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Catherine T. Edwards

Loyola Marymount University, catherinedwards06@yahoo.com

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Recommended Citation

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Dividing Los Angeles

Catherine T. Edwards

Dividing

L O S

A N G E L E S

By C. Tara Edwards

F o r e w o r d

Growing up alongside Interstate 10 in the Pico Neighborhood of Santa Monica, my interactions with the infrastructure, and particularly the freeways that connect and divide Los Angeles, heavily influenced my perceptions of community. As my knowledge of social structures and systematic oppression developed with age, I became more explicitly aware of my subconscious understanding of the freeway behind my childhood home. The tunnel that runs under Interstate 10 at Dorchester Avenue serves as a portal between two worlds. Though close in distance, these halves are separated by a raised concrete boundary that effectively serves as both a physical divider and a conceptual marker of social status. I grew up on the southern side of the freeway in a community of predominately white families and adjacent to a line of restaurants and shops on Pico Blvd. The northern side, by contrast, is comprised of houses as well as trailer homes, a park that was built on top of toxic waste, and the obstructive presence of the new Metro Expo Line. Residents in my neighborhood had little reason to cross the tunnel to the “other” side, and doing so was unspokenly taboo.

Inspired by this experience, I embarked on Dividing Los Angeles with the intention of utilizing photography to explore how the infrastructure of the city divides communities. In this study, I investigate the history of urban planning in Los Angeles through an academic, artistic, and personal exploration of the physical structures, mainly freeways, which continue to segment communities while shaping the city’s visual

and socio-political landscape. Through an evaluation of primary and secondary sources, direct observation, on-foot exploration, and an analysis of public art and maps, the concept of division unravels far beyond my bisected neighborhood to include a range of communities across the sprawling city.

The politically charged and racially motivated infrastructural development of Los Angeles nestles within the overarching trends of systematic oppression and white privilege that continue today. As a white student at a private university, and as someone who grew up on the more affluent half of a freeway, I recognize the discrepancies in my ability to objectively, accurately, or fully represent the experiences of marginalized communities through either my research experiences or photographic eye. Still, this project serves as my attempt to explore the concept of division through art and academia as it relates to both the history of my neighborhood and impacted communities across the city.



I n t r o d u c t i o n

In postwar Los Angeles, land privatization, industrialization, slum clearance, contentious debates over public housing, and the development of suburbia divided communities on the basis of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Not only did the infrastructural development of the city displace individuals under the name of urban renewal, but it simultaneously laid the foundations for further segregation.

As freeways arose throughout Los Angeles, they physically divided communities and formed boundaries that would grow to develop as unofficial social stratifiers; borders engrained within the city's collective conscience. While real estate redlining and racially restrictive housing covenants effectively segregated Angelinos, physical structures such as freeways, built following and in correspondence with this settlement, served as large-scale fences and obstructors of space. This study investigates the history and ongoing significance of the dividing structures that disproportionately affect low-income communities of color by separating neighborhoods from each other and serving as manifestations of geographical dichotomies. More so, this research celebrates the reactions and adaptations of resilient citizens who pave their own paths in attempts to transcend physical and social boundaries.

“Fences fence out, and fences contain, but only the explorer
paralleling them and occasionally pausing to scrutinize them
sees the ruthlessly efficient divvying up of the country.

John Stilgoe *Outside Lies Magic*

B u n k e r H i l l



Community division and residential segregation in Los Angeles are intertwined with a longstanding tradition of displacement, as structures that displace people often divide those who remain. Narratives of displacement become an anticipated aspect of urban development when eminent domain clears the way for large scale projects in the name of renewal and further segments the city along socioeconomic and ethnic lines. Though Los Angeles' history of disregarding marginalized populations during infrastructural and civil planning is as old as the city itself, as evidenced by the land's original relationship with the native Tongva, the cases of Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine exemplify displacement.

