



## Talking about Race in Puerto Rico: Four Descendants of the Transatlantic African Diaspora Share their Experiences

Nataka Moore, Julissa Pagán-Peña, Paola Rodríguez-Dávila, Rebecca Rodríguez-Rivera, and Tiana Santisteven

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**Author Biographies:** *Nataka Moore*, is on faculty at Adler University in the Department of Psychology. Dr. Moore is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 15 years of clinical and academic experience. Dr. Moore currently sees individuals and couples in her private practice. Dr. Moore, as a human rights activist, has led major social justice based international initiatives and have recently won the 2019 social justice award at Adler University for her work. In Cuba her work centered around racial equity and women's rights as she co-led a delegation of 19 women through her work with the US women and Cuba Collaboration. Dr. Moore has been recognized by the Women Issues Committee through the National Council of Schools of Professional Psychology and was awarded the 2017 Diversity Award for her commitment to women's issues and intersectionality. In the Dominican Republic and Liberia she worked with issues related to human rights and mental health. This coming September through the support of a Department of State grant and an Adler University Seed Grant, she will be working in Madagascar addressing post-partum depression with rural Malagasy women. *Julissa M. Pagán-Peña*, is a bicultural and bilingual clinician who is currently completing her post-doctorate fellowship in Dallas, TX. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Puerto Rico and received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Adler University in Chicago, IL. Dr. Pagán-Peña has trained in different settings including medical, schools, and community-based organizations. Her clinical work

has focused on providing psychological evaluations and psychotherapy services to families and children from diverse cultural backgrounds and survivors of complex developmental trauma. Her dissertation focused on examining the relationship between parent-child acculturative discrepancies and youths' self-efficacy. Her past and most recent research experiences have looked into Black-Puerto Rican identity development, depression among Puerto Rican adolescents, and mental health in Latino communities in Chicago. *Paola Garcia*, obtained her doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology (PSYD) in December 2019. She also has an MS in Clinical Psychology from Ponce Health Sciences University; BA in General Psychology from University of Puerto Rico in Cayey. She currently works as a staff therapist/ psychologist for the Talley Center at the University of Mary Washington. Dr. Paola Garcia is both an English and Spanish speaker, who was raised and born in Puerto Rico. She completed her internship at Central State Hospital, a state psychiatric hospital, and then worked as a Psychology Associate for a Private Practice. Paola enjoys working with a variety of populations but has a particular interest in working with diversity, self-esteem, and acceptance/ adjustment issues. She also has a great interest in working with issues relating to skin conditions such as keloids, which she herself has. She mostly works from an Integrative Psychotherapy approach and mostly integrates CBT and Mindfulness skills. When it comes to therapy she tailors her treatment to the needs, goals and interests of the client using a dynamic, collaborative, and creative approach. She has experience working with mood and anxiety disorders, self-esteem issues, and adjustment and acceptance difficulties. *Rebecca L. Rodríguez Rivera*, is a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at Adler University in Chicago. She was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She holds a BA in Psychology from the University of Puerto Rico and a MA in Clinical Psychology from Adler University. Rebecca is an adjunct professor at St. Augustine College in Chicago, where she works with bilingual and bicultural non-traditional Latino psychology students. Her clinical and research work include substance abuse and trauma treatment, Puerto Rican Diaspora, acculturation, and systemic racism. *Tiana Santisteven*, is doctoral candidate in counselor education

and supervision at Adler University. Tiana is a Chicago native. She earned her M.A in counseling with a specialization in rehabilitation counseling in 2018 and has been a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Tiana assists veterans reach their vocational goals while addressing mental health concerns, physical disabilities, co-morbidities, and social justice themes. While in graduate school, Tiana lead the Hispanic Latinx Student Association at Adler University for two years. Tiana is eager to complete her dissertation that is focused on the Latina experience in doctoral programs and begin a career in academia.

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**Corresponding Author:** Nataka Moore, Psy.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist (IL, NY), Professor, Department of Psychology, Adler University, 17 N Dearborn St, Chicago, IL 60602. Email: [NMoore@adler.edu](mailto:NMoore@adler.edu)

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**Abstract**

Puerto Ricans are racially characterized by a mix of three races (Spaniard, Taíno, and African). In fact, this statement dominates any other version of the Puerto Rican racial identity, which has limited the discussions about racial issues such as *blanqueamiento* and racism. In an effort to better understand racial dynamics and the Puerto Rican's perception of race, four descendants of the African Diaspora engaged in a self-reflective process using a roundtable approach to analyze their experiences in Puerto Rico. The roundtable approach is based in an ethnographic method of the qualitative approach. Each individual journaled each moment from their own perspective, then as a group they came together to discuss the themes, experiences, and impressions of the journey. They did this by attending the Latin American Studies Association Conference that was held in San Juan in 2015. While visiting the conference, the attending researchers made efforts to learn as much as they could through experiences such as visiting historical sites and engaging with residents. The investigators discussed the themes they observed in Puerto Rico that related to the overarching question, "What does Blackness mean in Puerto Rico?" and the impact of this meaning on the well-being of Black Puerto-Ricans. These roundtable discussions took place over a year with multiple 2-3 hour meetings. In discussing the themes, the researchers created a space where each author had an equal voice and expertise. This roundtable process not only expanded the authors' understanding of how Blackness is understood in the diaspora, but also their very own personal understanding of Blackness. The findings from each author were compared to develop a broader and deeper understanding of how each viewed the research questions. If the themes from the different authors arrived at the same resolution, then their confidence in the themes was strengthened. This process resulted in the team identifying four major themes; the romanticization of belonging to the three races, psychological sense of belonging and resiliencies, tension points in Loíza: resiliency, resistance and social exclusion and the rehabilitation of each individual's cultural identity as descendants of the Transatlantic African Diaspora. Each individual reproduced their own experiences in this process into these four themes. In regards to the romanticization of belonging to the three races, one member wrote

*"On my way home I couldn't believe the day we had. I saw discrimination and racism with my own eyes. I saw it here in a place I always believed was filled with no racism. In a place, I consider was innocent to color differences and that respected and valued the power of differences. I discover that as Puerto-Ricans we are so used to the fantasy of diversity that we do not see that, for some, diversity is unrealistic; especially when you can't even acknowledge the basic rights of others."*

Using their individual reflections as data, the four researchers were able to identify the resiliency factors that have helped to strengthen their and others' racial identity. In this process, the researchers were able to have a deeper understanding of their African ancestry and develop a more inclusive Puerto Rican identity. This process included the researchers examining ways that anti-blackness and colorism are displayed in the Puerto Rican culture, and also detecting areas of racial justice and resiliency throughout their community. The ultimate goal is to determine how transgenerational transmission of resiliency could better inform interventions and strategies targeting racial adversities for all descendants of the Transatlantic African Diaspora while considering its impact on cultural identity development and formation. Collectively, as a result of this project, there is a higher sense of connectedness to African roots. In team discussions, it was found that a limitation of this paper is not having a person who identifies as Black Puerto-Rican as an author and how this would have added greatly to the roundtable discussions and findings. The authors recognize that there may be tension points that exist for Puerto-Ricans to fully accept their African heritage. The objective of this paper is to start a dialogue to open up spaces and opportunities to engage in this difficult conversation. It is the authors' hope that this paper can spark conversations and strategies to address the historical and contemporary impact of how Blackness is socially constructed in Puerto Rican Society. Finally, it is with hopes that this can connect the experiences of Black Puerto Ricans' historical/contemporary resiliencies to the larger knowledge base of strategies that can help address racial adversities of all people from the Transatlantic African Diaspora.

