

BARRIO URBANISM: FREEWAYS AND THE ART OF EAST LOS ANGELES



Eric Avila

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4:15 pm

101 Dwight

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Eric Avila is Associate Professor of UCLA's César E Chávez Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies and the Department of History. He is the author of *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (UC Press, 2004) and is currently at work on a second book, *Folklore of the Freeway: Highway Construction and the Making of Race in the Modernist City*. This new book project, from which his lecture will be drawn, examines how freeways engender subjective expressions of social identity.

This lecture explores the relationship between cultural production and the urban built environment by considering the image of freeways in the art of East Los Angeles, the nation's largest concentration of Mexican Americans in the United States. From the paintings of Carlos Almaraz and Frank Romero, to the murals of Judith Baca, to the novels of Helena Maria Viramontes and Gil Cuadros, freeways have earned a prominent place in the culture of the L.A. barrio. Why so many freeways? Do Chicano artists and writers simply love them? Or does the prominence of freeways in the cultural landscape of the barrio reflect the historic placement of freeways in the physical landscape of East Los Angeles?

As a centerpiece of modernist city planning that debuted during the 1950s and 1960s, freeways have since earned a distinction within the 'postmodern' sensibility of Chicano artists and writers, who have issued a distinctive set of meanings and interpretations of the LA freeway, which often defied or subverted the intentions of highway engineers and city planners. This discrepancy between use and meaning -- between 'top-down' modes of urban planning and 'bottom-up' cultural practices -- is especially vibrant in cities like Los Angeles, where the synthesis of structure and culture generates new and unexpected urban cultural expressions.

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