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Citizen in the Colony: An Americanish Reading

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Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection on the possibilities of broaching race, racism, and Whiteness in Puerto Rico in the college classroom. It does so by briefly recounting class discussion of poet Claudia Rankine's critically acclaimed book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which focuses on the quotidian manifestations of anti-Black prejudice and violence in the United States. By telling of and commenting on the difficulties in sustaining a sincere dialogue on Whiteness as part and parcel of institutionalized racism on the Island, the article sheds light on the unsettled character of these conversations.

Keywords: Puerto Rico; Whiteness; Racism; Microaggressions; Claudia Rankine

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The Colony

In his review of the documentary film *Dear White People*, U.S.-based Puerto Rican intellectual Ed Morales (2014) posed the following challenge to fellow intellectuals and academics on the Island: “It would be interesting to see who dares to make a version of *Dear White People* in ... Puerto Rico? What would the complaints regarding [racial] microaggressions be? Would they be like those in the U.S.? Which ones would be more painful to contemplate?” (my translation). With microaggressions, Morales was referring to the wide array of quotidian comments and prejudicial acts directed at Afro-Puerto Rican people that denote severe contempt for Blackness and that occur regularly on the Island with impunity (Giovanetti, 2016). The concept of microaggressions, as it has been developed within the American sociopolitical context, has proven to be a valuable contribution to contemporary studies of race and racism insofar as it sheds light on the ways in which anti-Black prejudice continues to reinvent itself and spread in a supposedly post racial (or pre-Trump) America (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), where more blatant instances of discrimination are increasingly reproached and/or censored (Pierce, 1978). Morales’s challenge then is an invitation to apply the concept within the Puerto Rican context to uncover racism’s pernicious effects in a society founded on the myth of *mestizaje* (race mixing), where racial discrimination is not supposed to be prevalent.

Though certainly well intentioned, Morales’s challenge is misguided. Historically, racism in Puerto Rico has been thought of as an exclusively interpersonal phenomenon (Aranda, 2007). As such, public debate and theorizing on the subject have mainly focused on individuals’

thoughts and feelings regarding race—how these come to be adopted, believed in, and communicated across generations through social learning (Santos-Febres, 2005). And while studies have considered the way race is constructed through talk across public and private arenas (Falú Merino, 2004; Rivero, 2005), few have broached the possibility of discovering larger structural patterns that extend far beyond whatever individual actors might say or do (Godreau, 2015). In this sense, the head and the heart are still considered to be the preeminent loci of Puerto Rican racism, which manifests itself in “unfortunate,” isolated incidents that Black islanders suffer on a regular basis, but that taken together do not amount to a “race problem” on the Island (Blanco, 1985). This is attributed in the literature to the historical conflation in Puerto Rico, and in other Latin American countries, of race with other social markers such as class status, national origin, and spatial dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Dinzey-Flores, 2013). Moreover, race is not thought of as simply one of the factors affecting people’s quality of life, but it is widely considered to be the least influential factor, inasmuch as Puerto Rico is thought of as a racial democracy (Arroyo-Martinez, 2014), where a person’s color does not really matter. Thus, to bring up race in a conversation regarding poverty, for example, is perceived on the one hand as forcing an issue (or avoiding the *real* issue), and on the other, as a symptom of colonialism insofar as one would be taking American ideologies and carelessly applying them to social life on the Island (Rebollo-Gil, 2005).

Furthermore, those texts that do seek to shed light on the more structural aspects of racial discrimination tend to focus on the social construction of Blackness and its real-life effects on Afro-Puerto Ricans (Ríos González, 2005; Rivero, 2005; Zenón,

1975). While this focus has certainly contributed important studies on the workings of discrimination in education, employment, policing, and the media, among other areas, it has also led to the problematic equation of race with Blackness, and of racism studies with studies of Black history, culture, and people. Thus, racial discrimination is commonly understood as a Black issue to be attended to by Afro-Puerto Rican scholars and activists and in no way a larger political problem requiring national attention. A direct consequence of this equation is that racism—contrary to gender discrimination and LGBTTQ rights, for example—has not appeared in any elected officials' agenda nor are politicians ever faced with questions regarding racial equality, even when official reports show severe racial disparities in crucial areas such as policing and corrections (Muñoz & Alegría, 1999). This absence becomes even more worrisome considering the past two U.S. census results where upwards of 75.8% and 80.5% of the island population identified themselves as White (Elnuevodia.com, 2011). These results have in turn helped to further cement common sense notions regarding the supposed irrelevance of race in Puerto Rico, which can be articulated as follows: How can racism be a problem if there are so few Black people?

