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Mike Davis, California's 'prophet of doom', on activism in a dying world: 'Despair is useless'

Wednesday 31 August 2022, by [BECKETT Lois](#), [DAVIS Mike](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2022).

His warnings of ecological and social breakdown have proved accurate. But with months to live, Davis is anything but defeated

For decades, the southern California writer Mike Davis has obsessively documented the dark side of the Golden state - its wildfires, earthquakes, megalomaniac real estate developers and violent police departments.

In essays like *The Case for Letting Malibu Burn*, Davis has argued that California's natural disasters are not really natural at all, but the result of greed, racism, and lack of foresight from the region's power brokers. In *City of Quartz* - published in 1990, two years before the Rodney King uprising - he depicted Los Angeles as a white supremacist police state that had successfully marketed itself as paradise.

He was branded "the prophet of doom" [1] and some called him too critical, a delusional lefty. But in recent years, Davis's warnings of ecological and social destruction have begun to sound increasingly prophetic. As California struggles with soaring wealth inequality and homelessness, new protests over police violence erupt, and the mansions of Malibu burn again and again, his writing has only become more relevant.

All this comes as Mike Davis is dying. This summer, the 76-year-old stopped treatment for esophageal cancer and began palliative care, giving him an estimated six to nine months to live.

"What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to accept the verdict"

I interviewed Davis at his San Diego home in early August, alongside his wife, Alessandra Moctezuma, an art curator and professor. Over the course of more than eight hours, he regaled me with tales from his childhood as a working-class kid growing up in El Cajon; his decades of activism in the civil rights and labor movements; how his work as a truck driver and Los Angeles bus tour operator influenced his late-in-life writing career; and his thoughts on youth activism, the climate

crisis, and what it feels like for your life to end at a grim moment in history.

Davis was wary of being too grandiose about his own death – “People don’t write their own legacy, for chrissakes” – and feared the morphine he takes for pain might dull his encyclopedic memory or oratorical flair. But he needn’t have worried. The sun set. My laptop battery reached 0%. But Davis wasn’t done telling stories.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You’ve made your reputation as a historian with an uncanny knack for [seeing what’s next](#). In 2005, you wrote a book, *Monster at the Door*, about the threat of a flu pandemic. Just a few months before January 6, you warned that the American left was unprepared for the country’s [“increasing levels of social violence”](#). What do you see coming now?

What I think about more often than anything else these days is the death of California. The death of its iconic landscapes. I wrote a piece in the Nation on [why these changes are irreversible](#). How much of the beauty of the state might disappear for ever. No more Joshua Trees. No more sequoias.

I’ve exalted in the beauty of California my entire life. Hiking, mountain running, traveling all over the state. There’s so much I wish my kids could see, could have seen, that they’ll not see. And that, of course, is happening everywhere in the world.

What do you think about California’s responses to this destruction?

[California’s Governor Gavin] Newsom is going to run for president, partly on his achievements in fighting global warming in California. Every time there’s a fire, he’s out there saying, ‘This is global warning, and we’re ahead of the pack on this, we’re setting the best example.’

But we’ve passed the tipping points in so many ways, and we’re doing so many of the wrong things. It’s not just global warming, and drought, it’s the fact that two-thirds of the new homes built in the American west are in high fire-hazard areas, and the Democrats refuse to talk about a moratorium on construction or even rolling back construction in the urban-wildlife interface. It’s easier for politicians to say they’re supporting electric vehicles. [Greenwashing](#) has reached a disgusting extent. Our ruling classes everywhere have no rational analysis or explanation for the immediate future. A small group of people have more concentrated power over the human future than ever before in human history, and they have no vision, no strategy, no plan.

The climate crisis, migration crisis and pandemic have shown us the truth about how supposedly democratic states react to globally threatening events: they pull up the drawbridge.

You’ve been organizing for social change your whole life. How do you deal with a future that feels so bleak?

For someone my age who was in the civil rights movement, and in other struggles of the 1960s, I’ve seen miracles happen. I’ve seen ordinary people do the most heroic things. When you’ve had the privilege of knowing so many great fighters and resisters, you can’t lay down the sword, even if things seem objectively hopeless.

I’ve always been influenced by the poems Brecht wrote in the late 30s, during the second world war, after everything had been incinerated, all the dreams and values of an entire generation destroyed, and Brecht said, well, it’s a new dark ages ... how do people resist in the dark ages?

What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to

accept the verdict, however all-powerful it seems. It's what ordinary people have to do. You have to love each other. You have to defend each other. You have to fight.

Republicans are doing a splendid job of combining protest movements with electoral politics

What do you think Americans should be doing right now?

Organize as massively as possible: nonviolent civil disobedience. Instead of just fighting over environmental legislation in Congress, ending up in a bill that's as much a subsidy to the auto industry and to fossil fuel as anything else: start sitting-in the board rooms and offices of the big polluters, all these meetings where the Kochs and other oil producers sit down with Republican politicians.

