

## **UC Merced**

### **TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World**

#### **Title**

López-Calvo, Ignacio, Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. Print. 239 pages.

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9338r3g5>

#### **Journal**

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 1(3)

#### **ISSN**

2154-1353

#### **Author**

Birns, Nicholas

#### **Publication Date**

2012

#### **DOI**

10.5070/T413012889

#### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2012 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

**López-Calvo, Ignacio, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. Print. 239 pages.**

---

NICHOLAS BIRNS  
EUGENE LANG COLLEGE, THE NEW SCHOOL

López-Calvo has written several excellent studies of diasporic literatures within Latin America such as *Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture* (008) and *Written in Exile: Chilean Fiction from 1973-Present* (2001). Here, he turns to the literature of and about the Latino/a population of the greater Los Angeles area. As in his other books, López-Calvo's methodology, while focusing on readings of literary texts, branches out to many cultural and sociological aspects of the bodies of work surveyed, as well as focusing on underlying historical currents. He is not only an advocate, one with emancipatory intent, but also a scholar who will not cut intellectual corners in proceeding to that goal. The diligence, comprehensiveness, interpretive zest, and argumentative stamina so much in evidence in this critic's previous work are in ample evidence here.

The "of and about" in terms of the Latino subject is important; López-Calvo analyzes not just works by Latino authors but looks at novels by Kate Braverman, Danny Santiago, and T. Coraghessan Boyle and a film by Allison Anders, all European-American artists who undertook more or less seriously to represent the Latino population as a major signifier in their Los Angeles-set works. Though López-Calvo points out stereotypical aspects of some of these works, he does not see them as inherently inauthentic because of the origin of their creators; instead using them to show that, even as demographic realities demand Latinos actually be represented in treatments of Los Angeles rather than being marginalized or effaced, the opportunity to take a full view of their culture is often missed. In general, the works by Anglos are seen as insightful but possessing a comfort level with the status quo. Some may be more critically self-aware than others, but there is a gap—though not, López-Calvo indicates, a total one—between them and writers from the barrio who do not possess this sort of mobile social capital. The same is true, in a different way, of Latinos with an exceptional relationship to the region, such as the Chilean Alberto Fuguet, who in his *Las películas de mi vida* (2003) depicts a childhood in the Los Angeles of both film and reality which he evokes as both idyllic and essentially, though not unqualifiedly, admirable. Danny Santiago—an Anglo who wrote about Latinos with a Latino pseudonym, is seen as a bit more of an insider by López-Calvo, who grants that he was "born in Kansas City" (13) but sees his depiction of Latino Los Angeles as basically done from an internal rather than external perspective. Identity does not have to be purely biological or linguistic; but it does have to emanate from a felt cultural affinity.

The writers from outside, however well intentioned, are trapped within certain paradigms. López-Calvo points out the limiting effects of these paradigms in his analysis of

Anders's film *Ma vida loca* (1993). This movie depicts a girl gang in East L. A. in a more or less realistic manner in terms of the clothing styles and linguistic and behavioral traits of the gang members but neglects to show how poverty and a lack of other options for social advancement make joining a gang the only possible road for many of the sorts of people represented here. A narrow focus on authenticity prevails over a broader sense of context. Many more of the authors this book studies, such as Héctor Tobar, Helena María Viramontes, and Oscar Zeta Acosta, are far more conscious of this context. But the important aspect of the book is that the critic is doubly aware, and gives both a satisfying overview of what he more or less defined as the Latino LA canon (though inevitably missing some recent works such as Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park* and Tobar's *Barbarian Nurseries*).

Though Anglo Californians are reminded every day of the Latino imprint on the region by virtue of the many Spanish place names still in use, as well as the faux-Spanish architecture so popular in parts of the twentieth century, López-Calvo argues that Latino identity, once nearly invisible, is still shrouded in misconception and paranoia. Racist hysteria about undocumented workers and bilingual education combine with anxiety about the inherent liminality of the US-Mexican border amid the still-persistent aftermath of the invasion and annexation of much of northern Mexico by the US in the 1840s to make the active suppression of Latino discourses a key element in the construction of an Anglo baseline normality. In the opening pages of the book, López-Calvo recounts his first impressions of Los Angeles upon taking a job there in the late 1990s: that the city he actually encountered was very different from the media stereotypes promulgated about it. Similarly López-Calvo finds that, due to the dominant culture, with its xenophobic response to Latino culture, has marginalized it in such a way that Latino/a writers must “negotiate their own interpretation of social space dynamics” (3). What López-Calvo calls “lived experience” (3) cannot simply be transparently presumed, but must be actively asserted and argued. When the dominant powers base their lives upon the assumption that you are invisible, you begin to feel that you are in fact invisible, and so writing against that invisibility becomes a matter of constructing an identity as much as enabling access to upon one already latent. Interestingly, López-Calvo indicates it is not just modern but postmodern stereotypes that are the problem; the universally visible idea of a glitzy, simulacral LA as late-capitalist pseudo-paradise also excludes Latinos, even when this paradigm is argued, as in the style of Fredric Jameson, as a critique of neoliberalism.

