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Author(s): Mara Loveman

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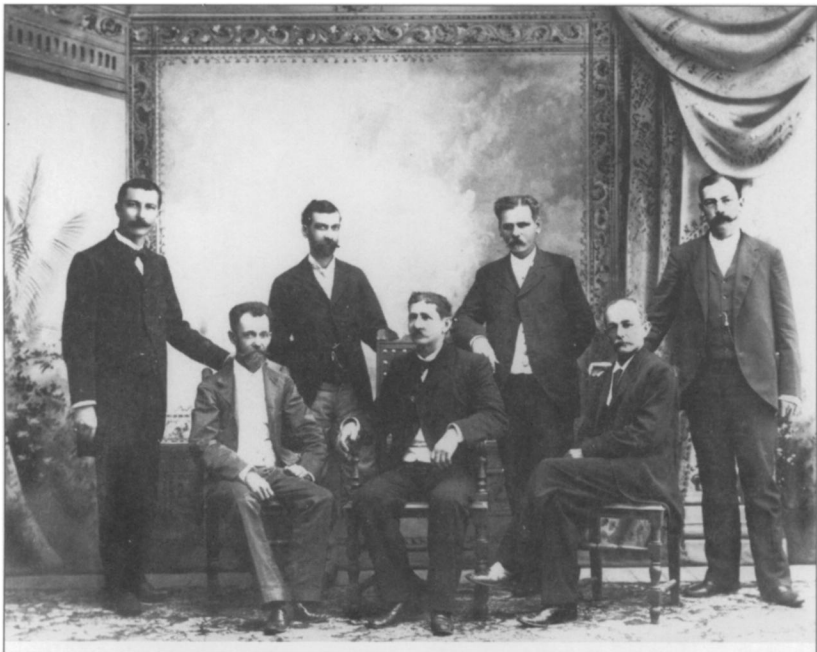


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Enumerators and supervisors of Puerto Rican census, n.d.,  
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# THE U.S. CENSUS AND THE CONTESTED RULES OF RACIAL CLASSIFICATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY PUERTO RICO

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*Mara Loveman*

## ABSTRACT

Official census results for many Latin American countries in the early twentieth century show gradually whitening national populations. Puerto Rican censuses in this period reveal a similar whitening trend. In Puerto Rico, uniquely and counter-intuitively, such statistics were generated by the U.S. Census Bureau, an agency institutionally committed to a restrictive definition of whiteness. Using new data from the 1910 and 1920 Puerto Rican censuses, this article analyzes the administrative practices that underlay Puerto Rico's whitening census results. Juxtaposition of (1) the U.S. Census Bureau's official enumerator instructions; (2) Puerto Rican enumerators' *de facto* classificatory practices, and (3) Puerto Rican census supervisors' post-enumeration edits of enumerators' work, reveals that census-taking was a site of active contestation over the demarcation of racial boundaries in Puerto Rico under U.S. colonial rule. Puerto Rican enumerators often departed from their official instructions in reporting the race of fellow Puerto Ricans, and they did so much more in 1920 than in 1910. Supervisors, meanwhile, worked to enforce the Census Bureau's classificatory rules through post-hoc "correction" of enumerators' work. The intra-agency struggle over the racial classification of Puerto Ricans in the census resulted in a *de facto* rejection of the Census Bureau's criteria for *defining* whiteness coupled with a tacit acceptance of the United States of America's systematic *privileging* of whiteness.

**Keywords:** Puerto Rico, race, census, population, colonialism, 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## RESUMEN

Los resultados de los censos oficiales de muchos países latinoamericanos en las primeras décadas del siglo XX muestran el blanqueamiento gradual de las poblaciones nacionales. Los censos de Puerto

Rico en este período revelan una tendencia de blanqueamiento similar. En Puerto Rico, de forma aislada y contra lo que sería de esperar, tales estadísticas fueron generadas por la Oficina del Censo de los Estados Unidos, una agencia comprometida como institución al uso de una definición restrictiva de “blancura”. Usando nuevos datos de los censos de Puerto Rico de 1910 y 1920, este artículo analiza las prácticas administrativas que subyacen a los resultados oficiales de blanqueamiento de la población puertorriqueña. La yuxtaposición de (1) las instrucciones oficiales a los empadronadores de la oficina del censo de los Estados Unidos; (2) las prácticas clasificatorias de hecho de los empadronadores puertorriqueños; y (3) las correcciones posteriores al empadronamiento hechas por los supervisores de los empadronadores, también puertorriqueños, revela que el censo demográfico era un foco de confrontación activa sobre la demarcación de los límites raciales en Puerto Rico bajo el dominio colonial de los Estados Unidos. Los empadronadores puertorriqueños a menudo ignoraron las instrucciones oficiales para la clasificación racial de la población puertorriqueña, y dicho fenómeno se dio con más intensidad en 1920 que en 1910. Los supervisores, a su vez, trabajaron para hacer cumplir las reglas clasificatorias de la oficina del censo mediante la corrección *post hoc* del trabajo de los empadronadores. La lucha en el interior de la agencia sobre la clasificación racial de los puertorriqueños dio lugar al rechazo de hecho de los criterios de la oficina del censo para *definir* la blancura, así como a la aceptación tácita de la práctica sistemática norteamericana de *privilegiar* la blancura.

**Palabras clave:** Puerto Rico, raza, censo, población, colonialismo, siglo XX

### RÉSUMÉ

Les résultats de recensement officiels dans beaucoup de pays latino-américains durant les dix premières années du XX siècle présentent le blanchiment graduel des populations nationales. Les recensements de Porto Rico durant cette période indiquent une tendance de blanchiment semblable. De façon isolée et contrairement à ce qu'on attendait, des statistiques ont été produites à Porto Rico par le bureau de recensements des États-Unis, une agence institutionnellement investie dans une définition restrictive du «blancheur». En utilisant de nouvelles données des recensements de Porto Rico de 1910 et 1920, l'article présente une analyse des pratiques administratives qui est au dessous de celle des résultats du recensement de blanchiment de la population portoricaine. Juxtaposition (1) des instructions officielles aux agents du bureau de recensement des États-Unis; (2)

des pratiques en matière de classification des faits aux agents recenseurs portoricain. (3) Les corrections réalisées par des surveillants du bureau de recensement des États-Unis y de Porto Rico révèlent que le recensement était un espace de confrontation active sur la délimitation des frontières raciales à Porto Rico selon la règle coloniale des États-Unis. Les agents recenseurs portoricains se sont souvent écartés les instructions officielles de classification raciale de la population portoricaine, ce phénomène a eu plus d'ampleur durant les années 1920 qu'en 1910. Pour sa part, les surveillants ont travaillé dans le but d'imposer les règles de classification du bureau de recensement moyennant les corrections *post-hoc* du travail des agents recenseurs. La lutte à l'intérieur de l'agence sur la classification raciale des portoricains a eu comme conséquence le refus des critères du bureau de recensement pour *définir* ce qu'il entend par «blancheur» ainsi que l'acceptation tacite de la pratique systématique nord-américaine de *favoriser* les blancs.

**Mots-clés:** Porto Rico, race, recensement, population, colonialisme, 20ème siècle

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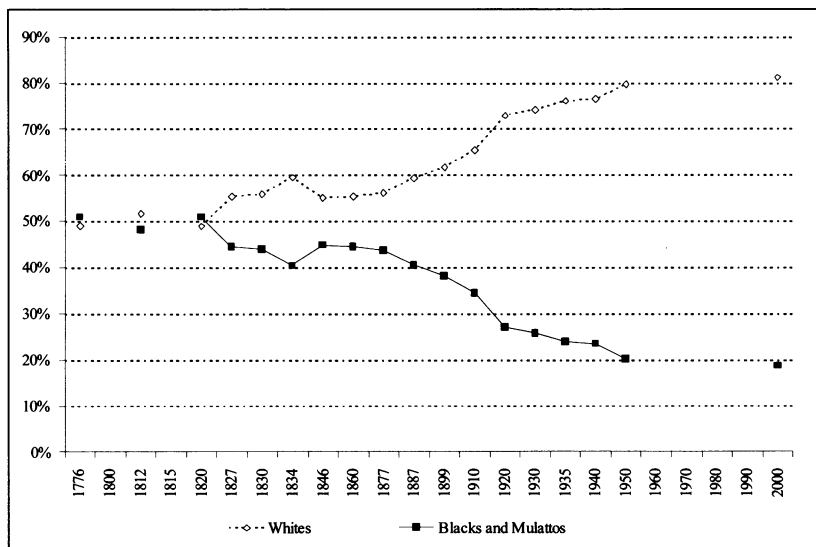
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## Introduction

“The surprising preponderance of the white race,” began an article published in *National Geographic Magazine* in 1900, was among the “main facts revealed by the Census of Porto Rico, taken October 16, 1899, under the supervision of the War Department” (*National Geographic* 1900:328). Even more surprising, the numerical majority of “whites” in Puerto Rico’s population would increase markedly in the first decades of U.S. imperial rule. From 61.8 percent of the island’s population in 1899, the proportion of Puerto Ricans reported by census-takers as white would rise to 73 percent by 1920. By 1950, the reported white share of Puerto Rico’s population reached nearly 80 percent, very close to the percentage of Puerto Ricans on the island who self-identified as white in the 2000 Census (Figure 1).

