

# Ethnographic Refusals, Unruly Latinidades

*Edited by Alex E. Chávez and Gina M. Pérez*

*Foreword by Arlene M. Dávila*

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Founded in 1889, the University of New Mexico sits on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia. The original peoples of New Mexico—Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache—since time immemorial have deep connections to the land and have made significant contributions to the broader community statewide. We honor the land itself and those who remain stewards of this land throughout the generations and also acknowledge our committed relationship to Indigenous peoples. We gratefully recognize our history.

Cover illustration: *Woman Talking with Megaphone* © WeAre, Getty Images, and David Flores

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## *Diasporic Signs*

### Puerto Rican Place-Making, Latinx Artivism, and the Aesthetics of Resistance

JONATHAN ROSA AND DAVID FLORES

*Yo te doy la gracia por poner este sign — es una belleza,  
lo que tú has hecho aquí para nuestra ciudad de Holyoke.*

*[I thank you for putting up this sign — it is beautiful  
what you have done for our city of Holyoke.]*

—Holyoke, MA, resident commenting  
on the display of a mural celebrating Holyoke's Puerto Rican  
diaspora next to city hall in October 2014

In June 2015, four years after moving to the small New England city of Holyoke, Massachusetts, we—a US-born Puerto Rican anthropologist (Jonathan) and US-born Mexican artist, designer, and activist (David)—finished loading a moving truck and prepared to drive to Chicago, where we were both relocating for new opportunities. The only remaining item was a box of a couple dozen T-shirts displaying the image of a Puerto Rican license plate dedicated to Holyoke (see fig. 4.1). The image on the T-shirt corresponded to a mural featuring an oversized Puerto Rican Holyoke license plate that David had played a leading role in designing and creating, and whose public display had become the object of considerable controversy in Holyoke just a few months prior. This debate inspired many Puerto Rican residents and allies throughout Holyoke and beyond to embrace the mural and its various replicas, including the T-shirts designed as part of a community art fundraiser that David organized. As we finished packing the truck, the box of leftover T-shirts ended up sharing precious cabin space with us. The plan was to distribute the shirts among Puerto

Rican Chicagoans who had begun collaborating with Puerto Rican Holyokers on various political campaigns, including the effort to secure the release of Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar López Rivera.<sup>1</sup>

While preparing to depart we noticed that our neighbors—a multigenerational Puerto Rican family—a couple of doors down were having a party in front of their home and wondered whether they might appreciate a few of the T-shirts. We carried the box over, exchanged greetings, and discussed our moving plans before opening the box to offer the shirts to them. Smiling widely, they passed the box around and returned it to us completely empty in what seemed like an instant. After saying goodbye and beginning our journey, we watched in the rearview mirror as this beautiful family of children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and friends excitedly transformed their front yard into an impromptu fitting room, with several of the kids running around in oversized Puerto Rican Holyoke shirts that nearly completely enveloped them. This image of public, outsized Puerto Rican diasporic pride, which galvanized not only these youth but also an entire community, was in many ways an apt beginning to our journey along the I-90 corridor connecting so many postindustrial cities with often small, but profoundly proud Puerto Rican populations. What from some perspectives might seem like curiously emphatic expressions of Puerto Rican pride in these communities, located in and around Boston, Springfield, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Lorain, and Chicago, demonstrate how multiscale aesthetic practices can become powerful enactments of ingenuity and survivance in the face of ongoing displacement and marginalization across the Puerto Rican diaspora.

In fall 2014, when the public display of artwork celebrating Puerto Rican Holyokers' diasporic identities sparked a local controversy that became the focus of widespread conversation and debate, Holyoke was the US city with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans outside of Puerto Rico.<sup>2</sup> Despite these demographics, efforts to display affirming public representations of Holyoke Puerto Ricans were continually met with challenges from the city's white ethnic—predominantly Irish—power structure. This phenomenon can be understood as part of broader internal colonial dynamics through which various ethnoracially minoritized US populations face marginalization and erasure across spheres of everyday life, including electoral politics, education, housing, and claims to public space.<sup>3</sup> For Puerto Ricans throughout the diaspora, struggles in response to myriad forms of marginalization require ongoing endurance in the face of perpetually deferred decolonization.<sup>4</sup> This chapter analyzes efforts to disrupt



FIGURE 4.1 Puerto Rican Holyoke T-shirt. Photo by David Flores.

this marginalization in the context of controversy surrounding Holyoke residents' collaborative creation of a celebratory diasporic Puerto Rican public art installation, which became a contentious claim to space in a deeply stratified community. This effort, resulting in a broader debate about the public display of artwork affirming Puerto Ricanness within Holyoke, received national media attention focused on the censorship of Puerto Rican identity and eventually led to a citywide ban on public art.<sup>5</sup> However, through the collaborative efforts of local artists and activists, the installation is currently displayed outside of Holyoke's city hall and represents a momentous victory for the city's Puerto Rican community. Thus, activism—the interplay between political struggles and aesthetic practices—can become a powerful vehicle for social change, underscoring Baca's point that public art consists not only of design elements such as “line, form and color but all the environmental and social factors that are inherent in the space and that cannot be separated from it.”<sup>6</sup> We build from this insight to explore a set of ethnographic refusals through Puerto Rican place-making and Latinx activism, which we suggest become crucial sites for redefining diasporic community, solidarity, and political belonging.

