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Latino Voices in New England

Carlos Eduardo Siqueira, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



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Book Review

Latino voices in New England

David Carey Jr and Robert Atkinson (eds.)

State University of New York Press, NY, 2009, 251pp., \$24.95, ISBN: 978-0791493786 (paperback)

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Latino Voices in New England is a well-written and clearly organized first-person account of 12 interviews with foreign and US-born Latinos who adopted Portland, ME as their homes. The interview narratives are brief stories told by the interviewees to answer a set of standard questions. Participants are transformed into storytellers who often responded to open-ended questions with personal stories. The interviews are introduced by David Carey in the beginning of the book and discussed by Robert Atkinson as a conclusion to the book. The introduction provides the historical and social immigration context of Portland, ME, whereas the conclusion summarizes the main themes elicited by the Latino storytellers. The interview narratives are creatively edited into chapters placed in the middle of the book, titled with the real or changed name of the storyteller and subtitled according to one of the major themes brought forth by the interviewee. The editors analyze the content of the narratives on the basis of interesting immigration theory arguments in the Latino Studies literature that concentrates on the political, economic, cultural, social and historical foundations of Latino community trajectories in new urban immigration areas.

The main thesis of the book is that Latinos in Portland have united and built a transnational

community despite national, cultural, gender, age and class diversity. The developing collective identity of Latinos enabled Latino residents to become social actors who have been able to organize the Latino community in Portland to make positive contributions to the economic, social and cultural life of the city, and struggle against racial and ethnic discrimination. The integration among the Latinos and between them and Portland is considered as part of the same process of Latino identity formation.

This book contributes to Latino Studies in several ways. First, it provides historical and empirical evidence collected from a variety of experiences of the first-generation Latinos in Portland, one of the Whitest cities in the United States. The narratives provide real-life histories and stories that illustrate the emergence of and challenges to a pan-Latino identity of the Latino residents originally from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Venezuela, Peru and the United States.

Second, the themes discussed throughout the book include important issues faced by most Latinos in the United States, such as the conflicts between acculturation/assimilation and cultural preservation, integration in a dominant White society, racial and ethnic discrimination, transnationalism, and Latino identity



formation and development. The individual points of view about these issues are not homogeneous and indicate the multiplicity of opinions and debates prevalent among the Latinos in the United States. Some Latinos are conservative, others are progressive. Some have clear religious affiliations, others do not. Some believe the United States is a great country, whereas others see it as an empire. Some are deeply committed to the Latino community, others not so much.

Third, the book approaches Latino identity formation as a dynamic, historic and multi-layered process that is constantly evolving as a result of the life experiences portrayed. This theoretical openness facilitates a more fluid understanding of the numerous interconnections between and among Latino gender, class, age, religious, geographic, social, ethnic, regional and national identities revealed by the storytellers. This fluidity seems to avoid either an essentialist or an instrumentalist view of identity that tends to simplify and freeze dialectical relationships that are present in the lives of the Latinos. Last, it shows that the Latino immigration to Maine is not new, but rather a new wave of a more widespread immigration from North, South and Central America.

Latino Voices in New England is a good complement to the book *Latinos in New England*, which profiled diverse Latino groups from a variety of theoretical perspectives. It should interest a broad academic and non-academic audience because it makes complex issues experienced by a group of Latinos, who have different religious, cultural, social and economic backgrounds, easy to understand, without any of the contradictions and obstacles created by the distinctions among them. The originality of the book lies in its well-balanced mix of theory and empirical qualitative data collected by researchers that show commitment to both intellectual rigor and community development. This combination

is not easy to achieve and leads me to strongly recommend the book to Latino Studies students and scholars.

The perspectives of the storytellers are based on the feelings and thoughts that most Latinos across the country, especially recent immigrants, can relate to, ranging from difficulties with learning English to traumatic US–Mexico border crossing or obstacles to job mobility or family reunification. The apparently friendly integration of Latinos in a very White society may bode well for new immigration areas across the United States. Other Latino communities may learn something useful by incorporating some of the community-building initiatives implemented by the Latinos in Portland. On the other hand, Portland may be another exception to the current anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in many states. It is thus difficult to imagine how much of what happened in Maine can actually happen in another new immigration area in the United States.

Census data may not show a large presence of Brazilians in Portland, but I find it interesting that though there is some mention to Brazilians in a few interviews, they are not included in the book as part of the Latin American diaspora. It may well be the case that the Brazilians have not yet migrated in large numbers to Maine, but they already have done so in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The implicit or explicit definition of Latinos as Spanish speaking may contribute to the exclusion of Brazilians (or Haitians) from this pan-Latino identity, which should certainly not be an intended consequence of such a definition if we want to unify and build solidarity between and among Latino communities in New England.

Carlos Eduardo Siqueira
The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino
Community Development and Public Policy,
Boston, MA