On the surface, the whitening trend in Puerto Rico’s official census results resembles a pattern observable in the censuses of many Latin American and Caribbean countries during the first part of the twentieth century. Confronted with scientific theories that linked a nation’s prospects for development to the racial make-up of the popu-

**Figure 1**  
**The Whitening of Puerto Rico: Percent of Population**  
**by Year and “Race”**



*Sources:* From 1765 to 1887, Vázquez Calzada (1988:8), based on Abbad y Lasierra (1866); Flinter (1834); Coll y Toste (1899); US War Department (1900). From 1897 and after, Duany (2002:248) based on statistics reported in Administración de Reconstrucción de Puerto Rico (1938); Departamento de la Guerra (1900); U.S. Bureau of the Census (1913), (1921), (1932), (1943a), (1953a), (2001).

lation, modernizing elites throughout much of the region sought ways to promote, and publicize, the “racial improvement” of their respective populations.<sup>1</sup> Published volumes of national census results were often marshaled towards this end. For state and nation-builders in early twentieth-century Latin America, national censuses were ideal venues to assert their countries’ inevitable demographic escape from the dire predictions of scientific racial determinism. From Cuba to Argentina, and from Brazil to Mexico, official census results from the early part of the twentieth century appear to document the gradual whitening—or at least lightening—of national populations (Loveman 2001; Clark 1998; Nobles 2000).

But Puerto Rico’s statistical whitening differed from the documentation of “racial improvement” in the published census results of many other Latin American countries in at least one crucial respect.

Puerto Rico's whitening census results were not generated by the central statistics agency of an independent and modernizing nation-state. Rather, Puerto Rico's twentieth-century statistics were produced by the long-established Census Bureau of an *imperialist* state—and not just any imperialist state, but one that had demonstrated time and again its ideological and institutional commitment to *policing* the boundaries of whiteness. In regional comparative perspective, Puerto Rico's whitening census results stand apart as an historical anomaly: Why would official demographic statistics produced and disseminated by the U.S. Census Bureau—an agency actively committed, in the early twentieth century, to maintaining the “integrity” of the white racial category in census enumeration—show a population becoming significantly whiter from one census to the next?

New Public-Use Micro-Samples (PUMS) of the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Censuses of Puerto Rico provide unprecedented leverage to address this historical puzzle. These new datasets are a rich source of demographic information for early twentieth-century Puerto Rico (Velyvis et al., *this issue*). Analysis of these data using demographic methods reveals that differential rates of fertility, mortality, and net migration cannot account for the rapid shift in the racial composition of Puerto Rico's population in this period; rather, the statistical whitening of Puerto Rico between 1910 and 1920 reflects changes in how race was classified on census returns (Loveman and Muniz 2007). To understand why Puerto Rico's censuses show a rapidly whitening population in this period thus requires analysis of the contested classificatory practices that underlay the official results.

Fortunately, the 1910 and 1920 Puerto Rican PUMS are not only valuable as *tools* of historical analysis; they are also uniquely revealing as *objects* of historical analysis. The census forms themselves provide surprising new information about the behind-the-scenes administrative practices through which Puerto Rico's census results were generated. Specifically, close examination of the 1910 and 1920 Puerto Rico census returns reveals that at two distinct points in the U.S. Census Bureau's administrative process for generating official demographic statistics there were discordant views about how to classify the Puerto Rican population. First, there was a marked discrepancy between the official instructions for racial classification issued to Puerto Rican census enumerators by the U.S. Census Bureau, and the way enumerators classified their fellow Puerto Ricans in practice. This discrepancy was present in both 1910 and 1920, *but the gap*

*between official instructions and de facto classificatory practice by enumerators grew substantially between censuses.* Second, in thousands of cases in 1910 and 1920, the racial classifications of Puerto Ricans as originally filled in by Puerto Rican census enumerators were subsequently changed. On several thousand census returns—and with much greater frequency in 1920 than in 1910—*individuals' racial classifications were manually crossed out, and a different "race" was written in.* These post-enumeration edits, it turns out, were done by a select group of Puerto Ricans hired to supervise and “correct” the work of fellow Puerto Rican enumerators.

Evidently, census enumeration was a site of active contestation over the rules of racial classification in U.S. occupied Puerto Rico. The census was a highly visible and politically charged component of the broader U.S. government effort to “modernize” Puerto Rican society. As such, the census became an arena of symbolic struggle over the demarcation of racial boundaries on the island. For the most part, the maneuvers in this classificatory struggle (Bourdieu 1990) took place out of public view, buried in the unglamorous administrative work of conducting a comprehensive demographic census. Analysis of the administrative rules and practices that underlay the official published census results brings the contending visions of racial divisions in early twentieth-century Puerto Rican society into sharp relief.

Through close examination and juxtaposition of (1) official enumerator instructions issued by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1910 and 1920; (2) enumerators' *de facto* classificatory practices, and (3) census supervisors' post-enumeration edits of enumerators' work, this article traces how competition between contending views of racial difference in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico played out in an administrative context—the filling out of census forms—where only one way of defining race could prevail. In part, analysis of census-taking in 1910-1920 Puerto Rico highlights the clash between American and Puerto Rican understandings of race following the U.S. takeover of the island. The discrepancy between the official enumerator instructions and *de facto* classificatory practices illuminates how Puerto Ricans who worked for the Census Bureau mediated the American agency's formalize rules of racial classification through their own tacit understanding of how to sort people into racial categories.

At the same time, however, the “backstage” work done by Puerto Rican census supervisors suggests that the image of a two-way contest between American and Puerto Rican racial paradigms is too simplis-



tic, obscuring the heterogeneity of ideas about racial difference that coexisted *within* each of these contexts in the early twentieth century. The well-worn trope of describing the collision, with U.S. imperialist expansion, of two diametrically opposed racial (il)logics —the rigid, ancestry-obsessed “one drop rule” heralded by the imperial power, versus the more situationally-flexible, continuous, and phenotypically-weighted social definition of race held by the colonized— overstates the ideological uniformity and coherence of racial thought in both Puerto Rico and the mainland United States in this period. On the “American” side, the idea that any trace of African ancestry made an individual “black” was not fully embraced across the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, nor even by the U.S. Census Bureau itself —which retained a category for “mixed” individuals through the 1920 Census (Washington 2006; Nobles 2000; Davis 1991).<sup>2</sup> On the Puerto Rican side, recent scholarship reveals that beliefs about racial difference varied across different segments of the island’s population; class position, region, gender and occupation all contributed to the ways in which racialist ideas and racialized practices were experienced by Puerto Ricans in the early twentieth century (Go 2004; Guerra 1998, Rodríguez Silva 2004; del Moral 2006).

This article contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to describe and explain the stratified landscape of ideas about racial difference in societies bound together through empire (Go 2004; Glassman 2004; Stoler 1989, 1992). Within the circumscribed context of census enumeration in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, contending understandings of the correct way to sort the population into discrete racial kinds came head to head. Given that official census results show a rapid increase in the white population between 1910 and 1920, we know whose understanding of how to classify individuals into racial categories won out in the end —in this specific domain, if not more broadly. Puerto Rican census enumerators’ increasingly liberal use of the category “white” fueled the rapid whitening of census results between 1910 and 1920 (see Loveman and Muniz 2007). By analyzing not only the final census results, but the stages of classificatory competition that produced them, this article illuminates how seemingly mundane colonial administrative practices —and subversion of these practices by the colonized— can contribute to the social redefinition of racial boundaries in colonized societies (cf. Longman 2001).

