Haslip-Viera, Gabriel
Changed Identities: A Racial Portrait of Two Extended Families, 1909-present
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Disponible en: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37721248002
This article traces how the official and personal racial trajectories of two extended families from Puerto Rico changed in the period from 1909 to the present as a result of migration and the alterations that took place in government policies with regard to how race and ethnicity were defined. The article also shows how racial categories for individuals and entire households could be changed at the whim of government bureaucrats or by family members when certain opportunities arose as a result of changes in economic, social, marital, and/or professional status. The relative inefficiency of official recording systems and the unreliability of racial statistics for Puerto Ricans and other Latin@s is also demonstrated.

[Key words: race, racial classifications, US Census, Puerto Rico, family history]
HASLIP-PEÑA AND VIERA-SANTIAGO ARE THE NAMES OF MY PARENTAL

extended families, whose shifting ethno-racial identities demonstrate the arbitrariness, confusion, and inconsistency of racial classification in the United States and Puerto Rico. They also illustrate how Puerto Ricans can ignore, obfuscate, or repress an African or Afro-Latin@ background or origin, and how different cultural and social environments can influence the adoption or construction of an ethno-racial identity by individuals or entire families in a forced or self-serving manner. In addition to the role of social privilege and prejudices, much of this confusion also reflects how census enumerators and other bureaucrats on the island or mainland made frequent mistakes, cut corners, and often failed to apply the expected “one drop rule” of hypodescent for persons of African or part African background when classifying people by race prior to 1960, when changes in policy began to permit a degree of self-identification in official and unofficial documents. It is true that there has been some predictability in the direction and/or motivation for change in racial classification in both Puerto Rico and the United States over the years. However, there have also been on-going problems with biased judgments, poorly articulated questions, inconsistency, and sheer laziness and/or incompetence on the part of census enumerators and bureaucrats that have not, and may not be accounted for. These problems and others, along with the changes in policy themselves, have also contributed to the unreliability of racial statistics in official documents—especially when it comes to Puerto Ricans and other persons of mixed background.

The Haslip-Peña Family in the U.S. Census and Other Official Documents, 1909–1955

Nicholas (Nicolás) Gabriel Haslip, my paternal grandfather, was born on the island of Curaçao in the Netherlands West Indies in 1883, the offspring of a European Dutch father, and Regina, who was possibly of Jamaican or part Jamaican origin. Raised solely by his mother and apparently educated in the elementary and secondary schools of Curaçao, he joined the merchant marine as a young man and traveled throughout the Caribbean before establishing residence and a small dry goods store in Puerta de Tierra, the port of San Juan, Puerto Rico. He also married Mérida Peña Torres, my paternal grandmother, a native of Guayama, in 1909. Nicholas Gabriel was a man who would be described as a “jabao” or “grifo” in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, or even as a white person, which was certainly the case when he lost most of his hair in the middle years of his life. By contrast, his wife
Mérida was clearly someone who would be categorized as a mixed race “mulata” in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and as “Negro” or “Colored” in the United States, which were the terms in use when she lived in New York between 1915 and 1945. At the time of his marriage in 1909, my paternal grandfather was classified as “pardo” or brown, a term traditionally used in Puerto Rico and Latin America to define persons of mixed African and European background, along with mulato. 

However, in the 1910 U.S. census for Puerto Rico, he and his wife Mérida, along with his brother-in-law, José Peña Centeno, were listed as “N” for negro or Black in Spanish.

In the years that followed, Nicholas Gabriel’s racial classification and that of his family, as recorded by bureaucrats and census enumerators, changed unpredictably and erratically. For example, after coming to New York and establishing residence in Brooklyn in 1915, he was listed as “black” in skin color (“BL”) on his February 1918 “Alien Seaman’s Identification Card.” However, seven months later, his “race” was listed as “white” on his draft card for the U.S. military during World War I. Afterwards, Nicholas Gabriel was recorded as being “white” in the 1920 census, “white” with “dark” complexion on his 1921 “Certificate of Naturalization” (U.S. citizenship), “yellow” in complexion on his 1923 passport application, Negro (“NEG”) in the 1930 census, and again as “white” with “dark” complexion on his military draft card for World War II.

