

Excerpt from

Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education

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INTRODUCTION

Mi Fortuna

I'VE HEARD IT SAID that one in eight people in the United States can trace their heritage to Brooklyn. This doesn't surprise me. The largest of the five boroughs of New York City, Brooklyn has been, and still is, home to millions of residents, mostly immigrants, first-, second-, and third-generation folks from Europe, the US South, the Caribbean, and, later, South America, Africa, Asia, and every other region of the world. All these people have arrived with their own dreams. From Brooklyn, they have dispersed to other big cities, small cities, suburbs, and rural areas throughout the country. But Brooklyn claims its inhabitants, gives them its stamp of approval—or not—and then sends them on their way to propagate Brooklyn dreams elsewhere.

I am one of those one in eight who trace their heritage to Brooklyn. I was born in 1943 in Beth-El Hospital (in 1963, the hospital, now expanded, changed its name to the Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center) on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a high holy day in the Jewish calendar. My mother told me she didn't get lunch that day, no doubt because the staff thought she was Jewish, like most of the other women giving birth that day. I spent my formative years in several Brooklyn neighborhoods, an experience that indelibly stamped me as a Brooklynite. Though I have spent more than half my life in Massachusetts, leaving Brooklyn at the age of thirty-one to pursue a doctoral degree in education and vowing never to return, Brooklyn has left its mark on me. There's clearly something to the saying "You can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but you can't take Brooklyn out of the girl." Ironically, two of the three neighborhoods where I grew up—Williamsburg and Fort Greene—have become so trendy and costly that nowadays, young professionals hope

against hope to find an affordable place to live in these now-hip neighborhoods. In my youth, people wanted to escape Williamsburg and Fort Greene for greener pastures, figuratively and literally. The third neighborhood, East Flatbush, was then a more desirable community, where unpretentious one- and two-family houses seemed grand in comparison to the poor working-class communities of Williamsburg and Fort Greene. Ironic, too, that East Flatbush is now mostly home to immigrants from the Caribbean and many of the homes there have lost their luster.

Despite the tough life endured by many Brooklynites in those days, the city instilled in me three lasting desires: to be a writer, a teacher, and an educated person.



I WROTE MY FIRST BOOK AT TEN. Not surprisingly, it concerned a girl of about my age, a girl who, like me, lived in Brooklyn with a family similar to mine. Sitting cross-legged on the bed in the room I shared with my sister Lydia, I documented my life as a novel. I wrote every day for months, relentlessly and consistently. When the book grew to more than a hundred pages, I threw it in the garbage.

I don't know why I threw it away. Even though I wanted to see myself as an adult—highly educated, successful, an accomplished writer—I probably thought it absurd that I should even attempt to write a book. At the same time, the incident also says something about the aspirations and identity I saw for myself in the future. For years, I've regretted having thrown the manuscript away, wondering what it would reveal about me as a child.

Besides writing a book, another great desire was to become a teacher. Around the same time I was writing a book, I fantasized about teaching. I saw myself standing at a blackboard with pointer in hand, teaching a lesson in grammar or math or talking with my young charges about the wonders of science. My overarching desire, really, was to become highly educated. Teaching appealed to me because I wanted to be a professional even before I knew the meaning of that word. Teachers were the only professionals I knew close-up. To me, they were powerful, in charge, and smart. As I got older, my desire to be a teacher intensified so that by the time I got to college, it was the only career I envisioned for myself. I loved the idea of working with young people, of seeing that light in their eyes when they

understand or get excited by an idea or learn a new skill. That image of wonder stayed with me throughout my career, whether it was teaching reading to fourth-graders, preparing young adults for a life of teaching, or tackling challenging but exhilarating ideas about diversity and multicultural education, my future areas of endeavor.

My parents did not share my fantasy, at least not directly. Though they wanted the best for their children and sacrificed in every way they could, they had limited formal schooling. It was probably hard for them to imagine a college education for us. They knew little about middle-class pressure-cooker dreams for the Ivy League, about hiring tutors, or about SAT prep courses. They had come from Puerto Rico by ship, my father in 1929 at the age of twenty-eight, and my mother in 1934 at twenty-six, not knowing one another and each seeking the fortune, or at least the relative security, they had been told existed in New York City, the landing place for most Puerto Ricans at the time.

