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Oral History Interview with Reverend Santiago Soto Fontáñez
Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.020
Interview conducted by John D. Vazquez on September 18, 1974 in Brooklyn,
New York

VAZQUEZ: Tell us something about your early background?

FONTANEZ: First, I was born in Caguas. I went to elementary school in Caguas. I have an aunt in Ponce so I spent some years in Ponce, during my high school, and then I went to Ponce High School. I finished my course and immediately after high school, I went to the University of Puerto Rico for a special course for [unintelligible] teacher. They used to have this at that time. So I went to the School of Education, to the Normal School--they used to call it--and became a [unintelligible] teacher, and my first school was up in the mountains in Jayuya. All the way it was a harrowing experience because it was really out of this world. Up in the mountains there was very little transportation and sometimes I had to walk home and I couldn't get a horse, and I worked as a teacher one year, as a [unintelligible] teacher. Then something happened; an American missionary, who had been in Puerto Rico when I was there, a young boy in Caguas, was working in El Salvador. Dr. Edgar Humphrey, and he had this school in El Salvador and he wrote and offered me a job. So I decided to go to Central America. That is why it happened that, I never, I didn't go to the university. I came back to Puerto Rico many years later, because the only thing I did at first was to take that Normal course for [unintelligible] teachers. I went to El Salvador and taught there; first for Colegio Libertad and then Colegio Bautista in El Salvador, for almost seven years. And I came back to Puerto Rico during the Depression in 1932. Everybody there; hundreds of teachers without work and everything was completely paralyzed with the Depression. And for almost a year, something like a year, I did odds and ends. People would be surprised; I worked for a time at the Cometa, in Ponce, a hardware store--now is a big department store, a Cometa--and I happened to

work there for just one purpose. I was a basketball player and soccer. I used to play soccer in South America. As a matter of fact, I went to the Caribbean Olympics in Havana representing El Salvador. So when I went to Puerto Rico, they were very interested in a tournament between the stores and somebody found out that I could play. So I came to work at the store because I could play. [laughter] And we got the championship as a matter of fact. And I used to play soccer with the Ponce Athletic Club that used to practice over there. Ponce—what do they call it, the Ponce Country Club or—? [unintelligible] I used to play soccer.

VAZQUEZ: When you came to play soccer and you were playing at Cometa, is that when you started in the UPR, the University of Puerto Rico?

FONTANEZ: No at that time I—there was nothing to do, because I worked for a time at El Cometa, and then there was a project by the federal government by which they put money into the school system, and I came back into the school system as athletic director in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico. It was a funny situation; I taught baseball and basketball, and for a time there they also used me in some classes when they were short of teachers. And the project ended suddenly; independent of the money that they could get from the government and the project of athletic director ended suddenly. But my superintendent of the schools knew me and what I could do, so he took me to San Juan again, with him, and got me a special license. So I went to teach at the second unit they call Viñuelas in Santo Domingo, Viñuela.

VAZQUEZ: You were teaching what grade?

FONTANEZ: Fourth and fifth grades, and I taught there for 2 years. And then, because I was also very involved in church life at the first Baptist Church in Ponce-- one of the pastors, the pastor of Yauco, was very sick and he had to retire so--they offered me the job of taking over the church as a lay person. And I accepted. So I went to Yauco, worked, and that was my first involvement as a minister, as a lay pastor in Yauco. I stayed in Yauco three years and then I started taking courses... extension courses with the University of Puerto Rico, in Ponce.

VAZQUEZ: What was your main area of interest? Were you taking theology, or—? What courses were you primarily concentrating in?

FONTANEZ: No, it was the University. I was a B.A. I was a major in sociology and economics was my main interest at the time. So I took some courses there and, at the end of three years, I was called to a church in San Juan, in Barrio Obrero, and they asked me and I said, "Well, if you let me finish my university, my college."
[unintelligible] I'll go to Barrio Obrero school." So they accepted and I went to Barrio Obrero. And it was in Barrio Obrero where I went to the University. I finished there. I continued immediately for my BA and then my MA at the University.

VAZQUEZ: And what was your major for, your M.A.?

FONTANEZ: At the university I got my BA in education--but my major was Spanish and Spanish American Literature--and my master's too. At that time, it was just before the upheaval up there, the university. I was given a scholarship to go to Mexico to get my PhD but I have had this experience several times; I was given this scholarship and I found that in Mexico they start courses in February instead of September. The year there is different from ours, and it happened that our church in Barrio Obrero was supposed to be the host for annual meetings for associations. So I asked the university to postpone my scholarship for the next year, but during that next year there was a complete change in the university administration. Tugwell was the Governor, he was made Chancellor of the University for a while and then came the election of Jaime Benitez, and with Jaime came a complete different organization of the university. Up to now, the university had been oriented to languages and more in the humanities. Jaime Benitez oriented it to sociology. And all the scholarships he gave were for people to come and study either sociology or economics, and then I lost my scholarship. When I came to the point, I found that I didn't have it. So as I had made my plans to be with the church I decided to go on my own to the Columbia University and I came to Columbia.