### Entering Holyoke

Nicknamed the “Paper City” due to its reputation as the world's largest paper producer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Holyoke was the first planned industrial city in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The paper mills brought waves of migrant and immigrant groups to the area starting in the mid-nineteenth

century, beginning with the Irish and followed by French-Canadians, Germans, and Poles. These groups initially worked low-wage factory jobs and faced various forms of marginalization; over generations, however, they were able to achieve upward mobility through participation in labor unions and increased access to employment in the public sector. In the mid-twentieth century, as factory jobs began to disappear, an influx of Puerto Ricans and other Latinx subgroups began to arrive in Holyoke.<sup>8</sup> According to the 2017 American Community Survey, Latinxs composed the largest ethnoracial group in Holyoke; the city of approximately forty thousand residents is 51 percent Latinx and 43 percent non-Hispanic white.<sup>9</sup> The Puerto Rican community composed nearly 50 percent of the population of Holyoke, the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans in any US community.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Holyoke's previous (im)migrant groups, Latinxs have not experienced upward socioeconomic mobility or increased employment opportunities across sectors over generations. The Puerto Rican population in particular is concentrated in the downtown area and South Holyoke, the city's most stigmatized and socioeconomically marginalized areas.

Puerto Rican marginalization in Holyoke underscores Flores's broader point that "the search for Latino identity and community, the ongoing articulation of a pan-ethnic and transnational imaginary, is also a search for a new map, a new ethos, a new América."<sup>11</sup> When we first began living and working in Holyoke, we were struck by our perception of a Latinx space with so few visual markers and affirmations of identity typically associated with "barrio urbanism" and its "jardines, color, calles, árboles, tiendas, arte public, y la vida de la calle."<sup>12</sup> Instead, the public streets of Holyoke were covered in giant green shamrocks representing the city's Irish community (see figs. 4.2 and 4.3). Importantly, these shamrocks were concentrated primarily in the predominantly Puerto Rican downtown area rather than the areas where the large majority of Irish and other white residents reside.

Disparities between visual affirmations of Irish and Puerto Rican identity are perhaps most starkly evident during the annual St. Patrick's Day and Puerto Rican Day Parades. During the St. Patrick's celebration, held annually in March on the Sunday following St. Patrick's Day, downtown Holyoke is essentially shut down, the streets are closed, traffic is rerouted, and an entire 6.2 mile stretch of road is reserved for the parade and 10k road race. The widescale preparations throughout Holyoke reflect the fact that the city hosts one of the largest St. Patrick's Day Parades in the United States, attracting hundreds of thousands of people from across the Northeast.<sup>13</sup> The approximately 6,400 Irish residents



FIGURE 4.2 Shamrock in downtown Holyoke. Photo by David Flores.



FIGURE 4.3 Shamrocks on High Street downtown in front of city hall. Photo by David Flores.

constitute 16 percent of the city's population.<sup>14</sup> Recall the aforementioned statistic that Puerto Ricans constitute nearly 50 percent of Holyoke's population, the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans anywhere in the mainland United States. Yet, in contrast to the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, held annually in July, covers a mile-long stretch of road, attracts around four thousand people, and takes place in a park on the outskirts of the downtown area.<sup>15</sup>

Despite a Puerto Rican population that is three times larger than the Irish one and sunny summer weather as compared to the typically brisk climate in late winter/early spring, the annual Puerto Rican festivities are thus strikingly outsized by Holyoke's St. Patrick's celebration. These two very distinctive celebrations of identity demonstrate Holyoke's Irish dominance and Puerto Rican subordination. Similar to racial dynamics across the country, the fraught politics of space and place within Holyoke privilege populations stereotypically associated with normative American whiteness, empowering them to define the landscape and—by extension—the city's identity. This underscores Breitbart's point that "one of the clearest demarcations of power, wealth and influence in the urban landscape has always been the ability to invest one's living space with meaning—to literally occupy, define and decorate one's surroundings."<sup>16</sup> Breitbart's use of the colonial language of "occupation" is fitting not only because of the longstanding displacement and eradication of Indigenous populations in US communities like Holyoke but also because of Irish immigrants' access to whiteness and by extension white land occupation facilitated through various twentieth-century policies and because of Puerto Ricans' colonial displacement prompted by US occupation of the island.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Holyoke's highly stratified contemporary relationships between Irish and Puerto Rican residents are rearticulations of long-standing colonial systems that stipulate the locations where and the conditions under which different ethnoracial populations can reside in the United States.

The reproduction of Holyoke's spatial and ethnoracial boundaries has continuously repressed its minoritized residents and contributed to striking forms of political and economic marginalization. These boundaries enact and institutionalize white supremacy by structuring inequality in domains such as electoral politics and public education. Puerto Ricans are clustered in fewer wards than other population groups in Holyoke, which reduces their representation in the city council: the city's Latinx population outnumbers its non-Hispanic white population, yet at the time of the public art controversy discussed in this chapter, only three of the fifteen city counselors were Latinx, with the rest being

non-Hispanic white. In public schools there is a reverse effect: Latinxs compose roughly half of Holyoke's population, yet they make up nearly 80 percent of its public-school students. Indeed, in some Holyoke public schools, the student body is more than 90 percent Latinx.

