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# "La Feminista Nuyorquina" Contextualizing Latina Experience in the Space of Radical U.S. History: Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Presence in New York City

Maribi Henriquez

*Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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*“La Feminista Nuyorquina”*

Contextualizing Latina Experience in the Space of Radical U.S. History:  
Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Presence in New York City

by

Maribi Henriquez

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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**Thesis Adviser**  
**Michele Wallace**

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**Date**

**Approved**

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**Executive Officer**  
**Matthew K. Gold**

---

**Date**

**THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK**

**Abstract*****“La Feminista Nuyorquina”*****By****Maribi Henriquez****Adviser: Michele Wallace**

*International migrations of women to the United States had a pronounced urban bias because cities offered women the best chances to work for wages, whether they came alone or in family groups. Immigrant women were more likely than men to arrive in East Coast ports, especially New York – Donna Gabaccia*

Latino immigrants have been entering the United States through New York City since before the inception of the country’s history. Political history on the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba includes influential interference from the United States. Latinos began mass migration to the U.S. in the 1940s and most heavily through the 1970s and 1980s. Radical U.S. History (i.e. National Protests of Vietnam War, Black and Chicano Civil Rights Movements, Women’s Liberation Movement) carved a space for Latinas assimilated in U.S. life to participate in the counterculture and political movement. However, their cultural existence and personal attachments to the islands traditions provoked a big challenge in being able to fully participate and be accepted as influential in U.S. political history. I have concentrated my research to contextualize the experiences of Hispanic Caribbean women to respect differences in historical, political, economic and social status that make up the Latino racial identity and migration pattern.

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## Introduction:

### *A Lunch Date with Mirtha Quintanales*

My favorite passage in the “Writings by Radical Women of Color” anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, is written by Latina Feminist Mirtha Quintanales. In a letter titled “I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance” addressed to Barbara Smith in January of 1980, Cuban-American Mirtha Quintanales patiently and courageously attempted to add another layer of complication to the women of color struggle. The Latina experience is multiracial, multicultural, and translated from multiple socioeconomic statuses and political histories. The journeys of Latino migration to the U.S. are not the same.

She addressed her main concern in the following passage:

The Black woman’s commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up “colonized” in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing (always a very tenuous situation – since acknowledgment of ethnic ties is inevitably accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice *and* various kind of discrimination – the problem is not just personal, but “systemic”, “political” – one more reality of American “life.” (Anzaldua, Moraga, 1983; 151)

I had not come across a passage that explicitly expressed the sort of struggle I felt before this. My experience in the United States afforded me the “women of color” struggle of both racism and sexism, but if I did not speak Spanish out loud I could pass for “white.” I constantly get asked if I am of Italian or Greek descent, “something Mediterranean.” “I’m Dominican” was usually met with the question “where’s that?” when I was growing up and now it is more of “I thought you were Puerto Rican” or “you don’t look it.” It does not come as a compliment to me,

I am not proud at how ambiguous my presence is amongst my non-Latino peers. I knew I needed to find a way to meet this woman because as a person of Hispanic-Caribbean descent that speaks to the experience of Latina feminists from within the women's movement, I could identify my place in American history with her.

I tracked Quintanales down with the digital guidance of Google search engine and about a month later I received an email saying she would gladly meet me. We had lunch at the University and I began my spiel about how important finding her work was for me. "I can't relate to the Chicana struggle. It is the most popularly taught in my feminist classes as an attempt to engage Latina feminism, but I find holes in the syllabus that should be filled with works of Hispanic Caribbean women writers." She sympathized with my struggle and told me of the time she went to California to meet with Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, "They didn't know [anything] about Caribbean Hispanics" she laughed, "But they were interested. They were not separatist feminists like some other Chicanas."

Although I am Spanish-speaking and labeled Latina, like the honorable Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, my heritage is not Mexican and I was not raised on the West coast. Beyond that, I am only a second-generation citizen of the United States and not well assimilated to American identity because of my strong cultural ties to the Dominican Republic. Being raised on the other side of the Hudson River, I have always lived a 20-minute train ride away from New York City history and culture. I have witnessed the cultural community of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem, most lovingly known as *El Barrio*, put up their own bookstore of Latino Literature and create museums of the Hispanic Caribbean art as a way to expose history and leave footprints. I have accompanied my parents as they voted for Dominican presidential elections in New York City and waited by the television all night watching the action as it



happened over *there*. I have been introduced to Cuban politics by women in my mother's beauty parlor and followed along as the World Wide Web brought the realities of everyday life on the island to my attention via blogger Yoani Sanchez's popular site *Generacion Y*. I have discovered the islands through my experience living *here* as much as I have visiting *there*. These were the women and experiences that participated greatly in forming my identity as Latina and feminist. Though my experiences have strong national ties to the Caribbean and its culture, I take with me the yearning for freedom and prosperity that lives within its diaspora. That is the first thing I adopted as an American value.

I contend that there is missing history when Latina Feminism in the classroom is synonymous with Chicana Feminism and does not take into account the different waves of migrant history and its relationship to the United States. I constantly resist the urge to depend on anecdotes to clarify that the experiences of Latinas include complex issues of racism, colorism, homophobia, sexuality, language, and religious and political structures. That our issues are transnational and cannot be understood via traditional American social constructs of gender, race, and sexuality (See Pessar and Mahler, 2003:816). In developing this work I modeled my approach from Pessar and Mahler's central ideology in "Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In," "Our model takes as its foundation the obvious but not always stated fact that people – irrespective of their own efforts – are situated within power hierarchies that they have not constructed." I identify as a Latina and a feminist of Caribbean descent. It is through this thesis that I will begin to challenge the ambiguous attitude of understanding the history *there* (on the Caribbean islands we refer to as "home," "motherland," or "*patria*") in relation to the way the women migrants from these countries have built national and gender identity around the history *here* (on the island of Manhattan, commonly referred to as New York City, NY, USA).

The 1960s and 1970s is a time period heavily dipped in counter culture and revolutionary spirit and protest. People of color in America were unapologetically questioning American ideologies. In the words of Historian Terry Anderson, it is a time in which Americans are forced to ask, “was America racist, imperialist, sexist?” (See Anderson, 1995). Protests against the Vietnam war and civil rights movements like the Black Power Movement, Chicano Movement, and the Women’s Liberation Movement were highly influential to young Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban revolutionaries in New York City who joined and created forces to support political issues on the islands and in their neighborhoods. Some examples of causes were the encouragement of the Cuban revolution, the independence of Puerto Rico, protest of housing conditions in Latino neighborhoods, vouching for Black and Puerto Rican Studies in colleges, development of community programs, and working towards proper health care and bilingual education in public schools. The Latino cause was unique in its deep historical connection to immigration and a strong cultural identification that relates directly to the home country and not U.S. influences.

Though influenced by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., many of the Latina revolutionaries in the United States working towards the Puerto Rican movement listed revolutionary leaders of Latin America like Argentine born Che Guevara and Puerto Rico’s own Pedro Albizu Campos, Puerto Rican feminist leaders Luisa Capetillo and Blanca Canales as their main influences. They supported the Cuban revolution as a modern day movement that defended and demanded rights for the people. “The people” stands for the non-elite, working and lower class people who live in marginalized neighborhoods. The revolution is for those who believe in equality and fair treatment for the people. Political scientist, Eric Selbin, has a particular interest in revolutions and has the following to say in terms of understanding the historical event:

“Revolution is not something people consider lightly and inevitably with fear and trepidation; it is also associated for many with struggles for food, land, peace, justice, access to resources and to opportunity, a home, health care, and education. For many, revolution suggests ‘better must come’” (Selbin, 22). This thesis carries a revolutionary sentiment as my reader is expected to consider oral histories captured through interviews, testimonies, and memories as academic material worth acknowledging and telling as history of some rather revolutionary women, otherwise known as Latinas *feministas*. This thesis is my attempt to “create a space” for Latina feminists in academia and adding to the discourse a greater understanding of what it means to identify as such. In the following pages I use my mother’s narrative as a script to introduce the perspective of Hispanic Caribbean women, as I cannot touch upon the histories of all Latina perspectives in this thesis, and explain the context in which they understand themselves in diasporan spaces and communities.

## I. A Story of Immigration

*My mother also passed on her courage, hope and love for our people. Her adventuresome nature had her riding motorcycles in the forties, and when the economic conditions in Puerto Rico became bleak she left for New York without knowing any English. She was not going to let her two children go hungry – Elizabeth Martell*

My mother's ancestry consists of Italian and Spanish born grandparents who she never had the opportunity to meet. She is a "white" Dominican woman with a head of black hair that does not curl in the slightest. These small details are of importance and open arms acceptance in one country, but the cause of community backlash in another country. She was born in La Vega, a town southwest of the capital city Santo Domingo. My mother considers herself a city girl as she was raised in the capital; there is "a clear difference" according to my mother. She was not sure she wanted to get married after seeing how her older sisters dedicated their lives to husbands, their children, and their homes. She was *progresiva* (progressive thinker) not quite *feminista*. She planned to become a nun to fulfill a life with responsibility to no one else but herself, God, and her community.

She wasn't quite aware of any feminist thinking or movement until her first semester of college. She was asked by a gentleman if she believed in *la liberacion feminina* (women's liberation) that was popular in the United States, to which she responded that her culture was different and she believed that women could be educated and exercise their degrees but essentially they were of the home, men were of the streets. She became interested in imagining a world where women did not have to serve men food first, or iron her brother's clothes because of cultural traditions, where home could be a space in which both sexes worked equally. When I asked my mother if she was aware of the feminist movement that occurred in the Dominican

Republic, she said “No, I grew up in the 1970s under the Balaguer regime.<sup>1</sup> People did not want the feminist movement to grow in our culture, my mother was *machista* (she showed preference to her sons), and I grew up in the church.”

