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*Conflict and  
Identity:  
Puerto Rican Teens  
in Metropolitan  
Hartford*

Rebecca Simonds  
Senior Thesis  
International Studies  
Trinity College  
Spring 2005

## *Conflict and Identity: Puerto Rican Teens in Metropolitan Hartford*

The term Hispanic is commonly used today to refer to the range of different immigrants from Spanish-speaking Latin America including, but not limited to, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Peruvians and Cubans. But when one uses the term “Hispanic,” to refer to these many different ethnicities, they are diminishing the individual cultural identities of each ethnic group and asserting a commonality that does not necessarily exist. When in Hispanic countries, people would never group Puerto Ricans in the same category as Cubans, just as nobody would claim that Italians were the same as the French. Why, then, are the differences between immigrants from Latin America overlooked and blurred as the formation of one group, “Hispanic,” is created? Suzanne Oboler states, “Once in the United States...they [Hispanics] also discovered that their newly asserted national identity was of little relevance to the society at large. Instead, they found out that they were now U.S. ‘Hispanics,’ a term whose meanings and social value...they were expected to learn and assimilate.”<sup>1</sup> Puerto Ricans, in particular, have a very unique immigration experience to the United States that differs not only from other immigrant groups but also from other Latino immigrants.

This paper will explore the notion of identity, as it relates to Puerto Rican teens in the United States. More specifically, I will discuss how Puerto Rican teens in the metropolitan Hartford area perceive their national and cultural identities.

The results of my study indicate that Puerto Rican teens in the metropolitan Hartford area claim to be Puerto Rican Americans, with Puerto Rican being their primary

identity; but the reality is that they are negotiating two distinct identities by melding them together. In other words, while they feel they are Puerto Rican first, they are also taking certain aspects of American culture and incorporating them into their own identity. In addition, geographically, despite locality differences between city and suburban Puerto Rican teens, their expressions of cultural identity were more similar than different, contrary to what one might expect. Through their preference for music, Puerto Rican teens in metropolitan Hartford illustrate the joining of their two identities. While their guardians' culturally identify with traditional Spanish island music, Puerto Rican teens pointed out that they identify with both island music and present day hip-hop and both reveal a connection to their Puerto Rican cultural roots. Language is also a symbol of cultural identity and for the teens in the study, it is clear that their dual use of language, both English and Spanish, is also symbolic of the linking of their two identities. In addition, it was evident that experiences of prejudice had no impact on the promotion of identity for Puerto Rican teens, as both those who did and did not experience prejudice, were connected to a Puerto Rican identity with equal commitment. The institution of family also has an influence on the formulation of Puerto Rican teen identity but familial bonds have been modified as more generations are born on the mainland. The importance of family is evident through who the teens in the study perceive as their role models. However, many of the teen's experiences with Puerto Rican culture are solely through their families' practices, as a lot of them have only been to the island for a brief period of time. And finally, informal networks and community are crucial to the formation of Puerto Rican teens identities in the greater Hartford area. The experience of a perceived community, whether large or small, encourages the promotion of their Puerto Rican

cultural roots. This paper will explore all of these claims to illustrate the way that Puerto Rican teens unite their two identities, Puerto Rican and American, in the formation of a new identity particular to the current generation of teens.

Puerto Ricans are a distinct group under the umbrella of “Hispanic” for a variety of reasons which will be discussed in this introduction; this uniqueness also filters out into their perceptions of their own identities. There are many factors that come into play when thinking about one’s identity, and it is important to note that there is not just one element that determines how one perceives identity, but rather a variety of different components contribute to its formation. Music, food preferences, language, clothing, personal and familial relationships, location, and emotions are all important to consider when determining identity. It is also important to note that how one perceives his/her identity is not necessarily clean-cut; some might feel themselves to be completely American,<sup>2</sup> others Puerto Rican, and others Puerto Rican-American. In addition, one’s identity can be fluid and constantly changing throughout different stages of his or her life. Omayra, a 30-year-old woman from New York, provides us with a perfect example of how one’s identity is constantly under transformation.

The teenage years of one’s life are often the interval where identity is dramatically shaped, therefore it is important to study Puerto Rican’s during these crucial years in their lives in order to get a complete understanding of their identity development and understanding. Omayra was born in the New York Bronx; her father had quit school after sixth grade and traveled from Puerto Rico to Ohio as a migrant farm worker to pick carrots. He eventually traveled to the Bronx under his brothers’ influence and worked as a busboy for many years. Her mother worked in a factory, hoping to earn enough money

to buy a wedding dress. Her parents did not know English, and thus she grew up speaking only Spanish in her household. Throughout her childhood, she moved back to Puerto Rico twice, once when her mother and father separated and then again a few years later when she and her father had a serious dispute. Omayra said that through her elementary school years she felt her identity to be completely Puerto Rican, and could not identify with an “American” side at all. “I felt completely Puerto Rican...I mean, we basically lived in a little Puerto Rico. Our neighbors were all Puerto Ricans who my family had known on the island, my friends were all Puerto Rican, and I spoke Spanish with my friends and in my house.”<sup>3</sup> It was not until she traveled to Turkey that she felt remotely connected to an American identity. Someone in Turkey asked her where she was from, and when she responded, New York, the person said, “Oh, then you are American.” She replied, saying, “No, I’m Puerto Rican,” but the person was baffled because she had said she lived in New York. This was the first time she realized that outside of the United States, other people saw her as American because that was where she was born and lived. She claims that this is when her perception of her own identity began to undergo changes. She struggled with her identity because she felt as if she really did not have a place—when in America she was considered Puerto Rican, when in Puerto Rico she was considered ‘Nuyorican’ and when she was somewhere across the world she was considered American. Under these conditions, she felt it difficult to define her identity, as she felt different depending on her location. Her story tells us a lot about the complexity of identity. What I am most interested in understanding, and thus informs my research question, is how Puerto Rican teens perceive their national and cultural identities in the metropolitan Hartford. Omayra’s story reflects the struggles of Puerto Ricans with the

issue of identity, and her claim that her high school years were when she really began to question her identity reflects the thinking behind my thesis.

David Abalos states, “A Latino identity is presently being forged out of the elements of our past with our present conditions serving as a catalyst. To choose to be a self and a Latino is a twofold political act; both are acts of resistance against a system based on the anti-self and against a dominant society and culture that wants us all to be ‘white’ or devoid of our color and consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> As Abalos states, the development of an identity is based upon both the past and the present conditions; identity can be fluid and influenced by a variety of different things. My study, therefore, must take into account the history of Puerto Ricans in the United States, the history of the island itself, and also a variety of different elements that Puerto Rican teens in particular face on the mainland.

## Research Methods

In order to come to an understanding of how Puerto Rican teens in the greater Hartford area perceive their national and cultural identities, I conducted 10-15 minute interviews with Puerto Rican teens in metropolitan Hartford. I chose to interview teens in both the city and the suburbs of Hartford because of diversity differences in the metropolitan Hartford area. The suburbs of Hartford have a much smaller Puerto Rican population, and are much less diverse than the city of Hartford. Because of this difference, I thought it was important to interview Puerto Rican teens from both areas in order to see if they share a similar outlook on identity. These interviews were set up

through the help of Tracey Wilson, a teacher at Conard High School in West Hartford, and Linda Martinez, who works at Trinfo Cafe on Broad Street in Hartford. Specifically, I interviewed five teenagers from Conard High, at the school, and 7 teenagers from schools in Hartford, including, Manchester High School, Wethersfield High School, the Sports Arts Academy, Windsor High School, and Bulkeley High School, and an adult education program.

The following table illustrates what town the teens in the study are from:

Town	Number of Puerto Rican Teens Per Town
West Hartford	5
Wethersfield	2
Manchester	2
Hartford	3
Windsor	1

This next table shows where the students in the study attend school:

School	Number of Teens in study attending each School
Conard High School, West Hartford	5
Wethersfield High School	2
Manchester High School	2
Bulkeley High School, Hartford	1
Sports Science Academy, Hartford	1
Windsor High School	1
Adult Education Classes	1



The interviews of the teens that did not attend Conard were conducted at Trinfo Cafe. In terms of diversity at these schools, the following chart shows the percentages of Asian, Hispanic, Black and White students at each school in the years 2003-2005 and is taken from the website [www.publicschoolreview.com](http://www.publicschoolreview.com):

<b>School</b>	<b>% Asian</b>	<b>% Hispanic</b>	<b>% Black</b>	<b>% White</b>
Conard High School, West Hartford	10 %	15%	10%	65%
Manchester High	4 %	11 %	18%	67%
Wethersfield High	2 %	6 %	3 %	88 %
Windsor High	4 %	7 %	42%	47%
Bulkeley Academy, Hartford	2 %	65 %	17%	16 %
Sports Science Academy, Hartford	0 %	50 %	48 %	2 %

As shown, the degree of diversity varies depending on the school. 75 % of the interviewees were born in the U.S mainland and the remaining 25% were born in Puerto Rico, but all had moved to the U.S. by their second grade year if not sooner. 46% of the interviewees' parents were born in the U.S. while 54% were born in Puerto Rico and moved to the United States at some point in their lives.

It is not only the schools that Puerto Rican teens attend that influence their identity, but also other things, for example, the towns that they live in. Therefore, it is important to know the demographics of not only the schools that the Puerto Rican teens in the study attend, but also the demographics of the towns where they live. The following percentages are taken from the 2000 census data and illustrate race percentages by town.

Town	% White	% Hispanic	% Puerto Rican	% Asian	% Black
Wethersfield	93.2%	4.2%	2.5%	1.6%	2.1%
Hartford, City of	27.7%	40.5%	32.6%	1.6%	38.1%
West Hartford	86.0%	6.3%	3.2%	4.8%	4.8%
Manchester	82.8%	6.5%	4.4%	3.2%	8.4%
Windsor	65.1%	5.0 %	3.3%	3.1%	27.1%

5

During the interviews, I asked a series of questions to get at the heart of my research question. The questions that I compiled all drew and reflected upon cultural and national identity. In addition, the questions tried to evoke a response that would show whether certain things influenced, and helped to shape, Puerto Rican teen identity, or whether they played no role at all. Some of the questions included: what music they listen to, whether they speak Spanish with their friends or their family, what kinds of foods they eat, if they feel integrated into their schools, who they see as role models and if they have ever been to Puerto Rico (See Appendix A for a complete list). When analyzing the interviews, I conducted a basic content analysis to make claims about the proportions of teens that raised specific themes in the interviews. However in addition to simply asking

questions, I observed the ways they responded and spoke about Puerto Rico and being Puerto Rican and living in Hartford. From the data that I gathered in the interviews, as well as secondary sources of books, newspapers, journal articles and papers I was able to respond to my research question. In my paper, I have changed the names of the teens in the study to conceal their identity and maintain confidentiality. Also, in order to ensure clarity when quoting the teens, in comparison with other sources, I will use only pseudonym first names when I am referring to one of the teenagers interviewed. The following is a map of the greater Hartford area that includes all of the areas of the schools, and homes, of the teens interviewed. I refer to the places throughout the paper.



# Introduction: Puerto Rican migration to the U.S.

The most glaring difference between Puerto Ricans and other immigrants is their citizenship status. In 1917 Puerto Ricans were given U.S. citizenship through the Jones Act. The granting of citizenship had many crucial implications; it not only facilitated travel to and from the United States, but it also illustrated a great deal about the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. Puerto Rico was a, “non-incorporated territory,” and “the provisions of the constitution did not automatically apply to Puerto Rico. By this decision, Puerto Rico ‘belonged to’ but was not part of the United States.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the relationship that existed between the mainland and the island was one of domination and exploitation. Puerto Rico was not only helpful strategically, for the defense of the Panama Canal, but also provided an area for economic growth.

