

Puerto Rican Presence Wanes in New York

By MIREYA NAVARRO

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These days, though, it is hard to resist the sense that Ms. Martinez is hanging her flags with as much feeling of nostalgia as pride.

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LOOKING BACK
special report.

the city in great numbers 60 years ago — down by nearly 100,000, or 11 percent, according to data from the Department of City Planning. With the growing presence of Dominicans and Mexicans, Puerto Ricans now account for 37 percent of the city’s Hispanic population. Experts say the decline is destined to continue.

In certain ways, city planners say, the trend reflects a traditional immigration pattern: the dispersion of groups from the city to the suburbs and other parts of the country as they make economic headway. But unlike most traditional immigrant groups who came to New York during the early part of the 1900’s, more than a third of Puerto Ricans leaving the city have moved to Puerto Rico, including significant numbers of people born in the States.

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De 'trás Pa 'lante The Future of Puerto Rican History in New York City

An Essay by
Angelo Falcón



**PRLDEF Institute
for Puerto Rican Policy**

The Policy Division of the
Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund

January 2001

Hildamar Ortiz, a lawyer born in the Bronx, now lives in Puerto Rico. “You belong here,” she said. “You feel it; nobody questions it.”

Richard Perry/The New York Times

This essay is a revised version of a presentation made at the symposium, “*Contra Viento y Marea*: Historical Reflections of the Puerto Rican Community in New York — The Past, The Present ...and The Future,” CUNY Graduate Center, New York City, September 22, 2000. The symposium was organized by Dr. Antonia Pantoja with the co-sponsorship of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College, the Gotham Center of the City University of New York, the Center for Continuing Education of the CUNY Graduate Center, and the PRLDEF Institute for Puerto Rican Policy. Plans are currently underway for the publication of the proceedings of this symposium, which will include an expanded version of this essay.

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“...one of the most difficult things for young people to understand is that life is a struggle. It never ends.

And in this regard the struggle for justice and freedom must continue. The work must be linked from one generation to another, and we must see ourselves as links. Everyone has a part to play. No one can afford to sit on the sidelines. What affects one of us affects us all.”

—**Antonia Pantoja**, Interview (1998)

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

—**Karl Marx**, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

The Puerto Rican experience in New York City, spanning over more than a century, has seemed to always contain within it the future of others. It is this trait that makes an examination of the future of this community such a daunting task in capturing those essential features of the “*de’tras pa’lante*” (“backward forward”) motion of a past and present that might most usefully point to the unfolding of that which has not yet happened.

At the very start of the new millennium, the world was greeted with the headline, “Puerto Rican Presence Wanes in New York,” on the front page of the *New York Times*. (Navarro 2000) Now, the word “waning” can be used in a number of senses. According to the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (1999), it could simply mean, “to decrease in strength, intensity, etc.,” or to “to decline in power, importance, prosperity, etc.” On the other hand, it could have a more ominous meaning: “to draw to a close; approach an end.” The picture accompanying this headline on the front page was that of an obviously overjoyed Puerto Rican woman standing on a beach in Puerto Rico, immediately reminiscent of a feminine deodorant commercial. Was she happy to have escaped this “waning” of her community, or did she represent this “waning”? It was an odd coupling of words and images or, one might say, *un de’tras pa’lante*.

The millennium year also saw the production of a new documentary on Puerto Ricans in New York entitled, *Nuyorican Dreams* (Collyer 2000; and Stainburn 2000), which premiered at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival. This 97-minute film follows a Puerto Rican family in Brooklyn over a four year period and documents what can perhaps better be described as a Puerto Rican nightmare of a family overextended and battered by poverty, drug addiction, criminal behavior, abandoned children and other social problems. Evocative of Oscar Lewis’ controversial bestseller, *La Vida* (1966), this viewing of a hyperdysfunctional Puerto Rican family, while containing faint glimpses of hope, seems more like a viewing at the funeral of the Puerto Rican family.

