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According to the 2000 census, Chicago's population increased by 4 percent, an important, and somewhat unexpected, reversal of a 50-year trend that witnessed a dwindling of Chicago's population. While some have credited Mayor Richard M. Daley for successfully capitalizing on the economic boom of the 1990s and making the city more attractive to middle-class families, demographers have pointed out that the city's remarkable rebound is largely a result of Latin American and Asian immigration. Today, more than a quarter of Chicago's residents are Latino or of Latin American/Caribbean origin and constitute a majority in almost 15 percent of Chicago's 77 official community areas. Like Los Angeles and New York, Chicago's economic, social, and cultural vitality is largely attributed to its burgeoning Latin American—and primarily Mexican—immigrant populations, as academics, politicians, the media, and others attempt to analyze how Latinos and Latin American immigrants are refashioning and reinventing American cities and national identity.

Migration scholars have made important contributions to these debates on immigration, migration, and community life, and they have done so, in part, by challenging traditional approaches to immigration research that have focused primarily on immigrants' eventual assimilation into receiving communities and by looking, instead, at the different ways in which immigrants continue to maintain social, economic, political, and cultural ties with their countries of origin. Like transnational corporations and businesses, "transnational migration" involves constant movement of people, ideas, technology and capital across borders. For the past decade, writers both inside and outside the academy have invoked the term "transnationalism"—as well as the concept "globalization"—to explain these movements. And while this framework has helped to broaden scholars' knowledge of immigrants' experiences both home and abroad, it can also distort our approach to migration research since it assumes that movement—as well as personal or family migration histories and migrants' connection to various communities of origin—is the primary way in which first and second generation migrants understand their lives.

I experienced these conceptual problems firsthand when I began my fieldwork in 1995 among poor and working-class Puerto Rican women in Chicago. Like all researchers, I began my project with a number of key assumptions that guided my research questions and my approach to the migration and life history interviews I conducted with first and second generation puertorriqueñas living on the city's Near Northwest Side. At that time, popular and academic debates about the "Puerto Rican problem" of persistent poverty—that attributed Puerto Ricans' poor economic standing to circular migration patterns, which allegedly disrupt family life and schooling and weaken their attachment to local labor markets—influenced my decision to create a research project that would explore the relationship of gender, poverty and migration among Chicago puertorriqueñas. My intention was to make an intervention in these debates by demonstrating how circular migration was not a reason for poverty among Puerto Rican women but, rather, an important strategy for survival as they worked to make ends meet in their daily lives. Despite these good intentions,
however, I misdirected many of my initial questions to the women I interviewed precisely because I underestimated their own and their families’ mobility and sense of belonging to a “transnational community.”

In what follows, I show how first and second generation Puerto Rican women’s stories reveal their rootedness in Chicago while they simultaneously feel connected to Puerto Rico in a variety of ways. For these women and many others who live on the city’s Near Northwest Side, issues of housing, pursuing an education, raising families in precarious circumstances, and retaining a unique Puerto Rican cultural identity are ongoing struggles that attest to both their power to overcome difficult circumstances as well as to the enduring importance of place in an increasingly globalized world.

**LEARNING HOW TO LISTEN**

Like many of the puertorriqueñas I met throughout my fieldwork in Chicago from 1995-1996, 30-year old Aida 7 was a young mother absolutely committed to finishing her G.E.D. while raising her five children. Born and raised in Chicago, Aida had spent most of her life living in different homes in the same square mile just East of West Town, near the high school she had attended. My first interview with her was in November 1995 at a coffee shop near Ashland and Chicago Avenues. She and I had quickly become friends earlier that summer, and this was my first formal interview with her. It is also an example of my incorrectly privileging migration as a way of understanding her life in Chicago. I began by asking her to tell me about her families’ migration stories:

**I:** So...tell me what you know about the stories your family told you about their migrating from Puerto Rico to Chicago.

**A:** I was telling my kids the other day, I was telling them about my father. The only one who ever talked about it was my father. I know my mom came here when she was 12 years old to work in my godparent’s house. To clean their house. She was 12 years old, so she was, like a maid...And then my father came here, I think he was 16 or 17 when he came here from Puerto Rico. Because I know my father left school when he was in third grade in Puerto Rico to support my grandmother and his brothers and sisters. Because my grandfather left my grandmother. That’s all I know.

In fact, that is not all that Aida knows about her family’s migration history. She has a very rich knowledge of this history and she becomes visibly excited as she tells stories about her family’s arrival in the 1960s—her parents met in Chicago having migrated on their own—the difficulties they faced, and the time she spent in Puerto Rico when she was young. Her paternal grandmother had shared these stories with her when she was younger and she is determined to pass this knowledge along to her own children.

