

The “Gente-fication” of Boyle Heights

Magally A. Miranda Alcazar

FMST 194, March 2015

Professor Felicity Amaya-Schaeffer

Many people have written about the impact of gentrification on struggling *barrios* and ghettos. In January 22, 2014, National Public Radio (NPR) published an article and an accompanying podcast by Laura Sullivan called "Gentrification May Actually Be Boon to Longtime Residents." In it, Sullivan, one of NPR's "most decorated journalists," elicits the support of two men to assist in making the point suggested by her piece's title. The first interviewee is a Washington, DC resident and retired cook named Bobby Foster, Jr. Foster. We can probably assume based on his use of African American vernacular is an elderly black man despite the author's altogether avoidance of race. She approaches the man outside a grocery store that survived what she calls the 'crack wars' and ensuing urban blight of the 1980's, and remains standing amid a gentrifying neighborhood. Foster, she says, is "conflicted" and we proceed to hear him say in a rather casual way that there are good and bad things. The second interviewee is a Columbia University professor named Lance Freeman who studied how many people were pushed out of their homes after gentrification. He found that higher costs could push out the elderly, people with disabilities and those who lack rent control, but that a lot of renters overall were willing to stay with the addition of new parks, safer streets and schools and jobs. With the help of research by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, she emphasizes that the reality of higher credit scores for residents who stay does not measure up to the slogan "Gentrification is class war" popularized by New York anti-gentrification activists in 1988.

Together with titles like The Economist's February 2015 article "Bring on the Hipsters: Gentrification is Good for the Poor" and The New York Times March 2015 piece "Viva Gentrification!" that make up an ever-growing archive of literature that represent gentrification as relatively good, rather banal and basically inevitable changes that many modern cities are undergoing. Promises and often evidence of economic, cultural and social changes are leveraged

against images of struggling urban neighborhoods suffering from decades of ‘crack wars’, gangs, struggling schools and a majority of residents living below poverty lines (Medina). When these do highlight positive attributes—economic, cultural and social—of the *barrios* and ghettos it is often as the quaint, sometimes explicitly ethnic, fading backdrop to be folded into the multi-cultural and mixed-class city espoused by the influx of new energy and money. For example, in a 2012 advertisement by the Los Angeles Metro Transit Authority (MTA) encouraging visits to Mariachi Plaza in the *barrio* of Boyle Heights, we saw a scene of three white men in business suits dining at a Mexican restaurant being serenaded by a mariachi ensemble.

In my preliminary research about culture in Boyle Heights, I found a different framework than the gentrification model to be a better starting point for truly understanding contemporary processes in the neighborhood. Through a framework that centers culture (its production and consumption), I found there are in fact two competing metrics by which we even assess the impacts of gentrification. The first and dominant lens is the creative class theory championed by Richard Florida that I have already done some work to describe. This is one that is largely being resisted entirely by residents. Florida’s theory privileges the role of wealthier cultural workers in pioneering development, entrepreneurship and innovation. It implies that gentrification, or the influx of new energy and money, into struggling neighborhoods presents potential for utopic cross-cultural societies and/or the ultimate in cross-class collaboration. According to Florida, the ‘super-creative core’ of “scientists and engineers, university professors, poets, novelists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the ‘thought-leadership’ of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think tank researchers, analysts and other opinion-makers” (ibid), or people who can make new forms and meaning are the most crucial elements of healthy cities. In this model, other elements of the city such as immigrants or

members of the LGBTQ community are good in quantities prescribed by the desires of the elites. But by comparison, in Boyle Heights for the most part the so-called pioneers like urban planners of the MTA are consistently rejected by community voices who have ideas of their own about development. These clash against taken-for-granted ideas about gentrification about the goodness, banality and inevitability of gentrification. As one Boyle Heights artist, my informant, suggested, gentrification produces a certain kind of “collateral damages” when it privileges wealthier, whiter or more affluent brown newcomers at the risk of displacing what was and is there. This thing that was and is very much still there in places like Boyle Heights is a version of the popular masses and their popular culture.

