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An Upbeat West Side Story:  
Puerto Ricans and Postwar Racial Politics in Chicago

GINA M. PÉREZ

**Abstract**

Chicago Puerto Ricans have inhabited a number of ideological positions since their arrival *en masse* in the late 1940s, ranging from their short-lived tenure as the city's "model" minority in the 1950s and 1960s and, eventually, to their membership in urban America's alleged "culture of poverty" and "underclass". Using historical and ethnographic data, this article analyzes the different ways in which Chicago Puerto Ricans have been portrayed and imagined differently over time; explores the role of the state in constructing and disseminating particular constructions of Puerto Rican migrants in Chicago; and demonstrates how varying constructions of Puerto Ricans are related to both their shifting location in Chicago's political economy as well as their relationship vis-à-vis ethnic and racial and ethnic Others in the city.

Postwar Chicagoans loved the Puerto Ricans. In June 1965, the *Chicago Daily News* ran an article titled "Chicago's Proud Puerto Ricans," which made the following observations:

Everyone who has seen 'West Side Story' or reads the papers or has seen Spanish Harlem in New York knows there is a 'Puerto Rican problem.' He can talk knowledgeably about gang fights and knives and five Puerto Ricans hanging themselves in New York jails and all the other problems of the Spanish ghetto.

It has been printed and reprinted that more Puerto Ricans, sick of subway knifings and dirty air and dirty tenements, are going back to Puerto Rico than are coming to New York.

The surprising thing is that none of this is true in Chicago.

(*Chicago Daily News*, June 5, 1965)

*Opposite: The late Mayor Harold Washington, along with Luis Gutierrez, meeting the Mayor of Loiza during the Washington's visit to Puerto Rico to attend the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1985). Photo by Carlos Flores.*

Newspaper articles like this were not uncommon in postwar Chicago. And although oral histories and print media from the 1950s and 1960s also documented ethnic rivalries, tensions, and even violence between Puerto Rican migrants and other immigrant groups, such as the Italians and the Polish, city officials and local media downplayed such instances, celebrating instead the city's newest migrants as hard-working role models in search of the American Dream. In an era characterized by Cold War anxieties about race, gender, culture, and family, Chicago Puerto Ricans were positioned center stage as examples of group success and were used as a benchmark against which the city's black population and New York Puerto Ricans were judged and derided. Their tenure as the era's model minority, however, was short-lived. By the mid-1960s, as Chicago Puerto Rican's structural position changed, so too did public perceptions of them as the standard bearers of successful ethnic mobility. The Division Street Riots in June 1966—most immediately precipitated by the police shooting of a young Puerto Rican man—marks not only the beginning of a politicized ethnic consciousness among Chicago Puerto Ricans, but also a new public image of them as dangerous, poor, and culturally deficient, characterizations that continue to define Chicago *puertorriqueños* into the present.

In what follows, I use historical and ethnographic data to analyze the different ways in which Chicago Puerto Ricans have been portrayed and imagined differently over time. Although my focus here is primarily the 1950s and 1960s, I also draw on my ethnographic research among poor and working-class Puerto Ricans on the city's Near Northwest Side in the 1990s to highlight important continuities in Chicago's public discourse of race, ethnicity, poverty, and immigration/migration. First and second generation Puerto Ricans have metamorphized from "model minorities" in the 1950s and early 1960s, to "slum-dwellers" mired in a "culture of poverty" in the late 1960s and 1970s, to, finally, members of an alleged "underclass" in the 1980s and 1990s (these designations rely on various cultural explanations of group success, poverty, and social organization). The shifts in description are related primarily to Chicago's changing political economy, Puerto Ricans' location in these shifting contexts, and the emergence of ethnic Others to replace them as standard-bearers of hardworking and upwardly mobile migrants. I use gender and race as a lens for examining these shifting understandings of Chicago Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis ethnic and racial others in the city. Moreover, I demonstrate how the dominant image of public perception of postwar Chicago Puerto Ricans as modern-day Horatio Alger's and the era's model minority was a carefully constructed one, involving island and city officials, and was predicated on specific ideologies of race, gender, work, class, and family and their embeddedness in Chicago's shifting political economy. Not surprisingly, Chicago's "upbeat West Side Story," like the original "West Side Story," was largely myth, based on stereotypical notions of gender relations, race, and cultural difference.

### **Puerto Rican Migration and the Migration Division Office**

As scholars of Chicago's Puerto Rican communities have discussed at length elsewhere, postwar Puerto Rican migration to the city was largely a result of contract labor: Men were recruited to meet labor needs in factories and steel mills; and women were contracted as *domésticas* (E. Padilla 1947; F. Padilla 1987; Maldonado 1979; Toro-Morn 1993, 1999). This recruitment effort was also part of a larger planned migration strategy in Puerto Rico aimed at resolving the island's "overpopulation problem" and advancing its new industrialization program (Pantojas-Garcia 1990; Pérez 2000; Whalen 2000; Toro-Morn 1999). As Maura Toro Morn

has noted, this history of contract labor migration has linked Chicago and Puerto Rico in “distinctively gendered ways” (1993:58). Like other immigrants, chain migration—the subsequent arrival of extended kin and friends through migrant networks—ensured the rapid growth of Chicago’s Puerto Rican communities in the postwar era as well (Ramos-Zayas 1997).

Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of this movement, however, was the role of the Migration Division Office in encouraging Puerto Rican migrants to settle in Chicago. Originally the Bureau of Employment and Migration—which was first established in 1947 in New York City—the Migration Division Office was charged with regulating and overseeing Puerto Rican migration to the mainland. In 1949, the Migration Division established its Chicago office and serviced Puerto Rican workers engaged in industrial and agricultural work throughout the Midwest region, including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Although the office was initially established to orient migrant workers and help them secure employment, it quickly refocused its efforts to promote the gradual integration of migrants to their new social and cultural context.

To this end, the Migration Division was deeply committed to manufacturing and managing a positive public image of Puerto Rican migrants in order to avoid the nativist backlash confronting Puerto Ricans in New York City. As in New York City, the Chicago Division Office collaborated with local government and community agencies to address problems involving Puerto Rican residents in the city. Division officials, for example, worked closely with the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination and Chicago’s Public Welfare office to resolve work-related conflicts, and they responded to negative news reports about Puerto Rican workers through local radio and print media. They consulted frequently with researchers from the University of Chicago and Northwestern University in projects about integration, employment, and ethnic relations between Puerto Rican migrants and Mexicans in the city. The Division also helped these researchers collect data for a fertility study in Puerto Rico. Finally, Division officials advised Puerto Rican residents to establish community organizations and institutions that would address the needs of its growing community. In short, the Migration Division was deeply engaged in promoting Puerto Rican migrants’ full assimilation and creating civic organizations that would “not get off on a tangent destructive to the ultimate goal of integration.”<sup>1</sup>

The Office also used local radio and print media to disseminate a profile of “the Puerto Rican migrant,” stressing her industrious work ethic as well as her ability to assimilate easily into her new urban American environment. The Division’s February 1952 monthly report, for example, documented employers’ concern about Puerto Rican workers’ absenteeism. The Division responded swiftly by persuading local radio stations to air public service announcements stressing the importance of being responsible and reliable employees. The Division also showed films such as *The Girl from Puerto Rico*, *The Crowded Island*, and *Pedacito de Tierra* in local community colleges and social service agencies and lent them to city organizations like The Pan-American Council of Chicago as part of their education campaign.<sup>2</sup> When *The Daily News* published unflattering articles about Puerto Ricans in the city, officials immediately mobilized Puerto Rican community organizations to “channel their energy in a constructive way.” In response, the Division wrote a letter to the editor that was “courteous and proper, but also firm” and sent a copy to all concerned organizations. This action led to two additional articles in *The Daily News* that were much more positive than the previous ones.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, while the Office’s stated purpose was to “help individual adjustment and integration into the community where one resides,” its principal focus was to promote

a positive image of migrants and maintain a favorable working relationship with civic groups and government agencies.<sup>4</sup> An inventory of its print materials demonstrates that “between sixty and seventy percent of Migration Division press releases, articles, pamphlets and films in the middle 1950s appeared in English, addressed to a non-Puerto Rican audience” (in Lapp 1990:207). Division officials also encouraged migrants to be actively involved in civic life as a way to advance the Migration Division’s goals. Thus, everything from blood drives—“Such efforts as obtaining blood donors among the Puerto Rican residents will maintain our good relations with the hospitals”—to ethnic celebrations—“All of this activity has created much favorable publicity in all the city and has been a valuable organizing experience for the various Councils of the *Caballeros de San Juan* (the Knights of San Juan)” —either promoted or detracted from the Division’s primary objective.<sup>5</sup>

The Migration Division Office readily acknowledged its public relations campaign and admitted that such measures were fueled by two important and related phenomena: the desire to avoid a “racial powder keg” that characterized New York Puerto Ricans’ experience, and the need to manage the exodus of thousands of Puerto Ricans from the “overpopulated island” in order to ensure the industrialization program’s success.

