# Creating Transformative Education: Robert Beecher and Thinking through Race and Empire from Panama to New York City

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## Introduction

What constitutes transformative education? What is the relationship between this type of education and addressing the legacies of American imperialism and White supremacist ideologies? Does this transformative education remain a possibility for public school students in segregated and underfunded schools throughout the Americas? And what role can teachers and scholars play within and outside the classroom in creating forums for addressing prejudice and inequality? This article proposes that an examination of Panamanian-born and eventual New York City (NYC) public schoolteacher Robert Houston Beecher (1914–1987) allows for some preliminary answers to the foregoing questions. Specifically, a review of his life and career highlights the continued need for conversations about the complicit and complicated relationships between race, education, and empire.

Robert Beecher migrated from Panama to NYC during the middle 1950s. He used his experiences with racial exclusion, citizenship, and educational opportunity in Panama to engage in debates about race and public education

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in NYC. These debates focused on issues of race within Latino communities, desegregation, and the growing African American and Puerto Rican populations in the city's public schools. Beecher's formation as a teacher-scholar, and his participation in these debates had as much to do with the politics of educating Puerto Rican and African American students as it did with re-educating other teachers and scholars about these groups. The latter process also involved recognizing limitations in the available scholarship regarding the complex realities experienced by non-White students. These realities included the ongoing legacies of imperialism and anti-Black exclusionary practices across the Americas.

This article provides a micro history of one man's life to trace the tangible effects of living through and writing about these legacies. Specifically, it explores Beecher's transnational educational upbringing and training, assesses his observations regarding his work as a teacher and acting principal in the Canal Zone's segregated schools, and connects his experiences as a Canal Zone educator with his interest in the history of Puerto Rico and the education of Puerto Rican students in NYC. This article likewise reviews Beecher's observations regarding questions of ethnicity, color and acceptance within and between Puerto Rican and African American communities; and it explores his introduction of an African American history course for elementary school students in the Bronx. Beecher's life and work hence offer some preliminary insights into how educators sought to address pervasive racial and imperial legacies that, as American Studies scholar Saidiya Hartman notes, form a "racial global order so intractable that it now appears fated."[1]

## Empire, Transnational Education and the Panama Canal Zone

Robert Beecher was the eldest of seven children born to Jamaican natives Lucille Jones and Henry Beecher. His birth on April 16, 1914, coincided with the end of construction for the American-financed Panama Canal. Lucille and

1 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 59. I thank the members of the 2014–2015 Committee on Globalization and Social Change at the City University of New York Graduate Center for their generous feedback to earlier drafts of this article. I also thank the anonymous reviewers of the *International Journal of Africana Studies*, as well as its editor, Bertis English, and copyediting team, for their detailed attention during the final stages of the article's revision.

Henry were among the tens of thousands of migrants, principally from British Caribbean colonies, who made their way to Panama to work in and around the Canal Zone's military and civilian areas.[2] Lucille and Henry Beecher made full use of the institutional structures that helped shape these areas. Public schools were among these structures. Their son received his elementary schooling in Gatun, one of a dozen or so segregated "colored towns" within the Canal Zone designated for non-White and non-American employees and their dependents. Though resources available to the students in these colored-only schools lagged tremendously behind those for Zonians (White Americans born in the Canal Zone or who resided there for extended periods of time), Beecher excelled academically.[3] To continue his education, however, his parents had to look outside the Canal Zone. High schools for non-American students did not exist inside the zone until 1946. There and elsewhere in Panama, public school officials often discriminated against students whose parents did not speak Spanish fluently and only a select number of the private schools created by longtime Afro-Caribbean residents had high school-level programs.[4]

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2 More than 150,000 men and women from the English- and French-speaking Caribbean alone immigrated to Panama from 1904 to 1914. About this and related matters concerning migrants and the canal project, see Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 16–23, 45–74; Julie Greene, "Silver Lives," chap. 3 in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 123–58; Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914*, 3d. ed. (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1984), 43–88; and Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2014).

3 As part of the Canal Zone Code of Governance, schools operated since 1906 and, not unlike all other facilities and institutions in the zone, employed a strict segregationist policy. Non-white and non-American workers comprised the majority of the student population up to the 1960s. See John Biesanz, "Race Relations in the Canal Zone," *Phylon* 11 (1950): 23–30; Michael E. Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014); as well as Herbert Knapp and Mary Knapp, *Red, White, and Blue Paradise: The American Canal Zone in Panama* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

4 See Robert Houston Beecher, "Resume" and "Brief History of My Accomplishments," n.d., in Box 1, Robert Houston Beecher Papers, Schomburg Research Library for the Study of Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York (hereinafter cited as RHBP, SC); Kaysha Corinealdi, "Envisioning Multiple Citizenships: West Indian Panamanians and Creating Community in the Canal Zone Neocolony," *Global*