At first, the United States transformed the poly-crop agriculture of Puerto Rico into one based primarily on sugar. Later, they virtually destroyed the agriculture as U.S. businesses and capital were brought to the island. While in theory, American investment was intended to benefit both the United States and Puerto Rico, it in fact had detrimental effects for many of the families on the island. While many women were able to find jobs in the industrial sector, there simply were not enough jobs to supply everyone who needed them. Men who were previously agricultural laborers were hit hardest as jobs in the agricultural sector diminished, and there was no work for them with the new industrial economy. This environment helped spur migration to the United States, a place

that was thought to have unlimited employment opportunities and opportunity for social advancement. However the United States didn't necessarily fulfill the 'American dream' of Puerto Rican immigrants; instead, they found that they faced the same hardship as other immigrants and their citizenship status, if anything, made their struggle even worse.

The first wave of Puerto Ricans that migrated to the United States came as agricultural workers under Operation Bootstrap (1947-1968). Operation Bootstrap was a policy implemented by both the Puerto Rican government and the U.S. government that encouraged migration. There were two components to the operation: American investment in Puerto Rico and labor migration to the U.S. The former heavily influenced the latter. As Americans invested more and more in Puerto Rico, unemployment increased, especially for men, and thus migration to the United States also increased. Suzanne Oboler states, "As a result, Puerto Rico witnessed the unusual spectacles of a booming economy with a shrinking labor force and shrinking employment."<sup>7</sup> For many Puerto Ricans, migration seemed like the best option because they could work during the high season in Puerto Rico while also finding work during the high season on the mainland. The implications of Operation Bootstrap were also twofold; the Puerto Rican government wanted migrants to stay on the mainland, thus reducing the overpopulation that plagued the island, while the United States government merely wanted Puerto Ricans as temporary workers to help benefit the U.S. agricultural economy, not as permanent citizens who they would have to provide for and look after. Again, this points to the relationship of exploitation that America sought after with Puerto Rico which continued on the mainland.

One of the largest pushes for migration to the United States occurred following World War II for a variety of different reasons. First, jobs were thought to be widely available on the mainland. In addition, not only were there agencies that helped Puerto Ricans with payment plans and provided them with special transportation rates, but also, transportation itself became much cheaper as commercial air travel between the island and the mainland developed quickly. And finally, having citizenship status made travel to and from Puerto Rico incredibly easy. While a wave of migration occurred after World War II, Puerto Ricans were not an attractive labor force during the war. This was because other immigrant groups could be sent home after the war was over and the troops came home, thus replenishing the labor supply; however, because Puerto Ricans were citizens, they could not be forced to leave at any given time. A duality exists where on one hand Puerto Ricans seem to be at an advantage because of their citizenship status, but, in reality, we see that this in fact worked to their disadvantage at times. Juan Flores notes the way that Puerto Ricans are often seen as a “problem” immigrant group as a result of their citizenship status, saying, “The Puerto Ricans are still the ‘exception’ to the pan-ethnic rule, the ‘problem’ even among their own kind. Derailed from the path toward a new politics of Hispanic assimilation, the U.S. Puerto Ricans are granted a special chapter all their own.”<sup>8</sup>

Once in the United States, Puerto Ricans faced a variety of different problems—some that they shared with other immigrant groups, as well as others that were particular to their own experience. One of the largest internal conflicts was how to adjust to their new lives and their new position in society. Perspectives differed on whether it was better to try to promote ethnic identity and ethnic nationalism in order to

adjust to American life or whether it was better to try to assimilate through Americanizing themselves. This was particularly challenging and pertinent for Puerto Rican teens on the mainland, as they were, and are, just coming to terms with their identities and their perceptions of themselves. Suzanne Oboler notes in her book, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives* that Puerto Ricans were confronted by the “consequences of a daily experience of contradictory messages in their personal life...and community: on the one hand, a constant hammering of patriotism and democratic ideals...and on the other, a persistent marginalization and exclusion from the justice, respect, dignity and equality embedded in the ideology of Americanism and democracy.”<sup>9</sup> Puerto Ricans were consistently marginalized in every aspect of society, whether it was improper housing, racial prejudice, political representation, discrimination in education and the labor force or through the language barrier.

The most common way that Puerto Ricans began their experience in the United States was through contract farm work. As stated above, Operation Bootstrap brought many Puerto Ricans over as contract-laborers; however, it is important to note that a lot of the workers ended up staying in the U.S., even after their contracts were terminated. Contract work was one of the most menial and low-paying jobs in the U.S., which is partly the reason why agricultural contractors sought immigrants, especially Puerto Ricans, to fill the positions. Not only was their salary low, but the work was also laborious and offered no room for economic mobility. While workers earned close to nothing, the companies that they were working for made millions. In addition, the housing that was provided for the workers was in poor condition and overcrowded.

Puerto Ricans in cities were not much better off than those working on farms. In the cities especially, they faced harsh discrimination and people looked down upon them as though they were backwards and inferior. Joseph Fitzpatrick states, “Theories of assimilation tended to glorify the way of life of the people in the U.S. to disdain the way of life of the newcomer...this created an unfavorable attitude toward the immigrant as one who would threaten the great achievements of the Anglo-Saxon.”<sup>10</sup> It was precisely this discrimination that made it difficult for Puerto Ricans to find adequate housing, employment and social acceptance. One obvious difference between many Puerto Ricans and other European immigrants was the color of their skin. Therefore, from the very beginning, Puerto Ricans were victims of a racism that many other immigrant groups did not have to face. The racial barrier filtered out into many different aspects of society, including housing. Small towns, and white people, were not ready to accept them as neighbors or tenants because of their phenotypic features. As Pastora San Juan Cafferty states, Puerto Ricans were, “violently and indiscriminately harassed by the police and by a justice system established to protect all citizens under the law—they were denied access to political channels to voice demands for equality and justice under the law.”<sup>11</sup> This racism effected many different aspects of the daily lives of Puerto Ricans. Police were unduly suspicious of their every move solely because they were Puerto Rican. Actions like standing on a street corner were seen as suspicious if the person was Puerto Rican since they were seen as a “problem” group. Widespread stereotypes existed claiming that Puerto Ricans were dumb and lazy. These kinds of stereotypes and discrimination spread to even larger problems such as housing discrimination. Inadequate housing was one of the largest problems that Puerto Ricans faced when trying to settle into the United States.



Because of racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination, Puerto Ricans were forced to take any housing that they could find, regardless of the conditions or price. Landlords were eager to find whites, or members of other ethnic groups, as tenants instead of Puerto Ricans, who they deemed as dirty, lazy and inferior. Apartment owners would divide up apartments that were intended for one family and make four separate apartments out of the space. Then, they would charge Puerto Rican families the same price for the much smaller space; thus, they were overcharged for deteriorating housing. Connecticut provides a good illustration of the housing injustices that Puerto Ricans faced.

Because my study specifically focuses on the greater Hartford area, it is important to have a solid understanding of the history of Hispanic, and Puerto Rican, presence in this area. Similar to Puerto Rican migration to all of the United States, Puerto Ricans came to Connecticut through networks of families and friends and the migration was spurred by political and economic changes on the island. Hartford, however, stands out amongst an array of East coast cities because of its diverse racial and ethnic population. As Michael Sacks states, 4 of every 5 city residents in the year 2000 were minority group member, the largest groups being Hispanic and Black.<sup>12</sup> However, the large minority population in Hartford did not erase the racism and prejudice that Puerto Ricans in particular faced.

The 1960's document a period of rapid Puerto Rican migration to Hartford. Unfortunately for Puerto Ricans, the timing of this migration could not have been worse; as Puerto Ricans were migrating into the city of Hartford, partially due to a decline in the agricultural sector, the factory jobs that they came to fill were leaving the city. Jose Cruz notes the process of industrial suburbanization stating, "Industries...fled to avoid the

burden of urban taxes, traffic and deterioration.”<sup>13</sup> Hartford was simply not ready to embrace and accommodate the growth of the Puerto Rican population, both physically and culturally. As the minority population in Hartford continued to grow, whites fled the city and moved to the suburbs due to racial and ethnic prejudice; they did not want to be living amongst minority groups that they believed to be inferior. Schisms were created between different areas of neighborhoods and different towns in the Hartford area, and if boundaries were crossed, violence often ensued. In an article *La Gente, la Casa*, Robert Pawlowski states, “Puerto Ricans who crossed designated boundaries would be beat up or shot or both.”<sup>14</sup> This violence was a result of clashes between racial and ethnic groups due to cultural stereotypes, as well as a competition within the labor force as groups were fighting to obtain the same jobs.

Clearly, racial and ethnic tension remained constant amongst the greater Hartford population, and it is therefore no surprise that, as Ruth Glasser asserts, “Puerto Ricans turned ethnic identity into a rallying point for action.”<sup>15</sup> Because of prejudice, Puerto Ricans were being marginalized by the government in many different ways. One of the most obvious ways is through quality of housing. Sacks’s research concludes that, “Federal policy contributed to the decay of poor and minority neighborhoods in the inner city.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of designating federal money to the poorer areas that needed it the most, the government embarked upon urban renewal plans that built things like office buildings, shopping malls and retail stores. But in addition to monetary prejudice by the government, it was the attitudes and outlooks of others towards Puerto Ricans that also affected their day-to-day lives. Police officers constantly assumed that they were causing trouble simply because of their ethnicity. Magazines, such as SWANK, were easily

convinced to print racist jokes at the expense of Puerto Ricans. And gangs, such as the motorcycle gang *The Comancheros*, often started conflicts with Puerto Ricans. In one key incident they beat up an elderly Puerto Rican man simply because they did not like the fact that Puerto Ricans had begun to move into an area, South Green, that the gang occupied. It is these instances, these stereotypes and assumptions towards Puerto Ricans, which truly marginalized many aspects of their day-to-day lives in Hartford.

In the 1950's urban renewal programs were aided by federal funding and replaced by low-income housing with things like retail and entertainment facilities, office buildings and hospitals. The majority of the changes under the urban renewal program benefited the upper and middle class, but hurt the lower classes. These programs forced many Puerto Ricans into areas that were overcrowded and deteriorating. Ruth Glasser notes that, "Such drastic changes hit the still-young Puerto Rican community hard. The lack of decent, affordable housing had been a constant complaint for years among Puerto Ricans coming to Connecticut's cities and the problem was now getting worse instead of better."<sup>17</sup> There was only so much that people could do to fix up their houses, but beyond that, fundamental problems existed that only landlords and owners could resolve. One Puerto Rican living in Hartford during the 1950's stated,

The rats and bugs are there for all to see; indeed, their ravages upon the very young and very old are daily occurrences. The buildings' walls crumble and the stairwells break down. The plumbing no longer lets fresh water come in or human refuse go out. The rents are beyond one's ability to pay by oneself and so another cousin or two come to live in the already crowded rooms. These are simply the visible aspects of the problem.<sup>18</sup>

These changes cut deeper than physical relocation but also completely destroyed whatever life migrants had begun to make for themselves in the city; it destroyed them at an emotional level as well.

