Urban Renewal or Urban Legend? Re-Historicizing Human-River Relationships Disrupted by Displacement Before and Now in Los Angeles

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Urban Renewal or Urban Legend?
Re-Historicizing Human-River Relationships Disrupted by Displacement Before and Now in Los Angeles

Jamie Sophia Helberg

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis & International/Intercultural Studies

Spring 2020

Readers:
Professor Joe Parker
Professor Susan Phillips
I first want to acknowledge that this project was written on and inspired by Tongva lands, on which I am a settler. I am grateful to the indigenous peoples who are the original caretakers.

Secondly, I’d like to thank my readers – Professor Joe Parker and Professor Susan Phillips – for their immense support during this semester. This thesis was not possible without their patience and mentoring during the COVID-19 shutdown.

I also would like to thank Professor Andrea Scott for her guidance throughout this academic year. I cannot thank her enough for the support system she gifted me during these uncertain times. She has been an invaluable resource to so many seniors writing thesis amidst a global pandemic.

Thank you to Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) for hosting me that one summer in 2017. My internship opened my eyes to an underlying passion for environmental justice and urban policy. That experience informed my major declaration, post-graduate plans and this entire thesis. I am grateful to Lewis MacAdams, the great poet who recently passed away on April 21, 2020, for creating this nonprofit in honor of the river. May his legacy live on through the great work FoLAR does.

Thank you to those friends who were willing to Zoom conference call with me as we all worked on thesis and finals together. Thank you to my best friend, Tyra Popovich, for motivating me every day to finish my work. All of you made me feel less alone in this process. I feel blessed by your (virtual) company. Shout out to the Class of 2020 as well. Despite the circumstances, we made it through!

Papi, thank you for teaching me to find solitude and peace of mind from a relationship with a river. Thank you for teaching me to ride a bike so I could ride along the LA river all those years. Thank you for opening the doors to a world where nature and the city have always been one.

It is because of you that I can see that now.

Mami, my favorite movie has always been *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* which we first saw in an empty theater all to ourselves. Karamakate says to the children, “cada planta, cada árbol, cada flor, está llena de sabiduría. Nunca olviden quiénes son y de dónde vienen. No dejen que su música desaparezca.”

*Every plant, every tree, every flower, is full of wisdom. Never forget who you are and where you come from. Don’t let your music go away.*

You have instilled the same wisdom in your daughter – values of balance and gratitude towards her surroundings. To not be wasteful. To not just take but to give back. Most of all, you taught me to not let our music disappear. To remember our roots. I promise to never forget.

Thank you to both of my parents for being understanding and comforting when school shut down my final semester of college. Thank you for creating a healthy work environment on short notice.

Last but not least, thank you to the river. Without you there would have been no reason to write this, especially during a pandemic. Thank you for being a part of my childhood. You are the blueprint to my understanding of an urban environment. I pray my niece grows up experiencing your magic as well.
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“Nobody knows Los Angeles without knowing its river” - Joan Didion

Introduction

Name Story

Hidden below the intersection of the 2 and 5 freeways, nestled between a concrete river and Riverside Drive, “Frogtown” remained out of sight, out of mind for many non-NELA (Northeast LA)/Central Los Angeles locals. The midpoint for Silver Lake and Glassell Park, Elysian Valley received its nickname “Frogtown” due to its long history of amphibians emerging from the Los Angeles River and frolicking around the residential area. Long-term Frogtown residents reported the disappearance of their toad friends began in the 1970s, however the nickname remains as “Frogtown” becomes increasingly visible to outsiders (Jao 2016). Prior to “Frogtown”, Elysian Valley has been known by many names: first being called Gopher Flats in the early 1900s then Little River Valley and then Frogtown by the 1930s (Jao 2016). For the Tongva, the indigenous people whose land Los Angeles is settling on today, these northeast areas surrounding the river were named Maaw’nga and Geveronga (Villa).

The Los Angeles River was called Paayme Paxaayt.

According to Mapping L.A, a Los Angeles Times project, there are about 8,000 people living in Elysian Valley, about 60% of which are Latinx, 25% are Asian and 10% are white (2000). The median income is $49,000 however a quarter of the neighborhood makes $20,000 or less. Furthermore, 17% of its residents have a four-year degree while 45% of the neighborhood older than 25 does not have a high school diploma. Lastly, almost half of the population is foreign-born, predominantly from Central America. Many Frogtown residents have had historical ties to the area since the Battle of Chávez Ravine, the forced removal of Mexican
Americans from current day Elysian Park in order to build Dodger Stadium. After being displaced from the Chávez Ravine, many of these families moved into Frogtown and have been there ever since (Sagahun and Saillant 2014; Simpson 2014).

Those who have lived in Frogtown for multiple generations share communal memories of interacting with the hundreds of miniature toads that covered their backyards as young children. Frogtown natives noticed the cyclical nature of the toads burrowing themselves in the ground, reappearing after rainy days and navigating back to the LA River to breed. The Frogtown toads no longer invade backyards as they once did, likely due to the introduction of invasive species, specifically the American bullfrog (Jao 2016). Many residents still express their nostalgia for interacting with their amphibian friends, an interaction facilitated by living next to the Los Angeles River. For many generations, the Los Angeles River has served as a foundation for human-environment relationships in “Frogtown.” However, this relationship continues to be threatened. Similar to the American bullfrog threatening the miniature toads, gentrification and urbanization are acting as invasive species as well, driving Frogtown natives away with rising housing costs and terminating their intergenerational relationship with the river. However, invaders disrupting intergenerational relationships with the river is a tale as old as time for the Paayme Paxaayt.

When these relationships are fragmented in the name of “urban renewal” or “development” who is given a right to interact with nature? How can we break binary thinking of river revitalization being contingent to involuntary displacement/gentrification? How can human-environment relationships be protected from green gentrification? How can settler relations to the river be changed to restore reciprocal relationships implemented by the Tongva?
In this thesis, I will speak to how the historical and on-going colonization of the river has consistently traumatized the relationship disadvantaged communities have had with this waterway. I will also explore how gentrification is an agent of neocolonialism by policing, criminalizing, and commodifying human-environment relationships. In studying the placemaking practices implemented in Frogtown, I problematize notions of territory as physical drawn-out places by demonstrating how Frogtown residents transform space and bring visibility to their relationship to place and the river. For instance, Frogtown is technically drawn as a part of Central LA; however, this neighborhood holds close connections to communities and nonprofits in Northeast LA, right across the river, demonstrating the hybridity / *Borderlands* of city lines.

Charles Sepulveda’s “Our Sacred Waters: Theorizing *Kuyuyam* as a Decolonial Possibility” acts as a theoretical framework for this thesis. Sepulveda speaks to the destruction of the Santa Ana River and presents approaches to restoring the river by abolishing settler colonialism and centering Native knowledge systems. By analyzing the river’s history through this lens, I ultimately conclude that imagining a similar decolonial possibility can prevent gentrification and displacement while sufficiently revitalizing the Los Angeles river.

**Thesis Sections**

In Part 1, I examine the histories of relationships between humans and the Los Angeles River since the Tongva resided along its banks up until today in Elysian Valley. By analyzing the histories of these relationships, I expose how gentrification has been consistently present in this area since colonialism and on-going neocolonialism. Usually discussed as a modern-day housing issue, “gentrification” was originally coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) from studying north London where working class families were being displaced by middle class homeowners (Lin 2019, 58). However, Part 1 of this thesis defines “the first gentrification” of
the Los Angeles River as the initial stealing of Tongva lands by Spanish settlers. Part 1 also discusses how colonization of the river did not end with Spanish colonial rule but rather continued through American settlers, flood control/channelization, and current day gentrification, bolstered by neoliberal housing policies. These factors racialized and criminalized access to the river in favor of white supremacy. For instance, state-sanctioned infrastructure along the river criminalized certain human-river relationships by privatizing riverside spaces that were previously used for access by disadvantaged groups, specifically the Tongva and low-income Latinx communities.

Following the historicizing on the river, I specifically focus on the impacts of a fragmented relationship between Frogtown residents and the Los Angeles River by utilizing Fullilove’s (2005) concept of “root shock” regarding intergenerational neighborhood trauma. Many of the native Frogtown residents are related to the families who were forcibly displaced from the Chávez Ravine and found refuge in Frogtown. Understanding the implications of secondary displacement upon this community exposes how gentrification is an act of violence. I also explore the use of epistemological violence throughout history in relation to the river. Studying the history and development of the Los Angeles River reveals an on-going pattern of white settlers dismissing and erasing knowledge systems and experiences of the river from the Tongva, Mexican settlers, Chávez Ravine residents and current Frogtown residents.