My life, on the other hand, has been defined by education. From the day in 1949 when I started first grade at PS 55—the once rather regal-looking urban school had been built in the late nineteenth century but had since lost its sheen—to the day I was awarded a doctoral degree from the University of Massachusetts in 1979 and beyond, I knew that education was the only way out of poverty and a life of unfulfilled hopes and dreams. How did I know this? While my parents certainly told us how important it was to be “good” (that is, to behave and be respectful) at school, to pay attention to our teachers, to get good grades, and to complete high school, college was not part of the equation. My parents probably knew better than anyone else that a good education was the only chance their children would have for a better life than they had, but a good education for them meant high school graduation. Unable to help with homework, disconnected from our school lives, and working long hours to give their children everything they could, my parents neither expected nor demanded a higher education. My sister Lydia, fourteen months my senior and my constant companion and best friend, and I surpassed our parents’ wildest dreams. And though they didn’t always understand why we pursued higher education so doggedly, they were immensely proud of us.

There was a huge chasm between our experiences and theirs. One incident, years after I had graduated from college, epitomizes this difference.

In 1979, just as I was ready to defend my dissertation, Robert Sinclair, my doctoral adviser, said, “Sonia, I want you to make three copies of the dissertation: one for yourself, one for me, and one for your mother” (my father had died a few years earlier). While I appreciated the thought immensely and did make a copy for my mother, I ended up giving it to my sister instead, knowing Lydia would get a lot more out of it than my mother. The irony is that my dissertation study concerned Puerto Rican families, particularly mothers, in curriculum decision-making. And yet I knew that for *my* Puerto Rican mother—given her limited education and unfamiliarity with the abstract ideas and fancy language in the dissertation—the document would make as much sense to her as a dissertation written in Chinese. One of the penalties higher education extracts is that in becoming highly educated and crossing over to the middle class, a greater gulf is often created between generations.



THE IDEA OF WRITING this memoir began to form when I realized that—besides my great good fortune to have parents who, despite poverty and lack of opportunity, made certain their children would have better options—my life has been a story of the redeeming social and emotional value of public education. Education has been my defining moment, my mission, my goal, and my odyssey.

Yet, though it has been so significant in my life, public education has failed the Puerto Rican community in general. Those of us fortunate enough to get through the eye of the needle that is higher education often realize that success has as much to do with luck and opportunity as with intelligence and merit. I am tired of hearing that it is individual effort alone that makes the difference between failing and succeeding in life. Yes, resilience and determination have something to do with it, as do other personality traits and the choices we make along the way. But I am not so naive as to believe humans completely control their destiny; there are too many conditions beyond our power to believe this. Poverty, limited opportunities, and other conditions play equally important roles in our lives. But poverty or limited opportunities are not necessarily destiny. Although people may have little power over many things in life, they can make choices that can help define their future.

I cannot claim to have experienced the crippling poverty of Frank McCourt, whose life was so powerfully documented in *Angela's Ashes*, or the heartbreak of living with an alcoholic father as Sonia Sotomayor described in her memoir *My Beloved World*. But as the daughter of working-class and poorly educated immigrant parents living in relative poverty, I have a story to tell about the potential of public education to change the course of a person's life. Yet my experience does not reflect the experience of most second-generation immigrant Puerto Ricans or of other young people with limited opportunities. Although I believe passionately in the value of public education, it has failed too many young people, particularly the children of immigrants, the poor, and the dispossessed.

That public education has not worked for everyone is an indictment of the system. This failure is amply documented in government statistics, research studies, commission reports, and policy documents. I certainly don't want my readers to conclude that because I have been successful, there must be something wrong with all the others who have not been successful in similar situations. I've heard this argument all my life, and rather than making me proud or grateful—as surely it has been meant to do—it annoys and angers me. Following this line of reasoning, the only conclusion you can reach is that failure is an entirely individual choice caused by laziness, lack of effort or personal resolve, or what is deemed an undesirable cultural background. These are, in fact, the arguments made by many educators and policy makers. Yet through my personal experience and research and the benefits of an excellent education, I know that individual effort explains only a small part of success. Many institutional barriers, including inadequate health care and nutrition, poor housing, parental unemployment, limited work opportunities, a paucity of educational and cultural opportunities, and racism and bigotry, are at the heart of the failure to learn. My life's work has been fueled by this reality. In fifty years as a teacher, researcher, lecturer, and writer, I hope I have influenced others, from students to community members to educators, to fight to change these institutional barriers so that all public school students can reap the benefits of a good education.

