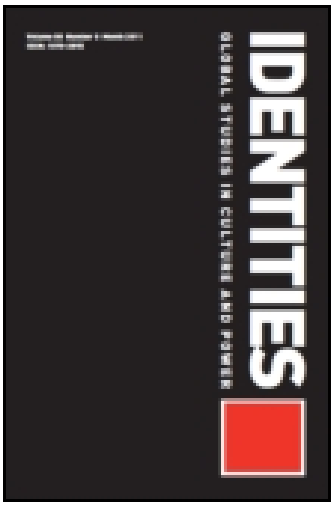

Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20

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Published online: 24 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: Isar Godreau (2002) Changing Space, Making Race: Distance, Nostalgia, and the Folklorization of Blackness in Puerto Rico, Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 9:3, 281-304, DOI: 10.1080/10702890213969

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10702890213969

Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 9: 281–304, 2002

1070-289X/02 $12.00 +.00
DOI: 10.1080/10702890290091543

CHANGING SPACE, MAKING RACE: DISTANCE, NOSTALGIA, AND THE FOLKLORIZATION OF BLACKNESS IN PUERTO RICO

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In this article, I critique some of the discursive terms in which blackness is folklorized and celebrated institutionally as part of the nation in Puerto Rico. I examine a government-sponsored housing project that meant to revitalize and stylize the community of San Antón, in Ponce, as a historic black site. Although government officials tried to preserve what they considered to be traditional aspects of this community, conflict arose because not all residents agreed with this preservationist agenda. I document the controversy, linking the government's approach to racial discourses that represent blackness as a vanishing and distant component of Puerto Rico. I argue that this inclusion and celebration complements ideologies of blanqueamiento *(whitening) and race-mixture that distance blackness to the margins of the nation and romanticize black communities as remnants of a past era. I link these dynamics to modernizing State agendas and discourses of authenticity that fuel cultural nationalism worldwide.*

Key Words: Puerto Rico, cultural nationalism, blackness, housing, blanqueamiento

In March 1995, *The San Juan Star,* one of Puerto Rico's leading newspapers, announced that "Puerto Ricans will 'bleach away' many of the physical traces of its African past by the year 2200, with the rest of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean following a few centuries later" (Bliss 1995:30). The article, which was written to commemorate the 122nd year anniversary of the abolition of slavery on the island, also seemed to be commemorating the future "abolition" of blackness itself. "In two centuries," said one of the experts interviewed, "there will hardly be any blacks in Puerto Rico" (historian, Luis Díaz Soler, in Bliss 1995: 30).

This racial forecast and concomitant claims to the gradual disappearance of black cultural manifestations reinforces ideologies of *blanqueamiento* well known and thoroughly documented in Latin America (Burdick 1992; de la Fuente 2001; Lancaster 1991**;** Martínez-Echazábal 1999; Skidmore 1974; Stephan 1991; Wade 1993, 1997; and Whitten and Torres 1992, among others). Scholars and activists have demonstrated that such notions of whitening often go hand in hand with dis-

courses of *mestizaje* or race mixture that tend to exclude blacks, deny racism, and also de-legitimize indigenous claims and demands (Hale 1999; Helg 1995; Purcell and Sawyers 1993; Whitten and Torres 1998). To challenge the silencing effects of such nationalist ideologies, Latin American activists have responded by developing important social and political movements that stand for black affirmation, the raising of black consciousness, and the nurturing of Afro-diasporic solidarities that extend beyond and complicate the regional boundaries of Latin America (Hanchard 1994**;** Franco-Ortíz and Hernández 1993; Gordon 1999; Wade 1997). These documented activities of affirmation and celebration mostly operate in contention with State agendas, national elites, or ideologies of mesitzaje.

The purpose of this article, however, is to examine what happens when celebratory renderings of blackness are appropriated by those who control the State apparatus. Rather than look at how blackness is excluded from nationalist narratives and how people challenge its institutional invisibility, the goal is to analyze some of the contested terms in which blackness is accounted for, celebrated, and represented institutionally as part of the nation. As a case study, I will discuss a government-sponsored housing project currently being developed to honor the community of San Antón in Ponce, Puerto Rico as a site of black folklore. It is argued that this inclusion and celebration is not distinct from but complements and works together with ideologies of *blanqueamiento*, as it relies upon some of the same ideological principles that distance blackness to the imagined margins of the nation.

Problems related to the appropriation of black symbols by the State have been successfully tackled in Caribbean scholarship (de Freitas 1999; Giovannetti 1998; Patullo 1996; Price 1998; Trouillot 1995, among others). Questions related to State objectifications of black people or black communities in Latin America, however, have not received the same kind of attention (recent exceptions are: Collins 2001; Guss 1993, 2000; Hagedorn 2001; Lewis 2000; Moore 1997; and Ortíz 2000). Scholars have, nevertheless, produced sophisticated critiques of mestizaje by focusing their attention on State appropriations and elite interpretations of the indigenous (see Clifford 1988; García-Canclini 1989; Hale 1999; Ramos 1992; and Urban and Sherzer 1991, among others). Sherzer and Urban, for example, speak of the "folklorization" of indigenous practices, as "a process that relocates native customs from their original contexts to new urban contexts usually under the direct sponsorship of the state" (Urban and Sherzer 1991: 10). Analyzing the Mexican State interpretation of coastal black communities, Lewis also deploys the term folklorization, defining it as a process that transforms traditions through spatial and temporal decontextualization (Lewis 2000: 912; see also Hagedorn 2001). Such transformations usually involve what García-Canclini calls "the staging of the popular" (1989: 191) through performances (festivals, folkloric dances, recitals) that promote national culture as the cohesive product of different socio-racial heritages (Dávila 1997; Lewis 2001; Martínez 2002; Urban and Sherzer 1991).

Government-sponsored performances and public representations of Puerto Rico's

black folklore share similar dynamics to such State interpretations and objectifications of tradition. They resonate with the feelings of loss inherent in State modernizing agendas, which uphold the romantic belief in pristine yet endangered cultural essences, and which scholars have noted for fueling nationalism worldwide (Bendix 1997; Handler 1988; Domínguez 1989).