Bunker Hill experienced several transitions that resulted in the replacement of a historically significant community and Los Angeles icon with a privatized corporate fortress. In the 1880s, Bunker Hill housed Downtown Los Angeles' upper class in Victorian homes and hotels. Following the construction of Angels Flight, a short passenger railway ascending up the slope to the elevated community, Bunker Hill began growing in accessibility and eventually evolved into a working class neighborhood.¹ By the 1940s, the original structures began deteriorating, and city officials, viewing both the living conditions and inhabitants as less than favorable, contemplated

redevelopment as a means of slum clearance. Between 1959 and 1964, the Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Plan pushed out the existing community and its residents.² After partially leveling the hill and disregarding the majority of the neighborhood's history, Bunker Hill was left mostly vacant for decades.³ Though a bustling business district eventually arose from the dirt, arguably enlivening Downtown, producing revenue for the city, and even directing funds into affordable housing projects,⁴ injustice still marks the forced removal of the working class community and its history. With Bunker Hill specifically and urban renewal in general, contentious debates over space center on the acquisition and preservation of property and resources for privileged people and those in power.

















STARBUCKS COFFEE





Chavez Ravine



Following World War II, Los Angeles city officials, with the assistance of the federal government, initiated an agenda centered on postwar developments that emphasized housing and freeways.⁵ In the Chicana/o community of Chavez Ravine, congruent to present day Elysian Valley northeast of Downtown, the city organized a plan to replace existing homes with new housing developments. Prior to the case of *Hawaii Housing Authority v. Midkiff* in 1984, eminent domain could only be implemented for public projects, but purposeful flaws in interpretation allowed for Chavez Ravine to meet its end.⁶ Though more problematic in its disregard for the politically underrepresented residents of this neighborhood, the potential for new housing developments met fierce opposition because of society's anti communist sentiments.⁷ As a result, Mayor Poulson and the City Housing Authority decided to sell the land back to the city with the condition that it be saved for public use, a memo that was ignored in 1959, when Walter O'Malley bought it to build a stadium for the newly relocated baseball team known as the Dodgers.⁸

Despite political opposition from officials such as Edward Roybal, who organized a voter referendum, and protest from residents like the Arechiga family, who was forcibly removed after refusing to leave their home, mass evictions commenced and concluded successfully.⁹ The Los Angeles Times, who originally denounced the housing plan for displacing residents, now supported the construction of Dodger Stadium, which satisfied capitalist criteria diametrically opposed to the "socialist" agenda of public housing.¹⁰ Many affected families moved further east, including the Santillions to Lincoln Heights and the Arechigas to City Terrace in East LA, a community also targeted by the prejudiced politics of urban planning.¹¹ Dodger Stadium was thus constructed, further establishing a precedent of displacement, supporting the growth of land privatization, and accelerating the geographical marginalization of working class latina/os.

Today, Dodger Stadium continues to serve as both a center for quasi-public gathering and as a community divider. At the time of its construction, Mayor Poulson claimed that the stadium would unify people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and ironically this theory proved true, as thousands of Angelinos regularly flock to the quintessential landmark to support their local team. While the expression of city pride through baseball nearly transcends ethnicity and class status as an iconic aspect of Southern California culture, UCLA professor of Chicana/o studies, Eric Avila, believes that this perception "undermines efforts to define Dodger Stadium as a monolithic symbol of Chicana/o oppression."¹²

While this symbol of inequity resides nearly forgotten in the city's collective conscience, the tangible presence of the massive stadium is less easily avoided. With the majority of land allocated for event parking, Dodger Stadium resembles an unwelcoming, vacant, fenced-in lot on off days. While an occasional visitor may stop by security and drive up to patron the gift shop, civilians and community members are otherwise required to navigate around this sporting haven. Circumnavigating Dodger Stadium, for anyone interested in traveling between the communities on either side, takes approximately two hours on foot and is complicated by dead end streets and a tangential freeway. The stadium restricts the mobility of residents, who are also faced with the additional challenge of traversing the area when thousands flock to see the Dodgers on game day. The limitation of travel in and through communities is synonymous with larger scale social justice issues regarding transportation, pedestrianism, and residency. Consequently, this behemoth of privatized land reflects the city's history of displacement as well as current community division in a longstanding tradition of residential segregation.



