In addition to physical deterioration of the housing units that the majority of Puerto Ricans occupied, the language barrier hindered their ability to maintain a dialogue with their landlords about the problems. Furthermore, landlords in general had little interest in the complaints of their Puerto Rican tenants. Thus, Puerto Ricans' occupation in the slum areas of Hartford only further perpetuated their negative image as they came to be associated with this poverty. Ruth Glasser states that, "As Puerto Ricans came to Connecticut and settled in these crumbling neighborhoods, there was a corresponding deterioration in the attitudes of many non-Latino residents towards them."<sup>19</sup> They seemed to be stuck in a cycle of poverty and marginalization that was carried with them wherever they went and with whatever they did. Whereas earlier immigrant groups were able to form tightly-knit communities with families, friends and other people of their same background, it was difficult for Puerto Ricans to begin to form that niche. However, it is evident that in Hartford they have made huge strides in the formation of a community. If you drive along Broad Street or Park Street in Hartford, everywhere you look you see businesses dedicated to serving the Hispanic diverse populations—grocery stores, retail stores, specialty stores and restaurants. Ruth Glasser notes the role of informal networks for Puerto Ricans in Connecticut stating, "As more Puerto Ricans moved to Connecticut towns, they began to build networks to resolve problems of discrimination and misunderstanding, to recreate their hometown atmospheres."<sup>20</sup> While Puerto Ricans still occupy the poorest and most run-down areas in Hartford, they have at

least been able to create a community, a community that evokes a sense of the community on the island; the largest difference being here on the mainland, the community faces greater problems of racism and prejudice.

But despite the hostility that Puerto Ricans faced in Hartford, they continued to fight for their rights and their dreams. They were able to mobilize politically partly because of their power in numbers. In Hartford, “from 1957-1959 the Puerto Rican population in the city increased by 100% from 3,000 to 6,000.”<sup>21</sup> In terms of politics, Puerto Ricans in Hartford were able to achieve great political power. Initially, Puerto Ricans worked collectively with each other to resist oppression. As Jose Cruz states, “collective behavior also stimulated unity and formal organizations.”<sup>22</sup> Things like the Puerto Rican parade, the Puerto Rican Political Action Committee (PRPAC), and the Spanish Action Coalition (SAC) in Hartford were formed to advance ethnic nationalism and further the rights of Puerto Ricans. Also baseball, church and the Teacher Corps (1971) in Hartford were all tools to encourage collectivity amongst Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Rican parade was a simple, yet powerful, effort by Puerto Ricans to promote their ethnicity and gain publicity about their struggles. “The basic mission of the Puerto Rican parade...was to affirm Puerto Rican culture and encourage political participation.”<sup>23</sup> By working together collectively, Puerto Ricans were able to push for more pressure to implement change.

The SWANK magazine incident, and also the riots of 1969 in Hartford are perfect examples of collective behavior and action. The riots of 1969 were the response to an Anglo motorcycle gang who assaulted an elderly Puerto Rican man. Remembering the 1969 riots, Jerry Zayas responds, “that was one of the incidents that contributed to the

unity of the Puerto Rican community. It generated a lot of interest in the goals of the community improvement, building our own organizations, and developing our own political efforts—not that there weren't others, like Maria Sanchez, interesting in these things and working in the community—but I think that that's when the community began to unite.”<sup>24</sup> Essentially, due to the hostility and violence of the motorcycle group, Puerto Ricans were outraged and decided to act out in anger. In addition, they were upset with the way that police were handling the situation because Puerto Ricans felt like they were favoring the whites. The SWANK magazine incident in Hartford was another incident, mentioned above, that increased awareness and action of Puerto Ricans in Hartford, however the response to this incident was different than the riots of 1969 in that it brought about both collectivism and the idea of what Jose Cruz terms brokered representation and political mobility.

Essentially, the incident occurred when SWANK magazine printed in one of their issues a series of racist jokes about Puerto Ricans that were completely inappropriate. The Puerto Rican community was incensed at first that these jokes were written and second that they were published in a reputable magazine. But the Puerto Rican community was divided about how to deal with the incident.

The SWANK incident brought some measure of unity to the community, although the tensions and conflicts that had been prevented unified action in the past had not gone away. Puerto Ricans remained divided along partisan, organizational and ideological lines. The legitimacy of community leaders whom critics accused of being inconsistent was still questioned.<sup>25</sup>

The SWANK magazine incident demonstrates a different form of action which came about after collective behavior. It may seem as though brokered representation would be weaker than group action, but in fact, it proved to have the opposite effect. In terms of brokered representation, and factionalism, Jose Cruz notes that the “positive side is that recognized leaders had to prove their mettle, and in the process new activists emerged. Competition also fostered coalition-building efforts.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, more people were involved and worked harder in the face of competition from other Puerto Ricans.

The method that one was involved was less important than the fact that people were involved and committed to action. PRPAC also played an essential role in the political activism of Puerto Ricans in Hartford, and it was the leading political force among Puerto Ricans in the city. Cruz notes that, “PRPAC represented an instance of ethnic based mobilization that raised questions about how identity affected politics rather than the other way around.”<sup>27</sup> PRPAC mobilized Puerto Rican politics along ethnic lines and while initially it was a more radical group it eventually moved towards the middle ground and a place in the Democratic Party. The one main downfall of PRPAC was that it was weak at policy making which was a necessary condition for a political group. PRPAC is one of the strongest examples of groups like these, but it is important to recognize that others existed in Hartford as well. In time most of the Puerto Rican political parties came to a middle ground instead of promoting radicalism and solely ethnic nationalism as a basis for policy. Thus people who were the extremes of ethnic nationalism, such as the Peoples Liberation Party (PLP), and others who believed in complete assimilation, such as Maria Sanchez, met in a middle ground. The political situation for Puerto Ricans in Hartford was, and is, a result of the great number of Puerto

Ricans that have migrated to the city. This migration occurred through the role of human agency—formal and informal networks of family and friends.

Indeed, as made clear in the case of Hartford, once Puerto Ricans were on the mainland, their actions were determined by human agency, contrary to both the Puerto Rican and United States government's expectations. Both governments tried to disperse the settlement of Puerto Ricans so as not to interrupt the lives and communities that already existed and to decrease possible tensions and conflict between Puerto Ricans and white Americans and other immigrant groups. However, formal networks of government and agencies only provided people with a certain amount of information. Informal networks of family and friends provided the additional information needed for migrants. Carmen Whalen points out that, "Contract laborers sometimes signed up with family or friends, and those who broke their contracts and stayed after completing them relied on family and friends already living in the city. Still others bypassed farm work...Like farm workers, however, they relied on and/or sparked informal networks of migration."<sup>28</sup> Thus word of mouth, and whom one knew, played a vital role in where someone ended up and what kind of work he/she found. Informal networks played an integral role in the daily lives of Puerto Ricans in the United States, as they were surrounded by people from the island while trying to settle into the mainland. This is one of the most difficult problems that every immigrant group faces—trying to assimilate into an entirely new and foreign way of life.

Assimilation was particularly difficult for Puerto Ricans as they maintain close ties with their homeland, due both to their citizenship status as well as the close proximity and easy access to the island. Assimilating into American culture takes on a whole new



meaning for Puerto Ricans as they are caught between two worlds: their homeland and the mainland. Consider the difficulty of defining oneself if one is born in Puerto Rico and has family in Puerto Rico, but is a U.S. citizen, permanently living in Hartford, yet frequently traveling back to the island to see his or her family. Or even more difficult is the identity struggle of Puerto Rican teens who attend English speaking public schools in Connecticut, are involved at school and speak Spanish at home and have parents who push for the promotion of a Puerto Rican national identity. A Columbian woman who lives in the U.S. speaks about this dual existence of Puerto Ricans saying, “They [Americans] don’t really know if they’re [Puerto Ricans] American or if they’re Puerto Rican. See, they have a problem with Puerto Ricans because they can’t believe that they can be Americans but still speak Spanish. So they catalogue them as Americans for some things, but for others they’re Puerto Rican.”<sup>29</sup> This illustrates the difficulty that Puerto Ricans must face as they struggle to promote a cultural identity in an environment where not only are rejected as an ethnic group, but also many Americans are confused about who they are and where they belong.

Maintaining cultural identities and cultural values becomes something you must work at instead of something that comes naturally. For Puerto Ricans, maintaining their culture was and is particularly important because of their travel to and from the island. Family roles are one thing that dramatically changed on the mainland. In the 1970’s, the traditional Puerto Rican roles of husband and wife were shifted because it was easier for women to find work in the cities than men. Although women were still paid poorly and in menial jobs such as the garment industry, they were, nonetheless, working and providing income for their family. They had much more economic independence then they ever did

before. Additionally, women were much more involved in social and community activities, compared to their involvement in Puerto Rico. There was also a shift in the role of the child. Children from Puerto Rico behaved very differently than those in the U.S. On the mainland, children were taught to be self-reliant, aggressive and competitive—all characteristics that were de-emphasized in Puerto Rico.<sup>30</sup> During the 1970's, this became a source of conflict within families as Puerto Rican children were assimilating into the American culture and their parents were less than thrilled with their Americanization. The very structure of the family was also undergoing transformation as families were splitting up between the island and the mainland, as well as throughout the mainland. Extended kinship weakened family bonds. As Joseph Fitzpatrick asserts, this was partly because “the way of life in mainland cities was not a convenient environment for perpetuation of family virtues and family values.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the transformation of the family structure, cultural values were undermined when on the mainland. The cultural values of Puerto Ricans clashed with the norms of the “system” on the mainland. Puerto Ricans tend to question the system and trust the person whereas North Americans tend to have faith in the system and question the person when things go wrong.<sup>32</sup> Personal relationships are therefore much stronger and much more trusting in Puerto Rico, and it was difficult for some Puerto Ricans to make that shift when coming to the mainland. Joseph Fitzpatrick notes, “The need to adjust to the dominant patterns of American society requires a preparation to seek employment and advancement on the basis of merit or ability. To people for whom the world is an extensive pattern of personal relationships, this is a difficult adjustment.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps it is precisely this difficulty in assimilation process that made the promotion of ethnic nationalism a rallying point for Puerto Rican politics.

Cultural identity plays an important role in furthering the economic rights of Puerto Ricans. From the very beginning, there was a push to become Americanized as even on the island, the government instituted American holidays, as well as the English language into schools. But contrary to the efforts of the United States, Puerto Ricans had their own ideas and opinions about how to deal with their cultural identity. “To some, ethnicity meant a rejection of Americanism—to the extent that embracing the U.S. meant sanctioning colonialism in Puerto Rico—but to the majority, ethnicity was a code that structured their entrance into the mainstream society and politics.”<sup>34</sup> Their position was a difficult one because many wanted to assert their cultural identity, which in turn opened the door for hostility and racism. Identity, broadly defined is, “The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.”<sup>35</sup> However, for Puerto Ricans living in the United States, one’s personal identity is often complex as they are being pushed and pulled in many different directions by both American society and Puerto Rican culture and association. Furthermore, a Puerto Rican identity in the United States can be influenced by things like family, schools, friends, language, neighborhoods, food and music. Identity is an important aspect of the study conducted as the study tries to determine Puerto Rican teens in the Hartford area’s perceptions of their own identity.

# Music and Identity

Through music people are able to express themselves and make known who they really are and how they truly feel. The power of music is that it speaks to different emotions and sentiments; people identify with different types of music and even different songs within a specific genre. It is not surprising, then, that Puerto Ricans in Hartford enjoy a variety of different types and styles of music—both in English and Spanish. Unlike their parents, who culturally identify primarily with music from the island, teens connect with two musical genres: island music and mainland hip-hop. While island music and hip-hop were the two forms of music that Puerto Rican teens were most inspired by, they also mentioned listening to rap, rock, R&B, and soul music as well. There was little discrepancy in the identification of music between the teens living in the suburbs and the teens living in the city.

