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# Puerto Rican and Proud: The Varying Understandings of Puerto Rican Identity Among Island-Born and Mainland Puerto Rican Students at Syracuse University

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## **Introduction**

I have always been intrigued by identity. The process of identity formation and management may be different among people, but everyone goes through some process of determining who they are. My motivations for my thesis were both personal and professional. I decided upon the topic when I needed to complete an assignment for my SOC 319- Qualitative Methods class. The assignment was to choose a topic and conduct in-depth interviews with two people. My original idea proved to be unsuccessful and I had less than a week to completely start anew. I thought back to my interests in identity, and knew of two Puerto Rican students that I would probably be able to interview in the short time frame. The idea was born.

I decided to continue researching the topic and expand it into a thesis after conducting two very interesting interviews. Identity was very complicated among the students, especially because of Puerto Rico's unique relationship with the United States. Never having studied Puerto Rico before, my personal motivation was to learn more about the country and the people through my thesis. Professionally, I also wanted to choose a group of people who identified differently than I did. My primary research questions were: 1) how do Puerto Rican students choose to identify and display their identity on a personal level, and 2) how do they manage their identities within a larger context on a predominantly White campus.

## **Puerto Rico: A Historical Overview**

Puerto Rico has a rich and vibrant history. For the purposes of my research, I will condense the history into the early events that I believe most affect the identity formation of the Puerto Rican people and the island. There are several dates in which landmark decisions were made. These decisions still have a large impact on Puerto Ricans today. First, it is important to understand the various colonial powers that claimed Puerto Rico as a territory.

Prior to becoming a colony, Puerto Rico was largely inhabited by the Taino Indians. However, in 1493, Christopher Columbus landed on the island and claimed it as a possession of Spain (US Commission, 1976). The island was formally colonized in 1508 by explorer Juan Ponce de Leon (Stafford, 2006). Over time, conflicts arose between Puerto Rico and Spain because the Puerto Ricans wanted increased freedom, and wanted to lessen Spanish rule in the country. An agreement, known as the Charter of Autonomy, was signed between the two countries in 1897 (US Commission, 1976). However, the Charter of Autonomy was short-lived. The Spanish-American War disrupted the agreement, when the United States took control of Puerto Rico (Senior, 1961). The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1899, in which Spain ceded their control of Puerto Rico to the United States (US Commission, 1976). This was the beginning of the US influence in Puerto Rico.

After the Treaty of Paris was signed, the US Congress gained political and civil control over the island of Puerto Rico and its people (US Commission, 1976). Originally, Puerto Rico was governed by military rule. A

civil government was not created for Puerto Rico until the Foraker Act of 1900 (US Commission, 1976). Another pivotal date in Puerto Rican history was 1917. Under the Jones Act of 1917, all Puerto Ricans became US citizens (US Commission, 1976). This date was highly important because it unleashed the first wave of migration from Puerto Rico to the United States. Although Puerto Ricans were able to freely move between the island and the United States, they still lacked many rights on their own island.

In fact, Puerto Ricans were not even given the right to elect their own governor until 1948. It was not until 1950 that Puerto Ricans were able to draft their own constitution (US Commission, 1976). Finally, in 1952, Puerto Rico was declared as a US Commonwealth (US Commission, 1976). However, there was a stipulation with this declaration. The Supreme Court decided that Puerto Rico would become an unincorporated territory (Bhana, 1975). Being declared an unincorporated territory meant that there was no future goal that Puerto Rico would be incorporated into a state (Bhana, 1975). Surendra Bhana has noted that the decision that Puerto Rico would be an unincorporated commonwealth started a debate over statehood that still continues to this day, stating, “This, in short, has been the source of unending debate on the issue of political status: how to strike a happy balance between Puerto Rico’s economic needs, which could be filled through uninterrupted association with the United States, and the cultural divergence between the mainland and the island (Bhana, 1975).”

Since Puerto Rico was made a US Commonwealth, there have been great efforts to increase the industrialization of the island. In fact, an initiative known as “Operation Bootstrap” started to increase, improve and develop the industries on the island (Bhana, 1975). Despite economic improvements in Puerto Rico, which led the island to be nicknamed “The Miracle in the Caribbean” (Senior, 1961), many Puerto Ricans still migrated, at least temporarily, to the United States. With greater economic opportunities in the US and the invention of air travel, migration was easy and seemed advantageous (US Commission, 1976). In fact, the US Commission on Civil Rights wrote that “between 1940 and 1970, about three-quarters of a million Puerto Ricans left their island to seek better opportunities on the US mainland (US Commission, 1976).”

Overall, Puerto Rico has largely been under the control of other countries for most of its modern history. The Spanish and American influence has undoubtedly affected Puerto Ricans to some degree. My research examines the ways that Puerto Rican students understand their own self-identity, and looks to see to what degree their country’s history affects their own understandings.

### **Literature Review**

There has been extensive research about Puerto Rico and the complexities that arise with its US commonwealth status. Specifically, material has been written documenting the experiences of Puerto Ricans, both those that spend their lives on the island and those that either were born in the

US or travel to the US during their lifetime. While reading the previous research, several major themes relating to identity arose. These theories have been both supported and contested by past researchers, and my current research also draws conclusions based on the past research.

One limitation of past research was that many of the materials were written during the 1960s-1980s. This was a popular period because the number of Puerto Ricans coming to the United States was especially high. While this information is helpful in putting Puerto Ricans' sense of identity into context, it may be somewhat outdated relative to the current beliefs held by Puerto Ricans. One popular idea mentioned in the early research was the melting pot theory.

Researcher Jose Hernandez studied Puerto Rican migrants who came to live in the United States from the island. As Hernandez wrote, the melting pot theory was the idea that immigrant groups assimilated during their transition to the American way of life (Hernandez, 1980). He found that while many immigrant groups were known to have welcomed the idea of becoming part of the melting pot, Puerto Ricans as a group were different. Hernandez noted that there was a "continued affirmation of a Puerto Rican identity and a desire to preserve a lifestyle really different from that of the average person in the US" (Hernandez, 1980).

Researcher Dale Nelson also looked at Puerto Ricans who migrated to the US. Specifically, he studied New York Puerto Ricans and their level of activity in American politics. He also looked at the ideas of assimilation, but

distinguished the ideas of assimilation and acculturation (Nelson, 1980). According to Nelson, assimilation occurred when ethnic groups made an effort to enter the mainstream society, while acculturation was the specific act of adopting the mainstream culture instead of holding on to the ethnic culture (Nelson, 1980). In his research, Nelson used data to prove/disprove assimilation theory. According to assimilation theory, it would be more likely for first generation Puerto Ricans to keep their ethnic ties, while second generation Puerto Ricans would be more involved in the American lifestyle. However, his data concluded that first generation Puerto Ricans were also largely involved in American lifestyles, and he found no major differences between the two generations in terms of their acceptance of American culture. In some ways, Nelson's research supports views that differ from Hernandez's research. While Hernandez saw Puerto Ricans as holding on to their culture, Nelson saw both first and second generation Puerto Ricans being interested in participating in American politics.

Another major idea relating to Puerto Rican identity and migration as a whole is the idea of transnationalism. Transnationalism is the linkage that immigrants maintain between their home country and their new relocated country (Acosta-Belen et al., 2000). The idea of transnationalism is important especially for Puerto Rico because the researchers viewed the country as a "commuter nation" (Acosta-Belen et al., 2000). Since citizens travel back and forth between the island and the US, it is very likely that aspects of their

identity are affected and even molded because of the constant back and forth travel.

A final theme which arose was the idea of ethnocentrism. Author Clarence Senior thoroughly researched the issues surrounding Puerto Rican migration to the US during the 1960s. In this research, he spent time focusing on ethnocentrism, xenophobia and labeling of Puerto Ricans as they entered the American terrain (Senior, 1961). In his research, he focused on the difficulties that Puerto Ricans faced against the mainstream White America, and the hurdles that they were forced to endure (Senior, 1961).

Much of the research surrounding Puerto Ricans focuses on similar topics. The population of Puerto Ricans coming to the US was a popular topic, but there were few studies focused on particular age groups. There were fewer articles available which discussed Puerto Rican college students and their own sense of identity.

One article, while not focusing specifically on Puerto Rican students, looked at the ethnic identity development of college students. Instead, the article looked at multiethnic students. This may create discrepancies between the findings in the article, and findings of a solely Puerto Rican population. However, the article was able to explain different identity development theories, which may still be relevant to monoethnic students as well as multiethnic students. The article cites Phinney in developing a three phased ethnic development model. The first phase was unexamined identity, the second was ethnic identity search and the third was achieved ethnic identity



(Chaudhari et. al, 2008). In the three phases, the individual seeks out their cultural values, affirms them and then commits to their ethnic group (Chaudhari et. al, 2008).

Another article written by Jose Lorenzo-Hernandez was much more relevant to both my topic and my age demographic. The article discussed the idea of back migration, and the ways in which island-born and migrants viewed one another once the migrants returned to Puerto Rico (Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1999). The research looked at a sample of middle-school-aged non-migrant students and a sample of migrant students, referred to by the non-migrants as Nuyoricans. In his research, he surveyed both migrant and non-migrant adolescents, and asked them to rate themselves and the other group based on certain attributes.

The findings revealed that each group viewed themselves more highly than the other group. Additionally, the non-migrant students rejected the migrant children rated with higher levels of Nuyoric attributes (Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1999). While this research is much more relevant to my study, it examined middle school students, while I am examining the views of college students. Additionally, the island-born students that I talked to made the voluntary decision to come to the continental US, instead of migrant adolescents returning to Puerto Rico.

Overall, the past literature has assisted my study in putting my research into context. However, my research differs from past work in that it examines the ways in which Puerto Rican college students understand their

Puerto Rican identity. Also, instead of only focusing on US born or island-born Puerto Ricans, my research attempts to look at both groups and then draw conclusions.

### **Setting & Methods**

The data for this project were obtained through in-depth interviews. Students who identified as being Puerto Rican or being of Puerto Rican descent were recruited to participate. These recruiting methods consisted of mass e-mails across the Latino listserv and several organizations which had a membership primarily consisting of students of color. Once initial participants were selected, the snowball method was used. This proved to be effective because the Puerto Rican students interviewed were able to refer me to their friends and classmates. However, one weakness in using this method was that I was only aware of a small proportion of the Puerto Rican population on campus.

My initial goal was to recruit students of all academic years, and have a balance between island-born Puerto Ricans and US born Puerto Ricans. However, this goal was not completely achieved. I relied heavily on the contacts that I was given. This may have caused my participants to be stratified geographically, economically, and by age. Despite an uneven balance, the thoughts and perspectives given during the interviews proved all of the data too important to omit. One student, who was attending graduate school at the university, had great insight about her experiences as a Puerto

Rican female. For those reasons, I included her statements as well, although she was not an undergraduate student.

Interviews were conducted in private and quiet closed study-rooms. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. During the length of the interview, participants discussed their home lives, lives at the university and their feelings about self-identity and Puerto Rican identity. The participants were aware of my role as a researcher. While many did not inquire, I was also open about my motivations in doing the research and that I was not of Puerto Rican descent. Ultimately, 10 interviews were conducted. Of the 10 in-depth interviews conducted, seven of the students were island-born Puerto Ricans and three were US born Puerto Ricans.

While the data obtained from the research was insightful, there were several limitations to the research. As previously mentioned, the sample size was small, and the sample of US born Puerto Rican students was very small. Additionally, my lack of knowledge of the Spanish language hindered me because at times the students (especially the island-born Puerto Ricans) said words in Spanish to better express themselves. Despite efforts to find translations, some of the subtleties of their comments may have been lost.

Also, it is important to note that the quotes provided by the students have only been polished in order to aid in comprehension. While some of the quotes may be grammatically incorrect, I found it important to leave the quotes untouched so that the reader gains a better sense of the ways in which the students were communicating.

