

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE AND PLACE-MAKERS IN THE LIFE OF A LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY:

What Gentrification Erases
from Echo Park

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at restaurants as urban forms of public space in which ethnic entrepreneurs act as place-makers. The author highlights El Nayarit, a Mexican restaurant in the Echo Park section of Los Angeles, from 1947 to the present, as a nucleus of a community where racial, ethnic, class, and generational boundaries were breached. This restaurant and its spin-off enterprises also helped to define the neighborhood as ethnic space.

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In contrast, urban redevelopment and gentrification, beginning in the 1990s, have resulted in erasure of the area's history and the sense of space in which ethnic identity and multiethnic bonds were once fostered.

Keywords: racialized space; Mexican restaurants; gentrification; Echo Park

Since the 1970s, the histories of racialized groups in the U.S. have been studied in separate fields, notably Chicana/o, African American, Asian American, and Native American history. In the last ten years or so, scholars have begun to look at groups comparatively and relationally. By doing so, they have expanded their focus to include the multicultural everyday worlds and spaces people have created and inhabited. California and, in particular, Los Angeles have been key sites to mine for investigation because of their diverse demographics. Some work has examined the ways in which people crossed ethnic and racial lines in order to make political and social change through coalitions. Notable examples are Shana Bernstein's *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*, Scott Kurashige's *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, and George Sánchez's "Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism."¹ Other research has focused less on people who have worked to make change within the system and more on subcultures and forms of resistance, particularly as seen in youth culture. In *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* and *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935–1968*, Luis Alvarez and Anthony Macías, respectively, probe ways in which Mexican Americans rejected second-class citizenship and racial segregation practices in Los Angeles through their participation in popular culture, including wearing bold styles of dress and crossing color lines as they traversed the city to listen and dance to music.²

1. George Sánchez, "Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism," *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (Spring 2010); Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

2. Anthony F. Macías, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

In the first part of this article, I am deliberately shifting the focus away from communities that fit within the dominant paradigms of contemporary research. Instead, I will focus on restaurants as urban institutions and forms of public space in which ethnic entrepreneurs act as “place-makers.” I begin by looking at a particular restaurant, its owner, and its employees in order to argue that restaurants can serve as social spaces that shape the neighborhoods in which they are located in ways that empower those who inhabit the surrounding area. My specific focus is El Nayarit, a Mexican restaurant located in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Echo Park during the 1950s and 1960s. El Nayarit became a crossroads, a physical and social space that regularly brought together individuals whose ethnicity, class, language, and sexual orientation differed. Equally important, the restaurant engendered among its almost exclusively Mexican immigrant workforce a “politics of the possible.” Unlike the activists who are the more typical focus of scholarly research, these employees (many of whom were recent arrivals in the U.S.) generally were not involved in oppositional politics. They did not organize unions or lead protests, but they did contribute to the creation of working environments in which they felt valued and where they received fair compensation for their work. They did not don zoot suits or establish political parties, but they did generate a sense of community that reached across racial, ethnic, class, and generational boundaries. Moreover, some employees went on to open their own restaurants and other enterprises and collectively helped to define the areas where they did business as ethnic spaces.

My goal is to reveal ways in which individuals and groups who do not work explicitly to subvert social norms can nonetheless be place-makers who leave a mark on the urban landscape for generations to come. In the case I will discuss today, Natalia Barraza, the owner of El Nayarit, and her employees were place-makers who provided a social and recreational space where their customers, often other Mexican immigrants, could imagine their lives outside of the strict confines of being a “worker.” And regardless of their particular social status, by being a part of an urban and cosmopolitan milieu, both the restaurant’s customers and its staff were exposed to and were able to imagine “the possible.”

In his book *Race Rebels*, Robin Kelley describes how, as a teenaged worker at McDonalds, he used myriad ways to eke out a little extra from his low-paying job, in the form of food and time. “That we were

part of the ‘working class’ engaged in workplace struggle never crossed our minds,” Kelley writes, “in part because the battles that were dear to most of us and the strategies we adopted fell outside of what most people think of as traditional ‘labor disputes.’”³ Kelley urges us to “write history from the bottom up” and to re-imagine what politics of resistance might look like when we focus on black communities. Similarly, I would like for us to see that Mexican immigrants made important contributions to their communities whether or not they ever joined the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) or the American GI Forum (AGIF) or bucked the system as a zoot suiter.

I have known parts of the story of El Nayarit for most of my life, but as a historian I have shied away from exploring it because the actors do not fit into traditional activist roles. I have a unique connection to El Nayarit. The restaurant belonged to my grandmother, Natalia Barraza, after whom I am named. I never met her because she passed before I was born, and the restaurant closed a few years after her death. My mother, Maria, was her right-hand assistant in the business. Neither Barraza’s husband nor their son were regularly involved with the business. She and her husband had separated by then, and her son joined the service at age eighteen. I grew up listening, fascinated, to stories about the restaurant that were told and re-told dozens of times. Although El Nayarit has been closed for decades, every family gathering I can recall has included friends who once worked there.

I was also mesmerized by Barraza’s personal story. In 1921, she came to the United States alone, a young, single, Mexican woman (a demographic not often talked about in the literature) who, in time, opened her own business (ethnic entrepreneurs, and especially female ethnic entrepreneurs, also are rarely studied). Barraza and her employees created a social space where everyone—from recent Mexican immigrants to professional ballplayers to movie stars—wanted to be. She and her staff were place-makers. They enhanced the neighborhood’s identity by running a business that drew people both from inside and outside the neighborhood, providing opportunities for all to forge bonds of understanding. The restaurant also served as an entry point

3. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York and Toronto: Free Press, 1994).

that offered a ready-made social network for immigrants new to a dauntingly large, foreign city. Access to a space in which the language, food, and atmosphere were reassuringly familiar helped to better position recent arrivals for success in their new lives.

Despite having concerns about the relative absence of actors who are the more traditional focus of histories of subjugated groups—activists, politicians, community organizers, oppositional youth—in El Nayarit’s story, I kept circling back to this narrative because I recognized that it did get at something important, namely how people of color voice their own narratives and create their own spaces in a way that re-claims dignity. These spaces are crucial to understanding the making of multiracial Los Angeles and the ways people navigated it. The story also addresses an issue that spurred me to write my first book, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1940*, which is that the Los Angeles most often portrayed in movies, the media, and, until fairly recently, in the scholarly literature as well, arises from a view of the city from the top down. Little attention has been paid to the struggles that have occurred from the bottom up. Today we use terms such as “community revitalization” and “stake holders” when we are talking about transforming an area and the people who inhabit it. Non-profit organizations and government agencies often play roles in this process. What I discuss here predates that kind of official organization and restructuring. The people I focus on were organic place-makers. Thus, this site gets at the dynamics of community formation just as powerfully as a revitalization project would, but the view is from the bottom up.

In her influential monograph, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, which focuses on Los Angeles, Dolores Hayden argues that the concept of place refers to a shared space, a communal space. Her book also highlights and underscores the importance of sites previously overlooked because they were not historically or culturally significant according to dominant conceptions of the time. Published in 1995, Hayden’s demonstration of the need to better know and understand the urban landscape and its history through a re-claiming of previously overlooked spaces remains urgently relevant.⁴ In 2012, Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and

4. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

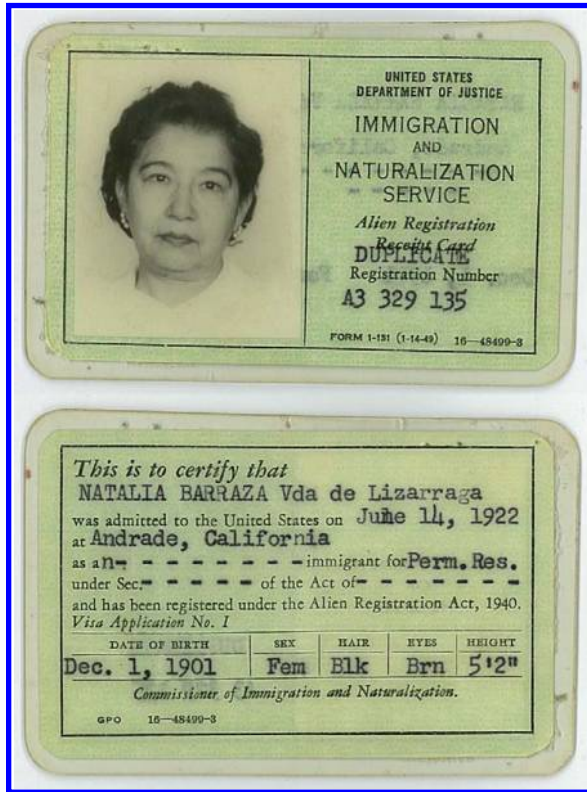
Wendy Cheng published *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. These authors felt that a vernacular guidebook was needed for precisely the reasons Hayden had pointed out almost twenty years earlier: marginalized communities and histories are still not being recognized for their roles in shaping the urban landscape. Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng highlight sites that “have been erased by urban redevelopment, destroyed by state violence, or simply forgotten because they were embedded in the everyday.”⁵ I will return to this issue of erasure in the second part of the article. I turn now to the story of El Nayarit and the role it played in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s.

RESTAURANTS AS A CULTURAL CROSSROADS

Natalia Barraza immigrated to Los Angeles in 1921 at the age of twenty-one. She came alone, a newly divorced, single woman from Nayarit, Mexico. Barraza, like others who came north from Mexico seeking employment during this time period, was fleeing the ravages of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). The growth of large-scale farming in the American Southwest promised abundant opportunities for immigrants, and the completion of railroad networks facilitated movement between distant points. Los Angeles was a particularly easy starting point for immigrants because by 1930 the city claimed a Mexican population that was second in size only to Mexico City.