## Introduction

As an African American psychologist, I have been grappling with the question of how do we as African Americans heal from the wounds of historical trauma and the continuous brutal racism that exist in every corner of American society that impact our lives daily? The historical trauma that we experience is not only rooted in 400 years of slavery, segregation, and lynchings but also continues through mass incarceration, police brutality, and mass inequities in almost every sector of life be it through economic, health and education disparities. As a Black psychologist, I am well aware that while there are theories and interventions that address healing from trauma, there are few theories that attempt to address healing from 400 plus years of historical and ongoing trauma.

The urgency of needing to find methods of healing from 400 plus years of trauma lead me to wonder about the ways in which we as a Black American community have developed resiliencies to address the ongoing pain and suffering of living in a racist society embedded in White Supremacy. In connection to this question, I also became curious about how Black people across the Transatlantic Diaspora, those who have ancestors that was brought to the Americas and Caribbean to be enslaved, developed resiliencies in the face of White supremacy in their respective countries. In answering this question, I wanted to investigate the challenges, strengths, and resiliencies that Black people face throughout the diaspora. The aim would be to develop a framework of the collective healing and resiliency experiences of the Black Transatlantic diaspora to gain a broader understanding of what is needed to heal from a macro-level

transnational optic. I began this journey by publishing a paper in 2015 titled, *Talking about Race in Cuba: Four Trans-Atlantic Diaspora Women Share their Experiences*. For this paper, I pulled together a team to investigate what Blackness means in Puerto Rico and to understand the strengths and resiliencies of Black Puerto-Ricans in the face of White Supremacy by engaging in an ethnographic study.

To embark on an ethnographic study in Puerto Rico, I knew that I would understand the impact of racism from my location as Black person of the diaspora but there would be cultural nuances I would not understand, as I am not Puerto-Rican. I engaged three Puerto-Rican women to be a part of the research team who were born and raised on the island, and one woman who is of Puerto Rican ancestry but raised in the United States. The co-authors of this paper are Julissa Pagán-Peña who identifies as *Caribeña*, Tiana Santisteven as Latina, Paola Rodríguez Dávila who identifies as White Puerto Rican, and Rebecca Rodríguez-Rivera who identifies *mestizo*, a light-skinned Puerto Rican.

## Methods

To develop this study, we decided to use ethnographic methods. Our ethnography approach involved a comprehensive narrative of what we observed through dialogues and reflective experience attending an international conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, visiting communities, tourist places, and organizations in Puerto Rico that serve Black Puerto-Ricans. Overall, this method allowed us to integrate the analysis of social interactions and perceptions within Puerto Rico through our eyes and experiences. The first author Nataka, along with Paola and Rebeca were the team that attended the conference in Puerto Rico and thus the majority of the ethnographic data are from their experiences.

As a research team we wanted to learn what Blackness means in Puerto Rico, how racism toward Black Puerto-Ricans was perceived on the island. We also wanted to know about the resiliency and obstacles Black Puerto Ricans face in maintaining a sense of well-being. Additionally, we wanted to raise the questions of political and social differences, as well as similarities between Puerto Rico and the United States. To answer this question, we began by reviewing literature on racism in Puerto Rico and the similarities and differences of the history between the United States and Puerto Rico. As a team, we wanted to make sure that by reviewing the literature we were grounding ourselves in the topic at hand. As first author, I needed to understand Puerto- Rican culture. For the rest of the research team, all Puerto Rican women, it was different because they were born into this culture. However as none of the Puerto-Rican authors identified as Black or Afro-Puerto Rican, they needed to ground themselves in the experiences of Black Puerto-Ricans found within the literature and documentaries.

As a team, we had an extensive research meeting on which questions to ask and how to approach and coordinate our visit to the island. We mapped out the areas we wanted to visit and we came up with the places to visit and people to engage with that for us had knowledge on the topic of what does it mean to be Black in Puerto Rico. We had the opportunity to coordinate our visit to the island around the Latin American Studies Association Conference held in San Juan in 2015. Through using an ethnographic method, we had the opportunity to journal our experience through those four days on the island. We were also able to write our observations on how this research and findings confronted our understanding of Blackness on the island and our own value systems. Our journal reflections were pulled from our engagement in the conference, museums, visits to various communities across the island, cultural activities, and

conversations with multiple people. The researchers who attended the 2015 conference journaled independently and later discussed their findings with the additional authors. We had what we called “round table discussions” that took place over a year with multiple 2-3 hour meetings. In discussing the themes, we created a space where each author had equal voice and expertise. This roundtable process expanded our understanding of how Blackness is understood in the diaspora but also our very own personal understanding of what it means to be Black in the diaspora. The findings from each author were compared to develop a broader and deeper understanding of how each of us viewed the research questions. If the themes from the different authors arrived at the same resolution, then our confidence in the themes was strengthened. Through this process we gained a wider understanding of the experience of Black Puerto-Ricans through our own eyes.

## Literature Review

### *Shared history of slavery in the U.S. and the Caribbean*

The Caribbean and the U.S. share similar history, particularly as it relates to colonization, slavery, and human rights violations of African slaves (Moore et al., 2015; Lopez-Levy, 2011; Oldfield, 2012). Between the 17th and 19th centuries there was a mass slave trade from Africa to the “New World” (Bondarenko, 2015). In the US, most of the traded slaves were located in the Southern and Northern colonies to work on various plantations where they spent extensive hours of physical labor (The Library Congress, 2020). African slaves did not control their labor hours which began early in the morning and ended late afternoon, and whose “supervisors” utilized physical punishment as a threat. Interestingly, the mortality rates among slaves in the US were lower than in most of

the “New World” territories, especially when compared to the Caribbean. Therefore, by 1850 the African slave population included third, fourth, and fifth generation Americans (Berlin, 2009). Furthermore, as the African slaves reproduced themselves, the owners’ wealth increased as well because they did not have to invest in trading more slaves from Africa. In sum, the purpose of slavery, in both the US and the Caribbean, was to maintain the colonized status while promoting the economic growth of the European imperialism (Moore et al., 2015; Klein, 2010; Oldfield 2012).

