

A Troubled Corner:  
the ruined and rebuilt environment of a  
Central American barrio  
in post-Rodney King riot Los Angeles

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*This article draws from a larger study on the contentious spatial cultural politics of a Central American immigrant barrio during the period between the 1992 Rodney King Riot and the most recent Los Angeles Police Department Rampart scandal. Under consideration here are Rebuild Los Angeles's (RLA) redevelopment and the Rampart Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) gang abatement unit's crime prevention strategies, and the representations of the space of the barrio therein. Specifically, I examine how both redevelopment and law enforcement employ the idiom of community to rebuild the ruined environment of Pico-Union and to smooth over spatio-economic conflicts and contradictions in Los Angeles. [Redevelopment, policing, community, Los Angeles Riots, Central American and Latino immigrants]*

## Introduction

C ONTEMPORARY LOS ANGELES HAS become intimately associated with Fredric Jameson's essay on the Bonaventure Hotel (or Bonaventura), which Jameson posits as the architectural pronouncement of a depthless postmodern space. In that article, the "hyperspace" of the Bonaventure looms above the culturally deep "great Chicano markets," located below on Broadway Avenue and 4th Street just east of that hotel's towering glass surfaces (1984:62).<sup>1</sup> In this article, I want to take you just west of the Bonaventure, situated as it is in LA's downtown node of global finance capital, to a troubled corner in a Central American barrio (neighborhood) in the Pico-Union district. I do so to locate and to orient you—although there is a certain irony here since, according to Jameson, spatial orientation is,

of course, precisely what we have lost to postmodernism.

In the 1980s, Pico-Union served as a major entry point for Salvadorans and other Central Americans fleeing their war-torn countries. Today, it is Salvadoran Los Angeles's symbolic, if not demographic, center. I say symbolic, because while Pico-Union is predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American, it is also home to



Central American botanica in Pico Union

nearly every Central American community organization, has served as the central stage for their political protests and cultural production, and is saturated with the signs of that diaspora.<sup>2</sup> *Pupuserias*,<sup>3</sup> street vendors selling green mango with lime and chili, *botanicas*' windows filled with plaster of Paris figurines of saints

popular to Central Americans, and courier and travel services to Central America dominate the landscape. Pico Union is home to many immigrants working in the Los Angeles service and informal sectors: janitors, hotel and restaurant workers, day laborers, street vendors, and domestic workers. The area was also a major flash point of the 1992 civil disturbances and the focus of the more recent Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) Rampart division scandal.

This article draws from a larger study on the contentious spatial-cultural politics<sup>4</sup> of this Central American barrio during the period between the 1992 Rodney King riot<sup>5</sup> and the LAPD Rampart scandal (Zilberg 2002). Here, I focus on post-riot representations of the space of Pico-Union.<sup>6</sup> Under consideration are Rebuild Los Angeles's (RLA) redevelopment initiatives and the Rampart Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) gang abatement unit's crime prevention strategies.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, I consider the ways in which a mini-mall, burnt and ransacked during the riots, the Pico-Union neighborhood and the Central American community therein became the sight of intensive intervention by those particular redevelopment and law enforcement agencies. Focusing thus on the ruined and rebuilt

environment of a particular street corner, I bring Walter Benjamin's romantic historical materialism and its central figure, the ruin,<sup>8</sup> into articulation with recent urban and architectural theory on the built environment.

While I consider the structures that come to fill the space the ruined mini-mall once occupied, I should stress that I am not focused on the built form in the narrow sense, architecture in a literal sense, or the role of design in the enforcement of LA's spatial apartheid (Davis 1990). Rather, I am here concerned with the spatial-cultural politics—discourses and practices—of late capitalist urbanism, and the ways in which these politics appropriate the idiom of community<sup>9</sup> to construct unitary images of social space through a series of exclusions and intrusions (Deutsche 1996).<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I examine the mutually supportive relationships between redevelopment and law enforcement in facilitating new relations of domination in post-riot Central American Los Angeles. Through a montage of ruins and the haunting memories of these contagions—looters and street hoodlums<sup>11</sup>—I explore how both redevelopment and policing leverage the ruined and rebuilt environment of this Central American barrio to smooth over spatio-economic conflicts and contradictions in Los Angeles. Pico-Union is an intensely occupied and imagined space, where the management of its immigrant population—the working poor and youth—works to exclude and submerge life worlds other than “the mainstream of neo-liberal and advanced consumer capitalist America” (Stewart 2000:1). Immigrant barrios such as Pico Union serve as key ethnographic sites through which to view the oppressive nature of contemporary urban restructuring, the authoritarian limits of democracy, and how both combine to manage the pressures of globalization.

## The Ruined Environment

Let's turn then to the “ruined environment” of Pico Union and to that artifact from the 1992 Rodney King riot—the burnt and ransacked mini-mall on the corner of Pico Boulevard and Hoover streets. A black steel skeleton rises against the towering glass backdrop of downtown Los Angeles's skyscrapers. In the foreground is the figure of a Latino man in a “face down” on the sidewalk with his hands cuffed behind his back.<sup>12</sup> In the background is a television crew crouching behind the black and white squad car of the

Los Angeles Police Department and just beyond it, two vehicles normally deployed at the United States-Mexico border—an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) bus and a Border Patrol sports utility vehicle waiting “to give these folks a free ride back to [their] country” (Mydans 1992). The arrested form of the Latino immigrant—turned subsequently into a newspaper photo



The ruined mini-mall

caption, “Latino looter,” and absorbed into these newspapers and magazine article headlines, “Over 61% of Arrested Looters were Latino” (Rand Corporation 1992) and “Nearly One-Third of Riot Suspects were Illegal Aliens” (U.S. Attorney General, Williams P. Barr quoted in Brimelow 1992:46)—became a

national “folk devil” (Cohen 1972), judged guilty of “transgressing the law of place” (de Certeau 1984:118) on two counts: private property and national sovereignty.<sup>13</sup>

Three months after the riots, a small group of Central American community leaders gathered at the intersection at Pico and Hoover to hold a press conference in front of that ruined mini-mall. Whereas in the aftermath of the riots, the media and the anti-immigrant movement had been mining ruins such as these for nationalist narratives in which the body of the *Latino looter* was fast becoming a powerful political text, these Central American leaders were hoping to construct something else out of the ruin’s loosened building blocks—to very different ends.

