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REMEMBERING PUERTO RICAN  
IDENTITY: WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN,  
BY ESMERALDA SANTIAGO, AND FAMILY  
INSTALLMENTS: MEMORIES OF  
GROWING UP HISPANIC, BY EDWARD  
RIVERA

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REMEMBERING PUERTO RICAN IDENTITY:  
*WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN*, BY ESMERALDA SANTIAGO, AND  
*FAMILY INSTALLMENTS: MEMORIES OF GROWING UP HISPANIC*,  
BY EDWARD RIVERA

An Essay Submitted to the  
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By  
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Remembering Puerto Rican Identity:  
*When I Was Puerto Rican*, by Esmeralda Santiago, and  
*Family Installments: Memories of Growing Up Hispanic*, by Edward Rivera

**Prologue**

“*Boricua!*”

I initially became aware of this call during a lunch break at a local bookstore. I found myself seated next to a gentleman who, moments earlier, had attempted to gain my attention. I was unaware of his attempt until he struck up a conversation with me. He asked out of curiosity, “Didn’t you hear me calling to you? *Boricua! Boricua!*” He was surprised when I said no. I asked him what *Boricua* meant. As he explained, I noticed his accent. On the surface, this gentleman looked as if he were African American because the color of his skin was darker than mine. “*Boricua*,” he explained, “is a call used between one Puerto Rican to another. This call identifies individuals as members of the Puerto Rican community.” Before the conversation continued, he admitted to being confused when I did not respond to the call in kind, which led him to believe that I had lost my Puerto Rican identity. My response, I assumed, may have similarly surprised him when I revealed that I was not Puerto Rican but, rather, African American. Upon reflection, I did recall hearing something being directed toward me. It was very subtle, as loud as a soft hello.

This brief exchange turned into an hour-long dialogue, which covered such topics as politics, crime, education, culture, poverty, and assimilation in Puerto Rico. Yet, despite the challenges, Puerto Rico was as endearing to him as a long, lost love. The way he spoke of his island was akin to poetry; I felt as if I were listening to the reading of a very private love letter.

A native-born Puerto Rican, he moved to Cleveland, Ohio, with his parents. His parents eventually moved back to the island. This led me to wonder why he stayed in Cleveland. The answer, I am sure, could not be addressed during a lunch break. There seemed to be in him a dichotomy of sorts, whether to stay in the United States or return to his beloved Puerto Rico. This question provided me the springboard for subsequent research and exploration.

### **Introduction**

This essay will explore some of the challenges of this in-betweenness facing Puerto Ricans during the mid-to-late 1940s through the mid-to-late 1950s with liquid/open borders between the United States and Puerto Rico. The goal is to investigate, on the basis of two memoirs, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, by Esmeralda Santiago, and *Family Installments: Memories of Growing Up Hispanic*, by Edward Rivera, what it means to be Puerto Rican in this fluid setting between borders. At the same time, we will examine the effects of crossing borders on Puerto Rican culture and community in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Finally, a brief discussion of the challenges of allegiance to both the U.S. and Puerto Rico will follow.

In an attempt to organize and provide continuity, I am providing an outline to address these issues as follows:

1. A Brief History of Puerto Rico - How Puerto Rico Became a Commonwealth of the United States
2. The Effects of the Acquisition by the U.S.
3. The New York City Connection and Puerto Rican Migration
4. What about Home? Puerto Rico: The Post Migration Effect
5. It's a Matter of the Heart: Retaining Puerto Rican Identity

### **A Brief History of Puerto Rico - How Puerto Rico Became a Commonwealth of the United States**

*Borinquén* is a name used by Puerto Ricans for the island of Puerto Rico. It means “the land of the brave lord,” attributed to the Taíno and other indigenous people of the island, before the Spanish arrived (Novas 127; Wagenheim and de Wagenheim 4). Puerto Rico, located in the Caribbean Sea, was considered a strategic gateway between the new and old worlds. In its virgin state, Puerto Rico consisted of rich, tropical forest, fertile land, water and lush environment for wildlife, and vegetation. The Spanish, in their quest to gain territory, with Christopher Columbus as the leader of the expedition in 1493, landed in Puerto Rico, eventually naming the island San Juan Bautista (Picó 34). Although Columbus was not interested in settling on the island, it was believed that his shipmates discovered gold. The limited interest in the island was to mine the gold on behalf of Spain, which at the time was experiencing financial difficulties. The opportunity to mine the gold was the means by which the Spaniards took advantage of the native inhabitants. Thus, slavery was instituted on the island (Picó 35). At the same

time, “Ponce de León founded the first Spanish settlement in Puerto Rico at Caparra, near the southern shore of San Juan Bay,” and was also Puerto Rico’s first governor (Wagenheim and de Wagenheim 16).

As centuries passed Spain’s presence on the island continued to grow. The occupation of Puerto Rico provided the relief that Spain needed to address its financial and economic challenges. The consequence of Spain’s introduction of industry to the indigenous population began to take its toll as the survival rate among the natives began to sharply decline. Factors that contributed to the decline of the indigenous people included “accelerated pace of work,” exposure to Spaniards and their diseases, and changes in regimen and diet (Picó 37).

Because of the decline of the indigenous population, African slaves were introduced to the island until slavery was abolished by Spain in 1873:

African slavery persisted in Puerto Rico until King Amadeo of Spain abolished the institution there in 1873. By then, the Africans, who believed that their ancient Yoruban deities had followed them to Puerto Rico, had grown deep roots in the fertile tropical soil of the island and felt quite at home there. Intermarriage and interbreeding were common among the three ethnic groups - the Taíno, Africans, and Spanish - which is why Puerto Rico is so racially diverse today. Puerto Rican art, music, philosophy, literature, religion and cuisine all reflect the rich legacy of these three peoples. (Novas 129)

The intermingling of three groups of peoples that distinguishes one as Puerto Rican, as a result of occupation and subjugation, will further complicate in years to come the struggle for the Puerto Ricans to establish an identity and culture on their own terms. Furthermore, it complicated assimilation in the United States. Assimilation, in the United States, although a contradiction in terms, required immigrant populations to clearly identify who they were (e.g., Italian, Irish, Black). The racial disparities, tensions and mistrust amongst the nationalities created a need for each group to establish a place in the

United States, and build separate communities in a new land, in an attempt to retain their unique cultural identity.

During the centuries of possession by Spain, much time and resources were spent protecting the island from foreign invaders. The island was vulnerable to marauders from all sides, desiring to strip the island and its vast resources from Spain. In addition to the African slave population there were other European nationalities who settled in Puerto Rico, most notably after the abolishment of slavery because of the opportunities for work. Such cultures included the Dutch, Italian, and Chinese, as explained by Chef Yvonne Ortiz, whose influences, she recognized, can be observed and experienced in traditional Puerto Rican cuisine (3).

What is it about this Puerto Rico that drew so many to its shores? To read narratives, songs and discourses, Puerto Rico is an alluring goddess that powerful men can't help to want to possess, like one would a lover, or a captivating vixen.

Before providing a brief synopsis of the Spanish American War (1898) which resulted in Puerto Rico becoming independent from Spain, I wanted to explore why this land had such a sex-like appeal to those who were desperate to have it. The following quotes from men of the times illustrate their positive impressions of the island:

We proceeded along the coast the greater part of that day, and on the evening of the next we discovered another island called *Borinquén*... All the islands are very beautiful and possess a most luxuriant soil, but this last island appeared to exceed all others in beauty. Translated from a letter by Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1493. (Wagenheim and de Wagenheim 1)

The population of the island is so scattered that we find houses everywhere we go. There is a great abundance of bananas, and fish are plentiful in the rivers and along the coast; there is a great supply of fruits, sweet potatoes, beans, corn and rice in the hills. Cow's milk is abundant. Household furniture ... usually consists of only a hammock and a kettle... A machete is the only instrument used in their

work. With it, they cut the sticks, vines, and palm leaves to build their houses, and also clear the ground and plant and cultivate their crops. - Translated from *Fray Íñigo, Abad, Noticias de la Historia Geográfica, Civil y Política de Puerto Rico*, Madrid, 1788. (Wagenheim and de Wagenheim 27)

In most descriptions of Puerto Rico, provided by early explorers and non-indigenous settlers, were lavish descriptions of the island and the simple way of life lived by the natives as relaxed and lush in a tropical paradise.

