

Puerto Rican Feminist Discourse: Culture through Narratives

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Puerto Rico is one of the oldest colonies in the world. Perhaps because it has been through a history of colonialism, post-colonialism, and post-colonial colonialism, it makes for a fascinating story to tell and explore. In proceeding with this research, I was interested in Puerto Rico's unique status as a commonwealth and its quasi-colonial relations to the United States in a postmodern context. My initial interest in these questions shifted to a concern about Puerto Rican identity in the United States. In particular, I wanted to explore the diverse experiences of Puerto Rican women. Through reading different stories by Latina writers about Latina narratives in the United States, I realized how important these stories are in feminist discourse. I was attracted to comparing these fictional stories with real-life women and their experiences. In gaining a better understanding of the feminist and Puerto Rican discourse available, I was hoping to uncover the cultural, economic, and political factors of why Puerto Ricans are at a crossroads concerning their national identity.

Literature Review

Labels and Misconceptions

In recent literature within feminism, I have found that historically discriminated people are being discussed as individuals with unique experiences. Euro-American feminists have embraced women-of-color theory as part of their overall conversations about women, not just a branch of feminist thought. Rather than having divided conversations about “kinds” of women, feminists are exploring womanhood in relation to racial, ethnic, class, and gender characteristics without disregarding them as separate constructions of identity. We are now talking about women and cultural identity in more than just opposing dichotomies. It is no longer a discussion about conflicts between feminine/masculine, woman/man, and White/Black binaries. Our descriptions have become multifaceted because our diverse experiences are relevant in deconstructing the power structures in society.

In my discussions of Latinas and feminist theory, I wanted to engage in identity politics through writing. By identity politics, I mean expressing my own affinity to feminist theory, “AmeRican” culture, and literature through rearticulating discussions about these topics and forming my own conclusions about what it means to be a Puerto Rican woman, politically connected to her cultural and gendered self.

In her personal narrative called *Daughter of Bootstrap*, Luz Del Alba Acevedo describes how the rapid period of industrialization known as “Operation Bootstrap” changed the way she thought about her culture and gender. She reveals:

My identity reflects the contradictions brought by the process of socioeconomic and cultural transformation that shaped my life experiences and determined the opportunities that paved the way to the woman I have become. The woman I have

become, in turn, represents a site of political struggle over the definition of self that synthesizes the national and transnational dimensions that determine my experience as a Puerto Rican woman regardless of the geographical spaces I occupy. (Acevedo, 2001, p. 147)

Acevedo's unique experience as a Puerto Rican woman was affected by the economic policies at the time she was growing up. Acevedo recognizes that where she grew up does not fully constitute her cultural identity. She admits that to define herself, she had to recognize the political and social factors that shaped her experience and how these in turn affected the way that she understood herself as a Puerto Rican woman. Acevedo demonstrates the complexities of the Puerto Rican narrative and the ways that it is connected to the social, political, and economic circumstances for each individual. Acevedo's experience as a "daughter of the bootstrap" is linked to this crucial time in Puerto Rican politics. Her definition "as a Puerto Rican woman was in connection with the historical events affecting her position as a woman, a professor, a daughter, a wife, a Puerto Rican. Not a mother, not an American, not a migrant anymore, but a wanderer at heart" (Acevedo, 2001, p. 146). In defining her identity in connection to Puerto Rican politics, Acevedo argues that her individual experience is not separate from the political conditions in her country.