Latinx political underrepresentation and educational underachievement is often problematically viewed as the product of a "pathological culture," which is how one non-Hispanic white city council member described Holyoke's Puerto Rican community at a community literacy event. This thinking, in conjunction with the marginalization of Puerto Ricans throughout Holyoke, can be understood as a part of broader patterns of stigmatization and exclusion. As Baca states, "if you deny the presence of another people and their culture and you deny them their traditions, you are basically committing cultural genocide."<sup>18</sup> More recently, scholars have conceptualized the abject marginalization that racialized communities face as a form of "social death" that renders particular populations disposable by denying their personhood and justifying the forms of marginalization they face.<sup>19</sup> As demonstrated by the thinking of the city councilor quoted above, social death and cultural genocide are rationalized by attributing a "culture of poverty" to Puerto Ricans that renders them fundamentally illegitimate and in need of containment. Pérez shows how long-standing stereotypes about a Puerto Rican "culture of poverty" emerged as deceptive behavioral rationalizations that obscured political and economic shifts taking place in a particular historical moment.<sup>20</sup> Massive Puerto Rican migration to northern US urban centers in the mid-twentieth century corresponded to initial access to stable jobs that quickly and dramatically declined as part of broader patterns of deindustrialization. Rather than understanding Puerto Rican poverty that resulted from these conditions as the product of a shifting political economy, culture of poverty logics blamed Puerto Ricans' experiences of extreme economic marginalization on their cultural behaviors. The notion that Puerto Ricans suffer from a culture of poverty becomes a way of framing inequality as the product of individual choices rather than forms of structural exclusion and institutional racism—including access to education, childcare, health care, employment, stable housing, and transportation. Structural inequalities require structural interventions, but the problems that plague Holyoke are continually attributed to stereotypes about a deviant Puerto Rican culture, erasing the ingenuity and resilience Puerto Ricans have continually been forced to cultivate in response to a rigidly stratified community.

A purported cure for the "culture of poverty" that plagues Holyoke is the

recruitment of middle-class and wealthy newcomers to the city. An opinion piece titled “Holyoke Needs Middle-Class Housing,” published in a prominent local media outlet, states:

Nationwide, there is a tremendous untapped market for middle class, market-rate housing in vibrant, walkable urban areas. So far, Holyoke has been unsuccessful at turning this market to its advantage. Instead, it has watched a valuable asset stagnate into a bleak cityscape of social service offices, in effect prioritizing a government-led economy over a more productive, more dynamic privately-led economy for the city’s historic business center.<sup>21</sup>

This perspective, voiced by one of Holyoke’s most prominent developers, reflects some middle-class and wealthy Holyokers’ interest in consolidating their privilege and power, while leaving socioeconomically marginalized residents to fend for themselves. This coincides with efforts elsewhere toward establishing residential tax abatement zones in gateway cities, which would serve as a tool to bring about gentrification and displace the existing residents in downtown neighborhoods through increased rents.<sup>22</sup> Through such efforts, Holyoke has sought to create more cafés, restaurants, bars, and condos in predominantly Puerto Rican areas. While the case for such development is articulated socio-economically and culturally, the invocation of “a bleak cityscape of social service offices” signals a set of racialized assumptions about populations that are stereotypically productive versus those alleged to be parasitic. This involves a distinction between a dynamic, racially unmarked “creative class” imagined as generating its own prosperity on the one hand and a stagnant, racialized Puerto Rican underclass necessitating perpetual public aid on the other.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the former is represented as an engine of cultural and economic development, the latter is framed as a burdensome, welfare-dependent population incapable of sustaining itself. Narrative contrasts between allegedly individually generated economic prosperity and purportedly pathological state dependence serve as a justification for neoliberal revitalization efforts organized around disinvestment in social services and incentivization of private development.<sup>24</sup> This championing of individual development and scapegoating of marginalized Puerto Rican communities obscures ongoing structural inequalities that have systematically reproduced both an institutionally empowered—that is, state-dependent!—non-Hispanic white population and an economically precarious,

welfare-dependent Puerto Rican population; it also ignores the incredible cultural and economic ingenuity that Holyoke's Puerto Rican community has developed to survive abject marginalization, which could be reimagined as a space from which to redesign the city by prioritizing the well-being of its most marginalized residents. As a result of this erasure, Holyoke Puerto Ricans are rendered fundamentally problematic and disposable. Characteristic of many communities targeted for gentrification, proponents of development demonstrate little to no concern for long-standing residents' individual well-being and collective cultural lifeways in these neighborhoods of Holyoke.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the primary goal is to push for economic development by attracting outside developers and investors, and, by extension, displacing Puerto Rican residents. The following section highlights the deceptive ways that apparent efforts to overcome Holyoke's inequalities through revitalization and multicultural unity can in fact contribute to the reproduction of disparity.

### **Revitalization and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Community-Based Design**

In 2014 the Holyoke Alleyway Revitalization Project (HARP) emerged as an effort "to bring people together from all wards of the city to clean up and transform an urban alley for daily use as an attractive, connecting walkway/bikeway, including plantings and art."<sup>26</sup> Its director stated her hope that the alley would provide space for events and activities for Holyoke's residents and visitors alike.<sup>27</sup> The development of the project was to include input sessions with residents, collaboration with and consent from property and business owners, and applications for public funds. Despite this purported commitment to widespread community engagement and the location of the HARP alleyway in Holyoke's predominantly Puerto Rican downtown area, all but one of the proposed HARP public art designs were ethnoracially unmarked, apolitical urban decorations (e.g., paintings of a peace sign, yin yang, and silhouettes of figures dancing). The lack of ethnoracial specificity in these designs was part of a broader politics of neoliberal multiculturalism in which cultural differences are strategically represented in ways that privilege marketability.<sup>28</sup> Rather than promoting progressive community transformation by creating representations that honor the unique experiences of marginalized populations, neoliberal multiculturalism downplays issues of power and inequality in favor of depoliticized invocations of difference.