She then met my father, a *trigueño* (refers to wheat-colored skin tone) from Moca, a town just south of La Vega, while she worked at her uncle’s toy store. My parents met a brief time when in Santo Domingo, she was 17 and he was 19 with his visa in toe leaving to the United States of America in two weeks, it was Summer of 1979. They formed an intimate friendship via letters and phone conversations. My mother accepted a marriage proposal via telephone and wedding plans were made through more letters. They would meet Christmas Day of 1982 in Santo Domingo and get married. She had just turned 19 years old and my grandmother, with 13 children to tend to, did not fight to keep her home. Every penny she made at the time went to my grandmother, but she would make even more money when she arrived at *los Estados* in December 1983 where she would remain responsible for sending her family money.

There have been plenty of times in which my mother has expressed regret of migrating to the U.S. She dwells on the fact that she was about to enter her second semester at the University, she was in art school, and was working a government job as a secretary...but she fell in love with a man whose ambitions for himself and his family did not fit on the island. My mother’s first job in the U.S. was at the factory where her sisters- in-law worked and she did not last one year there, she decided she was going to take advantage of being in the U.S., which she consistently refers to as the “capital of the world” in the telling of this story. She started asking around for help to find schools where she could study a trade. She was a secretary in the D.R.

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<sup>1</sup> Joaquin Balaguer was the Dominican Republic’s succeeding President after the assassination of Dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961. Balaguer was handpicked by Trujillo and was in rule of the country for 12 years after his death.

and thought she could do the same here. She was met with responses of “here, Hispanics belong in factories” (where she was highly frustrated by the fact that she could not use the restroom until lunch time).

Mom does admit she felt privileged in the Dominican Republic, where people did not believe she was Dominican because of her appearance. She was an anomaly of the good kind but she did not know the extent of what that would mean *here*. When brought to the U.S. people constantly asked my father if she was American and he would respond, “She’s more Dominican than you are.” The only mother figure she had in the U.S. was her mother-in-law, who reprimanded her for wearing 1980s fashionable garments such as tube tops, which revealed her shoulders. My mother tells with great gratification of the time she arrived to a party with my father and he refused to dance with her because the dress she wore had no sleeves. She did not look as if she was a “married” woman and they left angered with each other because she would not cover her shoulders. Looking for support from the women in her new Dominican community she was met with comments such as, “that’s what you get for being a *malcriada*”. *Malcriada* refers to children who are not well behaved, insinuating they are not well raised. She was also met with women who hastily referred to her as *Doña Bella*, which translates to “Mrs. Beauty.” “They had a problem with me because I was a woman who thought she owned herself and I liked fashion, what do you think of that?”

The New York City metro area had a substantial amount of Dominicans, but the women continued their cultural traditions, for the most part, wherein gender roles were strictly kept within the family. After that event, she became determined to learn English and to get her driver’s license with the encouragement of a friend she found within the family circle who had gotten here before her. My mother became a cosmetologist and in beauty school she was

mentored by a second generation Puerto Rican woman who sent her to work in an Italian-American beauty parlor because she would “fit in.” She had a privilege she didn’t quite understand and was afraid she did not know enough English to work at the parlor. She felt she was doomed for failure but it was a job, so she went. She learned on her first day that she had “Italian privilege” and the owners willfully helped her with her English and she built substantial clientele. She thinks back to the times when her bosses would look at my father and tell her “you can do better.” She recalls, “I really did not understand what they meant, and over *there* your father wouldn’t be discriminated... He did have a pretty stellar afro at the time, so I thought that was why.” My mother understood hair politics. Racial politics in the United States are completely different than in the Dominican Republic.

Eventually, she started her own business. Her beauty parlor became the first stop as more of her sisters-in-law arrived one by one to *los Estados*. She was influenced greatly by second-generation Puerto Rican women who worked as English teachers in the community, were members of her parish and clients of the beauty parlor. She recalls giving new *Americanas* three rules to making it here: learn English, go to school to get an education or learn a trade, and learn how to drive. “It was the 1980s, Spanish was not spoken everywhere like it is now, and these women would depend on their husbands for a trip to the doctor or the supermarket because they did not know English.” My mother became a pioneer within the Jersey City community. She proved my father and his family wrong countless times and was known for helping women who were recent arrivals from the Dominican Republic to the NJ/NYC area. She received phone calls from mothers on the island who were afraid their daughters would not take advantage of opportunities in the U.S. During her experience, my mother was confronted by men who wanted her to stop helping their wives and by women who submitted to their husband’s wishes to stop

their friendship with her. She distanced herself respectfully. My mother took on the responsibility of settling immigrant women in the community through her strong presence in family affairs, church, and the beauty parlors.

My mother was raised in 1960s and 1970s Dominican Republic and did not come to the United States until 1983. She engaged greatly with the church during her formative years as a way to negotiate her liberation of self and cultural tradition of maintaining proper gender roles for the success of positive familial structure and relationships. She remembers occasions where her older sisters begged her not to become a nun, but she could not see the glory in becoming a wife like them and she knew she could not criticize the role of women out loud. It is during this time that the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation Movement and Sexual Revolution is taking a radical tone and challenging double standards head on with demonstrative protests, community organizing, petitioned constitutional amendments, and promotion of women's sexual health and educating on preventative measures. The non-Latino and "American" feminists, as my mother would refer to them, were deliberate in their work to empower women as independent agents who participated in all aspects of life that men did be it political, economical, social, or sexual. As progressive as my mother's thinking was, it is my belief that she would have deemed this time in American politics as chaotic and shocking had she been fully integrated in the society at this time.

There were not many Spanish-speaking people who were in the media visibly advocating and participating, especially in the attainment for women's liberation, to show how my mothers had any relation to the causes. How could she understand that these women were aware of her concerns as a woman with cultural values founded on preserving the family? How does the women's movement define sexual freedom and feminism in a culture where girls and women are



never innocent or victims, rather they're bodies are the cause for excitement? How do you explain racism to a woman who did not perceive her husband or his family as "black" until her first interaction with racial discrimination is in the United States? She, naturally, cannot foresee the possibility of connecting to these causes before she can see herself as an American.

Carmen Delgado Votaw and Ana Peña, both Latina feminist and activists and representatives of the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women and Midwest League of United Latin American Citizens, respectively, are interviewed for Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago's book, Breaking Ground and Barriers: Hispanic Women Developing Effective Leadership. Votaw and Peña are in attendance at the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1976 when interviewed by Bonilla-Santiago where they communicate the struggle for the women's movement to connect with Latina women in the following statements,

"Most Latinas are very traditional minded...They are reluctant to openly express women's movement views that to them seem outlandish. Their culture hasn't prepared them to discuss things like sexual freedom"  
– Carmen Delgado Votaw

"We know that there's discrimination because of sex, but we still haven't gotten beyond discrimination in education, in housing, and in other vital areas...they don't welcome you. They don't say 'You are a part of us; when we talk about sex discrimination, we include Spanish-speaking and Blacks.' What they say is, 'When we talk about discrimination, we mean all women.' But it is not so"  
– Ada Peña (Bonilla-Santiago, 1992: 40)

The story of my mother is not incredibly unique, as there many immigrant women who in the absence of their family members had to create a support circle to learn the ways of surviving American life, but she did have a "racial" privilege lurking in her ancestry that allowed her a certain ease to economic success. My mother took the opportunity to learn all that she could and participated in paying it forward. Her story can be placed in contrast to that of a woman who is

*trigueña* and together present the different dimensions of challenge encountered by Latinas in the basic entity of discovering how use of language, culture, economic and social politics here would and could be different than back at home. In the slightest, learning English was a radical act for many first generation Latinas while teaching their children Spanish and maintaining culture within the home was regarded as a necessity. For others, in succeeding generations as well as first, speaking Spanish in public was a radical act used purposefully to attract other Spanish-speakers and to also defy the racial and bodily definition of “Latina.”

Culture includes bringing with them the traditional gender roles of the islands to their private homes and Hispanic enclaves in the United States. Latinas actions were policed simply on account of identifying to their home culture, but I question the extent to which they were able to break free of these traditional and gendered ideologies within the radically driven sociopolitical scene of the United States? For the basis of this thesis, I will be referring solely to the histories of Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban (the three largest Latino/Hispanic groups in the United States after Mexican-identified people) Hispanic<sup>2</sup> women as my Latina subjects in New York City. New York City, as a major diasporan hub of the East Coast, has been the center of protest and community organizing around racial, gender, and economic infused politics. My goal throughout this paper will be to contextualize their experience alongside historical moments such as the pinnacle years of sexual revolution and second wave feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the black power movement. Along with vouching for social and civil issues in their resident homes, these Latinas, with a close connection to their home on the Caribbean Sea, also protested in solidarity and nationalist pride with the people and nations they left behind.

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<sup>2</sup> Term Hispanic is in reference to Spanish-speaking, Spanish-heritage identified people.

Evidently, assimilating fully to the United States proves to be problematic. I argue that the issue of assimilation does not only remain in Latinas who are first generation Americans, but persists and carries onward to their daughters and so forth who find themselves in a place of negotiating a healthy balance between two home cultures. Writer Judith Ortiz Cofer has a personal narrative titled “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria” wherein she describes the confusion of negotiating mixed messages and cultures that did not match. Ortiz Cofer refers to a particular example concerning clothing,

As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor. As a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper señorita. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too “mature” for our age (Cofer, 204).

