

A HISTORY OF FLIGHTS

by

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I was four months old when I first boarded an airplane. The year was 1946, my birth coinciding with the emergence of postwar commercial air travel. My mother held me in one arm as her other hand guided my sister, not yet two, who had recently started to walk. The plane, according to my mother, was bullet-riddled from the war and the seats were wooden folding chairs. We were flying because my mother was leaving my adulterous father and the dim future of a divorced woman in then-rigidly Catholic Puerto Rico.

A more traditional woman would have resigned herself to an island man's adulterous nature and waited out his contrite return. Of course, many years passed before I could piece together the marital issues that led to this flight and understand why, hoping for a reconciliation, in less than two years my mother packed us up again to fly back to San Juan only to have us boomerang and finally start her new life in my godmother aunt's apartment in a still partly-Jewish Bronx neighborhood.

Ironically, because my mother and aunt harbored every islander's determination to make this trip to *Los Estados Unidos* a sojourn, our settling down in New York meant that I was destined to take many more flights to keep in touch with family and the island to which we were destined to return. Once I started school—my sister having already been rescued from growing up with loose *americana* morals by being taken away, schooled by nuns in Puerto Rico— in late June

I flew to San Juan in the custody of my vacationing aunt and in late August returned in the care of a flight attendant, who back then was always a woman and called a stewardess. Around this round trip my future years unfolded, and the stages of my life I came to identify with evolving generations of airplanes, airports, and passengers.

The earliest flights back to the island remain the most memorable, having been solemn rituals, steeped in the collective sadness of having left the island and presumably foreshadowing an inevitable, final departure for home. Dress codes of those days contributed to the solemnity because to interact in public, especially to travel, one dressed more formally. My mother and godmother aunt, who most often flew with me, dressed themselves and me as we did to attend church, where in effect we were going because Idlewild Airport— called that before J. F. K. made a name for it— was practically a cathedral, the site where, souls packed in suitcases, the anointed arrived to be transported to their ancestral land.

We always flew on cheapest night flights. Family friends filling a second car came to help us haul baggage down five flights and see us off at the airport ostensibly because in those days flight was still a novelty, which made a trip to the airport its own adventure, but really to be that much closer to their Caribbean temple. Absent today's terrorism, they could accompany us right up to the departure gate, where they entrusted my aunt with totems of bond across an ocean: shopping bags of things requested in Air Mail letters by relatives and neighbors of those relatives. Once we disappeared past the departure gate, they would go upstairs to the terminal's Observation Roof.

My aunt would only fly on Pan American,¹ one of two airlines that flew nonstop to San Juan, the other being Eastern, whose flagship plane when I was five was the four-engine "Yankee Clipper." I still recall it photographed in the glossy flight schedule and appearing huge even though most of it could fit on one wing of today's largest jets. Boarding those planes was more romantic than today's walk through a covered ramp. Amid tarmac sounds and fumes passengers paraded in the night in the direction of the movable staircase, climbed the stairs and just before entering the plane, in a manner now reserved for dignitaries, turned to wave toward the observers on the roof. The trip would take eight hours.

As my aunt and I only flew in summer. Because the cabin lacked air conditioning, inside it was always stuffy. Cooler night air awaited high up but until then the only relief came from a small fan above every passenger's seat. In that cabin heat, my aunt led me down the aisle between pairs of seats until we found ours, mine always by the window. Having flown since when my safety belt consisted of my mother's arm, I knew to buckle up, and my aunt, all the while murmuring to herself, stored the shopping bags under my dangling feet, buckled her seat belt, and took out her rosary beads.