VAZQUEZ: In 1944 that was--

FONTANEZ: In 1944, I lived in the International House for a while. I came to Columbia, and I remember I had never been to the States. I had been to Central America, South America but never to the States. I went to Columbia that week, and to enroll, and I asked about work. So they sent me to the alumni--they had sort of an employment office there--and I told them what I wanted, so they sent me to Lord & Taylor's, 38th Street and Fifth Avenue, and I stayed at Lord & Taylor's for two years or three years where I worked while studying.

VAZQUEZ: What did you do at Lord & Taylor's?

FONTANEZ: At Lord & Taylor's I was the stock boy, translator, everything. There were very few—

VAZQUEZ: —with a master's there.

FONTANEZ: Yeah. I worked in the second floor at the food department, I remember that very well. And I was used in many capacities--but mostly, doing manual work--but at the time, they treated me very well. I was getting \$46 dollars a week and going to school. At that time, \$40 a week was fantastic. My wife was in Puerto Rico. We had a girl, a little girl. She didn't want to come to the States. She refused to come to the States at first. But I convinced her, and from International House—I had some friends in the Bronx at Claremont Parkway and they got us an apartment. And we used to pay \$39 a month, 3rd or 4th floor apartment, and then she came over. It was during the war. The war was raging and it was very difficult to get transportation to the United States, but I had a friend who had gone to school with me at the University who worked at Pan Am, and she was able to get her on the London-New York clipper, and she came over the next year. I stayed here for a year before she came. The girl was about six, so we arranged it and she went to work.

VAZQUEZ: You have one daughter?

FONTANEZ: We have a daughter and a son now. The son that came 15 years later; he is at Brooklyn College now, in the 3rd year.

VAZQUEZ: I remember. He's at Brooklyn College. What is his major?

FONTANEZ: His major is Speech, and Theatre.

VAZQUEZ: Beautiful.

FONTANEZ: The other day they presented "The Night That [unintelligible]" at this theatre and he was the technical director. He has been technical director for many plays in Jamaica High School, and other places, and has worked with the art projects of the city during the summer.

VAZQUEZ: Your daughter is also in Speech, Theatre?

FONTANEZ: No, my daughter is a high school teacher in Kingston. She teaches French and Spanish, in Kingston, New York. She got her master's degree from Rochester. And her husband used to teach German and Latin. He is now in [unintelligible].

VAZQUEZ: So you got your PhD at Columbia while you were living in the Bronx?

FONTANEZ: Well really, no, I moved, because when I finished my requirements at Columbia I became interested in this literary group in Brooklyn. There were about 18 people in the storefront but this is now the Central Baptist Church.

VAZQUEZ: What storefront in Brooklyn was this? Where is this?

FONTANEZ: This was on Park Avenue near Tompkins.

VAZQUEZ: Where the church was, 706?

FONTANEZ: Well, 706 Park Avenue. That was where the church was. Now there is a school there.

VAZQUEZ: I went to church there.

FONTANEZ: You went to church there? Oh yes, you probably went--

VAZQUEZ: When I was a little boy I went to Bible class during the summer.

FONTANEZ: With Miss Byers--Beale, with Miss Beale, an American lady.

VAZQUEZ: Beale, an American missionary, yes.

FONTANEZ: When I came to the church, I found her there. There was a little group of people—

VAZQUEZ: She taught me how to read, recite the Bible in Spanish. She used to make me recite in front of—Yeah, I remember.

FONTANEZ: Yes, she always—that's right, every Sunday, she would work with a group of boys and girls and make them—She'd cite verses of the Bible. That's right, that's Miss

Beale. We went to that storefront; one door only, no exit, anyplace. One of these; cold stoves in the middle, a big one with a chimney, I don't know if you remember that. It was really something; very cold, very bad the storefront, there. And I came to help them and they used to give me \$5 for tokens. You know the subway cost 5 cents then. So they gave me \$5 a month for tokens. That was my salary when I started. But I did involve myself with that. But before that, I had been to Lord & Taylor's and they wanted me to stay there. They wanted me not to quit there. But I told my wife what they wanted, but I didn't study to work in a store, so I said, "I am not going to work this Monday. I'm going to try and get work in my line, as a teacher." First, they offered me a job in the University of Connecticut, at Storrs, but it never came up. There was a Puerto Rican there as head of the department. I don't know. It never came up. Then this Monday I said, "I am not going to work at Lord & Taylor's."

