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**PORTABLE ROOTS:
LATIN NEW YORKER COMMUNITY BUILDING
AND THE MEANINGS OF WOMEN'S RETURN
MIGRATION IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO,
1960-2000**

Eileen J. Findlay

ABSTRACT

This article examines the life histories of women return migrants to Puerto Rico. It emphasizes the cultural aspects of return migration, especially how the narrators understood and expressed their collective identity as distinctive from Puerto Ricans born and raised on the island. These informants turned their life histories into morality fables of class mobility, gender role restriction, and social rejection on the island. These tales asserted their radical differences from both middle class-islanders, whom they had joined, and the working-class diaspora in New York City, from which they had come. The narrators also built an organization which reinforced their "Latin New Yorker" identity, invented on the island.

Keywords: migration, gender, culture, class mobility, diaspora, Puerto Rico

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las historias de vida de migrantes femeninas de retorno a Puerto Rico. El ensayo enfatiza los aspectos culturales de la migración de retorno, particularmente cómo las narradoras distinguieron su identidad colectiva de la de los puertorriqueños nacidos y criados en la Isla. Estas narradoras convirtieron sus historias de vida en fábulas de moralidad de movilidad de clase, restricciones basadas en el género, y rechazo social en la Isla, las cuales insistieron en sus diferencias radicales de los isleños de clase media y la diáspora obrera en Nueva York. Las narradoras también construyeron una organización que reforzó su identidad de "Latin New Yorker", la cual fue inventada en la Isla.

Palabras clave: migración, género, cultura, movilidad de clase, diáspora, Puerto Rico

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les récits de vie de femmes migrantes qui retournent à Porto Rico de New York. Il se concentre sur les aspects culturels des mouvements migratoires de retour au pays, notamment sur la manière dont les narratrices ont différencié leur identité collective de celle des portoricains nés et élevés à Porto Rico. Ces narratrices ont reformulé leurs récits de vie en termes de fables caractérisées par une morale de mobilité de classe, des limitations basées sur le genre et le rejet social sur l'Île. Ces histoires de vie ont mis l'accent sur les différences radicales entre les portoricains de classe moyenne et la diaspora ouvrière à New York. Les narratrices ont également créé un organisme qui a renforcé leur identité de «Latin New Yorker», inventée sur l'Île.

Mots-clés: migration, genre, culture, mobilité de classe, diaspora, Porto Rico

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“Identity itself is not the rediscovery [of roots], but what they as cultural resources allow a people to produce.” –Stuart Hall

I fight for you, puerto rico, you know?
 I defend myself for your name, you know?
 I enter your island, i feel foreign, you know?
 I enter searching for more and more, you know?
 but you, with your insults,
 you deny me your smile,
 i feel bad, indignant.
 I am your son,
 of a migration,
 a sin forced on me,
 you sent me to be born a native of other lands.
 why? because we were poor, right?
 because you wanted to empty yourself of poor people.
 Now i return, with a boricua heart, and you, you scorn me, you look
 askance, you attack the way i speak, while you're out there eating
 mcdonalds in American discotheques,
 and i couldn't even dance salsa in san juan, which i
 can dance in my neighborhoods full of your customs.
 So that, if you don't want me, well, i have
 a delicious puerto rico where i can seek refuge
 in new york, and in lots of other alleyways
 that honor your presence, preserving all
 of your values, so that, please, don't make
 me suffer, you know?

Tato Laviera, “Nuyorican”

This article analyzes fifteen life-history narratives spun by a particular group of New York-born-and-raised women living in the San Juan metropolitan area of Puerto Rico.¹ These tales shared with me in 2002 represent their attempt—both individual and collective—to make sense of the struggles they experienced after arriving on the island as young adults in the late 1960s and 1970s. The women whose stories I feature here are second generation outsiders, if you will—children of the massive working-class Puerto Rican diaspora, marginalized in New York City, who as young adults sought solace and adventure in their parents' Caribbean homeland. There, they found relative financial success. They also encountered sharp social and cultural rejection, and as they struggled to negotiate the contradiction between the two experiences, they built an enduring community among themselves.

Most of these women responded to their complicated sense of difference from the middle-class Puerto Rican contexts in which they built their island lives by participating in an organization which they dubbed the Latin New Yorkers. The women insisted that through this social club they managed to reclaim and refashion the more positive aspects of post-World War II working-class New York City Puerto Rican sociability. Through their life stories, which emphasized class mobility, gendered constraints, and triumphant oppositional community creation, my informants asserted their right to invent their own feminine version of a “delicious Puerto Rico”—one built, not on a physical withdrawal from the island, as Tato Laviera's poem defiantly implies, but on reconstructed New York ways, invented in Puerto Rico itself. New York City may have been a bitter lived struggle in many ways, but it became quite successful as a basis for creating a vibrant collective identity on the island.

The narrators featured here were some of the earliest of a wave of return migrants from the huge, generations-deep Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City. The women appeared to have incorporated themselves extremely well into Puerto Rican society, becoming homeowners, developing white-collar careers, speaking Spanish fluently, and building close relationships with their neighbors and island-born family members. Viewed in external, measurable terms, they seemed to have made a successful homecoming pilgrimage, returning to their “roots” on the island. Yet the women's recounting of their life-stories and their most intimate social choices expose another level of their understandings of themselves and the Puerto Rican society into which they seemed so well integrated. All of these female narrators insisted that they were “*cien por ciento boricua*”, expressing great affection for Puerto Rico. Clearly they had forged a powerful connection to their parents' homeland. By the time of our interviews, they had lived on the island continuously for

decades and almost all of them expected to never move away.² The narrators also emphatically—often even in the same breath—stated that they were NOT Puerto Rican; at least, not like those born and raised on the island.³

While agreeing that their long years in Puerto Rico had brought them occupational and material benefits, these women narrators by and large criticized the gender politics of social interactions on the island. They nostalgically compared memories of their social experiences as respectable working-class girls in New York with what they saw as stiflingly restrictive roles for married women in Puerto Rico during the 1970s and 1980s. Their memories of the hopes, hard labor, and disappointments of building lives anew in Puerto Rico frequently centered on such tales. Their stories probably reflected incidents which did occur in the past. Even more vigorously, however, they wielded definitional power. Through them, the narrators asserted a generalized Puerto Rican constriction of heterosexual gender relations and thus discursively distinguished themselves from the islanders who they felt had rejected them unfairly. Such stories also functioned as cautionary tales to those who might facetiously assume that material betterment unequivocally meant social fulfillment. Class mobility was not without its pitfalls, when viewed through a Nuyorican female lens. To a woman, my informants insisted that in their “Latin New Yorker” community on the island, they had managed to transcend these painful limitations by creating a new type of woman-directed heterosexual sociability, a utopian family of sorts, which none of them had ever experienced in other contexts, whether in working-class New York or middle-class Puerto Rico—safe, yet free of repressive surveillance.

Of course, by discussing the women’s tales of simultaneous class success, cultural exclusiveness, and restrictive gender relations, I do not claim to be reporting universalizable, empirical truths about late twentieth-century Puerto Rico. Many return migrants from New York and other parts of the United States have never managed to achieve the material comforts which the narrators featured here have enjoyed on the island. Many others *have* developed a powerful sense of national belonging in Puerto Rico, unlike these women. And many New York-born Puerto Ricans on the island would probably disagree with the narrators’ denunciations of married middle-class life in Puerto Rico. The narrators themselves varied in their interpretations of sexual possibilities and meanings on the island, despite their consensus about others’ married lives. Finally, the memories recounted by these women to me were shaped by both their responses to me—a formally educated, white, North American woman—and by their need to make sense of their pasts in light of their present lives.⁴ Thus, the stories which I analyze here are

the expressions of the particular meanings attributed to their pasts in particular contexts by this particular group of women.

These narratives' significance, however, resonates widely. The women's tales of making their way in the island of their parents' birth insist upon the diversity of Puerto Rican identities that have developed over the course of many decades of circular, multi-generational migration. Their rich stories carry us beyond the carefully quantified analyses of migration studies into the realm of subjectivity—the personal, powerful, and often contradictory meanings which people have bestowed upon the act of “homeland return”.⁵

The interpretations which these return migrant women have inscribed on their pasts remain compelling illuminations of the complexity of national belonging. The women displayed many elements of the “diasporan stance” delineated by Juan Flores—a “stance of insistence, even defiance . . . an anti-assimilationist position” which “evinces complex, ambivalent, often extreme reactions from non-migrant nationals in the ‘home’ country. . . Intense emotions mingle: rejection and resentment alternate with acceptance and inclusion. In short, a place is made at the table, but not without lingering discomfort and suspicions.”⁶ The experiences and meanings articulated by this group of return migrants are an as-yet ignored aspect of the centuries-long experience of colonial migration which has indelibly marked Puerto Rican history. As such, they deserve recognition as part of the spiraling historical experience of the great Puerto Rican diaspora, folding in and out of its original island territory.

Scholars historically have erected a barrier between Puerto Rican diaspora and island experiences, assuming that they have little to do with each other.⁷ In the last decade, however, numerous scholars have begun to emphasize the frequent movement of Puerto Ricans between New York and the U.S. mainland, adopting writer Luis Rafael Sánchez's metaphor of the “guagua aérea” [the air bus] as the paradigm for understanding the quintessential late twentieth-century Puerto Rican experience.⁸ The more permanent return migrants in Puerto Rico, however, generally do not figure in these discussions; they do not easily fit into their frameworks. Mentioned in both scholarly and contemporary literatures almost exclusively as a social problem or as victims of islander rejection, validated only when they conform to dominant island norms of behavior, appearance, and language use, until recently “Nuyoricans” on the island had not been considered valid culture and community creators in their own right.⁹ Juan Flores has forcefully challenged this interpretation in his new book *The Diaspora Strikes Back*. He calls for serious study of the cultural encounters, exchanges, and labor inherent in the process of return migration, insisting that Puerto Rican return migrants, along with

their Dominican and Cuban counterparts, not only are persistent cultural and historical agents, but that through their “cultural remittances” they can contribute to substantial changes in their host island society.