Beecher's parents eventually enrolled him in Brown's Town High School in St. Ann Parish, Jamaica, their island of birth. He studied there from 1926 to 1930. He was among a select group of young men sent to the British Caribbean by adult family members and community sponsors to pursue secondary degrees.[5] St. Ann Parish had a unique history within Jamaica. For example, Marcus Garvey was born and reared in the parish, and his education—or miseducation—under the colonial British system influenced much of his anti-colonial and Black Nationalist thought. As a student in St. Ann, Beecher doubtless heard much about Garvey and the future of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), particularly given Garvey's deportation from the United States of America (USA) to Jamaica in 1927. Ironically, Beecher heard even more about Garveyism once he returned to Panama, as the movement enjoyed much popularity throughout Central America. Garveyites, in fact, organized a number of UNIA branches in Panama, Cuba, and Costa Rica.[6] Decades later, Beecher reflected on Panamanian elders who had been active participants in the UNIA. Beecher considered writing a history of the UNIA in Panama. He actually conducted preliminary interviews on the topic but never finished the writing project.[7]

In 1935, at age twenty-one and possessing a Cambridge certificate earned in Jamaica, Beecher began teaching at a segregated school in the La Boca

*South* 6 (fall 2013): 87–106; and George W. Westerman, *Los inmigrantes antillanos en Panamá* (Panamá: La Impresora de la Nación, 1980), 55, 76, 111.

5 See Beecher, "Brief History"; and George W. Westerman, "Historical Notes on West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama," *Phylon* 22 (winter 1961): 344.

6 See Carla Burnett, "'Unity Is Strength': Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike," *Global South* 6 (fall 2013): 39–64; Marcus Garvey and Robert A. Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 11: The Caribbean Diaspora, 1910–1920 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); Frank Andre Guridy, "*Un Dios, Un Fin, Un Destino*: Enacting Diaspora in the Garvey Movement," chap. 2 in *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 61–106; and Ronald Harpelle, "Cross Currents in the Western Caribbean: Marcus Garvey and the U.N.I.A. in Central America," *Caribbean Studies* 31 (2003): 35–73.

7 Beecher mentioned the unfinished writing project about the United Negro Improvement Association in Panama on an unlabeled notepad dated May 24, 1979, located in Box 2, RHBP, SC.

Township of the Canal Zone. Five years later, in 1940, while still teaching in La Boca, he enrolled at the University of Panama to pursue pharmacology and education degrees, which he completed in 1948. Beecher was among the first graduates from the university, founded in 1935. His graduation represented an important feat for a first-generation Afro-Caribbean Panamanian. Discriminatory practices and limited educational opportunities hampered many others with similar aspirations. Indeed, Beecher completed his degree amidst a tremendous anti-Black and anti-Caribbean political moment in Panama. This movement culminated in 1941 with the passing of a constitutional clause denying citizenship to Panamanians "whose parents belonged to the black race whose first language was not Spanish." Lawmakers amended the clause in 1946 to allow those with foreign parentage to access their citizenship after providing documentation proving their "spiritual and material incorporation" into the nation. This requirement would remain in effect until 1961.[8]

Faced with race based-segregation and exclusion both inside and outside the Canal Zone, Beecher had to create ways to overcome these oppressive systems. Pursuing higher education and educating youth were two principal means to achieve this goal. In 1949, he earned a scholarship as part of the Fresh Air Camp at the University of Michigan. Camp officials principally recruited young, professional scholars to work with students from "disadvantaged backgrounds"; Beecher served as a student counselor. He also pursued a master's degree in applied psychology during his two-year tenure at the university. This time outside Panama also provided him with a break from the combative racial-imperial structure within the Canal Zone.[9]

Beecher returned to Panama upon completing his master's degree and entered the Canal Zone under the American payroll scale (one of two citizenship-based

8 *Constitución de la República de Panamá* (Panamá: Imprenta Nacional, 1941), 4. See also Virginia Arango Durling, *La inmigración prohibida* (Panamá: Publicaciones Jurídicas de Panamá, 1999), 57–60; Lara Putnam, "Eventually Alien: The Multigenerational Saga of British West Indians in Central America, 1870–1940," in Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, eds., *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 278–306 (writing about general discrimination faced by blacks and Asians in Latin America from the 1920s to the 1940s); and Westerman, *Los inmigrantes*, 95–101.

