

UNEQUAL SISTERS

*A Multicultural Reader
In U.S. Women's History*

Edited by Ellen Carol DuBois
and Vicki L. Ruiz

1999

Routledge

New York and London

In Search of Unconventional Women: Histories of Puerto Rican Women in Religious Vocations Before Mid-Century

Virginia Sánchez Korrol

Oral history is frequently used to document the lives of people deemed typical or representative of their group or community. The three women whose stories form the core of this essay, however, can help us understand a broader history precisely because they are unconventional: at a historical juncture in the development of Puerto Rican *barrios*, when women's roles were circumscribed by social custom and occupation, they chose to break new ground. Each followed a personal calling for spiritual and humanitarian reasons, and came to play an important pastoral and religious role. Though unknown outside of their respective religious communities, their important role in the history of the Puerto Rican community is just beginning to be understood.

The life histories of these unconventional women, as recorded through oral history, illuminate the professional and to a lesser extent, the personal life experiences of each individual, while also documenting their contributions at specific historical points in Puerto Rican community development. In this sense, the oral histories do more than add to our growing knowledge of individual Puerto Rican lives: they are especially valuable in enabling historians to begin to construct an inter-generational view of the Puerto Rican experience.¹

Two of the women, Sister Carmelita and Reverend Leoncia Rosado, began their careers in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively. A vulnerable period in the development of the young community, it was also a time when women were expected to follow traditional roles and remain in the home as wives and mothers. The third woman, the Reverend Aimee García Cortese, is representative of the transitional second generation of Puerto Ricans, born in the U.S.A., which internalized many of the old customs while accommodating to a mainland reality.

The period between 1917 and 1950 was highly significant for Puerto Ricans in New York City. Under the leadership and influence of the earliest substantial migration from the island's rural and urban sectors, the community in New York City began to take shape as identifiably Puerto Rican. As early as 1910, over a thousand Puerto Ricans were said to reside in the United States. American citizenship, conferred in 1917, stimulated and facilitated migration, and within a decade all of the forty-eight states reported the presence of Puerto Rican-born individuals. Estimates indicate substantial population gains throughout the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in a total population of some 425,000 by mid-century, 80 percent of whom lived in New York City.²

Women formed an integral part of the migration experience, comprising over half the migrant flow in some decades. A partial tabulation of representative Hispanic districts in

Reprinted with permission from the author and the *Oral History Review*, vol. 16, Fall 1988.

the New York
migrant popula
wives, under th
the most part
York commun
conditioned to
of involvement
However, v
community, cl
factories, laun
parallel the de
as seamstresse
employment b
piecework at h

While the m
than 4 percent
either formally
ment, exercised
upon their arri
above the ordi
form volunteer
had previously
expressed their
women who ch
understand—F

Carmela Za
in a rural atmo
predominantly
her mother in
receive a Cath
articulated the
missionary num
the conventual
be the first of

What impre
day journey al
believes she le
to Mondays; sh
but without the
Promenade at E
aware that she
where she wou
later, she was
Brooklyn, the
choice in the n
Rican commu

that center
we had boy

the New York State Manuscript Census of 1925, provides some insights into the earlier migrant population. Of 3,496 women listed in the census, the majority were young housewives, under thirty-five years of age, who had resided in the city for less than six years. For the most part, Puerto Rican family traditions defined women's place in the early New York community. Expected to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers, women were conditioned to accept these roles as their primary life functions, regardless of their degree of involvement in community, career, or work-related activities.³

However, when confronted with the economic realities of an overwhelmingly poor community, close to 25 percent of the migrant women went to work outside the home in factories, laundries, and restaurants. This figure would rise in the coming decades, and parallel the demand for workers in the garment and other industries. Many women worked as seamstresses and domestics; others found ways to combine homemaking with gainful employment by taking in lodgers, caring for the children of working mothers and doing piecework at home.

While the majority of the migrant women fit into the above categories, a handful—less than 4 percent—established a foothold in other areas. These were the women who were either formally educated, skilled or bilingual, or who, by virtue of their community involvement, exercised leadership roles. Some sought and secured white-collar, office employment upon their arrival in the city; the status inherent in that work was sufficient to raise them above the ordinary. Others proceeded to launch supportive community enterprises, or to form volunteer organizations in response to the special needs of the community, as they had previously done in Puerto Rico. Still others, writers, poets, essayists and journalists, expressed themselves through their creative and artistic talents.⁴ Finally, there were the women who chose the church, and in their own way contributed towards—and help us understand—Puerto Rican community development.

