



American Conversations (Puerto Rican Studies)

Ellen Bigler

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Growing numbers of working-class Puerto Ricans are migrating from larger mainland metropolitan areas into smaller, "safer" communities in search of a better quality of life for themselves and their families. What they may also encounter in moving to such communities is a discourse of exclusion that associates their differences and their lower socioeconomic class with a lack of effort and an unwillingness to assimilate into mainstream culture. In this ethnographic study of a community in conflict, educator and anthropologist Ellen Bigler examines such discourses as she explores one city's heated dispute that arose over bringing multiculturalism and bilingual education into their lives and their schools' curricula. The impassioned debate that erupted between long-time white ethnic residents and more recently arrived Puerto Rican citizens in the de-industrialized city the author calls "Arnhem" was initially sparked by one school board member's disparaging comments about Latinos. The conflict led to an investigation by the New York State Education Department and to attempts to implement multicultural reforms in the city's schools. "American Conversations" follows the ensuing conflict, looks at the history of racial formation in the United States, and considers the specific economic and labor histories of the groups comprising the community in opposition. Including interviews with students, teachers, parents, and community leaders, as well as her own observations of exchanges among them inside and outside the classroom, Bigler's book explores the social positions, diverging constructions of history, and polarized understandings of contemporary racial/ethnic dynamics in Arnhem. Through her retelling of one community's crisis, Bigler illuminates the nature of racial politics in the United States and how both sides in the debate over multicultural education struggle to find a common language. "American Conversations" will appeal to anyone invested in education and multiculturalism in the United States as well as those interested in anthropology, sociology, racial and ethnic studies, educational institutions, migration and settlement, the effects of industrial restructuring, and broad issues of community formation and conflict. Author note: Ellen Bigler is an Assistant Professor at Rhode Island College where she holds a joint appointment in Educational Studies and Anthropology. An educator in New York State schools for fourteen years, she also served as a consultant to the New York State Department of Education on its K-12 Latino curriculum project, *Latinos in the Making of the USA: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*.

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