

Bridging the Divide: The Ivory Tower and the Island

The Puerto Rican Studies Faculty/Community Seminar

JOSEPH KRUPCZYNSKI



Puerto Rican Studies Seminar delegation with the women and children members of the Centro mujer y nueva familias at their center in Barranquitas.

The entrance to Enlace de Familias faces onto Main Street in downtown Holyoke, amid a row of buildings darkened by wear and age and all the stresses of city life. Once inside, the visitor is enveloped in the warmth of brightly colored walls and the drawings by children that are everywhere. This is a place of community, a place for families and children. It is also the meeting space for a group of people who have come together to learn about Puerto Rico and the diaspora of its people that has interwoven the culture and history of a craggy New England city with that of a tropical island in the balmy Caribbean.

This December day, a group gathers slowly late in the afternoon in one of the rooms. The chairs surrounding the long table that runs the length of the room scrape back and soon fill with people who greet each other like old friends. In fact, they have become friends over the course of the fall, meeting once a month for three hours each time. They are a diverse group of about a dozen people who include faculty members, a dean, and a librarian from the Five Colleges, a faculty member from Holyoke Community College, and several professional staff members from such Holyoke-based agencies as Solutions Community Development Corporation, Enlace de Familias, the Housing



Preston Smith

Discrimination Project, and Headstart. What brings them together today is their participation in the Puerto Rican Studies Seminar (PRSS).

Today's meeting is typical of the others: there's a carefully structured agenda that includes time for discussion of the assigned readings, and a presentation by two speakers followed by more discussion. The only exception is a handout entitled "Delegation Schedule: Puerto Rico Trip, January 8–15, 2006." A cursory glance at the schedule reveals that each day begins at 7 and ends by 8 or 9 and includes meetings with scholars at the University of Puerto Rico and community organizers in places that aren't on the usual tourist routes: Barranquitas, Santurce, Rio Piedras, Loiza, Fajardo, and Vieques. In the entire week's schedule there is only one brief stop at a beach.

The person chiefly responsible for drawing up the reading list for the yearlong seminar as well as the itinerary for the January trip to Puerto Rico is Agustin Lao-Montes, a University of Massachusetts Amherst sociologist who is a widely recognized authority on Latino studies and Puerto Rican studies. This is the third year of the PRSS and the third group to embark on the intensive, weeklong immersion experience that he has designed. Agustin, says Preston Smith, "has been a key figure in the

development of the seminar." Smith teaches politics at Mount Holyoke College, where he also directs the college's Community Based Learning program housed in the Weissman Center for Leadership.

The idea for a seminar devoted to Puerto Rican studies originated, he says, with one of his former students about four years ago. Irma Medina, he says, was at the time a Frances Perkins Scholar, a Mount Holyoke program that supports women who return to college or attend college, often later in life. She came from Holyoke and was also working part time at the Care Center there. The center, Smith explains, is an agency that works with pregnant and parenting teens in Holyoke. At the time, he was just one of a handful of faculty whose courses included a component of community-based learning (CBL). Through Medina, Smith began partnering with the Care Center as the locale where his students would be assigned to carry out research or otherwise assist with the agency's needs.

Medina at the time was also taking other courses that had a CBL component, Smith says, "and she expressed grave concerns to me about how ill prepared the college students were to come into an agency like the Care Center. As faculty, she felt we weren't teaching about the Puerto Rican experience and that we couldn't because we simply didn't know its culture

or its politics or its history. Even migration, which represents a huge factor in the Puerto Rican experience, was something that scholars like me did not understand and needed to if we were to prepare our students to work in Holyoke in that community.”

Medina, who is currently one of the facilitators for the PRSS, is a transfer/financial aid counselor for STRIVE, a program at Holyoke Community College that serves first-generation college students. She is also president of the board of directors for the Community Education Project in Holyoke. She recalls her conversations with Smith several years ago: “While I was working at the Care Center,” she says, a number of Mount Holyoke students were there to volunteer or to do research. “Let me tell you, some of these students just did not understand the cultural norms of either the community or the agency! I remember one student, a women’s studies major, who asked in front of the staff and students if she was the only one there who was not pregnant or did not have a kid. And then she asked me if I had a kid as well. That just rubbed everyone the wrong way and, needless to say, she did not get much cooperation from anyone there after that.”

Medina says she felt fortunate to have Smith as her adviser while she was a student at Mount Holyoke. “I was able to speak candidly with him about my experiences,” she says, and about the fact that “although many of the faculty were well intentioned, they did not fully understand the Latino community, specifically in Holyoke.” As a consequence, their students had no preparation or related readings—“they were just put into various agencies in Holyoke or told just to ‘observe’ and walk around the city.” Many of the students, she realized, were not from the area and had never interacted with a Latino community before, “so they had a lot of assumptions, and all they saw were problems. It would kind of tick me off, though I knew it was not their fault,” she says.

