

The History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, by Frank Espada, from his book, The Puerto Rican Diaspora - Themes in the Survival of a People

Background

The great Puerto Rican exodus began at the turn of the twentieth century, when dismal economic conditions—the result of four hundred years of Spanish colonial exploitation and neglect—were further aggravated by the dislocation caused by the annexation of the island by the United States. Puerto Rico was (as Senator Henry Jackson put it) “war booty” of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Further exacerbating these dismal conditions was the devastating hurricane San Ciriaco, named for the saint’s day when it struck on August 8, 1899. Destitution, hunger and disease ravaged an already weak and under-nourished population. The frail economy, in shambles, set the stage for the beginning of the Puerto Rican Diaspora.

Between 1900 and 1901, more than five thousand Puerto Ricans emigrated to Hawaii, recruited by representatives of the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association in need of strikebreaking labor for the sugar fields of the newly acquired Pacific territory. This was the start of a massive dislocation that reached its peak some fifty years later, caused in large measure by self-serving, insensitive colonial policies instituted soon after the occupation of the island by the United States.

Puerto Rican economic exploitation followed soon thereafter, when the virtual take-over of the sugar industry by large American corporations caused the collapse of the weakened coffee and tobacco sectors, effectively creating a one-crop economy; unemployment became endemic and institutionalized. By the 1950s, the great migration had reached historic proportions; by 1987, over two and a half million had fled—more than a third of the population of the island. Puerto Rican *colonias* sprang up throughout the United States; most immigrants entered through New York City, where over a million still reside, some already in the third generation.

Others settled in the farming regions of the eastern seaboard (called “stay-grants,” these migrants did not return to Puerto Rico); throughout the industrial areas of the northeast and mid-west (U.S. Steel imported several hundred “defense workers” to its plants in Lorain, Ohio, during the Second World War); and as far west as California and Hawaii. The past decade has seen a movement away from the large urban centers to the smaller cities of states like Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts: another flight, this time from inner city urban blight, crime, drugs and poor educational systems.

Today, there are over sixty Puerto Rican communities on the mainland and Hawaii with populations of ten thousand or more. This mass migration was, to a great extent, quietly encouraged by the Puerto Rican political and economic elite, who welcomed the exodus as depopulation—a possible cure for the persistent and embarrassing problems of unemployment and poverty—and by American business interests, always seeking cheap labor. Emigration thus became an important, though silent, component of the newly-created Commonwealth government’s economic recovery efforts during the decades of the fifties and sixties.

This program, “Operation Bootstrap,” which portrayed Puerto Rico as “The Showcase of Democracy” in the Caribbean, was designed to revitalize the Puerto Rican economy by attracting mainland corporate investment, thereby creating new jobs through tax deferments, ten year forgiveness and other incentives to mainland corporations seeking low-wage, non-union labor under U.S. hegemony.

Instead, it further entrenched U.S. investments within the life-blood of the Puerto Rican economy, compounding its dependency on the mainland economy. It was eventually to be a dismal failure, a victim of factors partly outside the proponents’ control, as competition from other Third World countries—Haiti, the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, the Dominican

Republic, and other low-wage areas—overcame efforts to raise the minimum wage and to unionize Puerto Rican labor.

During the 1980s, when most of the photographs in this book were taken, unemployment was rampant, with the official rate approaching 40%, and more than half of those under twenty-one officially unemployed: the young bearing the brunt as usual. The most glaring result of these failed economic policies was the shocking dependency on the federal dole, as more than 60% of the population received the equivalent of food stamps, arrogantly called “the Puerto Rican program” by R.W. Grace, the Chairman of President Reagan’s Commission on Waste in Government. Puerto Rico receives billions of dollars a year through various federal programs. With this also comes pervasive control of the Puerto Rican social fabric: over nine hundred federal rules and regulations govern many aspects of society.

Today, Puerto Rico’s economy is limited to holding on to highly automated, labor-intensive industries such as pharmaceuticals and electronics. The heavy petrochemicals came, polluted and left, leaving a legacy of violence to the environment and future cancers to the people. Agriculture is, for all intents and purposes, non-existent: most of the food consumed on the island has to be imported. Produce such as plantains, a once plentiful local staple, must be imported from Santo Domingo. Frozen chickens are flown in from Tennessee, beef from the Midwest, all at a disproportionately high cost to the Puerto Rican consumer; the cost of living approaches that of some mainland urban centers. Recent studies have brought attention to a new phenomenon—the brain drain. Many college-trained Puerto Rican professionals have opted to leave, unable to find local outlets for their skills.

