



SLIPPERY SEMANTICS: RACE TALK AND EVERYDAY USES OF RACIAL TERMINOLOGY IN PUERTO RICO

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Puerto Ricans talk about race in a shifting linguistic pattern defined here as “slippery semantics.” Such usage is highly dependent on context and defies the often sharp dichotomization made between binary forms of classification, associated with the US and more ambiguous forms or racial terminology associated with Latin America. The author argues that both forms can co-exist and proposes an incipient typology of contexts that considers when binary or multiple terminologies are deployed and the social implications of such usages. [Key words: race, Puerto Rico, *blanqueamiento*, racial binaries, racial language, race in Latin America, racial terms]

IN JULY 1995, A FIGHT ALMOST BROKE OUT IN PONCE, PUERTO RICO,

when a male friend of Doña Julia called her “*¡so negra!*” (yo’ black woman!) as she walked by the streets of her barrio in San Antón.¹ Doña Julia knew her neighbor said this phrase jokingly to call attention to the fact that both of them were black. The verbal gesture established a sort of racial solidarity between them. However, another friend walking besides her interpreted the phrase as an insult and quickly jumped to her defense, declaring: “*¡Oye, Oye, que a esta señora hay que respetarla, ¿sabes?*” (Hey, hey, you have to respect this lady, you know?!) Holding his rising arm with her hand, Doña Julia appeased him, stating “*Está bien, está bien, no te preocupes, es que él y yo bromeamos así*” (It’s ok, it’s ok, he and I joke that way).

It is a well-known fact among scholars of race relations in Latin America that racial terminology is highly situational and intimately linked to context of usage. *Negro*, for example, often carries pejorative connotations because of its association with slave status. Yet, in certain interpersonal exchanges such as the one described above, it can also be used to mark racial solidarity or “sameness” among those who openly identify themselves as black. Nonetheless, in other instances, the use of negro or its diminutive form *negrito* (or *negra, negrita*) may communicate affection and intimacy regardless of the skin color of the person to which it refers, but not regardless of the relationship between the speakers. Which meaning is to be ascribed depends on who says it, when, and how.

Likewise, the term *blanquito* is the diminutive for white, but the term is also utilized in Puerto Rico to refer to a person of the upper class, often times with pejorative connotations. Once again, this second sense, although bearing some relationship to skin color, does not depend on phenotypic variations. A wealthy black person may be identified as *blanquito*, while the same may not necessarily be said of a white or light-skinned person who is poor. However, when the person called *blanquito* is a black person, the label can also be an accusation made for “acting like a white person.” When a white person is called a *blanquito*, the charge has to do with an elitist, snobbish attitude or lifestyle. Other uses of the term *blanquito* may be deployed with a condescending attitude to describe a person who is too white and unattractive, as in *jincha* (ugly and pale) or “*pote de leche*” (milk container).

Determining the significance of racial categories becomes even more complicated with terms like *trigueño*, *de color*, and *indio*. The widely used term *trigueño*, for instance, is often used as a euphemism to classify people considered black because of the belief that negro is offensive. In this case, the meaning is similar to

the more old-fashioned term *de color* (colored). *Trigueño* however, can also be used to indicate that a person's color is lighter than black or darker than white (Nazario 1961: 348–9; Godreau 2007). This second application responds to a three-tier classificatory system that distinguishes the mixed *trigueño* from other types that are understood as less phenotypically hybrid, such as *negro* or *blanco*. In such cases, applying *trigueño* is not necessarily informed by the belief that *negro* is offensive, but by the attempt to use an “accurate” description in a social context where “mixed” (i.e., *trigueño*) is interpreted as different from “black.”²

Of course, this fluidity and ambiguity of social terms is not infinite. Hernández-Hiraldo for example, found that in Loíza *trigueño*, *negro*, *blanquita*, and *jabao* (high yellow) were the most common primary classifications among her informants (Hernández-Hiraldo 2006: 38). In Guayama, Clarence Gravlee, found that people privilege five main categories—*negro*, *trigueño*, *jabao*, *indio*, and *blanco*—and that there is a great deal of consensus on the physical and phenotypic criteria people use when the researcher asked them to provide definitions (Gravlee 2005). Such consensual views, however, can be suspended, contradicted, and altered when deployed in everyday conversations. Thus, for example, *indio* might be used to describe someone with dark skin who has straight hair (Gravlee 2005: 975), but in other contexts, *indio* could be used as an euphemistic term for *black* (regardless of hair type) in order to not offend the person being described.

The polysemic character of racial terms and its strong dependence on context and history has been an important focus of Latin American and Caribbean scholarship, (Alexander 1977; Drummond 1980; Harris 1970; Hoetink 1985; Khan 1993; Mintz 1971; Sanjek 1971; Sheriff 2001; Skidmore 1974). Within this literature, scholars have pointed to the various factors that influence the use and meaning of racial terms, particularly ethnicity and class, but also age, physical proximity, place, time, social spheres of interaction (family life, hanging out with friends, or quarrels), and cultural norms of etiquette. Lillian Guerra, for example, examines the construction of blackness as an extreme identity and the ironic declaration of “mutual blackness” as strategies people use to construct solidarities across race and class in the context of North American colonialism. She interprets racialized forms of address such as “*¡Que hay negro!*,” which are applied regardless of color, as means through which Puerto Ricans of different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds “created interstices of engagement between each others’ notions of identity” vis-a-vis the North American colonizer (Guerra 1998: 233).³ Another aspect explored by her and other scholars is the gendered dimensions of racial term uses in expressions that reinforce a dominant racial/gender hierarchy, such as “I am a *negra* *but* beautiful,” the use of *rubia* to complement a black woman’s good looks or of “*negra*” to discredit a woman’s sexual reputation (Hernández-Hiraldo 2006: 38; Guerra 1998: 234; Findlay 1999: 25).

In this article, I argue that operating alongside this variance of factors that influence the use of racial terms, there is a particular linguistic pattern of “race talk” not previously identified in the literature, which I call “slippery semantics.” By slippery semantics I mean a recurrent linguistic inconsistency in racial identification processes that takes place when people use different systems or logical grids of racial classification during a single conversation. Such grids can include the use of multiple racial terms to describe the same individual, the consistent use of binary black/white terminology, or the use of the same racial term to describe different “types of phenotypes” during a single narrative event. Examples will follow, but consider the case of an elderly self-identified black woman from Ponce who,

upon my inquiry about her family, said, “*Mi mamá era mulata y mi papá trigueño también*” (My mother was a *mulata*, and my father a *trigueño* also) [My emphasis]. She could have used these terms as euphemistic substitutes for black or just to emphasize her parent’s race-mixture. She could have used *mulata* to mean darker than *trigueño*. In any case, what is important to highlight is the fact that she used two terms (i.e. *mulata* and *trigueño*) instead of just one, to describe her parent’s equivalent racial type (see Godreau 2000; Hernández-Hiraldo 2006: 38). Other examples in this article will show how people can also suspend this multiplicity and adopt binary modes of racial classification that are consistent and clear-cut in the application of black/white identities.

THUS, MORE THAN DETERMINING THE SOCIAL WEIGHT OF “RACE” VIS-A-VIS OTHER IDENTITIES, MY AIM IN THIS ARTICLE IS TO HIGHLIGHT THEIR INTERDEPENDENCE.

I argue that this tendency towards polyvalency and inconsistency produces a destabilizing effect on the status of “race” as an identity-marker during the course of everyday conversations. This is not to say that Puerto Ricans do not classify each other racially, or that they do not act according to the racist implications of such classifications, but simply that such classificatory practices are not consistently or permanently verbalized as pertaining to fixed racial identities. Rather, what we see is a constant variance in the system of classification itself, combined with the recurrent switching of color and racial terms, and a general apprehension over the public ascription of racial labels to individuals. This slippery effect, I also argue, can reflect and construct different interpersonal relationships among those implicated or involved in the conversation indexing solidarity, intimacy, distance, or respect among speakers. In that process, social identities that go beyond race come into play, making racial meaning dependent and conflated with the social cleavages they summon during the conversation. Thus, more than determining the social weight of “race” vis-a-vis other identities, my aim in this article is to highlight their interdependence. In that sense, my concern is not “race-relations” per se or even “racial identity” as an autonomous category, but rather the everyday use of “racial identity labels” to mediate, represent, and reproduce social identities and hierarchies in the context of quotidian social encounters.

