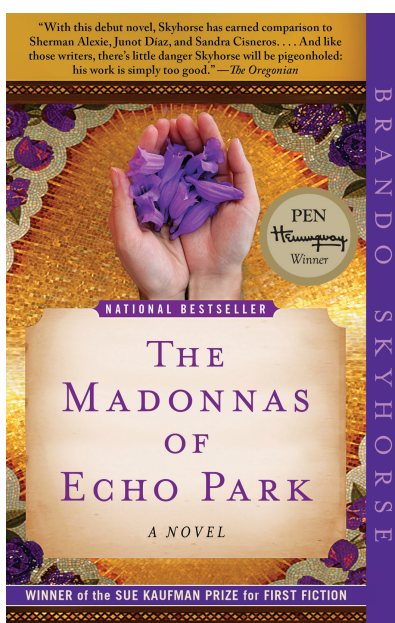


HSUAN L. HSU

The Invasion of Echo Park

LA rocks on

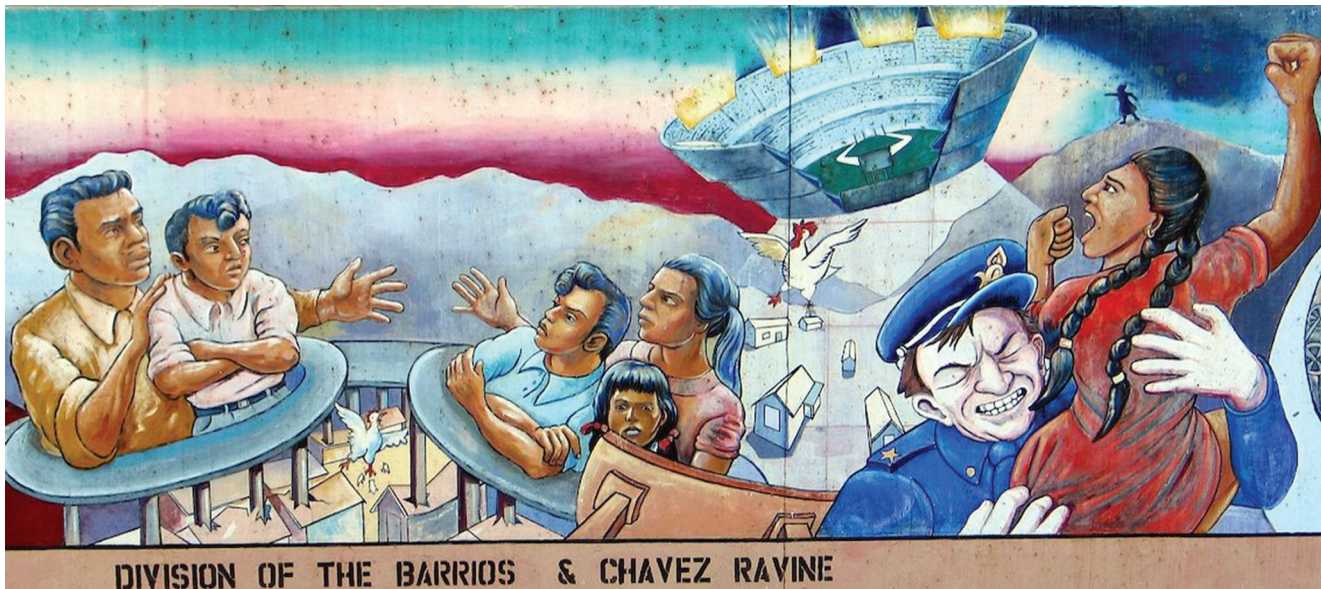


The Madonnas of Echo Park by Brando Skyhorse, Free Press, 224 pages

In late 2011, the Occupy movement quickly became one of the most visible and viable means of sheltering and sustaining people who have been displaced by the unemployment, foreclosures, and evictions resulting from offshoring and rampant financial speculation. Violent police raids on Occupy encampments throughout the country bear witness to how difficult and vital it is for disempowered groups to access and lay claim to living space in US cities. Brando Skyhorse's first book of fiction, *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, covers two historical moments that underlie contemporary struggles over public space in and beyond Los Angeles: the withdrawal of jobs, tax revenue, and services from the inner city caused by suburbanization and "white flight" in the decades following World War II, and the return of real estate speculation and middle-class residents to urban centers in recent decades. In addition to dramatizing the lives of characters caught between languages and cultures, *Madonnas* is a story about how gentrification affects the Mexican/Mexican American community in the transitional neighborhood of Echo Park.

