

“RATCHET OF THE EARTH”: Using Black Feminisms and Chicana Methodologies to Understand Brown Youth Resistance in Schools

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Abstract: *This study examines the acts of resistance used by elementary-aged Brown youth in a Title I school through Black and Chicana feminist lenses. Inspired by the theorizations of Black feminist scholars around the concept of “ratchet” as a form of resistance (Brown and Young 2015; Cooper 2012; Lindsey 2012), we examine the Chicana/x and Latina/x youths’ use of this word to draw parallels and mark distinctions as a means of understanding and complicating Brown youth resistance. We move from Lindsey’s (2012) discussion of “ratchet” as a reflection of Fanon’s larger thesis in *Wretched of the Earth* (2004) and make parallels to the oppressive experiences felt by young Brown people today. We engage the discourse of “ratchet,” a term used by our students, to understand the multiple and complex ways that these youth recreate, embody, and perform resistance. We designed our study using a Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal 1998) as well as methods, engaging in pláticas with predominantly Chicana/x youth who were a part of a year-long after school Introduction to Chicana/x Studies class we taught. In this study, we illustrate the nuances of understanding how and why young Brown people take up ratchet and other subjectivities and rhetoric, particularly within schools. We argue that Black and Brown youth are viewed as the “Ratchet of the Earth” because of the multiple oppressions they experience as a result of their race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and age (Lindsey 2012). We offer that despite the ways in which they are socially constructed, Brown youth engage in various forms of resistance against the systems that strip them of their humanity. The implications of our research are that critical educators must open themselves to the varied subject positions that their students bring with them into the classroom, including subject positions that are traditionally constructed as negative or maladaptive. In doing so, educators may be able to use these subject positions in ways that recognize the embodied knowledges of youth of color.*

Key Words: *Black feminisms, Brown youth, Chicana feminisms, ratchet, resistance, schools*

Sylvia: "How are the teachers with you?"

Frida: "I feel like they hate me."

Cherrie: "I feel like they hate me too."

Sylvia: "Which ones?"

Frida: "Ms. Brewer was passing papers and she gives them to everyone all nice and she throws mine to me. I was like, 'no, bitch. Do that again.'"

Cherrie: "She almost threw a marker at me!"

Socorro: "On purpose?"

Cherrie: "She was across the room and I was right there [points]. I was talking and so the garbage can was right next to me, and she threw it. But she didn't make it. And she's not supposed to throw things. At anybody!"

Frida: [joking] "But when I threw scissors at her she got mad?"
[all laugh]

Frida: "Just kidding."

Socorro: "I know when y'all did the presentation on sluffing¹ you talked a lot about teachers and classes and if teachers were nicer to you, you'd like it [school] more."

Cherrie: “Yea.”

Frida: “Cuz I feel like they don’t—like they look at you in a way that they don’t like you. When she [Brewer] looks at me I feel like—like some teachers, like the teachers I don’t know well, they don’t even say hi or nothing. Well . . . some do. But Ms. Brewer, she looks at you weird—como si no te quiere.”

We share the above narrative to provide a glimpse into how Chicana/x and Latina/x² elementary students interpreted interactions with their sixth-grade teacher as signifying that she does not care about them. Basic school rules that they must abide by, such as “be respectful” or do not throw objects, do not seem to apply to the teacher, and when the teacher breaks these rules, these students understand her behavior as motivated by dislike, or, as Frida puts it, “como si no te quiere.”

For the fifth- and sixth-grade Chicana/x and Latina/x youth participants enrolled in the after-school Introduction to Chicana/x Studies class we taught, the experiences they shared with us, like the one provided above, reminded us of the realities of contemporary schooling institutions for Black and Brown students. The youth regularly described feeling like their teachers did not care about them and viewed them in deficit ways. Their stories reminded us of the work of Black and Chicana feminist scholars who have written extensively on the ways in which Black and Brown bodies are marked by a history of colonization and the impact of this resulting racial hierarchy at the institutional level, especially in schools. The youth shared their forms of resistance to their mistreatment in schools, adopting a self-described “ratchet” subject position to make it known to their teachers

they challenged the deficit views they held of them and defied this mistreatment.

The work of Lindsey (2012) and other Black feminist scholars became central to this research then, as Black feminists have theorized the use of “ratchet” as a form of resistance for Black women who have been subjected to a history of respectability politics, or Eurocentric norms and standards of behavior meant to control Black people after Jim Crow. In her 2012 conference paper, Lindsey links “ratchet” to Frantz Fanon’s seminal book *Wretched of the Earth* (2004) to highlight the process of racialization that has existed across the globe that marks Black bodies as “Other” and to highlight how Black women have resisted this racialized and gendered oppression. Lindsey offers that “ratchet” serves as a form of expression that is free from the constraints of respectability politics, thus creating the space for Black women to express themselves apart from the social constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality assigned to them through slavery and colonization.