Beyond all of this negativism, there are other, more positive images that have emerged from the Puerto Rican community in New York City as well. The most prominent have been the spectacular successes of entertainment figures like Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Luis Guzman and others. However, while these



positive images focus on individual achievements, the negative images are more generalized. Perhaps the most impressive and visible collective Puerto Rican accomplishment in the city, the massive annual National Puerto Rican Parade, was itself marred earlier that year by the negative images of misogynistic assaults by largely Puerto Rican and other Latino men against defenseless women in Central Park during and after the parade, vivid images that were carried around the world. (Gonzalez 2000)

The “Waning” of the Puerto Rican in New York

What do these images, generated at the start of the new century, tell us about the possible future or futures of the Puerto Rican community in New York City? Perhaps some hints might come from an examination of the arguments presented in the *New York Times* article on the waning of the Puerto Rican community just mentioned.

Written by a Puerto Rican reporter, the *New York Times* article isolated the following factors as contributing to Puerto Rican decline in New York City:

POPULATION DECLINE. For the first time in over 60 years (and perhaps much longer than this), the article reported that the Puerto Rican population in New York City *decreased* in the 1990s. Navarro (2000) cites Department of City Planning figures that the drop in Puerto Rican population between 1990 and 2000 was close to 100,000. This means that for the first time in memory, Puerto Ricans were not the majority of the city's Latino population — dropping to around 37% of total Latinos in 2000.

PERSISTENT POVERTY. Adding to the population decline (and probably contributing to it), the article points to the “puzzling” high poverty rate experienced by Puerto Ricans in New York of about 40%. This is seen as puzzling because, unlike other Latinos, Puerto Ricans arrived in the city already as United States citizens since 1917, which *should* have put them at an advantage compared to other newcomers.

HUMAN CAPITAL. A factor affecting the poverty status of Puerto Ricans that the article discusses is this community's low educational attainment. Less than 10% of adult Puerto Ricans in the city, it reports, hold a college degree at a time when the economy is demanding highly skilled office labor. Navarro quotes one educational expert who points to the long-term neglect of the schools and “poor family involvement in education.”

MIGRATION PATTERNS. The article makes much of the impact of Puerto Rican migration patterns, as it should, but presents inconsistent scenarios. It points to the disruptive effects of the frequent back-and-forth movement between Island and metropolis of many, as well as to the Puerto Rican population dispersal to other parts of the United States. It also reports on the sizeable return migration to Puerto Rico — 38% of Puerto Ricans who left the city went to the Island between 1985 and 1990 (and 40% of those were born in the States). Despite all of this evidence of rigorous movement, the article inexplicably points to the possibility that Puerto Ricans could also be seen as “mostly a static group.”

The impact of all this demographic motion is contained in its “bad timing,” according to one explanation offered in the article. There is also the negative consequence of Puerto Ricans on the Island already being U.S. citizens, which, the article points out, eliminates the selectivity of the migration, allowing a greater proportion of poor to enter in comparison to other immigrant groups. Puerto Rico, in essence, exports poverty to New York. However, it also notes that Puerto Ricans migrating to other parts of the country (Tampa and Los Angeles are the examples given) are more successful, raising questions about the just

mentioned negative impact on Puerto Rican migrants of their U.S. citizenship.

In contrast to these trends, the article goes on to explain that researchers have found that Puerto Ricans returning to the Island are poorer and less educated than those remaining in the city. So, New York City exports poverty to Puerto Rico. But, on the other hand, the article points out that retirees and successful young people have also been drawn back to Puerto Rico.

TIMING. Navarro finds that another cause for the problems Puerto Ricans face in this city is related to the migration and its "bad" or "terrible timing." Puerto Ricans migrated to New York in massive numbers just when the economy was changing in ways that would severely disadvantage them as a group. The decline of the manufacturing sector of the city's economy, where Puerto Rican workers were historically concentrated, is seen as the source of the current poverty conditions of this community.

COMPETITION WITH OTHER LATINOS. Perhaps also as a consequence of this timing problem is the broader Latinization of New York City that has been occurring, to the point that Puerto Ricans are today no longer in the majority among Latinos. By 2010, the article points out, city planners project that there will be more Dominicans than Puerto Ricans in the city.

FAILING INSTITUTIONS. Along with citing the failure of the school system, the article also points to the problems of residential segregation, racial discrimination, the lack of autonomous churches, and the welfare dependency that allowed Puerto Rican single mothers with children to stay out of the labor market. There were also references made to structural poverty, pathology and indifference by both government and the public.

ATTITUDES. Finally, Navarro refers to as a problem for Puerto Ricans their "passionate nationalism" and the way it keeps their attention on their homeland and not on their circumstances or future in New York. This has caused, she observes, many Puerto Ricans to resist acculturation and to blame the United States for the poverty conditions that prompted their migration.

