

A Public Presentation by Frank Espada in Hawaii, February 1st, 1983

{This is} a documentary on Puerto Ricans generally all over the country - the great migration that has taken place since 1900, to Hawaii, and then later, particularly in the late '40s, '50s, and '60s to the mainland. And I won't go into the causes of that great migration because you tend to get a little bit political, and the causes are all there for everyone to see.

It was a country that really couldn't support its people, and the economy could not support the workforce, and essentially, to put it bluntly, they had to export {its workers}. But it's still happening, because of course, as the population kept growing and so on.

But in any case, it's probably one of the largest migrations in the history of Western world, considering that probably half of the Puerto Ricans now living have been in the United States at one time or another. That's really something. When you think about the fact that there are somewhere about over two million Puerto Ricans in the United States now in the mainland, and in the Island, we have something like 3.8 million. So, percentage-wise, we have probably *the* largest migration of people away from their country to a country, really, that is totally different than.

Although we've been citizens of the United States since 1917 we're a different culture ethnically, linguistically; We are a nation although in this country, we're not recognized as a nation because we're recognized as an ethnic group. Well, all you got to do is look at our people and you'll see that I think we have almost as many variables of people as in Hawaii and that's saying a lot. We have the entire range of people in our island. And I think that's reflected also here. Puerto Ricans who come here and who have also intermarried.

Our rate of intermarriage has always been high even in Puerto Rico where about a third of Puerto Ricans have non-Hispanic surnames. That's an

interesting statistic because if you're German and you go to Puerto Rico and you settle there and you marry and you have children, your children aren't Germans, they're Puerto Ricans. Over here you would be German forever or Irish or Italian or whatever.

In any case, getting back to the project. The project was conceived to try to begin to develop a record of this great migration. And originally we intended to do a very basic kind of thing- go to a half dozen places and identify certain characteristics of our community, and by doing that we felt that, of course, we'll have it. Well, we were all wrong. We submitted a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Spring of 1979 and they liked the proposal very much. And we had asked for a planning grant and they gave us money for six months to do some planning, and to travel around the country, which I did. That was the first time I came to Hawaii, in January 1980, when we had a 5-day storm of the 10 days that I was here, but anyway that's where it started.

And then by the time I got back from the six months of travel, which I was on the road pretty much six months, meeting a great many people. That's around the time when I met the key people here. We developed a concept of the Padrino Agency which is a padrino organization. A godfather agency, which kind of has negative connotations in English, but in our culture, padrino is a very important relationship, godfather, *compadrazgo* system.

So we identified immediately the United Association. That's when I met Blaise and I met a number of others who are here, and we at that point proposed to the association that they become the godfather, the sponsors, and they agreed to it, and we did this in 24 other cities throughout the country. We connected up directly all over the country, and when I got back from the six months, we realized that it was impossible to do it the way we originally conceived it. Well, that was the idea of the six months planning grant.

We then resubmitted a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities and we received a grant for two years, and during that period we have visited more than 20 communities all the way to Hawaii and Puerto Rico. We did the story on the return migrants, and, of course, during all this time we developed other ideas.

We also had ideas about developing a Puerto Rican collection to describe the diaspora, the diaspora or the spreading out, which essentially is what you see back here. The *Boricua Hawaiiiana* is very much what we had in mind in terms of the development of that collection, that is to gather old photographs, old documents, and so on, that describe the migratory experience. We also intend to publish a couple of books out of this, and out of this also has come an attempt to develop a national Puerto Rican cultural center that will be based in Washington, DC, and a number of other ideas that I won't trouble you with now.

But this has become very much of an ongoing project. The idea now is to institutionalize it within Boricua College. Boricua College is the sponsor of the project. They're the only four-year, bilingual, bicultural institution in the country, and we're very proud of that. We have about 1200 students now, with no federal assistance because we don't get any federal money. So, that we're very proud of that. We have two campuses. One in Brooklyn and one in New York in the Upper West Side right in the middle of the barrio, and if you're ever in New York City, I wish you would look them up because they're great people.

In any case, Boricua is very much the kind of the home for the project although we operate out of Washington, DC. We've learned a great deal, as I've said before, about our community in the short 2.5 years that we've been working with it, although I have been involved with this community for many years before that. Many of the things that have happened have happened kind of spontaneously where I have learned certain things or I fell, by luck, into one thing or the other.

