

# Puerto Rican Needleworkers and Colonial Migrations: Deindustrialization as Pathways Lost

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## Abstract

The dominant narrative of U.S. deindustrialization opens with the Northeast as the definitive starting point for industry followed by a direct linear relocation to the South and then the Global South. In this framework, deindustrialization appears to have a logic, a rational pathway following cheaper and compliant labor. When Puerto Rican needleworkers become visible in the history of the textile and garment industry, however, their colonial migrations complicate deindustrialization, and its linear logic collapses. From the perspective of these colonial women, industrialization of Puerto Rico began at the turn of the twentieth century - the same time factories and mills increased in the South. Thousands of women also migrated to the Northeast mainland, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, when many white workers were mourning the loss of textile and garment jobs. Puerto Rican women moved to the old factories of the Northeast, which had become outposts for large transnational corporations that did not relocate their manufacturing in a direct geographic path but rather spread their processes over any arrangement that offered the best cost-benefit analysis. For Puerto Rican women, employment in the plants of the Northeast during the 1960s and 1970s offered hope rather than despair, and many took pride in meeting their quotas and providing wages for their families. In the 1980s, when the Reagan administration initiated major reforms to financial policies and the practices of leveraged buyouts made closing old plants a better return on investment, Puerto Rican women mourned the loss of jobs in an industry many experts had already declared 'dead.'

Fragmentation of the archives between Puerto Rican studies and U.S. labor history have allowed for a simplistic narrative of deindustrialization and an erasure of the losses and disappointments of women who left Puerto Rico for the promise of higher wages in the postwar Northeast mainland. When the oral histories and documents related to the migrations of Puerto Rican needleworkers become visible in the larger history of the 'American working class', we see deindustrialization as sprawling and contingent rather than as linear and naturalized. Puerto Rican studies scholars have written about needleworkers as part of their field with particular attention to gender as it relates to notions of motherhood, but this article sets the women as American workers into the losses of the textile and garment industry without eliding their specificity as migrating and racialized colonial labor. In addition, the women expressed grief that went beyond losing a specific job - many of these workers lost their place in the U.S. workforce and the promise of financial stability as they became associated with racialized poverty and welfare debates.

## Keywords

Puerto Rico, needleworkers, textiles, apparel, colonialism, labor markets, migrations, Operation Bootstrap

## Introduction

As late as the 1970s, Puerto Rican women moved to Willimantic, Connecticut, for jobs in the American Thread factory. American Thread and other companies recruited Puerto Rican workers until 1980, when the disaggregation of textile and garment manufacturing spread beyond the reach of the women's migrations. By that time, Puerto Rican needleworkers had been part of the U.S. domestic textile and apparel industry for several decades. Their stories reveal a working-class identity and aspirations for steady industrial employment. Unlike many white workers in the Northeast, however, they had always understood manufacturing employment as shifting and mobile, rather than as stable and rooted. Their voices challenge the historiography of the U.S. industrial working class, with its traditional focus on white workers, especially men and their families, who identify with particular factories in specific locations.

For Puerto Rican women workers, 'deindustrialization' was not the loss of a geographically rooted and substantial physical plant where their families and neighbors had worked for three or four generations. It was the occlusion of their pathways through an industry that was sprawling into longer supply chains and lines of trade, beyond concentrated hubs like southern New England. That textile and garment industry relied on gendered and racialized labor markets, with the movement of women workers as well as manufacturing in many directions, to drive down costs as needed. In the 1980s, almost all remaining island and northeastern factories closed following the trade and financial policies of the Reagan administration. Despite decades of labor, Puerto Rican needleworkers found themselves without another industrial option, without another place to move for a job.

As Puerto Rican women grieved this loss, they were not legible as the 'American working class' experiencing deindustrialization, but rather as poor women of color seeking welfare. White male workers and their struggles had appeared in popular media throughout the twentieth century, in movies like *Modern Times* (1936), *On the Water Front* (1954), *East of Eden* (1955), *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *Rocky* (1976), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Breaking Away* (1979), and in television shows like *All in the Family* (1971-1979). White women as industrial workers received some visibility in *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Silkwood* (1983) and the television series *Roseanne* (1988-1997).

