Reviews
The Impeachment of Mike Davis

Ruben Martinez

Mike Davis, L.A.'s socialist-noir prophet, has taken an intellectual pummeling in recent months. The 1998 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship recipient and author of two seminal texts on L.A.'s literary and literal destruction (City of Quartz, Ecology of Disaster) has been skewered in the pages of several journals, including Salon and L.A.'s "alternative" weekly, the New Times. But the attack on the City of Angels' dark messenger stepped into high gear in early 1999 when the Los Angeles Times weighed in with not one but two caustic A-1 stories ("Apocalyptic Look at L.A. Sparks Literary Fistfight," January 6; "Seer of L.A. or Blinded by Its Light?" April 13). I cannot recall another writer receiving this two-fisted attempt at a literary knockout from the Los Angeles Times—and on the front page, no less! Just what did Davis, until recently a marginal lefty cult figure, do to deserve this wrath?

Like President Bill Clinton's fiercest enemies on Capitol Hill, Davis's critics insist that the issue is not about essence (in Clinton's case, sex; in Davis's, his unabashedly socialist critique of L.A.'s race-and-class divisions). Instead, they have combed through his heavily footnoted work and found that he misspelled former California Governor George Deukmejian's name. Worse yet, they say, he bends facts to fit his apocalyptic vision of L.A. Worst of all, they accuse, he fabricates entire anecdotes and interviews. Ironically, a relatively friendly article written about Davis and his work poured most of the fuel on this fire. Lewis MacAdams, writing for the L.A. Weekly, recalled Davis inventing an interview with MacAdams for Davis's first major journalistic piece, an environmental essay about the Los Angeles River (also published by the L.A. Weekly). While MacAdams was shocked when Davis showed him the
article prepublication, he did not ask Davis to retract. Wrote MacAdams in his own article in the *L.A. Weekly*, "The words he put in my mouth made me sound like I knew a lot more about the Los Angeles River than I actually did. I told him to go ahead with the piece just the way it was."

I know Mike Davis well, although we haven't spoken in several years. He never forgave me for writing a post-L.A. riot piece that poked fun at the ad-hoc committee of conspiracy theorists and assorted leftist loonies that he convoked to channel the energy of the "rebellion" in a "revolutionary" way. (Back then he would often address his friends as "comrades.") Before our break, we co-authored one major piece on the Catholic Church for the *LA Weekly* and I later served, on occasion, as his editor there. I myself witnessed some of the shenanigans that his critics today accuse him of. I clearly remember the fact-checking department having a hell of a time confirming the who-why-what-when-where of his dispatches.

Davis's biggest contradiction is that he is a Marxist—and so, according to his own ideological gods, must have a scientific, material basis for his work—but also a writer. A writer with a vision. And his passion for his subjects has taken him beyond the realm of objectivity. But since objectivity doesn't exist in our realm of the universe, I can forgive him most of his transgressions. Because, in the end, this flap is not about misspelled names and fact twisting. This is no Mike Barnicle or Stephen Glass incident. It is about how L.A. is intellectually represented, and who gets to do the representing. And it is about how a small group of influential boosters with ties to business and political elites is attempting exactly what Henry Hyde and company were doing on Capitol Hill. They are trying to impeach L.A.'s most important intellectual, not because of his methods but because of his message.

Nora Zamichow's piece in the *Los Angeles Times* is typical of the slew of anti-Davis stories. Being a paper of record, the *Los Angeles Times* presents the story as news, in classic "objective" fashion. It leads with the old school pro-and-con formula of mainstream journalism. "Is [Ecology of Fear] 'indispensable to any understanding of Los Angeles?' Or is [it] an L.A.-hating perversion?" Note that, with this opening, Davis's work must be one or the other. It is either good or bad. And the structure of the rest of the story clearly makes the case that it is bad. Zamichow quotes no less than nine "experts" about Davis' work. Of the nine, seven are critical
of Davis. His two defenders (including former *L. A. Weekly* staffer R. J. Smith) are quoted practically back to back in the upper third of the story. For the remainder, Davis is left to answer his critics one on one, putting the lie to the headline ("Apocalyptic Look at L.A. Sparks Literary Fistfight") and the deck ("Supporters praise 'Ecology of Fear' as brave. Others condemn author's research and accuracy"). If Zamichow's piece had really been about a "literary fistfight," surely she would have concentrated on a back-and-forth between Davis's critics and supporters. The published attack would have been more honestly titled "California Boosters Attack L.A.'s Prophet of Doom."