Barraza was a skilled cook. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, she quickly found work in a small restaurant. The owner took pity on her when he learned that this newly divorced young woman knew no one in Los Angeles. She was grateful for the job, but her goal was to open her own restaurant. The fact that she did not speak English nor know how to write in Spanish did not deter her. She used to say, “Si Dios nos da un centavo, nosotros podemos trabajarlo y hacer dos.” (If God gives us one cent, we can work and turn it into two cents.) Her first restaurant, El Buen Gusto, did not succeed (year or years of operation unknown). In 1947, she tried again, opening El Nayarit on Sunset Boulevard at the edge of downtown Los Angeles. The restaurant was only a few blocks from Olvera Street, which had once been a Mexican neighborhood. By this time, however, it had become

5. Laura Pulido, Laura R. Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng, *A People's Guide to Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 10.



Natalia Barraza's alien registration card, 1921. Photograph provided by author.

a tourist destination that traded in popular images of Los Angeles's Mexican past and residents.⁶

For ten years, Barraza lived upstairs from the business, in four small rooms, with her two children, Maria and Carlos, and occasionally with relatives who came from Mexico to work in the restaurant. This choice of living quarters was likely due to financial constraints, but it also meant that Barraza was invested in the area as both a business owner and a resident. Because she had little start-up money, the restaurant was sparsely furnished. It would have been even more spartan had Barraza not been befriended by Isaac Ranger, the owner of The Phoenix, a furniture store located next to the restaurant. Seeing the austere interior, Ranger loaned her chairs at no cost, asking only that she repay him when she could afford to do so. The two proprietors maintained a strong friendship for years, demonstrating how living

6. Details of Natalia Barraza and the restaurant are derived from Maria Molina, interview by Natalia Molina, March 8, 2014 and "Natalia Barraza: Nayarita pionera en L.A.," *Nayarit En California* (Asociación de Nayaritas en California) 1993, 16-19.

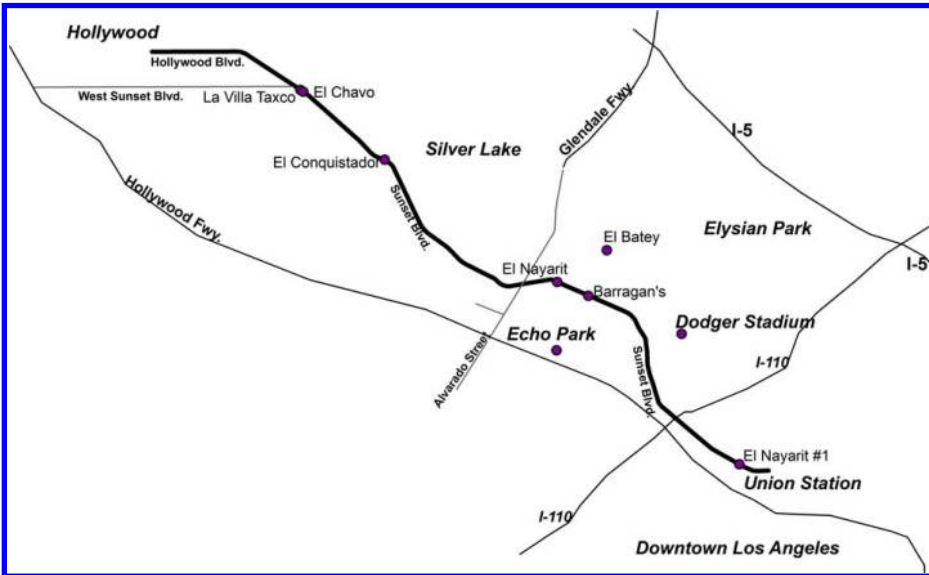
and working in non-ethnic enclaves allowed immigrants like Barraza to form ties with people outside their own classed and raced social networks. In addition to being friends, these individuals could act as cultural brokers, connecting immigrants to the larger community.

Barraza's business grew. El Nayarit attracted a steady clientele of Mexican workers who either lived or worked nearby. The decor may have been sparse, but the restaurant was lauded by its customers and the local paper for its handmade tortillas and for the authenticity and freshness of its food. The restaurant differed from other businesses owned by ethnic entrepreneurs during the 1940s and 1950s in that most were located in ethnic enclaves, served mainly those from the community, and often made only enough profits to meet the needs of the owners' families.⁷ El Nayarit, in contrast, allowed Barraza to dress well, send her children to Catholic school, eventually purchase a home, and even expand her business to include a second restaurant.

The original El Nayarit was located close to the Boyle Heights neighborhood, which then, as now, had a large Mexican population. In addition to already having a solid consumer base for ethnic businesses, including restaurants, pharmacies, and retail shops, the area is a gateway to the city of East Los Angeles. For her second restaurant, Barraza chose not to orient herself in this eastward direction, where she would have been in the company of many of her fellow Mexican nationals. Instead, she looked west. The second, larger El Nayarit was located two miles further down Sunset Boulevard, in the Echo Park neighborhood. It opened in 1951 and seated seventy people.

The decision to locate the new restaurant two miles west versus two miles east from the original location may seem to have little significance. But in Los Angeles's historically segregated neighborhoods, the two enclaves were social worlds apart. By examining the story of Barraza and her two restaurants, we can gain a sense of how the formation of multicultural spaces helped erode the isolation of ethnic enclaves, providing both the impetus and the means for immigrants to cross the color line. These spaces shaped whom immigrants socialized and did business with, and whom they called their neighbors.

7. Among specifically Latino-owned businesses, it was rare to operate outside of Latino ethnic enclaves or to serve broader, non-Latino communities. See Geraldo L. Cadava, "Entrepreneurs from the Beginning: Latino Business & Commerce since the 16th Century," in National Park Service Advisory Board, *American Latinos and the Making of the United States: A Theme Study* (Washington, DC, 2013).



Place-Making: Map of Natalia Barraza's restaurants, El Nayarit #1 and #2, and other establishments opened by her former employees with her encouragement, in reference to their Los Angeles neighborhoods. Map by Steven Bouton.

ECHO PARK AS A CULTURAL CROSSROADS

Echo Park is located northeast of downtown Los Angeles in a bustling corridor that includes four freeways that are among the busiest in the United States.⁸ Sunset Boulevard connects Echo Park to Hollywood, which lies just five miles to the northwest. Elysian Park, now home to Dodger Stadium and the Los Angeles Police Academy, sits in Echo Park's backyard. Being a geographic crossroads positioned Echo Park to become a cultural crossroads as well.

Unlike the Los Angeles County cities of Compton, South Gate, and San Fernando, which explicitly espoused racial segregation, and East Los Angeles, which experienced *de facto* segregation, Echo Park could claim a much more diverse population and history. Historically, it had been part of a larger region called Edendale that included neighboring Silver Lake and parts of Elysian Park. It had a long tradition of being home to creative groups—architects, Hollywood studio employees, printmakers, and other assorted artists—attracted in part by the neighborhood's more affordable rents. Echo Park also

8. The bordering highways are the Hollywood freeway (101), Interstate 5 (the main West Coast freeway, running from the U.S.-Mexico border to the U.S.-Canada border), and the 110 freeway. California State Route 2 (which connects the 101 with the 5 or the 134 freeway) traverses Echo Park.

drew marginalized groups. Political leftists and Communist party affiliates appreciated the area's congenial environment and public meeting places, such as the local bookstore. Gay men also found a receptive community there and formed groups that helped them express their identity politics.⁹ And, lastly, Echo Park attracted white residents with progressive and radical politics who were known for reaching across the color line and demonstrating a shared sense of struggle with racialized groups.

In my book, *How Race Is Made in America*, I write more broadly about connections across the color line based on people's shared experiences of discrimination. In the book, I introduce the term *racial scripts* to highlight the ways in which the lives of racialized groups are linked across time and space and thereby affect one another, even when group members do not directly cross paths. Some of Echo Park's white activists had experienced injustice themselves or had witnessed it first-hand. Despite their different social, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, they worked toward the common goal of attacking the roots of systemic injustice. During the 1940s, key Echo Park activists included Alice McGrath, who was instrumental in the defense and support of young Mexican men who were charged in the infamous Sleepy Lagoon murder case; community organizer Fred Ross, who helped found the Community Service Organization, a civil rights group that aimed to empower the Mexican and Mexican American community; African American civil rights attorney Loren Miller, who argued against restrictive covenants before the Supreme Court¹⁰; and noted author, attorney, and political gadfly Carey McWilliams, who, among many other significant contributions to social justice and multiracial and multicultural causes, served as head of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee.

These individuals and the generally progressive politics that characterized Echo Park before and after World War II left their mark and helped establish a legacy and identity for the area. By the 1950s, when the larger El Nayarit was in place, Echo Park was experiencing white

9. Tom Sitton, "Another Generation of Urban Reformers: Los Angeles in the 1930s," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1987): 321, 24; Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 221, 329, 60.

10. I thank Mike Amezcua for informing me of Miller's residency.

flight like many other areas of Los Angeles. As some white residents relocated to other parts of the city and the suburbs, Mexicans, and some Asians, attracted by low housing prices, replaced these residents. In addition to the white residents who chose to remain during this period, another influx of whites with progressive politics arrived throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. New residents included Leo Politi (1908–1966), an Italian American children’s book author whose work celebrated cultural diversity; Allan Sekula (1951–2013) an artist, photographer, and filmmaker whose work critiqued capitalism and garnered awards from the Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities; and Mike Davis (1946–), a founder of the LA School of Urban Studies and MacArthur Genius Award winner.¹¹

Jackie Goldberg, a teacher, politician, activist, and Echo Park resident since 1967, also deserves mention here. She joined with parents in the area in the 1970s to open a residential day-care center that offered affordable childcare to Echo Park residents. The group worked to get more municipal funding for childcare centers and to change zoning codes to allow for centers in residential neighborhoods. Because of their efforts, fifteen other day-care centers opened, offering affordable day care for working-class families.¹² Goldberg went on to become president of the Los Angeles Board of Education, to hold a seat on the Los Angeles City Council (where she authored and helped pass a living-wage ordinance), and to serve as a California State Assembly representative.¹³ Goldberg, Sekula, Davis, and others I mentioned previously are whites who clearly could have traded in their 1920s Craftsman bungalows in Echo Park for ranch houses in a new suburban development but instead chose to remain in or move to Echo Park, where they would be around people with a similar urban sensibility and, likely, similar politics.