After discussing these histories in Part 1, Part 2 speaks to how Frogtown brings visibility to a history of spatial injustice. This understanding is then used to argue against justifications of gentrification as “urban renewal”. I examine how Frogtown mobilizes in response to gentrification, specifically analyzing the use of placemaking practices as a form of resistance. Exploring the place-based histories and communal memories of this area reveals how Frogtown
provides a sense of place and produces collective notions of difference while problematizing notions of “identity” and “territory”. In this section, I also analyze how Frogtown residents create alliances with nearby nonprofits (FOLAR, Clockshop, LA Más, Mujeres de la Tierra, etc…) to understand how the nonprofit sector has tried to advocate for the community.

Lastly, in Part 3 I re-focus on Sepulveda’s *Our Sacred Waters* to imagine a decolonial possibility for the Los Angeles River and urban planning in Frogtown. What does it mean to decolonize both the river and human-river relationships? I conclude that historicizing the river through Sepulveda’s framework brings to light the need to abolish settler-colonialism and economies of dispossession in order to realistically revitalize the river without displacement.

**Methodology**

My work is based on a mix of firsthand experiences and academic literature regarding the river and gentrification. Elements of my thesis may be perceived as “auto ethnographic” since I speak to my childhood growing up near Frogtown, my time working at Friends of the Los Angeles River in 2017 and a recent gentrification opposition workshop I attended at FoLAR in 2020. I have also included my own photography from biking around the neighborhood. I chose not to interview anyone but rather extract information from Kim (2018) and the nonprofit LA Más’s report *Futuro de Frogtown* (Leung & Lamadrid 2015) which both contain statements from Frogtown residents regarding gentrification. To historicize human-river relationships, I focus largely on Orsi (2004) and Gumprecht (2005) who both have written in-depth histories of the river in relation to the city’s historic development.

As theoretical frameworks, I focus on a range of literature largely related to decolonization and re-thinking difference. For instance, Anzaldúa (1987) pioneered the concept
of the Borderlands, the idea that areas (geographical, cultural, linguistic, social) that appear to have distinct “borders” actually consist of hybridity. The borderlands can refer to anything. “The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands...in fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldua 1987, Preface).

Anzaldua’s Borderlands theory speaks to these gray areas, erasing the falsely drawn borders, in which identity boxes are being deconstructed and reconstructed by individuals and communities all the time. Los Angeles in many ways represents the Borderlands. LA is incredibly diverse, allowing for hybridity between those diverse cultures and neighborhoods as they interact with one another in the city despite mapped-out borders attempting to paint them as isolated entities.

Besides cultural implications of the Borderlands, Los Angeles represents the Borderlands ecologically as well. With its urban ecology, Los Angeles navigates the hybridity of two concepts deemed opposites: the city and the natural environment. Los Angeles shows how the two come together with coyotes roaming the cityscapes and fires emerging by freeways.

Utilizing Gupta and Ferguson (1992), which furthers Anzaldua’s Borderlands theory by focusing on how cultures cannot be mapped out, I examine how Frogtown problematizes colonized notions of space. I speak to how LA neighborhoods cannot be realistically drawn out into separate areas by city planners. In “Beyond Culture” Gupta and Ferguson (1992) explain how the Borderlands is a place of incommensurable contradictions (18). According to city lines, Frogtown is that final narrow slice of Central LA, before crossing the water into Northeast LA. However, “the fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the border” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 7). In reality,
Frogtown is the Borderlands for Central and Northeast Los Angeles and those who inhabit it bring visibility to those incommensurable contradictions of city lines.

Colonialism creates “the displacement of one form of interconnection by another” (Gupta & Ferguson 8) as seen through representations of space in Western social sciences as “remarkably dependent on images of break, rupture, and disjunction. The distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures…on the fact that they occupy “naturally” discontinuous spaces…from which to theorize contact, conflict, and contradiction between cultures and societies” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 6). Despite having those falsely discontinuous spaces marked around it, Frogtown deconstructs these colonized notions of distinct physical territories through its NELA/Central LA hybridity, serving more like the bridge connecting both sides of the river. Frogtown also transcends predispositions of place-identities. How does Frogtown produce space? How does Frogtown’s ability to claim territory relate to justice? How does Frogtown bring visibility to collective notions of difference in place?

As revealed in Decolonizing Methodologies, Smith (2012) explains how research is inherently linked to imperialism and colonialism because it brings “a new waves of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation” (25). I want to avoid reinforcing harmful colonial roles as a non-Indigenous settler in Los Angeles writing about decolonizing the river. Smith offers a framework to address my own positionality in academia which I hope to implement throughout this thesis. For instance, Smith analyzes how “history is told from the perspective of the colonizers” (29). In Part 1, I strive to avoid this historical narrative by focusing on how the indigenous people are the original caretakers of this land and how that relationship was disrupted due to colonizers, leading to the demise of the river. Rather than glorify colonizers by telling history as the story of those in power, I want to focus on the histories of those marginalized
communities and environmental resources who have been wronged by these violent systems that continue to sustain colonization and threaten our urban environments.

As Byrd outlines in *Predatory Value* (2018), academic and political debate today could be transformed through “an understanding of colonization as ongoing and the lived experience of colonialism as a condition of possibility” (7). I strive to address this in my thesis by illuminating how gentrification is colonization and who it negatively and positively impacts relates to a capitalism that is inherently racialized. Byrd lends an insightful framework for analyzing gentrification as neocolonialism through the concept of “economies of dispossession” which means “multiple and intertwined genealogies of racialized property, subjection and expropriation through which capitalism and colonialism take shape historically and change over time” (Byrd 2018, 2).

Furthermore, Sepulveda (2018) and Byrd (2018) provide theoretical frameworks to imagine decolonial possibilities for the LA River. Sepulveda asserts the notion of *Kuuyam*, the Tongva word for guests, to present an alternative model for settlers in order to re-establish reciprocal human-land relationships in lands degraded by colonialism. *Kuuyam* “disrupts the dialectic between Native and settler through a Tongva understanding of non-natives as potential guests of the tribal people, and more importantly – of the land itself” (Sepulveda 2018, 41). What does it mean to be a guest on Tongva land? How can those of us who are settlers on this land work towards *Kuuyam* to revitalize the river? The first step is dismantling these economies of dispossession highlighted by Jodi Byrd (2018), the same economies which have violated indigenous peoples and lands and destroyed the human-river relationships of communities disadvantaged by racialized capitalism.
Fostered by Frogtown: Developing my own Human-River Relationship

To effectively communicate why Frogtown is worth protecting and empowering, I have to speak to my own human-river relationship. In the spirit of Anzaldúa, I want to implement aspects of her genre *autohistoria* by writing my own history as a “border woman” (Anzaldúa 1987, 2) who also lives in the Borderlands of my own identity contradictions. First, I must acknowledge that although I am implementing the methodologies discussed previously, I am not an indigenous person. I am a settler on Tongva land.

I am grateful to the Tongva for their wisdom and caretaking of these lands.

The reason I chose Frogtown is because I grew up near this community in a “bordering” neighborhood. Furthermore, like many of those who live in Elysian Valley, my family immigrated to the United States from Latin America. My mother immigrated here from Colombia as a teenager. My father was an infant when his family immigrated from Cuba and settled not too far from Elysian Valley in Echo Park where he grew up. Thus, I am the product of two cultures seen as distinct. I come from two individuals who immigrated from two different Spanish-speaking countries that are seen as different. Growing up in the United States meant trying to understand how my two cultures interacted with one another, producing the hybridity for those two distinct cultures within myself. Linguistically, my Spanglish / broken Spanish further communicates my internal Borderlands growing up in the United States.

I take pride in how my father and I combined are two generations of growing relatively near the Los Angeles River, our shared blueprint for how we understand nature in an urban environment. It was because of my father that my mother, my older sister and I would fall in love
with Frogtown. Frogtown has been our family’s collective launch site to accessing our individual relationships with the Los Angeles River.

To Frogtown, estoy agradecida.

