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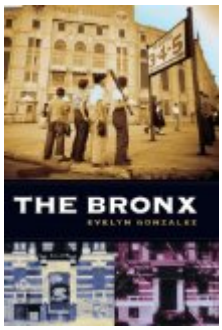
Evelyn Gonzalez. *The Bronx.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. ix + 263 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-12115-6.



Reviewed by Joseph Dorinson

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New Yorkers harbor a love-hate relationship with the Bronx. Ogden Nash framed this ambivalence with a negative assessment: "The Bronx--no thonks!"[1] Visions of burning buildings, white flight, urban blight, citizen fright: all contributed to a profound despair, vintage 1970s. Yet, the Bronx also evokes pride in Yankee glory, the famous zoo, the beautiful parks, cooperative houses, progressive politics, and a safety valve for recent immigrants seeking refuge from overcrowded Manhattan.

Culling data from every available source pertaining to this borough, author Evelyn Gonzalez earns high praise for meticulous research that encompasses eighty-plus pages of endnotes and bibliography. Many maps and tables enrich this narrative. The splendid photograph collection (following p. 144) alone justifies the price. In addition to a detailed account of how the Bronx developed over time, she offers a novel interpretation of its plight, a result of urbanization and suburbanization without a viable plan. Gonzalez provides a masterful analysis of race and ethnicity and their interplay in Bronx culture. In 1950, Gonzalez observes that the South Bronx was two-thirds white. In a dramatic demographic shift, by 1960, it was two-thirds black and Hispanic (pp. 1, 144). Thereby, hangs a Bronx tale.

This valuable contribution to the Columbia History of Urban Life series under the able editorial aegis of Kenneth T. Jackson joins other major studies by such intellectual heavyweights as Deborah Dash Moore, Frederick Binder, David Reimers, Clarence Taylor, Andrew Dolkart, and Craig Steven Wilder, in chronological order.[2] Professor Gonzalez charts urbanization from the 1840s to the present. Each era, she avers, depends on a principal source (p. 3). Chapters 1 and 2, for example, build on Joel Schwartz's important dissertation. That is quite appropriate since Dr. Gonzalez fills a vacuum at Montclair State University of New Jersey left by the untimely death of Dr. Schwartz. Chapters 3 through 5 spanning the period from 1876 to 1916 derive in large measure from real estate records. Chapters 4 and 5 issue from the *Bronx Home News*, which covers the years 1907 to 1915. The Lillian Wald Papers at Columbia University, amply supplemented with clip-

pings on tenement and social conditions, furnished vital data for and filled gaps in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Gonzalez relied heavily on the Robert F. Wagner Papers at the New York City Municipal Archives and the *New York Times* for the post-World War II years in chapters 7 and 8.

Gonzalez provides a comprehensive overview of Bronx geography and history. When residents of Manhattan trickled across the Bronx River, it was part of Westchester County. Parts west of the Bronx River, Morrisania, West Farms, and Kingsbridge were annexed in 1874 and became the twenty-third and twenty-fourth wards of New York City. They were later absorbed when Bronx became a borough in the 1898 fusion that culminated in Greater New York City. In subsequent decades, Bronx became a haven for second-generation immigrants seeking respite from crowded tenements in Manhattan's Lower East Side and East Harlem. Electrified in 1892, streetcar trolleys nearly doubled ridership in a single year. Rapid transit proved pivotal to rapid growth. The subway arrived in 1905 followed by a building boom in Hunts Point and Crotona Park East. A tremendous spurt in population yielded 153,000 residents by 1920. 90 percent foreign born, they were principally Italians and Eastern European Jews who flocked to multistory apartment buildings.

Inexpensive transit led to a population spurt of one million-plus residents by 1930. In the preceding fifty-year period, 1880-1930, the Bronx epitomized rapid growth. By 1960, however, the borough's images turned sour. Gonzalez lists a whole host of explanations but attributes the rise and fall to "ongoing urbanization" rather than the usual targets: race, crime, poverty, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, and Co-op City. She stresses population density as the pivotal element. A collection of neighborhoods teeming with intense street life, Bronx's huddled masses yearned to leave as soon as they could afford to.

Gonzales correctly calls attention to "a road not taken" that might have altered the course of Bronx history. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted advocated a plan that would have yielded a garden suburb. Though supported by the *New York Times*, Olmsted's vision was rejected in favor of helter-skelter construction in grid patterns. Mass transit in the form of elevated trains invaded the Bronx as speculators and promoters cheered rapid urbanization. Ironically, the many subways, highways, and housing developments in the north encouraged potential residents either to leave or to bypass the South Bronx.