The actions of individuals such as those I have been describing may not have the same weighty impact on people’s quality of life or opportunities to advance as do the historical legacies of the discriminatory home loan practices of the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s that adversely affected Echo Park or the uneven allocation

11. “Historic Echo Park,” <http://historicechopark.org/id114.html>, accessed February 8, 2014.

12. “Day-Care Center Teaches Commitment Echo Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 03, 1990.

13. http://totalcapitol.com/?people_id=4, accessed March 20, 2014.

of government resources across city neighborhoods and racial groups.¹⁴ But our understanding of the history of Los Angeles would be incomplete without examining the legacy of the place-makers who worked to better race relations in the city even if their efforts did not directly translate into policy. The familial bonds they developed and their affective relationship to this space opened up opportunities for Mexican immigrants. As these newcomers moved into the cultural crossroads of Echo Park, they could feel safe, develop a sense of belonging, and imagine opportunities that Mexican immigrants living and working elsewhere at this same time—in agricultural fieldwork in the Southwest, for example—could not even dream of.

Echo Park's legacy of progressive politics likely contributed to the fact that when my grandmother opened her restaurant, no "neighborhood committee" greeted her to "suggest" she would be happier if she established her business elsewhere. This was in stark contrast with the experience of other entrepreneurs and homebuyers, such as blacks, who, immediately after buying a new home, were "encouraged" (often with thinly veiled threats of violence) to move, as Lorraine Hansberry famously captured in the ending of her book, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). No bricks were thrown through Natalia Barraza's windows; no racial epithets were painted on the outside walls of El Nayarit.

Historically, Mexicans in the U.S. have been able to walk the color line more easily than blacks.¹⁵ But in cities like Los Angeles, the specificity of place, not just race, affected their ability to do so. By 1950, Barraza owned two restaurants and her own home. In contrast, during this same time period but in a different part of Los Angeles, City Councilman Edward Roybal, the first Mexican American to be elected to the council in the twentieth century, had a very different experience. A real estate agent bluntly told Roybal that he could not

14. Historians have closely examined the ways in which poor and working-class areas have been subjected to negative acts, policies, and cultural representations that disadvantage these areas and their residents for generations to come. See Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

15. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

sell him a home in a new housing development located in the new councilman's own ninth district because Roybal was "a Mexican."¹⁶

But it wasn't just *de facto* or *de jure* residential segregation that kept people of color from moving freely throughout the city. Concerned for their own safety or because they did not want to be harassed or targeted by suspicious or threatening glances, many racialized peoples did not often venture outside their neighborhoods, except to go to work. For example, historian Josh Sides cites various examples of African Americans in the postwar period who experienced police harassment, arrests, and violence simply for being in areas where they were unwelcome.¹⁷ These acts of self-policing would have effects for decades to come. Of course, this does not mean that people of color did not challenge boundaries. The work of Luis Alvarez, Anthony Macías, and Scott Kurashige, mentioned at the start of this article, along with Danny Widener's study of the development of black visual arts communities that spread throughout Los Angeles in the postwar period, exemplify how people of color could seek opportunities, collaborations, or simply a good time outside their neighborhoods, even when doing so challenged accepted boundaries.¹⁸

Living and working in Echo Park, however, removed the need to actively look for opportunities to cross cultural boundaries. People from different racial, class, and sexual communities came there. They were the ones who did the boundary crossing. Other areas, like East Los Angeles, became more rather than less isolated in the post-World War II period owing to a combination of white flight, disinvestment by local governments in the urban core, and deindustrialization.¹⁹ In addition, other factors, including the sprawling, fragmented manner in which Los Angeles developed, historical segregation, and a new layer of segregation in the postwar era spurred by white flight and suburbanization, further minimized encounters between different racialized groups and whites.

16. Sánchez, "Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism," 52, 54.

17. Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American in Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); 136, for example.

18. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

19. George Sánchez, "'What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews': Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside During the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 633–661.

Understanding Echo Park as a multicultural crossroads reveals ways in which the experiences of Mexicans who lived and/or worked in this area differed from those of people in more traditional Mexican ethnic enclaves. Until very recently, the majority of historical studies of ethnic groups have centered on a specific group and have not examined that group's relationship to and with other racialized groups or their alliances with whites. The fact that racialized groups often live in ethnically segregated neighborhoods means that studies focusing on particular neighborhoods as a unit of analysis may inadvertently miss opportunities for a more comparative perspective due to the lack of diversity in the geographic area under study. Thus, ethnic history fields have developed separately not only because Chicanas/os, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans historically have been studied separately but also because many of the studies are circumscribed by *place*.

Consider some of the signal publications produced in Chicana/o history in the 1980s. These works are limited not just to the study of a single ethnic group but to a specific location as well. Examples include *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio*; *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930*; and *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945–1975*.²⁰ These are unquestionably foundational works upon which future scholars will continue to rely. Yet studies in highly segregated areas foreclose lines of inquiry which might arise organically in a more diverse space. The presence of diversity is more likely to prompt researchers to consider the ways in which a racialized identity is also shaped by those outside an individual's national group—people encountered while commuting on public transportation, for instance, or at church, or during union meetings, or while socializing at restaurants.

My point here is not that Echo Park was some kind of multicultural utopia. It was not. Rather, it was an area that did not contend with the great weight of a history of racial covenants and strictly

20. Richard Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 204; Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Rodolfo F. Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945–1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publication, University of California Los Angeles, 1984), 646.

enforced Jim Crow or “Jaime Crow” segregation.²¹ The absence of those burdens permitted opportunities for more frequent and positive interactions between entrepreneurs, customers, and local residents, which in turn set the stage for the growth of meaningful bonds across the color line. Examining the story of the second El Nayarit restaurant, first from the perspective of its customer base and then from the perspective of its employees, lets us see how multicultural and multi-racial interactions and bonds developed.

EL NAYARIT AS A SOCIAL CROSSROADS

The Customers

Barraza’s restaurant was more than a place to get a meal. It was a social space. El Nayarit’s core customers were working-class Mexicans. They looked forward to eating the foods they enjoyed and craved, but they also knew they would be able to relax, speak in their mother tongue, and readily bump into friends and countrymen, just as residents of most ethnic enclaves do at their local establishments. The restaurant remained open until 5:00 a.m. every day. It regularly had a nightly rush around two in the morning with the arrival of employees who had finished their shifts at other local restaurants and businesses—busboys who had clocked out at the Ambassador Hotel, bartenders who had cashed out at the Beverly Wilshire, and cooks and waitresses at other local restaurants where the kitchens had closed for the night. El Nayarit was where working people came to assume—or in some cases create—their full identities, ones that went beyond who they were as laborers. A busboy wasn’t a laborer here; he was the fellow with the great voice who sang with a trio; a waitress from another restaurant became a new woman, transformed as she replaced her uniform with a beautiful dress.

The restaurant offered these customers a sense of belonging, yet it was also, to some degree, a cosmopolitan space. Movie stars, athletes, musicians, and singers came on a regular basis. In fact, it was this kind of clientele that helped the Echo Park restaurant get its start. Despite the first El Nayarit’s success, the second one got off to a slow start. That changed the evening when two famous boxers fought at the restaurant over, what else, a woman. The fight was between Lauro

21. Historian Albert Camarillo coined this term for the racial segregation directed at Mexicans in the Southwest. See Albert M. Camarillo, “Navigating Segregated Life in America’s Racial Borderhoods, 1910s–1950s,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (2013).

Salas, a highly successful Mexican featherweight boxer, who would go on to win the World Lightweight Championship the next year, and Arturo Aragón, nicknamed “the Golden Boy.” A Mexican American, Aragón was a top-ranked lightweight who had dated actress Mamie Van Doren and could claim friendships with a string of star-



Regular customers and employees at El Nayarit at its re-opening in 1967 after a fire. The restaurant had been shut down for repairs after a customer left a cigarette smoldering overnight, causing the fire. Maria Molina (Barraza's daughter) in black dress on left; Barraza's sister-in-law, Rosario "Chayo" Cueva, cook and later cashier, in white dress, right of center; Barraza's nephew, Pedro Cueva, waiter and later piano player, peeking over the latter's shoulder; and Salvador "Chavo" Barrajas, prior cook, who lived in Barraza's home for many years after immigrating to the U.S., to the right of Rosario "Chayo" Cueva, holding her hand. *Photo provided by author.*

lets, including Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Sophia Loren, and Betty Martin (Dean Martin's ex-wife).²² That night Salas beat Aragón. When the two met the next year, in a sold-out match at Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, Aragón beat Salas. Both boxers

22. "Colorful L.A. Boxer in the '40s and '50s," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2008.

remained regular customers. For years, Salas would remind Barraza's daughter, Maria, about the restaurant fight, asking, "But who won the night we fought at the Nayarit?" and then answering, "Me!" The real winner that night, though, was the restaurant. News of the fight spread instantly and ended up on the front page of the local paper the next day. Business at El Nayarit picked up quickly as new customers came, eager to see where the fight had taken place.

Among the famous personalities the restaurant attracted, there were people from both the American and Latin entertainment industry and from the world of baseball. A brief review of some of these celebrities, baseball players, musicians, and singers is one way to see that many famous personalities of the period did not lead isolated lives as "Latin musicians" or "American actors." Paying attention not only to the people they starred with and collaborated with but also to those they ate and socialized with shows that in their personal and work lives there were many opportunities for mingling across the color line.