This paper uses a methodology that centers *barrio* culture and *barrio* cultural workers to better understand the oft-erased needs, desires and imaginations of people in neighborhoods like Boyle Heights. In this paper, *barrio* refers to a sort of internal colony of Latinx/Chicanx (gender-inclusive terms), working class, and often heavily immigrant communities and can also be a descriptive word for the people who make their homes there for economic or cultural reasons. Culture refers to ideas, imaginations, quotidian practices and other ways of making meaning. The precise parameters of the *barrio* culture are real but also somewhat ephemeral because it can be both a place and a state of consciousness delineated by residents as well as by political and economic factors larger than the neighborhood. Nevertheless, *barrio* culture is an important category of analysis here because of the symbolic work it does to interrupt reified subjectivities like those suggested in the Florida model that produce inadequate categories like creatives and non-creatives, or gentrifiers and the gentrified of even categories that too often harken back to the colonial encounter. A popular (as in, folk but also popular in social media) phrase that some have turned to, for example, is “Columbusing,” which is imagined as a white colonizeresque

individual allegedly discovering something that existed in another cultural context, but for the mainstream. So, in this paper I make significant use of Arlene Davila's concept of barrio cultural workers to suggest that not only is Florida's creative class no vanguard or first wave of cultural development, but that it is a trap of sorts. The dominant creative class camp is imbedded in problematic neocolonial and neoliberal processes that tends to glorify certain cultural workers as it undervalues parallel cultural work. Barrio cultural workers or grassroots cultural workers are "just as important to the health of global creative cities but are regularly discounted and bypassed from most national and global considerations of urban cultural policies, while they remain the most precariously affected by neoliberalizing reforms" (Davila 5). She also says that new (and neoliberal) logics of culture fabricated for consumption distance themselves "from the popular classes and histories through appropriation, transformation and mainstreaming (Davila 4)" and "the result is racial and class-based hierarchies that are not only marked by the politics of representation, in terms of the cultural content alluded to or appealed to by different cultural industries, but also by the exclusion of racialized others from the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products (ibid)." In what follows, I trace the products of these moments of encounter between high creatives and barrio cultural workers focusing on hybrid, alternative, parallel, and resistive imaginations and practices of culture in Boyle Heights.

In the remained of this paper, I explore the "gente-fication" of Boyle Heights, one of the hybrid, alternative, parallel and resistive imaginations that is picking up significant clout as a legitimate way of knowing barrio culture differently than the mainstream archive. I also do a significant amount of original research to piece together and fashion a theoretical framework for ideas and practices that are more folk in practice than written. The frameworks I work with attempt to get at some of the nuances of race, class, gender and other power differentials that are

glossed over in more mainstream accounts of barrio culture, so I found a lot of use in turning toward decolonial tools. I found that contemporary barrio cultural work in Boyle Heights has roots in third world liberation movements like Chicanismo and the civil rights movement. Angeles-based counter-imaginaries that subvert the contemporary archive of gentrification. Specifically, this paper highlights the work of a Chicano-identified urban planner named James Rojas who is a theorist on the rise among creative workers in the barrio because of how he puts forth a utopic conception of urban development through the trope of the mythical Chicano homeland of *Aztlan*. I argue that there are factors of difference that make *Aztlan* difficult for some to identify with, but it nonetheless provides a foundation for how “gente-fiers” make sense of their projects of *gente*-driven development. These two Los Angeles-based counter-imaginaries subvert the contemporary archive of gentrification in very sophisticated ways that should be explored further.

Imagining Aztlan, Developing East Los Angeles

“In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal “gringo” invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.”

-Alurista, poet laureate of Aztlan (1969)

“Aztlan,” the mythical homeland of Chicanos, first appeared in Chicano popular culture in the 1960’s, a time of massive third world liberation struggles in the United States and elsewhere. Some people like Harold Cruze argued that the racially and economically segregated *barrios* and ghettos comprised an internal colony. It is easy to see why in cities like Los Angeles

where restrictive covenants produced *de jure* segregation. At the turn of the 20th century, the neighborhood of Boyle Heights was one where non-Anglo—primarily Jewish, Japanese, Latina and some black—Angelinos were allowed to reside. It was a cross-cultural ghetto. After the elimination of legal segregation, Boyle Heights remained a ghetto, though now it took on a distinctly working-class, immigrant Latinx/Chicanx, or *barrio*, culture.