But Aida was also frequently uncomfortable talking authoritatively about her family’s migration history, and she often suggested that I speak to her parents for more information. For example, when I asked Aida why her parents came to Chicago, she initially responded quite confidently, but then reiterated her limited historical knowledge:

**I:** Do you know why your dad came [to Chicago]?

**A:** For a better life. Because my grandmother came here. Then she couldn’t take it no more so she brought all her kids over here and then—but I’m not too sure. For that you have to talk to them. I’m not too sure. My mom came over first or my dad came over first. I’m not too sure. I know about, a little bit more about my mom.

**I:** What do you know about your mom?

**A:** That my grandmother sent her here over here to work with some people. To work in a house, to clean up their house. Yeah, I know that they...wouldn’t let her out, not even look out the windows. They wouldn’t let her look out the windows!

**I:** Really? Why?

**A:** ‘Cause they were real strict back then. I don’t know what my mom did either, you know...You see, the only one that I remember who would tell me stories was my grandmother. She would sit me...down and I’d sit at her feet. And she’d tell me these stories. That’s how...I know so much about the Bible too, because she taught me. And everything she told me, I remember.

Even though Aida was eager to talk about her family’s history—both the triumphs and challenges—she did not speak with the same authority that she later demonstrated when talking about life in Chicago. And although she assured me that her accounts were reliable precisely because they are based on the stories passed on to her by her grandmother, she still qualified her knowledge by telling me to talk to her parents for the “real” answers. But because I had particular understandings of what migration meant to her and to other women I interviewed, I continued to ask questions that were largely unproductive and sometimes frustrating for both of us.

My interview with 26 year-old, Chicago-born, Yvette Jiménez produced strikingly similar results when talking about Puerto Rico. Yvette began her life history with stories about Chicago—growing up poor in Chicago, the racism she and her family faced, and her struggles to raise her own family by using both low-wage jobs and public aid to make ends meet. She only mentioned Puerto Rico later in our interview when she described how her teenage sister—when she “started to get into trouble”—was sent to live there with her grandmother. Sending adolescents to live with family in Puerto Rico was a common strategy of dealing with real and potential problems with children in Chicago, a common theme in most of the life history narratives of Puerto Rican youth.8 When I responded by asking her if going to Puerto Rico was ever an option for her as she dealt with myriad problems with families, jobs, and housing, she disagreed.

**Y:** Oh, God! My husband, he would like to go...there to retire...he went to college for mechanic’s school at Northeastern...He didn’t even finish a year because his father told him that he was leaving to Puerto Rico and he wasn’t gonna support him anymore, so he had to find a source of his own income. He was 21...He’s working in Dearborn now. And he’s been working there for...eleven years...and he’s planning on staying there ‘cause he got a new position and a raise...so he wants to [build] a house in Puerto Rico. I’m planning to go to Puerto Rico [next summer].
Aida, for example, was sent to live in Puerto Rico to encourage their children to remain in the island—although they encouraged their children to remain romantically and culturally connected to the island through their own stories and desire to take them there one day. Aida, for example, was sent to live in Puerto Rico when she was thirteen years old, and despite her dismal experience, she echoed Yvette’s desire for them to visit the island.

For these and many other second and third generation Puerto Rican women, traveling to Puerto Rico is a way for their children to learn more about “their culture.” However, this cultural knowledge—as well as mastering Spanish and becoming fully bilingual—is not merely a luxury, since women like Aida and Yvette regard it as an invaluable cultural, economic, and social resource to improve their lives in Chicago. In this way, Puerto Rico’s symbolic and material value is fundamentally connected to their commitment to live and raise their children in Chicago and their ability to recognize and value their local knowledge of the city. Yvette concluded our discussion about Puerto Rico quite confidently: “I really don’t have much to say about Puerto Rico because I don’t know much about Puerto Rico...I wouldn’t want to live there. Maybe because I am used to Chicago. I know Chicago so well. I mean, I get around so well [here].”

I have included an extended discussion of Yvette’s and Aida’s ideas about migration, Puerto Rico, and their family histories because they hint at a particular kind of transnational existence frequently overlooked: one firmly rooted in a particular place like Chicago, yet still connected affectively and nostalgically to Puerto Rico. In other words, migration and Puerto Rico are certainly important themes in women’s life histories, but they are important primarily in relation to their understandings of their lives, challenges, and struggles in Chicago. For me, listening and transcribing taped interviews were key to seeing how women like Yvette and Aida understood their lives in Chicago primarily through the lens of race, class, and place. Their stories about public aid, families, housing, schools, and discrimination—topics which predominated in all of my formal interviews with Chicago puertorriqueñas—reveal the deeply local nature of their concerns, even while they maintain certain affective and cultural connections with Puerto Rico.

