

## **PASEO BORICUA: IDENTITY, SYMBOLS AND OWNERSHIP**

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### **PASEO BORICUA: IDENTIDAD, SÍMBOLOS Y PROPIEDAD**

#### **RESUMEN:**

Este artículo es sobre Paseo Boricua, un área comercial demarcada por dos banderas de acero que representan la identidad puertorriqueña en Humboldt Park, Chicago. Las banderas y los establecimientos tienen la función de reclamar este espacio como puertorriqueño. El propósito de este artículo es analizar la relación entre los sistemas de propiedad legalmente reconocidos y los métodos simbólicos para reclamar la pro-

piedad empleados por aquellos que se identifican en el área con la cultura puertorriqueña. El artículo se basa en entrevistas personales, observaciones y clips de periódicos, entre otros documentos, para abordar la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo se pueden usar la identidad y los símbolos para hacer reclamos colectivos de propiedad?

**KEYWORDS:** PASEO BORICUA, PUERTORRIQUEÑOS, GENTRIFICACIÓN, DESARROLLO COMUNITARIO, PROPIEDAD.

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## Introduction

In this work, I argue that Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park Chicago have attempted to construct symbolic forms of ownership instead of individualized ideals that are common sense in capitalist society. As will be demonstrated throughout this paper, the so-called free-market, far from constituting a natural force in human interaction, is thrust onto communities through the invention and enforcement of private property rights by nation-states. Put simply, where orthodoxy depicts market exchange as natural and inevitable, this analysis maintains that market economics relies on systems of private property legitimated by broader social systems (especially discourses surrounding conceptions of “rights” of ownership) and the various enforcement arms of the national state. These systems, furthermore, are far from being in the assumed state of resolution from which positive economists construct their developmental theories. On the contrary, economic systems should be seen as vague and ambiguous complexes, ever to remain in a constant state of flux and contestation. The supposedly natural and all-encompassing internal

laws of market economies should, therefore, be seen as misinterpretations or fixes of the temporary and instable processes of structuration that are largely based on the decisions of the nation-state and are contestable—and therefore malleable and re-definable—at the ground-level (Giddens 1986).

In this paper, I argue that declaring space through symbology is a form of not only declaring ownership, but it is effectively a form of property—communal property. Conceptions of property rights and ownership are offered here as a complementary framework to expand the work of other scholars who have extensively studied and written about *Paseo Boricua*, a commercial and cultural corridor in Humboldt Park marked by two gateways in the shape of Puerto Rican flags. About 23 percent of Puerto Ricans in the city of Chicago lived in the Humboldt Park neighborhood in 2010 (Cintrón et al. 2012).

The function of *Paseo Boricua* has been described in length as a form of declaring a Puerto Rican space (Alicea 2001, Cruz 2007, Flores-Gonzalez 2001, Pérez, 2004, Ramos-Zayas, 2003, Rúa 2012). Gina Pérez (2004) argues that *Paseo Boricua* and the flags are one of the many

strategies that the Puerto Rican people use to resist the negative consequences of the kind of economic development that results in displacement. Based on this analysis, we might argue that *Paseo Boricua* and the flags are a tool to express Puerto Rican belonging to an urban (and thus rapidly changing) place, maintain cultural identity, and exert agency in the context of a racially and ethnically segregated city. Chicago is highly segregated by race—blacks, Latinos, and whites largely live in different neighborhoods. This segregation by race and ethnicity has profound implications for unequal access to quality healthcare, education, employment, and housing. When conditions improve in a neighborhood, gentrification might serve as a tool of (re)segregation.

The basis for declaring space, according to Rúa, is the development of a “grounded *identidad*” (identity) defined as “demands and struggles over place and memory” (162). In her book, Rúa explains how the Puerto Rican identity in Chicago has emerged from the struggles of the Puerto Rican people and continuous displacement from urban renewal projects and gentrification. As a result, Puerto Ricans have framed their identity through resistance and *Paseo Boricua* and its flags are a material representation of the nexus between identity formation and placemaking. Instead of identity,

Ana Ramos-Zayas’ book (2003) presents “national performances” as a form of “survival” for Puerto Ricans. Beyond narrow understandings of nationalism (e.g. flag waving), Ramos-Zayas conceptualizes national performances as practices. Every day, Puerto Ricans express resistance to issues of class, race, and space (specifically, they react against the process of gentrification). It is in this context that Ramos-Zayas aptly observes, “Puerto Ricans shared an intimate understanding of the conflictual meaning of the flags” (209) (And, I will add, *Paseo Boricua*, as a whole).

Professors Pérez, Rúa, and Ramos Zayas, among a number of other Puerto Rican scholars, have discussed how this claim is reinforced by the flags of steel that act as gateways to *Paseo Boricua*—along with the businesses, nonprofits, and a variety of cultural symbols on the street—that evoke this feeling and materiality of a Puerto Rican space. The materiality of the flags is not only due to the representation of Puerto Rican laborers (many of whom worked in the steel mills when they first came) but piping and welding used in the flags themselves. Through the use of symbols, the physical space becomes claimed. This declaration over space, in turn, reinforces Puerto Rican national performances, grounded in space, of those who live there. It sends a clear signal that the Puerto Rican com-

munity is distinct and unique, but also that it is part of the city of Chicago and that it intends to remain so even in the face of gentrification.

