differently. It was my
very first encounter with racism, his family’s cynical comments were charged with painful racist remarks. His family never showed any respect toward me; they called negra sucia dirty Black woman, slut, and me unintelligent. It took one experience to realize that race does matter in Puerto Rico. My trigueñidad was contested. It did not matter my degree of brownness in the Puerto Rican color continuum or my education, phenotype, or that I lived in the urbanización.6

For the White family, I was a Black woman.

**La Trigueñita: Making Sense of Blackness**

La *Trigueñita* is a wheat-hued color Puerto Rican woman, slightly toasted by the Caribbean sun. The Trigueñita possesses traces of “European” phenotypes: hair, lips, or nose that make some of us distant from the darker skinned women on the island. Yet, we are still not close enough to the European-looking women. Depending on spatial, social, cultural, and public or private spaces, we become visibly Black. In addition, genealogy plays a significant role in the assertion of Trigueñidad; our last names or lines of descent directly from a White or Black ancestor can trace this.

The embodiment of a Trigueñita often means upward mobility and “an ethnic or cultural ‘lightening’” (Torres and Whitten 1998, p.9). This process occurs with the appropriate hispanophilic education in the island that transforms another Black body to a civilized being. At the personal level, defining Blackness is fragmented, suppressed, silenced, and sugarcoated under narratives of racial mixture. As a Trigueñita on the island, I live hyphenated by markers of differences. A devalued social marker in our contemporary Puerto Rico is residing in Carolina, listening to radio station Z-93 Salsa de la gorda, dancing to Reggeatón, attending public schools, and/or residing in some of the racialized sectors in the island, such as the caseríos (urban projects) or predominantly African descents municipalities (Flores 1993; Santiago-Valles 1996;
and Aparicio 1998). As a Trigueñita, I negotiate a racialized, gendered, and sexualized body between “[la] cultura Puertorriqueña y mi cultura Negra.”

As some of us know on the Island, The Cortijo Center for the Fine Arts does not have the same cultural meaning as the Luis A. Ferrer Center of the Fine Arts. Within Puerto Rican national discourses and narratives, the other is historically presented as essentialist in terms of race, class, culture, and language. Despite the fact that we live in a global and highly visual society where images travel by cable television networks, commercial media, the Internet, and even cell phones, in Puerto Rico these technologies are constrained within a power structure in which Eurocentric views and national ideologies dominate.

Similarly, as Yeidy Rivero asserts, “Puerto Rico’s commercial media representations of and discussions on Blackness functioned within the theatricality of nationalism embedded in the discussion of la gran familia puertorriqueña discourse (2005, p.17). Blackness is erased or misrepresented by local programming, but also by that of most Mexican, Brazilian, and U.S. Spanish-speaking television. Nonetheless, the images of Black people that do appear on Puerto Rican airwaves are those transmitted from our shores and are customarily presented in a negative light.

In Puerto Rico, portrayals of African culture are stereotypically embodied in nineteenth-century historical discourses that trade on slaves and mammies. For example, media and cultural representations of the racialized woman traditionally deploy a folkloric figure of African heritage (Mama Inés, a nostalgic figure of the past), or portrayals of women selling bacaláitos (codfish fritters) in Piñones (a coastal town in Loiza with a large population of African-descent Puerto Ricans), mopping the floors, and/or cleaning calderos (pots). Associated with displaced citizens
and the working class, this essentialized and folklorized Black figure has become the Island’s cultural ambassador for the consumption of Blackness.

Davila points out that culture is certainly fashionable in Puerto Rico. Well aware of this fact, transnational and local corporations draw on images have Puerto Rican folklore and popular culture to advertise their products (2000). Corporations and the commercialized media wrap, package, and sell the island’s African heritage in products, an example being La Rumba de Mama Inés, promoted by Yaucono Café, Company, and Noches de Jazz-Latino by Heineken. Corporations’ even use the recent popularization of Reggeatón to sell a racialized, sexualized, and urbanized genre associated with the island’s underprivileged class. Blackness is further represented in such stereotypical roles as the servant, the drug dealer, the impoverished, the prostitute, Raperos (Rappers), Reggaetoneros, and Dominican immigrants.

Another character that continues to appear in television is the funny but clever Black man typically portrayed as a comical, ridiculous, uneducated Black man. A modern-day example of minstrelsy is still permitted on our airwaves. Isar P. Grodeau describes discursive nostalgia as a phenomenon that idealizes “Black people as happy and rhythmic tradition bearers who still inhabit supposedly homogeneous and harmonious communities—locating its phenotypic and cultural signs ‘somewhere else’ and in pre-modern times” (2002, p.283).

This nostalgia is evident in the fact that a great majority of the population on the Island does not see the iconic and folklorized figure of Mama Inés as problematic, but rather as a cute doll representative of the Island’s past. This folklorization of Black identities is hermetically sealed in the past, during the era of slavery. Blackness on the island is equated with slavery, inferiority, awkwardness, ignorance, and being uneducated, comical, hypersexual, and of the underprivileged class.
Blackness is seldom acknowledged, praised, or used as a concept to empower people in the island. Antonio Gramsci asserted, “In effect it is through ideological hegemony that those in power control not only the means of production but also the production of ideas” (cited in Jewell 1993, p.9). Puerto Ricans are victims of an ideological and cultural hegemony in that they have been indoctrinated through the effective aid of the educational system and commercial media. Stereotypical images of Black women in newspapers, television, telenovelas, commercials, and magazines continue to inform women of their position in society.

The media’s role in the construction of a Black cultural identity and the process by which Black Puerto Ricans negotiate and interpret media messages is questionable. As far as my own relationship with the media, I recall growing up in the Island feeling invisible, not part of the dialogue, nor considered a customer or a target audience member. Whether I was watching local television, Mexican and Brazilian telenovelas, or looking at local publications and magazines, I remember the emptiness of passively observing the association of beauty, achievement, and success with Whiteness. Clearly, little attention was or is paid to the significance of the Black female as a cultural consumer. In such an oppressive and subdued racial environment, a self-identified Black person is effectively denigrated.

The Meaning of Being Black, Being Female in Puerto Rico

I have struggled to find words to express the experience of Blackness within the context of Puerto Rico and its notions of racial utopia. I grew up in a culture of racial silence where to speak of prejudice or Blackness was considered a taboo. Raising this subject is treated the same way today; the victim is frequently blamed or said to “ser un acomplejado” (have an inferiority complex).
As a Black Puerto Rican woman, I live with a sense of what W.E.B. DuBois called a “double consciousness”; I am “two souls, two ideals” (1903, p.9). 11 On the one hand, I am nation. On the other hand, I am race, and erased. The latter is ambiguously silenced, not necessarily by the self, but by the eyes of the others (Fanon 1952). In a sense, estoy cargando la cruz (I carry the cross) of my Puerto Rican-ness at the cost of silencing my African-ness. I am visibly invisible, stigmatized, sexed, and marked other, only a passerby. Growing up as a Black woman in Puerto Rico, I felt my body being dis/placed in dangerous spaces, fluctuating between what I would describe as a defective and an erased entity, though always sexually enticing. The dis/placing of my sexualized and racialized dark-skinned body is re/defined in the imaginary metaphors of Blackness.

“Euphemisms such as mulata, jaba/grifa (high yellow), morena (Black or dark-mulatto), Trigueñita (wheat-hued), and un poquito quemaita (medium brown or slightly burned)” (Santos-Febres 2001) are some of the terms that describe Black women like me in the Island. “Puerto Ricans express racial differences according to gradation of color for each classification represents a gradation of color among Black Puerto Rican women accompanied by different attitudes and perceptions about color” (Jorge 1979, P.134).

Perhaps such a gradation of brownness from brown to Black somehow legitimates why so many visibly Black Puerto Ricans do not classify themselves as Black. Regardless of their ancestral makeup, whether they have strong African features or show evidence of more Spanish blood, many Black Puerto Ricans do not view themselves as strictly Black, but rather as a combination of races. Frequently, the language used when addressing dark-skinned women in the Island is ambivalent and insensitive, typically charged with power, class, and sexuality. Terms of “endearment” such as negrita, negra rubia, and negra fina or negra de salón are freely used to
attribute characteristics of honor and respectability that presumably only light-skinned women possess. It is my belief that such “endearment” terms is another way of objectifying the Black body.

In a colonial and patriarchal society, class, race, gender, sexuality, and social respectability intersect particularly for racialized, dark-skinned women, who are seen as sexed bodies, visibly invisible, inherently unworthy, tainted, and therefore not “decent.” Eileen Suárez-Findlay asserts “decency was the term used to maintain social order and boundaries between the elite and the working class, men and women, Whites and people of African descent, and between the married and the unmarried in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico.” (1999, p.21) Today, the situation is similar except that honor and decency are also defined within marked spatial discourses.

Arlene Torres has written,

In Puerto Rico the opposition between the coast and the interior and between coastal/urban and rural laborers positions are subsumed by the tripartite classification of el negro, el blanco and el jíbaro in society. In Puerto Rico, a mythico-historical figure called a jíbaro and represented by a light skinned peasant living in the mountainous interior sized the Puerto Rican imagination. He has become the bearer of a nascent Puerto Rican identity and symbolically represents Blacks who are marginalized (Torres 1998, p.289).

For example, I am from a predominantly Black municipality, Carolina. Those living in such areas are perceived as inferior, indecent, or lacking the same sociocultural status as the inhabitants of the capital city, San Juan, or the Isla Verde “municipality.”
Performing Blackness and Gender

Markers of difference such as color, spatial locality, music, and language, among others are markers of class and race in Puerto Rico (Aparicio 1998, p.73). I am a fervent “cocola,” one who prefers the beat of the drums, from bomba to hip hop to Reggaetón and salsa music. Frances Aparicio refers to cocolos/as an African-derived term for young Black men who attend salsa concerts and who drive old Toyotas with the driver’s seat lowered and the loudspeakers playing salsa (1998, 69).

