

**The struggle to belong**  
*Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*  
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**(Re)mapping Los Angeles: marginality in/through the city**

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This paper examines how Central American and Mexican domestic workers and their native-born employers occupy and move through Los Angeles. A burgeoning field of urban scholars has written extensively on the ways in which the built environment of Los Angeles creates and maintains disaffection, exclusion, and class, ethnic, racial, and gender inequalities. Most of these authors, however, study the city from above. That is, they do not focus on the day-to-day uses of these places. Ethnographic research illuminates another perspective: how does this segregation look on the ground. How does it affect the everyday lives of Angelenos? And, how are socio-spatial boundaries maintained? Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Los Angeles, this paper analyzes how employers and domestic workers use the city. Different ways of engaging with L.A. construct distinct versions of the city. They also produce specific types of persons, tying individuals to particular neighborhoods, modes of transportation, and forms of habitation. As such, they locate these women within already existing regimes of value, reproducing the distinctions that make domestic service possible.

It's 9:30 on Monday morning: Josefina and I are sitting at a Chevron station, on Ventura Blvd in Tarzana, eating tacos. A Mexican immigrant in her mid 40s, Josefina Lopez had worked in various homes as a live-in nanny before becoming an organizer at the Household Workers' Association. In her current position, she rode the buses several times a week, handing out information about the organization and about workers' rights. She also visited domestic employment agencies and spoke to women looking for a job. This morning, we'd started out at 7:00, meeting on the corner of Wilshire and Vermont in Koreatown. A couple of hours, one metro ride, and two buses later, we finally arrived at our destination—this gas station was conveniently located next to a bus stop and a block away from an employment agency that specializes in household placements. We usually stayed all morning, so that we could catch hopeful individuals on their way to the agency and, more importantly, the disgruntled ones on the way out. In between, we sat in front of the store, facing the gas pumps, at one of two cement tables with umbrellas to shield us from the sun. We sipped our coffee and ate tacos, a \$4 breakfast for two purchased inside the minimart, as we chatted with women waiting for the bus or to those who ran out of the agency to use the bathroom or payphone at the station. The first time I tagged along with Josefina, I was taken aback, for I had never sat down at a gas station, much less spent an entire morning there. I felt out of place and fixated on customers in cars, wondering what they thought of us. After repeated visits, however, I stopped looking at, or even noticing, people who drove up—I forgot that this place could be anything other than a convenient location for meeting domestic workers.

I begin with story to underscore the importance of urban space to daily life—how the layout of Los Angeles and everyday struggles to navigate the city help to structure social life and to (re)inscribe relations of power (cf. Lefebvre 1991). The experience of invisibility is crucial in this account, a concrete and metaphorical erasure that facilitates domestic service by obscuring the disparities that underlie it. This paper attends to one layer of this invisibility, emphasizing its literal

dimension, how it is that different groups people do not *see* one another. I focus on the unseen to illustrate its opposite: how moments of supposed disjunction become sites of convergence.

Domestic workers and their employers, immigrant and native-born women, seemingly inhabit separate and separable worlds but it is *through* this perceived detachment that they constitute one another and, in turn, “Americanness.” The processes of “Americanness” require inequality but they also require that this inequality be invisible. Here, I explore the everyday spatial practices that reflect and affirm social hierarchies and argue that invisibility is necessary for and effect of these differences.

### **Place, space, and the body**

As Lefebvre reminds us, space constructs and is constructed by social relationships. Space is never neutral, although its imagined “transparency” (1991: 27) allows us to believe that it serves as an innocent container for social interaction. A burgeoning field of urban scholars demonstrates that Lefebvre’s injunctions are particularly apt in the case of Los Angeles (cf. Bobo et al. 2000; Cuff 2002; Davis 1990; Fulton 1997; Hayden 1995; Keil 1998; Ruddick 1996; Scott and Soja 1996; Soja 1989, 1996). These authors have written extensively on the ways in which the built environment of Los Angeles creates and maintains disaffection, exclusion, and class, ethnic, racial, and gender inequalities. Most, however, observe the city from above rather than analyzing how individuals engage it in the day-to-day. I take an alternate approach, honing in on the ways the built environment *and* its uses are central to defining types of persons.