The centuries long occupation of Puerto Rico by Spain was not kind. By the end of the Spanish occupation, the land and its natural resources were severely depleted. At the same time, it is important to take note of how beautifully and richly described Puerto Rico was by occupants and so dearly loved by the natives. The lush vibrancy would be the foundation of national pride, of legend, and of legacy, as the United States eventually gained possession of the island and the borders between the United States and Puerto Rico opened up.

Again, the Spanish-American War of 1898 led to the U.S. eventually acquiring the island of Puerto Rico. What precipitated the war was Cuba's fight for independence from Spain, which began in 1895. Three years later in 1898, the United States, out of sympathy for Cuba, joined forces on its behalf, demanding the independence of Cuba, and renouncing any claims that the United States would take possession of Cuba. Thus, began the Spanish-American-Cuban war. The involvement of the United States in this conflict was considered the first of its kind, known as a media staged war (Novas 136).

There was also another powerful faction in the United States that seemed to want war: the press-specifically, newspaper barons William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, both of whom had learned from the American Civil War that wars sell papers. The Hearst and Pulitzer papers began running stories (many of them true) about the atrocities that the Spanish were committing against the Cubans and urging the president to intervene. William Randolph Hearst, who was chomping at the bit for America to declare war so that he could expand his



readership, is said to have dispatched artist/correspondence Frederic Remington to Cuba in 1897 to send back sketches of bloody atrocities. When Remington couldn't find anything really horrific to paint, he sent a cable to Hearst in 1898 asking for permission to return home. Hearst was furious. 'Please remain,' he cabled back. 'You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war.' (Novas 136-137)

Unfortunately, war is not fair nor is it noble. The United States' involvement in this war was strategic. This would be the perfect foray for the United States to operate in a European arena. It is believed that US politicians were itching for a war and precipitated events which propelled the US involvement in the war with the bombing of the USS Maine in the harbor of Havana on February 15, 1898. There were 260 casualties (Novas 136).

The war was not equally matched. The Spanish forces were unprepared for the sheer force of a young and powerful United States. Needless to say, the war between the United States and Spain quickly came to an end on July 17, 1898 (Novas 126-160).

As part of the Treaty of Paris between the United States and Spain, signed in December 1898, Spain released Cuba, surrendering Guam, Wake Island, the Philippines and Puerto Rico to the United States for a reported 20,000, 000 dollars (Foraker 464-471). Once the United States gained the territory of Puerto Rico, it governed the island from December 1898, to May 1900. The Foraker Act created a civilian government, a governor and an executive council appointed by the U.S. President. Eventually, in 1917, the executive board was replaced by an elected Senate, however, the President of the United States had the power to veto legislation. Puerto Ricans became United States citizens and eligible for the World War I draft (Keen and Wasserman 520).

Under the governance of the United States, Puerto Rico's opportunity for independence appeared to be fleeting as it had, prior to the war, progressively gained

more independence from Spain. In an attempt to secure its loyalist ties and minimize potential uprising by separatist movements, Spain had been desperate to hold on to its colonies. Puerto Rico and Cuba remained loyal to Spain. As a reward for loyalty, the government of Spain reduced import taxes (tariffs) on items imported from Spain which led to the increase of imports that in part helped to greatly increase economic potential, specifically equipment needed to expand the sugar industry as well as open trade with “friendly nations” most notably, the United States (Novas 126-160).

In addition to these concessions, the leadership in Spain began to transition to a more liberal stance and reforms with the installation of King Amadeo in 1870. After an insurrection in 1868 deposed Queen Isabella II, a constitutional monarchy was established in 1869 (Novas 126-160).

One of the major outcomes from new leadership resulted in the formation of political parties:

Spain also enacting political reforms, which had a profound effect on Puerto Rico. The colony was represented in the Spanish parliament for the first time since 1837, and the island’s press had greater freedom to discuss important issues. In this more liberal atmosphere, Puerto Rico’s first political parties were formed. The first was the Liberal Reformist Party (*Partido Liberal Reformista*), followed by the Liberal Conservative Party (*Partido Liberal Conservador*). The Liberal Reformist Party favored assimilation, that is, it wanted Puerto Rico to become a province of Spain rather than a colony. The Conservative Party wanted to maintain the island’s colonial status. (contriesquest.com)

### **The Effects of the Acquisition by the U.S.**

In stark contrast, post Spanish-American War Puerto Rico was positioned under the United States, a country that acquired its first colony with no experience governing a foreign country.

Early on, the United States was found to be very unresponsive to the needs of the people and resistance began to rear its head. Despite the foiled attempts by the United States to govern Puerto Rico, and installing poor leadership, Puerto Rican political leadership remained robust (Keen and Wasserman 521).

Besides the major political shift, the United States changed Puerto Rico's primary crop, coffee, by exporting sugar crop to European markets, entrusting its production to a few harvesters. Sugar production was not as profitable as expected. The price of sugar experienced a sharp decline and Puerto Rico's economy began to experience a downturn. Further complicating Puerto Rico's burgeoning economic downward spiral, the island was greatly affected by The Great Depression that prevailed in the United States during the 1930s, as starvation was an epidemic in areas of Puerto Rico. From 1933 to 1941, the Puerto Rican economy was given a boost of \$230 million by the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration (Keen and Wasserman 521).

While it is nearly impossible to explore every nuance to explain, justify or support the decisions that led to the colonization of Puerto Rico, it does provide a lens that may in part provide a limited understanding of the challenges the Puerto Ricans faced.

As was previously discussed, Puerto Rico was on the verge of radical change under the Spanish rule. No longer a colony with political and certain other freedoms with the potential to propel the country toward greater independence, Puerto Rico was suddenly thrown backward under the control of the United States as a colony. Puerto Ricans had very little to no political rights. This situation along with the intrusive nature of the United States, propelled the citizens into a radical change. One can appreciate their

struggles and wherewithal to become independent or endure hoping for another, greater opportunity for independence.

The United States' occupation in Puerto Rico as benevolent provider, introduced paved roads, education, religion, healthcare, language, industry, a military base, commerce, introduction of modernity in a rural setting (telephone, canned/processed foods) and what could have been perceived as the golden ring, open borders to the United States (Wagenheim and de Wagenheim 110-142).

The Puerto Ricans prior to US occupation were simple people, who had a oneness with the land; food, livelihood, memories and identity were intricately tied to the land, the sounds and the wildlife it supported. The family dynamic, however, was a bit complicated by gender construction and norms between men and women, which provided great tension in the family. This generally produced broken families, absent fathers, depression, a hypersensitivity to sexuality of women, and a head of household supporting large families. Serial infidelity among men, as well as social disparages between educated and uneducated, the noble *jibaro* (country dweller) and resistance by some to distance oneself from this simple peasant were quite common.

In the memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, she gives us a sample of the simplicity she experienced as a child in Puerto Rico:

We children slept in hammocks strung across the room, tied to the beams in sturdy knots that were done and undone daily. A curtain separated our side of the room from the end where my parents slept in a four-poster bed veiled with mosquito netting... Papi left the house before dawn and sometimes joked that he woke the roosters to sing the *barrio* awake. We wouldn't see him again until dusk, dragging down the dirt road, his wooden toolbox pulling on his arm, making his body list sideways. When he didn't work, he and Mami rustled behind the flowered curtain, creaked the springs under their mattress, their voices a murmur that I strained to hear but couldn't. (11)

In subsequent chapters Santiago describes her father as cheerful, and easy-going, and attached to his battery-operated radio, a lover of music, poetry and news with an emphasis on international developments:

Early each morning the radio brought us a program called 'The Day Breaker's Club,' which played the traditional music and poetry of the Puerto Rican country dweller, the *jibaro*. Although the songs and poems chronicled a life of struggle and hardship, their message was that the *jibaros* were rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and deeply rooted proud nationalism. (12)

Santiago's childhood experience in Puerto Rico is richly and colorfully described using as her cues the yard, the smell of her mother's bosom, texture of hair, food, music, laughter, dirt roads, floorboards, insects, father struggling to make ends meet, the arguing, her mother confronting her father's infidelity and later, his abandonment and Santiago's mother taking on a job to care for the family. The experience although dramatic at times is melodic and soothing. Later, we find that the family move to New York City will provide descriptive cues that are less organic and natural and more industrial, harsh and loud. Long before the family moved to New York City, there were noticeable changes in the daily landscape of Santiago's life that shifted the dynamic of what was normal to barbaric, almost tribal. Since Santiago was a child she always wanted to be a *jibara* against her mother's wishes. For most of her early life, this continued to be a point of contention between them. Her mother, a progressive in her own way, longed to be independent, financially stable and appeared to want more for her children. The noble *jibaro*, a national cultural treasure to some and an object of scorn and shame for others, divided people, and did not represent progress. For her mother, the *jibaro* was a simple, uneducated peasant. Perhaps her disregard for the *jibaro* is tied to

her experiences with Santiago's father, who may have seemed simple, limited and going nowhere.