[For] Puerto Rico migration has an important meaning, since it is the common knowledge that migration, although voluntary, is an integral part of the program “*Manos a la Obra*” [Operation Bootstrap]. It is important because migration helps maintain a population index on a more or less stable level with its corresponding impact on employment and unemployment, in health, education and housing, etc. It is also important because it is a very important source of income for the economic life of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Statements such as these revealed both the Division’s complicity with the Puerto Rican government as well as its allegiance to the *Partido Popular Democrático* (Lapp:207). Like the “Chicago Experiment,” the Puerto Rican government’s involvement in migrants’ lives through the Migration Division was an important precursor to what contemporary scholars now refer to as the “new transnationalism.”<sup>7</sup>

In its attempts to promote the peaceful integration of Puerto Rican migrants into Chicago’s social life, the Department’s comparisons of New York and Chicago Puerto Ricans were frequent and explicit. Chicago Puerto Ricans were upheld as hard-working migrants, immune to the kind of violence, pathology, and welfare dependency that characterized their New York counterparts. Equally powerful, although not quite as explicit, were the ways in which Chicago Puerto Ricans were compared to racial and ethnic Others inhabiting the city. Soon after their postwar arrival, local newspapers and city agencies helped to reflect and shape a public image of Puerto Ricans as standard-bearers of hard work and “good” immigrant behavior. Between the late 1940s and the mid-1960s, they were popularly cast as the city’s “model minority” and enjoyed this honorary status until June 1966, when the Division Street Riots erupted in the new Puerto Rican neighborhood. The linguistic journey from “model minority” to “underclass” has important political implications in that it helped to define what constitutes “good” vs. “bad” ethnic groups and continues to be a salient instrument to identify and explain social problems as a product of culture rather than larger political economic structures of inequality.

### Ascending the Model Minority Throne

While a number of scholars have identified the Civil Rights Era as the cradle of model minority rhetoric explaining Asian and Asian-American success vis-à-vis U.S. blacks and Latinos,<sup>8</sup> I argue that national anxiety about American families and gender ideologies was particularly fertile terrain for postwar model minority tropes elevating Chicago Puerto Ricans. As many feminist scholars have noted, postwar family ideology rested largely on a new cult of domesticity enshrining women's roles as selfless mothers and men as breadwinners. These iconic images of *the* American family were deeply raced and classed: Not only did they betray white, middle-class women's wartime waged labor, they also erased poor and working-women's continued formal and informal work and ignored the fact that some women—women of color as well as immigrant women—had long histories of wage labor and continued to work in postwar America (Coontz 1992; Zinn and Thornton Dill 1994; Glen 1986). Postwar mass media, especially television, were key to inventing and disseminating images of the American family as a harmonious domestic unit residing happily in segregated social spaces in the suburbs (Williams 1999:85–86). This postwar family ideology was a politically charged construct, celebrating proper gender roles, a robust work ethic, and strong family ties allegedly under assault by deviant sexualities, communism, and the anomie of urban life.<sup>9</sup> It was also the cornerstone of an emerging “model minority” trope in the 1950s.

In today's political and racial landscape, journalists, academics, and politicians invoke model minority rhetoric to explain Asian-American educational and economic success. According to the model minority myth, Asian Americans possess unique cultural values—a strong work ethic, deference to authority, patience, strong family ties—that have allowed them to succeed. And unlike poor blacks and Latinos, Asian-Americans have allegedly done so with little government assistance. Asian American scholars have carefully documented the emergence of the model minority myth in the mid-1960s as a reaction to the civil rights movement and black and Latino political mobilization. Its persistence into the 1980s and 1990s, these writers argue, attests to the rightward shift in American racial politics since the late 1960s and the myth's appeal to deeply held beliefs of American liberal democracy such as individualism and merit.<sup>10</sup> Both then and now, family ideology has been the tenuous foundation upon which this model minority rhetoric rests.

Beginning in the 1950s, national concerns about American families mapped onto Chicago's volatile problems of race and residential desegregation, complementary racial fears enabling Chicago Puerto Ricans to become the city's “model minority.” Local news accounts prominently featured Puerto Rican migrants as hardworking family men who sent for their wives and families once they had established secure jobs and proper living arrangements in Chicago. Like European immigrants before them, Puerto Ricans were said to hail from close-knit families that were self-reliant, eager to work, and unwilling to receive public aid. A *Chicago Daily News* article, for example, spotlighted Cesar Rivera and Domingo LaBoy as “examples of good citizens among the Puerto Rican newcomers.” A large number of family photos in LaBoy's home demonstrated his commitment to family both on the island and the mainland; and Rivera was praised for being “very much the head of his family in the manner of the Spanish culture.” In short, both men fit the profile of *the* Chicago Puerto Rican: “What kind of Puerto Rican comes to Chicago? The hardworking guy who isn't looking for a handout.”<sup>11</sup>

By the late-1950s, Chicago media consistently praised its Puerto Rican residents for their strong families. One news article profiled the Medinas, a “model Puerto Rican family” whose social life centered on its large extended family and friends.

Most of the Medinas’ social life centers around the family—more than 100 relatives in Chicago—and Puerto Rican friends...It is nothing for 15 or 20 relatives to drop-in on one evening, to visit on the front porch or climb the additional flights to the Medinas’ apartment. Occasionally the girls bring friends home from school...but usually they are Puerto Rican friends.<sup>12</sup>

Newspapers also emphasized the ways in which families—and, when necessary, local businesses—helped orient newcomers.

When a member of the family arrives every one of his kinfolk, blood or marriage, must be there to meet him. He must be taken in hand, housed where there is no room, and fed where there is nothing to eat. Finding work for the newcomer is a family project. Buying winter clothing (something unknown in tropical Puerto Rico) is another. If the family’s resources are inadequate, the neighborhood lends its aid. The grocer, the bartender, and the beauty parlor operator relay bits of information on apartments and job openings.<sup>13</sup>

The two preceding excerpts appear to be solid journalistic accounts culled from a sharp ethnographic eye. In fact, such articles reified “the Puerto Rican family” as an unchanging cultural form. These accounts also elided the ideologically charged nature of upholding the Puerto Rican family as the standard-bearer for all families in the urban landscape. If all families behaved as these model families, the articles seemed to suggest, there wouldn’t be the same social problems currently plaguing American households.

City agencies like the Mayor’s Committee on New Residents affirmed these media portraits, underscoring how Puerto Ricans’ experiences resembled that of earlier immigrant groups. Despite unavoidable problems of “crowded slum housing, job difficulties, language trouble, prejudice and ghetto-living,” Puerto Rican families were stable and organized “in the Spanish tradition.”

Authority in the family resides in the male, the children are under his control, and the family group often comprises an extended clan of relatives. Relatives help each other because they are ‘of the same blood’ and children are almost always taken care of by the family and rarely are sent to an orphanage. Women are expected to be submissive, to restrict their activities to the home. Girls in lower class families usually marry young, and often they are content to live in a common law marriage without the benefit of civil or religious sanction (Chicago Commission on Human Relations 1960:5).

