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CMF

English 110: College Composition 1
Reading & Writing Race and Identity
Professor Baz Dreisinger
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The Puerto Rican "Gringo"

When I was younger, during the latter part of the 1960's and early 1970's, my family would throw enormous parties. Imagine a three bedroom apartment in public housing where the place is so small that everyone must walk counter clockwise in order to avoid congestion. Living there were my six siblings, mother and father, two aunts, Dina and Miriam, my uncle Saul and his girlfriend Yoli, who later became my aunt Yoli, adding two cousins, Benji and Joel, to the mix. In total, fourteen people dwelled in this small abode, adding up to a party in its own right. It was not your most convenient living arrangement, but it was common among most Puerto Rican families, who during the 1950's and well into the 1970's came from the island and were forced to live with other relatives due to economic hardships.

Nevertheless, we were happy. Everybody brought food potato salad, rice with pigeon peas, roast pork, fried pork chops, and my all-time favorite, sweet fried plantains. Others would bring liquor, and the musical responsibility was usually designated to whatever musicians and instruments there were in the house. Those parties would go on for days the only indication that the party was over was when somebody would yell over the cacophony of the horde, "La Policia esta aqui" (The cops are here).

I loved gathering with family and friends. The parties influenced me a great deal, because it was during those parties that I learned about my culture and heritage. The elders would tell their stories about the old days "en la Isla," and about how they grew "Cana" (sugar cane) and

tobacco in order to earn a living. My elders spoke with reverence of the culture handed down to them by their parents and grandparents and I was grateful to hear it from them.

We learned of people such as El Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos (A scholar and founder of the political and revolutionary Independent's party), Luis Munoz Marin (the first elected governor of Puerto Rico), and the poet Lola Rodríguez de Tío. Many others gave us a sense of pride for being of a people that had persevered through numerous adversities. There was a great sense of pride in their being Puerto Rican, and that sense carried over to me. However, that pride would come into question in the summer of 1978, when my family planned a visit to the island for the first time in eleven years.

I was ecstatic. I was finally going to visit the place that gave birth to both my parents, and my maternal and paternal grandparents. My roots were there and I was on my way to see and experience them. The ride from the airport to our family's home was about an hour and a half long, which seemed like a thousand miles. The anxiety gradually building inside of me had me ready to jump from the car and run alongside it. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the scenery.

When I arrived, I was in awe of the Kaleidoscope of colors surrounding me. Everything was so bright, trees that seemed to go endlessly up into the sky and shrubs that lined the only highway that existed on the entire island and an aquamarine sea that made me squint every time I looked at it.

Finally, we arrived at my ancestral home in the village of Maravilla, in the province town of Rio Piedras, or "Rock River." It means, "wonder" and it is where my family comes from. There were hugs and kisses all around, too many for a twelve year old such as myself, and the atmosphere was so upbeat that it caused a lot of tears and laughter; it was the best day of my life. There were so many people, Aunts and Uncles, Great Aunts and Great Uncles and first, second and third cousins. Not only was I impressed, but I was even prouder to be Puerto Rican. Seeing

my entire family gathered for the first time, expressing so much love and adoration for each other, was enough to make anyone feel euphoric.

At one point four boys, teenagers about my age, approached, curiously sizing me up.

“Quien tu eres?” The taller one asked. “Who are you?”

“I’m Richie, your cousin,” I responded, in English.

“Este es un gringo,” he mentioned to the others. At which point they immediately started to laugh. In my confusion, I too started to laugh, though I was not sure what a gringo was. Without another word they walked away laughing. Confusion, anger, and fear enveloped me. It was then that I realized that I was the butt of the joke.

I sought counsel from my uncle Saul, who was always my source of important information. “Tio, what’s a gringo?”

He smiled then responded, “A white American.”

“White American?” I thought to myself with anguish in my heart. “I’m no gringo. I’m Puerto Rican!” “My mom and dad are Puerto Rican and so are their moms and dads; therefore, that makes me Puerto Rican.” I went to state my claim.

As I approached, I hear “Bucktooth” say to the others, “Here comes el gringo.” However, I’m ready.

“Yo no soy gringo!” I belted out in my best Spanish. That only made them laugh harder. I guess that my New York accent combined with the fact that I did not speak Spanish made me sound even funnier. Yet I was undeterred.

“Yo soy Puerto Rican!” I exclaimed in triumph.

“Ha,” snorted the little one, “you can’t be Puerto Rican, you weren’t born here, and you do not look like us,” he retorted in their native language.

Instantly I realized not only our contrasting complexions, but also the language barrier. At that point, I felt defeated. Could it be that I was a gringo? After all, I did not speak Spanish all

that well, but I did speak good English. I was also light-skinned, almost pale in comparison to the island's natives, and I did love the Yankees, Nathan's hot dogs, and hot apple pies. Then again, I also loved Puerto Rico's rich history, food, and culture. It was the birthplace of my parents.

Some people, such as my cousins, might argue that one's nationality is determined by where that person is born. For me, one's nationality is characterized by where his/her heart lies. I have mentioned that my parents were born in Puerto Rico. Therefore, through genetic inheritance I can easily surmise that I too am Puerto Rican. More than that, however, is the fact that I am not solely Puerto Rican because I have inherited the culture from my parents, but because I have had the privilege of personally experiencing and enjoying two distinct cultures on my own terms; [the island of Puerto Rico and its rich culture, and the beautiful and vast country of my United States.] Shortly after my trip with my family, I no longer cared about what my "Puerto Rican" cousins thought of me. Because who is to say that your heart cannot dwell in two places? In my heart, I am Puerto Rican and always will be. However, I am also a "gringo" and proud of that too.