In the weeks preceding the press conference, the site had been thoroughly picked over by city dwellers. An African-American man—his already dark skin blackened with the grease and grime of his homeless meanderings, bare-chested, baggy pants held up with a rope—emerged from the rubble of this burnt out shell with a steel cross-bar support. He carried away this buttress, bearing its weight like a crucifix on his back, and made for his next station of the cross. Next a family drove up to the ruin in a loud explosive jalopy.

The children scrambled into the ruins to gather scrap metal, which they dragged back gleefully to their father. Pleased, he hauled the booty onto the truck bed. They drove off once their improvised truck-station wagon-van was loaded to capacity.

On the day of the press conference, the local Salvadoran leadership came to mine the ruin for its last scraps before the evidence, the fossil record, was erased by the approaching bulldozer. The pretext and news angle for this press conference was a complaint: the city had done nothing to clear the rubble and begin rebuilding.

Pico-Union and its Central American population were, they lamented, the last to receive the attention and resources galvanized by the riots. The sudden arrival of the bulldozer threatened to upset the photo opportunity their press communications staff had choreographed. They desperately attempted to keep the gaze of the few reporters in attendance away from the bulldozer, just long enough to imprint the image of the ruin on film before it was leveled. The cameramen were ushered into position with their backs to the machine, but the drone in the background was unmistakable.

Standing between the ruin and the cameras thus, these activists offered the following rereading of the production of the ruin. Against the media generated image of the *Latino looter* burned into popular (televsual) consciousness, they produced affidavits testifying that law enforcement and immigration had taken advantage of the confusion and the generalized suspicion of looting to collaborate in rounding up and raiding the apartments of Latinos, all under the guise of looking for loot. On the streets and inside these densely populated single room apartments, when no loot was to be found, immigration papers were sought instead. They argued that the vast majority of Latinos turned over to the INS were arrested, not for looting, but for violating a vague and confused curfew policy upheld unevenly and disproportionately in immigrant neighborhoods (Zilberg 1999:200).

The press conference closed with an impassioned call to rebuild the neighborhood and with an announcement of an upcoming community forum, organized to insert the needs of the area and of the Central American community into the agenda of Mayor Tom Bradley's and Peter Ueberroth's post-riot redevelopment initiative, Rebuild Los Angeles. That day, however, only the Spanish language media was present. One of the reporters there lamented that these organizations didn't have the resources to get their message out to the broader community.

## The Rebuilt Environment

Fast forward to 1999 and to the “rebuilt environment” of Pico-



*The new Jack in the Box*

Union. The ruin is now gone, and so too is the tall wire fence with a “For Sale” sign which surrounded the empty dirt lot—one of the 250 properties registered under Rebuild Los Angeles’s Vacant Lot Project. For years the only trace of the mini-mall’s demise was a blackened wall of the lone remaining brick building, which served as its backdrop. In 1999, Pico and Hoover became the site of a spanking new Jack in the Box. That intersection was also a target area in the controversial court injunction against the 18th Street Gang, enforced by the Rampart Division’s special gang abatement unit, Community Resources against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) (*People of California v. Eighteenth Street Gang*, BC 190334 [1988]).

The ruined mini-mall, which served as the central prop to a seemingly failed media stunt, came to be a target area—indeed epicenter—for both RLA’s redevelopment and

LAPD’s crime prevention strategies. Clearly, redevelopment and policing are combined techniques, which like Foucault’s disciplinary technologies “make possible the accumulation of capital” (1979:220), and there is a relationship to be drawn here between “bourgeois concepts of exclusionary rights of private property and legitimate state control of urban spaces” (Deutsche 1996:xxi). Indeed “security,” the last item to be included in the “investment packages” of RLA’s Vacant Lots Revitalization Strategy, was addressed more overtly in an LA Times editorial, which insisted that “to encourage greater investment, the federal government also should promote public safety by supporting urban police forces” (November 2, 1992).<sup>14</sup> Before I begin to explore what might have

been behind this uncanny coincidence between the cartographic renderings of RLA's and LAPD's target areas and between their investment and litigation maps respectively, I want to consider what kind of "social spatial harmony" (Deutsche 1996:261) these distinct techniques of managing the inner city and its immigrant population were attempting to restore.

## Rebuild Los Angeles

Let's return then to the rebuilt Jack in the Box on the corner of Pico and Hoover, and to Rebuild Los Angeles's Vacant Lot Revitalization project.<sup>15</sup> Pico-Union and the Central American community did in fact enter RLA's agenda. One of the Central American leaders present at that press conference, Carlos Vaquerano, was in fact invited onto RLA's community board of directors, and Pico-Union became "Cluster Area #1" in the Vacant Lot project, and the intersection of Pico and Alvarado, "Site 1," in the project's investment package portfolio. The corner, the neighborhood, and the community thus became the sight of intensive intervention for redevelopment.<sup>16</sup>

RLA's spatial-cultural discourse constructed Pico-Union as a particular kind of object of knowledge: a neglected area, a zone of need, and the ignored poor, isolated inner city.<sup>17</sup> This discourse about the undeveloped inner city was, of course, not new, but derived from the '60s and the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. What was new, however, was the privatization of the development function, not to mention the focus on retail and commercial enterprises, and consumption rather than production. I will return to this last point later. Remember that in 1992 the institutional apparatus of the capitalist welfare state was entering its last moments before the full onset of "devolution" in 1996 with the passage of welfare reform legislation. The problems of the inner city, which once required state action, were now seen as the results of state activity. What was once the solution (activist social policies) had become the problem (dependence). The state was now depicted as an unproductive agent in development, and development was to be returned to the marketplace (the private economic arena).

