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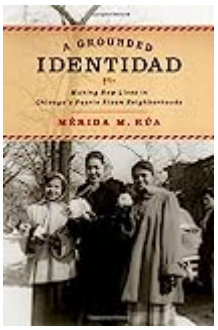

Mérida M. Rúa. *A Grounded Identidad: Making New Lives in Chicago's Puerto Rican Neighborhoods.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xviii + 234 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-976026-8.

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Group Identity and the Scholar's Responsibility

Late in MÃ©rida M. RÃºaâs excellent *A Grounded Identidad: Making New Lives in Chicagoâs Puerto Rican Neighborhoods*, the author quotes her own dissertation, where she identifies herself as âone of âthose peopleâ who literally conducted research at âhomeââ (p. 127). RÃºa makes it clear that her monograph is not about her personal story, but that of Chicagoâs Puerto Rican community and their neighborhoods. In the process of conducting her fieldwork, however, she came to realize that she herself was a historical actor in this narrative. This realization results in a work that probes deeply at the creation of this groupâs identity and that openly challenges the long-standing black/white binary that has dominated American urban history for decades.

RÃºa describes her project as being âneither a traditional community history nor a conventional neighborhood ethnography,â but instead a work that blends the methods of both disciplines in its approach to its subjects (p. xvii). This approach is an attempt to understand the nature of group identity as ephemeral and shaped by historical circumstances. RÃºa describes *identidad* as complex and fluid, and she states that it âneeds to be recognized and explored as âgrounded,â as rooted in both time and place, and as manifest in everyday exchanges with people within and beyond oneâs own ethnoracial groupsâ (p. xv). This conception requires the reader to move past established views not only of Chicago but also of most American cities as being defined by the polarization between black and white communities. As one might expect, the text is replete with instances in which the lived experiences of the cityâs Puerto Rican residents challenged this perspective on race, but RÃºa probes even further by explaining how the interactions between several groups served to shape both group identities and spatial relations in Chicago. Her historical actors are largely Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent, but the landscape presented in *A Grounded Identidad* is also home to Mexican, Cuban, and Japanese Americans who complicate the cityâs racial identity. The experiences of the cityâs Puerto Ricans in interacting with these other groups âwould point to connective histories among communities of color within and beyond a black-and-

white only schemaâ (p. 79).

Through a combination of archival research and extensive fieldwork, RÃºa demonstrates that the racial landscape in Chicago is far more complex than it has been traditionally understood. Communities and individuals attempted to forge alliances across ethnic and racial lines. The interactions between Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and African Americans saw these Chicago residents seek to âincorporate its special concerns with broader issues, negotiating participation and working toward collaboration, as allies, often under tentative and fragile circumstancesâ (p. 101). The Puerto Rican community makes a particularly illustrative example of the confluences and divergences of experience in relation to other groups. While they shared an immigrant experience, a common language, and a degree of common culture with the Mexicans they encountered in Chicago, which RÃºa refers to as their *latinidad*, the Puerto Ricansâ American citizenship and their cultural divergences prevented full identification between them and Chicagoâs Mexicans. While there were cultural and racial cleavages between the cityâs African Americans and the Puerto Ricans, both groups shared second-class citizenship in the United States.

These differences and similarities ensured that there would be often unexpected cross-cultural connections. There is, for example, the case of a protest against the U.S. Navyâs weapon testing on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques in May of 2001. During the protest, Enrique ObregÃ³n, a Mexican-born director of a Latino social service agency on the cityâs North Side, joined a human chain of protesters that stretched across Chicagoâs city limits from north to south. This protest is noteworthy not only because the protesters included people of many nationalities and ethnoracial groups, but also because when a black bus driver, his passengers, and others angrily confronted the demonstrators for blocking traffic, ObregÃ³n cried out âRosa Parks!â and the bus driver stopped arguing (pp. 96-97). This incident illustrates cross-cultural alliances and how cultural signifiers could be used by one group to illustrate their struggle to members of other groups. As RÃºa explains, in the attempt to âenter into meaningful alliances, both individuals and communities recognized and *misrecognized* themselves and one anotherâ (emphasis in the original, p. 101).