Carmela Zapata Bonilla Marrerro was born in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico in 1907. Raised in a rural atmosphere on the western coast of the Island, she belonged to a family composed predominantly of middle-class farmers and property owners. After the premature death of her mother in 1918, a move to Mayaguez, the island's third largest city, enabled her to receive a Catholic school education. During this tender period in her life Carmelita first articulated the desire to enter a convent. At sixteen, she made the decision to become a missionary nun in the Roman Catholic Church. Leaving her home and family for Georgia, the conventual center of the Trinitarian Order, in 1923, she hardly imagined that this would be the first of many trips between Puerto Rico and the U.S.

What impressions and images must have crossed the girl's mind as she made the five-day journey alone from San Juan to Brooklyn, where the ship was due to make port! She believes she left on a Thursday because the steamship lines always sailed from Thursdays to Mondays; she remembers traveling second class which offered the same menu as first, but without the dancing; and she recalls that the nuns met her ship at the Columbia Heights Promenade at Fulton Street. Carmelita spent her first night at the Brooklyn convent painfully aware that she was in strange surroundings, and anxiously anticipating her trip to Georgia, where she would enter the Convent of the Holy Trinity to begin her novitiate. Two years later, she was given her first assignment and sent to her order's Court Street Center, in Brooklyn, the first Puerto Rican nun in their community. As a young nun, she had little choice in the matter, but the assignment proved to be propitious for the Brooklyn Puerto Rican community. As she recalled, her first impressions were:

that center was two old houses and they were put together for the purpose of having clubs—we had boy scouts, girl scouts, brownies, sewing clubs, manual work for the children,

emed typical or
es form the core
because they are
an *barrios*, when
chose to break
an reasons, and
outside of their
ie Puerto Rican

gh oral history,
riences of each
points in Puerto
than add to our
able in enabling
can experience.¹
gan their careers
ent of the young
tional roles and
d Aimee García
Ricans, born in
ng to a mainland

Ricans in New
migration from
an to take shape
ans were said to
stimulated and
ed the presence
gains through-
by mid-century,

ng over half the
anic districts in

mother's clubs, library, arts, crafts, all that. We had hundreds of children. We had no Puerto Ricans in this neighborhood then. We had lots of Polish, Irish. It was called Irishtown . . . (There were) Polish, Lithuanian, Chinese, Filipino.⁵

Although her earliest missionary work was carried out among the poor multi-ethnic children of Brooklyn, it was the plight of the Puerto Rican migrants that sparked Sister Carmelita's imagination and dedication:

During those years it was when they use to put them, you know, out—dispossess them—and it was very hard. And I thought that it was my duty to save every Puerto Rican that I found—from anything. I felt that terrible, you know, so I remember seeing them on the sidewalk, with all their children, and their beds, and all their things—dispossessed. Then we had no welfare. So then I remember a friend of mine—in 176 Sand Street—she owned that building and one day I met her. And I use to visit Puerto Ricans there. “Sister,” she said, “I have this building and nobody pays rent so I’m gonna give you the key to this building. When you see a family dispossessed, you bring them to this building.” That’s what I did. I had that building filled with people—no heat, but anyway, they had a house for a while.⁶

Sister Carmelita remained in Brooklyn until 1949, active in numerous social welfare programs. A familiar sight in the local precincts and hospitals, she was frequently called upon to intercede on behalf of the Puerto Rican community, to translate for them and guide their general welfare. But her return to her native Puerto Rico allowed Sister Carmelita the opportunity to teach and pursue her own academic interests within the structure of her convent. She earned a Bachelor's degree as well as a Master's from the University of Puerto Rico, concentrating on the study of social work, an area in which she was experienced. In time, a personal desire to return to the Brooklyn community and the families she had left behind motivated Carmelita to request a transfer to the mission center where she had initiated her career.

During the fourteen years that Carmelita spent in New York, a diverse Puerto Rican community—the *Barrio Hispano*—developed. It straddled the East River with *colonias*, or neighborhoods, on both sides. Puerto Ricans predominated among the city's Spanish-speaking population. As American citizens, they were unaffected by the immigration barriers that restricted aliens from coming to the U.S. In terms of actual numbers, however, census figures varied depending on who was taking the count. Puerto Ricans could easily fit into several groupings. They could be counted as blacks or whites or racially mixed, as citizens or immigrants. To further complicate matters, as residents of a U.S. possession, Puerto Ricans did not figure into immigration counts.

A report issued by the New York Mission Society in 1927 estimated a total of between 100,000 and 150,000 Spanish-speaking inhabitants of whom approximately 85,000 were Puerto Ricans engaged in the cigar-making industry.⁷ Overwhelmingly working class, theirs was a tightly knit, introspective community whose neighborhood organizations boasted substantial audiences of one or two hundred persons at any given function, and where Spanish-language newspapers and magazines found an appreciative reading public.⁸ Culturally, the Puerto Rican community identified strongly with Spanish America. The Spanish language and the Roman Catholic faith served to weld close bonds. The institutionalization of common customs and tradition insured both the insulation and isolation of the nascent *colonias*. Advocacy in their interest frequently rested with the organizations that structured the community.

