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“Make *El Barrio* Great Again”: A Latinx Family’s Journey with Gentrification

At 7:05 p.m. on a Sunday, I call Karla Ynfante on FaceTime. Her little brother, Miguelito, answers. He tells me that *hermanita* will be right with me, and asks if I saw the latest episode of *Doña Flor y Sus Dos Maridos*, a telenovela on the Latin channel *Univision*. His sister interrupts and apologizes for the delay. She asks her parents to join her in the living room for the interview. We begin.

Señora Ynfante: Bueno, papi llego primero que nosotros.

Señor Ynfante: Si yo llegué en el año 1989, y esto no era ni la sombra de ahora; era una zona como quien dice “libre”...muchos problemas en la comunidad. Si, pero aviamos muchos hispanos, muchos negocios, carnicerías *muy* buenas. Los precios eran mas asequibles, la renta era bien baja, la gente no quería casi ni mudarse a este sector. Tu les decías a ellos, por allá en otros sitios, y donde tu vives? En Williamsburg. Ah! Yo por ahí no quiero ni saber de eso, tu eres loco! Porque aquí avía mucho tijeraje, muchas gangas, muchos asesinatos. Avían muchos trabajos, *si*, porque aquí avían muchas factorías—muchas habitaciones desocupadas, buildings que nadie los quería, nos los ofrecían por centavos y no los quisimos nunca; que *hoy* nos peso, porque habían buildings que te lo daban hasta por diez mil pesos para que tu los siguieras pagando, diez mil dólares, y tu no los aceptabas. Entonces, los que vivíamos por aquí éramos héroes, como quien dice. Yo vine dique que me iba de una vez, y mira ya, treinta años en este sector. Si porque cada día—como se ha ido cambiando la cosa...ella [mami] vino después, *once* años después que yo...ahora mismo *no es* la cosa igual, cuando ella llego la cosa iba cambiando.

Señor Ynfante’s excerpt gives us a glimpse into life in *pre-gentrified* Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

His narrative highlights the intricacies found within Williamsburg, as on the one hand, the neighborhood was suffering from gang violence and poverty; while, on the other hand, it was an affordable place to live that was home to a bustling Latinx community. Señor Ynfante notes that many people living outside Williamsburg had negative perceptions and stereotypes about this community; however, for him, Williamsburg was *home*. Moreover, he emphasizes that this

community was *not only* a place of residence, but *also* a site of employment, as many blue-collar workers found jobs at local factories.

This paper will use the Ynfante family's narratives to trace the effects of gentrification in Williamsburg. Themes that will be explored are: industrial displacement, limited access to affordable food, and housing instability. Additionally, it will analyze how neoliberalism has been used as a means to *justify* the gentrification. Moreover, this paper will conclude by responding to the paradox of how one make's *El Barrio* "great again."

EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION

Industrial Displacement

Señora Ynfante: Si una factoría, la fabrica de Domino, del azúcar...la cerraron, y...lo que querían era un building...para quitar la factoría...y lo querían era para personas *ricas*...

Señor Ynfante: La factorías fueron saliendo por la cuestión de los impuestos de la ciudad [...] Las factorías estaban desoladas...desocupadas y muchos building abandonados. Entonces esas gente compraron, y ahí aprovecharon para hacer edificios [de residencias]. Pero la de nosotros se mudo. Hay muchas [factorías] que se mudaron para otros estados, se fueron para New Jersey, otras para Long Island. La mía se fue para Long Island...

Señora Ynfante: Lo malo es que las factorías que dan los trabajos a la gente de bajos recursos se han ido [de Williamsburg]. Y ahí que irse *lejos*...como el [papi] que se tiene que ir ahorita para Long Island...

Karla Ynfante: He works in Long Island...at a factory...so now he would have to take a cab with his friends as a car pool, and they would go to Long Island at three in the morning.

The quotes above expose the deleterious effects of gentrification on blue-collar workers. Specifically, these narratives highlight how displacement of blue-collar industries drastically affects people's *lifestyle*, as Señor Ynfante has to *now* wake up at the crack of dawn in order to arrive on time for his job. Moreover, these accounts indicate that the reason behind industrial displacement is a monetary one, built upon real estate investments and residential profits.