The most traditional and popular type of music on the island is salsa and merengue. Even though salsa is most popular among Latinos, it has a significant following among the rest of the population both in the United States and around the world. The term “salsa,” is actually a broad term to describe a variety of different types of music like the cha cha cha, the mambo, rumba, and merengue. Merengue is one of the most popular types of music that is under the designator category of salsa. Salsa is a form of Latin American dance music that weaves African American and Caribbean rhythms with Cuban melodies while also infusing forms of jazz and rock. As the Latino population in America increased, so did the popularity of salsa in the United States. Latin music holds significant importance, as it is an influential factor in the shaping, or

maintaining, of an identity. Through traditional Spanish music, Puerto Rican teens are able to connect, and identify, with their Puerto Rican identity.

Latin music remains extremely popular among the Puerto Rican population in the United States today. Ninety percent of the Puerto Rican teens in the study said that they liked to listen to salsa and merengue and an overwhelming majority said that their guardian plays salsa music in the house. It is through their guardian's preference for salsa music and their own desire to stay connected with their cultural roots, that the teens also developed a connection to the music. Pedro noted, "my mom always listens to salsa when cooking, cleaning or hanging around the house...it's what she used to listen to on the island growing up." As historian Maria Perez Gonzalez states, "their [Latin music] songs were sentimental, nationalistic, patriotic and passionate."<sup>36</sup> Because Latin music contains all of these elements—nationalism, patriotism, and sentimentalism—it especially reaches out to Puerto Ricans on the mainland, as many often think of the island and what they have left behind. Thus, through their parental figures' preference for Latin music as a symbol of their culture, the majority of Puerto Rican teens in both suburban and urban Hartford, also enjoy Latin music, as it connects them to their Puerto Rican identity. In addition, another form of music exists that in many ways re-invents more traditional Latin and Caribbean music, with a flare that appeals to the current generation of teens.

Hip-hop originated as, "an expression of the poverty-stricken inner-city minority youths who grew up during the 1960's and 1970's."<sup>37</sup> Through hip-hop music, people related to one another with the commonality that they all were struggling to survive, that they were all in the same place and shared the same oppression and hardship. Maria Gonzalez notes the way hip-hop brings people together, stating,

It [hip hop] is a musical form that incorporates a shared, lived urban experience that revolves around the music—rhyming and dancing; often makes a social statement against the harsh realities they must deal with on a daily basis...Puerto Ricans and other Latino Caribbean's contributed heavily to the hip-hop aspects of break dancing and graffiti. <sup>38</sup>

While people of all races and all ethnicities enjoy and identify with hip-hop, some of the teens in the study felt that hip-hop, in addition to traditional island music like salsa, also connects them to their cultural roots. This is somewhat baffling because hip-hop is not usually perceived as having a solely Latino following, but rather simply a younger following, regardless of race or ethnicity. It is interesting, then, that some Puerto Rican teens in the study felt a connection to their Puerto Rican cultural roots through hip-hop music. While I could not get to the core of that question during the interviews, one might speculate that because the majority of Puerto Rican teens in the greater Hartford area, at least those in the study, listen to hip-hop, then perhaps they feel the music to be unifying in the way that it evokes a sense of a Puerto Rican hip-hop community.

It is through present day hip-hop that Puerto Rican teens truly identify with their cultural roots, even more than through salsa and merengue. It was the parents or guardians of the Puerto Rican teens in the study that felt most connected to the Latin music of the island, rather than the Puerto Rican teens themselves. Roberto stated, “[Puerto Rican] Culture is very enforced in my house...mainly through music...we have hundreds of cd's of Spanish artists in our house.” Again, Roberto's parents encourage the connection to Puerto Rican culture, and a Puerto Rican identity, through the promotion of Spanish music. Roberto later states, “Me? I like the island music...I like all sorts of

music...but what I **love** is Hip-hop.” The majority of the interviewees spoke passionately about hip-hop music and became more animated when expressing their interest in it. While 90% of the teens in the study like and listen to salsa and merengue, hip-hop appears to be their primary vehicle for expression and what they relate to most. When asked what television shows they watched, the majority of the Puerto Rican teens pointed out that they watched BET, a station that plays mainly hip-hop videos and songs. In addition, more than half of the teens mentioned watching MTV and/or American Idol, both of which are directed towards the promotion of music and/or music videos. Clearly, hip-hop is the most prevalent and important music in their lives, but even mainstream American music is significant to them.

Park Street and Broad Street designate an area where there is a high population of Puerto Ricans; one might even call it an ethnic enclave. But regardless of its label, it is evident when you drive through the area that music, and in particular salsa, merengue and hip-hop are important to the people living there. I almost always hear Latin music playing—whether it is in the houses, playing in cars or just a radio with people gathered around and relaxing while listening to music and socializing. Latin music, thus, is one symbol of identity for Puerto Rican teens in Hartford. Joseph Fitzpatrick states, “In the process of migration and integration into a new culture, the presence of some impressive symbol is thus important in the preservation of a sense of identity.”<sup>39</sup> Latin music—in particular hip-hop, salsa and merengue—helps Puerto Rican teens connect with their cultural roots and plays an important role in the formation of a Puerto Rican identity across metropolitan Hartford.

# Language

Language can be seen as a symbol of culture. It can be constraining in that if one does not speak the language of “his/her culture” he/she might feel isolated and distant, and those who remain a part of the culture, those who do speak the language, might see him/her as not authentic enough, as being outside of the cultural boundaries. However, language can also be mobilizing as Puerto Rican youngsters make determined efforts to learn Spanish, and their parents make an effort to ensure their Spanish language ability, in order to be a part of Puerto Rican culture. The dual use of language—English and Spanish—by Puerto Rican teens in metropolitan Hartford illustrates the way that they are melding together their “American” identity and their cultural identity. The majority of Puerto Rican teens in the study spoke at least some Spanish but used English as their primary means of communication. Thus through the use of language, Puerto Rican teens remain connected to, and in contact with, both the “American” and Puerto Rican sides of their identity.

Older generations of Puerto Ricans on the mainland often use language as a way to maintain their Puerto Rican identity. In the U.S, if you do not speak English then you are considered to be “less American” than those who do, thus English becomes a symbol of American identity. For immigrants, then, learning English can be seen as a way to integrate into American culture, or, the opposite, not learning the language as a way to defy assimilation and to encourage a nationalistic identity. As Leslie Espinoza states,



We recognize our various identities in our different languages. Language is a vehicle by which others know us and by which we know ourselves. We give labels to our external and internal thoughts and experiences. Through this process of naming, we define our reality. Words are symbols for knowledge. Learning to speak is learning to attach the ‘right’ symbol to the ‘right’ knowing in the ‘right’ context. This is a cultural, political and personal process.<sup>40</sup>

Thus language plays an important role in the composition of identity. More than 75% of the Puerto Rican teens in the study spoke Spanish fluently, spoke it a little, or learned it when they were young but had since lost their ability to speak it. 100% of the teenagers interviewed said that their parents spoke Spanish at least occasionally. However, while 75% of the teens could speak Spanish, the majority of them did not speak it on a regular basis, but rather chose English as their primary language. The reasons for this practice varied based on the person. One interviewee, Jorge, stated that he communicated through Spanish if he was with a group of people who all spoke it, but that he generally spoke English so as not to exclude anyone from the conversation. Another teen, Maria, said that her mother did not want her to speak Spanish because she wanted her to fit in and be successful in the U.S., referring to the perceived link between English and success and participation in society. At the same time, though, her mother wanted her to have a strong identification with Puerto Rico and a Puerto Rican identity. This is important to understand because while her mother encouraged her assimilation into American culture through language, thus making language a vehicle for success and integration, she simultaneously wanted her daughter to maintain her Puerto Rican identity

and to have a sense of her own heritage; in other words, these things can sometimes be seen as interrelated—assimilation and ethnic nationalism.

Sometimes a dual identity, an association with two different identities, in this case Puerto Rican and American, exists simultaneously drawing upon different aspects of one's life. Results from the study indicate that language truly is one way that Puerto Rican teens in the greater Hartford area integrate their cultural and national identities into one identity. By using both languages, Puerto Rican teens are illustrating that they are connected to two different identities. If language is a symbol of culture, then they are merging two cultures together and making it the culture of their generation. Because culture is mobilizing, constantly changing and fluid, it is easy to see that the culture of the present generation of Puerto Rican teens would be somewhat different than that of their forefathers. Leslie Espinoza, a sociologist, speaks of the interchanging between identities, saying, "It takes a lot of energy to hide our accents, our idioms, our language. We have to learn to shift between identities, without an overlap. And then comes a time when we feel secure enough in the mastery of the dominant language to experiment with transformative speech—to create a new combination of languages."<sup>41</sup>

In terms of the "new combination of languages" she speaks of, the term Spanglish is often used to describe a combination of English and Spanish—using the two languages at the same time by intertwining English and Spanish simultaneously. But this has a deeper meaning than merely the interchangeability of two languages, but rather reaches into the heart of what language means and thus speaks to the uniting of the two identities. For Puerto Ricans teens in particular, their dual use of language is representative of their dual identity—of assimilation and ethnic nationalism. The first part of Espinoza's quote

notes the difficulty of actually connecting the two identities, the prejudice and racism that comes along with being tied to a minority group, a group other than white American, while living in the U.S. It is not easy for all Puerto Ricans to feel connected to both an American identity and a Puerto Rican identity. Nicholas, a teen who lives with his grandmother on Broad Street in Hartford, said that his grandmother refuses to learn English, not because she is unable, but because she feels that by learning English she would lose her connection to Puerto Rico. She thinks that by learning English, she will become American, thus linking language, again, to the notion of identity. Maria Perez, a historian, speaks about how many elderly people purposely do not learn English in order to defy assimilation saying, “This can be perceived as a disadvantage for an immigrant group, but it can also be regarded as an expression of dissatisfaction, frustration, and protest against a society they believed would welcome them as equal citizens.”<sup>42</sup> Manny, who lives in West Hartford, said that his grandmother never learned English because she wanted to protest assimilation into the melting pot. Jorge Duany describes this need to maintain symbols of identity such as language stating,

Popular allegiance to these well-recognizing symbols of Puerto Rican ness arguably express a collective will not to become just another ethnic minority within the American melting pot but to retain a separate nationality...Thousands of boricuas are dispersed around the world and none of them, with very rare exceptions, denies his Puerto Rican homeland or race. That is the seal and the distinctive mark that we all carry with us. That mark, or peculiar way of being is what distinguishes us from other races and fellow peoples of the new world.<sup>43</sup>

Puerto Rican teens in Hartford, however, seem to maintain more of a dual identity, with their Puerto Rican identity being first and American second. Rather than trying to preserve a purely Puerto Rican identity like many of their guardians and family members, teens, instead, identify with both cultures. This is evident through their use of language as many speak both languages and use them according to the situation they are in and whom they are with. This could be a result of their birthplace and the fact that they grew up in the U.S. Generally speaking, the younger that one is when he or she moves to a new place, the more receptive to the culture and environment he or she is. <sup>44</sup>

Therefore, logically, it makes sense that Puerto Rican teens now are growing up learning both the language of their cultural roots as well as the language of the environment they now occupy. Because they have spent the majority of their lives in the United States, it is only natural that they learn, and identify with, the English language. Learning English is especially necessary because the high schools of the teens interviewed are not bilingual, thereby putting them at a disadvantage if they only speak Spanish. At the same time, the fact that most of them learned Spanish, in addition to English, illustrates their tie to their Puerto Rican identity. Many of the teens in the study are surrounded by family members who purposely speak Spanish to affirm their cultural identity and thus transmit their preference for their cultural identity. Maria Gonzalez confirms that, “Language is a transmitter of culture; it is a mechanism by which individuals are socialized into society. The values, beliefs, and attitudes of society are communicated, and loyalty and allegiance to society expressed.” <sup>45</sup> Thus we see the many ways that language is used as a way to make a statement about identity. The fact that most of the teens interviewed spoke at least a little Spanish, but spoke primarily in

English, illustrates the way that they remain connected to their cultural roots while simultaneously integrating into American society in ways that might be considered necessary to succeed and progress.

