

Seduced by Images: Identity and Schooling in the Lives of Puerto Rican Girls

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Based on a two-year ethnographic study at an urban middle school, this article describes the power that images created by and about Puerto Rican girls hold in shaping their schooling experiences. Using a black, critical, feminist framework, I show how dichotomizing the sexuality of Puerto Rican females against their intellectual development obscures the complex ways that identities are co-constructed and then affirmed, appropriated, or resisted within their school site. I conclude that to resist the reproduction of educational inequality in the lives of Puerto Rican females, we must explore and seek to transform the influential ways that identities are mediated and educational outcomes are produced within the school contexts where Puerto Rican females are educated. [Puerto Rican, urban, educational equity, ethnicity, gender]

School achievement continues to be mediated by identity characteristics such as ethnicity, race, social class, and gender. This is a troubling reality for Puerto Rican girls who have one of the highest high school dropout rates in the United States and are noticeably absent in undergraduate and graduate programs (Ginorio and Huston 2001; Nieto 2000; Rolón 2000). Despite research revealing the limited educational levels reached by many Puerto Rican girls, little research has been conducted that provides rich and thorough descriptions of how ethnicity and gender intersect to influence schooling for Puerto Rican girls. In this article, I illustrate how images and representations created by and about Puerto Rican girls powerfully influence their educational experiences. I argue that images used to describe Puerto Rican girls at school focus on their sexuality and are cast in opposition to cultural productions of what educated or educable girls should be. I explore ways that the girls both contribute to the formation of these images and “talk back” to controlling images. Finally, I conclude that unilateral views of girls that limit their agency in expressing all aspects of their identity also curtail the potential of schools to serve as sites of resistance to educational inequality along ethnic, class, and gender lines.

A black, critical, feminist framework provides the lens through which I analyze the data and assert that deterministic views of identity that dichotomize Puerto Rican females’ sexuality against their intellectual development do not adequately account for the influential role that the school context holds in mediating identities and subsequent schooling

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outcomes. This assertion stands in contrast to frameworks on identity and educational inequality, such as Ogbu's often-cited cultural ecological model (Ogbu 1978, 1991; Ogbu and Simons, 1998), that emphasize how essentialized attitudes and attributes developed by minority group members account for differential achievement. Ogbu contends that students develop particular group identities and subsequent schooling dispositions based on their views of the opportunity structure and the sociohistorical status of their ethnic group. Under Ogbu's rubric, Puerto Ricans are labeled as involuntary immigrants and are believed to have "oppositional" identities that lead to attitudes and behaviors that negatively influence their performance in school.

Scholars have critiqued Ogbu's model because it conveys an overly deterministic view of identity and schooling dispositions (Erickson 1987; Espinoza-Herold 2003), pays inadequate attention to variability between and within ethnic groups (Conchas 2001; Flores-González 2002; Hayes 1992; O'Connor 1997), and minimizes the role of educational contexts in constructing particular student identities and schooling experiences (Conchas 2001; Espinoza-Herold 2003; Flores-González 2002; Mehan et al. 1996; Trueba 1988; Valenzuela 1999). Despite these criticisms, the premises behind Ogbu's model continue to be popular in explaining differential school achievement. For instance, although the teachers' views reported in this study do not include direct reference to Ogbu's model, they often echo Ogbu's practice of attributing essentialized schooling dispositions and attitudes to students based on their identity characteristics.

Research Design, Setting, and Participants

Data for this article are part of a larger, two-year (1999–2001) ethnographic study that addressed the vexing dilemma of differential and inequitable educational achievement along race/ethnic, class, and gender lines through a contextual exploration of the schooling engagement of Puerto Rican, low-income girls. Ethnographic methods allowed for an exploration of the ways that descriptions, actions, and relational encounters within a school site culturally produced and valued or disparaged images and representations of Puerto Rican girls.

The study took place at James Middle School (JMS),¹ located in a working class/poor, racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhood in the northeastern United States. The neighborhood had changed substantially in the last two decades as available jobs shifted from the manufacturing to the service sector, and as white residents moved out and were replaced with an increasing number of African American and Latino/a families. The 1,100 students who attended the school reflected the neighborhood demographics, with almost equal numbers of students from European American, African American, and Latino/a backgrounds making up the student body, and 92 percent of the students qualifying for the free or reduced lunch program. Although pedagogical

practices and student engagement at JMS varied for students as they transitioned from class to class and teacher to teacher, James Middle School was struggling to improve education despite a large number of teacher vacancies, dismally low test scores, limited parental participation in school-sanctioned activities, and minimal resources available within an underfunded district.

During my fieldwork at JMS, I focused on the lives of nine second-generation, Puerto Rican, low-income girls who had attended U.S. schools for the majority of their kindergarten through middle school experience. Two teachers assisted in the recruitment of participants with the goal of obtaining a small group of seventh grade girls who varied in their level of classroom and extracurricular participation, academic performance, school attendance, and classroom behavior. The girls also varied in the amount of Spanish that they spoke with friends or at home, but all chose to conduct the majority of interview and focus group conversations in English.

In building relationships with the girls, I emphasized my role as a student at a local university and sought to spend time at school in places and activities that the students frequented. Although being a Puerto Rican woman able to speak Spanish seemed to facilitate some connections with the participants and their parents, there were other factors in building rapport and trust with the girls. Visiting the girls' homes and speaking with family members seemed important in demonstrating to the girls that I was interested in what their lives were like, and it was also helpful in contextualizing what the girls shared. Being in the field for two years also was helpful in adding detail and depth to the data shared by and about the girls.