James Rojas, a Los Angeles-based city planner, was born and raised on the eastside, and studied in MIT where he wrote his dissertation about 1970's city planning in East LA and Boyle Heights. Now, he studies how East Los Angeles became a site of "Latino urbanism." In his 2015 piece "How the Civil Rights Movement Shaped Latino Urbanism in East L.A.," Rojas defined Latino urbanism as a phenomenon that "goes beyond creating great public spaces... [It] includes cultural identity, which is shaped by needs, desires, and imagination." The Doctor's Hospital in East LA and Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights are structures that reflect a style of architecture that mirrors the needs, desires and imaginations of the 1970's social movements articulating a "Chicano utopia". Evidently, the needs, desires and imaginations reflect an aesthetic of hybridity, mestizaje and resistance at once and elude easy categorization. The aesthetic effect is greater than the sum of its parts. That is, it is an act of creativity that imbues space with new meanings that reflect indigeneity and Western modernity. Because culture is as much about the producer's intent as it is about the consumer's perceptions, this aesthetic leaves a lot of room for interpretation at times as both mestizaje, resistance. Often, Chicanismo is explicitly resistive, however, even as it draws from different elements of the colonial encounter.



This photo from Yelp by user “George M.” captures a portion of the mural on the side of the East Los Angeles Doctor’s Hospital featuring an indigenous curandero practicing Pre-Columbian medicine on a mother and her child.

His Chicano utopia is a place is a physical space as well as a conscious one. He writes that “the initial grassroots artistic Chicano interventions of the 1970s created civic discourse and influenced architecture.” In addition to murals and plazas, this kind of urban planning deals with materials like stucco and metalwork as well as styles that evoke a certain ethnic, racial, historic, and spiritual consciousness. It also recognizes the role of working-class Latinx/Chicanx people in shaping the day to day landscape. In fact, on any given day, one can see Mariachis sitting on benches, metal and plastic chairs around the plaza eating dinner, smoking cigars, practicing their instruments, and waiting to be picked up by patrons. The formation of the chairs, tables, and instruments as well as the murals, the smells and the sounds all contribute to a certain ambiance.

Aesthetics by themselves do not a Chicano utopia make and his insight is helpful for imagining that there is some precedent for *gente*-driven urban planning.

One way we might push Rojas' theory further would be to think not just about the style of architecture but the political subjectivities and new ways of thinking of urban space produced by the grassroots communities in organized fashions. We might consider Chicano utopianism as a continuity of the colonial encounter as well that produced mestizaje, hybridity and resistance. Spaces are hybridized with both various sets of preoccupations at once--indigenous and other practices as well as modern capitalist biopolitical institutions. We don't have to look far to find an example of this. White Memorial Hospital is situated in a central area of Boyle Heights, Cesar Chavez Ave. The large buildings that make up the hospital complex are decorated with murals similarly to the Doctor's Hospital on First Street in East LA, an example that Rojas touts as a classic example of Latino urbanism. What distinguished White Memorial, at least before last year when Proyecto Jardin moved its operation, was that part of its property was utilized by a non-profit community garden where people could practice indigenous and land-based forms of wellness.

Futurity is also another worthwhile element to consider here. In a conversation with my housemate Arash Ehya one day we talked about the ideas of the future in gentrification. All communities are bound not only by space but also by a telos, or time. Any community is part of a collective vision of a past and can be a vision of the future. In the context of the technological era, there are various understanding of the future. The creative class of Richard Florida imagines itself as the makers of the future who create technologies. How this plays out is that one future squashes another future. Because of the capital they have relative to other communities, they have more access to creating this future.

In San Francisco, for example, billboards cater mostly to the technological workers. What is Github? It is a “source-code repository,” but it is not relevant to people’s everyday lives. It creates a new vision of the future for the city that crushes the kind of future imagined by other communities. Mural artists in the Mission District that depicted to some extent utopian visions of the future, depictions of indigenous art and a multiculturalism that imagined a future with one foot in the past. They were fundamentally different visions of the future than the Silicon Valley vision.

