

**A Field Guide to
Love and the Los Angeles
River**

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Dedicated to water,
which shapes the world,
softly.

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Keywords

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environmental humanities
environmentalism
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graffiti
history of emotions
intimacy
invasive plants
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Los Angeles River
love
narrative
nature
oral history
rivers
socionatural
urban history
urban rivers
urbanism
water

Abstract

With more humans living in cities than any other landscape, and our ecological impacts more cumbersome than any other moment in human history, there is a strong imperative to understand and critique how we relate to nature in urban environments. This thesis takes the contemporary history of one of the planet's most-recognised damaged places, the concrete-entombed Los Angeles River, and examines it through the lens of love—and more specifically intimacy—to build new understandings of human connections to the environment. Oral history interviews with public officials, campaigners, designers, architects, artists, and community members, along with archival and place-based research, tell stories of deep emotional affinity with a profoundly urban river and attest to the power of regarding cities as legitimately natural landscapes, worthy of our attention and our care. Inspired by the generic conventions of the naturalist's field guide, the thesis takes three material objects important at the river—water, paint, and weeds—and through them maps a new definition: that intimacy is a state of being sustained, feeling belonging, and paying close attention to places that matter to us. The field guide component of this work is prefaced by a series of grounding chapters that explore the sociodemographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of Los Angeles and her river; constructions of nature and naturalness; the state of environmental history, a subfield that has been criticised for paying insufficient regard to the role of emotions; the particularities of river historiography; and key concepts in the scholarship of sense of place and of the emotions. Contrary to popular and scholarly representations of the river as a forgotten landscape, this research demonstrates that it has long featured significantly in the emotional terrain of people and the city. If a highly altered river, repellent in many ways, has maintained and indeed increased its importance as a place of nature in the city, this thesis offers a new way to think about human connectedness, to the more-than-human world in the Los Angeles River watershed in particular, and in urban life in general. From both there are opportunities for instructive, inspiring, and ecologically responsible engagements with strangely complicated socionatural places, opportunities that merit close and critical attention.

List of Abbreviations and Notes on Terminology

Alt. 20—Alternative 20 (the agreed approach, from a range of alternatives, to ecological restoration of the Los Angeles River led by the US Army Corps of Engineers, the City of Los Angeles and a range of other stakeholders)

EPA—Environmental Protection Agency

FEMA—Federal Emergency Management Agency

FoLAR—Friends of the Los Angeles River

IPCC—Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

LA—Los Angeles (to remain faithful to original source materials, occasionally L.A. is used)

LACDA—Los Angeles County Drainage Area

LA River—Los Angeles River

NARA—The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, at Riverside

UCLA—University of California, Los Angeles

Australian spelling and metric measurement has been used throughout, except in proper names and in quotes.

Currency is in US dollars and is as reported in the primary sources, without conversion.

“Watershed,” rather than the Australian term “catchment,” is used to describe the entire land area from which water flows into the river.

References to the left and right banks of the river are taken from the vantage point of an observer facing downstream.

In Los Angeles, freeway names are commonly used as placemarkers and navigational aids and, when doing so, people will use a shorthand naming convention in which, for example, the Interstate 5 highway becomes simply “the 5.” I do likewise in this thesis.

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1. Introduction

You probably already know the Los Angeles River. It is Hollywood's favourite film set for car chases and the apocalypse. It is a place of baptism and carp fishing. A muse for poets. A policed canvas for artists. It is home. It is safe haven and heart-pounding danger. I wonder if you know it well?

This is a love story, of sorts. It asks how people, all kinds of people, have known and loved this river, since it became a petri dish of human experimentation, a place to observe—and indeed influence—what happens after a once-vital watercourse is entombed in 3.5 million barrels of cement, 66,000 tons of steel, and 205 tons of stone.¹ In the city of angels—an epicentre of dreams and imagination—all kinds of agencies, organisations, individuals, businesses, and others are dreaming up a new river. Some call it restoration, though nobody seems quite able to say just what is being restored. The river is an important place, an instructive place, the place where “Culture and Nature and Politics can begin to meet.”²

1.1 MEETING THE RIVER

The Los Angeles River is an 82-kilometre channelised watercourse, the once-ephemeral river now encased in a concrete straightjacket after extensive engineering and hardscaping in the mid-twentieth century. It stretches from Canoga Park in the north to Long Beach in the south, passing through well-heeled neighbourhoods, working-class suburbs, urban downtown, industrial districts, and re-created estuarine wetlands.³ While the river was once a seasonal

¹ Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 226.

² Robert B. Gottlieb et al., “Re-Envisioning the LA River: A Program of Community and Ecological Revitalization,” *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*, no. Paper 4 (2001), 3.

³ Primary sources reveal that there are varying metrics regarding the length of the river, both before and after channelisation. These are explored in Joe Linton, “How Long Is the Los

watercourse shaded by willow trees and home to steelhead trout, it is now for much of its length a large and steep-sided concrete channel, constructed by the United States Army Corps of Engineers in an attempt to prevent flooding which ravaged the city. With an area of 2160 square kilometres, some 9 million people call the watershed home.⁴

The river's watershed forms a shape much like a question mark. The hook of the question mark begins about 30 kilometres north east of Malibu in the sprawling San Fernando Valley, cradled by the Santa Susana Mountains, the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills. It extends eastwards through the San Gabriel and the Verdugo Mountains, and then tracks southwards from the foothill cities of Monrovia and Duarte and along the path of major tributary the Rio Hondo until its confluence on the eastern edge of the City of Lynwood right by the 701 freeway. Like many things in Los Angeles, the watershed's topography invites hyperbole, with the San Gabriel Mountains being amongst the steepest in the world; the watershed elevation drops from more than 2,000 metres down to sea level in just 82 kilometres.⁵ The western edge of the question mark extends across the Santa Monica Mountains by Griffith Park and then turns southwards roughly in line with the Hollywood Freeway taking in the City of Los Angeles, and almost all of South Central Los Angeles. The dot of the question mark is Long Beach, where the river meets the ocean alongside a highly-altered harbour, one of the busiest container ports in the United States.⁶ The main stem of the

Angeles River?" Accessed August 14, 2014.

<http://lacreekfreak.wordpress.com/2008/09/29/how-long-is-the-los-angeles-river/>

⁴ County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works, "Los Angeles River watershed," County of Los Angeles. Accessed December 15, 2016.

<http://www.ladpw.org/wmd/watershed/la/>

⁵ Kristy Morris, Scott Johnson, and Nancy Steele, "Los Angeles River State of the Watershed Report," (Los Angeles: Council for Watershed Health; City of Los Angeles Sanitation; and City of Burbank Public Works, 2012), 1.

⁶ Kimball Garrett cited in Council for Watershed Health, "Los Angeles River Watershed Map," Council for Watershed Health, <https://www.watershedhealth.org/resources> (Accessed May 8, 2017).

river is intersected by Bells Creek and Arroyo Calabasas at its headwaters, and then Brown's Canyon Wash, Aliso Canyon Wash, Caballero Creek, Pacoima Wash, Tujunga Wash, Burbank Western Channel, Verdugo Wash, Arroyo Seco, the Rio Hondo, and finally Compton Creek. All are channelised.

One third of the watershed consists of impervious surfaces and the average dry weather flow at Long Beach of 153 cubic feet per second can more than triple in the event of rain.⁷ The waters of the Los Angeles River are far from pristine. A 2015 study, for example, found high levels of *E. coli* at all 125 sampling sites, with 86% exceeding safe recreational levels.⁸ That same report found metal concentrations to present, but below Water Quality Objective or California Toxics Rule thresholds in almost every instance.⁹ Overall, and unsurprisingly, the most of the river consistently meets the criteria of an impaired water body under U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-enforced Clean Water Act:

The majority of the Los Angeles River is considered impaired by a variety of point and nonpoint sources. The 2010 303(d) list implicates pH, ammonia, a number of metals, coliform bacteria, trash, odor, algae, oil, DDT, as well as other pesticides, and volatile organics for a total of 116 individual impairments (reach/constituent combinations). Some of these constituents are of concern throughout the length of the river while others are of concern only in certain reaches.¹⁰

Because the river lacks almost every feature of a more natural waterway, it struggles to behave like one. Ecologist Peter Bowler catalogues some of the resulting problems: extreme water temperature fluctuations, lack of shade for fish, a broken energy and food cycle in the absence of leaf litter, and water that moves faster than is tenable for aquatic life, leaving "no place for organisms to

⁷ City of Los Angeles Stormwater Program, "Los Angeles River Watershed," City of Los Angeles Stormwater Program,, <http://www.lastormwater.org/about-us/about-watersheds/los-angeles-river/> (Accessed January 25, 2018).

⁸ Council for Watershed Health, "Los Angeles River Watershed Monitoring Program 2015 Annual Report," (Los Angeles: Council for Watershed Health, 2015), 49 and 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰ Morris, Johnson, and Steele, "Los Angeles River State of the Watershed Report," 17.

rest or hide.”¹¹ There are survivors though. One of the few comprehensive fauna studies, in 1993, showed that despite extreme alteration, the remnant habitats along the river’s course still supported considerable animal life.¹² In terms of fish, three native species remain in the upper watercourse. Non-native fish species and the altered riverscape have hindered their spread downstream to the river’s mainstem.¹³

The Los Angeles is a remarkable river. While it could be characterised as a ruin, a scar upon the landscape, a void, or merely a gigantic stormwater drain it is far more rich and fascinating than that. It is a living, bustling, complex, and ever changing socionatural place that invites, if not demands, our closest attention.

¹¹ Bruce Bartrug, Peter Bowler, and Charles Hood, *Río de dios : thirteen histories of the Los Angeles River* (Los Angeles, Red Hen Press, 2008), 21.

¹² Morris, Johnson, and Steele, "Los Angeles River State of the Watershed Report."

¹³ Friends of the Los Angeles River, "State of the River: The Fish Study," (Los Angeles 2008), 20.



Figure 1: The river before channelisation, near Highland Park in 1912. The woman in this photo is unnamed. From the Security Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Image Collection.



Figure 2: Images from the upper stretch of the Los Angeles River, from the headwaters in Canoga Park to the Verdugo Wash confluence. Photos by the author.



Figure 3: Images from the middle stretch of the Los Angeles River, from Verdugo Wash to the Arroyo Seco confluence. Photos by the author.

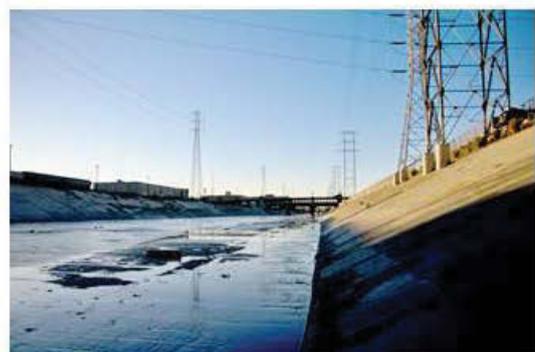


Figure 4: Images from the Downtown stretch of the Los Angeles River, from the Arroyo Seco to the Rio Hondo confluence. Photos by the author.



Figure 5: Images from the lower stretch of the Los Angeles River, from the Rio Hondo confluence to the river mouth at Long Beach. Photos by the author.

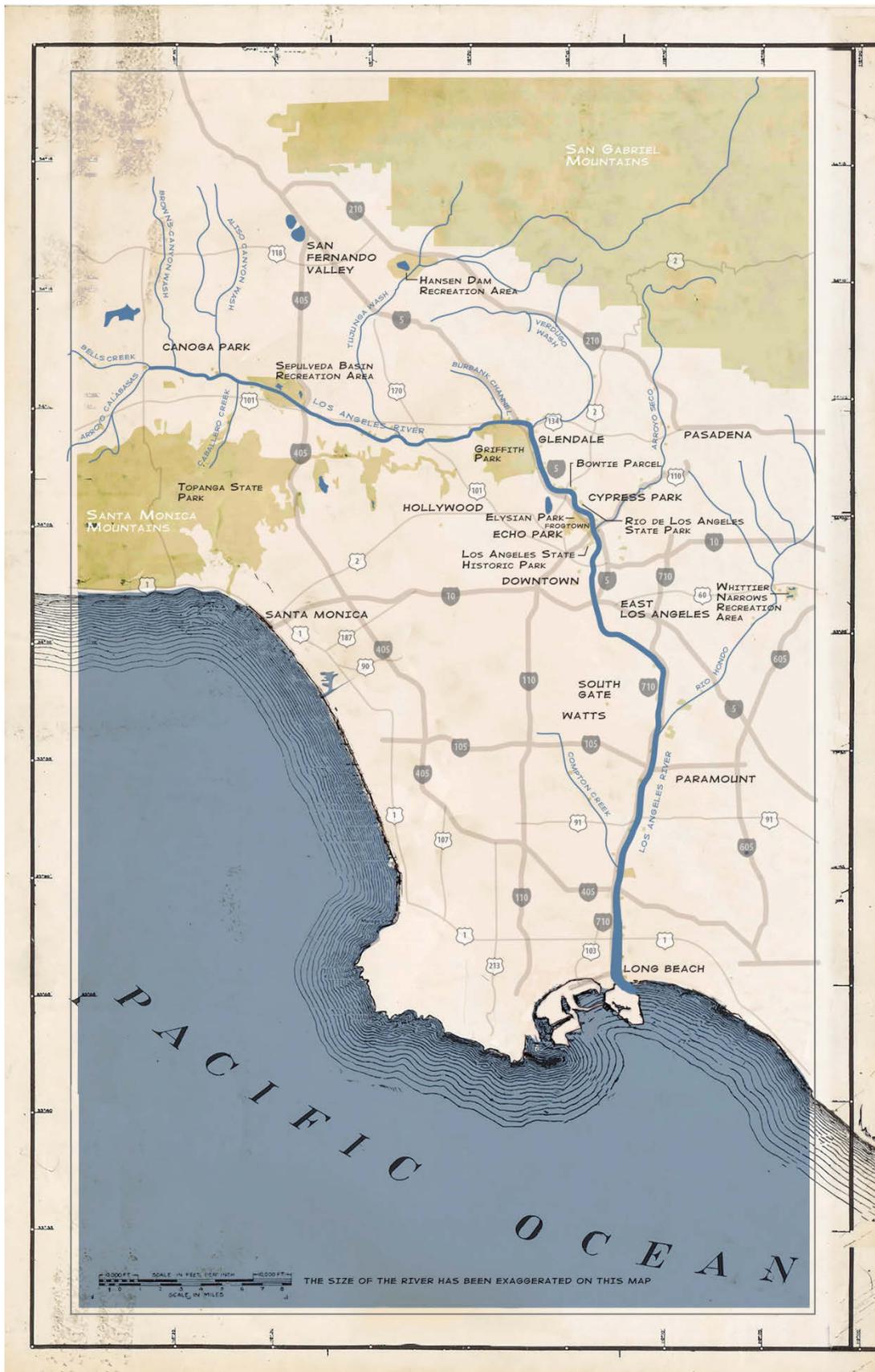


Figure 6: Los Angeles River overview map, designed by Brendan Savage and Tilly Hinton.

1.2 A LOVING GAZE

This thesis is a contemporary history and an unlikely love story. You will come to know the Los Angeles River in a new way, through the lens of love. I invite you to think about human beings and our indelible impact on the planet by turning the gaze around, to consider also the planet's indelible impact on us. Inspired by the genre of the nature field guide, I offer you an analysis by way of three material objects, which are synonymous with this strange concrete river: water, paint, and weeds. I care about both love and damaged landscapes, and I hope that you will, too.

As you read intimate, close-in accounts of people's relationships with the Los Angeles River you are at the same time reading a much larger historical story, about urban identity, belonging, shifting patterns of industrialisation and its many consequences, what nature means and who we humans are in relation to it. And, I venture to suggest, you are reading about possible futures, too.

Because the decisions we make about how to regard landscapes, by commission and omission both, literally changes them. This is no value-neutral space. The river is, right now, subject to an incredible degree of potentially transformative attention from all levels of government as well as community organisations, real estate interests, businesses, the media, and others.

This is a juncture as significant as that one in the late 1930s, which led to the river's entombment in concrete. In this context, I offer here an argument that we must deeply and authentically regard urban nature—in all of its compromise and complexity—with the same respect afforded to more apparently pristine landscapes. We humans are part of the warp and weft of the urban fabric. Accepting this, noticing it, and celebrating it, opens us and our landscapes up to a new kind of resonance. Loving places opens them to our comprehension, and thus our care.

This widespread noticing of the river carries risk. Key among them is gentrification, in which:

the rezoning of riverside sites from industrial to residential use ... will further marginalize low income communities in the vicinity of the river as rents and land values begin to spiral upward.¹⁴

There is surprisingly little written about the process and impacts of gentrification with regards to the Los Angeles River. Geographer Matthew Gandy's work stands as a sentinel, marking the need for more attention to be paid to the environmental justice implications of river revitalisation. Urban theorist Mike Davis' article on the river and homelessness is one of the few that pays any deep attention to the meaning of the river for the many people who call it home, and accounts of the river as a site for sustenance through fishing and foraging remain largely anecdotal and unresearched.¹⁵ Matthew Gandy writes about how the forces of gentrification lead to a forgetting of the river's rich past:

The derision directed at the landscapes of the Los Angeles River tends to downplay the degree to which these marginal spaces have played a distinctive role within urban culture. The environmentalist disdain for the "concrete river" ignores cultural appropriations of the drainage channels that utilize these landscapes in unexpected ways. A functional space that had been the focus of spontaneous forms of social and ecological appropriation is now being reframed, if not partly reengineered, to meet a very different set of expectations. The imposition of an "ecological simulacrum" in place of the concrete river, as part of a wider agenda of landscape restoration, raises its own set of social, cultural, and ecological assumptions that are invariably cloaked beneath rhetorical claims to present the public interest. The specter of "ecological gentrification" lurking behind the greening of Los Angeles suggests that

¹⁴ Matthew Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 178.

¹⁵ Friends of the Los Angeles River, "State of the River: The Fish Study," (Los Angeles, 2008); Mike Davis, "Afterword—A Logic like Hell's: Being Homeless in Los Angeles," *UCLA Law Review*, vol. 39 (1991); Jim Burns, "Carping in L.A.: The Los Angeles River." *California Fly Fisher*, 2 2010; Carman Tse, "Six-Pound Carp Lands the Top Prize at Inaugural L.A. River Fly Fishing Derby," accessed September 29, 2016. http://laist.com/2014/09/07/la_river_fly_fishing.php; Isaac Simpson, "You Can Fly-Fish the L.A. River, and It's Pretty Damn Cool," accessed 29 September, 2016. <http://www.laweekly.com/news/you-can-fly-fish-the-la-river-and-its-pretty-damn-cool-5065453>.

the arguments for environmental justice, first articulated in the 1980s, remain vitally relevant.¹⁶

And so, without environmental history to light the way, we would risk a future in which places, and their resonance and meaning to people, are forgotten, an enthusiasm for the new that obscures the already-rich existence of the past and present. As Gene Desfor and Roger Keil write:

urban environmentalism in Los Angeles is tied to constantly changing socio-economic fragmentations and polarizations, which have been part and parcel of that city's globalization ... urban natures have been contentious social struggles around justice, culture and democracy.¹⁷

Environmental history serves as a tool for finding, or more accurately making, coherence from the fragmentation.

The remaking of the river has been a perpetual project. Pre-channelisation, it was a quest to make the river into something safe, controlled, and tamed. It was an utter reimagining. The reimagining continued, in a different direction, when advocacy organisation Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) promulgated a mission of reimagining back in 2002:

If you take time to look at it, you can see that the Los Angeles River can be even more. Imagine a Los Angeles River greenway with a canopy of trees welcoming people to its banks. Consider a clean and protected habitat with wildlife and native vegetation that serves as a classroom for school children to learn about the environment and its preservation. Think about parks along the river, which can serve as catch basins where rain water is collected in anticipation of cyclical droughts. Picture commuters leaving their cars home and bicycling along the river greenway in the morning and afternoon—imagine bluer skies and less congestion. Envision communities from both sides of the banks joining in common effort to keep the river and ocean clean. It is possible. It can happen.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 182–83.

¹⁷ Gene Desfor and Roger Keil, "Every river tells a story: the Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as articulating landscapes," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2000), 18.

¹⁸ FoLAR, draft report "River Watch: Bringing Communities to the Los Angeles River," 2002, Box 37, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013, (Collection 2215), Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Every river transformation has the potential to withhold the river from particular people and groups. Every instance of the river's remaking is value laden, and environmental justice must be made a constant and active concern.

1.3 AN IMAGINED INVISIBILITY

When I'm researching in Los Angeles, I talk about the river with almost everyone. Again and again, I hear the same story, as if it's a script clipped out of the *Los Angeles Times*. People smile. They tell me nobody in Los Angeles knows that the city has a river. Then they recount an intimate, personal story about this supposedly unknown 80-something kilometre watercourse. I am yet to meet someone in the know-nothing category. The river just may be the city's least-kept secret.

The janitor polishing brass fixtures in one of downtown LA's oldest and swankiest hotels tells me as I loiter in the lobby, pretending I am staying there while actually waiting for an interviewee to arrive, how he played in the river as a child in East Los Angeles. His father would repeatedly drill the children about river safety through a Spanish phrase that translates, loosely, as: "No matter who you are—rich, poor, black, white, Latino—if you mess about with the river it'll badly mess with you."

The security guard at one of UCLA's libraries knows right away about the proposed billion-dollar river restoration measures and about architect Frank Gehry, recently enlisted for his "starchitecture" prowess to once again reimagine the river's future.

An elderly man I met at a fancy club in Hollywood remembered his childhood in Frogtown, when the ground would be so thick with frogs that he couldn't walk for stepping on them. He smiled with boyish excitement, remembering the popping sounds they made, and reminded us both why so few people in Los

Angeles call that place by its proper name, Elysian Valley. The frogs made it Frogtown long ago.

Someone else I met told me about doing jury duty at a trial for an alleged gang killing in the lower reaches, and another asked me to take care, grimacing as he told me how a friend had found a human corpse in the river while on a walking tour. Everybody, it seems, carries a little piece of the river with them. Horror stories, love stories, quirky stories, life stories ... the Los Angeles River has them all.

Scholars seem to like this lost-river narrative, too. Matthew Gandy, who has been writing about the river for years, describes it as a mostly forgotten place:

For much of its course the river is now little more than a concrete channel hidden within the heart of the city: buildings face away, billboards obscure its location, and its banks are often inaccessible behind miles of fenced-off levees.¹⁹

Matthew Gandy is right about inaccessibility, but I argue that he and a wealth of others are less right about it being hidden, or about the river being nothing more than a concrete channel.²⁰ Yes, the Los Angeles River has until recently been difficult to access in many stretches, due to both the constraints of the built environment and uncertain legal status regarding access, ownership, and trespassing.²¹ Illegality and the river have been fairly constant companions, with access and use made complicated at least, or forbidden at most, by a complex

¹⁹ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 146.

²⁰ Instances of this include: Jenny Price, "Remaking American Environmentalism: On the Banks of the L.A. River," *Environmental History*, vol. 13 (2008); "Thirteen ways of seeing nature in L.A.," *Believer Magazine*, 2006; Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*; Dick Roraback, "Exploring the L.A. River: Small Tales from Along Lario Trail." *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1985.

²¹ The development of parks along the river, the increased prevalence and use of cycle paths, sanctioned recreation programs such as kayaking and urban campouts, and the growing popularity of the river in general, are all markers of significant change.

maze of different jurisdictions, processes, and conditions.²² The Los Angeles River is concreted in all but a few short stretches where natural groundwater conditions, or engineering considerations, precluded it.



Figure 7: Signage near a homeless encampment at the southern end of the Bowtie Parcel. Photo by the author.

But, there is ample primary evidence of people using the river for all kinds of purposes, of people thinking about the river in all kinds of ways, of it being a place that has always mattered and continues to matter. So much so that it is impossible for me to abide by this invisibility narrative. My research offers a new view of an amply scrutinised waterway, articulating what Erica Nathan has described as “social flow,” arguing that:

Our imagination cannot feed on aquatic taxonomies. It requires a history of our past connections with water, a sense of how our values have shaped particular waterscapes and then ricocheted back into community life ... what I refer to as a river’s ‘social flow’. Knowledge, memory and experience of water petitions, riverside picnics, special waterholes,

²² Friends of the Los Angeles River, “Recommendations for near-term recreational access and use of the Los Angeles River,” (Los Angeles: Friends of the Los Angeles River, 2011).

creation stories with river resting places, sepia photographs and modern paintings, overhanging trees, slippery boulders, gold diggings and water races, allocation moments, submerged towns, frontage disputes, sandy bottoms and twiggy snags, are what connect people to place.²³

Every river's social flow is unique and instructive. The approach taken in this thesis documents and explores some of the features of the Los Angeles River's particular social flow, and the ways in which its particularities connect people to place.

Words are a vital river object. They might not be ensnared in trees like plastic bags, nor are they slippery underfoot like the algal meadows that grow in the perfectly warmed shallow river water. But words articulate the river's past, present, and future. The river runs with words. And, by exploring the river through its stories, we are able to learn to see in new ways. When I interviewed Jill Sourial, former staffer to Councilman Ed Reyes, in her office at The Nature Conservancy, she reflected on how the hydrological underpinnings of a city are obscured from view: "most of us don't see how rivers work, how watersheds work, how the city is actually designed, because we've never been taught to look at it that way."²⁴ It is because people are learning to see the river anew that it is now taken seriously as an ecological asset and a place worth attending to. In an interview with me, kayaker and river advocate George Wolfe talked about those "deeper, darker days," a time "when you couldn't pay people to go near the LA River."²⁵ Environment writer Jenny Price writes that "Angelenos have lost their fifty-one-mile river in plain sight—and can't see the essential daily connections from the river to their lives."²⁶ Counter to these perspectives, my reading of the

²³ Erica Nathan, *Lost Waters: A History of a Troubled Catchment* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 4.

²⁴ Jill Sourial, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Jill's office, The Nature Conservancy, Downtown Los Angeles.

²⁵ George Wolfe, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George's Home, Los Angeles.

²⁶ Price, "Remaking American Environmentalism: On the Banks of the L.A. River," 549.

evidence indicates that there has never been a time since channelisation that the river has been forgotten. Nor did it ever disappear, despite the narrative temptation that leads many authors to say this was so. What has shifted is that the river has moved from being a place which individuals solely found important, to one valued by both individuals and some forward-thinking community groups, to now the river being almost universally important—to government at multiple levels, private interests, residents, scientists, architects, ecologists, and more.

1.4 CITIES ARE OUR NATURE

This is a tale of love and a beloved. It is me shouting to the heavens—and perhaps to you—that humans belong in nature and nature abounds in cities. It is a lot of evidence and words assembled to say a very simple thing. We cannot understand a river, nor ourselves, without being willing to augment hydrology, policy, engineering, land-use planning, design, ecology, and economics with stories of emotions, especially love. Our imaginations matter, and to sustain them we need stories. This thesis documents a quest to feed my imagination, and now yours as well. This is the argument: urban landscapes—no matter how damaged, how strange, how altered, how complex—are not only made by us, they make us. For this reason, we simply must regard them as legitimately natural places, and we must regard them emotionally.

1.5 LOVE AND INTIMACY AS EMOTIONAL TERRAINS

Emotional terrains are complex things. In this thesis, I elect to dig deep into one emotion—love—instead of skimming across the surface of many. I choose love over other possibilities because of its cultural pervasiveness; it is arguably the

emotion most written about over the last 500 years.²⁷ It is also a galvanising emotion. As Cary de Wit writes:

A relationship with a place can be likened to a relationship with a person and is subject to many of the same manifestations, such as irrational attachment, selective judgment, personal sacrifice, bereavement at separation, and fierce protectiveness. This personal attachment has broad implications, too, because people can have passionate reactions to impacts on places they hold dear, reactions that can throw a wrench into a political or economic apparatus of any size and scuttle the best-laid plans of resource managers, city planners, and civil engineers. In effect, sense of place plays a significant role in shaping our social, political, economic, and even physical world.²⁸

It is not surprising then that love emerged often as a theme in my oral history interviews, and to some extent in archival materials. Kat Superfisky — a landscape architect, artist, and ecologist who moved to Los Angeles in 2013 because “the seed had been planted in my brain that this thing called the LA River existed” — expressed her deep love for the Bowtie Parcel, a piece of land which will eventually become a state park on the left bank of the river in East Los Angeles: “when I came across that piece of property, that was just love. Love, love, love.”²⁹ In the FoLAR archives, a report from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation included a reflection from that organisation’s founder, that “we accept as true the oft-quoted adage, ‘We protect what we love.’ We’ve got a lot of protecting to do.”³⁰ Archived materials from a graduate student, Karen Holden, also referenced love as a galvanising emotion:

Born in Los Angeles, I’ve lived here on and off for 53 years, yet the first time I knowingly looked at the L.A. River was this autumn, on our class field trip to Dominguez Gap. It was, oddly, love at first sight. Something about the black-necked stilts picking at the tiny life in the algae-coated concrete, the small song bird — what kind, poor memory, what kind —

²⁷ Simone Belli, Rom Harré, and Lupicinio Iñiguez, “What is Love? Discourse About Emotions in Social Sciences,” *Human Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2010), 254.

²⁸ Cary W. de Wit, “Interviewing for Sense of Place,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2013), 122.

²⁹ Kat Superfisky, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

³⁰ Captain Charles Moore, *Algalita Annual Report*, 2008, Box 39, Folder 2, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

perched on the handle of an overturned worn shopping cart, the sheer width of the channel, and what could and could not be seen on the other side, thrilled me. The Gap, which seems so lovely, was a pleasant experience, but the river was like lightning on the road.³¹

In closely reading the draft and final versions of a newspaper feature piece on the river, I found references to love omitted not once but twice in the final version.³² This is a small incident but a compelling prompt for curiosity: to wonder where else love has been silenced and what may be gained from being willing to speak its name.

I use psychologist Robert Sternberg's triangular model, that love is comprised of *passion*, *decision/commitment*, and *intimacy*. Sternberg explains that while the presence of *passion* and *decision/commitment* vary according to the type of love being expressed, *intimacy* is ever present.³³ For this reason, intimacy is my close focus in this thesis. As others have taken an interest in sewage, channelisation, flooding or urban planning, my quest is to understand how people have related to the river, how they have felt. Why? Because knowing and loving places is at the core of being ecologically responsible. Because more of us live in cities than anywhere else on the planet. The Los Angeles River is by no means the most damaged place in the world—sadly, there are countless contenders jockeying for that spot—but it is perhaps one of the best known, by image if not by name. And because writing about the emotional terrains of an altered landscape casts it—and places like it—in a new light. A light that illuminates urban nature as more than a consolation prize, which offers new ways of thinking about urban living

³¹ Karen Holden, research materials, 2008, Box 39, Folder 7, *ibid.*

³² Neil Cohen, draft and final versions of "Mark Twain!" article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, *ibid.*

³³ Robert J. Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory of Love," *Psychological Review*, vol. 93, no. 2 (1986), 120.

in the Anthropocene³⁴, and provides evidence-driven relational and emotional perspectives that are, remarkably, absent elsewhere.

This project responds to a gap in the literature because it examines underpinning emotional characteristics that animate people's interactions with river places. This explores a dimension of river history that is under-represented in extant research, which tends to focus on practical, geographic, scientific, and sociopolitical aspects. A deeper understanding of the loving connections that people form with rivers can make a powerful contribution to cultural and environmental policy and practice, in government and across society. As one of my oral history interviewees, Jill Sourial, reflected, "people care for a place to the extent that they understand or feel how special it is, so yeah, we still have more to do."³⁵

In accord with my belief in history as a means for social change, love is a compelling emotion to understand, especially in relation to altered—even damaged—landscapes. My research builds new understanding of human connections to the environment in Los Angeles, an exploration long obscured and contorted by an imposed nature/culture divide in western thought. It invites physical, emotional, social, and spiritual lines of inquiry. It asks not just what activities, changes and continuities the river has experienced in its recent post-channelisation history, but also how people came to belong to these highly altered locations, exploring the ways that they loved, longed, yearned, won, and lost. It pushes back against the critique of environmental history that, as a discipline, has been "more interested in dirt than in perceptions, per se, of

³⁴ Libby Robin and Will Steffen, "History for the Anthropocene," *History Compass*, vol. 5, no. 5 (2007); Noel Castree, "The Anthropocene and the Environmental Humanities: Extending the Conversation," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014).

³⁵ Jill Sourial, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Jill's office, The Nature Conservancy, Downtown Los Angeles.

dirt.”³⁶ My research is wholeheartedly concerned with perceptions. Exploring human relationships with rivers is a powerful tool in engendering social and ecological responsibility, which is one of the motivations for this research. And, ultimately, these relationships are good for us. Barry Lopez anticipates that “someone someday will trace the roots of modern human loneliness to a loss of intimacy with place, to our many breaks with the physical Earth.”³⁷ We need stories about love and landscape for all of these reasons, and more.

One of these reasons is accuracy, plain and simple. Donald Worster laments a kind of amnesia in history, that:

historians seemed to have forgotten completely that, until very recently, almost all people lived as intimately with other species and with the wind and weather as they did with their own kind. To ignore that long intimacy was to distort history³⁸

In a similar vein, I argue that to neglect, dismiss or otherwise ignore people’s ongoing intimacy for places is similarly lamentable. Love is an emotion so prevalent in our lives that, to adequately historicise a complex altered environment, it demands that we pay it close attention. This attentiveness has not—until now—been afforded to the Los Angeles River.

1.6 GETTING TO KNOW THE RIVER

The Los Angeles River runs like an artery through the city of Los Angeles. Altered, straightened, obscured, tamed. It is actively being reclaimed on several fronts: by a concerned citizenry, through policy machinations, by attention from planners and developers, and by nature itself. Learning about urban rivers means learning how to read complex landscapes. Here, as everywhere,

³⁶ A.W. Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 4 (1995), 1188.

³⁷ Barry Lopez, “Coldscapes: Otherworldly Beautiful, the Lands of Perpetually Frozen Earth Reveal the Delicate Rhythms of the Planet. But Will Permafrost Stay Permanent?” *National Geographic*, 2007.

³⁸ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.

understanding matters. We pay more attention and act more responsibly if we know what things are called, if we understand how and why they work.

Sometimes urban nature can seem almost unreadable. This *Field Guide to Love and the Los Angeles River* is a gesture towards legibility, an invitation to you to explore one of this planet's strangest socionatural landscapes. A place that we made and unmade, and make and unmake, in these endless loops of alteration and restoration.³⁹ Here, I use the term "socionatural" as geographer Erik Swyngedouw deploys it, as recognition:

that natural or ecological conditions and processes do not operate separately from social processes, and that the actually existing socionatural conditions are always the result of intricate transformations of pre-existing configurations that are themselves inherently natural and social.⁴⁰

The river is a place that, if we can make some more sense of it, has plenty to teach about urbanisation, belonging, destruction, recovery, and life, in all its many dimensions.

The river's channelisation came soon after a period of intense urban growth, with the city's population increasing twelvefold and its land footprint multiplying by ten, between 1900 and 1930.⁴¹ This growth was only possible because by then the Los Angeles Aqueduct carted a vast supply of water into the city from the distant Owens Valley in central California.⁴² What had been assessed as an overabundant new supply of water quickly became barely enough. Opportunistic shifts in agricultural practices in the San Fernando Valley

³⁹ See, for example, T.S. McMillin, "Strange Waters: From Confluence to Vortex in the Los Angeles Basin," in *The Politics of Fresh Water: Access, Conflict and Identity*, ed. Catherine M. Ashcraft and Tamar Mayer, (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

⁴⁰ Swyngedouw 1999, cited in Nikolas C. Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw, *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

⁴¹ William L. Kahrl, "The Politics of California Water: Owens Valley and the Los Angeles Aqueduct, 1900–1927: II. The Politics of Exploitation," *California Historical Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2 (1976), 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 103.

demanded of the aqueduct a quantum of water that was at times greater than the entire flow of the Owens River.⁴³ From the 1920s, the Owens Valley sunk into water poverty while water-guzzling Los Angeles flourished.⁴⁴ Massive, hydrologically transformative infrastructure had shown itself to be good for Los Angeles. The scale and intensity of the Aqueduct's development make for a creation story that includes dynamite-fuelled sabotage, armed patrols, subterfuge, rebellion, the Ku Klux Klan, shoot-to-kill orders, journalistic witch-hunts, and a plethora of promises made and broken.⁴⁵ Compared to the aqueduct, this was a relatively straightforward endeavour. Also, the abundance of water conveyed by the aqueduct meant that the river was no longer a necessary source of municipal water, giving it a "starkly diminished role" in the city.⁴⁶

And then, hot on the tail of the aqueduct spectacle, the Great Depression. In Los Angeles, one feature of this period was extensive labour organising, often on ethnic lines that were reflective of employment patterns in the manufacturing and agricultural industries: Mexican and Japanese fruit pickers striking to increase their hourly rate higher than nine cents an hour; Latina organisers in the garment-manufacture sector leading an industry-wide strike of Mexican, Russian, Polish, Italian, and Jewish workers, mostly women and all low-wage; the foment of revolution extended out of workplaces and into the rest of life, with organisers mobilising people to lobby for educational reform, better recreational spaces, employment for young people, and social security reform.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Matthew Gandy, "Riparian Anomie: Reflections on the Los Angeles River," *Landscape Research*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2006), 137.

⁴⁷ Robert Gottlieb et al., *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Liveable City: Updated with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 21–23.

Among all of this, the Los Angeles River's eruption into a series of floods was a shocking affront. This was, after all, the city "where nature helps industry most," according to the Chamber of Commerce in 1915.⁴⁸ A mythology had been constructed about southern California's Edenic and benevolent climate:

That these series of extreme [flood] episodes have been purged from our memory is no accident. The hucksters to franchised California sold sunshine, not deluge. This meant that, no matter what the cost, something had to be done about the periodic flooding, mudslides, collapsing palisades, and pummeled beaches. No one was willing to concede that nature was irrational, let alone uncontrollable.⁴⁹

Government agencies had tried to codify the river's extent by declaring it a channel, thereby neglecting the river's time-honoured pattern of ranging fairly wildly across the floodplain. This was coupled with an overwhelmingly newly arrived population who simply lacked the intergenerational, place-informed memory of how the city behaved in various weathers.⁵⁰ In a string of floods, nature wasn't "helping industry most" or very much at all, and solutions were sought. The winning solution was that executed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, with their initial workforce of relief-roll labourers. Emerging mechanisation technologies in the 1940s soon bolstered the pace of construction.⁵¹ These technologies were a result of the Army Corps ongoing attention to river alteration, since the passing by Congress of the *General Survey Act* vested in them responsibility to 'carve navigation passages for a growing nation' in 1842 and later the federal government's increasing support for flood

⁴⁸ Jared Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 13.

⁴⁹ Greg Goldin and Mike Davis, magazine clipping of "A River Runs Through It: The Perils of Life in Los Angeles," *L.A. Weekly*, 1995, Box 29, Folder 12, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000), (Collection RG 077), National Archiving and Records Authority, Perris, CA.

⁵⁰ *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 13–14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 110–11.

control measures with the 1917 *Flood Control Act*.⁵² These legislative developments readied the Corp to step in once the County of Los Angeles and various city municipalities surrendered in their efforts to prevent the Los Angeles River once again breaching its banks.⁵³ And that, in short, is how it comes to be that Los Angeles now has a river that many mistake for a stormwater drain, is better known for its inorganic than its organic characteristics, and has a great deal to teach us about how to live, both in cities and in the Anthropocene.

In spite of there being many impediments to emotional (and indeed physical) closeness, people have remained and grown to be deeply connected to this hybrid riverscape, a ribbon of places that can prompt explorations of nature, alteration, ecological responsibility, and the role of historical research in environmental policy and advocacy. The Los Angeles River is, and historically has been, meaningful to people against apparent aesthetic and functional odds. It is a seemingly unlovable place, which is in fact loved by many.

Advocates say that, when the steelhead trout return to the Los Angeles River, the work of ecological restoration will be complete. This is still a long way off. The Los Angeles River has been the subject of extensive human interventions—the most dramatic of which involved concrete, chemicals, and various urban developments. As a result of these, it is channelised, flowing in straightened and shifted paths, and bears the scars of decades of pollution. Countless histories

⁵² Matthew T. Percy, "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the evolution of navigation practice and policy, 1800–1865," in *Two centuries of experience in water resources management: a Dutch-U.S. retrospective*, ed. John Lonnquest, et al. (Alexandria, Virginia: Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Rijkswaterstaat, Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, 2014), 51; William F. Willingham, "U.S. era of progressivism and large public works, 1900–1970," in *Two centuries of experience in water resources management: a Dutch-U.S. retrospective*, ed. John Lonnquest, et al. (Alexandria, Virginia: Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Rijkswaterstaat, Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, 2014), 215.

⁵³ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 205.

have unfolded within this “exceedingly complex urban ecosystem.”⁵⁴ When I interviewed the iconic graffiti artist Saber, he described it vividly, saying, “you have this river that’s been almost surgically removed and replaced with mechanical parts.”⁵⁵ Even with all the surgery, the river’s course includes stretches that are, in all kinds of ways, wild. Take, for example, the Bowtie Parcel, recalled here by Kat Superfisky:

I feel like it always is the golden hour when I’m there.
It’s always like the sun is just setting in this perfect way,
casting this brilliant shimmer over the entire concreteness.
It then shimmers on the LA River, too,
right there is where it has this amazing bend.
You almost feel like you’re watching it through a window.⁵⁶

Kat, and many others likewise, has come to know the river landscape well, her love and her intimacy intensifying with each interaction, in much the same way that Robert Macfarlane describes his relationship with the Gog Magog Downs outside of Cambridge, UK:

Slowly, though, I have acquired that literacy. I have learnt to read the edgelands and have come, if not quite to love them, at least to arrive at an intimacy with them. Proximity and time have helped: I have lived here a decade now, and in that period I have walked and run thousands of miles back and forth over the few hundred hectares of edgeland between my home and the Gogs.⁵⁷

There is much to be gained by getting close to a landscape. It is, in fact, a commonly held human desire, which holds promise for the wellbeing of the human and more-than human worlds in the urban habitats we occupy together, entwined.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵ Saber, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

⁵⁶ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁵⁷ Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 237.



Figure 8: Images from the Bowtie Parcel. Photos by the author and Kevin Skaggs.

If this thesis does what I hope, you'll feel like you've been to the Los Angeles River, even if its foamy waters haven't rolled over your shoes, even if you haven't discovered a nest of just-hatching black-necked stilts, even if its scale hasn't yet left you breathless, and in love.⁵⁸ As you meet the protagonists I had the privilege of interviewing, I hope you might come to know more about them and their river, as I have done. When I interviewed these people, I thought of our interactions a little like those sweet conversations you have with couples who are in love. Questions that gently pry open some of the mysteries of love and intimacy: *How did you meet? What do you still not know about him after all this time? What were some key moments? What does your love for each other make possible? Tell me the thing you know most closely about her? What do you do together? What does your lover give you in life? And you, what do you give in return?* These kinds of questions have allowed me to plumb different analytical depths than those

⁵⁸ This account of black-necked stilts hatching comes from Kat Superfisky, who recalled that this happened in the morning of the first official river campout in 2015, and her co-organiser Lila Higgins, who also saw the tiny hatchlings that had emerged overnight.

afforded by previous research about the river, bringing to the surface emotional dimensions not yet explored in the literature.

A riverscape as complicated and compromised as the Los Angeles River is an apt location for such an exploration. As geographer Jennifer Wolch writes:

It is both symbol and symptom of the twentieth-century approach to urbanization: a landscape rooted in worries about the destructive power of the natural world and the need to control it via massive engineering works and technological feats. Today, this fifty-one-mile waterway runs through the city linking affluent exurbs that cling to the San Gabriel Mountains, up-scale San Fernando Valley movie industry districts, downtown Los Angeles, the region's industrial "rustbelt," and down-at-the-heels postwar inner suburbs with the highest levels of concentrated poverty in the state.⁵⁹

In the FoLAR archives, an undated paper written by FoLAR botanist Christine Perala captured much of the extent of river's transformation:

The Los Angeles River was and is perhaps the most misunderstood river in the world. When newcomers arrived at the City of the Angels in the 1700s, they found an idyllic meandering stream lined with cottonwoods, sycamores and willows, bordered by majestic oak woodlands. These were plant communities well adapted to the periodic floods typical of desert riparian systems. Yet the native hydrology of the Los Angeles River was a wild card, unpredictable in its intensity and speed. The lure of year-round sunshine continued to draw people west to riches, fame and health, but the river defied people's sense of rightness and refused to behave as a river "ought to" behave.⁶⁰

This is Los Angeles in a nutshell. A place that boosters make into a promised land, abundant in fertility, sunshine, and opportunity, while at the same time a landscape undeniably complicated and prone to risk.

The environmental change generated by these conditions, and by human habitation, is extreme and irreversible. One instance of this, a crucial one, is the Los Angeles River. It is profoundly altered (see Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure

⁵⁹ Jennifer Wolch, "Green Urban Worlds," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 97, no. 2 (2007), 374.

⁶⁰ Christine Perala, paper on "Weed Management of the Los Angeles River: Jurisdictional Problems for Native Aquatic Plant Mangement, n.d., Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

11). As David Browne and Roger Keil describe, the river articulates much of Los Angeles' recent history:

To many onlookers, the Los Angeles River is not a part of natural water circulation systems but a segment of the city's human-made infrastructure of sewer flow and flood control. Those who know and care recall a history of diverse human–nature interactions along the river, which is also the story of the degradation of a complex riparian ecosystem.⁶¹

With the river's hydrology so extremely altered by channelisation, the state of the river provides a rich basis for narrating several important stories about structural forces at play—race, class, gentrification, gender, and uses of space, as well as (and this is where my analytical crosshairs are trained) the internal emotional terrains of people who have a relationship with the river. The river is arguably, as FoLAR has described it, “one of the largest conceptual earthworks ever constructed.”⁶² The extreme scale and scope of the river's alteration has not obscured the relational exchange between human beings and the rest of nature, but rather illuminates it brightly.

⁶¹ David R. Browne and Roger Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles,” *Organization Environment*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2000), 172–73.

⁶² FoLAR newsletter, 1995, Box 31, Folder 10, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.



Figure 9: The Hyperion Ave Bridge at Atwater Village, looking north-east. Photo by the author.



Figure 10: Channelisation in the upper reaches of the river. Photo by the author.



Figure 11: River repairs in Downtown Los Angeles. Photo by the author.

1.7 TANGLED RELATIONSHIPS OF NATURE AND CULTURE

The nature–culture web tangles in all kinds of ways in the watershed, banks, and bed of the Los Angeles River. It is a testing ground for observing complex human, nonhuman, and more-than-human interactions; for wending and working our way through the complexities of urbanisation, place, belonging, damage, and emancipation. And in this, it offers us an extreme example. It is a river that William L. Graf classified in 1996 as “completely artificial,” the extreme end of spectrum, which, at its other terminus, has the “completely natural” Middle Salmon River in Idaho.⁶³ In the face of urbanisation, climate change, and unprecedented rates of resource consumption, humanity faces a future in which nature will be an increasingly complex concept. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that environmental history—the study of humans and the

⁶³ William L. Graf, “Geomorphology and Policy for Restoration of Impounded American Rivers: What is ‘Natural?’,” in *The Scientific Nature of Geomorphology: Proceedings of the 27th Binghamton Symposium in Geomorphology*, ed. Bruce L. Rhoads and Colin E. Thorn (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 451.

rest of nature—is widely described as a burgeoning field.⁶⁴ My research centres on a river that is an ideal site “to find the natural thriving in places swamped by human activity.”⁶⁵ Using a range of sources that illuminate people’s intimate connections to the Los Angeles River, the thesis will examine what people have made of nature and what nature has made of them.

Matthew Gandy writes of the nature–culture jumble that is the Los Angeles River in a way that casts human beings outside of nature and in domination of it:

Nature if present at all is incidental, functional, or in the case of surface water a potential threat, yet at the same time concrete is itself a material manifestation of nature transformed into human artifice.⁶⁶

But this dichotomisation of human beings from the rest of nature is for me untenable, and also unhelpful. Rather, I take on Tim Ingold’s view that, because we dwell in the landscape, its state constitutes a living record of our humanness:

the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves.⁶⁷

That is to say, we write ourselves upon landscapes not as outsiders but as active agents in a complexly woven tangle of nature and culture. And so, in reading landscapes, as this thesis seeks to do, we need to do so from within, taking in the detail, the senses, the nuances and—most importantly but least attended to—the emotional terrain of the places in which we dwell. By doing so, we are as Paul Sutter writes, more able to “extend moral consideration to the natural world.”⁶⁸ And this sensibility, particularly as an active response against the hefty impacts of human beings on the planet, is of the utmost importance.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2013), 95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁶ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 173.

⁶⁷ Tim Ingold, 1993, cited in Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, “Rethinking Nature and Society,” in *Contested Natures*, ed. Phil Macnaghten and John Urry (London: SAGE Publications), 152.

⁶⁸ Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” 94.

Any place we encounter is changed—in tiny, enormous or even catastrophic ways—by that encounter. It is an outdated and impossible idea that we may encounter a place leaving nothing but footprints. Given that we, unavoidably, will leave a mark, the moral question becomes, what kind of impacts might we leave? Impact is, in an emotional sense, reciprocal. Just as we affect a place, we too are affected by it.

Perhaps this explains why we human beings so deeply crave connection to place. As Barry Lopez writes, “many of us, I think, long to become the companion of a place, not its authority, not its owner.”⁶⁹ He argues, and a wealth of literature in various fields affirms his argument, that this “archaic affinity for the land ... is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair.”⁷⁰ This idea, despite its apparent significance, is underexplored. As Grace Karskens notes:

we need histories of the deep and often unacknowledged relationships people have with bushland, gardens, beaches, rivers, wildlife and weather ... These are the stories with which we need to reconnect, because in the end, policies, laws and governments alone are not going to make our cities sustainable and secure—city people must be involved, connected and committed too.⁷¹

My research addresses this call, using archival, oral history and place-based sources to seek to understand how love has been a feature of people’s interactions with the Los Angeles River in the period after channelisation, and particularly in what we could call the river’s revitalisation era, running from the mid 1980s and continuing today. The thrust of my work is to argue that relationality is embodied and everywhere.

⁶⁹ Barry Lopez, “A Literature of Place,” *The EnviroLink Network* (1997).

⁷⁰ *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (London: Pan Books, 1986), 266.

⁷¹ Grace Karskens, “Seeking Sydney From the Ground Up: Foundations and Horizons in Sydney’s Historiography,” *Sydney Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 196.

Far from being the preserve of human beings and special set-aside places, intimacy with place can arise wherever we are. Even against many odds, and even in a concrete river. As Rodney Giblett writes in his commentary on relationship and landscape photography:

In conservation and ecology this entails a shift from the setting aside of special places in sanctuaries, such as national parks, to the sacrality of all places, rural and urban, pristine and spoiled. These shifts from mastery to mutuality, from sanctuarism to sacrality, could be developed in relation to landscape photography.⁷²

Furthermore, relationality extends to the more-than-human world. Co-founder and for three decades the president of FoLAR, Lewis MacAdams “looked to the day when ‘cormorants, red-legged frogs, and humans can meet as equals’ along the river.”⁷³ To think relationally of places, entwined with the teeming life they support, is a refreshing but in no way new perspective. These feelings are central to indigenous cosmologies, new as they may seem to non-indigenous people. As Deborah Bird-Rose explains:

The relationships between [Indigenous Australian] people and their country are intense, intimate, full of responsibilities, and, when all is well, friendly. It is a kinship relationship, and like relations among kin, there are obligations of nurturance. People and country take care of each other.⁷⁴

For Indigenous Australians, Melissa Lucashenko writes, “exile [from Country] is a peculiar form of illness, and of blindness, since the stories which give life meaning ... are contained not in human language alone, but also in language expressed within and by landscape.”⁷⁵ This relational way of being in the world has seen recent precedent-setting decisions in both New Zealand and India,

⁷² Rodney James Giblett, *Landscapes of Culture and Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 120.

⁷³ Jonathan Spaulding, “On L.A.: Light/Motion/Dreams: Developing an Exhibition on the Natural and Cultural History of Los Angeles,” *Environmental History*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2005), 307.

⁷⁴ Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 49.

⁷⁵ Melissa Lucashenko, “Not Quite White in the Head,” *Manoa*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2007), 27.

granting legal personhood to the Whanganui and the Ganges rivers.⁷⁶ In not only structural but other ways, being in relation with place can significantly impact all of the life and landscape held within it.

1.8 WHOSE RIVER, WHOSE STORIES

By making people's relationships with place the primary unit of analysis, my research approach ensures that "ordinary people, with their different interests, desires, and experiences ... [do not] disappear from view," a risk to which environmental history is prone, according to Stephen Mosley.⁷⁷ I am concerned with love stories. In archival materials, in oral history conversations, and inscribed on the landscape itself, my search is for traces of love, instances of intimacy, descriptions of emotions, and also evidence of what resulted from those relational dialectics between people and place. Oral history interviews form the spine of this research. I recorded stories of people who have an emotional connection with the river, and for whom that connection has animated some kind of action. My oral history protagonists are "*riverly*," to borrow a term popular among river folks and coined by one of my interviewees, Carol Armstrong.⁷⁸ The dual criteria of emotionally connected and actively engaged were applied alongside a pragmatic selection criterion of availability and willingness, as I drew on my existing and emerging networks of river contacts in Los Angeles.

This work is concerned with understanding how love has contributed to the historical trajectory of the Los Angeles River. I focus on a period following the

⁷⁶ Michael Safi, "Ganges and Yamuna rivers granted same legal rights as human beings," accessed August 15, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/21/ganges-and-yamuna-rivers-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-beings>

⁷⁷ Stephen Mosley, "Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2006), 920.

⁷⁸ Carol Armstrong, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

river's channelisation in the mid-twentieth century, because I am especially interested in how people relate to unconventional, altered, and strange places. It is grounded in the field of environmental history, which is concerned with understanding history from the ground up. The particular emotional focus taken in this project also seeks to write history "from the inside out," moving from inward emotions to outward behaviours and stories in the tradition of history of the emotions.⁷⁹ My research pays attention to an iconic river landscape as it is memorialised in archives, recalled in people's memories, felt under my feet and attested to in writing and other forms of art. It speaks to scholarly absences by being urban, emotional, and hopeful. Grace Karskens writes that:

we know a lot about the messes that cities make, but the cultural, emotional and visceral environmental experiences and behaviours of city dwellers are rarely acknowledged or explored.⁸⁰

Accordingly, my gaze is fixed on that which is too rarely explored in river-centred environmental history: emotions, memories, intimacy in particular, and love in general. It is—in the tradition of Greg Dening and more recently Grace Karskens—ethnographic, in that it is concerned with the "small-scale and intimate."⁸¹

Oral history has been imperative to this project because it reveals much about people's emotional connections to the place. As Grace Karskens observes:

so often emotional attachment was experienced physically, emotionally and through the senses, and expressed not so much in writing but in spoken words.⁸²

⁷⁹ Susan J. Matt, "Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out," *Emotion Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2011), 123.

⁸⁰ Grace Karskens, "Water Dreams, Earthen Histories: Exploring Urban Environmental History at the Penrith Lakes Scheme and Castlereagh, Sydney," *Environment and History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2007), 118.

⁸¹ Karskens, "Seeking Sydney From the Ground Up: Foundations and Horizons in Sydney's Historiography," 182.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 195.

Given this, it is an ideal, and increasingly used, research method for understanding people and places that are meaningful to them.⁸³ Given the focus and ethos of the project, which takes meaning to be subjectively constructed, the memories that emerge through oral history are meaningful, not in spite of their subjectivity, but because of it. In this project, oral history is a cornerstone, a foundation. It has allowed a more targeted exploration of how individual people have felt intimacy with the Los Angeles River, making it possible to delve deeper into the emotional terrain of this topic. The active nature of oral history—that conversation between you and your primary sources happens in real life and not only within the bounds of your analytical mind—is its greatest strength. For this reason, it “transforms the practice of history.”⁸⁴ Historian Rebecca Jones writes that “between the oral interview and the written manuscript is a long, meandering journey in which a narrative is crafted.”⁸⁵ The journey is even longer and more meandering than this. Oral history is a process of unearthing stories that belong to protagonists, stories that are made by them, held by them and retold by them. The stories that emerge in interviews are the result of a complex alchemy of events, experience, memory, narration, and exchange. Therefore, as with any source, they are constructed, partial, and a version of what happened, not ever a re-creation of it.

Oral history is, at its core, about memory. The interview is an invitation to the research participant to share memories, sometimes for the first time. These recollections, stories that range from sad to happy, disturbing to inspiring, are shared in an initially intimate setting – just me and them – but will become public later on as they are analysed, woven together with other sources of

⁸³ Shelley Trower, *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

⁸⁴ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), ix.

⁸⁵ Rebecca Jones, “Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2004), 23.

evidence, built into larger narratives of the river, and the city, and more. As Valerie Yow argues, "for oral historians, memory is a vital concern."⁸⁶ That oral history has moved from the centre to the margins and back again as a credible historical research practice is in large part because of the shifting perceptions of the reliability of people's memories as a historical source. Alistair Thompson tracks this progression as four paradigm shifts. The first of these was a swing from historians in ancient times valuing eyewitness reports, to a nineteenth century doubting of anything but the written documentary record, to a re-valuing of oral testimony after the Second World War, particularly because of its affordances in generating primary source materials from ordinary people whose stories would previously not have been heard.⁸⁷ The next paradigm shift was a tussle between critics who discounted oral history on the grounds that people's memories were inherently unreliable, having been:

distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past.⁸⁸

only to be countered with a new wave of argument, that:

the so-called unreliability of memory was also its strength, and that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory.⁸⁹

This all-in celebration of memory's subjectivity was fairly short-lived, with a third paradigm shift, a more circumspect call since the 1980s that oral history interviewers engage critically with our own subjectivity and the impacts it

⁸⁶ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording oral history: a guide for the humanities and social sciences* (Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press, 2005), 35.

⁸⁷ Alistair Thomson, "Four paradigm transformations in oral history," *The Oral History Review* vol. 34 (2007): 51-53.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

inevitably exerts on historical scholarship.⁹⁰ Here Valerie Yow's guiding questions came to the fore:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn't I choose these?
6. What other possibilities are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?⁹¹

Lastly, Thomson wrote of being "in the middle of a fourth, dizzying digital evolution in oral history."⁹² It is the shift from paradigm two to three that is most pertinent to questions of memory. I frequently checked my research practices with Yow's line of reflective questions, in scoping the project, framing questions, conducting interviews, listening and re-listening, analysing the interviews as a source, and writing this thesis. I did so along an epistemological grain of memory being always subjective and always constructed.

The oral history interview extracts throughout this thesis are the final product of a self-reflexive interplay between faithfully transcribing the oral history recordings and editing them for clarity and pithiness. On the one hand, I have been tempted to re-create the oral accounts on paper, with all of their foibles: pauses, cadence, errings, slang, and the patterns of speech that make each voice unique. On the other, speech and text are different modes and any attempt to simply match one to the other is likely to fall short. My approach is in line with Michael Frisch's initially challenging advice, that we can be most faithful to a text by dramatically altering it. He writes that "the integrity of a transcript is best protected, in documentary use, by an aggressive editorial approach that

⁹⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁹¹ Valerie Yow cited in *ibid.*

⁹² Ibid., 68.

does not shrink from substantial manipulation of the text.”⁹³ If this sounds extreme at first blush, Rebecca Jones makes the same argument with some gentler words:

In written form, reproducing speech exactly as it is spoken can also be a barrier to communication rather than facilitating it. A general audience is not necessarily experienced in reading verbatim text. Verbatim is interesting and challenging to the reader but may, in fact, be self-defeating as the reader may lose the content at the expense of the style.⁹⁴

This interventionist approach does not accord with Alessandro Portelli’s—and others’—view “that the orality of the source is central to its significance and that to ignore it is to lose the rhythm, inflection, tone intonation, and irregularities of the spoken word.”⁹⁵ On either side of this debate, every oral historian will “face choices and dilemmas about the way to edit an interview for publication.”⁹⁶

While Rebecca Jones calls this process “translation,” a more accurate way to characterise my own approach is to call it *composition*. I am interested in assembling the words spoken by each protagonist to keep their meaning but to sharpen them towards the analytical reason that first prompted me to quote them, at the same time removing the vocal distractions that bring little benefit in a written version of the spoken word. I have followed Barry York’s call to maintain the lyrical qualities of speech by expressing interview content in a style similar to free verse poetry.⁹⁷ The line breaks reflect the rhythm of the narrative and also seek to highlight the key ideas as they emerged in the interview.

⁹³ Michael Frisch cited in Heather Goodall, “Writing a Life with Isabel Flick: An Exploration in Cross-cultural Collaboration,” *The Public Historian*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2005), 75.

⁹⁴ Jones, “Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews,” 32. This approach is also advocated by Willa Baum cited in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 363.

⁹⁵ Jones, “Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews,” 32.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹⁷ Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 364.

One of the major challenges of this research has been accepting the incompleteness of the stories I am able to know and to tell. My research is extensively informed by the FoLAR archives and by the 19 oral history interviews I recorded with river protagonists (see Appendices 1 and 2 for the interview protocol and a thematic summary of all interviews). In oral history, the quest is to find well-informed narrators, rather than to interview, say, a set percentage of a cohort.⁹⁸ The priority for interviewing was to seek out people who were “involved in pivotal decisions, were most active in important events, or were most directly affected.”⁹⁹ The narrators I interviewed were people I sought out because they have, in one way or another, long-standing or deep connections to the Los Angeles River. Some names were self-evident from my research and general knowledge about the river, while others emerged, snowballing, through suggestions and introductions along the way. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I did not achieve coverage anywhere near comprehensive. My oral history interviews were conducted during one intensive field visit in early 2016. They spanned in length from 37 minutes to 3 hours and 33 minutes, typically lasting for 2 hours. In several instances, it was impossible to schedule interviews in the short timeframe I was in Los Angeles and I didn’t manage to cast my interview net as widely as I had hoped.

My interviews do not reflect the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of the population of Los Angeles, nor the prevalence of Latino and African American populations living in neighbourhoods adjacent to the river. The filter for interviewee selection was that they had an affiliation to the river that was substantial and sustained. By this criterion, it is a gap that people from organisations such as Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, Frogtown Neighborhood Association, the Mothers of East Los Angeles, the

⁹⁸ Yow, *Recording oral history: a guide for the humanities and social sciences*, 81–83.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

Labor/Community Strategy Center, The City Project, Urban Semillas, Mujeres de la Tierra, the Chinatown Yard Alliance, and the Alianza de los Pueblos del Rio de Los Angeles are absent from my interview list. They should be there. It is no coincidence that these organisations have a relatively low profile in academic and popular literature about the river. The resourcing and high profile of FoLAR makes its archival and human assets far more accessible than those of other advocacy groups. Furthermore, my status as an outsider, without elaborate networks of social connection in the city, made it more difficult to reach less-accessible groups, whereas I have been fortunate to have a relationship with FoLAR for some years now. Creative practitioners such as those within Metabolic Studio would have much to add to the conversation, but proved inaccessible during my fieldwork visits. Also missing are the perspectives of the countless people outside of formal organisations such as FoLAR and The City Project who have a deep connection with the river. For instance, people who live in encampments next to the river or even in it, on the islands formed from sand, rocks, and plants, would have had a lot to teach me, but were outside of my reach in this project. In FoLAR minutes taken in 1992, Lewis MacAdams expressed concern that Steve Hartman, a newly recommended FoLAR board member, was “another white male from the [San Fernando] valley.” Lewis’ cry for “more women and minorities” back then is not unlike mine today, to which I would add a general plea for more voices, always more voices, particularly in a city as diverse as Los Angeles and a river with such an incredible diversity of adherents.¹⁰⁰ This list of missing perspectives forms part of my agenda for further research.