Members of Nicolás Gabriel’s immediate family and other relatives who lived in his household also experienced shifts in their racial categorization during these years, with changes usually reflecting how he was classified. Despite the expected application of the “one drop rule,” and as a result of inconsistent record keeping, Mérida, my mulata-looking paternal grandmother, was listed as “white” in the 1920 census, “NEG” or Negro in the 1930 census, and “Spanish” on her 1945 death certificate. All of my grandfather’s children, including my father James (Jaime), and my uncle Julius (Julio), who had tightly curled hair and light to medium brown skin color, were listed as “white” in the 1920 census, and Negro (“NEG”) in the 1930 census. This erratic pattern is also seen in my father’s official records around the time of his marriage in 1937. In January of that year, he was listed as having a “brown” complexion on his Merchant Marine “Protection Certificate.” However, six months later, he was recorded as having a “dark” complexion on his Merchant Marine “Certificate of Identification.” In World War II he was also listed as having a “dark” complexion on his military draft card, but in this case, the term “dark” was part of a hierarchical list of categories that ranged from “Sallow” to “Light, “Ruddy,” “Dark,” “Freckled,” “Light Brown,” “Dark Brown,” and finally “Black.” Later, my father was also listed as “Negro” on my own 1941 birth certificate, and again as a “Negro” when he was profiled with several African-American and Afro-Westerners.
Indian employees of the United States Customs Service in an article that appeared in *Ebony* magazine in October 1950. My father’s classification as “Negro” or as a person of color probably continued in the years that followed, but other labels were also used with increased frequency, especially after 1960, when a change in government policy allowed people to self-identify on census forms and other documents to some degree. More often than not, my father came to be classified as a racially undifferentiated Puerto Rican, or Puerto Rican/Hispanic, but he was also listed as “white” on my younger brother’s birth certificate as early as December 1951—only about a year after the publication of the article in *Ebony* magazine. This change in classification may also have resulted from an arbitrary decision made by a hospital bureaucrat, but there was also the possibility of pressure from my father, who at this stage in his life was able to exhibit an assertive, authoritarian demeanor as a relatively tall, stocky, well-dressed official of the U.S. Customs Service. Ten years earlier, in 1941, he had also tried to change the listings for race on my own birth certificate, but with only partial success. According to the story, there was an argument with a hospital bureaucrat that resulted from a typed birth certificate which listed my mother as “White,” my father as “Negro” and yours truly as “Negro,” but with the word “Negro” crossed-out and replaced in handwritten ink with “Puerto Rican.” Thus, I may have become one of the earliest members of the “Puerto Rican” race on the U.S. mainland—a label that became commonplace for Puerto Ricans in official documents by the 1950s, along with “White,” “Negro,” and “Other.”

**THUS, I MAY HAVE BECOME ONE OF THE EARLIEST MEMBERS OF THE “PUERTO RICAN” RACE ON THE U.S. MAINLAND...**

Changing racial classifications are also seen on the matrilineal side of my family. However, in this case, there is a decided overall shift from “mixed race” categories to whiteness in the period from 1910 to 1930, providing some support for recent research and speculation on how race was classified in Puerto Rico by locally recruited agents of the U.S. Census in defiance of Bureau policies. Isidra Mercado de Santiago, my maternal great grandmother, was classified as “MU” or “mulata” in the 1910 census for Caimito, Río Piedras, as were her mother, Demetria Jorge de Mercado, her son Ángel Santiago, and her daughter, María Santiago, my maternal grandmother. Isidra’s son, Ángel, was also classified as “mulato” in the 1920 census, soon after he married and established his own household, but two years earlier, he had been classified as “negro” on his 1918 military draft card—reflecting in this case, the apparent application of the “one drop rule” for persons of African or part African background.