“So I saw it from both perspectives—as a student and as someone who worked at one of the agencies,” Medina says. As she and Smith began to talk about what might be done, another student in a class he was teaching at Smith College suggested he meet someone named Agustin Lao-Montes. Jennifer Cannon was a graduate student in the School of Education at UMass Amherst and had studied with Lao-Montes. She had also done extensive

2005–2006 Seminar Participants

Facilitators

- **Mari Castañeda Paredes**, Department of Communication, UMass Amherst
- **Joseph Krupczynski**, Department of Art, UMass Amherst
- **Irma Medina**, STRIVE Program, Holyoke Community College

Community Leaders

- **Edgar Cancel**, Solutions CDC
- **Maritza Figueroa**, HCS Headstart
- **Ray Lichtenstein**, Enlace de Familias
- **Amaad Rivera**, Solutions CDC & YouthBuild AmeriCorps
- **Nathalie Vicencio Delgado**, Housing Discrimination Project

Faculty

- **Elena Carbone**, Department of Nutrition, UMass Amherst
- **Giovanna Di Chiro**, Women’s Studies Program and Earth and Environment Department, Mount Holyoke College
- **Isabel Espinal**, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, UMass Amherst
- **Michael Ford**, dean of the college and dean of students, Hampshire College
- **Lisa Foubister**, Department of English, Holyoke Community College
- **David Marquez**, Department of Exercise Science, UMass Amherst

community partnership work in South Holyoke as the former director of the Amherst College outreach program. Cannon convinced Smith that Lao-Montes would be the ideal person to consult because he had grown up in Puerto Rico and was now a recognized authority on Latino studies and on Puerto Rican studies in particular.

“It was Jen’s idea,” Smith says, that the seminar include not just faculty and scholars but also community members. “And we all agreed it should be middle-management people, not directors,” he adds, “as a way to provide them with a form of professional development and to enable them to get to know the faculty they might work with in future.”

This “partnering” feature, Smith says, has become an essential element in both the work and the success of the seminar: “It gives community members a chance to talk about their organizations, how they work, what roles they play in them.” And this gives faculty, he says, “another level of knowledge about the nuts and bolts of the agencies and some valuable insights into how they and their students might work with them.” While cities like Springfield, Hartford, and New Haven have large concentrations of people from Puerto Rico, in comparison to its overall population the city of Holyoke, Smith points out, has the largest percentage: 41 percent of the people who live in Holyoke are Puerto Rican “and that,” he says, “makes it unique.”

Smith admits his own involvement with Holyoke and its Puerto Rican community has come gradually. After finishing graduate work at UMass Amherst, Smith first came to Mount Holyoke as a part-time instructor and head resident. “Back then,” he recalls, in the 1980s, “I was not aware of how close Mount Holyoke and the city of Holyoke are.” The realization of their proximity to one another came only after he returned to Mount Holyoke in 1992 in a tenure-track position: “I came

back here wanting my research and teaching to connect with an urban area—urban politics is my field. I wanted my classes to come alive, to be part of the real world, to connect with all that’s out there.” Although he had some contacts in Springfield, Holyoke, he thought, “seemed a logical place to have this happen because of its proximity to the campus where I was teaching.”

He credits women’s studies at Mount Holyoke with giving him the support he needed to do his first CBL course. “Sally Montgomery and Martha Ackmann had received funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,” he says, to support a seminar on the liberal arts in the world of work. At the time, women’s studies was the only program that required students to do a community-based form of research, so the grant also provided funds to encourage faculty in developing courses that included a component of community research.

Until that time, CBL had been largely equated with volunteer work, Smith notes, and he had reservations about that model: “It required a lot of monitoring and training to make it work well. But having the students carry out research that the

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Onelia Perez, the director of the Centro mujer y nueva familia, shares a hug with PRSS community participant Amaad Rivera.

organization did not have the time or staff to do meant that we'd be contributing to the intellectual capital of that organization." And the students, he was convinced, would be learning a good deal from their experience.

Smith's first project in Holyoke spanned three years. "I got the idea from Carlos Vega," he says. Vega is a longtime community leader who directs Nueva Esperanza, one of the oldest and most successful organizations serving the Puerto Rican community. "Carlos pointed out that a lot of bank mergers then taking place were having a disastrous effect on the Holyoke community," says Smith. Fewer branches meant reduced access to banking. Smith, in consultation with Nueva Esperanza, designed a course that would have students research the feasibility of establishing a credit union in the city. Unfortunately, he says, once the research was complete, there was no money to implement the idea.