What made the difference for me? I wish I had an easy answer, one that might satisfy pundits who wish to claim that the answer lies in acquiring the right attitudes, in having the will to learn English and assimilate,

in parents who learn the ways of the middle class, or in other panaceas. In my case, it was most likely a variety of factors, primary among which is my family's move to a middle-class neighborhood when I was thirteen—a move that gave me the opportunity to attend excellent public schools. I was not born a genius; nor am I one now. But I was always a serious and hardworking student with more resilience than brainpower and with more determination and grit than brilliance, and somehow I knew from an early age that I wanted more out of life than what I saw around me. Whether in first grade or graduate school, I was the classic overachiever, doing more than was asked of me, wanting to please, to be teacher's pet, to learn and compensate for what I couldn't claim by birth or privilege. But this alone doesn't explain how I got to where I am. My stable family life, a wide supportive network, a few great teachers and mentors throughout my life, a social and political environment that made it possible for my father—with a meager education—to be gainfully employed throughout his life, and serendipitous opportunities all helped, although others in similar circumstances have not been as fortunate.

My nuclear family (my father, Federico Cortés; mother, Esther Mercado; older sister, Lydia; and younger brother, Freddy) are as critical to my story as I am. The many cousins who grew up with us in Brooklyn, all within blocks of one another, also played a role. And the relatives who lived in other neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and even my many cousins in Puerto Rico, along with their parents, also shaped who I am today. The extended family in our community, our neighbors, and those we called *como familia* (who I was convinced were cousins, aunts, and uncles until I found out years later that they were actually only very loosely related to us) formed part of that stable network and gave my siblings and me a safety net not available to many young people today. This family network is a major theme in my story.



IMMIGRATION IS NEVER EASY, and although it often holds the promise of a better life, the immigrant experience is also fraught with pain, loss, and desperation. In a recent interview, the Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat was asked to select a literary passage that had particular meaning for her. She selected a passage from Patricia Engel's memoir, *It's Not Love*,

It's Just Paris (2013), in which the author's father tells her, "All immigrants are artists because they create a life, a future, from nothing but a dream. The immigrant's life is art in its purest form."

I found this quote moving and enormously insightful. It made me rethink my parents' pilgrimage to New York. I saw them in a new light, as creative explorers rather than as victims of colonialism, poverty, and helplessness. When my parents arrived in the States in the first decades of the twentieth century, there were just several thousand Puerto Ricans in New York City, compared with five million in the United States today. As part of the group referred to by historians as *pioneros* (the first large-scale group to arrive after Puerto Ricans were made US citizens in 1917), my parents found a small network of compatriots but little else save the hard life of poor working-class immigrants. My mother and father led difficult lives and yet were remarkably successful, not in monetary or even educational terms but in making a good life for themselves and for us, their children, and inspiring us to follow their example of hard work, family devotion, and drive.

Many of the Puerto Ricans I went to school with were as smart as, and often smarter than, me. They had hopes and dreams just as I did. Yet many ended up dropping out of school and, like their parents, remaining part of the unemployed or poor working class; most were never able to attend college. Even today, Puerto Ricans still have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any ethnic group in the United States, just as they did when I was a child. The rates range from 40 to 60 percent or more, depending on the city or town and the year in question. Employment is often precarious, and unemployment remains stubbornly high even in good economic times, while the college completion rate of Puerto Ricans continues to lag behind that of Whites, Asians, and African Americans.

The issue of identity also looms large in my memory and in this book. How I constructed my identities and how they shifted—what it meant to be Puerto Rican in Williamsburg, then a largely Puerto Rican community in Brooklyn; in East Flatbush, a largely Jewish and middle-class community; and, later, in my university, where I was one of the few Puerto Ricans—are also part of the story. That I managed to retain my native language—moving from a monolingual Spanish speaker to practically abandoning the language and, later, to claim it again in young adulthood—is

an equally significant issue in my identity. I am grateful to my parents for their tenacity in speaking and encouraging us to speak Spanish. No less significant is that we were a light-skinned Puerto Rican family, something that surely helped my sister and me because teachers and other authority figures in our lives (most of whom were White) then saw us as more like them, thus more acceptable or, at most, as different from other Puerto Ricans.

Mentors have also been a significant reason for my success, though some of them may not even know how they changed my life. These include some family members, especially my parents and Lydia; my husband, Angel; and teachers, professors, colleagues, and supervisors in a variety of positions. I describe them here in ways that I hope honor their influence.

