

Critical Latina/o Urban Studies in a Metropolitan Perspective: The Case of Latina/o-Majority Union City, New Jersey

Johana Londoño

“Ni aunque me pagen con polvo de oro me voy a trabajar aya, en Manhattan!”
(Not even if they pay me in gold dust will I go work in Manhattan!)

—Marina, 2014

In 1977 Marina, a young seamstress from Medellín, Colombia, arrived at JFK International Airport. Her traveling companion, a female coworker at a shoe factory in Medellín, had arranged for a childhood friend living in Queens to host them on their first night in the United States. The following day, the host—eager to help the recent arrivals and anxious to avoid what too often became extended stays in a city where deindustrialization made finding work difficult for already-established immigrant groups let alone newcomers—sent them off into Manhattan and across the Hudson River to Union City, New Jersey. In Union City, a small but savvy group of Colombian immigrants helped Marina and her friend find sewing jobs at local garment factories run by Turkish and European immigrants and an apartment in a building owned by Cuban exiles. Thus, within two days of arriving in the United States, Marina had a job and a place to stay. Her exceptional sewing skills soon stood out, and she was encouraged to find a job in midtown Manhattan’s garment district, where pay and opportunities for advancement were

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thought to be better. Marina's excitement soon diminished, however, when she realized to her great dismay that the Lincoln Tunnel she would have to commute through daily was underwater. Having lived in Colombia's mountainous inland territory, the thought of crossing and, as she put it, "dying in the water without my body being found" set off deep fears for this devoted Catholic. In 2014 Marina, self-consciously laughing at her younger, parochial self, told me this story of how she came to live and work in Union City for thirty-seven years. Explaining her mind-set then, she exclaimed, "Ni aunque me pagen con polvo de oro me voy a trabajar aya, en Manhattan!" (Not even if they pay me in gold dust will I go work in Manhattan!).

Marina's story points to migratory experiences and settlement decisions that are metropolitan-wide in scope. Though her fear of underwater tunnels is an unusual example, it is a powerful reminder that when people chose to move to Union City, other possibilities across the metropolitan area were weighing heavily on their minds. Marina's reasons for staying so long in the city match that of other Latina/os who migrated there for available work and an affordable-housing supply. Industrial concentration and local, national, and foreign policy also influenced these choices, attracting Latina/o migrants to northern New Jersey from the historic Latina/o settlements in New York City (NYC). This process began in the early twentieth century, when the very first Latina/o migrants, who were primarily of Cuban descent, arrived in northern New Jersey. Thus was created a peculiar Latina/o place identity contingent upon the rest of the metropolitan area.

To understand how Union City's place identity has evolved, this essay examines a metropolitan spatial order that creates and limits the racialized and classed meanings—the "barrio-ness"—of Latina/o-majority places and influences their relation to other places in the metropolitan area. The essay asks how a metropolitan perspective—an approach to Latina/o urbanization that addresses its metropolitan links—might critically expand on a Latina/o urban studies that often focuses on inner-city barrios as discrete entities. Though barrios are seldom studied from a metropolitan perspective in academic scholarship, the residents, policy-makers, and planners I discuss below readily view the barrio through a metropolitan lens, making market comparisons with and experiencing it in relation to other cities. Exposing the metropolitan scope of on Latina/o urban concentration can identify the spatial politics of producing and sustaining different Latina/o communities across the metropolitan area.

The first section below proposes three threads that underlie a metropolitan perspective for Latina/o urban studies. The second section builds on my previous scholarly research and participant observation as a long-term resident in Union City to offer a sociospatial and cultural analysis of the city and show how metropolitan restructuring shapes the Latina/o specificity and barrio-ness of Union City. To conclude, I outline the contributions of a metropolitan perspective to the study of Latina/o urban places and political advocacy on behalf of these ethnoracial places.

A METROPOLITAN PERSPECTIVE FOR LATINA/O URBAN STUDIES

Since the 1960s and 1970s, and well into the present, scholars of Latina/o urban studies have prioritized the inner-city barrios in central cities of major metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, New York, and, more recently, Chicago. Scholars examining transnational circuits and the racialization of regional spaces have begun to loosen the spatial parameters of Latina/o urban research.¹

¹ For transnational urban research see: Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr., *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Kathleen Staudt, César M.

