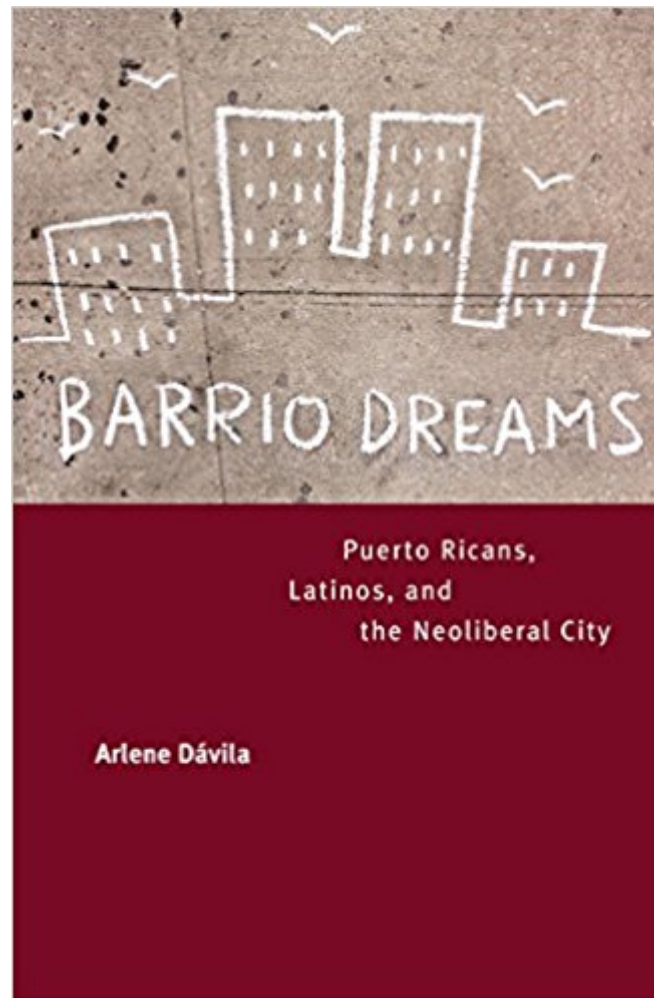




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Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, And The Neoliberal City



Synopsis

Arlene D'Ávila brilliantly considers the cultural politics of urban space in this lively exploration of Puerto Rican and Latino experience in New York, the global center of culture and consumption, where Latinos are now the biggest minority group. Analyzing the simultaneous gentrification and Latinization of what is known as El Barrio or Spanish Harlem, *Barrio Dreams* makes a compelling case that despite neoliberalism's race-and ethnicity-free tenets, dreams of economic empowerment are never devoid of distinct racial and ethnic considerations. D'Ávila scrutinizes dramatic shifts in housing, the growth of charter schools, and the enactment of Empowerment Zone legislation that promises upward mobility and empowerment while shutting out many longtime residents. Foregrounding privatization and consumption, she offers an innovative look at the marketing of Latino space. She emphasizes class among Latinos while touching on black-Latino and Mexican-Puerto Rican relations. Providing a unique multifaceted view of the place of Latinos in the changing urban landscape, *Barrio Dreams* is one of the most nuanced and original examinations of the complex social and economic forces shaping our cities today.

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"D'Ávila's keen insights into the politics of marketing ethnicity, community marginalization and class divisions cuts through neo-liberal postures to glaringly reveal the real issue - who will construct (and control) East Harlem's future? Well versed in the scholarship, D'Ávila has produced a book that is essential for understanding the increasingly important role and aspirations of Puerto Rican and Latino communities in New York's history."—Virginia Sánchez Korrol, author of *From Colonia*

to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City"Providing an expansive ethnographic portal into New York's famous 'El Barrio,' Davila documents the ways in which the neighborhood's Latino cultures can be commodified as a magnet for gentrification as well as providing an obstacle to it. An absorbing read providing a unique contemporary perspective on East Harlem."#151;Neil Smith, author of American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization"Unlike most ethnographers of the urban poor in search of authentic street experience, D  vila gives us an ethnography of power. With rich insights and sensitivity, she documents the pitched battles between developers, politicians, long-time residents, newcomers, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and African Americans over space, gentrification and cultural representation in East Harlem. D  vila peels back the many layers of local stories in order to reveal a complex, national story of resistance against urban neoliberalism."#151;Robin D. G. Kelley, author of Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination

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This book arrived promptly but it's not an easy read, it seems to me there was very little information and a whole lot of confusing fluff in this book. I dropped my class because this was the first book we

had to read and honestly I didn't learn one thing from it and I got about half way. It was too theoretical and wordy for me, I prefer my books to get to the point.

Had to get this book for class. A cool read.