Marlon Brando was a regular customer who became friends with Barraza's daughter, Maria. The two would sit and talk when he visited the restaurant; he also called her at home to talk. Brando asked out women he met at the restaurant, including, in one case, El Nayarit's eighteen-year-old cashier, Evelia Díaz Barraza. Before she could accept the invitation, Evelia had to ask permission of Barraza, who was not only her boss but also her aunt and guardian. According to an often-repeated family story, when Barraza asked her niece what Brando wanted, Evelia, not understanding the meaning of the phrase, replied that he said that he wanted to make love. Brando went home alone that night. He remained a loyal customer, nevertheless. During the Christmas season, El Nayarit staff often distributed promotional keepsakes to their loyal customers. One year they gave out wallets. Brando carried his El Nayarit wallet for years, implying a sentimental attachment to the restaurant and suggesting that he was doing more than just cultural "slumming."²³

The restaurant drew other famous actors and actresses as well. For instance, the Puerto Rican actress and singer Rita Moreno, who dated

23. Chad C. Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Lon Kurashige also discusses cases of whites coming into LA's Little Tokyo for a sense of adventure and voyeurism, Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Los Angeles, 1934–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Brando for many years, came to El Nayarit. Moreno's portrayal of Anita in the movie *Westside Story* (1961), for which she won an Oscar, gave young Latinas their first chance to see someone who looked like them playing an important role in a Hollywood movie. The Mexican cinema star Emilio Fernández, nicknamed "El Indio," also frequented the restaurant. In addition to acting, El Indio was a screenwriter and director. He won the "Grand Prix," the highest prize then offered at the Cannes Film Festival, in 1946 for his direction of the film *Maria Candelaria*. Notably, El Indio was the model for the figure on the Academy award known as the Oscar. He was friends with the famous Mexican movie star Dolores del Río, who introduced him to her future husband, Cedric Gibbons. Gibbons was the MGM art director responsible for designing the statuette. He picked El Indio to pose for it.²⁴ (That's right: The figure is not an "Oscar"; it's an "Óscar.")

Musicians and singers came to the restaurant after they had finished their sets. Some were famous: Tito Puente, dubbed the "King of Latin Music"; Xavier Cugat, the Spanish American bandleader; Abbe Lane, the Jewish singer, dancer, and actress married to Cugat at this time; and Latin jazz musician Cal Tjader. Other entertainers who stopped in after performing at local clubs like Club Virginia in MacArthur Park or Club Havana in Silver Lake were not as well known, but they too enjoyed the food, laughter, and socializing.²⁵ Club customers came to El Nayarit, too, lured by the flyers Barraza had her employees put on car windshields just before the big Latin dances ended for the night at the clubs.²⁶

Baseball players, especially Latino players from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, were frequent customers, although most were from visiting teams as the Dodgers had very few Latino ball-players in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, the Dominican brothers Felipe, Jesus, and Matty Alou, one of baseball's noted families, were customers when they were in town. Giants player Juan Marichal, also from the Dominican Republic, visited El Nayarit frequently enough

24. Luis Reyes and Peter Rubie, *Hispanics in Hollywood: A Celebration of 100 Years in Film and Television* (Hollywood: Lone Eagle Pub., 2000).

25. Macías, *Mexican American Mojo*, fn 89, page 340. For more on these musicians and the music scene in LA at the time, also see Macías.

26. Barraza also regularly advertised on a popular daytime Spanish radio show hosted by Martin Becerra, who also served as the master of ceremonies for shows at the Million Dollar Theatre. "Romance Singer Celebrates 100 Year Milestone," Eastside Group Publications, July 5, 2012, <http://egpnews.com/2012/07/romance-singer-celebrates-100-year-milestone/>, accessed March 23, 2014.

to become friends with Maria. He would sit and talk to her while she closed up, and then she would drop him off at the Ambassador Hotel, where he stayed when he was in Los Angeles.²⁷

As this round-up of customers from diverse backgrounds suggests, El Nayarit drew a varied group of people who, despite differences, shared enough characteristics to feel comfortable together, eating and socializing in a shared space. This social comfort seems to reflect a version of the pan-Latino identity that scholars have termed *Latinidad*, an overarching identity involving “a collective sense of cultural affinity and identity deeply rooted in what many Latinos perceive to be a shared historical, spiritual, aesthetic, and linguistic heritage.”²⁸ Scholars credit this phenomenon as developing in the aftermath of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Cellar Act), which abolished the national quota system established by the 1924 Immigration Act. Two major changes occurred in the wake of the 1965 law: immigration increased dramatically, and the countries of origin represented in the largest immigrant streams changed considerably. Most surprisingly to many, immigration from Latin America and Asia expanded swiftly. It was this rise in numbers and diversity of a Latin American population that made a pan-Latino identity possible, at least from a demographic standpoint.

During the 1950s and 1960s in Los Angeles, “Mexican” was the default pan-Latino identity. El Nayarit was a microcosm of *Latinidad*. There were few Mexican restaurants in the city run by and for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. El Nayarit attracted not just Mexicans but other Latin American minorities in the area, whether permanent residents or visitors. These actors, musicians, singers, and ball players may have differed from the Mexicans they mingled with at the restaurant in terms of the kinds of music they usually listened to, the foods they ate, and the way they spoke Spanish, but their shared sense of *Latinidad* likely made El Nayarit a haven while they were in town.

27. On Latino baseball players in the major leagues, see Adrian Burgos, *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

28. David Gutiérrez, ed. *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States since 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

The Workforce

The restaurant's employees, like their core clientele, were working-class Mexicans, many from the state of Nayarit. Barraza sponsored dozens of family members and friends from her hometown. The restaurant provided them with a safe place to begin adapting to their new surroundings, a luxury Barraza had not had when she arrived. Some worked at El Nayarit for six months to a year. They saved money, intending to return home and buy a car or start a small business in Nayarit; or they simply wanted to accumulate savings for the future while having an adventure before they settled down. For those who wanted to build a life in Los Angeles, Barraza served as an official sponsor in the immigration process so that these newcomers could attain their green cards. She required all recently arrived friends and family members to study English during the day and work in the restaurant at night. While few became fluent, the acquisition of English not only allowed them to communicate with their non-Spanish speaking customers but also enabled them to more freely explore the city during their leisure time. She opened her home, which was five blocks from the restaurant, to those who needed lodging. Barraza was generous with the profits she made at the restaurant, paying family and friends' travel costs, immigration application expenses, and, eventually, helping many establish their own homes. Employees also regularly received moderate cash bonuses on busy nights. Thus, the restaurant provided a ready-made social network that helped a newly arrived immigrant find his or her place in Los Angeles.

In the post-World War II era, Mexicans and Mexican Americans organized to end segregation and gain equal rights through various organizations. In some cases, the ideologies, memberships, and tactics of these groups diverged greatly. For example, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), founded in 1929, was strongly middle class; its members embraced an assimilationist approach, demanded civil rights as Americans, and emphasized their Caucasian, not indigenous, roots. Other groups organized across citizenship lines, fighting for Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike. *El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española* (the Congress of Spanish-speaking Peoples) is one example. It was formally established during a national convention in 1939. The majority of delegates hailed from California, from Los Angeles in particular. Other Mexicans and Mexican



Rosario “Chayo” Cueva, Natalia Barraza, and Luisa Cota (her cousin) in Acaponeta, Mexico, at the wedding of her nephew, Luis Díaz, to Livier Tejeda.

Photo provided by author.

Americans organized for rights as workers, joining unions that were not racially segregated, such as the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA).²⁹

Neither Barraza nor her employees were politically active or engaged in social movements. This is not surprising, given that they were not citizens and could not vote. Nor was this lack of formal engagement atypical of immigrants of their generation. Of the 629,000 Mexican residents in Los Angeles in 1960, only about 2 percent were registered to vote.³⁰ Of course, there were organizations such as the Congress of Spanish-speaking Peoples where they would have been welcome. Perhaps El Nayarit employees did not seek out

29. Thomas A. Guglielmo, “Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4; David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

30. Rodolfo Acuña, *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1996), 47.

organizational alliances because they were already part of a social network that met many of their needs.

In addition, although Barraza and her workforce were proud of their Mexican identity, they were more oriented toward their home state of Nayarit and their specific hometowns than they were toward Mexico as a nation.³¹ No festive gathering of Nayarit employees ever failed to include the playing of the state's anthem, "El Corrido de Nayarit," a lively song that begins, "I am proud to be from Nayarit" and continues with lyrics that reinforce that pride with shout-outs to the state's cities and small towns. They kept up their relationships and ties with family and friends in Mexico through visits home, phone calls, letters, and gifts. They also subscribed to *El Eco de Nayarit*, a weekly paper that covered news from both the Mexican state and expat activities in the United States, thus connecting diasporic countrymen in this imagined community. Yet, despite their fierce pride as *Nayaritas* (people from Nayarit) and deep connection to Nayarit, no one at El Nayarit expressed a strong desire to return to Mexico to live. They chose to remain in the United States and be Mexican in America.

It was not unusual for individuals who were heading to Nayarit for a visit to take one or two extra suitcases filled with luxury items like clothing, make-up, perfume, and See's candies. Some of these items were distributed to their own family members; others were delivered to their coworkers' loved ones. At the end of visits home, those same suitcases would be re-filled, this time with gifts such as a baptismal gown, wedding favors, or specialty foods and other items hard to get in the U.S., all sent by relatives in Nayarit to their family and friends in Los Angeles. On her own regular trips to Nayarit, Barraza, too, brought gifts. She also brought donations and gifts for Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, the Catholic church in her home town of Acaponeta, which could be raffled to raise money. Her actions reflect a long tradition among ethnic entrepreneurs of using their economic success not only for their own benefit but for the good of their communities in the U.S. and in their country of origin.³²

31. See Monroy on the transition from a regional to a national Mexican identity. Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

32. Cadava, "Entrepreneurs from the Beginning," 222.

Unlike businesses that catered to tourists, such as those that lined Olvera Street, Barraza and her employees did not try to whitewash their Mexican heritage to make it more palatable to a diverse or middle-class clientele.³³ The restaurant held events that celebrated their ethnic heritage, such as Mexican Independence Day on September 16th. These were not promotional undertakings that sold culture to bring in more customers, as commonly happens today with Cinco de Mayo. They were occasions for displaying their pride in their ethnic heritage. The staff proudly hung the Mexican flag; the hostesses donned beautiful, traditional Mexican dresses; and everyone partook in the “Grito,” a long shout traditionally called out on the evening of September 15th and followed by cries of “Viva Mexico!”