The only genuine Puerto Rican cultural history she has in the United States remain in the teachings of her mother, which seem to land her in places of struggle the older she gets. Later in the essay Ortiz Cofer spends time observing the business attire of her Puerto Rican female classmates and compares to styles of her white female classmates. In this scene she illustrates for her reader the internal conflict produced by the stereotype of the Puerto Rican woman, “The way our teachers and classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on.” As a Latina, she does not own her body and is sexualized before she can do or say anything deemed ‘sensual’. Her stereotype is based off the exotic and eroticized image of island women and Caribbean life and culture. Meanwhile, she needs her body to survive and be respected in American context. In Latin American cultures women wear more “provocative” clothing due to the culture of warm weather

and coastal beaches, this image is not as restrictive on the island. There is also a control of gendered social interactions where in order for a woman to warrant respect she must learn to dismiss men's flirtations, resist urges to entertain sexual acts, and practice abstinence to prevent pregnancy as per the Roman Catholic religion and church.

The battle to reach for the American Dream without losing her Puerto Rican roots is endless for Ortiz Cofer. Even in her older age, where she is a writer of multiple published works with people who read and recognize her literature, her migration defines her physical appearance and creates a moment in which she is confused for a server at a restaurant and not as an author (See Cofer interview). Reading the first line to another personal narrative by Ortiz, "The Story of My Body" always stops my breath in attempt to reset my mindset. Ortiz Cofer, in the same perspective as Mirtha Quintanales, flatly states, "I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico, but become a brown girl when I came to live in the United States." A cultural phenomenon she could not have fathomed as a young girl migrating to the Land of Dreams. Being "brown" in Puerto Rico is not the same as "brown" in the United States, where the dichotomy allows a limited space for black versus white politics. This affects the way in which these women choose to participate in creating their spaces within American social politics. How do they defend their national identity? Can they afford to put their nationality before their sex? They risked being called traitors to their nationhood and the cultural family and religious structure that defined *latinidad* here in the U.S. and there on the island.

## II. *Testimonio* is “Theory in the flesh”

“Creating spaces for Latina feminisms – *latinidades feministas* – mean confronting established and contested terms, identities, frameworks, and conditions that have emerged in particular historical contexts. In charting our own course through these contested terrains as Latina feminists, we have attempted to expand traditional notions of ethnicity and nationalism, question Eurocentric feminist frameworks, and situate ourselves in relation to the activism and writings by women of color. At the same time, as Latina feminists we have felt the need to create our own social and discursive spaces” (The Latina Feminist Group 2)

My formal education allowed me the opportunity to encounter people who introduced me to texts such as *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, and *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* by The Latina Feminist Group. Moraga has described *Telling to Live* as “theory in the flesh,” and I have built this thesis from the oral tradition of Latinas telling their accounts of women’s history in the U.S. First person narrative is a necessary component of contextualizing the complex identity, Latina, as it is not transcribed to fit academic language, rather academia must learn to include it as valuable material in their work and classroom syllabi. Its delivery comes from a most genuine space of needing to be painted in to the feminist portrait of American life. In their 2001 anthology, The Latina Feminist Group give much value to the anecdotal experience as evidence that has a necessary political component that is yet to be considered in gratifying civil liberties to all American people. These works are of the lives of people who must document their own experience; they are the only ones who can truly write it best. The Group makes clear the need for testimony in regarding the Latina experience, “*Testimonio* has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (The Latina Feminist Group, 3). It is valuable to capture the essence of the many American dreams carried by Latinas, of the discontent realities encountered once they arrive

*here*, and consider what are the successes attained as Latina women in America. The Latinas, as part of a cultural group in the United States, are attached to a “motherland”, also referred to as *patria* in the Spanish language, that comes with its own cultural understanding of gender roles specifically linked to the formation of a nuclear family structure. Similar to the experience of other women of color (African-American, Asian-American, Native-American, etc.) the Latina experience, as one of migrant women with differences in history and language and important cultural ties to the family structure, was not taken into consideration when defining the purposes of the feminist movement.

The Chicana movement, though relative Latina experience because of the Spanish language, has a particular history to the United States that has resulted in their long presence *here*. Unlike the Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban Latinas, Chicanas have generations and generations of women living in the U.S. and mostly reside on the western hemisphere of the country. They also identify differently than other Latin American women by popularly stating they are “Mexican-American” women, “Tejana” or “Chicana” women, depending on their discourse in the U.S. Other women of Latin American heritage only have the “Latina” or “Hispanic” American constructed identities to subscribe to when speaking about themselves politically. I have narrowed my focus to the Hispano-phone Caribbean countries, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba, to introduce a perspective that I recognize as hidden history. The women who emigrated from the Caribbean to find refuge in the United States had the opportunity to come voluntarily, like my mother, or involuntarily, like many Cuban-Americans seeking political asylum from Fidel Castro’s regime. Diasporas from Latin America, when considered individually, have historical timestamps that come with a multitude of reasons.

### III. Identity Politics: The Need to Retain Distinct Identities

*In the multiethnic context of my childhood I constantly had to negotiate the politics of being a Puerto Rican girl. This meant that wherever I visited friends, I was subjected to a certain scrutiny by wary mothers who wanted to assure themselves I wasn't that kind of Puerto Rican*  
– Caridad Souza

Upon entering the U.S. Latinos from different countries begin to interact with one another and differentiate based off cultural behaviors, adopted racial stereotypes, and family structures (single parent homes versus nuclear family structure). The question, “where are you from?” though inconsiderable of American politics, is tell-all in the Latino community. While conducting research on this topic I noticed how much of the Latina/o literature in mainstream libraries has found structure in 1980s and 1990s into the turn of the century, and more often than not allowed the Latina/o surname to be synonymous with the Mexican-American/Chicano cause. Much of the literature I have reviewed has been based on the construction of the Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban racial and historical identity in the U.S., which strongly impacted the East coast due to the Caribbean islands’ proximity to major cities like Miami and New York City. Kevin Johnson in his publication “Tension and Differences within the Latino Community,” regards this issue directly, “The history of subordination of Mexican Americans differs from other Latinos, such as Puerto Ricans, for example. Although commonalities exist, such as their treatment as ‘foreigners,’ they may be ‘racialized’ in different ways and, in effect, may be of different ‘races’ ” (Delgado, Stefancic 1998; 490). I am deliberately addressing the importance of visibility of other groups in the 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of Latino presence in America.

In the 1960s, Latinos were urged to identify as “white” on the Census due to their being of Spanish (inevitably European) descent, subscribing them to be another group of “ethnic white”, but only on paper. While they upped the count to raise the status of “white” in America to remain as majority, the differences of their racial presence in the United States stood clear as

anything but “white.” Jorge Duany’s research, “Reconstructing Racial Identity: Ethnicity, Color, and Class amongst Dominicans in the United States and Puerto Rico,” provides a foundation for understanding how Caribbean Hispanics translate their racial identity to North American terms. He carefully examines how Dominicans and Puerto Ricans ‘racialize’ residents on the island and compares their terms to standard racial terms here. He also looks at the communities and social status of the migrants as a result of their racial presence and experience in the United States.

Duany concludes,

The racialization of the Caribbean immigrants in the United States and elsewhere places them in a disadvantageous position in labor and housing markets and excludes them from hegemonic cultural practices of the receiving nation-states. . .the immigrant’s’ lower-class standing reinforces their public perception as ethnic and racial outsiders. The intersection of ethnicity, color, and class makes it harder for Caribbean diaspora communities to shed their multiple stigmas (Duany, 1998; 166).

In the 1960s black racialization was determined via “one-drop” rule, which if applied to Hispano-phone Caribbean countries (Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba) complicates the U.S. politics of racial identification and undoubtedly, the Latino versus Hispanic identity. There were many times during this research where I thought of the many Latina/os who were assimilated enough and involved in black struggle or anti-black struggle, to compensate their ambivalent and multiracial presence in the United States. In the 1970s Latino presence enters the government in a census category created for people who are Spanish-speaking or considered of Spanish-heritage.

Identifying as “Hispanic” or “Latino/a” has long been the subject of misunderstanding the differences of persons from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. “Hispanic” is generally used in the United States as a term to identify all people whose ancestry is from a Spanish-speaking country. “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” are pan-ethnic



and consequently pan-racial terms. I'd like to clarify that there are significant historical and cultural differences amongst Latin American and Hispanophone Caribbean countries that allow for diversity in culture, immigration, and understanding/participation in politics. This is especially problematic in attempting to historicize the Hispanic/Latino experience in American context. As Suzanne Oboler highlights in her article "Hispanics? That's What They Call Us," users of the term "combine longtime native-born U.S. citizens and residents with more recently arrived economic immigrants who may have crossed the border yesterday" (Delgado, Stefancic 1998; 3). Latinos in the United States usually identify with their distinct nations in social settings.

As a Latina/o, when asked, "where are you from?" I have an understanding that I am not being asked about where I reside, I am most likely being asked about my heritage, because my American nationality is not sufficient information to explain my physical appearance. I respond that my parents are from the Dominican Republic," it is the easiest way to identify. Rarely do I hear my Latino peers identify as Hispanic or Latino outside of politically concerned settings like the classroom, government offices, or even doctor's offices. The term does not carry the weight of our individual cultural histories. I have an understanding that my racial make up is "mixed." My father's ancestry is more embedded in African heritage than European as he does not have the direct lineage to Europe my mother has. Because I am aware of the history behind my nationality, I do not identify as "black", which is not a term Dominicans use to racially categorize themselves although my history *here* certainly does reflect the experience of a "black" or "colored" person. If I had to categorize myself on the American scale, I would have a hard time doing so, as I would also take into consideration being policed by other Latinos whose

generations in the United States go back further than mine and are offended by the “H” word. In Caribbean culture, it is not quite the same (See more Rivera, 2003).