Similarly, to the US, Puerto Rico and other colonized islands in the Caribbean experienced a massive importation of African slaves (Duany, 2001). In fact, the Caribbean was the recipient of almost more than half of the imported African slaves (Godreau, et al., 2008). The slaves were spread between the greater and minor Antilles. Although the Caribbean islands share similar experiences on the slavery trade, Puerto Rico’s slavery history slightly differs from other islands in the Caribbean. Whereas other Caribbean colonies had a sugar plantation industry well established for many years, the sugar industry in Puerto Rico did not start to develop until the end of 18th century beginning of the 19th century (West-Durán, 2005). Haiti’s independence in 1804 was one of the primary events that influenced Puerto Rican sugar plantation industry growth. By this time, Haiti was considered one of the world’s largest producers of sugar. Due to Haiti’s independence, Cuba and Puerto Rico doubled their sugar production to cover Haiti’s production. During 1850 Puerto Rico’s sugar industry exponentially grew, producing as much sugar as other Caribbean islands (West-Durán, 2005). Given this economical growth, the slave population was also growing.

Previous to Haiti’s anti-slavery and anti-colonial revolution, the African slave

population in Puerto Rico was relatively smaller [15%] in comparison to other colonies in the Caribbean (West-Durán, 2005). It was not until the sugar plantation industry started to develop by the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century that the island's slavery population started to grow from 5 to 9 percent until slavery was abolished in 1873. In fact, Puerto Rico experienced one of the earliest laws that liberated slaves in the Caribbean. This law stated that slaves could be emancipated three years after the law was established. Additionally, one of the statements included the freedom of babies born in 1873 or after and of slaves over sixty years of age (Sanchez-Korrol, 2014). This gradual emancipation of slaves promoted a phenomenon of African non-slaves and slave population in Puerto Rico. In fact, by 1873 the total number of free black slaves was greater than the total of slaves in the island (Godreau et al., 2008; Mintz, 1989:87) By this year slaves in Puerto Rican society composed 5 to 15 percent of the total population where the majority included white or free non-whites (West-Durán, 2003; West-Durán, 2005). This data reflects the significant racial mixture between Black, Spaniards (White), and Native (Taínos) that happened in Puerto Rico, which is considered greater than any other island in the Caribbean (West-Durán, 2005).

#### *The omitted history of slavery and *blancamiento**

Historically, there has not been full acknowledgement of the atrocities of slavery in the Caribbean. Although governments (i.e. Cuba) have slightly identified and weighted the historical injustice related to the slave trade (De la Fuente, 2001; cited on Moore, et al, 2015;), Puerto Rico's society is still struggling with the idea of fully recognizing the impact of the age of slavery. Societal entities and the colonized condition of Puerto Rico perpetuate this denial.

Godreau and others (2008) conducted an ethnographic study that aimed to examine how the slavery was taught in history in an elementary public school located in Cayey, Puerto Rico. The researchers identified race-talk anxiety when discussing the history of slavery on the island, where Black equals slave. They further observed the rhetoric statement of racial identification about the "three races" which refers to the fact that Puerto Ricans are the result of the racial mixture between White, Taíno (natives), and Africans. This statement dominates any other version of the racial identity. From a historically perspective, talking about Puerto Rican slavery represents a threat to the racial discourse of "mix of the races" because it elicits a dialogue about racism and racial discriminations (Godreau, 2008). This further relates to the notion of whitening or *blancamiento*. In addition, the "three races" speech does not allow room for racism and racial discrimination in Puerto Rican society, minimizing the presence of Blackness among Puerto Ricans.

Throughout US history, Blackness, as a race, has been conceptualized differently. For instance, due to the union between slave African mothers and white fathers, a new classification system called "one drop rule" emerged over the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an effort to distinguish between those who were of a mixed race (black and white) while promoting segregation (Davis, 1991). Historically the "One drop rule" suggests that even if only one of your ancestors was African, one or several generations ago, you would be identified as either Black, Mulatto, Quadroon, or Octoroon; thus, you were non-white. As a result, racially mixed generations have been classified to socially constructed subordinate racial groups formed by racist ideologies. This modality of race-thinking throughout US history has limited other possible racial classifications (Glasgow et al., 2009). In contrast, there is ambiguity among Puerto Ricans in how the term Negro (Black)

is used. From a negative perspective, Negro could be associated with the slavery trade history and is often considered offensive. Conversely, when a Puerto Rican uses the diminutive version (i.e. *negrito*, *negrita*) is contemplated as an attempt to transmit some type of affection depending on the relationship that the communicator and receiver have (Godreau, 2008). Nevertheless, *trigueño* is the most common term used to describe a dark-skin Puerto Rican because of the negative connotation that the word Negro has, as it relates to slavery. *Mulata* and *jabao* are other two racial categorizations within Puerto Rican society that directly refer to the historical trajectory of eliminating any trace of racial blackness heritage (Godreau, 2008).

### *Contemporary Puerto Rican Blackness*

Whitening is still encouraged in Puerto Rican contemporary society. Women with darker skin are persuaded to marry a White man to erase any Black trait in the family genes (Santos, 2010). This process promotes Black Puerto Rican women to develop a sense of rejection towards their own race. Along with racial oppressive feelings, they can experience low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority in comparison with lighter skin women. Similarly, men are conditioned to be attracted to lighter skin women; they are raised in an environment where Black features on women are not seen as attractive as White features. The ultimate goal is whitening the family to eliminate any black feature among generations to come (Santos, 2010). Therefore, family values play a crucial role in the socialization of many Black Puerto Rican women and men.

Post-slavery, most of Puerto Ricans have perceived themselves as racially White. There has been an evident denial or resistance to racially identify with the African heritage. Furthermore, the census has reported a drastically shift suggesting an apparent growth of the White population. Even though

White immigrant population did not increase, by 1950 almost 80 percent Puerto Ricans reported being White (West-Durán, 2005). This exponential growth of White Puerto Ricans was given to a phenomenon of racial identification; those who once identified as *trigueño* shifted to White, and those who were Black before changed to identify themselves as *trigueño* or *mulatos* (a mix of white and black). Therefore, from a generational perspective, race identity in Puerto Ricans was “whitening, not a darkening process” (West-Durán, 2005).

