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**The Silence of the Black Militia:  
Socio-Historical Analysis of the British Attack to Puerto Rico of 1797**

**El silenciamiento de los pardos: análisis sociohistórico del ataque británico a Puerto Rico del 1797**

Milagros Denis-Rosario, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Using the theory of silencing developed by Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot this essay analyses the British attack to the island of Puerto Rico in 1797. It argues that Puerto Rican historiography neglected and silenced the pivotal role of Black Puerto Ricans in this historical event. This historical reflection also proposes a new way to revise the hegemonic historical discourse, which contributes in the marginalization of Black Puerto Ricans from the construction of the island's national identity.

**Keywords:** Spanish colonial Puerto Rico, resistance, racial discrimination, silencing.

**Resumen**

Utilizando la teoría del silenciamiento desarrollada por el antropólogo haitiano Michel-Rolph Trouillot este ensayo analiza el ataque británico a la isla de Puerto Rico en 1797. Sostiene que la historiografía puertorriqueña ha descuidado y silenciado el papel fundamental de los pardos puertorriqueños en este acontecimiento histórico. Esta reflexión histórica también propone una nueva forma de revisar el discurso hegemónico histórico, lo que contribuye a la marginación de los pardos puertorriqueños en la construcción de la identidad nacional de la isla.

**Palabras claves:** Puerto Rico colonial, resistencia, discriminación racial, silenciamiento.

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## Introduction

On his acclaimed book *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot analyzes the participation of human beings on the historical process. According to him (1995:23-25), people perform like agents in the evolution of history for they occupy a singular position in a specific structure. As a cast, they exist and develop a certain understanding of their existence, or they progress depending on historical particularities. As subjects, they define the terms that will be used to describe their own situation.

After outlining this theory on the value and power of history as stated by several schools, in the following chapters Trouillot exemplifies how many events, actors, and subjects have been silenced from the historiography of the Haitian Revolution. The author argues that the scarce of sources should not represent an excuse to avoid studying any historical event. He reiterates that a historian also plays a vital role on choosing an event, the documentary sources, the characters involved in it, as well as in the interpretation of facts. All these elements

combined produce a text, or historical narrative, but they also serve as a weapon to empower a society and its individuals.

A historian has the power to point out a fact, or to reduce it into silence. If he or she opts to present history from a partial point of view—which Trouillot calls “one-sided historicity” (1995:14)—, or from a specific perspective—“single-site historicity”—, the historian fails to her/his duty to present facts from a more representative approach. This occurred before, and still happens with many historians whose interest in seeking alliance to either the “one-side” or the “one-site” end up silencing peoples and events.

If, on the contrary, all findings were interpreted and exposed from a wider perspective, many populations and ethnic groups traditionally marginalized and oppressed could have been empowered. On such ways the theory of silencing developed by Trouillot becomes highly relevant when a historian procures to show and review historical facts that have been forgotten or underestimated when complicity among historians and/or institutions have proven themselves more

powerful than the duty of documenting history.

This work examines an important fact occurred in Puerto Rico, and that has been diminished on the annals of Puerto Rican historiography: the British attack of 1797. The event is analyzed from a socio-historical perspective that includes a brief review on the battle between Spain and England to control the routes of commerce in the Caribbean, for it contextualizes how such fight affected the inhabitants of all Spain colonies on the Caribbean.

Many historians (Scarano 1993; Giusti 1998; Morales Carrión 1952; Zapatero 1964; Franco 1964) consider that this period stands out for the struggle for power from other European countries against Spain, to achieve a better participation and gain control of the routes and possessions of the Spanish empire in the Caribbean. However, a detail that has been overshadowed is that although Puerto Rico was a cause of rivalry between Spain and England, it also suffered the impact of the Haitian Revolution. While revisiting the British attack of 1797 this essay intends to apply

Trouillot's *silencing* theory in order to analyze the underestimation of the participation of the Blacks Militia as a crucial part of the resistance.

A reexamination of contemporary accounts along with the historiography that refers to that period will be sufficient to prove my hypothesis. The narrative on this matter takes an unexpected turn when we find out that Black Puerto Ricans who dwelled on the communities of Piñones/Loíza broke that silencing pattern and organized a committee in charge of preserving, validating and interpreting their own history. In other words, as historical characters, they empowered themselves and became narrators of their own historical process.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Background**

“Borikén,” as named by the Taínos Amerindians, is located at the East of Hispaniola, now integrated politically by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In his

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<sup>2</sup>On the historiography about the process of silencing in colonial America refer to the work of Robison A. Herrera, *Natives, Europeans and Africans in Sixteenth Century Santiago de Guatemala*. University of Texas Press. Texas, 2003; and Matthew Restal, ed. *Beyond Black and Red Afro-Native Relations in colonial Latin America*. University of New Mexico Press. New Mexico, 2005.

second voyage Christopher Columbus sought an island on November 19, 1493, and called it “San Juan Bautista,” honoring one of King Fernando’s and Queen Isabel’s sons, but also after John Baptist of the Catholic tradition. The colonization and conquest of the island did not start until fifteen years later, which reflects the same pattern established by Iberian conquerors in other American and Caribbean territories.

Once in the island, Spaniards built up a pyramidal society based on class and race hierarchies in which Spanish and Creoles (colonials of Spanish descent) held all positions of power and control. Castes that included racial mixtures among Taínos and Spaniards, or Spanish and Africans, occupied a lower level. Enslaved persons were placed at the bottom of that system. That castes category classified people of color using nouns such as: “mestizos,” “blacks,” and “morenos”. The last two of these classes will determine the evolution of the Puerto Rican society at a certain point in history.

When the slave trade was introduced to the island in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many Africans were brought as enslaved, and

substituted the workforce initiated with the indigenous people. Between its ups and downs the society in San Juan Bautista achieved a slow, but stable growth. Free and enslaved peoples from African descent became the highest percentage of the population, and their activities would be essentially related to the establishment of a slave society.<sup>3</sup>

### **Eighteenth Century Puerto Rico**

The Eighteenth Century found Spain as a very weak empire. England, Netherlands, and Spain had struggled for controlling the routes of commerce on the Caribbean since the previous century, when England, France, and Holland attacked the Spanish colonies and possessions in the Caribbean as a strategy to colonize the Lesser Antilles. This colonization campaign began when the Danish and English army took Santa Cruz in 1620.