We found it intriguing, then, to hear and watch these elementary-aged Brown youth engage in a similar (although most certainly divergent) process of resistance through a self-proclaimed ratchet subject position. In theorizing the use of ratchet by these youth, we applied Black and Chicana feminist epistemological lenses to conceptualize their forms of resistance. We do this with the recognition that the historical context for Black and Brown communities and their various forms of resistance both converge and diverge because of anti-blackness.³ We recognize ratchet as an explicitly Black oppositional politic that developed as a response to anti-blackness and reflects Black communities’ cultural practices and responses. While the Chicana/x and Latina/x students’ self-described ratchet subject positions illuminate the contemporary material realities and social conditions of Brown youth as a result

of colonialism, and helps identify some of the ways Chicana/x and Latina/x youth resist their oppression, we recognize that the experiences and histories of Chicana/x and Latina/x youth are different from Black youth in a white supremacist society and intend to explore anti-blackness in Chicana/x and Latina/x communities while moving towards imagining Brown and Black collaborative efforts in future research.⁴

We organize this essay first by briefly describing how US schools serve as one of the many institutions that reinscribe colonial thinking and logic, which in turn harms underserved students and students of color. From there, we transition to a discussion of how Lindsey and other Black feminist scholars conceptualize “ratchetness” in relationship to the social control of Black bodies. Next, we outline the *plática* methodology (Chabram-Dernersesian and de la Torre 2008; Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016; Gonzalez 2001) that largely informed our data collection and analysis process, as well as the work of Black feminists that helped us make sense our findings. We drew from Chicana feminisms to conceptualize our study, as this framing allowed us to view and treat students as complex human beings, especially by using the Chicana feminist methodology of *pláticas*. We outline our process of engaging this methodology with Chicana/x and Latina/x youth later in this manuscript, as well as discuss how this Chicana feminist approach shaped our analytic process. The students’ use of the word “ratchet” led us to the work of Black feminists whose work we honor in our discussion. Specifically, we draw connections between Lindsey’s work and the youth whom we describe as “ratchet of the earth” using three themes: 1) ratchet defined by youth, 2) young Brown youth as wretched, and 3) ratchet as agency and resistance—and corresponding examples derived from our yearlong study. Lastly, we end this essay with a discussion of the implications of understanding a ratchet subject position for educators who work with youth “on the margins” (Anzaldúa 2007).

Schools as Colonial Sites

Educational institutions, schools, and schooling as a whole within the United States have been plagued with racial/ethnic/class-based hierarchies, colonial practices, and assimilatory goals (Noguera 2012; Spring 2016). Though it can be argued that schools do not work for youth of color and marginalized communities, critical educators know that schools are working exactly as they should be (Alemán, Delgado Bernal and Mendoza 2013; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Rist 1973; Spring 1978). In other words, schools are inequitable by design, and students of color and low-income students are unsurprisingly subjected to substandard education. Given this colonial history and legacy, it comes as no surprise that schools in the present day follow these same patterns.

When thinking about how colonization has and continues to affect schools and schooling institutions, Calderón (2010) writes, “Education in the United States today is not merely a legacy of the colonial project—it is a functionary arm of colonialism that acts to absorb even progressive educational movements” (53). Thus, Calderón argues that schools engaging in “normative multicultural education” continue to center and uphold Western ideologies such as individualism and notions of linear histories as normative, unquestioned practices.

In understanding how schools are designed to uphold Eurocentric and Western values—thus placing White students as the norm—we recognize that on a daily basis, youth of color operate within these limiting ideological formations. This is particularly important given that some youth may spend more time at school than at home due to family work or other obligations. As such, they are consistently and constantly immersed in a system that places whiteness above all other ways of being. It is within this context that we situate the

lives of the youth whom we worked with, in trying to better understand how they navigated a whitestream (Matias 2016; Urrieta 2010) school within a contemporary setting.

“The Ratchet” as Resistance to Colonizing School Systems

In her presentation titled, “The End of Respectability: Black Feminism and Ratchet Politics,” Cooper (2012) provides a genealogy of the development of respectability politics within African American history, dating back to the nineteenth century. Once slaves were freed, Cooper offers, African Americans worked to develop strategies that would prevent any further discrimination, turning to a politics of respectability that would make themselves palatable to dominant white culture. This involved dressing and behaving in ways that conformed to and upheld white norms. This rhetoric of respectability has resurfaced throughout history, most notably in regard to the ways in which Black bodies dress and behave. Cooper references not only rhetoric, but actual policies created and enacted—such as those related to sagging pants, an oppositional aesthetic enacted by some young Black males that resists ideas of respectability. By sagging their pants, Cooper suggests that young Black males engage in a politics of the body, a literal “kiss my ass” in response to the historic and continued surveillance from systems that oppress African Americans, regardless of what they wear. In this way, Cooper argues there is a place for “the ratchet,” as ratchetness transgresses the boundaries of respectability and propriety.

In pop and youth culture circles, ratchet is a slang term that is understood as mostly derogatory. The 2012 song “Ratchet Girl Anthem,” highlighted by Brown and Young (2015), illustrates some of the behaviors of a ratchet. For example, the lyrics, “girl yes, I’m pregnant but I still hit the club (that’s right), in the middle of the floor with no shoes (what’s up),” equate ratchet behaviors

with the slang term “ghetto.” A ghetto girl, for example, goes to the club while pregnant. Citing rapper Hurricane Chris as mainstreaming the term in 2007, Brown and Young (2015) write, “ratchet has become a choice word for describing the indecent actions of a particular caliber of African Americans” (2). Hence, as mentioned in the song lyrics, going to the club while pregnant and without shoes on is ratchet.

Drawing from Sesali Bowen, Brown and Young (2015) use her definition of ratchet to encompass experiences that are specific to being low-income, of color, and darker-skinned in the United States, “[ratchet] has become the umbrella term for all things associated with the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices, witnessed or otherwise, of poor people; specifically, poor people of color, and more specifically poor women of color” (2–3). Thus, ratchet is a term that is understood as being tied to a positionality on the margins.