9 Beecher, "Resume (Updated 1978)," in Box 1, RHBP, SC (hereinafter cited as "Updated Resume").

pay scales in the zone, the other being the local scale based on comparable salaries in Panama). The American scale, the much higher of the two, was mostly restricted to White American workers, but Beecher fought successfully to be included in this scale on the basis of his American educational credentials.[10] Beecher worked as an instructor in the La Boca Branch of the Canal Zone Junior College, founded in 1950 and the area's only two-year college for non-White students.[11] Afro-Caribbean Panamanian activists who desired to provide greater educational opportunities for non-Whites compelled zone officials to found the junior college.[12] Their effort was successful, but racist and exclusionary policies limited the growth potential of the college's students in the same manner that racism and exclusion limited the potential of other non-White students in the Canal Zone. Undeterred, Beecher not only taught at the local junior college for non-Whites, but he also served as acting principal of the La Boca Occupational High School.[13]

Throughout his twenty-two years of educational service in the Canal Zone—first as an elementary schoolteacher of numerous academic subjects, then as a junior-college instructor, and ultimately as acting principal of a high school—Beecher had the opportunity to interact with hundreds of students. As principal, for example, he oversaw the education of 350 students. Beecher, the quintessential leader, did not limit his duties to mere academics, however. He mentored his students, informing them about the peculiarities of his work and of his existence as an Afro-Caribbean Panamanian within the neo-colonial American-controlled Panama Canal Zone.[14]

For some residents of the Canal Zone, its schoolteachers represented the most privileged non-American workers in the area. For Beecher, however, any such privilege was limited. While Afro-Caribbean Panamanian teachers could point to opportunities available to them within the zone, especially compared to discrimination they might face outside this area, teachers could never presume

10 Canal Zone Personnel Bureau, "Notification of Personnel Action," November 8, 1951, in Box 1, RHBP, SC.
11 Beecher, "Updated Resume."
12 See, for example, Corinealdi, "Envisioning Multiple Citizenships."
13 Beecher, "Updated Resume."
14 Ibid.

ascending the zone's educational structure, as could their White contemporaries.[15]

The tense political relationship between Panama and the USA also limited Beecher's ability to use La Boca schools as a zone of empowerment for himself or his students. The Panamanian state had for many decades sought a revision of the 1903 Panama Canal Treaty. The first extensive revision came in 1955 in the form of the Remón-Eisenhower Treaty. It proposed equal access to zone jobs to both Panamanians and citizens of the USA (with certain security restrictions) and the promise of an equal wage scale. The treaty likewise allowed the Panamanian state to tax its citizens employed in the zone and increased the annuity paid by the USA to Panama for canal profits. Less attractive aspects of the treaty included the shuttering of hundreds of local jobs for longtime residents and citizens of Panama who formed the majority of the zone's workforce. Consequently, they and their families joined those already struggling to survive in Panamá and in Colón, the two cities bordering the Canal Zone. Many of these newly unemployed and homeless residents were first- and second-generation Afro-Caribbean Panamanians.[16]

Faced with an increasingly impoverished population, local and state officials initiated relief plans such as building housing projects in Colón and Panamá.[17] Those unwilling to wait for relief or who were not confident relief plans would ever materialize took matters into their own hands. Specifically, they petitioned for visas to visit, study, and eventually work in the USA. Panamanians with family members or friends in the USA also sought out avenues for reconnection. Robert Beecher was one of these petitioners, though an earned graduate degree from the University of Michigan made him very different from most other Panamanians who were petitioning for visas. Similar to them, however, Beecher came from a working-class background and by departing Panama would yet again leave behind his family and a close network of friends. But

15 See, for example, George W. Westerman, "School Segregation on the Panama Canal Zone," *Phylon* 15 (fall 1954): 276–87, esp. 281.

16 See Larry LaRae Pippin, *The Remón Era: An Analysis of a Decade of Events in Panama, 1947–1957* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964); and César Samudio, "La guerra fría y el Tratado Remón-Eisenhower," chap. 5 in *El Canal de Panamá, 1903–1955* (Panamá: Imprenta Nacional, 1992), 179–210.

17 See, for example, George W. Westerman, *Urban Housing in Panama and Some of Its Problems* (Panama: Institute for Economic Development, 1955).

for Beecher, an opportunity to further his academic education and possibly start anew in the USA proved especially compelling.[18]

Beecher arrived in New York City in 1956. After securing room, board, and part-time employment, he focused on his academic ambitions.[19] By fall, he was enrolled in select for-credit classes at the City College of New York. Shortly thereafter, he requested letters of recommendation from his former professors at Michigan, applied for doctoral study with a focus in human relations at the New York University (NYU) School of Education, and was accepted in September 1957.[20] Beecher, in his personal papers, does not specify if he applied or was accepted to other schools and what in particular drew him to NYU; however, the latter decision likely corresponded to the small but growing Afro-Caribbean Panamanian population in the city at the time, a population particularly concentrated in Brooklyn where he found a room to rent.[21]

Whilst in NYC, Beecher began to write about the racism that he had experienced as a principal in the La Boca School System. Up to this point, he had been silent about the matter. In 1961, or five years into his stay in NYC, Beecher forwarded a project proposal to a friend employed at the NYC Board of Education. Beecher described his proposal as a "case analysis [of an] acting principal" who from 1954 to 1956 was "resentful of the methods used by his immediate supervisors in settling problems pertaining to the job." His proposal also described segregation in the Canal Zone School System. He highlighted the special preferences given to "white Americans trained in the United States" who wished to become principals. They, he said, were more likely to achieve their goal than "local residents" with the same aspirations. In general, his case study depicted a school system that privileged White American citizens' knowledge more than that of the expertise and interests of trained Black educators.