Such images suggest that Puerto Rican domestic groups were immune to the pathologies threatening the postwar American family. The celebration of their proper gender roles and strong kin ties also underscored the ways in which popular culture and social policy encouraged the postwar American family fantasy.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to being deeply family-oriented, Puerto Rican migrants were widely regarded as innocent, loving, and gentle people. Unlike “the Negro, Indian and Southern white” residing in Chicago, Puerto Ricans were dangerously naïve and vulnerable to unscrupulous business practices such as faulty credit schemes.<sup>15</sup> According to police, young Puerto Rican men rarely caused problems, drank little, and when they did get into trouble, one officer remarked, they usually fought among themselves. “They wander around in gangs of 15 or 20 looking for their music. Every now and then a little trouble develops and knives come out. But they give me less trouble than a lot of the others.”<sup>16</sup> According to the Mayor’s Committee on New Residents, the little crime that did exist among juvenile or adult Puerto Rican men was “slum-conditioned, related to their cultural background (statutory rape) or their inadequate command of the English language (traffic violations).”<sup>17</sup> In short, the “dark-eyed, gentle people from the blue-ringed island” were remarkably different from Chicago’s racial/ethnic Others. As one man confirmed, “The Puerto Rican psychology is very different from, say, the Mexicans. They don’t like to fight. Other Latins are more easily incited to violence. I never saw any mass movement interested in violence in Puerto Rico.”<sup>18</sup>

Through the mid-1960s, Chicago media continued to compare Puerto Ricans to other ethnic groups such as “hard-working” Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants and not-so-hardworking populations such as the New York Puerto Ricans. Chicago’s *Daily News* trumpeted Chicago Puerto Ricans as “an upbeat West Side Story”: They were “peaceful and furiously ambitious,” while New York *puertorriqueños* were violent, welfare-dependent, and involved in gangs. “If Horatio Alger were alive today,” the article maintained, “*he* would sure to be a [Chicago] Puerto Rican,” whose industriousness, level of self-analysis, and desire to “put roots here” resulted from the “modern Puerto Rican personality,” which was “a mixture of Latin and North American characteristics.”<sup>19</sup> This particular news account, like many others, spotlighted hardworking Puerto Rican men, the stable nuclear families they established, and portrayed (rather incorrectly) women solely as dutiful homemakers. This profile of *the* Puerto Rican migrant as a hardworking man not only rendered women’s migration experiences and work invisible, it also served as a benchmark to distinguish “good” Puerto Rican migrants from “bad” ethnic Others in the urban imagination.

Like its recent incarnation, 1950s model minority rhetoric also highlighted cultural explanations for group success. As cultural hybrids, Puerto Ricans embodied the virtues of two distinct cultures—a patriarchal Spanish sensibility mixed with North American determination—which explained their impressive ability to overcome adversity. Chicago city officials were equally fascinated with this cultural spectacle:

Culturally, the Puerto Rican presents an interesting phenomenon. A thin layer of American culture is laid upon a strictly Spanish speaking background, and Puerto Rico may be called the melting-ground of two distinct cultures. This is visibly documented by the aged Spanish fortresses that once protected the harbor of San Juan and only a little distance away, the tall chimneys of modern industrial plants, symbols of Puerto Rico’s new association with industrial America. Both Spanish and English are taught and spoken and cockfighting and baseball are national pastimes. In short, when a Puerto Rican says goodbye to his native land, ‘he leaves a land as Spanish as avocados and as American as ice cream.’<sup>20</sup>

Because Puerto Ricans were Latin and North American—they were, after all, American citizens, a fact agency documents and memos carefully affirmed—they successfully navigated between the Scylla and Charybdis of modern urban America: They nurtured strong families and communities without the provincialism or degraded ghetto living that allegedly characterized Chicago’s black population. Media representations of model Puerto Rican families, therefore, clearly reflected important academic and policy concerns of the day. Acculturation theory and the vitriolic debates surrounding residential integration provided the important backdrop against which the model minority image was constructed.

By highlighting Puerto Ricans’ “Americanness” and their cultural values—patriarchal families, diligence, kindness, and strong family ties—city officials and local media provided white Chicagoans with a cultural antidote for their racial fears. Severe housing shortages in postwar Chicago exacerbated long-standing black/white racial tensions. Unable to accommodate new migrants, the city’s Black Belt boundaries were transformed as blacks entered into formerly white neighborhoods like Oakland, Kenwood, Hyde Park, and Woodlawn.<sup>21</sup> Increased suburbanization in the 1950s helped to relieve the city’s housing pressures as middle-class whites relocated to new single-family homes in the suburbs. But for those whites remaining in the city, interracial friction over shared public spaces—such as parks and beaches—as well as the often-violent white protest against black residential integration, was almost commonplace.

White residents of South Deering and Hyde Park, for example, invoked cultural arguments to explain their resistance to black residents in their communities. Southern blacks were regarded as backward, while blacks from Chicago’s ghettos suffered from “physical and...moral deterioration” (in Hirsch 1998 [1983]:182). The prevailing acculturation theory affirming the gradual cultural integration of “newcomers” into larger white society provided whites with academic ammunition to oppose black settlement in their neighborhoods on cultural rather than racial grounds. As whites in South Deering succinctly argued, they would oppose black integration in their neighborhood until blacks were “educated to behave and act like civilized people.”<sup>22</sup>

Puerto Ricans certainly were not white; but media portraits of hardworking Puerto Rican families also assured city residents that they were not black.<sup>23</sup> Being christened the modern Horatio Alger cemented Chicago Puerto Rican’s “model minority” status. Yet it also betrayed black claims of entrenched racism and racist social policy that rendered black Chicagoans poor and segregated in the city’s bursting ghettos. Model minority rhetoric, therefore, not only chastises ethnic/racial Others for failing to achieve economic success, it also smoothes over intragroup differences, ignores the ways in which racism shapes people’s lives, and elides a more complicated reading of history. For example, at the same time Chicago embraced Puerto Ricans as the city’s model minority, government officials feverishly worked to deport unemployed Puerto Ricans to the island. While Chicago-based media virtually ignored these events, *El Mundo* provided extensive coverage of government plans to deport the city’s “model citizens.”<sup>24</sup>

Most scholars agree that model minority rhetoric stigmatizes both the group being praised and those who do not fit the model minority profile. It also relies on fantastic historical narratives that perpetuate the model minority’s own racial subordination while delegitimizing claims of racial inequality.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, this myth relies on false claims about women, work, and family. Thus, while newspapers and government agencies praised Puerto Ricans for their patriarchal families and “Spanish” gender roles, city officials simultaneously expressed deep concern about Puerto Rican women’s employment. Despite the model minority construction of Puerto Rican men as the

indisputable heads of their families and their wives as dutiful homemakers, historical evidence and women's life histories paint a very different picture. In short, Chicago Puerto Ricans' status as model minorities was short-lived precisely because it had very little basis in their lived experiences.

### **Ideologies of Gender, Work, and American Families**

By the mid-1950s—the early years of Puerto Ricans' model minority tenure—the Migration Division Office expressed deep concern for Puerto Rican women's ability to find secure employment in Chicago. In April 1952, the office documented the lack of employment for non-English speaking women who had been laid off by light industries. In July, the office reiterated its concern about women's low levels of employment. Finally, that year's October report focused almost exclusively on women and the labor market, detailing how many arrived at the Division looking for work, the number of women successfully placed in jobs, and various Division attempts to follow up on women they had referred for jobs. Officials pointed out that this was exclusively a problem with female employment and underscored the need to teach women English so they would be able to secure jobs as office workers.<sup>26</sup>

The Mayor's Committee on New Residents later echoed this call for women to learn English. It also encouraged them to attend the Board of Education's Americanization classes. Like Mexican women in California decades earlier, Puerto Rican women were targeted because of their role as mothers and homemakers.<sup>27</sup> But they were also singled out because of their long history of waged labor in Puerto Rico. According to the Committee's report, women in general “have an excellent reputation with respect to their manual and finger dexterity. This has been particularly apparent in the case of Puerto Rican girls and women who are in great demand in the textile, clothing and related industries.” Language and cultural orientation would only make them more attractive to local companies. To this end, the city offered classes at local elementary schools, a local high school, and even at the Cabrini Homes, where approximately 1,000 Puerto Rican families lived.<sup>28</sup>

City efforts to promote Puerto Rican women's employment coincided with its embrace of Puerto Rican families as standard-bearers of the model American family. These surreptitious attempts to employ Puerto Rican women, however, betray the true race/class bias of postwar family ideology. As many feminist scholars have demonstrated, some women were always expected to work, and the prevailing gender ideology of the stay-at-home mom was deeply raced and classed, excluding poor and working-class white women and women of color (Glenn 1986; Zinn and Thornton Dill 1994; Ortiz 1996; Ruiz 1993). Puerto Rican women, therefore, occupied an ambiguous ideological space in postwar Chicago. Like other poor and minority women, they were expected to work; but they were also upheld as the ideal of family and female virtue. Their propensity to work in the informal sector—mainly caring for relatives' children—often obscured their waged labor, reproduced the myth of breadwinning fathers nonproductive mothers, and reaffirmed their popular image as mothers wholly dedicated to their nuclear families. As one woman explained to me when asked whether her mother ever worked, “She took care of us. She babysat. She never worked. She never worked. She always worked in the house. Because that is how my father was.”