In contrast, after conducting information-gathering sessions with Puerto Rican Holyoke residents in conjunction with his initial collaboration with HARP, David Flores proposed a design explicitly intended to affirm Puerto Rican identity and avoid a situation in which “any population could move through the place without being reflected in it.”<sup>29</sup> Inspired by his previous work with Chicago’s Puerto Rican Cultural Center and its celebration of nationalist Puerto Rican public art and architecture, Flores’s design consisted of a large-scale art installation that would resemble a giant Puerto Rican flag made of chain-link fencing draped on the side of a building.<sup>30</sup> The fencing would hold thousands of bells, which would create a soothing sonic effect in the wind or rain. This design reflects Flores’s commitment to creating “art that will ask people to use all of their senses.”<sup>31</sup> The fencing and the bells would be painted light blue, red, and white as a tribute to the anticolonial version of the Puerto Rican flag. The project was to take around three months to complete. HARP agreed to fund the project entirely through grants and fundraisers and Flores was to be in charge of the actual execution.

Flores collaborated with a Holyoke city council member and a local career center to identify Puerto Rican youth to work as paid interns and assistants on this project. His commitment to community collaboration is similar to that of other Latinx place-makers, for whom bringing “talented young people into the design crew fits the goals of the project . . . it’s part of the leadership development aspect of the program, giving kids more and more power to meet and enhance their growth.”<sup>32</sup> Participation in the creation of public art can have a powerful impact on youth. In Breitbart’s analysis of her own public art collaboration with youth in Holyoke, she explains that “when young people are encouraged to re-examine the strengths and weaknesses of their surroundings and then act creatively to transform them, the experience can alter young people’s attitudes towards each other and their future.”<sup>33</sup>

Hoping to spark this transformation through his work with youth in Holyoke, Flores collaborated with one such group of young people for several weeks to realize his design. He sought to exchange knowledge, share skills, and empower youth through action. This approach to art and the design itself reflects Flores’s rejection of neoliberal multicultural aesthetic approaches. As a Chicago-born Mexican artist who had previously worked with Chicago’s radical nationalist Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Flores worked from a position of Latinx political solidarity. In opposition to neoliberal multicultural sensibilities that might celebrate the homogenization of Mexicanness and Puerto Ricanness into a



FIGURE 4.4 The creation of the Puerto Rican license plate mural.  
Photos by Jonathan Rosa.



FIGURE 4.5 Holyoke license plate mural outside of city hall. Photo by Rob Deza.

whitewashed *Latinidad*, Flores's Latinx activism emphasized political solidarity through a Mexican–Puerto Rican collaboration that centered Puerto Rican empowerment.<sup>34</sup> This effort can be understood as part of a broader “Latinx activist movement” that “may represent a significant break and intervention away from the dominant ‘Latino’ projects . . . that promote assimilationist and conservative representations of Latinos as ‘model minorities.’”<sup>35</sup> Flores's Latinx activism involved a complex insider-outsider positionality that presented him with the opportunity to enact solidarity with Holyoke Puerto Ricans as a Holyoke resident, but a newcomer, and as Latinx, but not Puerto Rican.<sup>36</sup>

However, several weeks into the project, HARP informed Flores that they needed to cut the originally agreed upon budget by more than 75 percent. Flores went back to the drawing board and developed a less costly, but no less affirmatively Puerto Rican, design based on one of the community consultation sessions that he had previously conducted. He proposed to create a mural consisting of a Puerto Rican license plate with HOLYOKE written across the center. The following section explores the diasporic thinking that informed this design.

### Latinx Activism and Diasporic Puerto Rican Place-Making

Reflecting a commitment to creating a site-specific art piece that would affirm Puerto Rican identity, David Flores designed an 8' × 16' mural of a Puerto Rican license plate that reads HOLYOKE (see fig. 4.4). Whereas many Puerto Ricans throughout Holyoke proudly display similar license plates that point to their hometowns on the island, Flores's piece intended to claim that Holyoke is part of Puerto Rico. By drawing on a local diasporic practice and projecting it onto a larger scale, Flores sought to engage in what Juan Flores characterizes as "thinking diaspora from below":

The grassroots, vernacular, "from below" approach helps to point up the many diaspora experiences that diverge from those of the relatively privileged, entrepreneurial or professional transnational connections that have tended to carry the greatest appeal in scholarly and journalistic coverage. That approach, guided by a concern for subaltern and everyday life struggles of poor and disenfranchised people, also allows for special insights into ongoing issues of racial identity and gender inequalities that are so often ignored or minimized in the grand narratives of transnational hegemony.<sup>37</sup>

