

BOOK REVIEWS

Mike Amezcua, *Making Mexican Chicago. From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022, ISBN-13:978-0-226-81582-4*

Review by Ioana ALBU

Making Mexican Chicago is a journey in time in which the author, Mike Amezcua, set on exploring his own becoming as both a Yale graduate, writer and historian, overcoming self-doubts, finding his right place in the unfamiliar *milieu* and learn to value his continuous effort for self-fulfillment and education with the help of his mentors, to whom he feels largely indebted.

Both dedicated to his parents, immigrants and community members and makers and stemming from the stories of his mother, to the collective raconteurs that span distance and time, as the author retells, Mike Amezcua underlines the contribution of his mentors to the interpretative range of Mexican American history and the way professors and researchers have introduced the young graduate to the world of history that he grew to be so passionate about. The study of the city, as well as the classes in architectural history, was revealed to the author as a passionate student of history, with all its intriguing challenges and opportunities, followed by the interpreted history of Mexican Americans. For all the countless source materials, the assistance provided by dozens of specialists who provided invaluable knowledge, consulting the special collections and archives and the years put into this research, and last but not least turning to people and their neighborhoods in order to conduct oral histories for the book, the author acknowledges the fact that Latinx Chicago remains '*severely undercollected and underarchived*' (Mike Amezcua, p.250). What came to be the point illustrated by Mike Amezcua throughout his interpreting peoples stories is the keypoint of his work, i.e. working-class immigrant communities are often the best reflection of their struggles, success and failure, aspirations and



dreams that spiced with their own emotions often are not in line with more conventional sources and it is this particular dynamic that the author sets forth to show throughout his story picked up from the very core of the community.

The book, which tells the becoming of Chicago into a Mexican metropolis in the second half of the XX-th century, opens with referral to a 1950's case, Villarreal, a real estate merchant, (*case U.S. vs. Villarreal, 1957*) who helped ensuring housing for numerous Mexican immigrants, at a time when an estimated seventy-five thousand immigrants – both Mexican and Mexican Americans – found Chicago their home (study by McPharlin, 1955, Chicago History Museum). The *stage* displayed a racial system of forcing Mexicans and non/US citizens to continuous alienation. Postwar Mexican settling in Chicago was undesirable by the white majority, though their labour force highly needed to build US capitalism. The struggle between Mexicans and Mexican Americans building new communities and the confrontation with the resistance of the white population, facing segregation, exclusion, poverty and gentrification reveals the origins and endurance of urban inequality. The role played by both Anita Villarreal and the real estate brokers in the transformation of the city into *Mexicanization* (Amezcuca, M.) is brought to light, and the way Villarreal extended the area of the Mexican settlement into the all-white neighbourhoods, demanding the Mexicans' immigrants inclusion into the property ownership post-war *American dream*, fuelling and forging the migrants' sense of belonging, yet 'submersing' them into the American capitalist regime of the time, highly exploitative and racialized, on the basis of the post-war growth of, particularly, the city of Chicago, as the city of Chicago was not the only city in the U.S. where the wave of Mexican immigration expanded, throughout the successive waves occurring between the 1940s and 2000. This the book places Mexican immigrants, from all the other immigrants (European-Southern and East-Europeans ('undesirables'), African Americans) at the core of the modern history of Chicago, a city where the Mexican immigrant-built environment took shape, transforming the white neighborhoods in what was coined as the conservative revolution. Central to the book is the racial politics devolving from the European American ethnics' attitude and feelings towards the Mexican/Americans as they gradually transformed the city and its landscape. The author thereby examines the various manifestations of propertied white ethnics, on the one hand, who felt a sense of resentment and loss, being exposed to external hostile sources further to the mass arrival of migrants and the Mexican settlement on the other, who was driven by ambition, seeking equity and

pursuing their dream, the aim of the white ethnics being to prevent property devaluation, degradation of their neighborhoods and unwanted diversity that the transformation triggered. The ensuing local violence is rendered by having a close look at the city's power brokers, real-estate business, building managers using all their might and means in order to shape the urban infrastructure in a way that enclaves were created, wherein Mexican families and African Americans alike were forced to substandard public housing conditions. *Fraudulence* and *concealment* are central to the Mexican settlement in the US metropolitan areas, involving a whole array of smuggling, illegal border crossing, clandestine recruitment, fake documentation and hiding all the above acts. All Mexicans were portrayed as '*racially inferior and unassimilable outsiders*' whose place was not for the urban society.

The book sets forth to reconstruct the history of post-war Mexicanization of Chicago viewed from two sides, containment of Mexicans due to restrictionist policies and community forces and their efforts to become community builders inscribing empowerment onto the cityscape. Revising the collective perception of modern US conservatism is also the vista for understanding the intricate reality of political categorization. Last but not least, the book views how conservatives and moderates within the community reacted to the new political landscape. All in all, it is a book about the formation of a community and the building of a city by migrants for all the hindrances and injustice confronted with, hostility, state violence, political disenfranchisement and inequality, to mention but a few, while highlighting the poignant antithesis of the Latino community being highly essential, yet erasable and undesired that can be encountered in a society imprinted by neoliberal multiculturalism and racial capitalism, as Mike Amezcua masterfully, yet bitterly depicts in his incursion.

Selected bibliographical references:

xxx *United States vs. Anita Villarreal* (1957);

Mc Pharlin, James, *Study of the Mexican-American Population of Chicago by the Catholic Charities*, CHM 1955;

Hirsch, Arnold, R., *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*, University of Chicago Press, 1998;

xxx *Hispanic Population and Origin in Select U.S. Metropolitan Areas*, 2014, www.pewresearch.org, 2016;

xxx *Chicago's Latino Population Spreads Out*, www.chicago.suntimes.com (2020 U.S. Census shows)