While early on in the article Navarro observes that "there has been no shortage of success stories," she notes that "there is much about the fate of Puerto Ricans that remains puzzling." The myriad and sometimes conflicting developments that she reports on that describe a community that is clearly in decline are perhaps a useful cataloguing of the different ways that Puerto Rican leaders and researchers define the problems besetting Puerto Ricans in New York City. But upon closer examination, as this essay attempts to show, perhaps not.

The article has generated a generally negative response in the Puerto Rican community, probably provoked most viscerally by the "waning" headline more than for the content of the piece (and certainly not helped by the series title of "Falling Back: A Special Report"). Feeling that newspapers like the *New York Times* do not adequately cover Puerto Ricans as the city's largest ethnic group, the appearance of such a pessimistic article on its front page (and above the fold) raises suspicions of bias, despite the fact that the writer is herself Puerto Rican with an excellent record of covering racial and ethnic issues. The depth of this feeling by Puerto Ricans who see a community besieged by outside forces is reinforced in research currently being conducted by the PRLDEF Institute for Puerto Rican Policy. In preliminary results from a survey on the Census conducted last year among Latino community activists throughout the Northeast and the Caribbean, when asked if they felt there was a policy in Washington, DC to undercount Latinos because of this community's growing numbers, an amazing 65% of the Puerto Ricans agreed to this conspiratorial explanation, compared to 44% of the other Latinos. (PRLDEF Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, forthcoming)





But be that as it may, what does the *Times* article tell us about the future of the Puerto Rican community in New York City? On the surface, of course, the news is not good: Puerto Ricans have had plenty of time to make it in New York City and they have failed, losing whatever footholds they have in politics and other spheres, and dispersing like the wind. It is as if this community was permanently hit and uprooted by a social hurricane. For Puerto Ricans in New York City it is like the end of history. Puerto Rican pride, Navarro observes, is melting into a pool of nostalgia.

The problem with this scenario is that it is a familiar one for Puerto Ricans since their coming to New York City in massive numbers after World War II. The many factors delineated in the *New York Times* article should have killed this community off a long time ago, but as they say in Puerto Rico, *lo que no mata, engorda* (“what doesn’t kill you, fortifies you”). As Frank Bonilla (1971: 464) put it thirty years ago in a famous essay, “According to all going theories of history, culture and collective psychology, Puerto Ricans do not exist or are bound to disappear,” but, nevertheless, “*seguiremos siendo Puertorriqueños*” (“we will keep on being Puerto Rican”).

The *New York Times* piece is perhaps as good a starting point as any for exploring the Puerto Rican future (or futures), but more for what it doesn’t say. The many factors shaping the Puerto Rican experience in New York City outlined in the article are certainly real but represent an incomplete accounting and add up to an incoherence that is ultimately unsatisfying and unhelpful. For anyone looking at that analysis for signs of what will and can be, it simultaneously points everywhere and nowhere. Is the current situation of Puerto Ricans just a function of bad luck (“terrible timing”?), a result of a lot of bad decisions, attitudes and miscalculations, or of forces (many accidental) over which no one has any control? Who or what should be held accountable? Are these factors that affect everyone the same, or are there some things that are unique about the Puerto Rican case?

Taking the *New York Times* article as a point of departure, the remainder of this essay will focus on its discussion of Puerto Rican population decline in New York City and its implications for the future of this community. The seven other factors discussed above that are treated in the article can each serve as useful entry points in exploring where the Puerto Rican community is headed in this city, but that would be a far more ambitious undertaking than this essay is assuming.

Population Decline and the “Disappearance” of the Puerto Rican People?

Navarro’s report that city planners estimate that the Puerto Rican population would be declining for the first time in memory by 87,000 or 11% between 1990 and 2000 was itself the first time that this development had been reported in the news. This estimate is probably derived from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey that is based on a sample of the population (the *New York Times* article, unfortunately, doesn’t provide this important piece of information). However, this may be a conservative estimate. Another sample drawn for the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (Pereira 2000), also conducted by the Census Bureau, put the Puerto Rican population in New York City in 1999 at 750,821, representing a 16% drop since 1990. If we take this “worst case” scenario and project it linearly (and with tongue firmly planted in cheek), it would mean that the Puerto Rican population in New



York City would *cease to exist in 820 years*, give or take a year.

