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*In Search of a City:
Essays on Los Angeles, Food Trucks, and Home*

Nicole Lipman
April 25, 2019

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

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“Everybody in the world has an idea of what Los Angeles is. Everybody thinks they know what Los Angeles means, even if they’ve never been here. And if you live in Los Angeles, you’re used to having your city explained to you by people who come in for a couple of weeks, stay in a hotel in Beverly Hills, and take in what they can get to within ten minutes in their rented car. The thing that people find hard to understand, I think, is sort of the magnitude of what’s here, the huge number of multiple cultures that live in the city who come together in this beautiful and haphazard fashion. And you know, the fault lines between them are sometimes where you find the most beautiful things.”

Jonathan Gold

Preface

On July 21st of last year, I was sitting in my friend's apartment in Poughkeepsie and scrolling through Twitter when I saw that Jonathan Gold had died. Gold was a restaurant critic at the *Los Angeles Times* by title, but his writing about food in Los Angeles — from taco trucks to mom-and-pop shops to hole-in-the-wall dives — masterfully told larger stories about the city and its people. Gold wrote about food, but he really wrote about Los Angeles in all of its strangeness and messiness and beauty.

I first became familiar with Jonathan Gold's work through the 2015 documentary *City of Gold*, which followed the critic through the streets of LA. Like me, Gold grew up in Los Angeles, where he attended UCLA and eventually wrote for the *LA Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Times*; his life was shaped deeply by the city. I fell in love with Gold's work and his approach to the city, which sought to recognize and celebrate LA's complexity instead of glossing over it. His essay "A Neighborhood Just West of Downtown," penned in the wake of the 1992 LA Uprising, is a particularly striking example: Gold writes lovingly about the intricacies of his neighborhood, a place "nobody has really bothered to give a name," even as he watches it burn. It's my favorite essay about Los Angeles. It is pinned to the wall above my desk.

I love Jonathan Gold's work because he writes about Los Angeles as a real place and not as a conduit for various stereotypes and tropes. In the classic writings about the city, Los Angeles is always somewhere else — a stand-in for a mythical place, be it utopia or dystopia or Hollywood or the frontier. It's frustrating to read about the city I am from as if it were a fiction, but I would be lying if I claimed not to be fascinated by these portrayals, too. I love narratives of

Los Angeles, the countless books and songs and movies that have translated the city for millions of people who will never set foot there and that have allowed me to take pieces of the city wherever I go. I am torn between believing that Los Angeles is a singular, uniquely magical city and believing that the city is just like any other place. I think the reality lies somewhere between the two. Los Angeles is not exceptional in some grand sense of the word, but the quotidian experiences of the city, the banalities of everyday urban life, make the city special. The small stories are the ones that create the real Los Angeles.

Growing up in LA, food trucks were always part of the backdrop of my life. Trucks parked on side streets and in gas station parking lots are as much a part of the Los Angeles landscape as freeways and palm trees, but they're rarely remarked upon as such. The food trucks of Los Angeles are ubiquitous enough to hide in plain sight, and it took seeing the absence of food trucks in other cities to make me recognize their presence in LA. When I started noticing them a few years ago, I saw sites of social and cultural overlap, places where Angelenos of all walks of life interacted, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes not. The food trucks seemed like microcosms of Los Angeles, as if understanding them could lead to understanding the city as a whole.

This thesis began as a comprehensive study of the food trucks of Los Angeles, an examination of the ways that food trucks shape the urban environment and conceptions of public space in the city. As I began writing, the project became more personal and both smaller and larger in scope. I became fascinated with narratives of the city and the ways in which policies and patterns intersected with my own histories and memories. Over time, this thesis became less about food trucks and more about the stories food trucks allow us to tell about Los Angeles.

The title of this work comes from a famous quote, possibly never really uttered but often attributed to the writer Dorothy Parker, that “Los Angeles is seventy-two suburbs in search of a city.” The quote is both a slight and an astute observation, simultaneously implying that Los Angeles isn’t a city at all while capturing the very hodgepodge that makes the city exactly what it is. It is storied and multivalent, just like Los Angeles. The six essays in this thesis revolve around six themes — history, narrative, development, gentrification, movement, and memory — that have informed my life in Los Angeles and my understandings of the city. Though written separately, the essays are intended to complicate each other. No element of Los Angeles stands in isolation.

This thesis is indebted to the work of Lynell George, David Ulin, Jessica Hopper, Colson Whitehead, and the late Jonathan Gold, whose writings about place have been deeply influential on my own. I hope these essays capture something true about living in Los Angeles, the city I will always call home.

Introduction: A Necessary History

The origins of the modern Los Angeles food truck can be traced to the nineteenth-century American West. Following the end of the Civil War in the 1860s, large masses of people moved westward, creating a demand for beef in a part of the country where there had been little demand before. Texas cowhands suddenly found themselves with a need to move huge herds of cattle across long distances without assistance from railroads. This kind of journey wasn't easy. As the American Chuck Wagon Association explains, "to move a herd of cattle overland meant crews of cowhands had to live in the open for months at a time."¹

Recognizing a need to feed these roving crews, cattle herder Charles Goodnight attached wooden boxes to an old United States Army truck and filled them with utensils and food appropriate for long, unrefrigerated journeys: coffee, cornmeal, bacon, and salted beef.² Soon, these "chuck wagons" were a common feature in the landscape of the western United States. Chuck wagons were the ancestors to the modern food truck, moving with people to provide food and supplies in areas with few options and little to no infrastructure.

Meanwhile on the eastern side of the continent, a man named Walter Scott in Providence, Rhode Island was developing the first "lunch wagon," a wheeled cart stocked with pies, sandwiches, and coffee, which Scott sold to curbside customers in front of a local newspaper office.³ Though "lunch" sounds like a midday meal, Scott's lunch wagon was a late night operation, a "night lunch." A journalist himself, Scott knew that people in newspaper offices often wanted "quick meals at strange hours," as did night shift workers and bar-goers.⁴ At night, the streets of Providence were full of people of all classes. But while wealthy people were able to

enjoy a bite to eat at any hour, the dining options for everyone else were practically non-existent after dark: as was the case in many American cities in the late nineteenth century, the restaurants in Providence closed by 8:00 p.m.⁵ Seeing an opportunity, Scott began selling food from his lunch wagon to journalists working late as well as to passersby, and it wasn't long until others across Providence were setting up late-night lunch wagons of their own. Lunch wagons were designed to provide a service for working-class people, but the operations had mass appeal, and a typical night at the lunch truck “would see ‘people in tuxedos [and] businessmen, along with the ordinary worker and the showgirl.’”⁶

A man named Thomas Buckley began manufacturing several different models of lunch wagons for sale, which he decorated with colorful paint, noisy ornaments, and even mosaic tilework meant to attract customers and make each lunch wagon stand out from the quickly-growing pack.⁷ Though lunch wagons evolved into larger, stationary operations and eventually became what we think of as the classic American diner, it's in these early food vehicles that we can see some of the first examples of food truck ‘branding’ — and some of the first instances of casual, late-night, curbside dining.

Mobile food vehicles found their way into military operations in the form of field kitchens during the first and second World Wars, but the lineage of Los Angeles food trucks is more directly related to the civilian ice cream and catering trucks that emerged after those wars.⁸ In the years following WWI, Prohibition was in full swing in the United States. Unable to legally operate bars, many entrepreneurs turned to fast food. At the same time, production and sales of Henry Ford's Model T were booming, and America was quickly becoming an automobile nation. Searching for a way to combine these two industries, in 1920 Harry Burt, the founder of Good

Humor ice cream, purchased twelve refrigerator trucks and equipped them for ice cream distribution in his home of Youngstown, Ohio.⁹ Burt made sure his trucks were appealing to parents and kids alike: he employed “professional-looking drivers in signature white uniforms” to drive his clean white vans, which followed specified, pre-set routes.¹⁰ To make sure the whole neighborhood was aware of the Good Humor van, Burt attached bells to his vehicles so families would always know exactly when the ice cream truck was passing by. Burt’s ice cream trucks soon expanded from Ohio to operations all over America, and the ubiquitous-to-this-day Mister Softee trucks joined the ice cream game in 1956.¹¹ Family-friendly, clean, and highly organized, the ice cream trucks of the mid-twentieth century worked hard to convey an air of professionalism and safety to their customers, many of whom were experiencing mobile food vehicles for the first time. But highly designed ice cream trucks were not the only food vehicles on the road at this time.

In the booming post-war economy of the 1950s, massive numbers of veterans returned home to the US and settled with their families in the suburbs. The demand for suburban housing grew exponentially, and so in turn did the demand for food options that could serve construction workers and other home servicemen in suburban places where few restaurants existed.¹² Aluminum-sided catering vehicles responded to these demands. These “roach coaches,” as they were widely and derisively called, filled a significant culinary need but also developed a reputation for greasy and unsanitary conditions that still color Americans’ perceptions of food trucks today.

It’s true that food trucks present unique health and safety challenges because of their cramped quarters, but the “roach coach” stigma likely arises more from racist and classist

attitudes towards food truck operators and their customers than it does from actual truck conditions. Not only were these aluminum food trucks largely catering to low-income construction workers, ‘ethnic’ food trucks were also becoming more prominent in America at this time.¹³ In Los Angeles specifically, the erosion of middle-class manufacturing jobs overlapped with accelerated immigration from Latin America and Asia between the 1970s and 1990s, making food trucks an appealing business venture for new immigrants.¹⁴ Food trucks were a relatively-low cost gateway into the American economy, a kind of entry-level capitalism that gave immigrants a stronger foothold in the United States. Food trucks became strongly associated with “Latino customers, drivers, and neighborhoods,” contributing to a sense of cultural identity for many immigrants in Los Angeles.¹⁵

In Southern California specifically, the food trucks that emerged post-WWII fell into a longstanding milieu of informal dining. The first fast food institution, the commercial cafeteria, opened in Los Angeles in 1905.¹⁶ At a commercial cafeteria, customers were left unattended after paying at the cashier, free to socialize, change tables, and linger for as long as they pleased. Southern California was also home to the first drive-in and the first McDonald’s restaurant, where “Speedee” service “bypass[ed] traditional mealtime ritual.”¹⁷ In these dining environments, there was a “lack of hardened custom” and “a sense of ‘anything goes.’”¹⁸ Dining, these Southern California institutions proved, did not have to be a stuffy, formal, or even seated affair.

The regional acceptance (and even expectation) of casual dining created a welcoming environment for the first Los Angeles food trucks. In 1974, Raul Martinez Sr., a Mexican immigrant and former dishwasher, converted an old ice cream truck into “King Taco,” likely the

first taco truck in the city.¹⁹ Though his friends told him he was crazy, Martinez wanted to sell soft-shell tacos out of the ice cream truck.²⁰ Operating outside of an East Los Angeles bar on Brooklyn Avenue (now Cesar Chavez Avenue), Martinez sold tacos al pastor to late-night customers, selling \$70 worth of tacos on the first night alone.²¹ As a former employee of Martinez told the Los Angeles Times, “He was an innovator, he had a vision, and he made it possible. [...] We didn't have food trucks back in the '70s — back when he started.”²²

Raul Martinez’s King Taco truck may have been the first *lonchera*, or stationary food truck, in Los Angeles. Literally translated as “lunch box” in English, loncheras “typically park at a single location for several hours while serving ready-to-eat Mexican food” and are a common feature of the Los Angeles streetscape.²³ While colloquially referred to as “taco trucks,” loncheras tend to serve a range of traditional foods that are often (but not exclusively) Mexican.

Loncheras are distinguishable by their spatial practices. Martinez parked the King Taco truck in front of an East Los Angeles bar on a major street, but loncheras are also often found on side streets and in residential neighborhoods. As Jesús Hermosillo explains in his study of these Los Angeles food trucks, “loncheras have historically served low-income, disinvested neighborhoods, filling a void in adequate foodservices, meaning that they have few or no direct competitors.”²⁴ *Loncheros* (lonchera operators) park their trucks in places where there are few if any outposts for fresh, hot food, often in the same geographic area where these loncheros already work and live. Motives for opening a lonchera vary — some lonchera operators see food trucks as a low-investment business opportunity or a chance to be their own boss; others take over loncheras from family or friends — but loncheras are generally family-run operations owned by Mexican immigrants.²⁵ These food trucks tend to park in the same location and follow the same

schedule for years on end.²⁶ As such, loncheras have deep ties to the communities that they serve and are a consistent, reliable dining option for Angelenos who may not otherwise have a place to buy fresh food in their neighborhoods.