VAZQUEZ: What year was this, about?

FONTANEZ: '45 or 6.

[Interview interrupted.]

VAZQUEZ: Let's begin with 1945, and go from there.

FONTANEZ: OK, I, I decided to go to find work as a teacher, so I went to Brooklyn College.

Went to the Language Department and Dr. [unintelligible], who was head of the department there, and I explained to him that I had gone to Columbia and that I was looking for work. He just simply said, "Well maybe we can use you. Leave your telephone and your address and we will get in touch with you." The next day I was very surprised when they called the house, they told me to come to Brooklyn College. I went to the office again and I didn't fill any papers. They didn't ask me anything about my background. They just gave me a program of several courses that I had to teach in the school; general studies. I saw Professor de Valdez there and I asked him, "What am I going to do? I have a program, but I don't know what I am supposed to do." He said, "Well, every teacher here makes his own course, so you go and do what you know what to do. You are on your own."

VAZQUEZ: This was in September of 1945, then you moved to Brooklyn, when?

FONTANEZ: '45. I was still leaving at Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, and I used to come to Brooklyn College from the Bronx. But at the end of 1947 I decided I should move to Brooklyn and I looked for houses near Brooklyn College and they were too expensive. So I found a house that I liked in the upper Williamsburg area and Myrtle Avenue, and Celia Vice and her husband were the ones that sold the house to me. They were very helpful in my getting the house. I have kept a very good friendship with both of them. Though they are not together any longer, I think. I came to Brooklyn in 1948. At the beginning of '48, in the winter, I remember that it was Christmas time and we came to the house. There is where we worked on the presents for the church kids.

VAZQUEZ: When you came to live in Vernon Avenue were you the only Puerto Rican family on Vernon Avenue at the time? Or were there other Puerto Ricans?

FONTANEZ: We were the only Puerto Rican family on Vernon. 4 or 5 houses down there was a couple from Santo Domingo. The only Hispanics on that street were--they were there before I--and we were the only ones. As time went by--

VAZQUEZ: What were your neighbors primarily on Vernon?

FONTANEZ: They were all Jewish; on both sides all the way down and all the way up. And the streets, as you might remember, had beautiful trees in front of all the houses. They were very well kept. They were beautiful streets; Willoughby and Vernon and all the streets. Now, we came there at that time and from there I used to go to Brooklyn College. The church was only a few blocks and eventually we moved to the corner of Vernon and Tompkins, which was nearer. In 1953, in January 21, we opened the new church. It was the first church ever built up to then, with a Spanish congregation, at that time. It was a small thing. But it was the first. I then became involved with the community and became a member of the school board in the Williamsburg area.

VAZQUEZ: First Puerto Rican [inaudible].

FONTANEZ: And I was the first Puerto Rican in the school board in Brooklyn. At that time, the school board didn't have the power they have now. But still we had a review, the power of review of some things that were not in the schools. We had to deal with school principals and assistant school principals. I remember that I had a very special

case with the school—assistant school principal; he was the assistant school principal at Union High School on Ellery--

VAZQUEZ: Junior High School 148. I graduated from that school.

FONTANEZ: You must remember that school because as the Puerto Ricans came, more and more to that school.

VAZQUEZ: Who was the assistant principal?

FONTANEZ: I think I shouldn't—I don't remember his name exactly.

VAZQUEZ: Was it Rabinowitz? Was it Rabinowitz? It was Rabinowitz.

FONTANEZ: Yes, you remember the name better. I remember that name, but I didn't want to. But he was Assistant Principal, he did something which I really resented very much; it was a young boy in that church and the son of one of our members and this matter of gangs was starting, but they were not really in strength. But this boy made a zip gun in his house, but he was not carrying it with him, and this assistant principal was talking to them and he asked whether any of them had any zip guns and he told them it was illegal. And he told them that if they brought them to him he would take care of them and nothing would happen. So this boy, very naïve, went home and brought his, his gun to him. So he turned around and called the detectives, and gave them the gun, and gave them the boy. I had to go to court with the boy, and this would have been a something that would have been on his record forever. I went to court, and the judge was a woman, and I explained to her. I said, "I am very upset, because this man told this boy that if they brought these zip guns to him nothing would happen and this boy went home. He didn't have it on him and brought it to him, and now he does this. How can anybody believe him any longer?" And then they let the boy go in my care and no charges were lodged against him. I'm glad for that because the boy--the mother went to Puerto Rico with the boy. He went to the University of Puerto Rico. He is a major in the army today, out in Maryland. He will be finished with the army in a few years and he's a, he's a lawyer. But this principal almost wrecked this; it would be in his record forever. These were the little things that happened at the beginning and that are still happening, I suppose, with the Puerto Ricans.