I first learned to ride a bike in an empty lot hovering above the river in Elysian Valley. I graduated from that parking lot a week later when my dad decided I was finally ready to race along the river bike path with him. 9-year-old me took deep pride in that rite of passage, riding from our house down to Riverside Drive, entering the river path through that pink gate cornering Frogtown. I remember the rush I felt that first time I sped along the path, the river to my left and Frogtown to my right. Learning the ways of the river path from my father felt sacred.

Besides riding along the path, Frogtown continued to be a staple in my childhood. My sister, like my father, attended a high school in Glassell Park (Northeast LA) right on the river across from our home in Central LA. Picking her up from school meant a quick ride over the bridge that hid Frogtown from nonlocals for so long. When I eventually left for college, my dad passed down the beautiful road bike he bought from Coco’s Variety, our family’s go-to bike shop in Frogtown. I remember the heartbreak I felt admitting to my parents my sophomore year that the bike had been stolen on Pitzer’s campus. I had watched my dad ride along the river on that bike. I am still mourning its loss my senior year. Still today we go to Coco’s Variety for everything. Even if I get a flat tire in Claremont with my new replacement bike, I will make the trip into Frogtown to have it fixed there – no disrespect to Pitzer’s Green Bike Program.

Gracias a Coco’s Variety por siempre arreglar nuestras bicicletas.

My first internship in college was at Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), an environmental river-advocacy nonprofit across the water from Frogtown. I worked as a
development intern, organizing their databases, drafting newsletters and facilitating river-clean up volunteer events. To get to work each day that summer, I raced down the street from our house, crossed Riverside Drive traffic and entered that pink Frogtown gate onto the path – just as my father taught me. The morning commute was better than the ride home because the water flowed in the direction towards FoLAR’s office, motivating me to arrive on time. The best part of the commute was recognizing familiar faces. There was a sense of security in seeing the same individuals fishing, walking, jogging, and sitting along the riverbanks each day. All of us would nod or smile at one another in familiarity. It felt like an unspoken way of saying “I see you.”

It feels good to be acknowledged, especially when it’s in association with the river.

My time at FoLAR was especially gratifying. It was the first time I was really exposed to the politics regarding the river’s revitalization and how Frogtown residents perceive the city’s plans to restore the river. It also forced me to recognize how the Frogtown I knew in my childhood was changing. Throughout that summer, I took notice of the random coffee shops and loft developments being introduced to the community. It’s been three years since I worked at FoLAR but when I’m home from college I try to bike through Frogtown and photograph the growing presence of an invasive species I was blinded to for so long. Gentrification.

*My photographs taken in Frogtown can be found distributed throughout this thesis.*

**Addendum– Written in April 2020**

When I began writing my thesis in January 2020, I was entering my final semester of college at Pitzer. I thought my last semester would be dedicated to thesis deadlines and wrapping up my last moments on campus. The last thing I expected was for a global pandemic to turn the world upside down. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Claremont Colleges were
forced to shut down in mid-March. Students were expected to quickly arrange new housing plans to finish their classes online which revealed an array of inequities within academia. Students were asked to focus on virtual classes despite familial responsibilities, financial burdens, unemployment, homelessness, health, travel bans prohibiting travel home – the list goes on. As students, we have lost motivation and remain disoriented by the uncertainty in front of us.

I feel that this is important to explain because I was hesitant to continuing writing about this topic, a topic that means so much to me, knowing that the quality of work I am producing in these circumstances will be much different than what I might’ve produced on campus on the top floor of Honnold Mudd Library, my revered thesis space. As I struggle to keep my attention intact during these distressing times, I want to convey that I do not claim I have all the answers to gentrification or am doing this subject the rightful justice it deserves. Frogtown deserves so much more but I promise to be as respectful as possible as I attempt to write about it.

Currently, I have been in quarantine with my family (near Frogtown) for over a month. For the first few weeks, it felt impossible and irrational to open my computer and continue writing this thesis as if it were “business as usual” and there wasn’t a global pandemic on the rise. Recently, I rode my bike down to the river, while wearing a mask, to see if it could help me focus on my writing again. While I was there, I saw one of the riverbank businesses, Spoke, was still open. The owner explained that bike shops were deemed “essential businesses” because bike repair is imperative during a financial crisis as more people resort to cycling to save money. Besides the bike shop, I barely saw anyone by the river other than those living in tent cities. I would also like to note that the city failed to issue a rent freeze and has not properly sheltered the homeless community during this pandemic.
In *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer (2012) explain how neoliberal economic transition and recession have led to “the global pandemic” which they define as urban social unrest due to the deprivation of marginalized inhabitants (1). Reflecting on the discontentment of marginalized communities / urban social unrest as “the global pandemic” during this current moment of COVID-19 has left me wondering about the many pandemics that go undefined as pandemics but result from legacies of colonization. I am left questioning what COVID-19 means for this growing urban social unrest? This quarantine has impacted our urban environment in ways that I cannot effectively communicate. As we are urged to stay home, it is apparent that air quality has improved in the city and I wonder how that has impacted the river. Fewer cars are passing above it on the freeways. More wildlife is immersing from urban margins. Many of us feel disconnected from the river right now while perhaps some of us may feel closer.

I do not have the answers but there is much to be learned from what is happening at this moment and there is no going back to “normal” after this.

*Before Dad’s bike was stolen (2017)*
Part 1: Legacies of (neo)Colonization Disrupting Human-River Relationships

“They came not as guests of the Indigenous peoples, but as conquerors with regimented, institutionalized, and militarized hierarchical conceptions of human difference”
(Rodriguez, 2008)

The First Gentrification

The first human-river relationship disrupted by violent settler-colonialism was that of the Tongva people. Using all forms of violence – e.g., physical, sexual, epistemological – Spanish settlers attempted to erase these tribal nations, their livelihoods and knowledge systems from these lands. As Sepulveda explains, descendants of indigenous nations can still be found today and despite a severed connection, “the power of the land itself remains and…their identities as indigenous are meaningful related to the land and the river” (Sepulveda 2018, 41). Spanish colonialism is the first gentrification of the river, as natives were killed and displaced from their home to commodify land to benefit settlers. With the river’s first gentrification also came its first disrupted human-river relationship as indigenous relations to place were traumatized. However, the use of colonization to displace and disrupt did not end with Spanish settlements. As Mohawk scholar Taiake Alfred (2009) explains, colonialism is “an irresistible outcome of a multigenerational and multifaceted process of forced dispossession and attempted acculturation-a disconnection from land, culture and community” (52). Thus, colonialism can continue to disconnect and dispossess throughout generations and its ramifications can still be felt today at the LA River.

For instance, when the Spanish arrived in the 18th century and colonized Tongva lands, Sepulveda explains how this process also brought “the Western understanding of nature separated from humans” (Sepulveda 2018, 39). The Spanish turned what would become Los Angeles into an agricultural village in 1781, using the river as an irrigation and domestic
resource (Gumprecht 2005, 118). As a result, this understanding of nature as a one-sided parasitic relationship to benefit humans only was carried on via a multigenerational process in which the river was slowly destroyed, channelized, and domesticated for settler self-interests. The logic behind dominating nature is connected back to “the American project rooted in white supremacy, capitalism and heteropatriarchy” (Sepulveda 2018, 43). Thus, this colonization project continued beyond the Spanish as American settlers expanded into these regions to claim, develop and commodify territory for the United States.

In 1848, the United States becomes the colonial power in California, enforcing dominance over the Tongva through a system of regulated slave labor and native land abuse by domesticating, channelizing, damming, and diverting waterways for irrigation, consumption, property and electrical interests (Sepulveda 2018, 48). A legacy of colonial domination of nature inherently became “conventional wisdom” in Los Angeles (Orsi 2004, 9) as more and more people moved to this developing city and continued to “tame” these waterways, assuming every flood was “an indication of the need for more bulldozers and more concrete” (Orsi 2004, 9). It was this ignorance of the landscapes and denial of indigenous and local knowledge systems that would lead to the demise of the Los Angeles River.