RLA was a compelling example of the reprivatization of functions formally attributed to the state. Rebuild Los Angeles was to the 1992 Los Angeles riots what the Community Redevelopment

Agency (CRA) was to the 1965 Watts riots. Both entities were leveraged by Mayor Tom Bradley in order to address the post-riot needs of the inner city. But whereas the CRA was a city agency, RLA was a privately incorporated organization. RLA literature is filled with pejoratives about government, and boasts: “RLA is not government, it is not laws, taxes, courts . . .” it is rather “the only *predominantly private-sector* response to civic crisis in history” (italics mine), and where “government [has] failed . . . thankfully corporate America has responded.”

Which is not to say that government does not have a role to play, albeit subordinated, in redevelopment.<sup>18</sup> To quote the designer of RLA’s three-ringed logo, the rings represent: “The tripod of the Community, the Government and the Private Sector.” Government has most certainly been enjoined. But my concern here is with the role that “community” is to play in redevelopment. Who is this “community?” I’ve mentioned already that RLA did open its doors to the Central American “community” with a seat on its board. And indeed, RLA cannot be faulted for lack of representation of the official African American, Latino, and Asian “community” leadership—many of whom were relatively new voices in LA, and had never sat at the same table with the likes of the Governor of California, or the CEOs of Bank of America, ARCO, or GTE. Indeed, this was no small feat for Carlos Vaquerano, who first came to Los Angeles to work with the Central American solidarity movement against U.S. state and corporate interests in El Salvador. Vaquerano now heads the Salvadoran American Leadership and Educational Fund (SALEF). The organization draws much of its support from those corporate contacts, which Vaquerano argues he made through RLA. My concern is thus not with representation per se, but with what “community” has come to replace, and with a very particular exclusion.

What then does the language of “community” displace? The “*positive power* of community” (italics mine), to use the language from RLA’s organizational brochure, excludes labor and inner city residents themselves. One can arguably infer indirect representation of inner city residents in the board membership of city council members, church leaders, and agency directors—the official representatives, albeit invariably not the residents of the inner city. But where are the official representatives of labor on RLA’s 80-member board? The previous social contract of the Ford-Keynesian era between business, government, and *labor*—dismantled in the 70s and 80s—has been rewritten as private sector, government, and *community*. To be sure, the discursive shift to “community”



implies a “continuing recognition that some degree of inclusiveness is necessary to ensure stable growth of capital” (Harvey 1989:122). However, it would appear that if business is going to be “persuade[ed] to come back to the inner city” (Los Angeles Times, November 2, 1992), it is going to have to be without organized labor. Certainly in the case of the Central American immigrant “community,” this is a remarkable exclusion. To elide the historical fact that Central Americans comprise a significant sector of the low-wage immigrant *labor* pool vital to the contemporary restructuring of Los Angeles, is also to avoid the centrality of their role in a newly invigorated labor movement, a movement which was building strength at that very moment in LA’s history.

In fact, Pico Union is and was then home to the immigrant-dominated Justice for Janitors Organizing Committee. Not surprisingly, RLA came under severe attack by the labor project, who in their 1992 campaign, “LA Must Work for Everyone,” challenged the redevelopment initiative directly—not simply for the lack of labor representation therein, but for RLA’s failure to account for the phenomenon of the “working poor,” and to address issues such as quality of jobs and labor practices in its 22 point list of “What Can Companies Do” to revitalize the inner city neighborhoods (Justice for Janitors 1992, Weinstein 1992, Zellers 1992).

If RLA’s spatial-cultural discourse failed to recognize or to acknowledge the Central American “community” as the working poor, they were most anxious to represent them as an untapped community of consumers. RLA’s redevelopment strategies in the Pico-Union district focused on the “Shopping Cluster Concept,” and the intersection became a featured “investment package” therein. Using Geographical Information Service’s Atlas Mapping Programs, RLA matched the vacant lots at Pico, Alvarado and Hoover with a number of geographical variables. The site was photographed, its title reports obtained, property owners contacted, and zoning information gathered. Potential investors were to be sold on the idea that this immigrant neighborhood represented an as yet “untapped consumer market,” and that “businesses were likely to yield high profits because of the large degree to which [this] neglected area [was] underserved.”<sup>19</sup> These claims were backed up by “community needs assessment surveys,” which—in documenting consumer retail and commercial needs—were in effect marketing research surveys. The interests of capitalist expansion are expressed therein as the fundamental and essential material needs of the community. This call for private enterprise to meet this “underserved community’s . . . pent up demand” is, in

the aftermath of the riots, ironic to say the least. As the body of the *Latino looter* was being circulated as a political text for the anti-immigrant movement, in the business realm, Central Americans were being discovered as something more than a cheap labor force for global capitalism, they were now also ripe subjects for consumer capitalism.<sup>20</sup>

In the language of RLA, the rebuilt Jack in the Box on the corner of Pico and Hoover is a success story in terms of the language of Rebuild Los Angeles's Vacant Lot Project. Indeed, one has to acknowledge that this corner did get rebuilt and then some.<sup>21</sup> The Jack in the Box has been joined by two medium sized supermarkets, and both a new and rebuilt mini-mall.<sup>22</sup> Rebuilt, but to what end? That "pent up demand" for goods unleashed by the frenetic disorderly crowd of looters has now been absorbed into a discourse of redevelopment, which refashions looters and laborers alike as a potential docile consuming public. Indeed, another of those Central American leaders present at that press conference, who has since earned his masters in business, now puts together Power Point presentations on the Central American consumer at venues such as the exclusive downtown Los Angeles City Club, long-time home of the city's business elite. The Central American population's settlement and consumption patterns have made the agenda. Overall, RLA's redevelopment strategy for Pico-Union, therefore, mirrored broader economic restructurings and was embedded within the wider periodicity of late capitalism on these three fronts: privatization or devolution of the welfare state, the post-Fordist renegeing on the social contract with labor, and an emphasis on consumption rather than production.