In the article written by Zain Deane, *Puerto Rico Travel Expert*, he succinctly describes the *jibaro* as:

...country folk from the interior of Puerto Rico who were principally farmers and laborers. It was largely on their backs that the agricultural boom took place. The *Jibaros* worked the fields and plantations of the *hacendados*, or Spanish landowners. The arrangement was typical for the times: *Jibaros* weren't slaves (the Spanish imported slaves from Africa), but they were an impoverished and uneducated group. And, like the slaves, they found their voices in music; today, the songs of the *Jibaros* are a celebrated part of the island's culture. The *Jibaros* also became the subject of paintings and other artistic expressions by some of Puerto Rico's most renowned masters. (1)

The process of assimilation of the Puerto Rican by the United States, was introduced very innocently to Santiago, like Santa Claus bearing great gifts. Santiago attended daily English class taught by Miss Jiménez:

She told us that starting the following week, we were all to go to the *centro comunal* before school to get breakfast, provided by the *Estado Libre Asociado*, or Free Associated State, which was the official name for Puerto Rico in the *Estados Unidos*, or in English, the Jun-ited Estates of America. Our parents, Miss Jiménez told us, should come to a meeting that Saturday, where experts from San Juan and the Jun-ited Estates would teach our mothers all about proper nutrition and hygiene, so that we would grow up as tall and strong as Dick, Jane and Sally, the *Americanitos* in our primers. 'And Mami,' I said as I sipped my afternoon *café con leche*, Miss Jiménez said the experts will give us free food and toothbrushes and things ... and we can get breakfast every day except Sunday.' (64)

At the meeting Santiago describes the Americans as "You could tell the experts from San Juan from the ones that came from the Jun-ited Estates because the Americans wore ties with their white shirts and tugged at their collars and wiped their foreheads with crumpled handkerchiefs" (64).

Santiago spoke briefly of the absence of men at the meeting because of their seven-day work schedule, highlighting that matters such as these were considered women's work (by the men). In a subtle way, it appeared as if the effect of absent men (at these informational meetings) who lacked the desire to participate out of ignorance deeming it woman's work, may not have realized the potential damage this may have caused on the family structure and their role as head of household. The disproportionate education of women to men, relegated the men to working class laborers. This theory, although not formally discussed in the context of this essay, is worth considering when I discuss the transformation of Santiago's mother after visiting relatives in New York City. Finally, the mother decides to relocate to New York City with her children, despite Santiago's father's failed attempt and bouts with depression in order to provide for his family.

The dynamic between Santiago's parents seems to be part of a cultural norm that was socially accepted. They had been together for 14 years and never married, yet had eleven children. Despite her father's long absences and indiscretions, Santiago's mother and father remained together. Santiago's mother made known her desire to be legally married instead of accepting common-law status. This enlightenment of her mother developed after a return visit from New York City (195).

The dynamic of love in real life compared to the advertised idea of love, made a marked impression on a young, maturing Santiago. Her experience of love, was arguing, love making, separation, making up and then the cycle, not necessarily in a predictable order, began again.

Her father, was a hard worker, though it seemed as if he was always struggling.

At one time he began to separate himself from the family, regularly going behind closed doors:

He had converted what used to be a tool shed into his private world, with a padlock on the door and curtained windows from which sometimes rose sweet-smelling smoke. He came home, ate dinner, and disappeared into his room with a lit candle and books and magazines. We knew better than to disturb him. He was as withdrawn as a person can be and still live in the same household; morose, preoccupied with the matters that were none of our business. (191)

Her parents attempted to start a business together, a food truck. It was not very profitable and quickly came to an end. Shortly thereafter her father returned to his trade as a handyman (193–194). Santiago’s father remained in her life until her mother decided to move to New York City in 1961, a decision that Mami made independent of his wishes. He was a loving father, one could tell, as Santiago carefully and beautifully describes their relationship in detail.

Of her family’s departure she recalls:

When the day finally came, he drove us to the airport, the radio tuned to the American radio station, where Brenda Lee sang her regrets. He hummed along with her, his eyes focused on the road, the rest of us silent as a fog. At the airport he unloaded our bags, helped us verify our tickets. I kept expecting him to change his mind, to get down on his knees and beg Mami not to leave. But he didn’t. When it was time to go, he kissed us good-bye, held us for a long time. I grasped his neck and pressed myself against his chest, smelled the minty fragrance of his aftershave, tickled my fingers through his kinky hair. Behind him, Mami gathered Edna and Raymond, her eyes focused on the door to the tarmac, her mouth set in a solid line. I didn’t want to give up either of them. But it felt as if I were losing them both. Papi pushed me away, kissed both of my cheeks, and brushed the hair from my eyes. ‘Write to me,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget.’ ... For me the person that I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jibara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting. (208 - 209)

Conversely, in the memoir, *Family Installments: Memories of Growing up*

*Hispanic*, we meet Edward Rivera, a Puerto Rican native who moved to New York City



in 1952. We are introduced to his family through the failed suicide attempt and eventual death of his paternal grandfather, Xavier F. Alegria, who is described as an itinerant school-teacher, part-time painter, poetaster, guitar-picker, and Mariolater. He should have died from the self-inflicted bullet wound but instead slipped into a coma for weeks and eventually died of starvation. According to Rivera's mother, this was a common occurrence in Puerto Rico (13):

...1919, the year it happened, had been a good year for meeting the All Merciful... In 1919 she had been a little over three years old. Poverty, she said, *la pobreza*, had done a lot of good people in, and some bad ones, too; and she would rattle off the names of the people she'd known in Bautabarro, our home village, people whose names and lives, like the names and lives of their parents and grandparents, would disappear when Mami's generation died off. The hilly village of Bautabarro had no chroniclers; illiteracy was high in those days, headstones a luxury. Besides, who would have had the time to record all the comings and goings, the births and deaths? Who would have bothered? The people of Bautabarro were peasants, not history-minded, culture conscious scribes. You died, and a few years later people forgot where you'd been buried. (13-14)

Rivera continues to describe his grandfather, Xavier, as a real Renaissance man, a well-known artist/educator. He was not a wealthy man as his fame would indicate, but he made more than the farmers or their workers. He designed the church altar, he and his wife had three sons and a daughter who attended mass regularly and confessed her sins. His wife Sara was known as the "perfect wife and mother, the kind Puerto Ricans, men and women, like to call 'saint' meaning a docile daughter, submissive wife, and a totally devoted mother. And a saint she died, though a little young to be leaving her husband and four children for a better life" (16).

After Xavier's death, Sara's parents adopted the children that included Rivera's father and his two brothers. Rivera describes Papa Santos Malánguez as a poor hillbilly, a *jibaro desgraciado*, and said, my father, who was his favorite was the kindest man he

ever knew. Papá Santos was called Chicken-thief Robin Hood of Bautabarro, because he would steal chickens and Vegetables to feed those who had no food. To make up for the crime he would do favors for no reason. He would do anything for his three orphaned grandsons (16).

Papá Santos' wife was unstable and very violent. She made his life miserable, yet he remained a devoted husband until her death. When Papá Santos died "... the three boys and their neighbors buried him somewhere in the hills alongside his crazy wife. No grave marker. The graves quickly disappeared into the wild vegetation, and even Papi, his favorite, lost sight of their graves" (19).

Following the death of Papá Santos, the boys had to fend for themselves. They tried farming Papá Santos's land. They met with little to no success. After the failed attempt at farming, each boy, Elias (19), Papi (17) and Mito (16) was desirous of plotting his own course. Elias, the oldest, knew early on that the farm was no place for him; he had aspirations to live in the city, settle down and get married. Elias, very shortly, quit the hillbilly life and headed for the city. Soon after, Papi and Mito sold the farm to neighbors and went their separate ways in search for work. Work was hard to find in these times as the island was experiencing the effects of The Great Depression (20).

In search of work Rivera's father is hired as a field hand for the wealthy Gigante Hernández described as "a hardworking, puritanical dirt farmer who found time to produce nine children. 'Eight worthless daughters and one half-ass son' was how he used to put it" (21).