Two main questions guide my documentation of this linguistic pattern: What are the social effects of using “slippery semantics” in everyday conversations? And what does this linguistic pattern tell us about the way “race” is constructed in Puerto Rico? In the following sections, I seek to answer these questions by analyzing various examples taken from specific ethnographic instances and interviews in terms of their microdynamics (i.e. the topics being discussed in the interview, the stakes of speakers involved at the moment of the conversation, the impact of specific political views in the use of terminologies, etc.). Most of the interviews analyzed derive from

fieldwork I conducted for my dissertation in 1993, 1995, and 1996 in the barrio of San Antón, a predominantly black community located in the southern city of Ponce (Godreau 1999). Other interviews were conducted more recently in the interior town of Cayey and in the San Juan capital of Puerto Rico, as part of an on-going project on racism in education (Godreau et al. 2008).

Examples of slippery ambiguity

The matriarch who took me into the community of San Antón in Ponce, Doña Julia, often made open reference to her black identity saying “*Yo soy una negra de San Antón*” (I am a black woman from San Antón). Her son and daughter were also equally vocal about their blackness. In fact, they objected to people using intermediate terms such as *jabao* (high yellow), *mulato*, and *trigueño* when referring to them. According to them, you are either *blanco* or *negro*, and on several occasions I heard them declare themselves very proud to be black.

Example 1

One day, concerned about her son’s academic progress, Doña Julia went to visit the vocational public school to speak to her son’s teacher. During their conversation, the teacher talked about the absence of black teachers and administrators in public schools and the negative impact this could have upon young black students, like her son. These were not his words exactly, though. He used at least five different terms to refer to the victims of racism during the course of the conversation with Doña Julia: *trigueño*, *mulato*, *de color*, *de barrio* (from the barrio), and *humilde* (of humble background).

The teacher often hesitated before using some of the more racially explicit terms. This is not unusual in exchanges where speakers do not know each other well, or are somewhat unsure about their interlocutor’s racial identity politics. Exchanges like this one are often characterized by a certain nervousness and uneasiness, not just with the process of racial classification in general, but also with the term *negro* in particular. Thus, besides the use of euphemisms such as “*de color*” (colored) and the constant switching of terms, it is not unusual for people to stammer, hesitate, pause, repeat themselves, or look for comparisons, such as stating that “He’s the same color as so-and-so” in order to avoid the stigma and the social hazards of using *negro*.

Pejorative connotations that equate the word *negro* with slave status can be traced to 19th century practices in Puerto Rico that distinguish between a non-white free population who called themselves *morenos*, or *pardos*, and the slave population who were “racialized” as “black” by both whites and non-whites (Nazario 1961: 346–7). In the Hispanic Caribbean, this negro-slave equivalency was facilitated by the rapid growth of a population of free blacks and mulattos who grew to become a majority and who sought to distinguish themselves from slaves (Mintz 1974; Torres-Saillant 2000: 1094; Guerra 1998: 222).

Much of the tentativeness and coyness that complements the use of euphemisms has to do with this historical baggage and the challenges of coming to terms with the history of slavery. Yet slippery semantics is not just a cluster of euphemism. In fact, in some conversations people can use *negro* as part of the cluster of color terminologies and later substitute it by a term like *prieto* or *como yo* (like me) and so forth. And even in those instances when *negro* is avoided, people do not just use one, but various alternative euphemistic terms to describe the same individual during the course of the conversation.

Moreover, people often use these clusters of racial terms in combination with others that refer to social class, such as *los pobres*, *gente humilde*, *gente de barrio*;

for the affluent, there are the terms *blanquitos*, *elitistas*, “those people from over there,” the *come mierda* (stuck-up), o la *gente de buena familia* (of a wealthy family). The constant mixing of these terminologies and switching of racial terms in everyday interactions not only upsets the semantic stability of race as an identity but also incorporates other, relevant dimensions of class, lifestyle, and education into the conversation. In this case, when the teacher talked about racism and the lack of black role models in school, he defined those who are privileged and those who are less privileged in term of race but sometimes also in terms of class and class-informed attitudes such as *de barrio* (from the barrio) and *humilde* (humble).

Furthermore, in conversations such as the one I previously described, in which racism is being denounced by speakers who do not know each other well, might occupy unequal positions of power, and could identify themselves as racially different, the constant switching of terms might help avoid allusions to any participant as black victim or as non-black perpetrator. During the conversation, the teacher—whom I describe as a light-skinned mulatto with green eyes—never identified himself racially, but identified members of his family as *de color* and as persons of humble background, *de barrio*. Doña Julia also used these terms to refer to her family and community. Thus, some of the class-informed labels the teacher used in the process of describing a racial hierarchy in school positioned him besides, not above Doña Julia.

In this sense, slippery semantics can help people construct alternative solidarities based on multiple positionalities such as social class, gender, religion, or political affiliation. Rather than level out and fix racial identities by using the binary terminology of *blanco/negro*, the constant oscillation, in some conversations, among terms allows for a multidimensional interpretation of power relationships in everyday encounters. Thus, using—or not using—multiple terms during the conversation may itself be an important factor in establishing sameness, difference, distance, or intimacy between speakers.

Example 2

In the next example, interlocutors did not build alternate solidarities based on class or other socially relevant criteria. Rather, the speaker’s attempt was to distance himself from blackness and its assigned low social status through the popular aspiration of whitening or “*mejorar la raza*,” which literally means to “improve one’s race” by having offspring with someone who is of a lighter complexion.⁴

The interview took place in 1996 in the central plaza of the city of Ponce. Sitting in one of the plaza’s benches, a Puerto Rican man in his late 60s assured me that in Puerto Rico “there isn’t any racism. Here blacks join with whites.” He continued to explain:

“—I’ve got a son that lives in Texas, really white with blue eyes, and he married a *negrita* (diminutive form for black woman).”

“—Did anybody say anything? I asked.”

“—Well, what can we say? She’s a *trigueña elegante* (an elegant black woman). The only one who griped a little was me. I was improving the race (*adelantando la raza*), and he pushed it back”—he laughed. “Then my daughter—that one lives here, because, you see the way I am (referring to his looks), but my wife is white with green eyes, and I come from a white family too, you see? Then my daughter, who’s a blond with blue eyes, also married a *trigueño*. His father is very *negrito* [black, diminutive form], but his mother is white with blue eyes. He was like me, trying to improve the race (*mejorar la raza*).”

“—And what’s this thing about improving?” I asked.

“—Well, trying that they be white and not be prietos (black), so they won’t have to pull their hair so much when they comb it.”

“—And why do you think that people say “improve” toward the white side and “go backwards” toward the black side?”

“—That’s what’s always been said around here. Let’s improve the race a little, so the kids can comb themselves better.”

“—And don’t you think that is racism?”

“—Well, it might be racism, but our way, the Puerto Rican way. Because, one likes to be a little lighter. Not me, because I’m “Puerto Rican colored,” because I’m not prieto (black), I’m indio. Not this guy [pointing to a man who was sitting next to him], ‘cause this guy’s trigueño, but he has *pelo malo* (bad hair) right? [the man nodded].”

ONE REASON FOR THIS MAN’S AVOIDANCE OF THE TERM NEGRO TO DESCRIBE HIS FRIEND, OR ANY OF HIS IN-LAWS FOR THAT MATTER, MIGHT BE BECAUSE HE CONSIDERS THE TERM NEGRO AND, MORE BROADLY, THE CONDITION OF BLACKNESS UNDESIRABLE.

Besides the salience of *blanqueamiento* as a strategy that informs this man’s unattained goal of “*adelantar la raza*” in his family, I want to call attention to his use of racial terminology. During the interview, he constantly shifted terms when alluding to people he considered “black,” using one term in one sentence, another term in another sentence, and so forth. I am not talking about the mere use of euphemisms, because he did more than just substitute one term for another. Instead he used four different terms during our conversation to describe people he considered “black.” These were “negro” (in his first assertion that in Puerto Rico blacks join with whites), prieto, trigueño, and negrito. During this conversation, the man interviewed also described himself as being of white ancestry, as being indio, and as being “Puerto Rican colored.”