## The 18th Street Injunction

Let's now turn to the obverse side of this redevelopment story—policing and the spatial-cultural practices of LAPD's special gang abatement unit, Community Resources against Street Hoodlums (CRASH). The *street hoodlum* is to the rebuilt environment of Pico-Union what the *Latino looter* was to its ruined environment.<sup>23</sup> Where RLA proposed its Vacant Lot Revitalization Strategy, LAPD proposed a court injunction against the 18th Street Gang. The litigation maps prepared for the District Attorney's Gang Unit by the city's Geographic Information Specialist (GIS) encompassed the very same neighborhood geography as RLA's GIS pro-

duced investment maps.

If one could argue that in post-riot Los Angeles, the ruined environment did get rebuilt, one can hardly argue that the LAPD got reformed. In 1999, the ghost of Rodney King's bruised body returned to Los Angeles in the form of the paralyzed, framed and wrongfully imprisoned body of undocumented Central American immigrant, Javier Ovando. Ovando's persecutors and framers were from the Rampart CRASH unit, the very same unit that patrolled the rebuilt environment of Pico-Union, and whose officers' declarations were used to support the 18th Street injunction.<sup>24</sup>

Passed in 1997, the gang injunction leveraged public nuisance and loitering laws to legally enshrine and formalize severe restrictions on the freedom of movement and the right to free association between gang members, thereby criminalizing behavior which to others is a guaranteed civil right. This gave LAPD's special CRASH unit a very nearly idealized exercise of disciplinary power over the rebuilt environment in question. Gang injunctions—much like the INS's media splashes at the United States-Mexico border—are spectacular performances in spatial legislation designed to take command over a politically marked space. Building on the Street Terrorism Enforcement Prevention Act (STEP),<sup>25</sup> and combined with anti-loitering laws, the injunction bans all forms of association and communication between two or more gang members—be they standing, sitting, walking, driving, gathering, appearing, whistling, or gesturing anywhere in public view. It is, therefore, nearly impossible not to associate under the terms of the injunction. Like those border performances, the injunctions are exaggerated re-enactments of practices and procedures already generalized over a much larger territory: racial profiling of youth of color.

The 18th Street Gang injunction took as its field of operation the architecture and geometry of the barrio of the Hoover Street Locos, one of five 18th Street cliques operating in the Rampart division, and the intersection of Pico and Alvarado is identified as a strategic site therein. The spatial-cultural discourse, which emerges from the six-volume case file,<sup>26</sup> constructs Pico-Union—not as a “neglected area” ripe for redevelopment—but as a violent topography in which a countervailing and illegal economy strangles legitimate local business. A Los Angeles Times three part series on the 18th Street Gang, which was included as supporting documentation in the case file, and which mirrors much of the testimony therein, devotes considerable attention to the Pico Fiesta strip mall at the southeast corner of Pico and Alvarado. The archi-

tectural rendering of the mall, titled in bold, “Troubled Corner,” is introduced thus: “Burned to the ground during the 1992 riots. Rebuilt, it now faces a more insidious danger: dope dealing orchestrated by the 18th Street Gang . . . (November 18, 1996).”

In a diagram of the mini-mall, the article breaks down the topography of this violence play by play in and around the three structures which comprise the strip-mall as follows: In the street, gang members patrol Pico Boulevard to protect their drug-dealing partners. In front of King Taco, an armed guard, a veteran of the Nicaraguan National Guard, eyes illicit activity. Inside the restaurant, La Casita de Don Carlos, gang members and dealers drink beer, watching the activity and coming outside to make sales. The

owner stands by helplessly. Dealers line up in front of El Pavo Bakery selling to walk-up traffic. The Fiesta Parking Lot serves as a lookout for police, and dealers loiter on the sidewalk selling to customers who drive through the strip mall (*Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1996).

We are left with a most vivid picture of the mini-mall as an

occupied territory, a resistant space of significant strategic importance to the 18th Street Gang, and therefore, in the war for and against drugs. The gang has successfully superimposed its countervailing economy on the rebuilt mini-mall, using the architecture of the former to tap into a consumer market quite distinct from that targeted in RLA’s strategic plan. We have a clash between two competing ideologies of entrepreneurship and their respective niches in the market: dangerous versus docile consuming publics. The signage on the built environment is testimony to this mixed economy of the neighborhood. Graffiti is visible on the wall behind the barbed wire fences and iron gates bearing “No Trespassing” signs, and under and above the signage for the local businesses, advertising their *productos Latinos* (Latino products)—*carne* (meat), *lengua* (tongue), *pupusas* etc., defacing even the occa-



The Pico Fiesta Mini-mall

sional cultural heritage board signs in the neighborhoods. This area, once “consumed” by looters, rebuilt, is now a thriving commercial zone for *street hoodlums*, those “impoverished architects of social space” (Blanchard 1992:502).

The injunction draws upon highly localized geopolitical knowledge and intense scrutiny of the everyday practices of particular individuals. Indeed, a crucial phase in the development of the injunction is the identification of the dangerous individuals—who they are, where they hang out, how they are to be characterized, their gang affiliation, their *moniker* (nickname or *nom de guerre*)—and how surveillance is to be exercised over them individually. This analysis of the massive plurality of the gang, not unlike the techniques and procedures Foucault discusses as the “principle of enclosure” do the work of breaking up collective dispositions, their distribution, circulation, and dangerous coagulation (1979:195-200). The injunction’s first and foremost principle is, therefore, to ensure that these gang members have no opportunity to combine (American Civil Liberties Union 1997). Sixty such individuals were named within Pico-Union’s 18th Street injunction, and are prevented from “combining” therein—although the effects are generalized to neighborhood youth in general. Indeed, a lot fits into that space between the signifier (race, ethnicity, age, geographic area, style, language etc.) and the signified (gang membership).

