



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

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Migrants in San Juan

Centro Journal, vol. XXIV, núm. 1, 2012, pp. 20-43

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

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Slipping and Sliding: The Many Meanings of Race in Life Histories of New York Puerto Rican Return Migrants in San Juan

EILEEN J. FINDLAY

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the workings of race and ethnicity in the life stories of fifteen New York-born Puerto Ricans who have lived in the San Juan metropolitan area for several decades. I argue that discussions of race and ethnicity played an important symbolic and structural role in these memory accounts. The narrators used such conversations to distinguish themselves from islander Puerto Ricans, to assert their legitimacy as true Puerto Ricans, and to critique the United States. These memories confirmed scholars' observations that Puerto Ricans have historically experienced a homogenizing, oppressive racialization upon emigration to the U.S. Finally, the narratives also expose multiple, changing, emotion-laden meanings of race, particularly of blackness. Ultimately, I argue that the meaning of race not only shifts according to the historical context, but that in narratives spun by New York Puerto Ricans, multiple interpretations of race can exist simultaneously. Thus, these narratives demonstrate that a single interpretive framework for analyzing race, even when carefully contextualized, can offer us only a partial understanding of the complex workings of race for Puerto Ricans. [Key words: New York, diaspora, return migration, race, memory, racialization]

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“Researchers should explore the discarded and overlooked areas manifested in the subtleties ... of utterances ... as well as in the archive of people’s bodies and patchwork memory(ies). It is in these archives that the stories of ‘the people’ are etched, stories too often missed or ignored by ‘official’ historical accounts.”

—LLORENS (2005)

IN RECENT YEARS, SCHOLARS HAVE BEGUN A RICH CONVERSATION ON THE ROLE OF RACE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF PUERTO RICANS AND THEIR MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES. They have delineated how Puerto Ricans in the U.S. not only struggle against poverty but have been persistently racialized, regardless of their phenotype, as inherently inferior to those ethnic groups deemed “fully white.” Puerto Ricans’ own racial diversity, which renders any claim to whiteness suspicious at best, their frequent resistance of the dominant U.S. white-black racial binary, their linguistic and other cultural differences from mainstream U.S. society, and their homeland’s longstanding colonial subjection by the U.S. have created enduring patterns of discrimination against them. Encountering this racism upon arrival in the U.S., scholars have noted, often produces a new racialized identity among Puerto Ricans, somewhere in the nebulous ideological and political terrain between white and black—even Puerto Ricans who on the island were considered white are assigned to a position of “racial other” in the U.S. (Aranda 2007; Ayala and Bernabe 2007; Duany 2002; Cobas, Duany and Feagin 2009; Grosfoguel 2003; Grosfoguel and Georas 2000; Negrón-Muntaner 2007; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997; Rodríguez 1994, 2008). This “inbetween,” “non-white” identity, while imposed upon Puerto Ricans, has also often been actively claimed by migrants from the island and their descendants, as they have insisted on the integrity of Puerto Ricans as a whole, and as they have grappled with the racism which they encountered in the U.S. (Aranda 2007; Duany 2002; Rodríguez 1994; Rumbaut 2009). Several authors have also noted that this new racial identity and consciousness have frequently fostered solidarity and creative collaboration with other marginalized, racialized groups, particularly with migrants from Latin America and other parts of the Caribbean, as well as with African Americans (Flores 1993, 2009; Rivera 2007; Rodríguez 1994, 2009; Rumbaut 2009).

Scholars noting this hegemonic system of racialization in the U.S. differ, however, in the attention they give to the racial dynamics among Puerto Ricans themselves. Many assume or assert that Puerto Ricans by and large have been united by the discrimination they face in the U.S. A few, though, insist that racial difference is one of the primary internal fault lines of Puerto Rican collective identity. They point out that while blackness and black Puerto Ricans themselves have often been denied or excluded from hegemonic definitions of Puerto Ricanness, Puerto Ricans' own cultural production often have been rooted in Afro-diasporic forms and sensibilities. They also emphasize the importance of Afro-Puerto Ricans themselves as cultural and political workers in both the diaspora and the island. (Flores 1993, 2009; Jiménez Román and Flores 2010; Quintero Rivera 1998, 2009; Rivera 2003, 2007).

Scholars working on the island have begun to excavate the workings of race—especially understandings of blackness—among Puerto Ricans with great care. They have criticized Puerto Rico's own hegemonic racial ideology, which denies Puerto Rican racism and celebrates the island's alleged racial democracy, always in contradistinction to the U.S.' open racism. Puerto Rico's dominant racial regime is clearly more flexible than the U.S.' history of overt racial segregation, but it is still profoundly racist, these scholars argue; it accepts blackness only as a folkloric, romanticized identity buried in an allegedly victimized past of slavery or contained in particular geographic locations such as Loíza or Barrio San Antón of Ponce. According to the hegemonic nationalist discourse, Puerto Ricans may be deemed "racially mixed" or "mulato," but rarely black. These scholars have also analyzed how Puerto Ricans of African descent simultaneously participate in the dominant culture's silencing of blackness and keep black identities alive. Puerto Ricans' popular racial attitudes, identities, and practices then, can be profoundly contradictory, both eliding blackness and asserting its presence in daily life (Godreau 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008; Godreau, Reyes Cruz, Franco Ortiz, and Cuadrado 2008; Lloréns 2005; Martínez 2007; Quintero Rivera 1988, 1992). For many Puerto Ricans, even those who identify as being of African descent, blackness can be "fugitive"; "blackness suffers at once from 'erasure,' 'masking,' and 'denial' while simultaneously surfacing time and time again in public discourses about identity politics.... [I]t refuses to remain muted against attempts to minimize its relevance and existence. It surfaces and reappears..." (Lloréns 2005: 8, 16). These scholars, then, both denounce the silencing racism of an apparently racially inclusive society and suggest that even within large, overarching patterns, racial identities and meanings can take on multiple, even contradictory forms for Puerto Ricans.

In this essay I hope to contribute to this conversation about the effects of race on Puerto Ricans by analyzing the life history narratives of fifteen Puerto Ricans born and

raised in New York City during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. All of the narrators whose life stories I examine in this essay relocated to the San Juan, Puerto Rico, area as young adults during the late 1960s and early 1970s, where they have remained living until the present. I conducted the interviews in Puerto Rico during 2002.