As a second generation American who has been raised closely tied to Dominican heritage and the understanding of cultural differences amongst Latin American and Hispanophone Caribbean nations, it is a challenge to identify solely as Latina or Hispanic. Growing up I was very aware of the cultural difference between my *dominicanidad* amongst the presence of other Latinos, and was raised to identify as *Hispana*<sup>3</sup>. By my *dominicanidad* I am directly speaking to my black racial presence in the face of other Latinos, according to Duany’s 1998 findings this is precisely the stigma developed by Dominicans who migrated to Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup> Similarly to my *testimonio*, Caridad Souza, a member of the Latina Feminist Group, gives her testimony of growing up Puerto Rican amongst other Latinos in her Far Rockaway, Queens neighborhood.

She writes,

The experience of living in a predominantly Latino area, as opposed to a predominantly Puerto Rican area, provided me with a nuanced sense of Latin American racial, national, and class dynamics. [...] I also quickly perceived that Puerto Ricans were at the bottom of the hierarchy of Latin American groups as well. I didn’t learn until I was a teenager the specific class dimensions of our racialization or how sexualized Puerto Rican women were among Latin Americans (Latina Feminist Group, 117).

Jorge Duany would render Souza’s personal example and mine as a direct result of creating transnational awareness. Latino politics include being mindful of American racial identities and

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<sup>3</sup> “Whereas North Americans classify most Caribbean immigrants as black, Dominicans tend to perceive themselves as white, Hispanic, or other (including the folk term *indio*...). This contradiction between the public perception and the self concept of Dominican migrants is one of their key problems in adapting to North American society” (Duany, 1998:148)

<sup>4</sup> “Puerto Ricans traditionally adopt a flexible definition that recognizes multiple and heterogeneous racial groups, especially among intermediate types. Still, the dark skin color and other “African” features of most Dominican immigrants, together with their low occupational status, place them at the bottom of the Puerto Rican stratification system” (Duany, 1998:165)

structures as well as attaining knowledge and maintaining respect for Latin American construction of racial identities. Duany states, “Transnationalism interacts with ethnicity, race, class, gender, and other variables, complicating the process of identity formation. Among other consequences, transnational migration often transforms the cultural definition of racial identity” (Duany, 149). Latinas are often left to their own devices when identifying racially in the U.S. We have a very clear understanding that we are “in-between” the white and black racial category because our Caribbean heritage proudly stands as a mixture of both, aside from our strong claims to aboriginal, Taino Indian roots. But when we are confronted with the racial politics of Latin America, which is not fully understood amongst Latino citizens who have spent most of their life in the U.S., we are left to negotiate our presence in Latino spaces as well as in the spaces of other races. The translation of Latin American cultural and racial makeup has sloppily melded into an umbrella category *here*. Other cultural identities formed amongst women are *Latinegra*, Afro-Latina, and Afra-Hispanic to reflect the presence of black, or darker-skinned, Latina women (See Cruz-Janzen 2001). This is crucial to forming a full understanding of *latinidad*. Another important factor of identity politics that will be encountered throughout this paper is the significance of first, second, and possibly third and fourth generation Latinas.

#### IV. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba as Victims of U.S. Imperialism

##### *Puerto Rican Migration Meets Barrio Politics*

*The case of Puerto Rico is distinctive because of its persistent colonial status and the sheer magnitude of its diaspora. Although Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917, the legal definition of their identity does not entirely correspond to their self-perception as “Puerto Ricans first, Americans second” Jorge Duany (2000: 5-6)*

On July 25, 1898 U.S. troops invaded the island of Puerto Rico, in what Latin American scholar Jorge Duany calls the “Spanish-Cuban-American” war<sup>5</sup>, and never left. It was not until 1917 that American citizenship was given to all the residents of Puerto Rico but the constitutional rights remained for those who would live on the U.S. mainland (See more in Duany 2011). In 1948, Puerto Ricans elect their first governor Luis Muñoz Marin, whose campaign focused on economic reform and restructuring political relationship between the United States and the people on the island. The government launched a program, Operation Bootstrap to boost industrialization on the island, one of the poorest in the Caribbean, and invited American companies to invest assuming the island could not live solely off its agrarian resources. The raw materials would be imported and the finished product would be exported to the U.S. market. In return for providing jobs the companies would receive tax exemptions and assistance for infrastructural costs (See Women in World History).

Women were highly recruited for these new positions, changing the structure of the family to include two working parents where the mother could possibly become the breadwinner, and a need for extra childcare. During this time the state status of Puerto Rico was still up in the air and the issue of voluminous birth rate was a concern for developing public policy. Muñoz, fearful of any interference with the plan for industrial modernization on the island, sets up the administration to educate about birth control and even encourage surgical sterilization and

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<sup>5</sup> See Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders*

promote migration to the U.S., referred to as mainland. Women continued to participate in labor movements, and protested for equal wages and better treatment.

The 1950s began with a little bit of a vengeance. Civil Rights movements on the mainland are up in arms over the government's interference in conjunction with companies' coercive and forced treatment of women's health rights over the newly developed sterilization policy. Women were caught in the middle of the two states, understanding that they were racially ostracized in the grand scheme of U.S. politics and they were considered cheap labor as they did not receive equal pay to men, but it was a job. Also during this time, the U.S. declares Puerto Rico a commonwealth, and multiple Nationalist uprisings begin to take place in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Ironically the word commonwealth translates to *Estado Libre Asociado* in Spanish, which literally means Free Associated State. The Nationalist leaders would not give in to the confusing commonwealth status placed by the American government.

One revolutionary leader is woman, Lolita Lebron, who along with three men led an attack on the U.S. House of Representatives on March 1, 1954. About 240 members of the House were debating an immigration bill when gunshots were released and Lolita's voice cried "Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" translated to "Long Live Puerto Rico" and unleashed a Puerto Rican flag. According to reports by the Washington Post, Lebron had expected to die on that day was arrested and in her purse was a handwritten note where she wrote,

"Before God and the world, my blood claims for the independence of Puerto Rico. My life I give for the freedom of my country. This is a cry for victory in our struggle for independence. [...] The United States of America are betraying the sacred principles of mankind in their continuous subjugation of my country."

Lebron's efforts were mainly patriotic and not gendered in their fight for the liberation of Puerto Rico. Her historical effort was not clouded by the traditional acceptance of *machismo*,

though the underlining effects would remain in home cultures and show its strength in later generations of revolutionaries in the U.S. like in that of the members of the organizations in the Puerto Rican Left Movement (Core groups: El Comité, Young Lords Party, Puerto Rican Student Union, Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the Movement for National Liberation, the Armed Forces for National Liberation, the Nationalist Party, the Puerto Rican Independence Party) . These politically in tuned, radical advocates for equality took their lead from observing the work as part of the Cuban revolution and Civil Rights movement and began to organize to demand more attention be given to the issues of the Puerto Rican cause both here in the United States and there on the island (Torres, Velazquez 1998). They aimed to demand freedom and respect on both ends of the spectrum, but the cause was extremely broad and tensions between island-born Puerto Ricans and second-generation ‘Nuyoricans’ heightened as social unrests and personal histories *here* and *there* did not match. After World War II there were an estimated 887,662 Puerto Ricans living in the United States with about 85% residing in New York City. In the 1960s Puerto Ricans made up about 80% of New York’s Latino population

### ***The Cuban Exodus***

*Some of the nation's newcomers are not immigrants, but rather refugees or asylees, applicants who must satisfy a different set of standards to gain entry: a "well-founded fear of persecution" if they return home" (Berta Esperanza Hernandez-Truyol, "Natives and Newcomers" Latina/o Critical Reader 125)*

On June 22, 1898 Cuba was invaded by the United States when the USS Maine exploded in the Havana harbor, beginning a Spanish-American War. The United States formed a military government in Cuba from 1898 to 1902, when Cuba gained its independence. Cubans have been immigrating to the United States since 1911. Nevertheless, After World War II and into the late 1950s many more Cubans immigrated in search for political asylum, fleeing the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, which lasted from 1935 until about 1953 when leftist Fidel Castro led a guerilla movement and took power on January 1, 1959. The Cuban revolution showed the world and in particularly the United States that "power in its backyard was not absolute" (Torres, Velázquez, 1998; 3). The revolution began an exodus over the next few decades and caused about 1.2 million Cubans to emigrate to the United States, Puerto Rico, and other countries (See Duany 2011).

There was a clear difference amongst the first group of immigrants to the ones from the 1980s and 90s who would be known as the "Mariels." The United States created a refugee program specifically for Cubans in exile and allowed them the benefits of American citizenship. Lisandro Perez highlights the significant difference between the first decade of Cuban immigrants and second in his 1986 essay, "Cubans in the United States." He gives us his break down of the statistics, "Among the 1960-62 Cuban immigrants, 12.5 percent had completed four or more years of college, a level attained by scarcely 1 percent of the Cuban population as a whole by 1953. By the early 1970s, the exodus of the upper sector was essentially complete..." (Perez, 1986: 129).

