(De)constructing Los Angeles: Spatial Injustice and Memoirs

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I Introduction

Memoirs are useful as both a form of analysis and a cultural artifact. Theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe life narratives (including memoirs) as works in which “people write about their own lives” in either first, second, or third person from simultaneously “externalized and internal points of view.” As works produced by subjective and self-referential writers, the works may be considered true in the sense that anything the authors say, however distorted it may be, is true to themselves. Thus, memoirs are useful not as sources of historical fact, however we define it, but as testimonies to lived experience and identity. Qi Wang also writes that the autobiographical self finds its root not only in personal experience, but also in the experiences and memories of our families, communities, and cultures. Memoirs are historical artifacts and works of art that showcase an author’s internal and external reflections and identity formation. In the case of postwar L.A., memoirs by D.J. Waldie and Luis J. Rodriguez serve as sources of experience, observation, and place-based understanding of the processes of suburbanization, urban renewal, and the production of space. These authors write about their communities’ experiences from within their own perceptions and contexts.

To analyze the way in which memoirists D.J. Waldie and Luis J. Rodriguez contribute to a larger scholarly conversation, it is necessary to establish why L.A.’s process of spatial geography matters. We must understand why L.A. is an important model of urban development, and we must deconstruct how artists engage with that development. As Arthur L. Grey, Jr. wrote in 1959, “The Los Angeles region demonstrates great significance as the progenitor of urban change throughout the United States.” Describing L.A. as an “urban prototype” of decentralization, Grey argued that although New York may be the American idealized archetype for urban planning, L.A. is the “norm toward which our cities are tending.” Almost 50 years later, Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez echo Grey, describing L.A. as paradigmatic and prognostic of postwar modern urban processes across the United States and the globe. L.A., they write, “has come to embody both the hopes and fears of Americans looking to the future of the nation and the world.” As a modern urban paradigm, though perhaps an ominous one, L.A. is a valuable site of study because its engagement with space, place, and identity is both locally particular, and nationally and internationally applicable.

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2Smith and Watson, 12-13.
California is often viewed as unique and a late-comer to industrialization and urbanization, as Greg Hise and Andrew Isenberg remind us.\(^8\) Imagining California as a unique place apart from all other American cities has produced a certain brand of Californian exceptionalism, obscuring recent scholarship’s envisionment of Southern California as an urban prototype.\(^9\) Hise and Isenberg contest these claims of California as an ahistorical and exceptional site, arguing that California’s history fits within the broader story of urbanization and industrialization across the country.\(^10\) It is a history of the making and unmaking of space, place, and meaning, of racial borders, of functional and social segregation, and of transnational identity production.\(^11\)

To understand these memoirs of geographic identity in L.A., a short history of place is essential. In the first memoir, *Holy Land*, D. J. Waldie locates himself in the southeast L.A. suburb of Lakewood, which was developed mostly in the early 1950’s and boasted 57,000 residents by 1954.\(^12\) Becky Nicolaides writes that postwar suburbs were shaped greatly by two interrelated forces: the federal government and World War II.\(^13\) California was at the “vanguard” of increased federal spending – California industry grew by 96 percent during the war, while at the same time, Southern California grew four times faster than the rest of the country.\(^14\) Employment, production, and defense industries exploded, and by 1944, a quarter of L.A.’s residents had only been in L.A. since 1940.\(^15\) Historian Kevin Starr writes that California’s population grew from 6.9 million to 10.6 million between 1940 and 1950, with more than a million people coming just between July 1945 and July 1947.\(^16\) Housing shortages prompted the need for further development. Federal housing policy in the postwar boom shifted to provide significant support for the white working-class and middle-class to buy suburban homes, instead of building them. Not only did the World War II and postwar housing policy prevent non-whites (especially African Americans) from buying homes in the suburbs, it also affected urban minority neighborhoods outside of the suburbs.\(^17\) Nicolaides writes that Watts previously was an ethnically diverse community, but due to wartime housing shortages and intensified crowding, it began to be perceived as a ghetto.\(^18\)

