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Resisting the Racial Binary?

Puerto Ricans' encounter with race in Depression-era New York City

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This article examines the power of a binary racial discourse in the United States to distort the histories of people who would resist ascription to the "black" or "white" categories. It looks closely at the history of the famous Harlem riot of 1935 and one of its little known protagonists, a Puerto Rican boy whose near-arrest sparked the conflict. The article traces the ways that a heterogeneous group of Puerto Rican migrants in Depression-era New York City drew on their complex and often contradictory native discourses of race as they struggled against the oppressiveness of the United States' binary racial ideology, and tried to secure recognition as legitimate social and political actors in the metropole. In assessing the historical impact of silences about racial and national identity in the story of the Harlem riot, the author draws comparisons to similar problems in the narrative of another landmark of American history, the Plessy v. Ferguson case.

Key words: race, Harlem riot, citizenship, racial categories, New York City, Puerto Ricans.

Photographs showing signs denouncing police brutality during the Harlem Riots of 1935. From La Prensa, 21 March 1935. Reprinted by permission.
One afternoon in March, 1935,
sixteen-year-old Lino Rivera got caught stealing a penknife at a Kress five-and-dime store on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue, a few blocks from his home on Manhattan Avenue and 122nd Street. When the store’s manager confronted Rivera and detained him, the boy resisted and allegedly bit the man on the hand. Someone called the police, and a crowd gathered outside and in the front of the store. After the manager decided to let the boy go instead of arresting him, a police officer escorted Rivera through the basement to the back exit on 124th Street. When Rivera disappeared with the officer into the basement of the store, a rumor spread through the crowd that he was being beaten; and when an ambulance drove up to the back entrance of the store and drove away empty—having been called, some accounts noted, because of the hand wound Rivera was supposed to have inflicted on his captor—some in the crowd said that the boy had in fact been beaten to death. Even skeptics began to concur with this rumor when the driver of a hearse coincidentally parked in front the store on 125th Street. The crowd consisted of shoppers in the neighborhood’s busy commercial district as well as residents of central Harlem, who were almost entirely African American, and it dispersed for a time after police arrested the woman accused of inciting the disturbance. Several hours later, a group of protesters began an impromptu public meeting about the rumored violence against a black child, and as the police were trying to remove a speaker from his soap box stand and clear the sidewalk, someone threw a rock into the front window of the Kress store (Greenberg 1991: 3; Fogelson and Rubenstein 1969: 2-7). Thus began a full-scale riot in which several thousand Harlemites participated, an event that before long would symbolize the acute suffering and resentment of the country’s most storied African-American community.

The Harlem riot of 1935 is amply cited in the history of African Americans’ civil rights struggles in the twentieth century, but rarely have historians and other chroniclers written about or even mentioned the fact that the “Negro” or “black” boy whose arrest set off the famous riot was, in fact, Puerto Rican. The Jamaican-born writer Claude McKay’s 1940 book *Harlem, Negro Metropolis* included one of the few English-language accounts of the riot that described Rivera as Puerto Rican; the Puerto Rican writer and activist Bernardo Vega noted in his memoir, written in the 1940s, that observers “thought Rivera was a black American, although he was of course Puerto Rican” (McKay 1968: 207; Vega 1984: 180). But these accounts were exceptional.¹ The overwhelming silence about Rivera’s nationality raises some
questions about the significance of historical actors’ categorical identity. How much did it matter, in this case, that the riot’s unwitting instigator was not actually part of the community of African Americans in Central Harlem but resided, instead, in the Puerto Rican barrio to the east? More important, how significant was it that Rivera was categorized by most observers as simply “Negro,” when actually, his New York compatriots described him in far more flexible terms as a “puertorriqueño de color”? Racial categories have a long and variable history in the Americas, and in the United States in particular they have served not just to order but to minimize the complexity of the nation’s racial past. People in the United States have acknowledged the fact of mixed African and European heritage to varying degrees, and have given different names to mixed race people through time—one referred to as a “quadroon” in 1880 might have been called, more generally, “mulatto” in 1900, or “biracial” in 1980. But North Americans’ enduring categorization of racial identities has been the division of the majority of people into a binary scheme based on the labels “black” and “white” (Nash 1995). Despite the mutability of these categories as they conform to shifting social landscapes over time, the discourse surrounding them makes them seem fixed and true; and they have allowed little room for the inclusion of groups that don’t describe their members in binary racial terms. Puerto Ricans, forming the fastest-growing community of foreign migrants in New York in the late twenties and thirties, contended with racial categories by ambivalently rejecting the American schema and clinging diffidently to their island’s own contradictory racial discourses (L. Thomas 2002).

This article examines Puerto Rican migrants’ local engagements with racial ascription, exploring how a group of racially mixed Caribbean migrants confronted the particular boundaries of racism in the United States. I analyze the commentary and debates about race among a diverse but mostly elite set of activists who became preoccupied with their group’s racial identity in New York by the early thirties. For every one in the city, it was a moment of especially intense “racial formation,” due in part to the pressures of a broken economy but also to the major changes in the Northern urban social landscape following the arrival of millions of Southern blacks, and the shutting down of European immigration. Racial categories had hardened anew in New York City by 1930, the year that the United States Census dropped its “mulatto” category (in Puerto Rico as well as in the United States), leaving only “white” and “Negro” thereafter (Guterl 2001: 154–44; Lee 1993; Loveman 2007). The critiques and complaints of many Puerto Ricans in this period betrayed a fear that a proscribed racial identity, forged by the limitations of the binary racial regime, would lead to a circumscribed political identity within the nation, a fear that as a group they would fail to attain the promises of American citizenship. Acutely aware of racist power dynamics within their own island society, Puerto Rican migrants across the political spectrum talked about the pitfalls of “second-class citizenship,” of being relegated to the inferior status of the Negro—“citizens without rights”—and excluded from many of the benefits and protections that white citizens expected, demanded, and got. Puerto Ricans confronted a particular problem as they sought to avoid categorization as “Negro” in the United States: if they refused that label, how would they fit into the nation? What alternative identity would be available to them?

My other objective here is to consider the extent to which historical narratives are distorted and flattened by the crude structure of racial ideology in the United States, and the damage such distortions have caused to our understandings of the past. The neglected fact of Lino Rivera’s national identity in the story of the Harlem
riots—a fact deemed unimportant by the vast majority of chroniclers, including historians, even up to the present—represents only one of countless silences that mark the “hidden history” of Puerto Ricans in New York City, where their racial ambiguity added another layer of invisibility to a group already marginalized for its colonial identity in the nation. The exclusion of Lino Rivera’s Puerto Rican-ness from the narrative of the Harlem riot also diminishes the complexity of that story itself, refashioning as purely “American” the backdrop of foreign-born and mixed-race as well as native black and white residents of Harlem. Recovering the details of Lino Rivera’s identity within the story of the Harlem riot calls to mind a similar obfuscation in another central narrative of American history, the story of Homer Plessy, the plaintiff in one of the most important legal decisions in United States history. Americans all learn, starting in middle school history, that Plessy was a black man who sought to test Louisiana’s 1890 law requiring Negro rail passengers to ride in a car separate from whites. Some learn—though few later recall—the small but important detail in that standard narrative, namely, that Plessy was not just a “plain Negro” but was of mixed racial heritage. He was the grandson of a white, French-born Haitian, raised by “free colored” parents among the French-speaking Creole elite in New Orleans, and almost never do even the more sophisticated versions of the Plessy narrative include such details of his identity (Lofgren 1987: 41–5; Domínguez 1986: 263).5 Creoles like Plessy had been visible and active members of New Orleans society in the late nineteenth century, but they became invisible through a 20th century telling of the legal history of segregation that relied on binary categories for its exegesis.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS AND NUANCES OF PUERTO RICANS’ OWN PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR RACIAL IDENTITY IN NEW YORK WOULD REMAIN AS INVISIBLE AS THAT OF HOMER PLESSY, REPRESENTING A LOST OPPORTUNITY TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL RACIAL TERRAIN.