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18 See Conniff, *Black Labor*, 137; and George Priestley "Raza y nacionalismo: George Westerman y la 'cuestión' antillana 1940–1960," in Alberto Barrow and George Priestley, eds., *Piel Oscura Panamá: Ensayos Y Reflexiones Al Filo Del Centenario* (Panamá: Editorial Universitaria Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro, 2003), 93–136, esp. 133.

19 Robert Beecher, "Diary, 1956," Box 2, RHBP, SC; Robert Beecher, "IRS Form 433-D-Monthly Income Tax and Expense Analysis," January 5, 1960, Box 1, RHBP, SC.

20 "Resume," Box 1, RHBP, SC. "Letter from New York University Office of the Director of Admissions to Robert Beecher," September 5, 1957, Box 2, RHBP, SC.

21 Conniff, *Black Labor*, 137; Priestley, "Raza y nacionalismo," 133.

Beecher left this injustice when he departed Panama; but, unbeknownst to him, similar questions regarding who should control the schooling of non-White students were prevalent in NYC.[22]

## Race in NYC

The New York City that Beecher made his home starting in the late 1950s was a changing metropolis where numerous people shared his demands for belonging, respect, and a government responsible to the educational and cognate needs of the local population. Economically, NYC had a decreasing manufacturing sector—vital during the first half of the twentieth century—with jobs for those without a post-secondary education increasingly limited to the service sector. A policing of union jobs by White bosses likewise prevented non Whites, long-term residents and migrants alike, from securing or retaining relatively well-paying jobs in the industrial sector. Such occurrences resulted in an economic structure where non Whites, especially those without post-secondary degrees, had very few options but service-sector work—if they could secure these jobs at all.[23]

Nathan Glazer, Daniel Moynihan, and other social scientists presented a naturalized rendition of this structure. Glazer and Moynihan, in their coauthored 1963 study titled *Beyond the Melting Pot*, characterized African Americans and Puerto Ricans as lazy slum dwellers, welfare abusers, and self-proclaimed victims largely uninterested in employment. In the specific case of African Americans, Glazer and Moynihan connected the problem of unemployment with the lack of "motivation, training, and ability to fill the opportunities that [were] available." They likewise affirmed that African Americans refused to take on the task of self-improvement and instead "insist[ed] that the white world listen to [their] problems." As for Puerto Ricans, Glazer and Moynihan decried "paternalistic guidance" and a reliance on "social services," as symbolized by "large families on welfare," for the group's inability to "develop powerful grass-roots organizations." Glazer and Moynihan did admit to some entrepreneurship among Puerto Ricans but mainly presented this act as a means of countering African

22 Beecher, "Case Study," 1961, p. 2, in Box 1, RHBP, SC.

23 Roger David Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

American claims about discrimination. Per this rationale, if Puerto Ricans could work past language barriers, then African Americans could secure loans and capital to create businesses.[24]

The conclusions reached by Glazer and Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot* and by Moynihan alone in a 1965 study titled *The Negro Family*, known commonly today as the "Moynihan Report," typified the opinions of many White NYC politicians and their constituents (many of whom considered themselves to be sociopolitical liberals) and had tremendous implications for how New Yorkers in general would handle shifting ethnic and racial dynamics in their place of residence.[25] By the time the foregoing studies were released in the 1960s, NYC had the largest concentration of Blacks in the northeast USA.[26]

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24 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963), 41, 53, 110, 112, 118.

25 Patrick Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965). The 1964 report focused on female-headed households and lack of traditional American values as the causes of growing delinquency and poverty among African Americans. For scholarship on the legacy of the poverty-shaming, stereotype-driven, and heteronormative imperative of the Moynihan report, see Patricia Hill Collins, "A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life," *Signs* 14 (summer 1989) 875–84; Roderick Ferguson, "Something Else to Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and the Negations of Black Lesbian Feminism," chap. 4 in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); James T. Paterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*: *The Moynihan Report and America's Struggles Over Black Life: From LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and, among other sources, Susan B. Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images About Poverty* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

26 See, among other sources, Regina Andrews, *The Black New Yorkers: The Schomburg Illustrated Chronology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 219–302; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1998); Pedro R. Rivera, "Carlos A. Cooks: Dominican Garveyite in Harlem," in Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds., *Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Michelle Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Irma Watkins, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Migrants and the Harlem Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Steady migration from Puerto Rico,[27] in addition to migration from various Caribbean nation-states, especially from 1965 onward, also increased NYC's diversity and further added to the social, political, economic, and cultural milieu of the city.[28] Whites born in the USA remained NYC's controlling group but, as Robert Beecher found out firsthand, broadening ethnic and racial diversification in the city caused many Whites to coalesce further around a shared racial identity, particularly in relation to public accommodations such as schools.[29]

At New York University, Beecher studied the intersections of race, psychology, and education and developed a great interest in race-based debates regarding public schooling. As part of his doctoral studies, which he initially pursued while working a number of part-time jobs before his appointment in 1959 as a full-time NYC public schoolteacher, Beecher explored youth culture, social anthropology, and Puerto Rican education.[30] Beecher became especially interested in the educational experiences of African American and Puerto Rican children. Possibly because of his extensive experience in school segregation debates and his familiarity with colonial structures, Beecher sought more knowledge about Puerto Rico, particularly its youth. Beecher, teaching first in Manhattan and later in the Bronx, encountered a number of Puerto Rican students in his classroom. Beecher spoke Spanish fluently, so he was able to teach English as a Second Language and became a translator for other teachers and school officials.[31]

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27 See Juan Flores, ed., *Divided Arrivals: Narratives of Puerto Migration, 1920–1950* (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1987) and Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth Century New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

28 See Roy Bryce-Laporte, *Caribbean Immigrations and Their Implications for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983); Nancy Foner, ed., *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); and Phillip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

29 See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

30 "Resume," Box 1, RHBP, SC.

31 "Chairman's Report on a Visit to Mr. Robert Beecher, Spanish 3:3," January 13, 1965; "From Principal Schweitzer to RB," February 3 and 26, as well as March 26,

During the summer of 1960, New York University and the University of Puerto Rico sponsored a six-week workshop on Puerto Rican history and education. The workshop was held in the capital city of San Juan, and no fewer than thirty-five public schoolteachers including Beecher attended it. Among other activities, they enjoyed "lectures, field study, and visits to homes," Beecher recounted decades later.[32] Coverage by the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo* revealed the level of importance given to the workshop by local and state education officials. Jaime Benitez, rector of the host university, delivered a two-hour talk to Beecher and other teachers upon their arrival in San Juan. Benitez emphasized the importance of Beecher and company understanding both "Puerto Rican culture and the problems facing the island . . . so as to better cope" with the continuous migration of Puerto Ricans to mainland cities such as New York.[33]

Numerous Puerto Rican politicians lent support to the six-week workshop in San Juan. Luis A. Ferré, a candidate for governor on the *Partido Estadista Republicano* (Pro Statehood Republican Party) addressed Beecher and his teaching associates two weeks into their stay. Ferré declared that Puerto Rico had undergone a process of cultural and political revolution that brought it closer to that of the mainland USA. Specifically, he spoke of the islands' supposed move away from a Spanish/European political and cultural orientation to one where a distinctive Puerto Rican culture grounded in peace and equality and American notions of liberty and enterprise had prevailed. Because of this transformation, Ferré insisted, Puerto Ricans were ready for their place among the American union of states. His address provided Beecher and other workshop participants with more information than they had likely anticipated learning regarding Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth and the campaign to secure statehood status. This view, of course, ignored those within the island calling for independence and those who understood migration to the mainland or statehood as a necessity and not a choice. Inasmuch as these opinions critiqued American imperialism, they were avoided by all

1965; "From Speech and Language Core Department Chairman to RB," April 28–29, 1965, all in Box 1, RHBP, SC.

32 Beecher "Resume," Box 1, RHBP, SC.

33 "45 Profesores EU Visitan Al Rector Jaime Benítez," *El Mundo*, July 28, 1960.

speakers who addressed the visiting teachers.[34]

Once Beecher returned to NYC, popular African American periodicals such as *Jet* magazine became important resources for his alternative education about race, education, and neighborhood politics among Puerto Ricans in the city. The August 1, 1963, issue of *Jet*, which Beecher purchased, carried the headline: "Plan to Report Puerto Ricans as White Stirs Racial Dispute." The attendant article, titled "Are Puerto Ricans Negro or White?" and written by Art Sears, indicated the superintendent of education for New York State had in a closed-door meeting ordered school officials to "report Puerto Ricans as white on a de facto school segregation report he want[ed] by September 1." The superintendent's report sought to discern whether segregation was increasing in the city's public schools, and labeling Puerto Ricans "White" would effectively downplay segregation—the apparent goal of the superintendent.[35]

Sears, in addition to providing *Jet*'s readership with news about the education superintendent, used his article to discuss whether, "many Puerto Ricans wish[ed] to be considered white because of the advantages that color [Whiteness] provides in the U.S." He interviewed Puerto Rican academics and other professionals who self-identified as Black or White about the topic. William Santos, a Black Puerto Rican who worked as an advertising salesman, insisted that Puerto Ricans came in a range of colors, as did Black Americans. Santos sarcastically proposed that if Puerto Ricans were White, then so too were Blacks. Frank Negron, a New York-born White Puerto Rican and executive of the New York-based Chelsea Conservation Project, also agreed that Puerto Ricans came in various colors. Negron insisted, though, that racism in the mainland USA caused "99 per cent of Puerto Ricans to want to be considered white. Not because they are white themselves—many of them are jet black—but because of [American] society." According to Negron, such racial tension did not exist in Puerto Rico.[36] This pronouncement of peaceful race relations aligned with

34 See ibid.; "Maestros de Nueva York visitan EL MUNDO," *El Mundo*, July 20, 1960; "Habla a Maestros de NY: Ferré Señala Isla ha 'Revolucionado' Dentro de un Régimen de Libertad," *El Mundo*, August 10, 1960; and Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

35 Art Sears, "Are Puerto Ricans Negro or White?" *Jet* 24 (August 1, 1963): 14.

36 Ibid., 14–15 (first quotation), 16 (second quotation).

the ethos of Puerto Rico's culture of equality that Beecher and his colleagues heard during their visit to the island.

