A close-up portrait of Hilda A. Hidalgo, an older woman with short, wavy grey hair and glasses. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right. Her hands are clasped in front of her, and she is wearing a patterned shirt, a ring on her finger, and a bracelet on her wrist.

*“Because if you
don’t have a
history, you don’t
have a present.”*

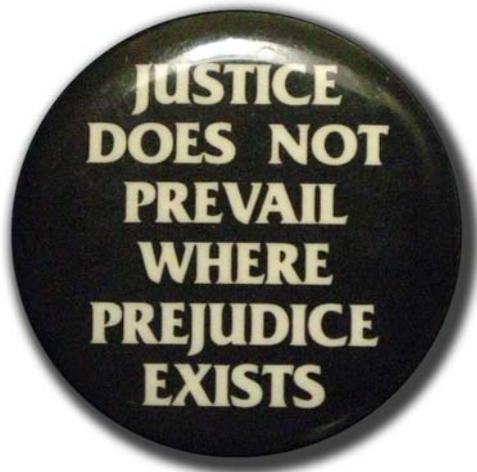
—Hilda A. Hidalgo, Oral History, June 5, 2009 (track HH09034)

**HILDA A.
HIDALGO**

PhD.
Puerto Rican
Latina
Lesbian
Feminist
New Jerseyan

by Elizabeth Parker

**Associate Archivist, Puerto Rican Community Archive, New Jersey Hispanic
Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library**



What emerges from reading these quotes is two-fold: history is a controlled narrative, written by the dominant culture, or “victors,” which is shaped by the biases and prejudices within that culture; secondly, history serves as the ultimate teacher, showing a population who they are, where they came from, and where they may be going.

The Latino Community and “American” History

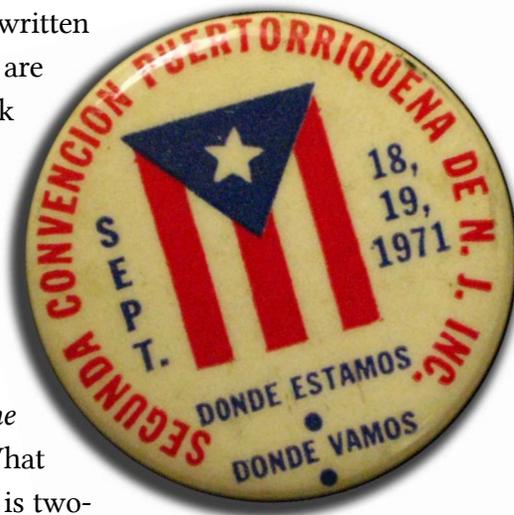
Gordon Bond’s introduction to the December 2013 issue of the *Garden State Legacy*, “My History Too,” has the subtitle, “GSL explores the intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity with the New Jersey history community.” In it, he offers his observations about the history community in New Jersey and, more broadly, in the United States, acknowledging the Euro-centrism of the profession that has only relatively recently begun to change with the emergence of fields of study devoted to historically marginalized groups. On a more specific level, Mr. Bond reflects on the growing Latino community in New Jersey and wonders if or how this might affect the New Jersey history community. He ends his introduction with the observation:

On the one hand, the history of groups previously ignored by the traditional hegemony are at last being included, forming a more complete and accurate narrative. On the other, some argue, by parsing out “black history” or “women’s history” we are ultimately just reinforcing the divisions of an unhealthy ‘us-and-them’ mindset. Does it make history more inclusive or more divisive?

And while we’re at it, another group to get their own university study departments and bookstore sections is the LGBT community. Is there such a thing as “gay history”? Or is it history made by people who happen to be homosexual?

There is a lot to unpack, so to speak, from this introduction, and a few points, specifically about the discipline of history, that bear further examination.

One need only perform a Google search on “history quotes” to receive pages upon pages of quotes, often of dubious provenance, about history; one of the most famous, often misattributed to Winston Churchill, is: “History is written by the victors.”¹ A few other gems are Mark Twain’s quote, “The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice” (*Following the Equator*, 1897) and the often quoted, or misquoted, chestnut penned by George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (*The Life of Reason*, Vol. 1, 1905). What emerges from reading these quotes is two-fold: history is a controlled narrative, written by



The buttons shown here are from the Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD. – Papers: Button Collection



So perhaps the question that should be posed to the New Jersey history community should not be how to address how the Latino community will affect it, but rather why this group has been so thoroughly excised from the historic narrative and how alienating that has been to the Latino communities of New Jersey.

the dominant culture, or “victors,” which is shaped by the biases and prejudices within that culture; secondly, history serves as the ultimate teacher, showing a population who they are, where they came from, and where they may be going. As Cicero remarked in his work on oratory, *Brutus*, “Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum” [Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child].

