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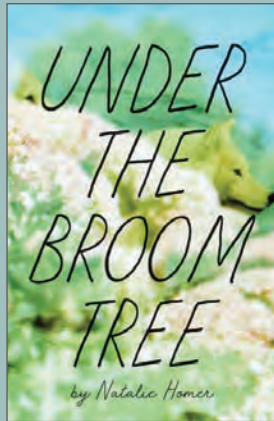
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American Home

Sean Cho A.

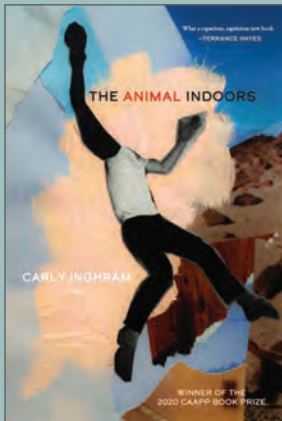
"The voice in *American Home* is surprising, odd, and subtle. I can't resist the poems' allure and unanswerable questions."
—Danusha Laméris, author of *Bonfire Opera*
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Under the Broom Tree

Natalie Homer

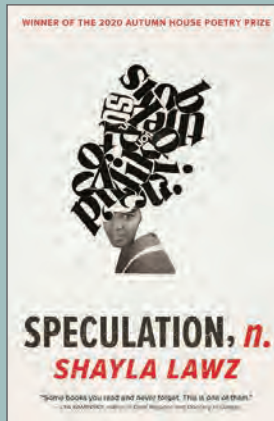
"At once wry, candid, and rich with description, *Under the Broom Tree* is a wonderful book."—Geoffrey Hillsabeck, author of *Riddles, Etc.*
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The Animal Indoors

Carly Inghram

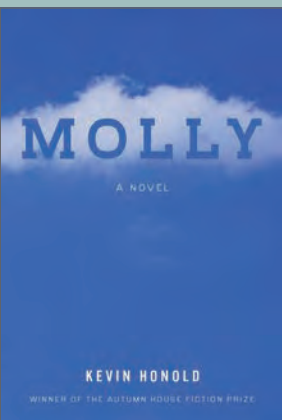
"*The Animal Indoors* is full of capacious, capricious edges. This poet straddles worlds. A dynamic debut."
—Terrance Hayes, author of *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*
Paper \$16.95



speculation, n.

Shayla Lawz

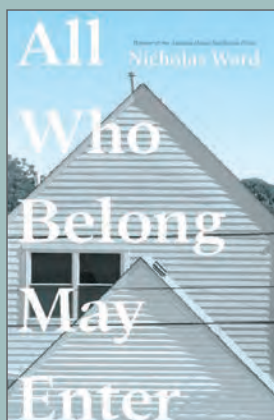
"Lawz's *speculation, n.* is a debut collection that could easily live on the walls of an art museum."—Harriet
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Molly

Kevin Honold

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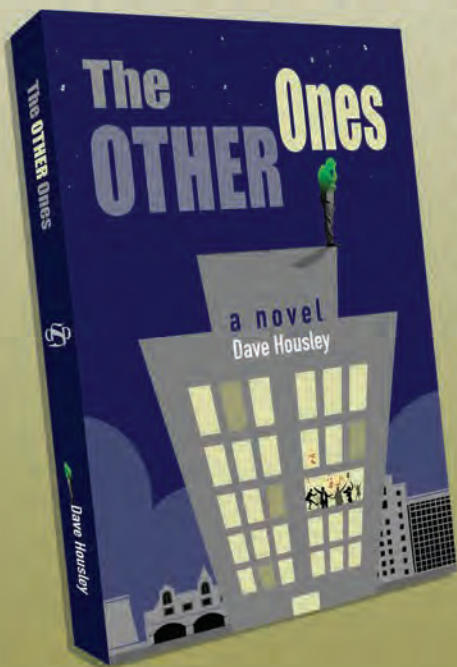
All Who Belong May Enter

Nicholas Ward

"Well observed and curious, these essays will appeal to readers who, like Ward, are sensitive to inequality but unsure how to combat it."—*Publishers Weekly*
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Praise is rolling in for *The Other Ones*, the must-read new novel from that great chronicler of popular culture, Dave Housley



Dave Housley's *The Other Ones* is a riotous and bighearted office comedy, about a surprising kind of Rapture where it's not a heavenly force that whisks away half of your coworkers but a winning lottery ticket you forgot to throw in on. Fans of Chris Bachelder or Sam Lipsyte will thrill.

— Matt Bell, author of *Appleseed*

Dave Housley's sardonic, sly, gem of a novel, *The Other Ones*, pinpoints the beating heart in the cubicle.

— Leslie Pietrzyk, author of *Admit This to No One*

It's time to admit what everyone knows: there's no bolder, no wittier critic of our modern, polarizing American culture than Dave Housley.

— Susan Muaddi-Darraj, author of *A Curious Land: Stores From Home*

Dave Housley is the author of two previous novels and four collections of short fiction. He is one of the founding editors of the literary organization Barrelhouse, which aims to bridge the gap between serious art and popular culture.



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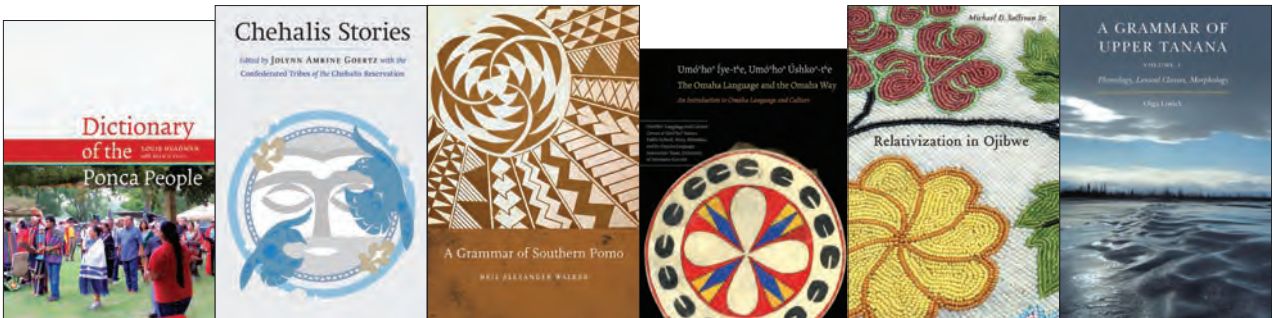
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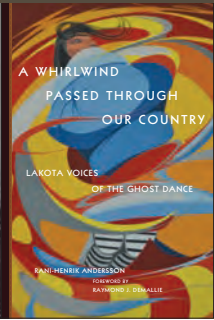
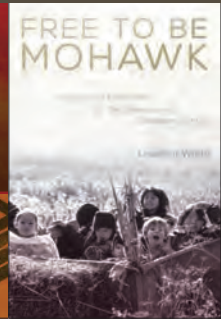
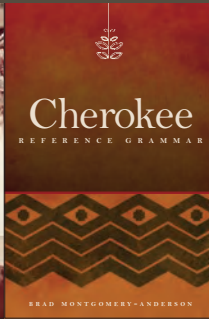
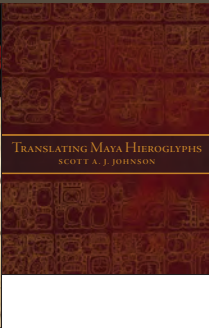
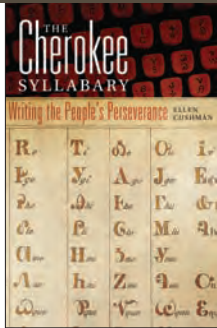
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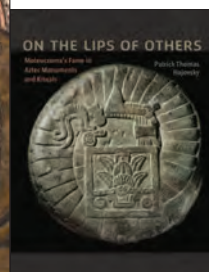
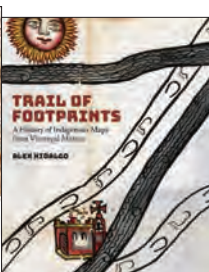
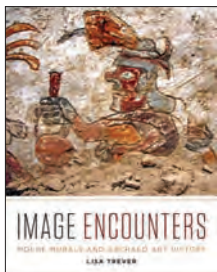
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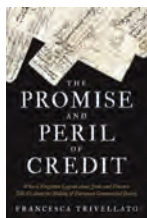


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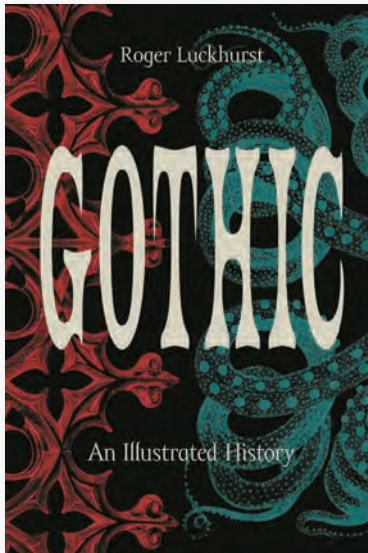
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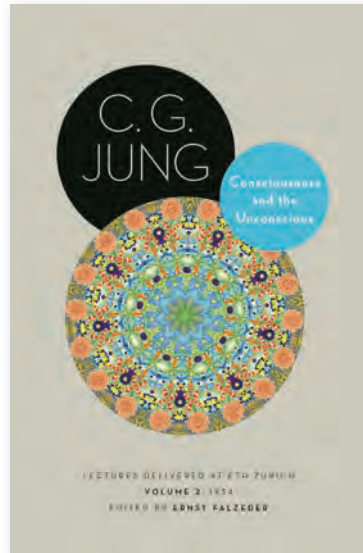
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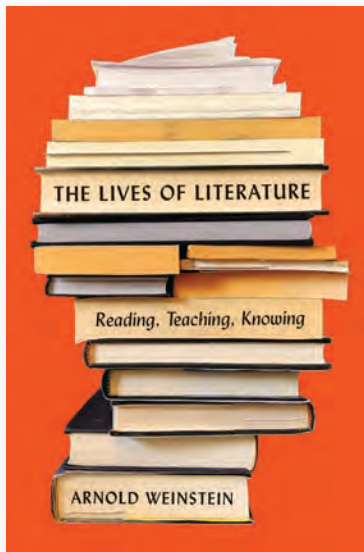
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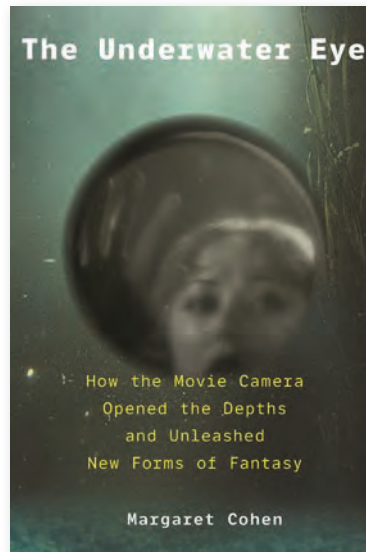
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WHAT IS L.A.?

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translation by Sholeh Wolpé</i></p> |
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HIS FATHER'S
SHADOW TO CLAIM
HIS OWN PLACE AS
A MAJOR FORCE IN
AMERICAN
CULTURE."—
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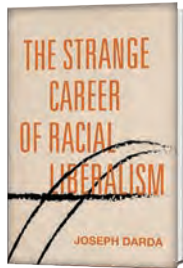
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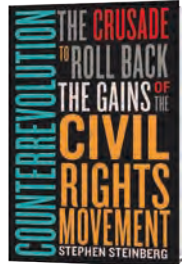
LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Before we could even start to answer this issue's question — "What is LA?" — we had to ask ourselves a more personal one: What is *LARB*? Our 10th anniversary has naturally inspired a good deal of soul-searching. What have we built, and what needs a remodel? Who do we want to be? What is there left to say? What are we even *doing* out here?

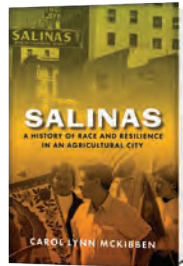
These are the most fundamental of L.A. questions. People here are always seeking something, wanting to be someone, perhaps not knowing what or who. We here at *LARB* do know who we are, of course, and are proud of what we've done over the last decade, online and in the pages of *The LARB Quarterly*. We've helped hundreds of new writers publish their first pieces, and built new bridges between the worlds of scholarship and popular culture that we promise to keep maintaining well into the future. But looking forward we want to do more. We want to take risks. With this new phase, we're committing anew to our original mission of offering a diverse and always challenging body of creative critical work from a range of authors, both old friends and new arrivals. And we at *The LARB Quarterly* are also renewing our vows to Los Angeles, a city whose status as a literary capital has always been underappreciated. We'll continue to showcase writers from all over the world, but we'll always keep one foot on this side of the San Andreas fault, writing as if the Big One were coming tomorrow.



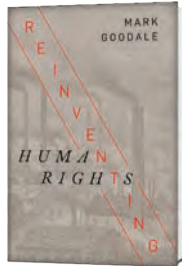
The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism
Joseph Darda



Counterrevolution
The Crusade to Roll Back the Gains of the Civil Rights Movement
Stephen Steinberg



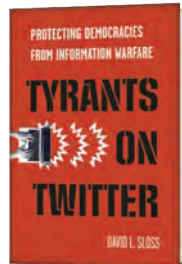
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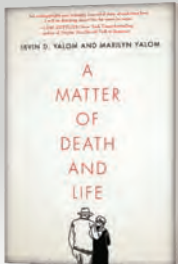


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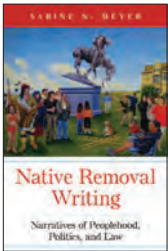


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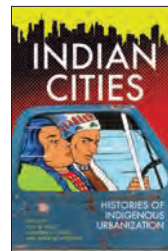


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So finally — what is L.A.? “Buried under a mountain of clichés,” says Mike Davis in his laconic blurb for our bloated burg on this issue’s last page. Those clichés are indeed hard to shake, but that’s so for a reason: some part of each one sticks to the truth. Take the old saw about L.A. being the place you go to reinvent yourself. Every L.A. crime writer worth their salt, from Dorothy Hughes and Ross Macdonald to Walter Mosley and Steph Cha will tell you it’s a mug’s game, trying to break loose from the past. But that doesn’t keep people from trying and, on occasion, succeeding. The self-appointed prophets of the 1920s, immigrants from across the globe, disgruntled East Coasters seeking the sun and maybe getting burned, hundreds of pseudonymous stars, and even Angelyne in her pink Corvette — all icons of reinvention, all Angeleno as they come. And we’re no different. As the pieces in this issue show, journeys through L.A.’s labyrinth can dead-end or, just as suddenly, open up to unknown vistas. The closer we get to the heart of the city, the more mysterious paths unfold before us.

The only constant in Los Angeles is change, and after a decade, it’s time for a few changes around here. Welcome to the new *Quarterly* — and get ready for a re-energized *LARB* yet to come.

Yours,
Sarah Chihaya, Boris Dralyuk,
and Chloe Watlington



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LAX —

A guest column on arrivals
and departures

EMILY RATAJKOWSKI

The first time I fell asleep at the wheel, I was 19 and a few miles south of where the 101 drops out of Downtown into the 5. I was in typical Los Angeles afternoon stop-and-go traffic, which always starts around 3:00, sometimes even on the weekends. I caught my head falling against my neck and told myself, out loud, to wake up. I turned the radio louder, kept driving, and, despite the warm Californian day, left the heat turned up. The car was my sanctuary; it was a place to relax, my own private world. My backseat was filled with heeled boots and crumpled jeans. Stained coffee cups were piled up in the median, and a gold medallion hung from the rearview. The environment was mine. I chose

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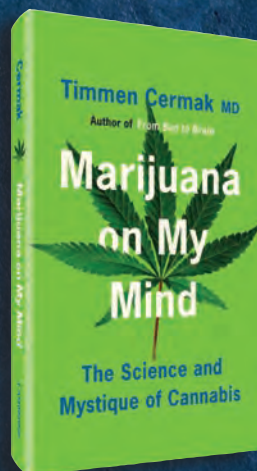
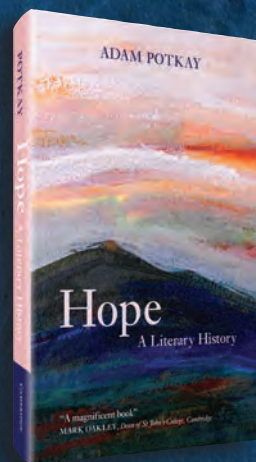
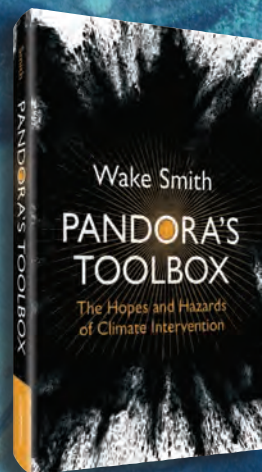
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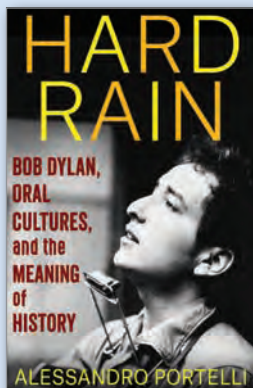
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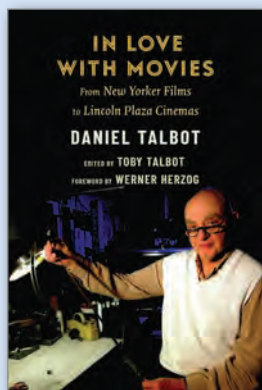


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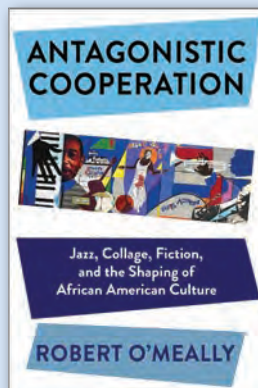


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the conditions, and I liked it to be hot. My body melted into the driver's seat like a warm bath.

When I came to once again, I was being propelled toward two bright tail lights too fast. I instinctively slammed my foot as hard as I could on the brake, but it was too late. The front of my car crumpled easily against the vehicle in front of me.

I was spending a lot of time on the road then, commuting to L.A. for work multiple times a week from a small town in North County, San Diego. If I left at 4:30 in the morning, I could do the trip in an hour and a half, but it usually took me closer to four. This is when I'd fall asleep: sitting in gridlock traffic, cozy from the heat and lulled into a dream-space by the monotony of the drive and the West Coast sun. I had two more accidents during this year of commuting. Luckily no one was ever hurt.

This is a moment in my life that I like to gloss over: an in-between time at the beginning of adulthood when I felt simultaneously stuck and untethered, unsure of where I belonged or who I wanted to be. I dropped out of college to work full-time as a model, but I didn't know where to live in Los Angeles. The city, despite the time I spent there, felt like a stranger to me.

One afternoon while still enrolled in school, I decided to take Sunset Boulevard all the way from my dorm room on the edge of the 405 over to the East Side, and then

south to Downtown. At traffic lights, I studied the billboards and the endless strip malls filled with smoke shops and neon signs, feeling a loneliness I have only ever known in California. Driving allows you to be in the world while also keeping you entirely separate from it. You interact with nothing and no one, save the occasional eye contact through windows at a traffic light, or, of course, the encounter that comes with an accident. I did not dare pull over to get out and explore by foot. It seemed inappropriate and absurd to imagine my disproportionately small figure walking along the massive boulevard. I was determined to understand the city, to find a place for myself in it, but when I returned to campus, I was as confused as ever. L.A. seemed impenetrable.

So, instead of trying to find an apartment in Hollywood or wherever else, I returned to my hometown, defeated. I told people I just didn't like L.A., but the truth was that I felt rejected by her. I moved into a small studio apartment five exits north of my childhood home with my boyfriend. He was a couple years older than me, but I'd known him through the group of guys I'd hung out with in high school. He had a job as a line cook at the bar and grill on the 101, just down a small hill and across the train tracks from our place. He would walk or skateboard to the kitchen in the afternoons and if I managed to get back early enough in the evening, I would pick him up. He always smelled of pizza

dough and dish soap.

Eventually, after more time than I'd like to admit, I moved to Los Angeles. But I continued to come and go, traveling nearly every week and moving to the East Coast twice, keeping an apartment in Los Angeles with a roommate and later moving into a house there. I never was able to permeate the city. I could also never let it go.

Arriving at LAX now, a 30-year-old woman with my infant son in tow, overdressed from the winter I've left behind in New York, where I plan to raise my child, I step out onto the curb. I peel off my layers and take the socks off of my son's feet. It is bright, of course. The sky is blue as hell — I squint to glance up at it. It feels like noon but it could be earlier or later. It could be any season. Any year.

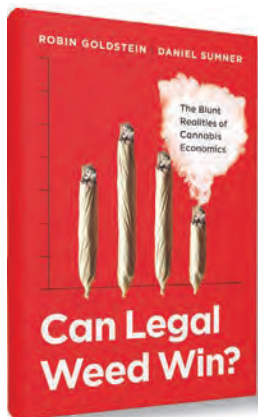
For a moment, I feel a wave of confusion pass over me, as if I've woken suddenly. I have a split-second of trying to locate myself. How old am I? Where am I in this life? Los Angeles is a place that makes it difficult to measure time: the never-ending continuance of the freeways and their exits. And, of course, the weather — always the same — mostly sunny and 70 degrees. There are no real conditions to help measure a year.

There is something disorienting about the relentless consistency of Los Angeles that makes me feel initially lethargic and then panicked, just like the moment before my collision, as if I could suddenly find myself in the future or the past.

I might be an old woman at the end of my life, or perhaps more frighteningly, 19 again — irresponsible and reckless and lost, searching for a way to ground myself, unaware that time will not always feel so abundant. People say Los Angeles offers a comfortable life, but it's that ease that scares me the most. The radio is playing, the heat is turned up. I am still afraid of falling asleep at the wheel.

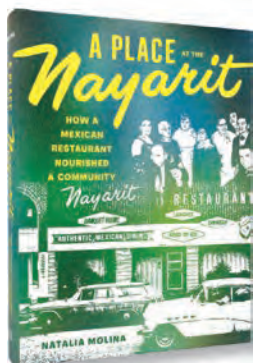
VIEWS FROM THE WEST

THE LATEST FROM UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS



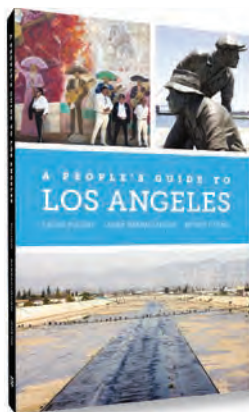
"It's high time economists took a serious look at weed."

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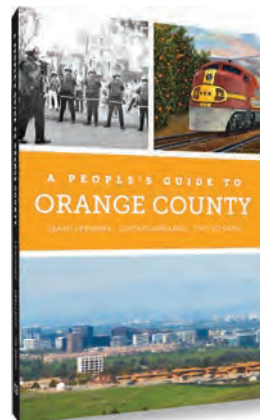
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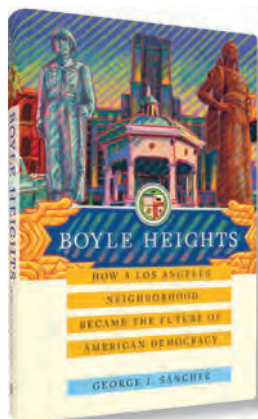
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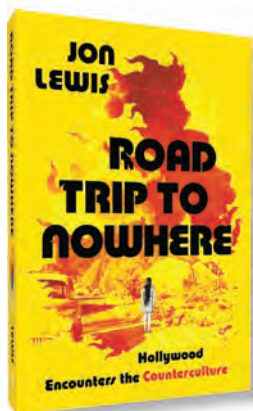
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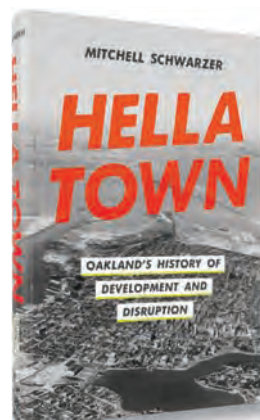
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KEY TO THE CITY

LISA TEASLEY

Walking the streets of Los Angeles, wandering determined, puts me more intimately in touch with the map than driving ever could. It makes plain where my identity shifts in the city, reveals the infinite ways to read and reread place.

I was born in this city and raised in Baldwin Hills since midway through second grade, after the family spent a six-and-a-half-year interval in Durham, North Carolina. I went from racing turtles and hiking in woods lit by fireflies to banana-seat biking the Dons — as all of Baldwin Hills's street names begin — where many Black TV, film, and music stars lived long before the recent influx of white residents. I was not walking the neighborhood streets until after a family

friend's 18-year-old kid tried to rape me when I was 13 and babysitting his kid sister. A month or so afterward, he died doing a motorcycle trick in front of his house, which was the scene of the crime. I then walked past to see how I would feel — and if the street itself might describe the terror of him crawling through the window, grabbing his sister, and locking her in her room, and then dragging me into his. I wondered if I would feel proud of how hard I fought for the hour and got away, or if because he was now dead it might feel like it never happened. There was blood on the street. I was shocked to see the stain and wondered how many days of rain it would take to wash away the evidence of his existence.

I cannot remember the first time I walked a labyrinth, but it has been my way of washing clean for decades. On a really good day, walking a labyrinth can feel like wearing a decoder ring and doing tactical magic to solve the riddle of being human. It can open the appointed realms, summon future memory, encourage emotions to well up, move through, and out into the ground. When doing too many of them in too short a span of time, it may also feel like turning in place on varied spots of the map.

On Sundays, when I was a kid, we went to my Panamanian maternal grandmother's house in the West Adams district where we ate her most delicious black-eyed peas in coconut milk rice, stewed chicken, and fried plantains. I danced all day and evening with my many cousins — most of us now working in various fields of the arts — and any number of us would walk together to the liquor store for sweets and anything else our mothers, drunk on

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—Maurice Cherry,
founder and host,
Revision Path

champagne, wanted. I was friends with my grandmother's neighbor Googie, who sometimes sat on the porch next door scratching his father's dandruff and combing his long hair — and it was not until after becoming good friends with the writer Jervey Tervalon in the early 2000s that we discovered we had written about the same person in our respective story collections, which I happened to see shelved side-by-side at San Francisco's beloved City Lights bookstore. Once Googie and I walked to the liquor store when, all those blocks away, I suddenly needed to pee, and though we had just bought a bag of goods from the store owner, he refused a seven-year-old's request for the bathroom. In shock, I stood right there at the counter and pissed on the floor. It was a perfect storm of rage, humiliation, and nature calling — and he was certainly sorry. This was my first marked awareness of racial discrimination.

When we got back to Googie's — I was too embarrassed to face my grandmother, mother, aunts, and uncles — he had to sneak me into their bathroom. His mother was a nurse who had a side business of putting up white women recovering from facelift surgery who did not want to be "seen by anyone," as Googie put it. This only added to the day's indignity, as all of us on my grandmother's street could see the women arriving and leaving: were we not people too? But the Adams district was all Black then, and the Santa Monica Freeway was built in the 1960s to run right through "Sugar Hill," as it was called in the '30s, to destroy it.

My grandmother was a housekeeper

for a family in Bel Air, where I was also bussed from Baldwin Hills to an elementary school on Bellagio Road that no longer exists. The bus was privately arranged by my father and a group of other influential Black businessmen in cooperation with the actor Burt Lancaster and other Bel Air proponents of integration. During that first bus ride up the Bellagio Road hill, people threw rocks at the windows, but after a week they must have gotten used to seeing the little school bus of what could not have been more than 25 Black kids. The city took over the bussing program a year later, after it proved a success. I spent many lunch periods wandering the perimeter of the campus and dreaming upward at the creatures running through the hills.

My education continued on the Westside: Emerson Middle School, which is directly behind the intimidating gold mountain of the Mormon Temple on Santa Monica Boulevard, where all of us at school were warned never to trespass, particularly the skaters, with whom I sometimes hung out. I was then bussed a little farther west to University High, when drivers ed was still on campus, and during my sole lesson on Sunset Boulevard, approaching the downhill winder just past the 405 freeway at what would become my alma mater, UCLA, I pressed the brakes, but my teacher slammed his foot on the accelerator and shouted, "Go!" From the age of 16 I have driven the city streets like this — with an offense-as-defense race car assertion, even with the maddening increase of phones, of Lyft and Uber drivers who may not know the city. I am still weaving through to make

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NEUROMATIC

Or, A Particular History of Religion and the Brain

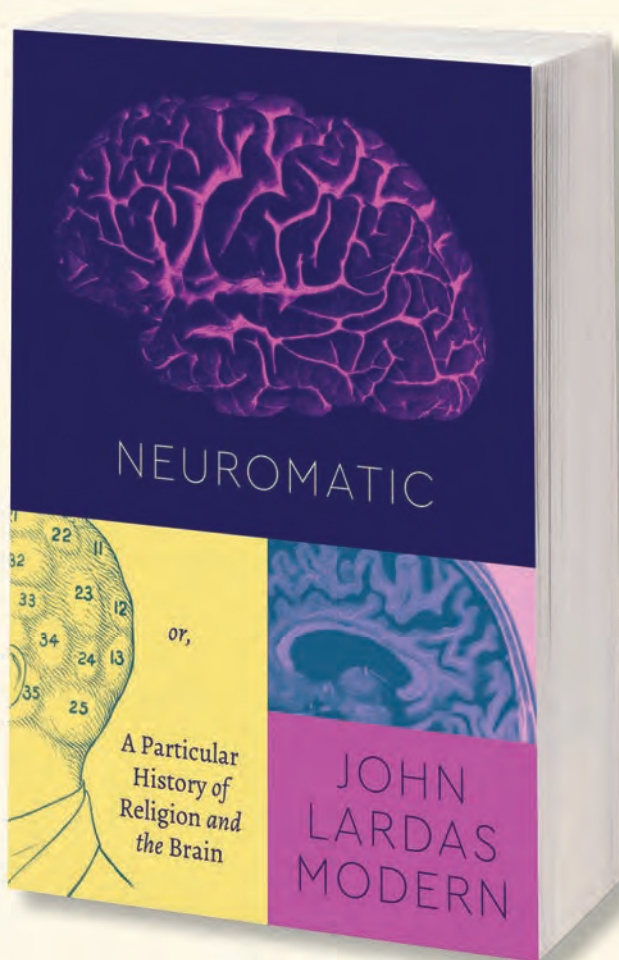
JOHN LARDAS MODERN

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—Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Wesleyan University

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that green light or the freer faster lane on the freeway.

