

A GROUNDED IDENTIDAD



*Making New Lives in
Chicago's Puerto Rican Neighborhoods*

MÉRIDA M. RÚA



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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rúa, Mérida M.

A grounded identidad : making new lives in Chicago's Puerto Rican neighborhoods / Mérida M. Rúa.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-976026-8 (hardcover : acid-free paper) 1. Puerto Ricans—Illinois—Chicago—Social conditions. 2. Puerto Ricans—Illinois—Chicago—Ethnic identity. 3. Puerto Ricans—Illinois—Chicago—Interviews. 4. Ethnic neighborhoods—Illinois—Chicago. 5. Chicago (Ill.)—Ethnic relations. 6. Chicago (Ill.)—Race relations. 7. Chicago (Ill.)—Social conditions. 8. Chicago (Ill.)—Biography. 9. Social surveys—Illinois—Chicago. 10. Interviews—Illinois—Chicago. I. Title.

F548.9.P85R83 2012

305.868'7295077311—dc23 2011051389

Cherrie Moraga's "The Welder" from *This Bridge Called My Back—Writings by Radical Women of Color* used with permission.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

En memoria de Luis Rúa (1941–2006) y de Petronila Delgado (1906–2006)

I am the welder.
I understand the capacity of heat
to change the shape of things.
I am suited to work
within the realm of sparks
out of control.
I am the welder.
I am taking the power
into my own hands.
— Cherrie Moraga, “The Welder,”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project, more than a decade in the making, would not have been possible without the generous support of a number of individuals, institutions, and grants. The list of those who contributed directly and indirectly to this manuscript is lengthy and I apologize in advance to any I may have forgotten. I am deeply grateful and indebted to the Chicagoans who trusted me with pieces of their personal stories and allowed me to follow them about their daily routines. Time and again they made themselves available throughout my field research and allowed me to reenter their lives through follow-up phone calls and visits. It was their commitment to my studies, to me as one of their own, that gave me the strength to pursue and complete this project. The Bishop family deserves a most cherished acknowledgment for graciously accepting to be the subjects of more than a few undergraduate research papers, and what eventually became this book.

Archivists and librarians in Chicago, New York, and Puerto Rico helped me immensely in the acquisition of sources. I thank staff at the Research Center of the Chicago History Museum; at The Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library; Lara Kelland at the University of Illinois Chicago Daley Library, Special Collections Department. At the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, I especially thank Pedro Juan Hernandez; at La Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín, Dax Collazo was a life saver on the copyright front; and, finally, my appreciation to Gloria Arjona, who gave me access to her personal archive in Puerto Rico. The time and resources necessary for research, writing, revising, and editing were made possible by generous grants and fellowships from the University of Michigan, Williams College, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The spirit of this book began as a doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Frances R. Aparicio, Earl Lewis, Arlene Torres, and Alford Young Jr. I thank them for their encouragement, intellectual engagement, and true generosity in reading my work. In their own unique way, each challenged me to make my arguments more precise and more nuanced, allowing me to see what could be most interesting for a book.

I am grateful to the many students I have had the pleasure of teaching and learning from; they have made my life in the academy worthwhile. Many thanks to students from Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School, Latin American and Latino studies majors at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and American Studies majors and Latina/o Studies concentrators at Williams College, particularly students in my “Chicago” course. A special shout-out to Yamnia Cortez, Priscilla Damaso, Luz Gomez, William Lee, Omar Mendez, Hannah Noel, Cristina Villegas, and, research assistant extraordinaire, Taisha Rodriguez.

For providing a warm and supportive atmosphere that has encouraged and enriched my development as a scholar and teacher, I thank my colleagues in Latina/o Studies and American Studies at Williams College. Two individuals who deserve special note are Carmen T. Whalen and Roger Kittleson, who read many, many versions of various chapters, offering wise council, incisive critiques, and tons of encouragement. I would also like to extend heartfelt gratitude to Linda Saharczewski, Lucy Gardner Carson, and Megan T. Konieczny for the extraordinary assistance they have provided Latina/o studies faculty over the years.