While all of these quotes can be dismissed to a certain extent as overly vague and reductionist, it cannot be disputed that a large portion of the population of the United States of America has not been well-served, represented or researched within the general history community, either amateur or academic. It is perhaps that lack that has led to the continued popularity of books like Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*² and James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*³ among the general populace. It must be recognized that what is generally termed “American History,”⁴ particularly as it is taught in K–12 classes, starts from a perspective that American History began with the arrival of the Pilgrims; a gradual shift in perspective has led to some discussion of the various Native American nations that already populated the continent, but even this is generally cursory. Additionally, as James Loewen points out, “Starting the story of America’s settlement with the Pilgrims leaves out not only American Indians but also the Spanish . . . Few Americans know that one third of the United States . . . has been Spanish longer than it has been ‘American,’ and that Hispanic Americans lived here before the first ancestor of the Daughters of the American Revolution ever left.”⁵ In fact, it has recently been determined that the first non-Native settler of the island of Manhattan was a man named Juan Rodriguez from what is now the Dominican Republic.⁶

So perhaps the question that should be posed to the New Jersey history community should not be how to address how the Latino community will affect it, but rather why this group has been so thoroughly excised from the historic narrative and how alienating that has been to the Latino communities of New Jersey. How would a mention of Juan Rodriguez, for example, in a history class engage students of Dominican descent? How would it engage them, learning that Latinos have been part of the story of the settlement of what is now the continental United States since the very beginning? What impact would it have on the Latinos’ perceptions of U.S. history and conversely, on “Americans’” perceptions of the Latino community’s place both in the United States and in its history?

The subject of this portrait, Dr. Hilda A. Hidalgo, commented in an oral history conducted shortly before her death, that the work of the



After all, it is much easier to “other” (to borrow an anthropological term) a community that appears to be recent intruders into a narrative, rather than a community that has been an active participant in the historical narrative from the beginning.

Puerto Rican Community Archives [PRCA] was vitally important “because if you don’t have a history, you don’t have a present.”⁷ To a great extent, this observation encapsulates the precise problem with U.S. history as it pertains to various minority groups and, as it is traditionally taught, their relationship with it. It must also be acknowledged that this problem extends beyond the realm of the discipline of history. As Jacques Deridda remarked in his work, *Archive Fever*, “There is no political power without control of the archive, or without memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”⁸ In this context, the “control of the archive” and “its interpretation” may be understood to refer to the power of a population to both determine what is worthy of inclusion in an archive, and thus worthy of preservation and of use to the creation of a historical narrative. Without that control, the history of a group that might be preserved and recorded is not their narrative, but rather the narrative of a culture or group that may find it more advantageous to eliminate that history, whether purposefully or as a result of “benign neglect.” Without a firm grounding in the past, a recorded history, the power of that community is easily sidelined. After all, it is much easier to “other” (to borrow an anthropological term) a community that appears to be recent intruders into a narrative, rather than a community that has been an active participant in the historical narrative from the beginning.

Part II: Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD—Papers⁹

The PRCA, a division of the NJ Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library [NJHRIC], was created to address some of the issues raised in the previous section.¹⁰ The PRCA’s mission is to preserve the history of the Puerto Rican community in New Jersey, and in attempting to do so has, over the course of seven years, accessioned roughly 450 cubic feet of materials in 45 distinct collections. One of the collections, about to be made available for research, is the papers of Dr. Hilda A. Hidalgo. Dr. Hidalgo’s papers are an incredibly valuable resource for a number of reasons, but what may be most striking in the context of this article is the number of communities she counted herself a member of, and her importance to the historical narrative of New Jersey.

Hilda A. Hidalgo was born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico in 1928. A precocious child, Dr. Hidalgo had graduated from high school and completed a year of undergraduate education by age 16. Following a desire to become a saint,¹¹ Dr. Hidalgo joined a convent and spent the next 11 years as a nun in a convent in Philadelphia and on a missionary posting in Coama, Puerto Rico, teaching at the catholic school. After coming to the realization that life in the convent was not for her, Dr. Hidalgo left the



convent with papal dispensation and completed her undergraduate education, receiving her BA from the University of Puerto Rico in 1957. She had accepted a job with the Girl Scouts of America in Santurce, Puerto Rico to pay for her undergraduate education. The Girl Scouts then offered her a scholarship to a graduate program in educational guidance at Catholic University, Washington D.C. with the understanding that she would continue to work for the organization for at least two years.

