

The day I fly to Orlando to meet Carlos Robles the temperature is as high as it is in his hometown of Fajardo, Puerto Rico. The same humidity, too. Occasional puffs of cool air cut through the midday heat, which hits eighty degrees by noon and hangs there until the sun sets. The weather helps explain why so many Puerto Ricans relocate to Orlando in search of opportunities.

"The truth is I wanted a new job and couldn't see myself moving too far north. I can't stand it when it gets below sixty," says Carlos.

He has been in Orlando for two years and so far only the most extreme winter chills (extreme, that is, by Orlando standards) have rattled him. Puerto Ricans are the only U.S. citizens born on a piece of U.S. soil where Latin culture and the Spanish language are dominant. They are not immigrants or the children of immigrants like all the other Latinos. Since 1917 they are U.S. citizens and, despite their island's colonial friction with the United States, they are basically Americans born and bred. Taking a trip to Puerto Rico, lovely as that might be for me, isn't going to tell me much about Latinos in the larger American experience because the island in many ways operates like its own Latino country. So, instead, I've come to Orlando, Florida, a favored destination for islanders looking to come to the mainland.

I meet Carlos in the sun-splashed garden of the Valencia Community College Center for Global Languages where Carlos is taking a class. Students from all over the world study here to improve their pronunciation and understanding of the English language. They used to call the classes Accent Reduction but no one enrolled. So they renamed them English Conversation class and now they're full.

Carlos is a fair-skinned, chunky guy with short dark hair and a squared-off goatee. He is sweating and antsy and shakes my hand like he's just walked into a do-or-die job interview. When he says, "Eh-lo," I think of my grandmother with her two words of English. I tell Carlos that I know Spanish but that if I were to talk to him in Spanish he'd be doing this story about me. He starts smiling little by little. I recall how my mother used to say "hog-dog" all the time for hot dog and get a snicker of recognition out of him.

Carlos's features could make him from anywhere Latin, except that his Spanish is very Puerto Rican. When he speaks Spanish he replaces his *rs* with *ls* and he talks like he's about to start singing. It's a happy form of speech, very homey, almost like teasing. But in English he sounds like he's spitting out phrases. He is hesitant, throwing out each word almost like he's asking the question, "Is this the right word, am I pronouncing it right?" So this guy who was born on American territory, educated in American schools, is about to begin barking out language drills in a classroom so he can communicate with his fellow Americans here in Orlando. He laughs at his whole situation.

I meet another Puerto Rican student in the garden. Santos Martinez is tall, black, bald, and looks like the basketball coach he is. He coaches in English but feels like he's not communicating with the parents. "I can't do that if the fathers keep looking at me like, 'What did he just say?'" says Santos. He rattles off his personal résumé to explain why he's here. "I'm part-time [at] JetBlue, no wife, no kids. In my culture that's a loser." His language limitations have kept him from rising professionally or meeting the American wife he's looking for. Santos, Carlos, and I trade words before class begins. Carlos can't say the *ths* properly. Instead of "thought," he says "tawt." I ask them what's the most difficult word to pronounce in English and Santos says, "Crocodile." I ask him how you pronounce it in Spanish and suddenly we're all standing there sputtering: "Co-co. Ca-ca-ca." We all begin to laugh.

Carlos's journey to Orlando began in his hometown of Fajardo, known as *La Metrópolis del Sol Naciente*, the Metropolis of the Rising Sun. It's a small town on the east end of Puerto Rico where recreational boats float in the Atlantic Ocean and big ferries take off for the islands of Vieques and Culebra. Nothing in Fajardo seems to move quickly, not even the cooling breeze that comes off the ocean. Like Orlando, it's a place many people associate with a good vacation.

Carlos worked as a police officer in nearby Carolina, where an international airport sits beside a string of resort hotels, lazy beaches, and a very large shopping mall. His territory included the towns of Loiza and Canóvanas, which have housing complexes with substantial drug problems. Carlos felt he was on a road to nowhere good. The pay was low; his family was threatened by the drug dealers; his mother was always praying for his safety. Homes on the island are very expensive so he felt he'd never be enough to buy something nice. He had to get out. But it made him sad to walk away from the tranquility and tropical weather he loved.

Years earlier, his aunt and uncle had moved their family to Orlando after his uncle was transferred there by the navy. There were a lot of Puerto Ricans in Orlando and the family found the weather and atmosphere familiar. Carlos and his family visited so often that his grandmother purchased three small apartments to use as vacation homes for all her kids and grandkids. When Carlos decided to quit his job to search for new opportunities, his grandmother offered him a free apartment in Orlando so he could join his aunt, uncle, and two cousins. He was gone in weeks.

This is a familiar story for many Puerto Ricans who relocate to Orlando. The island has 15 percent unemployment and there isn't enough affordable housing, while there are more opportunities for jobs and homes on the mainland. Jorge Duany, a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, researched the phenomenon of Puerto Ricans moving to Orlando. He discovered official efforts to encourage Puerto Ricans to move to Orlando dating as far back as the 1950s, when central Florida needed more farmworkers and the island's government began a program to encourage migration. That was followed by another contract labor program in the 1970s.

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and the island had a lot of trained agricultural workers. Since the island had lower salaries, the Puerto Ricans were a cheap, hardworking domestic labor force. The workers made more money on the mainland, bought homes and stayed. Friends and relatives followed. In 1971, Disney opened and real estate speculation drew even more Puerto Ricans. Disney also liked Puerto Rican workers. They sent representatives to the island to visit schools and job fairs. They even offered cash relocation bonuses at one point.

Orlando in general was exploding with people. The local chamber of commerce estimates one thousand a week were coming at one point. Research by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2002 determined Orlando's Latino population had 300 percent growth since 1980. The U.S. census said the place was adding 347 people a day in 2001, and there's no denying that Puerto Ricans were a big part of that growth. They represent 56 percent of the Orlando Latino population, and that doesn't even count the many Puerto Ricans who travel back and forth.

As the population of Orlando became more Latino, other companies looked to diversify their workforce and offer bilingual services. Puerto Rican employees filled both those goals without having any immigration issues. NASA, just forty miles away, sent recruiters to hunt for talented engineers at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez. Florida Hospital in Orlando signed an affiliation agreement with the University of Puerto Rico in 2005. Between 2000 and 2006, according to census figures, 200,000 of Puerto Rico's 4 million people moved to Florida. After the farmworkers came bluecollar laborers and then professionals. They didn't just come from the island but also from big mainland cities like New York and Chicago, traditional destinations for Puerto Ricans. Almost half the Puerto Ricans in Orlando come from other cities on the mainland, Duany found in his research. He also discovered that the newcomers are mostly white, well educated, and have more than double the median family income of their counterparts back on the island. The move is paying off.