The lack of stability in racial terminology is furthered complicated in this interview by the fact that some of the racial terms I mentioned may not be used to mean the same thing. For example, the man interviewed used the word trigueña to describe his son’s wife. In this sense trigueña served as a euphemistic label for someone he had previously characterized as black or as negrita. However, later on, he used trigueño to describe the person sitting next to him, commenting that he was trigueño but had “bad hair.” When analyzed in the context of his previous assertion

about being indio, one realizes that he is describing his *trigueño* friend as someone who could be mistaken for being indio if it wasn't for his *pelo malo* (bad hair). Hair here functions as a key racial marker for determining blackness (Candelario 2000; Godreau 2002b). Thus, he is saying that his friend's hair reveals his blackness, in spite of his *trigueño* or mixed looks. In this sense, *trigueño* and black are not synonyms.

One reason for this man's avoidance of the term *negro* to describe his friend, or any of his in-laws for that matter, might be because he considers the term *negro* and, more broadly, the condition of blackness undesirable. From this point of view, the correspondence we see in the interview between the content of the narrative (*blanqueamiento*) and the form (ambiguous semantics) is not purely coincidental. The same historically informed anxiety that tries to mitigate the stigma of blackness and whiten its mark of slave origin informs a languagepractice that leaves blackness without a stable mark of identity in the conversation. The only thing stable is the interlocutor's wish to distance himself from it.

Another factor to take into account when examining slippery semantics is that word choices are not only determined by the classifying system and values of the speaker, but also by the perception that the speaker has of his interlocutor's values and categories. Discussion groups conducted by UMUPUEM (Union of Black Puerto Rican Women) reveal, for example, that even when individuals say they do not consider *negro* an offensive term, they refrain from using it in certain interactions, fearing that it might be taken as an insult. Other participants stated, however, that they always use *negra* or *negro* openly because they do not care to tailor their language to the racist sensitivities of those who might feel offended by the term or by their affirmation of a black identity (Franco and Quiñonez 1993).

Example 3

How such assertiveness is received, however, depends on who is using the label *negro* and what they look like. Consider for example, the case of a light-skinned reporter, who during a TV news report described the community of San Antón in Ponce as a community of "blacks." Commenting on the newscast, an elderly self-identified black resident of San Anton said:

"I'm bothered by what they said on TV, that we were *un barrio de gente negra* [a *barrio* of blacks]. It may be true that we are *tristes de color* [have a sad color], but to say that we are a *un barrio de gente negra*... that word! They could say we are a *barrio* of people who are *trigueños*, but not to be so rude. We're mixed with African people, but that's going too far. Because there's racism in the US and there's racism in Puerto Rico also. But the type of racism that's coming now is too much. In the old days, people weren't in that thing that 'whites this' or 'blacks that.' It is now that people say things like that, and they start saying things like 'This is a community of *negros*.' It is true that we are black, it is true that we *somos tristes de color* [have a sad color], but you don't say that word like that."

During my conversation with Libertad, I brought attention to her description of black as a "sad color," stating that my father was *negro* and that I had never heard anyone use that term before. Then, she continued to say:

“As a black woman I feel proud. Black people are proud, but that does not mean that other people can behave with such despotism. We know what we are, and that’s enough.”

Libertad’s self-deprecating comment about being *triste de color* shows the prevalence of dominant interpretations of blackness that construe black people as inferior, ugly, or less fortunate—a stigma Libertad seems to be accepting, rather than challenging. However, Libertad’s statement also speaks to the very real implications of being subject to the racist gaze of others. San Antón is best known in Ponce for being the birthplace of *plena* music. This reputation as a site of black folklore, however, operates alongside the popular perception of the community as a place of crime, where “black people live.” Such discourses often displace blackness to communities like San Antón in Ponce or Piñones in Loíza (Hernández-Hiraldó 2006), constructing the rest of the island as non-black (Godreau 2002a). Libertad’s discomfort with the reporter should be understood against the backdrop of such essentialized constructions of her community. Furthermore, her answer to my query and my positioning in relationship to my black father specifies the notion of pride as an alternative interpretation of blackness that can be taken for granted, only if the affirmation comes from someone who is part of the community.

The effects of this triple gaze—the gaze of the racist other (the reporter), the gaze of the questioning other (the researcher), and the internal gaze of the observed self (Libertad)—not only manifest themselves in the apparently contradictory content of the interview, but also take place in the slipperiness of its language. Libertad used four different terms to describe the people of San Antón: negro, trigueño, of “triste de color,” and “mixed with African people.” Each one of these terms must be analyzed within the context of the narrative in order to determine its significance as insult, as depiction, as euphemism, as status-marker, or as source of pride. This reliance on context is not a new finding. What I want to emphasize, however, is the recurrent linguistic slipperiness and multiplicity that complements the process. My analysis of the next set of examples maintains that such multiplicity of meanings can also include binary forms of racial classification that assume dichotomous black-white identities.

Examples of slippery binaries

Example 4

When I interviewed Felícita and her daughter Rosa in San Antón about the topic of racism, Rosa talked about an instance of racial discrimination that she had suffered in a store with a woman. Summarizing our conversation to her sister who had just come into the kitchen, she said:

“Those racist blancos!” “What about them?” her sister asked. “Well, if they see somebody who’s prieto, someone de color ... whatever ... well, they reject him.” Her sister agreed.

Rosa’s use of “whatever” in this instance seems to suggest that, prieto and de color mean the same thing, as far as this conversation was concerned. At other points during our interview, however, Felícita and Rosa substituted their slippery semantics to introduce a more consistent binary system of classification. This occurred when the topic of the conversation changed to how racism was in the old days. Felícita said:

"It used to be that a blanco couldn't walk in front of a negro and a negro couldn't walk by in front of a blanco.... Because, you know, you're walking by, and I come along, and you're giving me this dirty look because you don't want me walking by, you don't want me to even be there. But here you can't tell a negro, 'You can't walk there because that's for blancos, you can't walk there because that's for negros,' because these days everybody's all mixed together."

As she continued to talk about "nowadays" she used words like *mulatos*, *prietos*, *de color*, etc. However, when she referred to racism in the past—a kind of racism she understood to be more deep rooted—the social divisions between *blancos* and *negros* were explicit and consistent in her narrative. What changed in the mind of the informant to make this linguistic distinction? The answer could be inferred by what she said previously during the interview. Felícita believed that "nowadays" one could not find black people "because everybody is mixed." She associated the term "negro" with racial purity and, more important, with the past. Within this ideological framework, negro as a distinct identity from blanco might be better suited for describing past circumstances than present ones.

Felícita's construction of black as a "past identity" resonates with dominant national discourses in Puerto Rico that define all Puerto Ricans as heirs of The Spaniard (white), The Taíno (Indian), and The African (black) heritage. These "races" are understood as heritage symbols of a past that has been diluted and replaced by a new "mixed" present where the "pure," foundational "races" no longer exist. To the extent that being mixed and non-black is constructed as the representative identity of the modern Puerto Rican, blackness is not only relegated to the past but its applicability is essentialized to very narrow and stereotypical physical characteristics, such as having very dark skin color, kinky hair, and wide lips and nose shape (Zenón-Cruz 1975; Vargas-Ramos 2005: 4). Whiteness, on the other hand, is defined in Puerto Rico as an inclusive, flexible, wide-ranging category that can be impure and encompass people with different phenotypic features. Herbert Hoetink (1967) argued, for example, that even during the 19th century, the ideal of phenotypic whiteness (what he called the "somatic norm image") was much darker in the Hispanic Caribbean than in the English or the French Caribbean. People who belonged to the upper class and were identified as "colored" in the French or English Colonies, argued Hoetink, could be defined as white in the Spanish colonies (Hoetink 1967). Thus, as Lillian Guerra has noted, blackness was eluded by "negotiating degrees of whiteness" (Guerra 1998: 214). She states, "In contrast to the United States where the possession of any amount of African blood warranted equal derision from whites, the system of race classification in Puerto Rico was based on expressly the opposite premise: *miscegenation between black and white could only add to the numbers of the white or intermediate mulatto group*" (Guerra 1998: 214-7).