## **Prejudice and the construction of a Puerto Rican Identity**

Racial prejudice is one element that distinguishes the Puerto Rican experience from other immigrant's experiences. Puerto Ricans in the United States suffer prejudice because of their race as well as their ethnicity, making their integration into North American culture particularly challenging. People deal with, and make sense of, prejudice in different ways depending on a variety of factors. However, two of the most common ways to manage prejudice are to either suppress one's cultural identity and push to assimilate, diminishing a notion of difference, or to counteract the prejudice through the purposeful promotion of cultural identity in a manner that screams, yes I am a Puerto Rican and I am proud of my cultural roots and ethnic identity. Despite differences in the experiences of prejudice of the teens in the study, all promoted their Puerto Rican identity with equal fervor and intensity.

There was a definite difference in the experiences of prejudice between Puerto Rican teens living in Hartford and Puerto Rican teens living in the suburbs of Hartford. Teens living in the city reported, as a whole, less prejudice than those living in the suburbs. Nonetheless, prejudice does exist and can be extremely hurtful and confusing for a teenager who experiences it. The fundamental issue is that prejudice implies that race or ethnicity marks inferiority or superiority. In other words, Puerto Ricans as being inferior

to other European immigrants, and whites, because of their skin color and because of their ethnic identity. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco asserts that, “U.S. political elites have long held the ‘pervasive belief that Latin Americans are an inferior branch of the human species’ and, furthermore, that the ‘belief in Latin American inferiority is the essential core of United States policy towards Latin America.”<sup>46</sup> Thus whiteness has become associated with superiority and the elite classes, putting Puerto Ricans, and other Latino immigrants, at a disadvantage from the very beginning. Their inferiority has been imprinted on them even before they left the island, making their experience on the mainland that much more difficult.

Puerto Ricans’ experiences of prejudice and disadvantage also result in general stereotyping about Puerto Ricans. As one teen, Maria, puts it, “society isn’t used to seeing success in minorities...they expect us to end up on the streets.” She is speaking of how her success in school defies the racial and cultural perceptions about minorities, and in particular, Puerto Ricans. She also emphasizes that, “Many people don’t think we are capable of holding down jobs, that we are inferior, and that we don’t belong here.” All of the interviewees who spoke about experiences of prejudice noted that they were hurt and upset by people’s stereotypes towards them and many said that it was difficult for them to try to combat people’s stereotypes and get people to see them for who they really are. Suarez-Orozco writes about the negative stereotypes of Latinos saying, “In this ideological structure, Latin Americans are depicted as racially and culturally inferior, ignorant, degraded, filthy, and child like.”<sup>47</sup> This is precisely the type of stereotype that many teens in the study mentioned and tried to escape.

W.E.B Du Bois' term, "double consciousness" can be used to describe the way that Puerto Rican teens face a double understanding of their own identities. In other words, they have a "double consciousness," in that they must deal with their own perceptions of themselves as well as how other people perceive them and the stereotypes that come along with it. Teens from Conard High School in West Hartford, where there are few Puerto Ricans, mentioned the stereotypes that people placed on them. One young man interviewed who attended Conard High claimed to be depressed because his friend's parents forbade their children to hang out with him solely because he is Puerto Rican. As he put it, "They think I'm a 'bad seed,' and that I am a bad influence on them [his friends]." Here, he faces the perceptions of his friend's parents, who believe the stereotypes that Puerto Ricans are a "problem group," while he understands himself to be a regular teenager who is no different, no more problematic than any other. Marisol, from Conard High, spoke about the prejudice she received at school from her classmates. Marisol declared, "People like to stereotype and make assumptions about us...some kids in my class always say, 'go back to Puerto Rico,' or 'you can't speak English.'" Ironically, Marisol speaks perfect English and is one of the few in the study who could not speak very much Spanish. Mary Waters, a sociologist, speaks about a paradox in the United States; prejudice exists towards certain immigrant groups, like Puerto Ricans, yet the U.S. imagines itself as a melting pot of large numbers of immigrants from all around the world. Part of the Puerto Rican "problem" is that they refuse to melt into the pot with the rest of the immigrants. Waters states, "Americans exhibit a fundamental ambivalence about immigration and immigrants. We are a nation of immigrants, and yet racism is a constitutive part of our national psyche. We tend to have warm feelings about immigrants

when we think of our ancestors, and yet the immigrant is often seen as the ‘other.’”<sup>48</sup>

Puerto Rican teens in metropolitan Hartford must negotiate their own perceptions of themselves as well as how others perceive them. The promotion of a Puerto Rican identity, and also the joining of both their Puerto Rican and American identities, is the result of this negotiation.

The teens that lived in Hartford, many in the Frog Hollow area, claimed to experience less racism and less prejudice than the ones from the suburbs. Originally I just assumed that the schools they attended were more diverse than Conard, which is located in West Hartford, however after researching the statistics, I realized that Conard is actually more diverse than some of the schools in Hartford. Wethersfield High, however, which is also a suburban school, has little diversity. For example, Conard has a 15% Hispanic population, 10% Black population, 10% Asian population and 65% White population. Wethersfield High, which is also a suburban town, only has a 6% Hispanic population, 3% Black population, 2% Asian population and 88% of the students are White. Interestingly, the two teens from Wethersfield High experienced less prejudice than those who attended Conard High. I anticipated there to be a correlation between lack of diversity and experiences of prejudice, however, when examining the data further I realized that this was not necessarily the case. One of the teens that attended Wethersfield High said that she felt the prejudice that she experienced to be a result of “financial disadvantage” rather than racial or ethnic disadvantage and prejudice. When I asked the teens in the study whether or not they felt prejudiced against in school, or outside, the overwhelming consensus of the teens who went to school in Hartford, was that because of the diversity in their schools, prejudice was not as evident and people on average were



more tolerant of racial and ethnic difference. Perhaps because the students who are from Hartford live in more diverse towns, they automatically feel that their schools are also diverse as well, and visa versa, the teens who live in more racially and ethnically segregated towns feel the effects of their less diverse neighborhoods in their schools, even though this is not the case. However, it is also important to mention that these same teens who attended schools in Hartford noted that their schools, and their friends, were mostly Puerto Rican or black, whereas at Conard the students in the study all said that their friends were of more diverse ethnic backgrounds. Thus maybe because the teens from the city of Hartford have a less diverse group of friends, then, they may not have been singled out as much in terms of facing prejudice as those teens from Conard High School. Still, the students from Wethersfield high illustrate that questions still remain as to why some experience prejudice and others do not. Interestingly, despite their location in the suburbs of Hartford, their responses seem to be closer to those of the students from the city of Hartford. The results are concluded from the question asked, “what background do most of your friends come from?”

While Puerto Rican teens in the suburbs perhaps feel more prejudice and racism than those in Hartford, no discrepancy exists in their promotion of ethnic identity. Teens, in both the suburbs and the city, tend to promote their cultural identity, despite prejudice or assimilation, more than the promotion of a national identity. In other words, the interviews illustrate that no real line exists between the experience of prejudice and the promotion of a cultural or national identity. Prejudice simply affects the emotional character of Puerto Rican teens but does not cause them to choose one identity over the other.

# Informal Networks and Community as they Shape Identity Formation

Informal networks of families and friends, as well as the creation of Puerto Rican communities, help to shape the identity of Puerto Rican teens on the mainland.

Community, broadly defined, is people living in the same place and sharing a common interest or certain commonalities. For the purposes of this paper, community can be understood as the neighborhoods, or networks, of Puerto Ricans living amongst one another in metropolitan Hartford. They maintain their culture through the established communities which in many ways resemble, or parallel, small town communities and neighborhoods on the island. Some researchers would predict that Puerto Rican teens in urban areas would be more likely to feel a strong connection to a Puerto Rican identity because they are living in the midst of a cultural enclave, a Puerto Rican community. Other researchers might expect that Puerto Rican teenagers in suburban areas would be more likely to have a deep connection to a Puerto Rican identity because they are seen as outsiders in a predominantly white community and therefore might feel the need to reinforce their cultural identity in order to affirm who they are and where they are from. However, the results of this study indicate that both suburban and urban Puerto Rican teens in the greater Hartford area promote their cultural identities with equal determination and commitment.

For Puerto Ricans, the way that communities were initially formed in the United States was through the role of networks—of family and friends. Networks are

contacts—family, friends, and acquaintances—that help establish connections to make it easier to survive and prosper on the mainland. In other words, through connections of people already established and living in the U.S., Puerto Ricans had places to stay and people to help them jump-start their life on the mainland. However, both human networks and communities hold even more importance than helping with settlement on the mainland, but they actually help to sculpt the identities of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., especially teens. Ruth Glasser notes the way that Puerto Ricans used networks and communities to facilitate the promotion of Puerto Rican culture and ethnic identity. Glasser states, “All migrants worked hard to recreate the communities they had left behind.”<sup>49</sup> By this re-creation, Puerto Ricans were able to experience every day the island life that they left behind. However, while 77% of the Puerto Rican teens interviewed had been to the island, only one had stayed on the island for an extensive period of time. Most of the interviewee’s noted that they visited the island as a vacation and went primarily to visit their families. Thus much of their experience and understanding of Puerto Rican culture comes from how they see culture being practiced on the mainland and in their communities. In other words, Puerto Rican teens perceptions of Puerto Rican culture is a result of their surrounding Puerto Rican community. Ironically, both Puerto Rican teens from West Hartford, which is predominantly White, as well as Puerto Rican teens from the city, which has a much greater Puerto Rican population, connect with their Puerto Rican identity through the same channel and in the same way. Despite the difference in locality of the teens in the study, 100% of the teens identified with their Puerto Rican identity first and their American identity second. What is interesting about these statistics, however, is that while the students from Conard High

in West Hartford live in neighborhoods with a smaller Puerto Rican, and Hispanic, population, they still claimed that they felt they were a part of a greater Puerto Rican community. In other words, community extends beyond one's neighbors and neighborhood, but rather a community can be scattered throughout an entire region, like metropolitan Hartford.

Community, however, is not necessarily as romantic as it might sound. A lot of the time, community is idealized to represent something that does not necessarily exist. Communities are often seen in relation to an outside force, to illustrate the internal versus the external. For example, the Puerto Rican community in Hartford might imagine itself to be a community because it sees itself in juxtaposition to the surrounding White population. Miranda Joseph points out the way that communities may exist more in theoretical terms than in actuality. She states, "Communities seem inevitably to be constituted in relation to internal and external enemies and that these defining others are then elided, excluded, or actively repressed."<sup>50</sup> As we idealize and conceptualize our own understanding of community, we must take into consideration the fact that community does not necessarily mean unity and cohesion, but rather often it is just one characteristic, one belief, or one fact that ties people together, and outside of that one element, whatever it might be, the community might be diversified in every other aspect. Miranda Joseph notes the way the "false bond" comes into play when imagining communities. She states, "While identity is often named as the bond among community members, it is a false name in that communal participants are not identical and many of those to whom an identity is attributed do not participate in communal activities."<sup>51</sup> In essence, two Puerto Ricans in the Hartford community could have completely different beliefs, ideas,

backgrounds, and speak different languages, but they are still members of the same community because of their common origin.