At this juncture, it is important to debunk any notion of FoLAR being the first or leading voice for the river. Many individuals and groups have spoken and do

¹⁰⁰ Board of Directors minutes, 1990, Box 91, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

speak for and about the river. They are all important, even if in this thesis the voice of FoLAR resonates louder than other groups and individuals. As just one example, an essay titled “Browning the Green Movement” described a disjuncture between FoLAR’s constituency and the city’s Latino population:

FOLAR calls itself “the original voice of the river,” and for a decade the group was the leading voice in the movement to green the L.A. River—a voice spoken in Sierra Club–style conservation terms, with a white, middle-class dialect. But by the late ‘90s, some in the Latino community felt left out of the discussion entirely. Latino leaders, like Antonio Gonzalez, president of the William C. Velasquez Institute, found FoLAR’s river advocacy alienating and ineffective: more about nature than about people. What is the good of preserving a watershed habitat with fish and birds, they said, if the people who actually reside on the River can’t enjoy the revitalization? “FOLAR and these groups were very marginal—a voice in the wilderness,” says Gonzalez, as he rubs his temples and turns down the volume of the evening news.¹⁰¹

This *original voice* characterisation appeared also in 2010 in an interview that the City of Los Angeles published with then-executive director of FoLAR, Shelly Backlar, saying, “next year FoLAR will celebrate its 25th anniversary as the original voice of the River.”¹⁰² It is conceptually and ethically unhelpful for a researcher to buy into claims like these, especially when the definite article is used. And there are, of course, many more voices and many earlier time periods than the 1980s, when FoLAR began to speak about, or in their characterisation, “for” the river. It is however true that, in terms of the public record—as it has been accessible to me in the English language—FoLAR is certainly a stentorian voice. Co-founder Lewis MacAdams’ inimitable style, along with the simultaneously strange and appealing qualities of the organisation’s quest and their ability to tell remarkably good stories, and to bring people to gather at the river, has rendered it a very high-profile organisation.

¹⁰¹ Evan George, “Browning the Green Movement,” accessed 16 April, 2017. <http://www.cityprojectca.org/blog/archives/305>

¹⁰² City of Los Angeles Stormwater Program, “Friends of the LA River: Interview with Shelly Backlar,” accessed May 8, 2017. <http://lateameffort.blogspot.com.au/2010/10/friends-of-la-river-interview-with.html>

There is also the matter of archiving. When I first undertook field research in Los Angeles in the spring of 2011, FoLAR's archives—and I use the term fairly loosely—were housed in a hot and airless storage area where I would balance cautiously on a tall shaky ladder, pulling mystery boxes down from the high shelves in a game of lucky dip to see what historical stories might be found within. Skip forward a few years and the complete FoLAR archive, 20 linear metres of materials, is now in the safekeeping of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The breadth and availability of this collection means that I have drawn heavily upon these materials and, while it could lead to an impression of FoLAR's pre-eminence, it is an expression of how historical memory is much more likely to survive when it is kept and archived in accessible ways.

FoLAR has certainly attracted ample critics and criticism and, while I happen to have a great deal of respect for FoLAR and for the people who have been pivotal to that organisation's existence, it is important to acknowledge the complex nature of relationships, agendas, politics, and power in Los Angeles. This is not a hagiography nor is it a polemic, but rather an account of the emotional entanglements of a handful of key people with certain stretches of the river, researched and written at a pivotal time in the river's history. This is a time when there is a great deal at stake, and looking at river relationships must be done at a close-in scale.

Perhaps most at stake is belonging and power, in particular of people already experiencing disadvantage. Land-use patterns and, consequently, land values, are changing along the river. Deindustrialisation and the recent turns of real-estate and recreational attention towards the river mean that, for people in less privileged river-adjacent communities the river that has long been an important

and, in some ways, undisturbed place is now a site of contested belonging, agency, and power.

When I interviewed kayaking instructor Anthea Raymond, who lives right by the river and knows it intimately, she reflected on how what were once “very private places for people in the community” were changing:

Who’s down there, that’s going to change a lot.
It’s still very local, kids sometimes in their cars,
some homeless people,
a lot of dog walkers now, are on this side [in Cypress Park on the river’s
east bank]
because they don’t want to be on the other side [in Frogtown]
where the bikes are, which is just too scary.
I can see why people in Frogtown, when they built that bike path,
people, locals, were like, “Wow, we’ve lost our Main Street.”¹⁰³

These are changes that minority communities have long been sensitised to in the river corridor. In 2005–06, artist and philanthropist Lauren Bon created the land art project *Not A Cornfield*. She planted tracts of corn across a post-industrial brownfield that is now the 32-acre Los Angeles State Historic Park in Downtown Los Angeles. It met with community opposition for various reasons, including that “contaminating corn (by using it to detoxify soil) is tantamount to sacrilege for many Mexicans and Guatemalans in the neighborhood.”¹⁰⁴ The river is a forever-contested place.

A 1994 article in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* recounted community fears bubbling over at a FoLAR consultative meeting about parkland developments at Taylor Yard. Lewis MacAdams and Martin Schlageter, who joined FoLAR as its first executive director, started outlining ideas for the park’s development, which were translated into Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese to reflect the

¹⁰³ Anthea Raymond, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

¹⁰⁴ Antonio Gonzalez, “The Cornfield Novela: Another Chapter Unfolds in LA’s Long History of Disregarding the Powerless,” accessed April 18, 2017. <http://www.asnc.us/2005-archives/06-Jun/0605-info-CornfieldNovela.htm>

neighbourhood demographics at that time. The article reported an almost-immediate chorus of concern: “We don’t want a park here, it’ll attract gangs!”; “How can we afford it?”; “That railroad land is poisoned!” and “We don’t want a bridge over the river! The gangs will come!”¹⁰⁵ Following reassurance from the two men that they neither represented developers nor the state, the conversation turned to MacAdams’ invitation to dream about future possibilities:

An old man in the second row pipes up: “A merry-go-round!” This brings down the house. People applaud. There is a flood of ideas, and Schlageter is hard put to scribble them down: “Trees!” “A museum!” “Nature lessons for the kids!” “Soccer!” “A pool!”¹⁰⁶

Los Angeles is a place where tensions simmer, unattended by many, and then erupt in ways that make the issues, for a short while at least, impossible to ignore.

Most memorably, this pattern resulted in the city-cleaving riots of 1965 and 1992, each instance “an emancipatory struggle for social and political liberation in an effort to move beyond pervasive alienation in minority neighborhoods to a variant of the autonomy that permeates the white community.”¹⁰⁷ In between the extreme efflorescences of riots, deep disparities of education, employment, wealth, health, and access to open space simmer away. The river and the changing river-adjacent corridors are key sites at which these issues play out.¹⁰⁸ This is why Saber, the Los Angeles graffiti writer¹⁰⁹ you’ll meet in a subsequent

¹⁰⁵ Judith Coburn. “Whose River Is It, Anyway?” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 1994.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ M.J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise, *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 80.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Jennifer Wolch, John P. Wilson, and Jed Fehrenbach, “Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-mapping Analysis,” *Urban geography*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2005), 32–3; Pulido, Sidawi, and Vos, “An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles,” *Urban Geography*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1996).

¹⁰⁹ Here and elsewhere in the thesis, graffiti artists are referred to as “writers” because, in graffiti culture, this is a much more common term than artist. It references the sophisticated use of letter forms that is at graffiti’s stylistic core.

chapter, urged me to meet Pepper, the rough-sleeping man who is known to many as the Mayor of Skid Row.¹¹⁰

His lifeblood is connected to the river.
He's the living pulse, the eyes, the ears.
The smell of the LA River is him because his body sort of shakes to it.
You know what I'm saying?
His face is it, his heart is it, his mind is it; it's wild.
Talk about fuckin' LA River, that's Pepper.¹¹¹

I have not been back to Los Angeles yet, to try and find my way to a meeting with Pepper. But knowing *of* him and knowing that even Saber, who is inextricably connected to this concrete river, can also feel like an outsider there, reminds me that, as Ruth Fincher and Jane Jacobs argue, "we inhabit different cities even from those inhabited by our most immediate neighbors ... social differences are gathered together in cities at unique scales and levels of intensity."¹¹² This means not falling into the apparent ease of stereotypes, not trying to have the few narrators in this work of oral history speak for the many. They speak only for themselves and for the river and the city, as they know them. I do likewise, informed by a wealth of primary sources but ever-aware of the incompleteness of what any collection of sources is saying. This is the only way of knowing, particularly in the face of such an extremely complex urban landscape, and on a topic as subtle, elusive, and deeply personal as love.

Another sense in which the voices in this thesis are limited is in terms of archival research. This is a twofold limitation. Firstly, there are several archives I have not included in the scope of this work: City and County records, and the collections of various museums and libraries are not plumbed here. These would have provided further insights and confirmations. Secondly, in those archives in

¹¹⁰ Estevan Oriol, "Skidrow Stories: Pepper," accessed March 12, 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dBPGak8lmQ>

¹¹¹ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

¹¹² Ruth Fincher and Jane M. Jacobs, *Cities of Difference* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998), 1.

which I worked, it will surely be appreciated that searching for personal stories of people's love for the river was a fairly tough ask. I always wonder how the archivist of the Army records at NARA Riverside reacted to my research focus. I had tried in my correspondence to make my research sound less esoteric and more attuned to the kinds of records that a federal agency of army engineers might retain but, ultimately, yes, I was looking for love stories between people and this strange urban river. The FoLAR records at UCLA lent themselves a little more closely to my quest— after all, FoLAR is an organisation co-founded by a poet and conceived of as a forty-year artwork.¹¹³

What I sought in the archives proved particularly elusive. Over time, I worked out ways of asking for archival materials without sounding completely kooky, I hope. My introductory letter to the archivist at NARA Riverside read, in part, as follows:

Essentially, I'm interested in human stories about various material aspects of the river in the period since channelisation. In particular: weed control and vegetation, fauna, concrete, restoration, trash control, water quality, graffiti, barriers to entry and use, and homeless encampments. I know this is broad! The kinds of documents I'm seeking are those that give insights into people's emotional engagements: letters from members of the public, records of interactions with organisations such as Friends of the LA River, speech transcripts, and any notes or journals kept.¹¹⁴

These words are code, of course, for emotional questions: How did people feel? What made their hearts pound faster? Who were they? When did a connection to the river caress them tightly, and when did they feel pushed or torn away? Have they cried for the river, and why? In preparation for visiting NARA Riverside, I had pored over the finding guides with a diminishing sense of hope, identifying a small handful of record series that might turn up something.

¹¹³ See, for example, Lewis MacAdams, "Restoring the Los Angeles River: A Forty-Year Art Project," *Whole Earth Review*, no. 85 (1995).

¹¹⁴ Letter from the researcher to the National Archives and Records Administration at Riverside, December 2015.

I approached the archival research with a keen awareness of the partiality of records—that they tell only some parts of some stories, of only some people, at some times. As Verne Harris describes it, archival materials afford researchers “a sliver of a sliver of a sliver [that] is seldom more than partially described.”¹¹⁵ Archival collections are meaningful as much for what they exclude as what can be found within them. As Lisa Mastrangelo and Barbara L’Eplattenier write:

It seems to be human nature to create a smooth, cohesive whole instead of settling for disparate parts. We like to work with texts that are complete, and archival work requires us instead to work with fragments. We long for a plot, a hero, a villain, a conflict, a resolution. But we would do well to remember that there are no smooth, unified stories. The stories are rough and bumpy with false starts and misleading paths, populated with non-heroic, fragile, determined and tenacious people who went about their daily business, focused on their own goals and their own desires.¹¹⁶

The drive for cohesive and powerful narrative needs to concede to the inherent incompleteness of the archival record. The archival materials I used were mostly formal, official documentation—reports, minutes, publicity collateral, and the like; while evidence of emotional engagement was elusive, some useful sources evidenced emotions directly, and other materials provided background and contextual depth. As I delved into archives, just as interested in what was missing as what was there, Greg Dening’s maxim, that “the one thing historians never do is observe the past” echoed in my mind.¹¹⁷ Just as every archive is utterly incomplete, it is also always mediated by others. As Dening explains:

All we observe is the past transformed in some way into history. All we ever observe are the texts made of living experience—whether these texts are something written down in a letter or a journal, whether they are oral traditions transcribed in some way, whether they are material objects, like a feather cloak, enclosing its narrative in a colour, a design, a texture, whether it is some story caught in advance or a painting or a tattoo, whether it is gender, power, class, wealth or poverty in the shapes and

¹¹⁵ Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” *Archivaria*, vol. 1, no. 44 (1997), 141.

¹¹⁶ Gesa E. Kirsch et al., “Stumbling in the Archives: A Tale of Two Novices,” in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, ed. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 164–65.

¹¹⁷ Greg Dening, *Readings/Writings* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 207.

shadows of an archaeological site. We all make history by observing somebody else making history.¹¹⁸

I am with Verne Harris when he argues that it is the very “preciousness of the complex [archival] fragment[s] which we preserve and feed into social memory” that creates the “full richness of archives.” We milk meaning from archives because they are complex, elusive, partial, and complicated, not in spite of it.¹¹⁹ They are by their very nature surprising, as Trevor Barnes writes when reflecting back on his own archival work: “you never knew what you would pull out next.”¹²⁰ That is the archive’s way.

One of the reasons that emotional through lines, or traces even, are elusive in archival collections is disparities of power. Power dictates not only what is kept in archives, but is also a filter through which archival materials must be viewed. This means answering Adeney Thomas’ call that we environmental historians must re-read sources:

not only “against the grain” of purely human power, but with the grain of biological, physical, and chemical power, the structures of nature to which we are all unavoidably beholden.¹²¹

The archival evidence available to us is always shaped by “material acts of power.”¹²² As Paul Thompson writes:

The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive. The very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” 137–38.

¹²⁰ Trevor J. Barnes, “Geo-historiographies,” *The SAGE Handbook of Human Geography*. (London: SAGE, 2014), 222.

¹²¹ Julia Adeney Thomas, “From Modernity with Freedom to Sustainability with Decency: Politicizing Passivity,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 55.

¹²² Sharer 1999 p. 121 cited in Janine Solberg, “Googling the Archive: Digital Tools and the Practice of History,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2012), 66.

The kinds of documents that might be more likely to reveal emotions—journals, handwritten notes, phone conversations or discussions down by the river—are much less likely to be lodged in an organisation’s formal record-keeping system. This scarcity is a sizeable but unsurprising obstacle to finding what I sought in the archives.

There is something also more than this at play, which is that, despite urban living now being a dominant way of life, we are not yet particularly good at documenting our emotional entanglement with the kinds of nature that cities make. In other words, it is not entirely a problem of power and archives, or haphazard archival practices. It is something much more existential. We have learned what nature looks and feels like, and it is still that far-away place that we might be tempted to call “wilderness,” even though we know there’s no such thing. Archival and culturally, we haven’t caught up with ourselves yet. This state of play makes for fascinating engagement with sources, grappling with presence and absence, each as important as the other. As Greg Dening writes:

If the texts of the past are mountainously high, the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of pain, and of happiness for that matter, silences of guilt, silences of fear, silences of exclusion, silences of forgetting. The language of the deepest passion is often trite, bland and without apparent depth. The highest and lowest moments of human living often have no elaboration. These are sorts of silences too.¹²⁴

All this talk of partiality and elusiveness is not to cry poor about primary sources. There is a wealth of materials about the Los Angeles River and, indeed, there have been repositories my research has not even peeked into, in the interests of keeping the work at an appropriate scale and scope. While I have not undertaken archival work looking at civic records from the County of Los Angeles, the City of Los Angeles, and indeed the twelve other municipalities with jurisdiction over stretches of the Los Angeles River, I have used secondary

¹²³ Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.

¹²⁴ Dening, *Readings/Writings*, 208.

sources that have done so extensively. I am indebted to the detailed work of Blake Gumprecht and others, through whose work I have drawn indirectly on these archival collections. Stephen Pyne notes that “environmental history has much to offer because it bursts with information ... if anything, there is too much.”¹²⁵ Too much is a wonderful problem to have.

I have elected to focus on a relatively brief, and a contemporary, chapter of the river’s history. This enables deep rather than broad exploration of the emotional terrains of urban nature. This is a story of a concrete river and the intimate, entangled, loving relationships that people have formed with it, unlikely as that may seem. It is specific and detailed. Like the topic itself, this thesis seeks to be intimate and that has meant a choice to focus very close in, on a time period that spans the past thirty years. Furthermore, much of the earlier history of the river is well represented in the historiography already, so my most useful and original contribution is to speak of what has happened much more recently, to place the river’s very contemporary history on the record. The filling of this gap in the literature is especially timely, given the insatiable pace of change taking place along the river at this time.

Historians are storytellers who undertake the creative act of making narrative within important disciplinary norms; the stories we tell have to be aligned with what is known, be ecologically tenable and be written ready for critique by scholars and readers.¹²⁶ Between the lines of this charter from William Cronon, you can read that every telling is a construction. We cannot promise utter truthfulness or unfailing accuracy because, let’s be honest, there just isn’t any such thing anyway. What we can commit to is a search for meaning, that grain of significance storytelling seeks to find in the chaos of “an overwhelmingly

¹²⁵ Stephen J. Pyne, “Firestick History,” *The Journal of American History* (1990), 1139.

¹²⁶ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *ibid.* vol. 78, no. 4 (1992), 1372–3.

crowded and disordered chronological reality.”¹²⁷ It is a search that is inherently discerning and necessarily entails struggle. As William Cronon writes:

As storytellers we commit ourselves to the task of judging the consequences of human actions, trying to understand the choices that confronted the people whose lives we narrate so as to capture the full tumult of their world. In the dilemmas they faced we discover our own, and at the intersection of the two we locate the moral of the story. If our goal is to tell tales that make the past meaningful, then we cannot escape struggling over the values that define what meaning is.¹²⁸

The kinds of stories that merit historiographical attention are, Christof Mauch argues, those of hope as well as those of destruction.¹²⁹ It has seemed to me that a well-rounded story of any landscape will, by default, have evidentiary threads of both. But, when it comes to Los Angeles, tales of hope are often drowned out by declensionist narratives. I believe my role as a historian is to pursue both narrative threads, simultaneously interweaving and detangling them to tell stories of the complexity of people, the places we inhabit and that inhabit us. Our task is not to replicate the work of science but to shine another kind of light on it. As Stephen J. Pyne writes:

historians add value when they speak to those issues of ethics, aesthetics, narrative, and perceived understanding of the world that do not reside in the sciences and in fact can help place those sciences within a social and intellectual setting. They provide meaning by comparison and context.¹³⁰

This role, this license to write widely about the social and intellectual fabric of a place, is an invitation to find a distinctive authorial voice and gaze.

We are a storied civilisation. As William Cronon writes:

In the beginning was the story. Or rather: many stories, of many places, in many voices, pointing toward many ends.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1349.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1370.

¹²⁹ Christof Mauch, “The Magic of Environmental History and Hopes for the Future,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 60–62.

¹³⁰ Stephen J. Pyne, “The Cash Value of Environmental History,” *ibid.*, 47.

¹³¹ Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” 1375.

Story is characteristic of the human condition. Finding and telling good stories of who and where we are, and might be, is a central pillar of sustainability. Just as story is important to human civilisation, it is also important to history. W.B Gallie offers a taxonomy, in which history is a “species of the genus Story. Narrative is the form which expresses what is basic to and characteristic of historical understanding.”¹³² Stories are a way to convey complex meaning in simpler ways and, furthermore, narrative writing can be a means to effect change. As Merrill Findlay argues:

social change can be purposefully precipitated by introducing new narratives into individuals’ or communities’ repertoires and/or by re-narrating already familiar stories from alternative perspectives. Writing can thus be considered every bit as ‘practical’ as lobbying for political change, or getting your hands dirty restoring wetlands and woodlands.¹³³

By crafting stories about the Los Angeles River, and conveying them here, I am offering a detailed examination of an important recent past, while at the same time inviting you to think about an even more important future. What will the river’s stories mean to you? To the river? To our adaptation or otherwise as we sink deeper into and learn how to live in and through another period of unprecedented change?

Just as an author is always connected to the words they write, writing always comes with an audience in mind. The influential William Cronon insists that a key writing goal should always be to foster engagement from readers:

historical storytelling helps keep us morally engaged with the world by showing us how to care about it and its origins in ways we had not done before.¹³⁴

¹³² W.B Gallie cited in David Walter Price, *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and The Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 21.

¹³³ Merrill Findlay, “Understanding Place Through Narrative,” in *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*, ed. F.M. Vanclay, Matthew Higgins, and Adam Blackshaw (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008), 19.

¹³⁴ Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” 1375.

I am convinced of the power of environmental history to do this, as much as I am convinced that the need to do this is acute. Environmental history is—in every sense—a matter of human interest.¹³⁵ We will do our most powerful work when ideas are communicated approachably, orienting attention outwards so as to engage with the general public more, and more effectively.¹³⁶ This is a balancing act: to maintain scholarly rigour with accessibility and warmth. It calls us to attend deeply to the human in the Humanities. As Greg Dening writes, “being a humanity is one of history’s many graces.”¹³⁷ Tom Griffiths rightly insists that “bridging the divide between science and the humanities is vital [because climate change] is not just a technical issue; it implicates and challenges our humanity.”¹³⁸ Environmental history calls us to know ourselves, speaking and writing with confidence to an audience whom we also need to know, whose needs, beliefs, vulnerabilities, and curiosities stay front of mind, alongside the historical sources and analyses that we seek to bring to their reading attention, and ultimately perhaps change their worldview.

There are countless ways to know a river or any other place. I have come to know this river as an environmental historian. Because this is my discipline, I carry particular tools, ideas, and sensibilities with me as I research, think, and write. In broad terms, environmental history explores places—in their human and more-than-human dimensions—across time. Such exploration enables “deepening our understanding of how humans have been affected by their

¹³⁵ For a discussion of the interrelatedness of environmental history and anthropogenic climate change see, for example, Ruth A. Morgan, “Histories for an Uncertain Future: Environmental History and Climate Change,” *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2013).

¹³⁶ Patricia Limerick, “The Repair of the Earth and the Redemption of the Historical Profession,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 9–12.

¹³⁷ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.

¹³⁸ Tom Griffiths, “A Humanist on Thin Ice,” *Griffith Review*, vol. 29 (2010).

natural environment through time and, conversely, how they have affected that environment, and with what results.”¹³⁹ Places, and perhaps particularly rivers, are so universally significant to people that I repeatedly experience well-meaning attempts to redirect my work elsewhere. On hearing of my research, someone will say, “Oh, you really should study this or that other river.” Someone else will listen for a moment or two, before smiling in a knowing way and saying, “Ah, you’re really doing geography, right?” People ask you questions about fluvial geomorphology, which you dearly wish you could answer but you can’t because, well, you’re not a scientist but a historian. You find yourself waking up in the night, worrying that perhaps your time period is both too recent and too fleeting, before being reassured that oral history is necessarily that way; people only live for so long. You remember that Marc Bloch dismissed historiography of any period after 1830 as journalism, but that J.R. McNeill countered that “he said that about eighty years ago, so maybe we should update it.”¹⁴⁰ You do the maths and realise that, even updated, a time period that spans from the mid-1980s until now is very, very recent. You trawl through philosophy texts that are not historicised, and historical texts that are not philosophised, and some days you find yourself dreaming of a career in plumbing, diplomacy or something that has much firmer boundaries than these.

1.9 WRITING INTIMATELY

My research pays close attention; it is intimate. This seems to me the only meaningful way to explore the emotional dimensions of people’s affinity with the rest of nature. This has to be done close in. My work steps into the conversation about nature and culture, taking Donald Worster’s advice to:

¹³⁹ Donald Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 290–91.

¹⁴⁰ John Robert McNeill, “Future Research Needs in Environmental History: Regions, Eras, and Themes,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 14.

regard nature as participating in an unending dialectic with human history, seeing the two, that is, as intertwined in an ongoing spiral of challenge–response–challenge, where neither nature nor humanity ever achieves absolute sovereign authority, but both continue to make and remake each other.¹⁴¹

Historical evidence about the Los Angeles River demonstrates this very spiral. Examples abound: the challenge of flooding, the response of channelisation, or the challenge of seeking nature in a concretised river. The challenge of a city with insufficient outdoor space, the response of wire-cutters applied to river barrier fences, the challenge of flash flooding or garbage, endangering human and river life respectively.

History only ever amplifies some voices. This applies both to historical subjects and to authors. Shifts in who is heard prompts shifts in who can legitimately speak in historiography. The 1960s and 1970s brought a “revolution in looking at history from the bottom up and away from the history of elites to the experiences of ordinary people, the subaltern, the marginalised, and the oppressed.”¹⁴² And with it came an invitation to let go the mantle of historian as “omniscient narrator.” Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson explain, noting particularly the influence of oral history:

Oral history changes the writing of history much as the modern novel transformed the writing of literary fiction: the most important change is that the narrator is now pulled into the narrative and becomes a part of the story. This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude. The narrator is now one of the characters, and the telling of the story is part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political and personal involvement than that of the external narrator.¹⁴³

It is a shift that has, likewise, happened in historical geography—embracing that, so long as words are being written, the writer is necessarily ever present.

¹⁴¹ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 22.

¹⁴² Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46–47.

¹⁴³ Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 41.

The writer's self is there not merely to provide an engaging opening line or a connecting anecdote but because, intellectually, we think through the filters of our own selves and our own stories, and there is no way to make meaning other than as an active author, involved in the making of the text's meaning. As

Trevor Barnes explains:

As author I am here the whole time. I don't slope off, the writing then taking over on its own. It is uncomfortable to be so present, going against the grain of everything I formerly believed. But here I am, as I was on the first page, because there is an obligation to make clear that the history of geography I struggled over came from me, the writer. What you write comes from the life you lead and have led, your biography. That's why there are stories about me from my past. They are not meant to be decorative, an alluring lead-in followed by the same old stuff, or an opportunity to trumpet myself. Their primary intent is to show that I am part of the story, that my life shaped the narrative and I cannot be disconnected from it.¹⁴⁴

I too am here, speaking each word to you, inviting you into a conversation. There is nowhere else to go. This thesis is written by *me* and addressed to *you* because I seek to mirror in style the love and intimacy about which I write. I cannot stand aloof because intimacy doesn't make sense from there. I cannot forget about you because intimacy is a relational thing. This thesis is an invitation for you to come closer in.

Intimacy is both an emotional entanglement and a way of looking at, and writing and thinking about, place. In other words, intimacy can be felt, and it can also be a scale at which to examine landscapes and riverscapes. It is the scale of being close in. When *The New York Times* reviewer Horace Reynolds reviewed the Rivers of America series in the late 1930s—a book series convincingly argued by Nicolaas Mink as an alternative inception marker date for the field of North American environmental history—he praised it for the “intimate description of

¹⁴⁴ Barnes, “Geo-historiographies,” 223.

America” it offered.¹⁴⁵ Elsewhere in this thesis, you will read about the kind of intimacy that is emotional entanglement. It is a central theme of my research. In framing the thesis as a kind of field guide, I am focussed also on intimacy of scale. The centrality of three in-depth chapters, each about a single material object—water, paint, and weeds—seeks to bring intimacy, not alienation, into both the analytical and stylistic foregrounds.

A field guide lets us appreciate the details and to read a landscape slowly – to “move slowly,”¹⁴⁶ in Bruno Latour’s words. And while the extremely-altered Los Angeles River may seem an odd choice of waterway to undertake such a task, I am convinced it is, in fact, an ideal one. The Los Angeles photographer, Lane Barden, who has given the LA River one of its most remarkable representations through a comprehensive series of linear aerial photographs from source to mouth is right in his observation that the river needs to be understood at close range.¹⁴⁷ And, in written word as well as in embodied practice, this is very much the case. The Los Angeles River makes a little more sense close-up. Indeed, to more fully understand it, we must take both close and distant views. Our attitudes of affinity and love are better fostered this way.

¹⁴⁵ Nicolaas Mink, “A Narrative for Nature’s Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of Rivers of America,” *Environmental History*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2006), 752.

¹⁴⁶ Bruno Latour cited in Kristin Asdal, “The Problematic Nature of Nature: The Post-constructivist Challenge to Environmental History,” *History and Theory*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2003), 66–67.

¹⁴⁷ Lane Barden, “The Los Angeles River Picturing Los Angeles: Conduits, Corridors, and the Linear City, Part 1,” in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Barcelona/New York: Actar, 2008), 82.

Even when we think we know somewhere, so much is easily missed. An important antidote to this is paying close attention. For advice on how to pay attention closely, Robert Macfarlane turns to nature writer Richard Jefferies' 1897 book *Nature Near London*. Here are Jefferies' instructions, as Macfarlane relays them:

'It would be very easy ... to pass any of these places and see nothing, or but little.' His engagement with the landscape was not prescriptive but exemplary, offering what he called – with an epistemological flourish – a 'method of knowing'. 'Everyone must find their own locality. I find a favourite wild-flower here, and the spot is dear to me; you find yours yonder.' His method was based on long-term and patient acquaintance, and on careful observation. It involved 'keep[ing] an eye' on one's locale 'from year's end to year's end', and in this manner coming 'to see the land as it really is': the creaturely bustle of hedge, copse, sky and field.¹⁴⁸

In this way, Jefferies was able to find the anthropogenic effects of development at London's urban fringe, its edgeland "not to have suppressed nature, but rather to have provoked it to odd improvisations."¹⁴⁹ Richard Jeffries was writing of a very different London, more than a century ago, but his urging to walk, to engage with a place on purpose, to make careful observations, and to do so over time remain as pertinent as ever.

This assessment applies likewise in Los Angeles. Getting to know a place is a vital prelude to caring for it. Lewis has always talked about his involvement with the river as a "forty-year art project."¹⁵⁰ The artwork began with MacAdams and a few friends listening to the river. He has been dispensing the same advice to others ever since. Joe Linton, who in the mid-2000s literally wrote the book about how to explore the Los Angeles River, remembered being first inspired by hearing Lewis respond to questions about what people could do

¹⁴⁸ Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 238–39.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, MacAdams, "Restoring the Los Angeles River: A Forty-Year Art Project."

for the river.¹⁵¹ Joe recalled that Lewis would say, “just go there and listen to it and let it talk to you.”¹⁵² An edition of the FoLAR newsletter in 1989 had the same counsel:

In the last few months, people all over Los Angeles have begun asking, “What can I do to help save the Los Angeles River?” The first thing to do is to take a walk along one of the living stretches of the river, especially early or late in the day when bird life is at its most intense. Then take out a subscription.¹⁵³

If there was only one instruction that could be issued for how to live well in cities, it would be the exhortation to pay attention. Appreciate the nature that is there, even if unexpected, if strange, if somewhat hidden.

There is a lot to be said for paying close attention, for leaning into a complex landscape and finding what becomes revealed. Philosopher and founder of the Deep Ecology Movement, Arne Naess, was a tireless advocate for cultivating this attentiveness. He said it should begin in childhood:

If you have small children and are with them in nature, bend all the way down to the ground, point to something, and say, “Look at this.” The children might say, “There’s nothing there.” But you insist that they look, and say, “Oh yes there is! There is a little plant here that just started to grow in the early spring. In the wintertime there was something underground that you couldn’t see that was alive.” Then you tell them a bit about the life of such a little thing. But the most important thing is that you bend all the way down, so the children get the impression that this must be something very important. “Father is bending all the way down!” The children will easily grasp that there is something phenomenal about a living being—not necessarily something beautiful, but something ... life.¹⁵⁴

and continue in adulthood:

We set up camp after dark and in the morning we came together and I said, “For sixty minutes no words. Just see where you are.” They found

¹⁵¹ Joe Linton and Friends of the Los Angeles River, *Down by the Los Angeles River: Friends of the Los Angeles River’s Official Guide* (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2005).

¹⁵² Joe Linton, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

¹⁵³ FoLAR newsletter, 1989, Box 31, Folder 4, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

¹⁵⁴ Christian Diehm, “Here I Stand,” *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2004), 10–11.

that very strange. I tried to influence them by looking around, at the water over there, etc. I bent down looking at an organism—a small snail—and after a few minutes they came down and said, “What are you looking at?” I said, “Shhh!” They were talking, asking about what we should do, and I tried to convey to them that any such being is worth not just a half a minute of their time, but half an hour.¹⁵⁵

Naess’s interviewer, philosopher Christian Diehm, noted that this approach sounded very much like “a notion of ‘dwelling.’ Naess readily agreed, imploring people to notice something, to slow down, and to ‘look intently at it for a few minutes ... [letting it become] very important and very special.’”¹⁵⁶ I now invite you to slow down and look intently. As you read stories from archival and living memory—of water, paint, and weeds—perhaps the river will, for you, become very important and very special, just as that tiny snail did for Arne Naess, and as the river has for so many already.

Heidegger wrote that, while curiosity is a restless search for things, a state of forever being “uprooted,” we *dwell* when we slow down. Doing so, we bring those things that jumble “into salience.” Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas compares this attentiveness to a film camera zooming in tight on its subject, drawing it close in to the viewer’s gaze. As things are drawn closer in to us, or perhaps it is us to them, this is what Heidegger would call *nearing* .¹⁵⁷ The field guide is perhaps the quintessential genre of *nearing* , a tool that makes it possible for us to see, and therefore *dwell* in the particular places that are brought into salience by the field guide’s explanations. As Gail Stenstad says in her reflections on field guides and dwelling, “how on earth are we to care for things of which we are ignorant?”¹⁵⁸ While field guides may not readily come to mind as persuasive texts, I am here to argue the case for exactly that. Paying close

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 76–77.

¹⁵⁸ Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad, *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 232.

attention is a powerful thing. A meaningful act. World changing, even. Love of, and particularly intimacy with, place has proven to be one of the most important factors in people's ongoing relationships with the Los Angeles River, and this field guide invites you, too, to come in close.

1.10 MAPPING THE RESEARCH TERRAIN

One of Australia's eminent historians and founding member of the "Melbourne Group," the late Greg Denning, has become a mentor to me from beyond the grave. Though I never met him, his writing has impressed upon me the power of storytelling, the pleasures of writing, and the craft of historical scholarship. Alan Ward, an undergraduate student of Denning's in the 1950s, recalls:

We were trained, systematically, to 'take the scaffolding away' in the later drafts of essays, not leave it there, ugly and intruding upon the view of the construction itself.¹⁵⁹

I have followed Denning's advice to some extent. As you read this thesis, you will find both the finished construction itself and the unfinished building site. I have left much of the scaffolding within view and within your reach, so that readers, you, may form views about not only where my arguments land but how it is that I arrived there. This will situate my findings within existing academic literature, in environmental history as well as further afield. If you are inclined towards the finished construction, or you feel ready to dip your toes or dive right into the Los Angeles River, I invite you to start with the objects chapters: water, paint, and weeds. If you are wondering about how this thesis-construction was built, then all of the other chapters will give you something of a guided tour of the building site.

¹⁵⁹ Alan Ward, "Review Article: Comfortable Voyagers? Some Reflections on the Pacific and Its Historians," *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1996), 237.

In the chapter “Locating the Los Angeles River,” I offered detailed analytical introductions of both Los Angeles and the Los Angeles River, exploring key demographic, political, cultural, and environmental features that bring the river to the state it is in today. This is followed by: “Places are Emotional Terrains,” “Our Very Urban Nature” and “A Riverly Historiography.” In these chapters, I survey the historiographic landscape as well as scholarly literature more broadly to provide a context in which to situate my research. The key questions explored are the ones raised by the river’s remarkable characteristics. I review literature about urban nature, rivers, sense of place, history of emotions, and love. Next, in the field guide element of this work, the chapters “A Field Guide to Water,” “A Field Guide to Paint,” and “A Field Guide to Weeds” zero in on material objects central to the river’s identity. I use these to explore the river’s recent emotional history and to redefine intimacy.

There could have been many other chapters in this section. I have left chapter plans for concrete, barriers, words, companions, home, paradise, and quietness on the cutting-room floor. I developed the three you will read because together they tell the most comprehensive story of intimacy, that emotion which Robert J. Sternberg defines as “feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships.”¹⁶⁰ I agree, but suggest that his definition is not quite enough. It certainly captures that belonging is a central element of intimacy; connectedness and bondedness are synonymous with belonging. Closeness, which I prefer to call attentiveness, is in the mix also. But what the definition does not include is sustenance, the nourishment or wellness that flows from an intimate connection with someone or something. That is the missing link. In my work, I define intimacy as: a state of being attentive, belonging, and deriving some kind of sustenance or nourishment from the intimate other. This intimacy may be requited or not, it may entail solitude or community, and it may be in

¹⁶⁰ Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory of Love,” 119.

relation to any entity other than ourselves—people, places or creatures in the more-than-human world.

This is how the three material objects—water, paint, and weeds—come to feature above all the other possibilities. “A Field Guide to Water” explores the sustaining qualities, literal and otherwise, of water. It is a truism that water is life, but I argue that this merits more attention within the frame of urban environmental history. “A Field Guide to Paint” is about belonging; the jostling of different people and groups to assert themselves in the riverscape, the sense of safety, and impetus that belonging at the river has lent to the graffiti artists I interviewed, and hints at the stories of people for whom the river might be one of the few places they belong. “A Field Guide to Weeds” is about attentiveness, about noticing the small things and exploring the changeability of our relations with plants, depending on the attention we pay to them

Lastly, “The Future Has Many Pasts” concludes with reflections on the river and on this research. It calls for a substantial reshaping of how urban nature is regarded, perceived, and shaped.

You have probably gathered already, this is a river that is important to me. I am here declaring—as Jacqueline Jones Royster says we must—that the Los Angeles River is one of my most “passionate attachments.”¹⁶¹ It means a great deal to me. While on holidays in Los Angeles some years ago, a friend recalled childhood memories of the channelised river in furious flood. As he did, my imagination struggled to keep up, to imagine this trickle of water as somewhere so unforgettably dangerous, inscribed on his memory some five decades later. I got to know the river by poring over contemporary and archival journalistic

¹⁶¹ Jacqueline Jones Royster cited in Solberg, “Googling the Archive: Digital Tools and the Practice of History,” 67.

commentary on the river first, then spending time at and with the river on visits to Los Angeles, then writing about it and exploring archival materials to piece stories together. And here, in this research, I remain committed to the stories. From people, from archives, and from the river, I have found, assembled, questioned, and shaped historical evidence to bring you to the river, too, to invite you to look at it with eyes of love, as I do, along with so many others. Yi-Fu Tuan, in his autobiography, writes of the “shock” and “revelation” he experienced when “the enormous appeal of the desert took [him] by surprise.”¹⁶² I understand, because I have been, over and over again, shocked by how this unlikely riverscape, a contemporary megalith, has such enormous appeal to me, as the desert has to Tuan. He reflects that it was “a puzzle to me why I should feel not only wonder but an intoxicating happiness.”¹⁶³ It is, likewise, a puzzle for me.

Understanding places and their pasts through environmental history has an inherent usefulness. This has been characteristic of the discipline since its emergence in the United States in the late 1960s, step-in-step alongside the emergence of a new American environmentalism.¹⁶⁴ J.R. McNeill describes environmental history as a useful tool for problem-solving, a prompt for “moral engagement,” an explanatory tool and an exemplar for:

a better future by revealing the existence of societies in the past that had managed their relations with the environment more successfully, perhaps even sustainably.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Who Am I? An Autobiography of Emotion, Mind, and Spirit* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 52–53.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶⁴ Roderick Nash, “American Environmental History: A New Teaching Frontier,” *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1972); Richard White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field,” *ibid.* vol. 54 (1985).

¹⁶⁵ John Robert McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” *History & Theory*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2003), 15.

Environmental history's usefulness can be pragmatic, offering "concrete lessons ... for policy makers or scientists or environmental activists."¹⁶⁶ It can also be inspirational, evoking people's sense of responsibility towards a particular place through storytelling.¹⁶⁷ We make places through our thinking and caring about them. As Simon Schama writes, our sense of place is made "as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock."¹⁶⁸ This thesis seeks to do both. Pragmatically, it brings fresh historical perspectives about the uses and emotional resonances of the river to the attention of the many decision makers with a stake in the Los Angeles River. These memories from the past are an important element that could too easily be forgotten in the flurry of attention currently being paid to the river's future. The historical accounts contained here articulate people's ways of relating to the river, they illuminate it as a site for both being alone and building community, and they remind us that we can indeed love the apparently unlovable. I tell new urban nature stories, which are intimate accounts of that deep connection between human beings and the landscapes in which we dwell.

This thesis is not a chronology. It is not a biography. It is not comprehensive, though it is comprehensively researched. It is an invitation to understand a much-narrated river in a new way. It is an argument, told through historical accounts, that we human beings must, can, and in many instances do, cultivate intimacy with landscapes no matter how compromised, complicated, and concretised they may be.

¹⁶⁶ Frank Zelko, "Offering Solutions," in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 38.

¹⁶⁷ Sarah Brown et al., "Can Environmental History Save the World?," *History Australia*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2011), 8.

¹⁶⁸ Simon Schama cited in *ibid.*

2. Locating the Los Angeles River

2.1 UNDERSTANDING LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles is as sprawling as it is complicated (see map in Figure 6). One of its most fundamental contradictions is that it is, at once, both a magnetic Eden and a repellent hell. This push-and-pull dynamic is shorthand by historian and architecture theorist Kazys Varnelis as “positive or negative boosterism.”¹ This is the best explanation I have found so far for how almost any experience of Los Angeles seems to double back on itself as something else. It is the land of salt in wounds as much as it is milk and honey. Photographer Lane Barden recalls how “seeing Los Angeles from the air elicits a feeling of shock, matched by an equally intense feeling of fascination.”² For Barden, seeing Los Angeles from above provides:

proof that our impact on the earth has become so vast and so intricately woven with causal relationships that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain an intellectual distinction between nature, culture, and the built environment.³

This is the city that prompts people to ask questions like:

L.A. is no longer a Midwesterner’s vision of Paradise; but a Megalopolis: an organism in search of a new philosophy, a new myth. What exactly is the nature of this rough beast?⁴

Its Edenic characterisation must sit alongside scientific evidence that “the Los Angeles basin is one of the most heavily polluted areas in the world.”⁵ The two aspects tussle endlessly with one another, neither ever adequately characterising the complex metropolis.

¹ Kazys Varnelis, *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles* (Barcelona/New York: Actar, 2008), 15.

² Barden, “The Los Angeles River Picturing Los Angeles: Conduits, Corridors, and the Linear City, Part 1,” in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, 78.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Promotional material for seminar series at the Los Angeles Public Library, circa 1997, Box 31, Folder 2, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁵ Janet Barco et al., “Linking Hydrology and Stream Geochemistry in Urban Fringe Watersheds,” *Journal of Hydrology*, vol. 360, no. 1 (2008), 32.

Los Angeles has a way of suspending reality, asserting its own signature brand of positive boosterism that suggests the city can survive anything, while at the same time indulging in a kind of apocalyptic fantasy that has the city, negatively boosted, as the place where the world is poised to end at any moment, or probably has ended already. I promise I am not exaggerating when I say the apocalypse always feels a little closer in Los Angeles. These views of the city, each strange in their own way, prompt scholarly interpretations that cast it as a kind of hyper-city, less affected by the natural limitations that might shape possibilities anywhere else, but at the same time perilously prone to them.

As Jared Orsi reflects, words like “*first, worst, largest, last, most*, and other superlatives pervade both lay and scholarly descriptions of the city, especially when it comes to disasters.”⁶ Of superlatives and apocalyptic interpretations, Mike Davis is undoubtedly the master. In an essay about storms he remarks on the “growing popular apprehension that the former Land of Sunshine is reinventing itself ... as a *Book of the Apocalypse* theme park ... [a] virtually biblical conjugation of disaster.”⁷ Davis’ writing and scholarship is controversial, frequently contested on grounds including veracity, extravagance, exaggeration, and unjustified declensionism.⁸ Given this, Davis neglects to reflect that it may well have been his own hyperbolic and popularist writing about the city that was fanning the flames of a growing apprehension about dangers and disaster in Los Angeles.

Robert Gottlieb’s perspective on Los Angeles, carefully formed through a career of academic and public service work in the city, sees him organise his treatise on the city into three spheres: *water politics, cars and freeways, and immigration and*

⁶ Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 166.

⁷ Mike Davis, “Los Angeles After the Storm: The Dialectic of Ordinary Disaster,” *Antipode*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1995), 222.

⁸ Kevin Stannard, “That Certain Feeling: Mike Davis, Truth and the City,” *Geography* (2004).

globalization; a much more socioecologically grounded take than the many interpretations of the city which attempt to either suspend reality or catastrophise it.⁹ Memories of ecological conditions in Los Angeles—even very recent ones—are infamously selective, except that the landscape itself still tells the story. As Greg Goldin and Mike Davis wrote in an article clipped and kept in the now-archived records of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

the hucksters to franchised California sold sunshine, not deluge. This meant that, no matter what the cost, something had to be done about the periodic flooding, mudslides, collapsing palisades, and pummeled beaches. No one was willing to concede that nature was irrational, let alone uncontrollable.¹⁰

The interplay of perfection and imperfection has long characterised writing about Los Angeles.

In a guide to the city written in the 1930s, project supervisor John D. Keyes promised a publication that aimed “to present Los Angeles truthfully and objectively, neither glorifying it nor vilifying it.” He went on to lament that “for many decades the city has suffered from journalistic superficiality; it has been lashed as a city of sin and cranks; it has also been strangled beneath a damp blanket of unrestrained eulogy.”¹¹ In this breadth of meaning, Los Angeles has a way of being all things at once. As Edward Soja writes:

One can find in L.A. not only high tech industrial complexes of the Silicon Valley and the erratic sunbelt economy of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighborhoods of

⁹ Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: nature and community in the global city* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007), 10; Beth Rose Middleton, review of “Where the River Meets the City: Tracing Los Angeles’ Social and Environmental Movements,” *City*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2009), 152.

¹⁰ Greg Goldin and Mike Davis, clipped article from *LA Weekly Magazine*, 1995, Box 29, Folder 12, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

¹¹ W.P.A. Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in Southern California and David Kipen, *Los Angeles in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City of Angels*, Second ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, circa 1941), vi.

rust-belted Detroit and Cleveland ... There is a Boston in L.A., a Lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a Sao Paulo and a Singapore.¹²

This complexity makes Los Angeles a slippery place to get to know. As Stefano Bloch reflects, “LA is not a place to be taken lightly, or visited quickly ... it is this complexity and its multiple realities that make LA special, if not entirely unknowable.”¹³ Curators of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles’ exhibit in 2004–05, *LA: Light/Motion/Dreams*, worked to resist actively the dominant “sunshine or noir paradigm within the regional historiography” which pits “boosters” against “critics” in an endless tussle between extremes.¹⁴ Despite this goal, the curators reflected afterwards that “some visitors came away wondering if the exhibit was not too much like the city it portrays— all surface and no depth.”¹⁵ It is far too simplistic to critique Los Angeles as being shallow; indeed, its very indefinability and complexities make “shallow” an utterly implausible and inadequate diagnosis.

The push and pull leads to archival sources like this one, which describes a mild climate and successful settlement while in the same breath upselling the necessity of flood control, without at any point surrendering to acknowledge any imperfections that may actually necessitate its construction:

The Los Angeles area is remarkable! It is remarkable for its mild climate, for its topographical features, for its explosive population growth, and for its industries that are vital to the world of entertainment and the national defense. These very aspects, together with the foresight of enlightened public leaders in promoting measures to enhance the local economy, have resulted in a remarkable flood control project to protect Los Angeles County. It is a long-range project, a vast undertaking and an

¹² Edward Soja cited in Melissa Wilson and Bob Catterall, “City’s Holistic and Cumulative Project (1996–2016): (1) Then and Now: ‘It all comes together in Los Angeles?’,” *City*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2015), 132.

¹³ Stefano Bloch, “A People’s Guide to Los Angeles [Book Review],” *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2014), 116.

¹⁴ Spaulding, “On ‘L.A.: Light/Motion/Dreams: Developing an Exhibition on the Natural and Cultural History of Los Angeles,’” 298.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

outstanding example of close cooperation and participation between local, State and Federal agencies in a common cause.¹⁶

A little like a relationship where your partner can't quite decide if being with you is the best or the worst life choice they have ever made, so too Los Angeles' relationship with flooding and flood control is one of mixed and contradictory feelings. LACDA (Los Angeles County Drainage Area) was a proposal in the early 1990s by the Army Corps of Engineers to substantially raise parapet walls for flood protection in the lower reaches of the river, below the Rio Hondo confluence. Their argument had to be that while the existing flood control was a feat of engineering and utterly successful in meeting its objectives, yet the neighbourhoods were at substantial risk of flooding and much more extreme re-engineering of the river would be required.

2.1.1 FRAGMENTATION AND FRUSTRATION

Los Angeles is an infamously fragmented city. In the 1920s, Aldous Huxley described it as "nineteen suburbs in search of a metropolis"; since then Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott, and others have all been credited with a coining an updated version, that Los Angeles is "seventy-two suburbs in search of a city."¹⁷ This spatial fragmentation, that the city is more sprawl than hub and spokes, is just one form of fragmentation that exists there. Socioeconomically, the city is also deeply divided, its "fragmentations and polarizations" inextricably linked to the kinds of urban environmentalism that have emerged there.¹⁸ The distinctiveness of Los Angeles led to the establishment of the LA School, "a group led mainly by geographers and cultural theorists who emphasized how

¹⁶ C.T. Newton and Harold E. Hedger, Paper to the American Society of Civil Engineers, 1959, Box 26, Folder 15, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

¹⁷ Hugh Rawson and Margaret Miner, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 126.

¹⁸ Desfor and Keil, "Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes," 18.

forces such as postmodern culture, technology, and urban sprawl had ‘decentered’ the city and elided neighborhood boundaries” and that the substantial differences embodied in Los Angeles made it necessary to form an alternative approach to that provided by the well-established Chicago School. The Los Angeles School is alert to new urban formations—because Los Angeles is a case study of them—arguing that more nuanced attention needs to be paid to future city forms, beyond traditional geographical and cultural configurations.¹⁹ Indeed, it may be that Los Angeles’ exceptionalism has in fact become the new normal, demonstrating the very kinds of “decentralized, polycentric development that would overtake all the great cities of the world.”²⁰ Los Angeles has “emerged through riotous bouts of speculative excess [and] splashed crazy-quilt across basins and canyons.”²¹ And running through its heart is the Los Angeles River, an opportunity, a begging plea for integrative, holistic, and less-fragmented thinking about the city’s past and future.

As Norman Klein observes, “Los Angeles is a city that was imagined long before it was built ... as if a deal had been cut with God about how to promote real estate.”²² Just as this construction, this *imaginary*, characterises the city’s emergence as a globally iconic, for better or worse, megalopolis; it also dominates Los Angeles’ historiography and, to a great extent, the city’s consciousness and identity. Along with the push-and-pull tussle between Los Angeles being heaven and Los Angeles being hell comes a dominant

¹⁹ Robert J. Sampson, Jared N. Schachner, and Robert D. Mare, “Urban Income Inequality and the Great Recession in Sunbelt Form: Disentangling Individual and Neighborhood-level Change in Los Angeles,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2017), 103.

²⁰ Robert Fishman, “Re-Imagining Los Angeles,” in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, ed. M.J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 259.

²¹ Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles,” 175.

²² Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2008), 27.

historiographic tone, that is somewhere close to the jaded end of an attitude spectrum. There is some exasperated eye-rolling implied in phrases like “the measure was a quintessentially L.A. nonsolution” and “on the surface, this suggested great optimism, but only on the surface.”²³ Melanie Winter, a long-time river advocate, first with FoLAR and now with her own non-profit, The River Project, described Los Angeles as “an epicenter of bad choices that have reverberated across the globe.” But she was still optimistic, as Angelenos tend to be. “I was born here,” she continued, “I was born on the river. If I can see that those choices were made inappropriately and it shouldn’t be that hard for us to take a step back. It’s only been a hundred years, nothing ... adjust, Jesus!”²⁴

2.1.2 LAYERED HISTORIES OF BELONGING

All of this is very recent history, of course. Los Angeles is built layer upon layer: the Native American Tongva peoples, the Spanish colonisers, Mexico taking back control after the War of Independence with Spain, and then the United States annexing California following the Mexican–American War; before the rapid development of the city into the megalopolis it is today. The river traces through the homelands of the Native American peoples who came to be known as the Gabrielino-Tongva; the first half of that name is a marker of colonisation, so named for the area having been forcibly occupied by the Spanish when they founded the Mission San Gabriel in 1771.²⁵ The Tongva delineation marks:

not a single “tribe,” but a collection of lineages ... that shared a language, culture, religion, and lifestyle that distinguished them from neighboring Indians like the Chumash or Cahuilla.²⁶

²³ Gottlieb et al., *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Liveable City: Updated with a New Preface*, 192; Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, 44.

²⁴ Melanie Winter, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie’s Home, Studio City.

²⁵ L. Mark Raab, “Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles,” in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, ed. William Deverell and Greg Hise (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 25.

²⁶ Claudia K. Jurmain and William McCawley, *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2009), xxii.

Books about Los Angeles tell many stories, but few of them stretch to remember that just a few centuries ago—and for at least 8000 to 10,000 preceding years—what is now called Los Angeles County was already full of rich and complex human society and life.²⁷ There are no empty places, just ones we don't tell, or don't know, the stories of. It leaves such a chasm. Blake Gumprecht describes how the river's rich biodiversity "helped support one of the largest concentrations of Indians in North America."²⁸ Anthropologist Mark Raab narrates the contesting scholarly interpretations of the Gabrielino-Tongva's relationship to the landscape. On the one hand, the pre-colonisation Los Angeles Basin has been depicted as an abundant landscape in which "Indians [were] constrained to comparatively simple, passive, and contented cultural reactions to existence in a natural hunter-gatherer paradise." Other scholars argue that these very same conditions led instead to:

the development of storage techniques and other truly skilled applications of human ingenuity [which] allowed these people to develop beyond the normal parameters of hunting and gathering, particularly in the sociological, philosophical, and religious realms.²⁹

Mark Raab challenges both of these two ways of seeing as "extreme Indian cultural stereotypes: [as either] passive, childlike residents of a vast nature park or unerringly successful ecoengineers."³⁰ These stereotypes each fail in their own ways because:

the first image portrays Indians as hapless, with only Euro-Americans able to effect real change on the environment. The second image sets up Indians as environmental saints, denying them the complex and sometimes less than adaptive motives and behaviours that characterize all cultures.³¹

²⁷ Raab, "Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles," in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, 25.

²⁸ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 26.

²⁹ Raab, "Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles," in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

As I write, discussion is alive in my home country of Australia along these very same lines.

Fairly recent, paradigm-shifting developments in Australian historiography refute long-propagated colonial beliefs that Aboriginal Australians were passive hunter-gatherers, roaming the country nomadically in a primitive social system. We now know from a growing body of evidence that indigenous peoples here were—among many other complex social systems—growing yams on a large agricultural scale, honing elaborate technologies to care for country using fire, grinding flour from kangaroo grass and other seeds to bake bread and living, not in nomadic temporary camps, but in substantial and permanent dwellings.³² This has likewise been the case in emergent understandings that the Tongva-Gabrielino people actively shaped the habitats in the area that eventually became Los Angeles, that these were places “deliberately maintained by, and essentially dependent upon, ongoing human activities of various kinds” prior to colonisation.³³ All of this highlights that so much is not broadly known or understood. Mark Raab observes that “Gabrielino culture was largely obliterated by disease and oppression.”³⁴ Paula Schiffman echoes this, commenting that Tongva “culture was decimated when the Spanish mission era began [and consequently] only a sparse history of the environment as they experienced it survives today.”³⁵ In saying this, Raab and Schiffman are both right and wrong all at once.

³² Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2014).

³³ Thomas Blackburn and Kat Anderson cited in Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 209.

³⁴ Raab, “Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles,” in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, 26.

³⁵ Paula M. Schiffman, “The Los Angeles Prairie,” *ibid.*, 40–41.

Colonisation in California, as here on Australian shores, was without question horrific in many regards. But indigenous cultures were and remain more complex and resilient than the cultural obliteration storyline would have us believe. Because connection to country is inextinguishable, the Gabrielino-Tongva are as intricately and intimately connected to the river and the basin today as ever, it is just that the ties that bind are harder for outsiders, including scholars like me, to find, interpret, and narrate. As historian Kevin Starr writes, “to be a Tongva is a time-tested way of being a human being; of becoming more human, more aware, loyal, and spiritual through bloodlines, family ties, and cultural memory.”³⁶ This time-tested identity was jeopardised first by the Spanish in the late eighteenth century, and then successively by Mexican and American governments, all forces against the Tongva who were “a sovereign people: people of the land and sea, their identity molded by the environment and their relationship to it.”³⁷

The spiritual and cultural rigour of Tongva societies has intermingled since colonisation in complex ways with Mexican and Spanish colonial influences, and is still shaping and re-shaping itself in contemporary Los Angeles. As Tongva woman and American Indian scholar Cindi Alvitre writes, “We have a very unique identity, a very unique history, and a way of seeing the land around us.”³⁸ This history is layered and no layer subsumes or erases those that came before:

Los Angeles exists of layers of history stacked one on top of the other, each layer as real as the buildings and streets that stand today ... Past and present coexist. I don't see these rectangular blocks of asphalt and concrete. I see earth and villages.³⁹

³⁶ Foreword by Kevin Starr in Jurmain and McCawley, *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area*, xi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

³⁸ Cindi Alvitre cited in *ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ Cindi Alvitre cited in Vincent Brook, *Land of Smoke and Mirrors: A Cultural History of Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 12.

Alvitre writes in the present tense because, despite many attempts to extinguish the ongoing presence of the Tongva in Los Angeles, their survival, culture, and identity persists. The Tongva persist despite extreme colonial oppression, despite being federally unrecognised as a tribe, and despite being unrecognised in various contexts.⁴⁰ This persistence is not one that is frozen in time, essentialised, but rather is dynamic, fluid, and multi-faceted, calling us all to regard more thoughtfully “the ambivalent notions of belonging that have long permeated Indigenous cultures.”⁴¹ Or as David Campio, who prefers to describe his indigeneity as being of “the Clay People” rather than the Tongva, explains, “a culture, any indigenous group ... is altering daily ... The seasons change, everything changes.”⁴² We know from Cindi Alvitre’s writing that the river was and remains an important site. During the Spanish invasion, she tells us:

colonization and missionization accelerated the pace of relocation as native people tried to outrun the colonizers, always clinging to the river. After the secularization of the Missions [in 1834], native people were cultural prisoners-of-war, released from generations of confinement into a permanently altered existence. [The river homelands of] Yaangna became a refugee camp for tribal families seeking some sense of tradition.⁴³

While the last of these villages—located where Aliso and Alameda streets meet with the Hollywood freeway—was destroyed in 1847 by the Los Angeles City Council, Tongva-Gabrielino cultural practices and knowledges remain alive, nourishing a “mother earth” that is a mirror of humanity’s condition, a land that

⁴⁰ Jurmain and McCawley, *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area*, xxvi. Throughout this collaborative storytelling project, which shares first-hand accounts from Tongva people of their lives and cultural identity, are recollections of experiences in which they were told that no Tongva people had survived.

⁴¹ Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny, “Performing Indigeneity: Emergent Identity, Self-Determination, and Sovereignty,” in *Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences*, ed. Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 14.

⁴² Jurmain and McCawley, *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area*, 3 and 149–51.

⁴³ Cindi Alvitre, “Coyote Tours,” in *LAtitudes: an Angeleno’s Atlas*, ed. Patricia Wakida (Berkeley: Heyday, 2015), 46-7.

“wants to be free” and “that speaks to those who will listen.”⁴⁴ The land and water in Los Angeles still breathes with Tongva breath.

The arrival of the Spanish in August 1769, comprised of Captain Gaspar de Portolà, Fray Junípero Serra, and unnamed soldiers and American Indians, walked heavily in Tongva footprints. Fray Juan Crespí was there also, as we know from his brief but often-cited diary note about the Los Angeles River.⁴⁵ The expedition camped by the river, naming it El Río de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula (The river of the town of Our Lady of the Angels of Porciúncula). The expeditioners met the Yang-na people (a lineage of the larger Tongva grouping), for whom the watershed had long been home, and assessed by the Yang-na’s occupation that it would be a suitable site for a Spanish pueblo. This came to be in 1781 with the arrival of forty-eight people, mostly settlers and a few soldiers.⁴⁶ As Richard Griswold del Castillo observes, the establishment of a pueblo here was in part a decision of terrain, as “Indian settlement indicate[d] that water, fertile land, and game were nearby’; but it was as much a decision motivated by human resources, with Indian populations providing “a ready source of labor and—as was usually the case—women.”⁴⁷ As William David Estrada argues, we simply must see the city with this longer, pre-European view to remind us that “Los Angeles was not created from a void” but rather:

long before the arrival of the first settlers from colonial Mexico, the earliest inhabitants of Los Angeles recognized the area as being ecologically suitable for permanent settlement. Therefore, they learned to manage their lives with an understanding and respect for the natural landscape, especially for the force of the Los Angeles River. Those who came later built on that same sense of place. Consequently, as Los Angeles slowly evolved from pueblo to ciudad to metropolis in the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁵ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 35–39.

⁴⁶ Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850–1890: A Social History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 4–5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the basic infrastructure of the city, from roads and railways to freeways, its geography, and its mythology were built upon its indigenous past.⁴⁸

Here again are the layers with which Los Angeles has been constructed, none obliterating or replacing those laid down previously but instead forming an ever-thicker patina, a palimpsest, of the city's complex identity. Mexico is nearby geographically, and even closer culturally and historically. As William Deverell writes:

Understanding Los Angeles requires grappling with the complex and disturbing relationship between whites, especially those able to command various forms of power, and Mexican people, a Mexican past, and a Mexican landscape.⁴⁹

Only twenty years after Mexico gained control of California in 1821 by way of the Mexican War of Independence, which brought Mexico freedom from colonial Spanish control, the United States took California in 1847, having waged the Mexican–American War in pursuit of Manifest Destiny, the conviction “that God had ordained that Americans should populate and govern a vast expanse of land west of the Mississippi River.”⁵⁰ Successful in claiming California as its own, the United States laid down more layers still with:

changes wrought by the layering of U.S. colonial rule on top of Spanish–Mexican colonial rule and the creation of new sites for national borders ... ushered in a period of rapid industrialization, especially in the Plaza area [on the west bank of the Los Angeles River in what is today Downtown Los Angeles], that not only signaled a transition in the political economy of the small town but also marshalled an immigrant workforce, especially from Mexico. These industries helped to solidify U.S. rule in the region, with a growing population of Mexican women, men, and children who needed housing.⁵¹

⁴⁸ William David Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 40.

⁴⁹ William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20.

⁵⁰ Richard Griswold del Castillo, “Manifest Destiny: The Mexican–American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” *Southwestern Journal of Law and Trade in the Americas*, vol. 5 (1998), 31–32.

⁵¹ Isabela Seong Leong Quintana, “Making Do, Making Home: Borders and the Worlds of Chinatown and Sonoratown in Early Twentieth-century Los Angeles,” *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2015), 50.

And with this, another new Los Angeles emerged from the layers. A rapidly industrialising city, constructed on the rhetorically charged platform of Manifest Destiny for which California was a trophy state, a city built on extreme power differentials drawn along stark racial lines.

2.1.3 A CITY OF INDUSTRY

An emerging American Los Angeles sold itself on a narrative of paradise, while sustaining itself in large part with manufacturing industries. This is a perfect expression of the two-faced nature of the city. While Los Angeles has since de-, and to some extent, re-industrialised since the mid-twentieth century, the geographies of a Fordist economy, fragmented in an inimitably Angeleno way, remain (see Figure 12).

A highly industrialised economy rapidly became a hallmark of Los Angeles in the city's Americanisation following the Mexican–American War (1846–48), as “merchant shops and manufacturing replaced agriculture [and] the local economy transitioned to one based in localized industries with a global workforce and a global market reach” by the 1880s.⁵² The river is a protagonist in the city's industrial geography. Factories are built along its banks and, during the 1920s, immigrants would settle along those industrial stretches of river to such an extent that these places earned the title “foreign districts.”⁵³ Much of the Los Angeles River is still part of the region's industrial backbone, enabled by the presence of an extensive low-paid labour force along with existing infrastructural affordances of transportation, appropriate zoning, and post-industrial brownfield land.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 52.

⁵³ Katia Perini and Paola Sabbion, *Urban Sustainability and River Restoration: Green and Blue Infrastructure* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 108.

⁵⁴ Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 90, no. 1 (2000), 26–27.



Figure 12: Downtown Los Angeles and a small segment of the industrial urban core, seen from the top of Los Angeles City Hall. Photo by the author.