The identity of the critics further defines the ideological bent of the piece. Kevin Starr is state librarian and a professor at the University of Southern California (USC) who teaches "policy, planning and development." Joel Kotkin is a senior fellow at the Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy. Gregory Rodriguez is a senior fellow with the New America Foundation. All three just happen to be regular contributors to the *Los Angeles Times* "opinion" pages. Professors Bryce Nelson and Philip Ethington are also professors at USC. In other words, all belong to institutions that have a vested interest in maintaining a positive image of Los Angeles. Among the *Los Angeles Times*, USC, and Pepperdine, real estate interests tally in the billions of dollars. Starr, Kotkin, Rodriguez, and Nelson, unabashed boosters all, blast Davis for his doomsday visions of an L.A. rent by seething race and class tensions and beset by apocalyptic environmental hazards. Ethington is brought in merely to discredit a Davis faulty footnote.

But these intellectuals do exactly what Mike Davis does, what we all do. If we dig deep enough into the footnotes of their dissertations and essays and books, we'll find exaggerations. We'll find fanciful interpretation. We'll find spin. Maybe we'll even find a fabrication or two. I, for one, have too many other things to do than to sit in a library at USC and research these fuckers. For those of you who need "facts" and "objectivity," go on and do it. If I were the publisher of *Hustler*, I'd offer a handsome sum of money for someone to do the dirty work.

Davis's biggest defense is that he comes from the L.A. that he writes about. While he is a voracious reader and intense library researcher, it is his background as a working-class kid in Fontana and the desert community of Bostonia, his years driving a truck, and his years hanging on the streets that gives
him the authority to write what he writes. Sure, he’s got a nice house in Pasadena, but in the years that I saw Davis in action, he was more often in the barrio than in the ‘burb.

And my biggest criticism of his detractors, the boosters, is that they don’t know this L.A. They don’t hang in the barrio. They don’t research the homeless. They don’t interview street vendors or day laborers or transvestite prostitutes or gang kids and other small- or big-time hoodlums who are trying to emulate, in the only way they can, Bill Gates. I haven’t seen them driving trucks lately, though I bet they regularly eat at the Pacific Dining Car along with the rest of the city’s elite. I haven’t seen them checking up on what’s happening to the white trash families of the Mojave desert now that welfare is dead or trying to get to the bottom of skinhead rage. Probably, they are just praying that the dark underbelly of L.A.—which has always been here, and will be well into the next millennium, and, I suspect, forever (if it didn’t exist, L.A. wouldn’t be L.A.)—stays hidden and doesn’t sully their sunny vision of a prosperous World City strategically placed on the Pacific Rim. Davis is absolutely right. There’s a class war going on here, and right before our very eyes: Between upper-crust, pedigreed academicians and think-tankers, and a guy who never finished his doctoral dissertation and writes about marginals whose mention causes real estate values to swoon.

The other L.A. is real, and it is the city that Mike Davis represents in his work. He cares more about tenement families in Pico-Union than Malibu homeowners, which is insulting, of course, to people who live in Malibu and places like it. I am reminded of the local news anchor who, during the 1992 L.A. riots, droned about the images of destruction in the ghetto but shrieked when it appeared that the Hollywood power lunch den of choice, Musso & Frank’s, was going up in flames. The boosters don’t care about the other L.A.

No other high-profile intellectual represents the other L.A. This is a city that has never gotten its fair representation, in politics, in the economy, or in the media. It is a dangerous city, a heroic city, a place where people struggle against the odds, and where the popular cultures that eventually are co-opted by the entertainment industry are created. It is the city that makes L.A. L.A. And because Mike Davis now has the world’s ear, and is introducing the academic and media mainstream to this L.A., the boosters won’t forgive him for it.
This other L.A. comprises hundreds of square miles and millions of people. And what's the story here? That the economic recovery has helped many people and left many others out in the cold. That rampant gentrification is pricing working families out of their neighborhoods. Yeah, there's low unemployment, but there are also high employment rates in dead-end, service-sector jobs with poor benefits. There are still a hell of a lot of sweatshops in L.A. Oh, and then there's hundreds of thousands of illegals out there blowing leaves around, stuck in economic and social and political limbo. Hey, the economy's purring, so why rain on the parade?

