

Boricuas en the Silver City?: (De)Constructing Diasporic
Puerto Rican Identity in Meriden, Connecticut

by

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La Borinqueña (The Puerto Rican National Anthem)

La tierra de Borinquén
donde he nacido yo,
es un jardín florido
de mágico fulgor.

Un cielo siempre nítido
le sirve de dosel
y dan arrullos plácidos
las olas a sus pies.

Cuando a sus playas llegó Colón;
Exclamó lleno de admiración;
"Oh!, oh!, oh!, esta es la linda
tierra que busco yo".

Es Borinquén la hija,
la hija del mar y el sol,
del mar y el sol¹.

Escrito por Manuel Fernández Juncos (1846-1928)

¹National Anthem, "La Borinqueña," <http://www.nationalanthems.info/pr.htm> (accessed December 20, 2012).

Introducción:

Translation:

“The Land of Borinquen/where I have been born./ It is a florid garden of magical brilliance./ A sky always clean/serves as a canopy./ And placid lullabies are given/by the waves at her feet./ When at her beaches Columbus arrived,/he exclaimed full of admiration:/Oh! Oh! Oh!/ This is the beautiful land, that I seek./ It is Borinquen the daughter, the daughter of the sea and the sun./ of the sea and the sun,/of the sea and the sun,/of the sea and the sun,/of the sea and the sun,²”

...

“La Borinqueña,” speaks to the stunning natural beauty of Borinquen, now known as Puerto Rico, by lightly referring to the first colonial encounter that would forever change its course of history and come to redefine its Boricua/Taino People as Puerto Ricans. Whether Christopher Columbus truly exclaimed in admiration as he arrived onto the island is irrelevant, but his mere mention in the national anthem acknowledges a moment of rupture between the pre-colonial times and the two colonial administrations Puerto Rico would undergo in the following 500 years. Despite its recognition of an iconic colonial figure, the national anthem seems to fiercely reject its colonial name and only uses its pre-colonial name, actively resisting multiple types of Colonialisms and their legacies.³ Apparently unwilling to accept the island’s longstanding and continuous

² Magaly Rivera, “La Borinqueña,” <http://www.topuertorico.org/bori.shtml> (accessed December 20, 2012). Rivera runs a website called ‘Welcome to Puerto Rico’ where she provides national facts and information about Puerto Rico including an English translation of the Puerto Rican national anthem.

³ By multiple forms of Colonialisms and their legacies, I am referring to the Spanish colonization of the Americas, which in Puerto Rico consisted of land conquest, genocidal actions against Indigenous Taino

colonial possession status, “La Borinqueña” outright claims that Borinquen and her people belong only to the Sea and Sun. Thus, del Mar y el Sol I am.

Twenty-First Century Boricua:

Born in the late twentieth century and on the longest-existing, internationally recognized colony of the New World, Puerto Rico, I inherited a world entangled within Colonialism’s active legacies.⁴ And although Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, is my birthplace, it is not my hometown. Puerto Rico is not ‘Home’ to me because my family left the Island only a few months after my birth. Flying into New York City, like millions of other Puerto Ricans as early as the 1860’s and still do today, my family permanently relocated outside of Puerto Rico. Unlike the majority of Puerto Ricans, however, for my parents and I New York City was only a stopover; we took a cab to Meriden, Connecticut, where

Peoples in Borinquen, and enslavement of imported African slaves. Additionally, I am also acknowledging multiple types American Colonialisms from extractive colonialism to a Cold War Showcase Colonialism and more recently Neocolonialism, which includes the mass removal of federal funding and reinforcement of economic dependency (do you have a reference here for this understanding of Neocolonialism?).

⁴ Active legacies refers to what Puerto Rican Sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel defines as ‘Coloniality of Power’: “a crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor, subaltern group political strategies, and Third World migrants’ inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities.” Grosfoguel highlights the capitalist, racial/ethnic, gender and sexuality global hierarchy that perpetuates global oppressions and modifies them into new forms to accommodate the hegemonic global power of the United States. Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley, CA): University of California Press, 2003), 4.

we settled permanently. Due to the City's industrial background, my parents joined a growing wave of Puerto Ricans who had chosen to relocate here because non-skilled/semi-skilled work was readily available at that time. Puerto Rico and Meriden may be nearly 1,700 miles away from each other, but since the mid-twentieth century one can say that Puerto Rico lives deeply and loudly within this mainland city through its strong Boricua community.

Meriden is Home to me for a variety of reasons. Primarily, it is the place where *I* grew up; the place *I know best* and is *most familiar to me*. From South Meriden to Jacobys on the East side to Downtown Meriden in the middle to West Fort on the West Side, *Meriden is all I know*.

Meriden is also where my closest and most beloved family members reside. It is these people who have helped shape me, in mind and perspective. Growing up with a Puerto Rican father and a Nicaraguan mother provided me the unique experience of belonging to two different lineages. Both these lineages have parallels but also significant historical differences that have had longstanding consequences for both countries and that allowed me to have multiple, sometimes incongruous experiences within larger dominant

form of oppression that is Colonialism⁵ while Nicaragua is a sovereign nation-state that seems to be enthralled within Neocolonialism, Puerto Rico has continuously been subjugated as a contemporary colony.

Growing up in Meriden I had a very specific type of Puerto Rican experience, a mainland experience, which is to say, a life in diaspora. It was an experience that increasingly called into question the relationship between the Mainland and the Island.

As a child, I often wondered if Puerto Rico was part of the United States, was it a state?

In the first years of elementary school, my teachers introduced the word “territory” to my vocabulary. In their words, Puerto Rico was a “territory” of the United States, not a State.⁶ My young mind wondered what it meant to be a “territory.” From early on, it was

⁵ Steve J. Stern’s “Fedralism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean,” draws attention to the Spanish settlers’ various economic handlings of its empire during the Spanish Colonization during the 16th and 17th centuries in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Central and South America, the Spanish used local indigenous populations as their workforce in the mining expeditions, which were more common in those areas than in the Caribbean. In the Caribbean, the Spanish implemented a plantation-economy with imported African slaves because the indigenous populations were rapidly declining and unable to be retained as a steady workforce. Thus, Spanish Colonialism was multi-faceted and often adapted to the conditions in the periphery, Latin America and the Caribbean, to better benefit the core, the Spanish Kingdom.

⁶ In this instance, I am playing with State as in a nation-state that may or may not exercise its sovereignty, depending on its political status and clout in a global context, and state as the political (federal) entity forming part of the United States. Additionally, I do so to call attention to the extreme political ambiguity the United States’ territories all have in common due to the particular and often contradictory handling of

evident Puerto Rico was somehow connected to the United States but not in the same way as the rest of the continental states. Was I American? I was undeniably Puerto Rican, but was I American?

In my eighteen years of residence in Meriden, Puerto Rican-ness and American-ness always seemed to be in tension. At home, Spanish was the dominant language. At school, English was the dominant and sometimes the only language. Somehow I managed to go through two years of public education without speaking or learning much English. It was not until my first grade teacher picked on me to read aloud that anybody realized my tongue only still spoke Spanish. In the next ten years of public education that followed, my ears constantly heard phrases like “Only English, this is America,” “Spanish at home, English at school,” and “Stop talking that gibberish!”

Beyond my bilingualism, my name itself often set me apart from my white classmates in Meriden’s heavily racialized school system.⁷ Most teachers seemed unable to pronounce my three-letter name, Luz. In reality most teachers failed to realize that Luz

all territories individually by the U.S. Supreme Court, a powerful judicial entity that has often created political precedents in the best interest of the United States federal government.

⁷ In my experience, Latino and Black students were tracked out into lower level courses at an early age. By high school, I was often one out of two or three Latino and Black students in my Honor courses when Latino and Black students make up nearly three-fifths of the student population. School Map, “Orville H. Platt, High School,” <http://www.schoolmap.org/School/Orville-H-Platt-High-School> (accessed December 20, 2012).

was not even my full name. Luz Marian is my true first name. My mother never anticipated leaving Puerto Rico, so she never put the apparently necessary hyphen required for two-part first names in the U.S. With all these tense experiences a constant aspect of my daily life, by the time my Wesleyan tenure began, I recognized Puerto Ricanness and Americanness were deeply connected but was still unsure of how and why.