It is no secret that our society continues to thrive and grow out of the economic structure of capitalism. Globalization provides more opportunities for free trade, and in the process our economy becomes increasingly privatized. These concepts of neo-liberalism, which require less government intervention, have been expressed through policies that deregulate 'big business' and further the gap between the affluent and the impoverished. Although many are bearing the fruits of this growing interconnection of trade and exchange, it comes at the expense of those who remain indefinitely at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Through her book *Barrio Dreams*, Arlene Davila uncovers many repercussions concerning the growing competitive housing development market in El Barrio or East/Spanish Harlem. Davila discusses the process of gentrification that has resulted in a pauperized community within New York City. The book aims to characterize the cultural and political interactions between different groups of Latinos as well as between those within the greater community. Their attempts to shape the future of their barrio while understanding their own cultural capital are also constantly revealed. Davila portrays the politics of marketing ethnicity as culture, and how it is treated as industry to further the process of gentrification. This book highlights the increasingly significant role of Latinos in American society and their struggles to gain power and authority in their communities. In areas such as New York City, where property value only has the ability to grow with time, impoverished neighborhoods such as East Harlem are susceptible to development from outside private companies. Government policies have further contributed to the gentrification in the Empowerment Zone in NYC and have opened the door for private development. Davila states, "Since the 1980's, similar policies involving tax incentives to the private sector, as in today's EZs, have consistently replaced publicly financed community-based development strategies as the dominant urban development strategy (pg 9)." In compliance with the philosophies of neo-liberalism, governmental organizations have shifted the responsibility of social housing onto private development organizations, which are solely driven by profitability. Unfortunately, this has rapidly decreased the amount of affordable housing in East Harlem. Local businesses and residents have been displaced and neglected as a result of this rapid gentrification. "East Harlem's real estate is not advertised in *El Diario* or other Latino and local newspapers...many believe, (they) intend to keep Latinos out of the area (pg 54)," said one of the area's residents. This process is a result of the

lack of representation from Latinos and residents of the community. Even those Latinos from the area who have shown upward mobility have been consequently displaced outside of East Harlem and thus do not intend to return. Spanish Harlem symbolizes the romanticized version of Latino culture and will unlikely relinquish its reputation of being underprivileged. Roberto, a union leader Davila interviewed, describes why he can not live in El Barrio: "I saw a lot of brutality...El Barrio will always be El Barrio, not the Puerto Rican Barrio, but the barrio of immigrants and the poor (pg 38)." Roberto's comments shine light on the fact that this neighborhood is not able to develop without providing outlets for upward mobility and representation. Part of reshaping the marginalized perception of El Barrio is being provided by activists in order to "secure the identity of (their) place (pg 24)." The current commercialization and outside marketing contradicts attempts and assertions that are being made to redefine the associations to the Latino identity. Many of the residents that reside in East Harlem are not a homogenous culture or ethnicity. Specifically, Puerto Ricans have struggled to assert their identity as a community in American society. As a group, they have attempted to downplay the stereotypes and negative associations that are being exaggerated by cultural marketers. In attempting to understand the own accurate identity, Puerto Ricans must be able to understand their significance in El Barrio. Puerto Ricans have been commonly linked with other ethnic groups such as African-Americans, who reside in West Harlem. Davila discusses the movement of Puerto Ricans to differentiate themselves as a functioning and successful ethnic group. Mexicans, who are the fastest growing immigrant population in the United States, experience similar struggles of re-signification in East Harlem. They have tried to establish themselves as "worthy and hard-working immigrants," and separate themselves from the marginalized reputation of other Latinos in the area (pg 156). Davila cites one man who commented, "We Mexicans are hard workers and don't depend on welfare as do Dominicans...many Mexicans are deported because they are illegal. Each month, Dominicans are deported because they've been jailed for selling drugs, committing robberies, crimes and fraud (pg 172)." The US depends on Mexicans to fill the lowest positions in the workforce - those jobs that require extensive manual labor for very little pay - but our government and policies prevent these immigrants from gaining rights and representation in their communities. The Mexican Day Parade was one example of a culturally-specific event that was marketed and organized by non-Mexicans for corporate interests. Davila emphasizes that the control of such cultural events by marketers who do not represent the Mexican community actually undermines the purpose of such ethnic celebrations. Further, she stated that the outrage of Mexicans in such situations "asserted ethnicity over industry and challenged the inequities in the production and consumption of ethnic events (pg 167)." Artists have become catalysts for publicly

marketing the real Latino identity with images that represent both the past and present. This initiative contradicts the growing commercialization of Latino culture geared toward economic gains in the EZ. The author adds, "Heritage is ancillary to tourism, put in the service viable tourist districts containing cultural, entertainment, dining, and recreational attractions (98)." The various cultural projects in East Harlem that would further allow the appropriate exposure of Latino heritage, such as el Museo del Barrio and the Edison Project, were centered around tourism, economic interests, and employment. This only furthered the process of gentrification in East Harlem. To inhibit this process, artists began to show an effort to represent Latino aspirations and dreams through non-profitable murals and graffiti. Their actions signify that ethnicity is more than just a business venture. Davila posits, "The fact is that current ethnic and cultural identifications are being concurrently fueled by a variety of political and commercial interests, and are thus not about to fade, as long as they are profitable, politically marketable, and viable (pg 214)." Thus, the need for further artistic expression of the actual Latino ethnicity is vital. Through her book, Arlene Davila clearly represents the position and role of many Latinos in American society today. Neoliberal policies further prevent these groups from taking hold of their community and ethnicity, and allowing private companies to consolidate affordable housing. This book can only shine light on the rapid gentrification of all cities around the country. It is difficult not to think of the re-urbanization process going on in Durham over the last five years, and in doing so I hope those involved think of places like East Harlem. Many of the same efforts to improve the image are fueled by economic interests, however without considering the history and diversity of this culturally-rich city, the future of Downtown Durham will continue to be tainted.