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<sup>3</sup> There are several publications that detail the economic, political and social development in Puerto Rico. An important reference is Salvador Brau, *Historia de Puerto Rico*. Editorial Edil. Río Piedras, 2000. This book provides a general understanding about the Puerto Rican society from the Spanish conquest to the American occupation. For a complete historical framework of the island’s economy in the 16th century consult, Elsa Gelpi Baiz, *Siglo en blanco: historia de la economía azucarera en el Puerto Rico del siglo dieciséis (1540-1610)*. Editorial de la UPR. Río Piedras, 2000.

Later, the British took Barbados, and the French took the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and the Western part of Hispaniola.<sup>4</sup> The loss of these colonies and the active participation of England, France, and Netherlands in the slave trade raised political tensions among those countries.

To make things worse, King Carlos II died leaving no successors to the throne and his deed was changed. France suggested Felipe de Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV, but England, Holland, Austria and Portugal opposed to his appointment, for it implied more participation of France over European issues. It also created the expectation of the introduction of French methods of colonial administration. This conflict initiated the historical event called the Succession War (1702-1713), which ended after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) and the designation of the Bourbon Dynasty as sovereigns of Spain. This Treaty guaranteed that France would keep Felipe V as sovereign of Spain and its territories, will compensate England and Netherlands with a higher

participation in the slave trade, and will fight for the implementation of political reforms in their possessions in America. As a result, England became the highest trader of enslaved Africans in the Americas. At the same time, all Spanish colonies in the “New World” faced a critical period because they did not receive economic support from their Motherland.

Spain became involved in many decades of war that brought, as a repercussion, the abandonment of its colonies in America. As expected, primary products, such as: flour, oil, workforce, and finally gold, began to decrease. Another reason that explains such scarce was that pirates intercepted offshore most of the ships from the Spanish fleets that set sailed from Mexico with subsidies. With this situation a peripheral economy, or contraband, evolved throughout the Caribbean. As stated by Arturo Morales Carrión, during those years, Puerto Rico established very particular links to the English, French, and Danish Caribbean.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Treaty of Ryswick of 1697 granted France control of the western part of Hispaniola and it changed the name of that territory from Santo Domingo to Saint Domingue.

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent analysis of this period can be found in the study of Arturo Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico and the Non Hispanic Caribbean: A Study in the Decline of Spanish Exclusivism*. University of Puerto Rico. Río Piedras, 1952, parts 2 and 3. Also on this interesting period of Puerto Rican

In the 1700s, Puerto Rico had about six thousands inhabitants, many of whom lived in San Juan and its surroundings. In 1765, the population increased drastically to 44,883 citizens. According to Fray Iñigo Abad y Lasierra ([1782]1970:153), in 1776 the distribution of people consisted of 29,263 (whites), 37, 711 (blacks and mulattoes), and 6,537 (enslaved persons).<sup>6</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the enclaves of Black people were located on the municipalities of Toa Alta, Vega Baja, Dorado, Loíza. There was also a great majority of free blacks/mulattoes who settled their communities in different neighborhoods in San Juan, in areas

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history see Francisco Scarano, *Puerto Rico: cinco siglos de historia*. Mc-Graw-Hill. San Juan, 1993. P. 361. A classic scholarship of this period is the work by J.H. Parry and P. M. Sherlock, *A Short history of the West Indies*. Mc Millan, New York, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> The study of Abbad y Lasierra provides an very particular perspective of the 18th century Puerto Rican society. This author has been subjected to many interpretations. His book (*Historia geográfica*) represents a primary resource. The figures about the island's population suggest, that in comparison to Cuba and Santo Domingo, the African descent population in Puerto Rico was proportionately larger than in Cuba. Sources about the Cuban population in 1774 shows the following: 96,440 (whites), 36,301 (free blacks and mulattoes), and 38,879 (slaves). In Santo Domingo in 1794 the census shows: 53,000 (whites), 38,000 (mulattoes) and 30,000 (slaves). For a better insight of the Cuban slave society consult, Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century*. University of Wisconsin Press. Wisconsin, 1970. P. 22; and for Santo Domingo, Frank Moya Pons. *The Dominican Republic: A National History*. Hispaniola Books. New Rochelle, 1995. P. 85-89.

outside the walled city (like Puerta de Tierra y San Mateos de Cangrejos). Many studies about the San Juan demography profile (Stark 1996; Chinaea 2005) confirm that most dwellers of these communities were blacks, free mulattoes, and refugees from British colonies.

As a slave society, Puerto Rico also forged a racial hierarchy, which stipulated that both Spaniards and Creoles would derive all privileges from the system. It means that officials from the military, educated people, and planters belonged in this social class. Colored people who enjoyed freedom due certain circumstances had to take whatever opportunities the system granted them. Finally, for the enslaved the only alternative to leave behind such living conditions was to escape, to inhibit themselves, or to be freed by their owners.

It is interesting that in the Spanish colonial system, freed colored people and blacks took advantage of its contradictions in order to climb on the society ladder.<sup>7</sup> One of those

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<sup>7</sup> I believe that the term 'contradictions' is the appropriate word to describe how in a slave and racist society as established by the Spanish, still

opportunities was to become a corsair. As part of the attacks to the Spanish fleet, European nations—particularly England and Holland—recruited pirates to intercept Spanish cargo ships full of treasures. As a response to that, Spain appointed “corsairs”: an equivalent term to what nowadays we call “coastguards.”

In Puerto Rico, Miguel Enríquez, a mulatto, was also an experienced marine officer, got himself a fortune, and obtained a license as a corsair. López Cantos (1994), in a biography about Enríquez, documents his exploits, including the occasions when he backed the colonial government when the subsidies did not arrive on time. One of

his major achievements was to be entitled as Knight of the Royal Sphinx for his many services to the Crown. Enríquez became an example to all black soldiers, but his power and fame rose envy among some. At the end, Enríquez was dispossessed of his fortune, and ended up isolated in the Santo Tomás de Aquino monastery, where he died in 1749.<sup>8</sup> This act represents a clear example of how the Puerto Rican society was not ready to accept this kind of individual. As stated by historian Salvador Brau ([1854]2000:142) “the progress of the fortunate mulatto ended up bringing him enemies; envy merged to the racial prejudices so deeply rooted in those times.”

