

The Puerto Rican Experience In Willimantic: A Reflective Account 30 Years Later

*By Keynote Speech By Dr. Norma E. Boujouen Ramírez, Cultural
Anthropologist At the Latino Migration Exhibit Windham Textile and
History Museum April 19, 2013 • March 18, 2019*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Good evening to you all. I am delighted, more than delighted, I am very “emocionada” to be back in Willimantic decades after I left the area. I am also very grateful to Dr. Ricardo Pérez for inviting me to this important event.

The invitation to share with you this evening led me to an inner journey back in time, revisiting the Puerto Rican Experience in Willimantic study undertaken by my colleague James Newton and me 30 years ago. I remember vividly, the meetings at the Victorian Lady with Jeff Beadle (director of WRCC, the sponsoring agency), Scott Cook (former UCONN anthropology professor and like a father to me) and Jim to discuss the findings of this first research on Puerto Rican people in this city that brought to light their migration, settlement, work and socio-cultural life. As I kept walking down the road of this inner journey, I revisited the “Menea Esas Manos...”, my doctoral dissertation research that depicts the experiences of Puerto Rican women in the Hartford Poultry and American Thread factories and the impact of closings in their lives. The inner road also led me to seeing ...in my memory, friends, neighbors, co-workers, places, events, festivities and all the connections I had both as a resident and as researcher.

This evening I would like you to take a journey of the Puerto Rican Experience across time from the fifties through the 1980's. For this journey I weaved the information from the Puerto Rican Experience in Willimantic research, my doctoral thesis, and my own recollections (memories) of life as a resident and as a member of the PR community. In this journey through time, I include – using fictitious names – the voices of the people interviewed.

A PLACE OF GOOD OPPORTUNITIES

So we begin our journey looking into the time when Puerto Ricans began arriving in this city and the reasons they chose Willimantic as a place to live. Let us imagine the fifties, Puerto Ricans coming to Willimantic from other places in the northeast and/or directly from Puerto Rico. As years went by pioneer migrants brought relatives from the island and a continual influx flow of people led to the growth of the PR enclave in late 1960's and early 1970's. A large majority of migrants came from semi-rural and rural areas on the Island and poor family backgrounds. They were the daughters and sons of agricultural workers, migrant farm workers, domestic servants and home needle workers.

Puerto Ricans came here in search of what many people said "un mejor ambiente" ("a better environment") which meant job opportunities. The reason why Willimantic was chosen rather than some other town was usually because a relative or hometown friend was in the area already. Most of the people I knew and those interviewed had already received information about the good job opportunities and other advantages Puerto Ricans felt the town offered. As Lupe recalled during an interview:

"My cousins had said in their letters that they would go to the stores here and buy things. They said they had plenty of fun going to parks, taking walks along the streets, and eating ice cream. They wrote me that everything was good here and they made money. They sent money back to their parents and they had some left. After that I dreamed I was going to find something nice. You know something out of this world. One then dreams to come here because they told you there was plenty of money. That is why I came here."

The information received from kin or hometown friends generated an ideology whereby Willimantic was perceived as a place where people could “earn good money”. Differences in salary between Puerto Rico and Willimantic were a common reference in interviews and conversations with people living here. The jobs they found here paid slightly higher wages and were regarded as potential stepping stones to a better life. So let’s listen to Fernanda who spoke about her family in Puerto Rico:

“My father worked mostly in the sugar cane plantations. My oldest brother who also worked in the sugar cane came here and found that jobs were better than working in the sugar cane. He did not return to work cutting sugar cane. To work under the hot sun for eight hours or more is horrendous. My other brothers followed him to this area. Once, my mother came to visit my brothers and on her return to PR she sent us here.”