**River Neglect and Betrayal**

>Perhaps nothing symbolizes the environmental transformation of Los Angeles more than the destruction of the Los Angeles River, that thing, ironically, to which the city owes its life”

Who Killed the LA River? (Gumprecht 2005, 115)

As American settlers from eastern states migrated into Los Angeles, their ignorance regarding Southern California hydrology led to draining the river dry and treating it as an industrial dumping ground (Gumprecht 2005, 117). For instance, there are accounts of eighty
horse carcasses being dumped into the riverbed in 1887 and records of residents in 1904 complaining to the city about tar and oil river dumping that was threatening public health (Gumprecht 2005, 126). The river was being treated as disposable, despite the fact its existence allowed for the city’s birth. As the river was being increasingly abused, people continued to live in its bed. Starting with the Tongva’s riverside villages to current day tent cities along the bike path, humans have lived along the river for generations. However, these riverbank communities are met with criticism from the city and historically always have. For instance, the Los Angeles Times wrote an article in 1901 regarding “the ever-shifting class that inhabits the riverbed” such as “men of morose disposition with ambition dead, a drug fiend, and even ex-millionaries” (Gumprecht 2005, 127). Treated as an urban misfit, the river became refuge to other outsiders.

These outsiders were blamed for pollution in the river despite the city’s dumping practices. For instance, in 1903 the city health officer complained that “squatters living in the river threatened the health of local residents” and called for a city ordinance prohibiting living in the river channel (Gumprecht 2005, 127). Blaming river inhabitants for the river’s conditions was incredibly hypocritical considering city council records indicating the city continued to dump in the river until 1925, despite a 1910 ordinance prohibiting them from doing so (Gumprecht 2005, 129). However, solely pointing the finger at river inhabitants is not unusual. Still today there is a sentiment that homeless populations are to blame for the river’s damaged ecosystem. However, the destruction of the Los Angeles River lies on the hands of the city’s initial reliance on the river, a reliance that was greedy and not reciprocal, which resulted in a dying river whose death was received with the city’s mockery.

Early news articles in Angeleno history demonstrate how the river became “an object of ridicule” (Gumprecht 2005, 134) as jokes were made about the river’s appearance and lack of
flow. However, these jokes, which continue today as pictured below, stem from an overall ignorance of the river’s history. Indigenous knowledge systems and early Mexican settler memories spoke to what the river once was, but that knowledge had been consistently ignored by white settlers.

![Image of billboard with text: Calling yourself a cook is like calling the L.A. River a river. Dinner. We get it.]


“What happens when you deny that your river is a river?” (Price 2005, 229)

**Epistemological Violence**

As the city continued to grow, nonresidents and relative newcomers, majority white, stubbornly held ideas about the river that were not shaped by local attitudes. For instance, Orsi explains how “the city’s original Spanish and Mexican settlers, like the Indians before them, understood the erratic nature of streams in arid regions and built their homes far enough from the river…in times of flood” (Gumprecht 2005, 130). However, these newcomers did not acknowledge the past experiences or overall knowledge of those who had lived there before them. Misperceptions of the river became the core of an overall campaign to attract more migration to Los Angeles.
The city was being advertised as an oasis of “environmental beneficence” with its Southern California air and climate, all to attract thousands of migrants “who for the most part were both ignorant of the region's violent flood history and condescending toward the Mexican inhabitants who did know about it” (Orsi 2004, 13). These migrants, majority white Americans from the east, dismissed the river stories of “old Mexicans” (Orsi 2004, 16) and disregarded the flood knowledge of local communities. Those same American migrants would tend to be the city builders who aimed to change the landscape according to their desires (Orsi 2004, 16). Thus, the development of Los Angeles as a city was founded on multiple forms of violence: violence against natural systems due to ecological ignorance, violence against indigenous and non-white local communities, and epistemological violence by censuring the voices, memories, and knowledges of those same communities.

As Gumprecht writes, “concrete channels merely became the coffin for a river that had already been sapped of nearly all its life” (2005, 134) The city used the LA River as its sole water source up until 1913. By 1935, the US Army Corps of Engineers took over and three million barrels of concrete would ultimately be used to confine the river (Gumprecht 2005, 117). Today, three plants in the San Fernando Valley discharge treated sewage water into its channel (Gumprecht 2005, 115). As a result, many Angelenos have assumed the LA River is essentially a sewer. As someone who grew up in this city, I am aware that many perceive this urban waterway as the ghost of a river that once was. However, those who reside in riverbank neighborhoods like Frogtown have remained in close contact to the river for many generations. These river-neighborhood relationships have been sustained for so long as many outsiders turned a blind eye to the LA River. However, “green gentrification” along the river is threatening those river
relationships, repeating the vicious cycle ignited by Spanish colonialism and Western notions of nature as commodification put into practice by economies of dispossession.

**Intergenerational Neighborhood Trauma**


This vicious cycle continued to inhibit human-river relationships beyond the Tongva as the channelization of the river in the 1930s caused both massive ecological destruction by removing public greenspace and lack of access through a watershed management regime which “effectively criminalized the historically established interactions between riverside resources and communities” (Kim 2017, 188). Thus, attempts to dominate and control the river resulted in further severance from human connection to this waterway by altering landscapes and rezoning space. However, this severance is incredibly racialized as spatial injustices throughout river history have mainly deprived indigenous and Latinx populations of their river relationships. Another instance of spatial injustice was the demolition of Chávez Ravine, a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood who underwent immense neighborhood trauma.
The Chávez Ravine was situated in the hills of Elysian Park, above the river, until their forced displacement in the 1950s. When the city categorized this region as "blighted" and turned the land over to two architects, Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander, as the site for a new housing project, the Chávez Ravine community became immediately threatened. When opposition to redeveloping the Chávez Ravine grew, a number of groups and institutions from the Chamber of Commerce to the Los Angeles Times referred to the resistance as "creeping socialism," a dangerous allegation considering the hysteria suffused by McCarthyism and the Red Scare at the time (Hines 1982, 137). The battle over the Chávez Ravine lasted for ten years, ending when the city offered the land to O'Malley, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, as a new baseball stadium. However, this battle was a violent one. Sheriffs were used to evict and physically drag people out of their homes. Bulldozers demolished what these families had built, leaving no other choice than to leave home.

The destruction of the Chávez Ravine relates back to Byrd’s (2018) analysis on economies of dispossession. For instance, in “Taking Back the Boulevard,” Lin analyzes the gentrification of Northeast LA through the framework of Marxist geographer David Harvey’s (2012) concept of “accumulation by dispossession.” “Accumulation by dispossession” refers to how capitalism accumulates for some by dispossessing from others, specifically through privatization of land, slum clearance, property foreclosure, and marginalizing the poor (Lin 2019, 170). Under neoliberal gentrification, dispossession is amplified at the expense of marginalized urban inhabitants. However, Jodi Byrd takes Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession” a further step by problematizing the way in which dispossession is “conventionally treated as a self-evident and circumscribed practice of unjust taking and subtractive action” (Byrd 2018, 2). Byrd’s concept of economies of dispossession speaks more
directly to how capitalism’s “accumulation by dispossession” directly stems from colonization and racialization for capitalism (2018, 2). We can see this in the Chávez Ravine where colonization and racialization are at the core of its battle: a community’s marginalized status, due to class and ethnic background, ultimately result in a forced, violent dispossession of what was once home to further commodify land and benefit those in power, both wealthy and white.

Home was not the only thing that was lost: relationships to place, people and land were severed. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) explain when some members of a community are displaced, even those who remain in familiar/ancestral places find their relation to place changed and “the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken” (10). When the Chávez Ravine community was broken, trauma became associated with place, including the river. In many ways, the Chávez Ravine community was another human-river relationship that was dispossessed. This is evident in the documentary “Chávez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story” (2004) in which Chávez Ravine families reminisce about growing up interacting with the river but now refuse to return to Elysian Park or visit Dodger Stadium due to painful memories. Their forced displacement as a result of neoliberal housing policies and state-sponsored infrastructural projects resulted in a disrupted relationship with the urban environment, specifically lack of access to the river.

Many residents from the Chávez Ravine were able to move into neighboring communities, such as Frogtown, allowing that relationship with the river to continue and “thus forging a racialized historical-spatial relationship connection between the two neighborhoods” (Kim 2017, 188). That historical-spatial relationship plays into Anzaldúa’s concept of the Borderlands by blurring distinct borders of time and space as Frogtown remains inextricably connected to a physically erased Chávez Ravine. However, Frogtown is now threatened by
displacement as gentrification grows along the river. In an interview, a Frogtown resident stated that with restoration projects, “people who live here won't be able to afford it anymore” which is “particularly sad considering so many of the people here are the ghosts of Chávez Ravine” (Sagahun and Saillant 2014; Simpson 2014), depicting how displacement can traumatize marginalized groups across generations.