Besides claiming a physical space in Chicago, Puerto Ricans are actively trying to reclaim their voices and take up a “metaphorical space” as a group of people who deserve to be heard and recognized. Struggles are easier to endure, and victories can be enjoyed together as a group. The only way Puerto Ricans can remain in the face of gentrification is if they declare “ownership” over space. This research seeks to construct a framework to interpret Puerto Rican narratives surrounding ownership in Humboldt Park, Chicago. In this article, I argue that Puerto Ricans in the Humboldt Park neighborhood have employed the Puerto Rican identity as a form of constructing symbolic ownership over space. This ownership is not individualized; it is communal. This kind of ownership stands in opposition to the commodified ideals held as common sense within the broader nation-state. In that light, this paper asks: How can identity and symbols be used to make collective claims of ownership?

To answer this question, in Part I, conceptualization of gentrification, rent gap theory, placemaking, and the right to the city will be discussed as part of the theoretical background.

Part II investigates the creation of *Paseo Boricua* and its role in directly creating a community identity and claims to ownership through symbols. This section uses newspaper clips and conversations with residents and community leaders to investigate how people feel and talk about the installation of the monumental flags in *Paseo Boricua*. In addition, this section discusses how the flags are symbolically used to claim ownership over space. Finally, in Part III, lessons will be drawn about the importance of *Paseo Boricua* as a tool for creating a Puerto Rican “rootedness” to place in order to stem the process of gentrification. I will discuss the importance of acknowledging cultural and historical ideals and how these claims move us away from the dominant ideology of the value of a thing or a place by only acknowledging exchange-values (Harvey 1983).

### *1. Theoretical background*

This section will discuss how the uneven development of capitalist society might cause gaps in rent value and potential value of an exchangeable commodity—land, housing, or commercial property—and, thus, result in gentrifica-

tion. This section will also discuss how, through placemaking, everyday people challenge the dominant and longstanding traditions of individual property rights. Urban development tends to frame market economics as being undergirded by natural systems of private property rights, the ubiquity of market exchange, and the invisible balancing act of individualized competitive motivations. This article seeks instead to understand cultural groups' diverse perspectives surrounding conceptions of ownership while simultaneously interrogating the means by which these groups come to terms with and contest the impositions of dominant social groups on their communities through placemaking practices—including gentrification.

Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” in 1964 in her book *London: Aspects of Change*. She defined the process as when the middle class, block by block, transforms the homes of the working class to the point that the character of entire neighborhoods has been changed. In this process, working class people are displaced because they are no longer able to afford the upgraded residences.

Neil Smith's (1979) rent gap theory of gentrification explains why some areas gentrify. If a gap exists between the current and potential ground rents (on the piece of land only), then the area might gentrify. For Smith, a rent gap is consti-

tuted by “the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use” (22). Thus, there is the actual rent—based on its present use—and a potential rent based on a potential “highest and best” use. The disparity between the two is the rent gap. Many urban theorists, including neoclassical economists as well as Marxists, have noted that when rents that could have been extracted from a given location become lower, property owners do not have any interest in repairing and maintaining the buildings (Bourassa 1993, Smith 1979). Therefore, the area starts experiencing further and further disinvestment. When the rents are sufficiently low, speculators start holding properties for future redevelopment.

As soon as the future land rent sets in, capital might start flowing into the area, properties in mild disrepair might be redeveloped, and those which fell into complete disrepair might be torn down and new buildings take their place. The end result of this process might be the same regardless if redevelopment or new development takes place—the people who used to inhabit the area are less likely to be able to pay the new rents and therefore may be displaced. This theory shows how investment in capitalist cities could be in many cases cyclical. An inner-city neighborhood could experience

investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment in a matter of decades. Smith's theory should not be taken in a deterministic way—the existence of a rent gap does not guarantee gentrification, and socioeconomic and cultural conditions might interfere with the process. In the case of Puerto Rican Chicago, we will see how Puerto Ricans have tried to halt gentrification through the making of a Puerto Rican space.

In this article, I will show that the role of placemaking in the creation of a Puerto Rican enclave has been key to both the development and survival of the Puerto Rican community. The Puerto Rican identity is both a tool to develop and a tool to avoid displacement. Placemaking in Humboldt Park accentuates the Puerto Rican identity through the use of flags, vibrant colors, murals, Spanish words and names, and a vast array of symbols (e.g., the *coquí*, a local frog celebrated on the island of Puerto Rico). The culture and identity of people, when manifested in the urban built environment by residents, business owners, non-profits, and others, especially when coming from the grassroots, is known as placemaking (Thomas 2016, Walljasper 2007). In this particular case, placemaking becomes a way of claiming ownership over space. Henri Lefebvre explained how city dwellers produce and reproduce space through their everyday practices. Hu-

man creation of social meaning shapes the physical landscape (Lefebvre 1992). Lefebvre believed that people could transcend capitalism by claiming their “right to the city.” The practice of placemaking can become a way of challenging the view that space is not only physical, but it is also abstract, being mental and social.