In people’s recollections the names of Don Cheo and Doña Eloa came out frequently. From their accounts, this married couple recruited workers mainly from the South Coast for the Hartford Poultry Farm and also ran a boarding house in town. As Alfredo once told me:

“They paid the air fare and the lodging here. My mother came to Willimantic because she had relatives who came here with those people. She too was recruited. They paid her the air fare. She worked two years in the poultry plant. She came back to Puerto Rico to bring us kids back here with her. She was recruited by a man who is now retired and no longer lives in this town. He was sent by the factory.”

The case of Alfredo illustrates the chain that occurred in the PR migration to Willimantic. For many it was a one-step migration directly from Puerto Rico while for some it was a two-step migration in that they had lived in other Northeast places like Hartford and New York cities. While there were recruiters, once people moved here and started working in the factories, they brought siblings, cousins, sons, daughters and even their parents. Patria, a former American Thread worker recalled how she found employment:

“Well my sister-in-law brought me here. She took me to the American Thread. I applied and in less than a week I got a job as machine operator. Then I wrote my cousins to come here to work. They did and went to work to the thread plant. My sister in-law got her job at the mill because her uncle used to work there. It was easy to find jobs when I came here in 1969.”

While migration was motivated by a desire to improve one’s socio- economic condition, for some women marital discord or a family crisis propitiated their decision to migrate. Maria declared in an interview: *“It was all of a sudden. Since I had my sisters here, well, I decided to come here. I was having problems with my husband. That was what most convinced me to come here. I had got to the culmination point where I said to me, ‘That’s it’; I can’t take it anymore. I came here and began to make a living.”* Marcia, age 15 when she came here to join her grandmother, wanted more freedom. In her words: *“During that time I wanted a change in my life. I wanted a change because I was raised in a very rigid environment controlled by my father who wouldn’t give me freedom to go out.”*

On this issue, I would like to point out that a common observation in migration studies is that oppressive living conditions such as marital discord/breakup, domestic violence and familiar restrictions on single women – are factors influencing women’s decisions to leave their countries. Therefore, searching for a better environment had an added meaning for the women who came here from Puerto Rico or elsewhere in the northeast in a quest for a change in their lives.

THE EARLY PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

Now our journey takes us to the early Puerto Rican community through the eyes of pioneer migrants who recounted their experiences in terms of dates of arrival, size of the community, weddings, baptisms, job placement, factory work, family and social life.

Puerto Ricans came mainly from two regional areas in Puerto Rico: the western highlands (mostly from San Sebastián and Añasco municipalities) and the South Coast (mainly Juana Diaz municipality). Let me explain something about municipalities. Puerto Rico is partitioned into 78 government subunits known as *municipios* (municipalities) which are similar in structure to the towns. The major urban center carries the same name as the “*municipio*” and a person from any municipality could be from the urban center or from an outlying rural *barrio*. It turned out that most migrants came from the rural *barrios* in the municipality of origin.

Upon migrating to Willimantic, newcomers joined a Puerto Rican socio-cultural enclave made up of kin groups and hometown friends (“*compueblanos*”). The interconnection between these kin groups and hometown neighbors provided a mechanism for employment, childcare, entertainment, and other kinds of support. People, especially women, often alluded to the good time they had in the past. They reminisced about the house parties and other kinds of amenities in Willimantic.

Most people were young (under 25) when they arrived in Willimantic. Indeed, reflecting upon their age when they arrived and started their long journey of factory work, one could say that many were in their late adolescence and young adulthood (ages 17-24). At the time of the 1983-84 study and my dissertation research, I never gave that much importance to this fact. To me, they were people in their most productive years. Now I realize that Puerto Ricans comprised a late teen and early adulthood workforce. No wonder in their recollections they emphasized the good time they had when they came to live here and the teasing and joking in the places of work!

Social relations in the context of family and neighborhood relations allowed the interaction of young single men and women that ended up in marriages. For these young people, the transition through the various life cycles (early/mid adulthood, marriage, motherhood and fatherhood) took place in the context of factory work. In the particular case of women, their entry or continuity in wage labor after having children was facilitated by the emergence of an informal network of childcare in the community provided by female kin, neighbors or hometown friends.

