From Urban Village to East Village

The Battle for New York’s Lower East Side

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Neighborhood 'Burn-out':
Puerto Ricans at the End of the Queue

Christopher Mele

Neither the dream of retaining the children of turn-of-the-century European immigrants in a Lower East Side purged of ethnicity, nor its alternative of replacing the ethnic working class by professionals or even clerks from Wall Street, materialized in the postwar period of the 1940s and 1950s. For this was a time when young Americans were heading to the new suburban developments mushrooming on open farmland to accommodate the generation whose most lasting achievement was to produce the baby boom.

The adult children of parents who remained in the 'old neighborhood' refused to return home. Those who were veterans were assisted by liberal federal benefits, including the G.I. Bill of Rights which opened the social mobility path available through higher education, and special Veterans' Administration mortgage guarantees which, by reducing downpayments and subsidizing interest rates, opened the physical mobility path to home ownership. Once the war ended, this generation married quickly, founded new families, and collectively created new ways of life that were often snobbishly satirized as Babbitry transposed from small towns to suburban 'ticky tacky little boxes,' or as life behind cracked picture windows. These new ways of life were the antithesis of life on the Lower East Side. Their parents may have remained willingly in the old neighborhood, but for their children, clinging to their ethnic heritage was often embarrassing, even humiliating.
In the past, the Lower East Side had not depended on retaining the children of immigrants. Rather, population had been continuously replenished by new ethnic groups. Thus, the original Irish had been succeeded by the Germans who, in turn, were replaced chiefly by Italians and Jews from eastern Europe. Since the neighborhood’s vitality depended on constant replacements, it was hit exceptionally hard when Congress curtailed immigration during the 1920s. The effects were felt almost immediately in the neighborhood. Population on the Lower East Side began to drop, although enough children of the old immigrant stock remained to forestall complete neighborhood ‘blowout.’ When, in the postwar period, these children began to desert the city for the suburbs, vacancies piled up on the Lower East Side, requiring landlords to adopt new strategies to keep their buildings full.

To counteract declining demand, urban planners, property owners, business people, and merchants at first sought to modernize the neighborhood, to replace its obsolete and substandard housing, and to create an area that could compete with the suburbs for middle-class housing consumers. This strategy reflected real estate interests in that it was designed not to remedy the conditions of the poor who were living in blighted areas, but to recover profitability. It was thought that the best way to stem the flow of people and money to the suburbs was to demolish slum buildings and replace them with attractive, middle-class housing. However, because the scale of such a rebuilding effort was enormous and the access of private investors to the capital needed for carrying it out limited, rebuilding the Lower East Side came to depend on government subsidies.

The efforts of real estate investors to harness government policy to help them construct middle-income housing in inner-city neighborhoods were only partially successful. True, urban renewal succeeded in replacing some slums with middle-income developments, but government policies ultimately obstructed investors’ revitalization plans by funding the construction of low-income housing. Despite this contradiction, many slum owners supported government programs of both middle-class renewal and publicly subsidized low-income housing, since these at least compensated owners for their land and the deteriorated structures on it.

However, the goal of redevelopment, namely, stimulating middle-class demand for central city housing, was ultimately defeated by the intensification of trends rooted in the prewar era. Even greater capitalization of the suburbs in the immediate postwar years and generous federal mortgage subsidies made suburban homes affordable to more people. Industrial relocation to the suburbs continued after the war on an unprecedented scale, draining jobs from the center city. These conditions exacerbated the growing obsolescence of the Lower East Side as a residential quarter.

Middle-class redevelopment was neither as pervasive nor effective as real estate interests operating in the Lower East Side had hoped. After more than a decade of efforts to redevelop the slums, the area’s housing market remained confined to low-income families and older white ethnics. The worsening conditions of the tenements, brought on by age and lack of upkeep, aggravated the situation of diminished demand. The enduring built form that had operated so effectively for urban real estate capital in the era of the great European migrations thwarted all postwar efforts to attract higher-income residents. New sources of low-income demand would have to be found.

The entry of unskilled and semiskilled Puerto Rican workers into New York City in the early 1950s served to make slums profitable again. Their entry into the neighborhood recreated the slum housing market of a half-century earlier. These workers were employed and resided in the inner city in a manner reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century European immigrants. Entreprenurial real estate capital responded to this new demand for low-income housing, and a speculative revival of interest in slum housing occurred in the first half of the 1950s. Speculators purchased heavily in areas such as East Harlem and the Lower East Side, where Puerto Ricans were most likely to settle. Profits could be realized by rent gouging the vast number of newly arrived Puerto Ricans in desperate need of housing. Landlords in the Lower East Side (as well as in other slum areas of the city) further subdivided their tenement apartments, charging by the room and renting to several families. Many buildings contained only one toilet per floor, to be used by many families. The quick profit derived from renting overcrowded and deteriorated living space was reminiscent of an earlier Lower East Side.