To speak of "nationalism" or the "State" in a context like Puerto Rico, however, may be considered problematic since Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the U.S. This means that the U.S. Congress may exercise plenary powers over the Island, regulating fundamental aspects such as citizenship, currency, postal services, foreign affairs, military defense, communications, labor relations, environmental policies, commerce, finance, health, and welfare. In spite of this complex neo-colonial situation, however, most Puerto Ricans consider themselves part of a distinct national group (Morris 1995; Dávila 1997)**.** In determining such national distinctiveness, the United States often figures as a powerful counterpoint against which authentic Puerto Rican culture is defined (Dávila 1997; Duany 2000). In this context, deploying the ideology of racial mixture and democracy becomes instrumental, as it serves to distinguish between a mixed, supposedly harmonious Puerto Rico and a deeply segregated U.S. "other." Similar dichotomies have been drawn to support nation-building projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, key ideologues of mestizaje like Freyre in Brazil, Martí in Cuba, and Muñoz Marín in Puerto Rico construed their corresponding versions of racial democracy in explicit comparison with the U.S. and in diasporic dialogue with U.S. institutions and thinkers (see Martínez-Echazábal 1999; Fry 2000; and Díaz-Quiñonez 2000).

Privileging blackness as a destabilizing, yet constitutive force of ideologies of racial democracy and *blanqueamiento*, I examine some of the specific riddles that government-sponsored events bring to the folklorization of black identities in Puerto Rico. Specifically, the focus is on the role that discursive distance and nostalgia play in this process. By discursive distance, I refer to state representations that bind blackness geographically and temporally, locating its phenotypic and cultural signs "somewhere else" and in pre-modern times. By discursive nostalgia, I refer to ideological frameworks that overlook issues of power, idealizing black people as happy and rhythmic tradition bearers who still inhabit supposedly homogeneous and harmonious communities.

My analysis of such folklorizing dynamics echoes similar processes of heritage objectification and romanticizing documented elsewhere. I argue, however, that what distinguishes the folklorization of race, and more specifically of blackness, in Puerto Rico from the objectification of other traditions—as previously documented by García-Canclini (1989), Clifford (1988), Domínguez (1989), Handler (1988), Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983), and others—is the impetus that the ideology of *blanqueamiento* provides to such objectifying processes. Defined as the gradual "purging" of black features from the general population, I argue that *blanqueamiento* not only encourages, but also enables dominant, romantic repre-

sentations of black communities as remnants of a by-gone era. Because discourses of whitening are also part and parcel of modernity and of the modern need to "rescue" national traditions in Latin America, I show how such dynamics of objectifying heritage through distance and nostalgia are particularly nourished in Puerto Rico by this "wishful thinking" over the supposedly vanishing qualities of blackness.

I learned of these folklorizing dynamics through the fieldwork I conducted from 1995 to 1996 and intermittently from 1997 to 2002 in the community of San Antón in Ponce, Puerto Rico. San Antón is a poor community, currently constituted by approximately 300 families, which was established during the 1800s by freed slaves (*libertos*) in the municipality of Ponce. Ponce is the second most important city in Puerto Rico and was an extremely important port during the heyday of sugar production in the island (Scarano 1992). Residents familiar with the barrio's history link its development to the sugar plantations and haciendas that flourished nearby during the late 19th century. The community, however, is best known in Ponce and in Puerto Rico for its *bomba* and *plena,* which are two musical genres that rely heavily on dance and the use of drums. These rhythms, previously characterized as "local" and "primeval," acquired recognition as "national" genres over the years, constituting the most explicit, celebrated link to the island's African presence (Blanco 1953; see also Amador forthcoming; Barton 1995; Banco Popular de Puerto Rico 2001).

Because of San Antón's reputation as the birthplace of the *plena*, residents of Ponce and Puerto Rico consider the community to be a traditional site of black culture. In Ponce, the community is also well known as the birthplace of nationally recognized black athletes of baseball and basketball. This folkloric status is actively sustained and promoted by a select group of community members in coordination with government agencies such as the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, Ponce's Municipal Department of Tourism, and The Department of Sports and Recreation.

The housing project, discussed as a case study in this article, was also developed in coordination with government agencies in charge of managing the city's historic and cultural development. For example, the first phase of the project (built in one sector of the barrio between 1996 and 1998) involved personnel from the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and the Office of Historic Preservation (*Centro Histórico*) in Ponce. The second phase, which is currently under construction, is also subject to guidelines developed by personnel from the Office of Historic Preservation in Ponce. The main goal of this on-going project is to answer the needs of the residents of San Antón, who for decades had endured decaying conditions by providing new and better-quality housing facilities. The housing development, however, also intends to mark the community as a site of Afro–Puerto Rican traditions by preserving features that architects and city planners deemed to be typical of this community.

A number of forces backed this preservationist approach. Tourism was one in-

centive, but not the main goal since San Antón falls outside the official boundaries of Ponce's historic/tourist district and trolley routes have not been established yet to bring outsiders to the *barrio*.[1] A second, more powerful stimulus for the housing project came from Ponce's staff of architects and urban planners: a team of relatively progressive, young, well-educated, light-skinned professionals who felt committed to developing San Antón in a culturally sensitive way. In the following section, I explain how they applied this sensibility to the project's design.

For now, it is important to underscore a third, more immediate motive having to do with the construction of the first phase of the housing project taking place during a general election campaign (1996), and in the midst of heated controversies about the issue of national identity. At that time, the island's governor, Pedro Rosselló, declared that Puerto Rico "is not and has never been a nation." An advocate of statehood for Puerto Rico, Roselló said his nation is the United States (Torres-Gotay 1996: 16). Six months later, more than 80,000 Puerto Ricans marched to challenge Rosselló's statement declaring that Puerto Rico was undoubtedly a nation because it had a territory, a language, a culture, and a common heritage (Randall 1996: 3).

It was in this context that Ponce's mayor, Rafael Cordero Santiago, used the housing project as a political platform that would demonstrate his defense of Puerto Rican traditions and national pride. Ironically, this "patriotic move" in San Antón was funded, like other housing initiatives for low-income families in Puerto Rico, with federal U.S. government funds from HUD. Specifically, the project relied on grant-money provided by HOME and section 108 of LGA (Loan Guarantee Assistance). Both are linked to HUD's Community Development Block Grants. Next, I examine the effects that San Antón's folkloric status had upon the conceptualization of this not-so post-colonial housing initiative.