I spent extensive time as an observer at JMS, documenting each visit through field notes. Visits varied in length from one-hour long observational classroom visits to six-hour visits when I shadowed each girl throughout her school day. I conducted hour-long interviews with the girls during their seventh grade year and held weekly individual and focus group discussions during their eighth grade year. I also recorded individual interviews with 20 members of the JMS staff, 13 of which were with the girls' primary subject teachers (social studies, math, English, reading, and science). Eleven of these 13 teachers were white (the remaining two were African American), and ten of 13 were females; they resided in the suburbs and described themselves as currently belonging to the middle- or upper middle-class. All but one of the teachers cited or described here were white (the exception was Mr. Smith, an African American). The teachers represented a range in teaching experience, but the majority were veteran teachers who had taught for ten or more years.

During interviews and focus group conversations I used open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to discuss issues relating to identity (ethnicity, social class, gender); the family, peer, and community contexts of the girls; school life; and educational success, failure, and opportunity.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded using categories derived from the research questions and theoretical framework. A grounded theory approach was used in which categories and codes were drawn from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Additionally, feedback was obtained from the participating girls on preliminary findings and analysis during the last months of fieldwork.

The experiences of one of the study's primary participants, Beatriz, are highlighted throughout this article. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain that exchanging stories about individual situations is a useful basis for interpreting social reality. I highlight Beatriz' story because it provides the most detailed and nuanced illustrations of the themes present across the lives of the nine girls. In addition, unlike some of the girls in the study, Beatriz' academic performance and school behaviors did not seem to be hindered by any academic difficulties. Thus, Beatriz' story is helpful in focusing on other ways that identity may influence schooling experiences for Puerto Rican girls.

Before beginning my analysis of how identity influenced the schooling experiences of the focal participants in this study, I provide a brief summary of the themes within black feminist critical theory used to understand and analyze the experiences of the Puerto Rican girls. I also present a portrait of Beatriz focused on the multiple factors that influenced her identity and school experiences.

Black Feminist Critical Theory

The intellectual work of feminists of color (Collins 1991, 1998; hooks 1989, 1992, 2000; Zambrana 1988) has been instrumental in pointing to the complex ways that race/ethnicity, class, and gender intersect and influence individuals' lives. One way that these identity characteristics give meaning to the lives of girls and women is through the images that are created about, by, and for women to define who they are or to explain their experiences. Black feminists have asserted that images and representations about women of color have often been utilized as powerful forms of domination and control. Calling attention to the controlling power of images in the lives of people of color, hooks (1992) argues that there is a strong connection between domination and representation. In exploring the role of representation in the lives of people of color she argues that images have ideological and political intent and serve to maintain white supremacist patriarchy.

Collins (1991) defines controlling images as ideological representations through which assumed and stereotypical qualities are attached to groups of women based on an identity characteristic such as ethnicity, race, or class. Collins argues that societal institutions serve as sites where controlling images of black women are created and transmitted. Collins' (1991:68) discussion of the power of controlling images in maintaining "interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression" informs my analysis of how images associated with Puerto Rican

girls shape the interactions that they experience with teachers as well as the roles that they are cast into as female students in school. Grounding my research in black feminist critical theory, I examine how ethnic and gender characteristics influence constructions and representations of identity made by and about Puerto Rican girls at JMS.

Although black feminist thought has helped us understand the ways in which power operates through created images, scholars in this theoretical field also have pointed to the multiple ways that women have sought to resist controlling images. hooks (1989) reminds us of the importance of resistance in the lives of students who must deal with false or incomplete representations of their lives. She writes: "In resistance, the exploited, the oppressed work to expose the false reality—to reclaim and recover ourselves" (1989:3). Collins (1998) uses the metaphor of "coming to voice" to describe what is needed to engage in resistance that allows women active participation in the knowledge and realities that are perpetuated about them. Collins explains that resistance involves breaking silence about images and experiences that objectify women and producing oppositional knowledge that allows women to move toward full human subjectivity. However, as I show in my analysis, the outcomes of resistance are closely linked to the power differentials embedded within particular social structures and often require more than individual instances of girls or women "coming to voice" and attempting to "talk back" to damaging images. I turn my attention now to Beatriz, one of the study's main participants, as I aim to provide a textured portrait that gives attention to the varied aspects of her identity she claimed as important.

Beatriz

Beatriz was an energetic, extroverted girl who quickly made connections with others and who enjoyed the opportunity to tell stories and express herself in our conversations together. Beatriz described herself as a caring and loving person; someone that "does a favor for anyone." Her gentle, caring spirit was obvious in the way she looked after her younger sister at school and in her attention to an assortment of animals at home. Beatriz also liked reading, dancing, playing video games, rollerblading, or doing her nails. She chose the word "goofy" to describe her personality outside of school. I often saw this side of Beatriz in our small-group discussions where she lightened up conversations with her humor, often sending herself into a fit of giggles. Beatriz lived with her father, mother, and three siblings. In describing Beatriz's role at home, her mother explained that Beatriz served as her translator at appointments and assisted her with the math computations to pay the bills.

Like most of the girls at JMS, Beatriz had long hair that she wore pulled back into a ponytail with separate long strands of gelled hair gracing the side of her round face. Her almond-shaped, dark brown eyes gave her light brown face a distinctive look, particularly when she

smiled and the corners of her eyes turned up. Although she most often wore the standard middle school outfit of jeans and a T-shirt, once in a while she chose a more dressy look of tight-fitting pant and shirt ensembles with matching heels and a more generous application of lipstick and eye makeup.