The work of Sister Carmelita and her Trinitarian Sisters notwithstanding, the Catholic

Church was which were Señora de la followed by

By 1939, churches sh ethnic or nat ral services groups. Infl gration expe and custom: immigrant a policies that unlike other to the New island there native, Spar and more si generation r as schools a Puerto Rican welfare need included cha Mission Soc

Through in her work. directly crec numerous y and needy c speaker; to their rebellio nity. Her voc to the peop system and. she develop barrios as in

I was a know, e help me were rig everybo I met al came— dollars. Kings' l

Until poe to do what s

Church was slow to respond to the needs of the growing Puerto Rican settlements, most of which were nominally Catholic. The first church to offer masses in Spanish was Nuestra Señora de la Medalla Milagrosa, founded in East Harlem in the 1920s. La Milagrosa was followed by Santa Agonia and St. Cecilia, both of which were established during the 1930s.⁹

By 1939, the Catholic Diocese initiated reforms based on the premise that all parish churches should become integrated or multinational. Previously, the Diocese had favored ethnic or nationality-oriented churches, and these had adequately provided guidance, pastoral services and a sense of cultural identity for earlier Polish, Irish, and Italian immigrant groups. Influential and respected institutions, the nationality churches cushioned the immigration experience of their congregation by fostering ties with the native land, language, and customs. Moreover, the churches functioned as brokers or mediators between the immigrant and the dominant society. However, in the case of the Puerto Ricans, the new policies that argued against differential treatment were rationalized on several counts. First, unlike other immigrant groups before them, Puerto Ricans did not bring clergy with them to the New York settlements. Indeed, the Church failed to understand the point that in the island there had never been sufficient numbers of native-born Puerto Rican priests. Non-native, Spanish-speaking clergy had been imported to Puerto Rico for decades. Second, and more significant, the Catholic Diocese in New York had weathered a decline in third-generation national church membership. It argued that the already existing clergy, as well as schools and churches, could simply be retrained and restructured to accommodate the Puerto Ricans.¹⁰ Partly because of the failure of this policy, many of the spiritual and social-welfare needs of the Puerto Ricans defaulted to numerous community organizations. These included charitable groups such as the Catholic Settlement Association, the New York City Mission Society, Casita Maria, and the Protestant churches.

Throughout the years, Sister Carmelita utilized the organizations, as well as the church, in her work. She was one of the founders of the settlement house Casita Maria, and she is directly credited with influencing and motivating the academic growth and aspirations of numerous youngsters of that period.¹¹ Her recollections evoke images of a dismally poor and needy community. She was frequently called upon to advocate for the non-English speaker; to mediate between migrant parents, intent on maintaining island customs, and their rebellious U.S.-born children; and to confront the authorities on behalf of the community. Her vocation dictated expertise in teaching, counseling, and religion, and her dedication to the people she served sharpened her knowledge of the law, public health, the penal system and housing. Her office in St. Joseph's on Pacific Street was open to everyone and she developed a resource network rooted as much in the leadership of the Puerto Rican *barrios* as in the church. She states:

I was a friend of the politicians. I must admit I used to ask the politicians for help, you know, especially those that sold *bolita* (numbers racket)—the bankers—and they used to help me a lot for the poor people. And then the politicians that didn't belong to the *bolita* were right there, in Borough Hall so they were good to the Puerto Ricans. I use to visit everybody who was Spanish-speaking, no matter what it was or when it was and that's how I met all those people. I use to ask them to please help me out, like when Thanksgiving came—*el día del pavo*— [the day of the Turkey] they used to give me two or three hundred dollars. I used to spend that in food and for Christmas. It was the same for *Reyes* [Three Kings' Day].¹²

Until poor health forced her retirement in the early 1970s, Sister Carmelita continued to do what she could to influence the social, cultural, and educational development of the

Brooklyn Puerto Rican community. The number of Catholic institutions providing spiritual and material resources specifically for Puerto Ricans throughout the 1930s and 1940s was clearly limited.

By contrast, there were some twenty-five Puerto Rican Protestant churches, most of them Pentecostal. These were fundamentalist sects which adhered strictly to a literal interpretation of the Bible and encouraged rejection of worldly concerns among the members. The American invasion had facilitated the Protestantization of the island, accelerating a process already evident in the late nineteenth century. By the mid-1930s one observer noted that some of the Protestant churches in New York were located on the second floor of various types of buildings, and that as one approached Upper Harlem, these became more numerous. Some religious congregations met in private homes, while others rented storefronts for prayer and worship. Although the origin of the Pentecostal movement in New York remains unclear, an estimated five percent of the Puerto Ricans living in the city during this period were Protestant.¹³ And within a decade, the Pentecostals had become the fastest-growing Protestant group among Puerto Ricans.