Still—and although the respective research of Edward Soja, Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres on the Los Angeles metropolitan area anticipates a critical approach to the metropolitan area in the social sciences—little research exists that addresses the metropolitan level in the sociospatial production of Latina/o urbanization.² Even less scholarship uses the urban edges of central cities as the launching point for Latina/o urban studies research.³ The slow development of this research is conspicuous given the current grassroots and policy interest in metropolitan political coalitions and the growth of the Latina/o population in areas outside central cities.⁴ According to the Brookings Institution, in 2002, 54 percent of all Latina/os lived in suburbs, exceeding the central-city population by 18 percent.⁵ Decentralization from inner cities to suburbs is now common for Latina/os living in metropolitan areas, including the traditional (im)migrant destinations listed above. For these reasons I propose an additional focus for Latina/o urban studies that takes into account a metropolitan perspective in the sociospatial and cultural analysis of Latina/o urbanization.⁶

A first thread in this metropolitan perspective focuses on actors and recognizes that the expansion of Latina/o culture and residents outside central cities is connected to the emergence of a socioeconomically diverse Latina/o population and ethnically diverse urbanists involved in creating Latina/o places. These actors may offer a reformulation of urban politics that veers away from the strong Latina/o nationalist bonds or grassroots politics that are common aspects of the most researched US barrios. Therefore, in addition to economically poor residents, a number of other actors and their urban place-making tactics ought to be included in critical Latina/o urban studies. The class and racial motives and professional imperatives of wealthy and middle-class

Fuentes, and Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso, *Cities and Citizenship at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, “Latino Landscapes: Postwar Cities and the Transnational Origins of a New Urban America,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (2014): 804–31. Examples of research on the racialization of regional spaces include: Wendy Cheng, *The Changes Next Door to the Díaz: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and Daniel D. Arreola, *Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press Austin, 2002).

² See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989); and Victor M. Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres, *Latino Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³ I make this argument in a brief paper. See Johana Londoño, “At the Edge of the Metropolis: A Call to Expand Barrio Research,” *Antipode Foundation: A Radical Geography Community*, <http://antipodefoundation.org/2013/09/17/a-call-to-expand-barrio-research/>. There are exceptions, of course, to this general trend in Latina/o urban studies. One notable example is not metropolitan in focus but addresses Chicano labor history in several Latina/o-majority places in the Orange County region. See Gilbert G. González, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴ Manuel Pastor Jr., Chris Benner, and Martha Matsuoka, *This Could Be the Start of Something Big: How Social Movements for Regional Equity Are Reshaping Metropolitan America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵ In 2002 the Latina/o population in the United States was estimated to be 37.4 million. In 2013 it was estimated to be 54 million people. Robert Suro and Audrey Singer, “Latina/o Growth in Metropolitan America: Changing Patterns, New Locations,” Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy and the Pew Hispanic Center, Brookings Institution, Survey Series, Census 2000 (July 2002), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2002/07/demographics-suro>.

⁶ My use of a metropolitan perspective may seem odd in light of Edward Soja’s ideas of the “postmetropolitan.” For Soja, a “postmetropolitan transition” is one in which the usual spatial, industrial, and social order attributed to the core and periphery of twentieth century metropolitan areas is transforming into a polycentric urban region. Briefly, this essay maintains a metropolitan interest to highlight the persistent symbolic and economic centrality of NYC throughout the twentieth century even after urbanization spread beyond its core. Edward Soja, *My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Latina/os living in cities and suburbs and of Latina/o and non-Latina/o urban specialists and policy-makers working toward Latina/o place-making—and the extent to which it takes on a barrio character—could be analyzed under this thread.

A second thread is spatial and involves looking at Latina/o urbanization at the edges of and in relation to the central city and the rest of the metropolitan area. Satellite suburbs and exurbs may have land uses, migration patterns, economic imperatives, and barrio politics that differ from the inner-city barrios usually studied in Latina/o urban studies.⁷ Unlike traditional inner-city barrios, this Latina/o geography does not always have distinct geographic parameters and may point to a post-territorial boundedness of Latina/o spaces as globalization explodes the social and cultural bonds of the place-based barrio and gentrification interrupts community formation and the built environment.⁸ Just as well, looking beyond central cities may reveal spaces that are not labeled barrios but are nonetheless Latina/o concentrations that fit cultural or sociological notions of urbanism.

A third thread looks at how the politics of actually existing Latina/o urbanism varies in relation to spatial reconfigurations under capitalism. Following a Lefebvrian dialectical approach to urbanization—what Edward Soja later termed “socio-spatial dialectic”—this thread examines how capital produces Latina/o spaces and how this production conditions and is conditioned by a Latina/o politics of space. This suggests looking at the extent to which capital not only locates and/or concentrates an ethnoracial group in space and encourages its representation in built and commercial environments but also meets and collides with bottom-up Latina/o demands for fair access to city space. Implicit in this is asking why this politics of contestation is present in some areas and not others.