Her thumb and index finger stroked the beads as I looked through the small cabin window in the direction of the Observation Roof, looking for my mother, waving in the hope she could see me while I saw little more than lights and silhouettes of heads. From that Roof, on days that my family saw others off, for a dime I peered through a green, ovular-shaped, binocular scope. A familiar face and hand waving back from the plane's tiny window ignited a collective bosom and

¹Whose founder was the felicitously named Juan Trippe, not Hispanic, but named after his uncle's Venezuelan wife, Juanita.

our hearts ascended to fly with them, *Adiós! Adiós!*

Now *I* was returning. The cabin doors were shut, the spinning propellers roared, and the shaking cabin rolled down the runway for so long that, before the plane actually flew, one of the two stewardesses demonstrated in English how to put on a life vest. Knowing the lesson by heart, I paid no attention nor did my aunt, who placed greater trust in the Hail Marys she had been whispering since before she broke out the rosary, since before she boarded the plane, since we walked out of the terminal.

With the first sensation of lift, the volume of her praying voice rose as a second stewardess stumbled down the aisle, offering tiny yellow or pink two-piece boxes of Chicklets. Chewing always did the job of popping out the air that clogged our ears. My aunt's prayers, on the other hand, I saw as an expression of her risible timidity. Until one unforgettable flight.

It had started out especially happy because my mother and sister were flying with us. On those overnight trips, normally after takeoff I lay my head on my aunt's lap and cruised in a dream of the beauty that always awaited: awaking to the Caribbean's radiant sunrise, its glorious, breathtakingly blue sky as gleaming silver wings cut through the tallest bleached sculptures of cloud. This time I awoke to a dimly-lit cabin and tried to lift my head but couldn't because my aunt held it pressed against her lap. Her palm over my ear also muffled the crying and moaning behind her louder, breathless appeals to Mary as the jittery rosary bounced against my hair. Then the cabin plunged, no longer flying and just dropping in a free fall that streamed incandescent screams, mine among them, until it stopped with a bounce as if tethered.

The plane gained altitude again and the ordeal appeared to be over, but I couldn't free my head from under my aunt's hand that pressed even harder without interrupting her *Santa*

María, Madre de Dios, llena eres de gracia...., which she suddenly shouted at the top of her voice as the plane plunged again and I screamed into her lap for my mother (who sat with my sister in another row), visualizing our cabin falling luminously in the night until I felt another bounce and another ascent, which this time, after previous treacherous ascents, offered no illusion of relief. I continued to wail into my aunt's skirt through the respite and several more plunges, bounces, climbs to my aunt's uninterrupted loud prayer until Mary herself, I truly believed, calmed the winds and leveled the plane, allaying too my fear of flying alone back to New York.

That experience did not give me a fear of flying; more scarring was the sadness of being wrenched from a sunlit world of extended family to my latchkey solitude in the constant overcast of a city apartment. To return I always flew alone, in the care of stewardess. She would take me by the hand to my seat among the first rows and in her sight among other children in her care. I also remember contemplating the mainly Puerto Rican passengers filing in, timid-looking *jibaros* that made me wonder why so many would leave behind the colors and warmth of our beautiful island for such gray dullness with winters.

I would learn years later that, like me, they too were being wrenched, escaping from the tropic's sun clouded permanently by poverty, and that they came never imagining the drop in temperature that awaited them. U.S. citizens and yet cultural immigrants, they traveled without a passport, most about to step foot for the first time on the country that legally claimed them about which they knew little more than that English was spoken. Nobody then thought that they were also making history: they comprised the United States's first transoceanic domestic migration, its first voluntary transatlantic influx not from Europe, and the first large migration on airplanes.

The migration had started out on passenger ships. Since 1898, when the U.S. took possession of Puerto Rico as booty of The Spanish-American War, and through the early twentieth century leading up to WWII, passenger ships by way of Havana transported a roster of more cosmopolitan islanders to New York and Miami. After WWII, mainly agrarian poor boarded the direct-route Marine Tiger, a cargo ship back from war duty, its name coming to brand any recently-arrived bumpkin who wandered inept in New York, *un marine tiger*. Among the first generation the Marine Tiger survived in lore as the umbilical symbol of the migration. But the greatest number arrived later by air.

The migration was induced by the island's first democratically elected government's industrialization initiative, Operation Bootstrap. Its success counted on reducing the population of agrarian and unskilled poor, a project aided by the postwar burgeoning of commercial air travel. The agenda was bicoastal, marshaling New York City planners, who readily cottoned to the idea of new garment workers to replace earlier, now upwardly-mobile Jewish immigrants.