Dependent on a grass-roots tradition for their leadership, ministers often came from the ranks of the congregants. Sects were frequently self-starting and self-sustaining, supervised by ministers who were working class themselves. Small and intimate, many Pentecostal or evangelical churches provided a sense of community not found in the more traditional denominations.¹⁴ Women played a pivotal role in this phase of church and community development, as they did within the structure of the Catholic Church. However, if conventual roles were limited under the strict, formal policies of that complex institutional structure, they were also restricted by gender. As a nun, subordinate to a male hierarchy, Sister Carmelita's professional and private life was circumscribed. By contrast, the Pentecostal faith permitted the ascendancy of a few women to the pulpit. Among these was the Reverend Leoncia Rosado Rosseau.

Born on April 11, 1912 in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, Leoncia Rosado Rosseau believes that she was destined for the ministry from birth. The second of five children born to Señora Gumersinda Santiago Ferrer and don Manuel Rivera Marrero, Leoncia received her religious calling in 1932 at the age of twenty. Then followed a period of evangelism in the poorest *barrios* of Puerto Rico. A small and slender young woman, she was not afraid to enter the most alien and hostile environments because she was convinced that it was all part of God's mission. Foretold in a vision that she was destined to carry God's word across the ocean, in 1935 she left the island for New York to continue her work as a missionary and evangelist. By 1937 she had received her first certificate in Divinity.¹⁵

In New York City, life was firmly anchored in church and community. Reverend Leoncia preached on street corners and delighted in debating scripture with nonbelievers. She offered testimony to the glory of God, visited the sick, and assisted in the general organization of her church. She traveled to the Dominican Republic and other Latin countries in the service of her church. There too she continued in her dual roles as missionary and evangelist. But while her spiritual gifts and fervent dedication were acknowledged by her fellow congregants, she was limited by tradition to addressing the congregation from the floor, and not the pulpit. On the eve of the Second World War she married a church elder, Roberto Rosado, and added to her life the dimensions of wife and homemaker.

About this time, the Puerto Rican community in New York City witnessed a decline in the numbers of individuals coming from the island and a rapid dispersement of those already residing in the city into all five boroughs. Puerto Ricans continued to fill the ranks of the working class and competed for the meager unskilled employment of the Depression period. But this situation changed radically in the 1940s, when women, minorities, and foreign

nationals f
The labor
migration
expansion:
demands c
were Puer
departure
the labor 1
yearly net :
in the garr
collar, low
the island'
inform the
from Puer
For the
life. It sign
and it bro
creation of
Accordi
Lord took
quantities
could not

Finally
had be
were t
to the
the en
Wit
husba
he did
into th
for thi
would
that ev
forgot
of Bro
assist
this bu
how I

Even th
Puerto Ric
become m
her follow
objective a
of the ocea
engaged in
disciples b
In the d

nationals from bordering countries were vigorously recruited for factory and farm work. The labor shortages of the Second World War precipitated the large-scale Puerto Rican migration of the period just before and after the war. But this was only part of a broader expansion: close to 400,000 foreign contract workers entered the country in response to the demands of the labor market between 1942 and the end of the war, very few of whom were Puerto Rican. Some scholars argue that despite the general postwar contraction, the departure of many of those workers after the war created a vacuum in particular sectors of the labor market to which Puerto Rican workers responded. Between 1947 and 1949, a yearly net average of 32,000 individuals migrated from Puerto Rico, many destined to work in the garment and needle-trade industries.¹⁶ They continued to be concentrated in blue-collar, low-paying sectors, especially in light industry. By 1948, the Migration Division of the island's Department of Labor established programs to aid potential migrants and to inform them about New York City. And by the start of mid-century, the great migration from Puerto Rico was well under way.¹⁷

For the charismatic Reverend Leoncia, this period represented a turning point in her life. It signaled the beginning of her ministry as Pastor of the Damascus Christian Church and it brought the church directly into the social service of the community through the creation of the Christian Youth Crusade.

According to the Reverend Leoncia, both events were foretold in a vision in which the Lord took her to the edge of a river where He indicated that she was to retrieve enormous quantities of carrots from the waters. She agonized over her task and exclaimed that she could not do it but He replied "Yes, you can. Continue. Take them out."¹⁸

Finally, I got them all out of the river and when I turned around I saw that all the carrots had become people and most were young. Then we walked in front of the multitudes which were uncountable and we were going to find Damascus. I don't know what had happened to them, but they had a small congregation. We had loudspeakers to take the message to the entire world. That's how far I went with the Lord and I wondered what this all meant.