In *West Side Story* (1961), the two main women characters are Puerto Rican needleworkers, but they appear as exotic beauties and troubled urban teens, not as American workers. In development, performances, and reviews, people did not discuss *West Side Story* as part of any public conversation about the working class (Davine 2016; Acevedo-Muñoz 2013; Garebian 1995).<sup>1</sup> Even in her 2013 memoir, Rita Moreno did not mention the relevance of Puerto Rican industrial needleworkers, despite the fact her mother had worked in island sweatshops and northeastern garment factories (Moreno 2013). Retailers, manufacturers, and government agencies had been analyzing and recruiting Puerto Rican needleworkers since 1898. Yet Maria and Anita of *West Side Story* perform as tropical Others rather than as U.S. labor. Such exclusion further constructed the American working class as white and predominantly masculine.

What happens to the historical narrative when we de-center the Northeast mainland with its familiar North-to-South-to-Global South linear relocation and instead examine the industry from the point of view of Puerto Rican women? The Northeast becomes one significant site among several in the twentieth century, and Puerto Rican needleworkers become visible as labor, legible as the American working class. It also

<sup>1</sup> *West Side Story* was one of three movies with Puerto Rican characters who wielded knives and fought in the city streets, *Cry Tough* (1959) and *The Young Savages* (1961).

becomes clear global capitalism does not function as a linear advancement but rather as a constantly shifting array of sites, trade lines, investment options, and racialized and gendered labor markets. In the postwar period, the textile and garment industry stretched at an accelerating rate due to federal trade and financial policies and the large transnational corporations that squeezed regional manufacturers out of business. As the industry sprawled, Puerto Rican women moved through it on their quest for better jobs because this constantly shifting array was not new to them.

Puerto Rican studies scholars have written about needleworkers with particular attention to migration, gender and notions of motherhood, and unionization. This history, however, positions the women as American workers within the domestic textile and apparel industry without eliding their specificity as racialized and migrating colonial labor (Whalen 2008, 2002; Boris 1996; Ortiz 1990). It argues that Puerto Rican women understood themselves as U.S. workers and migrated for manufacturing jobs. When structural reconfigurations cut off their pathways to industrial wages, however, Puerto Rican women were not recognized as either workers or legitimate mothers. Their stories highlight two emotional responses: grief and anxiety about the sudden lack of stable employment, and confusion and humiliation about the perception that they came to the mainland just to get welfare.

### **Textiles and Garments for U.S. Empire**

The cotton textile and garment operation, from plantations to retail, spanned the world by the mid-1800s. It was a major engine of global capitalism, with intertwined enterprises stretching from the Caribbean to India and Massachusetts to Mexico (Beckert 2014). The American Thread Company formed in 1898 when two companies, headquartered in Scotland, founded a holding company that bought mills in New England. These included the Willimantic Linen Company in Connecticut as well as a wooden spool factory in Maine. American Thread built its first southern factory in Dalton, Georgia, in 1925 (Nuñez 2007).

The same year as the formation of the American Thread Company, the U.S. occupied Puerto Rico. Just months after the military ended Puerto Rico's semi-autonomous constitution and took over governance, mainland retailers and manufacturers were already sending items to the island for finishing and embroidery. A Spanish tradition of needlework had fostered a cottage industry of rural women doing piecework within a system of insular contractors. Mainland managers quickly realized it could be adapted to their industrial manufacturing needs. The decline of European trade and immigration during World War I intensified both the industrialization of the island and the recruitment of Puerto Rican women to factories on the Northeast mainland.

In 1940, New Deal and island administrators hired Arthur D. Little, a consulting firm headquartered in Boston, to develop a comprehensive economic plan for Puerto Rico. These consultants noted with approval the extensive colonial arrangements, such as extreme exemptions from sovereignty, investment regulations, and labor laws - and the migration of poor women to the mainland (Schmidt 2000, pp. 221-245; Magee 1985, pp. 10-16; Little 1942). U.S. offices, insular investors, and Arthur D. Little adapted the colonial exemptions and bureaucratic infrastructure to cultivate the dual migration of manufacturing to the island for cheapest labor and women to the Northeast as cheaper labor. Many women moved back and forth for training as well as jobs. That plan became the platform for Operación Manos a la Obra/Operation

Bootstrap, which would serve as a model for later neoliberal projects called export processing zones (EPZs) (Schmidt 2000; Bolin 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, American Thread consolidated its manufacturing while expanding product lines. The consolidation was not as simple as closures in New England with complete relocation to the South, but rather closures and updates in both regions and extensions into Puerto Rico. For example, American Thread closed plants in Fall River, Massachusetts, and Bristol, Tennessee, during that decade (American Thread Annual Reports, 1953-1979). It also began to recruit Puerto Rican women to Willimantic. By the 1960s and 1970s, white residents of the city noted that the number of Puerto Rican women workers had increased and mentioned the pervasive sounds of people speaking Spanish (Russo 2017; 'Millworkers of Willimantic', 1979-1980). American Thread also opened new sales offices and distribution points in Puerto Rico to service manufacturers on the island (American Thread Annual Reports, 1953-1979; 'Millworkers of Willimantic', 1979-1980; Boujouen 1990, p. 73). These manufacturers had developed since the 1898 occupation of the island and grown with the financial incentives of Operation Bootstrap.

