

# Opinion: L.A. is not Latin America, but it could be

By Joe Mathews

Los Angeles is not Latin America.

Such a statement should be as uncontroversial as a map of the western hemisphere. But in L.A., elite conventional wisdom runs the other way.



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Lewis D’Vorkin, the Los Angeles Times editor, recently promoted L.A. as “the northern capital of Latin America” in a staff memo. Organizers of L.A.’s recent bid for the Olympics used a similar formulation.

In its Pacific Standard Time series, the Getty Foundation supported 70-plus exhibitions—from Santa Barbara to San Diego—under the title: “LA/LA”—for Latin America and Los Angeles. In its publicity material, the Getty called L.A. “a Latin American city of long duration.”

The impulse to pump up L.A. is understandable; after all, it’s not even the capital of California. But here’s a reality check. Los Angeles isn’t a part of Latin America—or of anyplace else.

Helen Hunt Jackson, author of the 19th-century novel “Ramona,” famously termed Southern California “an island on the land.”

The 20th-century California chronicler Carey McWilliams borrowed Jackson's line for the title of a 1950 book, in which he wrote that Southern California "is as distinct, as unlike any other part of the state, as though it were another country."

Yes, L.A. has a Spanish colonial and Mexican past. Yes, it has long drawn Latin American artists. And yes, nearly half of Angelenos either are immigrants from Latin America or are descended from them.

But Los Angeles, for almost its entire history, has been a walled-off and peculiar place. When L.A. has bothered to define itself, it has done so in opposition to the world—and to Latin America in particular.

When whites built Los Angeles as a "city of the future" they nearly obliterated its Mexican history and Mexican-American people. As the historian William Deverell wrote, "Understanding Los Angeles requires grappling with the complex and disturbing relationship between whites, especially those able to command various forms of power, and Mexican people, a Mexican past, and a Mexican landscape."

Unfortunately, that whitewashing left a permanent separation. In his book "The Labyrinth of Solitude," the Mexican author Octavio Paz described the city as having a "vaguely Mexican atmosphere" that felt distant, like it was "floating" in the air.

"I say 'floats' because it never mixes or unites with the other world, the North American world based on precision and efficiency," Paz wrote, adding: "It floats, never quite existing, never quite vanishing."

Today this city still floats nebulously, without quite landing. L.A. might pride itself on its diversity, but the town's culture is still ruled by predominantly white Hollywood. The center city and Westside—the parts of L.A. most

familiar around the world—are far whiter than the U.S. as a whole.

While L.A is not a Latin American city, it is a profoundly Latino one. But as immigration diminishes, its Latinos are becoming less Latin American. Today, more than 60 percent of L.A. County's Latinos are native-born. If you want to see a truly Latin American U.S. city, you should visit Miami.

The town's population trends work against Latinization. One of the two biggest demographic stories in Los Angeles in this century has been the rapid decline in the number of children, including Latino children. The other big story is the increase in the number of whites in the city—by nearly 40,000 between 2010 and 2014—outpacing the rise in the number of Latinos.

Since the 1990s recession, Latin American immigration here has dramatically declined, while the regional economy has tilted away from Latin America. International trade here is dominated by East Asia. Mexico is the third-largest trading partner of the United States, but ranks 10th as an L.A. trading partner, behind Germany.

The weakness of ties between L.A. and Latin America now seems like a real vulnerability, as the California-hating Trump administration deports immigrants and retreats from the world. León Krauze, a Mexican journalist who is an anchor for Univision in L.A., said the Trump threat may force closer ties, as Angelenos and Latin Americans realize they must be allies in protecting immigrants from the U.S. government.

At the same time, there is something cynical about the “L.A. is Latin America” messages of L.A.'s elites. Many Southern California institutions have celebrated prominent Latin Americans while being slow to include L.A.'s own Latinos. Take the motion picture academy, which has been giving Oscars to film directors from Mexico—Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and, perhaps soon, Guillermo del Toro—while doing

little for Latino filmmakers.

Still, it would be wiser to embrace the “Latin America–Los Angeles” narrative as aspirational. After all, Los Angeles would have much to gain from deeper ties to a region that has seen gains in democracy and in its middle class over the past two generations.

Building those ties would take sustained work, including creating more spaces for preservation of the Spanish language. More broadly, making L.A. a Latin American city would require the same freedom of movement in the western hemisphere as the European Union enjoys, so that Latin Americans could visit, study and live here with ease.

But, first, L.A. would have to obliterate the walls that have long surrounded it.

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