Let's take a closer look at a few members of the lynch gang, the cabal that has stooped to the most disingenuous and even grossly personal attacks on Davis. It's high time they got a dose of their own medicine.

Joel Kotkin cannot factor the grit of L.A. into his work because if he did, the business clients he does consulting for would relocate to Arizona. Kotkin also has an abiding fear of blacks and browns. In *Tribes*, his tome on race and economy in the global era, African Americans and Latinos are practically nonexistent, and this, for an intellectual who claims to know L.A. better than Davis does, is incomprehensible. But it is not surprising. A few years ago, Kotkin told me point-blank that he thought African-Americans just don't have a place in the new economy. By his demeanor, I understood that he wasn't unhappy about the prospect. I do have some respect for Kotkin—he's a political and business wheeler-and-dealer with chutzpah. But a careful academician? An honest intellectual? Give me a break. He fancifully interprets and spins with the best of them.

Gregory Rodriguez, who just happens to be a Kotkin mentee, is the resident reactionary Latino in the *Los Angeles Times* opinion pages (especially since Richard Rodriguez has leaned left in recent years with his unflinching defense of Mexican immigrants). Greg grew up middle class and is obsessed with Hispanic success stories—he published a veritable manifesto on the “growing Latino middle class” in the form of a Pepperdine-funded study fawned over in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*, precisely because it fit the rosy image of the new, balmy, yuppie, post-riot City of Angels. Ironically, I initially defended Greg's thesis in Chicano intellectual circles. I saw nothing wrong with his noting what was obvious—that many hard-working Latinos had made some money in recent
years and improved their living conditions. I stopped defend- 
ing him when he started attacking those of us who remain 
committed to drawing attention to the enduring problems in 
our community. Apparently, it never occurred to Greg that 
concurrently we can celebrate our gains and fight the injus-
tice that remains. In the context of the Davis debate, Greg has 
placed himself even further to the right of the activist and aca-
demic Left. He is now solidly among the boosters. Which is 
probably why the Los Angeles Times has practically christened 
him Latino Spokesperson in its Opinion-Editorial pages.

And Kevin Starr—the one Davis detractor I have a soft spot 
for, mostly because his huge jowls and bellowing voice remind 
me of a circus barker—has carved out his professional domain 
by being rewarded handsomely for telling pleasantries to the 
World War II-generation elites who want to die believing Cali-
ifornia is still more or less the way it was portrayed in Ramona.

What Angel City do our boosters live in? It's still 
Chinatown, Jake. Just look at the MTA.

One thing Mike Davis cannot be accused of: He is no arm-
chair revolutionary, although his critics are armchair reaction-
aries of the first order. In the great tradition of impassioned 
historian-writers that came before him—he especially follows 
in the footsteps of Carey McWilliams, who also preferred the 
company of the marginal instead of the elites—Mike creates 
work that takes literary license on occasion. Thing is, his vi-
sion of L.A. rings true where he writes from—the L.A. where 
the future looks less like a golden dream than a golden calf. 
And that's a kind of authenticity the boosters will never have.
Rubén Martínez, author and performer, is an associate editor at Pacific News Service and visiting lecturer in literature at Claremont McKenna College. His new book on "postborder culture" will appear on Metropolitan/Holt next year.
**Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol.** By Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and Felicia Rice. (Santa Cruz, CA: Moving Parts Press, 1998. 60 pp.)

My America is a continent (not a country) which is not described by the outlines on any of the standard maps.

—Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Codex Espangliensis*

Standard maps—those which position national identity, cultural allegiance and the laws of wealth and poverty in the Americas of the late twentieth century—are among the several authoritative discourses to come under scrutiny in the *Codex Espangliensis*, a collaborative book project by artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and printer Felicia Rice. Incorporating the textual residue of Gómez-Peña’s spoken-word performance, and the visual play of Chagoya’s rhetorically sophisticated collages in the skillful montage of Rice, the *Codex Espangliensis* tells of colonial conquest, cultural transformation, and economic interdependence in the Americas from “Columbus to the Border Patrol.” In tales that unfold in poetic spanglish and an elaborate pictography, the artists reveal history as anything but a coherent, linear narrative that leads step by step to the inevitable present. Instead, they offer an unfinished, catalectic, text in which history must be read forward and backward, in fragments and in the movement of recurrence, in the changes in language that allow systems of power to remain unchanged—in short, as history itself tends to unfold.

Inspired by the pre-Hispanic codices that escaped immolation during colonial invasions, the artists’ book is a metaphorical recuperation of this textual heritage and, at the same time, a reminder of what has been lost or transformed in the fusion of European and indigenous cultural contact. Printed in a large rectangular format on a thick *amatl* (or, in Spanish, *amate*), paper made from a fibrous bark, the book’s richly
textured surface and substantial weight have the feel of the original. This sensation is enhanced when opening the book to reveal pages bound in accordion folds that expand to over thirty feet. In fact, the pre-Hispanic codices often exceeded this length, and it is believed they were read either by unrolling the pages on a flat surface, such as soft grass, or by mounting them on a wall for viewing. The *Codex Espangliensis* creates a monumental textual space for the reader, who navigates its length page by page or as one continuous, extended frieze. The artists also chose to honor the codices tradition of reading from right to left by having the book open on the left side, though each individual panel of text reads from left to right. Registered in this ghostly yet material manner, the problem of bicultural literacy becomes a question of operating across several distinct systems of signs that reshape familiar, even corporeal, practices of reading. Such details also signal that, despite *Codex Espangliensis*’s many historical references, it is not conceived as a facsimile. The work transforms this traditional model to suit the contemporary concerns of Gómez-Peña and Chagoya who introduce in its pages a critical view of the history of the Americas and, through a new form of writing history, imply a new form of reading history as well.

Both Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Enrique Chagoya were born in Mexico, attended university there and emigrated to the United States in the late 1970s. Parallels can be found in their professional development as well, as each formed an intimate, if complex, relation to the Chicano art movement of the time: Chagoya was director of Galería de la Raza, Gómez-Peña was a founding member of the Border Arts Workshop. As Mexicans, however, they were not really Chicanos, as U. S. residents they were not really Mexican, and as former Mexicans, there were not really “American” in the hegemonic meaning of the term in the United States. Unsurprising, then, that the work of each reveals the complexity of relationships between cultures that are sometimes in conflict and sometimes in collusion; that each develops a strategy of reading across the real and artificial borders erected by institutions. Whether in the mixing of language, accents, slang, poetry, and prose in Gómez-Peña’s performance or in the juxtapositions of images from popular culture, art, and mass media in Chagoya’s paintings, drawings, and collage, the outcome is a rich détournement. Irreverent to the last, both artists employ iconic figures and persistent stereotypes to overturn
the fantasies of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and historical amnesia that cloud international relations in the present.

Their sensibilities are integrated in the *Codex Espangliensis*, where text and image are presented neither as illustrations nor annotations but as two distinct discourses in dialog. Excerpts from Gómez-Peña’s “Free Trade Art” (1995) and “Chianost: Radio Nuevo Orden” (1991) enliven Chagoya’s already provocative overlays of colonial era etchings, nineteenth-century political cartoons, and high-tech science fiction diagrams, linking contemporary border politics and xenophobia with a much longer history of economic and ideological inequalities. Action figures and cartoon icons stand in for the cultural imperialism perpetuated in commercial as well as political realms. Superman, Mickey Mouse, and Wonder Woman join in a visual history of political oppression and exploitation that is both violent and seductive. From such details, the multiple voices in the text emerge as a chorus—someone has blood on his hands.