In 2020, there were massive street protests all over the US, and the world, after the police killed George Floyd. Yet you've argued the left in America has surrendered the streets to the far right. Why?

Republicans are doing a splendid job of combining protest movements with electoral politics. It's not only that Republicans have mastered low-intensity street-fighting, it's that they've also been able to sustain a dialectic between the outside and the inside in a way that progressive Democrats haven't been able to do.

Both of our kids [the couple's now 18-year-old twins], all their friends turned out for Black Lives Matter. So much attention was given to the participation of whites in the protests, but I think the most exciting part was the number of new immigrant kids, Latinos, who were in the thick of it. After summer 2020, they kind of became orphans. What to do, where to protest, what to join, how to conceive of the possibility of a life dedicated to struggling for social change - all of that went unanswered.

The base for a more activist, more aggressive, but also more strategic left politics exists. Students in inner-city high schools in California are a sleeping dragon. If you measure things by opinion polls, this generation is more leftwing than the 1930s. A huge number of people under 30 say they're in favor of socialism or they're prepared to listen to arguments for socialism. That's astonishing.

I was surprised to hear that it was in London, oddly enough, where you first conceived of the project that would become *City of Quartz*, the book that made your reputation.

I had a really hard time in London, and in my homesickness, I started thinking: how would I explain southern California in radical terms?

The book is one of the first people recommend to anyone moving to Los Angeles. What do you think of some of the other iconic LA writers?

Some favorites of mine are long forgotten. One is Myron Brinig, who wrote this funny takedown of

LA bohemian circles circa 1930 called Flutter of an Eyelid. A New England novelist is sent by his agent to recuperate in the sunshine of California. He's at a cocktail party, and this beautiful woman walks up, and he says, "What do you do, ma'am?" and she says, "I deliver and accept pain." It doesn't stop from there.

I've never been a fan of Joan Didion since I read *Salvador*, an awful book, with El Salvador as a country of dead bodies, [not a people, not a culture](#).

I hate Raymond Chandler, yet I've read him and reread him so many times. He's a fascist, and I mean this in a precise sense. He represents the small businessman being trampled by outside forces. Each of his novels has an openly racist section. But of course, you care about the writing, and you end up forgiving things that really aren't forgivable. Chandler was a strange guy. He's buried a mile from here.

Have you been to Chandler's grave?

Yeah. It's right next to our Home Depot.

Earlier this summer, news about your decision to stop cancer treatment was shared, without permission, on Twitter. This prompted an outpouring of tributes to your life and work. What has it been like reading those?

I have pretty old fashioned values - you don't hide terminal illness, but you don't broadcast it either. I've been bombarded with love and deeply moving messages, but at the same time, there seems to be some competition of who can write the best obituary. Then I get this stuff: 'Can I bring my girlfriend down next week? She wants to meet you before you die.' There's somebody who wanted to bring their students on a trip and have me tell them about my legacy. It's a very strange situation.

Can you share some of the messages you've received? *[Davis picks up one stack of papers from his printer, and opens a drawer and pulls out another stack, and begins to read passages aloud.]*

"We've never met but like many people out there I've been changed by your work. I'm a brown kid from Orange county who spent many years trying to understand and articulate the complex but unshakable love I have for our home, its haunted uncanniness, its beauty, its cruelty ..."

"I hear you are in the final stretch of, well, all of this. I write to you from Paris a few hours before I fly back home to LA, and I know that when we make the final descent into the LA basin this afternoon, I will cry softly, as I always do, so in love with the place I call home ..."

"You came on my podcast back in late 2020 and we talked a lot about rural America. Right now my community is in shambles, because last week eastern Kentucky was hit really bad by a one-in-a-thousand-year flood. I'm having a real hard time time finding any hope anywhere. But I read this interview you did, and it made me feel, not necessarily more hopeful, but more at peace ..."

"It is pretty common for people to underestimate their own legacy. So allow me just to say that I'm glad that you did not die on the barricades too soon, before we had your wonderful books. After all, aren't they a kind of barricade for the ages?"

There is so much unmobilized love out there. It's really moving to see how much.

What are you and your family doing with the time you have left?

Avoiding this trap where writers feel they must weigh in with famous last words or a long essay on dying. We're watching a lot of Scandinavian noir on HBO. In the last month, I've started consuming immense amounts of military history, an infantile throwback. I find the counterfactuals - this battle, what did it decide, what was the alternative - deeply fascinating.

You can't expect to die at a very heroic moment. It'd be nice to die in 1968, or with the liberation of Europe in 1945. You're on the barricades in 1917, 1919. Go out of life with the red flags flying. But despair is useless.

Lois Beckett in San Diego
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P.S.

- The Guardian. Wed 31 Aug 2022 06.00 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/aug/30/mike-davis-california-writer-interview-activism>
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-nov-24-bk-fredsiegel24-story.html>