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RicanStruction Sites: Race, Space, and Place in the Education of DiaspoRican Youth

Jason G. Irizarry & René Antrop-González

Significant increases in the population of Latina/os in the United States, coupled with persistently problematic academic outcomes for this group, have resulted in increased attention given to the education of Latina/o youth. One-fifth of all students enrolled in school are Latina/o, and if demographic predictions are accurate, by 2030 Latina/os will represent the numeric majority in schools. Recent data reveal that approximately half of all Latina/os over the age of 18 do not have a high school diploma, and fewer than 13% of all Latinos have a college degree, compared to 33% of Whites (U.S. Census, 2011). Because they represent more than 60% of all Latinos, much of the scholarship addressing the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino youth has focused on Mexican and Mexican American youth. Considerably less is known about the experiences of Puerto Rican youth attending schools in United States, heretofore referred to as DiaspoRicans, the second largest group of Latina/os in the country.

Acquired by the United States as a spoil of war in 1898, Puerto Rico is the oldest colony on the face of the earth (Fernández, 1996; Trías Monge, 1997). Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, although they are denied rights integral to full citizenship, such as the right to vote in federal elections, and as such can travel to and from the United States without restriction. Puerto Ricans have had a long-standing presence in the United States, with sizeable Puerto Rican (im)migrant¹ communities dating back to the early 20th century. Whether motivated to leave the Island² and settle in the Diaspora by federal policies and recruitment efforts or through their own accord, segments of the Puerto Rican population have been dispersed, and DiaspoRicans have established *colonias*—communities with large concentrations of Puerto Ricans—in cities across the country (Acosta-Belén & Santiago, 2006; Vargas-Ramos, 2006). Now numbering more than 4.2 million, there are more Puerto Ricans in the United States than on the Island, which has a population of approximately 3.8 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Citizenship

status, exposure to U.S. culture, and a lengthy history in the United States notwithstanding, DiaspoRican youth have not experienced widespread school success.

Drawing from Critical Race Theories and the field of Critical Geography, this study uses data collected as part of ethnographic studies at two high schools serving large percentages of DiaspoRican youth, one a comprehensive high school in a small city in the Northeast, the other an alternative high school in a large urban community in the Midwest. Using Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Race Theory as analytical frameworks, this study compares and contrasts the experiences of students in each setting, with a special emphasis on how they experienced race, racialization, and racism in particular spaces. Our study was organized around the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of DiaspoRican youth navigating schools? (2) What types of interactions occur between students and teachers in these two distinct spaces? and (3) How might the educational experiences and outcomes of DiaspoRican youth be transformed by approaches to teaching and learning that center their cultural identities and frames of reference?

Puerto Rican Schooling and the Struggle for Educational Opportunities

The schooling of Puerto Rican students residing on the Island and in the United States Diaspora has been marked with frequent struggles and sporadic triumphs. When the United States military invaded Puerto Rico in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, it had much more in mind than simply adding more colonial land to its already immense empire. In fact, much historical research (Algren de Guitierrez, 1987; Alvarez, 1986; Barreto, 1998; Canino, 1981; Cebollero, 1945; Fox, 1924; Gorman, 1973; Méndez-Bernal, 1997; Muntaner, 1990; Navarro, 1995; Negrón de Montilla, 1998; Osuna, 1949; Ryan, 1981; Spring, 2001) suggests that high ranking military and civilian officials consciously embarked on a much more psychologically insidious mission that consisted of cultural and linguistic genocide.

Fox (1924) powerfully described the hidden curriculum of Americanization when he stated,

There have been many understandings between the Porto Ricans [note the Anglicized spelling] and its continentals. When the Americans first went to the Island they were offended by the nakedness of the children and insisted that parents should clothe their offspring. At Christmas time they celebrated the Three Wise Men instead of Santa Claus and the Americans tried to do away with the old tradition. Also the seal of Isabella and Ferdinand had become an Island token of the days of discovery, but the blundering Americans felt that its presence showed a lack of sincere allegiance to the United States. Then too the Americans thought all vestige of Porto Rican individuality and Latin culture should be assimilated into American costume—even to wiping out the Spanish language. (p. 55)

Hence, the United States government would continue to appoint North American

men to direct the Puerto Rico Department of Public Instruction and use the Island's schools as their main battlefield in their campaign to exterminate Puerto Rican ways of knowing the world in addition to destroying the Spanish language. Consequently, the hiring and placement of North American teachers to teach English (Pousada, 1996; Resnick, 1993; Solís-Jordán, 1994) and inculcate the value system of the White, middle class became a popular practice in the Island's schools. Moreover, Puerto Rican teachers were also expected to teach English to their students and carry out other acts of cultural and linguistic hegemony. Currently, English as a second language is still taught in Puerto Rico and required of students enrolled in public and private schools in all grades with the purpose of exalting the culture and language of power of the United States.