Unlike factory work or working on an assembly line, women's informal labor didn't challenge postwar gender ideology. In fact, it enabled Puerto Rican families to live the way white, middle-class American families were supposed to live. While almost all of the women I interviewed did work informally at some point in their labor histories,

they also worked in factories making handbags, clocks, lamps, gloves, mattresses, and candy. They assembled automobiles, airplanes, bicycles, and furniture, and they also started their own businesses like restaurants and clothing boutiques. Poor and working class *puertorriqueñas* clearly worked in Chicago (see Toro-Morn, this volume). Most had also been employed in Puerto Rico before leaving the island. In fact, some blamed their waged labor for strained male-female relations on the island and on the mainland. One newspaper article quoted a Puerto Rican man explaining that because women worked in Puerto Rico and men did not, “the rooster was no longer the rooster. Men were taking care of children. It was a tremendous loss of face. Men decided, ‘I can’t live here, my friends, my relatives, are looking at me.’ So they went to the States for work. Again, the man felt like the rooster.”

Such statements provide an interesting twist to contemporary ethnographic studies documenting the ways in which migration challenges “traditional” gender ideologies and erodes men’s status and power. Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia Pessar’s work (1991) among Dominican immigrants in New York, for example, shows how women resist men’s attempts to return to the Dominican Republic because they fear losing their autonomy gained largely through wage labor in New York.<sup>29</sup> Many of the women I interviewed also described *el sufrimiento*—or suffering—involved in returning to the island after living and working in Chicago.<sup>30</sup> Family and community pressure to stay at home, a renewed dependency on husbands because of inadequate public transportation, and limited job opportunities all contributed to women’s dissatisfaction upon returning to Puerto Rico. Together, these narratives of migration, work, and gender ideologies draw in sharp relief how poor Puerto Rican women’s wage labor is politically and ideologically charged. Almost fifty years after the model minority myth enshrined Puerto Rican women as dutiful wives, mothers, and homemakers, their reproductive and productive roles continue to be politically charged terrain for activists, academics, and politicians. Like black Americans, Puerto Ricans’ eventual membership in urban America’s underclass rests, in large part, on faulty assumptions about women, culture, and family ideology.

### **The Division Street Riots and the Emergence of Chicago’s Underclass**

One year after being christened the modern Horatio Alger, Chicago Puerto Ricans’ status as a model minority was seriously challenged with the Division Street Riots in June 1966. On June 12th, immediately following Humboldt Park’s first Puerto Rican Day Parade celebration, a white police officer shot a young Puerto Rican man. An already tense situation was further exacerbated by the police’s use of attack dogs to quell the crowd. On the surface, the three days of rioting were a reaction to a clear instance of police brutality. But as scholars and some community activists have recently argued, the riots—or The Division Street Uprising, as it is popularly referred to—were a response to a longer history of police abuse and Puerto Ricans’ economic and political marginalization (Padilla 1987). The Division Street Riots stunned city officials who had expected unrest in other Chicago neighborhoods but not in the Puerto Rican community. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s protests in Chicago, marches demanding fair housing, and brutal repression of black militancy during the summer of 1966 all suggested that black ghettos—and not the new, quiescent Puerto Rican *barrio*—were potentially volatile zones. According to the Commissioner of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, “There [was] no indication that something of this type could happen [in the Division Street area]. To say that we were surprised would be a big understatement.”<sup>31</sup>

The Division Street Riots marked a radical shift in the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago for a number of reasons. These events, for example, impelled the creation of a number of community-based projects to address the problems of poverty, housing discrimination, and police brutality among Puerto Ricans. The Division Street Riots were also key in transforming Puerto Rican community organizations into activist-oriented groups with a new leadership interested in community development (Padilla 1987; Ramos-Zayas 1997).<sup>32</sup> Finally, the Division Street Riots were key in transforming the popular perception of Puerto Ricans as hard-working, peaceable, and furiously industrious people. News articles, for example, began to focus on the problems of gangs, drugs, welfare dependency, and violence that now, according to media accounts, characterized the community. Humboldt Park and West Town—the neighborhoods with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans beginning in the late 1960s—were no longer quaint, ethnic neighborhoods with diligent, noble migrants. Instead, they were portrayed as dangerous, decaying, and ruled by local gangs. Literary production, newspaper accounts, and policy debates reflect these changes on a national and local level. In *Humboldt's Gift*, Saul Bellow's main character Charlie Citrine laments the transformation of his former neighborhood into “what had become a tropical West Indies slum, resembling the parts of San Juan that stand beside lagoons, which bubble and smell like stewing tripe”(167).<sup>33</sup> A news article shortly after the riots declared West Division Street “no man's street. It belongs to no one,” and quoted a settlement house director saying, “Division is one of the most difficult streets of our city. It is one of those streets where the newcomer takes over without much trouble.” Like the West Town community area in which it is located, Division Street was riddled with juvenile delinquency, illegitimacy, and excessive public assistance.<sup>34</sup> And through the late 1970s, Chicago media focused—albeit, at times, sympathetically—on its “underfed, underemployed, poorly housed Puerto Rican community” and queried, “Language problems, lack of jobs, and massive cultural shock often shatter Puerto Rican families. The question is why is this the case now and not before?”<sup>35</sup>

Two nationally acclaimed books in the 1960s offered possible explanations for these “new” problems in Chicago's Puerto Rican community. In *Beyond the melting pot* Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan declared that unlike other ethnic groups—specifically Jews, who the authors repeatedly highlight as a successful immigrant group—Puerto Ricans lacked “both a rich culture and a strong family system.”

The net of culture keeps up pride and encourages effort; the strong family serves to organize and channel resources in new situations. In both these aspects Puerto Rico was sadly defective. It was weak in folk arts, unsure in its cultural traditions, without a powerful faith...Nor was there much strength in the Puerto Rican family (88).

Glazer and Moynihan elaborate on the problems of Puerto Rican families in New York by emphasizing how “broken families” tend to have more children and are on welfare, setting in motion an intergenerational culture of dependency (117–122). As for New York's black population, Puerto Ricans' cultural values explain their poor economic standing. And although their closing remarks appear to be upbeat, if not meekly hopeful—“But the American nationality is still forming: its processes are mysterious, and the final form, if there is ever to be a final form, is as yet unknown”—it is clear they believed culture, and not the state, was responsible for economic, social and political outcomes.

Anthropologist Oscar Lewis' *La vida* provided an alternative narrative of broken Puerto Rican families. Many poor Puerto Rican families on the island and the mainland had developed a "culture of poverty" that was "both an adaptation and reaction...to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society" (1966:xliv). Because "landless rural workers who migrate to the cities" were more likely to develop a culture of poverty than "migrants from stable peasant villages with a well-organized traditional culture," Chicago Puerto Ricans were prime candidates for participation in this new subculture (xlv). Among the many traits associated with the culture of poverty, the "lack of effective participation and integration...in the major institutions of the larger society" and a "relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children," resonated most closely with new media portraits of Chicago Puerto Ricans. And even though Lewis believed that abolishing poverty in itself "may not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty which is a whole way of life," he was hopeful that revolution—"by creating basic structural changes in society, by redistributing wealth, by organizing the poor and giving them a sense of belonging, of power and of leadership"—might succeed in abolishing a culture of poverty (lii).