Revival of the slum, however, proved short lived and was replaced by an ensuing period of neighborhood ‘burnout’—a widespread disinvestment of real estate capital that devastated large portions of the Lower East Side. This chapter explains why this shift occurred. It analyzes the dynamic relationship between the socioeconomic makeup of the new Puerto Rican residents and landlord investment strategies in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite contemporary predictions that Puerto Ricans would replicate the American immigrant success story, the character of the Puerto Rican settlement in New York City was entirely different from that of the Europeans. The labor-market opportunities in the urban economy were transformed in the postwar era of sectoral economic change; manual labor was downgraded and deskilled, while white-collar positions were
expanding. These factors converged to present new kinds of problems for the relationship between the low-income housing of workers in the Lower East Side and New York City’s economy. As the city’s economic base restructured away from manufacturing, the function of the neighborhood’s housing became marginal to the emerging growth sectors of the local economy: producers’ and government services. Although this transformation had its roots in the early 1920s, the relationship between residence and employment that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s was radically different from that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ‘slum.’

At the beginning of the century, the Lower East Side had functioned as a dormitory for the legions of workers who constructed the city and labored in its industries. In contrast, the integration of Puerto Rican workers in the city’s employment base was aborted by the restructuring of the economy. Many of the new residents would become permanently poor (redundant workers) and marginal to the city’s economy. Thus, the prospects for continued profit making by tenement landlords deteriorated. When real estate investors discovered that the profits to be made by reinventing the slum were short lived, they responded by disinvesting. The residents of the Lower East Side paid the price of displacement in the widespread housing abandonment of the 1970s.

**PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS**

The formation of a Puerto Rican residential enclave on the Lower East Side did not replicate that of earlier immigrants – either in its trajectory of generational outward mobility or in residents’ ability to mobilize power over neighborhood housing conditions. These paths, forged by the European immigrant experience, proved historically specific to them and to the social and economic conditions of the industrial era. The Puerto Rican migration experience was different.

Unlike former mass migrations from Europe whose beginning and end dates are easily bracketed, Puerto Rican migration was spread out and more episodic. In 1940, there were still only about 61,500 Puerto Rican-born residents in New York City. Their numbers increased to almost 246,000 by 1950, to well over 612,000 by 1960, and by 1970 exceeded 800,000 (see table 6.1). Puerto Rican migration was affected by the legal status of the islanders as American citizens. In 1917, the Second Organic or Jones Act conferred citizenship on Puerto Ricans and thus eliminated quotas, waiting lists, and complex documentation. This lowered the social and economic costs associated with migration, since Puerto Ricans ‘burned no bridges’ when they came to the mainland. It also meant that the migration flow was subject to sudden reversals. Migrants could – and many in fact did – return to the island and back again to New York, as required by personal or economic needs.

**Table 6.1** Population of Puerto Rican origin living on the US mainland and in New York City, 1910–1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total on mainland US</th>
<th>Total in New York City</th>
<th>New York City’s Puerto Rican population as percentage of mainland US Puerto Ricans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>11,800</td>
<td>7,400</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>52,700</td>
<td>44,900</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>61,500</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>301,000</td>
<td>245,900</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>892,500</td>
<td>612,600</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1,379,100</td>
<td>811,800</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The ability of Puerto Rican arrivals to carve out large neighborhood niches was hindered by the fact that migration was neither numerically overwhelming nor concentrated within a span of a few years. In addition, the mobility of New York Puerto Ricans to and from Puerto Rico and other destinations in the United States diluted any particular attachments to place. Post-World War II settlements in New York tended to be small, more numerous and differentiated, and dictated less by cultural ties to established Puerto Rican enclaves than by the availability of inexpensive vacancies. Consequently, except in East Harlem and parts of Brooklyn, Puerto Ricans never achieved the critical mass needed to overwhelm an entire neighborhood. The Puerto Rican settlement pattern was more piecemeal: initially a few apartments within a building, later a few buildings on a block, and eventually a few blocks in a neighborhood.