The display of Puerto Rican license plates throughout Holyoke can be understood as a practice of "diaspora from below" that reflects the symbolic value associated with the Puerto Rican flag among a people whose flag was outlawed by the US colonial government from 1898 to 1952.<sup>38</sup> By drawing on the imagery of the license plate and the flag, Flores invoked Puerto Ricans' resistance against colonial experiences on the island as well as in the United States generally and Holyoke specifically. The broader goal was to imagine an alternative Holyoke in which Puerto Ricans would have a legitimate claim to place. As Sommer explains, "Without imagining the world otherwise, change is unthinkable . . . and thinking otherwise is an invitation to play."<sup>39</sup> In this case, to "play" would mean to creatively reconstruct a more inclusive Holyoke. For Sommer, "exemplary creative agents can spark recognition of agency in others who artfully engage the world."<sup>40</sup> The effort to draw on subaltern cosmopolitan themes to spark progressive action reflects Flores's aspiration as a Latinx activist.<sup>41</sup>

The planned size of the mural was informed by Flores's intuition that "changing scale . . . makes people perceive things differently."<sup>42</sup> That is, "by taking a

small object and transforming it into a giant image, you teach people to look at it in a different way.”<sup>43</sup> This semiotic claim to space would serve to intervene in Holyoke’s status quo, wherein the majority of Puerto Ricans, specifically in the downtown and South Holyoke areas, are repressed to the point of being erased. However, this erasure is countered with tremendous pride in symbols of Puerto Rican culture and identity. This situation, in which visual symbols are very important to populations even if they are marginalized in public space, is similar to Baca’s description of the Los Angeles context in the 1960s and 1970s:

The group of people I was working with was very connected to and influenced by visual symbols—in tattoos, in the kind of writing that went on in the street—but there was no visible reflection of themselves in the larger community. Nothing of the architecture or visual symbols reflected the presence of the people—other than the graffiti.<sup>44</sup>

Flores was similarly dismayed by the dearth of visual affirmations of identity in a community with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans anywhere outside of Puerto Rico. He sought to create a mural with this community that would resonate with and reimagine cultural symbols that residents value. For Baca, the representation of these symbols has a unique power:

Symbols already had significance in this community, and it made sense to create another set of symbols acknowledging the people’s commonality, the fact that they came from the same place and had a common culture. It seemed to me this could break down the divisions among these people, give them information, and change their environment. The murals have been clear forms of expressions, reflecting issues and needs as they see them. I think decorative murals are a waste of time in urban areas. They’re urban decoration, Band-Aids on cancer.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, for Flores, this mural was intended to be more than urban decoration or simply a Puerto Rican license plate that reads “Holyoke.” Instead, he intended to challenge the terms of belonging in a community where several generations of Puerto Ricans have made their lives yet face continued marginalization. Flores’s politically provocative semiotics of Latinx place-making involved reclaiming Holyoke as part of Puerto Rico and emphatically asserting the primacy of Puerto Ricans’ claim to Holyoke.<sup>46</sup> By engaging with deeply vernacular practices that

might seem to have little normative material value and projecting these practices onto a significantly larger scale, Flores also drew on a Chicano aesthetic of *rasquachismo* that embraces resilience, resourcefulness, and boldness.<sup>47</sup> Flores's effort not only recognizes the basic presence of Puerto Ricans in Holyoke—it reclaims the city as a uniquely transnational and translocal Puerto Rican space while at the same time symbolizing broader, long-standing struggles for Latinx rights and resources across various diasporas.

### From Reclamation to Repression

In September 2014 Flores's mural celebrating Holyoke's Puerto Rican community was scheduled for installation as part of a set of pieces created in conjunction with HARP, a public art initiative funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council/Holyoke Local Cultural Council. Before the piece could go up, however, the owner of the building on which it was to be installed decided that it could not be displayed on any of the exterior walls of her property. In explaining her decision, she said she thought, when giving initial permission, that Flores's piece was going to be "about the community" and "for every ethnic group;" she further suggested that the mural would do more harm than good to Holyoke's Hispanic community. She proposed hanging it on the inside of the garage; in order to display it outside, she stipulated that Flores would have to change it to make it "more diverse." Holyoke's public streets are covered year-round with giant green shamrocks that represent the city's Irish population and yet these displays are not met with the same demands for "diversity." The notion that Flores's mural should be displayed inside rather than outside is similar to the spatial marginalization demonstrated by the aforementioned Puerto Rican festival, which is minimized and relegated to the margins of the city. Worse, although the building owner had previously approved of Flores's design and seen the finished project well in advance of the scheduled installation, she responded affirmatively to pressure from nearby business owners and other residents seeking to prohibit public displays of Puerto Ricanness in Holyoke. While HARP purportedly supported Flores's mural, the decision to collaborate on this project with a building owner who opposed public affirmations of Puerto Ricanness reflects problems that are characteristic of various revitalization initiatives. In fact, like revitalization efforts in Puerto Rican neighborhoods and communities of color throughout the United States and beyond, such projects can often contribute to processes of gentrification despite

their organizers' expressed intentions.<sup>48</sup> The other artwork funded through the grant, which was regarded as more inclusive than Flores's mural, was displayed on the building whose owner discriminated against Flores's piece based on its affirmation of Puerto Rican identity.