Female cocolas, cacos/as have had to negotiate spaces for us in masculine-dominant domains that are clearly marked by class, race, and gender. Salsa, reggaetón, bomba, and hip-hop provided me with an escape in which the musical rhythms invoke a Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Black culture. However, I would argue that the salsa genre has become too Eurocentric. Musicians and singers have moved far away from the improvisation style of soneros, grounded in Africanness as opposed to the more Europeanized versions. Some experts argue that this situation is due to the market-driven music industry, where Whiteness apparently sells.

Growing up in Puerto Rico, I listened as much to José “El Canario,” Sonora Ponceña, and Gilberto Santarosa, as I did to the Fugees, LL Cool. J, or R&B music. My musical style is a mélange of local and U.S. “foreign” rhythms. I lived en carne propia (in my own flesh) inside the dichotomy of not being rockera but cocola “in which one side … is privileged while the other is denigrated” (Collins 1990, p.252). Distinctions that legitimate the dominant culture and exclude the subordinate culture serve to erase people from the national discourse. Having attended numerous salsa concerts and fiestas patronales, which are celebrations of the town’s patron
saints, I have witnessed and now theorize the racialization of being cocola and the socioeconomically divided society in which we live in Puerto Rico.

Listening to Reggeatón—the latest beats flavored by bomba, reggae, dancehall, and salsa—is equivalent to being \textit{a cacos/a}, a poor, Black, and uneducated person who lives in the caseríos (urban projects) or other racialized and marginalized urban sectors in the Island. Black Puerto Rican women and men must function in a racially mixed society under the pretense of racial utopia. Presumably, we are all equals; therefore, it is assumed that racial discrimination does not exist. Yet people of African origin tend to be disproportionately located socially, economically, and politically at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Patterns of stratification around skin color are readily apparent through observation, but such demographic information is not verifiable through government agencies or by means of statistical instruments such as contractor compliance records, and other such sources. However, it was not until the 2000 U.S. census incorporated the racial categorizations that have been used since 1950. Racial categories had not been used in the census on Puerto Rico prior to 2000. With the census, we currently possess statistical data that corroborates the island’s racial, class, and social stratification.

In commemoration of the Island’s emancipation day, Hemergildo Ortiz, an Afro-Puerto Rican scholar, was interviewed for El Nuevo Día newspaper on March 22, 2002. Ortiz discussed the need for reliable data to measure racism in Puerto Rico and proposed a comprehensive analysis of the census figures, according to which only 10.4 percent of the population are self-identified as Black in an Afro-Caribbean island. Ortiz argued that the “racial factor contributes to the vulnerability of populations, due to the fact that throughout the world and Puerto Rico, Black
populations tend to be the poor ones, and the dimension of poverty is an important subject that must be taken care of with urgency” (p.24).

There is a need in Puerto Rico to collect data on race in order to document socioeconomic disparity and stratification on the island. We need to problematize the “Hispanic” check box found on governmental and other forms and become conscious that Puerto Ricans are racially diverse. Economies are racialized not just in terms of the processes of production but also in terms of distribution processes. The instrumental role-played by the United States and local governments in the island, the latter form “is a coloniality of power enforced by the local elites the ‘blanquitos’ or ‘little whities’ over local hegemonic political, cultural, and economic spaces, sometimes under the banner of a nationalist ideology” (Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997, p.23). The power structure in Puerto Rico makes the racialized population economically vulnerable in the distribution system that exists on the island.

**Puerto Rico: “Whitest of the Antilles”**

Puerto Rico considered by some as the “Whitest of the Antilles” (Miller 2004; Pérez-Duthie 2002; Santiago-Valles 1996, and others). The 2000 U.S. census data apparently confirm that roughly 84 percent (3,199,547) are Whites and 10.9 percent (416,296) are Blacks or African American. Godreau argues that the “gradual disappearances of Black cultural manifestations inform ideologies of blanqueamiento,” or Whitening of the race (2002, p.281). Cruz-Janzen asserts “even today, blanqueamiento remains the key to personal and national advancement, while darkening of the race is ‘blamed for everything from poverty and underdevelopment to the whole sorry history’ of all Latin America and the Caribbean.” (2001, p.174) As children, the educational system deprived us of knowledge about our African heritage and failed to provide an
encouraging environment in which we could build a positive and strong identity that embraced our African past and present.

As Afro-Scottish artist Maude Sulter observes, “Without the textualization of our knowledge we remain invisible, in a world in which literacy and the written words are icons of power and privilege” (McClaurin 2001, p.17). Even today, the school curriculum promotes racial mixture, were we learned that culturally, “we are a fusion of European, African, and Indigenous cultures and traits constructing a racial and cultural identity mixture” (Rivero 2002, p.484). Michael Foucault wrote about the way power as domination reproduces itself in different locations, or institutions, employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control. In contemporary Puerto Rican society, the media and educational institutions, among others, perpetuate the erasure of Blackness and the elite class power of Whiteness, effectively functioning as mechanisms by which dominant power interests continue to marginalize the oppressed. Raised in such a disheartening environment, some of us have somehow managed to fight back and empower ourselves. In Puerto Rico today, spaces for the critical interpretation of Blackness are beginning to flourish publicly.

**Cruzando el charco: Becoming Afro-Puerto Rican**

“[C]aught up between two sticks”
Piri Thomas, Down These Mean Streets (1967)

As some of my African American and U.S. Latino friends said when I came to live in the mainland, “Girl, you’re Black!” I knew then that, living in the United States, I was no longer sheltered in my Puerto Rican cultural and racial mix and I encountered a markedly different racial system with more rigid and defined ethnic borders than I was accustomed to. Silvio Torres-Saillant argues that because of “the overwhelming racial fusion of the Dominican
population, one cannot speak of Blacks versus Whites or identify cases in which people align themselves politically along [the United States color lines]” (2000, p.1091). I agree with him based on my similar experiences in Puerto Rico. When asked what race I was either on university or government application I described myself as Puerto Rican or Hispanic, but never as Black or White.

The category of other has become increasingly more attractive to me as I deal with systems of oppression and imposed classification in U.S. mainland and Puerto Rican society. Bailey argues that “the United States’ history of slavery, segregation, color-line maintenance and discrimination makes contemporary Black/White racial categories qualitatively distinct from other social/ethnic categories in terms of cultural meanings and salience in popular consciousness (2001, p.684). In the current identity politics climate of the United States, transnational identities, cultures, and ethnic borders are challenging traditional cultural markers.

It has been within an academic environment that I experienced the U.S. racialized process. I came to the United States to attend college, and later worked as a university program director while completing a master’s degree. My racial experiences have led me to re/define and re/invent my Spanish speaking Black cultural identity by negotiating power, gender, color, language, and the meaning of difference in what has come to be a journey toward racial assertiveness for me.

Indeed, I no longer suppress my Blackness. I no longer struggle with the question “Are you Black?” As an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in the United States, I share the same stigmatization, prejudice and racism that African Americans and other clearly marked citizens of African descent have witnessed in this country. The experience is one that light-skinned Latinos do not confront. For light-skinned Latinos, discrimination occurs through ethnicity not on the
basis of color, phenotype or other racial markers. Vidal-Ortíz argues, “On a phenotypic level, I argue that color cannot be a simple marker for separating light-skinned Puerto Ricans or other Latinos from their darker-skinned counterparts, while light-skinned Puerto Ricans/Latinos may experience what is known as skin privilege, they also experience discrimination as Puerto Ricans/Latinos (2004, p.183).

According to U.S. racial polarization, I am Black first and Puerto Rican second. In the United States, color has become my “floating signifier” (Hall 1997). Like many other Afro-Puerto Ricans, I have been “[c]aught up between two sticks” (Thomas 1967). Within U.S. racial categories, I occupy a unique position as a dark-skinned Latina or Afro-Puerto Rican. While negotiating my cultural and national background as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in the United States, my Blackness allows me to negotiate a different type of racialization. At times, I am not recognized as a Latina, Spanish-speaking Caribbean or Hispanic. In other moments, when my rich Spanish accent “strikes back,” I am not seen as an “authentic” African American woman due to my Spanish colonial origins. Becoming an Afro-Puerto Rican acknowledges the U.S. racialization process.

According to Hoffnung-Garskof, observers have frequently marveled at how many Black Puerto Ricans in “New York take pains to avoid being ‘mistaken’ for Black North Americans in an attempt to avoid the trap of the hardening color line” (2002, p.7). Being “mistaken” for an African American, from my perspective, suggests that my Blackness is not derived from my geographical and historical context, but rather constructed through the lens of the U.S. mainland’s Black/White racial dichotomy. Dzidzienyo (2003) argues that the relative rigidity of U.S. racial binarism provides a space to reaffirm Blackness. Such a rigid racial process has allowed me to (re)define myself as an Afro-Puerto Rican in the United States. Here, I no longer
have to suppress my negritude, the same one that is buried in Puerto Rico under racist ideologies such as blanqueamiento and mestizaje. “Consciousness is a place of crossing, of transition and metamorphosis” (Sandoval 2000, p.130).

My racial consciousness has been informed by my relationship with the racial politics, culture, literature, history, art, and music of African Americans and other U.S. Latinos. However, relations with Afro-Latinos/as and African Americans are neither ideal nor free from bias (Hernández 2003). Re/asserting Blackness along with Latino or Spanish origins in the United States challenges the identity politics surrounding U.S.Latinidad and the Latin American emphasis on social harmony resulting from mixed race heritage. As I stated earlier, most Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos deny the “existence of racial prejudice within the community and treat the concept of Blackness as foreign to Latino/a identity” (Hernández 2003, p.154). The “internalized racism of Latino/as who come to the US is evident in their perceptions of African-ness as foreign to Latino/a identity and in their acceptance of European-ness (Whiteness) as continuing to hold currency among many Latino/as” (Hernández 2003, 158) and in U.S. society.