Although the postwar suburban boom impacted the development (or lack thereof) of poorer urban areas, the history of L.A.’s ghettos, barrios, and slums reaches back even further. Cultural studies scholar Raúl Homero Villa argues that the “barrioization” of space began with the Anglo conquest of California in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^19\) As L.A. grew in the early twentieth century, it was increasingly confronted with areas of urban “blight.” By the early 1940s, concern about areas like Bunker Hill and others rose, with opposing views in both the private and public sectors about the efficacy and advisability of “slum clearance” and public housing efforts as strategies for “redevelopment.”\(^20\) Thus, we see that even before the onslaught of suburban development, L.A. already was dealing with inequity between neighborhoods. When L.A. flourished in the postwar boom, the economic benefits were unequally distributed over an already stratified metropolitan landscape.

\(^16\) Starr, *California*, 238.
Suburbanization (and the later deindustrialization of the 1980s) reproduced and amplified extant spatial segregation, inequity, and marginalization.\(^{21}\) Moreover, another process affecting urban spatial geography paralleled and succeeded suburbanization: “urban renewal.” Contemporary scholars connect urban renewal to the larger context in postwar urban America of deindustrialization, class and racial struggles, community formation, commerce, suburbanization, highway expansion, civil rights, and the rise and fall of the liberal state.\(^{22}\) While suburbanization provided a place outside of the central city for middle class whites, urban renewal cleared or otherwise developed areas within the city deemed blighted, slums, or ghettos – often the places of poor African Americans and Latinos.\(^{23}\)

Not only have many scholars written on the urban planning, spatial segregation, cultural politics, and postwar history of L.A., but so too have Angeleno artists engaged with these topics. My research focuses on artistic reactions to historical urban development in L.A. after World War II and to the present. I listen to writers who experienced this historical era from within their places in the Los Angeles landscape. By examining two memoirs (\textit{Holy Land} and \textit{Always Running}) about life in very different parts of L.A., I hope to begin to understand how people from within these studied spaces understand and reflect upon cultural constructions of space, place, and identity. One is a memoir by D. J. Waldie about growing up in Lakewood, a lower middle class suburb near Long Beach. The other is a memoir by Luis J. Rodriguez about growing up primarily in \textit{Las Lomas}, or “The Hills,” in East Los Angeles. I choose to put these memoirs into conversation because both deal with space and identity, and because I aim to build on Min Hyoung Song’s scholarly work on \textit{Always Running} by incorporating Waldie’s exemplary work on the suburban L.A. experience.

\section*{II \ Negative Space on the Los Angeles Grid}

Negative space – the unincorporated, unproductive, and unwelcomed cells in a grid of land – features prominently in both \textit{Always Running} and \textit{Holy Land}. In \textit{Strange Future}, Min Hyoung Song applies “negative space” to the urban map, defining it as unincorporated poor neighborhoods of L.A.’s suburbanized grid.\(^{24}\) Song borrows this concept from the visual arts, in which negative space is defined as “the form of the regions between represented objects.”\(^{25}\) It is the undisgnated space between designated objects. Song describes negative space in L.A. as those unincorporated areas “defined by economic poverty, ethnic and racial diversity, and a noticeable separation from the other equally managed, incorporated, wealthier, and more racially homogenous grids…”\(^{26}\) Their inhabitants occupied negative spaces because the lands were not part of official development plans in the 1960s and 1970s.\(^{27}\) Despite the fact that communities developed in these negative spaces, they remained “uninhabited” in the eyes of city officials and developers, leading to the “infilling” of

\begin{itemize}
\item\(^{23}\) Zipp and Carriere, “Introduction,” 361, 363.
\item\(^{26}\) Song, \textit{Strange Future}, 27-29.
\item\(^{27}\) Song, \textit{Strange Future}, 45-46.
\end{itemize}
the grid that pushed out marginalized people into more intensely marginalized spaces.\textsuperscript{28} External forces perceive negative spaces to be “outside the cultural logic of progress, reflection, and starting over.”\textsuperscript{29} Song hints that the perception of negative spaces as backward and blighted applies not just to its land, but to its people.\textsuperscript{30}