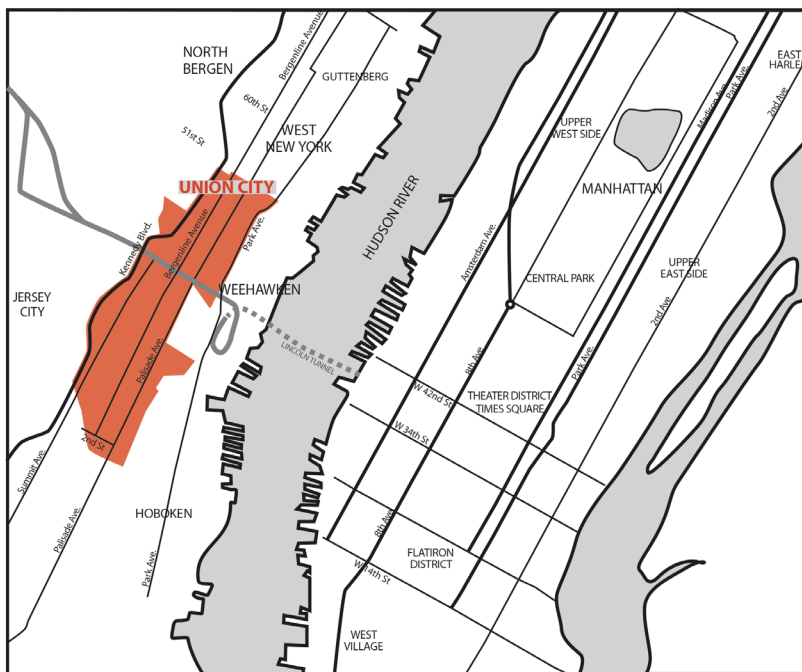
UNION CITY’S LATINA/O URBANISM IN A NEW YORK CITY METROPOLITAN CONTEXT

Union City presents the conditions for analyzing the threads outlined above. As noted, a few publications on Los Angeles adopt a metropolitan perspective, but the majority of these works continue to focus on the central city. Outside the West Coast, metropolitan spaces, and especially the Latina/o-majority places at the periphery of the central city, have yet to be examined. This section attempts to reverse this by showing how metropolitan-wide spatial restructuring affects the geography, culture, economy, and politics of Latina/o-majority Union City.

Prior to Union City’s establishment in 1925, policy-makers and urban elites in the 1910s and 1920s debated whether to merge all Hudson County cities, including the better-known cities of Hoboken and Jersey City, into one “Greater Jersey City.” The idea was to compete with the political and economic clout of recently incorporated NYC and create what real estate agents described as the new frontier in metropolitan settlement. In 1910 a *New York Times* article boasted that a “[n]ew suburban era is dawning in New Jersey.... [T]here is not a member of the New Jersey–New York Real Estate Exchange whose dreams of the immediate future are not filled with visions of a

⁷ Michael Jones-Correa notes how the suburbanization of Latina/os has made place-based political mobilization less relevant. See Michael Jones-Correa, “Reshaping the American Dream: Immigrants, Ethnic Minorities, and the Politics of the New Suburbs,” in *The New Suburban History*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 202–3.

⁸ For more on how transnational forces are reimagining research on the experience of Latina/os in urban space, see Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos, *Beyond El Barrio*.



glorious horizon, radiant with silver-lined clouds.”⁹ Accompanying these shifts in land and real estate development was a major metropolitan demographic development. Union City’s population was quickly growing with the arrival of Irish, Italian, and German immigrants flowing out of NYC. This wave of immigration included working-class, mestizo, and white Cubans who left the farms and factories of early twentieth-century Cuba behind for NYC and then relocated to northern New Jersey in search of work, open space, and quiet neighborhoods.¹⁰ While a growing population and potential growth in tax revenue supported, according to some, the prominent logic of consolidation, by the 1920s the corrupt politics of Jersey City’s Mayor Hague and the Great Depression¹¹ halted plans for a Greater Jersey City and with it pipe dreams of subsuming Hudson County into an even-larger assemblage of Greater New York.¹² In the end the only merger that resulted was that of Union City, a combination of the towns of Union Hill and West Hoboken. E. C. Stokes, the New Jersey Republican state chairman, who opposed the countywide

⁹ See Otto Kempner, “New Suburban Era Dawning in Jersey: Northern New Jersey to Be Big Shipping and Factory Center—Choice Residential Sections,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1910.

¹⁰ Yolanda Prieto, *The Cubans of Union City: Immigrants and Exiles in a New Jersey Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); and Eleanor Meyer Rogg and Rosemary Santana Cooney, *Adaptation and Adjustment of Cubans: West New York, New Jersey* (Bronx, NY: Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, 1980). Author interviews with Cuban locals substantiate this history.

¹¹ Thomas Fleming, *New Jersey: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 181; and Thomas Fleming, “Us against Them: How the Irish Ruled Jersey City,” *New Jersey History* 127, no. 1 (June 18, 2012), accessed June 1, 2013, <http://njh.libraries.rutgers.edu/index.php/njh/issue/view/250/showToc>.