Oddly enough, according to the spatial arrangements of the injunction, these gang members are theoretically not prohibited from “combining” outside their barrio. As one gang member said to me just after the lifting of the injunction: “As soon as you cross over the border, say it’s Normandie Avenue, then the injunction doesn’t apply to you anymore, and the police in the next division don’t know you because their CRASH Units only works with the gang in that neighborhood.” In this respect, the injunction would seem to work quite differently from other well-known forms of spatial legislation such as those at the United States-Mexico border, or in South Africa under apartheid. The injunction is not directed at the borders between, nor does it entail confinement to the barrio, and it does not focus on violence produced by trespass of another order—gang members crossing over into rival territory.<sup>27</sup>

The injunction is rather directed at the territory within, and is tied to the geometry of the barrio as it is mapped out and produced by the gang structure itself. Anti-loitering ordinances effectively strike at the heart of the gang, its *raison d’être* and *modus operandi*: “hanging” or “kicking it with [your] home boys in the barrio,”

often referred to as *el vacil*. The latter term, derived from the verb *vacilar*, is the flip side of loitering, and both are integrally linked to the pedestrian quality of the barrio—the everyday use of its built environment.<sup>28</sup> If the gang member is to avoid incarceration for violation of the injunction he or she has two options: To stay off the streets entirely or to leave the barrio. Leveraging anti-loitering laws on the streets of the barrio effectively places the gang member under house arrest—at least within the boundaries of the neighborhood—or forces the gang member into exile, evicting him/her, if you will, from the streets of the barrio.

These microphysics constraining the everyday movement have enormous implications for the sociality of the street in general. In urban theory, Los Angeles, until very recently, has been taken as the extreme demonstration of the decline of public space, of the destruction of any truly democratic urban space (Sorkin 1992, Davis 1992), and with the “death of the street” (Holston 1989:101-36). The barrio is one of the few spaces in LA’s contemporary built environment where pedestrianism exists outside the postmodern theme parks and shopping malls of Universal City Walk or 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica.<sup>29</sup> But in Pico-Union, pedestrianism is under constant assault. During the course of my fieldwork, parents would complain that their children were coming home with up to three tickets a day for jay walking, blocking the sidewalk, and improper association. As one youth complained to a concerned group of neighborhood residents, “They put a ticket on me for nothing. It’s just a method to keep us off the streets. They know we can’t pay. And if you don’t pay, you eventually get a warrant, and then you go to jail, and then you get placed on probation, and then you wait for them to catch you for improper association and put you behind bars again.”

While I would not argue that the injunction is a pure example of Foucault’s panopticism—it is hardly economical or efficient—it does share certain features: spatial partitioning through the penetration into, and regulation of, the smallest details of everyday life. And while the mini-mall at Alvarado and Pico is not on the postmodern technological order of Mike Davis’s “smart building,” it is an integral figure in the redevelopment of the barrio as “carceral city” (1990:221-264). This re-engineering at the street-level is further perfected by another key figure, which perhaps is, at a formal level, truer to Foucault’s notion of panopticism—the helicopter in the sky above and its constant night scope, which swoops back and forth along the streets and alleys of the barrio, peering into the windows of the apartment buildings, where these gang members

are, so to speak, under house arrest.

Take for instance this lament of one mother and her fears for her children. Every night, she explained, she would go out onto the balcony of her five story apartment building—the elegant and gracious urban architecture of Los Angeles of the '20s now turned inner-city tenement building—and look up at the helicopter hovering above looking down at her. “They must know my face by now, have a picture of me,” she said, framing her face with her hands, and cocking it to one side. “Whenever I am *balconeando* (out on the balcony), they’re always there above me. They must have a close-up photograph of my face peering up into the sky with that worried look, wondering, always wondering: ‘Who are they looking for? Where is my son? What terrible thing has happened or is about to happen?’”

While the injunction acts locally, its effects are global. Practices like the injunction effectively police the boundaries of the national community on the streets of the immigrant barrio. At the time that I conducted my research, 10,000 gang members on the California Gang List had been targeted for deportation, and INS and Border Patrol agents maintained a regular presence in LAPD booking and charging out facilities. Indeed, incarceration followed by deportation South has come to serve as a key management strategy for the North.<sup>30</sup> Both theories of the urban-built environment and governmentality need, therefore, to look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in order to account for these local and global mediations.

The injunction rests on, and derives its moral authority from a similar trinity of social forces as Rebuild Los Angeles: private enterprise, the state and the community. The name of the case file is after all “The People vs. the 18th Street Gang,” and the concept of community is built into the acronym CRASH—“*Community Resources against Street Hoodlums*” (my emphasis). As Deputy DA, Lisa Fox, author of the injunction explained to me: the injunction is intended to “help the community take back their neighborhoods.” The question then rearises: Who is this community?

Who is the purported agent in and benefactor of the restoration of this former social spatial harmony?

By CRASH’s own account, the Pico-Union Neighborhood Watch, the only representative body of the community’s concerns included in the case file, draws few people to its gatherings. Neighborhood residents, we are told, are fearful of retaliation by gang members. I don’t want to disregard this fear, but the relative weight given to declarations submitted by police, government

employees, security guards, business owners on the one hand, versus that given to neighborhood residents on the other is overwhelming. And the community residents included therein are, with one exception, property owners—a rare breed in Pico-Union where the housing stock is given over almost exclusively to rental units. Absent from community testimony are the renters of those properties: street vendors, day laborers, janitors, maids, gardeners, and nannies—parents to the youth targeted by CRASH as *street hoodlums*. The injunction thus rests on a similar social exclusion as RLA's redevelopment strategy: Pico-Union's working poor inner city residents.

