

Preface: Becoming the “Born-Again Boricua” in the Middle of Indiana

*Rise! Revolt! Resist!  
Do as the bull in the face of  
adversity:  
charge  
with confident power.*

José de Diego,  
“To the Persecuted”

*Your best defense against the  
ignorance of bigots and haters is  
pride in your own heritage. That’s  
why you must learn your own  
history. Do it now. Don’t wait until  
you are in College. You don’t need  
teachers. Go to the library. Ask your  
parents and relatives and friends.*

José Torres,  
“A Letter to a Child Like Me”

I did not grow up in a Puerto Rican or Latino community. Born in the small, rural town of Pacific in Washington State, I was brought into this world by my mother (a light-skinned Puerto Rican, born on the Island) and my father (a white, U.S. citizen of German and English descent). They met when he was stationed in Puerto Rico with the Air Force; and when I was born ten years later, Puerto Rico was literally and figuratively far away.

Eventually raised in what was basically an all-white neighborhood in Puyallup, Washington, I was brought up (along with my brother) to be a “good American boy” ... which meant that I was raised to be as much like the white kids as possible. There were a couple of problems with this plan. First, I wasn’t exactly white. Kids would, in bouts of racist banter, confuse me for Japanese, Arab, and more—but rarely Puerto Rican because, where I grew up, there were no Puerto Ricans. There were few Latinos of any kind, for that matter.

The second problem: something was wrong with my speech. I couldn't pronounce "Y" or "U" or "CH" sounds (among others) the "right way." Called a "pathology," I was "treated" for my "ailment." But it wasn't a pathology, a sickness, or anything of the sort. I had my mother's Puerto Rican accent, which is actually kind of funny when you consider that part of being raised to be a "good American boy" meant that my mother wouldn't teach me Spanish outside of the "show-and-tell" setting when she would visit the classroom.

The Americanization process was further heightened during my early school period when my mother was in her second marriage—this time to a racist and abusive alcoholic. I remember repeating to an uncle—unaware of my own African heritage—one of the racist jokes my stepfather had told me. But how was I to know any better? There were two or three African American students in my grade school; perhaps four Asian students; and there were no Latinos, let alone Puerto Ricans. I didn't meet another Puerto Rican until the ninth grade. All of my teachers in grade school, junior high, and high school were white. My first teacher who wasn't white was an African American professor of astronomy, who I had my junior year of college.

As a graduate student, I eventually took some steps to begin to see my heritage. When I finally met a Puerto Rican professor, I decided it was the moment to start learning about myself. Sneaking peaks at books on my own time, I didn't really dive head first into scholarship and literature on Puerto

Rico until what was supposed to be my last semester of coursework. Once I did, however, I knew I could never turn back.

Since that moment several years ago, I have been transformed. For a lot of people I know, the dissertation is a hoop; it is just one more thing to do to get the degree. Those acquaintances and friends have certainly been interested in their topics; but many of them have also been sick of their topics by the time they defended. For me, though, the dissertation has been a life-altering experience in a good way. As I complete the process, I am just as, if not more interested in my topic as the day I began. More importantly, though, I am a different person, changed forever by the experiences I have shared with professors, friends, colleagues, and all of the Young Lords and others I have met.

So why tell you, the reader, any of this? There are a few reasons. First, I think it is important for you to know where I have come from to get to this point. Second, I think it is also important to understand the personal stakes I have in this project. Researching and writing this dissertation has changed me in ways I sometimes have a hard time even articulating. Finally, I tell this story in the hopes that someone like me, another burgeoning Puerto Rican scholar, will read this and realize s/he is not alone; realize that in a culture supposedly marked by principles of equality and respect for difference, that there are many others who share a similar story of struggle,

growth, and progress; realize that s/he can become, like me, a “born-again Boricua” ... even in the heart of Indiana.