

Book Review: Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots by Erualdo R. González

In Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics and the Grassroots, Erualdo R. González contributes to the literature on gentrification through a nuanced and critical analysis of community development and planning policy in Santa Ana, California, a predominantly Latina/o community. This is a convincing study, writes [Jaime Guzmán](#), which shows how racist and elitist discourses shape gentrification processes and resulting spatial alienation.

***Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots.* Erualdo R. González. Routledge. 2017.**

Find this book: 

A little over 50 years ago the word ‘gentrification’ was coined by [Ruth Glass](#), resulting in a research field that has traced this phenomenon to identify its agents, effects and contexts. In recent years, the discussion of gentrification has become more prominent in the popular press as tensions have risen due to the threat of displacement and cultural erasure. In his book, *Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots*, [Erualdo R. González](#) engages in the gentrification debate by focusing on *Latino urbanism*, which he defines as: ‘a theoretical and practical approach to community development and planning policy that seeks to understand how socio-economic and political change affects the nature and functioning of cities with large Latina/o populations over time’ (1). Placing a focus on his positionality as a resident of Santa Ana, California, González presents a critical and nuanced analysis of gentrification in which he urges academics to consider how racist and elitist ideologies play a role in the spatial alienation of predominantly poor neighbourhoods of colour – specifically Latina/o neighbourhoods.

Through an analysis that incorporates racial, intra-ethnic and class dimensions, *Latino City* offers a study of gentrification that pays attention to the ways that power operates in its processes. In short, gentrification is not a natural, neutral or inevitable process of an urban city. The author uses mixed and community-based methods to conduct his case study on Santa Ana gentrification, ranging from participant observation in a grassroots organisation to archival research on community organising as well as the city’s redevelopment documentation from 1958 to 2015. Ultimately, González argues that planners (i.e. elected and appointed officials, developers and civic leaders) use gentrification to benefit an imagined future for the white middle-and upper-middle-class population.

There is no clear answer in the dominant gentrification literature as to who is responsible for gentrification processes. In recent years, scholars like [Neil Smith \(2002\)](#) have pointed out that the term ‘gentrification’ has all but disappeared from official city documentation to be replaced by words like ‘revitalisation’, ‘renaissance’ and ‘redevelopment’. What has not disappeared, however, is the anti-ethnic rhetoric used to justify the process of gentrification in neighbourhoods made up of people of colour. González presents two major insights into the gentrification of the Latina/o neighbourhood of Santa Ana. First, he shows the ways that city planners strategically erase or minimise the existing Latina/o population in Santa Ana, thereby making ‘gentrification’ and the ultimate displacement of Latina/o bodies more palatable for the city to approve. Second, he focuses on the ways that grassroots organisations fight the city’s erasure of their neighbourhoods by placing their Latina/o identity at the forefront of political activism.

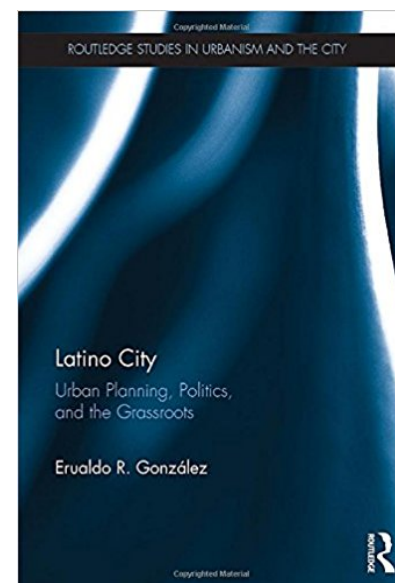




Image Credit: ([Loco Steve CC BY 2.0](#))

The first half of the book highlights how the city planners actively worked on the revitalisation of Santa Ana while simultaneously failing to present Latina/o population in their future vision for the city. González instantiates this when he describes the influx of Mexican and Mexican-American people to the city of Santa Ana, specifically in the downtown commercial zone established in the 1970s, which became known as *La Cuatro* (the Spanish translation of Fourth Street). In Chapter One, the author connects the creation of *La Cuatro* with rampant white flight. Overall, this set the precedent for city officials to have grown weary of the decline in consumer power with regards to the new citizens of Santa Ana: 'the city's assessments of the downtown sales tax revenue during the 1960s and 1970s almost always involved brief qualitative assessments of an underperforming zone, accompanied with mentions of *blight*' (25, my emphasis). The focus on 'blight' led to the creation of the *Downtown Santa Ana Development Plan* (DSAPD), a 1974 report that specifically targeted *La Cuatro* and Latina/o neighbourhoods in Santa Ana for possible redevelopment.