THE HOUSING PROJECT AND THE RE-CREATION OF FAMILY *PATIOS*

The construction of the first 24 houses in San Antón began in March, 1996. Before trucks began to pivot and load its fertile soil, Ponce's mayor Rafael Cordero visited the community to promote and justify the imminent intervention. In his speech, Mayor Cordero declared:

> Because in this soil where I am standing today, here the Africans contributed what they had to our race (*nuestra raza)*. And our race is nothing else than the mixture of the African, the Spaniard, and the Taíno Indian and from there comes the Puerto Rican race. . . . We somehow had to give back what San Antón has meant for the history of our country and of our city. (Public Speech. Ponce, P.R. My translation)

Residents were eager for the change. Houses ravaged by moths and termites, ceilings that leaked, the fire-hazards that come with overcrowding and the lack of

a sewer system, signaled poverty and, according to many residents, administrative abandonment. Community members had actively denounced such conditions since the 1970s, but it wasn't until 1994, two years prior to general and municipal elections, that the municipal government began to address the problem assertively. Newspaper articles announced "the rehabilitation of the Barrio of San Antón contemplates returning the rooted community to its origins" (Millán-Pabón 1995:5). Referring to the proposed housing project, Mayor Cordero stated:

> "The facades of the houses will be from the last century. They will be wooden structures, with double roofs and wooden columns in the balconies, with French windows and other carefully planned details," said the Mayor of the Southern Pearl with pride. "The rehabilitation will respect the *patios* (yards of various families) . . . as well as some trees where people used to gather and still gather to dance the *bomba* and *plena*." (Millán-Pabón 1995: 5)

The explicit attempt to "respect" San Antón's *patios* was articulated by architects and planners as one of the most innovative elements of this new development. A *patio* can be roughly defined as a small plot of land occupied by an extended family. Approximately 68% of all the families in San Antón were established in this arrangement before the housing project began (Urbain 1997). *Patios* vary in shape and composition (see Figure 1:a). The smallest *patio* was made up of 3 persons, while approximately 57 members constituted the biggest.

Patios in San Antón typify the settlement that took place in this region of Ponce among free blacks in the 1900s, a pattern documented in other parts of the Caribbean as family land (Besson 1984; Olwig 1998). Much has changed since the 1900s, however. In the past 50 years alone, the construction of a river canal, three bordering highways, an urban neighborhood, and the raising of electrical energy facilities turned what used to be a vast sector into a much smaller and divided community.

Patios are still, nevertheless, an important reference point for community residents. They facilitate familial bonding, support, and socializing among family members and friends. Structurally, the *patio* adds an outdoor dimension to the idea of a home. Outdoor spaces located in between houses are often swept, cleaned, and kept regularly just as if they were another living room. Residents often place chairs in these areas, an outdoor sink, a poultry yard (chickens, ducks), and also ornamental and fruit trees. Although some *patios* are accessible to pedestrians, these spaces are considered private. An outsider is not supposed to just "walk right in." These spaces are also gendered, as it is often women who adorn and maintain them regularly.

The housing proposal for San Antón adopted the idea of the *patio* as an organizing principle for the spatial distribution of living units in the new development. Houses would have frontal access to the street and a back door facing a common green area in the center (see Figure 1,b). This common area and the houses surrounding it in block formation were to be occupied by members of the same ex-

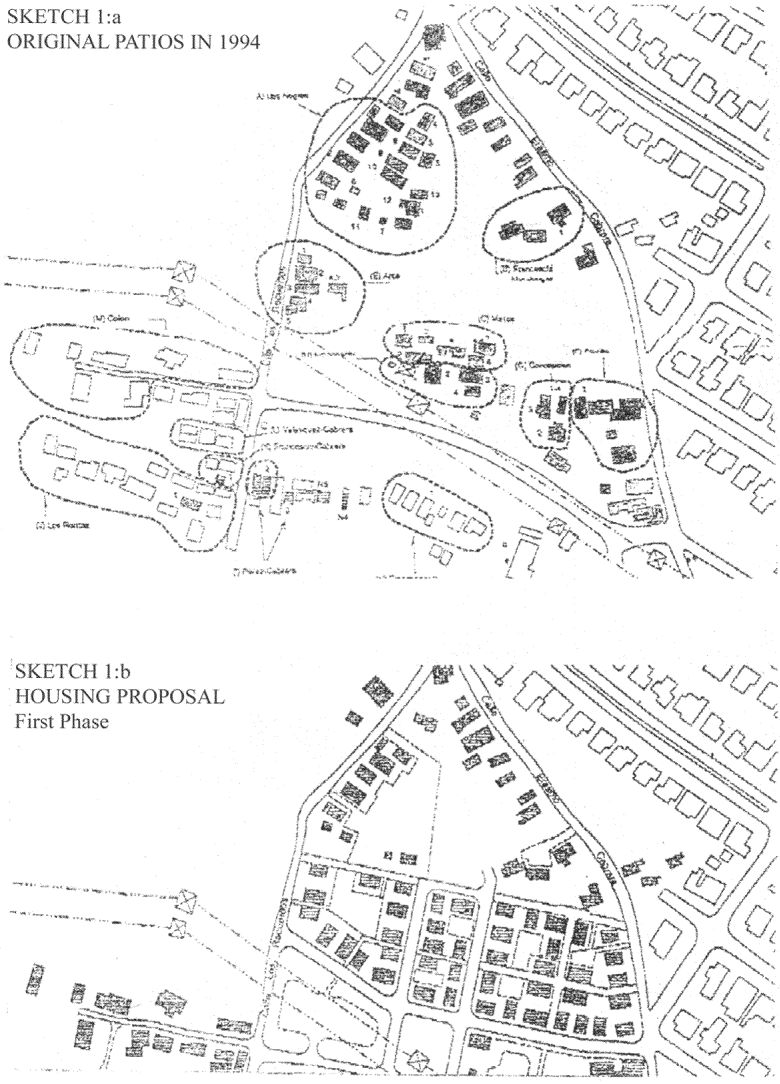

FIGURE 1 (a) Sketches showing original patio configurations and (b) proposal drafted to reorganize them in family block formations.

tended family. In fact, the architect provided a tentative assignment of blocks for each family in the proposal.

Houses built in the new development, however, were not to be raised over communally owned land. Instead, units were parceled out into single plots to be indi-

vidually owned by particular family members. In this way, the government replaced the principle of communal ownership for one of familial proximity. Yet, because the plan sought to reproduce, at least formally, the principle of connectivity and communal interaction, plots were not fenced. In fact, the project contemplated a series of semi-public corridors that connected yards and street. In their pursuit of keeping the families together, the government also went to great efforts to avoid the need to relocate residents elsewhere while the project was under construction.