From this perspective, racial microaggressions occur in a micro context that pales in comparison to the more extensive spaces and aspects of social life where gender, sexuality, and class disparities operate. Thus, the present “conditions of possibility”—to borrow a term from Alain Badiou (2006, p. 102)—for racism on the Island become unlimited, as a history supposedly free of systemic racial discrimination is coupled with a small and ever-decreasing Black population. This

makes its manifestations (all thought to be micro) the exclusive province of a select group of people: Black victims and White aggressors. The former is simply expected to deal with it and move on, while the latter somehow evade both thought and fault.

As it pertains to thought and fault, in the featured plenary of the 2007 Puerto Rican Studies Association conference held at Cornell University, historian Luis Figueroa-Martinez's (2007) opening remarks were as follows: “[T]he problem of racism in Puerto Rico is the problem of White supremacy.” From there he proceeded to argue that it was necessary for activists and academics to shift the focus of studies of race and racism from Blackness to Whiteness, and recognize that racism, as a project, is intent on potentiating a social context where White supremacy permeates all aspects of our collective life. The opposition was immediate and visceral. And it geared mainly around the allegedly ludicrous notion that there was such a thing as a Puerto Rican White subject. Figueroa Martinez was thus accused of carelessly attempting to impose the American racial construct of Whiteness—understood here as a set of power relations that assign cultural, symbolic, and material capital to White individuals across generations (Feagin & Vera, 1999) to a sociocultural context where White privilege finds no clearly identifiable manifestation outside of the most elite circles.

In defense of carelessness, and following Figueroa Martinez, I would argue here that the most significant and insidious manifestation of White supremacy on the Island is the easy deniability of White privilege inasmuch as Whiteness has benefitted from its historical conflation with the Puerto Rican national identity (Godreau, 2015). Whereas race signifies Blackness on

the Island, most everything “Puerto Rican” refers to European heritage and the supposed values of Spanish colonialism, which encompass a wide array of attributes ranging from cultural rites and practices, work ethic, morality, political agency, linguistic turns, and—yes—skin color (Dinzey-Flores, 2013). Thus, while the White subject is embedded in a complex network of privileges and benefits that allow him/her to accumulate symbolic, social, and material capital through informal channels mediated by race, the founding myth of *mestizaje* (race mixing) enables this subject to participate in the exchange of such privileges without the inconvenience of having to explain or justify them within a framework of inequality by race. And it is precisely this crucial element that has been lacking in critical studies of race and racism on the Island.

For this analysis, we must turn to more recent autobiographical and/or autoethnographic accounts penned by self-identified White Puerto Ricans that engage these issues in more literary or journalistic writing. Harry Franqui-Rivera (2014), for example, in an incisive article written after the 2014 police killing of African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, broaches racism on the Island as a problem of White privilege. Franqui-Rivera writes:

I'm Puerto Rican. This may startle you. But, since I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, I enjoyed white privilege. My family, for all intents and purposes, socioeconomic and culturally, was a Caribbean mulatto one—though many of my siblings may disagree (we roll like that in the Caribbean). ... The German name my parents gave me, and our Corsican last name inherited from a landowner some in my family still call

abuelo helped me claim white privilege. But it was my very light skin, freckles and copper hair (a trait from that abuelo I never met) that closed the deal. My relatives, neighbors, teachers and even the cops presumed me a good boy, smarter and more handsome than my relatives and peers, and destined to have a bright future because of my complexion, which made me white in el barrio.

While Franqui-Rivera's personal account of White privilege as lived experience reads very like the critical self-writing readers have become accustomed to within Whiteness studies in the United States, it has no discernible precedent in Puerto Rico. In this regard, I propose that the author's will to position himself in relation to the assassination of Michael Brown in terms of racial privilege opens a discursive window to inquire about the ways in which White subjectivities are formed on the Island. It is a self-identification that needs to be considered, following Figueroa Martinez, as a function of White supremacy on the Island. Only then would the census results garner social and political meaning. Only then could we make sense of a supposedly colorblind social order that produces race-specific results in inhabitants' quality of life. Only then could we understand the impunity with which countless racial microaggressions are committed on a regular basis.

Thus, to return to Morales, the real challenge as it relates to critical race studies on the Island is not simply to make the inventory of these microaggressions, but rather to understand and portray them as distinct manifestations of a larger social structure of White supremacy that is not supposed to exist.

The Text

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) offers a poetic and critical depiction of anti-Black racism as lived experience in the United States, mapping interactions between White and Black Americans across social spaces. It opens with the author's personal inventory of the microaggressions that she, a Black poet and college professor, is regularly subjected to within the relatively privileged (and White-dominated) locations of university cafeterias, coffee shops, tennis lessons, and upper-middle-class neighborhoods. It also offers intriguing readings of African American celebrities like Serena Williams and ends with a series of obituaries (as denouncements) for Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and other victims of racist police violence in the United States and Europe.

I included it as required reading for my Writing About Literature course in the University of Puerto Rico's English Department in the Spring of 2015.ⁱ The class was composed of 24 undergraduate students, all Island residents. The following is a brief account of our class discussion.