¹² As early as 1900, Andrew H. Green, the man who oversaw the merging of communities (later boroughs) into one New York City in 1897, was hinting at the possibility of Hudson County’s inclusion in Greater New York. See Andrew H. Green, “New York City as It Will Be in 1999: Pictorial Forecast of the City as Approved by Andrew H. Green,” *The World*, December 30, 1900, as cited in Anita Klutsch, *Andrew Haswell Green, the Father of Greater New York and His Dual Vision of a Cultivated and Consolidated Metropolis* (inaugural diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany, Books on Demand, 2012), 138.

consolidation by singing the virtues of small-town life and deploring the loss of “civic spirit” experienced by big cities such as New York, may have applauded the smaller merger.¹³ But wishes for preserving small-town life contradicted the changes afoot in Union City, which was on track to becoming an urban industrial and immigrant core within a fast-changing metropolitan economy.

Latina/os have played an important role in the twentieth-century urbanization of Union City. The unprecedented number of Cuban migrants arriving after the 1959 Cuban Revolution was a major first step in transforming this nascent city. The few Cuban residents who had arrived before the revolution steered the postrevolution arrival of family, friends, and acquaintances from Havana, the rural town of Fomento, and the province of Las Villas in central Cuba into northern New Jersey. About 2,000 Cuban exiles moved to Union City in 1959.¹⁴ In 1960 the newly formed United States Cuban Refugee Program relocated Cuban exiles arriving in Miami to Hudson County to relieve some of the economic burden facing southern Florida.¹⁵ From 1961 to 1966, of all the states receiving resettled Cuban refugees, New Jersey received the most. Amounting to an estimated 20,000 people, most of these migrants were less wealthy and had lower professional status than the Cubans who settled in Miami.¹⁶ A large number of these refugees settled in Union City and began to replace a population of upwardly mobile Germans, Irish, Swiss, Austrians, Poles, Russians, and Italians who were concurrently moving out to middle-class New Jersey suburbs.

Cold War interests and racial discrimination influenced the development of Cuban settlement in Union City and led to the strategic exclusion of other Latina/o groups from the city. As Ramón Grosfoguel notes, the Cuban Refugee Program invested millions of dollars in cities where Cubans relocated.¹⁷ The money was primarily allocated for education, welfare, hospitals, and other public services. A portion of the funds was allotted to the Small Business Administration (SBA), which in turn distributed the resources among several business loan and mortgage programs. Whereas Cubans were able to benefit from these monies, Puerto Ricans and African Americans were systematically excluded from attaining startup capital through SBA.¹⁸ Cubans’ perceived whiteness and their tendency to have professional backgrounds were believed to facilitate their successful integration into an American middle class, a process that, if successful, would allow the United States to play the role of noble guarantor of freedom and upward mobility vis-à-vis communist Cuba.¹⁹ Thus, redlining policies linked with Cold War politics to create a political economic and geographic bias. This, along with the family connections and friendships that attracted an overwhelming number of Cubans to the city, partially explains the large numbers of Puerto Ricans and African Americans in nearby Jersey City and the relatively small Puerto Rican and even smaller African American populations in Union City.

¹³ “Opposes Creating Greater Jersey City,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1926.

¹⁴ Evelyn Nieves, “Union City and Miami: A Sisterhood Born of Cuban Roots,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1992.

¹⁵ The Cuban Refugee Program was begun in 1960 by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and was aided by religious organizations around the country that organized the Cuban migrants’ arrival in particular cities. In Hudson County the Catholic Church played an important role in Cuban relocation. See Rogg and Cooney, *Adaptation and Adjustment of Cubans*, 16; and Prieto, *Cubans of Union City*, 28.

¹⁶ Rogg and Cooney, *Adaptation and Adjustment of Cubans*.

¹⁷ Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 168–71.

¹⁸ Ibid. Grosfoguel derives his information from D. M. Cronin, “Ethnicity, Opportunity, and Occupational Mobility in the United States” (PhD diss., State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1981).

¹⁹ Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*.

Cuban Union City was the result of a community-led, state-managed, capitalist urbanization that contributed to racial divisions in the metropolitan area's Latina/o geography. Unlike other Latina/o communities in the area, the Cuban influx to northern New Jersey was welcomed by urban elites, who found a way to benefit, and profit, from the newly formed ethnic cluster. Politicians, business owners, realtors, and residents believed that Cubans could reverse the economic decline in real estate and retail caused by white flight and contribute to a much-needed industrial workforce for German-, Swiss-, and Austrian-owned factories. "Thank you Castro" read a sardonic gambit in a *New York Times* article of 1988, reflecting businesses' appreciation for this historic shift in consumer demographic. Elected officials in higher offices furthered this belief. In 1966 Senator Robert Kennedy commented on the virtues of this upwardly mobile Cuban population in the NYC metropolitan area, and at a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees, the governor of New Jersey, Richard Hughes, noted the Cuban predilection for work, their minor impositions on welfare bankrolls, and their contribution to the "economic vitality of their environment."²⁰