Through a preliminary, specific case study, this article attempts to answer Juan Flores’ call. The current essay illuminates some of the complex cultural aspects of return migration for a particular group of people. Along with Flores, I argue that return migrants are important as cultural workers, not only as economic or political actors. Thus, in this essay I seek to understand “the seams and borders of national experience . . . not as absences or vacuums but as sites of new meanings and relations,” to re-imagine the migratory experience as “an active process of breaking and re-membling.”¹⁰ Indeed, the Nuyorican women on the island whom I interviewed had reconceived the meaning of “New Yorker” as well as of Puerto Ricanness—most of them had not lived in New York for decades. For these narrators, the “New York and other alleyways” which the poet Tato Laviera invokes lived most powerfully in their memories, not in their day-to-day experiences. Remade in this way, these portable roots were, nonetheless, a compelling basis for community and identity building.

I also insist here on the importance of reading life-history narratives in several ways. Many social science studies of return migration use life histories as a basis for their analysis. Most, however, mine their informants’ accounts solely for empirical information, to piece together “the real story” of what happened in the past. We need to avoid the pitfalls of this “reduction of culture to behavior.”¹¹ I certainly see the narratives produced for me as a recounting of past experiences and use them as sources of empirical data. I also, though, treat them as important meaning-making activities, a place in which story-tellers spin particular interpretations of past events, in light of their present. Thus, life histories are not simply empirical reports. They are also fables, morality tales, symbolically rich cultural artifacts. We miss much of the meaning of return migration if we ignore these aspects of life-stories.

Historical Context

Even before the United States wrested colonial control of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898, Puerto Ricans were emigrating there in search of work in the expanding industrial center of New York. Throughout the 20th century this migratory path deepened. By the time the populist Luis Muñoz Marín won political power on the island, first as leader of the Senate (1940) and finally as the first elected Puerto Rican governor (1948), New York City—“p’allá ‘fuera”—was firmly entrenched as the destination of choice for those Puerto Ricans searching for a more secure

survival than that afforded in the cane and coffee fields of their island. Muñoz Marín implemented a development plan which combined rapid industrialization using U.S. capital, lured by tax-free investment and low wages, provision of social services through an expanded welfare state, and encouragement of massive emigration from the island. During the 1940s and 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans followed their predecessors to New York, and later to other urban centers of the colonial metropolis. By 1960, more than 500,000 out of a total of 2 million people had left the island. The Puerto Rican community engulfed all other Latin American immigrant groups in New York City; even before this post-war emigration explosion, Puerto Ricans had successfully built religious, civic, and economic institutions in New York. Emigration from the island slowed in the 1960s and 1970s, but the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed another huge out-pouring; more than 250,000 Puerto Ricans emigrated to the U.S. in the 1990s alone, many of them now highly educated professionals. By the year 2000, more than 3.4 million people of Puerto Rican origin were living in the mainland U.S., almost as many as the 3.8 million residents of the island.¹²

But Puerto Ricans did not disappear permanently into the heart of the colonial metropolis. During the late 1960s and 1970s, more people arrived in Puerto Rico than left. This included thousands of Cubans fleeing socialist revolution and Dominicans fleeing grinding poverty. As factory employment in U.S. cities dried up in the midst of a general U.S. economic contraction, thousands of Puerto Ricans also began to return to the island. In addition, the return migrants were drawn by the Puerto Rican post-war government's propaganda campaign in the U.S., which trumpeted the alleged success of a reformed colonial relationship between the two countries. For a short time, Puerto Rico's "Free Associated State", based on federal government subsidies and tax-free U.S. corporate relocations to the island, seemed to have produced an economic miracle of industrialization, wage increases for those with jobs, social service expansion, and the construction of massive new suburban housing tracts for the growing middle class along with public housing for the urban poor. Despite sharp criticism from the island's socialist and Nationalist movements for maintaining colonial relations and not delivering on early promises of radical social justice, Puerto Rico's rapid changes seemed to hold great promise for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora whose parents had been thrown into economic exile decades before.

The marked influx of "Nuyoricans" caused great anxiety among island-born Puerto Ricans. The returnees were denounced as contaminating an already embattled national character with their allegedly foreign dress, mannerisms, behaviors, and speech. Such allegations continue today, despite the fact that it is now nearly impossible to

distinguish clearly between outsiders and insiders. In 2000, almost 20% of Puerto Rico's population was people who had lived in the U.S. and their children. Practically every family on the island has members who have emigrated at one point or another. A significant number of Puerto Ricans will not settle permanently in one place or another, but over the course of their lives will move numerous times between the island and the U.S. mainland.¹³

The storytellers featured here were a very particular group of return migrants. All of these 15 interviewees were women. In addition, the majority of their parents left the island for New York in the 1920s and 1930s, prior to the immense emigrations of the immediate war and post-war years. Thus, the narrators featured here grew up during the '40s, '50s, and '60s in rapidly expanding Puerto Rican diaspora communities, raised by parents who were more experienced in the ways of New York than many of the newer arrivals. Only two of the narrators had visited Puerto Rico more than once before moving there as adults.¹⁴

All the narrators came from working class families whose parents had often struggled to survive economically in New York. Their parents for the most part had little formal education. Their mothers almost uniformly worked long hours in New York sweatshops sewing, assembling toys or electronic equipment, cleaning office buildings, and the like. Several narrators had been raised by widowed or divorced mothers; these women often worked double shifts at extremely low wage jobs, racing home to attend to their children after school before returning to labor at night. The narrators' fathers worked in construction, painting ships, driving delivery trucks, or as security guards or store clerks. Several fathers suffered serious injuries which disabled them permanently. A few lucky ones were able, through neighborhood social networks, to eventually set themselves up as managers or owners of tiny all-purpose corner stores, the ubiquitous *barrio bodegas*. Despite their hard life in New York, all of the narrators' parents stayed many years in the United States, moving employment and residences within the city rather than returning to Puerto Rico.

All of the narrators managed to graduate from high-school in New York with solid academic skills, although they also all entered the work force at a relatively young age. Many of them lamented not having been able to study more because of their family's need for their full-time wages. Several eventually went on to secretarial or technical schools. One, who became an elementary school teacher, graduated from a public university with a degree in foreign languages. Thus, all of the narrators had more advanced skills and education than their parents. However, most of them continued to be frustrated in their work life. Jobs in New York were scarce and often offered little opportunity for

professional or economic advancement. The narrators cited unemployment or “dead-end jobs” frequently as a primary reason for relocating to Puerto Rico.¹⁵

The historical moments which they lived, both in New York and upon their arrival in Puerto Rico, encouraged these women to produce quite specific cultural practices on the island. Adult, employed, and thus more autonomous than the teenagers who returned to Puerto Rico with their parents during the 1960s and 1970s, and who have tended to be the object of sociological studies of return migrants, all but one of these narrators formed and became life-long members of a San Juan-based organization called the Latin New Yorkers. At its height in the 1980s, the organization boasted hundreds of formal members and thousands of participants at its regular cultural activities.¹⁶ This organization, the social network these narrators formed through it, and the rejection by island-born Puerto Ricans which they often encountered became central in their creation of an “in-between” identity, based in what the Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant has called *diversion*—playfully subverting the status quo through cultural work, while frequently “returning to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away.”¹⁷

“Cuando Bajé del Avión, Subí de Clase”

All the narrators were able to establish themselves quickly on the island. With their good reading, writing, and arithmetic basics, and their fluency in English, most of the women got jobs with U.S. companies as secretaries and relatively rapidly won promotions. One worked as a bookkeeper for the English language newspaper *The San Juan Star* and another quickly found a position as a hairdresser in a new luxury shopping mall. The teacher immediately found employment in a private English-language school for U.S. children. Another narrator transferred her position as a claims clerk for the Social Security Administration to Puerto Rico. Thus, Puerto Rico’s colonial dependency on the U.S. served these returnees well. They were able to gain access to stable, salaried service positions for U.S. capital, which dominated the island’s economy and burgeoning welfare state. English fluency, in this context, wielded a power unimaginable in the U.S., offering them the possibility of modest, lower-middle class life-styles. All but one of the narrators owned their own homes within a few years, many of them in the sprawling suburban communities being feverishly constructed on top of the cane fields of Bayamón and Carolina. As one narrator put it: “When I stepped off the plane, I moved up in the world.”¹⁸

The narrators’ discussions of their shift in class status often coincided in the narratives with their experience of themselves as fully autonomous

adults; Puerto Rico meant individual self-fulfillment as well as material well-being. Mirna Jiménez reveled in learning to drive—her first solo extended motor vehicle trip was a triumphant pilgrimage to her parents' hometown of Lares. Her move to Puerto Rico was directly linked in her narrative to her discussion of first moving out of her parents' home in New York; she used the same language, pivotal phrases and sentence structure to describe both events.¹⁹ Gillie Rodríguez began her life story with her arrival in Puerto Rico, making this trip her life's implicit starting point. She drew a parallel between her move to the island and that of her New York boyfriend at the time who had gone off to university to "better himself". "I was falling in love [with the island]! I didn't know I had a dreary life until I came to Puerto Rico!" she exclaimed. Thus, for several narrators, upward social and economic mobility and the emergence of an autonomous, fulfilled self melded in their recollections of the early years in Puerto Rico.²⁰