Despite economists' concerns of the potential for homogenous development, this paper argues that it is critical that we come to terms with the empirical fact that communities' economies are built around historically contingent and path-dependent traditions and evolving cultures (Hodgson and Knudsen 2013). Claims to place vary from the economic depictions of sameness to the rich array of shared traditions, histories, and modes of expression in general, including the imagined homogeneity imposed by popular forms of media like television programming and news reports or by social classifications (Bourdieu 1984). Wryly speaking, we might say that this paper seeks to problematize the imposed narratives of sameness by positivist commentators vis-à-vis the empirical truth of *difference* between communities, cultures, and, indeed, economies, and how these are manifested in space. One clear example of placemaking through the accentuation of cultural difference is the gateway flags of

*Paseo Boricua*. The next section discusses their history and meaning.

## 2. *Paseo Boricua*

### *Monumental flags*

The Puerto Ricans' status as a diaspora and group of colonial subjects who have been constructing a community in exile, in constant change and mobility, has been discussed by a number of Puerto Rican scholars (Duany 2002, Flores-Gonzalez 2001). Diaspora refers to those Puerto Ricans who live in the United States (Whalen and Vazquez-Hernandez 2005). Puerto Rican migration accelerated after World War II when commercial planes started to fly from San Juan, Puerto Rico to New York City and later on to Chicago. Hundreds of thousands of working-class men and women migrated in search of employment and a better life. These diasporic forces have specific social and spatial manifestations in Chicago tied to gentrification and the need to create a *pedacito de patria* (a piece of motherland) (Flores-Gonzalez 2001, Pérez, 2004, Ramos-Zayas, 2003). Specifically, *Paseo Boricua* (with its flags of steel) and Humboldt Park have become a kind of national territory and politically sovereign state that, in the face of neighborhood change, according to activists, must be protected so as to protect Puerto Ri-

can rights, citizenship, and communal ownership. The existence of an expansive Puerto Rican symbology as a form of social and political power makes this a compelling case for studying how the production of symbols affects the abstract forces of market accumulation and vice versa.

The two giant metal Puerto Rican flags function as a gateway for a seven-block corridor of Puerto Rican businesses, restaurants, and non-profit organizations—this strip is considered by those living inside and outside of the area to be the heart of Chicago's Puerto Rican community (Flores-Gonzalez 2001, Rúa 2012, Pérez, 2004, Ramos-Zayas, 2003). These wavy flags, whose steel was fabricated by Chicago Ornamental Iron Co., each weigh about 45 tons, rise to 56 feet in the air, and extend 59 feet across the street (Flores-Gonzalez 2001). They stretch for a whole mile on Division Street, between Western and California Avenues (Guerrero 2003). According to activists, they are the largest flags in the world that are not made of cloth. These flags were made of physically powerful steel to commemorate Puerto Rican industrial workers who first arrived to Chicago and worked long hours in the hot steel mills (Cruz 2007).

*Paseo Boricua* includes a Puerto Rican Walk of Fame resembling the Hollywood Walk of Fame and features the names of

distinguished Puerto Ricans like Lucecita Benitez, Tito Puente, El Gran Combo, Andy Montañez, Chucho Valdés, Calle 13, and many others. The area has many street murals that date back to the 1980s, painted by Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican artists. Street banners showcase the three heritage pillars of Puerto Ricans: the sun (indigenous), *el vegigante* or carnival mask (African), and *la garita* or watch tower (Spanish).

As part of a sidewalk beautification project, 78 large pots were placed, each decorated with paintings of one of the 78 town flags of the Puerto Rican island. The strip has about 16 small plazas with stone tables and benches for public use. At the tables, visitors can wait for the bus, play dominoes, or simply chat with a neighbor. In addition, some of the building façades of affordable housing projects like La Estancia Apartments and Teresa Roldán Senior Apartments have been built to look like the architecture of Old San Juan—with pastel colors, wrought-iron balconies, and tile-roofed buildings. *Supermercado La Municipal* (Supermarket “The Township”) is made to resemble a Spanish fortress in San Juan. Many businesses are named after rural towns in Puerto Rico such as Yauco, Rincón, Jayuya, and others. The flags of *Paseo Boricua* make the area the “only officially recognized Puerto Rican community area” in the United States (Guerrero

2003).