### Inside the Jack in the Box

Fast forward yet again, this time, to the summer of 2000. I am eating lunch in that Jack in the Box at the intersection of Pico and Hoover. The fast food veneer, indistinguishable from any other Jack in the Box on the outside, reads quite differently on the inside. My companions, Magdaleno, Melly, Cristina, and I order through a Plexiglas buffer, which shields the counter help and cash registers from its neighborhood clientele. All legitimate transactions—the exchange of money for food—are conveyed through drawers that can only open out to one side of that exchange at a time. The chance of the illicit use of bullets, knives, money, or drugs is thus carefully curtailed by the architecture of this Jack in the Box, which—on the inside—looks more like a high security bank or prison. Inside the Jack in the Box, development and policing have combined to control the spaces of consumption in this barrio, and to order the act of consumption along acceptable paths of circulation in the face of that “pent up” demand for, among other things, intoxicating goods.

My companions and I have just come from the Los Angeles County Criminal Court in downtown Los Angeles, and from a hearing to vacate a felony conviction for Alex—colleague to Magdaleno and me, brother to Melly, and boyfriend to Cristina. Sitting on yellow and red plastic stools, eating burgers and fries, and drinking shakes, our conversation about the morning's convoluted legal arguments, and the complex relationship between criminal and immigration law, is repeatedly interrupted by Melly and Cristina's cell phone chatter with boyfriends, homegirls, and homeboys: Where did I get my cool new red sporty book bag with



cell phone pocket? Where can Cristina get her nails done like Puppet, who just got out of “Juvy,” and is looking “hot”? When can we go to Universal Studio’s open-air theme mall, City Walk, to see a movie and to be seen? Can they go with Magdaleno to a swap meet in South Central Los Angeles to buy Dickies, hair combs, and Three Flowers hair oil for their homeboys deported to El Salvador? Can I give them a ride for their Father’s Day weekend plans to visit Cristina’s child’s father, who is in prison, and Alex, who—after his arrest by Rampart officers—was being held in an Immigration Naturalization Service detention center? When Magdaleno asks to borrow the phone to check in about his next meeting, Cristina chides him to be quick, adding in a gleeful gloat over this latest acquisition, “*No es público. Apúrate! Apúrate!*” (It’s not a public phone. Hurry! Hurry!). Their excited chatter about consumption laced as it is with signs of incarceration and deportation, rubs against the backdrop of redevelopment and policing as they combine in the architecture inside the Jack in the Box.

## The Empty Space of the Social

Thus far I have outlined the specificities and intersections of the spatial-cultural discourses and practices of redevelopment and law enforcement through an archeology of the ruined and rebuilt environment of that street corner in Pico-Union. I’d like to close as I began, with a discussion of the ways in which the state and private enterprise appropriate “community” as an unconditional social unity, a homogeneous unanimity, and of what police and development tropes strategically exclude. Both RLA’s board and CRASH files included community representation, but in both cases, representation in itself was not the problem. The problem was rather the restrictions placed upon legitimate participation in defining the terms of representation. These structural constraints precluded the creation of robust and inclusive visions for community revitalization.

In her book, *Evictions*, Deutsche notes that “community,” as a referent to an outside origin of power, conveniently transcends the ongoing political and contested nature of urban space over and within city neighborhoods. Borrowing from Lefort (1988), she invokes that marvelous image of the empty space of the social, and the ways in which the “guardians of public space” attempt to occupy, fill up, and take possession of that “empty place” with “The

People,” which, in democratic society, is the locus of power (1996:273-5). RLA proposed its Vacant Lot Revitalization Strategy to clean up the lots whose “deterioration” they argued “breeds illegal dumping, and accumulation of trash and crime.” CRASH’s original acronym was in fact TRASH: Total Resources against Street Hoodlums, but the ring of it did not sit well with the “community.” As social trash, the *looter* and the *hoodlum*, those once intrusive, now haunting figures on Pico-Union’s ruined and rebuilt landscape—arrested, incarcerated, deported, or exiled—point to the authoritarian limits of democracy and to the oppressive nature of contemporary urban restructuring. Under the guise of social responsibility, both “guardians of public space” under consideration here—RLA and CRASH—invoke this idiom of “community” to rebuild and retake that “vacant lot of the social” on the corner of Pico and Alvarado. At this “troubled corner” at least, the dual projects of capturing a docile market and policing a dangerous market have been integrally combined. Immigrant gang youth are only the most publicly sanctioned site for managing the pressures of globalization, and for policing the boundaries of the national community. The dialectical and complicitous relationship between redevelopment and law enforcement work through “community” to exclude the agency of immigrant labor: the working poor, who toil in service to the centers of global finance capital, and their children.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In his discussion of the “Emergent Postmodern Mexicano,” José Limón takes issue with Jameson’s implicit racialization of the low Other, which alongside the great Chicano markets, is relegated to an old modern space, and stands outside the new cultural dominant such as the elite space of the Bonaventure (1994:106-107). Similarly, Roger Rouse urged us to look for signs of late-capitalist spatiality beyond architecture and

aesthetics, but rather in the everyday literal footsteps of Mexican “(im)migrants” and in the emergent social formation of transnational communities (1991).

<sup>2</sup>Given the decentralized nature of Los Angeles, Salvadorans are to be found throughout and even beyond the greater metropolitan area within these sometimes unlikely and counter-intuitive zones of concentration: Korea Town, Hollywood, South Central Los Angeles, south east Los Angeles, North Hollywood, and the San Fernando Valley—Panorama City and Van Nuys in particular. Indeed, even the symbolic centers of African-American and Korean Los Angeles are now predominantly Latino, and Pico-Union, which itself remains primarily Mexican, is also home to Guatemalan, Honduran and Nicaraguan immigrants. There are other such symbolic Salvadoran centers in the United States: the Mission district in San Francisco, Adams Morgan in Washington, D.C., and Long Island in New York.

