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# **T.C. Boyle's "The Tortilla Curtain"**

Urban Conditions, Racism, and Ecological Disaster  
in Fortress Los Angeles

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## 1. Introduction

Los Angeles, the Californian megalopolis, is famous for its sunny weather, for the Hollywood film studios and for being *the* residence of the rich and beautiful. And although – or, precisely because – all this is more illusion than reality, the city frequently serves as setting for various pieces of fiction. However, Los Angeles does not only play a huge role in the media, but since lately also in the realm of urban studies. Having long been a kind of ‘outsider’ in the field, it is now regarded as a prototypical example for urban development by the L.A. School. In this context, its image is less sunny and positive, but reveals a deep-rooted racism against Latin-American immigrants in combination with a fortress mentality on the part of its white population as well as a unique urban ecology, in which natural catastrophes seem to be regular occurrences. This paper now intends to outline the significance of Los Angeles in urban studies and trace the thereby acquired findings in a fictional representation of the city: T.C. Boyle’s novel *The Tortilla Curtain*. In the process, it is shown how urban conditions, racism and nature, especially in the form of ecological disasters, intersect and influence each other.

While the following chapter provides basic information about Los Angeles, the third section deals with the metropolis in the context of urban studies. First of all, the theories and conclusions of the L.A. School are introduced. After that, Mike Davis’s concept of the ‘fortress city’ is further examined, leading to the topic of material and immaterial boundaries within the city as well as the complex of problems concerning the U.S.-Mexican border, the ‘Tortilla Curtain’. It becomes clear that the crossing of these borders and boundaries becomes increasingly difficult and leads to aggression and fear, thereby still intensifying racial segregation in Los Angeles. Subsequently, L.A.’s urban ecology is explored. Here, different forms of environmental racism are identified and analyzed with regard to Malthusianism, ecocatastrophes and animals.

The fourth part then is concerned with T.C. Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain*. It is shown that Davis’s fortress mentality finds expression in the novel with respect to the Arroyo Blanco residents, who intend to build a wall around their exclusive residential community. The next chapter deals with the

fictional representation of border crossing (and hence immigration) in pursuit of the American Dream as well as the tangible and intangible walls in Los Angeles, with which the newly arrived immigrants are confronted. In the following, a particular form of racism, running like a common thread through the novel, namely the comparison of the Latin-American protagonists with animals, is described. And last but not least, socio-ecological themes such as the greening of hate, environmental degradation through suburbanization as well as the causes and consequences of natural disaster are traced throughout the narrative. Here, it is pointed out that only an apocalyptic force can lead to the denouement of the conflict between the two male protagonists.

All in all, this work brings together urban studies and fiction. Thereby, it examines how *The Tortilla Curtain*, as a fictitious representation of Los Angeles, partly reflects the reality of the metropolis as well as urban theory. In this sense, it is concluded that fiction can be an important account of urban problems and their possible solutions and that *The Tortilla Curtain* has therefore a social and a political message.

## **2. Los Angeles: Basic Facts and Figures**

With a total population of 16.3 million (in 2000), the Los Angeles region – which contains the counties of Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside – is the second-largest megalopolis in the United States (cf. Fröhlich 154). In addition, its population is one of the most diverse in the country (cf. Cruz 72), providing Los Angeles with the label “heteropolis” (Dear, “Los Angeles” 60).

This is not least due to the city’s complex cultural history. After all, it has been

shaped successively by eighteenth-century European colonization, nineteenth-century U.S. territorial expansion, and twentieth-century migration from across the nation and the world (Villa, Sánchez 2):

From time immemorial having been inhabited by Native Americans, California was conquered and occupied by the Spaniards in 1542 (cf. Cruz 74). In 1769, Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolá arrived in the Los Angeles region