The narratives provide a striking example of the discursive workings of “fugitive blackness” among New York-born Puerto Rican return migrants to the island. While at first glance race seemed to be a rather minor theme in the interviews, it soon became evident that commentaries on race actually marked crucial narrative turning points and delineated discussions of Puerto Rican authenticity. Race, then, despite its apparent marginalization as a theme, was both structurally and symbolically important to the oral histories. Also, these discussions of race on one level created consensual understandings of the past, especially in the New York-born narrators’ interest in constructing a collective, empowered sense of themselves as legitimate Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis middle class islanders. At this consensus level, the narrators heartily confirmed the macro-level analyses of Puerto Rican racialization and internal solidarity within the U.S. On another level, however, the narrators asserted a surprisingly wide range of interpretations of Puerto Rican blackness. Thus, these narratives remind us that the meanings of race can be strikingly specific; sweeping observations about broad historical patterns of racialization, while important, only offer us a partial understanding of the complex workings of race for Puerto Ricans. Finally, the life stories remind us that racial meanings are emotional as well as political.

The Interviews and the Narrators

I recruited the initial interviewees through neighborhood networks in San Juan as well as from people I met in the course of daily life interactions in restaurants, at libraries, in parking garages, and so forth. Interviewees often introduced me to their friends and acquaintances, who also agreed to be interviewed. In total I conducted forty life histories with people who had been born in the U.S. and by 2002 had resided for a substantial period of time in the San Juan metropolitan area. I chose this sample of fifteen from the larger group because they were from the same generation, were New York born and raised, and had lived in San Juan continuously since they had initially arrived there in the late 1960s or early 1970s. My formal interviews with the fifteen narrators were open-ended and held in their homes in the San Juan metropolitan area. The conversations were taped and generally flowed back and forth in both Spanish and English. I always began in Spanish, and followed the linguistic lead of the interviewee, switching languages if and when they did. I asked the narrators simply to tell me the story of their lives, as they saw fit to describe them. I tried to limit my interventions

to clarifying questions about themes already broached by the narrators. The resulting interviews, then, were truly “life stories”—structured by the symbolic, thematic, and narrative structures chosen by the narrators themselves. They were not built from a predetermined list of questions devised by me. The memories recounted by these New York born-and-bred Puerto Ricans were shaped by both their responses to me—a formally educated, white, North American woman—and by their need to make sense of their pasts in light of their present lives. Thus, the stories I analyze here are the expressions of the particular meanings attributed to their pasts in particular contexts by this particular group of narrators.

In a few instances, narrators’ direct denunciations of racism, whether in the U.S. or on the island, served as a way to test or confirm me as a trustworthy interviewer. One informant opened our interview in her living room by thrusting the 1959 book by Oscar Handlin, *Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis*, into my hands and demanding, “Have you ever heard of this before?” Only after telling her that it had been important in my research, and engaging in a long conversation about the history of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean, did she continue with her own life history (Lebrón). Another conducted her entire interview with me based on pages of her own hand-written notes. After several hours of conversation, when we had turned off the tape-recorder, she burst into a passionate denunciation of racism in Puerto Rico and its effects on her mother, who, unlike her, was visibly of African descent. This, she informed me later, was only possible because she had decided that I was trustworthy (Benítez).

I insist here on the importance of reading life-history narratives in several ways. Many social science studies use life histories as a basis for their analysis. Most, however, mine their informants’ accounts solely for empirical information, to piece together “the real story” of what happened in the past. We need to avoid the pitfalls of this “reduction of culture to behavior” (Flores 2009: 44). I certainly see the narratives produced for me as a recounting of past experiences and use them as sources of empirical data. I also, though, treat them as important meaning-making activities, a place in which storytellers spin particular interpretations of past events, in light of their present. Thus, life histories are not simply empirical reports. They are also fables, morality tales, symbolically rich and emotionally charged cultural artifacts. We miss much of their meaning and usefulness if we ignore these aspects of life stories. In this article, then, I do not seek to describe in depth the lives of the featured narrators in either San Juan or New York City. Rather I strive to illuminate how and why Puerto Rican return migrants mobilized race in the ways they did in their life stories.

The storytellers featured here were a very particular group of return migrants. The majority of their parents left the island for New York in the 1920s and 1930s, prior

to the immense emigrations of the immediate war and post-war years. They grew up during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in rapidly expanding Puerto Rican diaspora communities, raised by parents who were more experienced in the ways of New York than many of the newer arrivals. Only two of the narrators had visited Puerto Rico more than once before moving there as adults.

All the narrators came from working-class families whose parents had often struggled to survive economically in New York. Their parents for the most part had little formal education. Their mothers worked long hours in New York sweatshops. Several narrators had been raised by widowed or divorced mothers; these women often worked double shifts at extremely low-wage jobs, racing home to attend to their children after school before returning to labor at night. The narrators' fathers worked in construction, painting ships, driving delivery trucks, or as security guards. Several fathers suffered serious injuries that disabled them permanently. Despite their hard life in New York, all of the narrators' parents stayed many years in the U.S., moving employment and residences within the city rather than returning to Puerto Rico.

All of the narrators managed to graduate from high school in New York with solid academic skills, although they also all entered the workforce at a relatively young age. Many of them lamented not having been able to study more because of their families' need for their full-time wages. Several eventually went on to secretarial or technical schools. One, who became an elementary school teacher, graduated from a public university with a degree in foreign languages. Thus, all of the narrators had more advanced skills and education than their parents. However, most of them continued to be frustrated in their work life. Jobs in New York were scarce and often offered little opportunity for professional or economic advancement. The narrators cited unemployment or "dead-end jobs" frequently as a primary reason for relocating to Puerto Rico.

All the narrators were able to establish themselves quickly on the island. With their fluency in English, most of them got office jobs with U.S. companies. One narrator worked as a bookkeeper for the English language newspaper *The San Juan Star* and another quickly found a position as a hairdresser in a new luxury shopping mall. The teacher immediately found employment in a private English-language elementary school for U.S. children. One man worked for many years as a waiter in a luxurious Condado restaurant. Another narrator transferred her position as a claims clerk for the Social Security administration to Puerto Rico. Thus, Puerto Rico's colonial dependency on the U.S. served these returnees well. They were able to gain access to stable, salaried service positions for U.S. capital, which dominated the island's economy and burgeoning welfare state. English fluency, in this context, wielded a power unimaginable in the U.S., offering them the possibility of modest but comfortable, lower-middle-class lifestyles.