In her "critical personal narrative," Myriam Torres explains that as a Latin American immigrant she often experiences a high level of suspicion from others. She explains in the following excerpt: "I often find myself in situations in which I am prejudged negatively and therefore have to prove that people are wrong in their assumptions about me. It is evident to me that my physical characteristics of Latina and Spanish accent in English are enough to unleash their negative assumptions about Latinos and immigrants" (Torres, 2004, p. 130). Like countless

other Latinas, Torres faces discrimination based on preconceived notions about her ethnicity and gender. This causes a feeling of powerlessness and shame, forming questions about the meaning of labels and associations to “Whiteness” or “Other.” In her article, Torres talks about the importance of the “critical personal narrative.” This style of writing is intended to express personal experience while forming connections to the structure in our society. Torres reflects this struggle: “As bell hooks argued, multiple oppression such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexual orientation confine some of us who are pushed to the margins. Moreover, she suggested that those of us that are pushed to the margins need to construct meaning for their lives from the perspective of those marginal places” (Torres, 2004, p. 131). This means if you are marginalized, you have to find where you fit in the puzzle, correct the negativity toward you, and empower yourself and others. In other words, we all have to find what is just through experiences with discrimination, racism, classism, and sexism to prevail against them.

Feminism through Narratives

To talk about the Puerto Rican experience in an all-inclusive way, it is useful to examine the unique experiences and perspectives of Puerto Rican women, including the work of Puerto Rican feminists. After taking many women’s studies courses, I was not surprised at the lack of reference to Latina feminists. I struggled with the fact that I could not relate to either White or Black feminist theory because I simply did not belong in either of those categories. There are many Latina feminist writers who contribute to feminism—I just had to dig to find them.

“Feminism has nearly as long a history in Puerto Rico as in the United States, but colonialism has prevented the full-grown development of movements, cultures, and communities of resistance that have been possible for women in the United States” (Morales, 2004, p. 103). Latinas have many stories to enrich our lives. My thirsts for such stories have drawn me to study

the writings of women like Gloria Anzaldua, Esmeralda Santiago, Aurora Levins Morales, Ana Castillo, and Edna Acosta-Belen.

Caridad Souza talks about her frustrations as a woman of color: “It’s really a feat to be a Puerto Rican woman in the late 20th century. You barely exist outside of your own imagination except in the form of vicious stereotypes” (Souza, 2004, p. 114). Souza is not different from the many women in the United States who are having a conversation about who they really are with society. In challenging the stereotypes about Latinas, they are changing the way people interact with them.

Souza argues, “I’ve learned to question everything. People have their own sense of meaning, and they also make meaning as they move along the trajectories of their lives. I learned that I don’t have to accept their meanings, especially if those meanings were constructed to devalue me. My own meanings, perspectives, and interpretations are just as valid, just as useful” (Souza, 2001, p. 122). In reading this narrative, I realized that my own experience is important in this research. As a bilingual, working-class, and politically aware Latina, my own narrative is also important.

One important aspect of Latina feminist discourse is to examine the feelings of isolation, otherness, and vulnerability Latinas face as a part of an ethnic and gender group often discriminated against or, worse, ignored. The corrective side of feminist discourse is the opportunity for women of color to engage in a conversation once denied to them. Once women of color organized themselves into the feminist movement, they began to create literature that spoke about their stories in a society that once excluded them.

Aurora Levins Morales argues, “Latina feminist scholars found a way to gather and talk, we threw away the agendas and began making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the

stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else” (Morales, 2001, p. 32). These narratives were a way for Latinas to share their unique circumstances, cultures, and identity within broader feminist dialogue. They created a new way of reading about women of color altogether.

Morales talks about the agency feminism has allowed her in her *testimonio*:

It has been in the critiques of feminist women of color of their own cultures that I have found the space as a Puerto Rican woman to speak most truthfully about my real experiences, not the ones I was supposed to be having as a U.S. Puerto Rican. That it was here that I could freely name the ambivalences and contradictions, had a space to fiercely defend Puerto Rico from colonialism and still claim what I love about the United States, while still critiquing what I find unbearable about Puerto Rico. (Morales, 2001, p. 103)

Feminism allows for the articulation of culture, history, and aspirations for women of color. For a long time, these women did not have a room of their own; this discourse offers them room to express themselves. I can personally take comfort in a language that speaks about my upbringing, my interactions with the world, and my reality.