Song uses Greg Hise’s \textit{Magnetic Los Angeles}, however, to combat the rationalized idea that negative spaces emerge organically as part of the unplanned nature of suburban development. Hise challenges the common assumption that urban sprawl was unplanned, instead arguing that L.A.’s development systematically and purposefully focused on suburbs and dispersal.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, these negative spaces are the parts of the artificial grid that have not yet been filled in, but did not just happen to become “blighted,” marginalized, and ignored. The barrios of \textit{Always Running} did not randomly become marginalized, but became increasingly marginalized through the purposeful development of communities like Lakewood in \textit{Holy Land}. Using the paths of least resistance, L.A.’s efficient and purposeful development abused communities that could not make effective political claims to their land rights.

Deliberate planning created L.A.’s sprawling metropolis of racial fragmentation. Discussing the development of Boyle Heights in East L.A., George J. Sánchez writes that in the early twentieth century desirable immigrants (such as white Midwesterners) were “carefully separated” from less desirable immigrants (such as working class migrants from the South, from Northeast and Midwest cities, from Mexico, and from Asia) through “an intricate residential segregation that placed American-born Anglo newcomers on the west side of the city” and confined foreign-born and non-whites to the east side.\textsuperscript{32} In 1908, “city zoning ordinances. . . made Westside L.A. the first urban area in the United States exclusively reserved for residential land use.”\textsuperscript{33} Combined with racial segregation enacted through the real estate industry’s restrictive covenants, this zoning policy crafted west L.A. into a middle-class “zone of whiteness.”\textsuperscript{34} East and South L.A. neighborhoods, on the other hand, were allowed to develop industrial sites, with working-class and non-white migrants following jobs. Sánchez also discusses how some of these undesirable migrants (especially Jews) eventually became coded in the 1930s and 1940s as “Caucasian,” but that others (Mexicans, Asians, and African Americans) remained excluded from white suburban development.\textsuperscript{35} We see that L.A.’s midcentury sprawl was not random. “Blighted” negative space did not occur organically, but through purposeful and exclusionary spatial planning.

L.A. is not alone in its development of negative spaces. We can see similar marginalized and unrecognized ethnic-minority communities targeted as “blighted” areas needing to be “renewed” elsewhere in California (such as the Fillmore District in San Francisco) and throughout the United States and even the globe.\textsuperscript{36} Prominent scholars have written about the connection between pro-growth structures, urban renewal policies, and the prioritizing of exchange (commodity) value over use (human necessity and inhabitation) value as part of a commoditization of space in the United States and abroad.\textsuperscript{37} The postwar L.A. case, however, is remarkable due to its extremeness. As

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{28\textsuperscript{Song, Strange Future}, 46.}
\footnote{29\textsuperscript{Song, Strange Future}, 48.}
\footnote{30\textsuperscript{Ibid.}}
\footnote{32\textsuperscript{George J. Sánchez, ““What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews”: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,” American Quarterly 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 635.}}
\footnote{33\textsuperscript{Sánchez, “Boyle Heights,” 635.}}
\footnote{34\textsuperscript{Ibid.}}
\footnote{35\textsuperscript{Sánchez, “Boyle Heights,” 638.}}
\footnote{37\textsuperscript{John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 17-23.}}
\end{footnotes}
mentioned earlier, L.A. postwar growth exploded with no parallel. Moreover, this spatial and economic growth primarily focused on suburban development, while also engaging in urban renewal, creating the vast grid of modern L.A. that some scholars see as today’s global paradigm of urban expansion. L.A. is an extreme example of deliberate social, economic, and racial spatial planning producing both “positive” and “negative” spaces within the grid.

Song’s theory of negative spaces emerges primarily from his discussion of Rodriguez’s Always Running. Although I do not wish to recapitulate his argument, I will summarize and build on it. Song uses selections of Rodriguez’s memoir to describe the neighborhoods forgotten by suburbanization. One of the passages he cites is Rodriguez’s most intense description of negative space, in which he writes, “Unincorporated county territories were generally where the poorest people lived, the old barrios, which for the most part didn’t belong to any city because nobody wanted them.” Rodriguez adds that most of Watts and East L.A. (two of L.A.’s poorest neighborhoods) were unincorporated. “Most drivers,” he writes, “never imaged such a place [as Las Lomas, or “The Hills”] existed, a place you could have found in the Ozarks or the hills of Tijuana.” These neighborhoods had limited or non-existent infrastructure and literally were unseen by cars passing on nearby freeways.