It is this understanding of ratchet that Lindsey (2012) aims to problematize in her research. Recognizing the ways in which ratchet has been applied, mostly to working class Black women, and has been made into spectacle for consumption via reality television, Lindsey (2012) offers that serious engagement of the ratchet as resistance can reveal nuances and critiques of larger systems of oppression. Through engagement with the ratchet, Lindsey (2012) suggests that those relegated to the status of “wretched of the earth,” including poor Black folks and sex-positive Black women, are moved from object to subject by humanizing ratchetness and searching for the resistance and agency imbedded within. Through this approach, the ratchet is recognized as a site of pleasure, of resistance, and of creativity, as it represents other ways of being in the world. It also serves as a “fuck you” to a history of respectability politics that aims to control and thus stunt Black subjectivities and as such, is met with resistance by dominant culture for its refusal to behave or act right. Through Lindsey (2012),

Brown and Young (2015), and Cooper (2012), the ratchet is a site of resistance, innovation, and critique and is useful in understanding the oppositional behaviors of Black and Brown youth in schools.

“Ratchet Politics” as a Regular Practice of Schooling Institutions

Inverting traditional understandings of ratchet, Brown and Young (2015) argue that it is schooling institutions that engage in “ratchet” behavior, and not Black and Brown communities. In this way, they redefine “ratchet,” holding institutions accountable for their oppressive policies, arguing institutions engage in what they identify as “ratchet politics.” Ratchet politics include “. . . policies, structures, or institutions that promote and/or result in inequality, oppression, marginalization, and denies human beings his or her full humanity as a citizen or resident of a nation state” (Brown and Young 2015, 7). Schools enact ratchet politics daily by subjecting historically marginalized students to systematic mistreatment, including punishment measures that often do little to improve student behavior and academic engagement (From Fingerprint to Fingerprints 2014). Thus, it is ratchet politics and their respective institutions that are in need of reform, and not people of color.

We present Brown and Young’s “ratchet politics” (2012) to provide one way of reimagining a ratchet subject position. We further argue that Brown youth also offer their own reimagining of “ratchet” that is productive and useful, in that it takes to task institutional ratchet politics by resisting these systems. The following section describes a site with an example of these ratchet politics of Brown youth and our methods for studying it.

Study Context: The Youth and Plática Methodology

During the 2013–2014 school year, we codeveloped and coconstructed an Introduction to Chicana/x Studies after-school class, where we invited a

select group of fifth and sixth grade Chicana/x and Latina/x students who had the option of voluntarily participating. Our motive for developing this class came from a reflection of our respective schooling experiences, and how they would have been different if we had been introduced to Chicana/x Studies and Ethnic Studies earlier than college. We met with students twice a week after school for one hour during the fall semester, and for two hours on Saturday during the spring semester. Though the class number varied slightly throughout the year, we had a total of eleven students who identified as Chicana/x, Latina/x, Mexican, or Mexican-American.⁵

As part of the community-engaged partnership work in which we were involved at the time, we were both research assistants in a college awareness and preparatory program, *Adelante* (Delgado Bernal and Alemán 2017). In these roles, we developed relationships with our study participants over the course of several years. We came to know these students very well, including knowledge about their pop culture interests, personalities, and their family dynamics and obligations. Because we had long-standing relationships with the older students, we invited students from both the fifth-grade bilingual classroom and sixth-grade bilingual classroom. The majority of our participants were female and about half came from each grade level. At least one of them identified as Mormon, while the others who were religious at home were Catholic. All but one was considered low-income, since they qualified for free lunch. Many of them participated in other after-school activities, such as soccer, but also in the after-school program, where they waited for their family members to pick them up. Two were cousins. One had a father who had been in prison throughout the school year. At least three had family members who were deported or adjacent to deportation (e.g., police coming to their homes). One was himself undocumented. And one later (when the class was over) openly identified as bisexual.

The narratives that we share throughout this essay are derived from field notes, observations, and *pláticas* (Chabram-Dernersesian and de la Torre

2008; Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016; Gonzalez 2001). In particular, pláticas were a fitting methodological approach, given that we both draw largely from Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal 1998; Calderón et al. 2012) in our approach to research. As self-identified Chicanas who grew up low-income in the states of Texas and California (respectively), we embody the schooling experiences incumbent of our marginalized identities. At the same time, we recognize our privilege today as educated Chicanas who have our doctorates and are no longer living with the same conditions of our youth, no longer living in poverty and with limited means to transform the socioeconomic status of our families or ourselves. Though we used our positionality to connect with our students on some levels, we also had to check ourselves constantly and allow ourselves to be checked by students who understood that our life experiences in both of our respective contexts were still vastly different than their own.

Drawing from Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), we recognized how our pláticas with these youth were bi-directional and rooted in a holistic approach to working with young people who saw our conversations as healing. For this particular age group, they also took place in many informal settings, including in school hallways, on walks to the local Mexican market to grab food, and outside on the playground after school. It is also for this reason that many of these conversations were not captured through audio recordings.

A plática methodology allowed us to contextualize the oppositional behaviors of these youth, as we were able to discuss with them the motivations and intent behind particular behaviors, their desired outcome, or simply reflect on events of the day. A plática methodology helped to remove any immediate judgment about the youths' behaviors and served as an attempt to understand rather than police—a surveillance the youth expressed they felt non-stop throughout their

school day. It also recognized the youth as creators and holders of knowledge and experts of their own lives (Delgado Bernal 2001).

Further, while we collected our own observations and coded separately for our individual dissertation projects that centered on our work in the Introduction to Chicana/x Studies class, we also regularly engaged in pláticas with each other to reflect on the data we were collecting, to process our pedagogy in the classroom, to compare our interpretations of our interactions with the youth, and to check in on each other while engaging in this type of community-based praxis.