### *The Participants*

All of the names of the participants have been changed, and pseudonyms have been used. Any similarities with actual students are purely coincidental.

#### **Island-born participants**

Guillermo Hernandez is a junior at Syracuse University studying architecture. He was raised in a small town in the middle of Puerto Rico, and grew up near the mountains. He enjoyed the small-town atmosphere and saw everyone there as part of an extended family. For the first years of his life, he grew up in Germany because his father was stationed there in the Army. Guillermo had several experiences in the United States, including vacations to Disney World and longer trips for high school programs. It was during these programs that he got his first taste of the United States. He is currently unsure whether he plans on returning to Puerto Rico after college, pointing to a lack of job opportunities as a detriment to returning. He is considering staying in the US or moving to Spain, but ultimately wants to retire in Puerto Rico.

Sophia Vasquez is a junior at Syracuse University. She grew up in a city in northern Puerto Rico. She lived with her sister in an area frequented by tourists. Sophia has three older brothers, one of whom also lives in the United States. While she had been to the US prior to becoming a student, her trips were very limited. Sophia considers coming to SU her first real experience with the United States. After college, Sophia hopes to continue with graduate

studies. While she does not rule out returning to Puerto Rico, she hopes to move to Miami in the near future.

Miguel Salazar is a sophomore, majoring in communications. He grew up in San Juan, the nation's capital. He grew up speaking Spanish, but was also taught English in school. Miguel had visited the US on vacations and short trips prior to attending college. He chose to attend SU due to a last minute decision and an interest in living in a new environment. Miguel also identifies himself as being pro-statehood for Puerto Rico, even though he does not believe that it will happen. He plans to live wherever he can find a job after graduation, but never wants to be too far from Puerto Rico.

Marisol Campo is a junior at Syracuse University, majoring in communications. She grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and has two younger siblings. She attended a private Catholic school growing up, where both Spanish and English were spoken. She has traveled to the US for several vacations before coming to college. She was planning to stay in Puerto Rico for school, but increased strikes on the campus convinced her father to let her attend school in the US. After graduation, she plans to stay in the US to gain job experience and then return to Puerto Rico.

Eva Fuentes is a junior, majoring in both communications and arts and sciences. She is from an affluent suburb of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and grew up with her parents and her younger brother. Her parents are a CPA and a general manager of a company. Growing up, Eva compared her high school's affluence with that of the television show "Gossip Girl." She knew that she

wanted to attend college in the US. Principally, she felt that Puerto Rico was very close-minded and wanted to leave and experience something different. She had traveled to the US several times prior to college, both for vacation and for a high school program. After college, she currently does not plan on returning to Puerto Rico.

Jose Martinez is a sophomore at Syracuse University. He was born and raised in Puerto Rico. He had only been to the US a few select times, before coming to school at SU. He had been in the US both on short vacations to the Disney theme parks, and also for a few prolonged stints while his father did research. He considers being at SU the first time he has really lived in the US. Jose is used to the large city atmosphere of San Juan, and the warm temperatures. In Puerto Rico, he went to an American school, where he learned both English and Spanish, although all of his classes were taught in English. He doesn't consider Spanish to be his first language, because he was taught Spanish and English simultaneously.

Elena Rodriguez is a junior at Syracuse University. She is studying communications and is also in the Army ROTC program. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico (outside of San Juan) and lived there until coming to the university. She first fell in love with the idea of coming to the US in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and since then has wanted to attend an American university. Upon being accepted at Syracuse University, she decided to come. In Puerto Rico, she went to a bilingual private school, but still considers her first language to be Spanish. After graduation, she will be enlisted in the Army. However, she

expressed hopes of returning to Puerto Rico eventually. Elena considers herself to be very close to her family, especially her mother. She said that she talks to her mother daily and loves holidays because she can see her entire family.

### **Mainland participants**

Celia Delgado is a senior hospitality major at Syracuse University. She was born and raised in the Bronx, New York, but spent summers with her grandparents and cousins in Ponce, Puerto Rico. As she got older, she began to get into trouble while in Puerto Rico, and got into fights with island-born Puerto Ricans, and has not returned to Puerto Rico since high school. Celia would like to return to Puerto Rico for additional vacations, but would like to stay at a resort. After graduation, she plans to return to New York City.

Maria Castillo is a freshman, who grew up in New York City. She is a multi-ethnic student, whose mother is Puerto Rican and whose father is Dominican. Despite a multi-ethnic background, she identifies most closely with her Puerto Rican roots. Although she grew up in New York City, she attended high school at a boarding school in Pennsylvania. Maria feels strongly about her Puerto Rican identity and has promoted it and educated others about it, especially while attending her boarding school.

Alisa Munoz is a graduate student at Syracuse University. She was born and raised in the Syracuse area, but obtained her undergraduate degree in New York City before coming back. Alisa cited her parents' divorce as having a large impact on her own cultural identity. Alisa has visited the island several

times, and her father currently resides there. She is currently working on completing her Masters degree in social work.

### **Findings**

***“While Puerto Ricans lack a separate citizenship, they have a clear sense of national identity.”***

- Jorge Duany

Scholar Jorge Duany’s quote exemplifies the complication felt by many Puerto Ricans. Despite their commonwealth status, Puerto Ricans on both the island and mainland have strong cultural ties which influence their sense of self and daily lives. My research examines these understandings of culture and identity at the collegiate level, a time when many people are trying to discover who they truly are.

For all students, college is a time of transition. However, Puerto Rican students deal with the typical transitions of students as well as an additional layer of transition. As they find their place at Syracuse University, they also make conscious decisions as to how to manage and maintain their cultural identities while at a predominantly White institution. The students’ sense of self can become highly complicated. For island-born Puerto Ricans, their political status as a US Commonwealth has direct implications on all aspects of their identity. Puerto Rico’s status causes students’ identities to be in constant conflict- were they uniquely Puerto Rican, American, or a combination of the two. Mainland born Puerto Ricans have an equally



difficult task. In establishing their own identity, they faced exclusion from two sides as well. As an ethnic group, they were clearly different from White counterparts; as Americans, they faced exclusion from the island-born Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rican students' understandings of their identity, and their decisions as to how to present it to others, were multifaceted. First were the cultural components of their identity, then their political identity coupled with their attitudes toward Puerto Rican nationalism. Throughout the interviews, a sense and pride of Puerto Rican identity came through; however the details of this identity differed greatly among the students, especially between the island and mainland students. For island-born Puerto Ricans, their identity included an exclusion of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, most pointedly the population of New York born Puerto Ricans. US Born Puerto Ricans denied this exclusivity, and embraced the idea of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Despite these differences, many common themes emerged, which detailed the extent and ways in which identities were managed.

The findings and analysis will be organized in several parts. Parts 1 and 2 will discuss the identity formation and management of the island-born Puerto Rican students. Part 3 will discuss the identity management of US born Puerto Rican students. Part 4 will discuss the interactions between the two groups, and the ways in which their ideas of being Puerto Rican are similar and how they differ. Finally, part 5 will further discuss the political landscape

of Puerto Rico, and the ways that its status as a commonwealth influences feelings of Puerto Rican cultural identity.

### **Part 1- The island-born Puerto Ricans**

***“I actually correct them. I say, I'm not American, I'm Puerto Rican.”***

- Marisol Campo

Despite the historical and political events which have led Puerto Rico to become a US commonwealth, the self-identities of the island-born students did not always reflect having an American connection. However, as scholar Jorge Duany wrote, there is a difference between political nationalism and cultural nationalism (Duany, 2002). While political nationalism focused on whether the citizens wanted their country to become sovereign, cultural nationalism affirmed the culture of the people (Duany, 2002). This is important to note because the affirmation of being Puerto Rico should be viewed as a cultural affirmation and not a political one.

While island-born student Sophia identified herself with the umbrella term of being a Latina, other island-born students were much more specific in their self-identifications. For example, Marisol believed that Puerto Ricans were an especially proud group of people, and their pride came through in their proclamation of identity.

We are very proud, um I know if we, if you ask if we are Hispanic, and you know, we are, we say yes but we're Puerto Rican. Or, if we're a Latina, yes, but we're Puerto Rican. Like, you define yourself and you make yourself different from everybody else. You just don't, we're not satisfied just being a Latina I guess.

However, Eva rejected the Latina identity that both Sophia and Marisol accepted.

Yeah, I always identify as Puerto Rican. I never identify as Hispanic or Latin and that was actually the first thing, like, whenever I'm in a class, I always bring that up. Whenever I'm in a women's studies class I always bring that up because they always say Hispanic and I'm like I don't know what that means.

Eva's claim that she did not know what being Hispanic meant may suggest a need to have a strong cultural connection with the self-identity that she expresses. For example, there is a clear cultural connection if someone claims to be Puerto Rican. That same connection does not exist if someone identifies as Hispanic. This may also explain why Marisol felt the need to further specify her identity after accepting that she was Latina or Hispanic. As Eva later explained, she believed that Puerto Ricans had a different struggle than other Latin countries, and therefore her nationality could not be lumped together with that of other countries. While Eva felt a strong affinity towards being Puerto Rican, other island-born students adopted a dual identity. For example, Miguel, a sophomore, believed he was both Puerto Rican and American.

Um, I guess that's kind of a difficult question because sometimes if you say I consider myself an American, then some Puerto Ricans would think, oh well, what about your Puerto Rican identity? But I think that they can co-exist. Ultimately, I think that they are the same thing because America is made up of different people that come from all types of different backgrounds and, so I don't think there's anything wrong with having both identities. You know, like living the American Dream, or you know, trying to be successful in life and live the American way of life and considering yourself Puerto Rican. I think they're the same.

Miguel refers to the idea of the United States as a melting pot. He believes that in this case, he can also be American because he can bring his culture into the American “pot” and thus become both Puerto Rican and American. Elena, also an island-born Puerto Rican, felt that her self-identity evolved after joining the Army.

In a way, like now, I consider the idea of being an American too. Like, I'm Puerto Rican first but then I'm also an American. And then before, before joining the Army, not before coming here, because you can ask any other Puerto Rican that comes here and they'll still tell you "I'm a Puerto Rican, I'm not an American." But I feel because I joined the Army, it's different.

Both Miguel and Elena's understandings of their self-identity combine cultural and political nationalism. Miguel mentions the American Dream, an economic well-being that he wanted to attain. Also, Elena mentions the Army, also not a cultural component of identity. Through these statements, Miguel and Elena seem to have a multi-faceted understanding of their sense of self, and illustrate the inability to separate Puerto Rico's politics with its culture.

These understandings of self-identity also show that despite all being island-born Puerto Ricans, the group is not homogeneous. The students have different ideas of how to define themselves and what they view as important. They all self-identify on some level as Puerto Rican, but there is no single explanation as to what being a Puerto Rican means. For island-born Puerto Ricans like Marisol, their definition of being Puerto Rican includes the exclusion of being American.

I don't consider myself an American even though I probably am cause, well, we are a territory of the United States, but we are not part of it.

So, I'm Latina, I'm Puerto Rican, but I don't feel that connection just because we're not part of the United States, and that's something people say we are, but that's something, I actually correct them. I say I'm not American, I'm Puerto Rican.

On face value, this feeling of identity cannot be understood as simply the result of geographic location. For example, both Hawaii and Alaska lack a border with the continental United States, yet there is a clear understanding of being a part of the country. However, the island-born students further their argument of not being a part of the United States by stating cultural differences. Therefore, it seems to be less about geographic location and more about a cultural identity which seems to separate Puerto Rico from the mainland United States.

The island-born students display cultural differences as a method to differentiate themselves from the United States. The students use cultural indicators such as familial relationships, clothing, attitudes, language, food and music as ways to separate themselves from Americans. These differences were used to separate themselves from both Americans and mainland Puerto Ricans.