Loncheras are a specific form of “hot trucks” — food trucks with built-in kitchens that are equipped to prepare and serve hot meals.²⁷ As outlined by Los Angeles legal codes, hot trucks can be either gasoline-powered vans or wagons towed by a vehicle, and both forms of trucks are common in the city.²⁸

Loncheras were the main hot truck in Los Angeles until 2008, when a ‘new wave’ of food trucks began with Roy Choi’s Kogi BBQ food truck. The “brain child” of entrepreneurs Mark Manguera and Caroline Shin Manguera with Chef Choi, the Kogi truck began serving Korean-Mexican ‘fusion’ food on the streets of LA in November 2008.²⁹ Like its lonchera predecessors, Kogi set up shop to serve handheld food to hungry waiting customers. But Kogi differed from the Los Angeles loncheras in several ways. For starters, Roy Choi was a highly trained professional chef, an alum of the Culinary Institute of America who had cooked in internationally famous kitchens like Le Bernardin.³⁰ Moreover, Choi was cool: young, tattooed, and perpetually clad in streetwear, the Korean-American chef was charming and media savvy — making it easier for Kogi’s hired PR staff to brand and advertise the truck.³¹ Most significantly, Kogi used a website (kogibbq.com) and a Twitter account to advertise the truck’s location, sending Angelenos on a “treasure hunt” for short-rib tacos and kimchi quesadillas.³² Thanks to buzz and positive press, soon there were 500-person (and several hours) long lines wherever Kogi went.³³

It didn't take long for other chefs and entrepreneurs to begin launching their own new-wave food trucks. The crash of the housing bubble in 2008 meant that construction projects throughout Los Angeles were stalled, so many loncheras who relied largely on a customer base of construction workers found themselves struggling for business.³⁴ Hundreds of used food trucks went up for sale. At the same time, chefs throughout the country found themselves newly unemployed, and potential restauranteurs were nervous about opening traditional restaurants in the economic climate. Food trucks, as relatively-low risk and relatively-low cost endeavors, seemed to present a solution. In 2009, Los Angeles saw the launch of the Buttermilk Truck, serving french toast sticks and red velvet pancakes, the Grilled Cheese Truck and its short-rib-mac-and-cheese sandwiches, the architecture-inspired Coolhaus ice cream truck, and dozens of other roaming kitchens. These new trucks were colorful and highly decorated, designed to stand out both from each other and from traditional loncheras. Like the Good Humor ice cream trucks of the 1920s, new-wave food truck operators used design, branding, and advertising to influence perceptions of their trucks. Like Kogi, all of these new-wave food trucks used Twitter or websites to broadcast their routes and locations, quickly amassing follower counts in the thousands or tens of thousands.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, food trucks were a significant cultural and culinary trend in Los Angeles. New-wave food trucks proliferated, as did designated food truck lots and food truck festivals all over the city. In 2006, there were 2,422 food trucks authorized to do business in Los Angeles County.³⁵ In 2010, about four-thousand food trucks were authorized, with 115 of them considered the new-wave variety.³⁶ Pop culture caught on — in 2010, Food Network debuted its “Great Food Truck Race” reality show (the first episode taking place, of

course, in Los Angeles), and in 2014, Jon Favreau's *Chef*, a movie about a high-profile Los Angeles chef who quits his job to open a food truck, made more than 45 million dollars at the box office.³⁷ In 2010, Roy Choi and his Kogi Truck were named to the prestigious *Food and Wine* list of Best New Chefs, demonstrating how food trucks were quickly embraced as important sites of culinary innovation.³⁸ The same year, Zagat started including food trucks in its restaurant guides.³⁹ In media coverage, new-wave food trucks were described with words like "innovative," "exciting," and "gourmet," implying that these food trucks were something distinct and improved-upon from the trucks that had been operating for decades prior. Loncheras were not included in the newfound hype; they were largely left out of media attention and buzz, or were mentioned only to serve as contrast to the glory of the new-wave trucks. It's worth noting that Kogi's origins were not dissimilar from Raul Martinez's King Taco — both trucks began as late night operations in front of bars or clubs — but that Roy Choi is more readily associated with food trucks in Los Angeles. Martinez may have invented the taco truck, but he's widely faded from the popular narrative. Loncheras, stationary and largely-undecorated, have never disappeared from LA's streets, but they've been ignored, eclipsed by the shiny discourse surrounding new-wave food trucks in the city.

Los Angeles County does not distinguish between the three different types of hot trucks. On paper, loncheras and new-wave food trucks are subject to the same fees, restrictions, and regulations. All food truck operators must obtain health and vehicle permits and must follow the same Health Code requirements as fixed-location restaurants.⁴⁰ Food truck operators pay fees for operating "high risk" mobile food facilities and receive health department grades from the Los Angeles County Public Health Department.⁴¹ Additionally, food truck operators are required to

operate out of a commissary, “a food facility that services mobile food facilities and mobile support units where food, containers, or supplies are stored; food is prepared or prepackaged for sale or service at other locations; utensils are cleaned; liquid and solid wastes are disposed of; and potable water is obtained.”⁴² In addition to Los Angeles County regulations, food trucks must also comply with local city ordinances and guidelines ranging from additional permitting requirements to extremely restrictive parking guidelines.

Though the legal guidelines for operating both forms of hot trucks in Los Angeles are the same, I distinguish between loncheras and new-wave food trucks because they enact different kinds of spatial and culinary practices in the city. Lonchera practices are relatively sedentary. Parking in the same location every day, often for years, loncheras almost resemble traditional fixed-location restaurants: constantly parked at a specific corner or intersection, loncheras become part of the built environment just like a stationary operation.⁴³ Loncheras cater to the needs of residents in their chosen neighborhoods — the trucks tend to be affordable, reliable, and easily accessible, and they’re generally well-integrated into the neighborhoods where they set up shop.⁴⁴ Loncheras, which are often run by Latino immigrants, generally park far from restaurants and other food trucks. Because of their consistent routines and geographical practices, loncheras rely less on advertising and customer-attracting practices than the other forms of hot trucks.

Unlike loncheras, new-wave trucks tend to move a few times a day, remaining in a parked location for several hours at a time. These trucks advertise their schedules in advance, generally through websites, Twitter, or Instagram, and they often follow weekly patterns (i.e., a new-wave food truck will park outside the same bar every Thursday night). As a group, new-wave food trucks also differ from other hot trucks in the broad range of cuisines that they serve.

While loncheras usually serve Mexican food, new-wave food trucks are often highly specialized, focusing on a specific food or meal (lobster sandwiches or breakfast, for example) or an international cuisine.

The most significant difference between new-wave food trucks and other Los Angeles hot trucks are the geographies traced by these trucks in the city. As Hernández-López details, many new-wave food trucks “operate in front of nightclubs or bars, close to universities, or in trendy young adult neighborhoods mostly west of the traditionally Latino and immigrant East LA, such as Silver Lake, Hollywood, Venice Beach, Santa Monica, or mid-Wilshire” — a contrast to loncheras that serve “mostly Mexican food to predominantly Latino consumers” in East LA neighborhoods.⁴⁵ Even the Kogi fleet, which consists of four trucks serving different areas of Los Angeles, tends to make stops in majority African-American and Latinx neighborhoods far less frequently than in other parts of Los Angeles.⁴⁶ The spatial practices of new-wave food trucks (and their price points, which tend to be higher than those of loncheras) affect the customer base of these trucks, which is generally more affluent than the customer base of other Los Angeles hot trucks.⁴⁷

The different kinds of hot trucks in LA occupy different spaces in the cultural milieu of the city, but the lines between them are blurry. On a late-night drive through Los Angeles, you’ll pass all kinds of food trucks in all kinds of places, and as Jonathan Gold once remarked, “Loncheras tweet too.”⁴⁸ We assume loncheras and new-wave trucks stand as separate categories with distinct practices and customer bases, but Los Angeles is a city of overlap, and its food trucks are no exception. The history of food trucks is not a linear progression from loncheras to new-wave trucks; rather, the varied kinds of food trucks influence each other and give rise to

complex and ever-evolving foods and experiences in Los Angeles. Food trucks — whatever their classification — are part of the fabric of LA, and they shape the city as much as they are shaped by it.

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¹⁸ Molotch, “L.A. as Design Product,” 243.

¹⁹ Jesus Sanchez, “King Taco Got Start in Old Ice Cream Van,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-11-16-fi-14263-story.html>.

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²³ Jesús Hermosillo, “Loncheras: A Look at the Stationary Food Trucks of Los Angeles” (UCLA School of Urban Planning, 2010), 11.

²⁴ Hermosillo, “Loncheras,” 7.

²⁵ Hermosillo, “Loncheras.”

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City on Screen

When I leave my apartment at 7:00 p.m., Spring Street is already packed. It's Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk tonight, the monthly event that brings thousands of people to Downtown's Historic Core for late night gallery hours, sidewalk arts and crafts vendors, music and dance performances, cheap alcohol, and food trucks. I'm headed towards a private parking lot on the corner of 4th and Spring for dinner, unsure of what trucks await me there.

I squeeze my way through massive crowds on Spring, the street bulging with groups of Angelenos taking blurry iPhone photos of sidewalk jazz performances and costumed dogs. Music blares from bars and night clubs, and cars honk at the pedestrians spilling into the road. I am reminded of how much I dislike Art Walk and the way it makes my neighborhood look like a rowdy party space.

I'm relieved when I get to 4th Street and see the lot, which is on the northwest corner of 4th and Spring. The lot is small, taking up only about a quarter of the block, and it's surrounded by a light blue metal fence. There are about a dozen food trucks here, all of the new-wave variety, and they create a ring of bright colors and loud graphics around the parking lot's perimeter. Tents with vendors, advertising booths, and a DJ playing dubstep fill the middle of the space. Hundreds of people mill about in between, eating lobster rolls and ice cream and banh mi and concoctions being advertised as "sushirritos." It's dark in the parking lot, and the bright lights of the food truck serving windows shine like beacons.

I get in line for the obnoxiously-yellow Grilled Cheese Truck. I'm surprised by how quickly I make it to the front, where a man wearing a shirt with a silhouette of a girl eating a

grilled cheese sandwich, a riff on the trucker mudflap girl image, takes my order. When the Grilled Cheese Truck first opened in 2009, standing in line for one of their mac-and-cheese filled sandwiches could be a multi-hour odyssey. I did that a few times in the truck's early years, gleefully participating in the communal experience of waiting to eat something so hyped by media and friends, only to devour my sandwich in a matter of minutes.

I wait for my sandwich in a small cluster of others, a mix of teenagers, millennials, and families with young children. We've been lured here by the truck's reputation, by photographs on Yelp and Instagram of gooey orange cheese and slightly-charred bread tumbling out of red checkered serving dishes. When my name is called, I'm tempted to take and post a photo too, if not of the food then of the truck and the event around me. An Instagram from Art Walk would prove that I was cool enough to be in the know about this ephemeral event. In a photograph, I could hide the noise, the unpleasant smells, and the dangerously large crowds — I could brag that the event was fun, and that I was having a good time.

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Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk started in 2004 with the simple goal of getting Angelenos to come Downtown. At the time, the neighborhood was a blip on the city's radar, feared as "sketchy" by people from other parts of town. The Walt Disney Concert Hall had just opened the year before, and construction on L.A. Live, the neighborhood's central tourist attraction, was still years away from completion. Less than twenty thousand people lived in the city center in 1999, the year that the Los Angeles City Council passed an Adaptive Reuse Ordinance meant to ease the renovation of Downtown's historic office buildings into lofts and apartments.¹ The ordinance spurred the creation of thousands of residential units, and the

population of the neighborhood began to grow. By 2008, Downtown's population was approaching thirty-five thousand residents.² In 2013, the Los Angeles Downtown Center Business Improvement District estimated the neighborhood's population at 52,400.³

Downtown's residential boom can be partially attributed to the relative ease of development in the neighborhood during the 2000s. The 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance facilitated the conversion of old commercial buildings into residential ones, and new residential buildings could be constructed on the sites of former parking lots, meaning that previously-standing buildings didn't need to be torn down to make room for new construction projects. The residential development surge created thousands of available housing units in housing-strapped Los Angeles, funneling Angelenos into Downtown. Moreover, Downtown's condos and rental apartments were appealing in the post-Recession city in which single family homes were suddenly out of reach for many LA residents.

The Downtown LA residential boom also changed perceptions of the neighborhood. More housing in the neighborhood meant that Downtown LA wasn't just a place to work; Angelenos started seeing the neighborhood as a viable place to live. Downtown LA looked different from the rest of the city — there was public transportation, high-rise apartment buildings, and density more commonly associated with Manhattan than Los Angeles — but that was part of the appeal. Downtown wasn't like the rest of LA; the neighborhood was trendy, the city's next big thing.

With new residents came new shops, new restaurants, and new neighborhood attention. Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk grew — by 2009, the event was bringing ten thousand people to Downtown on the second Thursday of every month, people who were much more excited to

party at bars and venues than check out the neighborhood's art galleries. Food trucks were the perfect beast to serve this influx of visitors, and in turn, their presence brought more people and cars to each month's Art Walk.

In July 2011, a car attempting to park on Spring Street at the height of Art Walk jumped a curb, killing a two-month-old baby and injuring the child's mother.⁴ Some blamed the tragedy on the over-crowded streets, highlighting the fact that the accident occurred after thirty-five food trucks had gathered in the area. Motivated citizens began circulating an online petition to close Spring and Main streets between 2nd and 8th streets during the monthly event, but city officials rejected the proposal in favor of a temporary food truck ban in Art Walk's core area.⁵ Food trucks, the ban made clear, were the major source of the pedestrian and vehicle traffic at Art Walk. By tweeting their locations, the trucks became a magnet for thousands of people looking to take part in LA's latest trend.

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I moved with my dad to Downtown Los Angeles in 2009, two years before the Art Walk accident and about one year after Roy Choi's Kogi Truck first opened, launching the new-wave food truck movement in the city. Chefs and entrepreneurs all over Los Angeles were beginning to open up gourmet restaurants on wheels, and like Choi, they used Twitter to broadcast their whereabouts, menu specials, and sometimes even contests or games. At the time, Twitter was a relatively-new social media platform for disseminating information and sharing brief, real-time updates to a small collection of followers. The platform was just beginning to take off — in 2009, Twitter introduced the “retweet” function, which made it easier to connect with increasingly wide networks of users.⁶ As food trucks proliferated rapidly in the streets, so did

their followers online. Tracking a food truck's movements was as simple as clicking a button and letting the information flow into your feed alongside breaking news, jokes, and viral videos. For truck operators, Twitter was a direct-to-consumer advertisement; a no-cost, low-effort means of reaching thousands of potential customers in the greater Los Angeles area and beyond. For customers, Twitter was a treasure map: a gateway to a culinary adventure ahead, if you were willing to follow the clues and join the chase.