One concern women shared was that of “struggling to get an education.” 20-year-old Lorena Santiago, for example, was born in Chicago but raised for many years in Puerto Rico before her family returned to the city in 1986. Like Aida and Yvette, her life history focused primarily on the struggles of her daily life in Chicago. Although she describes herself as a “church girl” who enjoys learning and going to school, Lorena dropped out of high school at the age of sixteen because of problems with gangs. She explains:

I had no choice but to drop out of school because [opposition gangs] were talking...[and] they could have killed me, just because I was hanging out with [other people]. It’s just ridiculous. My brother had problems at [Kelvyn Park High School]...with the Disciples because we live by [the Latin] Kings. So they automatically think we’re Kings, Queens, you know, so we had no choice but to drop out too. They wanted to kill him and...my big brother. We had a lot of problems with gangs.

Problems with gangs continued to emerge as an important theme in Lorena’s life history: Some of her family members were implicated in gang violence, and she lived in a neighborhood characterized by heavy inter-gang rivalry. These concerns were shared by many residents on the Near Northwest Side of Chicago. Aida, for example, would grow visibly frustrated when she had to buy clothes for her oldest son who attended another high school, since she had to be sure he didn’t wear any colors that might suggest a particular gang affiliation. As she scoured the racks at the different kiosks throughout the Mega Mall for “just a plain black winter jacket”—with no logos—that was both affordable and his size, she cursed (in both English and Spanish) the gangs and the unnecessary power they had on her life. Others related how local media portrayed different neighborhoods as “gang-ridden” which made it almost impossible for them to secure stable employment. And all lamented the ways in which the threat of gang violence circumscribed their lives.
Another important theme emerging from *puertorriqueñas*’ life histories was the economic struggles they faced as children and continue to confront as they now raise and nurture their own families. On the one hand, women like Yvette resented the fact that their mothers had to work such long hours outside the home that they would rarely see them. Because her father only worked intermittently while she was growing up, Yvette’s mother carried the burden of being the family breadwinner by working at a small factory on the Northwest Side. She explained:

[My mother worked at Amber’s Tubing] for a long time....And I used to cry to see her leave in the morning because I knew, you know, she had to go to support us. But it—it was a struggle. I knew I wouldn’t see her for a long time...and she would come home tired. And it wasn’t like a...family I would like to have, like come home and all, and sit and eat [together] at the same time and tell her how my day went...and hear how her day went. It was never like that.

Like her mother Yvette also spends long hours working, cobbling together different low-paying jobs and public aid to make ends meet. And although she tries hard to “be there for my kids” the way she felt her mother was not able to be there for her, her time is limited and she often feels immense pressure trying to balance her long hours at work as a store clerk downtown, with her vast household responsibilities that include taking care of her three children as well as her own and her husband’s extended families. One way she attempts to strike this balance is to sell Mary Kay products on the side, an activity that generates some extra money—although not nearly as much as she had anticipated—and allows her to spend time with her children since she is able to bring them with her as she visits different women in their homes in the evenings and on weekends.

Lorena and Aida describe similar struggles trying to balance work and family. But because most employment available to them are poor-paying service sector jobs, they have used public aid at different times as a way to support themselves and ensure medical coverage for their children. Narratives about public aid—the bureaucracy, the shame and humiliation they feel, their sense of powerlessness and, at times, their struggle to feel empowered—are, by far, the most common and sensitive topics women discussed. And they are all painfully aware of the media images portraying those “on welfare” as lazy, unwilling to work, and looking for a “free ride.” Aida, for example, criticized the government’s analysis of welfare becoming a “way of life” for generations of poor people. Lorena also criticized this dominant image, although she did so by simultaneously refuting truisms that welfare recipients don’t want to work, and pointing out the ways in which she was different from other women who may, in fact, abuse the system.

“[The government and media] make us out to be, like—that most of the people are Hispanic and black people that are getting welfare. Which is not true, okay? But I want to prove to them that I am different than most of the Hispanic people maybe are. You know, [those] who don’t want to go to work. Maybe they have their own excuses. Maybe they can’t go to work. Maybe they’re sick, you know. But I could go to work, so I’m making a difference for myself [so I can get a good paying job with medical benefits]. I’m different, you know.