In this discursive context, describing someone as "black" becomes problematic, not only because of its association with slave-status, but also because—to the extent that negro is construed as pure—it is considered unrepresentative of the Puerto Rican mixed present. Binary uses of negro as a distinct identity from blanco are therefore much more common in narratives about the past, especially in historical or educational accounts about Spanish conquerors and African slaves, than in dominant representations of "modern" Puerto Rican people (Godreau et al. 2008).

Another context in which clear distinctions between blancos and negros are evident is when people want to establish ties of solidarity based on racial criteria (like the story at the beginning of the article with the use of “¡so negra!”). Once equality in terms of racial identity has been recognized and valued between speakers, it is quite possible that the consistent use of fixed binary terms may prevail over multiple and ambiguous terminology in a conversation.

The dualism of blancos and negros is also common in jokes or in the heat of an argument, when unequivocal distinctions are made to humiliate the “other,” or to show that he or she does not belong. Examples of such popular sayings are “*El negro, si no lo hace a la entrada, lo hace a la salida*” (The black man, if he does not do something as he enters, he will do it as he exists) or “*Ellos son blancos y se entienden*” (They are white and they understand each other).⁶ Finally, binary forms or race talk are also commonly deployed to denounce racism.⁷ The following interview is an example of this type of usage.

Example 5

This interview was conducted in the interior town of Cayey at a public school. A teacher who described her sister as *prieta*, *negrita*, and “darker than me” changed her use of terminology during the interview when telling a story about racism among her kindergarten students. She narrated a story about a boy who called a girl in his class *negra sucia* (dirty black girl). The teacher recalls:

Hearing that word, and hearing it used that way, like he told her, it really shocked me! And the kid was not white, which made me say, ‘But how is it possible?’ When the kids came in, I was forced to change what I had originally planned to do on that day ... because I was really angry. I stopped the boy in the middle of the room and decided to show... to let him see that he was black also... that the person he was rejecting was a black girl, but that he [himself] was black. And the boy ended up crying. But I didn’t care that he cried, and his parents were called in for a meeting. At that moment, I was blinded, but how could I allow such a small girl to be called ‘negra sucia’?

This example, in which intermediary and multiple color terms were suspended in the narrative in favor of a white/black binary, is not rare. Other teachers interviewed so far reported that when confronted with incidents of racial harassment in school, they try to make the perpetrators see themselves as black, telling them they are not white and that they have black features or black people in their family. In this way, assigning a black identity becomes a moral tool to undermine a bully’s superior and arrogant stance towards black children. The problem with this strategy is that teachers did not challenge the racist logic that defines blackness as an inferior trait, but rather turned it into a “shared stain.” Interestingly, teachers did not identify these bullies as “black” in other nonconfrontational contexts, but used more intermediate racial terminologies or alluded to specific phenotypic features to describe them (Godreau et al. 2008). In that sense, binary classifications mostly prevailed in their response to racial harassment.

The teacher’s characterization of a bully as “also black” finds sustenance in discourse of *mestizaje* and popular sayings that claim that “*el que no tiene dinga, tiene mandiga*,” meaning that every Puerto Rican has an African ancestor. In the following short excerpts, three antiracist activists in Puerto Rico critique this homogenizing notion. Specifically, they contend this discourse is used to minimize racism and erase the

significance of racial difference, not only by Puerto Ricans but also by the US. In the process of launching this critique, they also used a binary system of racial classification.

Example 6

The three short excerpts below are extracted from interviews conducted with three women activists from San Juan who are involved in a variety of antiracist efforts Puerto Rico: providing antiracist workshops for different organizations, participating in black women's organizations, or working for human rights groups at the local and international level.

ACTIVIST 1

The myth “del que no tiene dinga y mandiga” and that we are all black, that everybody has their *raja* [black mark] and that “y tu abuela a’onde está” [meaning that we all have a black mother somewhere]— all those myths —I believe it is time for us to begin to dismantle that because I am not convinced that we are all negros or that we are all blancos.

ACTIVIST 2

For me these are arguments [i.e., that all Puerto Ricans are black, nice, hospitable⁸] are arguments that justify the social exclusion of certain sectors of the population. Thus, it's very difficult for people to see it because people say, “Yes yes... we are all negros,” and expressions such as ‘the great Puerto Rican family’ minimize a problem that we see when we make an assessment of the social situation of the country, of the social and economic situation....

ACTIVIST 3

But also we have to talk about the racism that comes from the United States because they don't see us as blancos or negros, they see us as mestizos mulatos. For them, there are no differences and that is very clear, in how they have treated us, so we better deal with it or we'll get lost, because we have no power as a colony.

In these interviews, all three activists stressed the social significance of racial difference and questioned the discourse that Puerto Ricans are “all the same.” In the last example, activist 3 linked her critique to the question of US colonialism, highlighting the fact that the erasure of racial differences within Puerto Rico and its concomitant representation of the Island as mixed and homogenous is not only dominant in the Island, but also pervades in how North Americans view Puerto Ricans. Further analysis of these three interviews (the transcriptions of which were from 14 to 17 pages long) reveals that—when naming the difference—neither of them hesitated or felt uncomfortable with the term negro. In fact, they never used words such as *trigueño*, *de color*, *jabao*, or *indio* to describe people during the interview. The most common terms used to name victims of racism, besides negro, were *Afro-descendiente* (Afro-descendent) and *Afro-puertorriqueño(a)* (Afro-Puerto Rican) (see also Merino 2004). The term *mulato(a)* was seldom mentioned; only in the example above and in another interview was the word used to signal the non-whiteness of Puerto Rico's racially mixed population. Overall, their narratives privileged marks of identity that responded to a binary logic of classification.

The reasons why these three women activists interviewed felt confident with the use of terms like *negro/a*, *Afro-boricua*, and *Afro-descendiente* have to do with their

acquired historical consciousness of what it means to be black not just in Puerto Rico but as part of a broader Afro-diasporic community that is conceptualized as transnational, yet distinct and experiencing a common struggle (Gordon 1998). The binary nature of their discourse also makes sense because the topic addressed during the interview was racism. And racism is, in effect, a binary and not an ambiguous experience. When clear lines are drawn between those who can claim a privileged position and those who can't based on racial criteria, activists and non-activists (like Felícita in example no. 2) may thus very well resort to binary schemes of racial identification. Indeed, they will do so unless other social variables come into play that warrant more ambiguous terms (such as in the first example of the conversation between the teacher and Doña Julia).

Two models in conversation

Binary forms of racial classification might be distinct from those that rely on more ambiguous, intermediary terms. However, to the extent that people are familiar with and can move from one mode of race talk to another, I see them as forming part of the same linguistic culture of slippery semantics described above.⁹ Both modes, I also argue, are equally affected by context, for people will use different linguistic grids to evade, conform, or confront racial hierarchies in everyday interactions.

These two different linguistic and conceptual patterns of race-talk (binary and ambiguous) have not been traditionally described as co-existing, but as representing two different racial models (see Hoetink 1967; Seda 1968; Tannenbaum 1947; and Carrión 2005 among others). One variant, typically associated with the US, is described as operating according to the rules of “hypo-descent,” which establish that “one drop of black blood” makes a person black. The other variant, associated with Afro-Latin America, is described as a more fluid model that recognizes a continuum and multiplicity of color categories.

The criteria scholars have used to establish and explain these two racial models have undergone a great deal of scrutiny since the 1950s. Previous analysts of Latin American race relations argued the difference resided in Latin American nations being less racist and more tolerant of interracial unions, a position advanced by scholars such as Caribbeanist Frank Tannenbaum (1947), Brazilian ideologue Gilberto Freyre (1975 [1933]), and Tomas Blanco (1942) and José Celso Barbosa (1937) in Puerto Rico. A series of studies sponsored by UNESCO during the 1950s in Brazil, however, questioned this myth of racial democracy. Although comparative approaches continued to account for differences between Latin America and the US, scholars began to link the use of multiple racial terms in Latin America to ideological and discursive mechanisms that allow racist practices to prevail.