The establishment of enclaves on the Lower East Side and in Chelsea followed this pattern. Although Loisaida (Nuyorican for Lower East Side) later emerged as a cultural and political center for Puerto Ricans living downtown, it was initially formed as a satellite barrio, highly sensitive to the ebb and flow of Puerto Rican population movements. At first, the Lower East Side took in the overflow from older core communities; new
arrivals with few housing options settled in the cheapest housing in the worst condition. Many of these units were concentrated in the eastern blocks of the East Village and in the area just south of Houston Street (see table 6.2).

Table 6.2  Population of Spanish language or Hispanic ethnicity* in the census tracts of the East Village, 1960–1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing projects 20</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>3,105</td>
<td>5,077</td>
<td>4,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing projects 24</td>
<td>3,177</td>
<td>3,831</td>
<td>4,879</td>
<td>4,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-project tracts 22.02b</td>
<td>1,453</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>548</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 (0.01 and 0.02)b</td>
<td>5,510</td>
<td>6,876</td>
<td>3,070</td>
<td>2,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>2,362</td>
<td>2,746</td>
<td>2,540</td>
<td>3,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.02b</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>721</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>1,328</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>2,301</td>
<td>2,944</td>
<td>2,967</td>
<td>1,832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.02b</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>501</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>1,258</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>1,152</td>
<td>1,032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,461</td>
<td>1,357</td>
<td>1,564</td>
<td>1,030</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>141</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20,434</td>
<td>24,934</td>
<td>25,131</td>
<td>21,875</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Primarily Puerto Rican. Between 1960 and 1990 the Bureau of the Census periodically revised its categories on Hispanics. This table uses the definitions extant in each census year.

** Prior to 1970, subdivision of tracts had not taken place.

* Not reported in 1960 and 1970.


Contributing to the dispersion of Puerto Rican settlements were conditions of the postwar housing environment. Newcomers arriving immediately after World War II encountered a severe housing shortage. This shortage was compounded by the city's efforts to clear slums, which had intensified overcrowding in remaining low-income areas. Families living in urban renewal areas were displaced. In the process, a large portion of low-income housing on Manhattan's west side was eliminated; public housing construction in the East Harlem area erased several blocks of occupied tenements. Urban renewal thus displaced more poor families than could be accommodated either in existing slums or in new public housing projects. Urban renewal—nicknamed 'Puerto Rican Removal Plans'—shifted hundreds of Puerto Rican families from one slum area to another. Families had little choice but to double- and triple-up with friends and relatives in substandard apartments, although some displaced Puerto Rican families were resettled in public housing. Public housing was not an option for the newest comers, however, since there was a two-year residency requirement for prospective tenants. Much to the advantage of slum landlords, government policies increased the demand for low-income housing by reducing its supply.

These experiences made it difficult for Puerto Ricans to organize a unified response to their precarious housing situation. Spatial deconcentration of Puerto Rican residents, resulting from their intermittent migratory patterns, their option to return to the island, displacement from their homes by urban renewal projects, and the unscrupulous tactics of landlords, inhibited the formation of the community-based self-help organizations that had been crucial in easing the transition for earlier immigrants. Strong Puerto Rican community groups eventually transcended these limitations, but most of the early groups organized around other issues. In more dispersed areas (and during the 1950s most Puerto Ricans lived in areas where they constituted less than half of the area's population), however, the formation of community-based organizations was uncommon. As Terry Rosenberg observed:

Puerto Ricans have found scattered housing sites, perhaps a block, perhaps an apartment building, which were available to them. . . And while they have been restricted to recognized 'poverty' areas of the City, they have not been able to establish within these areas the ethnic group concentrations supportive of community projects and organizations.12 Organizations created in the 1940s focused primarily on cultural themes; few addressed economic and housing issues of living in New York City.13 This changed as their numbers grew. The Puerto Rican Forum and the Congress of Home Town Clubs dealt with local educational issues. The Puerto Rican Family Institute, Aspira, and the Puerto Rican Community Development Project addressed poverty issues.14 More militant groups surfaced briefly in the mid-to-late 1960s, raising Puerto Rican consciousness but having little success in bettering material conditions for the poorest Puerto Ricans.15 New York affiliates of The Young Lords, a politicized youth gang from Chicago, were very active in social and political issues in Spanish Harlem.