Indeed, Cuban migration throughout the twentieth century was instrumental in developing Union City into a manufacturing powerhouse, part of the so-called "embroidery capital of the world."²¹ The city had long been an industrial town peppered with family-owned embroidery and silk factories. Since the late 1800s, Swiss and German entrepreneurs had seen the Palisades as an excellent place to locate their large and heavy (10- to 20-ton) machinery, which required firm bedrock for the constant and clangorous vibrations of textile production.²² Union City's metropolitan location was also crucial, because much of the embroidery manufactured in the city used fabric bought in midtown Manhattan and later was designed and sold there as well.²³ In the 1930s this proximity made the area ideal for "runaway shops," which, according to union representatives, NYC manufacturers and jobbers set up in Hudson County to circumvent NYC's strict labor laws and high rents.²⁴ Once the Lincoln Tunnel was completed in the 1950s, only a short, fifteen-minute ride divided production from consumption. However, geographic location and inexpensive labor alone could not sustain the embroidery industry. Fashion also played a role in its economic success. When Cubans entered the industry in the early 1960s, the industry was slowly recovering from a lull, eventually picking up momentum again as fashion trends popularized embroidery²⁵

²⁰ "Hughes Says Cubans Are Asset in Jersey," *New York Times*, April 15, 1966.

²¹ Hudson County was regarded as the "Embroidery Capital of the World," whereas Union City was called the "Home of the American Embroidery Industry." While embroidery and silk factories constituted the most prominent industries in the city, there were plenty of other kinds of manufacturing that took place. Residents with whom I spoke confirm that rotary phones, women's handbags, and garden hoses were also produced in Union City in the late twentieth century.

²² "Embroidery Field in Midst of a Boom," *New York Times*, December 10, 1972; "History: The Schiffler Lace and Embroidery Manufacturers," Schiffler Association: The Lace and Embroidery Manufacturers, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.schiffler.org>.

²³ Leonard Sloane, "Tides of Fashion Delight Weavers of Schiffler Lace: Gains Predicted in Schiffler Lace," *New York Times*, June 11, 1964.

²⁴ Nancy L. Green, "From Downtown Tenements to Midtown Lofts: The Shifting Geographies of an Urban Industry," in *A Coat of Many Colors: Immigration, Globalization, and Reform in New York City's Garment Industry*, ed. Daniel Soyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 27–44.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See also Herbert Koshetz, "Embroidery Invades Even the Casual Fashions," *New York Times*, March 7, 1971.

and, I surmise, because Cubans represented an even cheaper, more precarious, and docile feminized labor force than previous white ethnic workers.²⁶

By 1970 Union City and neighboring Hudson County cities were home to 90 percent of the embroidery machinery in the United States. This industry became increasingly dependent on a new and diverse Latina/o migration from NYC or directly from Latin America. According to a *New York Times* article of 1970:

Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Colombians, and other Latins [*sic*] are shying away from the main Spanish-speaking sections of New York City and are making New Jersey their home. . . . Many of the newcomers to New Jersey came to escape the lack of decent jobs and housing in New York City. Others were lured by relatives and friends who wrote of the good life to be found there and of the many jobs.²⁷

Appreciating this new demographic, the executive director of the area's Schiffler Lace and Embroidery Manufacturers Association said, "Many Americans want a work week of only 35 hours . . . but we can't function that way. The Spanish-speaking people are willing to work a long day. One owner says that they're a godsend to the industry."²⁸ Indeed, by 1972, 70 percent of this workforce was Latina/o, a significant ethnoracial change to the industry given that the county's Latina/o population prior to 1960 was very small.²⁹ Workforce changes coupled with embroidery demands of the Vietnam War—shoulder patches for military uniforms, emblems for the US armed forces, and US flags—made the area's industry a financial success well into the 1970s, when Marina, for instance, arrived, as described above, from Colombia.³⁰

The racialized work and consumption that Union City's Latina/o population offered throughout the late twentieth century maintained a capitalist interest in the city, or a "spatial fix" that the topography of the Palisades and metropolitan location had initially spurred. According to David Harvey, a spatial fix arises to solve a capitalist crisis defined by the overaccumulation of capital and labor that has yet to spatially converge in a productive way to elevate production and/or consumer demand for the capitalist.³¹ After the Cuban Revolution, the arrival of jobless Cubans in an already-oversaturated Miami created a labor surplus that US refugee policy redirected to Hudson County. This occurred at a propitious time when manufacturing in Union City was stagnating and the city's white ethnics were moving to wealthier suburbs, a white flight that hurt the city's housing and retail landscape. Cuban migration and the monetary assistance from the US refugee program that followed it were key to inciting production and consumer demand in a city feeling the fallout of white ethnic suburbanization. Cuban locals whom I interviewed describe Bergenline Avenue, the city's main drag, in the 1970s as an outdoor mall selling exquisite goods with "nothing to envy Macy's." Enthusiasm for the city's economic potential attracted Latina/o investment from NYC. In 1971 the first non-Mexican Latina/o-owned bank in the United States was opened in Union City. Pedro L. Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican dentist whose

²⁶ For more on the feminization of labor in the city's industry, especially the entry of Cuban women into the workforce, see Prieto, *Cubans of Union City*, 63–84.