Song uses this vivid image of the unincorporated, unofficial, and unseen spaces of L.A. to explain how these places became “marked... for future development.” Further using Always Running as literary evidence of an historical occurrence, Song cites a passage in which Rodriguez describes the process of “infilling” which involved new tract homes appearing “on previously empty space or by displacing the barrios.” Song argues that infilling simultaneously ignored the presence of marginalized people on land deemed developable, and further marginalized those people by displacing them into the barrios that remained unincorporated, undeveloped, and “forbidden.”

Supplementing Song’s discussion, I would like to add one more example of negative space in Always Running. In this example, Rodriguez describes the social invisibility of negative spaces, which is as essential as the geographic invisibility of these spaces. “Railroad tracks divided us from communities where white people lived, such as South Gate and Lynwood across from Watts,” Rodriguez writes, “We were invisible people in a city that thrived on glitter, big screens and big names, but this glamour contained none of our names, none of our faces.” Not only do we see that these spaces were excluded from maps and from the view of the successful, their existence was erased from the public identity of L.A.

The concept of negative space emerges out of the work both of artists like Rodriguez from the barrio and also of artists like Waldie from the dissimilar suburbs. In D. J. Waldie’s Holy Land, the idea of the grid that is placed upon “empty” land recurs consistently. In Holy Land, we see a history of L.A.’s land that starts with “empty,” meaningless land – or at least that is how developers see it. Those lands then become rationalized, planned, and developed upon a precise grid. Some cells – the barrios, or ghettos – on the grid lapse from initial rationality to negativity. What is key, however, is the perception of empty space.

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38Nicolaides, My Blue Heaven, 187.
41Rodriguez, Always Running, 39.
42Ibid.
43Song, Strange Future, 46.
44Rodriguez, Always Running, 41.
45Song, Strange Future, 46.
46Rodriguez, Always Running, 20.
47Song, Strange Future, 48.
Waldie writes early in the memoir, “Before they put a grid over it, and restrained the ground from indifference, any place was as good as any other.”

In this quotation, we see that Waldie is engaging with the idea that land is meaningless space until labeled, planned, and developed, and that difference in space and place occurs after the application of the grid. Waldie later writes, “Every map is a fiction. Every map offers choices. It’s even possible to choose something beautiful.”

Waldie suggests that the artificiality of the grid means developers always are making choices and purposefully creating spatial circumstances, which contradicts the common assumption that suburbanization is unplanned, chaotic, and organic.

Unlike the developers, Waldie does not see land as meaningless, empty, and unoccupied. In a subtle, yet poignant statement after a discussion of the type of soil found in the L.A. Basin, Waldie writes, “When sugar beet production declined in the 1920s, the truck farmers who leased the land from the Montana Land Company alternated crops of carrots, lima beans, and alfalfa. Most of the farmers, before 1942, were Japanese.”

Whether intentionally or not, Waldie alludes to a subject that should produce an emotional reaction from anyone versed in American World War II history: the internment of the Japanese and subsequent land loss of many Japanese farmers. I interpret Waldie’s subtle reference to this emotionally-fraught history as a move to underscore the fact that the land developers seized was not unoccupied, meaningless, or unused. It just was not used by desirable people or people who could fight against the power of the imposing grid.

III Rationality and the Natural World

Connected to negativity is the concept of rationality; that which is negative is inherently irrational. Song writes that negative spaces are perceived as “outside the cultural logic of progress, reflection, and starting over.” He writes: “the orthodoxy of planned communities, incorporated and unincorporated spaces, racial exclusions, and capital flows are built on assumptions of cultural superiority, human progress, and consumer desire.” Song is arguing that the conceptualization of negative space is dependent on underlying assumptions about rationality, as determined by the ideas of progress, civilization, and property.