One might wonder why did the government not simply fix and restore houses where they were in order to maintain the original *patio* configurations. The reason, as stated by officials, is that according to urban policy regulations, original *patios* connote clustering (*hacinamiento*). Leaving these houses where they were would not have eliminated the overcrowding or the access problems for ambulances or fire trucks. Another reason preventing the restoration of existing structures was the fact that not all residents owned the land or the houses they occupied. This ownership factor prevented the government from making a permanent investment in certain housing units, since absentee landlords could ask residents to leave at any moment. To solve this uneven ownership situation, the government bought land in San Antón from residents and non-residents, parceled it into individual plots, and then sold those plots to residents.[2]

The implementation of this complex transaction and development initiative required a tenacious approach on the part of architects, planners, and administrative officials. This staff, described by a Smithsonian journalist as a "savvy, meticulous and driven group" (Jolee 1994: 65), also had to maneuver around various financial and political obstacles to get the project going. For example, funding sources targeted for historic sites were difficult to obtain because the barrio did not fall within the official zoning parameters of the historic district of Ponce. The normal procedure to follow under the federal agency involved (HUD) is to demolish and build from scratch. Thus, the team had to adopt creative funding strategies to research San Antón's *patio* configurations. In this research phase, they benefited from the voluntary assistance of Ana Julia, a young teacher who was raised in San Antón. Although she did not live in the community at the time, Ana Julia enlisted residents' cooperation in the research process as she accompanied the architect house by house, while he collected information on residents' housing facilities, family structure, and settlement patterns.

Constructing wooden houses also required some out-of-the-ordinary procedures because under federal regulations the standard material used for the construction of low-income housing in hurricane prone areas is cement, not wood. Still, the director of the Housing and Communal Development Office explained how they managed to get the approval:

> I managed to get some "waivers" and that's because they normally don't allow the investment of federal funds in wooden houses, but because of the barrio's typical

> nature, we succeeded in getting their approval for this project. The normal thing is for it to be done in cement, if you are going to invest federal funds, and here, well, they allowed it. . . . That has been the priority of the municipality's administration, to maintain the barrio just as it was in its origins. (Interview with the author July 1996)

The perseverance and creative strategies adopted by these government officials are indicative of their understanding that San Antón is a deserving site of cultural recognition. Their efforts also reflect an interest in preserving what they perceived to be residents' communal practices. Let us examine, how residents received and interpreted these well-intentioned gestures and celebratory renderings of their traditions.

CHALLENGING FOLKLORIC HOUSING

"All governments cheat the poor!" (*Todos los gobiernos engañan a los pobres*), said Evelyn while I paid for a soda at her small store in San Antón. "I might be stupid, but everybody knows when they're being deceived." Construction of the housing project was already well underway. As I walked by Marta's house, she commented from her wooden porch: "They say that this is a ghetto (*arrabal*), but what they're building there is just another one, a modern *arrabal*."

Besides criticizing the new houses for their small size, and for the proximity between each unit, residents also criticized their high cost and the fact that they were made out of wood. "Why move from one wooden house into another wooden house?" said Luis, the owner of the local liquor store. "We have the right to protest, Isar," said Maria, while I walked with her to the elementary school. "The majority of the people are against that project. The social workers don't give any information. How am I going to throw away everything I have to live uncomfortably?"

Residents also complained about the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen to their property: Could they choose not to participate in the project? Would the government expropriate their land if they refuse to sell? If they moved, whom would they live next to? These questions remained unanswered. Other factors, such as the lack of parking spaces for cars or for cultivating plants also figured in the long list of complaints.

In the process of voicing those complaints, the heterogeneity of San Antón became evident as residents proposed different alternatives to their housing needs. Arcenia, for example, would have liked the houses in her *patio* to be more aligned: "Each house with its front yard, not spread out like they are now." She favored a linear set-up similar to that of more "modern" urban neighborhoods. Armando, on the other hand, thought that the best solution would be to give each household money so that each family could fix their houses as they pleased. Guillo, the owner of the convenience store, thought the houses should be left as they were, but he suggested the municipal government build new houses on an empty plot of land

adjacent to his establishment. Another resident said she didn't understand why the government could not do as they had done in previous years where they gave money to people to move and buy houses elsewhere.

In spite of differences in opinions, the general consensus among residents was that this was not the housing project they had hoped for. Even old-timer baseball player, David, whom I had never heard complain, said, "Those houses are a scam!" And while he looked towards the construction site from his usual afternoon bench he added, "This is gonna' cause an uproar! (*¡Aquí se va a formar un revolú!)*

The uproar took place. Within the next two weeks, the community was meeting in front of TV cameras and radio reporters to make their concerns known about the housing project public. The president of the newly formed Committee in Defense of San Antón (*Comité en Defensa de San Antón*) explained their plea to one radio reporter in the following way:

> We are owners of the land that we live on. They intend to expropriate the land and the homes, businesses won't work either, to then make us . . . because it's been done arbitrarily and unilaterally, to make us contract an unwanted debt. . . . What's happening here is that due to a lack of information, uncertainty reigns. The people of San Antón were promised one thing and what they made were pigsties (*una porquería*), like it were, just like North Americans did with the Indians. . . . They're trying to corner us into little houses, where you'll realize if you take a glance back here, that . . . the way the government has it set up doesn't resolve our problem of being overcrowded. (Transcribed Radio Broadcast WPAB, Ponce, P.R. May 1996, My translation)

As far as the issue of historical preservation the Committee's vice president told the reporter:

> Penchi, this is simple, in other words, you can't move history from its place. History is where things take place. History is born, you can't take, for example, make one of the houses that are being built over there and give it to the Franceschi family and then bring the tourist and say, "this is where Juan Franceschi [the famous athlete] was born." Juan Franseschi was born HERE, in other words, you can't move history from its place. (Transcribed Radio Broadcast WPAB, Ponce, P.R. May 1996, My translation)

After his intervention, the reporter asked: "Will the new community's *patios* be communal; will they be *batey* type (Taíno Indian religious and festive communal grounds)?"

"But what *patios*?"— said the vice president—"What *patios*? That's an Indian reservation. In other words, there is no *patio*, Penchi, there is no *patio*."