Not surprisingly, the subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) of Puerto Ricans follows those families who are forced to move to the United States from the Island. As a result, the 2000 United States Census Bureau revealed that there are now more Puerto Ricans residing in the United States than in Puerto Rico (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Long before Puerto Ricans residing in the Diaspora outnumbered their compatriots on the Island, students from this ethnic group were having immense struggles with accessing educational opportunities. As Nieto (1995) asserts, "Puerto Ricans have achieved the dubious distinction of being one of the most undereducated ethnic groups in the United States" (p. 388).

Recent educational research has documented the large extent to which Puerto Rican students are marginalized in United States schools, especially in urban centers (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Antrop-González, Garrett, & Vélez, 2005; Flores-González, 2002; Irizarry, 2011; Nieto, 2000; Sokolowski, Antrop-González, & Maldonado, 2010; Tucker-Raymond, Rosario-Ramos & Rosario, 2011). This marginalization is characterized by hostile conditions, such as culturally irrelevant curricula and pedagogical practices, English-only attitudes perpetuated by teachers and administrators, and deficit ways of thinking about Puerto Rican children, youth, and their families by school agents that purport to serve them.

As a result of these devastating practices, many Puerto Rican students begin to internalize intense feelings of low self-concept and unworthiness, whereby they begin to actually believe they are not capable of being smart and/or worthy of intellectual pursuits (Irizarry, 2011). Hence, they fulfill the stereotype threat and reify what their teachers and administrators already think regarding their supposed low potential to be high achievers (Steele, 2010). Fanon (1967) also referred to the *psychology of the oppressed* when he described colonialism and its devastating impact on the psyche of the subaltern through its accompanying feelings of internalized racism and intense feelings of self-doubt. Furthermore, colonized peoples often experience much psychological and physical pain (Darder, 2011).

While the aforementioned scholarship is important in its attempts to explain the high push out rates that many Puerto Rican youth in the United States experience, there is recent educational research (Antrop-González, Garrett, and Vélez, 2005) that

describes the factors that high achieving Puerto Rican students in an urban school credited with their academic success. The first factor was the advocacy and support of mothers provided their youth. These mothers held their youth to high academic expectations even when teachers did not do the same. Moreover, they worked hard to seek out and obtain important information on the college going process for their youth when schools could not fulfill this role. Second, these Puerto Rican youth credited their church membership with having a significant role to play in their academic development. More specifically, they established meaningful relationships with adults of color in their churches who had a college experience and could offer guidance concerning the college going process. In this case, the church served as a “space of possibility” where individuals could develop more positive identities than those offered to them at school. Third, the participants described how their high academic achievement enabled them to affirm their ethnic identity. In fact, they mentioned how many of their teachers and school peers held them to low expectations and expressed their belief that Puerto Rican students were not capable of being smart. Thus, the very act of being marginalized by their teachers and peers actually worked to motivate these youth to excel in their intellectual pursuits. The final factor that student participants described was the potential for caring teachers to impact their love for learning. While these students defined caring teachers as individuals who were willing to hold their students to high expectations, they also reported that they did not view the majority of their teachers as caring.

The aforementioned scholarship works to challenge and dismantle deficit notions that often describe Puerto Rican youth and their families as being intellectually inferior and their communities as lacking in resources. However, this work frames the accomplishments of these youth as individual actors rather than as accomplishments earned as a result of collective agency. Thus, the purpose of this article is to describe how Puerto Rican youth collectively work to RicanStruct their schooling experiences and sense of identity through their theorizing of race, place, and space. The RicanStruction of schooling is described within the context of two distinct school sites, one hegemonic and the second counterhegemonic.

Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Race Theory

Because the role of race and racism in the educational experiences of DiaspoRican youth has been understudied, we sought a framework that explicitly highlights race/ethnicity and pays special attention to the role of power within racialized systems such as schools. First developed and applied within legal studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/o Critical Race (LatCrit) theory have increasingly gained traction within educational research as scholars have sought to better understand the role of race, racism, and racialization in the educational experiences and outcomes for communities of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Irizarry, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Milner, 2008; Solórzano, 1998). CRT

challenges hegemonic epistemologies and ideologies such as notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality and seeks to expose the ways in which racialized power relations shape the experiences of people of color (Chapman, 2007). It also emphasizes the importance of counternarratives, stories that challenge stereotypical, negative depictions of people of color, and represents another point where the meaning-making of race, place, and space are negotiated, interrogated, and resisted. While both theoretical frameworks center race in examinations of power, LatCrit aims to explore the intersections between race and other variables, including but not limited to class, gender, language, ethnicity, and immigration status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006). LatCrit also challenges the Black/White binary that often limits considerations of race and racism to two groups, thereby creating discursive space for Latina/os who can be of any race, and individuals who may be multiracial. Such an expansion is integral to understanding the multifaceted and nuanced ways that racism impacts the education of DiaspoRican youth and the diverse array of factors that influence their educational trajectories.

