

DAVID LAU

Drastic Measures in Los Angeles

Culture workers in the shadow of Hollywood

Bill Mohr, *Hold-Outs: The Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance, 1945–1992*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011, 217 pp. \$39.95

Ignacio López-Calvo, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction: the Cultural Production of Social Anxiety*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011, 264 pp. \$50.00

The culture of Los Angeles—the city’s film, art, and literature, its lived architecture—remains tough to see whole, even after decades of representations as a dream factory with a dark underbelly. The region’s two postwar ages—cold war military industry/real estate, and finance/global trade—ineluctably mark this very typification of the contemporary city. The current *dim-sum-con-salsa* “ethnoburbs”—East LA, Venice, Hollywood, Santa Monica, Long Beach, San Pedro, South Central, Beverly Hills, Palos Verdes, Mid-Wilshire, Koreatown, the Westside, or the older, secluded canyon suburbs in the Valleys or Orange County—have all produced a fructifying bounty of images and texts for culture workers past and present.

In a city hectored by the artificial glare of the film industry, LA’s poets occupy crucial shadows. They imagine a discrepant motion picture in LA, a striking contrast to the tales told by *auteurs* and city boosters. Even the poets’ iconoclastic behavior and outlawry, characteristic of many California lifestyles, cuts against the grain of the other Los Angeles’s literary or cultural history.

In *Hold-Outs: The Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance, 1945–1992*, Bill Mohr, a poet, editor, publisher, and now professor in the Los Angeles poetry scene, has written an account of several of the prominent places and publishing networks in postwar Los Angeles poetry. The book provides a useful corrective to the reductive and discounting tendencies of recent studies of American poetry and literature during the cold war, many of which ignore LA altogether. (Few critics have claimed anything like a renaissance took place there.) Mohr provides the historical context necessary to understand the current flowering of LA poetry, with its notable conceptualist avant-garde.

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an enormously gifted poet of the psychically murky and delirious senses:

this song or segment of song for that flawed song Leland at
26 in 61 tongue out dripping for
balm in the corrupt
land bereft angry hungry weeping
male snake of that time in my dark those pale hard
headlights wove
over my dusty ceiling from
car beneath my window, wide open on selma my
young gay hustlers

Formally turbulent, his my-dark-places, sprawling long poem (the preferred and difficult-to-excerpt form for many aesthetically experimental LA poets) finds an able reader in Mohr, who shows the specificity of Angeleno experience to Hickman's work.

After some astute discussion of work by Hickman and Wanda Coleman in the fourth and wonderfully titled chapter "Left-Handed Blows," the final chapter of the book, "Fault-Line Communities," provides a disappointing conclusion. *Hold-Outs'* growing concentration on core poets connected to Beyond Baroque presents a skewed picture of the larger city scene. Although the book had been moving chronologically toward the present—and indeed Mohr discusses the 1980s multicultural poetry—he concludes by looking back on Charles Bukowski and the Long Beach standup poets epitomized by Gerald Locklin, the Boswell to Bukowski's Johnson. Mohr makes minimal mention of poets like Sesshu Foster or Will Alexander, two of the most original minority poets in recent decades. Names are dropped in great Whitmanic lists, but many are not followed up. Rubén Martínez—whose hybrid poetry and journalism pervades his early 1990s classic *The Other Side*—is mentioned once. Kate Braverman and Amy Gerstler are discussed without quotation from their poems. Victor Valle—whose work as an editor, poet, and journalist Mohr deems worthy of a page-long discussion—is not quoted at all, which is a pity, as his Brechtian poem "Los

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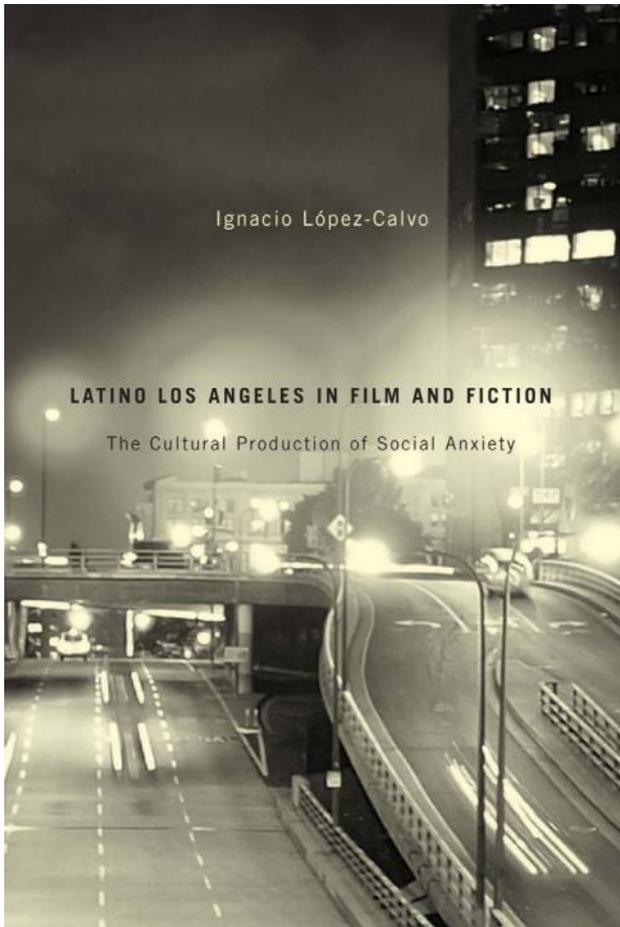
Angeles" is among a handful of laconic attempts to capture the city's history, as defeated radicals in a diverse and progressive era give way to a surplus of self-enriching capitalist planners:

