

Mapping South Pasadena's Imagined and Material Geographies:
Nostalgia, Amnesia, and Exclusion

By Olivia Nouriani

The city I grew up in – South Pasadena, California – still fills me with warmth and nostalgia every time I visit. My best friends today remain those I went to grade school with, and wandering the charming suburban streets of the town brings me a comfort I never expected to feel when I eagerly emigrated to the East Bay. But in spite of that comfort, each time I visit home, there's a dark undercurrent to the city's ethos that's impossible to ignore. The town's "quaintness" and "charm" are inextricably linked to exclusion and racism, and are built on violent colonialism and negationist narratives of linear progress. In profiling the neighborhood, I explore these themes more closely, and examine South Pasadena's place in the racial and political geography of Los Angeles.

A city at a crossroads

South Pasadena is in a unique position, situated along the border of the city of LA. It is a gateway to the wealthy Verdugos, and in many ways it acts as such; between majority-Latine NELA and majority-white Pasadena, South Pasadena is somewhere in between: its population is roughly 40% white, 30% Asian, and 20% Latine, while its high school population is near-evenly split into thirds among the three identifications. Regardless of (or perhaps related to) its diversity on paper, the city engages in multifold projects to maintain racial hierarchies. This is palpable in the urban geography of the city; South Pasadena is insulated from majority-Latine Los Angeles communities by a combination of natural and man-made barriers. My map of the city illustrates several of these barriers, which are examples of what Mike Davis calls "architectural policing of social boundaries,"

a practice which defines the zeitgeist of modern Los Angeles. Man-made barriers work in tandem with natural ones, such as hilly landscapes and the Arroyo Seco, evoking a system quite similar to Jason De León's hybrid collectif, while an imagined binary between nature and humanity exonerate South Pasadena from any intentionality in the creation of these boundaries.

A history of exclusion

This landscape embodies a more tangible history of exclusionary policies and practices in the city. From South Pasadena's founding in the 1880s, when a group of colonists from Indiana set their sights on the land (then known as Rancho San Pascual) and transformed it from agricultural to residential by settling there, developers in the city built housing with the aim of attracting a wealthy colonial elite.

After the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the area transformed from Rancho San Pascual to South Pasadena. This mirrored developments across California, and the period was accompanied by a process of differential racialization of Mexicans. Disdain for Mexican rancheros began to circulate. Meanwhile, those who labored on the ranchos — lower-class Mexicans and those indigenous to the area — were pushed out of work as land was purchased for residential development. The working class were imagined as "*gente sin razón*," locating them as even further from white than the ranchero elite (Almaguer). Some Mexican "*gente de razón*" may have assimilated and intermarried with the influx of Anglo settlers, while the majority of Mexican and indigenous residents and laborers — especially those with darker skin — were pushed off the land. At the end of the 19th century, as land ownership in the area came almost entirely under Anglo control, the modern American racial structure was consolidated in South Pasadena. The early project of developing the newly-founded South Pasadena prioritized attracting as many Anglo residents as possible (Saavedra; Apostol).

In the 20th century, the threat of increasing political agency of people of color in America stoked fear in South Pasadenans. Town residents took the preservation of white supremacy into their own hands. Black Americans had always been *de facto* excluded from South Pasadena, economically and via social norms, but in the 1940s South Pasadena made it a matter of official policy. The city became a “sundown town”: non-whites were not permitted in the town after sundown, unless they worked as “servants, caretakers, or in similar menial work” (Hormann). Meanwhile, the city took an active role in the internment of Japanese Americans. In the decades before WWII, a substantial Japanese community had taken root in the city, even establishing a Japanese-American Cultural Center (where the South Pasadena Historical Museum, seen on my map, stands today). Upon the onset of Japanese internment, city officials rounded up Japanese residents and transferred them to the Santa Anita Race Track — located in the Verdugos, less than 10 miles away — where some were forced to sleep in horse stalls (Hormann). When internment ended in 1945, Japanese-Americans were officially allowed to return to their previous residences. In South Pasadena, however, acts of vandalism during internment made some of these homes unlivable, and those who did return reported facing significant discrimination in the town. By 1946, no Japanese, nor any other non-white minority, resided in the city (Hormann).

After policies explicitly banning non-whites were ruled unconstitutional, private properties maintained racist covenants — these covenants are still codified in the deeds of some South Pasadena households today (ARC). City officials also found new avenues for exclusion. In 1955 a young Black girl from neighboring Highland Park tried to enter South Pasadena’s public swimming pool. Employees turned her away, and, in a clearly racist dog whistle, the city subsequently passed a law forbidding non-residents from using the town’s public spaces, going so far as to require residents to carry IDs that proved their residency.

