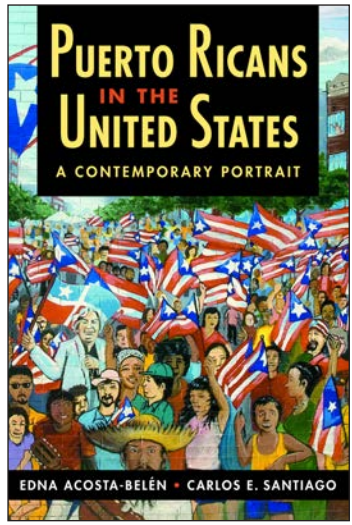
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Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait



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1

Introduction: Portrait of a Commuter Nation

The US Puerto Rican population has reached 3.4 million, according to the 2000 census, a figure rapidly approaching that of the island of Puerto Rico's 3.8 million inhabitants. Thus it is not unreasonable to predict that before 2010 the number of Puerto Ricans living in the United States will surpass the total island population (see Chapter 4). In fact, some of the most recent population estimates are being used to support the claim that this has already happened (see Falcón 2004). Although more than half (58 percent) of the Puerto Rican diaspora was born in the continental United States, this fact does not change the reality that a large portion of this population remains strongly connected to the island of Puerto Rico. Consequently, the lives of Puerto Ricans from both shores seem to be inexorably intertwined; and more than ever before, the Boricuas *"de la banda acá"* and *"de la banda allá"* (Puerto Ricans from this shore here and that shore there) described in a popular *plena* (a type of folk music),[1] are experiencing the diverse effects of reciprocal cultural and socioeconomic exchanges between the island and the US metropolis. They also experience those stemming from over one hundred years of a colonial relationship that lingers without any signs of a prompt resolution.

Puerto Rican migration to the North American continent grew out of specific political and socioeconomic conditions, whether it happened under Spanish colonial rule or under the US regime. After the US invasion of Puerto Rico, a result of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898,[2] contract labor to Hawaii, New York, and other US localities, as well as to the Dominican Republic and Cuba, became a colonial government strategy for dealing with the island's high rates of poverty and unemployment, and for satisfying the expanding North American industrial and agricultural sector's need for low-wage labor. Nonetheless, to this day, migration has never been acknowledged as part of any official policy either by US or Puerto Rican government officials.

The current association between the United States and Puerto Rico is the result of a set of economic and political circumstances that developed through-

out the nineteenth century, intensified during the twentieth, and still shape the present lives and conditions faced by the Puerto Rican people in both settings (see Chapters 2 and 3). This colonial relationship has brought forth both positive and negative consequences and changes for Puerto Ricans that continue to limit their possibilities of envisioning a future that responds to their national needs and self-interests rather than to those of the North American nation. In this sense, the situation of Puerto Ricans offers a compelling example of US government policies and actions in pursuit of its hegemonic ambition in the hemisphere that continue to influence the present. An obvious aftereffect of these policies and actions is the uninterrupted and overwhelming influx of Puerto Ricans and other Latino populations to the United States.

Latinos, with a population in the United States that had reached 41.3 million in 2005, are now the largest and fastest-growing minority group in US society. Puerto Ricans represent over 9 percent of the total Latino population, and more than double that percentage, if one combines the US-based Puerto Rican population with that of the island of Puerto Rico.[3] The dramatic growth in the number of US Latinos, which is projected to continue throughout the twenty-first century, is transforming the lives of almost every Latin American and Caribbean nationality—Puerto Ricans included—both in the United States and in their respective countries of origin. The Caribbeanization and Latinization of many major cities and localities are adding a new vitality to US society while challenging the melting pot or Anglo-conformity assimilation model, as new (im)migrant groups, most noticeably Latinos, are now more inclined than before to preserve their respective cultural and linguistic heritage, and are quite comfortable functioning in two cultures and languages. This pattern is common in many European countries, but was not so in the United States until the latter part of the twentieth century.