When negotiating an Afro-Puerto Rican identity among Latina/os, I am amazed at the responses I get: “I didn’t know that Puerto Ricans are so dark,” “How come you are Puerto Rican and Black? “You don’t look Latina?” Are any of your parents Black?” The emphasis on social harmony resulting from mixed race heritage is quite evident in their inquiry. Cruz-Janzen suggest that “the more Latinas/os become immersed in the racial ideology of the United States, the sharper and more unyielding the Black/White dichotomy becomes, and the more powerful is the need and desire to free themselves of any and all vestiges of African ancestry” (2001, p.172). Many Afro-Latinos in the mainland deny their Blackness and identify themselves as “Hispanic
like their European compatriots” (Cruz-Janzen 2001, p.172). In my case, I embrace both my national identity (Puerto Rican) and racial identity (Afro-Spanish Caribbean).
CHAPTER 4
MEDIATING BLACKNESS

BLACK WOMEN: ARTICULATING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

The Afro Puerto Rican woman is a brave fighter, overcoming any obstacle. She finds herself struggling desperately to move forward or simply to remain afloat, using whatever resources she can mobilize. She always takes the lead to battle against discrimination.... The level of resilience is high; despite societal oppressions she continues to move forward51. (La maestra, 2005)

This chapter focuses on how Afro Puerto Rican Women articulate and negotiate representations of their own identities throughout popular culture and everyday life. In doing so, it will build off of similar strands of media and popular culture research on diverse populations of women. The chapter tracks the trajectory of and illuminates the themes that emerged from my interviews and focus groups using the analytical methods described in Chapter 1. The analysis reveals that Afro Puerto Rican Women regularly discuss two key issues at the heart of their identities, namely “Race and Puerto Ricanness” and “Gender, Womanhood and Race.” The latter will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Prior to my analysis, however, I want to provide a brief introduction to the advertising industry and its practices in Puerto Rico in order to highlight both its complexity and its remarkably simplistic discriminatory attitude. I interviewed two marketing and advertising experts, Mr. Finees Almenas and Mrs. Mayra Encarnación (pseudonym) who kindly walked me thorough the labyrinths of an industry that is given comparatively little critical attention in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean media and advertising literature. After this brief

51 “La mujer Puertorriqueña es una mujer luchadora, superada, valiente, sobrepasa cualquier obstáculo y siempre tiene que ponerse al frente al discimren por genero y raza....El nivel de resiliencia es alto – a pesar de las opresiones seguimos adelantes.”
introduction, I will focus the remainder of the chapter on Black women’s responses to the
“Fritoleras and Citibank” text in relation to their lived experiences.

**Advertising Labyrinth: Puerto Rico**

Advertising and marketing act as cultural intermediaries that use language to bestow
meaning upon commodities. As a result, advertising usually sells identities, lifestyles, class, and
national identity, etc. as often as it does an actual product. The Puerto Rican advertising industry
is no exception to this rule. From its inception, the industry has also been comprised of a
mélange of U.S., Latin American, and local advertising practices. Spanish is the predominant
language used by the industry, and this reliance on Spanish-based marketing has permitted the
island to become integrated into globa-Latin American media networks. In order to lower
advertising production costs, Puerto Rican advertisers have also historically utilized ready-made
American ads by simply redubbing them in Spanish.

In terms of the firms themselves, the industry is composed of both local agencies and
companies based in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Firms in Puerto Rico seem
to be predominantly staffed by White Puerto Ricans and college graduates, as my two
interviewed participants noted. When I asked Mr. Almenas, who is a local advertising freelancer
and creative director who specializes in small-to-medium size advertising campaigns, about the
racial diversity in the industry, he quickly acknowledged a noticeably disparity. According to
Almenas, who has more than 20 years of working experiences in Puerto Rico and the U.S.,
companies ostensibly hire based only on qualifications, but they rarely have Blacks on staff.
Whether at the level of models, creative directors, or account managers, it is rare to find a Black

---

52 one of the top agencies include Badillo NAZCA S&S; BBDO Puerto Rico; Euro RSCG; FCB;
J. Walter Thompson (JWT); Leo Burnett Co.; McCann-Erickson; Ogilvy affiliate; WING Latino;
and Young & Rubicam Puerto Rico.
person, and even rarer to find a Black woman, in the industry. “If you find a Black person it is in the creative department” argues Encarnación, an advertising and media professional with 20 years’ experience, “it is usually a Black male.” She states, “in [my] many years working in advertising, I never met a Black woman or man as an account manager. When we are trying to fill up those positions we do not hire Blacks as account managers because there is an ‘unspoken’ hiring practice by which agencies simply do not hire Blacks because the agency does not want to ‘offend’ a potential client and lose their account.” Though research into this phenomenon is sparse, feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Aixa Merino Falú have expressed concern with the ideological intent of images and discourses produced by commercial media that ultimately reinforce dominant class relations. As Encarnación’s testimony shows, the ruling class has clearly defined the ideal "business woman," and Blackness is certainly not among her qualities.

Advertising “Puerto Rican Culture”

Anthropologist Arlene Dávila (1997, p.301) argues that transnational corporations often construct and utilize concepts of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism as a way to sell products, services, and—crucially—identities on the island. By selling the concept of a collective Puerto Rican culture, advertisers corroborate with the concept of cultural identity that pervades nationalist discourses and mestizaje ideology, namely that Puerto Rico is an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society. As Dávila notes, corporations use the politicization of culture as a discourse to legitimize conflicting certain cultural ideals as well as political positions on the island.

Though I am not particularly interested in addressing the relation between corporate sponsorship and politics that Dávila so eloquently discusses, I do want to use her analysis to
consider the prospects for forming cultural identities within the increasingly transnational context of contemporary media. I want to argue that in most media and particularly in advertising, presentations of race and gender identities that differ from homogenized conceptions of Puerto Ricanness are inevitably folklorized.

Figure 4.1: Fritoleras and Citibank ad (same as figure 1.1)
On 17 August 2004 Citi Corporation published the advertisement shown in Figure 4.1 in *El Nuevo Día*, the leading newspaper in Puerto Rico. The advertisement states “*Ya puedes eliminar de tú lista algo que creías que era improbable,*” which can be translated as “Now you can take an item off of your to-do list, something that you thought was impossible [improbable] to achieve.” (August 17, 2004 *El Nuevo Día*)

In our discussion group, Tita suggested…

“The ad implies that only White people can obtain a Citi MasterCard. “Just take a look at the last word of the sentence,” she noted, “it says ‘improbable.’ I think what they are trying to say is that it is ‘improbable’ for Black people to have good credit and enough money to obtain a credit card. I think the word ‘improbable’ is humiliating. Then they have her with those clothes that signify poverty, you know, frying codfish fritters. In Puerto Rico being White is never associated with poverty.” Tita thus enumerates here the negative ways that the advertisement portrays Black women like her. In a similar vein, much of contemporary media draws upon familiar, stereotypical representations to make Blackness intelligible to Puerto Rican audiences. One of the most common and oldest stereotypical images is that of the Caribbean *negras*, who is usually portrayed in relation to the sugar and coffee plantation economy of the region.

For example “la Yauconita”, the iconic figure for the Yaucono Café Company better known as Mama Inés, was used during the 1950’s as a promotional advertising. (Figure 4.2)
Figure 4.2 *Mama Inés or la Yauconita*  Iconic figure from Yaucono Café Company, Puerto Rico

For more representations of negra characters, see: Tuning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television (Console-ing Passions) by Yeidy Rivero, 2005.

*Negra* is portrayed as the antithesis of Puerto Rican standards of femininity. She is dark-skinned and working-class; she wears a head rag and lives along the coastline or picking coffee in the mountainous areas. Significantly, negras within the context of Spaniard colonized island epitomize the “nanas negras” who dedicated their lives taking care of children in the Plantation house – an economy that benefited the Creole elites. Most of the women I interviewed understood the negative stereotypes associated with the *negra* and with the Citibank advertisement in particular.

*Las Fritoleras and Piñoneras*

The woman appearing in the *Fritoleras* and Citibank advertisement is depicted as a resident of the Piñones coastal region of Puerto Rico, which is situated between the two predominantly Black municipalities of Loíza and Carolina. People who reside in that area refer to themselves as Piñoneros/as, according to one of my participants who was born and raised
there. In the Piñones, *las Fritoleras* are local entrepreneurial women who created innovative ways to sell food either at *kioskos* (kiosks) or while simply standing along the roadside. This informal market has been a way for Black and poor women to cope with the impact of colonialism, oppression, racism, and sexism. These forces have hit Black women the hardest given that their original status in Puerto Rican society was that of slaves, a fact that is rarely mentioned in formal accounts of the island’s history. Even after being freed from slavery, Black women remained part of a displaced and disregarded sector of Puerto Rican society. Elizabeth Crespo states that women who work as *fritoleras*, a domestic servant, laundresses, cooks, or *mondogueras* (women who prepare *mondongo*, or tripe) are more often of a lower class and tend to be non-White (34). These women nevertheless create respectable careers to support themselves and their families in a society that continues to negate the notion that employment opportunities are determined by one’s gender and race.