Pláticas then, not only served as our methodological approach, but also became a part of our analysis, contributing to a collaborative teaching and research process that is reflective of social justice work. Pláticas served as a tool for us to not only get to know the students on a deeper level through our conversations with them about their lives, but allowed us to process these conversations, with each other, and within the context of academia that values competition and individuality. Pláticas provided a way for us to engage in Chicana feminist praxis in seeking to challenge these notions of individuality and detachment from community present within higher education.⁶

While we never explicitly discussed Fanon and *Wretched of the Earth* with the students, we created our class around themes of humanity as theorized by Anzaldúa and other Chicana and Black feminist scholars (Anzaldúa 2007; Delgado Bernal 2001; Revilla 2004; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga and Flores Carmona 2012; Reza-López, Huerta Charles and Reyes 2014; Cruz 2001; de los Rios 2013; Lindsey 2012; Cooper 2012; Brown and Young 2015; Cohen 2004) that encouraged the students to self-reflect on their “being”—ontologically. In the class, the students were asked to complete a final digital presentation answering the question, “Who am I?” Our class pláticas throughout the school year were developed to help students reflect on this question, particularly

through the concepts of race/ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status. The next section highlights the findings of our research and how we use the work of Black feminist thinkers to theorize through the youths' conceptualization of ratchet in relationship to schools.

Ratchet of the Earth

In this section, we share parts of our data to illustrate how we conceptualize the experiences of our youth as “ratchet of the earth.” We have organized our data into three interrelated themes: ratchet defined by youth, young Brown youth as wretched, and ratchet as agency and resistance. Next, we share the discussions we had with our students on their understanding of the word ratchet, to give the reader a context for how they were thinking about this term.

Ratchet Defined by Youth

As the following two excerpts will show, students had multiple applications of ratchet—for themselves, for others, and for behaviors. Their use of ratchet was context-specific and as Brown and Young (2015) highlight, tied to a positionality of being low-income, of color, and for some of our students, being undocumented or having undocumented family members. Recognizing how others in society typically viewed them, our students demonstrated through their use of ratchet that they had an awareness of the liminal space their bodies occupied. In the plática below, we draw from one sixth grade student, Gael, who describes ratchet in relationship to style and dress, connecting it to ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and “being cool.” We specifically use the example of Gael because his “cool” and oftentimes “ratchet” behavior prompted others to follow his lead, including boys and girls.

Sylvia: “So for you to be ratchet is to have a lot of swag? How do you do that?”

Gael: "Just wearing hats."

Socorro: "Like, if I was wearing a hat am I ratchet?"

Gael: "No. 'Cuz it depends on what you wear."

Sylvia: "What do you wear?"

Gael: "Shorts, and, um, socks. Vans. Or you sag."

Sylvia: "And what does that tell people?"

Gael: "That they're not you, they're a different person.
So they're not like you."

Sylvia: "And why is that important?"

Gael: "Because if they try to copy your style they're gonna say, 'That kid is like copying.' They're gonna say, 'Oh now he looks ratchet.'"

Sylvia: "So it's a good thing to look ratchet?"

Gael: "Yea. Not always, but yea."

Sylvia: "What if somebody else said that you're ratchet—would it be the same thing?"

Gael: "No. 'Cuz they don't know me. . ."

Sylvia: "Aside from the clothes, how do you have to act to be ratchet?"

Gael: “Act like a man. Your shoulders like that [puts out chest] and walk like that . . . Some people say you have to have a girl.”

Socorro: “Like a girlfriend?”

Gael: “Yea. You gotta be [pauses]—even though you’re acting like a cool kid and stuff, trying to be all bad, you have to listen to your parents because something bad might happen to you.”

Gael acknowledges and describes what it means for him to embody a ratchet lifestyle and subjectivity. He connects ratchetness to race, class, gender, and sexuality. For Gael, ratchet is something to own, something that makes him masculine, cool, and as a result, dignified or powerful. Gael recognized that his social position and that of his parents, undocumented and low-income, does little to give him access to power and wealth. Performing a ratchet identity served as a way to dignify himself and be unique. For Gael, his manner of dress both resisted respectability politics, by purposefully sagging his pants and wearing hats, both against school code, while it also elevated his status with his peers as someone who is cool and “ratchet” (Cooper 2012).

The students frequently took issue with their school’s dress code and uniform policy, claiming that it stunted their ability to be self-expressive. It also made them feel as if they “were gangsters” because the dress code bans colors associated with local gangs, as well as “gang insignia.” In other words, the school assumed that if students could dress how they wanted, they would be tempted to or would dress in gang-related colors and clothing. Many schools in lower-income communities of color enforce uniform policies and the primary rationale is the same: ensuring that students are not mistaken for gang members. While the threat of physical violence is real in many communities, these types of dress

codes often reinforce the notion that students should have their clothing (and bodies) regulated to avert their potential (and likely) criminality. Despite and perhaps because of their low-income status, many of our students took pride in wearing clothes that they knew signaled wealth, such as original Jordans, Nikes, or other expensive clothing. Engaging in “ratchet” behavior, the sixth graders frequently packed a separate outfit in their backpacks that they would then wear when participating in after school activities, or if they left school grounds. This was their way of compromising with the school dress code but still resisting it when they were not participating during school hours.

Using ratchet in many ways, students differentiated between calling their friends ratchet, calling themselves ratchet, and someone else calling them ratchet. Gael highlights this when he says that someone else calling him ratchet is not the same as when he calls himself that, because they do not know him. In this way, our students understood that ratchet really was a term that was context-specific, and that only others who shared similar experiences of oppression could understand and apply it in particular ways. Alejandra, in fifth grade, demonstrates this when she discusses her understanding of ratchet, tying it specifically to experiences for young Brown girls.

Alejandra: “Well—ratchet, what I think my cousin says about like when she’s getting ready, and she puts her hair in a bun, like she has no makeup she’s like, ‘I look ratchet,’ like, like I look weird.”

Sylvia: “Oh, like a bad thing?”

