Mérida M. Rúa


Chicago Illinois looms large in the American imagination as the center for industrial expansion in the Midwest. Its steel mills dominated city skylines and clogged the air of nearby Gary and East Chicago, sinewy steel towns in Northern Indiana, once home to the Miami and Shawnee peoples. The city’s meatpacking mills attracted workers from as far away as Mexico, the East Coast’s immigrant shores, and the struggling coal-laden towns of the Alleghenies. Industry’s promises wrestled farmers from humble villages dotting the western plains; but its brave assurances often led to crowded tenements, hunger, and the lash of cold, winter winds. Yet, each new group in the “windy city” helped change the landscape dramatically for generations to come, adding festivals, mingling languages, creating cultural sites that made the city pulse with vitality. Chicago emerged in the twentieth century as one of the most dynamic, diverse, and racially segregated cities in the country.

Path-breaking scholars, such as Zaragoza Vargas, whose Proletarians of the North (1993) heralded new transnational studies on the vitality of Latinos in the labor marketplaces of urban Mid-America, showed how these new industrial recruits imaginatively assimilated into new communal structures, creatively molded their social networks, and welcomed others from home. Studies on Puerto Ricans in the Midwest have been sparse; and none offer as intricate an analysis of labor networks and community formations as Vargas’s panoramic work. The paucity of studies on Latinos in the Midwest, especially of its Puerto Rican diaspora, faced long-term stagnation as scholars focused principally on the Eastern Seaboard’s “traditional barrios” in urban New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Except for early landmark studies such as Felix Padilla’s Puerto Rican Chicago (1987) and the gender studies of Marixsa Alicea (1997, 2001), who captured the complex migratory patterns and community development of Puerto Ricans in Chicago, the fabric of everyday life experiences of Boricuas in the “windy city” remained largely ignored.

More recently, Puerto Rican scholars have engaged in producing, from the vantage point of their personal experiences, anthropological research that engages readers in an understanding of identity negotiations, the challenges of urbanization, and the growth of gentrification within Chicago’s Latino communities. Some, like Mérida Rúa whose identity is rooted in Chicago, offer insight not only into the daily lives of her community’s inhabitants but also into the difficulties of producing research that directly responds to the needs of the community itself. Rúa’s A Grounded Identidad not only adds an important
chapter to the evolution of intricate social networks that encapsulate her community but also to an understanding of the struggle for recognition and appreciation within the academic community at large.

Rúa pays homage to those whose work in community organizing began in ways similar to her own—as aspiring intellectuals in graduate programs assisted by family networks and supported by established scholars. She begins by paying tribute to anthropologist Elena Padilla who, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1940s, collected testimonies of Puerto Rican domestic workers to encourage equity in pay. The first section, echoing her previous role as editor of *Latino Urban Ethnography and the Work of Elena Padilla* (2011), describes the declining economic conditions in the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico that led to widespread migration to New York City and, later, to Chicago. In a book divided into a prologue, a narrative of Padilla's ethnological research agendas and her own, and an essay on methodology, Rúa offers six chapters, none of which are intricately tied to each other; rather they serve as “stand alone” pieces within a chain of memories, fieldwork, and ruminations of varying brightness and circumspection. The trail of information has promising moments, but, leaping too often into landscapes of familiarity, it lacks discrete data on the historical growth of Latino communities in the region and a critical distance to overcome issues of authenticity when the researcher emerges as a major player in a personal network of informants. Writing through the vantage point of storytelling (the foundation of Critical Race Theory), she would need to establish incisively her goals, boundaries, and methodology at the very beginning. In not doing so, Rúa disappoints critical readers who can become lost in “an episodic pattern of constant movement” (p. 56) between topical explorations.

Her tableau is Chicago’s Near North Side, a landscape that resembles, to a large extent, Gina Pérez’s neighborhood in *The Near Northwest Side Story* (2004). The two authors explore similar themes—the origins of displacement, transnational cultural politics, and the negative effects of gentrification. Whereas Pérez delves deeply into survival strategies in Chicago and Puerto Rico’s insular communities, Rúa freely interlaces observations and commentary on community activism, the salience of interracial relationships, and the influence of friends and acquaintances on identity formation. In her first section, she provides an overview of the denial of citizenship rights to Puerto Ricans living on the “mainland” during the time of the Black “great migration” to the Midwest. She explains that while Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens, perceptions among policy makers and their endemic social services offices kept many of them off relief rolls while encouraging exploitation. Her account of interlaced histories among African Americans and Puerto Ricans helps us