As with the other focal participants in the study, Beatriz' ethnicity played a prominent role in the way she defined herself. The following quote illustrates the way she used labels to describe her ethnic heritage and the way she distinguished herself from her parents.

Well, really [I am] Mestiza which means I'm Puerto Rican but American Puerto Rican. Sometimes I say Mestiza, sometimes I say Boricua.² My parents are Boricua and that makes me Boricua, the only thing is that I was born here.

In this statement, Beatriz' use of the word "only" is indicative of the minimal emphasis she placed on the impact that place of birth had in differentiating her ethnic identity from that of her parents. Beatriz' pride and appreciation for her Puerto Rican heritage was nurtured by her parents at home. Beatriz' mother, Neida, wanted her children to speak Spanish at home and English at school so that they would be able to communicate in both languages. She also affirmed Beatriz' desire to learn more about Puerto Rican culture, sharing stories of her experiences in Puerto Rico and assuring her that sometime in the near future they might visit Puerto Rico together.

Quick to choose ethnic labels to describe herself, Beatriz was more uncertain about how to label her family's social class standing. Beatriz was aware of her family's limited financial resources, but was hesitant to use the term *poor* to describe herself. She reacted to her mother's use of this term by indignantly stating, "We're not poor." Indeed, it was not unusual for girls in the study to use terms other than poor to describe themselves, particularly in relation to fellow community members. However, when the girls described themselves in comparison to their teachers and people in other city neighborhoods, they often used the label "poor." For instance, in comparing herself to her teachers, Beatriz said, "They're working class so they don't really understand until like you get to my point where my dad don't work, my mom don't work, I have to live off welfare. My dad gets SSI [Social Security income]. That's called poor."

All of these identity characteristics influenced Beatriz' life and her role as a student. Beatriz was a stellar student in elementary school but her school performance became more inconsistent in middle school. Although Beatriz valued learning, she was less interested in school activities that did little to engage her mind and interests. Responding to a question about her schooling experiences, she indicated that she enjoyed learning but disliked coming to school. She said, "I don't like coming to school. It's boring. Like when they be giving those lessons I be sleeping." The boredom of school partly accounted for her inconsistent performance as she vacillated between moments of completing work despite

being bored, and moments when the rewards of completing work were not enough to keep her interested and motivated. In her decisions to complete homework she also considered whether or not the homework made a difference in the grade she obtained.

Although Beatriz' completion of homework was sporadic and largely dependent on the consequences attached to completing homework, she showed, in other ways, that she was concerned about her school performance. For instance, Beatriz always made sure that she had given her completed work to teachers before leaving a class to meet with me, she was eager to show me test papers or reports that received good grades, and, on occasion, she asked me for help with her schoolwork. Additionally, her efforts to meet the expectations of teachers were evident through her behavior. Field notes from a visit to Beatriz' seventh grade science class showed her working to complete an assignment that counted toward her grade despite the limited learning that the activity provided:

The students are in the science room completing several pages in their workbooks. Some students are goofing off, laughing and joking in between writing things in their notebooks. Beatriz mostly stays on task but talks often. Once in a while Beatriz says she can't find an answer and asks for help. Daisy tells her it's right in the book. She [Beatriz] is still struggling so I help her find a couple answers. After awhile I suggest that she may want to read the material before attempting to answer the questions. She tells me, "But we don't have time to read. We gotta copy all this stuff down and just find the answers." The girls continue working on the assignment for about 20 minutes. I'm still helping Beatriz with some other answers when Mr. Smith tells them it's time to hand in their work. Beatriz slams her hand down in her book and says, "See, we don't have enough time, I'm not done with all the work."

Beatriz' frustration at not being able to complete her work showed her concern about her schoolwork and her efforts to do what it took to succeed in school. Beatriz was also motivated to do well in school by the expectation her mother held that she was able to get good grades. Responding to a student who told her not to worry about a low test grade, Beatriz said, "You don't know, my mom don't play, she grounded me for a month when I got an F last time, she don't play, I'll get in trouble."

Beatriz' engagement in and completion of work was inconsistent. Although a full discussion of how the school context influenced her level of engagement is beyond the scope of this article, some factors that contributed to Beatriz' level of engagement included the rewards or consequences of completing work (i.e., would it count toward her grade; would she get in trouble at home), her interest in the subject matter, and the pedagogical style in which the schoolwork was presented. When the rewards for learning were not as great and she felt bored, Beatriz found it difficult to stay motivated. Other factors and identifying characteristics need to be considered in Beatriz' school engagement. For instance, Beatriz' role at home influenced her ability to complete schoolwork.

Beatriz sometimes missed school if one of her siblings had an appointment for which she needed to serve as translator. Additionally, although Beatriz helped her siblings with their schoolwork, her place in the family as the member with the most developed literacy skills left her unable to rely on anybody else at home for assistance with schoolwork.

As is evident from this portrait of Beatriz, she, as well as the other girls in this study, presented multilayered identities shaped by various factors, including family dynamics, ethnicity, social class, and gender. However, as Yon (2000) reminds us, we make ourselves in relation to others in specific contexts. Thus, members of Beatriz' school community such as peers and teachers also contributed to the construction of her identity by holding mental images of what they thought Puerto Rican girls were like. These images responded to the physical representations that the girls presented but were also partially determined by the ethnic, classed, and gendered images that teachers held of particular groups of students.