Even though neither book specifically addressed Chicago Puerto Ricans, their broad popular appeal—like media images of New York Puerto Ricans decades earlier—almost certainly informed local understandings of emerging urban problems.<sup>36</sup> Despite an expanding U.S. economy in the 1960s and 1970s, working-class Puerto Ricans—like poor blacks—lost jobs to the suburbanization of Chicago's manufacturing sector (Squires 1991:15). Urban renewal plans in Lincoln Park also displaced poor blacks and Puerto Ricans, pushing them further west into Humboldt Park and exacerbating both groups' already highly segregated residential patterns.<sup>37</sup> These political economic shifts impoverished Chicago's Puerto Rican community. And the national racial backlash—which *Beyond the melting pot* helped to usher in—blamed the poor themselves for their worsening economic conditions. As some scholars have demonstrated, the white ethnic community ideology of family loyalty and strong neighborhoods emerged as the template against which poor urban minorities were compared.<sup>38</sup> If poor Puerto Ricans were only more like white ethnics, the logic goes, they would have intact families and strong communities and would lift themselves out of poverty.

A second riot in June 1977 and a wave of arson in Humboldt Park and West Town cemented Chicago Puerto Ricans' participation in a "culture of poverty" and, in the 1980s, their membership in America's urban "underclass."<sup>39</sup> Beginning in 1975, local newspapers documented the alarming increase of fires in Humboldt Park. According to one account, from August 1974 to August 1975 over four hundred fires were reported, mainly in the half-square mile area between North Avenue and Division Street to the north and south and Western Avenue and California Street to the east and west.<sup>40</sup> Humboldt Park was also described as an area "besieged," and residents accused landlords of paying Puerto Rican gangs to burn old houses they were unable to sell. One woman remarked, "I think these slumlords are the ones we're dealing with. They don't want to fix up the houses, they have just sucked the buildings dry." She then quoted a state legislator's response to the arsons: "Beautiful [he said]. Let the G.D. Puerto Ricans burn up the neighborhood. That's one way to get them out."<sup>41</sup> The *Chicago Daily News* criticized the city's neglect of Humboldt Park, observing, "There are no special teams working in Humboldt Park, no special effort to control the seemingly endless fires. So the arsonists, uncounted and unconvicted, are free to continue burning. Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but no one seems to know who's playing the violin for Humboldt Park."<sup>42</sup>

Real estate developers certainly were not playing the violin. Instead, city government abetted developers' pursuit of exchange value by failing to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the 30 percent decrease in Humboldt Park's housing stock due to arson.<sup>43</sup> In fact, *barrio* residents, activists, and journalists all noted that as Humboldt Park burned—thereby ridding itself of its poor Puerto Rican, black, and white residents—its eastern neighbor Wicker Park ascended as “the hottest real estate market around” (*Chicago Tribune* April 24, 1977). Young white professionals, who “can't afford to buy in desirable locations elsewhere in the city,” were turning to Wicker Park, a “heavily black and Puerto Rican [neighborhood], a dumping ground for welfare recipients, crime, garbage collection and sewage.”<sup>44</sup> These housing pressures, Puerto Ricans' frustration with the city's failure to investigate years of arson in the *barrio*, continued police harassment, and a lack of political “clout” in city government all contributed to the outbreak of violence in June 1977. Unlike the Division Street riots a decade earlier, these events demoralized an already weary community faced with rising unemployment, increased poverty, and sustained political marginalization. The “upbeat West Side Story” was now a “community without dreams” and a “troubled island without clout.”<sup>45</sup>

Such images of Humboldt Park continue to define the neighborhood. In 1997, for example, one journalist referred to Humboldt Park as “hell's living room.”<sup>46</sup> And while events in Humboldt Park and about Puerto Ricans in general are practically invisible in local, English television media, coverage in the local Spanish news focuses, in large part, on the problems with gangs and violence that “plague” the Puerto Rican community. In late April 1997, for example, I noticed that one Spanish television station periodically warned people that “when the temperature rises in Humboldt Park, the violence also rises” (“*cuando sube la temperatura en Humboldt Park, sube la violencia*”). When English language print and television media do feature Humboldt Park in local news coverage, they focus almost exclusively on the divisiveness of nationalist politics and the “terrorist activities” of Puerto Rican independentistas, which, according to these media accounts, render Humboldt Park a dangerous political space as well.<sup>47</sup> As a G.E.D. instructor in one of Chicago's Puerto Rican cultural centers, I heard students complain bitterly and consistently that whenever the news is about Humboldt Park—or about Puerto Ricans in particular—it is always negative. One day in class, nineteen-year-old Nelly López<sup>48</sup> commented on a television news report, saying, “I'm tired about them always saying bad things about Puerto Ricans, you know. That we're violent, gangbanging and doing drugs. That Humboldt Park is dangerous. It's not because we're Puerto Rican. It's poverty, you know. Sometimes we have to steal, do those things just to get by.”

Unlike many politicians and academics, this student recognizes the ways in which the economy—and not culture—shapes particular behaviors. A second-generation migrant, Nelly frequently discussed how the public perception of Puerto Ricans circumscribes her employment possibilities. Echoing Kirschenman and Neckerman's findings (1991), Nelly explained, “[Humboldt Park] is not dangerous. Why do they have to talk about us like that, you know? Because people see that and say, ‘Oh, I'm not going to hire her, a Puerto Rican,’ you know. Because of what they see.”<sup>49</sup> Like many of my G.E.D. students, Nelly has worked in a number of different low-paying service sector jobs—working at fast food restaurants, dollar stores, and selling clothes in small neighborhood stores—and she often felt exploited in these jobs. One employer consistently underpaid her each paycheck. Another manager “worked me like a man,” expecting her to work twelve-hour shifts with few or no breaks. And she quit one job because she was afraid the storeowner would accuse her of stealing clothes lifted by the stores' patrons.

N: ...I quit that job for the main reason, was because one day I was over there and some guy came in and it was around Christmas time, you know, and he came in and he just stuffed his coat with stuff, you know. And when I saw, in the back, if it was a wallet or a gun.... But he did, he did it real slick where nobody could see him. I didn't even catch him. But I knew when he walked out the store, he told me, 'Shut up. You better not even trip because I know you work here.'

I: Was he white, black or Puerto Rican...?

N: He was Puerto Rican. So, I quit, you know. Because I didn't want [my boss] to think I stole, you know. Because if he counts his merchandise, then, um, I didn't want him to know. I don't know, I felt like I failed, you know. But I wasn't gonna put my life for some clothes.

I: You couldn't just tell him what happened?

N: [With a cigarette in her mouth, she shakes her head] 'Cause he was real, he was a real asshole, you know what I'm saying. So, you know, I just let it be....

Because Chicago is "the city of neighborhoods," "Humboldt Park" means "Puerto Rican" in the popular imagination. These racial/ethnic and spatial associations stigmatize Puerto Ricans and seriously limit their social and economic opportunities.

By criticizing the ways in which city institutions construct and reproduce dominant images of race and space that unfairly mark Puerto Ricans and Humboldt Park as dangerous, I do not wish to suggest that these communities do not have serious problems. Unemployment and poverty *are* pervasive among Puerto Ricans in the city. At 33.8 percent, Puerto Ricans have the highest poverty rate among Latinos—which is 24.2 percent overall—and a slightly higher poverty rate than that of African-Americans, which is 33 percent (Latino Institute 1995). Instead, I wish to highlight how local knowledge about a particular population is produced and is imagined differently over time. How first- and second-generation Puerto Ricans have metamorphized from a "model minority" to members of "the underclass" is related both to their position in the local economy and to the emergence of other ethnic Others to replace them as standard-bearers of hard-working, furiously ambitious people.