First, familial bonds were viewed as a major aspect of Puerto Rican identity. Family was considered to be incredibly important to the students. Elena believed that some of her interactions with her parents were different from a typical American family.

Like in Puerto Rico, at least with our entire family, an example is [that] I always have to ask my parents for their blessing, that kind of thing. And my parents have to ask their parents for their blessing. Every time that I talk to them on the phone, every time that I say

goodbye, as I'm leaving the house, and I feel like that kind of thing is something that the American culture doesn't do.

Marisol's family connections were also very important to her, and she believed that part of being Puerto Rican was having relationships with extended family members as well.

Puerto Rico is a very family place, we celebrate everything. Even at the death, we go to dinner and celebrate, even though we are sadder...that is one of the things that I miss, being with my family. I'm used to celebrating everything with my family. Um, I have a relatively big family and we are very close, um, I really liked it there. It is very different from here I think...Puerto Ricans feel like the entire family, not just your close family, like when we are outside Puerto Rico we help each other even if we don't know each other, so that's, like, you have your own family and then you have your bigger family, which can be the entire island.

The island-born students had the perception that Americans did not have these close relationships with their own families. Therefore, family was one of the components that defined a Puerto Rican. Aside from the importance of family, language was also viewed as a defining factor in being Puerto Rican. Miguel believed that speaking Spanish was one of the few cultural differences that separated Puerto Rico from other countries.

Culture I think, to me, the most important thing is language cause I think that's what sets us apart from Americans the most. Um, cause sometimes if you look at like, pop culture, it's very similar. If you look at different, like, the way we dress, it's kind of like different, influenced by American culture so it's sometimes kind of melts together. Um, especially with traditions like Christmas and Halloween, we've been very Americanized in some cultural ways, but the language is always going to be different.

Language also separated island-born Puerto Ricans from Americans because of their understanding of the English language. Upon coming to the university, some of the students struggled feeling comfortable with English. Sophia believed that the English language was one of her biggest culture shocks in coming to college.

It was horrible. At the beginning, I went to a private English school so my classes were in English and Spanish. But still my English wasn't the best one of all so when I came here it was very hard for me to talk to people and write papers and all those kinds of things. But I got used to it.

While an understanding of Spanish identified them as decidedly Puerto Rican and not American in their minds, language cannot be the only component used to define a Puerto Rican. While many Americans may not speak Spanish, there are many other people that comprise the Spanish Diaspora. Additionally, the students' use of language to exclude them from being Americans was also used by Americans to exclude Puerto Ricans. The students' difficulty with English excluded them from being American in the eyes of others. Marisol expressed her initial hesitance to use her English once in college.

I don't know, like I feel, even though I have an accent and all, like, I know Spanish and English. I learned Spanish and English at the same time but I studied here to practice it more because I don't really use English at all back home. Here I was so scared at first because I wasn't used to talking in English all the time, and speaking in English and everything, so it was kind of hard at first to get used to.

Guillermo, who was born in Germany, had an especially interesting interaction with language because English was initially his first language.

She [my mother] said like when I came to Puerto Rico, I only spoke English most of the time so when I got to Puerto Rico, everybody was like speaking Spanish and it was completely new to me, and then, like, I became frustrated with English so I, like, completely denied English until like sixth grade or something like that... Then it was like, they started to say, like, no, you need English in your life, so that's when I basically was like, ok let's learn English.

Therefore, while Guillermo never identified as anything other than Puerto Rican, he initially did not know Spanish. This idea contests with Miguel's view that language is a primary component in defining a Puerto Rican. However, once living in Puerto Rico and developing his Spanish skills, Guillermo once again struggled with English. He felt especially limited during a high school trip to Washington DC.

We had to stay with everybody together and it was the first time that I actually had to be, like, completely speaking in English and it was a disaster. I remember being so frustrated with my English and, um, I don't know, meeting so many people it was like, wow, like, I don't know, it was amazing.

The importance of knowing Spanish as a factor in self-identity was also illustrated when several of the island-born Puerto Ricans started losing their Spanish fluency. Elena found that her Spanish has suffered since becoming a student at the university.

Something that happens to me in the States here is that I spend so much time here that I even start to forget my Spanish. I call home and I talk to them in Spanglish cause there are some words that I forget. So, so, that is very frustrating when I'm forgetting my Spanish.

In Elena's explanations, it seems forgetting Spanish words holds a greater importance to her. Her forgotten Spanish represents a loss of her identity as



well. Despite her own frustration, Elena explains that the reaction of others is also not typically positive.

It's like, "Hey we're in Puerto Rico. You can talk to me in Spanish." They just kind of remind me. Like sometimes I forget too. Like I'm speaking in Spanish and I just continue speaking in English. So they just kind of remind me. "You can continue speaking in Spanish, it's cool." Or if I forget, they don't really say anything. If I forget a word I just ask them "What's the word for that?" So people, like, if you talk all the time in English, they say "Who do you think you are, better than everyone else? Don't speak in English, speak in Spanish."

This reaction is also important because it shows that speaking English holds greater implications for relations with fellow Puerto Rican islanders. In their scolding of Elena for speaking English, it is clear that speaking English may hold a connotation of superiority, and is an attitude that the Puerto Ricans do not embrace. This may also explain why Elena becomes frustrated when she forgets Spanish. She is forced to adopt an identity that she does not embrace. Eva experienced a similar loss of Spanish since coming to Syracuse University.

Yeah, I mean, even when I talk to the people back home, I, like sometimes, texting people so much at home or writing on Facebook and then I read it and I'm like, why did I do it in English?, you know. And like, even when I'm at home, my mom is like, "You're losing your Spanish, you know. You're talking in English all the time." And I have this mixture of Spanglish, which is what we call it, between Spanish and English. It's kind of interesting I guess.

While language is one component of the Puerto Rican identity, the liveliness of its people was another agreed upon trait. During the interviews, Puerto Ricans were regularly described as "loud." Eva was one student who

felt conflicted about this self-proclaimed trait. On one hand, she enjoyed the loudness and the ways in which the Puerto Rican people celebrated.

We love to party. We look for an excuse to party every single time that we can. Um, we get excited by the little things. We get excited when Daddy Yankee wins a Grammy, when we win a sports crown. There was a week when we won this boxing match and we won this horse crown. That week was crazy. You know how it was here when Obama won? Everyone went out; everyone was beeping in their cars. Well, that's how it was that night. It was crazy and that's what happens whenever one big person wins. Everyone is, like, riding in their cars and, like, going out on their windshields and like [she screams]. So we're very, very celebrat[ory]. We like to celebrate.

In this example, the liveliness that Eva described represents a national pride in the victories of Puerto Rico's celebrities and fellow citizens.

However, on the other hand, Eva also believed that the noise associated with Puerto Ricans could also be a negative trait. Instead of liveliness being a part of her identity that she always embraces, at times, she rejects it.

Whenever, like, coming to Syracuse, there's always two flights that you have to take. And whenever you stop, like, if it's in New York or South Carolina or Philadelphia, that plane from wherever it is to Puerto Rico, is so different from any other plane that you're going to see because people are so loud. I actually hear the stewardess say, like, "Oh here we go, yeah, I hate this flight." And that actually makes me, like, mad and then I say, like, oh my god, people are not shutting up. People are always screaming. People think that it's ok for little kids to be running around up and down the aisle and it's not, and like complaining about everything.

This shows a further complexity in Eva's self-identity. It is unclear whether this feeling of frustration started prior to attending an American university, or only afterwards. Therefore, while Eva is clearly conflicted about

some aspects of her identity, it is unclear whether being in the United States has had a negative effect on her images of her Puerto Rican self.

The decision of the island-born students to attend an American university, specifically Syracuse University, illustrated another aspect of their identity formation. The students were looking for an opportunity to expand themselves, and increase their opportunities. Despite not seeing themselves as American, they were interested in being immersed in an environment with Americans. Initially, however, cultural understandings did play a role in making the decision to attend college in the United States. Guillermo's conception of his Puerto Rican identity initially made him not consider US colleges.

Well, I, I remember in 11th grade and even in 12th grade, being the guy that used to go, like, those guys that go to the States to study, they're like, like antipatriotico, which is like, how do you say that, like country-seller maybe? They're selling their country. And I was like, and I'm never going to the States and blah blah but then, um, I remember, like, SU being, like, they went to my school and I was like, yeah I'm going to apply. They have architecture, I may apply. So, I just sent a few things. But then, like, um, I also, like, um, applied to the schools in Puerto Rico. And um, I was expecting for my number one school over here [in Puerto Rico] to accept me but they didn't. I was accepted to the university with honors and everything, but not to the school. And, they were like, "Well, you could, um, this program was like an honor to be in it, so you could, like, enroll in it and probably next year you will enter the school." And I was like, yeah but that's not what I want. I want to enter the school. So then, the second school in Puerto Rico, they sent me [a letter] that was, like, maybe. But then I visited SU and like, it seemed like so many, like it was so big, in a way I could be more exposed to different experiences, like, in Puerto Rico, like, to think outside my box of what I see in Puerto Rico. So, that really changed my view of SU. Like, I was, like, oh this could be good for me. They also have, like, the Florence program, so this would be even more helpful to me because it would even expose me to the world, so I was, like, so that really defined, that really did my final decision.

For Guillermo, coming to the US to study was a last minute decision. However, it was his curiosity to learn about other cultures and people which ultimately motivated him to attend. According to previous research, many scholars believed that Puerto Ricans who migrated to the US did so because of economic motivations. However, in this case, Guillermo was primarily motivated by the interest in seeing a new place. However, he also mentioned the ability to study abroad and the ways that the experience could help him further his career. This could be seen as an economic motivation because it may allow him to obtain a better job in the future.

#### **Other People's Perceptions: Coming to SU**

*“What really upsets me sometimes...people didn't really know what Puerto Rico was.”*

- Eva Fuentes

While self-identity is clearly a major part of identity construction, another layer is added in the way that a person manages their identity in front of others. For the island-born students, the decision to come to SU served as a major transition. Many of the island-born Puerto Ricans had never before been in the ethnic minority. This changed once coming to SU.

One of the first changes that the students encountered was the ways in which other people identified the Puerto Rican students. While the students may have self-identified as Puerto Rican, others initially saw them as

something other than Puerto Rican. Elena believed that her White complexion served as a disservice to making people see her as Puerto Rican.

I definitely don't look like the typical Puerto Rican because I'm so White. I'm Whiter than most Americans here. So, even a lot of Americans look at me here like, "Are you seriously Puerto Rican?" Like, they don't believe me. And then I have to start speaking Spanish and then they believe me.

Elena contrasts her White skin to that of the "typical" Puerto Rican.

When questioned further, she claimed that the typical Puerto Rican has tanned skin, with dark hair and dark eyes. In this example, it seems like Elena agrees with the other students in questioning her identity. Instead of stating that a Puerto Rican can also look like her, she describes a Puerto Rican as looking completely different than she does. Sophia also referenced her roommate's White complexion as something that created questions about her identity.

Like, you can see a person, like someone like my roommate who is White, like this white (points to stark white object), and I think Latin people, they look at her, and they think she is an American. Once, we were doing a community service job at the Boys and Girls club and [she] started talking in Spanish, my roommate to me, and [a] girl came up to her and was like, "You talk Spanish?!" She's [my roommate] like, "Yeah I'm Puerto Rican" and she was like, "No you're kidding, how are you Puerto Rican, you're White."

In both cases, others' perceptions of how a Puerto Rican should look contrasted with Elena and Sophia's roommate's image. One reason that this occurred may be because of the US's ways of categorizing people based on race. In Puerto Rico, ethnicity was viewed as more important than color. However, in the US, color holds primary importance. Additionally, the island-born Puerto Ricans were forced to use their Spanish language to justify their

identity, as their affirmation of their identity was not enough. Once again, language is used as a cultural indicator, and as a method to differentiate the island-born Puerto Ricans from the Americans.