Extending CRT to more adequately address the experiences of Latina/os, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) forwarded five themes that undergird a LatCrit framework in education: the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and the interdisciplinary perspective. Forwarding the emic perspectives of DiaspoRican youth and highlighting their experiential knowledge allows for the inclusion of heretofore subaltern voices to inform the debates on school reform and has the potential to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for a group of students that has been traditionally underserved by schools.

Methods

Data for this article derive from two separate yet interrelated inquiries regarding the experiences of DiaspoRican youth in U.S. schools. Each study sheds light on the challenges facing students, framing their voices as powerful counternarratives that challenge deficit explanations for the underachievement of DiaspoRicans that exclusively blame students' cultures and communities for the lack of educational success.

Data Collection

Project FUERTE: DiaspoRican youth engaged in YPAR. The first study examined the experiences of Latino/a high school students enrolled in an action research course at Rana High School³ taught by Irizarry who simultaneously conducted a multi-year ethnographic study of those students. The course was embedded in a larger, multigenerational research collaborative referred to as Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators Conducting Research to Transform Teacher Education). The high school student researchers⁴ in the project worked with Irizarry to critically

examine the educational experiences and outcomes for Latina/o students and develop empirically based recommendations to improve the preparation of teachers to work with Latina/o youth. Participants consisted of seven students from RHS, a high school serving approximately 1,000 students in the northeast. Five of the students were DiaspoRican, and this article draws from data focusing on their experiences.

Similar to many U.S. schools, RHS was experiencing a surge in Latina/o population, and the majority of teachers, administrators, and professional staff were unprepared to meet these students' needs. In one of the state's lowest performing and most economically depressed districts, the school was under increased pressure to improve student performance and graduation rates. The official annual dropout rate of the school for the year the study began was 4.1%, but a closer look at the data reveals that less than half of all Latina/o students who enter in the school as ninth graders are enrolled in the twelfth grade four years later.

Irizarry met with the students twice a week for two consecutive academic years, during class, after school, and during school vacations. In all, he spent more than 400 hours with the participants, working with and observing them across an array of contexts in and out of school. He constructed field notes after class periods and out-of-school meetings. Student presentations were video recorded and each student was formally interviewed six times over the two-year period using a standard format for phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006). Each interview was transcribed and along with field notes and student work products constitute the data set for this study.

School as Sanctuary: The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School (PACHS). The second study examined the experiences of students at PACHS. Antrop-González collected and analyzed school-related historical and curricular documents. These documents included brochures, archived newspaper reports, and a copy of the formal curriculum. These documents enabled him to learn more about the high school's history and operations, such as why it was founded, how it was funded and accredited, how the school was operated administratively, and how its curriculum was structured.

Second, semistructured one-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 DiaspoRican student participants. Students interviewed for this study had to meet several criteria that Antrop-González established before participant recruitment. For example, they had to be enrolled at the school for at least two years, because Antrop-González felt this amount of time would ensure the richness of the students' experiences at the school.⁵ These students were interviewed after school hours, so that they would not lose valuable class time. While Antrop-González was only able to interview a limited number of participants over a short period of time, these criteria enabled the participants to elicit rich descriptions pertaining to their experiences at the high school. Although the small number of participants limits the degree to which one can make generalizations, the findings nevertheless reveal

how the PACHS served as a DiaspoRicancentric space marked by racial/ethnic and linguistic affirmation, high academic expectations, and the presence of meaningful, interpersonal student-teacher relationships.

Finally, observations and access at the school were also facilitated in several ways by Antrop-González position as an active participant. Antrop-González participated in school and community-related events, such as marches and rallies, clean-up detail after community events, and tutoring at the school. He also assisted in cleaning the school, because there was no money to pay a janitor's salary at the time of the study. Additionally, he assisted staff members in serving students their daily lunches, helped in the production of the school's 2000 yearbook, and participated in the 2000 senior class retreat. Antrop-González felt compelled to assume these roles, because he felt that they would help him "blend in" and become a more familiar sight at the school. He also believed that his work at the high school would help contribute to its pedagogical mission and enable him to give back to the school in return for the experiences he was provided.

Data Analysis

Bringing our two data sets together, we identified salient themes within and across each data emerging from each setting. Employing cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we looked across the two cases for similar and distinct themes regarding DiaspoRicans' journeys through secondary school. Cross case analysis is particularly appropriate for this unique data set in that it allows the researchers to reconcile "an individual case's uniqueness with the need for more general understanding of generic processes that occur across cases" (p. 173). The two cases we compare emanate from two distinct settings but each reflects some similar tensions, themes, and processes. To facilitate this process, we constructed categorical matrices representing key findings. We then looked across cases to identify key themes, which we then developed in analytic memos. This process of constructing matrices and then writing memos allowed us to use the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) to identify and test for the robustness of various themes across the cases. Finally, we conducted member checks with our student participants and audit trails with supportive colleagues in order to ensure that we did not misrepresent their experiences. Moreover, these particular data analysis techniques also enabled us to triangulate our data sources to ensure that there were no notable inconsistencies and/or contradictions in our interpretation of students' experiences. We also employed these data analysis techniques, so we could pay particular attention to similarities and/or differences across gender.

