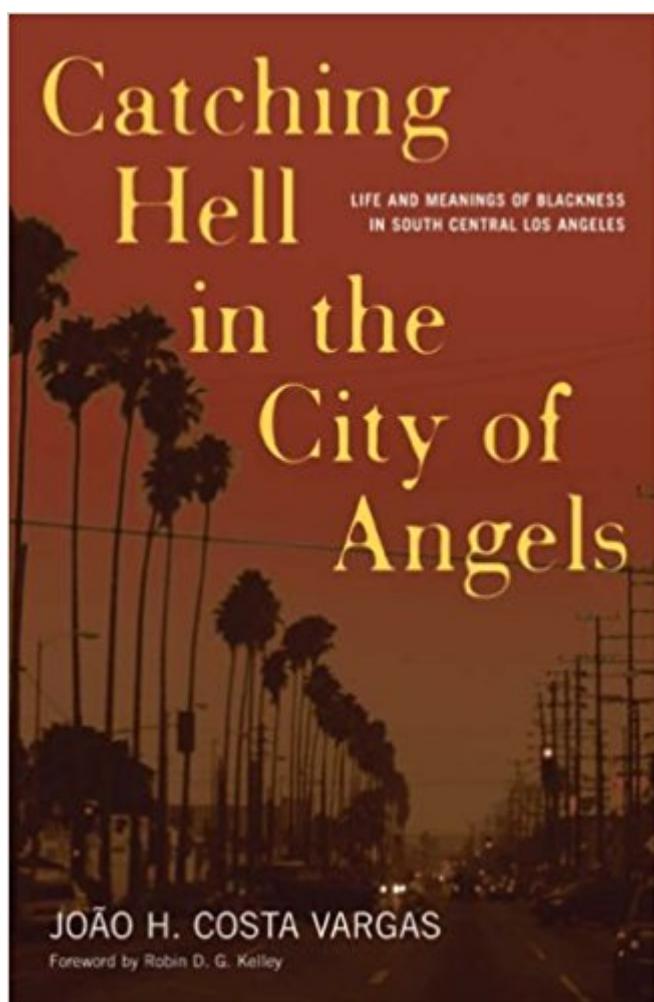


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# Catching Hell In The City Of Angels: Life And Meanings Of Blackness In South Central Los Angeles (Critical American Studies)



## Synopsis

Since the 1980s, Los Angeles has become the most racially and economically divided city in the United States. In the poorest parts of South Central Los Angeles, buildings in disrepair—the legacy of racial unrest. Moving beyond stereotypes of South Central's predominantly African American residents, João H. Costa Vargas recounts his almost two years living in the district. Personal, critical, and disquieting, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels* examines the ways in which economic and social changes in the twentieth century have affected the black community, and powerfully conveys the experiences that bind and divide its people. Through compelling stories of South Central, including his own experience as an immigrant of color, Vargas presents portraits of four groups. He talks daily with women living in a low-income Watts apartment building; works with activists in a community organization against police brutality; interacts with former gang members trying to maintain a 1992 truce between the Bloods and the Crips; and listens to amateur jazz musicians who perform in a gentrified section of the neighborhood. In each case he describes the worldviews and the definitions of “blackness” these people use to cope with oppression. Vargas finds, in turn, that blackness is a form of racial solidarity, a vehicle for the renewal of African American culture, and a political expression of revolutionary black nationalism. Vargas reveals that the social fault lines in South Central reflect both contemporary disparities and long-term struggles. In doing so, he shows both the racialized power that makes “blackness” a prized term of identity and the terrible price that African Americans have paid for this emphasis. Ultimately, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels* tells the story of urban America through the lives of individuals from diverse, overlapping, and vibrant communities. João H. Costa Vargas is assistant professor in the Center for African and African American Studies and the department of anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin. Robin D. G. Kelley is the William B. Ransford Professor of Cultural and Historical Studies at Columbia University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Yo Mama's Disfunctional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*.

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## Customer Reviews

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good book

South Central L.A. looms large in our popular culture as the center of a dangerous underworld that must be contained and controlled. Finally we get a book that goes beyond the media's ominous depictions. Vargas spends time actually living in the neighborhood and getting to know the people there. He writes about their lives with honesty and compassion. Moreover, unlike many ethnographies of the "ghetto" he avoids the construction of a moral typology that measures behaviors against "mainstream values". Instead he recognizes the actions of residents as complex responses to a political economy and legal system that powerfully marginalizes them. Highly readable, this book should be studied by everybody who wants to know Los Angeles beyond the Hollywood fictions.

Vargas takes an aggressive microscopic look at life in South Central Los Angeles. Gang violence, drug abuse, unemployment, inadequate schools are just some of the issues he examines. His historical perspective will help the reader gain a profound understanding of why so many people in this community continue to catch hell. As a person who grew up in this community, I can honestly say that Vargas has truly captured the essence of what life is like in the hood. No doubt the same

social, political, economic and racial issues that permeated this community yesterday have not gone away. More work must be done! A must read for anyone who desires to learn more about life in South Central Los Angeles.

this was a gift, for my daughter which she loved

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