Alejandra: “Well—not always a bad thing and then, when you [pauses] like girls that dress with short shirts—what I [emphasis] say hoochies . . .”

Sylvia: [Laughs]—“it’s also ratchet?”

Alejandra: “My cousin said. Then I tell my grandma, um, when we go to the store I say, ‘Ew, grandma! She’s ratchet.’ And then she’s like, ‘what do you mean?’ She’s a hoochie.”

Sylvia: [Laughing] —“What does your grandma say?”

Alejandra: “She gets mad.”

Sylvia: “Why?”

Alejandra: “She said that’s not nice.”

Sylvia: “Oh ok. So ratchet is . . .”

Alejandra: “Well, sometimes me and my cousin, we call ourselves ratchet.”

Sylvia: “Like as a joke?”

Alejandra: “No.”

Sylvia: “So what else does it mean? Because you’re not calling yourselves hoochies, right?”

Alejandra: “No. [Pauses] Well some people use it as a nickname.”

Sylvia: “As a nickname? I also thought it was another word for like ghetto or hood.”

Alejandra: “Yea! I look ghetto—I look ratchet. Oh, and then my cousin—she wanted to get a tattoo that says ‘ratchet’ right here” [points to arm].

Sylvia: [Laughing] —“Tell her no!”

Alejandra: “She wants one on her arm and she wants me to get one like here” [points to herself].

Sylvia: [Laughing] —“What did you tell her?”

Alejandra: “I said I don’t know yet.”

Sylvia: “You could go with her and get the one for your mom when you’re older. What is the difference between ratchet girls and not ratchet girls? [pause] Is there a difference?”

Alejandra: “Well, some are hoochies and some are not.”

Sylvia: “And what’s a hoochie?”

Alejandra: “[A girl] that dresses with short shorts—booty shorts. With a bra.”

Sylvia: “Why do you think girls dress like that?”

Alejandra: [Pause] “Maybe because their parents have like abused them and they ran away.”

Sylvia: “And what kind of girl are you? How would you describe yourself?”

Alejandra: “I’m honest. Sometimes I’m not. I’m [pauses], I’m not ratchet.”

In this excerpt, Alejandra discusses the nuances and complexities of a ratchet subject position. For example, she shares how she and her cousin apply “ratchet” to their selves, when they are not feeling their best in terms of appearance. In this way, ratchet is used to describe their feelings of insecurity for failing to present themselves using particular beauty standards applied to women—without makeup or their hair done up.

Interestingly enough, Alejandra also identifies ratchet as a specific youth culture, sharing that her cousin wants matching tattoos literally inscribing the word onto their flesh. In this way, ratchet is a youth culture worthy of representation on their very bodies, by their choosing. While on the one hand, ratchet can describe looking “ghetto,” at the same time, ratchet also represents a ghetto or ’hood subject position that symbolizes a particular lifestyle positioned within certain material realities that youth recognize, take up, and express pride in. Paralleling what Lindsey (2012) and Brown and Young (2015) theorize about ratchet, Alejandra identifies that ratchet can have a positive representation by signifying having survived circumstances tied to colonization, using strength, creativity, street smarts, and embodied knowledge. Alejandra understood ratchetness as stemming from a set of experiences that are specific to being low income and of color.

Alejandra and her family have experienced countless obstacles tied to systemic oppression—incarceration, health issues and lack of quality healthcare, and gang violence—that have given her insight into a ratchet subjectivity. Because

of these experiences, Alejandra and her cousin, proudly take up a ratchet subject position for surviving and thriving despite and because of the obstacles their family has experienced.

This is juxtaposed with an alternative definition of ratchet, provided by Alejandra, of ratchet as potentially “hoochie,” which Alejandra recognizes as the ways that some young girls perform an assumed hypersexual subject position through their manner of dress. Alejandra assumes some girls do this because of potential abuse in their families, which speaks volumes to her embodied knowledge or *facultad* (Anzaldúa 2007) regarding sexual abuse of young girls. Alejandra, although stereotyping particular young girls, does not necessarily blame them for presenting themselves in this way and attempts to sympathize if these girls are doing so because of traumatic experiences regarding sexual abuse.

Ratchet as hoochie is also a form of performance in that young women can take up a ratchet/hoochie subject position to potentially subvert dominant standards of beauty and sexuality steeped in white supremacist or Eurocentric ideologies. While Alejandra admittedly takes up a ratchet subject position to refer to the social conditions and material realities she and her family have survived, she distances herself from a hypersexual ratchet subject position that does not fit her personal ethics, yet, like Lindsey (2012), does not judge or blame other young Brown girls who choose to express themselves in this way. As such, Alejandra identifies the multitude of ways youth of color take up, enact, and subvert dominant ideologies through a performance of ratchet.

We offer these youth-centered definitions of ratchet to reveal the complexities and nuances of this particular youth culture and subject position. In their definitions, the youth reveal they are aware of their use of the word *ratchet* and

the various life experiences this particular subject position is attached to and reflects. In this way, they are not absent-mindedly employing a random slang term, but rather intentionally taking up, performing, and using a ratchet subject position to express their everyday lives and social conditions as young Brown youth. In the next section, we discuss how a ratchet subject position, while youth-centered, is tied to the material realities of youth of Mexican descent, highlighting how these youth are positioned by schools, and considered as ratchet as wretched.

Young Brown Youth as Wretched

Though we position our students as having agency whilst being socially constructed, we nonetheless recognize that their lives are influenced by larger systems of power. This section illustrates our students' awareness of their social position and that of their families. We highlight this to further demonstrate how these youth engaged in "ratchetness" *on purpose* and recognized it as being tied to a set of experiences on the margins.