The second half of the great Cuban exodus was carried by the Mariel entrants, due to internal conflicts with people seeking asylum from the Cuban government in the Peruvian embassy. Castro announced that anyone who wanted to flee the island and seek asylum would be allowed to leave Cuba. On April 20, 1980 the announcement that Cubans would be allowed to depart from the port of Mariel and met by Cuban-American relatives was made, thus beginning the cycle of mass immigration to the United States that lasted until October 1980. It was soon discovered that Castro had purposely allowed members of “undesirable” groups permission to leave via Mariel boatlift. By “undesirable” he included groups of prisoners, homosexuals, mental patients, and prostitutes.

This group automatically was racially diverse and perceived as a lower-status class than the Cuban groups of the first mass exodus. They were nicknamed the “Marielitos” and stigmatized upon their arrival to the United States, here begins the preferential treatment of the light-skinned immigrants and the closing of the Mariel boatlift (See Susana Peña, 2007). Susana Peña addresses the intentional motives of Fidel Castro’s regime to rid the island of homosexual men, as they were harmful to the Cuba he envisioned as “desirable” and perfect. In her essay, “‘Obvious Gays’ and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift,” Peña emphasized the underlying effect of the medias spotlight on those deemed the “undesirables,” “Racialization, class stigma, and sexual deviance were thus embedded in coverage of the Mariel migration, reinforcing the notion that these migrants were no loss to Cuba and posed a potential problem for the United States...After the 1959 Cuban revolution, the homophobia and heterosexism that already existed in Cuba become more systematized and institutionalized. Gender and sexuality explicitly entered political discourse ...” (Peña, 486). During the 1980’s the United States had its own bouts with accepting the



homosexual community to the social strata of gender normativity and the familial structure. This was not solely a Cuban issue. The influence of the AIDS epidemic, outcry of national homophobia and promoting of heterosexual family structures as “nuclear” and normative, was crucial to understanding a radically infused sexuality politic and revolution within the United States.

***Progress Dressed as a New Yorker in the Dominican Republic***

*Starting from almost zero, in the span of a decade Dominicans became on the largest new immigrant groups in New York, and New York became one of the largest Dominican cities. – Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof*

In 1613 Juan Rodriguez was the first non-native to arrive and settle in New York City. He was a Latino and man of African blood who was from a city in the Caribbean island later known as Santo Domingo, *Republica Dominicana*. These findings were noted by the Dominican Studies Institute at City University and fairly recently has resulted in a 59-block stretch of the upper Manhattan Dominican hub to rename Broadway, Juan Rodriguez Way in commemoration of this rich immigrant history<sup>6</sup>. After the settlement of Rodriguez, Dr. Ramona Hernandez and her team have been able to identify 5,000 Dominican families who entered the U.S. through Ellis Island, which undoubtedly included women and children.

The Dominican Republic was originally a Spanish colony known as Santo Domingo and became independent, the first time, from Spain in 1821. It was soon occupied by Haiti from 1822 to 1844, the year which the country celebrates its February 27 independence day, and placed under Spanish rule again in 1861 until 1865 when it is granted its second independence from Spain. The United States played a major role in occupying the Dominican state both directly and indirectly. The U.S. planted their seed in its first occupation between 1916 and 1924, participated in strengthening the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo from 1930-1961, and culminated direct influence in the infamous invasion of 1965-1966 (Duany, 2011). But its relationship with the United States is longstanding and highly influential amongst the Dominican people, so much so that the dream of progress is not established in reaching the capital city, Santo Domingo, rather it

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/uptown/dominican-immigrant-non-indian-manhattan-settler-article-1.1175017>

is in reaching New York City and getting to attain the American dream (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2004). Hoffnung-Garskof explains the influence more explicitly,

United States movies, music, and consumer products also leaked into the small national market. Representatives of the United States occasionally made earnest, if self-serving, attempts to alleviate poverty, build a modern state, and establish a democratic polity in the Dominican Republic [...] the United States held a powerfully ambivalent grip on the imaginations of Dominican elites, who both admired and deplored the neighbor that so dominated them (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2004; 40-41).

In the 1960s, after the assassination of Trujillo, the United States worked to prevent a “second Cuban Revolution” by sending aid, advisors, and U.S. Marines to Santo Domingo. During that time the U.S. government built large visa offices in both Santo Domingo and Santiago and increased the numbers of visas it granted. In the late 1970s, the Dominican Republic was extended 20,000 visas under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. The Dominicans had developed a footing in New York in the 1960s and this was their grand opportunity to reunite with family and pay the opportunity forward to future generations of Dominican-Americans.

The Hispanic Caribbean diaspora is fueled directly by the United States. Castro and Trujillo dictatorships began with aid and military training as part of the U.S. meddling to protect its interest and assets in the Caribbean. Amongst the millions of migrants were women who sought to raise children with their culture’s traditions, but not lack of what they would learn to determine as “endless possibility” found in the United States. My mother does not say “capital of the world” lightly during her testimony. Her eyes open wide and she speaks with her hands when she repeats the phrase for emphasis, it was especially important to translate people’s aspirations to come here for the opportunities and luxuries the capitalist society promoted. People on the

island had experienced U.S. domination and wanted to chase the illusion that they could be liberated from poverty and government control by working the American power machine. To make dollars meant sending money back that could put whole families in a bigger house, pay children's catholic school tuition, and purchase medicine. It is important to note how American identities form for these particular Latinas before their migration to the United States even begins. The need for capital is built mostly around the ideology of protecting family.

## **V. *El Salon de Mami*: How Latin Women Make It in America**

*Use to be/ Ya could learn a whole lot of stuff/ sitting in them/ beauty shop chairs/ Use to be/ Ya could meet/ a whole lot of other women/ sittin there/ along with hair frying/ spit flying/ and babies crying/ Use to be/ you could learn a whole lot about/ how to catch up/ with yourself/ and some other folks/ in your household./ Lots more got taken care of/ than hair.../ - Willi Coleman, "Among the Things that Use to Be"*

I had the pleasure of witnessing my mother's beauty parlor be the first place many newly arrived Latinas came to tell their stories and search for communal support from women who had "made it" here. It was important for me to include the discussion of beauty parlors as a place of refuge and as I researched I found the sociological work of Ginetta Candelario concentrated in this very space. Just in her choice of poem as opening score for her work (above excerpt from Willi Coleman's "Among the Things that Use to Be") did she validate the experience I witnessed and she documented in her essay, "Hair Race-ing: Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production." Though it is concentrated as an experience of Dominican women in New York City, a lot of the participants and loyal members of these communities are Latinas from different countries. Candelario focuses her study on Dominican beauty parlors because they are most popularly known as being at the center of Dominican women's migration and they are crucial to the maintenance of Dominican beauty ideologies in the United States.

Beyond being an entrepreneurial space where Dominican women flourished independently from their husbands, it was the first community organization for the advancement of women that I ever witnessed. Candelario goes into more detail by explaining, "Work in the New York Dominican beauty shop, while not entirely autonomous or especially well-paying, makes possible greater autonomy and flexibility and higher earnings and community status...the Dominican beauty shop represents a female-dominated entrepreneurial sector, somewhat parallel to the male-dominated Dominican bodega (grocery store)" (Candelario 132). Here, women were

the bosses and knew how to run the business best. Women talked about whatever they wanted. For the most part the women came to each other to discuss personal situations and it was only in *el salon* that I heard them freely discuss sexuality (within the context of heterosexual relationships) without placing shame, which spilled into the public space of educating their sons and daughters of sexual health. *El salon* was extremely resourceful for these women who just had to figure out how they were going to survive and send money back to their families, this is how they can prove they are living their purpose in America. Every employee had a special talent or connection and that became their area of expertise. For example, my mother was infamous for finding low-rent apartments in decent neighborhoods of the city for women with children, and it was because she used her connections to members of her parish for help. I vividly remember the sharing of people's stories and the willingness to help one another. There was constant movement planning and organizing in the beauty parlor; it was open Monday-Saturday 9am to 6pm with a steady flow of walk-in customers, loyal regulars, and neighbors.

Many women connected and found employment in *el salon* because it was a Latina-centric community where these women could empathize with each other's situation, whether it was personal, economical, or political, nothing was off limits or under scrutiny. I heard countless stories of women who married men for citizenships. It worked out for some, who were later able to get divorces and live their lives as average American women, and some were taken advantage of as men took their money and ran right before they had to file paperwork for residency. Many women found themselves in situations of domestic violence and as I think back to the reactions of the group I realize that these women knew it was not acceptable and they said things like, "in this country we have help." *El salon* became a cultural hub wherein these women preserved their language and music, shared news, created networks and bonds with Latinas from other countries

and who had more experience *here*. It was in *el salon* that Latinas discussed the role of women as evolving because they were in the U.S. The women could contemplate American ideologies in the context of Latin American culture and had a better understanding of how they could empower themselves and other women. The beauty parlor was an outlet from the harsh reality of living new beginnings in the U.S. and mothers shared these experiences exclusively with their daughters who would integrate the weekly routine in their lives when they became young women (See Candelario 2000).