Puerto Rican Girls: "Oozing with Sexuality"

As I interviewed teachers, they discussed various aspects of the schooling experiences of Puerto Rican girls. However, the overriding emphasis teachers placed on Puerto Rican girls' sexuality seemed to forefront and often dominate conversations about Puerto Rican girls. One of the dominant, controlling images teachers used to describe Puerto Rican girls was that of a hypersexual girl. Teachers explained that Puerto Rican girls spent too much time on their hair, make-up, and appearance, and described the girls' way of dressing as "provocative" and overly sexual. Ms. Nadler described Puerto Rican girls by saying that, "maybe they dress, some of them, in a little bit more showy, a little bit more provocative way." In general, teachers tended to bring up Puerto Rican girls' appearance and sexuality as a primary area of their concern, implicating the girls' culture in encouraging girls to present themselves in "feminine" and "sexual" ways. For instance, Ms. Simms said:

The Puerto Rican girls are more feminine and sexual. Their sexuality is really oozing out of them. I don't know if they really see it or not. But I see it. Their culture is so much a part of, it's the dancing, it's very suggestive. They're very feminine, very seductive in not always an intentional way. . . . And it's like they're trying to really shine and be very tits and ass. Really, I don't know what other way to put it. They're like oozing with sexuality. I don't see that in the white kids at all. And in the black girls, I see a bit of it but not to the degree. Like when a Puerto Rican girl comes in dressed beautifully, feminine, feminine, feminine.

Ms. Simms went on to explain how cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations of girls' behaviors and stated that those that were unfamiliar with the culture should remain "nonjudgmental." She said:

I think a lot of the people who are not familiar with the culture tend to think that they're fast and loose, because it's the message they send. So you have to stay back and be really nonjudgmental.

By focusing on the "message" that the girls send, this teacher indicted the girls' culture, making assumptions about the intent of their actions, without attending to the ways that messages also are interpreted through the receiver's cultural lenses. This was typical of teachers' statements; their cultural frames of reference influenced ensuing definitions of the girls' behaviors and appearances that were labeled as being overly suggestive or too sexy.

As teachers used their own culturally biased frames of reference to decide what was acceptable and unacceptable in terms of girls' appearance, they often marked those who did not conform to their frameworks as outsiders whose practices were inappropriate. In referring to Puerto Rican girls, Mr. Reese acknowledged:

There's a cultural issue here—where there's a small time to be a child and a lifetime to be an adult. And this should be a time of, I can use the word innocence. But culturally, and I'm not passing judgment here, many Hispanic families, girls marry young. And they date young. And they date men that are older. . . . You look at closing [graduation] exercises when they come in as eighth graders. And I look at the way that the young ladies dress. And it reflects a culture. But it clearly portrays, not a 13 year old or a 12 year old or an 11 year old. In my eyes, you're forcing a child into a world of an 18 or 20 year old.

Despite his attempts at not "passing judgment," Mr. Reese, and other teachers, used their ethnic, class, and gender specific lenses to make judgments about what counted as appropriate or inappropriate dress and behavior for middle school girls. In doing so, Puerto Rican girls' actions and physical representations were placed on the margins of what teachers deemed to be culturally, gender- and age-appropriate for middle school girls. By applying their own, limited vision of how girls should dress and comport themselves for school, teachers culturally produced an image of what middle school girls should have looked like as they came to school. Feminists of color (Collins 1991; hooks 1992, 2000; Zambrana 1988) remind us of the inadequacy of universal claims and categories in understanding the complexity of socially constructed identities. At JMS, bounded, universal definitions of what the bodies and physical actions of middle school girls should look like placed Puerto Rican girls' physical representations of self in opposition to the limited images perceived as "age-appropriate" for middle school girls.

Beyond perpetuating stereotypical views that hindered the expression of multiple selves at the school site, controlling images also were troubling because of the unexamined assumptions that sometimes explained particular behaviors. For instance, Ms. Butler speculated that Hispanic girls' "suggestive" way of dressing was perhaps linked to their need to feel powerful or valued. She rationalized that the choices girls

made in terms of their appearance were based on something the girls were lacking at home (e.g., attention from their fathers) or something that they were imitating (e.g., the promiscuous behavior of women).

And I think they're not valued for who they are, at times, at home. This may be true for all girls but when they come to school they can empower themselves. And you can empower yourself by being nasty, by using bad language, by showing off. Most Hispanic girls are the ones that, the girls who show their assets. Do you know what I mean? Yeah. This is dawning on me now that they're more inclined to wear tight pants. More inclined to wear that low-cut dress. And maybe that dress gives them that feeling of power. But also, maybe it's because they're not valued. And like I said this could go for all girls. If you're not valued, you find a way to value yourself. And if you have people saying, "Oh, what a body on you." Whether it's a 13 year old boy or a 25 year old man, then that's OK to continue to dress and behave the way you do. Do you know what I mean? And if you show a child, especially, obviously a female, that you can go and sleep with ten different guys and have four kids by four different fathers; that if you can go out and get your food stamps and get your food and then come home and watch the Jerry Springer show, I think that devalues womanhood across the board.

I concur with Ms. Butler's assessment that girls' behaviors and representations of self may be enacted as strategies of resistance. And, I acknowledge that some girls, Latinas and others, sometimes dressed in tight, revealing clothing that drew attention to their rapidly developing bodies. However, Ms. Butler's speculations about the way the girls represented themselves and their resistance efforts were based on generalizations about the homes of the girls she taught. Although Ms. Butler was careful to explain that her generalizations perhaps ran across the lives of girls from all ethnic groups, she highlighted the particular relevance of the issue to Puerto Rican girls. Missing from Ms. Butler's analysis was a critique of the ways that the images and corresponding interpretations that were predominant in teachers' minds were based on deficit views of the girls' culture and homes. These images influenced the response of teachers to girls at school and overlooked other identity characteristics that Puerto Rican girls negotiated as they engaged in schooling endeavors.