Tales of Heterosexual Intrigues

As she related her life story to me, one of the narrators, Gillie Rodríguez, directly linked her sense of personal fulfillment and class mobility in Puerto Rico to her sexuality. She spoke enthusiastically of the flirting and flowery compliments which men showered upon her. In Puerto Rico, "men looked you in the eye to say all these things. They'd make the most dangerous thing sound so poetic!" "I loved all the fuss the men made over you. In New York, I was one of the guys [she had 5 brothers]—here, I felt *female!*" Living in a rented room in YWCA boarding house near the beach, phenotypically white, and one of a small group of single, working women not living with family members, Gillie told of dating lawyers and other men of professional social status who she met at the beach or at her job as a secretary for a U.S. shipping company. She talked of having intimate social access to people "who I barely would have *seen*, much less known in New York. . . . They would take you out to eat in fancy hotels—not like in New York—here you'd go to shows and meet the entertainers, I even met Tony Bennett once!" On the island, living beyond the bounds of her extended family and reaching into professional social circles, she felt that she had become a celebrity.²¹

Rodríguez also felt that her early experiences in Puerto Rico restored her honor, lost years before as a teenager in New York when she discovered that her fiancé had been cheating on her. This deep sense of shame, which tainted her pride in maintaining her virginity through years of adolescent courtship, haunted hours of our interviews. In Puerto Rico, where, she insisted, men of all classes desired her, but where she successfully negotiated a virginal, independent life until meeting her

husband, Rodríguez literally felt redeemed. Economically and socially autonomous in San Juan for the first time in her life, Gillie rejected her island family's accusations of loose living. She spoke joyfully about making her own sexual rules, dating many men and sleeping with none of them. She delighted in the seductive powers of her "curvy body" and New York "experienced" reputation. Rather than openly proclaiming her virginity, Rodríguez insisted to her dates that "I pick who I go with". She readily withdrew from petting sessions if the men got too "out of control", and insisted on dancing *salsa*, with its free-wheeling turns and fancy steps ("that felt free!"), rather than the slow, grinding *boleros*, ("when men would just pull you around and rub their crotch against you").

Thus, Rodríguez reconstructed her early years in Puerto Rico as a time when she was able to experience a potent sensuality but maintain her honor; "you know, I put up walls between them and me". In the process, she allegedly generated a great deal of confusion among her male suitors, who she claimed gossiped about whether she was "liviana o lesbiana" [loose or lesbian]. As a single working woman, exploring the beaches and nightclubs of San Juan unaccompanied by older family members, Rodríguez may well have seemed fair sexual game to the professional men whose masculine social prowess depended upon developing sexual affairs with women of lower social classes, while publicly and more restrainedly courting "marriageable" women from their own social networks. Rodríguez's insistence on maintaining her virginity, while joyfully experiencing other sensual pleasures and powers, would have challenged dominant male assumptions about class-based definitions of female respectability.

Rodríguez's stories of successful refusal of familial and societal scrutiny, and her confounding of the sexual categories which had felt so oppressive in her adolescence constituted a powerful narrative of personal liberation—"I just felt *light!*" she proclaimed to me. She confirmed her honorable sexual empowerment in Puerto Rico by telling me triumphantly how her ex-fiancé, "haunted by his memories of me," begged to see her when she returned for a short visit to New York.²²

Rodríguez's exuberant tales of sexual exploration and romance free of surveillance as a young single woman in her early years in Puerto Rico were perhaps the most striking of all the narrators' symbolic linking of the island with individual self-fulfillment. Such anecdotes provided one of the central threads of her life-story. Rodríguez recounted them with great zest, laughing out loud and gesturing dramatically. Certainly, this story of a journey from poverty-stricken, New York-based shame and dishonor to sexual empowerment and moral redemption on the island was on one level a powerful fable of upward class mobility. Rodríguez persistently linked her expanding economic and social opportunities with

an increasing sense of sexual agency and pleasure. Rodríguez delighted in her confounding of dominant social categories, which again twined social class and sexual expectations. Lurking within these tales, though, coiled occasional warnings of potential sexual danger and class vulnerability; one wrong move and the gallant lawyers might “step over the line” or leave Rodríguez stranded. Upward mobility could be tenuous.

We also could read Rodríguez’s sexual stories as a skilled performance for me, her North American, formally educated female audience, a performance which functioned on a number of levels. These tales repeatedly asserted her honor and dignity in the face of any possible judgment from me of her sexual exploration or of her relatively tenuous middle-class status (by the time I interviewed her, she lived on a fixed income with her elderly husband and disabled son in a crowded apartment in the Miramar section of Santurce). Rodríguez also may have given these particular stories a renewed emphasis as she noted my historian of sexuality and gender’s interest in these passages. Finally, as a sexual raconteur, Rodríguez rapidly established an intimate female solidarity with me, sharing “feminine stories” of disillusion and pleasure which “most women can understand.” “You know how men can be”, she frequently commented. These stories, then, and the dynamic humor and emotional force with which she told them, ensured her a central place in my own writing and thinking about the life stories as a group.

The other informants also built their accounts around the theme of gender relations, but none of them posited Puerto Rico as a place of sexual pleasure or redemption. Rather, all of the narrators (including Rodríguez) complained bitterly about middle-class gender relations on the island, especially in the suburban urbanizaciones in which they lived.²³ “Men are so possessive here. . . . They always want to know where their women are,” lamented Lizzy Benítez, as she told me how a woman neighbor refused to attend a movie with her, worried about how her husband would react. Gladys Lugo agreed that middle-class married women in Puerto Rico seemed to have no social life or friends of their own. “If we went to a party, the women wouldn’t leave their husbands for more than a second. . . . They’d be hanging onto him as if they’d be ripped away or something.” Once married herself, Gillie Rodríguez insisted, she noticed that married couples created sex-segregated, sexually competitive social space—men generally sat together playing dominoes, while on the other side of the room, women passed the time criticizing each other, jealous of their husbands’ possible attractions to other women.²⁴

All of the narrators concurred that these social patterns contradicted their own experiences as working-class youth in New York. There, the interviewees recounted, they had been accustomed to group dating, where many friends and family members—brothers, sisters,

and cousins—joined together to go dancing or organize excursions to amusement parks or ferry rides. These outings, the women insisted, were collective, friendly, and supportive. Here, they could develop non-sexual friendships with young men, and share closely with women friends. The boundary between family and friends often blurred.

The interviewees acknowledged that this system of youth socializing served parents' interests well, entrusting the policing of girls' behavior, especially potentially sexualized interactions, to older brothers and cousins. Such group activities extended the women's experience as children growing up in the "calm and peace" of firmly regulated families. "I went from a strict home to the strict nuns—I thought that was the way life was going to be, all strictness, you know? . . . I went along with all that strictness for a long time. We had a little Puerto Rico in our home."²⁵ None of the interviewees recalled conflicts over these surveillance practices, however, either in childhood or during their teenaged years; familial surveillance in New York City allegedly produced safety and camaraderie, not repression and mistrust.

All of the narrators proudly remembered their families being among the "respectable, decent" working-class Puerto Rican émigrés to New York, melding the strict supervision of children and teenaged girls with their families' intense work ethics and insistence on disciplined school work. In these families, girls did not get pregnant before marriage. Boys did not join gangs, or use drugs. Marie Lebrón spoke of her widowed mother dragging home late at night, exhausted from working double shifts, to review the children's homework and ensure that no household tasks had been left undone, prohibiting her daughters from wearing pants and her sons from fraternizing on the streets at night. Thus, the gendered regulation of children and youth loomed large in the narrators' memories of "decent" working-class life.

Such "upright" behavior allegedly proved the women's difference from the larger Puerto Rican masses flooding into New York City. Gillie Rodríguez, for example, claimed that her father was the only man in her building of 32 families in Spanish Harlem who held a steady job.²⁶ These comments from many of the narrators reproduced dominant post-war U.S. stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as over-sexed, unproductive, and welfare-dependent. These discourses reached a fever pitch in the New York and national media during the 1940s and 1950s, despite the release of numerous sociological studies which soundly disproved their assertions. They were given added force in the 1960s by politically influential academic texts, such as Oscar Lewis' *La Vida*, in which Lewis elaborated his infamous "culture of poverty thesis", and Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan's, *Beyond the Melting Pot*.²⁷ Most of the return migrant women I interviewed were deeply invested in asserting their distance from such

stereotypes, which had reverberated throughout New York as they were growing up there, and whose truth they implicitly accepted.

And yet, in the memories of these narrators, respectable working-class Puerto Rican youth culture still allowed girls relatively autonomous physical movement. The informants remembered traveling from an early age far and wide across the city on public transportation for school and, later, work. They played and told jokes in neighborhood parks, if accompanied by older brothers and cousins. As they grew older, they visited amusement parks, museums, movie theaters, and, most enjoyable of all, stayed out late dancing on weekend evenings, all, of course, under proper supervision, again, of young male family members. When carried out collectively, in groups understood to be familial, girls could explore quite a bit of the world which surrounded them. They could live in public, as well, if not with the same freedoms, as boys.