Research on Puerto Rican women’s racial self-identification has supported this notion of whitening. Landale & Oropesa (2002), conducted a study with a sample from Puerto Rican women residing in the U.S. and Puerto Rico who were asked about their racial identity. Interestingly, women from both cultural contexts responded to the race question by identifying themselves as Puerto Rican. Some of the participants residing in Puerto Rico identified as White, Black or *trigueña* but none of the mainlanders identified with skin color or race. Furthermore, the authors identified that dark-skin Puerto Ricans living in the US did not consider the traditional Black-White understating of race (Landale & Oropesa 2002). This speaks to the flexibility of racial categorization in the island where other shades of Black skin color are contemplated as racial identification (i.e. *mulatto* or *trigueño*). On the other hand, this is not the same case for the US society where there is a dichotomy conceptualization of race. Those who migrated to the US utilized Puerto Rican as both their ethnic and racial identity.

Like other Caribbean cultures, Puerto Rico acknowledges and celebrates their African heritage through various art expressions. Cuba is one of those Caribbean islands where, the African heritage is present in their literature, art, dances, and music, yet there is a lack of research on Black-Cuban identity

(Moore et al., 2015). In Puerto Rico, the *Afro Boricua* pride is mostly celebrated throughout musical and dance expressions (West-Durán, 2005). Contemporary genre music such as salsa and *reggaeton* have also highlighted the African heritage with some pride. The concept of *Afro Boricua* pride suggests the beginning of an identity transformation among Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, when it comes to racial identity, most Puerto Ricans are still identifying as White or *Mulatto*. This is mostly perpetuated by the historical rhetoric of *mestizaje* (racial mixed), which allows little room to re-think racial identification in the context of Puerto Rican society. Perhaps, until slavery is fully acknowledged, accepted, and processed, Puerto Ricans' racial identity will remain in a grey area.

## Results

### *Theme 1: Obstacles/Anti-Blackness in Puerto Rico*

In this section, the team members describe interactions and observations that demonstrate anti-Blackness in Puerto Rico. Through these encounters, one can vividly see how anti-Blackness is not only active on the island but how African heritage and influence on Puerto-Rican culture is often minimized. This is showcased using moral credentialing as a rationale for anti-Black sentiments and behavior. According to Krumm & Corning (2008), moral credentials are collections of evidence accrued by an individual to be utilized in the future as a token that they are in fact not prejudice. This gathering of proof may be used to reduce their likelihood at being perceived as discriminatory. Some examples indicated by Krumm & Corning of moral credentials included over-favoring groups, participating in activist activities, trivial compliance and affiliation with others. One may state, "I have Black friends or my cousin is gay" or some may rationalize their donations as acts of

activism towards justice (2008). In addition, anti-Blackness is present through minimized opportunities for Black Puerto-Ricans to express Blackness/African heritage, limited opportunity to discuss racism, and the dismissal of Black Puerto Ricans in this society.

### *Sub-Theme 1: The Romanticization of Belonging to the Three Races and Moral Credentialing*

We identified that many Puerto Ricans describe themselves as deriving from the three race/ethnicities in this order: "White, Brown, and Black". We found that although there appears to be pride in the discussion of being descended from the "three races", it is often discussed in a romanticized fashion. The discussion tells a picture that all three races have equal standing and acceptance in Puerto-Rican identity and culture. We found that the romanticized rhetoric can give the appearance that everyone is equal and have the same racialized experiences and opportunities. We observed Puerto-Ricans who do not identify as Black Puerto-Rican, openly acknowledge having African heritage. However, the discussions were not from a space of pride in acknowledging how it may show up in the curls of their hair, or the color of their skin, the food they eat, and the deep African roots that exist within every fabric of Puerto-Rican culture, but instead talked about it in a way that deflected anti-Blackness on the island; thus using moral credentialing. The following journal entries are reflective of our observations in this regard.

*Paola's Journal:* *We asked another lady in the museum how many people from the island and tourists came and she said that it depends on the day but that people from Puerto Rico do visit the exhibition. I also explained our research and asked her opinion and she said that she was no racist, that her family wasn't racist, and that in Puerto Rico, because we*

were mixed, we were not racist. There I saw it once again, the colorblind. So I challenged her, what about Loíza? Don't you think there is segregation?... and she said, "well, maybe." Another staff person came into the conversation and she was horrified that the other lady told us that there was segregation, and she said "not here, no such thing here"... We only acknowledge the music and the culture that comes with our African heritage, but hide the fact that we are Black. She said that there are absolutely no policies in place that give rights or power to Black Puerto Ricans or Black movements in the island.... we prefer to say we are the three races as a way to romanticize these ideas instead of dealing with the fact that there are also people who relate/identify more with one of three individual races and who differ in their ability to obtain privileges.

Nataka's Journal: Puerto Rico uses names to call people in their community *triguena* or *mestizaje* and it is basically saying that we are all "mixed". This is opposite than what happens in the United States, as most African Americans are of multiracial/ethnic heritage as research and genealogy has shown us and yet we identify ourselves as Black. Lastly, Black seems to be associated with slave status in Puerto Rico. When you became free in Puerto Rico you no longer had the status of being Black...you were now *triguena* maybe? Thus, people do not want to associate with this status...because there is shame, thus they do not want to call themselves Black.

Rebecca's Journal: The ideology of *mestizaje* does not confront racism. In fact, racism is hidden by *mestizaje* discourse in *vida diaria* (daily lives). Racism has been hidden when explaining Afro Puerto-Rican poverty and skin color diversity. Racism is omitted when explaining history, which perpetuates actual discourse and the oppressive intentions of the White man. What are the effects/consequences of racial and ethnic categories? Of self-categorizing? Of wanting a lighter skin color?

*Blanqueamiento* is not an ideology but rather a "real economical, political, and personal process" (Bonilla-Silva, and Dietrich, 2009). *Blanqueamiento* is a way of negating discrimination where a darker skin color means the recognition of racism. With *blanqueamiento de la raza*, the perception of discrimination is minimized... It makes me remember Foucault's reading on power and oppression because we have to rethink general discourse and how language is constructed (body, race, country). Slavery is the base/center of capitalism. Capitalism became alive as a result of racism and slavery, which at the same times it is narrated in our education as a romantic story hiding the atrocities of slavery.

#### *Sub-Theme 2: Limitations on Discussing Anti-Blackness*

The team found that because Puerto Ricans describe themselves as descending of the three races it did not leave much room for those who self identity as Black Puerto Rican to take up space and make known their reality on the island with anti-Black racism. Through sitting in community groups focused on women sharing and working through their collective experiences with racism we found that some Black Puerto Rican women struggle to describe their experiences and put language to their encounters of racism at all levels (macro, meso, micro and personal levels) and make meaning out of internalized racism. We also found destructive and dehumanizing images of Black people in Puerto Rico (i.e. *pikininis*) that seem to be accepted in Puerto Rico as the images remain and flood tourist shops and cultural spaces despite being hurtful to Black Puerto Ricans. How do you explain experiences of racism and living in anti-Black spaces when it is not supposed to exist? The following reflections illustrate this issue.