Within a short time my husband was drafted. He was already an ordained minister. My husband at that time weighed 105 pounds because he was sick with a heart condition. And he did everything possible, even writing to the President of the United States, not to go into the army. I prayed that he wouldn't have to go but the Lord responded, "Do not pray for this—it is my will that he go, but he will return." He [Rosado] was sure that the army would not take him. When he went for his induction, weighing 105 pounds more infirmed that ever, he was accepted. It never crossed my mind to take over for him because I had forgotten my dream, and I could not seriously think or suggest this to him, and so we spoke of Brothers Fernando Noriega and Belén Camacho as possible substitutes. And I would assist them as I had helped (my husband). And so we went to meet with them to discuss this but they said, "No, not us. The one who should remain here is Sister Léo," and that's how I came to be pastor of the Damascus Christian Church.¹⁹

Even though precedents for women to act as missionaries and evangelists existed in Puerto Rico and in the New York Puerto Rican *barrios*, it was extremely rare for women to become ministers. In Puerto Rico, Juanita Garcia Peraza, or "Mita" as she was known to her followers, epitomized the role of women as evangelists and ministers.²⁰ There are few objective accounts of Mita's life and work, but her achievements were known on both sides of the ocean. In the early 1940s she inaugurated her own sect and Pentecostal church, which engaged in the operation of cooperatives and provided social services for its congregants. Her disciples believed she was God's incarnation on earth and referred to her as the "Goddess."

In the daily operations of Pentecostal churches in New York, women were also indispens-

able. They supervised Bible study classes, succored the sick, comforted families in distress and performed countless acts of charity. Missionaries participated in street ministries and proselytized aggressively from door to door. Yet, despite the high degree of visibility and responsibility that women undertook in church matters, their involvement, by tradition, seldom extended to the pulpit.²¹

Although the Reverend Leoncia encountered resistance and discrimination toward her calling because of her gender, it was nothing compared to the obstacles she faced in orienting her church to the social/economic problems of the community. Until that point, pentecostalism among the Puerto Ricans in New York had served as a sanctuary from the cultural and social malaise inherent in the migration experience; it basically shielded the congregants from spiritual contamination by the outside world. Leoncia Rosado's ministry opened the way for new definitions.

When the Christian Youth Crusade was initiated in 1957, Damascus Christian Church had expanded to include branches in other boroughs. One of the earliest grass-roots programs to fight drug abuse, it was sustained by funding from within the church. It provided a refuge for gangs, addicts, alcoholics and ex-convicts, and its philosophical base was strictly religious. The addict was viewed as a sinner and only repentance and acceptance of the Lord would bring about a cure. The major center for treatment was in the Damascus Christian Church in the Bronx but there was also an upstate site, Mountindale, to which recovering addicts would go. In spite of its success, however, the church was most reluctant to engage in such community-oriented tasks. Reverend Leoncia recalled the confrontation with the church leaders on this matter:

Our church was a church like any other. It did not work with alcoholics, etc. Sophisticated, illuminated with the Holy Spirit, yes, but it did not work with alcoholics. I came and told them of my vision. I understand these are alcoholics and lost souls, and the lowest people in society. But God wants us to do this work and they said, "Not here, no, no, not here," and I said to them, "Yes here! Because God mandates it of us." The church which closes its being and heart to the clamor of lost souls does not have a right to a place in the community. What do you think you're here for? Here is where the work is to be done and if you don't do it, I'll present my resignation. I was the pastor there then. My husband had returned from the army, and he was a bishop with the church council. Then they (the congregation) gave me a place that we call the Tower of Prayer, which was a long room and there I placed beds and cots which I found.

Imagine a person like me, who had never even smoked a cigarette, unworldly, working with addicts, breaking their habits cold turkey, without aspirin or anything. My husband Roberto and I and the brothers and sisters of the church who helped us there . . . legs full of sores, and then when an addict is breaking the habit, their stinking sweat, that fever, the cold, the trembling, the heat, their screams . . . it was a tremendous thing!

And that bunch of kids—about fifteen, sometimes twenty or twenty-five, and their crying Mama—that's where I got the name, Mama Léo—Mama, it hurts here, rub there, or there, and when I would treat their legs and feet, oozing full of sores, I would think, I held the feet of Our Lord.