Freshman year at UCLA, I lived on Hilgard Avenue in the Christian Science dorm and was kicked out a month before the end of the school year for having my boyfriend in my room with the door closed, rather than ajar, so that in privacy we could argue over whether I should go home with him to Carmel for the entire summer. When the residents of the Women's House — all of them white girls whose parents had voted for Reagan and found my way of dressing "loud" — had voted me out for this official reason, my parents, knowing exactly what this was actually about, did not say a word when they picked me up and drove me home to commute for the remaining month.

Before the sophomore year began, the only apartment building whose manager did not run out in a panic to tell me the Vacancy sign was supposed to have been taken down, was on frat row, Gayley Avenue, so I moved in. I do not believe I ever saw another Black person on my daily walks to campus. And at the start of junior year, I was in a Veteran Avenue apartment across from the cemetery — I also walked its perimeter — for two days until my two white roommates, to whom I had only spoken on the phone, arrived, were shocked to see my skin color, and promptly told me this would not work out. All of this occurred in the '80s.

My current favorite labyrinth is in the Tuna Canyon Park Trail — you take Old Topanga Canyon Road, climb Fernwood Pacific Drive, and keep climbing to Tuna Canyon, then turn

down Las Flores, past a small horse ranch, and park somewhere between 10 cars at most. At the gate, you head left and climb the hill, walk past an overlook bench, and keep going. If you choose a gray day, the labyrinth will sparkle on the cliff under watery sun, the clouds beneath your feet, and the maze of glittering rocks appears to float above a phantom coast.

When I lived in Led Zeppelin's party house in Laurel Canyon for 13 years (after Sycamore and Beverly; Saint Andrews in Koreatown; Fountain and Spaulding in West Hollywood; and after a horrible discrimination case, a house on Redondo near Washington Boulevard with the settlement money; then seven years in New York, first in the Village, then Williamsburg, then SoHo), I made my own labyrinth in the backyard woods, which I walked every morning, making peace with the day.

When living in Bangkok, before making it back to L.A. in time for the 2020 lockdown, my favorite walk was in a nearby Chinese cemetery, where there is a river, many temples, a boxing gym, squares for dancing, *qigong*, and lanes for running amid the archipelagos of tombstones, making death, beauty, and life one.

Today, I signed the lease and got the keys to a cottage in Jefferson Park, after a month of couch surfing in the homes of loved ones in the Adams district, Silver Lake, Canoga Park, and Mar Vista. This month, finally over, was the first time in all these decades of my life that I could be described as unhoused. In these pandemic years, observing my native L.A., I sometimes saw only a city coldly sold to



Featuring over 100 photographs that have been selectively colorized to highlight the edible part of the wild, native flora.

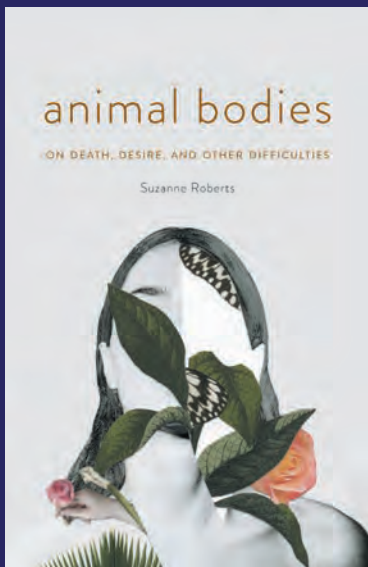
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the highest bidder, a city that was never about stone fruit and cinema but was a site of 241 years of ruthlessness.

But that is when I would head to a labyrinth. I now have a map of many, thanks to a visit last fall to the Annenberg Community Beach House. They had a weekend labyrinth in the sand, built by designer Lars Howlett, and the kind attendant, seeing my mirth as I walked, ran up to give me the key to the city.

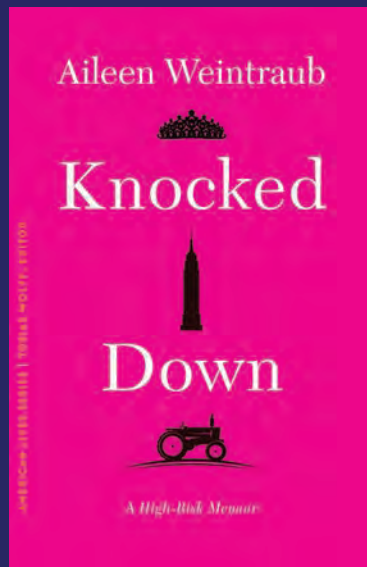
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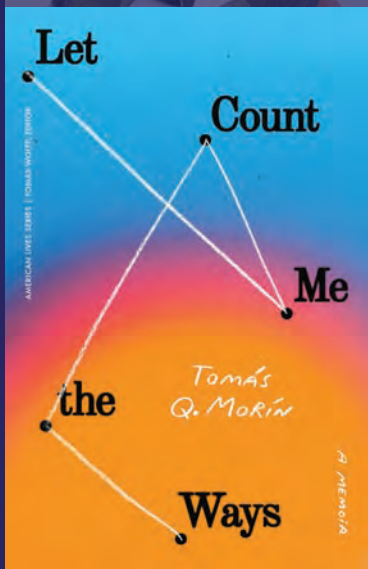
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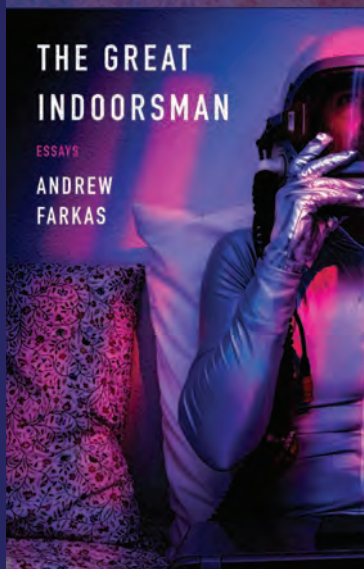
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INFAMOUS

An excerpt from *Brown and Gay in L.A.:
The Lives of Immigrant Sons*

ANTHONY CHRISTIAN OCAMPO

In the fall of 2004, when I started grad school in sociology at UCLA, I set out to become an expert on immigration and race. In my statement of purpose, the essay in which applicants propose their future research ambitions, I wrote that I wanted to study how race shapes the lives of children of immigrants, a group that sociologists call the “immigrant second generation.” I read hundreds of research studies about their everyday experiences with their families, and in their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. As the son of Filipino immigrants who arrived in this country in 1980, I was especially interested in the “new” immigrant second generation — the children of Latin American, Asian, African, and

Caribbean immigrants who migrated after the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which opened US borders to immigrants after a four-decade hiatus.

All the while, there was another world beyond academia into which I was being socialized, mostly between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. A few miles east of my UCLA apartment was West Hollywood, a two-square-mile strip of bars, clubs, restaurants, coffee shops, adult stores, and health service organizations that catered to gay clientele throughout Southern California. As early as the 1920s, West Hollywood was a safe haven for queer men and women relegated by society to the closet. By the 1970s, West Hollywood “had come to epitomize a new gay lifestyle,” write historians Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons in their book *Gay L.A.* “[T]he residents of West Hollywood became emboldened, expressing gay freedom not just after dark, but brazenly in the sun: holding hands, flirting, and cruising all over the district.” West Hollywood was the site for landmark moments in gay history. It became home for gay people seeking refuge from other countries, other states, or even other neighborhoods in L.A. It was the site for gay-owned businesses and gay activist movements. It was the first American city to have a free health clinic for gay people, to have a majority-gay local government, and to legally recognize same-sex relationships and offer medical benefits to same-sex partners.

In 2004, I knew none of these things, despite being a lifelong Angeleno. I grew up in Eagle Rock, a racially diverse middle-class neighborhood in Northeast Los Angeles, but for most of my life, my family and friends rarely went west of the 101 Freeway, which runs north and south and splits the city in half. As Faderman and Timmons point out, “L.A.’s distinct ethnic neighborhoods, spread out over 450 square miles, and its clogged freeways and inefficient public transit system have created de facto segregation.” Anyone who has grown up or lived in L.A. knows it’s a place where decisions about one’s social life are dictated by race, class, and a willingness (or lack thereof) to sit through traffic.

But that year it was my budding queer sexuality that led me to venture to West Hollywood. After graduate school seminars, writing sessions, and happy hours, I’d make my way to the two-mile stretch of bars and clubs along Santa Monica Boulevard, at least three or four times a week, if not more. The residents of West Hollywood are mostly White and affluent, but the events I attended catered to gay men of color. There were Latinx nights, which drew crowds of immigrants and US-born Latino gay men. There were also hip-hop nights, which drew mostly Black but also Latino and Asian American gay men. There was GAMEboi, which drew Asian American gay men of different ethnicities, mostly US-born Filipino,

Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese patrons. (The *GAM* in *GAMEBOI* was short for “Gay Asian male,” a nod to the AOL chat rooms of the 1990s.)

For the most part, these men were not West Hollywood residents; they came from surrounding neighborhoods, cities, and counties across Southern California, where most residents were people of color. Within a few months, the gay men of color I met at these parties introduced me to a broader circuit of queer POC party scenes beyond the main boulevard — in Hollywood, Silver Lake, the San Fernando Valley, the San Gabriel Valley, and the Inland Empire. In a region where Latinxs, Asian Americans, and African Americans collectively make up 70 percent of the population, there was no shortage of gay bars that catered specifically to gay men of color. Historically, many of these clubs — Circus Disco in Hollywood, Catch One in Arlington Heights, and Chico’s in Montebello — became the primary nighttime gathering spots for gay POC who encountered racial discrimination in the predominantly White social scene of West Hollywood.

Straddling the worlds of graduate school and gay POC nightlife positioned me to see a major shortcoming in how sociologists were discussing immigration: they presumed that immigrants and their children were heterosexual. In my seven years of graduate school, I spent countless hours in seminars, lectures, and

conferences learning about how the lives of children of immigrants were shaped by a constellation of factors — their parents’ socioeconomic status, the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods and schools, their language abilities, their connections with the ethnic community, their racial identity, their gender, and their religion. Throughout these conversations, the topic of sexuality rarely came up.

All the while, several nights a week, I was drinking, dancing, and socializing with second-generation Filipino and Latino gay men. Some of the men grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods like mine. Others grew up in working-class Latinx neighborhoods in East L.A. or Southeast L.A. Others came from the multiethnic suburbs surrounding Los Angeles County. Others had migrated to Los Angeles from other parts of California or from the East Coast. We found our way to each other’s company because whom we desired and how we expressed ourselves were incongruent with the rules of a heteronormative society. We were bound together by both our Brownness and our queerness.

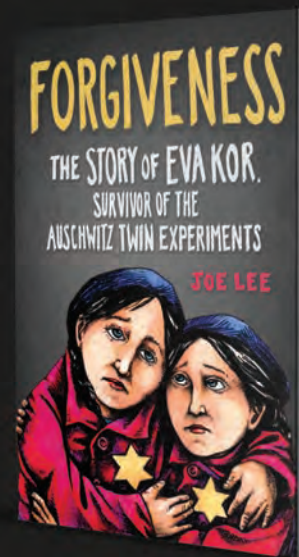
It was through these men that I discovered renderings of gay second-generation lives. There were essay collections curated by queer Asian American and Latinx academics who study literature, culture, and HIV/AIDS activism. There were documentary films and plays produced by LGBTQ students of color at local universities. Most of



“Joe Lee weaves
Eva’s story of
overcoming
atrocious and
finding peace
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into a well-crafted
and beautiful
work of art.”

—Leah Simpson,
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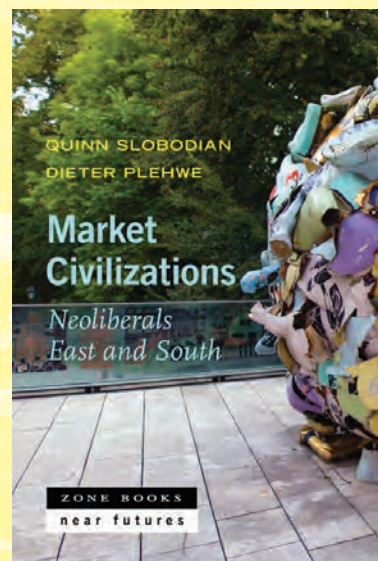
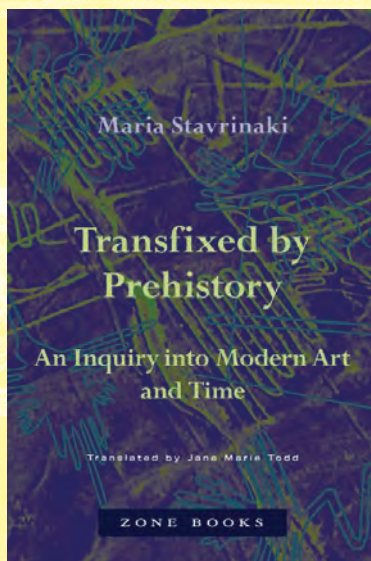
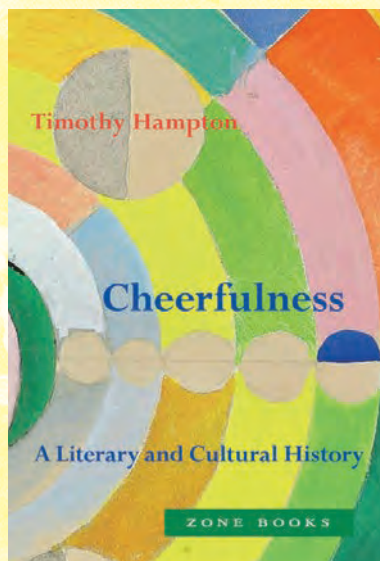
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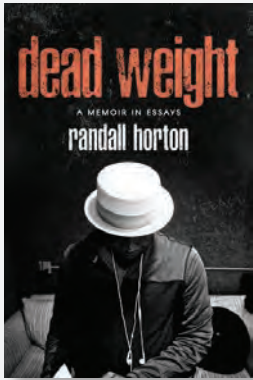
what I learned came from the people who existed at the intersection of immigration, race, and gay identity. Beyond academia, I learned so much from gay second-generation men of color who shared their lives online — on message boards, blogs, social networking sites, and social media. At the club, we'd dance, shedding the shame we'd all grown up with, basking in the longing and acceptance denied to us for most of our lives.

I started the research for this book in 2012. By then I had been a part of the gay POC scene for close to a decade. If I showed up to La Cita in Downtown L.A. on a Monday, or Micky's in West Hollywood on a Thursday, or Circus Disco in Hollywood on a Friday, I'd know more than a few people there. It was my intimate familiarity with the gay POC scene (and my identity as a gay man of color) that allowed me to connect with many of the men I ended up interviewing. Most of the men I approached for a sit-down interview agreed because they'd seen me around.

The men shared their first memories of realizing they were “different” from other boys. They recounted the disparaging comments their family members, classmates, and members of the church made about gay people. They recalled story lines on television shows and movies in which gay people were belittled — or, worse, beat up and killed. They remembered their parents watching alongside them and saying they deserved it. They spoke about strategies

they developed to conceal their queerness at home and at school, the places children are supposed to feel most safe. They talked about the fear of being, as the late queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz once put it, a “spy in the house of gender normativity.” Many recounted these painful moments with such vivid detail and emotion that you would think they had taken place last week instead of years or even decades ago.

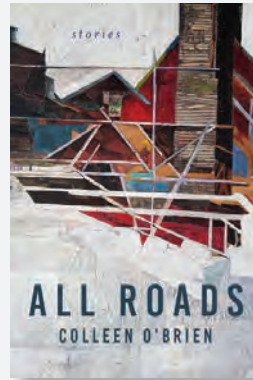
By the time they were young men in their 20s and 30s, the national pulse on LGBTQ issues was rapidly shifting. States began legalizing gay marriage in 2004. To borrow the words of queer Latinx writer Carmen Maria Machado, they came of age “in a culture where gay marriage went from cosmic impossibility to foregone conclusion to law of the land.” After a decade of heated legal battles at the state level to define marriage as the union between one man and one woman, the US Supreme Court — in a five-to-four decision — declared marriage equality a federal law in June 2015. Of course, for major segments of the LGBTQ population, such as Black and Brown queer and transgender people, there are other priorities besides gay marriage. Workplace discrimination, health inequality, housing insecurity, and violence (particularly against transgender Black women and women of color) are more pressing issues. Nonetheless, that acceptance of same-sex marriage doubled within a decade and a half — from 30 percent in 2004 to 60 percent in 2019 —



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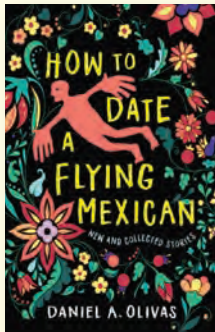
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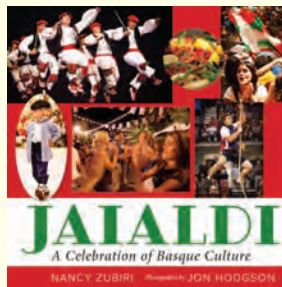
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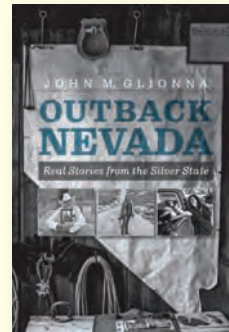


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Graciela Iturbide, *Cristina, Whitefence, East LA, USA* (1986)
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indicates that the cultural landscape is tipping in the direction of LGBTQ acceptance.

Even with these metrics of progress, however, the truth remained: growing up gay, especially as a person of color and a son of immigrants, was hard. The majority of the men said they'd been a target of *both* racism and homophobia at some point in their lives. They were called faggots — behind their backs, to their faces, and in multiple languages. They held memories of being barely tolerated or outright rejected by members of their family and community. Manny Roldan, a Filipino American college student, shared his mother's heart-breaking reaction when she discovered he was gay. "It got to the point where, when we were eating, I would drink from my mom's cup, and she would throw away the cup," Manny said. "If I sat on her bed, she would change the sheets. It was emotionally devastating. Like not feeling welcome in my own home." Societal attitudes toward gay people may have been shifting, but for Manny, this did nothing to ease the tension between him and his immigrant parents.

In the era of marriage equality, I've encountered more than a few straight people who tell me that being gay is "not that bad" because being gay is "more accepted now," as if the increasing acceptance of gay marriage could erase the trauma experienced by men like Manny. They conveniently ignore the labor and everyday acts of resistance it took for gay people to exist in a

heteronormative world.

Throughout the writing of this book, I kept returning to a question posed by Imani Perry, professor of African American studies at Princeton University, in her book *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*: "How do you become in a world bent on you not being, and not becoming?" Perry is not writing specifically about queer experiences; she is writing about the challenges Black boys face growing up in a society where Black boys and men are routinely and unjustly criminalized, imprisoned, and killed. The men I interviewed are not Black, nor do they experience race and racism in the same way. But by virtue of their Brownness and their queerness, they, too, know what it feels like to be a "problem," to riff off the classic question raised by sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. In many respects, *Brown and Gay in LA* is an acknowledgment of — and a tribute to — the labor of becoming.

One book cannot fully capture the rich mosaic of second-generation LGBTQ experiences. In my choice to pan in on the particular, like the excerpt you are about to read about the T-parties of '90s Los Angeles, I hope you catch glimmers of the universal. As my friend, the Filipina American scholar Carolina San Juan once told me, in a moment when I was struggling to write, "Your book is about the queerness in all of us that wants to be loved." Indeed, it is.

Justin Ruiz, a Mexican American hair stylist who grew up in Echo Park, first started hanging out in West Hollywood in the mid-'90s when he was a sophomore in high school. He and his friends were not old enough to get into the bars and clubs, so they would sit outdoors for hours at restaurants and coffee shops along the main strip of gay establishments on Santa Monica Boulevard.

"We would take our asses to West Hollywood just to go, almost like mall rats, but like West Hollywood rats," he recalled, nostalgia radiating from his voice. "You would go be a fucking West Hollywood rat at that one pizza place and literally just eat pizza and hang out and just meet other young gays." The drive from Echo Park to WeHo took more than half an hour, but he made it a point to make the trip at least a few times a week "just to be around the gays." Back then, he "didn't really do the AOL chat room thing," so making the trek to WeHo was the only reliable way to connect with other gay people his age.

Then he met Raymond Martinez. Raymond was a member of Infamous, a Latino party crew in East L.A. known for throwing "T-parties," social functions that catered specifically to gay Latinos. Party crews (both gay and straight) were a staple of L.A. Latino culture during the 1990s and early 2000s. As artist and writer Virginia Arce argues, Latino party crews were both an alternative to gang culture, and a response to the negative ways Latinos were targeted as "illegal" and "criminal" — by teachers in public schools, by conservative politicians, and in Hollywood story lines. Each weekend, party crews would

throw backyard parties in predominantly Latino neighborhoods throughout Southern California, in East L.A., South L.A., Santa Ana, and the Inland Empire. The parties seldom took place in the same location, and they were often broken up by police within hours; nevertheless, Latinos from different regions continued to congregate by the hundreds every weekend.

Justin and Raymond met in front of a WeHo pizza parlor, where Raymond was passing out flyers for an Infamous party. "On this little party flyer, there was a number I had to call to find out where the T-parties were gonna be," Justin explained. "It was like some cholo guy on a voicemail that was like, 'Wassup, party people, the place to be tonight is...' and then it told me the address and direction of where the party was that night." One Friday night in 1997, Justin went to see what a T-party was all about. For the next two years he was hooked. "We were at those T-parties every motherfuckin' weekend."

The parties were "always in the hood" and "right off the freeway," according to Justin. Most of the time they took place in the backyard of a house or in the back lot of an apartment complex, but occasionally they would take place at other sites. One man I interviewed remembered a T-party that took place in the parking lot of a South L.A. laundromat. Justin remembered attending a T-party at an auto repair shop in Historic Filipinotown. "It was crazy. I went to one that was at an auto body shop, and it turns out it was the same auto body shop my grandfather owned in the fucking sixties!" he said. "The

party was covered up [black tarp surrounded the outer fence], but I mean any cop could see it driving by. Like fucking lights and shit, strobe lights, and all these fucking queens dancing and just lining up outside.”

“A lot of teenagers kick it at the mall or go to school dances. What was the appeal of going to T-parties?” I asked Justin.

“Probably the fact that we knew there was going to be lots of other gay boys or men our age,” he answered. “It was just the idea of being able to meet other gay kids that weren’t at my school. And I feel like it was just the lure of nightlife at that age. I think it was just enticing to me. It was like the closest thing I thought I would get to going to a club or being in a room filled with kids that were just like me.”

T-parties pulled crowds of around one to two hundred people. The overwhelming majority of partygoers were Latino teenagers and young adults, with a handful of Black and Asian American queers in attendance. “We never really saw White kids there, that’s for damn sure,” Justin said. Sometimes there were men who came to the party in drag. “There were a few drag kids, obviously, who wanted to put on a dress and some pumps. The T-parties were like a perfect reason for them to do it since they probably couldn’t do it at their high school.” At every party, there was a station where beer and “jungle juice” were served. There was always someone selling balloons filled with nitrous for some momentary euphoria while dancing to deep house.

Jesse Madgiral, a Mexican American

graphic designer, was 15 when an older gay cousin took him to his first T-party, in South L.A. Most of the men at that first T-party were Latino; many were wearing crisply ironed white T-shirts or plaid long-sleeved flannels, with baggy jeans or Dickies, a brand of workmen’s pants popular among Latino youth. The men dressed like the gang members from his high school, but after talking to them, he discovered they weren’t gang affiliated. As cultural theorist Richard Rodríguez notes, these young men were “queering the homeboy aesthetic,” adopting a style typically associated with Latino male heterosexuality and taking ownership of it. The young men who weren’t dressed like “cholos” (Jesse’s descriptor) were usually dressed like “rebels” — a style among Latinos that evoked James Dean’s look in *Rebel Without a Cause* — in white T-shirts, black faux leather jackets, snug-fitting jeans, and with slicked-back hair.

While the young men at the party embodied an aesthetic Jesse was familiar with, he was “mind blown” to see them engaging in same-sex public displays of affection. “You’d see these straight-up gangsters with tatted-out heads making out with other guys,” he said. “I was like, ‘What the fuck? Like freakin’ cholos making out.’” It was the first time Jesse saw other young men who embodied the Latino masculine aesthetic he’d grown up with being physically affectionate with other men: dancing together, hugging each other, kissing one another. “T-parties were an eye-opener,” he said. In his high school, he was the only student who was openly gay; at T-parties, the men in attendance looked

just like the men he'd knew in his family and school; they looked like *him*.

For Raymond, joining a party crew provided a community and family he had lost in the aftermath of coming out. In his early teens, he had been part of a Catholic youth ministry at his local parish. One weekend during a retreat, Raymond tearfully revealed to friends in the group that he was gay. They didn't outright reject him, but he felt something change after having shared this secret. Soon he stopped going to meetings and disassociated from his friends in the group. A few weeks after the retreat, Raymond's parents found a shoebox full of letters he had been exchanging with a male friend. "They confronted me about the letters," he said. "I got clumsy and they saw some of my emails. Then they started to eavesdrop on the phone and hear that I was talking all affectionate with a guy." Raymond's parents took him to see a priest and, later, a psychologist — all in an attempt to steer him away from being gay. The psychologist informed his parents that there was nothing wrong with Raymond. "He basically told them that I didn't need help. That being gay was not a mental issue. That the only thing that mattered was that I was happy." On the one level, Raymond felt validated to know that a mental health professional was on his side. On the other hand, he was devastated that his parents sought out conversion therapy in the first place.

When Raymond went to his first T-party, hosted by Infamous, he was enamored with the sense of camaraderie the members had. He found himself crushing on one of the crew's veteran

members. "Sammy, the main guy that was throwing all the parties, he was a smart cholo," he said. "He just came off so intelligent, and when he saw me, he was like, 'You are really cute. You are never gonna have to pay here when we have a party, ever again, okay?'" By the next party, Sammy had Raymond on NOS duty. "Here, your job is to sell balloons," he told him. "Two for three dollars." Before Raymond knew it, he was helping each week to plan Infamous's T-parties — scouting for the location, booking a DJ, designing the flyers, and distributing them outside of all-ages clubs like Arena in Hollywood and Ozz in Orange County. Within a few months, Raymond had established himself as one of the most well-known promoters in the T-party scene. He recalled fondly, "This was our world, and it felt good to be recognized at every party I went to."

Ultimately, as these men got older and the option to attend bars and clubs became available, the appeal of T-parties waned. "A friend gave me a fake ID, and then I stopped going to T-parties," Justin explained. "It said I was 26, and I was definitely still 17 at the time, but I never got turned away. Not once did I get turned away, which is crazy because it said I was from Pennsylvania and it wasn't even my photo. But it worked." Justin's fake ID gave him access to bars and clubs throughout WeHo, Long Beach, Orange County, and the Inland Empire. He began dating a Marine 10 years his senior. "Bitch, I was fucking 17, dating this grown-ass man like the bad bitch I was!" he told me. When presented with the options of



Graciela Iturbide, *Cholas con Villa, Zapata y Juárez, Whitefence, East LA, USA* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

a brick-and-mortar gay establishment or a T-party likely to be broken up by the cops within hours, Justin and his boyfriend preferred the former.

Jesse said he stopped attending T-parties after an altercation with the police. “The last time I went to a T-party, the cops stopped us and put us up against the wall,” he remembered. They cuffed him and his friends and ran his name through a database. After finding that none of them had a record, they let them go. Jesse escaped the incident unscathed, but he was a few weeks away from starting college and feared that another encounter with the police might derail his future. “I had just turned 18, and I was like, I don’t need to go there. I am not going to do this again.”

✕

Brown and Gay in L.A.: The Lives of Immigrant Sons is now available for pre-order, and is forthcoming from NYU Press in September 2022.

& YOU

KENJI C. LIU

It was discovered that the best way to combat
Sadness was to make your sadness a door.

— Terrance Hayes

i am my mother's eyes and ears now, opening
to all newness as if signs
the bright green sprouts of calendula, submerged
but faith leaping, following directions from dreams
day by day, it will happen, keep looking
writing, trusting you
and rain clouds making way for december's half light
in the apartment, our dead returning through all its small doors
when i cradle you, my mother will hold me
again, a red thread runs between us into the future
the bush offers one pink rose at a time
i meet her in every feeling now
writing, hoping
these words wrap around you, warm and feathered
this is where my months have wept, in this corner of los
angels, so many doors
i leave the crumbling gardens
via passage from the other downpour to this one

THE HAND CLAPS

Let the poems make the decisions

*RACHEL RABBIT WHITE
& ROSIE STOCKTON*

What follows is a recorded conversation between two poets whose respective work and lives are fashioned around the question of how poetry gets written. The conversation previews a series of poems titled Rob Me Then in which each poet invites the other to steal language and ideas from each other, troubling the tradition of single authorship and the contradiction at the heart of possessing an idea. The remainder of the poems are published on our website.

Rosie Stockton: I've been thinking about something you said in an interview with Nico (Walker) about how utopia is striving toward anonymity. What conditions make us feel anonymous: total exposure or total clandestine obscurity? Does being anonymous or being known give you a feeling of safety?

Rachel Rabbit White: I was thinking about that too recently — if you can somehow be anonymous during your lifetime — I guess I have a line that's like, "To evade fame must be the height of luxury." But I mean that's about money. I feel like, it's almost like the people that can write anonymously, or can afford to be off social media, are people with wealth, you know?

RS: Last night, I had this nightmare that I was stuck at the top of this mountain. I could see everything but could not touch anyone, and yet everyone could touch and see me. I woke up and thought, I need to scrub my image and name from the internet. Or I need to proliferate more names to fracture my selfhood. Either overexposure or total erasure of names would work. I've always been like ...how to become ungovernable? You have to become un-Googable...

RRW: In my meditations, names come to me that make no sense. Almost like angel names, that are no-names, and I'm like I wish I had more things to name, I wish I had names.

RS: I have so many email addresses with different names and my friends are like, which fucking email do you use?