Today, while *las fritoleras* are licensed owners of their family businesses, Puerto Rican society still heavily regulates their entrepreneurial ventures as well as their racialized bodies. This is accomplished by strictly enforcing U.S. laws surrounding business patents, hygiene, and in particular health regulations. For example, women are now forced to wear a “white sanitary cap” when cooking and serving customers. Designed ostensibly to improve the sanitary conditions at the workplace, these caps also regulate and mask the Black woman’s body itself. The irony is that these *kioskos* are exposed to a variety of environmental pollutions, such as heavy traffic fumes when they are placed along the roadside, which are not under any kind of sanitary regulation. Nor are these caps the first time Black women’s bodies have been marked by power. In fact there is a long history of the U.S. government’s regulation of Puerto Rican women’s bodies. An extensive scholarship exists concerning Puerto Rico’s position as an
important testing ground for U.S. pharmaceutical companies working on the effectiveness of the birth control pill, for instance, and the resulting sterilization of a slew of women. This tradition is carried on today through laws such as those involving health policies which, along with “unspoken” everyday practices of racism and sexism, comprise a system of oppression that affects Black women in the island.

Literature and popular culture have provided the language (visual, written and spoken) to describe Black women in the island, and in particular to discuss them as hypersexual beings. Poems such as “Que negrita condená,” “La mulata antillana,” and “Majestad Negra” are a few examples of the literary work that simultaneously celebrates and mocks or trivializes curvaceous Black bodies. Similarly, commercial television and popular culture disseminate restricted and stereotypical images of Black womanhood. Simplistic constructions of Black women and their sexuality such as these are pervasive and are tied to folkloric notions of the past. Thus Black women must struggle against a society that uses media to present an image of racial equality while simultaneously maintaining their underprivileged positions in social and economic settings.

**Racialized Signifiers: Race and Bad Hair**

As Black feminist scholars argue, it is not just racism that is oppressing Black women but sexism as well, and my participants clearly understood how these dual axes operate in tandem. However, in the Puerto Rican context racialized terrains are also tied into race-, sex-, and class-based systems of discrimination. As Anthropologist Arlene Torres denounces in Puerto Rico there are stigmatized racial oppositions between the coast and the interior or urban. Today, 21st

---

53 Briggs, 2002; García, 1982; and Safford, 1984.
55 Torres, 1999.
century, the ghetto and gated communities; and the city of Guaynabo and the city of Carolina, to name but a few remains a way to racialized women bodies. Martinez Vergne writes on the spatial regulations of 19th-century San Juan, and notes “city officials controlled and regulated the poor, immoral, and sexually deviant.” She writes that throughout discourses of space, city officials implemented residential laws that literally put the working class “in their place," but also regulated the behavior of women and molded the nature of children (1). These measures were supported by the middle-class, whose occupation and social status began to influence their surroundings and public spaces.

Stereotypical associations of race with specific spatial locations continue to this day. The aforementioned Piñones region, for instance, is generally seen as a cultural bastion of the island’s African folklore, music, and cuisine. This association has been supported by recently developments. Specifically, the culture and cuisine of this region has slowly incorporated newer African flavors and sounds as more Dominicans establish businesses in the area and Haitians have begun to sell a mélange of cultural artifacts representing “African Caribbeanness” along the road. Piñones is also often portrayed as a place where poverty and social marginalization prevail, and consequently as an area where modernity is non-existent. In this way, discursive narratives in the island cast Piñones as folkloric, irrelevant to contemporary society, and as anti-modern. This racialization and stereotyping of the geographical space of the coastline have affixed a stigma that continues to reinforce culturally perceived differences between the social statuses of Black and White women (Crespo 34). As indicated by the following conversation between Susana and Glory, black women are treated differently, stated Susana, a dark-skinned woman who self-identifies as negra. Susana further explained that she is treated poorly in restaurants, hotels, and even the Plaza Las Americas mall, “people have an attitude, like you are not worth
it.” Glory, a lighter-skinned woman identifies herself as Trigueña and negra simultaneously. She abruptly replied to Susana, “You are una acomplejada,” meaning you have an inferiority complex. “People never treated me that way, I think you just want to be at El Balcón del Zumbador,” a bar in Piñones where Black and non-Black Salsa dancers often get together to dance and “taste” the coastal culture. “Ay! Susana, you need to be proud of who you are: a Black woman.” Susan replied, “You are saying that because you are Trigueña with pelo bueno (good hair) and fine features. Men never have eyes on me they only look at you. For the same reasons, people will treat you differently. Perhaps you do not understand me because you don’t have the same experiences as me.”

As this interaction shows, Black women and Trigueñas often focus on discussions of hair and other phenotypes when considering how they see themselves and how others see them. Susana contends that, because she is dark-skinned and has visibly Black features; Puerto Rican society treats her differently than most Trigueñas. In a society that dissimulates diversity, supposedly skin color is not the fundamental issue here. Rather, the problem lies in the “unspoken” everyday practices that castigate the racialized gendered bodies of understanding the suppression and devalorization of themselves.

**Decoding Blackness: Fritoleras and Citibank Text**

In my focus groups, discussions about the Fritoleras and Citibank text generally began to take shape as soon as the study participants noticed the “Frituras-Fat Free” sign in the advertisement. Tita, an assertive young mother of two who identifies as a Trigueña, told the group that…
“The Citibank advertisement was a mockery of Black women and their African culture, their cuisine, and their intelligence. “Frituras,” she stated, “are obviously high in fat, but the ad suggests that the fritolera is not intelligent enough to be aware of this fact.”

From the very first round of discussions, I could sense that the participants had already made a unanimous decision about the racial stereotyping present in the ad in alignment with gender, race, class, and racialized terrains.

Since slavery, Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) and other Black feminists have written about the way Black women have historically been stereotyped as promiscuous because the nature of their laborer occupations relegated to them often required that they work outside. Misconceptions that Black women are not intelligent and are genetically equipped only to cook, clean, and take care of other people children continue to be widespread. More tragically, many Puerto Ricans assume that Black women are content with their social conditions and that it is their own fault for not working hard enough to get ahead in life. Indeed, there is an attitude that Black women should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, regardless of their social positions. Today, these practices are tightly together to an even greater demon - neoliberal reforms.

On another note, stereotypes and misconceptions reveal the tendency of most Puerto Ricans to maintain racist perceptions that ignore the operations and effects of existent structures of power. They reveal, too, that the attitudes and values held by White Puerto Ricans in particular are generally formed without cognizance of the limited economic opportunities available to Black women. In all, they demonstrate how simultaneous sexism and racism together form a double shot of oppression for this always already marginalized sector of society.
Marking Gender, Race and Advertising

Feminist media scholars have examined how the conceptualizations of gender and femininity presented in contemporary advertisements are generally derived from Westernized and specifically Europeanized values (hooks, 1992; Valdivia and Molina, 2006). They have noted, too, how the traditions, morals, and values presented in media help preserve Puerto Rico’s Spanish heritage, which associates racial Whiteness with a “superior” European civilization rather than with the immoral and imperialist United States. This is not to say that the media is the only vehicle used for endorsing such specific nationalist ideologies, however. Cultural and governmental institutions—including museums, and communal spaces—as well as the educational system collude with media to promote these Europeanized ideals.

Marking Whiteness and anything derived from Hispanic culture as superior, civilized, and modernized thus allows advertising to participate in a powerful system of structures that support nationalist and racist projects in both Puerto Rico and other Latin American nations. The erasure of African culture and African descendants is a purposeful strategy designed to create a unified concept of a “civilized” nation. Generally, the Black community in Puerto Rico was persuaded to learn to love “la madre patria,” the mother country of Spain. La maestra, a pseudonym for one of my participants who is a fifth grade teacher in her forties and who self-identifies as Black, notes that this relationship with Spain could nonetheless quickly become strained.

In Puerto Rico, we learn to love our mother nation of Spain, Spanish culture, customs, and language, the Catholic religion and its saints. . . . As an African descendant, I cannot relate to Spain as a mother. Instead, I find Spain to be a madre maltrante (abusive mother) for those that are Black like me. Interviewed –La Maestra
They have noted, too, how the traditions, morals, and values presented in media help preserve Puerto Rico’s Spanish heritage, which associates racial Whiteness with a “superior” European civilization rather than with the immoral and imperialist United States. This is not to say that the media is the only vehicle used for endorsing such specific nationalist ideologies, however. Cultural and governmental institutions—including museums, and communal spaces—as well as the educational system collude with media to promote these Europeanized ideals. Marking Whiteness and anything derived from Hispanic culture as superior, civilized, and modernized thus allows advertising to participate in a powerful system of structures that support nationalist and racist projects in both Puerto Rico and other Latin American nations. The erasure of African culture and African descendants is a purposeful strategy designed to create a unified concept of a “civilized” nation. Generally, the Black community in Puerto Rico was persuaded to learn to love “la madre patria,” the mother country of Spain. La maestra, a pseudonym for one of my participants who is a fifth grade teacher in her forties and who self-identifies as Black, notes that this relationship with Spain could nonetheless quickly become strained.

La maestra states that “Spain left us surviving with their sons and daughters, los blanquitos (Whites), the dominant class in the island, those who live over there.” Her facial gesture suggested that “those who live over there” were individuals of Spanish descent residing in the best gated communities in Puerto Rico, such as Monte Hiedra (Caguas); Guaynabo “City;” Ashford Avenue (Condado); Old San Juan; and Miramar. My interviewees commented directly on the reification of Puerto Rican national identity and its association with Hispanic heritage. They explored the extent to which the affirmation of Spain as a mother country reifies the island’s nationalist discourses in which Hispanic culture is idealized.
La maestra’s portrayal of Spain as an abusive mother nation touches particularly upon how internal power structures forcibly have historically and continue to maintain hegemonic Whiteness in Puerto Rican society. Such cultural arbiters as the government and the media fabricated an idealized image of the jíbaro, the white, mountain-dwelling farmer. As many scholars have already noted, the master narrative created around the icon of the jíbaro and his family forms a lens through which Puerto Rican culture was, and in many respects still is, constructed. Much like other national myths posited throughout Latin America, the narrative of the gran familia puertorriqueña is based upon an idealized concept of mestizaje that appears to include all races and ethnicities within the national fold. However, this supposedly democratic mixture of bloods and cultures in fact has a 19th century eugenic narratives of sangre pura, of pure cosmic race. The figure of the jíbaro thus represents a desire to achieve the idealized, purified culture of la madre patria.