The infamous “one drop rule” in the United States, along with other conventions of binary categorization, have most often made people with complicated racial heritage—like Plessy and Lino Rivera—simply black, even if the majority of that person’s ancestors did not consider themselves black. Thus have racial categories, relentlessly and rigidly applied in the dominant discourse, obscured dimensions of human experience that are central to an individual’s identity: details of family history, regional ties, ethnic identification, and national origin. The impact on the historical record is immense, as this simplifying of people’s identity to conform to
racial categories flattens accounts of events, especially those in which the race of the actors plays a central role. The distinctiveness and nuances of Puerto Ricans' own perspectives on their racial identity in New York would remain as invisible as that of Homer Plessy, representing a lost opportunity to understand more about the local and national racial terrain. Examining this detail of the riot, and the ways the different groups of Harlem residents interpreted it, corrects the narrative and returns to it a complexity that would have been familiar to many New Yorkers at that time—even if they were not inclined to make it part of the official story. It also reminds us to look closely at the kinds of details about cultural, regional, and national identity that are often ignored, by contemporary chroniclers as well as scholars, in conventional narratives about race.

Puerto Ricans and the Racial Binary in New York City
To a large extent, it was American lawmakers' perception of the “mongrel” Puerto Rican people, members of a mixed and “alien race,” that had inspired many in the United States Congress to fight against offering them citizenship after the United States took control of the island in 1898, just two years after the Plessy decision. But over the course of a decade or so, Puerto Ricans came to look less belligerent, not to mention less darkly “savage,” than the Filipino people whose legal relationship to the United States was also under debate. The pragmatists in Congress (many of them openly racist, their defense of Puerto Ricans' lesser savagery notwithstanding) argued that the America would have greater control over the island if the constitution “followed the flag,” and they won out in 1917, conferring United States citizenship on a mixed race people already controlled by American law (Perea 2001: 159; Smith 2001: 379). There was already a small but lively community of Puerto Ricans in New York, many of them dissident immigrants drawn to the city's enclave of Antillean tabaqueros, Cuban and Puerto Rican independence fighters whose major sector of employment was cigar making. (Notably, the man who is indisputably the most famous of these early Puerto Rican New Yorkers, Arturo Schomburg, had “crossed over” by the early 20th century to the African American community in New York, and lived the rest of his life largely separate from his compatriots. [Hoffnung-Garksof 2001: 9 and passim]. With citizenship suddenly in hand, thousands more Puerto Ricans also followed the economic boom inspired by World War I, alighting in New York City alongside the largest urban population of African Americans, many of whom had fled the stagnating South for the industrial North (Rosenwaike 1972: 121; Greenberg 1991: 13; Sánchez Korrol 1994: 58–60). Side by side, these two groups of largely impoverished migrants took up residence in the city that was experiencing, more than any other place, the social and political impact of restrictionist immigration policies that had radically reduced the number of European immigrants entering the United States by 1925. Native whites, who had reviled New York's poor Russian, Italian, and Eastern European transplants—at first seen as too “swarthy” and uncouth to be considered white—now readily adapted their old racisms to target the growing communities of darker-skinned newcomers from the south.

Puerto Ricans fit uneasily in this unstable social terrain. Rejected by the increasingly white-seeming ethnics as not white; suspicious, themselves, of the Negro racial identity reflexively imposed on them by white society; and seen by African Americans as “Spanish”—or, at least, distinctly foreign—more than black, Puerto Ricans began to perceive the degree to which the intense and distinctive racisms of the United States would shape their experience as Americans. Racism was, of course, an old
and persistent problem, not only for African Americans in New York but also for migrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. But New York during the depression years witnessed key changes in race relations, not only because of the exploding populations of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. The economic pressures of the depression also intensified social hierarchies, and thus do the 1930s provide an exceptionally clear glimpse of a society in the midst of “racial formation” (Winant 2001: 21). In the 1920s, the community of thirty thousand or so Puerto Rican migrants was dominated numerically by a skilled working class and culturally by a small Hispanicized professional elite, some of whom coped with their concerns about North American racism by “passing” for Spanish. During the Depression, though, as their foreignness and their inscrutable racial origins hindered them in their competition with other New Yorkers for jobs and a growing array of welfare funds, and as their increasing numbers inspired intensifying prejudice on the part of whites, racial identity became a subject of intensely concerned debate within the Puerto Rican community. The new preoccupation with their ascribed racial identity was not limited to the light-skinned elite, including many nationalist activists, who felt they had the most to lose. Socialist internationalists and communist racial egalitarians participated in newspaper debates and public forums as well, worrying over the fact that the group was perceived not just as immigrants, but as “Negro” colonial transplants vying for a place in the metropole. To an extent, Puerto Ricans were confronting a problem that was common to many other immigrant groups. Mexican, Chinese, and Irish immigrants, among others, had been called “niggers” and faced violence, segregation, and discrimination that varied somewhat by place and time, but that delineated forcibly the distance between themselves and “native” white Americans. For those who were far less likely to find “whiteness” within their reach, as the Irish and other European immigrants eventually did, a slippery divide between “black” to not-quite-white would define their social identity and limit their prospects of achieving social equality.

WERE THE NEGROES’ PROBLEMS PUERTO RICANS’ PROBLEMS TOO? MANY PUERTO RICANS (AND AFRICAN AMERICANS TOO) IN THE THIRTIES TRIED TO FIND SOME WAY TO ANSWER “NO” TO THAT QUESTION, AS THE DISCUSSION THAT follows WILL SHOW.

Puerto Ricans had been taking the measure of that divide, with increasing anxiety, since the early thirties. So when the Harlem riot exploded right alongside the largest Puerto Rican barrio in the city, it begged a kind of reckoning: Were the Negroes’ problems Puerto Ricans’ problems too? Many Puerto Ricans (and African Americans
The Jamaican-born writer and Harlem resident Claude McKay, one of the very few chroniclers who mentioned that the riot had begun with a conflict involving a Puerto Rican boy, remembered the Harlem riot as “a spontaneous community protest against social and legal injustice.” “Harlem broke loose,” he wrote in 1940. “The Black Belt ran amok along Fifth, Lenox, Seventh, and Eight Avenues, from 116th to 145th Street” (McKay 1968: 206). In the end, seventy-five people were arrested, hundreds of windows were broken, and sixty-three people, including several policemen, were injured. One black boy, shot in the back by a police officer, died several days later (LaGuardia papers; Fogelson and Rubenstein 1969: 15). City investigators, reporting a year later, described the immediate sentiments that sparked the riot as linked to much deeper grievances:

The rumor of the death of the boy, which became now to the aroused Negro shoppers an established fact, awakened the deep-seated sense of wrongs and denials and even memories of injustices in the South. One woman was heard to cry out that the treatment was ‘just like down South where they lynch us.’ (Fogelson and Rubenstein 1969: 8)

While it was immediately clear that the Kress Store incident had struck a nerve with black Harlemites who saw an opportunity to publicize the suffering of their community, city officials and reporters took seriously rumors that the riots had been encouraged by external agitators with a political agenda. A group of mostly white Communists called the Young Liberators looked most suspicious to investigators, since members had been spied distributing incendiary leaflets as the rioting began: “Child Brutally Beaten Woman Attacked By BOSS and COPS= Child near DEATH” and “WORKERS! NEGRO AND WHITE Protest Against this Lynch Attack of Innocent Negro People,” they trumpeted. With this evidence, many of the New York dailies pointed to the Communists as the primary instigators of the riot. A year later, though, writers of the Mayor’s Committee final report disagreed, maintaining that it was simply residents’ resentment over local conditions that had fanned the flames of protest in Harlem (Fogelson and Rubenstein 1969: 10–1). 10 Whatever role the Young Liberators played in the riots, their flyers certainly sensationalized racial tensions in Harlem, simultaneously trading on fears of black-
white conflict and promoting black-white unity. And in doing so, they used Rivera as the symbolic “Negro” who was the innocent victim of “this Lynch Attack.”