It was during the 1920 census that the move towards whiteness clearly manifested itself in the Viera-Santiago family as a result of subtle changes in the instructions for enumerators and other factors that may have influenced the classification of
persons by race. In these records, and in contrast to the 1910 census, my great-grandmother, Isidra, now living in Santurce, was categorized as “B” for blanca or “white,” along with my grandparents, María and Juan Viera, and their children. All of these individuals varied in appearance to some degree. Juan Viera, my maternal grandfather, was described as “looking like a typical Spaniard.” My grandmother María was apparently darker, but no picture of her has survived. Their children, including my mother Virginia, ranged in color from white to medium brown, but all had very straight hair which was considered, and continues to be considered, an important factor when it comes to racial classification and the determination of status in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Juancho, the oldest, my mother Virginia, and two other siblings born in the 1920s, Irma and Roberto, came out looking “Spanish.” In contrast, my uncles Luis, Raúl, and Ramón came out looking somewhat trigueño or Indian, with two other siblings, Ernesto and Francisco, falling somewhere in between. Other family members were also recorded as living in this large household in the period from 1920 to 1930. These included two younger sisters of my grandmother: Nemencia, who died soon after, and Simona Santiago Cruz, who as I remember, could surely have been classified as mulata, along with her two daughters and her darker, African-looking son, Carlos. However, in the 1930 census, they too were listed as “white.”

Racial Trajectories: 1950-Present

How my maternal and paternal grandparents viewed race, and how they identified racially is unknown to me. Both my maternal grandparents died in Puerto Rico in the early 1930s. Mérida, my paternal grandmother, also died suddenly and unexpectedly in her Brooklyn home in 1945, but Nicholas Gabriel died several years later in 1951 when I was ten years old. Based on what I remember and what I have learned since then, it appears that he might have tried to minimize or ignore the race issue as much as possible. He married a woman who was much darker in complexion than he was, and had children whose color ranged from “almost white” to medium brown—all with very wavy or tightly curled hair. His friends, and his work and business associates varied by race and nationality. As the head of a Curazaleño community organization in the 1930s, who also spoke fluent Spanish, he worked with, and was a friend of the dark complexioned brothers, Joaquín and Jesús Colón—important Puerto Rican/Latin@ community leaders in Brooklyn from the late 1920s to the late 1940s. Like the Colón brothers, he may have tried to emphasize the ideals of a color-blind North American, Puerto Rican, and/or internationalist identity, which in part was the view asserted in the late 1960s by my uncle Robert (or Norberto) Haslip, his oldest son and a jabao, who interrupted a conversation that I was having with several cousins on the race issue by declaring that “all of this talk about race is silly” because “we are all Americans and that’s the way it should be.” However, my father’s view toward race and ethno-racial identity evolved differently from that of his older brother and other siblings.

The ethno-racial environment that I first witnessed as a child growing up in New York’s East Harlem in the late 1940s was quite complex, yet seemingly harmonious. By the time I was seven or eight years old, I became aware that there were all sorts of people living and working in the neighborhood. Italian-Americans were concentrated in the eastern part of East Harlem. Puerto Ricans and other Latinos were largely situated in the western part of the neighborhood. We lived in the Italian section, but in the East River Houses, an ethnically mixed
“municipal housing project” that included families of mostly Italian and Irish background, other European ethnics, some African Americans, and only four Puerto Rican families, including ours. I attended an elementary school with students who mostly represented the groups resident in the Italian part of the neighborhood, I played in the streets with the Italian-American and Irish kids, I bought my soda, candy and chewing gum in the Italian-American grocery and candy stores, and I walked with my parents to visit relatives and friends in the Puerto Rican section of the neighborhood to the west of Lexington Avenue. No significance that I can remember was ever placed on differences in physical appearance during this period, and there was never any mention of Africa or an African background in the family conversations. I was told that we lived in “America,” that we were Puerto Ricans, and that we had relatives—including my paternal grandfather—who came from the Dutch West Indies. But I was also told that none of these differences really mattered. The family discourse, especially that of my father, focused on individuals and nationality groups, except for the “colored people” (i.e. African Americans), but we were not “colored people,” and it didn’t matter anyway as long as they were or “good people.” As far as my father and other family members were concerned, the important issues were “proper” individual behavior, a degree of intelligence, good manners, personal cleanliness and good grooming, proper dress, and whether or not people’s homes were fastidiously clean and orderly.