INVENTED TRADITIONS

Scholars interested in the social construction of nations have argued that the collection and rescuing of traditions, whether real or invented, is a prevailing nation-

building practice (Bendix 1997; Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Handler 1988). Commenting on Hobsbawm and Ranger's book, *The Invention of Traditions* (1983), Virginia Domínguez suggests that all traditions, and not just specific traditions, could be considered inventions motivated by the desire of finding legitimacy through history (Domínguez 1986: 550). This is because history is often constructed as a narrative of truth (Chakrabarty 1992; Trouillot 1995; Yelvington 2002). García Canclini links such validating processes to elite readings of folklore, arguing that part of the reason why those in power show interest in the preservation of "popular traditions" is because it strengthens their legitimacy to rule (García-Canclini 1989: 194).

In places like Puerto Rico, where national culture is often perceived to be threatened, the showcase of folklore as historical evidence can bestow political authority onto those who seek to administer the "colonial nation." In that sense, the new *patios* of San Antón tell us more about those who implemented them than about those who occupy them. They speak, for example, about how those in power attempted to gain support for the upcoming elections by presenting themselves as the true upholders of Puerto Rican culture.

The intent of salvaging the "traditions" of San Antón in the name of Puerto Rican culture also reproduces discourses of authenticity and romance found in other contexts (Bendix 1997; Handler 1988; Yelvington et al. 2002). Writing about nationalist thought in Quebec, for example, Handler points out that such processes are accompanied by the objectification of culture as a set of distinct traits found in language, folk songs, artifacts, ceremonies, and foods. These objectified properties of the nation appear to exist naturally and independently of the power relations that mold them and give them contemporary significance.

In Puerto Rico, the musical genres of *bomba* and *plena* are celebrated as one of those objectified traits of culture. However, state-sponsored performances of *bomba* and *plena* rarely make reference to how such creations were forged in the context of discriminatory practices that still persist. A similar process occurred at the more local level in San Antón with the objectification of the *patio*. The positive value assigned by the government to these "black" working class settlements might seem patriotic. Yet the controversy demonstrated the inadequacy of an approach that romanticized the *patio* without considering the social relationships of power that determined it, and—more importantly—without discussing its implementation with residents.

For the people of San Antón, it was not choice, but rather need or lack of resources that determined most of what is considered typical housing in this community. The wood, the proximity, the small size of some houses, all index a reality of economic hardship and the strategies people have employed in order to survive and adapt. Consequently, although *patios* and their wooden houses may seem "quaint" to the eyes of outsiders, they may or may not be valued as "the most beautiful" or the "most desirable" way to live by residents.

On the other hand, those families who did wish to continue living in *patios*, did

not recognize the government's reinvention of this institution as their own. In fact, during the days of the controversy, residents referred to the empty spaces they saw drawn in sketches as *placitas* (small plazas) for which they began to assign new possible uses. Some feared they could be used by drug-users or drug-dealers. Others thought the government might use them for tourists. For example, during one community meeting organized to protest the project, the following was exchanged between a young man and his neighbor, María:

> Young man: "So that tourists can come in the trolley; they sit there and people dance *bomba* and *plena* for them. . . . And I don't know what *bomba* and *plena* they're going to get. . . . What they might get is shot!"
> María: "So a space that can be used for us is going to be given to them?"
> Young Man: "Imagine those gringos coming here to laugh at us. How ugly, what savages."
> María: "If they dare, I'll throw a rock at them! (*¡Que se atrevan que les tiro una pedrá!*)."

Keenly aware of the exotic gaze of others who associate blacks with ugliness and primitiveness, this young man's critique of the *patio-placitas* also speaks to the objectification of the community as a place of racial difference.

BLANQUEAMIENTO AND THE SPATIAL DISTANCING OF BLACKNESS

Scholars have underlined the importance of region and racial geographies for understanding how blackness is constructed in the Americas (Rahier 1998; Wade 1993; Whitten and Torres 1998). Wade, for instance, has developed a nuanced analysis of power-dynamics within the territory of Colombia by highlighting the singularity and social hierarchy of racialized regions (1993). Equally important, however, is to underline the role of discursive distance in constructing blackness as a singularity, exception, or vestige of the nation. Such racial maps of distinctiveness become increasingly problematic in Cuba, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, or Brazil where one might not want to consider black people a minority.

Having said this, I realize that by speaking of black people in terms of minorities or majorities I run the risk of representing "blackness" as an objective, easily quantifiable identity. Certainly, the question of who is black and how one defines it is always an elusive one (Godreau 2000). However, there are important demographic factors tied to the historic development of the plantation economy and to patterns of Caribbean migration that distinguish the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil from other countries in Latin America that were not so strongly influenced by the African Diaspora.

Approaches to the issue of blackness in the Hispanic Caribbean and in Afro-Latin America, however, have tended to focus on communities that are deemed "different," given their predominance of black people, to document the prevalence

of African cultural traits or survivals (Herskovitz 1941). In spite of important contributions, theoretical conceptualizations of black identity in these studies are often construed as unambiguous and blackness is often conceptualized as something that can only be found in a specific sector. Thus, while regions like Bahia in Brazil or Oriente in Cuba are marked and celebrated for their "cultural distinctiveness," the nation is overwhelmingly represented by light skinned individuals in the media and in a wide range of nationalist events (beauty pageants, tourist campaigns, museum exhibits, etc.)

In Puerto Rico, this maneuver of whitening surfaces in representations that locate blackness only in the northern coastal town of Loíza or in the bodies of immigrants from the Dominican Republic.[3] Such displacements of blackness also take place in Ponce, as people often refer to San Antón as "the place where black people live." This characterization indirectly constructs Ponce and Puerto Rico as not black. People in San Antón are thus celebrated as traditional, but simultaneously excluded from the nation for not being mixed enough.