Puerto Rico in Connecticut:

As I said earlier, Puerto Rico and Meriden may be nearly 1,700 miles away from each other, but Puerto Rico lives deeply and loudly within this mainland city *and* Connecticut as a whole. Ruth Glasser's *Aqui me Quedo: Puerto Ricans in Connecticut* informs us that by 1990, "Connecticut [had] the sixth-largest Puerto Rican population in the United States.... In 1990, there were at least 146,842 Puerto Ricans in Connecticut, or 4.5 percent of the population."⁸ Connecticut's Latino population has doubled within the last twenty years from 6.5 to 13 percent.⁹ As the fastest growing population in the state, the Latino population is only expected to continue expanding.¹⁰ Given the United States' economic hardship—which impacts the Island with ever higher unemployment rates and

⁸ Ruth Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo: Puerto Ricans in Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Connecticut Humanities Council 1997), 11.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County Quickfacts (Meriden, Connecticut)," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09/0946450.html> (accessed April 15th, 2012).

¹⁰ Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo*, 21.

currently the highest rate in the nation¹¹—it is possible more Puerto Ricans will continue migrating, over to the mainland, to places like Connecticut because of the established Puerto Rican enclaves throughout the state.¹² Puerto Rican migration to the mainland may be due to unfortunate economic reasons, but, as was the case throughout the second half of the twentieth century, established Puerto Rican communities will provide adequate help and resources to those who choose to remain transnational and those who decide to settle permanently. Selfishly, I wait happily for the Puerto Ricans that will come to settle in Meriden and keep Puerto Rico living loudly in the Silver City¹³.

At Wesleyan, I felt the tension between my Puerto Ricanness and Americanness grow as there were considerably less Latinos around me. Not only is the Latino community at Wesleyan estimated to be only ten percent of approximately 3,000-students¹⁴, but it is predominately Dominican. My eyes could hardly believe the lack of

¹¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, “State Unemployment Rates Mixed in December 2012,” <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/labor/state-unemployment-update.aspx> (accessed December 20th, 2012).

¹² Glasser writes, “When the United States was in the Great Depression of the 1930’s, as one Puerto Rican said, his island suffered a “depression and a half.” Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo*, 45. Given this quote and the knowledge Puerto Rican migration is directly connected to the economic issues on the mainland, it would be unsurprising if Puerto Rican migration were to increase in the upcoming years due to the 2008 Global recession.

¹³ Meriden is known as the Silver City because of its mass production of silver during War World II.

¹⁴ Wesleyan University, “Wesleyan at a Glance,” <http://www.wesleyan.edu/about/profile.html> (accessed December 20, 2012).

Puerto Ricans on campus. How was it possible, with such a large Puerto Rican population ten miles up the road, Wesleyan would only have a handful of Puerto Ricans as students on campus? In time, I would learn that the term “territory” was a euphemism for colony and that Puerto Ricans had long been (negatively) racialized on the mainland. In a racialized American society, where institutionalized racism is in place and permeates almost all spheres of life, it was no wonder there was such a small Puerto Rican population within the Wesleyan Latino community, especially considering Connecticut has the largest achievement gap between white and Black and Latino students.

Puerto Ricanness and Americanness were, then, connected through a colonial relationship. In an empire-building move, the United States invaded Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War in 1898.¹⁵ Determined to show its potential global force, the U.S. used its newly modernized Navy to defeat the Spanish forces. Through the Paris Treaty of 1898, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the U.S. as a war cession.¹⁶ Believing that the

¹⁵ The Spanish-American War is also known as the Spanish-Cuban-American War. Personally, I think this alternate name is more historically accurate because the Spanish-American War was originally about Cuban Independence and the Spanish bombing of a U.S. naval ship in a Cuban port. After this incident, the United States declared war on the Spanish Kingdom and entered the conflict between Spain and Cuba. In the Treaty of Paris of 1898, Spain recognized Cuban Independence while ceding its territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands) to the United States.

¹⁶ Yale Law School: Lillian Goldman Law Library, 2008 The Avalon Project, “Treaty of Peace between the United States and Spain; December 10, 1898,” http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp (accessed March 21, 2011.)

U.S.'s 'anti-imperialist' ideals applied to both its domestic *and* foreign politics, Puerto Ricans welcomed American soldiers during the invasion.¹⁷ Unfortunately, it appears that the U.S. had been anti-imperialist only when it came to their colonial relationship with Great Britain, and Puerto Rico remained as a colony after 1898 until present-day; the only way its status changed later was through the colonial administration overseeing the Island.

Within twenty years of the American colonial takeover, the U.S. Federal Government granted Puerto Ricans American Citizenship under the Jones Act of 1917.¹⁸ But does American citizenship make one American, especially considering it was granted largely to benefit the colonial administration's business endeavors?¹⁹ And what kind of citizenship is that of residents of an American "territory," both a part and not a part of the nation?

Final Introductory Thoughts:

¹⁷ Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 116.

¹⁸ Lorrin Thomas, "How They Ignore Our Rights as American Citizens: Puerto Rican Migrants and the Politics of Citizenship in the New Deal Era," *Latino Studies* 2 (July 2004); 141.

¹⁹ José D. Román's "Trying to Fit an Oval Shaped Island into a Square Constitution: Arguments for Puerto Rican Statehood," (2002) refers to the *Insular Cases*, which included a series of Supreme Court Cases where the Court often ruled in favor of the United States' corporate interests and set legal precedents that ensured a legal ambiguous relationships between the United States and Puerto Rico.

As a local Meridenite studying at Wesleyan University, this essay was inspired by my desire to integrate Home and Wesleyan. Without Meriden, my world perspective would surely be different. Meriden, demographically an anomalous city amongst its surrounding cities, has provided an extremely unique experience²⁰, because of its large Latino population and more industrial/factorial work force. It is where all my insights and reflections about institutions such as racism and classism are rooted. As a Wesleyan student, my education has been heavily concentrated on studying and analyzing social constructions such as ‘Race’ and ‘Class’ within an American context. Both of these worlds have come together to help cultivate and deepen my world perspective about my Puerto Ricanness; my (otherized) Americanness; and my socioeconomic status amongst several other components of my multi-faceted identity.

²⁰ Some of the surrounding areas include Berlin, Middletown, Wallingford, Cheshire and Durham. In Berlin (2011), the total population was approximately 19, 966 with the Latino population only constituting about 3.5% of the total population. Berlin’s total population is about 95% white. In Cheshire (2010), the total population was approximately 5,786 with the Latino population only constituting about 3.3% of the total population. Cheshire’s total population is about 89% white. In Durham (2011), the total population is approximately 7, 416 with the Latino population only constituting about 2.3% of the total population. Durham’s total population is about 96.3% white. In Middletown (2010), the total population was approximately 47, 648 with the Latino population only constituting about 8.3% of the total population. Middletown’s total population is about 71.6% white. In Wallingford (2010), the total population was approximately 18, 209 with the Latino population only constituting 14.3% of the total population. Wallingford’s total population is about 79.2% white. Hence, Meriden’s Latino population (28.9%) is considerably larger than the surrounding areas as well as its white population (58.8%), which is notably smaller than its surrounding homogenous cities and towns.

My points of entry to the topics of Puerto Ricans' American identity in Meriden are two Puerto Rican institutions in Meriden: Casa Boricua de Meriden, Inc., a Puerto Rican social service agency²¹ established in 1977; and the annual Puerto Rican Festival, which began to take place in the city in 1967. Through ethnographic and archival research about these two central establishments, I explore the larger themes of: (1) Connecticut as a Host/Home state for Puerto Ricans; (2) if Casa Boricua is a place that fosters Puerto Rican social and economic empowerment; and (3) if the Puerto Rican Festival acts as a vehicle for cultural affirmation. The Puerto Rican Diaspora is a complex twenty-first phenomenon and one of the world's youngest diasporas, only recognized officially in 2008²² after more than a century of sustained Puerto Rican out migration. Thus, the Puerto Rican Diaspora has no single identity attached to it; rather it is home to a multiplicity of diasporic identities that are directly affected by the localities that host and eventually become known as 'Home' to the ever-expanding Puerto Rican

²¹ Although the local newspaper often refers to Casa as a community service agency, Magali Kupfer and her staff strictly refer to it as a social service agency, because they have a funding and legal status only as a social service agency.