*El Salon* also served to uphold certain beauty politics obtained on the island. There were women who came in at the same time and day on a weekly basis for their blowout. As a child I was amazed at their diligence, some women literally could not live without getting their hair straightened. Other women came regularly to perm their hair, and they were reminded they were due for a process as soon as new growth came in. This reminder does not go unnoticed to me because like Candelario I now understand the underlying implication that was being sold to the women. The idea of accepting your natural hair, or your “naps” being deemed professional, beautiful, while the natural state of Dominican women’s hair was unfathomable. It was certainly not “Hispanic” of them to embrace natural hair and so the women could not identify based on cultural stigma. Candelario explains, “The explicit work of the salon, the transformation of a Dominican woman’s hair into a culturally acceptable sign of beauty, hinges the customer’s sense of self and beauty on certain racialized norms and models. The Dominican salon acts as a socializing agent” (Candelario 135). Beauty politics were actively discussed and maintained in this place and it became a problem for me as I began my personal quest for defining womanhood. It was then that I noticed just how American I was becoming, and I had a big problem with that as well.

The *pelo malo* versus *pelo bueno* acceptance (because no one ever debated the causes of good or bad hair) was a sign of us, especially as Caribbean women, denying the parts of our heritage that alluded to negritude. In her study Candelario elaborates stating, “There are clearly racial connotations to each category: the motion or bad hair implies an outright denigration of African-origin hair textures... Thus, hair becomes an emblem of the everyday engagement of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening.” As a second generation American citizen, first-generation college-bound young Dominican woman, I wanted to wear my culture on my sleeve in defiance of American racial politics. The last thing I wanted to do was straighten my hair on a weekly basis, like *el salon* culture and my mother had imposed on me, so that I could hide the only resemblance I had to prove my non-whiteness. I wanted to be a tad radical, so I began applying the notion of everyday politics and started with my hair. I certainly did not realize the commotion that would ensue within my community, my family, and even digitally to my family in the Dominican Republic, simply because I cut my hair.



## VI. A “Gringa” Story Evolving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

My mother gave birth to me in Hoboken, NJ in 1989. I was the first girl born into my father’s side of the family, which was the side I grew up living with in a three-stacked apartment, family home. My older brother and I were the light-skinned members of the family, not entirely because of the actual pigmentation of our skin but because we had straight and wavy hair that was “manageable” and as a girl I was able to run around carefree. My father was one of nine siblings and only three of them were women. I did not understand the implication of being able to “run around carefree” until my younger girl cousin was born and coming to age about four years after me. My aunt would tell her she couldn’t wet her hair when we went to the pool, so she had to stay in the shallow end while I was swimming with the boys in the deep end. We were all forced to get our hair done every Saturday at my mom’s beauty parlor, where most of my aunts worked, and we had to make it last throughout the week so we looked “presentable” at school. My little cousin Pamela and I always cried at *el salon* because we had to sit there all day and be the very last costumers who got the irritated staff working on their hair. Pamela went through more pain than I did and one day, when I was eight years old and she was about four or five, she asked me to cut her hair. I did exactly as she asked me to, thinking it was the right thing to do. Needless to say, when my aunt discovered my baby cousin’s braids on the floor and saw school scissors in my hand she became extremely upset with me. I had ruined her daughter’s hair.

I like to look at that moment as a metaphor for my adolescence. I really just wanted to free my girl cousins and I of the painful blowouts we had to get every Saturday. It was not fun being forced to have long hair, because it was my dad’s favorite, and have two or three women tugging at my scalp to finish the work quicker. I always complained, and I became even more

nonconformist as I entered high school and college because puberty had granted my curly hair wishes. My girl cousins and I all went to parochial school, especially for high school, because we had to learn to be ladies and concentrate on advancing our education. Pamela got permission to go to the co-ed Catholic school, but I went to the all-girl school that was run by nuns. It was not a bad experience, but it was the first time I felt I was indeed a “minority” and was called “Spanish girl” on a regular basis. My worst experience at that school was the time the other “Spanish” girls and I were speaking in the hallway where we usually spoke in Spanglish, which was much easier than trying to translate phrases to English. We were stopped by another “Spanish” girl and she reminded us we were in America now. “Here, we speak English,” she said.

From that moment on it became my goal to not assimilate as much as that girl did. I chopped off my long hair at 18 years old, and it went from my waist to my chin. I told my mom it was because I was not going to go to a beauty parlor every weekend and I was not interested in learning how to blow-dry my own hair. It was a waste of time, and for the first year of my life I was going to let my curly hair (which I prayed really hard for when I was 11) live. My first big chop was not as dramatic as the second time I cut my hair two years later. I had taken a couple Women’s studies courses and thought of myself as invincible while on campus. So I took to my hair again, the symbol of all righteous and Hispanic femininity, and this time I would risk almost identical resemblance to my brother.

My mother refused to cut my hair the way I wanted to, so I went to a beauty parlor outside of the family and got a pixie cut which warranted me many nicknames like “white girl” or “*macho*,” which translates to male in Spanish. I expected the “*macho*” name calling, because the women in my family had already begun to tell me that I “wanted to be a man” but “white

girl” really came as a surprise to me. My male cousins had donned me “white” because my appearance was no longer Dominican, as if a Dominican had singular and particular features. They began making fun of the way I spoke when I did speak English and it was not a plus that I was the only member in the family that was in college and living away from our inner city home. My cousins equated “white” with “intelligent” and I got the title based on my new appearance, which now highlighted things I always enjoyed such as reading and writing. Soon, my books became the blame for my newfound sense of feminism and daring attitude. Ironically, I spent most of my college career intimidated by the classroom setting, where I was once asked by a meticulous professor to get a writing tutor at the beginning of the semester due to my obvious “English as a second language” face. I replied that I was a writing tutor at the school’s writing center and could surely keep up and take care of my own assignments.

I was always the “Spanish” girl who tried to make sense of her social standing in classes that only addressed the white versus black experience in American racial politics and assumed the rest of us were immigrants. I was certainly not “white” in that setting, and posed a challenge many professors could not address. It was just “too complex” to discuss.

It upset me greatly to be thought of as the family “gringa,” because being too American denigrated me to the status of cultural “traitor” and being untrue to my family and our values. My mother constantly defended me by talking about how I was going to write a book one day as my great contribution to this world. But, on the other hand, it was my righteous “American-ness” that allowed me the audacity to believe I could demand a right to equality in my classroom experience, my work, and within my community. My hair became a symbol of my need to liberate from such strict policing of national and gendered appearance.

My “gringanness” became the gateway to questions like, “who do you think you are? A man?” quite frequently amongst both men and women in my family. The older generation seemed to be complacent living amongst the troubles of being ghettoized people who had to accept life on the margins. They had developed dreams of going back to the island, but for some Latinos that could not be their dream. For many Cubans and Puerto Ricans, who were born and here or saw no future for themselves on the island, “the way things were” could not be accepted. This was their home and they sought to be part of the larger struggle for civil rights. Iris Ofelia Lopez wrote a *testimonio* called “Reflection and Rebirth: The Evolving Life of a Latina Academic” and exposed the influential power of the civil rights and feminist movements were in formulating her observations of the Latina experience.

“The Black Power movement was meaningful to me because I was able to learn about my own history and gender inequality, which made studying personally relevant. Courses in Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies provided me with the first forum in which I could articulate and express my ideas and listen to others put into words my experiences of erasure and social injustice. Some of the ugly truth about the world started to make more sense as I learned about capitalism, class, race, and gender oppression” (The Latina Feminist Group 78).

It is through the work of Black leaders and revolutionary organizations that we can begin to open our eyes to the realities of being Latinas. We could begin to relate to the cause because we recognized our heritage and culture as a result of being colonized peoples and our mixed blood held the bitter taste of betrayal for centuries. Who were we and where did we belong? The appearance of these U.S. radical movements was about to place our curiosity on the map and open a trail to allow us to organize and form our American presence.

## VII. Civil Rights Movement en *El Barrio*, East Harlem, Spanish Harlem (1970s)

*The story of our women as leaders in the movement is barely known. Books and films usually project a male-dominant view. But we were there, throughout the organization – Carmen Vivian Rivera*

A lot of Puerto Rico's most significant literature (both fiction and non-fictional) focuses on the *vaiven*, the in-between state of constant migration back and forth from *there* to *here* and back *there* again. The ambivalence reflected in this work was meant to address the unrest the Puerto Rican people felt, not quite American. They could never be fully American as *el vaiven* allowed them to maintain their close connection to the island and the racial tensions found in American society turned them off. But the issues on the island are not the same at the issues they acquired as a strong Latino community here. As generations of Puerto Ricans are born in the United States, their connection to American soil is inevitable. *El Barrio* becomes a cultural staple of New York City Hispanic life and suddenly Puerto Ricans have a home and an identity *here* they must pioneer and fend for.

The Puerto Rican Radical Left Movement began in the late 1960s with prominent organizations: The Young Lords, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, El Komite, the Puerto Rican Student Union, the Movement for National Liberation, the Armed Forces for National Liberation, the Nationalist Party, and the Puerto Rican Independence Party. My main access to this information is an anthology, The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora, edited by Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez. Their main goals were similar, though some groups turned their energies working towards the independence of Puerto Rico, they wanted equal access to services, healthcare, and education from the American government. They, too, were humans living *here* and their neighborhoods deserved to be tended to. The Puerto Rican Left were influenced greatly by other radical and militant organizations such as The Black Panther

Party. The influential group took to public spaces to defend the rights of oppressed people and neighborhoods (For more see Tyner, 2006). I use the personal accounts of the women of the Puerto Rican Left, Esperanza Martell, Carmen Vivian Rivera, and Iris Morales, to tell a small part of the history of radical Latinas and how they got involved in the movement.

