



Life experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York from 1950 to 1960: a Research

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to submit a research proposal on life experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York from 1950 to 1960 and who currently live in Puerto Rico. However, with this proposal our final objective is to create motivation for fostering a large-scale, oral history project on the experiences of the Puerto Rican diaspora. These experiences will be published through the media, particularly on a web page that will serve as a link between all Puerto Ricans, wherever they live. It is my hope that this flow of information between all Puerto Ricans will be able to help us understand ourselves better as members of a single Puerto Rican nationality. For this purpose, we will establish partnerships with institutions interested in this topic such as the Puerto Rican Collection of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus; the Digital Library of Puerto Rico; and CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

Origin and description of proposal

The idea behind this proposal came during Christmas of 2010 when I visited my uncle. He is 84 years old and lived in New York City in the 1950s. Since I also lived in the United States in the 1980s and '90s, I asked him to tell me about his life experiences in New York, hoping that I would encounter similar experiences. However, his experiences moved me so much that they inspired me to write this proposal. Further along I will share with you my uncle's experiences, which show the Puerto Rican traits in terms of resilience, working mentality, and human quality.

Methodology

This research project covers three phases:

Through the methodology of oral history, the initial phase seeks to obtain samples of at least ten life experiences from Puerto Ricans who lived in New York during the 1950s and who presently live in Puerto Rico. The aim is to obtain a small-scale sample that will include:

- ✓ A review of the literature that will form the basis for the project
- ✓ Life experiences in oral format (audio and/or video recordings)
- ✓ Description of the socio-economic, political, and cultural context of the period when such experiences took place

In turn, this socio-economic, political, and cultural context of the time will be presented by identifying and obtaining the following resources:

- ✓ A bibliography of research and publications about that period
- ✓ A sample of relevant literature that describes the time period. This will include short stories, novels, poetry, drama, etc.
- ✓ Audiovisual resources such as movies, musicals, photos, songs, and videos

The second phase seeks to refine the project and seek alternative funding to enable a large-scale launch of the project.

The third phase is the preparation of the final product. This would be a web page documenting the progress and development of the project from its very beginnings, turning it into a socio-cultural link between expatriate Puerto Ricans and those residing on the Island.

This presentation seeks to describe results achieved during phase one. This includes a review of literature relevant to the project, as well as a sample of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural context of the period by using examples from literature, movies, musicals, photos, songs, and videos.

Literature review:

The first part of phase one of the project was a review of literature. Here the main objective was to learn more about the methodology of oral history and identify the important variables for the project. We found that Jaksic (1992, p. 591) states the following: "A successful approach to oral history takes into account the cultural and historical differences of the regions in which it is applied, and a good oral historian seeks to work with the interviewee in developing and contextualizing testimony". As part of the project, we seek to contextualize by using research; publications; and examples of literature, as well as movies, musicals, photos, songs, and videos. Two important variables were found for studying the group of emigrant Puerto Ricans: 1) Life and socioeconomic conditions in the country of origin, and 2) Life and conditions in the country to which they emigrate.

Phase one will identify the subjects and their life experiences. The greatest difficulty with this paper was to identify people who lived in New York in the 1950s and who currently live in Puerto Rico. We thought we would need to use a means of mass communication such as radio or television.

The radio seemed the more viable alternative. Several potential radio programs were examined. Finally, Professor Inés Quiles allowed us to invite people who fit the research profile to participate in the project on May 11, 2011, in her program "*Si no lo digo revienta*" (If I Don't Say It I'll Burst"), which is broadcast by Radio Isla. This enabled us to identify ten people willing to participate. Those ten people went through a preliminary interview, and later a formal interview will take place that will be recorded. Following a preliminary analysis of the phase-one interviews, the decision will be made as to what individuals will have a second interview, and a video will be recorded. All participants in the project must sign a consent form authorizing disclosure of the information. The life experiences will be retrieved using the oral history method from short audio and/or video recordings. Not all interviews will be recorded on video. Criteria will be developed to determine which ones to use. It is expected that an article will be written based on phase one. Phases one and two of the project will be placed on a web page, which would be phase three. The purpose of the web page is to establish a socio-cultural link between the expatriate Puerto Ricans and Puerto Ricans on the Island.