The *Amsterdam News*, New York’s largest African-American daily, also failed to identify Rivera as Puerto Rican, referring to him instead as a “young Negro boy.” Claude McKay was one of the very few contemporary chroniclers to specify that Rivera was Puerto Rican. McKay’s sensitivity to nationality alongside race is not surprising, since West Indian-born residents of Harlem generally took pains to distinguish themselves from American-born blacks (Waters 1999; Reid 1970). McKay also wrote that “a rumor started that they were beating a colored boy in the basement,” a description that suggests a way in which the ambiguity or error about Rivera’s identity developed: to call Rivera “colored” could mean either that he was “Negro,” born in the United States, or that he was “de color,” a more elastic description in Latin American Spanish (McKay 1968: 207). Perhaps African Americans elided the difference between an American Negro (or “colored boy”) and a “negro” Puerto Rican to provide coherence in the narrative of the causes of the riot: to focus on Rivera’s Puerto Rican identity would have diluted black Harlemites’ message about racism and its effect on conditions in their neighborhood.

On the other hand, African Americans, and white observers too, seem to have viewed the riot’s participants through their own binary racial lens. Many may well have known that Rivera was Puerto Rican, but the only social fact that really mattered was that he was colored, and if he was colored, he may as well be called “Negro.” To whatever extent Puerto Ricans took part in the riot, they remained a more or less invisible presence in all of its coverage by the citywide dailies. The *New York Herald Tribune* did note in its front-page article that “a Puerto Rican youth [was] the cause,” and the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*—whose headline warned of a “race war”—even preceded its introduction of the “Porto Rican” Lino Rivera with the assertion that he was “almost forgotten in the hullabaloo.” The *New York Sun*, on the other hand, which printed a photograph of him standing with an African-American police Lieutenant, ran an article subtitled, “Negro boy admits he was not beaten in store.” The first *New York Times* report referred only to a “16 year old Negro boy” whose shoplifting precipitated the riot; a subsequent article pictured Rivera and gave his name, but commented no further on his role.

New York’s Spanish language daily *La Prensa*—headed in the 1920s and ’30s by a Spaniard, José Comprubí, and frequently criticized by working class Puerto Ricans as a mouthpiece of the elite—more carefully noted the distinction between the rigid North American social category “Negro” and the more descriptive Spanish term “negro,” which referred to phenotype but did not necessarily represent a rigid social category. *La Prensa* reporters implied that the “disturbances” were attributable only to “gente de color, americana,” and reported that most of the protesting and looting activity actually took place in central Harlem, several blocks west of the East Harlem barrio where most Spanish-speakers lived and shopped. Such elision between description and category in Spanish was characteristic of the way Puerto Ricans (and many other Latin Americans) talked about race; sociologist Maxine Gordon reported that in Puerto Rico in the forties, the racial vernacular was still peppered with a half dozen terms for different kinds of brown skin. It was a deceptively “flexible” system, according to historian Miriam Jiménez Román (1996: 10), one that allowed the existence of multiple contradictions. Puerto Ricans could uphold “the institutionally sanctioned and popularly reinforced belief in distinct races with identifiable, essential traits” alongside “a corresponding notion of a
'multiracial' society whose citizens enjoy harmonious relations," while propounding the notion of "la gran familia puertorriqueña," a 'race' of mestizos that shares a common culture, language and history”—but tended to minimize its African heritage (Gordon 1949: 294–301). This non-binary racial vision was illustrated in the "complexion" label of identification cards made available to Puerto Rican migrants in New York between 1930 and 1950, via a program established by the Puerto Rican Department of Labor. About 30,000 migrants applied for ID cards, mainly in order to prove their American citizenship to prospective employers. The Puerto Rican ID office clerks who assigned their complexion labels used terms like “dark,” “light,” “ruddy,” “olive,” “regular,” “brown,” “light brown,” and “dark brown.” Although they were loose translations at best, these complexion descriptions resembled the island’s varied racial terminology in that they interpreted the phenotypic dimensions of racial identity with fluidity. 

THE AMSTERDAM NEWS, NEW YORK’S LARGEST AFRICAN-AMERICAN DAILY, ALSO FAILED TO IDENTIFY RIVERA AS PUERTO RICAN, REFERRING TO HIM INSTEAD AS A "YOUNG NEGRO BOY."

If the African American press and city officials in New York agreed that the causes of the Harlem riot were rooted in the problems of Negroes, not Puerto Ricans, many middle-class Puerto Rican and Hispanic residents were happy to support that perspective. La Prensa reported on the rioting in central Harlem in distancing tones, calling the incident “race riots” among the “colored elements of that neighborhood.” Here the editors were using the term “colored” in a North American sense, meaning Negro. The editorial printed two days after the riot offered an explicit warning about the dangers of Puerto Ricans’ being implicated in the riots. “The fact that it was a Puerto Rican boy who was the excuse for the noisy disturbances and clashes with the police, could serve as the basis for a new, negative interpretation of...the Hispanic community here,” wrote the editors. They described the “colored” sections of Harlem as characterized by “intense political activity” and “bizarre cults.” On the other hand, “entirely separate from this is the Spanish-speaking group of the neighborhood, with distinct problems, absolutely different interests, and ethnic characteristics that disassociate Hispanics from their colored American neighbors.” The editorial ended with a warning that “events and situations created by the other half of the district, not Hispanics”—not only the riot, but also, for instance, the illegal numbers game—threatened to exacerbate the preexisting antipathy of “the authorities” towards Hispanics. The editors admonished their readers: “You must not ignore the fact that, once again, the discredit and unwanted notoriety generated by non-Hispanic Harlem, falls upon our part of the neighborhood.”
La Prensa also reported extensively on the damage done by rioters to Hispanic-owned businesses in Harlem, with detailed descriptions of window breaking and looting in stores owned by Hispanics. Yet while the reporters and editors were anxious to defend the distinction between Spanish-speakers and African Americans in Harlem, they assailed what they referred to as the “racial dividing line” erected by some black businesses, which “have in their shop windows signs that say ‘colored,’ indicating that people of the white race are not welcome.”

This was a rhetorical sleight of hand, using an expression of concern about racial divisions as a way to increase the social distance between black Americans and Spanish-speakers, declared to be not “colored.” Indeed, La Prensa editors pointedly suggested that many Spanish-speakers could be counted in “the white race,” despite the fact that much of their actual readership—mixed-race Puerto Ricans—would be excluded from that category.

La Prensa profiled Rivera as a well-mannered, well-behaved boy from a home “characterized by an admirable cleanliness despite its modesty,” who demonstrated loyalty both to his mother (he left high school to help support his family) and to his native country (he remained fluent in Spanish). One report declared that Rivera “involuntarily” caused the “racial clash” and “deplore[d] what happened.” Apparently, Rivera had noticed some disturbances on the sidewalk as he was leaving the Kress store, but was not aware that a woman had begun to scream about “a boy of the colored race …being beaten to death.” The reporter described this as the “incident with the woman of his [Rivera’s] race,” suggesting that the skin color Rivera shared with both that woman and the other rioters was only skin deep, and implied no social kinship nor common cause. The main point of the interview emerged when the reporter asked Rivera whether he would have tried to pacify the crowd if it had been possible. “Of course!” Rivera replied, reinforcing the idea that Puerto Ricans had no investment in the “racial hatred” that “exploded” in Central Harlem.

Challenging the Racial Binary, Part I
The threat of being marked by an “unwanted notoriety” was something that Puerto Ricans in New York, the migrant elite in particular, had been worrying over since the beginning of the decade. Behind La Prensa’s assertions of separateness from African Americans in the wake of the riots lay a specific, political concern expressed by the elite colonia members: If Puerto Ricans landing on the “black” side of the racial line in the US, how could they capitalize on their citizenship, the benefits of which clearly were limited to whites? Their first call to alarm came late in 1930, when the New York American printed an article on “Newcomers in the Slums of East Harlem.” The article referred to migrants as “wretched” and “the lowest grade of labor”—“lower than the colored worker.”

María Más Pozo, a Nationalist activist and frequent contributor to La Prensa’s letters column, attacked the New York American article with venom. “It is time to think long and hard about the situation of my compatriots in this country,” she said. She continued,
The Puerto Rican must not be seen as worse than the native blacks of this country. We do not want a North American citizenship that humiliates us, depriving us of our dignity, after having been stripped, in the name of humanity, of our blessed land. We want to be pure Puerto Ricans, only proud of single race; that which mixed her white blood with the passionate blood of the Indian.  