Industrialised landscapes multiplied in the city's east and south following the early 1900s, when covenants and zoning ordinances deemed Westside Los Angeles almost exclusively residential, and the population distribution followed with what Vincent Brook describes as an "east/west (and south/west) ethnoracial divide."⁵⁵ This has shaped East Los Angeles and the river's southern reaches in municipalities such as Paramount City, Washington, Commerce, and South Gate. Unlike Westside neighbourhoods, where the limited industrial apparatus that does exist is both less prevalent and better-hidden (oil derricks hidden inside fake building facades and flower-emblazoned towers, for instance) industrialisation by the river is evident in plain sight. For example, Paramount City, a municipality on the east bank of the lower Los Angeles River, describes itself as the city that "provide[s] a place for industry that nobody wants."⁵⁶ The

⁵⁵ Brook, *Land of Smoke and Mirrors: A Cultural History of Los Angeles*, 158; Wolch, Wilson, and Fehrenbach, "Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-mapping Analysis," 8.

⁵⁶ Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," 32.

deindustrialisation of Los Angeles was already underway by the 1950s as aerospace manufacturing shifted to the city's periphery, and then intensified when the Watts riots in 1965 divided the city on racial lines.⁵⁷

The "socio-spatial arrangement" of Los Angeles is complex and utterly heterogeneous.⁵⁸ Space is extensively racialised, even when this exists more in imagination than in reality. For example, there is the long-standing characterisation of South Central Los Angeles as "a dangerous, dark place ... inscribed with blackness" and East Los Angeles as having a "Mexican-origin population ... crime-ridden, poor, and undesirable."⁵⁹ These generalisations persist despite that, for example, the population of Watts in South Central Los Angeles is now dominated by Latinos, constituting more than 70 per cent of residents.⁶⁰

Now, in an age that many scholars shorthand as post-Fordist, Los Angeles is characterised by polluted deindustrialised land being re-developed as housing for people of colour; entrapment of residents by the constraints of a racist housing market; poverty; and a reshaped workforce that is more flexible, decentralised, feminised, and non-unionised.⁶¹ Industrial production remains, but it is more often 'low-wage apparel, food and furniture' industries than the 'auto, tire and steel-related mass production industries that fled in the 1960s and

⁵⁷ Laura Pulido, Steve Sidawi, and Robert O Vos, "An archaeology of environmental racism in Los Angeles," *Urban Geography* vol. 17, no. 5 (1996): 433; Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," 30.

⁵⁸ Pulido, Sidawi, and Vos, "An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles," 425.

⁵⁹ Edward J.W. Park, "Our L.A.? Korean Americans in Los Angeles After the Civil Unrest," in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, ed. M.J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 181.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Medina. "Watts, 50 Years On, Stands in Contrast to Today's Conflicts." *The New York Times*, August 10, 2015.

⁶¹ Browne and Keil, "Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles," 160.

1970s'.⁶² The transition from 'organized' to 'disorganized' capitalism is profoundly evident in Los Angeles.⁶³ Through the heart of a city that boasts some of the wealthiest strata of American society now runs:

the rustbelt of Los Angeles, with numerous abandoned factories, high unemployment rates, economically devastated neighborhoods, extensive outmigration, and deskilling and wage-reducing occupational shifts from industry to service jobs.⁶⁴

Laura Pulido also describes that same rustbelt, a tract of the city that "not only harbors various environmental hazards but, as a politically weak and industrially oriented area, attracts [environmentally hazardous] projects."⁶⁵ The riparian zone of the river, for most of its length, has been a key industrial and transportation corridor. While it is now zoned mixed use—with recreation, residential, retail, and educational land uses diversifying the previously industrial profile of river land use (see Figure 13)—the impacts of industrialisation and its ebbs and flows will long remain inscribed both on the landscape itself and the sociocultural characteristics of the river and the city.

⁶² Pulido, Sidawi, and Vos, "An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles," 433.

⁶³ Paul Hirst and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Flexible specialization versus post-Fordism: theory, evidence and policy implications," *Economy and Society* vol. 20, no. 1 (1991): 8.

⁶⁴ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London/New York: Verso, 2011), 201.

⁶⁵ Pulido, "Rethinking environmental racism: White privilege and urban development in Southern California," 31.

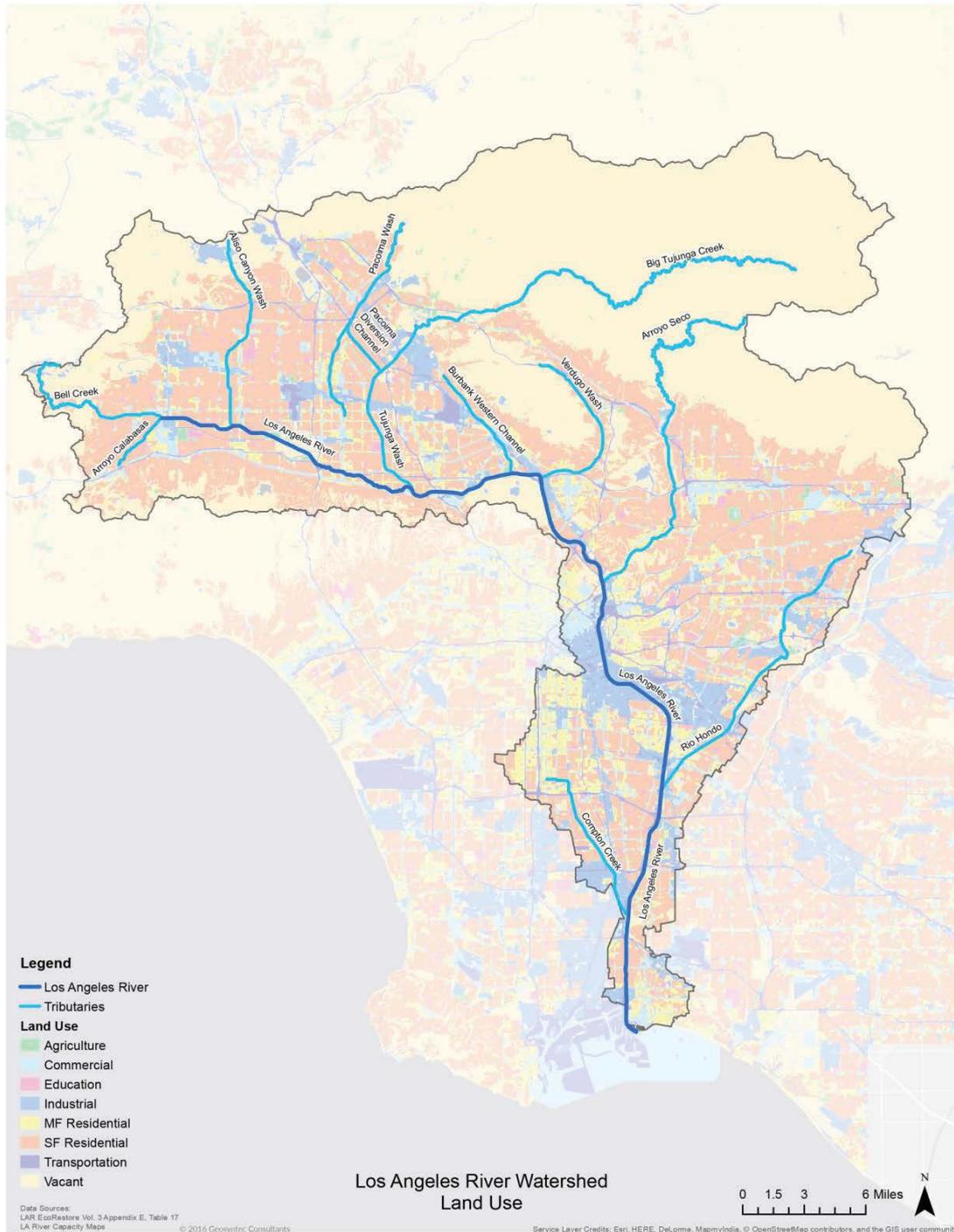


Figure 13: Los Angeles River Land Use map, image from the *LA River Index*, 2016.

2.1.4 DANGEROUS INJUSTICES

One of the characteristic features of Los Angeles is that social inequality is a real and present danger. As David Browne and Roger Keil argue that among all the dangers of Southern California, “the greatest threat of all...remains the explosive

social injustices and power lines that define the region.”⁶⁶ Social inequalities deeply affect where people live and how they live, including a higher prevalence of ecological risk factors in areas of social disadvantage.⁶⁷ Research in Los Angeles affirms the relationship between low-income levels, environmental toxicity, and poor public-health outcomes.⁶⁸ One of the results of this socioeconomic polarisation is that environmental activism in Los Angeles has tended to be more alert to matters of environmental justice than has been the case elsewhere. Desfor and Keil note that the environmental activist institutions Mothers of East LA, Concerned Citizens of South Central, the Labour/Community Watchdog, and the Communities for a Better Environment/La Causa are uniquely and characteristically Angeleno, not paralleled in other North American cities such as Toronto, the subject of their comparative study.⁶⁹ Neighbourhoods of disadvantage adjoin the river for much of its length (see Figure 15). Despite then-Mayor Tom Bradley’s urging in 1989 that “Los Angeles cannot permanently exist as two cities—one amazingly prosperous, the other increasingly poorer in substance and in hope,” it appears to be doing just that.⁷⁰ His view was echoed to me almost three decades later when, in 2016, former councilmember Ed Reyes readily described Los Angeles

⁶⁶ Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles,” 158.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Los Angeles Collaborative for Environmental Health and Justice, “Hidden Hazards: A Call to Action for Healthy, Livable Communities,” (Los Angeles: Liberty Hill Foundation, 2010); Pulido, Sidawi, and Vos, “An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles.”

⁶⁹ Desfor and Keil, “Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes,” 18.

⁷⁰ Mayor Tom Bradley, Fifth Inaugural Address, 1989 cited in Gottlieb et al., *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Liveable City: Updated with a New Preface*, 69.

as, in parts, a third-world city.⁷¹ This is a view held also by Allen Scott and Edward Soja, who write of Los Angeles as:

the postmodern archetype ... a city split between extremes of wealth and poverty, in which a glittering First World city sits atop a polyglot Third World substructure ... undergoing a simultaneous deindustrialization and reindustrialization.⁷²

The third- and first-world areas are cobbled together, neighbourhoods that for all their geographical proximity are profoundly disparate in socioeconomic terms.



Figure 14: Homeless encampment at the southern end of the Bowtie Parcel, looking east. Photo by the author.

Not coincidentally, these neighbourhoods are also places disrupted by various infrastructure decisions, most notably freeway construction, which has cleaved communities apart, and building projects such as Dodger Stadium, which have

⁷¹ Ed Reyes, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 6, 2016, digital recording at Marsh Park, Elysian Valley; unofficial river access point near Taylor Yard parcel; driving in East Los Angeles; and Elysian Park.

⁷² Allen John Scott and Edward W. Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 98.

displaced ethnic and less-affluent communities altogether. As the influential landscape architect Mia Lehrer reflected during our interview:

Los Angeles happened to be the recipient of many, many bad infrastructure decisions. Harnessing the river in concrete and not realizing the repercussions in the late 1930s, the environmental, and economic and social gashes that really disrupted communities.⁷³

These decisions have transformed Los Angeles into a crowded, urbanised place, with a population in 2016 of more than ten million people.⁷⁴ Now, and for the last century at least, the city has been hungry for parkland, nature, and open space. Although in Los Angeles “it seems any plant can thrive in the California sun,” the city nevertheless has substantially lower tree-canopy coverage at 18 per cent compared to the national average of 27 per cent.⁷⁵ In an extensive analysis across the United States, Los Angeles had the dubious honour of building the most new impervious surfaces (roads, buildings, sidewalks, and parking lots)—an average of 550 hectares of each year.⁷⁶ A recent analysis of park space per capita in Los Angeles County showed that some neighbourhoods had as little as 0.5 acres of parkland per 1000 residents.⁷⁷ While there are small pockets that are abundant with parkland space, and are shaded with an ample tree canopy, they are infrequent. Vast concrete surfaces, with their vaporous heat-island effects, dominate the landscape. This paucity of open space makes the river an especially significant element in the city’s highly constructed terrain. The swathe that the river carves through the county offers an unparalleled

⁷³ Mia Lehrer, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁷⁴ United States Census Bureau, “American Fact Finder,” accessed 10 January, 2018. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk_

⁷⁵ Warren Techentin, “Tree Huggers: Landscape,” in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Barcelona/New York: Actar, 2008), 132–34.

⁷⁶ David J. Nowak and Eric J. Greenfield, “Tree and Impervious Cover Change in US Cities,” *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2012), 27.

⁷⁷ County of Los Angeles Public Health, “Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County: A Cities and Communities Report,” (2016).

opportunity and hunger for transformation of the river into public outdoor space. While it is a terrain that invites sweeping assessments and booster-style generalisations and promises (both utopic and dystopic), it is time for a new view of Los Angeles. This thesis offers that view: it zooms in, examines at close range, and asks questions that are intimate in their scale.

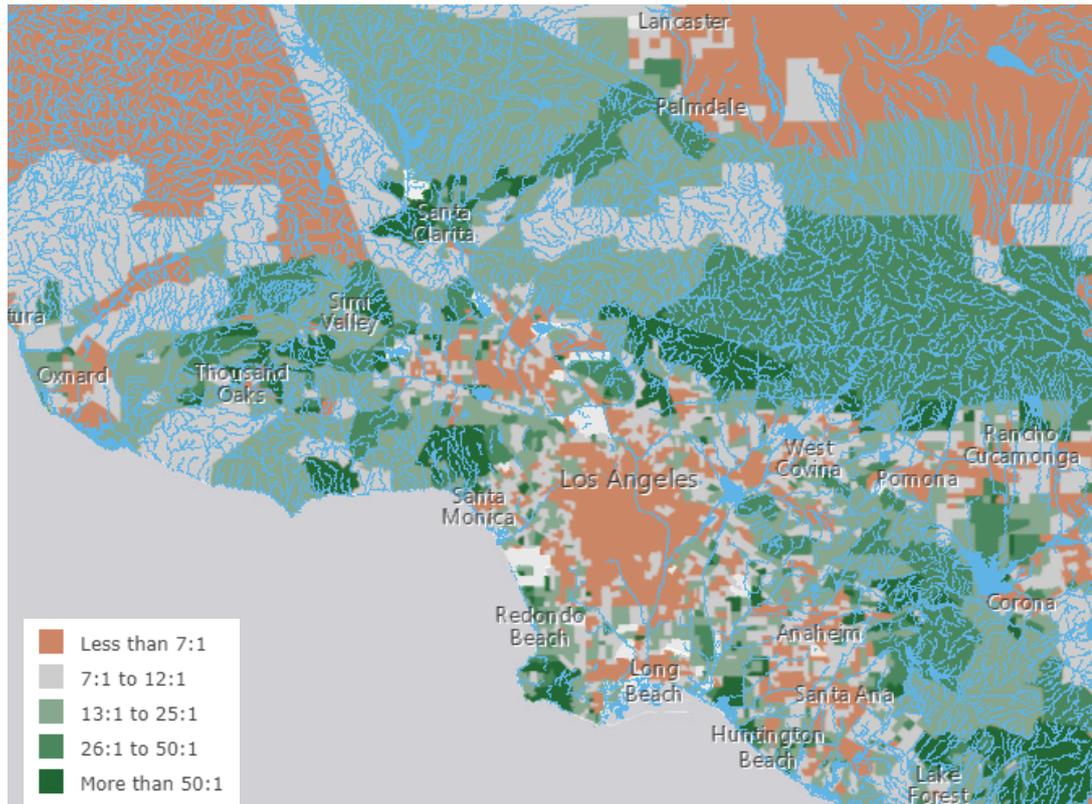


Figure 15: Poverty Ratio Map for Los Angeles. The United States poverty ratio is 6.2 households above the poverty line for every 1 household below the line. Green areas on the map have a higher-than-normal number of households living above the line, while orange areas have a higher-than-normal number of households living below the poverty line. Map generated by the author using ARCGIS. The map layer is by Atlas Publisher, and uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for 2013.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING THE RIVER

There is ample writing about the river in scholarly, media, and other publications. Along with words, the river is muse, star or setting in countless artworks and popular culture artefacts. As Californian poet L.A. Murillo calculated in 2006 (although I’m not sure how this might have been quantified) “there is nearly as much written about the L.A. River as about any of the major

rivers of North America and the world.”⁷⁸ In writing about the river, the narratives tend to follow a remarkably consistent formula. With some minor variations, the plot goes something like this. The river was once a bucolic, idyllic place. But it was fickle in the winter rain and the escalating dangers of flooding meant that something just had to be done. A side note is necessary here—the danger of flooding wasn’t escalating, but rather the city’s relentless development in the flood plain left humans increasingly vulnerable to the flooding that had long been part of the Mediterranean climatic region’s natural rhythms. Los Angeles County, having attempted many fixes themselves, called in the Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1930s after a rapid succession of serious floods. The Army Corps of Engineers—and here you choose your word—tamed/destroyed/transformed the Los Angeles River into a highly effective flood-control channel, a water freeway. Los Angeles forgot it had a river, despite it being the very reason for the city’s existence. It vanished, nobody knew it was there and, even today, they are still not all that sure.

An unlikely but rather effective saviour arrived in the mid-1980s in the form of performance poet, Lewis MacAdams, who formed FoLAR in 1986. Decision makers, the media and, slowly but surely, private sector interests started to be convinced that the city actually had a river. It became the subject of planning and strategic documents, media coverage, guerrilla campaigns, being declared “traditional navigable waters,” funding allocations, and state and federal political attention.⁷⁹ Ever since, the river has been in a perpetual, if slow, state of emancipation from obscurity and disrepair. It could now become the city’s

⁷⁸ L.A. Murillo, 2006, essay in poetry anthology *Verses*, Box 146, Folder 5, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁷⁹ For example, the *Los Angeles County Los Angeles River Masterplan* (1996) and the *City of Los Angeles Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* (2007), extensive coverage in print and electronic media, campaigns such as George Wolfe’s expedition to kayak the river, the EPA navigability declaration, funding allocations through various propositions, and the extensive attention generated by the Alt. 20 revitalisation measures.

Central Park, its High Line, its San Antonio Riverwalk, its Yosemite, its salvation.⁸⁰ This same storyline dominates river scholarship too, with Irene Klaver, Matthew Gandy, Jenny Price, Blake Gumprecht and many others, echoing the narrative.

Almost any writing about the river will mention its presence in films. This is a quintessentially Southern Californian activity, to know places not so much for where or what they are but for which films and television shows they have featured in. On film, the river is a fairly simple subject. You can take your pick from post-apocalypse dystopia or gritty urban background for a scene in which a vehicle of some kind—hotted-up car, flame-flanked motorbike, police car making chase—drives at breakneck speed in search of something or someone. Almost without exception the river is an edgy place, and it is the concrete-clad stretches that dominate on the silver screen. Think *Grease* (1978), think *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), but also think *Tarzan*; with extra plants brought in, the river was used to shoot jungle scenes in the 1930s.⁸¹ Norman Klein calls Los Angeles “the most photographed and least remembered city in the world.”⁸² The very same could be said of the river; when remembered for film roles it is rarely as a river, people are typically incredulous that the setting is anything more than a concrete drain.

2.2.1 AN UNRULY PLACE

The river is—perhaps counterintuitively given how ruled it is by infrastructure—an unruly place, in the sense that nature exercises its agency in

⁸⁰ For this sentence, I owe inspiration credit to David Fletcher, who wrote “the Los Angeles River is the single most powerful space in Southern California: our Golden Gate Bridge, our Yosemite” in Varnelis, *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, 38.

⁸¹ Susan Harris, “Pigs Will Fly: Protecting the Los Angeles River by Declaring Navigability,” *BC Envtl. Aff. L. Rev.*, vol. 39 (2012), 185–86.

⁸² Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, 247.

“complicated and composite” ways there.⁸³ Despite extensive engineering, the river remains in a sense as unruly as ever, not entirely mollified by intervention, nor intent. David Groenfeldt writes of how “flood risk management” is the new way of talking about “flood control,” because:

River channels can be controlled with dams, levees, dredging, and channel straightening, much as ropes and chains can control an unruly prisoner. But just as physical abuse to prisoners can produce hardened criminals who lash out at the first opportunity, rivers that are “tamed” have a way of unleashing even more ferocious floods when nature provides an opportunity.⁸⁴

The river is a prime example of what Samuel Temple describes as “the contact zone between nature and society ... our Bermuda Triangle, easy to lose one’s bearing in.” I concur with Samuel Temple that this zone, a place that “environmental historians struggle to describe,” is an abundant setting for historical enquiry, a place where “environments acted upon and environments acting ... emerges as a provocative and potentially useful theme”.⁸⁵

The river has long been compromised by pollution, a telltale sign of a place being the kind of contact zone, the meeting point of nature and society that Samuel Temple describes. In the late nineteenth century, pollution in the Los Angeles River consisted of industrial waste, charred horse carcasses, animal waste, tar, oil, and much of the refuse from the Los Angeles City Dump.⁸⁶

Flood control officials in general and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in particular are blamed for turning the Los Angeles River into an eyesore, when in truth they were little more than undertakers, closing the coffin on a river that was by and large already dead. The destruction of the river had begun half a century before the first concrete was poured,

⁸³ Siddharta Krishnan, Christopher L. Pastore, and Samuel Temple, eds., *Unruly Environments*, Rachel Carson Center Perspectives (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2015), 5.

⁸⁴ David Groenfeldt, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (2013), 36.

⁸⁵ Samuel Temple, “Unruly Marshes: Obstacles or Agents of Empire in French North Africa?,” in *Unruly environments*, ed. Siddharta Krishnan, Christopher L. Pastore, and Samuel Temple, Rachel Carson Center Perspectives (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2015), 11.

⁸⁶ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 112–17.

when the river, so unlike the waterways back home remembered by residents in this city of perpetual newcomers, began to be viewed not as a giver of life or a thing of beauty, but as a dumping ground—for horse carcasses, petroleum waste, and the city's garbage.⁸⁷

In 1836 the first documented river prohibitions were introduced, banning swimming and laundering clothes in the river because of water-quality concerns.⁸⁸ As city development continued apace, the scarce water flowing in the Los Angeles River became increasingly toxic, with the mid-twentieth century seeing the river contaminated with industrial waste, animal refuse, and untreated sewerage.⁸⁹ By the 1970s, newspaper sources indicate that the river's flows contained oil, untreated sewerage, chlorine, hexavalent chromium, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), and other unspecified discharges.⁹⁰ There were some prosecutions of polluters under the state's toxic waste law, and many instances of waste discharges undertaken with appropriate permissions. Much pollution, however, was left without any legal, or indeed ecological, redress.⁹¹ In 1984 a Superfund site in the San Fernando Valley was designated for remediation after an Environmental Protection Agency investigation of groundwater contamination with industrial chemicals.⁹² Other than this, much of the river corridor's industrial profile remains as a testament to land and water pollution. High levels of copper, cadmium, lead, zinc, aluminium, and selenium have placed much of the river on the Clean Water Act section 303(d) list of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 124–25.

⁹⁰ See, for example, "Foothill Update—June." *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1978; "Energy, Environment: Chemical Contaminates Compton Creek." *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1978; Richard Buffum; "Pelican Source Put to the Test." *Ibid.*, June 27, 1976; "Engineers Fail to Solve Problem: River of Gasoline Perils L.A. Water Supply: Gasoline River." *Ibid.*, July 28, 1970.

⁹¹ See, for example, John Kendall. "Firm Fined a Record \$15,000 for Pollution." *Ibid.*, October 2, 1981.

⁹² Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 126.

impaired water bodies and rubbish pollution, largely carried to the river in stormwater, also impairs the river ecologically and recreationally.⁹³



Figure 16: Experiments in bio filtration of polluted river water, at Metabolic Studio. Photo by the author.

2.2.2 A PARK IN PERPETUAL PROGRESS

Though there were some early proposals that the Los Angeles River become parkland in the city, this has only seriously been pursued in the last few decades, with several formal and informal recreation sites now established along some river stretches. While early initiatives noticed the river's potential, it has taken a long time for this potential to begin to be realised. In 1906 Dana Bartlett argued that the river should become "a line of beauty." In a never-realised urban plan, described in their 1930 report *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*, renowned planners the Olmsted Brothers and Harland Bartholomew and Associates imagined part of the river becoming a "pleasure

⁹³ California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Los Angeles Region, "Basin Plan," (Los Angeles: California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Los Angeles Region, 2014), 7.146, 7.13–7.14.

parkway,” accommodating both cars and landscape architecture.⁹⁴ For various reasons these possibilities never eventuated, most notably because of the lobbying efforts of business and political powerbrokers in the city, who opposed the plan because it “would have involved removing swathes of land from the city’s burgeoning real estate market.”⁹⁵ There was also the curious belief that Los Angeles “would not need an extensive park system for it had transcended the traditional urban ills that made parks necessary” and that, with freestanding homes boasting private backyards, public parks would be obsolete.⁹⁶ Such a transcendence has not proven to be true, and now large-scale efforts are being made—such as through the recent Alternative 20 River Revitalisation measures, costing at more than \$1.4 billion, which will see initiatives to restore ecological values to several sections of the river.

2.2.3 FROM MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM

The widespread acceptance of, and enthusiasm for, river revitalisation—by city residents, politicians, commentators, advocates, and others—is just one of the signals that the Los Angeles River has, once again, found its place in the city’s identity and urban fabric. I say *once again*, as if the river had been lost, but in fact something even more interesting than that has been happening. The river has always figured in people’s lives; attentiveness to it is neither a recent phenomenon nor a renaissance. There have been changes, certainly, but the trajectory of the river in the city’s identity is not from absence to presence. What has changed is that different kinds of people are paying attention to the river now, and often they are doing so in ways that are more socially palatable.

⁹⁴ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*; Greg Hise and William Francis Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted–Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁹⁵ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 152.

⁹⁶ Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55.

We can too easily overlook stories that flashed into existence in the city's newspaper but have otherwise been forgotten. The "hobo" Johnny Kake (J.K.) and so many others, those vagrant men who "took to the rails, moving from town to town, looking for work, telling stories, and sleeping in 'jungles' or hobo camps" in the first half of the twentieth century. Markings, showing J.K.'s various names and notes chronicling his life, remain inscribed in a tunnel on the Los Angeles River. We know from the dates that he was there over a lengthy period, at least from 1945 to 1952. He was one of many.⁹⁷ We can ignore that low-paid industrial workers relied on river fishing for sustenance, certainly in the 1980s and likely long before that, given that steelhead trout were being caught in the river up until the 1940s.⁹⁸ We can forget that in early 1985 "unemployed dancer/actor/singer" Bill Richards cared for a stretch of river "with the authority of a police officer walking a beat" on a "volunteer crusade, collecting garbage left behind by 'inconsiderate' passers-by".⁹⁹ We can discount that in 1976 a trio of Sky Knight helicopters had clocked a decade of river surveillance, apprehending children playing in the riverbed, unlawful activity, and suspicious vehicles.¹⁰⁰ Or that in advance of the 1984 Olympics, a tent city was created on the river's banks to hide the city's homeless population.¹⁰¹ The river has always been in use; people have always been attending to it. It is just that now river people are as much in the mainstream as they are on the margins.

⁹⁷ Susan A. Phillips, "Notes from the Margins," *Journal of the West*, vol. 48, no. 2.

⁹⁸ "L.A. River Yields Confused Carp of 22 Pounds." *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1978; Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*.

⁹⁹ Jan Klunder, "Trash Commando: Dancing Volunteer Declares War on Refuse Along River." *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 1985.

¹⁰⁰ Peyton Canary, "Sky Knight Protects 230,000 Earthlings." *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 1976.

¹⁰¹ Gandy, "Riparian Anomie: Reflections on the Los Angeles River," 142.

This broadening from margins to mainstream narrates both the city's evolving character and some of its unchanging core. What has evolved in Los Angeles is an appetite for public green space, a desire for more human connection and, selectively at least, with the rest of nature. The Los Angeles River is a mirror to social expectations. When State Assemblyman Richard Katz proposed in 1989 that the river be converted into a gridlock-fixing freeway, he mirrored the anxieties of a city bursting at its transportation seams.¹⁰² When current Mayor Eric Garcetti writes about the river, it is in terms of a desire to "reconnect neighborhoods, revitalize communities, and [have the river] reemerge as a cherished natural and cultural resource [to make] a sustainable city."¹⁰³ This narrates the city also. What has remained constant is the perpetual Los Angeles quest to ask what else might be possible, the hungry booster culture that has made Los Angeles a city of dreams and the imagination, a place perpetually remaking itself, shifting and changing thereby. The river holds the promise of a *rags-to-riches story*, able to be remade as a landscape enactment of the American Dream. It is this booster spirit that has moved the river from the margins and, increasingly, to the centre of the city's identity.

2.2.4 GETTING CLOSER AND CLOSER

The other major change is that it has become increasingly possible to get near to the river. That closeness is a vital element in building a relationship with it. Photographer Lane Barden writes about how the river, being nine metres below street level, can be hard to see. He is absolutely right when he says that "to grasp the river, you need to be next to it, or on top of it, or in it."¹⁰⁴ As I have befriended the river over these years of research, it has been the time spent right nearby that has been most instructive. As Lewis MacAdams is fond of saying,

¹⁰² Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 273–74.

¹⁰³ Eric Garcetti, "Mayor's Welcome: City of Los Angeles Los Angeles River Revitalisation," accessed June 23, 2017. <http://lariver.org/mayors-welcome>

¹⁰⁴ Barden, "The Los Angeles River Picturing Los Angeles: Conduits, Corridors, and the Linear City, Part 1," in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, 82.

you just have to get close to the river and listen to what it has to say. For me, I've grown closer and closer by walking on its banks, sitting on the dried-out concrete riverbed where the water doesn't quite stretch, watching squirrels play in the weedy jumbles of vegetation in the centre of the channel, chatting with people in the now-numerous river-adjacent pocket parks, reciting poetry aloud in the Bowtie Parcel, and drinking black drip coffee while sitting on the sloping trapezoidal banks. This ease of access is one of the important results of community activism in recent years. Things have progressed significantly since the early days of FoLAR when, as Joe Linton recalled, boltcutters were standard equipment for a guided river walk. The *Los Angeles Weekly* once described Joe Linton as "the guy who helps wayward Angelenos discover the river's beauty, by taking them down the right path or sneaking them through the right fence."¹⁰⁵ Leaving the FoLAR offices in the late 1990s to take groups to explore the river, someone would invariably shout out to him, "have you got the keys?" Boltcutters in hand, he would reply, "Yes," setting out with the knowledge that he could cut a makeshift gateway through the ever-present chain-wire fences.¹⁰⁶

Cutting through the fences was a practical and symbolic act from the very first days of FoLAR's existence. In 1986 a trio of people—including Lewis MacAdams, who remains deeply entwined with river advocacy in Los Angeles—made their way through chain-link fences to the river with wire-cutters, declaring that "the river still lived below the concrete," seeking permission to speak for the river in the human realm. Silence was taken as acceptance, and the now-iconic organisation FoLAR was thus formed.¹⁰⁷ While FoLAR was the first to argue for a river-long, multiple-issue transformation of Los Angeles' relationship to the river, there had been other people voicing

¹⁰⁵ David Zahniser. "The River Guide." *LA Weekly*, April 19, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

¹⁰⁷ Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: nature and community in the global city*, 136–37.

environmental concerns at earlier points. Jared Orsi cites a number of articles in which authors lament the demise of an idyllic river. One, for example, mourned the loss of a watercourse “climbing over mossy, jutting boulders, descending in miniature waterfalls glinting with color as sun and water joined.”¹⁰⁸ It was FoLAR, however, that heralded the commencement of fiercely persistent advocacy for the Los Angeles River, which continues to the present day. This advocacy began as outreach to Lewis MacAdams’ friends when he founded FoLAR in 1986, and expanded fairly rapidly to include the media, general public, and political interests. “The origin of FoLAR,” Lewis recalled, “is totally in art, in the art world, because the only people I knew when I came to LA literally were artists, and a couple of other stragglers and drug addicts.”¹⁰⁹ FoLAR was not a singular voice for long. Other organisations and individuals soon joined the fray, their voices adding more ambitions for the river, dragging it into more mainstream public attention.

So much of what is written about Los Angeles suggests a need to do things over. Titles abound with calls to re-this or re-that: *Reimagine*, *Rethink*, *Post-this*, *Post-that*, *Renewal*, *The Next*, *After Los Angeles*, *Transform*, *Reinvent*. In the city’s constant quest towards the future, a keen eye towards the past is crucially important as it provides much-needed ballast and navigation towards what the city, and its river, has been and may yet become.

¹⁰⁸ Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 134.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis MacAdams, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

3. Places Are Emotional Terrains

3.1 HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

Urban history and the history of emotions are subfields that have only fairly recently begun to cross-pollinate. A recent special edition of *Urban History Review*, in 2014, was devoted to exploring “the fascinating entanglement of urban environments and the emotional dispositions of their occupants.”¹ In it, Nicolas Kenny writes that:

Rarely have urban historians problematized these personal responses to urban life explicitly as emotional experiences. By the same token, the rapidly growing field of the history of the emotions, while offering ever more sophisticated insights into the historical contingencies that shape emotions, have been slow to anchor their work in notions of space, urban or otherwise.²

History as a discipline has been slow to take up the challenge of writing about emotions, and where we have done so it has tended to be by way of studies of particular emotions and the social expectations and norms that regulated people’s enactment of them, in the style pioneered by Carol and Peter Stearns in their emotionological approach.³ This work used how-to literature as the key primary source to map an emotion in terms of how people of a particular time and place articulated its rules and characteristics.⁴ This is shifting, slowly, towards a more integrative approach where emotions are not only a historicised subject, but are an analytical lens with which historians can see landscapes and time periods afresh. The turn towards emotions in history is new, a twentieth

¹ Nicolas Kenny, “Emotions and City Life,” *Urban History Review/Revue d’histoire urbaine*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2014), 5.

² Ibid.; Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, *Doing Emotions History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 7.

³ Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions in History,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 3 (2002); Jan Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns,” *History and Theory*, vol. 49, no. May 2010 (2010); Matt, “Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out.”

⁴ Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 4 (1985).

century pursuit. Johan Huizinga and Norbert Elliot began the trend, publishing emotions-centred history monographs in 1919 and 1939 respectively.⁵ Then, it was Annales historian Lucien Febvre who, galvanised by the horrors of the Second World War, called in 1941 for historians to pay attention to the emotions. Without them, he argued, the historian was unable to understand the history of ideas or of institutions and, furthermore, society ran the risk that, ignored, the historical force of emotions “will tomorrow have turned the universe into a fetid pit of corpses.”⁶ Febvre’s enthusiasm for history of emotions was realistically framed. He acknowledged readily that “any attempt to reconcile the emotional life of a given period is a task that is at one and the same time extremely attractive and frightfully difficult”.⁷ Following Febvre, three key history of emotions founders emerged to peg out the field with conceptual and historical work about various particular emotions, and also about the operations of emotions and emotions history: the Stearnses, William Reddy and Barbara Rosenwein. Each has brought a set of concepts to the field: from Peter and Carol Stearns *emotionology*, from Reddy *emotives*, *emotional regime* and *emotional navigation*, and from Rosenwein *emotional communities*.⁸ Debates are alive in the field as to how these ideas are most meaningfully enacted in historical scholarship.

History of emotions, in its brief lifespan, has had two main pursuits. The first has been to understand emotions themselves as historicised subjects, asking questions like, *What is fear?* and, *By what rules do people experience and express anger in different social settings?* This is important work, establishing analytical baselines in a fledgling field of enquiry and deepening conversation beyond

⁵ Matt and Stearns, *Doing Emotions History*, 3.

⁶ Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions in History,” 822.

⁷ Matt, “Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out,” 119.

⁸ Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns.”

merely naming an emotion to empirically exploring its function in a given time and cultural context. The second pursuit, and the one to which this thesis seeks to contribute, is to use emotion as an analytical lens. Women's history started work on writing the sidelined half of the population back into history, and then historiography went further still to understand that gender is a construct which in turn shapes historical moments, events, and eras. This double-edge, of constructedness and constructing, has propelled work that acknowledges that history is gendered, and applies likewise with emotions. With the—literally—world-changing Anthropocene biting at our heels, responsible environmental history scholarship simply must write emotions in. To not do so is both a missed opportunity to understand the past and, more ominously, a lost opportunity for environmental history to be meaningful for the future of places, and the humans who dwell within them.

3.2 LOVE

The central emotional thread of this thesis is *love*. In a simpler version of reality, it is at this juncture that I would insert a well-referenced, pithy, and apposite definition of love, which would map the conceptual terrain of this work, building fences and traverses to contain the ins and outs of my argument as it threads through the thesis. But the meaning of love, I probably need not tell you, is a “bedevilled” thing.⁹ Emotions, as Joanna Bourke observes, are difficult to discern and prone to inaccuracy even in real time, let alone after the passage of time.¹⁰ They are, geographer Hille Koskalla writes, “often ambivalent or muteable ... no sound reality to be grasped, but instead multiple unstable,

⁹ John Wylie, “Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2009), 284.

¹⁰ Joanna Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2003), 114.

nebulous, and unpredictable realities.”¹¹ So, let me begin somewhere else instead, with the question of, *Why love?*

Love is one of four emotions—along with fear, hate, and joy—that Joanna Bourke places at the “very heart of historical experience,” observing that emotions “still tended to be regarded as by-products in historical scholarship.”¹² This thesis is an attempt to bring love to the foreground, regarding it as a catalyst and a character, rather than a mere by-product. It uncouples an emotion that is typically reserved for more conventionally beautiful and loveable landscapes, and opens places to our comprehension, and our care. Barry Lopez writes of the power of intimacy in revealing otherwise inscrutable landscapes. Writing of the Arctic, Lopez says, “like other landscapes that initially appear barren, arctic tundra can open up suddenly, like the corolla of a flower, when any intimacy with it is sought.”¹³ The Los Angeles River is an unconventional landscape to read. It would not be a stretch to compare its strange barrenness to tundra. Furthermore, the river tends most often to be depicted as neglected, forgotten, empty, dire, desolate, broken or apocalyptic. To exercise regard for places that are unconventionally “natural” – or indeed appear not to be alive at all – is both a social and an ecological imperative.

What then is love? Love, and its absence, is a pervasive force in human life. You would think that we may have become better at talking about, it given that poets, scholars, philosophers, moody diarists, advice columnists, novelists, and almost everybody else has been trying for, well, ever. Psychologist Robert Sternberg developed a much-cited triangular model of love where the vertices

¹¹ Hille Koskela, “Fear and Its Others,” in *The Sage Handbook of Social Geographies*, ed. Susan J. Smith, et al. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 390.

¹² Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History,” 114.

¹³ Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, xxiv.

are commitment, intimacy, and passion.¹⁴ Of those three components, *intimacy*—Sternberg tells us—is the omnipresent one, “at the core” in loving relationships of all kinds.¹⁵ Commitment and passion, in contrast, are components whose variance marks different kinds of loving relationships—Sternberg gives examples of passion being a component found most often in romantic relationships, and of commitment being much higher for one’s own children compared to more transient friendships.¹⁶ In more recent research, Sternberg has augmented the triangle model with another very different conceptualisation, of *love as story*. He assures readers, and I agree, that this new view is a companion to his earlier work, not a replacement for it.¹⁷ In his newer love-as-story approach, Sternberg argues that we express and enact a particular “conception of what love can be,” and this story shapes the love that we find, how we experience it, and its actual or anticipated ending.¹⁸ His model offers an inventory of possible stories, a list that is indicative rather than comprehensive. A definitive list, Sternberg writes, would be a “hopeless attempt.”¹⁹ His taxonomy of stories, each accompanied by particulars of thoughts, behaviours, views, roles, advantages, disadvantages, and potential for success, itemises the following love stories: addiction, art, business, collectibles, cookbook, fantasy, sports, gardening, government, history, horror, home, humour, mystery, police, pornography, recovery, religion, science, science fiction, sewing, theatre, travel, and war.²⁰ Love, he argues, was more likely in cases where the other person holds a love-as-story conception “complementary to ours.”²¹

¹⁴ Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory of Love.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁷ “Love as a Story,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1995), 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Belli, Harré, and Iñiguez, “What Is Love? Discourse About Emotions in Social Sciences,” 253.

Another theorisation of love is that developed by sociologist John Allen Lee, who proposes a taxonomy of three primary and three secondary “lovestyles.” In his model, the primaries are *eros* (beautiful), *ludus* (playful), and *storge* (gradual) and the secondaries are *mania* (*eros* and *ludus* combined to make an intense and jealous lovestyle), *agape* (*storge* and *eros* combined to make a lovestyle that is gentle and altruistic), and *pragma* (*ludus* and *storge* combined to make a lovestyle concerned with vital statistics and compatibility).²² This theoretical approach, developed from an interview-based research technique, has been described as offering “an intriguing combination of conceptual richness and clarity”.²³ In a useful synoptic article that explores both the nature and use of emotions in various fields within the social sciences, Simone Belli and her co-authors describe Lee’s work as “a landmark in the field.”²⁴ Love, Lee writes, is impossible to define without the effort being undermined by the author’s “own biases instantly creep[ing] in” so he typologises love rather than attempting to define it.²⁵

I outline these few, of many, theories of love for two reasons. First of all, they hint at the diversity of approaches taken when theorising love. Both Lee and Sternberg are extensively cited and have longevity in the literature. Secondly, though neither provide a comprehensive answer to the *What is love?* question—indeed both argue it is unanswerable—taken together they guide the way to understanding love as something which has various styles, has intimacy at its core, and is narratively articulated and mediated.

²² John Alan Lee, “A Typology of Styles of Loving,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1977), 174–75.

²³ Clyde Hendrick and Susan Hendrick, “A Theory and Method of Love,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 50, no. 2 (1986), 393.

²⁴ Belli, Harré, and Iñiguez, “What Is Love? Discourse About Emotions in Social Sciences.”

²⁵ Lee, “A Typology of Styles of Loving,” 173.

Intimacy, therefore, is the organising emotion of this thesis. Intimacy is, as Sternberg defines it, “feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships.”²⁶ Sternberg goes on to offer a non-exhaustive list of these feelings manifested in more detail:

- (a) desire to promote the welfare of the loved one
- (b) experienced happiness with the loved one
- (c) high regard for the loved one
- (d) being able to count on the loved one in times of need
- (e) mutual understanding with the loved one
- (f) sharing of one’s self and one’s possessions with the loved one
- (g) receipt of emotional support from the loved one
- (h) giving of emotional support to the loved one
- (i) intimate communication with the loved one, and
- (j) valuing the loved one in one’s life.²⁷

Very compatible with this conceptualisation is Erich Fromm’s characterisation of love as an active striving, an in-control emotion more than a derailing one. He says we are better to think of the process as one of “standing,” rather than “falling,” in love. Love, he says, is “the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love.” It is impossible otherwise, for “where this active concern is lacking, there is no love.”²⁸ Love and, likewise, intimacy are reciprocal in the sense that their effects flow in both directions, but they are almost certainly never experienced in uniform ways by each protagonist.

Intimacy is a strong word—it gets at more than merely liking or appreciation and moves squarely into the realm of, to use Fromm’s term, active concern. These ideas are as applicable to the bonds forged between human beings and their surroundings as they are to wholly human relationships. Brett L. Walker notes that intimacy is a word that may evoke uncomfortable reactions from readers, because of the “closeness, familiarity, and private nature that the term

²⁶ Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory of Love,” 119.

²⁷ Sternberg and Grajek cited in *ibid.*, 120–21.

²⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956, republished 2006), 25.

evokes.”²⁹ I am drawn to the term for the same reasons. It signals close attentiveness, affinity, awareness, and entanglement and, in this way, it affirms a deep and meaningful regard for places.

3.3 A TURN TO PLACE

Historian David Blackbourn argued in 2011 that the next significant turning point in history would be place. After the linguistic and cultural turns, he predicted, the next shift would be “a powerfully renewed sense of place, [as well as] the return of material history.”³⁰ Sense of place is not a new concept—it has been in the lexicon since geographer Edward Soja coined the phrase almost three decades ago, and was hinted at by Foucault in a lecture in the late 1960s when he declared it to be “the era of space.”³¹ Place is a complex thing. Alan Atkinson writes of the elusiveness of sense of place for the historian looking for it in written form. It is “something difficult to weigh in the scales of historical significance ... so ephemeral—just breath on the lips—and at the same time so resilient and vigorous.”³² Dolores Hayden describes it as “one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled that one can never shut the lid.”³³ For Clifford Geertz, it is a term “hard to fix in the mind”:

Like Love or Imagination, Place makes a poor abstraction. Separated from its materializations, it has little meaning.³⁴

²⁹ Brett L. Walker, “Animals and the Intimacy of History,” *History and Theory*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2013), 49.

³⁰ David Blackbourn, “Environmental History and Other Histories,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 19.

³¹ Gerd Schwerhoff, “Spaces, Places, and the Historians: A Comment from a German Perspective,” *History and Theory*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2013), 423.

³² Alan Atkinson, *History and the Love of Places* (Armidale: University of New England, 1999), 17–18.

³³ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 15.

³⁴ Clifford Geertz afterword in Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 259.

Place both escapes definition and invites it. Lineu Castello writes of it being “one of those concepts, like ‘passion,’ whose definition is damaged when put into words.”³⁵ Given all of this, let us begin with a broad definition of place, sufficiently umbrella-like to shelter the definitional and conceptual complexities that must necessarily follow. For this definition, human geographer Yi Fu Tuan serves us well. For him, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”³⁶ Expressed another way, by historian Leif Jerram, “space is material, location is relational or positional, place is meaningful.”³⁷

The turn to place builds, of course, on the now decades-old *spatial turn*. The work of scholars who mark this turn – Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Yi-Fu Tuan, David Harvey, Edward Soja, and Edward Casey – has left “bookshelves groan[ing] under the weight”.³⁸ Like any attempt to categorically demarcate a turning point in scholarship, the spatial turn is a contested and complex one. This is not least because, as Leif Jerram points out, there is nothing near definitional consensus among scholars as to “precisely what space is”.³⁹ And then, there are complexities of timing. While the spatial turn is generally accepted as having occurred in the 1980s, landmark texts such as Michel Foucault’s lecture in which he declared it to be the “era of space” had in fact

³⁵ Lineu Castello, *Rethinking the Meaning of Place: Conceiving Place in Architecture-urbanism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), xiv.

³⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

³⁷ Leif Jerram, “Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?,” *History and Theory*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2013), 404.

³⁸ Philip J. Ethington, “Placing the past: ‘Groundwork’ for a spatial theory of history,” *Rethinking History* vol. 11, no. 4 (2007): 466. See also Jenny Gregory and Jill L. Grant, “The Role of Emotions in Protests against Modernist Urban Redevelopment in Perth and Halifax,” *Urban History Review / Revue d’histoire urbaine* vol. 42, no. 2 (2014): 45.

³⁹ Jerram, “Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?,” 401.

already existed, unpublished and long-delayed, since the 1960s.⁴⁰ All that is really clear is that scholars have long been thinking about how to think about space, and even though there is no conceptual nor chronological consensus on the matter, an interest in space, place and landscape remains a compelling force.

Outside of history's disciplinary boundaries, despite or perhaps because of an upswing in scholarly interest about place, research has revealed a plethora of explanations and instantiations of people's relationships with place. Place attachment is a terrain that is at least as varied as human attachment to other humans. In 2004 Maria Lewicka published an extensive literature review, mapping the territory of place attachment as examined by some 400 qualitative and quantitative social sciences studies, spanning from the founding days of place research in the 1970s, as well as the influence of phenomenology—particularly the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty—in the preceding decade.⁴¹ She finds that, despite all the deep attention paid to it, research on place attachment has remained largely stuck in the same definitional and conceptual debates with which it was occupied at its outset. And in this preoccupation, Lewicka notes, the scholarly gaze has remained fixed much more on people, to the detriment of empirical or theoretical work on the places to which people are attached or the processes by which they become so.⁴² These three elements—people, place, and process—form the PPP model of place attachment, developed by Scannell and Gifford (see Figure 17).

⁴⁰ Schwerhoff, "Spaces, Places, and the Historians: A Comment from a German Perspective," 423.

⁴¹ Gjermund Wollan, "Heidegger's Philosophy of Space and Place," *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift-Norwegian Journal of Geography*, vol. 57, no. 1 (2003): Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (1977) are both heavily influenced by phenomenology.

⁴² Maria Lewicka, "Place Attachment: How Far Have We Come in the Last 40 Years?," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2011), 222.

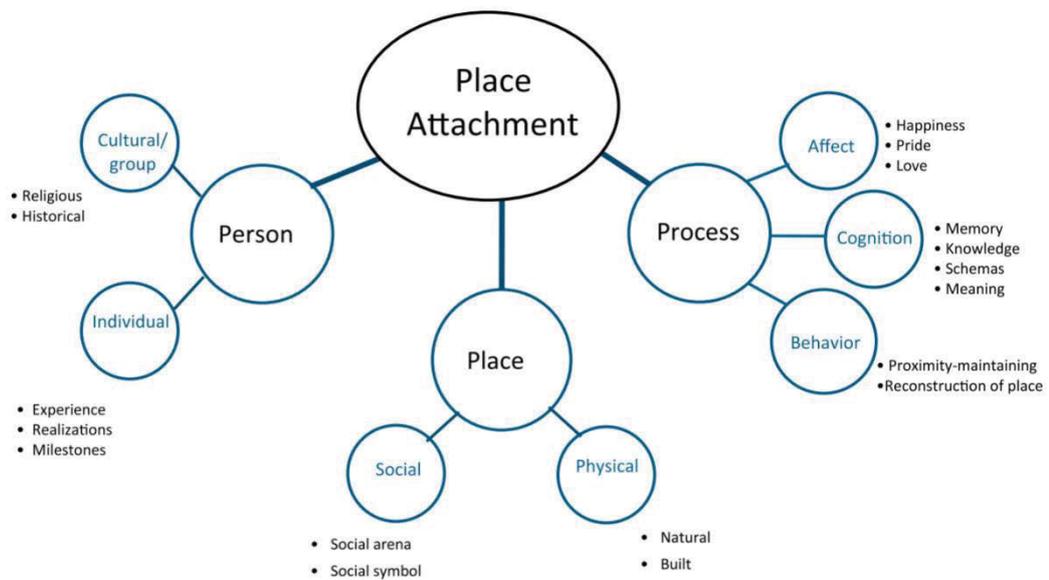


Figure 17: Scannell and Gifford’s “Tripartite Model of Place Attachment” Reproduced from the journal article “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework” (2010).

This framework is a synthesis of a burgeoning literature on place; a response to the “plenitude of definitions [that] has accumulated” as place and place attachment are so extensively studied across various disciplines, conceptual questions, and locations.⁴³ The tripartite model is both a synthesis of research and the outlining of a new research agenda, with the authors suggesting that “as knowledge grows about the specific levels within each of these dimensions, a comprehensive understanding of place attachment will be reached.”⁴⁴ To take each of these dimensions in turn: *person* is concerned with “the actor: who is attached and to what extent is the attachment based on individually and collectively held meanings?”; *process* asks “how are affect, cognition, and behaviour manifested in the attachment?”; and *place* is concerned with “what is the attachment to, and what is the nature of, this place?”⁴⁵ In definitional sum, “place attachment is a multidimensional concept with person, psychological

⁴³ Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford, “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2010), 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, also discussed 7–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

process, and place dimensions."⁴⁶ This definition is much more comprehensive, and thus useful, compared to other approaches such as that of Hawantee Ramkissoon et al. who, while also formulating a multi-dimensional definition, do so entirely confined within the *process* dimension of Scannell and Gifford's PPP framework. For them, again seeking to aggregate the literature, place attachment is defined as a composite of dependence, identity, affect, and bonding.⁴⁷ While this is certainly tenable, it is only a small part of the larger picture described by Scannell and Gifford's PPP framework.

In another synthesis of scholarly writing about place, environmental psychologist Lynne C. Manzo identifies four key terms: *sense of place*, *place attachment*, *place dependence*, and *place identity*. She comments that "the exact connection between them remains unclear" and gives various examples of the terms being organised differently in hierarchical structures.⁴⁸ Undeterred, she selects a definition for each term from the literature. In the interests of some degree of consistency I subscribe to these, rather than creating my own and thereby contributing further to the definitional chaos. *Sense of place* is "an experiential process created by the setting, combined with what a person brings to it."⁴⁹ "The bonding of people to places" is *place attachment*.⁵⁰ *Place dependence* is "the perceived strength of association between a person and specific places."⁵¹ And, lastly, *place identity* is those "dimensions of the self that develop in relation to the physical environment."⁵²

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Haywantee Ramkissoon, Betty Weiler, and Liam David Graham Smith, "Place Attachment and Pro-environmental Behaviour in National Parks: The Development of a Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2012), 4.

⁴⁸ Lynne C. Manzo, "Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2003), 47.

⁴⁹ Steele cited in *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Altman & Low cited in *ibid.*

⁵¹ Stokols & Shumaker in *ibid.*

⁵² Proshansky in *ibid.*

These definitions, useful as they are, put individuals at the centre of analysis and, in so doing, they miss the reciprocal and broader sociocultural interactions between people and place. By this I mean that people's behaviour changes landscapes, both immediately where we each work and live, but also far more broadly. Change ricochets through the places where our food is grown, where our waste ends up, where resources are extracted from the Earth to serve our needs, and where the outflows of industry are secreted. Our attention is heaped upon the places we make an effort to protect, and denied to those places we ignore. Sense of place, place attachment, place dependence, and place identity are all a little self-absorbed. We need to think also of reciprocity, to recognise that there is exchange in everything, a give and take between our existence and that of the entire more-than-human world.

Even if current models of place are excessively anthropocentric, thinking in terms of place remains important, a powerful cultural intervention. Place matters because it is where we always are. As Clifford Geertz writes:

it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, even the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—"the world around here." The sense of interconnectedness imposed on us by the mass media, by rapid travel, and by long-distance communication obscures this more than a little. So does the featurelessness and interchangeability of so many of our public spaces, the standardization of so many of our products, and the routinization of so much of our daily existence. The banalities and distractions of the way we live now leads us often enough, to lose sight of how much it matters just where we are and what it is like to be there.⁵³

Places are collectively and individually meaningful, "felt on a deeply personal level [and also] products of a larger political, social, and economic reality."⁵⁴

Dolores Hayden's argument, that physical spaces are a manifestation of

⁵³ Clifford Geertz afterword in Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 262.

⁵⁴ Manzo, "Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places," 55.

individual and collective memories, aligns with this.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Lineu Castello classifies places into three categories: *places of aura*, *places of memory*, and *places of plurality*. *Aura* refers to the spatial features of a place, the meaning that inheres in its features what Castello describes as an “invisible halo.” *Memory* classifies place-related meanings that are temporal, that have been inscribed in people’s recollections. *Plurality* denotes the connection with place that stems from social interactions that have occurred there. Sense of place is generally a combination of these factors.⁵⁶

Places of aura are more generally thought of as appealing landscapes that provoke positive affect—those that are “visually striking and possessed of powerful images [such as] Mount Rushmore, Stonehenge or Lake Baikal.”⁵⁷ The landscapes of the Los Angeles River offer an opportunity for a new interpretation of the *places of aura* category. The river is a site at which Castello’s “invisible halo” of place has a kind of contrary beauty, an unexpectedness, what Los Angeles River activist Lewis MacAdams has described as “orneriness.”⁵⁸ This is one of the reasons that the river is such an important and instructive setting and subject for research, just as or perhaps more important than the majestic landscapes that Castello categorised as *places of aura*.

In this, I am reminded of Arne Naess and his search for the small and ordinary, not the spectacular. David Rothernberg, whose scholarly friendship with Arne Naess included time spent at Tvergastein, as well as working together at the University of Oslo and travelling in the United States, recalled a trip with Naess and conservation biologist Michael Soule. Naess dismissed the Grand Canyon,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Castello, *Rethinking the Meaning of Place: Conceiving Place in Architecture-urbanism*, 11.

⁵⁷ Richard Muir, *Approaches to Landscape* (Lanham: Barnes & Noble, 1999), 273.

⁵⁸ Lewis MacAdams, interviewed by Jane Collings, 4 sessions: August 17, 2007, January 10, 2008, January 31, 2008, February 29, 2008, digital recording at UCLA Center for Oral History Research.

their first stop, as too spectacular, asking his companions, “Why must we always wish nature to be spectacular? Can’t we find something ordinary, with sun, a few rocks to climb, lizards, and flowers?” Across Arizona, the trio searched for a place sufficiently unspectacular to satisfy Naess, eventually finding a spreading tree shading a sandy creek bed at which they made camp. While Rothenberg was “mad [that] we had forsaken the grandest of canyons for this piece of nowhere,” Arne Naess now felt at home, saying, “our purpose is to dwell, in the Heideggerian sense.”⁵⁹ This is, of course, a notion of dwelling that is far more expansive than just the home, and it is a reminder that places of lesser apparent grandeur are nevertheless important sites for dwelling and the fostering of place attachment.

Place attachment is key to this thesis, given my focus on love. To take Manzo’s definition—the bonding of people to places—a little deeper, place attachment is a “person–place bond that evolves from specifiable conditions of place and characteristics of people.”⁶⁰ The focus of place attachment research has broadened from being about the emotions that humans form for home—that is, neighbourhoods and individual houses—to places at other scales—cities, nations, regions, continents, recreational sites, and indeed a plethora of other places too, including sacred sites, non-primary residences, work places, sporting facilities, and even virtual and imagined places.⁶¹ As Lewicka argues, the ongoing research attention paid to place “corroborate[s] the claim made long ago by phenomenologists that sense of place is a natural condition of human existence”.⁶² Dwelling in the Heideggerian sense—as interpreted by Brian

⁵⁹ David Rothenberg, “Out of Nowhere: Travels with Arne Naess,” *Trumpeter*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1992).

⁶⁰ Shumaker and Taylor 1983 cited in Richard C. Stedman, “Is It Really Just a Social Construction? The Contribution of the Physical Environment to Sense of Place,” *Society & Natural Resources*, vol. 16, no. 8 (2003), 672.

⁶¹ Lewicka, “Place Attachment: How Far Have We Come in the Last 40 Years?,” 209.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Wattchow in his reflective writing about navigating Australia's Murray River system as a research praxis—"allows places to reveal their essential character" and is in itself a narrative process, as "our experience of dwelling in place requires a constant telling and re-telling."⁶³ As such, dwelling describes both nature and culture, and their entwinement. It is, as Paul Cloke and Owain Jones describe, "the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time."⁶⁴

Arne Naess talked about this binding in a conversation with Christian Diehm, who visited the elderly philosopher in Norway in 2001. As they talked, Naess illustrated how "being in the world" describes a relationship without separation or distinction:

There are some tiny flowers—beautiful, tiny flowers—high in the mountains where I have my hut. I feel like I am together with these flowers—they are more beautiful than me, but we are together as one entity. This is very striking, because I couldn't feel that way with flowers anywhere else. The conditions there are so extreme, and the identification is so deep, that we are one ... Being with those flowers and really concentrating, I find that a unity exists, that there is an existing unity—a unity that is not just in feeling but in existing.⁶⁵

In other words, emotional identification with a place renders the observer and the observed indissolubly connected. Edward Relph calls this "belonging ... deep and complete identity with a place."⁶⁶ It is this kind of entanglement that renders a landscape transformative to the people who relate to it in a reciprocal way, where both habitat and inhabitants are transformed.

⁶³ Brian Wattchow, "River Songs: A Poetic Response to Australia's Wounded Rivers," in *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*, ed. F.M. Vanclay, Matthew Higgins, and Adam Blackshaw (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008), 52.

⁶⁴ Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, "Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset," *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2001), 651.

⁶⁵ Diehm, "Here I Stand."

⁶⁶ Shmuel Shamai and Zinaida Ilatov, "Measuring Sense of Place: Methodological Aspects," *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, vol. 96, no. 5 (2005), 469.

Heidegger has underpinned the thinking of geographers, including Relph and Tuan, about place, placelessness, the spirit of place, and the relationships forged between human beings and our world.⁶⁷ The notion of dwelling has been used by Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, also geographers, to “account for the intimate, rich, intense, making of the world, where networks fold and form and interact in particular formations”.⁶⁸ Dwelling, they write, “is thus potentially bound up with ideas of home, local, and concern or affection for nature and the environment.”⁶⁹ Brian Wattchow draws upon Heidegger to think about the Murray River as a wounded river in need of tender care:

In a Heideggerian sense it may be an attitude of sparing, as a ‘tolerance for places in their own essence’, that is needed. Whether we rely upon the river as a local resident or a visiting recreator, we locate our being-with the river when it becomes a field of care to us, and when we become duty bound to take responsibility for it and begin to tend its wounds. This is the river that continues to flow beneath all our cultural interpretations of it, even as it carries the physical wounds we have inflicted upon it. It emerges through our senses in the smell of damp earth along an irrigation ditch. It is there in the watery embrace felt when we shed our fears like an old snake skin in the forest and allow ourselves to float upon our backs and drift away with the steady pace of the current, our skin tingling with the pulse of the river.⁷⁰

Tim Ingold calls for landscape to be regarded with a dwelling perspective, which “enables him to reject two characteristic conceptions of landscape: the realist or naturalistic conception of the real landscape, and the culturalist, interpretivist conception of landscape as sign.”⁷¹ For Heidegger, “people were always embedded in the world.”⁷² So, our existence means that we are by default building layer upon layer of memory through multiple interactions with

⁶⁷ Wollan, “Heidegger’s Philosophy of Space and Place,” 36.

⁶⁸ Cloke and Jones, “Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset.”

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 651.

⁷⁰ Wattchow, “River Songs: A Poetic Response to Australia’s Wounded Rivers,” in *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*, 51.

⁷¹ Macnaghten and Urry, “Rethinking Nature and Society,” in *Contested Natures*, 167.

⁷² Cloke and Jones, “Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset,” 651.

the particular places in which we dwell, and in so doing they come to matter deeply to us.

Heidegger, particularly on space and place, is fiendishly difficult. Cloke and Jones describe his notion of dwelling as “complex and obscure.”⁷³ Heidegger’s influence on the social sciences, both in general and in terms of his phenomenological approach to place, has been more muted than might ordinarily be expected of such an otherwise influential figure. As Gerjmund Wollan writes:

There seems to be a disparity between the considerable influence Heidegger’s literary works have had and how much this is applied within the social sciences. There are probably several reasons for this, but the most important is undoubtedly his partly impenetrable language and his unfortunate role in Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s.⁷⁴

These problematics are mammoth obstacles to overcome or put aside. While some have done so, and I am thinking here particularly of scholars in the disciplines of ecocriticism and human geography, others have mounted arguments to disappear Heidegger altogether. One such example is Greg Garrard, who concluded his polemic against Heidegger’s work after *Being and Time* with the wish that “if my argument can spare even a single ecocritic the disproportionate and unrewarding effort of reading Heidegger, I will consider it vindicated.”⁷⁵ While the temptation to be spared is admittedly fairly magnetic, Heidegger’s influence on the formulation of ideas about place, particularly his conception of dwelling, is too useful to entirely disregard. In this thesis, I am influenced by Heideggerian notions of *dwelling* and *sparing* as they have been interpreted and applied by scholars in geography and deep ecology.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Wollan, “Heidegger’s Philosophy of Space and Place,” 32.

⁷⁵ Greg Garrard, “Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2010).

3.4 PLACE AND EMOTION

Various scholars have coined, or repurposed, terms to describe the connections between place and human emotions. There is Yi-Fu Tuan's *topophilia*, the *biophilia* of Erich Fromm and E.O. Wilson, and *solastalgia* conceived by Glenn Albrecht. Tuan describes *Topophilia* as an overarching:

neologism, useful in that it can be defined broadly to include all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment. These differ greatly in intensity, subtlety, and mode of expression. The response to the environment may be primarily aesthetic: it may then vary from the fleeting pleasure one gets from a view to the equally fleeting but far more intense sense of beauty that is suddenly revealed. The response may be tactile, a delight in the feel of air, water, earth.⁷⁶

This is uncertain territory. Yi-Fu Tuan himself describes his work as consisting of "quasi-literary, quasi-philosophical probes into the murky worlds of value and emotion."⁷⁷ Biophilia has a more meandering route to its present-day use as a term describing people's attraction to nature.