We should also note that our identities shaped many aspects of this work, from conceptualizing and implementing the research projects that are described here through the analysis of the data and development of this manuscript. As DiaspoRican scholars, former teachers of DiaspoRican students and current faculty members in Schools of Education at large public universities, we are both com-

mitted to promoting the success of DiaspoRican youth and other communities that have been historically underserved by schools. While our experiences working with DiaspoRican youth and communities, and specifically the resiliency and thirst for knowledge we have witnessed in these settings, gives us hope for a brighter future, we remain concerned about the fate of our schools and implications for DiaspoRican students and others who are embedded in learning environments that ignore or, worse, pathologize their cultural identities.

Findings

The data suggest that students in the two sites experienced racism and racialization, albeit in unique ways, and were ever conscious of the impact of these forces on shaping the educational opportunities available for them. The notion of space, which for the purposes of this analysis is confined to the schools that students navigated, also loomed large. Students at RHS were embedded in a space that was forced to confront shifting demographics due to recent increases in the Latina/o population in the community, and students at PACHS attended school in a context that was created as an alternative to the traditional public school system specifically to accommodate them and address their needs in ways that were more culturally responsive. Finally, the education of DiaspoRican youth doesn't take place in a vacuum but rather is profoundly shaped by larger forces outside the control of schools. Categorized as race, space, and place, we explore these three themes in the education of DiaspoRican youth across context in what follows.

Race in the Education of DiaspoRican Youth

The dialogue regarding issues of race is typically limited to the Black-White binary, often rendering silent the racialized experiences of Latina/os, who can be of any race and often identify as multiracial. Moreover, there is a general reluctance to systematically and critically discuss issues of race within educational settings (Pollock, 2008; Sleeter, 2001). Despite educators' aversion to discussing how race can and often does dictate the types of educational opportunities offered to youth, the DiaspoRican students in our two studies consistently underscored the prevalence of race and racialization in their schooling experiences.

DiaspoRican youth from RHS highlighted two distinct, yet equally problematic ways that race and racism manifested themselves in their schooling experiences. The first, which we broadly describe as rendering *puertorriqueñidad* invisible, reflects the more subtle, institutionalized ways that racism motivated policies that were intended to suppress the educational aspirations and outcomes for DiaspoRican youth. In an interview conducted a year and a half into Project FUERTE and a month prior to her graduation, Carmen articulated the processes through which DiaspoRican students are targets of racial oppression and marginalization through institutional processes largely outside of the control of youth and their families.

After looking closely at the curriculum, at the books teachers use, the fact that there are no Latinos [teaching] core subjects, and the fact that like 50% of the school is Latino, Puerto Ricans mostly, you see how they like treat us like we aren't even here... as if we don't exist. Everything here, from the morning announcements [which are] always in English-only, the posters on the walls, for real, like everything tells us that you have to be White and I'm not White, we are not White.

Carmen's appraisal of her educational experiences is echoed in an interview with Taína, who similarly underscores how within this context Puerto Rican identities are suppressed while whiteness is elevated, suggesting to students that they have to conform to the more dominant forces in the system for any chance at school success.

Boricua's rep[resent] hard. They represent. You know what I'm saying. We love being Puerto Rican. We got the flag; we got our music and all that stuff. When we come here, you can't show that love, that pride. It's like you gotta hide it. That sounds funny cause everybody knows I'm Puerto Rican, but you know... I gotta not be me. I gotta be like *los blancos*, and like I'm always sayin' we ain't *los blancos*.

While students acknowledge a general animosity against the burgeoning Latina/o population at the school, the climate for DiaspoRican youth was especially hostile. As part of the their data collection for the YPAR project, the students administered a survey to the teachers, administrators, and professional staff at their school. Although not directly addressed on the instrument, several teachers, without provocation, chose to share their perceptions regarding the differences in work ethic they perceived among various groups of Latina/o students attending the school, with one teacher going as far as to say, "Mexican and Central Americans are clearly more motivated than Puerto Rican students" (Irizarry, 2011). The anti-Puerto Rican sentiment expressed by teachers and clearly felt by students made RHS a hostile space for DiaspoRican students to navigate.

The second way that race and racism permeated the lives of DiaspoRican youth at RHS was through the more overt targeting of students and the intentional suppression of their cultural identities. Jasmine explains how language policies implemented by many teachers at the school target Puerto Rican Spanish-speakers yet exalt the use of other world languages.