In the 1960s, American Thread's annual reports repeatedly presented its top problem as the dramatic increases in cheap imports. The main competition came from Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) and U.S. State Department had helped build a postwar textile and garment industry (American Thread Annual Reports, 1953-1979; Ekbladh 2010, pp. 77-113; Chomsky 2008, pp. 115-126; Rosen 2002, pp. 29-42; Shenin 2000, pp. 15, 28, 41, 67, 133, 162-164). Despite this concern, American Thread developed a 1963 proposal for updating its mill in Willimantic and building a new plant in Transylvania, North Carolina. The new technology for Willimantic, which came from Germany rather than from New England machinists it had used in the past, included equipment for more synthetic materials (American Thread Annual Reports, 1953-1979). American Thread also continued to hire Puerto Rican women in Willimantic, sometimes paying them cash to fly to the island and recruit workers (Boujouen 1990, pp. 95-96).

### **Puerto Rican Industrial Needleworkers into the 1980s**

By the 1970s, there were thousands of Puerto Rican women in the U.S. textile and apparel industry from Massachusetts and New York City to Philadelphia and the island. Most women had moved from rural parts of Puerto Rico to insular cities and then throughout cities in the Northeast mainland (Whalen 2008, pp. 121-150; Whalen 2002, pp. 45-68; Ortiz 1998, pp. 105-110; Boris 1996, pp. 33-54; Muñiz-Mas 1996, pp. 181-205; Torruellas et al. 1996, pp. 189-190). They understood mobility rather than rootedness as central to their industrial employment and worker identity. For example, Aracelis Martínez learned industrial sewing at the Ana Roqué High School in Humacao in 1962. She moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1964 for better wages, returned to the island and worked in another factory for a few years, and went to New York again in 1970. She was a sewing machine operator in an undergarment factory (Medina 2018; Martínez 2018). Martínez eventually paid for her daughter's flight from Puerto Rico to New York in the mid-1970s, and they moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. Martínez worked at Gemini Mill, a former Carter's factory that was owned and managed by Joel Gordon. He was an industry executive from eastern Massachusetts who had attained contracts for OshKosh, B'Gosh and Izod. Gordon told a reporter that he often struggled to find workers with sewing skills and an interest in the job, but Puerto Rican women had the necessary experience (Medina 2018; Robbins 1985, p. B9; Claffey 1979, p. 3; Rumelt 2019).

<sup>2</sup> I share the Spanish and English terms for Puerto Rican programs so readers can recognize them in other sources. Then I continue with only the English term.

In the early 1970s, Maria Berríos completed piecework at home in Swedesboro, New Jersey. She made octagonal needlework pieces, sewed them together in a pattern, packed them in boxes, and shipped those to New York City. Berríos would then receive a paycheck and another box of materials. Her daughter helped with packing and labeling. Berríos also made embroidered doilies for their apartment, carrying on the original cultural tradition from Puerto Rico even as she applied her skills to industrial manufacturing. In the late 1970s, Berríos moved the family to Holyoke, Massachusetts, where she worked for the Elco Dress Company until it closed in 1986 (Salgado-Cartagena 2017).

Puerto Rican women continued to move to Willimantic to work at American Thread as well. In her studies of Puerto Rican women in the 1980s, Norma Esther Boujouen found that the majority in her samples moved to Willimantic in the 1960s and 1970s. Some joined family members, some were recruited, and some heard about the lower rents and cost of living with the good jobs at American Thread and Hartford Poultry (Boujouen & Newton 198?, pp. 10-11, 94). A woman named Patria told Boujouen, 'Well, my sister-in-law brought me here. She took me to American Thread. I applied and in less than a week I got a job as a machine operator. Then I wrote my cousins to come here to work... It was easy to find jobs when I came here in 1969.' Another woman named Daria came to Willimantic from Puerto Rico in 1970 because her uncle had written to her parents saying young women could get good jobs (Boujouen 1990, pp. 1-5, 35-63, 76-77, 97-98, 101-106; Boujouen & Newton 198?, p. 13).