Puerto Ricans living in smaller enclaves, however, were robbed of the potential political and economic capital gained from community organizations and their leaders.16 In terms of housing, the connection between the lack of community organizations and low community power is clear. As their economic position worsened and the gap between their resources and rising rents widened, Puerto Ricans were ill equipped to withstand the effects of landlord disinvestment.
SECTORAL ECONOMIC DECLINE

The major difference between the experience of earlier immigrants and that of Puerto Ricans was the tighter economy the latter confronted. Initially, in the early 1950s, the economic situation for new arrivals was promising. The demand for labor that stemmed from the cut-off in immigration in the 1920s was amplified during and immediately after World War II. Wartime labor shortages in manufacturing in the industrial northeast and the rustbelt were largely filled by women and by African-Americans migrating from the south. In New York, the shortage of unskilled workers was also alleviated by Puerto Rican labor. The large migration wave of the 1950s corresponded to an increase in demand for workers to serve the expanding postwar economy. Migration was also facilitated by commercial airlines which began to offer cheap flights to the mainland. Initially, Puerto Ricans did well in comparison to the general laboring population of the city, since their rates of labor force participation were higher than the city average. In 1950, for example, 76 percent of Puerto Rican males 14 years of age and older were in the labor force, as compared to 75 percent of the total male working-age population of New York City; 40 percent of Puerto Rican women were in the labor force, as compared to only 35 percent of the city’s female working-age population.

The demand for workers in low paying jobs was produced by the aging of the former immigrant population, and the lack, with the exception of the African-American migration from the south, of any notable labor migration since the early 1920s. Puerto Ricans increasingly found jobs in the labor market niche of center-city blue-collar positions left behind by the exodus of workers to new industries in the suburbs or by the occupational advancement of existing workers. Puerto Rican migration was viewed as crucial to salvaging New York industries that depended on inexpensive labor, such as the garment industry.

Puerto Rican workers were employed largely in unskilled and often seasonal labor. In garments, for example, Puerto Rican men loaded and unloaded fabrics, operated heavy machinery, and delivered finished garments from factory floor to nearby showrooms. As the postwar demand for cheap labor swelled, firms stimulated the migration of more Puerto Ricans to the mainland. Several industries, including New York apparel firms, recruited Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico, offering them jobs and placing them in housing. Government agencies encouraged migration as well. In 1948, the Migration Division of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor was formed to monitor the recruitment practices used by the numerous U.S. labor contractors operating on the island. The division also maintained branch offices in New York and Chicago to facilitate employment placement. In New York, the Puerto Rican Commonwealth Office and the Mayor’s Commission on Puerto Rican Affairs assisted in establishing air routes to San Juan and aided unemployed new arrivals by placing them in manufacturing jobs.

The significant access to entry-level manufacturing jobs made by Puerto Ricans, however, was eventually curtailed by both the decline in and downgrading of manufacturing in the city. After World War II, blue-collar manufacturing jobs, traditionally held by new immigrants, declined in number or were transformed into lower-paying ‘deskilled’ positions. Industries were leaving Manhattan for the suburbs or overseas. New jobs were almost exclusively in the service and governmental sectors. This deindustrialization eliminated the union footholds through which earlier immigrants had achieved socioeconomic and residential mobility.

Puerto Ricans bore the brunt of these economic declines. A large proportion were employed in exactly those industries most affected by restructuring. Forty-two percent of the Puerto Rican labor force worked in manufacturing in the 1950s. Between 1959 and 1969, manufacturing employment in New York City declined by 13 percent. A declining number of light assembly jobs in plastic flower making, electric plating, costume jewelry preparation, and furniture making could still be found in nearby SoHo and Tribeca well into the late 1970s, but after that, manufacturing firms in those districts were displaced and their industrial lofts were transformed for new uses, such as upscale housing, art galleries, and boutiques. Those industries had formerly recruited Puerto Rican labor from the Lower East Side. For example, in 1962, 48 percent of textile and apparel workers employed in loft plants in SoHo were of Puerto Rican origin.

By virtue of their lack of seniority, Puerto Ricans often occupied the least secure positions in these industries. Garment making offers a very clear demonstration of the problems faced by Puerto Rican workers. Despite the gains Puerto Ricans made in capturing jobs in the garment industry and despite their numerical strength in union membership throughout the 1950s, the garment industry failed to provide them with the social mobility it had granted earlier immigrants. The industry was radically restructured. Positions were eliminated; work in less stylized and uniform garment production, such as underwear, brassieres and children’s clothes, was eliminated as shops relocated offshore (ironically, many to Puerto Rico). Production previously done in-house was farmed out to subcontractors to take advantage of significantly lower costs.