The plan also involved negotiating with Pan American Airways, the largest and first to offer nonstop service, to tally the profit of a cheap fare (\$25.00), multiplied by round-tripping businessmen lured by tax-free incentives and tourists vacationing at newly constructed hotels and the shuttling visits of relocated, homesick Puerto Ricans. Pan Am's move prompted Eastern Airlines to offer the same deal while, on the industrializing island, public service ads hyped the promise awaiting those who flew to the neighboring isle of Manhattan.

The migration, coupled with the industrialization's indicators of promising success contributed to the optimism of a "permanent union" with the United States that was ratified in 1952, its officially titled "Commonwealth" political status. Described as a freely entered,

permanent compact between Puerto Rico and the United States, its official title, as I was told by an ambassador from the then-Ceylon, misled the U.N. Implying the truly autonomous postcolonial relation of the former members of the British Empire, “Commonwealth” feigned compliance with the United Nations’s post-war mandate to end colonialism, camouflaging an unchanged colonial relationship.

By the early fifties Pan American was flying its new flagship, the Constellation. Pressurized cabins made Chicklets no longer necessary and the flight was reduced to six hours. Eastern kept pace, so throughout the Eisenhower years pressurized cabins relocated islanders in boroughs beyond Manhattan’s already crowded “El Barrio,” a population shift that by then was changing the libretto of New York City to extremely unfavorable reviews. Particularly noisome were deemed first and second generation youth that expressed urban anger as teenage gangs. Bigotry associated Puerto Ricans with gangs, ignoring historical context: this was the American fifties of *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel without a Cause*.

Shuttled on airplanes between a dysfunctional parent on each coast, an icon of that troubled youth was the sixteen-year-old gang leader Salvador Agrón. In 1959, wearing his signature black cape, Agrón lead his gang The Vampires to a city park to “rumble” with a gang that never showed up. Two non-Hispanic boys who happened to be in the park ended up dead, and Agrón and another gang member, Luis Hernández, 17, AKA The Umbrella Man, were convicted of killing them.

At sixteen Agrón was the youngest person in New York State condemned to die in the electric chair. Three days before his scheduled execution his sentence was commuted by Governor Nelson Rockefeller. (Hernández’s sentence was overturned owing to a lack of proof

that he actually stabbed anybody.) Demonized by his own teenage bombast (“My mother can see me fry.”) and by a *The Daily News*’ photograph of him in his stolen Dracula cape, he was immortalized as The Capeman.²

Almost at the same hour that Agrón was said to have committed the killings, another Puerto Rican gang was rumbling that night, on Broadway. Playwright Arthur Laurent and Composer Leonard Bernstein, who had originally planned a musical on the conflict between Irish and Jews, picked up more timely metaphors in the drama of recently arrived Puerto Ricans, resulting in *West Side Story*, a love story set against a clash of two gangs, the white Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks. The gang names were actually malapropisms. The Jets were the grandchildren of immigrants who arrived on ships while the Sharks represented a migration still arriving airplanes. By the play’s 1957 debut those planes would be faster, not actual jets but on propeller planes aided by jet propulsion, the propjet, introduced that same year, shortening the New York-San Juan trip from six hours to four.

The propjet provided an apt metaphor of Puerto Rico’s undefined status: like the propjet, neither simply propeller plane nor pure jet, the Commonwealth was neither nation nor American state. One can also say that the just four hours it took to fly between coasts stoked the fight over the island’s political status, complicating things for those who resisted the Americanization of island culture: the propjet was the needle that wove island industry more efficiently into the mainland economy, inspiring a renewed mobilization of island advocates of statehood.

One of the most successful examples of the economies intertwined by flight was Trans

² Agrón would become the inspiration of Paul Simon’s eponymous musical, *The Capeman*.