Some women felt pride in their jobs at American Thread in the 1970s and 1980s, especially if they met quotas. Others worried about the speed and expectations. Many recalled a particular supervisor who regularly called out, 'Menea esas manos', which translates to, 'Keep those hands busy'. Gabriela liked her time at American Thread, saying, 'I enjoyed looking at my machines filling with thread. Everything looked so beautiful. I did a good job because I was careful. My bosses praised me for my work'. Tatiana had a different experience. 'I was almost always nervous because of the constant pressure to make quota', she said. 'I got nervous every time the bosses came to check my work. I felt I had to hurry up'. Another woman, Renata, described the training process. 'I learned to operate the machines in two weeks. The difficult part was to achieve dexterity to produce the quota. It took me about three months to make the quota'. Lupe, however, easily learned and went beyond the quota in a few weeks (Boujouen Ramírez 2013, pp. 2-5; Boujouen 1990, pp. 1-5, 35-63, 76-77, 97-98, 101-106; Boujouen & Newton 198?, p. 13).

Puerto Rican women understood themselves as industrial workers with options and important roles in the production. They viewed the quota as making basic money for the company. Completing extra piecework, or 'pizual', was earning money for themselves. Dolores, who worked at American Thread as a machine operator from her arrival in Willimantic in the 1960s until it closed in 1985, liked the job. 'I like sewing', she told an interviewer before her last day. 'I never had any accidents. The work there is divided into piecework and the task. The task is what you are supposed to produce in order to earn your salary. Piecework is what you produce after your task... so that we can earn extra money' (Boujouen Ramírez 2013, pp. 2-5; Boujouen 1990, pp. 1-5, 35-63, 76-77, 97-98, 101-106; Boujouen & Newton 198?, p. 13).

Despite the low wages and tough work conditions, many Puerto Rican women expressed pride in their skills and providing income for their families. A woman named Maria went to New York City around 1950 and learned to sew on multiple types of machines. When a boss refused to increase her wage per piece even though she knew how to run the zig-zag machine, she waited until the factory was backlogged and went to find a job with better pay. Maria did not see herself as a victim, but as a valuable skilled

worker with mobility and pathways to improve her contributions to the family (Erazo n.d., pp. 1-5). In Springfield, Martínez smiled when she said she was able to bring money into her household and buy bicycles for her children, which would not have happened without her Gemini Mill paycheck. She was proud that she met her quotas, earned money, and did not need welfare (Medina 2018). Minerva Torres Ríos told oral historians that she went to New York to help her family financially and, like many Puerto Rican women, did not see a sharp divide between supporting the household as both a wage earner and a caretaker in the home. These women's work allowed their children to graduate high school and attend college or find jobs in clerical and medical fields (Torruellas et al. 1996, pp. 187-188).

### **The Closure of an Industrial Labor Pathway**

The 1980s, however, saw intensified changes to the entire U.S. domestic industry, which must include Puerto Rico. The textile and apparel industry had been disaggregating since the turn of the twentieth century, especially after U.S. imperialism multiplied options in the Caribbean, Pacific, and East Asia. The occupation of colonies and participation in warfare around the world, with the resulting federal offices, military bases, and policies, opened new manufacturing sites, labor markets, and investment experimentation. The Reagan administration then launched the 1983 Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which undermined Puerto Rico's position as a manufacturing enclave exempted from labor and investment regulations as well as from duties and taxes. To qualify for inclusion in the CBI, countries could not have a Communist Party government or property nationalized from a U.S. citizen or corporation (Dypski 2002, p. 103; Rosen 2002, pp. 129-152). In return, the CBI offered Caribbean nations a 'mini-Marshall Plan' and a 'Puerto-Rico style special relationship'. It included investment supports and tax exemptions to diversify export manufacturing, along with trade preferences and duty-free access to U.S. markets. Supporters argued this diversification would reduce the region's vulnerability to fluctuations in its traditional raw material exports. Puerto Rican officials and managers, however, worried about CBI impacts. Some argued it even placed Puerto Rico at a disadvantage because the island had to comply with limited aspects of U.S. labor and environmental regulations while Caribbean nations did not (Dypski 2002, p. 101; Gautier-Mayoral 1990, p. 13; Polanyi-Levitt 1985, pp. 229, 242-243; Pastor 1982). Puerto Rican island needleworkers were no longer part of a site with special advantages.