"What's in a name? History! The African American community has their community in Harlem; the Dominicans are beginning to carve out a space for their people...Spanish Harlem is the soul and heartbeat of the Puerto Rican people...groups survive by controlling space and maintaining a viable and visible presence..." (p. 73). This statement, made by an activist and poet during a debate on the use of the term "El Barrio" to reference East Harlem, touches on one of the main issues that Arlene Davila so brilliantly expresses in her book, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*. This rich ethnography focuses on the issue of space, particularly in the neighborhoods of El Barrio, or Spanish Harlem, located in the East Harlem district. She brings to light the cultural politics involved in the definition of space and its subsequent appropriation, as well as the commodification and marketability of ethnicity and race. Through extensive research, that includes interviews with local neighborhood residents, observations and participations at community

meetings and organizations, and public hearings, Davila is able to put together a magnificent work that documents the complex effects of culture, space, commodification, representation and gentrification of space and the residents in El Barrio. In doing so, she is able to call "attention to the symbolic and representational processes that have tied race, ethnicity, and place in East Harlem within the public imagination...account[ing] for the value of these representations in the symbolic economy of contemporary cities" (p. 24). El Barrio, a growing urban, Latino community is the foreground for Davila's examination of the politics of culture, urban space, gentrification of neighborhoods, and "the neoliberal policies that favor privatization and consumption" (p.2). Davila raises important questions in her work by focusing on the increasing attempts to create social change in urban communities through the introductions of new developments, businesses, museums, charter schools and tourist sites. In the chapters in her book, she devotes much time analyzing the complexities surrounding such gentrification issues, bringing in to play the resistance of the local residents against developers. One particular impressive aspect of Davila's work, touches on the difficulties local residents face when they buy into the developer's ideas of programs that include home ownership and museums. Many residents agree that the image of Spanish Harlem as "poor, crime-ridden, and underdeveloped" sheds a negative light on their community (p.115). Developers, craftily pointing to the lack of value and marketability of Puerto Rican heritage or "Puerto Ricanness" reinforce the existing stereotyped image on El Barrio as unpopular (p.114). Yet as Davila shows, the support of local residents of new projects can sometimes in fact lend a helping hand to the process of gentrification, resulting in residents jeopardizing their stake and claim in their own neighborhoods. In other words, "by supporting consumption and entertainment projects, such as museums and home-ownership programs, residents are furthering gentrification and increasing prices in East Harlem, thereby hindering their own future claims to the area" (p. 4). The Edison Project that Davila describes in her fourth chapter highlights the attempts of private organizations to claim stake in the urban communities of El Barrio, telling residents that "the project would educate residents about their own common heritage" while creating avenues "that would provide jobs and place the neighborhood on the map" (p. 129). But the price of these incentives was not free. Developers used culture as "the bait for a larger project for privatizing social services and further commodifying place in El Barrio" (p.129). Arlene Davila does an excellent job in bringing to light the complexities involved in the processes of gentrification and culture consumption and the desires of residents to reclaim their neighborhoods through highlighting their cultural values. Another fascinating aspect of Davila's work touches on the issues of the relationships between the Puerto Rican residents of El Barrio and African Americans. Davila points out that both African Americans

and Puerto Ricans share a common history, yet the introduction of a cultural space and the desire for "local control of resources" and "local electoral politics...has polarized the groups' relationship since the start of urban renewal projects and still mediates debates over space and development in the area" (p. 19). The advancement of African Americans in the political sphere is another point of tension between the two groups, as well as the dominant leadership roles of blacks in the urban development sectors. Additionally, Davila describes the tensions that exist between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. The rapid growth of the Mexican population in El Barrio is causing the "rapid transformations in the area's demographics and landscapes" resulting in "tensions between Mexican and Puerto Rican populations, raced to their different histories, citizenship status, and/or self-conception as residents, racialized minorities, or temporary immigrants" (p. 21). While illuminating, the relationships and tensions that arise between the Puerto Ricans, African Americans and Mexicans alike can sometimes be messy. Their fight for control over space and their commonalities as minorities, whose culture is being commodified by developers and outside organizations, all tie in and relate to one another in a complex web of defining space and cultural values. As a results, the neighborhoods in which they all reside are slowly changing, reflecting the backdrops of multiculturalism, neoliberalism and globalization that form a common thread between the various issues and projects that Davila discusses in her work. Barrio Dreams is an exceptional piece of work that illuminates the debates and issues surrounding the ever increasing urbanization and gentrification of one of New York's most well known neighborhoods. Arlene Davila is truly a genius at work!

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