I also decided to write this memoir so that I myself might make some sense of my life and the trajectory it has taken. As I write this, I am about to turn seventy-two. Thinking about my story has helped me understand more deeply what I have attempted to do with my life. I hope that what I have learned will help others on a similar journey. At this age, I am still a work in progress, as my career has not taken a rest. I write extensively; speak often at schools, colleges, universities, and conferences; and consult with school systems and other educational organizations a good deal. I feel blessed to have such an active and fulfilled life.

Thinking back on my childhood in Brooklyn, I am amazed at my good fortune, *mi fortuna*, to take a page from my father's life (whose first bodega was called La Fortuna, named after the farm on which he worked in Puerto Rico as a boy). Although my Brooklyn dreams have been more than realized, those of many other young people, from Brooklyn to Detroit, Orlando to Los Angeles, and everywhere in between, have not. I hope that this memoir will shed some light on how our society can make these young people's dreams come true as well.

At the same time, writing a memoir is a tricky business. What to include and what to leave out are momentous questions. A person's memory—fading at this age—is also a challenge. I never had a very good memory to begin with, so it's ironic that I took up the challenge of writing a memoir, something that relies so heavily on memory. In writing, however, I have found that long-lost memories have been recovered—something for which I am grateful. Some memories have come back slowly; others have

catapulted into my mind. This book is based on real events, although, of course, I've had to reconstruct the dialogue and some of the sequence of events. Occasionally, I've changed people's names and descriptions to protect their privacy.

This book describes my journey from a declining urban elementary school in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn in the 1950s to my doctoral work in bucolic Amherst, Massachusetts, in the 1970s and beyond. My story, however, is not just one of individual achievement or a Puerto Rican version of the Horatio Alger story. I refuse to be cast as "the Puerto Rican exception," as if I was so different from other Puerto Ricans. Rather than just my story, the book is about the potential promise and, ultimately, the disappointing outcome of public education as it was first envisioned at the dawn of public schooling in mid-nineteenth-century United States. Granted, initial pronouncements of the benefits of a free, tax-supported, universal public education were steeped in paternalism, not to mention racial and ethnic exclusivity in that they included only children of European descent. Recently freed slaves, Indigenous Americans, Mexicans, and other non-Europeans were conspicuously missing from such noble pronouncements and are—not coincidentally—those most neglected by public education even today.

Nevertheless, the ideal of a universally available and common school experience for rich and poor and for those of all ethnic and racial backgrounds remains a lofty, though perhaps never-to-be-realized, goal. It is, however, one worth fighting for. Whether or not the promise of public education will ever be achieved, those who have benefited the least have been the ones to struggle the most fervently for this goal. In fact, the educational history of the United States is replete with the stories of such struggles, from desegregation to multicultural education, from gender-fair to special education, and others, a history documented in a 2005 article I wrote for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Harvard Educational Review*.

The book covers many of the events, values, and inspiring ideas that have defined and enriched my life. I describe how I came to understand and develop my ideas about education; the emergence of my political consciousness through my firsthand experiences in the contentious movements of community control, bilingual education, ethnic studies, and multicultural education; my own growth as a scholar and researcher; and

the impact my ideas may have had on the field. I share my thoughts on how education has changed in the fifty years that I have been an educator. I also describe my own personal coming of age, how I fell in love and started and raised a family, and how the themes of family, education, community, and justice have intertwined to help me become who I am.

Sadly, today the forces of privatization and marketization, the scapegoating of teachers, the high-stakes testing frenzy, and continuing racism and bigotry are making the goal of an equal and high-quality education more unreachable than ever. As a result, the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is not only reflected in our public schools, but also exacerbated and perpetuated by them. If this situation continues, the grand vision of public education imagined by its proponents over a century ago is certain to disappear. Yet what brings all the themes of my life together is precisely public education: mine as well as that of my sister and brother, my children and grandchildren, the children I taught directly, and the children I have never met but who have nonetheless been my professional concern throughout my life. In writing this book, I have understood, perhaps more clearly than ever, that without public education, my life would be vastly different and immeasurably poorer, not necessarily in economic terms but in meaning and purpose. Given current defeatist ideas about the purpose and meaning of education, I hope that this memoir offers instead a story of the redeeming value of public education, if it is ever given a chance.