First developed by real estate investor Thomas Kelly in the 1880s, Echo Park (then called "Edendale") was a center of the LA film industry during the silent era and a middle-class neighborhood in the early twentieth century. As many middle-class white residents relocated to the suburbs after World War II, Mexican Americans moved into the area's affordable homes, becoming Echo Park's majority, along with smaller populations of Chinese, Filipino, and Southeast Asian immigrants. Brando Skyhorse has an unusual relationship to the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural diversity: abandoned by his Mexican father when he was three-years-old, he grew up believing he was the son of his mother's Native American boyfriend, a man named Paul Skyhorse Johnson. In interviews, the author explains that even after learning of his true genealogy in his early teens he continued to hide his Mexican identity because his mother, who was Mexican, was passing as a Native American (he did not publicize his Mexican identity until after his mother's death in 1998). Drawing on this personal history of "passing," Skyhorse's novel offers an engaging

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The Great Wall of Los Angeles by Judy Baca and SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center) commemorate Chavez Ravine and the division of the barrios with freeways. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE CITY PROJECT.

meditation on displacement and its effects on a complex cast of characters.

An author's note establishes the connection between the author and his characters by narrating Skyhorse's own (possibly fictionalized) encounter with a girl named Aurora Esperanza at a grade-school dance. When Aurora asks him to dance to the tune of Madonna's "Borderline," the young protagonist refuses, saying "You're a Mexican," and Aurora leaves the school in shame. In the stories that follow, Skyhorse attempts to make restitution for that moment of unwitting self-rejection by creating a diverse group of nine Mexican American narrators, each of them facing identity crises associated with the challenges of assimilation: middle-class jobs, learning English, college educations, stereotypes in Hollywood films, cross-racial dating, and the messages of popular singers like Madonna, Gwen Stefani, and Morrissey.

The identity confusion featured throughout *The Madonnas of Echo Park* is complicated by the fact that there is no "authentic" culture or neighborhood to which these characters can return. Skyhorse exposes the fantasy of an

authentic Latino 'hood by repeatedly referencing the video for Madonna's "Borderline":

... Madonna, dressed as a classic "Low Rider" *chola* in a forties-style hair bonnet, white wife-beater, long drape coat, and baggy pants that came up past her waist, had been kicked out of her *gringo* photographer boyfriend's fancy loft for spray-painting a streak on his sports car. Out on "her" streets again, Madonna walks past El Guanaco and is welcomed into the arms of her *cholas* hanging outside, who realize she has not abandoned her *chicas* or her 'hood. They walk into the *Mercado*, and after a selection at the jukebox, Madonna dances into the arms of her former boyfriend, a young Mexican guy who has pined for her throughout the video and represents the Mexican roots, the Mexican *life* she cannot turn her back on (p. 47).

The idea of "genuine Mexican roots," it seems, can be co-opted by white artists (and in this case an Italian-American pop star) who identify ethnic minorities with exotic neighborhood cultures and then commodify those cultures. But when Mexican characters look to Madonna to teach them about the appeal of Echo Park's street culture and the importance of roots, the notion of a pure ethnic identity seems

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Lives intersect without the characters being aware of their mutual connections.

naïve. Instead, the novel's central scene—which ties together most of its ensemble cast—features Aurora and several other girls dressed up as Madonna (that is, as Madonna disguised as a *chola*) dancing to the tune of “Borderline” in front of El Guanaco market, where the street scenes of the video were actually shot. In the world of music videos and their fans, there seems to be no borderline between Echo Park and Hollywood, Mexican and *gringo*, a rock star and neighborhood girls dressing up as the “Madonnas” of Echo Park because their parents cannot afford other forms of entertainment. But on a more material level, Skyhorse frequently stresses the effects of neighborhoods and national borders: one of the girls dancing in front of the market is killed by a stray bullet; Aurora's father is deported at the end of the first chapter; and a city bus driver, though acutely sensitive to the racial dynamics of the different neighborhoods traversed by his route, is pushed to extremes.

All of this makes *The Madonnas of Echo Park* a strange instance of the LA ensemble narrative—a genre of fiction that fantasizes about personal encounters that counteract the isolation of sprawl and suburbanization. In the films *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Magnolia* (1999), and *Crash* (2004), and in novels such as T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), characters from different racial and ethnic groups encounter one another despite the fact that the layout of LA and its suburbs and its history of “white flight” have substantively minimized such encounters. In the wake of the 1992 LA uprising, these stories often feature interpersonal meetings that cross boundaries and heal racial fissures: random encounters and car crashes teach characters that everyone is connected.

With its cast of nine first-person narrators who cross paths in the neighborhood of Echo Park, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* certainly reads like an ensemble narrative—but it refuses to close with an upbeat lesson about interconnectedness. Instead of assembling characters through significant coincidences, *Madonnas* shows how the characters, most of whom are Mexican American and many of whom are related by blood, become so

disconnected that they can continually miss opportunities to recognize and communicate with one another. In the novel's climactic scene, Aurora encounters her estranged father, her half-sister, her mother, her grand-uncle, and her estranged grandmother at the annual Lotus Festival without recognizing (or being recognized by) any of them.

By organizing his book around moments where subplots and characters' lives intersect without the characters being aware of their mutual connections, Skyhorse evokes the social and emotional distances intervening among broken families, provisional erotic relationships, and an increasingly scattered community struggling to maintain a cultural foothold in the gentrifying neighborhoods of Echo Park.

Madonnas traces the attrition of cultural identity and community ties to the actual eviction of Mexican American families from affordable housing in Chavez Ravine in 1959. Aurora explains that “My first name comes from the last woman evicted from the ground that would become Dodger Stadium” (p. 150). Skyhorse bases the character of Aurora's great-grandmother, Aurora Salazar, on Aurora Vargas, whose forcible eviction from Chavez Ravine is the subject of several iconic photographs (she was fined and jailed for disobeying the eviction order). Growing up in the aftermath of LA urban planners' assault on black and brown neighborhoods, the younger Aurora has no direct knowledge of the dirt trails and rustic hillside community of Chavez Ravine. She says, “I didn't know those hills; I didn't know that woman. What I knew were tunneled-out highways that unfurled like streamers tossed off a balcony from atop Dodger Stadium and endless days of riding my bicycle through its saucer-tiered parking lots, flat and featureless . . .” (p. 152). In documenting the aftereffects of the evictions at Chavez Ravine and the division of the barrios by freeway construction, *Madonnas* extends the explorations of recent works such as Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Heather Woodbury's *Tale of 2 Cities*, and historian Eric Avila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*.

Most of Skyhorse's book is set in the present, as gentrification gradually extends the earlier displacements epitomized by Chavez Ravine. As an anonymous flier titled “GENTRIFICATION” posted in an Echo Park laundromat explains, “People that grew up in echo park, had family and friends here, were forced out of there [sic] homes to welcome the new european invader. The Christopher and Christina Columbus of our time . . . The HIPSTER . . .” While boutiques, cafés, and other evidence of gentrification



"Angustian Family Evicted from Home in Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles." *Los Angeles Times* (May 9, 1959).

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appear with gradually increasing frequency throughout the book, the chapter entitled "The Hustler" takes the measure of urban renewal by depicting a convict's disoriented return to Echo Park after nearly twelve years in prison:

On the starting tip of Sunset Boulevard (which is now called César Chavez Avenue—when did that happen?) I survey my territory—the new apartment buildings and stores, the fresh coats of paint on the doors and window frames on abandoned shops, new storefront signs in English covering the old sun-bleached Spanish ones[,] the odd presence of young bearded white men with coffee, not six-packs, on the street corners. Where are the *Chicanos*? Or the *Chinos*? (p. 113)

Freddy finds that a "white woman with short black hair and a tight T-shirt that somehow makes her look like a man" has moved into his lover's home; notices a house being renovated "by some Mexican day-laborers"; is surprised to see graffiti in *English* in his 'hood; and finally settles down to hustle a sucker at pool table. His mark—"a white guy in his thirties with thick Buddy Holly-style glasses, a short-sleeve shirt that changes color depending on what angle I look at it from, baggy black pants with a chain dangling from his right pocket, and spotless black 'work' shoes" (p. 120)—seems like a naïve hipster. But after Freddy wins some money and attempts a different hustle, the white man beats him up and takes his cash.

Overall, *Madonnas* does not take a one-sided stance against either cultural assimilation or gentrification. Aurora, too, feels disoriented upon returning to the neighborhood, "as if an antimatter explosion had detonated high above Echo Park, reconstructing decay into a glittering faux affluence, a Willy Wonka neutron bomb coating the landscape in radioactive smiley face yellows and Wellbutrin blues." But she does not flee from the new condos, cafés, and boutiques although. she admits she feels lost, she concludes, "I guess it's good for the neighborhood" (p. 189). After accidentally—and to her, miraculously—running into the singer Morrissey (who once said "I wish I was born Mexican") at the Lotus Festival, Aurora decides to cast her lot with Echo Park. Popular culture and gentrification may have dislocated the cohesive Mexican American community, but Aurora believes it to be "a land rich with roots that grow, thrive, burn, are razed, heal, then grow again, deeper and stronger than before." Only the reader knows—from assembling the threads of other chapters—that she has just walked past several family members without knowing it, and that her father is in the process of being deported at the very moment she thinks "This is the land we dream of, the land that belongs to us again" (p. 199). With such ironic dissonances filling the gaps between its chapters, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* records the promise of new forms of belonging as well as the loss that attends the violent uprooting of the old. **B**