When describing Puerto Rican migration, scholars have often referred to "a commuter nation" (Rivera-Batiz and Santiago 1994; Torre, Vecchini, and Burgos 1994) or characterized it as a "revolving door" or "circular" migration (Tienda and Díaz 1987; Meléndez 1993b). All these characterizations share the basic notion not only that Puerto Rican migration is a continuous occurrence but also that there is a great deal of back-and-forth movement of Puerto Ricans between the island and the US metropolis. These descriptions also imply that some Puerto Ricans migrate to the United States but do not necessarily stay there permanently and eventually return to the island. The reality is that although migration might have been originally envisioned by government officials as a one-way movement of people settling in the United States that would alleviate Puerto Rico's severe unemployment and surplus labor problems, some workers saw this move as a temporary measure for economic survival. Many migrated to the United States to try their lot before deciding to uproot their families. Some returned to Puerto Rico, but a large number of those first-generation migrants established permanent residence in the United States.

There were those who kept alive the idea of sooner or later returning to the island, and some did and still do. But the research on return-migration patterns is not adequate to determine the magnitude of this incidence, and that research is already dated (Hernández Alvarez [1967] 1976; Meléndez 1993c). The studies that have shown that about two-thirds of Puerto Ricans who emigrate to the United States have lived there before and those returning to Puerto Rico also have lived there at some point have confirmed the presence of a circular migration pattern and of transnational processes than continue to fortify the connection between the island and the diaspora (Meléndez 1993c). Year after year, Puerto Rican workers in the blue-collar, professional, and business sectors, students, politicians, and others continue to move with relative ease between Puerto Rico and the United States in pursuit of their respective endeavors. It can be thoroughly documented that the great majority of Puerto Ricans who migrate settle and carry on productive lives in the United States, eventually producing new generations of US-born Puerto Ricans that develop or maintain different kinds of connections to Puerto Rico (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Migration, which is not by any means a fortuitous process, and the unique status of Puerto Ricans as colonial migrants contribute to the demographic conditions described above, which are projected to continue in the decades ahead. The current *"guagua aérea"* (air or flying bus)—a metaphor invented by renowned Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez to characterize the back and forth migratory movement between the island and the United States—is making it unavoidable for Puerto Ricans from both shores to ignore each other anymore.[4] Mass migration from Puerto Rico is closely linked to the advent of air travel (see Chapter 3). Therefore, the image of a commuter nation or a "nation on the move" (Duany 2002) is now more solidified, and this transnational migration pattern is influencing Puerto Rican lives in ways that make it no longer possible to ignore or downplay. Its socioeconomic, political, and cultural ramifications are ever present and are shaping discussions and decisions on major issues influencing the well-being and future of all Puerto Ricans. It is now quite common for US Puerto Ricans and Latinos serving in Congress to be sought out or lobbied by island politicians on issues related to federal funding for Puerto Rico's social programs, or to rally them to exert pressure on political issues that have a bearing on some aspect of island life. A case in point occurred when island Puerto Ricans were trying to get the US Navy to cease its bombing-training practices in Puerto Rico's island municipality of Vieques (see Chapter 8). Conversely, US Puerto Ricans have been making it clear that they want to be included in any future congressional discussions or decisions related to the process of seeking new alternatives to end the island's current colonial status.

Whether one refers to the "crossroads," "dilemmas," or "paradoxes" facing Puerto Ricans, these characterizations indicate that after more than a century of US domination, Puerto Rico remains "an unincorporated territory" of