Winfred Curran's article, "From the Frying Pan to the Oven": Gentrification and the

Experience of Industrial Displacement in Williamsburg, Brooklyn,” affirms the notion that as urban neighborhoods gentrify, manufacturing industries face displacement due to increased demand for upscale residences (Curran 2007:1427). More importantly, in Curran’s study of businesses and factories that have relocated from Williamsburg or closed altogether, he finds *most* cited “the rising cost of real estate, lack of appropriate space, changes in the neighborhood, and policy decisions specific to the gentrification of Williamsburg as their reasons for moving or closing” (Curran 2007:1432). This corroborates Señor Ynfante’s account that many factories in Williamsburg closed due to rising property taxes, which correlated to the increased cost of real estate. Further, Curran’s study also *validates* the negative effects industrial displacement has on lower-income Williamsburg residents, as it results in considerable job loss (Curran 2007:1438). More importantly, Curran finds that “while Williamsburg has been a walk-to-work community since its development in the 1840s...those employed in Williamsburg live throughout New York City” (Curran 2007:1438). Therefore, this demonstrates how industrial job losses in Williamsburg is *not only* a neighborhood issue, but rather becomes a *citywide* calamity.

Limited Access to Affordable Food

Similarly, gentrification not only affects people’s employment prospects, but also their access to *affordable* bare necessities, such as food, shelter and clothing.

Señor Ynfante: Es el nivel de vida...los ingresos que nos van a sacar.

Señora Ynfante: La libra de pimentón...te cuesta allí en Wholefoods, te cuesta cinco dólares, y quizás es lo mismo. Ellos [los blanquitos] dicen orgánico...pero es lo mismo... entonces que hace uno? Uno va adonde este mas barato...

Señor Ynfante: Tenemos el Meatfood que también vende productos Dominicanos que esta en Broadway. [**Karla Ynfante interrupts:** pero eso tu tienes que caminar mas] Si pero esta bien yo voy ahí, caminando todavía...uno le sirve como quien dice de ejercicio...

In this excerpt, Señor and Señora Ynfante share their perspectives on the effects of organic supermarkets like Wholefoods in Williamsburg. They view these alternative food

sources with skepticism, and as another way white gentrifiers seek to make profit. Additionally, they note that they would prefer to walk *further* in order to find cheaper deals and buy Dominican food products, than shop at the *local* Wholefoods across the street. This statement correlates with results from Daniel Sullivan’s 2014 study on food access in a gentrifying Portland neighborhood, which found that “white and college-educated residents—characteristics closely aligned with gentrifiers—are much more likely to shop [at the new local organic supermarket] weekly than are minority and less educated residents” (Sullivan 2014:34). Further, the study highlighted that conversations about “healthy living” and “organic food” often take on a colorblind approach, neglecting the hindrances these alternative food practices place on poor communities of color (Sullivan 2014:34). Therefore, the Ynfante family’s decision to walk *further* in order to access cheaper food sources demonstrates the sinister way gentrification *slowly* forces lower-income people to move and eventually become displaced.

Housing Instability and Displacement

Señor Ynfante: Lo que *no* queremos es que nos saquen ha toda la comunidad de aquí.

Señora Ynfante: Y si no nos plantamos en que la renta *no* nos la suban... buscar ayuda con los concejales, nos van a sacar, nos van a sacar! [**Señor Ynfante interrupts:** *ellos* no nos van a sacar, si no el *sistema*, el nivel de vida, como quien dice los *ingresos* es lo que nos va a sacar].