Although she elsewhere criticized the “imposition” of an unequal and debased form of US citizenship on Puerto Ricans—a common Nationalist complaint—Más Pozo insisted here that that United States citizenship should function to protect Puerto Ricans against the ascription of a low social status, one that made them “worse than the native blacks” on the mainland. More to the point, for all Más Pozo criticized North Americans for their racial hypocrisy, her concern was not with racial injustice; she complained only about the specific injustice of Puerto Ricans’ being paid “worse than Chinese and blacks” in America. A number of similar letters followed in La Prensa’s “de nuestros lectores” section, including one from East Harlem resident Fernando Arjona López, a self-identified independentista who railed against the “humiliation” of “comparing us with black Americans…putting us in a debased sphere”—one of the many insults of U.S. colonialism.  

Only a single reader criticized both the New York American article and the commentators who failed to challenge the hierarchy in which Puerto Ricans fell beneath Negroses and Chinese immigrants. Introduced by La Prensa’s editors as “a Puerto Rican of the black race,” Gabriel Rivera also protested “los insultos de los yanquis,” but questioned other readers’ outrage over being categorized with black Americans:  

I don’t see the motivation to feel so profoundly injured because they see us as black Americans; since…I wouldn’t want to be seen as a white Texan or Georgian, either; because…I am filled with contempt and disgust by the white man for his savage and heretical instinct, which the lynchings in the Southern states have shown us so recently.  

Rivera’s reference to “the lynchings in the Southern states” would not have surprised La Prensa’s readers in 1931, since the rise in racial violence in the South during the twenties was covered regularly in La Prensa. More surprising, given the dominance of the slippery discourse of mestizaje in Puerto Rico—a discourse with a blind spot regarding the African component of the mestizo—was the way Rivera took Más Pozo to task for her definition of Puerto Rican peoplehood: “What would my countrywoman do with black-blooded Boricuas..., whose blood is mixed as much as white blood is mixed with Indian?” Más Pozo defended herself aggressively. “Many times in La Prensa and other New York periodicals, I have taken up the defense of the colored man with every ounce of my being.” Indeed, in previous letters to La Prensa, she had fashioned herself as a champion of the underdog and a proponent of racial enlightenment.  

But there was more than just a grain of political expedience in her positions. It was one thing for Nationalists to criticize the United States for claiming to import lessons of liberty and democracy to Puerto Rico (and other “backward” countries) at the same time that the nation trampled on African Americans’ civil rights at home. But for migrants like Más Pozo, whose house in suburban New Jersey and ties to the
Map showing Harlem's racial distribution in 1935. From The Sun, 22 March 1935, p. 23.
Manhattan migrant elite suggested her origins in Puerto Rico’s mostly white upper class, it was another thing entirely to connect racial injustice in the United States to the unequal racial order of their native society. Jiménez Román refers to this problem as the “historical amnesia” of the “twice colonized” island elite, who found it expedient to argue against US colonialism with a romanticized vision of a gentler social order under Spanish rule (Jiménez Román 1996: 15, 22). “One could say that in Puerto Rico there is no racial prejudice,” Más Pozo proclaimed in another letter. Here she elaborated on her reply to Rivera’s criticism with another romantic portrayal of Puerto Rican racial equality, and a familiar Nationalist trope about racism and the moral corruption of the United States:

A colored Puerto Rican man in New York, as long as he is in the colonia, is considered by other Puerto Ricans who are not colored to be “one of us”.... Only the North American, to debase the Puerto Rican, insists on making comparisons between the blacks from [the United States], and our countrymen, which angered me so much that I wrote that article, not because they compare us, but because of how the colored man in this country is viewed... I came to know these prejudices in this country, in the country of liberty and democracy, the only one in the world where black people are lynched.

The several letter writers who followed Más Pozo’s lead in decrying Puerto Ricans’ social debasement argued for maximizing distance between the Puerto Rican and the American Negro.

Several years after the initial reaction to the New York American article, and a year before the explosion of rioting in Harlem in 1935, another sensationalist piece on Puerto Rico appeared in the American popular media. The controversy this time centered on the photographs of dark-skinned peasants for an article on Puerto Rico in the nationally circulating Literary Digest, just the kind of snapshot of her country that María Más Pozo was afraid of. In fact, the Digest article may have brought to mind, among the older members of the migrant elite, an 1899 report about the island assembled by a United States observer that was amply illustrated with photographs of Puerto Rico’s exotic racial types. The report’s title, moreover—Our Islands and Their People—offered a remarkably precise description of how the average Congressional reader might have described the new relationship (Jiménez Román 1996: 15; García 2000). Dr. Augusto Arce Álvarez wrote to La Prensa from what was then the middle-class enclave of Washington Heights to lament that “the publication of such photographs in this country...has led the majority of Americans to believe that our island is populated entirely by Negroes.” Álvarez called on Puerto Ricans to lean on their status as citizens—though exactly how, he did not say—to counter the putative racial insult: “We must defend our rights before the people, without fear; we must seek the protection of the citizenship given us by the Congress of the United States in 1917.”

This time the debate about the dilemmas of Puerto Ricans’ racial identity in the United States played out differently. In 1931, all but one of the participants in the debate over the New York American article rejected comparisons of the Puerto Rican to black Americans, and refused to acknowledge African roots in Puerto Rican history. Now, however, Dr. Álvarez’s passionate expression of this latest “injury” against Puerto Rico “provoked immediate attention within the colonia,” according to La Prensa’s editors, attention that pointedly criticized Álvarez for his racist views. “I was not born black,” wrote one critic, who signed his name M. Callejo, “but if I
were I would be proud to be part of a race ...whose struggle...is that of the oppressed 
masses...” Using a logic familiar to Nationalists like Más Pozo, Callejo went on to 
deconstruct Álvarez’s invocation of citizenship as a source of “protection” for Puerto 
Ricans. “I ask you: ‘Is this the way to defend the rights of the people, insulting the 
majority of your people and bragging about the citizenship which the Congress 
of the Morgans and the Rockefellers used to send to their death their unlucky 
soldiers?’” Callejo was referring here to a an interpretation of the 1917 Jones Act, 
popular among Nationalists and anti-imperialists, which asserted that the Congress 
granted citizenship to Puerto Ricans when it did—after 17 years of debate—in order 
to enable the armed forces to draft Puerto Ricans to fight for the United States 
in World War I. More of a challenge to the status quo was Callejo’s claim that 
“the majority” of Puerto Ricans were black, or at least would identify with Negroes 
in the United States. Other readers also objected to the racism in Álvarez’s letter, 
but couched their criticism in more genteel terms. Said one,

That they see us as black does not affect our dignity as a people, does not tarnish 
our collective aspirations, nor impede...our ability to prove, living in this land, that 
we are conscientious about our responsibilities as citizens and will remain vigilant 
about our rights.

“We are what we are,” said another reader. “They can spoil our language, impose 
their education on us, but they cannot take away our color.” In all of these 1934 
letters, “our color”—to whatever extent North Americans viewed it as “black”—
figured as a distinct source of pride for Puerto Ricans.

Many readers would have noticed that La Prensa’s letters pages charted a major 
shift in discourse about the political dimensions of race in the US, even while its 
editorial leadership remained the same. Elite readers like Más Pozo seemed to fall 
silent in the flurry of reaction to the Literary Digest photos. Were outspoken Puerto 
Rican migrants beginning to embrace a political strategy of demanding rights as 
“underdogs,” aligning them more closely with African Americans? The growing 
number of working class Puerto Ricans would have been hearing—and perhaps 
begun to agree with—the rising chorus of black activists in Harlem who were 
framing blackness as a political issue and demanding expanded civil rights, many of 
them influenced by Communist party discourse on race in the thirties and events 
like the Angelo Herndon case and, later, the trial of the Scottsboro boys. The more 
progressive letter writers in 1934 were willing to make peace with the idea that 
Americans might “see us as black.” They also tended to give less credence to the rigid 
divisions required by racial ideology in the United States: “We are what we are...they 
cannot take away our color.” This assertion could have been interpreted readily in 
terms of the distinctly non-African “gran familia puertorriqueña,” what María Mas 
Pozo referred to as “pure Puerto Ricans, only proud of a single race.” But in the 
context of the series of letters criticizing Álvarez for his anti-black racism, 
it actually represented a challenge to that discourse—as well as a challenge to 
the North American racial binary.