Confinement to the hills: zoning and redlining

By the 1960s South Pasadena's explicitly racist practices had come under fire, and many had been ruled illegal. In 1964 the first Mexican purchased a home in the city (apparently only because a realtor had mistaken him for white), and members of the growing Asian population in Los Angeles took interest in moving to the town. Zoning and redlining policies enabled the city to maintain a modicum of control over populations of color.

The first case of the deliberate construction of affordable or multi-unit lots in South Pasadena was during the Great Depression. The town's economy had plummeted, and town leadership reached a resolution to attempt to attract residents they described as "less desirable." They made this decision as a "last resort," and agreed that efforts should be taken to "contain" the expansion of undesirable populations. They determined that such housing should be constructed in a small part of town where the famed Raymond Hotel once stood. This neighborhood was situated along the northern border, and was somewhat separated from the city because it was atop a hill (Apostol). Today, the Raymond Hill (as it is still known) remains one of the only parts of South Pasadena whose zoning permits multi-unit properties, and as such it is primarily occupied by Asian immigrant families on the lower end of the city's socio-economic spectrum. These families often cannot afford to live in any other neighborhood of South Pasadena.

The decade was also defined by the town's efforts to develop the Monterey Hills, a hilly neighborhood at southwestern border to Los Angeles. A federal grant enabled the development of the area, which came with the requirement that residency be open to any buyer regardless of race. At first, this sparked outcry in the community, but it ultimately proved a tolerable compromise for whites; people of color moving into the city were directed to the hills, offering a sort of geographic confinement of non-whites. A new elementary school was established in the neighborhood, allowing the other two public schools in the district to remain lily-white. Today, Monterey Hills

Elementary has a higher Black population and much higher Latine and Asian populations than the other 2 elementary schools, despite the fact that the entire city is only 3 square miles.

The collective memory: nostalgia and amnesia

The city's written history, as well as its collective memory, conveniently overlook the decades during which racism and exclusion were not only *present* but a *defining feature*, ultimately enabling the dismissal of accusations of institutional racism in the town today. Rather, the town's archive, in accordance with the Protestant ethos of colonialism, puts forward a narrative of linear progress (Saavedra). The most comprehensive written history of the town, Jane Apostol's *South Pasadena: 1888-1988*, brushes over the subjects of racism and redlining, suggesting such incidents were few and far between. She writes, for example, that upon being released from internment, Japanese South Pasadenans were welcomed back to the city with open arms. Charles Kikuchi, a scholar and survivor of internment who lived in South Pasadena, told quite a different story.

It is not only post-incorporation racism that the archive fails to describe. Apostol's account, as well as the archives at the Huntington Library and the South Pasadena Cultural Museum, have surprisingly little to say about pre-colonial times or indigenous peoples in the area. The mainstream records that do exist mention forced labor, evangelization, and disease, without any insight into the lives or experiences of the Kizh people who inhabited the land around the Arroyo Seco before the conquests of Gaspar de Portolá. This display of trauma reflects Saidiya Hartman's notion of the archive as a tomb – sometimes quite literally, as in the case of the San Gabriel Mission, which stands as a historical record in itself *and* houses the bodies of 6,000 indigenous people in its cemetery. Moreover, most if not all mainstream historical records of the region refer to members of the Kizh Nation as the Tongva, Gabrieleño, or Gabrielino Native Americans. Some Kizh activists

have criticized these labels as colonial and ahistorical, but, per standard practice, the language of the colonizers is given precedence in the archive.

These historizations, however, have never gone unchallenged. The Kizh people have documented and circulated their own histories, and have engaged in projects to remap LA County through an indigenous lens (Mapping Indigenous LA, UCLA). Japanese activists and scholars have published the true story of South Pasadena's role in internment, and Black organizers have more recently put pressure on the city to acknowledge its history as a sundown town, and address ongoing institutional racism. Immigrant neighborhoods in the city also take part in active community-building and reterritorialization that is excluded from the standard imaginary of the city. The largest apartment complex in South Pasadena, for example, is situated in the Raymond Hills, and many of its residents are members of the Filipine community. When residents celebrate a special occasion, such as a birthday or graduation, and on Filipine holidays such as Rizal Day, families often gather in the apartment courtyard, dance to Tagalog music, and share celebratory Filipine dishes like *lechon* (whole roasted pig) (A. Rogando, personal communication, 2021). These processes of community formation are at the core of life in Los Angeles (Cruz-Manjarrez).