In the 1960s, Erich Fromm used biophilic orientation as the opposite of necrophilic orientation, arguing that empirical research was needed to understand the extent to which the United States population had "already gone into the 'valley of the shadow of death,'" preferring the glorification of industrialisation, mechanisation, and war over humanism and the "enjoy[ment] of life and all its manifestations."⁷⁸ Fromm's biophilia was "the love of all that lives or, more simply, nature-friendliness."⁷⁹ E.O. Wilson took up the term some two decades later, being "so bold to define [it] as the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes," going on to conclude that "to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and

⁷⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values with a New Preface by the Author* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 93.

⁷⁷ *Who Am I? An Autobiography of Emotion, Mind, and Spirit*, 30–31.

⁷⁸ Erich Fromm, "Creators and Destroyers," *The Saturday Review* (1964).

⁷⁹ Riyan J.G. van den Born et al., "The New Biophilia: An Exploration of Visions of Nature in Western Countries," *Environmental Conservation*, vol. 28, no. 01 (2001), 66.

on ourselves.”⁸⁰ Later, Wilson redefined the term as “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms.”⁸¹ While *philia* is frequently translated from Greek as “love,” its actual meaning—affection, fondness, friendship—accords well with Wilson’s use of the term, its meaning spanning “from attraction to aversion, from awe to indifference, from peacefulness to fear-driven anxiety.”⁸² Or, as Ryan Gunderson aptly summarises, “the innate human need to emotionally affiliate with the biophysical environment in various ways.”⁸³ A much more recent concept, solastalgia, describes “the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment.”⁸⁴

Place remains a tumble of ideas. As Cary de Wit reflects, “since the early 1970s, the use of this term [sense of place] has steadily increased in academic and popular literature, but without any coinciding increase in scrutiny or elucidation.”⁸⁵ This is no doubt compounded by the *everythingness* of place. Places are, after all, “a confluence of cognition, emotions, and actions organised around the human agency.”⁸⁶ As evidenced by the tumult of academic attention, there is certainly a rising tide of interest in space and place. This interest has been long sustained since the ground-breaking work of geographers on the late

⁸⁰ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁸¹ E.O. Wilson, 1993, cited in Ryan Gunderson, “Erich Fromm’s Ecological Messianism: The First Biophilia Hypothesis as Humanistic Social Theory,” *Humanity & Society*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2014), 187.

⁸² E.O. Wilson, 1993, cited in *ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Glenn Albrecht et al., “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change,” *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 15, no. 1 suppl (2007), S96.

⁸⁵ de Wit, “Interviewing for Sense of Place,” 121.

⁸⁶ Ramkissoon, Weiler, and Smith, “Place Attachment and Pro-environmental Behaviour in National Parks: The Development of a Conceptual Framework,” 259.

1970s, of important commentators in other disciplines on whose thinking they built, and of others who now build on those foundations.

There are parallels between intimacy and biophilia. It is about taking care. Aldo Leopold argues for this same notion and extends it into an ethic of care, writing that “we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”⁸⁷ He is speaking from experience, having himself felt such an affinity with his own landscape:

In October I like to walk among these blue plumes, rising straight and stalwart from the red carpet of dewberry leaves. I wonder whether they are aware of their state of well-being. I know only that I am.⁸⁸

A historical account of a local environmental movement in Coffs Harbour demonstrates this point, with one interviewee describing “at length her intimate knowledge of the tides, winds, changing colours of the headland, the tiny grasses, migratory birds, and so on.” Historian Johanna Kijas observes of her protagonist that this knowledge “was embedded in her stories [and] allowed her to act with confidence on behalf of that place”.⁸⁹ Research about biophilia has shown it to be important to human wellbeing and a prompt for pro-environmental behaviours, as well as a range of other benefits.⁹⁰ I prefer to frame human–place relationships as being able to be intimate, rather than merely biophilic, because of the power of the term. Intimacy takes us closer in, places our actions in lockstep with the more-than-human worlds of which we are undeniably a part. When intimate with place, we are more than fond of it, and we do more than bask in biophilia’s known benefits for human wellbeing. When intimate, the welfare of a place becomes something for which we bear

⁸⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 214.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁹ Johanna Kijas, “Moving to the Coast: Narratives of Belonging on the Mid-north Coast of New South Wales,” *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 22 (2000), 95.

⁹⁰ See, for example Helen E. Perkins, “Measuring Love and Care for Nature,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2010).

responsibility. With intimacy, knowing a place becomes possible. Indeed, so entangled do we become that active concern—to borrow Fromm’s term—is the character of the relationship.

In the historical analysis throughout this thesis, I have found my way to pertinent primary sources by way of looking for stories of intimacy, descriptions of intimacy itself, as well as the behaviours that close familiarity has prompted or enabled in the interplay between humans and nonhuman actors connected to the Los Angeles River. This thesis narrates the river differently from the work that has preceded it, because love and intimacy make for a new perspective.

3.5 PLACE IN HISTORY

So what about place in history? Has David Blackbourn’s prophecy come true? Has sense of place been the next big turn in history? It is difficult to say with certainty, as these kinds of turns are often seen most clearly in the eye of the beholder, the scholar who longs for their own specialisation to have its time in the sun. William Cronon observes this of American Historical Association presidents, noting that the predictions by presidents as to the next direction in which historiography would turn was always set to be their very own sub-discipline.⁹¹ It risks being a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are some ways to test Blackbourn’s prediction, however.

In Australia, conference themes and, where available, titles of papers and panels for the Australian Historical Association (AHA) conferences over the past decade indicate an intermittent and patchy, rather than linear, turn towards place. The 2008 conference was dedicated to space and place with the overarching theme “Locating History.” Participants were invited to “respond to the broad range of resonances suggested by the theme of history and locality—

⁹¹ William Cronon, “Storytelling [Presidential Address 2012],” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2013).

to make sense of place in history, and to think geographically/ spatially about the past.”⁹² It would not be until 2013 that an AHA conference again embraced place in any substantial way, making environmental history one of six subthemes and featuring as keynote speaker Matt Matsuda, whose book *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* was at that time recently published.⁹³ At the 2014 conference, there is no evidence of place or environmental history being a focus. In contrast, AHA conferences in both 2015 and 2016 have had place and environmental history strongly represented, so much so that there was a dedicated environmental history strand in 2016. In 2017 the conference theme was “Entangled Histories,” a theme that lends itself to place explorations.

In the United States, annual presidential addresses of the American Historical Association are another bellwether of historical turns, notwithstanding the inherent bias problem pointed out by William Cronon. They say little of a turn towards spatiality and the history of place. Of the speeches made over six years, from 2011 to 2016, only one could be taken to have signalled a turn towards sense of place. This was the 2012 presidential address by one of environmental history’s foremost intellectuals, William Cronon, so this resonance is hardly surprising. And even he did not use the platform to argue for a turning to sense of place, though he did confess to being:

sorely tempted ... to deliver a manifesto prophesying environmental history as the next new new thing in the future of our discipline—or at

⁹² Royal Historical Society of Victoria, “Locating History – Australian Historical Association Biennial Conference [Call for Papers],” Royal Historical Society of Victoria, accessed February 8, 2017. <http://rhsvnews.blogspot.com.au/2008/02/locating-history-australian-historical.html>

⁹³ Judging by paper titles and/or calls for papers: in 2009 there were three place/environment papers; in 2010 ‘Place and history’ was one of 23 sub-themes; and in 2011 there was call for urban history and plant/animal stories. In 2012 there was no evidence of place or space being a thematic concern.

least to express the pious hope that my colleagues in other fields should include its questions and methods in their own historical toolkits.⁹⁴

Instead, Cronon offered “a meditation on teaching and storytelling as essential activities of our discipline”.⁹⁵ While there may not, or at least not yet, have been a dramatic turn of attention towards the analytical and conceptual importance of place, space, and environment as history’s next frontier, it is on a steady boil. And, given that these themes are unquestionably crucial as the age of the Anthropocene brings us face-to-face with our effects on the planet and its effects on us, place matters more than ever.

⁹⁴ Cronon, “Storytelling [Presidential Address 2012].”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

4. Our Very Urban Nature

It is easy to think of nature as somewhere *out there*. Somewhere green and blue and pristine-looking, where rays of sunlight sweep across the landscape, skies stretch on forever, water runs clear, and the air is clean so as to give your lungs reasons to gulp in deeper breaths. In such places, the soil beneath your feet teems with life. Nonhuman animals live harmonious, safe, and uninterrupted animal lives. Humans visit or live there, and are renewed and replenished by nature's abundant riches.

This thinking is, of course, largely mythological.

4.1 NATURE CANNOT BE FAR AWAY

The tendency to associate nature with places that are far away, literally or figuratively, runs deep. Emma Marris argues it is “unfortunate” that we reserve our admiration for places that seem pristine. This pristineness is impressionistic at best. As a potent example, she describes how the raging spectacle of Niagara Falls can be called to a stop by tweaking some controls in a hydroelectricity plant room, because that place is as much a power-generation device as it is a majestic waterfall.¹ Pristine is inaccurate, when we have interfered so fundamentally with most places on the planet. As Emma Marris writes:

Nature is almost everywhere. But wherever it is, there is one thing that nature is not: pristine. In 2011 there is no pristine wilderness on planet Earth. We've been changing the landscape we inhabit for millennia, and these days our reach is truly global.²

And worse than being merely inaccurate, the segregation of ourselves from nature blinkers our ability to see and appreciate nature wherever it is.³ This is especially so in cities: the more urbanised an environment, the higher the risk of

¹ Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 168–69.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

us being oblivious to nature there, unless material or cultural interventions are made to shift this view. We need to be entangled. We need citizen science reporting of “foul and filthy” waterways in China⁴. We need wild-feeling places in New York’s Central Park. We need urban beekeeping on Melbourne rooftops. Cities also are sites for the reinvigoration, and remediation, of industrialised sites in which nature is reclaimed and remade, for a population hungry for nature connection and ecologies in need of places to recolonise. Leipzig Recreation Park in Germany, the High Line in New York, a remade river and the Liupanshui Wetland Park in western China, the motorway-turned-park Madrid Rio in Spain, and Cheonggyecheon, the freeway returned to waterway in Seoul, South Korea.⁵

⁴ Elizabeth Tyson and Kate Logan, “Tracking China’s ‘Foul and Filthy’ Rivers With Citizen Science,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Environmental Change and Security Program, accessed May 2, 2017. <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2016/04/tracking-chinas-foul-filthy-rivers-citizen-science/>

⁵ Kevin Archer and Kris Bezdecny, *Handbook of Cities and the Environment* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 32–33. See also Y-H Kim et al., “Does the Restoration of an Inner-city Stream in Seoul Affect Local Thermal Environment?,” *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, vol. 92, no. 3–4 (2008).



Figure 18: The Ed Reyes Greenway, an urban habitat and stormwater management site on the banks of the river. Photo by the author.

Landscapes are made by the active entanglements of geographic forms with the societies that inhabit them. As R.J. Garcier writes, “there is a complete interpenetration of the fluvial system and socioeconomic system that gives birth to another object that is neither natural nor social.”⁶ For example, weeds are classified as such, not because of any inherent qualities they possess, but rather because they are materially and politically made into “invasives” in a given time and place. Paul Robbins argues convincingly that “it is not species but sociobiological networks that are invasive.”⁷ Jodi Frawley and Ian McCalman argue likewise.⁸ So too, cities are cities—not because of their urbanised geography or because of the social and political realities that create them—they

⁶ R.J. Garcier, “Rivers We Can’t Bring Ourselves to Clean—Historical Insights into the Pollution of the Moselle River (France), 1850–2000,” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 6 (2007), 1733.

⁷ Paul Robbins, “Comparing Invasive Networks: Cultural and Political Biographies of Invasive Species,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 94, no. 2 (2004), 140.

⁸ Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman, *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, Routledge Environmental Humanities (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 4.

are cities by virtue of the complex interweavings of these things, the sociobiological networks that make them so. Cities are, in short, urban ecologies. And urban ecologies are inhabited by urban ecological citizens. Jennifer Wolch writes that:

the urban ecological citizen is one whose rights include environmental justice but whose duties and obligations are defined by their ecological footprint: our production and consumption habits. Such habits are, in turn, predicated on a history of colonial and postcolonial exploitation and on current practices that appropriate resources and life chances from distant elsewhere. Thus, ecological citizenship changes the geography and moves the scale of citizen action beyond the nation-state.⁹

The risk of this globalised, networked topography of belonging is that the local and intimate can be marginalised, if not forgotten. While yes, effective citizen action can and sometimes must transcend the borders of the nation state, there is a compelling argument for fostering local, urban intimacy with place.

Otherwise, leaving nature as somewhere *out there* leaves urban ecological citizens without the widely acknowledged positive impacts of place attachment and ecological responsibility.

Nature, environment, landscape, place. The ubiquity of these words belies their onto-epistemological complexity to use Karen Barad's neologism *onto-epistemology*, with regard to the division, or lack thereof, between humans and nature.¹⁰ In our minds, we construct romantic notions of untouched and pristine environments, and in our daily life we build and unbuild landscapes so they become utterly altered by humans. One might be tempted to shorthand this as countryside versus cities, preservation versus destruction, but that's far too simplistic. Or, in another way: nature versus culture, an appealing, but manifestly inadequate, dichotomy. Pristine is a tempting shorthand to describe a

⁹ Wolch, "Green Urban Worlds," 379

¹⁰ The term onto-epistemological is coined by Karen Barad, cited in Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "The Transversality of New Materialism," *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2010), 166.

place that looks and functions in particularly non-urban or non-agricultural ways, but it is a highly defective term because, as Gary Snyder writes:

there has been no wilderness without some kind of human presence for several hundred thousand years. Nature is not a place to visit, it is home—and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places. Often there are areas that are difficult and remote, but all are known and even named.¹¹

For William Cronon, nature is “one of the richest, most complicated and contradictory words in the entire English language.”¹² The multi-layering and multi-valence that happens when we try to categorise places as either natural or damaged is well illustrated by the Los Angeles River, a place where:

labelling the river as either natural or unnatural, stream or flood control system, cannot do justice to the complex interactions of city and ecology we find along its banks. Yet, denying the river its nature or demonizing it as a threat only will also deny the possibility of renewal of both city and ecology in Los Angeles.¹³

In Los Angeles in the years after the 1938 flood, the river was made into what has been described by river advocate Lewis MacAdams as a “concrete corset.”¹⁴ It is extremely unnatural-seeming.

And yet, journalist Michael DiLeo wrote in the early 1990s how “nature is alive here, I realize, right in the midst of this city, and every neighbourhood, from upscale Encino to gritty Vernon, deserves access to it”.¹⁵ DiLeo was writing after sewage treatment came online and started discharging treated water into the river, but before policy makers at County or municipal levels had released the

¹¹ Gary Snyder, “The Etiquette of Freedom,” in *The Practice of the Wild*, ed. Gary Snyder (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 7.

¹² William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), xvii.

¹³ Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles,” 174.

¹⁴ Linton and Friends of the Los Angeles River, *Down by the Los Angeles River: Friends of the Los Angeles River's Official Guide*, 88.

¹⁵ Michael DiLeo, magazine article in *American Way* magazine, 1992, Box 90, Folder 5, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

large-scale river revitalisation plans that were to come. As FoLAR member and ornithologist Dan Cooper wrote some time later, “despite our best efforts, we can’t keep nature out of our cities.”¹⁶ In truth, it never really ever left.

Nature as only the distant, beautiful *out there* is an untenable idea. It is well past time that we moved it nearer, much nearer. The ways that we demarcate places as natural or unnatural, wild or urban, have many implications. One of these is the right of people to experience and to belong. Socioeconomic disadvantage, entrenched through current and historical structures of power, may mean that a concrete river is the only piece of nature that a person may be able to readily access. Even getting to beaches on the Westside to plunge into the cool water on a hot summer Los Angeles day is a world away for many, a combination of poverty, geography, lack of time, a fledgling public transport system, and the ever-present traffic congestion of Los Angeles. The river is becoming Los Angeles’ Eastside ocean.¹⁷ To discount an environment because it is compromised, and falls short of iconic wilderness status, is to deny too many people potentially emancipatory and transformative experiences of being in nature. Whether it is Downtown Los Angeles, the towering redwoods of northern California, the glasslike lakes of Yosemite or the stretched-to-the-horizon desert plains heading east, access to nature must be maintained wherever even traces of it remain.

This could read as an argument for settling for second best, which is far from my intention. In much the same way that, between Willow Street and the 105 freeway, channelisation has inadvertently created an abundant feeding ground for migratory shorebirds that pass through each autumn feasting on fly eggs and

¹⁶ Dan Cooper quoted by David Ferrell, newspaper clipping from the *Los Angeles Times*, 2001, Box 39, Folder 11, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles; Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

larvae, people also genuinely benefit from the ecological values of the river, complicated and compromised as they may be. The river is not a consolation prize for those unable to live somewhere more naturally beautiful, or to holiday regularly at a lake house or forest campground. The river is, unarguably, worthy of the attention and respect given to other places in nature. If I could, I would live for some time in a simple cabin on its banks, just as Henry David Thoreau and Arne Naess did in Walden and Tvergastein respectively. As they did, I would pay close attention to the character and patterns of the place. Closeness to a complicated place, that is rendered—and perpetually re-rendered—by our very own human decisions and desires, has everything to teach us about the place and our belonging within it. This thesis is a meditation on dwelling, different from Naess and Thoreau in that life’s exigencies have not led me to actually live at the river, but the same in that my quest to learn about myself and my surrounds is animated by a keen attentiveness to place, and a belief that *who* we are is linked inextricably to *where* we are.

The Los Angeles River may seem a long way from Thoreau’s Walden, though one must temper romanticism about Thoreau’s solitude there by recalling that his cabin by the lake was close enough to be “a pleasant walk to his family home ... close enough that he brought his mother his dirty laundry and went on enjoying her apple pies.”¹⁸ It is further still from Tvergastein, that simple cabin nestled onto a mountainside in southern Norway, a place that remains the beating heart of Arne Naess’ seminal thinking and writing on Deep Ecology, even after his death.

¹⁸ From the introduction by Paul Theroux in Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), ix.

We live in the shadow of a western philosophical legacy that has us convinced of humankind's separateness from the rest of the world, rather than our integration, entanglement, and kinship with it. This has real, and dire, ecological consequences. As William Cronon argues:

By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature—in all of these ways, wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁹

Every decision, conscious or otherwise, to locate nature *out there* means a decision to not locate it *right here*. The disconnect makes it easier to flick a switch to consume electricity from a coal-fired power plant, to drink water from a dammed wild river, to eat food manufactured by an industrial-scale agricultural machine. We are removed from nature, though still utterly vulnerable to it and at its mercy. As ecologist James R. Miller observes, “not only are direct encounters with nature on the decline, but the encounters that do occur tend to be in environments of progressively lower quality.”²⁰ A shift in thinking that entangles us with nature in our home environments, our neighbourhoods, streets, backyards, and nearby vistas, readies us to protect nature far more fiercely than when it is—erroneously—decoupled from where and how we live. If we are to confine nature to weekend road trips, stunning nature photography, and perhaps our bucolic childhood memories, in so doing we confine our future prospects as a civilisation, limiting our prospects of surviving well and perhaps our prospects of surviving at all.

¹⁹ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1996), 17.

²⁰ James R. Miller, “Restoration, Reconciliation, and Reconnecting with Nature Nearby,” *Biological Conservation*, vol. 127, no. 3 (2006), 360.



Figure 19: Detritus after flooding in Frogtown, showing organic and inorganic debris. Photo by the author.

The interconnectedness of humans with the rest of nature makes the modernist binary argument—that we are distinct from and superior to nature—untenable. As William Cronon so famously asks, “at what moment, exactly, did the city of Chicago cease to be part of nature?” The answer, of course, is never. It is a question most notable for its “absurdity.”²¹ It is absurd because nature is always where we are and cities and their hinterlands rely on one another in complex ways. We are utterly entangled; there is no us and them.

This isn't to say that structural dividing lines are not drawn between human and non-human at the river. This happens frequently. For example, when part of Taylor Yard, on the east bank of the Los Angeles River, became the Rio de Los Angeles State Park in 2007, tensions between nature-based and recreational park use resulted in what Joe Linton described as a “North Korea–South Korea”

²¹ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 18.

solution, in which the park was split in two, even with separate parking lots.²² This physical division of space mirrors, Joe told me, a structural one, that City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks don't see themselves as responsible for nature parks, leaving this to the State administration.²³ We persist in separating ourselves from our habitats, untenable as that idea remains. One example of many is the way in which contemporary western society still easily subscribes to the idea that we exist quite independently of animals, despite the fact that we would survive for hardly a moment in their absence.²⁴

If our exemplary nature places persist as the *out there* rather than the *right here*, we create risks that are dire indeed. A scholarly and lived opportunity exists then, to take ideas about nature that were cultivated on mountains and in woodlands, and to relocate them to where most of us actually live. To relocate and replicate them into places of urban sprawl, concrete, traffic chaos, and hectically entangled human and more-than-human landscapes. I am proposing relocation, not in a tokenistic or quirky way, but rather arguing that we must deeply and authentically find ways to regard urban nature with the same esteem we afford to the apparently pristine places. The ways in which we appreciate nature in urban landscapes are different and fascinating. We are tasked with creating a new way of conceptualising nature very close-in; to learn how to feel awe, peace, and connection in cityscapes as we have for centuries felt for more majestic, non-urban naturescapes:

Certainly, it is unfair to compare our river to the popular Edenic conception of "river," with all its associated expectations and tidy bourgeois sentimentalities. Rather, we must reassess the very definition of "river," expanding our idea of "nature" to include the parrot, the shopping cart, the weed, the sludge mat, and the stormdrain apartment. We must develop new narratives and vocabularies for our vital urban freakologies for these are the ecologies of the future. If not, the river will

²² Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bruno Latour cited in Wolch, "Green Urban Worlds," 379.

never be truly understood or integrated into the ongoing urban project. Only by integrating the river's complexities into planning efforts, can we move forward realistically.²⁵

This call that David Fletcher makes is a many-forked path. It could lead to the fetishisation of the river as a “freakological,” post-apocalyptic simulacrum of all that humans have broken in the world. It could reify the river as a monument to the powers of engineering to overcome nature's force (though this would be a more difficult argument to hold). Or it could, and this is the reading I urge, hold a mirror up to ourselves, in this anthropogenic age, of our power and our responsibility to unmake and remake our habitats, and to regard deeply past, present, and future forms as nature, and therefore as part of ourselves.

These dialectics are what Tim B. Rogers would describe as *third nature*. For him, *first nature* is all those things which are empirically in the world, “the space and its occupying elements that exist outside of ourselves as material and real—mountains, rivers, the ‘built’ environment, nonhuman animals, trees, [and] insects.” *Second nature* is all of the ways humans make sense of nature through “lexical indicators, signs, codes, metaphors, attitudes, values, discourses, narratives, myths.” And *third nature* is the “relationality” through which *first* and *second* natures connect, characterised as dialogical, embodied, grounded (in place and time), and endless.²⁶ This three-natures model—empirical, symbolic, and relational—offers a powerful conceptual frame in which to locate and understand people and their relationships. You will find its echoes everywhere in this thesis.

²⁵ David Fletcher, “Flood Control Freakology: Los Angeles River Watershed,” in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Barcelona/New York: Actar, 2008), 50.

²⁶ Tim B. Rogers, “Nature of the Third Kind,” *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2009), 402–06.

Accepting this epistemology — that nature is at once the physical, the cultural, and the relations between the two — means accepting a kind of magic, that nature can disappear, re-appear or transform in different ways. A change to an actual physical landscape — *first nature* — can take nature away, change it, bring it back or perhaps create it anew. A shift in attitudes, thoughts or behaviours — *second nature* — can have the very same effect. But in expressing it bluntly this way, I have neglected *third nature*, which is the space most occupied, the space where the sense making about actual physical places is relational and entwined. Environmental history does this entwining. In its simplest terms, environmental history is the study of “humans and the rest of nature.”²⁷ Environmental historians use a breadth of source materials to explore and explain “the earth itself as an agent and presence in history.”²⁸ Environmental historians have examined the historical dimensions of soil, dust, and dirt, as well as agriculture, horticulture, forests, cities, creatures, rivers, oceans, gardens, deserts, and water.

Stephen Mosley argues that the “stubbornly enduring nature–culture dichotomy” can be overcome by the work of environmental historians “interweaving environmental, socioeconomic, political, and perceptual issues in their analyses.”²⁹ With “nature and culture ... engaged in a perpetual dance of co-constitution ... no decisive boundary could ever separate the two”.³⁰ I am writing towards a kind of environmental history that notates some of that dance, using sources and theory to penetrate deeply into the emotional, the affective,

²⁷ This phrase is repurposed, with thanks, from an article by Robert Costanza et al., “Sustainability or Collapse: What Can We Learn from Integrating the History of Humans and the Rest of Nature?,” *Ambio*, vol. 36, no. 7 (2007), 522.

²⁸ Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*.

²⁹ Mosley, “Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History,” 920.

³⁰ Cecilia Chen, Janine McLeod, and Astrida Nemanis, “Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?,” in *Thinking with Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 13.

ties that bind humans to the natural world of which we are a part, in an extremely modified hyper-urban landscape.

4.2 ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Environmental history has a long history. While it is tempting to shorthand the field's lineage by ascribing it as having emerged in the United States in the 1970s, this is much too simple an explanation.³¹ Indeed, any evidence for doing so is largely based on the self-declaration by Roderick Nash that he was the founder of this nascent discipline. In that creation story, he recalls that having enthusiastically listed a brand new course "American Environmental History" to teach in the spring of 1970, he quickly realised that:

There were few places to turn for answers. To the best of my knowledge no similar course had ever been offered. Also lacking was the body of reading material, examination questions, paper assignments, and the like that normally surround long-established courses.³²

Richard H. Grove, in a broad-ranging analysis of environmental history's much deeper roots, describes this characterisation, of environmental history as a discovery in virgin territory, as "really quite extraordinary [...] that Nash's knowledge of the literature outside the United States, even outside California history, was apparently almost non-existent".³³ Nash was not breaking new ground, but rather walking through territory long explored by others.

A non-exhaustive survey of various countries indicates that attentiveness to people's interactions with the non-human natural world was already thriving, well before Roderick Nash imagined he was breaking new ground. In France the Annales School, most notably Braudel's epic work on the Mediterranean and Le Roy Ladurie's work in climate history. In Australia, colonisation and climate

³¹ Richard H. Grove, "Environmental History," in *New perspectives on historical writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 263.

³² Nash, "American Environmental History: A New Teaching Frontier," 372.

³³ Grove, "Environmental History," in *New perspectives on historical writing*, 274-75.

were key themes in environmental history scholarship. In England, a turn towards local history bringing fresh attentiveness to place and landscape. Historical geography was firmly established as a field already.³⁴ Scholars in Africa developed regional historiographies, concerned particularly with colonial and post-colonial relations between people and environment in the global south.³⁵ In Europe, environmental history tended to focus close in, on “local peculiarities.”³⁶ So deep do environmental history’s antecedents run, and so many and varied are its contemporaries, that achieving any definitive clarity about its beginnings and trajectory is a fools game. In all its instantiations, Donald Worster’s characterisation of the three strands of enquiry that environmental history pursues – “understanding nature itself [...], the socioeconomic realm as it interacts with the environment, [...] and [how people] dialogue with nature” – is a useful and encompassing summary.³⁷ Beyond this, we must surrender to the reality that for ever, humans have both experientially and analytically made sense of the complex, changing, and challenging environments that surround us.

In the United States in the 1970s, in step with a burgeoning environmentalist movement, various strands of environmental analysis in the academy cohered into what became known as *environmental history*. It was not a new term, even though many commentators suggest it was so.³⁸ What was probably new, however, is that for the first time *environmental history* was “a self-conscious field.”³⁹ It had been created anew. Scholars were tapping into what Donald

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, “The problem of the problem of environmental history: a re-reading of the field,” *Environmental History* vol. 12, no. 1 (2007): 4.

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

³⁷ Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, 305–06.

³⁸ Grove, “Environmental History,” in *New perspectives on historical writing*.

³⁹ Sörlin and Warde, “The problem of the problem of environmental history: a re-reading of the field,” 1.

Worster labels “the global predicament,” asking how history might usefully turn its gaze towards the places, ecologies and environmental dilemmas all around us.⁴⁰ Earth Day has become the marker of a shift in consciousness, to which American Environmental History is closely pegged.⁴¹ There were other key markers too, such as the passing of clean air and clean water legislation as well as the ongoing reverberations of Rachel Carson’s 1962 book, *Silent Spring*.

Environmental history was, for this reason, interwoven with and underpinned by the social and political milieu of the time.⁴² J.R. McNeill describes environmental history as clustering into three domains: *material*, *cultural/intellectual*, and *political*. They jostle, he writes, “competing for attention like acts in a three-ring circus.”⁴³ These align quite closely with what Nash had written about ecology some three decades earlier. Nash writes of the “gospel of ecology,” a trinity consisting of: the politics of the environment and environmentalism, an approach which he calls *utilitarian*; the Earth as a precious thing endangered by human beings, which he calls *ecological*; and the beauty of nature and its meaningfulness to human beings, which he calls *aesthetic*.⁴⁴ The two taxonomies, side-by-side, are remarkably consistent despite environmental history having had a generation-long opportunity to redefine itself in ways more nuanced—or even revolutionary—than merely an inheritance of its ecological intellectual heritage.

There is general consensus among environmental historians, established and fledgling, that ours is a field that escapes easy clarity or classification.

⁴⁰ Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, 290.

⁴¹ Eva-Maria Swidler, “Greening History,” in *Greening the Academy* (Springer, 2012), 122.

⁴² White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field,” 299.

⁴³ McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” 6.

⁴⁴ Nash, “American Environmental History: A New Teaching Frontier,” 372.

J.R. McNeill describes environmental history as deeply interdisciplinary, meaning that boundaries are “especially fuzzy and porous.”⁴⁵ It provokes epistemological struggles for even its most accomplished writers, such as William Cronon, who says that:

as an environmental historian who tries to blend the analytical traditions of history with those of ecology, economics, anthropology, and other fields, I cannot help feeling uneasy about the shifting theoretical ground we all now seem to occupy.⁴⁶

Jane Carruthers offers a summary of similar concerns from other researchers, who catalogue problems of theoretical uncertainty, absence of clear methodological approaches, marginality, incoherence, and even chaos.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, there has been significant disciplinary maturation in Australia, from twenty years ago when Stephen Dovers concluded that “environmental history can hardly be called a discipline, but rather a loosely defined area of study located at a ‘confluence’ of disciplines.”⁴⁸ More recently, the label “environmental historian” and the discipline of environmental history seem to be much more readily applicable to researchers in spite of, or indeed because of, their “diverse disciplinary backgrounds.”⁴⁹ In contrast, Michael Williams, who as a historical geographer looks at our discipline from the outside in, recognises environmental history very clearly as a well-formed field of research, with

⁴⁵ McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” 9.

⁴⁶ Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” 1349.

⁴⁷ Jane Carruthers, “Recapturing Justice and Passion in Environmental History: A Future Path,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 57–58.

⁴⁸ Stephen Dovers, “Sustainability and ‘Pragmatic’ Environmental History: A Note from Australia,” *Environmental History Review*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1994), 25.

⁴⁹ Libby Robin, “History for Global Anxiety,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 41.

foundation stories, organising principles, and intellectual struggles.⁵⁰ It has, in other words, become a bona fide discipline.

A resistance to theory may well be a symptom of what some bolder historians have called, to quote Alan Smith, a “relentless uninterested[ness]” of historians in questions of epistemology.⁵¹ There is a paucity of environmental historians who have “explicitly tried to build theories.”⁵² One blistering critique describes history as “a peculiarly conservative field within the environmental disciplines,” lacking “theoretical, intellectual self-consciousness.”⁵³ Similarly, Amy Dalton cautions that environmental history is plagued by “more inherent theoretical ambiguities and methodological dilemmas than other areas of history.”⁵⁴ Critique of the field’s robustness is not confined only to environmental history; Keith Jenkins generalises the concern out to the entire discipline of history, saying that ‘historians’ methods are every bit as fragile as their epistemologies.”⁵⁵ Interdisciplinarity creates what Sverker Sorlin and Paul Warde call a “reservoir of thinking that is available to environmental historians.”⁵⁶ While the reservoir may be extensive, its depth remains unplumbed. As Eva-Marie Swidler argues, there remains much to be done regarding theory, self-critique, a misplaced desire for objectivity, and the so-far-

⁵⁰ Michael Williams, “The Relations of Environmental History and Historical Geography,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1994).

⁵¹ Allan Smith cited in Swidler, “Greening History,” in *Greening the Academy*, 121.

⁵² McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” 37.

⁵³ Swidler, “Greening History,” in *Greening the Academy*, 122.

⁵⁴ Amy Dalton cited in Carruthers, “Recapturing Justice and Passion in Environmental History: A Future Path,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, 57–58.

⁵⁵ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 14.

⁵⁶ Sörlin and Warde, “The problem of the problem of environmental history: a re-reading of the field,” 1.

uncommon practice of environmental historians being willing to take political and advocacy positions on environmental matters.⁵⁷

Against these considerable odds, environmental history is pervasive and rapidly growing, “like kudzu on a hot July day.”⁵⁸ Given that it is among the youngest historical sub-disciplines, it is perhaps just a matter of time before more clarity emerges.⁵⁹ The analogy that Paul Sutter offers—likening environmental history to the invasive creeping Kudzu vine that grows more than 30 centimetres in a day, quickly enveloping entire landscapes—seems rather extreme. Indeed, Linda Nash lays the path for the metaphorical Kudzu taking over everything, reflecting that “the future of environmental history lies in showing that all history is environmental.”⁶⁰

Being a discipline does not preclude deep interdisciplinarity. It demands it. As A.W. Crosby writes, if we are to understand a place sufficiently environmental historians need to be:

avant-garde in the agility with which they leap over the concertina wire that divides the humanities from the sciences. They expect to read articles and books on geology, demography, meteorology, epidemiology, or agronomy and, after some struggle, to understand them ...
Environmental historians have discovered that the physical and life sciences can provide quantities of information and theory useful, even vital, to historical investigation and that scientists try and often succeed in expressing themselves clearly.⁶¹

There is a seemingly limitless list of disciplines from which environmental historians draw, in search of primary source materials, contextual information, and conceptual insights. Though this can evoke a degree of epistemological

⁵⁷ Swidler, “Greening History,” in *Greening the Academy*.

⁵⁸ Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” 95.

⁵⁹ Limerick, “The Repair of the Earth and the Redemption of the Historical Profession,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, 9–11.

⁶⁰ Linda Nash, “Furthering the Environmental Turn,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2013), 135.

⁶¹ Crosby, “The past and present of environmental history,” 1189.

anxiety, it is ultimately one of environmental history's richest qualities and greatest promises. As Donald Worster argues, "it is surely ... the moment for some cross-disciplinary cooperation. Scholars need it, environmental history needs it, and so does the Earth."⁶² As a discipline, it heeds Bruno Latour's reflection about thoughtfulness, that "to force us to move slowly, we must discuss nature, politics, and science at the same time."⁶³

Outside of environmental history, there have been changes too. The declaration of this time as the age of the Anthropocene has cast new attention on humans' unprecedented negative impacts upon the planet.⁶⁴ In parallel, we have seen the emergence and gathering momentum of *environmental humanities*—a "new conceptual umbrella" for interdisciplinary academic work that broadens the human focus of humanities to encompass the more-than-human as well.⁶⁵ Thirdly, there has been a clarion call for academic research to be as concerned with application and impact as with research and analysis⁶⁶, likely a hybrid result of the ever-increasing concern for our planet's future coupled with shifting higher education policy drivers, at least in Europe and Australia. These changes bode well for the future of place-based scholarship, that it can be urgent not uninterested, broad-ranging not confined to disciplinary silos, and impactful rather than passive.

⁶² Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, 305–06.

⁶³ Asdal, "The Problematic Nature of Nature: The Post-constructivist Challenge to Environmental History," 67.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Gregg Mitman, "Living in a Material World," *Journal of American History*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2013), 129; Archer and Bezdecny, *Handbook of Cities and the Environment*.

⁶⁵ Deborah Bird Rose et al., "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), 2; Hannes Bergthaller et al., "Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities," *ibid.* vol. 5 (2014).

⁶⁶ Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch, "The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities," (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011); Brown et al., "Can Environmental History Save the World?."

One of the ways that environmental history builds meaning is to explore both stories and relationships as they emerge, from, with, and in places. Everything has agency, because “in environmental history, humans are actors, but nature is an actor too.”⁶⁷ On balance, my research approach gives much higher emphasis to human characters though, of course, these humans and their stories are utterly entangled in place, in the river, and drenched in the more than human. My research is concerned with the intimate links between humans and the river places in which my study is situated, corresponding with William Cronon’s argument that “the chief protagonists and antagonists of our stories are almost always human, for reasons that go to the very heart of our narrative impulse.”⁶⁸ This quest for narrative, so ubiquitous across many contexts and disciplines, is in pursuit of making meaning, of making sense. Useful narratives—the type that I am seeking to unearth and reassemble in this research—are neither utopian nor declensionist, but rather are testament to complexity and double-edgedness. This approach accords with Allen Scott and Edward Soja’s argument about the importance of resisting binary representations of Los Angeles as either utopic or dystopic, in favour of “a more encompassing purview capable of holding several different standpoints simultaneously in perspective.”⁶⁹ My focus, necessarily, neglects other fascinating and important actors. Non-human animals, plants, microbes, fungus, and the like appear in this thesis but don’t take centre stage; this will need to wait for future research or other researchers.

⁶⁷ Mauch, “The Magic of Environmental History and Hopes for the Future,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, 60.

⁶⁸ Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” 1369.

⁶⁹ Scott and Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 2; Michael E. Engh, “At Home in the Heteropolis: Understanding Postmodern L.A.,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 105, no. 5 (2000), 1678.

4.3 THE PLACE OF CITIES

More of us live in cities than anywhere else on Earth, and Northern America is the most urbanised region of any in the world.⁷⁰ The race of growth in cities has been a rapid one, from 30 per cent of the world's population being city-dwellers in 1950, to 54 per cent in 2014, predicted to rise to 66 per cent by 2050.⁷¹ This is the time, then, to pay attention to people and nature in cities. This is a chasm of attention, with a tendency in fact swinging the other way towards "a certain anti-urban bias."⁷² The grind of traffic is a more likely soundtrack than that of water rippling over moss-wrapped pebbles. Birdsong, if any, will compete with the sounds of sirens. Serenity may come from the white noise machine in the corner of your tiny apartment rather than the feeling of grass, sand, dirt or mud between your toes. Cities have particular, and invaluable, things to teach us about ourselves and our entanglements with the rest of nature.

That is why this thesis dwells on the Los Angeles River. It is a modified environment to an extreme degree. And far from cities being places that are so far-gone we can give up on finding nature there, rather we are offered fascinating, strange, and important opportunities for nature connectedness in them. This is very much the case in Los Angeles. Rogers and Keil use the long-established term "urban ecology" to characterise this. Urban ecology "explodes the notion of urbanization as a continuous process of subordinating 'nature' to 'city.' Urban ecology brings nature back in."⁷³ The Los Angeles River is a place where urban ecology is a living, breathing reality.

⁷⁰ World Health Organisation, "Global Health Observatory statement on urban population growth," accessed May 16, 2014.

http://www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/

⁷¹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, "World Urbanization Prospects: Highlights Report," (United Nations, 2014).

⁷² Archer and Bezdecny, *Handbook of Cities and the Environment*, 3.

⁷³ Desfor and Keil, "Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes," 10–11.

William Cronon describes nature as “an astonishingly complex human construction,” citing Raymond Williams’ remark that “the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.”⁷⁴

Cities, therefore, are especially informative sites for exploring nature:

Recognizing nature in the city, where our language itself has taught us to believe nature no longer exists, challenges our ability to see the world clearly—but to miss the city’s relation to nature and the country is in fact to miss much of what the city is.⁷⁵

This view has become a dominant one in environmental history since 1990, the starting point that Paul Sutter identifies for the “hybrid turn.”⁷⁶ It makes for a more nuanced analysis of continuity and change in landscapes, and invites the uncovering of deeper stories from places that previously might have been dismissed as destroyed or irretrievably compromised by human alteration and destruction. This is a historiography of hope, as Richard White characterises it.⁷⁷ Prior to the hybrid turn, “environment [was defined] almost exclusively in terms of wild or at least unsettled land.”⁷⁸ This idea of nature consisting of pristine or untouched landscapes falls short; it is socially, historically, and ecologically untenable. As Lynn White Jr says, “all forms of life modify their contexts ... ever since man became a numerous species he has affected his environment notably.”⁷⁹ The characteristics and consequences of environmental modifications are nuanced, rarely with clear delineation between benefit and detriment, winning and losing. As J.R. McNeill argues, “environmental changes usually are good for some people and bad for others, and indeed good for some species or

⁷⁴ William Cronon, “Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 76, no. 4 (1990), 1122.

⁷⁵ *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 19.

⁷⁶ Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” 96.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field,” 300.

⁷⁹ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767 (1967), 1203.

subspecies and bad for others.”⁸⁰ Everywhere, but most pervasively in urbanised landscapes, the concept of environment, and therefore of environmental history, is troubled, unstable, and decentred. It is in urban places, Richard Walker argues, that the most important environmental history research needs to be undertaken, for it is here that “nature lives ... [as] nature transformed and transformed nature resurgent).”⁸¹ In cities, nature and culture are simultaneously entwined and estranged. Environmental damage is both perilously evident and distanced in a way that can induce an ill-founded sense of ecological ease, or at least indifference. While it is unnecessarily reductive to privilege urban environmental history above the exploration of other landscapes – of course we must examine all kinds of places, and their complex interconnections, contrasts, similarities and flows – Richard Walker’s arguments as to the importance of urban environmental history are convincing ones.

Urban areas are strange and important places. Despite the footprint of cities totalling only 2 per cent of the planet’s total landmass, it is in cities that humans consume 60 to 80 per cent of the world’s energy and output 75 per cent of total carbon emissions.⁸² As Bekessy et al. observe, “urban areas are generally located in regions of regular rainfall and fertile soil, which are also often areas of high biodiversity” and therefore are imperative sites for attentive conservation

⁸⁰ John Robert McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-century World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), xxv.

⁸¹ Richard Walker, “On the Edge of Environmental History,” in *The future of environmental history: needs and opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011), 51.

⁸² Hashem Akbari et al., “Local Climate Change and Urban Heat Island Mitigation Techniques—The State of the Art,” *Journal of Civil Engineering and Management*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2016), 1. See also John Rennie Short, “Urban Imaginaries of City and Nature,” in *Handbook of Cities and the Environment*, ed. Kevin Archer and Kris Bezdecny (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 38.

planning, urgently.⁸³ Nature exists all around us. Hidden, strange, altered, marginalised. It isn't just us living here. We're here with all kinds of more-than-human beings as well. As T.C Smout writes, "Environmental history is never our history alone; it is always, in addition, the history of the organisms at our mercy."⁸⁴ Add to this the history of forces that we are at the mercy of—floods, famines, earthquakes, landslides, fires, storms, and more. Nature, right here where we are, is utterly important. It is unhelpful to make a claim that it matters more than anywhere else, given the global impacts of soil degradation, melting polar ice caps, and the like. But nature in cities certainly matters more than most of us give it credit for. It merits our attention, our respect, and our care.

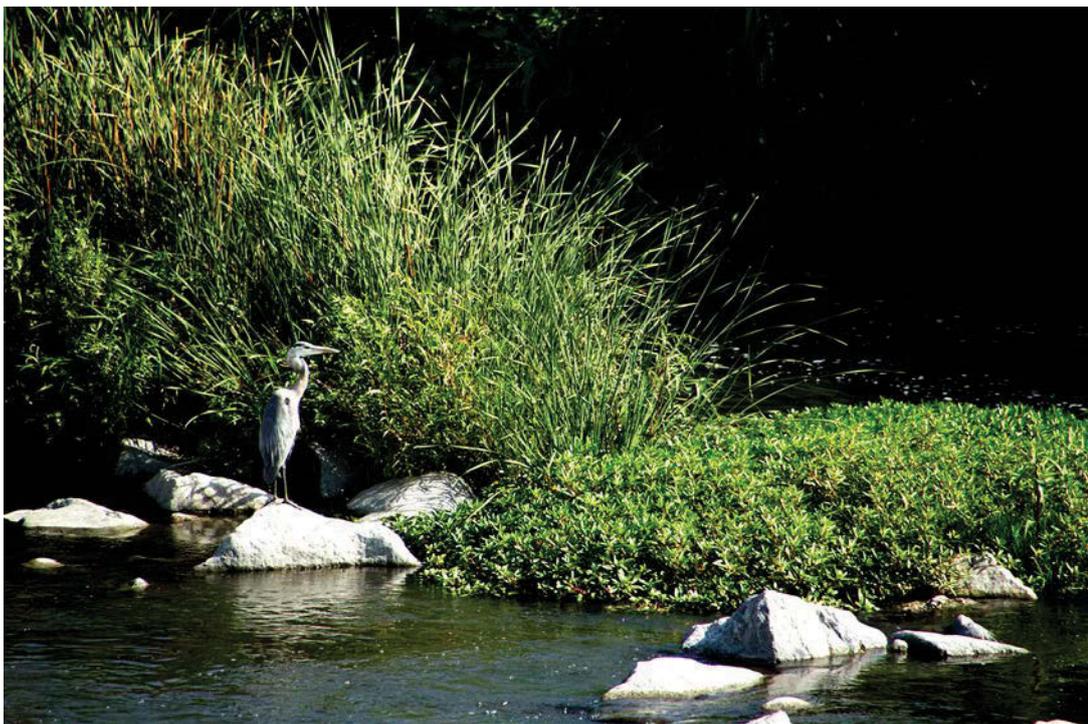


Figure 20: A Great Blue Heron at the Bowtie Parcel. Photo by the author.

⁸³ Sarah Bekessy and Ascelin Gordon, "Nurturing Nature in the City," in *Steering Sustainability in an Urbanising World: Policy, Practice and Performance*, ed. Anitra Nelson (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 227.

⁸⁴ T.C. Smout, "Urbanization, Industrialization, and the Firth of Forth," in *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities, and Space in Europe and North America*, ed. Stéphane Castonguay and Matthew D. Evenden (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 180.



Figure 21: The river through Downtown Los Angeles in early morning light. Photo by the author.

Cities are, as Henri Lefebvre characterises them, the mesh between “the global and the everyday.”⁸⁵ They are sites in which humans live “with and despite nature,” leading to ecological scenarios that are at once “intensely utopian and radically practical.”⁸⁶ This makes more or less sense, depending on one’s epistemological stance with regard to the division, or otherwise, between humans and nature. The interconnectedness of humans with the rest of nature dismantles the binary argument fairly rapidly. What cities offer the environmental historian, or any observer willing to look, is the richness of hybridity. They are, as Grace Karskens describes them, the “nemesis” of wilderness and “the ultimate examples of hybrid landscapes.”⁸⁷ Urban environmental history is almost inexorably drawn to the *unnaturalness* of cities. The physical and cultural effects of urbanisation make this an obvious focus, a

⁸⁵ Desfor and Keil, “Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes,” 10–11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Brown et al., “Can Environmental History Save the World?,” 9.

lower-hanging fruit than finding nature—and natural beauty—within city limits. Grace Karskens writes that it is often assumed “the role of humans, and the city itself, is unrelentingly destructive. Thus nature and the city remain opposed, cities are the villains, and the outlook is dire.”⁸⁸ My charter, enacted in this thesis, is to take one of the Earth’s landscapes most prone to villain status and doomsday predictions, and treat it otherwise. To notice Los Angeles’ hope and beauty, to get close to its river and some of the people who hold the river close, and are held close by it.

If we accept, as I do, that one of history’s foremost reasons for being is pedagogical, then cities are certainly among the discipline’s most effective instructors. Understanding the entangled relationships of urban people and places over time has much to teach us about our present and future. As environmental historian Christof Mauch argues:

perhaps the most important stories are the ones that provide us with an understanding of the double-edgedness of human intervention in the natural environment, stories and histories that tell us about pitfalls as well as successes: for instance about the unintended consequences of environmental visions that were developed on the drawing board but ignored the dynamics of nature. Stories about the straightening of rivers’ courses are a good example: today we understand better than ever before that the manipulation of river beds often aggravated flooding and destroyed flora and fauna. Learning how past cultures adapted to more “natural rivers” helps us to envision new ideals for the fluvial landscapes of the future.⁸⁹

With urbanisation on the rapid rise, lessons from the past are crucially important, and Los Angeles is an ideal setting for learning them.

For some time now, environmental historians, and indeed the community at large, have been unearthing different narratives of cities. At the helm has been the territory-shifting work of William Cronon, with his work on the city of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Mauch, “The Magic of Environmental History and Hopes for the Future,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, 62.

Chicago; Martin Melosi, who calls for attention to cities' impacts on nature, as well as urban growth more generally; and Samuel Hays, who argues for a much-broadened focus for environmental history, including paying attention to cities.⁹⁰ Christine Meisner Rosen and Joel Tarr echo this, in their reflections on the historiographical field and in their own historical research.⁹¹ Whether urban environments belong in the field of environmental history has been a contentious issue, although the dust seems to have largely settled on a victory for those arguing in favour of inclusion. It took some time after Donald Worster's now seminal chapter on approaches to environmental history, in which he argued that the built environment had no place, for others to challenge his characterisation of nature as nonhuman and to thus assert the place of the city within this emerging historiography.⁹² The temptation remains to be declensionist, following a narrative arc where because "nature and the city are opposed and city dwellers are environmental vandals the outlook is dire."⁹³ Despite the now-widespread acceptance of urban landscapes into the environmental history camp, an assessment in 2007 found that the vast majority of its historiography was still concerned with wilderness rather than cities.⁹⁴ There is much still to be explored.⁹⁵ That exploration is an important counterbalance to the dominant negativity about cities and nature:

⁹⁰ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*; Martin V. Melosi, "The Place of the City in Environmental History," *Environmental History Review*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1993); Samuel P. Hays, "The Role of Urbanization in Environmental History," in *Explorations in Environmental History: Essays*, ed. Samuel P. Hays and Joel A. Tarr (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

⁹¹ Christine Meisner Rosen and Joel Arthur Tarr, "The Importance of an Urban Perspective in Environmental History," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1994), 299–301.

⁹² Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*.

⁹³ Karskens, "Water Dreams, Earthen Histories: Exploring Urban Environmental History at the Penrith Lakes Scheme and Castlereagh, Sydney," 117.

⁹⁴ Sörlin and Warde, "The Problem of the Problem of Environmental History: A Re-reading of the Field," 109.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Heather Goodall, Allison Cadzow, and Denis Byrne, "Bringing Everyday Ecology to Sydney's Industrial Georges River," *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2010).

Of course we hear much and do much about the negative aspects of city environments—air and water pollution—but we have lost touch, as a society, with the importance of cities in civilization and in the value of a pleasing, sustained environment to make our lives productive and creative. In the science of ecology, scientists and practitioners have, in general, shown little interest or done little research in urban environments. Instead, they have ignored and even disdained urban environments.⁹⁶

Environmental history is an antidote to disdain, a tool for reflection about anthropogenic impacts on the planet, and an opportunity to re-engage conceptually and emotionally with the kinds of landscapes in which most of us live.

The Los Angeles River—much like the sprawling city that is built upon its floodplain—is urban, gritty, complicated, and a very, very long way from pristine. These qualities make it an ideal, if surprising, site for exploring nature, beauty, and love. It isn't the first place one might go in search of an exemplary version of nature, but it is a destination I and many others heartily endorse. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes of how his students “overwhelmingly designated a wilderness area or the countryside as their favourite place and almost never the city,” whereas for him, the city is magnetically appealing. “Strange as it may sound,” he writes, “I am drawn to it for the same reason that I am drawn to the desert. The appeal in both is a certain starkness—and, more than starkness, a crystalline splendour, a glittering inorganic majesty.”⁹⁷ Cities need to be one of our first locations in the quest for nature-connectedness. They are the places which most of the population call home. They are the sites of extreme consumption. They are where we can, and must, learn to live with all the rest of nature, that complex web of existence on which our very survival depends. We are enmeshed in cities, and there is much to be gained from regarding them as genuine sites of nature.

⁹⁶ Daniel B. Botkin and Charles E. Beveridge, “Cities as Environments,” *Urban Ecosystems*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1997), 4.

⁹⁷ Tuan, *Who Am I?: An Autobiography of Emotion, Mind, and Spirit*, 55–57.

5. A Riverly Historiography

5.1 RIVERS AS A MEASURE OF SOCIETY

Not only do they literally sustain us, rivers feed our imagination and identity as well. Founding editor of the influential Rivers of America book series, Constance Lindsay Skinner, recalled that her motivation was a conviction that “rivers—the perpetual motion in the quiet land—had had, and must ever have, a powerful influence on the temperament and imagination of mankind.”¹ She is right. We have been concerned with rivers—philosophically, spiritually, and practically—forever as a human civilisation. And this concern is an important and instructive one:

a river is an archive; it records and retains what has been done to it and by it. The condition of rivers is in some sense the measure of the societies dependent on them.²

The trajectory of the Los Angeles River is connected in no small way to shifting patterns of dependence upon it. It has been attended to when the city has seen its utility, and ignored or mistreated when its value has not been evident to those making decisions about its use.

What we do with rivers articulates plenty about who we are and what we believe in. For example, the orderliness of farming practice in Illinois is a praiseworthy trait. There, neatness is a signal of efficiency. So, when farmers on the Upper Embarras River construct drainage ditches to move water around, it is much more than a physical act of waterscape alteration. As Michael Urban describes it, the ditches are also:

a personal reflection of the farmers’ values and their ability to efficiently run the farm operation. In effect, streams become part of a complex

¹ Mink, “A Narrative for Nature’s Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of Rivers of America,” 751.

² Christopher Armstrong, Henry Vivian Nelles, and Matthew Dominic Evenden, *The River Returns: An Environmental History of the Bow* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).

means of communication between individual farmers and the rest of the farming community.³

It is no stretch, likewise, to read the Los Angeles River as a personal reflection of a plethora of Angeleno cultures and conversations. As William Deverell writes:

Rivers are saturated with the past. They can *tell* stories as much as they can *be* characters in stories if listened to and studied carefully enough. What is especially significant is that rivers can reveal as much about cultural transitions and cultural conflicts as about economic, landscape, or political change. The puny Los Angeles River, so unlike the noble Seine, is also a river in which human memory mingles with water. It is a river all about memory, a place where nature and culture surely flow together.⁴

When viewed historically a river shows—or at least gives clues about—its past, present, and future all at once. It is cultural and at the same time it is biophysical, and in so doing it “reflects the types of behavior determined to be ethically appropriate by the local community.”⁵ Some of these signals are written on the landscape and some need to be sought out elsewhere. I have done so by trawling people’s memories through oral history interviews and looking for signs of life in the archives.

What happened to the Los Angeles River was not unusual but rather reflects a broader nineteenth- and twentieth-century approach to river management, which has left its concrete and steel mark on rivers across the world. Rivers were a commodity, needing to be controlled. As Ruth Morgan and James Smith observe, “engineering efforts were couched in the language of redemption as well as human mastery, such as ‘improvement,’ ‘taming,’ and ‘correction’.”⁶ In the United States, the first half of the twentieth century saw the balance of

³ Michael A. Urban, “Conceptualizing Anthropogenic Change in Fluvial Systems: Drainage Development on the Upper Embarras River, Illinois,” *The Professional Geographer*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2002), 213.

⁴ Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past*, 94.

⁵ Urban, “Conceptualizing Anthropogenic Change in Fluvial Systems: Drainage Development on the Upper Embarras River, Illinois,” 210.

⁶ Ruth A. Morgan and James L. Smith, “Premodern Streams of Thought in Twenty-first-century Water Management,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 2013, no. 116 (2013), 117.

population swing to predominately urban rather than regional for the first time, a central characteristic of the “modernisation” of the country:

By the turn of the twentieth century, the forces of industrialism, urbanism, and large-scale immigration—loosely labeled “modernism”—were remaking the United States. These changes rapidly transformed the lives of ordinary Americans. The growth of cities dramatically reflected the transformation underway in the American society and economy. Population trends mark the transition. In 1880, 72 percent of the nation’s population lived in rural areas; by 1900, that number had declined to 60 percent. Urban dwellers finally outnumbered rural inhabitants for the first time in 1920: 51 percent urban to 49 percent rural. The pace only accelerated over the next 20 years. In 1940, the urban–rural split registered 56 to 44 percent.⁷

In response, cities struggled to adjust to the multitudinous problems of urban growth. The modernist conviction “in the power of scientific expertise to solve social and political problems” was the characterising feature of the Progressive Era (1890–1920), a time when professional engineers, for the first time mostly trained by universities and institutes rather than through apprenticeships, were tasked with addressing a complex mire of issues emerging in cities across the United States.⁸ The Army Corps budget from congressional appropriations increased fourfold between the 1890s and the 1920s, their project tally skyrocketing from around 30 in 1880 to more than 1200 in 1920.⁹ This period had seen the Corps increasingly tasked with flood control, with severe floods in the Mississippi and Ohio river basins hastening the pace of federal intervention to tame flood risks in other rivers across the country.¹⁰

⁷ William F. Willingham, “U.S. era of progressivism and large public works, 1900–1970,” in *Two centuries of experience in water resources management: a Dutch-U.S. retrospective*, ed. John Lonquest, et al. (Alexandria, Virginia: Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Rijkswaterstaat, Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, 2014), 205–206.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹ During the 1890s, appropriations totaled \$166.7 million; in the next ten years, they reached \$254.7 million. During the 1920s, Corps appropriations stood at \$674.2 million according to *ibid.*, 207.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

It is in this milieu that Los Angeles flood of 1914 saw an about-turn from flooding in the region being seen as “a colourful exception to the normally benign behaviour of the environment” to it being a “frequent and dangerous” threat.¹¹ This aligns with the three factors Denis Miletti identifies as developing and interacting with one another in increasingly complex ways: changes in the Earth’s physical systems, shifting population distribution, and the increased density of the built environment.¹² Eyewitness accounts from that time suggest that it was not the worst flood in living memory.¹³ And yet, as Jared Orsi chronicles, “so great was their mistrust of the rivers after the 1914 flood and so great was their confidence that experts could tame the waters” that work began immediately to control flooding.¹⁴ The character of the river precluded it falling into the purview of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, who at that time had flood-control jurisdiction only when it related to navigation. The Los Angeles River was not such a river.¹⁵ It would take until the 1935, with the promises of modernisation growing ever stronger, for the commencement of extensive Army Corps of Engineers works, which shapes the urban riverscape we know today.¹⁶ Los Angeles illustrates well both the *improvement* paradigm that characterised river management in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and elsewhere during that period, and that flooding is as much a social construction as a hydrological one.

¹¹ James P. Reagan, *Early Floods in Los Angeles County: Notes* (Los Angeles County Flood Control District, 1915).

¹² Dennis Miletti, *Disasters by Design: A Reassessment of Natural Hazards in the United States* (Joseph Henry Press, 1999), 3.

¹³ Reagan, *Early Floods in Los Angeles County: Notes*.

¹⁴ Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

5.2 HOW RIVERS MAKE US THINK

My very earliest forays into discovering the Los Angeles River, from a distance in Australia, had me thinking that it was all wide, trapezoidal flood-control channel, like in the film *Grease* where Danny and Leo race hot rods in the riverbed along the Downtown Los Angeles stretch, their respective admirers watching on, every shot filled edge-to-edge with monolithic concrete and those bridges, one after the next. Of course, I quickly came to know that the river has many faces. This was only one of them.

The riverscape varies significantly from source to mouth—soft-bottom stretches, narrow box channels, vast expanses of water, trapezoidal channels like a gaping yawn, narrow trickles, and stretches with no visible water at all. And more than this, to think of a river means to think of an entire watershed. This means tributaries, floodplains, surfaces (impervious and otherwise), stormwater systems, and other infrastructure, so much more than the river’s main stem. This is the analytical power of rivers. They force us to think connectively rather than in separate, modular ways. As landscape architect Joshua Link reflected in his interview, “you know, the sediment issue that’s way up in the hills, that you wouldn’t really associate with the LA River—this storm drain basically that’s going through the city—you just start making a lot of connections.”¹⁷ There is a hard-to-get quality of the river too, it makes you look carefully and seek meaning to get under its monolithic surfaces. It reminds me of other seemingly inscrutable landscapes, like the English fens, a landscape that Joe Moran describes as “a deceptively monotonous landscape with meanings all the more enriching for their having to be extracted with difficulty.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Joshua Link, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

¹⁸ Joe Moran, “A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing,” *Literature & History*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2014), 52.

Finding meaning and making connections doesn't need to mean connecting with everywhere, however. Environmental educator Lila Higgins told me how, in doing reconnaissance for a river engagement initiative, she realised how many places along her beloved river were in fact unfamiliar to her. Was it okay that she didn't feel so enamoured of the lower reaches? Shouldn't she know all of it intimately? She does, after all, think of the river as her boyfriend.¹⁹ After some grappling, she is reconciled that the river is a tapestry of known and unknown to her:

The river is so long. I mean, fifty-one miles.
Do I need to be connected, and have this really special relationship with the entire fifty-one miles of it?
If I think about places in England, there are specific places along the Severn River where I grew up where we had special relationships with, and then there are other parts where it's this strange place and an exploration.²⁰

Getting to know a river is a big ask. Intimacy with the river, as it emerged through interviews and archival materials, invariably found its expression in relation to particular places. So, as the Los Angeles River is being poked and prodded by the attention of so many in the name of restoration and revitalisation, it is vital that opportunities be made and maintained for people to feel close to places, to feel alone with them, to feel as if a place is all theirs, and they are all its as well. Thinking connectively of rivers means including everything in our conception: the bed, banks, riparian zones (strangely altered as they may be), and the physical and human geography and history of its entire watershed.

One of the common mistakes is to see rivers as fairly fixed environments, which couldn't be further from the truth. This fixedness leaves observers shocked

¹⁹ Lila Higgins, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

²⁰ Ibid.

when a river floods, as if it is almost a personal affront. Uwe Lubken observes that:

modern societies, however, tend to think of rivers as canals rather than meandering and dynamic streams; they think of them “as having a fixed length but no prescribed breadth, with the result that the floodplain is often used for farms and settlements as if it were not part of the river’s system” ... this separation of the river from the floodplain—both conceptual and practical—was of great importance for the economic success of the Euro-American settler societies in temperate North America.²¹

Forgetting or ignoring a river’s changeability creates what could be called a natural disaster, a flood. More accurately, a flood is an incompatibility of human and nonhuman needs. Uwe Lubken transcribes the story of an old Cincinnati waterfront man:

“Trouble is, lots of this land where houses are, really always has belonged to the river ... People just keep encroaching on the river, with mills and warehouses and wharves, making it narrower and narrower. Then, when it gets high and must spread, there’s no place for it to spread except up into somebody’s second-story windows.”²²

River-adjacent land, which can appear vacant, unused, and available, is in fact an inherent element of the river’s geomorphology. It is only in flood, when the river extends far beyond its usual in-channel flows, that the general public become aware of the extent of the river’s actual land claim.

Cities are places of concentration, the coming together and packing-in tight of people, culture, development, and consumables. Consequently, leaving land undeveloped for the use of the river during rain events is a generosity that most cities—their planners, developers, and others—do not extend. Because of this, urban development creates an ample amount of environmental risk, particularly

²¹ Uwe Lubken, “Rivers and Risk in the City: The Urban Floodplain as a Contested Space,” in *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities, and Space in Europe and North America*, ed. Stéphane Castonguay and Matthew D. Evenden (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 131. The quote within this quote is from Mark Cioc’s book, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography*.

²² Anonymous quoted in Frederick Simpich “Men Against the Rivers” and cited in Lubken, “Rivers and Risk in the City: The Urban Floodplain as a Contested Space,” in *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities, and Space in Europe and North America*, 130.