Hence, anthropologist Marvin Harris, for example, concluded that ambiguity in the use of race and color terms in Brazil prevents the development of a recognizable racial ideology, and this, in turn, helped maintain the stratified nature of Brazilian society along race and class lines (Harris 1970: 12). Pointing to the same flexibility of racial terms, Degler examined the distinction between “mulatto” and “black,” arguing that the difference hampered racial solidarity and political mobilization because it provided an “escape hatch” for those who sought social mobility on account of their lighter features (Degler 1971). Assuming an even more critical posture toward the idea of the racial continuum, recent scholarship about Brazil has looked at the ways in which multiple racial categories reproduce and sustain discourses of “erotic racism” (Goldstein 1999), “silence” (Sheriff 2000), and the negation of race

and racism (Costa-Vargas 2004). Although these and other scholars point to the complexity and multiplicity of color terms as one factor that distinguishes Brazil from the US, they pay less attention to such differences, so that they can highlight the prevalence of racist dynamics that respond much more to a binary rationale of exclusion than to a fluid logic of racial mixture or upward mobility (see Sheriff 2001; Vargas-Ramos 2005; Hanchard 1994; for a similar argument in Cuba, see Helg 1997). Hence some scholars in the US and Latin America have questioned the contrast between the US and the Latin American model of race relations, suggesting that there might be more similarities than previously acknowledged between them, particularly in terms of how racism and racial discrimination are naturalized and reproduced (Skidmore 1993; Winant 1992). The exclusivity of the US binary system has also been criticized by scholars, especially after they considered the fluidity prevalent in African-American “race talk” in the US (Russell et al. 1992; Keith and Herring 2005).

...MULTIPLE AND AMBIGUOUS DYNAMICS OF RACIAL IDENTIFICATION DO NOT PRECLUDE RACIST PRACTICES OF EXCLUSION BASED ON BINARY FORMS OF RACIAL CLASSIFICATION.

In line with previous critics, activists and scholars have argued that the prevalence of intermediary racial categories such as *mulato* or *trigueño*, or *pardo* (Brazil) in everyday discourse hinders and dilutes political mobilization against racism in Latin America. The complex terminology is also said to mask racism and obscure fundamental differences in terms of the life chances and opportunities that exist between what are basically two segments: whites and non-whites (Telles 1999; Hasenbalg and do Valle Silva 1999). Under this prism, the use of multiple and ambiguous color terms is interpreted as deceitful, masking, or superficial at best, and the racial binary is assumed to be the linguistic model that can truly articulate and convey the stark reality of racial hierarchies¹⁰ (Sheriff 2001; Costa-Vargas 2004).

Taking a very different stance, there are those who argue that such binary divisions and essentialized constructions of race belong to the US and have little relevance for the Latin American context. These scholars interpret the theoretical deployment of racial binaries in places like Brazil or Puerto Rico as a manifestation of US imperialism or “ethnic ethnocentrism” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Carrión 1993) or the imposition of foreign racial norms and values (Rodríguez 1994; Duany 2002; Vargas-Ramos 2005).¹¹ Puerto Rican sociologist Eduardo Seda-Bonilla, for example, criticized Siney Mintz, arguing that imported assumptions that rest upon binary systems of classification made him and other US researchers blind to the existence of racism in Puerto Rico (Seda-Bonilla 1961).

My theorization of slippery semantics benefits and departs from the theoretical contributions posed by this scholarship. I argue, like others have done for Brazil, that multiple and ambiguous dynamics of racial identification do not preclude racist practices of exclusion based on binary forms of racial classification. Furthermore, as we saw, dichotomous constructions of racial identity can exist alongside more fluid models of racial identification and are deployed in a variety of Puerto Rican scenarios. Hence, defending the fluidity and cultural specificity of racial continuum as the only model operating in Puerto Rico does not account for those situations in which racism causes all other variables to collapse and black people are labeled, discriminated, and marginalized unequivocally because of their color in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Afro-Latin America. It also ignores that people build solidarities and practice strategic essentialism based on racial criteria in response to their social reality. In that sense, I disagree with interpretations that represent essentialized white/black racial dichotomies as foreign or inadequate for the Afro-Latin American or Puerto Rican context.

On the other hand, interpreting the complex, slippery web of racial terminologies that co-exists with racist practices as a “cloak” mechanism that masks the true nature of racial hierarchies can also undermine what people are doing in other linguistic moments as a problem of “false consciousness.” The use of intermediary terminology is thus reduced to a superficial/deceiving expression of a “more real” binary racial structure that lies underneath. Such dismissal of everyday race-talk can deter paying attention to how people create, through language, the construction of mixed-race identities, or selective solidarities as they mark, configure, and re-configure different social postures, etiquettes of behavior, identities, or essentialized expressions of group membership, depending on the context of usage. Thus, my take assumes that binary constructions of race are just as socially constructed and context driven as the multiple color categories people use in everyday discourse. For example, the use of euphemistic terms may have pragmatic implications on everyday encounters in terms of signaling respect, condescension, or *blanqueamiento*. At the same time, moments when people who consistently deploy racial binaries in race-talk can also create relationships of distance or solidarity between speakers, and have pragmatic effects upon everyday and formal encounters. As a concept that captures both, slippery semantics is an indicator of the fact that race is inherently informed by power dynamics and hierarchies that people will reproduce, challenge, or attempt to negotiate through language.

Race, language, and semiotics

Saussure’s structuralist linguistics and his contributions to the field of semiotics provide a useful starting point for understanding the pragmatic approach to race talk I proposed here. Saussure’s work underlines the arbitrary nature of the sign as a fundamental element of the social, pragmatic dimension of communication (Saussure 1959; Peirce 1991). Such ideas laid the foundation for the postmodern proposal that language constructs, rather than merely “represent,” reality. Likewise, post-structuralist literary criticism and its implications for African-American literary and philosophical theorizing have also linked these principles to the analysis of the arbitrary meanings of “race” (Fuss 1989; Gates 1988). According to Henry Louis Gates, for example:

Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. ... Yet, we carelessly use language in such a ways as to *will* this sense of natural difference into our formulations. (Gates 1988: 6)

Language, concludes Gates, is not merely a medium of this insidious tendency, it is its *sign*.

Studies in linguistics have also been emphasizing the importance of considering social context when analyzing language and meaning for some time (Levinson 1983). Silverstein (1974), for example, uses the term “shifters” to refer to words such as “here” or “there” whose meanings are relative and that, in addition, are linked to the specific moment of the linguistic exchange. Other terms such as *tú* (you) and *usted* (thou)—which Silverstein calls “non-referential indexes”—do not simply communicate information about the speakers; they actually constitute those relationships at the moment that they are used in the linguistic exchange (see also Benveniste 1966). Similarly, slippery semantics can be seen as a form of race talk that not only marks but also constructs relationships of intimacy, respect, racial solidarity, or “ingratiating agility” (*agilidad congraciante*) between participants (Lauria 1980).

Scholarship on Puerto Ricans living in the US also highlight the centrality of language in constituting Puerto Rican ethnic identity and the importance of using ethnographic methods to understand how, when, and why Puerto Ricans mark their belonging to different communities. Urciuoli and Zentella, for example, discuss how Puerto Ricans are racialized by others as they use, combine, and re-create language varieties of English and Spanish in different social contexts (Urciuoli 2005; Zentella 1997, 1982).

Focusing on Puerto Rican racial terminology, specifically, sociolinguist Edward Bendix has argued that the relation between racial terminologies and the social meanings ascribed to them by Puerto Ricans is best understood as a system which is negotiable in conversation and which would appear, in semiotic terms, to be a process that generates the social order as much as it represents it (Bendix 1990: 52). Thus, making a list of all the possible racial terms or meanings in order to grasp the systems of classification is futile, says Bendix, because the system does not exist independently of the context in which it is deployed. Instead, he calls for a pragmatic analysis of racial classification systems that considers a variety of factors, including the syntactic frames of the people being interviewed and the racial categories brought into play by the interviewer.