Several narrators also recalled their own early married days in New York as autonomously companionate. Lizzy Benítez told me how after she and her husband spent the week working, “on Saturdays I’d do my things and he’d do his, whatever that was. And then I remember that we’d come home and we’d watch *The Honeymooners* that was on at that time. And it was nice!” Gladys Lugo agreed, remembering how she and her husband would often spend entire days each wandering through different sections of New York art museums, reuniting in the evening to tell each other what they had encountered.²⁸

The narrators agreed that middle-class married women in Puerto Rico had little to no such social autonomy on the island. They asserted that wives suffered constant surveillance from both their husbands and other women, who worried about sexual competition. Men in Puerto Rico could not be trusted to be faithful partners, either, they concurred. Gillie Rodríguez insisted that the same island men who judged her for combining sexual explorations—however virginal—and social independence were terribly hypocritical. She said that many men she met and began to date turned out to be married. It was shocking, she recounted, how this seemed “a way of life . . . I was with a crowd in New York where you didn’t even think about *divorced* men!” She then launched into a lurid reminiscence of her closest friend Cuca knowingly dating married men, a result of being seduced at the age of 12 by her stepfather. Ultimately for her, the only viable, faithful partner was a Cuban, “nation-less like me,” who she claimed did not ascribe to the same sexual norms as Puerto Ricans.²⁹

Lizzy Benítez also ruminated on her island-born husband’s sexual roaming, which she claimed became evident only after their move to the island. She bemoaned the fact that she had not “married someone more like me”, recalling her allegedly steady male friends (of Puerto

Rican descent) from New York who courted her and her girl friends by spending all their time together—“They would come to our house and kiss my mom and would be only with us. Only with us!”³⁰ Gladys Lugo raged about how “when I went to the store, [in Puerto Rico] I would cross the street a million times—the horrible things that the men would say! I was not used to that! In New York, people hardly look at you, everyone’s so into their own world—people bump into you and keep on walking. . . .”³¹

Such stories of male sexual predation on the island stood in stark contrast to the narrators’ memories of protected, collective, yet autonomous youth and marital leisure time in New York. Indeed, several interviewees recounted how their husbands seemed to “backslide” once they had moved to Puerto Rico, trying to control their wives’ behavior in surprising ways. “Like in public. Like I couldn’t be as friendly as I was over there [in New York]. ‘Hey, he’s gonna think you want to make out with him. You’re my wife!’”³² Odette Pabón and her husband moved to a comfortable house in a suburban community in Puerto Rico. Once there, however, her husband refused to let Pabón move about on her own, and tried to limit her contact with her family in New York. When he responded violently to her protests, Pabón finally left him to return with her daughter to her more autonomous, much less materially comfortable life in New York.³³

For these women, then, the new suburban Puerto Rico had the potential to become a gender prison, where informal surveillance techniques between husbands and wives combined with social norms restricting dress and appropriate public activities for women. Gladys Lugo recalled being ejected from a hospital on the island for wearing a pantsuit rather than a dress in the late 1960s, and complained of the social opprobrium she encountered for playing pool at a local bar with her husband, brother and sister-in-law. “I was caged. I was a caged animal.”³⁴

Clearly many of the narrators, particularly those who arrived on the island as married women, felt Puerto Rico’s middle-class gendered social restrictions very acutely.³⁵ This was in based in class as well as geographic changes. Aspiring to middle-class life styles, complete with homes in the freshly-built San Juan suburbs of the 1960s and 1970s and expectations that married women would not work outside the home, placed the return migrants in quite new cultural and physical contexts.³⁶ Confronted with more restrictive middle-class gendered norms of behavior, and unable to move about freely and cheaply on public transportation, relatively far from the urban attractions of nightclubs, theaters, and museums, the narrators chafed at limits they had not previously experienced living in the heart of New York City. Several of the women had to struggle against their husbands’ and neighbors disapproval at their insistence on

working for wages. Such restrictions shaped the way that these women initially experienced the island, and how they ultimately chose to build their social networks there.

Interestingly, the one informant who did not discuss such limits did not quickly enter conventional middle-class married life upon her arrival in Puerto Rico. Rather, like many young women on the island during this period, she began to study at the University of Puerto Rico. She also participated in a range of radical activist causes, within which gender power relations were sometimes questioned. Thus, the narratives themselves expose the fact that middle-class Puerto Rico of the 1960s did not offer as restricted a spectrum of gender relations options as most of the narrators claimed.³⁷

Just as clearly, New York families and friendships were not actually as harmonious and secure as the narrators asserted in their life histories. Gillie Rodríguez peppered her life story with denunciations of her island-born father's sexual infidelities and drinking. Lizzie Benítez spoke of hiding in the closet as a child to escape her father's violent rampages against her mother. Marie Lebrón mentioned her brothers' struggles to escape parental surveillance and "mix in the street." Both Rodríguez and Lugo experienced unfaithful male partners in New York City.³⁸

Thus, rather than the simple reporting of empirical truths, we need to understand the consistent images of tension-free parental supervision and egalitarian youthful New York socializing in the women's stories as recurring symbolic foils to what they experienced as deeply restrictive bourgeois heterosexual social relations on the island. Indeed, the impassioned telling of both nostalgic New York and denunciatory Puerto Rican tales of gender and family politics created a falsely stark opposition between the two places. Such accounts legitimized the narrators' non-island-based identity as a comfortable gender space, appropriately distinguished from island society and rooted in the women's re-inventions of their New York youth. These "body stories" functioned, then, as both reports of lived experiences and as powerful discursive devices in the narrators' collective re-making of themselves.³⁹

Encountering Rejection

The difference in gendered social expectations between New York and Puerto Rico resonated in the narrators' life stories with another undeniable division between themselves and islanders—their use of English as a first language. Gladys Lugo directly linked the two in her narrative: "Oh my God! Restrictions on what I said, on what I did, on where I could go, on how to dress! And then really, my Spanish wasn't so good. I had to carry a dictionary with me everywhere."⁴⁰ Outsiders on

both counts, all but one of the narrators emphatically stated that they did not feel Puerto Rican, primarily due to the unrelenting ridicule and suspicion which they faced for their English use from those born and raised on the island.

Given the historical context, it is unsurprising that islanders were often unnerved by the growing influx of English-speaking children of the diaspora. From the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, when the concern in Puerto Rico over return migrants reached its height, the island suffered an increasing unemployment rate. During the 1980s, this employment crunch engulfed the middle classes as well as the urban and rural working classes.⁴¹

Islanders' particularly virulent hostility toward the return migrants' use of English also had deep historical roots. English has a long connection to the humiliations of colonialism in Puerto Rico. The U.S. colonial regime imposed English as the sole language of instruction in Puerto Rico's public school system in the first years of the 20th century. This created an educational disaster since most teachers, much less pupils, did not speak English. The policy remained in effect until 1940 when Luis Muñoz Marín and his Popular Democratic Party swept into political power. Frequent English use is also a troubling reminder of the island's ongoing colonial status. And finally, since Puerto Rico has no independent nation-state or citizenship, the Spanish language has become a key "national identifier" which gives Puerto Ricans on the island a claim to national cultural integrity.

Simultaneously, the Puerto Rican economy has been deeply dependent on U.S. capital and government transfers since at least 1898. Consequently, by the mid-twentieth century, knowledge of English became indispensable for large-scale economic success. The children of the Puerto Rican diaspora, mainly of working-class extraction, now arrived on the island with a ready-made tool for social and economic advancement, enabling them to gain access to jobs and social spaces previously denied to those of their social background. Such people must have seemed particularly threatening to the island's increasingly economically vulnerable middle-class.⁴²

The denigration of "Nuyoricans" was often overwhelming. It came from many quarters. Famous intellectuals like Salvador Tió railed publicly against return migrants' frequent mixing of Spanish and English.

The confusion in the meaning of the words, calques to the extreme of calcomania, borrowings so numerous that they make many individuals susceptible to a total breakdown in communication, are contributing to a disfiguring of the language itself. But if what is happening to Spanish is serious, what is happening to English is much more serious. At this rate, the island of Puerto Rico may come to be, in a few generations,

the cemetery of the two great languages of the Americas.⁴³

The popular press weighed in as well. As early as 1964, articles were appearing like Kal Wagenheim's "Artificial Paradise" about the alleged epidemic of heroin addiction in Puerto Rico. This piece placed much of the blame for the "plague" on returnees. It was accompanied by a sensationalistic testimony of drugs, violence, and prison life by an addict who emigrated to New York as a child with his mother.⁴⁴

Ordinary citizens also wrote scathing letters like this one to the editors of local newspapers:

. . . Nor are the 500,000 born, raised, and educated in New York, Puerto Ricans even if they go to 100,000 Puerto Rican parades, live 100 years in Puerto Rico, or if their parents were lucky enough to have been born on this enchanted island. Accept reality: if you were born, raised, and educated in the U.S., you are American and not Puerto Rican. You are also a New Yorker.⁴⁵

Official proclamations such as this one from a 1980 *Junta de Planificación* report were frequent:

The Puerto Ricans who return and their descendants, who were exposed to a culture and a lifestyle completely different from ours, bring with them a series of behaviors, moral values, and attitudes toward authority which can come into conflict with those of the non-migrant population.⁴⁶

Official and media concern spawned a spate of studies funded by the University of Puerto Rico during the 1970s and 1980s. All of these studies assumed that young returnees and their families would be "mal-adjusted" and create social problems. All of the researchers found much less evidence of such negative phenomena than expected. But in their conclusions, they often insisted on the overriding problematic behaviors and social effects of the returnees. Indeed, whether hostile or sympathetic, the discussion generated by official or press sources consistently presented the returnees as a problem to be reformed or excluded. Never were returnees considered an asset to Puerto Rico. This stood in stark contrast to the counter-discourse created by the Latin New Yorkers.⁴⁷

To a person, narrators bitterly remembered being suspect for all kinds of social contamination, from bringing promiscuity and drug addiction to the island, to destroying the Spanish language, Puerto Rico's last bastion of national identity. One interviewee, when speaking of her participation in the pro-independence movement during the late 1960s, recalled radical university students' contempt for her inability to express complex thoughts in Spanish. In their eyes, this made her an "instrument of imperialism." If they heard her speak, whether in English or in halting Spanish, "It offended them. It wasn't that they didn't understand

English. It offended them. It was like a betrayal of the fatherland, to speak English.” Paralyzed with fear at saying something incorrectly, she was unable to speak in group settings. She desperately studied long into the night to broaden her Spanish vocabulary. Gladys Lugo recalled the jeers she encountered when trying to speak Spanish at her job at the English language newspaper *The San Juan Star*. She likened her brother’s struggle for acceptance in his job at a Puerto Rican advertising agency to his fisticuff battles with Italian and Irish neighbors when their family left El Barrio for the Bronx in the 1950s. “He finally had to leave Puerto Rico before he killed somebody!” she exclaimed.⁴⁸

Lizzy Benitez commented on her seemingly constant outsider status: “Growing up we only spoke Spanish at home, and I didn’t know any English when I went to school and that was really hard. Everyone knew, listening to me, that I wasn’t from New York, because of my accent. And here, everyone knows, listening to me, that I’m not from here!” Aura Hernández passionately proclaimed, “There comes a point where it becomes like a torture. It’s like what those people tell you—I’ve been Puerto Rican all my life, and I come here, and these people reject me! It’s like [speeding up, almost tripping on her words] the children—my mother! How can my mother reject me?! This is the one person I expect to find security in, right?”⁴⁹

Gillie Rodríguez’s account of this rejection and concomitant disillusion merits lengthy quoting; it echoes many of the narrators’ sentiments.