In a similar vein of racial justice, one La Prensa reader wrote to the editor after 
the 1935 riots with a passionate critique of the conditions created in Harlem by the 
“explotadores capitalistas.” Libertad Narváez lived near the area of the rioting, outside 
of the boundary of El Barrio, and expressed deep sympathy with the plight and the 
grievances of the rioters:
Thousands of black workers, most of them unemployed...took to the streets of Harlem with the sounds of protest against the miserly aid distributed by the “Relief” Administration, and the discriminatory...treatment by officials of this agency of which they are victims; against the high rents and unhealthy conditions of Harlem apartments; against the unconscionable... conduct of the rich business owners who refuse to give employment to those of [the colored] race, despite the fact that they represent almost the entirety of the shoppers....

Narváez, who sympathized with and may well have belonged to one of Harlem’s many Communist organizations in the thirties, asserted that Communists “are the only ones who defend the interests of the black worker in this country, and the only ones who sincerely represent and openly support...the highest social, racial, national and political aspirations of this oppressed race.”

Like virtually all of the other commentary on the riot, however, Narváez’s letter was silent on both the place and plight of Puerto Rican migrants in Harlem. Not only did it fail to mention the large numbers of Puerto Ricans who would be identified—and might identify themselves—as “Negro workers.” It also ignored the fact that Puerto Ricans had been expressing for years the same grievances as African Americans concerning housing, relief, and discrimination. This writer’s silence on these parallels reminds us of the pains taken not just by the elite but also by working class, leftist Puerto Ricans to distinguish their countrymen from the black Americans whose plight they so often decried. Even the well-known radical activist Bernardo Vega stopped short of connecting Puerto Ricans’ experience in Harlem to “all the pain and suffering of the black people [that] rose to the surface” during and after the rioting (Vega 1984: 180). Vega was active in a variety organizations in the thirties that sought to push back against “the pain and suffering” of Puerto Ricans in New York, and he was certainly an outspoken proponent, along with Jesús Colón and many other dark-skinned working class migrants, of racial justice in New York. But Vega’s recollection of the riots in terms of the literal and figurative distance separating “Negroes” and “Puerto Ricans” in Harlem speaks to the persistent problem of blackness in New York’s Puerto Rican colonia. The price of accepting the ascription imposed by the racial binary in America—blackness as Negro, not just negro—was potentially too steep even for Puerto Rican radicals.

**Challenging the Racial Binary, Part II**

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who had a solid reputation as a racial progressive, formed a committee to investigate not only the immediate causes of the riot, but the conditions in Harlem that constituted the underlying motivations for protest. Over the course of a year, the Mayor’s Committee on Conditions in Harlem (whose members included ten men and one woman, six of them black, five white) investigated Harlemites’ experiences with relief, housing, education and recreation, health and hospitals, and crime and the police. After 21 public and four closed hearings, including testimony of 160 witnesses, and months of research, the Committee submitted its report to the Mayor’s office in March 1936. It concluded that the Harlem riot was a protest against the “intolerable conditions” wrought by five years of economic depression in an already poor community, “which made [Harlem residents] feel more keenly than ever the injustices of discrimination in employment, the aggressions of the police, and the racial segregation...”
(Fogelson and Rubenstein 1969: 122). In his first public statement about the riot, made on the day after it ended, Mayor LaGuardia promised to appoint a committee of “representative citizens” to study the riot and its causes. But the Committee turned out to consist only of African Americans and white Americans, despite the fact that Puerto Ricans comprised the plurality of residents on about one quarter of Harlem’s residential blocks and was the second-largest national or “ethnic” group in the neighborhood. In a memo suggesting possible areas of investigation for the Mayor’s Committee, Walter White, Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), did refer to the presence of Puerto Ricans and advised that the “origin of population” in Harlem be examined along with housing, schools, health, and recreation. White proposed that the Committee address the “interrelation of various groups making up [the] Negro community of Harlem,” including Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and Virgin Islanders, as well as “the effect of friction or cooperation between various groups.” But no Puerto Ricans were appointed, and the specific problems of the group never made it into the Committee’s reports.

IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING THE HARLEM RIOTS, PUERTO RICANS BECAME THE PRIMARY VICTIMS OF A NEW “ANTI-HISPANIC CAMPAIGN” IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS, WHERE MIDDLE CLASS PUERTO RICANS HAD BEGUN TO SETTLE EARLIER IN THE THIRTIES.

In spite of their apparent consensus that the riot was not a Puerto Rican affair—because of their geographic and social distance from the Negro community—leaders of a number of El Barrio’s working class and Nationalist organizations expected to participate in the discussions about conditions in Harlem. Jesús Flores, head of Unidad Obrera (Workers’ Unity), wrote to the MCCH two days after its appointment requesting that his organization be allowed to testify about the concerns of its members. He explained, “We have in our possession several cases of discrimination, denials of relief, deaths due to the carelessness of the officials representing the different aid societies, police terror against Spanish-speaking workers, corruption of police by using gangsters to provoke workers and especially the workers’ organizations.” In a second letter, this time representing the Comité Pro-Puerto Rico, Flores reiterated, “So that you may hear the different slights and humiliations to which the Puerto Ricans are subjected, we expect... that you allow this Committee, which is composed of more than 60 organizations, Spanish-speaking and in their majority Puerto Rican, to testify.” Since the majority of the hearings held by the Mayor’s Committee were public, Puerto Ricans were free to testify about their grievances along with all other residents of Harlem, although they were never included by invitation, as many African American leaders were.
Several other Puerto Rican leaders protested Puerto Ricans’ exclusion from the MCCH. “We believe that excluding the Puerto Ricans from that committee was unfair if you will take in consideration the great number of Puerto Ricans not only unemployed but antagonized with so much prejudice against them,” wrote Antonio Rivera, Secretary of the Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana. Isabel O’Neill, a Nationalist activist, wrote to the Mayor as a representative of the Junta Liberal with a harsh indictment of his treatment of Puerto Ricans:

...what is most displeasing—and...unwarranted—is not only the discrimination shown in the selection and or appointment of members to the investigating committee, but also the complete ignorance [sic] of Puerto Ricans; of them, whose interest in Harlem and the betterment thereof is a vital factor...in their lives and general social welfare and being.

It seems that we have been omitted from every civic activity that has presented itself...and the omission is even more flagrant in this instance, an act of political and civic indifference and unmindfulness at which we feel aggrieved....

There is no record of how LaGuardia’s office responded, if it at all, to such charges. What is clear, though, is that Puerto Ricans’ specific grievances—despite their similarity to those of black American Harlemites—failed to make it into the Committee’s reports.

In the months following the Harlem riots, Puerto Ricans became the primary victims of a new “anti-Hispanic campaign” in Washington Heights, where middle class Puerto Ricans had begun to settle earlier in the thirties. The Jewish and Irish landlords in the neighborhood had begun raising rents sharply in an alleged effort to “drive out” their Puerto Rican tenants. Spanish-speaking observers saw the landlords’ coordinated action as a reaction to two threats: first, that more and more of their Hispanic tenants were recent arrivals of the “lower classes,” and second, that these “brown-skinned or darker” new tenants would bring with them the kinds of problems that might turn Washington Heights into “a second Harlem.” These observers saw a specifically racial prejudice against dark-skinned Puerto Ricans. “The situation in Washington Heights is not simply a situation of nationality, it is purely and unjustly a question of race,” asserted one letter to La Prensa. Even the lighter-skinned among them should not feel immune to this kind of discrimination, he warned, since no clear line existed, here, between light and dark complexions; the only line was between white and dark. “If it could happen to them, it could happen to you,” he warned. That is, any Puerto Rican, no matter his or her complexion, could be discriminated against as a person occupying the non-white side of the binary—the black side. In spite of the growing public concern about race-based discrimination against Puerto Ricans, there remained a firm impulse, from various sectors of the colonia, not to complain about the same injustices that African Americans objected to, and, still, not to talk about the Harlem riot as a Puerto Rican issue. When the New York State legislature voted to assemble a “Temporary Commission on Urban Colored Populations” two years after the riot, La Prensa editors applauded the move. “[It is] certain that there are many thousands of persons of the colored race living in Harlem under the saddest of social conditions,” announced the editorial, skirting any mention of Spanish-speaking residents, especially Puerto Ricans, in the area.
By the late thirties, the energetic discourse of these vocal, mostly elite Puerto Ricans seemed to have forestalled, and perhaps even reversed somewhat, their identification as black by white New Yorkers. The colonia celebrated a different victory when migrant Oscar García Rivera was elected on a Republican ticket to the New York state assembly in 1937. It was the first time a Puerto Rican held an elective office on the mainland, and the Puerto Rican community saw this achievement as an open door to greater recognition by the major parties. However, it was soon clear that García Rivera’s office could not reverse the political invisibility that the growing Puerto Rican population had been fighting throughout the decade. Nor could it protect them from an identity as colonial citizens in the metropole, a real liability in mainstream politics that proved to be at least as powerful as their ambiguous racial identity. In 1937, when Nationalist agitation reached a new peak of violent conflict in Puerto Rico, Roosevelt appointees on the island—who had sought to rescue Puerto Rico with island-based New Deal programs—suddenly jumped ship, leaving the island’s fiscal fate to a hostile American Congress. Puerto Rican nationalists in New York decried the false promises of liberal politicians, formulating an angry challenge to the integrity of American liberalism at the very moment of its ascendance. As the New York colonia burst into flame with political activity, with the community uniting like never before around the issue of independence, New York liberals turned further away from the political hot potato of Puerto Rico (L. Thomas 2004).