Coming to SU also forced the island-born Puerto Ricans to experience being in the minority for the first time. Other students' lack of knowledge of them and Puerto Rico's culture was a constant element that they encountered. Miguel had to field questions from Americans about Puerto Rico, who seemed completely unaware of its culture, traditions and history.

I've also got reactions from people who don't know where it is or asked me, like, "Oh, do you have restaurants, like do you have McDonalds over there?", and kind of, don't know anything about it. And think we're like this really poor third world country with, like, no schools. And they've asked me like, "Where do you buy clothes and how do you like the States, the malls and stuff," and it's the same thing really. People have asked me, like, how long is the drive from Syracuse to Puerto Rico, and there's no drive, and asked me like, "What's your currency and how is the currency change affecting you?" and it's like, same dollar. And we always make jokes about that, like, "Oh, like, a dollar is equivalent to, like, 3 coconuts, or a chicken, that how I bought my jacket."

Miguel chooses to laugh at such situations, which show how little his own cultural identity is understood by American students on the campus. Eva also is forced to deal with similar displays of ignorance when discussing her home with non-Puerto Ricans.

What really upsets me sometimes...people didn't really know what Puerto Rico was. And they were like, "Wait, where is Puerto Rico?" And like, that, that was okay if people were like, "I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm ignorant. Teach me." But they were like, "Wait, like, how did you get here?" And it was like, "Well, my dad was the chief of the tribe so he exchanged some horses and I got here in a canoe." They're like, "Ohhh, okay." It's like, "No!, no, it's a joke, it's a joke." We do have an international airport. We do have internet. We do have all the

little things that you have. It's the same thing, it's just, I do live in a concrete house in the suburbs and drive a car, and, you know, I paid \$10,000 more for the car because they have to ship it from the States to here, but it's the same thing.

Both Miguel and Eva used self-deprecating humor as defense mechanisms. While Miguel seemed content to just laugh about it, Eva seemed more hurt by the lack of knowledge of others. Her expressed interest in wanting to educate those who claimed to be ignorant shows a willingness to want to share her culture and identity with others. The questions that Miguel and Eva had to field proved to them that they were minorities in their new environment. Jose also was forced to deal with discrimination against his Puerto Rican heritage during his first year at SU.

I went [ice] skating and I had never seen snow when I came to SU, so it was going to be my first experience actually seeing snow. So I went ice skating and someone told me, "Oh don't worry about it, it's you know, you'll recognize it right off the bat. It's similar to cocaine, you know about that."

This insult referred to the idea that all Puerto Ricans were familiar with drug use, or had been around drugs in their lives. While Jose did not mention that the insulter directly mentioned him being Puerto Rican, Jose felt as though the comment was only made because they knew that he was of Spanish descent. This insult put Jose into the "other" category, once again separating him from other Americans. Marisol also felt that she was separated from the rest of the student body due to her cultural differences. She felt isolated from others because she and her roommate spoke Spanish together.

It was weird because we lived in Flint and my friend and I were both Puerto Ricans, speak Spanish all the time in between us, so people walked around us and heard us speaking Spanish, and I don't know why, asked us if we spoke English. And we were like, "Yes, why wouldn't we?" I don't know. It was very weird. We were kind of, not the rejects, I don't want to say that strong word, but people, like, I saw that Americans, they quickly made friends with each other and they were friends and they had their groups. But I think there were like 3 groups in my hall and we were like, the rejects kind of. Like another separate group and there was just the 2 of us, because we spoke Spanish I think. I don't know. It was weird. And I really noticed that all the time. Like Americans make friends very fast (pause) with Americans, and it's harder to make friends with Puerto Ricans and Americans. I don't know why but that's what I have experienced.

Once again language plays a role as a cultural indicator. In this case it has a dual effect. It plays a part in the Puerto Rican students' own sense of self-identity. Yet it also separates them from the American students. Instead of only showing a different identity from the Americans, it also causes the American students to limit their interactions with Marisol and her roommate. These were only a few of the transitions that the island-born Puerto Ricans faced.

Once coming to SU, they noticed additional cultural differences which separated them from the American students that they encountered. Once again, these differences can be used in defining Puerto Rican identity. One of these differences was the amount of personal space that the island-born Puerto Ricans were accustomed to in comparison to the American students. As Miguel noted, he was used to being closer than the American students that he met.

I've had experiences where they [Americans] are introduced to a friend or something, you kind of kiss them on the cheek, the girl. Over here,



that's sometimes kind of seen as, like, violating that person's personal space. So sometimes, I've kind of learned to (pause), that kind of led to awkward situations to people. Since Latino people tend to be more, like, touching people more and tend to be more warm with that, where some Americans are a bit more distant with that.

Another noted cultural difference was the friendliness between the two groups of people.

We're very friendly, that's what I mean. It's like what I was saying before. Like until I came here to Syracuse University, it was the first time that I met someone who would be nasty to you, like out of nowhere. Like go to Bursar's Office and you're really nice to them and they will attack you before you even say a word. Um, I had never met, like, that was a type of culture shock. Like when, the first time I went to the Bursar's Office, I wanted to cry because I felt like everyone who worked there was so nasty to me. Like, just like, not that they insulted me, but the way that they addressed me was so so nasty. So I left and I just cried because it was like a culture shock.

In both cases, the cultural differences felt by Miguel and Elena led to awkward or hurtful situations. While Elena did not address the details of the conversation, it was clear that she did not expect the reaction that she received. Sophia also noted a difference in the friendliness between Puerto Ricans and the Americans.

And people are very nice in Puerto Rico. For example, what I miss from home, is you can sit at a bar and talk to a random person and it's completely normal and it's like "Hey, we're Puerto Rican, we're here, let's talk. Let's have a chat." But here, you sit at the bars and people try to stand away from you as possible. It's like, "I don't want to sit next to you. No way, who are you?"

Sophia mentions a change in the attitude that strangers in the US possess with each other as opposed to in Puerto Rico. As Marisol mentioned earlier, the idea of the island being a large family may affect Sophia's

understanding that strangers in a bar should be able to talk to one another.

Another concept that scholar Clara Rodriguez mentioned in her work was the idea of *dignidad* (Rodriguez, 1974). *Dignidad* was the Spanish word referring to mutual and reciprocal respect awarded to all people. Rodriguez believed that it was a major component of Puerto Rican identity. This may explain the reasons why the island-born students were offended or surprised when they did not receive mutual respect.

Finally, the use of alcohol played a major role in the cultural differences between island-born Puerto Ricans and American college students. While some of the island-born students were not used to the drinking styles of the American students, others had already had those experiences prior to entering college, due to the differences in drinking age in Puerto Rico and the United States. In fact, the difference in drinking age between Puerto Rico and the US caused Eva to have different social expectations once she came to SU.

In my freshmen year, everybody here was like, “Oh, let's go out and party. Let's go out and drink.” I come from Puerto Rico. I can drink since I was 18, which means I was going out since I was 14. So I'm done with the whole partying thing and I sort of, like, just go back home [to Puerto Rico] and that's when I go out and that's when most of my friends are there. That's the big difference from being here.

However, despite having a lower drinking age than her American counterparts, Elena was very apprehensive about drinking and the drinking behaviors that she thought American students had.

I don't know if it's true or not, but in America teenagers grow up faster. It doesn't mean that they go out of their house at the age of 18. I feel like here kids are drinking earlier and they're partying earlier, and that just wasn't me and it wasn't my group of friends. I came from twelfth

grade, and in high school my hang out would be either go to a friend's house on the weekend or go see a movie. That was my hang-out. Not really drinking or anything else. So, so yeah I was scared of having that culture shock.

Once again, these differences in social activities show a disparity between the island-born Puerto Ricans and American students, and show a variety of interests that the students had, even with drinking as an option. These encounters and cultural differences show that the American student body saw a difference between themselves and the island-born Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, the American students behaved in a manner to support their feelings of difference. The lack of knowledge that Americans students possessed about Puerto Rico and their sense of difference made the island-born Puerto Ricans feel like a minority within the student body.

During the transition to the college environment, the island-born Puerto Ricans formed communities. Yet despite all of the differences encountered, the island-born students still stated that they were not trying to form exclusively Puerto Rican communities at the university. Elena made a conscious goal to spend time with other people besides Puerto Ricans while at the university.

And it was just something that I said when I came here. I'm not going, like, I'm not going to go to New York to hang out -- to only make friends with more Puerto Ricans. If I wanted that, I would have just stayed home. A school in Puerto Rico, I could have met tons of them there. The reason why I came here was to have a cultural experience. So, when I came to the States I didn't look for the Puerto Ricans... Like a lot of people come to college and all their friends are Puerto Rican and to me that just doesn't make sense. I don't feel like I block them out, but they're not going to be my only friends.

Elena's statements show that despite her own affirmation of Puerto Rican self-identity, she was not only looking for friends that identified in a similar manner that she did. Sophia found that the program Summer Start was useful in helping her initially form friendships.

I came here in summer start and I just made friends with everybody, so...I do feel more comfortable with the people from Puerto Rico because we all understand each other and it's easier for me to be around them and be myself, but, um...no I have a lot of American friends and friends from other countries all over the world and we just get along very fine.

Despite the fact that Sophia mentioned having a variety of friends, she seemed less hesitant when speaking about her bond with her fellow island-born students. Eva's situation was the opposite from Elena and Sophia because initially she spent a large amount of time with other Puerto Rican students. Eventually, she began spending less time with them, especially after she met her American boyfriend during her freshmen year.

Um, 9 girls from my high school also came here, so we sort of...My roommate was also one of them, for my freshmen year, was actually one of them, so we were very inseparable for the first semester. I met this guy, we were neighbors, I lived in Sky Halls freshmen year and we were neighbors, my next-door neighbor, and we began dating. We're still dating, two and a half years later, and (pause) we, at the beginning, we [her Puerto Rican friends] used to do everything together. But it sort of started being like high school again. Like, it was all girls, and it started being like the whole girls environment again. Like stupid fights over, you know, "Oh my gosh, she hooked up with this guy," or, I was just tired of it and so since I lived so far away [on campus] also. I was the only one who traveled, me and my roommate, and my roommate at the time was always studying, always doing all this work and she would never go out. I just started hanging out with my boyfriend, my current boyfriend now.

Although their initial goal may not have been to develop communities of island-born Puerto Ricans, for many of the students, this still eventually happened. Partially, the large number of Puerto Rican students accepted into the university may have helped to facilitate these relationships. According to research gathered by Syracuse University's Enrollment Management, the number of Puerto Rican students who claim Puerto Rico as their residence has recently increased. In Fall 2005, there were 17 first year matriculated students who claimed Puerto Rican residence. For the Fall 2008 school year, there were 34 students. While some students found the increased number of Puerto Ricans helpful in their social lives, others tried to avoid the group. Marisol spent time with the Puerto Rican students that she already knew and expanded her network through those connections.

Um, I knew a lot of people from back home... They had, like, a lot of Puerto Ricans from here, so we kind of have our own Puerto Rican group. We always, when we are out of Puerto Rico, we usually come together and share because we, I don't know, it's like an attraction. Even though we don't know each other, it's like, your family. Yeah, and I found the other people from, like, my classes. Um, my roommate was in architecture and she has her architecture friends and so they became my friends too and we hang out. Um, and that's how I actually have friends.

Once again, Marisol references the idea of the Puerto Rican students forming a family, while being away from her biological family in Puerto Rico. However, Elena did not appreciate the large number of Puerto Ricans attending the university, and believed that the university was accepting any Puerto Rican who applied.

Ok, freshman year there was only, my class, there was only 19 Puerto Ricans. So it wasn't that big. The year before that, it was even less, the amount of Puerto Ricans that came to SU. The year after, my sophomore year, like 40 Puerto Ricans came over here. And then I met some of them. But then this year, even more Puerto Ricans came over here. So the way that it looks to me is that Syracuse is transforming itself into the next University of Puerto Rico... I hate it. I absolutely hate it. Cause I don't know like, like I feel that SU is admitting a lot, a lot of Puerto Ricans and that doesn't really make, I don't know, like, I don't know how to describe it. As far as how you say prestige, like, when I go back to Puerto Rico, I can show my diploma and be like, "Hey I signed up with the University of Puerto Rico," and my employer will be like, "Oh yeah, you did? --so you and 15 other people that are coming for this job." So I hate it. I hate that SU is admitting any Puerto Rican that comes.

This negative reaction to the presence of Puerto Ricans seems to have less to do with cultural nationalism than with economic motivations. Elena seems upset that so many Puerto Ricans are attending the university because they are reducing her likelihood to stand out to employers. Therefore, she wants fewer Puerto Ricans to attend the school so that she can further capitalize on the advantages of having attended an American university when she returns to Puerto Rico. While her words are strong, her distaste for the admittance of Puerto Ricans seems unrelated to her cultural understandings.

## **Part II- US born Puerto Ricans**

***"The whole idea of knowing my roots was always really important to me."***  
**- Maria Castillo**

The identity formation of the US born Puerto Rican students differed greatly from that of the island-born Puerto Ricans. However, while their formation was different, the students' proclamation of their self-identity was

largely the same. Maria, a half-Dominican and half-Puerto Rican student, initially only identified with her Puerto Rican heritage.

Um, I usually tell people I'm half and half, like I'm half Puerto Rican and half Dominican. But for a while, like, just because I was raised with my mom, I would just tell people that I was Puerto Rican, like, just cause, like, or I would just tell people that I was half and half. I would usually ignore my dad's side because I couldn't come to terms with it because I didn't feel like he was a part of my life so why should I acknowledge, like, that part. Like, as I'm closer to him, like, starting to get used to and getting over that, and just accepting, like, who I am.

Despite now acknowledging both sides of her heritage, Maria still largely identifies with her Puerto Rican roots and expressed pride in being Puerto Rican.

It's, like, very important to me. Like, that's what I am, first and foremost, you know what I mean. I am American, but I also am Latina, and that, like, means the world to me. The fact that I can speak Spanish and come from, like, a cultural background, like, matters to me. It matters that I know my history, you know what I mean, and know about where I came from. And I feel like all of this came when I took this African-American history class my senior year of high school. [It] gave me a different like, like, shed a different light on, like, my background and where I came from, and, like, it was, like, really important for me and, like, I eventually want to become Greek, you know, in a sorority, and I already know I want to be in a Latina sorority.

In Maria's affirmation of her Puerto Rican identity, she identified several components that were important to her. First, she expressed the importance of knowing Spanish as a part of knowing and understanding her heritage. Secondly, she mentioned wanting to join a sorority with other Latina students. Although these students may not all identify as being Puerto Rican, Maria's desire to form a community with other Latina students is also a part of

her identity expression. Similarly, Celia proudly accepts her identity as a Puerto Rican.

Um, yeah, I'm really proud to say I'm a Puerto Rican Hispanic woman and, um, I think it's a pretty good accomplishment. Especially from where I come from, like, my family and everything, I'm the first to ever go to college, and actually, like, I'm finishing. So I'm proud to say I'm Puerto Rican and Hispanic. Like, that's how I identify myself.

For Celia, being Puerto Rican includes an additional layer of importance. Her pride to be Puerto Rican includes the way in which she represents herself. Because of her academic successes while in college, Celia believes that she is showing the ability of Puerto Ricans and the successes that they can achieve. Finally, Alisa also identified as Puerto Rican, as both of her parents were from the island. For the US born Puerto Rican students, their families actively promoted being Puerto Rican starting with childhood. Alisa notes that her household helped her form her Puerto Rican identity.

Um, when I was younger, my parents were together, so being Puerto Rican was definitely a huge part of my identity. You know, Spanish was spoken in the house...Um, but when we were younger, like, all of my parents' friends were Puerto Rican. Um, family is a huge deal you know, always big family parties and things like that.

Once again, Alisa notes the importance of Spanish language and close family bonds in helping her identify with being Puerto Rican. Maria, who lived in a predominantly Latino and Black neighborhood, also described how her Puerto Rican culture was expressed in her household.

Like, I loved it. It was fun cause, like, um, I'm 75% Dominican, 25% Puerto Rican, but I was raised in a Puerto Rican household. Like, my grandmother was 100% Puerto Rican and my mom is also half and half, but we only lived with our mothers, like I only live with my



mother, my mother only lived with her mother. So it's like Puerto Rican cooking all the time, music playing, just like really loud. And my grandparents lived in the same apartment for 40 years so it's like a bunch of memories and so many Christmases and Thanksgivings. It was good.

Despite not being completely Puerto Rican, the household that she lived in played a large role in shaping her identity.

For the mainland students, another part of their identity formation was visiting the island of Puerto Rico. While none of them were born on the island, they believe that having that connection strengthens their Puerto Rican identity. Celia regularly spent summers there, but had negative experiences during her later visits to the island. She cited a lack of acceptance from the island-born Puerto Ricans as the root of the problems.

They, like, come across in the wrong way or just won't even talk to you. They won't even bother, and others [talked to me] only due to the fact that I was over there [and] they were family friends. They accepted me, but it wasn't really that hard. I was a little kid so I kind of fit in, like, everywhere. But as you got older, it was kind of (pause) it was kind of harder. I think that it was, like, age 14, was one of the last times that I went by myself, because that year we kind of got into a lot of trouble. That year, we got into fights and (pause) it was kind of bad.

In her early years, Celia did not notice problems because of her age, and her limited social interactions. However, she believed that the fights that she encountered as a teenager occurred because she had heightened interactions with other island-born Puerto Ricans who she did not know. She stated that one of the main causes of the fighting was with island-born girls regarding island-born boys.

Um, mostly out there, it was stupid, but it was about guys. Like, they had a really big thing about, like, “my property.” So, like, I didn't think anything of it. I thought we were just trying to make friends and guys were kind of more accepting than the girls were. And there was this one stupid thing, “Oh, you're talking to my guy.” And I was walking away and they don't like when you turn your back, so that was like insulting.

In these situations, Celia's fights were over cultural differences between her and the island-born Puerto Ricans. For example, the island-born Puerto Ricans had different understandings of their relationships with boys and rules that Celia did not adhere to. Celia stated that her male cousins usually ended up defending her against any altercations that she encountered. She stated that she has not visited the island since she was 16 years old. While she still has a desire to continue to visit Puerto Rico, she wants to go to the resort areas instead.

[W]hen I go back, I want to stay in, like, a resort. Everyone's like, “Oh Puerto Rico is so beautiful” and stuff. I'm like, “You haven't, you, you, you stay at a resort and of course it's beautiful. Everyone treats you there with respect and everything. You haven't stayed in like the pueblo with the actual islanders.” And they're not very, I can't say all of them because most of them are, but some of them are not very pleasant at all. So I have the experience of actually living in Puerto Rico, not like some luxurious resort or hotel or something and go touring and stuff. I've actually lived there.

While Celia did have the experience of actually living in an everyday setting in Puerto Rico, she did not seem to enjoy all of her experience. In fact, instead of helping to strengthen her Puerto Rican roots, her experience seemed to alienate her from the island. Alisa, whose father currently lives in Puerto Rico, has also visited the island several times. However, unlike Celia, she found that she was more readily accepted.

Um, I went once when I was really little, when I was like four so I don't remember much, but um, and then I went again probably when I was about 22 for the first time. And so it was a really good experience, like, felt really connected to the place and my dad was living there. So he was actually living with my grandmother and they lived kind of in the country um, so I got to go there and sort of see the family and see the island. And I really fell in love, like, felt really connected to the place because I knew it was part of my heritage and that was really important to me. And then I had like, my mother's relatives that I had seen in the United States but I hadn't seen in a long time and then, going back there, um, I have a cousin that's my age and so it was really cool. And he would take us around. I went with another cousin of mine, and then I've probably been back, since 22, so like, so that was like 5 years. I've probably been back like 4 or 5 times. So I kind of made it more of a regular thing even if it's only for a few days. Mostly because I love the beach and it's cold here (laughs).

Despite Alisa's final comments that she liked visiting Puerto Rico for the beach and the warm weather, it is clear that she felt a strong connection during her visit. She was able to re-connect with family members and feel a strengthened bond with her own heritage. While Celia and Alisa both had the opportunity to see the island, Maria is still waiting for her opportunity to visit.

Hopefully, I want to spend a summer [there]. My family's excuse for not having taken me is, like, the part where we're from in Puerto Rico is, like, Santa Seville and the Ponce area and it's not at its best right now so they're worried. And just like also, a lot of my family who lives in Puerto Rico is on the older side and I'm 18 and I'm not just trying to be at home. Like at Puerto Rico, I'm trying to hit the beach, go to parties, so that's like their excuse for why I haven't, like, why we haven't gone.

Maria's excitement at the idea of going to Puerto Rico demonstrates that it is an important part of her identity to make the trip. Even with the mixed experiences that Celia faced, going to the island seems to be a part of identity building for the mainland Puerto Ricans.

While Celia encountered issues as an outsider when she visited Puerto Rico, the US born Puerto Ricans also encountered identity issues while in the United States. All three students moved to neighborhoods where they became the racial and cultural minority. Similarly to the island-born Puerto Rican students, the mainland students moved from an area where they were the majority to neighborhoods where they were the ethnic minorities. Alisa's move occurred after her parents' divorce. The separation from half of her Puerto Rican roots made it harder for her to stay enveloped in all of the Puerto Rican culture and traditions after her move. Additionally, the new places where she moved were all predominantly White.

[W]e moved around a few times, but they were always suburban schools so it was usually all White people and then maybe like one or two Black people. And then there was me. Well, the fact that I always identified as Puerto Rican and my last name is [Munoz] so it sounds very like Spanish. I know that I've always been lighter and my hair's always been really straight so that was really confusing to the kids that I was around. Like, they didn't, like the only, the only people that they'd ever seen, not even that they saw Mexicans because they weren't even around here, but when they saw like Latinos, they thought of Mexicans. Like on TV and then they would ask me like, "Oh, do you eat tacos at home?" and stuff like that and that used to bug me because it was like, "No." So it was very like, I guess, trying to educate, but you know, not making a big deal out of it because most people that knew, like, didn't really know anything or they just thought I was White or Italian because I'm light and my hair is straight. And like, you know, I don't talk like I'm from the Bronx or like Rosie Perez or (laughs) whatever stereotypes there is.

Alisa's role as the educator mirrors the experiences that Miguel and Eva faced when coming to SU. While Miguel and Eva were forced to educate the American students, Alisa was forced to educate her White counterparts.

Also, while Jose encountered the stereotype that he was familiar with cocaine, Alisa had to encounter the stereotype that she ate tacos.

Alisa also mentioned that her image did not coincide with the way that her peers thought that Latinas should look. Because of this, her identity was not understood by her peers. However, unlike the island-born Puerto Ricans, Alisa's identity difficulties did not disappear even after she moved back into an area with other mainland Puerto Ricans. Even in this environment, she had a hard time fitting in with the other Puerto Rican students.

I was a very good student and I was a little, like, straight and narrow, you know, and these girls, they like grew up in the city. They were much more street than I was too. So you know, they would say things like, "Oh you know, you talk like a White girl" or, you know, "You have straight hair. Are you sure you're not...?" A lot of people would try to get me to insist that I was half-White at least cause that's what made the most sense and then, so you know, I dated, you know, like little middle school boyfriends. [I] dated different ones but like, they were predominantly, like, Black and so, you know, a couple of times where like, these two guys, probably because I didn't want to go out with them, they would say like, "Oh you're such a nigger lover" and blah blah blah which was really kind of offensive. And something that always bothered me because I never wanted to um (pause) I never wanted to feel like I had to, like, talk about my identity and prove, like, I had to do something to prove that I was Puerto Rican. Like, "Oh I speak Spanish. You must not really be Puerto Rican if you don't speak Spanish well" or "You must not really be Puerto Rican if you don't look it," and so I kind of ignored those things. But, like, under the surface they always bothered me, but, like, I also never felt like I had to over compensate. I just kind of grew up with the attitude of well, you know what, whatever. This is kind of how I am.

Alisa's struggle was unique, compared to the other students, because she was forced to defend her identity against other mainland Puerto Ricans. Other mainland Puerto Ricans did not identify her as Puerto Rican because they claimed that she did not express her identity properly. For example, they

used the insult that she spoke like a White girl as a way of telling her that she was not speaking like a Puerto Rican girl. However, as Alisa stated, her refusal to over compensate to please the girls illustrated that she viewed her identity as internal, and not something that others had to approve of. Celia also dealt with being a racial minority in school when she moved out of New York City to upstate New York.

I think the only [time I] really thought about my identity was when, I think around 5th grade, I moved up, like, upstate, up north, because my parents wanted to get away from the city. And that's when I felt really awkward, when I moved into a predominantly White school, so...that's when I noticed I was like the only, the only minority here. Ok so it kind of felt weird.

Celia also had to deal with others' perceptions of her as the only Puerto Rican in her school. While she adjusted, she thought that the White students initially feared her and the other students of color. Maria also had a unique experience because she attended an out-of-state boarding school instead of continuing her schooling in New York City. Despite being in a new and predominantly White environment, she made a conscious decision to show her Puerto Rican roots.

I went to a boarding school in Pennsylvania cause, like, as many people from New York know, our public schools are not the best. And you know, my mom wanted me to get a good education and um, I made sure that I kept my roots. I took Spanish up until the AP level, um, I was, like, um, co-leader of the Latin American student organization in my school. There's a play called *Platanos and Collard Greens*-I brought that to my school. So it was, like, diversity and the whole idea of like, knowing my roots was always really important to me.

Maria's willingness to educate her peers about Puerto Rico contrasted with Alisa's frustration at people's questions of her. Also, while Celia initially felt uncomfortable not being a part of a Puerto Rican community, Maria embraced the idea of being an ambassador. This variety of reactions to being in an ethnic minority show the different ways in which the mainland students openly expressed their identities.

Also, despite being born and raised in the US, the mainland Puerto Ricans still went through cultural and identity transitions once coming to SU. Celia attended a summer program which she felt gave her a false impression as to the diversity of the school during the academic year.

I really enjoyed it here. And I guess I didn't realize the summer was way different from what it is during the academic year. So Summer College was more of a minority thing. That was again, like another melting pot, and I felt comfortable and I liked it and I loved the school. So I was like, "Yeah this is where I want to come", like, after I was done [with high school]. So, like senior year, I went back to school and I applied and everything and this was my first choice and this is where I wanted to go. So that's how I made my decision. Like, I mean, I visited other schools and everything, but I always thought this was my place.

Celia's mention of the melting pot seemed to reference having many cultures and races interacting with one another, more so than the idea of groups assimilating into the mainstream society. However, upon attending SU during the academic year, she felt that it was much less diverse.

Uh, it was another getting used to. It brought me back to elementary school, like, (under her breath)"Oh it's like this again, that's great (laughs)." It's like, ok, I mean, it just took a lot of time to get used to. Especially because I was older and I kind of had these stereotypes in my head so, kind of taking away from that so, I mean, sometimes, it's kind of like, once you meet your friends, once you establish your, who

are your friends and you get used to it and stuff, it gets, it basically got easier from there on out.

Because of the lack of diversity, Celia looked for a community of primarily Latina friends. She said that she was able to find her group of friends through her boyfriend and other connections. After attending an undergraduate university in New York City, Alisa also had to re-adjust to a much less diverse environment. While she does not believe that she is as connected to the campus as a Masters student, she was still surprised at the lack of diversity in her program.

Like, at least in my year, and in my classes, like, there's one other girl and she's Dominican; there's one Native American girl and there's one Black girl. And like, even males, there's not even many males and I know, like, within the program there's, like, a little bit more diversity but not very much. Like, and I was really surprised in that. And maybe I got a little brainwashed from the city but you know, everyone was like a White female. And not even, like, there weren't even like Jewish White women (laughs). Just White women and I was really surprised and kind of disheartened about that. So, like, I think that that kind of made me think about it a little bit more after I had been in the program for a while. Like, towards the end of my second semester, because I was just like, where am I getting diversity in my life?

Even though Alisa was a graduate student and not an undergraduate like the other mainland students, she still expressed a desire to be surrounded by different types of people. While it was not explicitly stated, Alisa may have been hoping to see more Puerto Rican students.



### **Clash of the Cultures: Island-born and US born Puerto Ricans**

*“There's always this struggle between Puerto Ricans, between the ones who were raised here and the ones that were raised there, as to who's the true Puerto Ricans.”*

**-Eva Fuentes**

Despite the similarity in these groups' self-identities, there are many strains in the relationships between island-born and mainland Puerto Ricans. Based on the interviews conducted, both groups see each other as largely separate. One way that island-born Puerto Ricans create differences between themselves and US born Puerto Ricans is through looking at their understanding of the Spanish language.

While it may not have been the initial goal, language is used as a method to exclude US born Puerto Ricans from being a part of the island-born Puerto Rican community. The “us versus them” mentality was used in several scenarios to create an exclusive community of island born Puerto Ricans. Miguel believes that many of the mainland Puerto Ricans' lack of Spanish fluency diminishes the cultural unity of the two groups.

Many times they'll be like, “I visited once at my grandma's house or something, but I haven't been there in years,” or you know, “I don't speak Spanish.” So it's kind of like there's a disconnect there.

The separation that Miguel sees penetrates the university community at many levels. It not only affects individual relationships, but it affects the student organizations that the two groups of students decide to join. Jose, in

discussing the Latino organizations on campus, also uses language to differentiate between island-born Puerto Ricans and US born Puerto Ricans.

Most of them [organization members] are Latino students from the United States. Once again you get that little difference, I mean, and it's a sad reality that, a lot, most of them don't even know how to speak Spanish properly.

Once again, while Jose does not explicitly state that he would not join one of these student organizations; he makes it clear that they are different than him because he does know how to speak Spanish properly. Currently, he is not a member of any Latino student organizations. While the island-born students seem to react harshly to the broken Spanish that some of the mainland students speak, the feelings are not reciprocal. The mainland students do not seem to have the expectation that the island-born students will speak perfect English. In fact, Celia gives credit to the island-born students for speaking English as well as they do.

Like, I kind of looked up to them. Like that's a really, really good accomplishment to come from the, right out the island, to be here. I was like, I give them a lot of props for doing that, and to be in a school like this -- predominantly White, strict English, and for you to speak it, read it, write it. I give them all the props in the world, I have nothing against them. Like, I really didn't have, I didn't have no animosity against them.

Although the mainland students were less critical about the island-born students' English skills, they did address the importance of knowing Spanish and how it affected their Puerto Rican identity. One of Alisa's regrets is not having a better grasp of Spanish. She explains that her mother's good intentions ended up becoming a disservice to her.

My mother, I think because when she came here she had a lot of trouble learning English, so she tried to make sure that we knew English really well. And it kind of, in some ways, it kind of backfired because we ended up learning, not learning as much Spanish as we should have... because like now I feel it's such a disadvantage, like not knowing Spanish. Personally and professionally. Like, the fact that, like, my last name is so recognizable to my identity, like, people just assume that I can speak Spanish and then the people that are more, I don't know, like when I go down to Miami or something like that, people would speak to me in Spanish because they know that I look Spanish. Like, it doesn't happen as much up here because people haven't been exposed to the same things but um, you know, so it's kind of an embarrassment to me that you know, both my parents are Puerto Rican and I can't really speak Spanish that well. And like, part of it goes into, like, embarrassment and now, like, I'm older and I should have taken the initiative or the responsibility, like that on my own. And I try here and there but, um, you know, it would have been nice if, like, I could have always known it. And then, professionally, it would be such a help, like right off the bat, in social work, to, like, work with people to know Spanish.

This generational difference and the decision of Alisa's mother to emphasize Spanish household reflects the assimilation theory. While Alisa's mother wanted her to know English so that she could flawlessly fit into mainstream American society, Alisa wanted to learn Spanish to help retain her cultural identity. Maria also did not focus on Spanish growing up, and has since tried to spend more time with the language.

Especially as I got older because I felt like at one point during my life when I was younger I kind of denied it. Just like, um, I never really spoke Spanish when I was younger, like most kids grow up speaking Spanish or having Spanish as their first language. Um, that wasn't me. I always, like, my grandmother or my mom would speak to me in Spanish, I'd respond in English. So, like, as I got older, that was important to me to, like, keep up with Spanish.

However, despite both groups emphasizing Spanish as part of their cultural identity, some scholars argue against the emphasis of language as a

defining component of being Puerto Rican. Scholar Jorge Duany states, “National identity is not always the primary form of allegiance and mobilization. Moreover, one must question the easy equation between being born in Puerto Rico, living on the island, and speaking Spanish as the sole criteria for establishing a person’s Puerto Ricanness” (Duany, 2005). Another factor which creates a division among Puerto Ricans is the stereotypes that island-born Puerto Ricans ascribe to mainland Puerto Ricans. Island-born Elena finds the two groups to be completely different.

I could definitely compare the Nuyoricans with the Puerto Ricans. Two different cultures (says with emphasis). It's like, you can put us together, and we just look different. Ok, there is, like, the stereotype. I haven't really lived in the Bronx to know but in Puerto Rico, we have our stereotypes of the Nuyoricano. They're pretty much like ghetto; they always wear, like, really tight clothing. For some reason, they feel like they have to promote that they're Puerto Rican, like, they have their flag, the Puerto Rican flag, all over the place. They wear the flag; they have necklaces with the flag. See, I wouldn't have to do that. I don't have to prove to you that I'm Puerto Rican. I know I'm Puerto Rican. I'm from the island. So I don't know, I think that's ghetto and....and, yeah, it's just different cultures.

Elena uses the term Nuyoricano to describe the mainland Puerto Ricans. Nuyoricano was a term coined to describe the mainland Puerto Ricans, many of whom settled in New York City (Whalen et al, 2005). While the island-born and mainland Puerto Ricans have already differentiated themselves on several accounts, the term Nuyoricano serves as a further distinction. As Elena describes the negative stereotypes that she has about the Nuyoricans, one of her major points was that the Nuyoricans show their identity externally. While

some may assume that this cultural pride would be accepted, Elena's Puerto Rican pride does not involve an external display.

Guillermo found that in his initial interactions with other Americans, they became more receptive to him when they found out that he was not similar to the Nuyorican stereotype.

They were pretty impressed because sometimes the impression that they had about the Puerto Ricans, they had about the Nuyoricans. You know, like, big pants and, like, always talking about listening to reggaeton, and then they looked at us and they were like, "Wait, are you really Puerto Rican?" Like...so that really sort of changed their minds.

An underlying part of the Nuyorican stereotype is the level of sophistication that the group supposedly lacks. Based on Elena and Guillermo's descriptions, the Nuyoricans were seen as less sophisticated than their island-born counterparts. While there is no proven validity to that claim, the stereotype seems to have a large effect in breaking apart the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Instead of welcoming and accepting all people of Puerto Rican descent, the island-born Puerto Ricans distance themselves from the US born Puerto Ricans on the basis of the Nuyorican stereotype. Miguel's statements about US born Puerto Ricans reflect this idea.

Well, usually I guess they're associated more with being uneducated and more you know, kind of like lower income too. Like associated with that... Yeah sometimes there is a little bit of, um, they kind of, some Puerto Ricans like from the island don't consider Nuyoricans like actual Puerto Ricans. Kind of like a different thing for some people because they think, like, you know, maybe they don't speak the language or they've never been there. You know, and even if they consider themselves Puerto Rican cause they have family members or whatever, sometimes they're not really, because different Puerto Ricans, sometimes there's a division.

Miguel involves the issue of social class in describing the Nuyoricans. These statements make the island-born Puerto Ricans seem elite, while the mainland Puerto Ricans are viewed as lower class. Interestingly, some of the island-born Puerto Ricans have family members that live in the States. Yet, they do not place the Nuyoricans stereotype on them. However, it is not only the island-born Puerto Ricans that notice differences among Puerto Ricans. The US born Puerto Ricans also consider themselves different from the island-born Puerto Ricans. Maria experienced the separation between the two groups first-hand.

Um, yeah, I feel like it goes, like talking about Africans who encounter Black people from America, I feel like it, it's just different. Like, I feel like, for example, Puerto Ricans, they call us Nuyoricans. Like it's not like we're the same because we're not like from the island. We haven't been living there our whole lives so I feel like it's a little like animosity kind of... there is, like, um, a lot of Puerto Ricans, um, I live in Day Hall and they come, like, straight off the island, you know what I mean. And it's different, like, I haven't, like, they stick together, even though, like, a lot of them might have other friends. But for the most part, like, their core group of friends are, like, other Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico.

Also, while the term Nuyoricans is one that the island-born students are comfortable identifying others with, it is not a term that all of the US born Puerto Ricans identify with. As Celia explains, she does not distinguish herself as a Nuyoricans and only sees herself as a Puerto Rican.

I really don't [consider myself], like, a Nuyoricans. I'm Puerto Rican. I'm a Puerto Rican woman. That's what I consider myself. Like a Nuyoricans, like, I ignore that term (pause) completely. Like, I don't associate myself with that at all. It's not a bad thing, but I don't

think... You're a Puerto Rican. You're not a Nuyorican or anything like that.

This statement helps to define the way in which Celia views her Puerto Rican identity. To her, where a person was born seems less important. Despite being born in the US, she still identifies as a Puerto Rican. While Maria does not find offense in the term Nuyorican, she also does not believe that her Puerto Rican identity should be determined because of language or any other secondary factors.

Like, I don't know, it's not really offensive. I mean, I feel like some people could find it offensive, but again, it is what it is. I am a Puerto Rican and I live in New York and Spanish wasn't my first language. But I still embrace the Puerto Rican culture. I feel like that's how many people perceive Nuyoricans. And a lot of them feel like, I don't know, I've talked about this in other classes. It just bothers me that culture or like an ethnic background is defined by language, and it shouldn't be that way.

Another aspect of clash between the two groups is determining which of the Puerto Ricans are authentic. As some of the island-born Puerto Ricans note, they do not consider all US born Puerto Ricans to be truly Puerto Rican. Eva believes that in order to consider yourself Puerto Rican, you must be knowledgeable about the island.

I have this friend, who, who all her family are Puerto Rican and she, she's never been to the island. And she said, like, "I'm Puerto Rican, I'm Puerto Rican." And I'm like the kind of person, there's always this struggle between Puerto Ricans, between the ones who were raised here and the ones that were raised there as to who's the true Puerto Ricans. I don't really care if you call yourself Puerto Rican and you were raised here, but don't tell me it's the same struggle because it's not. And I'm not saying that your life was harder or my life was harder, not at all, I'm just saying it's something different. You can't mix them up together and tell me it's the same thing because, you know, if you don't speak Spanish, if you don't know how the current

economy is, if I can't tell you about, like, a place in Old San Juan which everyone on the island would know about, I don't think it's the same thing. So, like, my definition of being Puerto Rican or being Latin is not the same as the people who were raised here and that's why I don't really hang out with them.

Eva mentions many different components of identity in her statement.

To some degree, she discounts the idea of a Puerto Rican Diaspora, because she discounts people who do not have a strong attachment with the island.

Interestingly, while Eva does not object to mainland Puerto Ricans labeling themselves as Puerto Rican, she has no interest in spending time with them.

Because of these standards that have been set to define Puerto Rican identity, the US born Puerto Ricans have all had encounters where their Puerto Rican identity was questioned by another Puerto Rican. In Alisa's case, she was considered too White in her complexion and behavior to truly be Puerto Rican. In Maria's case, her bi-cultural heritage is sometimes used by others to discount her Puerto Rican heritage.

Most of them are like, "No, you're not really Puerto Rican. You're like most[ly] Dominican", and it's just like, I don't know, it's so hard to be like more than one, like, I guess, ethnic background because, I guess, like, I feel like you have to justify yourself or explain yourself and I'm one of those people, I hate having to do that. Like, especially, like for example, when it comes to my hair texture, like it's not really curly. It's like I always say, I have that mix between Hispanic hair and like Black hair, and it's just like I hate having to explain myself to people. Like saying, well this is what I am, why can't I just be me, you know what I mean.

One again Maria is questioned on the basis of not looking like a Puerto Rican. She was also questioned due to her multi-ethnic identity. However, to Maria, her self-identity should not be questioned, despite other people's



feelings. Similarly, Celia's identity was questioned when she spent summers in Puerto Rico. She claimed that there were immediately differences in dealing with the islanders.

They're like, "You're not true Puerto Rican. Like your family is, but not you cause you weren't raised here." And I was like, "Okay, whatever you say" (laughs)... Like, like it hurts a little bit because I grew up on the language. I still speak the same language you do and I still understand you perfectly fine. I may not know exactly what it's like to live on the island, like I have, I stayed here for like two months or whatever, but yeah I go back home. And I know I'm from a different environment than you guys are, but we still come from the same place. Like, I feel like (pause), they question, like, my nationality. Like I'm not proud to be like, a true Puerto Rican and I am. What are you guys talking about? But they always say if you were born in the States, you're not true Puerto Rican because you're Americanized. Ok, I'll just leave it at that because like, you can think what you want.

In Celia's situation, island-born Puerto Ricans refuse to see her as truly Puerto Rican because they claim that she is too Americanized. However, with the island's status as a U.S. commonwealth, the island is also under American influence. Although Celia had spent summers on the island, she encountered people who did not think that those experiences were enough to truly qualify her as a Puerto Rican. Island born Elena believed that growing up on the island was very important in developing a Puerto Rican identity.

[You don't have to] live there, but at least be raised there-for at least your childhood. And then you can move to the States. I feel like your childhood, that's when you develop your identity. I mean, if you have your childhood there, then you can go to the States and identify yourself as Puerto Rican. Yeah, your culture changes a little bit, it gets intermixed, but like where you were born and where you were raised. That's forever yours. Your ethnicity and your culture.

Although the specific examples have all been different, there is a trend in having self-identity questioned. There seem to be different definitions of a real Puerto Rican, and those not fitting the definition are not accepted as authentic Puerto Ricans. Among different populations, there seem to be very different understandings as to what components of identity are important.

Finally, between the two groups, there are major differences in the ways that the groups outwardly display their identity. The largest example of this tension is the Puerto Rican Day Parade held in New York City. While the US born Puerto Ricans seem to embrace or at least accept the parade, island born Puerto Ricans were not interested in being associated with it. For US born Maria, the parade was a full day celebration for her.

The Puerto Rican parade is like frickin nuts here. Like we go so hard and I always definitely go out for that, for the festival in Harlem... Ok so last year I went to the 115th street in Harlem. It was crazy. It was just a whole bunch of food, people selling food and music and people just in the street with their bandanas, and their flags. Girls wearing like as little clothes as possible, it's like in the middle of the summer and it's just awesome, just being around a bunch of people that look like you.

For Maria, being around people “that look just like you” was an empowering feeling. Similarly, Celia regularly attended the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Yeah I used to go like every year (laughs). We used to go. I think I really missed, like, twice in a row already. Yeah I, used to go every year. That's just one (pause) place you go with your friends and you just see all the celebrities and everyone will come out, and you never know who you're going to meet. For us, it's like a networking thing. You go out. You never know who you're going to meet. [You go there] Just to be silly. There are so many cute guys, but it was fun. I mean, I always go. It's (pause) loud and rowdy. Like, if you're gonna go, you better make sure you know how to stand your ground or else they're going to walk all over. Just to be honest, I mean. It was like go early so

you can get like a front seat. Once you're in the front no one really bothers you...But if you're gonna, like, you need to, it's New York. It's New York. No matter what race you're coming from, it's rough. Like if you're not up with the hustle and bustle, you're gonna get run over. So, if you're gonna go, make sure you're, you really have to be up for it. It's like, long standing, hot, and other people might even (pause) expect to get hit on or disrespected cause some people are just stupid. But overall, like, I always have a good time when I go. I stay there to enjoy the music and everything. The group of people I go with, we have fun.

Despite the rowdy atmosphere that Celia describes, she is still a regular attendee at the parade. Even though Maria and Celia mention a type of behavior that the island-born students used in stereotyping the Nuyoricans, the mainland students did not see the behavior as defining themselves as Puerto Ricans. Instead, they saw it as typical crowd behavior that normally accompanies large events. While the US born Puerto Ricans seemed to enjoy the Puerto Rican Day Parade, island-born Puerto Rican Miguel made a point to avoid the parade when he visited New York City during the summer.

Well actually, last year I went with my family to visit Syracuse, and then we went to New York City for a couple of days and um it was the weekend of the Puerto Rican Day Parade, and it was just a coincidence. We didn't know, um, and we actually tried to distance ourselves from it. And that sounds kind of bad but again, it kind of goes back to the image that, you know, people from Puerto Rico have of Nuyoricans. It's kind of like sometimes you want to just distance yourself from that because you feel like we're different. We feel like we're not the same exactly. I mean, I was still proud of that. I mean everywhere we went people were like, "Oh you're from Puerto Rico, are you going to the parade?" And we're like "Yeah." (Interviewer laughs) Yeah we're proud of that but at the same time we're not like too into it.

Despite not wanting to be a part of the parade, he still lied about attending when other people asked him. While Miguel seemed to at least have respect

for the parade, island-born Jose does not understand why the parade needs to exist at all.

I personally, I'm not for that parade. Just because to me, it doesn't make sense. Americans, well not Americans, but let's say Jewish, don't have a Jewish parade or... you know, it doesn't make sense to me. And that's just been something that's given us a bad rap because then we sound stuck up. We sound like Puerto Rico's the best. We're not trying to say that. We love Puerto Rico. We keep it on the inside.

Jose also references the jibaro, the modest Puerto Rican farmer who is a symbolic figure of Puerto Rico (Guerra, 1998). For Jose, there is no need to publicly proclaim Puerto Rican identity. Instead, those displays of pride should be felt internally. These differences in looking at and displaying identity illustrate that all Puerto Ricans are not part of a homogeneous group. The many differences between the two large groups, and even among the students within each group, show that there is no one definition of Puerto Rican identity. The students all seem to struggle with finding their own definition, and dealing with the viewpoints of others who do not embrace their expressions of identity.

### **A Cultural Breakdown: United States' Influence on Puerto Rican**

#### **Identity**

*“If you ask a little child what does he prefer, either white rice with beans and pork and everything, or McDonalds, he would definitely go for McDonalds.”*

**-Guillermo Hernandez**

Puerto Rico's political status as a commonwealth has created an interesting relationship with the United States. Ultimately, the political status of the island cannot be separated from the cultural identity felt by Puerto Ricans. Especially for island-born Puerto Ricans, there is a constant conflict between traditional Puerto Rican culture and American culture which is present on the island. For the island-born Puerto Ricans, many of their viewpoints about being American directly relate to their political views about Puerto Rico's status. Miguel found it difficult to truly separate being a Puerto Rican from being an American because of the US's influences on the island.