GR: [In New York] we were all from where our parents were from. We never went there, but we were from there. SO . . . That’s how I grew up.

And then, my mother made it her business to give us the food. And my father too—you know, the culture—*arroz, habichuelas, chuletas*, you know, *pasteles* en Christmas.

EJF: So you felt like you had something to identify with.

GR: I was a Puerto Rican! I was a Spic! You know, they used to say spic and we’d slap ‘em. But the Italians were wops. Everyone had their horrible names, but they each had their, their . . . Yes, their pride. . . Until I came here. (slows) Then I was devastated. Because they said no, no, you’re American, ‘cause you’re not born here. I said, ‘All my life, I’ve been told I was Puerto Rican. ‘Oh no, your PARENTS are Puerto Rican. But *you’re* not Puerto Rican.’

And then I felt like, then where *am* I from, the ocean? And then I thought, maybe I should have a name, ‘cause between New York and Puerto Rico there’s an ocean—what’s the name of that ocean? Am I

an Atlantist, or whatever (chuckling, but a bit subdued). . .

So then I said, Gee, well, I spoke English, and my Spanish *was* bad. So, I, in a sense, just, in a sense, I felt . . . *fatherless* and, and *islandless* and

EJF: Sure, sure.

GR: and *nationalless*, and, and I don't know what! (Pause)

EJF: Sure.

GR: "cause then if I said, well I was born there, but I didn't feel like a white American. I was just, a *latina*. You know. (Quietly)⁵⁰

While growing up in New York, the interviewees felt their outsider status keenly, in the physical battles waged with Italians, Irish, and African-Americans over neighborhood turf, in their truncated educations, and in the substandard housing, racist attitudes, and the grueling labor with which they and their parents lived. But disparagement could transform into ethnic pride, as Gillie Rodríguez pointed out—slurs like “spic” could also function as a basis for community and identity-building. Now, in Puerto Rico, they revisited this process. Barred from claiming full membership in island society, the narrators fashioned a new identity, one which turned the island denigration of “Nuyoricans” on its head. Even those narrators who told me that they “felt they belonged here”, also unequivocally stated that they were New Yorkers—Latin New Yorkers—New Yorkers, of Puerto Rican descent.

In their eyes, this did not in any way lessen their allegiance to and participation in Puerto Rican-*ness*. Instead, the narrators rejected the asserted cultural purity of Puerto Ricanness which they confronted on the island. The Latin New Yorkers celebrated a fiercely proud *boricua* identity, but one permeated with customs, language, and styles from New York. This, they claimed, gave them access to a greater sophistication. Odette Pabón spoke proudly of her friendships, marital choices, and life experiences being “international,” “a true New Yorker.” (She was one of the few interviewees who made close personal friendships in her New York youth with non-Puerto Ricans; her first husband was African-American, her second was from Barbados.) Narrators frequently referred with pride to their eventual dominion of Spanish and contrasted their current bilingualism with what they saw as many islanders’ refusal or inability to become fully fluent in English. Many insisted that islanders were jealous of their linguistic fluidity. “They think we’re talking English because we don’t know Spanish. But it’s not that! We like switching in and out of them both!” “No, it’s a New York thing . . . I mean the people speak like you, switching from Spanish to English—*bien fácil, así*. . . we

do it, automatic!”⁵¹

Indeed, the narrators turned their linguistic code switching into a badge of honor. They joyfully (and rebelliously!) leapt from English to Spanish and back again in their organizational activities. No longer was English speaking a shameful act, when the Latin New Yorkers brandished it publicly as a collective expression of a proud oppositional identity. “Although still, still people don’t like to hear you talk in English. . . . And I mean, we all do, when we’re together—like when we take this bus ride? We go someplace and people from *here*, like they all look at us, like that [cutting her eyes]. We usually try to wear our shirts.”⁵² Another Latin New Yorker gave her knowledge of English deep historical roots when she insisted that her parents had known English before emigrating to New York in the 1920s, “Because at that time over here in Puerto Rico, they had an English governor and English teachers. [sic] So, however, badly, they spoke English and they left early to go to New York.” Later in the interview, she told with vivid humor how she and her sister allegedly were carted from classroom to classroom to demonstrate their English fluency during a brief stay in the island city of Caguas as children. They were celebrities even as “I felt like some kind of freak!” Their own teachers supposedly took them around town to hear them speak English. “They used to chase us, really!”⁵³

In their public use of English, the Latin New Yorkers represented a direct, living connection to the colonial center of power. They converted this relationship into a confirmation of their superiority, looking down upon those who had denigrated them. After an initial period of vainly struggling to conform to the linguistic and cultural expectations of island society, they chose by and large to empower themselves by embracing their colonialism-based privilege and claiming that it was a result of Puerto Ricans’ “natural” inadequacies.

Lizzy Benítez, for example, told me this story in English about her first visit to the island as a child in 1945. As their boat neared the island, “I looked out the window and I saw something so beautiful—I saw the Morro [the Spanish colonial fort which guards the port of San Juan] and the palm trees and everything. But then I got out of the boat, I saw the poverty of the time, you know—I wasn’t used to seeing dirt roads, and I thought, oh, what is this? And I saw crippled people on the floor, and I didn’t see things like that in New York.” I interjected at this point that she had certainly seen poverty in New York—she had spoken of how her mother struggled to pay the rent on their tiny rented room. “But nothing like this!” she insisted.⁵⁴ Another narrator talked of how Puerto Rico, despite its stunning physical beauty, would always be weaker, less developed than New York: “New Yorkers expect the water [here] to be cold. Nothing doing. There’s no such thing. They expect the water to

have that *power* (hits her palm with her fist). You have to make do with that, you know, tinkling. *Un chorriiitttooo* and you have to thank God that you have it.”⁵⁵

Interviewees frequently claimed that Puerto Rican New Yorkers were more industrious, more productive, and better educated than their island counterparts. “You have to work hard in New York—it’s hard there! If you don’t work hard, you’re done for!” Some narrators drew analogies between themselves and the Cubans who had emigrated to Puerto Rico in the early 1960s and now occupy a prominent position in Puerto Rico’s business community. They told many stories of being chosen for competitive job positions because of their stellar performances.⁵⁶ Emblematic was one narrator’s story of an island-based North American employer’s recommendation of her—“He said, ‘She can do all that! She’s a real go-getter, she’s from New York, she’s bilingual!’ I heard him saying all that! And then they hired me!”⁵⁷ Ironically, here in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican New Yorkers claimed to have won North American approval which might well have been impossible while in New York.⁵⁸

And yet, full Americans they could never be. Marie Lebrón recalled how “Americans have this habit of asking you—what are you?—I don’t know, what a stupid thing to say! As if you weren’t human. I’d answer, I’m American! And they’d say—no, no where are your parents from?” Gladys Lugo agreed, recounting angrily how “in the States they’re prejudiced against us because we’re not American!”⁵⁹

Generally, the narrators did not hark back nostalgically to life in New York. Their childhoods, however wrapped in family and community warmth, were often harsh; their parents worked double shifts at low wages in often demeaning jobs, while they themselves by and large had to forego their educations in order to help their families survive. The narrators enjoyed their improved material circumstances in Puerto Rico, and did not dream of returning to New York. Indeed, they sought to separate themselves from the poverty-stricken barrios of Spanish Harlem, Brooklyn, and the South Bronx as much as they proudly affirmed their difference from exclusionary islanders. The identity they forged was one of respectability, upward mobility, and triumph in the face of adversity—at the cost of identification with their less fortunate diaspora counterparts, who form the vast majority of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.⁶⁰

Several of the narrators painted a portrait of the Puerto Ricans of their era in New York as fitting the classic European immigrant model, gradually moving from the poorer areas of the city to own their own homes in the Bronx or New Jersey—an experience unavailable to the vast majority of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. “You know, you’re there for a certain amount of time and then you move out, move on to greener pastures. To get their own thing, you know.”⁶¹ “Like the Italians and the

Irish and the Jews, you know—they have moved out to the suburbs.”⁶² One interviewee explicitly drew a distinction between the Puerto Ricans of her parents’ generation, who she characterized as “extremely thrifty and hardworking” and those of the massive post-war emigration wave, for whom, she claimed, (incorrectly) “everything changed—there were no factories, and then everyone fell back on welfare.”⁶³ Another narrator felt ashamed of her father’s inability to move his family from their cramped, cockroach-infested apartment in El Barrio. Unaware of the structural factors which enforced these conditions, she celebrated how her move to Puerto Rico enabled her to personally transcend her father’s seemingly individual failing.⁶⁴

Community Beyond Nation

Although they did not feel a traditional nationalist sense of belonging, these narrators did live rooted in community—one made up of other bilingual Puerto Ricans like them—born and raised in the United States, now living on the island. It was this circle of friends which sustained them in their daily joys and travails. It was to this group of people that they swore their most enduring allegiances and through which they created a workable group identity for themselves. It was not the floating, shifting identity invoked by many postmodern scholars of transnational migration. Neither was it based primarily in a love for the island itself. Rather, it was a solidarity forged out of these migrants’ particular context of transplanted-ness. Thus, deciding to remain in Puerto Rico for 30, even 40 years, despite the constant invitations by friends and family to return to New York, does not mean that these narrators had assimilated into being Puerto Rican—at least as understood by island-born and -raised Puerto Ricans. Instead, they had found other people who shared a common sense of cultural marginalization, with whom they had been able to build community and confirm the legitimacy of their own distinct ways of practicing Puerto Ricanness.⁶⁵

The Latin New Yorkers organization was an important locus of community for the narrators. They managed to sustain their friendships and build community with each other through the course of 35 years in part because of the enduring structure which the organization provided to their interactions. Its precursor was a group called the Nuyoricans’ Association, established in 1976. Gillie Rodríguez recalled reading an editorial by the founder announcing the first meeting of an organization “for people like us” in *The San Juan Star*, the island’s English-language daily newspaper. She attended that meeting and helped organize an initial cultural event for New Yorkers in the Don Q building in Old San Juan. About 200 people appeared and launched the formal organization.

