



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Caught up in Two Worlds: A Puerto Rican Migrant Story

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The title of this article is controversial. It is controversial because Puerto Ricans have been American citizens for 100 years. On March 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the Jones-Shafroth Act, which granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans born on the island. After the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American war of 1898 and the Treaty of Paris was signed, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines found themselves under the authority of a new emerging world power. The contradiction between the words from the Declaration of Independence with its affirmation “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” and the acquisition of colonies gained after the Spanish-American war has defined the history between the United States and Puerto Rico. It is within this contradiction that my immigration story takes place.

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. I was born in 1972. My father was a Puerto Rican Independence sympathizer and so was my mother. Because of their ideology and their longing for a free and independent Puerto Rico, both my father and my mother were labeled enemies of the Puerto Rican colonial authority and the United States government. The local FBI office in Puerto Rico sent two agents to my mother’s apartment in my hometown of Bayamón in order to harass her and make her give information about my father, Narciso Rabell Martínez. I was a toddler when this happened. They told her that they knew the nanny who took care of me and the hours when I was left with her. I remember when my mother, Awilda González García, told me this story for the first time. I saw her anger and the frustration of what it meant for her to live under such surveillance and restriction of liberty because of her ideas. I saw the face of a mother concerned for the well-being of her child. All of this persecution and harassment was coming her way just because she wanted her nation, Puerto Rico, to be free, just like the United States, our colonial ruler. Like the thirteen colonies in the eighteenth century, my mother longed for freedom. Her demand of freedom and justice was and is the same demand that the founding fathers demanded from the British Empire. What’s the difference?

The difference is location, race, ethnicity, economic interests, and power. Because she was blacklisted as an “independentista”

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(independence sympathizer) by both the local and federal authorities in Puerto Rico, my mother was eventually fired from her job with the Puerto Rican government. In the mid-1980s, when the Puerto Rican Supreme Court ruled against the government’s practice of surveillance and creation of records and files on people who were considered subversive or whose ideology did not support the status quo, thousands of Puerto Ricans received a letter informing them that they could go and get those files. These files were kept and created by the Puerto Rican state police. My mother received that letter as well. I was a teenager when I went with my mother to retrieve these files. The files went back as far as 1970, when my mother started dating my father. In them we found names of friends and family members who gave information to the police about my mother’s activities and whereabouts. She was heartbroken. She did not read the whole file. She did not want to know the complete list of people who gave information about her private life in order to repress her ideological commitments to a free and independent Puerto Rico. I did read the whole file. When I saw the names of fellow Puerto Ricans working as informants for both the police and the FBI, I wanted revenge. I told her that we needed to confront them and demand an apology. She said no. She diffused my anger. She wanted me to be a kid. She wanted me to study and become a force for good. She encouraged me to pursue justice and freedom through passive, nonviolent means. My sense of justice is grounded in both my faith in God’s unconditional

love and my mother's teaching about justice.

Although my family was nominally Roman Catholic, my mother had served in the Luther League of the Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. She was chastised by her priest when he saw her coming out of the Lutheran church and told her she was going to be excommunicated if she kept going to the "devil's church." Little did that priest know that her son was going to become a pastor in the "devil's church." Sadly, my mother was so afraid of the prospect of being excommunicated that she stopped going to the Luther League meetings. She had great admiration for the Lutheran pastor who led that congregation. She told me that he even visited her after the incident and encouraged her to continue on her faith journey in the Roman Catholic Church. This had a great impact in her life as well as mine.

Because of this positive experience with the Lutheran Church, my mother decided to put me in a Lutheran school for my primary education. I went to Holy Trinity Lutheran School. This institution was linked to the church whose pastor had been so gracious to my mother. This school was my introduction to the love of God, Martin Luther, and the concept of grace. I loved going there. After I finished college and got married, I found myself on an airplane to Philadelphia, in the summer of 1998. I was going to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. I had such a positive experience in the Lutheran Church as I was growing up that I developed a sense of call that was grounded in grace, love, and justice.

Let me end this article by saying that the fact that there is Lutheranism in Puerto Rico, a Spanish-speaking nation, is why I'm caught up between two worlds. I am both Lutheran and Puerto

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Rican. I am also both Puerto Rican and an American citizen. The contradictions do not stop there; I am also a saint and a sinner. I recognize these contradictions and have learned to live with them. Here is an example: I still advocate for Puerto Rico's independence, while I live comfortably in an American suburban community in New Jersey and serve an ethnically diverse Lutheran congregation in a municipality where 90 percent of the people are European American and Caucasian. Although I was born an American citizen, I was not treated as an equal because of my skin color, accent, and native language. When I go to Puerto Rico, I live under the colonial rule of the most powerful nation on the planet, and when I return to my home in New Jersey, I live both as an insider and as an outsider. What is the resolution of this dilemma? Only time will tell. St. Paul's words summarize the duality and contradictions that I experience every day; "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord" (Romans 14:8).