

# Letras Hispanas

## Volume 16, 2020

**TITLE:** *The Latinx Urban Condition: Trauma, Memory and Desire in Latinx Urban Literature and Culture*

**AUTHOR:** Crescencio López-González

**PUBLISHER:** Lexington Books

**YEAR:** 2020

**AUTHOR OF THE REVIEW:** Molly Metherd, Saint Mary's College of California

Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's groundbreaking work *The Production of Space* (1974), scholars from many disciplines including history, geography, sociology, and cultural studies have explored how cityscapes shape the psyches of the people who inhabit them. Literary scholars too have turned to textual representations of space to examine how characters and communities are shaped by their environments. In *The Latinx Urban Condition: Trauma, Memory and Desire in Latinx Urban Literature and Culture*, Crescencio López-González does just that. He examines literary narratives by Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban American and Dominican Americans set in urban centers and reads these inner-city landscapes as symbolic representations of everyday life. The book analyzes texts set in urban centers in California, Arizona, Texas, New York and Florida that have been transformed by immigration, the need for cheap labor and discriminatory urban policies. The characters often internalize the violence, trauma and dispossession of these social spaces while they also imagine new possibilities for urban life.

The first chapter, "Geographic Displacement," focuses on the social spaces of Chicano narratives by Helen Maria Viramontes, Luis J. Rodríguez, Yxta Maya Murray, Gary Soto and Aaron Michael Morales. Most of the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of the book is laid out here, and López-González

draws on the work of Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau as well as the work of the urban cartographer David Harvey and the literary scholar Raul Homero Villa. This chapter examines how the characters experience the social and economic realities of urban barrios in Los Angeles and Oakland, CA and Tucson, AZ and portray how characters internalize the uncertainty, violence, and dispossession.

Memoirs and semi-autobiographical novels by the Nuyorican writers Esmeralda Santiago and Ernesto Quiñonez are the subject of the second chapter "Displacement, Memories and Desires." López-González focuses on how different forms of state power, including education, policing and public policies, can entrap characters in neighborhoods and in social classes. This chapter argues that autobiography and memory work against the depersonalizing narratives of urban development and consequently make space for more varied depictions of these urban spaces.

Three Dominican American novels, *Geographies of Home*, by Loida Maritza Pérez, *Soledad*, by Angie Cruz and *Drown* by Junot Díaz are the focus of Chapter Three "Geographies of Trauma, Memories and Deceit." These novels are all set in Washington Heights, New York and also in the Dominican Republic, and thus interrogate conceptions of home. This chapter focuses more on private spaces rather than public and on the relationship between home, trauma and

the body rather than between the city, the state and the individual. It looks at how the geographic displacement is internalized and homes can become oppressive environments and sites of trauma.

The final chapter again takes up at geographic displacement, here with a focus on Cuban immigrants in New York and Miami. This chapter, titled "Floating Urban Geographies of Trauma, Detachment and Dislocation" examines novels by Cristina Garcia, Virgil Suárez and Roberto G. Fernández and as well as a documentary film by Carles Bosch and Josep Domènech. As in the previous chapter, López-González demonstrates how displacement and memory can lead characters to feel fragmented, anxious and unbalanced. However, he moves from an analysis of private urban spaces to examine class differences within the Cuban American communities as well as excessive consumerism and the internalization of capitalist expectations at

the expense of cultural values. He also highlights the ways in which characters in the novels can reimagine their personal narratives by embracing hybrid identities.

*The Latinx Urban Condition* offers a compelling analysis of how urban landscapes impact the interior lives of characters in literary narratives. The chapters at times feel fragmented and repetitive and would benefit from more effort to shape them into a coherent whole. Nonetheless, this book makes an important contribution to the field of Latinx Studies as it expands upon research on the urban imaginary in Chicano literature to include Puerto Rican, Dominican American and Cuban American texts. It offers an important assessment of the unique social, historical and economic forces that shape each community, while it also documents similar incidents of oppression, dispossession and trauma across Latinx urban settings from the 1960s to the present.