

A Work of Love and of Protest: Leo Politi Remembers Bunker Hill
By Jennifer Escobar

“I told him that the pencil was a great tool because with it one can draw beautiful pictures, design fantastic cities, and write words that can move the hearts of men.”

Leo Politi, *The Poinsettia* (1967)

An Angeleno and award-winning children’s book author and illustrator, Leo Politi (1908—1996) spent much of his career depicting the people and spaces that he encountered. Awarded the Caldecott with *Song of the Swallows* (1950) and the Caldecott Honor with *Juanita* (1949) and *Pedro, The Angel of Olvera Street* (1947), Politi depicted stories that were rooted in locality rather than universality; his passion for using sketching as a means of remembering complemented his desire to tell the tales of communities that were being erased and transformed before his eyes.

Throughout his children’s books, neighborhoods around and within L.A.’s public spaces remained central, and Politi often focused on children as a way to highlight a community. In *Pedro, the Angel of Olvera Street*, he dedicates the book to “the children of Olvera Street;” the young child Pedro is chosen to lead La Posada and with his experience the reader learns the background, reasons, and language associated with this tradition. The focus of *Moy Moy* (1960), the title character, a young Chinese American girl who lives on Chanking Street, experiences Chinese New Year. Like his other works, the story highlights translation of key phrases and words, like “Nee how mah?” for “How are you?,” which bridges rather than divides the different ways of identifying through language.

Respect for history and people also emerge in Politi’s work; an older generation imparts history and tradition to the title character thereby balancing past and present. In *Pedro*, the grandfather notes, “How things have changed...Olvera Street was so important then, and now how little and lost it is in the midst of such wide streets and tall buildings! But still it is beautiful.” *Three Stalks of Corn* (1976) shares how Angelica, who “lives with her grandmother in...the ,Barrio de Pico Viejo” [an older district of Pico Rivera], learns about her family’s traditions. When Angelica’s principal asks her grandmother to come to the public school and teach students how to make delicious Mexican food, both Angelica and her grandmother are honored. Older generations, whether of the bodies of people or the historical structures, become the texts that remember and, more importantly, teach the young.

Two of Politi’s works serve as snapshots of his beloved city and express his sadness over its changing. *The Poinsettia* (1967) and *Bunker Hill, Los Angeles...Reminisces of Bygone Days* (1964) are tinged with nostalgia and a longing for important city spaces to be preserved; the works themselves operate as a way to preserve them in time. *The Poinsettia* highlights several spots in Los Angeles—the Watts Towers, the Bradbury Building, Grand Central Market, and Olvera Street, among others; his sadness and frustration with “the ruthless changes in our city” (my emphasis) are more notable as he winds his way through many recognizable city landmarks.

Called “his first book for adults,” *Bunker Hill* features many remarkably illustrated snapshots, panoramas, and details while also providing a brief account of the place and the people. Its front and back inside covers feature an eastern view of Bunker Hill that required Politi “to call on his memory and on his file of earlier sketches to locate the missing structures” in order to fill in the blanks. As *City Terrace* shares, “You forget how it was before,” and some writers have difficulty remembering the past: for Politi, the presence of his sketches provides a way not only to recall but to communicate the importance of individual and collective memories while acknowledging that these images are his imaginaries.

As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions,” and Politi’s depictions indeed parade an array of imagery—visual, auditory, and kinetic. Politi’s panorama of Bunker Hill celebrates the movement within and across several spaces; cars drive every road that marks the grid, a plane flies overhead, and people stroll, shop, sit, stand, wait, run, sweep, wash, sun, and direct in every corner of the city. Among the people while apart from the bustle, Politi observes and sketches the cityscape; find him near Casa Alta.). Reopened recently, Angel’s Flight is positioned in the center, identifying Hill Street; slender palms streak the skyline and emphasize that, yes, we are in L. A. He figures in tools of construction and destruction: in the top right, a crane prepares to raze a structure with a wrecking ball, still in motion mid-air—a subtle reminder of how the city has changed and will continue to do so for several “buildings sketched on the map had long since been removed when Politi did the drawing in mid-summer of 1964.”

The print of *Bunker Hill, Los Angeles* (1968) provides a whimsical view of Politi’s beloved neighborhood. As in his books for children, Politi captures an older generation: across the street, three elderly women chat. The quotidian life manifests as a man lumbers home after a long day of work and another slumbers on a nearby veranda. Greenery fills the frame with brilliant purple and red flowers, shrubs, and palms adorning front yards; rather than compete with the city, the botanical flourishes enhance the urban scene.

The viewer intimately enters the neighborhood through someone’s front yard; the porch, curled cat, and rocker remind the viewer that L.A. is not the chaos that some may depict—people (choose to) live here, too. With Los Angeles often imagined as a place *through* which to move (“No one is *from* L. A., right?”), rocking chairs on every front porch subtly remind the viewers that this is a place for individual respite, too. Nevertheless, the three women move from the privacy of their homes to the public space of the sidewalk, a very subtle move that emphasizes the significance of the street within this space. Only a glimpse of the freeways and skyscrapers peek through the driveway at the far left, reminding us that Bunker Hill is home even in the midst of the city.

L.A. writers often mention the shadows and grays of the cityscape; the shadows come to symbolize the forgotten, the past, a threat, or destruction. Although Politi shares an interest in this palette, he paints with more optimism and a nuanced insight into the dynamic between residences and the metropolis. The painting avoids sharp contrasts between the oft-depicted sterility of the gray city and the more vibrant houses. Instead, the gray colors the streets and homes alike. The residences do not conflict with the street: the gray complements their interdependence and seeks to unify them.

In his conclusion to *Bunker Hill* (1964), Politi shares his purpose in remembering:

Can we really call it progress when it means the extinction of our leading landmarks of known historical, esthetic, and sentimental values?....By destroying all our islands of heritage we are not only erasing the continuity of our city’s history, but above all we are denying our children the precious knowledge of the past which would greatly enrich their lives. In ending I would like to say what little value of this work may have, it has been a work of love and also of protest.

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