Beecher also perused newspapers such as the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* to discern other opinions regarding questions of race among Puerto Ricans as well as the possibility of cross-racial alliances or cross-ethnic relationships among Puerto Ricans and African Americans. One such September 1963 article provided the views of Joseph Monserrat, then-director of the New York City Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Montserrat denounced the automatic pairing of African American and Puerto Rican experiences and struggles. "Negroes and Puerto Ricans," he declared, "are referred to constantly almost as if they were one and the same. . . . They are not the same." Many Puerto Rican migrants to mainland USA, he insisted, described themselves as "modern-day Italians or Jews or Irish." "Our problem," Montserrat continued, "is complicated by the fact that Puerto Ricans have never met prejudice before. The outside community wants us now to accept their values about color, but we refuse." For mainland-based Puerto Rican officials such as Montserrat, while the civil rights fight being waged by African Americans and other members of the Black Diaspora throughout the country connected to their own specific historical burdens, Puerto Ricans were caught between this history and their own supposedly race-neutral aspirations.[37]

As part of his daily teaching activities and doctoral program investigations, Beecher examined whether African American and Puerto Rican youth held similar concerns about coalition formation and racial and historical impositions. He specifically explored the changing school demographics that news outlets often described in apocalyptic terms: African American and Puerto Rican students becoming the majority in NYC's public schools. Having taught at Morris High School in the Bronx from 1957 to 1959 and at Edward Stitt Junior High School in Manhattan from 1959 to 1964,[38] Beecher was aware

37 Woody Klein, "Puerto Ricans Slow to See Rights Role," *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, September 26, 1963. For a rich study on the complexities of interactions of Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and civil rights debates in New York City, see Sonia Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

38 Robert Beecher went back to Edward Stitt Junior High School in 1964–1965.

of the ethnic shifts of which news outlets such as the *New York Times* were reporting (in 1964, the *Times* proposed "mainland whites" [a term that limited Whiteness to those born in New York of European descent] would constitute a numerical minority of NYC's elementary school population by 1966).[39] Beecher did not have much interest in whether mainland Whites were leaving NYC's public school system. The possibility of relationships between African American and Puerto Rican students, even as those in the popular press refuted this probability, constituted his interest. Beecher, as he would later explain in his dissertation, expressly wanted to assess whether recent migrations (from the island of Puerto Rico to the mainland USA and from southern states to New York City), skin color hierarchies, and the status of either ethnic group (African American or Puerto Rican) as a numerical majority or minority within a given classroom or school, affected the development of these cross-ethnic relationships.[40]

Clarence O. Senior, a public scholar who sat on the NYC Board of Education, provided Beecher with comments and suggestions for the proposal project that would eventually become the basis of Beecher's dissertation. Senior formed part of a growing number of anthropologists, sociologists, and statisticians in the USA who were conducting research on Puerto Rican migration.[41] Among other activities, Senior had coauthored a major study in 1950 titled *The Puerto Rican Journey*.[42] Writing to Beecher in 1963, Senior expressed his overall approval of Beecher's project and noted that its "results would be most useful to all interested in the various ethnic groups of New York City."[43]

## Cross-Ethnic Relationships and Teaching African American and Puerto Rican History

The NYC Board of Education approved Beecher's study on April 10, 1963. Obtaining this approval was necessary given that Beecher would be

39 Leonard Buder, "Ethnic Balance in Schools Shifts: Negro-Puerto Rican Majority Indicated in 6 to 7 Years," *New York Times*, January 1, 1964.

40 Robert Beecher, "A Study of Social Distance among Adolescents of Ethnic Minorities" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1968), 1–10.

41 See, Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 133–200.

42 C. Wright Mills et al., *The Puerto Rican Journey* (New York: Harper, 1950).

43 "Letter from Clarence Senior to RB," February 13, 1963, in Box 1, RHBP, SC.

working with public school students and would need to solicit teachers who would distribute and collect questionnaires and other relevant study materials. Furthermore, as his approval letter specified, the anonymity of all students, teachers, administrators, and even the names of the schools involved in his study would need to remain paramount.[44]

Beecher conducted most of his dissertation research from 1964 to 1965 while still teaching fulltime at the Edward Stitt Junior High School in Harlem. He surveyed 190 students in two lower eastside Manhattan junior high schools with large Puerto Rican populations. Beecher, as he explained in his dissertation, selected these two particular schools after visiting them and deducing they offered a good sample of the demographic shifts taking place in Manhattan schools—principally, the growing presence of Puerto Rican and African American students. Being able to secure necessary permissions from all relevant school administrators was a second reason for his selection.[45]