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This attitude on the part of my parents, and apparently among most if not all of our relatives and friends, prevailed during the period from 1950 to 1955, after we moved to the Pelham Parkway Houses, another municipal housing project in the Williamsbridge section of the northeast Bronx which, like the East River Houses in Harlem, had a complex ethnic mix that nevertheless included very few African Americans, Puerto Ricans, or other Latin@s. Proper individual and family behavior
and the ideals of a color-blind society also continued to be the main focus of the family rhetoric during this period, but the public discourse on civil rights and the politics of desegregation in the South had also begun to intrude. As it turned out, there also had been complications or trouble in the alleged racial paradise of the Haslip-Peña family all along. As I reached my teenage years, I began to hear subtle and not so subtle references to family members who had entered into marriages or relationships that were considered correct or incorrect based on the idea of mejorar la raza—a concept historically prevalent in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean that encourages non-white persons to make every effort to improve the family racial stock by marrying “white” or as “white” as possible. What resulted in the Haslip-Peña family were racial trajectories that went in different directions, depending in large part on the relationships or the marriage decisions that were made and the neighborhoods where family members lived.

According to the tidbits of conversation that slipped-out over the years, my medium dark complexioned uncle Julius and my lighter complexioned father supposedly made the correct decisions when they married women who were defined as white (Italian-American), or passed for white (my Puerto Rican mother). By contrast, my light complexioned uncle Robert, Nicholas Gabriel’s oldest son, made the wrong decision when he married a dark complexioned Puerto Rican woman and continued to live in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn as it became increasingly Black in the years between 1930 and 1960. Over time, my uncle Julius became somewhat de-racialized because he lived in multi-family dwellings in the Italian-American sections of South Brooklyn and Kensington with his large extended family of Italian-American in-laws. His two daughters, who originally looked jabao and even somewhat mulato in appearance, also became Italian American or “white” because they grew up in these environments and married Irish and Italian-American husbands. By contrast, my Uncle Robert’s three children went in two different directions. The oldest child, a daughter, and the second son became Black in cultural orientation because of their appearance, their surname (Haslip only), and because they grew up in Bedford Stuyvesant, married Black or Black West Indian spouses, and continued to live in Black neighborhoods. The oldest son, by contrast, eventually developed a mixed race identity because of a perceived African/Indian appearance, his surname (Haslip only), and because he married a Puerto Rican woman who could pass for white. He also fathered three daughters—two of whom could easily pass for Latinas, and one of whom became Black in social and cultural orientation.

In contrast to the Haslip-Peñas, the racial trajectory of the Viera-Santiago family followed a different but consistent path during this period because of their surnames, their time of arrival in New York, and despite variations in their appearances. My light complexioned mother and her light complexioned older brother, Juancho, were immediately defined as “white” when they came to New York in the early 1930s. They also soon became “Puerto Rican” when Puerto Ricans were recognized as an ethnic group and subsequently defined as an undifferentiated racial group in the years between the early 1930s and the early 1950s. The other siblings who came to New York also had similar experiences. My aunt Irma and my uncle Roberto, who looked “white,” and my uncle Ernesto, who was a bit trigueño, were also quickly categorized as undifferentiated Puerto Ricans when they came to New York in the late 1940s. Their experience also replicated the path followed by my maternal grandmother’s mulato-looking
younger sister, Simona Santiago Cruz, who came to New York with her children in the mid-1930s. Despite their hair texture and skin color, which ranged from light to medium dark brown, they too became undifferentiated Puerto Ricans by the late 1940s. Overall, the African background of the Viera-Santiago family vanished during this period. They became or accepted classification as Puerto Rican in the 1940s and 1950s, Puerto Rican and Hispanic by the late 1960s, and for the most part, they have also continued to self identify in this way up until the present time.