“on the urban floodplain, a space that focusses the contest between rivers and cities.”²³ In cities, the apparent emptiness and uselessness of floodplain lands invites the utilisation of the river’s floodplains for many purposes other than absorbing the expanse of floodwaters in times of abundant rains.²⁴ Cities have a relentless appetite for space. Floodplains are magnetic sites for human use, creating “a perpetual conflict [...] people versus the river.”²⁵ Los Angeles is no exception, with the river’s former floodplains accommodating factories, rail-transport corridors, trucking and rail-freighting facilities, film and television studios, housing, and more. They are there because of zoning and regulatory decisions, and because structural controls—such as the extensive channelisation of the Los Angeles River—create what Devar et al. describe as “a false sense of security.”²⁶

Erica Nathan writes about the intellectually ephemeral nature of watercourses, noting “that rivers could disappear, not just into pipelines but also from our navigable physical world and our collective psychological terrain.”²⁷ While considerable efforts have tried to make the Los Angeles River disappear from view, its cultural and ecological resonance fiercely persist. The river and its people are companions, intimately linked. In this research, I argue that this intimacy is what keeps the river from disappearing. Engineering, even as dramatic as that on the Los Angeles River system, does not disappear a river, despite a view in geomorphology and, indeed, among the general public that

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ This is in contrast to more rural settings, where floodplains are typically valued for various functions—extractive industries, farming in the rich alluvial soils, hunting, grazing, and recreation. Their uses, urban or regional, remain largely human-centric.

²⁵ Kersi S. Davar, John M. Henderson, and Brian C. Burrell, “Flood Damage Reduction,” *Water International*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2001), 164.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nathan, *Lost Waters: A History of a Troubled Catchment*, 2.

rivers so extremely changed are no longer rivers.²⁸ In fact, these landscapes are crucial objects of enquiry “especially in a world where human agency may be more important than ‘natural’ processes in shaping riverscapes and landforms.”²⁹ In the age of the Anthropocene, human agency begs to be understood. To ignore it is at everyone’s, and everything’s, peril.

5.3 RIVERS AND CHANGE

Just as we are adaptable in our categorisation of nature, nature is adaptable too. Ornithologist Dan Cooper had a regular column in the FoLAR newsletter for some years. In one piece, he wrote vividly about how the manufactured human environment of the Los Angeles River had come to belong to the birds as well:

The bird community of the Los Angeles River defines adaptation. Freeway overpasses substitute for rock ledges for nesting Black Phoebes. Thousands of sandpipers congregate on the stretches of concrete, where a shallow film of flowing water supports algae and invertebrates. One of the most noticeable adaptations is that of various birds of prey substituting high-tension powerline towers for large dead trees. From these vantage points, species such as osprey are able to scan the river for fish, its sole food source.³⁰

Notwithstanding that there has always been life in the Los Angeles River, bringing the river back to life has been a persistent ambition and rhetoric. Marking, in 1996, the ten-year anniversary of FoLAR’s establishment, the newsletter celebrated the founders’ belief “that the concrete-lined river could be brought back to life.”³¹ But what does *life* mean? In that newsletter, the focus was on working “to make the Los Angeles River central to civic life.”³² At other times, botanical life was the driving concern, such as the “hope that the Southern California grape will one day hang in curtains from the towering cathedral

²⁸ Peter Ashmore, “Towards a Sociogeomorphology of Rivers,” *Geomorphology*, vol. 251 (2015).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

³⁰ Dan Cooper, FoLAR newsletter column, 1993, Box 31, Folder 8, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

³¹ FoLAR newsletter, 1996, Box 31, Folder 11, *ibid.*

³² FoLAR newsletter, 1996, Box 31, Folder 11, *ibid.*

forests of the L.A. River.”³³ Restoration is about life, too, about making lively nature more visible to humans. In the melting pot of ecological restoration’s various drivers and values, in this kind of “reimagining” and “resculpting” as the river is crafted into its “new norm,” visibility to humans is a pertinent, though certainly not the only, goal.³⁴ It is an utterly appropriate one. In the age of the Anthropocene, we simply must get comfortable with our human needs being a driver of ecological choices. We are irreversibly part of the ecological fabric of urban environments; indeed, we made much of it. This has always been so, but our heavily industrialised, hyper-consumptive, waste-generating cultural economies have changed the weave of urban ecologies, and in so doing have transformed non-urban ecologies, too. It is more important than ever to re-insert nature into urban narratives, to draw explanatory lines between local and global effects of the behaviours and decisions of cities. Creating opportunities to be near nature in cities is a crucial element of fostering ecological responsibility, and ecological restoration decisions must be comfortably human-driven, hand-in-hand with creating opportunities for the flourishing of plant and nonhuman animal life.

Furthermore cities face a range of perils—an optimist might call them opportunities—that are being triggered by our changing climate. The major climate change impact on cities identified in the 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report is heat, by way of increased air temperatures and also the increasingly frequent occurrence of heat waves, which will be hotter and longer lasting. Beyond the urban heat island effect, there are also impacts of rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and soil degradation.³⁵

³³ Christine Perala, FoLAR newsletter column, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, *ibid.*

³⁴ These quotes come from Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

³⁵ Akbari et al., “Local Climate Change and Urban Heat Island Mitigation Techniques—The State of the Art,” 1; Botkin and Beveridge, “Cities as environments,” 6-7 and 17.

Urban rivers must be an element of our adaptive response to these changes. Rivers are known to have a mitigating effect on the urban heat island effect. Vegetation and green spaces, even small areas of coverage, have a cooling effect on cities.³⁶ Urban bodies of water are highly valuable, contributing to cooling in two additional ways: evaporation and heat transfer.³⁷ Conversely, hardscaped riverbanks increase urban heat, more so if the materials have low solar reflectivity.³⁸ The urban heat island effect is a positive feedback loop; the problematics increase in a self-perpetuating way:

Urban heat island has a serious impact on the quality of life of urban citizens. It increases the energy consumption for cooling purposes, increases the peak electricity demand during the summer period, deteriorates indoor and outdoor thermal comfort, increases the concentration of harmful pollutants like the tropospheric ozone, and has a serious impact on the health conditions of the vulnerable urban population.³⁹

Given this, people's love for the Los Angeles River—an emotional regard that has galvanised clean-ups, campaigns, picnics, the creation of public parks, community-driven artwork, education and awareness campaigns, birdwatching, fishing, and the many other riverly activities known to occur along the city's "51 miles of possibility"—has tangible positive ecological implications.⁴⁰ Love is very much, as Erich Fromm describes it, "the active concern for the life and the

³⁶ E.A. Hathway and S. Sharples, "The Interaction of Rivers and Urban Form in Mitigating the Urban Heat Island Effect: A UK Case Study," *Building and Environment*, vol. 58 (2012), 22; Akbari et al., "Local Climate Change and Urban Heat Island Mitigation Techniques—The State of the Art," 1; Kim et al., "Does the Restoration of an Inner-city Stream in Seoul Affect Local Thermal Environment?," 239.

³⁷ Kim et al., "Does the Restoration of an Inner-city Stream in Seoul Affect Local Thermal Environment?," 239.

³⁸ Hathway and Sharples, "The Interaction of Rivers and Urban Form in Mitigating the Urban Heat Island Effect: A UK Case Study," 14.

³⁹ Santamouris 2015 cited in Akbari et al., "Local Climate Change and Urban Heat Island Mitigation Techniques—The State of the Art," 2.

⁴⁰ The drenched-with-implications phrase, "51 miles of possibility" comes from a 2016 Public Service announcement released by River L.A., an independent development-focussed nonprofit founded by the City of Los Angeles. The PSA can be viewed at "New PSA Gives Bird's-Eye View of LA River as Recreational Site." NBC4, 2016.

growth of that which we love.”⁴¹ As the highly altered Los Angeles riverscape faces another era of dramatic alteration, there are opportunities to adapt the river once again, this time to provide some degree of fortification against the deleterious impacts of climate change, to make the city cooler, to allow more opportunities for groundwater infiltration, and to create more spaces for connecting emotionally with the more-than-human natural world.

Thinking about altered riverscapes means thinking about restoration. And thinking about restoration immediately renders even the word itself inadequate. But accepting the word, for now, let us talk about what restoration is. It is a process of redesign. As Peter Ashmore says:

The restoration industry can be viewed as re-designing rivers by re-imagining and reconfiguring the fluvial landscape according to a particular set of precepts and ambitions, the application of certain scientific conceptions, founded on a pre-determined ‘need to restore’, and in line with particular styles determined by vision, values, politics and the market.⁴²

Looking back to the early twentieth century, we see engineers compelled by a need to “improve” rivers, a word noted by Ruth Morgan and James Smith as distinctively human-focussed.⁴³ It is a long tradition. For example, the first documented instance of the German Rhine being altered for flood control was in 1391.⁴⁴ Now, as the pendulum swings from improvement to restoration, human beings remain utterly central, but it is now a more complex equation, an “intertwining of social, scientific, technical, and natural actors.”⁴⁵ Michael Urban uses the term *biophysical landscape* to describe the inevitable overlap between the sociocultural and geomorphic contexts of a riverscape environment. In his

⁴¹ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 25.

⁴² Ashmore, “Towards a Sociogeomorphology of Rivers,” 153.

⁴³ Morgan and Smith, “Premodern Streams of Thought in Twenty-first-century Water Management.” 117.

⁴⁴ David Blackbourn, *The conquest of nature: water, landscape, and the making of modern Germany* (New York, Norton, 2006), 83.

⁴⁵ Ashmore, “Towards a sociogeomorphology of rivers.” 153.

model, the landscape is far from fixed. Rather, it is “a snapshot of existing conditions at that given time ... a transitory artifact of past processes.” A landscape, he tells us, “is always in the process of becoming.”⁴⁶ It “becomes” through the interactions of changes to the geomorphic and the sociocultural contexts, which are each in themselves influenced by a myriad factors.

So, viewed in this way, restoration is not about taking a riverscape back to a set point when all was well, as is the popular view of restoration. It is not fixing up or undoing what has been done. Rather, it is about changing the direction in which a river’s *becoming* moves, by intervening in both the geomorphic and sociocultural landscapes of that place. It is an ethical expression, as much as it is anything else. Because a place is always both cultural and biophysical, it always “contains and reflects the types of behavior determined to be ethically appropriate by the local community.”⁴⁷ This means, of course, that there will be disagreement about the ethics of restoration.

The river restoration initiative that dominates current Los Angeles River conversation is Alternative 20 (Alt. 20), the preferred of various options proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers in 2013, and subject to extensive negotiations and public and political attention since.⁴⁸ The package—still working its way through the complex web of requisite approvals and assessments—focusses on an 18-kilometre stretch of river, and includes more than 700 acres of restoration works along eight river reaches from Griffith Park to Downtown Los Angeles, including reshaping the concrete channel, regenerating riparian habitat, restoring streams, constructing marshlands and

⁴⁶ Urban, “Conceptualizing Anthropogenic Change in Fluvial Systems: Drainage Development on the Upper Embarras River, Illinois,” 209–10.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ United States Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District, *Draft Feasibility Study and Environmental Impact Statement* (Los Angeles: United States Army Corps of Engineers, 2013; repr.).

wetlands, bank “softening,” water-infiltration measures, creating additional natural river-bottom areas, placing railway lines onto elevated trestles, and terracing.⁴⁹ When I interviewed Melanie Winter in her home, which doubles as the headquarters of The River Project and WaterLA—her two projects dedicated to the ambitious task of transforming the relationships that Los Angeles has with water—she told me that she had given up hope for the soft-bottom stretch of river at Frogtown, a major focus of the Army Corps’ current restoration efforts in the Alt. 20 project. The place that others celebrate as the river’s centre of social and ecological redemption was to Melanie an expression of entirely unpalatable ethics: development winning out over sustainability, concrete remaining king, and impermeable surfaces continuing to prevent the groundwater recharge that is so needed in water-starved Los Angeles.⁵⁰ “It drives me nuts,” she told me, “that we’ve turned this into some sort of shiny civic art project, and it’s not.”⁵¹

Alternative 20 is a long-awaited initiative for which then-councilman Ed Reyes had been sowing seeds in 2003 when he wrote in a letter, “I have been actively working to focus the resources of the City on transforming our river from a neglected backyard to a beautiful welcoming front yard.”⁵² In this, he too is describing an ethic of restoration, a very different one to that which Melanie advocates. Restoration is an act of making better, according to the values of the restorer. So too is channelisation the act of making better, in the eyes of those leading the works. The only trait that sets them apart is that restoration seeks to make nature more visible and lingering, where channelisation seeks to vanish it. In both, engineers, designers, architects, and decision makers all have

⁴⁹ Ibid.; City of Los Angeles, *Reader’s Guide for the LA River Ecosystem Restoration Project* (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles, 2016; repr.).

⁵⁰ For discussion of this, see Botkin and Beveridge, “Cities as Environments,” 7.

⁵¹ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie’s Home, Studio City.

⁵² Councilmember Ed Reyes, generic letter, 2003, Box 93, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

improvement—a word drenched in implications of control, dominance, and change—in mind. It is just the character of that improvement which changes.

If there is one sentiment that resoundingly pervades the rhetoric of restoration, it is hope. In the early 1990s, when a restored Los Angeles River was an incredibly ambitious dream, journalist Michael DiLeo wrote:

The light is soft and yellow, and the expansiveness of the sea, in which the paltry contribution of the river is instantly lost, seems somehow a harbinger of hope. We've made this river a "completely screwed-up place," as Lewis MacAdams says, but perhaps the time for redemption is near.⁵³

Hope was dominant also when a TV news host asked Dorothy Green—one of the city's most important environmental campaigners—to "dream a little, Dorothy" on a televised panel discussion in 1996. This was at the peak of the Los Angeles County Drainage Area (LACDA) campaign. She responded:

Ah, my dreams for the river are pretty wonderful. I see the river as providing the lifeblood of the whole redevelopment of some of the most trashed parts of our communities. The areas that are along the river now are old, worn-out industrial neighborhoods. Many buildings are for lease, for rent, boarded up, for sale. Much of the land is polluted. But if that land could be converted into park space and open space, this city, all of our communities here in Los Angeles County, are so under-served with parks.⁵⁴

In a film about the river, a homeless man is interviewed. He had hope for the river, he told us to camera, "I want it to look like the Amazon or the Nile. The Amazon or the Nile. If it looked like that, I would be satisfied."⁵⁵ The river is in a perpetual state of becoming. Much like the city itself, there is projected onto the river a restless appetite for it to be something, to be something more, to be something else.

⁵³ Michael DiLeo, magazine article in *American Way* magazine, 1992, Box 90, Folder 5, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Bill Rosendahl, VHS tape of 'A Perspective on the Los Angeles River', 1996, Box 156, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Gerard Dawson, VHS tape of 'Something Resembling a River', 1987, Box 156, *ibid.*

Restoration is a troublesome term. While alternatives like Ian Tyrell's "renovation" hold considerable appeal, the widespread acceptance of restoration makes its use fairly unavoidable. Accepting the term as necessary, the next debate is what ecological restoration actually describes. Here, Eric Higgs provides clarity. He argues for a better demarcation between restoration ecology and ecological restoration. The former is a sub-discipline of ecology and "comprises what we consider typical of a contemporary natural science: hypotheses, conjectures, testing, experiments, field observations, publications, and debate." Ecological restoration, much more broadly, "is the ensemble of practices that constitute the entire field of restoration, including restoration ecology as well as the participating human and natural sciences, politics, technologies, economic factors, and cultural dimensions."⁵⁶ In other words, ecological restoration is the whole assemblage of players and domains, drivers, and complexities. It is as much about humans as it is about the rest of nature.

Despite the literal meaning of restoration—to return something to an earlier condition—ecological restoration is in fact:

a self-conscious attempt to recreate the bio-diversity of ecosystems that preceded the growth of the industrial metropolis in order to foster a different kind of synthesis between nature and culture.⁵⁷

The key word here is *different*. Restoration is not going back, but rather restoration is the creation of "a post-industrial or late modern synthesis between advances in ecological science and new approaches to landscape design."⁵⁸ Dan

⁵⁶ Eric Higgs, "The Two-Culture Problem: Ecological Restoration and the Integration of Knowledge," *Restoration Ecology*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2005), 159.

⁵⁷ Matthew Gandy, "Urban Nature and the Ecological Imaginary," in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, ed. Nikolas C. Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 69.

⁵⁸ Matthew Gandy, "Urban Nature and the Ecological Imaginary," in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, ed. Nikolas C. Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 64.

Cooper encapsulated this in his comments about the river's future, in an interview in 2001:

It isn't perfect. It isn't the creation of a lost, mythic, Eden. It isn't paradise—it never will be—but it is becoming a better place for people and for wildlife.⁵⁹

Restoration is both historically informed and future focussed, but it is never a return to what once existed. Surrendering to this definition diffuses much of the discomfort that ecological restoration can generate.

Environmental historian Ian Tyrrell writes of *renovation*, in preference to *restoration* or *rehabilitation*. Environmental renovation is “the reworking of the land to achieve a new kind of equilibrium, adding new concepts of cultural landscape and new layers of land management.”⁶⁰ Restoration misleads by implying that there was a right time, a set point where all was well with the river. And, if we could just return to that, all would be well again. If there was such a moment, we can be absolutely certain that there is no going back there. It would most certainly be prior to the Army Corps of Engineers' channelisation. Slide the date back to the 1930s. A restored river surely wouldn't have banks lined with timber and rusted-out cars, as was the case in the 1930s, an earlier attempt at flood control before the Army Corps stepped in.⁶¹ The date slides back further still. It would have to be prior to the Los Angeles Gas Company dumping tar and oil into the river in 1904, making “a pool two to ten feet deep and thirty by eighty feet in area” that swallowed up cattle until bystanders managed to rescue them.⁶² Further and further back in time. Back before the thriving pigeon farm in Cypress Park in 1903, a magnetic tourist attraction

⁵⁹ Dan Cooper quoted by David Ferrell, newspaper clipping from the *Los Angeles Times*, 2001, Box 39, Folder 11, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁶⁰ Ian Tyrrell, “Acclimatisation and Environmental Renovation: Australian Perspectives on George Perkins Marsh,” *Environment and History*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), 155.

⁶¹ Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 128.

⁶² Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 113.

despite its waste outflows that reportedly made the river a health hazard.⁶³ Certainly earlier than 1887, when the river was a dumping ground for the carcasses of almost a hundred horses perished in a stable fire?⁶⁴ And, as we know, the invasive plant *Arundo donax* – a plant responsible for greening much of the river while at the same time being cast as an ecological villain – has been growing in the river since at least the 1820s, so back further still we go.

Mia Lehrer is the renowned landscape architect who developed the City of LA's award-winning 2007 *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*, and many river-related projects since. She is clear-sighted about the need to recognise how extensively altered Los Angeles landscapes have become. When we talked in her buzzing river-adjacent studio on the river's left bank, across from Downtown Los Angeles, she was quick to say that "the new norm can't be 1880s Los Angeles. I mean, it's different."⁶⁵ This was a common theme in almost all of the oral history interviews. Jill Sourial, who knows the river well from her public service roles and as a regular cyclist of the river's many bikeways, reflected on complexities and time, that any change process would necessarily be gradual:

I mean, when you think about restoration, we have such an altered environment that really you're not restoring to what it once was, so how do you, how do you do it in a way that kind of is real restoration but also understands that we have a very different system than what we started with. And so it kind of feels almost like, yeah, it's always going to be an iterative process and there's no way to tackle it all at once ... I think there'll always be some weeds in the river.⁶⁶

When Anthea Raymond – kayaker and volunteer patroller on the river – talked about *Arundo* she asked, "but what is native in the middle of a redesigned river

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁶⁶ Jill Sourial, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Jill's office, The Nature Conservancy, Downtown Los Angeles.

bed?"⁶⁷ Nature is nothing if not adaptive. Joe Edmiston reflected on this as we talked about weeds and the river:

these oddball nature creations and trying to deal with them and I think we're gonna just have to accept them just as we, just as we accept all kinds of immigrants to this country, we have to accept immigrant vegetation into this country ... in nature the egrets will, ah, eat the grubs, on ice plant as well as on a native vegetation, just as well, and it just doesn't make a lot of sense to try and undo what has been done.⁶⁸

This is the story of the Los Angeles River in particular, and restoration in general. There is no undoing what has been done, but there are options for renovating, for making new again.

Relying too heavily on people's memories of a place can foster excessively nostalgic ecological restoration plans, an emotion aptly described as "memory with the pain taken out."⁶⁹ Taking out the pain of a complex natural environment, where there are material risks needing mitigating, would be a restoration mistake. But nostalgia is not all bad, and it can be a force of change. When a beach was re-created on the Rio Hondo, a tributary of the Los Angeles River, press coverage celebrated the "decades-old memories [that] come flooding back [of] families lolling on blankets, children chasing crayfish through the shallow stream, people dancing to the joyful strumming of guitars." That ecological restoration, of the once-popular Marrano Beach, "boxed in by tangled brush and forgotten by many" before being restored and reopened as Bosque del Rio Hondo Natural Area, was a project championed by County Supervisor Gloria Molina. She picnicked there with her family when she was a child.⁷⁰ I am curious about nostalgia. In part this is because I have noticed how quickly it has

⁶⁷ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea's Home, Cypress Park.

⁶⁸ Joe Edmiston, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

⁶⁹ Lowenthal cited in Macnaghten and Urry, "Rethinking Nature and Society," in *Contested Natures*.

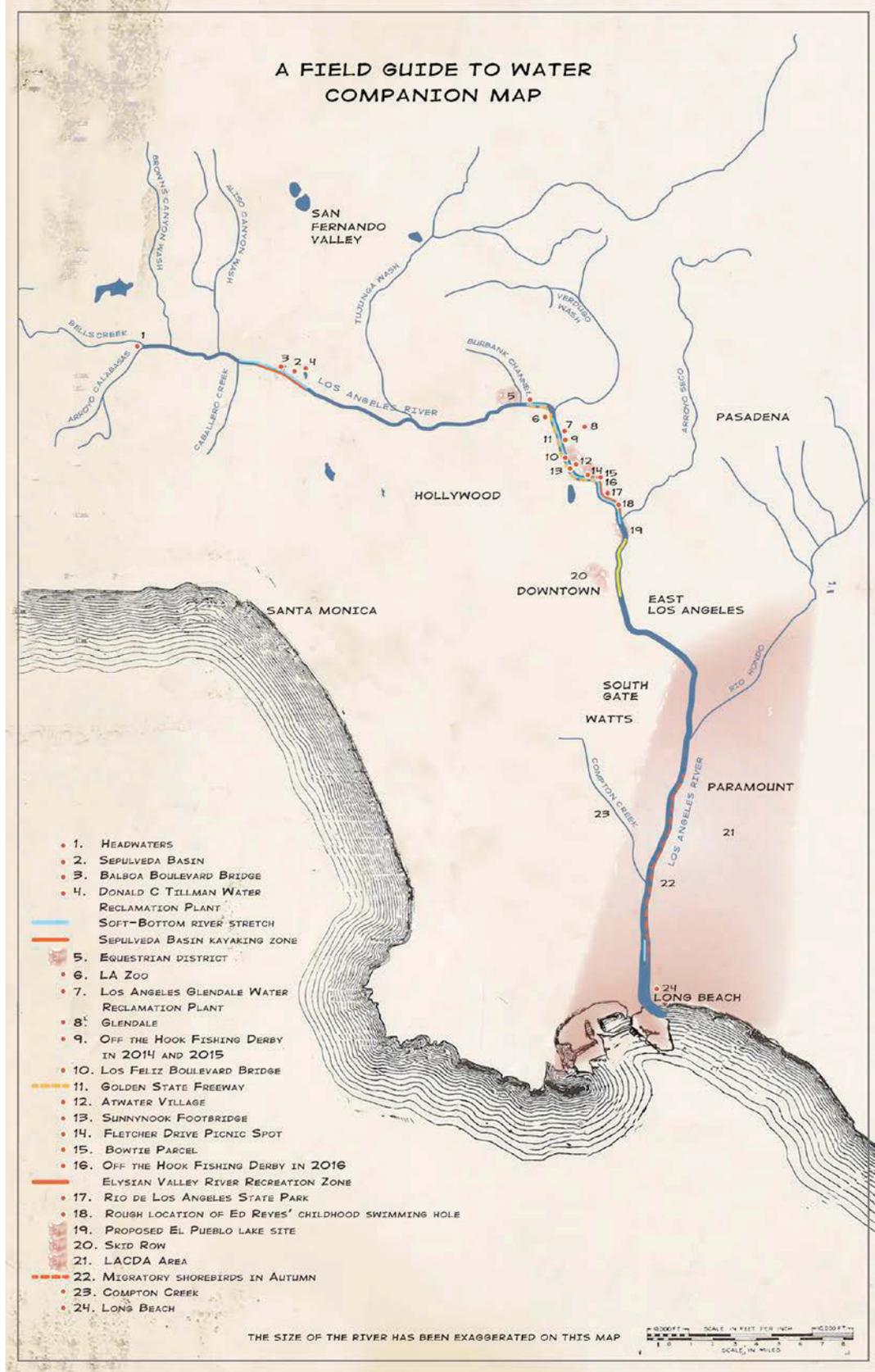
⁷⁰ Matea Gold, *Los Angeles Times* article "Riverbank's Transformation Into Park Triggers Flood of Memories," 1997, Box 37, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

found its way into my own psyche. Having known the Los Angeles River for only a handful of years, I already feel a sense of attachment to how it is and has been. I worry about it being transformed into some kind of unrecognisable act of urban placemaking, a landscape artwork that everybody visits, where people can't feel alone anymore, where subcultures, solitude, and acts of community have been pushed out by an influx of sightseers. My sense of nostalgia was so palpable that Lewis MacAdams asked me if I felt it. He told me with conviction that nostalgia is not an emotion that he feels about the river. "I feel like I should feel like that," he reflected right away.⁷¹

The extensive presence of rivers in environmental historiography attests to their importance as indicators of social and environmental values, practices, and norms. While the story of a river as dramatically-altered as the Los Angeles River could be seen as exceptional, it is in many ways quite routine, a reflection of technocratic river management approaches that have sought to commodify and control. Understanding rivers means doing research in connective and lateral ways, looking for evidence of both constancy and change. The remaking of rivers – through renovation, restoration, revitalisation, mitigation, clean up, remediation, decontamination and more – is an ecologically and socially complex intervention that merits the close attention of scholars in environmental history and countless other disciplines.

⁷¹ Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

6. A Field Guide to Water



“There is something in all of us that loves rivers, that loves to listen to them flow, that loves to watch as butterflies flit past and swallows and swifts swoop and frogs croak and little boys throw rocks in the water to hear them plop. Maybe it’s because we’re eighty percent water and so is the Earth. Maybe it’s because in the river’s journey from the mountains to the sea we see our own history and our own destiny, and sense our place in the scheme of things. Maybe it’s just because we like to sit on a rock in the shade of a willow and dream.”—Lewis MacAdams, co-founder of FoLAR, writing in August 1995

It started out as a joke, but before long it was something akin to a religious experience. Lila Higgins, an entomologist, science educator, and infectiously enthusiastic river advocate was at a River Picnic, an initiative she founded in 2013. These picnics bring river enthusiasts and their friends to the river to share food, stories, old-fashioned games, and quality time in somewhat unexpected places. Someone had, surprisingly to everyone, arrived at the picnic in a wetsuit. They swam. Lila, captivated by the water that variously courses or trickles in the river that she deeply adores, followed after them into the water. “I totally put my head in the river and just like baptised myself in the river,” she recalled during our interview. “There is something beautiful about having water from a place that I ... [here Lila trails off for a moment, before returning] dripping down you.” She had a little more to say, “it’s more meaningful because it’s the river.”¹ Her words echoed what Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas has to say about water, that “attunement to the spirit of place means attunement also to the spirit of water.”²

¹ Lila Higgins, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

² Jeff Malpas, “The Forms of Water: In the Land and in the Soul,” *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2006), 7.



Figure 23: A river picnic in 2015. Photo by the author.

6.1 THE SUSTAINING POWER OF WATER

Water is both a measurable physical entity and an elusive ethereal force in the Los Angeles River, and everywhere. Over and over again, my conversations with oral history interviewees brought this to the surface. The *wateriness* of the river, both directly and by way of the plant and more-than-human life it enables, and even resuscitates. Intimacy is, in part, the feeling of being sustained by something outside of ourselves. Water does this. In the intimacy trinity put forward throughout this thesis—consisting of sustenance, attentiveness, and belonging—the river stories about water amply illustrate the first of these.

Ed Reyes was almost embarrassed to tell me how much the river’s water means to him, feelings which seem to have intensified in the decades since he made his first childhood memories at the river in the early 1970s:

this will sound real corny, but I still recall
being able to feel the grass and how spongy it was,
how soft, the smell of it, the rolling in it.
And I’m what, maybe nine, ten years old,
thinking how the water felt when I hit the river,

how it cooled me down and how special that was,
and how different.³

Water sustains in physical and psychological ways. The sensory experience—of watery sounds, smells, touches, and sights—were important to many of those I interviewed. The waters of the Los Angeles River had sustained Anthea Raymond for the past decade or so, long before she became a kayaking expedition leader on the river in the inaugural year of sanctioned kayaking in the Glendale Narrows, in 2013. She lived right by the river in Frogtown, before a sealed bike path was built, and would walk her dogs there—“they could just kind of go”—meanwhile, she would listen to the water:

That’s what I really first liked about the LA River
is that you could hear the water moving,
and you go there any night you can still hear,
it’s moving through rocks
and it’s a very joyful kind of relaxing.
Water running is a kind of consistent sound too,
it’s like waves, but in a different way,
just kind of mesmerising and relaxing⁴

Lila Higgins remembered her first river encounter vividly. She recalled glimpsing the river as she drove on Fletcher Drive in Atwater Village in late 2009. She stopped, impulsively. Immediately, it was a relationship:

I walked along and had this moment and this feeling:
this is what I’ve been looking for.
I was walking in this concrete channel bed,
and the river was right next to me.
This was what I’d been looking for!
I remember seeing fish,
I could hear the sound of the river,
as you walk down there the sound of the street goes away
I saw dragonflies, and damsel flies, and butterflies
That was my moment, it was the very beginning of my relationship with
the river.⁵

³ Ed Reyes, February 6, 2016, digital recording at Marsh Park, Elysian Valley; unofficial river access point near Taylor Yard parcel; driving in East Los Angeles; and Elysian Park.

⁴ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

⁵ Lila Higgins, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

Water is a magnet. It draws people to the river and means something to them once they get there. Melanie Winter talked about how people’s “love” for the river takes all kinds of forms but stems from an affinity with the sustaining qualities of water:

everyone comes to it for a different reason.
You come to it because you’re a birder,
you come to it because of the peace and quiet,
you come to it because it reminds you of some place you grew up that,
oh, there actually is water flowing here.
Everybody wants to, has this need to be by a flowing river, for this, ah, I
don’t know, it’s a psychological thing that allows you to process,
it’s like dreams, right,
you sit there and you watch the river the go. And it’s that time thing.
Yeah, time and timelessness. That’s very soothing and very helpful.⁶

When I asked Shelly Backlar — who is now vice president of Programs at FoLAR, where she has worked since 2003 — what has become one of my favourite questions — *Could you tell me about the place on the river that you know best?* — she responded with a list of several significant places. She described them easily, in detail. She knows why they matter to her. And then, Shelly’s voice faltered a little and I listened in even more closely, because it seems to me that the places that take our words away can often be the most important. Water, that sustaining feeling of water, is again the defining feature:

There’s something about that place [Sunnynook Footbridge],
sort of along, around, you know, afternoon, twilight, they call it the
“magic hour” for a reason in filmmaking.
Um, but when you’re down there, there’s,
there have been times when I’ve been down there
where literally you’d see an egret and a heron
within three feet of one another along this stretch
and there are geese that you don’t see in other places,
hybrid geese and cormorants are often there,
along the electric lines.
Because of the way that their wings are
they sit there prehistorically and dry their wings.
There’s so much going on there.
The sound of the water.

⁶ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie’s Home, Studio City.

And you're right there at the 5 freeway, literally, you can see it.
There's just something so magical about that spot.⁷

The Los Angeles River hasn't been the primary contributor to the city's water supply since the early twentieth century. And yet, Angelenos told me about being sustained by it and archival sources indicate that the presence of water in the river is meaningful and nurturing to people, that it sustains them in ways other than physically. Water flowing through its channel allows people to have a more loving relationship with the river, to relate to it as a *river*, even in all its strangeness.



Figure 24: Water outflow at Long Beach. Photo by the author.

⁷ Shelly Backlar, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.



Figure 25: A view from the Bowtie Parcel, showing the vegetation of the soft-bottom Glendale Narrows. Photo by the author.

Comedian Conan O'Brien filmed a sketch comedy segment in 2009, where he and Andy Richter attempt to canoe the Downtown Los Angeles stretch in a craft with wheels, flanked by graffiti and rushing trains. In the clip, they also go fishing and camp out in the lee of a stormwater drain, Conan warmed by the glow of a campfire, strumming a guitar and singing "LA River you shine so bright, your concreted wall always make me feel right, LA River, you make me feel swell, LA River ..." ⁸ While it's funny and endearing, and was meant to be far-fetched, the clip is not far at all from reality. Because of water, people fish the river routinely, in favourite spots, and at the annual fishing derby. Boating in the channelised river has a long history, though it only became officially sanctioned quite recently. ⁹ And camping, well, there are many people sleeping rough who call the river home, and the first officially sanctioned campout for people

⁸ "Conan and Andy ride the Los Angeles River," accessed September 20, 2016. <https://vimeo.com/182465160>

⁹ Jessica Hall, "Of Nexus and Navigability, Part 2: Journalistic Journeys," accessed September 20, 2016. <https://lacreekfreak.wordpress.com/tag/los-angeles-river-navigable-waters-jurisdictional-determination/>

seeking a unique urban nature experience happened in 2014 at the Bowtie Parcel complete with roaring campfires, inquisitive nature walks, delicious s'mores, and vibrant storytelling for those fortunate enough to secure a ticket to this rapidly sold-out event.

Environmental humanities researcher Astrida Neimanis pokes and prods at the question of human relationships with water in her research, seeking to understand the significance of water to human beings. As she says, "we are intimately bound up, both physiologically and semiotically, in our wateriness."¹⁰ Water and its intimate relationship with our bodies is, she argues, the ultimate argument against a binary categorisation of water as either natural or cultural.¹¹ There's a magic to water, and an invincibility. Water never disappears, but rather is always in a state of reciprocity as it "is constantly exchanged between the earth and the atmosphere."¹² Man One, artist, curator, and graffiti identity, reminded me of this when he talked about the river being a Los Angeles constant, the stayer that has maintained its course in all the city's chaos:

The river has maintained its course.
It's done what it's always done.
It's been there for whoever has always been willing to go down there
and I don't think that has changed
So while all this craziness is going on in the city,
like the river has just always been there,
I was going to say the river keeps flowing but it doesn't always flow.
So, it's still there, whatever that means. You know. Sometimes it flows,
sometimes it trickles, but the river's still there.¹³

Torrent or trickle, the wateriness of the Los Angeles River is utterly important. As with people and their rivers the world over, relationships are formed around and with the river's flowing waters.

¹⁰ Astrida Neimanis, "Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons," *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 21 (2009), 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹² Luna B. Leopold, *Water, Rivers, and Creeks* (Sausalito: University Science Books, 1997), 3.

¹³ Man One, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

Water has been the river's saving grace. This may seem obvious; rivers and water are surely inextricably linked. So let me be a little more precise. The visible manifestations of water, and the life enabled by them, have allowed the Los Angeles River to survive extreme human alteration. Acres of concrete, without water, are just concrete. Acres of concrete, with even a little water, quickly become spiked with tenacious weeds, cultivate variously coloured algae, and make offerings of habitats to birds, locals and migrating ones. With more water, nature appears with more abundance. For the Los Angeles River, additional water came from two sources. First of all, there are the soft-bottom stretches where the bubbling up of spring water made concrete an impossible proposition. Secondly, a growing population meant more sewage, and the treated water outflows from water reclamation plants constructed along the river—the Los Angeles Glendale Reclamation Plant in 1976 and the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant in 1985—proved transformative. Their existence meant a Los Angeles River that flowed year-round, giving nature visible opportunities to flourish in among and in spite of the concrete, thanks to the daily ablutions of an-ever growing city. As the river became more visibly alive, it “reinforced the appeal about a living river.”¹⁴ This typifies the LA River paradox: that an ostensibly unnatural intervention—an industrial wastewater treatment facility—led to a resurgence of plant, bird, and aquatic life.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: nature and community in the global city*, 142.

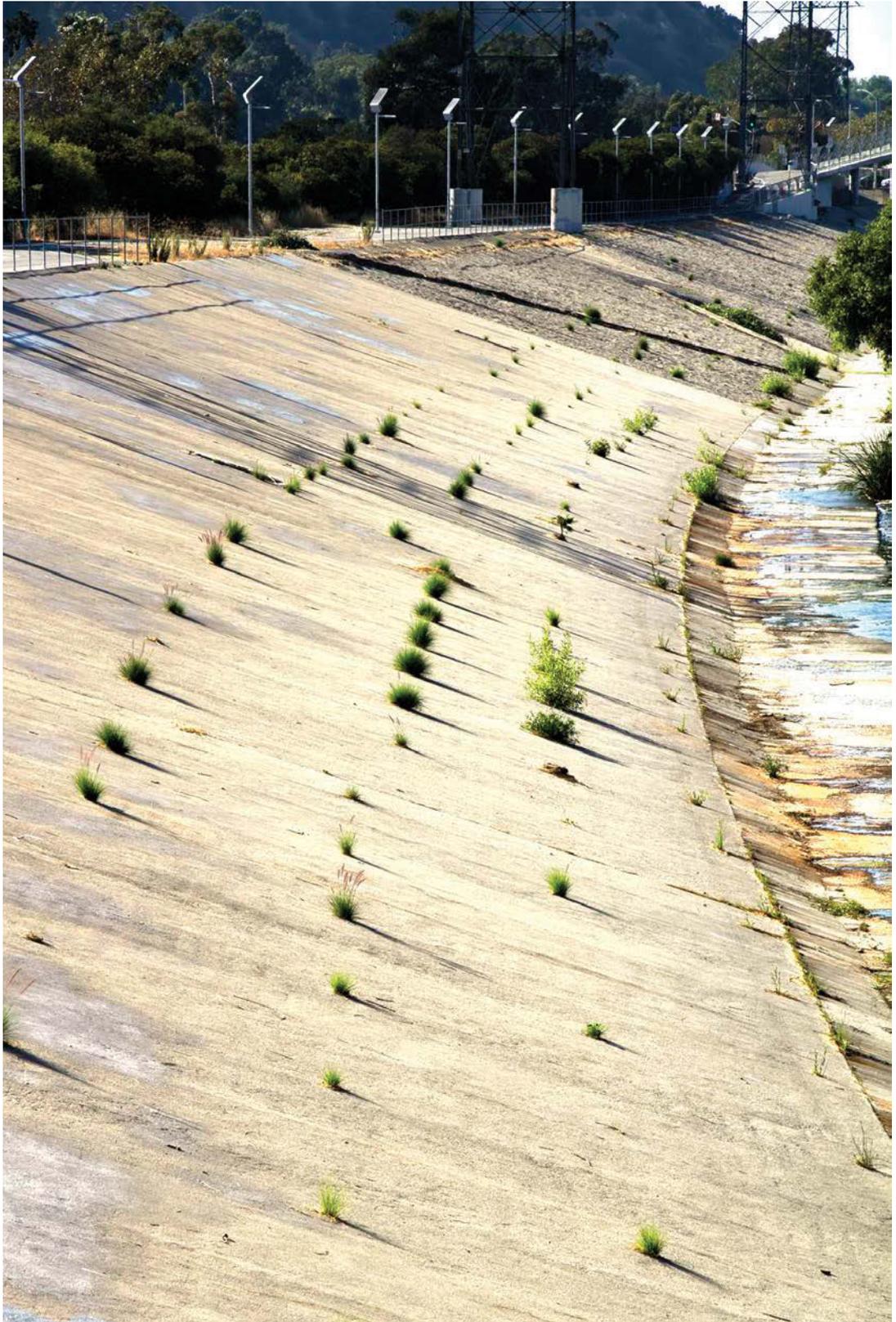


Figure 26: Tenacious and orderly weeds, Atwater Village. Photo by the author.



Figure 27: View from the Sunnynook Footbridge, Atwater Village. Photo by the author.



Figure 28: Dominguez Gap Wetlands, a small parcel of soft-bottom river in the low reaches. Photo by the author.

Our need for water is multidimensional. Astrida Neimanis writes of how the hydrological cycle has meaning, not only as a matter of survival, but in all kinds of other important ways:

We survive in more ways than one, and our basic water needs are not only physiological but, indeed, naturalcultural. Our implication within the hydrological cycle is not only biological, but social, ethical, political and cultural.¹⁵

The impact of water on the river's function and appearance captivated Neil Cohen, who wrote a feature piece about the river in 1990. Save for sewage treatment outflows and the few soft-bottom stretches—where the river is able to function much more like a river than a channel—he would have had to tell a markedly different story:

I kept hearing rumors that in certain spots, amazing as it sounds, the river actually still looked like a river, with rock-strewn banks and even running water. Just north of the towering high rises of downtown, there was even supposed to be a place where shade trees still grew along its banks, where you could even fish—though God knows what you'd reel in!¹⁶

Even after the Tillman plant in Van Nuys came online and started discharging considerable flows of tertiary-treated wastewater into the Los Angeles River, the ecological values evident in the river varied wildly along its length. It depended both where you were, and whom you were, as to what assessment you made of the river. Near Griffith Park, where the soft-bottom stretches are most prevalent, a 1985 article by Lewis MacAdams, clipped out and filed by the Army Corps of Engineers' Los Angeles District Office, described how:

A few yards away from the Golden State Freeway, cottonwoods are growing in the river, as well as young oaks, sycamores, and walnut trees. If you look upstream from the Los Feliz Boulevard Bridge, you might see horses from the Griffith Park stables splashing through the river. If you're on the bridge at dawn or dusk, you might see big white American egrets and great blue herons wading up the river. In the spring, the songs of nesting red-winged blackbirds fill the air. The living sections of the Los Angeles River are habitat for hundreds of land- and sea-going

¹⁵ Neimanis, "Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons," 171.

¹⁶ Neil Cohen, final version of "Mark Twain!" article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

cormorants, mallards, and grebes during their migrations. Even fish are starting to reappear.¹⁷

Further downstream, Jim Danza in his regular FoLAR newsletter column that provided news from the Technical Advisory Board, reminded readers in 1992 that, despite having undergone even more extreme alteration, the Downtown stretch was still home to important flora and fauna, in “small, but ‘enchanted’ natural areas.” In those areas, year-round water flows and the soft-bottom natural riverbed made habitats for various birds, grasses, and wildflowers.¹⁸

Water sustains human and more-than-human life. Carol Armstrong is Director of LARiverWorks in the Office of the Mayor of Los Angeles. She compared the solace of the river to that provided by the ocean:

there’s something to the way it provides that psychological respite,
I always say it’s like standing at the ocean,
it makes your problems feel so small.
When you’re standing at the river, it’s the same thing, just in a different
way.¹⁹

Nearness to the river has a powerful effect on people. In a vast majority of instances, these effects are unknowable to me as a researcher. The voices that are within my reach are those that make it into some kind of permanent realm, those that cohere into a source, and through them it is abundantly clear that people build intimacy with the river because of the sustaining effects of the water with which it flows.

6.2 CONTRASTING CONCEPTIONS OF ECOLOGICAL VALUE

Told or untold, these enchanted areas offer escape and solace from the pace of city life. A 1992 FoLAR newsletter told members how, “while walking among

¹⁷ Lewis MacAdams, newspaper article “Let the Los Angeles Go Green to the Sea,” 1989, Box 27, Folder 8, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

¹⁸ Jim Danza, FoLAR newsletter column, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

¹⁹ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

the willows of Compton Creek, one can easily forget you are only yards away from the noise and congestion of the city!”²⁰ This very same area, just a couple of years earlier, had been readily discounted as insignificant by the Army Corps of Engineers. In 1990 the *Los Angeles County Drainage Area Review* study, prepared for the Corps by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior concluded that:

no natural habitat exists [and therefore] no fish, wildlife, and habitat impacts are anticipated with the project. Presently there are no natural habitats nor fish and wildlife resources in the project impact area ... there are no ecological impacts ... no mitigation is required ... the project would not enhance nor degrade the existing environment.²¹

Further LACDA Project documentation repeated this assessment in 1991, arguing that channelisation had resulted in there being “few environmental resources of significance in these [lower river] reaches.”²² The Environmental Protection Agency responded to this with dissatisfaction, giving the project an Environmental Impact Report rating of *EC-2 Environmental Concerns—Insufficient Information*, complaining of “vague discussions of several critical issues which should be clarified.”²³ This tussle between nature’s absence and presence is a constant for the Los Angeles River. You feel it when exploring the river on foot, flicking through collections of river photographs, or poring over archival materials. It could in many ways be seen as a dystopia, except that water—and the tenacity of nature—pulls it back from that precipice quite readily. This extract from a FoLAR newsletter, in 1992, quoted one of the young workers in the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, Gustavo Guzman:

I am looking in the river, I see a big 500 pound boulder, I see market baskets with algy [sic] and moss that have probably been here for a long

²⁰ FoLAR, June newsletter, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

²¹ Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act Report prepared for the Corps by the Fish and Wildlife Service, US Department of the Interior, Laguna Niguel Field Office, May 1990, reproduced in full in United States Army Corps of Engineers, *Los Angeles County Drainage Area Review, Feasibility Study and Interim Report: Environmental Impact Statement* (1992).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Public comments collated in *ibid.*

time. I see the plants that have grown in the middle of the river. I see a yellowflower that looks like a sunflower but I know it isn't because it is too small and it isn't a daisy because its [sic] too big. There is life in this river, at least the part that I am looking at. I don't see fish or too many things moving around, but I do know that there is life. There is algy, plants, moss, and the sound of birds that live here. All of this is a part of life on the L.A. River. I see the reflection of the sun on the water, the sight of that really fills my mind with wonder.²⁴

Wonder, and love, need water. Lewis MacAdams wrote in 1989 about the newly flowing river being rediscovered by people: "wildlife and people are discovering its possibilities as a source of life and beauty."²⁵ With water, there is sustenance, and the river begins to come alive.

6.3 A RIVER FOR FISHING

Jim Burns is a journalist and a keen fly fisherman. In 2011 he pitched a story about catching carp in the Los Angeles River. The magazine, *California Fly Fisher*, said yes. They didn't know he had never been to the river, despite living just a few minutes drive away. So, because there is nothing like the pressure of a deadline to get things done, Jim headed out to fish. He was scared at times, of gangs, of graffiti, and by how incredibly difficult carp are to catch. But he got his story, and formed a deep and active bond with the river:

I don't want to get too mystical and all, but the river speaks to you. You have to be quiet and you have to be lucky, but the river was speaking to me, and saying, *help, help*.²⁶

For Jim, the love of nature looks like an urgent conversation. Like reciprocity, like protecting a landscape that others have given up for dead.

²⁴ FoLAR, June newsletter, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

²⁵ Lewis MacAdams, newspaper article "Let the Los Angeles Go Green to the Sea," 1989, Box 27, Folder 8, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

²⁶ Jim Burns, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim's Office, Occidental College Library.

When I met with Jim Burns in his college office, he described one of his most memorable river moments. He is now a prolific Los Angeles River fishing blogger and one of the founding forces behind the annual fishing event, Off Tha' Hook. While fishing, he found a crop of summer squash, saw frogs and crayfish, and then:

I heard this BAM! in the water behind me.
I jumped up in the water. "My god, what's that?"
I looked and it was an osprey
and he had come down and grabbed a carp and was flying out of the
water with the carp; he was lifting off.
That's another one of those moments
where you're like, *this is absolutely incredible*,
because you have thousands of cars going by you
and yet here's nature just putting on a show.²⁷

Further downstream, in autumn it is usual for 15,000 migratory shorebirds to congregate together in the stretch of river between Willow Street and the 105 freeway. They are there because the shallow water spread across concrete encourages the growth of an "algal mat [which] supports flies, whose eggs and larvae offer abundant concentrated food."²⁸ I have seen many birds on the river, but I have never been at the right time of year to experience this large-scale migration. The pattern of migration comes to my mind often, nevertheless. It is at the heart of the ecological renovation conundrum: that nature is highly adaptive and has made use of the altered environment to such an extent that transforming it to some apparently more "natural" state could in fact displace nature rather than restoring habitat opportunities.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Daniel S. Cooper, "Shorebird Use of the Lower Los Angeles River Channel," *Western Birds*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2006), 2.

Jim tells me that, in the early twentieth century, there was a flourishing steelhead trout tourism industry along the Los Angeles River. In 1900 Los Angeles River catch limits were set at one hundred fish per day. This is huge; a typical limit now would be only six.²⁹ Today, the steelhead trout is a symbol of the extent of river damage; the last-known steelhead in the river was caught near Glendale in January 1940. The grainy photograph that documents this—an image of the fish being held proudly by a man in a three-piece suit—tells us that his catch was 25 inches long, “believe it or not.”³⁰ I believe it, just as the optimist in me believes that one day this indicator species may just return to the river, a signal of ecological renovation, cooler waters, and the removal of all the impediments to its survival through the extreme decades of river channelisation. In a draft essay for Lauren Bon’s 2007 *Not A Cornfield* publication, Lewis MacAdams had typed, “I started telling people that when the steelhead trout run returns and the yellow-billed cuckoos were singing in the sycamores that the work of FoLAR would be done.” In a firm hand, in ink, he added, “I wanted them to see a living river.”³¹ The word “see” is underlined heavily; Lewis has always known that people’s sensory experiences and their imaginations are pivotal to achieving any degree of transformation on the Los Angeles River.

²⁹ Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim’s Office, Occidental College Library.

³⁰ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 240 and 42.

³¹ Lewis MacAdams, draft essay for the publication “Not a Cornfield,” 2007, Box 31, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.



Figure 29: Afternoon fishing near the 2 freeway. Photo by the author.

Imagining the return of the steelhead trout runs is a dream that fishing blogger Jim Burns shares wholeheartedly. It would be a game changer:

If we could have something like that come back,
oh my God, that would be like dropping an atom bomb.
I mean, every environmental scientist would be here in the western part
of the U.S. and it would change things, it could change the
conversation.³²

Even without the return of steelhead trout, the conversation *is* changing. Since 2014, Jim has collaborated with FoLAR to run an annual fishing derby. Called Off Tha' Hook, it has brought the river ever closer to FoLAR's vision of a "swimmable, fishable, boatable, bikeable Los Angeles River for our community."³³ It is part recreation, part science, and part activism.³⁴ This catch and release—or catch, bag, catalogue, and transport away for toxicology testing,

³² Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim's Office, Occidental College Library.

³³ Friends of the Los Angeles River, "What We Do," Friends of the Los Angeles River, accessed September 26, 2016. <http://folar.org/whatwedo/>

³⁴ See, for example, Tse, "Six-Pound Carp Lands The Top Prize At Inaugural L.A. River Fly Fishing Derby."

as happened in 2016—event builds intimacy between people and their river.³⁵

As Jim Burns said to an *LA Weekly* journalist in 2014:

This really means something. It means the river is vital, that it's something that people want to enjoy rather than just sort of accept. And, more importantly, are pursuing a better river in the future.³⁶

In the FoLAR archives, I found some undated scraps of paper, just a handful of them, with people's handwritten responses about fishing on the river. My best guess is that they were part of the research for FoLAR's 2008 fish study, although they are not referenced directly in that document. Along with several gripes—difficulties with rangers and a desire for more natural areas along the river's length—one respondent wrote, "I can't believe I'm fishing in the LA River." and another inscribed just one word: "Potential."³⁷

All of this ignores that, right alongside the hype of fishing derbies and blogs and media coverage, fishing has been going on quite routinely. Filmmaker and founder of the arts organisation Clockshop, Julia Meltzer, told me how the same two Korean fishermen are always on the other side of the Fletcher Street Bridge, right by the end of Clearwater Street in Frogtown where Clockshop is headquartered.³⁸ In my earlier research, trawling the *Los Angeles Times* for signs of river life, I found stories of everyday fishing in the 1970s and 1980s: a plant worker catching a 10 kilogram carp and eating it with co-workers; children catching carp and crayfish in Atwater Village; and a man's in-home aquarium, stocked with various fish caught in the river.³⁹ In the 2008 FoLAR fish study,

³⁵ Larry Wilson, "Fishing the L.A. River of the Future," *Los Angeles Daily News*, accessed September 29, 2016. <http://www.dailynews.com/opinion/20160909/fishing-the-la-river-of-the-future-larry-wilson>

³⁶ Simpson, "You Can Fly-Fish the L.A. River, and It's Pretty Damn Cool."

³⁷ Response slips from the Los Angeles River Fishing Survey, 2007–08, Box 20, Folder 3, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

³⁸ Julia Meltzer, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Julia's Office, Clockshop, Elysian Valley, Los Angeles.

³⁹ Tilly Hinton, "More Than Concrete: Accounts of the Los Angeles River in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1970–1985" (Macquarie University, 2011), 18 and 91.

FoLAR asked local fisherman Carmelo Gaeta to interview a number of river anglers. The youngest was twenty-eight and the oldest eight-two. Sustenance fishermen reported making soups, barbecues, and smoked fish, having caught them with tortilla bait or, in one instance, by stunning them with a rock. Catch and release anglers favoured a stretch of river where the banks are clear of trees because there are no branches to snag their lines.⁴⁰ Fishing is both ordinary and extraordinary in the Los Angeles River: an act of sustenance, playfulness, attentiveness, or perhaps all of these things at once.

6.4 A RIVER FOR BOATING

At a 1996 consultative roundtable held by the American Society of Landscape Architects, who were developing a brochure about possible futures for the Los Angeles River, Denis Schure argued for the inclusion of active recreation, as a key to people building relationships with the river and appreciating it: “There’s no denying this is a true river when you are down near the water and active recreation is a key part to people realising that.”⁴¹ Denis Schure knew this well. In the early 1990s, he held what may have been the first formal permit for boating on the Los Angeles River. He led classes, tours, and at least one fundraising activity on the river, activities which were not unproblematic. At the beginning of 1993, Peter Ireland, president of the Coalition to Save the Sepulveda Basin, asked to address the FoLAR Board at its January meeting. There is no detailed record of what was said, but a lengthy and careful follow-up letter from FoLAR’s then-executive director Martin Schlageter opened with: “Wednesday’s discussion in front of the Sierra Club was more confrontational than I wished for.” The conflict was over an objection to canoeing on the river, an activity that Martin Schlageter was adamant to defend as beneficial:

⁴⁰ Friends of the Los Angeles River, “State of the River: The Fish Study,” 28.

⁴¹ FoLAR, Summer newsletter, 1996, Box 31, Folder 11, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

While the permit in question is not held by FoLAR [it was issued to the City Dept of Parks and Recreation by the Army Corps for Denis Schure to lead canoe classes and for tours with decision makers], it is true that FoLAR is enjoying the benefits of canoeing on the river. Canoeing can expose people in a unique way to the beauty of the LA River. It can also give decision makers an experience which impresses like nothing else the value and potential of our river. Generally, they come away as supporters of our goals. This tool has been instrumental in obtaining money for the river and the basin.⁴²

Almost 25 years later, Shelly Backlar at FoLAR talked with me about the 2011 commencement of sanctioned kayaking, the program that has run every summer since then. She described kayaking as an introduction to the river like no other.⁴³ Giving opportunities for the formation and nurturing of relationships—be they river-with-individual or river-with-community—is imperative, especially in places so extremely altered as the Los Angeles River. As Environmental Protection Agency administrator Lisa Jackson observed, when she announced in 2010 that the river had been designated as traditionally navigable:

When we talk about the quote-unquote “environment” it brings to mind sweeping vistas and wide-open landscapes. What doesn’t usually come to mind is a river with a concrete bottom—a river that flows through one of our nation’s largest cities and a bustling urban area. But as we’ve seen from this community, environmental issues are just as important here in the city as they are anywhere else.⁴⁴

One of the instances to which Lisa Jackson was no doubt referring, which convincingly attested to community concern for the river, was an unconventional exploratory kayak expedition in the summer of 2008, from the river’s putative source, just below the football fields of Canoga Park High

⁴² Martin Schlageter, letter to Peter Ireland and further information in Board Meeting Minutes, 1993, Box 91, Folder 3, *ibid*.

⁴³ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

⁴⁴ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, Remarks at Compton Creek Declaring the Los Angeles River Traditional Navigable Waters, As Prepared,” accessed October 2, 2016.

<https://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/8d49f7ad4bbcf4ef852573590040b7f6/b9f2a53e6cae08228525775f006bd676!OpenDocument>

School, through its many riverscapes all the way to the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach. Photos of that expedition were illustrated in the EPA's determination documentation, confirming the role that the expedition had played in making the case for the river.

At the helm of the expedition was George Wolfe. When George moved to Westside Los Angeles from watery Seattle, he brought with him a white-water kayak and a passion for boating. Without a river to paddle, he felt like "a fish out of water." Discovering that the Los Angeles River might just fill that need, he attended a river walking tour in the mid-2000s:

I was like yeah, yeah, yeah, okay, the river and the history,
and it was fascinating and I was certainly interested in it.
But I was equally just sort of jonesing to get my boat out there on the
river, and do my own exploration.⁴⁵

Before long, he had started to explore the upper reaches of the river by boat, and was hatching a plan to lead the expedition that would go on to be a cornerstone of the traditional navigability declaration. It was, he told me, "this kind of twisted love affair with the river before it became kind of popular."⁴⁶ The expedition concept was both simple and incredibly complex. Put simply, a handful of people—boaters and novices—spent a July weekend in 2008 navigating the Los Angeles River from source to mouth, documenting the expedition with notes and photographs in order to show that the river was navigable. Here is how George Wolfe, the co-creator and public face of the expedition, described what happened:

we were tickled that we could take something
that started out as a bit of a lark, just sort of an adventure,
a youthful adventure, interest, and a curiosity, sort of a twisted curiosity,
that you could turn that into some sort of federal policy
that actually protected the waterway
and gave it a chance to come back to life,
that was just complete icing on the cake and,

⁴⁵ George Wolfe, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George's Home, Los Angeles.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and, and beyond anything we imagined when we started out on planning the trip.⁴⁷

They photographed the trip extensively; the journey became the subject of a documentary film (*Rock the Boat*) and received considerable media attention, interest piqued by an earlier satirical video of George Wolfe abandoning his car to gridlocked traffic and instead kayaking—in suit and tie—in a mock commute to work by water rather than freeway (see Figure 30).⁴⁸ Photographs and observations formed the basis of a thirty-page report to the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The report split the river into twelve transects, each named, described, illustrated, and assessed for various characteristics, including navigability, recreation, and nature. For George Wolfe, seeing the expedition's photographs used in the EPA navigability determination was a tremendous achievement, and testimony to the important role the expedition played. The expedition was a bold public statement to authorities about the river's right to exist and people's right to access it for recreation. It was an act of love and of intimacy, a speaking for and with the river as a place of significance.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Tipton, "George's Way," accessed September 20, 2016. https://youtu.be/0ro__HhM_3I



Figure 30: Kayaking as satire, and precursor to river transformation. A still from the *George's Way* film made by Jeffrey Tipton and George Wolfe, 2007.

One of the material remains from the expedition is a pair of block-printed images, styled like postage stamps. George Wolfe sent them to FoLAR with an update on key events after the expedition and a note thanking the organisation for “being a stalwart supporter.” One of these mock stamps (see Figure 31) has the words “Explore” and “A watershed moment” beneath an image of the river, showing a Downtown Los Angeles bridge, ample flowing water, a trapezoidal concrete bank, an electricity transmission tower, a flock of birds in V-formation, and the unmistakably Los Angeles palm trees. The other plants in the image, growing on the riverbank, look to be Cattails (*Typhacae*) that have gone to seed, with tufts of the white cotton-like substance that assists the seeds to spread so effectively. Curiosity and exploration were magnets for George. When we talked in 2016, he described how his “boyish ... youthful fascination with the possibility of going on a quest in a place that felt unexplored was a really powerful

motivator.”⁴⁹ Likewise, it certainly is a motivator for Anthea Raymond who estimated that, between 2013 and 2016, she had guided more than 1200 people on sanctioned river kayaking trips. The river motivates her and the neighbourhood:

I just know how important the river is to keeping this area feeling refreshed, and it just refreshes me to be back in there.⁵⁰

She is convinced of the benefits of spending time at the river as “a daily project,” a project of spending time and being sustained.⁵¹ It is a fascinating place to do so.



Figure 31: Commemorative Los Angeles River Expedition “stamps”, preserved in the FoLAR archives at UCLA.

Boating is an interaction with the river that has gained an ever-higher profile in recent years. From 2013, travellers arriving at Los Angeles International Airport were greeted by a massive photograph of the Mayor, Eric Garcetti, kayaking in

⁴⁹ George Wolfe, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George’s Home, Los Angeles.

⁵⁰ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the river (see Figure 32).⁵² And this was not a quirky photoshoot of a scenario that would never happen in real life. In fact, from Memorial Day through to Labor Day (the last Monday in May to the first Sunday in September) each year since 2011, parts of the river are opened to sanctioned kayaking, both bring-your-own-craft or organised group paddles. A decidedly novice paddler, I signed up to kayak the calm Sepulveda Basin stretch in the summer of 2014. Heavily jetlagged from travelling most of the way across the world, I joined a group paddling upstream from the Balboa Boulevard Bridge. Tickets sell out quickly for these popular group paddles; there was a buzz of excitement as we stood in the baking Southern California sun, being briefed on boating safety and paddling technique. We could have been anywhere; the hustle of America's second-largest city seemed at least a world away. That stretch of river is even more lush when you are in the midst of it. The plants growing in the river's soft bottom almost envelop you.

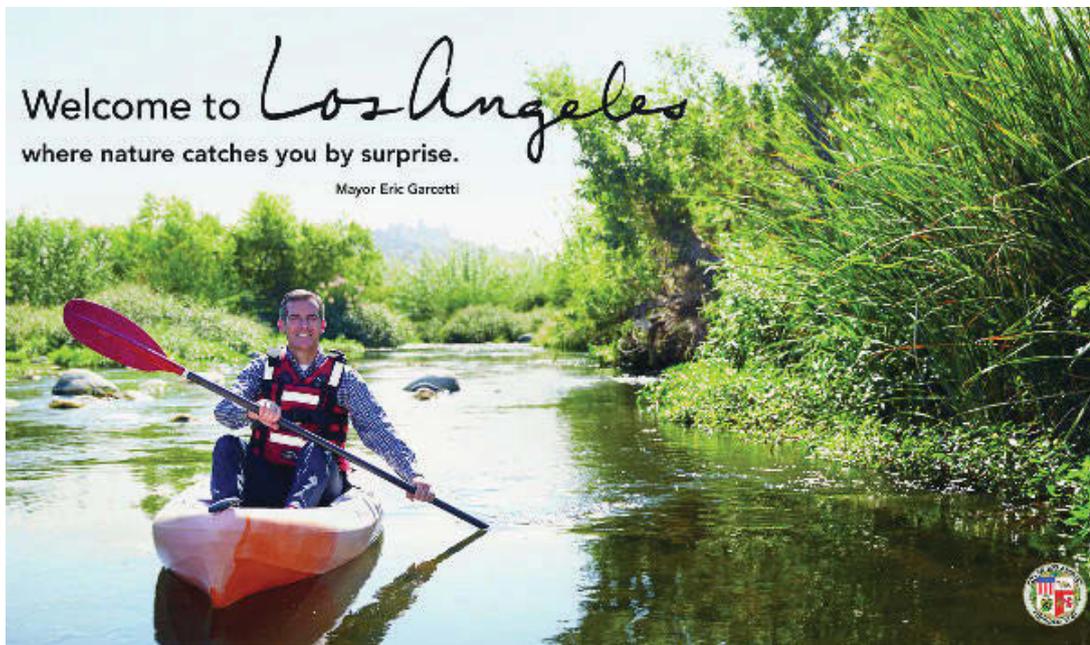


Figure 32: Airport Welcome Poster. Image from the *Los Angeles Times*.

⁵² David Ng. "LAX Getting New Eric Garcetti Posters Shot by Catherine Opie." *Los Angeles Times*, 2013.