To foreground the latter, I join the above literature with scholarship on bodies and places.<sup>1</sup>

L.A. is, after all, a city “experienced as a passage through space, with constraints established by

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<sup>1</sup> Literature on space and place does not present a definite picture of what these terms mean. There is a lot of slippage, as most authors take up one of the two terms without really explaining their choice. Casey’s (1996) discussion is perhaps the most deliberate; he insists on the use of “place,” arguing against the assumption that “space” exists prior to “place” (cf. Massey 2002). Even Casey, however, concedes that there is no single meaning attached to either term, explaining that “by ‘place’ I mean something close to what Soja (1985) calls ‘spatiality’” (2001: 693, fn 38). Here, I try to use the terms preferred by each author, but throughout the chapter, I favor “place.”

speed and motion” (Weinstein 1996: 35). Here the body takes on a prominent role. As Lefebvre points out, “[t]he whole of (social) space proceeds from the body” (1991: 405). It is through the body, and through movement, that individuals experience the “place-world” (Casey 1996: 24). Indeed, bodies and places are “interanimating” (Basso 1996), mutually constituting.

Bodily experience and movement are socially informed, shaped by the built environment, which serves to naturalize the social order (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1977). Places do not fashion uniform subjects; they craft specific types of bodies and selves, locating these in existing hierarchies (cf. Ainley 1998; Jacobs and Fincher 1998; Nast and Pile 1998; Hooper 2001). At the same time, bodies and selves remain active agents, for bodies are both “technical objects” and “technical means” (Mauss 1973[1935]:75)—the subjects, not merely the objects, of culture (cf. Csordas 1994; Turner 1994). Bodies constitute and are constituted by/in place, and this occurs through movement and social interaction (cf. De Certeau 1984; Farnell 1999; Van Wolputte 2004).

We find, then, a productive tension, one where individuals simultaneously make and are made through spatial practices. For as people travel through and inhabit various places, they lend shape to those very places. Yet they also take up dispositions appropriate to those places, thereby naturalizing and reproducing the rules and expectations of society. Underscoring this give-and-take, I examine the production, reproduction, and erasure of difference in Los Angeles.

### **Neighborhoods and mental maps**

Los Angeles<sup>2</sup> is vastly dispersed and highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and income levels. This creates a logic of the city that marks neighborhoods according to who lives there, defining an area’s desirability or imagined level of danger by the income levels and ethnic or racial backgrounds of its residents. In turn, the neighborhoods that individuals inhabit categorize them and locate them in the social hierarchy. These spatial distinctions hold up existing regimes of value,

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<sup>2</sup> Unless I specify, I use Los Angeles as shorthand for L.A. County.

not only reflecting differences but actively producing marginality.

We can find the roots of this configuration in the late nineteenth century, when Los Angeles began its transformation from village to sprawling metropolis. From 1870 to 1910, the population of L.A. grew from 5,000 to 320,000 people (Wachs 1996: 108) and by 1930, L.A. county included 2,200,000 people (Wachs 1996: 113). The arrival of the railroad in the mid-1870s; several economic booms led by manufacturing and the discovery of oil; and real estate boosters who painted Southern California as a wholesome return to nature combined to create this “largest internal migration” in American history (Wachs 1996: 113). L.A.’s Anglo elites, themselves fairly recent arrivals, had set out to build a paradigmatically “American” (read: white) city, and this required a particular demographic (cf. Deverell 2004; Hise 2004; Molina 2006). Accordingly, they promoted L.A. as an Eden—a place of health, wealth, and leisure—successfully targeting large numbers of relatively well-off, white Protestants. The majority of these new settlers were economically prosperous individuals who wanted to escape the perceived deleterious effects of large, overcrowded cities like New York or Chicago. They sought space, privacy, and homogeneity, convinced that this would prevent the conflicts that plagued contemporary urban areas (Weinstein 1996).

The desire for space, along with relatively affordable and widely available land, streetcars, and, eventually, cars brought about L.A.’s dispersion. Initially, the creation of new housing tracts followed public transportation routes, but the growth of automobile ownership, which by 1915 was the highest in the country (Bottles 1987: 92), allowed for development of ever more outlying areas (Wachs 1996). From the start, this diffuse settlement pattern was also intentionally segregated, moving “Americans” away from foreigners, the Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican communities who resided in the city’s historical center (Sanchez 1993: 76-77). As the population grew and suburbanization intensified, these unassimilable groups were regularly excluded from new tracts by

real estate developers, banks, and existing homeowners (cf. Davis 1990; Soja and Scott 1996). Thus, by the 1920s, one could already see “a thorough, extensive, and permanent land-use segregation in the metropolis” (Fogelson 1967: 147).