In addition, Sonia—a woman in her forties who lives in the la’26 section of Carolina—notes that “Spaniards were racist too; Americans are not the only racists.” Sonia thus reveals that racism persists in Puerto Rico in spite of the influence of Spanish culture and the hegemonic argument that the island is a unified mestiza family. Despite Sonia’s assertion, Puerto Ricans rarely converse about serious incidences of racism and racial hatred. Instead, these issues are castigated as problems that exist only within the United States and diaspora communities. Most tragically, this practice of racial silence villainizes victims of racial oppression who speaking of their race-based subjugation as maliciously breaking a cultural taboo. In a culture where racial silence is practiced, ideological apparatuses such as the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, the Department of Education, television and advertising, and “local” culture industries all collude to repress the necessary discourse of racism.
For Black women in the island, the mediation of Blackness must inevitably be attempted in relation to this concept of nationhood that maintains many aspects of Hispanic culture and that has normalized racial hierarchies and White privilege. By asserting that the U.S. is not the only racist nation, Black Puerto Ricans have understood the need to reframe the influence of Spanish rule. Spaniards brought Blacks to work as slaves on the island, and Blacks were consequently brutally castigated under the Spanish ruling class and Creole elites. Tita and la maestra touch upon the need to rewrite Puerto Rico’s past to include a history of this oppression and particularly of the racially motivated systems imported during Spanish colonial rule, among them the education system. As la maestra implies, education in Puerto Rico today teaches Hispanic “culture, religion, and saints” with an overly ideological intent. This need to rewrite the island’s past and its cultural heritage is an area that deserves further research.

It is also worth noting that, despite its castigation by the ruling ideology as a racist society, the United States has heavily impacted the island’s racial formations, practices, values, and ways of living. While on the one hand denying all ties to the country, the dominant classes in Puerto Rico also assert their birthright privileges as American citizens. Indeed, this particular group often maintains its class status by educating its children first in private schools and later in American universities on the mainland. This is an educational opportunity unavailable to many Blacks. Individuals educated at American universities often stay in the United States and become part of the middle class, but those who return to Puerto Rico tend to become part of the affluent class and, tellingly, often join the island’s advertising and marketing industry.

The marginalization of predominantly Black communities in Puerto Rico by media, advertising corporations, and governmental institutions alike has had a tremendous social impact on the condition of Black women on the island. Under the auspices of attempting to sell
products, local advertising agencies have helped to establish a standard of Puerto Rican national identity as Hispanic, Catholic, and White. In addition, other socio-economic forces such as the purchasing of local Puerto Rican commercial television networks by international corporations in the 1990s have left Puerto Rican audiences the challenge of negotiating mediated identities in localized spaces that are impacted by global forces. In spite of these challenges, I propose that media can serve as a locus for creating contemporary Black identities that speak to a global economy. In resisting localized stereotypes and folklorized representations in the media, Black women today demonstrate the multiple ways in which Black identities can be (re)constituted vis-à-vis global and local forces.

Media such as television programming, magazines, and advertisements, along with the commercial products they sell, have long been influential in the construction of identities. Representations of Blackness in advertisements produced from within Puerto Rico and by Latin American Spanish language media are scarce. In fact it is more likely to find representations of Black women in commercials or print advertisements imported from the U.S. This is not to imply that all American marketing is beneficial for increasing the awareness of racial diversity, however. As Rivero (2005) states, the tendency of larger, U.S.-based networks to purchase television companies on the island has resulted in a lack of media outlets in which Puerto Rican audiences can interact with local cultural and racial identities. There are similar issues with Spanish-language programming from the U.S., which has provided a relatively new perspective on Latinos living in America. These shows provide the illusion of a “pan-ethnic,” multicultural, and transnational form of programming, but they too fail to discuss or represent Blackness. I want to argue, therefore, that representations of race and gender in advertising and commercial

56 Rivero, 2005.
media from the United States have allowed for novel perspectives of both old and new Black identities in Puerto Rico. Though numerous social and cultural norms constrain Black women, this does not mean that they are not constantly questioning these racist ideologies and their relations to structures of power.

Each of the women in my focus groups experienced the repercussions of discriminatory practices that coexist with an official denial of racism. Finding a language to express such oppression is one of the most difficult tasks for Black women in Puerto Rico today, as governmental institutions and the general public regularly punishes those who assert racial discrimination by recasting the victim as the instigator. Ironically, though it is often depicted as the cause of racist practices, the United States has become a bastion of hope for oppressed racial groups and genders. American law has established a federal office in the island for the investigation and prosecution of racial and sexual discrimination in both the public and private sectors. Yet it is up to “los blanquitos” to enforce the “American” laws in the island, and thus such anti-discriminatory regulations often go unenforced.

The five participants of my focus group unanimously agreed that in Puerto Rico the media offer conventional depictions of Black Puerto Ricans as poor, uneducated, and destined to live in marginalized sectors such as caseríos or in such predominantly Black municipalities as Carolina, Ponce, and Loíza. Glory and Susana, who are both homeowners and professionals, were in disbelief about the essentialized representations of Black women in contemporary Puerto Rican media. Despite these problematic representations, media and popular culture are powerful venues in which women can assert their national and social identities. However, in Puerto Rico there are very few media that provide Black women with positive images with which they might develop an affirmative sense of Black identity. Instead, the media offer only the previously
mentioned folklorized representation, which provide an inaccurate depiction of Black women in Puerto Rico today. This coincides with Hall’s argument that circulating ideologies is a major role of the media (Hall 1980, 37). As bell hooks (1992) asserts, there is an “abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchal society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people (1992: 2).”

During the focus group the problem of race became the focus of the conversation, and the opinions of the women I interviewed were markedly similar when they discussed representations of Black women in advertising. For my interviewees, the representation of the fritolera stood in stark contrast to their own experiences of being Afro Puerto Rican Women, especially for those who held professional occupations. Nonetheless, they also identified with the fritolera and expressed a sense of shared cultural heritage with her, as well as a shared disenfranchised position within Puerto Rican society. Indeed, each of the women in the group deeply resented the place given to Black women. A Piñonera stated that

Black girls perceive themselves as not belonging to other places beside Piñones. A great majority does not like to shop, visit, or eat in areas where White people live, such as the Plaza las Americas, San Juan, and hotels. Media and TV are powerful institutions that influence how they see themselves and how others see them. If what they see is “Whiteness” as the equivalent of beauty, sexuality, and class, their self-esteem suffers.

The danger with advertising is that they do not sell us a product; they sell us an idea “represents” the “norm”. In this case, the ideas are status, beauty, femininity and lifestyle. In the advertisement, the fritolera was expected to use her Mastercard to charge, “all the things that she thought w[ere] improbable.” Moreover, the statement represents standards of whiteness, class,
status, income and access. The representation of the fritolera is constructed in opposition to the hegemonic values of Puerto Rican whiteness. The fritolera is not expected to have an income or credit standing to apply for credit cards.

Media and advertising created a visual distinction in this situation. In the context of black women, media and advertising created an image of the strong black woman, though sometimes presented in a sympathetic light (Leeds Craig, 2002, 7). In the context of Puerto Rico, the image of the black woman is similarly constructed as a strong black woman centered in a Spanish Caribbean plantation economy in today’s global economy.

In the context of my study, my participants negotiated and articulated their black identities in an uneasy allegiance (Race, womanhood and nation) and filled with contradictions. Susana feels that due to her dark-skin, she does not belong to the white sectors of the island—terrains that are culturally and socially marked by class and race have created a symbolic but powerful color line. Susana’s perceived social racial paranoia or ser una acomplejada (inferior), as Glory unjustly labeled Susana, shows that these injustices and practices have been alive in the island since Spanish ruling. These ideologies continue thorough US racial policies and practices in the island. While, Trigueña bodies’ get better social treatment and are “accepted” in Whiter spaces according to Susana and Glory; these white spaces, I notice in their conversations are defined by male-dominated arenas. As Susana recounts, ”men don’t look at her… they look at Glory because of her phenotype”. In the class and racially hierarchical society, the Trigueña’s term it is perceived as beautiful and desirable. In contrast, Susana’s dark-sinned body is less desirable.

In analyzing the Fritolera and Citi advertisement, the participants unanimously felt under attack by the Citi bank Company. They understood the advertisement as a mockery of their
African culture, cuisine and traditions. There is a need to shed light on the lack of representation of Black women and of women in general in Puerto Rican media. Most significantly, there is a need for inclusion of black women as consumers to optimize a media analysis in understanding consumer intelligence.

In sum, analyzing the *Fritolera and Citi* advertisement, the participants unanimously felt under attacked by the Citi bank Company. They understood, the advertisement made a mockery of their African culture, cuisine and traditions. There is a need to shed light on the lack of representation of Black women and of women in general in Puerto Rican media. Most significantly, there is a need for inclusion of black women as audiences and consumers to optimize a media analysis in the understanding consumer intelligence.
CHAPTER 5
FOREIGNNESS OF BLACKNESS AND BEAUTY

For the black women who have been deemed beautiful and objectified by a white masculinist gaze, their distance from the white feminine ideal has not produced [an] unambiguous revulsion... rather, it has been a substantial part of their appeal. However, this attraction, based on the exoticism of otherness, is just as problematic as the racism from which it has emerged.

—Lola Young, *Racializing Femininity*

In this chapter, I identify how my focus groups and interviewed participants responded to the “Fritoleras and Citibank” advertisement with regards to the connection between race and beauty. I will focus particularly on the media’s association of beauty with a White feminine ideal within the Puerto Rican context and the ways in which my interviewees acknowledged and negotiated this articulation.