An incipient typology of contexts

Previously discussed examples of the use of binary and multiple racial categories in conversations imply that there are contexts that prompt black vs. white types of classifications and others that invite more ambiguous formulations. A reviewer of this article suggested I classify these more consistently into an incipient typology of contexts. Although more empirical evidence is needed to produce such a typology, the examples discussed previously provide useful clues for deciphering some of the cultural norms that inform slippery semantics, which could be tested by further research. Binary forms of race-talk, for example, seem to prevail when racism is being denounced or practiced. Racial indictments can take place in formal or informal settings (in everyday conversations or in court, in a speech, an interview,

or conference). Formal uses of binary race talk are also common when people refer to the past, as when Felicita talked about the old days. They are also common in historical narratives or when people talk about the founding ethnic groups of Puerto Rican culture (i.e, los negros, los blancos, y los indios) such as in school discourses about Puerto Rican history (see Godreau et al. 2008).

However, binary forms of race talk seem to be more prevalent in informal settings, when people make explicit racist remarks alluding to color or—on the other hand—for marking racial solidarity among speakers who consider themselves negros. Jokes, teasing, or mockery of others who appear to deny their “blackness” are common contexts in which stark contrasts between whites and blacks are drawn during informal conversations to offend or build alliances. On the other hand, the use of multiple and intermediary racial terms seems to prevail as the dominant “social etiquette” in Puerto Rico, especially in formal contexts when speakers do not know each other well.

2000 Census: A Bridge of Cultural Norms?

Bridging the cultural norms and values that inform such codes of social etiquette can have critical and serious effects in certain situations. The Puerto Rican census of 2000 is an example. Prior to the year 2000 and since the 1960, Puerto Ricans were not required to “pick a race” in the census. In line with a nationalist ideology that espoused mixture and racial harmony, the Popular Democratic Party successfully lobbied to eliminate “race” and “color” from a number of public registries, such as the census and Puerto Rican government statistics. Documents utilized in Puerto Rico by U.S. federal agencies such as applications for Social Security and Medicare, for example, also eradicate “blackness” from the Puerto Rican identity by creating “black” and “Puerto Rican” or “Hispanic” as separate options in certain forms. The consequences of this silence and eradication of blackness are significant, considering the state is an important force in the construction of racial identity (Omi and Winant 1986; Golberg 2002).

This changed in 2000, when the Puerto Rican government decided to adopt the same census form used in the US, which included a “race” question and offered such choices such as White; black, African-American; American Indian or Native Alaskan; etc. Silvia, who worked as an enumerator for the census in the town of Cidra, states that when she asked people what race they considered themselves to be, “They kept looking at me with this face like saying ‘What are you talking about?’ and some people would ask me. ‘But why are they interested that?!’” Eliza, another census enumerator I interviewed, stated that a fellow co-worker who worked in the area of San Juan met a man who became so infuriated when the enumerator asked the race question that he pulled down his pants and showed the enumerator his buttocks. A study conducted by the Census Bureau later revealed that only 53 percent of households returned their census 2000 questionnaire and that the race question was an important factor for not returning the questionnaire (Berkowitz 2001a). Among the reasons people gave for not filling out and mailing the census was because they found the race question discriminatory, divisive, and inappropriate. One man interviewed stated, “It occurred to me that this question was somewhat racist and I did not want to fill out the form and so I did not” (Berkowitz 2001a: 17).

These responses illustrate the dominant understanding that classifying people racially—particularly by the government—is improper and offensive.

The government use of binary racial categories, for such purposes, exacerbated the problem as people felt they could not identify with any of the answers provided. One woman from an interior town interviewed for the Westat study said: “When we were in school, we were taught that Puerto Ricans are descendants of the Indian, African, and Spanish races, and none of this is part of those answer categories.” Participants were also critical of the fact that the form divided family members racially, forcing siblings to choose sides according to skin color (Berkowitz 2001b: 14–5).

The fact that the Puerto Rican government does not sponsor affirmative action programs or support social justice initiatives based on “race” also fed people’s suspicions and disapproval of the government’s interest in the question. As one participant of the study said, “I continue to ask myself why the Census wants to know the number of White and Black people in Puerto Rico. Here we do not need to know whether we are White or Black or tan or Indian in order to receive help. We are all children of God” (Berkowitz 2001b: 12).

Black Puerto Ricans who are denied jobs, educational opportunities, admissions to certain clubs, or the possibility of marrying a person because of their color know too well that such values and principles do not always translate into practice. However, because racism is not recognized in public discourse and the government declares “race” an irrelevant aspect of Puerto Rican social life, assigning racial identities to individuals, particularly in formal settings, is often interpreted as creating and not as naming the problem. Racial frames introduced by the government in the 2000 census contradicted people’s expectations of a government apparatus that represents Puerto Ricans as part of a “Great Puerto Rican Family” (*La gran familia puertorriqueña*¹²), declares a color-blind ideology of race mixture, and teaches it to its citizens in school.

Despite the discomfort, confusion, and irritation caused by this census, results nevertheless revealed that racial hierarchies are quite present in people’s mind. As it turned out, only 8 percent of those interviewed declared themselves to be black, while an overwhelming majority, 80.5 percent identified themselves as white (US Census Bureau 2000). Scholars have argued that these results are questionable, given the lack of relevant and local-specific labels used in the questionnaire (see Vargas-Ramos 2005; Duany 2002)¹³. However, results beg the question of why—if Puerto Ricans are so keen to the use of intermediate and multiple terminologies—didn’t most people pick more than one racial category in the race panel or choose the option of “other”? This is a trend quite prevalent among Hispanics and Puerto Ricans who live in the US (Duany 2002; Rodríguez 2000).

The overwhelming preference for the “white” category over that of “black” suggests that binary modes of racial identification might be considered improper, divisive, or even offensive, but not completely alien. While it is true that there are discrepancies between Puerto Rico and the US, one can find binary constructions of race in both places. Furthermore, one can find binary constructions of race that support such practices in both places. In the US, dominant “one drop rule” models of race construct anything that is not white as black. In Puerto Rico, as mentioned earlier, “black” is essentialized as “pure” and anything that is not black is constructed as mixed (enabling, in some cases, those who define themselves as mixed to call themselves white). Many participants of the Westat study, for example, said they had picked the category “White” even though they knew they were not “pure” whites. One woman said her family came from a mix of different races. She said, “I was not comfortable answering my race to be White, but it was the best answer among the alternatives available” (Berkowitz 2001b: 16).

Another man said he ended up reporting himself and his family as White because *trigueño* was not a choice available, and although he toyed with the idea of answering Black, he believed that only very, very dark people—people who he said were “pure violet black” would truly qualify as such (Berkowitz 2001b: 16). As Duany has noted, “Most islanders checked the white box on the 2000 census questionnaire because local standards of race allow them to consider themselves white, even though some of them might not be accepted as such according to American standards” (Duany 2002: 260). Correspondingly, in her analysis of early 20th century census results, Lillian Guerra confirms that “black” was understood as “an extreme condition meriting little of no reason for affiliation. Thus, what people considered themselves *to be* is not as important as what people considered themselves *not to be*” (Guerra 1998: 237).

THE REJECTION OF INTERMEDIARY TERMS LIKE TRIGUEÑO IN FAVOR OF THE AFFIRMATION OF A NEGRO(A) IDENTITY ALSO APPEARS TO BE A USE THAT IS BECOMING MORE COMMON AMONG UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED PEOPLE.

It therefore becomes clear that US models of race define “white” as pure and establish a white vs. non-white dichotomy, while the Puerto Rico model defines “black” as pure or extreme, privileging a black vs. non-black dichotomy. In both cases, racial binaries provided general frameworks that oriented people as they navigated—even if they were offended or startled—through census categories. In that sense, the difficulty or distress people experienced with the 2000 census might have more to do with the inadequacy of the context usage and the breach of previous expectations created by government discourses, than with the use of a racial binary or black/white dichotomy itself. Thus, I agree with Vargas-Ramos (2005) and Duany (2002) that the categories used in the census of 2000 were not adequate. Including intermediate racial categories such as *trigueño* or *mulato* in the census would have conformed much more to what Puerto Ricans expect for such “formal” procedures.¹⁴ However, this does not mean that binary constructions of race are inadequate for describing other contexts of Puerto Rican social life or that such constructions are generally at odds with Puerto Rican people’s self-concept.