Twenty years earlier, when state-wide river advocacy organisation FoLAR held their Southern California meeting at Pasadena City College in 1993, they were granted permission from the County for a flotilla to boat on the river. It was described in a FoLAR newsletter vividly:

the boats coming out of the morning's mists and stopping for a string of horseback riders to cross on their way into Griffith Park' [while] red winged blackbirds balanced on reeds and the air was alive with swallows⁵³

It wasn't all arcadia, though. There were authorities to contend with. Both the Los Angeles Police and Fire departments sought evidence that the group, who filled "two kayaks, a canoe, and two six-person rubber rafts" were appropriately authorised to be in the river.⁵⁴ The group could flash the permit from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, a markedly more straightforward permission protocol than what George Wolfe and Jeffrey Tipton faced in organising their expedition some fifteen years later. It was one of the most difficult obstacles in planning the expedition and was the cause of many potential paddlers withdrawing from the project.

The only authorisation that George and Jeffrey had for the 2008 expedition they led was a filming permit. Joe Linton was one of the kayakers on the expedition. He told me, when we talked as the sun set over the communal gardens at the Los Angeles Eco-Village where he lives, that the trip had shown him the river in ways he had never experienced before: "being down in the water was a different thing."⁵⁵ This from someone who knows the river intimately, having led tours, explored, written extensively about it, and created maps and drawings of river

⁵³ FoLAR, December newsletter, 1993, Box 31, Folder 8, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁵⁴ FoLAR, December newsletter, 1993, Box 31, Folder 8, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

places for more than two decades.⁵⁶ I mention Joe Linton here because he explained the strategy they used, a trick he'd learned from Dennis Schure's earlier river explorations. It was a three-page permit document and:

on the third page, it said you couldn't get in the water,
you couldn't float anything on the water,
and so we took, and I learned this trick from this guy Denis Schure
who, gosh, who was the first person who took me on a boat in the river in
the nineties.
You take the permit and you put it on a piece of cardboard
and then you wrap it in saran wrap [cling film]
so the front page says, "You've got a permit!"
I think we got pulled over twice and the second time the police came.
I had the permit in my canoe.
I had written the filming number in big pen.
I handed it to them.
Had they actually unwrapped it and looked on the third page, they
would have said, "You're not allowed to be here."⁵⁷

Now, many hundreds of people get down into the river to paddle every summer. What was once guerrilla is now mainstream.

6.5 THAT JUST LEAVES SWIMMING

Not-quite-so mainstream is the idea of swimming in the Los Angeles River, the hardest-to-get element of FoLAR's vision of a "swimmable, fishable, boatable, bikeable Los Angeles River for our community."⁵⁸ Carol Armstrong told me, during a quick interview at the City's river headquarters high up in City Hall in early 2016, how "people joke that it's the Eastside ocean."⁵⁹ It seems to me less a joke and more an astute observation. Kayaking advocate Anthea Raymond, herself born and raised in Los Angeles' Westside beaches, had said much the same to me a few weeks earlier. She argued the need for "this second waterfront" to account for traffic gridlock and to return the mega-city's focal

⁵⁶ Joe Linton, interviewed by Jane Collings, 4 sessions in 2007: 30 May, 12 June, 19 June, 26 June, digital recording at UCLA Center for Oral History Research.

⁵⁷ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

⁵⁸ Friends of the Los Angeles River, "What We Do."

⁵⁹ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

point from the beaches back to Downtown.⁶⁰ Former councilman Ed Reyes took me to his childhood stretch of that inland ocean. As he recalled skidding down the steep concrete banks as a child in the late 1960s, the joy was still palpable. It had most definitely been his beach. In the 1987 documentary film by Gerard Dawson, *Something Resembling a River*, we meet a man who swims in the river because it reminds him of home in Mexico and we watch another man slowly immerse his body into the river, ever so gradually, face and ears and all.⁶¹ While some are squeamish about water quality, others are more relaxed. Lila Higgins routinely paddles in the river up to knee height. "I've been all up in that water. It's tertiary treated," she told me.⁶² Shelly Backlar described swimming as "the last bastion." As a warm smile spread across her face, she said, "and those of us who have fallen in the river kayaking have done it so I know it's possible!" Shelly has fallen into the river not once, but three times. She describes it as a lesson in surrender:

I thought I was going to be very proactive and conquer the water.
I flipped out not once but twice,
the water it was deep and it was moving.
It taught me a lot, that a lot of this was: just don't fight it, don't conquer
it.
If I would have just relaxed and put my feet in!
It's just another kind of metaphor
for we're going to tackle this; we're going to do this.
It's just: jump in and do it. It's a process.
Yes, swimmable, swimmable is next ...⁶³

Sometimes ideas surrender, too. Anthea Raymond told me how she had been part of a feasibility study into the idea of building a white-water park in the Los Angeles River. An expert had come in and assessed the river's potential and, while the initial assessment had shown inconsistent flows to be a major

⁶⁰ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea's Home, Cypress Park.

⁶¹ Gerard Dawson, VHS tape of "Something Resembling a River," 1987, Box 156, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁶² Lila Higgins, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

⁶³ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

impediment to such a development, Anthea and others could still imagine this Eastside ocean being a massive tourist attraction.

I asked if this kind of expansion brought any tensions for her. She told me of her love for walking her dogs nearby, “in the secret places,” and how walking, particularly at dusk, makes her feel:

like you’re in this big open space in the middle of ...
it’s not chaos but it’s just, there’s all this energy
just kind of throbbing around you
and you’re at the centre of something that’s very peaceful.⁶⁴

Later on in our interview, I ask Anthea what she feels optimistic about in relation to the river. Her answer is *people*, the involvement of people who are passionate about and have an emotional connection with the river. Then, she returns to our earlier discussion about white water:

I actually think I want to tamper down my urge to like commercialize, because, I mean, if you had people surfing surfboards or surfing kayaks in the middle of Los Angeles, it would bring a lot of attention to the LA River, probably too much attention to the LA River because it would be like: “Right, Gidget goes east” [laughs].
I’m not sure, I mean, I’ve been talking about this for a long time, and writing and thinking about it for a long time
but I’m not sure I want that to happen. I mean, I like the idea of a beach⁶⁵

This is the push and pull of river change, where every gain poses a potential loss. An act of apparent salvation may be one of destruction in the same swoop.

6.6 RIVER TEMPERAMENTS

The river has many temperaments. Before being channelised, it was an ephemeral watercourse, typical in Southern California. Flood control mechanisms pushed the river towards aridity until water reclamation plants came online, discharging treated water into the river and, inadvertently, creating an altered ecology much more receptive to fish, birds, and humans. FoLAR

⁶⁴ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

members Linda and Thomas Brayton, in their submission to a draft Environmental Impact Study in late 1991, described the river as “an unintentioned but, nevertheless, valuable and essential habitat for wildlife.”⁶⁶ Indeed, it was and is. Contemporary river flow rates are thought to be higher than at any previous point in time.⁶⁷ As journalist Neil Cohen put it, things had not been this way at any point since the Stone Age.⁶⁸ Natural patterns and human alterations make for a highly variable river that changes along its course, throughout the changing seasons, and across time. The river’s many temperaments make for many emotional reactions.

It was the summer of 2012 when Kat Superfisky—at that time a graduate student in landscape architecture and ecology back east in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and now one of the river’s most passionate advocates—first saw the river. She was standing on the Los Feliz bridge, looking north to Griffith Park. She recalled to me her incredulity at this concrete river: “I remember thinking to myself, *you’ve got to be kidding, Los Angeles, you call this a river?*”⁶⁹ It is certainly a river that challenges expectations. When Joshua Link guides people on river kayaking trips, he teaches them that:

you’re literally paddling down three or four rivers at the same time because, obviously, we get water from a lot of remote locations. So there’s the Owens River kind of north-east from here. There’s the Sacramento River, the Colorado River.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

⁶⁷ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 127.

⁶⁸ Neil Cohen, final version of “Mark Twain!” article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁶⁹ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁷⁰ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

All of that water has been somewhere else before flowing down the Los Angeles River, through stormwater drains or as outflow from a water reclamation plant. Anthea's daily river observations include watching how stream flows change at different times of the day. She told me how it "parallels people's usage patterns but twenty-four hours behind."⁷¹ The presence of water changes people's emotional engagement with the river. The city's king of water, William Mulholland, remembered the river as he had seen it in the final years of the nineteenth century. He described the river in 1877 as "a beautiful, limpid little stream with willows on its banks." It was an instant affinity for him, "something about which my whole scheme of life was woven, I loved it so much."⁷²

Many proposals have come and gone to make the river a more water-filled place. In 2004 the City of Los Angeles proposed constructing El Pueblo Lake, a recreational space that "would extend from the confluence of the Los Angeles River and the Arroyo Seco, south to Main Street. This would be a seasonal lake, using inflatable rubber dams that would be deflated during the rainy season."⁷³ Later that same year, Lewis MacAdams wrote about the proposal in a draft article about development options for the river, which remains in the FoLAR archive. It reads this way:

In April, the city engineer's office presented a computer-generated study of how a seasonal waterway in the channel, operated by inflatable dams, could create "El Pueblo Lake," where DESCRIBE POTENTIALLY IDYLIC SCENES⁷⁴

That note, to add in descriptions of the "potentially idyllic scenes" that could be generated by this mile-long artificial lake, gets to the core of one of the river's many tensions. It is the tension of authenticity. The rivers of our storybooks

⁷¹ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea's Home, Cypress Park.

⁷² Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 95.

⁷³ City of Los Angeles, "El Pueblo Lake Initial Concept Study," (2004), Box 93, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁷⁴ Lewis MacAdams, draft article about development options for the river, n.d., Box 31, Folder 1, *ibid.*

have ample water, but never so ample as to be wracked by dangerous floods. These imagined rivers have beautiful tree-lined banks, ready to shade picnickers but repellent to vagrants or criminals who might be tempted to hide there. There is clean water to splash about in, creatures in abundance, and boating, swimming, and loveliness. And, of course, river water is blue and river edges are green, right? Not quite so, in a climate and landscape like Los Angeles. Joshua Link, a landscape architect born and raised in Los Angeles, explained it this way:

The real landscape of Los Angeles is about subtlety,
whereas if you see the more manicured landscapes of LA
it's all about lush and tropical and flashy.
That just doesn't feel authentic to me.⁷⁵

In his architectural drawings, as he came to know the watershed more and more intimately, he started representing the river differently, stripping back the intensity of colours to show a more authentic vision for the city and river:

I would start doing these Photoshop renderings
I would start trying to show a little bit less water,
start playing down the really verdant aspects of it.
There was one command I would do at the end of every single drawing.
It was the saturation command. I always would bring it down like
twenty points in saturation.
It was just like this magic thing.
I was like before, "No, no, no, that's Columbus, Ohio, or that's back in
New York"
and I would adjust the saturation and like, "Okay, that's LA"
It's just a little less, a little less *verdant*.
You can change the perception of a project, just with a few clicks.⁷⁶

The river's changeability—across time, across seasons, and across different places along its course—is one of its defining features. A feature it maintains against many odds, most notably the extensive engineering works to contain and control it, to make it "a water freeway."⁷⁷ The river remains changeable for a

⁷⁵ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

raft of reasons—among them, weather, changes in the built environment, human interventions and interactions, and love.

Before channelisation, the Los Angeles River was an ephemeral watercourse, flowing and flooding with winter rains. Its course ranged broadly across the Los Angeles Basin, swelling in the winter rains and running underground in the dry summers. The river mouth shifted to meet different stretches of coastline, from Santa Monica through to Long Beach. In flood, the river swept up roads, buildings, and bridges, not because it was some malevolent force of destruction but because human development had occurred in places that belonged to the river. Following the thinking of William Cronon, these were not natural disasters, but squarely human ones.⁷⁸ Water flows changed as rapid urbanisation paved most city surfaces. This meant that what would once have soaked into the soil, as groundwater recharge, instead became stormwater run-off. And that run-off was drenched with rubbish and chemical waste, scoured from roads and drains. When rain did fall, it rushed to the river and out to the ocean, rather than soaking slowly and surely into the aquifers below the city, nature's water tanks. Journalist Michael DiLeo writes how the highly paved city means "nearly every drop of water that strikes this place takes a bullet-train trip to the river."⁷⁹ Flooding quickly became an issue for Los Angeles. Before the broad-scale concrete channelisation of the river, attempts made to control its virulent floods included "a Flintstone-style series of unreinforced mud walls, chicken wire, concrete boulders, and lots of wooden fencing."⁸⁰ Greg Goldin and

⁷⁸ William Cronon cited in Ted Steinberg, "Fertilizing the Tree of Knowledge: Environmental History Comes of Age [book review]," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2004), 273.

⁷⁹ Michael DiLeo, magazine article in *American Way* magazine, 1992, Box 90, Folder 5, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁸⁰ Neil Cohen, final version of "Mark Twain!" article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, *ibid*.

Mike Davis describe the enormous scope of the “improvement” works that followed, once the Army Corps took control of the project:

Eventually, the entire hydrology of Los Angeles was transformed. It is said today that a single raindrop falling in the San Gabriels [Mountains] reaches the Pacific Ocean less than an hour later, and you can see how this is possible. The three major rivers—LA, San Gabriel, and Santa Ana—as well as tributaries—including the Tujunga Wash, the Rio Hondo, and the Compton—were “improved.” Concrete walls and floors line 470 miles of formerly unimproved riverbeds. Two hundred twenty-five crib dams, 290 sediment catchment inlets, 143 debris basins, 15 flood-control and water-conservation dams, five major dams, 33 storm-water pumping stations, 2,400 miles of underground storm drains and 75,000 catchbasins capture a trickle of water beginning in the hills and mountains and channel it to the Pacific. It has been a Sisyphean effort ... the entire system requires Herculean maintenance.⁸¹

Even the apparent permanence of the concrete solution requires ongoing maintenance and remodelling. While what was created, and is maintained, in the channelisation of the Los Angeles River is an expression of political will; it is not in any way “less a fluvial system” by virtue of its extreme alteration.⁸² Places like the Los Angeles River are the artefacts of “historical (mainly political) contingency; rivers could have turned out differently but alternatives did not develop or were not politically supported.”⁸³

Joe Edmiston remembered as a child being confused by the scale of the concrete river infrastructure.⁸⁴ It seemed to him, and indeed it has to me at times, so disproportionate to the volume of water typically flowing in the channel. Matthew Gandy describes this scale as offering “an exhilarated form of

⁸¹ Greg Goldin and Mike Davis, magazine clipping of “A River Runs Through It: The Perils of Life in Los Angeles,” *LA Weekly*, 1995, Box 29, Folder 12, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

⁸² Urban, “Conceptualizing Anthropogenic Change in Fluvial Systems: Drainage Development on the Upper Embarras River, Illinois,” 214.

⁸³ Ashmore, “Towards a Sociogeomorphology of Rivers,” 152.

⁸⁴ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

landscape experience.”⁸⁵ This is the necessity of a design that is intended to rush sudden, infrequent, potentially destructive floods as quickly as possible through the city and into the Pacific Ocean. Even straitjacketed by concrete, the river commands considerable power. Lewis MacAdams recalled an El Niño year, he didn’t say which one, where the flooding rains called attention to the river. He told me that it:

was one of the first times that anybody paid attention to the river as anything except a joke. Suddenly the river had its own power and the river was going to speak for itself, so stand back, the river is about to address you.⁸⁶

The graffiti artist Saber thinks of the Los Angeles River as suppressed but not destroyed. He told me how “the lifeblood line of this river is still there, it’s just been muted” before going on to compare the souls of rivers and people:

I would say human beings are more expendable than a river, that’s why the river when it rages it takes you away with it. So, does one human soul, the light of that person, if there is a fuckin’ soul, does it equate the soul of the entire river? And I would say an entire population might be more expendable than the soul of a river. Right? It’s water.⁸⁷

Or as Lewis MacAdams said of the quest for power over the river: “nobody can have it. There is no *it*. There’s just the water.”⁸⁸ But, there is always more than just the water. One of the additional factors, an imperative one, is that there are relationships between people and place. There is love for the river in some of its temperaments, there is fear of it in others, and there is repulsion, too. These variations differ wildly for different people, in different seasons, along different river stretches, and for a plethora of reasons. Love and loathing both feature in the emotional terrain of the river.

⁸⁵ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 173.

⁸⁶ Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

⁸⁷ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

⁸⁸ Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

In the early 1990s, one of the greatest contests about the river's future thus far played out: the Los Angeles County Drainage Area (LACDA) upgrade project that would significantly increase the flood control fortifications of the lower river, in response to re-calculated risk assessments and re-drawn flooding maps. While the Army Corps rallied support for large-scale expansion, FoLAR and various other organisations rallied support for a new approach to flood control. It was a chance to end what FoLAR technical advisory board member Christine Perala called "the Dark Ages of flood control."⁸⁹ Opponents of the proposal called for multi-purpose flood control, a more comprehensive system that would address flooding risks throughout the basin, while also creating parklands, opportunities for groundwater recharge, rainwater capture, and so on. In other words: "wise watershed management" as FoLAR described it in a document published in 2006.⁹⁰

While multi-use flood control was evident in other Army Corps projects in the watershed, when it came to the Los Angeles River's main stem an avowedly single-use policy seems to have maintained dominance with few exceptions, namely: equestrian movement across the river by way of a dedicated bridge, cycling on the river-adjacent cycle path, and, most recently, sanctioned river kayaking during the summer months. In contrast to this single-use dominance, the Army Corps encouraged recreation at other sites in the catchment: Hansen Dam, Sepulveda Dam, and the Whittier Narrows Dam. Draft text for a promotional brochure edited out the claim that "in all kinds of weather, both in war and peace, the Corps has successfully met the challenges of man and nature" but retained information about the 3 million acres of water and 18,000 miles of shoreline that "are available at normal pool levels for boating, fishing, bathing, camping, picnicking, and other recreational purposes" at flood-

⁸⁹ Christine Perala, FoLAR newsletter column, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁹⁰ FoLAR, Information sheet on Los Angeles River Tours, 2006, Box 20, Folder 4, *ibid*.

control sites in the Los Angeles Basin. It was reported that “in 1958 alone, family groups made 95 million visits to these projects, more than double the attendance of 1953.”⁹¹ Likewise, in a speech some ten years earlier, Colonel Burns had addressed the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco. His speech reportedly prompted “much favourable comment” from his audience. In that address, multiple-purpose flood control was likewise the default position:

While the basic responsibility of the Corps of Engineers is for flood control and improvement of navigation, it is the policy of Congress that when we are investigating, at its direction, the economic and engineering feasibility of a dam for flood control or navigation, we also consider all the other purposes that the dam might serve. In addition to flood control and improvement of navigation, these purposes include generation of power, irrigation, abatement of stream pollution, recreation facilities for the general public, improvement of streams for fish life and recreation, and water supply for domestic and industrial consumption. In other words, we consider all potentialities and arrive at a solution or plan which will insure conservation for optimum use of that great natural resource—water.⁹²

One of the criticisms routinely levelled at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is that the channelised Los Angeles River was rendered inaccessible, inhospitable, and unsafe for life. Under their control, it became a place repellent to plants, humans, and other animals. That this was so, in spite of a countervailing willingness to design flood control with other, multiple purposes in mind, suggests that the main stem of the river first of all suffered not from a failure of policy but a failure of imagination.

6.7 CLEANING UP THE “DEATH GUNGE”

Unpolluted water is a key marker of a healthy river. Everyone has a story of the river’s water quality. Jim Burns recalled that, sometimes, the water in the Los

⁹¹ Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers, draft brochure, n.d., circa 1964, Box 27, Folder 11, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

⁹² Colonel Burns, Speech to the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco, 1952, Box 217, Folder 1, *ibid.*

Angeles River is “very clear and smells like Tide, smells like laundry soap.”⁹³ Neil Cohen wrote in a draft of his feature article that, in Vernon, “the storm drains have the telltale smears of the grease, sludge, and blood that is illegally dumped in the river all through this industrial corridor.”⁹⁴ Robert Ghirelli, executive director of the Regional Water Quality Control Board, described the river in 1990 as a “chemical bouillabaisse” in rainy weather. Back then, when it rained, as much as 300,000 gallons of sewage would spill in a single day from the Los Angeles Zoo sewage pond.⁹⁵ In 1991 an unidentified water pollutant, described only as a “death gunge,” killed an estimated 1000 fish, including catfish and carp weighing up to 9 pounds in the living stretch of river behind the Sepulveda Dam. One hundred wild mallards also died. Savage funding cuts to the Regional Water Quality Control Board were publicised by FoLAR, who argued that the lack of adequate field inspection and water testing was dire for the river’s health.⁹⁶ By 1992, FoLAR was taking water quality into its own hands, educating its members about water-quality legislation and encouraging citizen reporting of pollution incidents and water-quality issues.⁹⁷ It would be several more years until FoLAR secured funding to undertake a community-run water-testing program, River Watch, which launched in 1998, although from the scanty archival sources available it seems to have taken several years of development, before starting in earnest in 2002.⁹⁸ A few years later, then councilmembers Eric Garcetti and Jack Weiss would write a letter to the editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, affirming that “The city intends to abide by its commitment for the benefit of the residents of Los Angeles, who deserve to swim in clean water and who

⁹³ Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim’s Office, Occidental College Library.

⁹⁴ Neil Cohen, draft version of “Mark Twain!” article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁹⁵ FoLAR, June newsletter, 1990, Box 31, Folder 5, *ibid*.

⁹⁶ FoLAR October–November newsletter, 1991, Box 31, Folder 6, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ FoLAR, March newsletter, 1992, Box 31, Folder 7, *ibid*.

⁹⁸ FoLAR, draft report, 2002, Box 37, Folder 1, *ibid*.

deserve to live along a decent river.”⁹⁹ Clean water is about removing rubbish as well as pollutants. Both have significant deleterious impacts on the river’s health, as well as to people’s relationships with it. As Wendell Berry reflects, “the truth is that we Americans, all of us, have become a kind of human trash, living our lives in the midst of a ubiquitous damned mess of which we are at once the victims and the perpetrators.”¹⁰⁰ Shelly Backlar recalled being at the Sepulveda Basin in 2005 after floods and seeing the high-water line marked out with discarded plastic bags lifted high into the trees by raging floodwaters. She described her shock at the sight: “you know how people take tissue [paper] and they make like ghosts out of it and they hang it? It looked like these ghostly streamers in the trees.”¹⁰¹

6.8 WATER SUSTAINS

Being shocked by a damaged ecosystem can be a powerful trigger for relationship building with that place, and for taking action accordingly. Fishing advocate Jim Burns had this kind of galvanising experience when he saw three primary school-aged children on bikes down by the river. His first reaction was nervousness, not sure if these children might portend some kind of gang-related danger. Soon enough, they were chatting and then fishing together. Jim started to think about those children’s civic right to a clean river. Here is how he recalled that experience:

No child should have to have recreation in a river like that.
So, that kind of radicalized me or something.
I came back and I was just so angry that the system—whatever our
system is or lack of system—didn’t have more opportunities for young
people who want to be at that river.
That river could be the only chance

⁹⁹ Eric Garcetti and Jack Weiss, letter to the Los Angeles Times, 2004, Box 20, Folder 1, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Wendell Berry, *What Are People for? Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 127.

¹⁰¹ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

for that young person
to ever be around water, you know.¹⁰²

Water also was at the heart of the issue for Jim Danza, the long-serving chair of FoLAR's Technical Advisory Board. A summary, printed in the FoLAR newsletter, of his Masters thesis argues that:

The once bountiful Los Angeles River was killed by the concrete and ensuing water pollution—no one cared. Now, after social uprisings, droughts, near obliteration of natural systems in our city, and a major flood threat still remaining, consciousness of the river's virtues and its lack of ability to handle floods is growing. Flood control, water quality and the quality of our life and environment are interrelated. Revitalization of the river is not only attainable, but is necessary if we intend to build a better Los Angeles.¹⁰³

Water is a galvanising element in the creation and nurturing of loving relationships between people and their river in Los Angeles. A deeply felt affinity with water, mysterious still, has made people care about the river. Water itself has made life possible, and made recreation possible, while at the same time being a source of peril for a city built right up to the river's edges. Water has carried pollution in liquid and solid forms, and in both its presence and absence has resulted in people taking the river seriously. Seeing a living river deepens people's connection with the place and, in many instances, turns them from observers to defenders, as it did for journalist Neil Cohen:

The current is fast here, and it's easy to tune out the freeway. You can see the little waterspouts where the river has worked itself under the stone footings and is bubbling up through cement. This creates small pools of algae and insects, a veritable banquet for the birds. If these tiny ponds were bigger, cattails and watercress could grow, and those species of birds that need a rest from the current would return to the L.A. River. I consider enlisting the aid of a sledgehammer, but that's definitely illegal.¹⁰⁴

It is in pockets like this where water makes life thrive, even without the aid of a sledgehammer.

¹⁰² Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim's Office, Occidental College Library.

¹⁰³ Jim Danza, FoLAR newsletter, 1994, Box 31, Folder 9, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

¹⁰⁴ Neil Cohen, final version of "Mark Twain!" article for *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1990, Box 60, Folder 1, *ibid*.

Saber told me a story about water that still makes me shudder. Actually, it's about the absence of water. You see, on Skid Row there are few, if any, publicly accessible water outlets. If you are sleeping rough during a hot, dry Los Angeles summer, dehydration is going to appear somewhere fairly high on the list of serious perils you face. Water, the most fundamental component of human life, is very, very hard to find. When Saber, with fellow graffiti artist FUTURA, hosted a group of wealthy executives on a Hennessy-sponsored Los Angeles street-art tour in 2012, here is what happened:

So I take 'em. And instead of taking them to see grand murals
I was like, "All right, you wanna see LA? Let's go."
I took 'em to fucking Skid Row. And I made the bus pull over.
We pulled over in front of a RETNA mural,
I made all the CEOs get out of the fucking bus,
empty their wallets and give change to all the homeless people
and I made 'em give all the drinks and all the sodas to everybody there
because a homeless guy can't even have access to water.
There's not even, there's not even one faucet accessible to those people in
that entire fucking neighbourhood, okay.
They can't, they don't even have access to water in an urbanized setting
when behind the walls within a foot away
or buried underneath them within six inches
is thousands of pipes for water.¹⁰⁵

A journalist on that tour wrote of being "humbled by [Saber's] compassion and command of the situation."¹⁰⁶ I am struck by the story because it reminds me that people in one of the world's most iconic and, by some measures, most successful cities go thirsty every day. And I am struck also by the symbolism of the story for thinking about the river.

I imagine a hypothetical where the future of the Los Angeles River hinges somehow on a bus tour, led by a take-no-prisoners docent much like Saber, and the tourists have that moment of revelation where they realise that everything is

¹⁰⁵ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

¹⁰⁶ Cori Clark Nelson, "Street Art and Los Angeles: Futura and Saber Tour the Town with Hennessy," accessed September 16, 2016. <http://laimyours.com/24625/street-art-and-los-angeles-futura-and-saber-tour-the-town-with-hennessy/>

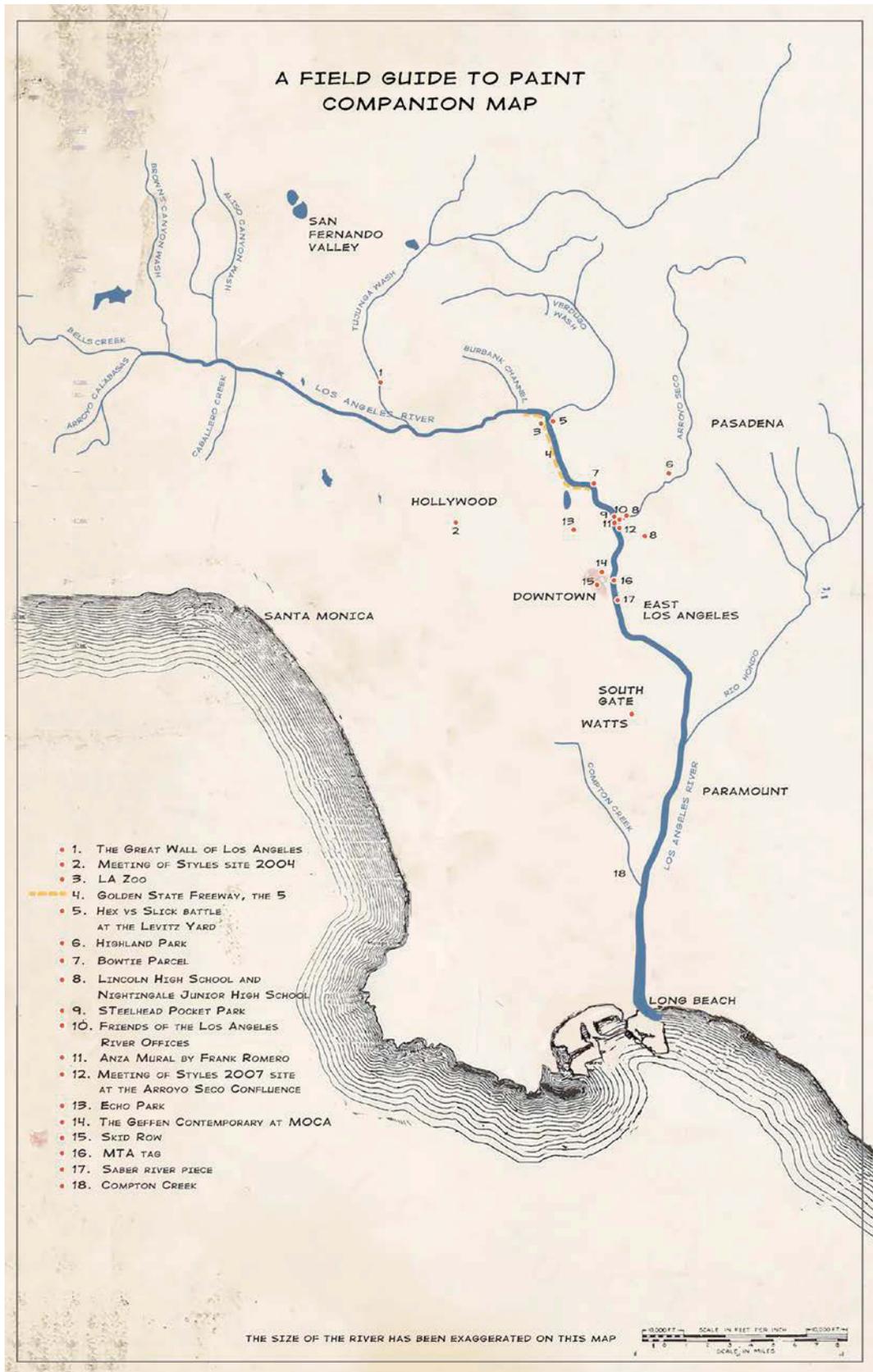
connected. That the convenience of paved streets and an extensively built environment is the reason that water races through stormwater drains and turns the river, periodically, into a raging torrent. That taking water from watersheds far from here to feed voracious appetites for lush green lawns and manicured, water-hungry gardens helped us to forget that keeping the Los Angeles River healthy is important. That climate change and the inevitable wear-and-tear on concrete infrastructure means that the channelised river needs rethinking, no matter what. The thing is, the complexities that the river poses are even greater than the stomach-churning problem of Skid Row rough sleepers being denied access to water. It strikes me that, while Saber was able to provide some temporary relief with loose change and bottled drinks to the problems of waterlessness in Skid Row, it was a momentary fix. For Skid Row, and for the river, what is really needed is deep structural change. For the river, this would mean a fundamental, whole-of-watershed reshaping of human beings' relationships with water, and with all of the life and growth that water enables. As Lewis MacAdams wrote in 1989:

The Los Angeles River, after all, will continue to flow, no matter what we do. Our task is to decide whether its course will be ugly or beautiful. It's about time to do just that.¹⁰⁷

Water is life. The presence of water in the river is in large part both the explanation and the catalyst for people's deep, sometimes surprising, love of this place. This is so because water sustains life. The waters that flow here are cleaner than many think, yet are far from pristine, and they come from many sources. Even in a river that is so extremely altered, the flow of water sustains flora and fauna, as well as providing a sense of nourishment and sustenance for the people who spend time there.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis MacAdams, newspaper article "Let the Los Angeles Go Green to the Sea," *Los Angeles Times*, 1989, Box 27, Folder 8, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

7. A Field Guide to Paint



“I know the surface of the LA River. It’s crumbly, on a, on a thin level it’s super crumbly. Depending on where it is, it’ll really break down, in other parts it’s pretty solid but there’s still, you can still kinda get a little roll of pebbles going, little, little rocks. So painting-wise you gotta really layer the shit on and then it gets sun-drenched and soaked with fucking sun, okay. Then you got layers of freeway dust. So let’s say you live in Echo Park, okay. Your walls will have black freeway dust, sticky dust. Especially in your cheap kitchen. That’s what you’re living through. So that’s on there. And then you have the water ... so all that paint’s going to get bombarded as well. So, basically, I kind of knew that, and I was like, ‘Well, the piece is going to age and form on its own.’ So, but it’s still going to sit as a ghost. So I’ve got to go back one day and do oil paint.” —Saber, Los Angeles, February 2016

People like to say the river is a canvas. Eighty-two kilometres ripe and ready for paint. Even with a fierce graffiti abatement program seeking to erase its marks, paint is a principal character in the Los Angeles River story. For Los Angeles artists Saber, Leo Limon, and Man One, the particularities of the river have enabled art that could have happened in no other place. In the Los Angeles River, paint is much more than just variously coloured substances stored in paint tins or spray cans. It is a protagonist; a reason for being; and a way of expressing love, hate, and belonging. Paint is having a voice, and having that voice be heard. Any field guide documenting the river as loved and lover must linger on paint—sprays, rollers, brushes, brooms dipped in paint, mason jars with melted road tar, acrylic, and oil markers.¹ Paint can bring about danger, inspiration, or salvation. In all its guises, paint is part of the Los Angeles River. Graffiti polarises people, it is ugly or beautiful, safety or danger, alienation or belonging, depending on who you are. For Saber:

a wall crushed in graffiti with trash in front of it is fucking beautiful.
I don’t know why. I’m dysfunctional. You know what I’m saying?²

¹ Ulysses L. Zemanova, *The Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River* (San Jose: Grimmelbein Kitamura, 2008).

² Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

Part of the *why* is certainly the intimacy of belonging, that your sense of belonging is expressed by leaving a mark on a place that has held you close, that is a haven, that is your home plate, your goal, your reason and your belonging.

7.1 RIVER CATZ

I met Leo Limon beneath the crisp winter sun in a tiny pocket park at the end of Oros Street in Frogtown in early 2016.³ The pocket of land is called Steelhead Park, in recognition of the river's indicator species, a trout that hasn't survived channelisation. We had planned to meet downtown at the capacious Los Angeles Public Library but, at the eleventh hour, Leo sent me a message to meet here instead. Wear sensible shoes, he reminded me. His last interview was with an undergraduate journalism student who wore stiletto heels, a considerable impediment to scaling the 60-degree tumbled stone riprap banks in this stretch of the river. We were there to talk, and to check in on one of Leo's iconic River Catz, painted on a drain cover just nearby. The cats are a manifestation of Leo's intimacy with, and a quintessential icon of, the Los Angeles River. There is even a replica cat painted on plywood board in the Smithsonian Institution.⁴ This is place-based art: the stormwater drain covers along the river take the shape of a stylised cat face, with pointy steel-plate ears and a round face (see Figure 35). Leo was not the first person to notice this effect, although he has become synonymous with it.

Half a century ago, Leo Limon was ten years old. His face was pressed against the window of the bus, peering impatiently at the river in search of something interesting on the way to the Los Angeles Zoo. He found it. In 1960 Felix the Cat

³ Leo Limon, interviewed by Tilly Hinton, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

⁴ Leo Limon's print work is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and he created a plywood replica River Catz work for an exhibition titled *Reclaiming the Edge: Urban Waterways and Civic Engagement* in 2013 at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum.

had been painted onto several drain covers, right by the 5 freeway. Burbank housewife Mrs Jacqueline Meyer had, you could say, been vandalising the Los Angeles River. With a tin of paint and a brush bundled up in a brown paper bag, riding rental bikes, the Meyer family descended into the riverbed to commit what Mrs Meyer described as “facing, not defacing.”⁵ While it was an unconventional way to spend Memorial Day for this otherwise—as far as we know—conventional family, that human beings want to leave their mark on the river, to express belonging, is commonplace. An archival image from the *Valley Times* (see Figure 34) is probably the lasting record of this adventure.

Mrs Meyer was no hardened graffiti writer but she did deploy one of graffiti culture’s most abiding principles: being seen. Freeways, especially one as busy and connective as the 5, are prime sites for making art visible. It is, in part, what motivates graffiti writers to risk life and limb, scaling structures such as freeway overpasses with tiny narrow ledges to initial them with a tag or some more complex mark. Saber, the graffiti artist who has fed his need for visibility by creating the world’s largest wildstyle graffiti piece on the river’s channel wall and by skywriting above Wall Street during the Occupy protests, explained it like this:

[the] piece is stationary and the whole world is moving around it,
so then you think how many people is it collecting?
Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding.
So freeways are like, you know dddddrrring, dddddrrring,
ddddddrrring. [laughs] Ah, it’s amazing.⁶

So, when Leo saw those Felix the Cat paintings from the bus window, so visible, a seed was sown in his mind. Later, in 1970, Leo was a junior at Lincoln High School, his friendship circle extended from there to Florence Nightingale Junior High. Both schools are east of the river; Nightingale is a block north of the Arroyo Seco and Lincoln is further south. To get between them on bicycle, the

⁵ Jack Smith. “Confessing to the Cat Caper.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1975.

⁶ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

trail took you close to the river, and so it became the middle ground place to hang out. There, Leo saw the same kinds of drain covers that Jacqueline Meyer had painted near the 5 freeway in 1960, further north. Already immersed in art and advertising through an arts development program for teens, Leo started experimenting with making his own mark by adding animal faces to the drains. He recalled, with a click of his fingers, what he thought at that time: “Hey, I’m getting into art. Maybe I should start something with the cats. You know?”⁷ That “something with the cats” has persisted, creating a unique visual iconography for the river.

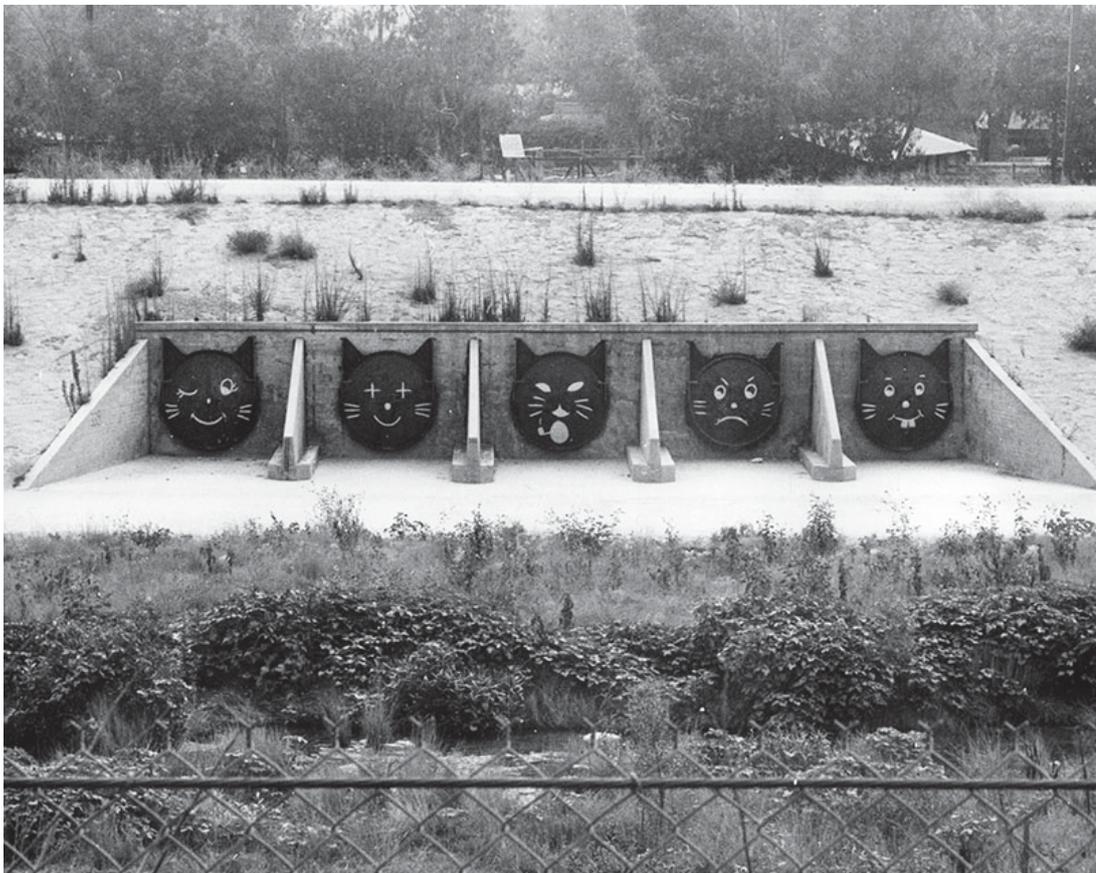


Figure 34: An early cat painting, probably the work of Jacqueline Meyer and her family. Image published in the *Valley Times*, dated July 29, 1960. Photo by the Dean Gordon, image from the LA Public Library Photographic Collection.

⁷ Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

Leo Limon's artistic practice, it seems to me, has always been a mix of success, struggle, and serendipity. It has always been about belonging in Los Angeles, leaving a mark, and having a public voice. Maybe it is that way for everyone. As a teenager, he was selected for a weekend art program. He had gained the attention of the selection committee because of some trees he painted on big sheets of Masonite hardboard. His paint of choice was discarded tattoo ink from his cousin. At the program, the first task was life drawing. A teenager, without easy access to nude models, Leo turned again to the resources of an older cousin. This time it was *Playboy* magazines, as he practised and practised and practised the human form. Leo was talented, though depicting hands and feet eluded him. His renditions of *Playboy* beauties had contorted bodies to hide their hands and feet away. The River Catz for which he is now so well known could have been nudes, other creatures, or cats painted in other media. Leo tried both horses and pigs, but it was his *gatitas* ("little cats"), these playful, colourful whimsical works with a direct bloodline back to Mrs Jacqueline Meyer, which persisted. In the early days, while still a high school junior, Leo started out using latex and enamel paints, and worked under a hot daytime Southern Californian sun, unsuccessfully:

I started in and it was terrible, it was terrible, just terrible.

I just made a mess, I didn't know the product, I made a mess.⁸

At that time, by chance, Leo looked down and found a disused spray can at his feet. "Why not?" he asked himself, and swapped the melting, failing latex and enamel for this new kind of paint.

And that is how I came to be, some forty years later, sitting under the warm sun watching Leo deftly handle a spray can and some acrylic paint marker pens, creating a red-lipped gatita on the buffed stormwater drain cover right by Steelhead Park. It was broad daylight and Leo was unconcerned. His ease

⁸ Ibid.

surprised me given the stories I knew already about Los Angeles' voracious commitment to graffiti abatement. I felt both excited and nervous. What was happening was undeniably illegal. He was defacing public property. But, at the same time, Leo Limon is something of a city institution, and he assured me he's never been arrested or charged for his art.⁹ He told me how, more than once, uniformed officials who have come upon him painting a drain cover let down their hackles when they realise "Oh, you're the guy who does the cats, oh, okay."¹⁰ This respect does not, however, stop his work from being obscured by abatement teams.

The cat had been painted over since he was last here, made beige, an assertion of belonging from the other side of the graffiti war. I watched Leo add the next layer to the contestation. It started with a ritual. He tidied the area around the drain cover, picking up the last of autumn's fallen leaves and the ever-present rubbish. This was no new ritual for Leo. A 1998 FoLAR newsletter article that reported that "a litter of kittens is being reborn at the riverbank, thanks to the caring husbandry of a one-man decorating crew named Leo Limon." It described how he used a small rake, nicknamed Junior, salvaged from the 1997 Los Angeles River Clean Up to prepare an area for painting. Finding the rake gave Leo the sign he needed, "that I was ready to start painting the cats again." One of the accompanying photographs shows "Leo and his adopted corner of the world."¹¹ It shows Leo belonging, intimate with the river.

The drain cover is slightly ajar, and Leo wondered aloud if someone might be living inside. There is always life at the river, one way or another. He knocked, shouting out greetings. We could have been loitering at someone's front door.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ FoLAR newsletter, 1998, Box 31, Folder 13, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

There was no answer. With occupancy status clarified, another conversation began. The ritual continued. This time Leo was talking with the nonhuman, inanimate world, asking the vanished, painted-over cat how she was doing, as if she was really alive:

How are you today? Hey, you look pretty good. Fresh. Guess what?
I brought you something! Guess what? Here kitty, kitty, kitty ...¹²

I counted off the gifts he had brought this vanished cat, his gatita. A calico shopping bag with some spray cans, tips, and acrylic markers, a lifetime of creativity, a relentless enthusiasm, and an almost religious zeal for the social and political power of painting cats on drain covers at the river:

I came up with an idea. Hey, I'd put out the word.
I'd like to become the Department of Catz, the LA River Catz.
They looked at me and I said, "I want to be the LA River Catz. I'll document it, wherever you say, all the way down to the ocean, I'll document it."
And then if I find any openings, places.
I was trying to create a crossing-bridges idea. School, school. Ah, a cat motto. A cat image. Logo. I paint one on this side, from this one on that side. What happened? Your catz crossed the bridge, you can too.
Every month two kids. Brooms. They go and they clean the walkways, create pen pals. Create chess clubs. Biking clubs. Have baseball games, barbecues.
See you're educating.¹³

It is never tiring to paint and repaint these cat faces, Leo assured me as he resurrects the abated gatita with bold curves of black aerosol paint and detail filled in with acrylic markers. She was pretty, this gatita. Arching eyebrows, a green heart-shaped nose, and an enormous smile with pouty red lips. Her eyes turned out cross-eyed. Leo laughed, and it was immediately political. "Look, I did it cross-eyed," he joked. "Is this Australia or is this New Zealand? And this is what the TPP is doing to my gatitas. It's crazy isn't it?"¹⁴

¹² Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

It was timely. That week, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) had been protested a few miles from here on the streets of Downtown Los Angeles and, just the day before, the agreement had been signed by the twelve countries party to the wide-ranging and controversial trade agreement. Leo recalled that this cat, in this location, had been re-created at least a dozen times over forty years. That day, while I watched, she emerged as a sweet, wide-eyed, Antipodean gatita (see Figure 35), watching in silent protest of the transnational flows of capital and agency, and the new/old models of imperialism that have wrapped our globe for so many centuries already. And, in so doing, Leo asserts once again that he has belonged at the river since he was a child, and always will.



Figure 35: One of Leo Limon's River Catz, freshly painted on February 5, 2016, near Steelhead Park, Frogtown. Photo by the author.

The relative ease with which Leo Limon paints at the river is in stark contrast with what happens to others. Abatement looms constantly. Leo called this "blotch city, blotched river ... they're spanking our hand every time you write

something.”¹⁵ The blotches are the marks of graffiti abatement (see Figure 36 and Figure 37). Tags, throw-ups, and pieces are partially, clumsily concealed with mismatched corrective abatement paint.¹⁶ Some artwork is safe because it is institutionally endorsed, such as Frank Romero’s *Anza Mural* on the river’s main stem and Judy Baca’s *The Great Wall of Los Angeles Mural* on the Tujunga Wash (see Figure 40). Everything else is up for grabs, vulnerable to abatement. Leo called it the “sterilization process,” his tongue firmly in cheek as he said, “it’s how to keep the neighborhood sterile, coz that’s how we want it.”¹⁷ For Man One, sterility went to the next level when, in 2007, the artworks created at Meeting of Styles—an international graffiti art event he curated on the concrete walls of the Arroyo Seco near its confluence with the Los Angeles River—was surreptitiously destroyed in the depths of night.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In graffiti terminology, a *tag* is the stylised signature of the writer and is the most prevalent of all graffiti forms. A *throw-up* is bubble-like letters executed quickly, again using the artist’s name. *Piece* is short for *masterpiece*, a much more elaborate and labour-intensive artwork. The heavy emphasis on letter forms in graffiti means that artists creating these works are more often referred to as writers. For more on terminology, see Matt Randal, “10 Graffiti Terms to Remember,” accessed 5 August, 2017. <http://www.widewalls.ch/10-graffiti-terms/tag/>

¹⁷ Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.



Figure 36: Blotches of graffiti abatement in the Equestrian District. Photo by the author.



Figure 37: "Blotch city, blotched river" in Downtown Los Angeles. Photo by the author.

7.2 MEETING OF STYLES

This is quite a story. Let's start at the start. It was late September, autumn 2004.¹⁸ Man One had been in an alleyway off Melrose Avenue in Hollywood, at an international collaborative arts event for graffiti writers called Meeting of Styles. Meeting of Styles is a global event series. At each one, around a hundred writers "from all over the world gather at walls for which permission to paint has been acquired and produce legal murals ... to showcase the diversity of styles from around the globe."¹⁹ Man One has been painting graffiti in LA since he was a teenager. By this time, he had carved out a hefty reputation as co-owner of Crewest Gallery and as an artist. Man One recalled being underwhelmed by the Melrose location. Not enough visibility, not enough festivity, and amazing works only being seen by other artists, rather than by the throngs of people driving, shopping, and hanging out along Melrose Avenue, just nearby. He knew his city well enough to know that it could offer a better location than this. He said as much to Manuel Gerullis, the German founder of the global Meeting of Styles movement.

A phone call came from Manuel a few years later. Meeting of Styles was returning to Los Angeles and perhaps Man One could suggest a suitably iconic location, given his sense that the city could do better than 7562 Melrose Avenue. The river came directly to his mind. It came to mind for two reasons. Firstly, the river was scored into his memory as a graffiti writer, memories inscribed of freedom to paint pieces, the close calls with police, the HEX vs SLICK graffiti battle²⁰ on the Levitz wall, and the graffiti he had made at the Arroyo Seco

¹⁸ Meeting of Styles, "24–26 September 2004, Los Angeles (USA)," Meeting of Styles, accessed May 16, 2016. <http://www.meetingofstyles.com/blog/24-26-september-2004-los-angeles-usa/>

¹⁹ Ronald Kramer, "Painting with Permission: Legal Graffiti in New York City," *Ethnography*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2010), 251.

²⁰ A graffiti battle is where two individuals, or groups of artists, each complete an artwork on a wall, with judges declaring a winner at the conclusion of the battle. This battle is

confluence years before. And, secondly, because he had been collaborating recently with Lewis MacAdams and FoLAR, planning a river art event. So, FoLAR secured permits for Meeting of Styles to happen at the Arroyo Seco confluence, a site selected for its vertical walls and easy access, including for cars to drive down into the site.²¹

It strikes me, on reflection after my conversation with Man One, that Meeting of Styles must have been almost surreal for him. Picture it: against a barrage of setbacks, Man One and FoLAR delivered a global graffiti event in the bed of the concrete river that was so important to them both, a place both marginal to the city and pivotal to graffiti culture. I run through a mental checklist of Man One's earlier river experiences. So many times, they were about avoiding the public gaze while creating art, mitigating the risks of chase, arrest, incarceration, and gang violence:

Exhibit A: I think of his friends from Berlin, who insisted on trying to paint graffiti in the river when visiting Los Angeles in the 1990s. Man One knew it was dangerous. He advised them against it and he stayed home. The river was "burned": unsafe for graffiti writers to be there because of surveillance cameras, trip wires, silent alarms, police attention, and harsher-than-ever-before penalties for those caught.²² The "War on Graffiti" was in full effect at that time.²³ The Germans went anyway, escorted by a local writer who knew how to escape. Security gave chase and a squad car approached with lights and sirens. There

famous in Los Angeles graffiti history and received ample attention from the graffiti community and the general public. Hex (Hector Rios) and Slick (Richard Wyrzatscht), two artists in their early twenties, battled at Levitz Yard, an industrial site in Glendale where the owners had granted permission for graffiti artists to paint. See, for example, Denise Hamilton, "Dueling Spray Cans: Graffiti Artists in Showdown on Furniture Warehouse Wall." *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1990.

²¹ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

was only one way out, jumping onto a moving freight train. The local guy did just that but the German visitors ran instead, into the water of the river, through unfamiliar terrain, they raced to escape the searchlights now seeking them out from a police helicopter circling above. A homeless encampment became their shelter; they cowered wet and cold under blankets until the morning when they found their way back to Man One's studio. He was right, the river was far too "hot" to be safe.

Exhibit B: Sometimes the river was hot and dangerous but, other times, it was more like a playground because of the paucity of people there. Danger varied according to the politics of the city and the particularities of the place.

Crackdowns on graffiti came both from gangs and from law enforcement; a flourish of attention from either could cause turmoil. River locations, which had either poor access for police or poor lines of sight for citizen informants, lent themselves to graffiti at a more leisurely pace. Without the risks of being seen, graffiti became possible in broad daylight. People could spend time honing their skills rather than racing against time so as to not be caught. The isolation had been an asset for their graffiti practice.

Exhibit C: To stay alive, Man One and his crew sometimes painted in the early hours of the morning, at 6 a.m., before gang members were likely to be awake, because certain gangs had a "greenlight" — a shoot-to-kill order — on graffiti writers. Graffiti writers made gangs resentful by "bringing unwanted heat to their neighborhoods." In response, some graffiti writers started carrying guns for protection, and authorities then started treating many graffiti crews as gangs.²⁴

Exhibit D: Lastly, even in collaborating with FoLAR to produce arts events on the river, there had been substantial obstacles. Sponsorship deals failed to

²⁴ Ibid.

materialise for the initial street festival Man One and Lewis MacAdams had dreamed up together. And then, uncharacteristically for Los Angeles in September, it had rained on the scheduled Meeting of Styles weekend. The river's design, to move water through the city as quickly as possible, meant risks of raging floodwaters right where the event was to happen. With a week-long delay, floodwaters calmed but some of the big-name international artists had pre-existing flight arrangements and could not stay.

For those who could stay until the rescheduled date, the next weekend in September 2007, the Arroyo Seco confluence was filled with the smells of spray paints and barbecue. Around 200 artists painted the vertical river walls with more than 900 square metres of mural art. They could drive in. The artist were in plain sight, with appropriate permits, and were making their mark legitimately. There were cars, film crews, a DJ mixing music, art materials, ladders, friends, family, and a palpably positive energy. So many people were there. The guest list included Chaz Bojorquez, the man Saber nominated respectfully as "the missing link to the Old World" because of how he painted graffiti at the river in Highland Park, in north-east Los Angeles, in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵ Man One concurs. Chaz Bojorquez is "one of our elders," he told me.²⁶

At Meeting of Styles, Chaz Bojorquez was painting a title wall in old-school Los Angeles script (see Figure 39) when a police officer arrived, flashing lights in an all-too-familiar muscle flex against graffiti. Chaz, with the swagger of a respected elder, politely let the officer know that law enforcement had no place there. Graffiti culture, community, and river life coincided and, despite the risks of gang territoriality, everything stayed safe. There was still relief in Man One's voice, nine years hence, when he recalled to me that it was "such a peaceful

²⁵ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

²⁶ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

positive event, you know what I'm saying ... there was like a peace treaty for that weekend, and no one did anything."²⁷ Jill Sourial, at that time a senior staffer working with councilman Ed Reyes, dropped in to experience Meeting of Styles. She, too, vividly remembered the smell of paint, and the fun and festive atmosphere. For her, it was a "really interesting event and [an] interesting kind of aftermath of the whole thing."²⁸ The story could end at "interesting." Fringe culture meets mainstream. Gang wars truce for a few days. Vertical grey riverbank walls get draped with art that tells stories about the river, its city and people. Then Meeting of Styles moves on to its next city. But there was no such simple, or happy, ending.



Figure 38: A moment at the Meeting of Styles, Arroyo Seco Confluence, 2007. Photo by 236ism.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jill Sourial, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Jill's office, The Nature Conservancy, Downtown Los Angeles.



Figure 39: Meeting of Styles title piece, showing distinctive Los Angeles letter forms, by Chaz Bojorquez. Image by Mark Mauer.

Shelly Backlar remembered that what happened next were her darkest moments since she started working at FoLAR in 2003, becoming one of the river's foremost advocates and negotiators.²⁹ Man One still seethed with anger, remembering it. Hung on his East Los Angeles studio wall, vibrating with the whirr of sewing machines from the small-scale clothing manufacturer next door, is a painting of a grotesque inflated pig with a human face and enormous swollen teats. He calls it *Power Trip*. It's a portrait of Gloria Molina, a County Supervisor when Meeting of Styles happened. She made herself, after the fact, the event's arch nemesis. Man One explained to me how the painting expresses his feelings of "the monster of the political system kind of crushing you."³⁰ He shrugged, made wise by that experience and others I suspect:

This was, ah, not the inspiration you want to get sometime, you know, going through the process.

²⁹ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

³⁰ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

But luckily as an artist I have this outlet.
I was able to get all my frustrations and feelings on that whole thing on
this piece.³¹

Meeting of Styles had been a runaway success. Sanctioned by way of the required permits, which FoLAR had arranged, the Arroyo Seco confluence had become a vibrant outdoor art gallery in just one weekend. Permitting distinguished this event from much of the other graffiti that adorned the river's banks. It was official, approved, above ground, and legitimate.

Then two things happened. A Los Angeles County official decided that some of the work was offensive. And other graffiti artists—reminded perhaps that the river could be a giant canvas—extended the coverage across another 450 square metres in the week that followed. As well as graffiti writers traipsing down to the concrete, many others swarmed to see the art. It was light then darkness, sweet success swiftly followed by bitter complexity. Shelly Backlar remembered how, despite “the impetus and the drive ... things still fell apart.”³² It was a success for a short while, as Man One described:

people kept flocking down to the river,
and walking the river, and taking photographs and taking video.
Photographers went down there and artists went down there,
professors were bringing their students down there to view the artwork.
I mean, it was incredible,
now there was a reason for people to go to the river,
which was kind of the whole point of FoLAR, right?
That was their interest: we need to make the river, you know, a place
of gathering, a place that's interesting, and we want it to serve the
community.
So we had accomplished that, which was amazing, I thought.
We were all happy; we were all celebrating.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

³³ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

The basking continued for a handful of days, until Gloria Molina's office called FoLAR, demanding that the graffiti be removed:

And FoLAR was confused, like, "What graffiti?"
Like, "What? Those are murals, they aren't graffiti."
And she goes, "Well, whatever they are, I want it out of there."
And they were like, "No, we got a permit," and no. Like that.
There's no, you know, we did everything by the book.³⁴

Within a week, Molina and a huddle of her staffers were at the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens meeting with FoLAR and Man One, who together had brought Meeting of Styles to the river confluence. It was a David and Goliath battle. Molina was reportedly furious. Joe Edmiston described her anger:

unfortunately, there were some very demonstrative things done there, including, um, some purple women who were, who had outsized, ah, body parts that absolutely, um, the supervisor for the area Gloria Molina just went crazy.
Somehow, somebody told her about it, or somehow, so she went and took a look at it and was just off-the-wall crazy.
There was this one very prominent ...
This was very clear, direct, right out there and so your eye wasn't distracted by anything except ...³⁵

He trailed off for a moment and didn't return to the thought. I must confess, I didn't press for details about which purple female body parts were outsized, but it's an easy guess. Since then, though, I have trawled through photos of the Meeting of Styles and I am yet to be offended by any large-breasted, purple-skinned women. There was a nymph-like girl with purple skin wearing a modest green dress and another, topless yes, with green skin. Both say more about connection with nature than they do about nudity or lewdness, to my sensibilities at least (see Figure 41 and Figure 42). Molina's office came down hard, Joe Edmiston recalled:

they just tried to unwind everything that they did.
Unfortunately, they claimed, you know, they lied basically:
"No, we never gave approval or anything."
Well, they had. They had the documentation.
They never said, "We're going to have approval over any of the artistic

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

content,” they just said, “Okay, you can do this.”
So, unfortunately, there hasn’t been any more legal artwork on the river
and eventually I think that will change. But we have a new supervisor
now; she may be more willing.³⁶

Man One confirmed this recollection. He remembered the meeting at the FoLAR office. When Judy Baca’s iconic mural *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* was mentioned, Molina said she would destroy that too if she could. The *Great Wall* is a massive mural that stretches for almost a kilometre along the concrete channel wall of the Tujunga Wash, one of the river’s tributaries.



Figure 40: Great Wall of Los Angeles mural on Tujunga Wash by Judy Baca. Photograph by the author.

The Great Wall of Los Angeles is an epic artwork. The brainchild of a much-loved Chicana artist who, with 400 collaborators— young people being paid \$2.32 an hour— over five summers from 1974, painted panels depicting “the” — history of Los Angeles. This is perhaps a tongue-in-cheek use of the monolithic preposition, given that the work fiercely explores history from the margins—

³⁶ Ibid.

women, immigrants, the poor, and the dispossessed.³⁷ It rumbles with visual reminders that there is no singular retelling of history, there are many, and some of those histories span across the Tujunga Wash walls (see Figure 40). The Army Corps of Engineers bankrolled the project and, in a lavishly illustrated promotional brochure from 1976, they declared the community beautification project a great success. The paid employment of wayward youths to realise the artistic work was declared “an outstanding contribution to the community.” Summer after summer, it offered “juvenile-justice-referred youth a chance to gain a valuable measure of self-worth, an opportunity for self-expression, and an appreciation for art.”³⁸ If Man One understood Gloria Molina correctly in that heavy-handed meeting at FoLAR in 2007 — that the County Supervisor wished she could destroy the mural that the Army Corps, Judy Baca and hundreds of assistants had created as an act of beautification and community development — this was undoubtedly a declaration of war on paint and painters, on people marking their mark in public space.

³⁷ Social and Public Art Resource Center, “The Great Wall of Los Angeles” Social and Public Art Resource Center, accessed June 8, 2016. <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>; “The Great Wall – History and Description,” Social and Public Art Resource Center, accessed June 8, 2016. <http://sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-part-2>

³⁸ Brochure on the Los Angeles River Tujunga Wash Project, 1976, Box 65, Folder 8, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).



Figure 41: *Cultivate Love* piece by Mear One. Photographer unknown.

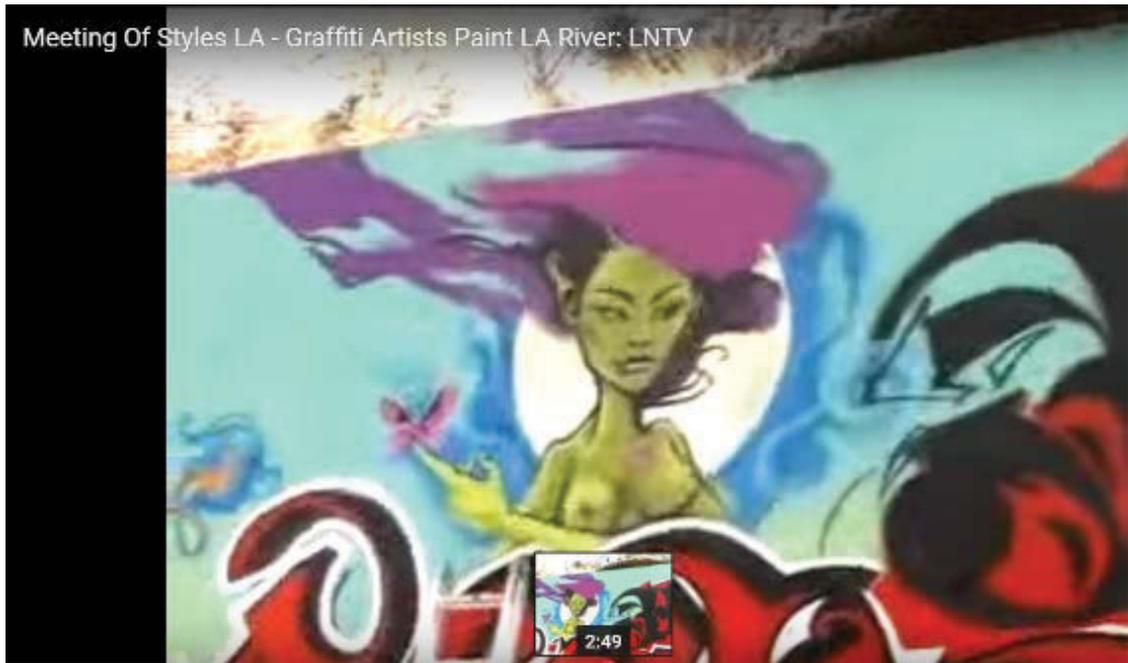


Figure 42: Meeting of Styles piece. title and artist unknown. A still from “Graffiti Artists Paint the LA River” by LNTV.