In the mid-1960s, the organizers of the Hollywood Christmas parade invited El Nayarit employees to participate. They agreed and took the opportunity to display their ethnic heritage. About six staff and visiting family members dressed in Huichol attire. The clothing is often white cotton, decorated with symbolic designs, including water, snakes, and deer, cross-stitched by hand in vibrant colors. Huichol hats are constructed of palm leaves and adorned with feathers on top and colorful beads that hang down from the brim of the hat. The decision to wear these clothes in the parade is noteworthy, given the long history of assimilation politics that Mexicans in the U.S. embraced or were pressured to adopt. A public display of one’s indigenous background carried the risk of reprisals, including a limitation of hard-earned rights and privileges.³⁴

El Nayarit employees were exposed to politics first-hand through events that took place at the restaurant. The newly formed Mexican American Bar Association held regular meetings there (although they considered El Farrolito in East Los Angeles their official meeting spot). These meetings brought in customers from different class and

33. See, for example, Vicki L. Ruiz, “Citizen Restaurant: American Imaginaries, American Communities,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

34. On the costs of an indigenous heritage for Mexicans, see Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2014), Chapter Two: “‘What is a White Man?’: The Quest to Make Mexicans Ineligible for U.S. Citizenship”; Martha Menchaca, “Chicano Indianism: A Historical Account of Racial Repression in the United States,” *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 3 (1993).



Senator Robert Kennedy had won a place in the hearts of Mexicans and Mexican Americans by supporting the United Farmworkers' grape strike. It was from Kennedy that César Chávez (right) accepted bread on March 10, 1968, to end his 25-day fast in Delano, California. Helen Chávez is on the left. *Richard Darby, Photographer. Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.*

geographic backgrounds and provided restaurant staff with potential opportunities to seek these customers' counsel. Also, Los Angeles City Councilman and later US Congressional Representative Edward Roybal (mentioned earlier) regularly held meetings and banquets at El Nayarit, where he would also spend time talking to the employees.³⁵

Other connections to political figures were more tragic. In 1967, Barraza decided to get a liquor license for the restaurant. Neither she nor Maria knew how to run a bar, so in January 1968, Maria enrolled in a six-week course at the International School of Bartending on Sunset Boulevard. She was paired with another student in the course,

35. Roybal served on the city council from 1949 to 1962; he spent the next thirty years (1963–1993) serving in the House Representatives. He is remembered, in part, for his multiracial coalitions.

James Earl Ray. Soon after their training ended, Ray left Los Angeles and traveled to Memphis, where he assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.³⁶

Two months later, three of the regular customers of El Nayarit, Hector Molina (my father), Bobby Salcedo, and Victor Arreaga, all bartenders who worked at the Ambassador Hotel, were on the job while presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy was a guest at the hotel. Although none of them had a chance to meet Kennedy directly, another Mexican immigrant from Nayarit, Juan Romero, a seventeen-year-old busboy, did. Meeting a Kennedy was considered a distinct honor. Bobby Kennedy had won a place in the hearts of Mexicans and Mexican Americans by supporting the United Farmworkers' grape strike, meeting with César Chávez, and being with Chávez when he ended his twenty-five day hunger strike earlier that year. Romero, who made a room-service delivery to Kennedy, recalled, "He shook my hand as hard as anyone has ever shaken it. . . . I walked out of there 20 feet tall, thinking, 'I'm not just a busboy, I'm a human being.'" ³⁷

Certainly, few guests at the Ambassador (or customers at El Nayarit) had the aura or credentials of a Kennedy, but Romero's brush with greatness gives some sense of how individuals who worked in places outside of their own ethnic enclave might find themselves in contact with people they would otherwise not likely meet and indicates that such experiences could be formative for working-class, Mexican immigrants like Romero and the employees of El Nayarit.³⁸

Romero had one final encounter with Kennedy. After winning the California primary and delivering his victory speech, Kennedy tried to avoid the throngs of supporters by going through the hotel's kitchen. Romero stood in the crowd gathered in the kitchen. Kennedy reached out and shook Romero's hand just before Sirhan Sirhan fired the shots that killed Kennedy. He fell to the floor in front of Romero, who knelt to help him, reaching his hand under Kennedy's head to support it. Ethel Kennedy then pushed him aside in order to

36. For details of Ray's time in Los Angeles, see Gerald L. Posner, *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1st Harvest ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999).

37. "Ex-Busboy Will Never Forget Bobby Kennedy," by Steve Lopez, *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2003.

38. Ibid.

kneel next to her husband. Romero's final contact was to press his own rosary beads into Kennedy's hand.³⁹

Employees at El Nayarit, few of whom were citizens, felt a special connection to RFK's assassination because their regular customers, the three Ambassador bartenders, were at the hotel that night and shared their experiences with El Nayarit staff. The police and FBI had kept everyone who was at the hotel at the time of the shooting overnight for questioning. No one was released until morning. Knowing that a fellow countryman, Romero, had tried to offer Kennedy comfort in his last moments also deeply touched them. Though these workers didn't participate in the Chicana/o movement, they could still feel a part of its history through these kinds of connections.

Perhaps because Barraza was exposed to so many people from different backgrounds and from different parts of the city, she encouraged her daughter and the relatives she sponsored to broaden their horizons. Once a month, she urged them to explore a different part of town, take in a show, and dine at a fine restaurant. She would lend her female relatives her nice clothes and jewelry so that they could dress up. Vicky, one of Maria's younger cousins, worked at El Nayarit (as did Vicky's brother, Pedro, and mother, Rosario) and recalls those days fondly. "I didn't know anything when I got here," she told me. "I just used to do whatever Maria did when we went out. They would ask her, 'What would you like to drink?' and she'd coolly answer, 'A Tom Collins.' So I would also get a Tom Collins."⁴⁰ The restaurant thus not only provided a social network in terms of work and a place to live. It also supplied a kind of social capital for recently arrived immigrants.

I asked Maria if she thought her mother might have been trying to elicit respect from others or demonstrate that she was now a woman of some means by encouraging her relatives to go out to chic locations. She seemed taken aback by my suggestions. She answered, "No, when we went out to nice restaurants or a dance, we had to be back at the restaurant before the late night rush. We'd get back, change out of our nice dresses and into our uniforms and get straight to work. When we went to Mexico and stayed with her family, she still preferred to sleep on a cot like she did growing up. My mother also had

39. Ibid.

40. Vicky Tavares, personal conversation with author, March 8, 2014.

us visit poor areas and stay in modest places when we visited Mexico. She just wanted us to learn. She said it was important to know both.”⁴¹ Learning to navigate in both the familiar local community and the posh areas of town was made possible, in part, by the fact that El Nayarit’s customers included a diverse and often cosmopolitan mix. This positioned its employees to have interactions and experiences that connected them to what historian Anthony Macías has termed the “multicultural urban civility” of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles.⁴² Their workplace experiences, when combined with Barraza’s encouragement and their English acquisition, helped El Nayarit’s working-class staff seek new opportunities and venture into places where they were not likely to resemble the average clientele. In this way, these employees were not just *place makers* but *place takers*.⁴³

Barraza died in 1969, after a steady but quick decline. Her death was commemorated in Los Angeles and in her home town in Mexico. Her funeral mass was held at the historic La Placita Catholic church next to Olvera Street. There were so many mourners that they could not all fit in the church. The radio station Radio Express played “Las Golondrinas,” a traditional farewell song in her honor after her death. Barraza had made monetary donations to the church in her home town of Acaponeta, Nayarit, for many years. The money helped finance the construction of a bell tower. When she died, the bells were rung to commemorate her passing.

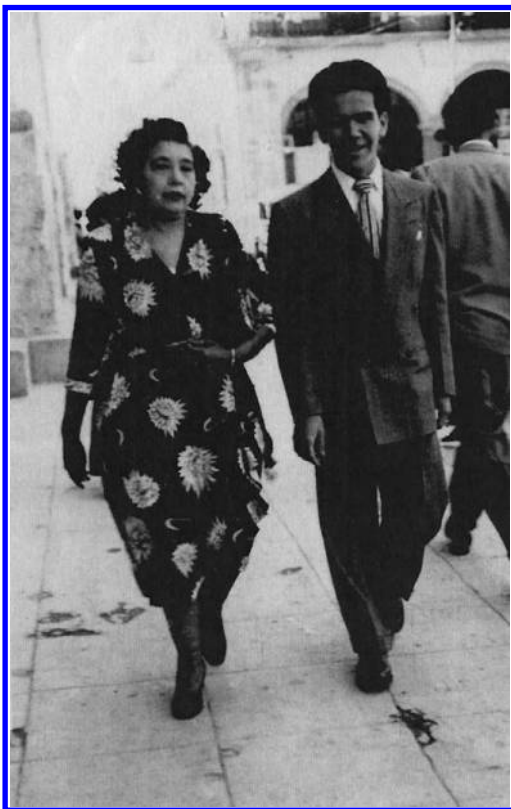
MAKING PLACE

Even after Barraza died and El Nayarit closed, she continued to serve as a place-maker through the businesses launched by former El Nayarit employees. Some took the skills and knowledge they acquired working for her and opened their own Mexican restaurants in the same area. In time, these became cultural landmarks in their own right. Barraza provided the initial seed money for one restaurant—Barragan’s—and moral support for the others. The owners of the

41. Maria Molina, interview by Natalia Molina, March 8, 2014.

42. Macías, *Mexican American Mojo*.

43. I draw on rich works that help lead me to a tradition of immigrants as *place takers* including George Lipsitz’s theory of the “black spatial imagination” and Robin Kelley’s the “moving theatre.” See Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011). On new and exciting works coming out in this area, see Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).



Natalia Barraza and Ramón Barragan in Guadalajara, Mexico. Barraza provided the original seed money with which Barragan, one of the original cooks at El Nayarit, opened his own restaurant, Barragan's, three blocks east of El Nayarit, in 1961.

Photo provided by author.

restaurants, all of which were located on Sunset Boulevard (some within walking distance of El Nayarit), supported one another and often patronized each other's businesses (See map page 77).