Song emphasizes the role of the border between rational and negative spaces that people from negative spaces (like Rodriguez) cannot pass.

Extending the concept of negative spaces as “irrational,” we can also see connections between “rationality” and “nature.” In discussing rational space, Song does not incorporate the role of nature, or the natural world, in the perception of space as rational. I argue, however, that the presence of “nature” is essential in perceptions of rationality.

Throughout Holy Land, Waldie repeatedly returns to the image of the grid – and how uncomfortable it makes people. Waldie believes the subsequent design shift to suburbs with meandering cul-de-sacs in the 1970s was a reaction to the starkness, artificiality, soullessness, and hyper-rationality of the gridded suburbs with streets meeting at 90 degree angles.

Although we might expect that rationality would be perceived as positive, Waldie shows us that being too rational is not desirable. Moreover, we subtly see that nature plays a role in rationality in this example, as well: “This is not a garden suburb. The streets do not curve or offer vistas. The street grid always intersects at right angles... The city planted some of these [streets] with eucalyptus trees and red crape myrtle.

49Waldie, Holy Land, 47.
50Waldie, Holy Land, 133.
51Song, Strange Future, 48.
52Song, Strange Future, 29.
53Song, 48-49.
54Waldie, Classroom visit to American Studies 396, Carleton College, May 21, 2014.
on narrow, well-tended medians and parkway strips.” Waldie contrasts the hyper-rationality of the grid with the rational, but soft, “garden suburb.” As seen the images accompanying the text of *Holy Land*, Lakewood’s grid is neither scenic nor winding, but rather efficient. The photos Waldie includes show the progression of Lakewood from “empty” land, to lined and gridded land, to the completed gridded suburb.

The distinction between *garden suburb* and *gridded suburb* is essential. As Kenneth T. Jackson writes, one of the most influential developers of the idea of the garden suburb, Andrew Jackson Downing, was “particularly scornful” of developers who “cover the ground with narrow cells” and advertise these cells as “charming rural residences.” Working in the mid-nineteenth century, Downing criticized the model Lakewood would follow almost a century later, scornin a suburb near Manhattan that had built rows and rows of houses on streets intersecting at right angles with shade trees along the border. For Downing and others, the ideal suburb would bring out “the best of both the man-made and natural environments.” In an idealization of both nature and home ownership creating a patriotic citizen, urban/suburban thinkers like Downing provide an early context for the negative reactions to the gridded suburb of L.A.’s (and other cities’) postwar developments. This sentiment foreshadows those which Waldie perceives to be dominant in academic descriptions of suburban developments like Lakewood.

Too much wildness and nature, however, also is not seen as ideal – at least to the external powers of planners and government officials. We see in *Always Running* and in historical sources about barrios, ghettos, or slums of L.A. that perception of irrationality can be intertwined with observance of unkempt flora and loose fauna. Many historians and sociologists have noticed, often as a side note, that one of the reasons city officials viewed the Chávez Ravine as a “blighted” neighborhood was the presence of un-manicured gardens, patches of grass or other vegetation, and free-roaming chickens, goats, and cows.

The Chávez Ravine was a mainly Chicano barrio community northeast of downtown with homes, a school, a church, and small businesses. It was considered “blighted” both physically and socially. Its story is complex, but results in the displacement of its residents and the successive construction of Dodger Stadium (instead of public housing) on the then-empty land in 1957. The Chicano community protested against the project, and saw it (as many scholars today see it) as a “land-grab.” Many scholars and community members continue to view the history of California and L.A. as one of Chicano displacement and the erasure of the meaning applied to land by undesired others, with the Chávez Ravine as a classic example.