In displaying the traditions of San Antón, Ponce's municipal government also constructed the barrio as a site of racial difference. Among those who promoted this vision is the architect and main designer of the project, a young, white European man, who studied architecture in the United States, married a Ponceña, and moved to Puerto Rico in 1992. When I asked him about the criteria he used for the design, he said:

> I see it in terms of the barrio's urban organization: how the houses are organized, how the family has characteristics that are essentially more African than Latin [sic], apart from any influences that it has received from outside. The African culture is there . . . ah . . . the Puerto Rican culture is clearly there also, but it's the [African] one that predominates and so . . . it seems to me . . . I see it as a foreigner, I guess. I came to this barrio about four years ago . . . and it seems to me like something totally distinct within Puerto Rico . . . and that's the way I keep trying to see it today. . . (Interview with the author May 1996)

He worried that people might interpret his approach and housing design as segregationist. There were other architects, he said, who believed San Antón should be "more open" and connected to the surrounding neighborhoods. However, he believed that San Antón has always been a closed community. According to him, the reason why there has been so much controversy over the design of the project is because people have looked at San Antón as a Puerto Rican community and they have assumed that what is good for Puerto Rico is good for San Antón. He compared this sort of reasoning with the mentality of European colonizers who assumed that Africans were backward and uncivilized because they did not follow their European model, when in fact they were civilized, but in their own way. In his view, San Antón is a piece of Africa in Puerto Rico and this is something that should be preserved.

In another interview that took place after he read my dissertation (Godreau 1998), the architect clarified that he did not think San Antón's *patios* were of African origins. His perceptions, he said, had more to do with the community's family structure, particularly with the relationship between the *patio* and the extended family as a key aspect of San Antón traditions (González in *El Vocero* 1995). In this posterior interpretation, it is not Africa, but the idea of extended kin networks that sustains his reading of San Antón's uniqueness.

A related interpretation, which was documented in a newspaper article, is that such kin networks are gendered since women, many of whom are prominent community leaders, often head households. The article featured an interview with a young female community leader who described San Antón as " a matriarchal community where women assume an active voice and where her figure plays a pivotal role in the struggles for a better future." (Banchs in González 1995: s4). Immediately after her quote, the reporter linked such leadership to the *bomba* and *plena* traditions of San Antón, reinscribing once again the presence of racialized subjects in this particular place. Certainly, women in San Antón have played a key role in community struggles as well as in the everyday maintenance of networks and institutions such as the *patio*, exchanging goods, labor, and emotional support. Yet similar support networks of extended kin, often headed by women, can be found throughout Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.[4] However, the racialization of the community as different because of its blackness contributes to the casting of these and other gendered dynamics as "unique or exotic manifestations."

Ironically, residents rarely described their *patios* as "traditional," "matriarchal," much less as African in our interviews. *Patios* were, in fact, rarely mentioned as important objects of my anthropological study, or as something I should see or take note of. If I asked about them, people would talk about them. If I didn't, they often took them for granted. Furthermore, very few of the residents I interviewed shared this notion of San Antón being different from the rest of Puerto Rico.

Some even questioned the characterization of San Antón as a black community. For example, Libertad, a long time resident, said:

> I'm bothered by what they said on TV, that we were a "barrio of blacks." It may be true that we have a sad color (que somos tristes de color) but to say that we are a barrio of blacks . . . that word! They could say we are a barrio of people who are *trigueños* (wheat-colored [5]) but not to be so rude. We're mixed with African people, but that's going too far. Because there's racism in the U.S. and there's racism in Puerto Rico also. But the type of racism that's coming now is too much. In the old days, people weren't in that thing that "whites this" or "blacks that." It is now that people say things like that, and they start saying things like 'this is a community of *blacks.*' It is true that we are black, it is true that we have a sad color, but you don't say that word like that. . . . As a black woman I feel proud. Black people are proud, but that does not mean that other people can behave with such despotism. We know what we are and that's enough. (Interview with the author June 1996)

As an outsider to the community, I also came across residents who expressed concern over the possible implications of being labeled black by me. On one occasion, a female resident of San Antón told me, "Most people here in San Antón are not black, black. If you want to study black culture you should go to Loíza. People are *really* black over there (*ahi sí que son bien negritos).*" Her response is also somewhat indicative of the fact that in Puerto Rico, even in San Antón, blackness is always located somewhere else.

This deployment of discursive distance also prevails in interpretations of the African influence in the Puerto Rican body. For example, kinesthetic, rhythmic, and sensual qualities associated with blackness are often described as remote or "hidden traces" that may surface at particular moments. Commonly voiced phrases like "*Se le salió lo de negro*" (the black came out of him) and words commonly used to talk about the African heritage such as "roots," "veins," and "blood" shows that this legacy's contribution is understood as residing in a distant place that lies deep within one's body.

The representation of blackness as a distant, different, and exotic element of Puerto Rican culture emerges out of dominant discourses that rendered Hispanic heritage as the essence of the nation. Deployed throughout Latin America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this notion became particularly popular in Puerto Rico among an elite group of educated men and public figures who sought to counter U.S. political hegemony over the island during the 1930s (Ferrao 1993). Nationalism was at that time linked to Europe and to the racial properties of whiteness. As a result, many Puerto Rican intellectuals upheld whiteness as a necessary component for self-government (Rodríguez-Vázquez 1998). Anchoring the origins of "the nation" in European heritage, the Catholic religion, and particularly in the Spanish language also became an important strategic discourse to differentiate Puerto Rico from the U.S. and legitimize its potential as a nation. Africa, on the other hand, was construed as a destabilizing disturbance, an element that had been culturally assimilated and should continue to be biologically subdued through gradual *blanqueamiento*.

TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT, RACE-MIXTURE, AND MODERNITY

The distancing of blackness in national discourses is not only manifested in spatial range or body depth, but also operates in terms of time. In fact, the temporal distancing of blackness is one of the most constitutive elements of mestizaje and *blanqueamiento* in places like Puerto Rico, Cuba, The Dominican Republic, and Brazil where Africa is recognized, albeit marginally, as part of the national heritage. In Puerto Rico, for example, State representations of the racial triad, construct the Spaniard, the African, and the Taíno Indian as ancestral-symbols that have left a cultural trace in all Puerto Ricans, regardless of their color. Racial purity is, in that sense, only recognized in the past, while mixture is understood as

the mark of the present. Yet, while race is mixed and de-essentialized at this point, the cultural outcome of that hybridity is construed as a homogenous national product. As a result, when the phenotypic and cultural signs of blackness are celebrated in their own terms, they are often rendered as remnants of a past era that has been replaced by a modern, mixed present.

In displaying the "traditions" of San Antón, Ponce's municipal government also constructed residents of this community as authentic trait-bearers who could easily amuse others with the enchantments of their barrio. Ponce's mayor, for example, declared in the newspaper that the rehabilitation of San Antón would preserve the trees where "people used to gather, and still gather, to sing the *bomba* and the *plena*" (Millán-Pabón 1995:5).