In the nascency of the new-wave food truck boom, tracking a food truck through the streets of Los Angeles could feel akin to a hunt. There was no guarantee that by the time you'd seen a truck tweet about their lunchtime location that they'd still be there, or that they'd still have all of their menu items. A single tweet from Kogi could send hundreds of Angelenos running for their cars, hoping to beat the crowds for a chance at kimchi tacos — one Kogi stop at UCLA generated a line of more than 500 people.⁷ A sense of impermanence pervaded the whole ecosystem, but that was part of the adventure. Getting to a popular food truck required social media savvy, passion, and agility. For consumers, the food truck experience was as much about the food as it was about the chase. Hunting for a truck was proof that food and food culture mattered to you — a way to prove yourself a “foodie” and gain social and cultural capital while doing it.

The origin of the term “foodie” has been attributed to Gael Greene, who in 1980 used the word to refer “to a subculture of people that ‘were obsessed with food, taking cooking classes, competing to cook complicated perfect dinners, [and] making the rounds of three-star restaurants in France.’”⁸ Foodie culture in Greene's definition emphasized skill, perfection, and financial

means: to participate, one must have the time and the money to buy ingredients, receive specialty training, and go out to eat. Being a foodie was not some flippant hobby; it was an “obsession.”

Over time, “foodie” evolved. The term came out of an era plagued with an economic recession, which associated food and “foodie” practices with a luxury attitude. Like the 1980s, the Great Recession of the 2000s also was a period of exacerbated income inequality that limited “foodie” practices to those at the wealthiest end of the economic spectrum. But instead of curtailing spending on food like many economists predicted it would, the Great Recession instead “guided consumers to approach spending in a novel way.”⁹ “Foodie” practices were still seen as luxuries, but these were luxuries that people were willing to splurge on.

Foodie culture is now mostly associated with millennials, individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 who, despite debt and low-paying jobs, spend more money on dining out than any other age group.¹⁰ Millennial foodies look different from the people Greene was describing in the 1980s: today, the term has been used to refer to everyone from people interested in food history and food systems to individuals using food as an identity expression. And while socio-economic status still plays a significant role in access to food, foodie culture revolves more around social capital than economic capital. “Humbly bragging about your trips to niche, hole-in-the-wall restaurants or your extensive knowledge of the best whisky dive bars is ‘relevant to show who you are, to distinguish yourself from others, and also to show off your cosmopolitanism,’” writes Matthew Sedacca. In a mid-Great Recession Los Angeles, hunting for a food truck was a means of obtaining social currency at a time when financial currency was scarce. And social media provided the means for flaunting this social currency — if you went to a food truck and didn’t tweet about it, did it really happen?

Twitter was an inseparable part of the food truck ecosystem in Los Angeles during the early 2010s. More than a way for customers to find trucks, the platform allowed people to brag about their food truck experience to a hungry digital audience, proving (if only fleetingly) that they were in the know. Twitter, however, has never been the ideal place for creating a lasting impression. On Twitter, content flows at a lightning pace: your update only matters until more recent tweets push it down the feed and out of relevance. The platform is busy and messy, suited to passing thoughts and breaking news. It's the perfect social media network to broadcast that you're at a food truck and enjoying your dinner — but the social currency of that tweet is necessarily ephemeral.

In December 2014, Instagram announced that 300 million people were using the photo app every month, making the platform officially more popular than Twitter.¹¹ Like Twitter, Instagram's rapid rise was attributed partially to its simplicity and ease of use, but the app's popularity likely also stemmed from its contrasts with Twitter. As a photo (and eventually video) sharing app, Instagram was designed for different content than text-based Twitter. Instagram also presented a different relationship to internet time. On Instagram, your feed wasn't updating every minute with new content. Your posts lingered longer, and they were always accessible in a tiled grid on your profile tab. Instagram allowed users to create a more permanent social media presence, so the social currency associated with that presence could be more permanent, too. The app was a godsend for foodies — here was a place where you could reap the social rewards of the food truck hunt; here was the platform where your stylized photograph of secret late-night tacos could be archived.

A not-insignificant amount of Instagram content is food related. A quick search for the hashtag “#foodie” turns up 120 million posts, well-lit photographs and videos of enormous cheeseburgers, gooey cheeses, and elaborate desserts. The #foodie search page is a vibrant mosaic of color and decadence. The posts highlight the foods’ excess in scale, fat content, or even price, but there are few shots of people preparing or eating these foods. Instead, the dishes appear to exist in a universe of their own, divorced from the human realities of production and consumption. And though it’s often difficult to imagine eating the outrageous foods of #foodie Instagram, you automatically assume that the user posting the photo did, and that those foods were delicious. It may have been cloyingly sweet or exorbitantly expensive, but that edited, beautiful photo of a towering ice cream cone is all we see, and it’s hard not to be jealous. #Foodie food is aspirational; it’s proof that you’re the kind of person who lives a “foodie” life and has the social capital to go along with it.

On Instagram, your life *is* your photographs — a collection of edited, perfect moments presented in an easy-access visual format. Every second isn’t catalogued in unfiltered detail the way it is on Twitter, because Instagram posts are more curated than tweets. There’s more thinking-before-speaking, and there’s also more editing. On Instagram, it’s easy to hide the trials of the food truck experience — the long lines, the brutal sun, the sometimes-not-really-worth-the-trouble food — by just posting a photo of the perfect-seeming bite. Other people’s perception of your experience is the reality, and if you can hide the flaws, your social capital is that much greater.

Editing and curating are, in a way, processes of fictionalization. In our posts, we eliminate the unpleasantness from our experiences, presenting a fake reality instead. There’s a

reason why teenagers create secondary Instagram accounts (“finstas,” a portmanteau of “fake” and “Insta”) where they post messy, candid photographs and text meant only for the eyes of close friends. In the world of Instagram, realness — and all of the ugliness that comes along with it — is “fake,” but the perfect, curated profile is “real.”

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In *Montage and the Metropolis*, Martino Stierli argues that photomontage is the ideal way to represent a city in its multi-faceted glory. Photomontage, or a collage of photographs, is a means of capturing several different perspectives on a city and collecting them into a single object. No image presenting a single perspective can accurately depict life in the modern metropolis, Stierli writes, because a single perspective cannot capture the conflict, overlap, and juxtaposition inherent to the city.¹² The photomontages Stierli discusses are collages of multiple photographs assembled into a single, distinct frame or object. Occasionally, these photomontages contain maps, illustrations, and text, but their primary components are photographs.

An Instagram feed presents a different, modern kind of photomontage. Like the artworks Stierli analyzes, our Instagram feeds contain many kinds of content — images, screenshots, videos, text — but the app still remains oriented around photographs. While the posts are separate, organized by algorithms and dotted with advertisements, the experience of scrolling through the feed on a phone or computer collects all of these posts into a single unit. Every Instagram post in your feed becomes part of a single narrative, the narrative of the people and places in your life at the moment you choose to open the app. If you’ve lived in a single city for a significant amount of time, chances are that this Instagram narrative is heavily based in that city too. My Instagram feed is a collection of posts from college friends, high school friends, and

public figures, but the content is still Los Angeles-heavy. Scrolling through images and videos, I'm confronted with the overlapping perspectives of the city Stierli sees in photomontages, each contributing to the picture of Los Angeles in my head. But these images and videos that I see are curated, edited to present snapshots from idealized lives and spaces. My Los Angeles Instagram photomontage is assembled from fictionalized pieces, and it begs a question: what's real here?

Questions of fiction versus reality are not new in representations of Los Angeles. In literature, movies, songs, and other narratives, Los Angeles tends to be a place defined by tropes and stereotypes more than experiences. Even the processes of fictionalization themselves have come to be stereotypically "Los Angeles" — the image of the Botox-ed, bleached-blond celebrity is indelibly associated with the city. Part of this stems from the conflation of Los Angeles with the entertainment industry and the resulting association of image-making with the city itself. The pervasiveness of tropes in depictions of Los Angeles, including the trope of the fictionalized city, demonstrate that images of the city are powerful — it's images of Los Angeles, not the day-to-day experiences of reality in Los Angeles, that shape our thoughts about the city.

A positive image of Los Angeles is necessary to sell the city to tourists, corporations, and even potential new residents. City officials and neighborhood business improvement districts have a stake in this image, as their revenue is dependent on both visitors and a replenishing and growing tax base of Angelenos. But the image of the city isn't disseminated in tourism brochures and directed advertisements; instead, our image of Los Angeles comes from what we see on social media. And so we get the rise of the Instagrammable City: the crafting of spaces, neighborhoods, and events designed to be photographed and shared on social media. In the Instagrammable City, editing and curation comes before the photograph is even taken. Here,

places are already picture-perfect — the places are already fake. These Instagrammable places are colorful, or sparkling clean, or unusual and unique, but they aren't natural. These are places designed to be flattened into a photograph rather than walked through in real life.

The idea of an Instagrammable City has often been discussed in relation to explicit, obvious ploys at social-media friendliness, like colorful murals on street corners (“Stand here and think about someone you love!” proclaims one on the corner of Sunset and Lucile in Silverlake) or sidewalk-graffiti stencils with hashtags searching for viral fame. Articles on websites like BuzzFeed and Curbed direct you to “40 Of The Most Instagrammable Food Spots in LA”¹³ and the “Most Instagrammable Places”¹⁴ in the city. There's also, of course, the recent proliferation of Instagram-oriented “experiences” in Los Angeles, like the Museum of Ice Cream and Refinery29's 29Rooms, temporary pop-ups with a high price of entry that advertise “experiences” but are not-so-secretly designed for the purpose of being flattened into into shareable social media posts. The “experience” is about generating content and promoting a brand — in essence, these spaces are elaborate, expensive selfie backdrops. Critic Amanda Hess describes these pop-ups as an “existential void”¹⁵, as these spaces only offer “the facsimile of traditional pleasures.”¹⁶ The pop-ups look more fun than they are in reality, but that's the point: in a world driven by Instagram, appearance is more important than experience.

Like the Museum of Ice Cream, Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk looks better in photos than it is in reality. Compressed into pixels, the griminess of the litter-filled streets, the loudness of the crowds, and the endless waiting in line disappear, leaving a polished facsimile of an urban neighborhood. Art Walk narrativizes Downtown as a place that's a fun, vibrant party, and the food trucks are a big part of this. Though people don't tend to broadcast it on Twitter anymore,

food trucks in Los Angeles are still a gateway to social currency; eating at a food truck (and letting everybody know you're doing so via an Instagram post) makes you look cool and in-the-know. That social currency works on the neighborhood scale, too — by hosting those food trucks, Downtown Los Angeles itself also comes across as cool, a precious designation for a growing neighborhood.

Food is a selling point for any neighborhood or city. We travel to new places to try new foods, whether it's a short drive to the next town to try a new sandwich shop or a fourteen-hour flight to Tokyo to eat the sushi that food writers have been raving about. We look for “authenticity,” or foods that are supposedly representative of place: when in Rome, eat as the Romans do. In the age of social media, foodie culture and the Instagrammable City go hand in hand — part of selling a city is selling that city's food, and there's no better way to sell food than to make it Instagrammable. And though foodie culture has played into the rise of the Instagrammable City, the two are also linked in ethos. Both contemporary foodie culture and the Instagrammable City use social media to sell an image, either of the self or of a place. They are projects of coolness and social currency reliant on the curation and editing tools of social media to shape narratives and perceptions. Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk is just one example: an event where foodie culture and the Instagrammable City converge to make Downtown seem fun, exciting, and carefree.

In reality, living Downtown is often complicated and unpleasant. A good residential neighborhood needs basics and anonymity; a day-to-day life in a place is built around pharmacies and grocery stores and neighborhood eateries that aren't overflowing with tourists. What's cool to a visitor is often inconvenient for a resident, and Art Walk is the prime example.

Just as an Instagram post from “Candytopia” fictionalizes the actual experience of spending thirty bucks and waiting endlessly in lines for photo ops, Art Walk fictionalizes Downtown — and it helps that photos of the event look pretty cool. During the event, it’s easy to obscure the polarizing income inequality that’s been pushing immigrant-owned businesses out of the neighborhood for years and the staggering poverty of Skid Row lying just east of Art Walk’s food truck lot. Instead, we see an edited version of the neighborhood.

The idea of the Instagrammable City is usually discussed in terms of proliferating museum pop-ups, murals, and spaces clearly designed to be photographed, but I think the term can be broadened to include things that may not seem so explicitly designed for social media on the surface. At its core, the Instagrammable City is one that prioritizes fictions over realities. Even after Art Walk’s food trucks were determined by the city to be the source of the dangerous vehicle and pedestrian traffic that led to a fatal 2011 incident, the trucks came back. They’re the most popular part of the event. So I take a photo of my mac-and-cheese sandwich from the Grilled Cheese Truck and post it on Instagram.

¹ Cara Mia DiMassa, “Ordinance Brings New Life into Downtown L.A.’s Main Street,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/11/local/me-main-street11>.

² “Downtown: Mapping L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, accessed March 2, 2019, <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/downtown/>.

³ Ben Bergman, “Trading Desks for Beds in Downtown LA,” Southern California Public Radio, August 7, 2015, <https://www.scpr.org/news/2015/08/07/53539/in-downtown-la-residential-building-trumps-commerc/>.

⁴ Dennis Romero, “Art Walk Accident Downtown Takes Life of 2-Month-Old Boy,” *L.A. Weekly*, July 19, 2011, <https://www.laweekly.com/news/art-walk-accident-downtown-takes-life-of-2-month-old-boy-2389154>.