Caribbean Airways. In 1945, real estate investor O. Roy Chalk had founded Trans Caribbean Airways with its hub in San Juan to fly mail to the mainland and surrounding islands. Chalk also owned the two competing New York Spanish-language tabloids, which he later merged into *El Diario La Prensa*. He saw a missing component in the increasingly lucrative New York-San Juan passenger route: the only two airlines who flew the route offered English-only service to passengers still largely Spanish speakers. In 1958, he leased a fleet of propjets, advertised in his *El Diario*, and swung deals with Puerto Rican-specific travel agencies, such as Cofresí Travel, which packed his planes with passengers.

The new Trans Caribbean Airways offered bilingual personnel hired from the children of the earliest *marine tigers*. Stewardesses, strictly women flight attendants of those days, wore a uniform designed by Mrs. Chalk,³ with a hat “that was supposed to be a copy of the Spanish Cordobes hat, the color Blue trim in Aqua,” representing the Caribbean’s Spanish heritage. In practice, however, his planes were more in the tradition of the country bus with chickens and roosters and overstuffed parcels. The cheaper Trans Caribbean became famous for its joke-cracking loudmouths and pint-bottle drinkers turned away at the gate. Most colorful was its invariably off-schedule and cheapest, midnight "Kikiriki" flights, which arrived with the "Ki-ki-ri-ki" of Spanish-crowing roosters.

By this time, I was a young teen and the economics of flight allowed me to fly in the morning. Flying at dawn, I had lunch at the house of one of my aunts, grateful that the propjet flew a shorter time and above storms like the one in which that “Yankee Clipper” roller-coastered over the Atlantic. But I missed little details about the older planes. Flying above the

³According to information given on Wikipedia, with no sources.

weather, the propjet's window view was now monotonously blue. Far below floated the epic cloud sculptures, now visible as a white lumpy carpet. On those propjet planes landed the tens of thousands who would occupy more of the Brooklyn and Bronx neighborhoods that immigrant Jews had left for Long Island suburbia.

The propjet was actually the cheaper alternative to its competitor that debuted in the same year, the Boeing 707 pure jet, which Pan Am put into service in 1958. Eastern too upgraded its fleets. The 707 didn't reign alone for long before we were flying the McDonnell-Douglas DC's, the choice of Trans Caribbean.

With the jet, now one crossed the Atlantic in three hours and fifteen minutes, and Puerto Rican passengers began the practice of applauding when the plane's wheels touched down in San Juan. Landing home had always elicited some cheers, but something about the jet prompted an ovation. Tourists would look around bewildered, appearing to think: maybe these people, awed by technology, were even simpler than we thought. At first the applause celebrated homecoming, and landings in San Juan were the loudest. Eventually applause garlanded landings in New York, suggesting that the city was now considered home.

Sentiments of homecoming can explain the impulse, but the applause also burgeoned from other chambers of the Puerto Rican psyche. The jet's consistent choreography— its invoking the energy to make tons weightless, the silk of its cruising speed, and finally its almost ballet alighting—is a performance appreciated by a collective consciousness for whom flying had long been not just physical transportation but a transport. The applause, in sum, was a transference, a secular reaction to artistry from a people with a legacy of flight as a soulful event.

In 1970 Pan American added the Boeing jumbo 747, with its distinctive size and bulb-

top, first-class lounge. I never got to see the first-class lounge, but for a brief span early on, these jumbos offered a tail-section, economy-class, lounge with a cash-bar. This lounge and bar may have sounded on paper like a great passenger perk, but besides not paying for itself, the bar invited problems with unruly passengers, prompting the companies to fill that space with seats.

In 1971, looking to expand into the Caribbean and Central American market, American Airlines acquired Trans Caribbean's route, the deal creating a triumvirate of premier lines. The purchase also marked this route as a premier air travel market, which had really started out as a Puerto Rican government scheme.

From the start, jet propulsion delivered a double-edged harsh reality. A speedy bridge that lessened the trauma of leaving, it promised a fast return, freeing the once single consciousness of ill-adjusted New Yorkers to resettle throughout the Northeast. From Allentown to Boston, far-flung relations could converge for a wedding or a funeral, landing on the island in such a short time they could easily convince themselves that they had not changed that much. But the jet also proved to them that they had. For by the time of the pure jet, the mainland Puerto Rican community had developed a personality increasingly its own and no longer an imprint of island kin.