The guidelines of the public grant that funded HARP state: "In accordance with state law, local councils may not discriminate against applicants on the basis of race, gender, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, disability, sexual orientation or age, nor may they fund projects that discriminate on the basis of these attributes."<sup>49</sup> Reflecting on the violation of the grant's guidelines and the broader discrimination against Puerto Ricanness in Holyoke, Flores embarked on a mission to find a home for his mural. For Flores, this mural represented the Puerto Rican community that had been systematically pushed aside, so it was important for it to be displayed in a highly visible and prominent location. He passed out flyers to passersby and local business owners and hung them on buildings whose owners allowed him to do so. The bilingual flyer, which read, "ADOPT MY MURAL/ADOPTA MI MURAL," briefly recounted of the series of events surrounding the mural's exclusion from the public art initiative. Many people were immediately receptive and offered to display it on the outside of their buildings and homes. While Flores was excited about the outpouring of support, most of the spaces that people offered were not in prominent locations; they were neither high traffic nor highly visible. Still, community members' overwhelmingly positive response to the mural not only encouraged Flores to continue seeking the right home for it but also demonstrated the ways that public art can galvanize a community that might otherwise appear fractured or docile.

### **Transforming Place**

After news of the controversy surrounding the mural began circulating on social media, it made headlines in several local and even national news outlets.<sup>50</sup> This helped Flores secure a meeting with Holyoke's then-mayor, Alex Morse, who expressed support for the mural and broader efforts toward affirming Puerto Rican identity. Moving from words to action, Morse sent representatives from Holyoke's Department of Public Works to collect the mural from Flores's residence and began to build a frame for it that would allow it to be displayed outside of city hall, which it was on the following day (see fig. 4.5). The mayor released a public statement:

I'm happy to announce that David Flores' mural will be displayed outside City Hall. This mural is not only an impressive work of art; it is also a fitting symbol of the city's values and commitments. The story of Holyoke has always been the story of people from varying backgrounds and different cultures making their homes here—a story of diverse people sharing a common dwelling and striving to share a common purpose. At its best, that's what the city of Holyoke stands for.

Today, nearly 45% of Holyoke residents claim Puerto Rican heritage—a higher percentage of Puerto Rican residents than any other community in the United States. And while our Puerto Rican residents have too often been marginalized, and have too often failed to enjoy the full benefits of membership in our community, they have nonetheless contributed to the life and vibrancy of our city in incalculable ways. Puerto Rican culture is just as much a part of Holyoke's history as Irish, Polish, or French culture, or any of the other expressions of identity that enrich our civic life. Our differences should not be denied or ignored, nor should an affirmation of one culture be considered threatening to any other. And if an artist wants to celebrate a marginalized group, that should be welcomed by all Holyokers as an invitation to appreciate difference, to question the assumptions we make about others, and to imagine a more just community for us all to share.

Over the past two weeks, I have closely followed the debate surrounding HARP and David Flores' mural. I was saddened and disappointed by what happened to Mr. Flores, and believed—and still believe—that he deserved better. But I also think this controversy and the debate that ensued may provide a valuable opportunity for our community to grow. Very important issues have been raised—issues such as the systemic nature of racism, the problem of assimilation, and the value of celebrating cultural difference—and I would hate for our city to miss a chance to discuss them.

In the coming weeks, I will be announcing a series of steps to address, and to facilitate dialogue about, issues of race, class, and culture in Holyoke. For now, I am happy that this mural has found a home, and grateful to Mr. Flores for agreeing to display his art at City Hall.<sup>51</sup>

After the mayor had the mural installed next to city hall, it was met with a tremendously positive reception from the community. Holyoke residents began taking pictures in front of the installation and using images of it in their social

media profiles.<sup>52</sup> One man recorded a video next to the mural which was circulated on social media: “David Flores, yo te doy la gracia por poner este sign . . . esta es una belleza lo que tu has hecho aquí para la ciudad de Holyoke . . . te agradezco de corazón y Cristo te ama” (“David Flores, thank you for putting up this sign, what you have done for the city of Holyoke is beautiful . . . thank you from my heart and Christ loves you”). This powerful community response demonstrates how the claim to place and identity represented by the mural can be understood as an enactment of Latinx cultural citizenship affirming Holyoke Puerto Ricans and rejecting their marginalized status. Cultural citizenship involves the fashioning of alternative modes of political relationality beyond normative models of state-recognized citizenship. Rosaldo suggests that “in effect, new citizens have come into being as new categories of persons who make claims on both their fellow citizens and the state.”<sup>53</sup> However, the assertion of diasporic identities that at once transcend the nation-state and stake a claim to hyperlocal experiences demonstrates that Puerto Rican Holyokers simultaneously experience, contest, and forge new forms of citizenship and noncitizenship.<sup>54</sup> The widespread embrace of Flores’s project reflects the ways that art can become a platform for the expression of cultural citizenship and noncitizenship by breaking “habit by ‘defamiliarization.’”<sup>55</sup> For Lippard, “the power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, lying in its connection of the ability to make with the ability to see—and then in its power to make others see that they too can make something of what they see . . . and so on.”<sup>56</sup> The widespread circulation of residents’ pictures with the mural signaled not only the potential for art to stir the imagination but also the inability to contain Holyoke Puerto Ricanness.