From that group came many of her dearest friends, still members of the Latin New Yorkers in 2002. When the original group splintered over conflicts with the founder, a number of members took the name Latin New Yorkers and made up t-shirts with the slogan: “Coquíes que se cultivaron en dos patios: uno de manzanas y el otro de mangoes.”⁶⁶

Mirna Jiménez, the current president of the Latin New Yorkers, recalled seeing the t-shirt and calling to find out about the organizations’ activities in 1981. At her first meeting, “I found myself surrounded by people in my same situation. . . . Everyone was so warm and friendly, so loving and affectionate. I thought—is this for real? And I decided right away to join.” Gillie Rodríguez said that discovering the organization “was like my heart’s desire! Everyone was just like me!”⁶⁷

The Latin New Yorkers consciously drew on a vibrant tradition of hometown clubs in the Puerto Rican diaspora communities of New York. Throughout the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s, Puerto Ricans in New York established scores of these social clubs which sponsored dances, sports tournaments, celebrations of Puerto Rican holidays, communal dinners, and music and theater performances. Mirna Jiménez spoke warmly of biweekly gatherings at her parents’ beloved *Asociación Cívica Lareña*. “It was very safe, like a little Puerto Rico, where everyone was family, and where my father would let me dance, even though he was so strict all the time. It was the center of my social life when I was a teenager.” The New York social clubs not only provided a venue for members to share and rejuvenate their cultural integrity in an often hostile environment. They also created a forum for reminiscences about Puerto Rico and served as the basis for many crucial social networks, helping fellow hometown residents to locate housing, jobs, and food sources. Both Mirna Jiménez and Gillie Rodríguez’s fathers served as officers in their hometown clubs in New York; the daughters followed suit once they relocated to Puerto Rico.⁶⁸

In San Juan, the Latin New Yorkers created their own version of their parents’ hometown clubs. Together, they celebrated a conglomeration of Puerto Rican and United States holidays, often replete with costumes—Three Kings Day, Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and their own special invention, “Christmas in July”—where they all gathered in mid-summer at the beach to exchange gifts and sing Christmas carols in English. Numerous other social activities filled their agenda; bowling tournaments, talent shows, bus rides to various museums, and historic or scenic sites on the island, even week-long cruises, where they filled entire yachts with their members. They engaged in charitable work at times, sponsoring orphans, collecting funds and supplies for children’s hospitals and the like.⁶⁹

For decades, though, the organization’s main draw was their monthly

salsa dances. All the narrators spoke with lights in their eyes about the joy they felt there, where they could feel desirable without having to negotiate the complicated terrain of consummated sexuality. At these dances, they felt profoundly Puerto Rican in their movements and rhythms, while communicating in a fluid mix of English and Spanish. Salsa, the music created in New York during the 1960s by musicians from all over the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and embraced by Puerto Ricans as quintessentially theirs, seemed the perfect expression of the Latin New Yorkers' particular brand of Puerto Ricanness.⁷⁰ Several narrators recalled how the dances often drew people from New York, as well as from throughout the San Juan metropolitan area, uniting the Puerto Rican New Yorker diaspora.

"You know, every February, when it's so cold in New York, we had a big dance and a lot of people came down here from New York! We used to have a Valentine's Day dance, and we'd dress in *red!* We'd dress in green for a Saint Patty's Day dance. We once did one for Hawaii, and we all dressed up. We did a talent show, and Bobby was Harry Belafonte and his wife was one of the singers. And I was, I was Iris Chacón, because I have a big butt! And Gillie was a fat lady, who used to sing. And the people said—these folks really know how to have a good time! People came a lot from New York to enjoy with us. And then the dancing part—we always danced a lot."⁷¹

"I used to look forward so much to those dances once a month. And in that little club, we knew everyone! And one thing about the Latin New Yorkers is that Bob, I would go to dance with him, and Lettie wouldn't care a thing. She knows that we're not interested in anything. We're like a family." Several women drew this analogy between the Latin New Yorker dances and their patterns of socializing in New York, where groups of friends and family would attend dances together, switching dance partners frequently, without regard to the coupled restrictions and sexual fears which to them seemed to mark Puerto Rican heterosexual social life so implacably. The women I interviewed insisted that the Latin New Yorker dances were not a venue for kindling romances—"if I wanted that, I could go to any bar." None of the narrators spoke of couples meeting and falling in love there. Rather, a good part of the salsa dances' special character, at least for these interviewees, was the joy of physical movement, rhythm, and sociability without the complications of sexual overtones. "Whatever we do, we never stop moving our old skeletons!"⁷²

Over and over, the interviewees echoed this egalitarian familial metaphor, explaining that the Latin New Yorkers were their "closest family," much more present in their daily lives than their extended biological families on the island. Members not only insisted that they

successfully created non-threatening, non-competitive heterosexual social space together. The women also supported each other *as women*, assisting each other materially and emotionally through divorces, unemployment, deaths, and chronic illness. When one member was left with no income after her husband's business failed, the Latin New Yorker women "made sure that we ate. Betty cooked for us and Gladys bought clothes for my son. One day, I had two dollars on me and I had to decide between soap and deodorant. But I knew we'd never starve because of the Latin New Yorkers."⁷³ These women spoke of lovingly caring for each other, sustaining each other through life crises and celebrating each others' joys. Many of the Latin New Yorkers were married, or actively dating men, but the organization and the powerful informal personal ties which undergirded it were built upon women's connections to each other. One of them proclaimed with great feeling, "we're a sisterhood." Another's life story turned directly from reminiscing about tranquilly watching television at home with her (now-divorced) husband in New York after a long weekend out and about on her own to affirming her intimacy with the other Latin New Yorker women: "But that's what I like –we're family. We communicate with each other all the time. . . ." The narrators confirmed emphatically that building an extended social family of transplanted Puerto Rican women was a primary reason that they had never left the island.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

I hope that the methods and questions which I offer here spur more extensive studies of the gendered ways in which return migrants interpret their experiences and how such meanings affect their historical actions. The women whose narratives I have drawn upon to write this article, and other return migrants in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, are creative cultural laborers. These women spun compelling tales about their lives—to me, as I recorded them during the year of 2002—but perhaps much more importantly, in myriad conversations over many years with their families, neighbors, and collaborators in social, religious, and civic activities. Such conversations are themselves powerful creative acts, cultural artifacts and practices. They help build new identities, new consciousnesses of self in relation to larger institutionalized collectivities such as territorially-bound nations. Sometimes these conversations crystallize in public, more communal or organizational forms like the Latin New Yorkers. With their salsa dances, t-shirts, tourist outings, charity work, and community care-taking the organization's members helped create a vibrant counter culture which nurtured the informants for this article and many more over the course of several decades.

Participating in this organization encouraged the development and circulation of a certain world view and style shared by its core members. This process, in turn, shaped the interpretations which these narrators forged of both their past and their present, forming a simultaneously oppositional and accomodationist cultural politics. Most of the women featured in this article did not articulate the kind of radical political vision which Juan Flores in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* hopes that return migrants can offer to their home societies.⁷⁵ Rather, this article's narrators generally confirmed colonial power and distanced themselves from the impoverished diaspora from which they came. But their labors have been significant nonetheless, producing venues for ocean-crossing cultural encounters, criticism of restrictive gender roles, and the challenging of purist national narratives.

These women drew strength from flexible roots, which lay not in a particular national territory, but in the remaking of the New York diaspora cultural traditions of hometown social clubs, group dating, and salsa dancing which have for many years translated into extended family gatherings and resilient social and economic support networks. They were portable roots, feeding and nourished by transplanted communities even as they grew out of and contributed to colonial, exclusionary impulses.⁷⁶

Notes

- ¹ I interviewed a total of 30 return migrants in the San Juan metropolitan area of Puerto Rico, ranging in age from 23 to 80 during a six-month stay there during 2002. Seventeen of the interviewees were women; thirteen were men. I met return migrants in all sorts of situations—restaurant waiters, parking lot security guards, teachers, junk yard workers, lifeguards, supermarket cashiers, and neighbors. Once I discovered that a person was a return migrant, I proposed an open-ended life-story interview, to be carried out at the place and time of their choosing. Most people were eager to do the interviews. For this article, however, I have chosen to focus on the particular experiences and meanings elaborated by this group of 15 women, to whom I was introduced by a neighbor who had attended some of the Latin New Yorker dances. The informants for this essay were a generational and gender cohort whose experiences together in the Latin New Yorker organization gave their narratives a cohesion which I felt merited focused analysis. I plan to write and think further about the full sample of 30 narratives.

I purposefully did not set an agenda for my interviews, other than telling my interviewees that I was interested in their experiences in both New York and Puerto Rico. I always opened the interview process with an invitation to “tell the story of their life”, thus encouraging the interviewees to shape their own questions and narrative structures. As their stories progressed, I did pose further questions, but tried to leave most of the form of the interviews in their hands. Once the narrators finished their accounts, I asked questions which had occurred to me in the course of the main interview, and also gathered basic demographic and chronological information.

