An Island Among Islanders: The Unique Identity of Holyoke's Puerto Rican Community

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Introduction

Over the past century, Puerto Ricans have established one of the most prominent Latin American diasporas in the United States. Almost six million people of Puerto Rican descent live "stateside," comprising the second-largest Hispanic group and the largest Caribbean group in the country (U.S Census, 2019). Puerto Rican communities exist across the entire U.S., most prominently in New York City, which has become a center of Puerto Rican culture. New York does not have the largest proportion of Puerto Ricans, though; neither do Philadelphia, Miami, or Chicago. That distinction goes to Holyoke, Massachusetts, a small industrial city just north of Springfield. Almost half of Holyoke's residents are Puerto Rican, a percentage rivaling the South Bronx (ICIS, 2010). This is a rare distinction: the vast majority of other cities in the U.S. with substantial Puerto Rican populations (>25%) are the suburbs of large metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, more than one eighth of the Springfield-Holyoke area's 630,000 people are Puerto Rican (U.S. Census, 2010).

Perhaps even more strangely, this demographic quirk has come into full force only since the 1950s. In its earliest days, Holyoke was a quaint, sparsely-inhabited peripheral community of Springfield. The town's fate was changed forever by two infrastructural developments, the Holyoke Canal System (1849) and the Holyoke Dam (1900), which made mills, especially paper mills, particularly productive. Holyoke quickly became a global locus of the paper trade, producing 320 tons of paper daily at its peak in the 1880s. This, in turn, led to staggering population growth around the turn of the twentieth century (Smithsonian, 1885). It is worth noting that Holyoke has always been a city of immigrants; in fact, it had the 3rd-highest foreign born population in the entire country in 1890, an incredible distinction for a community of its size (Census Office, 1890). It was this prosperity, as well as the post-World War II farming

programs put forth by the U.S. Department of Labor, that attracted several waves of Puerto Rican migration in the 1950s and 1980s. Since this occurred alongside a sustained period of white flight, by the 2010s, Puerto Ricans were the largest single demographic in Holyoke (U.S Census, 2013).

Throughout this demographic shift, Holyoke's Puerto Rican residents faced persistent discrimination from the city's white majority, which has left them socially and economically marginalized to this day. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the city's public school system was deeply segregated, and Puerto Ricans were vastly underrepresented in Holyoke's city government (Moriarty, 1981; Gram, 1981). They also disproportionately bore the brunt of high infant mortality rates and the AIDS epidemic (Borges-Méndez, 1994). The subsequent decades have seen growing representation of Puerto Ricans in culture and local politics, but even then, it was only in 2021 that Holyoke elected its first Puerto Rican mayor, Joshua A. Garcia, and economic disparities still abound (Christensen, 2021).

With this in mind, how does the identity of Puerto Ricans in Holyoke and Greater Springfield compare to those in other diaspora communities across the United States, especially New York? In an attempt to answer this question, I bought a bus ticket from Boston to Springfield to explore the Holyoke area and observe the presence of Puerto Rican identity in day-to-day life. After walking through downtown Holyoke and its environs, I stopped at the Puerto Rican/Afro-Caribbean Cultural Center in South Holyoke to gain further insight into the personal histories of the city and glean connections between it and the rest of the Puerto Rican diaspora. I kept in mind my position as an outsider in these observations; I imagined that being a white, non-Puerto Rican, non-Holyoker might affect my interactions with people in one way or another, so I tried to limit my observations to the circumstantial and environmental. I came to

find that, unlike in other major urban Puerto Rican diasporas, the identity of Holyokers is detached from their surroundings and almost entirely centered around Puerto Rico itself, a sentiment which stems from decades of socioeconomic isolation and segregation from the rest of Western Massachusetts.

Going to Holyoke

The very basics of the above information - chiefly, that Holyoke was the most Puerto Rican city in the mainland U.S. - was about all I knew about the city before I started this project. To that end, I didn't go into it with many expectations. I realized a few days before I was set to go that I had "bit off more than I could chew," as most of my other classmates had chosen topics that were centered around Boston and its environs, i.e. that wouldn't require a four-hour-long bus ride during a random weekday; nevertheless, I knew it would make a good anecdote, and I loved transit, so I went in head-first. I talked to a few people about the project beforehand, many of whom were Massachusetts residents themselves, who either derided me for picking a location so far away or cautioned me to "stay safe," as Holyoke was, supposedly, a "bad neighborhood." I recognized this rhetoric; it is often sweepingly and reductively applied to Black and Latino neighborhoods in my own hometown of Chicago, so I knew to at the very least take it with a grain of salt. (More on the implications of this later.)

