

Review Essays

Living in Los Angeles: Places, People, and Politics

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Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Robert Gottlieb, Mark Vallianatos, Regina M. Freer, and Peter Dreier, *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

What lies at the heart of Los Angeles? The question echoes a 1940s *noir* film, where the answer was likely to be a broken promise, a dastardly lie, a horrid twist. Yet, like Philip Marlowe hot on the trail of an urban mystery, scholars have been asking this question too. How do we make sense of Los Angeles? What is its core? And as often as not, academic answers echo the hard-boiled plot. The picture of a corrupt elite is there, the shocking depravity of a world where everything has a price, the insensible urban spaces, the steady rain of irony. Such is the tradition of the Great Wrong Place, where Los Angeles is not a city but merely the façade for one, and behind the pretty face is instead a setting for dissolution and unreality. The seeming dysfunction of a city that is not what it pretends to be, this central paradox of Los Angeles beguiles scholars, and vexes them. Like Marlowe trying to solve the crime, students of Los Angeles keep searching for clues to what makes the city tick.

But Los Angeles does not easily yield to analytical models. The concentric rings of Chicago School lenses, for example, could not bring Los Angeles into greater focus. As a whole, it remained incoherent, unintelligible to those seeking a certain geographic or social logic. The establishment of the 'LA School' in the 1990s signalled the gathering of scholarly momentum towards a new urban theory that could not only solve the puzzle of Los Angeles but also produce new paradigms for understanding where urban development was leading elsewhere. The geographers, architects, and urban planners who set themselves this task argued that Los Angeles' paradox was the reason the city was important to study. It had

an exceptional history that bypassed traditional forms of urbanism and heralded new patterns so-called postmodern cities would follow. This assertion, that the city could be both unique and uniquely paradigmatic—a bit of a paradox itself—has underwritten much interdisciplinary attention to Los Angeles' as urban behemoth and national bellwether.

LA School advocates took the elements of the city's apparent dysfunction and redid the math. Edward Soja, Michael Dear, and others, suggested that such long-known aspects of Los Angeles' growth, including its municipal fragmentation, sprawling population, and automobile-centered planning, its various suburban centers, exurbs, and 'edge cities,' its diverse demography, growing hybridity, and racial polarization, represented not just next steps in the evolution of urban form. They added up to a whole new formula of postmodern urbanism. The neologisms developed by Los Angeles theorists—glocalization, heteropolis—promised to uncover the hidden rationality of a Los Angeles that functioned with the logic of a Keno board or a multi-topping pizza.¹

The L.A. School thus presented a clear counter to other urban archetypes. By trying to grapple with this elusive city on its own terms, scholars raised the profile of Los Angeles as a site of inquiry. Despite a great deal of insight, however, what remains is the impression of just how odd Los Angeles is. A model of the city as pizza pie or Keno game offers as much conundrum as clarity. Indeed, the very impossibility of Los Angeles continues to form part of its core definition. But as Mike Willard remarked in a recent Special Issue of *American Quarterly* devoted to Los Angeles, "cities are not organisms or gaming boards.... [T]hey are lived in and built by people."² Trying to posit Los Angeles as phenomenon necessarily overlooks Los Angelinos themselves, most of whom would be surprised to find their daily lives declared a paradox.

The strength of these four recently published works rests in their very lack of focus on either *the paradox* or an attempt to unravel it. In different ways, they keep their pencils on the ground. What has Los Angeles been like as a place to live for various residents? Why did ordinary life here produce distinct urban social dynamics? How did the city manage to nurture a tradition of progressive movements, a series of radical moments, and the potential for working-class coalitions despite a reputation for repression? The answers found in these works of history, political science, and urban studies vary, but share one key outlook. Theirs is *the city* of Los Angeles, not Los Angeles as a School, a postmodern metropolis, or a large pepperoni-and-mushroom. These authors chronicle the urban experiences of a diverse group of people living in Los Angeles, and the different ways they sought to change city landscapes, politics, and social relations.