Paola's Journal: She works in an organizational project that works with Black

communities to work against racism. In this workshop they tried to open the minds of Black women to challenge and hopefully change their perspectives on race, racism, and internalized racism. For example, the institutionalized perspective about hair, what type of hair is beautiful and which one is not.

Nataka's Journal: We then went to the proper place to meet with the professor but before we met with her we met with another Black Puerto Rican woman who was very informative on her experience. She talked about some of her work in communities talking about racism at the systemic level and at the interpersonal level; helping women to put words and language to their experiences of racism. One of the topics is Black hair and the women keep a journal of this discussion.

Rebecca's Journal: We constructed a social imaginary about the pikinini on Black people. We have naturalized these images and they have intersected Puerto Rican culture and education as well. The paradox of the pikinini images is that why do these images bother us? Is it because it reflects the other or it reflects myself.

Nataka's Journal: The barriers to well-being however is being excluded and consistently oppressed and not really knowing that "being Black" is why they are oppressed. He said not having a movement makes it difficult to connect to the plight of their people as Afro-descendant. This is what we heard before as well. I asked if there is a movement now and he said there is a group going around and "waking people up" to know what it means to be Black. It reminds me of the "stay woke" campaign somewhat happening amongst Black Americans. I was thinking to myself that knowing is only part of it because I am Black and African Americans are Black and know it and yet we still have issues of knowing our worth at times or acknowledging the barriers we experience due to institutionalized racism and the impact on our health and well-being. I

saw so many similarities to a constant assault on the Black diaspora knowing their worth collectively. I was loving the collections of book and videos they collected to raise the consciousness of the people.

Sub-Theme 3: Denying Puerto Rican identity to Black Puerto Ricans

While there we had opportunities to observe how people treated the first author as a Black person in Puerto Rico. It was interesting to observe how people automatically treated the first author as if she was not Puerto Rican. They refused to speak to her in Spanish. After talking to another Black Puerto Rican woman who has lived on the Island her entire life and grew up in Loíza, a predominantly Black municipality on the northeastern coast of Puerto-Rico, she expressed that she too has had the same experience; a refusal from lighter Puerto Ricans to address her in Spanish. This renouncement sends a message that phenotypical ideas of Blackness do not belong. Some of the team's experiences with observing racism are illustrated below.

Nataka's Journal: One young lady had a critique on who has the ability to publish. She states that while they may have had a Black experience in the US they are White here {Puerto-Rico} and yet they are the authority on Blackness in Puerto Rico. She also talked about her feelings of anger related to people in Puerto Rico refusing to talk Spanish to her although she and her family has lived in Puerto-Rico their whole lives. She is from Loíza, a predominantly Afro-Puerto Rican community.

Paola's Journal: So when he asked what we were doing, I told him we were researchers studying how Afro Puerto-Ricans understood their African heritage. In that moment he bluntly said, "So is the Black women with you the experiment." I was so mad I wanted to scream and call his manager but I just answered: No, actually she is the professor. I

*could tell he was embarrassed so he just said he was a psychology student too and all this shit about education. He automatically assumed that because she was Black she had to be the person we were studying, he didn't even hesitate to think that she could have being another student at least. I didn't know how to tell Dr. Moore or even Rebecca but I knew I had to because it was a shared experience. However, I didn't want to because I felt so ashamed and disgusted of how a person working in a tourist store was so bluntly disrespectful.*

Nataka's Journal: *He later spoke to my student about what we were doing and Paola told him about our research project and he asked if I was the experiment. Still processing my thoughts with this...my shield was up with this comment. As a Black American woman, I noticed that probably as a coping skill passed down through generations, I have to compartmentalize personal experience with racism and process the issues later.*

Rebecca's Journal: *Conversations with locals: how they view Blackness and racial segregation? Are we really that color bind? How we negate racism exist?!*

*Theme 2: Spaces and places to challenge anti-Blackness in Puerto Rico*

In this section, the sub-themes of the psychological sense of belonging will be explored. It was found that national patriotism and academia are some of the places where anti-Blackness is confronted. This will elucidate how the research team navigated spaces where anti-Blackness existed in Puerto-Rico while recognizing the same spaces held opportunities to discuss and challenge White supremacy. The investigators observed individuals in these areas and reflected on how socially inclined individuals work and put efforts forward to dismantle anti-Blackness on the island

through advocacy, literature, research and more.

*Subtheme 1: Psychological Sense of Belonging and Resiliencies (National Patriotism and Belonging)*

While the identified issues in theme one (i.e. romanticization of triguena) can serve as barriers for Black Puerto-Ricans to openly talk and make meaning out of their experience of racism. The national identity may conversely, in context of the Puerto Rican and United States divide, serve as a facilitator for Black Puerto Ricans to feel a sense of belonging to the national agenda. In addition, Puerto Rico has adopted African influenced music as part of its national identity. Music genres that have strong African ties have gained popularity thus evolving into a form of resistance towards anti-Blackness and movement towards pride. Through the adoption of Black inspired forms of music and art, Black voices and worldview can become visible and validated in some spaces. Although the Black Puerto Rican civil rights movement was officially suppressed, music and art in Puerto-Rico has continued to be an expression of resiliency and resistance of all Puerto Ricans. However, there is tension that exists as the authors observed that the music by Black Puerto-Ricans that more explicitly talk about experiences of racism and discrimination might not always be considered acceptable. The following quotes highlight these aforementioned themes.

Nataka's Journal: *Being colonized by the US has had an impact because folks are fighting against nationalism, which might have stopped a Black Puerto-Rican movement from happening. But you have to wonder like in Cuba, is at the heart of this a sense of belonging? So we are all Puerto Ricans fighting against America...like we are all Cubans fighting against the blockade of America...thus we are the same and can "pass" in this respect. With this understanding Black*

*Puerto-Ricans can feel more like an equal citizen fighting against colonialism versus having to address White Supremacy and racial injustice.*

Paola's Journal: *I also love that they mention music as a source of resilience. However, the way we interpret it is because here some lyrics from the reggaeton music talk about freedom and nondiscrimination but because they come from a genre of music that we associate as bad and mostly from the streets we dismiss the voices of many singing to be heard. Most of the composers and singers of reggaeton that sing of freedom and ending discrimination are Black. Meaning that still in music we tend to disregard their opinions and feelings about how the color of their skin dictates the way they live.*

Rebecca's Journal: *There is a discrepancy in the feelings of belonging between Black people in the United States and in Puerto Rico. In the United States, Black people found spiritual strength and cohesion in the Civil Rights Movements. However, in Puerto Rico we tend to see it more as music and food than spirituality and sense of belonging (Black people do not have in Puerto Rico a place where they belong). In Puerto Rico there was no Affirmative Action because we are blind or do not want to see segregation, or policy changes based on race, but there was skin color segregation.*

#### *Sub-Theme 2: Academia*

The experience at an international conference revealed to the researchers that discussions of Blackness in Puerto Rico in academia still faced challenges. Despite the efforts that scholars have made to record, investigate, and report on Blackness in Puerto Rico there are some unexpected barriers for these scholars to seek full recognition of these efforts. However, these scholars have continued to find creative ways to break down barriers and share knowledge amongst

Puerto Rican academics and the community. The following reflections exemplify this observation.