He continues to describe him thus:

There was something Taíno Indian about his face, enough to suggest that way back somewhere on the island's hills some ancestor got down off the family tree

long enough to knock up an Indian maiden. Or the reverse: that some lickerish warrior from the tribe of Chief Orocovix or Guarionex scampered up the family tree and straddled a fertile virgin of the Hernández tribe. But if anyone had suggested this to Gigante Hernández, he would have reached for his machete and hacked the blasphemer's balls off in a single chop, like sugarcane. This *puro-macho* old-time patriarch took no shit from either sex, in or out of the family. He was proud, stern, and excessively strict, a boondocks tyrant who'd had the cunning to marry a submissive madonna. (21)

Gigante's wife died during childbirth. He would not remarry as it was frowned upon in his village. His wealth and machismo would have caused the offended to look aside. Besides a new wife would give, upon his death, his hard-earned estate to a stranger. He made sure that his children were educated. His one and only son was lazy. Having no interest in the family business, he opted to enlist in the army instead (22).

Gigante's wife had been a submissive wife, more like a footstool to her husband. Despite her doting nature and strength to bear nine children, Gigante remained the center of attention. He was praised by his neighbors for single-handedly raising "close-to-perfect" daughters. The girls had a reputation of being "What hard workers they all were! What obedience and loyalty! What humility!... They were known as the humble sisters" (23).

Gigante's daughters had very little choice, but to submit. Their father kept them isolated, he bullied them physically, he was overbearing and controlling. The only male child was weak; he was not the man that his father was. He used his privilege, his father's reputation to assert his manhood, mimicking his father as best he could. He was known to hang out with the peons, and watched after his sisters. The only child in the brood, that was strong, more like her father than the others, was Aunt Celita. No one messed with her. She bowed to one man only, and that was her father. She, more than the others, had a strong frame, strong features and could manage work around the house just as well as a man. Amazingly, the girls managed to be well balanced, knowing their place

as women, yet in their own way, displayed the strength of their father. The education he provided for them and their Catholic upbringing, likely helped offset the overbearing male rearing.

Rivera's father Papi (Gerán was his official name), a field hand, wooed and married Gigante's oldest daughter, Lila. Papi was very frail and often described as having weak hazel eyes, scrawny, yet "uncommonly courteous," sincere, not overtly sexual, proud looking, humorous, the most unlikely person to win the heart of Lila (27-28). Lila "...was a shade or two darker. Her hair, thick and long, was jet-black, like a *Borinquen* Indian girl's; she had high cheekbones, large limbs and a strong constitution. She thought nothing of standing on her wide feet all day" (27). The two seemed physically mis-matched as Papi's features resembled those of a Spaniard. Eventually Papi stole Lila away from a life of comfort and wealth to care for her and start a family of their own.

Rivera's mother Lila was described thus:

Such a way of life Lila had been born into and never once seriously thought to question. Even when Papá Gigante or Hortensio said or did something displeasing to her sense of right and wrong, when some *diablito* somewhere in the back of her head told her she'd just been insulted, or when the blackbird Celita pointed out some injustice she'd been subjected to at the hands of her papá or big brother and tried to convert her to resentment, it was herself Lila admonished, her own conscience she condemned for it: 'Get behind me, Satanás.' Because Mamá had taught her again and again in her saintly fashion, that our earthly life is one trial after another and that 'it's not for us to complain, Mija, but to endure. Endure and be humble Lila.' And endure she did, with humility to spare. (27)

Despite Lila's humble temperament, she had her way against the authority of her father. Papá Gigante was forced to concede that Lila was going to marry, without his consent:

But Gigante, without being at all conscious of it, sensed that the world was changing, knew that this was only one telltale speck in the great pile to come - women wearing pants and smoking in public, children refusing to be blessed by

parents, the loss of those venerable village customs, the end of *his* way. So he just stood there in the stream, naked, the cold morning water lapping at his brown behind, and he said nothing, not even a curse for God. For a wedding present, Gigante gave them a part of his worst land, most of it hilly and overgrown with weeds and thorny bushes. (32)

The land proved to be unproductive. Papi could not catch a break taking odd jobs and handouts from Papá Gigante in support of his wife and child. He did not have the mind of a businessman and often made poor choices to the shame of his wife, yet in keeping with her character, she endured with humility. Papi's failed endeavors did not discourage him from dreaming of a better life outside of the village. He was indebted to his father-in-law for a mule loaned to his wife, with a promise to return it in a few days. The mule was very old and should have been put out of its misery long ago. Before the mule could be returned, it fell victim to an unfortunate accident and was eventually put to sleep. Papi could not fully repay his father-in-law for the donkey so he insisted on paying him off in "installments" then retracting the offer insisting on paying him in full once he struck it rich (37–41).

Very quickly Rivera's family history narrative reveals much about four very different household dynamics in terms of gender construction: 1. the role of the father and mother, children, men and women in absolute terms, 2. the relationship between education, wealth, privilege and identity 3. the cultural association and loyalty, and 4. the importance of Catholicism for Puerto Ricans, beginning at the turn of the century. Rivera's father (uneducated, dreamer), through marriage, positioned himself at an economic crossroads. By inheritance/legacy, he could have chosen to die in poverty, known as a hard-working man who did all he could to support his family, or, he could

chase his dreams of owning a home and enjoying the good life, rising to the lifestyle to which his wife was accustomed.

The balance of power and strength among men, even in the small village setting appeared to be in the acquisition of land, fertility (boys were more valuable than women), overt machismo, dominance/mastery, control and sexual prowess. Weakness was not an option for men. Marriage (for a man) was to a wife worthy of saintly status, who was all at once submissive, fertile, and a devout Catholic. Daughters were obedient, domesticated and followed in the way of their mothers. Above all, the women were chaste or at least by appearance. Women, decent women, were not sexual. They were sexually objectified and ready at all times to meet the sexual desire of men as wife or lover. Boys were expected to be strong and provide, conquer (including sexual conquests), subdue like their father. Education was also an indication of means. The higher one ascended, economically, one would deny the indigenous (Indian or African) ancestry in favor of Spanish heritage. Papá Gigante was an example of denying his indigenous heritage though his indigenous features were strong.

From all accounts, as narrated by Rivera, Papá Gigante was in an enviable position. Who would not want to be him? His life appeared too perfect. Unfortunately for the rest of the villagers, if there was no desire or gumption to ascend economically, the measure of wealth became relative. Wealth for the peasant/peon was measured by the strength of one's character and generosity. Rivera's paternal grandfather was artistic, educated, the embodiment of the noble *jibaro*. As stated he made more money than most, yet poverty, and hard times contributed to his mental decline. Depression set in. He failed at a suicide attempt and, as stated before, eventually suffered death by starvation.

It was for his character and contribution to the community and church and not his wealth or lack thereof that he was remembered. Papá Santos (maternal grandfather), remembered for his generosity, a devoted husband and grandfather, died in poverty and was buried in an unmarked grave. The family structure at the time was husband and wife, devotion to the Catholic Church, raise the children with love, care, compassion making sure their needs were met. The husband was the *paterfamilias*, yet as in the example of Papá Santos, he did not rule or dominate his wife, who displayed severe mental illness. He was devoted to her, to the extent of suffering bodily harm and near death. He bore the additional responsibility of raising three grandchildren. Counter to the machismo with which Gigante raised his brood, Papá Santos favored Rivera's father because of his kindness.

The unifying trait that the men in Rivera's narrative shared was the devotion to the family. Abandonment was not an option. They did not leave their family; this was the highest offense that a real man could commit. Also, it appeared as if the indiscretion of men was very private and did not appear to interfere with or supersede the obligation of family.