![Image of Frogtown with text: Gentrification = displacement (ft. my current bike) (2019)](image)

On a familial level, displacement creates financial strains on individuals which triggers aggravated physical and mental health, including “hypertension, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, depression, anxiety and sleep disorders” (Lin 2019, 176). Thus, serial displacement can amplify these chronic stress-related illnesses but also result in widespread community traumas such as “root shock”. “Root shock” refers to the traumatic stress reaction to losing a community, built over time and generations, that served as an emotional ecosystem specifically for low income immigrant communities confronted by economic and social marginalization (Lin 2019, 176). “Root shock” is a concept derived from Mindy Fullilove (2005), a professor of clinical
psychiatry and public health at Columbia University, who studied the impacts of serial displacement, due to forces such as gentrification, on communities. When residents in Frogtown speak about the Chávez Ravine, they speak to the pain of losing a cultural, multigenerational social network that supported families who were forced on the margins already. How does a community heal from “root shock”? How can Frogtown families whose ancestors were forced out of Chávez Ravine trust their city? How many more relationships to the river will be dispossessed as a result of colonization and racialization?

This is not to depict Frogtown as a victim. Further discussed in Part 2, the Frogtown community has utilized placemaking methods as a form of resiliency. For instance, the neighborhood constructs a community “identity” or sense of difference that produces space, bringing visibility to their history of spatial injustice and resilience (Kim 2017, 188). If anything, Frogtown residents have been strategic in their opposition to gentrification in this area and stands as a model for the fight against “green gentrification”.

 维持 Frogtown Household In Between Elysian Valley Gateway Park and New Development (2019)
Part 2: Where “Green Gentrification” Meets Resistance

Re-Painted Wall along River in Frogtown (2019)

Nonprofits as Allies?

The summer following my first year at Pitzer, I interned at Friends of the Los Angeles River, where I organized any task passed down to me, from donation databases to community events. Some of these events were river clean ups or environmental education workshops in Frogtown. From my experience at FoLAR, it seemed as though they were generally well-liked by Frogtown residents and remained in communication with the neighborhood. However, there were some long-term residents who felt nonprofits advocating for river revitalization, like FoLAR, were contributing to the progression of gentrification. For instance, I remember the first time I heard about a community member’s distrust of nonprofits while volunteering at the Frogspot, FoLAR’s ecology visitation center on the river path in Frogtown. A protestor, an
individual who had lived in Frogtown for a long time, was knocking over signs advertising FoLAR’s event at the nearby park.

Someone from FoLAR went to speak with him to understand why he was protesting. Afterwards, it became clear the individual had confused FoLAR with a different LA River nonprofit, River LA, located in the DTLA Arts District. River LA’s main mission is to connect all 51 miles of the river as accessible public space; however, they are in close collaboration with Frank Gehry, a highly regarded Los Angeles architect. River LA has received backlash for taking the original grassroots effort of integrating the river’s 51 miles and allowing it to be adopted by big developers like Gehry. This is my personal opinion, but it is clear that FoLAR and River LA both want the river to be accessible but disagree on how to achieve that goal. It is my impression that River LA treats riverside development as the main solution and riverside displacement as a “necessary evil” for revitalization. For that reason, some Frogtown residents may have become wary of nonprofits who position themselves in support of the river and public space. However, many nonprofits in and around Frogtown have demonstrated a sincere desire to support the community and provide concrete, rather than band aid, solutions that resist displacement.

After that summer, I stopped working at FoLAR’s office at the LA River Center across the water from Frogtown. However, a couple months ago, I decided to visit the place that jumpstarted my academic interests in urban environments now that I was about to graduate. There was public event organized by FoLAR that I registered to attend to see what they were doing now, nearly three years later. FoLAR had organized an opposition workshop to mobilize the public against a large-scale riverbank development project, Casitas Lofts, which is threatening the Glassell Park community. If you google this luxury development, FoLAR’s constant media coverage will pop up first.
Their opposition workshop occurred on March 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2020 at the LA River Center, where FoLAR’s office is housed, along with other environmental advocacy nonprofits and agencies such as Mujeres de la Tierra, Northeast Trees, the National Parks Service Rivers, and the Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. This workshop was organized by FoLAR, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and Clockshop, another important Frogtown nonprofit. Please note the information I have gathered on this project is from notes I took the day of the workshop. Casitas Loft is a concerning development because it would be built on a flood plain, raising concerns about hydrology and pressure on the river, but also it is next to a designated state park, raising issues of accessibility due to the exclusivity of a luxury development. Casitas Loft also consists of 419 housing units, of which only 35 are designated as affordable.

Furthermore, such a large-scale project would generate a net increase of 2,000 more vehicle
trips, meaning a 500% increase in traffic for this community. Overall, this would be the largest housing project in Glassell Park, right across the river from Frogtown.

The point of this workshop was to organize and respond to the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) that Casitas Lofts submitted for review. Overall, the workshop had high attendance, unlike anything I saw when I interned at FoLAR three years ago. All age groups and an array of Northeast LA and Frogtown residents were present. During the workshop, there were five breakout groups to collectively brainstorm questions and possible issues found in Casitas Lofts’ DEIR. These groups were Traffic, Housing, Land Use, Tribal and Cultural Resources, and Rivers/Parks. For traffic, people pointed out lack of access for nonresidents to public space, how increased traffic means increased pollution, the implications of developing by a freeway, possible impacts on the adjacent bike path and potential noise issues. For housing, concerns were the lack of affordable housing and further gentrification. For land use, the use of hazardous materials was mentioned; for rivers and parks, potential sewage spills and hydrology issues. For tribal resources, attendees spoke to the potential impact on local indigenous tribes and how the development would "change the feel and culture of the river and state park." At this breakout group, representatives from the nonprofit Clockshop led the conversation. They mentioned that in 2017 a few indigenous tribes asked for consultation regarding Casitas Lofts. One tribe specifically asked for a Native American Monitory to be present on-site during any and all ground-disturbance activities. However, it seemed unclear if Casitas Lofts responded to this.

Each breakout group wrote their ideas on poster paper and prepared to contact city leaders to voice opinions on Casitas Lofts. At the workshop, FoLAR had an "activation table" which had tons of iPads to submit email complaints to city officials. There were also letter-writing materials for those who did not want to use iPads. Overall, I was really in awe of
FoLAR’s efforts to shut down this development and protect riverside neighborhoods and parks from further gentrification. FoLAR was sending a message to big developers: any luxury development proposed on the river would be met with grassroots opposition. I am grateful that I finally got to re-visit the place that started it all for me as my college career ends. Now in this pandemic, I am wondering if we cannot gather in public meetings, let alone have access to the streets in protest, *how do we continue this fight against gentrification?* In the face of social distancing, FoLAR remains very active online and on social media to keep the opposition intact. I plan on tracking their efforts and the progress of this development as quarantine continues.

In this anecdote, I wanted to speak to my personal experience regarding nonprofits in Frogtown and how they have been perceived to my knowledge and how they have demonstrated deep care for this community. The rest of Part 2 is going to explore how the Frogtown community resists gentrification, how local nonprofits try to be allies and how these two actors engage with one another.

**The Battleground**

“In the Borderlands – you are the battleground – where enemies are kin to each other: you are at home, a stranger, the border disputes have been settled” (Anzaldúa 1987)

The Los Angeles River consists of a plethora of stakeholders from communities to local governments, from the private sector to the public sector. Indigenous and homeless communities are also stakeholders but have been censured and isolated from decision-making surrounding the river. Nonprofits, who are also stakeholders, have arguably been given more of a voice in this arena. There are many nonprofit organizations revolving around the river. For instance, Friends of the LA River (FoLAR) was founded in 1986 by poet Lewis MacAdams and co-founders
Melanie Winter and Joe Linton. It’s important to note that after years of championing the river, Lewis MacAdams recently passed away on April 21, 2020 at 75 years old.

