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1% left of 100: Taino History and Puerto Rican Identity

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Gonzalez Torres, Alanis, "1% left of 100: Taino History and Puerto Rican Identity" (2022). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 6.

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1% left of 100

Hola. Hello.
*Me llamo Alanis.*¹
I am.
Only 99% Complete.

Born mid-July
On an island
5 degrees south of
The Tropic of Cancer

I open *ojos negro*²
To a world of white
black
and shades of brown

I meet a white *papi*³
a tanned *mami*⁴
a dark *abuela*⁵ –
And they're all from one place

Puerto Rico –
Home of a Native
Raided by a Foreign
Prison to a Friend

We are divided – out of three
33% Taino
33% Spaniard
33% African

But what is left out of 100?
What is left of me?



¹ My name is Alanis.

² black eyes

³ dad

⁴ mom

⁵ grandmother

[Family history]

I have the eyes of my mother
quien tiene los ojos de su madre
*y sus madre's madre*⁶.

And with brown eyes
comes brown hair
and brown skin.

We couldn't be of our fathers.
Those men had blue eyes
light hair, pale skin.

Nothing that completed me.
My lineage is women strongⁱ
tracing back to our Native people.



*Mi mama*⁷ —
Curly hair from her father
But brown comes from her mother
dark eyes, black hair, tanned skin
She is her mother's daughter.

*Mi abuela*⁸ —
My great-grandmother —
*Mi tia*⁹ —
My great-aunt —
I see me in You.

We wear Our *marrón*¹⁰ on display.



⁶ who has the eyes of her mother, and her mother's mother

⁷ My mom

⁸ My grandmother

⁹ My aunt

¹⁰ brown

[Brown ≠ Black]

I'm a brown girl in a white family.
My family pictures show a dark girl
holding a light brother
and people still say they look alike.

In 4th grade, I raised my hand and said,
“My grandmother attended the March with MLK!”
A lie – I knew, looking at the pictures,
there was no way to point her out in such a large crowd.

I sat on a couch with two boys I liked in the 7th grade.
A classmate called out how racism is dead!
Sitting together: a white, a black, and an Asian.
Looking over to the guys, neither of them were black.



I've had *that* talk – many, many times.
“We're Puerto Rican! We have African in us!
Doesn't that give us the right to say N—”
No. It does not.

Because our history is not that history – Black history –
It's *my* history – a history
I needed to figure out
For myself.



How could I ever admit
efforts have been tried
to ridding the part of me
which gives me my glow?

Let's change our names – *indios!*¹¹ⁱⁱ
Let's marry lighter – to whiten our kids!ⁱⁱⁱ
Let's pull our privilege – We're U.S. citizens!^{iv}
Let's just not talk about it– maybe we'll forget!

But this will never erase what is inside us all.
For without one drop of African blood,
We wouldn't be proud to call ourselves
Puerto Ricans.

Dark or light, black or white or brown.

¹¹ Indians

[PSAT]

Never viewed as human

by that Spanish man^v

I didn't feel human

when the first question asked was

ETHNICITY/RACE

White on paper

brown on skin

A war rumbled in me

that You'd never experienced^{vi}

MARK ALL THAT APPLY

ETHNICITY

Puerto Rican – Correct

the circle is filled in darker than I am

Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander – Incorrect

'Islander^{vii}' is the word I recognized

RACE

Black or African American – Correct?

Afro-Caribbean origin, does that mean me?

White (Including Middle Eastern origin) – Incorrect?

Is this supposed to be me, too?

I already failed the first part of the test.

Example:

Figure A. 2015 and Prior Years AP Answer Sheet

Figure B. Current AP Answer Sheet

[Loss of Language]

*Papi*¹² stabs the *Yuca*^{viii} –
The side with our dinner
*Arroz con habichuelas*¹³
It's a family-traditional meal
Started by the Native farmers of our land.

I hear Spanish – but I don't speak it.
They ask a question in a second tongue –
But I answer it in another.
I know, I know
I lose a little of myself every time this happens.