All but one of the narrators owned their own homes within a few years, many of them in the sprawling new suburban communities of Bayamón and Carolina. Thus, from hardscrabble, working-class lives in New York City, these narrators had moved up into the island's respectable, but still economically vulnerable, lower-middle class.

The late 1960s through early 1970s, when most of the narrators arrived in Puerto Rico, were years of great political ferment; social movements and intellectual currents exploded focused on anti-colonial struggles, labor activism, feminism, and racial identities. Thirteen of the fifteen narrators, however, made no mention of involvement in such movements; on the contrary, seven of them explicitly distanced themselves from radical political activism. For these narrators, gaining a firm foothold in middle-class respectability seemed more important than questioning the political and social status quo. Interestingly enough, the two narrators who did discuss their involvement in radical causes of the era—one of them in various African American movements for liberation in the U.S. and the other in *independentista* organizations as well as a fledgling anti-racist organization in island university settings—were also two of the three narrators who made blackness central to their understanding of being Puerto Rican. Clearly, these two women's youthful politicization nurtured an enduring vision of racial identities and relationships different from those of the other narrators.

“A Different Kind of Puerto Rican”

Despite their long decades of residence, work, community building in Puerto Rico, and their deep love for the island, the vast majority of these narrators asserted that they were a “different kind of Puerto Rican” than those island-born and raised. These New York born-and-bred, long-term residents of San Juan consistently insisted on their dissimilarity from island Puerto Ricans—in language use, work habits, their claimed sophistication of world view, and particularly in their gendered expectations, values, and social practices. They deeply resented the discrimination they had experienced on the island as part of the New York diaspora, accused of bringing “foreign ways” to Puerto Rico.

The workings of race in these life histories, as is frequently the case in Puerto Rican contexts, was much more difficult to pin down than that of gender, which was a central theme in all the life histories. Questions of racial identity, instead, generally haunted the edges of the narratives, surfacing in quick references to historical experiences, or mythic familial struggles. However, comments about race were far from unimportant in these life histories. Through their discussions of racial prejudice and mixing among Puerto Ricans, and in their comments about racial and ethnic confrontation in the United States, the narrators simultaneously insisted on their legitimacy as Puerto Ricans, critiqued the

U.S., and differentiated themselves from island Puerto Ricans. These New York Puerto Ricans residing in San Juan displayed unanimity in such commentaries.

All of them agreed that their generation of New York born-and-bred Puerto Ricans did not experience or practice racial prejudice among themselves. They also agreed that their parents and past generations, raised on the island, had been much more highly conscious of racial distinctions among Puerto Ricans than they themselves were. In addition, they insisted that racial prejudice haunted present islander Puerto Ricans in a way supposedly inconceivable for New York Puerto Ricans. Despite islanders' allegedly heightened racial prejudices and concern with racial differences among Puerto Ricans, which marked them in these narratives as more susceptible to intra-group racism than New York Puerto Ricans, the narrators implied that Puerto Rico offered more possibilities for racial social advancement and interracial love than did the U.S. They remembered the U.S., for the most part embodied in New York City, as defined by intense conflict among different racial or ethnic groups and a rigid binary racial system that imposed "black" or "white" identities on the more racially fluid Puerto Ricans.¹

The experience and memories of such sharp aggression by racial and ethnic "others" in the U.S. produced a powerful solidarity among the Puerto Ricans who grew up in New York in the 1950s and 1960s and moved to Puerto Rico between 1968 and 1980. In their narratives, their experiences of ethnic/racial discrimination in New York City contrasted sharply with an alleged racial harmony among emigrant Puerto Ricans.

Upon arrival in Puerto Rico, however, they noted a subtle, yet persistent tendency on the island toward exclusion of Puerto Ricans of African descent; this racism echoed the hostility with which islanders met the narrators' New York-based cultural distinctiveness. The discourse of blindness to racial difference among Puerto Ricans raised in New York consequently became an important theme in their life narratives. Their understanding of race and its significance (or lack thereof) became a marker of their distinction from island Puerto Ricans, who had rejected them.

In these narratives, assertions of the invisibility of racial differences among Puerto Ricans in New York could morph into persistent hints of racism on the island. Thus, the meaning of race shifted according to its social and historical circumstances—a product of both material experience and political context. In these transplanted New York Puerto Rican life stories, race often "did the work" of "making the world intelligible" for the people who talked about it. By reflecting on the distinctions and solidarities race inspired, as well as its burdens and impositions upon them, these narrators remembered and interpreted various population groups as communities, in relationship and in conflict with each other. In the process, the narrators asserted their own and others'

collective identities (Holt 2000).² Commentary about race and people's reaction to it, then, was often a way to assert the existence and legitimacy of particular identities—in this case, the authentic Puerto Ricanness of working-class New York Puerto Ricans, who had struggled to gain a foothold within the island's middle class.

But the workings of race in the life histories were not solely patterned in this way. Indeed, a careful analysis of these narratives shows us how variable race's meanings can be. Three of the fifteen narrators openly identified themselves with blackness, making race a foundational theme in their life stories. Unlike the other narrators, they all three insisted that blackness—culturally or biologically—was an integral part of being Puerto Rican. This simple insight took on a surprisingly wide range of meanings, however, which will be explored later in the article. Taken together, these life stories warn against the creation of a totalizing meta-narrative about the workings of race for these New York Puerto Ricans. As we will see, not only could racial meanings shift according to historical context; they could also vary from person to person, and even change in the process of a single person's storytelling. People's phenotypes could affect their historical experiences of race and the meanings they ascribed to them, but did not definitively determine them. Thus, we should not equate the particularities of racial experience and memory with the larger "racial regimes" which Puerto Ricans inhabited in New York City and on the island. The historical specificities of "the work race does" can operate on various levels—societal and individual, empirical and narrative—overlapping, contradicting, pushing each other in multiple directions.