Unlike in San Francisco, Los Angeles planning of late has been driven by transit. In Boyle Heights, there is something called “Transit Oriented Development.” The city of Los Angeles is currently looking for proposals for TOD for redevelopment in Boyle Heights’ Mariachi Plaza. Mariachi Plaza is a beautiful plaza in the heart of Boyle Heights. It stands as a classic example of Latino urbanism, with murals of dancers and many other representations of brown life strewn across its small businesses. It is by definition quaint, ethnic and community-oriented. It got its name by being the worksite of transnational Mariachi musician who can be seen walking around the plaza on any given day of the week waiting to be hired by people from all over the city. TOD threatens to destroy all of this past by destroying the plaza as we know it in favor of transit-oriented future depicted in literature as a multi-cultural state of the art mall. In this vision of the future put forth by current TOD proposals, Boyle Heights will lose its working class Latinx/Chicanx creative character and its residents will be displaced in the interest of a “future” that altogether ignores its community-driven “backwards” past. This would be a tragic betrayal of Chicano utopian ideals that influenced the previous generation of East LA planning.

Indeed, one of the most insightful contributions of Chicano utopianism as well as “gentefication,” I believe is that they are examples of non-modern decolonial and oppositional projects.

In her work “Towards a Decolonial Feminism,” Maria Lugones suggests that modern and monolithic categories of identity such as “woman” and “black” anchor colonialism, capitalism and other systems of oppression. She writes, “I want to emphasize categorical, dichotomous, hierarchal logic as central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender and sexuality (Lugones 2010).” I want to think about “gente-fication” as a decolonial category that defies modern conventions that anchor the value of cultural work in contested urban spaces. At Lugones’ suggestion, I want to look at the sites of resistance created by social organizations in tension with those logics (ibid). She uses the term “non-modern” to describe these various projects as a way to guard against their reduction to pre-modern or easy co-optation into the modern.

One shortcoming of Rojas I want to consider further is his championing the Chicano nationalism. Desiree Martin describes how “Chicano nationalist identity is especially symbolized by the claim on the U.S. Southwest and Mexican north as Aztlan, an indigenous ‘nation historically anterior to the founding of the United States’ and Mexico(Martin 117)”. In this way Rojas’ “Chicano utopia” is a new articulation of Aztlan, a site of a cohesive Mexican and indigenous identity. In the discourse of gentrification, this strategic essentialism may be a useful tool for counter-acting the whitewashing of public space, but it falls short of faithfully capturing power differentials among Chicanos that are informed by class, immigration status and gender. Drawing from her study of Cesar Chavez, a hero of the Chicano movement, Desiree complicates the homogeneity of Chicano/a identity first by complicating the narrative of male heroes that has eclipsed women’s participation (ibid). Furthermore, she says:

“[Romano V.] calls the Chicanos/as inspired by a man in Delano shouting !Huelga! (Strike!) ‘descendants of the Aztecs’(77-82). But this cohesive Mexican indigenous past is

unsustainable for contemporary Chicanos/as, while the myth of Mexican solidarity rings false for several reasons. It should not be forgotten that many Mexicans, especially those from the middle and upper classes, either ignored Chavez or were simply unfamiliar with him. The Mexicans who were familiar with Chavez's deeds and legacy often criticized him, interpreting his support of immigration controls as an affront.”(ibid)

Chicano nationalism builds discourses and aesthetics that refuse to white-wash and sterilize Mexican and indigenous history from the landscape, at the sake of creating a Mexican and indigenous identity that perhaps never was a viable identity for many Eastside residents, including the middle class, undocumented people, women, and Central Americans. Regardless of these often problematic aspects of homogeneous representations, this earlier moment not only indexes ongoing cultural work that was taking place there - work that not only showed the self-fashioning characters of the community, but also its alternative visions for the city which are still resonant for contemporary residents.

Nepantla as Utopia in Boyle Heights' Gentrification Movement



Image by Nico Avina, also known as Naco Nico, a local artist, activist and co-owner of Espacio 1839, an barrio artisanal shop in Boyle Heights, CA.