⁵ “Food Trucks, Vendors Banned from Art Walk,” ABC7 Los Angeles, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://abc7.com/archive/8301679/>.

⁶ Biz Stone, “Retweet Limited Rollout,” Twitter, November 6, 2009, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2009/retweet-limited-rollout.html.

⁷ Zach Behrens, “Eat This: Korean BBQ With the Edge of a Street Taco,” LAist, accessed April 20, 2019, https://laist.com/2008/12/04/kogi_bbq.php.

⁸ Matthew Sedacca, “How ‘Foodie’ Culture Survived the Recession,” Eater, May 19, 2016, <https://www.eater.com/2016/5/19/11705966/foodie-millennials-recession>.

⁹ Sedacca, “How ‘Foodie’ Culture.”

¹⁰ Sedacca, “How ‘Foodie’ Culture.”

¹¹ Josh Constine, “Instagram Hits 300 Million Monthly Users To Surpass Twitter, Keeps It Real With Verified Badges,” TechCrunch, December 10, 2014, <http://social.techcrunch.com/2014/12/10/not-a-fad/>.

¹² Martino Stierli, *Montage and the Metropolis: Architecture, Modernity, and the Representation of Space* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

¹³ Nicole Martinez, “40 Of The Most Instagrammable Food Spots In LA,” BuzzFeed, June 12, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/nicolemartinez082/40-of-the-most-instagrammable-food-spots-in-la-11cba>.

¹⁴ Elijah Chiland, “The Most Instagrammable Places in LA,” Curbed LA, December 27, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/12/27/16822336/los-angeles-instagram-best-spots>.

¹⁵ Amanda Hess, “The Existential Void of the Pop-Up ‘Experience,’” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/arts/color-factory-museum-of-ice-cream-rose-mansion-29rooms-candytopia.html>.

¹⁶ Hess, “The Existential Void.”

A Neighborhood Just East of Hollywood

Every day a taco truck sets up shop in the parking lot of a discount shoe store on the northwest corner of Sunset and Western, just east of Hollywood. The area is one of those Los Angeles spaces without an obvious name, more aptly referred to as the Home Depot/Food 4 Less corridor than by any neighborhood title. When I drive past at 3:00 p.m. on a Monday, the parking lot's mostly empty, save for a few pick-up trucks and a couple cars parked near the shoe store's entrance. I drive into the lot and park near the truck along the low concrete wall separating the parking lot from Sunset Boulevard. The truck is a Leo's Tacos Truck, one of several in the Los Angeles area, famous for their *trompo*-cooked tacos al pastor with fresh pineapple and their hungry late-night crowds.

Leo's Tacos is lonchera-like in spatial practice, parking in the same spot with the same hours every day, but new-wave in appearance: the truck is wrapped in bright yellow paint with a graphic of a smiling cartoon man giving a thumbs-up from the truck's rear. Like the men inside the truck, the cartoon man wears a hat with the words "Tacos Leo" and an image of a lion slicing meat off of a rotating *trompo*. A scrolling, flashing sign on top of the truck blinks a message of "Tacos Al Pastor" that can be seen from a block away.

There's no line at the truck when I arrive. I place an order for three tacos al pastor and a plastic water bottle "for here," then I take my seat on a red plastic stool along the three foot high dividing wall of the parking lot. Nearby, two men on stools laugh over paper plates of tacos and glass bottles of Mexican soda. The traffic noise from Sunset and Western is cacophonous, and

small pieces of debris drift through the parking lot as the occasional car drives in and out. On the other side of the dividing wall from me, several people wait for a city bus.

Other than the transit riders and a rainbow-umbrellaed fruit stand on the corner, there's little pedestrian activity on this strip. The streetscape along this section of Sunset is populated with big box store chains and massive, sprawling strip malls. It's a landscape not dissimilar from much of Los Angeles, though the nothingness — the lack of landmarks, the size of the strip malls, the monotony of the area — exists on a more massive scale here. The blandness is extensive. Two blocks west, the 101 freeway slices diagonally under Sunset Boulevard, drawing intense rush hour traffic through the zone.

In the last several years, this area just east of Hollywood has become locally notable for the presence of an enormous, half-built Target store located on the southwest corner of Sunset and Western, directly across from my plastic stool perch at the taco truck. The structure, known colloquially as the Target Husk, has stood in this half-built state since 2014 like an ignorable, quotidian moment frozen in time. The Target Husk is the size of a city block, a mixture of concrete and steel beams and yellowing stucco that looms imposingly, blocking the sidewalk of Sunset Boulevard below. The building is big, ugly, and clearly supposed to be a Target; the builders have even left an indented circle where the corporation's glowing bullseye logo will obviously sit. The promise of a Target is there, complete with shiny surfaces and neat aisles and a careful choreography of employees and customers, but instead a Target Husk sits bafflingly, a half-finished building slowly falling into decay. It's almost as if the Target Husk has broken the fourth wall, begging the question, "is anyone else seeing this?" Target Husk has spawned a Twitter and Facebook presence, posting as a sentient creature rightly frustrated with its state

halfway between death and life: “Target is the name of the corporation. Husk is the name of its monster.” reads one June 2017 tweet.

The Target Husk saga goes all the way back to 2007, when the southwest corner of Sunset and Western was occupied by a strip mall and a CVS. At the time, a Target in the area was just a rumor, though renderings for an undisclosed “major discount retailer” had begun circulating in the local press.¹ In 2009, information about the Target officially appeared on the Los Angeles Department of Planning’s website. The structure being proposed wasn’t just a Target, but a three-story complex with retail and parking on the ground floor, parking on the second floor, and a Target store on the third floor, all connected by something called a “vertical pedestrian core,” which would allow easy pedestrian access to all three levels from the street.² Locals were excited about replacing the dilapidated strip mall on the site and the fact that this Target would be subway accessible (only two blocks from the Metro Red Line!), but there was a catch — Target was proposing a building that was eighty feet tall, when zoning restrictions in the area limited building heights to thirty-five feet only.³ Still, in June 2010 the Los Angeles City Council approved the Target, with exceptions made to both parking requirements and zoning height laws for the structure.⁴

That’s when the lawsuits began. In August 2010, a Los Angeles resident named Doug Haines represented by attorney Robert Silverstein sued the city for violating the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in approving the Target project. Haines, it turned out, was a member of a group called the La Mirada Neighborhood Association, a group Silverstein had represented in numerous anti-development cases before. In response to the lawsuit, Target

renounced the zoning code exceptions and announced it would be conducting an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on the project in order to comply with the CEQA.⁵

CEQA was signed law into law by then-governor Ronald Reagan in 1970. The act was intended to protect the environment by creating stricter standards for preservation and pollution regulation in California, partly through requiring California's local governments and public agencies to measure the environmental impacts of any major new developments including large buildings and Community Plans. If an agency fails to properly conduct an environmental review of a new project, CEQA says, members of the public can sue the city and force a review to occur.⁶ It can take several years to conduct a full EIR like the one Target announced it would complete. Because of this, the CEQA provision has become a tool used by anti-development groups to seriously delay or entirely stop construction projects throughout California — exactly Silverstein and Haines's intention.

When Robert Silverstein sued the City of LA on behalf of Doug Haines in 2010, he was already intimately familiar with CEQA. Silverstein is a notorious anti-development lawyer who's been accused of using the law to "greenmail" developers, threatening CEQA-based lawsuits and then settling to receive cash from developers unrelated to environmental concerns — in one instance, a developer agreed to pay \$90,000 to Silverstein and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association for attorney's fees and costs and \$250,000 to La Mirada "to be used as to be La Mirada sees fit."⁷ In exchange, the La Mirada Neighborhood Association promised not to take any legal action that would challenge the development project. And it's not just Silverstein and La Mirada: other Los Angeles neighborhood associations have been accused of the same kinds of practices, using money gained through "greenmailing" to personally financially benefit the

members of these associations and not for the benefits of the communities they purport to stand for.⁸

In blocking development projects, Silverstein, Haines, and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association have often been referred to as NIMBYs. An acronym for “Not In My Back Yard,” NIMBYs are people and groups who object to development projects and changes in their neighborhoods. Though their arguments can vary widely, NIMBYs frequently use the rhetorics of preservation and protection to argue against development, a kind of “won’t someone think of the children?” plea used to disguise sometimes less-charitable reasons for preventing urban growth. Often, NIMBYs invoke “neighborhood community” as something threatened by increasing density and new construction projects, as opponents to the Target project did. But this logic falls apart in the neighborhood of the Sunset/Western Target, which one would have difficulty referring to as a “neighborhood” at all.

“Neighborhood” is a vague term, defined without requirements or boundaries, but the word implies a sense of community. The area around Sunset and Western is largely devoid of residents, but the La Mirada Neighborhood Association defines itself in court cases as a “community association” that “advocate[s] for residential quality of life issues.”⁹ There is little community to organize into an association here, nor are there residential properties in the area that would be readily associated with the Sunset/Western Target. In fact, the Leo’s Tacos Truck on the corner of Sunset and Western across from the Target Husk may be the closest thing to a community center in this part of town. There’s a near-neighborly attitude among the truck customers, who share space and salsas with the people around them. People linger and have conversations over cheap tacos here, which are some of the only non-fast-food-chain dining

options in the vicinity. The truck is a gathering point. The truck community isn't the community La Mirada is invoking, however. Though geographically close, the "La Mirada" that the neighborhood association gets its name from, La Mirada Avenue, feels distinct and separate from the commercial corridor of Sunset Boulevard. In Los Angeles, "La Mirada" refers to a city near Anaheim, not a neighborhood in Hollywood, making the title "La Mirada Neighborhood Association" a strange one. And it gets stranger: the La Mirada Neighborhood Association is practically un-Googleable, with no website or page of contact anywhere on the internet. *Curbed LA* has speculated that the Association is actually just one person — Doug Haines — and that the neighborhood association title merely gives him more power and a name from which to sue.¹⁰ If he is the only member, who does the La Mirada Neighborhood Association stand for, and what do they want?

In suing under the CEQA, Silverstein and Haines were speaking out against then-City Council Member (and current Mayor of LA) Eric Garcetti's dreams of a more-pedestrian-friendly Los Angeles. In a speech delivered to the City Council in August of 2010, Garcetti used a Jane Jacobs "eyes on the street" style argument to defend the Sunset/Western Target and other Hollywood redevelopment projects, presenting a vision of the city with more transit, less cars, and more people; in a word, a more urban place.¹¹ Not only would Target improve a dangerous, vehicle-prioritized neighborhood, the store's supporters argued, it would also bring jobs and revenue to the greater Hollywood area.

Though Silverstein and the NIMBYs succeeded in delaying the Target project, a year and a half later Target presented a draft EIR and the City approved it. Proposed was a seventy-four foot tall structure slightly changed from the original plans, but still not in compliance with the

thirty-five foot zoning height limits in the neighborhood. In their approval, the City Council argued that the height requirements would place an “unnecessary hardship” on the Target corporation, with Target’s lawyer adding that the company had pursued a taller structure at the behest of Eric Garcetti, who wanted space for more amenities at the sidewalk level.¹² La Mirada sued again, but this time Target had already started construction and continued building as the lawsuit progressed.¹³

Meanwhile, hearings for public comment on an update to the Hollywood Community Plan were beginning. Community Plans are huge Planning Department documents that define land use in particular neighborhoods, detailing “the types of development permitted, at what densities and intensities, and [outlining] strategies for how to accommodate anticipated growth.”¹⁴ In 2012 when the hearings began, the Hollywood Community Plan had last been updated in 1988 — years before five Metro Red Line subway stations opened in the neighborhood, dramatically increasing Hollywood’s transit accessibility and potential for urban growth. The proposed Community Plan update allowed for increased building density in the Downtown Hollywood area, especially near transit stations, and outlined strategies for accommodating potential population growth in the neighborhood over the next few decades.¹⁵ In essence, the Hollywood Community Plan update of 2012 strove to bring the city’s planning department documents up-to-date with the realities of contemporary Hollywood, setting new guidelines that matched the neighborhood’s evolution into a potentially-walkable urban hub.

On June 19th, the City Council held a final hearing on the update, which included a twenty-minute public comment period for voices from the pro-update and anti-update teams. Opponents came ready: among other scary visions, they argued that the “big one” would destroy

all the new high rises, that tourists would no longer be able to see the Hollywood Sign, and that “more lives will be lost and more fires will burn out of control” because the plan would create too much congestion for the LAFD to navigate through.¹⁶ The opposition directly and indirectly threatened lawsuits during their public comment period, but the City Council unanimously approved the plan anyway. True to their word, Robert Silverstein and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association sued shortly after, using a CEQA-based lawsuit to argue that city leaders had acted rashly and unjustly — even though none of the concerns voiced by the opposition at hearing meetings had much to do with environmental protection at all. In December 2013, a judge struck down the update to the Hollywood Community Plan, returning the planning documents to the 1988 state. Silverstein called his victory a “significant setback” for now-Mayor Eric Garcetti, arguing that the plan would “push out longtime stakeholders, harm neighborhoods, overtax our infrastructure, and overburden our already gridlocked streets and freeways” — something he claimed Garcetti wanted to emulate citywide.¹⁷

In the meantime, the Target at Sunset and Western kept progressing. With less than a year before the planned opening day, Doug Haines issued a statement: “Garcetti didn’t want something that fit in the community. ...He wanted something that set a precedent so there could be massive buildings along Sunset Boulevard,” he told the *Park La Brea News*.¹⁸ What Haines was saying was that the Target’s existence and approval process set a precedent for a Hollywood of density and development, with the implication that this would be a terrible future.

