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Latino Urban Ethnography and the Work of Elena Padilla

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Mérida M. Rúa (ed.)

Latino Urban Ethnography and the Work of Elena Padilla. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. viii + 215 pp. (Paper US\$22.00)

At its 2002 International Conference in Chicago, the Puerto Rican Studies Association (PRSA) recognized Elena Padilla's legacy to Puerto Rican and Latino Studies. Padilla is coauthor of the classic ethnography *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Steward et al. 1956) and author of *Up from Puerto Rico* (Padilla 1958), the first major study about Puerto Ricans in New York directed by a Puerto Rican scholar. The book under review compiles the papers presented at the PRSA conference by Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores, Mérida M. Rúa, Nicholas De Genova, and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, as well as an introduction by Rúa and Arlene Torres. The volume also features a brief prologue by Padilla and her 1947 master's thesis at the University of Chicago, "Puerto Rican Immigrants in New York and Chicago: A Study in Comparative Assimilation." Altogether, the book assesses the theoretical, methodological, and substantive contributions and limitations of Padilla's study of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

Padilla's early fieldwork followed closely the model of the Chicago School of Sociology. First, her research relied primarily on participant observation, unstructured interviews, personal documents, and archival materials. Second, she focused on the acculturation and assimilation of recent immigrants to U.S. urban life. Third, she posited that an ethnic group's size and "ecological distribution" within the city's landscape were critical in its adaptation to American culture. Overall, Padilla confirmed the tenets of urban ecology proposed by sociologists William I. Thomas and Robert E. Park. She concluded that acculturation and assimilation had proceeded more swiftly in the smaller and more scattered Puerto Rican settlements in Chicago than in New York City during the 1940s. Surprisingly, many Puerto Ricans moved into Chicago's predominantly Mexican neighborhoods and often married Mexicans. This was an intriguing example of "acculturation"—cultural change through intergroup contact—without "assimilation"—a group's incorporation into the host society.

The contributors to *Latino Urban Ethnography and the Work of Elena Padilla* reflect on the broader implications of her thesis on the Puerto Rican diaspora. Dinzey-Flores builds on Padilla's insights into the way race and class shaped the residential segregation of Puerto Ricans in the United States. She shows that urban planners like Daniel Hudson Burnham and Robert Moses, as well as followers of the architect Le Corbusier, crafted innercity enclaves that increasingly concentrated poor ethnic and racial minorities. In postwar Puerto Rico, she argues, Le Corbusier's model of the superblock also inspired public housing projects, though consisting primarily of medium- to low-rise buildings. As

in the United States, such projects tended to separate poor and dark-skinned residents from wealthier and lighter-skinned ones.

Rúa's chapter focuses on Padilla's commitment to improve the quality of life for her study's participants. Together with Muna Muñoz Lee and other graduate students at the University of Chicago, Padilla denounced the deplorable conditions of Puerto Rican contract workers, especially domestic employees, in Chicago during the mid-1940s. The students' report caught the attention of the Puerto Rican Senate, which commissioned an investigation into the alleged labor abuses and eventually elaborated a new policy toward migrant workers. Like Padilla, Rúa identifies with the subjects of her own ethnographic fieldwork, Puerto Rican women who migrated to the Near Northwest Side of Chicago in the 1950s. Rúa chronicles how such women managed to construct a viable community amid urban renewal efforts and gang violence.

De Genova critically interrogates the significance of the close ties between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago during the mid-1940s as precursors of *Latinidad*, a common identity among people of Latin American background. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in the United States were stigmatized as nonwhite and followed a different path from previous waves of European immigrants. Yet both groups, which formed the backbone of the contemporary Latino population, were also distinguished from African Americans through their housing, occupational, and marriage patterns. Contrary to Padilla's prediction of their imminent "Mexicanization," Puerto Ricans in Chicago came to assert a vibrant identity apart from Mexicans, especially through the creation of *Paseo Boricua* ("Puerto Rican Promenade"), a one-mile strip along Division Street near Humboldt Park. As De Genova underscores, "There is nothing automatic, inevitable, or even necessary, after all, about the emergence of a shared sense of 'Latino' identity among distinct groups of Latin American origin or ancestry" (pp. 171–172).

Ramos-Zayas's final contribution to this volume explores how Padilla straddled discourses about public intellectuals in Latin America and the United States. Padilla's predominantly male colleagues marginalized her, and she never held an academic appointment in an anthropology department. Ramos-Zayas documents the difficulties of a Puerto Rican woman to meet the conflicting standards of a public intellectual in the United States and Puerto Rico. As she writes, "Padilla was in a subordinate position as a Puerto Rican working with mostly American researchers for whom anthropologists needed to be separate from the 'exotic-Other-subject' of their study" (p. 197). At the same time, Padilla's work was generally neglected in Puerto Rico because it did not engage directly with the nationalist discourse then prevalent among the island's intellectual elite.

Latino Urban Ethnography and the Work of Elena Padilla is a valuable addition to Puerto Rican, Latino, and Caribbean studies. The volume recuperates a little-known account of postwar migration from Puerto Rico to the United States by a pioneer in Caribbean anthropology. Rúa's thoughtful collection revisits many relevant issues for contemporary researchers, such as the reflexive role of the "native fieldworker," the gendered dimensions of academic politics, the racial and class stratification of urban enclaves, and the ongoing construction of a panethnic sense of *Latinidad*. I strongly recommend the book for those interested in immigration, ethnicity, and race in the United States and the Caribbean.

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