According to several old time residents, the Union Street area was a focal point of activity before the mid-seventies. It was some sort of “little Puerto Rico” that was destroyed in the 1970’s by urban renewal. Alfredo who came here during mid-adolescence recalled:

“Union Street was another world. Union, Broad, Center and part of Jackson Street was all Puerto Rican. You could hear music in the summer; we sang in Spanish. Everyone was outside. I was accustomed to it. I would say: This here is mine. Here I don’t have to speak English. I feel good. I don’t have to face those racist people. I belong here.”

As it can be seen, Alfredo felt safe, loved, and connected to his people. When he came to Willimantic he hardly spoke English and had to make adaptations to the local school environment.

In the late 1960's, an organization called People's Barrio Place was formed to cope with some of the educational and social problems affecting Puerto Rican youth. The organization provided tutorial services, recreation, organized events like dances, and provided breakfast for students. The facility located on Union Street was provided free of charge the owner of the building. Unfortunately, this organization ended due to urban renewal in the area.

INSIDE THE FACTORY

In this journey, we now go inside the factories through the lens of Puerto Rican workers. The first employer for most Puerto Ricans entering Willimantic before the 1980's was either the American Thread or Hartford Poultry, a chicken processing plant. There were cases in the 1983-84 study that reported having worked first at the Hartford Poultry and later at the American Thread. Almost half the women interviewed (15 out of a total of 33) for my doctoral thesis had worked first in the poultry place.

Work at the Hartford Poultry ("*pollera*" or chicken place as people called it) was physically demanding, unpleasant and involved risk of injuries. The most common problem mentioned by men and women alike, who had worked there included cold temperatures, wet floors and the rapid pace of work. People often used the phrase "*iba a todo fueite*". In Puerto Rico, "*fueite*" means to spank, to slap, or to strike- like spanking a child (*darle fueite a un niño*). For many people, the speed of the conveyor line was like a "beating to the worker". And they repeatedly told me "*esos boses te querían matar*" (those bosses wanted to work you to death). The more former workers spoke about their work experience in this plant, the more they expressed intense resentment against their former bosses, especially if they were Puerto Rican whom they regarded as tough, inconsiderate and abusive. As Cassandra pointed out:

“They worked us like animals. They spent the whole day yelling at you. Look, once I suffered a cut and what they did? They yelled at me these things: What is wrong with you? You don’t do your job well. Were you sleepy? Each time I was yelled at I would start crying. You see Norma; I wish you could have seen the faces of the women there. Just as we joked and sang, as we often did, we cried...out of pain and anger. If you got sick they didn’t let you go home. If you missed days of work they fired you. That was abuse! That was the chicken place!”

Interestingly, women often spoke about the “*relajo*” among workers. In our culture the term “*relajo*” describes a variety of behavior referents including teasing, kidding, and joking often with sexual overtones or ridicule. As Manuela recalled: *“We spiced up the day by telling jokes. Many women, like me, love to joked a lot. I told jokes and funny stories and the women around me spent the day laughing. Certainly, we didn’t stop working as the line moved continuously.”*

I must say that under oppressive working conditions, the “*relajo*” as a cultural practice served workers in two ways. First, it made degrading work more tolerable as described by Fernanda, *“I already told you how hard we worked and how badly we were treated. If it weren’t for those enjoyable moments I don’t think I would have stayed working there.”* Secondly, it represented a way of voicing anger and disgust toward supervisors while avoiding direct confrontation. As one delightfully remembered: *“we used to laugh at bosses. Sometimes we called them lambeojos. Sometimes they laughed but other times they got mad at us.”*

How people felt about the American Thread? Generally work at the ATCO was seen as more positive and, in the words of Norberto, who had been an employee of the Hartford Poultry, *“At the American Thread, I was earning more than in the ‘pollera’ (chicken place) and I could work overtime. And it was inside and warm.”* Another former worker had this to say: *“We worked by rounds. We got paid by fixed rates. We spent our free time walking around, chatting with bosses and drinking coffee.”*