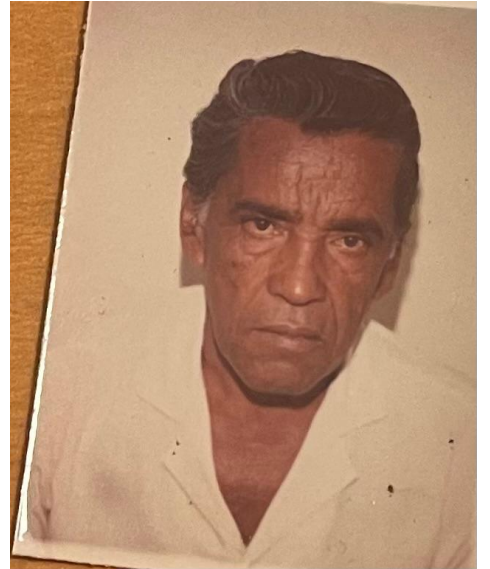
Manikatho –
“she is silent; she says / does nothing”^{ix}

Your language –
a mix of Your own flare
and indigenous dialect –
I hear it, can't speak it, but
tell me

How did it become
once prominent and important
to being erased, with only
three-hundred related sayings left
in use today?^x

Do I lose Yourself
when I lose my language
my family
my people
my home

I can hear –
Your distant call –
Mayanimacana –
“Don't kill me”^{xi}
...but I do



¹² Dad

¹³ Rice with beans

[Nomadic]

I hold nomadic roots, just like You.

You traveled the lands
Of Orinoco Valley, West Indies,
Hispaniola, Puerto Rico^{xii} –

I traveled the flatlands and mountains
Of Kansas, Oklahoma,
Italy and Virginia.

This doesn't make us much different.



[Religious]

I believe in a higher being, just like You.

I wasn't raised with this Genesis
Starting with Yaya and Yaya^{xiii},
But of God and Jesus Christ.

A variant, like all the other stories.
My God scarified His Son.
Your god, unnamed, killed his son.

This doesn't make them much different.



[Different]

I'm a little too much like You.

“Submissive, patient,
Peaceful and virtuous”^{xiv}
These make us one and the same.

I have lived two decades, half the time
You had lived, but unlike You
I'm willing to put up a fight.

This is what makes us so different.

[1%]

I remember
The first time I saw You

A Facebook post
Shared by my aunt
With the status
“*Boriqua*¹⁴ and proud!”

Attached, an image
Of three people
Two facing the side
You were looking at me

That was when I learned –
Spaniard, African
You – *Taino* –
self-named, “men of the good”^{xv}

This is to be Puerto Rican!
This is what completes me
But I knew nothing about You...
Why is that?

I found out
there is no person alive
to claim being 100% You^{xvi}
What’s left is what we make of it.



So you’ll only live
inside me
in fragments

Only 34%.

¹⁴ A person from Puerto Rico

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- ⁱ “The Tainos are reported to have had a matrilineal descent system... In matrilineal societies, individuals belong first to their mother’s lineage” (Keegan and Wilson, 113-114).
- ⁱⁱ “...some dark-skinned Puerto Ricans would refer to themselves as *indios* so as not to identify themselves as having African heritage” (West 159).
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Blanqueamiento* (whitening) – “by marrying lighter-skinned individuals to gain social status and supposedly dilute, through mixture, the ‘African blood’ of the next generation” (Reyes-Santos 151).
- ^{iv} “...Puerto Ricans—through political, economic, social, and cultural practices that identify the island as a modern, developed, industrial, consumer society—are whitened compared with other Antilleans by their U.S. citizenship” (Reyes-Santos 155).
- ^v “Todorov has shown, Columbus never viewed the Tainos as complete human beings” (Stevens-Arroyo 73).
- ^{vi} “While there were occasional disputes over fishing or hunting rights or unpaid dowries, violence was rare and war almost unknown [amongst the Taino people]” (Ferguson 9).
- ^{vii} “—that is, “an islander”; an excellent self-designation, but hardly an identification of membership in a given polity or larger ethnic group” (Oliver 7).
- ^{viii} “Yuca was recorded by the Spaniards to be the principal crop of the Tainos” (Stevens-Arroyo 42).
- ^{ix} Arawak Indian language
- ^x For material on the Taino Language, see Highfield and Wilson, *Some Observations on the Taino Language* (154-168).
- ^{xi} Taino lexicon is still used in today’s vocabulary. *Ma-* is a negative particle and *macana* means “to kill” (Highfield and Wilson 159).
- ^{xii} For material on the migration of Taino pre-descendants through the Caribbean, see Oliver, *Caciques and Cemi Idols the Web Spun by Taíno Rulers between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico* (9-11).
- ^{xiii} For material on the Taino’s version of the world’s Genesis, see Oliver and Wilson, 1999,, *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean*, esp. “The origin of the Ocean, Fish, and Life in the Universe *Version 1*” (144).
- ^{xiv} (Stevens-Arroyo 4).
- ^{xv} “These people have been called Arawaks by some historians... Others now increasingly prefer the term Tainos, since this is the name they subsequently gave themselves, meaning ‘men of the good’” (Ferguson 7).
- ^{xvi} “By 1568 there were believed to be fewer than five hundred ‘pure’ Tainos left” (Ferguson 37).

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*Image 15 (last image)

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