The establishment of a Puerto Rican/Hispanic category in official documents during these years also allowed my father to continue to emphasize and privilege the Puerto Rican as a racially undifferentiated identity and further diminish the importance of his African background in notable contrast to those members of his extended family who became increasingly Black or Afro-West Indian in their social and cultural orientation. The shift toward a Puerto Rican identity was also reinforced by the move that my parents made in November 1955 from the northeast Bronx to the town of Huntington in suburban Long Island, where I first experienced real racial polarization and crude, blatant bigotry as a fourteen-year-old. At the time, the town was rigidly segregated into Black and white sections. The residents were primarily assimilated, upper and lower middle class persons of Irish and German-American background, but there were also a considerable number of Italian-Americans, some White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and other European descended ethnics. The African Americans were largely poor, marginalized and politically passive. Most of them lived in a restricted, rigidly segregated enclave north and south of the railroad tracks, which cut through the middle of the township. A few Puerto Ricans also lived near the tracks, but these were mostly poor, male, and largely invisible migrant farm workers employed in the declining potato, vegetable, and duck farms of Long Island. My father bought his house in one of the white, lower middle class sections of town, but near the frontier with the Black section. Some of our white neighbors were not too pleased by our presence when we moved in, but they were soon neutralized by my father’s tactful, yet authoritarian demeanor, and by his now mid-level bureaucratic position in customs enforcement. He also made it clear in a subtle, diplomatic manner that he was superior to his neighbors in various ways, and that we were Puerto Ricans of Hispanic culture and language and not like those “colored persons” who lived in the Black section of town.

In the years that followed, my father took on a leadership position among the immediate neighbors. In actuality, most of the neighbors were minimally educated, working class individuals, who lived a middle class lifestyle and status based on the relatively higher incomes that they earned as unionized workers in manufacturing,
construction, and services. They frequently asked for his assistance in their dealings with town and county bureaucrats and politicians. He wrote letters, made telephone calls, and established the necessary contacts to resolve problems or get things done. At the same time, he continued to rise in the Customs bureaucracy, reaching the position of Assistant Area Director and Assistant Regional Commissioner in charge of enforcement before retiring at the age of seventy in 1985. During these years he became somewhat de-racialized, but I was nevertheless quite surprised to find out that he was declared “white” on his death certificate when he passed away in 1999. I had concluded, wrongly as it turned out, that defining persons by race on these types of documents was passé by this time.

As it turns out, increasingly complex racial trajectories have been the rule for individuals of my generation and those that have emerged since the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the individuals on the Haslip-Peña side of the family have solidified their connections to the African American or Afro-West Indian communities—self-identifying or accepting classification as Black, although even here, there are many times when reference to a Latin@ connection is made. Others have contributed through intermarriage, professional attainment, and in other ways, to an evolving racial mix that has allowed their offspring to adopt white, Latin@, or other identities with the mixing destined to continue in unpredictable ways in the years to come. On the Viera-Santiago side of the family, identity and classification as Latin@ continues to be the norm with some exceptions. There is a trend toward whiteness among those individuals, primarily females, who have married white husbands and have become middle class. At the same time, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Simona Santiago Cruz have continued to identify as Puerto Ricans, or they have become Black or undifferentiated Latin@s because of their surnames and because of the neighborhoods where they live—again demonstrating the ultimate futility of trying to accurately classify Latin@s (and other groups) by race in an era that permits racial self-identification in official documents, and in many official and unofficial settings.