Outraged commentary abounded in *La Prensa* and in the meeting minutes of a variety of colonia organizations, elite and working class alike. Migrants took a renewed interest in connecting the problems of colonialism with the problems of Puerto Ricans’ racial identity in the United States. Pilar Pacheco, a Nationalist activist, wrote a biting letter to *La Prensa* reminding her compatriots that

> Each Puerto Rican is a free and sovereign citizen of the United States... free and sovereign to chase after his bread,...which he is denied.... The Puerto Rican in the United States has the privilege of scrubbing plates in restaurants; of rising at five in the morning on harsh winter days to line up at the factory, at the cafeteria, at the docks with the hope of being chosen among the hundreds of foreigners who comprise the working masses of this people.... We are absolutely free to hear how they call us “niggers,” to see how they ignore our rights as American citizens....41

Puerto Ricans may have marked their difference from black Americans, but now it seemed clear that they would be unable to escape the injustices that confirmed their minority status and excluded them from the category of “free and sovereign citizens of the United States.”

As for the attempt of some Puerto Ricans to claim the privileges of American citizenship by defining themselves, individually, as white: this too seemed likely to fail by the late thirties. Backing up the observations of Puerto Ricans in Washington Heights who were anxious about race-based discrimination by 1935, the applications for the ID cards provided to migrants by the New York Office of Employment and Identification showed a suggestive trend in the “complexion” category. During the thirties, the number of applicants identified as “dark” increased (from 60 percent before 1935 to 80 percent in 1937) and those identified as “light” declined (from 12 percent before 1935 to 8 percent in 1937). In the absence of reliable census data about the numbers of Puerto Rican migrants in the city, much less about their skin color (census takers did not count Puerto Ricans separately until the 1940s), it is
possible only to speculate that this trend reflected both an actual increase in the number of dark-skinned migrants arriving in the thirties, and a growing perception by ID office staff that the mostly poor migrant applicants would be considered “dark,” or at least not white, in New York. Indeed, at no point in the thirties was any applicant in the sample identified as “white.” Even when a migrant himself wrote “white” in the complexion blank of the application, a clerk corrected it, calling the applicant “fair” or “dark.”42 Even if the application was accompanied by a birth certificate designating the race of the applicant’s parents as “de raza blanca,” ID office employees changed the complexion description, and the applicant did not wind up with a “white” complexion label on his ID card.43 In denying an applicant’s claim to be white, perhaps OEI employees reasserted their sense of island-based racial
hierarchies in a racist society (who was a peasant to say he was “de raza blanca” if his social superior might not even be able claim such status?). And as sociologist Lawrence Chenault observed in 1938, “the white Puerto Rican, after he has lived in New York for several years, takes up what is described as the ‘American attitude’ on the question of color.” ID office employees reinforced the prevailing racial climate in Depression-era New York, which was now understood to exclude Puerto Ricans from the white side of the binary (Chenault 1938: 151).

STILL FIGHTING OFF A “NEgro” IDENTITY, BUT FAILING TO ACHIEVE AN IDENTITY APPROACHING “white,” PUERTO RICANS FACED AN INVISIBILITY THAT CIRCumscribed THEIR POLITICAL POWER THROUGHOUT THE THIRTIES, AND THEN WAS COMPOUNDED BY THE EXPLOsion OF COLONIAL TENSIONS AFTER 1937.

Yet, in spite of this crystallizing of Puerto Ricans’ racial identity as nonwhite, new factors complicated this outcome towards the end of the decade. Americans expressed a new anxiety about racial divisions in their own society as they watched Nazism march across Europe, which meant that, in spite of the sharp rise in interracial activism in New York City, few wanted to acknowledge the presence of another dark-skinned minority group in their midst (Gerstle 1994; Hollinger 1975; Weiss 1979). Most important for Puerto Ricans, American lawmakers were forced to get serious about a solution to Puerto Rico’s colonial status—since the Allies were fighting a global conflict for “freedom,” and allegedly supported decolonization movements all over the world (Tugwell 1968 [1946]: 69; Goodsell 1965: 53–8; Torres 1995: 27). The intensifying argument between Puerto Rican statehooders and independentistas in this context made the racial composition of the island a more salient issue: if the United States was supposed to be a white country, it was better for Puerto Rico to be whiter too. Statehood supporters did a fine job of publicizing the phenomenon of “the vanishing Negro,” a thesis about racial change that was allegedly substantiated by studies of the Bureau of the Census (Cabranes 1979: 98). Apparently, the proportion of the “white” population on the island had grown from about 62 percent in 1900 to almost 80 percent in 1940, inspiring a contemporary edition of the Encyclopedia Americana to suggest hopefully that “if this decrease should continue for a number of years, the black race would eventually disappear from Porto Rico” (Cabranes 1979: 98; Jiménez
Román 1996: 9, 23). On the mainland, these developments resulted in a reversal of the ID card trend by the beginning of World War II, wherein the number of migrants identified as “light” or “fair” tripled or quadrupled in the early forties. The war years provided an opportunity to situate Puerto Ricans as a group more securely in the not-Negro category in the United States. This was not the same as “white,” but it got many Puerto Ricans closer to what was, after all, the goal of their struggles to avoid the wrong side of the binary racial scheme: securing the privileges of white American citizenship, the only status that would guarantee them recognition as equal members of society (Fraser 2000: 113).

To “Buck the Color Line”: Recognition Beyond the Binary

The 1940 edition of the American Guide to Puerto Rico quipped that “on the mainland a drop of Negro blood makes a white man a Negro; while in Puerto Rico a drop of white blood makes a Negro a white man.” Not only did this remark exaggerate the differences in the two societies’ ideas about race, it was also wrong. In Puerto Rico, racial identity could be situated in either “black” and “white” categories or along a continuum, and was determined, in any case, not just by “blood” but by social circumstance. Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States resisted the American version of the “one drop rule,” which they found to be neither entirely imaginary nor fully real. Light-skinned Puerto Ricans took their advantages where they could find them, some migrating out to neighborhoods where their darker compatriots would have been refused housing, while most Puerto Ricans “de color” stayed in their poor, mixed-race neighborhoods but continued to keep their distance from their Negro neighbors.

The more salient conflict for Puerto Ricans had to do with their persistent political invisibility not only as dark-skinned foreigners, but also as colonial citizens. In the realm of island politics, independentista migrants in the 1940s watched the disappearance of what they had seen as their wartime opportunity to hold politicians to account on the question of Puerto Rico’s status. The famously radical-left Congressman Vito Marcantonio was the only elected official in America in that era who put issues affecting Puerto Ricans on the political agenda—and only rarely, when some other interest was at stake, did his Congressional colleagues even respond, much less vote in favor of Marcantonio’s bills. At the local level, Puerto Ricans’ energetic activism had brought them no closer to securing the concrete privileges they hoped their American citizenship would give them, including access to decent housing, fair employment, and recognition as legitimate actors in local and national politics. Still fighting off a “Negro” identity, but failing to achieve an identity approaching “white,” Puerto Ricans faced an invisibility that circumscribed their political power throughout the thirties, and then was compounded by the explosion of colonial tensions after 1937. Historian Carey McWilliams, in his radical 1943 treatise on race in the United States, Brothers Under the Skin, announced—old news to residents of the Manhattan and Brooklyn barrios—that Puerto Rican migrants “discover, rather to their amazement, that they are all classified as ‘Negroes,’ and must, perforce, buck the color line” (McWilliams 1964 [1943]: 16).