Schooling and Sexuality as Incompatible Desires

Dominating images of Puerto Rican girls also were troubling because of the associated dichotomous thinking they engendered. In the lives of Puerto Rican girls at JMS, a focus on appearance and a particular, culture-specific way of expressing femininity was often cast as incompatible with a focus on school and education. For the Puerto Rican girls in the study, the image of the hypersexual girl was cast in opposition to the image of an educable girl interested in her schooling endeavors. Collins (1991) explains that dichotomous thinking promotes a view of differences as oppositional forces. Thus, ideas, perspectives, actions, or motives

are not only different from their counterparts but also are inherently opposed to their counterpart. The following quote from Ms. Russell shows how the interests of girls were constructed in a narrow manner, focusing on their sexuality and interest in boys. She said:

It's just very hard to find anything that like interests them other than like boys. You could sit here and talk to them about boys and relationships and you'll have their fullest attention. You know, talk to them about China, forget it.

Ms. Morgan concurred with Ms. Russell's perspective, believing that an interest in boys took precedence over girls' interest in school. Teachers rarely spoke of the possibility that Puerto Rican girls could express an interest in romantic relationships while sustaining other school interests. In discussing girls who had difficulty in school, Ms. Morgan had this to say to describe them: "Because education is not [an] important thing. The most important thing seems to be which boy you are going to hug outside." She suggested that girls' interest in their appearance and in boys was incompatible with what was important and valued by successful girls interested in their education.

Successful students, I think they have [a] totally different outlook. Their interests are not in the trivial things—if their hair is straightened up and this kind of stuff, that's not the important stuff.

Teachers repeatedly negatively linked girls' performance in school with girls' interest in boys. For instance, Ms. Sellers described Mariah by stating, "She's a very smart young lady but [she] just doesn't always work up to full potential. And I think for her too it's one of those experiences where the boys are more interesting than school work." Similarly, Ms. Morgan associated Clarissa's declining school performance by focusing on her interest in boys:

She's slipping, she's slipping. And I think it's because of a boyfriend. She hasn't turned in all her work this semester. Sometimes I leave the school here around 4:00 and I see her out there at the bus stop with her boyfriend. And I think that if he was asking her to go places, things that would keep her from doing her homework, I think she would do it. She's getting a B this marking period. She's not getting straight As like last report period.

In reality, Clarissa's time with her boyfriend was limited to the brief time she spent waiting for the public bus to take her from school to her home because her parents closely monitored her time and activities during after-school hours.

As the nine focal girls in this study came in contact with their teachers, images of Puerto Rican girls that centered on their sexuality remained prominent even when girls seemed to defy stereotyped representations. For instance, as Mr. Riley discussed several Puerto Rican girls in his class, the power of prefabricated images in shaping how he thought of

Puerto Rican girls was evident. In the statement below, controlling images focusing on Puerto Rican girls' sexuality remained prominent in Mr. Riley's discussion about Daisy and Julia, another Puerto Rican girl in Daisy's class. He said:

I see Daisy as having a strong family behind her. I don't know. I've never delved into it. But she seems to be all school. She does well. Whatever needs to get done, Daisy does. Now Julia started out that way but now is gone backwards. And I think it's a stronger interest in boys. . . . But Daisy, it seems that she's ready, she's on the ball, she's ready to go. I don't know anything other than what I see. She's very quiet. She may have a 20-year old boyfriend though.

In this statement, Daisy was described as a good student and compared to another girl who was doing well but had "gone backwards." The teacher speculated that Julia's declining performance in school was perhaps due to her stronger interest in boys. Being interested in boys was thus constructed as derailing girls from their progress in school. In describing Daisy, the assumptions and images that Mr. Riley held of Puerto Rican girls were also obvious. hooks (1992) reminds us that stereotypes are powerful because they serve as false representations that "stand for what is real" and distort the realities that we create about particular individuals and groups of people. Although Mr. Riley had not "seen" any evidence, he felt compelled to mention the possibility that Daisy may have had an older boyfriend, thus relying on a stereotyped image to construct her reality.

In presenting the contrast between what teachers saw in Puerto Rican girls and what was actually there to be seen, I acknowledge that there were partial truths in what the teachers discussed. For instance, the girls were concerned about their appearance and were interested in their romantic relationships. In seventh grade, Beatriz said, "Trust me, I've had a lot of boyfriends." She also found ways to make boys and relationships the center of conversations during our group discussions. However, although the girls may have been complicit in perpetuating stereotypes, representations that dichotomized aspects of their identity against their schooling interests did not capture the complexity of how their identity influenced schooling.

The Impact of Controlling Images: Miss America on Display

Controlling images of Puerto Rican girls at JMS shaped the interactions they experienced with teachers as well as the roles that they were cast into as female students in school. Controlling images thus acted as double-edged swords, serving as tools to chide girls for behaviors that purportedly fit negative images while also allowing girls to cast themselves or be cast into restricted roles based on those images. To illustrate how the image of the hypersexual girl influenced what was emphasized in interactions with or about Puerto Rican girls, I narrate two experiences

involving Beatriz. These two incidents illustrate the power of controlling images in shaping how events are interpreted and what is given prominence in the educational experiences of Puerto Rican girls.