<sup>3</sup>The *pupusa*—like the *taco* is to Mexican cuisine and the hamburger is to American—is the quintessential Salvadoran national fast food. It is a thick corn tortilla stuffed with any combination of these ingredients: a salty hard feta-like cheese, beans; pork, and *loroco* (a green leafy vegetable). It is topped with *cortido*, a pickled cabbage (the Salvadoran equivalent to sauerkraut) and a very mild red salsa or sauce.

<sup>4</sup>My notion of spatial-cultural politics draws from the fruitful contemporary marriage between anthropology and geography, and rests upon the contention that history unfolds spatially and that space is central to the exercise and analysis of power (Soja on Foucault 1989:17-24). My examination of the social production of space (LeFebvre 1994) of the immigrant barrio is written in answer to the call for anthropologists to go “beyond culture” in order to politicize the discipline’s long-held observation that culture is spatially constructed by attending to how spatial meanings are established, who has the power to make places of space, and what is at stake (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:11).

<sup>5</sup>My use of the term “riot” may raise some eyebrows. I hold onto the term because I find what one does with the analysis of the event more important than the label one gives it. More than that, I am a follower of Walter Benjamin’s aesthetic of engaging and working through the forms circulating in the public imaginary and its discourses to arrive at allegorical and critical rereadings of those forms—something Kathleen Stewart, drawing upon James Agee (Agee and Evans 1941) might term “an act of political poesis” (1996:143-4).

Let me say, however, that in my own analysis, the events of April 1992 are multiply determined, and as such are all of those things attributed to them—riot, uprising, rebellion, civil disturbances, justice riots and then more. In other words, it is the interpretive excess of these terms, that which they cannot contain, that guides my analysis.

<sup>6</sup>LeFebvre draws a distinction between the “representation of space” and “space of representation.” The former is understood as the conceptual, abstract formulations of space modeled by social engineers constituting the *savior* of power, while the latter is treated as the space of inhabi-

tants, users and the avant-garde, and the dominated space which the imagination seeks to change and to appropriate constituting the *connaissance* of the underground and clandestine side of social life (1994:36-46).

<sup>7</sup>In the full study, I explore the Central American barrio as a space worked upon and over and thus produced by the multiple and contradictory pressures of redevelopment and law enforcement agencies, youth gangs, and immigrant rights organizations. As such, I counter-pose dominant representations of the space of the barrio with subaltern spaces of representation (Zilberg 2002).

<sup>8</sup>My use of the ruined mini-mall as artifact and fossil record is drawn from Susan Buck-Morss's reading of Walter Benjamin's *Passenwerk* (Buck-Morss 1993:159-201). The retrospective contemplation of the destroyed mini-mall herein is guided by Benjamin's work to relocate social memory through the discarded objects and sites of the late 19th century. The ruin—a 20th century Los Angeles strip mall rather 19th century Parisian arcade—is taken both as a politically instructive fragment, and as an emblem not only of the transitoriness and fragility of capitalist culture, but also its destructiveness. It is an architectural rendering of the wounds of the history of human violence, and it is from its loosened building blocks that a new order—be it repressive and/or libratory—is to be constructed.

<sup>9</sup>In the larger study, I explore how the counter projects of so called community-based organizations (CBOs) also leverage the language of community to make their claims on the barrio.

<sup>10</sup>Drawing upon the notion of disciplinary technologies (Foucault 1979) and the social production of space (LeFebvre 1994), Deutsche examines the “spatial-cultural discourse” of public art projects to reveal the collusion of the aesthetic ideologies of art, architecture, and urban design with the interests and agendas of late-capitalist urbanism. Deutsche demonstrates vividly the ways in which these aesthetic discourses “smooth over the violent disturbances in [New York's] social life” (1996:18), and how these aesthetic ideologies aid and abet in an “oppressive program of urban restructuring” (xiii). While my term spatial-cultural politics resonates strongly with Deutsche's notion of “spatial-cultural discourses,” I opt for what I consider the more anthropological of the two terms since it accommodates a discussion of both discourses and practices.

<sup>11</sup>Foucault argued that behind disciplinary mechanisms can be read the memory of haunting contagions, (1979:198).

<sup>12</sup>The “face-down” or “prone-out” position on the pavement—a common police tactic—was taken up at length in a 1992 Amnesty International USA report on “Torture, Ill-Treatment and Excessive Force by Police in Los Angeles” (1992). The report documented that well beyond the scope of the riots, Latinos along with blacks are subject to a disturbing pattern of physical brutality including: excessive beatings, unjustified police shootings, the misuse of canine units, unjustified stops and searches. They are also, often without probable cause, made to “prone-out” face down on the pavement (19-20). The images included in another post riot report of row after row of brown and black bodies “face-

down” on the streets of Los Angeles was a macabre hyper-intensification of this otherwise everyday sight in the urban barrios and ghettos of Los Angeles (Labor Strategies Center 1992:cover page).

<sup>13</sup>The *Latino looter*, as criminal type, resonates strongly with Stuart Hall et al’s study of the trope of the *black mugger*, which emerged as an ideologically saturated term in Britain in the 1970s in reaction to the wave of immigration from former British colonies (1978).

<sup>14</sup>Although the CRASH program had been in existence since 1979, this statement was written in the context of the President Bush’s Weed and Seed Program. George Bush Senior responded to the neglect of the inner city by offering to extend to LA the national pilot project, which funneled urban renewal monies through the Department of Criminal Justice. Weed and Seed was a redevelopment model which rested on the premise that neighborhood weeds (i.e. its criminalized elements) must be eradicated before anything else such as enterprise zones can take seed. Crime prevention is, therefore, key to laying the conditions for stable economic development. In the immediate post- riot climate, there was a call for the city to reject Weed and Seed money. With respect to crime prevention, Rebuild Los Angeles had a much more subtle albeit complementary agenda for redevelopment.