Three months later in August 2014, a judge sided with Haines, Silverstein, and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association, ordering the city council to invalidate the structure’s permits and halt all construction.¹⁹ La Mirada wanted the structure to be torn down completely, and

Target asked city officials to rewrite the specific zoning restrictions at issue, which, if amended, would make the ruling against Target “moot,” according to Target’s attorney.²⁰ The Target was thrown into purgatory, and a Target Husk was born.

For two full years Target Husk sat in limbo, its yellow construction tape bleaching to white and fences accumulating dense webs of graffiti tags. “Target Husk” the Facebook page and Twitter account emerged, gaining a small but dedicated Los Angeles following for the accounts’ jokes, memes, and local political commentary. The structure stood unchanging the whole time, a half-built, half-approved Frankenstein battleground over visions of the LA’s future.

Glimmers of hope emerged for Target in May 2016 when the City Council voted unanimously to allow construction to continue on the Husk, altering zoning height restrictions for the structure, but La Mirada sued again, questioning the legality of the zoning changes.²¹ Doug Haines launched a bid for City Council around the same time, running on an anti-development platform.²² A judge sided with the Haines and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association in May 2017, predictably and somewhat comically putting the Target Husk back in limbo before any new construction had even occurred.²³

Target Husk has gathered local notoriety because of its size, its social media accounts, and its obvious and seemingly forever half-constructed state. But Target Husk is just one of several NIMBY-stalled or obstructed development projects in Hollywood. A few blocks to Target Husk’s west stands the Sunset Gordon Tower, a mixed-use high rise whose permits were invalidated after the La Mirada Neighborhood Association brought litigation against the developer and forced the eviction of all of the 299-unit apartment building’s tenants.²⁴ A mile to the northwest, La Mirada halted the construction of a previously approved twenty-story retail and

residential tower at Hollywood and Gower.²⁵ And in 2016, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, led by Michael Weinstein, sued to prevent the construction of the 731-unit Palladium Residential Towers next to Weinstein's 21st story office in Hollywood — represented, of course, by Robert Silverstein.²⁶ Michael Weinstein is notorious for using the AIDS Healthcare Foundation's name and finances to wade into political battles promoting his personal beliefs: in the same year, Weinstein's AHF began bankrolling Measure S, a March 2017 City of LA ballot measure that sought to impose far-reaching restrictions on new building in Los Angeles.²⁷ Weinstein argued that Measure S was motivated by anti-gentrification and displacement concerns, but opponents saw the ballot measure as an abuse of resources and a misguided, blanket anti-development measure that would stagnate urban growth and housing construction in a city that desperately needed more housing.²⁸

The vision of Measure S — and of Robert Silverstein, and Doug Haines, and the La Mirada Neighborhood Association, and the other NIMBY activist groups in Los Angeles — is a kind of “make Los Angeles great again”: an idea that Los Angeles must be preserved in some historic, perfect (suburban) state, one that maybe never really existed. A conversation about development in Los Angeles has been happening since the 1960s — in his 1966 book *Eden in Jeopardy: Man's Prodigal Meddling with His Environment: The Southern California Experience*, Richard G. Lillard bemoaned Southern California as a place rushing “from one brilliant improvisation to another, valuing means, neglecting ends.”²⁹ Lillard's jeremiad against development feels relevant today because the development conversation has become especially loud in recent years with increasingly rapid gentrification, the presence of Measure S on the 2017 ballot, and the approach of the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. Development, in an

abstract sense, has come to stand as the battleground on which the future of Los Angeles is being fought. There are voices articulating a Los Angeles of the future that is urban, dense, vibrant, pedestrian-friendly (and sometimes to a fault, developer-friendly), and they're arguing with these NIMBY visions of Los Angeles's supposed past in a very public forum: the literal streets of LA.

Though LA's anti-density preservationists have succeeded in stalling development projects throughout the city, the largest arrows seem to be pointing towards Los Angeles as a urban twenty-first century city. In August 2018, a court of appeals reversed the May 2017 decision that stalled Target's construction, and in December 2018, the California Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal from La Mirada, affirming that the zoning changes issued by the city were valid and that the Target could resume construction.³⁰ As of March 2019, a permit for work to resume on the Target Husk has been granted, and the site is being prepared for construction once again.³¹ Measure S, Michael Weinstein's anti-development ballot measure, failed resoundingly. Doug Haines lost his bid for City Council. And the 2028 Olympics, which have generated protests from housing and homeless advocates who believe development surrounding the games will cause displacement, are progressing with no major setbacks. A different Los Angeles is coming, and maybe it looks more like New York or other more traditional big cities, with more people and more skyscrapers and more major corporate developments.

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If the La Mirada Neighborhood Association and Robert Silverstein were to get their way, Los Angeles would stagnate. Ironically, the Neighborhood Association pushes for a Los Angeles without neighborhood communities, a city in which people keep their distance from one another by design. The Los Angeles that La Mirada seeks to create (or "preserve") is also an isolating

Los Angeles, one that would treat taco trucks as nuisances against “residential quality of life” instead of actual gathering and community places.

The Los Angeles of the future is a city where food trucks would thrive, sustained by denser and more consistent networks of pedestrian customers. It’s a city where interactions and overlaps between different groups of people are more frequent, a city where the conversations about neighborhoods and communities and developments are brought out of the courtrooms and into more public discourse. In that Los Angeles, the one with a fully-built Target on the corner, this parking lot food truck has more hungry customers on a Sunday afternoon. Or maybe it’s a Los Angeles in which this parking lot no longer exists, replaced by another corporate mega-structure or a towering housing complex, and Leo’s Tacos parks on the street in front. Maybe the truck is gone, forced out of the neighborhood by the new developments.

But then there’s the Los Angeles that exists right now: a still half-built Target on a wide boulevard, across from an empty parking lot with a food truck, in front of a hyper-busy bus stop next to a fruit cart sidewalk vendor. To the east and west, clusters of skyscrapers stand.

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¹⁰ Elijah Chiland, “Work to Start Again on Half-Built Hollywood Target,” Curbed LA, May 5, 2016, <https://la.curbed.com/2016/5/5/11594032/hollywood-target>.

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¹² David Zahniser, “Judge Strikes down City’s Approval of a Hollywood Target — Again,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-hollywood-target-struck-down-20170502-story.html>.

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¹⁴ “Hollywood Community Plan Update,” Hollywood Community Plan Update 2 (HCPU2), accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.hcpu2.org/>.

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Multiply and Divide

I leave the Echo around 11:00 p.m. on a mid-winter Sunday night. I'm coming from a sparsely-attended concert where most of the audience seemed to be friends with the bands. The room was a collection of tattooed and bearded twenty-something Angelenos, mostly men, drinking overpriced beer from the bar inside the venue — typical of a weeknight show in an LA neighborhood like this. I've reached an age where I no longer look so young and out of place here; now, I just kind of blend into the crowd.

It's drizzling lightly when I step outside, but that's enough to clear Sunset Boulevard. Aside from a few others stumbling out of the Echo and into Lyfts or the hip Thai restaurant across the street, I am the only pedestrian I see for blocks.

I'm hungry, so I open the maps app on my phone and search "taco truck." A few loncheras appear within walking distance — El Flamin' Taco in the gas station parking lot at the west edge of the neighborhood, Taco Zone near the Vons a little to the north, and a Leo's Tacos truck at the off hours car-wash behind the Echo Park Lake — but I settle on Tacos Arabes, which my phone tells me is parked on Logan a couple blocks away. It's the closest truck, but more importantly, it's near the ATM and I have no cash. The ATM is next to a locally-beloved dive bar, inside of which two women were stabbed a couple years ago and outside of which a man was stabbed last year. I try to not think too hard about this. I take out twenty bucks and start walking back to Logan.

Walking away from the ATM on Echo Park Avenue, I pass two cheap clothing and gift stores, a tattoo parlor, a cafe billing its fare as "craveable, sustainable, comfort food," and an H

+R Block, among other businesses. This late at night everything's closed. With lights off and shutters down, the stores all seem the same. Across the street stands the massive Lassen's Natural Foods and Walgreens parking lot complex, bordered on Logan, Sunset, and Echo Park Avenue by a three-foot high stone wall. The parking lot is mostly empty, save for a few late night Walgreens customers.

I spy the taco truck as I cross to the north side of Sunset. It's parked on the east side of Logan, next to the Lassen's complex. The truck, as it turns out, isn't Tacos Arabes but Tacos Arizas, and it's not so much a truck as it is a trailer attached to a pick-up truck with a duct-tape-covered taillight. Tacos Arizas is a lonchera, and I realize as I'm walking towards it for the first time that I've seen the vehicle stationed in this location for years — I've just never really looked.

Tacos Arizas is parked across two parking meters under a tree that shelters it from the light rain. Its brightly lit facade, illuminated by bulbs hanging off of the serving window, is almost jarring on the otherwise-pitch-black side street. The truck is close enough to Sunset for pedestrians to see, but it's deep enough down Logan that brick-and-mortar businesses would be unwarranted in complaining about the lonchera's presence.

Tacos Arizas has been parking in this same location since at least 2009, when negotiations between Los Angeles Council District 13; the Asociacion de Loncheros, a lonchera-advocacy non-profit; the LAPD; and the owners of Tacos Arizas, resulted in Tacos Arizas moving its semi-permanent location a block north from its previous spot.¹ The council office wanted the truck to move away from residences further south on Logan, where the lonchera's activity — and its rowdy post-concert customers — were causing a disturbance for locals. It's hard to picture a boisterous crowd in front of the truck this late on a Sunday, but standing in front

of Tacos Arizas, I can see how the noise of the vehicle could cause problems: a generator perched in the bed of the attached pick-up truck rattles loudly as I walk towards the yellowy light.

Pictures of the menu are posted on the sidewalk-facing side of Tacos Arizas, illustrated with photos and a list of prices. There are tacos, tortas, burritos, quesadillas, and sopas, all available with a choice of various *carnes* or *vegi*. Paper plates taped on top of the menu advertise fish tacos and other specialties, half in English, half in Spanish. Other plates in English make it clear that Tacos Arizas is cash only.

I approach the truck window and a friendly middle-aged woman takes my order, which I deliver half in English, half in Spanish: two tacos de pastor and two de pollo. In English she asks me if my order is “for here or to go,” “for here” referring to one of four upright milk crates leaning against the Lassen’s parking lot wall. I opt for “for here,” and the woman calls my order deeper into the truck where a couple men prepare food in cramped quarters. I walk to the crate and take a seat.

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When my dad and I moved to Downtown LA in 2009, our moving truck drove through Echo Park. I’d grown up in Hancock Park, an upper-middle class neighborhood fifteen minutes west, but I’d never spent much time in the neighborhoods to the east. As a child in Los Angeles, my geography was limited to what my parents knew of the massive and sprawling city they’d moved to in the 1990s. Their Los Angeles was Hollywood, the Fairfax area, mid-city, and occasionally Santa Monica. The east side of LA wasn’t part of their geography, and so it wasn’t part of mine.

When we moved downtown, my map of LA shifted. Part of it was proximity: the neighborhoods that used to be a short drive away were suddenly far and unreachable except by slogging through freeway traffic jams, so new neighborhoods took their place. But part of my shifting map was social, too. By the time I moved downtown, I'd somehow learned that Echo Park and its neighbors, Silverlake and Los Feliz, were the cool neighborhoods of Los Angeles, and the neighborhoods that I, a thirteen year old who wanted so desperately to be cool, could be spending my time in. These were the neighborhoods where young people wore thrift-store clothing and went to concerts and independent bookstores. The neighborhoods of 'eastside' Los Angeles looked and felt like the opposite of a stereotypical LA full of celebrities and palm trees and tiny dogs, at least before "Silverlake" became shorthand for an oversized-hat-wearing, avocado-toast-eating new stereotype of Angeleno. I wanted my Los Angeles to be like these eastside neighborhoods, and less like Sherman Oaks and Beverly Hills, where my friends from my San Fernando Valley high school spent their weekends. I started exploring the eastside in my free time, Yelp-ing places to get lunch with my dad or sometimes asking him to drive me to the area and drop me off on a Saturday afternoon. When I got my driver's license at sixteen, my geographic freedom increased dramatically and I spent even more time on the eastside. Slowly, I rewrote my map.

In the Silverlake/Echo Park/Los Feliz tri-neighborhood area, I understood Echo Park as the cool, almost-funky district near Dodger Stadium. Grungier than Silverlake and younger than family-friendly-feeling Los Feliz, Echo Park's mix of longstanding immigrant-run storefronts and high-design coffee shops, small brightly-painted duplexes, and walkable scale felt like Los Angeles to me. The neighborhood was a complicated and often messy mixture of cultures and

people set against a backdrop of hills, bougainvillea, and sticker-covered telephone poles. And Echo Park was constantly changing: the nearby manmade Echo Park Lake was in the process of renovation, and new cafes and shops seemed to be opening every month. Every time I drove to the neighborhood, something shiny and new stood in the place of something old.

I later came to understand that Echo Park was undergoing a slow gentrification, the same process that had already consumed Silverlake and Los Feliz, driving up rents and shifting the demographics of the neighborhoods. With changing economics came a change in cultural cachet, too: Echo Park's gentrification wasn't just pushing out older residents and businesses, it was also turning the eastside neighborhood into something that I, a white teenage girl, could understand as "cool."