Being a beautiful Puerto Rican woman means being “White, beautiful and skinny”... everywhere you look, billboards, advertising, even bus stops, you are constantly getting a message that White women are beautiful, therefore I am ugly because I am Black.

Here Susana vividly recounts a fundamental feature of popular culture on the island. In the context of an Afro-Caribbean space such as Puerto Rico, the persistence of White feminine ideals of beauty has its roots in colonial history. Throughout the 19th century, elite Puerto Rican *criollos* utilized disciplinary practices to separate themselves from the “others,” which included the indigent and unruly women of African descent (Martinez-Vergne, 1999). It is this historical separation of White creoles from Afro-Puerto Ricans from which contemporary ideals surrounding race and beauty were derived. In this way Black women were castigated to a subordinated role in Puerto Rico in terms of both social standing and cultural values such as beauty.
Contemporary commercial media and popular culture have distinguished themselves as means for maintaining such race- and class-based hierarchies in Puerto Rican society. Cultural products from the United States play a crucial role here as well, as middle-class White Puerto Ricans are often associated with a tendency to assimilate American culture and lifestyles. As scholars have noted, sectors of Puerto Rican society that associate with American culture—such as those who listen to rock and roll, called “roqueros/as” on the island—are also associated with American racial Whiteness and its racial hierarchy. In this sense, I argue that constructions of White feminine ideals of beauty on the island have been profoundly—and often negatively— influenced by American culture as well as by Hispanic/European notions of Puerto Ricaness.

**Race and Beauty: Puerto Rico**

The following section provides a detailed analysis of three women’s responses to issues of race and beauty in Puerto Rican society. In an effort to undertake a feminist analysis of body politics, I explore how individual Black Puerto Rican women contest hegemonic practices and beliefs surrounding race and gender. In the process, I will strive to answer such questions as: How does being a Black Puerto Rican woman influence one’s social experiences and Black subjectivity? How do individual women come to identity as Black in a society where racial identification is discouraged? And, crucially, how do individual women negotiate American commercial images of race and gender in light of how their own Puerto Rican “nation” presents them?

I propose that Black Puerto Rican women’s “distance from the white feminine ideal has not produced [an] unambiguous revulsion...rather, it has been a substantial part of their appeal” as Lola Young asserts about African American women. Black Puerto Rican women have been exposed to what I call “double visual effects” of Whiteness. Their concepts of race and beauty
have been influenced by both Latin American *telenovelas* and Spanish-language women’s magazines that represent a White feminine ideal, but also by U.S.-based Spanish-language commercial television and American television programming, which has been available on the island since 1954. For my participants—who must constantly negotiate these double visual effects—the presence of the White feminine ideal is not bothersome, as they are aware of the discrepancy between their own race/color and that associated with beauty. My participants understood that the way to achieve White feminine beauty ideals is not through alterations of one’s race, but rather through one’s class. In a similar shift of focus, they were more concerned with achieving femininity than with aligning themselves with culturally hegemonic associations of class.

For Glory, for instance, “beauty” was tied closer to class relations, as it served as a synonym for respectability, prestige, and economic opportunities. Glory is a forty-year-old Black Puerto Rican woman who works as an accountant in a local, federally-funded agency in Hato Rey. Glory grew up in Carolina (Centro) and lived there from the 1970s through the 1990s. During local government elections, Glory often volunteers as a Pro-Statehood campaign member in her hometown. In one of our many conversations, she told me that she was one of the founding members of and a Bomba dancer within the Afro-Puerto Rican cultural group *Los Pleneros de Severo*.

*Question:* Where are Black Puerto Rican women in the media and popular culture?

*Glory:* There are none. Where I do see *negras bonitas* (beautiful Black women) is on the “Miss Clairol” box? There you see well-dressed and elegant *negras Americanas* (Black American women). We don’t have that kind of portrayal of Black Puerto Rican women anywhere in television, newspaper, or magazines. When I go to purchase my make-up
and perfumes you see all kinds of beautiful Black women *de afuera* promoting lipsticks, eye shadows, etc.... Some of the models that I have seen are Halle Berry, Iman, Naomi Cambell, Tyra Banks, and many others. In the island it is very rare to see a Black Puerto Rican woman promoting a beauty product.

Glory emphasizes the extent to which contemporary Black women are exposed to a number of *de afuera* standards of beauty as represented by American and international models, actresses, and beauty pageant contestants, as well by hair care products and popular music. Pamela (Pseudonym), a Black woman and Carolina resident, responded to Glory in a somewhat defensive manner.

Together Susana and Glory reveal the aesthetic conflict between the preference for White, skinny bodies and the alluring, "exotic" appeal of women of color that are both idiomatic of Western culture. Indeed, mixed messages underlie images produced according to local and Latin American standards of beauty. On the one hand, such images often present a superficial acceptance of a broader range of beauty and sexual desirability, but on the other, they usually limit the degree of identifiable ethnicity that impinges upon the Western norm. In other words, in order to be considered beautiful, the faces and bodies of Puerto Rican women must display only minor departures from the standard white Western European look.

**Untangling Differences: Pelo Bueno y Pelo Malo**

Growing up in the island, I am too familiar with the racially and politically charged term of “el pelo malo, and pelo bueno”. This racial coding is rooted in notions of the ‘Mestiza family” and the racist processes of blanqueamiento (whitening). The term: blanqueamiento is when it is

---

57 Term used on the island to refer to those who live outside of the island and specifically in the mainland United States.
believed that by marrying a “white” person, a black person will “improve their race” or in Spanish “mejorar la raza”. The diluting of blood, one hope will erase the inferior race and its traits. As testified by my participants, Afro Puerto Rican women have mediated collective and individual identity in a society that chastises blackness.

I argue that racial aspects related to hair straightening, curls and hair extensions, weave the differences of sameness, as is proclaimed in a racially democratic island. I also examine racial identities related to hair straightening (chemically relaxed, flat-ironed, keratina, or wearing the latest fashion items on the shelves - “weaves”) in the Puerto Rican context. Looking at local hair salons “biuti”, Dominican Republic, local hairdressers and hair product markets, I argue that “hair” is a Racial Signifier.

Maritza: Define the term "pelo bueno" y "pelo malo" and what it means in Puerto Rican society.

Mary G: forty-two years old stated “good hair” is straight, natural, and a hair that doesn’t require chemical straightening products. The “bad hair” you need relaxer (straightening cream) in order to improve its condition and to be presentable. A hair that is really-really “bad”, usually means that it is a black person, he/she is not mixed – “el negro no es mutante” meaning the ‘black person cannot be altered’---

Maritza: What is ‘pelo bueno y pelo malo”?

Soraya: Bad Hair cannot be combed, it rejects the straightening cream and it does not curl.

Nildita (pseudonym): They make fun of those who have bad hair, “they say ‘you don’t get embarrassed?’ Bad hair is ugly, it is the worst – They make them feel bad.

Mary: When you have straight hair it is prettier, elegant and it looks better.
Soraya: The difference between good hair and bad hair: Good hair can be worn straight (with flat-irons, Keratina or weaves) and at the same time curly with other products.

Yilka: How can one have curly hair and straight hair at the same time...? It is a mixture of hair –some Black/white girls have here in Puerto Rico.

The prominence of hair as a determinant of “race” in Puerto Rico can be traced to the 19th century. Anthropologist, Isar Godreau states “Censuses conducted among the slave population of the time refer to, for example, hair texture, color and type, while also indicating other significant attributes such as name, place of origin (nation), distinguishing marks and skin color. One of the terms most often used to describe the slaves’ hair was “grifo (kinky)” Spaniards, as well as, Creoles would use this term as a generalized racial category, i.e. “negro grifo” (light-skinned). The term is still used today in descriptions of curly hair or in reference to an individual of African ancestry.

This construction of hair as a “racial signifier” remains despite the island’s long process of racial mixing, which nonetheless makes it virtually impossible to classify people according to strict U.S. racial categorizations of Black or White. By way of example, one of the female participants informed me that if there is any doubt regarding the racial classification, she states, “I did not know how to racially classify my husband when responding to the U.S. 2000 Census, I asked my neighbor, who told her “you can tell by the hair.”

The dominant attention given to hair in discussions concerning race is not limited merely to Puerto Rico. Its importance as a decisive factor in racial labeling is evidenced throughout the Spanish Caribbean, where their origins can be traced to the 19th century. A recent study on the prevailing aesthetic beliefs among Dominican women indicated, for example, that:
For Dominicans, hair is the principal bodily signifier of race, followed by facial features, skin color and, last, ancestry. The role of [hair] as a signifier of race dates back to at least the eighteenth century (Candelario, 2000: 140 [223]. I noticed that my participants by "combing" through hair differences, they were not reducing the power of the (local) racial categories, such as Black, Negra, Trigueña o Café con Leche, Negra or Prieta (dark-skinned) nor denying the power of cultural codes.

The “N” Word: “Negra”

As I have discussed in regards to early nationalist discourses and the Poesía Afro-antillana movement, history and literature have tended to characterize the Black Puerto Rican woman by her physical, sexual, and culinary gifts. Black women’s history and experiences have also long been told in contrast to those of White, “decent” women. Depicting them as producing melazas (molasses), savagely dancing to drumbeats, or cooking frituras on the side of the road, White male scholars racialized and sexualized the bodies of Black women. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that—as Rivero documents in her chronological history of race in Puerto Rican television—these stereotypes made their way to television and began to shape conceptualizations of Blackness for Puerto Rican audiences at large. As a result, I propose that the term Negra became a pejorative term used to denote cultural backwardness and marginalization. It became part of a familiar discourse, one which is deeply embedded in contemporary Puerto Rican society and daily life.