Smith and his colleagues believe the Puerto Rican Seminar has the potential to help the campuses re-define the meaning of community. "I'd like us to be able to see Holyoke and other urban areas nearby as part of our campus communities," he says, "as part of an interdependent region that includes rural, urban, suburban communities. That's what makes this area unique. We've got it all."

The first Puerto Rican Studies Seminar came together with support from the Mount Holyoke President's Innovation Fund and the Five College Seminar Fund. Medina recalls it this way: "Preston decided we should go for it. That was so exciting. It was like giving birth to something so special. This baby has many parents—it took a village to shape it: Jen, Agustin, Preston, and I were the initial parents but I feel that each year as new participants come into the seminar they have left their imprint on it, too."

One of those is Joseph Krupczynski, who teaches in the Architecture and Design Program at UMass Amherst. He joined the seminar in the fall of 2003, its fledgling year, and has remained involved with it ever since. Currently, Krupczynski, along with his colleagues Mari Castañeda Paredes, Department of Communications, UMass Amherst, and Irma Medina are serving as facilitators for the monthly meetings. In January this year, Krupczynski returned to Puerto Rico for the second time as a group facilitator.



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Nilda Medina (left), founding member of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV), speaking to the PRSS delegation at Vieques. Along with Roberto Rabin, Medina is recognized as one of the principal leaders of the Vieques struggle to stop the US Navy's bombing on the island.

His first contact with the city of Holyoke, he says, was in June 2001 when he attended a conference hosted jointly by Hampshire College and the City of Holyoke on college–community partnerships. "That's the first time I heard Agustin speak," he says. He credits Lao-Montes with bringing him into the PRSS. "I didn't know what to expect when I joined," he says. Although his mother is Puerto Rican, Krupczynski had never studied the culture. But one of the criteria for being accepted into the seminar is a commitment to doing CBL in Holyoke, "and I had this interest," he says.

This year, Krupczynski gave a course whose focus on Holyoke was inspired by his first experience with the seminar. "What the seminar has given me," he says, "is a connection to my own heritage and a context to practice and carry out research that will connect learning with real community needs and interests." During his first trip to Puerto Rico, in January 2004, Krupczynski says he had been "inspired to see what engaged academic work can do in helping a community with practical issues and social needs." Among the many memorable faculty and community people he met while there was an architect named Edwin Quiles. Quiles does community architecture in the city of Rio Piedras, where the University of Puerto Rico is located.

Krupczynski subsequently began spending time in Holyoke, but it was not until the summer of 2005 when the idea for the course coalesced. “Carlos [Vega] mentioned to me that there was a hearing to discuss the demolition of the Skinner building in downtown Holyoke,” he says. After attending the hearing, Krupczynski resolved to have the course on architectural research he was scheduled to teach that fall focus on the question of what to do with the building. The Skinner building, he says, “represented an opportunity to put into practice something I’d learned from spending time in Rio Piedras, where I’d seen admirable models we could emulate for integrating CBL into the needs of a community like Holyoke.”

The Skinner building, Krupczynski and his students learned, was designed as a hotel but had later been turned into a unique kind of community facility by two women from the wealthy Skinner family. It was a place where women could come for a cup of tea, seek shelter from abusive relationships, or receive counseling and assistance in finding work. Using historical documents and archives in

the final decision, he concedes, may be governed more by a lack of funds than by a concern for historical preservation.

Mari Castañeda Paredes is another person who has come into the seminar and found a home. Paredes teaches in the Department of Communication at UMass Amherst and is now, like Krupczynski, a PRSS facilitator and a member of its advisory board.

“As a Chicana from Los Angeles,” she says, “I was very familiar with the transnational lives of Mexicans/Chicanos, but it was interesting to see that other Latinos, like Puerto Ricans in Holyoke, were also dealing with similar issues and challenges. PRSS has furthered my scholarly understanding and lived experience as a Latina. What’s more, I have come to regard it as my second family.”

The seminar, she mentions, has contributed to a course that she teaches called “Spanish-language Media,” which enables students to do community service by working with Latina/o media producers from Holyoke and other areas in western Mas-

“. . . we have always envisioned it as a coordinating collective that would include members of both the academic and the Holyoke communities.”

—Agustín Lao-Montes

both the Holyoke Public Library and the Wisteriahurst Museum, which was once the home of the Skinner family, his students researched the history of the building and its structure. What they discovered, Krupczynski said, is that “its architectural spirit grew out of its use . . . that’s the soul of the building worth preserving. It’s a building infused with community use and the progressive ideals that existed within it. It’s not about bricks and mortar. There are many more significantly stylistic buildings in Holyoke, but it represents so many decades of culture and community.”