One of the most interesting experiences, of course, is the story of those who have gone back to Puerto Rico, and the story is that no Puerto Rican comes to the United States ever to stay. We never come to stay. And we can be here 40, 50 years or even die here, but there's a very brisk business in terms of kind of, a little bit on the down side, but in terms of transporting people back there after they die to be buried in Puerto Rico. That's right.

So, the story of the return migrants is rather important and we felt that it would be very much a part of this because this is not meant to be a documentary of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Ricans that we photographed in Puerto Rico are part of the mainland story because they spent a good part of their lives here.

Just one example the couple there, back there, Ismael and Ana Colon, and I know all these people. They're all my friends. Ismael and Ana Colon over here, they spent 30 years in Paterson, New Jersey. She happens to be an ex-nun and he was a seminary student at one time. They met in Puerto Rico and decided that the life of the church was not for them. They eloped to Paterson, New Jersey. They married in Paterson, and they stayed in Paterson for 32 years, and they raised a family there, four children, and then his factory closed down and moved to the Midwest, and they didn't want to do that. They said, "The heck with it, we're going back."

So, they came back to Puerto Rico and what did they find? Well, they found some very difficult economic circumstances. He couldn't find a job. Luckily they have a program in Puerto Rico where poor families will get a quarter of an acre, what they call a *parcela*, which is what they had there, and they're kind of half self-sustaining. They grow some yuca, and bananas, and yautia and so on, and he's a day laborer. He goes out and he's a day laborer.

Now, the most interesting part of this story is their children. Their children, the four children, had never been in Puerto Rico, with the exception of the oldest one who spent the summer when he was younger.

So, when I was interviewing them, the young lady says, “Can you imagine, Frank, getting on a plane in Newark in the morning and then in the evening, you’re over *here?*”, and she looks around. It’s a very deserted place. It was very dark, you know. The cultural shock was tremendous.

And then they find that, unfortunately, that their Puerto Rican brothers there don’t really appreciate them because they can’t speak Spanish too well, and I think that our Hawaiian brothers understand that, and sisters. They can’t speak Spanish too well, they’re called Yankees, and that’s all in that in that little article that we did.

They have a program down there that’s funded by the Office of Education. Would you believe this? It’s a migrant program for migrant children in the states, but they convinced the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, that they were migrants and that they effectively were *a different language* because their language was English. So, they had this program to teach them, in English, to teach them, as a matter of fact, Spanish also.

And it’s a high school called Ramon Power High School. Ramon Power is one of the great men in our history, and they now presently have 40%, at that time, 40% of the student population were return migrants. So, they were planning to take the school over, you know, eventually.

But what was more interesting was that most of them did not want to go back, that they liked it, that in spite of all the problems, they liked living there, and that they were going to stay, and that by God they were going to make it, and at one point I started talking in Spanish to them, and they understood what I was trying to do, and we had a very interesting conversation for about a half hour in Spanish. I refused to speak English to them.

Only one of many, many, many stories. Practically everyone in the photographs here I could talk for at least this long on, and I could talk some more about that experience.

I think the most important thing that we have found is that wherever we've gone that we have identified with our culture and that we identify as Puerto Ricans, no matter what, but I also have to say this. This has been the only place where we hyphenate our nationality. We say Hawaiian-Puerto Rican, or Puerto Rican-Hawaiian. I have never found that anywhere else, and that's very encouraging in the sense that, you know, our people here are proud of the fact that they're Hawaiian, are proud of the fact that they're Puerto Rican, and are Hawaiian-Puerto Ricans, and we don't find that anywhere else in the country and I have some ideas about why that would be but we're over here for a while now. Many of us are second and third generation, or even fourth generation. I think we're on our fourth generation here now. Right?

So, there are many other things that have happened to us as a result of this project, mostly good things. I have some very funny things that have happened, and some weird things that have happened to me in my travels and so on. I misplaced all my equipment at one time, and I thought it was lost, and then a day and a half later, a young man walks in with all my equipment and says, "Well, you know, we got it back to you", and he didn't say why or when or where and that was it. That was in Chicago, and I didn't ask any questions, but they got all my equipment back, intact, you know, but there are many other things that have happened like that.