Paola's Journal: *I have to say the speaker that impacted me the most, was a professor from the University of Puerto Rico. What a lady! I have to admit that at the beginning I was a little confused when she changed her shirt into a t-shirt that said "Negra Desobediente y qué?" I didn't understand how in a conference she would act this way, I felt a little bit uncomfortable at the beginning but after she started explaining her reasons and talking about the discrimination Black Puerto-Rican authors and professors suffer. I was shocked, mad, and astonished to find out that even after all she studied and having a doctorate she still doesn't get the same privileges as other professors just because she is Black. My first thought was so much for equal rights. One of the things she said that I love was that in Puerto Rico we have been taught to deny our African heritage, to eliminate any signs of that culture in our body and our way of thinking. There is a build up code of silence in our culture that prevents us from recognizing our dislike and complete lack of knowledge and respect for our African roots. She also said that none of the Universities here in the island have a class on African culture. Lastly, I had to ask her what the shirt meant I knew what it meant in the literal sense, Negra desobediente y qué? Means Black disobedient women, and what? But she explained that for them it means that for centuries Black women were domesticated and subjected to take federal help because of fear to have repercussions from the government. However, they believe is time for them to resurface from the discrimination and into the light to be heard and to give themselves a voice. One of the ways they plan to do this is by giving recognition to Black women in the arts as well as Black men that have written books about our African roots and the importance of that part of us in our lives, as well as our traditions and culture that come from our African heritage.*

Nataka's Journal: *We also went to a very powerful conversation of a Black woman who was placed on a panel of students talking about the built environment and she was going to talk about racism against Black people in Puerto-Rico. She also discussed how there isn't a Black studies program in the department as well. She did not understand why she was placed on this panel with students given what she was presenting. When she came up to the podium she put on a t-shirt that said *Negra disobediente, y qué?* We found out later this shirt was to say that I am going to be me...Black and I am not going to be silenced by controlling images you may place on me. Anyways, I really enjoyed her presentation but I thought it was interesting to observe others in the room. The students on the panel, who were White, were challenged as to why they did not include discussions about racism in their discussion when talking about gentrification issues. They only said that they have discussion of racism in gentrification process in their notes and in their dissertation but did not have time to discuss this in the presentation. I also observed how earlier in the session a White woman used her privilege to shush a Black woman who quickly whispered something to a colleague before she was going to present (unbeknownst to the White woman) and a young man who also shushed me and my student for her translating. It left me wondering why they felt it was ok to do this.*

Through informal conversations and conversations with scholars and community activists, we began to understand the connection between the absence of a formal Black Puerto-Rican civil rights movement and why it is thus difficult to have discussions about race on the island.

Nataka's Journal: *We also talked about Puerto Rico and their understanding of diaspora issues. She said there is not much recognition of the relationship with other diaspora people*

*possibly because there has never been a Black movement in Puerto-Rico...also by not having this movement...there has been less recognition that they are Black or at least that there is more than just Africa being the "third" root. I feel that I have more understanding of the many ways in which government /political/ macro-level ethos can impact identity. What has been nice however is that there seems to be a small movement of people who want there to be more acknowledgement and acceptance of their African ancestry and ties to the larger diaspora...and through this will racism begin to decrease.*

#### *Theme Three: Tension Points in Loíza: Resiliency, Resistance and Social Exclusion*

There are areas across the island that many Puerto Ricans identified as "dangerous" or "bad places" to go. Interestingly, Loíza, one of the towns with a rich Black history, is one of those areas where many Puerto Ricans who do not identify as Black do not feel safe to visit. The residents in Loíza share resiliency factors that make them stronger as a community. *Loizeños* have emphasized survival and passing down of their culture as a form of activism and advocacy. Throughout their history, they have focused on the importance of belonging to a strong community and passing down their resiliencies to younger generations. The culture, traditions, and community values have promoted this resiliency. However, there are tension points that exist as people in Loíza are not fully protected from the negative stereotypes that exist about their community and its impact on their identity and well-being. Although residents in Loíza are aware of how often they are marginalized in Puerto Rican society due to their African ancestry, there is a resistance to talk with others about their discriminatory experiences. The following reflective quotes highlight these aforementioned themes.

Nataka's Journal: *OK, so today we went to Loíza. It was interesting because people said Loíza is a bad place to go. I was initially hesitant that we were going without a guide but when we pulled into the community I initially just saw raw beauty, the vegetation, the extensive beach. As we drove along I kept asking Rebecca how far we were because it made me realize how excluded Loíza is from other municipalities. Anyhow, as we got closer I noticed that parts of Loíza were surrounded by water, which means before the bridge and roads the community was even more so isolated. I began to wonder if Loíza was a place where people who were enslaved escaped as it seemed difficult to penetrate it if thinking about it from over 150 years ago... We then went to the public library in Loíza. It was small but I was amazed at what the library with its resources was able to accomplish. The library was used as a hub to educate the community on their African history and to be empowered. While in the library I heard a lot about resiliency in talking about the elders and how they have passed on information of resistance (i.e food, family, dance, music and religion) and pride in that but in an age where documentation means truth. And since many people are not publishing their story in Loíza, passing down of history it is at risk of being lost. I liked how one of the people we engaged in a conversation at the library talked of the Day of Patrons as the whole community comes out to celebrate together and at times how they mocked their oppressor but in the end they survived.*

Rebecca's Journal: *I had fears and biases before visiting Loíza. I was so sad that it took me to leave my country to really be interested and appreciate my African heritage since I never visited Loíza before. I am ashamed of myself. It resulted in that this place surprised me: it was the contrary of everything I had imagined. In addition, after visiting the Cave, I had a feeling of something; like something has had happened there in the past. You can feel it.*