Steering clear of the quest for a singular urban paradigm, these efforts to conceive of Los Angeles as lived place can offer a useful set of tools and perspectives. The first is an attention to place. Los Angeles' lack of any sense of place remains a standard cliché, but these authors are attune to the ways in which resi-

dents have forged distinctive neighbourhoods and communities. They sustain what is perhaps the LA School's strongest legacy—its insistence on spatiality as a key axis of urban life, both in terms of how to think about historical change and about the peculiar social geography of Los Angeles itself. Historians Mark Wild and Natalia Molina, for example, capture Angelinos of the early-twentieth-century thinking of the city in terms of 'spots'—cohesive places that theoretically embodied homogeneity. Less descriptive than ascriptive, this imagined urban landscape of 'white spots,' *puntos negros*, home spots, and 'rotten spots' reveals a particular social-spatial strategy at work in Los Angeles. The other studies do not identify a vocabulary of spots but find that place and space still matter in the contemporary era. Location, and traditions embedded in locations, Lisa García Bedolla discovered, has pronounced effects in the political engagement of ethnic Mexicans living in East Los Angeles versus residents of nearby Montebello. Place-based identities do exist in Los Angeles, if less on a citywide basis than within micro-communities (and not only the gated ones).

Another shared focus rests on the people inhabiting and creating these spaces, and in particular to the interethnic relations that typify so many of the city's places, despite its reputation for wide racial and economic gulfs. Molina, for example, considers both Asians and Mexicans in *Fit to be Citizens?*, but she does more than compare their separate pasts; she demonstrates how their experiences became linked through the public health system, where forms of racialization emerging in relation to one group often came to influence others. Both Wild and the authors of *The Next Los Angeles* discover interethnic communities that have cultivated much of the city's progressive tradition. All four volumes keep their analytical sights on how nonwhite, working class Angelinos responded to white, elite conceptions of the city that often sought to protect the presumption of paradise. Los Angeles' vast public imagery has been frequently studied, and these authors rely upon such work. But the stories they tell are less common—how the weight of this image came to fall upon those least able to live the dream and how they pressed the city to trade iconography for equity.³

Finally, each work pays close attention to the city's political life, to individual struggles for political voice, access, and power. In street speaking or petitions to the public health department, in the Bus Riders' Union or the ballot box, the seemingly marginal communities of Los Angeles emerge as central players in its political history. Though the usual suspects, from Harry Chandler to Darryl Gates, make appearances in these pages, the principals are different. Robert Gottlieb and his co-authors give us portraits of Job Harriman, a socialist who nearly won the mayoralty in 1911, Charlotta Bass, a long-time advocate for justice in the city's African American community, and others. Individually these figures might appear as occasional interruptions or lone voices, but link them to each other and to a multitude of ordinary activists and a new bottom-up view of Los Angeles politics begins to surface. Read together, these works suggest that we

ought to be thinking about the city's political history in terms of its grass roots organizing, its radical potential, and its pitched contestations.

In *Street Meeting*, historian Mark Wild resurrects a set of early-twentieth-century central-city neighbourhoods discernibly 'ethnic' but not necessarily the rigidly segregated mono-cultural islands one might expect. For all its reputation as a global polyglot today, Wild suggests that 'interethnicity' was much more common in Los Angeles before World War II than afterwards. His painstaking research in mapping residential patterns reveals that in some neighbourhoods, "blocks housed residents from at least three racial-ethnic groups" (31), Asian, Mexican, African American, Jewish, and European immigrant. He goes on to employ illuminating data to such as playground surveys that deepen the picture of this experience, where "central city children confronted possibilities for cultural interaction every time they left their homes" (96). Whether considering the interethnic contacts forged on playground swing sets, at the unique Church of All Nations, or within the sex trade, *Street Meeting* portrays a face-to-face culture, necessarily interlaced neighbourhoods, and a local Los Angeles rarely glimpsed by scholars.

Not that Wild assumes such neighbourhoods were idyllic multicultural havens, hemmed in as they were by structural discrimination and difficult living conditions. In fact, he argues, such interethnic places caused a great deal of consternation among white elites and reformers in the region. Looking at these neighbourhoods they too pronounced Los Angeles incoherent. "Surveyors, having engaged in futile efforts to draw physical boundaries between ethnic communities, wrote off large parts of the central neighbourhoods as a 'congested foreign lump, unassimilable,' an incubator for a mongrelized, illegitimate culture" (44).