Freeways



As postwar federal funding reached Los Angeles to support urban development, planners and the Division of Highways embarked on numerous projects to connect the sprawling city with freeways, appeasing the growing car culture of Southern California and the creation of suburbia. These lengthy concrete structures were planned deliberately around the existing social geography, in favor of the politically powerful and at the cost of communities of color. Freeways thus arose to connect the city but simultaneously pushed people out of their homes and paved over cultural landmarks, segmented neighborhoods along ethnic and class lines, and effectively contributed to the segregation of Los Angeles.

In the true spirit of urban renewal, freeway construction effectively displaced anything in proximity through the use of eminent domain and right-of-way policies, specifically targeting people of color. In his guide to urban exploration, *Outside Lies Magic*, historian John Stilgoe recounts the oppressive history of “federal highways that plowed through cities in the 1960s serving as camouflaged urban renewal, what 1960s grass-roots political activists began calling ‘black removal’ or ‘poor removal.’”¹³ In a similar spirit of renewal, freeways emerged across Los Angeles prior to the 1960s. The Santa Ana Freeway (Interstate 5) displaced 1,171 buildings in East Los Angeles alone, which was only a segment of one of the eleven freeways opened in Los Angeles between 1944 and 1965.¹⁴ In 1973, the Los Angeles Times published an article about a family in Watts that was stuck in a deserted neighborhood after their home was acquired through eminent domain and restricted requirements for funding from the city prevented

them from moving to a place they could afford.¹⁵ Given the magnitude of construction in the twenty years following the World War II, cases such as these are unfathomably abundant.

Urban planners’ decisions to run freeways through certain communities deliberately fed the system of social stratification in Los Angeles by disregarding the voices of the marginalized in favor of the politically powerful. While freeways arose to accommodate flourishing white suburbia, they were rarely built through white communities. Plans for the Beverly Hills Freeway, the Whittall Freeway, the Pacific Coast Freeway, and the Laurel Canyon Freeway never materialized.¹⁶ In 1959, Beverly Hills residents utilized their social status and political representation by hiring several legal firms to successfully reject the construction of a freeway near their homes.¹⁷ In other cases, planners preemptively dodged legal backlash by choosing to acquire locations represented by marginalized people, which was often more inexpensive property. The path of U.S. Route 101 conveniently avoided areas of industry, the Hollywood Bowl, homes of pro-freeway councilmen and Hollywood’s elite, and even a predominately white Presbyterian church, while instead paving through homes and appropriating community buildings like Saint Isabella Catholic church, a parish frequented by residents of Boyle Heights, for construction site headquarters.¹⁸ While only four percent of land in Los Angeles is allotted to freeways, 19 percent of property on the Eastside is occupied by these concrete structures.¹⁹ Urban development’s favoritism of industry over the interests of working class people is further illustrated by the distribution of 50 percent

of land in Boyle Heights to freeways.²⁰

Decades have passed since these structures pushed out residents and paved over their homes, businesses, and cultural landmarks, but freeways continue to divide adjacent communities from each other and the rest of the city. Echoing this theme, Stilgoe states, “While the old, sidewalk-bordered highways meandered through urban industrial and residential neighborhoods, the elevated interstate highway divided neighborhoods, making cross streets into long, dark, echoing tunnels, demolishing great swaths of structure, but above all, dead ending a great many city streets.”²¹ While navigating Los Angeles’ network of freeways by vehicle comes with its own set of challenges, pedestrian mobility is severely restricted. Limited to the use of tunnels and bridges to reach the other side, those traveling by foot, skateboard, or bicycle face the everyday hinderance of traveling around the looming structures. With communities on either side differentiating themselves from each other along ethnic and class lines, these freeways serve as physical boundaries that further manifest as psychological markers of social difference. All the while, many people who do not face the negative effects of living in the wake of freeways benefit from their presence daily. As author and former Los Angeles Times book critic David Ulin suggests, traveling by freeway is both a journey in and apart from the city.²² As commuters glide over Los Angeles complaining about traffic, most rarely consider the contentious history and diverse experiences of those residing in the communities beneath them.