McAdams created FoLAR to advocate for removing the concrete in efforts to restore the river back to its riparian environment. These three FoLAR founding figures engaged in “guerrilla theater performances, political lobbying, environmental watershed and land-use studies, community organizing and bike tours to change public perceptions of the viability of restoring the LA River” (Lin 2019, 78). Besides FoLAR, other nonprofits have been born from the riverbanks. Northeast Trees, whose office is next door to FoLAR at the LA River Center, was created in 1989 by Scott Wilson, a landscape architect and retired LAUSD high school teacher who promised to plant five trees a day for the rest of his life (Lin 2019, 78). Other nonprofits include Mujeres de la Tierra, also housed at the LA River Center, which supports women and families, generally who are low-income and from immigrant backgrounds, to become active participants in social and environmental policy issues. Clockshop, a nonprofit located in the middle of Frogtown, mainly focuses on environmental art projects for the public. LA Más, an urban design nonprofit located next to Clockshop, focuses on incorporating low income and people of color into the urban planning processes occurring in their communities.

All of these nonprofits serve different purposes but share a similar goal of accessibility and revitalization of the river along with providing resources to riverbank neighborhoods. However, as the river slowly grows closer to revitalization, developers begin to prey on these surrounding neighborhoods. As the presence of developers grows, tensions rise in Frogtown as memories of the Chávez Ravine linger and current gentrifiers disrespect “Frogtown protocol”. As discussed in Part 1, displacement along the river has historically been preceded by disregard
for longstanding communities and their ways of living. The same could be said of current
gentrification in Elysian Valley.

Frogtown residents have cited that their dissatisfaction is not the fact that people are
coming in. Their dissatisfaction “comes from the failure to recognize the characteristics of the
neighborhood” (Strauss 2015). Frogtown is a largely elderly, conservative, middle income and
blue-collar Latino, church-going population. It is very family friendly as well. However, with
gentrification, Frogtown residents feel disrespected by the marijuana dispensaries, nude bars and
overall loud party throwing events being introduced to the community (Strauss 2015). Many
Frogtown families now go to sleep with noisy parties next door only to wake up restless, seeing
front lawns full of bottles on their way to work (Strauss 2015). The blatant disregard for those
who have lived here for so long has resulted in a growing opposition for further density in this
0.79 square mile island-like community (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 17). Yet Frogtown remains an
appealing place for development as the river receives more outside attention.

The general argument in defense of gentrification is through the lens of “urban renewal”
– the idea that erasing “decaying” parts of the city to rebuild and develop ultimately creates more
opportunities, especially for employment and lowering crime rates. However, “urban renewal”
only helps certain already privileged communities at the expense of those who are low-income
and ultimately end up displaced. With “green gentrification”, especially in the case of the Los
Angeles River, displacement is justified as an opportunity for sustainability and “greening the
city.” As Kim explains, “the reframing of gentrification as inner-city “revitalization” or
“regeneration,” combined with the hegemonic status of “sustainability” as an indisputable urban
policy agenda results in ignoring or obfuscating the ways in which vulnerable populations are
displaced, marginalized, and rendered invisible, as well as depoliticizing the ways in which these
unjust socio-spatial relations are reinforced” (Kim 2017, 181). Additionally, colonizing and gentrifying environmental spaces does not provide more environmental opportunities, as analyzed in Part 1. It simply damages and breaks the already established human-environment relationships of disadvantaged populations so that those with more privilege can exclusively experience and profit off those green spaces.

There is no debate that gentrification is directly linked to current plans for environmental restoration of the river. In May 2014, the US Army Corps of Engineers announced their ambitious billion-dollar proposal to “turn the spine of Elysian Valley into a recreational and ecological destination” (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 17) which resulted in a spike of land speculation and land-grabbing. For instance, data from the Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor shows that "between October 2011 and December 2014, 39 commercial/industrial properties have changed ownership in Elysian Valley. Of these 39 properties, 10 are river adjacent. Five of those acquisitions of river-adjacent properties took place in 2014." (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 17). Frogtown residents are not blind to this and are organizing in response.

Consistently, Frogtown residents have voiced at meetings and workshops that planners and agencies need to inform and include the community, especially given the intergenerational neighborhood trauma of decades of disrespect and disregard. These residents have spoken to their place history and the deep history of spatial injustice, from freeway construction to the Chávez Ravine to riverfront development displacing people today (Kim 2017, 192). For this reason, Frogtown is a key case study for understanding how resiliency is cultivated in the face of green gentrification. As Kim illuminates, “the case of Elysian Valley illustrates how residents form and utilize a place-based identity that highlights the environmental and spatial injustices held in collective memory, and further helps to re-politicize their lived environments so that they
remain ‘just green enough.’ Through collective action, residents of Frogtown carry out a just green enough strategy that involves fighting air pollution and demanding cleaner industrial land uses while still resisting rampant redevelopment carried out in the name of sustainability” (Kim 2017, 193). Frogtown is the story of community activism in the face of urban environmental change - the Borderlands of deindustrialization and shifting socio-ecological conditions.

“Allow us to reintroduce this home – We buy homes and land” (2019)

**Making History by Re-Telling It: How Frogtown Resiliency Disproves Urban Myths**

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith problematizes History as fact by illuminating how colonization and Western academia categorizes oral ways of knowing, the fabric of many indigenous communities, as oral traditions rather than formal histories (Smith 2012, 33). Notions of history are thus inherently colonized in academia because other forms of knowing, specifically from the perspectives of those colonized and disenfranchised, are erased from the history books or deemed invalid. History, as Smith consistently outlines, is told from the perspectives of those
in power and how they accomplished that power. History had told us that those who resisted displacement in the Chávez Ravine were secretly “socialists” or “communists” for violating eminent domain during the Red Scare. History had told us that the Los Angeles River needed concrete walls despite indigenous knowledge and expertise of its hydrology. How will history portray the story of Frogtown? Who gets to produce that history? Who chooses to listen?

Smith explains that “coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (Smith 2012, 34). Frogtown residents exemplify this process by taking charge of their history and deciding how it will be remembered and told. From linking their community in the present day to the demolition of the Chávez Ravine, the Frogtown community brings visibility to a history of spatial injustice in Los Angeles that has been whitewashed and advertised as a “necessary evil” for the city’s historic development. As Smith outlines, “the need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance” (Smith 2012, 35). The Frogtown community is making history by choosing to re-tell it in a way that illuminates a hidden story of on-going injustice but also remarkable resiliency.

Besides storytelling, Frogtown residents implement other methods for resiliency and visibility through place-based politics. Kim analyzes how Frogtown residents and stakeholders improve neighborhood conditions “by practicing place-based politics that attempt to re-politicize the formation of place, their place. This politics of place involves construction of a collective identity grounded in histories and memories of neighborhood transformation” (Kim 2017, 181). Processes of place-making and identity formation are known to aid a community’s ability to resist and mobilize against further marginalization (Anguelovski 2014; Martin 2003; Pena 2003).
Place-based identities are not static or unitary but rather are constantly changing (Pulido 1997, 19-20). However, the Frogtown community achieves collectivity in those multiple place-based notions of difference through collective memories of a Frogtown before gentrification, the battle of Chávez Ravine, freeway construction, and other spatial injustices.

When speaking to “identity” formation in this section, I want to try my best to deter from using the term “identity” which furthers colonization’s “othering” of disadvantaged groups. Identity has been constructed by “institutionalized hierarchical conceptions of human difference that separate people by race, origins, religion, gender, and sexuality” (Sepulveda 2018, 55). For this reason, Anzaldua uses the Borderlands to problematize “identity” because it has been used to create borders that separate and erase the actual connectivity between entities perceived as distinct. Since I speak to the Borderlands of Frogtown, I would like to uphold Anzaldua’s methodology of bringing visibility to alternative notions of identity, senses of differences that are outside heteropatriarchal capitalism and show how difference can connect rather than dissect. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) explain, “for if one begins with the premise that spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection” (8). By defining what Kim (2017) outlines as place-based “identities” as being senses of differences or alternative notions of identity, there is room to rethink difference outside of a colonized understanding of separation. I want to demonstrate how Frogtown’s placemaking practices of creating alternative notions of difference within the community still allow the community to be further connected and united.

Kim explains how “through interviews, website updates, and statements at public meetings, neighborhood activists brought up past injustices in order to stress several claims: that
a clear pattern of disregard and disrespect has historically been imposed upon the community, that these projects intentionally targeted politically disempowered neighborhoods, and that residents are already impacted by the environmental burden of emissions from two major freeways” (Kim 2017, 189). As Gupta and Ferguson attest, “remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for the dispersed” (1992, 11). Holding memories of these past events and on-going neighborhood transitions allows Frogtown residents to stand united as a community, bridged through a shared memory connected to place.

