

2022

## Book Review: Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy

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### Recommended Citation

Castro, Jose (2022) "Book Review: Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy," *History in the Making*: Vol. 15, Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol15/iss1/15>

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## Reviews

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### **Book Review: *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy***

By Jose Castro

Historian George Sanchez' recent 2021 publication, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, examines the Boyle Heights neighborhood and offers insight into how this small enclave became a place of revolutionary inspiration.<sup>1</sup> The author provides a comprehensive study that explores how minorities have survived oppression and inequality over the decades. Sanchez analyzes the coexistence of people in this multiethnic neighborhood throughout its history, and the influence of those involved in revolutionary and social movements throughout Southern California. Published by the University of California Press, *Boyle Heights* offers an addition to the scholarly literature analyzing California's history.

Sanchez is one of the most prolific historians in Los Angeles. He is currently a professor at the University of Southern California (USC) and has published numerous journals and articles addressing the complexities of the Mexican community. His current work adds to the historiography of California by providing a point of view that represents the diversity in which the city of Los Angeles was founded in 1781. Other historians have tackled

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<sup>1</sup> George Sanchez, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).

the history of this area of Los Angeles as well. In 1983, Richard Romo published *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio*. In his book, Romo discussed the establishment of Los Angeles by a group of people from different ethnicities, including Spaniards, Mestizos, Mulatos, and Indians from Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Although Romo focuses on East Los Angeles, it should be highlighted that both neighborhoods are located adjacent to each other in what was the Belvedere region at the south end of Boyle Heights.

Located on the east side of the Los Angeles River, Boyle Heights was founded by William H. Workman (1839–1918) in 1876. To introduce the reader, Sanchez establishes the Tongva-Gabrielino Indian village of Yang-ga as living alongside the river in order to describe the geographical settlement that would become Boyle Heights. According to Sanchez, “the division between the west and the east sides of the river was substantial and reflected ‘markers of race-ethnicity, class, status and prospect.’”<sup>3</sup> In the first two chapters of *Boyle Heights*, Sanchez details the origins of this neighborhood. He uses these chapters to discuss the transition from the old ranch system to the birth of a metropolis. The Irish immigrant, Andrew A. Boyle (1818–1971), was a successful merchant who had a vision to grow grapes and commercially produce wine. Although there was a shortage of water, he managed to maintain a vineyard due to a ditch that carried water from the nearby Los Angeles River. His partner was his son-in-law, William Workman, who became a prominent politician and businessman and served as Los Angeles’ mayor from 1886 to 1888. Before being designated Boyle Heights, the area was a ranch by the name of El Parédon Blanco, meaning “the white bluff.” Workman renamed the area Boyle Heights when his father-in-law, Andrew Boyle (d. 1871), passed away in 1871.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Sanchez, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Sanchez, 23.



Figure 1. Map of the Workman Orchard Tract Los Angeles City, California, surveyed by J. A. Bernal in September 1888. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1880s, the expansion of the nation's railroad system to the west brought immigrants from Midwest and Southern states. The old ranch owners of Southern California decided to divide their property to sell to the Anglo-American settlers. Boyle Heights was planned to be "a suburb of 'refined whiteness' for the Anglo-American settlers from the East."<sup>6</sup> Sanchez denotes that what was intended to be a community only for White settlers from the East and Midwest sections of the United States became a community of immigrants. He writes, "William H. Workman initially attempted

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Bernal, "Map of the Workman Orchard Tract Los Angeles City, Cal.; surveyed in Sept. 1888 / by J. A. Bernal, 1888-09," Collection: Maps, Huntington Library, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://calisphere.org/item/a22e022741dbc4385f2a0f5bb76008f3/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sanchez, 29.

to build homes for the growing elite of the town.”<sup>7</sup> Anglo-American newcomers eventually settled on the West side of the metropolis, and Boyle Heights would establish itself as a neighborhood with a much more racially diverse population.<sup>8</sup> Boyle Heights became a multiethnic community starting with Russian and Italian immigrants, as well as Japanese and Jewish refugees. Sanchez writes,

This is how a neighborhood that was neglected by city leaders and intentionally marginalized became a multicultural ecosystem of coexistence and collaboration. For residents of the neighborhood, Boyle Heights became a microcosm of America.<sup>9</sup>

It began to lay the foundations of a racially diverse community.

From chapters three through five, Sanchez discusses how different political ideologies that were repressed in other countries came to establish themselves in this neighborhood. From Russian Jews and Molokans, who fled from tsarist persecution in Moscow, to the anarchists who took refuge from Mexico, the author explains the social and cultural encounters of these immigrant communities, and how they lived apart from members of the Anglo-Saxon community who resided on the west side of the city of Los Angeles. According to Sanchez, Boyle Heights became an urban apartheid. He notes, “Migrants to Boyle Heights would share radical traditions from their various homelands, even while the rise of nationalist sentiments and segregated enclaves in the period led them to strengthen their own ethnic sense of self.”<sup>10</sup> He suggests that immigrants “found in Boyle Heights a complex world of conflict, coalition, coalescence, comfort, and contestation shaped by racial and class segregation from the rest of Los Angeles.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sanchez, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Sanchez, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Sanchez, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Sanchez 66.