This was not unlike the dilemma of Homer Plessy, who was dismayed (if not amazed) to be categorized as Negro in post-Reconstruction Louisiana. Plessy’s milieu was a segment of the Atlantic World in which Caribbean migrants, some elite and some freed or escaped slaves, mixed with and married multiracial Louisiana-born Creoles whose ancestors had been free of slavery for generations. The “Latin Negroes” of New
Orleans, as Plessy’s friend Rondolphe Desdunes called his people, were outraged by the mounting indignities of the segregation that followed the demise of post-Civil War Reconstruction (Logsdon and Bell 1992: 203; Desdunes 1973 [1911]). It was the

THE HARLEM RIOT OF 1935 HAS SUFFERED FROM A FATE SIMILAR TO THAT OF PLESSY’S PERSONAL HISTORY: THE IMPOSITION OF RIGID AND SIMPLIFIED RACIAL CATEGORIES ROBS THE NARRATIVE NOT ONLY OF A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF ITS DEPTH, BUT ALSO OF SOME OF ITS MAJOR HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL MEANINGS.

preumption of their social equality that inspired Plessy, Desdunes, and several other elite Creoles of color, including a number of Haitian-born New Orleanians, to form a Comité de Citoyens and mount a test case against the Separate Car Act. In fact, in one of the briefs submitted to the court, Plessy’s lawyer Albion Tourgée made much of the plaintiff’s mixed-race identity, and pointed out that the reputation of whiteness constituted a valuable form of property—of which Plessy, called a “Negro” and consigned to the Negro railway car, had been unconstitutionally denied (B. Thomas 1997: 4–5, 29–30). When the United States Supreme Court announced its decision that “separate but equal” accommodations were indeed constitutional, the aspirations of the Comité were crushed (Laguerre 1998: 1–5; Logsdon and Bell 1992: 203; Scott 2005: 8, 88). Surely African Americans everywhere would have noted the gravity of the Plessy decision and feared for their future in a violently segregated nation, just as Desdunes and Plessy did. But in treating the central actors of such a story as part of one undifferentiated group, defined only by their roughly ascribed race, we lose the key differences of political agenda and worldview that distinguished, in this case, the members of the Comité de Citoyens from the ex-slaves and free black Americans who joined them in mourning the Plessy decision. We lose the possibility of understanding how racist ideology imposed distinct experiences and expectations on various groups in the nation, and motivated them to distinct forms of action.

The Harlem riot of 1935 has suffered from a fate similar to that of Plessy’s personal history: the imposition of rigid and simplified racial categories robs the narrative not only of a certain amount of its depth, but also of some of its major historical and political meanings. There is also a less abstract similarity between the two histories. Following the same logic that inspired Plessy’s 1896 claim about the denial
of his potential “property” in whiteness, many Puerto Ricans—even working class radicals and self-proclaimed racial egalitarians—realized the immobility of binary racial discourse and focused their efforts in the 1930s on affirming their place on the powerful side of the binary. This was a strategic denial of a black identity by many migrants, an effort to play by the rules of a powerful racist ideology to fend off disadvantage. Likewise Lino Rivera, the hidden protagonist in the Harlem riot who asserted that he didn’t want to be a protagonist: he denied the importance of the events he set in motion, in effect doubting the validity of the anger expressed by “the [people] of his race.” Ultimately, of course, Louisiana creoles and New York Puerto Ricans failed in their efforts to sidestep the pitfalls of their ascribed racial identity. Plessy was deemed just a Negro, and was told, along with 7.5 million other African Americans, that the Constitution permitted him to be separated from his white compatriots in all public places. Puerto Ricans in New York in the thirties found that they were rarely regarded as white, and would not enjoy the privileges of whiteness unless they managed to “pass.” These little-known details provide texture and depth to a very obvious point about the power of a rigid racist ideology to render disadvantage to those on the wrong side. They also illustrate a point only slightly less obvious, about the power of the racial binary to silence those historical actors who don’t fit into its categories. The complex identities of Plessy and these Puerto Rican actors have left perhaps just a shadow of their heterogeneous selves in the historical record. But with that shadow remains a hint about their many non-native and cosmopolitan ideas about race, ideas that have significantly shaped discourse about identity and power in the United States. Their reconstructed stories teach us not simply about “agency” or “resistance,” but about the creative work of seeking recognition as social actors beyond the racial binary in American society.
Notes
1 The most thorough academic study of the roots of the Harlem riot by a historian, Cheryl Greenberg's 1991 book *Or Does it Explode?*, does not identify Lino Rivera as Puerto Rican in its one mention of the role he played in the riot. Greenberg notes in passing that Puerto Ricans live in East Harlem and "usually tried to distinguish [themselves] from blacks; not always successfully," but does not discuss any further their relationship to the events leading up to, during, or after the riot. Another important history of that era in Harlem, Mark Naison’s *Black Communists in Harlem*, does not refer to Puerto Ricans anywhere in the book, and refers to Lino Rivera by name but does not describe him as Puerto Rican. The only two book-length histories of Puerto Ricans in New York, by Virginia Sánchez Korrol and Ruth Glasser, do not discuss the Harlem riot of 1935. More recent histories (of New York City and/or civil rights) that discuss the Harlem riot of 1935 have begun to at least mention the fact that Rivera was Puerto Rican. See, for instance, Klinkner and Smith (2002).

2 On racial categories and racial identities in Latin America, see, for example, Candelario (2007), Guerra (1998), Duany (1998), Jiménez Román (1996), Wade (1993) and Skidmore (1993). For an important reminder that Europeans were not "the sole inventors" of the idea of race and racial categorization, see Shoemaker (1997). On the United States, see Nash (1995).


4 See testimony by Puerto Rican independence activist Luis Muñoz Rivera before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, on H.R. 13818, p. 61. "Negroes—citizens without rights" is a phrase from historian Barbara Savage, personal correspondence with the author, July 2003.

5 Of course, in the US, a person presumed to be “black” more often than not has one or more white ancestors, frequently a result of the sexual violence inflicted on slave women by male slaveholders. The point here is that the common use of the label “black” or, earlier, “Negro,” masks the complexity of a person’s racial heritage. “Plain negro” is a term used by poet Simone White, personal correspondence with the author, Oct. 2000. In one of the briefs submitted to the Louisiana State Supreme Court, Plessy’s attorneys referred to him as a person “seven-eights white and one-eighth of colored blood.” In the arresting police officer’s affidavit, however, Plessy was identified simply as “a passenger of the colored race” (Lothrop 1987: 41–5). Anthropologist Virginia Domínguez (1986) provides an excellent discussion of the complexity and contestedness of the Louisiana Creole identity. She notes that Creoles who identify themselves as white object to “the mere suggestion of possibly African ancestry”; to black Creoles, on the other hand, the Creole identity is, by definition, racially heterogeneous, in part since this presumption served to elevate their status in the mostly tripartite racial hierarchy of Louisiana (1986: 263).

6 In 1785, Virginia law defined as black a person as someone with one parent or grandparent of African descent; (1/4 African); in 1930, state law changed that definition to a person with to “one drop” of African blood (Nash 1995: 943). See also David Hollinger, Thomas Skidmore, Barbara Fields, and Henry Yu in the 2003 AHR Forum, “Amalgamation and the Historical Distinctiveness of the United States.”

7 With the passage of the Jones Act in 1917, United States citizenship was conferred on Puerto Ricans in a form that legal scholar and judge José Cabranes refers to (along with many others), as “second-class,” since Puerto Ricans on the island cannot vote in Presidential elections, have only a non-voting elected representative in the American Congress, and do not pay federal taxes. This particular form of American citizenship is
explained in the 1922 legal decision *Balzac v. Porto Rico*, 258 U.S. 298 (1922) (Cabranes 1978: 403–4). When Puerto Ricans migrate to the continental United States, their citizenship becomes identical to that of other mainlanders.