While Negra is not a problematic term for many Black women (I include myself in this category), it has not gained collective political mobilization due to its cultural connotations and to the fact that many women consequently feel victimized by the assertion of being Negra. The language of Negra is also equated with a distant racial history with which many younger
generations do not relate. For younger Black girls, *Negra* is often associated with narrow, local views of Blackness that may be in competition with newer, more globalized concepts of Black identity. Black women are using these newer racial concepts to present themselves as part of the language and discourse central to concepts of Puerto Rican nationhood. In other words, my participants constructed their conceptualizations of what it is to be Black, beautiful, and feminine by drawing upon globalized images of Blackness, though they simultaneously used these conceptualizations to maintain a Puerto Rican identity. Glory’s regular consumption of cosmetics, for instance, suggests that she wants to be perceived as physically attractive, elegant, and important by Puerto Rican society.

**The Foreignness of Black Beauty**

Black feminist and media scholars have cast mass media as veritable makers of ideology through news and entertainment programs. They have noted how the media evokes and reinforces stereotypes of African-American women that serve to reinforce their economic and societal oppression. While these studies are certainly crucial to understanding racial issues in America, I want to look beyond the often-detrimental objectification of African-American women in media. Instead, I want to consider how images of African-American women in mass media as well as consumer beauty products help other Black populations create new Black identities. I argue that Black Puerto Rican women are negotiating race by drawing upon global images, narratives, and technologies. In this way, the assertion of Black identity is not conducted in geopolitical isolation. Black women and Puerto Ricans as a whole are in no way, in the words of the nationalist Antonio Pedreira, “insular islanders” separate from the rest of the world. Constructions of Black identities are in constant motion and regular communication with global and local notions of racialized and gendered identities, and thus should also not be conceived, as
is often the case, as static. My case study demonstrates how the negotiation of Black identity involves constant interactions with cultural influences from the United States, Hispanic culture in the Caribbean, and various other international and local forces.

Today, media and advertising alike continue to present highly stereotypical depictions of Black Puerto Rican women. The character of Susa in the television show “Kiosko Budweiser” exemplifies such hegemonic depictions. At one point in the show another character tells Susa that her troubles derive from the fact that she is "prieta, bruta y penepé:" Black, dumb, and a PNP member, the latter abbreviation indicating the Republican Pro-Statehood Party on the island.\footnote{Davila, 1999} Representations of Black women in Latin American telenovelas produced in Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia similarly reinforce race-based social hierarchies. Indeed, Black women in Puerto Rico must negotiate both American & Latin American standards of female beauty, two overlapping systems that tend to exclude them. The ideals of female beauty disseminated by these media are generally associated with Whiteness, and there has been a growing concern that these ideals also perpetuate a concept of beauty that is neither authentic nor attainable.

Issues surrounding the portrayal of women as beautiful and feminine have received a good deal of recent attention from feminist media, advertising, and cultural studies scholars. Nevertheless, these researchers tend to focus on Latina women in the United States (Baez, 2006; Molina, and Valdivia, 2004) or Latin American (Rivero, 2003).

**Globalizing Blackness**

The globalization of American media along with its ideals of feminine beauty—namely that women must be thin, White, have blue eyes, and be eternally young—has received extensive

\footnote{Davila, 1999}
critical attention. It should also be recognized, however, that images of African-American women have a substantial impact on international Black communities where representations of Black females are not available in the mainstream media. Many of my participants reported a desire to look “away” from the strict Puerto Rican models of femininity, and to look instead to the “American way” as a means to negotiate issues of race and physical beauty.

Consequently, looking at “beautiful Black women de afuera” becomes a means to avoid constructions of race under mestizaje discourses and media in which Blackness is folklorized and associated with certain gender- and class-based stereotypes. African-American beauty offers a response to the rejection by Puerto Rican society of the dark as primitive and sensual.

**Newer Black Identities and Popular Culture**

The women and models in the commercials or music videos produced in Puerto Rico are not Black like me. I looked at these music videos with Beyoncé and Rihanna to find out about the new Black hairstyles, fashions, make-up, etc.

Here Yilka, Glory’s 15-year-old daughter who self-identifies as *Trigueña*, emphasizes how Black women in Puerto Rico recognize contemporary representations of African-American women as models for Black female beauty. This relationship is worth examining, and I believe that investigating Blackness in a wider, more international context will allow for a comparison of how the overlapping nature of race, gender, and class affects Black women in various global communities, including Afro-Latinas in the United States.

Advertising campaigns are usually aimed at women and often include messages surrounding how to improve one’s appearance, increase physical attractiveness, and reduce the signs of aging. Issues of attractiveness even appear in the "Fritoleras and Citibank” advertisement. While physical beauty itself is not a key aspect of the ad, it does discuss such
attributes as status, economy, privilege, purchasing power, and mobility that are associated with attractiveness in Western culture. Mrs. Encarnación argues that

The reality of the “Fritoleras and Citibank” text is that the advertising campaign was targeted to those customers with limited income and purchasing power. I don’t think the message was to offend Black women in Puerto Rico. The banking industry is interested to extend credit to those with an established credit history and solid income.

Mrs. Encarnación’s argument that the banking system provides equal access to those with good credit regardless of skin color is simply a myth. The “Fritoleras and Citibank” ad depicts Black women as participating in the informal economy in Puerto Rico. Significantly, its text implies that it is “improbable” that a Black woman working as a fritolera will have access to the credit and purchasing power necessary to acquire a credit card with no interest rate. The ad is in fact tailored to attract customers that look like the woman photographed on the front of the MasterCard, rather than the fritolera.

In all, media images, governmental policies, and public perceptions have combined to keep Black women in the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy. New sets of narratives and images about Black women are consequently necessary but have yet to be created. The effects of social policy and media stereotypes in the island need further scholarly attention, as popular culture and mass media have entrapped Black women in restrictive roles.

My focus, however, will be less on this form of oppression. I instead am proposing the importance of analyzing how the representations of African-American women in media impact racialized, and specifically Black, communities. As my interviews show, Black Puerto Rican women consume and respond to both White and Black representations of ideal beauty as they negotiate new forms of Black identity.
In terms of localized racial categories, I found that hair and the term *Trigueña* were dominant racial identifiers for my interviewees. All the participants acknowledged the essentialist portrayal of Black women in the media and identified a deep-rooted racism that continues to permeate in public and private spaces. Although many women preferred to use the term *Trigueña* instead of Black or *Negra*, this varied depending on the women’s class and age. Indeed, younger and less educated women were more uncomfortable with the use of the term “Black.” The lived experiences of these women who live at the periphery of national discourses on race and gender together draw to question the hegemonic depiction of Black women’s subjectivity.

My goal throughout this dissertation has been to illuminate how Afro-Puerto Ricans women mediate blackness in relation to media, popular culture and everyday practices. I contend that Afro Puerto Rican Women mediate their Blackness by looking away from the folklorized representations of themselves that are perpetuated in local commercial media and advertising. Significantly, they mediate blackness in a society wherein *mestizaje*, policies of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, of the island’s population, and unofficial racism all coexist.

In Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, issues involving race and racism are handled both by a mechanism of denial and, exclusion and celebration. Many scholars have already written about the exclusionary practices of *mestizaje*, for instance, an official policy in Puerto Rico wherein colorblindness is lauded but which in fact serves to discriminate against blacks. I demonstrate *Trigueñidad* to be a more recent response among Blacks on the island to such racist policies as well as the lack of contemporary media representations of Blackness and even-handed narratives of Black heritage.
In the face of a society whose media presents race as part of a past, folkloric identity, many women adopt a new language of Trigueñidad in order to manipulate and challenge discourses about race, gender and nation which are embedded in media representations of Afro Puerto Rican women. As they reaffirm and transform traditional understanding of what it means to be mujer negra, (i.e. Afro Puerto Rican), these women give salience to three particular ways in which they understand blackness.

Throughout my own personal counts as Trigueñita and becoming Afro-Puerto Rican woman (Chapter 3). I shared the way I lived blackness as a Trigueña woman, not denying my African heritage, while asserting my third racial space – as a Trigueña. In a nation that constantly feed on past constructions of nationhood that secure Puerto Ricanness while battling newer constructions of blackness. Personally, I understood my blackness through my Trigueñidad.

Hence Chapter 4 and 5 shared the bulk of the study as it relates to women responses to the advertisement “Fritoleras and Citibank” and local representations of themselves in popular culture in Puerto Rico. When contesting local representations of women in advertising, the participants viewed Whiteness and femininity as a standard to represent Puerto Rican nation, class and gender. While mediating White-feminine ideals in media and advertising, dark-skinned women viewed themselves in contradiction of the island beauty standards – White Puerto Ricans. In contrast, those participants who self-identified as Trigueñas utilize white-feminine ideals to understand “lo no definido” throughout their phenotypes which distance them from blackness. Some of my visually - black Trigueñas participants literally distanced themselves from “Negras” identity. Other participants utilized the racially mixed embodiment of blackness to mediate their black lineage. Utilizing phenotypes, particular “hair” allows the racially mixed black woman to disentangle their African “roots” for some type of recognition. An area that deserves further
investigation. I noticed that throughout the discourses of hair pelo malo”, as a racial identifier perpetuates ideology of *mestizaje* and discourses of blanqueamiento (whitening) as it was presented in chapter 4.

Using the term “Negras” among younger generations, became problematic, as they noticed it is a sexually and classed charged term. In contrast, older generations self-identified themselves as Negras, or Blacks. *Trigueñidad* is thereby not necessarily just situational but is generational as well. I would suggest that older generations maintained a closer association with historical events and stories tied to Black as a result of growing up in Maroons communities such as Piñones or sugar plantation communities in Carolina, and that younger generations lack these historical and community ties. This generational shift to *Trigueña* identity thereby reflects a response to dramatic changes in the social, economic, and political forces that have shaped and reshaped conceptual categories of identity over time and with regard to place on the island. Racial categorizations remained a problem in Puerto Rico, as is presented in the results of various US Census’, with less than 10% self-identified as black in an Afro-Caribbean island. The complexity of Puerto Ricans accepting their blackness is rather complex. At first, its undefined status, ideological apparatuses, and subvert racism have worked to maintain white supremacist ideals and domination toward the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors – in this case black women.