RRW: I love that about hustler life and hooker life. I remember when I was first building my hooker website and had an advertisement out, I was corresponding with this one guy back and forth and my name, my first and last name, literally changed 15 times during the conversation. And at first he wasn't saying anything, and then he was like, are you okay? Are you going through something? Like, this name has changed so many times. And I'm like, look! I'm just trying to figure it out right now.

RS: Exactly, like if your own name becomes incoherent you must be mentally losing it.

RRW: Last night, during my insomnia, I was going back and reading Baudrillard, so I am going to get on my Baudrillard pedestal for a second. He writes that what happens in modern culture is that our society becomes so reliant on models and maps that we've lost contact with the real world and everything that preceded the maps. From there, reality begins to merely imitate the map and the model, taking on the appearance of a real world and real language too.

RS: That reminds me of what Sylvia Wynter says, "Don't mistake the map for the territory."

RRW: Yes, like language is the first brick that keeps us from accessing reality. You know how we were talking about being anonymous—I am thinking about folk songs spreading through culture to the point that it's not even clear what culture it originally came from. There's this

really girl-world version that happened to me where I grew up with those hand-clap songs. Did you ever have those hand-clap songs? You know like, *Down, down baby, down by the roller coaster, sweet, sweet baby...*

CAUSE AND EFFECT (RS)

Because money of course. Because God.
Love gets fungible, I get compact enough to make it.
Cramped as fuck in here. (In the me for money.)
Holy circlejerk longs for a viable sub.

It's going to be a good year: look how the lupine syncs with the chatbots.
They work very hard at it: avoidantly attached, spiting never swallowing.
Soul pups splash in the cement, giving away their anthem.
Crushed out automation takes the place of our lack.

That's how we baptize this spontaneous duet.
Fake mothers fall in our lap,
California King size heartbreak.

I carry her footsteps above me deep in the Law,
splurging on order she gave me, unwillingly, unknowingly.

This much she worked for:
four decades of spreadsheets,
down payment on a plot in heaven,
craigslist selling sunset.

RS: *Never let me go.*

Like Grecian sex bots, the original cartographers.

Now Come on God. Come God.
Come to me God. Mother amen, mother
amen. Amen God.

RRW: Yeah! And there are regional versions too, depending on where you grew up. I remember once reading that those songs are on all continents and have spread in a way that's completely mysterious.

RS: There's this simultaneous beauty in the lost origin, like when something goes viral and there is a desire to know where it came from, why and how it spread. It makes me think about the idea of plagiarism and the contradiction at the heart of possessing an idea, or thought, or song. I'm drawn to Kathy Acker in terms of this.

RRW: Oh my god, yes!

RS: Her work is all about repetition, mimicry, plagiarism. But it's meant to undermine those concepts and point out the origin-less nature of thoughts, concepts, words, phrases. There are these childhood songs, like the hand-clap songs, passed down forever, where the origin is completely lost. And yet when you learn some version of the origin story, you can understand how culture proliferates, how ideology brings you into your beliefs through these innocent seeming songs. I think about political slogans too, where it's like, on the one hand, they grow and the origin becomes totally obscure, and on the other, there is something so important about studying political genealogies and understanding the context in which a certain political phrase is coined. When political slogans lose their origin story, they become more easily neutralized or co-opted by the state and start no longer serving the local or historically specific political purpose that they once had. So shout-out to historians unburying subjugated histories, but also shout-out to Acker for being like, I'm just taking this as if it is mine and running with it.

RRW: So my sister and I, Irish twins, entered kindergarten, I was in first grade and I remember one day, I walked into the living room and my sister was showing my mom the hand-claps. And my mom was laughing because some of the songs were kind of dirty. And I just remember, I was so mad, and maybe ashamed, because now my mom, the authority figure, could see us.

RS: Because she wasn't a kid—because your sister told the secret.

RRW: She told the secret! Yeah! And I remember feeling very sullen and silent over this betrayal, you know?

RS: Secrets are important. With an authority figure—like a mother, or the state—there has to be a refusal of transparency. You can't know my songs! You can't know our secret language!

RRW: I've been thinking a lot about what's missing in my life—I think it started when I was in Mississippi and I was isolated from my friends. When you leave New York, it's hard to keep up with people, even if you're trying. But what I was missing was not the social updates or conversations, but like, that place you can get to when you're seeing someone close to you all the time and having conversations where language begins to break down, where grammar is breaking down. Everything becomes shorthand. That breakdown is where the poetic enters in. I think Elaine Kahn says this, about the poem needing a hole in it.

RS: Yes, like that's the way the poem

works best: if it can point to the fundamental lack at the heart of language, at the heart of being a subject.

RRW: I got really into reading about chatbot technology recently. When they build the bots, they have all these metrics they use to determine “how human is this conversation?” The ways of measuring humanness are very funny, especially as a poet, one of them is no repetition.

But when I think about the chatbot I also think about sex robots. This fear-mongering about the sex robot has been around forever. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, sailors encounter a sculptor named Pygmalion who is carving ivory sex dolls so lifelike you can’t tell them apart from real women. The question then was more about the human soul like if we can produce a truly lifelike machine does that mean a soul is no longer necessary criteria for being a human? Or is a soul no longer necessary to explain human behavior? And I find that way more interesting than our anxieties today, which are not spiritual, but more economical. If you Google it, you’ll find a million sex-robot-panic op-eds around the meaning of love and intimacy, but also about work, headlines like, “Strippers are going to be replaced by mechanical strip clubs!”

RS: This is reminding me of the Luddite textile worker rebellion. When we call someone a Luddite today, it’s like, this person is not up to date with modern technology, right? But actually, a Luddite is a term that comes from the textile worker uprising in England in the 1800s when their labor in cotton and wool

mills was being replaced by machines. In the Luddite uprising, they destroyed the machines, smashed them, and threw them out the window. And there’s this hilarious line in the Wikipedia about it: *The workers destroyed the machines not because they were hostile toward the machines, but it was their way of expressing their hostility toward their boss.*

RRW: Hostility toward work, yeah!

RS: I thought it was so cute that Wikipedia was consoling us that the workers actually felt solidarity with the machines.

RRW: That’s the thing! I feel solidarity with the machines. We are machines. The fear of, say, a sex robot, is totally reactionary. Because behind that fear, it’s like, your sex is being replaced by machines, your meaningful relationships when the very real threat has already happened when we sold our labor to the boss! We are already substitutable. We’re already useless because all value is performance. We’re already the robot, we’re already playing the automaton, you know?

RS: “How human is this conversation?” we ask the worker whose exploited labor is in essence already dehumanized.

RRW: I do think there’s a point when, and I think the pandemic contributed to this, but also getting older, where you start to lose wonder with all interaction, it’s the same conversations every day, every bodega sells the same items, you start to feel a lack of awe with the things around you. That’s the reason Proust started to write, to find awe.

RS: There's that amazing passage in *Swann's Way* where he's like, the danger of being a writer is that life will feel less lifelike, the narrative is the thing that gives you the *feeling* of being alive without the habits of everyday life.

RRW: Right! And you can only hope that you're going to get there. Remember what it felt like when you experienced those first freedoms as a teenager, and everything was full of inside jokes and alive and dangerous. It was all about connection. It was all about the other people you were meeting. And maybe finding the overlaps between you and that person's life was interesting—that they weren't a person you would have met before, but there were no gaps.

I TOLD JESUS (RRW)

I told Jesus, if there's one thing you can't take it

I told Jesus the trace becomes the origin
remove the ground on which I love to walk
I told Jesus change my name

I'm selling my former impressions, thoughts, and memories
I said everything must go /the origin is only real when it's obscured

driving through an empty dream
I want to say of how we pray
about the disappearance of names

become a substitute for eternity
your housing search / the secret to my housing search
even animals feel shame

we keep each other for each other
don't know how it gets spent
look back and see the days

I told Jesus I don't want to be a love song anymore
I don't want to work so hard,
all of us who work

who work so hard to change their names

RS: I think the joy is in the incoherence.
It's like groupchat energy.

RRW: And I feel like, you know, when you find yourself again in a place where security and money are your main worries, play disappears really quickly. I notice it in other people around me. Because everyone's really scared right now, you know? And yet, you talk a lot about the increase in refusal to work and compulsion to work, like people are risking it again.

RS: Anti-work politics have been so important to me for so long. The tradition comes out of an autonomist, feminist, and anti-capitalist genealogy that basically argues that collective refusal of work is crucial for a transformative political moment. My interest in this is personal, I hate having a boss. I hate the way that labor is exploited. There's this affective hatred toward the lie that work will ever lead you to the *Good Life*. And because that lie is propped up by the inequalities of racial capitalism, the refusal to work is not just about individuals refusing a particular job—anti-work, to me, must be a collective stance against the capitalist system of production and refusal of the idea that work has some innate moral value. We are living in this time where anti-work politics are becoming mainstream, there is the Great Resignation where workers are leaving their jobs at the highest rates ever recorded month after month since last spring. It is more important than ever to not mistake this an individual refusal, and to understand the implicit critique of capitalism it carries with it. People are like, no fucking way, it's not worth it. Work is not worth dying for.

The poem, like labor, has mechanical processes: meter and rhyme and feet that are measurable and propel a poem forward. So to approach poetic form from an anti-work perspective, I'm like, I am going to smash this machine so we can play. I just get so much joy out of sabotage.

RRW: The poem has to write itself. The poem takes over you. I want to give life to that poetic voice so that it keeps coming to me. I want to decorate my life for that voice. And it can't be a conscious thought, it has to be in this meditative state where the poems are pushing me, pulling me, dressing me, giving me the clothes. The poems are making the decisions, they're building the project, and I'm going along with them. I'm just the channel they play on.

Going back to the risk of anti-work politics, I think poetry and art need a sense of risk. You have to have a sense of risk to be like, okay, I'm becoming this poem now. Do I agree with what I'm becoming? It doesn't matter because you square it within you to subordinate yourself to the poetry.

RS: It's like that Amiri Baraka quote: "My poetry, then, has always been aimed at destroying ugly shit."

RRW: Right! And there's terror in beauty too, the terror of going after beauty, going into the terror, not away from it. When I'm engaged and the poem is making me or when I'm trying to write prose or trying to write essays, I refuse to fake anything, I can wait, I let it come to me. You know?

DOWN DOWN BABY (RS)

Lullaby and *Naïveté* are sunning
on the hilltop surrounded by code words.

They confess their jealousy,
which allows them to become free
of themselves and enter into a deep
omniscient sleep.

Insatiably, they rename
each other into acceptance.

You have given me the greatest gift, they whisper:
sunscreen and eternity.

RS: It's such a gift when that happens.

RRW: With these algorithm-based,
Instagram-influenced ways everything's
getting so sanitized and flattened, wheth-
er it's the way we talk or social justice
or relationships. That's why "the human
conversation" is a natural next poetry

project for me. Thinking about phenom-
enology, where a human is a split-up
object, there's the fantasy, there's the real,
and in the real we have the other, the
other's otherness, and then that gap, you
know, where we can't ever fully perceive
that other, we can't see all the sides of the
dice at the same time. When I wrote the
Paradise Edition of my book — *Porn Car-
nival* — I was interested in the phenom-
enology of romance and how we talk
about love and romance as optimizing
your life in structural terms so that rela-
tionships support your work and financ-
es. And I, being led by this poetic project
of falling in love, letting that terror and
passion lead me, I was more interested
in engaging in someone's otherness and
individuality, where you don't overlap, in
the gaps, where people are damaged or
problematic. For me that seems much
more like real romance, like a human
conversation.

Luddite and Leveler exfoliate with mud

I avenged her songs at Rock Bottom,
where God found me and whispered:
give away your best lines.

This is a family sitcom end game:
Beauty birthed *Lullaby* via an immaculate misconception,
& *she worked hard at it.*

No testimony, all miracle.
She worked hard at her miracles.
She gave away her names.

[Luddite and Lucite sitting in a tree
A-V-E-N-G-I-N-G]

Here is the dream that emptied its pockets,
held up by machines that tumble from a window.
Like ATM cottagecore, drawn by horse and buggy
to finance any ungovernable self-
defense, clear as night, wrapped in arms.

She became so substitutable,
she dragged her feet in the mud.
She exfoliated her souls, became un-Googlable.

This husk of a deep web,
searching for the trace deep down,
flaunting object impermanence.

*(sweet sweet baby
never let me go)*

RS: I'm working on a new project right now thematizing desire and the gap, or how we project onto a love object. Except my love object is the End of the World, not a lover. The World — like capital-W World — is a destructive regime that eclipses earth, life, difference. How can we end the World to save ourselves, to save the natural World?

I'm thinking about the collective political desire for a revolutionary horizon as if you're experiencing a crush. I'm trying to work with this idea of romantic love as perversion, taking an object that can't be possessed and trying to possess it. I'm traversing my desire for the End of the World in these love letters where it's total simp energy.

RRW: Oh my god. Are you finding that you're able to do it without much personification, or does some sense of human energy show up when you're writing that?

RS: Definitely. It's super personified. I love playing with that. What if the end of the world is onstage? On the stripper pole? She's the end of the world, and I'm giving her all my money, she's draining my bank account.

RRW: I once had this peyote trip in my early 20s where I was in this other dimension, with all these other dimensional beings, like mechanical elves, and

in the middle was a pink stripper pole where this gorgeous slug was dancing. I was giving her all my money. Her image was so, like, enrapturing. She was sensual, this slug.

I KEEP HEARING NEW NAMES OF NEW ANGELS (RRW)

Through interfaces, infrastructures, and genetic data, so as to hide it in the technology of confession, from myself

I present in multiples, I plagiarize
First of all, fuck is paradise ...
my boys have been smuggling this out of utopia

Well if youre *you*, constantly,
youre never *you* ...

RS: Of course it was a slug.

between the abyss of what is intended and what is produced, we study the multiplicities in ripples, in gaps

You say you've got 8 days before you go back on straight fluid karma, HRT... so if anyone wants to get you pregnant, now is the time to speak up

which path to take on the map of cause and effect

RRW: A lime green slug. She showed me the end of the world. I reached into my bag for a pen to write down what she showed me and had a full-on, open-eye peyote hallucination, that above us was God, but instead of the usual God it was Hello Kitty. And I was laughing because ...everything is a joke.



Julian Wasser, *Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude (Eve Babitz)*, *Duchamp Retrospective*, Pasadena Art Museum (1963). Courtesy of the artist.

NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS

Eve Babitz's L.A. is laid out like lace

KATIE KADUE

I was at a party in Hollywood when someone came out of the bathroom to say Eve Babitz had died. “I saw it on Twitter,” he said. “In the bathroom.” “She died in the bathroom?” someone said. “I thought she was already dead,” said someone else. Someone else said, “Who’s Eve Babitz?” (She was in town from the East Coast and so can be forgiven.)

It's a commonplace in stories about Eve Babitz to point out the commonplaces in stories about Eve Babitz. Everyone knows about the nude chess game with Duchamp, immortalized in a famous photograph and years later brought down to earth in Babitz's essay "I Was a Naked Pawn for Art"; the long list of lovers; the axiomatic one-liners by her and about her, especially the one most repeated in the days following her death: "Death, to me, has always been the last word in people having fun without you." But there was nothing commonplace about Eve, whose style, as many remembrances have already intimated, is inimitable. She wasn't like other girls, girls who fit neatly into her own Hollywood taxonomies ("I am quick to categorize," she wrote, "and find it saves mountains of time"): sorority girls, all "similarly unique" with their matching cars, their particularities dissolving in "timeless flames of love"; boring girls entranced by "ordinary sunsets," lulled into the dullness of heteronormativity and marriage. Driving to a boring girl's boring wedding at the beginning of a story called "Sirocco," Eve's sights are set on another horizon: "I was sure that somewhere a grandiose carnival was going on in the sky and I was missing it."

Babitz was an objective chronicler of ingenues, which had to mean she was not an ingenue herself. She was a genius. "She acted like a groupie," the artist Ed Ruscha admitted, but she wasn't a groupie: "she was so much of a personality." In her essay "Ingenues, Thunderbird Girls, and the Neighborhood Belle: A Confusing Tragedy," she's the belle: the only singular entity among a sea of

fungible copies and commodities, the individual beauty as unrivaled as Eden's first woman. But she knew all about the Eves who came before her. She knew that the girl who says *I'm not like other girls* is herself a cliché: "the neighborhood belle is all I'll ever be," she realizes after identifying the type in a minor character in a movie; but she also insists she's the only one who remembered that minor character, overshadowed for ordinary viewers by the starlet. She knew that worrying about missing a grandiose carnival in the sky was just as generic as being satisfied by ordinary sunsets, which may be why she announces, at the end of "Sirocco," "I don't even care if there's some grandiose carnival in the sky I might be missing." She was the stacked 18-year-old blonde who wrote to Joseph Heller, "I am a stacked 18-year-old blonde on Sunset Boulevard. I am also a writer," and she was also a writer. She had Emma Bovary's flair for ridiculously dramatic flights of (white, bourgeois) femininity but instead of getting married she started writing for *Rolling Stone*. Like Emma Bovary, she wanted to know what the words *bliss*, *passion*, and *ecstasy*, which had seemed so beautiful in books, meant in real life, but unlike Emma Bovary, she's the one who wrote the books. Another commonplace line in essays about Eve Babitz: "In every young man's life, there is an Eve Babitz," said the record company executive Earl McGrath. "It's usually Eve Babitz." She was an example of a type so perfect she was synonymous with the type itself, both the dancer and the dance. "Eve Babitz," she might have said, "*c'est moi*."

Did Babitz live in a simulacrum,

a city that is as much of a fantasy as Madame Bovary's romance novels? Was *Eve's Hollywood* Eve's Hollywood? Did she write autofiction? ("Everything I wrote was memoir or essay or whatever you want to call it," she told her biographer.) Her writing was about Los Angeles, but also about everything. Her essays meander like conversation, like drifting across lanes on the freeway, then changing back again on second thought, sentences falling into place like vague driving directions. (She herself abhorred the freeway, "the convenient freeway" that left you "emptyhearted": "It's for if you don't want to know about anything, you just want to get there," the fast lane to death.) She marveled at the constant feeling of compression in New York: "there are no spaces between the words," "like a tunnel where there's no sky." Not like Los Angeles, which, she wrote in an entirely unrelated piece, is "laid out like lace." Her Los Angeles essays are full of spaces. Short paragraphs hang aimlessly. Phrases repeat on a lazy loop, like they're looking for parking. The word "horrible" can appear twice in the same sentence, as if there's no point in seeking out a better word when everything is so horrible. In an essay that begins with her father telling her as a 12-year-old girl on vacation in Mexico that she could not have a leopard skin with a bullet hole in its head, because "you can't have everything," it takes a couple paragraphs to retroactively refute the paternal proclamation with the example of Hollywood — "Hollywood where everyone knew you *could* have everything." "Women are not prepared to have 'everything,'" she wrote, reflecting

on the death by overdose of Janis Joplin, "not when the 'everything' isn't about living happily ever after with the prince (where even if it falls through and the prince runs away with the baby-sitter, there's at least a *precedent*)." Everyone wants a precedent, even when they won't admit it, even when it's an ordinary sunset. Elsewhere, she wrote, "What I wanted, although at the time I didn't understand what the thing was because no one ever tells you anything until you already know it, was everything." She also wrote, "I just wanted to be a girl."

Babitz's impatience with the feminine fantasies of her peers, those interchangeable ingenues, wasn't born of the fact that she was different, but of the fact that she knew that, save for this self-knowledge, she was the same. She trains our gaze on her teenage body on the beach in a leopard-skin one-piece so that we know that she knows she could have been like any other hot girl if she wanted to. "To see me in this suit, in fact, with my long blond hair almost to my waist and breasts so spectacular that to this day I've never gotten a traffic ticket" was to know that the only reason she was shunned by the popular girls of Hollywood High "must have been something really demented in my attitude." To want everything and to just want to be a girl, to want like Emma Bovary to die and to live in Paris, to despair when your married lover says he's going to Brazil and will be back in a couple months ("Months!" I moaned. We could all be dead by then") — these are extreme examples of the genre of female complaint. Babitz's writing is many things, but it's also one thing: the

record of what Lauren Berlant called, in *The Female Complaint*, “the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot.” “Women are prepared to suffer for love; it’s written into their birth certificates,” Babitz wrote, at once naturalizing gender and exposing it as a script, one that might be rewritten. She wasn’t like other girls; she was diagnosing them. But just because she knew what she was doing doesn’t mean she didn’t want to lose herself in what Berlant called “the drive to become unhistorical, to become general through repetition into convention,” to be the perfect epitome of the stacked 18-year-old blonde on Sunset Boulevard (but also the perfect epitome of a writer), to be the Eve Babitz in every young man’s life and also be Eve Babitz. Plenty of L.A. women have inspired songs, but only one was so singularly generic as to inspire the Doors’ “L.A. Woman.” (Her novel *L.A. Woman* is about a Jim Morrison groupie, Sophie, who is just another Eve.)

Berlant, who also died last year, once said their mother “died of femininity”: of waistline-friendly cigarettes, of stilettos, of backbreaking armfuls of designer clothing she hauled as a shopgirl for other women to try on. Driving home through Pasadena in 1997 Babitz lit a cigar (“a Demi Moore type of thing”), dropped the match into her lap, and set her gauzy skirt on fire; a tight-fitting wraparound, it proved impossible to remove and fused to her skin, which mostly fell off. She survived, but she stopped partying and publishing. It reminds me

of how Medea, the sorceress of ancient myth spurned by her husband, sends his beautiful new bride a beautiful golden dress that’s poisoned; the other woman puts it on and dies, collapsed in a puddle of her melted skin. It also reminds me of a poem called “Love” by Lola Haskins, born the same year as Babitz: “She tries it on, like a dress. / She decides it doesn’t fit, / and starts to take it off. / Her skin comes, too.” There’s more than one way to die of femininity, but often we’re invited to watch a version of this same scene: the eternally ephemeral feminine, at it again. “Here’s what you would have witnessed,” begins Babitz’s 2019 essay, her first publication after the accident, recounting the experience and her months-long recovery. “A ’68 VW Bug comes to a stop, a woman flies out, skirt aflame.” A few sentences later: “That woman was me.” It’s as if she’s watching with us, indulging for a moment the idea that this woman could be any woman. It’s not; it’s Eve and no one else. Yet this Eve was herself an iteration. This wasn’t the first time she embarrassed herself naked in Pasadena, she reminds us: she had posed nude across the chessboard from Duchamp at the Pasadena Art Museum for that famous photo, that icon, that cliché.

THE NORTHERNMOST EDGE

Boom and ruin side by side in the town of Mojave

ROSENCRANS BALDWIN

Too many people are dying in the desert. Too many people are remembering their dead. Some combination of the two, perhaps other factors, recently led to complaints in *The Loop*, a newspaper serving the desert communities around Mojave, California, for publishing too many obituaries.

The paper's obituary section is called "Celebrations of Life." I read it over breakfast outside a deli. Maybe it had celebrated too much to some people's liking. The editors reported the complaints in the January 22 edition and responded in an unsigned editorial titled, a little defensively, "We Celebrate Because We Care." "In recent months, we've heard from a few readers that there have been

too many Celebration of Life articles in the paper lately. As the owner of *The Loop* newspaper Claudia Baker recently said, ‘Every life is unique and special. Each story deserves to be told.’”

Why readers had complained was left open to speculation. Perhaps the number of obituaries published during a global pandemic had gotten depressing. Maybe some readers didn’t like obituaries, or how these ones were done — they might have made a person envious, not for the deaths but the lists of accolades and ranks accomplished, countries visited, so many loved ones left behind when perhaps the reader wasn’t loved by many people, or even one.

Deserts are often associated with death. Barren, godforsaken, even evil. Places where every story doesn’t deserve to be told. In the same edition, there was only one obituary: a young Army veteran named Michael, dead at 24. “Michael started working in the wind industry in 2017 and was erecting windmills in Texas in 2021.” A picture showed him wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt and sunglasses, smiling at the camera. Not much else was offered. The obituary was mainly about the family’s belief in God, their faith that they’d be reunited with Michael in heaven someday, and how to contribute to a GoFundMe account to help pay for the funeral. About Michael, I learned almost nothing at all.

✘

Sometimes it’s easier to grab a hold of a thing by its edges. Los Angeles is like that. I find it elusive, limitless, full of landforms and odd forms of life, but

also desolation, isolation, a sense of void. As if as soon as you look at it directly, it shifts. Los Angeles never ends, a friend once told me, you just remember it less and less.

But if there are limits, for me the town of Mojave marks the northernmost edge. About a hundred miles north of Dodger Stadium, there’s an undertone, a sense that the vagueness of L.A., of Southern California generally, is almost completely elsewhere — but not quite. And the border there, the event horizon, is guarded by a dozen headless mannequins positioned on the side of the road.

In seven years of passing through Mojave, on drives from Los Angeles to the Eastern Sierra, the mannequins have always been there. They’re the property of a shop called Mojave Apparel. They stand by the road, wearing whatever the store deems trendy that season. I shouldn’t say they stand next to the highway so much as pose, heels slightly raised, like California’s most uninterested hitchhikers or the fashion world’s most rugged models. Day after day, season after season, arrayed like so many influencers with their fillers and injections, here in Platonic form — fully plastic — eternally facing the light.

The drive to Mojave is similar to any ride from L.A. to somewhere else. Mountains in the distance, the occasional white or pink mansion atop a hill. Gradually the way north becomes less green and more dusty. The southern portion of California State Route 14 (“the Antelope Valley Freeway”) connects the city of Los Angeles with communities like Lancaster and Rosamond. A McDonald’s branch in Acton, halfway

to Mojave, is designed in the Western mold, with a water tower on the roof and a sculpture of mustangs in the drive-through. Pulling into Palmdale, just south of Mojave, the highway actually cuts through the rock to reveal the San Andreas Fault. It's one of the few spots in California where our most famous earthquake line becomes visible: a wall, almost 100 feet tall, showing millions of years of folds and creases, layers of rock bowed and pressed, there to be seen from your car.

Founded in 1876 as a construction camp for the Southern Pacific Railroad, Mojave became a boom town during late 19th-century mining fever, then headquarters for the City of Los Angeles during construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. There is less booming today. Around Mojave the SR-14 becomes the Aerospace Highway; NASA's Space Shuttle once landed at Edwards Air Force Base nearby, and Mojave lately is a site of space industry, with the Mojave Air & Space Port, an industrial center, cordoned off to one side. But it's unclear how much of space life (or space money) trickles into town. Mojave has the look of a desert outpost, a burrow for meth addicts. The town has a single strip of businesses next to the highway, mainly gas stations. East of the business strip is a grid of small houses, and from there the Space Port — basically, a small airport inside an oversized office park for aerospace companies; the sign above Voyager Restaurant, the airport's diner, reads "Aviation Spoken Here" — and from there the sand. I drove nearly every street end-to-end in 15 minutes. Many intersections didn't

have stop signs and don't seem to need them. The total population is around 4,000, for whom I counted at least a dozen churches, and everywhere were large wooden signs placed haphazardly with Bible passages, as if installed overnight — propped against houses, hung on fences, positioned by a curb. "God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble." "In the beginning was the word. The word became flesh and dwelt among us." "I am the bread of life. He that comes to me shall never hunger." The overall impression was desperation. There's a Tesla Supercharger station in town, but no one was charging. A sign that said "LIBRARY" hung above a shuttered shop. One house in the middle of town was burned hollow but still standing. Another, with a large sign that said "Barbara Shop," had a T-shirt in the window for sale that said "BlaKKK Man Winning." A sign beside the door said, "Please knock," but when I knocked, no one was there.

None of this said Los Angeles to me. All of it said Los Angeles to me. Los Angeles exaggerated, Los Angeles elongated, boom and ruin side by side. David Darlington wrote in his book *The Mojave: A Portrait of the Definitive American Desert*, "If L.A. is space, the Mojave is truly outer space."

✕

I like to send postcards when I travel. Postcards have the feeling of obituaries to me, how they reduce something diverse to something simple, but in a nice way: a place promoting its favorite image of itself. *This is who we are and what*

we are. Come visit!

And yet, nowhere in Mojave could I buy a postcard of Mojave. Each gas station told me to try the next one. A woman at the Chevron suggested I try the library. I explained I'd seen the library. No, the other library, she said, the public library at the south end of town. Inside was a small, brightly lit room, a woman and a child reading, and a pair of friendly librarians. They didn't have any postcards — "You could try one of the gas stations," one suggested cheerfully — but they encouraged me to stay and look around. The room was small, with only two aisles of books. The first I noticed was *Confederates in the Attic* by Tony Horwitz. Tony died unexpectedly in 2019 at 60 years old, from cardiac arrest. He'd been a friend and a wonderfully sweet person. I opened the book at random, to a passage about Richmond, Virginia, and its "historic demons." Tony had been there when the city installed a statue of Arthur Ashe, the great Black tennis champion, on Monument Avenue, a street better known for being lined with confederate figures. "Ghosts still haunt us," a councilwoman told him, "and we haven't resolved that."

It made me think that perhaps the newspaper readers around Mojave, the ones who'd complained about too many obituaries, were asking their local paper to do better. Stop reminding them of death, treat their community as something more — as a place filled with diverse, strange expressions of life. The desert tortoise changing burrows. The chuckwalla lizards and creosote scrub and Joshua Trees. All the life that's unique to the desert and far from

godless, in fact, maybe more godlike in its mystery.

On the eastern edge of Mojave is a "plane graveyard," a massive boneyard of inactive 747s. They're stunning to look at up close, all glinting in the sun. I drove home thinking how much Mojave feels exposed to inspection, its mysteries plain for all to see, and this too felt fundamentally like Los Angeles these days: how the city lies open to interest, perhaps having gotten used to feeling overlooked for so long. It might be impossible to buy a postcard of Mojave in Mojave, but there are things to look at, things to buy, things to love. I stopped by Mojave Apparel before I left, the shop with the headless mannequins. That day, the mannequins were dressed in jeans and dresses. I asked the clerk if people ever ask what's the deal. "We get questions about them all the time," she said, laughing. The store had installed them about seven years ago, she thought. They changed the clothes the mannequins wore regularly — it all depended on the season, the style, what was selling. I asked whether they really helped sales. She thought about it for a moment. She said she wasn't sure. "But people do stop by all the time to pose for pictures," she said.



Graciela Iturbide, *Cristina tomando un foto, Whitefence, East LA, USA* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

ANGELENO MIXED STATES

Ever been so happy you wished you could die?

POROCHISTA KHAKPOUR

Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los
Angelese come to me the way I came to
you, my feet over your streets, you pretty
town I loved you so much, you sad flower
in the sand, you pretty town!