After receiving her first master's degree, Dr. Hidalgo worked as the District Director of the Girl Scout Council of Greater Essex, New Jersey

from 1960 to 1965. During this time, Dr. Hidalgo made it her mission to offer scouting opportunities to girls in urban areas from minority communities. During this period, Dr. Hidalgo experienced discrimination because of her ethnicity, gender, and race for the first time.

It was also during this period of her life that she met Joan McEniry, a fellow employee of the Girl Scouts, and fell in love. They remained in a committed partnership until Joan's death in 1995. In 1964, Dr. Hidalgo left the Girl Scouts, both because she felt she had done what she could for the minority girls in Essex County within the structure of the Girl Scouts, and also because she was growing increasingly uncomfortable with what she perceived as an imperialist, Anglo-cizing element to the organization.¹²

Dr. Hidalgo received her Master's of Social Work from Smith College School for Social Work in 1968, while working in Newark at the Child Service Association as the Director of Group Services. As a member of the Newark community, Dr.

Curriculum Vitae Hilda Hidalgo

In 1958

I was told I was "not qualified" to be served in a Texas diner.
I had 50 dollars in cash and 200 dollars in travelers checks.

In 1960

I was told I was "not qualified" to sign a lease for an apartment in Newark, New Jersey.
I had a permanent professional job and money to cover two months security.

In 1962

I was told I was "not qualified" to be accepted at Rutgers Graduate School of Education.
I had a B.A. cum laude, an M.A. from an American University and a combined average placing me in the top ten (10%) percent.

In 1964

I was told I was "not qualified" to teach in Newark's public schools.
I had a B.A. and M.A. in Education, a permanent teacher's certificate from Puerto Rico and ten (10) years of successful teaching experience.

In 1969

I was told I was "not qualified" to direct the guidance center at Livingston College, Rutgers University.
I had a M.A. in Guidance and Counseling, a M.S.W. in clinical social work, and more than five (5) years of practical experience with individuals and groups.

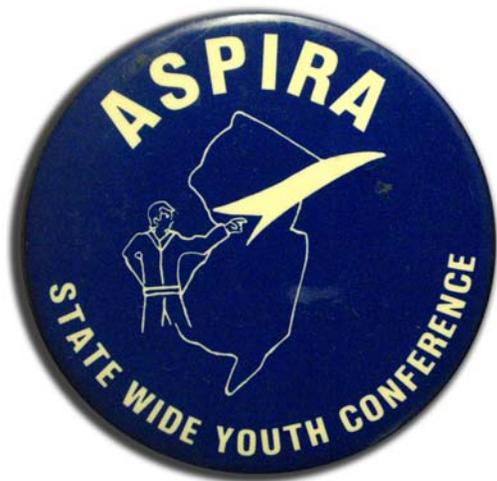
In 1976

I was told I was "not qualified" to be dean of Rutgers School of Social Work.
I had a Ph.D., held the rank of professor and had over fifteen (15) years of administrative experience, five (5) of them in academia.

In 1978

I was told I was "not qualified" to be president of a community college with a majority population of Hispanics.
I was the first choice of the search committee after a two (2) years search and interviewing more than 60 candidates out of a pool of over 200.

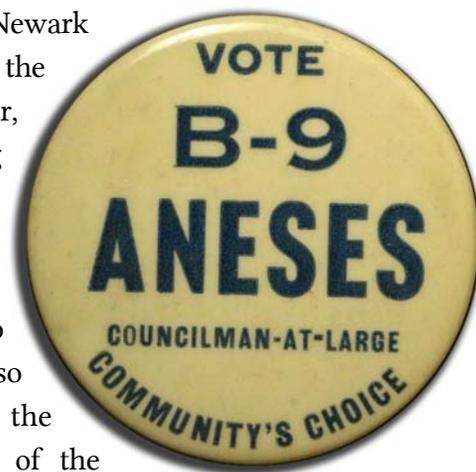
I am too Brown to pass
too outspoken to speak
too oppressed to be docile
too creative to be conservative
too old to play games
too woman to be a lady
I am a Puerto Rican, Lesbian, Feminist



It was also during this time that her car was fire-bombed, presumably as an intimidation tactic by those who opposed her work with the Puerto Rican and black communities.