Overall, it's been a tremendous experience for us, for me, personally. I think that I'm going to try to continue to do this for as long as I can. The federal money ran out and we did not reapply for additional monies. The reason for that was very simple. We had two and a half years, and that was plenty. I think there are many other people with worthwhile projects that deserve a crack at it, and we were asked to submit for more and we didn't. We said, "No, we're going to try to make it. We're going to try to get some support from some foundations," but so far, no foundation has stepped forth because of all the economic conditions. Before they never paid too much attention to our project. Now that we have a good project, now they tell us

that, "We can't give you money because of the Reaganomics and the economic conditions," and so on.

But we still get very little support from foundations, or from corporations, and that is the absolute truth. In any case, we're continuing with it. The college is supporting some of the overhead expenses, and the small staff that I have are not getting paid now. So, we're all kind of just pushing along trying to see how long we can keep it going, but we have a lot of faith, and we have a lot of support throughout the country.

We've developed a... I'm talking too much right now ... We developed a very good network of people and organizations throughout the country, and that's going to be turned into a national organization, a cultural alliance of Puerto Rico groups throughout the country.

All in all, like I said before, if nothing else, it has brought me to Hawaii three times. So, I'm really appreciative and I'm very happy to be here. I want to open the floor for any questions you might have, and whatever it is, I'll be happy to try to {answer}

Question: {inaudible}

I'm from Utuado. I was born in Puerto Rico in the center of the Island, in a very historic part of the country, and we migrated to New York when I was nine years old, in 1939. That was they still had signs up that said, "No Puerto Ricans need apply" and my father had a hard time getting a job although he was a certified public accountant in Puerto Rico. He had a very difficult time getting a job. He eventually got a job with Moore McCormack Lines, a shipping export lines for \$32 a week, which in those days, was not bad, but never as an accountant. He could never ply his trade here. He was just a clerk type.

But we've been here since '39, and I've never lived in Puerto Rico since then. I've gone back many times but I've never lived there, and I don't think

I would *want* to live there at this point, the way the country is right now. It's a very, very tough situation there.

Audience: Very high unemployment.

Extremely high unemployment. A lot of dissatisfaction with the way things are, and a lot of uneasiness, you know, so there's a lot of back and forth to the mainland. People don't know what to do, you know, it's really, really sad.

Any other questions?

Audience: {A question about El Museo del Barrio}

Oh, yeah. Museo del Barrio is probably our foremost art institution in the country. It is in Manhattan, New York, at 105th Street and 5th Avenue. It's right on the edge of the barrio, and it is presently the fifth largest in the city, and that's saying a lot because New York is loaded with museums. It is run by a Puerto Rican friend of mine who was born in New York. His name is Jack Agüeros, and they have been very closely associated with this project.

As a matter of fact, we're going to open a very large exhibit in November there, of probably something like three times the size of this exhibit. So, if you happen to be in New York around November, that's the place to go.

They have been extremely successful, and Jack, of course, the Director, is a very creative person, and he has brought a great deal of good art to the place, where today the museum is considered one of the top museums in the country.

We've exhibited in nine places. This is our ninth exhibit, and we've exhibited in museums in three places, and we've exhibited in a city hall in Harrisburg, which is a brand new city hall, and, nothing to compare with this, of course, nothing can compare with this, but it's really a very nice

building and we opened effectively. The day the city hall opened was when we opened that show. So, we inaugurated the city hall and that exhibit went very well.

We're continuing to exhibit and the interesting part about it is that the local organizations are on their own, with a little bit of help from us, applying for and receiving grants from the state's humanities and arts councils. That's important, because the National Endowment did not give us any money for exhibiting. We said we just want the money to develop the material, to go out there and get the interviews which are very important, the interviews and the photographs, and then since then the states have been picking up the cost of the exhibit. So, we're here as a result of a grant that was given to the Hawaiian Heritage Society in response to the Puerto Rican Heritage Association and United Puerto Rican Association of Hawaii.

So, it's really a very nice combination of people, and the fact that is supported by the state is very important, also. That was part of the idea at the beginning. Anything else?

Audience: Do you ever come to any parts of Canada?

Frank Espada: No, I have not. As a matter of fact, I was in Boston. That's as far north as I've gotten, and I wanted to get to Providence, Rhode Island, but I've not gotten to Canada. No.

Audience: They seem to be progressing favorably.

In what city is that?

Audience: Right across- like through Canada, Montreal...

Frank Espada: I want to talk to you about this afterwards because that's how I pick up information.