(see Figure 1 – p. 133)

Construction of the monumental flags was completed in 1995, and dedication occurred on January 6th (Three Kings Day) of that year. They were created under the leadership of Billy Ocasio, Alderman of the 26th Ward at the time. The cost of the flags is estimated to be about \$450,000 and an additional \$750,000 was spent on street enhancement projects (Newman 1995). It was determined that the project would generate between \$70,000 and \$80,000 per year, which means that the total investment of \$1.2 million would be recovered in about 16 years (it has been more than 23 years already). According to DeStefano and Partners, the architecture company that designed the monument, the flags were created to last more than 500 years. Their fantastic ingenuity won an award from the American Institute of Architects as well as six other prestigious awards.

#### *Flags bringing hope to a marginalized community*

Even before the monumental flags were installed there were a number of Puerto Rican restaurants and shops on Division Street. Thus, there were already notions that Division Street was a “Puerto Rican space,” according to politicians and activists who were involved in its



creation. But the socioeconomic and physical appearance of Division Street propagated the notions of an undesirable space, not only among the mainstream but also among the Puerto Rican community.

Urban scholars have long discussed the relationship between suburbanization, white flight, and exclusion, processes that have contributed to poverty concentration, hyper-segregation and, in many cases, downward socioeconomic mobility since the 1960s and 1970s (De Souza Briggs and Wilson 2005, Downs 1973, Smith 1979). Division Street has experienced several economic shifts in stability and decline. Many Ukrainian and Polish immigrants settled in the area between Western and California Avenues—thus Division Street had many businesses ethnically targeting the residents of the area (Padilla 1987). But as white flight occurred during the following decades, Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, and other Eastern European bakeries and grocery stores started to close. These were later transformed into Puerto Rican bakeries and bodegas, and the same was experienced by hardware and retail shops, restaurants, and so forth. While the original features remained in the buildings (say, ovens, like in the case of Café Colao), the identity of the business, as well as the clientele, completely turned around in a few decades. Change

in the neighborhood started before the 1960s, with the oldest Puerto Rican restaurant in *Paseo Boricua* being the Latin American Restaurant and Lounge, which opened for business in 1958. With the demographic and socioeconomic change, the commercial district also started to experience decline (Betancur 2002).

Thus, before the city investment in the 1990s, the inner-city blocks where *Paseo* is located were considered a sign of failure. Arson was a familiar experience for Puerto Ricans, and it carried a sense of normalcy (Alicea 2001; Pérez 2004; Rúa 2012). Figure 2 shows how six census tracts around *Paseo* in 1990 experienced a population decline of about 6 percent from the previous decade, high vacancy rates (14 percent), high poverty levels (44 percent), and high unemployment (17 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau). Eduardo Arocho, executive director of the Division Street Development Association, explains in a personal conversation that many of the businesses in *Paseo* at the time were just “surviving.” All these things were reflected in what is the predominant image of the disinvested inner-city: the abandoned, filthy, and crime-ridden city block.

Gangs such as the Latin Kings, Maniac Latin Disciples, Insane Spanish Cobras, and Imperial Gangsters, among others, dominated this inner-city territory. Occa-

sionally tensions between gangs and community members emerged. In March 1996, for example, about 75 residents who were critical of the gang violence and their ways of taking over the streets, held signs that read: “Hey, Hey, Go Away, Gangs and Drugs, No Way” (Chicago Tribune 1996). The rally was organized after the police arrested 44 suspected gang members in mid-March of that year. “We own these streets. We pay the house notes (sic) and the property taxes,” a 20-year resident commented to the Chicago Tribune on how the community needed to take the streets back (Chicago Tribune 1996).

The proliferation of organized crime, along with the 1966 and the 1977 riots (which both erupted as protests against police brutality), further compounded families’ fear about living in the area (Pérez 2004). This fear of crime, for a very long time, was reinforced by real estate developers who avoided the neighborhood and categorized it as “blighted.” The banking industry, through redlining, discouraged buyers from moving to the area, depressing housing prices even further (Betancur et al. 2001). And as more white families, and later on middle class Puerto Ricans, left *el barrio* (the hood) for safer communities and better schools, these problems were exacerbated. The Puerto Rican community was described by community

leaders themselves as “fragmented.”

All these conditions constituted forms of “divisions” according to key informants. Even though Studs Terkel stated at the beginning of his 1967 book, *Division Street: America*, that, “although there is a Division Street in Chicago, the title of this book is metaphorical” (xxv)—he probably would have enjoyed learning that, for the Puerto Rican community, *La Division* (the Division) was more than a metaphor. Eduardo Arocho, Executive Director of the Division Street Business Development Association, spoke in a personal conversation about what the metaphor means, as well as the transformation of *La Division* to *Paseo Boricua*,

We also have the challenge of the history of Division Street, *La Division* because I see them as two separate places. *La Division* and *Paseo Boricua* are two different places, but they occupy the same space...The history of “*La Division*” is gang, violence, drugs and all of the bad *cositas que la gente le gusta hablar* (little things that people like to say). *Paseo Boricua* is this new place that we are trying to create out of that history.