*He erected his fortress over two dead Wobblies
The way a wasp deposits her egg
On its stung moribund host,
And thereafter bequeathed his protégés
Command of the Words.
With these they abducted a river,
Subdivided a desert,
Walled families with velocities.*

And while Mohr's portrait of downtown's Woman's Building and its scene of artists and poets is commendable, there are just a few squeaks about what was the veritable East LA Renaissance—the Chicano one—centered on Self-Help Graphics, whose dynamic cultural organ was the small press magazine *Chismearte* (mentioned twice in passing). Alas, the Latino metropolis hardly registers on the horizon. The limit here is the critic's position as an interested party, with his first-person perspective elevating those poets closest to his scene and press beginning in the 1970s.

By contrast, Ignacio López-Calvo's new book of criticism, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction*, places Chicano and Latino culture under an illuminating spotlight. Closer to the present than Mohr's examination of Cold War LA poetry (which ends with the riots in 1992), and just as critical of industry (this time in the age of neoliberal capital), López-Calvo's book is a superb example of contemporary cultural writing, avant-garde and challenging in its own right. How else to set the record straight about cultural production in Los Angeles, a city long uneasy about its *Mexicanidad*? Sentence by implicitly critical sentence, López-Calvo works out the political implications, the racial and multicultural anxieties, of books by Kate Braverman, Daniel Venegas, Graciela Limón, T.C. Boyle, Luis Rodriguez, Mona Ruiz, and Alberto Fuguet; and of films by Dennis Hopper, Edward James Olmos, Allison Anders, and Hector Galan. (This is not an exhaustive list.) The book represents a *curandero* or folk healer's corrective ceremony against the many forms of Latino LA's exclusion.

López-Calvo's book of interpretations sketches an "oppositional counterhistory," but beneath the prosaic title, he carefully inserts recent films and fictions into a dramatic



historical process shaping the broader Americas—Euro-American encounter with Latino *mestizaje*. Once forgotten and now still marginalized, the Chicano and Latino population here, in criticism, discovers some measure of representational justice. The scene is the present or recent past; the characters—fugitive, resilient, incarcerated, exploited, and indispensable to capital—the many Latino communities in LA.

In his introduction to the book, Roberto Cantú situates López-Calvo within a diverse field of socially minded new Latino criticism. Indeed, this work is on close speaking terms with the textured experience of LA life since the 1980s. The stories of fiction writers, urban theorists, and filmmakers set up a sequence of explorations of the city's Latino history. It takes an agonizing intensity, especially in criticism, to represent the Chicano and Latino community—beset by a series of calamities, including displacement from Chavez ravine for Dodger Stadium's construction, and

displacement from parts of the old eastside for construction of enormous freeway interchanges, as well as the carnage that concluded the Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War.

The works in the two media he considers capture the historical actuality of Latino life in the city. His introduction asks why “Euro-Americans responded to Latino immigration by turning their backs on public schools, living in gated communities, demanding the secession of the San Fernando Valley.” His analyses—terse, systematic, poignant—criticize that life of servitude and marginalization. Across three capacious and crosscutting chapters—on environmental racism, on the marginalization of Latino youth, and on gender and national anxiety—López-Calvo probes the “racial guilt” Euro-Americans like T.C. Boyle or Kate Braverman display in their novels’ representation of marginalized social groups. Recent films like 1987’s *Colors* or 2006’s *Crash* (I would add 1997’s *Volcano* and 2009’s *2012*), the results of the famous LA-theme of apocalyptic showdown, also stem, so López-Calvo argues, from “racial anxiety.” Latino authors alternatively explore the “double consciousness” of an inferiority complex, famously captured in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, a novel inspired by the events surrounding the Chicano Moratorium. The critic emerges throughout as the temperature taker of the warming region’s political uneasiness.

With poets and writers active in the city today experimenting across a variety of forms, Los Angeles is now a quite crowded testing ground for new literature. Ambitious long poems, still something of a rule in LA, have opened terrain for a new practice of conceptual poetry (Vanessa Place comes to mind). Ambitions for Left critics too are building on the work of formidable predecessors like Victor Valle and Mike Davis. López-Calvo’s particular mode of following narrative incident to historical implication turns back the idea that this labyrinthine and intimidating city, this continuous conurbation, is just too much to grasp, let alone project into a vision of the coming years. With a subchapter heading like “The LAPD Is Just Another Gang,” this critic is asking us to take sides, even as the depictions of the barrio shift between comedy (as in Cheech Marin’s *Born in East L.A.*), tragedy (as with the History Channel’s ominously titled series *Gangland*), and transnational solidarity (as in Graciela Limón’s story of a journey to Chiapas in *Erased Faces*). As this new century now fans out before this microstate and laboratory

of globalization, the various social levels of this world city, the geographical pivot of East Asian trade's access to the US heartland, converge not just in the anxious image of omnipresent disaster (natural or otherwise), nor in a tense, interethnic foment of class inequality. This epicenter of social transformations in the United States may offer our century some new examples of coordinated worker mobilizations in an age of drift and economic stagnation. As the global economic crisis enters a new phase, with social struggles simmering on a planetary scale, the Los Angeles

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immigrant working class will sooner or later be precipitated into *la lucha*. For the region's culture workers, the truth of this as yet unknown world is structured like a struggle for a new fiction. **B**