

## BOOK REVIEW

*Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City.* By A.K. Sandoval-Strausz (New York: Basic Books, 2019. 416 pp. \$18.99).

During the latter half of the twentieth century, American cities were thought to be in crisis. This decline, argues A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, was the real result of “population loss, economic decline, fiscal crisis, rising crime, and the racialization of all of the above” (8). As manufacturing and retailing left urban spaces, city governments raised taxes to maintain schools, sanitation, and safety services. Consequently, tens of millions of people fled to the suburbs.

Contrary to other scholars, Sandoval-Strausz does not believe the “creative class” (a mix of white-collar, intellectual, and artistic workers) was responsible for an urban renaissance. Rather, he argues that 25 million citizen and migrant Latinos played an “indispensable role” in reviving and transforming American cities by moving into them at a time of decline (11). Despite poverty, discrimination, and ever-changing immigration policies, Latinos reenergized urban communities with their capital and cultures. Moreover, their essential labor in sectors like construction, restaurants, and childcare greatly eased the lives of the creative class when they arrived to gentrify. Sandoval-Strausz performs two case studies of Chicago’s South Lawndale community and Dallas’s Oak Cliff neighborhood which represent “the nation’s two main urban regions: the industrial North. . . and the Sunbelt” (11).

*Barrio America* is split into three parts—“There Goes the Neighborhood,” “Here Comes the Neighborhood,” and “The Seeds of the Future City.” Part One covers 1950 to the late 1960s, when corporations began moving manufacturing away from cities, millions of white people chose not to be neighbors to black people, and federal mortgage and highway construction programs subsidized suburbanization. Sandoval-Strausz introduces us to South Lawndale, where white residents strongly opposed racial integration and feared cultural change. Despite its rebranding as “Little Village” (evoking an old Central European hamlet), white residents fled. Gradually, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and other Spanish-surnamed families moved into Little Village because of affordability or displacement from other neighborhoods.

Latinos’ homeownership, however, did not come easy. Just as African Americans experienced obstructionism from banks and housing agents—or were swindled into buying homes “on contract” (in which they paid a large down payment but received no title and would lose all equity if they missed a single payment)—Latinos experienced the same discrimination and plunder.

Meanwhile, in Dallas, the impoverished and municipally-neglected barrio of “Little Mexico” epitomized the frustrating reality that even though Mexican Americans were legally classified as “white,” this did not mean they could always live amongst whites. This fragile racial status led some Latinos to lash out against blacks too. In speaking about violence directed against black and brown people, Sandoval-Strausz never shies away from calling white supremacy and racial terrorism for what they are.

Though toggling between two cities is difficult, Sandoval-Strausz provides a rich and deep history of both places. Likewise, he does not force black and brown history to compete—he asserts the importance of both. He is a thoughtful writer with engaging prose, and makes a consistent effort to capture the cultural ethos of each time period. For example, when describing crime-related fears of the 1970s, he reminds us that the American public was panicking about New York’s Son of Sam and San Francisco’s Zodiac Killer. He also references cultural productions (*The House on Mango Street*, *West Side Story*, *I Love Lucy*) to show us how Americans’ understandings of urban Latinos were being shaped over the decades.

Part Two focuses on the period between 1965 and the mid-1980s, when newcomers from Mexico and the Caribbean began to repopulate and stabilize cities. Between 1970 and 1980, Dallas’s Latino population (mostly Mexican but also Cuban and Puerto Rican) rose from under 8 percent to more than 12 percent. Meanwhile, Chicago was a palimpsest of twentieth century Latino migrants—Tejanos, Puerto Ricans, ex-braceros, and other Mexicans. The city’s Latino population nearly doubled in the 1970s to 14 percent. Along with restoring local economies through their labor and entrepreneurship, Latinos became involved with city politics. In Chicago, Latino students and their families publicly protested crumbling facilities, school closings, and exclusionary curriculum. A multiracial political coalition pushed back against disfranchisement and gerrymandering by electing Mayor Harold Washington. In Dallas, it was harder to achieve black-brown solidarity because of rivalries over War on Poverty monies. However, a group of black and Latino citizens jointly filed a voting rights lawsuit against at-large districts.

*Barrio America*’s final section tackles the period 1986 to the mid-2010s and concentrates on Central American civil war refugee migrations. By the 1990s, Little Village (which had absorbed many Guatemalans and Salvadorans) was 92 percent Hispanic. In Oak Cliff, another Salvadoran migration hub, Latinos made up 76 percent of the population. Part Three’s main argument is that when Latinos move into cities they do not create blight and instability, but rather revitalization and aesthetic appeal. Sandoval-Strausz paints a vivid picture of the bodegas, panaderías, taquerías, botánicas, and other businesses that infused cities with more life and money. Latino urbanisms included making more use of sidewalks, front yards, parks, and plazas (rather than isolating in cars and backyards); painting houses bright colors; and reenergizing street vendor culture. Through remittances, Latinos transformed the economies and built environments of their home countries as well.

To academics, it might seem strange that the author waits until the last chapter to offer his strongest historiographical critiques. Conversely, a general audience might feel that Sandoval-Strausz’s deep research is sometimes tangential or labyrinthine. Overall, though, this impressive book will appeal to readers

interested in urban and Latino history, geography, sociology, city planning and architecture, immigration, and race relations. *Barrio America* does the important work of debunking several myths. Mexican migration is not a “crisis” and Trump’s depiction of inner cities as hellish havens for illegal immigrant criminals is a chimera. What is devastatingly real, however, is that Latinos continue to be marginalized and scapegoated despite their contributions, and that gentrification and immigration enforcement throw into question “whether the very people who saved so many of America’s urban neighborhoods can continue to live in them” (325).

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