Emigration: life and socioeconomic conditions in the country of origin

It is important to study the socioeconomic characteristics and motivating factors of those who emigrate because they have an impact on the Island, the place to which they migrate, and on the emigrants themselves. The sociologist Virginia Sánchez Korrol – in her work *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* – argues that the factors that cause people to emigrate are, above all, of an economic nature. Puerto Ricans have been emigrating to the United States since the beginning of the 19th century. In 1917, the Puerto Ricans acquired U.S. citizenship, further facilitating emigration to the States. However, after World War One, the emigration was not as significant when compared to the 1950s, as reflected in Table I, Emigration from Puerto Rico, 1900-1990.

Emigration from Puerto Rico, 1900-1990

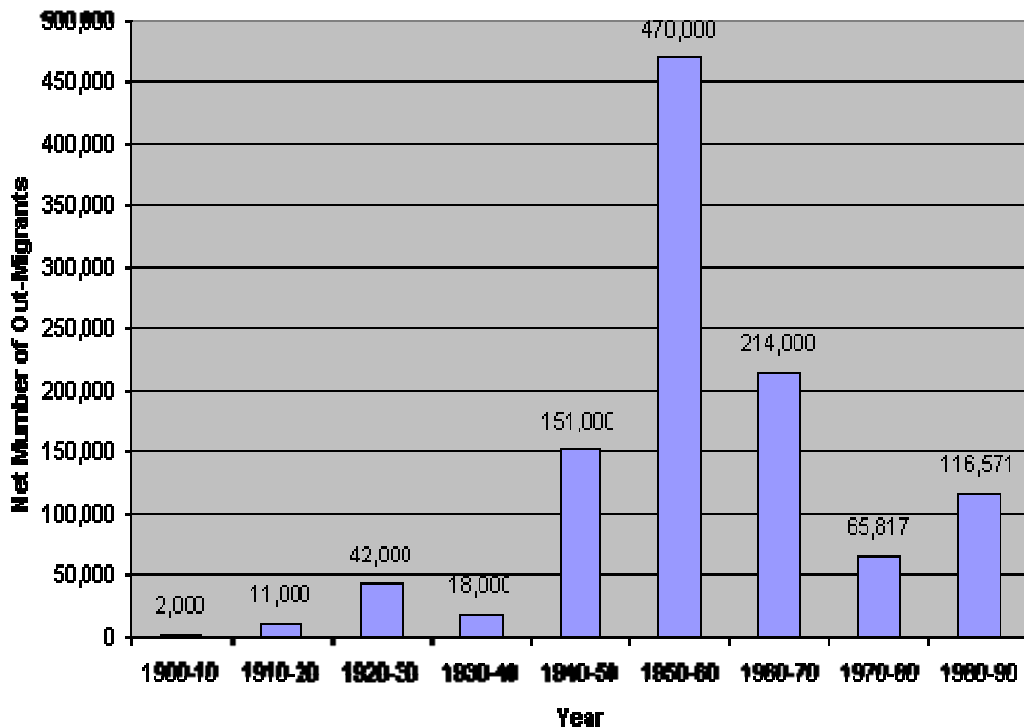


Table 1: Emigration from Puerto Rico, 1900-1990.

Source: <http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm>

Almost all emigration scholars point out the difficulty in obtaining reliable statistical data (Vélez, 2005; Duany, 2007). At times, not even the actual census records are reliable (Sandis, 1970). However, census records are the best instrument for identifying trends on a macro level. The 2000 United States Census estimated that nearly half of people of Puerto Rican ancestry lived off the island (Duany 2007), and it suggested that "No other nation in the Caribbean – and possibly in the whole world – has such a high proportion of its population living abroad" (p. 118). A news story from the newspaper *El Nuevo Día* from May 27, 2011, stated that according to the 2010 Census, the United States has an estimated 4,623,716 residents of Puerto Rican origin, compared to 3,406,178 in 2000. Furthermore, the population of the Island of Puerto Rico fell by 82,000 people to 3,725,789 (Delgado, *El Nuevo Día*, May 27, 2011, pp. 4-5). In the same article, Jorge Duany, an anthropologist of the University of Puerto Rico, states that the main challenge for Puerto Rico is how to redefine the Puerto Rican identity in non-exclusive terms from a linguistic and territorial point of view in order to include more than half of the population of Puerto Rican origin living outside the Island, and who may no longer speak Spanish as their dominant language. Duany (2007) analyzes the Puerto Rican emigration after 1940 in sociological terms, and Vélez (2007) analyzes the period from 1940 to 1968 from an economic and political point of view. Table 3 was created with data obtained from Vélez (2007) and from Table 1, and it shows that the data is not consistent. Both Vélez and Duany agree that in the 1950s, Puerto Rican emigration to the United States grew massively.