The concluding discussion provides a preliminary explanation for *why* Puerto Rican census enumerators —unlike their fellow Puerto

Rican supervisors— did not adhere to the Census Bureau’s rules for racial classification on the census, and why their divergence from the official instructions increased between 1910 and 1920. The shift in census enumerators’ classificatory decisions from 1910 to 1920 is revealing of the consequences of U.S. imperial rule for the social demarcation of racial boundaries on the island.

### **The Official Rules of Racial Classification: Examining Enumerator Instructions**

Censuses taken by imperial states tend to impose categories on subject populations that reflect colonizers’ visions of the relevant divisions in the population, rather than the distinctions most relevant to the colonized (Jenkins 1994; Hirschman 1987; Domínguez 1998). It could be argued that the first U.S. Censuses of Puerto Rico were not technically colonial censuses, because the island was designated a territory —not a colony— of the United States. But like colonial censuses elsewhere, U.S. censuses in Puerto Rico privileged questions and categories deemed relevant to the occupying state. Indeed, the default policy of the U.S. Census Bureau in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico was to translate directly the mainland census into Spanish, making as few concessions as possible to the local context (Schor 2001:389-92).

Of course, the Americans were not the first to use racial categories to classify and count the residents of the island of Puerto Rico. The Spanish imperial state also conducted censuses, imposing queries and categorical distinctions, and delimiting the scope of enumeration, in accordance with its own specific interests in the colony. Notably, a modest and uneven version of Puerto Rico’s whitening trend had appeared already in the nineteenth-century statistics produced by the Spanish colonial government.<sup>3</sup> The statistical whitening of Puerto Rico’s population did not begin with the U.S. occupation of the island.

But the whitening of the population in census results did *intensify dramatically* in the first decades of U.S. imperial rule. The very steep rise in the white share of the enumerated population between 1899 and 1920 in particular (see Figure 1), suggests that the colonial relationship to the United States stimulated a sudden acceleration of what had been a very gradual and uneven whitening trend under Spanish imperial rule. Indeed, the “white” share of Puerto Rico’s population increased faster in the first two decades of U.S. colonial rule than in any other period before or since.

Previous accounts of Puerto Rico's whitening census results in the early twentieth century suggest that the use of U.S. racial categories to enumerate the Puerto Rican population may have contributed to the statistical whitening of the population in this period. In a recent discussion of U.S. imperialism and racial ideology in Puerto Rico, Jorge Duany (2002:250) argues that the United States government brought "a binary race model to a fluid multiracial situation in Puerto Rico." From the perspective of the U.S. state, Puerto Rico was always divided between "'pure whites and those who are not'" (Duany 2002:250, citing U.S. War Department 1900:57). The dichotomous and ancestry-based understanding of race imposed by the United States contrasted with the more fluid, continuous, and appearance-and-status based popular understandings of race in Puerto Rico (see Godreau 2000). Duany suggests it was the mismatch between dichotomous official census categories and more continuous popular understandings of race that drove the statistical whitening of Puerto Rico in the first half of the twentieth century.

While official use of dichotomous racial categories in a context where people are accustomed to using more varied racial terminology may account for some of the whitening of census results that occurred *after 1930*, it cannot explain the much more intensive whitening of Puerto Rico's population that took place *up to 1920*. The reason for this is that before 1930, the U.S. Census in Puerto Rico included a "mulatto" category as an official option on the census. "Mulatto" was also an official category on the mainland census in 1910 and 1920. Indeed, in 1910 and 1920 the three primary racial categories and the rules for their use were almost exactly the same in Puerto Rico and in the mainland (see Table 1).

In both 1910 and 1920, the U.S. Census Bureau's official instructions to enumerators for classifying individuals by race embodied a biological (il)logic of racial group membership; race was assumed to be biologically inherited, and racial ancestry was presumed to be detectable—that is, *visible to enumerators*—via phenotypic traits. Whether in the U.S. mainland or in Puerto Rico, enumerators were instructed to distinguish whites from non-whites by invoking a one drop rule. In practice, this meant they were charged with the task of detecting traces of "black blood" by looking for phenotypic features associated with "blackness." Notably, however, prior to 1930, the "one drop rule" as used in the context of the census interview, was invoked to distinguish whites from non-whites, *but it did not automatically*

**Table 1**  
**Enumerator Instructions for Assigning Race in the U.S. Census, 1910-1920**

|      | INSTRUCTIONS TO<br>ENUMERATORS<br>IN PUERTO RICO  | INSTRUCTIONS TO<br>ENUMERATORS<br>ON THE U.S. CONTINENT   |
|------|---|---|
| 1910 | <p>Write 'B' for <i>blanco</i> [white], 'N' for <i>negro</i> [black], and 'Mu' for mulatto, as the case may be.</p> <p>For the purpose of the census, the word '<i>negro</i>' (N) includes all blacks of pure race, while the word 'mulatto' (Mu) includes all blacks that are not pure race, but that have traces of black blood, whether in half, fourth, eighth or sixteenth degree, as the case may be.</p>               | <p>Write "W" for white; "B" for black; "Mu" for mulatto; "Ch" for Chinese; "Jp" for Japanese; "In" for Indian. For all persons not falling within one of these classes, write "Ot" (for other), and write on the left-hand margin of the schedule the race of the person so indicated.</p> <p>For census purposes, the term 'black' (B) includes all persons who are evidently full-blooded negroes, while the term 'mulatto' (Mu) includes all other persons having some proportion or perceptible trace of negro blood</p>    |
| 1920 | <p>Write 'B' for <i>blanco</i> [white], 'N' for <i>negro</i> [black], 'Mu' for mulatto, 'Chi' for Chinese, 'Jp' for Japanese, and 'Ot' for Other as the case may be.</p> <p>For the purpose of the census, the word '<i>negro</i>' (N) includes [<i>abraza</i>] all blacks who are of pure race, while the word 'mulatto' (Mu) includes all blacks who are not of pure race, but who have some proportion of white blood.</p> | <p>Write "W" for white, "B" for black; "Mu" for mulatto; "In" for Indian; "Ch" for Chinese; "Jp" for Japanese; "Fil" for Filipino; "Hin" for Hindu; "Kor" for Korean. For all persons not falling within one of these classes, write "Ot" (for other), and write on the left-hand margin of the schedule the race of the person so indicated.</p> <p>For census purposes the term 'black' (B) includes all Negroes of full blood, while the term 'mulatto' (Mu) includes all Negroes having some proportion of white blood.</p> |

Sources: Departamento de Comercio y Trabajo 1910:24; Departamento de Comercio 1919:20; <http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/voliii/inst1910.html>, item 109; <http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/voliii/inst1920.html>, item 121.

*group all non-whites of African descent together as "black".* That is, "one drop" of black blood was sufficient to rule out an individual's classification as "white", but it did not automatically define an individual as "black." In the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Censuses of Puerto Rico—as on the mainland—an intermediate space was maintained for those who were "neither black nor white" (Degler 1971).

It is notable that while enumerators were provided with explicit rules for arbitrating the boundary between mulatto and black, the official instructions were silent on the matter of how to identify who was white. The U.S. Census Bureau apparently presumed the boundary between white and non-white to be sufficiently self-evident—even in Puerto Rico—to make any such clarification unnecessary. There might be some ambiguity between "mulattos" and "blacks", but anyone with any trace of "black blood" was to be excluded from the possibility of being classified as "white."

The specific terms used to describe this one drop rule shifted very slightly from 1910 to 1920, in both Puerto Rico and the mainland. In both 1910 and 1920, census enumerators were told to be on the lookout for individuals with "impurity of blood," but there was a subtle change between censuses in precisely how enumerators were prompted to *discern* racial impurity. In 1910, enumerators were alerted to be on the lookout for mulattos as "impure blacks" with any trace of *black* blood. In 1920, enumerators were alerted to be on the lookout for mulattos as "impure blacks" with any trace of *white* blood."<sup>4</sup>

The semantic shift in the Census Bureau's explication of how to differentiate "mulattos" in the population is not attributable to conditions or concerns of U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico. Rather, the change in the Census Bureau's instructions was an artifact of the Census Bureau's direct involvement in scientific debates in the U.S. mainland over the putative problem of "mulatto degeneracy" (Nobles 2000). In the early twentieth century, the statistics generated by the Census Bureau were central to scientific debates about the intrinsic qualities of "blacks" and "mulattos" relative to "whites." The "mulatto" category in the U.S. Census was introduced and defended by scientists, including statisticians on the Census Bureau payroll, who believed that accurate racial data depended on the census recognizing mulattoes as a distinct racial type. In response to questions raised about the accuracy or usefulness of the data on race from the Census of 1890, which distinguished between "mulattoes," "quadroons" and "octoroons," a statistician at the Census Bureau defended the continued collection

of data on “mulattos,” but acknowledged that the simple distinction between “pure” and “impure” blacks would generate more reliable data than the attempt to capture degrees of mixture (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1906:189, cited in Nobles 2000:67). Thus, the wording of the Bureau’s instructions for identifying “mulattos” had little to do with the conditions of census enumeration on the island of Puerto Rico.