What about Puerto Rican women pieceworkers? How did they feel about working in ATCO? A number of women interviewed reported they enjoyed working at the American Thread. These were women who considered themselves fast workers who showed a sense of efficacy and pride in the work they did at this plant. Gabriela, best expresses this sentiment:

“I loved the work I did at American Thread. I enjoyed looking at my machines filling thread. Everything looked so beautiful. I did a good job because I was careful. My bosses praised me for my work. I always made quality work. I had an excellent record. Each year the company gave me a paper congratulating me for my work. I also won a Perfect Attendance Award. I feel sorry they took American Thread away.”

Do all women interviewed feel the same way? Not really. There were women whom the pressure to work fast was nerve-racking. In the words of Tatiana:

“I was almost always nervous because of the constant pressure to make a quota. We knew they would give us a warning. So the pressure was ever present. I got nervous every time the bosses came to check my work. I felt I had to hurry up. I got a warning because I couldn’t make the quota.”

The “*pizual*” a common term used by PR women at times generated animosities among themselves as some women blamed fast workers for the pressures at work. As Ligia indicated to me: “*Piecework caused many problems. Many women would remain working in their machines during breaks. Those women only worked...and worked. That hurt us the people who took breaks, because if you couldn’t finish the quota, bosses would tell you to work as hard as these women did.*” Women who were at the opposite end of the situation brought about by Ligia felt other workers were jealous of them. As Renata said: “*People envied fast workers. If one worked hard or didn’t take breaks then you were called money-hungry.*”

Despite these animosities, women also spoke of exchanging food, information, taking rides with co-workers and joking “without stopping work.” From their accounts, close ties with co-workers were kept within ethnic boundaries.

In a nutshell, this was life inside the factories as told by Puerto Ricans. Their views relate to the work process and the mode of control of the workforce. Hartford Poultry was a despotic firm that used blatant coercive methods to impose discipline. The American Thread was largely a bureaucratic firm with written rules, a reward system, propaganda and ideological mechanisms to control workers’ behavior.

MY PRESENT BACK THEN, THE PAST NOW: THE PR COMMUNITY IN THE 1980’s

Now our journey takes us to the 1980's, which my present back then was and now it is the past. At that time, the community was composed not only of factory workers but also of teachers, social workers, service providers, retirees, welfare recipients and, of course, elementary, middle and high school students. The professionals (and some factory workers) tended to own their homes while most Puerto Ricans were tenants and concentrated in a few large apartment complexes, namely, Windham Heights, Nathan Hale Terrace, Ivy Gardens, and Village Heights. Those living outside the housing complexes lived in older multifamily housing bounded by Union, Milk, Chapman, Ash and Main Streets. As a tenant myself, I lived in several places like Brook Street (next to Ivy Gardens), Ives Street (in a duplex house owned by a Puerto Rican factory worker) and, lastly, in Village Heights.

Like in the past, there was much social interaction mainly through kinship and neighborhood ties as people gathered in parks, on the streets, on steps or lawns to talk, joke, play dominoes, or musical instruments, thus sharing and maintaining their identity as Puerto Ricans. Community problems, gossips, family affairs, news from Puerto Rico, stories about places of work (mainly factories) and male-female relationships were common topics of conversation. People attended the games of *Los Poetas*, later known as the San Sebastián baseball team. The social atmosphere during the games was very festive as adults watched and chatted while youngsters walked and run around the park. At Christmas time, the *parranda navideña*, an old Puerto Rican tradition, was practiced in this community despite snow and cold weather. I still remember how often I participated in celebrations of this kind in the homes of people I knew. In these celebrations, children and adolescents were not excluded. Regarding religious practices, most of the people that participated in the PR Experience in Willimantic research reported being Catholics (at least nominally) and attended Saint Joseph Church. There were people that engaged in other practices -seldom known to outsiders- involving a belief that the spirits can communicate with the living through a medium. Those people sought the help of an “*espiritista*” to get rid of evil influences, cure illnesses, secure employment, and improve finances.