These collective memories and place-based senses of difference are strategically used to problematize the notion that “green” urban policies are neutral or apolitical but rather act as catalysts for gentrification (Kim 2017, 182). Frogtown’s place-based storytelling reveals the inherent politicizing effects of these sustainability discourses that falsely portray gentrification as natural. The idea of gentrification as natural is an urban legend. In reality, it is the result of economies of dispossession perpetuating slow violence and systemic injustice that has denied class mobility and housing security to underserved communities. Frogtown residents bring to light the obscured racial and class implications of urban and environmental policies advertised as innocuous, thus challenging the sustainability discourse to acknowledge how its proposed market-based solutions only continue to dispossess and fail urban communities.

Besides debunking perceptions of urban policy as apolitical, the Frogtown community problematizes notions of “identity” and place by revealing the hybrid nature of this neighborhood. These communal and place-based memories and senses of difference are not unitary but multiple and ever changing. Yet, they are the puzzle pieces that come together to communicate a collective demand for recognition and participation in a community’s shared future. Frogtown’s ability to change and construct the narrative of their neighborhood merges
“identity, territory, and lived experience and further provides opportunities for challenging other forms of environmental injustice, such as environmental gentrification” (Kim 2017, 189). By disrupting concepts of river restoration and displacement as naturally paired, the Frogtown community gives space to the many disrupted human-river relationships throughout history that colonization consistently justifies as necessary for development. Similar to Frogtown, those disrupted river relationships contained histories and knowledges of their own that were deemed as “Other” or insufficient as History. If those alternative ways of knowing had been acknowledged, there would likely not be a need to revitalize a river in the first place.

Besides mobilizing the community, the Frogtown community mobilizes allies as well, such as the number of nonprofits who have recognized how Frogtown’s narrative of place highlights a legacy of injustice (Kim 2017, 182). These nonprofits are also a part of the history making and history telling. For instance, in the process of resurrecting the LA River with riverbank parks, nonprofits like FoLAR are slowly changing “the downtown stretch of the river in this history-averse city into a history route with stops that commemorate key sites and events in the city’s past” (Price 238-239). These efforts demonstrate how revitalizing the river means revitalizing history and making both accessible to the public in the process. Decolonizing the historical narrative of the river paves the way for self-determination for marginalized and indigenous communities which can ultimately set up reciprocal relationships to viably revitalize the river.

In the process of beautifying these areas, nonprofits must acknowledge native peoples and de-center human self-interests to realistically “green” these areas. Sepulveda (2018) explains that “these projects while honorable do not address Native peoples or decolonization. This is not the fault of the organizers, because they probably have never thought of Indians as living
environmental stewards. And most likely, they have never met a Tongva or Acjachemen, or view the land as continuing to be Indigenous space. It was never given to the colonizer, they never bought it, and they did not take it from us in any way that would be recognized as lawful through an international tribunal that included Indigenous nations” (51). Indigenous peoples are the original caretakers of this waterway. To realistically revive the river and help Frogtown, nonprofits have to demonstrate ally-ship to Native peoples as well. Besides honoring Native peoples in urban design, relying on strategies for sustainability that are not market-based is also necessary since utilizing economies of dispossession to invest in the river’s future only furthers the violence of commodification initially used against indigenous people.

![New coffee shop on the river (2019)](image)

**Community Organizing & Organizations**

Besides FoLAR, there are a number of other nonprofits and neighborhood organizations who play a part in shaping Elysian Valley’s future through community interaction. For instance,
the Elysian Valley Neighborhood Watch (ENVW) hosts regular community meetings to discuss safety and the community’s relationship to the police. The ENVW also holds “neighborhood beautification” events each month so residents can feel involved with community improvement projects (Kim 2017, 190). The Elysian Valley Arts Collective hosts the annual neighborhood art festival, the Frogtown Artwalk, to build community and showcase the artistic character of Frogtown, further shaping its communal neighborhood identity (Kim 2017, 190). The Elysian Valley Riverside Neighborhood Council (EVRNC), composed of old and new residents and stakeholders, acts as a liaison between the neighborhood and state offices to mobilize against environmental gentrification (Kim 2017, 191). These neighborhood groups all work towards strengthening Frogtown’s autonomy over its own future. Nonprofits (such as FoLAR, Clockshop, Mujeres de la Tierra, etc.) all further these efforts as well through community engagement. However, one nonprofit in particular, LA Más, has specifically focused on producing a concrete report that documents the hopes and fears of Frogtown residents.

In 2014, two stakeholders, Julia Meltzer from the nonprofit Clockshop and David Thorne, a Frogtown restaurant owner, commissioned LA Más to gather information regarding how the community feels about river restoration and land development (Kim 2017, 192). The goals of this report were to unpack community tensions regarding gentrification and involuntary displacement, support context-appropriate and culturally sensible growth in Frogtown and ensure community priorities are the ultimate driving changes for land use (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 7). Written about Frogtown for Frogtown, the report was rightfully titled Futuro de Frogtown in recognition of a community’s linguistic diversity. Data was collected via interviews, community workshops and public meetings. Outreach for Futuro de Frogtown was carried out through bilingual communications, paid advertisements, community partnerships, a project website,
canvassing, bi-weekly open houses and workshop markers (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 14). Compared to past attempts for this type of work, overall turnout was seen as higher, as about 200 of Frogtown’s ~8,800 residents participated in the project (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 14).

In this report, participants consistently speak to “the painful, politicized place history of Elysian Valley fraught with incidents of spatial injustice” (Kim 2017, 192). The report also provides recommendations for how planning can ameliorate Frogtown residents’ concerns. Before embarking on this report, LA Más set up their office space in Elysian Valley by the river to communicate “they aren’t here for the short term or for superficial answers as part of due diligence” (Strauss 2015). Further adding to local ties, the co-leader of Futuro de Frogtown, Helen Leung, grew up in Elysian Valley and helped form the neighborhood council. From using the report to advocate for Frogtown’s needs to the Los Angeles Department of City Planning to simply providing a space for Frogtown residents to speak to their place-based history and multiple identities, LA Más demonstrates approaches nonprofits can take to respectively work in solidarity with the community while supporting river restoration.

**Futuro de Frogtown Findings**

“Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still...One day the inner struggle will cease, and true integration take place” (Anzaldua 85)

Analyzing Futuro de Frogtown’s findings reveal promising potential efforts for safeguarding the community while revitalizing the river. In terms of priorities for Elysian Valley’s future development, Frogtown residents expressed a desire for affordable housing without density, better infrastructure/amenities and the legitimization of informal economies.
The report found that generally Frogtown residents are okay with more affordable housing, as long as it does not involve building dense infrastructure (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 7). Frogtown participants provided their own alternatives to reconciling a housing demand that doesn’t impact physical environment. For instance, some people proposed using granny flats, accessory dwelling units (ADUs) or converted garages, to legalize “hidden” density in Frogtown (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 29). They also preferred re-adapting industrial buildings as affordable housing, however the real estate market tends to avoid such projects since they usually lack subsidies (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 17). Overall, these Frogtown participants made it clear they want to avoid new developments. Residents explained that largely new housing stock means more people, meaning more cars, more traffic and more strain on already degrading water pipes and sewer lines (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 29). As a result, Frogtown residents call for better infrastructure and amenities now – not once development completely takes over the neighborhood. They want better sidewalks, more streetlights, free public Wi-Fi and a greater sewage system capacity. The elderly in the community specifically called for their own community center (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 31). Many Frogtown residents voiced that they prioritize improving infrastructure over building more housing due to a distrust of developers that is rooted in memories of the Chávez Ravine (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 26).

Frogtown residents have also voiced “a desire to see the informal economies of today be a part of the new economy of tomorrow” (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 7). What they refer to is an informal economy of street vending, unofficial art shows, day care centers, home-based food vending, and furniture making that has been critical to the culture, community interaction, and economy of Elysian Valley for decades (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 30). Before outside businesses are introduced to this neighborhood, the community demands the legitimization of the informal
economy that has been the fabric of its character. In the report, residents suggest that new development projects, who so far have jeopardized these informal businesses, act respectfully by providing discounted rental spaces to those existing neighborhood entrepreneurs (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 30). For instance, an interview with the head of the Elysian Valley Neighborhood Watch, David de la Torre, who has resided in Frogtown for over 30 years, further demonstrates the local desire to bolster existing businesses. De la Torre explains how “a local licensed baker [came] to [him] and said ‘David, I want to set up a bakery opportunity here in Elysian Valley that not only makes my goods accessible to all, but also affords me the opportunity to employ within.’ If that baker, who resides here and whose children attend our local schools, is not made a part of this winning formula, then this grand development will have failed” (Strauss 2015). Frogtown residents need to benefit, rather than be hurt, from any changes being introduced to their community.