### Conclusion: The Aesthetics of Resistance

While Flores’s mural was embraced by residents from throughout Holyoke’s Puerto Rican community, it was also met with significant pushback. The strongest opposition came in the form of a ban on public art that Holyoke’s city council issued in October 2014.<sup>57</sup> Within a month of Holyoke attracting national attention because of the exclusion of a Puerto Rican-themed art piece, the Holyoke city council instituted an indefinite ban on public art. Flores’s mural was part of a city-funded public arts initiative in the city with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the United States. If this had taken place in another context, one might have expected the city council to respond by denouncing this discriminatory use of public funds rather than doubling down on the repression

of public displays of Puerto Ricanness in Holyoke.<sup>58</sup> However, in this Western Massachusetts city, situated in a state in which a ban on bilingual education functioned from 2002 to 2017, racism and xenophobia are perhaps more readily legible as the law than in other contexts in which this is functionally the case.<sup>59</sup>

In response to the various controversies surrounding his mural, Flores launched a “Más Color, Más Poder” (More Color, More Power) initiative to promote visual representations of marginalized communities, cultures, and peoples. Más Color, Más Poder emerged as a fourfold vision to (1) create more Puerto Rican/Latinx public art; (2) create a Puerto Rican/Latinx arts and cultural center in Holyoke; (3) contribute toward efforts to put marginalized people in positions of power, especially in low-income communities of color; and (4) empower youth in these communities and establish a pipeline to positions of power and higher education by providing safe spaces, resources, and programming that contributes to self-empowerment. As an aforementioned fundraiser for this initiative, Flores created T-shirts that would fund future public art projects. The image of the mural began to circulate not only on T-shirts but also on license plate placards that Puerto Rican residents display proudly in their vehicles, homes, and public spaces.

Holyoke’s public art ban on the one hand, and widespread celebration of Flores’s mural on the other, demonstrate the fraught politics of space, place, and identity. Without recognition of the profound nature of Puerto Rican place-making represented in symbols such as Flores’s mural, the mayor’s effort toward “reinventing Holyoke” will reproduce the long-standing marginalization of Holyoke’s Puerto Rican residents.<sup>60</sup> This tendency is reflected in the gentrifying public arts initiative that sparked this debate, which promoted a whitewashed vision for public art in Holyoke, with limited participation of long-standing Puerto Rican residents and affirmations of Puerto Rican identity. This debate about public art and Puerto Rican identity is indicative of the broader need to abolish the city’s white, Irish-dominated power structure—from city council to the cultural council to the school committee to the police department. Then-mayor Alex Morse used his platform to bring attention to diversity issues and highlight the need to address Puerto Rican marginalization in Holyoke, which suggests that there is at least some political vision for guaranteeing rights and resources for Puerto Rican residents. However, diversity and inclusion are a far cry from decolonization and abolition in a city whose Puerto Rican residents face profound structural violence that deeply constrains their everyday lives. Engaging with these broader antagonisms and visions of change, Latinx activists

throughout the United States have responded to the realities of structural violence by creating representations that transform how marginalized populations understand and respect their histories and communities. This analysis of one such effort and the controversy surrounding it, examined together with a defiant diasporic community's embrace of affirming representations, demonstrates how Latinx activism can contribute to broader social and spatial change.

### Notes

1. In one of his last acts as president, Barack Obama pardoned Oscar López Rivera in January 2017. For a discussion of the debate surrounding Puerto Rican Holy-okers' efforts to advocate for the release of López Rivera, see Mike Plaisance, "Holyoke Council Committee to Debate Oscar Lopez Rivera, Federal Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Deal April 4," *MassLive*, March 4, 2016, [https://www.masslive.com/news/2016/03/holyoke\\_council\\_committee\\_to\\_d\\_3.html](https://www.masslive.com/news/2016/03/holyoke_council_committee_to_d_3.html).
2. These numbers shifted dramatically following the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States in the years following Hurricane María in September 2017; see Meléndez and Hinojosa 2017.
3. Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos 2010.
4. Ruiz 2019; see also Bonilla 2020.
5. Erica Y. Lopez, "Dispute over Public Art Celebrating Latino Heritage Drives a Wedge in Massachusetts Town," Fox News, October 2, 2014, <https://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/dispute-over-public-art-celebrating-latino-heritage-drives-a-wedge-in-massachusetts-town>.
6. Neumaier 1990, 270.
7. Della Penna 1997.
8. Throughout this chapter I use "Latinx" as a nonbinary alternative to the masculine "Latino" and feminine "Latina," in reference to people who (im)migrated or whose families (im)migrated to the United States from Latin America. I use gender-specific terms in direct quotations.
9. "Quick Facts: Holyoke City, Massachusetts," accessed October 22, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/holyokecitymassachusetts>.
10. "Puerto Ricans in Massachusetts: Demographic Profile and Fact Sheet," Massachusetts Parents United and University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute for Economic and Public Policy Research, October 2017, accessed October 22, 2019, [http://www.donahue.umassp.edu/documents/MPU\\_MA\\_Puerto\\_Rican](http://www.donahue.umassp.edu/documents/MPU_MA_Puerto_Rican)