Multiethnic neighbourhoods found themselves unwittingly the targets of various state and municipal agencies designed to adjust them to the emerging corporate reconstruction of the city. Whether examining zoning regulations, the California Commission of Immigration and Housing, or Americanization programs, Wild finds consistent attempts to disaggregate interethnic places—and resegregate them.

These efforts, according to Wild, were in part designed to push Los Angeles and "the persistent diversity of [its] central city" towards conformity with "corporate liberal, Chicago school models of assimilation based on cohesive ethnic neighbourhoods" (60). It was a spatial strategy, a reorganization of geography in both real and imagined terms typified by the elite conception of Los Angeles as "the white spot of America," a 1920s urban motto that implied ethno-racial and religious homogeneity. Given the fact of ethnic diversity, the white spot was fiction, but a telling one. "The key lay not in the 'white' but in the 'spot,'" and thus in the possibility of a series of spots, some white, some not, but that together hedged against ethnically blended neighbourhoods (39). The spot solution appeared to "reconcile the persistence of nonwhite populations in the city" with

the desires for homogeneity (60).

Wild suggests that this program failed on its own criteria, initially reinforcing the restrictive patterns that had generated interethnic neighbourhoods in the first place. Moreover, these spaces fostered shared experiences and thus increased potential for interethnic working-class coalitions glimpsed in the prevalence of street demonstrations and by the 1930s, vigorous local Communist Party organizing. Wild ends his treatment on the eve of what he calls the “triumph of corporatization,” which accelerated segregation and monoracial neighbourhoods and resulted in a “compartmentalized city,” where the “lines of distinction were hardening” both in geographic and ethnic terms (204-205). What was lost, he concludes, was “a landscape with the flexibility that was more hospitable to bottom-up political and social movements” (208). Though the solidification of this landscape comes after his story ends, Wild’s identification of spots and a corporate turn as markers of the shifting experiences and spatial conceptions offer a nuanced explication of the roots of Los Angeles’ ongoing urban challenges.

Similar notions of the ‘spot’ crop up in Natalia Molina’s history of public health in Los Angeles. *Fit to be Citizens?* begins with the city’s health officer labelling Chinatown in 1879 as “that rotten spot.” Here, the concept represented a strategy to blame any blemishes on the city’s pristine image, “including all forms of disease and any manner of disorder, to the city’s marginalized communities.” Her book follows a six-decade process where “areas home to L.A.’s Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican populations were separately and serially targeted as ‘rotten spots’” (1). With force and economy of style, Molina successfully demonstrates how “public health as an institution and a discourse evolved into a key site of racialization” (4). For example, public health agencies repeatedly connected outbreaks of typhus in the late-nineteenth century and pneumonic plague in the 1920s to people (Mexicans) rather than a set of conditions or symptoms. “This preference for using race as the organizing principle for understanding” local epidemics saddled their unfortunate victims with a kind of ethnic germ theory whose social effects were felt beyond the body (69-70).

Officials interpreted their mandate as endowing them with the authority to enter, inspect, characterize, and condemn the homes and businesses of non-white residents to protect the health of the larger (white) urban body. Whether it was the campaign to close Chinese laundries or the demeaning delousing of railroad workers, the result was the “pathologizing” of nonwhite living space as “disorderly and undesirable” (77-79). Ironically, concerned bureaucrats did little to address the structural problems with spaces deemed pathogenic. Chinatown, blamed for its “filth and stench,” did not gain access to the city sewer system until decades after neighbouring communities (16). When examining two prevalent health problems in Mexican neighbourhoods—high rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality—officials preferred to address the latter. Reducing TB rates would have required comprehensive housing reform, but their campaign for

“Better Babies required much less: home visits and cleanliness talks” (77). There were connections, Molina demonstrates, between classifying a place as “rotten,” attributing its causes to racial factors, and then ignoring its structural needs.

