

The Grit beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas. Hal K. Rothman and Mike Davis, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 388 pp., index.

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Quantitative assessments of Las Vegas's phenomenal growth in recent years have not been matched by qualitative accounts of what it is like to live and work there. Among a handful of exceptions is the collected volume, *The Grit beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas*, offered by its editors as a corrective to what they call "outsider reportage." Hal K. Rothman and Mike Davis claim that Las Vegas "has become the favorite setting for hip anthropologists to mock the distended appetites of the majority; in the process, they tell us more about their own faux elitism than they do about the people they are observing" (p. 5). Perhaps overstating their case, they allege that "no one has ever before stopped to ask the people of Las Vegas what they think of their place" (p. 14). Accordingly, their objective is to present readers with an insider's view of the city. Although their claim to representational authority has a distinctly territorial tone and too quickly dismisses other recent work on Las Vegas, distinguished urban historians Rothman and Davis—both of whom have long-standing intellectual commitments to the city—are ideally suited to the task they have set out for themselves. In their introduction, Rothman and Davis characterize Las Vegas as "a supple response to the changing cultural, intellectual, economic, and social trends of the nation and the world" (p. 1) and propose that the hermeneutic key to the city is its "fundamental malleability." To explore this malleability they have assembled an impressively eclectic mix of historical, sociological, personal, journalistic,

and photographic studies of Las Vegas. The 21 pieces are elegantly plotted around a theme of juxtaposition—between glitter and grit, reality and fantasy—immediately conveyed by the volume's cover image: a 1950s Cadillac and a modern Winnebago huddled together beside a dilapidated shack overgrown with trees, the sleek pyramid of the Luxor hotel and casino—icon of 1990s Las Vegas corporate fantasy architecture—rising in the background.

The volume appropriately begins with a section entitled "Image and Reality," in which contributing authors explore the architectural, literary, and cinematic face of the city. Klein opens with "Scripting Las Vegas," describing the "gritty patches" that interrupt the narrative order of the Strip and provide clues to the disorder that its designed spaces (or "ergonomic labyrinths," as he aptly calls them) attempt to hide through superficial illusion. Menendez follows with a discussion of how Las Vegas has figured in movies as "a moral testing ground" for U.S. audiences, and Goin offers a remarkable photographic tour of the city through the mobile frame of the car windshield. In "Nuts and Bolts," the more substantial section that follows, authors leave behind the sparkling play of surfaces to home in on the political-economic details of city infrastructure, or its lack thereof. As we learn of Las Vegas's fiscal, electricity, water, and labor union crises, the style of presentation also switches gears, from playful to empirical. Several pieces in this section might be described as clinical and dry, were it not for the always fascinating nature of the material itself. Moehring, eminent historian of the Southwest, outlines a regressive state tax structure that puts social programs at risk while benefiting a healthy gaming industry. Parker's meticulous look at the social costs of rapid urbanization is a particularly effective account of how southern Nevada's pro-development agenda systematically discounts the welfare of residents by dismissing problems of environment, health, and crime as "externalities."

A third cluster of articles, entitled "Voices," is composed of subjective commentaries on life in Las Vegas told by locals. Following the theme of juxtaposition that shapes the book, Miller's

"Inside the Glitter" presents readers with double photographic portraits of casino workers in their roles "on" and "off" the Strip, alongside excerpts from their life stories. McMackin presents an engaging set of reflections on her Vegas childhood, in which she mourns the incremental disappearance of the desert without being overly nostalgic. Other authors seem caught between a desire to celebrate the uniqueness of the city and a competing desire to stress its ordinariness. Two of the most compelling pieces in the anthology, Devereaux's ethnographically sensitive journal of her time spent as an educator in a local prison and Davis's journalistic snapshot of post-Rodney King racial discord, appear in "Shaping Life," a section whose structuring logic and distinction from "Voices" is not altogether clear.

Contributors to the final section, "From Pariah to Paradigm," return more directly to the volume's introductory query: "Will Las Vegas fulfill its promise as a prototype for the urban twenty-first century?" (p. 13), but not in the didactic manner that often spoils the concluding sections of edited volumes. Throughout the book, I was struck with the analytically unfinished feel of the contributions; although frustrating at times, this unfinishedness was a refreshing change from editors' tendencies toward overcoherence in analytic approach and presentational style. Despite Rothman and Davis's rather directive sorting of pieces by tone and type, which left me wondering whether the editors' opening emphasis on Las Vegas's vital malleability might have been more provocatively borne out through a looser, more dynamic sequence, the relatively untheorized and interdisciplinary nature of this volume encourages readers to conjure up their own provisional answers to the challenging questions raised at the outset.

By the end of the anthology I found myself questioning the volume's framing logic of juxtaposition. Is the call to look behind the city's shiny veneer—to find "tales from the real Las Vegas"—as radical and original a departure from the standard casting of Las Vegas as Rothman and Davis claim? Ironically, their attempt to dispense with the tropes of Las Vegas is guided by one of

its master tropes—the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy. Steve Wynn, reigning visionary of corporate casino culture in Las Vegas, once remarked that unsettling tourists' expectations (presenting them with a rain forest in a desert, for instance) sets up a conflict that confounds and yet delights. As he recognizes, the city is quite explicitly premised on a split between the possible and the impossible, the real and the mirage. Clearly, "locals"—even local scholars—are not immune to the allure of this split. The glitter-grit binary is in fact a cornerstone of the sort of stock portrayals of the city that the editors decry; by grounding their book in this binary, they risk participating in the representational current of Las Vegas against which they position themselves. Perhaps a more radical way to frame the anthology would have been to question this very split, to probe the mutual inflection of glitter and grit at the level of experience and representation.

Aside from these criticisms—which confirm the success of this book to stimulate its readers—I found the anthology a marvelous demonstration of Las Vegas's capacity to inspire a truly expansive range of questions, disciplines, and interests; in this sense, it stands as a testament to the city's malleability. Together, the pieces of this diverse collection made for a thoroughly convincing portrait of Las Vegas and one that was a pleasure to read.