

THE BIG APPLE AND THE MANHATTAN MANGO:

Symbols of Nuyorican Nostalgia

by Nicholasa Mohr



As a native New Yorker, I have always been comfortable embracing both New York City, my birthplace, where I've lived for most of my life, and the Island of Puerto Rico, from where my parents had migrated. The "Big Apple" and the "Manhattan Mango," symbols of my birthright, have always had their place in my existence for as long as I remember. After five decades, in May of 2001, I relocated to East Harlem, the neighborhood where I was born. Soon after my move, echoes of my early years caused me to reflect. Such contemplations have enlightened my understanding as to why this ability to embrace two different cultures has been a natural state of being for me. Questions of identity and where I belong as a Latina that have been posed by others and that I have occasionally asked myself over my lifetime have become more evident and easier to understand.

For over three years now I've been living in El Barrio, also referred to as Spanish Harlem. Popular songs like "A Rose in Spanish Harlem" and the famous *West Side Story* musical continue to spotlight this area, and not always in a favorable light. But much of the pejorative opinions once espoused have begun to change now that the real estate trade has discovered this area on Manhattan's Upper East Side, sandwiched between Central Park on Fifth Avenue through to the East River and from 96th Street north up to 125th Street. As a Barrio resident, when I find myself at the 96th Street border that some refer to as "La Frontera," the gap is immediately apparent. This distinction recalls my childhood, as the change of venue abruptly brings one out of the chic and affluent Upper East Side and further uptown into Spanish Harlem. As a child my mother and I would return from shopping at Bloomingdale's or at 86th Street, where fashion-

able shops and restaurants abounded, and in a moment were back inside our Barrio's small-town atmosphere.

Today it is much the same, as I find myself instantly rubbing shoulders with working-class folks who bustle in and out of mom-and-pop bakeries, luncheonettes, bodegas, and

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the numerous 99-cent stores. Fruit stands laden with produce; homemade wagons featuring flavored ices, fresh-cut flowers, and an occasional vendor offering homemade tacos line the streets. A few days ago a stranger walking beside me spontaneously began to share a frustrating moment. "That post office on 110th Street is good for nothing. *Fijate*, half hour it took for me to buy a money order." As I nodded in agreement, the woman wished me a good day before heading in the opposite direction. Another recognizes me and smiles, exclaiming, "You're the lady who's the writer . . . right? I seen you last Thursday at Julia's Jam." I can't help but be pleased that a Barrio resident has remembered my reading at a local event. I thank the elderly man as he gives me his blessings.

For many Puerto Ricans who were born in Puerto Rico and were living in the United States, relocating to their native land is a goal that has been achieved. A short airplane

journey of less than four hours and affordable plane fares make traveling back and forth to New York possible. Most of my friends who now live in their beloved Borinquen express how happy and secure they feel to be in their land of birth, back in a familiar environment.

And so it goes for me as well, as my return to the Barrio of my birth still has an intrinsic ambience that imparts familiar experiences because so much of a Latino gestalt imbues this Manhattan neighborhood. Notwithstanding that time has created differences, Latinos here are no longer only Puerto

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Rican as when I was growing up. Today we have a large population of Mexicans, who began settling in El Barrio in significant numbers in the 1980s. There are also substantial numbers of Central and South American immigrants, who intermingle their native ethnic legacies with the long-established Puerto Rican community that goes as far back as World War I. One only needs to walk along these streets of East Harlem to encounter a strong Latino mien everywhere. This fusion of Latino legacies works and coincides easily because the similarities of language, food, religion, and social behavior are stronger than the differences.

Growing up in my urban village, friends and relatives lived within a ten-block radius of each other. Two of my aunts lived no more than a five-minute walk from our building on 105th street off Fifth Avenue (to my delight, those buildings are still standing). Spanish, my family language, and English, my native tongue, were never a problem for me, and I handled both with ease. I'd walk alongside my mother on our way to shop at our big La Marketa, set inside the massive stone railroad bridge on Park Avenue and waited impatiently as she frequently stopped to chat with neighbors. Many of us also depended on our local bodegas, which accepted credit, and we purchased our school supplies at the "cheaperia" stores, where secondhand effects along with new merchandise were marked down to cheap. We would all attend the only Sunday Mass conducted in Spanish at St. Cecilia, a church that today continues to function and reaches out to its large Latino Catholic community. El Club Obrero was one of the most progressive political clubs that supported our popular Congressman Vito Marcantonio. Our grammar and junior high schools were also within walking distance. We'd play on the steps of the Museum of the City of New York on Fifth Avenue and run across the street to hang out by the gardens and dip our feet into the lake in Central Park. The changing of the seasons when autumn lit up the trees with bright oranges, reds, and purples, bringing us Halloween and Thanksgiving, were times of great joy. Our first big snowstorm, covering everything in sight with a spar-



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Photo by Chris Bell

ling white blanket brought down from the heavens, meant riding our sleds and building snowmen, creating tunnels, and having snowball fights. This was my Nueva York, and when I crossed south of 96th Street, I knew I had ventured outside my urban Latino village. I had traveled out of the center of my universe.