Consensual Definitions

All the interviewees agreed that Puerto Ricans born and raised in New York during the great migration from the island in the 1940s and 1950s did not highlight racial differences among their Puerto Rican friends. They remembered practicing what Gabriel Haslip-Viera (2009) has called "a racially undifferentiated Puerto Ricanness," distinct from other ethnic or racial groups in New York.³ Odette Pabón and her brother, George, returned repeatedly to a photograph of she and her two best childhood friends—one "*jaba'a*" one "*negra*," and the other "inbetween." The three girls were inseparable, they insisted, regardless of their phenotypical differences. Marie Lebrón also recalled that "*las latinas [puertorriqueñas] se buscaban—de todos los colores. Por la cultura.*" Aura Hernández told how as a child, "I don't think I saw Puerto Ricans with colors. I just saw them as Puerto Ricans. "Black" meant *moreno americano*. We looked at black Puerto Ricans and we saw them as Puerto Ricans.... I looked in the mirror and didn't see "white." I saw myself as Puerto Rican" (Aura Hernández [a] and [b]).

This allegedly race-blind social vision of the New York-born Puerto Ricans contrasted with the narrators' memories of their parents' and grandparents' generations in Puerto Rico as well as of other Puerto Ricans on the island. Gillie Rodríguez mentioned how islanders obsessively ferreted out traces of blackness in their neighbors and co-workers, making sly racist comments. "Those Puerto Ricans from the island—they smell it!" she cried (G. Rodríguez). Gladys Lugo agreed, commenting that her mother and extended island family were "very prejudiced against black people" (Lugo). Odette Pabón attributed her own more flexible racial understandings to the fact that she did not grow up around her grandfather and island cousins, who "constantly compared themselves to other people—'ay, yo soy un poquito más blanco,' like they do here [in Puerto Rico]" (O. Pabón). Indeed, several narrators claimed that their parents had originally emigrated to New York because their families of origin had refused to let them marry a person of African descent (Aura? Hernández; G. Rodríguez [a] and [b]; Lugo; O. Pabón).

On the other hand, Puerto Rico, however racist a place, still could countenance racial mixing; interviewees who considered themselves "white" affirmed this. María Pabón, born and raised on the island, claimed that she married a black man in defiance of her family's objections so that she could have a daughter with curly black hair, "*pelo bonito y vivo*" (M. Pabón). Her children George and Odette agreed that she had raised them to accept that they embodied "both Spanish and black" (O. Pabón). Gladys Lugo affirmed the possibility of racial mixing by threatening her racist mother—"Just you watch, I'll come out with a black baby, and that'll be your punishment!" (Lugo). Gillie Rodríguez's maternal grandmother had been black; her mother's sister married a black man and raised twelve children with him in Puerto Rico (Rodríguez [b]). Marie Lebrón, whose light-skinned mother married her very dark father in New York, remembered that her mother rarely spoke of racial hostilities on the island; rather, her mother told her that among poor people in Puerto Rico, racial differences had been immaterial. The most important thing was to marry and establish oneself in a home and job. Gillie Rodríguez excitedly noted that in Puerto Rico, blacks could become professionals—something she had never witnessed in New York. The boundaries of racial acceptance, although they existed, were markedly different in Puerto Rico than in New York—more subtle and individually flexible, if still persistent.

Once in New York, racial distinctions among Puerto Ricans seemed to diminish even further.⁴ There, the primary ethno-racial boundaries remembered were those demarcating Puerto Ricans from other groups. The narrators agreed that the Bronx was more ethnically and racially diverse than El Barrio and some other areas of Manhattan, which were filled primarily by Puerto Ricans (Aida, Aura, and Victor

Hernández; Matta; G. Pabón). This could have an effect on the New York-born generation's friendship options.

However, the narrators practically unanimously recalled an ethno-racial homogeneity in their intimate socializing, regardless of where they lived in the city. Marta Suárez told of African Americans, Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans all living in the same buildings in the Bronx during the 1940s and 1950s. The Latin Americans often attended the same Catholic churches. But in her recollections these groups had very little interaction with one another. She remembered African Americans in particular as very distinct from the Spanish Caribbean groups; they spoke a different language, ate different foods, listened to different music, and were Protestant rather than Catholic.

Even George Pabón—who as a teenager during the late 1950s and early 1960s became a youth leader in his El Barrio ecumenical Protestant church and had a good deal of contact during this period with African American church activists—claimed that differentiating between Puerto Ricans of African descent and African Americans was not difficult. Not only did Puerto Ricans tend to be lighter-skinned than “the folks in Harlem,” he alleged, but they dressed, danced, spoke, and even moved differently. Pabón insisted that African Americans' and Puerto Ricans' ethnic performances differed dramatically, with all Puerto Ricans, regardless of phenotype, sharing a common style.

Gladys Matta, who lived in the Bronx, talked of African American neighbors exchanging food and watching out for her, even sharing tales of personal travails with her as she worked at the neighborhood corner store. Friendly neighbors they might be, but never *amigas íntimas*—to invite into her home, have a party or attend a dance with, consider part of the close family-friend network. In these intimate spaces, she insisted, Puerto Ricans bonded solely with Puerto Ricans. Many narrators (Jiménez; Lebrón; Matta; G. and O. Pabón; Rodríguez [a]; Suárez) spoke of Greek, Italian, and African American acquaintances in school or work, and a smattering of ethnic groups living nearby, but even in peaceful neighborhoods, their New York memories were of intimate ethnic homogeneity within a diffuse, broader context of ethno-racial diversity: “We had a little Puerto Rico in our home” (Rodríguez [a]) “At home, it was a Puerto Rican world” (Matta).