These women’s work histories defy the dominant media images of welfare recipients. They, like other poor and working-class *puertorriqueñas*, have worked in a variety of jobs as cashiers, receptionists, fast food workers, store clerks, janitors, newspaper deliverers, factory workers, school truant officers and volunteers, and telemarketers.

These jobs, however, fail to help to make ends meet, as Puerto Rican women are increasingly concentrated in “the ever-expanding service sector” characterized by meager salaries and little opportunity for advancement and economic mobility. Being limited to low-wage service work is particularly a problem today, as Chicago’s soaring housing prices and simultaneous housing crisis have severely limited poor and working-class residents’ options for housing. This current crisis—which has characterized the city for more than two decades and has a longer history dating back to the migration of Southern blacks to Chicago in the 1920s—is particularly acute for Puerto Rican and other Latino families who live in communities experiencing some of the greatest levels of gentrification on the city’s North Northwest Side.

In neighborhoods like West Town, Wicker Park and, increasingly, Humboldt Park and Logan Square, Puerto Rican and Latino residents have been squeezed out, with Community Areas like West Town experiencing an almost 25% decrease in its Latino population in the past decade. In response, Puerto Rican women have had to come up with new housing options like doubling up with other family members and close friends, taking in boarders, and squeezing large extended families into smaller apartments in order to remain in their neighborhoods where, over the years, they have cultivated rich networks of neighbors, stores, and small businesses that enable them to feed and clothe their families from month to month.

Neighborhood stores, for example, are critical for many women whose long-standing relationship with the owners allows them to buy on credit until the next paycheck. This kind of reciprocity cements some women’s loyalty to buy in these stores rather than at larger supermarkets where some goods are significantly cheaper. One woman explained this seemingly irrational strategy saying, “You owe these [small] stores. Try to get something on credit from the big supermarkets when you don’t have any money. They don’t give you credit. But the [small stores], when they know you, they do.” For these reasons, many women endure living in cramped apartments in order to remain in the same neighborhood, even while they simultaneously dreamed of having their own home one day. Women like Aida have invested great amounts of time and energy cultivating these relationships and figuring out where to buy basic foodstuffs based on both price and quality. And even though she consistently talks of moving away from the *locura* [craziness] of her gang- and drug-ridden neighborhood, Aida recognizes the convenience of living in West Town and is proud of her economic strategies that effectively stretch household monthly income. “I buy my meat at Lorimar. I get my eggs and milk from Edmar’s. And I can walk over to K-Mart, over to Milwaukee [Avenue]. I have everything I need right here.” This is often a point of contention between her and her husband who wants to find a larger apartment further west and away from their troubled neighborhood. But since Aida doesn’t have a driver’s license and has lived almost all her life in her neighborhood, she doesn’t want to be far away from the stores she frequents and the easy access to her kin and friendship networks. “One day I’ll get my house,” she would say. “I’ll get my license and get my house, but not yet.”
These creative strategies to remain in one’s neighborhood, however, are frequently insufficient, and Latino families are increasingly forced to move further west in the city into new and unfamiliar neighborhoods. Hermosa, Avondale, and Belmont Cragin—the Community Areas just west of the Near Northwest Side neighborhoods—have indexed a dramatic rise in their Latino populations, increasing by more than almost 100% or more in at least two of those areas. And although these new places may appear to be safer, afford greater living space, and are relatively quieter than their previous communities, women are also faced with creating new support networks, learning to navigate unfamiliar surroundings, and become more dependent on private cars—their own as well as those of friends and family—to get around the city. And while these changes may appear to be inconsequential, they have a profound impact on women both emotionally and materially: They have to invest a lot of time to create new neighborhood relations that are critical for their households. They are often more dependent on others’ generosity and time for transportation as well. When puertorriqueñas do have their own cars, they rarely own them and, instead, pay a large portion of their monthly income in order to finance them. Chicago’s housing crisis has had a profound impact on the lives of the city’s most vulnerable residents.

A final recurring theme in these women’s life histories is the pervasiveness of racism in their lives and the current state of race relations among people of color in Chicago. While Aida, Yvette, and Lorena are all very light in complexion, Aida and Yvette are both black identified, seeking out work-based and neighborhood friendships with both other Puerto Ricans as well as African Americans. Lorena talked more about her relationship with Mexicans and Central Americans, partly because many family members are married to other Spanish-speakers though marriage, but also because she feels more comfortable speaking Spanish rather than English. However, all three women’s experiences as poor minorities living in racially and ethnically segregated Chicago—with an infamous history of volatile race relations—have shaped their understanding of their own social location as similar to that of poor blacks in Chicago. Yvette, for example used her experiences at work to explain the current state of race relations:

Y: [When I was growing up in Chicago], if you were prejudiced, you just kept it to yourself and stay away from whoever you were prejudiced against. Now, it’s just—it’s like gays. Now if you’re prejudiced, people confront people. “I hate you because of your nationality or your culture or your color.” It’s terrible.