However, *bomba* and *plena* are rarely heard or danced here on a regular basis. Even community gatherings I attended such as Christmas dinners or Mother's Day celebrations, which were held in public spaces of San Antón, did not display these folkloric rhythms. Rather, it is the rhythm of salsa, merengue, rap, and contemporary pop songs that are most popular, especially among the youth. Older folks also listen to *boleros* or *música de trio* (trio music). *Bomba* and *plena*, on the other hand, are genres reserved for performances in which the "outside" community is the main audience.

As a discursive strategy, the temporal displacement of blackness is closely connected to State modernizing agendas, which were first carried out in Puerto Rico under the leadership of Luis Muñoz Marin during the 1940s and 1950s. Like other populist figures in Latin America such as Cárdenas in Mexico, Perón in Argentina, and Vargas in Brazil, Muñoz sought to lead the country towards economic development, while promoting the preservation of traditional practices and national values as necessary identity tools for withstanding the impact of modernity.

This kind of romantic gaze, however, often inhibits the possibility of explaining *lo popular* (the popular) through its interactions with dominant structures (García-Canclini 1989). In that sense, García-Canclini says, ". . . people are rescued, but not known" (1989:196). Linking such concerns to the often-cited case of the Yanomami, Brazilian anthropologist Alcida Ramos writes that "Side by side with important and committed efforts to protect the land and freedom of choice of the Yanomami, there is a whole rhetoric of conservation that clings to the romantic idea that a good Indian is a naked, isolated Indian" (Ramos 1992: 65). As a result, indigenous groups have had to reinvent or borrow cultural practices to fit Western expectations of what Indians should look like and act like in order to garner international support for their demands (Conklin 1997).

In Caribbean nation-states where tourism is a key economic resource, this practice of constructing people as "traditionally picturesque" becomes increasingly important for attracting investors (Patullo 1996). The problem, states Richard Price, is that many of the practices that the State recasts as "long-gone exotic practices" are still very much a part of people's daily lives. According to Price, state-sponsored public events in Martinique "take some aspect of daily life—fishing, hous-

ing, gardening, wage-labor, language—and transforms it into official folklore through a combination of distancing/exoticizing and sanitizing/laundering, in the process erasing or obscuring central relations of power" (Price 1998: 196).

Although tourism is not an immediate objective of San Antón's housing project, developments here are somewhat similar because the State also intervened to objectify the community and the *patios* in ways that obscured particular histories of oppression and social inequality. San Antón's *bomba* and *plena* are not, however, everyday cultural practices. Consequently, rather than folklorizing what is already there, when it came to the issue of *bomba* and *plena*, the government had to "invent" the continuity of a tradition in order to justify their preservationist intervention. Thus, on the one hand, officials constructed the common, everyday aspects of the *patio* as "black folklore." On the other, they operate as if the folklore of *bomba* and *plena* was part of the everyday lives of people in San Antón. What we see then is a failure to recognize that residents of San Antón are also "modern," that some of them might no longer want to live in *patios* or in wooden houses, and that certain cultural practices such as the *bomba* and *plena* have been replaced or combined with new ones such as rap, salsa, and merengue.

I have argued that this oversight is not only informed by modernizing State agendas, but also operates in consonance with ideologies of *blanqueamiento* that represent blackness as a different and vanishing element of Puerto Rican culture. Behind such representations lies a longing to recover a black essence whose loss is only meaningful within the context of elite discourses that define the nation as not black. Thus, rather than motivated by the fear of losing the black subject, state sponsored constructions of blackness can best be understood as informed by an anxiety over its contemporary presence. At the same time, identifying only certain black expressions as authentic, constructs other more contemporary manifestations as illegitimate, impure, or Americanized. Hence, musical genres commonly associated with blackness or Caribbeanness such as salsa, merengue, rap, reggae, or body styles popular among the youth such as dreadlocks or corn-rows are displaced from the boundaries of the nation as foreign or inauthentic, reducing the repertoire of national signifiers to claim as "black" even more. This reduction operates alongside the whitening of other national symbols (such as the jíbaro) documented in traditional Puerto Rican scholarship as a light-skinned peasant of Spanish heritage (see Pedreira 1935; Alonso 1974; and for a recent analysis, see Dávila 1997; Guerra 1998).

The craving for pre-modern, localized, and by-gone black authentic expressions also informs the romantic construction of San Antón as a homogeneous and harmonious unit. The open spaces and yards connecting different properties, the semi-public corridors running alongside different housing units, presuppose agreeable and congruous relations between family members and among different family groups. Thus, while the government approached San Antón with temporal and spatial distance, they expected residents to live in seamless proximity. In this process, racism within and towards the community is construed as a non-issue while

notions of "culture" and " African heritage" are deployed as heuristic devices that supposedly allow "others" to understand black people and their "special" or, in this case, spatial needs.

THE AFTERMATH: MODERN SOLUTIONS TO A FOLKLORIZING STATE APPROACH

Despite criticisms, when one compares the approach of Ponce's municipal government in San Antón to previous development strategies of the 1950s and 1960s, which displaced entire communities to public housing projects (Duany 1997), this housing initiative represents a significant improvement. One noteworthy aspect of the project was that it did not force residents to leave, neither during the renovations, nor after their completion. This accomplishment results from previous struggles and public protests waged by residents who had been displaced during the 1960s and 1970s. Their trajectory of community activists coupled with the liberal outlook of the architects and planners in charge produced a relocation strategy that broke with traditional models of displacement. The rehabilitation of this sector within the community also solved access limitations and provided necessary infrastructure services for residents. Another benefit is that the project provided new and affordable housing, especially for those community members who did not own any property in San Antón. Finally, and most importantly, once residents mobilized in opposition to the project, government officials incorporated some of their demands into future plans for the community.

Among the list of conditions set by residents were requests for bigger houses and the reassignment of units. As a result, new houses were constructed in spaces that were originally intended for communal use, altering, in some cases, the family-block model. The *Comité en Defensa de San Antón* (The Committee in Defense of San Antón) also managed to arrange a personal meeting with the Mayor in which he reassured them that participation in the project was not mandatory and that no one would be obliged to sell their land.

On July 3, 1997, one year after the controversy, the first 24 houses of the housing project in San Antón were inaugurated. Members of the Comité en Defensa de San Antón participated along with the mayor and other government officials in the inauguration program. The ceremony featured, among other amenities, a local group of *bomba* and *plena*.