In the case of the Puerto Rican community in Hartford, their common history, their common origin, certainly brings them together and evokes a sense of unity and cohesion. In addition, drawing from the remarks of the interviewees, there are many common themes that thread the community of Puerto Rican teens. Many of these have already been discussed such as music, family, food preferences, culture, prejudice and language. The students in the study very much felt to be a part of a Puerto Rican community, whether it be through their schools, their friends, their family or their neighborhood—they certainly imagine their community to be very real and cohesive.

Many Puerto Rican teens have never left the mainland, or have only traveled to Puerto Rico a few times. Therefore, the Puerto Rican community they live in, their environment, is all they know of the island and Puerto Rican culture. Again, disparity exists in terms of the surroundings of the teens living in the suburbs of Hartford and those living in urban Hartford. Almost all of the interviewees from the suburbs said that they lived amongst white people, and that there were very few Puerto Ricans, if any, living in their neighborhoods. In contrast, those interviewed that lived in the city of Hartford said that they lived in neighborhoods where Puerto Ricans were the majority. However again, regardless of their immediate surrounding community, all teens in the study felt to be a part of a Puerto Rican community. Manny, from West Hartford, points out “Even though my neighborhood is all white people...Hartford in general has a lot of Puerto Ricans, so I am still surrounded by Puerto Rican culture.” Even those living in the suburbs noted that they generally go shopping at Spanish grocery stores and that their guardian’s surround

themselves with friends of Puerto Rican ethnicity. The interviewees, therefore, still felt to be a part of a Puerto Rican community even though a Puerto Rican population did not directly surround them. Jorge Duany notes the importance of networks and community in the shaping of identity, stating, “In addition to formal organizations, Puerto Rican migrants constructed their identity in informal ways. Social networks linked people according to kinship and friendship, community of origin, neighborhood residence, eating habits, religious beliefs, musical practices and sports interests.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, communities and networks maintain and promote the cultural identity of the island. Thus, as teens are brought up in the midst of a community of Puerto Rican culture, it is only natural that they, too, identify with their cultural surroundings and their cultural identity.

100% of the teens interviewed said that their parents, or whichever member of their family was first to migrate, came to a specific area in the United States because they had friends or family there, or they came under the contract farm worker program in which they ended up living with other Puerto Ricans who were also their agricultural laborers. Celia Jaes Falicov confirms this saying,

Immigrants seldom migrate toward a social vacuum. A relative, friend, or acquaintance usually waits on the other side to help with work and housing and to provide guidelines for the new life. A social community and ethnic neighborhood reproduce in pockets of remembrance, the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of one’s country. All of these elements create a mix of emotions—sadness and elation, loss and restitution, absence and presence—that makes grieving incomplete, postponed, and ambiguous.<sup>53</sup>

Again, it through human agency, social networks, that Puerto Ricans settled around the United States. Through the establishment of small communities of Puerto Ricans, the island culture thrives. Puerto Rican teens, especially in metropolitan Hartford, thus feel the effects of the cultural enclave that surrounds them as it helps to shape their growing and fluid identity. Regardless of location, the teens in the study felt themselves to be in touch with a Puerto Rican community and through this envisioned community, teens felt to be in touch with their Puerto Rican identity and their cultural roots, as they understood them to be within the context of their lives on the mainland.

Schools, and the networks of teachers, friends, clubs, and administrators, are one vehicle that helps to influence the shaping of the identity of its students. The teenage years are the time that people are most easily affected and swayed by others. Teens are bombarded with so many different stimuli every day, as they are trying to figure out who they are and what their purpose is. Whether it is the different cliques that are formed at every school, the clubs that are of interest to particular students, a teacher who touches a student, the peers who tease or the subjects that are taught, all these things greatly influence teenagers from both the city and the suburbs.

When asked if there were outlets for Hispanics who wanted, or needed, them at school, the responses varied. Eight out of thirteen students said that there were no Latino or multicultural clubs at his/her school, and the remaining four students said that there was a multicultural club, however none of them belonged to the club (that leaves one student, however he went to adult education classes and there were no clubs there). It is important to note that while 4/13 students claimed that their schools did have clubs, in some cases, other students who attended the same school were unaware that the clubs

existed. The fact that students of ethnicity might not even know that multicultural and Latino clubs existed, illustrates a lack of commitment, or a lack of advertisement, on the part of the clubs that did exist. Austin Sarat notes the problem with clubs in the school systems stating he, “discovered that there were many activities in schools that had begun ten to twenty years before—directed towards affirmative action and multicultural education...towards making an environment where people had respect for one another...what lacked was **real** commitment or leadership [to the clubs] from administrators and [the] schools.”<sup>54</sup> For whatever reason, whether it is a lack of commitment, or perhaps not enough interest, but clubs simply do not seem to be an outlet for Puerto Rican teens. Instead, friends and family are the most vital networks that the teens themselves rely on.

Teens said that the networks, and people, that they rely on most are their friends and their families. It is through these networks, and people, that teens are able to grapple with their identity. Marisol notes the importance of these networks, especially at the stage they are in their lives, as they are growing and learning about who they are. She states, “Now is the time where everyone is branching out...to be who they want to be...and it is my friends and family who help me, and teach me, to become my own person...and to be who I really am.” Marisol, like many other teens, therefore believes family and friends to be crucial components to Puerto Ricans during their teenage years. Another teen, Tiffany, said that the only person that she relies on is herself. She states, “My mom has always forced me to make my own decisions...she won’t make any for me...so I rely only on myself...you can’t trust anyone.” Tiffany said that she relies only on herself because of the stereotypes and assumptions that people make about Hispanic’s in general. A few



students also said that they relied on teachers for educational support, but as a whole, it seems that their reliance on school, the administration and clubs was minimal to non-existent.

The responses of the teens in the study indicate that friends, family and informal networks help to build and maintain identity, regardless of where one lives. Location, whether it be the city or the suburbs, does not influence the perceived identification with a Puerto Rican community.

## **Puerto Rican Identity in the United States : A Dual Identity?**

The Puerto Rican experience in the U.S. can be seen as a dual identity. The term, dual identity, refers to a dual existence. In the case of Puerto Ricans in the U.S, the two sides of a dual existence are assimilation and ethnic nationalism. Many Puerto Ricans on the mainland feel pressure from both sides and are pulled in two directions as they settle, or grow up, in the States. Felix Padilla defines assimilation as, “a purposive attempt to become directly involved in the larger American society by adopting, to whatever extent possible, the customs, attitude and language of white America.”<sup>55</sup> Assimilation, however, does not have to be an overt attempt to become “American,” but can also simply be integrating into U.S. culture and identifying with an ‘American’ side. In contrast, the promotion of ethnic nationalism is, in essence, the promotion and identification of Puerto Rican culture. Both assimilation, as well as ethnic nationalism, help to formulate an identity.

One interesting thing that was brought up in a few of the interviews, both the ones in West Hartford and in Hartford, was the different categories within the category of “Puerto Rican.” In other words, teens pointed out that there are different ways to “be” and “act” Puerto Rican and that there are therefore sub groups within the designating category “Puerto Rican.” For example, one student noted the divider of “Preps Vs. Ghets” at Conard High School. The characteristics that come into play to define a “prep” versus a “ghet,” are things like financial status, education (as in success in education) and arts; these elements help to differentiate and distinguish between the groups. Tension does not necessarily exist between the two groups, but they are certainly different, and the student who claimed to be a “prep” wanted to make sure that the difference was mentioned. Also, according to the student, “ghets” tend to exaggerate their Puerto Rican-ness through things like clothing, where they promote their Puerto Rican identity but do not necessarily actually care about Puerto Rican culture; in other words, their promotion of ethnicity is more of a statement than an actual commitment or connection.

Additionally, a couple of the teens from Hartford noted that varying degrees of being “Puerto Rican” existed. For example, Julian noted that there were three different levels; a “jibaro” was a Puerto Rican to the extreme, someone who listens to only Spanish rap, speaks solely Spanish, and promotes his or her Puerto Rican-ness to the maximum through clothing, music, attitude and friendships. They claimed that a lot of the Puerto Ricans that you see on Broad Street and Park Street fall under this category. A “guala” is the next on the scale of promotion of Puerto Rican-ness, followed by a “Rican”, who is considered to be a Puerto Rican American. Of the two teens who mentioned these

distinctions within the category of “Puerto Rican,” both claimed that they themselves were Puerto Rican.

It is important to note that assimilation and ethnic nationalism are merely two ends of the spectrum and are not mutually exclusive; in other words, it is possible for some Puerto Ricans to identify with both sides and to be somewhere in between the range. Leslie Espinoza notes the multiplicity of identity, stating,

The politics of dichotomous categorical identity require individuals to be placed into or forced to choose one particular defining identity. Once placed in that category, the individual is assumed to possess all the characteristics of that category, good and bad. Furthermore, that category is understood by its opposition to another category...Understanding personal identity, however, often requires the expression of multiple and distinct defining categories and the recognition of a unifying concept—the individual person.<sup>56</sup>

Thus when thinking about identity, one must recognize that each and every person views and understands his or her identity differently than any other. With this said, the study reveals a commonality when Puerto Rican teens were asked about their identities.

100% of the teens in the study connect with their Puerto Rican identity first, but more than half also identified with a secondary American identity. Thus a dual existence is present, to some extent, when analyzing Puerto Rican teens in the greater Hartford area, and the shaping of their individual identities as they grow up in an ethnic enclave. While everyone in the study felt themselves to be primarily Puerto Rican, many also identified as part American as well. One teen, Eduardo, stated, “I’m Puerto Rican

first...but I practice both cultures...at home I eat mainly Spanish foods...but also hamburgers and fries.” What he was really trying to explain was that while he identifies with a Puerto Rican identity first, that does not mean that he does not feel to be American. In other words, he feels that he has a dual identity of Puerto Rican American. Another teen notes, “I have Puerto Rican blood, I am Puerto Rican...but I’m proud to be American and I am grateful for the opportunities that America has given me.” Here, this interviewee asserts that one’s identity is based on one’s blood, his/her ethnicity, and thus he feels to be completely Puerto Rican for that reason. He noted feelings of being lost as when he returned to the island, people considered him ‘Nuyorican,’ American Puerto Rican, and thus different from islanders who were considered purely Puerto Rican. On the mainland, he claimed that, “We have formed a Puerto Rican community in order to stay Puerto Rican...even though we may be different the people who live on the island.” David Abalos, a historian, notes the complexity of the Puerto Rican dual existence stating, “Latinos have somehow partially maintained their language, religion, and culture, although they are constantly being reminded of how much they have actually lost. We are in a diaspora: We belong nowhere. We cannot go home or be content here, so we make a home within ourselves.”<sup>57</sup> Again, Puerto Rican teens are indicating that they are melding together their two identities; they are uniting their cultural identities with their national identities by assimilating while simultaneously promoting their Puerto Rican cultural identity and roots.