— John Fante

❧

We lived in the Villa Carlotta in the
heart of Franklin Village, across
from the Scientology Celebrity Centre.
William Saroyan and Louella Parsons
also lived there, plus some other famous
people whose names I only vaguely knew.
When we lived there, Rickie Lee Jones
lived on the floor below us and down the
hall was one of the less famous actresses

from *Suspiria* — she had a thing for my boyfriend and had a habit of knocking at our door at odd hours, even 2:00 a.m. once. They had all found out my boyfriend was a fashion designer and they wanted in. I felt so lucky to live there. Fifty units, Spanish colonial, it was definitely one of those glamorous and haunted old Hollywood joints that people dream of when they imagine L.A. In that house, we drank bad wine — even though we were supposedly sober — and smoked weed out of apples and he made endless pots of kitchari, the go-to meal from his monk days. On our first date I almost passed out next to his altar for reasons I still don't understand, but he had a spiritual explanation. He was a skater from Nashville who learned to make clothes for deities in the temples of Vrindavan — the only real job he'd had at that point — and his parents probably paid his rent in L.A. He smoked endless cigarettes and used to cry playing "The Girl from the North Country." It was the only time I slept on a California King. I was a shopgirl on Rodeo Drive and he would visit me and we used to prank call the racist manager at the local Pinkberry and close the shop early if we could make sure the shopgirls at Etro wouldn't snitch on us. Finally, when L.A. grew too much for me, as it always did, he followed me to New York, though sometimes I think if we had just stayed at the Villa Carlotta we probably would have been together today. It was a good thing we left.

I was from L.A. A Valley Girl, but not that valley. The other Valley, the San Gabriel one. The Valley girls here were East Asian and Chicana maybe and even though they didn't exactly sound like those Valley Girls, I can always hear it when someone is from my Valley. Still vocal-fried but unpretentious, hesitant, sweet, somehow confessional-sounding even if just talking to a bank teller — sometimes if my dreams aren't in Persian, they are in this register.

When we came to America in the mid-'80s, the first celebrity I learned about was the Night Stalker. We lived in the San Gabriel Valley — Alhambra, Monterey Park, and later Pasadena, to be specific — and all around us he was murdering people in their homes. I felt guilty about how handsome I found him and when they said he had killed someone while playing AC/DC, the devil's music, I felt doubly guilty checking out the music and loving it. New to America, the Marlboro Man was my first crush, but in some twisted way, the Night Stalker was second. When they caught him, I was so relieved, because by then I had decided that I was one of those girls serial killers seek out. What could be more L.A. than this kind of inverted exceptionalism, I later thought. Haunted kid in a haunted city, maybe I just wanted to be one of them — any of them, just a type you could call an American girl who people actually knew about. At that point, I felt too invisible to imagine anyone preying on us.

All the poor kids in South Pasadena lived in the Raymond Hill district. Immigrants and the POC who were not East Asian, because they also lived in the rich white areas. There were burglaries constantly, the sound of car alarms going off at all hours, police making their rounds at every odd hour. Everyone was wearing the wrong thing in this area — bad shorts and bad T-shirts, knockoff sneakers, budget gear. Everyone had bad haircuts, bad attitudes. All of us walked to and from school — this was an area for kids who had the keys to their house when they were still single digits, who barely knew their parents growing up because they worked so many jobs, who learned how to babysit when they were still babies as the siblings came in. This was the kind of area you wanted so badly to leave one day. It bred aspiration that way while the rest of South Pasadena was a wonderland everyone was a forever-citizen of; they all came back, but not the Raymond Hill kids, if we could help it. We were scared of the few white people who were our neighbors; anyone who was white who lived there had definitely done something extremely wrong in life. I made out with boys in their cars, made sure they parked uphill so my parents couldn't somehow spy us from their bedroom window, worrying about why I was late. When it came time to leave, I went as far as possible, 3,000 miles away, and when I came back to visit, the greatest compliment I received was New York had really changed me.

In 1990, Los Angeles's metro rail system began operating, though I never met anyone who took it until about a decade later. Even then, it was mostly out of curiosity. I started taking the Gold Line, one branch of the L.A. metro that ran out of Mission Street in South Pasadena all the way downtown. I learned to drive at 16 — a stick shift, because that's all my parents had, as they cost less — but my confidence was low, so I had us drive to Fontana where it was rumored that they passed everyone on the driver's license test. I passed too, but my confidence on the road was always a problem. The minute I learned what Xanax was, I took crumbs of it on the road until someone told me it could actually be debilitating for a driver and then I decided maybe driving just wasn't for me. I had friends and partners pick me up and drop me off, but most of the time I just went as far as walking took me. I tried to tell people it was because of all that New York time. But when the Gold Line was established with a stop on our town, I started taking it at all hours. Sometimes I was one of three people in a car. In Union Station, everything felt sad and desolate, like people were there because they couldn't be elsewhere. That feeling of not wanting to be there I knew well. I used to worry about earthquakes on those subway rides, especially when the train ran underground. The Northridge Quake had struck on my 16th birthday and was the first of a long line of disasters of my life, if you didn't count war and revolution.

There was only one summer that I loved L.A. I was 19. I was dating an ex-MTV VJ exactly twice my age, who I had met interning at RayGun Publishing. I wasn't sure about him, but he had given me a ride home — well, to his home — from their Santa Monica offices that turned into strip Scrabble and sleeping over and being told I was number 601. I also worked at Urban Outfitters that summer, my first of two summers there, and I was crushing on a co-worker, the first butch girl who really talked to me. We'd go to Canter's when our shift was up at 2:00 a.m. and I'd have macaroni and cheese and a vanilla milkshake, and she'd listen to me complain about the MTV VJ. Later, when I wrote her a note confessing my feelings, she was good about it but probably was smart to stay away. There were several male editors at RayGun who'd been fired from *SPIN* for sexual harassment, and they didn't seem to have learned anything. But there was a power in being 19 and having so many eyes — especially their eyes — on me. I felt dangerous. I'd wear long, tight white club dresses and black platform sneakers with silver glitter face makeup — the kind of thing that would be a hit at a rave, but I felt fine wearing it to work. I made sure you could see through everything. What's the worst that could happen? People thinking badly of me, people wanting me? It was 1997 and everything seemed mostly okay. One night my friend from high school and I went to a bar/club in L.A. called Louis XIV and an older French man took us to a private room where there were platters of coke. I had tried some at Sarah Lawrence, so it was

with confidence that I took the rolled up bill. Before the end of the night, we were with him and his friend in a dingy motel room — dingy but historic — the Saharan Motor Hotel on Sunset which I'd always driven by and wondered about. He played music videos on a dying TV, rewinding Enrique Iglesias over and over, and eventually he began groping me. We managed to leave and laugh about it for days, zero trauma somehow, just another night where we'd skim danger but be fine. That summer, I thought I would have no future but I didn't care because I was happy to be in that moment, the one time summer in L.A. felt good to me. *Ever been so happy you wished you could die?* I asked the VJ one day after he fucked me behind the Hollywood sign. He was almost my age now, and didn't look at me when he said, *Never.*

✕

The worst summer might have been just before when I became a shopgirl on Rodeo Drive, after a massive mental breakdown. I had spent a few seasons addicted to pills of all kinds, but mainly sleep meds and hypnotic sedatives, and I had three psychiatrists who I rotated but who had no knowledge of each other. I had no idea what was wrong with me exactly, but my anxiety and depression had started becoming constant suicidal ideation and I was responding to nothing. My mother got the idea that a shit job would help me, just a regular old 9-to-5 I wouldn't care about, something that didn't involve writing or my brain or my heart. I didn't feel like I had



Graciela Iturbide, *Rosario y su bebe, White Fence LA* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

a brain or heart at all, I wanted to argue. So an old college friend mentioned his rich mom had a store on Rodeo Drive and they needed a shopgirl and I offered myself, mentioning that I had worked retail many times since I was 17. I knew nothing about Rodeo Drive culture other than it was a place we'd go when we first came to America, as wide-eyed tourists to see what the thriving Iranians were up to. One time, we had spotted Ed McMahon on that street; I boasted to kids at school about it, but no one knew he who was except our teacher. For a couple seasons that Rodeo boutique was my life, full of luxury bags that were made of mostly endangered exotic animals. I hated Beverly Hills; Faulkner calling L.A. "the plastic asshole of the world" was always on my mind out there. The boutique felt nauseating but it became a home for me. The other shopgirls would come and go and I would do my best to keep employed, as for some reason it *did* seem to keep my mind off my woes. One bag cost more than I'd make in a year. Sometimes I got so nervous ringing them up that I would tell the customers to come back next week when they would be on sale. They would thank me profusely but never come back and I never had to ring up a five-figure purchase, thankfully. At my lunch break, I'd get an extra-large Jamba Juice or a bang trim at Vidal Sassoon or wander by the sales racks of the few generic lower-end stores. I'd pretend that one day some rich person would come and whisk me and my pills away and everything would be okay. We'd live in a mansion in Malibu and I would know real happiness, the kind that was so hard

to find in L.A. But all I got were other disappointed Iranians who immediately knew I was one of them, who wanted to know what went wrong to get me to that point. *Everything*, I wanted to tell them. *Show me something that went right.*

✕

It feels like an L.A. kid cliché to talk lovingly of the beach, but I always loved the beach. In my younger years, it had an irony, like I was a beach goth or something, in my all black and jeans, hiding in a book under shade. I wanted to hate it, but I couldn't. I would have these entire seasons of being sick with a chronic illness that it took ages to figure out, and the only place that made me feel okay was the beach. My mom and I would leave our native smoggy East Side and drive up to Zuma past Malibu and we'd sit there silently. So much silence in L.A. *The loneliest and most brutal of American cities*, Kerouac called this city. My mom would take photos of us, and I would beg her not to post them or show anyone. Sometimes I would cry until she promised me things would get better, that just like I'd grow out of certain things I'd grow into happiness, and sometimes I would believe her.

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At some point, in my 30s, I became one of those adults who got into Disneyland. I had always loved it as a kid but the idea of going there, heavily stoned and maybe even drunk on top of it, as a grown-ass person, had never occurred to me. Then it somehow did and it became a

ritual for my friends and I. I was always the ringleader. And there was such a joy on going over the same old rides, plus the ones I was always too scared to go on as a kid — the mountains, mainly. Disneyland seemed so outdated, so sad and pathetic, so expensive and unreasonable, so trying with all its long lines and crying children — and yet I loved it. Maybe it was an immigrant thing, but when I'd be there I'd genuinely feel like everything was okay. And it became a test of boyfriends, not unlike Death Valley which I also loved returning to time and time again, to see if they could stand me and some of my worst whims. *This was the first time it really hit me you are from California*, one said to me after a good 12 hours there.

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Editors always want to commission pieces about L.A. from me. I always swear this will be the last one and there is always one more. At this point, I have lived in New York longer than I have Los Angeles, but Los Angeles is always home. During the pandemic, so many I know fled New York and moved to L.A. but just a year into it, almost all of them moved back. Who could say for sure, but it seemed like the spikes would hit New York first and just as everyone was convinced the situation would become hopeless the numbers would even out or even drop and then the other coast, especially L.A., they would spike even more hopelessly; for a certain class of people, maybe “coastal elites” indeed, this geographic demographic seesaw made up the core of their pandemic

struggle, as if you could externalize this virus into some like a regional migration madness. I'm typing this from my first visit back to Los Angeles in two and a half years. It's the perfect temperature — 70 degrees — perfect light, even the air is better than usual. Outside my window there is bougainvillea and hummingbirds, the sound of one neighbor singing a song in Spanish and another group of neighbor's kids laughing in Mandarin. I'll be leaving in a few weeks and I'll probably be relieved to leave as the honeymoon will probably pass just before then, and I'll begin hungering for the constant stimulation, the dirt and grit, the intellect and attitude of that other coast. Something will happen and L.A. will remind me, you're not really from here. *But I was raised here*, I'll argue, *what more could qualify me as from here?* But I'll know what that means. *It is redundant to die in Los Angeles*, goes the famous Capote quote, and it's possible that, even now, this sad reality is the only reason that I love the place. L.A. was the first place to teach me that sometimes, sadly, love is like that, too — as heavy and dull and bleak and indifferent and sprawling as it is, you might barely feel it but it's there, it has you.

ON BOBA

Gelatinousness in the bones

KYLA WAZANA TOMPKINS

My first encounter with boba was not my first encounter with the gelatinous food objects that have come to occupy my imagination for so many years since. But because it took place my very first week in the United States in 1998, boba drinks, which are actually Taiwanese, have come to be associated for me almost entirely with California.

Gelatinousness was in my bones long before I moved from Toronto to California, a state in which crispness is a sanctified culinary value. By contrast, I grew up with collagen-rich food that often included ingredients like cow feet and tongue and other usually discarded bones and body parts. I met boba that first week in the US — still reeling from the shock of moving from East Coast to West Coast; of encountering a culture

so car-centered you couldn't even walk across a road to get groceries; of suddenly walking through the TV screen called the 49th parallel and finding myself in a *Truman Show*-esque landscape of US flags on every corner — when my assigned grad housing roommate, a fellow international student from Taiwan named Wen-pei (“call me Wendy”), got a friend of hers to drive us to a local boba shop so that I could try something she associated with home.

I remember the drive to get there through the suburban eternal of small-town California; I remember the white and blue and pink of the store; I remember feeling relief at finding myself in a store full of not-white people. I distinctly recall the tannic pucker of black tea syrup on the tongue, how concentrated black tea makes your taste buds feel concave and how the sweetness and milk bring them back. And I remember the chewy spheres and how I took to them immediately.

I guess there are people who don't like boba or tapioca or any food that resists the tooth. I guess there are people who don't want to eat cow's foot. I am not one of those people. Boba for me, then and now, tastes like a kind welcome from a new friend to a strange country, even when that new friend is a stranger, too.

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If I were to name my country now, almost a quarter-century of emigration later, it would still not be the United States; but it would definitely be Los Angeles. I have come to love L.A. with

the fullest of hearts. My Los Angeles is, like everyone else's, severely circumscribed by My Commute, the topic of constant conversation here. This is another way of saying that my L.A. is circumscribed by how the limits of time have shaped how far I can drive on a given day and still attend to the basics of getting things done: working; being with my son; writing; domestic labor. And thus, my L.A. is not the cinematic L.A. of the West Side and Beverly Hills. It is not even the consciously unglamorous new money of Downtown L.A. with its lofts and weekend scene, nor is it the studiously louche energy of the Silver Lake creative class with their elaborate artisanal take on everything that should only cost \$3.

Largely, my L.A. is everything to the north and south of the 210 artery that runs between the Inland Empire, where I work, and Altadena, where I live. All along my commute, lying to the south of me in the huge space of land between the east-west rush of the unlovely 10 freeway and the brown and frowning imposition of the San Gabriel Mountains that lie on the north side of the 210, is the great gift that is the multiethnic and transnational checkerboard of neighborhoods called the San Gabriel Valley. Much has been spoken and written by people who think about eating a lot, including David Chang and the late Jonathan Gold, both of whom recognized the SGV (“the Ess-Gee-Vee”) as the center of the widest range of and the very best multiethnic Asian restaurants in the United States. Part of what defines the SGV is that you take freeways to get there but the freeways

don't really take you there; instead, you take an off-ramp and then drive actual streets to get to actually anywhere, a long romp through a lot of space to get to a singular place. This, I think, keeps the SGV less shiny than other parts of L.A. but more human and more complex: you have to either work to get there or you have to be from there to enjoy finding yourself there.

Another way to say this is that the best parts of L.A. are those areas where other immigrants do their living: the arid and dried out streets with not enough trees on them; the parched stucco of the ordinary bungalow; nearly identical strip malls that seem to repeat themselves block after block after block until you've lived here for at least half a decade and your vision sharpens to the differences between them. Also the not-choice real estate that you find along highway frontage lanes in which the greatest enemy of your sleep isn't the aquatic swoosh of freeway sounds but the hideous roar of police helicopters chasing down cars for reasons you never can find out.

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Boba drinks were born in Taipei, either at the Chun Shui Tang Teahouse in Taichung or at the Hanlin Tea Room, both of them in Taiwan. Since the 1990s, boba, a tiny bubble of refined and boiled cassava paste that sits at the bottom of a sweet and fairly complex drink, has become one of the most globally recognized food and drink commodities of Asian origin. Its stores are gathering places for youth of all demographics,

but particularly, the studies tell us, of Asian teens from multiple transnational diasporas.

Cassava has a long and interesting history as a global commodity that, like most modern commodities, found its first foothold in the circulations of modern capital that emerged out of the Western colonial project. Cassava, food historians tell us, is indigenous to Brazil but was exported around the world, first to feed enslaved Africans as they were transported to the ships that stole their lives to the Americas.

Food anthropologist Kaori O'Connor tells us that what we know as tapioca (originally a Tupi food), boba, or cassava was originally known as *manioc*. Poisonous in its root form, in order to be eaten manioc requires days of soaking and fermentation to extract the possibly lethal amounts of hydrocyanic acid from its fibers. After a long soak, manioc is then vigorously pounded or grated to produce the meal and then flour now known in Portuguese as *farinha*. In pre-colonial times, what the West would now recognize as tapioca was then made from the liquid left behind when *farinha* was extracted. Between the cultivation and consumption of manioc, including drinking fermented tapioca drinks and hunting animals, the pre-invasion Tupi diet was well organized to supply enough carbohydrates and meat for survival.

Deracinated from Tupi culture and exported abroad as the European invasion and markets expanded, cassava became a central provision provided by enslavers to enslaved peoples: though labor intensive to produce, it

also provided carbohydrate calories to fuel cruel amounts of labor and energy extraction and was flavorless enough to adapt to multiple cuisines and locations. Cassava was transported to inland Africa to feed enslaved peoples as they were stolen and put on forced march to the vessels that would sever them from their worlds. It was taken to the sugar colonies to provide plantation and plot provisions. Cassava was, in other words, one of the most important sources of caloric fuel for the colonial world.

❧

Processed cassava is smooth, chewy, and soothing. Its neutral flavor allows it to live peacefully alongside almost any flavor continuum from spicy to herba-ceous; its gelatinous quality makes it a splendid preservative. Mixed with milk, it was used to create English puddings that kept dairy from spoiling; in Jamaica enslaved people reappropriated cassava to invent the divine and irreproachable coconut-milk-soaked fry-bread called bammie.

Cassava finally arrived in Taipei directly from Brazil in the hands of the Portuguese, either in the 17th or 18th centuries, but it wasn't until the 1990s that boba left Taiwan to become a global drink phenomenon. But is boba necessarily a drink? If you read boba cookbooks or watch videos about how to make boba, you come to understand that it is really just another kind of noodle, albeit one with a particularly resistant visco-elastic bounce in the mouth.

Much has been written about “Q,” the elusive mouthfeel so favored

in Taiwanese cuisine, and a lot of that writing circles in wonderment around the idea that a particular mouthfeel could belong to a particular place. We are used to thinking about flavor profiles geographically: it is taken for granted for instance that butter, white wine, and lemon are French, that turmeric, cumin, and curry leaf might signify a cuisine touched by the Indian Ocean; that ginger, garlic, scallion, and soy generally accompany a number of East Asian cuisines across borders.

But those are flavors: mouthfeel is something else altogether. How does a desire for a particular experience along and against and between the roof of your mouth and the length of your tongue emerge as a cultural phenomenon? I once spent a year in Boston and came away with the sense that, except for steamers and lobster and the impeccable genius that is chowder, basically everything I was eating was unnecessarily fried or topped with mayonnaise; two different kinds of too oily. Growing up Moroccan, I came to believe that we, as a culture, like our food wet and even sticky. Someone who had only eaten couscous in a restaurant wouldn't know that at home, couscous comes with a small pitcher or bowl of broth to keep it from getting dry. Even our salads are cooked.

What is taste? Over 25 years ago, I attended a food history conference in Fez where I heard the chef, restaurant owner, and food scholar Fatéma Hal talk about how Moroccans in general do not eat chocolate, and that it simply isn't a commodity with a great deal of pull in the country. That insight stunned



Graciela Iturbide, *Cholos, White Fence Gang, East Los Angeles* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

me: it had never occurred to me that one might belong to a food desire, as one belongs to a nationality.

There is such a thing, then, of a geography of the palate, if we define a palate as a set of flavors, aromas, textures, sounds, and memories agreed to be desirable or disgusting. A shared palate develops out of necessity, by force, because of ecologies, as a result of invasion and theft or because communities have been colonized or invaded. It's not always a bucolic or pretty history, and a short trip through the muck and mess of the past delivers you directly away from your wishes for anything like an "authentic experience." But palates are always *particular*. And they feel particular: they feel like they belong to the us-ness of us, the me-ness of me, the here-ness of wherever you came from.

Palates live in the mouth, but they can also travel. Palates change.

✦

If cassava is a global commodity that illuminates Asian and hemispheric American commodity chains and leisure cultures in the form of the boba tea joint, linking dispersed colonial history and late-modern national projects to each other, so too do the coffee, tea, and sugar ingredients that make up the drinks. These energy sources shape the sensory everyday into which our bodies are plugged and fuel the jagged experience of working under capital.

Boba drinks, especially when made with tea or coffee, feed the body's particular caffeine/sugar/carbohydrate addictions that plug us into work and

study schedules, but its pleasures are leisurely, too. Boba can roll out in phases, and in the more artisanal of boba drinks there is no mouthful that has not been designed with mouthfeel in mind, every layer an event: the chewiness of the balls at the bottom of the drink; the crystalline coolness of an ube slush, the meringue density of cream cheese topping. Are there any boba drinkers that mix the layers together? I've never seen that and it seems almost taboo: boba drinks seem to assume a palate that wants to be entertained, every layer a different texture game. Boba, in short, is fun: a ball pit at the bottom of cup that is eminently photographable, improved by any Instagram filter, an invitation to restage childhood games in your mouth.

The resistant gelatinousness of boba, the elusive "Q" texture, has variously been described as "springy and chewy" or, as one writer translated from the words *tan ya* — "rebound teeth." Gelatins are solid liquids, substances that are able to bind water, thickening and holding their shape, and, interestingly, often suspending aroma and taste for a slow release such that the experience of flavor unrolls slowly in the mouth and nose. The best gelatins — which is to say the smoothest and the clearest gels — promise an evanescent physics of recoil and release: scientific food at its best, where it meets the quotidian productions of street and small shop food production, transcribed into a multisensory event.

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WHAT IS L.A. ART?

PERWANA NAZIF

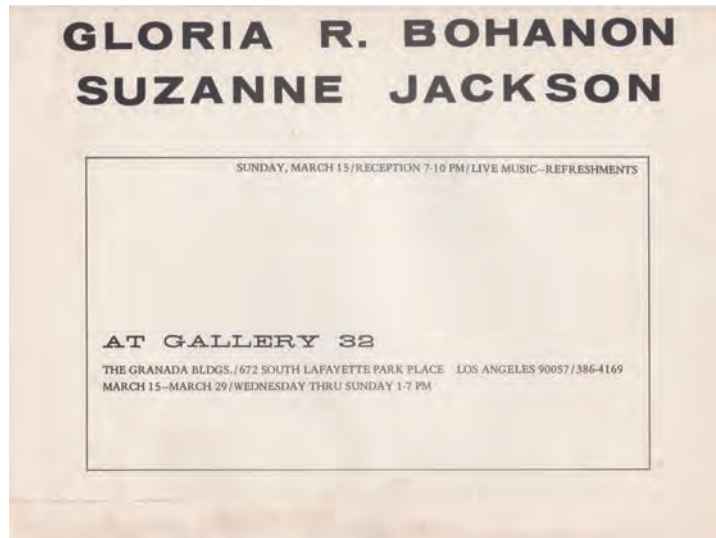
To articulate an L.A. art ethos is counter to the ephemeral, decentered nature of the city itself, its fiction-making and philosophizing. The specificity of L.A. art involves a sprawl: from the pedagogical experimentations of CalArts's heyday, to car-level murals blanketing the city, to the perceived lack of effective communal infrastructure that leads to art shows in the backyards of bungalows, closets, under freeway passes, dining rooms, alleys, basketball courts, garage entryways, neighborhood parks, old Western movie sets, motel rooms, hotel rooms, living rooms, warehouses. The list of art spaces in L.A. is exhaustive and, increasingly so, a "who owns" as opposed to "who's who" in its renegotiations (and reproductions) of public-private taxonomies. Still, the spontaneity circumvented

by the lack of heavy pedestrian traffic in Los Angeles is made up for by perpetual innovation. The through-line in Los Angeles art culture — from the capitalized, to the nostalgic, to the necrophiliac, to the golden-bathed, guava-splattered punctum in the sea of all that — is improvisation.

The stillness in L.A., its relentlessly sunny monotony, spawns anonymity. Strip malls, carpeted bars, the intimacy in moving vehicles' windows, echo through the city's built and affective infrastructures. If ever there were some way to articulate an L.A. ethos, the artists in the following portfolio certainly express it: they articulate the sentiment of plastic possibility. The range of works presented here, heterogeneous in medium, content, form, and process, refract the fixed and fixing parameters of L.A. and its art.



Suzanne Jackson at Gallery 32, Los Angeles during Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor's solo exhibition, 1969. Courtesy Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor.



Suzanne Jackson

Gallery 32

Suzanne Jackson opened Gallery 32 in unit 32 of the Granada Buildings at 672 North Lafayette Park Place in 1969. With a name that referenced the numbering of Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291, which was a meeting and educational exhibition space for avant-garde ideas, Gallery 32 was among few exhibition spaces that actively supported Los Angeles's emerging Black artists at the time — although not exclusively. A space indicative of its time, when live-work-exhibition spaces were not unusual and affordable in Los Angeles, Jackson's Gallery 32 set a precedent for what an official gallery could do in its openness to less formalized delineations, which allowed it to occupy myriad forms simultaneously and genuinely. Its pliancy generated an active and potent public.

Gallery 32 was a site of fecund experimentation, welcoming readings, fundraisers for organizations such as the Black Arts

Council, Watts Towers Art Center, and the Black Panther Party, and performances, dinners, and discussions with Jackson's community of artists, including Senga Nengudi, David Hammons, and John Outterbridge. Encompassing the social, political, the spiritual, and questions of Black aesthetic(s) of that particular moment, debates at Gallery 32 were not exclusive to after-dinner talk. A treasure of archival ephemera — announcements, images, mailings, and posters — renders palpable the gallery's meditations on the community it enacted.

Its traces linger, like the layers of salvaged material found in Jackson's most recent suspended acrylic works, which hybridize painting and sculpture, and often incorporate found organic matter. Jackson's work reminds us of that very real possibility of decomposing into the earth, not unlike how the closure of Gallery 32 in 1970 gave



Above and left: Original Gallery 32 exhibition announcement, 1970.
Private collection, Los Angeles. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects, New York

way to something other than the “end” — something remained there decomposed, deconstructed, fertilizing the future in both spiritual and earthly ways. Los Angeles art gallery O-Town House, located in the same Granada Buildings, paid homage to Gallery 32 in Jackson’s solo exhibition there in 2019, while Jackson’s New York gallery, Ortuzar Projects, last summer revisited the landmark Gallery 32 exhibition Sapphire Show, spearheaded by Betye Saar in 1970. The original show, which included Jackson along with Gloria Bohanon, Betye Saar, Senga Nengudi (then known as Sue Irons), Yvonne Cole Meo, and Eileen Nelson (then Eileen Abdulrashid), was the first survey of African American women artists in Los Angeles. These contemporary iterations affirm not only the historical precedent, but also, and equally importantly, the regenerative power in Jackson’s curatorial and artistic practice.

To that point, Gallery 32 was not a “blank canvas” white-walled gallery space that would pontifically employ the radical in name only — its social and political engagements were active and material. Such was the reality of the racial violence that the gallery’s association with fine art did not protect it: Jackson and the artists she worked with were often targeted by police, and the FBI regularly visited the gallery after a three-day exhibition of Emory Douglas’s work hosted by the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party. The ever-present threat of state violence in response to (and in anticipation of) art surfaces in a very different politics of experimentation, and of the identification of the revolutionary from the conventionally touted experimental art scene in Los Angeles. The potency of Jackson’s practice preceded and exceeded the vitality of the aesthetic forms she presented.

Not that Gallery 32's artists and audiences were always exclusively or explicitly politically active. The gallery was located at the nexus of several neighborhoods in Los Angeles, many of which were not immediately connected to fine art per se, and Jackson's background in dance and theater drew diverse crowds of visitors to the often-packed opening nights. She reached further-flung patrons by mailing gallery announcements to names and addresses she found in local newspapers' celebrity columns.

This ethos of pointed inclusivity is reflected in Jackson's own artworks. Her suspended painting *fly away mist* (2021), composed of acrylic, acrylic detritus, produce bag netting, carpet edging, laundry lint, and D-rings, offers a wide spectrum of reds from purple and brown to yellow, separate and mixed. Its wayward rounded form and reds read into the experimentation of its assemblage-like nature. Then, *to be Alone* (2018) drapes over a long cylindrical rod to create a cascading shape. The painting's translucency is increasingly made opaque with color and traces of color as one moves down the work. The overall work, then, forms the image of paint itself, suspended in the process of its making. Each suspended abstraction welcomes a rush of questions: Is it floating? Is it grounded by its suspension? Is it heavy or is it purely buoyant? Is it spiritual and ancestral, or rooted in material, in an earthiness? Is its improvisation limitless or is its freedom born of its knowledge of constraints? The answer being, of course, yes to all simultaneously.

