

Latin America

By Jon Wiener

Ricky Martin, Sammy Sosa, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera—something is happening to American popular culture, and in his new book, *Magical Urbanism*, Mike Davis pulls together the startling facts,

Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City
By Mike Davis
Verso
172 pages, \$19

identifies the underlying trends and considers the significance of the Latinization of America. In this short book—172 action-filled pages—Davis brings his characteristic analytical energy, eye for detail and exhaustive research to bear on an important phenomenon that remains mostly unexplored.

We think of Mike Davis as an historian and theorist of Los Angeles and Southern California, but this book shows he has been a fast learner about New York City. There, Latinos became the second-biggest “ethno-racial group” in 1996, surpassing blacks. Davis notes that, although there were “no street celebrations in El Barrio or Quisqueya (Washington Heights) ... it was an epochal event all the same”—the only historical precedents were the ascendancy of the Irish during the 1860s and the black migration that peaked in the 1960s.

Los Angeles is of course central to Davis’ analysis of trends: He points to the astonishing transformation the city has undergone since the early ’60s, when L.A. had the highest percentage of native-born white Protestants of the 10 biggest U.S. cities, to the present when Latinos outnumber Anglos in L.A. County by more than a million. In L.A., Davis has been studying the maps, trying to count the pockets of Latinos in the white landscape. That task is growing increasingly difficult, because, as he writes, a “perceptual figure-ground reversal is imminent”—it won’t be long before the maps show pockets of white settlement (the foothills and the beaches) in a Latino landscape. Indeed Latinos

now outnumber blacks in six of the 10 biggest U.S. cities, including Houston, San Diego, Phoenix and San Antonio. Detroit is the only major city where the Latino population is not growing.

What’s the significance of these changes? Davis begins by noting the lack



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of consensus about how to name the group in question—each generation has had its preferred term, and there is no consensus today that “Latinos” is superior to “Hispanics.” He reminds us that the ’60s conception of “Chicano” included a rejection of the “Mexican-American” identity in favor of a separatist claim to a distinctive origin in southwestern Aztlan—which seems surprisingly

parochial today. Davis concludes that different groups have different issues in this debate—for Mexicans, “the border” is emerging as an organizing concept, while Puerto Ricans recently voted to endorse “none of the above” in a choice between statehood and independence. And of course, the Cubans have almost nothing in common with the Dominicans who arrived in the ’80s.

The most vivid example of Latinization for Davis can be found in the “Siamese twins” of San Diego and Tijuana—the latter of which is now the bigger city. In fact, Tijuana is the fastest growing city in North America, with the single exception of Las Vegas—where a considerable proportion of the growth depends on Latino construction workers, maids and food service workers. Of course, the border is the organizational center of the Tijuana-San Diego complex; Davis argues that it “functions like a dam, creating a reservoir of labor-power on the Mexican side that can be tapped on demand by the secret aqueduct managed by Polleros, iguanas and coyotes”—smugglers of workers. The border, Davis also notes, has quickly become “North America’s toxic sink” as the by-products of factories on the Mexican side are dumped into rivers or released into the air.

If San Diego provides an example of one kind of Latinized city, New York provides the other with a striking variety of immigrant peoples and neighborhoods—21 major Latino neighborhoods in four boroughs, some of which are predominantly Puerto Rican, some Dominican, some South American. But what distinguishes the barrios of Gotham from those of Southern California is that every one of New York’s barrios includes large non-Latino minorities, ranging from blacks to Asians to Russians. Segregated Los Angeles, however, has its own version of multiculturalism: Asian capital is emerging as a crucial employer of Latino labor, as Chinese manufacturers set up plants on both sides of the Pacific Rim—in Taipei, Guangzhou as well as Tijuana and East L.A.

Part of the “magic” in Davis’ title is found in the transformation Latinos have brought to dying urban spaces. The changes are most visible in Watts, where virtually every street has been transformed by Latino homeownership.

Entire neighborhoods and business districts have been revived by the immigrant energy and burgeoning Latino family population—Davis' favorite example is Huntington Park in Southeast Los Angeles County, whose geriatric Main Street has become the festive center of Mexican immigrant life in L.A.