²⁷ Alfonso A. Narvaez, "Latins Integrating in Jersey Town: Latins Are Becoming Vital Part of an Industrial Town in Jersey," *New York Times*, February 4, 1970. See also "Embroidery Field in Midst of a Boom."

²⁸ "Embroidery Field in Midst of a Boom."

²⁹ "Looking for Embroidery? Look in Hudson County," *New York Times*, April 30, 1972.

³⁰ "Embroidery Field in Midst of a Boom."

³¹ See, e.g., David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 26–30.

Union City, NJ, Population

Year	Latino pop.	% Latino of total pop.	Cuban pop.	% Cuban of Latino pop.	Total pop.	% Individuals below poverty for total pop.
1980	35,525	63.9	17,661	49.7	55,593	20.3
1990	43,661*	75.3	14,709	33.7	58,012	18.2
2000	55,226	82.3	10,296	18.6	67,088	21.4
2010	56,291	84.7	7,510	13.3	66,455	21.4

Sources: 1980 census; 1990 census; 2000 census; 2010 census; "Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, New Jersey, Counties and Selected Municipalities: 1980, 1990 and 2000," New Jersey State Data Center, June 2001, <http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/lpa/census/2kpub/njsdcp2.pdf>.

*There is a discrepancy between the data offered by the New Jersey State Data Center and the 1990 census. This table uses the census data.

Bronx-based clinic included Union City residents on its patient list, opened the Pan American Bank to provide the growing Latina/o community with Spanish-speaking customer service.³² Cubans (and diverse Latin American migrants arriving in the 1970s and 1980s) in Union City promoted development and staved off a potential capitalist crisis that in a Cold War context would have been harmful not only to the economy but to the very ideology of US capitalism.

Insofar as Union City served the needs of a spatial fix and its population was associated with American values of white upward mobility, this state-sanctioned Cuban barrio, with an imperceptible barrio consciousness, became "the Havana on the Hudson" and celebrated by urban elites, including realtors, elected politicians, policy-makers, and business owners. But in the late 1970s, and well into the 1980s, as urban economies across the country faced decline, Union City policy-makers began to worry about continual migration to the city and its impact on municipal coffers. Socioeconomically and racially diverse Latina/o migrants from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Puerto Rico, some who had first migrated to NYC, began to replace Cubans moving away to wealthier New Jersey suburbs or Miami.³³ These Latina/o migrants had less educational attainment and received less governmental aid than their Cuban refugee predecessors and thus dampened the urban elite's celebratory talk of Cuban-led revitalization. Even some early Cuban migrants joined the voices of apprehension when the Mariel boatlift of 1980 brought to the city a large contingent of poor and Afro-Cuban "Marielitos," as these later refugees were at times disparagingly called. Established Cuban residents greeted

³² Rodriguez dreamed up his banking venture after hearing patients complain about a lack of Spanish-language service in Union City. See Robert D. Hershey Jr., "Dentist Envisions New Bank for Spanish-Speaking Community," *New York Times*, December 29, 1969.

³³ See Nieves, "Union City and Miami." Also, McHugh et al. note that Miami grew as a magnet for Cubans in the Northeast during the decade spanning 1985–95. By far, northern New Jersey experienced the most out-migration to Miami. Reasons included Miami's closeness to Cuba, warm weather, and a thriving ethnic economic niche. See Kevin E. McHugh, Ines M. Miyares, and Emily H. Skop, "The Magnetism of Miami: Segmented Paths in Cuban Migration," *Geographical Review* 87, no. 4 (1997): 504–19.

these later Cuban migrants coldly, believing this new group would tarnish the Cuban reputation in the city and give “law abiding Union City a bad name.”³⁴

Despite increasing fissures in Union City’s Latina/o population, since the 1980s the city’s diverse Latina/o population has made the city a Cuban commercial and political stronghold. Regarding the former, it is interesting to consider that in 1990, while Cuban middle-class families moved out of the city, 80 percent of businesses in the city were Cuban owned. On the political front, NYC-born, Union City–raised, Cuban American Democrat Robert Menendez was elected to various offices, first as mayor in 1986 and eventually as a US senator in 2006. Menendez’s prominent status, and the appearance of subsequent Cuban politicians, fed Cuban-Latina/o solidarity and patronage and ensured Cuban representation in municipal politics and local government agencies. The privileges afforded to early Cubans refugees of the 1960s, Cuban anticommunist nationalism, and the ability of Cuban politicians to co-opt recent migrants despite their diverse interests led to a more prominent presence in electoral politics and local public institutions than in radical left politics after the 1960s.³⁵