<sup>11</sup> Sanchez 65.

Noteworthy in chapters four and five are the revelations of the dark history of Los Angeles. It is within these chapters that the author decides to include two shameful episodes in the history of the United States. The first episode occurred with the massive deportation of Mexicans in the 1930s. The second circumstance involved the Japanese concentration camps during World War II (1939–1945). Sanchez relates the testimony of Mexican-Americans who the United States repatriated to a country they did not know. The statement of one girl, Emilia Castaneda (n.d.), provides insight into the suffering of children and their families. Emilia spent ten years of her childhood and adolescence living in towns, villages and small cities of Durango, Mexico. According to Sanchez, “Emilia returned in 1944 during World War II to Boyle Heights, where she had to relearn English and restart as a young adult.”<sup>12</sup> Sanchez also includes narratives of incarcerated Japanese-American families during the war. All of these accounts are from residents of Boyle Heights. These residents were victims of a racial rhetoric that preceded the twentieth-century and marked the systemic racism which developed in society.<sup>13</sup>

At present, the majority of residents in Boyle Heights are Mexican and Latino with over 87,000 people living in 6.52 square miles inside the city of Los Angeles.<sup>14</sup> However, over the decades the demographics of this community have changed. In chapter six, Sanchez discusses the exodus of Jewish immigrants out of Boyle Heights, many who had arrived in the early 1900s. Jewish immigrants moved to the San Fernando Valley primarily because their economic situation improved.<sup>15</sup> During World War II, the Jewish migration to the San Fernando Valley began to produce a change in the demographics of Boyle Heights for both the Jewish and Mexican communities. Sanchez concludes, “The Jewish

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<sup>12</sup> Sanchez, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Sanchez, 124.

<sup>14</sup> “Boyle Heights,” *Los Angeles Times*, accessed May 2, 2022. <https://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sanchez, 136.

community of Los Angeles as a whole was converted by this demographic shift, clearly becoming white in the racial hierarchy of the region, both geographically and politically.”<sup>16</sup> Boyle Heights became a predominantly Mexican community with a Jewish minority that accepted social multiculturalism in a neighborhood tied to the left-wing working class.

In chapters eight and nine, Sanchez discusses the political and social struggle of minorities in this neighborhood. He delves into the Civil Rights Era (1954–1968) and discusses the efforts of minorities to achieve equality. The author begins by recounting the case of Edward R. Roybal (1916–2005), who was the first Mexican-American to serve on the Los Angeles City Council in the twentieth-century. Sanchez highlights Roybal’s social and political activities and places him at the center of social activism.



*Figure 2. Edward Ross Roybal, (1916–2005) portrait, 1950. Courtesy of the Roybal (Edward R.) Papers UCLA, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sanchez, 156.

<sup>17</sup> “Edward Ross Roybal, Portrait, 1950,” Roybal, (Edward R.) Papers, UCLA, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb4s2009f1/>.

According to Sanchez, “The legacy of Edward Roybal’s time in the Los Angeles City Council is a blueprint for building a multiracial political coalition anchored by principled political practice.”<sup>18</sup> The constant struggle of minorities from the streets of Boyle Heights included both African-Americans and Mexican-Americans, who together sought social justice. Social organizations emerged that were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Sanchez notes, “Roybal’s constituency was diverse ethnically and economically. It included Mexican-American veterans and Mexican-American labor leaders, who also enlisted leftist organizers dedicated to interracial cooperation, African American, and Jewish Angelinos.”<sup>19</sup>

A determining factor in Roybal’s political campaign was the Catholic Labor Institute and the support of Monsignor Thomas O’Dwyer (1896–1966), Reverend of St. Mary’s Church. Sanchez neglected to mention this prominent priest who spoke out in favor of better housing, health care and labor rights. Reverend O’Dwyer noted,

It is our duty to sponsor and support, in every way possible, legislation that will secure for the workman his fundamental right to a living wage, adequate protection against industrial hazards, and an income that will provide properly for old age.<sup>20</sup>

O’Dwyer endorsed Roybal and mobilized Mexican voters from Boyle Heights to support Roybal’s political campaign.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sanchez, 183.

<sup>19</sup> Sanchez, 184.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Nelson, “Msgr. O’Dwyer: Nationally-known advocate for economic justice,” *Angelus News*, August 7, 2014, <https://angelusnews.com/local/california/msgr-odwyer-nationally-known-advocate-for-economic-justice/>.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Burt, “Catholic Labor Institute in Los Angeles,” July 12, 2010, <http://kennethburt.com/blog/?p=729>.