In addition to that Caribbean trade policy, the Reagan administration triggered a gutting of the mainland industry. Its financial deregulations encouraged leveraged buyouts (LBOs) that were particularly damaging. Even if remaining domestic plants produced reliable earnings, 'restructuring' with financial maneuvers and closures rather than manufacturing management often produced a greater short-term return or tax windfall. In an LBO, a large corporation, finance firm, or investor group buys a company by borrowing against its assets, which usually generates a spiked payment to shareholders. LBOs started in the 1970s when Michael Milken promoted the use of high-yield or 'junk' bonds, the low-rated bonds of small or plateaued companies, to make large capital gains. His firm, Drexel Burnham, began underwriting such deals, which produced high yields for investors and massive advisory fees for Drexel. Even when such deals failed and the share value collapsed, scavenger investors like Warren Buffet at Berkshire Hathaway often bought a cheapened company for the break-up of its enterprises with tax-beneficial closures. Drexel even hosted an annual 'Predators' Ball' in Beverly Hills during the 1980s (Rodgers 2011, pp. 80-82; MacLean 2006, pp. 312-313; Adler 2001, pp. 234-242). Reagan administration banking deregulation made such deals easier just as it was cutting Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) oversight.

In some LBOs, an acquired manufacturing enterprise then paid fees to the shell finance company for ‘consulting services’. This structure eliminated the SEC income-disclosure reporting required for senior management of public companies. For example, in spring 1986, a primary investor partnered with Drexel to attempt a hostile takeover of Warnaco, an apparel manufacturer earning steady profits with Hathaway shirts, Olga bras, and WhiteStag sportswear. The investor group provided about 1% of the financing with Milken raising the rest with junk bonds. The primary investor became chairman of the Warnaco board of directors. He had no interest in managing an apparel corporation and drew no salary, instead cashing in his equity stakes and receiving a monthly ‘consulting fee’ through his shell finance company. Between 1986 and 1989, that investor paid himself \$9 million in fees, which made him one of the highest-paid executives according to *Forbes* but gutted the company (Adler 2001, pp. 246-248).

Political battles over federal trade policy expose how reconfigurations of global markets and large corporations had splintered the domestic industry. Domestic manufacturers and unions were unable to fight the political power of the transnational corporations that now imported finished goods as well as pieces; the major finance investors moving capital around the world; and new discount retailers like Wal-Mart. The 1985 fight for the Textile and Apparel Trade Enforcement Act (H.R. 1562) was one of the last efforts to maintain a domestic industry with mainland employment. The loss of H.R. 1562 was not the result of a ‘dying’ industry and its waning unions, as if these were inevitable natural declines. The weakened position of domestic manufacturers was a result of postwar U.S. foreign economic policy, financialization, and management consultants that had reshaped and impaired the domestic companies and union membership. The resulting global markets also granted discount retailers an especially formidable influence in any contest (Minchin 2012, pp. 91-158; Collins 2003, pp. 27-61; Rosen 2002, pp. 119-128).

By the 1980s, transnational corporations had become experts at manipulating quotas, circumventing the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), and using transshipments through third countries to enter U.S. markets (Collins 2003; Rosen 2002).<sup>3</sup> New York City labor activist and Puerto Rican needleworker Gloria Maldonado discussed how nations gamed the quota system, with China buying Panama’s unused quota numbers so its larger manufacturers could import more to the U.S. (Maldonado 1985, p. 47). Multiple bilateral agreements essentially nullified most legislation to control textile and garment imports and stabilize U.S. employment. Remaining regional companies and unions like the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) contacted political allies and the Congressional Textile Caucus to pass H.R. 1562. During these years, however, regional companies continued to undermine their own labor allies with anti-union obstruction. But their respective leaderships did cooperate in legislative agendas regarding trade (Windham 2017, pp. 120-126; Minchin 2012, pp. 95-104).