In addition, garment employers downgraded high-wage skilled and craft positions to semi-skilled positions which carried little chance for promotion. What were once considered entry-level jobs with potential for
advancement were recast, with the consent of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), as permanent low-wage positions. Historically, immigrants entered the labor market in low-wage and unskilled positions as pressers, cleaners, ironers, and shipping clerks. Through union membership and seniority, these workers gained increasing job security, structured wage increases, welfare benefits, and employment training. These positions, once dominated by Italians and Jews, had been important vehicles of their occupational mobility. Indeed, Jews and Italians had utilized the ILGWU and propitious labor rulings of the New Deal era to cement employment gains that translated to increased socio-economic mobility.

But these gains were not passed on to the postwar rank-and-file members of the union, the majority of whom were African-American or Puerto Rican. The predominantly white-ethnic leadership of the ILGWU feared the restructuring that was occurring in the garment industry as a result of the standardization and decentralization of production. Their own positions would be lost if New York’s garment industry folded or set up shop elsewhere. With this in mind, union leaders, without consulting the rank and file, negotiated a series of ‘sweetheart’ contracts with the apparel industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. ILGWU contracts negotiated in the 1950s reveal that the union embraced the strategy of maintaining low wages to forestall an exodus of the garment industry from the city. In his study of those contracts, Herbert Hill writes: ‘Soon after World War II, the ILGWU adopted a policy of wage restraint that contrasted sharply with its earlier wage policy. This approach coincided with the rapid increase of nonwhites in the garment industry labor force.’

Wages for unskilled labor in the garment industry fell drastically. Puerto Rican women, employed after 1950 in coat and suit making, an industry previously dominated by Italians and Jews, were hired as semi-skilled laborers and paid wages well below their predecessors. Between 1960 and 1965, the real earnings of the rank-and-file members of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (again, most of whom were Puerto Rican and African-American women) declined below the poverty level for New York City families, even though two wage contracts between ILGWU and garment employers had been negotiated. The complicity of what was historically the pathbreaker of immigrant socioeconomic mobility, the ILGWU, with the marginalization of Puerto Rican labor was pronounced.

The deskilling of labor was not unique to the garment industry; most labor-intensive manufacturing industries that remained in the city after 1950 initiated forms of wage-increase controls. Because wages no longer kept pace with the rising costs of living, many Puerto Rican workers became impoverished. As the relocation or closing of plants continued unabated in the 1960s and 1970s, even more were displaced. This shifting economic context – deindustrialization – in which the postwar Puerto Rican migration took place meant the elimination of a principal means of economic, social, and residential mobility.

**CONCLUSION: THE DECLINING DISPOSITION OF HOUSING**

In the early 1950s, real estate capital in the Lower East Side saw a profitable future in the demand for low-income housing generated by yet another labor migration – the flow of migrants from Puerto Rico. The resurgence turned out to be a false revival with lasting consequences. Despite attempts by landlords to profit from this new wave of poor working-class migrants, their investments soon soured as they became proprietors of a neighborhood housing an economically idled population. The declining economic position of the vast majority of Puerto Ricans, their high rates of turnover, and their somewhat porous settlement patterns had profound implications for housing in the Lower East Side. The limited job opportunities for many of its residents isolated the Lower East Side from the expansion and growth of surrounding residential and business areas and marginalized the neighborhood from the fast-paced growth of financial, insurance, and real estate services in the city. The Puerto Rican population of the Lower East Side became trapped in a double downward spiral of poverty stemming both from its own economically disadvantaged labor-market position and from the increasing isolation of the neighborhood.

Although Puerto Ricans never numerically overwhelmed areas of the East Village, they inherited a large part of it when non-Hispanics aged and then died off; the decline in non-Hispanics came not so much from ‘white flight’ as from the mortality of the aged eastern European immigrants. Census data from 1960 indicate that the non-Puerto Rican population in the neighborhood was basically old. There were very few children or adults in the child-bearing years. The aged were the remnants of the pre-1924 cohort of immigrants who had never left the neighborhood. By 1970 many of them had died. By then, the population in the easternmost census tracts of the East Village consisted primarily of young Puerto Rican families with many children, whose incomes were well below the poverty level and who could ill afford higher rents. It was this shift in ability to pay higher rents – compounded secondarily by ethnic and racial discrimination by landlords – that set off the period of disinvestment.
Owners responded to the ceiling on profits brought on by the declining socioeconomic status of the residents by disinvesting. During the 1960s, the population thinned, due to Puerto Rican dispersal, return migration, and a drop in new migration from the island. The makeup of the remaining population shifted to those with meager economic resources and declining occupational prospects. Faced with declining demand and an impoverished pool of tenants, landlords disinvested in their properties by milking their rents and reducing upkeep. The consequence of real estate disinvestment through abandonment was the displacement of many Puerto Rican residents (see figure 6.1).

