

East L.A. Historia de un barrio

(East L.A. History of a Neighborhood)

Ricardo Romo

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Practically all Mexicans have or have had a relative, friend or at least an acquaintance

living in Los Angeles, California. Most probably, they lived in East Los Angeles, “the barrio.” Of course, this is not mere chance.

As the respective histories of their neighboring countries converged, Mexicans and Americans had their most fruitful mis-encounter during the first three decades of the twentieth century, until along the banks of the Los Angeles River, the neighborhood that is today home to almost 2 mil-

lion Mexican Americans was formed, the birthplace of the Chicano cultural movement.

Los Angeles was founded almost as a border outpost in 1781 by a group of pioneers from northern Mexico. With the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty of 1848, which turned it into a U.S. city, it was almost inevitable that its Mexican founders were put in a disadvantageous position which, with the passing of the years, ended up by becoming outright racial segregation. At the end of the nineteenth century, massive immigration linked to the gold fever, which attracted Chinese, Jews, Russians and Italians, concentrated an unstoppable wave of Mexican immigrants

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around the main plaza, which came to be known as Sonoratown or Little Mexico. This was the case until World War I. Turned into one of the several ethnic communities that fostered the city's spectacular economic transformation—between 1900 and 1930, Los Angeles went from being a town of 100,000 to a metropolis of more than a million inhabitants—Mexican residents there were caught up in a contradictory dynamic: on the one hand they were indispensable for filling the labor vacuum created by the lack of local and immigrant workers; and, at the same time, in the best of cases, they were ignored or relegated by government policies or, worse yet, they were hit by the consequences of the chauvinist image of them (“They’re lazy, tricky and inclined to violence.”). In less than a century, they had become the targets of anti-foreigner campaigns in the town that had been founded by their direct ancestors.

By 1920, physically displaced by industrial and commercial capital and thanks to the develop-

ment of urban transportation, 100,000 Mexicans who had previously crossed the Rio Grande in search of better living conditions, crossed this other river to avoid growing racial tension in what we could consider an act of re-foundation. That is the spirit with which the East Los Angeles barrio emerged: as a second capital for these Mexicans abroad.

The history of Los Angeles, apparently of little interest to historians because it is a relatively new city, is to a great extent the history of its ethnic communities. However, in an attempt to negate the unremitting presence of Mexicans in L.A., Americans have preferred to research Mexicans in Mexico much more than those residing in their own territory. As a result, there are very few studies about Mexican neighborhoods in the United States, and those that do exist deal with them as though they were temporary, unassimilated residents in the mode of a ghetto: in summary, as a marginal, incapable social group.

Ricardo Romo tells us all this in his essay *East Los Angeles. Historia de un barrio*, which places things in their proper perspective by showing how Mexicans adapted to the explosive process of industrialization without losing either their language or their customs. This is how they ended up forming the largest Mexican community in the United States: an authentic city within the city, a metropolis inside a megalopolis.

The book looks at questions such as the growth and development of the Mexican barrio, how Mexicans fare in the labor market, the problems associated with residential segregation and the social and educational experiences of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1920s. But, importantly, it returns to us the profound significance of this unstoppable migratory flow that, from the beginning of the last century, is a kind of peaceful “reconquest.” Compulsory reading.

Eunice Cortés

**Sociologist, psychoanalyst
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