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Miriam Jiménez Román

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Allá y Acá: Locating Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora(s)

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
ALLÁ Y ACÁ: LOCATING PUERTORICANS IN THE DIASPORA(S)
Yo soy Nuyorican.  
Así es—vengo de allá.

Soy producto de la migración puertorriqueña, miembro de la otra mitad de la nación. Lo digo con orgullo, conciente de que para muchos es una condición desgraciada. Para muchos no hay que hablar de "diáspora" de ningún tipo—y mucho menos de sus implicaciones.

Puerto Ricans and so-called Nuyoricans will understand the import of this seemingly simple statement of otherness. Many will reject it as an inappropriate identifier, viewing it as an admission of lesser status, of authenticity, of illegitimacy and even, perhaps, as an act of betrayal. To proudly claim membership in that community of Puerto Ricans whose formative years have been lived in the United States—and worse yet, in the very pit of the imperialist monster’s belly—is still a rarity in the island, where an atmosphere of discomfort pervades the very subject of the diaspora. To be de allá would seem to represent only failure: beyond the island’s inability to provide a viable homeland for more than half of its people is the equally painful reality that the majority of the diaspora community lives in poverty, stigmatized as a racialized minority and expressing perspectives wrought from that experience. The struggles and achievements of Puerto Ricans in the United States make up a still largely unknown history; what prevails is a distorted notion of the consequences of those experiences, shrouded in the language of pathology and the belief that those experiences have been overwhelmingly negative and, by implication, possibly anti-Puerto Rican.

One of the very first lessons I learned when I followed my parents’ dream and took the \(\text{guagua aérea} \) back to the land of my birth was that to be de allá was akin to suffering from a social disability, a condition that los de acá believed I had best overcome por el bien de la nación, if not my own accommodation. That was in the 1970s, when Puerto Rico was being invaded by a seeming horde of return migrants, and the children of the diaspora were beginning to be perceived as a problem, one that taxed the island’s already scarce resources and presented perspectives that seemed antithetical to long-cherished ideas about Puerto Rican identity. Throughout my many years living and working in Puerto Rico there was rarely a reference to los de allá that wasn’t, on some level, derogatory, so that even compliments (“Hay, pero tu no parece ser de allá”) only reinforced this sense of undesirable otherness. The image of Nuyoricans as immoral, violent, dirty, lazy, welfare-dependent, drug-addicted felons was not restricted to the United States; to this day, both countries produce media images that depict state-side Puerto Ricans as overwhelmingly engaged in some type of objectionable behavior. Even by the most sympathetic of accounts, it’s assumed that living in the \(\text{entrarías del monstro} \) ruins Puerto Ricans, robs them of language and culture and leaves them susceptible to destructive influencias ajenas.

Certainly among the most disturbing of those influences for the island Puerto Ricans has been the Nuyorican apparent obsession with race and racism and, most particularly, their identification with African-Americans. This rejection of Nuyoricans and their ideas about race cannot simply be attributed to an affirmation of Puerto Rican nationalism as against the colonizing metropole because some ideas de allá have clearly met with higher degrees of receptivity on the island. For example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Power and feminist movements were both viewed with skepticism—if not outright rejection—by most of the island’s intellectual and political elite as “alien” notions, potentially divisive intrusions into Puerto Rican national life. Within a decade, however, and despite continued hostility from some sectors, the island boasted a number of feminist organizations, as well as the official endorsement of the Commonwealth government. At the Comisión Para los Asuntos de la Mujer, for example, programs and literature developed in the United States barely underwent any alteration in their transit(ion) to Puerto Rico, most merely translated into Spanish. Not only were these “foreign ideas” acceptable but so too was the format—neither message (middle-class feminism) nor messenger (in the main, white women) met with the easy dismissal affected against Nuyoricans who talked about race and racism. Nor were those Puerto Ricans de acá who espoused the new ideas about women’s place in society any more receptive to the new ideas about race than was the general population. Thus, in a meeting with the then director of the Comisión, during which I described my own research on race and racism in Puerto Rico, I was assured that “aquí eso no es un problema” and counseled as to the danger of imposing “las cosas de allá, acá.” Little wonder, then, that twenty-five years after Isabelo Zenón Cruz published his biting exposé on racism in Puerto Rico, there is still no official acknowledgment of its existence on the island; newspapers, magazines and the broadcast media continue to ask if racism exists, rather than affirming that it does, a tactic followed by the island’s Civil Rights Commission in its recently published booklet, “Somos racistas?”