Sanchez summarizes what has come to define Boyle Heights in chapters nine and ten. The neighborhood of Boyle Heights became the image of the constant struggle for social justice. One important point that emerges is the story of Father Gregory Boyle (b. 1954) and the Homeboy Industries. Father Boyle, a Jesuit priest, observed the violence committed by the gangs in Boyle Heights. He began a mission to facilitate the rehabilitation of those gang members. According to Sanchez, Boyle learned that the gang problem was rooted in poverty and a lack of opportunities for the youth. Sanchez writes, “Homeboy Industries would grow into being one of the leading and best-known gang intervention programs in the world.”<sup>22</sup> Father Boyle’s work for the community was important at the end of the twentieth-century. However, one hundred years before Father Boyle, a woman from the Boyle Family would carry out similar social work. The only difference between the two is that Mary Julia Workman (Boyle) (1871–1963) performed her social work as a lay Catholic. Very similar to the Homeboy Industries, the Brownson Settlement House was established by Workman to provide education, employment, and public health to mostly Mexican immigrant families between 1901 and 1920. It is noteworthy that Sanchez ignores the social work done by this Boyle Heights native who lived her entire life for social justice and civic activism in the city of Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup>

The essence of Boyle Heights remains in the hands of the young people, of which the majority are Mexican and Latino, who are educated in community colleges and universities, and who return to their place of origin providing a multicultural sense of what Boyle Heights has always been. Sanchez concludes, “The multiracial history of Boyle Heights must continue to play a role in the development of the neighborhood, connecting those who currently live east of the river with the offspring of former

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<sup>22</sup> Sanchez, 236.

<sup>23</sup> Jose Castro, “Mary Julia Workman: Catholic Progressivism 1900-1920,” MA. Thesis in History, (California State University, San Bernardino, 2022), 71.

residents who left long ago.”<sup>24</sup> Sanchez’ examination of Boyle Heights offers readers insight into a neighborhood that is the epitome of a nation which boasts of diversity. Boyle Heights is a neighborhood that is identified with a racial minority and has been an example of how immigrants have managed to overcome the ravages caused by social injustice and a lack of civil rights. Sanchez presents Boyle Heights as a small neighborhood where people of different minority groups have managed to live together and overcome their barriers, all while defending their rights. It is in this neighborhood where they seek to address their own problems such as crime, oppression, and poverty. For example, the 1968 student walkouts were the result of a multiracial effort to bring equity in the school system in Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup> In 2020, the effects of gentrification caused an increase in rent and a continued social displacement in the neighborhood.<sup>26</sup> Sanchez explains that at the beginning of the twenty-first-century there has been a constant fight for fair, decent, and safe housing.

In his work, Sanchez depicts the birth of this community and the neighborhood’s demographic evolution during the twentieth-century. He ends by highlighting current problems such as gentrification and housing deficiencies. The takeaway from the book is an understanding of the social circumstances of Boyle Heights, which consists of mostly immigrants and Mexican descendants. and their plight for social justice and recognition. Strong cultural and social ties unite the community. Sanchez praises the neighbors who have “demonstrated resilience against gentrification,” noting, “the key will be whether Boyle Heights remains a place that low-income Latinos, particularly recent

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<sup>24</sup> Sanchez, 263.

<sup>25</sup> Sanchez, 112.

<sup>26</sup> Gentrification is a general term for the arrival of wealthier people in an existing urban district, a related increase in rents and property values, and changes in the district’s character and culture. Benjamin Grant, “Flag Wars”, POV, June 17, 2013, <http://archive.pov.org/flagwars/what-is-gentrification/>.

immigrants of all legal statuses, can find a shelter and establish their families.”<sup>27</sup>



Figure 3. Plea for more police protection, 1986. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.<sup>28</sup>

Boyle Heights is a small neighborhood in Los Angeles, but it represents the multiculturalism of a nation. A great source for students and researchers alike, Sanchez’ work reflects upon the inequality and segregation that its people suffered and demonstrates its importance in the history of California and the United States. The book offers deep insight into the history of Boyle Heights, creating additional layers to the narrative that is the history of California. Unlike the Romo’s *East Los Angeles*, Sanchez presents a story that stresses the social and economic problems of a multicultural society. Whereas Romo related the history of Mexicans and their legacy in the city of Los Angeles, Sanchez identifies the diversity and resilience of the neighborhood.

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<sup>27</sup> Sanchez, 262.

<sup>28</sup> “Plea for more police protection, 1986,” Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, accessed, May 18, 2022, <https://calisphere.org/item/f24109f0ef6457836c657f36480e8c1c/>.

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### ***Author Bio***

Jose was born and raised in Mexico City. He obtained his first bachelor of arts in communication studies in Mexico in 2006, and a second bachelor of arts in history at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona in 2018. He entered the inaugural class of the master of arts in history program at California State University, San Bernardino in 2020 where he found a wonderful cohort and a professional faculty. He will pursue a doctoral degree in history in the future. Jose is currently a docent at the Workman-Homestead Museum in the City of Industry. He is working on research about Mary Julia Workman, Catholic Progressivism, and Liberal Theology. He is interested in the history of California, history of Mexico, religious studies, and the history of Christianity in North America.