Edna Acosta-Belen explains why Latina authors choose to express their *Latinidad* in the following excerpt:

While men who tend to be conceived of or conceive of themselves as universal beings devoid of gender, perceive their oppression in U.S. society on the basis of ethnic, racial, or class differences, women additionally endure all the elements of negation and marginalization that come from sexism. Therefore, for women

writers, gender will be an essential factor in the search for expression and articulation of their own identity. (Acosta-Belen, 1992, p. 990)

Women writers have an affinity to express their unique stories because they counteract patriarchal values and practices through language and persuasion. It is an opportunity to contradict the sexist ideologies that suppress and marginalize women. For a female writer, writing is not just an intellectual exercise—it is also a way to advocate change and challenge the past notions about women. “In constructing herself as a subject, a Latina must dismantle the representation of stereotypes of her self, constructed, framed, and projected by the dominant ideology” (Oboler, 1992, p. 19). This means Latina feminism has a responsibility to respond to ideas about Latinas that are misrepresented, fictionalized, and oppressive.

Therefore, writing is a tool for women to empower themselves and also confront sexist notions from the past that have been printed, reprinted, and imprinted into our consciousness. Sexist standards in our society are identified as oppressive, manipulative, and inappropriate but still function in our lives today. If we can use these corrective ideas in everyday language, we might be able to fully engage ourselves in reflecting progressive thoughts.

Methodology

To uncover the ways Latinas express their unique experiences through writing and feminism, I researched the issues of race, gender, and class, as well as Puerto Rican culture and the discourse centered on its history, politics, and relationship with the United States. My research also led me to interviews with nine women of various Puerto Rican backgrounds. I asked them questions about their experiences with Puerto Rican culture, womanhood, and *Latinidad*.

The target populations for this project were first-generation women from varying socioeconomic backgrounds who have migrated to the United States. The groups of women were from diverse racial backgrounds located in Brooklyn, New York, and Denton, Texas. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to give the women freedom to share stories with which they were comfortable. I asked questions regarding migration, feminism, Puerto Rican culture, American culture, and reflections about Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth. These questions were meant to help me better understand how these women coped with two distinct cultures, how they defined their identity, and whether they were influenced by feminism.

Participants were recruited through the "snowball effect." I developed contacts through networking with people on the college campus, specifically through personal relationships with mentors. I also contacted a few organizations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area that target the Puerto Rican population. I made some contacts via e-mail and phone, explained the purpose of my study, and how I was able to reach them. Once they agreed, I met with them or spoke over the phone. The data were collected during the periods of April through July 2008. I gave the participants the opportunity to do the interviews in either English or Spanish; in most cases, the women spoke both languages. Most of the interviews ran for about 1 hour each, were audio-taped, and later transcribed for accuracy.

I was interested in conducting interviews to discover how Puerto Rican women conceptualize gender expectations, family obligations, and cultural differences in the United States. These interviews helped me identify the types of attitudes some Puerto Rican women have about their cultural heritage, feminism, and politics in Puerto Rico. I had a subjective view about being a Latina in the United States, but in doing this research I grasped a more diverse understanding about the Latina narrative.

Findings

Language

One crucial aspect of acculturation is to learn the native language. In the case of the Puerto Ricans, speaking English on the mainland is vital for survival, but Spanish is the language of their ancestors. For some individuals, the mother tongue is embedded in the expression of cultural heritage. I gathered interesting comments about the importance of learning English on the mainland for personal success, and the need for Puerto Ricans to know Spanish as part of the Puerto Rican tradition.