The following is a description of an interaction between Beatriz and her seventh grade geography teacher:

The class begins with Ms. Russell taking roll and giving instructions for the day. In the middle of giving these instructions, Ms. Russell turns her attention to Beatriz and says, "Beatriz, you're chewing gum, put that away." Beatriz replies, "But Ms. [Russell], everyone else is chewing gum." Ms. Russell seems to be angered by the remark and addresses the following loud remarks at Beatriz, "But you're not everybody else, do as I told you to do. I can't wait to talk to your mom tomorrow so I can tell her what your grade is. You're always chewing gum, combing your hair and putting make up on as if you're Miss America. Well I have news for you the Miss America pageant isn't here." When Ms. Russell is finished, Beatriz seems angry, indignant. She turns around to me and says, "Did you see that, everyone else was chewing gum but she had to pick on me. I've never put on makeup in her class. . . . She shouldn't have said that."

The image that Ms. Russell had of Beatriz as a girl primarily concerned with her appearance, led the teacher to discuss Beatriz' supposed concern with her looks in an incident that was clearly about another issue. Beatriz was guilty of chewing gum and of attempting to diffuse the teacher's command by focusing on what other students were doing. However, she did not have a hairbrush, mirror, or make-up in sight. Ms. Russell linked Beatriz' gum chewing with "Miss America"-like behaviors centered on Beatriz' appearance. Furthermore, in this short interaction Ms. Russell attributed Beatriz' inconsistent school performance to her preoccupation with her appearance. This incident illustrates how characteristics attributed to Puerto Rican girls can influence daily interactions at school and affect issues that are considered when addressing these girls' educational needs.

The second incident, a Memorial Day assembly during the girls' eighth grade year, shows how controlling images also contribute to the roles girls take on that perpetuate those images. In this assembly, beliefs of girls as sexual objects were reified as girls were on display for the admiration of an audience. Ironically, while Beatriz was chided for her supposed "Miss America" behaviors in one class, her participation in an assembly that perpetuated stereotypes was condoned within the school setting. The following fieldnotes capture the tone and content of the assembly in which Beatriz participated:

The assembly began with a very short reading from a girl explaining the reasons for celebrating Memorial Day. Primarily, the assembly was a dancing and modeling show showcasing a group of African American, White, and Latina girls in front of an audience of students and teachers. Connections to the Memorial Day holiday were made by having the girls wear red, white, and

blue outfits and dance or model to music focusing on the themes of heroism or patriotism. Beatriz was in the modeling show. She had on a tight, long, blue gown that glittered under the lights. It was sleeveless with a long slit coming up one leg. She wore matching high heels. Other girls had similar dresses or wore capri pants with tight-fitting shirts. Beatriz smiled and waved to her friends as she modeled down the auditorium aisle with a group of girls. Students hollered, hooted, and cheered for girls as they came down the aisle.

Although teachers planned and conducted this assembly with good intentions, some of the messages communicated by the content of the assembly, as well as what was absent from the assembly, were troubling and served to reinforce one-dimensional images of girls. The dances were well choreographed, rehearsed, and performed but the appropriateness of the performances for the purpose of the show (to commemorate the Memorial Day holiday) seemed elusive.

In the context of this school assembly, powerful lessons were communicated to students about girls' sexuality. Furthermore, the absence of other means of communicating at the assembly (writing, speaking, and expression through art media) promoted a limiting image of both girls and boys at the school. The girls played limited roles that mimicked the ways men and women are often portrayed in popular culture, yet those roles went without critique within the school setting. The girls in the show were clearly on display, visible as physical objects to be admired. The boys, on the other hand, primarily filled the role of audience members, consuming the image provided as entertainment. In this way, stereotypes about the role and function of these emerging young women were perpetuated and left unexamined.

Several teachers at the school held similar concerns about the content and tone of the assembly. Ms. Simms, for instance, spoke to me during the assembly, saying, "You know, this is exploiting these girls. What kind of message is this giving to them. . . . This is like a bachelorette party, that's all it is. It's a girly show, I can't believe it." She also stated that other teachers felt the same way and were especially frustrated when they realized that the girls had been kept out of class to practice for a show that teachers felt held little educational value. The responses to this incident provide an example of the contradictions and complexities inherent in resistance efforts for individuals who experience oppression along the intersectionalities of identity characteristics. First, it is interesting to note that Ms. Simms, a teacher who described Puerto Rican girls as "oozing with sexuality," was clearly able to see the ways that this assembly exploited girls along gender lines. As a white woman, she could perhaps relate to the oppressive images of girls perpetuated in this assembly, even though she could not yet see the ways that ethnic stereotypes were evident in her description of Puerto Rican girls. Thus, resistance for girls of color may necessitate a careful awareness of how identity characteristics operate in intersecting ways to influence their experience in school. The response to the assembly also shows the need for breaking

silence as a necessary component of resistance (Collins 1998). Although some teachers felt that girls were exploited through this assembly, the images and experiences that objectified the girls were not publicly challenged.

Talking Back to Images: "It Ain't Only Rican Girls"

In the preceding sections, I have attended to the ways Puerto Rican girls were represented at JMS by their teachers. In this section, I explore how the Puerto Rican girls exerted their own agency in both creating and undoing prevalent images about what it meant to be a female Puerto Rican student at JMS. The notion of "talking back" as a gesture that heals and an act that creates spaces for new possibilities in individuals' lives (hooks 1989), frames the presentation of data in this section.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. [hooks 1989:9]

I do not claim that the girls' conversations were acts of resistance that empowered them or liberated them against the power of oppressive images. Indeed, there were times that the girls seemed to be "talking to or talking with" images as they participated in internalizing and sometimes perpetuating stereotypes about themselves or other females. However, I frame their conversations as moments that offer possibilities for engaging in conversations that "talk back" to images and daily realities that constrain their potential and ability to meet the goals they set for their lives.