The Reading

Appetite won't attach to anything no matter how depleted you feel. — Claudia Rankine (2014, p. 79)

Food, we say, making it up as we chew. Yesterday we explained language. — Amiri Baraka (Baraka & Vangelesti, 2015, p. 408)

Our class discussion of *Citizen* was bookended by conversations regarding Juliana Spahr's (2005) poetry book *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and

David Lipsky's (2010) memoir *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. In discussing Spahr's work, we considered the way other people's pain, when consumed at a distance through mainstream media outlets, allows for a poetics of human belonging that is disconcerting, intellectual (read "artificial") and paradoxically, inspiring regarding literature, ethics, and politics. When discussing Lipsky's account of the days he spent with the novelist Foster Wallace in 1996, we talked about the ethical relationship between readers and writers, and about the possibilities of offering more than a cynical reading of contemporary sociopolitical issues. It is important to note here that neither Spahr's nor Lipsky's work, while prompting us to assume an ethical/political position regarding others (readers, war victims), required us to position ourselves regarding race. Rankine's (2014) text, on the other hand, demands just this sort of positioning from the reader:

You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person. (p. 5)

My lesson plan was to ask students to read into Rankine's powerful reflections on the more quotidian manifestations of anti-Black racism in the United States precise and urgent prompts for an earnest consideration of racism on the Island. To do so, I geared our initial discussion session around the author's stated interlocutor ("you") and asked students whether they felt addressed by her. Responses were hesitant, noncommittal. The "you," the class eventually conceded, was a stand in for the

“I” and was therefore, Black. And while a handful of students who had visited the United States could relate with the “feeling of being stereotyped” because of their Spanish accent or their Spanish surnames, the consensus was that the book wasn’t “meant for them,” especially when they felt guilty of several of the gestures and comments Rankine denounced as racist in the text. I then asked if to acknowledge such a responsibility meant positioning oneself as White and, if so, did Whiteness mean the same thing on the Island as in the States. Responses took the form of evasion by means of explanation. For example, rather than positioning themselves as White, a few students argued on behalf of the “unstable” and/or “messy” character of racial categories in Puerto Rico. They pointed to the culturally accepted notions of racial hybridity—whereby nobody could claim racial purity on either end of the White-Black spectrum. As such, no White people really existed in Puerto Rico. When I countered with the census results referenced above, a student suggested that the census was just another example of American colonialism, which sought to impose categories that had no real social significance on the Island. According to the student, what the census results *did* exhibit was a stated desire in the Island population to see itself as part of U.S. society. I conceded the point, but then asked whether we should consider significant that the desire to belong to U.S. society is channeled by an affirmation of White identity. The student reacted with irritation at my insistence on “wanting to see a color problem on the Island.”

After this exchange, responses were even harder to come by. I thus sought my own exit from the conversation by way of a return to the text. I read the following aloud: “How difficult is it for one body to feel the

injustice wielded at another?” (Rankine, 2014, p. 116). It is a question we had raised when discussing Spahr’s work and had handled, I reminded them, much more fluidly. “Is it because the other in Spahr remains unraced?” I asked to a silent room. “Is it that Rankine does not let us get away with thinking of the self and the other without first dealing with whatever race might mean in Puerto Rico?” More silence.

Playing off Rankine’s and Baraka’s verses, quoted above, the problem with talking about race and racism—and about Whiteness specifically—in Puerto Rico is that [language] won’t attach to anything [race related] no matter how [urgent] you feel [the issue is]. Words suddenly feel depleted of meaning, making any explanation impossible—that is, if one is interested in portraying racism on the Island as historical and systemic.

Taking this into consideration, the two main questions I posed to the class in our follow up meeting were (1) could the quotidian acts of discrimination the speaker was subjected to in Rankine’s text find resonance in the routine interactions that take place on the Island and, if so, (2) inasmuch as Rankine offered these instances as part and parcel of a larger racist system, couldn’t we then speculate as to the existence of a similar racist structure in place in Puerto Rico.

While students responded to the initial question with an overwhelming affirmation, they seemed hesitant to seriously consider a larger, structural racist dynamic at work on the Island. To have done so would have meant examining, for example, Puerto Rico’s well-documented history of police brutality (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012) through a racial lens; particularly, in the aftermath of the police

killing of Michael Brown. Regarding the violent deaths of young Black men and women at the hands of White police officers in the States, Rankine lists their names. I asked the class if it would be possible to make such a list; to regard the Puerto Rico Police Department as a racist institution. I had posed this question, feeling confident that the killing of Michael Brown—which had been discussed previously in the semester—as a blatant incident of racist violence was a view shared by the class. However, my attempt to “jump” from that event into a discussion of racist policing and racially motivated violence in Puerto Rico was stopped at the start by students who questioned the alleged racist intent behind the shooting. They argued that “the whole racial angle” was introduced by the media. It is important to note that this opposition did not arise when Brown’s murder was considered and discussed within a strictly delineated U.S. context. Thus, suddenly an attempt to make Brown’s death relevant to social dynamics on the Island prompted a reevaluation of the event itself. There still was no question of the tragic nature of the event; of the inherent wrongness of a life cut short. But racialized readings now became suspect; irrelevant to any serious discussion.