I suspect that the narrators may well have remembered more ethno-racial homogeneity than they actually practiced in New York. They spun their tales for me while living in Puerto Rico, where they had suffered decades of sharp rejection by many island-born and raised Puerto Ricans; the narrators, then, continually struggled to assert their “100% boricua authenticity.” Memories of growing up in insulated “little Puerto Ricos” scattered throughout New York City confirmed their own undeniable Puerto Rican identity.⁵ Indeed, a number of narratives hint at substantial inter-ethnic

interactions in New York during the 1950s and early 1960s. George and Odette Pabón spoke of collaborating with African American church youth groups, with whom they attended the March on Washington to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak. Gillie Rodríguez recalled an African American family on her block who frequently took her and her brothers on excursions to Long Island beaches and a large Greek family whose children regularly played with her after school. Aida Hernández, while reminiscing about her early marriage years, remembered a cosmopolitan New York life, filled with friendships that crossed ethnic boundaries to include Jewish, Greek, Italian, Dominican, and Mexican couples. Hernández contrasted this New York experience markedly with life in suburban Puerto Rico since her return, which for her had been permeated by subtle racial slurs and social taboos.⁶

For narrators like Mirna Jiménez, this sense of insular homogeneity translated into utopian memories of New York safety, stability, a tranquil existence, all the children from a given building playing stickball together, “all of us Puerto Ricans. The black kids had their own little streets—not that they were segregated, but they had their own streets. A few Cubans and Irish, too, but we were all Puerto Rican.”⁷

Most of the narrators, however, recalled the streets of New York as a battleground, where different ethnic or racial groups frequently clashed over territorial boundaries. Gladys Lugo spoke sadly of her brothers having to defend themselves in fistfights with the Italians and Irish whose neighborhoods her family integrated. Marie Lebrón remembered her family being denied entrance to an apartment building in the Bronx, and later living under the opprobrium of Italians, Irish, Greeks, and Jews who resented their presence. She trembled with fear when recalling the blows her sister suffered from African American girls on the way home from school. “I don’t know, maybe they resented us because we were dark! I don’t know why—We were dark, just like they were! ...Well, I had nothing in common with them. My music was different, my upbringing was different, everything was different!” Even Gillie Rodríguez and George Pabón, who grew up in solidly Puerto Rican neighborhoods, also recalled the gang conflict that permeated interactions between African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Italians. Usually, they claimed, such fracasas remained within containable limits, and most recognized how to negotiate the different ethnic zones of shared public spaces such as schools, pools, and public beaches. “We had a good existence because we knew our boundaries,” reminisced Rodríguez.⁸ Frequent discussions of heated ethnic conflict, even violence, overpowered the quick references to inter-ethnic cooperation and trust. Both may well have existed in the lives of these transplanted Nuyoricans; in *memories* of post-war New York, however, ethnic conflict and clear ethno-racial division generally took narrative center-stage.

The U.S.'s rigidly binary racial system that insisted on dividing people into the categories of "white" or "black" loomed over the ethno-racial complexity of New York neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Interactions with state institutions often forced Puerto Ricans to choose one side or the other of the dominant racial divide. Many elected to officially identify as "white" or were offended when categorically branded as "black," even when they acknowledged their own racially mixed ancestry. Luis Quiñones told of being taken for black by police in a Southern state—no laughing matter. George Pabón chuckled as he remembered the confusion of a military officer who could not definitively determine whether George was white or black. In the end, the officer turned to George's birth certificate, which listed him as "white." George's mother, María, chimed in to reminisce about the creation of such state documents. Although her Puerto Rican husband was black, she had applied for her children's birth certificates. As a result, both children were recorded as "white." Several of her husband's family members had done the same, ensuring that their very dark-skinned babies were officially defined as "white." "They didn't want to be the same as American blacks, you see," she asserted.⁹ Such stories confirm many scholars' assertions that Puerto Ricans have been historically forced into the dominant racial binary by institutional structures and agents and that they frequently resisted being identified with African Americans, who unequivocally occupied the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy (Aranda 2007; Duany 2002; Thomas 2009, 2010; Rodríguez 1994, 2009).

Even those Puerto Ricans who tried publically to claim their blackness could be rebuffed. Marie Lebrón recalled a confounding incident in her sister's classroom: the teacher asked blacks and whites to stand up while "doing a survey." When Lebrón's sister stood with the black children, the teacher asked her where her parents were from. Upon hearing Puerto Rico, the teacher told her to sit down. "She came home *confun-di-da*. She'd always thought that she was black, and here they were telling her she couldn't be!"¹⁰ Understanding herself as both Puerto Rican and black, but taunted by African-American schoolmates and denied her blackness by Anglo teachers, Lebrón's sister faced multiple levels of racialized exclusions in New York, enforced by both adults in state-run institutions and other children.

Puerto Ricans growing up in New York City during the island's "great migration" of the late 1940s and 1950s lived through a time of profound reconfiguration of racial politics. Descendants of European immigrants to New York had begun to consolidate their status as "white" in the U.S., despite their persistent identification with distinct nationalized ethnicities. Puerto Ricans debated and contested their racial positioning in New York beginning in the 1930s and on into the 1940s; like María Pabón and her friends who insisted on coding their children's birth certificates as "white," many Puerto Ricans

distanced themselves from the blackness of U.S. African Americans, who they considered particularly degraded in the U.S. context, even as they built political coalitions with them in the city or acknowledged their own Afro-Puerto Rican ancestry. Simultaneously, Puerto Ricans remained largely excluded from the expanding post-World War II liberal body politic that created spaces for both African Americans, marked as unambiguously “black,” and the plethora of whitening European ethnics; Puerto Ricans’ racially-mixed origins and their homeland’s ongoing colonial status rendered their political demands as well as their racial categorization problematic in a socio-political system structured through a stark black-white racial binary (Thomas 2002, 2009).

Carving out a working definition of blackness proved difficult for Marie Lebrón and her sisters, who braved street challenges from African American girls and teachers’ rejection of their claims to blackness.

Despite their insistence on the racial undifferentiatedness of their own national group, Puerto Ricans struggled with how to define themselves and others in such a context. Carving out a working definition of blackness proved difficult for Marie Lebrón and her sisters, who braved street challenges from African American girls and teachers’ rejection of their claims to blackness. Gillie Rodríguez, who did not identify as black, reported that none of the immigrants who surrounded her were “white.” “Everyone in New York was where their parents were from. No one said they were ‘American’ except the American blacks. And the WASPS—like you—but I didn’t know any of those then.” Marie Lebrón, however, who articulated her blackness as a defining characteristic in her identity, disagreed. “*Sólo había blancos y de color. Los blancos eran de Europa—Italianos, Irlandeses, judíos. Y los de color eran los negros y puertorriqueños negros. [pause] y los otros puertorriqueños, de cualquier raza.*” Dark-skinned Lebrón knew the pain and power of anti-black racism as the light-skinned Rodríguez never could. She also insisted—after reflection—on the unity of all Puerto Ricans, their solidarity in marginalization.