²² Sonia G. Collazo, Camillie L. Ryan, Kurt J. Bauman and U. S. Census Bureau: Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, "Profile of the Puerto Rican Population in the United States and Puerto Rico: 2008," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America in Dallas, TX, April 15-17, 2010), 1-2.

nation with more than four million Puerto Ricans living on the mainland and only 3.8 million on the Island itself²³.

I hope that this essay serves as a platform for my voice as a first-generation, low income Queer Latina to speak to my experiences and make sense of the world around me. I also hope it serves as a gesture of appreciation to the Puerto Rican and greater Latino Meriden community for creating a space within Meriden for Puerto Rican (and more generally Latino) empowerment and cultural affirmation. Undeniably, our community is a work in progress, but it is tackling issues of race, (American and cultural) citizenship, and integration head on with initiatives like the mass public education reform that is currently underway in the hopes of elevating graduation rates amongst its Black and Latino students. On the Wesleyan side of it all, this essay could not have come into existence without the help of various departments such as the Wesleyan Anthropology Department and the Ronald E. McNair Program. Lastly, as a Diasporic Puerto Rican, I only seek to speak to my experiences as a mainland-raised Puerto Rican woman and show that the Puerto Rican diaspora is just as diverse as its Rainbow people.²⁴

²³ Collazo, Ryan, Bauman and U. S. Census Bureau: Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, "Profile of the Puerto Rican Population in the United States and Puerto Rico," 1-2.

²⁴ Clara Rodriguez's fourth chapter in *Puerto Ricans Born in the U.S.A.*, "Rainbow people," speaks to racial heterogeneity as "an integral factor of Puerto Rican life," which undermines the mainland's highly dichotomized racial system of Black/White and often pressured Puerto Ricans to racially identify in ways

Colonial Blurring: Connecticut, a Host State or Homeland?

Puerto Rican Colonial Experience: On/Off Island Example

Since its acquisition of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Federal Government has worked exhaustively to define its relationship with the territory. Through a series of court rulings,²⁵ the U.S. federal government has established a difference between the following things: (1) Natural rights and Artificial rights; (2) States and Territories; (3) Incorporated and Unincorporated territories and: (4) Qualified and Unqualified Citizenry. Under its commonwealth status, Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory housing nearly four million citizens solely entitled to natural rights²⁶. In the U.S. federal government's extension of only natural rights, Puerto Ricans on the Island are considered an unqualified citizenry and cannot participate in presidential elections. But on the mainland, Puerto Ricans residing in *any state* are entitled to qualified citizenry because they live in

they had never done so before coming to the United States. Rodriguez discusses the difference in racial understandings on the mainland and the Island. Clara Rodriguez, *Puerto Ricans Born in the U.S.A.* (San Francisco, CA: Westview Press, Inc., 1991), 49-77.

²⁵ José D. Román, "Trying to Fit an Oval Shaped Island into a Square Constitution: Arguments for Puerto Rican Statehood." *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 29 (April 2002): 1681-1713.

²⁶ Román defines 'Natural rights': "include freedom of religion, speech, and the press; the right to personal liberty, property, due process, equal protection, and free access to courts; immunities from unreasonable searches and seizures, cruel and unusual punishments, and other immunities that are indispensable to a free government." Roman, "Trying to Fit an Oval Shaped Island into a Square Constitution," 1687.

a state, not a territory, and therefore have access to both natural rights *and* artificial rights.

Unlike its territories, states have the constitutional power to grant their citizens voting rights. In this simple example, we can see how, depending on their locality alone, Puerto Ricans can experience vastly different types of citizenship.

On the mainland, Puerto Ricans can vote, a right made possible via American citizenship and the out-migration that citizenship allows to occur. Yet on the mainland, Puerto Ricans certainly experience different types of second-class citizenship as well.

Ruth Glasser writes,

“Other pioneering migrants had experiences of discrimination and misunderstanding with members of different ethnic groups. Migrants complained particularly of the difficulties of finding an apartment to rent. When they did find apartments, Puerto Ricans were frequently charged high rents for poor quality housing. ... Sometimes not just apartments or stores but whole neighborhoods were forbidden territory.... Problems were particularly severe between early Puerto Rican male migrants and the police. Because of discrimination and their newness to the area, the early settlers had few gathering places to call their own.”²⁷

Given these circumstances, Puerto Ricans on the mainland were forced to forge their own spaces. In Meriden, the Puerto Rican community established their presence through several public spaces and forums such as Casa Boricua, the Puerto Rican Festival, St. Rose de Lima Parish, and a handful of Puerto Rican restaurants. Through creativity and

²⁷ Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo*, 97-99.

innovation, Meriden's Puerto Ricans continue to keep Puerto Rico alive loudly and unapologetically within the city. Hence, Puerto Ricanness persists in Meriden despite the historical adversity that wished to diminish its visible presence by the racialization of space across the City. Puerto Rican institutions such as Casa and the annual Puerto Rican Festival undermine that racialization through their locations. Casa is located on Colony Street, a street formerly known for its central role as Downtown Meriden. Colony street used to be home to the local Post office and nearly other pivotal local buildings such as City Hall, the Meriden Library and the Record Journal's offices. As for Hubbard Park and the Puerto Rican Festival, the Park is still located in a predominately white area of the City and with local police officers involved in traffic regulation, the surrounding residents only seem to be apprehensive about the temporary loss of parking spots. But in daily life in Meriden, there are enclaves of Latinos such as the Mills Project, Chamberlain Heights, Yale Acres, and my own hub of parallel and perpendicular streets of about six streets from South First to South Fourth Street.

Forced Out to the Mainland:

American citizenship may have granted Puerto Ricans the privilege to travel to the mainland freely. But it would be historically inaccurate to say Puerto Ricans had not left the Island for the mainland or other parts of the world before 1917. Since the

nineteenth century, Puerto Ricans have travelled to New England and other locales such as Hawaii. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most Puerto Rican migration was directly related to agricultural labor needs in the previously stated areas.²⁸ Conditions on the Island due to American colonialism helped propel Puerto Rican migration into existence. Historian Carmen Teresa Whalen writes,

The U.S. occupation radically transformed Puerto Rico's economy. The United States sought to incorporate Puerto Rico into U.S. trade circuits, and to foster U.S. investment in Puerto Rico, by removing obstacles and creating an infrastructure. The Foraker Act enabled these changes, by prohibiting Puerto Rico from negotiating treaties with other countries or determining its own tariffs, by making Puerto Rico part of the U.S. monetary system, and by requiring that all goods be transported in U.S.-owned shipping. Although, the act limited corporations to owning less than 500 acres, this provision was not enforced.²⁹

American colonialism rendered the Puerto Rican economy subservient and entirely dependent on that of the United States. The Foraker Act mentioned above worked to empower U.S. corporations while simultaneously pushing Puerto Ricans off their lands, and decreasing employment opportunities on the Island.

Whalen also writes,

Puerto Rico's primary crop shifted from coffee to tobacco and especially sugar. U.S. corporations invested in tobacco manufacturing, U.S. policy provided tariff protection for Puerto Rico's tobacco, and the industry prospered. It was sugar, however, that came to

²⁸ Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo*, 25-105.

²⁹ Carmen Teresa Whalen, "Colonialism, Citizenship and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora: An Introduction," in *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vásquez-Hernández (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005). *Whalen* 6-7

dominate the economy. U.S. sugar corporations purchased large tracts of land and invested heavily in huge grinding mills or *centrales*. U.S. policy provided a privileged and sheltered market for Puerto Rico's sugar. Puerto Rico became a classic monoculture colony, producing one crop, for export, to one market. Land concentration and an economy based on cash crops reduced household's abilities to meet their subsistence needs. ... Instead of the economic hardships wrought by U.S. policies and investments, U.S. policy makers defined Puerto Rico's problem as "over-population."³⁰

American Colonialism has taken multiple forms on the Island. At its very beginnings, it was a extractive. With corporations looking to maximize their profits while keeping wages low, Puerto Rico served as the perfect place to do so, because its political status rendered the Puerto Rican people voiceless. By turning the rising unemployment rates into an "over-population" issue, policy makers allowed for U.S. corporations to continue to profit and encouraged out-migration to the United States. In doing so, the Puerto Rican people were blamed for "their" economic misfortune rather than the United State's corporate greed and its direct negative impact upon local Puerto Rican economies.