In putting together his study, Beecher developed questionnaires that asked students to rank their interest in befriending the members of small groups they were assigned to in class. Beecher also had students supply biographical information which included details such as date and place of birth, address, parents' places of birth, parents' employment histories, language or languages spoken at home, and the grade in which the students entered NYC public schools. Additionally, Beecher asked teachers to identify students based on skin color ("light," "medium," "dark") and he provided photographs to coincide with each descriptor. By having teachers rather than students offer this classification, Beecher sought to discern whether any color bias would factor into how students interacted with one another.[46]

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44 "Letter from Samuel D. McClelland, Acting Direction of the Bureu of Educational Research of the Board of Education of the City of New York to Robert H. Beecher," April 10, 1963, in Box 1, RHBP, SC.

45 Ibid; Beecher, "A Study of Social Distance among Adolescents of Ethnic Minorities," 38–42.

46 Beecher apparently did not consider how color biases among teachers might also affect the skin-color designation they provided for each student. In putting together his questionnaires Beecher made use of the Bogurt Scale and the Ohio Social Acceptance Scale, two survey systems widely used by social scientists at the time. Following the Bogurt Scale, Beecher also had students rank their level of friendliness toward four distinct ethnic groups—Jews, Italians, Negroes, and Puerto Ricans—but focused his

Beecher, based on the classrooms he surveyed, concluded that African American and Puerto Rican students had mostly positive attitudes toward each other and overall expressed a willingness to have each other as friends and as neighbors. All the same, most of the students conveyed a preference for their own ethnic group. Beecher found that African American and Puerto Rican students who had lived in NYC at least five years had positive opinions of the other ethnic group regardless of whether they resided in the same neighborhood. He did note that, after ten years or more of shared residency, select stereotypes affected relationship building. Beecher also found that skin color was no factor in the acceptance decisions of these students and that being a numerical majority or minority in a classroom did not determine acceptance patterns.[47]

Beecher, in the conclusion to his dissertation, wrote extensively about the importance of "a climate of understanding fostered by the principal, faculty, and other [school] personnel" in NYC. In Beecher's judgment, this climate was a major factor in good relations between the African American and Puerto Rican students on whom his research focused. Beecher suspected that a positive school environment had a significant role in the progress of African American and Puerto Ricans from youth to adulthood. Beecher furthermore insisted that NYC's public school system "produce minority group members who [were] sufficiently knowledgeable and perceptive to explain phenomena like self-image problems." Beecher pointed to inferiority complexes among African Americans and an inadequate understanding of issues of generational differences among Puerto Ricans to reinforce his insistence. Both ethnic groups, he concluded, lacked proper models to appreciate positive aspects of their culture. For Beecher, an educational program informed by cultural awareness was the key to solving self-image problems among Puerto Ricans and African Americans. If allowed to learn of their cultures in a positive light, especially through informed role models, he posited, both ethnic groups would have better opinions about themselves and American society at large.[48]

In the summer of 1967, as part of a project unconnected to his dissertation,

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attention on perceived friendliness between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Beecher, "Study of Social Distance," 139–42.

47 Ibid, 94–106.

48 Ibid., 109 (first quotation), 115 (second quotation).

Beecher recruited a fellow teacher, whom he identified only as A. Harris, to join him in instructing summer courses on African American and Puerto Rican histories and cultures. When they began this project, Beecher was a permanent English teacher in the Bronx. He also served as liaison between the community and a newly created Community School Board (District 12) in the mid-Bronx bordering the Corona Park and Hunt Point neighborhoods. Lawmakers created the district in 1965 when activist parents and supportive teachers advocated for greater control over the school curriculum and funding decisions. Puerto Rican and African American students, many from low-income households, constituted the numerical majority in the district; other Latino groups and non-Whites constituted the minority. Public School 67, an elementary school where Beecher and Harris offered their summer courses, formed part of District 12. Beecher taught the African American history classes, and Harris led the Puerto Rican history classes.[49]

Beecher enjoyed instructing the African American history course but initially was surprised by a deep lack of knowledge among his students. Many of them, he remarked, did not know some of the most active civil rights leaders of the day. He thus spent the first sessions of the course reviewing the names and responsibilities of several key leaders. Beecher likewise employed novel teaching methods and an impressive array of traditional resources that included biography creation, class reading, "guess who" and "react to the myth" games, map drawing, and poetry reciting. Beecher furthermore used periodicals such as the *Crisis*, *Jet*, and the *Amsterdam News*, along with local Bronx newspapers and community newsletters, to discuss contemporary events. The textbooks he selected challenged the pathologies that grounded a number of academic studies about African American communities. In particular, he looked at the writings of William E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and other revolutionary leaders who had no qualms with strengthening African American communities through confrontational action as well as through nonconfrontational action.[50]

49 "Notes," October 7, 1967, in Box 3, RHBP, SC. See also "Community School District 12-Overview," ca. 1972, and Robert Beecher, "Report on Negro History and Culture Class," August 1, 1967, in ibid.