9 There is a substantial and diverse literature on the nonwhite “other” racial identities ascribed to various immigrant groups in the US. See, for example, Haney López (1996, 1998), Ngai (1999, 2004), Gutiérrez (1995), Low (1996), Kim (1999), Ancheta (2006). Shaping the racial identities ascribed to nonwhite others in the early twentieth century were new racist discourses of imperialism, lumping the Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Filipino people over whom the United States ruled into crudely differentiated categories of “nigger,” “savage,” etc. See, for example, Balce (2006), who cites W.E.B. DuBois’s 1920 book *Darkwater* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2007 [1920]), probably the first published book to explore the racist language of empire in America.


11 Redbaiting was also an issue in the selection of members of the Mayor’s Committee on Conditions in Harlem, established by the LaGuardia in the days following the riot. The *Sun* pointed to the radical activities of black appointees A. Phillip Randolph, Countee Cullen, and Arthur Garfield Hays (“Indict four more in Harlem riot,” *Sun*, 22 March 1935).


13 In 1913, a Colombian immigrant founded what would become the colonia’s newspaper of record, *La Prensa*, as a four-page weekly to serve his small community; by 1918, a Spaniard, José Comprubí, started running the paper as a daily to meet the needs of the expanding colonia. Ten years later, *La Prensa* reported an average daily readership of 15,000. The paper covered headline news from across Latin America as well as local news deemed relevant to its immigrant readership. In response to the complaints of working class readers, the editors would occasionally make a show of running a front-page interview with a working-class leader, or providing page one coverage of a dock workers strike (many Spaniards and Puerto Ricans were maritime workers). Puerto Ricans in particular also complained, from time to time, about the paper’s bias in favor of its Spanish readers. However, by the 1930s, the paper did frequently include news of the skilled working class community—see, for example, the announcement of “Un Ágape,” an event at the home of Conchita and Jesús Colón attended by other working class and leftist luminaries in the colonia, including Bernardo Vega; “Un Ágape,” *La Prensa*, 14 Feb. 1934, p. 8. On *La Prensa’s* history, circulation, and readership see Vega (1984: 99); and WPA Federal Writers Project, “Spanish Book,” “Spanish Newspapers, Magazines, etc., in New York” at the Municipal Archives, NYC.

14 See also Rogler (1944) and Fitzpatrick (1959). The contradictory discourses of
mestizaje, “racelessness,” and “racial democracy” exist in somewhat different forms in many other Latin American societies as well; see, for instance, Wade (1993), Skidmore (1992 [1979]), Wright (1992). On contemporary racial discourse among Puerto Ricans in the United States, see also Rodríguez (1980) and Landale and Oropesa (2002).

In Puerto Rico, as in the rest of Latin America, racial labels were descriptive, and did not necessarily define social status absolutely. See citations in footnote 2.

This was a reference to the Church of Father Divine. “Tropas para Harlem pedidas ayer; centenares de policías patrullaban anoche el barrio,” La Prensa, 21 March 1935, 1.


“Numerosos establecimientos hispanos apedreados y saqueados por la turba,” La Prensa, 22 March 1935, 1–2.

“Rivera, causa involuntaria del choque racial de Harlem, deplora lo sucedió,” La Prensa, 22 March 1935.


Researchers at the Tuskegee Institute in the 1930s determined that the number of lynchings in the South tripled during the first year of the Depression, from seven in 1929 (down from a high of twenty-three in 1926) to twenty-one in 1930. See Sitkoff (1978: 268–9 and passim); Bunche (1973: 116–7) and Wolters (1970: 337–40). See, generally, Naison (1985). Nationalists frequently responded to La Prensa’s stories and editorials on lynching throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.


See, for example, Maldonado-Denis (1972: 108) and Wagenheim and Jiménez de Wagenheim (1994: 123–4). Judge José Cabrantes, the foremost legal scholar on Puerto Rican citizenship, disagrees with this interpretation, asserting that “there is no evidence... that the timing of the two actions by Congress [extending US citizenship to Puerto Ricans and, a month later, declaring war on Germany] was anything but coincidental.... Indeed, the number of Puerto Ricans who served in the First World War appears to have been quite small” (1978: 404).


See, for example, Naison (1985), Vega (1984), Griffiths (2001). Another interesting development in this moment, to which I can make only suggestive links, was the publication in Puerto Rico of literature scholar Antonio Pedreira’s Insularismo: ensayos de interpretación puertorriqueña, a seminal meditation on Puerto Rican cultural identity that openly rejected the presence of African “blood” and culture. See Jiménez Román (1996: 2).


See, for instance, transcript of interview with Dona Lucila Padrón, conducted on 12 Jan. 1984 by Ana Juarbe, from the Costureras project of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, p. 99, in which Padrón describes a cousin trained as a teacher in Puerto Rico who was unable to find work in the city because she was “dark.”


Jesús Flores, Unidad Obrera, to Committee to Investigate Conditions in Harlem, 25 March 1935, LaGuardia Papers, reel 77. Jesús Flores, el Comité Pro-Puerto Rico, to Committee to Investigate Conditions in Harlem, 25 March 1935, LaGuardia Papers, reel 77.


Pacheco had written many other letters to *La Prensa* on subjects like women in the Spanish Civil War, the hardships of women working in the embroidery business, and the discriminatory nature of rhetoric about crime in Harlem. Pilar Pacheco, “De Nuestros Lectores,” *La Prensa*, 18 Aug. 1936, 4.

This discussion of the identification cards issued by the office of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor in Manhattan (referred to in the thirties as the Office of Employment and Identification) is based on my sample derived from the approximately 30,500 ID card applications that comprise part of the Migration Division archive at the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College. My sampling technique involved coding groupings of 220 to 250 applications during roughly the same time period every two years from 1930 to 1949. (The actual span of months decreased as the concentration of applications per month rose, from average of about 250 applications in four months during the 1930s to about 250 applications in one month during the forties). This denial of Puerto Ricans’ whiteness—by their own compatriots of the “better class”—was not limited to this decade. In spite of the fact that hundreds of migrants described their own complexions as white on their ID card applications, only about 20 applicants in my sample (in 1945 and 1947) wound up with an ID card that read “complexion: white.” I refer to applicants with masculine pronouns because there were very few women applicants for ID cards in the 1930s, most likely because of the nature of the labor market—fewer Puerto Rican women were applying for jobs in the formal sector, and those who were mainly sought jobs in the garment industry, where they were not at a disadvantage compared to other ethnic or national groups.

About 15 percent of applications from the 1930s had birth certificates attached. Birth certificates were not standardized from town to town; some listed the race of the mother or both parents; some did not. In well over half of these cases, an applicant who was said to be born of parents “of the white race” (or, at least, a mother “de raza blanca,” in the absence of an identified father) was labeled “dark” or “medium” or even “colored” on the ID application. In the remaining cases, all of the applicants were “light” or “fair,” but never “white.”

See also testimony of Vito Marcantonio, *Congressional Record*, 17 June 1943, p. 6028.

Here I’m drawing on political theorist Nancy Fraser’s interpretation of the concept
of recognition. Rather than interpreting the “recognition of difference” using what she refers to as the “identity model,” Fraser (2000) suggests that recognition be treated as a question of social status, that is, recognizing “individual group members as full partners in social interaction.” See also Habermas (1994) and Fraser and Honneth (2003).

46 See Rodríguez (1980: 26–7) and Gordon (1949).

47 Numerous commentators made observations to this effect in La Prensa and in the oral history transcripts in the CEP’s two major collections, the Costureras and the LIHS Pioneros.

48 The Congressional Record during the periods of Marcantonio’s tenure, 1935–1937 and 1939–1951, is full of such examples.

49 In fact, because Plessy could easily pass as white, he and his collaborators in the testing of the law had made a prior arrangement with the railroad conductor and the private detective who detained him—if they had not done so, Plessy would probably have ridden undisturbed. Tourgée made the argument about property in whiteness not because he or Plessy saw that as the central problem of the Separate Car Act, but because Tourgée deemed it the best way to argue that the law violated the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing that no person would be denied property “without due process of law” (Lofgren 1987: 41–5).

REFERENCES