As the privately owned housing nearby was transformed — by abandonment in the 1970s and later by gentrification that pushed eastward in the 1980s (see chapter 7) — the housing projects would provide the most secure haven against displacement pressures that overwhelmed the adjacent blocks. Puerto Rican families came to dominate the Lillian Wald and Jacob Riis Houses, two large government-subsidized housing projects at the easternmost edge of the East Village. These projects, completed in 1949–50, had initially been populated by white working-class families. For example, of the 1,850 original resident families surveyed when the Lillian Wald Houses opened in 1949–1950, only 34 families were identified as Spanish (presumably Puerto Rican).\(^{32}\) Between 1953 and 1956, however, the number of newly arrived and mainland-born Puerto Ricans living in the two public housing projects had increased by 150 percent (see table 6.3).\(^{33}\) Today, four-fifths of the inhabitants of the two projects are Hispanic, mostly Puerto Rican.

In the decade of the 1970s, the economically-isolated community of Loisaida outside the projects was decimated, and the remaining residents fell victim to multiple social ills. The eastern blocks of Alphabet City

### Table 6.3 Population of Spanish language or Hispanic ethnicity and as percentage of total population in the two public housing census tracts, 1960–1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>3,105</td>
<td>5,077</td>
<td>4,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Spanish language or Hispanic</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>3,177</td>
<td>3,851</td>
<td>4,879</td>
<td>4,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Spanish language or Hispanic</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{a}\) The Census Bureau has shifted the meanings and names of categories from “Puerto Rican birth” to “Puerto Rican parentage” to “Spanish language” and, finally, to “Hispanic.” As a result, the figures are only roughly comparable.

became among the poorest and most troubled in the city. Ironically, the devastation of the Puerto Rican community in the East Village prepared the ground for a successive period of attempted reconstruction. As land values and property prices plummeted, reflecting the neighborhood’s despair, a new generation of investors entered the arena, seeking opportunities for profit. The next two chapters describe the sequence of neighborhood disinvestment and reinvestment that sought to gentrify the East Village.

NOTES

1 A mocking folk song of the times created by Pete Seeger.
3 The Johnson Act of 1921 reduced the flow of eastern and southern Europeans to the United States by limiting the annual number of new immigrants from given countries to 3 percent of their populations, as revealed in the 1910 census. In 1924, Congress amended the quota to 2 percent of their populations, as listed in the 1890 census. By 1929, Congress had capped new immigration to 150,000 persons annually. See, inter alia, Virginia E. Sanchez Korral, From Colonía to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1917–1948 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 31.
5 Proceedings of Puerto Ricans Confront Problems of the Complex Urban Society: A Design for Change,' a community conference sponsored by Mayor Lindsay, April 15–16, 1967, held at the High School of Art and Design, p. 115. A similar labor influx of southern blacks to New York set off housing speculation in neighborhoods of northern Manhattan and Brooklyn. In the Lower East Side, the newcomers were predominantly Puerto Rican. The average percentage of housing units occupied by non-white persons in all of the East Village in 1950 was 3.2; for tracts 20 and 24, containing the public housing projects, the average was 10.2; non-whites then constituted 16.2 percent of Manhattan's population. (Source: United States Census of Population and Housing, 1950.)
11 Proceedings, p. 359.
13 Proceedings, p. 169.
14 Active but not very successful. Very few publications on Puerto Rican organizations operating in neighborhoods in the 1950s refer to successful movements organized around social issues in general and housing issues in particular. On the contrary, contemporary activists were concerned that few such organizations existed. See Adalberto López (a Puerto Rican scholar raised on the Lower East Side), 'The Puerto Rican Diaspora,' in Adalberto López and James Petras, eds., Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974).
17 Rosenberg, Residence, Employment and Mobility, p. 39.
23 See, inter alia, chapter 2 of Sharon Zukin, Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
Appendix to Chapter 6
The Other Side of the Coin: Culture in Loisaida

Mario Maffi

The Poet who today writes and prints, once only sang. But the Poet wasn't then an individual, but the community, and whoever could not sing verses would have had no other way to retain the data of his/her life.

Amadeo Bordiga, 1953

Maybe the masses receive their voice from the poet, maybe it is they who grant it, delegate it, and finally lose it.

Alessandro Portelli, 1992

The history of Loisaida cannot be told simply in terms of the dramatic process of its dispersal. Over more than a century, the entire Lower East Side experience showed that, however harsh, even desperate its living and working conditions might be, there was always day-to-day resistance on the part of its new residents – a stubborn creative response to chaos and misery that somehow made life endurable, nurtured several important sociocultural realities, and finally gave the area that laboratory-like quality it maintains to this day.