The establishment of discrete “Mexican” neighborhoods exemplifies this history. The term *barrio*, for instance, was not applied to specific sections of LA before the American takeover in 1848; and, in fact, it only gained currency in the 1870s, used to designate Spanish-speaking zones as the city’s overall population exploded (Del Castillo 1979). In the 1880s, the number of these areas shrunk as more Mexican Americans moved to the center of town, spurred by poverty as well as a desire to maintain both their language and close family connections. By 1887, fifty-five percent of them lived in this central neighborhood, one of the poorest of the city (1979: 14).

Early planners and boosters had imagined that as “leftovers,” Mexicans would eventually disappear (cf. Deverell 2004) and so ignored this group. But even as the city’s original population dwindled, migration from Mexico escalated. By the turn of the century, Mexicans were arriving in search of work, and their numbers ramped up significantly after the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (cf. Molina 2006; Soja and Scott 1996). If this (foreign) group could not be counted on to vanish, then spatial and social containment would help stave off its threat. Housing, planning, public health, and other city officials thus worked in concert to isolate Mexicans (cf. Deverell 2004; Molina 2006). The key was to keep this community at a comfortable distance—far enough away that individuals would be unrecognizable, disappearing instead into a faceless mass (Hise 2004:552; cf. Sánchez 1993: 76-77).

At the turn of the millennium, L.A. remains characterized by a “spatial apartheid” (Davis 1990: 230) that upholds other forms of exclusion and inequality. These distinctions are inscribed in the built environment. The domestic workers I knew lived in immigrant neighborhoods, just to the west of downtown, primarily in Korea Town, Westlake, Pico Union, and Hollywood. The

boundaries between these are porous—each of these areas blends into the next—but they are quite distinct from the wealthier neighborhoods where employers reside. A trip along Santa Monica Boulevard, one of the city’s main east-west thoroughfares, highlights the differences between employer neighborhoods<sup>3</sup> and those inhabited by domestic workers. We begin at the water’s edge, in Santa Monica, in front of exclusive hotels that have come under criticism for not paying their cleaning staff a livable wage. We pass Santa Monica, West L.A., Beverly Hills, and West Hollywood. This is a commercial street, so we do not see private homes, but we see many fashionable restaurants and some fast food places, all offering valet parking; office buildings; an art house movie theater; and many Starbucks or Coffee Bean shops. We drive in front of the Century City Mall, a good place to spot celebrities, and past Madonna’s record label. We notice at least two Trader Joe’s and a Whole Foods, two specialty food stores. Thus far, the only people we have seen on the sidewalks are probably jogging, waiting at a bus stop, or selling flowers or fruit on a street corner. If we were to turn off into a residential street, we would see large houses or expensive apartment complexes with well-manicured lawns.

As we go farther east, past Fairfax Ave, past the second Trader Joe’s, we notice a new Target. Approaching Western Avenue, we begin to see more people walking on the streets, signs are now in Spanish, and the strip malls now have donut shops, 99 cent stores, and Guatemalan, Mexican, or Salvadoran bakeries. The air is heavier, the smog more visible. The streets are dirtier, the buildings are more run down, and the stores are clustered together. The cars parked on the street and in mini-malls look older. We pass by a Sears and the entrance to the Hollywood freeway. The farther east we go, the more people we see on the street, walking, waiting for the bus, selling any number of things—fresh fruits and vegetables; homemade *tamales*, *tortillas*, or *pupusas*; bus

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<sup>3</sup> Through the course of my research, I realized that employers came from different social classes and different sections of the city. I use “employer neighborhood” to talk about parts of the city where the majority of residents either employ or can afford to employ some form of domestic service, neighborhoods where immigrant women would work but could not afford to live.

tokens; clothes. Turning onto a side street, we would find apartment buildings that are cheaper, have fewer amenities, and are not as well kept as those on the Westside; there are no swimming pools in these buildings. In a couple miles' distance we have traveled from stylish West Hollywood, filled with popular eateries, bars, gyms, and upscale supermarkets, and into a neighborhood reminiscent of a Central American city.

These changes in the landscape are more than picturesque. Social and economic inequalities work to produce, and are reproduced by, these distinctions. Street vendors, for example, signal economic need: individuals who are out of work or do not earn enough at their jobs supplement their incomes through street sales. People are on the street, because they do not have cars; they must walk or use public transportation. Those who do drive, generally own older, used, less expensive cars. In addition, pollution gets worse as you travel east; the mountains and the beaches have much better air quality than low-lying interior areas. To make matters worse, housing in these areas is overcrowded, dilapidated, and increasingly overpriced. People must move farther and farther away from the city's center to find affordable housing.

If immigrant neighborhoods are characterized by their proximity to bus routes and stores, by overcrowded apartments, busy sidewalks, and street vendors, employer neighborhoods are notably quiet. The more secluded they are, the more desirable; someone who lived in the Hollywood Hills explained to me that her house was an "escape" from the madness of the "city." Houses are not as close together in these sections of L.A., and the majority of residents live in single family homes. In addition, these areas have no public space—residents do not want the "city" encroaching on them, and public space would only encourage the (visible) presence of the people they seek to escape. Moreover, the bus does not reach many exclusive neighborhoods, especially those in the canyons or the Santa Monica mountains. There are also no sidewalks in many of these zones, because nobody walks—at least not anyone who lives there. Walking through Beverly Hills early

in the morning, the only people I saw on foot were joggers, power walkers, and paid domestic employees on their way to work.

Attached to these tangible distinctions among neighborhoods are ideas about each place and those who inhabit it. How individuals link danger and ease/comfort to particular areas of the city is closely connected to where they live. For example, residents of wealthier areas assiduously avoid the city's downtown. I was surprised when a life-long Westside resident asked me for the best way to get to the courthouse, downtown, for jury duty. She rarely visited this area and worried about finding suitable and safe parking. She also chastised me, more than once, for putting myself at "risk" by spending time in "those" parts of town.

Similarly, most of the immigrant women I knew preferred to spend time in those neighborhoods where they felt "safe," where Spanish was spoken, where stores were affordable and familiar, and where they were surrounded by others like them. For undocumented immigrants, "safety" depends on the ability to blend in, to pass unnoticed. Yet, this discomfort goes beyond the fear of somehow getting "caught." Even among immigrants who have papers, it shapes everyday interactions, or lack thereof, with people from different parts of the city, from different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Members of Sparkle and Shine, a domestic workers' cooperative (the co-op), made this abundantly clear when a group of students from a local university came by to interview them. The researchers asked a series of questions about the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA), federally-owned park land on the Westside, wanting to find out why more people of color do not use that park. All of the women responded that although the parks closer to their homes were not always well maintained, the SMMNRA was too far from where they lived. It would take too long, even for the ones who drove, to get there. Also, one of the members added, she did not like to go to places filled with *gringos*, i.e., Anglos, because she and her family, like other Latinos, "*hacemos mucho relajo*" (make too

much noise), and they would not want to disturb anyone. The other women nodded emphatically, agreeing that they were put off and intimidated by such places.

Each neighborhood, then, felt off-limits to people from certain sections of the city. More than others, domestic workers had to cross these borders, but when they did, they usually inhabited different places than the area's residents. Thus, Josefina waited until we arrived at the gas station, instead of getting coffee at one of the many Coffee Bean or Starbucks stores that we passed on our trip. Those are not the types of stores she patronized—because they were too expensive, because she did not speak English, and because she felt uncomfortable in a place filled with people who are not like her, i.e. (probably) white, wealthier, and not immigrants. Instead, she found locations, like the gas station mini-mart, where she was surrounded by Spanish speakers and could afford the food. Walking around employer neighborhoods with Josefina and other immigrant women, I often felt that we were looking for the few actual places that existed in a sea of emptiness—restaurants, stores, homes that we did not even look at, as though they were not there.

Everyone charts the city according to familiar and unfamiliar places, safe and unsafe areas, habitable and uninhabitable sites—constructing personal “mental maps” that guide their movements (Lynch 1960). As a result, we find multiple, incommensurable versions of city: clearly the Los Angeles of immigrant domestic workers varied fundamentally from the Los Angeles of their employers. The ways in which individuals talked about the city and, especially, their movements gave concrete expression to these cartographies. Each group defined its own boundaries and made them tangible through physical avoidance of particular zones. In this way, they did not have to see one another, avoiding the discomforts attached to the recognition of difference. These erasures concealed inequality while deepening the distinctions that sustain it.