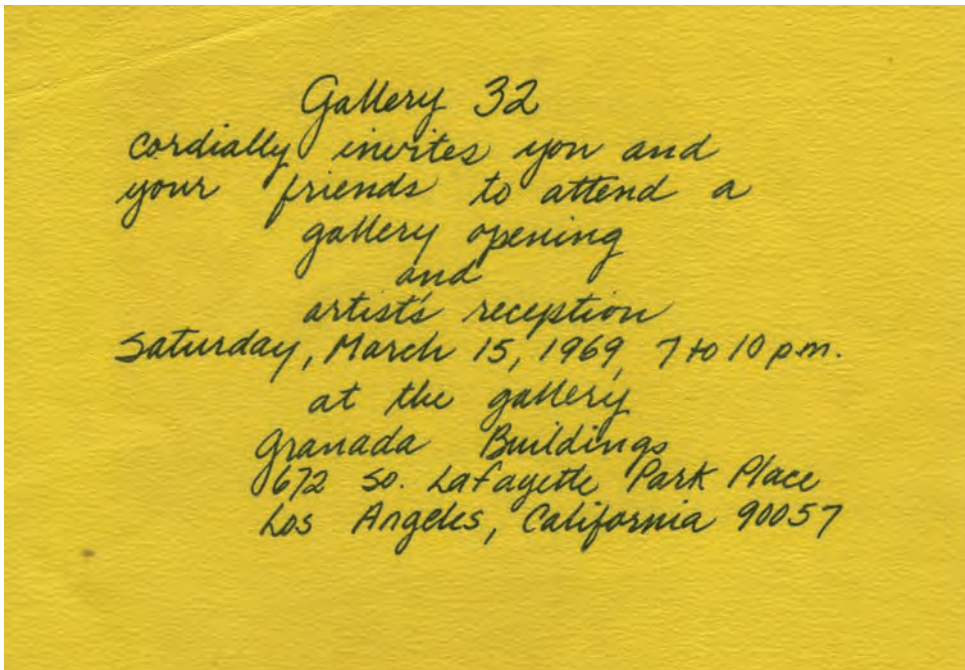
The possibility of change (over time with slight contraction or expansion, outside forces that could sway the work) and the capacity granted to view Jackson's paintings from below, from one side to another, to the edge and beyond, reiterate the ever-perpetuating nature Jackson generously seeded more than 50 years ago at Gallery 32.



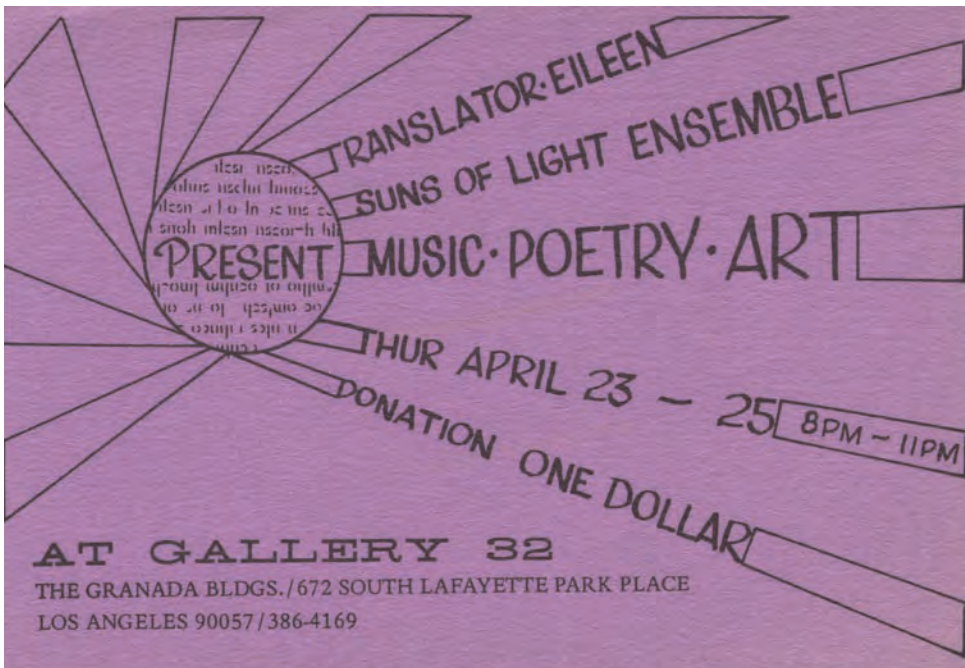
Suzanne Jackson, *Alice playing harp, her veils in the wind*, 2017. Acrylic, layered acrylic detritus, laundry lint, scenic bogus paper, lace, netting and wood, 104 x 76 x 12 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.



Ephemera and photographs from Gallery 32, operating in the Granada Buildings between 1969 and 1970. Photo: Riccardo Banfi. Courtesy of O-Town House.



Original invitation to the opening reception of Gallery 32, Los Angeles, 1969. Collection of Suzanne Jackson, Savannah. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects, New York.



Gallery 32 announcement, 1970. Collection of Suzanne Jackson, Savannah. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects, New York.



Suzanne Jackson, *Then, to be Alone*, 2018. Acrylic, layered acrylic detritus, bag netting, fabric swatches, 59 x 47 x 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

ASCO

ASCO (1972 – 1987) has always existed, or rather, survived, through the perpetuation of its own mythology. Its existence under repression and duress, as Harry Gamboa Jr. describes it, only strengthened its capacity to create, even in the guise of a mirage. The group emerged in the East L.A. of the 1970s, as the violent entrapments of the police state (most explicitly realized as unofficial martial law in response to the 1970 National Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War) produced a kind of militant artistry that brings to mind the Fanonian rupture of possibility under extreme force. Their very existence as antagonists to their repressive conditions made it such that ASCO's art was also, often, crime. They developed an evidentiary practice wherein "evidence" that the "crime" had taken place was embodied in the clothing and props left behind from their guerrilla street performances — the acts and the group themselves were shrouded in mystery beyond the whodunit. Tantalizing photographs left traces of their work, and also opened up further imaginings, like the existence of movies never to be produced (No Movies was a series of film stills for nonexistent films) or longer performances that would not take place. ASCO produced evidence of the speculative.

While they refused to identify as something so easily captured as an "art collective," ASCO's core member group consisted of Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, and Patssi Valdez. Their various works across mediums — street performances, media interventions, conceptual

cinema, performance murals, and mail art — could be best described as punk, absurd, and noirish razzle-dazzle, rife with humor and irony. Without a nameable organizing aesthetic, ASCO functioned more as a collaborative artists' group invested in ephemeral and conceptual form, grounded in their local aesthetics. However elastic, the core group of ASCO artists worked as a unit until the mid-'80s, with most members going on to continue their own individual artistic practices.

The group is perhaps most known for *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972), evidenced in a photograph that shows Valdez posing in front of the museum after the other three members have tagged its wall. Signing the exterior of LACMA was a response to a museum curator's disparaging statement that Chicanos did not make art, but could only engage in graffiti, gang culture, and folk art. The tagging defied and embraced racialized cultural tropes to disrupt their discursive and aesthetic maintenance of an oppressive social order. The proclamation of ASCO's presence, outside and yet as part of the museum (and eventually inside, as LACMA exhibited ASCO's retrospective in 2011), surfaces an ongoing critique of institutional representation, structural racism, and the exclusionary boundaries of the art world. In this case, the museum directly effected the ephemerality so crucial to their work by painting over and erasing the tag. The evidence here was rendered nonexistent — so whose "crime" was it? The specifics of agency and action, of perpetrators and defendants, are obfuscated in intricate webs whose subversive power is compressed and intensified in the flat trace of the photograph.

ASCO's uncontainable artworks continue to invite us to follow a trail of brazen breadcrumbs in ever more elastic and elaborate circles.

NO MOVIE

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions / L.A.C.E.
240 south broadway downtown l.a. 90012 third floor 213/ 620-0104

MAY
2 thru 31
RECEPTION
MAY 1
7-11 pm



Gallery Hours
TUE - SAT
11 am - 6 pm

Gil de Montes · Teddy · Glugio · Patssi · Gamboa · 78

NO MOVIE by Gil de Montes, Teddy Cruz, Patssi Valdez, Gronk (Glugio), Harry Gamboa Jr. LACE invitation, 1978.
Courtesy of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Gores* (Whittier + Axe), 1974, from the Asco era.
©1974, Harry Gamboa Jr. Performers (l-r): Willie Herron III, Humberto Sandoval, Patssi Valdez, Glugio Gronk Nicandro



Harry Gamboa Jr., *A la Mode*, 1976, from the Asco era. ©1976, Harry Gamboa Jr.
Performers (l-r): Glugio Gronk Nicandro, Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa Jr.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Asshole Mural*, 1974, from the Asco era. ©1974, Harry Gamboa Jr.
Performers (l-r): Patssi Valdez, Glugio Gronk Nicandro, Willie Herron III, Harry Gamboa Jr.

ISMANIA

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE
ALPHABET SOUP OF IDEAS
A CONCEPTUAL PERFORMANCE

WRITER **HARRY GAMBOA JR.** / ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **DANIEL J. MARTINEZ**

PERFORMER
GLUGIO GRONK NICANDRO

LIGHTING DESIGN/PROPS
DIANE GAMBOA

AUDIO DESIGN **JUAN GARZA** / GRAPHIC DESIGN **BARBARA CARRASCO**

LACE 1804 INDUSTRIAL, L.A., CA. 213/624-5650
ADMINISTERED IN PART BY A GRANT FROM THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION AND THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

SAT. MARCH 28, 1987 8:30 PM

THROUGH LOS ANGELES CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS (LACE)

TICKETS: \$7.00 GENERAL \$5.00 MEMBERS, STUDENTS

ISMANIA ©1987 HARRY GAMBOA JR.



ISMANIA by Harry Gamboa Jr. (writer), Daniel J. Martinez (artistic director), Glugio Gronk Nicandro (performer), Diane Gamboa (lighting design), Barbara Carrasco (graphic design), Juan Garza (audio design), LACE flyer, 1987. Courtesy of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.

Mario Ayala

The profuse paraphernalia in Mario Ayala's work calls back to the Southern California Chicano zine *Teen Angel Magazine*. The 1980s and '90s underground publication was predominantly submission-based, with much of its art, prose, poetry, and photographs by people who were gang-affiliated or in prison. The philosophies and aesthetics of the zine, from fashion and hand signs to car culture, lettering, and tattooing, are unambiguous signifiers in the Southeast Los Angeles-born artist's airbrush acrylic paintings. Ayala's labor-intensive craft draws from this blue-collar industrial aesthetic and asserts it as artistry. The red-nailed vixen hands and thorned roses piercing Ayala's canvases announce that the romance of *Teen Angel* is not lost.

The seduction of Ayala's works is equally expressed in his balance of the uncanny and hyperreal. There is extreme photorealistic detail given to neutral minutiae, alongside a refusal to abide to laws of reality; the familiar L.A. sight of a rainbow-parasol-topped fruit cart might also reveal a coquettish devil behind its freezer ventilation window. The fine wrinkles on brown-bagged beers and aluminum-foiled burritos in *Alumnus* (2021) are counterbalanced with their floating placements against Ayala's recreation of Diego Rivera's mural *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931) and the artist himself, mutating into a cockroach. His explicit self-inscription through fantastical imagery that references the children's book series *Animorphs* marks the porosity of the borders between the surreal and the real.

The title of *Alumnus* and the inclusion of Rivera's mural, located at Ayala's alma mater, the San Francisco Art Institute, make clear the school's impact on his work. From Rivera's mural to the Mission School of the 1990s and 2000s San Francisco art scene, SFAI's underground positioning was an extension of the area's rich mural and graffiti street culture. This is communicated in Ayala's work through his own rendering of a Los Angeles-localized aesthetic grounded largely in the styles of swap meets and skate subcultures. Ayala's synthesizing brilliance of the ever-effusive city reverberates in the playlists that often accompany his exhibitions—most recently for *Easy To Be Hard with Henry Gunderson*. The ecstatic longing of Ronnie Spector's "Be My Baby" cut to Too Short's relaxed delivery pulse into Ayala's paintings—old-school aesthetics reimagined and improvised, but always with style.

The exhibition catalog for *Easy To Be Hard with Henry Gunderson* was released in the summer of 2021 by Colpa Press and Quinn Arneson. The artist has an upcoming fall 2022 exhibition at Jeffrey Deitch in New York, organized by Los Angeles director Melahn Frierson.



Mario Ayala, *Gangster Soul Harmony*, 2021. Acrylic on Canvas, 62 x 72 inches.



Mario Ayala, *Reunion*, 2021. Acrylic on Canvas, 88 x 68 inches

Hedi El Kholti

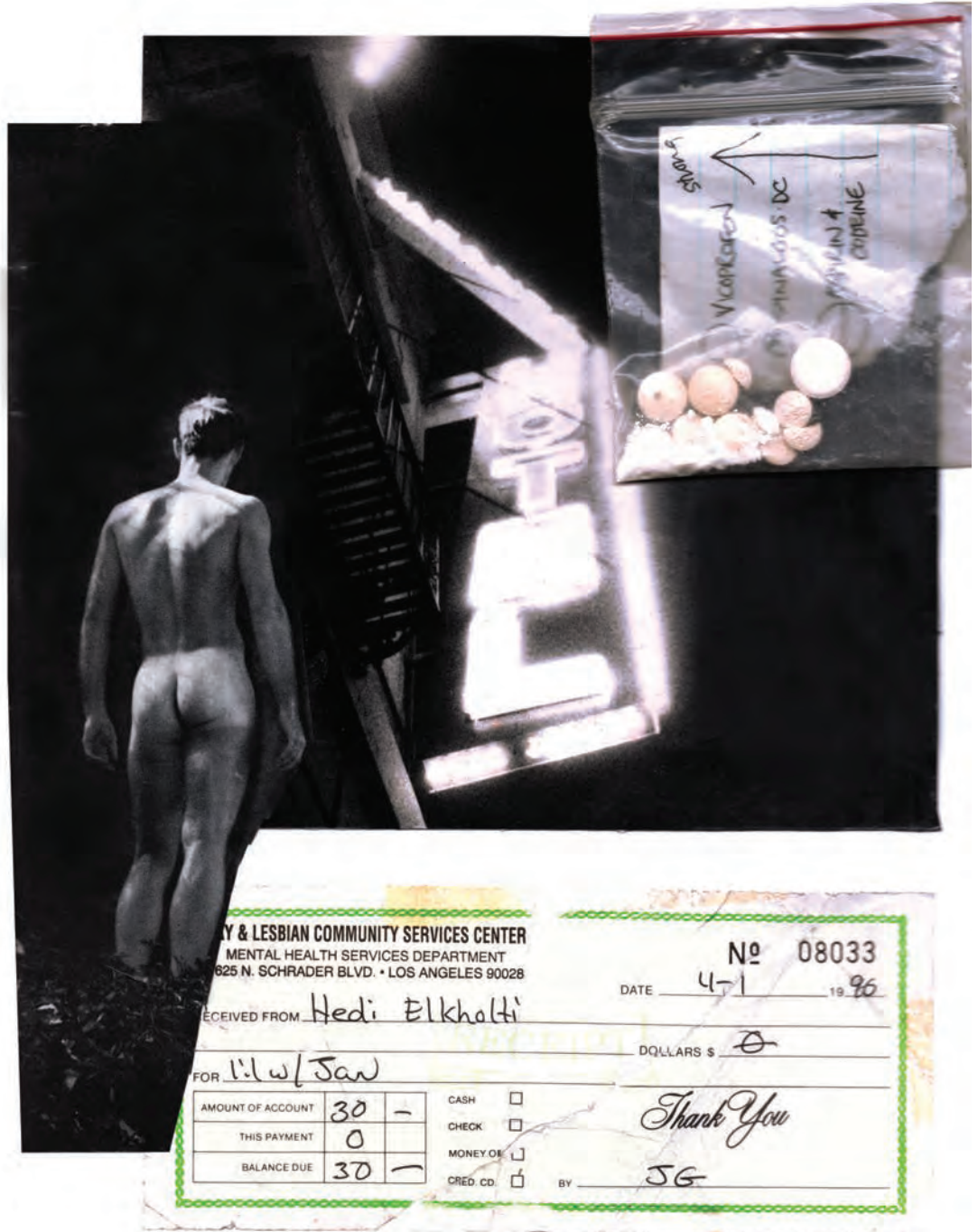
Hedi El Kholti moved to Los Angeles in 1992. The move to L.A. was not much of a surprise, as it was a city that had resonated deeply in his imagination as a kid in Morocco. His collage practice dwells in that same space of reverie. The photographs, lyrics, book covers, newspaper clippings, and, at times, various paraphernalia (receipts, matchbooks, drug baggies) piece together cinematic and literary narratives with media-sensationalized and personal ones. A glamorous delirium ensues. Sex appeal lurks, a melancholic figure.

The red shoes that marked Dorothy's madness. Werner Schroeter's Magdalena as a serpentine Madonna without child. Alain Delon's smolder clouded in a more or *Less Than Zero* narcotic, disaffected fog. To ascribe meaning is to foreclose the affective force of El Kholti's works — they linger insistently in impenetrability. It would be much more accurate to delineate his work as a site productive of unknowable feeling. Penetration, then, only functions in literality: the penetrating cut, its form coherent in the glue that fuses photographic images together.

The rhetoric of the image through a collaging practice — its disfiguration by fusion and aggregation — raises the question of the photographic collapse of the sign and referent. Is what we see what we get? Is the representation of each image the thing-in-itself? Or are representation and actuality never to be mediated: the entirety of the work, as the collaged work, the whole that is forever fraught?

Hedi's collages from the 1990s, with their worn aesthetic, are ambivalent to this postmodern quandary of the collapse of sign and referent. Instead, the formalization of the cut as (visible) material in the artwork performs a suspension between sign and referent. Concepts of the split or re-signification, by way of bringing things together, are no longer mutually exclusive. This can be seen in more recent works as well, as in the spectacle of Ed Buck's freaky grin in one of Hedi's works. The predatory politico's newspaper portrait is set on the cover of Jean Rhys's 1930s tragic novel *Voyage in the Dark* that deals, not unproblematically, with racial, sexual, and national identity. Hedi's more recent collage works can be found in his 2017 artist book, *A Place in the Sun*, published by Hesse Press.

El Kholti's gatherings signal pathology, seduction, fear, sex, magic, ecstasy, and alienation as nearly fungible. They are little deaths, really. Like the omnipresent helicopters chopping air over Los Angeles, there is a simultaneous living and dying at play here, although distinct from that violent cut — an eschatological intimation that to live is to die in L.A.



Hedi El Kholti, *Untitled Page from Collage Book #1 (Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center)*, 1996.

Où sont tous mes amants
 Tous ceux qui m'aimaient tant
 Jadis quand j'étais belle ?
 Adieu les infidèles
 Ils sont je ne sais où
 A d'autres rendez-vous
 Moi mon cœur s'a pas lâché pourtant
 Où sont tous mes amants

Dans la tristesse et la nuit qui revient
 Je reste seule, isolée sans soutien
 Sans ruelle entrave, mais sans amour
 Comme une épave mon cœur est lourd
 Moi qui jadis ai connu le bonheur
 Les soirs de fête et les adorateurs
 Je suis esclave des souvenirs
 Et cela me fait souffrir.

[Refrain]

La nuit s'achève et quand vient le matin
 La rosée pleure avec tous mes chagrins
 Tous ceux que j'aime
 Qui m'ont aimée
 Dans le jour blême
 Sont effacés
 Je vois passer du brouillard sur mes yeux
 Tous ces pans de ce que je vois, ce sont eux
 Luttant quand même, suprême effort
 Je crois les étendre encore.

Am Dm E
 Fm Bm

[Refrain]



Hedi El Kholti, *Untitled Page from Collage-book #6, (Frebel: Où sont tous mes amants), 2011–2022.*

If I could write this essay as a letter to other lovers of the gelatinous, I would extol the pleasures of these drinks as they happen in slow motion time. Some boba drinks contain multiple jellies: boba followed by basil seeds followed by lychee or grass jelly, followed by a fruit drink or a tea. Some bobas at the slushy end of the drink menu are layered with flavors like ube and coconut milk. Driving around the SGV with my son during the pandemic, trying to get away from the hygienic pandemic containment field defined by masks and car windows and windows and doors and fences, we drove to Rosemead to Neighbors Tea House to try the smashed avocado and durian drinks as well as the mung bean drinks, none of which we had with boba but which seemed boba-aligned in their indifference to any cultural line between drink and food.

We tried The Alley's Snow Strawberry Lulu and Brown Sugar Deerioca as well as the exquisite snow velvet muscat black tea, each of them a meditation on the kind of symphonic experience that sweetness can make musical. At the Boba Guys, we tried the perfect candy drink Banana Milk, the smoky Black Sugar Hojicha, and their highly photogenic strawberry matcha latte and strawberry rice milk drinks. We tried the peach tea and the strawberry fruit teas at Dragon Boba in La Cañada, and ogled but did not try the boba donuts. By far some of the best boba we had was the housemade boba at Tea Maru in Arcadia, where we tried the Strawberry Fluffy Matcha, layered atop a berry jam bottom, and the brilliant Okinawa Slush that flips the whole paradigm and

puts their homemade brown sugar boba on the top of the drink.

Boba's pleasing categorical and sensory promiscuity is summed up in the boba shop's ubiquitous wide straw, so completely opposite to the anemic straws of Western fast food. The former are made to not just let a liquid through but actually to let in food-like drink. This confusion of eating categories is perhaps what some people can't take about boba drink culture: if Lévi-Strauss long ago proposed a culinary triangle that elevated the West from the Rest via a differentiation between the primitive Raw and the cultured Cooked, Western food cultures tend to assume the difference between food and beverages, with the exception of the historically virtuous smoothie. Boba drinks are food and drink, or along another line, drinks that are more complex than a quick sip that slides down the throat. Boba tea from a really quality boba shop insists on a complex and interesting sensory experience that is visual as well as flavorful, that choreographs layers of texture that are as casually beautiful as they are sensually complex.

❧

How does one find a resting place in a culture that is not one's own? Is there a way to approach a world of difference without stealing from it? There are many bad racial subjects in food culture, just as there are in the world: the appropriators, the people who lift ingredients and transport them to other foods without understanding or appreciation for local food technologies; the cosmopolitans,

so eager to recite facts and knowledge about food cultures not their own; the thieves who take recipes from their original knowledge holders and reproduce them deracinated and unrecognizable. And in turn there are the “good” racial subjects, who write only about their own lineages and cultures. The immigrants nostalgic for a taste and feel of home, banking on recreating their memories as closely as they can approximate.

One shorthand way to talk about the politics of difference in food has been through bell hooks’s cannily marketable phrase “Eating the Other,” in which usually white consumers devour exotic difference metaphorically and figuratively, while not paying attention to the people whose lives and complexity they commodify. These are the slings and arrows thrown so easily around social media debates on race and difference and eating, and some of them land where they should, and it is all so very tiring. We are in a tiring time.

A more generous and gentle take might be that there are places and histories where people and their desires cross each other — where touch happens, where the sensory congruences that shape each of our innermost senses of having private desires and tastes in fact overlaps and resonates, as history or as a shared present. It is harder work to get there: history is dense and chewy that way.

Neighbor’s Tea House
4213 Rosemead Blvd, Ste. H2
Rosemead, CA 91770

The Alley
301 W Valley Blvd, Unit 102
San Gabriel, CA 91776

Boba Guys
11135 Magnolia Blvd, Unit 170
North Hollywood, CA 91601

Tea Maru
57 Wheeler Ave., Unit A
Arcadia, CA 91006

Further Boba Reading:

O'Connor, Kaori. "Beyond 'Exotic Groceries': Tapioca/Cassava/Manioc, a Hidden Commodity of Empires and Globalisation." In *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities, Local Interactions*, pp. 224–247. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013.

Carney, Judith A. "Subsistence in the Plantationocene: Dooryard gardens, agrobiodiversity, and the subaltern economies of slavery." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 5 (2021): 1075–1099.

Daly, Lewis. "Cassava Spirit and the Seed of History: On Garden Cosmology in Northern Amazonia." In *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 377–395. Routledge, 2021.

deGuzman, Jean-Paul R. "Beyond 'Living La Vida Boba': Social Space and Transnational, Hybrid Asian American Youth Culture." *Amerasia Journal* 32, no. 2 (2006): 89–102.

Wei, Clarissa. "How Boba Became an Integral Part of Asian-American Culture in Los Angeles." *L.A. Weekly*. January 16, 2017. Accessed February 27, 2022.

HEADLINE HEAD

What if there were no more stories to tell?

CHLOE WATLINGTON

Javier Cabral, a perplexingly skinny food writer, has yet to write his autobiographical piece about “what’s the proper word? ... getting rejected.” He describes the year he fell backward into the position of editor in chief for the popular news site *L.A. TACO* — a site known both for its hyper-local investigative journalism and its hyper-local food writing.

Javier started his writing career with free content on Blogspot, writing as the Teenage Glutster: “Food, punk, angst, hormones and a really, really fast metabolism” was the blog’s motto. At the time, *L.A. TACO* was a blog run by Alex Blazedale and Hadley Tomicki that covered the three most essential pieces of an L.A. night: weed, graffiti, and tacos. In this early 2010s period, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* was still just a Tumblr.

These young publications, some cooler than others, were posting with a manic energy that feels noticeably different from today's influencer-saturated World Wide Web. There was a lawlessness (or at least weed was still illegal) to early blog and forum culture. The free content was one antidote to the exuberant spending of the wartime economy between 9/11 and the financial crisis.

Javier's mentor, Jonathan Gold, who grew up in punk himself, was writing as the full-time food critic for the *L.A. Times*. But he just as often wrote for the free newspaper *L.A. Weekly*. Gold's tastes were high and low, and everything in between. He'd gained a following during a year in his 20s when he lived above a butcher shop on Pico Boulevard and decided to eat his way up the street from a downtown restaurant to the chili fries at Tom's No. 5, a burger chain on Manhattan Beach. They called him the "belly of Los Angeles," because if Jonathon Gold said a restaurant was good, you'd go there and eat at it and it would be good. Javier remembers asking a local chef who was written about by Jonathan, "how much do your sales grow after a Gold review?" The answer was typically three to four times more on the week it was published. When one of his most widely read reviews in 2009 gave Javier and his blog a shout out for alerting him to Moles La Tía, the rest of the city knew Javier was good, too. Next thing Teenage Glutster knew, he had nods from *Saveur* and *The New Yorker*.

Fast forward to when Javier dropped out of community college, and got a job briefly as the West Coast editor for *Vice's* food vertical Munchies. *Vice* didn't have

any food writers on the West Coast, nor did they understand the West Coast: "They were just a bunch of New Yorkers who thought they knew what the West Coast was and would get pissy whenever I published headlines with words in Spanish."

In Mariah Carey's version of "Fantasy," she does with Ol' Dirty Bastard, he shouts out to *both* the West Coast and Sacramento. "Sacramento in the house," followed by, "West Coast, are you in the house?" The first time, I noticed this I laughed. What a redundancy. Another Brooklyn native who imagines that to say "West Coast" is to say anything at all. But he was pointing out that there is a particular Sacramento rap sound. Just as there is Sacramento sound, there is Angeleno sound — and wrapped up in both sounds is a Westness, but it needs its particulars to be seen as a whole.

Javier did not want to edit pieces about "the West Coast" from Los Angeles. He wanted to write and edit about Los Angeles and what is endemic here: obituaries for the last issue of *Lowrider* magazine or hit pieces on the fence Netflix erected between their campus and a homeless encampment. He wanted to defend the food vendors not just from the cops, but from the divisiveness of brick-and-mortar restaurant owners. He wanted to publish in Spanish, and even regional Zapotec when necessary. All this was only possible after he was laid off from his job at *Vice* for refusing to write about Los Angeles under the New York gaze.

Javier returned to stringing, writing two-star restaurant reviews for *L.A.*

Weekly that made him the de facto food critic of the publication for a brief moment in time.

Suddenly, at the young age of 57, Jonathan Gold died of pancreatic cancer. He had been diagnosed only a few weeks prior. Javier barely had a chance to mourn before everyone started nudging him to take Gold's job at the *L.A. Times*. *You gonna do it, you gonna do it?* He took some time to mourn his mentor then told them, "Yeah, I am gonna do it."

At the time, the *L.A. Times* had just been sold out to Patrick Soon-Shiong, a biotech billionaire with a share of the L.A. Lakers. He bought the *Times* in a package with the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and some smaller local publications. Javier didn't get the job. The *Times* didn't hire another Gold character either. Instead, they hired Maryland native Bill Addison, who wrote for the website *Eater*, and Patricia Escárcega of *The Arizona Republic*. The paper paid out a roughly \$200,000 annual salary to Addison — which they afforded by stiffing Escárcega with a "Grand Canyon-size pay gap" as she put it when she publicly quit five months later.

Back at the *L.A. Weekly*, a hard-working crew of staff writers doing radical reporting had built up a loyal following. Javier threw a Hail Mary pass at the *Weekly* to make his temp job there permanent. After all, he thought it was his dream job to finally be a food critic because "what's more punk rock than getting paid to eat?"

The pass was dropped. The publication, as unexpectedly as Gold's passing, laid off all its editors and writers,

save one. An Ayn Rand fanboy from Orange County, Brian Calle (who has since bought New York's storied *Village Voice*), bought the paper with a cadre of boutique hotel, tech start-up, and legal weed free-market enthusiasts. On Twitter, former *L.A. Weekly* Editor in Chief Mara Shalhoup described the swift layoffs as the "Red Wedding" in reference to the wedding feast turned violent massacre episode of *Game of Thrones*.

Hungover from the Red Wedding, the loss of Gold, and the failure to score what he thought was his dream job, Javier was approached by his fellow aughts-era blogger and *L.A. TACO* publisher Alex Blazedale. Alex had planned to kill the editorial side of the long-running underground site since, to the surprise of no one, it's hard to maintain a self-sustained independent publication. But he took a risk on Javier. The city was devoid of a true alt-weekly. If Javier could get enough traffic to the site, Blazedale promised, the job and site would be his to run. If he failed, Blazedale would kill the editorial content and turn the blog into an Instagram. Javier went all in.

The indulgent nature of Los Angeles makes writing from this city weird. And food writing, in this respect, is even weirder. The *L.A. Times* hired outside of the Gold-Cabral orbit for a reason. To indulge readers with decadent food writing — even if it is about the proverbial "hidden" strip-mall restaurants — is only a veneer over the real controversy of the inescapable inequalities of this place. Those hires, especially the one they meant to keep, were perfectly chosen for the mass of young professionals scrambling to the top, fucking and

fucking over whomever they need to make it big. The high-paid content on the eating of cheeks is just another way to turn the other cheek, so the well-fed diner passes by the hundreds of thousands of people who are forced to call the streets their home.

These are the reasons why Javier says it's easy to get jaded on food writing, and yet in spite of all that, he doesn't seem very jaded. In fact, what is immediately noticeable about Javier is that he is really happy being an Editor.

Javier and Jeff Weiss, a music writer whose public resignation during the Red Wedding went viral, have a recorded conversation on *L.A. TACO* titled "Loving L.A. Means Embracing Its Dark Side, Too" about writing from Los Angeles. Jeff and Javier open up the conversation comparing and contrasting Eve Babitz (who apparently loved taquitos from Olvera Street) and Joan Didion. This interview took place in September 2020, way before Joan Didion upstaged Eve Babitz one last time by dying just days on her tail.