the North American nation; neither a state of the federal union nor a sovereign nation. It is a remnant of colonialism, a nation still wedged in an ambivalent political condition that keeps it a considerable source of profits for US corporate capital. Puerto Rico, although not so much as in the past, is a major strategic military site for US armed forces. At the same time, the island maintains a large degree of economic dependence and reaps the benefits of its association with the most powerful country in the world. Among those benefits is US citizenship, which Puerto Ricans have held since 1917 as a result of the Jones Act, a congressional decree that, paradoxically, also gave island Puerto Ricans a larger degree of self-government (see Chapter 3). The fact that Puerto Ricans do not enjoy the same equal treatment or benefits held by other US citizens living in the fifty states of the union is negligible to some island residents, although many, especially those who oppose the current Commonwealth status, still regard their US citizenship as "second class." These feelings stem from the fact that island Puerto Ricans lack any representation in the US Congress besides the presence of a nonvoting "resident commissioner."[5] They do not vote in presidential or congressional elections, nor do they pay federal income taxes.[6] However, Puerto Rico receives more than $13 billion annually in federal transfers from the US Congress to support its social programs and infrastructure. Programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment compensation, and a few others are extended to the island as if it were another state of the union. Concomitantly, US corporations make incalculable profits and receive substantial federal tax benefits from their investments in Puerto Rico, and they exert an overwhelming control over the island's economy, which in reality is totally integrated into the US economy and thus, subject to its cyclical fluctuations and flows. All in all, Puerto Ricans frequently find themselves in the odd position of being treated by the US Congress—site of the ultimate decisionmaking power regarding island affairs—as an entity that is "foreign to the United States in a domestic sense."[7] What this paradoxical and ambiguous statement really means is that island Puerto Ricans are often treated like colonial subjects who happen to be the holders of US citizenship and who should be grateful for all the benevolence bestowed upon their nation by the United States but who are, in the end, culturally different foreigners and thus not considered "real" Americans.

Underlying these contradictions is a deep-rooted reluctance on the part of the US Congress to contemplate either future statehood for Puerto Rico—an idea that often seems as insurmountable or unpalatable to some North American government officials as the idea of independence—or, for that matter, any of the other possible alternatives for removing some of the colonial limitations and enhancing the current Commonwealth. This political status is officially known in Spanish as the Estado Libre Asociado (Associated Free State) (see Chapter 3), a clear misnomer when one considers that Puerto Rico is neither a free nor a sovereign nation, and Puerto Rican citizenship is not legally recog-

nized in an international context. The harsh reality is that resolving Puerto Rico's colonial "association" with the United States is an issue that has a long history of being rejected or tabled by the US Congress almost every time it comes up for discussion.[8] In addition, these same officials continue to pay lip service to the notion that "Puerto Ricans must make up their minds" about their future political status, and they do not miss an opportunity to boast about the nation's generosity toward Puerto Rico or decry the island's ceaseless dependence on federal funds. They also manage to downplay the fact that the US Congress, the only body empowered to change Puerto Rico's present condition, has historically shown little interest in doing so. Perhaps the only certainties about what is often described as Puerto Rico's "colonial dilemma" (Meléndez and Meléndez 1993) is that Puerto Ricans across the political spectrum have not been able to envision a future for their country without some kind of close relationship to the United States and that they continue to reaffirm passionately the integrity of their distinctive Caribbean/Latin American cultural connections and the Spanish language. Nor has the US government shown any compelling desire to support substantial changes in the island's current status. In the meantime, the influx of Puerto Rican migrants into the United States continues unabated, maintaining a commuter or circular migration pattern between the island and the colonial metropolis. This transnational flow daily brings large numbers of Puerto Rican workers to the United States searching for better economic and professional opportunities and simultaneously allows the generations of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the United States to keep up their connections with the country of their ancestors.

It is within the context outlined above that we approach this interdisciplinary portrait of Puerto Ricans in the United States as a commuter nation. This brief introduction is followed in Chapter 2 by an overview of the historical and cultural roots of the Puerto Rican people, with special emphasis on their colonial experience under both Spanish and US rule. A framework is provided for analyzing migration in terms of the dynamics of colonialism and capitalist development in Puerto Rico. Control of the island's economy by US capitalist interests intensified after the 1898 takeover, making the Puerto Rican worker part of a flexible and movable labor reserve to satisfy the needs of North American companies both in the island and the metropolis. Early on, migration became an official tool or "safety valve" to deal with Puerto Rico's widespread poverty and unemployment. Migration continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, especially after World War II, unleashing a process that is still a vital aspect of Puerto Rican life.