I would make them a banquet for Thanksgiving and they would come dirty, strung-out, sick, anyway at all but before feeding them I would provide a religious service with the other youths already saved. The kids would say, "Mama, we came for the bird and you gave us the Word!"²²

An estimated two hundred and fifty to three hundred young people, mostly Hispanic, who were rehabilitated through that program went into the ministry. Many of them are active today in youth-oriented programs. Close to eighteen programs or schools have been

established
rewarding r

If the co
role in the
some of the
of these was
raised and
knit and rel
environmen
for the first
mother. Soc
stepped in t
rigor, discip
was fifteen,
Manuel Ló
ment notwi
American p
systematical
her sixteen

He told
going to
prepare
got down
came at
there, th
a licens
134th S
ahies d
that cor
verses.
a sudde
me in t
this oth
then I v
did that
and sai
these d:
me on t
When I
yourself
And th:

Aimee C
Wesleyan M
the Spanish
the South
Corrections
Leoncia Ro
for women

established by them worldwide. Reverend Leoncia considers this her greatest and most rewarding mission.

If the community-service programs begun by Mama Léo served to initiate the church's role in the streets, her example as a pastor and as a woman illustrated new directions for some of the young Puerto Rican women growing up in New York during this period. One of these was the Reverend Aimee García Cortese. Aimee García Cortese was born in 1929, raised and educated in the New York Puerto Rican *barrio* of the South Bronx. Her close-knit and religious family offered Aimee and her two brothers and sister a stable and loving environment in which to grow. At thirteen, Aimee encountered Pentecostal outreach efforts for the first time, when local church members offered prayers and services for her ailing mother. Soon afterwards, the family became active in church affairs. As New York teenagers, steeped in the world of movies and other social activities, the Garcías at first resisted the rigor, discipline, and sacrifice expected of Pentecostal youth. However, by the time Aimee was fifteen, she confided her intention to become a minister to her pastor, the Reverend Manuel López. He replied, "*las mujeres no predicán*"—women do not preach! His pronouncement notwithstanding, and fortified by her personal belief that she was named after the American preacher Aimee Semple McPherson, she returned to him and proceeded to systematically badger him into letting her preach. She received permission to do so before her sixteenth birthday.²³

He told me that the next Sunday I would be preaching. Well I was so proud that I was going to preach, I never thought that I had nothing to say, I never thought that I wasn't prepared to face a crowd but I was so proud of the fact that I was going to preach that I got down on my knees and said Lord, you know you've got to bless me. Well next Sunday came and he told me to be at church at 5:30 a.m. I said that's a little early. When I got there, there were four other young people. One had a flag, one had a tambourine, one had a license in his hand and he (the pastor) said to me "Now you go out to Brook Avenue and 134th Street and you preach." Oh, I thought it was going to be in church. "On no, mi hija, ahí es donde se aprende" [no, my daughter, that is where you'll learn] and it was there on that corner that I realized the strangest thing in the world: what do I say? I only knew two verses. All my friends were coming out of the holes, like cockroaches out of a wall. All of a sudden I'm surrounded by eighty, ninety kids of the neighborhood that had never seen me in this posture, and there was the crowd! I recited John 3:16, and then I went on to this other verse about God gives peace. I said this is very important that you know it. So then I went back to John 3:16, and then I went back to God is going to give you peace. I did that about five times and then I realized I had nothing to say. And I looked at the people and said, "Something great's happened in my life but I don't know how to say it. One of these days I'm gonna come back and tell you," and I started to cry. One young man tapped me on the shoulder and said, "vámonos" [Let's go]. And they took me back to the church. When I arrived, I was still crying, and the pastor said, "te di'te gusto nena?" [Did you enjoy yourself?] I had nothing to tell them. "Well, he replied, "get ready to tell them something." And that was it. And he taught me my first year, 365 Bible verses.²⁴

Aimee García Cortese went on to tell the people something. She was ordained by the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Puerto Rico in 1964, became a missionary evangelist for the Spanish Assemblies of God, Associated Minister of Thessalonica Christian Church in the South Bronx, and the first female chaplain for the New York State Department of Corrections. Reflecting on her past experience, Reverend García Cortese credits Reverend Leoncia Rosado Rosseau, as well as other ministers and missionaries, with opening the way for women in religious life and providing experiences from which to learn.

There were women in ministry, but different types of ministry. Like, take la hermana Cartegena. She was the missionary of our church. She will be eighty years old, come 1986. Now there was a woman, deep in the Word, a woman dedicated to visitation, and dedicated to doing God's work. To watch her, to be with her . . . and as I grew in the Lord, I grew out of proportion, in terms that I did not go with the young people. They didn't satisfy me. What they were doing didn't satisfy me. What satisfied me was what la hermana Cartegena was doing. She would visit the sick, knock on doors, give out tracts, and I thought to myself, this is God's work! I was kind of ahead of my day. I was a young girl with a "little old lady" mentality. Now I realize it wasn't a "little old lady" mentality, it was "kingdom" mentality, but I didn't know what it was then. I didn't know I wanted to reach the world for Christ. I didn't know the extent of my drive. But now as I look back, I realize

Elisa (Alicéa) was also a tremendous role model in the sense of daring to be innovative, in music, in leadership. [She] would pick up a trumpet and wake up a whole Puerto Rican town, in Ciales, and she did with music, you know, what, later on, I did with the Word. Just stirred people, woke them up, brought them into a "Hey, here's young people and we're doing something for God."