<sup>15</sup>By rebuilt Jack in the Box, I do not mean that the Jack in the Box was literally rebuilt on the same corner. I mean to say rather that the chain, Jack in the Box, made quite a display of the fact that they were the first to return to the inner city to invest and they did in fact literally rebuild on the site of a burned facility in South Central Los Angeles.

<sup>16</sup>Please note that, unless otherwise indicated, all Rebuild Los Angeles quotes are drawn from the Rebuild L.A. Collection, 1992-1997 archive, which is housed in the Research Center for the Study of Los Angeles Archives and Special Collections, Charles Von der Ahe Library at Loyola Marymount University.

<sup>17</sup>RLA defined a “neglected area” as a census tract in which 20% or more residents lived below the poverty line. This discussion of development in the undeveloped inner city is reminiscent of James Ferguson’s discussion of the “less developed country” (LDC) (1990). In this context the undeveloped isolated inner city comes to serve as the focus of intensive care by a host of government taskforces, social service agencies, private foundations, and community based organizations, and, in the aftermath of the riots, private corporations—so much so, that one is tempted to meddle with the order of the discourse a little and refer to the underdeveloped inner city as an ICU (intensive care unit).

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, the same point that Saskia Sassen notes about the continuing and integral role that the state does in fact play in globalization through legislating the terms of capital flows (1996:205-224), holds true for the role of the state in privatization.

<sup>19</sup>See RLA’s “Vacant Lot Revitalization Project Strategy” portfolio.

<sup>20</sup>For a discussion of the body of Jew serving as a “political text” see Feldman on Benjamin (1991:8).

<sup>21</sup>For a broader overview of post-riot redevelopment of affected areas see Héctor Tobar's *Los Angeles Times* article, "Riots' Scars Include 200 Still-Vacant Lots," April 21, 1997, in which Tobar revisits the still vacant lots of South Central Los Angeles, Pico-Union, and Korea Town five years after the riots.

<sup>22</sup>One of these mini-mall houses, among other things, a courier service, which transports letters, money and cargo between Central America and Los Angeles. These enterprises have become an integral part of Pico-Union's built environment (Landolt et al. 1999, Zilberg 2002). RLA's initial redevelopment strategy and "needs assessment surveys" did not register the intensive commercial activity around the need of this "community" to maintain transnational ties to family elsewhere. That said, later on in RLA's history, and with its changing leadership, there was an effort to research transnational immigrant entrepreneurs in the neighborhood and around Los Angeles (Wong 1996).

<sup>23</sup>As Stuart Hall et al note in their study of the figure of the *black mugger* in postcolonial immigrant communities in Britain, every trope or stereotype has a career or a prehistory (1978:3-28). Similarly, I consider the *looter* as the precursor to the *hoodlum*. Having said as much, I do not mean to imply that the *hoodlum* chronologically precedes the *looter*. Not only did the CRASH program predate the riots, but the term *hoodlum* has an interesting and instructive etymology, which can be traced back to late 19th century San Francisco. I am rather thinking along the lines of deCerteau and his discussion of how techniques or procedures, within a discursive configuration, take turns—if you will—hiding out and coming to the fore (1984:45-49). Within the narrow historical frame of 1992-2000, the *looter* precedes the *hoodlum*, and the techniques of policing transgressive mobility shift their attention from *looting* to *loitering*.

<sup>24</sup>In the wake of the scandal—deemed by the *Los Angeles Times* LAPD's "worst in sixty years" (Olney September 1999)—the injunction against the 18th Street Gang was lifted, and CRASH was, according to the official language, "dismantled"—although it is not yet clear whether its replacement will be different in kind or name only. Less than two years later, the LAPD proposed another gang injunction for the Pico-Union area.

<sup>25</sup>See California Penal Code Section 186.20-186.33.

<sup>26</sup>The case file for the state is comprised of enough expert declarations and photographic exhibits to fill a file box and then some.

<sup>27</sup>I am not here arguing that the borders between are not being policed. Clearly policing these boundaries by law enforcement is in full force for gang members or presumed gang member and youth of color as they travel through the city and its surrounding neighborhoods. Of course, the rival gang is hard at work policing the borders between the barrio and the territory of their rivals.

<sup>28</sup>*El vacil* or hanging out in the streets might be discussed in relationship to the Situationist International's notion of *dérive* or drifting (Debord 1958), and Walter Benjamin's *flânerie*, prowling or loitering

(Benjamin in Buck-Morss 1993:306). Elsewhere, I explore the mimetic relationships between the spatial-cultural practices of CRASH, the gang, and an immigrant youth violence prevention organization, and the centrality of the space of the street and the pedestrian quality of the barrio therein (Zilberg 2002).

<sup>29</sup>Pico Union is a vivid site for viewing what Mike Davis theorizes in his manifesto, *Magical Urbanism*, as “the redemptive power of Latinidad for the preservation and revitalization of public space” (2000:51-7). Similarly, in *Everyday Urbanism*, Margaret Crawford argues that in Los Angeles women, immigrants, low-level employees and teenagers are restructuring urban spaces according to an “alternative logic of public space” (Crawford 1999:28-29).

<sup>30</sup>As a result of these collaborations between LAPD and INS, even when minor charges against gang and purported gang members were overturned, INS still maintained a deportation hold on them. According to the Public Defender’s Office, this tactic had been employed by the LAPD to push many a key hostile witness into and through the deportation pipeline, thereby, hindering efforts of defense attorneys in pending cases against immigrant youth, and of those seeking to prosecute rogue officers in the Rampart case itself.

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