One difference between teachers' descriptions of girls and the girls' own descriptions of themselves was that the girls did not construct their interest in boys as being incompatible with other aspects of their identity or as lessening their interest in school. For instance, while Beatriz liked to talk about her relationships with boys, she also chose the words "smart," "active," and "talkative" to describe herself as a student. Beatriz' descriptions of herself, her assertion that "I actually want to learn in school," and her repeated conversations with me expressing interest in college, stood in contrast to the image cast by teachers of a "boy crazy" girl with little interest in learning.

Yanira also expressed that an interest in boys and an interest in school were not necessarily incompatible. She said, "I think about both [boys and school]. I'm not going to quit school because I'm with a boy." When the girls spoke of distractions or barriers to engaging in school and becoming an educated girl, they spoke more of contextual factors such as disruptive students, their ability to meet academic demands, substitute teachers whom they viewed as incompetent, limited relationships

between them and their teachers, lack of resources at their school, and socioeconomic factors that might impede their attainment of educational goals. These alternative explanations of barriers to school success centered more on institutional mechanisms than the girls' interest and interactions with boys.

The girls also "talked back" to the images created about them when I gave them the opportunity to respond to emerging data themes. The girls' discussions about their sexuality and their responses to teachers' concerns about their sexuality showed the girls' efforts at resisting images that did not fully capture their own female identity constructions. In their responses, the girls indignantly talked back about the erroneous nature of making generalizations across entire ethnic groups. For instance, Daisy and Beatriz had the following conversations concerning the physical appearance of the girls at their school:

- Beatriz:** OK, you see a lot of white girls with a lot of make-up on. A lot of hoochey clothes.³ A lot of Asian girls, you see a lot of Asian girls with a lot of hoochey clothes.
- Daisy:** And the *morenas* [black girls] too.
- B:** Yeah and a lot of make-up on. Come on now, it ain't only Rican girls. It's everybody, every chick does it.

Additionally, Glenda countered the notion that Puerto Rican girls were more sexually aggressive than other girls by describing the behavior of Mindy, a white girl in her class. She said, "Look at Mindy. She got this [guy's] number when we were on our [field] trip. And she was sitting with her leg halfway around him." Similarly, Yanira expressed her frustration of being seen in a degrading way while at the same time projecting the stereotype she resisted onto another group:

- Yanira:** I'm tired of these people saying that we're thugs and stuff and the girls are like hoes [whores] because they wear little shorts. If they don't like it, oh well. You could be Puerto Rican and wear whatever. White people, I think they're hoes, straight up.
- Rosalie:** What does it mean to be a hoe?
- Y:** They're fast. Like I have some white friends, they be having mad boys in their house.

In contrast to the links that teachers made between Puerto Rican girls' culture, their identities as females, and their style of dress, the girls expressed that a sexualized representation through style of dress was not necessarily unique to Puerto Rican culture and depended more on a girls' individual personality, preferences, or interests. In the quote below, Clarissa explained how a girl's style of dress was more dependent on the "character" of individual girls:

I think [the way they dress] depends on the person, like on their character. If they're like a tomboy, they'll dress like a boy and stuff. They may have different ways. So basically all the [Puerto Rican] girls don't dress the same.

The girls were quick to refute ethnic stereotypes about Puerto Rican females. However, the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class framed the consequences of appropriation or resistance to prescribed identities. Thus, talking back could simultaneously make girls complicit in creating images that they also sought to resist. For example, while the girls showed resistance in their claims that the domain of "hoochey" dressing was not exclusive to Puerto Rican culture, they did not challenge the label "hoochey" or the objectification of women's bodies as objects to be displayed. In another example, as Beatriz and Daisy countered the notion that they represented themselves in a way that would attract older boys, Beatriz affirmed her individual desires while also treating her body parts as objects to show off:

- B: I don't want to attract older boys. I want to be me. I want to dress the way I want to dress. I don't want to be like nobody. I want to wear what I want to wear. If I got the top part (she holds her breasts up with her hands), I'm going to show it.
- D: Well, I dress like this because I think it looks nice. I'm not trying to impress anybody.
- B: Exactly, you want to look nice. You want to look good. For yourself.

Weiler's (1988) feminist claim, that as individuals seek to resist oppression their efforts can actually lead to deeper forms of domination and to the oppression of others, is relevant to this analysis. Although the girls may have resisted constraining images based on their ethnicity, the power of this resistance was still limited because it did not address or challenge oppression along gender lines. While this critique was absent in the ways the girls talked of how they differed from girls of different ethnicities, the girls did address their gendered treatment when they spoke of their experiences with sexual harassment at JMS.

The girls' responses to sexual harassment at their school illustrated both their positions as victims as well as their resistance to being cast or treated as victims. Maria highlighted this complexity as she explained the damaging effect of sexual harassment while also explaining her feisty response to being verbally harassed:

I think it brings us [girls] down. It just makes us want to hurt them [boys] more. It's like, look you call me that, watch how fast I punch you. Like they were sitting in the class today talking about me, that I had sex and stuff, and I didn't. So, I turn around and go pop, pop, pop (she makes a punching motion with her hand) right on his head. And I kept calling him stupid cause he was saying that I was having sex.

Beatriz' and Yanira's responses to boys who physically harassed them were similar. Beatriz said, "Well first, if they mess with my ass; pop (makes punching motion). Randy, he pinched my butt and I smacked him right in his face." Yanira used a physically aggressive response to counter harassment while also enlisting the support of school authorities

in holding the boy accountable for his aggressions. She said, "Last year they used to touch me a lot. I beat them up. The last time I got some boy suspended."