The teachers flip on you if you use Spanish. They like send you out of class, to the office constantly. Even if you are just chillin' with your friends they tell you to speak English (raising her voice). We had some exchange students from Germany or somewhere over there. The teachers were sweatin them. They were like, "Oh, how would you say this in German?" or whatever. They don't care about Spanish, but they care about the other languages. That shows you what they think about us right there.

The racialized undertones of the suppression of Spanish and the support for other languages was not lost on the RHS students and contributed to their sense of isolation from school. Because language is inextricably linked with identity, the

students felt like their cultural identities were consistently maligned and suppressed. In contrast, expressions of *puertorriqueñidad* were embraced and practices at PACHS reflected what we term as the ethnic/political symbol framework of racial/ethnic affirmation. For Melissa, race was manifested through open, frequent classroom conversations regarding colonialism and its implications for race.

At PACHS we always talk in our classes about Puerto Rico as a colony and how racism affects our lives. We learn that racism affects everything like the foods we cannot get easily. We also talk about our neighborhood being a food desert and that race plays a part in not getting healthy food. We also learn about how important it is to struggle with other people of color like African Americans and other Latinos.

In additional conversations Antrop-González had with Melissa, she indicated that her heightened nationalist political consciousness was a result of the history classes she had taken at the PACHS. Damien also expressed the importance of Puerto Rican affirmation at the high school. He described his previous high school education as a “brainwashing,” because it did not expose him to discussions centering on Puerto Rican history.

In my other schools in Hartford and Chicago I was brainwashed. In those other schools, we never talked about Puerto Rican history and our political heroes. At the PACHS, we always be talkin’ about colonialism in Puerto Rico and how it hurts us in the US. I have learned a lot here about my history and culture and Spanish is spoken at the school all the time. Our people are respected at this school.

The experiences of the PACHS students interviewed revealed the ways in which the high school was important to them. Interestingly, the students emphasized the importance of the high school in terms of its willingness to build and sustain a culture of DiaspoRicancentric attributes. These rich, culturally specific attributes included the manifestation of caring relations between students and their teachers, the importance of a familial-like school environment, the importance of having a safe school, and allowing students a space in which they are encouraged to affirm their racial/ethnic pride. That is, in contrast RHS where students felt a bifurcated sense of identity, having to shed their cultural identities for a chance at school success, PACHS served as a “space of possibility” where students could reconcile and assert their racial/ethnic and academic identities. Although these DiaspoRicancentrically rich attributes had been missing in their previous schools, they were now an integral part of their everyday experiences at the PACHS.

The approach to educating DiaspoRican youth at RHS can most aptly be described as reactionary and motivated largely out of racialized fear and ignorance to the emergence of DiaspoRican youth as a numeric plurality in the school system. Students bore the brunt of teachers’ deficit orientations, assimilations practices and “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999), presenting significant implications for their feelings about school, academic achievement, and aspirations for life after high school. In contrast, PACHS was created proactively to meet the needs of Puerto Rican

and other students who were not being well served in the traditional public school system. This intentionality resulted in the centering of students' racial/ethnic identities and the creation of an atmosphere that supported personal and intellectual growth.

All of the participants consistently spoke to the prevalence of racism in their schooling and the impact of race-based structural oppression on their educational attainment. From a Latina/o Critical Theory perspective, DiaspoRican youth were silenced in one setting while allowed to assert their voices in the other. Most notably, the responses of school personnel to students' expressions of their cultural identities, through language practices, symbols, and the like, had a significant impact on students' perceptions of their school.

Identity development is a central feature of adolescence. Because of the time that they spend there and the significant influence schools play in shaping the experiences of youth, as DiaspoRican youth engage in this process, they are often immersed in contexts that do not value their cultural identities, thus alienating students from school. RHS and PACHS students, before enrolling in an alternative school, feel forced to choose between developing and asserting a healthy sense of self that includes a positive appraisal of their racial/ethnic identities or feeling pressured to strip themselves of their home identities and language. Unfortunately, most DiaspoRican students are highly pressured to internalize the latter rather than the former.

Consequently, many students react to these toxic schools by leaving school or by internalizing intense feelings of shame and guilt for being DiaspoRican. Hence, the psychology of the colonized is reproduced through dominant forms of schooling (Bulhan, 2004; Memmi, 1991). While PACHS offers an incredibly viable anticolonial, humanizing alternative to colonial schools, it is unfortunately the exception to the world of schooling rather than the norm.

Space in the Education of DiaspoRican Youth

Moving from participants' individual perceptions of race in their educational experiences to the institutions they are trying to navigate to secure quality educational opportunities, this section expands the focus to include how DiaspoRican youth were influenced by the larger Diasporic communities of which they were members. Space, in this context, describes the extent to which relationships among people produce power in territorial contexts (Forman, 2001). For DiaspoRican youth, being physically removed from the Island and living and learning in the context of the United States problematizes their notions of belonging. Students' sense of identity development and engagement with school are further complicated by the types of Diasporic communities in which they reside. That is, the history of Puerto Ricans in particular regions of the country, the political power they may have (or have not) amassed, and their participation in shaping policy and practice within local schools all factor the quantity and quality of services offered to DiaspoRican youth. RHS students, in community with relatively no Puerto Rican representation in the political sphere,

are caught in a community characterized by a predominantly Latina/o school-aged population and a predominantly older White voting populace.