Hidalgo also spent much of the 1960s becoming politically and socially active, participating in the civil right movement as well as co-founding ASPIRA, Inc. of New Jersey, La Casa de Don Pedro, the Puerto Rican Congress of New Jersey, the United Community Corp., and the Newark Urban League. Dr. Hidalgo attended the 1968 Democratic National Convention as a delegate for Senator Eugene McCarthy. She also served as the Chair of the first Puerto Rican Convention of New Jersey and the Secretary of the first Black and Puerto Rican Convention in Newark, New Jersey. It was that coalition that led to the Community's Choice Convention in Newark New Jersey in 1970, which resulted in the election of Newark's first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson. It was also during this time that her car was fire-bombed, presumably as an intimidation tactic by those who opposed her work with the Puerto Rican and black communities. She also served as a mediator between the National Guard and the residents of the Central Ward during the 1967 riots and between Rutgers-Newark Administration and the students who had occupied Conklin Hall in 1969.



In 1969, Dr. Hidalgo joined the faculty of Rutgers, in the Department of Urban Planning and Community Development at Livingston College. Dr. Hidalgo was initially hesitant to accept this position because she felt it was an incidence of tokenism in response to the disturbances of the last few years. She only accepted after her supervisor at Child Service Association heard of Rutgers' job offer and "fired" Dr. Hidalgo to convince her to accept the position. Dr. Hidalgo, in a unique move, convinced Rutgers to hire her at the lowest faculty rank, Assistant Professor, at a lesser salary than initially offered to counteract any implications of tokenism. She also negotiated for the ability to attend a doctorate program at the Union Graduate School, Antioch College to obtain her PhD. In 1971, Dr Hidalgo successfully defended and received her PhD; she was also appointed chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Community Development. Her renown was such that in 1971 President Nixon appointed her to the President's Cabinet Committee for the Spanish Speaking; she was the only woman and Puerto Rican to serve on this committee. The following year, she once again attended the Democratic National Convention as a delegate for the state of New Jersey.

It was during the 1970s that Dr. Hidalgo came out as a lesbian both to her family and friends. Emboldened by the positive response she received,

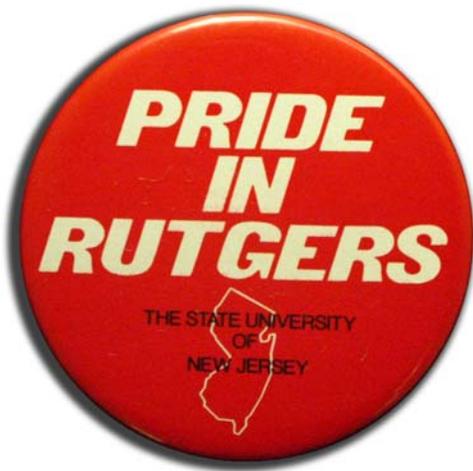


and by the internal feelings of freedom this caused, Dr. Hidalgo became active in the struggle for LGBT rights, both personally and professionally. She worked tirelessly to combat the perception of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder and eventually was the lead editor and co-author of the *National Social Workers Association Resource Manual: Lesbian and Gay Issues* (1984). She was an active member of the women's movement, and was an outspoken feminist. In both instances, she had the added interest of exploring how these social justice movements served Latinos and people of color in addition to Caucasians.



After working at Livingston College for 8 years, Dr. Hidalgo asked for a transfer to Rutgers-Newark because the daily commute to New Brunswick was becoming too difficult, and she felt that her work in Urban Studies and Social Work would be put to better use at the Newark campus. It was at Rutgers-Newark that Dr. Hidalgo made a significant impact on the academic landscape, creating two Masters Programs to train Hispanic professionals: the first was the Experimental MSW for Bilingual/Bicultural Hispanics; the second was the MPA Program for Hispanic Administrators. Dr. Hidalgo helped shape the curriculum for both these programs and was instrumental in securing their funding, since they depended exclusively on external funds. As a direct result of Dr. Hidalgo's efforts, with the help of like minded Rutgers faculty and her partner Ms. McEniry, roughly one hundred bilingual Latinos entered into the professional sphere in New Jersey, creating greater ease of access to a number of services, both public and private, for the Latino community.