Not places, then, but people, or rather bodies became the health department’s main targets. Describing Mexican and Asian residents as in great need of its services, gave the department a clear mission and “an opportunity for expanding the department’s power and prestige” (53). It was active in establishing and encouraging Mexicans to patronize public health clinics through the 1920s, and used the statistics gathered there to increase its budget. In the Depression, however, these same numbers became evidence that Mexicans burdened the public health system. Resident non-citizens thus became targets of a different sort, as those who used the county hospital became candidates for deportation.⁴

Molina uncovers striking documentation of resistance to health department policies and assumptions. One such document is indeed a find of historians’ dreams. In 1916, Mexican residents of a railroad camp protested the discriminatory basis of typhus control measures in the clearest of terms. The letter complained of humiliating treatment at the hands of health inspectors, but articulated a broader social critique. Workers suggested that the lack of a “fair wage” hampered their own health and declared their right to dignity – “TODOS SOMOS HUMANOS” (67).⁵ Later, such protests found a home in radical politics that called the city to task for abnegating its municipal responsibility. “Turning the tables, Mexican Americans indicted the city and county for perpetuating these [poor living] conditions and for undercutting Mexican American communities’ chance to thrive” (14). Ironically, Molina notes, it was the very process of racialization that provided a focal point for ethnic “solidarity and collective mobilizations aimed at turning negative ascription and exclusion into positive affirmation and empowerment” (188). As in Wild’s narrative, a corporate landscape—a set of spots—emerges, but so does the possibility of alternative political dialogues between them.

This process of transforming group stigma into pride and a call for political action forms the core of Lisa García Bedolla’s *Fluid Borders*. A political scientist, García Bedolla examines Latino political engagement during a post-Proposition 187 context.⁶ Interviewing 100 residents of two distinct Mexican communities—predominately Mexican and lower-income East Los Angeles, and more integrated and middle-income Montebello—she suggests that socio-economic status cannot alone predict participation. Rather, she proposes, residents’ perceptions of their political “place” in the city and of their own neighbourhood makes a difference. Both places experienced broader ethnic stigma, but East Los Angeles, she argues, “as a center of cultural and organizational Mexican life has served as an important source of ‘contextual capital’”—by which she means a tradition of community action and solidarity, which Montebello seems to lack (26).

This becomes clear in the data she supplies about voting patterns, but

even more so in the words of her informants (which regrettably do not appear until the third chapter). Here we see how Latino residents associated “politics” with a governmental apparatus in which they were often unwelcome, but spoke animatedly of their volunteer and community activism. This helps to explain why most were reluctant to “include the protests that they had participated in against Proposition 187 as political activity, because they viewed politics as the exercise of power outside the community” (113). In Montebello, where Latino-specific community organizations were less common, the “hostile racial climate leaves them feeling pessimistic” when it comes to the efficacy of politics. By contrast, in East Los Angeles, where collective activism was energetic, residents were “motivated to overcome their insecurities and discomfort with the political system and vote” (135).

In part, García Bedolla finds, the work such nonelectoral groups do in defining communities of interest outside set electoral containers (city, county, state) help to politicize the group and increase desires to advocate on their own behalf. Her subjects describe it in more succinct terms: “They [Mexicans] are the ones that can make the change. No white person’s gonna come here and make the change for them, for our community.” In terms of the poor housing conditions allowed to persist, another asked “Like the city, they don’t want to do nothing about it, like [they think] it’s a bad community, so why fix it?” (164-165). From the city’s point of view, the rotten spot remains, but what this study shows is that the internal perspective matters. Whether community members believe the place and the group is worthy of political effort is key to generating such activism. Interpreting Latinos’ place in Los Angeles politics, then, requires taking account of the multiple boundaries they encounter in the city—physical, psychological, social, and national. *Fluid Borders* makes a full accounting of these, but shows in the process that the existence of such boundaries does not always entail an inability to cross them.

Robert Gottlieb, Mark Vallianatos, Regina Freer and Peter Dreier, colleagues at Occidental College’s Urban and Environmental Policy Program, and several other contributors to *The Next Los Angeles* hope to leave readers with a similar impression. Their goal is to gather a long history of twentieth century social movements into a singular tradition they call “Progressive L.A.” One might quibble with the label, but what the authors intend by it gains a clear shape in the narrative. These disparate groups, they argue, brought about a better city simply (or not so simply) by agitating for one. Though individual or dramatic moments of success are rare, longstanding community activism and an “alternative cultural life” have nurtured a context for “a new kind of labour movement, of a community-oriented environmentalism, and of a multiethnic coalition politics” (2). The book begins with a decade-by-decade retrospective of the Los Angeles left. What this lacks in depth, it makes up for in the insights gained from stitching together figures and moments usually treated as historical oddities and political outliers, from

Upton Sinclair's campaign to End Poverty in California to the Mothers of East L.A.'s demand for environmental justices. It then surveys the broader political climate in more recent decades, paying particular attention to the municipal responses to the riots of 1965 and 1992 as well as to the evolving coalitions that elevated first Tom Bradley and then Antonio Villaraigosa (though evidently going to press before his 2005 mayoral victory).