Media and popular culture has been instrumental vehicle transporting dominant ideologies of race, gender and beauty. Feminist media scholars have examined how the conceptualizations of gender and femininity presented in contemporary advertisements are generally derived from Westernized and specifically Europeanized values. They have noted, too, how the traditions, morals, and values presented in media help preserve Puerto Rico’s Spanish
heritage, which associates racial Whiteness with a “superior” European civilization rather than with the immoral and imperialist United States. This is not to say that the media is the only vehicle used for endorsing such specific nationalist ideologies, however. Cultural and governmental institutions—including museums, and communal spaces—as well as the educational system collude with media to promote these Europeanized ideals. The erasure of African culture and African descendants is a purposeful strategy designed to create a unified concept of a “civilized” nation. Generally, the Black community in Puerto Rico was persuaded to learn to love “la madre patria,” the mother country of Spain.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As a critical feminist media scholar, I wanted to consider the role played by popular culture in the mediation of Blackness on an island that claims to be a racial paradise. As many scholars of race and nationhood in Latin America have noted, the elites of numerous nations have used mestizaje and blanqueamiento ideologies to establish dominant conceptions of their counties as ethnically and culturally homogeneous. In a similar fashion, many of the Black Puerto Rican women that I interviewed were comfortable declaring their Puerto Ricanness, but felt their race was less important as a category of identity. There was a generational gap in this attitude towards race as well. Women who identified as Negras tended to be older, working class individuals living in predominantly poor, Black neighborhoods such as La’26 in Carolina or Piñones. By contrast, younger generations living in the same neighborhoods were more comfortable with the term Trigueña. However, the lighter-skinned women and professionals living in Carolina maintained a Trigueña identity. While the darker-skinned participants, homeowners and living in Carolina maintained a negras identity. I feel the need for more ethnographic work that will highlight the conversations between negras and trigueñas.

One of the most rewarding aspects of working on my dissertation has been witnessing how my discussion groups have changed the lives and outlooks of so many Black women. During the two-year period in which I conducted my research, several of my participants began to develop a critical eye for understanding media representations of race and gender. Significantly, during my regular check-up visits I witnessed these women transform by acquiring a voice as well as a greater understanding of a patriarchal and capitalist system that uses silences.
and shame as strategies of oppression. They began to see how sexism and racism affect their everyday lives, and to develop a language for identifying and discussing the impact of these forces.

The most difficult task in writing this dissertation was theorizing Black and gendered experiences in a racially mixed island. Especially at the beginning of my work, I had some difficulties finding a language that could communicate the meanings of Blackness as negotiated and articulated by my study participants. Their stories became the empirical data that documented an otherwise silent racism for which there was as yet no established, descriptive discourse. “Dominant regimes of representation,” notes Stuart Hall, are the outcome “of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization” and in Puerto Rico such regimes have folklorized and subjected Black women via stereotypical representations of race and gender (cited in hooks, 1992, 3). Simply by being Black, women, and Puerto Rican, my study participants found themselves up against a threefold form of oppression that is wordlessly embedded in media representations and dominant discourses. Against these unspoken but nonetheless glaringly effective racist and sexist regimes, however, my dissertation found that Afro-Puerto Rican women have developed a sense of self and have worked to find ways to define and celebrate their Blackness, their gender, and their Puerto Ricanness.

My research reveals the normative absence (i.e., everyday invisibility) of Afro-Puerto Rican women from mainstream popular culture and, when they are visible, their simultaneous negative depiction. My participants were keenly aware of the simplistic roles that Black women are given in the media as well as the over-determination of white feminine ideals of beauty. Latin American and U.S.-based Spanish-speaking media such as telenovelas and news shows as well as other cultural products all were seen to promote stereotypical depictions of Blackness, or to
simply ignore Black women altogether. In response, my participants regularly used American mainstream culture, and in particular depictions of African-American women in popular culture and consumer products, as a means to negotiate their Blackness.

The print media they most commonly consumed included magazines in Spanish and local newspapers. Older and more educated Black women read El Nuevo Día, the leading newspaper in Puerto Rico, predominantly. In contrast, Primera Hora, the second leading newspaper that is also owned by El Nuevo Día, is marketed for younger audiences who work outside of the home and have little time to read. In addition, the younger generations (ages 18-30) watched MTV and MTV2, and are avid consumers of telenovelas. However, they also watched television programming, videos, and films sent to them through social networks and downloaded from the internet.

My goal was to determine how contemporary Black women would respond to the “Fritoleras and Citibank” ad. Overall, my participants were somewhat unsurprised at the limited way that Black women are presented in local media. They were more distressed, though, about the way the Citibank ad made a mockery of their African culture and culinary traditions. In discussing the intersection of race, gender, and class in relation to subordination and power in the advertisement, they noted, too, how it portrayed Black women’s folklorized and subordinated place in society. In light of their concerns, I propose that feminist political activists must commit to transforming media misrepresentation and stereotyping Black women.

“Negra” vs. Trigueña Identities

My participants wrangled with the differences between and meanings of Trigueña and Negra identity classifications throughout our discussions, both of which are heavily influenced by the mestizaje and blanqueamiento ideologies prevalent throughout the Caribbean. In the
Puerto Rican context specifically, literature, education, media, and everyday practices have transmitted the dominant culture’s general dismissal of Negras women. While older women often continue to classify themselves as Negras, the cultural and folklorized baggage associated with this term is clear. By contrast, Trigueña is an open-end term with its own baggage. Moreover, Trigueña speaks to a third racial space that communicates a change in racial meanings. The Trigueña participants revealed that while mediating blackness in the present they simultaneously looked at the historical past to make sense of blackness.

The past, according to anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, only exists because there is a present. I propose that a Trigueña identity does not necessitate losing a connection to the past; rather it encourages women to reflect on newer notions of Black identity that can then be connected with a reformulated and reconsidered past. In this way, Trigueña encourages Black women to look outside the insular and colonial ideals of race and gender that have been present since the days of Spanish rule. As la maestra testified, “no solo los americanos son los racistas. España tambien fueron racista.” Hers is a valuable reminder that the dominant ideology presenting Spain as a beneficent “motherland” ignores that nation’s long oppression and exploitation of Blacks, and particularly Black women, on the island. La Trigueña emphasizes the necessity of questioning the hegemonic narratives of the past and the concepts of Black identity they worked to instill. These narratives in fact deserve further research, I believe, with regards to their impact on the construction of racial identity on the island.

**Policy Implications**

It is important to conceptualize my participants’ mediation of Black identity as a complex and dynamic process that is impacted by a range of socioeconomic and political factors. For instance, inequities in education opportunities and media portrayals play a significant role in
determining how Black women are able to see and understand themselves. Given the influences of these kinds of factors on the mediation of Blackness, one can make several recommendations regarding public policy in the areas of media and education. For one, it is necessary to restructure the curricula of the island’s educational system. Indeed, a recent ethnographic research study conducted in an elementary public school in Puerto Rico ultimately argues that “subduing and narrowing the history of slavery is instrumental in the reproduction of national ideologies of mestizaje in Afro-Latin America” (Godreau et. al. 118). The authors contend that school textbooks and practices silence, trivialize, and simplify the history of slavery. They conclude that these maneuvers distance Blackness from Puerto Rican identity and silence racism while at the same time upholding ideologies of racial democracy and blanqueamiento (118). The authors argue for the necessity of integrating discussions of Black identity into school curricula starting from the third grade. Teaching students from an early age to embrace the diversity of the Puerto Rican population will allow future generations to appreciate the value of racial equality, and will allow Black children in particular to proudly accept their ethnicity. As some of my participants living in Piñones testified, such positive attitudes towards race are needed in the educational system. Policymakers are urged to support the restructuring of school curricula in order to reflect the richness of cultural and ethnic diversity in the island.

In addition, the media’s tendency to suggest that the real causes of poverty, sexual violence, and discrimination are Black women themselves must be confronted. We must hold the media accountable for its content while simultaneously addressing the more entrenched and salient problems of sexism and racism as they affect Afro-Puerto Rican women today. With respect to local advertising agencies, there are several recommendations for policymakers to consider. Foremost there is an urgent need to recruit and train Afro-Puerto Rican women and
men to participate in every aspect of the industry. There is a related need to effectively enforce the policies of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, as many public agencies and private companies benefit from federal contract funding (for example, U.S. Census advertising campaigns were often organized by local agencies) and consequently they must be held accountable to the EEOC’s requirements. As this recommendation suggests, it is not enough to address the issues of racial and gendered identity from a purely cultural context. Rather, real social, political, and economic changes must be enacted in order to improve the lives of Black Puerto Rican women. That said, more research is also needed to examine the unique experiences and circumstances of Afro-Puerto Rican women in order to better understand how policies such as those enforced by the EEOC can best help secure equal opportunities for Black women and other marginalized communities in the island.
REFERENCES


Hull, P. (1982). All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press


AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Maritza Quiñones Rivera graduated from Indiana University in 1996 with a Bachelor of Science degree in General Studies while raising two young children. She also completed a Master of Science degree in Information and Library Sciences from the same university in 1999. From 1999 through 2003 Quiñones was the web communication manager for the Office of the Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Multicultural Affairs at Indiana University. A native of Carolina, Puerto Rico; Quiñones is a proud mother of a daughter, Marielle Bianca, and a son, Christian Alexander.