To my morale-boosters—Thank you, thank you, thank you, for listening to ideas and/or reading and commenting on parts of chapters, full chapters, or the entire manuscript: Carlos Alamo, Marixsa Alicea, Jillian Baez, Gene Bell-Villada, Devyn Benson, Magnus Bernhardsson, Leslie Brown, Denise Buell, Mari Castañeda, C. Ondine Chavoya, Maria Cotera, Nicholas De Genova, Zaire Dinzey Flores, Virginia Dominguez, Tyrone Forman, Jennifer French, Lorena Garcia, Jennifer Guglielmo, Tom Guglielmo, Jacqueline Hidalgo, John L. Jackson, Jr., Gaye T. Johnson, Liza Johnson, Regina Kunzel, Aldo Lauria, Amanda Lewis, George Lipsitz, Gretchen Long, Norma Lopez, Alejandro Lugo, Nancy R. Mirabal, Kenda Mutongi, Elena Padilla, Gina M. Pérez, Kashia Pieprzak, Isaura Pulido, Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas, Bernie Rhie, Mark T. Reinhardt, Stéphane Robolin, Richard T. Rodríguez, Alberto Sandoval Sanchez, Eiko Siniawer, Lorrin Thomas, Armando Vargas, Kiara Vigil, Javier Villa-Flores, Manu Vimalassary, Steve Warner, Scott Wong, and members of my UIC writing accountability group, the Puerto Rican History working group, and my virtual writing *compañeras*—*Las Profes* Online Writing Group. All offered good advice about things large and small, making this a much better book. Special thanks are due to Lorena Garcia, Kashia Pieprzak, and Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas for the gift of their friendship and for the much-needed distractions that kept me human and sane.

To Nancy Toff, Sonia Tycko, Lora Friedenthal, and the production team at Oxford University Press, I am grateful for the care with which they shepherded this book into press. Thank you, too, to Sharron Macklin for the amazing maps.

To the late Jeannette Hopkins, I owe a debt of deepest gratitude for her unwavering commitment to this project and to me. She taught me much about the craft of writing, improving every aspect of this book as she relentlessly challenged me (often to a point of great frustration) to find my voice and to write a book that would give readers a reason to turn the page. I hope I've succeeded. To the friends I made in Portsmouth, N.H., David Taylor, George Friese, and Jennifer Holloway, thank you for the wonderful meals and great conversations.

The greatest appreciation, however, goes to my family: my mother, Mérida María Rúa Cruz, my sisters Lorraine Rúa-Figueroa and Lissette Rúa, my brother-in-law Richard Figueroa (who by now has accepted that he is a Rúa), and to my nephews Clemente, Ismael Aníbal, and Joaquín. Thank you all for the unfailing love and support that you give me on a daily basis. My father, Luis Rúa, and my *abuela*, Petronila Delgado, nurtured my love of history and my appreciation of everyday life. This book, appropriately, is dedicated to them.

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PROLOGUE

Field Trips and Field Notes

Reflections on Memory and Neighborhoods

My sense of narratives of place and community and my first “field trips” began on weekends after church on Sunday afternoons when I was a child in Chicago’s Puerto Rican neighborhoods. My father, Luis Rúa, a welder by trade, became tour guide as my mother, my *abuela* (grandmother), my two sisters, and I climbed into our gray Buick Regal for his weekly history lesson and his lesson plan for his daughters’ futures. In “site visits” we explored the neighborhoods of his childhood. This book continues that story of Puerto Ricans in Chicago.

Chicago was my father’s adopted city. He had migrated, in 1954, at fourteen, with his mother and sister from Patillas, Puerto Rico, to the city’s Near North Side, and soon called Chicago “home.” He loved the city even when the feelings were not mutual. He was especially proud of his old grammar school, Ogden Elementary, “one of the best schools in the city,” so he said, and it was so in the 1980s, if not in the 1950s when he and most other students were children of migrants and immigrants. Places that existed only in his memory he described as he remembered them and they became as real to me as the places I inhabited, my own first “field sites”—St. Sylvester grammar school and church in Palmer Square, the Puerto Rican parade festivities in Humboldt Park, our house on Armitage Avenue (where we lived on the second floor and rented the storefront). After he had driven us to places where he had lived and streets he had played in, we went beyond, to places of his aspirations. We would drive along Lake Shore Drive to see the city’s vaunted skyline, and arrive, by one route or another, at one of Chicago’s elite campuses, the University of Chicago or Northwestern.