On the grounds of nudity and profanity, the County Supervisor insisted that the murals must be removed. There had been no editorial element in the permits but, suddenly, Gloria Molina was insisting on creative control. One of Molina’s weapons was a threat to never grant another permit to FoLAR. Such an outcome would have been devastating for an organisation devoted to bringing people to gather at the river, an organisation that would always be negotiating the complex legal mire of river access and permitting.³⁹ Another of the County’s complaints was that the extent of the Meeting of Styles murals was expanding, with others gathering by the river to paint additional pieces. Indeed, the stretch of murals had grown by almost half its size again within a week of the event. FoLAR sought compromise. They agreed to two things. They would “put the word out” to writers to stop painting at the confluence. And they would pay for the removal of extraneous graffiti, which had not been part of the Meeting of Styles event.

³⁹ Friends of the Los Angeles River, “Recommendations for Near-term Recreational Access and Use of the Los Angeles River.”

This was an unpalatable truce for FoLAR and Man One, but a workable one. But Molina and her people were not happy. They wanted everything removed. Again, accusations were made about “nudity, and profanity and pornography.” Man One catalogued the possible offending works, just two: a bare-breasted green nymph and a pig wearing a suit.⁴⁰ The argument volleyed back and forth. The meeting ran for around an hour and ended, Man One remembered, with Supervisor Molina barking at a staffer, “make sure that they never get a permit to do anything in the river again.”⁴¹ Over the next couple of days, FoLAR started getting quotes for removal of work beyond the bridge. It would be thousands of dollars, but at least the Meeting of Styles murals would be protected. Or so they thought. Another few days passed and Man One received a phone call: “Hey man, someone has been down there and painted over the murals.” Man One was incredulous. He drove down to the confluence and found that a quarter of the Meeting of Styles murals were painted over. He knew for sure it was a professional job. Measuring more than 6 metres high, the works would have been difficult to erase:

It was professionally done.
I mean, it was huge murals, you know, they were twenty-foot tall.
It was done with a machine, it wasn't like some kid out there with a little roller. I mean, it was professionally done.
It was painted over, in gray, just painted over.
But right in the middle of the wall where it ended, it looked like someone told them to stop, or they ran out of paint, or something, but it was a very abrupt finish.
And we were like, “What the heck?”⁴²

The County were quick to deny responsibility. The City, previously supportive, now also objected to the work while denying responsibility for its abrupt removal.⁴³ The story hit the media in the city and across the country:

⁴⁰ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jay Babcock, “Molina's Mural Mess,” Nature Trumps: An L.A. River blog, accessed June 11, 2016. <https://naturetrumps.wordpress.com/2008/01/03/molinas-mural-mess/>

No one was able to get to the source because, obviously, it was done very well,
[the] paperwork was hidden extremely well, and we weren't able to find out who did it.⁴⁴

Everyone was looking for the responsible party, trying to cut through the denials from City and County officials. It was an intriguing and unjust series of events that captivated media, lawyers, and civil libertarians. It even prompted some Angelenos to write the code words for wanting somebody murdered—*Gloria Molina 187*—on walls, getting the police involved:

Even the cops would tell me, like, "You know we have to follow up on all these things because, when someone makes a threat towards a politician, we have to take it seriously." But why, why, what's the big deal? Like, why did they paint it over?
The cop is telling me. He's like, "I went down there to go investigate this and those murals look great."
The cop was telling me how nice it looks down there, you know.
And I'm like, "I agree with you, I don't know what's going on."⁴⁵

Soon after, the County Board of Supervisors approved an emergency motion brought by Gloria Molina to the meeting on December 18, 2007, to authorise the destruction of the remainder of the murals, to use paint to remove all traces that Meeting of Styles had ever happened at the confluence, and to send the bill to FoLAR.

Each meeting of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors begins with a religious invocation. On that day, the invocation was made by Rev. Dr Arthur Chang, founder of the Church of Religious Science:

in this moment of retreat into the oneness of life, we are sensing and feeling into that place, that [Rumi]* speaks about when he says, "out beyond right-doing and wrongdoing, there's a field. I'll meet you there."
And so we meet beyond a field of pairs of opposites, pairs of

⁴⁴ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

* In a glitch of transcription, the official record has Rev Dr Chang saying, "that room he speaks about." On reading the text version, I figured he was talking about Jesus Christ and a metaphorical room but watching the video recording it becomes clear that Rumi is in fact who is being quoted here.

contentiousness where we know ourselves as one, as the light within us know [sic] itself as one.⁴⁶

I think about his words. About that field out there, way beyond the tetchiness of “right-doing and wrongdoing.” I close my eyes and ask myself what it looks like. The answer comes easily: it looks like the confluence of the Arroyo Seco and the Los Angeles River during that Meeting of Styles event in late September 2007. That place where paint and painting had—for a little while at least—erased the heavily fortified barriers between gang members, graffiti writers, kids, environmentalists, cyclists, passers-by, residents, spectators, the international graffiti community, police, media, and government agencies. Where people’s gender, income, housing status, and ethnic identity made for belonging rather than alienation. Where people did the thing that they have always done by the river. They gathered. But my imagined field, I suspect, is not the same as Gloria Molina’s.

For Molina, what happened at the confluence merited an emergency motion being brought to the Board at its final meeting of the year, that very same meeting which began with the Rev. Dr Chang’s invocation to “know ourselves as one.” Emergency motions are rare. This one, about mural artwork in the Los Angeles River, was one of only three moved during the Board of Supervisors’ fifty-seven meetings held in 2007. The other two related to events one might more readily associate with emergency: the first, a school suffering a suspected arson attack, razing to the ground its much-loved auditorium just before the commencement of state testing; and the second, an unexpected state budget cut of almost \$10 million for much-needed public-health programs in the County.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ County of Los Angeles, “The Meeting Transcript of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors: December 18, 2007,” County of Los Angeles, accessed April 17, 2016. http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/sop/transcripts/080952_12-18-07.PDF

⁴⁷ Text searching of transcripts from 2007 (http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/transcripts/transcripts_2007.asp#P-1_0) found emergency motions used in only three instances. The Meeting Transcript of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors August 28, 2007 p. 38; The Meeting Transcript of

Supervisor Molina read and moved the emergency motion. It started out dry and formal:

In September of this year, the Department of Public Works granted a permit for the placement of mural artwork on the flood control district's right of way along the Arroyo Seco and its confluence with the Los Angeles River. The mural artwork was authorized at the behest of the Friends of the Los Angeles River.⁴⁸

More details were provided, as formality shifted to sensationalism in the motion. Molina warned of "graffiti and other graphic elements which are contrary to the public health and welfare and offensive to many" and concluded that "as we all know, and we've seen, graffiti is detrimental to the communities in which it is located. And it can lead to violence and even to [the] death of innocent persons as we saw with Mr. Whitehead and with Maria Hicks."⁴⁹ The emergency motion was silent about the illegal, mysterious removal of the work, for which no one has ever claimed responsibility. Supervisor Knabe seconded the motion, declaring the mural situation to be "outrageous." There was no further discussion. The remainder of the artwork was destroyed on day ninety-one, as soon as the required ninety-day notice period had elapsed. Man One recalled seven months of nervous exhaustion, and Shelly Backlar readily

the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors May 22, 2007, p. 215;
<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/21/local/me-garfield21>;

⁴⁸ County of Los Angeles, "The Meeting Transcript of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors: December 18, 2007."

⁴⁹ Mr Whitehead was a homicide victim at his home in West Valinda in March 2006. It was reported that he apprehended two gang members who were vandalising a neighbour's garage with spray paint. They fired several shots into Mr Whitehead's upper body and he died in hospital, ("L.A. Man Shot Dead over Graffiti," Street Gangs Forum, accessed June 12, 2016. <http://www.streetgangs.com/billboard/viewtopic.php?t=12556>). In August 2007, much-loved Pico Rivera resident, Maria Hicks, flashed her car headlights and sounded her horn at a tagger who she had seen vandalising a wall near her home. As she followed him in her car, another vehicle started to tail her, eventually firing several shots into her car. A bullet in the back of her head ended her life. (Tami Abdollah and Andrew Blankstein, "A Life Lost to Graffiti," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2007.)

described the experience as a “crisis,” the worst she had ever faced in her time at FoLAR.⁵⁰

The fallout from Meeting of Styles tells many stories. One of these is the fine line between right and wrong. It is paper-thin. Take, for example, the invocation of gangs in the protest against graffiti:

This isn't gang graffiti—people marking off their neighborhood or their territory.
This is art. We just happen to use spray cans.
But they're trying to instil fear in people to get their way.
This was a great, positive event that brought out thousands of artists and neighborhood people to one of the ugliest, most neglected areas of the city, and now they're trying to turn it into something else.⁵¹

Paint was the binding force behind Meeting of Styles. It brought talented artists together to create murals celebrating the Los Angeles River, an intimate act of being in and depicting place. It drew others to the river, like a magnet:

It was such a dramatic thing that happened.
You know, if the point was to get publicity for the river and for FoLAR, well, we did that. It worked.
Unfortunately, you know, all our art got destroyed in the process.⁵²

Meeting of Styles expressed the river's quality of being a place for everybody, a place of belonging. As people painted artworks about the river, on its towering walls at the confluence, they were being intimate with it.

The emergency motion included that FoLAR would have to bear the costs of the graffiti removal. Man One told me that a \$10,000 bill was sent to FoLAR and, almost a decade later, it remains unpaid.⁵³ There is a record of this in the FoLAR

⁵⁰ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

⁵¹ Matthew Fleischer, “Gloria Molina Orders Meeting of Styles Mural Whitewashed.” *LA Weekly*, December 21, 2007.

⁵² Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

archives, too.⁵⁴ Weathering a storm of abatement was enough to bear for FoLAR and the Meeting of Styles local organisers, let alone paying for it:

When you have a permit to create a mural,
and then you have to remove it because someone in power doesn't like it,
without any dialogue, that's censorship. That's a dictatorship.⁵⁵

The murals could have been sandblasted or whitewashed. It is fairly routine, though controversial, to use pressure hoses to strip away every trace, transforming art into tiny chips of paint. The other—whitewashing or buffing—simply hides it away. The County Department of Public Works chose the latter option. This means that the Meeting of Styles murals, all 900 square metres of them, plus the extra tagging, the extra pieces, and probably even the gang kill-order on Gloria Molina, still remain, hidden beneath layers of grey abatement paint. Saber describes these artworks as ghosts:

I knew, I know, that some way, shape, form, or fashion, that the ghost of that piece will come back in some way.
So that's me, is the need to feel relevant and live on, you know.⁵⁶

Ghosts of art, culture, anger, love, and displacement all languish at the confluence, gathering at the river.

7.3 GRAFFITI ERADICATION

Joe Linton has been watching, drawing, walking, and biking the river since the early 1990s. Of Joe, Lewis MacAdams said, “he has come to know more about the Los Angeles River than almost anyone else alive today.”⁵⁷ When Joe thinks about graffiti, it is as a marker of jurisdictional borders. He recalled the period when the County would abate graffiti but the Army Corps would leave it be. This changed when then-Supervisor Molina lobbied for the Corps to be more militant about removing graffiti and, now, an annual federal allocation of

⁵⁴ Undated, Box 110, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁵⁵ Fleischer, “Gloria Molina Orders Meeting of Styles Mural Whitewashed.”

⁵⁶ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

⁵⁷ Linton and Friends of the Los Angeles River, *Down by the Los Angeles River: Friends of the Los Angeles River’s Official Guide*, xvi.

\$6 million funds the Army Corps' graffiti abatement program. Joe thought out loud about where else that quantum of funds might be spent. It seemed to him like a waste; he "would rather they did habitat restoration." Compton Creek, Joe told me, was a prime example of these jurisdictional switches, because it moves several times between federal and county jurisdiction. Abatement would stop abruptly every time a boundary switched into federal territory and resume once back within county lines.⁵⁸ Abatement is appreciated by many, of course. Jim Burns associated his initial fear of the river back to graffiti. He readily described his emotional reaction to it as one of hatred. Murals are okay, he told me, but graffiti is "an exclusionary thing and a threat [of] violence."⁵⁹ For him, as for many, graffiti is the *broken window* referred to in the criminology principle that, if a neighbourhood looks dishevelled, unruly behaviour will quickly follow.⁶⁰ Joe Edmiston—head of an agency that endlessly removes graffiti within their park facilities—was also frustrated by it. He was quick to tell me that it is "a horrible problem" that must be eradicated "one hundred per cent."⁶¹

Kayaker George Wolfe misses the graffiti; for him, it is a signature that gives the river character:

The LA River, if it has a signature, it's this weird mix now of things. Like graffiti juxtaposed to sycamores and willows and whatnot in a kind of crazy combination of manmade wildlife and natural, or nonhuman, wildlife. To me, that's always been something that's kind of peculiarly LA-like. That's one of the reasons I like the river sort of, as it is because it is like no other river and it brings forth things you'd never find elsewhere. That's sort of the twisted fun of it.⁶²

⁵⁸ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

⁵⁹ Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim's Office, Occidental College Library.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Bernard E. Harcourt, "Reflecting on the Subject: A Critique of the Social Influence Conception of Deterrence, the Broken Windows Theory, and Order-maintenance Policing New York Style," *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 97, no. 2 (1998).

⁶¹ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

⁶² George Wolfe, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George's Home, Los Angeles.

One of the pieces that George Wolfe remembers is an enormous MTA tag that stretched for almost a kilometre along the channel wall of the river in Downtown Los Angeles (see Figure 45). It, along with Saber's renowned wildstyle graffiti piece on the river, were abated by the Army Corps in 2009 in a large-scale "clean up ... of urban blight" along the river and its tributaries.⁶³ The process took almost \$1 million of federal stimulus funds. It was launched with a media opportunity, a kind of reverse ribbon-cutting ceremony in the bed of the river right by the MTA tag. Sergeant major Jeffrey Koontz stumbled over his words a little when he described it as an "awards ceremony or presentation ceremony." It was an unconventional ceremony because nothing was being launched or recognised, except absence. The only thing officials attending the ceremony could do was don a chemical safety mask for a moment and wave a spray-paint hose around, weapon-like, in promise of the forthcoming abatement program. Smiling officials gathered for the launch to speak heavy-handedly about the criminality of graffiti, praise the Sherriff's Department for prosecuting graffiti writers, seek further funding, and make promises about the returned hope for the city and the river brought about by graffiti abatement.⁶⁴



Figure 43: Graffiti removal, marking the commencement of a large-scale Army Corps program of graffiti removal in the river. Images from a brief film by John Doe.

Saber told me how the War on Graffiti program added:

⁶³ Stompsdown, "Graffiti removal in Los Angeles," accessed June 21, 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_EEcu8hW4I

⁶⁴ John Doe, "Farewell to the Saber Piece and the MTA Roller: Just Wanted to Pay My Respects You Know?," accessed June 21, 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMnti5yEr_k

I don't know, eight thousand more gallons of paint to the surface of the LA River,
I don't know, ten thousand more gallons.
I don't know how much fucking, how many gallons you guys used, I mean, come on.⁶⁵

The paint colour used for buffing graffiti in Los Angeles is called Palomino Beige. It is drab. As Joe Mozingo wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*:

even [graffiti abatement] success is not always pretty. Once-scenic brick storefronts are now lacquer-smooth with dozens of coats of palomino beige. Freeway signs are ringed with ominous loops of razor wire to discourage would-be taggers. Windows are shuttered with steel curtains and stucco walls are splotted with haphazard rectangles of mismatched paint.⁶⁶

Saber has called it "the color of suppression."⁶⁷ The artist statement for one of his gallery exhibitions, a 2012 show at the Known Gallery in Los Angeles, tells us that:

Saber sees beauty in the chaos of the streets. The beautification of a city instead of the depreciation of a city. The constant fight against as Saber puts it "the struggle and innovation that is covered in 1,800 layers of 'Palomino Beige'." The constant fight against the city's attempts to white wash over the beauty of graffiti.⁶⁸

Abatement comes quick and often, by design, to minimise the exposure of graffiti and to keep things clean. For Man One, the normality of abatement never counters his desire for work to be long lasting:

To be honest, whenever I paint I want it to last forever, you know. I know the reality is it probably won't. But I do paint with the intention that it's going to last forever.⁶⁹

For Leo Limon, there is excitement in the fresh canvas provided by a lick of abatement paint. Towards the end of our interview, I watched him carefully as we walked together to the Oros Street stormwater drain cover that Leo has been painting and repainting for decades now. It is a battle of wills between his

⁶⁵ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

⁶⁶ Joe Mozingo, "There's No Ending Graffiti," *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1998.

⁶⁷ Nelson, "Street Art and Los Angeles: Futura and Saber Tour the Town with Hennessy."

⁶⁸ Graffitiurism, "Preview Saber 'Beautification' at Known Gallery," accessed May 12, 2017. <http://graffiturism.com/2012/07/21/preview-saber-beautification-at-known-gallery/>

⁶⁹ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

smiling cat faces and the dull beige abatement paint—between art and a fight against what is alleged to be an urban blight. That day, we found the cover buffed, clean, and erased. I felt heavy in the pit of my stomach. I’ve never painted on a wall—mural, graffiti, or otherwise. I am not sure how it would feel to make something only to see it vanish into nothing, layer upon layer of paint marking the complex and conflicted interplay between law enforcement and the person who might be labelled either artist or vandal, depending how you see the world. I imagined how I would feel if the words I crafted were erased, or a garden I built was destroyed. I looked to Leo. He was not crestfallen, as I imagine I would be. He is used to this: “Yep, see the sterilization crew has arrived ... yep, once again.”⁷⁰ When I asked how he feels, he was quick to answer that it’s a good thing, “wonderful, it’s fresh canvas, it’s fresh canvas,” he reassured me.

The river is many shades of grey. There is the grey concrete, of course, then layered over it is a palimpsest, layers and layers of graffiti, and the grey abatement paint that typically follows. It depresses Man One:

just gray, gray paint over everything. That to me is like, that’s the moment that I feel the most helpless, the most hopeless, the most despair, because it’s such a waste, you know. Gray makes you feel gray, you know?⁷¹

It intrigues me. I always wonder what lies beneath and also why, with all the technology of colour matching, graffiti abatement paint never, ever actually matches the colour of the concrete. The abatement, the massive patches that prompted Leo Limon to call Los Angeles “blotch city,” are as visually prominent as the tags and pieces they seek to disappear from the city’s landscape.

⁷⁰ Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

⁷¹ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One’s Studio, Los Angeles.



Figure 44: Abatement in the Downtown Los Angeles stretch. Photo by the author.

Abatement intervenes at most junctures throughout the creative process. There is the removal afterwards, hiding traces by painting over or blasting away with:

these huge pressure washers that we take out there.

It's a never-ending fight.

You see you have the gang graffiti, which is the attempt to claim turf, then you have graffiti that is just sort of proclaiming ... a proclamation to the world, and then you have the tagging, which is the individual tagger. I've been here. Every, every week we have to do fresh patch-up work, to take care of it.

It's an ongoing, a very difficult problem.

It's a whole cultural, it's a huge cultural issue.

I do not know how to address a culture that considers it to be valid to do that.⁷²

There's also fence building, actual and metaphorical. During 1997, when Saber spent a year painstakingly roller-painted the largest "wildstyle" graffiti piece in the world, the artwork that Man One described as "the singular most important piece ever done in the river,"⁷³ authorities built a new kind of fence to repel him:

⁷² Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

⁷³ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

because they didn't like me going in and out of there.
So they built this gnarly fence that, if you hop it, it'll shred your whole
body like so.
Before that they had razor wire, and I mean I got cut so many times.
This one time a piece of razor wire went up my finger, it was raining
blood.⁷⁴

Metaphorical fences are built by enacting laws that target graffiti writers. Saber and Man One both talked about the change of policy in 2009, resulting in graffiti writers being liable to be imprisoned for doing as little as spending time together. Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times* about the proposal, City Attorney Carmen Trutanich described it this way:

I'm going to put together an end-of-days scenario for these guys. If you want to tag, be prepared to go to jail. And I don't have to catch you tagging. I can just catch you ... with your homeboys.⁷⁵

It was during this end-of-days scenario that Saber's piece, the MTA tag, and countless others were destroyed. Simultaneously, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, was preparing to mount a large-scale graffiti and street-art exhibition, called *Art in the Streets*, opening in 2011. Law enforcement against graffiti writers grew more strident than ever, Saber told me, "that's when it hit its highest pitch." A legal graffiti event, on an otherwise quiet Sunday, was raided by twenty police, riot squads, machine guns, and helicopters. There was an outbreak of angry tweets from a Sheriff's Department Twitter account. Police were destroying graffiti with their own supplies of spray paint. Raids on houses, and parents' houses, became routine. Law enforcement officials attended exhibition openings and art shows, but not to appreciate the work. The harsh treatment of Saber and his friends was as a message to graffiti writers all over the city. This is how Saber remembered that time.⁷⁶ When fellow writer REVOK was arrested in 2011 for having a spray tip in his possession, his bail was set at \$20,000. Just a few years later, following his arrest at Los Angeles

⁷⁴ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

⁷⁵ Scott Gold, "'Tagging' or Just Hanging Out—Busted Either Way?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 2009.

⁷⁶ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

International Airport, his bail was set at \$320,000.⁷⁷ In this debate, there is no clear good or evil.



Figure 45: MTA tag in Downtown Los Angeles, 2008, photographer unknown.

Saber readily acknowledged to me that “yes, we’re not angels, yes, we broke the law.”⁷⁸ When Saber had almost finished his river piece, in 1997, he returned with 40 litres of black paint to complete outlining, the final detail. It already consisted of more than 400 litres of paint, much of it stolen and all of it carried in by hand. The piece had taken thirty-five nights spread out over a year to complete, painstaking in the most literal sense of the word. On that final night, it felt make or break. Saber was being chased: “I’m fucked. You know, like, I’m going to jail, or I’m going to die. Like, I have to finish this thing.” In those final moments, it was the abatement team that illuminated the work. There had been helicopters,

⁷⁷ Richard Winton, “L.A. tagger Revok arrested at LAX.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2011.

⁷⁸ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

“ghetto birds,” hovering overhead but they had stopped looking. And then, a detective in an unmarked vehicle drove slowly along the flat bed of the river, side-lights illuminating the nearly completed piece. It gave him the impetus to finish. When Saber told me about it, nineteen years later, I could still hear the lightness in his voice:

I have this amazing moment where he’s driving slow.

By this point they probably have a photograph of my face, you know, my description, my house, like everything about me is probably on a file in his lap.

And I’m right here, you know. Right here. This is where I be like right here. And this dude in the fucking car, this detective, and this light, this light was breaking my piece, and I could see the piece, it’s breaking the light.

Wow.

So he drives and he broke the whole piece with light. Just slow as fuck.

And I was like, “Wow, that’s the best way I could have seen my piece.”⁷⁹

And so, in the way that graffiti keeps on defying categorisation as good or bad, it was an act of abatement that enabled the first full viewing of what was, and still remains under layers of abatement paint, one of the most important graffiti pieces in the world.

⁷⁹ Ibid.



Figure 46: Saber river piece, measuring 76 x 17 metres. Painted over the course of a year in 1997, eliminated in a day in 2009. Photo provided by Saber.

As we stood by the river, with him being artist or vandal and me an intrigued observer, Leo Limon asked and answered the *What is it all for?* question I had been trying to find the right form of words to ask:

And why do I do it? It's art. Isn't that what it's supposed to be?
Aren't you supposed to be having fun doing art?
Art is fun. Fun is art. That's one of my clichés.⁸⁰

It isn't fun on all sides though. Julia Meltzer seemed to seethe with anger as she described how her arts organisation, Clockshop, needs to attend constantly to graffiti abatement in the Bowtie Parcel, the site they curate in a partnership with California State Parks.⁸¹ For her, it is "deeply frustrating, annoying, and makes me feel like, 'Why are we doing this [graffiti removal]?'"⁸² The arrangement that

⁸⁰ Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

⁸¹ Julia Meltzer, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Julia's Office, Clockshop, Elysian Valley, Los Angeles.

⁸² Ibid.

Clockshop has with the State Parks service makes her organisation responsible for managing the artworks that they commission in the space. This means removing graffiti on a regular basis. Her organisation's human, material, and financial resources go to removing the very marks that characterise the gritty urban landscape of the Bowtie, that stake out belonging in this previously neglected river-adjacent tract of land in East Los Angeles. Curatorial decisions are made with graffiti in mind because "anything we put a coat of paint on is an invitation for someone to tag it."⁸³ Artists and projects have been turned away because the risk of their work being tagged is too great. But the trap is that graffiti is part of what makes the Bowtie Parcel what it is. Julia Meltzer herself worries about the future of the space, wondering if it becoming a state park will erase its distinctive character:

what it is right now in this open, post-industrial, kind of decrepit but beautiful state that it's in, kind of like the most beautiful time before it's made into a thing that's nice for people.
I guess I'm slightly pessimistic about that.
I'm like, "Mmm, I don't know." You know what I mean? I don't know.
Maybe it'll work out and be nice and maybe it'll be like, it'll be whitewashed over.
It'll be made beautiful in a way that is too controlled, you know.⁸⁴

Graffiti and its abatement is a mire of complexity. Belonging is at the very core of the issue. The whitewashing of the Bowtie Parcel worries Julia, but every time she or one of her team removes a tag, it is arguable that they are whitewashing, too.

The Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles is devoted to preserving mural art on walls throughout the city. The process is expensive but is deemed worthwhile because what we paint on our city walls tells stories about who we are. What we paint on our city walls can breathe life into places. The Meeting of Styles murals, the Saber piece, the giant MTA tag—they are all still there,

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

layered under abatement paint. The Getty Conservation Institute restored the Siqueros mural in Downtown Los Angeles. Might they do the same for graffiti pieces in the future? It strikes me as eminently possible, especially if the hidden work is described as street art or murals, not graffiti, to make its artistic credibility more readily acceptable. Both Saber and Man One imagine the future restoration of graffiti pieces in the river. I find myself imagining it, too.

7.4 ARTICULATING BELONGING

Graffiti and territory are inextricably linked. The river is an encyclopaedia of meaning, though for most it is an encyclopaedia written in a foreign language. Saber described how a single name written somewhere by a graffiti writer – these are called *hand-styles* or, more colloquially, *tags* – can have repercussions in the graffiti community for fifteen years.⁸⁵ Territoriality is articulated, claimed, contested, and enforced by way of language. A language that is complex, sophisticated, and by definition inaccessible to those outside of the graffiti-writing culture. It is meant to be “abrasive ... it’s not supposed to be accessible.”⁸⁶ Take wildstyle, the graffiti style that Saber used in the river piece:

wildstyle is a certain language that’s universal, that only a small group of people truly understand.
It’s almost like a weird masonic club to a certain degree,
it’s about the esoteric nature of shapes and letters and combinations, it
has its own language that has nothing to do with street art.
Absolutely nothing to do with it.⁸⁷

He described his river piece as “its own-hundred page novel.”⁸⁸ Graffiti is sophisticated, Saber told me:

You can tell a person’s sophistication.
The average person sees a bunch of tags and goes, “What a fucking mess.”
I see points of levels of sophistication in hand.

⁸⁵ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena. “I’ve seen one tag set off a chain of events for years later [...] fifteen years later.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Like oh fuck that's cool, or that dude's the shit, or that whip's awesome. And then it goes regional. Philly is one of the most unique. LA is, has Chicano influence. New York is New York. That's the sophistication of the language. When you can say, "Oh, that dude came to LA in '85, met a crew, those guys painted and his style carried on and we're in 2006."⁸⁹

What Joe Edmiston dismisses as contamination, Saber venerates as a means of elaborate, asynchronous storytelling about people, place, and belonging.⁹⁰

Italian sociologist and graffiti scholar, Andrea Brighenti, explains how "each wall collects a temporally dispersed audience that, at some point, has transited nearby." The right to claim territory through marks on a wall is complex, mediated by belonging, culture, affiliations, and social standing.⁹¹ Saber talked about how he will always be an outsider to the Los Angeles River.⁹² This dialectic between belonging and estrangement seems constant in Saber's relationship with the river:

As much as I celebrate my piece, there's a dark side to it. And that is, thank God there's a source of inspiration in it because otherwise I would be a complete asshole for doing that, especially to the people who live there. Thank God I tried to make it pretty so that the people who live there could say, "Okay, there's something to look at while I smoke this joint real quick before I get fuckin' killed, shot, thrown in jail, or go back home to my problems." I always felt that with the river. I always felt I was privileged to go there, you know. Always. So that's why I felt I had to give that much back to it, or try to paint ... it's still my name. It's the most egotistical stupid thing you can do. I'm going to paint my name in lights as big as fucking possible so everybody can see me. It's the most self-absorbed, egotistical bullshit thing you could do in the world. I'm going to write my name on everything. Fuck you. You know. Talk about an asshole.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

⁹¹ Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Space and Culture* (2010), 9.

⁹² Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

⁹³ Ibid.

Territory claiming is a distinguishing factor in how many of my interviewees talked about graffiti. In summary: marking territory is for most an unpalatable reason to paint the Los Angeles River. As Joshua Link told me:

I guess I'm thinking of graffiti not just in terms of pissing to mark your territory graffiti,
I'm thinking of graffiti for graffiti's sake.
And that's a hard line to find sometimes.
Take the MTA tag, I mean, that's still pissing on the river right. It's still marking your territory.
But it's impressively big. It's a really tough one. That was like the biggest tag in the world.⁹⁴

Kat Superfisky talked about how all people "should be able to see themselves in the river and the mark they're making, and hopefully it would be a beautiful one." She was quick to clarify, though, that gang marks should be removed.⁹⁵ Carol Armstrong described graffiti as "another expression of people's love of place and trying to exert ownership when they feel a lack of power."⁹⁶ There's a finer line than this, though, which Saber's words alerted me to. Adding one's name to a place with paint isn't necessarily an act of ownership, but more a kind of homage to a place that matters. Sure, Saber said, "I've always been obsessed with inserting my name, face, and livelihood into the LA, the story of the LA River," but he was also quick to say he will never truly belong there, and to respectfully name some of those who do.⁹⁷ Melanie Winter, a long-time river advocate in Los Angeles who was an executive at FoLAR in the late 1990s and is now the founder-director of The River Project, is dedicated to removing concrete from Los Angeles and particularly the river. She worries that more art on the

⁹⁴ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁹⁵ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁹⁶ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁹⁷ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

concrete will be yet another obstacle to future concrete removal.⁹⁸ In this way she too is territorial, but the claim she stakes is a very different one.

Belonging is always a contestable thing. Saber has been making art at the river since he was a child, his father taking him to the Arroyo Seco confluence when he was only ten years old. His most renowned artwork, on the trapezoidal bank through Downtown Los Angeles, now hidden by abatement, is his autobiography. The spilt orange paint in the lower left corner (see Figure 46) told of the depths of his despair: “I was so emotional that night because my life was in so much turmoil. I sat there and I beat the bucket till my hand was fucking bloody.”⁹⁹ And yet, despite all these markers of belonging, of being intimate with this complicated place, Saber argued others will always belong more deservedly than him:

I’m still an outsider ‘cause I’m a fucking white kid from Thousand Oaks,
you know.
I am still an outsider.
I always will be, because that’s my place.
I don’t deserve the right to say that I am, that’s reserved for those people.
There’s a hardship that they led being there,
growing up where the system is standing on your neck,
and there’s really little opportunity,
and everything is fucked up,
and all you have is your culture and what you can see.
The first place those kids would go is the LA River.
When those kids just lost their grandfather,
or their brother was killed,
or these kids said they’re gonna fuck ‘em up,
or you know the whole neighborhood got raided,
or they don’t have money for food,
or you couldn’t get to school that day ‘cause his dad broke his leg,
or whatever the fuck hardship that comes with the system,
I think the first place some of those kids would venture out to get a sense
of serenity and peace was the LA River.
I can’t think about how many of those kids probably ran away from those
neighborhoods to go sit on those riverbanks by themselves.

⁹⁸ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie’s Home, Studio City.

⁹⁹ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

You know, like, that's the story of the LA River that has to be held onto.
That's where all the painting comes in.¹⁰⁰

Painting, tagging, bombing, making a mark—these are all acts of seeking to belong and, as such, they are intimate. Illegal, dangerous, offensive to many, but nevertheless graffiti attests to intimate belonging.

7.5 GANGS AND GRAFFITI

It is easy to conflate graffiti with gangs. But easy usually misses the full picture, and this is certainly the case here. It is true that gang territory is usually marked by graffiti. As Saber warned, “you better know what you're doing and where the fuck you're at ... once you understand the language you realize where the fuck you are.”¹⁰¹ But to think of graffiti and gangs as synonymous with one another is utterly inadequate. Interestingly, in the landmark history of the river by Blake Gumprecht, graffiti only earns two mentions. These make graffiti a primarily criminal act, connected inextricably to gangs and damage.¹⁰² So it is left to oral history interviews to uncurdle the milk, to separate back out the threads that this kind of treatment not only interweaves but melds together into one solid, inaccurate, and impenetrable mass.

When Saber moved to Echo Park a neighbourhood just north of Downtown Los Angeles, gangs featured large. He felt a much more intense version of the heaviness I felt when I drove my too-shiny hire car into that neighbourhood in search of the apartment I would call home for a couple of nights during my 2016 research visit. I knew I didn't belong, with my Aussie accent, my suitcase, and my out-of-state licence plates. I felt eyes on front porches tracing the movement of my car up the street, slow, watching still as I pulled over, re-checked the map, U-turned, and doubled back again. Saber recalled life in Echo Park as being

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 236 and 46.

“really scary,” a place drenched in gang politics that simultaneously excited and exhausted him. Soon after he moved there, meeting neighbours at a backyard Fourth of July party, Saber was confronted by a pack of Echo Park Gang members. They recognised him right away. He described what they offered him:

“Well, here’s the deal. We’ll allow you to live here.”

I’m like, “Okay.”

They’re like, “That’s the only reason is we like you. Here’s the thing.

We’re trying to get our brothers, younger brothers, away from gangs by getting them interested in graffiti so whatever thing you can help out, say, positive, whatever, we’ll be happy to hear it.”

They used us as the examples to say, “Look, go this route, don’t do gangs, you’re gonna die, you’re gonna go to jail.”

Get into graffiti, graffiti will save you. So there’s a whole culture of kids that their whole motto is graffiti saved my life.¹⁰³

Kids would get breathless when they met him. Being in his presence meant autographs, graffiti advice, and closeness to fame. He had painted the largest wildstyle graffiti piece in the world, so big it was visible from space. Of course, mentoring from Saber and others is only a sliver of the whole gang story, and a much more palatable sliver than many. In the 1990s in Los Angeles, massive crews of taggers formed, boasting several thousand members. Saber told me how the tagging crews “spiraled out of fucking control.” Archival news footage affirms his assessment.¹⁰⁴ The 1990s were tumultuous: gangs shooting-to-kill graffiti writers, early-morning writing missions, an increase of arms carried by gang members and writers both, and police gang lists targeting graffiti crews as well as street gangs. The rules of engagement profoundly changed. Street murals of the Virgin Mary, La Guadalupe, these communal shrines to which people would bring offerings of flowers and candles, lost their immunity from being tagged or were entirely painted over. Man One told me how, before, gangs wouldn’t paint over these, but after the 1990s shifts in culture, now they do, “not

¹⁰³ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

¹⁰⁴ Live Leak, “Los Angeles Tag Bangers of the 90’s,” accessed July 8, 2016.

https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=3d7_1344903808&comments=1#oGSKw6GyCqvUbUeW.99

even the Virgin Mary murals are sacred, you know.”¹⁰⁵ Against all of this change, Man One reflected, the river maintained its constancy:

The river has maintained its course.
It's done what it's always done.
It's been there for whoever has always been willing to go down there and
I don't think that has changed.¹⁰⁶

Gang members, graffiti writers, and those who occupy the interstitial spaces between, have found their place on the Los Angeles River.

When it comes to paint and the river, danger may not be a constant companion but it is never all that far away. It takes many forms. While Saber was painting the river piece in 1997, the paint itself proved a formidable danger. There was a gel medium in the glossy paint he used that kept its surface slippery for hours. Working with paint rollers across the massive surface area, the still-wet paint left him sliding uncontrollably across it. At that point, he realised that he would need to steal matt rather than gloss paint. There are the dangers of the physical environment—working on a steep slope, the slipperiness of algae growing against the concrete. There are the dangers generated by people: individually, organised into gangs, and those enforcing laws. People who grew up in tough neighbourhoods where, Saber told me, “these guys have to form militias to survive, it's crazy.”¹⁰⁷ There is the daredevil quest of graffiti culture itself—seeking to make marks in the highest, most-perilous, least-accessible, highest-stakes places—an extreme lifestyle choice that Saber described as “a young man's sport gone insane.” And the river is one such place: “something dangerous, it's a very dangerous fucking place, it's not a place to take lightly.”¹⁰⁸ Field notes about graffiti and the Los Angeles River could easily fill reams and books. Man One's growth as an artist was helped along by the river's unique

¹⁰⁵ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

isolation from some of graffiti's usual dangers. While graffiti elsewhere in the city was almost always a night-time pursuit—to stay hidden from security guards, police, highway patrol, or bystanders—the Los Angeles River, at times, was much less policed, allowing for more elaborate graffiti pieces to be created because they could be worked on in broad daylight and unhurried.

7.6 A PLACE TO BELONG

Particular characteristics—both logistical and more ethereal ones—of the Los Angeles River allowed art to be created that would not be possible anywhere else. That artists like Man One, Leo Limon, and Saber have made the Los Angeles River their canvas and, in a way their muse, is much more than mere opportunism, proximity, or there being no better option. For Saber, it is a kind of compulsion:

The LA River has always taught me that I have this knot that I have to do something.
In my stomach, this knot in my stomach,
in my mind, I have to do something,
I have to do something,
I have to do something. I never stop.¹⁰⁹

The river piece called on his compulsion. He was painting at night, the piece slowly emerging into its final form night after night, surprising even observers like Man One. Man One recalled, “it took a while to figure out that he was always working on it.”¹¹⁰ Saber painted in the shadows of darkness, using fine-tuned sensory perception to feel size, shape, form and perspective. Where visibility failed, others senses intervened; it was an artistic process not so much seen as felt. The Los Angeles River was more than a blank canvas; it was a protagonist, even a beloved:

The LA River gave me that ability to fulfil that vision in a way that no other place could ever do it.
I couldn't have painted the world's largest graffiti piece in history,
illegally, without having the LA River.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

The LA River forced me to become a visionary, in the sense that it gave me an opportunity to fulfil that vision as a painter.¹¹¹

For Saber, the river is a kind of alpha and omega of his artistic practice. It was the place where he felt free enough to paint his first “whack piece” as a fledgling graffiti writer, “down there where no one would see it or give a fuck, it gave you a sense of adventure, you know.”¹¹² Later, it would be somewhere far more public; somewhere he could respond creatively to the heat being applied to graffiti writing in Los Angeles, to its oppression by law enforcement:

it was war, it was a war and this was the home plate,
the LA River was my home plate, to kind of justify.
My whole point of view was I didn't want to spray damage around the
city and go to jail, I wanted to do something that had never been done
before in the LA River.
I set out to paint the world's largest illegal wildstyle piece, not just blocks
or throw-ups or something simple.
I was like, I want to paint the world's largest illegal wildstyle, which had
never been done before.¹¹³

Even though Saber made sure to acknowledge that belonging is like a ladder and he kept himself on a relatively low rung, his relationship with the river is unquestionably intimate and is characterised by knowing his place there, by enacting his belonging, albeit qualified and partial.

Resisting the temptation to be reductionist, to dismiss graffiti as crime and graffiti writers as criminals, brings intimacy—and in particular belonging—squarely into the story. Remember, Saber's first foray into painting and the Los Angeles River was not as a teenage delinquent. It was back when people called him by his given name, he was ten years old, and his father sat with him at the Arroyo Seco confluence, at night, so he could take long-exposure photographs that became oil paintings of this place that mattered to him. A place that, for all

¹¹¹ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

its repulsiveness, drew him in. A place that got under his skin, that he was “so in love with” that he painted the river piece in tribute to it.¹¹⁴

Lewis MacAdams told me how he envied the work of artist Jasper Johns, who “takes in the city and turns out the art.” It seems to me that Saber did exactly that, too. Walls tell stories to those who know how to read them:

I can go to any place in the world, anywhere,
and I can tell you exactly what’s going in that city through reading the
walls.
It’s very simple. It’s very easy.
And then if I really want to I can track those people down, figure out
how to meet them, then we can get a real tour of the city, straight to the
heart. And that’s something, that’s the language.
So, I can go anywhere and say, “Oh fuck, this is a volatile place, I don’t
want to be standing here right now.”
You know, it’s all political graffiti. You know, and it’s all crushed.
So let’s not stand here to look at this street-arty stuff, wow, everyone’s
safe and happy and they got their lattes, you know.
To no graffiti, fuck this place is scary.¹¹⁵

I think of that closed-door meeting with Gloria Molina at the FoLAR office in the wake of Meeting of Styles in 2007. Apparently, she had arrived with just an hour’s notice.¹¹⁶ Man One recalled the conversation going this way:

Molina: I want it removed. I want the graffiti out of here.
FoLAR and Man One: It’s not graffiti, it’s murals.
Molina: I don’t care what you call it, I want it out of here.¹¹⁷

I think about how the riverbanks are a patchwork of paint on concrete, traces of graffiti and its abatement, mark after mark left behind, each telling a story, however muted, however difficult to decipher. Graffiti is damage, and it makes for metaphorical broken windows, but it is also redemption. It is stories scribed onto channel walls, walls that are only there by virtue of the river’s channelisation, as Man One and Melanie Winter both observed in our

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Lewis MacAdams, Events update and notes on the Joseph Beuys fellowship, n.d., Box 110, Folder 7, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

¹¹⁷ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One’s Studio, Los Angeles.

conversations. When you encounter the river, you are sure to find paint. These days, it's more likely to tell a story of abatement than of creativity, territory, illegality, identity, belonging, intimacy, and placemaking. Those stories remain, but they are muted, hidden, disguised under many, many layers of palomino beige.

“Well, giving nature the opportunity to manifest itself in all its manifestations. And it does so pretty good. You just leave it, leave it to do what it wants to do. We have, we’re repopulating with mountain lions, with bears, with every conceivable type of flora and fauna including fifteen species of fish in the river and all kinds of interesting things along the river and things at other places that would be considered horrible like Arundo. In many areas we’re trying to eradicate that, yet, when it’s in the river it’s nice, kind of cool, so again that shows it all depends on location and how, something ... ‘Oh, it’s green in the middle of the river. Oh, it’s great.’ You put it in a more natural context and then people will say, ‘Oh, we have to eradicate it.’ The river is not a place for purists. I’m pretty catholic about nature—if it’s green, it’s good. Anything you can’t get rid of, let’s define it as good coz we can’t get rid of it anyway.”—Joe Edmiston, Malibu, January 2016

The river’s water illustrates how intimacy gives sustenance. The vast expanses of paint that adorn its banks tell stories of intimacy as an act of belonging. Weeds, the final object explored in this *Field Guide to Love and the Los Angeles River*, speak to intimacy as a complex act of paying attention. Weeds change, depending upon the kinds of attention we humans pay to them. They are a textbook study in social construction. Like a person who turns from stranger to love interest quicker than we can know, or a couple whose enmity makes it hard to imagine how they were ever in love, a plant which is just growing can be socially constructed as beloved or hated, depending on what it means to human sensibilities. Weediness is very much in the eye of the beholder.

8.1 YOU DON’T KNOW THE RIVER UNTIL YOU MEET ARUNDO

There is a plant called *Arundo donax*. Its common names include Giant Cane, Giant Reed and Elephant Grass, but most call it simply Arundo. Picture tall, lush, dark green foliage. Tight massed root systems. Picture yourself dwarfed by a plant at least twice as tall as you are. Arundo grows voraciously in some stretches of the Los Angeles River. To my eyes, a while ago, *Arundo donax* was just a mass of green. Now, when the breeze moves through it, across the water and onto my skin at the Bowtie Parcel in the parched heat of a drought-stricken Californian summer, I know what it is called. I know it can grow up to

10 centimetres a day. I know that it guzzles water, and that its water-hungry root system forms islands, which have been re-purposed as a participatory art installation by an Angeleno artist I met, by chance, at the riverbank a few baking summers ago. I know that, on paper, *Arundo* is a non-native plant; it is also an invasive species, we can at one level unhesitatingly call it a weed. And yet, I know that expanses of it have greened the Los Angeles River, transforming concrete grey into nature green, changing hopeless to hopeful. In the 1990s, Angelenos were urged to eradicate this weedy peril, described histrionically as “the plant from hell.”¹ I once talked with a Nepali woman about this same plant. It grew everywhere in Kathmandu when she was a child. For children there it was a favourite, though forbidden, place to play. Adults would say that the spirits made their homes in among the tall canes: the good spirits, and the bad ones. They, and the children, seem to have known the best places for hide and seek.

¹ Team *Arundo*, brochure “*Arundo*: Fighting the Plant from Hell: A Workshop on Combatting a Riparian Threat,” 1993, Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.



Figure 48: Urban sanctuary. Photo taken from the left bank of the Los Angeles River, looking north, near Glendale, May 12, 2015. Much of the greenery is *Arundo donax*. The Golden State Freeway (I-5) runs along the opposite bank. Photo by the author.

Arundo is arguably the signature plant of today's Los Angeles River. As Mia Lehrer told me, "everybody loves to hate *Arundo* but there's a visual sort of pleasure, I guess, that it probably gives a lot of people."² *Arundo donax* dominates this chapter, much like it dominates large swathes of the river itself. Almost every person interviewed told stories of this giant, fast-growing, complicated plant. It is variously craved, loathed, used, cautiously accepted, resented, and appreciated, but in all this it remains in the foreground of the river's identity.

² Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.



Figure 49: *Arundo donax*. Image from the *Manual of the Grasses of the United States* (1950).

8.2 WHAT ARE WEEDS

A weed, as the truism goes, is just a plant out of place. Undesirability is virtually the only unifying feature of the classification.³ Ecologist, designer, and avowed river sister Kat Superfisky talks about weeds as being the plants that a human doesn't want.⁴ You see, with weeds, it is all down to human judgement. And this judgement changes by time, place, landscape, ecology, trend, and priority. In other words, we are fickle when it comes to plants. If there is any objective measure by which plants fall in or out of the weed sin bin, it is their *invasiveness*, the extent to which they shoulder-charge other plants out of habitats. Some of these plants exude toxic substances through their roots to discourage or kill off competitors that attempt to grow too close. Others spread vegetatively, so that reproductive success needs little assistance other than a snapped-off piece of stem or root taking hold in a new location. Invasive weeds are depicted as the bullies of the botanical playground. There are no clear lines to draw. Which takes us right back to the beginning.

The adaptive nature of nature means there aren't clear demarcations about good and bad in regard to weeds. This is vexed territory. To explore this point, let us look to Kudzu. A breathtakingly invasive legume, Kudzu (*Pueraria sp.*) was the "miracle vine" of the American South, boosted in the 1930s and 1940s as the saviour to counteract soil erosion problems.⁵ While it served that purpose fairly well, just a few decades later a shift in land use, from predominantly grazing to forestry, rendered Kudzu much less useful, and in some regards problematic. By the 1970s, it was demonised as a weed, having "made a terrific nuisance of

³ Tim Cresswell, "Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions: A Geographical Interpretation of Metaphors of Displacement," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 87, no. 2 (1997), 335.

⁴ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁵ John J. Winberry and David M. Jones, "Rise and Decline of the 'Miracle Vine': Kudzu in the Southern Landscape," *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1973), 65–68.

itself.”⁶ It was no more or less invasive than it had ever been, if *invasive* is a biological description. But if we take the word invasive—and we must—to be a sociocultural description, then Kudzu was more fiercely invasive from the 1970s onwards.

Whether or not a plant is undesirable is no more or less than a human judgement, because human judgement is all that we have. As Carol Armstrong, who heads up the City of Los Angeles’ River team and is the woman known across the city as the river’s loudest cheerleader, put it:

You know, just like they say somebody’s trash is somebody’s treasure, somebody’s weed is somebody’s treasure as well. I think that one of the really exciting things that’s happening right now is the Grown in LA concept, of valuing what’s grown in LA and when we do that we start to understand what’s non-native, and then we start to understand how we might be able to do a better job of maintaining our native species so that our invasive species become less valued and [are] kind of pushed out.⁷

We are talking about a constant tussle of bullies and victims. We are talking about that strange schoolyard dynamic when the popular kid is suddenly universally disliked, the dorky kid’s voice breaks, and the quiet one finds their swagger and, suddenly, no one quite knows who is who anymore.

This is doubly complex, given that ecologies are never static and a slavish adherence to native and endemic species neglects that landscapes are forever changing over time. And, furthermore, classifying plants as “weeds” is both cultural and political. A plant’s invasive behaviour is determined by us to a large extent, as:

the ground is “prepared” for invasion. This preparation may occur either physically, by increasing the invadability of the landscape through

⁶ Robbins, “Comparing Invasive Networks: Cultural and Political Biographies of Invasive Species,” 146.

⁷ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

disturbance, or socially, by creating conditions to enhance the success of invasion.⁸

Lawn grasses, Paul Robbins reminds us, could easily be classified as weeds, having invaded front and backyards as well as public places across towns and cities, crowding out other species, lessening biodiversity, and guzzling water. But because, presently at least, verdant lawns are a desirable thing, the exotic and, in many cases, aggressive grasses that grow as lawns are not problematised as weeds.⁹

At Ernie's Walk, a guerrilla pocket park along the Los Angeles River in Sherman Oaks, geraniums and marigolds became the newly crowned popular kids when their planting transformed what had been a "weed-choked trail." But, you guessed it, both geraniums and marigolds are easily classifiable as invasive plants. Ernie LaMere made Ernie's Walk:

It was in 1988 that Ernie's Walk began along a service road strewn with garbage down the street from his Sherman Oaks home. After convincing the city and county to clean up the trash, LaMere began planting leftover geraniums and marigolds from his back yard garden. Using donations of flowers from his neighbors, the impromptu garden soon expanded to fill the nearly quarter-mile span between Kester and Cedros avenues, but it was only the beginning. Driven by an insatiable urge to tinker, LaMere placed benches and numerous whimsical objects along the walk to entertain passersby over the years, including a phony cemetery [for deceased neighbourhood pets] and "Godzilla's lair" — complete with an inflatable monster and the plaster bones of its "victims." "It's become almost an obsession for me," he told *The Times* in 1993. "I wanted to prove to the world that one man could make a difference to the environment."¹⁰

A renovation of the site in 2003 by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works removed all traces of whimsy, replaced with a stern "institutional concrete marker" proclaiming it to be the Ernie's Walk Pet

⁸ Robbins, "Comparing Invasive Networks: Cultural and Political Biographies of Invasive Species," 145.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰ David E. Brady, "Obituaries: Ernie LaMere; Created 'Ernie's Walk' From Weeds." *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1995.

Commemorative (see Figure 50). Plants liberated from Ernie’s and his neighbours’ gardens, and lovingly tended by him, were replaced by native plants.¹¹ Ernie LaMere was, as far as I can tell from the evidence he has left behind, intimately connected to the river. His acts of gardening were acts of love. Bringing plants and objects to that little spot by the river in Sherman Oaks, where the banks consist of savagely vertical concrete box channels, Ernie’s love, his attentiveness, transformed space into place, nurtured the river, him, and others who visit that place he created, from weeds, and with them.



Figure 50: Ernie’s Walk Pet Commemorative. Photo by the author.

Weediness is all a matter of judgement and extent. George Wolfe, guerrilla-kayaker-gone-mainstream, told me about the “out of control” cattails on the Owens River in Eastern California and how seeing them “makes you

¹¹ Linton and Friends of the Los Angeles River, *Down by the Los Angeles River: Friends of the Los Angeles River’s Official Guide*, 51.

thankful for the particular weeds that you don't have."¹² When he has boated there, he's seen it choked by cattails.¹³ On the LA River that very same Cattail (*Typha latifolia*), in this river system, is a desirable plant. In fact, a 2009 FoLAR curriculum guide encouraged students to seek them out when exploring the river, noting their value for preventing erosion; providing habitat to insects, birds, and amphibians; and as a source of valuable food and fibre.¹⁴ The aesthetics of edibility is one of qualities that can flip a weed from foe to friend. Shelly Backlar recalled a river walk where her guide encouraged the group to eat mustard, a peppery-tasting, highly invasive weed that thrives in Los Angeles.¹⁵ For Joshua Link, a fierce advocate for a return to native plants, the humble dandelion with its bitter leaves may well be his gateway plant into accepting the benefits of weeds:

the concept of weed is tough, too, because there are some weeds that are delicious.
I've harvested them in my yard and put them in felafel wrap.
There's dandelions and things that you'll find in the most urban of parks,
growing in a crack, and you'll find them in a farmers market for five
dollars a pound.
And it's just because they're at a farmers market that they're not a weed
and that they call them dandelion greens.¹⁶

As Joe Edmiston reflected, it "all depends on context whether something has to be eradicated."¹⁷ Everything is context and knowledge. Conservation biologist Dan Janzen calls for citizen upskilling in understanding plants. His program in Costa Rica, training novices to be parataxonomists (a term he coined in the 1990s) has created "a local populace that was bioliterate and invested in the

¹² George Wolfe, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George's Home, Los Angeles.

¹³ United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Lower Owens River Project: Environmental Impact Statement* (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2002).

¹⁴ Friends of the Los Angeles River and Algalita Marine Research Foundation, *Watershed Wonders: The Los Angeles River and the Adventures of the Cola Kayak* (Los Angeles, 2009), 57.

¹⁵ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

¹⁶ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

¹⁷ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

diversity around them. In the future, they would be able to recognise potential threats to it.”¹⁸ Learning to pay attention is a cornerstone of intimacy, whereby we can become more ecologically responsible, engaged urban citizens.

8.3 WHEN PLANTS MAKE THE PLACE

The idea of weeds being *plants out of place* is troubled by landscapes like the Los Angeles River. If we define them this way, what do they become? And what do we call them when they become a defining feature of a place? Or become important and valued? Or when, in a case of shifting baselines, they become the new nature, the vegetation we expect to see nurtured, not eliminated.¹⁹ Baselines are the set points of how things once were from which comparisons are made to determine the extent of change. The selected moment in time used to be prior to European invasion, but it is increasingly instead set to pre-human arrival, as we begin to recognise the sophistication of indigenous land-management systems, which were once thought to not have had any impacts on the landscape.²⁰ What happens readily, however, is that baselines shift because human memory tends to be short, selective, and self-absorbed. In other words, we lose track of our attentiveness, we interrupt our intimacy with place. In fisheries management, for example, shifting baselines occur when scientists perceive the “faunal composition and stock characteristics that existed when they began their careers to be the unaffected reference condition.”²¹ *Arundo*, for all its downsides, has draped the river in green. Because it raises water temperature where it grows—one of the many concerning characteristics of *Arundo donax*—it also cools the air,

¹⁸ Caroline Fraser, *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 315.

¹⁹ Simon Pooley, “Invasion of the Crocodiles,” in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman, Routledge Environmental Humanities (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 246; Frawley and McCalman, *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, 6.

²⁰ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World*, 3.

²¹ Paul Humphries and Kirk O. Winemiller, “Historical Impacts on River Fauna, Shifting Baselines, and Challenges for Restoration,” *BioScience*, vol. 59, no. 8 (2009), 681.

reducing the urban heat island effect that is one of Los Angeles' unfortunate signature traits. The river is a unique ecology, made all the more complicated and strange by human intervention. As Matthew Gandy writes:

The concrete river has produced its own distinctive cultural and biophysical ecologies that combine aspects of the architectural avant-garde with spontaneous assemblages of fauna and flora drawn from across the world. Grasses, rushes, and other plants have colonized parts of the concrete levees, and in three small sections of the channel where the bottom was not completely covered in concrete, there is a profusion of vegetation that has provoked alarm from flood control engineers²²

What provokes alarm to engineers creates ease for others, who find intimacy in noticing those very same "spontaneous assemblages" and who revel in the discovery that the concrete river is softened by foliage and enlivened by fish, beginning to teem with life because of the transnational flows of plants and creatures that arrive at a strange watery oasis in the midst of one of the world's great cities.

Weeds make places, which in turn makes it a less clear argument about them being out of place. Arundo is lush. A journalist once said to Ed Reyes that he felt immediately transported back to South-East Asia down there in the Arundo.²³ Shelly Backlar resents how Arundo has taken over the Glendale Narrows stretch of the river near FoLAR's seasonal pop-up venue The Frog Spot – a place that people gather for yoga, music, bands, environmental education, or an ice cream on a hot summer day. The Arundo obscures views of the river's flowing water and impedes access to the riverbed:

there hasn't been that much abatement of the invasive species
so it's becoming more and more difficult to walk
It's just much more of a jungle, tangle.
We brought a crew down there at one point,

²² Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 171.

²³ Ed Reyes, February 6, 2016, digital recording at Marsh Park, Elysian Valley; unofficial river access point near Taylor Yard parcel; driving in East Los Angeles; and Elysian Park.

and one of the camera guys said, “I feel like I’m in *The Hobbit*.”
It’s all overgrown; there’s this kind of like other-world feel to it.²⁴

Joe Linton observed how the greenness of foliage marks where the water runs beneath.²⁵ The Mexican Fan Palm (*Washingtonia robusta*) and California Fan Palm (*Washingtonia filifera*), are weeds in the river and at the same time iconic in Los Angeles. Imagine what the river would look like, and what knock-on effects there would be, if everything classified as a weed were to be removed. There would be dire adverse effects on people’s attentiveness, ecological responsibility, nature-affinity, intimacy, and love. But then, of course, there is all the damage that these invasives do. And the botanical reality that the lush greenness of weeds is an illogical ambition for the Los Angeles River. I recall Joshua Link’s fervour in telling me that “the real landscape of Los Angeles is about subtlety” and Mia Lehrer’s insistence that Angelenos need to learn to love the grey plants as much or more than the green ones, and how hard a task that can be.²⁶ And, with those two opposing ideas—the green and the grey—swishing around, the double-bind knot constricts ever more tightly.

In altered urban rivers, weeds visit often. They find fertility in apparently barren places. They wind like tendrils from narrow cracks in concrete; they colonise tiny cavities where organic matter has broken down into rich black soil. When Lewis McAdams talked about river transformations, he spoke of how places are resilient and regenerative, “because as we know, nature abhors a vacuum.”²⁷

Fisherman Jim Burns described nature’s powers of reclamation, including that of

²⁴ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

²⁵ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

²⁶ Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles; Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

²⁷ Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

weeds, in the river between Bette Davis Park and the Riverside Drive Bridge. It is soft-bottomed in this stretch, so nature is far less shackled by concrete than in much of the waterway:

There are holes in the fence and from there you see right where all the concrete stops.

Then there's a natural area. It's all natural.

The Corps was supposed to go in there and bulldoze the whole thing, they don't want the water to slow down because then it builds up.

From that area to the Riverside Drive Bridge—it's probably a half-mile—it's absolutely amazing.

You can look here and see what we did, and look here and see how nature has reclaimed itself.²⁸

Much of this nature reclaiming and being reclaimed consists of introduced species, it is nature but not native. Joe Linton described himself as a sceptic when it comes to the traditionalist environmental regeneration approach of demonising and therefore eradicating weeds. He is unconvinced by the broad-brush claims that there is no habitat value in weeds, seeing them as a symptom more than a cause of environmental degradation:

In our human-altered systems there are plants that are colonizing and making do. I think we need to, to get a healthy fauna back in the river, we need to change the hydrology of it and not just pull up the weeds.²⁹

Weeds are the great survivors and their presence is often transformative. It wasn't quite a yearly ritual for the *Los Angeles Times* to report on weeds flourishing in the Los Angeles River during the summer months, but it was noteworthy enough to make news twice in the 1970s. The *Times* reported the re-colonisation by nature of a stretch of the Los Angeles River adjacent to the Golden State Freeway³⁰ the many-laned interstate highway that runs the vertical length of the United States, from Mexico to Canada:

when people thought of the Los Angeles River, they pictured the gray-banked channel as it looked in concrete. This summer, however, motorists on the Golden State Freeway are looking out on a marshy,

²⁸ Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim's Office, Occidental College Library.

²⁹ Joe Linton, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Common garden and lobby, Los Angeles Eco Village.

³⁰ The Golden State is the I-5 Freeway; it is commonly referred to as "the five."

green strip between the artificial banks. Nature has reclaimed a part of its own. Although greenery in the concrete bed is not entirely unknown, this stands as high as a horse's eye, and ducks have taken to the place ... looking more like a watercourse every day.³¹

And then, another summer, another weed story:

And then there are surprises.

The bed of the Los Angeles River is of concrete. Sterile, solid, and unyielding; its mission, to contain and to direct.

No matter. The force that is life, the mindless determination that is the essence of survival is no respecter of concrete or of the intention of the builder.

The earth is there, the water rises in winter—and when the summer comes, the riverbank is in bloom.

Sunflowers, cattails, honeysuckle, and just plain weeds, their will is to live and their need is to grow. Never mind the concrete. Away with the asphalt. It is the time of survival.³²

Those “just plain weeds,” they do things. Human responses to weeds are notoriously fickle. While the *Los Angeles Times* celebrated weedy growth as a regenerative expression of nature's inalienable tenacity, others worried about the perils they posed.

8.4 TENACITY OF WEEDS

Weeds are, almost by definition, tenacious. When I asked Carol Armstrong about invasive species, she was quick to reflect that “some people call them evasive species, like they're hard to get.”³³ They are indeed. Julia Meltzer, whose organisation Clockshop is jointly responsible with California State Parks for the Bowtie Parcel, spends time not just curating the site as an outdoor art gallery and classroom, but also struggling with the indomitable force of weeds (see Figure 51):

Fountain Grass, *Penstamon*, *Pennisetum*? Fountain Grass.
I mean, it's everywhere.
That's totally invasive, not native, really hard to get rid of.
I mean there's no way, it's so massively all over the place.

³¹ Dorothy Townsend, “The Greening of a Waterway: An Island Sprouts in Concrete L.A. Riverbed.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1972.

³² “Life Flows On Even as Rivers Turn to Concrete.” *Ibid.*, July 26, 1979.

³³ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

We've taken out little patches, literally like just a ten by ten foot area just to see what else is there and if you can give it space but we don't have the capability to remove fountain grass. It would be beyond a full-time job.³⁴

Joe Edmiston, despite his stance against anthropomorphism throughout the rest of our interview, did take a moment in which he assigned a voice to nature: "nature says, 'Oh, you tried to get rid of us? Well, here's what we're going to do, we're going to come back even bigger.'"³⁵ Melanie Winter remembered – and agreed with – a biologist describing *Arundo* as "living concrete" because "there's no value to it here. It sucks up water, it takes up space, it pushes out habitat, and it doesn't do anything for any other living creature." According to Melanie, *Arundo* is so strong that it "can knock out a bridge."³⁶ These accounts accord with Jodi Frawley and Ian McCalman's commentary on weeds, that:

another of the human-driven changes of the Anthropocene, however, arises from the rampant overabundance of introduced species around the globe, a diaspora of nature resulting, in some cases, in the crippling of the new country's ecological health and balance. The results of this process have become generally known as invasion ecologies.³⁷

There is a temptation to be seduced by this tenacity, to see weeds as a metaphor for human resilience, to posit that their surviving and thriving in an environment as harsh as the Los Angeles River might be allegorical, a testament to humans succeeding against considerable odds in the city of dreams. However, there is a harsh double-edge to the nature of weeds, and both these sides must be carefully weighed and explored.

³⁴ Julia Meltzer, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Julia's Office, Clockshop, Elysian Valley, Los Angeles.

³⁵ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

³⁶ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie's Home, Studio City.

³⁷ Frawley and McCalman, *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, 4.



Figure 51: Fountain Grass and Mexican Fan Palm in the Bowtie Parcel. Photo by the author.

But the tenacity of a weed victor often means there is a correspondingly vanquished victim. Nurturing these victimised plants is what drives landscape architect and kayak instructor Joshua Link's approach to landscape design and river revitalisation:

I appreciate the resilience of some of the plants that have taken root there, but there's also a side of me that kind of laments and thinks about weeds, like fountain grass and giant reed and the Arundo, that's kind of clogging the river.