### **Modes of transportation**

#### *Cars and buses*

Along with the neighborhoods in which people resided, individuals' experience of Los Angeles hinged on the mode of transportation they used. How people move through the city defines how they know Los Angeles, and it gives form to their daily lives and social relationships. Cars and driving, for example, frames the lives of drivers. L.A. is notorious for its traffic and freeways; the first thing many people think of when they think about L.A. is cars. As I prepared to leave for fieldwork, everyone I talked to about my project asked if I liked to drive. I always brushed off the question, assuming it was not a big deal. I understood that I would have to drive in L.A., but I did not expect it to become such an important part of my life. Five minutes into my L.A. experience, however, I was caught in a traffic jam, and suddenly I got it. Driving would become a central and defining practice of my life in Los Angeles.

Indeed, driving plays a crucial role in the lives of Angelenos. The city is so spread out that people work far from where they live, and drivers spend a good part of their day in traffic or thinking about how to avoid traffic. One employer regularly left his house at 6 am, before the morning rush hour, to cut his commute by half an hour. There was no way to escape traffic in the afternoon, however, and dinner conversations at his house were often peppered with talk about his ride home or things he heard on the radio while stuck in traffic. In fact, seem to conduct their lives from the car. Wherever you look, drivers are busy talking on the phone. More surprising, perhaps, was a friend's report that her coworker pumped her milk in the car—a perfect way to save time.

The geographic layout of Los Angeles produces a heavy dependence on the car, creating a very specific kind of sociability or, I should say, lack of sociability. There is little public space in Los Angeles, and people who drive everywhere come into little contact with one another. In a car, even while stuck in traffic, people are detached. They cannot really pay attention to the street, and they do not look at one another. As individuals drive from home to work and other private places—supermarkets, shopping malls, restaurants—in parts of the city where they feel safe and at ease, they

hardly ever come into contact with people from different social classes or ethnic/racial backgrounds. They drive over uncomfortable, “dangerous” areas on raised freeways that are not integrated into neighborhoods and in a sense, render those neighborhoods invisible (cf. Wachs 1996). If they must take surface streets and actually pass through “undesirable” areas, their cars work to separate and thus protect them from local residents. For the most part, then, drivers manage to avoid seeing and interacting with people unlike themselves.

If driving defines one way that Angelenos engage with the city and with one another, riding the bus (and walking) provides another perspective. Certainly, getting from one place to another also structures the lives of bus riders, but it does so in an entirely different manner. Bus riders arrange their daily routines according to bus schedules and bus routes. They map the city as a series of bus and metro stops and describe places through their geographical proximity to public transportation.

The city also looks different to drivers and bus riders. Walking gives you another view of the built environment. In the car, you notice certain markers—intersections, lights, stop signs—but are moving too fast to look at details. By contrast, when you are on foot, people, houses, front yards, and even sidewalks become meaningful. One morning, I drove Eva to work, and she missed the house that she had been cleaning every week for over a year. When she realized that we had driven past the house, she laughed and explained that she did not recognize it from the car, that the street looked completely different when she was walking.

More importantly, on the street and in the bus, you talk to people. Individuals often take the same buses every day, so they become friends and tell each other about their lives, about their work, etc. That is why Josefina rides the buses in the mornings; she meets people in a place where it is not uncommon to strike up a conversation with a stranger, as long as the stranger looks like you or someone you would know. She tells them about her organization, and their stories come pouring

out. Every time we went out, we met women who were eager to talk about their work and their lives.

Because people spend so much time on buses, their lives and their stories are intertwined with bus rides. Carmen found a job through someone she met on the bus. She and Esperanza started talking on the bus one morning and became fast friends. They would talk every day, and when Esperanza had to go back to Honduras for a few months, she asked Carmen if she wanted to take over her job. Twenty years later, they were still friends, and Carmen was still cleaning that house. Carmen also met her ex-boyfriend on the bus. At the time, he was living with someone else, so he wooed her on different buses. Later, she was confronted by his then-girlfriend on a bus. And, much later, she found out that he was cheating on her from a woman she befriended on the bus.