Like blacks and other Latinos, Puerto Ricans have been disproportionately affected by economic restructuring in Chicago. Manufacturing jobs declined by more than half between 1947 and 1977, which has had a devastating impact on Latinos—particularly Puerto Ricans—who have remained in low-paying jobs and industries (Betancur *et al.* 1993:124). In contrast with Cubans and South Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have lower educational and average income levels and are concentrated in the low-wage service sector and as operatives.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, studies by the Latino Institute, The Chicago Urban League, and Northern Illinois University all demonstrate that none of the jobs requiring only a high school diploma—and even many of those demanding some post-secondary education—pay a living wage for a family with dependent children.<sup>51</sup> According to the Latino Institute, more than 75 percent of Puerto Ricans are employed in those sectors of the economy (1994). In short, while transnational investment and the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Chicago area have rendered Latinos in general much poorer than a decade earlier, Puerto Ricans specifically remain the most economically disadvantaged group in all Chicago.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Public perceptions of Chicago Puerto Ricans have shifted dramatically the past half-century. Like the political-economic contexts in which they are embedded, these images are constructed transnationally and are shaped in relation to real and imagined Others in Chicago and abroad. As standard-bearers of hard work, loyal families, and strong communities, Puerto Rican migrants ascended the model minority throne that rested on ideological constructions of gender, family, and work that were raced and classed. As Puerto Ricans' structural position has changed in Chicago, so, too, has public opinion shifted as politicians, academics, and journalists now understand the "Puerto Rican problem" to be a product of excessive migration, pathological behavior, and poor family values. Chicago Puerto Ricans' short-lived tenure as the city's model minority is an important cautionary tale of postwar racial politics. While it might be seductive for groups to accept the mantle of ethnic and racial exceptionalism, these designations are not merely ephemeral; they also help to reproduce American racialization projects pitting racialized ethnic communities against each other while leaving the structures of inequality by race, ethnicity, gender, and class essentially unchallenged.

b

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Division's activities, I would argue, were also aimed at circumscribing migrants' political independence and creating a docile and willing labor force. The Division's April 1952 monthly report underscores this ultimate goal of integration emphatically and details the creation of a central community of already organized Puerto Rican civic organizations to meet this end. See *Monthly Report* 1951–1952:2. See also *Monthly Report* January 1952:1 and *Informe Anual*, 1953–1954:45 for details about the Division's work with the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination and Chicago's Public Welfare Office; see *Monthly Report* September 1953 (1952–1953):1 for a discussion of Paul Hatt's and Northwestern University fertility study and *Informe Anual* 1953–1954:45 for details on the University of Chicago's study on Puerto Ricans in the city; and see *Informe Anual* 1955–1956:20 and *Monthly Report* 1951–1952, April 1952:2 about the importance of forming community organizations whose goals promote integration and assimilation.

<sup>2</sup> See *Monthly Report* 1951–1952, February:2 for details regarding radio announcements. And see *Monthly Report* 1951–1952 November:1 and *Monthly Report* 1953–1954 October for more information about the Division's collaboration with city organizations and community agencies to show films about Puerto Rico. Both *The Girl from Puerto Rico* and *The Crowded Island* were produced by the Migration Division as part of their campaign to produce a positive image of Puerto Ricans in the mainland. When *Crowded Paradise*—which was produced in collaboration with Fomento of Puerto Rico—was first released in New York, no Broadway theaters wanted to show it because, “according to them, ‘If we show a film that is favorable of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Ricans, many Puerto Ricans will attend our theater and that will send our clients away.’ Just this one event demonstrates the need to distribute this film widely” (*Informe Anual* 1955–1956:12–13).

<sup>3</sup> *Informe Anual*, 1955–1956:102.

<sup>4</sup> In its annual report, 1953–1954, the Division reaffirmed its mission: “This Division helps directly or indirectly those Puerto Ricans who come to the United States with their work plans, education, social well-being, to secure identification and establish themselves as American citizens and orient them in their rights and responsibilities in the community. It also helps individual adjustment and integration into the community where one resides with the direct cooperation of civic entities and public and private agencies so that they are better able to understand Puerto Ricans and recognize the valuable contribution they make and can make to the economies in the areas where they live and work” (1).

<sup>5</sup> *Los Caballeros de San Juan* was the principal social organization among Puerto Ricans in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. Padilla (1987) argues that its importance was more institutional than cultural. He writes, “The significance of *Los Caballeros de San Juan* among Puerto Ricans was first of all institutional, and only secondarily matter of cultural transmission and/or perpetuation as in the anthropological sense. *Los Caballeros* presented the primary means by which Puerto Ricans began to structure a self-conscious community for ethnic advancement and betterment...The embryo of what was to later become a diverse Puerto Rican community had its inception in the growth of *Los Caballeros*” (126). In its 1955–1956 annual report, the Division explains at length the positive consequences of the first *Día de San Juan* celebration, concluding, “This positive but not essential activity that helps us to create a more favorable environment without having to spend neither time nor money is one example of how we apply our concept of the economy of effort,” allowing other groups and organizations as much responsibility they are able, or can be encouraged, to assume (101). See also *Monthly Report* 1951–1952, December:1 for the more on blood donations and positive hospital relations among Puerto Rican residents in Chicago.

<sup>6</sup> “[Para] Puerto Rico la migración tiene gran significado, pues es de conocimiento general que la migración, aunque voluntaria, es parte integrante del programa ‘Manos a la Obra.’ Lo es porque la

*migración ayuda a mantener el índice poblacional en un nivel más o menos stable con los correspondents effects en empleo y desempleo, en salud, educación, vivienda, etc. Lo es también porque es una fuente de ingresos muy importante para la vida económica para el país” (Informe Anual, 1955–1956:117).*

<sup>7</sup> One of the distinguishing features of the “new transnationalism” is government involvement in the lives of migrants abroad (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992). My research—as well as that of other Puerto Rican scholars—suggests that these transnational political links are not necessarily new. Rather, they correspond with the timing of migration. First generation migrants, for example, might be more likely to engage in these transnational political practices than are second- and third-generation migrants. See Duany (2000) for an argument for including Puerto Rican migration within a transnational framework. Whalen’s work (2001) on Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia provides similar evidence of transnational practices in the 1940s, as does Lapp’s (1990) research on the Migration Division Office in New York.

<sup>8</sup> Several excellent works document and analyze the various ways in which model minority rhetoric has been used since the mid-1960s. See Lee (1996), Kim (1993, 1999), and Prashad (2000) for a discussion of the rise of model minority rhetoric in the 1960s and its emergence in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>9</sup> Coontz (1992) points out that rigid family and gender roles in postwar America converged with Cold War anxieties to further sanctify the family as the bedrock of American liberal democracy. “A ‘normal’ family and vigilant mother became the ‘front line’ of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition” (1992:33). Durkheim’s notion of anomie, or the pathological loss of community, was yet another sociological concern buttressing local officials’ efforts to strengthen families and communities. Local leaders such as Reverend Donald Headley, the head of the Cardinal’s Committee for Spanish-Speaking People, used the concept of anomie to explain why New York Puerto Ricans differed so dramatically from their Chicago counterparts. “When they reached numbers we got the situation the sociologists call ‘anomie,’ or loss of community... This meant that people felt lost. You couldn’t knock on a door without scaring the life out of them. Like it is in New York now. With anomie, the family falls apart. When you have a sense of community, it stays together. Not until the group has a sense of community can it afford to make contacts with the larger community,” quoted in “Chicago’s proud Puerto Ricans,” *Chicago Daily News* (June 5, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Lee (1996) points to Hernstein and Murray’s *The bell curve* (1994) and D’Souza’s *The end of racism: Principles for a multicultural society* (1995) as key texts invoking the model minority to explain Asian American vs. black and Latino academic success. Kim (1993) provides a more thorough political context for understanding current model minority morality plays, linking public policy discourse with academic perspectives about race, poverty, and family values. She argues that two racial myths—one depicting African Americans as “lazy, undisciplined, immoral, and lacking in family or community spirit” and the other portraying Asian Americans as “diligent, thrifty, honest, and rich in family and ethnic solidarity”—have been advanced inside and outside of the academy and have “facilitated the conservative campaign to vitiate civil rights laws, dismantle redistributive social programs, and transform Black poverty from a problem of racial and social justice to a problem of law and order” (1993:16). Prashad (2000) makes an excellent critique of the how the model minority discourse implicates South Asians in the United States and its larger political, economic, and academic context as well.

<sup>11</sup> “Puerto Ricans are eager to work, want no handouts,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 11, 1959. See also “Puerto Ricans adding Latin culture to Chicago,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 1, 1953, for another example of media praise for Puerto Rican migrants in Chicago.

<sup>12</sup> “Los Medinas, a model Puerto Rican family,” *Chicago Tribune*. September 17, 1961, in Padilla (1987:74).

<sup>13</sup> “The Puerto Rican families in Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune* January 24, 1968, quoted in Padilla (76).