In a class discussion with youth about Latina/x stereotypes in the media, we showed a clip from the animated sitcom *Family Guy*⁷ of Consuela, the family's housekeeper. Socorro then shared that her mom works in the housekeeping department at a hospital. This discussion prompted Keta, Sofia, and Josie to discuss their familiarity with their own mothers working in cleaning/service positions, and their mothers being treated differently than White employees.

Keta: "My mom, my mom works at, she does housekeeping . . ."

Socorro: "Yeah like limpia casas and stuff . . ."

Keta: "Yeah and departamentos . . ."

Student: "My mom does that, too . . ."

Keta: "And there's people that, that work like from Mexicans and Americans (read: white) and the Americans get a lot of money and the Mexican ones don't get a lot of money."

Sofia: "My mom used to babysit, and she didn't want to work there because she used to work from morning 'til night, and I used to come with her, 'cuz their sons and daughters used to come to this school and I would take care of them and help them with their homework. I helped my mom clean the house and she only got paid um . . . [short pause] . . . ten dollars the hour. And like the other American people got paid twenty dollars and my mom was like 'you know I quit, I'd rather work in real work' . . ."

Socorro: ". . . Somewhere where she wouldn't be treated unfairly?"

Sofia: "Yeah. And now she works at this place where there are people from different cultures and she gets more money. . ."

Socorro: ". . . She feels more comfortable there?"

Sofia: "Yeah."

Josie: "My mom used to clean for houses for ten dollars per hour, now she works at a different place but still cleaning and she gets paid like \$15 now, and then other people get \$30. So she cleans a lot and she, she cleans it very well. And she takes more hours."

Sylvia: "But they still pay her less?"

Josie: “Yeah.”

In this plática, the students reveal their awareness of their families’ positionality, and specifically that of their mothers. The students quickly identify that the only reason their mothers’ employers pay them a lower wage is because they are Brown women. They reveal they understand that other cleaners and domestic workers get paid more, even twice as much, for the same work because they are “American”—which for the students means not only white but also documented and English-speaking. In this way, the students recognize they and their families are “wretched,” meaning relegated to a particular socioeconomic status because of the labor exploitation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, particularly women.

The students recognize they are positioned as wretched in larger society, but also within their classroom at school. The sixth-grade students in particular frequently shared stories about their relationship with their teacher and other teachers at their school, which was typically based on deficit perspectives of their educability and value as students.

Sylvia: “How do you think the teachers here feel about you?”

Cherrie: “I feel like . . .”

Frida: “. . . Like they don’t like us. Like they think we’re never gonna change.”

Cherrie: “Yea.”

Sylvia: “What does that mean, ‘you’re never gonna change?’”

Frida: "Cuz like in the beginning of the year we had drama, because you know how there's always a group of girls—and that's what they think! When there's a group of girls they think they're bad and stuff. And there's a group of sixth-grade girls and a group of the fifth-grade girls and I guess they were all talking shit on the fifth grade and we all started fighting, but now we're all cool . . . [and] they [the teachers] think we're still the same. And it's weird because when we're in Go Girls [an after-school program] it's like Christine and all the girls act like they hate us—like they hate *us* [student emphasis]. Like Ms. Brewer's girls."

Cherrie: "Like we say, 'I like your hair today' and they just roll their eyes."

Sylvia: "What girls are those?"

Frida: "Christine, Tara and all those."

Sylvia: "White girls? So they don't like y'all?"

Frida: "We try to compliment them and stuff but they're just like—and Mr. Wise [sixth-grade faculty] thinks *they're* [student emphasis] the good ones and when we're in Go Girls, those girls act so nice to us, but when we're not in Go Girls, they're like hella bitches to us. It's weird."

In this plática, Frida and Cherrie highlight the ways their teachers specifically view them as wretched. Frida laments that the teachers view them in deficit ways, that youth—the sixth-grade Mexican girls specifically—are inherently

bad and will remain so beyond their adolescent years. Interestingly enough, Frida and Cherrie recognize that their teacher does not regard some of the White students in the same way. Rather, Frida and Cherrie view the teacher as taking ownership of those girls, referring to them as “Ms. Brewer’s girls,” as if they are their own clique bonded by whiteness. Ms. Brewer’s girls seem to understand Ms. Brewer’s deficit assumptions of Frida and Cherrie and girls like them and act out towards them when adults are not present. Yet, Frida and Cherrie and other Brown girls are stuck labeled as “wretched” beyond their formative years, no matter how they behave and engage with others.

Frida and Cherrie recognize that not only are they marked with this label of wretched by their teacher, other faculty and students at school, but that this label runs deeper. Because of how they are constructed, the predominantly low-income students of color students at this particular elementary school are required to wear uniforms and face strict regulations of their physical bodies in terms of class policies. For example, requiring permission and a hall pass to be able to use the bathroom; “butts in seats” classroom policies restricting their movement throughout the entire eight-hour day; and “no talking” rules that penalized students for wanting to speak outside of their turn, and speak in general.

These policies, though common in many schools, are enforced differently in schools that construct Brown youth as criminal, and always “up to something.” In particular, students were often upset about having their bodily functions, such as using the restroom, restricted. In at least four instances that year in the lower grades (first through fourth), students ended up wetting themselves because they were not allowed to use the bathroom. School policies that severely restrict when students use the bathroom because it is assumed they will be “up to no good” severely disrupt the trust between student and teacher, and the overall

relationship. Thus, as Frida and Cherrie point out, their teacher, and even other sixth-grade teachers, assumed that a group of Brown girls signaled trouble.

In the next section, we outline different approaches that Chicana/x and Latina/x elementary-aged youth take to embody a ratchet subject position as a form of resistance. Taking up the deficit label that is thrust upon them, they flip this label and engage in a ratchet form of agency and resistance that demands recognition of their subjectivity, brilliance, knowledge, and humanity.