Flores (2001) explains how *La Division* changed its identity to become *Paseo Boricua*:

While “*La Division*” has been the location of Puerto Rican economic, political and cultural expression for the past thirty years, it has been an unorganized space with unmarked and ambiguous boundaries that made it difficult for outsiders

to distinguish it as a Puerto Rican community. This left the neighborhood prey to urban development and gentrification. By contrast, *Paseo Boricua* is a planned and conscientious effort that transforms "*La Division*" into a recognizable economic, political and cultural space for Puerto Ricans and clearly demarcates the boundaries of the community. "*La Division*" contains the spirit of the Puerto Rican community, but *Paseo Boricua* is the concrete reaffirmation of Puerto Rican collective identity in Chicago and their will to stay put (9).

As Flores explains, prior to *Paseo Boricua*, *La Division* was a non-organized and unmarked area. *Paseo Boricua* became the central space through which community leaders began to realize the goal of advocating hope and self-determination. Even further, I argue, planning the space in a deliberate manner had the effect of claiming ownership, and thereby fighting gentrification. Today, 2010 statistics (see Figure 2 – p. 133) reveal that the area, in some respects, has improved; for example, poverty levels have gone down 31 percent, and unemployment is down 9 percent (U.S. Census Bureau). On the other hand, vacancy rates of 17 percent speak to how the 2008 foreclosure crisis affected the area. Population decline is still a challenge in post-industrial cities like Chicago: from 2000 to 2010 the six census blocks around *Paseo* showed a population decline of 18 percent. Specifically, within the last decade,

the Puerto Rican population went from 9,771 to 6,228, which represents a drop of 32 percent.

### *Halt gentrification*

*Paseo Boricua* has many characteristics that made it susceptible to gentrification: its proximity to downtown, highway access, buildings of good quality, and, most importantly, blocks zoned for commercial use. Additionally, east of Western there are highly successful businesses that mostly belong to gentrifiers, LLCs and other types of corporations. This area in the 1990s was predominantly Puerto Rican prior to gentrification. As Hipolito Roldán, Chief Executive Officer and President of Hispanic Housing Development Corporation put it:

The city is growing to become a Greater Loop, and while many poor neighborhoods have been losing population, there is a concentration of capital and land spilling out to our neighborhoods. There has been a great competition from yuppies.

At the Puerto Rican Agenda retreat that Billy Ocasio convened in 1993, Puerto Rican leaders came to the realization that Puerto Ricans needed to establish a place once and for all, after being displaced by urban renewal projects from Lincoln Park and the Near North Side during the 1960s and 1970s (Padilla 1993; Fernandez 2012; Alicea 2001) and, more

recently, the West Town community area during the 1990s (Betancur 2002). But more than Lincoln Park, Old Town, and Near North Side, historically, West Town (where officially *Paseo Boricua* is located as per the 77 Chicago community areas) has been the community area with the most Puerto Ricans (see Figure 3 – p. 134).

Puerto Rican leaders and politicians wanted to create a permanent symbol for Puerto Rican culture in the community, capable of sending a strong signal of “who owned the area,” as described by a member of the Puerto Rican Agenda, a collective of Puerto Rican leaders in the Humboldt Park area. The chair of the Puerto Rican Agenda at the time, Pablo Medina, at a retreat held on May 2014 reminded everyone about the purpose of that first retreat in 1993:

Puerto Ricans have been nomads in the city. The idea would be that we would be following the Poles and the other groups that moved in and moved out. We all know that if you do not control the land, you will be displaced. Some thought that we would end up in Wisconsin! We started thinking about coordinating our strategies. We wanted to coordinate our capacities. We have been meeting the first Saturday of every month. I have not seen a group more faithful to this vision. We are still here, but now the forces are reappearing that want to move us.

José López, a long-term community

leader and visionary added to Medina’s point,

How do we actually lay claim to that area? —this was the discussion at Roberto Clemente High School in 1993. The flags, the Institute for Puerto Ricans Arts and Culture...all came out of that. By 2003 Division Street had the most Puerto Rican owned buildings, at that time there were 120 establishments, 10 of them Puerto Rican restaurants. We have more Puerto Rican restaurants than anywhere in the U.S. I think we ought to talk about critical space. Others may talk about social justice. This is the last area that has a Puerto Rican space. For me critical space and place are important.

Puerto Rican leaders seem to be in agreement that the official creation of *Paseo Boricua*, with the city of Chicago’s installment of two steel Puerto Rican flags acting as gateways, acts as a physical and mental barrier against gentrifiers. These gateways inadvertently serve to defend the space and claim ownership. A community leader further explained, “

My view is that you need the mechanism to go out there and to tell them and say, “We have a map, we are here,” and then another mechanism is of just keeping people (the gentrifiers) out.”