<sup>14</sup> Williams (1999:70–71; 85–89) discusses how popular media reinforced ideas of an authoritative male head of household, a profile Puerto Rican families fit and advanced in 1950s Chicago. The praise of Chicago’s patriarchal Puerto Rican families, however, was a regionally specific phenomenon informed largely by the city’s race politics and political economic dynamics. Whalen’s (1998) work on Puerto Ricans in postwar Philadelphia paints a quite different portrait, whereby Puerto Rican families were criticized for their patriarchal family arrangements and for the popular perception of Puerto Rican women as submissive and, therefore, poor mothers.

<sup>15</sup> “Puerto Ricans eager to work...,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 11, 1959. See also *Informe Anual*, 1961–1962:211–213 for more discussion of the Division’s concern about credit schemes. Padilla (1987:60) also mentions the portrayal of Puerto Ricans as gentle, loving people, but regards it solely as “another major source of prejudice against Puerto Ricans.” I agree that profound racism informed these characterizations, but it is also important to analyze the ways in which these portrayals are used to denigrate other groups such as blacks, American Indians, and poor whites in the city.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 1, 1953.

<sup>17</sup> Chicago Commission on Human Relations, Mayor’s Committee on New Residents, 1960:VIII.

<sup>18</sup> According to the article, “Chicago’s proud Puerto Ricans,” *Chicago Daily News*, June 5, 1965, this quotation was an example of Chicago Puerto Ricans’ capacity for self-analysis.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, my emphasis. In 1953, The Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) shared similar concern about Chicago vs. New York Puerto Ricans. In a memo to the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, CYO officials explain why it was important to conduct a study of the city’s Puerto Rican population: “In general, and very important, such a study will point out the many problems faced by this group which day by day is rapidly increasing and which may be facing the same situation which confronts New York City at the present time. “*Chicago certainly does not want to allow such a situation to get out of hand as it has in New York city*” (my emphasis, September 21, 1953, quoted in Martinez 1989:109). City officials shared media fascination of Puerto Ricans’ embodying two distinct cultural identities

<sup>20</sup> Chicago Commission on Human Relations, Mayor’s Committee on New Residents, 1960:5. The quotation “as Spanish as avocados and as American as ice cream” is from “Know your fellow American citizen from Puerto Rico,” a document distributed by the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The “Know your fellow American” pamphlets were readily available at the Migration Division Offices and were distributed to organizations working with Puerto Rican migrants. A 1950 United Charities of Chicago interdepartmental memo, for example, issued copies of this pamphlet to district secretaries and departmental supervisors since “it should be of interest and help to the staff in working with Puerto Ricans who come to the United States” (United Charities of Chicago, May 31, 1950, Bulletin #204), in Martinez 1989:11.

<sup>21</sup> Hirsch (1998) [1983]:4. Hirsch carefully describes the ways in which federal and local governments financed and facilitated the creation of Chicago’s ghettos: “Indeed, the real tragedy surrounding the modern ghetto is not that it has been inherited but that it has been periodically renewed and strengthened. Fresh decisions, not the mere acquiescence to old ones, reinforced and shaped the contemporary black metropolis”(9).

<sup>22</sup> *South Deering Bulletin*, September 5, 1955, quoted in Hirsch:186. Hirsch (180–185) discusses at length how the University of Chicago addressed racial transition in Hyde Park by employing acculturation theory to explain white fears of integration.

<sup>23</sup> The racialization of Puerto Ricans as “not-black,” however, belies the ways in which many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans were discriminated against because of their blackness.

E. Padilla (1947) notes that “very dark-skinned Puerto Ricans” who spoke English well lived in Chicago’s Black Belt and that many interwar Puerto Rican migrants chose Chicago over New York as a destination precisely because, as one of Padilla’s informant’s explained, it was widely known that “only selected people could come to Chicago, neither laborers nor Negroes from Puerto Rico could come” (in Padilla:70). See Pérez (2000:93–95) for a longer discussion of Puerto Rican residential patterns and race in the 1930s and 1940s. F. Padilla (1985) also quotes Puerto Rican migrants’ observations of how race shaped their residential patterns and employment.

Harden (1999) demonstrates how Japanese Americans in postwar Chicago also complicated notions of race and the city’s fabled black/white color line. Like Puerto Ricans, Japanese Americans were used as a benchmark to compare the success and failures of Chicago’s black population

<sup>24</sup> See Pérez 2000:29–33 for a longer discussion of *El Mundo*’s reports on Puerto Ricans in Chicago and their passionate denouncement of the city’s failure to respond to the migrant communities needs.

<sup>25</sup> Kim (1993) lays out three ways in which model minority myth perpetuates Asian American racial subordination: “It encourage Asian Americans to compare their status with that of other racial minorities, obscuring the persistent socioeconomic gap between themselves and whites; it exaggerates Asian Americans’ prosperity and downplays their socioeconomic needs and problems; and it conceals anti-Asian racism behind a veil of essentializing praise” (12).

<sup>26</sup> *Monthly Reports* 1951–1952, November, April; *Monthly Reports* 1952–1953 July, October; *Informe Anual* 1955–1956:96–97.

<sup>27</sup> George Sánchez (1994) provides an excellent analysis of Mexican women and Americanization programs in California in the Progressive Era. Such programs, he argues, were a reaction to heightened Mexican immigration at the turn of the century and an attempt to encourage immigrants to “conform to the American industrial order in a prescribed manner” (284).

<sup>28</sup> The Migration Division documented 1,000 Puerto Ricans in Cabrini Homes in 1959–1960. *Informe Anual*, 1959–1960:160; Migration Division memo to Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, July 22, 1953 in Martínez:112; Chicago Commission on Human Relations, 1960:16–25.

<sup>29</sup> Several important U.S.-based ethnographies document how women’s wage labor challenges gender hierarchies and complicates gender ideologies with regard to family and housework. See Zavella (1987); Lamphere (1987); Lamphere et al. (1993); Pesquera (1993); Toro-Morn (1999); Whalen (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Alicea (1997) notes that Puerto Rican women often have contradictory notions and experiences of home and host societies, conceptions that may differ dramatically from men’s understandings since women largely engage in the kin work and caring work necessary to carry out migration and maintain transnational households.

<sup>31</sup> *Chicago Daily News*, June 13, 1966, in Padilla:149. The dominant perception of Puerto Ricans as docile, innocent, and naïve—in addition to city concerns about urban unrest in black communities in places like Harlem, Watts, and Detroit—all contributed to a misapprehension of the state of race relations in Chicago. Moreover, the truism that Chicago’s race problem—and its fabled color line—is purely black and white redirected government attention away from escalating tensions in non-black areas. Mayor Daley conveniently blamed “outsiders” for fueling the riot (Royko:152). And while Padilla (1987:149) cites police superintendent Orlando W. Wilson explaining his recent investigation into racial tensions in Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in the city, it is clear the city didn’t give serious attention to long-standing complaints about housing discrimination, police brutality, and poor social services in those areas.

In his scathing portrait of Mayor Daley in *Boss*, Mike Royko sums up the city's treatment of its Puerto Rican population, underscoring their fear of Martin Luther King Jr.'s influence on poor minority communities in the city. He writes, "City Hall didn't bother to extend the usual ethnic courtesies to the Puerto Ricans." When they held their big festival in a local park, Daley and one of their aldermen didn't attend. The other aldermen's contribution was a stern warning to the festival organizers to not invite civil rights speakers.

"Because they were undemanding and docile, they were cuffed around regularly by the police. The traffic policemen used the Puerto Rican neighborhood to dump their quota of tickets. Few of the policemen assigned to the district spoke Spanish. The Police Department didn't hire many Puerto Ricans because of the minimum height requirements" (151–152).

<sup>32</sup> Lapp (1990) describes a similar transformation from civic groups organized mainly around town clubs to activist-oriented groups among New York Puerto Ricans as well. This shift helped to diminish the New York Migration Division Office's influence in *barrio* politics beginning in the late 1960s. See also Pérez 2000 and Ramos-Zayas 1997 for a more detailed discussion of the emergence of Puerto Rican community organizations and the rise of activist-oriented community development beginning in the late 1960s.

<sup>33</sup> In "Puerto Ricans' area of agony," *Chicago Sun-Times* June 12, 1977. The journalist correctly points out how nostalgic invocations of Humboldt Park's "better days" is largely fantasy since it is the same neighborhood profiled in Nelson Algren's (1946) crime drama *The man with the golden arm*.