My own racial trajectory has also followed a somewhat circuitous route. As a teenager, I internalized my father’s identity as a racially undifferentiated Puerto Rican; but this aspect of my identity was very secondary to my sense of self as an individual. In the years that followed, I continued to see myself primarily as an individual who happened to be Puerto Rican despite the varied and sometimes negative experiences I had with regard to race in art school, the U.S. army, and the commercial art business. I adopted the prevailing liberal position toward race and race relations as I lived through the final years of the integrationist phase of the civil rights movement; however, a major change took place in my mid-twenties, when I moved from my parent’s house to the East Elmhurst section of Queens and started spending time in central Harlem as a result of a relationship I had with an Afro-West Indian woman, whose family had connections with leaders in the Harlem community. Among other notables, I “hung out” with Harold Cruse, the author of The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual—a book that opened up a whole new world for me—along with other books on African and African-American history and politics that I read for the first time. As an un-hyphenated Mr. Haslip, I was also assumed to be Black by many of the people I met during this period, which was no problem because I had already begun to internalize the reality of my partly African background. However, another change took place in the fall of 1969 when I started taking evening classes at New York’s City College.
At this point, I met new friends who were mostly Puerto Rican, cautiously joined the
student protests at the College, hyphenated my name, and developed an identity and
sense of self as a mixed race Puerto Rican with part African and possibly Amerindian
ancestry. I also began the lengthy process of education that eventually led to my
becoming an academic. Since that time, I have continued to articulate a mixed race
identity, although like most of my immediate friends and professional colleagues,
I have also adopted the position that race has no scientific validity, that race is
socially constructed, and that claims for a significant Amerindian background for
Caribbean Latinos has little or no basis in the scientific and historical evidence.
I even had my genetic background tested in an effort to determine what my alleged
racial mix might be, and whether there was any Amerindian background. As it turns
out, these tests are crude, simplistic, and unreliable, and their accuracy has been
challenged by scientists in academic journals and other publications. However, the
results in my case confirmed what I already knew or suspected. My mother’s distant
ancestry through her maternal line (mitochondrial DNA) came out to be sub-Saharan
African despite her white appearance, and my father’s distant ancestry through his
paternal line (y-chromosome) came out to be European despite his medium to light
brown skin color and tightly curled hair. The results of my recently concluded “admixture”
test also confirmed what I already knew or suspected. Despite an alleged South Asian,
Amerindian, Gypsy, or Arab appearance, I was told that my genetic background
was in fact 71 percent European and 29 percent sub-Saharan African, with absolutely
no evidence of an Asian or Amerindian background.

This means that I can identify in various ways depending on the context or situation.
Based on how race is currently constructed in U.S. society, I can identify and be identified
as an undifferentiated Puerto Rican, Latino, or Black person, but, in addition, I can also
be identified (and have

**CONFLICTING CLASSIFICATIONS: NICOLÁS GABRIEL HASLIP AND MÉRIDA PEÑA TORRES (AUTHOR’S PATERNAL GRAND-PARENTS) AND OF JAMES HASLIP PEÑA (AUTHOR’S FATHER).**

**Nicolás Gabriel Haslip**

1909: marriage certificate (Puerto Rico): “pardo” (colored)
1910: US Census (PR): Negro
1918: Alien Seaman ID Card (New York): black
1918: Military draft card (NY): white
1920: US Census (NY): white
1921: US Certificate of Naturalization (NY): white with dark complexion
1923: US Passport application (NY): yellow in complexion
1930: US Census (NY): Negro
1940s: Military draft card (NY): white with dark complexion

**Mérida Peña Torres**

1909: marriage certificate (Puerto Rico): “parda” (colored)
1910: US Census (PR): Negro
1920: US Census (NY): white
1930: US Census (NY): Negro
1945: Death certificate (NY): Spanish

**James (Jaime) Haslip Peña**

1920: US Census (NY): white
1930: US Census (NY): Negro
1937: Merchant Marine Certificate of Identification (NY): dark complexion
1940s: Military draft card (NY): dark complexion
1941: On author’s birth certificate (NY): Negro
1950: In Ebony magazine profile (NY): Negro
1951: On author’s brother’s birth certificate (NY): white
1960s: On different occasions (NY): Puerto Rican
1999: On death certificate (NY): white
identified) as a mixed race Puerto Rican, a mixed race Latino, a mixed race Black person, an Afro-Puerto Rican, an Afro-Boricua, and an Afro-Latino. Having listed all of these somewhat different and even problematic identities, the reader might ask which one is preferable, or which one I would choose. In a society that to some degree permits self-identification, “ideological code switching,” silence and denial, and “strategic ambiguity,”29 and rejecting all concepts of race as biologically and socially bogus, I would privilege none of these identities. However, we in fact live in a race conscious environment and not in an ideal world. Therefore, in a society where one has to play the game of race with some frequency, and given the presumptions and misinformation that permeate this issue, I can still articulate all of these identities, some of them, or none of them, with complete confidence and comfort, depending on the context or situation; however, I also firmly believe that every effort should be made to correct all misconceptions and misinformation with regard to this issue. We also have to continue the long arduous fight against racism, racist ideas, and all the other prejudices and patterns of discrimination that permeate our societies wherever they might manifest themselves.30 A starting point for the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and its Diaspora must be the recognition that the African contributions to the demography and cultures of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic are much more important than the contributions of the Taíno or the indigenous, which are of minimal importance in actuality.