A building we never entered on our Sunday field trips was one I would enter later as a scholar—the pristine, elegantly carved, white marble Newberry Library across the street from the Ogden School. When I became a “credentialed dissertation researcher” at the University of Michigan in 2000, I ventured into the Newberry and approached a research associate about its collection of community histories in search of anything on Chicago’s Puerto

Rican community. Nothing there would be of use to me, he said, the subject being too “new.” Too “new”? Puerto Ricans had lived near and around the Newberry for a half-century, had walked the very streets yet nonexistent in the Newberry files or on its shelves. Today, a decade later, the Newberry sponsors a seminar in Borderlands and Latino Studies, occasionally on Latinos in Chicago.

As a scholar myself I discovered that the Chicago of most social science scholarship was a white-and-black polarized city, the people whose heritage I shared obscured. I began to feel a responsibility to record their past and their “living” history. But I had, in fact, begun the search earlier by instinct, as a sophomore at Notre Dame High School for girls, when I took part in a Chicago History Fair; I prepared a poster on “Puerto Ricans in local politics,” and saved the photographs I took for later use. As a junior at the University of Illinois, I wrote a paper on black Puerto Rican women, and titled it “Triple Threat: Black, Puerto Rican, and Woman.” Assigned to conduct oral histories, I interviewed four women I had known as a child in Logan Square: Gina Bishop and three of her daughters, Gini, Becky, and Elsa, the only black family I really knew growing up in a segregated Chicago. For a year after graduation from the University of Illinois, I taught Caribbean history, Latino studies, and mathematics at Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School in West Town/Humboldt Park and worked, some evenings, at the Caribe Funeral Home, where, later, in researching this book, I lived in an upstairs apartment. At the University of Michigan, studying for my PhD in American Culture, I wrote an essay about my grandmother, “Tracing Partial Remembrances: The Everyday Politics of Language in the Life of an *Abuela*.” And I must have been imagining this book when, as a young adult, I took part in organized protests for better schools, affordable housing, and safer neighborhoods on the streets of the city.

Still, this book is not my personal story but a story of Chicago’s Puerto Rican neighborhoods and its people. I chose as “organizing spatial sites for my field research,” Chicago’s Near West Side and Logan Square, neighborhoods the literature characterizes as “secondary Puerto Rican communities.”¹ I was now armed with a detailed plan, my dissertation prospectus, and my “interview protocol,” and with an intent to perform as a detached “objective” scholar in search of “hard” data. My “subjects” and “informants” disrupted my careful scheme. I was interviewed by those I intended to interview: “*¿Por qué tu no vives con tu familia?*” (“Why don’t you live with your family?”)² “Why are you asking those questions, you know the answers, don’t you?” “What is this research for?” I realized that to some I interviewed, I myself was one of

the actors in these narratives of place, memory, and identity. I was *la nena*, the neighborhood girl, who went away to study and now needed help with her homework.

In the position of “native” researcher, I found a Chicago different from my memory but also different from the one I had read about in the scholarship, that city supposedly polarized between black and white. The Chicago I found had far more dimension and depth and complexity. It was apparent that the scholarship needed to be revised to reflect the reality of the lives of Puerto Ricans, and hence of the city itself. This book is part of that revision, a story of the complex ethnoracial dimensions of identity and space and their necessary connections. It explores the multiple meanings of *latinidad* (a shared sense of identity among people of Latin American and Caribbean descent) from a historical and also an ethnographic perspective by examining daily lives in the past and present Chicago. African Americans, whites, and, particularly, Mexican immigrants and migrants, had helped shape the meanings of Puerto Rican identity even as Puerto Ricans created their own identities in the city.

Identidad, complex and fluid, needs to be recognized and explored as “grounded,” as rooted in both time and place, and as manifest in everyday exchanges with people within and beyond one’s own ethnoracial groups. The second largest population concentration of Puerto Ricans in the United States at the time of this study, Chicago’s Puerto Ricans have continually constructed, restructured, and transformed place through discourses and experiences of rejection and belonging, despair and hope, claiming the city even as they sought to negotiate and honor their own distinct identity.

A Grounded Identidad begins in 1946 when two migrant groups in separate but converging streams arrived in the City of Neighborhoods. One was the small group of University of Puerto Rico graduates who had earned scholarships to enroll at the University of Chicago. The other was of contract workers recruited by an employment agency for household and industrial labor. It was the beginning of Chicago’s first community of Puerto Ricans, a virtual colony of the United States’ Caribbean empire in the industrial heartland. These arrivals laid the foundation over the next half century and beyond as a study of place and identity, of memory and loss and of renewal, of six decades of urban renewal, loss of neighborhoods, emergence of multiracial coalitions, protest movements, and celebrations of life. The story concludes with my reporting back to the community on what I learned. Or at least it is the end of a chapter in the larger story to come.