Decade	Net emigration to the United States	Net emigration to the United States Source: <i>http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm</i>
1940-1950	132,878 (Vélez 2007)	151,000
1950-1960	484,568 (net emigration) Vélez, 2007)	470,000
1960-1970	————	214,000
1980-1990		116,071 (from Table 1)

Table 3. Emigration of Puerto Ricans to the United States, 1940-1990

Table 4 gathers the qualitative terms that Duany (2007) uses to classify Puerto Rican emigration beginning in 1940. Duany further emphasizes that the statistics confirm that *"today's diaspora is equal to and perhaps has even surpassed the 'Great Migration' between 1945 and 1965"* (p. 121).

1940-1950	1950-1960	1960-1970	1980-1990
Mass growth	Expansion	Reduction	Regaining of strength

Table 4: Qualitative description of Puerto Rican emigration according to (Duany 2007).

Life and conditions in Puerto Rico from 1950 to 1960

In his essay *El tránsito hacia una sociedad industrial y urbana: la historia de Puerto Rico en imágenes, 1040-1948* (Transition toward an Industrial and Urban Society: a History of Puerto Rico in Pictures, 1940-1968), Waldemiro Vélez analyzes the island experience of the 1950s – the decade studied in this project – from an economic and political perspective (<http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/u/?ELM4068,3516>). Meanwhile – in *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the*

New York Political Economy – Andrés Torres (1995) analyzes the same period from the expatriate point of view. Finally, along with these two analyses, we have the conclusion of sociologist Virginia Sánchez Korrol that most emigration is caused by economic factors. This confirms that we cannot study Puerto Rican emigration to the United States without associating it with the complex economic, cultural, and political processes of society.

Vélez (2007) explains that by that decade, the Puerto Rican economy had suffered structural changes, evolving from a mainly agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban economy, resulting in a high unemployment rate. The 1940s established the foundation for this transformation, largely as a result of the emergence of the Popular Party and the agrarian reform that it promoted. Vélez divides the historical transition period into three phases: The first one, from 1940 to 1946, is characterized by the government being the main business owner and promoter of industrialization. In the second phase, from 1947 to 1963, we note the first important reorientation of industrialized politics. The government's role as a business owner was rejected, and emphasis was placed on private capital – and especially foreign capital – as the driving force of industrialization, seeking to especially attract light industries (clothing, food, and textiles) that make intensive use of labor. In the third phase, from 1964 to 1974, we note a change in the relative importance of the industrial branches; emphasis was placed on attracting heavy and semi-heavy industries that were large in capital (petrochemical and machine industries, etc.) (p.).

The first phase caused a high unemployment rate, resulting in an exodus as peasants fled to the city in search of work. This led to the rise of poor neighborhoods, and the peasants moved to New York City. This reality is vividly reflected in the theatrical work by René Marqués titled *La Carreta* (The Cart) from 1951, which is about the sufferings of a peasant family that is evicted from its home in the city.

In the second phase of economic change (1947-1963), emphasis was placed on private – and especially foreign – capital as the driving force of industrialization. This orientation is reflected in Hollywood movies such as *Sabrina* (1954), where the wealthy family of one of the main characters considers establishing a plastics manufacturing plant in Puerto Rico. It is during this second phase that emigration to the United States was intensified because the Puerto Rican government implemented an urban development program in an attempt to eliminate the poor neighborhoods that had emerged during the previous decade. In the musical *West Side Story* (1961), Puerto Ricans are described as arriving "to New York like cockroaches". Interestingly, Torres (1995) also describes an urban development program for New York City.