*Paseo Boricua*, then, became a strategic focus for the strengthening of the Puerto Rican community, the anchoring of space that gave it recognition and thus a place to marshal the forces against gentrifica-

tion. Although the blocks around *Paseo Boricua* have been losing Puerto Rican population, a concentration of Puerto Ricans in Chicago still remains and form a “critical space,” as José López puts it. The six census tracts around *Paseo* experienced a peak on their Puerto Rican population in 1980 (47 percent), and then a steady decline—in 2010, 26 percent of the population was Puerto Rican. The gentrified area had a total Puerto Rican population of 25 percent in 1970 and today is about 5 percent (see Figure 4 – p. 135).

### 3. Discussion

*Paseo Boricua* is considered “a city within a city” by activists like Enrique Salgado because it serves multiple roles as a residential neighborhood, a business district, and a space “owned” by the Puerto Rican community. The creation of *Paseo Boricua* has been ambitious from the beginning—the goal, as stated by community leader José López, to “make our community the heartbeat of the Puerto Rican diaspora.” Personally, as a Puerto Rican of the diaspora myself, *Paseo* was the only place in the city where I could experience my own culture. *Paseo* gave me a deep sense of belonging, not only in terms of the aesthetics (colors, murals, etc.) and the things I

could consume (e.g. food) but also the people (familiar faces, language, and way of interacting). A piece of Puerto Rico was produced and reproduced not only by the physical space but also the mental and social space.

Many Puerto Rican ethnic enclaves in the United States from El Barrio (NYC) to Williamsburg (Brooklyn) to Wynwood (Miami) have been historically formed as a socio-spatial unit dedicated to produce and maintain Puerto Ricanness in the face of displacement, whether from the island of Puerto Rico or from the gentrifying communities of the mainland U.S. But while U.S. and mainstream ideologies of individual property and market-oriented urban redevelopment have pushed to facilitate the accumulation of capital, community leaders in Humboldt Park have decided to come to the defense of *el barrio*. *Paseo Boricua* and the construction of the flags could be seen as a form of “Latino Urbanism”—a contribution to the everyday landscape and cultural imagery of the city from and for Latinos with the purpose of resisting a long history of racialization, marginalization, and inequality in the United States (Diaz and Torres 2012). And, I further argue, it constitutes the very essence of property through the mixing of labor, a conception that has not been acknowledged by gentrifiers (who, in the case of Humboldt Park, are mostly white) and

others who have more purchasing capacity than those of the working-class (mostly Puerto Ricans). It is not recognized that *puertorriqueñidad* (Puerto Ricanness), this shared sense of territoriality, made devalued land valued again. With the flags of *Paseo Boricua* activists and other *puertorriqueños* (Puerto Ricans) have created value without creating a surplus that deprives others of social and economic benefits.

In this essay, I have proposed that *Paseo* is the historical product of a number of intersecting factors, and arguably it was created as a symbol of ownership over space. As Billy Ocasio points out, "The flags, we needed them." The installation of the Puerto Rican flags in 1995 represented a new chapter for the community—a Puerto Rican marker that slowed down gentrification and brought hope and much needed economic development into these inner-city blocks. The construction of the flags created an idealized version of Puerto Ricans in the city of Chicago and beyond—unified, hopeful, proud, and capable of self-empowerment and ownership.

Twenty years later, *Paseo* is a true mix of Puerto Rican businesses, community services, and affordable housing projects. There seems to be, to the naked eye, a disparity between the discourses of business owners of what *Paseo* should be—a place that is capable of attracting tourists

(exchange values)—and the views of the community, more generally, who would like to have a place for community facilities like schools, health services, and nonprofit organizations (use values). An important fact to note here is that about one-third of the commercial space on *Paseo* is occupied by non-profit organizations (non-commodified space).

The rich history of *Paseo Boricua* makes it a useful case study that provides insights for understanding the complex politics around identity within a gentrifying space and how people claim ownership. The flags of steel were conceived as a mechanism of ethnic empowerment, ownership, and identity formation for the community at large. Counter-discourses that contest displacement and embrace claims of equality, social justice, and fairness for the Puerto Rican people, are created and re-created through what *Paseo Boricua* means symbolically.

As discussed, *Paseo Boricua* represents many things to Puerto Ricans living in Chicago, but especially for those who have fought for its establishment and for those to whom the monument is part of their everyday lives. This is why, more than ever, Puerto Rican leaders along *Paseo* feel that it is their responsibility to ensure a favorable outcome for the community at large: development without displacement. Along these lines, they have promoted various affordable hous-

ing projects in *Paseo*. As Pablo Medina, former chair of the Puerto Rican Agenda reflected about the potential loss of Puerto Rican control over the space:

We are almost 20 years later, still here, alive and kicking. We want to bring development without displacement. But who has done that? We have done that! We are the developers, without displacing people. The Puerto Rican Agenda is an example that, "*que si se puede!*" (yes, we can!). And as long as we are part of the have-nots we will be having the same issues. *La lucha continua!* (the struggle continues). Having the same issues doesn't mean that we have not done anything. We have created affordable housing, businesses...we have grown! We have done all that without any money. So, if you want to preserve a community: do not stay home! The best thing that we have done is moving the resources of our community. We are community-based.

