

# **Melissa Fernández Arrigiota - Constructing 'The Other', Practicing Resistance: Public Housing and Community Politics in Puerto Rico**

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This thesis evaluates the colonial productions and contestations of Puerto Rican public housing and its residents as urban 'others'. It combines a historical analysis of the political, spatial and material trajectory of the island's projects with an ethnography of the resistances enacted by a group of residents- mainly women- from one such complex called '*Las Gladiolas*' against an impending order of demolition and displacement. I argue that while a context of socio-spatial exclusion and environmental determinism has pervaded the constructions of these postcolonial '*projects*' in ways that have significantly discriminated against its residents, public housing has never been and can never be completed according to that limited governmental design - which today exists under the rubric of urban redevelopment - mainly because communities of solidarity, dissent and conflict emerge simultaneously with and against those formulations, taking on a life of their own in ways that collude with and escape rigid technocratic formulations of housing policy. The research presented emphasizes the symbolic struggle and material reality embedded in Las Gladiolas's community politics which resists and disrupts a homogeneous vision of past, present and future urban space.

The historical analysis highlights the ways in which '*othering*' was set in place within the colonial context of Puerto Rico's urban development in a way which has allowed for the continued stigmatization of public housing projects and for the reproduction of residents' disadvantage according to raced, gendered and classed discriminations. Those distinctions of difference also created the conditions for particular forms of resistance to emerge. The ethnographic data tells the story of how the political and physical enactment of the buildings' deterioration

intersected with residents' informal, institutional and legal resistance to relocation. It shows how the contemporary production, experiences and contestations over public housing are not fixed, but multiple and highly ambiguous. The complex interplay that emerges between political, social and material elements demonstrates that the boundaries separating Las Gladiolas from its urban environ, and Puerto Rican housing agencies from the American ones, are in fact open and porous, fluctuating according to use, appropriations, and political and legal transformations.

*Full text:* [M.Fernandez Arrigota - Constructing The Other](#)