Near the end of her tenure at Rutgers-Newark, Dr. Hidalgo was named to the "Complete Count Committee" for the 1990 Census by Sharpe James, mayor of Newark. She served as the chair of this committee, whose



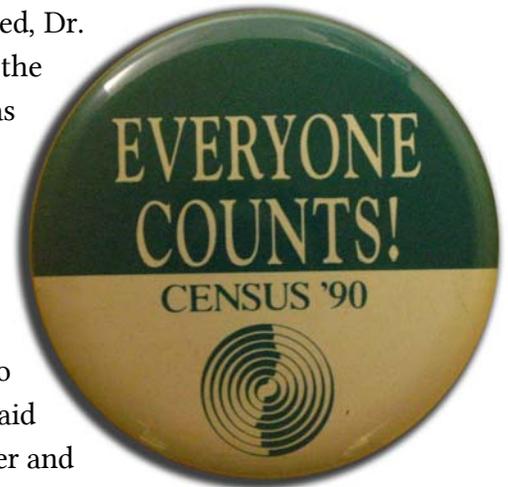
purpose was to increase the response from Latinos as well as from other historically underserved communities, like the homeless, the undocumented, and the poor.

In 1992, Dr. Hidalgo retired from Rutgers. However, rather than enjoying a well-deserved period of rest and relaxation, Dr. Hidalgo accepted a position as the Assistant Commissioner of Education for the State of New Jersey. Acting in this capacity, Dr. Hidalgo inspected Newark Public Schools to determine their status in preparation for a state takeover. While inspecting Morton Street School with members of the press, Dr. Hidalgo was arrested for trespassing and resisting arrest by the Newark Police; her wrist was broken by the police.

Along with getting her car fire-bombed, Dr. Hidalgo counted this as one of the proudest moments of her life. She was brought to trial, and was eventually acquitted of all charges in 1995, although it took an appellate court to do so.

Joan McEniry passed away in 1995 from cancer and Dr. Hidalgo moved to Florida; she did so, as she said in her oral history, to be near her sister and to die.¹³ But even with that goal, Dr. Hidalgo still found the time and energy to continue fighting for social justice, joining the LGBT advocacy group Equality Florida Council. She also met Dr. Cheryl LaMay through her sister; sparks flew and they started dating in 1997. In 2004, they got married in Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. Dr. Hidalgo remained active in her community in Florida until she was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. She passed away in 2009.

This portrait only skims the surface of what Hilda A. Hidalgo, a Latina, a *puertorriqueña*, a lesbian, a feminist, a scholar, and a New Jerseyan, was able to accomplish in her life. One need only spend a few minutes with her papers, or listen to her oral history, to see how much more she accomplished, the extent of her contributions to numerous communities in New Jersey. She may certainly be discussed in Gender Studies classes, given her position on the forefront of both the women's movement and her LGBT advocacy. Her scholarly writings, particularly her curriculum planning, are excellent tools for education scholars to examine for the history of the creation of bilingual graduate programs. As a *puertorriqueña*, she certainly belongs to Latino Studies. But even being all these things, she was also an American, a New Jerseyan, and her story is a part of the historical narrative of this state and of this country, and a vital and important part at that.



Endnotes and Sources

1. This quote is also written as “History is written by the winners/conquerors.”
2. Zinn, Howard. (2005). *A People’s History of the United States:1492–Present*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics. The first edition of this work was published in 1980.
3. Loewen, James. (2007). *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (2nd Ed.) [Kindle Edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
4. The confluence of “American History” with “United States History” is problematic in its own right, and deserves further discussion; however it is outside the scope of this article.
5. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, p. 71.
6. “CUNY DSI Publishes Monograph on New York’s First Immigrant.” (May 14, 2013). Retrieved February 26, 2014 from <http://www.ccny.cuny.edu/news/juan-rodriguez-monograph.cfm>.
7. *Interview of Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD. by Yesenia López, 6/5/2009*; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library, Audio Track HH09034.
8. Derrida, Jacques. (1996). *Archives Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (Eric Prenowitz, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1995)
9. All biographical data from the *Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD.—Papers*, The Puerto Rican Community Archives of The Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library and *Interview of Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD. by Yesenia López, 6/4/2009, 6/5/2009, and 6/7/2000*; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library.
10. For a complete list of the services and research collections offered by the NJHRIC, please visit the website <http://www.npl.org/Pages/Collections/njhric.html>.
11. “Mi Credo.” *Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD.—Papers*, The Puerto Rican Community Archives of The Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library, Box 4, Folder 16.
12. *Interview of Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD. by Yesenia López, 6/4/2009*; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library, Audio Track HH09009.
13. *Interview of Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD. by Yesenia López, 6/5/2009*; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library, Audio Track HH09028.