Today, so much of what I knew and felt comfortable with as a child is still ongoing. I meet folks on the street and chat; with my binoculars I bird-watch in the North Woods of Central Park. I shop along the fruit stands and enjoy a homemade fresh hot taco. My loft is located in a vintage building built circa 1890 that was once a junior high school. Its large windows and high ceilings are reminiscent of the charm of an architecture long since vanished. I know many of the writers and artists who have been living here for many years. They include Aurora Flores, Dolores Prida, Fernando Salicrup, José Morales, Diogenes Ballester, and Antonio Martorell, who lives in Puerto Rico but maintains a studio in El Barrio. As artists and Latinos we have a shared history. Cultural centers like Julia de Burgos with Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio offer art exhibits, music, dance, and poetry events on a regular basis. Concerts and street festivals are abundant during the summer. Successful restaurants and bars owned by Puerto Ricans are prospering; these include Camaradas, a tapas bar; La Fonda Boricua, which serves strictly Puerto Rican cuisine; and my favorite, Jake's, where I regularly meet up with friends to catch up and enjoy live music and poetry.

But as a native New Yorker, I am also part of that “other” New York where the Anglo society is dominant. My identity as an American female and a feminist and my roots as a Latina are not separate; they are simply who I am. For in fact most of my adult life I’ve resided in neighborhoods that include Greenwich Village; the Upper West Side; Park Slope in Brooklyn; Teaneck, New Jersey; and abroad in London, England, where the Latino presence was nil. But what still amazes me is that I’ve been able to return to my birth village and find that the Nueva York I’ve written about for decades and carried in my heart, albeit not without the imprint of time, continues as vibrant and alive as ever.

Because all is not perfect in our Barrio, with impending changes becoming ever more evident, I try not to cringe when peripheral transformations initiate the shrinking of our Barrio. One obvious instance is sky-high rents—now

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up to around \$1,000 a month for a studio apartment. Two examples of how the working class is being pushed out: Our border has begun to creep forward to 97th Street, and a complex of luxury rentals on First Avenue starting at 99th street has extended into 103rd Street. Gentrification comes with some good stuff; “tecatos,” drunks, and hookers are diminishing; the streets are cleaner; and more police are patrolling. However, more often than not, the price for these rewards is too dear. And, to my utter consternation, a new marketing strategy is now referring to Spanish Harlem as “Spa Ha.”

Yet I shudder that my Latino urban village will begin to erode into the real estate blueprint of gentrification. When I was a child, my parents and elders as displaced migrants longed for their beloved Borinquen, their “Isla del Encanto.” As children, we were told that living in Puerto Rico was as close to paradise as we could get. However, on my first visit to their beloved Island as an adolescent, I quickly understood that no such paradise ever existed. Later, as an adult, I was able to comprehend how on a spiritual level such a fantasy was imperative in order to sustain my parents’ faith in the future while also ameliorating the abuse and discrimination they endured on a daily basis in a foreign land. Perfection, after all, is in the experience of the keeper of her/his personal nostalgia. Even to this day, in spite of the many changes that have taken place in Puerto Rico, the massive highways, excessive blocks of concrete buildings in metropolitan areas, and the encroaching “Americanization” that has displaced many of our parents’ social traditions, my friends continue to enjoy the warmth, the colors, the climate, and the immense satisfaction of living on their native soil.

And so it is for this Nuyoric writer. Yet if the gentrification of El Barrio continues to usurp my urban village, I don’t know that I will fare as well as my Island patriots. Will I still hear the familiar sounds of Nuyoric Spanglish . . . or walk along these Barrio streets greeting friends and neighbors?

Will our Latino cultural centers be there with art exhibits, live concerts, poets, and dancers who share and fuse their Latino roots with the energy and creativity that is so endemic to New York? Or will the Anglo chic experience slide in and force us into obliteration? Right here, Puerto Ricans hold and have always believed what our parents taught us as special and unique: love Puerto Rico, cherish our rituals, and take pride in who we are. If El Barrio were to disappear, there would be no space left for us Latinos on the Manhattan Island of my birth. Such thoughts are depressing.

Still, I take heart in the fact that others have fought for and won their space in New York City. Italians have Little Italy, and the Chinese claim Chinatown. Fortunately, we do have a thriving Latino oasis in this cultural and economic capital of the world. I believe it is time to declare that “El Barrio,” a.k.a. “Spanish Harlem,” be celebrated for its contributions to our great city and that it be protected against the onslaught that would cause its demise.

In spite of my misgivings, I remain guardedly optimistic because like myself, Puerto Ricans raised and/or born here, along with other Latinos who have had a measure of success, continue to return, investing in property and giving of our time and talents to keep our Barrio “Latino.”

Right now, I am grateful to have the privilege of savoring a sweet nostalgia by once again experiencing those attributes that have enriched my childhood and shaped my life. These qualities remain strong and ongoing. After all is said and done, in such fast-changing times the promise of hope is not such a bad deal . . . at least for now.

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Nicholasa Mohr was born in Manhattan’s El Barrio of Puerto Rican parents. Some of her many books include *Nilda*, *El Bronx Remembered*, *In Nueva York*, *Felita*, *Going Home*, *Rituals of Survival*, *A Matter of Pride*, and *The Song of El Coquí*. A few of her numerous awards are Hispanic Heritage Award, Honorary Doctorate from the State University of New York, and a National Book Award Finalist. She lives in El Barrio, where she continues to write books and plays for readers of all ages. 