Nor is it surprising that Black Puerto Rican women, so long ignored as women and as Blacks, have found themselves compelled to establish their own organization, La Unión de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas Negras, as a vehicle for fighting the silence, invisibility and racism that marks their participation en la gran familia puertorriqueña.

This reluctance to engage racism as anything other than an imported “Gringo” problem is consistent with the exceptionalist posture typical throughout Latin America, where the myth of racial democracy has continued to dominate national discourse despite well-documented evidence to the contrary. Puerto Rico, identifying as culturally “Hispanic,” has looked to an increasingly Europeanized Spain and to other Spanish-speaking countries, ignoring the neighboring Caribbean islands full of “negros de verdad,” and instead focusing on a Hispanoamérica ostensibly full of mestizos, indios and blancos—and just as reluctant to acknowledge its strong African roots. Puerto Rico as a “Latin” country exempts itself from racism even as it distances itself from its Blackness, identifying as “real” Blackness as somehow inconsistent with Hispanic history and culture. This view has found support in a long trail of academic and lay publications that insist on the relative racial harmony among Puerto Ricans, born of the mestizaje that characterizes its people.

In this scenario, Puerto Ricans, defined as neither Black nor white, arrive in the United States devoid of racial prejudice only to be accosted by it in their new home. Puerto Ricans are presumably taught racism allá and forced to choose between Black or white identity, to the detriment of their “true” cultural selves. This perspective, prevalent in the scholarship produced since the 1930s, is also expressed in the more recent literary writings of Puerto Ricans such as Judith Ortiz Cofer who claims that she
"was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl" in the United States. Years earlier, in the autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets*, the dark-skinned Piri Thomas anguishes over being "caught up between two sticks." Yet, it would be more accurate to say that Thomas and the others are actually stuck between the myth of racial democracy with its implicit preference for *mestizaje*, and the reality of African descent and racism. The choice, if there were, is not between Black and white but between the myth of race-free color blindness and the reality of white supremacy—*tanto acá como allá*.

Nuyoricans were "infected" with *las ideas de allá*. But the newer ideas found fertile ground in the practical experiences of Puerto Ricans at both destinations of the *guagua aérea*. The generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s saw what earlier migrants have seen from the beginning of the Latino presence in the United States. Since the turn of the century people such as Arturo Schomburg have confronted overt racism, but with its open acknowledgment they have also found the political space to fight against it. The shared experiences of racial discrimination and the concrete conditions flowing from it—deficient educational, health, and employment opportunities—confronted the more subtly phrased, but no less destructive ideology of racial democracy, learned from our parents and our community, and it became clear that something was off kilter. The very language of racism—"pelo bueno," "pelo malo," "Negro pero inteligente," etc., etc., etc.—which we heard in Spanish and English, left little doubt that the similarities between us were actually greater than the differences. The counter-hegemonic ideas that flowed from the Civil Rights movement affected all those in the United States who were racially subordinated—African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Native Americans, Asians, etc.—in the United States and throughout the world. Nuyoricans were particularly receptive to the new discourses that arose from these struggles because, located at the very bottom of the social and economic hierarchy of the City, they realized there was much to be gained and little to be lost in de-mystifying the role of race in our lives.