Taken in the aggregate, these restaurants helped establish an extended community along Sunset Boulevard where Mexicans and Mexican Americans, single people and families, working-class and middle-class, gay and straight, felt comfortable. Each restaurant also served as a place-maker, providing a welcoming landing pad, a familiar home away from home. For some people, the restaurants even held out the possibility of adventure. Like El Nayarit, they did not have a monolithic customer base but served as cultural crossroads themselves.

In 1961, one of the original cooks at El Nayarit, Ramón Barragan, whose mother was childhood friends with Barraza, established a small restaurant three blocks east of El Nayarit and six blocks west of Dodger Stadium. When it first opened, the restaurant could serve a maximum of twenty-five customers. Barragan worked the back of the house as the cook, while his wife, Grace, worked the front, waiting on customers. Barragan's became a cultural landmark, acknowledged several times over the years by local politicians; the mayor's office issued official certificates of recognition to the restaurant. Barragan's served movie stars, Dodger players, and, once, Prince Philip of Spain, but like El Nayarit it retained a solid working-class Mexican customer base. Barragan, despite his limited English, was eventually able to expand the restaurant to

a seven-thousand-square-foot establishment that could accommodate three hundred customers. He also opened two additional restaurants, in Burbank and in Glendale.⁴⁴

Another restaurant, La Villa Taxco, was founded in 1959 by Vicky Tamayo, a former waitress at El Nayarit, and her husband Ernie. Vicky, who was Ramón Barragan's sister, and Ernie, who had an eighth-grade education in Mexico, opened their first restaurant in Silver Lake, which neighbors Echo Park where Sunset and Hollywood boulevards split, the gateway into Hollywood. Together, they grew the restaurant into a chain of nine establishments that spanned Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties. Fifteen years after the chain was sold, people were still writing to the *Los Angeles Times* food section asking the paper to republish past columns that featured the restaurant's enchilada sauce recipe (the secret is Mexican chocolate).⁴⁵

Across the street from La Villa Taxco, Ricardo de la Garza, with the help of his partner/boyfriend, Salvador "Chavo" Barrajas, both former waiters from El Nayarit, opened El Chavo around this same time. House margaritas and a spicy salsa roja were among the centerpieces of its menu.⁴⁶ After Chavo and Ricardo separated, Chavo opened his own Sunset Boulevard restaurant in 1973. Called El Conquistador, the restaurant was a few blocks east of El Chavo, on the border of Echo Park and Silver Lake. It became an unofficial headquarters for the Mexican and gay communities alike. The restaurant highlighted Mexican dishes and, like El Chavo, served lethal margaritas. El Conquistador's staff consisted mainly of Mexican immigrants, many of whom were gay men, as were the owners, Chavo and his new partner, Jesus "Jesse" Pinto. El Conquistador signaled its gay-friendly attitude in part through its bold aesthetic (described by one newspaper columnist as "caliente kitsch"), which included paintings of female gay icons like Liza Minnelli and Marilyn Monroe, bright and showy seasonal decor, and a waiter named Ricardo De La Torre, who dressed festively for holidays, including coat and tails paired with bunny ears and tail for Easter.⁴⁷

44. "Natalia Barraza," *Nayarit En California*.

45. "A Humble Start," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1984, 15; "Enchiladas from La Villa Taxco," April 24, 2002.

46. "Roundabout," Lois Dwan, *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1974, M50.

47. "Caliente Kitsch," Lina Lecaro, *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1, 2012, <http://www.lamag.com/laculture/culturefilesblog/2012/05/01/caliente-kitsch>, accessed January 10, 2014.

El Conquistador's openly gay environment signaled a new era. Police raids of bars where gays congregated were common in the 1950s and 1960s and often led to police abuse and arrests of the gay clientele. But in 1969, when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in New York City's Greenwich Village, patrons not only fought back that night but did so for several more nights and were joined by community members. The uprising is now commonly referred to as the Stonewall Riots. These local protests grew into a larger movement to stop the ongoing abuse. While Stonewall is typically seen as the catalyst for kicking off the gay liberation movement, two years prior a similar altercation happened in a Silver Lake bar, the Black Cat, located two blocks from where El Conquistador would later open. In the Silver Lake case, police arrested and beat fourteen patrons on New Year's Eve, 1966. Two men who were arrested for kissing another man were tried and convicted under state law. They were required to register as sex offenders. The arrests prompted hundreds of protestors to decry the police and legal actions, which sparked new efforts to improve the treatment of gays. The Black Cat is now considered the home of the gay liberation movement in Los Angeles and is an official historic-cultural monument.⁴⁸

From its beginning, El Conquistador aimed to establish itself as a place for people to come together. The restaurant was a central site for gay and gay-friendly groups to congregate during Sunset Junction, the gay street festival that transformed the community every August from 1980 through 2010. El Conquistador was located in part of the five-block area cordoned off for the festival. The festival, which grew to attract tens of thousands of people before permit issues and a backlog of debts brought it to an end, was originally conceived as a way to ease rising tensions as the neighborhood's long-time Latino residents grew increasingly concerned about being displaced by the influx of gay and lesbian newcomers. Restaurants such as El Conquistador served as one of the few common grounds.⁴⁹

A final business linked to Barraza opened in 1967, when Evelia Pack, Barraza's niece (and the El Nayarit cashier who had caught Brando's eye), joined her husband and his family in launching

48. "Silver Lake Bar Recognized for Gay Rights Activism," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2008, B3.

49. "Influx of Newcomers Changing Sunset Junction Neighborhood," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, December 9, 2002: 26.

a mom-and-pop neighborhood market just off Sunset Boulevard. The name of the market, El Batey, refers to a sugar refinery building, an allusion to Pack's husband's Cuban roots. Seven days a week for almost fifty years, Evelia worked as the cashier and place-maker at her market, greeting customers with a smile, connecting regulars with one another, sometimes cooking for them and other local shopkeepers and, at other times, being a guest at their tables. A *Los Angeles Times* article on Evelia and her store acknowledged her place-maker role, describing her as the neighborhood's "spiritual anchor" and noting, "She's history. She's community. She's block mother."⁵⁰

El Nayarit, La Villa Taxco, Barragan's, El Conquistador, and El Chavo were welcoming places. They drew crowds before and after a Dodgers game; they served much-needed bowls of menudo (a traditional Mexican cure for a hangover) in the morning for customers recovering from a festive night out; and they hosted countless wedding receptions, birthday parties, anniversaries, and baptismal celebrations. These restaurants were places where customers' memories of family, Mexican food, and place fused and where it was just as common to see the hot dog vendors from Dodger Stadium as to see the ballplayers. Regardless of their background, everyone came after the game in search of the same thing—good food and good drink—in a comfortable, familiar place.

PART II: CLOSING TIME OR ERASURE?

Much of the landscape created by place-makers who shared their humble beginnings at El Nayarit is in danger of becoming erased due to continuing gentrification that began in Echo Park around 2000. All of the restaurants I have discussed have either changed ownership or closed. Two—El Chavo and La Villa Taxco—went quietly into the hands of new owners: in the early 1990s for La Villa Taxco and in the mid-2000s for El Chavo. El Batey Market faced a series of astronomical rent increases that forced it to close. But, as I will explain, the closure of both Barragan's and El Conquistador in December 2013 stirred up a hornet's nest of angry denunciations, on the one hand, as well as loud support of gentrification on the other.

Gentrification generally refers to the influx of the middle class into a working-class neighborhood that results in both an economic

50. "Market Forces Threaten Market," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2008.

and social transformation of the area. Changes include a rise in median home prices and rents, the replacement of owner-operated, independent businesses with chain stores, and the displacement of long-time residents who can no longer afford to live in the area. Depending on one's perspective, gentrification represents either a form of urban renewal or a form of socioeconomic polarization. Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit, who holds the latter view, has offered this notable characterization: "[G]entrification is just the fin above the water. Below is the rest of the shark: a new American economy in which most of us will be poorer, a few will be far richer, and everything will be faster, more homogenous and more controlled or controllable."⁵¹

I don't intend to take a position on the relative merits or demerits of gentrification. What I want to bring to your attention is the importance of recognizing and memorializing the place-makers who helped to shape the urban landscape of Echo Park and of other, similar places. If we fail to acknowledge and value these actors' roles, we risk viewing gentrification as merely an uncomplicated urban renaissance in which a new set of place-makers revitalizes a vapid cultural wasteland filled with crime and blight. Gentrification is not just about changing the present; intentionally or not, it erases the past.

Many consider Echo Park the "ground zero for the gentrification sweeping Los Angeles."⁵² Even some long-time residents were excited about the initial changes in the late 1990s, as these brought new businesses to the neighborhood—including a Starbucks inside Lucy's Laundromat. But beginning in the early 2000s, rents started to double and triple; the median home price doubled by the mid-2000s; and apartment buildings that had long been subject to the city's rent control protections and that offered federally subsidized rent for low-income tenants were bought by investment groups. Residents were given notice to relocate. The councilman for the district at that time, Eric Garcetti (now mayor of Los Angeles), expressed support for low-cost housing by holding community forums and tenants' rights

51. Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzberg, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 13–14. On gentrification, see also Arlene Davila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

52. "Destination: Echo Park," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2010.

seminars and by backing legislation for stricter rent stabilization. Garcetti argued that “Echo Park [was] hanging on to being one of the last remaining mixed-income communities in Los Angeles.”⁵³ None of his efforts, however, produced meaningful positive results.⁵⁴

In the decade preceding the gentrification of Echo Park, much of the newspaper coverage of the area focused only on its high crime rates and gangs, implying that the neighborhood had little else to offer.⁵⁵ Even coverage seemingly intended as laudatory was equivocal, as the opening sentences from a 1984 *Los Angeles Times* article on the food scene indicate: “The expensive part of Sunset Boulevard—the Sunset Boulevard of Spago and Scandia and sushi bars, the Sunset Boulevard of Le Dome, La Toque, and the Chateau Marmont—is eclectic, expensive, and internationally oriented. It is known as the Sunset strip. Another part of Sunset Boulevard—the Sunset Boulevard of El Chavo, El Conquistador, Millie’s Coffee Shop and the Crest Coffee shop—is neither eclectic nor expensive and is not internationally oriented, you might call it Sunset stripped.”⁵⁶ The article does then praise the neighborhood’s good food and feel, but it leaves the reader with the clear impression that this area is not the Los Angeles of our collective imaginations. This is the L.A. that time forgot.