I: You find that a lot?

Y: Yeah, like at work. Yeah, I worked with a bunch of prietas (black women) and I loved them all. When I quit, that’s all that was there with me. They had a cake for me, they bought me a card. They’re the only ones who signed it. All the prietas. And the blancas (white women) and Mexicans, they didn’t talk to me because I talked to the prietas...it’s terrible, it’s terrible. And to me, blacks and Hispanics, we’re all in the same group because we’re all going through the same struggle.

I: What kind of struggle do you mean?

Y: Um, we’re all poor!!!

Like Yvette, Aida also recognized her shared social and economic position with African Americans, and she would respond angrily to black co-workers who would use black nationalist discourse to distinguish themselves from Puerto Ricans, telling them that even though she didn’t look black, she was Puerto Rican and, therefore, was black too. Besides, she would point out, “We’re all poor.”

Mexicans, however, inhabit a different ideological space and are often perceived as both an economic and cultural threat. All three women believe that part of the tension between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans revolve around issues of citizenship: Mexicans hate Puerto Ricans, these women and others consistently maintain, because they are born American citizens; and Puerto Ricans resent Mexicans because they allegedly compete for jobs and undercut legal workers’ wages. Despite extremely vocal condemnations of Mexicans, however, women like Aida are also ready to help Mexican women as they navigate city and federal bureaucracies for what she believes are “their rights.” On a larger community level, as well, Mexican and Puerto Rican women have collaborated in political struggles around school reform, housing, and gentrification. These moments of solidarity among black, Puerto Rican and Mexican women not only reveal their shared social location, they also underscore the fact that despite a long migration history and continued circulation between Chicago and Puerto Rico, most poor and working-class puertorriqueñas live deeply local lives.

CONCLUSION

In an era in which we are bombarded by romantic visions of transnationalism and mobility—by corporations, the media, politicians, and even some academics—it is important to see how these processes operate within a double standard based on race/ethnicity, class, and gender. On the one hand, private capital and popular culture celebrate the quick and unfettered transnational connections which have transformed our world into a “global village,” while the ebb and flow of people—economic and political migrants, laborers—is contested and even violently resisted by nativist movements throughout Western Europe and the United States. Likewise some accounts of transnationalism—both inside and outside of the academy—frequently ignore the power inequalities involved in globalization. They also tend to overlook those whose lives are rooted in particular communities and over-exaggerate the degree to which individuals move across borders. For some—usually the international elite—highly mobile lifestyles signal high status; for others, it is recognized as a necessary survival strategy for immigrants adjusting to an increasingly precarious economic future. Yet for other groups, this mobility is used to explain their economic and social marginalization. This is especially true for the Puerto Rican poor and impoverished puertorriqueñas who have been erroneously portrayed as “hyper-mobile” and who, in fact, tend to live deeply rooted lives in situations not of their own choosing.


6. All names are pseudonyms for questions of confianza.

8. Part of the reason why this is a common strategy is because of the different ways Chicago (urban and dangerous) versus Puerto Rico (rural and safe) are imagined. See Marixsa Alicea, 'A Chambered Nautilus': The Contradictory Nature of Puerto Rican Women's Role in the Social Construction of a Transnational Community, *Gender & Society* 11 (1997), 597-626 and Gina M. Pérez, *The Near Northwest Side Story and the Politics of Belonging*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming) for a more detailed discussion of this migration strategy.

9. Toro-Morn (2001) provides an important analysis of Puerto Rican women's shifting location in Chicago's labor market and describes how despite puertorriqueñas' new concentration in white collar sectors of the economy—replacing their earlier employment in blue collar work—they are still stuck in low-paying jobs, lack educational opportunities for better employment and advancement, and still suffer from discrimination in the workforce as they had before. See "Yo era muy arriesgada": A Historical Overview of the Work Experiences of Puerto Rican Women in Chicago," *Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, special issue on Puerto Ricans in Chicago, XIII (2) (Fall 2001).


12. Flores-González (2001) documents the following increases from 1990-2000: Hermosa 41.6%; Avondale 99.6%; and Belmont Cragin 198.1%.