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there were instances for groups within the “castes” to attain social mobility. For example, the system of *pureza de sangre* or pure blood, the conversion to Catholicism, and enlisting to the militia were many of the strategies used by blacks to improve their condition. Some observers of the Spanish colonial system were misled by these nuances and interpreted them as “positive/progressive” even “benevolent.” These characteristics were attributed when the Spanish slave society was compared with the French system. A classic study of this nature is Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: the Negro in the Americas*. Beacon Press. Boston, [1946]1992. Apparently, the “uniqueness” of the Spanish colonial system also inspired abolitionists who used their naïve anecdotes to embark into the anti-slavery crusade. Finally, the many opportunities for upward mobility of colored Puerto Ricans in the 19th century is the main focus of Kay Kinsbruner. *Not of Pure Blood. Free People of Color and Racial Prejudice in Nineteenth-century Puerto Rico*. Duke University Press. Durham, 1996.

Another way of making progress in the colonial system was to join the military. In Puerto Rico, as in Cuba, free color people saw the militia as a tool to improve their social status. The recruitment of enslaved persons and free blacks as soldiers by the colonial government, evidence that—either as

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the work of López Cantos, also refer to the historic novel by Enrique Laguerre, *Proa libre sobre mar gruesa*. Alba Editorial. Barcelona, 1996. A scene of the novel places Enríquez reflecting about his condition as a colored person and the racial prejudice of the Puerto Rican society.



soldiers, spies, auxiliaries, Indian hunters,<sup>9</sup> drummers, or colonial soldiers—blacks and Africans played quite a relevant role defending and consolidating the European influence in the Americas.

Peter Voelz (1993:118) argues that the service of slaves in the military was the sole discretion of the captain of the attacked ship, and adds the many reasons considered to enroll both slaves and free color men in the militia: 1) the absence of white men, 2) the belief that blacks were more resistant to tropical illnesses, 3) the fact that many of these slaves were already trained for combat in Africa, and 4) the need of counting on military units in case of an emergency.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Voelz and other authors refer to “caza indios” as “Indian fighters.” However, this term is a euphemism that avoids the animalization of Indians implicit in the Spanish concept. On the one hand, the expression “Indian fighters” makes one think that both forces are equally matched—one *fights* the other—, and that anyone could win. On the other hand, “Indian hunters” means that some men were hired to hunt Indians, as superior to them for the hunter’s knowledge and strategies underestimate and threaten the animals’ instinct for survival. It is a struggle between civilization and savagery. Considering this essay a study based on how the status quo silences historical events, it is imperative to understand euphemisms as one of the strategies used by the Power to “sanitize” its faults.

Enlisting slaves and free blacks in the colonial military is another example of the contradictions presented by the colonial system. To arm color people could represent a high risk to the Spanish authorities because of the possibility of a rebellion to obtain freedom,<sup>10</sup> but right then recruits were focused—as stated before—on improving their social conditions. It is known that in French and British colonies, many slaves served the military because, in certain circumstances, freedom was also guaranteed.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Bourbon Reforms**

In 1762, the British took possession of the city of Havana, and forced Spain to reevaluate the politics among its American territories. Spain implemented a series of reforms that would become

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<sup>10</sup> According to Gwendolyn M. Hall, French, Portuguese and British established the practice to arm slaves when they were attacked by the enemy. For a more detail analysis see *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies. A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba*. Louisiana State University Press. Baton Rouge, 1996. P. 115.

<sup>11</sup> For an extended discussion on the role of the black and Indian army in Mexico, Christon I. Archer, “Pardos, Indians and the Army of New Spain: Inter-Relationships and Conflicts, 1780-1810,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 2. (1974). P. 231-255.

crucial for the operation and stability of its colonies: *The Bourbon Reforms*.

Once the Seven Years' War ended, after signing the Treaty of Paris (1763), Spain was obliged to trade Cuba and Puerto Rico in exchange for Florida.<sup>12</sup> After that, both islands acquired more relevance as defense military centers for the Spanish empire in the Caribbean. This decision allowed Spain to maintain control and to supervise the routes of commerce, and the ships that arrived from Mexico to collect money, gold, and products destined for exportation.

As a part of the monarchical successions in Spain, Carlos III—fourth successor from the House of Bourbon—decided to implement the reforms introduced by his predecessor, Fernando VI. The Bourbon Reforms intended to militarily and administratively organize all Spanish colonies.<sup>13</sup> His first step was to gather a

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<sup>12</sup> There is a historical precedent about England's interest on Puerto Rico. In addition to the several pirate's attacks respectively in 1595 and 1598, during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), England proposed Spain the exchange of Cuba and Puerto Rico for the Rock of Gibraltar. See *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*. MacMillan Company. New York, 1929, chapters XXII-XXIII. In Puerto Rican historiography see Scarano, *Puerto Rico...* Op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> These reforms were implemented by Field Marshal or Inspector-General Alejandro O'Reilly,

committee in charge of complying with them, especially in the Caribbean. Due many of the South American territories had mobilized to achieve a certain degree of autonomy, Spain was determined to reestablish order, and recover its islands in the Caribbean, which were essential to this new phase of the Spanish colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding administrative issues, the Bourbon Reforms included codes to control both the enslaved and free populations in the colonies. Efforts were addressed to regulate the slave trade and slavery. Lucena-Salmoral (1996) reveals that some of the slave codes were developed after the French model, and submitted to an audience, but they were not approved. For example, the Carolino code (1784) became obsolete five years later (1789).

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who visited Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1765. In the case of Puerto Rico former governor, Miguel de Mueas (1769-76), he was committed to implement these reforms. An excellent description and critical analysis of the Bourbon reforms in Puerto Rico can be examined in the study by Altagracia Ortiz. *Eighteenth Century Reform in the Caribbean*. Fairleigh Dickinson Press. Rutherford, New Jersey, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> For an effective reorganization of the Spanish colonies it was crucial to have a better understanding of the population. In this sense the visit of Abbad y Lasierra to Puerto Rico is an example of the Spanish Metropole undertaking on following up the reforms initiated by O'Reilly.

Since then, the system would activate the “Slave Code.” In the case of Puerto Rico (1826), the regulations pursued: the legal slave trade, to keep an inventory of the enslaved population, to provide them with education and clothing, to promote labor and the use of working tools, among others.<sup>15</sup>

These regulations under such specific period can be interpreted as an effort from the Spanish government to align the regime along with those demands of the intellectual environment triggered by the Enlightenment, as well as another example of the contradictions of the colonial system. But, most importantly, these measures—particularly in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—respond to the “revolutionary environment” still alive after the Haitian Revolution. For those same reasons, the Bourbon Reforms turned out to be a mechanism for social control.