Puerto Ricans in the United States had come from their island colony not as émigrés but with the status of US citizen. Most considered themselves, and were considered in Puerto Rico, to be “white.” And, yet, in the United States their brownness was considered “colored,” their citizenship “second-class” and their status “foreign.” They discovered that they shared few of the rights other Chicagoans took for granted and wondered whether those of Puerto Rican descent were/are, in effect, historical anomalies of the vestiges of empire, or genuine US citizens. Puerto Rican Nationalists themselves prefer for Puerto Rico to be not a 51st state but rather an independent country. At an early stage of the mass arrival of Puerto Ricans in mid-twentieth century Chicago, legal residence in the city itself assumed more pronounced meaning than simply one of US citizenship. Puerto Ricans were regarded, and treated, as *personas non grata*. Residence in Chicago has remained a dominant theme of Puerto Rican existence and identity. Their claims to the social benefits of residence were challenged in contests over housing, neighborhoods, and community. For those cast as outsiders and underrepresented in history, residence is both a goal and a trope for belonging.

And what of the ties that bind Puerto Ricans to other Latinos, those who are US citizens and those who are undocumented or documented migrants? Is it only the Spanish language? Or origins in the Caribbean? What about Cubans and Dominicans? What role did race, class, and legal status play? And do Puerto Ricans consider Mexicans their “cultural twins and national others?”³ I discovered that memory and place, desire and reality, led, inevitably, to explorations of *latinidad* within and beyond *puertorriqueñidad* (Puerto Ricanness). After all, there had been considerable intermarriage and mixing. Julius Bishop, husband of Puerto Rican pioneer Gina Bishop and owner of the Caribe Funeral Home where I lived while I studied Chicago for this book, was an African American from the Deep South. One of the funeral home’s morticians was Mexican. Puerto Ricans took part with Mexicans in a 2001 May Day protest march, in which I joined, with flags and banners to the Near West Side’s Union Park to form a 20-mile long human chain of linked hands for amnesty for undocumented immigrants and for peace on the island of Vieques, where until 2003 the US Navy held bombing exercises. Puerto Ricans had marched with blacks in Chicago in the 1960s, and Jesse Jackson now marched with them in a brown and black coalition. Not homogenized, identities and discourses and loyalties, were competing and conjoining together, negotiated in memory and in the living present. Were/are identities distinct, and, if distinct, should they be acknowledged as significant, or neutralized and overcome, and if either in what context?

A Grounded Identidad, a story of many places and people, focuses on the series of neighborhoods Puerto Ricans possessed, in a way, and lost, expelled from Lincoln Park/Old Town by, for example, urban renewal or pushed out by gentrification. And yet some I talked with who were on the way up to secure a middle-class status told me they were not wholly opposed to gentrification, especially if it abetted racial and class diversity of the neighborhood. Mine is a story of places as embodiment and symbol of identity, certain channels more conspicuous than others. I strolled along boulevards on Sundays with sauntering people and traced the shifting neighborhoods. Certain buildings, too, I found central to this living history, as, for example San Francisco de Asís Church on the Near West Side, a historical site of latinidad; the Shakespeare building, once multiracial, now remodeled as pricey apartments rented by young, mainly white, people; and Caribe Funeral Home, the first Puerto Rican-owned funeral home in Chicago.

Inevitably *A Grounded* Identidad is a story of people, among them, these: an Anthropologist-in-training, Elena Padilla, graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, who collected testimonies about the working conditions of migrant laborers and distributed a report to the press, engaging in a series of “extra-anthropological interventions” that made an actual difference in peoples’ lives; William Rios, with his sky-blue zoot suit, white-brimmed hat, and dazzling salsa moves despite his seventy years, who told me tales about negotiating the City’s color line; Ana La Luz, a tiny but hard-edged grandmother, and matriarch (I trace her family’s intracity migrations from the 1950s to the present); Cándido Quiñones and Damaris Delgado, an upwardly mobile couple, he a state trooper, she a grammar school teacher, with a home in Logan Square and several properties in Humboldt Park; Bobby Escalas, a talented musician with a warm personality and a quiet charisma, Puerto Rican and Mexican, a quintessential Chicago Latino; Julius Bishop, who played his violin in his basement sanctuary amid his vast collection of books, a living repository of life in Chicago, and whose eulogy I would deliver; and Gina Bishop (née Rios), my landlady and owner (with Julius) of Caribe Funeral Home, high cheek-boned and bossy—a gambler at heart, she served as a sounding board for my research, occasionally asking for favors in return. These were among the living archives, my “interlocutors” and “informants,” the Puerto Ricans of Chicago.