The literature of Latino Los Angeles, though, also challenges other stereotypes. These include stereotypes within Latino literature, clustering around writers such as Rudolfo Anaya that authentic Latino identities are not to be found in the city. This assumption was, in a way, another avatar of the modernist organicism visible in the agrarianism of a group like the US New Critics, whose tightly-knit, texture-centered aesthetics are not too far away from the formal underpinnings of a novel like *Bless Me, Ultima*, or for that matter Villarreal's *Pocho*, which López-Calvo also briefly mentions. In López-Calvo's introduction, he traces the

slow recognition that Latino identity in Los Angeles is no longer a matter of referents to a Spanish and Mexican past, but that present-day Latinos deserve “the right of representation” (14) as a crucial component of the present-day community.

López-Calvo’s first chapter addresses the topic of “environmental racism” and the representation of nature. The reader might expect a predominantly ecocritical outlook, and indeed López-Calvo provides an ingenious and unexpected reading of John Rechy—usually analyzed in queer and ethnic contexts—for his use of “urban vegetation” (68) as a trope for the survival of personal and collective entities within a city environment often predicated, both literally and symbolically, against their survival. In describing how plants—both houseplants and those growing naturally outside—reflect social imaginaries, López-Calvo combines the art of close reading with a resourceful mode of analysis that uses elements at hand but usually neglected to construct a new, stimulating frame for the reading of Rechy’s fiction. But environmental racism encompasses more than just an ecocritical agenda. López-Calvo discusses how representations of the barrio in themselves have a constraining effect, as assumptions about poverty and despair are shackling in their constraint of the freedom and imagination to which all people are entitled. Writers like Rechy, in negotiating a way out of this environmentally racist cul-de-sac, provide a way out that is far from cultural boosterism but resonates at a more profound level.

López-Calvo’s second chapter addresses the role of youth in Latino Los Angeles. Ranging skillfully over a panoply of sources—including the science fiction and mainstream fiction of Alejandro Morales—the critic explores how what should be a season of promise and growth is too often blighted by the structural animosities that produce “degradation” and “victimization” (106). Though not all representations are negative—López-Calvo notes, and does not overly castigate, inspirational, feel-good movies about achievement again the adds such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988)—any attempt at realism must acknowledge issues such as gang warfare and police brutality. The role of the police here, indeed, evokes the thought of Foucault, as a character in Morales’s novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) accuses the police of preventing “mobility among Latinos” (115) for the sake of preserving their own jobs. If Latinos are not seen as being dangerous and criminal, the police are in danger of being laid off. Racism thus becomes a coefficient of a civil-service jobs-protection agenda; the demands of bureaucracy and self-perpetuation, more than overt ideologies, demand the oppressive level of policing in urban neighborhoods that almost reflexively generates gangs as antagonists. An entire network of social distress is maintained as if on life-support, for the good of a few Sacramento lobbyists and paper-pushers. Like many resistance movements, gangs purchase autonomy and effective force at the expense of internal authoritarianism, violence, and, as López-Calvo shows, a pathological treatment of women and sexuality. This is a depressing chapter, but López-Calvo has had the moral courage to name the problems.