The bulk of Chapters 3 and 4 is dedicated to a discussion of the factors that contributed to the various Puerto Rican migratory waves to the United States, including a comparative analysis of different phases and patterns of migration. Chapter 3 deals with the early settlements, or *colonias,* established in New York City and other US localities during the second half of the nineteenth

century and first three decades of the twentieth, and Chapter 4 focuses on the postwar "Great Migration" of the 1940s and 1950s and the migratory patterns that have developed since then.

A demographic portrait of Puerto Ricans in the United States is provided in Chapter 5; census data from the year 2000 and other subsequent population reports are used to assess their current collective status. Relying on the most recent data, we analyze the changes that have occurred in the overall status of US Puerto Ricans, emphasizing population increases and geographic dispersion, labor force participation, income, as well as other socioeconomic and educational indicators. We also discuss some major differences in the demographic profile of US and island Puerto Ricans.

In Chapter 6 we provide a detailed account of the diaspora's social, political, and educational struggles during the civil rights era, inserting Puerto Ricans into a movement that is still largely identified with the African American population. We provide a profile of the most vital community organizations and of their different activities. Chapter 7 focuses on the diaspora's creativity in literature, music, and the arts, emphasizing Puerto Rican efforts to build a distinctive cultural tradition within the United States. The voices and images of writers and artists represent another dimension of the contemporary portrait of US Puerto Rican life that we provide in this book. Chapter 8 features concluding observations that highlight the uniqueness of the Puerto Rican migrant experience and the present dilemmas and future challenges still confronting Puerto Ricans on the island and within the diaspora.

The underlying thread of this book is twofold. First, in order to provide a contemporary portrait of Puerto Ricans in the United States, we document and analyze the historical, socioeconomic, and political factors that propel Puerto Ricans to migrate in large numbers. Second, we examine how Puerto Ricans adapt and forge their lives in the metropolis and the socioeconomic conditions and challenges they currently face. Due attention is given to the creative ways in which migrants adjust to a new environment, how they carry out their lives and create new communities, and how they contribute to US society, struggle for their rights, claim their cultural spaces, and negotiate their exposure to two different cultures and languages. Of special interest to the authors is the Puerto Rico–US back and forth transnational connection and how it shapes the construction of Puerto Rican identities and creates an enduring sense of cultural affirmation and resistance within the diaspora. US Puerto Rican writers and artists have found their own creative ways of asserting their differences from island Puerto Ricans by embracing new labels to identify themselves, such as Nuyoricans, Neoricans, or Diasporicans.[9] Others have just adopted the term "Boricua," which is a form of identification traditionally used by island Puerto Ricans. But unlike the popular term "Chicano," adopted in the 1960s by a large portion of the population of Mexican descent in the United States to dif-

ferentiate itself from Mexico's population and from more recent immigrants from that country, there is no adequate single term that has yet captured the imagination of most US Puerto Ricans in a similar way. Thus they continue to identify themselves primarily as Puerto Ricans, whether they are living on the island or in the metropolis.

The authors have attempted to address and carefully document the information and issues included in the various chapters. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of research that still needs to be done in order to achieve a more complete picture of the collective lives and endeavors of Puerto Rican migrants in the numerous US localities where they have settled and in new emerging communities.

In the early 1970s, Frank Bonilla, founder of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños in New York City, in his essay "Beyond Survival: *Por qué seguiremos siendo puertorriqueños*" (Why We Will Continue Being Puerto Rican, 1974), deplored the negative portrayals of Puerto Ricans perpetuated in most of the social science literature. He argued then for the need to break away from the barrage of recurrent and confining negative images and from the internalized inferiority complex that dominated the discourses about the Puerto Rican people, and which were by-products of their subordinate colonial experience. Bonilla also stressed the urgency for "an unprecedented job of psychological and cultural reconstitution and construction" in order for Puerto Ricans "to grow affirmatively as a culturally integrated and distinctive collectivity" (363–364). This process would make it possible for them to move beyond the mere notion of survival as a community and engage in developing "a collective vision that reaches out to Puerto Ricans everywhere" (370).

