A casual observer walking along Paseo Boricua could easily conclude that Puerto Ricans are a people attached (clinging?) to their culture. The steel flags that mark the beginning of the business district, the restaurants serving Puerto Rican food, the art and cultural displays, and the music festivals affirm and celebrate Puerto Rican culture and identity. But what underlies these affective and symbolic displays of cultural pride? How does “culture” function in a place like Paseo and more broadly in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods of Chicago? How do community organizations like The Puerto Rican Agenda deploy notions of culture to articulate a class-based, multiracial and pan-ethnic political agenda in the city?

In this section of the report, we seek to analyze the significance of Puerto Rican culture and identity in current community struggles and in the ideological workings of the Puerto Rican Agenda. Briefly, culture functions as a kind of social glue, and, further, it drives the formation of an economic enclave. Culture is also a political line of defense that helps establish one’s presence in the city. It also functions as a form of rescue, a rescue of self and the rescue of a community.

An important myth must be dispelled here. Puerto Ricans do not carry “their culture” from the Island intact, unchangeable, unaltered and transplant it to Chicago. Instead, Puerto Rican culture, symbols, and language have been invented and reinvented, produced and (re)produced in order to answer the changing needs of a people. Culture is not fixed; it is not a thing; it is improvised; its beingness, so to speak, occurs in our interactions with others. For example, Puerto Rican youth during the focus groups became animated when talking about Puerto Rican culture. In particular the youth said that the future of culture is complex: here “Puerto Ricanness” plays with “Mexicanness” but also with “African-Americanness” and “Whiteness.” It is in this sense that culture and identity are improvised and (re)constructed again and again.

One can see all this at work along Paseo and in the immediate neighborhoods of Humboldt Park. Culture is constructed daily in small interactions between people and through the recreation of perceived traditions. Even the menus of restaurants negotiate both tradition and improvisation, and musically bomba runs alongside rap. Up and down Paseo the markers of preceding ethnic groups have, for the most part, disappeared (but, most tellingly, not the German architecture of the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture). Paseo’s physical landscape, then, is also an improvisation where the island’s social iconography and architecture mixes with Chicago’s vernacular architecture. The same came be said of the cultural festivals along Paseo: these are specific responses that produce, reproduce, and maintain old and new cultural traditions. Also these festivals, by attracting large crowds, inject significant amounts of capital into local businesses.
In multiple ways, then, culture addresses the fragile conditions of a community, for underneath the celebrations there is a sense of possible disappearance: economic diminishment, social disappearance, the loss of affordable housing, and so on. Perhaps culture as a politics bears a heavier burden in Chicago than on the island itself, for here it faces disappearance in a more visceral way.

Puerto Rican culture and identity also play an important role in the workings of the Puerto Rican Agenda as a community institution. Since its inception a decade ago, members of the Puerto Rican Agenda have deployed what we call in this report a strategic conception of Puerto Rican culture. In this context, “strategic” means the use of culture and its many signifiers in order to accomplish specific political goals focused on the well being of a community. For over a decade, members of the Puerto Rican Agenda have come together every month to shape a politics that addresses class disparities. They know that culture and identity are powerful devices for organizing such a politics, but they are also engaged in an ongoing critical assessment of self (or group) in relationship to others. Evidence of this can be seen in the conversations among members concerning ongoing relations with the growing Latino nationalities present in the Humboldt Park area and the long-term and carefully nurtured relationship with the Mexican American and African American communities.

A strategic deployment is aware of the dangers of using Puerto Rican culture reduced to a whimsical notion of solidarity such as the mancha de platano (stain of plantains) in order to shape political action. At the highest level of abstraction, a strategic deployment of culture is aware of the necessity to “be-with” and not “separate-from” the other. In sum, it represents an ethical commitment to the retelling of histories that are inclusive of marginalized groups. This ethical commitment seeks to engage nationality and pan-ethnicity to build more expansive notions of belonging and social justice. Underlying this social justice ethic is the necessity for respect and forgiveness between individuals and groups.