Secondary suppliers to mills and factories, like companies that provide parts, machine repair, and water testing, also lobbied for H.R. 1562. Unions emphasized the importance of these jobs for women and the racial diversity of the labor force. Union posters and flyers depicted white, black, Latinx, and Asian American workers in various jobs. The National Puerto Rican Coalition gave its support to H.R. 1562, arguing Puerto Rican communities were suffering a great deal due to cheap imports from Asia (Minchin 2012, pp. 95-104, 111). Maldonado understood these complexities, telling an interviewer, ‘On the import bill [anti-union companies and politicians in the South are] backing us... [b]ecause they have a lot of textile

<sup>3</sup> Transshipments occur when a nation has met its quota of towel imports to the U.S. so its trade office makes an agreement with another country on behalf of its manufacturers to send excess towels to that country, which has not met its quota. That country then ships the towels into the U.S. on behalf of the original nation for a fee.

mills there' (Maldonado 1985, p. 46). She argued the U.S. should not be opening its markets to imports when Japan and Europe do not allow similarly high numbers. 'So if all the work, or most of the work is sent out there, then we are suffering... Japan and other European countries, they won't let in any imports', Maldonado said. 'They protect, they have protectionism, you know' (Maldonado 1985, pp. 40-46, 54-56). Like many union representatives, Maldonado participated in labor activism as an organizer and as part of a movement attempting to shape the terms of contemporary globalization. Their fights, while not successful in preserving a widespread domestic industry, did have an explicit if asymmetrical influence on how the industry changed.

Large transnational corporations that developed and promoted recognizable brands while contracting the manufacturing overseas, such as Esprit and Liz Claiborne, opposed H.R. 1562. So did the largest domestic manufacturer, Levi Strauss, which was in the process of dispersing its production into Asia from its West Coast headquarters to become a brand company. The American Farm Bureau Federation and agricultural lobbies also opposed the bill because they feared trade retaliation, in which nations like China would not buy U.S. wheat and other commodities. Retailers pushed their own opposition, with the National Retail Merchants Association and K-Mart meeting politicians in 1985 to reiterate the word 'protectionist' in the narrowest, most negative connotation of blocking growth and raising prices for consumers (Minchin 2012, pp. 105-120; Collins 2003, pp. 27-61, 104-125).

Powerful opposition also came from the Reagan White House and its advisors who used the rhetoric of 'free trade' and 'free markets'. After months of negotiations, H.R. 1562 passed, but Reagan vetoed it a week before Christmas 1985. Workers, union leaders, and domestic executives from across the U.S. joined in a massive effort to override the veto. Five days before the override vote, however, the Reagan administration announced it had negotiated a tougher MFA with expanded import coverage and mechanisms to block import surges - without acknowledging all the ways transnational corporations and international trade offices evade such criteria. Reagan trade representatives argued negotiation, not legislation, was the best way to address the trade deficit and imports. In August 1986, the override was defeated (Minchin 2012, pp. 105-120; Collins 2003, pp. 27-61, 104-125). By 1987, imports accounted for 57.5% of apparel sales in the U.S. (Lichtenstein 2010, pp. 202-203).

These 1980s policies in support of the CBI, LBOs, and outgoing capital and incoming cheap imports fostered a collapse of remaining U.S. manufacturing. The subsequent closures of textile, apparel, and home goods factories along the Atlantic U.S. from New England to Puerto Rico impacted Puerto Rican women in a substantial but dispersed way. They lost the pathways through which they had navigated and organized as U.S. industrial workers. Employment along these multiple pathways of colonial migration had served as a platform for their income and household stability since the turn of the century. Many older Puerto Rican women had no choice but to retire and attempt to survive on Social Security income. Other laid-off needleworkers struggled to find secure jobs, applying for unemployment insurance and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) welfare payments to make ends meet. Thousands of displaced Puerto Rican women found jobs in lower-wage service fields like home attendant, nurse's aide, or fast food server (Delgado 1984, p. 55; Delgado & Maldonado 1985, pp. 142-144; Boujouen 1990, pp. 189-218; Glasser 1997, pp. 179-181; Torruellas et al. pp. 195, 205; Alvarez 1988, pp. 29-36; Benmayor 1987, pp. 7-8; Juarbe 1987, pp. 14-15, 23).

To conclude the American Thread case study, during the early 1980s it reduced its workforce and closed distribution points in Puerto Rico. In July 1984, American Thread announced that it planned to close the



Willimantic mill (Boujouen 1990, pp. 118, 121-129). When the company proceeded with the 1985 closure, it created a noticeable increase in Puerto Rican unemployment and workforce uncertainty for the city. Kendall Company, which made synthetic fabric for disposable diapers, had already closed in 1983, and Brand Rex had reduced its employees from 800 to 650 in 1981 and to 460 in 1983 (Boujouen & Newton, 198?, pp. 29-30). Many Puerto Rican women in Willimantic could not find industry jobs, so they went on unemployment insurance. Some found jobs in service industries like care work or cleaning and others had to rely on AFDC welfare payments (Boujouen & Newton, 198?, pp. 35-36). The experience of Rosario illustrates the challenges for former needleworkers in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1960s, she was recruited to work in the Hartford Poultry plant in Willimantic and then went to work at American Thread. She had to return to Puerto Rico for a short time around 1980 and could not get another job at American Thread upon her return. She took work cleaning offices but started to have serious back pain and had to leave employment and apply for welfare (Boujouen & Newton, 198?, pp. 13, 36).