VAZQUEZ: How about in the community? Did you have any political affiliations? Any political people that you knew? Anyone that you—did you ever hear of Jaime Kelly?

FONTANEZ: No, I—Jaime. [Interview interrupted.] I knew that Celia Vice was very much involved in politics of the time, but I never got really involved. Once they suggested that I should run for something. But, I don't say I am political. I am not. I have my political views, but I cannot be a politician because I can see the both sides of anything. My mind works in a way in which I see what is good in each side. That doesn't work in the political life. You have to believe that the other guy is wrong, all through. [laughter] Or you are no good. You have to believe really that you only have the truth about the whole thing. Something I couldn't do. But I didn't—

VAZQUEZ: Do you know anyone while you were living on Vernon Avenue otherwise that was trying to assist the Puerto Rican community or was active, aside from Celia Vice? Who else do you know was trying to help the Puerto Rican either get employment, problems with social service, or seeking out help themselves; education and otherwise?

FONTANEZ: There was very little. After Celia the only ones who—mostly for their own purpose, but—that helped somebody were the—And you knew them— the Hernandez—

VAZQUEZ: The Hernandez Brothers.

FONTANEZ: Julio and Eddie and all the rest, that lived around there; they were from our church and their mother also, were in the church [unintelligible] and—

VAZQUEZ: They had the voter's club on Tompkins Avenue.

FONTANEZ: They had the Voters Club and he tried to help in some ways. Mostly they were minding their own business because they had several business going, businesses going. But, this—I didn't get to know many of the politicians. I met the borough president at the time and his assistant who later became a judge.

VAZQUEZ: Borough president? Who was that? Abe Stark.

FONTANEZ: Yeah. No, before Abe Stark. Mangano, who was his assistant, became a judge later; he was the one whom I knew better because, and that's how I got into the school

board. But I didn't have any direct relationship with the politics in Borough Hall. Maybe I should have had.

VAZQUEZ: Were you involved in any other committees or any community associations in Brooklyn while you were a member?

FONTANEZ: Not the Spanish—There were very few, as you know. As a Baptist and as a Baptist minister it's very difficult for us and this has been one of our limitations. Let me say that you have to remember that 90% of the so-called Puerto Rican clubs are really dance clubs. Everything is a dance or a [unintelligible]. It's mostly social and that may be good, and many of the political activities were of that kind too. So as a Baptist [unintelligible], and a Baptist minister, I really didn't get involved much with this kind of activity. They should. Our members have found it very upsetting.

VAZQUEZ: You said something which I found very interesting. You said that the church on Vernon Avenue was small and that when you first got the congregation, a very small congregation; one, three—a couple of hundred. In relationship to that, are you saying that you have many converts? Do you have Puerto Ricans that were originally Catholics?

FONTANEZ: Oh yes.

VAZQUEZ: And other denominations who become Baptist? What I'm trying to say is, is the Puerto Rican Baptist Congregation growing?

FONTANEZ: Oh yes. Yes, besides the Pentecostal, which is the biggest because they are so divided and all through the city, the Baptists has been the group that has grown the most. We started with eighteen people and no money. By the time I left the church in 1960 we had property of \$150 thousand dollars and a budget of about \$30,000 a year. And they were able to call a pastor full time and pay him a decent salary and it has continued to be so.

VAZQUEZ: You have a church now, Reverend?

FONTANEZ: No.

VAZQUEZ: Are you preaching in any churches [unintelligible]?

FONTANEZ: Yes, well, I'm preaching at all the churches. This Sunday I am preaching at the Missionary Baptist Church in the Bronx; Brown Place behind the Cine Puerto Rico there; 137 Street and Brown Place. And the Sunday after that, I am speaking at another church, and the other Sunday, I am speaking in an English-speaking church in Parkchester.

VAZQUEZ: Are there many Baptist pastors there, Puerto Rican pastors?

FONTANEZ: Yes we have 2 now, and we have several South Americans and Central Americans but our pastors are all Hispanics. A wonderful pastor here on the Lower East Side; Jose Ortiz just finished his college and he finishes at Union Seminary this year. He used to be a worker for the Housing Authority, in charge of the--keeping plants there in the houses in the Lower East Side. And he went to Manhattan Community College, and then he went to Richmond College and got his BA, and then he went to seminary, and now he is 44 years old and he has 2 girls; one in college and the other in high school, and he just graduated.