***Esperanza Martell: Discovery of nationhood***

*I have survived all the ills of growing up Puerto Rican and part of the working class of New York City. I have experienced physical abuse, rape, alcoholism, and racist education system – a system, that when it first learned my name told me to change it. When I spoke Spanish I was sent to the principal’s office, and when I said, “I want to be a nurse,” I was given cooking and drawing classes.*

Martell began her political journey, like most young Latinas, as a translator for the older residents of the community. She was a crucial component for people gaining access to financial assistance, information on their children’s education and then their own, and obtaining proper healthcare. It is a large responsibility to have at a young age but it was necessary work that was limited to those who knew the language well. As Martell explains she arrived in New York City in 1949 at the age of four, it is safe to assume that she had to start her work early what with the influx of immigration from Puerto Rico in the late 1940s and 1950s. She was born in Puerto Rico and came to the United States at the age of four. She was not too young to notice the stark difference that life in New York City would provide and therein laid the wonder if growing up in Puerto Rico would have been better. Martell is explicit about this point in the telling of her story, “The experience of being uprooted from my homeland has had the most profound impact on who I am today; and it is the basis for the deep, justified rage I feel. I am a person without a country. I do not fit there or here, but I carry a deep love for my birthplace, Puerto Rico – the place that could have been my home” (Torres, Velazquez 173). Nevertheless, Martell grew up American and was present for protests against the Vietnam War, watched as the media presented violent

pictures of the effects of the Civil Rights Movement down South, and mourned the death of John F. Kennedy. Her first political act during was during her graduation and Julia Richmond High School in 1963, where she and a group of students decided they would not salute the American flag in protest against the “hosings, killings, bombings, and general terrorizing of Blacks in the South” (175). She later decided it was important for her to develop herself by going to MPI (Movimiento Pro Independencia – Pro Independence Movement) meetings and learning to understand the cause for Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the United States. Her journey began as a way of reconnecting with her roots and fully gauging the responsibility of being Puerto Rican the implications of that national identity.

She gained experience working in an anti-imperialist movement in revolutionary Cuba in 1970. She came back determined to join a revolutionary organization. She recalls going through her options, “MPI was out because I was ‘too New York.’ The Black Panthers’ ten-point program did not address the independence of Puerto Rico. My only option was El Comité. Their political program was similar to the Young Lords’ and included an antidrug policy” (179). Martell became part of the steering committee along with a former U.S. Marine from the Dominican Republic, Federico Lora, and ex-Jesuit from Puerto Rico, Americo Badillo. She was in charge of outreach and community organizing and worked as an assistant editor of *Unidad Latina*<sup>7</sup>. She was chosen as a leader because of her previous hands-on experience in the Cuban Revolution, and her gender. She explains, “El Comité had made a commitment to develop women’s leadership.”

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<sup>7</sup> El Comité’s Political Publication

***Carmen Vivian Rivera: Gender versus Nation***

*To many in Puerto Rico, I was viewed as 'la feminist muyorquina' (New York Feminist), too influenced by the U.S. feminist movement and not to be taken seriously. Why should we focus on the issue of sexism when we were dealing with a movement that emphasized class struggle and an end to colonialism?*

Rivera grew up conscience of racism. Her brother and her had to beware of gangs who were after “spics” and “niggers” in nearby neighborhoods. Her senior year of college she was part of a group that consisted of eight young Puerto Ricans and they called themselves Puerto Ricans for Self Determination. There she participated in her first meetings that discussed issues of capitalism, socialism, classism, colonialism and the work of liberation movements. It was not long before the small group, comprised of two women and six men, joined the larger scale Puerto Rican Socialist Party, formally known as Movimiento Pro-Independista or MPI.

MPI was a group founded in Puerto Rico in 1959 with a chapter in New York City. The struggle with joining MPI was that they were strong on the issue of language, constantly battling the importance of being fluent in Spanish or not. The MPI clashed with the Young Lords, a group of New York born youthful radicals who felt they had the same “right to leadership” as the island born Puerto Ricans. Rivera takes a moment to reflect on the main issue that she contends divided the Puerto Rican Left, “So little has changed in ten or twenty five years. Language continues to divide us. Puerto Ricans and other Latinos born and raised in the United States, who primarily speak English, are seen by some as less Latino. Spanish is sometimes used as a litmus tests for authenticity” (196). Right to nationality was divided amongst two different generations in the movement, while the Young Lords felt close to the issues of *El Barrio* and defending the oppression of people in neglected neighborhoods the MPI was built on the premise of fighting to free Puerto Rico of U.S. control. It was at the Puerto Rican Day Parade of 1971 that Rivera witnessed the Young Lords be beaten down by police and sent to jail for using the parade stage



to raise their issues and demand rights. Rivera confirms this was the moment she decided she would dedicate herself to the cause of bringing about change in this country and “in seeing Puerto Rico *Libre* (free).”

Working for the cause would not be an easy feat. As Rivera discovered, differences in political positions could and would divide family members who had grown up together. “Running into my family was the only thing I worried about. My father’s family was very conservative and some were pro-statehood<sup>8</sup> when it came to Puerto Rico’s status... I always made it a point to keep my political views separate from the people that I loved – especially the ones that didn’t agree with me” (200). Maintaining a sense of self required extra work when you identified with a cause. Plenty of the members of the Puerto Rican Left battled their family’s ideologies and had only the hope of a nationalist dream come true to comfort them. Rivera, more grounded in the concept of what was important to her personal liberation, made sure to tread lightly on the line and balance her work and family relations. Pro-independent nationalists were already marked as terrorists throughout the Puerto Rican struggle, because of their use of arms. This fact further divided relation to the cause of pro-independent Puerto Ricans, especially if you had never lived on the island.

Within the movement itself, Rivera had to constantly prove herself against her fellow *compañeros*<sup>9</sup> (translates to partners in Spanish) to get up the ranks and found hard against the issue of sexism. Similar to the women of the Black Panther Party, she was confronted with the issue of *machismo* though these men were educated and grounded in political consciousness. She explains, “Puerto Rican society and culture are largely based on patriarchal, male-dominant

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<sup>8</sup> Puerto Rican politics created a division amongst people who were pro-statehood and continue furthering relationships with the United States, and pro-independence which would allow the commonwealth to declare sovereignty as a country.

<sup>9</sup> Members of PSP referred to one another as *compañeros* and *compañeras*.

structure. It is therefore no surprise that elements of sexism and machismo are ingrained in family life and other social systems. The PSP was no exception” (204). The many commissars that came from the organizations main branch on the island were always men, and made it a point to stress the importance of staying focused on the cause for Puerto Rico *Libre*. The men in these organizations did not defend the rights of women and their families; here the personal was certainly not political. Their personal consisted of a double standard that was too embedded in their culture to convince all mothers and wives otherwise, and was ultimately convenient to them as brothers, husbands and boyfriends. Rivera was different, she recognized that *here* she was part of larger scale liberation movement that involved Puerto Ricans and all marginalized peoples alike. She writes, “Within the Seccional<sup>10</sup>, I was seen as being too sensitive to “women’s issues.” Why must I always criticize the men? My response: the men were often patronizing and invalidated the role of women and their contributions. In the PSP a group of us organized a woman’s caucus; in fact this is what most of the women in Left organizations did” (204). As political leaders the men on the island could display their *machismo* overtly, whereas in the United States alongside the U.S. feminist movement the men had to defy sexism in public spaces to maintain credibility as revolutionary leaders.

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<sup>10</sup> Name given to the NYC branch of Movimiento Pro Independencia

***Iris Morales: The Young Lord is Feminista***

*To us point thirteen, “We want a socialist society,” meant the liberation of both women and men. As we met and talked, our indignation at our second-class status grew. We worked just as hard as the men; we also put our lives on the line, and we wanted our voices as women reflected in the ideology and activities of the organization*

Morales entered the activist scene in high school after learning the United States used its power to force Native Americans onto reservations and interned Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II. She attended SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) youth meetings. After high school she became a tenant organizer with the West Side Block Association and worked representing tenants in court, and organized and conducted rent strikes to get the people to fight for decent living conditions. She went on to attend City College and joined the African American student organization ONYX. She studied African American history with a specific interest in Malcolm X’s teachings. As more and more Puerto Ricans participated on campus, she helped organize the first student group called PRISA (Puerto Ricans in Student Activities (211)). Morales participated greatly in cultural activities in *El Barrio* and it is there she connected with The Real Great Society, a forum set up by former gang members to fight poverty and advocate delinquency prevention. At the Crusade for Justice Conference in 1968 Denver, Colorado with a group of Latinos, Latinas, and African Americans, Morales meets the founding member of the Young Lords Organization (later to become YLP), Jose “Cha Cha” Jimenez, from Chicago, Illinois.

She describes Jimenez as a “soft spoken and unassuming leader” who explained that he had been in and out of jail for petty offenses but it was where he met Fred Hampton, the leader of Chicago’s Black Panther Party, who began to talk to him about political ideas. They conversed about the Black liberation movement and explored the idea of building unity amongst

Blacks and Puerto Ricans. When Jimenez returned to his neighborhood after having done his time, he began to organize the Young Lords (a street gang at the time) to protest urban removal. Soon the gang had changed to the Young Lords Organization and they designed a button with the map of Puerto Rico with the slogan “Tengo Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon” (I Have Puerto Rico In My Heart). They promoted community control, instilled national identity and pride, and forced institutions to answer to the concerns of the Latino community (212). Within six months, Morales was back in NYC after a trip to Cuba and became a member of the Young Lords of *El Barrio*.