In fact, as Bernardo Vega's memoirs or Jesus Colon's sketches clearly reveal, life in Puerto Rican areas of New York was less fragmented and disorganized than is generally supposed. Puerto Rican enclaves on the
upper West Side, in East Harlem, and in Lower Manhattan did manage to weave together a small effective network of coping institutions (clubs, newspapers, unions, and forums) and informal meeting places (stoops, rooftops, backyards, barber shops, marquetas, botanicas, and bodegas). In the complex dialectical process through which migrants became 'angled' by remolding anglo culture, these were the vehicles of tradition and information— the agents that held the community together when it was in the throes of adjusting to its new reality.

To this network of formal and informal community institutions must be added the written word. Among the individuals who figured large in this network were folklorist Pura Belpre, writers Julia de Burgos, Ramon Ruiz de Hoyos, Lola Rodriguez de Tio, and Jesus Colon, and politicos, such as Luis Moz Marin, Pedro Albizu Campos, and Bernardo Vega. But perhaps the most influential of all was the poet bard, Jorge Brandon, who 'carried his metaphors / in brown shopping bags / in steel shopping carts. These constituted decisive connecting links between generations, between a past of blue-collar work and a present of job displacement and population decline. Brandon, first with his Teatro Ambulante and then as 'the talking coconut,' carried on the tradition of the island's lectores (hired by cigar-makers to read aloud to workers) and juegos florales (beauty and poetry contests). He adapted to the new urban reality the figure of the oral poet who refuses to let his poetry be crystalized in print and who constantly remodels the collective experience of his countrymen in an ongoing monologue to be sung or told. In doing so, he acted as 'the sacred father-testament' to the younger generations of Puerto Rican poets en Nueva York.7

Street gangs, that elementary form of aggregation for ghetto youth, also provided an important avenue to a new sociocultural identity. Developing out of a Chicago-based gang and modeling themselves after the Black Panthers, the Puerto Rican dominated Young Lords Organization established chapters in New York. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the YLO had its headquarters on East Third Street in the Lower East Side; it shared the Christodora House (see Gordon, chapter 10) with other radical groups and operated a whole set of social services, from general culture courses given at St. Brigid's Church to free breakfasts for hungry children. The street gang scene had effects that went well beyond the Young Lords Organization, which eventually disappeared with little trace.

Charas, Inc.,8 a community center originally called 'The Real Great Society,' was born out of the confluence and politicization of two former gangs, the Chelsea-based Assassins and the Lower East Side Dragons. Charas immediately became involved in building, under the direction of architects Buckminster Fuller and Michael Ben-Eli, several geodesic domes in the area.9 This was the beginning of an intense two-decade activity in community resistance and revitalization, in which Charas worked with groups such as Cooper Square, Adopt-a-Building, and several homesteading organizations. Charas also became involved in cultural expression—the painting of murals, photography, and productions of theater, movies, music and dance.

The local Young Lords Organization was also active culturally, most notably as an incubator for the poetry movement. Indeed, it was on the pages of Palante, the YLO's newspaper, that Pedro Pietri's 'Puerto Rican Obituary' was first published—a long, bitter moving poem-monologue that summed up the Puerto Rican experience en la urbe, in an ever precarious balance between yearnings and disillusionment, ethnic identity and big city amputations, traditional mores and beckoning status symbols.

These empty dreams from the make-believe bedrooms their parents left them are the after-effects of television programs about the ideal white american family with black maids and latino janitors who are well train [sic] to make everyone and their bill collectors laugh at them and the people they represent.10

By giving literary voice to the new generations in New York, Pietri's work started the whole 'Nuyorican Poets' Experience'—Pietri himself, Miguel Algarin, Miguel Pino, Tato Laviera, Lucky CienFuegos, Bimbo Rivas, Sandra Maria Esteves, Americo Casiano, Martita Morales, and others. And although not all of them actually came from the Lower East Side, the neighborhood played a central role in their experience.11 In the mid-1970s, the opening of the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe on East Sixth Street, just off Avenue A, climaxed Loisa's 'golden age,' its gentrification flowering. It bespoke the fact that the community had by then reached rootedness in the neighborhood, and that this rootedness allowed it to nurture its own poets.