Through the memoirs of Santiago and Rivera, there appears to be a shift for Puerto Ricans from 1919, from traditional European family values as shaped by the Spanish, to indigenous culture transitioning due to the influence of the United States. The U.S. influence brought with it modernity, and education for all, not just pockets of people. This education accompanied by open borders brought with it opportunities in a new land. The family structure in Santiago's account did not require marriage. Men and women were having large families that they could not support, indiscretions were open,

intermittent abandonment was common and generally accepted because the state of marriage was not honored. Santiago recalls a store clerk disparaging his female customer because of a comment that she made as thus:

'Jesus doesn't love children who don't behave,' the gray woman said. Her voice crackled like a worn record. 'And he will punish them.' 'Just ignore her,' the counterman said. 'She's crazy.' He set a hot *alcapurria* and a frosty Coca-Cola in front of me. 'Leave my customers alone,' he shouted at her and waved the greasy rag the way Don Berto used to wave his sharp *machete*. 'That's what happens to women when they stay *jamonas*,' he said with a snort, and Papi laughed with him. The gray woman retreated to her bleeding heads. 'Papi, what's a *jamona*?' I asked as we left the market, our bellies full. 'It's a woman who has never married.' 'I thought that was a *señorita*.' 'It's the same thing. But when someone says a woman is a *jamona* it means she's too old to get married. It's an insult.' 'How come?' 'Because it means that no one wants her. Maybe she's too ugly to get married . . . . Or she has waited too long . . . . She ends up alone for the rest of her life. (89)

Women were devoted wives and mothers but had no security and became the backbone of the family. Women were visionaries and could determine the fate of their family, while working outside of the home. Being a single mother was no longer a social stigma. Men appeared to be great fathers but not great husbands, providers or non-committal. In a word, the men were stuck, relying on traditional ways of earning a living (field work, odd jobs) to hold in a world that had drastically changed. Papá Gigante, an astute man, whether he was consciously aware was very progressive when he conceded to Lila's marriage. He was sensitive to the change that was coming and what that meant socially. In Rivera's reflections, we observe the working out of the change that Papá Gigante detected.

Papi continued to struggle. He eventually earned enough money:

'gateway money' as Papi was to mispronounce it a long time later, the funds for a one-way, shopping bag, cardboard-suitcase, late-night flight to The North and just



enough left over for roughly two weeks of room and board in a single-room occupancy, which at first they mistook for a comedown hotel overrun with ‘disrespectful cockroaches’ since they had no way of knowing that the city they had fled to was also ‘a haven for vermin,’ an expression that might have been added to the famous one at the base of the Statue of Liberty. (51)

New York City would not be a permanent home for Papi, he planned to return to Puerto Rico one day. When Papi earned enough money, he would send for his family. In his absence he sent letters, packages and pictures. Papi was a man of his word. He eventually earned enough money to pay for three plane tickets to New York City.

Rivera’s family was on their way. He describes his departure:

*Chuito* took an oxcart with us to San Juan, then a bus to the airport, where we sat and stood around a long time with hundreds of others who must have stuffed everything they owned into suitcases braced with rope and belts, and brown paper bags with cardboard handles. It was as if half the island were leaving on the same airplane, and the other more melancholy half were there to see them off. (68)

### **The New York City Connection and Puerto Rican Migration**

Upon arrival in New York City, Santiago describes the confusion and hurried tones as mothers gathered their children in preparation to exit the plane. Along the way, she saw “overstuffed suitcases tied with rope” that burst loose and people’s undergarments were exposed. Meanwhile, people stood and laughed, waiting to see who would claim these belongings. New York City was the first time she heard her mother speak English.

Santiago’s impression of the city was far different than the home she left:

I pressed my face to the window, which was fogged all around except on the spot I’d rubbed so that I could look out. It was late. Few windows on the tall buildings flanking us were lit. The stores were shuttered, blocked with crisscrossed grates knotted with chains and enormous padlocks. Empty buses glowed from within with eerie gray light, chugging slowly from one stop to the next, their drivers sleepy and bored. Mami was wrong. I didn’t expect the streets of New York to be paved with gold, but I did expect them to be bright and

cheerful, clean, lively. Instead, they were dark and forbidding, empty and hard. (217)

The Puerto Rican Migration did not begin when it became a Commonwealth of the United States. The United States hosted many separatist or insurgents looking to defect from Spanish rule, as well as the elite and traders prior to 1898 (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 7). However, the Puerto Rican migrant in 1898 sought low-paying jobs as cigar makers, sailors, domestics and garment makers. Between the years of 1910 and 1945, Puerto Ricans, in search of community and work grew from 1,600 to 135,000 people in a span of thirty-five years (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 7). The migratory experience of Puerto Ricans to the United States is unique, complex and to date has not been duplicated. Joseph P. Fitzpatrick lists several factors working against the Puerto Rican's core and presents the greatest difficulty which was establishing a "secure sense of identity" in a new land, specifically, New York City, that they perceived as being harsh and impersonal. The Puerto Rican was, it seemed, the invisible migrant due to continual relocation/uprooting, integration into public housing, integration into Catholic parishes, disbursement over wide areas leaving little opportunity for the Puerto Ricans to build and establish community. The opportunities that came with dual citizenship such as fluid borders, becoming a commonwealth and change in legislative structure was promoted as progression towards independence. The reality of the dual citizenship fell short of expectations. The tradeoff for the island of Puerto Rico, once praised for its luxurious landscape, was replaced with industry and modernity. At one time, Puerto Ricans and Blacks had the highest population in New York City, each group suffering its own brand of racial tension (Fitzpatrick 4-6). The development of racial tension not only

between Blacks but other ethnicities in New York City greatly contributed to the Puerto Rican community's struggle to find a place in the new world.

Of the Puerto Rican as the invisible early (turn of the century) migrant community, Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol asserts:

While literature on Puerto Ricans during the fifties centered on the economic, social or racial assimilation or adjustment problems of the post-World War II migration, relatively few studies emphasized the community structure of the Puerto Rican New York settlements throughout the decades before the war. Social scientists like Daniel P. Moynihan and Nathan Glazer blatantly denied the existence of an early Puerto Rican community and failed to perceive the relationship between early support systems or coping institutions and the later migration. (4)

For forty years the steamship for the Puerto Rican as for many immigrants coming from distant shores was the common mode of transportation to New York City. It was a four to five-day journey from Puerto Rico to New York City. Second class on these massive steamships was the most economical. Second class travelers were subject to overcrowded conditions. For pleasure, it was commonplace for travelers to bring Bibles, card games and musical instruments. The tight quarters allowed the passengers to make connections for finding employment and housing once they reached New York City (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 9).

The Puerto Rican migration can be characterized as the first group to migrate by air, rather than by steamship beginning in the 1940s. Fitzpatrick describes it thus: “The Puerto Ricans have come for the most part in the first great airborne migration of people from abroad; they are decidedly newcomers of the aviation age. A Puerto Rican can travel from San Juan to New York in less time than a New Yorker could travel from Coney Island to Times Square a century ago” (2). The open borders and quick access to Puerto Rico were very problematic for the Puerto Rican. Unlike most immigrants coming

from the mother/old country, commonly risking life and limb to leave stagnant living conditions, oppressive government for opportunities to be part of industry, progression and jobs, Puerto Ricans could choose, counting the cost and taking calculated risks, coming to America. Citizenship for the immigrant had to be earned. They had to be processed before they were admitted into the country. The Puerto Rican, unlike the European immigrant, did not have a choice. The Puerto Rican was a migrant which simply meant moving from one place to another. For the Puerto Rican, America was a foreign country that brought its industry, language, education, and government to their motherland.

In the chapter "Letters from New York," Santiago tells us about her mother going to New York in order for her brother Raymond to receive medical care. Her mother would stay with her maternal grandmother for a couple of weeks before returning home to Puerto Rico. We are able to tell from her recollections how easy travel was between Puerto Rico and New York City and the medical advances that were in New York City that would heal her brother. Had her mother decided to follow the advice of the doctors in Puerto Rico, her brother, Raymond's foot would have been amputated. Santiago's grandmother consistently wrote letters to her mother and the children from New York City. Santiago's grandmother was very progressive. She told Santiago in response to receiving one of her letters that she had difficulty reading her letters because of poor penmanship and as a result challenged her to be careful about composing her letters (155-158).