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<sup>15</sup> On specific details about slaves codes under the Spanish colonial system see the work of historian Manuel Lucena Salmoral. *Los códigos negros de la América española*. Ediciones UNESCO-Universidad de Alcalá. 1996. A comparative approach on measurements of social control in the Caribbean see Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Social Control, Op. Cit.* p. 102.

### **The Bourbon Reforms Effects on Puerto Rico**

After recovering Cuba, Alejandro O’Reilly, Irish officer naturalized in Spain, was appointed as Field Marshal to evaluate the general status of the island.<sup>16</sup> After visiting Cuba, O’Reilly arrived to Puerto Rico on April 8, 1765.<sup>17</sup> The O’Reilly Report was the first intent to rejoin the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean into the legal commercial network of Spain. Regarding the illegal commerce, the Marshal stated that contraband did not benefit society or the economy.

O’Reilly was a key presence for many historical events that affected the island. Also appointed by the Crown to examine

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<sup>16</sup> On the Bourbon Reforms in Cuba see Allan Kuethe y Douglas Inglis, “Absolutism and Enlightenment Reform: Charles III, the establishment of the alcabala and commercial organization in Cuba,” *Past and Present*, Vol. 109 (November 1985). P. 118-143. Also as a comparative reference of this reform in Santo Domingo see Antonio Gutiérrez Escudero. “Las reformas borbónicas, Santo Domingo y el comercio con los puertos del Caribe, 1700- 1750.” In *Memorias. Revista Digital de Historia y Arqueología desde el Caribe, Memorias 12*. No 7. Colombia, Julio 2010. <http://rcientificas.uninorte.edu.co/index.php/memorias/article/view/715>

<sup>17</sup> It should be mentioned that Spain sent representatives to its American colonies. For example, in the case of Mexico, then New Spain Juan de Villalba was sent to assess the colony.

all fortifications in the city of San Juan, to evaluate the necessity of its neighbors, and to make recommendations, on his report “Memory”—addressed to King Carlos III—O’Reilly wrote a series of directions for the governors in the colonies.<sup>18</sup> Based on his observations, which considered administrative, social, economic, and military issues, he suggested the king: (1) to drive a detailed census on the population according to sex, age, and social class, (2) to design and build military structures to defend the island, and (3) to reorganize the army.

The 1765 census shows that the Puerto Rican population consisted of 44,883 people: 39,846 (including both white and colored people) were free; 5,037 were enslaved. O’Reilly pointed out that it was deteriorated, and that “Political Rules” were necessary in order to rise “the King and the Puerto Rican nation” to a higher level (quoted in Fernández-Méndez 1957: 241-247).

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<sup>18</sup> O’Reilly’s report entitled “Memoria sobre la isla de Puerto Rico,” was reproduced in several textbooks. For example the edited volume by Eugenio Fernández Méndez, *Crónicas de Puerto Rico, desde la conquista hasta nuestros días*. San Juan: Biblioteca de Autores Puertorriqueños. San Juan, 1957; Loida Figueroa in *Breve historia de Puerto Rico*. Volumen I. Editorial Edil. Río Piedras, 1979. For this article I am using Fernández Méndez.

Regarding the conditions of all forts, the Field Marshal recommended to strengthen all fortifications on the island, such as Santa Catalina, commonly known as “La Fortaleza,” the San Felipe del Morro castle, the San Juan Fort (Isla de Cabras), as well as parts of the wall. Because of his report, San Juan was proclaimed “defense of primary order,” as well as was assigned the mission of “guarding the Antilles and the Mexican Gulf.” They created a plan that became active immediately after its issuance. An engineer from the military, Thomas O’Daily, arrived to Puerto Rico to put into effect the refortification of the walls. Those works were made between 1765 and 1785, and many garrisons were created to guard the city entrance.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the changes made to the militia, it is important to recall that there were two military groups in the majority of the Spanish territories: the urban and the regulatory militia (*milicias disciplinadas*). The urban batallian was integrated by citizens with few military

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<sup>19</sup> The urban planning of San Juan is well documented. In addition to Spanish archives also recent publications such as in Aníbal Sepúlveda Rivera, *San Juan: historia ilustrada de su desarrollo urbano, 1508-1898*. Carimar. San Juan, 1988; also in National Park Services. *The Forts of San Juan*. NPS Publications. Washington, D.C., 1996.

training, with no uniforms, or arms. This group was divided between the artillery, and the infantry. There was also a fixed battalion (*batallon fijo*/army reserve), which was only active on international war events. All those regiments were under governor's orders, for he was also appointed as the General Captain. The city of San Juan—also known as the garrison of Puerto Rico—was considered the headquarters for the governor.

At that moment, O'Reilly found out that the island did not require two kinds of militia. During his inspection, he noticed that many soldiers: (1) lacked of uniforms, training, barracks and arms; (2) lived among relatives; (3) from the fixed battalion, who were also Creole, they lived together with colored women. This last observation is not surprising because in 1744 governor Juan de Colomo, on his report on the critical status of the military, wrote that only few Spanish men were enlisted, and that they lived together with black and colored women.<sup>20</sup> Those

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<sup>20</sup> In this context is important to point out that some studies argue that the customs of the soldiers of co-habiting with black women contributed to the racial makeup of Puerto Rican society. In this regard, see Lourdes Cáez, *La participación socioeconómica de los pardos de San Juan: 1800-1850*. Tesis de maestría, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993.

conditions were unacceptable to O'Reilly who recommended to reorganize the military and to make it more disciplined, one with new neighbors with the appropriate companies of artillery and cavalry on different parts of the island.<sup>21</sup>

According to Bibiano Torres (1964:196) the civilian's battalion (*batallon de vecinos*) caused commotion among men, and many enlisted in it. Therefore, when O'Reilly organized the military he took into account the census' outcomes, which revealed a great quantity of free men. This re-structuration brought nineteen new infantries, five cavalries—disciplined militias—, and from this last one O'Reilly created two subdivisions with men of color for the San Juan and Bayamón districts. From the disciplined militias Field Marshal O'Reilly created a

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<sup>21</sup> In the Spanish colonial context an army or *milicia* is defined as a military body which members are civilians and professionals of all types. Customary they are inhabitants of the colony who do not have any formal military training. In 1769 the militia in Puerto Rico was restructured following the model of the island of Cuba. This fact was discussed in a memo from the Governor of Puerto Rico Julián de Arrillaga to his officials, "Reales órdenes y decretos (1767-1854)," *Colección de Gobernadores Españoles en Puerto Rico*, Archivo Nacional, grupo 186, rollo T1122, Washington, DC. Bibiano Torres, Op. Cit also mentions a similar communication from an earlier date (May 17, 1765) *La isla de Puerto Rico, 1765-1800*. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. San Juan, 1968, p. 19, footnote 74.

subdivision called black regiment (*pardos*), and assigned it only to the district of San Juan.