Today, more than 20 years after the installment of the flags of steel, members of the Puerto Rican Agenda keep organizing against gentrification. A number of them have recently bought properties along the commercial corridor and are planning to transform them into spaces for community—new businesses, art centers, and housing projects will thrive on the remaining vacant and foreclosed properties. The case of *Paseo Boricua* shows that displacement is not a given and that gentrification is not natural—people can organize against it by claim-

ing ownership over space.

From the sections above, we can see the tensions that exist between claims to legitimacy and claims to property. On the one hand you have newcomers trying to buy private and individual property with the capital they have at their disposal, raising property values for everyone. On the other hand, you have old-timers trying to claim social ownership, mostly through the installation of public gateways, displaying flags, and painting murals. The case of *Paseo Boricua* guided my analysis because it questions the legitimacy of private property for exchange-values by claiming a Puerto Rican space for use-values. *Paseo* has been used by community leaders to communicate that "*Paseo* belongs to us." In other words, Puerto Ricans are claiming their legitimacy in that space. They are saying, "this is our property," even though legally it might belong to the public (this is a monument paid for with public dollars) or to private investors (as in the case with the residences in the area). Activists have been involved in projects of identity politics as a way of resisting gentrification pressures. We see how, throughout the public discourse presented above, symbols are used to communicate to others a single concept—that of legitimate ownership.

Puerto Rican leaders from the Agenda, including myself, and elsewhere feel that

it is their responsibility to ensure a favorable outcome for the community at large (development without displacement or use values over exchange values). But their thinking is quite opposite to the logic of individual property rights as proposed by Locke (Locke, 2003). They are really thinking collectively. The case of *Paseo Boricua* shows an activist movement that uses urban space (the flags, the buildings that display Puerto Ricanness, the public sidewalks that surround the private businesses, and so on) as a tool to not only make their voices being heard, but claiming what they wanted right away with the creation of symbols. In this sense, the idea of *Paseo* as an instrumental right of resistance to gentrification has played a key role in the construction of a new sense of legitimacy in the recent housing struggles against poverty and unemployment that could be traced back to neoliberalization and fi-

nancialization, appropriation through dispossession, and so on— but these actions are just a first step that should be accompanied by larger claims (such as getting more units of affordable housing, the establishment of community land trust and co-ops, etc.). Although this might be just a piece of the puzzle, through the creation of *Paseo* and its symbols, Puerto Ricans imagine this cultural heritage to be preserved for the benefit of future generations. As Eduardo Arocho, the Executive Director of the Division Street Development Association proclaimed, “Those flags are permanent monuments that belong to the City of Chicago. The unique history is specific to Puerto Ricans in Chicago area, not New York. The flags are made to last 500 years, perhaps longer than Chicago itself, and most definitely longer than any of us will be around”.