Jeff says Eve is "eccentric and captures the absurdity of the city, the beautiful tackiness, and the cheap opulence. She's emotional and nostalgic, but never overly sentimental, whimsical, but never self-serious." In other words, Eve is as indulgent as the city itself. Joan, on the other hand, beautiful and constrained, never tacky, "brought a real outsider's perspective." Joan grew up in the far away land of Sacramento and got her big break with a column in the *Saturday Evening Post* on places of West Coast interest. And Joan, as much as we adore her sentences, would totally be the one

to cover the West Coast from L.A. She then published the essays as her first blockbuster hit: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

Jeff continues, turning to another New York transplant, Nathanael West.

The Day of the Locust is as good as it gets, but Eve is a genius for articulating what always bothered me about the book — the fact that it's a projection of Los Angeles that satisfies the most cynical and dismissive ideas that New Yorkers have about L.A. — or least did before they all moved here. The cliché is that it's this completely shallow, barren wasteland of strivers constantly trying to get ahead, who end up lighting Hollywood Boulevard on fire."

It's not the lighting of Hollywood on fire that bothers Jeff, or Eve, for that matter who lit plenty of things on fire in her day. It's calling L.A. a wasteland. In *Eve's Hollywood*, Babitz writes that one can always differentiate between someone who is looking down on rather than out from L.A. if they refer to the city as a wasteland. "It requires a certain plain happiness inside to be happy in L.A.," she observes, "to choose it and be happy here."

Jeff and the other *L.A. Weekly* writers did not need the *Weekly* to be great, or to find plain happiness. They regrouped as a boycott against the paper and eventually formed the well-loved DIY magazine *theLAnd*. The land without the waste, with its sun and citrus, the guavas left on the stoop by a neighbor, does have the potential to make you happy, happy enough to like it and to choose it. Thus you appreciate the land so much that you can't ignore it, any of

it, least of all its broken parts.

To put myself in the frame, a transplant from nowhere in particular, who just took this job living and writing in L.A., it is overwhelming to consider happiness and enjoyment as the criteria for success, when the (my) creative life is so prone to misery and trying to beat the economic forecast. It can sometimes feel like too much credit is given to the insider's perspective wherever it applies, but on this point, as with many others, there is just so much to be learned from people who did not fly in here for success, but stayed around to make it better. It's a small thing, a plain thing, but it's important.

Javier and his wife drove their used sedan recently, 100 miles up and over the grapevine from Los Angeles to Bakersfield to eat dinner at the Noriega Hotel. The hotel had won a James Beard Award, even though Javier's description of the food — "cold, floppy spaghetti drowning in tomato sauce" — doesn't make it sound worth the drive. But like many restaurants, sometimes it is never really about the food.

On that night, a man named Arturo Soto came out to clear their dishes. Arturo said that the Noriega was a boarding house for Basque shepherds emigrating to Bakersfield, and that in the early 1900s it was the center of wool processing and lamb meatpacking. "Other [plates] heaped with lamb roast" took on a historical character. Just like Sacramento and Los Angeles have a sound, Bakersfield has a sound. It's called Bakersfield sound, one of the first country subgenres to go electric in the 1950s, hard-rock-influenced, jangly, and

scrappy. It plays the city to its beat.

Javier's got a word for scrappy: *rasque*. The attitude that comes with it is *rasquachismo*. He learned about it from East Los Angeles urban planner James Rojas who "humanizes public space by trumpeting a soulful philosophy he calls Latino Urbanism." To Javier, it means, "building something from nothing, and that being your main drag, your main style. Not ever having to grow to be over-polished because you have too many resources. There is a certain sense of beauty and engagement because of that. Because that makes people feel like, 'Oh crap!' They know what they're writing about. They're like me, you know, they're not the other; for once in my life, I don't feel otherized." For a punk like Javier, the style felt like coming home.

Javier points out that the narrative of the chef is almost always a narrative of someone who *used to be* like Arturo, but who has since risen up the ranks to become top chef. When Javier drove his sedan to Bakersfield, he was doing what he does best, finding neither rags nor riches but realism: a philosopher and a historian who works at a well-rated hotel restaurant. When COVID-19 social distancing measures (and maybe a few health code violations) forced the Noriega restaurant to close after 80 years of floppy spaghetti, Javier returned to Bakersfield to check in on Arturo.

Arturo told Javier that one night he was working too fast and dropped a heavy metal pot on his pinky finger, resulting in an epiphany: "Why rush if you're only going to be back here tomorrow and the day after doing the same?" Javier nicknames this way of



Graciela Iturbide, *Rosario preparando para salir* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

approaching life Rancho Zen for the impact this story left on him. “Although I’ve studied Zen for years, I still exist in a constant state of impatience, so Soto’s words resonated with me. In my heart, I have never again had hate for even the most enormous pile of dishes.” Arturo worked for 37 years at the Noriega Hotel, walking four miles to and from the establishment every day. He stopped rushing dishes. “Happily,” he added.

Investigative journalism, like autobiographies, is often written when something bad has already happened — when a writer or journalist has some unhappy story to tell about exploitation or inequality, rejection, or hardship. To keep the world informed, yes, but doing so by buying their sympathy rather than mobilizing it. Food writing, though, slips in between those exhaustive accounts of hardship with luscious reporting to remind us that some things, like a little smoky bark on a wet pepper, the tongue on tongue of birria lengua tacos, are sometimes enough. And if take the advice of these hyperlocal food writers, go out for a meal at their suggestion, have a chat with the workers, well what you find just might make you happy enough to fight alongside them to preserve it — and that’s the sweet spot Javier hits with *L.A. TACO*.

In less than two scrappy years of realist journalism, Javier and Blazedale have hired four staff members for *L.A. TACO*, a Deputy Editor, a social media editor, and more. And just like the Noriega Hotel, they got a James Beard Award, the Emerging Voice Award. His philosophy for *L.A. TACO* from the start was to let people tell their own stories.

Javier can’t scroll the internet or walk around without coming up with stories or headlines. It’s automatic. That’s why his friends call him Headline Head. And also why his wife half-jokes that all he’s good for is writing. Rilke says you have to “confess to yourself whether you would have to die if forbidden to write,” and Javier has confessed to not being able to do much else. Letting himself be the Headline Head is the only cure for what he calls journalist dread — that one day he will wake up and there are no more stories to tell.

“I still have that fear, all these years later, when I’m like, what if I wake up and I don’t know what I’m gonna publish that day? It never goes away. So I think that’s a healthy sense of keeping it real, because I try to remind myself to not take my position for granted, to not take my actual dream job for granted. Not take the fact that I get to work with amazing people that inspire me to be better for granted.” The rejection from what he thought was his dream job led him straight to his dream job.

If we take Javier as the model for L.A. native happiness, then it relies on the compulsion to organize life around the capacity to find characters and tell their stories, to be good to the people around you, and to be “someone with ears and eyes that don’t compromise.” Someone who stands behind the cheap opulence of delicious things and the labor workers put into that. And that’s why, in the end, it’s not about food or food writing — it’s about the taco.

A street taco. A small, well-balanced meal handed out through the window, sharp with sour limes, eaten standing up

out in public. It is one of the last uninsured, rentless, and unconstrained foods under the radar of the FDA. The taco can't be put back inside the restaurant. Resting on its corn-laced doily, it's the delicate anti-delicacy.

Javier and I are meeting on Zoom to write this profile via recorded conversation. He wanted to write the story himself, but he could not — these days, he's too busy. He is happy to say that he is busy because he has been writing a book about backyard carne asada, another corner of the city unconstrained by brick and mortar. As if that wasn't enough, he's also been involved in another season of the Taco Chronicles on Netflix, where he has served as an Associate Producer

The last topic we discuss is death. Would he die for *L.A. TACO*? No. Is anything worth dying for? Not yet. And where, when he does die, would he like to be laid to rest? He and his wife have already talked about having their ashes at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, and in the Pacific ocean off Puerto Vallarta, where she is from and where they are planning to move in a few years.

I mentioned that earlier that week, I was talking to the L.A.-based poet Rosie Stockton, who had come across a Hollywood Forever crypt on Craigslist by accident when searching for housing.

"How much?" he asks.

"\$7,000."

"That's cheap," he says. A long pause. "Because these days they usually go for no less than \$20,000."

A rooster who has taken up residence in the tent city below my apartment lets out a crow. I check the clock.

It's half past 6:00 p.m. on a Friday, and we are both tired from a long week.

"Let's all go in on it," I say about the crypt, knowing at this rate of rejection, this is probably our best shot at getting into Hollywood.

"Jonathan and Dee Dee Ramone are buried at Hollywood Forever, so I'm down. Old punks never really die, after all."

THE PENULTIMATE SUBURB

Suburban living in the sprawling metropolis

GEOFF NICHOLSON

There's a convincing argument to be made that Los Angeles is the most suburban city on earth. As you fly in and make a circling approach to LAX airport, you can look down and see hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of individual homes, each in its own patch of land, arranged geometrically along gridded, orderly streets. I think it looks fantastic. On the ground, this vision still applies, and even in some of the roughest, toughest areas you'll find detached one-family houses with their own reasonably sized gardens, garages, and driveways. The houses may be frayed at the edges, the cars in the drives won't be new, the gardens may be neglected, there may well be sagging chain-link fences around the properties, but visually the neighborhood suggests careworn suburbia rather than desperate "mean streets."

This may look like the very essence of sprawl, though there is no universal definition of that troubling term. By certain standards, however, chiefly those of population density, Los Angeles scarcely sprawls at all. Yes, its population is spread out over many, many square miles, but in fact the city's overall population density, and the density of L.A.'s suburbs, is in fact very high, higher than the overall population density of New York, San Francisco, or Chicago. That's because L.A.'s population is so evenly distributed that the difference between the density of inner city (a minor phenomenon in LA) and suburb is negligible. This won't seem like much consolation when you're stuck in your car during a two-hour commute, but it does mean that, when you get home, you'll have your house, your castle, your own patch of outdoor space.

Things are now changing, and that change happened even as I lived in L.A. from 2003 to 2018. Sprawl became an ever-dirtier word. Suburban life, single-family homes, were increasingly perceived as wasteful and environmentally damaging. Apartment buildings, some much higher-rise than others, are going up all over the city. Even so, it will be a good long time before L.A. as a whole becomes less than suburban. I don't know if that's a shame or not. I was pretty content with the suburban life I lived there for 15 years, until the day I wasn't.

The important thing to know about my move to Los Angeles is that it had nothing whatsoever to do with trying to "get into" the movies. I like movies — I like watching them, I like the

gossip and the craft, even some of the stars and directors, and I did have a distant, nodding acquaintance with one or two movie producers who'd bought the movie rights to a few of my novels. One of them, against all my expectations, even got made, but I didn't write the script and I never wanted to be a scriptwriter. (That film was 2009's *Permanent Vacation*, based on my 1990 novel *What We Did on Our Holidays*. Directed by W. Scott Peake, with a movie-stealing performance by David Carradine, it is, I think you'd have to say, a movie about a suburbanite who goes rogue.)

I was happy enough to be an observer of "the industry," but I had no desire to be part of it. I was a writer of novels and books of nonfiction, and that was precisely what I wanted to be. I told myself that being an L.A.-based writer who didn't write movies and who didn't *want* to write movies was a very healthy state of affairs. I would be a rarity, and I would keep my sanity when those around me went crazy because of notes from the studios and demands from the lead actors.

I moved to L.A. for what struck me at the time as the best of all possible reasons: because of a woman. My then-girlfriend, later my wife, lived in Brooklyn, and I lived in Maida Vale, London. We had a transatlantic relationship that had already lasted for five years, and although that kind of relationship comes with some obvious difficulties, it was working pretty well and we wanted it to continue. When my girlfriend's book publishing job gave her the opportunity to live and work in Los Angeles, however, it was clear that a long-distance

relationship that regularly involved not just crossing the Atlantic but the whole of the continental United States as well, was going to be just too difficult. So why didn't I move to L.A. too? I could write anywhere, so why not there? We'd find a place to live, probably we'd get married, I'd get my green card, and all would be well. Most of this did in fact happen.

I was already a serious Angelenophile. I'd been there a good few times, mostly as a tourist, a couple of times on working holidays. I'd seen the films, I'd seen the photographs. I'd read my Chandler, my Reyner Banham, my Nathanael West. I'd even read Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990), which portrays the city as a set of discreet, dystopian enclaves, each the territory of a warring tribe. The fact that some of these enclaves are in fact very expensive and exclusive gated suburbs would appear, in Davis's account, to be both the symptom and the disease. As he writes:

The discarded Joshua trees, the profligate wastage of water, the claustrophobic walls, and the ridiculous names are as much a polemic against incipient urbanism as they are an assault on the endangered wilderness. The *eutopic* (literally no-place) logic of their subdivisions, in sterilized sites stripped bare of nature and history, master planned only for privatized family consumption, evokes much of the past evolution of tract-house Southern California. But the developers are not just repackaging myth (the good life in the suburbs) for the next generation; they are also

pandering to a new, burgeoning fear of the city.

The idea that L.A. was part police state, part ungovernable chaos was scary, of course, but it was also madly appealing in a "living on the edge," post-*Blade Runner* kind of way. If you could survive there, you could survive anywhere. It would be like living in the suburbs of Gomorrah. And so off we went.

I had few expectations of how or where we might live in Los Angeles. My girlfriend and I were longtime flat or apartment dwellers. On the occasions that we'd visited L.A. together, we'd looked, out of curiosity, at local real estate ads, since they're everywhere, and it appeared that L.A. was cheaper than either London or New York. We could see possibilities. It looked like we might be able to own a little house, a bungalow, a unit, with a garden, a driveway, a garage; yes, something very suburban. I admit this had its appeal.

We began by renting a small place in Silver Lake and spent weekends looking at properties to buy, even as it seemed that prices were rising day by day. Seeing how other people live is always fascinating, and in L.A. there were specific, local fascinations. We went to view a house that had been clad entirely in black volcanic rock. It was on an otherwise unremarkable, middle-class suburban street close to Wilshire Boulevard. It had been owned by a local eccentric known variously around the neighborhood as The Witch of Wilshire, the Moon Lady, the Black Widow, and, most tellingly of all, The Lava Lady. The house wasn't expensive, and for a moment we did

consider it, but in the end we weren't brave enough to take on a house that was coated in pumice.

We saw a bungalow in Beachwood Canyon with a den in the backyard, a kind of cave that had been excavated out of the rock that rose up at the end of the garden. The seller said this was where "the drummer from the Beach Boys" had practiced. I didn't argue, but I found it hard to believe that Dennis Wilson had ever practiced, or needed to practice, in a hollowed-out den. True, after his death, the Beach Boys had employed other drummers, but it seemed to me that anyone who was in line to play drums with the Beach Boys would have had a much more sophisticated practice studio.

We looked at a 1960s house that had been built with a stereo (perhaps more properly a gramophone, possibly a radiogram) in an alcove in the living room, with wires that ran inside the walls to loudspeakers in every room. We learned that a couple of avocado trees in a garden could add an exorbitant premium to the price of a property. We observed all the trouble that some people had gone to in order to shoehorn a tiny swimming pool into their backyard. We saw how many residents had artistic aspirations, or possibly even careers, and had built a writer's hut, an artist's studio, or a recording studio in a corner of their plot.

And of course, we weren't very good at understanding or sussing out the neighborhoods. They all looked pretty good to us. A realtor showed us a bungalow just off Hollywood Boulevard and it struck us as a possibility, but as

we came out and were talking positively about it, the realtor looked at us sadly, a couple of rubes, and said, "Nah, you people wouldn't want to be here at night." We took his word for it.

But the fact was that, for all their variety, the majority of the places we looked at turned out to be smallish, detached suburban houses, with the usual trappings and trimmings. In many ways, these were more than we needed, more than we were looking for, but in some way, without having sought it out, we were generally looking at versions of the American suburban dream. Some of these houses we could afford, some we couldn't. Some we knew just weren't for us. But at a certain point we realized — and possibly we should have known it all along, given our price range — that we were generally looking at the cheap, somewhat quirky house on the expensive street. This hadn't been our intention, but we didn't object, and in any case, it seemed preferable to living in the expensive house on the cheap street.

And so it was that we went to look at a geodesic dome, located on what I came to describe as the lower slopes of the Hollywood Hills — although depending on whom you're trying to impress, or not impress, it could have been said to be in Los Feliz or East Hollywood or The Oaks, though I only ever met about three people in L.A. who'd even heard of The Oaks.

I know that people tend to think that geodesic domes are homes for hippies, preferably located in the desert or up in the mountains surrounded by pines, but this was a *suburban* geodesic dome, built in the 1980s by a schoolteacher who'd

inherited a plot of land from his mother. He and his wife were moving out and downsizing because of poor health. The dome was tucked into a hillside, close to other houses but screened from them by the lay of the land and by some strategically placed trees.

We didn't leap immediately. I'd always liked the look and the concept of the geodesic dome, popularized though by no means invented by Buckminster Fuller. They provided lots of space, enclosed by the minimum amount of materials. I can't say I'd ever had an overwhelming ambition to live in one, but the place we saw was attractive and appealing, with plenty of space, even if the decor was a bit tired and 1980s (acres of aquamarine carpet, though we got rid of that), and it had a dodgy-looking roof that had to be replaced. But what clinched it — and maybe this isn't the best reason for buying a house, though there are surely worse ones — is that I decided I didn't want to be the guy who goes around saying, "We almost lived in a geodesic dome, you know." Whatever the final outcome of my life, I wanted to be able to say, "I once lived in a geodesic dome." We made an offer, we got a mortgage, we were in business.

While we were waiting for the legalities to be finalized, we decided to take a walk around the neighborhood one Saturday afternoon to get a feel of the area. If the opportunity arose, we'd speak to one or two of the neighbors and ask what it was like to live there. We saw very few people. We thought some were definitely at home, but they were hidden behind their gates, walls, fences, and hedges. The notion that the

front garden is for others, the back garden for yourself, really doesn't apply in most of L.A. There are exceptions, but in general all the garden is all for you, and the less passersby can see of it the better. The property section of the *L.A. Times* regularly contains ads for landscape nurseries offering "Hollywood hedges" — fully grown tress, generally cedars or cypresses, 20 or 30 feet high, that can be trucked in and installed in a couple of days to provide swift seclusion: "Instantly block those nosy neighbors and unsightly views!"

At last, we did see a man working in one of the gardens, and in our naïve way we said hello and asked, "Do you live here?" The look he gave us contained mostly sneering contempt, though perhaps there was also a hint of pity for our lack of nous. Or perhaps he thought we were mocking him. The man was Latino, and as we realized after we'd moved in, as anybody in Los Angeles would know, if you see a Latino man working in a garden in the Hollywood Hills, even on the lower slopes, chances are he wasn't the owner of the house, he's the gardener. And that was the case here. We had a lot of learn.

And sure, no point denying it, we lived in a very white neighborhood. A Black guy lived across the street for a while. None of the neighbors treated him any differently than they treated anybody else, any differently from the way they treated each other. They said hello if they had occasion to, but those occasions were few and far between.

For what it's worth, our house had a deed on the land, unenforceable and dating from the 1930s, forbidding the



Graciela Iturbide (1986) © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

sale of the land to “Hindus.” I always assumed this was code for “Indians,” but I was never completely sure. I certainly don’t think it was an indication that every other religious group would be welcomed with open arms. I think it was taken for granted that Black and Southeast Asian people, whatever their religion, were never going to be able to afford to buy the land and live there, so that problem didn’t arise. But there was just a chance that those enterprising Hindus from Bombay or Calcutta might have the money to be able to buy into Hollywood. That apparently had to be nipped in the bud.

Once we moved into the house and I’d started working on the garden (I’d got to the stage in life when I enjoyed gardening), I saw that I was the only person on the entire street who did his own gardening. Everybody else employed teams of Mexicans who came once a week and used deafening leaf blowers. If this singled me out as some weird English mad dog, nobody ever said so to my face, but then none of the neighbors ever talked to me much at all. They probably just thought I was poor and eccentric. They weren’t entirely wrong.

I enjoyed making a new garden, and on occasions we did have to employ a professional, somebody who was handy with a chainsaw, to clear scrub or cut down branches that hung too close to the house. This was usually in response to an annual letter from the city telling us to make the garden safe for fire season. Too much scrub produces kindling for fires in the hills. If we hadn’t had the work done, we’d have got a fine, and then the authorities would have sent

in a contractor to do the work at local government rates and sent us an inflated bill for the work. It never got that far: we really didn’t want to get fined, and we definitely didn’t want our house to go up in flames.

People in L.A. do put a lot of thought and money and into their gardens. The thought may be their own, but the labor will most likely be other people’s. There are palm trees of course, sometimes giant cacti, succulents, agaves, euphorbia, things that don’t need a lot of water (that’s the current recommendation, which I was happy to accept), although there remains another category of garden that still requires huge amounts of watering and irrigation. These gardens are frowned upon by environmentalists, but oddly enough this has a limited effect on certain wealthy L.A. types.

When the time came for the unhappy divorce and I had to move out, saying goodbye to the garden upset me far more than saying goodbye to the house. A small and ignoble part of me did think about razing the garden, hacking it all down, spraying it with weed killer, spreading salt all over the ground to piss off my wife, but no, I didn’t do that. I was a distraught, spurned husband, not a maniac or a monster.

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If we think of a suburb as being rows and grids of more or less identical houses, then Hollywood Hills refuses to conform. Here every house is different from its neighbor. Some of them are unspectacular, are indeed the kind of houses you might find in any American suburb

of a certain era — low-rise, detached, single-family tract homes — but others break the mold completely. They can be quite ugly: out of place faux chateaus, haciendas, or castles. There are quite a few houses known locally as Arts and Crafts, though I don't think William Morris would have recognized them as such. Some are midcentury, some ultra-modern.

Some are spectacularly original, designed by “name” architects, sometimes owned by people who are names in the movie industry, but they sit cheek by jowl with perfectly ordinary, much smaller properties, in a kind of harmony. I tend to think this is a good thing.

Before I lived in Los Angeles, I'd read books about L.A. architecture, looked at photographs of buildings by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Gregory Ain, Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, et al, and they appeared to be surrounded by masses of empty space, but this was often a trick of the photographer. When I went on my field trips to look at these architectural gems, they'd often be in surprisingly ordinary suburban neighborhoods, tucked in between perfectly mundane houses and bungalows. At first this was surprising and disappointing, but I quickly got used to it, and I came to appreciate how the grand and the ordinary could be encompassed in a single neighborhood, in a single frame.

Change and development were always conspicuous in the neighborhood where we lived — houses being worked on, extended, given new roofs, new patios, just like in any suburban neighborhood. But sometimes it was far more

extreme than that, not just the matter of an upgrade, an extension, or a granny flat above the garage. Here you'd see complete transformations, not “tear-downs” as they're called in those parts, since demolition and rebuilding from scratch involved all kinds of difficulties with planning and permits. But, for example, there was a small one-story house nearby, a bungalow essentially, that was stripped down to the studs, leaving just a roofless, wall-less, wooden frame, and then it was rebuilt to look nothing remotely like a bungalow but rather like a very stylish, and currently very fashionable, minimalist, Brutalist concrete block. It looked great to my eyes, but you could question its authenticity. Many would also question whether it belonged in suburbia. No doubt many also felt that way about a geodesic dome.

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One of the attractions of living in Los Angeles, as far as I was concerned, was that you could get in your car and drive due east along the freeway, and on a good day, depending on the traffic (and in Southern California everything always depends on the traffic), you could be in the Mojave Desert in a couple of hours.

Naturally we think of the desert as being all about space, emptiness, wildness, big skies, isolation, the absence of humanity, but if you find yourself staying in the Travelodge in Yucca Valley, as I regularly did, you can look out of your window and see that suburban developments have been built right up to the parking lot of the motel. The desert

has been eaten up and covered up, divided into generously sized plots on which have been built large single-story houses, often with double or triple garages. The desert has been turned into suburbia.

I was, and am, essentially unhappy and uncomfortable with this, just like any desert lover. The desert should be the desert. But there were occasions when I woke up early in the motel room and, rather than getting in the Jeep and driving to some remote part of the desert for an early morning walk, simply went on foot and explored this desert suburb.

Needless to say, this was not the pure desert experience that I was usually looking for, but I think you can be too precious about these things, and it was definitely *some* form of desert experience. I believe in looking at what's there rather than what's not, and this was a version of suburbia I'd never seen before. It was a golden opportunity.

The houses in this suburb were not the "home in the desert" as most people, myself included, would generally conceive of it. The more usual image is of a wooden or cinderblock shack down a dirt road, not necessarily having electricity or water, and surrounded by five or 10 acres of raw desert, the next neighbor more than yelling distance away.

And when my wife told me our marriage was nonnegotiablely over, I did think, briefly, okay, I'll go and move into one of these desert shacks, become a deracinated Englishman gone native in the desert. But by then I was seeing a therapist (yes, I had gone a little bit Hollywood), and he said, and it came as

no great surprise, that since I was feeling lonely, depressed, and isolated, it really wouldn't be good for my mental health to isolate myself further by holing up in a desert shack. And even if I'd moved into a house in desert suburbia, I probably wouldn't have felt much less isolated. I certainly didn't imagine I'd fit in, although since I never put it to the test, I could have been wrong about that.

Walk out of the Travelodge and you're on Camino Del Cielo Trail. The street names, always a powerful indication of developers' intentions, if not their achievements, honor a Spanish heritage, despite there being a much earlier Native American one in that area. So, the streets are not called streets. They're mostly called trails: Martinez Trail, Benecia Trail, San Remo, El Prado, Cardillo.

The houses that have been built here and in other subdivisions nearby are not *of* the desert, and they don't exactly blend in with the landscape. In a sense, they look like the kind of houses that, with exceptions, might be built anywhere in Southern California, perhaps anywhere in America, although not every house in America has a couple of giant Joshua Trees growing in their front yard. Around here, those trees were not, *pace* Mike Davis, "discarded."

Some of the houses look as though they've been dropped into the middle of a cactus forest, with towering columns, spikes, and paddles lining the paths and driveways and pressing up against the windows. Those were the ones I liked best. Other houses looked as though they'd been built on a flat, razed, largely featureless bit of scrub and sand, and a

few cacti and succulents had been left, or possibly planted as landscaping, to fit in with the rest of the neighborhood.

There were elements of Hispanic, or at least faux Hispanic, architecture: red tiled roofs, Mission style arches on porches and gates. A few even show some midcentury modern influence — flat roofs, angled buttresses, some post and beam — but in general the houses are long and low, the roofs broad and shallow. Some of the walls are brick, but most are coated in pale earth-colored rendering or stucco, and one or two look like they're made of some prefabricated, metallic substance. As I walked around, I saw wildlife, a lot of jackrabbits, a few roadrunners, flocks of desert quail. I enjoyed that. It confirmed the sense of being in the desert, but it didn't make the overall effect any less suburban.

The few people I met as I walked seemed friendly enough, and nobody asked me my business. Maybe it was obvious that I was a tourist staying at the motel. A few looked like retirees, but many looked like working family men, setting off to do a day's hard labor. It seemed to me they weren't leading such a bad life.

This was comparatively cheap housing, perhaps not as cheap as you think it ought to be, given that in the middle of summer, the residents have to endure temperatures of well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, but it's cheaper than the equivalent in most other parts of California. If you're earning a decent wage, these houses are comparatively affordable and you can still have enough left over for some discretionary spending, to buy some toys. That's why,

outside these desert houses, you're likely to see a good few vehicles — one will probably be a truck, one may be a classic muscle car, there's a high probability there'll be a big, luxurious camper, there very well might be a couple of trail bikes and a dune buggy. There are even a surprising number of boats — Lake Hemet and Lake Fulmor are only a half-hour drive, and even the Colorado River isn't so very far away.

The people who live here don't want the mythical desert shack, they want a three-bedroom house with a nice bit of ground they can call their own, with plenty of room for the kids, plenty of parking and garaging, and a short drive into town to the supermarket and the Kmart. In Yucca Valley this was available, and they went for it.

One morning on my walk I met an old man, by which I mean that he looked significantly older than me, and he appeared to be friendly. We nodded at each other, and I felt able to ask, "What's it like living here?" I suppose I imagined he'd complain about the summer heat and possibly about the winter cold, but instead he said, "It's god's own country." I didn't argue with him.

Now, of course there's no real argument in favor of turning the desert into a suburb. You might say it's a desecration and a despoilation, and in broad, simple terms, 95 days out of 100, I'd completely agree with you. It would be far, far better if the desert were left untouched, not built on, much less suburbanized. And if the local zoning authorities in Yucca Valley had decided that the desert should remain pristine, that would have been a very good thing indeed. But they

didn't. They decided to allow people to build and live in the desert. If you were a hardline urbanist, you might say that building single family homes *anywhere* is wrong. And in fairness it should be said that Yucca Valley does have some apartment buildings and, like many desert communities, its share of trailer parks, which certainly don't sprawl. The trailers are packed in as tightly as if they were in a supermarket lot on Black Friday. Is that a better way of living? I honestly don't know. I think much must depend on who's in the trailer next door.

Sometimes I entertain the notion — part Le Corbusier, part J. G. Ballard — of a giant high-rise tower block sitting in the middle of the desert, the population densely packed inside their apartments, with the building's "grounds" extending to thousands of square miles of untouched desert. That would be a non-suburban way of living in the Mojave.

But I'm not holding my breath, and I'm pretty sure that nobody currently alive would actually want to live like that. I'm tempted to say that maybe it will become an attractive idea to future generations, but by then it might be too late: the whole of the desert could have been turned into one giant suburb by then, or maybe every suburb will have turned into a desert.

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Spalding Gray's memoir/monologue *Monster in a Box* (1992) contains a telling, if overly familiar, description of a writer's life in the Hollywood Hills. "The Monster" is the novel he's working on.

I'd get up and run over to my desk and open the *Monster* to work on it; the sun would stream across my writing hand and relax it. And I'd follow the sun around into the living room and have a cup of coffee, and watch the sun stream through the eucalyptus trees and have another cup of coffee, and watch the sun come through the palm trees. Then follow the sun into the dining room, and watch the sun come through the dining room window and have a martini. Watch the sun set over Sunset Strip and have another martini. Why go out? Why bother? Why work on a book?