Second generation Puerto Ricans, at least those whom I had contact with, spoke Spanish mixed with English. They used to dance to both Latin music (salsa, merengue) which they called Spanish dance, (*bailar español*) thus making a distinction from English dance. They tended to marry within the Puerto Rican group.

Kin provided the emotional and financial support needed to survive as resources were pooled, borrowed and shared. I also observed relationships among neighbors based on mutual aid that were most evident in times of crisis, deaths, accidents, fires and other emergencies (like for example, money to help with funeral expenses, tolls, exchange of food, borrowing money, car rides and use of telephones). People needing help would also go to PROP (Puerto Rican Organization Program) founded in 1972 that provided a multiplicity of services to the community.

As far I am concerned, the mid and late 1980's was a time of rapid changes in the Puerto Rican community. A majority of Puerto Ricans that were surveyed in the Puerto Rican Experience in Willimantic research project, identified drug use and abuse as one of the most serious problems the community was facing. Some pioneer migrants whom I knew well felt there was less cooperation than in the past as people expected immediate repayment for favors done to others like for example, asking for money for gasoline when they gave someone a ride. People felt PROP was not helping the community much less Puerto Rican youth. The American Thread had been closing down operations until it finally ceased operations between 1984 and 1985. The plant's phase out period caused a great deal of uncertainty, frustration and anguish among workers. America, a fast pieceworker who had been with the company for 20 years said angrily: *"I am very upset! It gets tiring to go to work not knowing when you are going to be terminated. We cannot leave before they give us the pink slip. If we do we would not get our money."*

The process of closing down its operations meant moving people around and re-assigning jobs. As Dolores expressed:

"The factory is in chaos. They [managers] shift us from one job to another. Since the announcement of the closing I have done several kinds of jobs. Right now, they put me to do a man's job and I hate it. Do you know what I have to do? Now I am pushing the little trucks that carry boxes. The boxes are heavy. My back is hurting."

Other factories where Puerto Ricans worked also closed down (Kendall Company) while other (Brand Rex) had been releasing workers. Job displacement resulted in the loss of seniority rights which meant starting all over again in a new place. Contrary to previous experience, job search was difficult in mid and late 80's as people no longer secured a job within days as they did in the past. The immediate option was to apply for unemployment compensation that for some informants was a humiliating experience due to unfair treatment they received at the unemployment office. Monín with 15 years of work at ATCO complained:

“I practically killed myself working hard at the factory. When you lose your job the worst thing that could happen to you is to go to the unemployment office. They always treat Puerto Ricans badly. They make you feel as if you were ripping off the system. To them Puerto Ricans are garbage.”

Puerto Rican workers mobilized their kin and neighborhood networks to seek new jobs. Those who found employment, moved from one factory to another (to lose a job again) or from factory work to the service sector taking maintenance jobs. Those who did not find a job moved to Puerto Rico or elsewhere, while others sought public assistance. Given the strong attachment of women – in the Menea Esas Manos research – to their work roles, seeking public assistance meant shame and the loss of a socially valued role. As Diana told me: *“I have never felt so bad in my whole life. I, a woman who have worked most of my life had to ask for help in the Town Hall [Social Service Department]. I had no choice. I cried every night because of the shame I felt.”*

Overall, the Puerto Rican community at the end of the 1980's was going through a process of change concomitant to the transformations in the local economy. Back then the end results of all these changes could not be foreseen.....

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, thank you for taking this journey back in time with me. Reflecting on that experience, what I see is a group of people – men and women – who ventured into an unknown place to be welcomed by their kin and hometown people. A place where they worked hard, formed families and faced adversities with resolve and tenacity. I only hope that the new generations of Puerto Ricans continue this tale searching the best of its people and of themselves. Puerto Ricans, Latinos and other groups must look at their own strengths to build together a better community while respecting and honoring diversity! Gracias de todo corazón!