My preliminary research suggested that Holyoke was a diverse, artistic, and culturally distinct place from the rest of Western Massachusetts, which intrigued me greatly. As futile as this may have been, I hoped to get a sense of the "real" Holyoke, or at least what the city meant to its residents beyond a single demographic statistic of Puerto Rican ethnicity. I have a lot of love for cities, having grown up in the middle of one myself, so I went into my research with the goal of "living in" Holyoke as well as I could for a day. If I've learned anything from Chicago, I

know you can learn infinitely more about a place by going there and taking it in compared to whatever a Wikipedia page and a couple people from elsewhere in the state might tell you. People from downstate Illinois, for example, often demonize Chicago for its tenuous, abstract association with “crime,” but this is several degrees removed from reality. I came to Holyoke with that in mind.

My trip began on Monday, October 24th, 2022, with an intercity bus to Springfield’s Union Station. The bus ride was comfortable, though traffic and poor weather led to us arriving about an hour later than scheduled. I had a half-hour or so before the next local bus to Holyoke, so I figured I would look around downtown Springfield for any initial hints of Puerto Rican identity. Surely enough, the first building I saw was a clothing store, marketed towards tourists, that was filled entirely with Puerto Rico-themed merchandise. As I peeked into the store to excitedly take photos, an old couple passed me on the sidewalk, both of whom wore hats decorated with the Puerto Rican flag. The quiet air was punctuated only by the occasional reggaetón song playing out of a passing car. Cafés were adorned with Caribbean flags and advertised a myriad of Puerto Rican snacks. I knew I was in the right place.

This became even clearer on the bus ride to Holyoke. I noticed that about half of the conversations I overheard were in Spanish; additionally, all of the signage on the bus was in both English and Spanish, with both languages given equal visual weight. The digital ads that cycled behind the drivers’ seat foreshadowed a socioeconomic dynamic that I eventually found was central to Holyoke’s identity. Ads for schools and attorneys were entirely in English, while ads for job openings (particularly in food services), as well as churches, were entirely in Spanish. The prevalence of the latter cannot be understated; every other street around Chicopee, on the

way to Holyoke, had a Spanish-language sign advertising a vividly-named church or a spiritual service, like palm reading or meditation.

The existing literature on this topic substantiates this observation. Holyoke's Puerto Rican community has been economically segregated and disadvantaged since its inception. Whereas more wealthy Puerto Ricans have tended to move to the middle-class suburbs of New York City or South Florida, Holyoke's community has generally remained poor since its inception. In fact, Holyoke is the poorest city in Massachusetts, and South Holyoke and the Flats - two neighborhoods that are disproportionately Puerto Rican even in comparison to the rest of the city - are some of the poorest cities in all of Massachusetts (Borges-Mendez, 2011). The religious dimension of this segregation was something I found particularly interesting. Reflective of the city's ethnic composition, 60.6% of Holyoke's population is Christian, and 49.1% are Catholic (Sperling's Best Places, n.d.). I would come to find throughout my stay that Catholicism and Puerto Rican identity were deeply intertwined within the city, and that Catholic institutions were sources of community and pride in one's background for many Holyokers.

Puerto Rican Diasporic Identity and Community

Though it may be less renowned as a center of Puerto Rican culture than New York or Miami, when I got off the bus at Holyoke, the city's cultural identity was unmistakable. Every street was lined with murals featuring the Puerto Rican flag and with a focus on indigenous identity. The city's lampposts bore banners that commemorated "Holyoke's Hidden Legends," featuring a Holyoke resident alongside - what else? - a Puerto Rican flag. At City Hall, that flag flew next to that of the United States, flanking the entrance on two separate flagpoles. Holyoke's Puerto Rican identity runs deep enough that the symbols of Puerto Rico have been co-opted as symbols of the city itself.

That said, there was also a clear sense of solidarity in Holyoke's Puerto Rican community between both other Latin Americans as well as other Puerto Rican diasporas in the U.S. The names of many restaurants and food markets referenced a pan-Caribbean or pan-Latin-American identity: "Domirrican Market" (a portmanteau of "Dominican" and "Puerto Rican"), "Centro-American Market" (decorated with Puerto Rican, Jamaican, and Guatemalan flags, among others), etc. One clothing store in Holyoke's central business district, called "Source of New York," advertised "South Bronx Fashions," displaying a diasporic connection across the Eastern Seaboard with New York City. Puerto Ricans in Holyoke have by and large embraced a connection to a broader Latin American and Puerto Rican diasporic culture, while maintaining a unique level of attachment to the island itself.

