CHAPTER 5

Experiencing Puertorriqueñidad through Citizenship

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on two issues: first, a discussion of contributors’ experiences of cultural national identity and belonging through citizenship as defined by them; and second, on how these experiences reveal meaning and shape the construction of contributors’ cultural national identity. Most of the contributors experienced their cultural national identity by focusing on having a different custom, culture, language, national flag, and anything that they felt was particular to Puerto Ricans. This chapter is structured according to themes that reflect multivocal and fractured experiences of cultural national identity and national belongings as shared by contributors.

The concept of citizenship is linked to the construction of cultural national identity and belonging. The term “citizenship,” in addition to being a legal term, is also a social construct that can be used as a mechanism of exclusion or inclusion to a given group. Graciela Botello (2002, 194) has argued that citizenship is the point of departure for the consolidation of a sense of psychological collective belonging directed at explaining everyday action in different social spheres (intimate, private, semi-public, public and civil). Through this dynamic, collective identities are created. These identities are multiple and are constantly shifting from exclusion to inclusion and vice versa (Geschiere 2009, 32). Furthermore, the construction of identity is constantly changing (Giddens 1991) and these changes take place in a sociocultural and historical context (see Baumann and Gingrich 2006; Bayart 2005; Hall 1996).
Throughout the narratives presented in this chapter, it is evident that many of the contributors construct their cultural national identity through theories of difference (or alterity) and theories of otherness. That is, difference is not binary, but constitutive. Lawrence Grossberg (1996, 93–94) illustrates these theories in the following way: (a) theories of difference construct identity or meaning based on highlighting that which is different or distinct from others; and (b) theories of otherness stem from the premise that difference is an effect of power that is historically produced.

For most of the contributors in this study, the United States became the “Other.” Although my premise is that identity constructs itself through the “Other” and difference, this construction is manifested through a relationship with the “Other” that can take place in many ways (see, Baumann 2006). This relationship is imbued with power struggles with the “Other” that must not be ignored. Baumann (2006) provides three possible ways by which identity is constructed. First, orientalism or negative mirror-imaging (i.e., characteristics mirror each other in opposition) (Baumann 2006, 20–21). Second, encompassment (i.e., adopt selected characteristics of “Other” but the higher trait incorporates the different characteristic into the universal characteristic) (Baumann 2006, 21–22). Third, identity can be constructed through segmentation (Baumann 2006, 22–23). Segmentation is revealed in a Bedouin proverb alluding to the idea that I can be in an argument against my brother, but my brother and I will team up against our cousin, and all of us will act in unison against any outsider (see Gladney 2004, 191). In other words, identity is contextual and classificatory.

In short, I am not assuming that in unequal power relationships the self and Other, the United States in this case, are intrinsically linked through “reciprocal identity formation” (Gingrich 2006, 11). By this I mean that although groups become aware of their identity and “who they are” through social processes, it is not indispensable to ask “who we are in relation to the Other” in order to define identity.¹ As Gingrich (2006, 11) argues, this would be psychoanalytical fatalism. Taking into account my premises as discussed above, I adopt Gingrich’s (2006, 6) working definition of collective identities as compromising both sameness and difference, being “multidimensional and contradictory,” and embedded in power relationships which are performed and transformed through understanding, language, emotions, imaginativeness, body and agency.