I n t e r s t a t e 5

















U . S . R o u t e 1 0 1



Alameda St

1/4

Mission Rd

3/4

San Bernardino Fwy



1









East Los Angeles Interchange



East Los Angeles, a latina/o community east of the L.A. River, was disproportionately affected by the rise of urban renewal following World War II, as nearly all of the city's serpentine freeways converge here. While about 61 percent of freeways planned for the rest of Los Angeles were actually constructed, over 100 percent of freeways designated to run through East Los Angeles were built and eventually connected using project engineer Heinz Heckeroth's design for a massive interchange.²³

The history of infrastructural development in these communities exemplifies the power of socio-politically savvy businesses in outweighing the needs of the people. When Interstate 5 was planned through East Los Angeles, representatives of the Sears department store were vocal in deliberation over its path.²⁴ While this ensured placement of the freeway close enough to convenience commuting customers, it also enabled the corporation to maintain its physical establishment without fear of relocation. Ironically, the Sears tower remains a symbol of East Los Angeles. Just down the street, however, Soto Street Elementary School forfeited part of its campus to the path of another freeway,²⁵ leaving the rest of its property pressed

up against the side of the structure where children continue to cope with the carcinogenic air pollutants²⁶ and disproportionate cases of childhood asthma. Environmental racism further manifested in other planning choices during the construction of freeways through East Los Angeles. While planners avoided nature in other areas, such as the Calaveras Big Tree State Park for the high cost of 3.1 million dollars, they bisected Hollenbeck Park, an iconic landmark in Boyle Heights.²⁷ Over the years, the eastside has continued to develop as a center for industrialization, coupling with the omnipotent presence of the freeways and lack of greenery to increase health risks for residents.

