Although the fate of the building remains to be determined, Krupczynski believes that in carrying out this research and developing plans for its renovation as a community space for the 21st century, his students “have contributed substantively to the community’s deliberations.” Unfortunately,

sachusetts. Recently, she taught a version of the course through the UMass Amherst Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) program, in which the students were predominantly Puerto Rican women working in Holyoke. For their final project, they shared their oral histories on the radio with Luis Melendez of *Tertulia*, WFCR, 88.5 FM. “People said this was one of the best shows Luis has ever hosted,” says Paredes, noting that several of these students are now taking part in the PRSS.

“Since that first year,” says Lao-Montes, reflecting on the evolution of the seminar, “we have always envisioned it as a coordinating collective that would include members of both the academic and the Holyoke communities.” In recent years, a HUD COPC grant has helped to support the work of PRSS. All the meetings are held in Holyoke, Lao-Montes explains, as a way to familiarize the aca-

demic members of the seminar with the city and its Puerto Rican community in particular. In drawing up a set of readings for the Five College PRSS, he says, the challenge for him and that initial core group—Preston Smith, Jennifer Cannon, and Irma Medina—was to select readings that would span the experience of the Puerto Rican archipelago and that of Puerto Ricans living in the United States from the 19th century to the present. The readings had to be introductory, he says, while also promoting a critical and nuanced understanding of Puerto Rican culture. Among the questions he and his colleagues grappled with, he recalls, were: “How to introduce Puerto Rican culture without folklorizing it; how to offer a clear picture of the complexities, plurality, and debates within the Puerto Rican cultural space; and how to establish connections between Puerto Ricans in the United States and in Puerto Rico while accounting for the particularities of place.” Another key consideration, he adds, was “to balance the educational goals of the seminar with its practical objectives in encouraging and helping to develop community–university partnerships.”

Everyone involved with the seminar from its inception describes the January trip to Puerto Rico as both a highlight and an essential element in its success. Lao-Montes drew on his network of family and friends there in shaping the itinerary. “I tried to research both the most innovative and interesting models of community–university partnerships in Puerto Rico,” he says, as well as “the most vibrant community organizations and social movements.” It was for him, he says, “like discovering a new Puerto Rico—even for those of us who visit the island frequently.” Thanks to his careful research, his colleagues say, the trip has become an “extremely powerful” part of the seminar experience, one that has engendered everything from new courses to new ideas for bridging the divide between what one seminar member described as “the ivory tower and the island.” Preston Smith has visited Puerto Rico twice in conjunction with the seminar. Asked to single out one highlight, he replies without hesitation: “Barranquitas.”

A town in the mountainous area of central Puerto Rico, Barranquitas is not easily reached, Smith says, mentioning that he drove one of the rented vans over the rough terrain. There, the group visited Centro mujer y nueva familias, the Center for Women and Families, which, he says, would be equivalent to a women’s shelter here. “But the differences,” says Smith, “are really telling.” Unlike

shelters here, the center is not hidden away but serves as both a community center and a shelter. “It reveals so much about the way domestic violence is treated there,” he says. The seminar group returns there every year “because it gives us not only an intellectual understanding of the culture but also insights into the politics and spiritual factors that play such a part in it.

“I’m convinced,” says Smith, “that you can’t teach the domestic experience of Puerto Rico without being on the island, that you can’t teach Puerto Rican studies without understanding that experience. For me, intellectually, the seminar and the trip provide an opportunity to visit the difference between Black and Puerto Rican politics and nationalisms. It stimulates my own thinking about the Black experience.”

To illustrate his point, he mentions a course he team-taught for the first time last year with his colleague Agustin Lao-Montes. It was, says Lao-Montes, “the beginning of an intellectual and political collaboration that will likely result in a conference and then a book.” Part of what they did in shaping the course, Lao-Montes says, was “to develop a research component to investigate the histories, social conditions, and political relations between Blacks and Latinos in five areas in the Northeast: Boston, Manhattan, Queens, Hartford, and Springfield.” One of their findings, says Lao-Montes, was that there has been a Black and Latino coalition in Springfield since the mid-1980s. “This is a very important discovery,” he says, “for our efforts to develop closer ties between Blacks and Latinos on the campuses that can also inform community/university partnerships.”

On April 27, at El Mercado in South Holyoke, a dozen fellows of the seminar will be making a public presentation about PRSS. It will, Paredes says, include testimonials from participants about its impact on their lives, their teaching, and their work, as well as photographs of the many community organizations and memorable people they met with while visiting Puerto Rico. “After three years of doing this, it’s become clear that we need to do more capacity-building work,” Paredes says, “so we can develop alliances between faculty and community partners across the three years, but more important, so that we can help mentor and support the future Latino leaders of Holyoke and the rest of western Massachusetts.”

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