Reasons why people use binary modes of racial identification in everyday interactions could be attributed to the above-mentioned dynamics, which deserve further study, particularly in terms of how Puerto Ricans construct “whiteness” and establish black vs. non-black dichotomies. Another topic for future research is exploring how black Puerto Ricans who experience racism come to positively affirm a negro identity in language and everyday contexts of interaction as they seek to resist discourses and practices that erase, whiten, make invisible, and exclude black people in Puerto Rico. Mariluz Franco and Doris Quiñonez’s

thesis “Mujeres puertorriqueñas negras: formas de resistencia y afirmación en la actualidad” is one of the few works to explore such self-affirming strategies among Puerto Rican women (Franco and Quiñonez 1993). The rejection of intermediary terms like *trigueño* in favor of the affirmation of a negro(a) identity also appears to be a use that is becoming more common among university-educated people. A participant in an internet blog says:

It is already common practice among people who have some education, to interrupt a speaker to clarify that he/she should say negro after hearing words like *trigueño*, *moreno*, *piel oscura* or some variant. Whites make it clear that people should say negro, among other things, to demonstrate how prejudice-free they are or how prejudice-free they would like their interrupted speaker to be. Blacks, on their part, make it clear that people should say negro in an act of social vindication; as a demonstration of pride and resistance to traditional prejudices. (Martínez 2006—author’s translation).

The author says he disagrees with imposing the use of a particular racial terminology onto others as if there were universal, unchanging reasons that dictate how one should express oneself. His own use of “whites” and “blacks” to describe the people he is referring to indicates that forms of binary classification are part of Puerto Rican people’s linguistic culture.

Questions pertaining to when, how, and why Puerto Ricans use binary black/white forms of classification deserves future study, considering that binary modes of race talk are not only used by anti-racist activists or well-educated, middle class internet bloggers, but are also evident in everyday interactions and in other popular linguistic forms of expression, such as the semantics of salsa, rumba, and rap (Rivera 2003; Abadía 2006).

Caribbean slipperiness: Some historical considerations

In documenting the co-existence of racial binaries with ambiguous forms of classification, it is important to ask what makes such shifts in slippery semantics socially apprehensible for Puerto Ricans? We have already mentioned the role of the state in constructing and erasing racial identities as well as the effects of broader, historical factors that date back to slavery and the plantation. Later, these factors informed the nationalist construction of Puerto Ricans as mixed and non-black. The stigma associated with “savages” coming from Africa, the various colonization processes, first by Spain then by the United States, also explain the “slipperiness” and discomfort people feel when discussing the subject of race, particularly when it is necessary to label anyone as “black.”

The linguistic slipperiness of Puerto Ricans with race also makes sense when examined against the historical backdrop of survival strategies long associated with Creole cultures of the Caribbean that rely on syncretism, cooptation, camouflage, and the indirect confrontation of power structures. In her study of Indo-Trinidadians, Virangini Munasinghe points out that “the behaviors and value orientations of Caribbean people repeatedly defy neat analytic compartmentalization because of the systematicity and ease with which they entertain multiplicity and contradiction” (Munasinghe 2001: 135). On a similar note, Lee Drummond has argued that Creole cultures are characterized by internal variation and change. Using Guyana as an example, he states: “Classification of an actual slice of behavior depends greatly on who is doing the classifying and where the behavior is taking place. The very practice that is regarded as ‘coolie’

or ‘Creole’ in Georgetown may be held up as fine example of ‘English’ behavior in the countryside or bush” (Drummond 1980: 357).

Scholars have also underscored this issue of ambiguity when referring to occupational multiplicity in plantation and post-plantation contexts, where the line between “slave,” “proletarian,” or peasant is not so clear cut (Mintz 1951; Trouillot 1992). Commenting on this issue, Trouillot states that these multiple adaptive strategies suggest two things:

First, that the systematicity with which people maintain multiplicity is prevalent enough for observers to phrase it, not in terms of movement between roles, but in terms of types of roles that include movement. Second, Caribbean people seem to have fewer problems than most in recognizing the fussiness and overlap of categories, and multiplicity is not confined to the economic realm or to the poor. (Trouillot 1992: 33)

Scholars of the Caribbean have attributed this intangible cultural disposition of Caribbean people to the deeply stratified nature of slave societies and the determinative role played by the plantation system in framing contemporary Afro-American experiences (Burton 1997; Browne 2004; Benítez-Rojo 1989; Mintz 1974; Trouillot 1992; Safa 1987; Yelvington 2001). Their observations point us to colonized slave societies, in which slave participation in public institutions and other overt forms of cultural expression were prohibited. This resulted in a cultural system with a surreptitious quality that would challenge any attempts to neatly compartmentalize Caribbean life.

A number of Puerto Rican scholars have written about this surreptitious quality in Puerto Rican culture. Sociologist Ángel Quintero, for example, describes a multi-racial dispossessed, maroon-like peasantry in 16th century Puerto Rico, which sought to escape from the control of the Spanish crown by seeking refuge in the island’s interior. Quintero argues that this sector avoided direct conflict with Spanish authorities by displaying certain Hispanic marks of identity as a way of appeasing any possible tensions between them and the Spanish crown. Thus, a cultural camouflage disguised those who could be perceived as foreign or black (Quintero 1992). In a similar vein, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones talks about *el arte de bregar* (the art of dealing with/working through something [my translation]) as a cultural code or non-written law, practiced among Puerto Ricans, that seeks to mitigate conflict without having to directly oppose the other, use violence, or “lose face” in the process of trying (Díaz Quiñones 2000: 22–3). In addition, contributors of the recent publication *None of the Above* (Negrón-Muntaner 2007) point out that ambiguity around political status prevails in Puerto Rico because people have grown tired of the idea that a well-defined resolution of status will give the state greater presence in their lives, preferring, instead, to circumvent or re-signify the state and its laws (Picó 2007)¹⁵:

Status ambiguity prevails in Puerto Rico, not because people are indifferent or indecisive, but because it allows a wide range of individual and group identities to coexist without completely spoiling each other. Within this ambiguous space, there are undoubtedly tremendous conflicts, inequities and frustrations. Yet there is a place for many contradictory versions of community and self. (Negrón-Muntaner 2007: 10)

The above descriptions of Creole dynamics as furtive, indirect, favoring the avoidance of conflict, and tolerant of contradictions resonate with certain aspects of slippery

semantics and moments when speakers avoid the consistent use of racial labels during a conversation because they consider it offensive, because they want to refrain from constructing their interlocutor as a victim or perpetrator of racism, or because they can better construct solidarity based on other social variables such as gender, class, sexuality, geographic location, or political affiliation. At the same time, the possibility of shifting between binary modes of racial classification and more ambiguous modes also allows for the co-existence of different constructions of community and self, as pointed out by Negrón-Muntaner. In that sense, slippery semantics can be theorized as an inherently Caribbean manifestation that, as Trouillot states, is best understood “not in terms of movement between roles, but in terms of types of roles that include movement” (Trouillot 1992: 33). Rather than describing slippery semantics as a speech strategy that presupposes a shift of racial identities, it is best to consider it as a strategy that depends on the conceptualization of racial identities as mobile in the first place. Much like Creole dynamics that mirror structural power difference in their attempt to challenge, collapse, and mediate the social tensions of colonialism in post-slave societies, slippery semantics mirror tensions and contradictions informed by social asymmetry and racialization in the Caribbean and Puerto Rico (West-Durán 2005: 57–8).

Conclusion

In this article, I define slippery semantics as a particular form of race talk, prevalent in Puerto Rico, that is consistently inconsistent in its use of racial terminology and in the system of racial classification itself. Grids of racial classification can include multiple racial terms to describe the same individual or the consistent use of binary white/black labels, or black vs. non-black identities. Such linguistic inconsistencies mirror the uncertain place of race in current public and private discourse, as well as the compromise that slavery and colonialism, first by Spain and then by the US, placed upon the humanity of the racialized subject in Puerto Rico.

In taking account of this historical trajectory, I argue that slippery semantics operates in the context of contradictory forces and tensions among blanqueamiento, ideologies of race mixture, racial democracy, and the institutional annihilation of blackness in government discourses and bureaucracies of Puerto Rico. Caribbean dynamics of camouflage, syncretism, and ambiguity are also mentioned as providing historical foundation for this linguistic culture.

