

Michelle Martinez  
CLST 384  
Catalogue Essay

## A Mexican LA

By Michelle Martinez

The Southwestern United States was once Spanish territory. That colonial past is a wisp of memory in the city of Los Angeles. It no longer resembles that frontier of haciendas and romantic allusions to Latin passion and forbidden romance. It is a city that simultaneously has no identity and many identities. A city that no longer holds true to its saintly name, as angels are few and far between. A city that has come to be defined in four words: community, bodies, borders, and migration. Words that can define a city, and can define a people that live within it. A people that have evolved within those four words, within a city that evolves it seems, every day. The Mexican community has been in Los Angeles since the beginning, since it was baptized as El pueblo de la Reina de Los Ángeles. The Mexican community continues to be a presence in the city in the now, and into its future.

Community. The Mexican-Angelino community. It is a community that began in the 1840s, stemming from the Treaty of Guadalupe and the annexation of the state of California, and by extension Los Angeles, by the United States. Practically overnight, this Mexican community became American. What did that mean? It meant that the Mexican community was no longer visible, no longer the owners of their land. Instead, the new American settlers that came west in search of a manifest destiny bathed in sun became the new coveted Angelinos. Thus, the focus moved away from the Mexican community already living in Los Angeles, and instead moved toward attracting the right community to populate and settle the city. The pueblo, and later the city, began to be sold to the right sort

of people, elite whites with money, that could give Los Angeles the cache it needed (Klein 2008). Thus, the new booster image, that illusion of Los Angeles glossed prettily over the reality of the Mexican American community that became invisible, lost amidst the palm trees.

Bodies. The bodies of the Mexican Angelino community that have become strong, brown, and ubiquitous as time passes and the city expands, expands beyond the reaches of its Mexican pueblo past. Growing, at the fringes, along the freeways, in the shadows of the duplexes and mansions and below the Hollywood sign. The bodies that cut the grass, that push the stroller, that sell the *naranjas*, that pick the ripest fruit, those bodies that move and move and move. Those bodies that serve the elite that have seized their manifest destiny and turned it into a Los Angeles dream of sun, fun, and a condominium in Malibu. No Mexican-Angelinos allowed. Unless they come in through the back doors, the buses silent and unseen. Always remembering that they are invisible, *other*. But the bodies of the Mexican-Angelino community know that they were here first. That the city is built and run on their physical efforts, that it moves because of their 'invisible' bodies. That if their bodies truly disappeared back into the ether, back to their supposed homeland, that the city would be left empty. Empty of the bodies it stands on, that its communities are formed from, the bodies that protest, and the bodies that make the best Mexican food outside of Mexico. Those bodies that add character, strength and flavor to the sprawling metropolis that calls itself Los Angeles.

Borders. Nothing looms more than the sun over the city than the border. The Mexican-Angelino community cannot forget, is not allowed to forget, that Mexico is only a

four-hour drive away. It is one of the biggest fears of the Mexican-Angelino community: the border. That reminder of hardship, endless dunes, panic and far-fetched hope. Would they make it over that border? Would they be caught? Would they succeed? Having once crossed that border, realizing that Los Angeles is full of borders that must be crossed every day. Invisible borders that keep the Mexican-Angelino community fenced in, as if they had never crossed the border at all. The freeways that divide the city, crisscrossing here and there, bypassing the fringes, taking one right over South Central, whizzing by East L.A so that one doesn't have to acknowledge that the fringe exist, that there are homes that come another size than super-sized McMansions. Yet, the Mexican-Angelino community has repossessed those borders, have mastered the crossing of these borders that define the city space. They have marked those borders with murals, with words of defiance: I am here. East LA is written in español, filled with mariachi music, and defiantly Mexican-Angelino. There is also a blurring of borders, as the community grows, and moves beyond those prescribed invisible edges. Where the fusion begins. There is a Mexican restaurant in Koreatown, a quinceañera shop in the valley, and cactus stocked at the local Ralphs. Thus, the invisible borders that sharply divide L.A, divide the Mexican-Angelino community from the city are eradicated so that one can see the colorful homes of the invisible hiding behind the palm trees, even from the freeways.

Migration. It defines the Mexican-Angelino community. It is all anyone ever tries to see. Not from here. Alien. Illegal. Moved from someplace else, willingly or forcefully. Settling someplace new for safety, gain, wealth, fame or the weather. Migrating even within the city, as they moved from suburb to suburb, each time, a little farther away from the center, from the various hearts of the metropolis. What does one keep when moving from

place to place? What does one leave? What does a Mexican-Angelino sacrifice in migration? Whether it is from a little town in nowhere, Mexico, or from East L.A to the Hills? Is one like the birds, with a beacon indicating home? There have been waves of migration from Mexico, each one bigger than the last, and each one more clandestine than the one before. No one in L.A knows how many Mexicans there are, only that each day there are more. Migration is ever constant; ever the contention between the Mexican-Angelinos and those other Angelinos that say enough is enough. Quota filled. But the city of Nuestra Señora, the city of the angels, it expands to hold more and more. The community will build with its own hands more Los Angeles to make room for the compadre. Enough is not enough. The city demands more Spanish, telenovelas, fútbol and picante. It will make room, and if not, the community will just migrate again, farther out, farther in. They are flexible, willing to move but not leave. The city belongs to them, to the invisible, to the community that built it from pueblito to metropolis, a bent back and calloused hands at a time.

## Bibliography

Klein, Norman, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, Verso, London, 2008.