*This cave was a place for slaves to hide and find refuge.*

Paola's Journal: *The first thing I noticed was the friendliness and warmth of the Loizeños and how many elders there were around the city. They might have been abandoned by our society, but it definitely preserved their history and the value of age. Our first stop of the day was in "El Centro Cultural de Loíza" where we met the nicest ladies who explained their festivities and the meaning behind their saints. They seem invested in promoting their town. However, when we asked about the elements of "Santería" in their traditional festivities they totally dismissed our questions; until I asked a lady if she felt that Loíza was segregated and then she answered me and said yes. She didn't hesitate and I don't blame her because that's the way I felt about it too. From there they sent us to the library, I never thought I would learn so much from the library and I'm not talking about the books but the actual people we were able to talk to in the library. We came to the library and we didn't even have to ask many questions because this man was an open book about Loíza. He had so much passion in his eyes and his words, but he also spoke a truth that for a second felt hard to swallow. I had never seen segregation before on my island until that day, and when he started explaining how that happened, I could not stop thinking how much I wanted to cry. I almost did, I almost cried but not because Loíza didn't have resilience, but because we pushed them away. They have wonderful resources and touristic areas like "Cueva Maria de la Cruz" a beautiful cave in the middle of Loíza. The person who shared so much with us said that Loíza was pushed away from the main routes after the bridge was built. He also said "We have so many culture, beautiful people but modern developments just seemed to skip us." When he said that, my heart just sank, and a tear actually came down my face because I could feel the pain in his voice, and the anger as well. I felt sad and angry because it was clear to me then that Loíza was segregated.*

*What's ironic is that the part of the island that had a larger Black population was the most discriminated and full of stereotypes. He also said we have so much to give, so many traditions, culture, beautiful people, and beaches. So much to give but they were left behind, and this is the reason why there is so much poverty in Loíza. Unemployment tripled in Loíza making some of the residents resort to underground business. We asked him why he thought Afro Puerto Ricans didn't fight for their rights. He answered that when we don't know about our roots, we reject them, and sometimes we even demonize them to walk away from them. In that moment I remember the professor from the talk yesterday and how she said that we have learned to push our African heritage and our Blackness away. Loíza is a huge example of that, we push Blackness so far from us that we pushed them into a small space of and forget that they as Black Puerto-Ricans have rights and a lot to give. Before going back to the conference we stop by "Cueva Maria de la Cruz", a beautiful cave that felt peaceful and with lots of history to offer. There we received information about the meaning that this cave had for our indigenous ancestors and for the African slaves during colonization. It was a safe haven for many of our ancestors and without Loíza, perhaps, the essence of who we are as Puerto-Ricans will have being lost forever.*

*Theme Four: Re-examining African Ancestry for the Puerto-Rican Authors*

One theme that surfaced during the review of this project was that there was an increase understanding of Blackness in Puerto Rico amongst the contributors. They journaled throughout their cultural identity shift and reactions. Readers are able to envision the process of re-examining of Blackness with the experiences of Puerto Rican women and can see how they grow to comprehend their own Blackness. At times, the contributors demonstrated guilt, shame, and confusion about their African ties in their beloved three

race culture. Puzzled by some discoveries and encounters, the researchers documented their internal processes with vulnerability.

It should be recognized that these Puerto Rican identifying women conducted this analysis and processed their findings with a Black identifying woman. It would be interesting to see how results would vary if the lead researcher was not a Black woman. Nonetheless, the contributors provide rich content that showcases the clash of courage, acceptance, guilt and resistance to Blackness in Puerto Rico. These journal entries are untouched and heartfelt depictions of a complex experience to unlearn anti-Blackness and shift to appreciation of African roots. The following journal entries demonstrate these encounter:

Rebecca's Journal: *We have thought Africa contributes to my culture in art, food, and music. However, I've never thought about how it contributes to my identity, racism, politics, and "slaving" others. My personal experience as a light-skinned woman in the United States on this trip has made me rethink what it means to be Black and have African heritage. How can I fully understand what being Black means as a light-skinned Puerto Rican? Can I connect with my African roots and feel part of the African diaspora being half Cuban with White Spanish father and grandparents? Does this mean I am White? How do I make sense of this?*

Paola's Journal: *I really wanted to ask if it was difficult for Puerto-Ricans to define or explain the term race in a place like Puerto Rico since we consider ourselves mixed or the three races. I thought my question was coming from attending the conference that day as I heard so many people comfortably talking about race issues. However, this question came more from me and my need to understand myself. I even remember growing up, and never touching on those subjects. It wasn't until I moved to Chicago that I learned about race issues and racism, especially against Black people. So I*

*was surprised to confirm that for us it wasn't difficult to talk about race but it was difficult to talk about Blackness in the island. This explained why we put it on the back corner and never acknowledge issues of Blackness in Puerto Rico. On my way home I couldn't believe the day we had. I saw discrimination and racism with my own eyes. I saw it here in a place I always believed was filled with no racism. In a place, I consider was innocent to color differences and that respected and valued the power of differences. I discover that as Puerto-Ricans we are so use to the fantasy of diversity that we do not see that, for some, diversity is unrealistic; especially when you can't even acknowledge the basic rights of others. Tomorrow is our last day and I wonder what I feel when this adventure is over because I have learned so much that I'm pretty sure I'm a different person.*

**Paola's Journal:** *After that we saw the African roots exhibition, it was hard to see the way they were slaved and the awful treatment they were given. The rape, the killing, the agony, and the Transatlantic meant so much hurt. All of this hurt but they were heroes because even with all the hate against them they found a way to be resilient. Their humanity was striped from them, but they rebelled in creative ways like their music and dance. The "bomba" is not only a dance but a creative way to reaffirm our African roots and for the slaves it was a form of resistance...The whole way home I could not stop thinking about this day and it was incredible to discover my own ignorance; how I could be so blind?, how could I talk about changing the world if I didn't even know what laid on my own backyard? I truly discover that I didn't know anything about my African heritage and that in my own white Puerto-Rican privilege I didn't do anything to change that.*

**Paola's Journal:** *Hearing her, I discovered why my grandma always told me to have my hair straight even when I love my curls. It's amazing to hear her own understanding of her*

*hair, as well as her African heritage and how that challenges my own beliefs about what hair is beautiful. Actually, analyzing it, should exist a type of beautiful hair?*

One unexpected contribution to this exploration is that the additional contributors experienced their own course of cultural identity reclamation. Contributors Julissa and Tiana, who both share Puerto Rican ancestry, contributed in writing and editing to this project but did not join the team on the visit to the island. Interestingly, with their efforts they both experienced a more inclusive development of Puerto Rican cultural identity and recognition of Blackness. With the translation of Dr. Moore, Paolo and Rebecca's experience, Julissa and Tiana faced their own cultural reclamation and documented their findings.