Similar conditions played out in other small New England cities. In 1989, the Gemini Mill in Springfield closed after two years of effort by the president to keep it operational, but its recent financial investors had benchmarks beyond profitable contracts (Sandler 1988, pp. 1, 19-20; Robbins 1988, p. E1). Martínez left the Gemini Mill and took a job as a janitor in the city school district (Medina 2018). The last mill in Holyoke closed in 1989. Berríos operated her own ‘side hustles’ after the Elco Dress Company shuttered. For example, she cooked food in her kitchen and packaged it for take-out orders. People in the neighborhood knew the days she cooked, and many ordered ahead of time (Salgado-Cartagena 2017).

### **Puerto Rican Women as Laid-Off Workers or Poor Welfare Mothers**

Most white workers and their households along the Atlantic U.S. experienced deindustrialization as the loss of a particular factory or industrial complex, with the stability it had provided as the center of a neighborhood. White steel employees, autoworkers, and coal miners appeared in news stories, songs like Billy Joel’s ‘Allentown’ (1982) and Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ (1984), and Hollywood movies like *All the Right Moves* (1983) starring Tom Cruise as a high school senior who wants a football scholarship to get out of his dying steel town. In these mainstream representations, white men and their families had a racialized and gendered cultural space to grieve.

Puerto Rican women went through a different loss. They had experienced the textile and apparel industry as shifting and moving. They were almost as mobile as the manufacturing, relocating in multiple directions and working in homes and factories at the same time. When these options ended, it was because the pathways they had traced and shaped through the U.S. industry had been occluded. Federal trade and financial policies converged quickly with new technologies, like barcodes and container shipping, that all facilitated global contracting by massive transnational corporations serving discount retailers. The connected but stretching lines of the textile and garment industry bent away from the U.S. to Asia, Mexico, and Caribbean nations.

In addition to the loss of their industrial pathways, Puerto Rican women had not been legible as the American working class. They were not granted popular attention for their loss or mainstream cultural space to grieve the economic abandonment. There were no top-ten songs or blockbuster movies about laid-off Puerto Rican needleworkers. Instead, Puerto Rican women became part of the popular cultural narrative of ‘welfare queens’ and poor women moving to the U.S. to take public services (‘Welfare Queen’ 1976, p. 51; ‘Welfare Queen’ 1979, p. B5; Davis 1980, p. A4; Page 1991, p. D11B; Page 1994, p. VYB13;

Demby 2013; Levin 2019). The colonial narrative of Puerto Rico as a site of backward and primitive ‘dark Others’ in need of U.S. assistance merged easily with an emerging racialized narrative of the ‘underclass’ and the ‘culture of poverty’ in families of color (Thompson 2010; Briggs 2002). In this framework, poverty was caused by a high birth rate and lack of work ethic in the poor rather than by labor, real estate, banking, and tax policies (Erazo n.d., pp. 1-5; Chappell 2010, pp. 199-241; Orleck 2005, pp. 82-97; Briggs 2002, pp. 177-188; Whalen 1998, pp. 217-222; Torruellas et al. 1996, p. 205).

Questions of poverty increasingly focused on poor women of color and motherhood instead of systemic economic reform. Public health officials from the mainland and Puerto Rico directed more attention and funding toward birth control efforts with a mix of motives that included concern for women’s health as well as sterilization ideology and experiments with long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) (Lopez 2008; Briggs 2002). Ignoring their decades of industrial wage work, many policy experts argued Puerto Rican women had shifted from dependence on male breadwinners to dependence on the state - completely missing their distinctive experience of deindustrialization (Whalen 1998, pp. 218-221; Torruellas et al. 1996, pp. 192-193). U.S. colonial offices and Puerto Rican labor agencies had recruited women to work throughout the industry on the island and in the Northeast. Insular contractors and managers and investors throughout the U.S. had made millions of dollars from their labor. But after U.S. trade and financial policies moved on from Puerto Rican needleworkers and left them without possible options, they were not even allowed to mourn as labor.