A reoccurring theme in the interview was the Ynfante’s fear of displacement—both for their family, as well as other Latinx residents. In this excerpt, Señor and Señora Ynfante note that if they let down their guard and cease to advocate for affordable housing, they might be forced to relocate from Williamsburg. More importantly, Señor Ynfante acknowledges that the root cause of displacement does not solely stem from rising rent prices, but rather it is influenced by Williamsburg’s new lavish way of life. According to an article by Kay Hymowitz for *The City Journal*:

[Williamsburg] has morphed into that much-hated entity, the ‘gentrified neighborhood,’ its grimy factories reborn as condos, its dive bars as \$30-per-entrée restaurants, its mom-and-pop corner shops as mirrored cafés, serving coffee that costs as much as yesterday’s blue-plate special [...] the neighborhood has become the brag-worthy destination for the Condé Nast crowd; town cars pick up the almost-famous at luxury hotels and gallery openings (Hymowitz 2016).

Hymowitz’s description of Williamsburg portrays an unflattering, but real tale of what it is like to live in a community inundated with lavishness. Moreover, it explains Señor Ynfante’s notion that his family’s lack of opportunity to *participate* in Williamsburg’s luxe living will ultimately drive them out. The Ynfante family currently lives in a rent-stabilized apartment as a result of Señor Ynfante’s *thirty-year* residential seniority. Therefore, though increased rent hikes and landlord arsons are immense problems for *most* low-income residents in Williamsburg (Quinn 2019), what the Ynfante’s fear most is that their income will not be enough to keep up with Williamsburg’s luxury living.

NEOLIBERALISM AND GENTRIFICATION

Justifications

In her book, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, Pauline Lipman defines neoliberalism as “an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital...and sharp retrenchment in the public sphere” (Lipman 2011:6). Neoliberal capitalists often justify the gentrification of neighborhoods under the guise of “progress.” Lipman uses Chicago as a case study and finds that redistribution of land and transformation of urban public spaces has often been influenced by the “image” real estate and bankers want to sell in the name of progress (Lipman 2011:24). Similarly, on April 2005, Williamsburg experienced what Lipman saw happen in Chicago—rezoning.

According to The Greenpoint Waterfront Association for Parks and Planning (GWAPP):

In April 2005, the Department of City Planning (DCP) rezoned Greenpoint and Williamsburg’s waterfront areas. The rezoning changed a low-density, waterfront, manufacturing sector into a now-prominent strip of high-density residential towers, situated among 75 blocks of mixed use-residential space North of the Williamsburg Bridge (Hill 2013:2).

This new rezoning plan, spearheaded by Amanda Burden of the Bloomberg administration, was grounded on ideas of progress and modernization—two tenets of neoliberalism; however, it did not take into consideration the construction of *truly* affordable housing. When the 2005 Greenpoint-Williamsburg rezoning plan went into effect, Christine Holowacz, a GWAPP board member and activist declared, “I think we’ve lost on every piece. It’s just privately owned property at the waterfront and it’s very much in demand, so in order for the community to have access to all of that, we would have to pay a hell of a lot” (Hill 2013:10). The GWAPP noted that as of 2013, *less than 20%* of the pledged affordable housing units were built (Hill 2013:12). As a result, gentrification *was* and *continues* to have control over the ever-expanding Williamsburg neighborhood.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO MAKE *EL BARRIO* “GREAT AGAIN”

The idea that *El Barrio*—the hood—can be made “great again” is a paradox, as it implies that the hood was “great” to begin with. As noted by Señor Ynfante, Williamsburg used to suffer from gang violence, dire poverty, and dilapidated housing; however, it was also home to a lively and proud Latinx community. Thus, the “greatness” of *El Barrio* that I allude to is the strong and *familial* sense of *comunidad* that came from a mutual understanding of *la lucha*—the struggle. The advent of gentrification in Williamsburg has pushed the strong Latinx community out, and replaced it with young rich yuppies seeking a “new and hip” destination to live out their best post-grad lives. Thus, *El Barrio* cannot be made “great” if the original community is no longer present.

This paper has followed the evolution of Williamsburg vis-à-vis the narratives of the Ynfante family. It found that under the guise of progress and modernization, neoliberal investors have *justified* the displacement of communities of color. More importantly, it revealed that in order for *El Barrio* to be “made great again” it requires that the Latinx community of Williamsburg be protected from job loss, inaccessible resources, and predatory renting. Therefore, his paper calls for a commitment to neighborhood revitalization that works directly *with* the original residents of the community and *their* needs.

Works Cited

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