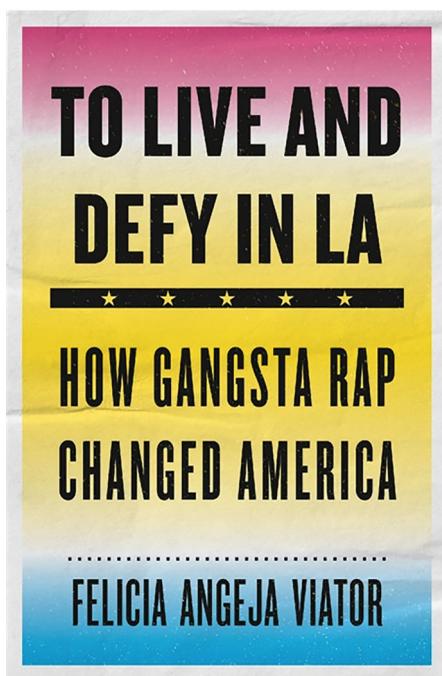


# BOOK REVIEWS

**TO LIVE AND DEFY IN LA: *How Gangsta Rap Changed America*.** By Felicia Angeja Viator (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020, 337 pp., \$35.00 hardcover). Reviewed by Gerald Horne.

This is a chronicle of a popular musical phenomenon with roots in South Los Angeles, arising and flowering in recent decades. “Gangsta Rap” is a form of oratory, often rhymed and rhythmic, frequently uttered against the backdrop of steady percussion and hypnotic bass beats. Often the words of this musical form reflected the deteriorating socio-economic conditions that characterized Compton, Watts and other sites where African-Americans have been prominent.



Strikingly, for a work that began as a dissertation at Berkeley and was then published by a major university press, it is heavily dependent upon newspaper accounts from the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *LA Weekly*, and magazines such as *Billboard*. The author does utilize the archive of former L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley at UCLA and collections at the often-neglected archival goldmine that is the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, sited in the very venue from whence this cultural form arose. This archival omission is

unfortunate for in limning the conditions that produced this music, the author could have relied upon the NAACP papers at Berkeley itself or the larger collection at the Library of Congress, the American Civil Liberties Union Papers at Princeton, and the voluminous collections at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Mark Ridley-Thomas, who has served the general vicinity that birthed this cultural

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form as a state legislator in Sacramento, a County Supervisor and a member of the City Council of Los Angeles during the time when “Gangsta Rap” was taking root. He was a representative of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the City of Angels, the grouping founded by Martin Luther King, Jr. One of Dr. King’s closest comrades was for years a pastor in this same general vicinity: the Reverend James Lawson. The voluminous SCLC Papers are sited at Emory University in Atlanta and are not referenced. Besides, Ridley-Thomas once hosted a popular radio program, tapes of which can be found at the Pacifica Radio Archives in North Hollywood, another rich source that is neglected.

Likewise, a godfather of “Gangsta Rap”, Marion “Shug” Knight was involved in various legal scrapes, including criminal prosecutions; he is unmentioned in the Index and, as far as I can tell, in the text also, though the author does mention Tupac Shakur, who was accompanied by Knight when this now iconic rapper and actor was gunned down in Las Vegas in 1996. Given the various legal conflicts that have afflicted this profitable musical enterprise, I suspect that a foray into federal court records at the illuminating archive that is the National Archives and Records Administration branch in Riverside County—not to mention state court records—would have been rewarding. Interviews of relevant historical actors would similarly have been rewarding.

Speaking of profitability, the focus in this book is mostly on the “artists”—Ice Cube, Ice-T, Doctor Dre, Eazy-E, et.al. —and not those who appropriated the lion’s share of what their labor produced. For example, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland harbors papers of executives, such as Ahmet Ertegun, the entrepreneur with Turkish roots who founded Atlantic Records—mentioned in passing (175)—a long-time force in the industry, and who carried on lengthy correspondence with many others, including other moguls. Since the moguls controlled the means of production, it would have been useful to examine in granular detail how and why “Gangsta Rappers” were allowed to flay the police in often profane terms, their hallmark which defined the genre.

But, as noted, this is a chronicle, not an analysis. So, little time is spent in placing this cultural form in the context of “gangsters” in Los Angeles: those who have dominated Hollywood, up to and including John Roselli, and various leaders of craft unions such as the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. Arguably, the general exclusion of African-Americans from unions and various failings of working-class groupings, provided fertile soil for the flourishing of “lumpen” creations like “Gangsta Rap.” Cultural analysis too would be insightful. It is evident that there was an audience that was thirsty and hungry for a reflection of their lived experiences and these “artists” demonstrated that performing rebellion on stage and discs could be lucrative. After all, following his deal with Apple, Dr. Dre now bills himself as a billionaire. Ice Cube has become a Hollywood stalwart and of late stirred controversy because of his overtures to the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. president. He was preceded by their comrade Eazy-E who was notorious for attending a fundraiser for the GOP that featured the late George H.W. Bush.

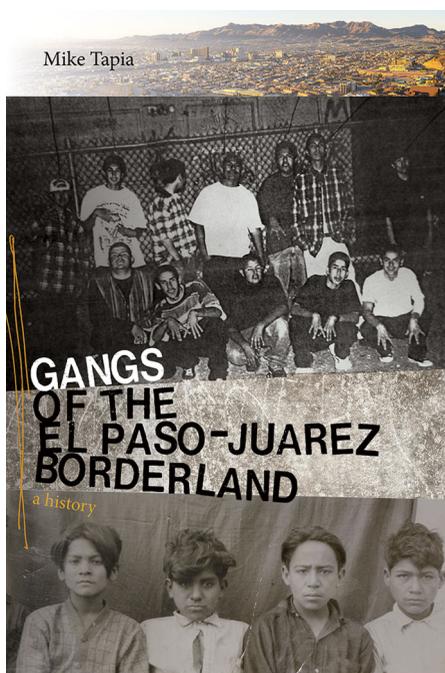
Assuredly, this book is smoothly written and is a useful primer in outlining the rise of a form of music that has come to define South Los Angeles nationally, if not

globally. Still, much more needs to be said about “Gangsta Rap” and the often-horrific conditions that propelled it.

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**GANGS OF THE EL PASO-JUÁREZ BORDERLANDS.** By Mike Tapia (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019, 200 pp., \$29.95 paper). Reviewed by James Diego Vigil.

This book is a long overdue account of one of the most volatile regions of the world. The author has persuasively argued that the borderland space where the cities of El Paso (US) and Juarez (Mexico) merge is a contiguous area that includes dozens of towns on both sides of the border. Street gangs and more sophisticated cartel drug members are responsible for the mayhem and crime in the region, even though El Paso has a low crime rate. This borderland space has a long history going back to the Wild West period; John Wesley Hardin, the famous gunslinger is buried in an El Paso public cemetery. It also is the oldest western US city with a street gang history.



I once asked a girl who joined us on an auto cruise through our neighborhood in early 1950s Downtown Los Angeles where she was “from,” a common practice for street people, and her answer surprised me. She responded with pride and an “attitude” that was supposed to command respect from me: EPT, she uttered, an acronym for El Paso Texas. Later, when I joined Pro-

essor Joan Moore’s group, the Chicano Pinto Research Project, she had just completed her book, *Homeboys* (1978, Temple), and in the account had mentioned in some detail the Texas syndicate in California prisons: EPT. As Tapia correctly states, the cholo gang style was born in El Paso, named pachuco, and found its way to Los Angeles during the early 1940s. Tapia views this earlier and later gang history as a result of poverty and discrimination and poignantly portrays how it unfolded in the El Paso/Juarez borderlands region.