The consequence of the semantic modification on Puerto Rico’s census results, meanwhile, though most likely quite minimal, may have nudged aggregate results in an overall lighter direction. The 1910 instructions, with their emphasis on detecting “black blood”, would seem more likely to have triggered the classification of some erstwhile “whites” as “mulattos”, while the 1920 instructions, with their emphasis on detecting “white blood”, would seem more likely to have triggered the classification of some erstwhile “blacks” as “mulattos.” In either case, however, the result would be more “mulattos” in the population, rather than more “whites.” Thus, the official enumerator instructions do not seem to explain the dramatic rise in the *white* share of Puerto Rico’s population in the first decades of U.S. colonial rule. The official instructions do, however, make clear that the U.S. Census Bureau *intended* to impose the same rules of racial classification on Puerto Rico’s population as were used to enumerate the population on the mainland.

### **The *de facto* Rules of Racial Classification: Examining Enumerators’ Classificatory Practices**

Whatever the content of official enumerator instructions, racial classification in the census is an inherently interpretive act (see Brubaker et al. 2004). Official instructions for racial classification in a census cannot be “applied” by enumerators without recourse to tacit knowledge or beliefs about distinguishing markers of racial difference. In U.S. Censuses in the first half of the twentieth century, enumerators’ instructions for reporting race were based on the assumption that race is a biologically inherited, individual trait that is readily observable in physical (phenotypic) manifestations of black, white, or other kinds of “blood.” The job of Puerto Rican enumerators hired to take a census of the island’s population was to get it right, that is, to accurately

read (off of individual bodies) and report (using the official categories) the race of each individual. The instructions issued to enumerators by the Census Bureau did not specify, however, how to *discern* traces of different kinds of blood. There was no explicit guidance as to which physical cues (or social characteristics) were to be taken as indicators of “black blood” or “white blood.” Nor were there necessary or sufficient criteria put forth for identifying the characteristic “impurity” of mulattos. Thus, to do their job of sorting the Puerto Rican population into the categories “white”, “mulatto” and “black,” Puerto Rican census enumerators in 1910 and 1920 had to “fill in” the official instructions with their own understandings of what traits to treat as meaningful markers of racial difference.

There is evidence that the tacit rules invoked by Puerto Rican enumerators to assign individuals to racial categories were not consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau’s official instructions. According to the official instructions, for example, all children with one “white” parent and one non-white parent (either “black” or “mulatto”) should have been reported by enumerators as “mulatto.” In practice, in the 1910 Census, Puerto Rican enumerators reported as “white” 16.8 percent of children with one “white” parent and one “mulatto” parent, and 5.7 percent of children with one “white” parent and one “black” parent. Clearly, enumerators did not always follow their official instructions to the letter; rather, they brought additional information, assumptions, or considerations to bear in their classificatory decisions.

Significantly, the discrepancy between the Census Bureau’s official instructions and enumerators’ classificatory practice increased markedly from 1910 to 1920. In the 1920 Census, Puerto Rican enumerators reported as white 25.9 percent of children with one “white” and one “mulatto” parent and 9.2 percent of children with one “white” and one “black” parent. Without any relevant change in their official instructions from the Census Bureau, enumerators’ propensity to classify children of “mixed” parental unions as “white” shot up between 1910 and 1920. The widening gap between enumerators’ official instructions and their classificatory practices between 1910 and 1920 is evidence of a shift in the tacit criteria deployed by enumerators to do their classificatory work.

In a recent article co-authored with Jeronimo Muniz, we demonstrate that this broadening of the definition of who was white in the context of census enumeration was the principal source of the rapid increase in the white population observed in official census results

between 1910 and 1920 (Loveman and Muniz 2007). Using demographic projection methods, we estimated what the size of the “white” population of Puerto Rico should have been in 1920 based on its size in 1910, and then compared this number to the actually-enumerated “white” population of Puerto Rico in 1920.<sup>5</sup> From 1910–1920, whites had slightly lower fertility and net migration rates, and higher life expectancies, than non-whites. But even after these differentials are taken into account, our demographic analysis revealed that there were still nearly 100,000 more whites in the enumerated population of 1920 than there should have been given the composition of the population in 1910.

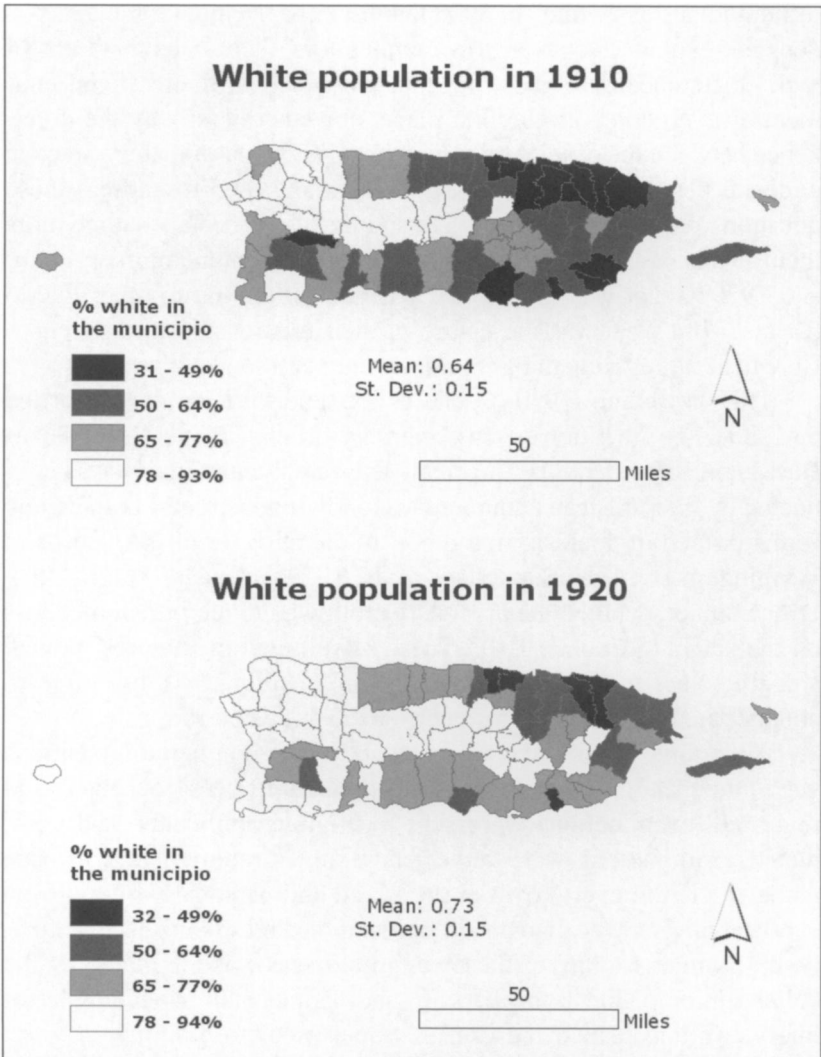
The extra whites in Puerto Rico’s 1920 population resulted from racial reclassification from one census to the next. Nearly 100,000 individuals who were classified by census enumerators as either “mulatto” or “black” in the census of 1910, were classified by enumerators as “white” in the census of 1920. Moreover, our demographic analysis enabled us to see that the “risk” of being reclassified between censuses was not evenly distributed across all individuals in the population. The fact that some categories of people were much more likely to be reclassified than others sheds some light on precisely *how* the tacit criteria used by Puerto Rican enumerators to classify people on the census changed between 1910 and 1920.

