Lilia Fernandez  

*Brown in the Windy City* focuses squarely on the often-overlooked complex parallel migrations, shifting residential patterns, and urban activism of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in postwar configurations of urban space in Chicago. Pushing against standard historiography, which has the tendency to eclipse “Brown” communities in general, Fernandez departs from studies that historicize U.S. urban history solely from a black-white racial paradigm and presents a heretofore untold history. Her study expands our racial vocabulary by deploying the term “Brown” to describe the roles of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in shaping Chicago’s inner city. By being attentive to and working around the mercurial ways in which the U.S. Census Bureau has sought to classify people of Hispanic or Latina/o origin over time, Fernandez shows how “Brown” communities gained increasing demographic and political legibility and how these two distinct communities transformed over time. She uses the word “Brown” as a capacious term with which to describe the distinct historical subjects of diverse ethnoracial and national origins that make up the focus of her study.

Each of the seven chapters broadens understandings of racial history by comparatively exploring where Mexican and Puerto Rican subjects fit into Chicago’s urban geographical landscapes, and just how certain postwar Latinas/os became politically active Chicagoans in the latter half of the twentieth century. Fernandez includes several charts, graphs, tables, maps, and aerial photos to buttress her historiographical study of the central city. The opening chapter explores labor migration policies, contract labor (as in the case of the Bracero program in the early 1940s), and both legal and unauthorized immigration spanning the 1940s–1970s. The second chapter focuses on Puerto Rican and Mexican residential patterns and the way specific Hispanophone communities negotiated intra-communal conflict, built alliances, and “put down roots” on the Near West Side during moments of significant demographic change.

The book goes on to situate the causal relationship between influxes of Latinas/os into inner-city Chicago and the subsequent increased suburbanization of lower-middle-class white residents into racially exclusive neighborhoods. Moreover, it sets out to trace moments when entire communities resettled to other parts of the city, describing these changes without abandoning a close look at how urban renewal efforts by city planners and real estate developers caused this very pattern of displacement. Fernandez shows that the reach of urban planners is not limited to the design of concrete lived space and that
urban planning ultimately influenced “Brown” residents’ sense of imagined community. While she asserts that “Puerto Ricans (and Mexicans) were not segregated or discriminated against in housing as fiercely and unequivocally as African-Americans were,” she details the hostility and racial tensions encountered by Latina/o communities throughout Chicago’s inner city (p. 152).

Fittingly, this study also investigates the organizations that developed in direct response to the challenges brought on by urban renewal and the experience of racial tension coupled with inner-city poverty. To highlight such responses, Fernandez turns to the powerful social function of the Young Lord organization in the face of racial tensions, confrontations with the police, and rapid neighborhood change. She shows how this group, which began as a street gang, evolved into a radical and politically conscious organization that advocated social change and rallied against poor neighborhood conditions. This section is particularly provocative because it explores the robust impact of the Young Lords as a full fledged political force in spite of the fact that they did not get much recognition on the national stage during the Civil Rights Movement or thereafter. Fernandez’s exploration of the Young Lord organization and its role in attempting to mitigate and eliminate inequality, social injustice, and urban poverty adds to our understanding of how panethnic Third-World leftist communities organized around antiracism and anticapitalism during the civil rights era.

The book also investigates the Mexican American barrio in light of social organizations emerging out of the Chicana/o nationalist movement during 1968–1974. While economic marginalization, criminalization of Mexican identity and “conflicts over identity assimilation, nationalism, and cultural distinctiveness” marked the experiences of Mexicans in the Pilsen neighborhood, communal minded activism flourished (p. 236). Fernandez shows how residents around Eighteenth Street, the geographical locus of Chicago’s Chicana/o movement, transformed the Howell House social service agency into the Howell House Casa Aztlán and how the community pressed for the construction of El Centro de la Causa, the Latin American Youth Center, Inc. to achieve social service reform. She details these sites of social service reform and community activism but points to the ways they maintained asymmetrical gendered dimensions.

Readers hoping to find out more about the role of women activists in these neighborhoods will be pleased to read the book’s final chapter in which Fernandez recovers the experiences of women engaged in cultural nationalist organizations and struggles in Chicago through an exploration of women’s activism in the organization Mujeres Latinas en Acción. It details the pivotal role women played when they mobilized around education, health and social services, and
questions of gender in their organized efforts to improve the lives of women in the Pilsen neighborhood in the early 1970s.

Fernandez clearly maps out the geographical, demographic, racial, and political transformation of inner-city Chicago from the 1940s to the 1980s. She succeeds brilliantly in investigating the gendered and ethnoracial dimensions of urban social activism, the labor migration patterns among Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, the public policies affecting urban reform, and residential flows into and out of the Lower West Side, South Lawndale, West Town, and Humboldt Park neighborhoods in Chicago.

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