From the beginning the black regiment was subjected to more strict ways compared to the remaining groups. For example, when the island was not in war, these men were assigned as construction workers at the new fortifications to come. Another unique element was their uniform. Paintings from back then show that the company of blacks wore a more colorful uniform.<sup>22</sup> Supporting this fact, Jay Kinsbruner (1996:129) observes that officers from that division showed off being in uniform and armed during

special events and parades held on Sundays. He says that for Afro-Puerto Ricans serving in the military was a motif of social satisfaction, although later he realizes: “[y]et, for all its obvious attractions and benefits, the military was at bottom an institution of racial restriction.”

As stipulated earlier, the majority of the black population was agglutinated on seaside towns, and the census showed that many of those individuals were free black men. Obviously, the organization of the military reflects the racial parameters and hierarchies intrinsic to the system.

### **The British Attack of 1797**

The previous section gathers the social and political background of Puerto Rico, and also how susceptible was the island under the battle to control the Caribbean. The main characters of this period were the Spanish and the British empires. The series of attacks from England to the Spanish territories in the Caribbean were the order of the day. They first attacked Cuba in 1762 and stayed there for ten months. It has been said that this attack was a strategy to gain control of both the

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<sup>22</sup> Taken from Carlos Fernando Chardón. *Reseña histórica del su origen y desarrollo de las milicias puertorriqueñas bajo el régimen español 1511-1898*. Ramallo Bros. San Juan, 1978, p. 120. The black militia uniform was characterized by its bright colors. A contemporary painting depicting the black soldiers is attributed to well-known Puerto Rican painter, José Campeche. Also in a publication documenting the Spanish colonial army, similar description about the black soldier's uniform are illustrated in the work by M. Gómez Ruiz y V. Alonso Juanola, *El ejército de los Borbones: Organización, Uniformidad, Divisas, Armamento*. Servicio Histórico Militar. España, 2004. Bibiano Torres Ramírez makes a detailed description of the colonial army and make references to the colorful of the black militia in his book, *La isla...Op. Cit.*, pp. 195-201. It is important to mention that the British army also assigned colorful uniforms to the black army created in the Caribbean colonies. See the work by Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats. The British West Indian Regiments, 1795-1815*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979.

Caribbean, and the French colony of Saint Domingue.<sup>23</sup>

In 1783 Spain ceded Tobago to England. Although the British army had no immediate plans for its occupation, it was after obtaining Trinidad in 1797 that their colonial administration reevaluated the importance of that island: its proximity to the Guyanas and the East of the Caribbean. According to one of the entries made by former governor Ramón de Castro in his diary on April 17, 1797, Puerto Rico interpreted the takeover of Trinidad as a clear sign of an imminent British attack: “Around six o’clock this morning there was a convoy of warships and sails that seemed like those of cargo ships, which amount, quality and nation could not be identified, but considering the ongoing war, and the news about a recent attack to this parade ground and island, people feared it could be an enemy fleet.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> About the British takeover of the Havana see Louis A. Pérez. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, 2006. P. 57-58.

<sup>24</sup> Governor de Castro’s journal entries related to the attack were reprinted by Pedro Tomás de Córdoba. *Memorias geográficas, históricas, económicas y estadísticas de la isla de Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Oficina de Gobierno. San Juan, 1832, Tomo 3; also in the work by Alejandro Tapia y Rivera. *Biblioteca Histórica de Puerto Rico que contiene varios documentos de los siglos*

That convoy was identified by residents from Punta de Cangrejos beach (at the Northeast part of the island, better known as Piñones, located in the municipality of Loíza).<sup>25</sup> According to the report emitted by war tenants, De Castro knew about the events on the island of Trinidad, and took charge of the situation: speed up the construction of the fortifications, mobilized the dwellers, and recruited any men available to face the enemy. At that moment, the fixed battalion (*batallón fijo*) was appointed to Saint Domingue fighting against the Haitian revolution.

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XV, XVI, XVII y XVIII. Imprenta Márquez, Puerto Rico, 1854. P. 550. Most recently, the excerpts were reproduced in the work by María M. Alonso y Milagros Flores. *El Caribe en el siglo XVIII y el ataque británico a Puerto Rico en 1797*. Traducción por María Mercedes Alonso. Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas. Puerto Rico, 1998. This segment of the article makes reference to Tapia y Rivera.

<sup>25</sup> During the 18th century Loíza was part of the San Juan district. This region, including Punta de Cangrejos was populated by Africans, maroons and native born blacks. Actual residents of the area are descendants of those original settlers. It is noteworthy to mention that Loíza was a Taíno village lead by a chief woman name Yuisa. During a raid the Taínos confronted Spanish and many, including Yuisa were killed. Thereafter, Spanish and Irish settlers established in the land and developed a plantation system in which the main cash-crop was *cassava*. This kind of cash-crop economy was very rare or almost unique on the island. For a more detailed study on this aspect of the plantation system in Puerto Rico and analysis of Loíza see Juan Giusti Cordero. “Labor, Ecology and History in a Caribbean Sugar Plantation Region Piñones (Loíza), Puerto Rico 1770 1950.” Doctoral Dissertation. Binghamton, State University of New York, 1994.

Therefore, enslaved and free blacks, as well as Creoles and French mercenaries were recruited by the military, which reached a total amount of seven thousand troops. De Castro's plan consisted on gathering food provisions for a three-month period.<sup>26</sup> The governor did not document any attempt from the British to reach the island. However, they did landed the next day on Punta de Cangrejos beach.