Images of the economy, housing, and poverty in Puerto Rico (1950-1960)

Economy



Photo 1: Sugar cane field in Yabucoa (1951)



Photo 2:
Bernardo Méndez demonstrating his invention for gathering and
transporting sugar cane.

Source: *El Mundo*, Nov. 25, 1960, p. 24. Text on back: Bernardo's
invention (Puchi Méndez - San Sebastián)

Urban housing and renovation



Photo 3: [Shack on plot close to Constitution Bridge] *El Mundo*, August 19, 1953. Bottom [of](#) photo: Makeshift homes. Shacks shoot up close by Constitution Bridge. Multiple views of the shacks that still remain.



Photo 4:
 [Residential area of the Juana Matos slum in Cataño]
 Marshland converted into residential use
El Mundo, March 12, 1960, p. 22

Living conditions in New York (1950-1960)

The vast majority of Puerto Rican emigrants to the United States during that decade were farm workers who emigrated to work in agriculture (tomato fields) or in low-income sectors of the economy. The data from the 1960 Census indicates that first-generation Puerto Ricans (those born in Puerto Rico but residents of the United States) had around three-and-a-half more years of schooling than those who resided on the Island (Table 5). Sandis (1970) indicates that this greater educational level did not always translate into better employment opportunities.

	Male	Female
Emigrants who return to the Island	8.6	7.6
Emigrants living in the United States	7.9	7.1
Residing on the Island	4.8	4.3

Table 5: Median years of schooling completed by Puerto Rican emigrants, by those who return to the Island, and by those residing on the Island aged 25 or older by gender. Data: 1960 United States Population Census (Sandis, 1970)

The Puerto Ricans arrived to New York City, a vibrant city by the end of the 1940s until the 1960s. The urban dynamics of that city consisted of manufacturing products and providing services used in other parts of the country. In other words, New York was linked to the rest of the country through the industrial sectors of manufacturing, clothing and textiles, printing and publications, finances, and the insurance industry (Torres, 1995).

The Puerto Ricans immigrated to New York under employment contracts or by using their social networks, and they were considered "colonial people, foreigners and people of color" (Puerto Rican Diaspora... 2005, p. 25). The government of Puerto Rico established an office in New York called the "Migration Division of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in New York City". It operated under that name from 1948 to 1968, and under other names until 1988. The purpose of that office was to facilitate immigration, settlement, and hiring of Puerto Ricans in the United States (Lapp, 1990). Puerto Ricans were presented negatively in the mass media (*West Side Story*, 1961), and the government of Puerto Rico tried to "help" improve that image. According to my uncle (who lived in New York during that decade), the city was segmented into urban neighborhoods according to ethnic and racial background such as Italian, Jew, African American, Puerto Rican, etc. Initially the immigrants arrived to the home of some relative or acquaintance until they were able to find independent housing. In New York City, a city revitalization program was under way in an attempt to eliminate old buildings. Such buildings were condemned, but unemployed Puerto Ricans used them as living quarters even though they did not have water, heat, or electricity. The theme in that environment was "every man for himself", and there was discrimination (anti-discrimination laws did not yet exist). The common forms of protection for these immigrant groups were the gangs from the different ethnic groups. The musical *West Side Story* (1961) transmits the message of the tension between gangs in New York in the '50s.

Examples of life experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York

During the last decade of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century, the reasons for emigrating included, in addition to financial motives, business purposes and the intellectual reasons of those opposed to Spanish colonialism. The economy of Puerto Rico was based on agriculture – coffee, tobacco, and sugar cane for exportation – in a system of big landowners who used the cheap labor system of the *arrimaos* (displaced). The result was a reduction of agriculture as a means of living and malnourishment of the population. This system of exploitation and misery is documented in the four literary works by Mr. Manuel Zeno Gandia titled *Crónicas de un Mundo Enfermo* (Chronicles of a Sick World), the most famous from which is the novel *La Charca* (The Pond). Published in 1898, to a large measure it offers one of the reasons for emigrating: the economy. The book by Matos Rodríguez & Hernández (2001) titled *Images of America: Pioneros, Puerto Ricans in New York City 1896-1948* features images, documents, and names of Puerto Rican pioneer immigrants in New York City. They include musicians, composers, soldiers, domestic employees, and agricultural workers. If we name the faces of some of those pioneers, we have Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Pura

Belpré, Jesús Colón, Bernardo Vega, Rafael Hernández, Pedro Flores, and Piquito Marciano.