- \_Fact\_Sheet.pdf; "Puerto Rican Influence in Holyoke," Greater Holyoke Chamber, accessed October 22, 2019, <http://www.holyokechamber.com/puerto-rican-influence>.
11. Flores 2000, 191.
  12. Díaz and Torres 2012, 4.
  13. Michelle Williams, "Holyoke St. Patrick's Day Parade Highlighted by USA Today as Place to Celebrate," *MassLive*, March 12, 2015, [https://www.masslive.com/st-patricks-day/2015/03/holyoke\\_st\\_patricks\\_day\\_parade\\_1.html](https://www.masslive.com/st-patricks-day/2015/03/holyoke_st_patricks_day_parade_1.html).
  14. "Holyoke, MA Population and Races," accessed October 22, 2019, <http://www.usa.com/holyoke-ma-population-and-races.htm#PopulationbyRaces>. Note also that, by concentration of Irish population, Holyoke ranks 207th in Massachusetts. See "Massachusetts Irish as First Ancestry Population Percentage City Rank," accessed September 23, 2021, <http://www.usa.com/rank/massachusetts-state--irish-as-first-ancestry-population-percentage--city-rank.htm?hl=Spencer&hlst=MA&yr=9000>.
  15. "About Us," La Familia Hispana, <http://www.lafamiliahispana.org/aboutus.html>, accessed October 22, 2019; Brian Steele, "Puerto Rican Parade and Family Festival Shows Growth, Pride of Holyoke's Hispanic Community," *MassLive*, July 10, 2011, [http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/07/puerto\\_rican\\_parade\\_and\\_family.html](http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/07/puerto_rican_parade_and_family.html).
  16. Breitbart 1998, 306.
  17. Ignatiev 1995; Grosfoguel 2003.
  18. Neumaier 1990, 256.
  19. Cacho 2012.
  20. Pérez 2004; Lewis 1969.
  21. John Aubin, "Viewpoint: Holyoke Needs Middle-Class Housing," *MassLive*, October 20, 2013, [http://www.masslive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/10/viewpoint\\_holyoke\\_needs\\_middle.html](http://www.masslive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/10/viewpoint_holyoke_needs_middle.html).
  22. <http://www.holyoke.org/cchip/>, accessed October 22, 2019.
  23. Dávila 2012.
  24. V. Rosa 2018.
  25. Dávila 2004.
  26. [https://www.facebook.com/HARPupdates/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/HARPupdates/info?tab=page_info), accessed October 22, 2019.

27. Ibid.
28. Londoño 2010.
29. Neumaier 1990, 262.
30. Ramos-Zayas 2003; Patrick O'Connor, "Holyoke's Alleyways Become Canvas for Paper City's Story," *MassLive*, July 21, 2014, [http://www.masslive.com/living/index.ssf/2014/07/holyokes\\_alley\\_ways\\_become\\_canvas\\_for\\_paper\\_citys\\_story.html](http://www.masslive.com/living/index.ssf/2014/07/holyokes_alley_ways_become_canvas_for_paper_citys_story.html).
31. Neumaier 1990, 258.
32. Ibid., 267.
33. Breitbart 1998, 321.
34. Dávila 2008.
35. Dávila 2020.
36. For more on solidarity see Pérez, this volume; for more on insider researcher positionalities, see Villareal, this volume.
37. Flores 2009, 25.
38. Ayala and Bernabe 2007; Wilkinson 2004.
39. Sommer 2005, 264.
40. Ibid., 265.
41. Dávila 2020.
42. Neumaier 1990, 259.
43. Ibid., 263.
44. Ibid., 261.
45. Ibid., 262.
46. For more on the semiotics of Latinx place-making, see Chávez, this volume.
47. Ybarra-Frausto 1991.
48. V. Rosa 2018.
49. "Local Cultural Council Program," accessed October 22, 2019, [https://www.mass-culture.org/lcc\\_public\\_applicant\\_guidelines.aspx](https://www.mass-culture.org/lcc_public_applicant_guidelines.aspx).
50. E.g., J. Kyle Sullivan, "HARP Mural Controversy," New England Public Radio, November 14, 2014, <https://digital.nepr.net/audiofiles/2014/11/14/harp-mural-controversy/>.

51. "‘Isla del Encanto’ Public Art Mural Finally Finds a Home in Holyoke, Massachusetts," *Latino Rebels*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.latinorebels.com/2014/10/08/isla-de-encanto-public-art-mural-finally-finds-a-home-in-holyoke-massachusetts/>; "Reflections on Public Art and the Community," accessed May 18, 2015, <http://www.holyoke.org/news/reflections-on-public-art-and-the-community/>.
52. Dozens of people changed their Facebook profile picture to the image of the mural.
53. Rosaldo 1997, 30.
54. Pallares 2014.
55. Sommer 2005, 270.
56. Lippard 2009, 199.
57. "A Temporary Ban on Public Art in Holyoke, Massachusetts," *Latino Rebels*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.latinorebels.com/2014/10/22/a-temporary-ban-on-public-art-in-holyoke-massachusetts/>.
58. Based on previous debates about public art in Holyoke, the city council's response was not entirely surprising. Many long-standing community members reported that the situation with Flores's art piece reminded them of the debate surrounding a mural created by Puerto Rican youth in Holyoke in 1996. Because the mural included a Puerto Rican flag and an upside-down US flag, a city counselor threatened to paint over the piece. In their analysis of the controversy surrounding the 1996 mural, Delgado and Barton show how "the obstacles faced in doing this mural project galvanized the Puerto Rican community" (1998, 354). Thus, debates surrounding public art have the potential to unify communities and spark action.
59. For a related discussion of the Massachusetts bilingual education ban and responses to it, see J. Rosa 2018.
60. Alex Morse and Greg Bialecki, "Reinventing Holyoke," *Boston Globe*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/05/29/reinventing-holyoke/CgGEojczPz4W2liUVYOlXO/story.html>.