This doesn't altogether describe the life I lived in L.A., but I recognize it. I worked in a basement room, which did have a window onto the garden, but the sun never streamed in; I chose the room as an office for that very reason. And having some reputation as a walker, I did try to leave the house for at least an hour a day and walk somewhere. But I never thought, "Why work on a book?" I worked all the time. I even liked to think that my walking was part of the creative process. When it comes to writing, I've always been regular and fastidious in my habits, not quite a nine-to-fiver but close enough, although yes, when happy hour came around, I did sometimes find myself, like Spalding Gray, with a martini in my hand, and it's true that often I could see no point in bothering to go out. I had everything I needed right there in the house.

And at about 7:00 o'clock, my wife would come home from work, from her

“real” job, that took her out of the house and into the world every day. I was always glad to see her, perhaps gladder than she was to see me, and of course we went out sometimes, but more often than not we stayed home.

And maybe this is an important difference between urban and suburban life. Urban life is lived far more outside the home than inside. After a day’s writing in my flat in London, I was always eager to get out there and *do* something, anything. I rarely felt that way in Los Angeles.

And then one day my wife announced that she didn’t want to be married to me anymore. This came out of the blue and as a terrible shock. I hadn’t been complacent; I hadn’t thought our marriage was perfect. Does anyone? I thought there were one or two minor problems that we might have addressed more directly, frustrations and irritations on both sides, but I didn’t think it was anything worse than that. And so, the announcement was devastating. My wife said I was no fun. I was a melancholic, a depressive. I didn’t and couldn’t deny that — melancholia and depression have been my lifelong companions, but nevertheless my wife and I still talked a lot, laughed a lot, shared a sense of humor. Or so it seemed to me. I thought we still found each other clever and witty. I thought we were best friends. How wrong can you be? I argued that we should stay together; I thought we had too much to lose; I thought that, whatever the problems might be, we could work them out. My wife thought very differently.

We had a “trial separation,” and she

went to stay in an Airbnb for a couple of weeks, while I had a miserable, lonely time in the empty marital home. When I suggested that, after this separation, we might have a “trial reconciliation,” she wouldn’t accept that. It was all over as far as she was concerned. I also thought — Occam’s razor — that she might simply have found somebody else, and as time goes by, I’ve come to think that must have been the case, though she never said so, and if that was the case, I didn’t really want to know.

After much pain and misery, and a few expensive visits to the therapist, I accepted the inevitable and agreed to a divorce. You can’t spend your life wanting to be with somebody who doesn’t want to be with you. And in due course, I headed back to England.

Did I miss Los Angeles? Did I miss the city, our house, the garden, my wife, my old life? I most certainly did, and sometimes, perhaps more often than is strictly healthy, I still do. But time moves on, and eventually things hurt less than they used to, but it’s not a straightforward progression. I’ve moved on because I had to, ended up in a new home in a small, chalet-style house in Lawford Dale, in Essex, a new life in a new suburb. Do I sometimes feel lonely, sad, bereft? Of course I do, but it’s not because I’m living in suburbia.

BATHTUB DRAFTS

Doja Cat wants you to see her

LINDSAY GELLMAN

Doja Cat sat in her dry bathtub, one hand cradling an Aperol spritz. It was Christmas Eve. Still, some 20,000 people joined an impromptu Instagram livestream to watch her vamp.

The 26-year-old Los Angeles rapper, singer, and producer — drunk, by her own admission — wore full makeup and an oversized white button-down draped over lingerie. Between puffs on a baby-pink vape, she gave detailed instructions for

making a graham-cracker-and-apple dessert that involved blasting the concoction with a blowtorch before serving it à la mode. (“No one’s listening bae,” a viewer commented in the chat.) She bumped Homeboy Sandman and Left Eye from her laptop, dancing, somehow still crouched in the tub, with skill and abandon. For the next 90 minutes, she rapped and sang along to an improvised DJ set of sorts, demonstrating an astounding recall of lyrics committed to heart, and encouraging fans to look up certain artists who “moved me figuratively and literally.”

After one of several intermissions, she returned to the tub, turned off the music, and looked into the camera. Maybe it was cringe, but, whatever, she wanted to talk.

“I’ll tell you my plan, the best that I can,” she said.

What would follow was a meditation on artistic ambition with the sort of earnestness that celebrity entertainers rarely dare to display, but that permeates Doja’s freewheeling broadcasts. On Instagram Live, she makes her creative impulses open-source. It’s impossible to look away.

She would put out another album of pop-skewing songs, she explained, like the hits “Say So” and “Kiss Me More” that helped vault her to recent commercial and critical success, as well as ubiquity.

But, she went on, here’s what she longed to do, planned to do, right after that: release a rap album, working with producers known for aughts-era work — like 9th Wonder — whose tracks had first made her swoon as a teenager.

“I think I’m reaching for how I felt years ago, you know? I want that feeling again. I want to feel like people are excited about the music I’m excited about,” like the sort of throwback rap and R&B tracks she’d been playing earlier. Much of what’s being released today, she went on, “doesn’t make me feel crazy inside. The way that Slum Village” — a Detroit hip-hop act — “made me feel was crazy.”

She touched a hand to her heart. “I want to bring that back. I don’t know what it is, if it’s an emotion, if it’s a feeling — I just want to bring it back.”

Her frankness might have surprised more casual fans of the recording artist, whose real name is Amala Ratna Zandile Dlamini, and who is known for her effervescent pop hits, lascivious and dexterous rap verses, outrageous outfits, and online class-clownery that can tip into controversy. She has courted, in some contexts, an aura of ironic self-deprecation, playing along with fans who show adoration by needling her on Twitter with photo and video outtakes — a time she banged her funny bone at a Taco Bell; a time she fell on stage while performing in a Miami club; a time her microphone grazed her veneers — and who taunt her, affectionately, with the refrain “make better music.”

Dedicated fans know, though, that Doja leans into both playfulness and sincerity, and thrives in the pockets where they overlap. “I don’t play with my pen / I mean what I write,” she sings on “Need to Know,” and like so much else Doja, the lines serve at once as earnest credo and as satire.

“DONT EVER FUCKIN

DISRESPECT ME AS A RAPPER,” she wrote on Twitter last spring. “AFTER THE LAST SONG I DROPPED YOU WILL RESPECT MY PEN AND THATS FUCKIN THAT. stream Very Best.” The 38-second track, which she uploaded to SoundCloud, is an obvious joke — a cacophony of clownish sound effects and disconnected vocal interjections like “fuckin’ on a bitch” and “delicious.” But wait — there’s also a digitized trill from the melody of Für Elise. And you can make out the faint vocals “What you know about rollin’ down in the deep end?” from the viral Masked Wolf song “Astronaut in the Ocean,” which itself recalls Adele’s smash record “Rolling in the Deep.” Careful: These layered allusions constitute an analytical trap; that’s part of the bit. She’s just having fun. There’s nothing here from which to wring meaning.

There often isn’t, when it comes to Doja’s self-avowed nonsense. Her occasional resistance to being parsed is itself compelling, even radical, in a cultural climate where digestible interpretive gloss is currency. Last May, she uploaded a clip to TikTok titled “House House” with the caption “(we were driving by a bunch of houses clumped together and made a song about it).” It features her in a moving car, duetting with a recording of her own a capella scatting — just the word “house,” repeated.

“the fact that she can make a song from literally nothing is amazing haha,” wrote one viewer in the comments.

“Alright man relax.....” Doja replied, with the side-eye emoji.

Wouldn’t it be absurd, she seems to

be asking — with “Very Best,” and other shenanigans — if I were serious?

“This is a draft,” read the captions on a few of Doja’s TikToks — a clip of her scratching her head in a crochet cap, a clip of her twerking, a clip of her pulling faces in the bathroom.

Also drafts: The livestream sessions, going back years, in which she tweaks unreleased music while anyone can listen in. Some of these tracks-in-progress make their way onto albums once they’ve been mixed in the studio, as did the records that became “Ain’t Shit” on *Planet Her* and “Up and Down” off the album’s deluxe edition, having been polished into final form.

Others don’t, or haven’t yet. They live on the internet as snippets, some recorded by fans during Doja’s old Periscope streams. In one from several years ago, as a few dozen people watched, she added vocal riffs to a track called “Ocean” and sipped red wine before conceding it was a “great song.” In another, wearing neon cat ears, she laid down a rap verse on “Whip,” including the couplet “My damn arm strong, you can talk to Lance / But he still ride with me like the Tour de France.”

“I love how you let us in on your studio process,” a viewer commented in the livestream.

It’s true. The thing about drafts is that, generally speaking, they tend to stay private. Or else, when it comes to those of popular artists, they might be stashed in a digital folder, perhaps to be excavated for an edited behind-the-scenes reel once the work is done. But Doja isn’t afraid to cannibalize novelty, at least with some tracks, trading it

instead to offer this striking mix of exhibitionism and generosity. “Need more light on me,” she sings on “Imagine,” and it’s as if she wields this public drafting like a two-way mirror: transparent to anyone peering in; reflective on the inside.

Despite fan entreaties, Doja won’t release versions of these song drafts for download or streaming, she said recently on Instagram Live, “unless I get in the studio and fix them.” For play to be converted to work — and evaluated as such — it must first be iterated upon, burnished through meticulous effort.

Even a face can be a draft. Doja often wants you to see her, via livestream, barefaced and bonneted as she embarks upon an elaborate makeup look. Last December, as many as 50,000 people watched as she spent hours on several such transformations within a few-day period, at some moments bopping along to music or balancing on her hands as she provided a tutorial on the break-dancing move known as a baby freeze, and at others stewing in palpable frustration at the recent news that some of her winter shows had been canceled due to COVID-19 protocols. (She would soon announce on social media that she had tested positive herself.)

During one session, she hit pause on a PARTYNEXTDOOR track, a brush from her own line of pink-and-gold makeup tools in hand, to read the comments crawling up the screen. Yes, she agreed, since she’d so far applied only base layers of concealer, foundation, and contour, her complexion looked yellowish — like SpongeBob, even.

Her eyes narrowed in momentary

exasperation. “Trust the process,” she said.

When Doja goes live, it might mean she’ll stream her video-game play on Twitch, complete with trash talking. (“Do you fucking do bunny ears when you tie your shoes?” she taunted another player as her avatar, clad in a quilted jacket, a garter belt, and heels, ran through a fictionalized Los Angeles landscape in *Grand Theft Auto V*. “You eat ketchup for breakfast.”)

Or it might mean she’ll vent. She’ll inveigh, for instance, against a rumor that her recent weight loss is due to cocaine use (“No, bitch, it’s eggs”). Or mock fellow Angelenos who shutter businesses during storms. (“You can’t go get a fucking bagel,” she asked, incredulous, in December, “because there’s frost?”)

It usually means that she’ll play music by other artists. Instagram can make this difficult, as its licensing agreements limit her ability to play others’ records, often forcing her to restart livestreams or end them entirely. Over on TikTok, policies governing music on livestreams are laxer, but the platform has slapped her feed with a warning if she drinks or vapes on camera. “How dare you try to make me look like I’m a bad influence, even though I am,” she ranted on a TikTok livestream, addressing its content moderation.

And through some mix of lip sync, karaoke, and hamming, she’ll embody the music she plays, enact the feeling. She’s both kidding, and not.

On Instagram Live in December, wearing only green lingerie, she incorporated a venti Starbucks cup into her

shtick as she bounced and mouthed the words to “Stroke” by IV4 featuring Jeremih, a recent R&B release. “I’ve had this song on repeat for a week now,” she said, pressing pause. “It’s evolved into different things in my head.” She recounted how she’d recently been singing the hook in a cartoonish falsetto while others begged her to stop.

“This song, it’s part of me now,” she said, laughing. “It’s running through my veins.”

Part of what Doja is reaching for, it seems, is some formula for reverse-engineering this feeling of succumbing to music — of being inhabited, moved by it. For working against entropy to coax vibrations from flesh and bone back to speaker, back to audio file. When it comes to this ambition, she’s utterly serious.

“I want to feel the way I feel about other’s music about my music. I’m gonna keep trying. It’s not for yall. I’m looking for it for myself,” she wrote on Twitter last June, days after releasing *Planet Her*. “This doesn’t mean I think my music is bad,” she added.

Anyone who’s engaged in creative work will recognize the chasm between what we can imagine and what we can actually make in the world. Bearing witness to any artist striving to narrow this gap is interesting; following an artist of Doja’s caliber who takes the measure of this distance, who insists we watch as she stretches herself across the span, feels electric.

As Christmas Eve drifted toward Christmas morning, and with the bathtub still serving as creative crucible, some of the very artists and engineers

she’d namechecked minutes before, like the producer Jay Versace, filtered into the livestream, floating up comments to accept her invitation to collaborate on the rap-focused project. “DM me,” she said, smiling as she scrolled through the messages.

Could she make new music that recaptured the old feelings? It was an idea she’d begun playing with on songs like “Tonight” featuring Eve, on the deluxe edition of *Planet Her*, using a beat from 2004 meant to evoke the sound of the early aughts.

Still, a rap project was the “less-smart” path forward, she said, than releasing a steady stream of pop hits that could form an easily legible body of work. Yet the possibility was intoxicating. She wanted to try. And now we were all privy to the effort.

“I guess maybe I was asking you guys how you feel about that. Not even asking you so much — it was more like 50-50, asking you how you feel, and also telling you that’s what I want to do.”

Enthusiastic messages bubbled up from viewers. Here was the fan-made meme come full circle, the irony made earnest.

She slouched against the wall of the tub. “I just want to do better,” she said.

THE COYOTE PROBLEM

Unapologetic savagery

YXTA MAYA MURRAY

Three weeks ago, while walking on a paved road cutting through Griffith Park, I found myself halted by a blonde woman wearing an anxious, clenched expression on her pretty round face.

“Careful! There are coyotes here!” she said.

I turned to see her trailed by three smiling canines with nimble, almost levitating gaits. The coyotes skipped forward with their heads low to the ground, and did not appear much frightened of the woman, me, nor a group of bicyclists that came zipping suddenly up the path.

“Watch it!” the woman yelled, this time to the cyclists. She checked on her charges, which serpented in jerky movements to avoid any collisions. When the

danger passed, she stretched out her arms and, in a voice she might use with a crying child, crooned, "It's okay, it's okay, you're okay." Thrusting her hand into her pocket, she threw what appeared to be dog treats onto the road. The coyotes snatched them up.

I moved hastily up an incline while rehearsing angry speeches in my head. *Don't you know what those things do? Don't you know it's illegal to feed them? What is wrong with you?*

The creatures the woman took so much care to protect were *Canis latrans ochropus*, otherwise known as the California Valley coyote. *Canis latrans* are old. The canids from which they descend emerged in the late Eocene, and their modern incarnations evolved in the heat and scrub of the American Southwest. They are scavengers and also carnivores, weighing up to 35 pounds, though in a few exceptional cases they can grow a bit larger. Coyotes often survive on urban garbage, but are also killers of rodents, rabbits, and, sometimes, deer. Here in Los Angeles, they are widely feared by pet owners, who lie in bed at night while listening to the wild things scramble up their fences with strong and flexible paws. My neighbors often trade stories of the evenings they have heard their cats scream, or their little dogs barking, only to run to their backyards and see coyotes with dead pets in their jaws. While still fleeing up the hill, I remembered my own bad history with these creatures, whom I regard as a personal threat after having lost a much-loved Siamese 20 years ago. Seeing them brought back sickening memories. In the months after coyotes

killed my cat at my San Fernando Valley home, I had problems with night terrors, wherein I would imagine his body being torn apart.

The blonde woman and I stand on separate sides of a longstanding Los Angeles divide on the issue of how to deal with the increasing number of *Canis latrans* infiltrating populated areas. Decades ago, the *Los Angeles Times* reported both on residents railing against coyotes as well as activists who stood up for their rights to coexist. "She was eaten totally, except for her head and her front paws and shoulders," South Robertson resident Charles Ryder told the paper about a beloved cat in 1985; the article went on to describe how officials attempted to control the coyote population with leg-hold traps, padded contraptions that were said not to hurt the animals. Pasadena's Ed Simpson, on the other hand, published an op-ed that same year, writing, "They have flourished despite bullets, poisons, burning of their pups in dens, traps and cyanide guns. Considering their adaptability and loyalty [...] they deserve their niche, and I say, let man get out of their way!"

L.A.'s coyote debate has intensified in recent years as global warming forces coyotes out of their dens. In 2015, news outlets reported that drought conditions push coyotes into the suburbs, where they slaughter companion animals and have chased at least one local, a man named Nick Mendoza. "When I was walking I saw the four and the others started circling, coming around, and that's when I knew that I was the prey," Mendoza told a journalist. "And when you're prey, it's very

scary.” As I commenced researching this essay in late January 2022, I read similar tabloid accounts about a handsome actor named Travis Van Winkle, who currently stars in a television series called *You*. Van Winkle plays a narcissistic supplement salesman who somehow gets trapped in a cage by a psychopath on the show, but in real life, his brush with death concerned a coyote attacking his dog, a black labradoodle-looking mutt named Karen, while he walked her at Griffith Park. On his Instagram account, Mr. Van Winkle posted a video of himself displaying a long, wide abrasion on his shin and explaining dramatically that they “almost got her leg, and I had to slide down the mountain, literally screaming at the top of my lungs.” This story went semi-viral on the internet, and on KTLA, a popular television station, the item was carried alongside a banner that read *Actor Takes on Coyote to Save Dog*.

I identify with Mr. Van Winkle’s frantic stance against coyotes but am flummoxed about how to express my enmity to *Canis latrans* without also coming across as unhinged. Many pet owners possess passionate connections with their dogs, cats, and birds, cherishing these creatures with the degrees of adoration and hypervigilance one typically expects a parent to lavish on their children. That the coyote also has been known to attack babies and toddlers only dials up these antipathies into the reddest zones: in July 2021, a two-year-old named Lejend Joseph was jumped and pinned by a coyote in Sylmar. His mother had gone to a neighborhood park in order to sign up her children for

a sports programs and was momentarily distracted. But when the other people lounging on the grounds saw the child roll under the coyote, they arose *en masse* and descended upon the animal, which had already left bite marks that cleft so deeply into little Lejend that he needed stitches thereafter.

For some, it is hard to maintain equanimity in the face of this kind of hazard. When I first decided to write about my encounter with the woman-who-literally-runs-with-coyotes, I intended to vent about my terror of the animals, a dread I do not think I will ever be able to release after the death of my cat. But the more I delve into the coyotes’ world, the more I encounter challenges to my reactions, until I now find myself set adrift in a murky moral space populated by scary anti-coyote zealots as well as moist-eyed coyote defenders who are driven by an iron rectitude reminiscent of civil rights leaders and advocates of genocide victims.

I learned that coyotes have, for at least the past century of US history, been victims of culls characterized by astonishing and unapologetic savagery. Dan Flores, A. B. Hammond Professor Emeritus of the History of the American West at the University of Montana-Missoula, and the author of *Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History* (2016), teaches us that in the 1930s, a government agency called the Bureau of Biological Survey developed chemical weapons to use against vermin, and between 1947 and 1956, killed about 6.5 million coyotes in the American West with these substances. The carnage, in part, sought to serve

the interests of cattle and other livestock barons, and so was accomplished in the name of our meat-eating population. It is not such a shock that so much pain and death supported questionable US dietary habits when we consider that the campaign occurred against the backdrop of escalating American environmental depredations — at the same time the Bureau tried to wipe out coyotes, the country nearly logged its forests into extinction, dumped unused chemical weapons into our oceans, and supported industry that led to an explosion of air pollution. The federal and state approach to other wildlife proved nearly as alarming as these incidents of ecological ruin, since the Bureau had by the mid-20th century killed nearly all of the contiguous United States's gray wolves, as well as untold numbers of mountain lions, by dispensing chemical agents such as strychnine, a neurotoxin that triggers convulsions and then asphyxiation.

Only when these dangerous “pests” were deemed controlled did the Bureau turn to coyotes, massacring them with the same heartlessness that characterized other governmental mistreatments of the natural world. To kill coyotes, Bureau agents used what writer Christopher Ketcham has described as the “super poison” sodium fluoroacetate, which makes the animals suffer “a frenzy of howls and shrieks of pain, vomiting, and retching.” This cruelty was supposedly justified by coyotes’ pernicious image, perhaps best captured in a 1922 speech of Washington State Congressman John W. Summers, who, when debating a federal proposal to fund experiments in killing coyotes,

along with other animals such as prairie dogs and the much-maligned wolves, said “coyotes [...] have rabies, and they are biting the stock, and it is dangerous for children to go to school [...]. [They are a] menace [...] to human beings.”

Summers’s sentiments are echoed still, and the appetite to kill coyotes remains just as ravenous in quarters of contemporary Los Angeles as it was in DC during the Jazz Age. A recent L.A. Reddit on “Just found out that two Coyotes are living in my backyard,” for example, bristles with encouragements to gun them down. “Kill them,” ThatBuffetEMT writes. “Kill them. Destroy them,” FriendliestRedditMan concurs. “I’ll shoot them for you,” CunningJelly adds. “Cull them,” TheDurkness adds. Another Reddit titled “Question about killing coyotes...” is filled with fantasies and advice about the legality of shooting coyotes dead.

Evidently this *is* legal? Hunters and state and federal animal control agencies kill approximately 500,000 coyotes a year in the United States, and under California law, coyotes are “nongame” animals, which means that civilians can take them if we possess a hunting license. Today we are only forbidden from shooting them with lead projectiles, poisoning them, or capturing them with leg-hold traps, which are now recognized as malignant designs that create untold suffering. Still, while California is a paradise for the coyote compared to other states, the beasts enjoy only minimal protections. Beyond the ban on the most painful types of capture and extermination methods, the state also prohibits feeding coyotes and trapping



Graciela Iturbide, *Sin Título, White Fence, East Los Angeles* (1986)
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY.

them (and other animals) for their furs. In addition, California law proscribes the keeping of wild and exotic animals; in the case of the coyote, those of us in the Golden State may not possess them as pets unless we obtain a permit from the Department of Fish and Game. More recently, a federal district court in Northern California oversaw an agreement that forbids the Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services from using poisons on mammals in the Sacramento District.

Considering the kind of enmity that coyotes inspire, it's a marvel that these safeguards were enacted into law at all. They came into existence only after strenuous advocacy of legions of local, state, and national animal rights organizations, such as Social Compassion in Legislation, Voice for the Animals, In Defense of Animals, The Center for Biological Diversity, PETA, and the ASPCA. California's history of this kind of activism is resplendent with examples of people dedicating their lives to animals, such as In Defense of Animals's Dr. Elliot Katz, a North Bay veterinarian who engaged in nonviolent protests over institutional abuses, such that he was arrested 37 times during the course of his career. Betty White, the much loved and recently deceased actress, is another example, as she worked tirelessly with rescue organizations and also helped upgrade the facilities at the Los Angeles Zoo. The conservationist Dr. Biruté Galdikas offers another admirable instance of animal welfare work, as she pioneered important aspects of orangutan studies, and founded the Orangutan Foundational International

in L.A.

California activists maintaining more direct contacts with coyotes also bear impressive histories of preserving the canids' health and welfare, though certain of these campaigners have sometimes strayed into ambiguous ethical and even legal territory. Camilla Fox, the award-winning founder and executive director of the Bay Area's Project Coyote, is one of most flawless coyote champions, having developed the organization in 2008 in order to (as per the Project's website) "change negative attitudes toward coyotes [...] by replacing ignorance and fear with understanding, respect and appreciation." Project Coyote has embarked upon a laudable public education mission, and initiated measures designed to diminish harmful coyote-livestock contacts. Still, sometimes Fox can strike an odd note, such as when she began talking about Native Americans in an undated interview posted on Project Coyote website:

[Coyotes] are [...] revered, respected and appreciated by many Native America tribes [...]. Unfortunately there is still wide scale anti-predator sentiment in this country that stems from our colonization of this continent and subsequent mass killing of large predators and anything else we feared and called "other" including Native Americans.

Are coyotes revered by Native Americans in exactly the way that Fox describes? And, more importantly, is

killing coyotes related to the mass murder of Native Americans? A brief study of connections made between Native Americans and coyotes reveals many scholars and journalists making sweeping declarations about the critical role that coyotes possess in Native American mythology and religion. It bears noting, however, that Cutcha Risling Baldy, an associate professor of Native American Studies at Cal Poly Humboldt, writes that “coyote” is a translation of the Indigenous names for charismatic figures or characters in a variety of Indigenous oral traditions. This term is derived from first, the Nahuatl, and then the Spanish word for *Canis Latrans*. It thus may be that the association is based on a centuries-old “misinterpretation,” as Baldy assesses, in her 2015 article “Coyote is not a metaphor: On decolonizing, (re)claiming and (re)naming Coyote.” Baldy’s analysis is subtle and deep, and seeks to avoid “policing” names for Coyote; rather, she strives to understand these uses of language, their colonial histories, and their liberatory possibilities. But her study does highlight the dangers of making these easy parallels. Further, Fox’s decision to analogize the roots of coyote slaughter to the US efforts to eradicate Native American life, family, health, and sovereignty is also curious, particularly when we consider the unfortunate history of analogizing people of color to animals.

The case of Martine Colette is more troubling. A daughter of a Belgian diplomat, Colette founded the Wildlife Waystation, a wild and exotic animal preserve that sat in the

foothills of the San Fernando Valley. Colette, who died in February, did not specialize in coyotes, but took care of them along with other exotic and wild mammals and birds. The activist was inspired to save animals after spending her childhood in “Africa,” where she saw firsthand the “horrors of trapping camps, hunting, and exploitation of animals,” according to the Waystation’s web presence. When Colette was not lobbying for better laws, or taking in at-risk animals, she educated the public about living with coyotes: in a 2019 interview, she advised that people should avoid leaving food out, and, when encountering wild canids, they should raise their jackets over their heads to look intimidating. But Colette was also a complicated person, as she mismanaged the Waystation to such a degree that, in 2002, the organization was cited as being in violation of 299 federal animal welfare laws, including holding animals in dangerous facilities and refraining from keeping adequate records, among other wrongs. “[R]espondents failed to establish and maintain programs of adequate veterinary care,” the Department of Agriculture’s 2002 consent decision reads. “Respondents failed to handle animals as expeditiously and carefully as possible in a manner that does not cause trauma or physical harm.”

Perhaps the most disturbing instance of coyote-rights activism is the response to the death of Kelly Lynn Keen, a three-year-old who was killed by a coyote in Glendale in 1981. The child, who had walked outside of her house one afternoon, was attacked in

her driveway. Her parents rushed her to the hospital, where she underwent hours of surgery, but succumbed to her injuries. Fast forward to 2004, when the Glendale City Council voted to allocate moneys to the trapping and killing of about 40 coyotes. Evidently the '81 tragedy was cited in support for this measure, and at least two advocates disputed Keen's cause of death. One of these was Lila Brooks, otherwise known as "the coyote lady." An L.A.-based activist and Hungarian native, Brooks devoted her life to coyote welfare, and fought against evils such as the leg-hold trap. In a self-published book titled *The Chronicle of a Coyote Defender* (2016), Brooks included the full record of her work to educate the public on the harms of leaving out food, and to put an end to the poisoning of California predators, among other efforts. "Inhumane cruel acts have an adverse and demoralizing effect on those who practice them and makes them insensitive toward all living beings, humans and animals alike," she wrote. But Brooks maintained that coyotes were not responsible for Kelly Keen's perishing, and she focused less on the plight of the Keen family and rather more on the coyotes that were decimated in the aftermath, a move she described as a "frenzy."

Worse were the claims of activist Pamelyn Ferdin, a onetime child actor turned nurse and energetic advocate for animals. At the 2004 hearing, Ferdin maintained that Keen had not been killed by any animal, saying, "The child had a ruptured spleen, from the medical records. That comes from blunt trauma. Blunt trauma comes from a beating,

not from a bite to the spleen." Many interpreted these comments as intimations that Keen's parents had killed their child, a suggestion so inflammatory that Keen's mother, Cathy, later drove to City Hall with Kelly's death certificate. "I cannot believe someone would accuse my husband or me of child abuse," she said. "I loved that child with all of my heart and soul."

In the writing of this essay, I am trying to use research and rationality to strike a clear ethical path through my morass of ugly feelings about coyotes, but I find it a challenge to synthesize a coherent history of the coyote, its enemies, and its guardians. The story of the coyote is a confusing saga of child attacks, terrified and bereaved parents, despairing pet owners, brutal government extermination campaigns, selfless advocacy, heroic dedication to vulnerable creatures, housing's encroachment into the bush, climate change, drought, confounding ignorance, and an inundation of intense emotion. Further muddying the waters is the sensation that the coyote's fate is linked inextricably with humanity's radical disconnect from nature, as well as our alienation from one another. Coyotes would not attack people if we had not built deep into the wild. Coyotes would not attack if we did not feed them or treat them like domesticated dogs. Coyotes are only following their instincts, and these have been both sharpened and derailed by man's errors. And the issues only get more mangled by our disdain for the suffering of our human antagonists, as well as our colonial history and problems with racism.

This morning, as I took my daily

walk in Griffith Park and thought about the possibility that I might, today, finally finish this project — it has been one of the most difficult pieces of writing that I have undertaken in long memory — two coyotes followed me on my trail for about 15 minutes. They bracketed me: one before me, the other behind. After realizing that I was being followed in this surreal way by my literary subjects, I did not know whether to feel frightened or just upset at their obvious acclimation to humans. I remembered my study of Martine Colette's advice and tried to make myself larger and intimidating by stomping and raising my jacket over my head. The coyotes did not care. I realized then that I had been driven to write about the animals because in the past month they have become, all of a sudden, a ubiquitous presence on my route through Griffith Park, where I had only rarely seen them before. I do not know why; perhaps they'll go away again; perhaps it's something permanent and related to the drought or other problems linked to the worsening climate. I suspect, also, that the animals are blasé about human contacts because people are violating the law and feeding them.

But I knew, also, that I could not harm them. At first, I could barely even pretend to do so. Finally, when they would not leave me alone, I picked up a stick and threw it toward them, yelling, and then did this three more times, though never coming close to hitting them. This, according to coyote literature, is known as "hazing." They finally dashed away, lowering their heads and grinning in that coyote way. Only when they'd left did I feel that by-now-familiar

combination of angst and remembered anger.