The differences between driving and relying on the bus also highlight a huge disparity. Buses are overcrowded and often not in the best conditions. They are slow, and they do not reach all neighborhoods. The bus is read as undesirable and dangerous, because the majority of riders are poor and non-white. Tracy, an employer who lived in Beverly Hills, once told me that she thought I was brave, because she would be afraid to get on the bus. When I pressed her further, she could not recall any concrete story or news report but was sure that buses were crime-ridden. This is a popular perception, and people who live in affluent areas, those who seek to “escape” city life, do not want bus service near their homes. This means that domestic workers, who already live far from their jobs, spend up to two hours commuting in each direction. Furthermore, since buses do not go to the most exclusive neighborhoods, at the end of a long trip, often on more than one bus, domestic workers have to walk a mile or longer, sometimes uphill, to get to work.

Bus service and bus riders are not a priority for the city, in large part because the people who ride the buses are the most disenfranchised and the most invisible. While many immigrants have cars, it is also true that most of the people who ride the bus are people of color and live in lower-

income neighborhoods: in 2003, median income for bus riders was \$12,000 (Streeter 2003: B3).

What's more undocumented immigrants cannot drive, because they are not allowed to have drivers' licenses. Many do drive, but the inability to obtain a license presents another hurdle for these individuals, who must opt for the bus or drive without a license and car insurance.

*Rising bus fares and a bus strike*

L.A.'s Bus Riders' Union (BRU) fights against these inequities and constantly challenges L.A.'s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), demanding better and expanded bus service. The BRU—a multi-ethnic coalition whose meetings are simultaneously translated into Korean, Spanish, and English—argues that the MTA is racist and purposely shifts resources away from low-income areas and communities of color. For example, in early 2003, just as the MTA was preparing to unveil its new Gold Line, from downtown to the wealthy suburb of Pasadena, it announced a planned rate hike for buses. The BRU opposed the Gold Line, because it cost \$869 million and argued that the MTA was raising fares to pay for rail service to a wealthy community<sup>4</sup>. The proposed increase, to take effect in 2004, would raise the price of monthly passes from \$42 to \$52, raise the price of tokens, and eliminate transfers.

Whether or not this fare hike was intended to subsidize the Gold Line, it would definitely make life even more impossible for bus riders. For most people who relied on public transit, a ten dollar increase in the price of a monthly pass presented an unimaginable expense. Many of the transit dependent already found bus fares unaffordable, and they used assorted combinations of with bus tickets, tokens, and transfers to save as much as possible.

Bus riders struggling to make ends meet grew increasingly dismayed about the proposed fare hike. On the other hand, the MTA appeared to remain indifferent. At the MTA's public

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<sup>4</sup>The Bus Riders' Union official denunciation of the Gold Line can be found in a press release at <http://www.busridersunion.org/PressMedia/PDFs/7-25-03-mta-pasadena-line-bad-for-civil-rights.pdf>

hearing on the price increase, the audience was packed with worried bus riders and social activists but only some of the board members were present. Before the meeting started, the chair of the MTA board announced that each person would be given exactly one minute to speak, including time for translation. Of course, anyone who did not speak English was immediately placed at a disadvantage. BRU members complained, and after some arguing, the meeting began, rules unchanged—individuals were called to the microphone for exactly sixty seconds. Everyone who addressed the board conveyed a sense of desperation, pleading as they explained that the changes would break an already too fragile balance. One woman wept as she described how even now, she could not afford two rides, so she had to buy herself a ticket and purchase a transfer for her daughter's ride. She did not know how she would manage if transfers were eliminated.

Mainstream, English-language media coverage of the MTA's plan also exhibited indifference to the plight of bus riders. A few weeks after the MTA's public hearing, Carmen and I attended a BRU press conference about the proposed increase. The room was fairly empty, and even though the BRU had invited people from all the news media, there were no television cameras present. The next day, I looked in the *LA Times* and saw no mention of the event. Three days later, the *Times* published an article, on the third page of the Metro section, reporting that the MTA planned to vote on this issue that afternoon.