But I got a story to tell. I want to tell a story. I have a friend who went on a tour of the Far East, and he was in Bombay, and he went to a marketplace and there, of course, there are several snake charmers in the marketplace in Bombay, you know, with the Cobra snakes out of the basket, and all that. And he was watching this one when all of a sudden the snake did something that he wasn't supposed to do. So, the guy goes, "Cuno!", which is a Puerto Rican mild curse word. So, my friend and his wife, they were shocked, and he said, "Did you hear that?...Let's find out what's going on?" So, after the thing was over, they went over and said, "Excuse me, where are you from?" "I'm from Utuado, Puerto Rico. Where you from?"

This guy is the head of the humanities in Puerto Rico, so, I mean, I believe him, but I think he changes the story according to what town you're from. So, if you're from Arecibo, he'll say he was from Arecibo.

But, no, I have found also in my travels a very, very scattered kind of community. I was in Helsinki and I met a bartender, a guy from East Harlem, working as bartender in this small bar in Helsinki, and there's a small community in London. I picked up on a study that was made of Puerto Rican migration to London, and I said What is this about? So, I tracked it. And there's a small community of Puerto Ricans in London.

So, we're pretty much all over the world and I certainly hope that someday I'll be able to track all of them down all over the world, but for now, I think we have our work cut out for us here just doing the mainland and Hawaii, and I haven't gotten up to Alaska, either, see? I'm waiting for that two weeks in the summer that I can go up there. Yeah.

Audience: {inaudible}

Yes, I'm familiar with that community because the mayor of Miami, Maurice Ferré, who's Puerto Rican is married to one of the high society ladies from Caracas, and her mother is Puerto Rican. So, there's a very affluent Puerto Rican community there.

Audience: The people from Venezuela come to Puerto Rico...

Exactly. Exactly. It's very interesting stories all over the country.

Anything else before we thank you again?

Audience {inaudible}

I stressed what? I'm sorry.

Audience: {a question about the Spanish language}

Frank Espada: No, I think that overall the stress is not on the Spanish language. The language is very important to maintain the culture, but you can see it here. like, you know, it's important but it's still surviving in spite of the fact that the language has receded, and in many places in the second and third generations in the mainland, we have the situation where the children are speaking less and less Spanish. So, it is kind of a problem, but I think that it can be overcome. I think that the important thing, more important than even language, is the feeling that you are Puerto Rican, that you have a heritage, and that you have a culture, and you have roots, and all of those good things.

Audience: Do you think it will ever die out?

Frank Espada: Well, I do care. Sure, I do care because the language is an extremely important part of the culture, but we have to face reality, you now, that's where it's at, and I would like very much for communities to begin to think about what happens to a culture when you lose your language and so on, but as I said, the fact of the matter is that the culture is still alive in Hawaii, and the fact of the matter is that most people cannot - and people's first language is English, and we have to recognize that.

Yeah, and I'm not, you know, I'm not going to do like some of my brothers do and put people down. You know, I went through that, too.

Audience: {I couldn't speak...}

Frank Espada: [Yeah. That's right. More and more. Yeah, and I went through a period I married a haolie girl, and went through a period where I spoke very little Spanish, and I've had to relearn a lot of things, and I'm reading a great deal in Spanish now and so on. So, you know, you always have to keep at it, otherwise, you lose it.

Audience: {inaudible}

Frank Espada: Well, I think that they don't even consider themselves American, you know.

[00:23:54] Audience: [Audio Distortion 00:23:55]

No. Oh, yeah, I don't think they consider...only in terms that they're citizens and that they can be drafted. And many of us have been drafted and many of us have died in the war but...

I think that the attitude depends on what society you come from, what level of society you come from. The higher up you go, the more you are pro-American, the more you are pro, you know, and I think that's pretty much the case everywhere.

The working class and the poor people really couldn't care less. It's just a matter of survival, and so on, but there is a very strong developing middle class there, and most of them are pro-statehood, for the statehood. Yeah. Most of them are, but I think most people when you scratch them, they're really independents. They're really pro-independence, yeah.

That's always a live issue down there, and I just don't think it should be an issue. I don't think there should be any question about it, you know. We should be a sovereign nation, that's all. Period, and I don't think it should be an issue. I don't think it should even be put to a vote like they do every once in a while, you know. Yeah, I say this everywhere I go too, by the way.

If there are no other questions, I'd like to thank you again for coming and God bless you all and...

Audience: Thank you... Thank you...

[Applause]