I want the coyotes to stay away from me and my family and my pets. But I am a Valley dweller, and I live in the hills that used to be their haven. I eat the meat that ranchers grow and that government officials still protect through poisoning. I consume products that contribute to global warming. I loved my lavender-eyed cat to distraction, but not with adequate care; I let him go into the backyard that day and so broke my own heart. In other words, I cannot stand the coyotes' presence in my life, and would be happiest to never see another one again. This conviction rests uneasily alongside my understanding that I am part of the coyote problem.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SAN GABRIELS

Specificity and improvisation

OLIVER WANG

If you're ever in the vicinity of the Santa Anita Racetrack in the San Gabriel Valley city of Arcadia, you might pass by a street named Sunset Boulevard. It's an odd avenue, only existing in name for four blocks, becoming California Boulevard on one end and Temple City Boulevard on the other. As a teenager of the '80s, growing up in nearby San Marino, I would often notice how *this* Sunset Boulevard curved northwest, out of eye shot, and I liked to imagine that it magically connected to the other Sunset Boulevard, *that* one in Hollywood. Me and my high school classmate, Winston, used to climb into his Camry station wagon and cruise *that* Sunset on weekend nights, joining hundreds of other cars as we slow-gawked our way beneath the strip's towering, irradant

billboards. At our age, we didn't realize that our trips to cruise Sunset were a terribly clichéd form of adolescent wish fulfillment, fueled by a self-flattering media industry, premised on the belief that there was some "real L.A." that was more glam than the staid suburbs we knew.

If we overlooked the charms of the SGV back then, we were hardly alone. Most visitors to L.A., then and now, have little awareness that this region even exists, despite being home to over 30 cities and 1.5 million people across 200 square miles that abut Downtown L.A. To put it a different way, the San Gabriel Valley is constantly overshadowed by "The Valley," a.k.a. the San Fernando Valley whose proximity to Hollywood has made it a popular setting for everything from *Karate Kid/Cobra Kai* to *E.T.* plus at least half of Paul Thomas Anderson's oeuvre. By comparison, the SGV, as a region, has never enjoyed a similar presence in the popular imagination. The irony is that production crews love to film here since its mix of aesthetically pleasing architecture and mature foliage allows for locations in cities like Monrovia and South Pasadena to pass as "Anytown USA." However, despite a cheery effort from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend's* musical number "West Covina," as Thom Andersen might have said, the San Gabriel Valley rarely plays itself.

For all these reasons, the idea that anyone would want to boast about being from here seemed unfathomable to me as a teenager, yet when I moved back to the area, 20 years later, it felt like something had shifted, with a new generation

of young people repping the SGV and 626 via streetwear and in social media tags. There are myriad explanations for why this change may have come about, not the least of which is how the boundless space of the internet can help make local identities more resonant. But with the SGV in particular, this newfound civic pride seems partially owed to the general rise of food culture and the roles that Asian Americans play within it.

✕

My parents moved us to the San Gabriel Valley in the summer of 1982, ostensibly "because it had good schools," but it didn't seem like a coincidence that the area was also replete with other Asian immigrants plus markets, restaurants, and other stores catering to these communities. I didn't know this at the time, but our family had joined a historic influx of Asian Americans to the SGV that began in the 1970s, eventually growing to over half a million today. While the Latina/o community is still the largest in the area, by far — 46 percent of the total population — that level of presence can be found in many other parts of California and the Southwest. By comparison, as an Asian America space, the SGV has no peer. There are more people of Asian descent living here than there are in over 80 percent of US states, and of all American cities with a majority Asian population, fully *half* are located in the SGV. If Asian America had a capital, it'd be here.

This demographic prominence has shaped the culinary landscape as well. Forty percent of the SGV population

is foreign-born, and the critical mass of such an immigrant base helps support restaurants that can cater to regional styles from different countries of origin. For example, over the past 10 years, chefs from the Chinese province of Sichuan began to open restaurants in Alhambra, bringing a more contemporary version of Sichuan (a.k.a. Szechuan) cuisine than the more anodyne, “Americanized” versions first introduced in the ’70s. A three-mile stretch of Garvey Avenue, between Rosemead and El Monte, offers the greatest diversity of Vietnamese food options outside of Westminster. Want whole hog Filipino lechon? Go to Monrovia or Duarte. How about boba bar innovations? Try San Gabriel or Rowland Heights. (And of course, for similar demographic reasons, there are countless Mexican specialty spots that span East L.A. to West Covina.)

As much as I appreciate having easy access to traditional preparations of pho ga or red braised pork, I’ve been more intrigued in the growth of what I think of as “second-generation Asian American” restaurants, i.e., those opened by people raised in the United States, many of whom had parents that ran their own restaurants or worked in kitchens. There are prominent examples in the mainstream food world: *n/*naka’s Niki Nakayama, Kato’s Jon Yao, and both *Top Chef* host Padma Lakshmi and recent winner Melissa King all grew up here but notably, none of them have restaurants in the area.

Instead, it’s the places actually in the SGV, opened by those who grew up Asian American, that I find most intriguing, be that the Taiwanese-inspired

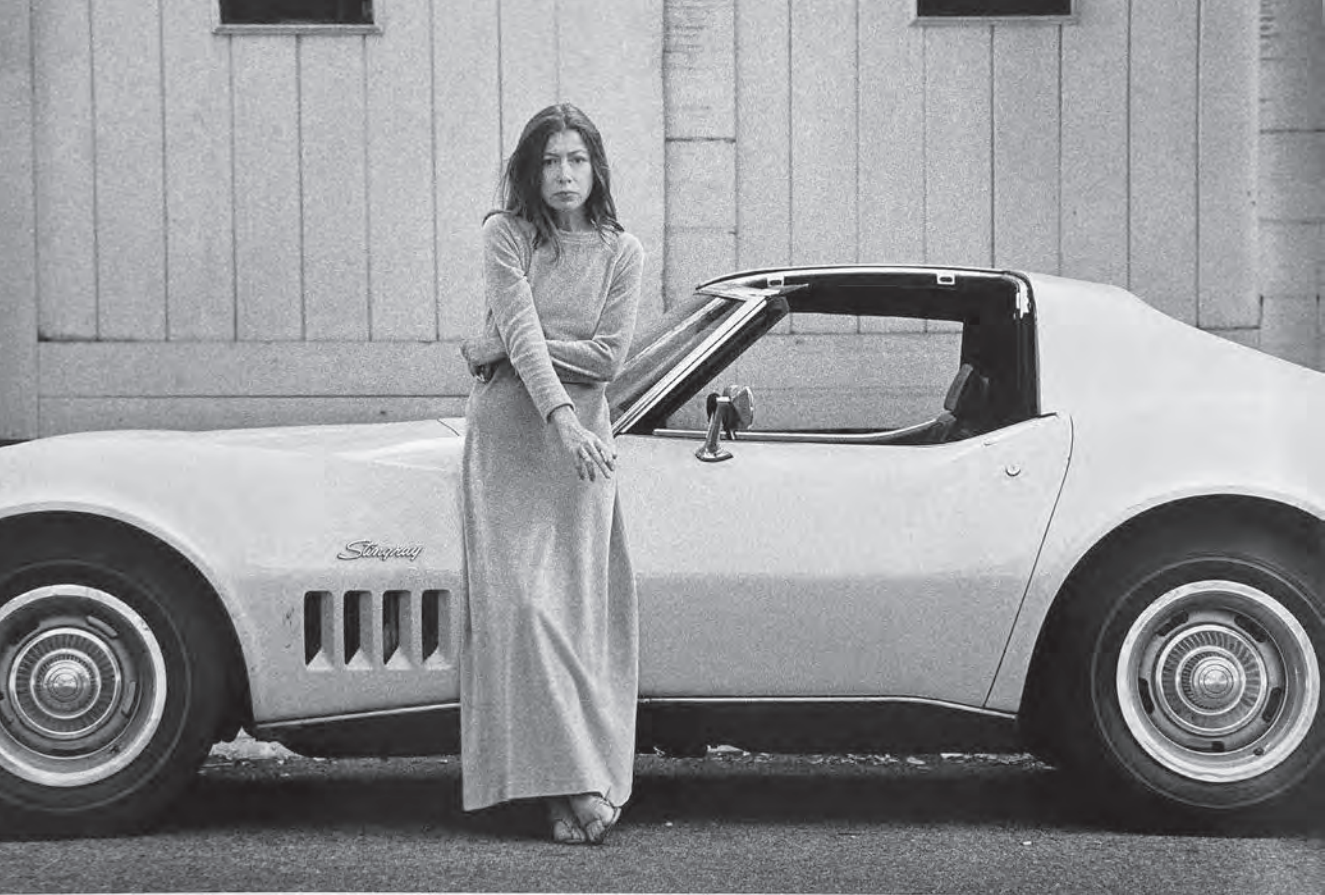
Bopomofo Cafe in San Gabriel, run by YouTube star Philip Wang, or the former Dip’s Grill in Alhambra, opened by a group of siblings to give their aging parents something to do, and whose menu included both bún bò noodle soup and fried chicken sliders. The cuisine at these places may not be the most avant-garde, but there’s often something hybridized about their sensibilities that feels deeply familiar to those of us who grew up with parents who went out for traditional Asian cuisine while us kids clamored for Sizzler (we didn’t know better back then).

These things especially matter because food is one of the few areas of American popular culture where Asian Americans can attain any level of public recognition. We’re still relatively marginal in TV and movies and there are scarcely any notable pop music acts and even fewer professional athletes. In the realm of a restaurant kitchen though, Asian faces don’t engender the same kind of confusion or skepticism compared to a concert stage or basketball court. In previous generations, restaurants served as a means to an end for Asian immigrants to gain an economic foothold but for many of today’s Asian American restaurateurs, food also offers an opportunity for creative and cultural expression.

However, even if rising 626 pride is partly rooted in this culinary bounty, there’s still a chip-on-the-shoulder annoyance aimed toward the historical neglect of the region within the L.A. food scene. Even today, you’ll still stumble across “best of” restaurant lists that barely seem to acknowledge

that there's anywhere good to eat east of Downtown. The obvious exception was arguably the greatest proponent of SGV eateries, Jonathan Gold, the former *L.A. Weekly* and *L.A. Times* restaurant critic who passed away in 2018. It may have helped that he lived in Pasadena, but Gold's intense culinary curiosity also fueled a desire to explore neighborhoods far outside the narrow Downtown-Mid-City-Westside corridor. As I wrote in a remembrance of Gold for the *Boom California* journal, when I moved back to Los Angeles, after 16 years away, much of how I re-acclimated myself to the city was by traveling to different neighborhoods to eat at places Gold recommended. This was especially true within the SGV where I noted how "[Gold's] columns became completely indispensable for me coming back to what I thought were my old haunts, only to realize I had never really explored the region at all."

Gold and other writers have done much to draw attention to the SGV's food scene, but the playing field still feels deeply uneven; a new restaurant in the Culver City is likely to draw far more attention than a dozen new ones in Temple City. That will likely change over time, especially if more second-generation restaurateurs come of age and decide to stay local. For decades now, the San Gabriel Valley has felt like a secret hidden in plain sight, but perhaps we're a generation (or less) from a day when teenagers from the rest of L.A. pack into cars, not to cruise Sunset but to wind their way down Valley or Garvey.



Julian Wasser, *Joan Didion, Hollywood*, 1968.
16 x 24 inch silver gelatin print, edition of 15. Courtesy of the artist.

MAKING THE SENTENCE CHIC

Joan Didion's allegiance to craft above action

ANA QUIRING

Upon the death of Joan Didion at age 87 at the close of 2021, her admirers shared a common adoration for one facet of her genius. “Her sentences — dear Lord, her sentences!” wrote *The New York Times*’s Frank Bruni in a tribute published on Christmas Eve. Twitter accolades from poets, journalists, and fans echoed this praise, to such repetitive vehemence that *LARB*’s own Phillip Maciak tweeted, “Joan Didion is one of the greatest writers of sentences to ever live on planet Earth. Sentences are different now because of the way she wrote. SENTENCES!”

This repeated accolade makes sense for such an eminent and prolific American writer, one whose legacy was secured long before her death. Brian Dillon anticipated Didion eulogies by writing a chapter about her “prose like a shiny carapace” in his 2020 book about the art of the sentence. All this praise is also, of course, a spectacular neg — a backhanded compliment that lauds her craft without engaging her ideas. We avert our eyes from the content of Didion’s writing, or at least make it secondary to style. While Didion’s primary subjects are also well known — the 1960s, California, the neuroses of having a self — they cannot compete with the singular elegance of her syntax. This is by her own design. Far from mangling her legacy, the ubiquitous neg is the product of Didion’s own self-fashioning. “Grammar is a piano I play by ear,” she wrote. For Didion, syntax was jazz, an improvised and instinctual play of ideas on paper, a pair of dark sunglasses that complete an outfit but obscure

one’s eyes. Didion embodied in grammar what she contributed to the reputation of the 1960s counterculture more broadly. She put the sentence in vogue, and in so doing, she abdicated responsibility for what it meant. She understood what lies at the heart of coolness: a very carefully cultivated refusal to care.

Revisiting writers at the end of their lives often leads us to evaluate the long arcs of their political visions. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Jessica Ferri notes that an unauthorized biography of Didion, Tracy Daugherty’s *The Last Love Song* (2015), revealed that Didion was no radical, nor “even a liberal.” In Daugherty’s book, Ferri writes, “Millennials learned an uncomfortable truth about Didion’s politics.” But this information was not new. In the foreword to her image-defining work, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), Didion wrote that many of readers demanded to know how she justified publishing her work in the conservative *Saturday Evening Post*. Her answer? “*The Post* is extremely receptive to what the writer wants to do [...] and is meticulous about not changing copy.” From the earliest days of her career, Didion declared her allegiance to craft above politics.

As discussed on *Dissent Magazine*’s podcast *Know Your Enemy*, Didion was part of a large class of conservative writers making names for themselves in the 1960s and ’70s, especially from the platform of the *National Review*, which recruited arty and pedigreed writers to gain credibility in the face of liberal backlash. She belonged to an era in which an aura of Republican reasonableness was in no way incompatible

with New York socialite chic. And then the Republican Party changed, not least with the rise of Ronald Reagan, who she hated. As conservatism became more populist, more evangelical, and, worst of all, more gauche, she left it behind. She sincerely became more progressive over the course of her life, calling for the exoneration of the Central Park Five in a 1991 essay. However, she remained a militant non-joiner of political movements. Anybody could be the target of her gloomy, shimmering sentences; she neither comforted the disturbed nor disturbed the comfortable. But it would be a mistake to call these refusals a let-down, at least to Didion's acolytes.

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's 1980 takedown of Didion bitterly identifies her draw. "Readers find Didion's fatalism and her fashionably apocalyptic outlook comforting. If the plague is indeed coming [...] what is there to do but wait, curtains drawn and migrainous, contemplating — if we are lucky enough to have them — our roses?" It's no wonder that, when Didion's death came, two years into the promised plague, her fans admired her sentences and let the other things go. Her privileged political despair, dressed up in silk and dark shades, can feel like an indulgence we've earned.

It was Harrison's opinion that Didion's nihilism rendered her writing shallow, superior, and abstract. "[She] makes it a point of honor not to struggle for meaning," she wrote. The critique is legitimate, and it's difficult to read Didion's journalism especially without a keen sense of her disdain for her subjects, from the lost children of the Haight Street hippie scene to suburban

lady-murderers. Their small lives, her writing implies, exist primarily to inspire near-Parisian levels of elegant despair. In one of her best-known essays, the title piece of *The White Album*, she learns the story of a woman who left her young daughter to die on a major freeway, an act of senseless cruelty. She contextualizes the event in her own life with a sentence that perhaps demonstrates her syntactical reputation. She read about this tragic abandonment in papers brought from "the mainland," she writes. "I spent what seemed to many people I knew an eccentric amount of time in Honolulu, the particular aspect of which lent me the illusion that I could any minute order from room service a revisionist theory of my own history, garnished with a vanda orchid." This sentence bears many hallmarks of Didion's style, from pretending that extreme wealth is "eccentric" rather than extravagant, to a crisis of selfhood, with a flourish of fragile blooms. It has what Dillon calls "a certain sonic ease." It's a wordy sentence, crowded with prepositional phrases, but she anchors it with expensive detail, as if syntactical clarity could be ordered from room service too. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel puts everything at her fingertips, gives her the peace of mind to imagine recreating the self along more tropical lines. This is the setting in which she internalizes tragic, sordid events like a young girl left to die on the freeway, and the orchid's presence matters. When we praise Didion's sentences, we have to admit that the combination of these two details does appeal to us. Horrible news is inevitable; Didion manages to douse it in elegance,

to rearrange its grimness with the kind of detail bought with cash.

In recent years especially, Didion's status as style icon has superseded her literary reputation. *Vogue*, *Elle*, and countless smaller outlets have reprinted her famous *White Album* packing list, with its emphasis on bourbon, leotards (no shirts nor underwear), and a mohair throw for cold hotel rooms. *Elle's* entry, entitled "That Time I Let Joan Didion Pack My Weekend Bag," includes links to shopping affiliates; readers can purchase dupes of Didion's cashmere pull-over with three clicks. Didion appeared in an ad for the Gap with her daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, in 1989 and, as an octogenarian in 2015, alone for Celine in signature oversized dark glasses. And then there are the older photos, which circulate on social media all the time: Didion in long dress and flip-flops in front of her 1969 Corvette Stingray, or leaning on the veranda railing of her Malibu home. No matter how much she claims to be a nobody, her writing is full of name-dropping. When Janis Joplin came over, Didion mentions in passing, she wanted "brandy-and-Benedictine in a water tumbler" to drink.

Whether Didion was successful in accurately documenting her era, either in dress or in syntax, she fundamentally shaped the tradition of female literary celebrity that would follow her. Stylish and mysterious women had written books before, but she was the first to work at the nexus of Hollywood fame and New Journalism, not to mention the rise of second-wave feminism. The times were right to launch a persona that could bridge the divide between popular

and literary culture, especially in the era of upwardly mobile literary white women, whose mere presence in the public sphere could register as feminist "progress." While Gloria Steinem dressed as a Playboy Bunny, Didion pioneered a more buttoned-up form of liberal feminist enlightenment: a public intellectual whose brains were somehow compatible with her ballet dancer physique and soft voice. In so doing, she paved the way for Donna Tartt and Sally Rooney, two other white women whose brooding books, shy manners, and minimalist wardrobes made them favorites online, from academic twitter to BookTok, the corner of viral video platform TikTok where young people recommend and discuss literature.

Tartt and Rooney have both bristled at the pressures of fame, but of course, that's part of the coolness equation that Didion taught. More important than proximity to Malibu or writing sentences that unroll like carpets is disdain for attention. Rooney's protagonists in particular have absorbed the other lesson Didion taught without saying a word: to be beautiful and tragic you must be very, very thin. For her, syntactical economy was synonymous with every other kind. If her sentences were stripped back of effusion or unnecessary details, so too her plain (expensive) wardrobe and spare frame made her just as chic. Didion defined coolness as disaffection. She disregarded the impulse to make political appeals as another form of appetite. Finn McRedmond notes that Rooney's protagonists "can only produce good work when [they are] starving." Appetite is anathema to coolness.

Despair is slim and languid; it makes a dress hang in elegant straight lines.

Our standards of coolness have changed and expanded since Didion's heyday. Literary celebrities are no longer entirely white or American, although beauty, often defined by European standards of slenderness and bone structure, still counts. There was a two-year period when, every time I entered the popular eyewear retailer Warby Parker, the low wall-to-wall shelving had been filled with copies of Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time*, for no apparent reason. Through her immense acclaim as a novelist, she had become decor. The parallels are even more pronounced between Didion and *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino, whose best-selling book, *Trick Mirror* (2019), echoes some of the most famous Didion lines: the world is nonsensical, but I write to find out what I mean, who I am. Lauren Oyler's semi-viral review of *Trick Mirror* also strikes a familiar chord. Every Tolentino essay taking the pulse on "the culture," she writes, becomes a circular reflection on the author herself; acknowledging this fact makes the inward turn literary, artistic, even brave. Though both writers claim to be self-deprecating, their status as beautiful is unquestioned. Oyler remarks that she assumes that Tolentino "must feel overwhelming pity for ugly women, if she has ever met one." Didion, who personally shopped for a dress for Manson murderer Linda Kasabian to wear to court, would probably sympathize.

In this era of the girlboss, where biographies of Harriet Tubman announce that "*She Came to Slay*," it would make sense to lobby for Didion's stylishness

as a revolutionary act, her gorgeous sentences some kind of "Lean in, listen up, boys!" Didion would hate this move, and I hate it too. On the other hand, while I'm grateful for the energy and rigor of feminist critiques like Harrison's and Oyler's, I can't match it. I have always loved her writing, more or less uncritically. For one, her style was practically designed to appeal to 21-year-old bookish girls. But even more, Didion's particular brand of pessimism feels unnervingly relevant for our times. She meditated on societal collapse, on plague years and senseless violence. Though many of our current public intellectuals (girlboss and otherwise) have been required to take more hardline political stances, the impulse to give up, to revel in loss, has never been more tempting.

Nowhere does Didion's ennui seem so trenchant as in her reflections on climate crisis. For her, the cruelty of an uncaring ecosystem lived very intimately with the glamour of Los Angeles. Didion knew two Californias: Hollywood glitz and the Wild West, a vast and uncivilized desert, a bleak settler fantasy. This California, the one in which she, and I, were born, was a place for religious ecstasy, blunted prairie manners, and existential dread. She obsessively prodded the permeable barrier between the two Californias and found the inspiration for much of her writing there. This portrait is also the source of her most delectable and embarrassing snobbery. Of the dusty and conservative county of San Bernardino she writes, "This is the California where it is possible to live and die without ever eating an artichoke."

Long before climate change became a popular talking point, Didion depicted Los Angeles as a city whose appeal was entangled with the caprices of atmosphere. She focused especially on the Santa Ana winds, which blow in toward the coast from the Sierras each winter, bringing a strange alchemical tang that sets the whole city on edge. In “Los Angeles Notebook,” she writes, “Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse [...] the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are.” These sentences depend on repetition and rhythm, cultivating unease as they collect attributes of the apocalyptic city.

For Didion, the chic desperation of Los Angeles was inseparable from climate despair. A place known for its good weather and laid-back attitudes, she thought, gained its racy edge from frequent disturbances in the atmosphere, impressing themselves upon the psyche of each resident. She was loath to find political meaning in this, preferring to brood as the superstition-laced wind made suicide rates go up and the fillings in one’s mouth vibrate. While this apathy became one of her greatest calling cards for fans, her detractors, quite rightly, react with frustration. Didion is at her most divisive when she revels in nihilism. I can’t make concrete judgments about who falls on either side of the division between fan and detractor, but I do know that Didion’s elegant disinterest has become less satisfying, less thrilling, for me as I have grown older.

Reading her as a 21-year-old also anxious to escape dusty inland California for a new landscape, I shared in her glamour. Now, nearing 30, I am frustrated by the way she substituted detail and self-pity for action. For me and, I imagine, many of her readers, she represents the particular time and place, not only of Los Angeles in 1969, but of our own lives, a moody and literary girlhood many miles from the nearest beach.

The last lines of *The White Album* center on the fire season of 1978, which razed hundreds of houses in her neighborhood in Malibu, just after she and her family had left it.

[M]y husband and daughter and I went to look at the house on the Pacific Coast Highway in which we had lived for seven years.

The fire had come to within 125 feet of the property, then stopped or turned or been beaten back, it was hard to tell which. In any case it was no longer our house.

Didion’s references to her house on the PCH aren’t precisely relatable, nor are they designed to be. However, her impulse to walk away from the fire, down toward the beach, has lingering — if inconsistent — appeal. For many readers, the selfishness of ignoring a fire is the last luxury America affords.

HERE, MY PHOTO OF YOU

VICKIE VÉRTIZ

For Shirin Neshat and Los Angeles

You are nearly smiling. I apologize: I don't have a violin to accompany me

I have tubas, snare drums, and men declaring seduction through their noses
It was time to go when the ocean herself took me by the legs

and tumbled my ass out onto the shore. And now we are back, to the beach
where this all began — there are so many ways to go home again

Let it come to you in the atoms of rosewater. In the turmeric
of the tongue. Crumbled over firozeh and the sweetness of your son's hands

Here are the waves: blue-green that swell and never crash
They grow and grow, passing you from one hand to the next
until you are in the center of the sea

We know what it's like not to go home. Neither here nor there, we

made home in the middle. What is madness but another way to see the world
To survive that which otherwise kills us on the inside and in real life

What is madness but the way we crack misogyny with the butt of a rifle

MEALS

CATHY LINH CHE

I hear the wet click of bones unfastening,
my mother's hands slick with fat.

Green the cold leaves that stuck to my hands
when I washed them in the silver bowl.

Translucent the cartilage
between my teeth.

The whole burnt summer,
I tasted nopales, I tasted the earth.

Tortillas warmed over the stove,
arrows pointed from the burner,

a slice of American cheese melted in between.
Martha chopped the onions, spraying acid.

I teared up when I crossed her kitchen,
the tiles cold against my bare feet.

In their backyard, José washed
tomatillos of their paper skins.

The hands my father used
to draw blood

pressed hard against my mother's.
I tasted a knife I'd lick clean.

Aunt Bê leaves new fruit bedside:
I stain my thumbnail with sap.

When I leave, I smell Đà Nẵng's salt air.
The ocean like a bath, everyone out before 7am,

before the sun can crisp our skin like roast duck.
Before I am coffee with condensed milk.

After the wedding, red pumpkin seeds
are spent firecrackers shelled across the floor.

This is when I begin.
When history teaches an apprentice

that he is less than a bowl of rice.
When hunger blunts his growth

and gnaws down the fat,
so that he is all sinew and muscle

raising three fleshy Americans.
When ice is a luxury to water down beer.

I begin with quail feed and pig feed.
With fish netted from the sea. With scales

that shimmer against the walls of the sink.
I begin with two brothers.

Around the kitchen table we become strangers.
I gnaw on the bones like a good dog.

They Food Network into the bourgeoisie.
Once I dreamt I was swallowed by a snake.

The snake was an immigrant household.
When did we become un-immigrant?

We fill our stomachs until they bell.
We eat until we peal.

We unsecret our history.
We write out our meager mouths.

GOD'S ENVOY

SHOLEH WOLPÉ

I'm sitting in my garden in the middle of L.A.
thinking God may be a manure factory
that despite His flamboyant Divine will
to feed in equal measure
bindweeds and dandelions, lilies and orchids,
He still stinks to highest heaven.

Just then

— and I swear this is true —
a green-neck hummingbird swoops
down, settles into air inches from my nose
like a hovering sword, so near
I think it has come to pluck out my eyes.

It lingers long and close enough for me to know
that of all hovering spirits,
this tiny ferocious ballerina in a frozen brisé
has been chosen to set me straight.

Here's to your theology, it seems to say.
Here's to your spiritual coup d'état,
you Solomonseal,
you Sholeh flower,
you pollen among others.

WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT L.A.

L.A. is already buried under a mountain of clichés and I don't wish to add another.

— Mike Davis, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*

When I moved to L.A. I felt like a runaway. Ten years later, I feel like a tool....

— Ottessa Moshfegh, author of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

I'll start out Fanny Factoid then say it straight: L.A. is the most populous county in the nation; adjusted for the cost of housing we have the highest poverty rate; we're the manufacturing capital of the US (used to be steel, now it's t-shirts and underpants and wut, u got a problem with that?); almost half the goods that arrive in this blighted and trinket-rich nation come through our two ports. If you want to know what the future looks like, and I mean its near-brutality, this is the place to live. Snow-capped mountains, citrus blossoms scenting the breeze, and scavenged train tracks with a bomb-blast of packaging materials for miles. Text me when you get to Union Station I'll pick you up in front.

— XOXO, Rachel Kushner, author of *The Mars Room*

Getting off the 118 at Topanga one day just before I left California for college, I looked at the boulders turning purple in the sunset and thought, with the idiot gravity of a recent high school graduate, "No matter where I go in my life, I will die in LA." I haven't spent more than a few weeks in the city at a time since then, and honestly I still think I was probably right.

— Ari Brostoff, author of *Missing Time*

Los Angeles is the best city in the world for writers. A night out with friends leads into earnest discussions of astral travel and ancestral dreams, diasporic iterations of the moon rabbit myth, the best Taiwanese breakfast spot for you-tiou, the cultural significance of Pornhub commenters. Everyone you meet here is operating on multiple dimensions of time-space. LA reminds me to always be curious, to observe everything and everyone with care.

— Jean Chen Ho, author of *Fiona and Jane*

Emily Ratajkowski is a model, actress, activist, entrepreneur, and writer. Her first book is *My Body*.

Lisa Teasley is a writer, artist, and Los Angeles native. She is the author of the award-winning story collection *Glow in the Dark* and the critically acclaimed novels *Dive* and *Heat Signature*, published by Bloomsbury. She is also the writer and presenter of the BBC television documentary *High School Prom* and an editor at large for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Her website is www.lisateasley.com.

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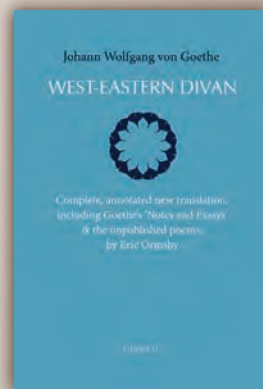
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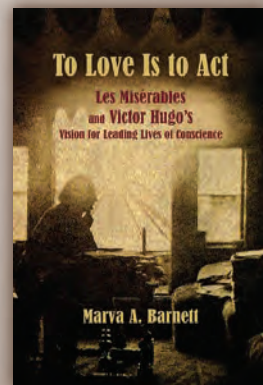
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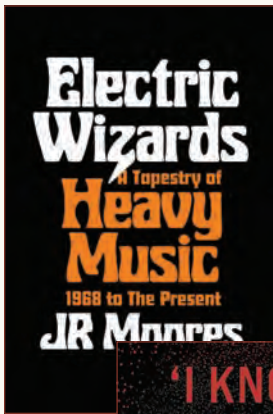
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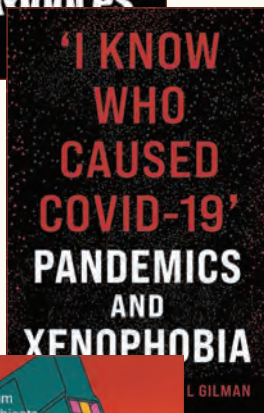
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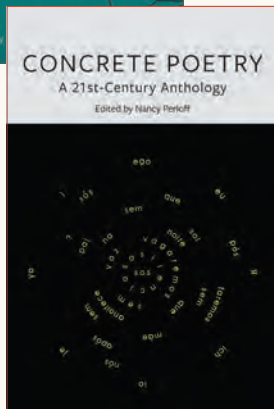
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