In many respects, *A Grounded* Identidad takes up the intellectual challenge for Puerto Ricans that Harriet Jones put before Anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney—to compose a work in which she could recognize herself and the black people she knew as “drylongso”: “You know, like most of us

really are most of the time—together enough to do what we have to do to be decent people.”⁴ My intent became to bring to light those often missing from the pages of traditional scholarship, Puerto Ricans and communities often typically rendered socially and racially expendable, with the “complex personhood,” to borrow from Sociologist Avery Gordon, of populations often reduced to lifeless stereotypes.⁵ History, as this book demonstrates, does not “happen” to aggrieved communities; they take part in making it, but they do not make it alone. I found a powerful sense of loss of place and neighborhood in the shifting ethnoracial landscape of Chicago, but also constant renewal of hope in new possibilities of belonging, and for creating place. Although social relationships and neighborhoods shifted, they were the blood and tissue that held the people together.

This work, therefore, is neither a traditional community history nor a conventional neighborhood ethnography but a blending of historical and ethnographic research that explores the varied ways Puerto Ricans in Chicago came to understand their identities and rights within and beyond the city they made home. In the process of writing, I thought critically about the relationship of scholars to the community of study. What were the community’s own views of me as a researcher and as a community member? What are their expectations of my scholarship and me? How did our exchanges shape the theoretical and methodological approaches of this scholarly endeavor? Thus, this book became a means of reimagining the relationship of and the responsibility between scholars, whether we consider ourselves “insiders,” “outsiders,” or the “outsider within,” and communities of study.⁶

A GROUNDED *IDENTIDAD*

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1 A FEMALE NETWORK OF DOMESTICS, STUDENT ALLIES, AND SOCIAL WORKERS

“Help available, Puerto Ricans (White), U.S. citizens, male or female,” reads the heading of a September 10, 1946, classified ad for general household workers placed in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* by Castle, Barton and Associates, a Chicago employment agency. In accord with the Puerto Rican Insular Department of Labor, the agency signed contracts with 362 domestic workers who responded, the majority single women, some as young as sixteen. It recruited some seventy men for the Chicago Hardware Foundry Company in North Chicago, and another eighty for Inland Steel Company in East Chicago. Daring Puerto Rican women and men, each with a limit of twenty pounds of baggage, boarded Commander Airline and Eastern Airline cargo planes in San Juan bound for Chicago’s Midway Airport. Half the cost of “regular” tickets, including one for return, would be deducted from their paychecks. The new arrivals were bussed to the Hotel Lincoln on Chicago’s North Side, to be lodged there until work placements were assigned.¹

Georgina “Gina” Bishop, my landlady during my research, and owner of Caribe Funeral Home, the first Puerto Rican funeral parlor in Chicago, had arrived in December 1950 from Humacao, Puerto Rico. When I asked why she migrated, Gina responded simply, “*a buscar arroz y habichuela*,” (“to look for rice and beans”). Her sister Medelicia Rios had come four years earlier, in the fall of 1946, to work as a maid for a Jewish family, and found a factory job instead. She arranged for Gina to be a *niñera* (nanny) for that same family. “*Yo era de la primera*,” (“I was one of the first ones”), Medelicia proudly claimed, perhaps even one of the “recent migration” of domestic workers Elena Padilla, a University of Chicago anthropology student, would write about in her 1947 master’s thesis, “Puerto Rican Immigrants in New York and Chicago: A Study in Comparative Assimilation.”² The labor and social conditions of the recruited low-wage, especially female, Puerto Rican migrant

workers in Chicago by Castle, Barton and Associates had attracted the attention of Padilla as a “daring scheme . . . to reduce the domestic wage scale to an all time low.”³

Padilla herself was part of a parallel, if smaller, migration—of young women and men sponsored by the University of Puerto Rico as part of the island’s nation-building project, who enrolled at US campuses, especially Harvard, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago.⁴ Padilla’s mother had died when she was an infant, her father, a businessman, when she was a child, and she spoke of herself as an “orphan.” Her godparents in San Juan had raised her. At the International House on the University of Chicago campus, her roommate turned out to be Muna Muñoz Lee, daughter of Luis Muñoz Marín, who in 1946 was president of the Puerto Rican Senate, a poet, journalist, and politician, son of Luis Muñoz Rivera, poet, politician, and founder of the Puerto Rican daily *El Diario*.⁵ Muna Muñoz Lee’s mother was the poet, feminist, and Pan-American activist Muna Lee. Together the two vibrant young women took Chicago as their duty.