The majority of individuals reclassified as “white” between 1910 and 1920 (over 50 percent) were children. Young adults, and especially young women, were also particularly likely to be reclassified as “white” between censuses. Reclassification was not restricted to these age cohorts, however; some reclassification affected even the very elderly. In addition to age, geographic region also appears to have influenced enumerators’ propensity to apply more liberal tacit criteria in deciding who to classify as white in 1920 than in 1910. Maps showing the racial composition of the island’s population by *municipio* for 1910 and 1920 show that the majority—but not all—*municipios* whitened between censuses, and some whitened more than others.

With the information available in the 1910 and 1920 census data, it is not possible to determine whether the uneven geographic distribution of whitening was due to internal migration across municipal boundaries, enumerators’ cultural association of certain areas with a particular “race” (Scarano 1996; Appelbaum 2003; Wade 1991), or a combination of both. It seems likely, however, that certain regions of the island that were traditionally associated with whiteness—like



**Figure 2**  
**Geographic Distribution of “White” Population by Municipio,**  
**1910-1920**



the coffee region, which was populated primarily by descendants of Spanish immigrants and associated in the popular cultural imaginary as the territory of the white, peasant, *jibaro* type (Scarano 1996)—made enumerators even more likely to classify people as white in those regions in 1920. The reverse may have been the case for traditionally African-descent majority regions, such as Loíza on the Atlantic coast.

Demographic analysis of the PUMS data thus revealed that Puerto Rico's official census results whitened rapidly between 1910 and 1920 because enumerators were much more likely to classify certain kinds of individuals as "white" in 1920 than in 1910. Demographic analysis does not explain, however, *why* enumerators' tacit understandings of racial difference diverged from that embodied in their official enumerator instructions in the first place, nor much less, why the divergence between the official rules and the *de facto* classificatory practice widened between the censuses of 1910 and 1920. To address these questions requires a better understanding of the census enumerators themselves. Who were Puerto Rico's census enumerators in 1910 and 1920? What was their social position in relation to other Puerto Ricans? And what was the nature of their relationship to the Census Bureau as an instrument of colonial administration?

The 1910 and 1920 Censuses of Puerto Rico were carried out under the direction of an American official of the U.S. Census Bureau, headquartered in San Juan. The actual enumeration was conducted by Puerto Rican enumerators, following instructions and using forms printed in Spanish. In a report to the Director of the Census in Washington D.C., the Supervisor of the 1910 Census of Puerto Rico, D.A. Skinner, detailed the procedures followed to recruit enumerators on the island (Skinner 1910).<sup>6</sup> These recruitment procedures provide valuable clues to the qualities and social positions of those hired to conduct the U.S. Censuses of Puerto Rico in this period.

According to Skinner, the availability of enumerator positions was announced in the newspaper, applications were accepted and reviewed, examinations were sent to eligible applicants, and completed examinations were reviewed. Skinner reported that he also made "a visit to every town in the island and personally interviewed every applicant who had made application and taken the examination" (Skinner 1910:6). This screening process was facilitated by the collaboration of local police, who made police stations available for interviews and helped the Census Supervisor "to eliminate at once from the list of applicants all those who had bad records" (Skinner 1910:7). Combining his "personal evaluation" with the exam results for all applicants, the Census Supervisor winnowed an applicant pool of 3,000 (300 of them women) down to a corps of 1,042 enumerators (51 of them women). Evidently, Skinner did not hire anyone whom he perceived to be "black." In response to a query from the Director of the Census in Washington regarding "the employment of negro enu-

merators,” Skinner responded that the question did “not apply to Porto Rico” (Skinner 1910:20).

The literacy requirement alone excluded the vast majority of Puerto Ricans from the possibility of working as a census enumerator in 1910 or 1920. Only 23 percent of Puerto Ricans could read and write in 1910, increasing to just 29 percent in 1920. Not surprisingly, given the long history of racialized exclusion on the island, literacy in this period was highly correlated with racial classification. In 1910, 74 percent of literate Puerto Ricans were “white”, 22 percent “mulatto,” and only 4 percent “black.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the skills needed to do the job, in combination with Skinner’s likely biases in hiring, favored light-skinned Puerto Ricans in the competition for positions as census enumerators.

The official documentation for the 1910 Census lists the names of 1,035 enumerators. In the 1920 Census the number of enumerators increased slightly, to 1,101. The island was divided into 68 *municipios* in 1910 and 76 *municipios* in 1920, which works out to approximately 15 enumerators assigned to each *municipio* in each decade. Of the 1,101 names listed as 1920 enumerators, 109 of them also appear on the list for 1910. (The actual number of repeat enumerators could be slightly higher, as this number does not include names that are nearly identical save for a minor difference in spelling).

Skinner’s report to the Director of the Census Bureau in Washington does not indicate how much enumerators were paid for their work. Given the temporary nature of the work, the positions most likely did not attract those with steady employment, unless they enjoyed unusually flexible working conditions. Skinner’s selection process would likely have weeded out individuals identified by local authorities as chronically unemployed or underemployed. Presumably, among the segment of the Puerto Rican population who could pass both the written exam and Skinner’s personal screening process, only those who either did not need to work for a living or who could afford to take time off for a short-term, one-time gig would have signed on for the job of census enumerator. Thus, it may be that many of those who worked as enumerators were motivated to participate, at least in part, for non-economic reasons.

It seems likely that those who worked as census enumerators in Puerto Rico did so, at least in part, out of a desire to play a role in America’s campaign to bring “progress” to the island. In this sense, Puerto Rican census enumerators might be likened to the local elites,

community leaders, teachers, and public health reformers across the island who welcomed the United States' drive to "modernize" Puerto Rico in the first decades of the twentieth century—even if they did not always agree, entirely, with how the Americans defined "progress" or envisioned "improving" the Puerto Rican population (del Moral 2006; Rodríguez-Silva 2004). Though additional research is needed to elucidate this matter, it also seems plausible that the educated, and relatively light skinned Puerto Ricans selected by Skinner to work for the Census may have shared, to some extent, a basic belief in the superiority of whiteness, as defined on the island in accordance with the Spanish and then Hispanist tradition (Scarano 1996; Guerra 1998; Rodríguez-Silva 2004).<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, however, enumerators clearly rejected the strict and narrow application of an ancestry rule for *defining* whiteness, as embodied in the U.S. Census Bureau's official enumerator instructions. Instead, as the patterns of classification of children in the 1910 and 1920 censuses make clear, enumerators superimposed on the official rules their own understandings of how to distinguish "whites" from "non-whites." In their calculus of children's racial status, Puerto Rican enumerators did not focus narrowly on the (ascribed) race of their parents, as per their written instructions; rather, they attended to other cues—such as physical appearance and social status—as well. Countering the written demand to focus *exclusively* on ancestry, enumerators advanced an alternative mode of classificatory practice that better accommodated their prior understandings of how to divine racial difference.

The discrepancy between the Census Bureau's official instructions for racial classification and the tacit rules invoked by Puerto Rican census enumerators to do their classifying work—already present in 1910—became much greater by 1920. Before turning to the question of why Puerto Rican census enumerators strayed *further* from the official instructions in 1920 than they had in 1910, it is instructive to first examine the U.S. Census Bureau's effort to counteract this trend.

### **The Official Rules of Racial *Re*-Classification: Examining Supervisors' Corrections of Enumerators' Work**

In an effort to ensure the reliability of the data collected in census operations in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, the man in charge of the Census Bureau's Puerto Rico office, D.A. Skinner, hired a select group of "special agents" (*agentes especiales*) to review enumerators'

work. For the 1910 Census, Skinner recruited seven “special agents” from among the hired enumerators; they joined four other agents he had already hired to supervise the work of enumerators. According to Skinner’s report on the 1910 Puerto Rican Census operations, sent to the Director of the Census in Washington, the special agents checked up on enumerators’ work during the enumeration and also reviewed their completed returns for errors:

All enumerators were instructed that upon the completion of the work in their districts they were to advise the special agent in charge of the district, who would at the earliest opportunity examine the work as completed, and, if found correct, transmit it to the supervisor’s office in San Juan. In this way many errors were corrected with very little inconvenience which would otherwise have caused great trouble (Skinner 1910:11).

Skinner’s report also stated explicitly that no additional editing needed to be done in Washington (with the exception of a recommendation that occupation tabulations be reviewed by bilingual clerks) (“Method of checking returns of enumerators”, Skinner 1910:13).