Of Mami and Raymond's visit to New York Santiago recalls:

So how long will you be in New York? Tio Lalo asked. Everyone looked at me. Mami wore a frightened expression, a couple of weeks, she said. You're going to

New York? I couldn't believe she hadn't told me. Now I knew why I had to spend time in this quiet, cheerless house. Your grandmother made an appointment for Raymond to see a specialist. Maybe they can save his foot. ... Your Mami can't afford to take both of you, Angelina said. It's very expensive to go to New York. (165)

Rivera, in his novel, describes the great anticipation that his mother felt, with every letter that was sent by his father, that it was finally time for them to join him in New York City. Travel to New York was very expensive. Papi did not earn as much money as he thought he would. This would continue to delay their reunion. Each letter that Papi sent spoke of the new land. His correspondence to his family confirmed his love and misery without them. One day, the letter containing the news that they had been waiting for finally arrived:

The tickets arrived. Three of them. A mistake? It had to be. There were four of us. But when she read the letter, it said, Lila, I'm sending only three tickets. That's all I can afford now, and I can't wait anymore. Chuito will have to stay behind for a few months, six at most, until I can get the money, and I'll get it, so help me. He went on apologizing for and explaining his 'necessary' decision for a couple of more pages, writing off his guilt. We couldn't believe it; but that's what she was reading to us. I don't think she believed it either. She must have reread it three or four times, twice out loud and once or twice to herself. (67)

New York City was a major port by which many immigrant populations gained access to The United States. Inherent in the environment were U.S. citizens sharing real estate, and job opportunities with culturally diverse peoples from all over. Naturally, tensions mounted as immigrants were absorbed, changing the landscape of New York City. The Puerto Ricans were not immigrants, but citizens, yet they were subject to the same prejudices as the immigrant population. To ease tensions and reduce prejudicial treatment in 1930, the United States issued green cards to Puerto Ricans certifying citizenship and granting permission to work (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 23). It was politically charged to deal with what the government perceived as overpopulation on

the island. Emigration was a proposed temporary measure used to move masses of people from Puerto Rico to the United States in order to alleviate the challenge of introducing industry to the island. The early Puerto Rican migrant, not meant to secure permanent residency, would come to the United States as proposed by government officials as manual laborers (Sánchez Korrol 18). Fitzpatrick proposed continual uprooting as one of the challenges that faced the Puerto Rican migrant. In a statement by Professor Maldonado-Denis in Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol's book, like a puzzle of the turn-of-the-century migrant, we see how his statement supports Fitzpatrick's claim. He states: "The social result of this process of progressive deterioration of Puerto Rico's agriculture has been the mass exodus of the peasant population to the cities (of Puerto Rico) and to the North American ghettos... Many of the displaced *campesinos* that flocked to the urban areas did so as an intermediate step towards migration to the mainland" (23).

### **What About Home? Puerto Rican Post Migration**

Assimilation as it relates to sociology is defined as the merging of cultural traits from previously distinct cultural groups, not involving biological amalgamation (Dictionary.com). Puerto Ricans had no homeland that reinforced their cultural identity. This wicked cocktail of extreme change, separation, movement, poverty, new language in a new land spurred an uprising in the community, that has been described as "highly organized networks of community and family. These networks not only transmitted values brought from Puerto Rico but also provided national, ethnic, spiritual and material sustenance for the migratory experience" (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 37). Beginning with the stabilization of the family, social clubs and the means to

communicate and the like, began to emerge allowing Puerto Ricans to be rooted in the new world. The social networks included pageants (as a means for fundraising) for children and women's, social, political, cultural organizations, and Feast celebrations (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 37). As the Puerto Rican community began to solidify, Hispanic-owned businesses, newspapers/magazines, social clubs began to spring up in the neighborhoods of New York City. The Puerto Rican began to flourish. Couples were getting married, and children were being born. Birthday parties, first communions were celebrated, as well as artistic expression and entertainment in the form of writing, acting, dancing, and music. These opportunities came at a high cost and tremendous struggle as it was not until the 1930s that the efforts of the early Puerto Rican migrant began to blossom.

Santiago's explains her maternal grandmother's move to New York City thus:

By the time we arrived in Santurce from Macún, with our bundles and expectations, my grandmother, Tata, had left for New York to join her sisters in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, a place said to be as full of promise as Ponce de León's El Dorado. (37)

Santiago's mother had the benefit of forward thinking women in her family who also provided a network for Santiago's mother to be successful and independent, shortly after her arrival to New York City with Santiago and her siblings. During their travel to New York, Santiago's mother told her that she had the opportunity to be a stewardess and see the free world (213, 215). It is clear that New York City for the women in Santiago's mother's family, was the gateway to opportunities that were unheard of in Puerto Rico. In contrast, Rivera's family did not have the same connections as Santiago's family. Once

the family settled in New York City they were close with neighbors and the Catholic Church (Rivera 73, 75).

The formation of social and political organizations allowed Puerto Ricans the autonomy, security and confidence to shape their environment, create economic opportunities based on craftsmanship, for example, needlework, that is very culture specific, freedom of speech, and the right to assemble that ultimately created notable celebrities, authors, and entertainers. In other words, Puerto Ricans embraced change and rode the wave of progression for all instead of an elite few, before the United States' influence affected them. Such notable Puerto Rican migrant celebrities in New York City included: Bernardo Vega (important figure in labor and leftist politics), Erasmo Vando and Emelí Vélez (actors, factory workers and journalists), Joaquín and Jesús Colón (labor leaders, activists, writers, and political figures), Pedro "*piquito*" Marcan and Pedro Flores (the most popular musicians in New York and Puerto Rico during the 1930s and 1940s), Julia De Burgos (writer), Dr. José Negrón Cesteros (doctor, activist and influential in the Democratic Party) (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 25–26, 30–31).

Perhaps the most impactful progression of Puerto Ricans in New York City is the shifting role of women, no longer limited to housewife and primary, docile, silent, invisible caregiver of the children. Women enjoyed equal opportunities as their male counterparts to contribute to the economy of the home by taking on jobs, as activists, as writers, as entertainers. Many homemakers took on piecework, sewing and selling their craft, while maintaining their homemaker status. As the women began to sell their wares, social connects were also established through shared commerce in New York City (Sánchez Korrol 95).



To wit, once in New York City, Santiago's mother was the head of the household, relying on Tata to take care of the children while she went to work. Santiago describes her mother's transformations in a series of excerpts such as:

We had a couple of new suitcases and three or four boxes carefully packed, taped at the seams, tied with a rope, and labelled with our name and address in New York that was all numbers. We had only brought good things: Mami's work clothes and shoes . . . . (216)

It was six in the morning of my first day in Brooklyn. Our apartment, on the second floor, was the fanciest place I'd ever lived in. The stairs coming up from Tata's room on the first floor were marble, with a landing in between, and a colored glass window with bunches of grapes and twirling vines. The door to our apartment was carved with more bunches of grapes and leaves. From the two windows in the main room we could look out to the courtyard we had come through the night before. A tree with broad brown leaves grew from the middle of what looked like a well, circled with the same stones that lined the ground. (221)

Two days in Brooklyn, and they already loved everything about it. Tata cared for them (the children) while Mami and I shopped. She sat them down in front of a black-and-white television set, gave each a chocolate bar, and they spent the entire day watching cartoons, while Tata smoked and drank beer (224).

There is enough work in the United States for everybody, Mami said, but some people think some work is beneath them. Me, if I have to crawl on all fours earning a living, I'll do it. I'm proud that way (225).

Mami eventually got a job working in Manhattan, while Santiago's grandmother watched the children. (234)

A comparable description is found in this passage "From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City." Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol writes:

When I was older, a married woman and mother myself, I never wanted for work because no sooner was my child born but there was a bundle of piecework for me to do. Do you know sometimes I made as much as forty dollars a week? (This was during the early forties) That was a lot of money for those times. So everything I learned from this great lady made it easier for me to work when we moved to New York. (95)

The United States provided, for those who embraced it, opportunities to achieve and dream, not limited to landowner, or farmer (particularly for the peasant population). Prior to open borders, and United States intervention, opportunities for the peasant population to successfully rise above their economic station were rare. There was a gap between the rich and poor Puerto Rican on the island. The United States was in part, unwittingly, the great equalizer. The migration to the United States also provided greater opportunities for children, who also enjoyed considerable gains in terms of opportunities for education, graduation and finding non-traditional jobs, moving away from laborer, servant or field hand.

After a decade since her graduation from the Performing Arts High School in New York City, Santiago was a scholarship student at Harvard University. She was the only one out of eleven children to reach such heights at the end of her book (269).

Rivera, in his memoir, reluctantly returned to Puerto Rico to bury his father. He, too, at the end of his novel was a college student. He, like Santiago, was the only one in his family to pursue higher education.