From a metropolitan perspective, this is in marked contrast to contemporaneous Latina/o concentrations in NYC, such as Puerto Ricans and other racialized Latina/os who were subjected to (im)migrant bashing and dehumanization. Puerto Ricans, whose birth rates and barrio concentrations in NYC scholars and policy experts branded as a “problem,” confronted this marginalization by making themselves visible, at least at first, in class-based place politics, urban cultural politics, or radical grassroots organizing.³⁶ Union City’s smaller land area and the dispersal of Latina/os throughout the city also made it easier for Latina/os to assert electoral power there, in contrast to NYC’s competing ethnic politics. These differences aside, new Latina/o migration to Union City did bring some symmetry to the barrios of NYC and Union City. Most notably, late twentieth-century Latina/o migration to Union City shows how racialized and poor Latina/o groups were cause for a growing pessimism about the economic potential of the barrio during postindustrial revitalization processes across the metropolitan area.

As in other urban areas, a postindustrial era in Hudson County led to an overreliance on service sector jobs and increased dependency on residential and commercial real estate for replenishing city tax revenue. Realtors marketed cities along the Hudson waterfront, such as Hoboken, Weehawken, and Jersey City, as the “Gold Coast” for new metropolitan development. The Lefrak builders, known for Lefrak City in Queens, opened Newport Mall and undertook residential and office projects in downtown Jersey City. And local and state government offered tax abatements and other special incentives to bring NYC companies to Hoboken and Jersey City. The latter city is now known as a “sixth borough” and extension of NYC’s financial district.

Because Union City lacks NYC-connected PATH (rapid-transit system) stations—the usual attraction for metro NYC development and gentrification—and is removed from the Hudson River waterfront, a neoliberal trend of government-subsidized, real estate–driven urban growth was slow to arrive in the city. When it eventually caught on, the impulse toward urban growth made the urban elite ever more conscious of how metropolitan location affects the city’s

³⁴ Jerry Cheslow, “Union City Angered by Cuba Pact,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1988.

³⁵ This date is important to specify, for there was Cuban political and fundraising activity in Union City on behalf of Castro and the revolution prior to 1959.

³⁶ Puerto Rican communities in other cities of the metro area, such as Jersey City and Newark, also engaged in bottom-up organizing and/or protests.

competitiveness. One major program operating under a neoliberal logic is the Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ), which targets select impoverished areas as sites for economic growth and provides local businesses with a low, 3.5 percent sales tax to lure consumers away from outlying malls and into Union City and with a façade revitalization to homogenize the environment and create what UEZ leaders believe to be a more appealing suburban “Main Street” look. The UEZ also offers new property developers tax subsidies for designated areas, including condominiums targeting professionals working in NYC. Adding to the pro-gentrification force of UEZ, the city’s elected politicians, most of whom identify as Latin/a/o American, welcome creative professionals priced out of NYC real estate and have even helped to rebrand the area as NoHu (northern Hudson) to echo the historic artist-led revitalization of SoHo in Manhattan.³⁷

In this new revitalization period Latina/os have not been completely brushed aside.³⁸ Seeking to appeal to Latina/o voters, elected politicians commemorate the city’s Latina/o community with small parks and/or streets named after Cubans Celia Cruz and Jose Marti, Dominican Pablo Duarte, and Ecuadorian Vicente Rocafuerte and a park in honor of the local Colombian community. Despite a nod to Latin/o American history, these recent projects coincide with a move toward gentrification that makes living in the city more precarious for poor, working-class Latina/os.

In 2010 the city, at slightly over one square mile, had an average of 51,796 people per square mile (NYC averaged 27,013 people per square mile; Manhattan, 69,468), making it one of the most densely populated cities in the United States.³⁹ In the same year, Latina/os represented 84.7 percent of the population, a larger share than at the height of the Cuban presence. But this mostly racialized, undereducated, poor and working-class population is now a part of a changing landscape of labor that creates a difficult living environment for the city’s poor. Unemployment is about 12 percent, and 21.1 percent of people in 2010 were living below poverty level—a situation heightened by the city’s location in New Jersey, one of the wealthiest states in the country and neighbor to wealthier midtown Manhattan. Instead of working with and expanding on the virtues of this Latina/o population to strengthen the city, policy-makers redirect their gaze and competitive energies toward Manhattan and the rest of the metropolitan area in an attempt to turn the urban economy around and craft Union City’s future.