Interstate 110





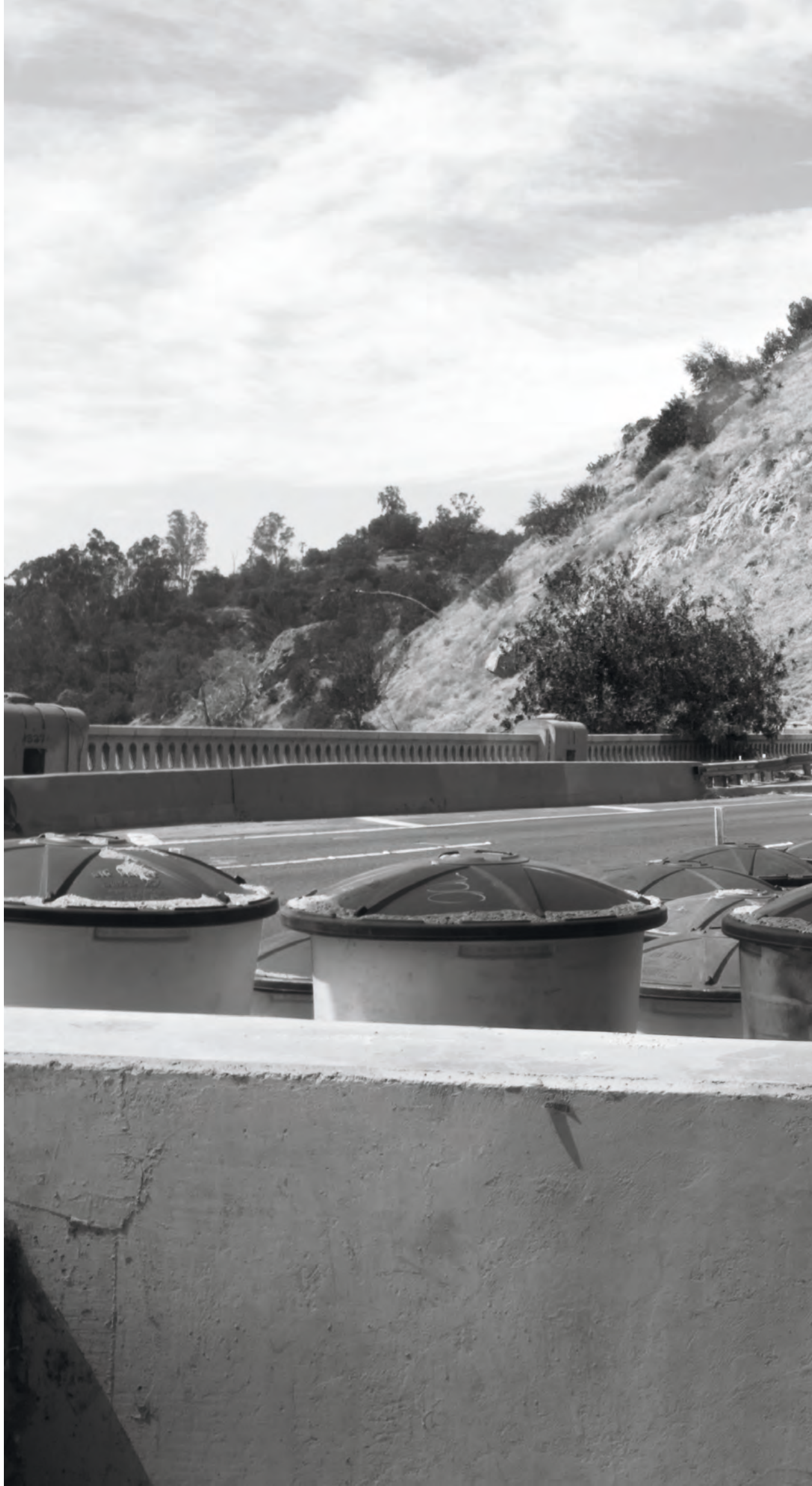




























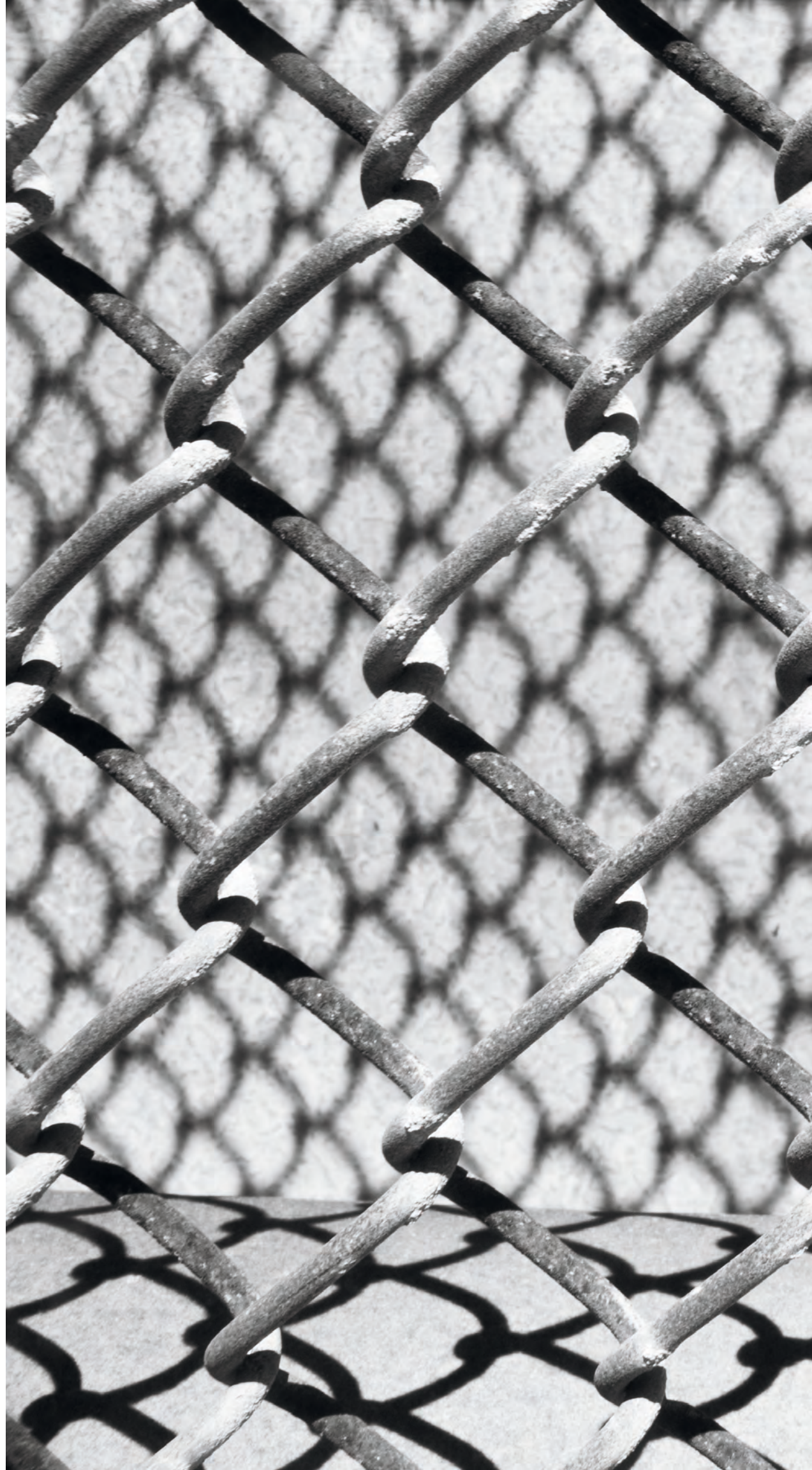


Interstate 10



Interstate 10, completed in 1966, is one of the latest freeway projects to unfold in the hype of federally funded postwar development. While arranging for this freeway's extension through Santa Monica, planners rerouted the structure through the Pico Neighborhood, where a community of black and latina/o businesses, farm plots, churches, homes, and a restaurant that once served as a hotspot for Civil Rights discussions flourished.²⁸ Though opposition, including Alyce Gullattee of the NAACP, suggested an alternative path for a section to run several blocks north, preventing the displacement of 1,900 black residents, the mayor's support of job-providing industry led to the rejection of this proposal.²⁹ Low income residents and property owners, lacking political representation and tempted by government offers, sold their land.³⁰ The Santa Monica Freeway was thus successfully constructed through the Pico Neighborhood, displacing its inhabitants and fracturing the community. While this division occurred long ago, its effects shaped the development of the halves that remain today - the formation of a collective understanding of what and who belongs on either side.































Metro Expo Line
Santa Monica







WARNING

KEEP OUT

PRIVATE PROPERTY
No Trespassing









Los Angeles River



While many structures within the city serve as social boundaries, the Los Angeles River is an especially pervasive symbol of division that materialized in conjunction with the segregatory effects of its physical presence. Today the river provides a tangible marker that defines the widespread, collective concept of east versus west. Within greater Los Angeles, the east/west dichotomy developed around this 49-mile-long waterway even before it was paved by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1938. According to author and professor of urban history Greg Hise, "A related coordinate can be observed in the common use of 'east' as a referent for the low. Alcaldes elected to the Spanish, then Mexican, ayuntamiento (civic council) drew distinctions between the west and east sides of the river (banishing both the Indian village and the dog pound to the east), and this dichotomy has been foundational for thinking about space, for the experience of place, for identity and meaning from that time forward."³¹ Prior to 1920, latina/os were primarily located west of the Los Angeles river in the main plaza district but were pushed across the river following the construction of the Union Pacific passenger depot as a part of a trend that led to the emergence of East L.A.³² While the westside emerged as ideal land in proximity to the beach, the construction of freeways through marginalized communities moved low income people of color eastward, past Interstate 405 and beyond the cement banks of the river.