In the 1950s, two photographers were drawn to photograph the blighted areas of L.A., particularly the Chávez Ravine. From 1949 to 1952, Los Angeles Housing Authority photographer Leonard Nadel produced a plethora of images of the Chávez Ravine and Bunker Hill, most of which focus on poverty, desperation, and destitution. In addition to emphasizing the impoverished state

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56 To see and learn more about these photographs, visit the J. Paul Getty Museum’s online collections.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
of these communities’ residents, Nadel’s photographs also reveal the “wildness” of places like the Chávez Ravine though images of overgrown hillsides and unpaved roads.\textsuperscript{63} Another photographer, Don Normark, had a more romantic perception of the Chávez Ravine, capturing images of children playing on hills with scraggly brush or people walking on unpaved streets with roaming animals.\textsuperscript{64}

In these photos, we see that the “natural world” was very present in the Chávez Ravine before urban renewal. Moreover, we visualize why the area was seen as blighted – in part, it was the patches of grass, the random plants and trees, the dog roaming at its leisure, and the farm animals mentioned in historical sources. The presence of nature, though perhaps not characteristic of all “ghetto” areas, is an aspect of perceived blight that Rodriguez incorporates in his memory of his early neighborhood: Watts, in South Central L.A. With the exception of its public housing projects, “Watts,” Rodriguez writes, “was a ghetto where country and city mixed. . . Chicken coops graced many a back yard along with broken auto parts. Roosters crowed the morning to birth and an occasional goat peered from weather-worn picket fences along with the millions of dogs which seemed to populate the neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{65} Rodriguez later describes Las Lomas similarly, writing about how one “could encounter chickens, wild dogs, or pigs” coming down one of the dirt roads.\textsuperscript{66}

The neighborhoods Rodriguez describes eerily match the description of the Chávez Ravine. Its un-manicured and seemingly unmanaged flora and fauna gave it a wildness deemed irrational by external forces. Thus we see “blighted” and “irrational” are intricately intertwined with “animal” and “wild.” While “garden suburbs” appear to be ideal to the white and moneyed, wildness may be even worse than the harsh artificiality of Lakewood’s grid. Recalling Downing’s vision of the garden suburb, we must remember that Downing and others wanted to combine the best of the natural world and of human accomplishments. The barrio was not, and is not, perceived as accomplishing that goal. The barrio is seen as wild, uncivilized, and outside the cultural logic of human progress.\textsuperscript{67}

Downing’s ideal of combining the best of the human-built world and of the natural world echoes Leo Marx’s description of Jeffersonian Pastoralism. Marx describes Pastoralism as a view of life that lead Jefferson “to conceive of the new American nation in the image of an ideal republic of the ‘middle landscape.’”\textsuperscript{68} This landscape symbolically combines European civilization’s most desirable features with “the most desirable features of the undeveloped North American continent – raw nature.”\textsuperscript{69} Pastoralism, he argues, favors neither the “wild, unspoiled, primitive nature” of the American Western frontier nor the “overcivilized nature of the gardens at Versailles.”\textsuperscript{70} Instead, it is a “landscape of reconciliation,” mediating harmony between humanity and nature.\textsuperscript{71} The Pastoralism Marx describes is not just a nostalgic longing for the past, but rather a futuristic belief in “Progress” that does not require total human domination over nature.\textsuperscript{72} Although, rather ironically, garden suburbs often destroy natural areas, their purported goal is in line with this pastoral goal: combining the best of human and natural environments.

\textsuperscript{63}Bloch, “Nadel,” 86-87; for more examples, see photographs by Leonard Nadel in Los Angeles Public Library Images collections (Web: http://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/photo-collection-overview).


\textsuperscript{65}Rodriguez, Always Running, 17.

\textsuperscript{66}Rodriguez, Always Running, 39.

\textsuperscript{67}Song, Strange Future, 48.


\textsuperscript{69}Marx, “Domination of Nature,” 215.

\textsuperscript{70}Marx, “Domination of Nature,” 217.

\textsuperscript{71}ibid.

The very idea of the grid came from Jefferson and the Land Ordinance of 1785: it divided nature into rationalized, equivalent units to be “improved” by citizen-settlers. The overly natural (irrational) is not desirable – it is not civilized or improved, nor is it a testament to human progress. In Jefferson’s day, it was wilderness; now, it is the ghetto, the barrio, the slum. Yet the excessively human (rational) also is not desirable – it is too civilized, too artificial, too harsh, and too unnatural. It is the gridded suburb. The desired landscape of reconciliation, according to Downing, is in between the two extremes, in the form of the garden suburb and its manicured lawn.