Through the analysis of the DSAPD, it becomes clear that the Latina/o business districts and neighbourhoods were labelled by the city as hostile and unsafe spaces. The report 'vilified the area and local community', since it placed the dangers within Latina/o bodies by categorising the Latina/o barrios as areas for 'winos and prostitutes', 'illegals', a 'high transient population' and 'crime association' (29). Due to this correlation between 'illegals' and 'criminals' and Latina/o neighbourhoods, 'the DSADP's final assessment [...] erases mention of families and residents living in and around the downtown and privileges civic professionals to reap from redevelopment' (30). Through this analysis of city planning texts like DSAPD, Gonzalez highlights the inherent racist ideologies embedded in future city economic prosperity. This racial tension set the foundation for local grassroots organisations to present their Latina/o identity at the centre of their opposition.

In the second half of the book, the author places greater emphasis on the grassroots organisation with an anti-gentrification agenda – specifically, the Santa Ana Collaborative for Responsible Development (SACReD). Chapter Three sets the stage for these anti-gentrification organisations through the rise of two redevelopment projects that aimed to compete with *La Cuatro*: the 'Artists Village' and the 'East End'. These two projects, adjacent to *La Cuatro*, became the city's initial attempt to redevelop the city by directly competing with the existing Latina/o business district. It is because of these strategic redevelopment projects that González claims the city sought to redevelop for an imagined future white middle- and upper-middle-class population rather than the Latina/o population already in Santa Ana. Beyond there being no mention of the Latina/o population benefiting from the redevelopment plans, there is also no account of the socioeconomic profile of the Latina/o neighbourhoods. Furthermore, there is no mention of the barrio history and of obtaining community perspectives on future development projects. Finally, the DSADP does not mention *La Cuatro* in its future vision of Santa Ana. Erasing the staple Latina/o commercial zone thus erases the 'area's well established identity' (77). Instead, 'the plan prioritises and normalises the need to attract new residents from the county' (78).

This intentional erasure of the Santa Ana Latina/o population from the DSADP's future imagined city is what drives SACReD to centre their activism around the 'Mexican/Latina/o and working-class community identity' as a 'critical and primary feature' of their activism (93). By doing so, the group emphasises 'responsible development, which it defined as the inclusion of residents, local community-based organisations, and businesses as equal partners and decision-makers in development negotiations' (94). Still, I would have wanted the author to present the ways that some Latina/o businesses used Latina/o identity as a commodity rather than as a critical contestation to redevelopment. For instance, in Chapter Two, González mentions a couple of cases against Santa Ana redevelopment, one of which was put forth by local businessperson, Robert Escalante. González notes that Escalante recently purchased a business property; however, when given the notice of eminent domain, Escalante pitched the idea of a 'Fiesta Marketplace', a proposed 'ethnic-themed festival public-private open mall shopping centre' (52), to protect his business interests. In this case, González stops short of fleshing out the ways Escalante commodified Latina/o aesthetics in order to secure the safety of his own business.

Ultimately, *Latino City* provides scholars and students interested in gentrification research with an introspective analysis of gentrification from the viewpoint of displaced populations. González presents a convincing study that links spatial alienation and city redevelopment initiatives infused with racist and elitist discourse. An explicitly clear statement connecting Santa Ana gentrification to the wider and continued gentrification of targeted neighbourhoods of colour in the United States (i.e. in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and so forth) would have been a great way to connect this micro case study to larger patterns of displacement. Nonetheless, this book is a must for students and academics interested in gentrification and Latina/o anti-gentrification grassroots organisations.

This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2xdYMcJ>

About the reviewer

Jaime Guzmán – University of Denver

Jaime Guzmán is a doctoral candidate in Communication Studies with an emphasis in communication and culture at the University of Denver (DU) and a recipient of the California State University Doctoral Incentive Program (2014-present). He holds a BA and MA degree in Communication Studies with an emphasis on rhetoric from California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). His current research project focuses on issues of gentrification and *gentefication* in Boyle Heights, California.