NOTES

1 Information on race in the United States was obtained primarily by enumerator observation up until 1950, by a combination of direct interview and self-identification in 1960 and 1970, and by self-identification in 1980, 1990, and 2000. See Gibson and Jung (2002). The “one drop rule” refers to the idea prevalent in the United States that an individual with any amount of African ancestry or “one drop of black blood” should be defined as Black. See Davis (1991: 4–5 and passim), Rodríguez (2000: 7, 29, 200 n. 5 and passim), and Duany (2002: 237 and passim). Also see Rodríguez (2000) and Duany (2002: chapters 10 and 11) for a comprehensive discussion of identity and its connection to the social construction of race for Puerto Ricans and other Latin@s.

2 As an example, see especially Loveman (2007) and Loveman and Muniz (2007) for Puerto Rico at the beginning of the twentieth century. Also see Rodríguez (2000) and Duany (2002: Chapter 10) for the U.S. mainland from the late nineteenth century to the year 2000.

3 These include what are referred to as “ideological code switching,” “strategic ambiguity” silence and denial, and “slippery semantics.” See Candelario (2007: 33, 20, and passim),
Godreau (2008), Duany (2002: 236, 242, 258), Thomas (2009), and endnote 29 in this article. Duany (2002: Chapter 10) also discusses the almost total unreliability of U.S. census data for Puerto Ricans on both the island and mainland and its history.

4 The records of the U.S. Census Bureau, military draft cards, and documents pertaining to the application for U.S. citizenship were obtained from databases on the internet website Ancestry.Com at <http://www.ancestry.com/>. These and other family documents such as birth and death certificates, marriage documents, seaman’s papers (etc.) are in the author’s possession, and are used throughout this article.

5 Among Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean Latin@s, a grifo or jabao is usually described as a person having a white European appearance but with tightly curled hair suggesting a degree of African ancestry despite an otherwise white appearance. See Stephens (1999: 227–8, 275–6). Duany (2002: 238 Table 10.1) also claims that grifo is used to define a dark complexioned person. This may also be true depending on the context.


7 The use of this label was perhaps based on rules that were applied by the U.S. Census Bureau with regard to classification by race in 1910. See Loveman (2007) and Loveman and Muniz (2007).

8 Upon his arrival in New York City in 1915, Nicholas Gabriel opened a dry goods store on the Brooklyn waterfront, where ships from Latin America and the Caribbean docked to pick-up and discharge cargo and passengers. He managed this store for the next fourteen years, but also invested in other small enterprises with business partners, catered parties for ships’ captains, loaned money to friends, business partners, and relatives, and worked for the old Porto Rico Steamship Company as “port steward” on the docks and chief steward on the Borinquen and San Facinto, two of the company’s five passenger ships.

9 In the 1920 census and despite his dark complexion, Mérida’s younger brother, José Peña Centeno, was also listed as “W” or white. In the 1930 census, all of the other persons in the Haslip-Peña household were listed as “NEG” or negro, including two daughters born in the 1920s, my grandmother’s Amerindian looking nephew, Tomás Peña, and four boarders, who sublet rooms in the two attached apartments that my grandfather rented at 43 Sackett Street in South Brooklyn (now Cobble Hill).

10 After graduating from high school and briefly attending classes at Brooklyn College, my father became a merchant seaman (1933–1941). He also worked in hotels, in the Veterans Administration Hospital in the Bronx, and was also employed by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), where he read mail written in Spanish during World War II with Bernardo Vega under the supervision of future Puerto Rican community leader, Luis Quero Chiesa (Vega 1984: 213). He was eventually hired by the U.S. Customs Service, where he rose from Port Patrol Officer in 1943 to Customs Inspector in 1947.