The responses of girls to the images cast about them and to their experiences with sexual harassment serve to highlight ways that girls countered oppressive representations and actions against their female selves. While Puerto Rican girls' resistance efforts are constrained by the power dynamics inherent in the dialectics of teacher–student and male–female relationships, their lives show the complex ways in which structure and agency interact and create both reproduction of inequalities and possibilities for resisting that reproduction.

Conclusions and Implications

Theoretical frames echoed in schools for conceptualizing the relationship between identity and school achievement have important implications for how the academic interests and needs of students are perceived and how their school achievement is analyzed, explained, and addressed. This study illustrates that relying on frameworks that essentialize identity can divert attention from other issues that need to be addressed to improve the education of Puerto Rican girls. Consequently, the undereducation of a large percentage of Puerto Rican girls can be normalized when stereotyped controlling images are not challenged and resisted within school sites.

In discussing the power of controlling images in the lives of black women, Collins (1991:67–68) writes that "controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power. These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life." At JMS, the stereotypical image of the hypersexual Puerto Rican girl powerfully seduced teachers' understandings of the messy intersections between identity characteristics and the schooling experiences of Puerto Rican girls. A focus on the incompatibility of Puerto Rican girls' sexuality with their school interests placed the onus of responsibility for success and failure on the girls and the way their sexuality was a "problem" leading to school failure.

Beatriz and the nine focal girls in this study attempted to enact identities that responded to multiple aspects of their lives and the roles they played as Puerto Rican, low-income, female students. However, it was also clear that the school context, and the images created therein, mattered in defining who these Puerto Rican girls were, what their schooling experiences entailed, and how their educational needs were discussed. Students do not merely come to school with neatly packaged and predetermined identities that can be sorted along ethnic, class, or gender lines. Instead, identities are constantly under co-construction and respond to images created by self and others within particular

school sites. This is an argument made by other scholars and illustrated with studies of students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (Conchas 2001; Espinoza-Herold 2003; Flores-González 2002; Goto 1997; Hemmings 1996; Katz 1999; Mehan et al. 1996; Mirón and Lauria 1998; Valenzuela 1999; Yon 2000). I contribute further to this literature through a feminist analysis that shows how the identities of Puerto Rican girls are culturally produced and then affirmed, appropriated, or resisted within a school site.

There are no simple explanations for what it means to be a Puerto Rican girl in U.S. schools or for how the educational needs of Puerto Rican girls should be addressed. However, one of the major implications of this work is that we need to engage both students and teachers in inquiries that allow them to examine how race/ethnicity, gender, and social class have operated and continue to operate in the lives of individuals to create certain identity representations and stereotypes that individuals embrace or resist. Oftentimes, professional development for teachers has focused on giving teachers formulaic recipes to describe who particular groups of students are and how to address their educational needs. However, this approach to professional development denies the contextualized way that identities are co-constructed over time within webs of relationships. Espinoza-Herold (2003:145) reminds us that to understand school success or failure "teachers must reflect on their own images of minority students' identities."

Teachers in all subject areas should be encouraged to engage in inquiry activities with students to examine how different aspects of identities are affirmed, rejected, stereotyped, and normalized across history and in different contexts. These explorations across curriculum areas can open the door for conducting similar examinations within the multiple worlds that students must navigate. Subsequently, both teachers and students can aim to understand their complicity in producing images and representations and strive to imagine new possibilities for how to do schooling together in a way that resists both (mis)representations and the educational inequality they can engender. In the context of this study, taking on these issues might mean that teachers and schools explore how they might address issues of sexuality while also encouraging the intellectual development of all girls. Dichotomizing the sexuality of students against their intellectual development fails to acknowledge the crucial role that both of these areas play in adolescents' development. Attending to these issues would also mean exploring how race/ethnicity and social class impact (mis)constructions of who and what is sexual and intellectual, both across content areas (e.g., history, literature) and in the particular lives and circumstances of students.

Currently, there is a strong move toward standardizing educational reforms, policies, and practices. This study and the implications it raises reveal the importance of attending to the context-specific nuances and details that ethnographic research highlights. Ethnographic methods

were especially beneficial in this case because they opened a window to observe the complexity of schooling for Puerto Rican girls through a contextualized view of what they did and said, and what was said about them. As Del Castillo, Frederickson, McKenna, and Ortiz (1988:14) state, "There exists a need to augment survey data with extensive ethnographic research in order to fully describe the supportive and detrimental patterns of interaction which occur between Hispanic females and school structures." Furthermore, Wortham (2002) reminds us that ethnography should often precede policy because it can reveal the contextualized and particular configurations that shape the needs, aspirations, and beliefs of Latino/a youngsters in varied settings. The agency of schools, students, teachers, policy makers, and researchers in co-creating identities with Puerto Rican girls that resist reproduction of inequality along race/ethnic, class, and gender lines can only be improved when studies, policies, and practices interrogate the ways that particular contexts and the actions and beliefs of individuals within those contexts impact schooling for all students.

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Notes

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1. Names of school, students, and teachers are pseudonyms.
2. The term *Boricua* is often used by Puerto Ricans to identify their ethnicity and land of origin. The term is derived from the word *Boriquén*, the name given to Puerto Rico by the Taíno Indians, the island's original inhabitants.
3. *Hoochey* is a contemporary slang term used to refer to a sexually suggestive individual or sexually suggestive style of dress.

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