When I visited the community the day after, the people I talked to said they were satisfied with their new homes. "Now people are going to live decently," said an older resident. There were residents who had refused to move to the new project, but those who did move seemed to be content. Residents called the project *las casítas* (the little houses) of San Antón. No one in the community, however, spoke of the new block arrangement as *patios*. In fact, living arrangements looked very different from the original projections of the master plan. Members of one family, for example, occupied houses on one block, but there were members of

other families scattered within that same block. One could also find people whose family members had not moved to the project, and yet others who did not belong to any family group because their family members had died or moved prior to their relocation. In addition, only three small communal areas remained, out of six that were originally envisioned. One of them currently remains empty, blending inconspicuously with the grass of surrounding plots. The other two have been cultivated, beautified, and claimed by residents as part of "their property."

Writing about the relationship between architecture, space, and race, Naa Norle Lokko states, "The world is usually organized according to principles that flatter the dominant imagination" (2000: 33). This does not mean, however, that the effects of such organizing principles are always predictable since people will often subvert their intended uses in unexpected ways.

So far, 39 new houses have been built and occupied by families from San Antón. Over time, residents have continued to complicate many of the folkloric assumptions underlining the project. For example, they lobbied to get permission to fence their property, and those who have been able to afford it have separated their plots from neighbors and family members. Libertad's household, for instance, took advantage of fencing, but also of the open-yard model. She integrated her plot to her sister and niece's plot by fencing the three properties off from those of surrounding family members. In this way, they created a communal space, shared by three households, equipped with chairs, swings for grandchildren, plantain trees, and domestic animals.

As I sat to talk to Libertad in this outdoor area, she told me about her dissatisfaction with the now, not-so new house, showing me the poorly leveled floors in her living room, the unfinished paint job, the leakages in the ceiling, and the decayed wood. She complained about not having enough space to cultivate and added that, unlike her prior home which was much more spacious, this one had only two small bedrooms.

Libertad is one of five people who expressed deep dissatisfaction with the new project in a recent survey I conducted in January 2002 among residents of the housing project. The purpose of the questionnaire was to assess their level of satisfaction with their new housing situation. A total of 35 households were interviewed, representing 92% of the houses occupied.[6] Out of those interviewed, 9 household members said they were more or less satisfied, while 21 (60% of those interviewed) reported they were very satisfied with the project. Among the advantages listed were living more comfortably, better conditions in terms of housing and infrastructure, having family members nearby, and being property owners (45% of those who moved to the project were not previous landowners).

Ironically, those aspects causing the most dissatisfaction among residents had to do with the re-invention of the *patio* structure and residences. For example, 73% of all residents interviewed, said they disliked the fact that properties were unfenced; 65% said they disliked the fact that houses were made of wood; and 80% of those interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the corridors that connect

streets and properties. In fact, at the time of the survey in 2002, residents were considering petitioning to close them off. The reasons were: unwanted noise and disturbances, fear of drug trafficking, and the desire to protect their family members against police harassment.

These and other ongoing developments in the community reveal San Antón residents' desire for modernity as inscribed in the claim for privacy, comfort, security, and the clear demarcation of private property. Rather than endorse these desires uncritically, my goal has been to point out the limits of a folklorizing and patronizing approach that did not consider them initially. Future phases of the housing project contemplate building even more houses. These phases will probably beget new and different kinds of controversies. Whatever the outcome, these transformations must now take into account the militancy of San Antón's residents. That militancy forced the government to engage them in the development of San Antón's future, problematizing, in the process, folkloric discourses that render black people as distant and bounded tradition-bearers. I take their commentary and practice as an important critique of how blackness is showcased by those who claim to have "better wisdom" and the power to implement their imagination.

NOTES

Received 28 March 2002; accepted 18 June 2002.

I am most indebted to the people of San Antón who have shared with me their time and their views throughout this process. This article is dedicated to the memory of Doña Judith Cabrera, and the example of her community activism. The Ford Foundation and the Wenner Grenn Foundation funded research and writing for this article. I am deeply grateful for their support. I would also like to thank the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Florida, especially Kevin Yelvington and his assistant Andrea Sturzen for supporting and facilitating my research endeavors as a Ford post-doctoral fellow at USF. Thanks also to Lisa Rofel, Anna Tsing, Virginia Domínguez, Jean Rahier, and the anonymous reviewers for critical readings of earlier drafts and to Christiana Schumann for her editing work. All oversights are my own. Earlier versions of this article were presented at an A.E.S. conference (May 2001) and in Hunter College, New York (March 2002). I thank my amigas, colleagues, and co-panelists: Yarimar Bonilla, Ivelisse Rivera Bonilla, Rima Brusi, and Gina Perez for their beloved and intellectual support.

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1. San Antón appears in government publications as a place of historic interests, but it is unclear whether the municipal government plans to take tourists there in the future. Residents mentioned seeing the tourist-trolley drive by occasionally. According to the director of Ponce's Office of Tourism, however, the government has no immediate plans of incorporating San Antón into the city tour.
2. Those families who owned property in San Antón had to sell it to the government, divide the money among the rightful heirs, and use that amount to buy the new property. Because the project is heavily subsidized by federal funds, residents who did not own property are currently paying monthly mortgage payments that fluctuate between $55 and $75. Many of those who owned property (houses) were compensated by the government and have used part of that amount to pay the total cost of the

new house. In a recent survey (2002) all of those making monthly payments said they considered the amount reasonable.

3. For an excellent analysis of how Loíza is romanticized in Puerto Rican literature, see Giusti-Cordero 1996. For an assessment of the impact that Dominican migration to Puerto Rico has on discourses of national identity, see Martínez-San Miguel 1998. For an assessment of the situation of Dominican migrants in the Island see also Duany et al. 1995.
4. Traditional anthropological literature treated such family structure as a "different" if not deviant aspect of Caribbean social life by pointing to the absence of male heads of households. Other scholarship interpreted aspects of black family structure as African retentions (Clark 1957; Herskovitz and Herskovitz 1947; Smith 1956). The question of how such gendered notions of the black family have affected the folklorization of blackness in San Antón merits further interpretation, but is beyond the scope of this article.
5. This is the literal translation. In everyday contexts, however, the term *trigueño* is used to name someone who is perceived as darker than white but lighter than black. The term is also used as a euphemism for "black" in those instances where people might consider that calling a person "black" is an insult (see Godreau 2000).
6. 39 houses have been built so far, but only 38 of those are currently occupied because the previous occupant died.

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