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THE CITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

As a researcher of race and racial stratification in Puerto Rico, I look forward to discussing the readings and topics of this seminar. My current research interests focus on how racialized and hierarchical notions of “self” and “other” play a role in organizing spaces, communities, and the distribution of resources in urban environments. I am especially eager to gain hands on experience with Geographic Information System (GIS) technology and to learn about methods used to understand the effects of environmental hazards on vulnerable urban populations.

In my most recent book manuscript, entitled *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism and US Colonialism in Puerto Rico* I explore how the geopolitical influence of the United States informs the processes of racialization in Puerto Rico, including the construction of “black places” or communities that are romantically constructed as a folkloric sites of the past or type casted as modern urban sites of danger, drug-dealing and crime. I explored the effects of national discourses of *blanqueamiento* or whitening that circumscribe blackness to a place, conveying the sense that blackness is different or exceptional from the context of the larger “mixed” nation.

Now that I have completed this book project, I am ready to develop a new research agenda that can be carried in collaboration with other researchers and colleagues at my home institution and engage a multi-disciplinary group of undergraduate students as research assistants. The Institute of Interdisciplinary Research (IIR) where I work at the University of Puerto Rico in Cayey precisely promotes the development of such applied interdisciplinary research projects that can engage students and provide them with the research experiences they need to enter graduate school. The new project I will like to develop in collaboration with colleagues from economics, environmental studies, epidemiology and others at my Institution, will apply a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to asses the effects of racial segregation in the University’s service region and urban areas. Specifically it will explore the social, economic, environmental and health related consequences of living in communities that are labeled “black” in Puerto Rico.

Most studies about race and racism in Puerto Rico (including my own) have been qualitative in nature and have only been able to determine the effects of racial discrimination in specific communities or social milieus. This is partly due to the fact that the commonwealth government in PR does not systematically collect or produce race-based statistics. The population census is the only source for demographic information that includes race as a variable. However, racial categories included in the Puerto Rican questionnaire copied those used for the US and were exceedingly criticized for being culturally inappropriate for the Puerto Rican context. Moreover, the combined effect of having inaccurate racial labels and an overt bias in favor of whiteness (*blanqueamiento*), produced striking statistical results for a Caribbean Island as only 12% of the general Island population self-identified as black, and an overwhelming majority of 74.5% identified as “white,” (US Census Bureau, 2010).

The research project I would like to undertake proposes to use consensus analysis in order to determine which geographical areas –towns or communities -- people in Puerto Rico identify as “black”. I argue that such labeling will have significant consequences in an Island that overwhelmingly imagines itself as white or at least as “non-black”. Once communities are identified and mapped, the research team will be able to explore the effects – in terms of life-chances, exposure to environmental hazards, property value, and access to services and resources --that such racialization processes have for residents. I believe this approach can produce more generalized, systematic results and demographically sound data about the effects of racialization in Puerto Rico, where other more reliable methods for collecting data on race are not available.

Lessons learned from this seminar will help me design a new interdisciplinary research agenda that takes spatial analysis, environmental effects, and the unequal impacts of urban development into consideration for the study of social and racial stratification. My short-term goal is to use the knowledge gained to develop a small research grant (with seed-funds provided by my institution) to begin gathering data on how these issues manifest themselves in the surrounding communities. The seminar will also enable me to be better prepared to work with colleagues from the natural sciences who can collaborate in this research and in the future preparation of a grant proposal to seek external funding for this project. Hence, learning about the local and global environmental impacts of urban development and the dimensions of inequality that results from such processes will not only benefit my conceptualization of the project at this initial stage, but will also enhance my capacity for leading a multidisciplinary team of researchers and students in the future. I look forward to the opportunity.