IV Artists and the Dialectical Production of Space

Both Villa and Waldie engage in a deep understanding and reflection upon the production of space as negative or positive, and rational or irrational, in postwar L.A. Their critique of both the processes affecting their communities and the dialogues about their communities help us understand these communities from the inside. The distinction between inside and outside is important to Raúl Homero Villa’s theoretical lens of “the dialectical production of barrio social space.” To understand Villa’s theory, one must understand why Villa uses L.A. to develop his ideas. Villa sees L.A. as a paradigmatic site of urban Chicano social history because its barrio neighborhoods in downtown and the eastside have had the largest Chicano populations since the early twentieth century (compared to other notable cities within the United States). He argues that L.A. is a representative paradigm for Southern California, the state of California, and event the Southwest not because of unique “processes and consequences affecting the urban experience of Chicanos” but because of the early and extreme manifestations of those processes and consequences.

Villa then describes his theoretical framework: the dialectical production of barrio social space. This dialectical production is the process of spatial production through the force of cultural construction of those living in barrio spaces and the force of external marginalization, repression, and limitation. On one side, there is external “barrioization” by city planners and government officials. Barrioization, which Villa borrows from Albert Camarillo, is the formation of socially-segregated Chicano barrios or neighborhoods, resulting from external social processes and dynamics. This complex of social processes depends on three main social controls: the landscape effect (which is the physical regulation and production of space), the law effect (social control of space through the legal and justice systems), and the media effect (ideological control of space through information dissemination). Together, these powers work to control and contain barrio space from the outside. In addition to the controlling barrio space, I argue that these external powers control other negative spaces within the L.A. landscape, particularly those of predominantly African American communities like Watts in South Central.

External control is not the only force shaping space and place, though. Villa recognizes that forms of social control and containment “have been regularly, if not uniformly, contested and or circumvented by Chicanos” either consciously or unconsciously. Some of the internal responses may be beneficial or detrimental to the community (for example, community organizing as opposed to gang formation), but all contribute to a sense of place, of home, and of “community conscious-

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76Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 4-5.
ness.” Villa uses the definition of dialectical production of barrio social space to explain how he views urban Chicano artists as exhibiting critical consciousness. He borrows this concept from Edward Soja, who describes critical consciousness as the ability to have “perceptively sensed the instrumentality of space and the disciplining effects of the changing geography of capitalism.” Villa sees Chicano artists as both internal participants in and external observers of the internal-external production of space. Although L.A.-based Chicano artists may not all agree in their understandings of the production of the barrio, they all contribute to an internal, “local authority” that battles “dominant strategies of urban space production.” Villa argues that artists who exhibit this critical consciousness “may help make the reified spaces of dominant urban planning into habitable places of Chicano individual and collective subject formation and cultural reproduction.” The key to this quotation is the distinction between space and place. Critically conscious artists help illuminate external views of the barrio as space, void of meaning, and instead argue for understanding of their location as places of meaning.

Differentiating between space and place is essential to understanding the concepts of negative and rational space. Song does not write about “negative place” — indeed, such a phrase is oxymoronic. A space’s “negativity” stems from the external perception of it as lacking meaning as a place. Although those living in a negative space see it as a place, they lose the battle to define their area to external powers that label it as space. Unincorporated negative spaces are neither desired nor legally recognized by the external powers of L.A., but instead are disregarded and viewed as fit for development because they are seen as commoditized space — meaningless land that can be developed and exchanged for profit. Through their critical consciousness, artists are able to see, emote, and communicate this process, and fight against it. Critically conscious artists recognize not only the externally place-erasing forces of urban planning, but also the internal place-producing forces of communities.

One of the qualities that makes Always Running a compelling memoir is Rodriguez’s critical consciousness. Rodriguez provides a startlingly clear example of the spatially-controlling “media effect” when discussing how information about L.A.’s negative, irrational barrio spaces was disseminated in the 1960s and 1970s: “The barrios which weren’t incorporated, including Las Lomas, became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion, which the local media, generally controlled by suburban whites, labeled havens of crime.” The externally-controlled media spatially and socially regulated the boundaries of Las Lomas, further marginalizing this community.