If the rise in fares went unnoticed by the majority of Angelenos, the bus strike in October and November of 2003 was harder to miss. On October 14, MTA mechanics walked out of their jobs over a contract dispute and bus drivers honored their picket line. The strike lasted 35 days, leaving approximately 400,000 people without transportation (Streeter et al. 2003: A1). Traffic was a nightmare, as people crammed into friends' cars, make-shift taxis, and the DASH bus system, which runs on limited streets and remained in service. Bus riders often arrange their days around bus routes and schedules, but during this time, finding alternative transportation dominated their

lives. They missed work or wound up having to walk miles, ride bicycles, or find other creative ways to get to their jobs.

Eva, for instance, managed to get rides to work every day but otherwise stayed “*encerrada en mi casa*” (locked up in my house). She missed church and was unable even to get to the bank to cash her paycheck. This worried her, as rent and other bills were coming due. Similarly, Mercedes found rides to her various jobs, but her fifteen-year-old daughter had no way of getting to school and missed almost a month of classes. Eva and Mercedes had it relatively easy, however. For the duration of the strike, Carmen’s son left his house at five am, walked to Alvarado St. (about two miles), caught a DASH bus downtown, and finally took a taxi to his job in Montebello—and then repeated this on the way home.

This work stoppage only accentuated the major disparities in the system. While employers, and drivers more generally, could sit by, fretting about their employees getting to work on time and their houses being cleaned, bus riders had to rearrange their whole lives. They bore the brunt of the difficulties, both physical and economic, scrambling to get to their jobs and missing out on school, social gatherings, and opportunities to make money.

Although most drivers knew about the strike, especially because the streets and freeways were more congested than ever, few seemed to appreciate the severity of the situation for non-drivers. For instance, a couple of days into the strike, I ran into an employer who did not know that it was going on. As an article in the *L.A. Times* conveyed, while transit-dependent neighborhoods were hit hard by the strike, everyone else remained unfazed: “To be sure, hundreds of thousands of people have seen their lives disrupted by the transit strike....But for the majority, the strikes pose a detour, not a derailment.” (Streitfeld 2003: A1)

Either way, employers expected their domestic employees to show up and to arrive on time. Some were demanding and inflexible. During a previous strike, one of Carmen’s employers had

paid for her to take a taxi to his home, but much to her surprise, he deducted the price of these rides from her subsequent paychecks. Others were more understanding. Many customers called the co-op to inquire about the strike and how it was affecting members. Christina, the co-op's coordinator, was convinced they called only to make sure that their houses would still be cleaned. Still, whatever their motivation, many picked up their domestic employees and drove them to work.

Moments of crisis, like the strike, emphasize how ease of movement remains the prerogative of select groups, how rights to the city are variegated and unevenly distributed. They expose the workings of difference by illuminating who is a (valued) member of society and whose struggles remain outside of (invisible to) public concern.

### **Shared places: Employer neighborhoods**

These inequities remain tenable precisely because they go unseen; residential segregation and unequal access to driving obscure the disparities they produce through physical separation removing one group of people from the other's line of sight. This is trickier to maintain in the context of domestic service, for every day, immigrant women traverse imagined and material borders as they cross into employers' neighborhoods and homes. Still, they remain invisible. How is this possible? Employers and domestic workers inhabit these sites in such radically different ways that they very often do not see one another. Low (2000) explains,

[t]he concept of spatial boundary often elicits an image of a physical or social barrier, a metaphorical fence or wall that separates and defines space and its use. It seems equally possible, however, that boundaries as such do not really exist and that what we are describing are locales where difference (different people, different ideas, different activities, different land uses) is evident....This reconceptualization of spatial boundaries implies that territories of influence...are perceived to be bounded or distinct because the activities and people within the territory are distinct from the people and activities outside it. (2000: 154)

Following Low, we can make sense of my gas station experience. Josefina and I made the gas station our "office," and we were so intent on talking to women who were getting on and off the

bus, that we did not really notice people who drove into the station. I do not think the drivers paid too much attention to us. As a driver, I rarely look beyond the gas pump when I pull into a gas station, except on the rare occasion when I go inside to buy a quick cup of coffee or bottle of water. “Well-trained” consumers, we do not expect people to spend much time at gas stations; like airports and train stations, they are “non-places” (Auge 1995), spaces of supermodernity that lack “any organic society” (1995:112) and are characterized by coming and going. In addition, Auge notes that people have a “contractual relationship” with these non-places, especially in “the way the non-place is to be used” (1995: 101). Josefina and I did not keep up our end of this contract; by making it our office, a place to conduct our work, we no longer used the gas station for its primary purpose. Furthermore, although we often bought coffee, sometimes even food, we stayed far longer than the expected amount of time, taking advantage of seats and shade where there was no public space that provided them. We made this place ours, shaping it to our needs. It was a place we shared with drivers, but because we used it so differently, our paths never crossed with theirs.