The image that has persisted in the scholarship and in the popular imagination of the Puerto Rican migrants is that they were, mostly, male. However, it was women who predominated in these early migratory flows. More recently, migration scholars have insisted that migration itself is a “gendered phenomenon.” The nature of this phenomenon directs attention to the relationship between power and gender in the “politics and governance of migration” and its link to ideologies of dependency and development.⁶ The “Chicago experiment,” the administrative name for the recruitment, was a prime example of this, intended, in part, as a means of birth control on the island, where a lower birth rate would be expected to reduce the rate of unemployment.⁷ In personal letters to Puerto Rican leaders, in the island and in the diaspora, Padilla and Muñoz Lee would point to the racial order of this Chicago recruitment plan: “White” Puerto Ricans were located in the US North and “colored Puerto Ricans [were imported] to work as domestics in the [S]outh” in response to US corporate capital’s scheme to reinforce a North/South racial divide of the US workforce.⁸ Yet, the migration not only reflected the racial complexity of Puerto Ricans themselves but also prefigured ways in which Puerto Ricans would begin to unsettle polarized US notions of race. The University of Chicago roommates’ letters and reports would bring a Puerto Rican social worker to Chicago—probably at the instigation of Muñoz Lee’s father—to investigate the matter and improve the daily lives of migrants.

Padilla’s master’s thesis became the first scholarly work to illuminate the significance of Puerto Rican migration to the Windy City and her

investigations of Puerto Rican experiences in Chicago, and later in New York and Puerto Rico, would be reclaimed by a generation of scholars examining racial, class, and gender inequalities in daily life and in the academy.⁹ Taken together, the popular configuration of Puerto Ricans as a cheap, and racialized, labor source and, consequently, as a people in need of population control can be understood as a demonstration of the politics of colonialism. Yet, from the perspective of “the girls” (as press described them), the “Chicago experiment,” most pointedly, provided a means to take initiative for their own lives. They were the core of what became the Puerto Rican community of Chicago.

The “Chicago Experiment”: A Colony of Contract Migrant Workers

“Solving the maid shortage and conducting a social experiment at the same time—this has been the experience of 39 Chicago families and 39 young Puerto Rican girls who are serving as maids for these families.” So read the opening passage of the *Chicago American Herald’s* October 5, 1946, feature story, “Puerto Rican Maids—A Successful Experiment.”¹⁰ Ana Rosa Garcia, an eighteen-year-old maid in the home of the Harris family in the South Shore area, was “typical” of the thirty-nine girls, according to the article. Initially skeptical of signing on with Castle, Barton and Associates, Mr. and Mrs. Harris were purportedly delighted with their Puerto Rican maid: “Ana is the pride of the household and the envy of the neighborhood.” An “accomplished personal maid” (styling Mrs. Harris’s hair) and babysitter for the family (looking after four-year-old Veta Lee), Ana spoke “English with only a slight accent” and her cooking was “far from being too spicy.” Ana’s only misgiving was the prospect of a Chicago winter, but she had a solution: “I’ll just stay in the house until it gets warm again.”¹¹ Weeks earlier, a brief news story in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that the “Puerto Rican girls” were not obligated to stay with their new employers, but that Castle, Barton and Associates predicted they would be “well satisfied.”¹² An official communication from the chief of employment services of Puerto Rico’s Department of Labor to all contracted domestic workers outlined the terms of the contract and described the “migration program”; it suggested that if the experiment continued to be a success, Castle, Barton and Associates intended to hire “a thousand or more workers for domestic services to work in the city of Chicago and its suburban zones.”¹³ Yet, not long after the first shipment, this enthusiasm for recruited

low-wage laborers turned to complaints from both the employers and the workers.