The youngest informant, Mariel, expressed, “Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m tied to the culture. Every Puerto Rican should speak Spanish” (personal communication, July 2008). She has internalized the idea that to be an “authentic” Puerto Rican, she had to be born in Puerto Rico and know the Spanish language. In contrast, one of the other participants (Nina) had difficulty fitting in when she first moved to the United States. She explains this cultural barrier:

School sucked, I didn’t know any English. I just had never been in an environment where I had to speak it or where I was exposed to it all the time. So that was hard. I was lucky that my sister was working as a secretary for an ESL program at her university for international students, and got me a scholarship to the program the summer before school. I was able to take classes intensively but still remember I didn’t feel prepared to start and was begging my parents and sister not to put me in school, I didn’t want to go. ‘I don’t want to go I’m not ready.’ My ESL teacher was, like, you’re ready you’ll be fine... you’re ready. It was really tough. It was just emotionally, mentally, and physically draining. I was so tired; I had to concentrate so hard just to understand. (personal communication,

July 2008)

Nina moved from Venezuela at age 13 and had to learn English as a second language to successfully attend school in the United States. In this quote, we can sense how difficult it was for her to adjust into American culture. On the other hand, Mariel was born and raised in New York and had the advantage of learning English at an earlier age. This was at the expense of mastering her native language, which in turn made her feel like she was not Puerto Rican enough.

Angelina and Sara argue that knowledge of both languages is vital for success on the mainland. Angelina argues, “Being bilingual is an advantage” (personal communication, July 2008). Sara finds “value in bilingualism.” They believe knowing the two languages has opened up many more opportunities for them. In having knowledge of both English and Spanish, they are able to acculturate into American culture with relative ease while maintaining a connection with Puerto Rican culture.

Ambiguous Identities

Mariel states, “I’m proud of being a Latina. I represent the culture by talking to friends about the things we do” (personal communication, July 2008). She also admits she feels “different” from Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico because she was not born on the island. This question about who is an “authentic” Puerto Rican is an ongoing debate among some Puerto Ricans. The following were some of the responses about identity:

As Puerto Ricans, we have ties to the U.S.—our relationship makes it easier—I spoke English, so that helped, language was an advantage. Our legality shapes the dynamic with the U.S. We do not go through some of the pain like other Hispanics. I married an Anglo and so I was able to grasp aspects of American

culture. There were challenges, definitely. But I don't think they were racial or ethnic. They were cultural. (Angelina, personal communication, July 2008)

Some of the Puerto Ricans I met had a chip on their shoulder—they would declare: You don't know what we've been through here in the mainland. (Sara, personal communication, July 2008)

I am very proud of my culture. We are different from other Spanish groups. I feel very proud of who I am. If someone says something negative, I say something right away. (Sara, personal communication, July 2008)

I'm not a real Puerto Rican. I'm a 'Nuyorican' [a blending of the terms "New York" and "Puerto Rican"]. I don't know my culture; I have to research it to tell my kids. (Rose, personal communication, July 2008)

I always identified as Venezuelan because that's where I was born. For me, my mom was Puerto Rican. I never felt like I'm Puerto Rican or I'm part Puerto Rican, at least not while I was growing up in Venezuela. If anything, when I think of my experience in terms of my identity with Puerto Rico, I feel like it's very similar to the experience of Mexican Americans here who discover later that their identity is Mexican, because I was never really close to the Puerto Rican side, you know, and didn't realize that until I came here. I think for a younger generation of Puerto Ricans that leave the island when they are very young or are born in the

mainland [but] still Puerto Rican—it's just so much more complicated to come to terms with that. And so I feel uncomfortable making a decision about an issue that I wouldn't be that much affected by. I don't see it as my issue, I think had I been born in the U.S. or had I been born and raised on the island or even raised in the mainland, I would think about it differently. So I am undecided. (Nina, personal communication, July 2008)

The varying responses about cultural and national identity demonstrate how different the Puerto Rican narrative is depending on personal life experiences. Each of the women expressed a different outlook about their ethnicity or alliances with a specific culture. This was based on whether they were born or raised in Puerto Rico or the United States. It is also based on their socioeconomic backgrounds including race, class, and education. Most of the women came from a lower- or middle-class background but moved up the social ladder through higher education.