Making Further Racial Moves

The divergence between Lebrón’s and Rodríguez’s analyses of race, ethnicity, and marginalization in the U.S., even while they concurred on the lack of discrimination among Puerto Ricans in New York City, reminds us how varied racial experiences and meanings can be, even within apparently shared experiences of macro-level racialization. Let us turn to how three of the narrators—all of whom asserted blackness as a central

aspect of Puerto Ricanness—complicated the overarching racial tale outlined above of Puerto Rican solidarity and insularity in an ethno-racially conflictual migratory context.

Odetta Pabón's narrative celebrated the personal joys of boundary crossing into a rich world of complex blackness during the 1960s and 1970s—years of political and cultural ferment among New York's African diaspora communities. Raised knowing that she was "both black and Spanish," Pabón moved outside the solely Puerto Rican world of El Barrio as a teenager and adult to forge deep friendships with African Americans and English-speaking Afro-Caribbeans. "I never felt out of place. I fit the groove!" She attended homecoming dances at Howard University, listened to jazz, blues, and danced to Motown as well as to salsa, attended speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and married two non-Puerto Rican men of African descent—the first, with whom she had two children, an African American from Indiana who had made his way to New York City, and the second, a Barbadian who she met in the Caribbean. Pabón's life story, full of enthusiasm and humor, revolved around her joyful "difference" from most other Puerto Ricans, in New York or on the island, who she insisted did not choose such an "international lifestyle", rooted in connections to a broad African diaspora.¹¹

Marie Lebrón identified as a black Puerto Rican rather than "both Spanish and black." In contrast to Pabón's joyous recounting of solidarity and exploration, to Lebrón, racial and ethnic difference signified vulnerability, exclusion, and pain. "I suppose I should begin with where I was born," she said at the opening of her interview, and launched into two stories of discrimination. She recounted a memory from her early childhood of how her family was turned away from an apartment that her light-skinned mother had rented in the Bronx once the landlord and other tenants saw her dark-skinned father. Weeping, she told me how she and her family remained stranded in the street with all their personal belongings until a Puerto Rican friend of her mother's found them another apartment nearby. She then turned to another tale of her mother protesting the rude behavior of a Jewish woman at a New York hospital. The woman taunted Lebrón's mother, calling out " 'Why don't you go back to your country!' and my mother said—look, ma-am, better to have a country than to have none! They were Jewish—it was a Jewish hospital. That woman was furious! All red with fury, and all the other Jewish women around us, by the time we got to the window. And my mother, she was so peaceful. I couldn't believe she had said such a thing!"

Discrimination in the U.S. could be both racial and ethno-national—for Lebrón, these identities fused and reinforced each other in a narrative laced with physical threats and material vulnerability. She dwelt at length on her dark-skinned father's disabling accident, his tragic death while she was still a child, being left alone in charge of the family as her mother worked double shifts, an assault which her

mother suffered walking home from a night shift job, the analogous attacks which she and her sisters suffered by hostile neighborhood children—often African Americans—and her having to quit school early, despite her love of learning, to support her mother and four younger siblings.

Lebrón closed the interview with a long description of a recent incident in the suburban San Juan condominium where she presently lived. Several neighbors, all white and economically comfortable, had gathered to meet the new “amigo” of a divorcee friend, also white. “You could feel the coldness when they walked in. Everyone talking and everything still, but you could feel it. He’s a *black* man. *Puertorriqueño*. You know, with his hair all up and everything. Maybe it was how he presented himself, and maybe because this lady [with him] was so *white*, but you could feel it. And these are people I *know*! And I thought—if you feel that way about *him*, how do you feel about *me*? You’ve been accepting me for what I can do for you? Or for what I am?” When a neighbor later informed Lebrón that her husband had forbidden her to invite the new couple to their house because of the man’s “appearance and attitude,” Lebrón was angered, but did not openly challenge the woman, fearing the “loss of the friendship.” Instead, she had simply declined the woman’s invitations to socialize. Racism, then, lurked in the heart of moneyed, well-intentioned Puerto Ricans.

Despite such insidious betrayals, Lebrón remained very clear that Puerto Rican race relations for her were preferable to those in the U.S. Overriding her acute awareness of social limits on the island (her physical self-presentation of contained female respectability, with meticulously straightened hair and precise, controlled speech—so different than the “*black* man...with his hair all up”—carefully acknowledged these limits), Lebrón continued to articulate a deep identification with her Puerto Ricanness. “In Puerto Rico, I feel more [long pause] I feel like I can go anywhere. Like in the States, there were times, when I was younger, when I’d say, God, I’d never be able to go to Florida. I mean, this is as a *child*, ...I’d think, I’m here, I’m born here, and there are so many places I can’t go!” In the end, Puerto Rico’s racism, which subtly limited social intimacy between those identifying as white and those aggressively asserting a public black identity, was much safer than the brutal, often state-supported, rigidly bifurcated racial hostility of the U.S., which affected even a careful, quiet, “respectable” black woman such as Lebrón.

Interestingly, unlike the other two narrators, whose identification with blackness was chosen rather than enforced, Lebrón wove a powerful endorsement of ethnic (NOT racial) purity through her narrative, grieving her brother’s marriage to a German woman and repeatedly lamenting her nephews’ and nieces’ propensity for marrying and making friendships across ethnic boundaries. “We were the first-born generation

of Puerto Ricans in New York. We still had all the protection, the culture of our own, embedded in us. But as our children grew up, they were friends with all sorts of international things. And they've intermarried. [American] blacks, Chinese, all sorts of mixtures! And you have to accept it!" Ethno-national purity, then, was essential to Lebrón, even if racial purity was anathema.

In her closing words to me, Marie Lebrón returned to the proud black man who met such opprobrium at the Puerto Rican dinner party. Approvingly, she stated, "He knew who he was, he was proud. He had to be ready for the fact that other people aren't always going to accept you." Immediately afterwards, in response to my question regarding whether Puerto Ricans were one ethnic group, without distinctions of race, as historians often imply, she stated clearly, calmly, "yes, all my friends who were Puerto Rican were black, white. We all accepted one another." Lived racial exclusion in the Puerto Rican island present only fueled memories of a reconstructed, racism-free New York Puerto Rican community.