And there was Mama Léo. I don't ever think there was a moment I wanted to be [exactly] like her. I just loved her for what she was, but, it looked like her walk was a much more difficult walk than what I could do. In other words, to me, Léo was somebody to learn from, but never to want to be. Maybe because Léo was one hundred years ahead of her time. On a one-woman scale, she did what, later on, organizations like Teen Challenge did, or an organization like Odyssey House did in the secular [world]. You're talking about a little lady, all by herself taking on the world.²⁵

The congregations directed by Reverend García Cortese, from the 1960s to the present, have incorporated many of the outreach programs that were considered radical in Reverend Leoncia Rosado's period. Today, youth and community programs are naturally included in church planning. Contemporary urban music plays a major role in attracting, and encouraging, religious expression among the youth. In Spanish or English, music has become an integral part of street ministries. If Reverend García Cortese's role as minister is no longer questioned because she is a woman, neither is the direction that she foresees for her congregation challenged. She envisions her church of the future to be a religious complex, including a community center with a swimming pool, gymnasium, physical fitness space, and Bible and Sunday schools. The building of the sanctuary would come last because a congregation's priority should be its youth and community. All of this she believes to be a legitimate part of worship.

From Sister Carmelita's period to Reverend García Cortese's, attitudinal changes toward church and community are apparent. They resulted from a combination of the external transformations of the 1960s, the maturation of the Puerto Rican community, and differing perspectives regarding women's roles. At the same time, similarities abound in the experiences of all three women. The utilization of these oral histories, in conjunction with an analysis of specific historical periods, offers a unique intergenerational perspective. They provide a significant variant on the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City, and more importantly they allow us to understand the continuity of our experience.

The task of recovering and defining women's histories in the New York Puerto Rican community before mid-century is clearly underway. From the 1920s to just after the Second World War, Puerto Ricans struggled to lay the foundations of a distinctive community with formal and informal coping structures, internal leadership, businesses, professions, common cultural interests and modes of behavior. The population movements alone, punctuated by the unique circular nature of the Puerto Rican migration, brought repeated ruptures and renewals of ties, dismantling and reconstructions of familial, individual, and communal

networks. We process of commanding social like Aimee Ga stabilization of opment.

Notes

1. Oral historie of 1985 by t of elucidatin interview wit interview wi Technical C community i
2. Joseph P. F. (Englewood
3. Virginia Sán 1948. (West Work Experi 23-30. Altaq "Puerto Rica Brooklyn C Women in t
4. Numerous a are Isabel Pi Valle, "Femi Puerto Rican overview of Educated P
5. Interview wi Brooklyn, N Church," in New Jersey:
6. Interview wi
7. One of the Iglesias (ed. translation, Force, Cent (New York:
8. Sánchez Ko the forties is 1982). The interesting c
9. Fitzpatrick,
10. Ann María I 1950-1973: also Anthon Puerto Rican
11. Interview w Elizabeth G ita for guidi
12. The Puerto perspective.
13. Lawrence R

networks. We have identified a small segment of the population that contributed to the process of community development, assumed the reins of leadership, and embraced demanding social commitments. Through their ministries and work with young people, women like Aimee García Cortese, Leoncia Rosado Rousseau, and Sister Carmelita aided in the stabilization of the Puerto Rican community at significant points in its historical development.