Boyle Heights has recently received media attention for the fact that it is said to be, winning its war against gentrification. Along with a more limited number of articles that represent a counter-archive to that of mainstream gentrification, there is a New York Times video called, “Gentrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!” by Sean Patrick Farrell that deals offer insight into community-driven development in Boyle Heights. Patrick’s short documents three community-owned small businesses in Boyle Heights—a bar called Eastside Luv, a coffee shop called Primera Taza and a shop called Espacio 1839. The owner of Eastside Luc defines gente-fication as “improvement of the community by people of the community. If the change is gonna happen we want to preserve the Eastside cultural integrity.” But is it Nico, a co-owner of Espacio 1839, who highlights its significance, that people investing in our own community can mitigate against encroaching real estate development.

So, what is “gente-fication”?

Gente-fication (n): Contraction from the word “gente” (Spanish for “people”) + gentrification = gentefication. Michelada-drinking, college-going, newly-minted professional Latinos moving back home to over-priced transitional neighborhoods, who move back 'home' only to find a new crop of (non-Latino) upwardly mobile gentrifiers, thus inducing an identity crisis.

Example: All this gentefication is getting out of control... my ma ain't gonna be able to stay here.

Example: Am I part of the gentification problem because I like trendy carbs and cocktails?

(Adaptated from an entry on

Urbandictionary.com)

At first “gente-fication” appears to us a silly, even hokey, contradiction in terms or paradox. The term itself is a *portmanteau*, a word that combines two other words. “Gente-fication” comes from the combination of the Spanish word for people, “*gente*,” and “gentrification.” Because the terms themselves seem to be unrelated if not completely oppositional, I argue that gentefication is part of an established Mexican and Mexican-American artistic tradition called *rasquache*. Rasquache is a Mexican and Mexican American aesthetic characterized by multi-layering and incongruousness (Taylor 2003, 97). Using Diana Taylor’s definition of rasquache, we can understand how it summons two terms that people may already have charged with meaning in order to create a new concept, for “it is citational, recycled, transposed into a context that brings about the reversal from high to low, from reverent to irreverent (ibid, 126).” Rasquache is an artform that creates the possibility for understanding differently because it disrupts taken-for-granted meanings. As such, it can be a decolonial and anti-capitalist artform if and when it disrupts taken-for-granted power relations. It is a rather sophisticated way of playing with words though it may come off as a joke. While the term has picked up some steam in bourgeois media outlets like the New York Times, those stories that have heavy-handedly focused on the petty bourgeois and more assimilated elements of the barrio creatives, the small business-owning class. In so doing, I believe they have missed one of the most important facets of “gente-fication”—its rasquache, folk and quotidian elements. Indeed, part of the beauty of rasquache as an artform is its simultaneous jokey-ness and seriousness and its fundamentally folk flavor. This, again, is part of the importance of trying to understand nuance and know subjects differently.

Take the urban dictionary definition, for example. As the entry suggests they are real issues that many individuals deal with on a daily basis. The most casual and every-day acts of drinking a michelada, a drink made from mixing a can of *cerveza* (beer), Clamato (a popular brand of tomato juice) and usually some kind of spicy powder. The term Michelada comes from the Spanish for *mi chela helada*, my ice cold beer. These everyday cultural practices are both trivial and make up the bulk of how people experience culture.

In 2002, Josefina Lopez, director of the critically-acclaimed film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), decided to open a theater company, Casa 0101, in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights neighborhood, a historically mixed-race and now-working class Latinx/Xicanx enclave located immediately east of Downtown. The theater had humble beginnings, opening as a single room with a stage but with a vision to expand into a state of the art theater that showcased Latinx plays and had accessible programming for the local community. Today both the one-room theater "Little Casa" and the visionary state of the art complex "Casa 0101" line 1st Street among storefronts that include Japanese-owned restaurants, *ranchero* and middle-aged queer bars, coffee shops, trendy restaurants and shops and others. Because of her motivation to place the center of her operation in Boyle Heights rather than a more commonsense location somewhere like Hollywood, some will count Josefina among a list of pioneers, mostly small business owners, who are infusing the neighborhood with new energy and new money (Medina). Yet even by the same sources writing about these kinds of practices by small-business owners, they have tended to situate these within a narrative of a historically multi-cultural and class-verigated neighborhood and acknowledgement of it as a symbol of deepening class-divisions among Latinxs in Los Angeles (Medina).