To be sure, the use of culture as a political device was already well established in Puerto Rican experience long before the arrival of the first Chicago migrants, for culture often comes into being when defending one’s interests against a colonizer. So, when Puerto Ricans began arriving to Chicago, their initial renditions of culture had already been shaped by their experiences on the island. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, informants explained that the initial renditions of cultural pride were private, passed from family to family, and intimate. In time, however, the experiences of housing and
job discrimination, displacement, and gentrification forged a critical awareness of injustice that, when melded to the politicization of the 1960s, was cathartic for some community members and leaders. Puerto Rican culture and the indignities of being treated poorly because “you are Puerto Rican” became one of the few political devices available to make demands to educational institutions, city hall, and the state. Puerto Rican culture and identity, then, became a means for organizing protest. As we mentioned in the education section, parents organized to demand bilingual programs and to gain some control over the educational experiences of their children. When educational institutions failed, community groups formed their own schools such as the Pedro Albizu Campos High School with a curriculum and pedagogy devoted to understanding culture, history, and marginalization through a strategic lens. There is evidence that the experiences in Chicago, New York City, and New Jersey (in the work of the Young Lords for instance) jumped the Caribbean and renewed the political actions on the island as well.

In Chicago the problems of job and educational discrimination, marginalization, and gentrification were pivotal for shaping a culture-based politics. As Division Street and Humboldt Park became linked to a new Puerto Rican space, organizations emerged with the expressed purpose of solidifying a community area. These organizations helped in the reinventing of Puerto Rican culture as a collective-community asset, or cultural capital. Some of the organizations featured in this report endured and have become part of the economic, social, and political infrastructure for Puerto Ricans in Chicago.

At this moment in time, the idea of cultural citizenship resonates in the community as a way to continue to connect culture and political struggle. As organic intellectuals, Puerto Rican Agenda members are currently articulating an expansion of this term. “Cultural citizenship” was first articulated by a group of Latino scholars. One of the central questions asked is this: If international law sanctions legal citizenship, can the idea of cultural citizenship be used as a political counter to shift our very understanding of what it means to be legal? Cultural citizenship claims that there are forms of belonging that legal citizenship cannot account for. If a three year old is brought over without papers and grows up on the streets of Chicago, is that person at the very least a cultural citizen though not a legal citizen? The courts, of course, would disagree that cultural citizenship has legal standing, and yet these forms of belonging motivated millions of immigrant rights marchers all across the country starting in 2006.

Since then and because of the work of well placed Puerto Ricans, including members of the Agenda such as Congressman Luis Gutierrez, Washington’s central advocate for immigration reform, immigration itself has become squarely a Puerto Rican/Latino issue. The work of Puerto Rican pastors in Chicago and the offering of sanctuary to the now well known Elvira Arellano, a Mexican woman who resisted deportation with her son for almost a year at a small church located on Paseo, have also helped to consolidate a national, Latino political block interested in transforming immigration law.
At a deeper level the idea of cultural citizenship may be the most powerful strategic deployment of the idea of culture. Members of the Agenda have articulated a trans-hemispheric future in which the economic growth of Latin America coupled with the size of its populations will represent a coming transformation of North America. A trans-hemispheric regionalism has already taken its first baby steps via economic treaties, which, admittedly unfair to Latin Americans, point to the necessity of alliances in order to compete with other regional alliances. If economic flows are wedded to flows of people, new arrangements of citizenship that are not so firmly locked into the nation-state form may have to be invented. Puerto Ricans have always been experimented upon. Even their citizenship has been a strange experiment. Their voices and experiences should have a special place as these newer, larger forms of integration take shape. Although cultural citizenship in the eyes of the law is a “mere” metaphor—that is, an aspirational politics whose struggles may never be realized—what is revealed here is that organic intellectuals can shape it into a tool to fight for a future.

In sum, culture in many of its strategic deployments sometimes performs a kind of rescue of the self—if the self feels poor or less than valued—or a rescue of the community or of a cause if it feels it is being washed away. In the end, culture may be unfixed, elusive, constantly improvising, but when it gets strategically deployed in these economic, political, and symbolic ways, it begins to establish presence, a fragile presence perhaps, but presence as a form of power.

“I recently married into a Mexican family and within that family there are other marriages between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. When you start to realize that generations after the first migrations—connectedness, us protecting one another, accepting one another. This is part of the Latino experience in America, that we respect and love our origins, but we also acknowledge and appreciate the commonalities between our cultures. I take my nieces and nephews to the Mexican Institute and then I bring them to IPRAC. They’re Mexican and they say, ‘I got a Puerto Rican tio who taught me a lot about Puerto Rico,” and then you have to acknowledge the American culture in us over the last 100 years.”