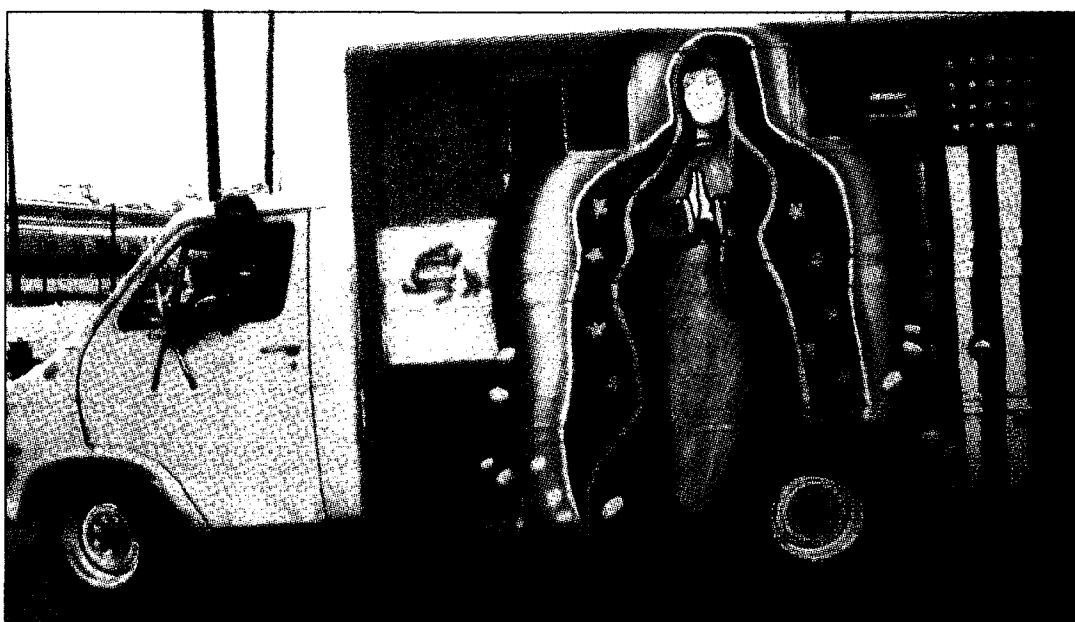
Other little-known features of the phenomenon of Latino immigration are the strong ties that exist between particular immigrant neighborhood communities in U.S. cities and towns in Mexico or Puerto Rico or El Salvador. This of course is nothing new—immigrant communities even in the 19th century maintained strong ties and had considerable back-and-forth movement between towns in the old world—but now there are entire regions of Mexico whose economy depends on

exporting labor to, and getting money back from, East L.A.

Davis ends his vivid and compelling book with a chapter on the Janitors for Justice campaign in Los Angeles, where (shortly after Davis' book was published) the recent victory had national significance. That was the

result not of magic, but of energy and commitment that provide a brilliant example for the rest of the American labor movement. ■

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CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA

Ice cream trucks, or *trocas*, are mobile works of folk art in Los Angeles.

Day-Glo Bacchanalia

By Jason Sholl

Over the past few years, the rave scene has become an unmistakable fixture on the commercial landscape. A recent Volkswagen ad revives The Orb's techno classic "Little Fluffy Clouds," while a Phillips commercial showcases a maverick parrot grooving to Talvin Singh's electronic bhangra. Underground electronic pioneers, such as Moby and The Chemical Brothers, now record bestselling albums and make center-stage appearances at the Grammys. Rave's frenzied dancers, day-glo costumes and trippy light shows surface everywhere from *Beverly Hills 90210* to *Time* magazine.

Many will call Greg Harrison's directorial debut, *Groove*, the final sell-out. *Groove* attempts to bring the rave

subculture—with its giant illegal parties, mass ecstasy use, and pulsing technobacchanalia—to life on the big screen. One can already see the tabloid headlines: "13-year-old nearly dies of ecstasy overdose: 'Groove made me do it.'" But while Sony (who picked up *Groove* for a cool \$1.5 million at Sundance this year) is doubtlessly counting on such hype to ensure a summer blockbuster, Harrison stays clear of the familiar media exaggerations. Unlike much recent fanfare, *Groove* attempts to penetrate beyond rave's eye-catching surfaces. The film attempts to take rave culture seriously on its own terms.

This is a daunting challenge. After all, like its techno soundtrack, a rave is repetitive, gives rise to fragmentary conversation or none at all, and requires

drugs to elicit the full effect. To insiders, a rave represents an oceanic feeling beyond the reach of language. To outsiders, a rave is just senseless noise, drug-induced abandon, a mass hedonistic spectacle for teen-agers. How does a director capture the real experience on film?

Doug Liman's 1998 film *Go* demonstrated the many pitfalls of trying. Although a giant Christmas rave ostensibly motivates the story, *Go* gives us only a few passing glimpses of the dance floor. Worse, a simplistic moral message—there's a price for having too much fun—underlies the entire plot. The only person who we see take ecstasy wakes up shivering and filthy in a heap of garbage. The girl who dabbles in drug dealing is left for dead in a ditch. In the end, rave serves as nothing more than an exotic backdrop for a very conventional story about friendship, love and the daily grind.

Groove, on the other hand, avoids the familiar stereotypes. No one dies of an overdose, no one is arrested for deal-