In fact, a majority of Connecticut's first Puerto Rican immigrants arrived as male seasonal agricultural workers on the mainland, mostly working in the tobacco industry during April until October. This mainland seasonal work occurred during *Tiempo muerto* on the Island, the off-season for the sugar industry.³¹ Afterwards, these seasonal migrants would return to Puerto Rico and continue doing seasonal agricultural work on the Island.

³⁰ Whalen, "Colonialism, Citizenship and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora", 6-7.

³¹ Whalen, "Colonialism, Citizenship and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora", 16.

According to Ruth Glasser, these pioneering migrants suffered from more than just homesickness for their homeland. While residing in their host state, they had to endure sub-par labor conditions, from indecent wages to inadequate living conditions. Yet, not all Puerto Rican migrant workers returned to Puerto Rico. Some stayed in the state where they worked. Forming budding communities in places like Bridgeport, Hartford, and eventually smaller urban cities like Meriden.

Casa Boricua de Meriden, Inc.: Puerto Rican Empowerment

For the most part, Meriden's Puerto Rican community comes from Aguada, Puerto Rico.³² Arriving as early as 1923 or 1924, the first Puerto Rican settlers were Jesusa and Miguel Fernández, a couple. At first the couple lived in West Virginia but soon moved upon seeing a job ad for New Departure, a ball bearings factory in Meriden, Connecticut. After getting settled, the couple wrote back to their families in Naguabo, Puerto Rico.³³ Within a few years, several other family members had moved to Meriden. Within the next twenty years, two other families established roots in Meriden, the Traverso's and Pereyo's.³⁴ Puerto Rican migration increased greatly post-World War II and once again during the late 1980's and early 1990's. Meriden may have been hosting,

³² Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo*, 22.

³³ Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo*, 33.

³⁴ Joyce Cohen and Rita Sola, "Puerto Ricans Celebrate," *The Record-Journal*, July 11, 1994, 1, 4.

slowly becoming home, to its budding Puerto Rican community, but Casa Boricua was not established until 1977.

Casa Boricua de Meriden is located on 204 Colony Street. It is located in a historically important section of Meriden, Downtown. Downtown Meriden is approximately at the center of the city. It is where West Main Street and East Main Street meet and where most people would say they are about to cross into the other side of Meriden (from West to East or from East to West). Furthermore, Downtown Meriden is the formal home to the local post office, which is the reason I first noticed Casa as a child. Presently, the relocation of the local post office has resulted in a small-scale desertion of Downtown. If it were not for the Highway exits located near it, I am not sure how often I would personally drive in Downtown Meriden. It is now home to Casa and a few other small businesses including my godfather's Puerto Rican bakery and the local Boys and Girls Club.

Beyond that, Casa has been under the continuous thirty-odd year leadership of Magali Kupfer. Kupfer is an elderly woman in her seventies now. She was one of the many people that organized to ensure the establishment and incorporation of Casa. Initially, she never intended to work at Casa for more than a year. In fact, the first year she worked at Casa, it was non-paid. Magali did not necessarily mind the lack of pay, but

she also only expected to volunteer for a year. After her first year, she was offered a humble salary and she accepted. When we first started interviewing, she had worked at Casa for 31 years. Kupfer is a short, light-skinned, brown haired woman who struggles to walk around her room due to the detrimental effects of arthritis. It is her reduced ability to move that has prompted the board to push Magali to retire. Throughout our interviews, she did not seem to mind this suggestion and rather embraced it, because in her tenure she had seen hardship too many times to count. By the end of this year, Magali Kupfer will be known as the *former* Casa executive director. Indeed, her unexpected thirty-one Casa tenure is beyond commendable, it is inspiring and reflective of how a simple idea can grow to concrete reality and true social change through empowerment of the People.

Through several interviews with Magali Kupfer, the current executive director of Casa Boricua, several things became evident. Meriden's Puerto Rican community arrived at time when Meriden was still newly home to various European ethnic groups. Kupfer has been quoted several times saying, "Meriden was immigrants all over. Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Polish."³⁵ Yet, Puerto Ricans are not immigrants but rather once-temporary but now permanent migrants, people who travel to do seasonal work, a complicated notion in relation to Puerto Rican migration since it is possible through the

³⁵ Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo*, 186.

existing colonial relationship with the United States, facilitating the permanent relocation of a substantial number of Puerto Ricans. Unlike its ethnic counterparts, Meriden's Puerto Ricans (and its greater Latino community) have never been integrated successfully within the greater city due to their language and culture differences, and the difficulties of classifying them within dominant mainland racial categories. Perhaps, American integration is not truly about actual integration, a world where many worlds fit as Mexico's Zapatistas would say, but rather guided towards assimilation into what is largely a hierarchal society. Undeniably, American society is enmeshed within a global racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness, and due to their complex history, Puerto Ricans are a mixed people whose identities undermine the racial categories of 'white' and 'black'. Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel writes,

Puerto Rican migrants in the United States experience the effects of racism as a hegemonic imaginary of the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. The Puerto Rican experience illustrates how racial/colonial ideologies have not been eradicated from metropolitan centers, which remain in grave need of sociohistorical decolonization.³⁶

Within American society, white European ethnics have not necessarily integrated into the greater Euro-American society; rather one could argue that they have undergone a process of assimilation facilitated by skin color, perceived "Whiteness," adoption of the English language, and the possible loss of native non-English language(s).

³⁶ Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 2.

In talking with Kupfer, I learned that Meriden's Puerto Ricans faced blatant racism in the form of economic and housing discrimination. Casa Boricua rose out of the collective perception that the community needed to help *disadvantaged* Puerto Ricans.

Casa, as Magali affectionately calls it, intended:

“to service as a voice for disadvantaged individuals in the entire Puerto Rican and Hispanic Community of Greater Meriden. To develop and furnish services to the entire Puerto Rican and Hispanic Community of Greater Meriden. To promote and motivate activities for the educational, economic, health, recreational and social progress of Puerto Rican and Hispanic community of Greater Meriden. To coordinate activities with other federal, state, and local agencies, soliciting from them economic cooperation and technical assistance for the benefit of the? Puerto Rican and Hispanic Community within Greater Meriden. To investigate sources and obtain the necessary funds for the realization of their purposes. To engage in any lawful act or activity necessary to promote or effectuate the above list of purposes and activities of the corporation.³⁷

Throughout our several interviews, Kupfer spoke to the various ways Casa has committed itself to helping Meriden's Puerto Ricans be self-reliant. According to Kupfer, the most prevalent issue facing Puerto Ricans and the larger Latino community is the “language barrier.”

Luz: What type of discrimination were people facing?

Magali: When they came here?

L: Yes.

M: They wouldn't rent them an apartment because they were Puerto Ricans. Was that true or not? I don't know. But that's what they felt. And I would say, ‘Do you have the security deposit?’ You know, they'd say, ‘They didn't ask for it.’ You know, but they had the rent money cause back then security wasn't [a problem] in the beginning. It wasn't a

³⁷ Casa Boricua de Meriden Inc., “Personal Policies,” Revised 2004, Meriden, Connecticut.

demand, it came after. And they felt, the Gringos, as they call them, wouldn't rent to them. Um, jobs. They would get fired. And I found out that it really wasn't discrimination-there was discrimination, but for some of them, let's say you work at a store or something or you own a factory and you hire people and you're trying to help them. And these people don't go to work because they are sick, but they don't know the law. You gotta call in. You gotta let them know, you gotta go see the doctor. And they would be fired, because of that. And they would come here and say there were being discriminated against; that they were being fired because they were Latinos. When I would investigate, it was because they were out four days and never called in or checked in! Okay, why didn't they? Number one: they didn't know they could. Number two: they didn't have phones. So you know when you go up to the Gringos and explain it, and they'd give them a second chance. And they would tell us, you know, tell them they have to call. Tell them, you know, this is the phone number. So we would give all that education to them. So that way they wouldn't be fired. So, it wasn't discrimination, it was because our people weren't following through. But you know, in a lot of cases, people look at you funny and stuff like that. But I think we brought it upon ourselves too. We couldn't speak the language so we spoke Spanish, so people look at you strange. You're in America, why are you speaking Spanish? You know, and I would answer that, it's my language and I am not going to let anyone take it away from me. But, you know, with them that's not something you can tell the clients to say."

Although the United States currently has no official language, it would be disingenuous to believe American society functions in the same way. English dominates American society in all its spheres. As an American city, Meriden reflects the larger society's dominant forms of oppression. Casa works extensively to provide English courses to foster bilingualism among all-Spanish speaking people who seek help.

Magali: In the beginning, they needed translation. They needed jobs. They needed to be able to have their kids being taken care of by a sitter, so they can go to work. So they really needed to know how to function in the community here. It is not the same thing like where they came from. It is totally different. So they had to be educated in a lot of different ways. And a lot of them learned. My goal was to mainstream them. ... The service I enjoyed the most was bilingual training. We did it in electronics. We did it in-

how do you call it?- machine shop. We did nurse's aid. The computer [training] was great too. Given that type of training, we would place people in jobs. We would go to the nursing homes, and they would give us the spots to train the nurse's aid. That was my favorite program."

From English-classes to bilingual computer classes to a former bilingual Certified Nurse Assistant Program running out of one of the local high schools, Casa has dedicated a large portion of its existence to empowering Puerto Ricans into bilingualism, not English-only.

Casa strives to empower Puerto Ricans and the greater Latino community, because Kupfer and her co-workers are well aware Puerto Ricans have been negatively racialized on the mainland. In an impromptu visit, Magali's daughter, Kim, spoke to her own diasporic Puerto Rican experience. Kim, along with her mother and her sister speak Spanish, but neither her brother nor husband speak Spanish. Both women expressed their unhappiness about the loss of language among their family.

Magali: My grandchildren, whose father is Spanish and their mother half, don't speak Spanish. It bothers me.

Kim: It bothers me too. Oh they knew it when they were small. They stopped when school started 'cause they didn't want to be "ghetto." They didn't want to be classified as "ghetto." And... and it was a stigma. And I said no, it is an advantage out in the workforce.³⁸

³⁸ Magali Kupfer, "On her experiences as Casa's Executive Director." Interview by Luz Marian Rivera on October 26, 2012.

Magali and Kim's conversation highlights the complexity of the Puerto Rican diaspora. In reference to this conversation, the work of Renato Rosaldo, a Chicano anthropologist who theorized about Latino Cultural Citizenship within the United States, is quite useful when dissecting Magali and Kim's conversation.

Renato Rosaldo's defined Cultural Citizenship as "the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes."³⁹ But along with this definition, Rosaldo states "the enduring exclusions of the color line often deny full citizenship to Latinos and other people of color."⁴⁰ Magali and Kim's conversation seems to indicate their family members experienced environments within Meriden that did not foster cultural citizenship such as the school system. And although both women are light-skinned Latinas, in the eyes of their white counterparts, they were *light-skinned Brown* women. It is their Brownness that serves to exclude them from being regarded as equal. Both women acknowledged that Meriden's school system did not encourage bilingualism and that both teachers and students actively reinforced an English-only environment in

³⁹ Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 17 (November 1994): 57.

⁴⁰ Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California," 57.

which Spanish was stigmatized as ‘backwards’ and ‘inferior’. As the conversation continued, I identified as Puerto Rican and Nicaraguan. Magali interrupted me in order to correct my seemingly racialized self-identification.

Magali: Being Nicaraguan and Puerto Rican, it’s a culture, okay? And I don’t understand why we always say, ‘I am Puerto Rican.’ Well, that’s my culture, that’s not-you know-me. The reason I say that is because the Gringos don’t understand that. They think it’s a race.

Kim: I had to correct like *educated* people. They do think it’s a race. I ask them, ‘Have you ever gone to the Island of Puerto Rico when you were going on a cruise?’ They’re like, yea? Do you realize how big that Island is? It’s this big! (Makes a small dot with fingers) Uh, I think Connecticut is bigger than Puerto Rico. God did not create a race just in Puerto Rico... I gotta tell you something, mom. The Federal Government makes it a point.

Magali: For funding, that’s all. That’s the only reason.

Kim: And the city does it for?

M: For funding. For funding, that’s all it is.

K: Because why? Because the government gives more funding to Hispanic Americans?

M: Yea, because we are low-income and we’re...we’re not as educated. So we need it more. The Gringos don’t need it.

Kupfer fiercely resists the racialization of Puerto Ricans that occurs on the mainland. Hence, the intervention she made upon my self-identification. In attempting to bypass racism, Kupfer situates Puerto Ricanness as cultural. In doing so, she indicates Puerto Ricanness is not innate but rather learned social behaviors just like any other culture. Kim’s opinion resonated with that of her mother’s. She also resisted racialization through the inversion of Christian rhetoric, another strong remnant of Spanish colonization.

Under Spanish Colonization, Christianity was one of the main weapons used against Indigenous and African peoples in the New World. Early Spanish colonizers used Christian rhetoric to legitimize the removal and enslavement of Indigenous and African peoples under the belief these Peoples were inferior to them. Kim resists the racialization through an inversion of the very colonizing Christian rhetoric used against Indigenous Tainos and African slaves to side step the racialization of the Island. *God did not create a race just in Puerto Rico* does not necessarily say Race is just a social construction everywhere rather it implies it is a social construction in relation to Puerto Ricans. Kim and Magali's resistance to think of themselves in racialized terms does follow what most Puerto Rican and Latino academic literature says about race, Latinos often find themselves forced to develop *dichotomized* racial identities in the United States that otherwise would not occur in their homeland, in this case Puerto Rico. It is the dichotomy that is resisted, because Race as a social construction is very much present on the Island just not in the same fashion as in the U.S. context.

Yet Kim's following statement is eye opening and quite insightful. She points to the largest infrastructure within the United States, its very own federal government. In doing so, she acknowledges that the reproduction of racial terms

occurs institutionally and a national level. She did not quite understand the purpose of such reproduction, but her mother interjected, claiming it was for federal and state funding. Kupfer was referring to the funding of social service programs. But Kim's questioning of production and reproduction of racial terminology within our society is valuable, because racial thought will continue to be pervasive in our society until there is an intervention at a mass level. Kim's comment also reveals the remaining structures the Spanish colonization helped set into place starting in the 1600's and continuing well into the 20th century, the solidifying of racial categories into a global racial hierarchy.

Casa Boricua acknowledges the longstanding effects of this global racial hierarchy, as Puerto Ricans are part of this structure of inequality.⁴¹ The economic disadvantage Puerto Ricans faced in Meriden is directly tied to the racialization and ghettoization of Puerto Rican culture including one of its main identifiers, the

⁴¹ Puerto Rican Sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel writes extensively about the 'Coloniality of Power': "a concept that attempts to integrate as part of heterogeneous structural processes the multiple relations in which cultural, political, and economic processes are entangled in capitalism as a historical system. At the center of "coloniality of power" is social power and the entanglement of capitalist accumulation processes with a racial/ethnic hierarchy and its derivative classifications of superior/inferior, developed/underdeveloped, and civilized/barbarian people." Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 17-18. Great – this can also go to bolster Rosaldo's concept of Cult Citizenship and to interpret Magali's and Kim's views in a more complex way, how the experience of cultural citizenship is linked to racialization and racism.

Spanish language. To add to Rosaldo's cultural citizenship theory, it is not only color that excludes, but language as well. Rosaldo also writes, "Latinos' identity is, in part, shaped by discrimination and by collective efforts to achieve full citizenship for themselves and their culture."⁴² Casa's empowerment is directly connected to the historical and current discrimination Puerto Ricans (and other Latinos) have endured and suffered through in Meriden as well as its gross manifestation in larger urban cities such as New York City. Kupfer and her staff fought against discrimination through the creation of various language-barrier breaking initiatives.

Magali's response aligns with the reality many Latinos face in the United States, institutionalized racism (and classism) that does not accommodate otherized bodies.

Yea, because we are low-income and we're...we're not as educated. So we need it more. The Gringos don't need it.

Gringos, the Spanish word for white English-speaking people, a general term for a white American, undeniably points out the racial undertones of the conversation. Sadly, institutionalized racism (and classism) helps prevent Latinos attain social mobility on both the mainland and the Island. Magali and Kim both agreed

⁴² Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California," 57.

Latinos would benefit from an increase in social services tailored to their specific needs.

Beyond considering the issues Puerto Ricans face, Magali also opened up about her own personal connections to the Puerto Rican diaspora. Similarly to me, Magali was born on the Island, but her family moved to Meriden four years later. She married a ‘Gringo’, as she affectionately calls her husband. Due to the cultural nationalism that is pervasive on the Island, which is also highly visible on the Mainland, diasporic Puerto Ricans can experience anxiety over issues of belonging and authenticity. In a moment of vulnerability, Magali expressed mixed feelings about permanently relocating to the Island with her husband, whom she has been married to for the last fifty years.

Magali: “My husband wanted to move back to Puerto Rico. He says, ‘I like it here blah blah blah.’ And I says, ‘We can’t. You don’t know the language.’ I says, ‘You’re gonna feel, you know, inhibited and what not.’ So I-I-I don’t think so. And he got a job there *con algunos Gringos* and he worked a summer there for about maybe a month, a month that we were there. And he says, ‘ I really like it.’ And I said, ‘Well I don’t.’ And I liked it over there, I just didn’t think it was the right place for him. I am glad [we didn’t move there], though.”

(*con algunos Gringos* translates to with some white Americans)

Magali is not alone in these types of feelings. Within my own family, there is anxiety about potential disconnections and ruptures between family members who have grown up

in Puerto Rico or Nicaragua and those who grew up in the United States. Unfortunately,

Puerto Rican cultural nationalism is based on five ideological premises:

First, the discourse considers the Spanish language the cornerstone of Puerto Ricanness, as opposed to English, which it typically views as a corrupting influence on the vernacular. Second, the Island's territory is the geographic entity that contains the nation, beyond the Island's borders, Puerto Ricanness is threatened with contamination and dissolution. Third, the sense of a common origin, based on place of birth and residence, defines Puerto Ricans. Fourth, the shared history of a Spanish heritage, indigenous roots, and African influences offers a strong resistance to U.S. assimilation. Fifth, local culture—especially folklore—provides an invaluable source of popular images and artifacts that are counterposed to icons of U.S. culture, avoiding unwanted mixtures.⁴³

Due to migration, Magali, like many other migrating Puerto Ricans and Latinos, experience a different reality that is completely related to the transcendence of the Island's geographical containment. Unsurprisingly, it is possible these five strict premises prompted anxiety about belonging within her. Her non-Puerto Rican and non-Spanish-speaking husband along with her children's varying fluencies of Spanish could cause diasporic anxiety about permanent relocation to the Island. In another instant, she says,

'My daughters they used to say, 'but Mami they keep saying we are not Puerto Ricans.' Kim, Karen, nobody's Puerto Rican, that just means Puerto Rico is a rich port. I says, 'You're a female.' Your parents, your ancestry what not, came from Spain, came from Europe. Your mother comes from Puerto Rico. That doesn't make you, that's not a race. You are part of the human race. And I try to educate them, because they feel like they

⁴³ Jorge, Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). 21.

were being left out. They didn't know where they belonged. They couldn't be with the Latinos, because Latinos didn't accept them because of their last name. They couldn't be with the Americans, because they were Latinas. So they really didn't know where to belong. So, you know, my kids went to Mercy High. I had no choice. They weren't going to Platt. I didn't want them in the public school, because they were being discriminated against by my own people, you know (laughs).

Once again, she seems to be touching upon underlying diasporic anxiety. In this moment, Magali once again resists racialization by asserting, "You are part of the human race," creating a sense of belonging that transcends the ethnic and racial divides her daughters seem to have experienced. And although she makes light of a serious moment, she does recognize that notions of authenticity, especially ethnic and racial, do play a central role in self-identification. In these moments, it was effortless to relate to Magali, her family and the people she works with on a daily basis. For me, self-identification has always been anxiety inducing, especially growing up with two Latino heritages. Within Puerto Rican cultural nationalism, there is true anxiety about mixing and "diluting" Puerto Ricanness. Racial mixing, although Puerto Ricans are historically a racially mixed people, still causes huge uproars, especially if the mixing is deemed to be threatening to Puerto Ricanness.⁴⁴ On the mainland, it is not only Puerto Ricanness that is threatened, but also

⁴⁴ Racial mixing is often about bettering the race, "mejorando la raza", which in reality means lightening the race. It's internalized racism and colorism. Essentially, it is Hispanophilia and Negrophobia balled into one ideology and works to whiten a predominantly African-descendent population.

privileged Whiteness, creating an unexpected double-consciousness about belonging and authenticity⁴⁵. Her daughters experienced two parallel types of racial anxiety, which helped shape diasporic identity. Hence, diasporic Puerto Rican identities and their constructions do not adhere to the Island's strict ideological premises. Undeniably, Puerto Ricanness is fluid and can/does completely exist outside of the geographical containment of Puerto Rico and should not be limited to the Island.

It is the mainland where the racialization of Puerto Ricans and their dynamic culture is most felt. Rosaldo says, "Cultural Citizenship is a process by which rights are claimed and expanded. It is only one process among many, but it is an important one. ... the manner by which groups claim cultural citizenship may very well affect a renegotiation of the basic social contract of America. So called new citizens- people of color, recent immigrants, women, gays and lesbians-are not only "imagining" America; they are creating it anew." Casa Boricua is a contemporary testament to Latino cultural citizenship, more specifically Puerto Rican cultural citizenship. Casa's very presence in the community testifies to the invaluable efforts of a institutionally disenfranchised

⁴⁵ Whiteness or White privilege "is about the concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society that whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society," as defined by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, ed., *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), p. 97.

community, within a larger dominant (white) community, to gain the same rights as their white neighbors and community members. As Rosaldo says, engaging in politics of Cultural Citizenship is not enough rather it a stepping stone to addressing the larger social issues within our society such as ridding ourselves of racialized thought amongst other binaries and social systems such as classism, sexism, sexuality, etc. Casa has empowered countless Puerto Ricans (and Latinos) to be economically successful and proud of their heritage(s). Perhaps, the next step would be the tackling and dismantling of macro social systems that continue to impact all U.S. constituents whether negatively or positively. After all, we do live in a society founded upon Privilege and Disadvantage, where privilege and disadvantage rely on each other to uphold a global racial hierarchy whose foundation was first laid down in the sixteenth century with the inception of Spanish colonization of the Americas.

Affirming Nuestra Presencia: Meriden's Puerto Rican Festival

Ya Vamo' Pa' alla: Meriden's 45th annual Puerto Rican Festival

One. tres... cuatro.... six..... EIGHT. I had been home, for nearly eight days, anxiously awaiting this year's annual Puerto Rican Festival. The last eight days had slowly glided by only to distort time and stir up a wind whirl of emotions. Although I have lived in Meriden almost my entire life, this would be my first time attending the

festival. When we were younger, my brother and I would wonder why our father preferred to stay home rather than go celebrate our heritage, especially since he was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Perhaps, my father has come to see Puerto Rico as a place where he felt disempowered and unable to fully thrive given the Island's economy. For my father, the United States has provided a life so far away from his life in Puerto Rico, it is unsurprising he has no plans or intentions to ever permanently return to his birthplace and former Home.

Year after year, the second or third Sunday of August was spent imagining what took place at the Festival. Finally, my eyes would see how fellow Meriden Puerto Ricans celebrate our history, our culture.... our heritage.

“Estas lista? Ya mismo nos vamos.”

“Si. Nos podemos ir cuando quieras.”

My mother asked if we were ready to go. I happily nodded and we left. Wonder incessantly flooded my mind as well as a tinge of uncertainty. It was a sun-filled breezy day, reminiscent of a stereotypical summery New England post card, for Meriden's Puerto Rican Festival. We drove up to Hubbard Park and parked on one of the nearby streets. We walked into the park and saw hundreds of people strolling about the park, enjoying the food; their families; and the sun. We saw the stage, the host of music. Local

Puerto Rican musicians were playing Salsa tunes and had some attendees dancing on stage. My mother picked a spot to stand for the next hour. As I leaned against a large leafy tree, my eyes were drawn to the large crowd sitting on Hubbard Park's main hill. The day's breeze carried Puerto Rican flags within its gentle wind, making them wave about freely. Little to medium to enormous Puerto Rican flags were intermittently dispersed throughout the crowd. Not only were flags visible, but also the phrase "Puerto Rico" appeared on lawn chairs, shirts, dresses and people's faces. After an hour or so, we began to walk around the park, which is located a few miles away from my house on Fourth Street. (We all know Southington is just a few miles down the road and that not many Latinos have yet to move into the most Western part of the city.) Luckily, I had twenty-five dollars for food and little souvenirs.

Within minutes, we pass by several food vendors.

...

"...Piña Coladas, one for three, dos por cinco..."

"...Empanadillas, Piña Coladas, arroz..."

"...Pinchos por cinco pesos!..."

.....

"Mami, todo el mundo esta viniendo la 'misma' cosa'. No se de adonde escoger comida."

"Solamente venden las cosas 'mas puertorriqueñas'. Están viniendo las mismas cosas que comes en casa. No gastes tu dinero en comida. Comprate otra cosas en vez de comida."

Somehow the idea that most food vendors were selling the same things manages to shock and confuse me. My mother advised me to save my money for other things, because I had already eaten all these staple Puerto Rican foods throughout my entire life. My mother found a vendor, who was selling Puerto Rican souvenirs. We quickly bought some bracelets and bumper stickers, but only ones he guaranteed were Puerto Rican-produced products. After walking around for an hour or so, we stood near the stage again. Music was still blasting, but soon stopped. An older man informed the crowd he would be introducing an upcoming Puerto Rican artist, but before doing so, he yelled out to the crowd,

“We thank Meriden for hosting us! We thank them for hosting a small part of the Nation! Puerto Rico lives within Meriden! Besides Meriden, quien más esta aquí? New Britain?..... Hartforrrddd?..... Waterbury?.... Bridgeport?NUEEVVAAA YYOORRKK?! Forget Boston, YANKEE BABYYYY!”

People howled until the young woman he briefly spoke about before came out on stage.

She was young and thin. She held the microphone and yelled,

“Hola mi gente Boricua! Como están mi gente? Adonde están mis Boricuas?!”
The crowd burst into cheers. But she was not done talking to the crowd,
“Ahora, yo se que nosotros Boricuas estamos aquí celebrando nuestra cultura pero adonde están mis Cubanos? Y mis Dominicanos? Hay Mexicanos aquí? Quien mas esta aquí?”

She greeted the crowd. She paid tribute to her Puerto Rican people, but also celebrated other Latino Peoples such Cubans, Dominicans and Mexicans. Right as I thought she was done entertaining the festival attendees, she voiced one more question: Who else is here? The crowd roared with sound. My mother shouts, “NICARAGUA!” My uncle’s wife yells, “Ecuador!” I laughed and kissed my little cousin, whom I was holding. He is Ecuadorian-Nicaraguan and quite possibly the cutest red head baby at the festival. He cooed as other country names bellowed from the jovial mouths of crowd members. Other Latin American flags emerged as it became abundantly clear this festival was not strictly limited to Puerto Rican affirmation. The crowd was visibly ecstatic as she performed. Soon afterwards, the Festival coordinator and his son stepped onto stage and asked the crowd for just a few minutes of their time. The crowd hollered but acquiesced quickly to their humble requests. Hector Cardona, the Festival Coordinator and a well-known local police officer, spoke and introduced local and state politicians. He stressed voter participation. The local and state officials all took turns talking to the crowd. Some only talked in English, but kept their message simply and short. Others took up the challenge of speaking in Spanish and asked the crowd to forgive their mediocre fluency. But whether in Spanish, English or Spanglish, all officials encouraged the attending

Latinos to vote and realize the potential they hold as the fastest-growing ethnic group.

Phrases like

*“You can make a **real** difference,”*
“We want your vote! Your voice matters!”
“Vote because you have the right to do so!”

struck me as official after official urged hundreds of people, a majority Latino, to participate in one of the most significant facets of American politics, voting. Renato Rosaldo’s Cultural Citizenship theory lingered in the back of my mind as I looked out to the crowd. Rosaldo’s phrase “democratic processes” quickly flashed in my mind and dissipated as hundreds of people applauded, hooted and proudly waived their country flags. An air of gravity settled over the crowd, but the local officials and festival coordinators quickly rushed off stage and urged the musicians to play Puerto Rico’s sound, Salsa. I wondered if festival attendees would vote in November. But I was pleasantly surprised to see cultural affirmation; and local, state and national politics intersecting and being integrated into the larger festivities. My mother looked at me and said,

“Ya terminastes? Vas a seguir observando el festival o podemos divertirnos? Ten cuidado que te vas a poner mas trigueña si no te cuidas.”

My mother's words entered my ears and bounced around for a while. Am I done yet? Am I going to continue observing or can we have fun? Be careful before I get any tanner? Of course, I respond back quickly and boldly...

Mami, de que tu hablas? Nunca terminare! No, pero en serio, me he estado divirtiendo todo el día. Y además, que importa se me pongo "mas trigueña?" Al lo mejor la gente trataría de pronunciar me nombre mejor, LLLUUUZZZZ."

She laughed, hugged me, and we spent the rest of the day amongst family and friends.

After six hours of attendance, we left.. sunbaked and a few shades darker like my mother predicted, but thoroughly enthusiastic about my first Puerto Rican festival.

Theorizing the Puerto Rican Festival:

Meriden is home to nearly twenty thousand Latinos.⁴⁶ As a third of the city's inhabitants, the Latino community is predominately Puerto Rican and Mexican.

Meriden's Puerto Rican community has established several markers of its long-lasting and permanent presence. The annual Puerto Rican Festival is one of those symbolic gestures of cultural affirmation and permanence. For Meriden, a Puerto Rican festival has occurred every year for the last forty-five years. The Festival takes place in Hubbard Park, one of Meriden's most well known parks. As a life-long resident of Meriden, I do not

⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. "State and County Quickfacts (Meriden, Connecticut)."

know of any other cultural affirmation celebration that takes place in the park annually.

Without a doubt, the Festival has established itself as one of Meriden's hallmark celebrations. Yet, one begins to wonder a number of things when thinking about this annually occurring citywide event.

For me, I wonder if the City, with all its Euro-American colonial history and its residents, has always been this accepting of its Spanish-speaking inhabitants, their cultural practices and public affirmation of their Latino identities? And although this is an extremely significant question, it does not fully address the complexities at the Festival or the construction of diasporic Puerto Rican identities in Meriden. What does the Festival reveal about Meriden as a City; the construction of Puerto Rican identities; about the Puerto Rican Diaspora; and practiced cultural citizenship? Renato Rosaldo's Cultural Citizenship theory and Jorge Duany's theoretical concepts of Nation, Identity and Diaspora can be put into conversation with each other and are useful theoretical frameworks to deconstruct my first Meriden Puerto Rican Festival.

Renato Rosaldo's Cultural Citizenship theory and its definition can be found within this essay on page 23. As I asked earlier, what does the Festival reveal about Meriden as a City? Considering Rosaldo's definition of cultural citizenship, one could claim Meriden's local city council and its inhabitants are practicing a modicum of

cultural citizenship. As an attendee, it was obvious to me the local city council validated Latino cultural citizenship via the Festival's very occurrence. As an attendee, I also noticed Meriden is home to an ever-growing Latino population, which continues to exert its presence during the festival and beyond it on a daily basis through permanent residence within the city. Throughout the Festival, the ideas of "Home", "Nation", "permanency" and out-island migration dominated the celebratory atmosphere. As the older man said,

"We thank Meriden for hosting us! We thank them for hosting a small part of the Nation! Puerto Rico lives within Meriden! Besides Meriden, quien más esta aquí? New Britain?..... Hartforrrddd?..... Waterbury?.... Bridgeport?NUEEVVAAA YYOORRKK?! Forget Boston, YANKEE BABYYYY!"

In acknowledging Meriden as a host, one of the festival's coordinators seemed to distinctly locate "home" back in Puerto Rico. And although his next remark might seem contradictory, it is loaded with meaningful insight about possible diasporic understandings of 'Nation'. In his remark, Puerto Rico is not contained to its geographic boundaries rather it transcends the Island's physical domain and crosses the Atlantic Ocean, encompassing Meriden as another site where the 'Nation' lives. In recognizing Meriden as another site for the 'Nation', the man implicitly points out out-island migration. After asking about the other surrounding "hosts", he directly aligns Meriden

with the “first home of the Diaspora,” New York City. In doing so, he places Meriden within a larger narrative of out-island migration, which inevitably allows for the construction of diasporic Puerto Rican identities to occur. Thus, the Festival reveals Meriden does not threaten Puerto Ricanness, because Puerto Ricans exercise cultural citizenship without compromising their identities to appease Greater Meriden’s white/dominant population.