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In contrast to other parts of the city that were explicitly segregated through legal structures, or areas like East LA that were *de facto* segregated, Echo Park has long been a site of mixing and diversity in Los Angeles.² Echo Park was first developed in the 1880s by a real estate investor named Thomas Kelly as part of the area then known as "Edendale," which encompassed neighboring Silverlake as well as parts of Elysian Park.³ The area was home to the first permanent movie studio in Los Angeles and became an epicenter of the silent film industry in the early twentieth century.⁴ When the film industry moved out of Echo Park and centralized in Hollywood, Echo Park became a middle-class neighborhood.⁵

In the years following World War II, Echo Park underwent a period of white flight. Drawn to the suburbs by the post-war economy, white middle-class residents moved out of Echo Park, leaving behind a decimated tax base but also affordable homes.⁶ Mexican Americans and

smaller numbers of Chinese, Filipino, and Southeast Asian immigrants took their place, quickly becoming the residential majority in Echo Park.⁷ Echo Park became an immigrant stronghold in Los Angeles, notable for its cultural diversity. The neighborhood was geographically and economically accessible for a wide range of Angelenos, and Echo Park quickly became a hotspot of overlap and mixing in Los Angeles.

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Longtime Echo Park resident Eric Trules points to 2003 as the start of Echo Park's gentrification, when developers cleared an empty lot at the top of Lucretia Avenue and erected three modern-style single family homes in its place. The homes stood out imposingly from the colorful bungalows and dingbats of the rest of the neighborhood.⁸ The three Lucretia Avenue homes were like an omen, peering down from the hill like "concrete birds of prey."⁹ It was clear that the concrete and glass single-family homes would be but the first of many to materialize in the neighborhood. Attracted to the neighborhood's then-affordable prices, developers quickly followed the Lucretia properties with new houses on Echo Park Avenue, an art gallery, and a vegan grocery store.¹⁰ Echo Park was being reconfigured into a place for people who could afford fancy new-built homes, and it was coming at the expense of the people who'd lived there for decades.

Echo Park changed immensely between 2000 and 2010. During the decade, the Latinx population of Echo Park fell from nearly seventy percent to below sixty percent, while the white population rose to make up almost a quarter of the area's residents.¹¹ These changes occurred even though California's white population shrunk and the state's overall Latinx population grew during the same time period.¹² Density also decreased in Echo Park, with the population of the

central area dropping by fifteen percent.¹³ Apartment buildings that had long been protected by rent control laws were bought by investment groups, and their tenants were told to relocate.¹⁴ In 2003, when the modern Lucretia Avenue homes were built, the median price of an Echo Park home was about \$300,000. Today, the median home price in Echo Park hovers around one million dollars.¹⁵

Gentrification is generally defined as the influx of middle-class or affluent people into a working-class neighborhood, a population shift that also brings rising rents and the displacement of longtime residents and businesses. In their place, homes, stores, and restaurants catering to the tastes of the new residents appear. But as Natalia Molina points out, “gentrification is not just about changing the present; intentionally or not, it erases the past.”¹⁶ The story of gentrification is not about the new coffee shop in the once mostly-non-white neighborhood; it’s about what stood there before and how that previous tenant rapidly fades from memory. When global capitalism pushes towards the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, manifesting in what Rebecca Solnit describes as “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,”¹⁷ who will be able to afford Echo Park, and what will they remember?

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In 2013, the LA Weekly crowned Echo Park the “Greatest Neighborhood in Los Angeles.”¹⁸ In the accompanying article, Hillel Aron described Echo Park as being in “that sweet spot of half-gentrification,” where hipsters roamed the streets but housing was still relatively affordable. Aron’s characterization feels slimy in its flippancy, the way it glosses over the destructive powers of gentrification in a disaffected tone, but it also points to dynamics of the

neighborhood. Describing Echo Park as “half-gentrified” implies that the neighborhood consists of two halves: the un-gentrified and the gentrified, or the longtime locals and the new wave of gentrifiers. There are the helvetica-lettered cafes and boutiques patronized by people who look like me, and there are the restaurants and storefronts that have been open for decades, *lavanderias* and charbroiled burger stands that continue to sustain the neighborhood. Posters in newer stores are written in English. Advertisements for the older establishments are multilingual. There is spatial overlap between these halves in Echo Park, but there are also clear divides. Though discount marts and *panaderias* stand next to boutique clothing stores with names like “Gingerly Witty,” their customers don’t interact. Affluent young people weave around the businesses and residents that have been standing for years as if they are invisible, or as if they’ve already been erased.

“Half-gentrified” implies an unfinished process. Echo Park isn’t “fully gentrified” because some of the old businesses and rent-stabilized apartments still stand. The ‘hipsters’ Aron sees on the streets still walk alongside working-class people of color, though maybe not for many years longer. Gentrification is like a boulder rolling down a hill, picking up speed and power and crushing what stands in its way. Rents in Echo Park keep going up. Shuttered businesses and displaced residents fade from sight, and from memory.

There is an Echo Park before gentrification, but it is not one that I remember. I remember an Echo Park with a bike shop and a corner pizza place, a Señor Fish restaurant, and a series of grocery stores in the location where Lassen’s now stands. Those places, many of which opened during Echo Park’s ‘first-wave’ of gentrification, replaced other places, and now they’ve been replaced themselves. That Echo Park, like the Echo Parks before it, exists in stories and

newspaper articles and fading palimpsests on Sunset Boulevard. Small pieces of it still stand, just as pieces of older Echo Parks still stand, too — the sign for Jensen’s Recreation Center, built in 1924, still glows at night.¹⁹ The overlaps of Echo Park are not just overlaps between different-looking people walking down the same street; the overlaps of the neighborhood are also overlaps of histories.

I started hanging out in Echo Park as a teenager, a time when I was beginning to figure out what I wanted my Los Angeles to be and who I wanted to be, too. In Echo Park, I saw a messiness that was comforting. Here was a part of the city grappling with the tensions of contemporary Los Angeles — wealth and class disparities, not-always-harmonious coexistence among diverse people, the capitalization of art and cultural production — but all I saw was a neighborhood that felt just as complex and confused (and in progress) as I did. Echo Park was a place that felt authentic to my optimistic conception of Los Angeles as a multicultural crossroads: a city in which the best places are intersections.

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As I’m waiting for my food at Tacos Arizas, a man in his late thirties or early forties walks up to the truck from Sunset. He’s on the phone, speaking Spanish, and he’s wearing sneakers and a blue button-up shirt. Unlike me, the man immediately knows what he wants, and he places his order without looking at the menu. He leans comfortably into the truck as he does so, and he chats briefly with the woman inside before resuming his cell phone conversation and taking a perch on the stone Lassen’s wall. I attempt to translate his cell phone conversation in my head, but I can barely hear over the rattle of the generator. I notice the blue health department ‘A’ and a window covered in stickers of brands, bands, and art in a rainbow of colors and languages.

The woman calls my order from the truck window and I pick up my tacos, sprinkling them with the salsas, onions, and radishes in plastic buckets perched on the truck's ledge before returning to my crate. I feel cool sitting here, like I'm in on some neighborhood secret, warm tacos and a semi-improvised seat reserved for those in the know, or at least those willing to look beyond the Instagram-friendly restaurants on Sunset for food. That sense of coolness comes partially from the way that Tacos Arizas feels authentically Echo Park: the truck is a crossroads space and a hodgepodge, in both appearance and clientele. I wonder if Tacos Arizas will withstand Echo Park's gentrification. Maybe the truck will remain here on Logan for a while, preserved as something 'cool' and 'authentic' for new residents to enjoy while the old residents are pushed away.

As I'm eating, two other young people approach the truck. The first is a young woman, probably a couple years older than me. She wears flared pants and sparkly sneakers, and she comes out of the neighborhood, presumably having parked further north on Logan. She orders her tacos to go. She's soon followed by a second customer, a twenty-something bearded man in a baseball truck, who approaches the truck from the Lassen's lot where he's parked. He orders his tacos to go, too, and like the cell phone man, both he and the young woman perch on the parking lot wall while waiting for their food. The three of us alternate between staring at the truck and staring at our phones, not talking to each other. Though they're only a couple feet away, the people on the stone wall feel out of the conversational bounds.

The sparkly sneakers woman picks up her tacos from the window and walks towards Sunset, opposite the direction that she came from. A few minutes later the bearded man also picks up his plastic-bagged tacos, but he heads to the parking lot. He walks to his car, which he

has parked directly facing the truck. Separated only by the low stone wall, his passenger seat is aligned directly with my milk crate. I expect him to drive off with his food, carefully wrapped in thin sheets of aluminum foil, but instead I watch him untie the plastic bag, unwrap the foil, and eat his tacos in the driver's seat of his car. With windows rolled up, he is separated from Echo Park. He stares at the truck while he eats, and the glow from the lonchera lights up his face behind the windshield.

¹ S. Francona, "Tacos Arizas and 'Taco Diplomacy' ~ Echo Park," *L.A. TACO* (blog), August 5, 2009, <https://www.lataco.com/tacos-arizas-and-taco-diplomacy-echo-park/>.

² Natalia Molina, "The Importance of Place and Place-Makers in the Life of a Los Angeles Community: What Gentrification Erases from Echo Park," *Southern California Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2015): 69–111.

³ Hsuan Hsu, "The Invasion of Echo Park," *Boom California* (blog), December 20, 2012, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2012/12/19/the-invasion-of-echo-park/>.

⁴ Annie Lloyd, "Ten Things You May Not Know About Echo Park," *LAist*, April 5, 2017, https://laist.com/2017/04/05/echo_park_10_things.php.

⁵ Hsu, "The Invasion."

⁶ Molina, "The Importance of Place," 78-9.

⁷ Hsu, "The Invasion."

⁸ Eric Trules, "The Gentrification of Mi Barrio, Echo Park," *Huffington Post*, June 4, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/trules/the-gentrification-of-mi-_b_5435209.html.

⁹ Trules, "The Gentrification."

¹⁰ Trules, "The Gentrification."

¹¹ "2010 Census Reveals a Decade of Echo Park Demographic Change," *The Eastsider*, March 9, 2011, <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2011/03/2010-census-reveals-a-decade-of-echo-park-demographic-change/>.

¹² Leslie Berestein Rojas, "There Are More Latinos in California, but Not in Echo Park," *Southern California Public Radio*, March 10, 2011, <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2011/03/10/7472/there-are-more-latinos-in-california-but-not-in-ec/>.

¹³ *The Eastsider*, "2010 Census."

¹⁴ Molina, "The Importance of Place," 100.

¹⁵ "Real Estate Market Trends for Echo Park, Los Angeles, CA," *Trulia*, accessed February 17, 2019, https://www.trulia.com/real_estate/Echo_Park-Los_Angeles/7234/market-trends/.

¹⁶ Molina, "The Importance of Place," 100.

¹⁷ Rebecca Solnit in Molina, “The Importance of Place,” 100.

¹⁸ Hillel Aron, “Echo Park: Greatest Neighborhood in Los Angeles, Which Has 87 of Them,” *L.A. Weekly*, February 26, 2013, <https://www.laweekly.com/news/echo-park-greatest-neighborhood-in-los-angeles-which-has-87-of-them-4174744>.

¹⁹ Becky Koppenhaver, “Jensen’s Recreation Center,” Echo Park Historical Society, October 28, 2005, <http://historicechopark.org/history-landmarks/places-landmarks/jensens-recreation-center/>.

Arteries

In *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham describes Los Angeles as an “Autopia”: a place where “the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, [and] a complete way of life.”¹ In Los Angeles, the freeways are more than a means of getting from A to B — they are a location in and of themselves. For Banham, the freeways are shapers of psyche: “the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes,” he argues.² Driving creates the Angeleno, and driving creates Los Angeles. Academic Richard S. Weinstein writes that LA “is experienced as a passage through space, with constraints established by speed and motion, rather than the static condition of solids.”³ Los Angeles would not be Los Angeles without cars. My map of the city is oriented around freeway entrances and exits, around parking lots and traffic patterns. My favorite places are as much about the routes I take to get there as they are about the destinations.

For better or worse, cars are synecdoche for the urban experience of Los Angeles. We see it in pop culture — the opening musical number to *La La Land* features dozens of Angelenos dancing in, around, and on top of their cars on a grid-locked freeway overpass. There are no city signs to indicate the movie’s setting; the cars and the seemingly endless stretches of road below are enough for the viewer to understand that this is, of course, Los Angeles. Classic images of the city — the palm tree lined boulevards, the Pacific Coast Highway, the downtown skyline surrounded by freeway belts — all center automobiles and automobile infrastructure. Banham called movement the language of urbanism in Los Angeles, the primary orientation of the

massive and sprawling urban form, but he meant movement only in terms of wheels.⁴ Missing Persons sang it in 1982: “Walking in LA? / Nobody walks in LA.” At the scale of the sidewalk, the city feels especially Autopian. It’s here that the top-down urban planning of the city becomes apparent; it’s here where you suspect the infrastructure of the city was designed for vehicles instead of people.

In the eastern part of Santa Monica near Cloverfield and Olympic boulevards, cars whiz by on four-lane-wide avenues as you pass block after block of inward facing offices complexes. Parking lots abound, and little to no ground floor retail exists. When you reach intersections — which are few and far between, the neighborhood having been shaped for the scale of vehicular movement — short crosswalk signals send you running to make it across the road in time. The neighborhood is the opposite of the urban form Jane Jacobs praises in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This is a place where the “eyes on the street” are more likely to belong to traffic cameras than people. In a word, the neighborhood feels like Autopia.

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Los Angeles wasn’t always this way, but patterns in the city’s early urban development primed the region for later becoming the car-centered place it is today. Los Angeles decentralized early and aggressively because Southern California wasn’t a major urban center until the twentieth century.⁵ Unlike other major American cities in the late 1800s, Los Angeles didn’t have dense layers of development around its central business district from decades or centuries of population growth; the city was relatively new. Because its history as a highly developed urban region was short, Los Angeles was still malleable and adaptable to decentralization in the nineteenth century.