When Puerto Rican women strategically used public services like welfare or food stamps to address the structural reconfigurations that had cut off their pathways to industrial wages, they were not recognized as workers or as legitimate mothers. Puerto Rican textile and apparel workers in the 1980s and 1990s experienced two sets of emotions from deindustrialization: grief and anxiety due to an inability to find stable employment, simultaneously with confusion and humiliation over the idea that they ‘bilked’ welfare. Leticia Quiroz had worked in manufacturing jobs for years, but when these became temporary and erratic, she decided she had to apply for AFDC because it offered steady income. ‘Sometimes I think if I go back to work and don’t like the job or if I get fired, what will I find?’ Quiroz continued, ‘Jobs are very hard to find today’. Paquita Ramírez arrived in New York City in 1979 with five children and the ambition to make their lives better. When she could not find affordable daycare or a steady job, she had to apply to AFDC. The social worker said, ‘Well, if Mrs. Ramírez doesn’t want to go back [to Puerto Rico], open her file because we aren’t going to put her out on the street with five minor-age children’. After the 1988 Family Support Act, many women were sent to work for their AFDC payments in labor they experienced as degrading, like cleaning empty lots where drug addicts went to shoot up. Most of the women did the workfare and developed ‘side hustles’ to get better lives for their children (Maldonado 1984, pp. 23-24; Torruellas et al. 1996, pp. 187-206).

## Conclusion

The fragmentation of archives between Puerto Rican studies and U.S. labor history as well as racialized, gendered, and spatial notions of deindustrialization have allowed for a simplistic narrative. This narrative erases the losses experienced by Puerto Rican women who had moved throughout the U.S. industry in pursuit of better wages and conditions. When oral histories and documents related to the migrations of Puerto Rican needleworkers become visible in the history of the ‘American working class’, we see deindustrialization as contingent and erratic rather than as naturalized and linear. Instead of a simplistic overarching explanation of deindustrialization as ‘jobs leaving the U.S.’ in the late twentieth century, this

history shows that industrial capitalism interacts with different manufacturing workers and sites in different ways. It creates a constant if changing catalogue of simultaneous labor options.

We also see Puerto Rican women lost more than a paycheck or specific factory - most lost their position in the U.S. industrial workforce and any possibility of recognition as members of the American working class. Their invisibility as workers in public discourse and popular media allowed them to become associated with racialized poverty and the heated welfare debates of the 1980s and 1990s. While they did not give up aspirations for their children, they endured the dispossession of a certain class status and the loss of economic mobility for themselves.

The stories of Puerto Rican needleworkers demand a historiography of the U.S. industrial working class that addresses racial and colonial aspects of labor markets, worker subjectivity, migrations, and deindustrialization. They also call for a labor history that acknowledges the U.S. as an imperial power throughout the twentieth century, which in turn destabilizes the normalized narrative of globalization. That version presents globalization as a recent event fueled by an unhindered increase of connections and flows. It ignores both the long history of various global connections and the ever-present if asymmetrical limitations and constraints on currents of goods and capital as well as people (Cooper 2005, pp. 91-93).

The erasure of Puerto Rican needleworkers has facilitated political attacks on women of color as people who do not work and 'just want welfare'. It has also served right-wing efforts to demonize all workers of color - in other nations and im/migrants in the U.S. - for 'taking jobs from the American working class'. A full understanding of Puerto Rican needleworkers moves labor history beyond inclusion and reframes ongoing debates about how the constant reconfigurations of capital affect different workers. The insights also open possibilities for more partnerships within the working class, across race and citizenship, as people recognize that jobs change as part of a relentless shifting array of structures. They do not 'leave' in a linear path toward workers of color who 'take' the jobs because they take less pay.

### Author Bio

**Aimee Loiselle** studies the modern U.S. as a hub for transnational labor and capital with an interest in women workers, gender, race, and popular representation. Her research traverses common divisions of method and field to examine how women navigate, resist, and reform the larger systems in which they work and migrate. Loiselle is also interested in the ways pop culture obscures such disconcerting nuances. Her current project *Creating Norma Rae: Southern Labor Organizing and Puerto Rican Needleworkers Lost in Reagan's America* explores the long history of the textile and garment industry that led to the contested production of the 1979 movie *Norma Rae*. It then analyzes the cultural work the film did to constitute a narrow notion of the white 'American working class' in the 1980s.

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