Newyoricans had lost the islander's hallmark understatement and obliqueness. Having grown up seeing their polite parents act elegantly, their manners misconstrued as an acknowledgment of deserving the social deprecation they received, they had learned from New York to respond blatantly, in-your-face. Their anger turned their lives into a political act, became their American identity that collaterally redefined their appreciation of Puerto Ricanness, its intuitive substance becoming murky and more nostalgic than real under its more sharply defined

vigilant defiance.

Arriving embattled from New York, the Newyorican elicited no empathy from middle-class islanders who enjoy a remote American citizenship in their autonomous, insulated space and feel spared the ignominy of a minority identity. Not having experienced immediate American bigotry and repelled by gang turmoils and underclass behavior, they envisioned a possible middle-class American and island Puerto Rican equality in cultural balance. Until the devastation of Hurricane Maria, that vision had only been punctured by *newyorican* anger, and dream-prone islanders preferred to kill the messenger.

The end of the twentieth century marked the end of the post-war migration era as the original airlines of the migration, Pan American and Eastern, had gone bankrupt, and Puerto Rico had become a more ranging airline market as signaled by TWA's and Delta's connecting the island to cities in the south until TWA folded in 2001. Into the new century, with every financial crisis, on Delta and American Airlines, over Jetblue and Spirit Air, began a middle-class airborne migration to mainland cities where one would not be confused with the darker Shark cast of *West Side Story*, the favorite destination Orlando, where Puerto Ricans became the largest Hispanic demographic.

At San Juan's airport the higher and whiter the social class, the fewer their numbers left for New York or even the Northeast, and if they did, it had to be in an upgraded class, away from the maddening crowd. When from places other than New York planes land on the island, one rarely hears the essentially working class applause. In other words, throughout the second half of the twentieth century jets had imposed on traditional island cultural mythos the fact of its always having been subdivided by race and class, a reality now spread over a larger consciousness and

aggravated by mainland social mobility.

Newyoricans had flown from the island as its poorest, and now landed economically middle class to be demoted culturally, taunted for their poor or no Spanish. In defense, they flaunted the English that back on the mainland they sprinkled with Spanish. Ironically, they even invoked a Yankee supremacist anthropology before islanders, defending their direct mainland manner as a culturally superior Anglo openness. The islander's rejection, they retort, is a denial, a quixotic dreaming of lost Spanish refinement as a buffer against Puerto Rico's bi-coastal and half-gringo reality.

Poorer sectors distinguish little between mainland and island travails, necessity making them less judgmental. But the middle and upper class defends a cultural standard. Cocooned by the Commonwealth's virtual autonomy, islanders imagined themselves as culturally sovereign, another piece of Latin America's collage, and dismiss the minority-minded *newyoricans'* counterattack as being so out of touch and unable to appreciate modern Puerto Rico's having creatively reconciled its contradictory connection to the United States with its Information-Age Latin American membership.

Love and hate have always made a truce during a political crisis or a natural disaster, when island organizations or governmental agencies appeal to the mainland community's political and media clout, and mainlanders accede to this tacit request that they forget how difficult the island can be, that they hold on to the myth of Puerto Ricans as one family. With that idea as motive, many mainlanders flew to Vieques to protest practice Navy shellings and, most recently, ambassadors of mainland solidarity flew to support the island after Hurricane María, in whose aftermath jet planes drain the island of the skilled and professional families escaping the

island's wrecked economy.

This latest migration converges with the large Latin American immigration that began in the eighties, largely induced by civil rights gains. Unforeseen by Puerto Rican and Mexican American activists in the late sixties was that gains they fought for in the name of all *latinos* would also attract other Latin Americans in search of economic and political exile. The majority crossed from Mexico, but except for poorer Central Americans who traversed Mexico to reach the border, thousands of Latin Americans boarded U.S.-bound jets. Like Puerto Ricans after WWII, different in not being legal immigrants, Latin Americans also landed out of step with American immigrant myths misty with the romance of ships from Europe entering New York's harbor, in the sight of Lady Liberty.