Ratchet as Agency and Resistance

For the students in the sixth grade, the sixth-grade teacher’s deficit assumptions of the students created a tense classroom space. In their individual pláticas, the students shared their teacher would explicitly refer to them and their actions as “dumb,” would not follow classroom rules of respect, would embarrass them in front of their peers, and would penalize them publicly using a behavioral management chart that everyone could see.

Earlier that year, we had worked on an in-class project with Ms. Brewer and the students, and over time, it became clear that she truly did not like them. She often referred to them as “troublemakers” and resisted a field trip to the store Trader Joe’s that we had planned because she thought it was “too much work” to take them on the train. By no means are we suggesting that all White teachers are like Ms. Brewer, we recognize her deficit ideas and pedagogy towards her students as the extreme end of a system that criminalizes young Brown youth. Rather than get to know her students on a personal level and develop close relationships with them, she continually engaged in a power struggle in the classroom in order to maintain control. Eventually, the students reached a point where they felt it necessary to confront the ratchet politics (Brown and Young 2015) of their classroom by organizing a literal classroom disruption against their teacher.

Frida: “Everyone was like, ‘All right, we’re not gonna listen to her.’ We’re not gonna listen to her and everyone started going down on their [behavior] cards because everyone was being a bitch to her. I was all like laughing on purpose. I didn’t even have a reason to laugh, I was like Ha ha! And Derrick was like—yeah.”

Sylvia: “Did y’all talk about it?”

Frida: “We started passing it around. Like we look at each other and we’re just like [nods, sticking her chin out as if to signal something].”

The students express feeling it necessary to address their mistreatment in class by pushing back against their teacher collectively. Rather than passively accept their oppression, they collectively organized to push back and resist, in spite of the consequences. Gael, who was also in the same class as Frida and Cherrie, explains why this was necessary.

Gael: “. . . Like if Ms. Brewer was nice, we would pay more attention, listen to her, but she’s like mean to us.”

Sylvia: “So you don’t.”

Gael: “So we have that feeling that she’s being mean to us, we have to do something. So she can know that she’s being mean to us.”

Sylvia: “So maybe she’ll change?”

Gael: “Yeah. ’Cuz like last year we told the principal that Ms. Peterson was being mean to us, so then they had a meeting with her [the teacher] and the principal and then like it was the middle of the year . . .

she became nice. She was nicer, we had more recess, had longer recess, like half an hour. But Ms. Brewer—if we tell the principal, Ms. Brewer’s gonna get all worried and stuff. Like she might get fired.”

Sylvia: “Who decided that, y’all the students decided just to go tell...”

Gael: “. . . The principal. Yeah.”

Sylvia: “It was a bunch of you?”

Gael: “Yeah . . . and it worked out.”

Sylvia: “But you think it will be different with Ms. Brewer?”

Gael: “Because they give Ms. Peterson a warning and with that warning she changed. But they told [the principal] and she talked to Ms. Brewer too. Ms. Brewer got all sad. So we’re all like, let’s be good and we started being good, and she started not following this direction, like we did to her. So she’s being like that to us then we’re gonna be like that to her.”

The above narrative clearly demonstrates the intentionality that students had in organizing their resistance. Even though they first approached the situation by the more conventional route, speaking with the principal, they found this option did not produce the results they wanted. Rather than remain complacent, they enacted a ratchet subjectivity by being “bad” on purpose. As Gael points out, he and his classmates would have changed their behavior if Ms. Brewer had been nicer. However, when they understood that she was refusing to treat them with respect, they engaged in a series of continued acts of defiance. The incident that Frida and Gael

describe above, was only one of many in which the class purposefully refused to listen.

The collective defiance that our students engaged in is perhaps viewed by more traditional educational circles as counterproductive because it only serves to exacerbate the hostile classroom environment. However, we argue that this collective defiance is actually an intentional, thoughtful, and appropriate response to their hostile classroom space, especially given the power differentials that limit options to change it. Recognizing this agentive, subversive resistant strategy is a major finding of this research, one with important implications. By contextualizing colonizing schooling contexts, situating the material realities and social conditions of contemporary youth, particularly of color, and recognizing the oppositional behaviors of youth as productive, critical, and meaningful, educators can transform their perspective of their students to garner a better understanding of who they are and where they come from, as well as cultivate caring relationships with them that can transform traditional classroom spaces, student engagement, and learning. We further discuss these implications in the next section.

Implications for Educators

Our goal in this essay was to highlight the complex ways that Brown youth recreate, perform, and embody a ratchet subject position that is tied to their experiences of oppression. Drawing on the Chicana feminist methodology of *pláticas*, as well as Black feminist scholarship on ratchet politics, we came to understand our students as “ratchet of the earth” because although they are continually subjected to being “other,” we recognized how they engaged in resistance against schooling institutions. For educators working with youth of color, it is important for them to develop an anti-racist educational orientation (Raible and Irizarry 2010). Anti-racist educational orientations provide tools

and a framework for educators to understand and recognize how schools operate to dominate and control young Black and Brown bodies. Below, we describe some of these approaches and strategies that can be used by both educators of color and White educators in working with predominantly Black, Brown, low income youth of color.

In taking an anti-racist educational orientation, educators should strive to familiarize themselves with 1) the material realities of the students who make up a given classroom space; 2) the frameworks that are useful in understanding the subjectivities of low income youth of color, including the Black feminist orientations we discussed throughout this paper; and 3) the understanding that it is schooling institutions that are deviant or “ratchet” as opposed to the young Black and Brown bodies in classrooms (Brown and Young 2015; Cooper 2012; Lindsey 2012; Tuck 2013).