The cultural and demographic disconnect played out in the struggle to get a school budget approved by the town, the impact of which was felt by DiaspoRican students.

Jasmine: Living in this town is hard. The White people act like we are invading their land or something like that. The things with the budget, where it didn't pass for like four tries, 'til after school already started tells you that the whites in [this town] don't want us here, they don't want us to get educated the way we need to.

These voting patterns support the findings from a 2007 study conducted by the Population Reference Bureau, which found that states in which the majority of voters were white and whose public schools served a majority of students of color often spend less on education than states in which the racial/ethnic texture of the voting population was more congruent with that of the students (Cohn, 2007). These trends highlight the power of a large, predominantly older white electorate to shape public policy that will undoubtedly affect the opportunity structure for an increasingly brown school-aged population. Students like Jasmine were acutely aware of the general sense of antipathy toward DiaspoRican youth in Rana City, manifested in voting patterns as well as the dominant discourse in the town and school harkened back to the "good ol' days" when things were "different."

DiaspoRican youth in Rana City spoke to the Latinization of their community (Irizarry, 2011) in a myriad of ways, offering their appraisal of the shifting cultural landscape expressing their hurt regarding the negative responses from non-Latina/o community members to the changing demographics of the town and its schools. In an original poem describing the changes she has observed in her community, Carmen wrote:

What was once referred to as Cloth City is now Cocaine Town.
 No more mills spinning the weaver's web, just drug dealers trying to manipulate
 teenage heads.
 ...People are thinking this is all their life.
 But what do you see now on Main Street?
 Busy Latin restaurants like El Pilon and Señor Taco.

As DiaspoRican youth strive for quality educational opportunities that give them options in life, their efforts unfold within a larger sociopolitical context that is often hostile to these efforts. The experiences of RHS students are similar to other newer diasporic communities where the cultural collisions between an older Anglo population and a more youthful Latina/o populace are relatively new and therefore more abrupt and jarring. The effects of living and learning in the Puerto Rican Diaspora are also felt by DiaspoRican youth living in communities with a long-standing Puerto Rican presence.

PACHS students also discussed the implications of living in the Diaspora. A recurring theme dealt with the institutional racism they often felt at the hands of

adults in positions of power and/or authority. When asked to describe their lives in Chicago, students often remarked how just getting to school in the morning and returning home from school in the late afternoons was often a challenge. Many of the students were either harassed by police officers and/or gang members. Alex remarked:

Man, just getting to school is hard. The cops are always messing me and many of my friends up. Just because we're Puerto Rican, cops be comin' up to us and telling us to hit the ground and spread. They always thinking we got weapons or drugs on us. When they do this to us, we always be getting to school late and missing work. We get jacked up just for being Boricua. When it's not the fucking cops, it's the gangs tryin' to recruit you. Life is hard here, man! Once I'm at the school, though, I feel safe. But once I leave the school, the rough shit starts all over again!

Alex clearly describes the extent to which he consistently faces institutional racism as a young DiaspoRican in Chicago. These experiences have undoubtedly shaped his views of the world in which he lives. Hence, he describes his life as being difficult. Nonetheless, he acknowledges PACHS as a space that he regards as being a refuge from these daily challenges.

Like Alex, Cathy also described her daily conditions as a young DiaspoRican woman living in Chicago. She also discussed the extent to which she faced physical objectification and disrespect of her status as a young woman of color.

On the bus, I'm constantly havin' to be lookin' out for people staring at my body and making rude ass comments. They're not looking at my mind or my talents but at my body. I hate that shit, yo! You askin' me how life is as a young woman here—it's okay at times and hard others. I know though, that once I get to the school, I'm not treated that way—I'm respected.

Again, the notion of facing difficult challenges as young DiaspoRican adults was a common one. However, students were also quick to point out that PACHS represented a respectful space in which they found a healthy escape from life on the streets. Hence, the intersections between race/ethnicity and space were an important one in the lives of PACHS youth.

Place in the Education of DiaspoRican Youth

Whereas the previous section focused on how DiaspoRican students experienced race and racism, this section looks at the institutions in which they were embedded and how students found liberatory spaces within otherwise oppressive educational systems. For the PACHS participants, attending an alternative school that was created with the interests of DiaspoRican students in mind, these spaces were readily available within the walls of their school. For example, PACHS is aesthetically rich in honoring the lives of Puerto Rican freedom fighters and other community activists. Murals and ensuing conversations regarding the tribulations of former and present Puerto Rican political prisoners are part and parcel of the progressively rich dialogues that take place in the school among students and

teachers. Furthermore, geographical representations of Puerto Rico are present at PACHS. Classrooms are named after municipalities in Puerto Rico, such as the *Juana Díaz* and *Ponce* rooms.