² In this sense, the narrators featured here differ substantially from the Latin American immigrants studied by Jones-Correa 1998. Jones-Correa discusses how many Latin American immigrants do not feel connected to the United States and experience ongoing exclusion on both social and, most importantly for Jones-Correa, political grounds. Most of his subjects articulated a deep desire to some day return to their country of origin, although relatively few manage to do so. The narrators for this article expressed no interest in returning to New York City. They were deeply committed to Puerto Rico, despite their deep feelings of cultural difference there.

³ The women whose stories I drew on had lived transnational lives in some respects, maintaining familial and friendship connections in New York, and occasionally travelling back and forth between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. However, their experiences do not fit the paradigm of recent scholarship on migrants which emphasize frequent transnational movement and economic exchange. Social scientists have interpreted such behavior as fusing different places into a single “social field”. Post-colonial cultural studies emphasize the sense of liminality, permanent migrancy, of transnational experience. These narrators have *not* led geographically shifting, mobile lives. Neither do they carry out “dual lives”, with significant social, economic, and political commitments in two societies. Rather, their primary interests lie with Puerto Rico, while the cultural disapproval experienced by these women on the island and their defiant collective response challenges the notion of unitary transnational social fields, at least on a cultural level.

For some important examples of the broader social science literature on transnational migrations, see Smith 2005; Levitt 2001; Rouse; Schiller, Glasch, and Blanck-Stanton 1992, 1994; Cordero-Guzmán, Smith, and Grosfoguel 2001; Smith and Guarnizo 1998. For cultural

studies approaches, see Appadurai 1996; Chambers 1994; Joseph 1999; and Lionnet and Shih 2005.

- ⁴ One might argue that the interviewees were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, as neither New Yorker (I am originally from rural Indiana) nor Puerto Rican, the narrators considered me an outsider, someone to whom they had to explain their lives, not an automatic ally. Also, they frequently argued with me, correcting my questions and assumptions about the workings of Puerto Rican society, including the arena of gender relations.
- ⁵ Pérez provides an insightful gendered portrait of return migrants to the Puerto Rican town of San Sebastián (2005). Aranda (2007) begins to describe the subjective understandings middle-class island-born Puerto Ricans have developed of their increasing circular migration during the 1990s. Kerkhof (2000) provides a sensitive ethnography of recent return migrants to Mayagüez. For other useful studies of return migration, see Gmelch 1992; Potter, Conway, and Phillips 2005; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; and Horst 2007.
- ⁶ Flores (2009:45).
- ⁷ Arcadio Díaz-Quinones (1993, 2000) has pointed out that Puerto Rico's diaspora was one of the primary points of "broken memory", the historical amnesia which has allowed Puerto Ricans to maintain a painless narrative of their rise to industrial "prosperity" out of the ashes of the Great Depression. Most historians of the island have long ignored the Puerto Rican diaspora as a legitimate part of Puerto Rican history. See, for example, my own book (1999), in which I make no mention of the time which various late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberals, feminists, and radical labor activists spent in Spain, New York, Florida, and Cuba.

At times, the differences in vision and experience among artists from the island and from the diaspora have emerged as direct conflict as well as politically convenient "amnesia." See Mohr 1994.

Scholars have themselves tended historically to divide into two camps—those studying island society, and those of the diaspora. For some examples of island historians, see these pioneering works, among others: Picó 1988; Quintero Rivera and García 1986; Silvestrini 1980; Quintero Rivera 1977; Pantojas-García 1990. For some examples of diaspora-focused scholarship, see Nieves Falcón 1975; Sánchez Korrol 1994; Whalen and Vázquez-Hernández 2005. See also the *Cuadernos* series on migration to New York published in 1974 by The History Task Force of the Center for Puerto Rican

Studies at C.U.N.Y., Hunter College. These workshops and their publications were foundational to early scholarly discussions in New York on the Puerto Rican diaspora.

⁸ Recent scholarship has begun to integrate diasporic and island historical experiences more fully, seeing them as a unified, although diffuse, field of study. *CENTRO: The Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* has been crucial in this endeavor over the last decade, as it was in founding the field of Puerto Rican studies in the U.S. during the 1970s. For some other examples, see Duany 2002; Pérez 2004; Díaz-Quinones, 2000; Torre, Rodríguez Vecchini, and Burgos 1994; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel (1997, especially the essays in section 3); Flores 2009, 2000; Martínez-San Miguel 2003; and Grosfoguel 2003.

⁹ Hernández-Cruz paints a portrait of Puerto Ricans circulating continuously between changing points on the mainland and the island in a “desperate search for employment” (1994:134-149).

Jorge Duany, a life-long advocate of problematizing dominant, purist notions of Puerto Ricanness, has launched a passionate call to a redefine Puerto Rican nationalism. He places great emphasis on the circulatory migration of Puerto Ricans, and takes a much more positive view of this phenomenon than Hernández-Cruz (2002). Duany argues that Puerto Ricans’ mobile lives do not translate into lower wages, lesser skills and educational levels. Rather, he insists that moving back and forth between the U.S. and Puerto Rico improves English language skills and diversifies work experiences—making Puerto Ricans successful negotiators of a transnational life style.

Ana Celia Zentella cites a host of virulent tirades against the allegedly tainted returnees in the popular press and official publications during the late 1970s and early 1980s. She notes that they could easily be models for the pamphlets produced today by U.S. anti-immigrant groups such as English First. See also Duany (2002:166-167) and Hernández-Cruz (1994).

¹⁰ Flores (2000:51, 61). Flores has been a long-standing scholarly champion of the diaspora’s place as a central part of Puerto Rican culture and history.

¹¹ Flores (2009:44).

¹² Duany 2002; Hernández Cruz 1994.

¹³ Zentella (2003:245-258). See also Hernández-Cruz 1994; Gina M. Pérez 2004; Duany 2002, 2007.

Return migrants to other countries have met similarly suspicious reactions from permanent residents. In addition to the works cited in notes 5 and 75, see Torres-Saillant 1999; Tsudas 2003; Smith 1996; Ishkanian 2001.

- ¹⁴ In this sense, the narrators were quite similar to the second generation children of immigrants studied much more recently by anthropologists. They rarely, if ever, visited their parents' homeland. However, they built a strong ethnic identity based on their experiences growing up in substantial ethnic enclaves in the U.S. They experience "no phantom pain, over a homeland that was never lost to them in the first place." Rumbaut (2002:91).
- ¹⁵ Hernández-Cruz notes this as a general pattern for first generation New York-born Puerto Ricans (1994:125-127).
- ¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Latin New Yorkers was founded and reached its largest membership, were the years of most intense public excoriation of return migrants in Puerto Rico. Carrasquillo and Carrasquillo mention the predecessor to the Latin New Yorkers, *New Yoricans in Puerto Rico, Inc.*, in which several of the interviewees also participated, as a hopeful sign in the late 1970s that "Neoricans" might not suffer permanent pariah status on the island. Carrasquillo and Carrasquillo (1979:16) See also Zentella 2003; Hernández-Cruz 1994; and Hernández 1999.
- ¹⁷ Glissant (1989), cited in Flores (2000:39-41). The "in-between" identity forged by the women featured in this essay resonates somewhat with the feelings expressed by many of the Latin America immigrants studied by Jones-Correa (1998). However, the women whose stories form the foundation of this article do not face the same sorts of questions of citizenship and political inclusion negotiated so delicately by the subjects of Jones-Correa's study, and on which Jones-Correa places most of his analytical emphasis. They are, formally at least, citizens and thus part of the local "body politic" of both the United States and Puerto Rico, albeit while in Puerto Rico in a colonial context replete with significant restrictions on citizens' broader political rights, such as an independent nation-state or full political representation within the U.S. national government. These women's ongoing struggles show us that focusing on questions of formal political status and action is not sufficient for full understanding of migrant experiences and group consciousness.
- ¹⁸ Aura Hernández, August 5, 2002.

- ¹⁹ Mirna Jiménez, October 5, 2002. See also Marie Lebrón, October 9, 2002.
- ²⁰ Rodríguez, September 18, 2002. Interestingly enough, several older women returnees created the same narrative pattern in their accounts of emigrating to New York from Puerto Rico as teenagers. See, for example, Gladys Matta, October 3, 2002, and María Pabón, September 5, 2002.
- ²¹ Rodríguez, September 18, 2002 and October 2, 2002.
- ²² Rodríguez, September 18 and October 2, 2002. Note that despite her vivid memories of sexual empowerment in Puerto Rico, Rodríguez accepted very clear limits on her ability to dictate the terms of her sexual exchanges. Her successful assertion of an honorable sexuality depended on 1) her continued virginity and 2) her eventual marriage to a man who was uninterested in the rumors about her and who remained sexually faithful to her. Thus, she did not “invent her own rules” completely freely. For a historical discussion of Puerto Rican honor codes, see Findlay (1999). For descriptions of San Juan professional and business classes’ sexual and marital expectations during the 1950s, see Scheele (1957:437-446, 459-462).
- ²³ The themes in these life stories resonate with Gina Pérez’s ethnographic observations of Chicago return migrant women in San Sebastián during the 1990s, despite their chronological, economic, and geographical differences. Pérez’s working-class, small-town female informants also complained bitterly of restrictions of their physical movement and economic autonomy once living on the island. (2005:191-199). See also Phillips and Potter (2005:81-86).
- ²⁴ Benítez, October 18, 2002; Gladys Lugo, November 22, 2002; Rodríguez, October 2, 2002; Odette Pabón, October 21, 2002; María Pabón, October 5, 2002.
- ²⁵ Jiménez, October 5, 2002. See also Rodríguez, September 18, 2002; Marie Lebrón, October 9, 2002; Gladys Lugo.
- ²⁶ Gillie Rodríguez, September 18, 2002; Marie Lebrón. See also Gladys Lugo, María Pabón, Odette Pabón, Luisa Quiñones; Mirna Jiménez.
- ²⁷ Lewis 1965; Glazer and Moynihan 1963. For an insightful discussion of Columbia University’s much-discussed sociological study of Puerto Ricans in New York during the 1940s and 1950s, see López 2007. For an examination of the post-war anti-Puerto Rican hysteria in New York, see Findlay 2009. Karin Roseblatt (2009) elaborates

a trenchant analysis of Oscar Lewis' intellectual and political trajectory, as well as the uses to which other scholars put his work.