In the light of history it is apparent that ideologies of gender, sexuality, and reproduction, as well as of labor supply, structured early relations between Puerto Rico and the United States.¹⁴ During the Depression years, the failure of the Puerto Rican economy intensified debates about overpopulation, and, by 1940, the fact that women outnumbered men loomed as a significant and troubling trend.¹⁵ Donald O'Conner, an economist for the Office of Puerto Rico in Washington, DC, concluded that, "aside from birth control, the most effective means of reducing the population of Puerto Rico is emigration, primarily of women of child-bearing years."¹⁶ But, wanting to keep such a purpose sub rosa, he issued a cautionary statement: "What need not be made clear, except in executive sessions of the legislative committees, is the demographic effect of female migration."¹⁷ At the same time, migration could also be a low-cost remedy for Chicago's shortage of domestics, since, at the close of World War II, housewives "deprived of the women who parked their mops and took factory jobs, were screaming for maids," as the *Chicago Daily News* put it.¹⁸ Castle, Barton and Associates, with an office in San Juan, saw a unique opportunity to draw on the island's cheap female labor pool, and, since Puerto Ricans did not need entry permits to migrate to the continental US, they could be "brought into the country with a minimum of red tape because they are American citizens."¹⁹ Nonetheless, soon after their arrival in Chicago, the YWCA of Puerto Rico asked the Chicago branch to "look out for the girls"—the new maids who were turning out to be more vexing than convenient.²⁰

To assist in proper assimilation of the new Puerto Rican maids, the YWCA's Industrial Relations Department sponsored Thursday Teas in order to provide the maids with "educational and recreational opportunities during their day off from work."²¹ It was there that Puerto Ricans in Chicago first came together as a group; otherwise, social relations were almost nonexistent. Puerto Rican women were not fond of "tea time"—they drank tea only when sick and preferred strong coffee with steamed milk. Still, they attended for the conversations, to foster friendships, and to assess and compare work conditions. The women (and men) in households, soon dissatisfied with working conditions and low wages, found the YWCA a space to vent their growing dissatisfaction with fifteen-hour work days, lower wages than their US counterparts, employers' disregard of a day off, and impromptu transfers from homes without workers' consent.²² If the majority of Puerto Rican men and women who migrated as contract laborers hoped for decent pay and an opportunity for social advancement, they got much less. In North Chicago, the

foundry workers' contract provided 88½ cents an hour, forty hours a week with time and a half for overtime, but after various deductions, many workers received less than one dollar for a week's worth of work. Men who fell ill were charged the full amount for their living expenses.²³ For Puerto Rican maids sixty dollars a month was the going wage, of which ten dollars was deducted for travel costs to Chicago and another eight dollars and thirty-three cents withheld by Castle, Barton and Associates until the terms of the contract were met or termination of employment occurred. The young women were left with net earnings of approximately ten dollars per week and without guarantee of standard work hours and tasks or a day off.

A Puerto Rican social worker assisting the YWCA told of a domestic worker who watched her new employer, little by little, drop her other household service workers after she arrived. "Now for sixty dollars, [the Puerto Rican girl] does the work of three people: the nanny, the cook, and the maid."²⁴ These were the very tasks praised by the Harris family in the *Chicago American Herald* story of their assessment of the "Chicago experiment," in particular, how their maid, Ana, simplified their lives while trimming household costs. Recruited for low-wage work, Puerto Ricans now also generated animosity among their North American counterparts, according to a December 1946 headline in *El Imparcial*, a newspaper in Puerto Rico: "Boricuas in Chicago Considered 'Undesirable' Due to Their 'Disloyal Competition.'"²⁵ The Household Employees League of the YWCA, an organization of domestic workers "who agree on certain minimum standards of pay and working hours for their household services," announced an extensive waiting list of employers prepared to hire maids "at the minimum pay of \$25 per week, eight hours of work, and 1-½ days off." Despite the scarcity of household help, many employers were willing "to hold to standards such as those set forth by the Household Employees League of the Y.W.C.A."²⁶ The League "consider[ed] it unfortunate that so many of the Puerto Rican workers (who were serious minded and responsible workers) came to work in Chicago under a contract which was unfair to them."²⁷ With unfair working conditions, 142 of the 362 women brought to Chicago in fall 1946 left their employers within five months, becoming "floaters"—that is, they took a job elsewhere. Thirty others returned to Puerto Rico within their first several weeks. Their departure left 142 disgruntled employers "out the \$210 they had paid to obtain the girls' services."²⁸

The Industrial Department of the YWCA now began to sponsor tea in the homes of a few employers to discuss the girls' and employers' concerns. A representative from Castle, Barton and Associates noted that, "all employers