VAZQUEZ: To sum up briefly; you mentioned Celia Vice as one of the outstanding people you know in the Puerto Rican community, and I know very well that you are well known in the Puerto Rican community; outside, outside of the religious circles, also. Aside from Celia Vice, would you mention anyone else who you have a great deal of respect for, or you have had contact with, or even heard his name mentioned in the Puerto Rican community?

FONTANEZ: Yes. There was a man in Brooklyn College; he was an older man, he was almost my age when he came, and I had him as a student and I found that he had been a merchant marine, and a superintendent of school, and superintendent in a house in Upper Manhattan, and I talked to him and I said, "Why don't you get into this special program that we have here in Brooklyn College and you can get your BA in a short time, and I got him into that program and 2 years later he went to Brooklyn Law School and he became a lawyer and he is Commissioner of Narcotics Santiago Grevi. He was my, my student.

VAZQUEZ: You know Santiago Grevi?

FONTANEZ: Santiago Grevi; he was my student and I oriented him to go to this special course and he became a lawyer and now he is State Commissioner of Narcotics and he has had this program, a radio program and television. So I had a little to do with his getting to be a lawyer. Though he was very active already; I don't take any credit for this. He has been a very outstanding figure here. I worked with Hupertto Ruiz for a time.

VAZQUEZ: Who is Hupertto Ruiz?

FONTANEZ: Hupertto Ruiz; he was a naval engineer and he is the Human Rights--on the Human Rights Commission of the State of New York, Hupertto.

VAZQUEZ: Was he from Brooklyn?

FONTANEZ: He was in the Brooklyn Navy Yard for many years although he doesn't live in Brooklyn. I don't think so. But he and I worked in several cases. As a matter of fact, I think I was the first Baptist minister to speak at the Fordham School in the radio program that they used to have at the Fordham School of Sociology, with Father Fitzpatrick.

VAZQUEZ: Do you think Father Fitzpatrick knows the Puerto Ricans well? He has written several books.

FONTANEZ: Well yes, he is a sociologist and whatever he has written, you have to consider it from the sociological standpoint; which, in some cases, is limited because sociologists have their own ways of doing certain things and they wouldn't deviate from that. You need to know a country to know a people; you have to not only to study the sociology, as Oscar Lewis did. You have to study the psychology of the people, the history. One of the things that had bothered me, I mention this, too. You know the book, "The Puerto Rican in New York," that book that this guy puts English and in Spanish, Tovar, Ribes Tovar?

VAZQUEZ: Tovar? Yes.

FONTANEZ: Yes, he published the first book and I bought it because I am interested, and I looked all over and there are at least 500 Protestant churches in New York City, Spanish, and there was no mention of religion in the book; and you can't know a

country or the people without knowing something about their, their religion, so I mentioned it to him. He sent a man here, and the next edition of the book came with a whole chapter of religion and there I was; my picture was there. And [unintelligible] Ortiz picture. And there is a good article in the Catholic Church on the Protestant Church. I was the one who called his attention to that. And there are many people who write good books from the Puerto Ricans in New York and they don't mention religion at all. [Interview interrupted.] You could have, because I went, just nothing very—formal way. But I look; the few Puerto Ricans that were in college, three out of every four Puerto Ricans that were in the city colleges, they were Protestants and not Catholics. The Protestant family always have tried to get the young people involved in schools. Not now, now I suppose because there are more Catholics than Protestants there are more Catholics than Protestants in the colleges. But that was not the case when you were there.

VAZQUEZ: When I was in school there were only 3 Puerto Ricans and 2 South Americans.

FONTANEZ: Yes, I remember. But when you find—You know who was also my student for 3 years? Marco, Marco Hernandez; you remember Marco Hernandez? He was principal of Eastern High School.

VAZQUEZ: Right, right.

FONTANEZ: And now he is head of the bilingual—He was my student for 3 years.

VAZQUEZ: Where is Marco Hernandez now?

FONTANEZ: He is at the main offices. He is in charge of the—I think he is coordinator of all the programs in Spanish, of bilingual programs.

VAZQUEZ: I spoke at the Waldorf-Astoria; the International Bilingual [unintelligible].

FONTANEZ: He was my student for three years in a row. I used to bring him sometimes also, because he used to live on Willoughby or around there, near where you live.

VAZQUEZ: Right I lived on [unintelligible].

FONTANEZ: I used to bring you home sometimes.