The Young Lords in New York City were historicized for their garbage initiative, their takeover of the First Spanish Methodist Church (which they renamed the People’s Church), and their occupation of Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. They were committed to the causes of the local community and were regarded as the “street fighters” because they were not intimidated to pressure authorities and retain the humane services the people of the community were allotted. The occupation at Lincoln Hospital formation of the Think Lincoln committee, surfaced when young Puerto Rican woman named Carmen Rodriguez died of a botched abortion. The Young Lords organized protests to bring attention to the disgraceful hospital care Puerto Rican and African American women obtained. The Young Lords was one of the Puerto Rican organizations to introduce feminist ideology and the issue of women’s rights.

The women of the Young Lords Party organized a caucus to discuss and organize a demand for a change in the Party’s thirteen-point program so that women’s issues would not be overlooked or deemed second-rate in the fight for equality. Morales highlights the achievement of the Young Lords’ recognition of women’s struggle:

“Point ten read, ‘Machismo must be revolutionary and not oppressive.’ We responded that machismo could never be revolutionary. That is like saying, ‘Let’s have revolutionary racism.’[...] The Central Committee rewrote point ten and moved its position to number five. It said, ‘We want equality for women. Down with machismo and male chauvinism.’ This point was the only change that the Young Lords ever made to the program” (218).

The Young Lords made their members accountable to the feminist ideals by implementing discipline for those who showed acts of machismo. The women insisted on childcare so that more women could become politically involved. The women also required articles written by women in every issue of *Pa'lante* newspaper to talk about the struggles of women. They wrote initial articles exposing the mass sterilization issue in Puerto Rico, they wrote about women’s oppression and machismo, and workers’ struggles in factories and hospitals. All issues that regarded to Latina women in New York City.

All in all, the women of the Puerto Rican Left, much like the women of the Black Panther Party and Civil Rights Movement, sought to establish a forum for Latinas to unite and organize around their issues as women. Martell was part of the creation of the Latin Women’s Collective, whose slogan was “Liberacion De La Mujer Atraves De La Lucha Obrera” (Women’s liberation through the working class struggle) and represented the needs of Latinas as working class women. Martell talks about the need to form a separate organization specifically for Latinas in her *testimonio*. She writes about their outlook and preparation for the Latin Women’s Collective,

“This was very important to us because as women of color we wanted to separate ourselves from the white feminist movement, which we felt was racists and ignored our needs. We researched our situation in education health, labor, and we studied Engels’s *The Origins of the Family and the State*, revolutionary women’s organizations in Cuba, Vietnam, and other countries, women’s organizations in the United States, and women leaders in

our communities here in the United States, Puerto Rico and Latin America” (Torres, Velazquez 184).

Morales and fellow women Young Lords members formed the Women’s Union, a mass organization for Latinas mostly around concerns of childcare, health and work. They published their own newspaper as well, *La Luchadora* (the Fighter) and opened the door for succeeding Latina organizations by conducting political education classes and activities with Latinas in their communities and schools. Morales had an understanding that Latinas needed their own feminist movement because the mainstream women’s movement did not create a space to fulfill their cultural needs. Morales justifies Latina feminism stating, “We considered ourselves feminists but distinct from the White women’s liberation movement, which believed that men were the principal enemy. We were critical of that movement for purporting to speak for all women when it represented primarily the White, middle-class women. It never successfully addressed the concerns of women of color and poor women” (219). These women were greatly inspired by the same influences the men relied on. They were hands on in the Latin American revolution abroad and had an understanding for the advocating of socialism. The women looked to the Cuban and Chinese revolution and the feminist women involved for guidance, they read the essays of Puerto Rican feminist Luisa Capetillo and learned Marxist and Leninist socialist concepts to gain full understanding of what an ideal society for Latinas would be like. As a matter fact, because they were women, I would argue they had a greater need for the cause than the men did. This is why they did double the work in organizing for the Puerto Rican cause and then for themselves.

The women of the Puerto Rican Left were very present and at the heart of the movement towards Latino liberation. These women were Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and Mexican as well, and they were all fighting for Latino rights in New York City during a radical explosion of revolution from different ostracized groups all over the United States. These are the histories that

are rarely written in our schoolbooks and are not introduced in classroom settings as part of United States History. As all of the women above mention, the struggle for visibility of the Latino community still persists.

**Conclusion:**

*La Feminista Nuyorquina* represents the woman who is said to have adopted American politics and made it her own. Although Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Dominican Republic did have feminist movements of their own, the fact that many people born on the island have moved to the United States for the opportunity to become breadwinners for their families on the island has taken precedence over that history. Gender biases are embedded in the cultural traditions and understanding of familial structure in Latino culture, for many, the only way to have broken out of it was to go to New York City, away from homeland politics, and practice being a woman in charge. Being in charge meant space to make decisions without the hovering scrutiny of family members and freedom to decide future plans and the opportunity to exercise those plans without government interfering. 1960s, 70s, and 80s on these Caribbean islands held stories of women who rightfully studied to acquire law degrees but were forbidden to practice, women who were illegally submitted to sterilization practices so they could obtain better jobs, women who could not freely participate in political conversations or state criticisms against the government without harmful repercussions, etc. *La Feminista Nuyorquina* is not a celebratory title, it is a critique of the women who spirited by the global revolutions wanted to put their right to equal treatment and protection on the table.

It is important to consider the personal experiences of Latina women in the United States, both first and second generation, because it is a group that remains fairly new to the social schema of American politics. Despite protests for immigration reform and discriminatory practices of Latino immigrant peoples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, migration from the island to the U.S. remains high amongst women and children (See Hooton and Henriquez). In the contextualization of Hispanic Caribbean Latinas, I followed the example of the Latina Feminist Group, a group of



Latina scholars and feminists who saw the importance in publishing their narratives to add to the women of color historical discourse in the United States. I chose to display stories of women who immigrated to tell of the new experiences encountered in America. It was also important for my project to introduce how they created solidarity amongst women within their Latino communities, and then how they understood themselves in participation of U.S. social politics.

I highlighted the difference in experience amongst first and second generation women in attempt to create an imagined setting that considered the psychological as well as the practical journey influenced by the time period. My own testimony and Judith Ortiz Cofer's personal narratives can be used to further illustrate the influence of island beauty politics on Latina American identity, even throughout the second and third generation. The Latina image in the United States does not conclude the varied understanding of racial background, hair, and body structure, but it does maintain the standard to upkeep "exoticism," desirability, and beauty of Spanish-speaking island women. We see this even in our images of popular Latinas in American media throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. That stark difference Cofer observes as a child in her narrative, "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria," allowed her readers to zone in on the confusion set as Cofer actively had to negotiate her two cultures in creation of one notion, righteous woman.

Latina is a diasporic identity. Latina women must negotiate culture and racial identity according to the new space they are in. New York City is deemed nurturing. My mother's reference to "the capital of world" shows the excitement she had to coming to the space that had created opportunity for many immigrants including many fellow Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. Here she would "become" someone to the global standard. If you could make it here, you could make it anywhere and the dream stands true for themselves and their daughters. The

reality of encountering the racial and sociopolitical history of the United States comes as a shock, for they must relearn the new trudging rules of how women of color make it in America.

The histories of the Caribbean do not get left behind in the migration of people. The political history of the migration of Hispanic Caribbean people is a product of U.S. imperialism. Both Trujillo and Castro were trained by the U.S. military and supported in their beginning efforts to govern the Caribbean islands. With the help of scholarship mainly from Jorge Duany and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, I do not imagine that the U.S. could foresee the lengths of the Cuban Revolution and Castro's position of authority as negative to them. The U.S. made advances to protect their interests in the Caribbean; it was a goldmine to them. The Cuban revolution serves globally as an exemplified win for "the people" in 1959, and many politically driven Latino youth in the U.S. looked to the cause as an example of the work that could be done in their communities and in non-independent or "colonialized" Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican Left, which was composed of many Latino youth at a time wherein the word "Latino" was not publicly used as the politically correct identification of Spanish culturally identified minority people, took to learning Marxist-Leninist theories of socialism and communism. They thought of the capitalist system as coercive, and in a racist American society the idea of people of color making it up the ladder and later helping bring up those at the bottom was, in a sense, unforeseeable. The women within these groups were young, idealist, educated (most had a minimum of some college experience), and politically frustrated women who took to fighting their national cause.

Many of the Latina women began their political activism with the Puerto Rican Left in college. Many had been raised in the United States and furthermore had been born here. They were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and the fighting the national cause against people

of color, but were underrepresented as women of color. Following the examples of women in the Black Panther Party, the women formed their caucus alongside their work in the Puerto Rican Leftist Movement. They fought for positions of leadership and the discouragement of machismo within their respective organizations. They organized many healthcare initiatives that focused on women's health and the healthcare of their children. They protested against the sterilization of Puerto Rican women and the disservice of Operation Bootstrap. The women wore their hair naturally and marched in militant clothing with the men. They politicized their image by recognizing *negritude* and the strong African and indigenous Taino influences of their Caribbean culture. Getting political meant embracing their truth as women, as American minorities, and as Caribbean descendants.

Unfortunately, this thesis only allowed the space for contextualizing the American identity politics of these Latina women and more radically Latina feminists in New York City. This is a piece of a larger puzzle that must be continued. I would go as far as to say that this thesis is the introduction to a new body of work that must be done to fully historicize the Latina experience in the United States. I was greatly influenced by the history of the Young Lords Party and the discovery of women like Mirtha Quintanales who led me to the Hispanic Caribbean and New York City identified narratives of some of the Latina Feminist Group members. My strongest feeling is that women like my mother were no longer "Third World Women" when they arrived to the United States. They attained economic autonomy but they also gained political interest due to the time period and the new racial identity they had no choice but to sit in.

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