The effect of the US anticarist movement on Puerto Ricans *acá* has received less attention but there is ample evidence of those influences. It extends far beyond the short lived trendiness of the African-inspired dress and hairdos or the continuing fascination with the musical innovations that we know as "salsa" and its "cocolo" aficionados, or even the growing intellectual interest in identifying the African influences—or, at another level, foundations—of Puerto Rican culture. Less obvious, or at least less commented upon, is the effect of the educational life of Puerto Rico, where the astounding growth of post-secondary educational institutions on the island can be directly attributed to programs implemented under federally-mandated Affirmative Action guidelines. Inter-American University, Sagrado Corazón, and the countless technical colleges that opened their doors in the 1970s were able to develop precisely because Puerto Rican students *acá* qualified for federal assistance programs designed to help racialized minorities *allá*. By definition, all Puerto Ricans—*acá y allá*—met this racial criterion; even as Puerto Ricans, especially on the island, rejected the stigma of racialization, they still accepted—indeed, actively sought out—the benefits of this racialization. That so many of the beneficiaries—again, *acá y allá*—were often the children of the more economically privileged sectors of our various communities does not diminish the significance of those race-based reforms. How many of those in this room today, *de acá*, can deny that their education was made possible by the programs instituted as a result of the struggles *de los negros y nuyoricans de allá*? The very existence in Puerto Rico of a Commission on Civil Rights—like that of the *Comisión Para los Asuntos de la Mujer*—is a by-product of that Black movement of thirty years ago and of the role played by Puertorriqueños *de allá* in those struggles.

And yet Puerto Ricans continue to ignore this more recent history and depend instead on a distorted past that distinguishes them from African Americans, specifically, and Blacks, more generally. We find, then, that the African diaspora has received even less attention than the Puerto Rican diaspora. But the fact remains that over 95% of the diaspora from Africa ended up in Latin America and the Caribbean; South America received 50% of those enslaved Africans, and throughout the colonial period Black people represented majority populations in all the major cities of the Spanish territories. The material and social contributions of these millions of Africans and their descendants to the making of Nuestra América cannot be exaggerated. Nor should we relegate the African presence to a distant past—in myriad forms Africa infuses almost every cultural space of this hemisphere, whether directly or indirectly, whether acknowledged or ignored.

Africa lives on in Mexico's Costa Chica where we can point to people who "look" African, and wherever *mejicanos* play and dance to the son jarocho.

Africa lives among the Arawak-speaking Garifunas of Central America.

Africa lives in the *zamacueca*, the national dance of Peru.

Africa lives among Bolivia's Aymara-speaking Blacks, descendants of the Potosí miners who enriched the Spanish coffers during the earliest years of the colonial conquest.


And Africa, of course, lives in Puerto Rico—este pedacito de tierra which, proportionately, received 1000% times as many Africans as did the United States!
The growing recognition throughout Latin America of its profound African roots is much more than a rediscovery of the past but an attempt to understand our present and assure a more dignified future. It is not a rigid, stagnant Africa of 500 or 300 years ago, or of yesterday, but the product of the years lived allá y acá. We seek neither an Africa nor a Puerto Rico locked in the past—but one nourished by that past.

Whether or not we are identifiable carriers of the continent's genes, Africa is part of us—individually and as a nation. This is documented fact, an incontrovertible truth. Africa is as much a part of us as is our legacy of colonialism and racism. Y eso es así para los que estamos allá y para los que viven acá. Quinientos años después de la conquista de Borikén, y cien años después de la invasión yanqui de Puerto Rico—ambos atropelos racionalizados con argumentos racistas—hemos llegado a este momento histórico: al reconocimiento que Africa vive en nosotros, que formamos parte de esa diáspora, que ya no podemos hablar de allá y acá. De la misma manera que tenemos que aceptar a los Nuyoricanos como parte íntegra de la nación, también tenemos que reconocer nuestros lazos con Africa y todos sus descendientes. Más allá de ser un acto de solidaridad, es apreciar que es parte de lo que somos.

