

Our Need for Space

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Our Need for Space

Alicia Lopez

Community begins with people. Not only those who currently reside on that land put past caretakers as well. My community is between West Adams and Crenshaw in Los Angeles. It is on Chumash Tongva (Gabrielino) indigenous land. The history of the land is important to acknowledge those who have lived before you and recognize their way of life. My community members are a mix of Oaxacan and Salvadoran people. Many members of my community migrated from their homeland at a young age or after marriage, to have a better life for themselves and their children. These migrations were not easy; it took various attempts to get here (U.S.) for some. Also, leaving behind family in their homeland is not an easy task and should not be overlooked.

My community found a place of sanction and a sense of home at my local Catholic church. This is where my community resides. Within this community environment, people of different ethnic backgrounds gather such as Korean and African American individuals. We all gather and practice our religion in the same space but at different times. The dominant members of this community are Oaxacans, referring to themselves as “Zapotec or as Indigenous people (Blackwell, 162). A key example of a cultural practice we hold is the celebration of patron saint days (often several within one year). According to Blackwell, these place-making practices have led, even more recently, to the migration of the patron saints themselves (163). Yes, we often attend different celebrations for different saints at other local parishes. Performances by Oaxacan dance troupes and brass bands are also present during these events. Events such as these, provide first-generation individuals like myself a sense of identity—Mexican/Oaxacan/American. Cultural practices are being taught by the older generation and brought to life in other parts of the world, including my church.

Another place in my community that provides a sense of belonging would be the local Oaxacan bakery/restaurant/ grocery store. The name of this store is El Valle Oaxaqueño. The vibrant color of papel picado hanging from the ceiling, the smell of all the traditional food, and

fresh pan de yema or yolk bread. All these elements and participating in Sunday mass make me feel at home. Sounds within my community would be the helicopter in the sky which swoops back and forth along the streets. Plus, Latin music by Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, Chayanne, Pedro Infante and so many more. All provide a sense of home, because they provide me with a sense of identity, and feeling of belonging. Yet, I am aware of my surroundings and the injustices occurring in the background. In my neighborhood, gentrification is a constant challenge. Many of my community members are being displaced from their homes. Moving to cheaper affordable housing, further down to East Los Angeles or leaving Los Angeles completely. This causes many of us to lose relationships that have been built over time. In addition to feeling less of a cultural community when those who move are from the same town my family is from. Displacement or migration is due to the tearing down of worn-down homes and building of tall apartment complexes.

According to Nielsen, displacement causes community members to pay disproportionately high rents due to real estate booms caused by new infrastructures, what she calls a “wave of condominium conversions” that are more aesthetically pleasing to incomers looking to rent or buy refurbished homes (Nielsen, 123-132). Incoming homeowners from suburban neighborhoods are flooding in, replacing low-income families who once lived there. She adds that these real estate booms have “drawn people to the region since the 1880s, when Union and Pacific Railroads fought to bring customers west” (Nielsen, 130). Gentrification also causes “increasing shortages of land and water and severe congestion and traffic problems” (Nielsen, 131). My family and many others have to find solutions to overpopulation in my neighborhood. One such example is having to park two or more streets down from where you live. Traffic in Los Angeles is an overwhelming challenge many Los Angelinos face in their everyday routine.

My community as well as others has its forms of resistance. My community speaks up through the use of murals. All around Los Angeles murals provide a sense of belonging and honor. For instance, artist Noni Olabisi and her mural “To Protect and to Serve” on Jefferson Boulevard and 11th Avenue, “was one of the first murals to address

the history of police brutality" (Gutiérrez, 2022). "I wanted the wall to scream," said Noni Olabisi regarding this piece. Her mural brought to light the subject of police brutality, racial discrimination, educational inequalities, access to health care, food insecurity, and all rights Black Panthers strived for, alongside the Brown Berets. This mural is my community's form of resistance and its continued demand for change as well as a "homage to Black radical organizing embodied by Huey Newton, Angela Davis and other members of the Black Panthers" (Gutiérrez, 2022).

Murals are marks to acknowledge our history, the history of community members, and their unforgotten past. They are footprints left even if we the community are displaced and no

longer reside there - pushed out due to gentrification, our footprints stay. African American and Latina/o relations and interaction highlight "the struggle of both communities, collectively and separately, for dignity, strength, and solidarity against all the odds" (Rosas, 101). "Black residents... worked to create opportunity in the midst of the most dehumanizing forms of class, gender, and racial oppression and inequality" (Rosas, 103). This struggle is viewed through murals and other artworks of Noni Olabisi, who recently passed. Yet her work will continue to live and validate the experiences African Americans faced over time.

My family passes down our history through storytelling and photographs. My parents retell stories of their childhood back in Mexico and folktales from their childhood as well. I love listening to their stories and learning about them and the environment they grew up in. Through storytelling, I know my parents' journey coming to the United States along with the struggles they faced along the way. Although they might not give me the full context of their journey to the U.S. due to not wanting to recall a traumatic experience, I at least know part of the story and am grateful for their sharing. History is passed down through generations in various forms, such as cultural traditions, murals, storytelling, or photographs. We can acknowledge and validate those experiences by sharing our history and the history of others too.



Noni Olabisi, *To Protect and Serve*, 1996.
South Central Los Angeles
Photo by Alicia Lopez, 2022.

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