Besides outlining the directly voiced desires of Frogtown community members, *Futuro de Frogtown* also brings to light the multiple collective notions of difference that further play into Frogtown’s place making practices. For instance, many Frogtown participants positioned themselves as members of the “creative class,” “working class” or “makers” (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 24). These were only some of the self-generated labels that came to life during the LA Más workshops. These self-generated labels ranged from “renters, homeowners, longtime residents, makers, artists, creative class, working class, Latinos, seniors, conservation activists, etc.” (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 24). Residents aligned themselves with multiples of these terms at once, further demonstrating the endless collectives and intricacies within a communal sense of difference. Despite defining these alternative notions of identity, these labels do not communicate separation but rather interconnectedness within a united community.

Recognizing the validity of these multiple forms of difference within the report further empowers Frogtown’s ability to take charge of their narrative, speak to the community’s diversity and decide how they want to be defined. Beyond formally acknowledging these place-making practices and senses of difference in their report, LA Más has also supported the community and their class mobility by directly producing resources and proposing other strategies to the city. For instance, LA Más, along with Clockshop, has hosted Renter’s Rights and First Time Home Buying workshops for Frogtown residents (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 9). Furthermore, with the support of the EVRNC, LA Más developed “Elysian Valley Knowledge Hubs” which are resident led programs providing information from housing issues and renter/landlord rights to financial literacy (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 36). For strategies, LA Más called for more community organizations to offer career development and asset building opportunities and workshops to low-income renters, to advocate for developers to give
discounted commercial space to local businesses, and to create a database or local resident hiring system that construction projects and businesses utilize to hire within the community first (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 38-43).

Despite this small nonprofits’ inability to carry out their proposed solutions independently, the actual documentation of the Frogtown community’s concerns and ideas is still pivotal to the overall battle against further gentrification. This report was used to inform officials on the concerns of a community whose distrust in the City remains from generations of spatial injustice. On that same note, this report also reveals the shortcomings of nonprofits in cases of intergenerational neighborhood trauma. *Futuro de Frogtown* reveals that “even sensitivity, through research, and a deep knowledge of the issues might not be good enough in the face of a community’s historical relationship with government and development” (Strauss 2015). This lingering skepticism begs the question as to how a city can rebuild community trust after generations of disenfranchisement.

**Building Trust from Distrust**

“How can those in power and those who feel powerless both create the conditions where collaboration is possible?” (Strauss 2015)

In *Futuro de Frogtown*, the residents’ distrust of the City due to the Chávez Ravine is specifically highlighted. The project leaders write that “the most emblematic moment of this fraught discussion came during a heated conversation between a representative of the City Planning and a resident of Elysian Valley. To the elderly resident, 50 years ago was still too close for such a traumatic lived experience, while to the younger planner 50 years was solid proof of the City’s ongoing commitment to not use eminent domain” (Leung & Lamadrid 2015, 27). The Frogtown community’s methods for resistance demonstrate that trauma does not come
with a statute of limitations. The City must recognize how invasive planning and developing along the river has traumatized many, beyond modern day gentrification and the Chávez Ravine. There is an ever-growing need to build trust from distrust in city planning.

Participatory planning that involves Frogtown community members is a start. However, more has to be done to prevent the further displacement and dispossession of future generations. By disrupting economies of dispossession and avoiding market-based approaches for sustainability, common ground for restoring the river and protecting nearby communities can be achieved. Imagining a decolonial possibility for the Los Angeles River reveals how actual sustainability lies in de-centering human self-interests and establishing reciprocal relationships with waterways. The concluding section of this thesis will explore Sepulveda’s concept of *Kuuyam* as a means for reconciling settler-land relations in order to achieve viable long-term sustainability for the river and Frogtown.

**In Conclusion: Imagining a Decolonial Possibility for the Los Angeles River**

“*Kuuyam, as I am theorizing, is not an open invitation for settler possession of Native land. Instead, it is a defiant act of love for our lands; placing them above the needs of humans*”

(Sepulveda 2018, 55)

Historicizing the river through the lens of those who had established relationships with this waterway (Tongva, Mexican settlers, Chávez Ravine residents, Frogtown residents, homeless populations, etc.) tells a story of resiliency but also intergenerational displacement, driven by economies of dispossession that increasingly commodify river-adjacent land. In the process of serial displacement, the river continued to be degraded and domesticated by white settlers who were not familiar with Southern California’s ecosystems and hydrology. At the time, those settlers assumed they were taking the necessary measures to develop the city. However,
their efforts resulted in the demise of a river whose existence allowed for Los Angeles’ growth in the first place.

Although my thesis focuses on human-river relationships, it is important to keep in mind that humans are not the only ones who created such relationships. Treating the river as though it was a one-sided relationship to benefit human beings is also a form of violence against the wildlife who also have relationships with that waterway. Human selfishness degraded the LA river. If those settlers had respected the indigenous and local communities who had knowledge systems of its flood patterns and hydrology, the river would not have its current need for rebirth.

Channelizing the river has resulted in a current grassroots movement to remove concrete walls to revitalize the river. However, plans to “green” and re-design riverbank spaces are mainly driven by human-centered market-based strategies that will ultimately still displace long-standing communities. Thus, revitalizing the river cannot successfully be done if it is focused on serving privileged humans only and is contingent to strategies that displace and dispossess as history has already shown. Sepulveda (2018) provides a promising framework to revitalize a river without furthering settler-colonialism and displacement by implementing Kuuyam.

*Kuuyam* is the Tongva word for guests which offers a decolonial possibility for abolishing settler colonialism through disrupting the Native vs settler dialectic by acting as potential guests of the tribal people (Sepulveda 2018, 39). *Kuuyam* also disrupts understandings of land and people as domesticable and solely meant to serve human interests (Sepulveda 2018, 41). *Kuuyam* creates the understanding that the river is not meant to serve humans but rather consists of intricate ecosystem services that provide for many non-human living beings as well. Thus, “by centering humans and human interactions with the environment, the various restoration projects along the river are continuing the project of domestication” despite an
attempt to help the environment (Sepulveda 2018, 52). To break this pattern of human selfishness and serial displacement, re-establishing reciprocal nonhierarchical relationships through Kuuyam can realistically bring the river back to life.

In the process of establishing nonhierarchical relationships with the environment, we establish the same between one another. Kuuyam is “an abolition of institutionalized hierarchical conceptions of human difference that separate people by race, origins, religion, gender, and sexuality. Instead, Kuuyam establishes relations beyond difference in a non-hierarchical manner” (Sepulveda 2018, 55). Byrd further elaborates on this point in reference to disrupting economies of dispossession. Since economies of dispossession depend on exploiting land and people, breaking those economies by establishing reciprocal relations to land “ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way” (Byrd 2018, 14). Rather than separating people based on identity markers, categories and binaries, Kuuyam helps us achieve what Gupta & Ferguson (1992) call for, “rethinking difference through connection” (8). In this process of denormalizing those identity boxes that separate us from one another, Kuuyam invites us all to understand ourselves as collective guests of the land (Sepulveda 2018, 55).

Thus, steps to achieving Kuuyam start with working against economies of dispossession since “a settler relationship to land in Southern California is predominantly informed through capitalism and its linear progression” (Sepulveda 2018, 56), along with abolishing efforts to domesticate the environment for human benefit. Both of these efforts allow for a revitalized river that doesn’t call for displacement, thus disproving that neoliberal gentrification is the only solution for “greening” the river. Reaching Kuuyam is a process that has to involve everyone. Imagine an urban planner going into these riverbank communities. How can they implement
*Kuuyam* and act as a respectful guest especially when entering neighborhoods who distrust city planning? How can nonprofits implement *Kuuyam* in Frogtown and in general as settlers on Tongva land to create an environment of trust and to adequately demonstrate their desire to help these communities? As a settler on Tongva land who has benefited from a relationship with this river, I am trying to dissect my positionality, acknowledge the one-sided nature of my own human-river relationship and theorize how I might give back to a river that gave so much to me.
Annotated Bibliography


Revitalization. Los Angeles Times.