I was curious about the linguistic dimension of this attachment, as that field of study is a personal passion of mine and my primary connection to the broader field of sociology. I spent my childhood in Oak Park, Illinois, immediately adjacent to the West Side of Chicago and the townships of Cicero and Forest Park, all areas with many Spanish speakers; as such, I went to a Spanish-medium primary school, and grew up speaking the language frequently. I am also something of a sociolinguist - an amateur one, at least. My teenage years were spent poring over phonological charts, syntax trees, and *Ethnologue* entries. For both of these reasons, I went into Holyoke paying special attention to the place and character of Spanish in the community. I came to find that the Spanish spoken by Holyokers - down to the finest details, even the pronunciation of one particular sound - was one of their most substantial signifiers of Puerto Rican identity.

The intricacies of this idea are rigorously documented by Alba Arias Alvarez in her 2018 dissertation, "Rhotic variation in the Spanish spoken by Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and Western Massachusetts." On a phonetic level, she explains, the alveolar trill /r/ is realized by

speakers of Holyoker Puerto Rican Spanish with a similar character and level of variation to the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico, though with some unique characteristics. Alvarez follows that the emphasis of a “Puerto Rican” pronunciation of certain phonemes, and more broadly the use of Spanish in general, is used as a method of connecting with one’s cultural heritage (Alvarez, 2018). I noticed this myself while I was in Holyoke: Puerto Rican Spanish was widely spoken and many signs and murals (often unilingually in Spanish) used Puerto Rican-specific vocabulary (e.g. *Boricua*). Spanish was not only the common-ground medium of communication in Holyoke but also, from what I could glean, a source of pride, and a cornerstone of Puerto Rican identity.

There is also a racial dynamic to this distinction. Around 2 p.m., all the walking was making me hungry, so I walked into a corner store to order some *empanadillas* for lunch and perhaps catch a glimpse of the Holyoke dining experience. The restaurant I entered had somewhat of a “hybrid deli” set-up, unlike anything I had seen in Chicago or in fact in the rest of Massachusetts. Food was cooked and served at a counter in the front of the store, with a table or two for patrons, while the rest of the space resembled a convenience store, a bit like a typical New York bodega. I quietly waited in line next to an old woman, who was having a rather hostile conversation with the restaurant’s manager (behind the counter) in Spanish. She eventually left, though, and as I walked up, the restaurant’s manager asked me what I would like in English. Since she had some difficulty with English and in an effort to observe “within” the community more seamlessly, I went ahead and ordered in Spanish as well, and our conversation continued from there. I could only assume that this was partly because, unlike everyone else at the restaurant, I was white.

This sociolinguistic anecdote is underscored by a dynamic of race and class that I was fundamentally unaware of until I returned from Holyoke. Towards the end of the day I made my trip, I was talking with my roommate from Amherst, only a few miles north of Holyoke. He told me that Holyoke is often disparaged in the rest of majority-white western Massachusetts as a "bad neighborhood," a perception that, in his words, arose mostly because it is more or less the only place in the area where people of color live. I hadn't realized how socially and economically segregated western Massachusetts was until this point, but I was immediately able to connect what my roommate had said with my observations in and around Holyoke. I found that the Springfield area was one of rigid disparities; the surroundings of my bus trip to Holyoke rapidly oscillated between working-class neighborhoods of smaller, occupied houses and empty lots and wealthy neighborhoods of wide lawns, meticulously paved streets and ample foliage.

The Cultural Center

My primary concrete goal in visiting Holyoke was to see the Puerto Rican/Afro-Caribbean Cultural Center, a museum operated by community non-profit organization Nueva Esperanza Inc. which also happens to employ the city's current mayor. I intentionally came to Holyoke on a Monday, in fact, because I knew the Center was closed on weekends, and I was hoping to interview some of the people who worked there. I had called them a number of times prior to my visit, to no avail - I figured they were probably so busy that they didn't have the time to answer. Nevertheless, considering how substantial Holyoke's Puerto Rican community was, I was sure I could at least find *someone* there to ask a question or two about the city's culture. I imagined it would be rather expansive, perhaps with some different exhibits and community resources here and there.