The dual identity that pulls Puerto Ricans in two different directions affects teens greatly. Again, because the teens in the study do not know Puerto Rico personally as their parents do, they must identify with the island through what is here in the U.S, and

particularly for this study, in Hartford. Jorge Duany notes the ways that Puerto Rican culture is brought to the U.S, and some of the ways that it influences Puerto Rican teens now, stating,

In these organized contexts [politics], as well as in more informal ways, migrants reconstructed their identity through such everyday popular practices as eating, drinking, dancing, playing dominos or baseball, praying, or simply socializing. Caught ‘between two flags,’ Puerto Ricans continually reasserted ‘the seal and the distinctive mark’ of their homeland, even as they increasingly found themselves in a transnational context.<sup>58</sup>

Thus it is through the informal aspects of culture—through the Puerto Rican foods cooked in homes, the Spanish that is spoken amongst family members and friends, the neighborhoods and Puerto Rican community, music, dance and family—that a Puerto Rican culture thrives and is passed down through generations. The extent to which families integrate and assimilate into American culture and life is a product of various elements rather than solely one driving force. It is not all that surprising, then, that the teens in the study identify with a Puerto Rican identity first, as they all live in the greater Hartford area, an environment with a huge Latino, and Puerto Rican, population. They are surrounded by Latin and Puerto Rican influences, many even more than American ones. But while this is true, one cannot ignore the fact that Puerto Rican teens are actually melding their two identities in the formation of their own identity of Puerto Rican American. Ricardo Ainslie notes, “The degree to which immigrant families are influenced by mainstream American culture varies as a function of myriad factors, such

as the location and character of the community within which a family lives and whether the immigrants have come alone, with friends, or with extended family.”<sup>59</sup> According to the Hartford census, in the year 2000, 40.5% of the city of Hartford’s population was Hispanic;<sup>60</sup> with this high percentage of Latinos in the greater Hartford area, it is easy to see why the study indicates that Puerto Rican teens identify with their Puerto Rican identity before their American identity. Thus in the negotiation of their two identities, they end up forming a new identity of Puerto Rican American.

## **Culture and the importance of Family in shaping Identity**

Family, and extended family, is one of the most notable and fundamental aspects of Puerto Rican culture and is the central unit around which Puerto Rican culture and life operates. Family is influential in shaping Puerto Rican teen identity, especially because nearly all the teens in this sample perceive their role models to be a family member. The connection within families is much greater in the Puerto Rican tradition than in many other cultures. It is not surprising, then, that the role of family continues to be an important aspect of life on the mainland. However, while familial bonds continue to be strong amongst Puerto Ricans in the U.S., it is also important to recognize that in many ways, familial bonds have taken on new meanings as new generations are born on the mainland. In other words, family clearly influences perceptions of Puerto Rican teen identity however it is not constraining. Instead, Puerto Rican teen identities are somewhat free from parental influence.

In order to understand the importance of family in the shaping of Puerto Rican teens identities in metropolitan Hartford, we must first examine the idea of culture because it is primarily through families that the promotion of Puerto Rican culture thrives and prospers. The term culture is a complex term that links to identity. Joseph Fitzpatrick defines culture as, “the sum of all the ways of believing, thinking, feeling, and behaving which makes up a person’s way of life...culture enables man to define himself and is the basis for group identity and personal identity.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, culture helps shape one’s identity; culture embodies how one is raised, what values one has, one’s morals and one’s tastes. Identity, therefore, is often a product of one’s culture. Stephen Greenblatt points out that culture is a result of both constraint and mobility. Culture is constraining in that it enforces and encourages certain guidelines, specific social norms, particular to a group and if one strays from that understanding they can be seen as different, or perhaps even outcasts. Therefore within a culture, certain boundaries for behavior are set; Greenblatt notes, “culture [acts] as a system of constraints...the internalization and practice of a code of behaviors.”<sup>62</sup> In terms of mobility, Greenblatt explains that if culture can be restricting, then it also must allow for mobility. Culture is mobilizing in that it is constantly moving forward, it is under transformation and therefore not stagnant. This understanding of culture is necessary to consider when looking at the structure of family, as it relates to Puerto Rican identity in the U.S., because family is one of the central institutions that keeps culture alive and thriving. The mobility that Greenblatt points out as a result of culture is evident through Puerto Rican teens’ connection to their cultural roots as it is different from that of their parents and older generations of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland. In other words, Puerto Rican teens identify with the traditional

sense of Puerto Rican culture as their parents understand it, but also, they identify with a somewhat different notion of that same identity. For example, Puerto Rican teens' use of the English language, their connection to hip-hop music, their sense of a dual-identity, their experiences of prejudice that are different from previous generations, and even their sense of Puerto Rican community all contribute to the formation of a sense of identity of the present generation of Puerto Rican teens.

Puerto Rican migration to the United States is often referred to as a “circular migration.” This is because of the constant movement of people back and forth, between the island and the mainland. Once in the United States, Puerto Ricans try to visit their families on the island as often as possible, and visa versa. 77 % of the teens in the study had been to Puerto Rico at least once. 100% of the teens in the study who had gone to Puerto Rico said that the reason for their visit was to see their family, and 100% of the teens who wanted to go to Puerto Rico, but had not yet been, wanted to go primarily to visit their family. This percentage illustrates the immense familial bond of Puerto Rican families, especially because such travel is outside of the budget of many of the teens' families. Jeffery Fagan notes this unique element of the Puerto Rican experience, saying, “The circular pattern of movement between the island and the mainland over several generations is unique among Puerto Rican immigrants, and has helped to cement extended family ties.”<sup>63</sup> This connection is important because it illustrates the way that Puerto Ricans are still very much connected to, and tied to, their cultural roots and their lives on the island. Some immigrant groups come to the United States and are able to easily assimilate because they know that they will not return back to their homeland, but for Puerto Ricans, this is simply not the case. The close proximity of the island, and its



easy accessibility, contribute to the difficulties of assimilation for Puerto Ricans on the mainland, and perhaps furthers their sense of cultural identity. In addition, their citizenship status makes travel between the mainland and the island particularly easy.

The effect of familial relationships on Puerto Rican teens is enormous. It is clear from the interviews that one of the strongest ways that teens identify with their Puerto Rican roots is through their families. Even those who had not been to Puerto Rico still felt a strong connection, a strong tie, to the island due to their parents and extended family's nostalgia. There are many ways that families try to remain connected to Puerto Rican culture besides physically traveling to the island---food, music, language, and cultural values are also ways that Puerto Rican culture can be maintained on the mainland. For example, 100 % of the Puerto Rican teens interviewed stated that their parental figure prepares traditional Spanish cuisine at home. However, it is not merely Puerto Rican foods that establish their connection with Puerto Rico, but also the whole market atmosphere. Broad Street and Park Street in Hartford are filled with bodegas, Hispanic grocery stores, and other Spanish named stores, thus creating an atmosphere of a commercial zone on the island. Robert Pawlowski states,

Frog Hollow today is the center of the Hartford Puerto Rican community. Park Street is dominated by Hispanic businesses which have thrived with the growth of the neighborhood's Puerto Rican community and its increasing economic strength. Park Street also reaches a much larger market beyond the neighborhood, and beyond the city, making it the most active Hispanic commercial district in New England.<sup>64</sup>

Thus it is not only the actual foods that are reminiscent of Puerto Rico, but also the environment and the general tone of the neighborhood. Stephania, who lives on Broad Street stated, “Of course I feel connected to Puerto Rican culture, just look around my neighborhood.” Another teen who is from an area in West Hartford that is predominantly white stated, “Even though my neighborhood is White.... my mother still shops in Spanish markets in Hartford.” Again, the foods and the market atmosphere that parallel small towns in Puerto Rico is a clear indicator of the way that families are trying to preserve Puerto Rican culture while living on the mainland.

It is important to note that while all of these elements contribute to the making of a “mainland Puerto Rico,” a cultural enclave, it still affects Puerto Rican teens differently than it does their parents and the older generations. Most of the teens in the study were born in the United States, or at least moved here at a very young age. They have never really had a knowledge of the island the way that their parents and grandparents do, yet they are definitely getting a taste of what it is like through their surroundings in Hartford. However, this is certainly not to say that Puerto Rican teens do not identify with Puerto Rican culture and identity; in fact, it is quite the opposite. However, it is important to recognize that a difference does exist between Puerto Rican teens’ association with Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rican culture, and their parents’ connection. Almost all of the teens in the sample felt a strong connection to traditional Puerto Rican culture through their families, but in addition, they also felt a connection to supplementary things that they deemed as part of their culture, yet their parents probably would not have believed to be so. For example, many of the teens in the study felt hip-hop to be part of their Puerto Rican identity. Perhaps present day hip-hop, then, is becoming a part of the current

generation of Puerto Rican teens' notions of culture that is similar to their parent's notion and connection to salsa and merengue. But nonetheless, it is through the families of Puerto Rican teens that they feel a connection to Puerto Rican culture; it is the family unit that promotes traditional Puerto Rican cultural identity.

Parental influence could be seen as a "constraining" aspect of culture in that parents want their children to act within certain codes of behavior; however, the interviews reflected identification with Puerto Rican culture that was personal and free from parental influence. When asked if they ever felt that people pushed them to behave a certain way, or adhere to certain codes of behavior, for example, the promotion of a Puerto Rican identity, the majority of the students said that they never felt Puerto Rican culture to be constraining. In other words, they never felt that they had to promote Puerto Rican culture because their parents wanted them to or because their parents did. Therefore, while the parents of Puerto Rican teens influenced them in that they made Puerto Rican culture present in their lives, and made sure that they at least knew about Puerto Rican culture, the promotion of traditional Puerto Rican culture was never thrust upon them. As Marcelo Suarez-Orozco states,

While immigrant parents encourage their children to cultivate the 'instrumental' aspects of culture in the new setting [tactical use of identity], they are decidedly more ambivalent about their children's exposure to some of the 'expressive' elements of culture in the new land [subjective feelings of common origin and a shared identity with others].<sup>65</sup>

In other words, immigrant parents want their children to assimilate into their schools, learn English, and cultivate an "American" identity insofar as it enables them to be happy

and survive, but do not want their children to actually identify with an “American” identity as their sole and dominant identity. What Puerto Rican teens have done, is meld the two identities together, both American and traditional Puerto Rican, and develop a sense of themselves that incorporates both, and illustrates the mobilizing aspect of culture.

This attitude was clearly expressed through the interviews; Puerto Rican teens identify primarily with their Puerto Rican identity, but simultaneously make attempts to survive and fit in within the U.S. culture, school system and English language. One example of this is the pledge of allegiance. The pledge of allegiance is played at Conard High School every morning, and the students have the option to recite it or not recite it. Most of the Puerto Rican teens interviewed from Conard pointed out that they chose to recite it, and many also put their hand over their heart. This act illustrates a lot about their understanding of themselves as Puerto Rican and American simultaneously. Yes, they all stated they felt to be Puerto Rican first but they also said they felt they were American. Whether their parents want them to be reciting the pledge of allegiance at school, or not, is irrelevant because they made the decision themselves that reciting it was important, and that their association with an American identity is still important. However this is not to undermine the importance of family and the immense impact that they have on Puerto Rican teens’ identity, because they certainly do hold a crucial role in that development. The primary identification of being Puerto Rican comes through one’s relationship with his/her family more than anywhere else. Juan Flores notes that,

What historical dimension there was to this process of identification came, certainly not from public schools, which tend to distort all things Puerto

Rican, Dominican, or Mexican, when they even mention them, but in lively, real, but anecdotal form from their parents, aunts and uncles, cousins and—the lucky ones at least—from their dear grandmothers, sus abuelitas.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, it is through the family that culturally is transmitted the most, therefore the institution of family is fundamental to the shaping of Puerto Rican identity and Puerto Rican teens' understanding of their cultural roots.