Arturo Alfonso Schomburg

Arturo A. Schomburg immigrated to New York in 1891 and participated among Puerto Rican and Cuban revolutionary circles in New York until the Spanish-American War in 1898. He was an historian and a bibliophile. A comment from a teacher that blacks had no history led him to raise money for and create the Schomburg Center for Research of the Black Culture at the New York Public Library in New York.



Jesús Colón, at right
Farm worker who immigrated to New York in 1917. Became an important
community and union leader.

Jesús Calderón is another pioneer who emigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1917. He became an important community and union leader in New York City. The book *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (2005) quotes works by Jesús Colón that show the contrast between dreams and aspirations on the one hand and the disillusionment with the United States on the other. Jesús Colón said that in 1915, when he was in Puerto Rico browsing through a history book, he saw the phrase “we, the people of the United States...” “That phrase evoked a picture of all those people who picked cotton in the South, raised wheat in the Dakotas, grapes in California...The people in Brooklyn who built the ships that plied the waters of the Caribbean. All those people and my father and the poor Puerto Rican sugar workers and tobacco workers, we were all together, the people of the United States. We all belonged.” (P.79). However, by 1948 Colón had readjusted his dreams and aspirations as follows: “In the phrase, *we, the people of the United States* that I admired so much, were there first and second-class citizens? [In NYC] the worker told me that we [Puerto Ricans] were from a colony. [It is] sort of a storage house for cheap labor and a market for second-class industrial goods. Colonialism with its agricultural slavery, monoculture absenteeism, and rank human exploitation are making young Puerto Ricans today [1948] come in floods to the U.S.” (p.80)



Pura Belpré
Librarian, author of children's literature, and puppeteer.

Her career began in 1921 and lasted until her death in 1982. She was born in Cidra, Puerto Rico, in 1899. She was educated in Puerto Rico, and her work captured the enchantment and the spirit of Puerto Rican folk tales and folklore. In 1930 she immigrated to New York, becoming the first Hispanic librarian at the New York Public Library.



In 1995 the American Library Association (ALA) instituted the "Pura Belpré Award", which is granted every two years to outstanding works that represent, affirm, and celebrate the Latino experience in children's literature. To compete for the award, the work must have been published in the United States or in Puerto Rico within the previous two years. This award is co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the ALA. This award was granted for the first time in 1996.



Rafael Hernández (*El Jibarito*; 'The Rustic Man')

He was born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, in 1891 and died in 1965. He participated in World War One and later settled in Harlem, New York. During the war he was a musician in the military band "Harlem Hellfighters", made up entirely of blacks. He was a composer and a musician, and he is considered one of the most important characters in the Latin American music of the time. In 1929 he composed a song titled "*Lamento Borincano*" (Puerto Rican Sorrow) at a restaurant in Harlem, New York, which was about the misery and hopelessness of the Puerto Rican people.

Insert (video with *Lamento Borincano* song by Bobby Capo)

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<object style="height: 390px; width: 640px"><param name="movie" value="http://www.youtube.com/v/ZGssSbEcNDc?version=3"><param name="allowFullScreen" value="true"><param name="allowScriptAccess" value="always"><embed src="http://www.youtube.com/v/ZGssSbEcNDc?version=3" type="application/x-shockwave-flash" allowfullscreen="true" allowScriptAccess="always" width="640" height="390"></object>
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Photo 1. Sugar cane field at Yabucoa (1951) [Post card] Available at:
<http://rs6.loc.gov/pnp/fsac/1a34000/1a34000/1a34061r.jpg>

Photos 2-4. Available at the Digital Library of Puerto Rico, Library System, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus.