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STORIES TO LIVE BY:

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THREE GENERATIONS OF PUERTO RICAN WOMEN

In the following selection, Celia Alvarez, a daughter of Puerto Rican migrants who moved to the mainland in the 1950s, and one of the researchers who collected the women's stories, reflects on her own experiences growing up in New York City. As you read the passage, think about the similarities and differences between her life and the lives of those who came before her.

My mother migrated to New York in the early 1950s during the period of rapid urbanization and industrialization concomitant with Operation Bootstrap on the Island. She was also a seamstress. She married soon after her arrival and subsequently had the three of us, one right after the other.

Raised in the projects of downtown Brooklyn near the Brooklyn Navy Yard I often wondered: What were we doing here? How did we get here? And why? Nobody said too much, however; no one wanted to talk about the poverty and pain, the family truces and secrets which clouded the tremendous upheaval from Ponce to San Juan to New York.

I grew up speaking Spanish, dancing *la pachanga*, *merengue*, and *mambo*, eating *arroz con habichuelas* and drinking *malta y café*. I was smart, and learned to play the chords of the bureaucratic machinery of

housing, education, and welfare very well at a very young age. I translated for everyone—my mother, her friends, our neighbors, as well as my teachers. My parents kept us close to home and it was my responsibility to keep my brother and sister in tow.

It was hard to understand it all, to try to make sense of who I was as a Puerto Rican in New York, so I read everything I could get my hands on; watched the games the government would play between Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans with social service monies; heard the poverty pimps tell their lies; watched the kids die of dope or heard about them getting killed down elevator chutes in the middle of a burglary; noted the high overpriced tags on old food being sold in the only supermarket in the neighborhood; knew of kids being raped and thrown off the roof. And I asked, "Why?"

The socially active local parish church became my

refuge. It was there that I began to make connections with the poor whites, Afro-Americans, and Asians in my community, and said there had to be a better way for us all. I participated in a variety of activities including youth programs, the local food coop, and newsletter, which basically involved me in community organizing, although I didn't know you called it grassroots work then. I got swept up by the energy of the civil rights movement and wanted to go to the march on Washington but my mother said, "No!" She worried about me—didn't like me wearing my Martin Luther King button or getting involved in politics. She was afraid I would get hurt. I always liked being out on the street talking to people, however, and she knew from way back that I was not destined to stay inside.

Tensions flourished when I turned fourteen and told my parents I was going out with a Puerto Rican boy in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, "boyfriend" in America and *novio* in Puerto Rico did not translate to mean the same thing. In 1968 I was chaperoned and followed by my father wherever I went because of that grave mistake. Their biggest fear? That I would get pregnant. They even threatened to send me to Puerto Rico. I had it all planned out that I would run away and stay with my cousin. She was the first to move out and get her own place. At least we could keep each other company. It never happened but we've been close ever since.

During this same period I started high school in a predominantly white school in the heart of Flatbush. I found myself desegregating the Catholic school system, one of five or six *Latinas* and Afro-Americans in my class. I was known as one of the girls from the ghetto downtown and was constantly called upon to defend my race. One day it went too far. Someone said my father didn't work and that their parents supported my coming to their school. I "went off"! You just didn't talk about my family!

I never told my parents about the racist slurs—never had the heart. They were breaking their backs to send me to school; my father kept his job at a city hospital for thirty years and took on a second job at the docks. We would all go help him clean offices at night and on weekends after our day outings together. My mother went back to work in a paper factory down the street. Prior to that, she had taken care of the children of women in the neighborhood who worked. I've also worked since about the time I was fourteen.

Anyway, I graduated high school with honors. I had every intention of going to college—I thought it would give me the credentials to be in a position to act on the miseducation that I saw we were getting. Of course I needed money to go, so I went to talk to my guidance counselor. She always prided herself in being able to say a few words in Spanish... her way of "relating." I inquired about government grants programs as well as anything else that she could tell me about. All she could say to me was, "Well, you're not the only one who needs money to go to school, dear."

No thanks to her, I managed to get to college with the help of ASPIRA. I marched over to their office on 14th Street—we didn't have a club in our school, there were too few of us—and presented myself to one of the counselors there. I'll always be grateful that he took me under his wing despite the fact he had an overbooked case load. I applied to about ten schools, got into most of them and

decided to go to a new institution in New England that broke away from the traditional, predetermined academic program and was primarily based on a mentoring system between student and teacher.

So I left home and landed in a progressive liberal arts college which looked more like a country club than anything else. It was so quiet I had to study with my radio blasting to concentrate. Ironically, it was there that I found my first Afro-American and Puerto Rican teachers. I was relieved to know someone who understood the reference points in my life without my having to explain. After pursuing some studies on Puerto Rico and the Caribbean—for the only formal mention of Puerto Rico in all my schooling up to that point had been in a geography class in which we had discussed its mineral resources—I studied questions of language planning, bilingualism and education, language, culture, and identity. I thought that knowledge of these areas would be useful to the Puerto Rican community...

I was admonished not to study the reality of Puerto Ricans because somehow I would be "getting over" and not doing valid research. Ironically, given my gender, class background, nationality, and race, I was as marginalized as ever in that setting.

Which brings me back to our oral history project. Listening to these women's stories has served as a tremendous source of inspiration and validation of my own experience as a Puerto Rican woman. They captured and brought back to life the struggles of my own socialization during the 1960s. Though born in New York, I grappled with many of the same social issues and problems as Flor, Lucila, and Eulalia. However, it was within the context of the educational opportunities historically afforded me through the civil rights movement, in conjunction with my own parents'

determination, that I was able to actualize myself in higher education and be in a position to help define this project. This oral history project enabled me to integrate all the different parts of myself—my skills as an intellectual, organizer, and nurturer, as well as my experience as a working-class Puerto Rican woman.

Through the public events linked to our research, I have been able to bring this experience back home: *to my own neighborhood* in Brooklyn, which I came to find out was one of the earlier Puerto Rican settlements in New York; and *to my mother* who came to our event on Puerto Rican garment workers and finally understood what it was I did at the university and how it was not a rejection but a continuation of her legacy to me. Our relationship qualitatively changed after that event: there was more honesty between us; we spoke woman to woman. And it is because of this convergence of historical and personal circumstance that I am sharing this collective experience with you the reader. □

SOURCE: "Stories to Live By: Continuity and Change In Three Generations of Puerto Rican Women." Excerpts from *Oral History Review*. Rina Benmayor, Ana Juarbe, Blanca Vazquez Erazo, and Celia Alvarez. 16:2 (Fall 1988) pp. 1-46.