These stories of resilience, community, and joy deserve a place in the archive, just as do stories of dispossession and injustice. This project has paid more attention to the latter, and examined the ongoing settler colonial project in South Pasadena, rather than counternarratives about the land it occupies. I found it important to examine the systems I have benefited from throughout my life, but will conclude by emphasizing the essential nature of transmitting these stories and histories, and turning to dispossessed communities to do so.



My map depicts the colonial imagined geography of my hometown, South Pasadena, California. Established along the Arroyo Seco on Hahamog'na Kizh land, South Pasadena today serves as a physical and political barrier between the city of Los Angeles and the wealthy Verdugos, employing an architecture of exclusion to fulfill this role by limiting non-white migration to the city and containing communities of color within its boundaries. The archival narrative and collective memory of the town's history also serve this project, emphasizing linear progress and cultivating small-town nostalgia while erasing indigenous histories, racist legacies, and immigrant communities from the narrative. This map draws attention to these two complementary processes of historical negationism and social exclusion.

Pasadena (from the Ojibwe phrase meaning "crown of the valley") is the northernmost city of the San Gabriel Valley (the SGV). South Pasadena — its own independent municipality — is tucked in the northeast corner of the valley, at the crossroads of three conventional LA County regions: the SGV, north-east L.A. (or NELA) to the west, and the Verdugos to the north. South Pasadena — a tight-knit, wealthy, plurality-white suburb which prides itself on its small-town feel — therefore finds itself in a precarious position. It is separated by mere blocks from the majority-Latine neighborhoods of Garvanza, Highland Park, Hermon, and El Sereno in the city of LA. In many ways, distancing and distinguishing South Pasadena from these brown neighborhoods is critical to the town's identity, and exclusionary architecture and natural barriers assist in constructing this distinction. The CA-110 freeway separates South Pasadena from Highland Park, and a large and pedestrian-unfriendly bridge is the only path between the cities. Similarly obstructive bridges separate the city from the neighborhood of Hermon to the southwest, and undeveloped and unpaved hills help further obscure paths out of the city in this direction. The Arroyo Seco, once a life-bearing epicenter of Kizh communities, is an additional barrier between South Pas and Highland Park and Garvanza. The southern borders to El Sereno and Alhambra are designated by the major thoroughfare Huntington Drive, and further enforced by hills as well as physical walls in several places. There are notably fewer physical barriers on the city's borders to Pasadena and San Marino, which are both wealthier and whiter than South Pas. Within South Pasadena's borders, multi-unit housing (and consequently, people of color) have been confined to two small, hilly, borderland neighborhoods known as Raymond Hill and the Monterey Hills. Today, Monterey Hills Elementary School maintains the highest percentages of Black and Latine enrollment of any school in the district.

My map illustrates these features, as well as several symbols that represent mainstream accounts of South Pasadena's history. These symbols constitute almost all of the "designated historical markers" in South Pasadena, and almost all of them represent imagined progress during the colonial period. The Raymond Hotel, for example, was an iconic 19th century landmark which served to attract many wealthy Anglo settlers to the area. The nearby Adobe Flores house, which young South Pasadenans often visit on field trips, served as a headquarters for the Mexican Army during the Mexican-American War, and is pointed to as a symbol of the concession of California to the US. Cathedral Oak, now marked by a small monument, was a tree that Gaspar de Portolá carved a cross into during his expedition and conquest. The Cawston Ostrich Farm, perhaps the most famous South Pasadenan historical landmark, was a tourist attraction where guests could observe and ride ostriches that Edwin Cawston captured from South Africa and shipped to the United States to be bred for amusement. Finally, the South Pasadena Cultural Museum plays a significant role in constructing the mainstream narrative of the town's history. It heavily features information about the Ostrich Farm and the early Anglo landowners in the region. Its only mentions of indigenous peoples are in the context of the San Gabriel Mission. It additionally exhibits a handful of indigenous artifacts, which it cites as belonging to the colonizer who pillaged them from their villages.

In South Pasadena, exclusionary geographies and ahistorical memories have been imposed on Hahamog'na Kizh land. This map represents that imposition, but does not do justice to the counterhistories put forward by Kizh Native Americans and Black, migrant, and colonized communities in the region today. These counterhistories are essential to reimagining, remapping, and decolonizing the land of the Kizh Nation.

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