After a few hours of walking around the rest of the city, I eventually found myself at the Center’s front door in South Holyoke, a neighborhood of murals on the side of every building and Puerto Rican flags on every available façade. To my surprise, the door was locked. I peeked into the window and eventually caught the attention of a woman working at a laptop who generously let me in. To my further surprise, she told me she was not at all affiliated with the Center, but was in fact part of a completely unrelated company who was sharing the workspace for the time being. She was the only other person there, which I chalked up to it being 3 in the afternoon on a rainy Monday. Nevertheless, I had expected the place to be much larger than it was, as the Puerto Rican cultural center for a clearly proud Puerto Rican community; the whole shebang was only about the size of a bedroom. Its contents clued me in as to why this was.

For the time being, the Center housed a portable exhibit called “Mi Abuela,” which showcased poetry and biographies from a number of Holyokers about their grandmothers. All of them had been born in Puerto Rico. The writings were deeply personal, interspersing family histories of life and death with sweet anecdotes about Puerto Rican food (*quenepas*, *viandas*, *bacalao*…) and culture. One that struck me in particular was a poem written by a teenage girl as an ode to her grandmother: “I was three and you… you were gone / I was just in your arms to calm / my brother's mom told them you were far… / 16 now living in a messed up town / Struggling weekly feels like all I do is frown.” This was a rather melancholy view of Holyoke. Crucially, the piece seemed to reflect a sense of distance from Puerto Rico and resentment about this and towards Holyoke, the “messed up town,” in general.

The poem made me rethink my observations in the rest of the city. I realized that of all of the murals, posters, and storefronts I had seen, many celebrated Puerto Rico and its history, but none celebrated Holyoke in particular. The closest thing I found to any “Holyoke pride” was a

novelty Puerto Rican license plate in that same Center with "HOLYOKE" written on it. Attached to the "Mi Abuela" exhibit was a smaller display of pictures of Holyoke that reminded its inhabitants of Puerto Rico in some way. Amtrak train tracks dug up daily commutes from Aguadilla to Mayaguez; Massachusetts triple-deckers evoked stoop-laden streets back home. These descriptions were both moving and informative. In general, my observations led me to conclude that the identities of Puerto Rican Holyokers were far more tied to Puerto Rico than to Holyoke. This is in marked contrast to other Puerto Rican diasporic communities, where locational identities are much more synergistic. My Puerto Rican friends from New York and Miami all maintain extensive pride for both their respective cities and the island to which they are ancestrally tied. In New York in particular, Puerto Rican children raised in the city have been evaluated by their peers as occupying a fundamentally unique "Nuyorican" cultural space, visibly distinct from that of Puerto Rico itself; this is far from the case in Holyoke (Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1999).

The complexity of this diasporic relationship is reflective of that between the United States and Latin America as a whole. Since its inception, the United States has distanced itself from the rest of the American continent in its identity and objectives, yet also asserted its right to maintain cultural, political, and military dominance over its neighbors with clauses such as the Monroe Doctrine and its Roosevelt Corollary. This hierarchy was heightened by the U.S.'s imperialist land-grabbing after the Spanish-American War, which put Puerto Rico under U.S. control in an uncomfortable political limbo that persists into today (Prevost & Vanden, 2010, p. 317). Few would question Puerto Rico's Latin American-ness now, but the island's judicial status as a territory of the U.S., rather than an independent country, puts it in a unique position.

This dynamic is reflected at a microcosmic scale in Holyoke and its surroundings. Holyoke's identity is tied far more to Latin America than to Massachusetts, or New England, or to the United States. This is driven by, indeed, a substantial population of people who have moved directly from Puerto Rico in pursuit of economic opportunities and community with other diasporic Puerto Ricans, but also more broadly a history of socioeconomic segregation and ostracization that have isolated the largely working-class, non-white community of the Pioneer Valley from its largely wealthy, white neighbors. It is no wonder, then, that Holyoke's residents seek to emphasize their connection to Puerto Rico; Western Massachusetts has been far from welcoming.

Sociological Imagination

What, then, does Holyoke tell us about the Puerto Rican diaspora, or about the relationship between Latin America and the United States in general? I found myself continuously impressed throughout my trip that this relatively small mill town had such an expansive history, even outside of its Puerto Rican community. After all, I was able to traverse almost the entirety of Downtown and South Holyoke in less than four hours. Most of what really implanted in my brain was not the Puerto Rican flags at City Hall, or the particular subjects of the city's murals, but just seeing people go about their day: the bilingual information sheets in the tax commissioners' office; the argument between the restaurant patron and its manager in Spanish, and her sudden shift to English upon meeting me; the group of kids riding bikes at Veterans' Memorial Park as cars playing Bad Bunny whizzed by. Holyoke had as much of a story to tell in its quotidian details as in its public image.