Ironically, American citizenship—granted Puerto Ricans in 1917—has worked to the disadvantage of many emigrants, starting when Woodrow Wilson had eighteen thousand Puerto Ricans drafted and sent “over there.” Very few made it back. Able to “go north” with nothing but an airline ticket and perhaps a tenuous contact on the mainland, the newly-honored

“citizens” found that they were dismally unprepared to deal with the hard realities of the promised land.

Part of our mainland folklore is the symbol of the *jíbarito* who lands in Nueva York (when air fares were \$45) in mid-winter with nothing but a thin jacket, a cardboard suitcase and a faded address in East Harlem. Neither the Commonwealth nor the federal government bothered to institute any significant efforts to orient, assist or otherwise advise those who chose, or were often forced, to leave. Many were immediately caught up in a new vise of hardships. Considered foreigners and racial inferiors, victimized by exploitation, racism and discrimination at every level of society, Puerto Ricans quickly landed at the bottom of the socio-economic pecking order, there to remain.

The United States Census Bureau reported in 1987 that Puerto Rican median family income was the lowest among “Hispanics” in the United States, and about half that of the general population. Nearly 40% of Puerto Ricans in the United States—American citizens—lived under the federal poverty line, as compared with “only” 10% for non-Hispanics. The litany of suffering cannot be properly conveyed through statistics; they are but faint indicators of the high incidence of social pathology which continues to plague us: mental illness, adolescent suicide, alcoholism and other drug abuse, infant mortality, child abuse, wife battering, and other criminal activity.

Victimized by high unemployment, low scholastic achievement (the high school drop-out rates are among the highest in the country; only a few ever get into college, and even fewer graduate), abysmal living conditions in high-crime areas, and lacking effective political representation or power, many Puerto Ricans in the United States are trapped in a cycle of poverty, want and deprivation, dependent on an unsympathetic social welfare system. We are, in the words of historian Gordon K. Lewis, “a despised people” in an alien land.

The Puerto Rican migration to the United States, proportionately among the major ones in history, continues and is quite complex in nature. Freedom of access has created a phenomenon called *la desesperación del va y ven*, which can be roughly translated as “the desperation of the constant to and fro.” It refers to those who are constantly moving between the island and the mainland, usually responding to economic pressures. Among these are seasonal agricultural migrant workers, who, although protected by contractual arrangements between the Commonwealth government and the growers in the mainland, are often viciously exploited.

There was a time when most simply planned to work here for a few years, even months, send some money back home and eventually return, preferably around the Christmas holidays. One never came here intending to remain. If one happened to die here, it was understood that burial had to be *en la isla*. But the bulk of us are here to stay.

The passage of time has brought new generations whose only experience is that of the mainland, who are simply not welcomed back to the island and who would much rather speak English and listen to rap than grapple with their parents’ language or put up with jíbaro music. Those who venture back are called “Nuyoricans”—New York Ricans—by the islanders, and are considered a main source of drugs and crime, which so trouble Puerto Ricans that there is a thriving market for *rejas*, effectively bars for all doors and windows, to keep intruders out and frightened Puerto Ricans in.

Perhaps Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico’s first elected native governor and the architect of the Commonwealth, was right in asserting, when asked about the future of those who migrated, that they would “simply cease to be Puerto Ricans, and that would be the end of it.” The specter of assimilation, then, is real. The new generations are losing their forebears’ language, and with that, their cultural heritage. More and more they are “mainstreaming” into the greater society, and although this may in the long run facilitate a chance at a better education, more employment

opportunities or a decent place to live, it almost always means the loss of cultural identity.

But in spite of seemingly overwhelming odds, Puerto Ricans on the mainland seem to endure. Economic exiles through forces beyond their control, they have in many instances proceeded to transplant their cultural values, language and traditions to their harsh new surroundings, far from their beloved *isla*, the “paradise” of their traditional hymn of praise. Hometown clubs, social and cultural events such as Puerto Rican Day Parades and Fiestas de San Juan, folkloric gatherings, poetry readings, dance companies (El Ballet Hispánico), theater groups (The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre), museums (El Museo del Barrio), art workshops (El Taller Boricua), and progressive groups agitating for the independence of the island, for bilingual education, for the needy, the deprived and the oppressed, all help nurture a Puerto Rican identity which manifests many new and unexpected features.