A previous generation of upwardly-mobile Latinx/Xicanxs may have been much more likely to move out of the *barrio* and never look back than their contemporary counterparts. Mike Davis' 2000 book, "Magical Urbanism," for example, offers an account of the deep economic divisions among Latinos fifteen years ago. He wrote that in Los Angeles County, Latino communities were decisively organized along incomes. Poor and new-immigrants cluster around the Downtown and South Central areas, while even slightly more affluent Latinos with incomes above \$35,000 a year center around the "Chicano suburban belt" of the San Gabriel Valley (Davis 2000, 48). If Boyle Heights at the turn of the 20th century was a multi-ethnic and class-verigated due to racial housing covenants, by the end of the century, a new distinctly poor and Latinx *barrio* culture had in fact emerged as a result of generations of middle-class Latinxs moving out. The Boyle Heights *barrio* of the late 20th century was characterized by "gangs, public schools were struggling, and a vast majority of residents were barely above the poverty line" (Medina), but also a very distinct Latinx working-class and immigrant culture. With the former criminal elements of the *barrio* curbed probably due to the so-called "war on drugs" and crack-down of gangs by city administration, today, Boyle Heights is undergoing new kinds of cultural and economic developments by cultural workers on the lower rungs of the racial and class hierarchies. As such, some of their work does not take place in the hallways of museums, classrooms or corporate office but in quotidian experiences.

Documenting these quotidian experiences of neighborhoods experiencing gentrification is of great importance because of how those most vulnerable to displacement through gentrification have tended to be marginalized. In a 2014 audio story by Laura Sullivan for National Public Radio called "Gentrification May Actually Be Boon for Longtime Residents," for example, the author casually mentions that gentrification is worthwhile despite the fact that the elderly, people

with disabilities and people who lack rent control would be displaced (Sullivan). For artists and activists in Boyle Heights like Femme-Cee, “Cihuatl Ce,” this kind of “collateral damage” is not one she is willing to risk in exchange for community improvements (De la X).

This kind of hierarchy of cultural work is described by Arlene Davila. She writes that a dominant understanding of creative class was popularized by Richard Florida. It centers the creative class around “highly educated and skilled (white) workers who are located at in the upscale sectors of advertising and entertainment, or in the academy (Davila 5).” And it focuses on architects, novelists, entertainers, opinion-makers, and others whose function is to “create meaningful new forms.” (Davila 73). Barrio cultural workers, on the other hand, are grassroots cultural workers who are “just as important to the health of global creative cities but are regularly discounted and bypassed from most national and global considerations of urban cultural policies, while they remain the most precariously affected by neoliberalizing reforms.” (Davila 5) With reference to Puerto Rican and Latino cultural workers, these often get dismissed as ‘ethnic’ or ‘quaint’ but can include dancers, tamale makers, etc (Davila 73).

From Davila’s study of anthropology, we also gather that “value is always culturally constructed and points us to look at the policies and institutions that sustain dominant beliefs for imparting value (Davila 78).” The work of Anzaldua also suggests there are different value systems for art between Western and tribal societies, whereby the first is about witnessing and the second is about interaction (Anzaldua 90).

There is, under capitalism, an analytical distinction between the actual value of an object inherent to the way someone expects to use it/what it does and a different value not related to the object itself but how much that value has in relationship to other objects. Cultural work in Boyle Heights is subject to these logics, though it also attempts to resist them. In a conversation with a

teacher in Boyle Heights, Genaro, I asked, what makes a place like Espacio 1839 different from a gentrifying bar in Echo Park? His answer was community. According to Genaro, who works and lives in Boyle Heights and is currently writing his Masters thesis about gentrification in the Mission, places like Espacio are where there is a dialectical synthesis between exchange and use value. Simply put, through the sale of cultural commodities like t-shirts, jewelry, and other cultural productions, Espacio makes enough money to survive but probably not enough to interest investors who may prefer a bar that sells expensive PBR. Community work such as a free radio show and poetry nights, children's workshops may be many gentifiers' saving grace. Whether or not Genaro's speculation is actually the case for the politics of "gente-fication" remains to be seen but nevertheless it illustrates openings, spaces of resistance to capitalist categories.