While Navarro's invoking statements from "city planners" appears to make these numbers authoritative, these estimates, especially when it comes to Puerto Ricans and similarly situated groups, are usually unreliable to the point that if they were proven to be accurate, it would be by sheer accident. Taking the Housing and Vacancy Survey, for example, we find that it resulted in an estimated Puerto Rican population for the city of 804,655 in 1991 (Blackburn 1995), while the 1990 Census counted 896,763 Puerto Ricans, producing a discrepancy of 92,108, or 10.3%, *below* the official Census figure. We should also note that the factor of the historic undercounting of the Puerto Rican population by the Census Bureau is not even being considered here.

Empirically, therefore, a major premise of the "waning Puerto Rican community" thesis is highly questionable. But whether this is the case or not, what would population loss mean for the future of the Puerto Rican community anyway? Certainly this would affect this community's voting and economic power, its level of demand for services and so on. But does it have the deeper meaning assigned to it by the *New York Times* article? Is there a necessary connection between population decline and the "waning process"?

A sharp drop in the Puerto Rican population, if it has occurred, has important symbolic significance, but the reality is that even under the worst case scenario we can muster up, there would be 750,821 Puerto Ricans in New York City today. This would mean that Puerto Ricans make up 10.4% of the city's total population and 39.2% of the Latino population. Puerto Ricans would remain the largest ethnic and the largest Latino group in the city. This number, for example, is much larger than the population of the capitol of Puerto Rico, San Juan, which was put at 439,604 in 1999 by the Census Bureau. Although the *New York Times* article focuses on sharply declining numbers (and did so with flimsy evidence), this approach gives the impression that what is left is an insignificant number of people when, in fact, the size of the Puerto Rican community in New York City remains quite large by any standard.

This is important to note because as we look at the increased attention by the media and others to smaller and newer Latino groups, such as Mexicans and Dominicans, largely as part of the growing immigration phenomenon in the city, the sizes of their populations clearly do not diminish their significance for the city. On the other hand, the perception is that Puerto Ricans, despite their larger numbers, have received less news coverage as a community in New York and, as a result, have been rendered nearly invisible in the public mind or seen as a much smaller community than they actually are. It is not uncommon, for example, for people outside of New York to inaccurately assume that there are now more Dominicans and Mexicans in the city than Puerto Ricans because of the images projected by the media.

This is interesting, given that over forty years ago the government of Puerto Rico was trying to allay public fears that there were *too many* Puerto Ricans coming to New York City, at a time when the media referred to the Puerto Rican migration as a "tidal wave" and so forth. Clarence Senior (1961: 20) argued back then that, "Compared with either previous or present immigration or with the other internal contemporary migration, (Puerto Rican) numbers are small. But they have been greatly exaggerated by sensationalists and xenophobes." He attributed the problem to what social psychologists and psychiatrists call "perceptual accentuation." Today, Puerto Ricans seem to be experiencing the results of a "perceptual *de-accentuation*."

How Puerto Rican population numbers are interpreted is of great importance to the future of this community. If there is a perception that the size of the Puerto Rican community is insignificant and decreasing, or that Puerto Ricans are on the verge of extinction, this would have considerable consequences for its development. Policymakers, for example, will not take Puerto Rican interests into account, politicians will not feel the need to respond, the public will not be aware of the contributions and needs of this com-



munity and Puerto Ricans themselves, especially young people, may start to internalize a sense that this community, and they, are not significant.

Much of the future of the Puerto Rican in New York City may depend on this community's ability to better project itself on the public consciousness, and back on its own. Puerto Rican institutions, including the government of Puerto Rico, will need to develop strategies of marketing the role of this community in contributing to the modern history of New York City and raising the public's consciousness of this community's needs. Puerto Rican intellectuals have a major role to play in this regard, as they need to produce, for example, a general history of the Puerto Rican community (a project whose need remains great). Much of the Puerto Rican future, therefore, will depend on this community's ability to shape its own image and not remain a victim to others defining its realities, whether this is the *New York Times* or the Mayor of the City of New York. The assumptions that this work has already been accomplished or that someone else will do it for Puerto Ricans have simply not been accurate.