Despite the fact that the field supervisors presumably came from the same social milieu as enumerators, the evidence of edited racial classifications on census forms reveals that enumerators’ and supervisors’ calculus of what made an individual one race rather than another did not always correspond. Evidently, enumerators and their supervisors relied on different rules of thumb to come to a classificatory decision. Analysis of the changes made to racial classifications on Puerto Rican census forms post-enumeration reveals that the “special agents” hired by Skinner attempted —as it turned out, essentially in vain— to *constrain* the growing propensity of enumerators to identify more and more Puerto Ricans as “white.”

As described by Velyvis et al. (*this issue*), the Puerto Rico Census Project data entry operators “tagged” all cases where “hand edits” are detectable in the manuscript census forms, such as the example in Figure 3 above, making it possible for researchers to identify all instances in the 1910 and 1920 PUMS datasets where an individual’s racial classification was manually altered post-enumeration. For these individuals, it is possible to compare the original racial classification reported by the enumerator to the subsequent change made by the supervisor. These unusual data provide rare insight into how top-level Puerto Rican employees of the Census Bureau in Puerto Rico used their own discretion to identify and correct “mistakes” made by fellow

**Figure 3**  
**An example of a post-enumeration edit of “race”**  
**on a census schedule, 1920 Puerto Rico**

|                     |               |            |          |           |           |
|---------------------|---------------|------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| <i>Mari's</i>       | <i>Jefe</i>   | <i>1 A</i> | <i>✓</i> | <i>Mu</i> | <i>40</i> |
| <i>es, Fernanda</i> | <i>Esposa</i> |            | <i>H</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>27</i> |
| <i>a, Alberto</i>   | <i>Hijo</i>   |            | <i>✓</i> | <i>Mu</i> | <i>19</i> |
| <i>-, Pedro</i>     | <i>Hijo</i>   |            | <i>✓</i> | <i>Mu</i> | <i>12</i> |
| <i>-, Juan</i>      | <i>Hijo</i>   |            | <i>✓</i> | <i>Mu</i> | <i>5</i>  |

Note: The image shows a portion of a completed census schedule, listing the head of household (“Jefe”), his wife, and their three sons. The sons were originally classified as “B” for “blanco”, corresponding with their mother’s racial classification. But the letters “Mu” (for “mulatto”) were later handwritten over the original classification, making the sons’ racial classifications consistent with the official enumerator instructions for classification of mixed children.

Puerto Rican enumerators in the assignment of racial classifications on the census.

For all cases in the 1910 and 1920 PUMS datasets where the race field was edited, Tables 2 and 3 compare the originally entered racial classifications with the subsequently entered corrections. The numbers in Tables 2 and 3 are the estimated number and distribution of edits of racial classification in the entire Puerto Rican population in 1910 and 1920 (they are based on population estimates obtained by expanding 1910 and 1920 PUMS samples). In Table 2, for example, it can be seen that a total of 1,530 individuals had their racial classification as originally reported by an enumerator changed to some other classification after the fact. The greatest number of changes (695) were cases where individuals originally classified as “white” were edited to “mulatto” post-enumeration.

Comparative examination of the post-enumeration edits to Puerto Rican census forms in 1910 and 1920 produces three striking findings. First, edits of the race field on census forms were much more common in 1920 than in 1910. In 1910, an estimated 1,530 out of 1,112,355 individuals had their racial classification changed after the fact (.0014). In 1920, an estimated 19,250 out of 1,281,540 individuals had their racial classification edited post enumeration (.015).<sup>9</sup> In both years, then, manual edits of racial classifications were the exception, not the rule. But in 1920, the originally reported racial classification on

**Table 2**  
**Post-hoc Edits of Reported Race**  
**in Puerto Rican Census of 1910**

| Race Edited To: | Race Recorded by Enumerator |       |         |                      | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------|---------|----------------------|-------|
|                 | White                       | Black | Mulatto | Unknown <sup>a</sup> |       |
| White           | 0                           | 0     | 50      | 265                  | 315   |
| Black           | 20                          | 0     | 15      | 30                   | 65    |
| Mulatto         | 695                         | 40    | 0       | 415                  | 1,150 |
| Total           | 715                         | 40    | 65      | 710                  | 1,530 |

<sup>a</sup> This category represents cases in which the race field was edited by a supervisor, but where the original classification was no longer legible.

**Table 3**  
**Post-hoc Edits of Reported Race**  
**in Puerto Rican Census of 1920**

| Race Edited To: | Race Recorded by Enumerator |       |         |         |                      | Total  |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------|---------|---------|----------------------|--------|
|                 | White                       | Black | Mulatto | Chinese | Unknown <sup>a</sup> |        |
| White           | 35                          | 20    | 805     | 10      | 945                  | 1,815  |
| Black           | 100                         | 0     | 155     | 0       | 195                  | 450    |
| Mulatto         | 13,225                      | 1,665 | 20      | 0       | 2,075                | 16,985 |
| Total           | 13,360                      | 1,685 | 980     | 10      | 3,215                | 19,250 |

<sup>a</sup> See note for Table 2.

the census was about *ten times more likely to be subsequently edited by a supervisor* than in 1910.

A second striking finding is that the majority of these edits, in both 1910 and 1920, changed individuals to “mulatto” not “white.” Edits of the race field in 1910 were much more likely to reclassify people as mulatto than white, and only very rarely reclassified someone as black. Of 1,530 cases edited in 1910, 20.5 percent (315 cases) were changed to white while 75 percent (1,150 cases) were changed to mulatto. Of those changed to mulatto, 60 percent (695 cases) were originally white while only 3 percent (40 cases) were originally black. The strong bias towards reclassifying “whites” as “mulattos” would seem to be consonant with the emphasis of the enumerators’ official instructions for 1910; the cue to note traces of “black blood” in individuals who were not “pure blacks” could have predisposed the census supervisors to be vigilant of enumerators’ failure to carefully identify “mulattos” in the population.

Rather surprisingly, however, the tendency of supervisors to change whites to mulattos was even more pronounced in 1920 than in 1910. This was the case despite the revised definition of a “mulatto” in the 1920 census (to recall, from an “impure black” with traces of “black blood” to an “impure black” with traces of “white blood”) which would seem to divert attention from the white-mulatto boundary to the boundary between mulatto and black. There were 1,665 cases in 1920 where blacks were changed to mulattos, but this number was dwarfed by the 13,225 cases where the category mulatto replaced white.

A third noteworthy discovery is that supervisors’ editing of racial classifications post-enumeration was much less random in 1920 than it was in 1910. Individuals who lived in the mountainous coffee region, a geographic area associated with the white *jibaro* type (Scarano 1996), were less likely to have their racial classification edited than those who lived elsewhere in both decades, but this became even more the case in 1920. Other individual characteristics—including age, position in the household, or marital status—were not associated with the likelihood of having race edited in 1910. In 1920, however, certain characteristics made individuals much more likely to have their racial ascription edited by a “special agent” post-enumeration. Children, in particular, were much more likely to have their racial classification edited in 1920 than in 1910. Children were also much more likely to have their racial classification edited post-enumeration than anyone else in the 1920 population. In fact, children were 217 percent more likely to have their race edited in 1920 than other persons in the household, and for each additional year in age, the probability of having race edited decreased by 1.7 percent.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that the majority of post-enumeration edits were of children’s racial classifications is evidence that supervisors were engaged in enforcing the classificatory logic of the official enumerator instructions. When supervisors saw that children listed in households with one white parent and one non-white parent had been classified as “white”, they crossed out “white” and replaced it with “mulatto”—following the letter of the official rules issued by the U.S. Census Bureau. Tasked with catching “errors” in their colleagues’ work, the cadre of Puerto Rican *agentes especiales* hand selected by Skinner opted to enforce U.S. Census Office directives, rather than look the other way, when they noticed deviations from the official instructions for racial classification.



In short, those working at the top levels of the U.S. Census Office in Puerto Rico actively intervened to police the boundaries of whiteness. The overwhelmingly uniform direction of the edits suggests that the “special agents” worked diligently to make Puerto Rico’s census returns conform to the official enumerator instructions, with their embodied ancestry-focused logic of racial classification. Though additional research is needed to better ascertain the motives that influenced the special agents in their work, it appears, that Puerto Rican supervisors strove diligently to adhere to U.S. Census Bureau protocol. Apparently, their efforts to demonstrate their reliability as “good civil servants” overrode more diffuse preoccupations, which they may have shared with other enumerators as well as with other “progress”-minded Puerto Ricans at the time, about mainland U.S. perceptions of Puerto Ricans’ racial status.