11 “Racially undifferentiated”—meaning that Puerto Ricans or Puerto Rican/Hispanics were (and are not) usually subdivided into distinct racial groups in official records. However, as we all know, Puerto Ricans and Hispanics (or Latin@s) had become racialized in the public mind as persons of color long before these categories were created as part of the official discourse in U.S. society. See Rodríguez Domínguez (2009) and Thomas (2009). Curiously, the overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland were defined as white by census enumerators from 1940 to 1970 (87 percent-1940, 92 percent-1950, 96 percent-1960, 93 percent-1970). See Duany (2002: 253–5, 259). This anomaly and the apparent overall failure to apply the one-drop rule begs for further research and explanation.
As far back as I can remember (mid- to late 1940s), my father always identified as a Puerto Rican without making any reference to race, or he resisted the articulation of such references.


This is also true of most family members referred to in this article because most of them have passed away.


In contrast to his siblings, my father’s emphasis on a de-racialized Puerto Rican ethnic and cultural identity (he was not a nationalist) was probably based on the fact of his marriage to a Puerto Rican woman who could pass for white and because of his mother’s Puerto Rican origins. His adoption of this identity might also have been part of a conscious or unconscious step on a hoped-for path to whiteness. He just as easily could have privileged his Curazaleño, West Indian, or “colored” identity, but he chose not to in contrast to his siblings and other relatives who adopted or accepted different identities.

Two daughters, Felicita and Thelma Haslip-Peña, also made controversial choices. Felicita married an African American but died soon afterwards. Thelma, who had three long-term relationships, initially married Avelino Perry (originally Pereira), a mulato who was judged acceptable to the family because of his “Portuguese” (actually Cape Verdean) background. She then had a relationship with an African American, but subsequently married a dark complexioned Dominican, who was also deemed acceptable because of his Latin@ origins. Needless to say, the racial trajectories followed by the children and grandchildren of these unions has been quite complex.

Meaning in this case that his medium to dark brown complexion and his hair texture were largely ignored.

The daughter also had a child with a Puerto Rican who nevertheless tends to identify or accepts classification as Black.

The recognition of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland as an ambiguously defined ethno-racial group to be included with African Americans, Indians, and Asians in official documents came about as a result of the large and dramatic influx of islanders to New York and other parts of the northeastern United States after 1945.

Justina Santiago, another sister of my maternal grandmother, had also come to New York in the 1920s to work for a wealthy Cuban family. She eventually married an Ecuadorian, Rafael Andrade, the family chauffeur, and had two daughters. In the 1930 census, the Andrades are listed as “IN” or Indians (Native Americans). This classification may have been based on Justina’s alleged Amerindian or South Asian appearance and her husband’s Ecuadorian origins.

I first met Harold Cruse the year after he published this book.

There were occasions when my father would claim an alleged Amerindian ancestry on the matrilineal side of his family.


Results from the National Geographic Society, The Genographic Project, 2007.

Results from DNA Print Genomics, 2007. These tests were originally taken as part of my research on claims that have been made that Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean
Latin@s have significant amounts of Taíno or Native American DNA. See Haslip-Viera (2001, 2006, 2007, and 2008) and Estevez (2008).

I cannot of course be identified as white and would not accept such a classification.

These terms refer to the different options or ways that Latin@s can self-identify or respond to questions that ask them to self-identify by race in U.S. society. According to Ginetta Candelario, ideological code switching and strategic ambiguity allows “simultaneously for purposeful self-presentation strategies and for equivocation in dynamic interplay between the internalization and externalization of official identity discourses. Identity is situationally bound. A given individual, group, or community can experience and understand itself in complex, complementary, or contradictory ways at any particular historical or biographical moment.” See Candelario (2007: 33; also 20 and passim). Also on this issue, see Godreau (2008), Thomas (2009), and Duany (2002: 236, 242, 258).

Víctor M. Rodríguez Domínguez (2005: 98) makes the interesting but controversial claim that U.S. society has experienced a “re-racialization” as a result of the Civil Rights movement, the economic restructuring that began in the 1960s, and the increased immigration that has resulted from the 1965 immigration law.

REFERENCES