The city’s growing interdependence with the metropolitan area can be seen in the rising commuter rates among Union City residents. The flight of low-wage jobs out of the city, the rise of service industries and retail in other places in Hudson County and in NYC, and NYC-led gentrification have made Union City, along with the PATH-serving cities of Hoboken and Jersey City, one of the top ten cities for public-transit commuting in the country. Hudson County has the highest growth rate in commuters to Manhattan—with a 21 percent increase from 2002 to 2009, the highest of any other county in the region.⁴⁰ In 2011 about 19.5 percent of Union City’s residents

³⁷ Vanessa Cruz, “NoHu Film Festival Wraps Up,” *HudsonReporter.com*, October 28, 2012, accessed May 22, 2013.

³⁸ For more on how urban governments and realtors promote Latina/o urban spaces during a neoliberal era, see Arlene Davila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 97–118.

³⁹ Data was taken from the 2010 census. I cite data for Manhattan, but perhaps a better comparison can be made with Brooklyn, whose low-rise buildings are more similar to the buildings found in Union City. Brooklyn has 35,369.1 people per square mile.

⁴⁰ Mitchell L. Moss, Carson Y. Qing, and Sarah Kaufman, “Commuting to Manhattan: A Study of Residence Location Trends for Manhattan Workers from 2002 to 2009,” Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, New York University Wagner School of Public Service, March 2012.

commuted out of New Jersey, most going to NYC, about the same number of people work and live in Union City, while over 60 percent work in other places in New Jersey. My observations show that there has been an increase in white and Asian professionals commuting via bus from Union City to Manhattan, and Latina/o workers are commuting to retail jobs in Jersey City's waterfront malls and big-box stores in New Jersey's wealthier suburbs or taking the bus to housekeeping, home health care nursing, or construction jobs in New York, Hudson County, and surrounding New Jersey suburbs. And as local business owners complained to me, new bus routes and a light-rail transit system (opened in 2006) have driven residents to shop elsewhere. Certainly, the population density of the city and a walk down Bergenline Avenue on a weekend attest to the fact that Union City continues to be an intensely used core—at the very least because it provides Cuban nostalgia and Latina/o-themed consumption or window-shopping—but the impulse to work and shop outside is becoming greater. And with it this historic urban core is slowly peeling outward, leaving the Latina/o—and the barrio—specificity of this city on a tenuous footing.

While in other Latina/o-majority places these developments might spark outrage, they have not become a grassroots concern in Union City. The city does not completely fulfill the expectations of a dominant Latina/o spatial imaginary built around the inner-city barrio as an alternative or resistance to urban forces that marginalize.⁴¹ In this city the social and cultural spaces forged in opposition to racial and classed policies are scattered and not all that visible. The small gestures of resistance that exist—examples described to me by residents include negotiating with your landlord to avoid a higher rent and evading a landlord's request to adhere to UEZ façade requirements—seem to be less a tool for community organizing and more of an individual concession in which the marginalized have the short end of the stick and are in a suspended state of always almost being displaced. Throughout a century of Union City's development it is evident that the making and unmaking of the city's Latina/o place identity, its barrio-ness, and the politics that might sustain it depend upon the city's location in and relation to the metropolitan area.

THE POLITICS OF A METROPOLITAN PERSPECTIVE

Showing how the production and sustainability of Latina/o spaces vary according to metropolitan restructuring significantly alters Latina/o urban studies. First, a research perspective that considers the push and pull of metropolitan economies can help identify why and how Latina/o spaces concentrate in particular cities and not others. Second, this approach exposes how strongly the central city influences a recent neoliberal logic of revitalization and the work and consumer patterns of residents. Adopting a metropolitan perspective in scholarship is useful for revealing the outward orientation that typifies Union City as well as other deindustrialized peripheral cities caught in a multi-city competition for state resources, wealthier residents with disposable income, and higher-tax-paying property owners. Studies of other Latina/o-majority places at the periphery of central cities might assume a metropolitan perspective to broaden Latina/o urban studies beyond municipal boundaries.

Finally, another reason for adopting a metropolitan perspective is to reveal the possibility of resistance against the inequality that restructuring may produce. The special issue of *Occasion*, "Race, Space, Scale," of which this essay is a part is expressly interested in how people of color

⁴¹ This use of a Latina/o spatial imaginary could be compared to the "white spatial imaginary" and "black spatial imaginary" that George Lipsitz describes in his account of racial segregation in varied geographic spaces across the United States. See George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

mobilize to negotiate or transform the conditions they face. In Union City, where such a politics barely exists, a metropolitan perspective is crucial for showing how unequal Latina/o geographies are made and remade according to capital flows and accumulation. The potential of research at a metropolitan scale lies in its ability to illuminate links between seemingly different neighborhoods and political subdivisions across the area and generate a new collective politics, such as that between other gentrifying communities of color in the metropolitan area. In writing this essay, it is my hope that such challenges soon begin to form to counter urban elites looking outside for the development of Union City and before all that remains of this city is a commuting suburb with parks and placards commemorating dead honorable Latin/a/o Americans. A