There were around seventy ships in the British fleet. Although they got approximately fourteen thousand troops, only three thousand would be active in the operative. Their men included English, German, French, and blacks from the island of Tobago. The leader of the invasion was Sir Ralph Abercromby, commander and chief of regiments on the West Indies.<sup>27</sup> The second man in charge, Admiral Sir Henry Harvey, led the troops and disembarked on Puerto Rico. About Monday, April 17 Harvey wrote on his

binnacle that "Breeze was warm, and the weather was fine. At midnight I signaled and we turned to starboard. At five o'clock in the morning, we hoisted the sails, and navigated along the coast of Puerto Rico at the West. At ten I made the sign to drop anchor, and at ten thirty, we anchored on a sandy bottom at 17 fathoms near Punta de Cangrejos" (quoted in Alonso y Flores 1998:302).

When they finally disembarked, the first people they made contact with were dwellers from the area, and the black battalion from Loíza. According to Harvey: "Soldiers from the enemy were promptly posted on the seashore, but while our guard advanced, they moved back towards the town..." (Alonso and Flores 1998:302). General Abercromby also alluded to troops from Loíza in his writing: "about a hundred enemies were hidden in the bushes surrounding the disembark area" (quoted by Alonso and Flores 1998:279). This suggests that British sources also refer to the blacks' militia, as well as the dwellers of the zone, as the first encounter they made for the advancement of the British to San Juan.

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<sup>26</sup> Tapia y Rivera, *Biblioteca Histórica... Op. Cit.*, "Diario," (día 17), p. 551.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Abercromby was a very important officer. He was involved in important campaigns for the defense of the British Empire. His army defeated Napoleon when he invaded Egypt in 1801. For this article is used the narrative of Abercromby and Harvey about the attack which are reproduced in Alonso y Flores, *El caribe...Op. Cit.*



Harvey kept a very detailed narration of the events, and it seems like the British army entered the island easily. He alludes constantly to all difficulties faced by the artillery regiment when they tried to move forward and introduce arms, because of the sandy land and the strong winds, but does not mention any physical contact between both armies. Later, he emphasizes on his strategy to advance toward San Juan, and how the residents and the military stood on his way and set the undergrowth on fire. Harvey's intention was to surround the city locating his warships near the defense batteries and fortifications. However, the British advanced and established themselves on San Mateo de Cangrejos. As they well planned San Juan was surrounded by land and sea. The main purpose was to take the parade ground and gain access to the interior of the island.

The Creole defenses in the city persisted. On his narration about the shooting against the batteries Harvey accepted that the bullets "did not reach our objective because of the distance." Most important, the density of vegetation and the mangrove in the Hato Rey-to-Río Piedras area turned out to be a natural protection

for the Creole. While the British troops tried to move forward throughout the coast, the disciplined militia and dwellers from Loíza, led by Francisco Andino, silently infiltrated throughout the undergrowth until they reached the Hato Rey area. Once there, as De Castro documents, "a party of blacks from Lo[y]sa captured two German soldiers from the enemy's military..." The interrogation of the prisoners helped local authorities to identify and strengthen their own weak points in order to stop the British from advancing. Commanders from both sides agreed on how the British were attacked from the rearguard on Cangrejos.

The black militia crossed through spouts familiar to them, and attacked during the night. According to Bibiano Torres (1964:252), such encounter is known as the battle of the Martín Peña's Bridge, which ended up with many wounded and dead people for both parts, but the local militia impeded the British army to advance to Hato Rey.

Reinforcements from several parties, like Toa Baja, reported to the field and relieved the guard of soldiers from San

Juan and Loíza. On April 28, Harvey admitted that his efforts were not enough. Although the battery of San Jerónimo was very affected, local defenses were still on guard. Harvey's binnacle entry on April 30 reveals, "The General decided to abort the attack, and embark the troops and artillery." The dead and wounded were taken in, and on May 2 the British army embarked as soon as they could, frustrated because the island of Puerto Rico did not surrender.<sup>28</sup>

### **Bargaining Victory**

The British stayed in Puerto Rico for almost thirteen days, when they were continuously confronted by the local militia. Although the Spanish Crown attributed victory mostly to high-rank officers, the performance of black Puerto Ricans, particularly those from Punta de Cangrejos, and the colored men battalions were not acknowledged. Residents from Punta de Cangrejos sought the enemy, and notified the San Juan authorities that made arrangements on time to repel the invasion. Bibiano Torres (1964), Brau

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<sup>28</sup> According to Bibiano Torres Ramírez, in December of the same year the British attempted to attack the island through the town of Aguadilla. However, the army prevented their success. Bibiano Torres, *La isla...* Op. cit., p. 258.

(2000) and Zapatero (1964) mention the contribution of black Puerto Ricans to this event, but not as a relevant one.

Communications among Governor De Castro, his officials, and the clergy acknowledge that victory was achieved thanks to the people. De Castro and ecclesiastic authorities pointed out the active participation of their communities: the military, and the parishioners. Regarding the parishioners a legend emerged (Coll y Toste 1924). It is said that the women from San Juan, as instructed by the priest, prayed to God for protection; that they made a procession carrying torches and confused the British military, who believed that the tingling of the torches were from soldiers posted behind the city walls.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In the city of San Juan there is a sculpture known as "La Rogativa" that was built based on this legend. It pays tribute to the women whose prayers saved the island. The artist commissioned for this sculpture was New Zealand's native Lindsay Daen (1923-2001). Daen was invited by the government of Puerto Rico in 1955 as part of a cultural program that was been developed on the island. He lived in old San Juan for more than forty years and contributed to the cultural production of the island. He was a member of the Royal Art Society in Sydney, whose artwork was exhibited worldwide. Also, Daen has important sculptures in the United States including the cities of Philadelphia and New York. His interpretation of the sculpture is inspired by the legend, which is documented in the work by Cayetano Coll y Toste.

“The Rogation” is a good example of how a popular belief becomes more important than the actual collaboration of the real troops and communities from Piñones and Loíza when a historical event is narrated as an epic. It is easy to understand that this legend raises the religious spirit of the Puerto Rican society and the fervor of the ladies from San Juan. Nevertheless, it also reveals ideologies of sexism, classism, and race.

First of all, women behaved accordingly to the priest’s (bishop Trespalacios) instructions; they did not act on their own, but as individuals submitted to the orders of he who represented a link towards God and his purposes. Putting God into context guarantees the mystical halo to keep the anecdote out of discussion. Second, considering the social divisions in the Puerto Rico of the eighteen hundreds the participants in the procession were high-class ladies from the urban settings of San Juan; in other words, they were not colored women. Finally, the atmosphere promoted by a legend linked to the dominant religion, the wealth, and the white—all parts of hegemony—contributed to reduce, and silence the black militia.