A rare exception to the negative media treatment of Echo Park was a 1988 *Los Angeles Times* article that did not single out the residents as the source of the neighborhood’s problems but instead highlighted the role of structural factors. The piece covered a community meeting attended by City Councilperson Gloria Molina (now a county supervisor) in which residents voiced concerns over the lack of city services in Echo Park. For instance, when large items, such as appliances, were put out for trash pick-up, city workers left them to decompose in the neighborhood rather than removing them. The new Echo Park branch of the city library, promised when the old building was damaged in the 1971 earthquake, still had not been built.

53. “UCLA Instructor Gets a Lecture as Tenants Take Protest to Class,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 2007, B1.

54. “Turning a Lens Homeward” *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 2005: B3.

55. See for example, “Good Life Sidetracked by Boyz Life,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1997; “LAPD Tries to Box Out Gangs Officers,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1987; “Anti-Crime Vigil Draws Thousands,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1996; “Child Shot to Death in Gang Confrontation [in] Echo Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1993.

56. “Savoring the Universe of Flavors,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1984, D20.



The former El Nayarit Restaurant (missing its “El”) is now “The Echo,” a live-music venue in gentrifying Echo Park. It opened in 2002, one of the first major businesses catering to a clientele from outside the neighborhood.

Photo: M. Ovnick, October 2014.

Residents had been making do with the “temporary” branch for more than fifteen years. Meeting attendees also pointed out that according to a recent study, Echo Park had the city’s worst average police response time. Some changes were promised (better police response), some requests were postponed (the new library), and others were redefined as the responsibility of the community (residents were responsible for alerting the city in advance to arrange for extra trash services). Overall, the issues raised at the meeting show, first, that Echo Park residents wanted their neighborhood to improve and, second, that they needed the city’s help to make that happen.⁵⁷

For the most part, media coverage of gentrification in Echo Park started from the unspoken premise that any region outside of L.A.’s Westside was a cultural wasteland. This perspective is clear, for instance, in a review of The Echo, a live-music venue that opened

57. “Echo Park Residents Scolded and Pleaded about the Deterioration of Their Community,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1988.

in 2002 in the building that was once home to El Nayarit. The Echo was one of the first major businesses catering to a clientele from outside the neighborhood. Although the article noted that this new party spot had “hot turntablists and a lo-fi ambience” and provided “another reason to take the party east,” the reviewer warned, “if you’re not used to slumming it, go west, young man, because the Echo is not for you. Aside from some colorful strings of Christmas lights, the Echo’s interior looks like blackened carne asada.” Given that carne asada is a well-known Mexican dish, this reference not so subtly linked “slumming” not just to class but to race and space. We see in this example how Echo Park’s diversity was a double-edged sword—it could be “cool” in one context and distasteful or even dangerous in another.⁵⁸

A more recent addition to the neighborhood is Mohawk Bend, a ten-thousand-square-foot bar and restaurant that successful restaurateur Tony Yanow opened in 2010. The business is housed in Echo Park’s almost one-hundred-year-old movie theatre, a landmark that had been closed for decades. Yanow, quoted as saying that “people who like to lurk in dark corners don’t like to lurk in places where there are thriving businesses,” has the support of some local residents who, like Yanow, think that Mohawk Bend will help minimize crime in the neighborhood. Place-makers from the past, such as the founders and supporters of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and the local parents Jackie Goldberg collaborated with, pictured improving the neighborhood through community legal services and affordable day care centers. The twenty-first-century solution, as proposed by Yanow, is to fight crime in Echo Park by opening a beer bar with seventy-three California craft brews on tap, plus a full bar and food service.⁵⁹

A third Echo Park landmark under new ownership is the Short Stop, a long-time cop bar transformed by the “cool group of young investors” who bought it at the end of 2000. One of the investors is Greg Dulli, front man for the Afghan Whigs, an indie rock band.

58. “DJs, Not Decor, are Cutting-Edge,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2002. On the emergence and circulation of urban nightmares, see Steve Macek, *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940*; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Raul Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

59. “Destination: Echo Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2010.

Recalling how the group envisioned their new business venture, Dulli said, "We weren't going to be a cop bar anymore." More specifically, "Garth Brooks is not going to be on the jukebox anymore. The foosball tables are leaving too, and electric darts—what were you thinking? But if you're cool with Johnny Jenkins and Black Flag on the jukebox, you'll be fine [at the new bar]." ⁶⁰ The "you'll be fine" comment suggests that the clientele the new Short Stop seeks is a different crowd, one as hip as its owners. And while apparently Dulli and his partners did away with everything that wasn't cool ("what were you thinking?"), they readily serve Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in tallboy beer cans—more retro than Garth Brooks, but, unlike Brooks, the beer is hipster approved (you just have to call it "PBR"). So the take-away lesson here seems to be that if you want to sell cheap beer in a twenty-four-ounce can in a poor area, sell it in a bar run by trendy young investors instead of a long-time, resident-owned business. That way your establishment will be considered a "cool" destination instead of a contribution to blight. ⁶¹

Articles about Echo Park after gentrification had begun also typically describe the feel of the neighborhood. The *L.A. Times* piece on the Short Stop bar, for instance, begins, "It's late on the night before Thanksgiving, and the stretch of Sunset Boulevard through Echo Park, from Mohawk to Douglas Street, is littered with young revelers. Lines form in front of bars, including the Short Stop, the Little Joy, the Gold Room and El Prado; taco trucks and gourmet food trucks idle curbside; and laughter, shouts and the occasional breaking of glass can be heard in the apartments above the street." Note the divide between the "young revelers," a description that evokes a sense of harmless merrymaking and the reference to shouts and breaking of glass heard from the apartments above the streets, units which in this area are still occupied by long-time Latino and Asian residents.

The story continues, "Ten years ago this bit of road was a no-man's land at night—at least for the kind of hip party people that now consider the area their stomping ground. Once a largely working-class Latino neighborhood, Echo Park is now home to one of L.A.'s most densely packed night-life corridors, with more than 15 popular bars, clubs and restaurants drawing crowds each weekend and often

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

on weeknights too.” Again, a divide is invoked between “the old” (“a no man’s land”) and the new (“a night-life corridor”). This depiction erases the nightlife and culture present before the “popular bars” opened, including the restaurants I have discussed in the article.

The article closes with an observation made by Terril Johnson, the Short Stop’s manager. It captures the complicated intertwining of gains and losses in gentrification: “I thought years ago that some day this strip will become pedestrian friendly and people will feel comfortable walking from the Echo to the Short Stop. And now they do.” Johnson may be right—these new “revelers” might not have felt safe walking here in the past, but there had been bars and restaurants in this area for decades, frequented by neighborhood residents who regularly walked between them.⁶²

GENTRIFICATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD TENSIONS

As discussed earlier, Barragan’s and El Conquistador both closed in December 2013. El Conquistador’s forty-year run (December 7, 1973–December 22, 2013) came to an end when its lease expired and the rent was raised substantially by the owners, the Sunset Triangle Partners, an investment group that now owns the entire block.⁶³

When Barragan’s closed, the Barragan family cited competition from new downtown restaurants that cut into their regular lunch crowd and taco trucks that attracted their more budget-conscious customers. A confidentiality agreement initially prevented disclosure that the restaurant had been sold to Potential, a group of investors who have a history of purchasing night clubs, bars, and restaurants.⁶⁴

Long-time residents posted emotionally charged comments in response to articles about Echo Park’s gentrification that appeared on *The Eastsider LA*, an award-winning local blog run by veteran journalist and twenty-year Echo Park resident Jesus Sanchez. The

62. Ibid.

63. Before the restaurant closed, the owners created a web page to announce the closure: <http://www.elconquistadorrestaurant.com/>, accessed January 10, 2014.

64. For details on the closure and confidentiality agreement, see “Closing Time: Barragan’s Restaurant Serving Up Bad News for Echo Park Customers,” *The Eastsider LA*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2013/10/closing-time-barragans-restaurant-serves-up-bad-news-for-its-echo-park-customers/>, accessed December 17, 2013. For more on Potential, see “What’s Going on at the Former Barragan’s in Echo Park?” *The Eastsider LA*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2014/01/whats-going-on-at-the-former-barragans-in-echo-park/>, accessed January 22, 2014.

comments reflect a sense that Barragan's closure represented more than the loss of a restaurant. Poster H. Mendoza wrote, "For a native Mexican, it was great having an authentic Mexican restaurant just down the street."⁶⁵ Another commenter wrote, "My wife, Carol Jacques, and I are DEEPLY saddened to hear of the upcoming closure of Barragan's in Echo Park. We've been enjoying both the food and the ambiance of Barragan's for years. My wife, a native of nearby Chavez Ravine (BEFORE the Dodgers arrived), remembers when the restaurant opened and has been eating there for as long as the restaurant has been open."⁶⁶

What's interesting here is that both blog posters stake claims as insiders and judges of authenticity—one because of his Mexican heritage and one because of a personal and physical connection to the area. It is not clear from the comment whether Ms. Jacques is Mexican American, but the invocation of Chavez Ravine portrays her as someone who has been witness to local power struggles. Chavez Ravine, part of Elysian Park and a ten-minute walk from Barragan's, was a close-knit and self-sustaining residential community that had been home to a working-class, racially mixed (but predominately Mexican and Mexican American) population. Residents felt betrayed when, beginning in 1951, the city used its power of eminent domain to seize land for a public housing project, forcing residents to vacate their homes and abandon the neighborhood. Then, instead of building public housing, the city sold the land to Walter O'Malley, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, at a fraction of its worth, as an incentive to move the baseball team to Los Angeles.