(Agenda Focus Group)
Puerto Ricans in Chicago celebrate two major cultural events:

**FIESTAS PUERTORRIQUEÑAS / PUERTO RICAN PARADE**

The Puerto Rican Parade has been an annual event in Chicago since 1965 and the Fiestas Puertorriqueñas has been celebrated since 1982. Fiestas Puertorriqueñas, 4-6 days of entertainment in Humboldt Park, has become Chicago’s second largest festival and the largest Latino festival in the Midwest. Approximately 1.5 million people participate in these two annual events, held in mid-June.

**Fiesta Boricua / Bandera a Bandera**

Fiesta Boricua has been celebrated on Paseo Boricua since 1993. This festival, also known as “Bandera a Bandera” (Flag-to-Flag) is held between two forty-five ton steel Puerto Rican flags that are each fifty-nine feet tall. The festival attracts approximately 250,000 attendees per year. The celebration takes place every September.

**The Puerto Rican community in Chicago is home to numerous Puerto Rican cultural institutions.**

This report highlights the following:

**PUERTO RICAN ARTS ALLIANCE (PRAA)**

Since its inception in 1998, the mission of the PRAA has been to increase awareness and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans through music, dance, visual arts, and theater. Their progressive programming provides underserved urban youth with the opportunity to learn about artistic expression. PRAA promotes the sustainability of the community by creating a space where artists, youth, and families can come together to experience their heritage.

**SEGUNDO RUIZ BELVIS CULTURAL CENTER (SRBCC)**

SRBCC, founded in 1971, is the oldest Puerto Rican cultural center in Chicago. SRBCC’s program celebrates the African heritage of Puerto Ricans through music, dance, and performing arts in addition to fostering cultural awareness, creative expression, leadership, and educational opportunities.
Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC)

Since 1973, the PRCC has been promoting Puerto Rican/Latino cultural expression as a means to empower and create solidarity within the Latino community. The PRCC engages in art, poetry, and music that speak of issues that afflict poor communities such as drug addiction, domestic violence, gentrification, HIV/AIDS, etc. Among their many initiatives are: La Voz del Paseo Boricua, a free bilingual alternative newspaper; Café Teatro Batey Urbano a space for youth arts and development; Vida/SIDA, an HIV/AIDS awareness center; Pedro Albizu Campos High School, an alternative public high school; CO-OP Humboldt Park, which includes a Homegrown Farmer’s Market; and others.

Institute of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture (IPRAC)

One of the major accomplishments of the Puerto Rican Agenda leaders is IPRAC. Established in 2001, it is the only museum in the United States dedicated to the history, arts, and culture of the Puerto Rican diaspora. On February 8, 2012, IPRAC was designated by the Chicago Park District as a Museum-in-the-Park and recognized as a valuable cultural asset of the City of Chicago. IPRAC offers a variety of programming, including visual arts, film, literature, performing arts, cultural celebrations, and educational workshops.

These major events and cultural institutions represent a unique opportunity to connect Puerto Ricans who live in the Chicago Metro Area. A survey conducted for this research project demonstrated that the majority of Puerto Ricans who visit Humboldt Park during festivals identify the area as the Puerto Rican cultural hub, and about 90% of the participants in the survey were satisfied with the cultural activities and events that the area had to offer. The survey showed that cultural activities received the highest levels of satisfaction when compared to housing, social services, jobs, etc.

These results are not surprising given that 10% of all of the organizations in Humboldt Park have a focus on arts and cultural programs geared toward the Puerto Rican population (National Center for Charitable Organizations 2009 database). Many community leaders believe that all of these organizations have been successful, not only in promoting culture, but also in serving as an economic engine for the community by encouraging visitors to support local businesses and other services. Together, in 2010, IPRAC, PRCC, PRAA, and SRBCC captured about $2.5 million in revenue and held a total net worth of about $12.3 million in assets (National Center for Charitable Organizations 2010 database). Nonetheless, to achieve and sustain such prosperity, these institutions are constantly engaged in the game of finding funding resources. Again, here is another sign of the juxtaposition of strength alongside fragility.

Batey Urbano anti-violence campaign, 2003

Maestro Antonio Martorell describes his exhibit at IPRAC to Mayor Rahm Emanuel, 2012