In works by the late Pino ('so please when I die... don't take me far away / keep me near by / take my ashes and scatter them thru out / the Lower East Side12) and Rivas ('A Job / to feed the time I spend adrift / in search for substance in the street / Awake at three a.m. / not knowing where or when the end / will come to my disdain13), one can feel the pulse of street life, the drama of everyday survival mingled with
a vivid creative vision – the raw materials of life in the ghetto giving body and breath to poetry. Introducing the Nuyorican poets, Algarin wrote:

The poet sees his function as a troubadour. He tells the tale of the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tension of bomba truth. Proclamations of hurt, of anger and hatred. Whirls of high-pitched singing. The voice of the street poet must amplify itself . . .

A poem describes the neighborhood of the writer for the reader . . . The poems of this anthology are in the dance of the moment. The Nuyorican poets have worked to establish the commonplace because they have wanted to locate their position on earth, the ground, the neighborhood, the environment. These are the places that the poet names for his readers.14

And it is precisely in this strict relationship between the poet and his/her environment, the neighborhood-as-community, that the fascination of Nuyorican poetry resides.15

In those years, Loisaida began to speak its voice not only through poetry, but through the visual arts. The crumbling walls of the quarter’s tenements erupted in an explosion of color. Mural artists, such as Eva Cockerof, John Weber, James Jannuzzi, Susan Caruso-Green, Alfredo Hernandez, Tabo Toral, Maria Dominguez, Lee Quinones, Chico, Tomie Arai, Alan Okada, and several others, a rather multi-ethnic group, contributed their wall paintings which evolved into a pure Lower East Side style. Either by themselves, or in conjunction with Charas or CityArts, they created murals whose titles reflected their convictions: Afro-Latin Coalition, New Birth, The Wall of Respect for Women, Chi Lai/Arriba/Rise UP!, Seeds for Progressive Change, Women Hold Up Half the Sky, Crear Una Sociedad Nueva, Arise from Oppression, Baile Bomba, Homenaje a Don Pedro, La Lucha Continua. These beautiful art works grew directly out of the community’s past and present, and by finding inspiration, materials, and types in the streets, were yet another expression of the kind of street culture that had always been typical of the neighborhood. What is more, they were collective, not only from a technical point of view (their conception and execution), but also in terms of content: they told the story of the whole community, often moving beyond the purely Puerto Rican boundaries to embrace all the communities that historically had comprised the Lower East Side. Other vital contributions were made by photographers, among them Marlis Mombre who documented the mid-1970s flowering with passionate engagement (and whose photographs illustrate this book).

Nor were little magazines,16 music festivals, and other community activities ignored. There were bomba ‘concerts’ at Charas and salsa dancing...
and collective. And it is not accidental, given the rising drug and crime rates, that the most frequent format to have appeared in recent years is the 'Rest in Peace' one – murals commissioned to Chico or to other local artists by the family and friends of a deceased. The mural in memoriam of Bimbo Rivas, with its riveting eyes, is one of the most loving, and it constitutes almost an epitaph to an entire period of Loisaida history.

But the whole history of the Lower East Side shows that the spirit of creative resistance runs strong in the neighborhood and, like the Italian Karst rivers that suddenly disappear underground only to burst through again miles and miles away, always reappears. The reopening in 1990 of the Nuyorican Poets’ Café on East Third Street off Avenue C, and the several social, artistic and political activities that are still going strong in the area are powerful signs of resistance and continuity. They may even be the beginning of a new stage in the Lower East Side’s never-ending story.

NOTES

This appendix is in memory of Miguel Piñero and Bimbo Rivas.

1 Quotations are from Amadeo Bordiga, ‘Fantasime Carlyliane,’ Il programma comunista (1953), now in Il battilocchio nella storia (Torino: Editing, 1992); and from Alessandro Portelli, Il testo che la voce. Oralità, letteratura e democrazia in America (Roma: Manifesto Libri, 1992).

2 The late poet-performer-activist Bimbo Rivas wrote the poem ‘Loisaida’ in 1974 and the term was immediately taken up by the community as an apt symbol of its reality and struggles. See Loisaida: Continent of Seven Colors (New York: Taller Latinoamericano, 1990); and Manuel Ramos Otero, The Point Blank Page, The Portable Lower East Side (1991).


5 Pedro Pietri, ‘Traffic Misdirector,’ in his Traffic Violations (Maplewood, NJ: Waterfront Press, 1983), p. 103. (During the 1980s, Jorge Brandon lived for a time in a squat-controlled building on East Eighth Street, before the city demolished the structure. Some squatters attribute the subsequent decline of Brandon’s health to the 1989 eviction/demolition of that building. Note added by Christopher Mele.)