Despite supervisors’ stepped up efforts to correct classificatory “errors” made by fellow Puerto Rican enumerators, the official census results still showed the Puerto Rican population becoming much whiter between 1910 and 1920. The work of a small group of supervisors to police the boundary of whiteness was not sufficient to stem enumerators’ marked increased propensity to report Puerto Ricans as white on the census. Given the efforts of the *agentes especiales* to enforce compliance with Census Bureau’s rules of racial classification, it is all the more significant that the “white” share of Puerto Rico’s population increased by so much, so quickly, between the 1910 and 1920 Censuses.

### **Revising the Rules of Racial Classification: U.S. Colonialism and Puerto Rico’s Broadening Boundary of Whiteness**

In the space of a single decade, Puerto Rican census enumerators became much more likely to classify fellow Puerto Ricans as “white” on the census, absent any significant change in their official written instructions. How do we account for the marked shift, between 1910 and 1920, in enumerators’ propensity to classify fellow Puerto Ricans—and especially children—as “white”? Why did their tacit definition of whiteness suddenly broaden, including many thousands of previously excluded Puerto Ricans within it?

Surviving historical evidence does not provide a direct answer to this question. One possibility is that enumerators’ more liberal use of the “white” category in the 1920 Census was a deliberate, orchestrated act of resistance (Scott 1990) to the explicit and implicit racism that

infused U.S. administration of Puerto Rico. Alternatively, and probably more likely, the broadening tacit criteria used to decide who was white may reflect a more diffuse and uncalculated cognitive adjustment of racial standards in the face of what enumerators perceived as an inappropriately restrictive definition of whiteness. Against the background of profound economic and social dislocation occasioned by the transformation of Puerto Rico into a key component of America's "sugar kingdom" (Ayala 1999; Cabán 1999; Scarano 2000; Hauberg 1975; Santiago-Valles 1994), the decade from 1910 to 1920 brought specific changes to Puerto Ricans' status that gave educated Puerto Ricans increasing reason to be anxious about possible consequences of American racist perceptions and practices for Puerto Ricans' lives. In this context, it appears that the broadening *de facto* definition of whiteness between 1910 and 1920 registers a diffuse and defensive cultural response by census enumerators to the intensification of Puerto Ricans' subordinated incorporation into the United States.

This interpretation of the sudden shift in enumerators' tacit racial calculus seems consistent with the findings of recent contributions to the historiography of early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, which point to the deep ambivalence of many better-off Puerto Ricans towards the American colonization of the island. For relatively elite, educated, and lighter-skinned Puerto Ricans, at least part of their ambivalence towards American colonial rule stemmed from their own preexisting ideas about race (del Moral 2006; Rodríguez-Silva 2004; Briggs 2002; Guerra 1998; Cabán 1999). On the one hand, many public figures and local leaders basically agreed with the American diagnosis of much of Puerto Rico's population as backwards, and did not take issue with the idea that race was one underlying reason for this backwardness. Educated, "progress"-minded Puerto Ricans often welcomed and participated in colonial policies that aimed to improve basic qualities of the population. On the other hand, these same Puerto Ricans were aware of the racist ideological justifications for U.S. imperialist expansion, and they recognized the potential collective and individual disadvantages of being seen by the Americans as non-white.

American views of Puerto Ricans as racially inferior were well known by literate inhabitants of the island (Rodríguez-Silva 2004:312-329; Kennedy 1971; Santiago-Valles 1994). These views influenced American debates over whether to occupy Puerto Rico and, after the occupation, about what the United States should do with the island and its population (Love 2004; LaFeber 1993). The view that Puerto

Ricans were racially unfit for autonomous rule was put forth to justify the prolonged occupation of the island (Clark 1973). And racist views about the “natural” deficiencies of Caribbean peoples for self-government were central to the move —until then unprecedented in the history of U.S. territorial expansion— to incorporate Puerto Rico into the U.S. polity on terms that explicitly denied the island’s people the same rights as other citizens (LaFeber 1993; Go 2004). U.S. government officials assigned to take charge of modernizing the island, meanwhile, were often explicit in invoking a color line in recruiting Puerto Ricans to work in colonial administration.

Of course, American colonization did not introduce racism into a society where it did not previously exist (Scarano 1996; Santiago-Valles 1994; Rodríguez-Silva 2004). However, imposed on a society that strongly privileged whiteness while calibrating individual racial status in relative terms, American colonial rule did threaten to introduce much more restrictive criteria for defining “who is white.” According to the U.S. Census, to be white was an “all or nothing” status; an individual was either *pure* white, or not white at all. While some of Puerto Rico’s elite also likely construed of whiteness in absolute terms, the broader propensity in the Puerto Rican population was to consider race as a continuous characteristic; whiteness could be treated as a matter of degree. Thus, if in some respects, the racist views espoused by American officials about the general state of the Puerto Rican population reaffirmed elite Puerto Ricans’ own beliefs, at the same time, the introduction of a hypo-descent rule to calculate individual racial status threatened to shift the boundary of whiteness in Puerto Rico to exclude many Puerto Ricans who had always considered themselves “white.”

While colonial administrative practices threatened to constrict the line demarcating who was white, the tightening linkages between Puerto Rico and the early-twentieth century segregationist United States threatened to increase the consequences for individual Puerto Ricans of being seen to belong on one side of the racial boundary or the other. Between 1910 and 1920 the subordinated incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the United States polity, market, and society intensified such that Puerto Ricans’ livelihoods —collectively and individually— seemed to hinge much more than before on how Americans viewed their racial status.

Following intense debate in the United States that turned partly on Puerto Ricans’ “racial fitness” for membership in the American nation

(Rodríguez-Silva 2004; Love 2004; Gerstle 2001; Smith 1997), Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens with passage of the Jones Act in 1917—without the same rights to self-representation granted to citizens born on the continent. With citizenship, in turn, Puerto Ricans became eligible for the military draft. Nearly 20,000 Puerto Ricans served in the army during WWI; the majority served in an all-Puerto Rican unit, charged with guarding the Panama Canal zone. The darkest Puerto Ricans, however, were assigned to a segregated black unit (the 396<sup>th</sup> infantry) and sent to combat in France.<sup>11</sup> In the army, Puerto Ricans witnessed and experienced Jim Crow segregation and American-style racism first hand (Colón 2002). Among those who directly experienced the segregated U.S. Army during WWI was Pedro Albizu Campos, who in the 1930s would become the virulently anti-American president of Puerto Rico's Nationalist Party (Carrión 2005).

Citizenship also facilitated economic migration to the U.S., including much contract labor. Emigration was fueled by high unemployment and dislocation on the island (largely a consequence of America's transformation of the island into a monoculture sugar economy) in combination with the wartime labor needs of the United States. According to the 1920 U.S. Census 7873 Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States between 1910 and 1920. The absolute numbers of migrants prior to 1920 was small relative to the very large flows in subsequent decades (by the 1940s, upwards of 90,000 Puerto Ricans had migrated to the United States [Vázquez Calzada 1988: 283-88; Duany 2002:15]). But the emigration rates did begin to rise after 1917, and as migration increased, thousands more Puerto Ricans, of all classes and colors, gained either first hand experience or second hand knowledge of their vulnerability to racial discrimination by Americans (Whalen and Vázquez-Hernández 2005; Korrol 1994; Senior 1947; Gordon 1950). Reports of atrocious treatment of Puerto Ricans in labor camps in the U.S. were publicized in Puerto Rico, fueling nationalist sentiments on the island.<sup>12</sup> Such reports seemed to substantiate stories about racial hatred and violence in the United States that had run in partisan (anti-imperialist) Puerto Rican newspapers since shortly before the U.S. occupation (Rodríguez-Silva 2004:298-331).

The surge in the relative number of whites between the 1910 and 1920 censuses of Puerto Rico corresponds precisely with the historical moment when Puerto Ricans became much more tightly incorporated into the American polity and society—as second class citizens. Enumerators' more generous use of the "white" category on the 1920

census appears to represent a diffuse, defensive, and perhaps even pro-nationalist response to the intensification of Puerto Rico's subordinated integration into the United States. It seems that in the context of census enumeration, if not more broadly, the colonization of Puerto Rico by the United States triggered an expansive re-demarcation of the racial boundary delimiting whiteness on the island.