<sup>34</sup> Stud Terkel's acclaimed *Division Street* (1966) paints quite a different picture, celebrating, instead, the ways in which the diversity of Division Street reflects the strengths and virtues of postwar America.

<sup>35</sup> "Latins finally winning attention here," *Chicago Daily News*, February 24, 1972, and "The Puerto Ricans," *Chicago Tribune* May 5, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Steinberg (1995) points out that *Beyond the melting pot* received the 1963 *Saturday Review of Literature's* Anisfeld-Wolf award for bettering intergroup relations (11). Micaela di Leonardo (1998:115–116) documents the breadth of Oscar Lewis' popular appeal: *La Vida* won the National Book Award, and his articles appeared in *Harper's*, *Commentary*, and *Redbook*. In her study of Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, Whalen (2001) also discusses the impact of these works and theoretical frames for understanding a similar transformation of Puerto Ricans in that city from "labor migrants" to members of an alleged "underclass."

<sup>37</sup> According to Massey and Denton (1993:12, 144–146), Puerto Ricans are the only Latino group to live in highly segregated communities similar to black Americans. It is for this reason that some scholars argue that Puerto Ricans, like African Americans, allegedly develop "underclass communities" and their concomitant pathologies.

<sup>38</sup> di Leonardo (1998:89–98), Steinberg (1995:107–119). Both authors also reveal how the white ethnic community construct is a largely fantastic claim of the past.

<sup>39</sup> In *The truly disadvantaged* (1987) William Julius Wilson argues that structural changes in the urban economy have given rise to an urban underclass characterized by persistent poverty, high rates of female-headed households, and the social pathologies found specifically in "ghetto communities" (6). Although Wilson specifically identifies poor, residentially segregated African Americans as members of the "underclass," several scholars have employed the construct to understand poverty—and its concomitant behavioral pathologies—among Puerto Ricans. See Chávez (1991); Tienda (1989). Massey and Denton (1993) also discuss how Puerto Ricans are the only Latino group to develop "underclass communities," meaning hypersegregated residential patterns rather than a set of values, behaviors, and domestic arrangements. For critiques of the underclass concept, see Reed (1992); di Leonardo (1998:112–127); Steinberg (1997); and Williams (1992). See Moore and Pinderhughes (1993) specifically for a discussion of Latinos and the underclass debate.

Oscar Lewis' 1960s "culture of poverty argument" largely informs William J. Wilson's "underclass" notion in the 1980s, although, as some scholars have carefully demonstrated, the former argument was far more progressive. See di Leonardo (1998:112–121) and Reed (1999:186–190).

<sup>40</sup> "Arson blitz is destroying changing area of the Northwest Side," *Daily News*, September 6, 1975.

<sup>41</sup> "Humboldt area besieged: A life of arson terror," *Daily News*, September 8, 1975.

<sup>42</sup> "400 fires in year and few suspects," *Daily News*, September 11, 1975.

<sup>43</sup> Within a 32-block area, almost 1/3 of the housing stock was lost to arson in eight years. "Humboldt Park: 'Community without dreams,'" *Chicago Tribune*, May 1978. The events on Humboldt Park's eastern border are a clear example of the conflict between use and exchange value of city space. As Logan and Molotch (1987) elegantly demonstrate, place—and cities more generally—is socially constructed and subject to intense competition between "residents, who use place to satisfy essential needs of life, and entrepreneurs, who strive for financial return" (2).

<sup>44</sup> "In Chicago, it's Wicker Park," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 22, 1973.

<sup>45</sup> "Humboldt Park: 'Community without dreams,'" *Chicago Tribune* May 1978; "Humboldt Park: Troubled 'island' without clout," *Chicago Tribune* June 12, 1977.

<sup>46</sup> Gene Wojciechowski, "Digging Dennis, just one of the kids," *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, March 16, 1997.

<sup>47</sup> The most recent example of this bias in English language print and television media has been the on-going controversy at Clemente Community Academy, a high school located at the eastern border of *Paseo Boricua*—the area of Division Street between Western Avenue and California Street—and an important community space for Puerto Rican residents of Humboldt Park and West Town. In February 1997, The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported that Puerto Rican terrorists used Title I Poverty Funds for promoting *independentista* political activities (*Independentista* refers specifically to the political movements struggling for Puerto Rico's independence from the United States). See *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 4, 1997, for early media coverage on the Clemente political scandal. See also Flores-Gonzalez (2000) for a detailed analysis of how community activists and radicals eventually were regarded as "terrorists" by the local media and politicians in this scandal. See also Ramos-Zayas (1997:380–384) and Pérez (forthcoming) for a discussion of the scandal and community reaction to it.

<sup>48</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I use pseudonyms to protect all informants' identities.

<sup>49</sup> Using extensive interview data with Chicago employers, Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) demonstrate the ways in which race, class, and city geography inform employers' hiring decisions. They write, 'Inner-city' also connoted a 'culture' that could be signaled by attributes other than address. For instance, employers talked about West Side blacks and South Side blacks. A few expressed a preference for those from the West Side because their roots were closer to the rural South; hence, they had more 'understanding of work'...Employers readily distinguished among blacks on the basis of space. They talked about Cabrini Green or the Robert Taylor Homes...as a shorthand for black. But they were not likely to make these distinctions among whites and Hispanics. They made no reference to Pilsen (a largely immigrant Mexican neighborhood), Humboldt Park (largely Puerto Rican), or Uptown (a community of poor whites and new immigrants) (217). One of the study's crucial methodological flaws is its failure to distinguish between different "Hispanics" to see how perceptions of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans also inform employers' decisions. My ethnographic data reveal that employers frequently do make distinctions between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, ranking the latter with blacks in terms of work ethic, family, and cultural values. By continuing to homogenize disparate Spanish-speaking groups under the label "Hispanic" or "Latino," researchers sacrifice accuracy for "the sake

of expediency in social communication” (Oboler 1995:xvi) and reproduce a racial ideology in the U.S. that focuses almost exclusively in black and white. See also Souza (2000) for a discussion of the negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans both in academic and policy discussions and Rodriguez (1997) for more on images of Latinas/os in the American media.

<sup>50</sup> Bentacur *et al.* point out that despite Cuban and South Americans’ economic success, according to the 1980 census their wages still approximated those of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans rather than that of whites (130). The 1990 census, however, paints a very different picture, emphasizing the growing gap between Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups in terms of average incomes, employment rates, and poverty levels.

<sup>51</sup> “Jobs that pay: Are enough good jobs available in metropolitan Chicago?” Working Poor Project, November 1995. See also, “When the job doesn’t pay: Contingent workers in the Chicago metropolitan area,” March 1995.

<sup>52</sup> See Ranney and Cecil (1993) for a detailed analysis of the impact of transnational investment on women, Latinos, and blacks in the Chicago metropolitan area.

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In an effort to "break up the status quo"™ in the press corps, Mayor Lori Lightfoot banned reporters, based on their skin color, from conducting interviews with her. Lightfoot has abused her powers before the people. A Chicago mayor banning white reporters proves the US has entered dangerous territory. Robert Bridge. Robert Bridge is an American writer and journalist. He is the author of 'Midnight in the American Empire,' How Corporations and Their Political Servants are Destroying the American Dream. @Robert\_Bridge. Robert Bridge is an American writer and journalist. He is the author of 'Midnight in the American Empire,' How Corporations and Their Political Servants are Destroying the American Dream. @Robert\_Bridge. 20 May, 2021 16:24. Get short URL. FILE PHOTO. We Puerto Ricans are easy to get along with, but we are hard to mess with" (Padilla 1987: 147). The experiences of police harassment and racial discrimination that fueled these sentiments and the riot were also narrated to me by my late mother and my uncles, who were born in Puerto Rico, but migrated to Chicago as children. They recounted being racially profiled and roughed up by white police officers, having doors slammed in their face by white landlords, and put in closets by white teachers for speaking Spanish. East Side Story then became West Side Story"at the time, the upper west side of Manhattan was a poor immigrant neighborhood and the site of multiple gang conflicts. The religious struggle was turned into a racial one, between a white gang and a Puerto Rican one, with the lovers Tony and Maria caught in the center. Stephen Sondheim was then brought in to write lyrics for West Side Story, making it his first Broadway musical. Robbins choreographed and directed the original production, and he was focused on making it real and gritty. A student of Method acting, Robbins