## **It's a Matter of the Heart: Retaining Puerto Rican Identity**

### **Puerto Rican Music and Dance**

Rivera's grandfather, Xavier, was known to be very artistic and among other things, as previously described, as a guitar-picker (13). Rivera did not describe his life in musical terms. He mentioned music as it relates to others for example, the church organist playing the Puerto Rican National Anthem and his cousin who briefly lived with them and held parties with music as an element of the party:

During choir practice he would tell us in a raised voice, while his right shoulder was ticking away, that the only reason he was 'stucked' with us in our basement auditorium (no heat, peeling walls, long benches for chairs) was because the concert halls were discriminating against him on account of his 'national origins'. ... He was playing one of the four Puerto Rican national Anthems, 'La Borinqueña,' on the huge organ, blasting the church with it, shaking the statues on their pedestals. The pastor had warned him about playing unauthorized secular music there, and about pulling out all the stops except during rehearsals, when Our Lord was locked up in the tabernacle, and the key safe in the sacristan's cabinet. But Padilla couldn't care less about these regulations and threats. He was both an artist and a diehard Puerto Rican patriot, and this organ racket was his way of both proclaiming his loyalty and protesting the wages received from the 'tied-fisted-pastor.' (92)

For Santiago, music was part of her daily life:

Early each morning the radio brought us a program called 'The Day Breaker's Club,' which played the traditional music and poetry of the Puerto Rican country dweller, the *jibaro* (12).

Santiago described her musical encounter in school and with her father as thus:

Miss Jiménez liked to teach us English through song, and we learned all our songs phonetically, having no idea of what the words meant. She tried to teach us 'America the Beautiful' but had to give up when we stumbled on 'for spacious skies' (4 espé chosk ¡Ay!) and 'amber waves of grain' (am burr gueys oh gren). At the same time she taught us the Puerto Rican national anthem, which said Borinquén was the daughter of the ocean and the sun. I liked thinking of our island as a woman whose body was a garden of flowers, whose feet were caressed by waves, a land whose sky was never cloudy. I especially liked the part when Christopher Columbus lands on her shores and sighs: '¡Ay! This is the beautiful land I've been searching for!' But my favorite patriotic song was '*En mi viejo San Juan*,' in which a poet says good-bye to Old San Juan and calls Puerto Rico a 'sea goddess, queen of the coconut groves.' ... Where was Noel Estrada going when he was saying good-bye to Old San Juan? Papi reached over and turned the radio down. 'I think he was sailing from San Juan harbor to New York.' 'It's such a sad song, don't you think?' 'At the end he says he'll come back someday.' 'Did he?' 'The last verse says he's old and hasn't been able to return.' 'That makes it even sadder.' (77)

In the preface of this essay, I recalled an exchange that I had with a Puerto Rican man at lunch and, how when he spoke of Puerto Rico, it was like reading a very personal love letter. Upon reflection, if he had burst out in song, it would have been appropriate as the words and his melodic delivery wooed me.

Music, was an important recreational activity for the Puerto Rican migrant: The common interests and attitudes which coalesced the Puerto Rican settlements into a community were eloquently expressed in the popular culture of the period. Music proved remarkably vital for internalizing and externalizing the attitudes of the migrant population. As primary vehicles for expression combining Iberian, African and Taíno Indian influences within the Puerto Rican culture, music, song, and dance had undergone a long development on the island and were transported to the mainland along with the migrant settler. Thus, traditional rhythms such as *Bomba, Plena, Aguinaldo, Seis, Danza y Danzón* were found at the center of musical development in New York *colonias* as well as in Puerto Rico. (Sánchez Korrol 77)

As I discuss the topic of music and its importance and influence on the migrant Puerto Rican community in New York City, I was reminded of how important it is to consider who is shaping the story and how an outsider's interpretation can define, diminish, divide, oversimplify or gentrify a culturally specific expression. In her book *My Music is My Flag*, Ruth Glasser focuses on Puerto Rican music in New York City from 1917- 1940, recognizing the tension created by outsiders (historians/scholars) who unfairly pitted one music form against the other, specifically, Cuban and Puerto Rican. Cuban music was seen as being the superior one while Puerto Rican, according to Glazer and Moynihan's 1963 contention that the Puerto Rican heritage is "weak in folk arts, is unsure in its cultural traditions, [and] without powerful faith... Unwittingly, such writers make Puerto Rican music the loser in an ahistorical Darwinian scheme that closely parallels social science condemnations of Puerto Ricans as a failed ethnic group" (3). Ruth Glasser devotes a book to a defense, discovery and validation of Puerto Rican music

while principally asserting that the two, Cuban and Puerto Rican, music can co-exist, supporting the environment/community from which it was inspired (7). This perspective lends credibility to the very real struggle for the Puerto Rican to self-identify against institutional, governmental and scholarly scorn. Is it fair to assign value to this music form or is it better for the purpose of understanding to simply listen and sensually experience the story being told through song? I chose the latter while addressing this topic in relation to the migratory experience.

By 1963 it appears, Puerto Ricans were still invisible to those outside of the culture. Regardless of the socio-scientifically assigned significance and value, or lack thereof by outsiders, Puerto Rican music was the soundtrack to the transitory nature of the Puerto Ricans experience since becoming a commonwealth of the United States.

In the first chapter of her book Glasser recounts a meeting in 1931 between a delegation of Puerto Rico's most outstanding musicians who traveled to Viejo San Juan to meet with Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., to petition the passing of a law which would allow them to create a music conservatory for the Puerto Rican. To that request, he responds "Oh yes," he said. "I think that support for your unrefined music [*la música brava*], that is, the *tiple*, the *güiro*, the *cuatro* and all those native instruments, is commendable..." Governor Roosevelt amiably insisted that the delegation should found an institution to promote 'native music' (13). Despite approval of the conservatory by the Puerto Rican House of Representatives and the Senate governor Roosevelt vetoed the bill. Discouraging as that may have been, Glasser asserts that restraints such as this, as experienced on the island, was in part the impetus for migration to the United States (13).

Music for the Puerto Rican peasant was the means by which oral history could be communicated as literacy was uncommon. As the peasants moved from region to region (in Puerto Rico) they were greatly influenced by other settings, social and political, and encounters with other musicians and adapted their style (and not the content) accordingly (Glasser 17). Of migrant music from Puerto Rico to New York City, Glasser states “The music that migrants carried with them as a treasured part of their heritage was constantly changing in dialogue with social, economic, and political forces. In Puerto Rico music embodied contours of class, region, and race and yet had its own unique dimensions, which transcended these categories” (18).

There are distinct musical presentations that are easily identified within the Puerto Rican community. *Bomba* (music and dance), a synthesis of (multiple) cultural (from French and English colonization) forms, is characterized by polyrhythmic melodies featuring “complex interaction between drummers and dancers.” *Bomba* (Afro-Puerto Rican producer/consumer) drums were made of empty rum, nail or lard barrels with goatskin head attached over the cask with ropes or screws and included ancillary drums made of hollowed out tree trunk or anything cylindrical (Glasser 18–19).

*Jibaro* music, created by small, independent farmers and sharecroppers, Spanish settler influenced, included *maracas* (gourd rattlers) and *güiro* (a ground scraper) with African and indigenous roots (Glasser 20).

*Seis* (song and dance form - having six couples in its configuration) was popular among *jibaros* and is described as a form that preserved melody and verse found in Spain during the conquest. “It was permeated by melodic and harmonic elements of southern Spain” (Glasser 20–21).

*Plena* was developed as a fusion in the community of displaced Spanish peasants, and freed blacks located on small and coastal lands and lower-class mulattos, primarily on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. Its verse construction is call and response accompanied by topicality and percussive emphasis with African influence. “*Plenas* were satirical and reflected the difficulties of life among the poor in urban and sugar-producing areas” (Glasser 21–22).

*Danza*, described as multi-sectioned music marked by its *habanera* rhythm was combined African, *jibaro* and European elements. *Danza* was “expandable” and “an authentically popular musical expression” (Glasser 24–25). Early migrants to New York City enjoyed both old and traditional style and presentation of music yet opportunities to create something new. After the occupation of the United States, Puerto Rican intellectuals touted *Danza* and music fashioned by *jibaros* as authentic music, calling it “genuine national expression” distancing from their more indigenous and African roots, catering to a Spanish and white culture (Glasser 27). (Aparicio 19) *Danza* as a national identifier was also used to assign gender to the Puerto Rican, as feminine, and received by some Puerto Ricans as “archaic and quaint” (Aparicio 19).