Bonilla was responding to basic shortcomings in the available scholarship on US Puerto Ricans, which was often shortsighted, misinformed, or full of problem-oriented or despairing representations. Little had been done to document the full history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, and with few exceptions, the majority of the studies about the diaspora were markedly skewed or recycled prevalent myths or stereotypes. But, above all, there was the recognition that a great divide existed between island and migrant communities, and that those Puerto Ricans living on the island were largely indifferent to or ignorant about the lives and struggles faced by their compatriots in the United States. These statements stand out even more if one considers that migration continues to be part of the normal course of life and an acceptable condition for the Puerto Rican people. Despite these assertions, there is no question that for a long time the separation between island and US communities was palpable, and islanders tended to perceive of the Puerto Rican migrant as poverty ridden, welfare dependent, and culturally deprived.

A great deal has changed since the 1970s thanks largely to the initiative and commitment of many US-based Puerto Rican Studies scholars and activists

who, like Frank Bonilla, challenged old assumptions, rectified omissions, and produced new scholarship that depicts more accurately the wide range of experiences and contributions of a primarily working-class Puerto Rican diaspora. Now a legitimate and fairly institutionalized academic endeavor, the field of Puerto Rican Studies was first conceptualized in the United States and was shaped by the experiences and struggles of Puerto Ricans as a marginalized ethnoracial minority within US society.[10] Part of the wider ethnic studies movement, and made possible by the advocacy and vision of intellectuals, students, and community activists, Puerto Rican Studies and other nontraditional fields made important strides in generating new scholarship and pedagogy that not only drew attention to the multiracial and multiethnic character of US society but also exposed some of the ethnocentric, racist, and sexist biases and normative assumptions of the traditional disciplines in their depictions of subaltern groups.

Thus, since the early 1970s, both US-based and island researchers have been developing a more nuanced understanding of the historical roots, power relations, and colonial dynamics that explain Puerto Rican migration, including an analysis of the transnational links that exist between island and US communities. In this book we explore many different aspects of this transnational circuit.

For many years, most studies of the Puerto Rican diaspora limited their scope to the larger and more established New York City community. But since the 1990s, geographic dispersion has become an important characteristic of Puerto Rican migration, and the New York population now represents about one-fourth of the total Puerto Rican population currently residing in the United States (see Chapter 4). This new reality is forcing scholars to pay more attention to the history and evolution of other communities, particularly the Puerto Rican presence in cities like Chicago (Padilla 1985), Hartford (Cruz 1998), Philadelphia (Whalen 2001), and the Hawaiian islands (Camacho Souza 1982, 1986; Rosario Natal 1983). Other growing communities, such as those in Orlando and Kissimmee, Florida (Duany and Matos-Rodríguez 2005), and several cities in Massachusetts and California are increasingly drawing the attention of researchers. We made an effort to synthesize some of the available research but also relied on primary sources of information, especially community newspapers and the records of several grassroots organizations largely overlooked in previous studies, as well as the most current US census data. At the same time, we hope that this study brings other researchers and readers new insights into the unfinished quest to advance knowledge about the realities, struggles, and enduring legacies of those Puerto Ricans who under a variety of circumstances made their lives away from their native island. These migrants are producing new generations that seek a more accurate understanding of their roots, the history of their respective communities, and their collective place in US society.

Notes

1, The expression "Boricuas de la banda allá, Boricuas de la banda acá" comes from the lyrics of the *plena* "A los boricuas ausentes" (To the Boricuas Who Left) popularized by César Concepción and his Orchestra. "Boricua," a word of Taino indigenous origin, was used during the Spanish colonial period to refer to the native inhabitants of Puerto Rico and is now a synonym for Puerto Rican.