But what exactly is Puerto Ricanness? Anthropologist Jorge Duany defines the Island’s conceptualization of Puerto Ricanness based on the following five ideological premises as previously mentioned earlier in the essay on page 30. Given this conceptualization of Puerto Ricanness, one can start seeing the divergence between Island and Diasporic Puerto Ricanness once again. Within the island conceptualization of Puerto Ricanness, one can see the fixation on geographic containment, language preservation, heritage and a strong resistance to U.S. assimilation. Throughout the entire Festival, all attendees seemed to undermine these five ideological premises at one point or another. Organizers spoke in both languages. Some favoring English over Spanish while others spoke Spanglish while the main organizer only spoke in Spanish. These five ideological premises did not hold true within the expressed and enacted Puerto Ricanness at the Festival. At the festival, diasporic Puerto Rican identities transcended the insularity

and rigidness of cultural nationalist-based Puerto Ricanness, because they reconfigured 'Nation' and extended its border to incorporate the locales of diasporic Puerto Ricans, even if they only named a few Cities.

Finally, the annual Puerto Rican festival undermines the seemingly fixed Puerto Ricanness by reflecting the impact of locality, a mainland American city. While doing archival research, Francisco Velez's name surfaced many of times. It would be a shame to not mention the man behind the Festival's first occurrence. Velez was fortunate enough to see another local Puerto Rican festival take place in New York. And although he claims, he simply wanted to throw "a huge party," Meriden's Puerto Rican festival has out-grown that simple notion. Its annual occurrence is a testament to local Puerto Ricans' unwillingness to disconnect from their history and culture while maintaining (and reconfiguring) old traditions and creating entirely new ones. Meriden's annual Puerto Rican Festival is about Latino/Puerto Rican affirmation, one that strives to be inclusive and reflective of its surroundings. Velez coordinated the Festival for nearly forty-two years and has passed on his legacies to Meriden's next generation of local Puerto Rican leaders, Hector Cardona and his son, Miguel Cardona. Lastly, Meriden's Puerto Rican Festival, along with the numerous local festivals that take place across the country, all have the potential to be the next political platform for a sociohistorical decolonization.

Epilogue:

Cuando era niña nunca sabía adonde pertenecía porque tenía raíces en Nicaragua y en Puerto Rico pero vivía en los Estados Unidos/When I was a young girl, I never knew where I belonged because I had roots in Nicaragua and Puerto Rico but lived in the United States. Mi madre hablaba de una época de guerra y pobreza en Nicaragua que no podía entender completamente porque era un niña creada en otro lugar adonde la guerra y pobreza tienen otra cara./ My mother spoke of war and a poverty that I could not completely understand because I was girl raised elsewhere where war and poverty look different. Mi padre solamente hablaba de Puerto Rico cuando una muerte en la familia había ocurrido/ My father would only speak of Puerto Rico when a death had occurred. Tristemente, solo he visitado Puerto Rico una vez en mi vida, a la edad de diez años/Sadly, I have only visited Puerto Rico once at the age of ten. Nicaragua y Puerto Rico son los países de mis padres, no los míos/Nicaragua and Puerto Rico are my parent's home countries, not mine. Mi experiencia es completamente basada en mi residencia en los Estados Unidos/My experience is completely based on my permanent residency in the United States. Soy Americana por las experiencias que he vivido, lo bueno y lo malo/I am American because of my life experience, the good and the bad. Soy Puertorriqueña por nacimiento e historia/ I am Puerto Rican by birth and history. Soy Nicaragüense por

historia/I am Nicaraguan by history. Soy las tres cosas a la misma vez y es imposible solamente ser una at any given time/ I am all three at the same time and it would be impossible to be only be one at any given time.

While researching the Puerto Rican Diaspora, I have come to see Meriden as a special place, as Home. Throughout this essay, I have said Puerto Rico lives loudly within Meriden multiple times and it is undeniably true as one can see Casa Boricua in Downtown Meriden, attend the Puerto Rican Festival and read about Puerto Rican affirmation in the local newspaper. Although not originally, Meriden has become Home to a small part of the Puerto Rican Nation for nearly a century.

Without anticipating such a rapid influx of Puerto Ricans and now more generally Latinos, Meriden has adjusted considerably better than other localities around the country that have over-extended themselves in the attempts to remain exclusionary and racially/class segregated. It would be unfair to Meriden's early Puerto Rican migrants to suggest their pioneering arrivals and transitions to permanency were painless, effortless or smooth. In their quests for a better life and opportunities, which became readily unavailable after U.S. corporations negatively impacted their local Puerto Rican economies, migrant Puerto Ricans navigated their ways in a strange and unfamiliar land. New York City became Home for some while for others it was Chicago or Bridgeport.

Yet, for a smaller subset places like Hartford and Meriden became Home. Whether in New York City, Hartford or Meriden, diasporic Puerto Rican identities adapted to each locality's specificity.

In Meriden, Puerto Ricans have forged their own places in the hopes to preserve and maintain their Puerto Ricanness alive for future Meridenites. The preservation and affirmation of Puerto Ricanness in Meriden has been the collective effort of a large Puerto Rican community. Community leaders like Magali Kupfer, Hector Cardona and Frank Velez have often acted on behalf of the Puerto Rican community by working closely together with thousands of Puerto Rican peers. Although they are the faces of Meriden's Puerto Rican empowerment and Latino affirmation, they have not acted alone or selfishly. In their valiant efforts to share their heritage, they have selflessly dedicated their lives to the cultural politics of integration in Meriden. Later this year, Magali will retire and Casa will be managed by yet someone else fully invested in the empowering of Meriden's Puerto Ricans to succeed economically as well as socially. Frank Velez passed a few years ago, but his legacy includes organizing Meriden's local Puerto Rican Festival for forty-two years. And without flinching at the large shoes he now has chosen to fill, local police officer Hector Cardona has organized the last three annual Puerto Rican festivals. Working closely with our community, year after year, they all have come to

show the richness and complexity of Puerto Ricanness. It is one of my sincerest hopes younger Puerto Ricans and other Latinos will become involved and work tirelessly in the hopes of true integration amongst all Meridenites.

As for me, I hope to continue researching the many facets of Puerto Rican diaspora as I am one of its nearly four million dispersed souls. Puerto Ricanness is not about how much Spanish one can speak or understand. It is not about living in Puerto Rico or even relocating to Puerto Rico permanently for mainland-raised Puerto Ricans. Duany's contemporary Cultural Nationalism is too rigid of a framework and does an injustice to the heterogeneity and multiplicity of Puerto Rican identities on the Island and the Mainland. Yet, Cultural Nationalism in of itself provides a few threads of political possibilities. If we choose to embrace our "a sense of common origin" and our "shared history of a Spanish heritage, indigenous roots and African influences offers a strong resistance to U.S. assimilation," it may help to redefine and construct new frameworks to better and holistically understand ourselves, our compatriots and our history. And before discarding contemporary Puerto Rican Cultural Nationalism, we should consider its very existence reflexive of the political status that has led to a change from Puerto Rican Political Nationalism when Independence seemed plausible to Cultural Nationalism in the last century where 'Independence' , 'Sovereignty' and 'Self-Governance' has become a

symbolic gesture and not a tangible possibility. Like a majority of the Puerto Ricans on the Island, I have come to believe 'Independence' as a political status will not bring prosperity to the Puerto Rican people. In the short, Puerto Rican Independence will only come from a sociohistorical global decolonization. In order to move forward, as a global people, we must acknowledge our world history and work to dismantle systems of oppression and their legacies. Finally, my sincerest hopes is this piece of writing shares my own histories to its readers and helps to expand their perspective about notions of Puerto Ricanness; Diaspora; Home; Host; Nation; and Migration.

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Last Words:

Del Mar y el Sol soy yo,
brillo hermosamente como la paz en el cielo de Nicaragua
y rumbo en un país conocido como los Estados Unidos.

Soy Puertorriqueña

soy Nicaragüense,

I am American,

I am Woman,

I am Human,

soy Luz Marian Rivera.

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