Santiago's father identified closely with the noble *jibaro*. His daily routine was always tied to the radio. Santiago recalls thus:

Papi hummed along with the battery-operated radio. He never went anywhere without it. When he worked around the house, he propped it on a rock, or the nearest fence post, and tuned it to his favorite station, which played romantic ballads, *chachachás*, and a reading of the news every hour. . . . I wanted to be a *jibara* more than anything in the world, but Mami said I couldn't because I was born in the city, where *jibaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect. . . . Our house, a box squatting on low stilts, was shaped like a *bohío*, the kind of house *jibaros* lived in. Our favorite program, 'The Day Breaker's Club,' played traditional music of rural Puerto Rico and gave information about crops, husbandry and the weather. (12)

Music was a staple in the Rivera's home as well. His father would often play his guitar and play folk music:

. . . Until Papi tried to open up a conversation on something safe: old folksongs. Have you heard of that old rendition of '*Lamento Jibaro*' over *La Voz Hispana*? . . . Afterward, Papi brought out his guitar ('If there is nothing to talk about,' he used to say, 'try music') and played some old tunes. (218)

. . . I preferred listening to the kind of music Papi played on his guitar in our dining room: Puerto Rican hillbilly, the le-lo-lai stuff. . . . (164)

His Italian colleagues teach him some opera lyrics and explain what they mean. '*Amarilli, mia bella, non credi, O del mio cor dolce desio...*' '*Sebben, crudele, mi fai languir Sempre fedele ti voglio amar...*' He sometimes hums himself to sleep with these; and years later he would sing them to himself in our dining room alternating *bel canto* with the le-lo-lais of our old village. A confusion of cultures, mild in his case. (179)

The descriptions listed do not begin to cover the plethora of forms covered in subsequent chapters in Glasser's book. Glasser defines these musical and dance forms in great detail born out of a life lived in continuum.

In the United States:

The records made by Puerto Rican musicians took their place among a variety of popular sounds as an indispensable part of the cultural world of their co-ethnics. Many Puerto Ricans eagerly bought the dozens of new *boleros*, *rumbas*, *sones*, *danzas*, and *guarachas* that were regularly offered by the record stores of New York's Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. (Glasser 129)

Glasser focuses a considerable amount on Rafael Hernández, composer and performer.

The songs written Rafael Hernández and recorded on Hispano revealed in numerous ways the composer's intense sense of pride in his heritage. In his songs, as in many of his other creations, Hernández lovingly detailed Puerto Rican historical figures, towns and types of food and slang expressions. On his Hispano recordings, however, Hernández was also able to use native instruments not found on many commercial recordings, as well as phrases and harmonic progressions taken from songs much loved in Puerto Rico. (144)



Glasser's use of Rafael Hernández as the ideal Puerto Rican model is fitting for this essay as he is the personification of what made Puerto Rican music and the romantic mythical-status of Puerto Rico for many, who may or may not have stepped foot on its shores. His ability to cater to the demand of the music company yet create a body of work considered by his audience as folkloric and thoroughly a "Puerto Rican Masterpiece." Equally impressive was his ability to use identifiable elements from other cultures yet remain true to the sounds, and phrasing that sincerely appealed to the Puerto Rican community (199).

Hernández, a composer:

who already had written hundreds of songs, rarely used indigenous instruments or worked within native Puerto Rican folk musical genres, aside from an occasional *aguinaldo* written and recorded near Christmastime. Moreover, the man who proudly called himself a *jibaro* grew up in a coastal town, hopped between Latin American cities, and quite possibly never spent a day in the country in his life... Jarvitz claims that the Puerto Ricanness celebrated in Hernández's songs and those of his contemporaries is based on, 'more than anything else, the lyrics of the songs... These lyrics are encased in musical forms which...are common to the entire Caribbean area. (159)

*Aguinaldos* were a big part of Santiago's celebration at Christmas time, as well as other musical forms. She recalls:

At home we listened to *aguinaldos*, songs about the birth of Jesus and the joys of spending Christmas surrounded by family and friends. We sang about the Christmas traditions of Puerto Rico, about the *parrandas*, in which people went from house to house singing, eating, drinking, and celebrating, about pig roasts and *ron cañita*, homemade rum, which was plentiful during the holidays. (40) Sometimes a woman's voice broke through, and then the men shouted louder, glass shattered violently, and the songs on the jukebox went from *boleros* about betrayal to *guarachas* and *merengues* about the good life. (156)

## Conclusion

Defining and articulating Puerto Rican identity is multifaceted and cannot be fully explored in one essay. There are no absolute answers as there are questions like: how would one define identity, and what aspects of institutions, environment and heredity impact identity? It is a mystery, like the creation of man. It is not static, it is constantly in flux. In my observation of Puerto Ricans through this essay, I find that they had to adopt to many different cultures that were imposed upon them by the Spaniards and later, the United States. They were given their language, religion and jobs. The United States offered greater freedom for all who had the desire to take advantage of the opportunities in this new land. For some, as in the example of the two memoirs, it is a constant struggle between progression/economics and honoring the noble *jibaro*, a national treasure, that is both the object of honor and scorn for some Puerto Ricans. As I discovered, one cannot truly run away from what is on the inside, a beacon for authenticity in this noisy world. ¡Boricua! Both authors achieved tremendous success academically – each from humble beginnings. Yet despite all of the success, there is something about home (Puerto Rico) that calls out to them. ¡Boricua! Each author expressed what it meant to be Puerto Rican in very different styles. Each of their experiences was unique, yet they still have a sense of what being Puerto Rican is by way of memory. Puerto Rican identity can best be defined as, in the example of the two authors, being and doing who you are, that is, by performance. Identity is action, it is being, it is doing and expanding what is known from past experiences and influences and with time, it changes (made new, revised and reverts to or more like a greater embrace of what is past) based on new experiences and

influences. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "No man ever steps in the same water twice, for it's not the same river and he is not the same man."

## **Epilogue**

This essay was born out of my natural curiosity and love for Puerto Rico and its people. My love affair started with salsa music and carried on, years later, to my studies in college as an art major. By then I had already gained experience with the community since I was 19 years old. My plan after earning my Master's degree was to teach art history with an emphasis on Puerto Rican art. What I discovered, to my disdain, was that there wasn't much material available written by Puerto Ricans about their art form and the context behind the art. I decided to work backwards and study the history of the people instead, hoping that by a process of discovery and cross references, I would be able to find art and its history as presented by a Puerto Rican. My burning question was how did the Puerto Rican arrive in the United States, and I must admit intrinsically/intuitively knew and witnessed the passion that Puerto Ricans (in general) have for Puerto Rico. I often wondered with open borders being as they are; would there one day be a movement back to the island. Yes, I know this may sound offensive to some, however, when I finally visited Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, I instantly understood what I had learned in the United States. The mythical-type expression of love, romance and longing for the island, I experienced all at once. When I was visiting Old San Juan, I felt as though I had come home. I was there for 12 days and in that time, I began plotting how I might return to live and work there. My bones didn't ache, it was warm, I ate and lived like a native, and freely spoke the little Spanish that I did know. Strangely enough,

I felt free. On our flight home, I knew instantly that we were far from the shores of Puerto Rico, I was struck by the frigid air; something didn't feel right. The first couple of days back in the States were the roughest. I couldn't understand it, I just wanted to cry. I was admittedly, mildly depressed. On my first day back to work, I stood in the middle of the floor and cried. I was, then, a 40-year-old United States native. What was happening to me? It is from that experience that I tried to present, not a full story but slices of experiences from a humanitarian stance rather than from a scientific or historical perspective and some of the effects of the Puerto Rican migration from the turn of the century to the 60s. The history and the migratory effects are still being played out today. I have learned a lot in terms of their struggle to self-identify and the challenges of fluid borders for a people with a pattern of movement and a legacy of uprooting. I also realized the importance of a sense of security needed to establish community and culture in a foreign land (the United States). I wanted to outline this journey using resources from a variety of perspectives with the goal being the inclusion of Hispanic scholars and those sympathetic to Puerto Ricans, instead of a scientific study. I hope this essay will be used as a springboard to delve a little deeper as there were many subtopics that could easily be an offshoot worthy of full investigation. I was reminded to be sensitive to who is relaying the facts and how opinions shape how we view a people. History is not one sided and should be challenged, ensuring that the subject of the study has a voice, for the purpose of understanding and not applying value upon someone's experience. Finally, I have learned that for Puerto Ricans establishing and asserting identity and pride is a challenge. Many great things were born out of this challenge that brought this community together in a foreign land, where there were opportunities available for all. Oral history of the island

carried on through song, food, family, and dance is important, however, being authentically Puerto Rican is something that comes from the heart. It is living and breathing this thing just as the gentleman displayed for me long ago during our conversation over lunch.

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