Los Angeles's transformation into the city that stands today began in the 1880s, when the Southern Pacific Railroad connected the then-sleepy city to the rest of the country.⁶ The region soon began growing rapidly, and railway and streetcar networks developed to match the booming population. By the 1920s, Los Angeles had one of the largest streetcar networks in America, which allowed people to live further and further from downtown.⁷ Los Angeles's suburbs grew, and the city kept sprawling.

Though the streetcars were well patronized, many Los Angeles residents were dissatisfied with rail service in the city. Cars were crowded, service was slow, and the railroad companies were perceived to be corrupt.⁸ Hoping to liberate themselves from the railways, Angelenos living in the suburbs began turning to private cars en masse. Car ownership nearly quintupled during the twenties,⁹ and the city became highly congested, especially downtown.¹⁰ Streetcars and personal cars competed for space on the narrow city streets, but the majority of Angelenos wanted to privilege car traffic over the public transportation networks.¹¹ After the Los Angeles City Council tried and failed to relieve congestion by restricting parking downtown, city officials found themselves faced with a challenge: if Angelenos wanted to drive, the city needed to find ways to let automobiles move freely.¹² Streets were widened to accommodate car traffic, but with the streetcar system in decline, Los Angeles needed new infrastructure to connect the far reaches of the ever-sprawling city. City officials started toying with the idea of a regional freeway network in the 1930s, and in 1938, a federally sponsored traffic survey suggested that "a system of limited access highways would allow the region to tie its subcenters together."¹³ In 1940, the first segment of LA's first freeway opened in Highland Park.¹⁴

Four years later, the Los Angeles Railway network was sold to a company whose stockholders included General Motors. The new owners immediately began replacing streetcars with buses.¹⁵ *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* cemented the perception in the minds of Angelenos that this takeover was a nefarious scheme orchestrated by the automobile industry at the expense of a thriving public transit system in Los Angeles, but the history of the LA streetcar network shows that the region's railways had in fact been in decline for decades. The once-massive public transportation network in Los Angeles was slowly dismantled. In 1947, the Collier-Burns Highway Act passed in California, and major freeway construction in the region began.¹⁶

LA's freeway system was never completed as originally planned. A 2003 map prepared by Caltrans shows the extent of the city's existing and hoped-for freeway networks, with the



From Faigin, “Southern California Freeway Development.”

amount of orange “Miles Not Built” closely rivaling the amount of blue “Miles Built” lines on the map.¹⁷ But even though the full Master System Plan was never realized in the LA region, freeways remain one of the most prominent features of the urban landscape. It’s hard to imagine

driving through the city without encountering the freeways, the massive slabs of concrete cutting through hills and neighborhoods and the pylons dotting the streets below. The automobile infrastructure of Los Angeles physically looms; it is inescapable. And this physical inescapability can become a mental inescapability, too: living in a city designed for cars shifts your expectations of urban space.

Los Angeles is sometimes described as the capital of car culture, a place where the automobile is both innovated and celebrated. Some of the manifestations of car culture are very literal: the colossal Petersen Automobile Museum on Wilshire Boulevard, established to “explore and present the history of the automobile and its impact on American life and culture using Los Angeles as the prime example”¹⁸ comes to mind, as do the lowrider car shows of East LA. There’s also the conspicuous abundance of surface parking lots in Los Angeles County, which cover a combined area more than four times the size of Manhattan.¹⁹ But car culture goes deeper — it’s embedded in the legal structures of the city, which require any new residential building with more than three units to provide a full-sized parking space for every unit²⁰ and set penalties for jaywalking that can be as high as \$250.²¹

Car culture also has abstract effects, like the way in which driving becomes the given mode of transportation and the assumption of urban life in LA. Seventy-seven percent of Southern Californians seldom if ever use public transportation, even though the LA Metro operates an extensive bus network in the city.²² And car culture affects the way places relate to each other in Los Angeles. Though I’ve lived in the city my whole life, I’m dependent on maps to get around because neighborhoods and landmarks feel disjointed when the nondescript, always-the-same freeway is the thing connecting them. Joan Didion wrote in *The White Album*

that actual participants in the “freeway experience” “think only about where they are. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway.”²³ The reality of freeway driving is less poetic, but Didion captures the liminal feelings of space and time when you’re on the road. When seen through a windshield, the city is both condensed and blurred. Los Angeles is a place in which distances are measured in minutes, not miles.

When driving is the norm, being outside of the car is novel. Walking in Los Angeles can feel like brokering with the city, traveling on narrow strips of concrete placed like afterthoughts on the sides of boulevards and avenues for cars. It’s easy to walk for miles in some neighborhoods without passing another person. But to decry Los Angeles as unwalkable is to take a shallow look at the city, a perspective that dismisses the pedestrian experience and the tiny, sometimes beautiful things that go along with it. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in *Wanderlust*, “walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it.”²⁴ In Los Angeles, being outside the car is a means of re-shaping and re-mapping the city: a way of challenging the car-centric design of Los Angeles and remaking it to your own specifications.

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Every weekday at lunchtime, in the same part of Santa Monica near Cloverfield and Olympic where cars whiz by, pedestrians pour into the automobile-centered streets from the nearby office complexes. They’re headed towards a stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue between 26th and Stewart streets, a sidewalk-less block that serves more as an alley entrance to various parking lots and garages than a viable roadway. It’s here in this unremarkable place that a dozen

rotating food trucks set up between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, providing lunch for the hundreds of students and office workers in the neighborhood.

I meet my dad here for lunch on a Wednesday afternoon. He works in one of the sprawling complexes nearby; I'm on my way to the beach a few miles west. I get to Pennsylvania Avenue at about 12:30. The street is mobbed, filled with mostly young tech and entertainment industry people. There are twelve trucks, six on one side of the street and six on the other, ranging from a poke-serving mini-van to a gigantic burger operation that looks like a standard issue food truck on steroids. There's one lonchera here, but the others are new-wave trucks wrapped in colorful, highly designed logos and stickers.

The lack of a sidewalk makes it difficult to walk along the serving-side of the trucks, so my dad and I stand in the middle of the street, occasionally dodging slow traffic, to suss out our lunch options. We settle on the Peri Peri Chicken Company truck, an off-shoot of the popular India Jones food truck that serves a variety of fried and grilled chicken dishes. I pick sliders and my dad orders a wrap. We stand on the curb side of the truck after ordering, balancing on a dirt hill dotted with parking meters that's serving as the waiting area for all the trucks on this side of the street. My dad smiles at coworkers as they pass by; they smile and wave back. Everyone looks happy to be outside on this sunny winter day, talking and walking with the people around them. "It's nice to get out of the office," my dad tells me, "and it's nice to not have to drive."

There's nowhere to sit or really linger at all near the trucks, so we pick up our food and head to eat in the courtyard of my dad's office complex. It's packed, and it takes us a while to find a seat. The distinction between public space and private space is blurry here: though it's

surrounded by privately owned buildings with fancy lobbies and security guards, technically anyone could walk in off the street and sit in the courtyard.

My dad buys lunch from the food trucks several times a week. For him, the trucks provide somewhere to eat in a neighborhood where there are very few options. He describes the trucks as a kind of utility; in addition to providing food to hungry office workers, the food trucks give him and his coworkers a reason to leave the office. “There’s not a whole lot here,” he explains, “which is what makes the food trucks so great.”

The food trucks are creating somewhere to pick up lunch, but they’re also creating a destination. The trucks and the people patronizing them are engaging in placemaking: “a hands-on approach for improving a neighborhood, city, or region [that] inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community.”²⁵ Placemaking is a means of transforming a nondescript space into a somewhere place; to placemake is to create a *there* there. The top-down planning of Santa Monica near Cloverfield and Olympic would suggest that Pennsylvania Avenue is a space for cars, not pedestrians, but the presence of food trucks says otherwise. The street is reclaimed from the domain of the private vehicle and is made public, vibrant, and walkable, challenging Banham’s notion of Autopia. There’s an irony to how food trucks disrupt the car-centered infrastructure of the city — at the end of the day, the trucks are vehicles themselves — but interacting with them requires being on foot and being out in the city. Unlike the isolation of driving, eating at a food truck is a communal experience. It’s an experience that reshapes our narrative of Los Angeles.

When I met my dad for lunch on Pennsylvania Avenue, I took the Metro Expo light rail line instead of driving — the new station is tucked just behind the speeding cars of Olympic

Boulevard. Walking towards the food trucks, I dodged bicycles and dockless scooters zooming down freshly painted bike lanes. Movement is still prioritized here, but the kind of movement is shifting. Los Angeles stands ready to reckon with its Autopian urban form.

¹ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 195.

² Banham, *Los Angeles*, 196.

³ Richard S. Weinstein, “The First American City,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen John Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 35.

⁴ Banham, *Los Angeles*, 5.

⁵ Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5.

⁶ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 14.

⁷ Hadley Meares, “Old Photos Show the History of Transportation in LA,” Curbed LA, September 19, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/9/19/16268026/transportation-old-photos-history>.

⁸ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 15.

⁹ Meares, “Old Photos.”

¹⁰ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 15.

¹¹ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 15.

¹² Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 15.

¹³ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 20.

¹⁴ Meares, “Old Photos.”

¹⁵ Bottles, *Los Angeles*, 2.

¹⁶ Meares, “Old Photos.”

¹⁷ Daniel P. Faigin, “Southern California Freeway Development (Part 3 — 1960s and Beyond),” California Highways, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.cahighways.org/maps-sc-fw-y-pt3.html>.

¹⁸ Leslie Kendall, “History of the Petersen,” Petersen Automotive Museum, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.petersen.org/history>.

¹⁹ Elijah Chiland, “In LA, Land Dedicated to Parking Is Larger than Manhattan,” Curbed LA, November 30, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2018/11/30/18119646/los-angeles-parking-lots-total-size-development>.

²⁰ Alissa Walker, “How Parking Lots Are Ruining Los Angeles,” Curbed LA, July 21, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/7/21/16011386/parking-lots-bad-los-angeles-development>.

²¹ James W. Jakobs, “New CA Law Means No More Jaywalking Tickets during Countdown,” ABC7 Los Angeles, October 4, 2017, <https://abc7.com/2489997/>.

²² Matt Tinoco, “Transit Ridership Is Falling Because Angelenos Keep Buying Cars, UCLA Report Says,” Curbed LA, January 31, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2018/1/31/16950224/metro-ridership-decline-stats-car-ownership-study>.

²³ Joan Didion, “Bureaucrats,” in *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 83.

²⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000), 29.

²⁵ Project for Public Spaces, “What Is Placemaking?,” accessed February 26, 2019, <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>.

So Glad to Meet You, Angeles

On the last day of my last spring break from college, I get in my car. It's mid-March and the sky is a blueish gray, and the short walk from my apartment to the parking lot is slightly chilly, but not chilly enough for me to go back and get another jacket. I take a minute to warm up in the cotton-upholstered interior of the car before I plug my phone into the AUX and choose a playlist. I scroll back to my earliest Spotify collections, through five or six years worth of playlists made for myself and friends, a blur of colorful album covers and inside-joke titles. I keep scrolling until I find the list called "ANGELES," written in all caps for easier access. From the list I choose a song by X and crank up the car's volume dial.

For the last six years I've been collecting every Los Angeles song I come across and adding it to a massive playlist spanning decades and genres and years of my life. Most of the songs are Los Angeles songs in the sense that their lyrics mention the city or landmarks or specific events, but others are Los Angeles songs in the sense that they remind me of the city and my life lived here. The project started inconsequentially, a meaningless grouping of songs and bands around a common theme, but over the years it developed into a small and private obsession. As I grew older and explored more of the city on my freshly-minted drivers license, I started to see pieces of LA that I'd never recognized before. I began to understand that Los Angeles was a special and unusual place, one that I was lucky to live in. When I left for college, listening to the ever-expanding "ANGELES" became a means of connecting to home, a secret personal world only accessible through my headphones. In Los Angeles, I like to put the playlist

on in the car when driving friends around, especially when those friends are visiting from places out of town. Today, though, I'm alone. I pull out of the parking lot and head east on 8th Street.

It's mid-afternoon, and I am driving towards a food truck parked just west of the northern edge of Downtown Los Angeles. I don't know exactly where it is. I've probably been driving past this truck for five years; its presence on the southern side of Sunset Boulevard (Or is it Beverly Boulevard? Or Temple Street?) has been my almost-home landmark for years, the sign that my long drive back from Hollywood or the Valley or Mid-City is finally almost over. I've often considered stopping on my way back from a concert or a friend's house, pausing my commute for just a few minutes to sit under the christmas lights strung between the truck and their plastic covered seating area, eating tacos with other night owls and locals, but I've never actually pulled the car over. Today is my last day in Los Angeles in the conceivable future, and I have a nagging desire to go to the truck and eat the tacos I have been contemplating for years.

From 8th Street I turn right on to Hill Street, twisting the steering wheel with my left hand and using my right to muscle-memory skip past a Joni Mitchell song that I am sick of. My phone makes a familiar high-pitched bloop as my thumb hits the fast-forward button, and the relaxed bass of Ice Cube's "It Was a Good Day" begins to rattle the car. I maneuver past construction cones and a stalled Metro bus, wondering how long it's been sitting useless and empty on the side of the road. I roll down the front seat windows and let bass notes escape into the traffic around me.