Additional examples of Puerto Ricentric images include posters of freedom fighters Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos and Lolita Lebrón, among other revolutionary figures. Above and beyond these important visual images that work to inform and honor the Puerto Rican experience, curricular materials that exalt alternative, anticolonial narratives are woven throughout content areas like English, math, and science. Thus, classroom projects and dialogues are further manifestations of how DiaspoRican students and their teachers name and make sense of their lived experiences. Moreover, PACHS is constantly working to revise their curriculum in order to raise consciousness around what it means to be DiaspoRican in an urban center like Chicago. For the FUERTE participants, their participation in YPAR, critiquing the oppressive institutions in which they were embedded, offered a vehicle for them to create a liberatory space within a schooling environment that students described as hostile and oppressive.

Examining place in the education of DiaspoRican youth is significant in that students' experiences in schools undoubtedly influence their personal and professional trajectories. For many of the Project FUERTE students, schools were viewed as a necessary evil they had to endure, a place to pass time and, as one student put it, "hopefully get a diploma." Because Latina/os were omitted from the curriculum, students made the flawed assumption that Latina/os had contributed little, if anything, to the development of this country. On an individual level, the lack of Latina/o representation in the curriculum served to alienate students from academic content and influenced the development of oppositional identities among students. An excerpt from a class discussion exemplifies students' frustration and their desire to disconnect from academic pursuits:

Alberto: We come to school everyday, but what are we learning really? I'm not interested in anything here. Like all of my classes are the worst.

Taina: Word. This is all mad boring. Everything doesn't have to be about Latinos but like something... give us something.

Jasmine: That's why a lot of the time I don't even bother trying. For what? If we learned things that are like connected to my life, then I would be more interested.

There was a general divestment from school among the Project FUERTE participants, which they attributed, at least in part, to being disconnected from the curriculum. As part of the Action Research and Social Change course, students had the opportunity to learn more about their cultural histories and found practical applicability in the research skills they developed to answer questions they generated. As students began to create liberatory space for themselves through their engagement in YPAR, they questioned the motives of their teachers and contemplated the

implications the whitewashing of the curriculum. In a journal entry as part of a class assignment, Tamara wrote the following:

I look on all the stuff I learned for this project and, even though I am glad to finally learn something about Puerto Ricans, I'm mad that this is the first time I am hearing any of this. Puerto Rico is part of the United States, and we are U.S. citizens. Not to mention the fact that [Puerto Ricans] are like half of the school population. Why wouldn't they want us to know our history? School is boring and has always been boring. Now that I am learning about my culture, I really like coming to this class. If this had started when I was younger, my life would be different.

The students at RHS were largely disconnected from their school and consequently from the learning that can take place there, engaged in a process of self-defeating resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). The YPAR project, embedded in a class offered by Irizarry at their school, offered students the opportunity to create a space within the context of a DiaspoRican reality where Puerto Rican could be synonymous with academic achievement. In this environment within the larger school structure, students were able to move toward transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001) where they could remake themselves, learn academic skills in context, and interrogate and challenge the oppressive policies and practices that served to marginalize and disconnect them from school.

In the case of PACHS, students were highly encouraged to dialogue about race/ethnicity and its place in Puerto Rican history and in the context of the lived experiences of DiaspoRican youth.

Melissa: At my other high school, everything was about the history of White people, and teachers made them seem like they were better than us. I was getting sick of all that talk—it's like we didn't even exist. But here at this school (PACHS), we actually get to talk about our own people and the good things they do for our community. Here, we are made to feel like we're somebody special.

Antrop-González: So, does feeling told you're special help you in school?

Melissa: Yeah, it makes me feel like I belong here, and then I want to do good things for my Puerto Rican people where I live. I've got friends who study with me here, and they feel the same way, too.

Melissa voices a powerful testimony regarding the power importance of a strong sense of belonging can have on academic engagement. This power enables Melissa to see herself as a young woman worthy of being acknowledged as a human being with voice and agency. Similarly, Damien compared his former Chicago public high schools with PACHS when he remarked:

What makes me want to be here at the school (PACHS) all the time is that the teachers make me feel good to be Puerto Rican. Here, we always talk about what it means to be Puerto Rican and what we can do to make our lives and the lives of our neighbors better. In my other high schools, I was always made to feel bad

about who I am. I was, shit, I got to get out of these schools. I'm glad I found this school (PACHS). I can even speak Spanish here and not get yelled at by the teachers or other students. We also get to read a lot of books about our history and struggles about our lives in the United States.