What we are witnessing is the development of the mainland Puerto Rican, member of a new and hybrid culture. It is no longer useful to debate the “two nations” argument, one on the island, the other on the mainland. Our present stage displays a multitude of “nations” in transition, with a wide variety of perspectives related to their migratory experiences, but all headed in the same general direction, impelled by the need to survive and by the hard realities they must deal with.

These “new” mainland-born Puerto Ricans will never become hyphenated—Puerto Rican-Americans—for they have come to terms with their permanent “alien” status within the dominant society, notwithstanding the facts of “citizenship” or “assimilation.” They have become masters of survival in an alien environment, making do with whatever is available, gritting their teeth and moving on. Skeptical of traditional assumptions, cynical regarding politics, government, leadership, and institutions, they are often alienated and highly individualistic. They hang on to their

“Puertorican-ness” as another survival tool; in their hearts they know they will forever be aliens in both lands.

Eventually, they may adopt and practice, like our descendants in Hawaii, a highly ritualized vestigial culture, symbolized by traces of a rich but forgotten tradition. But others (those of us “white” enough) will simply vanish into the so-called mainstream, defeated by the constant pressures, trading their identity for the featureless homogeneity of what is curiously called “American culture.” Francisco becomes “Frank” and moves on. The never-ending river of our people, seeking a better life, will continue to supply first generation Puerto Ricans to this *mélange*, perpetuating the eternal struggle with first generation “problems.” Those of us who care will forever have to deal with those among us who are caught up in this vicious cycle.

Against this dismal backdrop play the political actors, both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland. Theirs is a shocking record marked by plain incompetence, misguided good intentions, cynical opportunism, greed, personal ambition, and naiveté. Our political leaders on the island, forever obsessed with the status question, would rather debate issues that they cannot affect than deal with those within their purview. The illusion of local autonomy blinds many to the bare facts which everyday reaffirm the colonial status of the island. The choices—Commonwealth, statehood, or independence—are primarily in the hands of the colonial power, belying the often reiterated, high-minded-sounding statements from American presidents that the residents of the island will determine their destiny.

An excellent example of this charade is the well-documented fact that Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation succeeded in criminalizing the independence movement. Essentially, then, islanders are given a false choice: either stay with the Commonwealth status, a Potemkin village, or opt for statehood, which will never be accepted by the American political elite. Just try to imagine this: eight to ten Puerto Ricans in the House and two in the Senate!

Notwithstanding the wishes of its people, Puerto Rico will never be allowed into the American union simply because it is an essentially racist society. It will never admit representatives considered “foreign,” non-English speaking, many of darker hue, bringing their own cultural baggage. It will never grant us independence, for the island is prized for its “strategic value” by the military elite. Ironically, Puerto Rico is also one of this country’s best customers, a fact that doesn’t escape the notice of powerful corporate interests. So the present status, Commonwealth, will prevail for the foreseeable future, a true political limbo, submerged in a haze of false assumptions.

The continued economic and social oppression of the majority of Puerto Ricans in this country has created a permanent underclass from which few will escape. We are part of a great, invisible and historic national tragedy, a moral catastrophe which some ascribe to abstract historical forces, thereby neatly ignoring the suffering and exonerating the guilty.

Thus the need, as this writer saw it, for this work. It is an attempt to give voice to those who must bear the brunt of the failed policies of a power-hungry, greedy elite; to the victims of faded dreams of the glories of empire; of the so-called “accidents of history,” a smokescreen for racism, petty ambition and incompetence; of the cynical travesty which makes us “citizens” fit to fight and die in disproportionate numbers in this country’s wars but not allowed to vote in federal elections if we happen to live on the island, a fine definition of “second class citizenship.” It is an attempt to document the victims’ pain, fears, disillusionment, anger, and sorrow. But also, and perhaps in the long run more important, it is an attempt to honor their defiance, courage and determination to endure, survive, and eventually to overcome.

Make no mistake: this is a tough, energetic and creative young group—the average age is nineteen years—which is still to come into its own. There is a vitality, which vibrates through the pain. But they cannot do it alone; they

need all the help they can get, right now. Finally, this is a muted cry of despair, of anger and rage, to those of good will to see what I see and to feel what I feel.

This, then, is their story, as told by one of them, to give them voice, *con mucho cariño, respeto y dignidad*.