Notes

1. Oral histories with the Reverends Leoncia Rosado and Aimee García Cortese were taped during the winter of 1985 by the author and Dr. Benjamín Alicéa, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, with the purpose of elucidating a little-known period in the history of the Puerto Rican community in New York City. The interview with Reverend Rosado was conducted in Spanish and translated by the author for this essay. The interview with Sister Carmelita was conducted and taped, by Professor John Vazquez, New York City Technical College, when he directed one of the earliest oral history projects on the Brooklyn Puerto Rican community in conjunction with the Brooklyn Historical Society.
2. Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland*, Second Edition. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 135.
3. Virginia Sánchez Korrol. From *Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1917-1948*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983.) ch. 4. See also: "On the Other Side of the Ocean: Work Experiences of Early Puerto Rican Migrant Women in New York," in *Caribbean Review* (January 1979), 23-30. Altagracia Ortiz explores the role of women in the garment industry from the 1940s to the fifties in "Puerto Rican Women in the ILGWU, 1940-1950." Paper presented at the Women's Studies Conference, Brooklyn College, April, 1984. For a broader and comparative analysis see Palmira Ríos, "Puerto Rican Women in the United States Labor Market," *Line of March*, no. 18 (Fall 1985).
4. Numerous articles have appeared on notable women in Puerto Rican society. Among the most substantive are Isabel Picó de Hernández, "The History of Women's Struggle for Equality in Puerto Rico," and Norma Valle, "Feminism and its Influence on Women's Organizations in Puerto Rico," in Edna Acosta-Belén, *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History and Society* (New York: Praeger Press, 1986.) For an overview of exceptional women in New York, see: Virginia Sánchez Korrol, "The Forgotten Migrant: Educated Puerto Rican Women in New York City, 1920-1940," in *The Puerto Rican Woman*, 1986.
5. Interview with Sister Carmelita Bonilla, Puerto Rican Oral History Project, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York, 1977. See also: Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, "Puerto Rican Struggles in the Catholic Church," in Clara E. Rodríguez et al, *The Puerto Rican Struggle: Essays on Survival in the U.S.* (Maplewood, New Jersey: Waterfront Press, 1984).
6. Interview with Sister Carmelita Bonilla.
7. One of the best sources for the Puerto Rican experience in the U.S. during this early period is Cesar Andreu Iglesias (ed.) *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1977). English translation, *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega*, by Juan Flores, Monthly Review Press, 1984. See also History Task Force, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *Labor Migration Under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), and Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, ch. 2.
8. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, ch. 3. Another account of the community from the twenties to the forties is Jesús Colón's *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (New York: International Publishers, 1982). The Federal Writers Project, *The WPA Guide to New York* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) offers interesting observations regarding the Manhattan Puerto Rican community.
9. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, ch. 8.
10. Ann María Díaz Ramírez, "The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York and the Puerto Rican Migration, 1950-1973: A Sociological and Historical Analysis." Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1983. See also Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, "Puerto Rican Struggles in the Catholic Church," in Rodríguez et al, *The Puerto Rican Struggle*, and Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, ch. 8.
11. Interview with Sister Carmelita Bonilla. A number of individuals interviewed in my research, including Elizabeth Guanill, former Commissioner of Human Rights, Suffolk County, New York, credit Sister Carmelita for guiding and encouraging them.
12. The Puerto Rican Oral History Project yielded other life experiences which supported Sister Carmelita's perspective. Among these was the interview with doña Honorina Weber Irizarry.
13. Lawrence R. Chenault. *The Puerto Rican Migrant in New York City* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1970),

129. Refer also to the dissertation in progress of Reverend Benjamin Alicéa, "The Puerto Rican Protestant Churches in East Harlem: 1912-1980," Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York City.
14. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans*, 135-36.
 15. Interview with Reverend Leoncia Rosado Rousseau. First Reformed Church, Queens, New York, November, 1985.
 16. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, ch. 2. See also: History Task Force, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1979, ch. 2.
 17. Numerous studies have appeared on the migration experience of Puerto Ricans during the fifties and sixties. Among these are C. Wright Mills, Clarence Senior and Rose Goldsen, *The Puerto Rican Journey: New York's Newest Migrants* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950). Also, Elena Padilla, *Up From Puerto Rico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), and Dan Wakefield, *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959). Personal narratives include Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), Nicholasa Mohr, *Nilda* (New York: Bantam, 1973), and Edward Rivera, *Family Installments* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1982).
 18. Interview with Reverend Leoncia Rosado Rousseau.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, "Religion and the Puerto Ricans in New York," in Edward Mapp (ed.) *Puerto Rican Perspectives* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974), 119-31.
 21. Interviews with missionaries doña Virginia Martínez, New York City, doña Celina Díaz, Brooklyn, New York, and the Reverend Aimee García Cortese, Cross Roads Tabernacle Church, Bronx, New York, December, 1985.
 22. Interview with Reverend Leoncia Rosado Rousseau. Reverend Rosado Rousseau's achievements, particularly with the Christian Youth Crusade, were highlighted in an article by Howard Broady, "The Power of Faith," Associated Press, 1959.
 23. Interview with Reverend Aimee García Cortese, December, 1985.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. *Ibid.*

24 The Black Birth-Cont Jessie M. Roa

The decline in bl
been well docum
than cut in half. B
of childlessness, c
Researchers who
believing that bla
affects the interpr
been understood

This essay seel
black women were
reflect in part a
movement among
operated at the na
ment of local clini
of race and gende
groups, blacks ma
control in their co

Demographers
black fertility in te
with low birth rat
fertility. Populatio
late as 1938. Inst
drop resulted from
health conditions
contraceptive use
edge and practice

In drawing the
assumptions abou
black women's lov
exercises less pru
the entire black p

Reprinted with pe
Passion and Power: Sex
1989.