As Melissa and Damien remarked, the PACHS school space was racially/ethnically and linguistically conducive to respecting students' DiaspoRican identities. They were also aware of the fact that their previous high schools were intent on eradicating their identities in favor of White, dominant ways of seeing themselves, their communities, and their worlds. In contrast to these problematic experiences, they greatly valued the inclusion of race/ethnicity at a DiaspoRican space like PACHS, and they felt they were able to reclaim their humanity as a result.

The notion of place in the lives of DiaspoRican youth in both settings was salient, as the schools served as sites of interactions across lines of difference that were mediated by historic power relations. Place, then, according to theorists in critical geography, references the locus of complex interactions between power and identity (Helfenbein, 2010). PACHS, which was established specifically to address the needs of DiaspoRican youth who were underserved by the traditional public school system, was dominated by relationships of mutual respect that made Puerto Rican youth feel welcome and worthy of investment. Conversely, Rana High School was undergoing a demographic shift, as the predominantly white city was becoming increasingly Latina/o. The cultural collisions that ensued in this place between Latina/o students and their teachers created an environment that DiaspoRican youth experienced as hostile. Again, these interactions were strongly influenced by racism and processes of racialization in this community.

Discussion and Implications

The two schools we have described are prime examples of RicanStruction sites or spaces where DiaspoRican youth and their teachers labor together build and sustain teaching and learning spaces that honor, respect, and affirm their students' lived experiences across racial/ethnic and linguistic lines. In the case of the two schooling spaces described in this paper, positive transformation for youth of color is manifested in unique ways and offers the promise of RicanStruction in schools that have traditionally served their students poorly.

In the case of Rana High School, *Project FUERTE* applies YPAR philosophy and methods in order to raise DiaspoRican youths' political consciousness around the ways schools are set up to fail them by providing a culturally irrelevant curriculum and sponsoring toxic student-teacher relationships that are characterized by low academic expectations and the lack of authentically caring teachers who understand and honor their students' communities, parents/caregivers, and cultural and linguistic realities. Thus, many Rana teachers do not respect and/or affirm their students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Quiñones,

Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011) and/or community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). These particular concepts are predicated on teachers intimately knowing and viewing their students' home based ways of knowing the world as assets to be woven through curricular practices. Thus, *Project FUERTE* facilitated the inclusion of YPAR as a way to arm students with the skills to name and work to challenge and transform dehumanizing schooling practices. The project also created a space of possibility, an opportunity for students to take up this resistant place-making and work to transform the oppressive environment in which they were educated. As a result, they were able to reclaim and remake their DiaspoRican identities and demand that their culture and language be respected and used as important anchors in their educative process.

In sharp contrast to Rana High School, PACHS was founded as a direct response to large, comprehensive Chicago high schools that continually disrespected their DiaspoRican youths' lived experiences. As a small, alternative high school, PACHS students declare their school to be a sanctuary, because it is characterized by a culture of critical care (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006). Critical care in school spaces is marked by high academic expectations, racial/ethnic and linguistic affirmation in curricular practices, high quality student-teacher relationships, and a culture of psychological and physical safety. While PACHS has served DiaspoRican youth for 40 years and has waiting lists for youth wishing to enroll year after year, the students and teachers are constantly finding new ways to invigorate the school's culture of humanization. Thus, students and teachers together dialogue about curriculum and its implementation in the spirit of constant, positive transformation.

We purposefully use RicanStruction as a cognitive metaphor for more race and culture-conscious approaches to improving the educational experiences and outcomes for DiaspoRican youth. *Project FUERTE* and PACHS are school projects that were conceptualized in order to RicanStruct viable alternatives to the deplorable schooling and material conditions that most DiaspoRican youth face on an everyday basis. We feel it is morally imperative for school agents and students to challenge taken for granted assumptions regarding traditional forms of schooling, such as high stakes testing and culturally irrelevant pedagogy. In other words, we must demand that dehumanizing schooling practices such as these be dismantled and replaced with humanizing, liberating schools that actively labor to honor and build upon their DiaspoRican students' cultural and linguistic ways of knowing and changing the world.

Notes

¹ The parentheses in (im)migration are employed to signal the diverse immigration experiences among individuals and communities who journey to the United States, specifically underscoring potential differences in citizenship status. Puerto Ricans born on the island of Puerto Rico, a colonial possession of the United States for over a century, are U.S. citizens by birth. Subsequently, their move from the island to the mainland can be viewed as "migration"

rather than “immigration.” However, Spanish is the dominant language on the island and when Puerto Ricans, who are free to travel throughout the United States without restriction, migrate to the U.S., their experiences share many similarities with those of other immigrants from Latin America, especially in their encounters with xenophobia, racism, and linguisticism. Therefore, the parentheses are employed to call attention to the complexities of immigration across groups that are often overlooked in the dominant immigration narrative.

² We have chosen to capitalize “Island,” as we are referring to Puerto Rico specifically and to psycholinguistically decolonize the common thought that Puerto Rico is a small place that needs to be protected and “taken care of” by the United States.

³ All proper names in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

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