In conducting my observations of the city, I kept in mind the theory of sociological imagination, as defined and described at length by C. Wright Mills. The gist of Mills' framework

- that personal experiences are fundamental to the understanding of a broader social reality - seemed to encapsulate the situation between Holyoke, Puerto Rico, and the United States perfectly. Holyoke is just a small town, after all, but the psychological distance that its Puerto Rican residents feel from their immediate surroundings, and the unique ways in which they have maintained a connection to Puerto Rico, are illustrative of a broader phenomenon of ostracization: both of lower-income people of color in Western Massachusetts and of Puerto Rico, as a territory, from the continental United States.

In the first chapter of his aptly-titled *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills outlines three questions that he recommends should guide a well-rounded social study. First: “What is the structure of this society as a whole?” Second: “Where does this society stand in human history [and] what are the mechanics by which it is changing?” Third: “What varieties of [people] now prevail in this society and in this period… and what varieties are coming to prevail?” (Mills, 1959, pp. 4-5). As a culmination of my own sociological research, I will attempt to answer these questions in the context of Holyoke and connect them to the broader context of relations between Latin America and the United States.

In terms of structure, Holyoke and its environs are a place of stark and immediate contrasts. Downtown was quiet, but generally kempt; besides the Puerto Rican flags, it was reminiscent of many other mid-sized New England cities, with charming, antique façades and ample foliage. A 10-minute walk down Appleton Street into South Holyoke tells a completely different story. This was where Holyoke had been hit hardest by deindustrialization: nearly every other block was completely empty, and of the structures that still stood in the neighborhood’s Main Street, many of them were blown-out warehouses from Holyoke’s mill-town days. South Holyoke and the adjacent Flats are, again, disproportionately poor and Puerto Rican. Holyoke’s

hierarchy of race and class is a rigid one. The town remains deeply segregated, and its residents of color are by and large the “have-nots” in Holyoke’s social order.

Then, where does Holyoke stand in human history, and how is it changing? South Holyoke has suffered a lot, yes. But it also has the most murals of anywhere in the city. Neighbors still chatted over empanadas in those empty lots. Holyoke’s Puerto Rican residents have gained more political representation in the past decade than ever before. Despite the systematic oppression that they have faced, they continue to forge their own community and identity in the foothills of the Pioneer Valley. Holyoke is at once both a case study of deindustrialization, white flight, and segregation and a study of a community’s success in coming together against it. Community is the crucial word here, for that is the mechanic that has led the city’s Puerto Rican diaspora to thrive.

Again, Holyoke has always been a city of immigrants. Even within its Puerto Rican community, who only recently make up a plurality of the city’s inhabitants, it is incredibly diverse. One only needs to peruse Downtown and admire “Holyoke’s Hidden Legends” to see how many different stories are at the foundation of this city: writers, teachers, tailors, mechanics, restaurateurs, Black, white, Indigenous, Asian, young, old, and everything in between. All kinds of people “prevail” in Holyoke’s society. Though people of color, predominantly Puerto Ricans, have long been institutionally repressed by Holyoke’s city government and white surroundings, they are at the forefront of Holyoke’s modern identity, and its future. Working-class Puerto Ricans of all backgrounds are, indeed, the city’s “hidden legends,” and they have brought their community to where it is today: increasingly equitable, always evolving, and certainly always thinking of the Island in the back of its mind.

Conclusion

The primary distinction between Holyoke and other Puerto Rican communities is Holyokers' particular emphasis on their ties to Puerto Rico and distance from their immediate surroundings. This is amplified by a socioeconomic segregation between Holyokers of Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican descent that is substantially more pronounced than in other major cities such as New York. The relationship between Holyoke and Puerto Rico offers a miniature glimpse into the story of the Puerto Rican diaspora as a whole in a unique setting. It showcases the uneven dynamic between the U.S. and Latin America and how Puerto Ricans have navigated being uncomfortably caught in the crosshairs. Furthermore, it tells a story of community building in difficult conditions and within an environment of social and economic ostracization.

I had assumed going into Holyoke that it would be like any other Massachusetts mill town, albeit maybe with more Puerto Rican flags than usual. To some extent, this was true. However, I did not expect to find a place so clearly at the crossroads of U.S.-Latin American relations, nor a town with less than 50,000 people which has nevertheless become a center of Puerto Rican culture with its own unique sociolinguistic identity. I left Holyoke with a much more complex understanding of New England that transcended the typical picture of milquetoast American patriotism and college towns. Broader, too, was my understanding of the Puerto Rican diaspora of the mainland U.S., which I had long associated with the massive urban environments of New York City and South Florida.

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