Certainly such a perspective would begin to counter the racism that continues to dominate so much of our identity discourse. Perhaps it might even open up the possibility of accepting, as part of that diaspora, those dominicanos who increasingly speak the language of acá y allá as they make their homes among us, here in Puerto Rico and there, in the U.S. Because the last two decades have exposed the hypocrisy of proclaiming the Dominican Republic as our hermana antillana while simultaneously rejecting that island's immigrants as "negros cafres." Why is that solidarity so much in rhetorical evidence and so absent in the practical matters of every day life? How do a colonized people who insist on their latinidad, mestizaje and racial tolerance dare to cast aspersions on a similarly oppressed nation with the same ideological constructs? When did Dominicans stop being antillanos? When did the culture that presumably unite us stop carrying any weight? Is this transformation attributable to the affects of the Mona Passage—something akin to the supernatural claims made about the Bermuda Triangle? Or is it simply that ellos—al igual que yo—son negros y son de allá?

Clearly there are differences among us—centuries of particular experiences have forged countless variations on similar themes. But acá y allá should not continue to carry the dismissive tone that we still hear voiced whenever the subject of race comes up. Perhaps we can take a cue from an understanding that mutual respect comes out of the practice of sharing and the recognition that our stories, our histories, are inextricably joined. It signals, as well, our growing awareness of Puerto Ricans as a Caribbean people and Puerto Rican history as but one more expression of the strength and creativity that has always characterized diasporic peoples. For all of us here today—Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Dominicans—are people of the diaspora, indeed of multiple, and multi-layered, diasporas. Todos en un momento y otro somos de acá y de allá.

NOTES

1. While the term “Nuyorican” is often used to encompass all Puerto Ricans who have lived their formative years in the United States, I am using it in its original sense, as specific to those raised in New York City. Of course, Puerto Ricans in Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, etc., may identify with much of what follows.

2. The two-volume work, Narciso descubre su trasero, Humacao, (Puerto Rico: Editorial Furidi, 1975), was self-published, suggesting the resistance on the part of Island publishers to critical discussion of racism in Puerto Rico; the book quickly sold out and remains out of print.

3. A representative article is “So, Are We Racists? A Conspiracy of Silence: Racism in Puerto Rico” by Eneid Routté Gómez (San Juan, Vol.IV, No.VIII, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1995). Similarly, a publication by the Comisión de Derechos Civiles de Puerto Rico, ¿Somos racistas?: Como podemos combatir el Racismo (sic), (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1997), assertively asks the question but only implies a response in the affirmative, suggesting a perceived need to be as non-confrontational as possible.

4. I refer to Spain’s recent inclusion in the European community after centuries of rejection ostensibly because of its location on the “wrong side” of the Pyrenees, i.e., its proximity to, and strong ties with, Africa.

5. The oft-cited work of Clara Rodriguez, for example, rests precisely on this belief in the distinctiveness of Puerto Rican racial dynamics, which is contrasted with the so-called bi-polar racial classification system of the U.S. More problematic is her assessment that “trigueños,” i.e., those who are neither Black nor white, are the true Puerto Rican culture bearers. See Puerto Ricans: Born in the USA, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.


8. As is the case in most of the hemisphere, there are no reliable figures on the descendant African population of Puerto Rico. The U.S. Census Bureau eliminated the racial classification category for Puerto Rico in 1950, upon determining that the results in previous censuses were largely useless: Puerto Rican rejection of Blackness meant that, given a choice, ever greater numbers opted to identify as “white” regardless of ancestry or actual phenotype. The 2000 census reinstated the racial category but the results will not be available for some years.

Note to Readers: This essay is a version of remarks which I made as a participant in the conference, “Race and the Construction of the (sic) Puerto Rican Identity: New Paradigms on Race, Identity and Power,” held in New York City (April 22-24, 1998) and San Juan, Puerto Rico (April 30, 1998). Organized by concerned scholars and activists in both cities, the conference was one of many activities held in the centennial year of the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico that attempted to assess the past and propose viable alternatives to continuing problems. Its primary objective was to initiate a dialogue that would lead to future projects addressing race and racism in various areas, including the media, education, community organizing, advocacy and research. The speech was made in San Juan before an overwhelmingly Puerto Rican audience, the majority of whom were raised in the U.S. Thus, allá, refers to the United States and acá is Puerto Rico. Though it refers specifically to the Puerto Rican experience, some of the issues discussed may well resonate among other diasporic “children,” that is, the notion of being “de allá” or “de acá” crosses ethnic boundaries.