- ²⁸ Benítez and Lugo. See also Rodríguez, September 18, 2002; Aida Hernández, November 10, 2002; María Pabón, September 5, 2002; Gladys Matta, October 3, 2002.
- ²⁹ Rodríguez, September 18, 2002.
- ³⁰ Idem.; Benítez.
- ³¹ Note the contrast with Gillie Rodríguez's fond memories of similar *piropos* which she welcomed as a young, single woman recently arrived in Puerto Rico.
- ³² Lugo.
- ³³ Odette Pabón, October 21, 2002. See also Benítez and Matta.
- ³⁴ Lugo.
- ³⁵ Several of Elizabeth Aranda's informants reported similar experiences when returning to Puerto Rico from the United States in the 1990s (2007:96-103).
- ³⁶ José Flores Ramos (2007) analyzes the burgeoning of hegemonic bourgeois gender roles during the late 1950s and 1960s in Puerto Rico.
- ³⁷ Aura Hernández, August 5, 2002. For struggles to work, see Gladys Lugo, Gladys Matta, and Lizzy Benítez.
- ³⁸ Rodríguez, October 2, 2002; Benítez; Lugo. See also María Pabón and Gladys Matta.
- ³⁹ Ballantyne and Burton (2005:406-408).
- ⁴⁰ Lugo. See also, for example, Benavides, Hernández and Rodríguez, October 2, 2002.
- ⁴¹ Aranda discusses the increasing out-migration of middle-class Puerto Ricans during the 1980s and 1990s (2007).
- ⁴² Zentella (2003:246-249); Barreto 2001. Scheele (1957:437-440) discusses the growing pressures to learn English for wealthy and professional Puerto Ricans.
- ⁴³ "Sobre la lengua," *El Nuevo Día* January 26, 1982, p. 24. For some other examples, see also Juan Casilla Álvarez, "Nuestro español es irremplazable", *Claridad* June 24-30, 1983, p. 40; Rubén del Rosario, "Ser Puertorriqueño", *Claridad, Suplemento en Rojo*, Aug. 5-11,

1983, pp. 16-17; Seda Bonilla 1975.

⁴⁴ "Artificial Paradise" and "The Addict: A Confession," *San Juan Review*, November 1964, pp. 6-15, 41-45.

⁴⁵ Adelina Vélez, "No es puertorriqueño," *El Mundo*, June 24, 1983. See also David Vidal, "The Loneliness of the Returning Newyoricán," *The San Juan Star*, October 5, 1975.

⁴⁶ Cited in Zentella (2003:247).

⁴⁷ For a few examples of such studies, see Aguilera Cruz 1979; Fermain Burgos 1967; Rivera 1967; and Cintrón and Vales (1976).

Manuel Maldonado-Denis, a Marxist sociologist, provided a notable exception to this pattern. He insisted "The incorrectly labeled *New Yorricans* are as Puerto Rican as any of us; this land belongs to them as much or more than to those who have handed it over palm tree by palm tree to the colonizers of our people. This is not the time to wash our hands of this question, but rather to assume the historic responsibilities and welcome as our own those who return to the HOMELAND" (1980:128). Unfortunately, his was a rare vision in academic, popular, or state settings.

⁴⁸ Aura Hernández, August 5, 2002; Gladys Lugo.

⁴⁹ Lizzy Benítez, Aura Hernández, August 5, 2002; Gillie Rodríguez, September 15, 2002; Gladys Lugo.

⁵⁰ Rodríguez, September 18, 2002.

⁵¹ Marie Lebrón, Gladys Lugo, Odette Pabón, Maria Pabón, Gillie Rodríguez, October 2, 2002; Lizzy Benítez. Zentella (2003) and Hernández-Cruz (1994) found a similar desire to remain on the island and insistence on the ability of English-speakers to be authentically Puerto Rican among teenaged returnees in the late 1980s. Zentella also heard charges of Puerto Rican jealousy of Nuyoricans' ability to speak English.

⁵² Lizzy Benítez.

⁵³ Gladys Lugo.

⁵⁴ Lizzy Benítez.

⁵⁵ Rodríguez, September 18, 2002.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gladys Lugo, Odette Pabón, Lizzy Benítez, Marie Lebrón.

⁵⁷ Gillie Rodríguez, October 5, 2002.

- ⁵⁸ Many of these narrators were deeply invested in disproving the “culture of poverty” myth which has haunted Puerto Ricans in the United States for decades. They are happy to confirm it, however, for island Puerto Ricans, who many of them implicitly seem to say are suffering from a “culture of under-development.” See Phillips and Potter (2005:78-81) for similar patterns among Barbadian return migrants.
- ⁵⁹ Marie Lebrón and Gladys Lugo. See also Gillie Rodríguez, Aura Hernández, Gladys Matta, Luisa Quiñones.
- ⁶⁰ This collective distancing from the Puerto Rican diasporic masses differs radically from the cross-ethnic solidarity of the poor emerging recently in cultural spheres among many impoverished young Puerto Ricans, African-American, and Dominicans in New York. See, for example, Rivera (2007) and Flores (2001). There is a vast scholarly literature, too extensive to cite here, on the enduring poverty of Puerto Ricans in the United States, the most marked among any Latin American immigrant group. In scholarly literature, Puerto Ricans have often been considered more analogous to African Americans than to other immigrants. Explanations for this phenomenon range from the infamous “culture of poverty” argument, initially developed by Oscar Lewis and elaborated upon by Daniel Moynahan and Nathan Glazer (1963), among others, to Marxist-inspired critiques of the post WWII collapse of industrial capitalism and the enduring colonial subordination of Puerto Ricans within the U.S. economy. For a few of the foundational works, see Oscar Lewis (1961, 1965); Maldonado-Denis (1976); Campos and Flores (1976). For some more recent works which also analyze women’s experience in the U.S. labor market, see Colón-Warren (1996); Conway, Bailey, and Ellis (2001) and Baker (2002).
- ⁶¹ Gladys Lugo. See also Mirna Jiménez, who portrayed Puerto Ricans as the elite among Latin American immigrants who arrived in New York after 1960.
- ⁶² Marie Lebrón.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.* As stated earlier in this article, such assertions of mass Puerto Rican dependency on welfare do not correspond to the empirical reality of Puerto Rican emigration; Puerto Ricans have suffered persistent impoverishment in the United States, but this has been due to chronically low wages and underemployment, rather than an overweening dependence on public assistance.
- ⁶⁴ Gillie Rodríguez, September 18, 2002. Compare these narratives to

the comments of a young male return migrant from the early 1980s: “all my progress and development was obtained in Puerto Rico. In the U.S. I was alienated at all times.” He and his counterparts “aspire in the future to have a place in the country of origin.” Hernández-Cruz, (1994:146-147).

- ⁶⁵ Interestingly enough, even the one narrator who unequivocally claimed her place as an island-rooted Puerto Rican—and who attended Latin New Yorker dances, but never joined the organization—was at the time of our interviews in a long-term partnership with another Nuyorican who returned to Puerto Rico in the 1960s as a teenager with his parents.
- ⁶⁶ Gillie Rodríguez, October 18, 2002.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, and Mirna Jiménez.
- ⁶⁸ Sánchez Korrol (1994) briefly discusses the Puerto Rican hometown clubs. Other Latin New Yorkers participated in New York City church youth groups which served similar purposes as the hometown clubs; see Odette Pabón, Luisa Quiñones, María Pabón.
- ⁶⁹ The LNY’s increasing focus on tourist activities in the last decade is a fascinating statement on their continued outsider status—they travel together to “learn about the island,” enjoying and consuming it in much the same way as visiting North Americans do. Gillie Rodríguez, October 18, 2002; Mirna Jiménez, Odette Pabón, Lizzy Benítez, Gladys Matta, Luisa Quiñones.
- ⁷⁰ On the history, political economy, and cultural politics of salsa, see Quintero Rivera (1998) and Aparicio (1998). Wilson Valentín-Escobar sees salsa, as expressed through the art of Héctor Lavoe, as the quintessential cultural expression of “trans-nation boricuas” (2001). In Juan Flores’ interpretation, salsa was one of the central “cultural remittances” introduced to the island by returning Nuyoricans in the 1960s and 1970s. (2009:150-162).
- ⁷¹ Lizzy Benítez.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*; Gladys Matta. Also, see Gladys Lugo, Gillie Rodríguez, September 18, 2002 and October 2, 2002, and Mirna Jiménez. Note the parallel with Mirna Jiménez’s description of safe group socializing at hometown club dances in 1950s New York.
- ⁷³ Gillie Rodríguez, October 2, 2002.
- ⁷⁴ Gladys Lugo, Gladys Matta, Mirna Jiménez, María Pabón, Lizzy Benítez, Marie Lebrón.

- ⁷⁵ Flores (2009:140-147). The narrators did, however, as we have seen, consistently offer sharp critiques of gendered power relations on the island, a pattern confirmed by Flores as well as by other analysts of return migration in other parts of the Caribbean. See Pérez 2004, 2005; Phillips and Potter 2005, 2009; Condon 2004.
- ⁷⁶ See Juan Flores, citing Julio Ramos, in "Broken English Memories", p. 59.

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