This last conclusion can be described as equivalent to the silencing of Sans Souci’s role in the defeat of Napoleon’s military on Saint Domingue. Regarding the Haitian revolution, Trouillot observes that despite the evidence about San Souci’s leadership and determination the historiography related to this event turned him into a ghost. As another example of silencing, the anthropologist analyzes the silencing of the Haitian revolution in Western historiography.

Back to the case of the black militia during the British attack, they were silenced by their superiors back then, by society, and historians. Like Trouillot stated, such silence present many layers, and in one way or the other all agents, cast and subjects involved in the historical process are accomplices of silencing.

The role of blacks in the history of Puerto Rico is not limited to military prowess or patriotic endeavors. A study on black populations—focused on artisans, skilled workers, and women—of the island shows that free people of color had a significant participation in the economic structure of San Juan. It also emphasizes on the enslaved workforce as the pillar of

the economy for plantations.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, San Juan depended on the work of blacks, freed and enslaved, and when its population increased the dwellers relocated outside the colonial zone. Residents of Puerta de Tierra and San Mateos de Cangrejos continued with their jobs despite being excluded from the in-wall perimeter. The active participation of blacks in all facets of Puerto Rican history had always been constant to the dynamics of society, but sadly there has been a systematic effort addressed to silence their contribution.

In his journal, De Castro mentioned the black battalion only three times. One in particular, entered on April 26, shows distrustfulness and underestimation of the blacks:

“...D. Pedro de Córdova and Sargeant Rafael García, from the disciplined militia, along with 60 armed black men, embarked themselves in canoes held by cannon landing crafts, and... disembarked at pier Miraflores...

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<sup>30</sup> About the role of women in San Juan's economy see Félix Matos Rodríguez. *Women in San Juan, 1820-1868*. Markus Wiener. New Jersey, 2001; Aixa Merino Falú, “El gremio de las lavanderas de Puerta de Tierra.” En: *Historias vivas: historiografía puertorriqueña contemporánea*. Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores. San Germán, 1996.

[T]hey were spotted, and received a shooting load that *blacks backfired because this kind of people have no ability* [my emphasis] to act within discipline and appropriateness” (Tapia y Rivera 1854:572).

It is possible for De Castro to mean that those men were no members of the black militia, and were only free blacks recruited for the mission. Brau (2000:183) take for granted that the black battalion participated of that confrontation. If he was right De Castro did not use the term “soldiers” when he talked about them, but instead he expressed “this kind of people,” a pejorative expression in the eighteen hundreds as it is nowadays. It implies disdain and underestimation of others mostly when is used to describe people as unable of any satisfactory performance (“have no ability”).

This episode can also be interpreted as an example of stereotypes addressed to the black population under the Spanish colonial system.<sup>31</sup> Later in his narrative, De Castro clarifies that Commander De Córdova retired his troops and sought refuge in a warehouse after being

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<sup>31</sup> All these details are well documented in the scholarship of slavery in the United States. Particularly the stereotyping of black men, which despicts them as dummies and childish.

convinced that no one followed them, and kept on going later until they finally had a confrontation with the British. From that fight, De Castro wrote on April 26 that the British killed ten black men and wounded five others. The governor's language exemplifies how despite the many "flexibilities of the colonial system" nothing different could be expected from the Puerto Rican society of the eighteenth century, for it was a slave society full of prejudices.

This analysis does not intent to dismantle the popular imagery, but to pay attention to facts that have been overlooked by many historians. Silencing is not easy to prove, but when we consider that demographically the composition of the Puerto Rican society at that moment showed a majority of colored people, it was understandable that the black population, the residents and those naturalized on the island, which especially dwelled on the coasts, alerted everyone and protect their homeland from the invaders.

That was not the first time for blacks, whatever repressions and social prejudices they faced, to defend Puerto

Rico. Along with the 1797 invasion, in 1718 the island of Vieques was also attacked by the British army. Captain Miguel Enríquez congregated 289 soldiers, including 65 freed black men from the party of Cangrejos, and did not allow the opposition to occupy the island.<sup>32</sup> The attack of 1797—as observed by many historians—is an example of the evolution of the national sentiment that was already rooting among Puerto Ricans.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, such feeling of belonging was general. It could have, or could have not been a commitment to the Spanish crown, like one would conclude. However, this approach pursues to point out the participation of blacks in the making of both the history of Puerto Rico, and the presence of a national sentiment. This discussion also raises a similar question towards the role of the elites during the American invasion in 1898.

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<sup>32</sup> Historical details about Vieques can be found in Salvador Brau, *Historia de Puerto Rico*. Editorial Edil. 2000. P. 141. About the life and endeavors of Enríquez see the work by Ángel López Cantos, *Miguel Enríquez, corsario boricua del siglo XVIII*. Ediciones Puerto. San Juan, 1994.

<sup>33</sup> In relation to this matter see Fernando Picó, "El bicentenario olvidado," *El Nuevo Día*, 7 de agosto de 1996; Juan Giusti, "Piñones sí se acuerda," *Boletín de la Asociación de Residentes de Piñones/Comité 1797*." San Juan, 1997.

After the British army was defeated, Governor De Castro details on a report how the participants who protected the domains of “Your Majesty” were honored. This part of his journal—as well as other reports redacted by officials and clergy members—reveal that at the moment of the acknowledgements and compensation of soldiers the distribution of awards according to recipients was highly disproportioned. For example, in his entry for April 29 De Castro describes the event at Miraflores where the British offensive was at its peak. It seems that they attacked the locals with machine guns and grenades, but had no effect because of the insight of the Creole battalion. De Castro (quoted by Tapia y Rivera) said:

“The general awarded Mauricio del Rosario, soldier of the artillery, with ten pesos, and Tomás Villanueva, of the blacks’ militia, with four pesos because of his courage, for exposing himself to one of the royal grenades and avoiding the harm it could have caused if exploded.”

First, in the Governor’s testimony it is noticeable that there were battalions named after ranks (like “soldiers”) in military, but there was one named after

race (blacks). Second, Tomás Villanueva risked his life, protected other people, and despite that he was awarded with less money than Mauricio del Rosario. Third, such discrepancy confirms the existence of classism in the military: blacks were considered inferior to whites. In other words, Tomás Villanueva was a black man whose place in society and in the military hierarchy was predisposed because of his color, class, and ethnicity. Despite his heroism, the awarded granted to him reflects he inequalities that prevailed in the Puerto Rican society.