This resistance is exemplified in a story about Nico Avina, a co-owner of the cooperative Espacio. The following is my own recounting of the events from Nico, second-hand sources and the woman's bad review. Months ago, while Nico was working his shift at the store, a Latina woman came into the shop. She was raised in the middle-class San Gabriel Valley and did not travel to the poor, migrant barrio, until now having heard about its vibrant culture. While there, she mentioned to Nico that it was nice to see that Boyle Heights was experiencing such a cultural, to which Nico responded with a comment to the effect of, this is nothing new, we've been here. The woman was taken aback by what she experienced as bad customer service. Why wouldn't someone want to be nice to the patrons of their store? She went home to the San Gabriel Valley and told her father about Mariachi Plaza, to which her father asked, where do you think we have been getting mariachis for our parties all this time? I am not in a position to make a moral judgement about whether in fact Nico was rude to the woman but this kind of incident

illustrates some of the contradictory facets of “gente-fication” that are existing concurrently with more mainstream notions of gentrification.

The implication I am left to gather from these snippets of the quotidian suggest to me that “gente-fication” is not easily pinpointed. It is a term that describes a questioning of cultural identity. So it can be for many individuals from Boyle Heights asking themselves what they are doing in urban space and for whom they are doing it. Am I gente or a gentrifier? Is my project producing exchange value or use value? Am I an artist or a laborer? Am I living in the past or looking toward the future? Going backward or forward?

What clues does the rasquachismo of “gente-fication” give us for knowing ourselves differently from pre-packaged identities that put us in this state of cultural questioning? I understand “Gente-fication” to be state of *nepantla*, or a *nahuatl* (Aztec) word that means in-betweenness. Gloria Anzaldua spends much of her book, *Borderlands* writing about “the new mestiza,” a hybrid consciousness. In her seminal work, Anzaldua describes *nepantla* thus:

“Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepantla es tierra desconocida, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement--an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of “home.” Though this state links us to other ideas,

people, and worlds, we feel threatened by these new connections and the change they engender.”

Nepantla is indeed itself a space, and one that may be familiar to many people whether or not they describe it thus. Whether drinking a michelada or opening a theater in Boyle Heights, “gente-fication” is an everyday practice of meaning-making that defies conventional dichotomies of language, culture.

Conclusion

The mainstream narratives of gentrification fail to capture many of the nuances of cultural work and urban development. At the same time that they champion creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, they erase, displace, appropriate, misunderstand and manipulate the work of barrio cultural workers who Arlene Davila considers the real vanguard of the creative class. East Los Angeles continues to be a place to watch for subversions of this narrative. These alternative traditions articulate the needs, desires and imaginations of the most vulnerable elements who also happen to be those with the most to gain from development in the context of neoliberalism.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

"Bring on the Hipsters." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 21 Feb. 2015.

Davis, Mike. *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*. London: Verso, 2000.

Farrell, Sean Patrick. "Gentrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Aug. 2013.

Florida, Richard. "Cities and the Creative Class." *City and Community* 2.1 (2003): 3-19.

Lugones, Maria. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia*. Fall 2010.

Martin, Desiree A. *Borderland Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013.

Medina, Jennifer. "Los Angeles Neighborhood Tries to Change, but Avoid the Pitfalls." *The New*

York Times. The New York Times, 17 Aug. 2013.

Rojas, James. "How the Civil Rights Movement Shaped Latino Urbanism in East L.A." *KCET*. KCET, 21 Jan. 2015.

Rojas, James. "Looking for the Rasquache at Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights." *KCET*. KCET, 29 Jan. 2015.

Sullivan, Laura. "Gentrification May Actually Be Boon To Longtime Residents." *NPR*. NPR, 22 Jan. 2014.

Tobar, Héctor. "Viva Gentrification!" The New York Times. The New York Times, 21 Mar. 2015.