The influence of family in the shaping of identity of Puerto Rican teens is evident through whom they perceive to be role models. 85% of the participants in the study said that a family member was a role model; in addition, one interviewee did not have a role model, and one said that he was his own role model. When talking about specific family members as role models, a common theme was that the teen looked up to a family member for what he/she had been through and managed to overcome. For example, Tiffany stated, “my mother is my role model because of her great strength. She had a tough time living in poverty...at one point she and her seven brothers and sisters, her parents, and her aunt and uncle shared a three bedroom apartment together...my mom always smiles and is so positive. I want to be like her because I am always negative since things always go wrong.” Thus Tiffany admires her mother because of how she has risen above a difficult situation, and remained positive as she combated poverty and hardship.

Another teen, Chelsea, says that she looks up to her father for similar reasons. Chelsea states, “My dad is my role model because he had two kids by the time he was eighteen. He has overcome a lot and when he had to drop out of school to get three jobs to provide for his family...he went back when he could afford to.” Thus Chelsea sees her

father as a role model for his hard work and dedication to his family. Yet another teen, Julian, claimed his mother was his role model because she made many sacrifices for him and his family. He also said, “She has taught me so much about Puerto Rican culture and she has sacrificed everything for us [he and his siblings] to live here in Hartford.” It is clear through all of the interviewee’s responses that the institution of family holds significant importance in the shaping of identity for Puerto Rican teens in Hartford. Teens look up to their family members as role models because of their effort to make a better life for themselves, and their families, while trying to survive off the island. The teens’ familial role models can be seen as both constraining and as mobilizing components to their identification with Puerto Rican culture. They can be constraining in that the teens clearly admire their role models and thus feel that they identify with Puerto Rican culture, not because it is what they truly feel, but rather because that is what their role models identify with. In other words, it is constraining because of the possibility of mimicking the perceptions of the role model simply because they admire that person. Or, it can be seen as mobilizing in that their role models have helped them to identify with something that they really and truly feel—a connection to their cultural roots, to Puerto Rican culture.

The identity of Puerto Rican teens is shaped and influenced both by their guardians and the present world that surrounds them, the U.S., and in this case, Hartford. Children have a very different experience than their parents and, because it is easier for them to adapt, they are often forced to take on responsibilities that are ahead of their time. Many times Puerto Rican teens are forced not only to fit into their schools and their peer groups, but also to help their parents adapt to American culture and the American way of

life. Even if parents have been on the mainland for many years, it is often still more difficult for them to assimilate than their children because they are older and therefore already set in their ways and lifestyles. Thus, Puerto Rican teens are undertaking responsibilities of which others their age are not even aware. One teen from Conard High School, Jorge, claims that he has many more responsibilities at his home than many of the other students who are not Hispanic. He states, “Living in West Hartford...many of the students have maids, or housekeepers, who do everything for them. We do not have a maid or anything, and the Puerto Rican house is immaculate...it has to be spotless... and I was taught that at a very young age. Before my sister was old enough, I had to take on all of the responsibilities in the house.” Nicholas, another teen, notes that he is responsible for essentially being a translator, or an intermediary, for his grandmother because she does not speak English. This is a great responsibility for him, as he is responsible to help with every day communication between his grandmother and others who do not speak Spanish. Language becomes an important tool for the promotion of cultural nationalism as many older generations refuse to learn English in the desire to maintain their culture. While Puerto Rican teens negotiate their two identities it is clear that family plays

## Concluding Remarks

As illustrated, the issue of identity for Puerto Rican teens in Hartford is one that is not so easily defined. There are many different factors that come into play when thinking about the role of identity such as family, length of time on the mainland, language, music,

location, community, politics, networks and schools. While all of these elements are important, and help to shape and influence a Puerto Rican identity, there clearly is a common theme, a commonality that all teens in the study agree upon; Puerto Rican identity first, American second. When it comes down to it, when asked flat out what identity they connected with first, 100% of the teens pointed out that they felt to be Puerto Rican American, that is, Puerto Rican first, and American second. In addition, besides stating the obvious, through Puerto Rican teens association with the elements stated above, a Puerto Rican identity was felt. Puerto Rican teens in metropolitan Hartford melded their two identities, Puerto Rican and American, in the formation of a new identity of their present generation. Through traditional Puerto Rican music, Puerto Rican teens felt connected to their cultural roots, and through present day hip-hop they identified with their generation of Puerto Rican teens. Through their families, the Puerto Rican culture thrived and was maintained even through generational change. Family influenced their connection to traditional Puerto Rican culture and in addition, they integrated new aspects of culture that made their identity slightly different from the generations before them. Puerto Rican teens assimilated into mainstream culture while simultaneously keeping their traditional cultural heritage through their dual use of the English and Spanish languages. Through informal networks and a sense of community, which can both mobilize as well as constrain, Puerto Rican teens were inclined to promote their ethnic identity. While responses varied when talking about the experience of prejudice, it is clear that the experience of prejudice did not impede on a connection to Puerto Rican culture, and a Puerto Rican identity.



Who knows what will happen as more and more generations are born on the mainland, and more Puerto Ricans living on the island migrate to the U.S. As time continues on, and as the current generation of high school teens grows older, perhaps they too, like Omayra, will come to identify themselves as “American” first and Puerto Rican second. Or, perhaps, the opposite might occur, and as the Hispanic population continues to grow, Puerto Rican teens might come to identify even more strongly with their cultural and ethnic roots. But for the time being, at least in the greater Hartford area, it seems that Puerto Rican teens have come to protest the melting pot theory of assimilation and, instead, continue to promote their ethnic identity and maintain their cultural roots. This is not to say that they do not integrate and assimilate, because it is clear that that is not the case either, but that they do continue to identify with their Puerto Rican-ness first and foremost.

### Interview Guide

- 1) NAME and what part of Puerto Rico are you from (your family)? Are both of your parents from Puerto Rico? Have you ever been to Puerto Rico? Do you have relatives from Puerto Rico that visit? Who do you live with? Do you have any siblings?
- 2) At home-do you talk in Spanish or English? What about with your friends?
  - a. What TV shows do you watch?
  - b. What is life like at home? What do your parents do?
  - c. Do you live with parents? Relatives?
  - d. What foods do you eat at home?
- 3) Where do you live in Hartford?
- 4) How does it feel to be Puerto Rican at your school?
  - a. Are your friends mostly Latino/Puerto Rican or of another ethnicity?
  - b. what is the relationship between Puerto Ricans and other groups at your school? Are you separate? Integrated?
  - c. Are their outlets for you at school like Latino clubs?
  - d. Are there many Puerto Ricans teachers at your school? What about other Latino teachers?
- 5) What music do you listen to? What radio stations do you listen to?
- 6) Who do you see as a role model?
- 7) What do you want to do when you grow up?
- 8) Do you consider yourself Puerto Rican, Puerto Rican American, American, or something else?
  - a. How, if at all, do you remain connected to Puerto Rican culture?

# END NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels Latino Lives*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xii.
- <sup>2</sup> My use of the term “American” is referring to citizens of the United States who identify with dominant, mainstream, U.S. culture rather than all inhabitants of the Americas.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with Omayra Marrero, given by Rebecca Simonds, New York City, January 2005
- <sup>4</sup> David Abalos, *Latinos in the United State: The Sacred and the Political*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 43.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09/0937000.html>
- <sup>6</sup> James Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 83.
- <sup>7</sup> Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, 39.
- <sup>8</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, (West Sussex, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), 155.
- <sup>9</sup> Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives.*, 45.
- <sup>10</sup> Joseph Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1971), 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Pastora San Juan Cafferty, *Hispanics in the United States*, (New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers, 200), 49.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Sacks, *Suburbanization and the Racial/Ethnic Divide in the Hartford Metropolitan area* (2003), [http://caribou.cc.trincoll.edu/depts\\_hartstud/student%20papers/Sacks.pdf](http://caribou.cc.trincoll.edu/depts_hartstud/student%20papers/Sacks.pdf) .
- <sup>13</sup> Jose Cruz, *Identity and Politics*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Pawlowski, ”La Gente La Casa,” La Casa de Puerto Rico, Inc.
- <sup>15</sup> Pawlowski, *La Gente La Casa.*
- <sup>16</sup> Sacks, *Suburbanization and the Racial/Ethnic Divide in the Hartford Metropolitan area.*
- <sup>17</sup> Ruth Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo*, (Middletown, CT: Connecticut Humanities Council, 1997) 137.
- <sup>18</sup> Elwyn Nicholas Kernstock, *How New Migrants Behave Politically: The Puerto Rican in Hartford*, (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 141.
- <sup>19</sup> Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo.*, 141.

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- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 101.
- <sup>21</sup> Cruz, *Identity and Politics*, 49.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 68.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 98.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 68.
- <sup>25</sup> Cruz, *Identity and Politics*, 122.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 81.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia*, 131.
- <sup>29</sup> Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 156.
- <sup>30</sup> Francesco Cordasco, *The Puerto Rican Experience*, (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 215-230.
- <sup>31</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, 97.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 90.
- <sup>33</sup> Cordasco, *Puerto Rican Experience*, 219.
- <sup>34</sup> Cruz, *Identity and Politics*, 6.
- <sup>35</sup> dictionary.com “identity”
- <sup>36</sup> Maria Perez y Gonzalez, *Puerto Ricans in the United States*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 150.
- <sup>37</sup> Perez y Gonzalez, *Puerto Ricans in the United States.*, 153.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, 24.
- <sup>40</sup> Leslie Espinoza, “Latino/a Identity and Multi-Identity: Community and Culture,” *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy and the law* v 23 (1994).
- <sup>41</sup> Espinoza, *Latino/a Identity and Multi-Identity: Community and Culture*, 22.
- <sup>42</sup> Perez y Gonzalez, *Puerto Ricans in the United States*, 56.

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<sup>43</sup> Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 205-206.

<sup>44</sup> Lloyd Rogler, "Intergenerational Change in Ethnic Identity of the Puerto Rican Family," *The International Migration Review* 14, no. 2 (1980).

<sup>45</sup> Perez y Gonzalez, *Puerto Rican in the United States*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Mariela Paez, *Latinos Remaking America*, (CA: University of California Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>49</sup> Glasser, *Aqui Me Quedo*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xix.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>52</sup> Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*, 197.

<sup>53</sup> Suarez-Orozco, *Latinos Remaking America*, 274.

<sup>54</sup> Austin Sarat, "The Micropolitics of Identity/Difference: Recognition and accommodation in every day Life." *Daedalus: American Academy of Arts and Sciences* v 129 i 4 (2000)

<sup>55</sup> Felix Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 49.

<sup>56</sup> Espinoza, *Latino/a Identity and Multi-Identity: Community and Culture*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> Abalos, *Latinos in the United States*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the island and in the United States*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Suarez-Orozco, *Latinos Remaking America*, 289.

<sup>60</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09/0937000.html>

<sup>61</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, 22.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 227.

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<sup>63</sup> Ira Sommers and Jeffrey Fagan. "Sociocultural Influences on the Explanation of Delinquency for Puerto Rican Youths." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*. Vol. 15, Number 1. (1993): 39.

<sup>64</sup> Powlowski, *La Gente La Casa*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, "Everything you ever wanted to know about Assimilation but were Afraid to Ask." *Expanded Academic; Daedalus*: V. 129 (2000): 1

<sup>66</sup> Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, 2.