Aura Hernández's life story most radically demonstrates the changeability of racial meanings in these narratives; her definitions of Puerto Rican blackness literally shifted from story to story. In her conversations with me, Hernández returned several times to a moment in the mid-1960s that she understood as pivotal in her life. Sitting on her stoop in the Bronx with a large group of teenaged friends, an older African American youth named Erroll, recognized by all the young people as an intellectual and neighborhood leader, informed Hernández—"No Puerto Rican can be white. In the United States, there is only black and white. No matter hard you try, Puerto Ricans won't get to be white. So you're black.' I was astounded—I had never thought of race in this way before. So I went to my mother (the other person besides Errol who knew all about the world) and I asked her—"Mamá, are we black?" "Who said that to you?" My mother asked—now, see, she didn't say yes, or no, or dismiss me, so I knew this was important stuff. 'Erroll', I told her. 'Aah.' [Pause]—"He's right. If you put it like that, he's right."¹²

In this initial telling of the story, in the midst of a broader discussion between us about Puerto Ricans' marginalization within the U.S. empire and their various attempts to gain dignity, Hernández established "blackness" as a purely political, rather than a biological identity. Puerto Ricans were consistently marginalized and exploited in New York. This "blackened" them, placing them on a par with African Americans, with whom (in the Bronx of the 1960s) they lived, worked, studied, and shared leisure time. In turn, this shared oppression could be the basis for a deep inter-racial solidarity—one which Hernández lived daily in her New York neighborhood, and which for her was embodied in Erroll, the studious, charismatic, reflective teen elder who educated her about political realities in the U.S.¹³

Over the course of our conversations, however, Hernández's story about this early political awakening shifted. The final time she told the story to me, she presented Erroll's message quite differently. "Erroll didn't see it this way—all the Puerto Ricans are black. All of them! They're a nation, a people, mixed. Any drop of black blood makes them black. Look at them—they're all a mix. More or less, but everybody's got a drop.' But we saw each other as Latino, not as a racial mix.... After that discussion, I looked around me and I saw [gasping] that Puerto Ricans came in all colors! Before that, I don't think I saw Puerto Ricans with colors. I just saw them as Puerto Ricans" (Aura Hernández [d]). In this manifestation of the story, Erroll's challenge, albeit still political, enabled Hernández to see the full *biological* diverse beauty and wonder of her own people.

Conclusion

Hernández's narratives about the birth of political consciousness through a chosen identification with blackness—one focused on politics, the other on biology—remind us that the discursive meanings of race in these life histories are chameleon-like; they shift according to their context. These tales demand our careful attention to the specificities of when, where, and to whom people recount their stories. In the move from New York City to Puerto Rico, from one person's experience to another, and even from story to story created by the same person, race gathers its meanings from how people live and talk about it, always in a specific context. Careful contextualization on multiple levels, then, is crucial to understanding of the workings of race in oral histories. Such narratives allow people to gather and reshape the meanings of race, to mobilize it (intentionally or not) to do all sorts of work, making sense of the world they experience, with all of its injustices, exclusions, and joyful solidarities.

Race slips in and out of the interstices of island-dwelling New York Puerto Ricans' memory tales, winking, laughing, and moaning. In their life stories, these New York Puerto Ricans in San Juan spoke about race in many voices—sometimes in a homogenous, authoritative way, but also breaking out into ever more complex insights about community building, the birth of political consciousness, pain, and possibility. The transplanted New York Puerto Ricans who shared their stories with me created their understandings of race from their own life experiences and from broader discourses and political practices circulating in both post-war New York City and late twentieth-century suburban San Juan.

All the interviewees articulated a common narrative about a racially transcendent solidarity among oppressed Puerto Ricans in New York. Internal racial differences among Puerto Ricans, at least in the U.S. context, they insisted, were unimportant. In this, and in their insistence on the racialized discrimination that Puerto Ricans faced in New York, the narrators agreed with scholars who have emphasized the

power of U.S. hegemonic racial regimes, most importantly a black-white hierarchical binary that Puerto Ricans uncomfortably negotiated and within which they rarely clearly fit. This racialization of Puerto Ricans within the U.S., the narrators noted, was imposed both by the state—through schools, the military, and the production of official documents, among other sites—and by the non-Puerto Rican individuals and groups who surrounded them—neighbors, classmates, bosses, landlords, even people standing in line at a hospital. Generally, these Puerto Ricans in New York, even when identifying as black or maintaining cordial relations with African American neighbors and workmates, resisted identification as African American, carving out instead an uneasy “non-white” identity. The narrators insisted that a hegemonic racism operated on the island also, albeit in a subtler, more individualized and more flexible form—none of the interviewees discussed the ways that institutions such as the state, mass media, or schools fostered the silencing or denigration of blackness.

A few of the narrators, however, also spoke passionately about the central importance of blackness in defining their own identity, both in New York and on the island. They articulated multiple meanings of race. New political consciousness and racial identities could emerge from lived, intimate relationships with other Afro-diasporic peoples. Blackness could function as a source of joy and empowerment in solidarity; for another narrator it could be a source of terrible pain and suffering. Puerto Ricans could both practice racism and transcend racial differences. Blackness could be biological or unrelated to phenotype, the product of a group’s positioning in a colonial political economy. For some narrators, then, multiple interpretations of race could exist *simultaneously* and the emotions related to them could vary tremendously.

In their life histories, these narrators produced their own versions of what Isar Godreau has dubbed “slippery semantics,” simultaneously testing their relationships with me, asserting their solidarity with other Puerto Ricans from New York, and marking their distance from island Puerto Ricans. Godreau notes that in contemporary conversations, Puerto Ricans’ “everyday exchanges, in which racial identity is inconsistently conferred, challenge the construction of stable marks of racial identity.... Slippery semantics in race talk allows for various levels of typification and inclusion that might ease possible tensions, establish social distinctions, and/or build different types of solidarity in everyday encounters.... [S]emantic fluidity and its strong dependence on context should not ...[lead us to think that] racial hierarchies are less powerful in Puerto Rico.” On the contrary, Godreau insists, Puerto Ricans’ complex verbal strategies in negotiating “race” demonstrates its persistent power in their lives (Godreau 2008: 26–7).