Besides telling the king that the courage and heroics of the citizens were examples of their commitment and appreciation of “Your Majesty,” according to historian Bibiano Torres (1964:256-8) Governor De Castro and the ecclesiastic authorities also submitted a series of petitions that can be summarized in eight articles: 1) to decree the island of Puerto Rico as “Highly Noble and Faithful,” 2) to grant free port to San Juan for at least twenty years, 3) to grant tax exemption to meat and other fruits (concessions already granted to Cuba), 4) to liberate from the tithe those who pay contributions over land, 5) to appoint three current regents as

permanent, 6) to decorate the General Attorney and Major of the city of San Juan, and to appoint him Judge to the court on Saint Domingue, 7) to allow regents, majors, and other officials to wear the same uniform used in Cuba, 8) to declare all inhabitants of Puerto Rico “faithful and loyal vassals”.<sup>34</sup>

These petitions only benefited the few. “[T]he heroic act of protecting San Juan did not soften the consciousness of the highest Spanish dignitaries...” Excepting the requests asking for tax exemptions, and to turn San Juan into a free port, the rest of them were granted. Obviously, like the historian said, those petitions were mostly spiritual.

On another report from De Castro to the King, he details the promotions and distinctions awarded to soldiers. The great majority of the high-rank officers were promoted. Regarding the black battalion, only three men (Captain Félix Tanco, Lieutenant Juan de Dios Román, and Sub-Lieutenant Joaquín Belén) were recommended, “to receive a medal or distinction” (Alonso and Flores

1998:338). At the end Governor De Castro was appointed as Field Marshal, the position held by O’Reilly decades earlier.

The reluctance from De Castro to acknowledge the decisive participation of the black militia can be explained after considering the historical situation of those times. First, in 1797 the Haitian revolution was in its height and to validate the role of blacks during the British attack could light the spirit of the colored population and add fuel to the fire.<sup>35</sup> Second, when the Haitian revolution broke out the colonial administration was aware of the benefits they could have after the fall of Saint Domingue for Cuba and Puerto Rico. For example, they expected the raise of the sugar industry, the refugees that will

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<sup>35</sup> On the effects of the Haitian Revolution in Puerto Rico see Guillermo A. Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes. Conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico, 1795 1873*. Ediciones Huracán. Río Piedras, 1981; José Morales, “The Hispaniola Diaspora, 1791 1851 Puerto Rico, Cuba Louisiana and Other Host Societies, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1986. Also, Arturo Morales Carrión “La Revolución haitiana y el movimiento antiesclavista en Puerto Rico,” unpublished paper presented at The Caribbean Historians Association meeting. San Juan, 1982; Juan R. González Mendoza. “Puerto Rico’s Creole Patriots and the Slave Trade after the Haitian Revolution.” En: *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. University of South Carolina Press. Columbus, South Carolina, 2001. P. 58-71.

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<sup>34</sup> Bibiano Torres Ramírez, *La isla... Op. Cit.*, p. 256-258.

arrive from the French colony to the Spanish territories (including the planters with their captives, the agricultural technology, and capital). While planters in Cuba enjoyed the benefits of the fall of Guericó, as the French colony was also known back then, Puerto Rican planters struggled between their patriotic fervor and the maintenance of an economy so dependent on an enslaved workforce. In this context the Haitian revolution played a relevant role linked to events and decisions that the colonial authorities made on behalf of Puerto Rico after the attack of 1797.

## Conclusion

In April 1997 the Association of Residents from Piñones appointed a committee to celebrate the bicentennial of the “blacks’ participation in the victory over the British invasion.”<sup>36</sup> Local historians, artists, and faculty members of the University of Puerto Rico, as well as the community, understood that the celebration had to be interpreted as a victory for the black Puerto Ricans. The fact that these residents achieved the

involvement of intellectuals is an example of how a marginalized and oppressed community dares to make their own interpretation of a history that also belongs to them. In other words, the people from Piñones performed an act of appropriation of history, and fought against the traditional pattern of silence.

However, forces of complicity manipulated the events, and directed the attention to the American invasion of 1898. Historian Fernando Picó (1996) already stated that the celebration of the 1898 invasion overshadowed the one of the 1797. It can be noticed again how effective a plot can be to highlight one event, and silence the other. To commemorate the American invasion the intellectual community developed symposiums, activities, and hundreds of publications. Although the event of 1797 did not have the magnitude of that of 1898, for the latter ended up in a change of sovereignty, the first event was an act of resistance in which the people from the island did not allow the invaders to conquer. Celebrating the American invasion also means to celebrate the people’s failure on defending their homeland.

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<sup>36</sup> *Boletín de la Asociación de Residentes de Piñones/Comité 1797-1997*. San Juan, 1997.



Many essays, newspaper articles, and one or two books were published about the 1797 invasion. These outcomes can be useful to reassess the ways in which we keep track of our collective memories. The community of Piñones challenged the old methods and practices when they decided to commemorate the bicentenary with a great fanfare. Considering their resources and marginalization, this people achieved the unthinkable.

In April 2007, both the Piñones and Loíza communities triumphed again when they stopped a construction project intended to develop their areas as touristic settings, and also threatened the environment. Many families were about to vacate their residences like it happened before in the same zones; massive evictions have ended up in tragedies and in the destruction of an ecosystem. At the end, and as a symbol of identity and appropriation, these people raised the flag of Piñones when they celebrated the 210<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the blacks' victory.

Literature also validated the heroes of 1797 when writer Yvonne Denis Rosario (2009), in her story "El silenciamiento" (The Silencing), rescues the saga of this

community. The narration talks about a professor who is doing research and finds documents that belonged to one of the soldiers from the blacks' militia. Intrigued and fascinated, the historian steals the documents and returns them to the community. The story ends with a news report that informs that the professor has been arrested for robbery. In this context the author's critical and political perspectives take literature to denounce silencing, claim for historical justice and uncover aspects from the Puerto Rican historiography that had been veiled.

Undoubtedly, alternative means like literature, interdisciplinary analyses, and the revision of history help to reinterpret our past, and speak up in more ways than one as a resistance against those who embraced silence.

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