Gender Buster

One of the many issues addressed in feminism is traditional gender relations. Historically, Latinas have taken on rigid roles as caretakers because of the family dynamics in Latino homes. With increased opportunities in higher education, gender roles have become less rigid. Women are now relatively free to choose untraditional routes rather than feeling strictly obligated to domestic life. In the following excerpt, Nina shares what her mother went through as a professional in the late 1950s:

I think it was really hard for my mom because she was in that generation where these changes were just happening, and to happen to a Latina... It was happening in the U.S. too, where women's roles were changing... In a broader scale, I think it happened in Latina America, and so my mom was a working mom before there

were a lot of other working moms. My mom earned more money than my dad. My dad never got a degree, and so he had a lot of odd jobs. I'm sure that was a source of tension, but I'm sure my dad was probably ridiculed—'oh yeah your wife is feeding you' kinda thing. He wasn't the provider of the family, and sometimes he would try to compensate for that. There was verbal abuse in the family—my dad would say stuff to my mom that he shouldn't have said. As I got older, I was, like, wait a minute—you know? (Nina, personal communication, July 2008)

She then talks about her aunt and compares both women:

My *titita* [aunt] had a much more quiet way of getting things accomplished. I mean, she was a secretary for *Governador* [Governor] Carlos Romero Barceló. So, I mean that she managed to do that while married to someone very traditional... I think was a pretty big thing for her. I think my mom, just personality-wise, has always been much more vociferous, and so my mother will tell you what she thinks even if you don't ask her. But my *titita*, unless you ask she wouldn't talk... So just different ways of surviving, I think. (Nina, personal communication, July 2008)

These women defied gender expectations at a time when women were hesitant to question the status quo. Nina's mother exemplifies a strong independent woman who crossed important boundaries. Her aunt is one example of the way women overcame rigid lifestyles by being a wife at home but also joining the workforce. These boundaries were necessary to overcome for women to gain independence, freedom to work outside the home, and resources for their own financial security. These are the types of issues feminists address in their many works

of literature, walks of protest, and struggle for equality.

Female Role Models

“What are your thoughts about Puerto Rican women in your life?” This is one of the questions I asked the women I interviewed. I wanted to gain some insight on who had shaped the way they identified themselves. Nina replied:

Twenty years ago, I would have said I don't want to be like them. I don't want to be a bitch. I don't want to be the kind of woman that gets lead by her husband. I don't want to be the kind of woman like my mom who, yeah, changed things but still felt guilty as she was working—that she wasn't quite the Latina wife. But now I see it differently; I'm like, wow, what these women were able to accomplish, you know, raising their kids both from my mom's side and my *abuelita's* side, and in very difficult circumstances. For my *titita*, not having any kids while trying to fulfill this role of womanhood I'm sure was very difficult. And I look a lot like my mom. Yeah, whether I want to or not, I'm my mom.

(Nina, personal communication, July 2008)

In this quote, Nina addresses the pressures that some women endure when they attempted success outside the home. Although they crossed many boundaries, they still faced guilt, resentment, and judgment from others. Nina's mother and aunt demonstrate the resilience and courage it took early on for these women to change the structures of society. These small steps paved the way for women today, who are able to choose what they want without the same pressures or limitations from the past.

The Political Side of Puerto Riqueñas

One other important aspect of this research was to find how these women viewed the status of the island, whether Puerto Rico should remain a commonwealth or not. Some of the women were willing to share their opinions; others were hesitant. In the following paragraph, Nina shares some of her insight and the way that her mom has influenced her to be active in politics:

I have been the one to be the most politically involved (in my family), so ideologically and culturally, I am a big supporter of Puerto Rican independence. It is a stronghold of colonialism that very few Americans want to accept. On the other hand, then there's the question of economic sustainability, and there's the question of citizenship. The fact that Puerto Ricans as Latinos are U.S. citizens—that's a big deal, especially in today's political conditions. I think that gives the Puerto Rican community some leverage that other Latino communities don't have. Puerto Ricans are the poorest Latinos, so just because they are U.S. citizens does not mean they are reaping the economic benefits. At the same time, it gives some claim to be able to support and push forward that cultural and ideological independence. I think that where other Latinos are being questioned, 'well you don't have the right to ask the U.S. government because you are not citizens,' Puerto Ricans can say 'Hell yeah, I got a right, I got a right to demand.' The short answer to that question is my heart says yes—independence—where my head says, whoa, is it the best rational thing to do? (Nina, personal communication, July 2008)