For those who currently reside in communities adjacent to the river, the fences, steep concrete banks and water make crossing it to access the other side unrealistic. Navigating from the east to the west side requires making a trek to the nearest bridge and is especially difficult for those limited to pedestrian travel

and public transportation. By serving as a physical barrier, the river effectively complicates mobility and access to the resources located in Downtown. It serves as a physical and symbolic dividing boundary between communities that is hinged on the city's history of segregation.

Today, similar trends continue to manifest in alignment with the east/west dichotomy, as gentrification across greater Los Angeles moves people of color and the working class eastward to make room for corporations and hipster colonizers, alike. The forces of gentrification are now reaching communities adjacent to the river as discussions over environmental rehabilitation aim to "revive" the social life surrounding it in a spirit of urban renewal reminiscent of postwar Los Angeles. This comes at the cost of the preexisting communities on either side of its banks, including Elysian Valley and East L.A., where residents and local businesses grapple with increasing rent and the likelihood of displacement. This involuntary and forced migration of people of certain ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds around the Los Angeles River serves as a tangible example of contemporary residential segregation.

























Conclusion

In the face of oppression, most of the communities affected by the forces of urban renewal and infrastructural development fought to defend their homes and neighborhoods. In Chavez Ravine, voter referendums circulated and many families like the Arechigas resisted the colonizing forces of privatization. In East Los Angeles, the Barrio Defense Committee worked to defend their culture from the pervasive injustices in housing and policing. Further west, members and advocates of the Pico Neighborhood attempted to reroute the Santa Monica Freeway away from homes. While many of these battles were lost with the construction of Dodger Stadium, the evolution of Bunker Hill, and the construction of numerous freeways through marginalized communities, residents continue to define their own existence within these places.

Artists who paint on the surfaces that divide their city symbolically reappropriate this quasi-public space for the propagation of their own personal and cultural messages. Public art, muralism, and graffiti subtly and defiantly reclaim the space occupied by oppressive structures. The city's desperate attempts to cover up graffiti, labeling even the most intricate and impressive works as "vandalism," only further illustrate the power of this expression as something that must be concealed. In *The Pocho Research Society's Field Guide to L.A.*, Sandra De La Loza recognizes that "Chicana/o artists perceptively and dramatically used as canvases the concrete forms that lift the city's freeways, contain its rivers, and ultimately divide its communities."³³ In the Los Angeles River, Judith Baca painted the *Great Wall of LA*, which recounts the honest history of the city and the contributions of people of color to its growth. The segment following

World War II, notably depicts the development of the Red Scare, the birth of white suburbia, and the eviction of families from Chavez Ravine accompanied by serpentine freeways tightly wrapping around their bodies. Where Stewart Street runs beneath Interstate 10 in Santa Monica, a mural titled *History of the Pico Neighborhood* by Ann Elizabeth Thiermann tells the story of the Pico Neighborhood. The narrative depicts a multiethnic community struggling to stay unified as a freeway smashes through their homes. Filling adjacent walls on either side of the tunnel, it requires patrons to travel to both sides to fully read the story.

Despite the forces of division, homogenization, and segregation, affected people have built culturally rich communities adjacent to freeways and other structures unwanted by the white elite of the late 20th century. In "Border City," Hise asserts, "The presence of street vendors, murals, and shrines, the use of fences, front yards, and front porches as semipublic spaces (what James Rojas calls an "enacted environment") - these alterations and activities have been read as signs of cultural retention, as everyday acts of resistance against a putatively hegemonic national culture and a global, corporate, consumer culture."³⁴ Even so, many of these communities now face the new battle against gentrification, which threatens to displace residents and their local businesses, once again paving over the histories they have built in the face of oppression. In recognition of this imminent change, and of the recent national discourse favoring unforgiving borders along national and ethnic lines, it is more critical than ever to reflect on the unjust history of division in the diverse city of Los Angeles.

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