2. Generally known as the Spanish-American War, some scholars have argued that when the United States invaded Cuba in 1898, there was a war going on between the Spanish and the Cubans that had started in 1895, thus making the name Spanish-Cuban-American War more appropriate. The United States declared war against Spain in retaliation for the explosion of the *Maine* at the port of Havana. The declaration of war was followed by the invasion of, first, Cuba and, a few months later, Puerto Rico. US intervention in the Spanish-Cuban War was magnified by the North American press's mythification of the role of Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders in defeating the Spanish and liberating Cuba. Thus the role of the Cuban rebel army was undermined in US official accounts of the war. We are in agreement with those scholars who argue that the name Spanish-Cuban-American War reflects more accurately the historical reality behind this conflict. This conflict is also often referred to as the War of 1898. See Philip Foner, *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of U.S. Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); and Louis A. Pérez, *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

3. The US census official definition of the Hispanic (Latino) population includes only the twenty nationalities from the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain, but excludes the Puerto Rican population residing in Puerto Rico. In other words, Puerto Ricans are not counted as part of the Hispanic population unless they reside in one of the fifty states.

4. See Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* (San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 1994).

5. A nonvoting "resident commissioner," elected by the voting residents of Puerto Rico, has represented Puerto Rico in the US Congress since 1900. Between 1993 and 1995, under the Democratic Party administration of President Bill Clinton, the resident commissioner was given voting rights in the US Congress. This practice was rescinded when the Republican Party won the congressional elections of 1994 and took control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

6. Although island Puerto Ricans are not allowed to vote in US presidential or congressional elections, presidential primaries are held in Puerto Rico and both Democratic and Republican candidates actively campaign on the island for party convention delegates to support their nominations.

7. The statement "foreign to the United States in a domestic sense" is part of the Foraker Act, passed by the US Congress in 1900, which ended two years of North American military occupation and established a civil government in Puerto Rico. See Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). A more detailed discussion appears in Chapter 3 of this book.

8. For a detailed account of the long history of political status referenda or plebiscite bills introduced in the US Congress since the 1960s, see Juan Manuel García Passalacqua and Carlos Rivera Lugo, *Puerto Rico y los Estados Unidos: El proceso de consulta y negociación de 1989 y 1990*, 2 vols. (Río Piedras, PR: Editorial Universitaria, 1990, 1991); Marco Antonio Rigau and Juan Manuel García Passalacqua, *República Asociada o Libre Asociación: Documentación de un debate* (San Juan: Edi-

torial Atlántico, 1987); and Carmen Gautier Mayoral, ed., *Poder y plebiscito: Puerto Rico en 1991* (Río Piedras, PR: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, University of Puerto Rico, 1990).

9. The term "Nuyorican" was adopted in the 1970s by New York–based Puerto Rican poets and artists. See Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, eds., *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975); and Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York: H. Holt, 1994). Since the 1970s, the terms "Nuyorican" and "Neorican" have been frequently used, especially by island Puerto Ricans, to refer to US Puerto Ricans. The term "Diasporican" was introduced by poet Mariposa Hernández in her poem "Ode to the Diasporican." In some of the literature about Puerto Rican migration the terms "mainland" and "stateside" Puerto Ricans are used to distinguish the population living in the United States from that of the island. In this book we refer to island and US Puerto Ricans to differentiate both populations. Whether hyphenated or not, the term "Puerto Rican Americans" has been used by some North American scholars to describe the migrant population, such as Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971). This term, however, did not have much appeal within the community and it is rarely used today. Some scholars argued that since Puerto Ricans are US citizens by birth the term was redundant. Others rejected it on political grounds as a sign of colonialism or cultural assimilation.

10. For example, the University at Albany's Puerto Rican Studies Program was initiated in 1970, and it became a full-fledged academic department offering a major in 1974. The department later evolved into the current Department of Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies (LACS).