A shift and refusal strategy became evident: Resistance to a sincere discussion of the prevalence of racism on the Island will even go so far as to negate racism in the United States, widely considered in Puerto Rico as an inherently racist society (Rebollo-Gil, 2005). Consequently, the list I was proposing was ludicrous. To look for Black victims of racialized police violence in Puerto Rico was to risk denying racist policing as a social phenomenon on the Island and elsewhere. Class ended awkwardly. Racism, I said, repeatedly, making it up as I spoke. But language didn’t attach to anything.

This, however, did not impede a pattern from becoming noticeable. When considering the two class sessions we devoted to Rankine’s book, students’ hesitance to speak about Whiteness on the Island during our initial meeting finds correspondence in the hesitance to speak about Island racism as systemic in our subsequent session. Individual instances of racism—wherever they may occur—can be considered critically in the classroom because the possibility is always there for any one person—wherever on the color spectrum they may fall—to harbor negative, discriminatory views about a raced other. But to speak of a system, perhaps, means viewing the White-Black spectrum in Puerto Rico not as a messier—and therefore more liberatory—space given to us by the culture, but rather as part and parcel of the conditions that make racism possible on the Island. Concomitantly, to speak of Whiteness means to speak about an individual and group investment in that system. And, to be invested means that one can be addressed regarding the issue. Or, more precisely, as it pertains to *Citizen*, one can be implicated in a series of acts of discrimination precisely because the author chooses not to address “you” directly. But rather makes “you,” as a White reader, feel present in the text only to the extent to which “you” share the discriminatory views denounced by the author.

The Critique

A critique of my method is now in order. In their introduction to their edited volume *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine (2015, p. 19) write: “Racism often does its ugly work by not manifesting itself clearly and indisputably, and by undermining one’s own ability to feel certain of exactly what forces are in

play.” Following Loffreda and Rankine, I would say that my pedagogical strategy was faulty insofar as it presumed the certainty of consensus regarding a racialized reading of Michael Brown’s murder as the touchstone for a critical conversation into the hushed workings of racism in Puerto Rico. I proceeded as if readings of racist instances do not shift and change even during short time spans and among the same interlocutors, depending on how each dialogue is structured and for what purpose. Conversations on racism, across varying settings and contexts, are never really settled. Rather, they are *survived*. Meaning, a trace of whatever was said (“concluded,” “agreed upon”), remains in the collective memory. But the group, for better or worse, has moved on; each member having taken away bits of the dialogue that with all likelihood will be reconfigured, harmoniously or not, in the conversations to come. Thus, there is no such thing as *explaining* racism in a classroom, if by “explain” one means to get students to arrive at a set of new, different certainties regarding the lived consequences of race in Puerto Rico, or elsewhere. On this point, and reflecting on the possibilities of engaging students in discussions on racial and sexual violence post-Ferguson, Sarah Jane Cervenak (2015) writes:

I wonder then if the classroom can be a place for an ethical engagement with the explanatory as well as an ethical refusal to give it all the room. To not be entirely filled up with what needs to be talked about and dismantled, even if that might be part of the reason why we’re there in the first place. So, while the classroom moves within a teleological logic and bursts out of that telos to name, discuss, criticize, teach about, learn about, and undermine the institutional moorings of racial and sexual violence, it could do

some other kind of nonteleological work. That is, it can also make room for sitting with silence, the refused-to-be-explained features of black, trans and poor grief. (p. 225)

What is particularly daunting in Cervenak’s proposal when it comes to broaching Puerto Rican racism in college classrooms on the Island concerns the silence she asks us to make room for and sit with. In a sociocultural context where silence on matters of race is one of racism’s most pervasive and pernicious manifestations, it is difficult to regard silence in the classroom as anything other than our inability to attach language to the uncertainties that may arise within and amongst ourselves when we come together to talk about it. This silence is unsettling. The question, following Cervenak, is if one could also regard it as unsettled—meaning, as harboring potentialities for bursts of speech, unimaginable by us yet and completely made up. To again quote Rankine (2014): “Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—/ To know what you’ll sound like is worth noting” (p. 69). Rankine, in her text, often sounds depleted. It’s part of racism’s intended effect. I mentioned it to my class, towards the end of our discussion. We kind of looked like she sounded.

¹ The University of Puerto Rico is the only state-funded institution for higher education on the Island.

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