The third chapter, “Gendered and Nationalistic Anxieties,” is the most compelling of the book. Its center is the theme of girl gangs, which at once emulate the solidarity and brio of their male-dominated counterparts but also have different values, being less overtly

violent and more directed towards symbolic economies of pride and togetherness. Again, though, the dynamic of female gangs versus the male gangs echoes the dynamic of the gangs versus the police: to resist effectively one must also emulate the oppressor, including elements that are authoritarian or militaristic. This dilemma is a concrete version of the abstract propeller with de-universalization. De-universalization can only occur through the mechanisms of universality, in other words with the tools, or at least the grammar, of the oppressor. López-Calvo also points out that female gangs, as represented in Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* (1998), are slightly more bourgeois than their male counterparts, desiring "money, power, and respect" (142). "Live fast, die young, bad girls do it well," the refrain of the hip-hop artist M. I. A.'s song "Bad Girls," could well apply here, where peril and a kind of collective assertiveness go hand in hand. Though hip-hop culture in general has an entrepreneurial and surprisingly bourgeois-inspirational side, López-Calvo seems to indicate the male gangs strive more for dominance and social control, the female for more symbolic and inevitably, monetary forms of capital.

The chapter proceeds from Latina gangs' disturbance of both masculine and racial economies to a general discussion of transnationalism. López-Calvo uses this term slightly differently than the customary beyond national boundaries usage, pointing out that in the Latino/a context, "nationalism" could also apply to "the nationalism of the Chicano movement of the 1960s" (150). Whereas a post- or transnationalism with respect to Chicano liberationism might be expected to include assimilationist and hybrid rhetoric, López-Calvo goes further afield to discuss the dialogue between Latino activists and the Zapatista movement in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. When US Latino/a activists approached the Zapatistas in search of transnational solidarity, the Zapatistas politely told them that their best contribution to a struggle in such conditions so different from their own would be to go back to the barrio and wage an analogous sort of "warfare" there. Without overly idealizing either the Zapatistas or the concrete yield of these transnational connections, López-Calvo delineates how such lines of convergence can lead to a de-barrioization, what López-Calvo, using W. E. B. Du Bois's famous term, styles "double consciousness" (171) that goes beyond constraining stereotypes and identities without seeking absorption in some sort of overarching, abstract norm.

This chapter is followed by a brief but eloquent and sagacious conclusion where López-Calvo reasserts the need to look beyond Hollywood and Beverly Hills to "the daily life of the metropolis that has become a locus of interaction among working-class minority groups" (175). The "social anxiety" López-Calvo describes throughout is both that faced by Latinos themselves as the object of prejudice and economic exploitation and the paranoia felt by Anglophone whites at the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity of a country many of them once assumed were "theirs." The conclusion summarizes the need for mainstream US culture to come to terms with realities that are now not just demographic but cultural as well.

This comprehensive book has almost anything one could ask of it, including an astonishingly wide range of reference that encompasses not just mainstream fiction and film

but detective stories science fiction, memories and writing from feminist and queer communities. There are two factors, though, looming on the horizon, which this book necessarily does not completely consider. López-Calvo speaks of the "five counties of the Los Angeles metropolitan area" by which he means Los Angeles itself, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino. Yet much of the central and eastern parts of the two latter (geographically massive counties are at once outside the standard Los Angeles metropolitan area yet have accommodated population inflows from that area and more and more are coming to resemble it demographically, including a substantial Latino population; of course, southern Riverside County (the Coachella Valley and exurbs like Temecula whose growth zoomed in the 1990s and 2000s) has had a substantial Latino migrant population, in addition to California's present at the time of US annexation and indigenous peoples influenced by Spanish culture, for a long time. With these areas painfully impacted by the subprime mortgage crisis and the national recession, the "social anxiety" that López-Calvo excavates is likely to produce a set of literary works with altered environmental settings, both geographical and socio-economic. Mike Davis supplies a blurb for this book, and is cited several times within it; it could be argued that Davis's hometown of Fontana is moving ever closer to being the epicenter of the social turmoil in the greater Los Angeles region. Notably, even within Los Angeles County itself, Huntington Park, not any neighborhood within LA or East Los Angeles city limits per se, is now perhaps the vital core of the Latino community). Certainly, the Latino population in the region is growing more suburban and exurban. The Chilean Fuguet's representation of life in Encino, "against the grain" (34) when he wrote it, may end up being prophetic. In addition, in recent years the Central American Diaspora has been the principal driver of Latino immigration to Los Angeles. López-Calvo gives a detailed analysis of the early work of the Guatemalan Tovar, but, were this subject to be revisited in ten years, writers of Central American origin would surely play a larger role. These limitations, though, are the inevitable byproduct of the up-to-the-minute, vitally temporary feel of *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction*, which takes a heterogeneous body of material and shapes it into a coherent field. López-Calvo provides the best overview so far of a subject whose demographic and cultural urgency is undeniable.