RÃºaâs themes all intersect in her most extensively documented and most fascinating example, that of the Bishop family. The marriage of Georgina Rios, a Puerto Rican woman, and Julius Bishop, an African American from the Deep South, and the life and family this couple built is, in many ways, the axis around which *A Grounded Identidad* spins. RÃºa had known the Bishop family since she was a girl, but the family and their business, the Caribe Funeral Home, became central to her research while she was conducting fieldwork. Through the Bishopsâ connection to the surrounding community RÃºa gained access to the larger Puerto Rican community and their experiences. More important, the themes of race, class, and identity that underlie the book all converge in the experiences of the Bishop family. Julius Bishopâs adoption into the cityâs Hispanic communities and the controversies in his family regarding his marriage to Gina convey the fluid nature of race and ethnicity in a complex social environment. Through the Bishops, RÃºa is also able to detect a working-class identification by more affluent members of the Puerto Rican community (p. 76). The funerals held at the Caribe Funeral Home proved themselves to be ceremonies where those who knew the deceased could evaluate their life and in doing so reflect âthe values and experience of the community itselfâ (p. 104). As RÃºa explains, âa cultural identity and urban identity had been negotiated in death, as it has been in lifeâ (p. 124). The authorâs access to this family and their business provided significant amounts of evidence and brought about important theoretical insights.

The relationship between RÃºa and the Bishops also drives much of the authorâs self-reflection, her questioning of her own identity, and her place as both community member and researcher. By living in an apartment above the funeral home, RÃºa not only gained important community access, but also became enmeshed in the lives of the Bishops. During her time as a researcher, RÃºa was often called upon to aid the Bishops either by working in the funeral home or providing Gina Bishop with rides. For her, âhelping out was a blending of what a neighbor and friend would do and of my own need to reciprocateâ (p. 107). After her research, RÃºa was called to return to Chicago to eulogize Julius Bishop after his death. In her dissertationâs discussion of her identity, reproduced in the monograph, RÃºa ponders the dilemmas she encounters as a ânativeâ researcher for whom the research site was home. âAs a result,â she writes, âI do not have the luxury of leaving the site without facing the consequences of what I write. And yet, that very accountability has made this undertaking a worthwhile projectâ (p. 127). This level of self-reflection will seem foreign, even uncomfortable, to many historians. For the most part, we prefer to keep the connections we develop with our sub-

jects unseen or relegated to the acknowledgements. The importance of a monograph such as *A Grounded Identidad* is that it challenges long-held disciplinary conceptions and has the potential to move the discipline in new directions.

The book, however, is not without its faults. RÃºaâs talent for bringing the Puerto Rican community to life in later chapters is not as evident early in the monograph. It seems as if the earlier sections, based more heavily on archival research, lack the vitality she brings to the events and trends covered later. RÃºaâs interest in Puerto Rican anthropologist and activist Elena Padilla seems out of place with the rest of the monograph. It is not that Padillaâs contributions and experiences are not important, but a stronger parallel between her work and actions and RÃºaâs own questioning about her role as ânativeâ researcher could have strengthened the early sections of the monograph and enriched the authorâs questions about her responsibility to her community.

These flaws do not preclude *A Grounded Identidad* from being an important contribution to the literature on urban history and race relations in the United States. RÃºa joins a growing group of scholars seeking to challenge the primacy of the black/white binary in American historical scholarship. This book would be particularly useful in graduate-level classes. The authorâs astute criticism would be instructive for graduate students, but her extended meditation on her role as a scholar, the different approaches to historical subjects, and her process in researching and writing are likely to spark fascinating and fruitful discussions.