**Julissa's Journal:** *Writing this paper has challenged me to reflect on how my racial heritage has influenced multiple experiences throughout my life. Childhood memories aroused as I read some articles for the literature review and engaged in discussion with my colleagues. As a daughter of a light-skin Dominican mother and Puerto Rican father, I always heard implicit and explicit messages about my skin color and *blancamiento*. I remember feeling very confused by my skin color because I do not fall within any side of the spectrum (White or Black) but more so in the middle. I was always called "trigueñita" or "colorá" which means my skin has red pigmentation [?]"Don't exposed yourself so much to the sun because you are going to turn "negrita" [darker]! This is an example of some of the messages I was exposed to since an early stage in my life. As an innate curious person I remember asking myself "What's wrong with being darker?" It was not until I moved from Puerto Rico to the mainland to attend graduate school that I started learning and discussing topics related to race and racism in a deeper level.*

*As Puerto Rican and Caribeña who considers herself an advocate for racial equity, I have had to allow myself to grieve the multiple losses around racism and the history of slavery: (1) letting go of the internalized narrative of the White colonizer being the “savior” through relearning Puerto Rico’s and the Caribbean’s history; (2) the fact that are limited spaces where discussions about race and racism can be talked about in Puerto Rico without people feeling the need to defend the whitening narrative (3) the fact that we (Puerto Ricans) are still colonized by Americans and the main narrative is still the romanization of the three races. Reflecting on my racial heritage has also strengthened my own identity which has helped me to navigate spaces where people and/or systems try to limit my identity.*

Tiana’s Journal: *I quickly realized that this role of contributor would have a lasting impact on myself when I had my own personal revelations towards my cultural identity. My father is Mexican and my mother is Puerto Rican. My parents selected a more affluent neighborhood to raise my sister and I without the full understanding that geography would play a role in our culture formation. My cultural identity did not flourish until undergraduate school when I engulfed myself in Latin American studies, Spanish language courses, and engaged in discussions with family members about our histories. Interestingly, through this discovery period there was an absence of African roots in these explorations.*

*With this manuscript, I soon realized that I have abandoned a part of my own cultural narrative. I had general awareness of African roots in Puerto Rico and Mexico but during this I felt an enormous amount of shame and guilt. I was ashamed that I have neglected my ancestors of African descent. I felt guilty about my lack of appreciation of African influence to our culture. Additionally, I felt sadness and anger that Black Puerto Ricans who have fought so long for recognition have seldom received respect and honored as their non-Black counterparts.*

*I had many reactions while reading the experiences of my peers. I had the privilege to process my reactions with the first author, Dr. Moore, and it served me tremendously, but it was not a seamless process. Often Dr. Moore challenged my schemas of my African roots and we wrestled with my resistance. Dr. Moore asked me to think about my African ancestors, think about them in the room with you right now, what would you say to them or what would you do. Later, after this exercise she stated, “your African ancestors matter”. It was then when things shifted for me because they do matter. Working on this paper while in the midst of continued racial injustices towards Black people in America provoked emotions and allowed me to further investigate ways to improve advocacy and social justice work.*

It is evident that between all contributors, there is a lasting impact by either participating with the island visit or writing about Blackness in Puerto Rico. This theme showcases the challenges that Puerto Rican women have when they challenged with their African ancestry. The women in this article have wrestled with memories of childhood, oral traditions of ancestry, historical evidence, and live observations towards Blackness on the island. It is commendable of all contributors to be vulnerable and willing to participate in this experience. Additionally, these four themes supported by personal recollections provides narrative evidence that contributes to the challenges of unlearning anti-Blackness in the lands that have thrived because of the Transatlantic slave trade.

### **Discussion**

In researching this topic, analyzing the data and in writing the paper, we collectively as a result of this project feel a higher sense of connectedness to our African roots. For the first author, this paper aided in her continual work of expanding beyond her African American identity to be able to integrate her place in the greater African transatlantic

diaspora. For the four authors of Puerto-Rican descent this project helped to increase a more complete identity; to not just say that they are the three races but to more completely identify with their African ancestry. For the four Puerto Rican authors it felt before this paper that there was something missing in their ability to articulate the difficulty of discussing racism in Puerto-Rico and the United States. In our roundtable discussions, the four Puerto-Rican authors discussed that through heightened awareness and self-reflections, they felt a sense of increased competency in navigating the racial dynamics in the United States, particularly as it pertains to Black lives and other marginalized groups without fuller explanation needed. In addition, this project has transformed the three authors' experience in Puerto-Rico of the racial dynamics through their ability to recognize at a deeper level what the racial issues are and ways that Puerto Rico can heal and move forward as a society. In our discussions, we also discussed that a limitation of this paper is not having a person who identifies as Black Puerto-Rican as an author and how this would have added greatly to the roundtable discussions and findings.

In addition, we recognize that there may be tension points that exist for Puerto-Ricans to fully accept their African heritage. In Puerto Rico we found that many people connect to their African roots as expressed through art and music that is deeply embedded in the larger Puerto-Rican culture. This is seen as a possible facilitator to well-being for Black Puerto-Ricans as it can help speak their truth of their experiences with anti-Blackness, describe their resiliencies and take pride in their cultural identity. However, as a barrier to overall well-being and a tension point, there is also deep silence in discussing racism and its impact on Black Puerto-Ricans. In addition, there is difficulty in dialoguing or articulating what does belonging (a bi-directional concept) to

Blackness mean in Puerto Rico. The tension points may help to address possible disparities that exist due to institutionalized and interpersonal forms of racism.

One outcome of this is that there is a dearth in the literature that reviews racial health disparities and prevention/intervention methods in Puerto Rico because of the notion that racism does not exist in Puerto Rico. Another tension point is that many Afro-Puerto Ricans may feel a belonging to national unity which can increase well-being, but that same macro-level society may ignore that darker skinned or black identified Puerto Ricans have different racialized experiences, which can impact well-being. We also found through Loíza that community, traditions, respect for the elders, and the passing down of stories of resistance have been an incredible source of resiliency and pride for many Black Puerto-Ricans of that community. Loíza as a community has provided a strong psychological sense of community and safety for its residents. However, Black Puerto-Ricans in Loíza are not immune to the racist attitude of larger Puerto Rico toward their community. Thus, we acknowledge that there are facilitators and barriers to health and well being for Black Puerto Ricans.

It is our goal with this paper to start a dialogue as a means to open up spaces and opportunities to engage in this difficult conversation. It is the authors' hope that this paper can spark conversations and strategies to address the historical and contemporary impact of how Blackness is socially constructed in Puerto Rican society.

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