Despite or perhaps because of the breadth of its coverage, *The Next Los Angeles* contains a clear message, as its title indicates, one that is oriented towards future action more than historical analysis. Progressive L.A., the authors argue, is fundamentally a piecemeal, bottom-up effort, and in that lays its strength. Currently popular holistic methods of addressing urban problems, like the 'blue-ribbon' commissions L.A. 2000 or Rebuild L.A., often assessed the key problems that beset Los Angeles, but by their very nature could not solve them. Success stories instead arise from the home-grown, micro-movements that gained city-wide momentum: the "Los Angeles of EPIC clubs and zoot suiters; of janitors fighting for justice and parents and students advocating for farmers' market salad bars; of labour organizers mobilizing to rebuild communities and community organizers crusading for a living wage." Precisely because they drew upon the multiple places and people that are the heart of Los Angeles these efforts were better able to "envision a more decent place to live, play and work" (189) for all Angelinos.

The appearance of fragmentation of effort hides what has become a stronger defence of Los Angeles as place than promoted by the city's usual image boosters. In the face of recent secession movements where parts of the city, most famously in the San Fernando Valley, sought to sever their political identities from the City of Los Angeles, it was the civic left, the immigrants, radicals, and reformers who offered "the most compelling response to secession, fragmentation, lack of accountability geographic and economic division, and the other challenges that Los Angeles faces today" (196). Their investment in making the city "more livable, equitable and democratic" (13) represented a novel twist in the story of the elusive Los Angeles lifestyle. Less a demand to make good on the good life, Progressive L.A. calls in a way for the city to confront its ordinariness—to accept municipal responsibility to its citizens, to provide a living wage, to protect its environment, to foster inclusion and civic identity. Perhaps, like Marlowe who declared in *The Big Sleep*, "I was neat, clean, shaved, and sober, and I didn't care who knew it"—beneath the strange paradox of Los Angeles sits an ordinary city after all.

Notes

1. Michael Dear, ed., *From Chicago to L.A.: Making Sense of Urban Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2002), 71-80; Charles Jencks, "Hetero-Architecture and the L.A. School," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 48.

These two volumes, along with Michael Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996) offered the foundational theories of the LA School, though clearly Mike Davis was out in front of the movement. See his *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990). For useful reviews of the LA School approach, see, Michael Willard, "Nuestra Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 56 (September 2004): 807-44 and "Review Essays: Historicizing the City of Angels," *American Historical Review* 105 (December 2000): 1667-1691.

2. Willard, "Nuestra Los Angeles," 812-13.

3 See, for example, William Alexander McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 2000); Clark Davis, "From Oasis to Metropolis: Southern California and the Changing Context of American Leisure," *Pacific Historical Review* 61 (August 1992): 357-86; Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labour, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). All suggest the internal social costs of maintaining this image, and Garcia and Deverell pay particularly close attention to the experiences of specific communities who labour underneath, and in fact help produce, such images, but the construction of the image itself, whether it be a romantic Spanish memory, a leisured good life, or a landscape of citrus groves, remains the focus.

4. This was part of a broad campaign to repatriate thousands of Mexican residents, scapegoats for depression conditions in Los Angeles and the Southwest in general. See Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?* or Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

5. "We are all human." Emphasis from the original, Felipe Vaiz et al. to Mexican consul, 17 October 1916, in Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 67.

6. Proposition 187 was a state ballot initiative that sought to deny "state services, such as education and health care, to undocumented immigrants" and to require "providers of those services – teachers, doctors, nurses – report individuals to the Immigration and Naturalization Services." It passed overwhelmingly in 1994 elections but was later struck down in the courts. Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 29-30 and passim.