Whether landing from San Juan or Buenos Aires, the proverbial "coming to America" is a redundancy because for all Latin Americans "The Old Country" is America itself, the America in the United States of America. But they can all claim the rights to equitable opportunity earned by Mexican Americans on their home soil and mainland Puerto Ricans who arrived in airplanes decades before. The Southwest has its particular history and is its own historical monument, but in the nation's eastern half the mainland Puerto Rican community has every reason to see itself as the opening chapter and a living monument to the transforming airborne immigration from Latin America.

The dramatic history to tell of the fleeing from Death Squads, of schemes to procure visas, of cramming for citizenship exams is incomplete without the background of an arrival to this country more welcoming because Puerto Ricans faced the brunt of more bigoted American decades and joined with Mexican Americans and African Americans to guarantee rights of all

latinos, even those yet to immigrate. Fitting that the first Latina Supreme Court Justice of the Sonia Santamayer be a *newyoricana* born in the Bronx, embodiment of the history ineluctably inherited, along with its gains, by newest Americans with roots in San José or Cartagena or Montevideo— and the most recent economic diaspora that may misguidedly pursue preserving a *criollo puertorriqueñidad* mythically— demarcated from the history of flight pivotal to our now brackish, composite culture.

In my latest flight to San Juan post Maria, which I presume won't be my last, one felt the pall over everything, not only the urban landscape but as well over belief systems, a distinct identity crisis. Trump had treated the island expressing the same antipathy he had meted out at the border. He showed no respect for the distinction that the cultured islander presumed between itself and Newyoricans, whose angers were vindicated. Not recognizable as the thriving island, the only island that this generation had known as either a real or figurative home, it awaits a resurgence.

Meanwhile, flights continue shuttling from San Juan to New York, Chicago, Orlando and back, crossing latitudes and longitudes and as well internecine cultural divisions. Mainland passengers may still feel connected but reconciling the reality that, as more efficient planes shrank the nautical miles across the Atlantic, the fissure within the culture has grown to the size of an ocean. What decibels of an ancestral call the island will continue to transmit is increasingly garbled by the static in that widening demarcation.

Nevertheless, something overheard or said in the media or directly to one's face incites the admission that on that island originates the only source of a real identity, missing in this country that bestowed citizenship but not cultural kinship. At that moment the soul that had

appeared settled and acclimated comes down with a nostalgia whose first symptom is becoming cognizant of the chill it had been ignoring, resisting, overlooking, denying. Suddenly the music most danced to— even though now much of it originates in New York— and the food most consumed remind that an essence simmers in the primordial warmth of that now faintly audible call from the Caribbean.

The nostalgia may begin with the diction of tourists, talk of beaches, of the sun, a vision of a tropical mountain landscape. Then conversation turns to family that either once lived on the mainland and returned or was last seen at funerals or on a rare Christmas. Such enchantment induces a need to board a jet and go “home,” even if one was born on the U.S. mainland and even though one won't be welcomed everywhere on the island and even though, on landing again in New York, one will applaud the coming back. The flight, in fact, is usually booked to a destination that doesn't exist any longer, to an island that once was or should have been.

Disappearing are those passengers who dressed more formally and carried their souls in suitcases. And increasingly fewer of their descendants return to the island to keep in touch with blood. Of those who do, in our more profane times they wear blue jeans or shorts and sneakers, packing only clothes in wheeled carry-ons. No need for shopping bags with bonding totems requested by family or family friends on a island where anything can be gotten at a local or national chain store.

They arrive at the airport in a medallion or gypsy cab or a bus or an Air Train or the car of a friend or significant other. Those who once rode in a second car to witness the departure from an Observation Roof now text or call on a cellular phone. They send the same blessings and wish a safe flight to those taking off from the same but redesigned New York airport that long ago

stopped being a cathedral and being called Idlewild.