

Community in Los Angeles

Little Armenia, Chinatown, “the Westside,” Historic Filipino Town, “South Central,” Little Tokyo, Pico-Union, Skid Row, West Hollywood, Callejones, Little India, Fairfax, Toy District, “the Valley,” Melrose, Thai Town, Silver Lake, Koreatown, “the other Valley,” East L.A., Little Ethiopia...boundaries exist within and around Los Angeles. These boundaries overlap and blur, allowing both for fluidity and the solidifying of identity and space. These boundaries allow for a sense of belonging and simultaneously can create the ability to exclude and to feel alienated.

Communities in Los Angeles have been formed by external forces which have forced bodies of people together and kept bodies of people apart. Legal segregation by means of restrictive covenants and red-lining, economic segregation by means of “up-scale” designation and property values and rents, freeways which bisected or destroyed or boxed-in communities, urban renewal or gentrification or eminent domain policies which have wiped communities off the map or white-washed them.

Communities in Los Angeles have been formed by internal forces which have woven the richness of all of its own time and culture and experience with the space and resources allotted. Organically developed community centers, vitalizing street-vendor economies, grassroots public artworks and music groups, ethnic enclave economies, cultural and mutual assistance groups, rules and street codes meant to keep community members safe from abusive external forces all develop as a result of the formation of real and imagined communities in Los Angeles.

Communities in Los Angeles have been formed as people have migrated across borders, borders which have been imposed upon groups of people or which have been self-imposed by groups of people. At the same time, individuals claim membership in multiple communities at once, or are groups into one community externally, while self-identifying with another altogether. The results have been the mercurial nature of community in Los Angeles, at once definable and locatable on a map, and yet fluid and elusive, depending on the person searching for it.

So in this menagerie of communities and identities, who wins the title of that adjective, “L.A.,” as in, “that’s so L.A.”? Is the answer to be found in the images that flicker across the small and large screens of living rooms and movie theaters across the globe? Is it bikini-clad sunbathers and convertibles weaving along PCH side-by-side with the latest television/film/music star and their ensuing paparazzi pack? Is it the legions of fame-seekers looking for their big break from behind their sunglasses or trying to get in at the hottest club where *that* famous person died or *this* famous person was arrested? Is it the suburban-reared hipsters who adopt the identity of fearless urbanite as they walk their tiny accessorized dogs by the homeless of downtown?

In the mainstream imaginings of Los Angeles, do the large invisible blocks of people subjugated to the fridges, to the bottom of the resources and face-time totem pole, to the

abandoned industrial graveyards and decapitating freeway underpasses, to the floodplains and the other side of the river/tracks/freeway disappear? Or do they remain in the subconscious of Los Angeles, a menacing concern or a colorful weekend retreat or a chore on the cleaning list or an off-ramp on the freeway to speed past on the way to somewhere better or a bit of the scenery in a pan-over of the region or a sound-bite on the evening news? Or are they home, the smells and tastes and sounds of family? Are they the kind face of your Tia sitting at the kitchen table, or your Nana carrying grocery bags home, or your Ong picking you up from school?

The desire for a label...the desire to be that which cannot be labeled, a label in and of itself...a finger in every pie...a jack of all trades...always in the know, always on the cutting edge, always savvy to the ways of all worlds straddled simultaneously. As communities overlap and rub up against one another and contest with each other for space and rights and resources and names and face-time and the adjective of "L.A.," it is easy to get lost and lose oneself, so we reach for that logo or tagline or sound-bite that adheres us to a tangible entity, a home, a space, a community.

BODIES of people, cultures, ideas, and work both MIGRATE beyond BORDERS and create limits that produce communities. BODIES reinforce BORDERS so as to establish and solidify identity through COMMUNITY, or they defy or transgress or MIGRATE or mitigate BORDERS for that very same purpose...chasing "who am I?" and "where do I belong?" and "who is the other?" In a place like Los Angeles it is very easy to find a niche, and just as easy to completely feel alienated and out-of-place...perhaps that has always been the allure of L.A.

By: Elwing Gonzalez