A concluding chapter, "The Road Back," reads like a biblical narrative of redemption. Community groups, Gonzalez cogently argues, rescued the Bronx from oblivion. Animated by public-private partnerships, agents of progress worked to improve conditions. Holding devastation at bay, black as well as Hispanic entrepreneurs, community organizers, and religious groups all contributed to the ***summum bonum***, or common good. In 1987, New York City Mayor Ed Koch presided over a 6.1 billion dollar capital budget. This sum was critical to coping with the abandonment that the Bronx had previously suffered.

I would have liked more class-based analysis in the Marxian mold to explain cyclical fluctuations in the borough's development. Gonzalez concedes at one point that population density per se is not bad, but adds that social position and economic status are more influential. She does not effectively explain why long-time residents continued to move away. One tool of analysis that might explain this recurring pattern is Oscar Lewis's still relevant concept of "the culture of poverty."[3] Here, comparative analysis and other methodological constructs might have illuminated some of the issues of class that Gonzalez neglects. History from the bottom up invites a wider distribution of blame, along with wealth. Thus, at certain critical junctures, people sometimes contribute to their own plight. Why, for example, did Queens and Brooklyn escape the decline of both Newark

and the Bronx? Gonzalez does not address these questions.

For her valuable contribution to urban history, Gonzalez earns kudos to be sure; but this young scholar also invites critical commentary. Fixed on the South Bronx, she ignores the borough's rich history north of Fordham Road. Eager to chart both the decline and resurrection of this much-maligned borough, she plays favorites and scolds those who fail to measure up to her highly subjective standards. In one example, Gonzalez denigrates former borough president Robert Abrams because he was more concerned with image, she contends, than with the substance of rehabilitation of her favored turf in the southern end. As a progressive reformer who charted a dramatic departure from Boss Flynn patronage politics and later as highly competent New York State Attorney General, Abrams deserves better, while the controversial Father Louis Gigante, dubious connections notwithstanding, elicits excessive praise along with the more meritorious local activist, Genevieve S. Brooks (pp. 128-29, 132-33, 139).

Another bone of contention arises from Gonzalez's hit-and-run reference to the "Master Builder" Robert Moses (pp. 111, 113). Here, she misses a splendid opportunity to grapple with a recent bout of revisionism, engineered by her mentor, Kenneth Jackson, to rethink Moses's roles as presented by biographer Robert Caro (who strangely receives no mention in the text).[4] The arrogant Moses destroyed entire neighborhoods with his ill-conceived Cross Bronx Expressway. Current Moses revisionists like Columbia University Professor Hilary Ballon seem to yearn for a modern Mussolini presumably to get things--big projects--done regardless of social costs.[5] Whatever the position one holds--defense of Moses or support of his adversary, Jane Jacobs--Moses demands attention. There is none offered in this book.

Absent also is the world of sports. For this erstwhile rabid Yankee fan and current sports historian, the big ball orchard in the Bronx represented Mecca. The "house that Ruth built" became the home stage for such celebrated heroes who followed the mighty Babe as Lou Gehrig, Jose DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Reggie Jackson, Don Mattingly, and Derek Jeter. They helped to create the most dominant team in baseball, indeed, the most successful franchise in sports history. Other athletes of note who graced the borough included Hank Greenberg, Rod Carew, Vince Lombardi, and Lenny Rosenbluth, to name but a few. They provided a sense of pride in the borough and forged a strong bond of unity among diverse people through the grim years as well as the salad days. Surely, a Bronx history should have a place for sports as a vital part of the social fabric.

Because of the staggering number of sources--they total ninety-eight pages--the prose also invites scrutiny. Though highly informative, ***The Bronx*** reads like a dry dissertation laced with occasional clichés like "leaps and bounds" and "by and large" (pp. 46, 90). The endnotes at times are more engaging than the text. Even so, Evelyn Gonzalez and Columbia University Press earn warm praise for this valuable book, which breaks new ground on a maligned and misunderstood subject. Contrary to the condescending Ogden Nash, we offer a profound "thonks for the Bronx."

Notes

[1]. Ogden Nash, "Geographical Reflection," in ***Hard Lines*** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), 53.

[2]. Frederick Binder and David Reimers, ***"All the Nations under Heaven": A Racial and Ethnic History of New York City*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Andrew S. Dolkart, ***Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Deborah Dash Moore, ***At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Clarence

Taylor, ***The Black Churches of Brooklyn*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Craig Steven Wilder, ***A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[3]. Oscar Lewis, ***Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*** (New York: Basic Books, 1959); also see Oscar Lewis, ***La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York*** (New York: Random House, 1966).

[4]. Robert Caro, ***The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*** (New York: Knopf, 1974).

[5]. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., ***Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*** (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2007).