We, as historians, need to acknowledge these narratives’ lesson for us—that a single interpretive framework for analyzing race can be insufficient, no matter how carefully

contextualized. As Hilda Lloréns reminds us, “enacted history offers no authoritative text.” Rather, stories “as traditions in the making, are remade with every performance. These are not static, but multivocal, ever-changing and contested meaning terrains” (2005: 13–4). Indeed, the history of race, for Puerto Ricans, is in some ways like the tiny *coquí* frog, ubiquitous on the island. Rarely clearly sighted, the coquí’s loud calls in the night seem to never cease. Insistently present, seldom seen, always coming from a different direction—such are the historical workings of race for Puerto Ricans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ellen Feder and Lorrin Thomas and the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on previous versions of this article.

NOTES

¹ Elsewhere, I have discussed the broad structures of many of the narrators’ life histories, the symbolic effects of their gendered commentaries on Puerto Rican interactions in New York and on the island, the narrators’ pain at the distrust they frequently faced on the island, and the San Juan-based organization “Latin New Yorkers” in which thirteen of them were active members (Findlay 2009). I refer to the narrators throughout this article as “New York Puerto Ricans,” “New York born-and-bred Puerto Ricans,” or “Latin New Yorkers.” Fourteen of the fifteen narrators did not generally claim the identity of Nuyorican, probably because of the connotations of poverty, criminality, and “foreign” cultural practices associated with it on the island, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s. Thirteen of the fifteen preferred to call themselves “Latin New Yorkers,” as a way to assert their pride in their New York roots, to distinguish themselves from island Puerto Ricans and to distance themselves from the ongoing poverty of the New York Puerto Rican community. In recognition of the complexity of the actual “Latino” population of New York, I have not consistently used the “Latin New Yorker” term in this article.

² Thomas Holt provides a brilliant historical analysis of the “work race does,” which focuses primarily on the broad political economy and cultural contours of various “racial regimes” produced in the Americas over the course of several centuries. This article offers a different approach: a close analysis of the workings of race from the perspectives of insiders, people living with race and talking about it to others in an attempt to make sense of their world. It is from myriads of these sorts of conversations and social practices that the overarching racial regimes that Holt discusses emerge. Obviously, the life histories collected were also profoundly affected by racial regimes that their narrators inhabited. Thanks to Lorrin Thomas for her reflections on these points.

³ This “racial undifferentiatedness” was not the only option for Puerto Ricans in New York City, however. Haslip-Viera (2009) notes that his father’s siblings, who married an Italian-American and a black West Indian and settled in their spouses’ respective communities, over time became “less Puerto Rican” and assimilated into being “white” and “black,” respectively—their children even more so. Puerto Ricans of African descent have long made the choice to live, socialize, and marry in African American communities of New York City (Arroyo 2005; Hoffnung-Garskof 2001, 2010; Núñez 2009).

⁴ Marie Lebrón explained: “It depends on...on...on your surroundings. In certain surroundings,

everyone's like you. All the families are mixed, so they accept one another. Now if you go into another area where there might be white...white... white Puerto Ricans, then you might feel that way [discriminated against]. E.JF: But in New York, it wasn't that way? ML: Not unless there was a Puerto Rican who was very light-skinned, and their mother didn't want them to hang around dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, but I didn't know of that happening."

⁵ Ramos-Zayas provides an insightful discussion of how claims to "authentic insider cultural knowledge" can be crucial in designating who is considered a "real" Puerto Rican. She notes that residents of Chicago's working-class barrios often asserted that their communities preserved "authentic" Puerto Rican traditions and practices, unlike elite islanders who, they alleged, ate in McDonalds and studied in luxurious English-only schools while in Puerto Rico.

⁶ See Findlay (2009) for an extended analysis of the anti-Nuyorican attitudes of island Puerto Ricans during the 1970s and 1980s.

⁷ By the 1960s and 1970s, the face of the Bronx, at least, seems to have changed somewhat. Aura Hernandez remembered intimate inter-racial solidarity there among her generation of teenagers in the mid to late 1960s. African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and a few "left-over whites" hung out together on her stoop. "Those folks, we all call ourselves brothers and sisters, even today" (Hernández [b]). Gladys Matta also hinted of a similar shift in her comments about her daughters making close friendships with the "negras bien criaditas" as they grew up in the Bronx in the 1960s and early 1970s. These changes in social relationships among youth were probably rooted in not only the changing demographics of the borough, but also the emergence of political mobilizations around housing, education, police brutality, and anti-imperialism within which Puerto Ricans and African Americans collaborated (Fernandez 2010; Kusmer and Trotter 2009; Lee 2010; Ogbar 2006; Thomas 2010; Torres and Velásquez 1998).

⁸ Protestant church networks and downtown citywide educational institutions, such as GED centers and City College were the only multi-ethnic spaces mentioned that the narrators agreed did not contain this kind of overt conflict.

⁹ For fascinating discussions of the shifting expression and imposition of Puerto Rican racial identities in New York through state-generated documents such as migrant identification and military draft cards, censuses, and birth, marriage, and death certificates, see Haslip-Viera (2009) and Thomas (2009). The racial classification of Puerto Ricans in these documents could change dramatically depending upon the historical moment in which they were produced and who was making the recorded racial ascription.

¹⁰ Lebrón also passionately recalled how her aunt, who was light-skinned, was forcibly separated from her dark-complexioned children when they traveled through the state of Florida.

¹¹ Odette Pabón's narrative, as well as Aura Hernandez's, confirms the argument made by historians that the 1960s marked a period of increasingly shared political movements, cultural expressions, and educational experiences between New York Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and other African diaspora descendants. Their contemporaries in the group of informants for this article expressly rejected such an understanding of the past (Haslip-Viera 2009; Fernández 2010; Lee 2010; Ogbar 2006).

¹² This story, and Errol's political analysis of Puerto Ricans' positioning in New York's racially coded hierarchy, resonates deeply with the conversations between African Americans and Puerto Ricans that shaped the racial discourse of the Young Lords Party in New York City (Fernández 2010).

¹³ In this solidarity with African Americans, Hernández and Odette Pabón both echo many

of the stories recounted by the narrators featured in Flores (2009). Notably, they contrast markedly with the rest of the narrators' accounts.

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