Similarly, in the mornings, in employer neighborhoods, domestic workers gather in donut shops, Burger Kings, 7-11s, or the like, meeting before work to have coffee, gossip, eat breakfast, and sell their wares. There are well-known places—a Burger King in Westwood or a McDonald’s in Santa Monica—as well as impromptu gathering spots. Josefina and I sometimes visited a donut shop in Tarzana that is close to the intersection of two busy streets and to a number of bus stops. It is also, notably, across the street from a Coffee Bean, where most domestic workers probably would not go. The donut shop is smaller, cheaper, and has no bathroom, whereas the Coffee Bean has a bathroom, outdoor seating, and looks a lot shinier. Every morning, starting at six, immigrant women would stream in and out on their way to work, lingering over their breakfast, as they talked, drank their coffee, and passed around an Avon, Shaklee Vitamin, or Mary Kay catalog, sometimes delivering previously placed orders. One woman always brought several garbage bags full of new

clothes that she sold to the others. She took over a corner of the shop, where people would look through her merchandise and sometimes try something on over their clothes. Moreover, there was usually someone selling homemade food, primarily *pupusas* and *tamales* accompanied by homemade *curtido* (pickled vegetables). This donut shop, then, took on the feel of a market, a place to buy and sell goods, as well as to sit and gossip about boyfriends, husbands, children, and employers. The women who met regularly were good friends. One of them told me that she had been very depressed after her husband left her, but that her friends at the donut shop—along with the \$300 in Shaklee vitamins she had purchased from one of them—had helped her.

That they were buying and selling food inside a private establishment struck me as disjunctive; they were using a place defined in one way in a completely different manner. I kept wondering when they would get kicked out, but nothing happened. And, they seemed completely unfazed and unaware that this was something out of the ordinary. The domestic workers who patronized this shop, like the ones who hang out at the gas station, seemed not to recognize the “rules” or “contractual relationships” that customers are supposed to have with each of these places. Rather, their “counter-habitations” (Borden 2001: 181) transformed unwelcoming parts of town into places where they felt comfortable. In a city with little public space, they carved out room for social gatherings wherever possible. In the process, they changed these places, altering them in ways that bridged their current needs, understandings of life in L.A., and expectations they brought from their home countries. In so doing, they created new, alternative places that both remind us about and ask us to question social norms.

Yet, this process also reinforced invisibility, alterity, and social hierarchies. Lefebvre (1991) posits that abstract space, the space of capitalism, defines itself through homogeneity, seeking to erase difference as it actively creates it. When domestic workers enter employer neighborhoods, they are marked as different because they are in a place in which they do not

belong; they stand out as other. An (intentional) dearth of public space means that they must take their difference into the private realm, in a sense making their difference less visible. They are then doubly differentiated, because they cannot as readily afford the restaurants, coffee shops, and stores that their employers patronize. Difference is simultaneously constructed and concealed, as domestic workers are relegated, and relegate themselves, to “other” places, where people speak Spanish and things are less expensive. Therefore, as they change the meaning of these places and challenge assumptions about private space, these women also reproduce their own alterity. More importantly, social and economic inequalities premised on specific valuations of this difference remain untouched.

### **Conclusion**

Los Angeles, then, is not only fragmented—through geographic sprawl, class differences, racial and ethnic tensions—but it exists in fragments. Domestic workers and employers pass each other and pass by each others’ places but remain invisible to one another. The ways in which each of these groups uses the city—where people live, the neighborhoods they prefer, the shops they patronize, how they travel through the city, and how they inhabit specific places—construct distinct versions of Los Angeles, each as real as the other even if they do not often intersect. At the same time, these different ways of engaging with L.A. produce specific types of persons, fashioning specific dispositions that tie individuals to particular neighborhoods, modes of transportation, and forms of habitation. They also locate individuals within already existing regimes of value, reinforcing the economic, social, racial/ethnic inequalities that make domestic service possible.

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