Learning the material realities of students in schools involves a commitment to educating oneself of the school culture and the local community, by spending time in the community, and by also engaging in *pláticas* with students, their parents or guardians and other family members, and organizations affiliated with the local community. It is not enough to simply understand the context of a community that one is teaching in, but necessary to combine this knowledge with educational research by Black and Chicana feminist educational researchers who offer pedagogical approaches and considerations for working with Black and Brown youth. Specifically, some of the approaches that we used in working with youth involved spending time with them and getting to know and understand how they made sense of the world. For example, asking them to articulate a definition of ratchet or explain how they make sense of themselves as ratchet are examples of some things teachers can do in classroom settings to gain a better understanding of their students’ lives. A wide range of literature

within ethnic studies in education already exists that highlights the importance of providing space for students to learn about their history and themselves in critical ways (Cammarota and Romero 2014; Tintiangco-Cubales et al. 2014; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008). Teachers are not expected to come in knowing everything there is to know about their students. However, they should make attempts to better understand them and develop relationships with them that can lead to greater understanding and bridging of their experiences (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). For teachers like Ms. Brewer—who ended up leaving the school after a year—seeking professional development and advice for strategies in working with youth of color as a White educator is key. Overlooking the obvious, for example in terms of racial and ethnic differences or other salient differences between students and teachers, indicates to students a clear discomfort with openly discussing these identities that they embody and recognize as not being a part of the norm (Parmar and Steinberg 2008).

Familiarizing oneself with critical frameworks that can provide tools and strategies for working with youth of color is also key to educators who wish to take an asset-based approach in the classroom, where students are seen as valuable and deserving of love and respect. Doing this in the abstract is not enough—that is, it is not enough to merely want to do something. Rather, we encourage educators to get to a place where they are reflecting enough on their practice that it becomes uncomfortable—a space of *nepantla* (Anzaldúa 2007) that can lead to greater self-transformation and growth. Part of this process includes involving students in conversations regarding the classroom environment and in the ways that, as a class, everyone can take greater roles in supporting one another. For educators who find it difficult to address topics such as racism, sexism, and homophobia head on, it becomes easy to attribute negative classroom climates to the behaviors of “disruptive” students, rather than to a lack of self-reflection and introspection on behalf of the

educator. Learning more about critical frameworks and engaging with other educators who are practicing anti-racist pedagogies is crucial to any educator’s understanding of themselves.

By doing the labor of learning more about the realities of schooling for low-income youth of color, as well as immersing oneself in learning about critical frameworks tied to schools, educators can begin the process of identifying “undesirable” classroom behaviors as associated with material realities in society (poverty, hunger, school trauma) and as a reflection of colonizing schooling institutions, as opposed to deficit assumptions about Black and Brown youth. These strategies can help educators better understand why students act “ratchet” in class, or why they choose to engage in “disruptive” behaviors even when it appears that they are receiving no tangible benefits from those behaviors. By learning about and questioning what is actually ratchet, educators can shift their thinking around oppositional behaviors and better identify students’ needs, as well as encourage these students in their critical thinking and desire to create change, thus contributing to a transformative and empathetic learning environment that recognizes youth of color as complex individuals, leaders, change makers, and knowledge producers.

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Notes

¹ Slang for skipping or cutting class.

² Throughout this piece, we use the terms Latina/x and Chicana/x. In recent years, many scholars and activists have increased their use of the "x" at the end of Latina/x, to signify the fluidity of gender expression, particularly given the gendered language of Spanish. In line with that ideology, we use Latina/x in an attempt to include trans and gender non-conforming individuals who are part of the pan ethnic group Latina/x. Furthermore, we maintain the "a" with the "x" to recognize the struggles that specifically women have made in distinguishing themselves from the often used collective of "Latino," traditionally used to include women also, but still from a heteronormative standpoint.

³ We are in the process of developing a concept tied to ratchet resistance, which we are tentatively calling "ratcheta/x resistance." This future piece will build on the work that is presented here.

⁴ We also recognize the existence of blackness in Latin America (i.e., Afro Mexican, Afro Latino) that is often erased from Chicanidad/Latinidad as a result of anti-blackness.

⁵ The curriculum for the Intro to Chicana/x Studies course specifically focused on two major themes throughout the school year: racism and borders. We chose these two broad themes specifically with the intention of dialoguing with students about historical and contemporary patterns tied to oppression and privilege. In teaching about those themes, we engaged Chicana feminist pedagogies that allowed us to consider contradiction and healing within our process of working with youth. For more details regarding our Chicana feminist approaches, please see Morales, Mendoza Aviña and Delgado Bernal (2016), "Education in Nepantla: A Chicana feminist approach to engaging Latina/o elementary youth in ethnic studies," in D. Sandoval, A. Ratcliff, T. Buenavista, & J. Marin (Eds.), *"White" Washing American Education: The New Culture Wars in Ethnic Studies* (Vol. 1, pp. 67–93), Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers.

⁶ We discuss some of the challenges that we faced in conducting community-based research as doctoral students who are both of and not of the community in a piece entitled "Critical Race feminista Methodology: The Challenges and Promises of Preparing Graduate Students in Community-Engaged Research." This forthcoming piece by Delgado Bernal, Alemán, Jr., Morales, and Mendoza Aviña can be found in the book *Community-Based Participatory Research: Testimonios from Chicano Studies*, edited by Natalia Deeb-Sossa, published by Arizona Press (2019).

⁷ *Family Guy* is an animated sitcom satirizing American culture through the members and pet of the Griffins family. It debuted on Fox in 1999 and begins its seventeenth season in the fall of 2018.