This article also addresses some of the social effects of using slippery semantics in everyday interactions. I argue that everyday exchanges, in which racial identity is inconsistently conferred, challenge the construction of stable marks of racial identity during the course of everyday encounters and conversations. For this reason, 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 kinds of solidarities (including racial solidarity) in everyday encounters. Thus, speakers might avoid the consistent use of racial labels during a conversation because they prefer cultivating social ties based on variables that are not racial; or use binary modes of race talk to clearly establish insider/outsider status based on race, among many other alternatives. In that sense, slippery semantics has important social effects, not only because of the complexity that it adds to the differentiation in question, but also because it reflects and constitutes relationships among speakers, creating or manifesting respect, distance, intimacy, or solidarity.

A final word of caution is in order regarding scholarship that links racial mixture and the multiplicity of racial terminologies to interpretations that minimize racial

prejudice in Puerto Rico and Afro-Latin America. All the ethnographic examples presented in this article manifest that there is an evident racial hierarchy informing the different stories told and the linguistic style people use to tell it. Emphasizing semantic fluidity and its strong dependence on context should not, therefore, render racial hierarchies less powerful in Puerto Rico or Latin America. On the contrary, the strong connection between racial identification processes and context of usage precisely evidences the salience of “race” and people’s efforts to maneuver its different social effects on their everyday relationships and conversations.

I ARGUE THAT SLIPPERY SEMANTICS OPERATES IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTRADICTORY FORCES AND TENSIONS AMONG BLANQUEAMIENTO, IDEOLOGIES OF RACE MIXTURE, RACIAL DEMOCRACY, AND THE INSTITUTIONAL ANULATION OF BLACKNESS IN GOVERNMENT DISCOURSES AND BUREAUCRACIES OF PUERTO RICO.

Thus, rather than interpreting slippery semantics as the cover of an otherwise straightforward racial reality, I consider it a malleable, historically informed speech strategy that people can employ to mediate the very complex effects that racial hierarchies have upon social encounters. In the process, people might create and re-create classificatory grids of race as they engage in conversation to be strategically essentialist or ambiguous. Whether they succeed does not always depend on the speakers, but on how others perceive them and the somatic, socioeconomic restrictions that social and historical conditions place on their efforts. Hence, I am not arguing that people always have the power to define, negotiate, or determine the consequences of their racialization in everyday encounters. Racial semantics might be slippery, but racism is not. What I am arguing is that people will try to circumvent, get by, confront, resignify, challenge, and, in some cases, reproduce those constraints through language. In this sense, I do not see slippery semantics as an escape from “race”—even if my previous use of the term “fugitive” in *semántica fugitiva* could indicate otherwise (Godreau 2000). Rather, I see it as a linguistic way of dealing with—though not necessarily resolving—the conflicts, contradictions, anxieties, and destabilizing effects of racism. Key questions that have guided this article are not, therefore, “What does slippery semantics hide?” or “How are US binary models of race misrepresenting Puerto Rico?” The key question is “What can these forms

of race talk and their respective cosmologies tell us about people's efforts to deal with racial hierarchies in everyday encounters?" And, more important, "how can we incorporate the lessons learned into an antiracist agenda that empowers and doesn't alienate those who so skillfully try to maneuver their semantic effects."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is a different version of an earlier one published in 2000 and entitled "La semántica fugitiva" (2000). I thank Antonio Díaz Royo, Hal Barton, Mariluz Franco-Ortiz, Juan José Baldrich, Jorge Giovannetti, Mareia Quintero, and Juan Giusti for the input and support they provided when I wrote the first version. For this new version, I thank Jane Ramirez for the translation of certain sections of the article, Errol Montes for his support and comments, Yarimar Bonilla for her incisive and critical reading; the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas in Austin for inviting me to spend time to write at the campus, Shannon Speed for her hospitality while in Austin, and the excellent working crew of the Institute of Interdisciplinary Research at UPR-Cayey for their support while I was away writing. I am also grateful for the keen comments and criticism provided by the anonymous reviewers of this article. Some of the new research and writing done for this article was supported by NIH Grant 5-P20 MD000112-03 (RIMI program). Some of the data included here from that project were gathered and analyzed with the help of Mariluz Franco Ortíz, Mariolga Reyes Cruz, and Sherry Cuadrado. The views expressed here are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NIH or other contributors.

NOTES

- ¹ First names are used with the approval of informants. In other cases, pseudonyms are used or no name is used at all.
- ² My use of the term "accurate" does not refer to the unbiased application of biological criteria (since no such criteria exists for race) but rather to the application of culturally meaningful categories that make sense to people in the Puerto Rican context.
- ³ Guerra recognizes that such alliances across race or class interests could be fragile and artificial. Her point, however, is that such popular forms of expression (which relied on the affirmation of racial hierarchies and the acceptance of a white ideal) also served to augment the bonds of solidarity on which people relied for survival (Guerra 1998: 236).
- ⁴ Discourses of blanqueamiento privilege whiteness as a desirable, achievable status that can supposedly be attained through the gradual shedding of African blood and cultural practices via mixture (read assimilation) with white/European biological, or cultural elements (Burdick 1992; de la Fuente 2001; Rodríguez-Vázquez 2004; Stephan 1991; Wade 1993; Whitten and Torres 1998).
- ⁵ The term "Puerto Rican colored" is not a translation as it was originally used in English during the interview.
- ⁶ See other examples of popular sayings and racist jokes in Guerra (1998: 235–8) and Zenón-Cruz (1975: 273).
- ⁷ Robin Sheriff also notes that her informants in Brazil used binary forms of racial identification in jokes and when they talked to her about their encounters with racism (Sheriff 2001: 45). However, she distinguishes these binary conceptions of race from other forms of talk she calls descriptive or pragmatic, which have the deceptive implications of polite speech—or which are plays of language that do not seek to classify people in terms of "race," but merely describe them in terms of color. I, on the other hand, conceptualize all terms of color, no matter whether they are euphemistic or binary, as having possible pragmatic implications in everyday encounters.
- ⁸ The bracket indicates ideas expressed in a previous section of the interview.

9 In a previous article (Godreau 2000), I established a sharp distinction between slippery semantics and binary forms of racial identification. In that article, slippery semantics was an indicator of people's discomfort with the issue of race and of their efforts to build alternative solidarities based on more socially accepted identities. In this essay, I do not theorize binary forms of classification as being distinct from slippery semantics. On the contrary, I theorize slippery semantics as a much broader, mediating, linguistic mechanism of social interaction that can also include binary forms of racial classification.

10 Some scholars make the distinction between "color" terms as a descriptive terminology that is not necessarily used to classify people into discrete groups or fractions (i.e. *sarará* [Brazil], *jabao*, *trigueño* or *pardo* [Brazil]) and "racial" terms (*blanco/negro*), which are considered to be constitutive of racial identity and are binary in nature (Sheriff 2001; Costa Vargas 2004).

11 For a debate about the imposition of US racial categories and frameworks of analysis on the Brazilian context, see Bairros (1996), Fry (2000), and French (2000).

12 See Torres (1998).

13 For a discussion of the imposition of US census categories in Hawaii, see Virginia Domínguez (1998).

14 Vargas-Ramos (2005) conducted a survey in the town of Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, which demonstrates the impact of adding a term like "trigueño" in the census. His survey included the categories of White, Black, Trigueño, and Other. Results for the 2000 census—which did not include the term *trigueño*—indicate that an overwhelming majority—83.6 percent of those responding in Aguadilla—identified as white. In his survey, however, only 34.7 percent of Aguadilla residents identified as white, and 41 percent identified as *trigueño*.

15 Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain from 1493 until 1898, when Spain ceded the island to the US as a result of their loss in the Spanish-American-Cuban war. Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917, but with limited representation and rights. Since 1952 the political status of the island is known as *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA) or commonwealth. Puerto Rico has its own constitution and locally elected government, but legal sovereignty over the island rests in the US Congress. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans hold the US passport and serve in the US military but cannot vote for the US president; moreover, representation in Congress is limited to a representative who can speak but has no voting rights.

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