Nina raises many important questions. There are historical and cultural reasons why Puerto Rico should become an independent country. But the economic and political reasons seem

to hold more weight when speaking in practical terms. The idea that it should be independent seems idealistic. There are many factors that must be taken into account. Some of these factors include the economic well-being of the island, the psychological and emotional affect on its people, and the question of how the island would handle itself after centuries of foreign rule.

Ana had a powerful message: “The struggle of Puerto Ricans is that we allow ourselves to be marginalized, politically and socially, we don’t understand our psychological dependence” (personal communication, July 2008). This is such an interesting statement because it addresses the overall Puerto Rican mindset. Sara and Angelina reflect the varying opinions about this dependence:

Supposedly, we are U.S. citizens; we allow companies to settle on the island. I came to view it in the sense that it’s just a territory. We are far away, not like Massachusetts, different language, good infrastructure in good shape, but we are treated like second-class citizens. I don’t want to say that, but there is some truth to it. I don’t know whether we can survive independently but, at the same time, we stayed... a part of the U.S.—conquered people. There are movements, but I don’t know if it’s realistic. It’s complicated; there is not an easy answer to that. I remember being very idealistic when I was in college, I wanted Puerto Rico to have its own identity. I didn’t want to depend on the U.S. As I got older, I have thought, why not get statehood? Why not be full-fledged citizens? (Sara, personal communication, July 2008)

Sometimes, that can lead to a lack of incentive. I think people are afraid to become a state. There is a lot of skepticism about independence—there is not a lot of support for it.

The dream is further and further. The two valuable formulas are to become a state or remain the same. (Angelina, personal communication, July 2008)

Sara reflects a growing distaste for the status of the island as a commonwealth. Meanwhile, Angelina seems to view the status as one of the only possibilities for the island. Ana seems to look at the status as a psychological problem among Puerto Ricans. The women demonstrate the great division among Puerto Ricans about the status of Puerto Rico. There is not an easy answer to this question because of the radically different ideologies among Puerto Ricans.

Conclusions

These five themes correspond with the literature review. What I found was that the women had a sense of humor and pride in their answers. They were given the chance to explore this side of themselves I call identity. I was fascinated by their eagerness and inspired by their passion for Puerto Rican culture.

The participants seemed to follow feminist ideals without outright labeling them as such. This is the feasible aspect of feminism, that all types of women may adopt the fundamental ideas within feminism according to their experience. How can feminists of all backgrounds include women who may not connect to a feminist standpoint?

In terms of the relationship between nationality and gender, I believe that the women were in touch with their cultural heritage and womanhood. Although they did not label themselves as feminists, they understood that to empower themselves they had to insist on having better relations with men at home, work, and the rest of society. Rose brought up an excellent point: the difference between “us” and “them” is not always antagonistic. Many people feel comfortable about learning new cultures; therefore, the discussion about cultural differences is not necessarily conflictive.

I also found that identifying as a Puerto Rican is beyond ethnicity. This cultural heritage also entails a great deal of history, politics, and the struggle to become an independent state. Although Puerto Ricans have not attained complete sovereignty, they have managed to represent themselves as ardently as possible.

One other aspect I found in conducting this research is that the descriptions of the Puerto Rican experience in the academic language are very different from the language of the average working-class Puerto Rican. The fact of the matter is the intellectual project is coming from a privileged position. At the same time, it allows for successful Latinas and other previously ignored groups to speak about their experiences. Once given the opportunity, they began their own discourse based on the language they knew: the narratives, struggles, and joy in their lives.

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