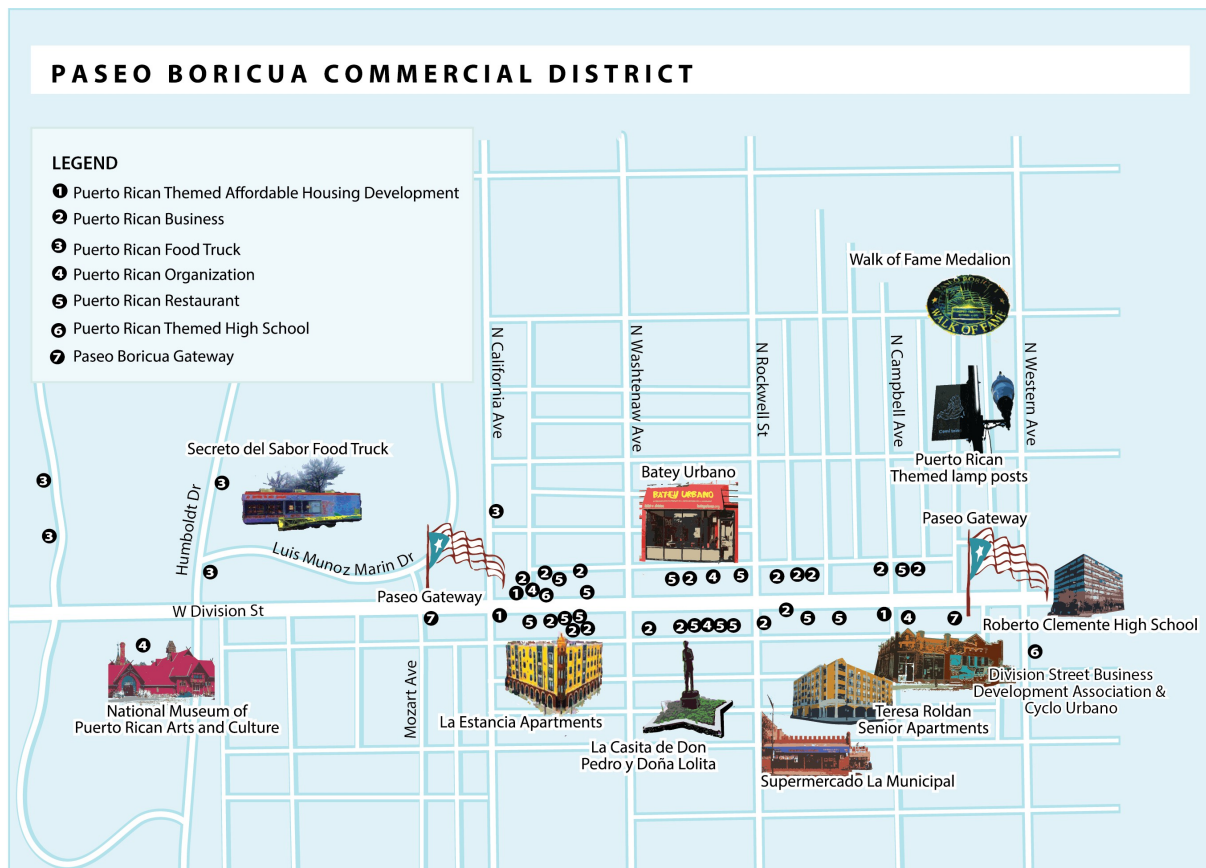


Figure 1

No.	Community Area	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
6	LAKE VIEW	7.236	6.412	2.641	1.264	1.057
7	LINCOLN PARK	5.114	2.012	1.263	657	684
19	BELMONT CRAGIN	88	1.150	6.877	12.995	12.110
20	HERMOSA	167	3.530	8.557	8.342	6.337
21	AVONDALE	493	3.228	4.699	5.704	4.465
22	LOGAN SQUARE	7.965	24.960	25.719	18.599	11.662
23	HUMBOLDT PARK	7.123	18.438	16.148	11.748	10.601
24	WEST TOWN	32.718	27.618	22.048	14.350	8.631

Figure 2 - Title: Puerto Rican population from 1970-2010 by community area.

Source: U.S. Census, 1970-2010 Long Form data and the 2010 Summary File 1.

Note: This table includes only community areas which at some point had more than 5,000 Puerto Ricans.

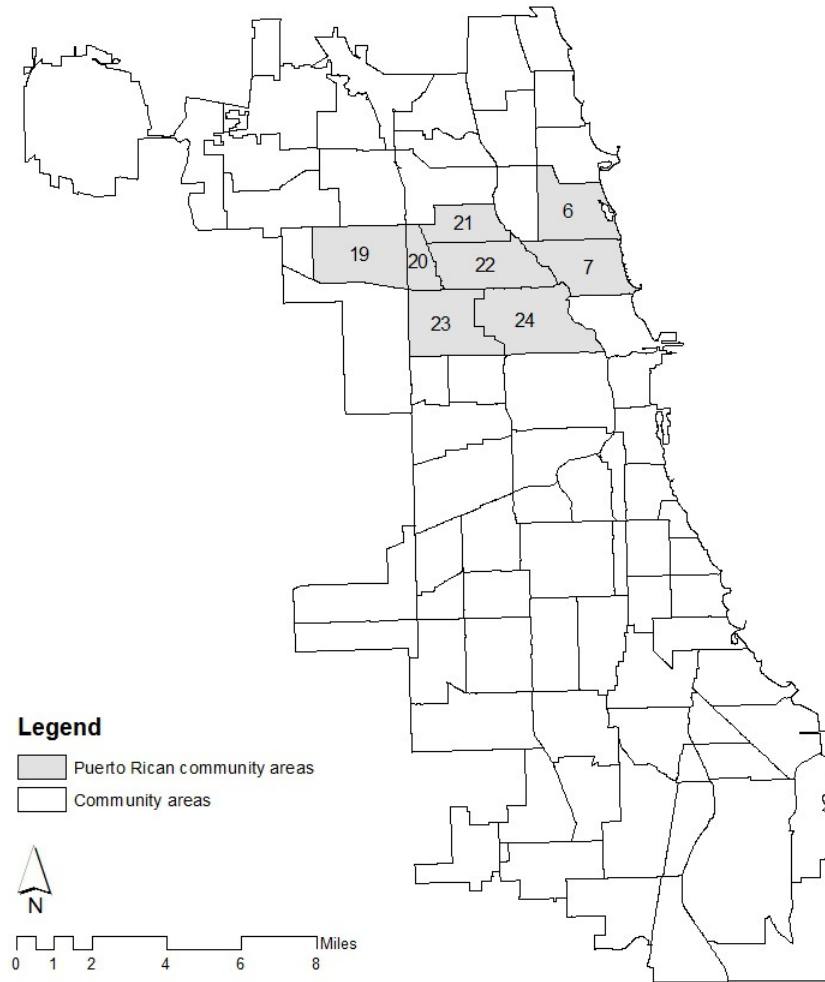


Figure 3



Figure 4

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