Whether it was the cumulative result of calculated acts of resistance, the product of a more diffuse, unselfconscious cognitive shift in racial standards, or some combination of both, one thing is certain: enumerators' rejection of the U.S. Census Bureau's criteria for *defining* whiteness did not translate into a rejection of the United States of America's systematic *privileging* of whiteness. Even as their revision of the tacit rules of racial classification undermined the imposition of a strict ancestral definition of "who is white" in Puerto Rico, enumerators' classificatory practices simultaneously reinscribed the ideological preference for a whiter Puerto Rican society. In doing so, enumerators' bureaucratic whitening of the Puerto Rican population lent credence, ironically, to the very ideology of white racial superiority invoked to justify American colonialism in Puerto Rico and the broader Caribbean basin.

The privileging of whiteness in Puerto Rico, an inheritance of Spanish colonial rule, was reinvigorated, even as it was recast, under the impetus of American colonization. Perhaps not surprisingly, the transition between empires did nothing to dislodge the broad—if incomplete—acceptance in early twentieth-century Puerto Rican society of the idea of white racial superiority. To the contrary, the ideological privileging of whiteness in Puerto Rico appears to have been significantly bolstered by the expansive redefinition of whiteness during the first decades of U.S. colonial rule. The whitening trend in Puerto Rico's official census results continued in subsequent decades, if at a more moderate rate. By 1950, enumerators reported nearly 80 percent of Puerto Ricans as "white", and by 2000, the first census in which the island's residents were given the opportunity to self-classify by race, the "whiteness" of the island's population was confirmed by 80.5 percent of Puerto Ricans.

Of course, it is important to remember that the classificatory decisions made by individuals in the context of a census may tell us relatively little about the social definition of racial boundaries in other walks of life—especially where relative strangers, rather than friends, family, or individual themselves are in the position of power to define

the situation. Clearly, analysis of racial classification on censuses cannot tell us whether individuals who appear as “white” on the census are perceived and treated as “white” in other contexts —at school, at church, or in the workplace, for example. Nor, much less, can the census data tell us what it means, in terms of lived experience in particular sociohistorical settings, to be perceived as “white” versus “non-white” in any of these domains. Census data, by their very nature, are silent as to the subjective-experiential meaning of being classified one way rather than another. Still, analysis of racial classification on censuses can provide a window into the sociological significance of the social demarcation of racial divides in particular historical settings – even if it is a window with only a partial view. This is certainly the case for early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, where it seems clear that the rapid change in census enumerators’ tacit *definition* of whiteness went hand in hand with consequential changes in the social *advantages* of whiteness —and the social *disadvantages* of non-whiteness— for Puerto Ricans living under U.S. colonial rule.<sup>13</sup>

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## APPENDIX A

**Coefficients from Logit Model:  
Post-hoc Edit of Racial Classification in  
U.S. Census of Puerto Rico, 1910-1920**

|                             | 1910                 | 1920                 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Age in years                | -0.014<br>(0.008)    | -0.017***<br>(0.003) |
| 1 if male                   | 0.234<br>(0.153)     | 0.057<br>(0.043)     |
| 1 if child                  | -0.012<br>(0.196)    | 1.134***<br>(0.078)  |
| 1 if single                 | 0.22<br>(0.580)      | 0.076<br>(0.206)     |
| 1 if married                | -0.025<br>(0.554)    | -0.099<br>(0.200)    |
| 1 if consensual union       | -0.816<br>(0.684)    | 0.076<br>(0.222)     |
| 1 if African-descent region | -0.291<br>(0.584)    | 0.248<br>(0.128)     |
| 1 if Coffee region          | -0.407*<br>(0.182)   | -0.319***<br>(0.051) |
| Constant                    | -6.479***<br>(0.634) | -4.688***<br>(0.219) |
| Pseudo_R2                   | 0.012                | 0.05                 |
| N                           | 132,056              | 151,070              |

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is an extensive literature on the development and deployment of whitening ideologies as part of early twentieth century modernization projects in Latin America. See, e.g., Skidmore 1993; Lesser 1999; Graham 1990; de la Fuente 2001; Briggs 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> While “one drop” of “African blood” may not have been sufficient, in parts of the early twentieth-century United States, for an individual to be socially defined as “black,” the smallest trace of African ancestry generally *was* sufficient to preclude social definition as “white.” This was true in how “white” Americans defined “mixed” individuals in the mainland, as in the newly acquired colonies. Exemplary of this, the following characterization of Puerto Rico’s population appeared in the widely disseminated *American Review of Reviews* in 1899: “Very few black negroes are seen ... the great bulk of the population is of a blood mixed of the three races [Indian, Black, White]; and especially in the country it appears to me to have reached a fixed type, nearly all being of the same shade and features. The peculiar negro features seem almost lost. The hair is long and nearly or quite straight, and the nose is not flattened. Indeed, I should imagine that the Indian forms a considerably larger factor than the negro in this composite result of four centuries of unrestrained miscegenation. (Ward 1899:314)
- <sup>3</sup> Direct comparison of Spanish counts of the Puerto Rican population at different points in time is hindered by shifts in classificatory practices, enumeration methods, and coverage. Comparison of Spanish statistics to those generated by the U.S. Department of War in 1899, and the U.S. Census Bureau thereafter, is likewise complicated by differences in methods of enumeration. For an official overview of the population counts conducted by the Spanish prior to the U.S. occupation of the island, see United States. War Department (1900). More research is needed to investigate causes of intercensus shifts in the reported racial composition of Puerto Rico’s population under Spanish rule.
- <sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the 1910 instructions for Puerto Rico were modified slightly from the English-language version of the instructions used on the mainland; the invocation of specific fractions of “black blood” in Puerto Rico’s enumerator instructions recalled the use of “quadroon” and “octoroon” in the mainland U.S. Censuses of 1870, 1880, and 1890. Perhaps someone at the U.S. Census Bureau thought the phrase “some proportion or perceptible trace of negro blood” too ambiguous a guide for detecting “non-whites” in 1910 Puerto Rico. The explication of the 1920 instructions to Puerto Rican enumerators, in contrast, was directly translated from the English language version: whether in Puerto Rico or the mainland, “black” was the term to use for blacks of “pure race”, while “mulatto” was for “blacks with some proportion of white blood.”

- <sup>5</sup> Our analysis was based on the cohort component method (Preston, Heuveline and Guillot 2001:119-129). Previous studies that have used demographic projection methods to estimate the extent of racial reclassification between censuses include Hout and Goldstein (1994) and Carvalho, et al. (2004).
- <sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Francisco Scarano for providing me with a copy of Skinner's report on the 1910 Census operations in Puerto Rico, which he discovered in the National Archives. A similar report on the procedures for the 1920 census is lacking.
- <sup>7</sup> The numbers reported in this paragraph come from the 1910 and 1920 Puerto Rico PUMS.
- <sup>8</sup> Hispanism, as articulated by the so-called intellectual "Generation of 1898," rejected American Imperialism, materialism, and lack of philosophical and literary subtlety. It had, however, its own racialist and racist bent, that denigrated indigenous and African peoples while glorifying imperial Spain (Fernández 2002:132-33; Pike 1971).
- <sup>9</sup> These are the numbers from the expanded sample of the PUMS datasets for Puerto Rico, 1910 and 1920. In the original (unexpanded) sample, there were 176 edits of the race field in 1910 (N=132,169) and 2,213 edits of the race field in 1920 (N=151,342).
- <sup>10</sup> The findings reported in this paragraph are based on logistic regression analysis of likelihood of "edit" in 1910 and 1920 as a function of age, sex, and whether or not a person is a child, single, married, living in consensual union, resident of predominantly African-descent region, resident in coffee-region. The comparative results for 1910 and 1920 are reported in Appendix A.
- <sup>11</sup> See <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/arng-pr.htm>; <http://www.veteransforpr.com/history.htm>
- <sup>12</sup> For an example of such a report, see: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/120/>; on Puerto Rican migrants' experiences in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see: Senior (1947); Whalen and Vázquez-Hernández (2005); Hauberg (1975).
- <sup>13</sup> On the changing social significance of racial distinctions in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, see especially, Rodríguez-Silva (2004); del Moral (2006); Findlay (1999); Briggs (2002).