50 See "Inter-group Relation Syllabus, 1967–1968," in Box 3, and "Book Collection," in Box 5, RHBP, SC.

In a short amount of time, Beecher's African American courses succeeded in giving his students much needed exposure to a broad range of materials on African American culture, including politics. Student interest in the course swelled fast, Beecher reported. One student asked to borrow one of his books about the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. two days after the course opened. Other students began borrowing books from their parents and from other adults who visited neighborhood libraries. Yet other students had engaging conversations with older persons who were familiar with the historical, cultural, and political information they were learning in the course. Regrettably, Beecher did not seem to keep notes on the effectiveness of his fellow educator's course on Puerto Rican history and culture.[51]

Beecher's reports about student interest in his African American course revealed as much about NYC's public-school curricula as it did about students who relied on these curricula to become more informed citizens. Beecher, as noted earlier, expressed concern about his students' initial ignorance of African American history and culture. Such ignorance was not due to any innate inability, however. Existing curricula simply did not emphasize the history and culture of Black Americans. Beecher thus committed himself to resolving this curricular issue—about which the average White American who helped design the general curriculum for the NYC public school system doubtless knew but was indifferent to resolving for an obvious reason: Education about one's ancestral history and culture promoted self-confidence and myriad other virtues. Such an education could then lead to new leaders challenging previously accepted norms. Of course, vanguards of both Black Power and Black Studies had desires akin to those of Beecher.

## Conclusion

Through his work as a teacher and a scholar, Robert Houston Beecher placed himself in the middle of heated debates about the future of African American and Puerto Rican children in New York City. He entered these debates informed by some of his own experiences navigating the educational landscape of Panama and Jamaica as well the USA. The experiences of Puerto Rican students in NYC attracted much of his interest, possibly because he himself had been

51 Beecher, "Report on the Negro History and Culture Class."

born and reared in the Caribbean, had attended and taught in schools within a colonial structure, and had migrated to the USA for greater educational and economic opportunities. For Beecher, teaching courses in African American history likewise helped his students understand their various roles as migrants to and, moreover, as citizens of localities such as NYC. Teaching these courses furthermore helped Beecher understand these roles, including his own.

Beecher's legacy is large still. In addition to championing a more culturally and ethnically diverse teacher pool in NYC, he connected his scholarly research on African American and Puerto Rican students to the growing number of Caribbean migrants to the city. He proposed that some of the same questions regarding southern African American and Puerto Rican migration to communities in NYC could feasibly apply to migrants from countries such as Barbados, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. Whether these newer migrants would continue to define themselves by their places of birth or embrace the USA as home—despite widespread ethnic and racial bias and discriminatory practices—was a key research question for Beecher. Scholars in Africana, Black, and Diasporan Studies continue to investigate similar matters to this day.[52]

Scholarly research was important to Beecher; however, he was not simply a researcher. He also was a pioneering classroom instructor who took a special interest in the histories and cultures of the multicultural students he instructed. Because African Americans and Puerto Ricans comprised sizable populations where Beecher taught, he took foremost interest in them. Even so, he interacted continuously with the growing number of Caribbean students in the city who were not from Puerto Rico. Whilst conducting research for his dissertation, Beecher had begun to note the small number of Barbadian, Dominican, and Jamaican students in the Manhattan classrooms where he distributed his research questionnaires. These students, particularly those from Jamaica, formed part of a second wave of Caribbean migration to NYC. From the early 1960s until his death in the late 1980s, Beecher mapped and remapped places such as NYC to include broader geographies of the Caribbean and furthermore to think and rethink the potentials of education among

52 Beecher, "A Study of Social Distance among Adolescents of Ethnic Minorities," 121–23.

African- and Caribbean-descendant students and teachers.[53]

By exploring some of the questions posed and observations made by Beecher during his long career as an educator, this article contributes to existing scholarly debates about uneven student performance, segregation and resegregation practices, and the funding and defunding of public schools with large non-White populations. Beecher's life and work hence serve as reminders that the sinister legacies of ethnic and racial discrimination, of imperialism, and of associated embodiments of American empire continue to haunt the realities of school systems throughout not only the USA but the entire Western Hemisphere. Beecher knew education could be personally enlightening and societally transformative, but he believed that truly successful education had to be grounded in an honest engagement with history and the incorporation of inclusive pedagogy.

53 See Bryce-Laporte, *Caribbean Immigrations and Their Implications for the United States*; Foner, *Islands in the City*; and Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York*. Some remapping is evident in notes that Beecher left behind dating from 1968 to 1982. He chronicled his travels to Panama, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. His 1980s journeys seem to have been especially inspiring. "Unsorted Notes with Multiple Dates," in Box 1, RHBP, SC.