2021

Review of *South Bronx Battles: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Renewal*. by Carolyn McLaughlin

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**Recommended Citation**
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4597
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol48/iss4/9

*South Bronx Battles* is a case study of the evolution of an urban neighborhood from the 1960s to 2018. It is a timely addition to ongoing conversations about urbanization, gentrification, and diversity, as well as nonprofit and community practice in social work. The book provides a wealth of historic details, including interviews with community members, photographs, a timeline, and a neighborhood map. It offers a unique perspective on changes in the South Bronx area of New York City through the perspective of author and social worker Carolyn McLaughlin’s five decades of work in the community, including 34 years as the Executive Director of BronxWorks, a large human services agency. When she began working at BronxWorks, it was a small agency with a budget of $50,000 and upon her retirement in 2013, the agency had 600 staff and a budget of $36 million. BronxWorks provides a wide variety of services, including housing supports, afterschool care, and economic opportunity programs (Scaglione, 2013), and MacLaughlin’s narrative richly describes both the growth of the agency and the evolution of the neighborhood.

McLaughlin describes the book as a work of oral history and journalism, and her stance as being that of a participant observer (p. 7). Her passion for the community and her deep knowledge grounded in years of experience come across clearly throughout the text. Readers interested in policy and history will appreciate learning about how social, political, economic, cultural, and demographic trends influenced the neighborhood, such as the 1960s urban renewal and the 1990s environmental justice movements.

In the tradition of radical social work, in recent years, the mainstream profession has begun to reflect critically on how white social
workers have failed to partner with, and at times been complicit in harm done to Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities. Too often, people of color are treated as recipients of service or subjects of research, rather than experts and leaders of the communities in which they live and work.

At times, in its perspective, South Bronx Battles reflects this marginalizing aspect of our social work history. For example, the book opens with a description of a community leader as petite and pretty, with an “Afro” (quotation marks in the original text, p. 1). Though likely unintentional, the focus on the leader’s appearance and use of quotations around the word afro diminishes and exoticizes the leader. Several pages into the introduction (p. 8), the author writes, “I also write as someone who is concerned about the tendency to blame society’s ills on poor people, rather than seeing these people as assets who contribute greatly to our communities.” To this reader, “these people” stands out as an othering term, framing the community as an object. Later in the book, after noting that 85-90% of the staff were people of color and neighborhood residents, the author writes, “As we grew, I necessarily became more of a supervisor and administrator and less involved in directly delivering service…I think (and hope) that I constantly pushed for program quality and for staff to act professionally” (p. 126). The juxtaposition of the description of the staff as consisting primarily of people of color with the comment about pushing for quality and professionalism is problematic. Standards for professionalism often reinforce norms and expectations imposed by the dominant white culture in how people dress, wear their hair, communicate, and work together (Gray, 2019).

This does not mean the text should not be read, shared, and discussed, but rather that the white-centric lens be considered as much a part of our history as the content. The future of community practice must involve more work based in mutual aid, which “rejects the idea of a hierarchy between giver and receiver” (Lowrey, 2021). Towards the end, in discussing solutions to gentrification and displacement, the book shifts towards a more empowerment-oriented approach as it describes tenant organizing through Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), “a membership driven tenant organizing
South Bronx Battles gives readers an opportunity to reflect on past social work practice and how we can focus our future efforts on meaningful partnership, equity, and justice.

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References