Indeed the primary visual trope that flows in black and scarlet throughout the flawlessly printed text is that of blood. From the red fingerprints that mark the pages, to the stained bodies of a slaughtered indigenous population, to the hands, fists, and footprints of the cartoon superheroes, to the body of Christ (serving as an ambivalent, iconic trope of colonization and Catholic conversion on the one hand, and as an image of suffering and martyrdom on the other). Blood adorns even the pre-Hispanic images of indigenous populations in conflict, exaggerating the European myths of violence that continue to plague contemporary interpretations of these early civilizations. Less concerned with historical accuracy than with a poetics of the imaginary, Gómez-Peña and Chagoya take artists’ liberty with many sacred sign systems—even those of the academy and of art history itself. Their goal, however, is neither iconoclasm in any traditional sense nor a simple polemical gesture. Rather, their goal is an historical narrative of cycles of violence that return in a repetitive and overlapping pattern to structure contemporary human relations. An eternal recurrence of the same, here becomes history told in a synchronic mode. Colonialisms of the body, of geography, and of culture appear side by side, deep scars on the skin of the paper.

Included on a single page, for example, is a Posada woodcut depicting a priest pointing toward the heavens while frightened parishioners gape or turn away in horror. Hovering above is not God, but a missile drawn in recent science fiction comic
book style. Rather than the metaphysical wrath of the divine, the real danger lies in a military or technological assault on the liberty of an unsuspecting population, Chagoya's substitution suggests. The text announces "Many Burning Questions Remain" and Gómez-Peña ruminations follow on the future relationship of the United States to Mexico after the advent of NAFTA, positing a new image of "America" not limited to the United States. He writes, "In my America, 'West' and 'North' are mere nostalgic abstractions—the South and East have slipped into their mythical space. Quebec seems closer to Latin America than its Anglophone twin." He rewrites traditional geography to map the cultural parallels that exist beyond its scope. On the other side of Gómez-Peña's text, a colonial era engraving attributed to Théodore de Bry depicts the painful torture and murder of an indigenous population while Mickey Mouse smiles gaily from the margin. National power and "super" power are also conflated in the action hero Spiderman who sports the head of George Washington and oversees the historical scene of destruction from above. In the context of this juxtaposition, Gómez-Peña's text is ominous: "Whether we like it or not, a new era has begun, and a new economic and cultural topography has been designed for us." Text and image make clear that having one's economic and geographical topography designed by powers beyond one's control is precisely the experience of the oppressed populations in the Americas. The Codex Espangliensis suggests that the results of this topographical project are just as brutal today as in the past, but the methods have taken on a new, commercial, and technological form.

In his conclusion to The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha remarks that:

The power of the postcolonial translation of modernity rests in its performative, deformativestructure that does not simply revalue the contents of a cultural tradition, or transpose values 'cross-culturally.' The cultural inheritance of slavery or colonialism is brought before modernity not to resolve its historic differences into a new totality, nor to forego its traditions. It is to introduce another locus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, 'inappropriate' enunciative site. . . .
Without such a reinscription of the sign itself—without a transformation of the site of enunciation—there is the danger that the mimetic contents of a discourse will conceal the fact that the hegemonic structures of power are maintained in a position of authority through a shift in vocabulary in the position of authority. (1994, 241–42)

The work of Gómez-Peña and Chagoya warns of such a “shift in vocabulary” from a geographical imperialism to a cultural imperialism, from George Washington to Mickey Mouse, “from Columbus to the Border Patrol,” a shift that maintains structures of power through a disguised language of diplomacy, popular culture, and advertising. As what might be called a postcolonial translation of modernity, the *Codex Espangliensis* can be read as a new locus of inscription, an “inappropriate” enunciative site intended to introduce a critical model of historical discourse that includes an inscription of the present. The work also suggests that, insofar as “hybridity” can be applied to the enunciative element of a work, it can and must also be applied to strategies of reading such a work. If texts are always somehow produced by those who read them, readers are also always produced by the texts that are read. Perhaps the most significant effect of the *Codex Espangliensis* as a contemporary work of art is its conception of a new “American” reader.

Jennifer González

*University of California at Santa Cruz*
Jennifer Gonzalez, assistant professor of art history at University of California at Santa Cruz, has written about Chicano/a photography in From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography and has contributed essays to numerous journals including World Art, Frieze, Diacritics, and Inscriptions and several anthologies including With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture.