

Puerto Ricans find 'Dream' elusive

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BY IVONNE M. GARCIA

Judge Sonia Sotomayor's unlikely rise from a fatherless home in a Bronx housing project to the classrooms of Princeton and Yale and, most probably, to the U.S. Supreme Court has been hailed as an American success story.



But her tale doesn't quite fit the traditional story line of "plucky immigrant succeeds in the New World" because Sotomayor, as a Puerto Rican, falls into one of the least defined areas of the U.S. cultural and national landscape. *The New York Times* recently dedicated an entire "After Deadline" blog to advising its reporters and editors on how to handle Sotomayor's ethnicity: "We can note that her parents moved to New York from Puerto Rico. Once again, remember: They were *not* immigrants."

As U.S. citizens by birth, Puerto Ricans are not immigrants, but they surely are a migrant people. The Pew Hispanic Center recently highlighted data showing that there are 4.1 million Puerto Ricans residing in the United States, slightly outnumbering the 3.9 million inhabitants of the island of Puerto Rico. Of those Puerto Ricans living in the U.S., 2.7 million or nearly two-thirds (including Sotomayor) were born stateside. Puerto Ricans are the second-largest Hispanic group in the U.S. (9.1 percent of the U.S. Hispanic population, behind Mexicans, at 64.3 percent), but tend to have more single-parent, women-led households. Most do not speak English at home, and most have lower educational and income levels than other Hispanics and the overall U.S. population.

These statistics make Sotomayor's outstanding accomplishments even more impressive but do little to help us understand how we got to where we are today. A little history is useful.

Puerto Rico was acquired as part of U.S. imperial expansion in 1898, along with Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Hawaii, and has remained an unincorporated territory since, although it obtained limited self-government in 1952. Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917 and have fought in all U.S. wars since then, but island residents do not pay federal taxes, cannot vote for president and don't have proportional representation in Congress.

While we may lack national sovereignty, we Puerto Ricans generally hold tightly to our cultural identity, as anyone who has seen the annual Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City will testify. Even after more than a century of U.S. influence, most Puerto Ricans on the island are not fluent English speakers. We are perhaps the last un-hyphenated minority group, almost never Puerto Rican-Americans, like Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Italian-Americans and so on.

Why have Puerto Ricans lagged even other Hispanics when we have not faced the barrier of lacking citizenship and have been migrating to the states for a century? Part of the answer may lie in that lack of a hyphen. The same Supreme Court that Sotomayor will soon join ruled in 1901 that Puerto Rico is "appurtenant to" the U.S., but not a part of it. Many Puerto Ricans feel the same, perceiving the U.S. as a place to seek a better life, but not necessarily a place where they have been welcomed to make their home. Puerto Ricans born in the states, like Sotomayor, are particularly betwixt and between: Puerto Rican in identity, U.S. in citizenship, with their own national culture but no sovereign nation to return to.

The Sotomayor nomination also has revealed something of the current state of ethnic relations. Consider some of her attributes that were disparaged, mostly by white men: her emphasis on her Puerto Rican ethnicity; her reported taste for Puerto Rican food; her refusal to anglicize the pronunciation of her Spanish surname, which some find difficult and mildly threatening; and, of course most famously now, her statements that a "wise Latina woman" might know more about discrimination than "a white male." The fact that Sotomayor's ethnicity has been negatively scrutinized more openly than President Obama's race was during the 2008 election suggests that attacks across the Anglo-Latino lines remain more socially acceptable than similar statements across the traditional binary of white and black.

Puerto Ricans, like other Latinos, are hard-working and stress the importance of education, just as Sotomayor and her mother did. That Sotomayor has achieved her individual version of the American Dream is testimony to her intellect and hard work. That the same has not happened for most of the eight million Puerto Ricans, who have been part of this country since 1898, suggests that the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship, now a tattered remnant of 19th century imperialism, has not been the most fertile ground for nurturing such dreams.

Ivonne M. Garcia is an assistant professor of English at Kenyon College.

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