I try Sunset Boulevard first. Turning west, I think about the hours I've spent in the graffiti-tagged CVS at the intersection of Sunset and Beaudry on my left, waiting for the clerks to process dozens of disposable cameras filled with pictures from my early high school

‘photography phase.’ On my right, I pass the restaurant where I nearly fainted after having had my blood drawn earlier in the day, saved by some toast and a concerned waiter. I shuffle past the electric guitar of “Santa Ana Winds” by the Cold War Kids, landing on “Shangri-LA” by YACHT. Staccato synths in warm melodies play under the chorus as the band declares, “If I can’t go to heaven / let me go to LA.”

I drive Sunset for a couple miles, keeping my eyes peeled for the food truck which I know parks on the left side of the street. The curves of the street are second nature, and I turn the steering wheel in harmony with the bends without even thinking. I drive past colorful retaining wall murals at the bottom of hillsides and broken sidewalks sprouting weeds. Five minutes past the northern border of Downtown, I know the truck isn’t here on Sunset. I drive a little further, just in case I’ve misremembered the geography, but soon I’m approaching Dodger Stadium and it’s clear I’ve gone too far. I make a u-turn and head back east.

I turn right at the CVS, weaving under the 101 freeway, and then I turn right again onto Temple Street, tracing a parallel line to the one I just drew on Sunset. No truck. I turn left on Glendale Boulevard, but the street is under construction and I can’t make a second left onto Beverly Boulevard. I’m suddenly lost in a neighborhood I drive all the time, circling the recently-shuttered and always sort-of-creepy Bob Baker Marionette Theatre in an attempt to get my bearings. A right and a left back to Temple and a left and another left later I am driving east through my target area of Beverly Boulevard, and there is still no food truck. I try each of the three streets again to no avail. I briefly wonder if the food truck is something I’ve totally imagined, a mirage I’ve been conjuring in the corner of my eye for years. More reasonably, I wonder if the truck is just closed — maybe, I’m realizing, it’s just a late-night operation, or

maybe they take some days off. Maybe the cold-for-Los-Angeles weather has driven them out of opening today. I try Sunset one more time, finding the intimacy of the road comforting in my failed quest. Near the CVS, I notice a taco truck parked on the right side of the street in an empty lot, but it's not the one I've been thinking of. I feel a mutated kind of *deja vu*, a sense that I've been here before but that everything is unfamiliar. I have passed through this city so many times that I know it almost too well, in the way that repeating a word over and over again makes it lose all meaning. I think about how Los Angeles changes but my memories crystallize, latched onto certain understandings of the city in my past. Los Angeles exists as much in my head as much as it does in actuality, maybe even more so. Driving away, I wonder which place is more real. The ethereal guitar of Elliott Smith's "Angeles" plays, and I continue west on Sunset, past Dodger Stadium, past Echo Park, and into Silverlake, past the mural memorializing Elliott Smith's life, and into Hollywood, where I loop onto the 101 south and return home.

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Before she moved two hours north to Ventura County, my mom lived in a small 1920s-style apartment complex with a garden courtyard and silhouettes of horses painted inexplicably on the complex's outside-facing walls. My mom's apartment was about a mile up Beachwood Canyon from Franklin Avenue. There, among the sidewalk fruit trees, the streetscape was dotted with pastel-colored apartment buildings from the mid-twentieth century and not the expensive Spanish-style single family homes that fill the upper canyon. Sometimes in the mornings my mom and I would walk up the winding canyon to the kitschy Beachwood Cafe, where we'd eat scrambled eggs and toast in a room full of tourists heading to Hollywood Sign hiking trails in the hills above. Other days, we'd walk or drive down the hill to the 101 Coffee Shop on the corner of

Franklin and Visa Del Mar, where we ate overpriced diner food in a room that felt straight out of the late 1960s.

I first heard Warren Zevon's "Desperados Under the Eaves" in late high school, when the LA-band Dawes covered the song on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. At the time I wasn't sure what the lyrics were about exactly, but I knew it was a Hollywood song, made clear by references to the Hollywood Hawaiian Hotel and the mystics who claim California will slide into the ocean. Zevon wrote the song in the seventies, but I wondered if his Hollywood was also filled with neon signs in house windows advertising psychic readings and tarot services, like mine was.

The final section of "Desperados Under the Eaves" is a repeated, desperate directive backed by soaring strings: "Look away down Gower Avenue," Zevon sings over and over, "Look away." Beachwood, where my mom lived until last year, was one block south of Gower — really Gower Street, not Gower Avenue, but I assumed Zevon was just taking poetic license and singing about the same one. It was imperative, I decided, that I listen to "Desperados" while driving down Gower. Maybe it would unlock some sort of window into the song, I thought, or a window into the neighborhood.

Leaving my mom's apartment for school one day, I paused to download "Desperados Under the Eaves" and the rest of Warren Zevon's eponymous album to my phone. There's no cell phone service in Beachwood Canyon, which meant that I had to pre-plan and download the first few songs of my commute before getting in the car. I put on "Desperados" immediately and then sat idling, waiting to get closer to the final lines of the song before driving down the canyon. I unparked at the second chorus and turned left, right, and left onto Gower at the instrumental

bridge. “Look away down Gower Avenue” came on just as I made the turn onto Franklin, passing the 101 Coffee Shop, the Gower street sign in my rearview mirror. I considered turning around, trying again, but I was already late, and I continued on my way.

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After the final performance of the junior class play, the cast and crew and I drove to the Du-par’s Restaurant in the mini mall on Ventura Boulevard for wrap party festivities. Du-par’s was our standard post-show haunt, a sticky retro diner where pancakes the size of your head were served on plates with the cursive Du-par’s logo scrawled around the edges. The food wasn’t great and the parking situation was a nightmare, but the restaurant was open twenty-four hours a day. By our junior year of high school the Du-par’s staff were used to assembling a long table for us when we walked in, where we ate and laughed and gossiped about our teachers and classmates. We felt at home there.

On the way to the diner, I rolled my windows down and sang along to Tom Petty’s “Free Fallin’”, reveling the strange suburban beauty of the San Fernando Valley around me. This is a rite of passage for Valley teenagers, driving around and listening to the greatest song ever written about this place, but I was not a Valley teenager. My home was Downtown Los Angeles, only fifteen miles southeast, but a wholly different LA. In the city, the area of Los Angeles south of the Hollywood Hills, streets were denser and filled with people. The Valley on the other side of the hills had thoroughfares filled with cars. Buses and subways crisscrossed my neighborhood, carrying people of different backgrounds and different futures, but in many Valley neighborhood public transit was a novelty. In the city, Los Angeles was urban. In the Valley, the urban was nowhere to be found.

Though I lived over an hour in traffic away, the Valley was the center of my teenage universe. I went to high school in North Hollywood, and all my friends lived in the Valley, in neighborhoods like Sherman Oaks and Studio City with manicured lawns and housekeepers. My Valley friends talked about “getting out of this town” like pop-punk song protagonists, desperate to escape the suburbia they found so stifling.

The Valley is the butt of the joke in Los Angeles. It is a region of families and schools and shops that look plucked from Anytown, USA; a sprawling landmass with seemingly no point. Du-par’s Restaurant felt like a microcosm of the San Fernando Valley. The dilapidated interior and almost kitschy dinnerware were perfectly matched to the Valley’s tacky suburbia and its kind-of-ugly, un-special landscapes; Du-par’s, like the Valley, was not an obvious place to love. But for me, a resident of the most unusually urban neighborhood in Los Angeles, the Valley was fascinating. The classic American nothing of the Valley landscape — wide boulevards full of cars, neon signs advertising liquor stores, huge indoor malls — was novel to me, fascinating in its difference from my neighborhood landscape. I liked the Valley’s ugliness, its boring qualities. I liked the way it seemed to fulfill the stereotypical visions of Los Angeles. Driving down Ventura Boulevard, I could lean into the Los Angeles tropes from books and songs and movies that I resisted in my own neighborhood. It was fun, and it was freeing.

After graduation, the Valley faded from my life. My Valley friends moved to places like New York and San Francisco, giving me little reason to make the trek over the hills. I saw local news reports that Du-par’s closed in 2018, its cursive sign replaced by the sans serif capitals of a Sephora, but I haven’t been back to the Valley to confirm. On my Ventura Boulevard Du-par’s still stands, and the windows are down in the car, and Tom Petty still plays on the speakers.

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It's a weeknight early in the summer, and my friend Madison and I are driving down Third Street, peering out the windows of Madison's Jeep and into the windows of restaurants and cafes looking for any signs of life. It's 2014. I've just finished my junior year of high school, and Madison has just graduated. We're hanging out for what we know will be one of the last times for a while, before Madison moves to Ohio for college and I start my senior year of high school in North Hollywood. It's springlike outside and though it's nearly 7:30 p.m., the light is only just beginning to fade.

Earlier that evening, Madison and I had decided on a whim to see *Chef*. We went to the fancy movie theater in Hollywood, the one with the big screens and reserved seating, and we used our parents' loyalty cards to get cheaper tickets. *Chef* told the story of a Los Angeles celebrity chef quitting his job at a fancy restaurant to open a Cuban sandwich food truck with his young son. We loved it. In the mostly-empty movie theater Madison and I had grooved in our seats to the film's Latin jazz and New Orleans blues soundtrack, but now, in Madison's car, we were listening to Harry Nilsson's *Harry* and singing along to "Fairfax Rag." Madison and I had bonded over our shared love of weirdo singer-songwriters like Nilsson and Randy Newman, drawn into their strange worlds of rhyming witticisms and stories told through unreliable narrators. Madison had even gone so far as to name her cat Schmilsson.

We'd left the movie theater around seven with a craving for Cuban sandwiches, but not knowing where to find any we set off towards the Third Street/Fairfax area, land of sandwich shops and counter service cafes. In the passenger seat, I opened Yelp and suggested names. Every place we tried was closed or was closing soon. It was frustrating at first, but soon our

unfortunate luck felt more hilarious than anything, and we laughed at ourselves as we looked for other places to eat. After twenty minutes of driving, we ended up at Joan's on Third. Joan's is famous in LA for its bougie subway-tiled vibes, fancy sandwiches and salads, and the 'gourmet marketplace' in the front of the cafe. I'd never been. Madison parked the car in the back of the shop and we ordered inside. Chairs were being stacked; Joan's, of course, was closing within the half hour. We took our sandwiches outside and ate on metal chairs that scraped the sidewalk when we dragged them from our table, talking more about the movie. We ate quickly, not wanting to linger.

I suggested dessert, so we hopped back in the car and drove to the cutesy cookie shop on Wilshire that I'd spied in passing a few weeks prior. We parked, walked, and found the store dark, locked, and clearly closed. We laughed at our terrible timing and our poor planning, and vowed to start Googling the opening hours of various establishments before driving to them. On the now dark sidewalk, we turned back to the car, and Madison drove me home.

•

Driving aimlessly around Poughkeepsie and feeling homesick, I shuffle through a playlist until I find "Let Me Back In" by Rilo Kiley. Jenny Lewis's voice fills the car:

Let it be printed, let it be known
I'm leaving you, I'm going home
And all you can do is just watch me go

It's dark outside and it's cold, and I am in a friend's borrowed car with Connecticut license plates and an ice scraper in the trunk. I've been driving for a while now, taking the long way back from the mall, feeling reluctant to park and enter the universe of college again. Here, in the car, I am

free from responsibilities and unread emails and the minutiae of small interpersonal dramas.

Here, in the car, it is just me, my music, and the city outside. The song continues:

From the Eastern seaboard, the landlocked midwest
The Keys, the Alps, the Black Hills, and Budapest
With my heart in a sling, tail between my legs a-swinging
I'm sorry for leaving

I am driving because I am running errands, and I am running errands because I am avoiding the weight of my thesis and my post-college job applications, and the feelings of not knowing what I am doing or where I am going after here. I try not to think about it, but the second semester of senior year is a constant reminder of endings. The countdown is no longer in months, but days. I am applying to jobs in New York.

But when the palm trees bow their heads
No matter how wrong I've been
LA, you always let me back in

I have spent the last four years turning Poughkeepsie into home and Los Angeles into the place that I visit. I cannot keep up with the city. My time in Los Angeles is filled with double takes, with 'was that there before?' and 'what happened to that place?'. My landmarks are disappearing, replaced by luxury condos and high-end clothing stores. Small memories of being in the city slip away without me noticing.

And you can bury me when my body breaks
In the earth that created me in the Golden State
By my mama and her brother and their mama too

I've been telling my friends and my family that I love LA, but that I want to live somewhere new. I am worried, mostly, that if I return to Los Angeles I will never leave, swept up in the

romance of the city in my head. I am worried, too, that Los Angeles will become something else while I am not there to keep an eye on it, and that I'll never be able to return to the city where I grew up.

'Cause I had a dream I was carried on backs of a thousand green birds
And they carried me to a place without words
And there was nothing, but there was everything
And it sounded like this

There is a clear memory, lodged deep in my brain, in which I am standing on the playground of my elementary school, surrounded by a small group of friends. We've probably just finished lunch, and we are waiting for our teacher to collect us and bring us back in for class. He walks outside just as a flock of green parrots flies overhead.

"Do you know the story of the green birds?" he asks us. We shake our heads and stare straight up at him. He continues.

"There was an old woman who lived out here, near the beach, and she had two parrots as pets. One day, the parrots escaped. Soon there were more and more parrots, and they started flying all over LA. Without that one woman, we wouldn't have our parrots." The birds squawk overhead, a flash of green in the cloudless blue sky. In an instant, they're gone. We nod, satisfied with the explanation. I have never checked to see if it is true. The song swells to a final chorus.

When the palm trees bow their heads
No matter how cruel I've been
LA, you always let me back in, back in, back in.

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