Conclusion

If there is a problem in the Puerto Rican present with this community's very ability to control something as basic as the images of its presence in New York City, then the Puerto Rican future is in jeopardy. As this essay attempted to demonstrate, Puerto Ricans, even under the worst case scenarios, will be in New York for a long, long time to come. But *as a community* that is recognized and an actor in determining its own fate, it may then have, to quote a 35-year old report on Puerto Ricans, "an uncertain future." (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976) It is quite telling in this regard that the entry "Puerto Ricans" in *The Encyclopedia of New York City* concludes by stating that by the mid-1990s, they "continued to identify themselves as Puerto Rican and retained ties with Puerto Rico." (Sanchez Korrol 1995: 961) It is both revealing and chilling that a statement as obvious as this should have to be made at all.

The fact is that the Puerto Rican community in the city is alive and kicking. The Puerto Rican experience in New York is, as this essay mentioned in its opening, in many ways critical to an understanding not only of this community's future, but that of New York City as a whole. Discussing Latinos in general, in this regard Suro (1999:157) usefully observes:

... The Puerto Rican story helps establish a perspective that makes it easier to understand the Latino experience at the end of the century. It shows how dangerous it can be to rely on the kind of social science that paints group identities on the basis of census data and then predicts outcomes. There is no way of knowing how today's Latino immigrants will end up simply on the basis of the human capital they bring with them. They arrive as Spanish-speaking peasants. They become citizens of postindustrial America.


To stress the uniqueness of the Puerto Rican experience (Cordasco 1975: xviii) or to see it as an "exception" (Chavez 1991) is to overlook just how typical it has become as the processes of globalization and economic restructuring are making more and more communities "Puerto Rican." Whether it was on the underclass debate with its roots in the controversy over the concept of a culture of poverty, current debates over multi-raciality and the claims made in the past that Puerto Ricans would bring a multi-racial sensibility to New York as "rainbow people", the impact of neoliberal policies in Latin America and the history of Puerto Rico's experience with "Operation Bootstrap," or white American youth's adoption of hip-hop culture and the early Puerto Rican role in its creation, there is much in the Puerto



Rican past that we are finding in other people's futures. As Davis (2000: 103) recently concluded, "Puerto Rican poverty, which rebuts the facile claim that citizenship provides a magic carpet for immigrant success, is the spectre that ineluctably haunts all debates about the future of the Latino metropolis."

As we debate the Puerto Rican future in New York City, we will come to understand that it will not simply be a linear projection of recent trends or that it can merely be reduced to statistics. It will be a debate about the future of New York City and the United States in whose destinies Puerto Ricans have been incorporated . . . and *not* of their own will. The late Father Fitzpatrick (1971: 184) concluded his now classic study of the Puerto Rican in New York City with the following observation:

Toynbee says that the city without a challenge is a city which is dying. If that is true, New York and the Puerto Ricans are very much alive. If the history of New York City tells us anything, it tells us this: At the dark moments when people were convinced that the city was being destroyed, it was actually breaking through into a new and richer life. This may not be the basis for contentment and peace, but it is the basis for confidence and hope.

While the tasks before the Puerto Rican community of New York City are formidable in  forging its own future, I think we can all agree that they must be tackled with such confidence and hope.

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About the

PRLDEF Institute for Puerto Rican Policy

The PRLDEF Institute for Puerto Rican Policy was created as a result of the 1998 merger between the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy (IPR) and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF). The Institute, originally established in 1982, now serves as the Policy Division of PRLDEF and focuses its work in three program areas: Policy Analysis & Advocacy, Civic Participation, and Policy Networking. In 2001, the Institute is initiating new projects on voting rights and political redistricting in the Northeast, bilingual education in New York City, welfare reform in the Northeast, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, the study of the needs of Latino nonprofits in the East Coast and Puerto Rico, planning for Latino participation in the year 2010 Census, and other issues.

The Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, a privately-funded nonprofit established in 1972, is the leading civil and human rights organization in the Puerto Rican community. Besides its Policy Division, PRLDEF protects the civil and human rights of Puerto Ricans and the wider Latino community through its Litigation and Education Divisions. PRLDEF currently is pursuing legal advocacy on a wide range of issues ranging from language rights, environmental justice, education and bilingual education, voting rights, fair access to public housing, equal employment opportunity, and other areas. The organization also provides educational services to Latinos and other students applying to and attending law school, including LSAT preparation workshops, scholarships, fellowships, and internships.

Major support for the PRLDEF-IPR merger and its development has been provided by The Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Rockefeller Foundation.



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