You don't know which way to go really. Um, and there are some people who kind of want to continue with the association with the United States and want to become a state, or want to, you know, continue that. And there's people who want to stay the same, and there's people who want to, like, completely be cut off from the US and become an independent nation.

Personally, Miguel is pro-statehood and believes that Puerto Rico has more economic opportunities because of the US's presence. Similarly, Sophia believes that Puerto Rico's commonwealth status can be confusing in understanding her own identity.

We have a really mixed, mixed, messed up identity because we are more like American society, but at the same time we speak Spanish. And then we use American money, we pay taxes, we have American passport, we have our own culture, we have our own flag. It's crazy.

However, despite feelings of confusion, Sophia does not want to see Puerto Rico change from its current political status. Jose, whose father is an Independent and whose mother is pro-statehood has heard both sides of the

argument since his childhood. Ultimately, he sees the US influence as being positive economically, but hurtful culturally.

It's been good to a certain degree. I think it's brought a lot of wealth, both in information and economy, but it's also kind of pushed us away from our culture that we really had before. Slowly we've been losing those things that made us who we are and our traditions from Spain and stuff like that. For example, sevillanas and flamenco are two types of dances that come from Spain and it's something that's been slowly forgotten, like little by little. Like, I like to dance it and it's just because I'm from a select group of people who were interested in it. So, on one side, it's bringing somewhat a surge of prosperity in some sense and then at the other it's also eating away at our independent culture.

Alisa also has strong opinions about the political status of Puerto Rico.

Although she was born and raised mainland, she remains connected to the debate through her father, who still resides there. Alisa believes that the decision is difficult because there are consequences for each decision.

My parents never really said too much about it. Like, you know, I think that a part of the reason that they got here so easily was that they were a commonwealth. Um (pause) sometimes when I call my dad, he practically reads me the paper (laughs). So we talk a lot about what's going on and stuff, and I try, especially as I have gotten older, I try to make more of an effort to look at what's going on there and when I think about them becoming a state, it just doesn't, kind of, it just doesn't kind of sit well with me. They would then be the poorest state, uh, in the union and financially I feel like that country is struggling so much that to impose additional taxes to become a state and to, um, to join the Union doesn't make a whole lot of sense. And I also would worry that there would be such a loss of culture, even though Puerto Ricans here have held onto such an identity. I just feel like becoming a state, I don't know if that would, as generations progress, if that would lose it. Um (pause) but to become independent, like there, there is so many issues. Like my dad works for the government. Like he works for the equivalent to the freeway system and like he like rarely works. It's like, "Oh yeah, they had to shut down this project because they ran out of money," or "Oh, you know, school's closed down a month early because they couldn't pay the teachers anymore." Like, and you hear that kind of stuff and if there was absolutely no like US support, then

how would they manage? There's already so much poverty there, How does that, how could they survive? So then, you know, I think for right now, until they get stronger, politically and their economy gets better, I think that they're kind of in the best situation.

Besides political and economic well-being, a major issue regarding Puerto Rico's position as a commonwealth is whether the Puerto Rican culture is being stripped away and becoming more American. The Americanization of the island is something that the island-born Puerto Rican have noticed while living on the island. One way in which American culture has influenced traditional Puerto Rican culture is through holidays.

They kind of, like, brought Santa Claus and Halloween and all the American traditions that weren't there before. So now it's kind of, like, um, like, a clash between the two cultures. Between, like, traditional Puerto Rican music and American pop music, you know. So they're always influenced by them and there's always people who have a, who don't want American culture to penetrate too much into the Puerto Rican way of life. But as time goes by, more and more young people are kind of adopting the American way of life, especially like I said, movies, television, it's kind of, like, sometimes it blurs the lines.

While Miguel claims that he enjoys the American influence, he still appreciates the traditional Puerto Rican culture. Similarly, Jose has noticed a change in traditional Puerto Rican holidays because of American influence.

A generation ago, like my parent's generation, Santa Claus was not a big thing. We rarely celebrated Santa Claus. It was Three Kings Day. My generation is flipped over. Now we celebrate both. We celebrate Santa Claus and Three Kings Day. But now Santa Claus, the 25th, is more important than Three Kings Day, which is contrary to what it had been for generations.

For Jose, this change represents a change in the values of the Puerto Rican people. While they originally enjoyed celebrating the traditional Puerto

Rican holidays, now people are more interested in adopting the American holidays and symbols.

The widespread American culture throughout Puerto Rico has also caused some of the island-born students to question what their identity is turning into. Guillermo is dismayed that current Puerto Rican children are becoming more Americanized.

What does that mean? Well, um, [it] means that every girl over there wants to be Hannah Montana. Um, [it] means that my neighbor is Wal-Mart. [It] means that if you ask a little child what does he prefer, either white rice with beans and pork and everything or McDonalds, he would definitely go for McDonalds.

Guillermo, who would rather see Puerto Rico as an independent nation, has also noticed linguistic influences, in which English words have been adapted into Spanish words. He also believes that Puerto Ricans are starting to adapt a more American mentality.

Well, I don't want to sound rude, but in a way, we have become, like, more cold in a way. We have become more (snaps his fingers) like fast track, like, "Oh I have to get this work done, I have to do this." So in a way, I really think that that had changed our way that we work.

To Guillermo, one of the negative effects of American influence in Puerto Rico is that Puerto Ricans have become colder towards one another. However, Eva also believes that Puerto Ricans have started to have expectations about American culture from being on the island.

There's a McDonalds in every corner. There's a Starbucks that are opening all the time. But, I mean, I guess to some extent, even though we don't consider ourselves Americans, we are Americans. And like, we expect everything that is here to be there too, to a certain extent.



Overall, the island-born students seemed very aware of the American influence on the island, and conflicted as to how they felt about it. While they all wanted the best economic situation possible for the country, they were wary that in exchange for economic prosperity, they would slowly lose all of their cultural roots.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, several themes can be taken away from the findings of the research. First, the students all express a strong pride in being Puerto Rican. Each of the students felt that being Puerto Rican helped to define them as individuals. Secondly, despite the pride that the students felt, none of them could agree upon a common definition of being Puerto Rican. The complications arose because each student had a different definition of what being a Puerto Rican actually meant, and through their definition excluded certain individuals who also self-identified as Puerto Rican.

Therefore, while they were all proud of their heritage, there were tensions among the group, and varying opinions as to what was truly important in being Puerto Rican. While the island-born students had varying degrees of understanding identity among themselves, the differences in identity were even more pointed between the island-born and the mainland students.

Interestingly, there were many commonalities in what was considered components of Puerto Rican identity. Family, language and liveliness were all mentioned by both the island-born and mainland students. However, despite

these similarities, the groups still view themselves as decidedly different. My research shows that the Puerto Ricans on campus do not form a homogeneous group and their self-identities and therefore their interactions illustrate their idea that they are different.

On a large scale, the idea of ethnicity can be further discussed. My research illustrates that there is incredible variation within ethnic labels. While all of the students identified as Puerto Rican, the ethnic label Puerto Rican seems to be more of an umbrella term than a clear definition. Ultimately, the students all feel that ethnicity is very important. The idea of being Puerto Rican is prominent in the ways in which the students live their lives and express themselves. However, a common ethnicity does not necessarily create a bond between individuals. My research shows that sharing an ethnic label is only the first step in sharing similarities, and in reality, ethnic identity is much more nuanced and complicated.

Based on my research, it is recommended that universities examine ethnicity more closely among their students. While universities try to increase their diversity numbers, my research shows that this is only the first step in creating a diverse student population. Understanding the various self-identities and understandings within an ethnic group is equally important in helping students to foster relationships and continue personal growth.

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### **Written Capstone Summary**

My Capstone project examines the complexities of ethnic identity. Specifically, I researched the varying understandings of Puerto Rican identity among island-born and mainland Puerto Rican students. Island-born students were those born and raised on the island of Puerto Rico. Mainland students were those born and raised in the continental United States.

The topic of the Capstone was devised after conducting two very interesting interviews with island-born Puerto Rican students for a sociology qualitative methods course. Based on those two interviews, I began to realize the complexities of self-identity and identity management, even for students who fell under the same ethnic label. I was interested to see how identity can shift based on interactions, and what influences affect how people choose to define themselves.

Identity was very complicated among the students, especially because of Puerto Rico's unique relationship with the United States. Never having studied Puerto Rico before, my personal motivation was to learn more about

the country and the people through my thesis. Professionally, I also wanted to choose a group of people who identified differently than I did. My primary research questions were: 1) how do Puerto Rican students choose to identify and display their identity on a personal level, and 2) how do they manage their identities within a larger context on a predominantly White campus.

Puerto Rico has had a long history with the United States, starting in 1899 with the Treaty of Paris. The Treaty of Paris was an agreement reached during the Spanish-American War in which Spain ceded their power of Puerto Rico to the United States. Since that time, United States' policies have directly affected the island. However, it was not until 1952 that Puerto Rico was actually declared a U.S. Commonwealth.

For my Capstone Project, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with Syracuse University students who self-identified as Puerto Rican. My recruiting methods consisted of mass e-mails across the Latino listserv and several student organizations which had a membership primarily consisting of students of color. Once initial participants were selected, the snowball method was used. This meant that students that I interviewed referred me to other students that they thought may also be interested in participating. However, one weakness in using this method was that I was only aware of a small proportion of the Puerto Rican population on campus.

Interviews were conducted in private and quiet closed study-rooms. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. During the length of the interview, participants discussed their home lives, lives at the

university and their feelings about self-identity and Puerto Rican identity. The participants were aware of my role as a researcher. While many did not inquire, I was also open about my motivations in doing the research and that I was not of Puerto Rican descent. Of the 10 in-depth interviews conducted, seven of the students were island-born Puerto Ricans and three were US born Puerto Ricans.

My project was divided into five parts. First, I examined the identity formation of the island-born Puerto Rican students. This included narratives about their childhood and other memories that they had while living on the island. Secondly, I examined the identity management of the island-born students once they came to Syracuse University as students. Since the island-born students were now in the ethnic minority, I hypothesized that they would have different encounters regarding their identity than they experienced on the island.

Thirdly, I discussed the identity formation of the mainland Puerto Ricans. These were students born and raised in the United States. Fourthly, I discussed the clashes between the two groups of Puerto Ricans. While both the island-born and the mainland students identify as Puerto Ricans, there is conflict between the two groups, and there are differing opinions as to which group truly represents and possesses a Puerto Rican identity. Finally, I discussed the United States' influence on Puerto Rico. I examine the relationship to see if it affects Puerto Rican students, and the ways in which the island-born students choose to identify.

Puerto Rican students' understandings of their identity, and their decisions as to how to present it to others, were multifaceted. First were the cultural components of their identity, then their political identity coupled with their attitudes toward Puerto Rican nationalism. Throughout the interviews, a sense of pride of Puerto Rican identity came through; however the details of this identity differed greatly among the students, especially between the island-born and mainland students.

For island-born Puerto Ricans, their identity included an exclusion of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, most pointedly the population of New York born Puerto Ricans. US born Puerto Ricans denied this exclusivity, and embraced the idea of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Despite these differences, many common themes emerged, which detailed the extent and ways in which identities were managed.

Overall, this project was significant for several reasons. First, it adds to the current research already written about Puerto Ricans and ethnic identity. While the original research regarding Puerto Ricans is plentiful, much of it focuses on similar topics. These topics include the migrant experience, being Puerto Rican in the United States, and Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States.

The population of Puerto Ricans coming to the US was a popular topic, but there were few studies focused on particular age groups. There were fewer articles available which discussed Puerto Rican college students and



their own sense of identity. My research can help to fill the gaps of previous literature.

Furthermore, my research may affect the ways in which universities deal with students of various ethnic backgrounds. While universities try to increase their diversity numbers, my research shows that this is only the first step in creating a diverse student population. My research emphasizes the importance of learning about individual students and their experiences, rather than grouping people together solely based on a common ethnic identity.