Other commenters shared their nostalgia for a place that has served as a connection to their past, regardless of how often they returned to the neighborhood or ate in a particular restaurant. One poster said, "I grew up on the Westside but my dad would haul me across town to brunch at Barragans for these epic 4 or 5 hour Latino politician layovers where they would discuss lawsuits to force redistricting, labor politics, who is up for what seat next and hold fund raisers for each other . . . the place has a spot in my heart because of

65. H Mendoza, 10/24/13. "Closing Time: Barragan's Restaurant Serving Up Bad News for Echo Park Customers," *The Eastsider LA*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2013/10/closing-time-barragans-restaurant-serves-up-bad-news-for-its-echo-park-customers/>, accessed on December 17, 2013.

66. Bill Rumble, 10/24/13, "Closing Time."

the time I spent with my pops there.”⁶⁷ This comment draws attention to several important aspects of place. It reflects how class, and not just race, can distance people from a neighborhood. The remark also suggests how place can connect people to the history of a larger political struggle, even when they were not actively involved in it. Finally, the comment reminds us of the personal feelings a place can evoke. Many people remember their parents in connection to holidays, vacations, and events. But in this posting we see how recalling Barragan’s simultaneously caused this commenter to remember and write about his “pops” on a public website.⁶⁸

As Sandra Figueroa Villa, a long-time social activist in the area, pointed out in her comment, Barragan’s did more than help people feel connected to a place. The restaurant also contributed to creating a broader sense of community: “Barragan’s was valued not just for their food and drink but because of the family’s connection to the neighborhood. Been in Echo Park for over 40 years. The Barragan family always stepped up to help out the community with their generosity. Armando Barragan made it a point to get involved in his community, whether it was with the local Lions, as President of the Chamber, or President of the Board of El Centro del Pueblo. His involvement was always a family affair including his wife Rosie. He has donated food to community clean ups, political campaigns, meetings and homeless outreach.”⁶⁹ Villa’s post was echoed and re-posted on the same site by others who also had witnessed the commitment of the Barragan family to the neighborhood.⁷⁰

Other postings expressed deep-rooted tensions around gentrification, exposing racial fault lines in the area. The following exchange is one example:

“Please no more restaurant[s] that only cater to the invaders.”⁷¹

“You sound like one of those bigots from the 50’s when a Latino or black moved into the neighborhood. Time to join modern times and leave the bigotry behind.”⁷²

67. ubrayj02, 10/24/13, “Closing Time.”

68. “Closing Time: Barragan’s Restaurant Serving Up Bad News...”

69. Sandra Figueroa Villa, 10/25/13, “Closing Time.”

70. “Closing Time: Barragan’s Restaurant Serving Up Bad News...”

71. Lee Garcia, October 25, 2013, “Closing Time.”

72. True Freedom, October 25, 2013, “Closing Time.”

“... and YOU sound like one of those white people who think that ‘reverse racism’ is really a thing. There’s a huge difference between passing laws and instituting racist business practices to prevent POC [people of color] from moving into the neighborhood and resisting the violence that is gentrification. More ‘invaders’ translates to higher rents, increased police violence against POC, and the death of culture.”⁷³

This exchange brings to the forefront some key issues about gentrification and racism. It evokes an earlier period when neighborhoods began to integrate after the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, in which the majority ruled that states could not enforce racially restrictive housing covenants. Integration was met with violence toward both the new neighbors of color and the whites who sold to them.⁷⁴ What the blog exchange and especially the reference to “reverse racism,” ask us to consider is whether an Echo Park resident’s resistance to a white middle-class family who moved into the area in 2013 was equivalent to white suburbanites’ shunning of their new black or Latino neighbors in the 1950s. The second part of that comment is especially noteworthy because it delves beneath the kind of conversations that frequently circulate in today’s post-racial, color-blind society, conversations that ignore structural racism. The comment reminds us that the changes that accompany gentrification happen not only at the level of individual choice but also at the structural level. The all-white neighborhoods that were the concern of *Shelley v. Kraemer* did not come about naturally. They were underwritten by federal dollars and laws that subsidized and maintained segregation.

The comments on *The Eastsider* blog regarding El Conquistador’s role in defining the community were similar to the posts about Barragan’s. “It’s hard to imagine going down Sunset and not seeing this place” is a typical example.⁷⁵ Some posters noted that El Conquistador was also important to the gay community. “El Conquistador is a historical landmark,” wrote one commenter. “It’s one of the

73. frank grimes October 25, 2013, “Closing Time.”

74. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*.

75. *El Dandy*, July 30, 2013. “Storefront Report: Silver Lake’s El Conquistador Vanquished by Rent Increase,” *The Eastsider LA*, July 30, 2013, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2013/07/storefront-report-silver-lakes-el-conquistador-vanquished-by-rent-increase/>, accessed on December 17, 2014; “Silver Lake Landmark El Conquistador Closing: What Happened?” Lina Lecaro, *LA Weekly* blogs, Aug 1, 2013, accessed December 17, 2013.

last gay places (that have been around forever) in Silverlake.”⁷⁶ Comments also alluded to how a restaurant could do more than just add meaning to a place; it could tie together a sense of the region and its history. “El Conquistador is a Sunset Junction institution. Even if it would open up again someplace else (and it won’t) the history that this restaurant embodies would still be gone forever,” was how one fan put it.⁷⁷ Another said, “. . . places like El Conquistador matter in ways far beyond their day to day role as restaurants—because they serve as critical social spaces that archive the highs and lows of the neighborhood’s history. . . . owner Jesse cares about the have-nots and recognizes that they, too, have a place in the neighborhood and in the world, with a documented history of helping out those in need.”⁷⁸ This last comment likely alludes to the fact that El Conquistador’s owner provided health insurance for his employees, many of whom lived in the area and some of whom had worked for him for decades. Long-time businesses like Barragan’s and El Conquistador were considered valuable to the community in part because they took care of its residents.⁷⁹

Ironically, some of the middle-class, often white, newcomers are attracted to the neighborhood because of its history, diversity, and community. They want to preserve it. But as the area’s popularity increases, so do its rents (and housing prices). Soaring costs price out long-time residents; and businesses that cater to the community’s new demographic profile replace the existing shops and restaurants. Thus, the very qualities that make the neighborhood attractive also threaten its continued existence. This dilemma was starkly evident when Evelia Pack’s market, El Batey (described earlier) was first in danger of closing because of a sharp spike in the rent. Jenny Burman, a journalist who lived in Echo Park for years and blogged about it for *LA Observed*, a site devoted to “media, politics, and place,” claimed

76. Sindie, “Storefront Report,” July 30, 2013.

77. C. Phylis, “Storefront Report,” July 30, 2013.

78. J G, “Storefront Report,” July 30, 2013.

79. “Storefront Report: Silver Lake’s El Conquistador Vanquished by Rent Increase,” *The Eastsider LA*, July 30, 2013, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2013/07/storefront-report-silver-lakes-el-conquistador-vanquished-by-rent-increase/>, accessed December 17, 2014. “Silver Lake Landmark El Conquistador Closing: What Happened?” Lina Lecaro, *LA Weekly blogs*, Aug. 1, 2013, accessed December 17, 2013.

that the “support for [Pack] [isn’t] just about sentimentality—it’s about embracing history and preserving a sense of place.”⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this article, I offered a brief overview of the history of Echo Park, focusing on its artistic communities, bohemian residents, and political denizens. My overview drew on the existing popular histories of Echo Park, all of which focus only on whites.⁸¹ Unquestionably, many of the area’s notable residents were whites who reached across the color line. But it is also true that Echo Park has long been a progressive, diverse space, occupied—in fact, dominated—by people of color, yet their contributions to history remain invisible. Despite the presence of diverse groups in this space for over seventy-five years, there is not a single written history of these rapidly disappearing nonwhite communities. At least before gentrification, there was a lived history, embedded in the area’s built environment, kept alive by places like the restaurants where people who lived and/or worked in the neighborhood frequented. There were buildings, signs, businesses, public spaces, and old-timers present as reminders of those who had lived and worked there.

This is one of the most troubling—and least often acknowledged—aspects of gentrification: the strong possibility that in the near future, no one will know this piece of immigrant and multicultural Los Angeles history or the role Echo Park has played in the formation of cross-racial bonds. The legacy of immigrant and minority place-makers is fragile because these actors frequently are not activists, politicians, or organizers. They make history quietly. Yet, without written histories of people of color in Echo Park, negative cultural representations of them, particularly of Mexicans, abound and readily circulate. Such images are present in movies like *Mi Vida Loca* (*My Crazy Life*) (1993), which centers on gang life in Echo Park; *Training Day* (2001), which tells the story of a crooked LAPD cop in Echo Park; and Michael Connelly’s best-selling novel, *Echo Park* (2006), which includes a heinous antagonist dubbed the “Echo Park Bagman”

80. “Market Forces Threaten Market,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2008.

81. Daniel Hurewitz’s *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) is the noted exception with a chapter devoted to race and politics in Echo Park and Silver Lake.

because he was caught in Echo Park with plastic bags filled with body parts.

Representations like these join a host of others in movies, television shows, and advertisements in which Mexican neighborhoods are invariably dilapidated, crime ridden, awash in graffiti and blaring Latin music, and home to gang members and lowriders. We need to think about what it means that there is a ready-made audience for negative cultural representations of inner-city Mexicans but not for historically and culturally accurate accounts. The cultural representations I just described are analogous to an earlier misrepresentation in which Americans understood who Mexicans were through California's Spanish Fantasy Past. This narrative projected a romanticized Spanish past replete with images of charming señoritas and handsome caballeros on horseback, a fantasy that masked the reality and violence of the U.S.-Mexico War. Combining creativity worthy of a Hollywood production with the government's power to shape culture, Mexicans were transformed from conquered subjects to picturesque denizens through this narrative.

As historians and educators, we have a responsibility to the future as well as to the past. We need to find ways to ensure that the images of barrio wastelands that dominate the collective consciousness will yield to more positive representations, including acknowledgement of the ways immigrants, citizens, neighbors, youth, entrepreneurs, and service workers have served as essential place-makers whose contributions we ought to both preserve and celebrate.