Although Villa focuses on the production of barrio social space and barrio artists, his theoretical framework is applicable outside of the Chicano barrio. D. J. Waldie exhibits a particularly interesting critical consciousness about the production of the place he calls home. Throughout Holy Land, Waldie continuously switches back and forth between an extensive discussion of the urban planning history of his community (which primarily was controlled by external forces) and a discussion of how residents engaged in the production of Lakewood’s suburban social space. For example, after describing in stanzas 160 to 162 how his personal experience through work at city hall “occasionally involves listening to the complaints of residents” who “often begin by telling me how long they have lived here,” Waldie abruptly switches to an objective history of the suburb. In stanza 163,
he writes that the “developers subdivided the ten square miles they bought into forty individual tracts,” providing a paragraph of statistics about these subdivisions.88 Waldie weaves his personal memories of his job, his faith, and his family into a broader, historical discussion of Lakewood’s suburban planning. He understands himself as an individual resident of Lakewood, but also as a social critic able to see the internal and external processes of spatial geography.

Villa focuses on how artists engage as community members in a fight against the top-down forces threatening to control, contain, or erase their place. His framework, however, can be extended to understand how artists engage in the broader intellectual understanding of place and space. Waldie’s critical consciousness is one that contests what he sees as standard and incomplete views of suburban space in academic perspectives on urban studies. One of Waldie’s most fascinating statements is one he does not explain: “The grid on which my city is built opens outward without limits. It’s the antithesis of a ghetto.”89 This quotation, we see that Waldie’s critical consciousness manifests in a defense of the much maligned suburb. Although he exhibits understanding of the issues the suburbs pose by including a few notes about racial and ethnic exclusivity, he also challenges the fully negative stereotype he sees characterizing “the grid” and the gridded suburbs it contains. He argues that the grid actually is not limiting, whereas the starkly defined and marginalized spaces of barrios and ghettos – negative spaces – are limiting in the extreme. He engages with and works against critical academic perspectives that dismiss suburbs as wholly segregated, community-less, and stifling developments. Scholar Lewis Mumford provides an excellent example of this perspective, writing in 1961, “Suburbia offers poor facilities for meeting, conversation, collective debate, and common action – it favors silent conformity, not rebellion or counter-attack.”90 One need not agree with Waldie’s perspective to see that part of his goal as an artist is not just to understand and explain his place, but to give voice to the residents who are silenced in the academic critique of their place.

V Conclusion

D. J. Waldie and Luis J. Rodriguez illuminate perspectives that can be missed both by the external forces of spatial production and by scholars themselves. As place-situated artists who focus on remembered spatial experience, they uncover hidden discourses, processes, and meanings unrecognized or dismissed by actors from outside these communities. They do not simply describe their places and themselves, but rather engage in an analytical discourse about the dialectical production of negative and rational spaces, and work to challenge the ways in which these places are understood. As writers working with the postwar time period of L.A., they help us understand the L.A. of today. This L.A. is one that has not ceased to breed segregation, racial and ethnic conflict, economic disparity, and social polarization. It is a L.A. that has continued its legacy of socio-spatial segregation and dialectical spatial production. As a regional, national, and international prognostic urban paradigm, the way in which L.A. produces its spaces, places, identities, and injustices continues to be important. Looking backwards, though being wary of nostalgia, may be essential in looking forwards. To gain the most accurate image of L.A.’s socio-spatial history, we must include the voices contesting accepted narratives about L.A.’s development. We must see works like Holy Land and Always Running not as the non-intellectual work of members of the public, but as the valuable public scholarship of civically engaged writers. Moreover, the concepts of critical consciousness and negative space may have utility outside of Waldie’s and Rodriguez’s works. What happens when we

88Waldie, Holy Land, 89.
89Waldie, Holy Land, 118.
use these ideas to examine narratives from different authors from different parts of L.A. or to look at narratives from outside L.A. altogether? Negative space and critical consciousness are ideas that allow us entry into rich and exciting conversations about literature, identity, place, and culture.