Those are troubling to me because they push out what was here, and what was here provides a lot of sustenance for things that really are having a hard time, a tough time.

They must be having a tough time, you know, since this all has been developed.³⁸

Weeds have had a tough time, too, the target of hyped-up, militaristic campaigns for their eradication. The FoLAR archive, housed in UCLA Library's Special Collections, includes a file of materials about *Arundo donax*. A brochure from 1993 invites people to a workshop about "Arundo! fighting the plant from

³⁸ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

Hell.” An accompanying information sheet lists of some of the threats that it poses, including water consumption, crowding out of habitat, and even sheltering wild pigs, gang members, and transients.³⁹ A clipped newspaper article deploys a sizeable number of combative analogies. In one battle scene, Arundo is “something out of a sci-fi movie—a leggy monster, more than 20 feet tall, and all green. [Against it] she readied her tank of poison and sprayed away. At a plant.” The fighter was Shawna Joyce, a United States Forest Service wildlife biologist, who characterised her foe as “just an all-around nasty plant.” Arundo, was “not your average vegetation ... predatory ... so resilient and its march into some wildlife areas is so incessant that it has worried environmental agencies plotting counterattacks.” The seemingly “immortal” plant, without “natural enemies to help control its growth” was in the crosshairs of “arundo fighters,” people with a “real bad attitude toward arundo,” deploying a “battle plan” of “ground and air assaults” as well as “hand-to-hand combat.”⁴⁰ In a FoLAR newsletter, we read that the North East Trees organisation “battles the killer weed,” and in them *Arundo donax* has “met its match.”⁴¹

As the language suggests, this *take-no-prisoners* policy against weeds has dramatic effects. A brochure marking the 1976 opening of a new park beside the Tujunga Wash, a tributary of the Los Angeles River, celebrated that the newly planted garden “thrives in an area once turned into a desert by herbicides applied to reduce maintenance costs.” The turnaround came by way of daily carbon applications and leaching for three months prior to the park’s

³⁹ Team Arundo, brochure “Arundo: Fighting the Plant from Hell: A Workshop on Combatting a Riparian Threat,” 1993, Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁴⁰ Chip Johnson, “The War of the Weeds Environment: Biologists are Fighting Arundo, a Nearly Indestructible Menace that Takes Over Sensitive Habitats.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1993.

⁴¹ FoLAR newsletter, 1998, Box 31, Folder 13, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

construction.⁴² A left-for-dead damaged landscape, an “eyesore” and “wasteland,” became “a place for bikers to bike, joggers to jog, walkers to walk, pretty girls to picnic, volleyball enthusiasts to play, and loungers to lounge.”⁴³ The regenerated soils were replanted with a less-invasive selection of plants—Indian Hawthorne and Purple Hopseed—though *Gazania*s, now classified as a moderately invasive weed in California, also made the cut.⁴⁴ Sometimes the tenacity of weeds is irresistible to an impatient gardener.

The battle metaphor can play in reverse, with weeds having the stronger arm.

As Joshua Link recalled:

I remember having a conversation,
talking about weeds in a very anthropomorphic way,
talking about them in terms of immigration.
He made the argument that they’re all welcome and I understood where
he was coming from, I totally understood,
but I kind of see them as, ah, kind of like the conquistadors.
They’re bringing blankets with smallpox.
You can think of it in different terms, right.
You can think of it as positive immigration or negative immigration.
I don’t think all exotics are necessarily inherently bad or anything
but there is that part where it’s almost just as bad as development, in
terms of how it’s pushing and stifling that which you know formerly
grew here.
I like to think that I have the voice for the river and the watershed.
I also like to think that I have the voice for our native flora and fauna.
Again, it all goes back to that little canyon, that’s where it all goes back
to.⁴⁵

The little canyon he spoke of was his grandparents’ yard when he was a child, out the back of a house nestled into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains in

⁴² Author unknown, Booklet about the Los Angeles River Tujunga Wash Project, 1976, Box 65, Folder 8, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

⁴³ Speaker unknown, speech transcript about the Tujunga Wash Linear Park, 1977, Box 65, Folder 6, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Speaker unknown, speech transcript about the Tujunga Wash Linear Park, 1977, Box 65, Folder 6, *ibid.*; California Invasive Plant Council, “Invasive Plant Management Plant Profiles: *Gazania linearis*,” California Invasive Plant Council, accessed September 1, 2016. http://www.cal-ipc.org/ip/management/plant_profiles/Gazania_linearis.php

⁴⁵ Joshua Link, January 19, 2016, digital recording at Millenium Biltmore Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

Altadena, a haven for nature play most afternoons of Joshua's childhood, until his grandparents moved when he was thirteen. It was this intimacy with nature, the play, the familiarity, the constant observation, and the sense of belonging that brought Joshua into adulthood as a landscape architect. One who cares so deeply about ensuring that landscape architecture stays true to Los Angeles' pre-colonisation habitats and ecologies.

8.5 A GATEWAY TO RESTORATION

The channelised Los Angeles River is transforming, in spite of significant obstacles, not least that a once-meandering, ephemeral waterway had been locked into place with almost 600 kilometres of concrete channel, five flood-control dams, and more than a hundred debris basins.⁴⁶ Once a riverine ecosystem, the Los Angeles River has become what many have described as a water freeway. Against all these odds, water, flora, and fauna have persisted and returned. To a great extent, weeds have been imperative to this resurrection of habitat. In FoLAR's archive (though, interestingly, it is absent from the Army Corps' archive) is a 1989 letter from Colonel Charles S. Thomas, the district engineer of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles District. It is addressed to Ms Lucille Eide— I'm afraid the archives record nothing of who she is—who had written to California Senator Alan Cranston about weeds in the river. She was worried that "these weeds will eventually absorb this river ... and cause havoc." Colonel Thomas responded that "although the open bottom was not designed to act as a wildlife corridor, it now serves as significant habitat, and there would be no purpose in clearing the area completely of its vegetative cover, especially in view of the scarcity of such habitat in this urban setting." The river, the letter tells us, was at that time home to "76 species of plants, 177 species of birds, and an undetermined number of other species of wildlife, many

⁴⁶ Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles*, 128.

of which are found in the open bottom stretch of the river.”⁴⁷ I immediately think about the nature that has already returned—and all the future nature potentially surviving and thriving in this strange and altered river system—when Saber said to me, in 2016, in the depths of a conversation about graffiti culture:

If I had to choose between graffiti and the blight by itself or nature,
you know, fuck it, whatever, let’s go for the nature.
My ego says, “I want my piece there,”
but you know, we need nature, so fuck it, bring back nature.⁴⁸

And I think of my own mother, a passionate restorer of regional Australian countryside, pillaged by decades of ecological neglect and over-farming. Speaking about others like her, who also seek to regenerate damaged land, she laments, “I wish they would learn. Weed like a Buddhist. Do no harm.”

Weeds, needless to say, have more complex identities than just being a problem needing eradication. When I interviewed Kat Superfisky, she told me how the Nature Conservancy are analysing the river’s Glendale Narrows stretch to understand if plants like *Arundo* have possible ecosystem benefits.⁴⁹ The results are not yet known. If the findings are favourable, we may see a turnaround like that of the Tamarisk (*Tamarix sp.*), a weed that has turned from foe to friend:

many conservationists are calling for an end to decades-long efforts to destroy tamarisks, Middle Eastern trees that look something like cedars, in the U.S. Southwest. Tamarisks have long been blamed for hogging water there, though recent research debunks the notion that they use more water than native vegetation. Now endangered southwestern willow flycatchers have been found to be nesting in their branches, and so “salt cedar,” as it is often called, may get a reprieve. A philosophical conundrum comes next. The various species of tamarisk are hybridizing. Are these hybrids native or not?⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Colonel Charles S. Thomas, letter to Senator Alan Cranston, 1990, Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁴⁸ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber’s studio, Pasadena.

⁴⁹ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁵⁰ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World*, 106.

In interviews and other research, the usefulness of weeds is apparent. Indeed, *Arundo donax* was intentionally introduced to Los Angeles in the 1820s for erosion control and as a building material.⁵¹ Leo Limon taught me that *carizzo* is another name for *Arundo*⁵²—it translates from Spanish as “hollow stem, or reed.” *Carizzo* has “been there since it got here ... it’s running rampant and it’ll just take over the whole river, it’ll just kill off everything else,” Leo predicted.⁵³ He uses it for making and building

different things, yes, to make arches, a display, whistles.
Right now, it’s very tender. When it’s green, with a hacksaw I go and I cut it,
I cut it into certain shapes.
It’s almost like bamboo, it has a notch, then goes hollow, another notch, goes hollow so I just cut it so that it leaves a notch,
then I take it to schools when it’s dry and have the kids sand it and then put string around it and you have a whistle, colored yarn, and so on.
Turn it around, it’s hollow then you go *wooooooooo*.
And I say, “This is for your mother, show your mom how to use it. Your mom’s going to call. When you hear this, it’s for you.”⁵⁴

People who might ordinarily be described as homeless have carved out *Arundo* homes on river islands in the stretch of river just upstream of the Arroyo Seco confluence. Anthea Raymond has seen these at close range:

I’ve been into a lot of the places where people—not now though, but in the summertime—are living.
Some of which are fairly elaborate, you know, they’re kind of carved out of the plant down there called the *Arundo*.
They just kind of cut big cavernous rooms underneath the *Arundo* and live there.
You know, some of them are quite nice.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Gary P. Bell, “Ecology and Management of *Arundo donax*, and Approaches to Riparian Habitat Restoration in Southern California,” in *Plant Invasions: Studies from North America and Europe*, ed. J.H. Brock, et al. (Leiden: Blackhuys Publishers, 1997), 104.

⁵² Leo spelled it out as c-a-r-i-s-o; translations online have suggested an alternative spelling with double z.

⁵³ Leo Limon, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Oros Street Pocket Park and adjacent river bank, Elysian Valley.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

Lila Higgins talked about these Arundo homes, too, and also about how fun it is to “kind of weave through and play in” the thickets of Arundo.⁵⁶ Lila was quick to note that, while it is fun for humans to play, the Arundo offers little habitat value to native species. I asked her, my voice all light and breezy as if it’s an easy question, “Do you think Arundo should be eradicated?” Her sigh—her deep, long sigh—said everything.

Joe Edmiston is right: “the river is not a place for purists.”⁵⁷ The river is a landscape dramatically altered, in a city utterly transformed, and in a region renowned for living terrifyingly far beyond its ecological means. It is one among a dizzying number of extreme examples of how “we are already playing god ... we live in an intensively managed world.”⁵⁸ In spite of a prima facie case for being able to easily distinguish weeds from non-weeds, the river presents a particularly vexing case study. Here is how ecologist and landscape architect Kat Superfisky described what is at play:

There are a lot of people who work on the LA River who very much think about the landscaping guidelines as the bible and that they don’t want to see any Red Fountain Grass, they don’t want to see any Arundo, they don’t want to see any palm trees coming up in the LA River. But for me, it’s one of those things where I think we need to really rethink the way that we’re looking at that as an ecosystem. It went from one hundred per cent natural, quote “natural,” to then one hundred per cent human-dominated, and who’s to say that humans aren’t a part of a natural system? If we brought palms here and if we brought some of these other varieties here, if they’re still providing a decent benefit to the ecology, to the aesthetic appearance, and to the experience that you have, and that the experience that other plants and animals have, as long as it’s in a balance, I don’t necessarily know if it needs to be called a weed or referred to as a weed.

⁵⁶ Lila Higgins, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

⁵⁷ Joe Edmiston, January 8, 2016, digital recording at Streisand Ranch, Malibu.

⁵⁸ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World*.

The LA River is going to present a really good opportunity for us to tease that *weed* word out and figure out what the new ecology is.⁵⁹

The evidence would suggest that, for some time into the future at least, non-native flora and fauna are one of the river's most viable options, to re-configure and re-assert the river as a place of nature in order for it to be afforded the respect, care, and attention it needs.

It is speculation on my part, but with solid ground, that were it not for the river's lush coating of non-native plants thriving in the soft-bottom stretches, and non-native fish swimming abundantly in its waters, almost all of the markers of hope for the river's future would not exist. Markers like the traditional navigability declaration, the sanctioned summer kayaking, the fishing derbies, Mayor Garcetti making the river one of his key performance indicators, the persistent attention paid by journalists, and the Alt. 20 funding parcel of over \$1 billion at last count in 2016. Just as a heroin addict might be well advised to wean themselves slowly by using methadone for some time in preference to quitting the drug cold turkey, a river with weeds is a much safer option than a river almost bereft of life at all. Rather than locking out natural beauty—whatever that means anyway—*Arundo donax* may be exactly the kind of beauty that an in-transition urban river needs, at least culturally and aesthetically, if not ecologically. Here, weeds foster attentiveness, and through attentiveness intimacy builds, between this strange weed-filled landscape and its people.

Removing the weeds in a quest for something more pristine and natural is impossible and undesirable, anyway. As David Fletcher writes:

The naïve desire to return the river to a “natural” state amidst an asphalt metropolis is, in fact, a threat to the urban ecologies that have emerged in response to the river's modifications ... a blanket eugenic response fails

⁵⁹ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

to respect how non-native landscapes perform significant ecological functions ... stability in nature is an illusion ... the native versus exotic debate is oversimplified: the landscape assemblages should not be mistaken as the cause of environmental degradation, when they are actually an ecologically appropriate result.⁶⁰

Weeds are not outsiders. They are an attestation of our human impacts on the river, they are a prompt to build our affinity with the riverscape, they are habitat, and they are one of the many challenges that the river poses as we learn how to reconcile human life and the rest of nature in hyper-urban, complex environments such as Los Angeles.

8.6 NOTICING THE CONNECTIONS

There is a further dimension that weeds illustrate, which is the connectivity between every part of the watershed. Melanie Winter recalled an incredibly frustrating incident when weed control in the main stem of the river led to an outbreak of *Arundo* growth in Hansen Dam, one of the flood-control reservoirs. She both laughed and raised her voice in retelling this story, her frustration palpable:

Getting rid of the *Arundo* is a big freaking deal.
And it's frustrating, and we do need to focus on it more and more than just the Army Corps.
We were, oh God, we were making progress, then they took a boatload out of the river between Balboa and the dam, we then came back years later and did upstream of Balboa.
But they had taken a bunch out, they [laughter] removed it and they dumped it in Hansen Dam, without treating it properly, without breaking it up. They didn't do the proper removal process, they didn't treat it after that. They dumped the, the mulch from it in Hansen Dam so then, suddenly, Hansen Dam had a massive ... it was like, "Oh God, you guys!"
So this is the Army Corps, right.⁶¹

Mia Lehrer joked, in that clever way of joking where it is more telling than funny, about how in a brief to her landscape architecture firm, the client insisted

⁶⁰ Fletcher, "Flood Control Freakology: Los Angeles River Watershed," in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, 46.

⁶¹ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie's Home, Studio City.

on an entirely native plant list but stipulated nothing about what might be growing upstream:

nobody said, but, and you're going to have to go ten miles up into the Arroyo Seco and make sure there isn't one *Arundo* plant to come, you know. There'll be a sign saying: "If you're an *Arundo*, go back."⁶²

And there we have it—the complicated and complicating, hybrid and hybridising—a “new ecology.”⁶³ The future river will be a renovation, a place renewed and created afresh, but not recovered. And while such extensive urban growth in what is really a floodplain constrains the options available to this particular renovation, there are countless choices that can and will be made. Choices about plant material, about culture, about aesthetics, about belonging, and about class. To succeed, as many questions need to be asked about the future as about the past, because:

The “invasive species” paradigm is so easy. If a species isn't native, it is an outlaw and ought to be removed. If a species is native, it is good and should be kept. If we ditch those simple rules, then suddenly every plant and animal is a separate case, and we have to ask ourselves, “Do we want this species in this place right now?” To answer we have to know what we want; we have to have a vision for the future of every piece of land.⁶⁴

Weeds have more than a bit part in the story of the river's remaking; they are in fact one of its most important characters.

I am reminded of a walk I took along the Cooks River in Sydney, Australia. Artist and activist Diego Bonetto leads groups of enthusiastic, and mostly novice, urbanites on edible weed walks. With Diego as guide, we met, and in some cases tentatively ate, a range of weeds while Diego told stories, foraging basket and knife in hand. The stories were ostensibly about plants but, invariably, they were just as much about people. Some of these weeds were

⁶² Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁶³ Kat Superfisky, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁶⁴ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World*, 108.

comfortable and familiar to me. Cobblers Pegs (*Bidens pilosa*) I know from picking out the spikes from low-hanging clothing at the farm, and more recently as a salad herb. Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) is another salad mainstay. Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) go into rich wintry soups and also can be drunk as tea when unwell. Dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*) is crushed and smeared on the skin when nettles sting, rather than nourish. Others plants were familiar in appearance but completely unfamiliar in use. On the banks grew Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), which can be wrapped around injuries as a super-healing natural Bandaid. An expectorant, it can be made into cough syrup, antiseptic, and skin salve. After flowering, the seed husks can be eaten for dietary fibre. Flatweed (*Hypochoeris radicata*) was a weed I had hitherto ignored. Who knew that the leaves are edible (better cooked) and the roots can be roasted to make a coffee substitute, as can dandelion.



Figure 52: Organised weeds at the Cooks River, at the conclusion of a weed walk with artist Diego Bonetto, October 2012. This is a visual summary of the walk. Photo by the author.

For Diego and his river-exploring patrons, weeds are a cultural connector, a means of understanding ourselves and each other. As Diego remembered his childhood in Italy harvesting dandelions with a butter knife, I remember my childhood spent reluctantly eating those same leaves at our family farm in Australia, the bitterness making my face contort and my eyes water. There is plenty of weedy life teeming along the Cooks River and, in my mind, I moved almost seamlessly between that terrain to my childhood river, many hundreds of kilometres north, and to Los Angeles. Weeds are one of the tightest-woven common threads that we have, and they create intimacy.

Intimacy is all about paying attention. Weeds hold stories just as tightly as native plants do. Joshua Link, when he guides kayakers on Los Angeles River boating expeditions, will point out a “wall of willows and cottonwoods and sycamores and then some invasive stuff, like Castor Bean, and you can tell stories about ... *Breaking Bad*.” Castor Bean (*Ricinus communis*) is a distinctive-looking shrub, growing more than 4 metres tall and containing a potentially lethal protein in its leaves and seeds.⁶⁵ Its seedpod looks like a terrestrial sea urchin, or a spiky mace. Castor Bean found popular-culture fame when the television series *Breaking Bad* used its toxicity to drive several murderous storylines. When Joshua talks about it to kayakers, there is that same “aha” sense of recognition that I felt with dandelions, childhood, Italy, and the Cooks River.

Entangled intimate connectedness is at the heart of the weeds story. Regarding plants with attentiveness, getting to know them, means looking deeply at interactions, networks, and exchanges across time and place, because:

Modern environmental approaches that treat nature with naïve realism or as a moral absolute, unaware or unwilling to accept its entanglement in cultural and temporal values, are doomed to fail. We need rather to investigate the complex interactions of ecologies, cultures, and societies

⁶⁵ Carla C. Bossard, John M. Randall, and Marc C. Hoshovsky, *Invasive Plants of California's Wildlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 271.

in the past, present, and future if we are to understand and solve the current problems of the global environmental crisis.⁶⁶

Choose your plant—Prickly Pear, acacias, eucalypts, lantana, mangroves, Castor Bean, various palm species, grasses, Arundo (there is a very long list)—and its rise as an invasive in a particular locality will be readily mappable as an entangled network of physical, cultural, and ecological exchanges and sensibilities. This is the only way to understand how we arrived here.

Weeds don't only remind us of places and stories. They can also remind us of ourselves. Lewis MacAdams, without even a moment's pause, reacted to my question about weeds and vegetation by saying, "Oh, I'm a weed. If there's gonna be a vote, I'd definitely end up with the weeds, being a, being an expression of nature."⁶⁷ Carol Armstrong said almost the very same thing about herself but for a different reason: "I'm a weed in Los Angeles, I'm not from here. I'm a non-native species. I think there's a lot of non-native species in LA."⁶⁸ And for Shelly Backlar, the way in which weeds take hold in unexpected places, becoming part of the landscape, can be humanised, too:

we all wind up in certain places,
sometimes we can put our feet down and thrive there,
so you know, it may not be the most beautiful thing,
or the most anticipated thing,
but it's still part of a bigger picture.⁶⁹

It strikes me that this belonging and thriving, against norms of beauty and expectation, is characteristic of both weeds and of the river.

Making sense of the wild—wherever it may exist—means making sense of ourselves. As Gary Snyder writes, "the richness of plant and animal life on the

⁶⁶ Frawley and McCalman, *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, 4.

⁶⁷ Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

⁶⁸ Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁶⁹ Shelly Backlar, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Friends of the Los Angeles River Offices, Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

globe including us, the rainstorms, windstorms, and calm spring mornings—is the real world, to which we belong.”⁷⁰ The extensive sense of place literature holds belonging as a central tenet.⁷¹ Sense-making about place is about extending beyond the obvious. Dwelling “describes a way of being-in-the-world that extends beyond one setting, and even beyond the built environment.”⁷² Indeed, dwelling is about much more than merely being somewhere. Heidegger reminds us that to dwell, etymologically, means to *remain, stay in place, cherish, protect, preserve, care for, stay, be at peace, be brought to peace, and remain at peace.*⁷³ Indeed, dwelling is at the very centre of our ontology as human beings. In Heidegger’s fourfold, we mortals are defined by our dwelling, just as the earth is “blossoming and fruiting,” the sky exists as change, and the divinities are their beckoning.⁷⁴ Gail Stenstad speaks of fostering dwelling by paying attention to plants thought of as weeds:

We discover these nurturing plants (which give us nutrition and perhaps also pleasure, nurturing us entirely—body, mind, heart), but then we turn again and learn to nurture these plants. We care for their habitats, whether woods or meadow or fencerow. Perhaps our gardens’ boundaries from “the wild” from weed and varmint, become less defined.⁷⁵

This is attentiveness. Wilderness extends beyond the here and now. Gary Snyder writes of “ghost wilderness” that “hovers around the entire planet: the millions of tiny seeds of the original vegetation [that] are hiding in the mud on the foot of an arctic tern, in the dry desert sands, or in the wind.”⁷⁶ His ghost wildernesses are places-still-in-potential, promises to the future that life will germinate, sprout, and—provided the right conditions—flourish. For me, there are other

⁷⁰ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: With a New Preface by the Author* (2010), x.

⁷¹ Manzo, “Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places,” 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷³ Martin Heidegger, “Building dwelling thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ McWhorter and Stenstad, *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, 233.

⁷⁶ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: With a New Preface by the Author*, 15.

kinds of ghost wildernesses, too. They are both constructed and in-potential, from our imaginations, from our affinity with a particular place or creature or plant, from hate or love. They are all the possibilities into which a place might transform. If natural and wild places live as ghosts right here under our feet, we and the weeds just may be the ghost whisperers that will raise those spirits back to life.

8.7 PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION

In a report she prepared while a botanist for FoLAR, Christine Perala wryly noted, “weeds have a way of growing while humans argue about how to solve the problem of weeds.”⁷⁷ They have a way, similarly, of growing voraciously while scholars like me interview people about them and tell their stories. As I have been writing these words, a single Tamarisk tree (*Tamarix sp.*) will have released hundreds of thousands of small seeds, spread on the wind and by water.⁷⁸ Giant cane (*Arundo donax*) will have harboured children and spirits in Kathmandu, and made for a more “riverly” river in Los Angeles, but it will simultaneously have guzzled precious water during a long-term drought and heated the water to be, as Jim Burns experienced it, as warm as a freshly drawn bath.⁷⁹ Urban rivers are complicated places of contrast when you pay attention. They are gritty and green, concrete and water, regimentation and freedom. The contrasts grab my heart and mind. Here there is abandonment and meaning, concrete walls and lush grape vines, intimacy and vastness. There are contrasts in the way that different-coloured waters join at Canoga Park High School in the San Fernando Valley, green running into yellow at the Los Angeles River’s headwaters (see Figure 53). Contrasts also abound when it comes to unruly weeds. The wild and the tamed, the peril and the praise, and the tenacity of their

⁷⁷ Christine Perala, paper on “Weed Management of the Los Angeles River: Jurisdictional Problems for Native Aquatic Plant Mangement, n.d., Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁷⁸ Bossard, Randall, and Hoshovsky, *Invasive Plants of California’s Wildlands*, 314.

⁷⁹ Jim Burns, January 25, 2016, digital recording at Jim’s Office, Occidental College Library.

growth as they colonise apparently vanquished lands. Melanie Winter was blunt about weeds. As she put it: “Arundo is a bitch, Castor Bean is a bitch.”⁸⁰ But the lushness that Arundo creates, the swathes of green, has its value too. Mia Lehrer acknowledged, “there’s a visual pleasure that it probably gives a lot of people.”⁸¹ Perhaps the answer lies in balance and education, as Carol Armstrong suggested, so that:

we start to understand what’s non-native,
and then we start to understand how we might be able to do a better job
of maintaining our native species
so that our invasive species become less valued and kind of pushed out⁸²

Carol noted later in our interview that post-apocalyptic scenarios in films always have concrete and weeds.⁸³ It stands to reason that a river that has experienced something akin to an apocalypse might maintain the same characteristics.

⁸⁰ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie’s Home, Studio City.

⁸¹ Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles; Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One’s Studio, Los Angeles; Anthea Raymond, January 11, 2016, digital recording at Anthea’s Home, Cypress Park.

⁸² Carol Armstrong, February 2, 2016, digital recording at City Hall, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁸³ Ibid.



Figure 53: The headwaters, where Arroyo Calabasas and Bell Creek meet, at Canoga Park High School. Photo by the author.

The leader of Team Arundo, a Monsanto-supported collaboration seeking to control the invasive plant in counties near Los Angeles, concluded that the plant “has no friends.”⁸⁴ The team leader also lamented, “It affects fish, river water levels, water temperature. All the natural beauty is locked out because of that damned cane.”⁸⁵ Against these negatives, giant cane is undeniably lush, green, and—some would say—bucolic. It shifts people’s attitudes, making highly altered places feel less so, and evokes affection, ecological responsibility, and stewardship. It is a curse and a blessing. It is good and bad—good, bad, and long established. Remember, *Arundo donax* grew in the Los Angeles River as

⁸⁴ California Exotic Pest Plant Council, Spring newsletter, 1993, Box 39, Folder 6, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁸⁵ Johnson, “The War of the Weeds Environment: Biologists are Fighting Arundo, a Nearly Indestructible Menace that Takes Over Sensitive Habitats.”

early as 1820.⁸⁶ It predates channelisation by more than a century. On this basis, it could arguably become an indicator of the river's ecological recovery, not of its demise. There is a guideline in the *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*, which is titled "Plants That Should Never Be Planted Along the River."⁸⁷ While it makes good sense not to introduce anymore of these "exotic weedy plants" with their "aggressive domination of riverside landscapes," those weeds that are already in place, and thriving, present a far more complex conundrum.

I worry that this chapter may seem to romanticise perilous weeds. This is not my intent. I confess to feeling a pit of guilt in my stomach when the remarkable growth rates and multiple-uses of *Arundo* are more fascinating than horrifying to me. When I see a soaring eucalypt growing by the 4th Street Bridge in Downtown Los Angeles, my first thought is not of the unconscionable wrongs of species invasion but, rather, I think of shade and home, an entire ocean away. This chapter is not a plea for or against weeds. It is instead a demonstration of how, when we intervene dramatically in landscapes, the rules of engagement become less and less clear. And it is a game we need to learn and to play well if there is any chance of backing away from the ecological clifftops we keep pushing ourselves to the very edges of.

So much of urban life is characterised by the double peril of haste and inattention. Noticing nature in cities, slowing down by a river, feeling a whisper of breeze across your face, hearing the rush of water even if it is in a curb-side drain, or waking to birdsong as well as sirens; these things offer opportunities to pay attention, to be intimate. Whether native or introduced, and whether officially categorised as invasive or just informally categorised as undesirable,

⁸⁶ David F. Spencer et al., "Evaluation of Glyphosate for Managing Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*)," *Invasive Plant Science and Management*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2008).

⁸⁷ Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, *Los Angeles River Masterplan Los Angeles River Master Plan Landscaping Guidelines and Plant Palettes* (Los Angeles 2004; repr.).

the humble weed stands sentinel. It keeps watch over our fickle habits but also reminds us that the act of paying attention is a powerful one. When we slow down to notice the bitter taste of dandelion greens, the lush expanses of Arundo, the intricate seed pods of Castor Bean, and the shimmering seed heads of Fountain Grass like heat haze on the riverbanks, this is intimacy. The landscape assemblages that surround us in cities are invitations. They are invitations to think otherwise about weeds, to see them in multiple ways at once, much as we do a beloved. They are invitations to be intimate by paying attention. Weeds are not bad in every sense, but they are certainly not all good either; our role is to look back and think ahead in time to make decisions about what will become of an ecological and cultural landscape that we made and that, likewise, in many ways makes us.

9. The Future Has Many Pasts

Deep in the FoLAR archives, I found a scrap of paper with handwriting that I have come to recognise readily as belonging to Lewis MacAdams. It said:

When I connected with the L.A. River over two decades ago, I had to convince people that our river ...¹

It stops right there; as quickly as it began. It is tempting to see this as a partly formed thought, the ellipsis marking a sentence interrupted and left unfinished. But, as I pound my keyboard at the precipice of finishing this historical exploration of intimacy and the Los Angeles River, those nineteen words are perhaps the most heartfelt and complete description of this mysterious river that I have unearthed anywhere. You see, relating to the Los Angeles River is, above all else, an opportunity to fill in the blanks. It is a place that can be almost anything you need it to be.

9.1 A LOVED RIVER

Loving the Los Angeles River is something that countless people have done during the time period on which I have focussed my gaze, and no doubt for millennia before that. While some have loved it as it is, others find love only for its future potential. It exists both in reality and—just as vividly—in the popular imagination; the river that everyone likes to think no one else knows about. It is alive just as much in people’s dreams as it is in their reality. It is at once a river that delivers and that disappoints, a spiritual home and a civic joke. The river is the canvas that made it possible for Saber to create graffiti so expansive that you could see it from satellites, through obstacles of gang war, blood-curdling injuries, anger, rage, and danger set against the sustaining power of his ambition, obsession, and love. Love is in the architectural renderings of future river scenarios with the saturation carefully dialled down, so that landscape

¹ Lewis MacAdams, (n.d) handwritten note, Box 110, Folder 7 Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

architect Joshua Link didn't feel like he was betraying the terrain he had learned so intimately, playing in nature at his grandparents' house in the upper reaches of one of the river's tributaries.

Through this thesis runs a simple but previously neglected argument: that nature in cities is valuable and important, and that it must be regarded emotionally. The value proposition of nature in cities is not as some kind of simulacrum or consolation prize. An urban stream is not a lesser version of the bucolic creek remembered from country drives, picture books, or nature documentaries. It is nature—valuable, legitimate, worthy, and fascinating nature. It is the bright yellow flower of a flatweed or the cloud-like seed head of a dandelion, alive because it tenaciously grew its way to life in cracked concrete. That is nature. The invitation is to feel awe, curiosity, and intimacy right here in the cities where we live. To let it enliven us but, more importantly, to use this under-exercised sensibility to relate differently, to undertake ever-more determined stewardship, and to defend the ecological heartbeat of cities, our most populous human habitats.

This thesis has explored the recent history of a place that, until now, has tended to attract historical accounts arranged in a before-and-after kind of narrative. The river invites such an approach, having been so utterly changed. Readers and researchers alike cannot quite believe that a pristine stream, lined with vines and oak trees and sycamores, could be turned into this concrete monolith, a standing stone laid out on the horizontal plane, commemorating what fear, greed, growth, and power can do. And because it is so extreme a change, time and time again the river is written about as what it once was and is now, with some intermittent musings on what it might become. In this work, I have elected to unravel the before-and-after narrative and offer instead a narrative of attentiveness, of details, of the beautiful and the complex.

Both in my interactions with the river, and when I interviewed others about theirs, I was constantly reminded that the place is as mysteriously alive to them as it has always been to me. Interactions are a conversation between human beings and the more-than-human places that matter to them, to me, to us. Concrete, water, tree, rock, and rubbish, they all speak a language that is audible to humans, at least the ones who are listening. Barry Lopez reminds us that this is a two-way exchange; this is reciprocity:

To hear the unembodied call of a place, that numinous voice, one has to wait for it to speak through the harmony of its features—the souging of the wind across it, its upward reach against a clear night sky, its fragrance after a rain. One must wait for the moment when the thing—the hill, the tarn, the lunette, the kiss tank, the caliche flat, the bajada—ceases to be a thing and becomes something that knows we are there.²

It is because I have sat by this river, waiting for it to speak and then listening, that I—somehow—know that it knows I am there. This is not because I have some anthropocentric sense of mattering more, but because I believe what John Muir believes, that for all of humanity’s shortcomings and our affordances, we are inextricably part of nature, that tangle of us and all the rest:

everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love.³

Environmental history invites delving into “nature’s own archives.”⁴ Nature is somewhere that we always are, and environmental history gives us powerful mechanisms and words for noticing that we are there.

² Barry Lopez, *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), xviii.

³ John Muir cited in Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 192.

⁴ Mauch, “The Magic of Environmental History and Hopes for the Future,” in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, 60.

9.2 AN EXTREME PLACE

The Los Angeles River is a landscape that has been, and is being, pushed to significant extremes. The answers to questions posed about its future are, accordingly, complex and perhaps almost unfathomable. A remarkably novel approach will be needed to re-imagine, renovate, and remake this river. Given this, one might also pause to reflect on how to avoid other places becoming so extremely altered as the Los Angeles River. Lewis MacAdams' call to arms has long been for people to be "part of creating a new mythology for the Los Angeles River."⁵ This mythology has been multidimensional: civic rebirth, opportunities for children to escape violence and for communities to escape poverty, public space, the city's "heart and soul,"⁶ artistic and cultural expression, and ecological reinvigoration, to name just a few. Restoration is both an actual and a symbolic act, as Felicia Marcus writes in an undated letter to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors:

The Los Angeles River has become a national symbol of the harm that humans can do to their natural resources. But it can also become a national symbol of the ways we have learned how to restore.⁷

Lila Higgins described her organising activities at the river as "like an invitation people didn't know they wanted, or didn't know they needed."⁸ The river is indeed an invitation. And while beauty does not appear to have been in any way a priority for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles Division, when they channelised the river, it certainly has become a place of both surprise and beauty, a place that invites us to learn new ways to be riverly, and that fascinatingly collides nature, culture, humans, and the more-than-human world.

⁵ FoLAR Board of Directors minutes, 1990, Box 91, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁶ Jill Sourial, February 5, 2016, digital recording at Jill's office, The Nature Conservancy, Downtown Los Angeles.

⁷ Felicia Marcus, letter to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, undated, Box 117, Folder 3, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

⁸ Lila Higgins, January 19, 2016, digital recording at HMS Bounty, Los Angeles.

Just as our relationships with other human beings have many facets, so too our relationships with place will always be characterised by their multiplicities. A place can be more than one thing at once. In the very same oral history interview, I would learn of both love and loathing for the river, and how feeling safe there existed simultaneously with feeling terrified. As Saber described it:

You can stand there, you feel thirst,
your body's dry, the sun is baking you
and the smell is a funk, depending where you are.
You kind of sit back, you overlook the place, thinking
Wow, I want to soak it in as long as possible,
but I know if I stay too long something could happen.
You're always on the edge.⁹

In many interviews this double-edgedness emerged, and it echoes through commentary about the river, too:

A breeze cools the sizzling city air, rippling across the water through a canopy of overhanging willows. A mallard family sizes us up and glides into our eddy. Tiny white butterflies drift by like cherry blossom snow in spring. Just upstream, busy Balboa Boulevard roars overhead. From the bushes, someone lost in a wilderness of the mind raves biblically. The "riparian" (riverbank) habitat here includes Coke cans, plastic bags and a shredded beach chair. It is not a clear day, and I notice that we are paddling in circles. That's because we're confined to one of three tiny man-made ponds, blocked off by piles of rocks, that push the river around in ersatz contrived whirlpools, as in a high school physics ripple tank.¹⁰

There is a much-cited experimental psychology study from the 1970s that found that male suitors who walked a rickety suspension bridge were more likely to feel attracted to the woman they met on the other side, compared to men who walked on a sturdy, safe-feeling bridge.¹¹ The heightened emotion and sense of danger sharpened their attraction. Urban nature offers us the same relational opportunity, the chance to feel more love for a place because it challenges us, and because its contrasts intensify the opportunity for emotional engagement.

⁹ Saber, February 8, 2016, digital recording at Saber's studio, Pasadena.

¹⁰ Coburn, "Whose River Is It, Anyway?"

¹¹ Donald G. Dutton and Arthur P. Aron, "Some Evidence for Heightened Sexual Attraction Under Conditions of High Anxiety," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1974).

The river offers exactly this. As Dan Cooper described it to a journalist in 1998: “There’s pressing urbanization on either side. You’ve got all this then down here you’ve got this explosion of life.”¹² The “all this” and the “explosion of life,” their collision with one another in this strange and enchanting way, is an apt summary of the Los Angeles River. This approach accords with Allen Scott’s and Edward Soja’s urging to view Los Angeles in many ways at once, rather than celebrating it as utopic or condemning it as already a dystopia.¹³ While biophilia, topophilia, solastalgia, and other such concepts are powerful and useful ones, they miss a crucial dimension of people’s emotional connection to place, which is that of emotional entanglement and multiplicity. It is too reductive to classify a relationship as one of love, fear, or distress when being attached to a place, dwelling in it, more realistically prompts a tangle of various, and often conflicting, emotions. Sense of place is rarely reducible to a single emotional affect.

9.3 THE THESIS FROM A BIRD’S EYE VIEW

Understanding the river starts with understanding the city, which is no mean feat in a city as contradictory and complicated as Los Angeles. I seek to articulate an understanding of both city and river in the chapter “Locating the Los Angeles River.” Whether it is Reyner Banham’s classic four ecologies model – *Surfurbia*, *Foothills*, *The Plains of Id*, and *Autopia* – or Robert Gottlieb’s more socioecologically aligned three spheres – *water politics*, *cars and freeways*, and *immigration and globalization* – conceptualisation of the city, representations of Los Angeles are invariably fragmentary.¹⁴ This reading is borne out in the

¹² Clipping from *Los Angeles Downtown News*, 1998, Box 39, Folder 11, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

¹³ Scott and Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 2; Engh, “At Home in the Heteropolis: Understanding Postmodern L.A.,” 1678.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: nature and community in the global city*, 10; Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971);

physical characteristics of the metropolis, cut into pieces along socioeconomic, class and racial lines, an agglomeration of diverse people, land uses, terrains, and cultures. The most characteristic feature of the city is the dynamic of push and pull, a place positively and negatively boosted, vilified for its sins and valorised for its virtues. Edward Soja aptly describes Los Angeles as many cities tessellated into one, something of a cabinet of urban curiosities, demonstrating in one single place the characteristic features of many other world cities.¹⁵ Among these re-instantiations of other urban terrains, the politics of race and class plays out conspicuously, with agreement among commentators that parts of Los Angeles are decidedly Third World. As Mike Davis writes, social inequality and power are the most calamitous of the many dangers to which Los Angeles is prone.¹⁶

And through this city runs the river, a watercourse told and retold in a fairly consistent—though utterly inadequate—plot line. It is the river that was bucolic until it turned savage and wrought extensive flood damage in the early twentieth century, only to be tamed with extreme channelisation by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which rendered it a ruined, no-longer-natural place ignored by the city through which it ran, until Lewis MacAdams found it in the mid-1980s and commenced his “forty-year artwork” to transform the river into a central spine of the city’s ecological, civic, and economic life, an endeavour that is now co-owned by a long and complicated list of stakeholders. While these things are true, they only scrape the surface of the story. I argue in this thesis, and I am a somewhat lone voice in doing so, that the river was never forgotten, but rather has gained the attention of different types of people with the passing

Middleton, “Where the River Meets the City: Tracing Los Angeles’ Social and Environmental Movements [Book Review],” 152.

¹⁵ Edward Soja cited in Wilson and Catterall, “City’s Holistic and Cumulative Project (1996–2016): (1) Then and Now: ‘It All Comes Together in Los Angeles?’,” 132.

¹⁶ Mike Davis cited in Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles.”

of time. To cast the river as forgotten says more about our propensity to ignore people from outside of the mainstream than it does anything else. The post-channelised river has always been a peopled landscape, but in the last thirty years, and increasingly so, it is peopled by Angelenos with social and political mobility, and thus it appears, illusorily, to have emerged from obscurity. Ornithologist Kimball Garrett called the river “habitat by mistake” and Lewis MacAdams complimented the river as a “beautiful [thing] that didn’t mean to be.”¹⁷ The river is a place where the ugly is strangely beautiful, where one feels alone despite nearby crowds, where even rubbish can take your breath away, as graffiti artist Chaz Bojorquez described to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter:

The river was always a positive place to go. Surprisingly, it was beautiful down there. Late at night when you’re doing graffiti with the river’s sound, the freeways and with a full moon, you could look down at all the broken bottles and see a diamond-studded highway.¹⁸

The complexity of territoriality is but one of the river’s many contradictions, and one that has belonging at its very core. The strange riverscape, this mistaken habitat, is facing an upcoming decade that may be its most transformative. At this juncture, a historical gaze will be more important than ever.

In this thesis, I have mapped the intellectual territory of environmental history to show that there is still insufficient attention paid to both urban environments and to people’s emotional engagements with place. Given that our ecological impacts are so vast, and that our anthropogenic footprint sinks ever more heavily into the planet’s future prospects, we desperately need to pay attention to both. Together, the chapters “Our Very Urban Nature” and “A Riverly Historiography” start with the idea that there is no such thing as pristine, and that nature is a complicated social construction everywhere. I work in what

¹⁷ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 287; Lewis MacAdams, January 27 & February 3, 2016, digital recording at Nursing and Convalescent Hospital, Pasadena.

¹⁸ Arnie Cooper, “L.A. River Runs Through It,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2010.

Roderick Nash calls the aesthetic domain, and what J.R. McNeill describes as cultural/intellectual environmental history, in that my approach is to explore the human experience of a place and to think in terms of cultural reactions to landscape. As Wolch argues, we must become urban environmental citizens. I agree, and argue that to do so we must regard urban nature as legitimately natural and valuable. Not second best, not in a state of ruin, not beyond repair, but rather a first, second, and third nature—using Tim B. Rogers’ conceptualisation—that is beautiful, precious, challenging, and connective. Too often, environmental history about cities is declensionist, telling stories about the demise of nature as it is subsumed by urban growth and the hyper-consumptive economies on which cities are built. This thesis, though it doesn’t ignore the damage, focusses elsewhere, close in, on the stories of beauty in unlikely places as witnessed by historical protagonists along the more than 80 kilometres of concrete channel that is the Los Angeles River. As the river faces an unprecedented era of revitalisation, or as Ian Tyrell calls it *renovation*, maintaining opportunities for people to feel close to the river, to know it intimately, and for it to feel frontier-like, are crucially important.

Place has nipped at the tails of historiography for a long time but with some notable exceptions, such as Braudel’s monumental work *The Mediterranean* and Constance Lindsey Skinner’s work on American rivers, it remains incidental to much historiography. And where place is attended to, as it most assuredly is in environmental history, it is often the place itself that is the focus more than the emotional effects of the place on human beings who are connected to it in some way or other. These matters are explored in the chapter “Places are Emotional Terrains.” Sense of place and its various permeations such as place attachment, dependence, and identity are tricky and much-researched concepts, “just breath on the lips” in Alan Atkinson’s characterisation.¹⁹ But for all that place concepts

¹⁹ Atkinson, *History and the Love of Places*, 17–18.

may elude definitional clarity, the one thing that remains utterly constant is that place matters. It always matters. Samuel Temple describes unruly places as contact zones between nature and society. It is in these unruly places that the effects of the Anthropocene will be directly, viscerally experienced by a majority of the world's population. It is in these places that we must pay very close attention.

The close attention I call for in this thesis is what Heidegger describes as *a field of care*, a domain that is attended to by humans who belong and dwell there. To understand this better, I have looked close in at one remarkable place as it is known to my oral history protagonists, articulated in archival records, and inscribed upon the landscape itself. And I have looked closely for one emotion, love. But *love* was too expansive a term, too slippery to grasp, so I focus in tighter to *intimacy*. In Sternberg's love as triangle model – the three components *intimacy*, *passion*, and *decision/commitment* – intimacy is the component that exists in every long term and close loving relationship.²⁰ Love, and more particularly intimacy, is a crucial way in to thinking about strange and altered landscapes like the Los Angeles River. It will change how we think about places, ourselves, our pasts, and our futures.

This thesis explores love and intimacy by being intimate. For this reason, it is composed of detailed, close-in, historicised encounters with the three material objects that most aptly characterise what it means to be intimate with a landscape. The jumping-off point for "A Field Guide to Water" is the spiritual reactions that water evokes, how being "all up in that water" as Lila Higgins described it, has left people with deeply inscribed place memories and emotions. The quality of intimacy that this chapter asserts is *sustenance*. This is both literal and spiritual. The return of water to the river has sustained new and returning

²⁰ Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory of Love," 119.

aquatic and terrestrial life. While the return of steelhead trout remains a future dream, dense vegetation has returned, emergent algal ecologies now nourish migratory birds, and fish thrive, as does recreational and probably also sustenance fishing. As ornithologist Kimball Garrett noted, “pretty much everything many bird species need can be found by the [Los Angeles] river.”²¹ The emotional terrains made by water are powerful ones, which surfaced time and again in my oral history interviews and also ran like a heartbeat through much of the archival material. Strange, altered, and compromised sites of nature remain meaningful so long as life is sustained somehow and, at the river, it is the flow of water that makes this so. Being sustained by a place is a component of intimacy that my work brings into the scholarly conversation.

“A Field Guide to Paint” interweaves paradigmatic stories from three Angeleno artists and infills them with responses from others about graffiti, abatement, and *belonging*. For all three artists—Saber, Leo Limon, and Man One—the river exists as what Saber described as their “home plate,” a zone of belonging, a goal to run towards, and a safe place. But the sense of belonging and safety they described so vividly in our oral history conversations is a complex one, and certainly not an absolute. While the altered architecture of the river isolated graffiti artists from potential eyewitnesses to their crimes, allowing more time for the creative process to unfurl, it also fed into a seething territoriality from river-connected street gangs, who issued shoot-to-kill orders against graffiti artists. The Meeting of Styles at the Arroyo Seco confluence felt for a very brief moment like an artistic expression of belonging. It was collaborative, regulated with appropriate permits, and a truly riverly event, until the anonymous destruction of the artworks in the midst of tense negotiations between the County and FoLAR rendered compromise impossible and cut to the very core of the feeling of belonging that is central to intimacy with place.

²¹ Carren Jao, “The Los Angeles River, a Surprising Oasis for Birds,” *KCET*, August 4, 2016.

Last of all, “A Field Guide to Weeds” shows the third face of intimacy, *attentiveness*. How we attend to plants determines whether they are weeds or not. They are in every way a social construction. That *Arundo donax* was cast as “the plant from hell” by some river advocates, while at the same time providing much-needed shelter for people sleeping rough and visual amenity in an overwhelmingly grey landscape, demonstrates this amply. Thinking about weeds as an act of paying thoughtful attention is a powerful counterpoint to the peripatetic haste of urban life. It is an invitation to dwell in the Heideggerian sense, to look close in, and in so doing to accept the socially constructed and therefore multivalent character of the plants that populate our urban landscapes and riverscapes.

9.4 CALLS TO ACTION

Emotion, we must remember, has as its etymological essence the active notions of *to move* and *to excite*, from the Latin and French respectively. In that spirit, I offer here three calls to action which emerge loudly from my research: to regard strange landscapes with the esteem normally reserved for the more conventionally beautiful; to look more deeply and insightfully at these complicated places; and to cultivate emotion purposefully with a view to the past and to the future.

9.4.1 TAKE PLACES SERIOUSLY

The river has been in a perpetual quest to be taken seriously. Frequently pilloried for its apparently un-riverly demeanour, the Los Angeles River has been prone to derision that is unhelpful and ill informed, particularly in this age of the Anthropocene, where our human impacts weigh with geological heaviness upon the planet’s function and future. It is dangerous to dismiss places as too altered, damaged, or strange when they present as something other than our more traditional conceptions of what nature looks like. We must take them seriously, regarding them as both lovable and valuable. The Los Angeles

River is a poster child for this quest. As hydrology consultant Peter Goodwin said to journalist Michael DiLeo in the early 1990s:

in some ways the Los Angeles River is the most important river in the world to restore, precisely because it has been such a joke, so notorious. If something good happens there, people will realize it can happen anywhere.²²

FoLAR faced the same reaction. Lewis MacAdams wrote in 1990 that “when people first hear there is a movement afoot to save the Los Angeles River, the most common reaction is laughter.”²³ This joke status was present in the very formation of FoLAR in 1986, when Gary Snyder spoke at a small fireside meeting and then to a large audience at the Los Angeles Theatre Center:

In between poems he told a crowd of six or seven hundred or so that he’d just been to the first meeting of Friends of the Los Angeles River—which it was, in a sense. I’d asked Gary to read some of his river poems as a benefit for Friends of the Los Angeles River. Enough people showed up in our living room that we could have “Friends of the Los Angeles River” stationary [sic] printed—and the audience snickered. Gary smiled, raising one gently admonishing index finger, “Don’t laugh.”²⁴

Snyder’s admonition not to laugh has needed frequent reiteration. No doubt because it challenges almost every perception of what a river ought to be that the Los Angeles River has needed its advocates to push back against the mockery that so readily comes its way, as Gary Snyder did at that reading at the LA Theatre Center. Not only was the river ridiculed but, likewise, those who sought to speak for its emancipation. Around the same time that Gary Snyder read at Lewis MacAdams’ family home, FoLAR co-founders Lewis MacAdams, Pat Patterson, and Roger Wong had mounted an eclectic theatre piece at the Wallenboyd Theater in Downtown Los Angeles, not far from the confluence with the Arroyo Seco. A *Los Angeles Times* theatre critic had said of the fledgling organisation that with friends like Lewis MacAdams—who had painted his

²² Michael DiLeo, magazine article in *American Way* magazine, 1992, Box 90, Folder 5, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

²³ Lewis MacAdams, Headwaters newsletter article, 1990, Box 90, Folder 1, *ibid.*

²⁴ Lewis MacAdams, draft essay for the “Not a Cornfield” publication, undated, Box 31, Folder 1, *ibid.*

body green and enacted various animals once native to the river, while Pat Patterson constructed an enormous sycamore tree from salvaged river driftwood behind him—the river needed no enemies.²⁵ People laughed, but the river is now at last beginning to be paid far more respect and, from this, we can derive a timely lesson in the importance of having respect for unconventionally natural places.

9.4.2 SEE IN NEW WAYS

Some landscapes present themselves with grandiosity, or with exquisite beauty. They are our picture-perfect postcards of nature, the stuff of tourism brochures and wilderness documentary films. We know how to drink them in, thanks to years of practice in recognising those places as “natural,” and therefore worthy of our care. Compromised and complicated places like the Los Angeles River and much of any cityscape in general, necessitate a retraining of our sensibilities. These places invite us to see with new eyes. To do so is an expansive and powerful practice, as Melanie Winter reflected in our interview:

in our midst, if you pay attention,
most people are amazed
that we have great blue herons and egrets in Los Angeles.
Most people don't see them,
just like most people don't even see the channelized creeks and streams
and tributaries that they drive by every day,
until you have your eyes opened.
Once you see that you begin to look for it,
you share that with other people so they begin to look for it²⁶

We need to see rivers with this deeper and more attentive gaze because, sometimes, others cannot or will not do so. During the LACDA controversy, the final feasibility report concluded that “a majority of the mainstem channels have been modified to the extent that there are few environmental resources of

²⁵ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 252–53.

²⁶ Melanie Winter, January 9, 2016, digital recording at Melanie's Home, Studio City.

significance in these reaches.”²⁷ Of the very same stretch of river, objector Sheila Ard wrote: “I’ve walked the river and marveled at the abundant life—spectacular flocks of wading birds particularly.”²⁸ How we see places can utterly change the future prospects of those places, and for us as well. Place-making initiatives like the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, a project led by academic and activist Jenny Price, advocate for redefining place by changing our conceptions of it. The rangers created a permit document that participants were invited, or perhaps required, to sign in advance of exploring the backcountry of the Los Angeles River. It read:

I understand that I am entering a major public space. I understand that the L.A. River is a river, and not a flood control channel. I understand that I can ask my federal, state, county, or city representatives at any time to open this essential public space for safe and consistent public use.²⁹

Even the most hyper-urban environments can feel new and mysterious. George Wolfe spoke of how his feeling of the place being unexplored was a crucial source of inspiration for the history-making kayak expedition he organized and led, which assisted in the river’s traditional navigability designation by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2010. It only happened because he saw the river with attentive and fresh eyes. This thesis invites, urges, and I hope compels, you to consider doing likewise.

9.4.3 CULTIVATE EMOTION

Emotions about places exist whether we intervene to shape those emotions or leave things be. This is because reacting emotionally—perhaps positive, negative, or a jumble of both—is inherent to our humanity. So, in altering landscapes, which we inevitably do, emotions are a powerful yet under-

²⁷ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles Division, *LACDA Review Final Feasibility Report*, 1992, Box 27, Folder 5, Records of the Los Angeles Division of the Army Corps of Engineers (Public Affairs Office, Administrative Records, and Records Relating to Flood Control and Civil Works Projects 1898–2000).

²⁸ Sheila Ard, compilation of public comments on draft EIS, 1992, Box 27, Folder 7, *ibid.*

²⁹ Los Angeles Urban Rangers, backcountry permit, undated, Box 90, Folder 1, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

regarded consideration requiring attention. Los Angeles heaves with the ghosts and detritus of infrastructure and planning decisions that paid insufficient regard to the ecological, social, and specifically the emotional dimensions of landscape. Sarah Whatmore and Susan Boucher developed, in the early 1990s, a typology of environmental narratives (see Figure 54), which David Browne and Roger Keil applied to an analysis of the Los Angeles River.³⁰ Browne and Keil concluded that river policy and planning used a blend of conservation and commodity narratives while subaltern groups used the ecology narrative.³¹

	<i>Conservation narrative</i>	<i>Commodity narrative</i>	<i>Ecology narrative</i>
nature as ...	externality	commodity	system
planning as ...	zoning	bargaining	integrating
narrative standard	conformity	authenticity	sustainability
narrative context	aesthetic	amenity	ecology

Figure 54: Whatmore and Boucher’s typology of competing narratives. Reproduced from the journal article, “Bargaining with Nature: The Discourse and Practice of Environmental Planning Gain” (1993).

³⁰ Sarah Whatmore and Susan Boucher, “Bargaining with Nature: The Discourse and Practice of Environmental Planning Gain,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1993); Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles.”

³¹ Browne and Keil, “Planning Ecology: The Discourse of Environmental Policy Making in Los Angeles.”

My research indicates that a new narrative has emerged to extend the Whatmore and Boucher model. I call this the *Experience Narrative*. In this narrative, I propose that nature be conceived as *experiential*, a much closer-in characterisation than Whatmore and Boucher's *externality, commodity, or system* categories. Put most simply, nature is a place to have memorable experiences. In the Experience Narrative, planning is not so much *zoning, bargaining, or integrating* but rather *articulating*. Planning shapes and arbitrates the kinds of experiences that are possible. In this new Experience Narrative, the standard is not *conformity, authenticity, or sustainability*, but rather *identity*. The narrative context is *intimacy*, extending the existing *aesthetic, amenity, and ecology* contexts identified in the original model. On this basis, the cultivation of emotion is an essential driver if we are to successfully navigate the complexities of noticing, making and remaking city nature in highly complex environments such as the Los Angeles River.

9.5 A FUTURE FOR RIVER HISTORY

For all of the attention already paid to the river by scholars across many disciplines, and by the media, there are still many opportunities for important further work. Lewis MacAdams recalled his discovery of the river as “one of those once-in-a-lifetime feelings, a sense that you’ve found your mission.”³² There are such abundant opportunities for research and for public history work at the river that make for ample opportunities to find a scholarly and societal mission in which the river is central. Of the many opportunities for further research, those most pertinent to the focus of my thesis are: further exploration of the river’s emotional terrains, interrogation of emotions with regard to gentrification and environmental justice, collecting stories of river connectedness that reflect a much greater diversity of protagonists, and the pursuit of public and creative engagement through experimental research in the fascinating

³² Michael DiLeo, magazine article in *American Way* magazine, 1992, Box 90, Folder 5, Friends of the Los Angeles River records, 1987–2013.

entanglements so characteristic of urban landscapes. This research agenda is an activist one. As Paul Thompson writes:

History should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge, and understanding which helps towards change. For this the myth needs to become dynamic. It has to encompass the complexities of conflict ... a history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world.³³

Historicising the river through an emotional frame has the potential to change the river in particular, and also the city and elsewhere. It is no overreach to say that what happens with the Los Angeles River will gain the attention of much of the world. If change can happen in as ossified and compromised a riverscape as the Los Angeles River, it gives hope that change can happen almost anywhere. Some particular future research projects that nestle comfortably in the cradle made by this research include: site-specific installations where people have opportunities to entangle themselves sensorially with river objects, such as eating foods prepared with river plants, making and viewing art from found materials, and listening to river sounds in unlikely places or ways. Alongside this, walking the entire river, perhaps retracing the steps of journalist Dick Roraback who did this for a serialised column in the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1980s would open up tremendous conceptual and empirical research possibilities to better understand the river as an emotional terrain. Crucially, more oral history work is required to preserve and share stories of the river, with a much more diverse array of narrators than my or other people's work has thus far brought into the public realm. I am with boater George Wolfe in the "hope [that] I'll always have one foot in the river."³⁴ There is such a lot to explore and to understand, to agitate for both change and preservation. The critical voices of historians, including my own, must speak loud and listen carefully in the many conversations taking place about the river's complicated future.

³³ Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*.

³⁴ George Wolfe, January 18, 2016, digital recording at George's Home, Los Angeles.

9.6 IN CLOSING

This thesis has, very intentionally, been a lingering exploration. As you read about each material object you will have found strands of nature, culture, politics, and science braided and braiding together. I invite you, in closing, to think yourself into the text, to bring your own river stories, and your love stories, squarely into frame alongside those that I have offered up to you.

A novice reader of historical scholarship, though not you I am sure, might have been anticipating a neat, linear account, characterised by elegance and ease. I would have told you how critical moments of the river's past—most of them as yet unexplored by other scholars—were amply documented in the archives. These accounts, rich in description and fortified by ephemera just perfect for illustration and material analysis, would have sashayed easily from archival records and into my notebooks, before being readily triangulated by engaging oral history accounts from every relevant protagonist, each of whom was available and willing to participate in the project. But you know, as do I, that Camilla Nelson is right, that “history is—or, perhaps, ought to be—a struggle with uncertainty.” In this thesis, I have taken up Nelson's challenge, to “dare to frame, let alone foreground, the sheer chanciness of this struggle.”³⁵

You see, it was good luck, not good planning, that had me in Los Angeles on Australia Day in 2016, which happened to be the day that the 6th Street Bridge was permanently closed to traffic in preparation for its demolition. The bridge was a victim of concrete cancer, and chance had me and perhaps a thousand other people down by the river saying goodbye that night, corralled in by packs of agitated Los Angeles Riot Police. I saw, sensed, and heard how an unlikely river could be so emotionally alive to its constituents. It was chance that had me walking the Bowtie Parcel alone, time and time again, harvesting the grey-green

³⁵ Camilla Nelson, “Archival Poetics: Writing History from the Fragments,” *TEXT*, no. 28 (2015), 6.

foliage of Californian herbs, smelling their bitter pungency, and feeling the breathtaking aloneness that many of my interviewees spoke of. Experiences like this have changed how I think, live, and write.

The opportunity to be intimate with nature is a precious one, and all the more so in complex and complicated urban landscapes. Our health and perhaps our survival as a civilisation turns in large part on how we choose to live, so how we relate to places like the Los Angeles River articulates our present and future possibilities. Nature is right where we are, in cities. These places deserve our respect and attention as both a physical and an emotional terrain. Man One described it this way:

Creative people love to go to the river.
It's so different, you're right next to one of the busiest cities in the world,
and you go to the river.
You might be the only soul down there; it's incredible.
You're right there, you could see the traffic,
you could see the freeways full of cars,
you can see all the people in Downtown.
You're standing there in the river and there's not another soul there.
That's amazing, like, it's almost, it's weird.
It's like a mini getaway.
It's that same attitude that people have when they want to get out of the
city to go to the mountains or go to the desert and just be by themselves.
It's kind of that feeling, but you're two minutes from everything else.³⁶

Urban nature as a place for persistent and emergent ecologies, and for humans to both gather and to be alone, is worthy of our sustained attention. In doing so, it will always be the case that place is an emotional terrain.

Irene Klaver and J. Aaron Smith write about the river's character and all of the questions that are raised as it re-enters:

the cultural imagination as a character in its own right ... a green-grey hybrid infrastructure that questions strict separations between human

³⁶ Man One, January 26, 2016, digital recording at Man One's Studio, Los Angeles.

built/technology and nature, between various socioeconomic [sic] cultures, and between different practices.³⁷

The next decade or so is set to be the most transformative so far for the river. Already, the following events are reshaping the river's future: Frank Gehry is undertaking a river-long reassessment of the river's use and potential.³⁸ The now-demolished iconic 6th Street Bridge will be replaced by a very contemporary design that cleaves the river's past from its future.³⁹ There is new leadership for FoLAR, with its patriarch Lewis MacAdams having stepped down from leading the organisation in 2016.⁴⁰ Alternative 20, if and when it proceeds, will remake stretches of the river.⁴¹ There is a high possibility of the 2024 Summer Olympics being hosted by Los Angeles, and the river has already been offered up as a key location in the bid and potential build.⁴² Increasing real estate and development attention is being paid to river-adjacent properties, from a city rediscovering the river's appeal and beauty, which is triggering serious concerns about gentrification, including from Joe Edmiston who is quoted as saying, "as things get more attractive [...] gentrification is the fundamental public policy issue that must [be] addressed."⁴³ A presidential executive order in early 2017 that prompted a review of National Monument lands, throwing into

³⁷ Irene J. Klaver and J. Aaron Frith, "A History of Los Angeles's Water Supply: Towards Reimagining the Los Angeles River," in *From Jericho to Cities in the Seas: A History of Urbanization and Water Systems*, ed. Terje Tvedt and Terje Oestigaard (London/New York: Tauris, 2014).

³⁸ River LA et al., "LA River Index," accessed October 8, 2016.
<http://riverlareports.riverla.org/tools-2/2d-information/landuse/>

³⁹ City of Los Angeles, "The Sixth Street Viaduct Replacement Project: Bureau of Engineering," City of Los Angeles, accessed June 26, 2017.
<http://www.sixthstreetviaduct.org/>

⁴⁰ Louis Sahagun, "The Head of the Crusade to Preserve the L.A. River Is Stepping Aside as Group's President," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 2016.

⁴¹ United States Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District, *Draft Feasibility Study and Environmental Impact Statement*.

⁴² Mia Lehrer, January 18, 2016, digital recording at Mia Lehrer + Associates Studio, Downtown Los Angeles. Later reworkings of the bid proposal shifted the proposed Olympic Village from the river-adjacent Taylor Yard site to the UCLA campus instead.

⁴³ "L.A. River Becomes a Hot Property," *The Eastsider*, May 27, 2014.

question the future of the recently designated San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, which protects 350,000 acres of land in the river's upper catchment.⁴⁴ And then, of course, there is climate change, leaving in its wake climatic uncertainty and rising sea levels.

There are more questions than there are answers. The river is a dizzyingly complex environment. An assessment in 1999 identified that the river was within the remit of thirteen jurisdictions and thirty agencies, a constellation of interest groups aptly described as a "crazy quilt".⁴⁵ By then, it was a much more complex river than that which Charles Mulford Robinson had surveyed in 1907, when he was hired by the city to bring his City Beautiful urban-planning expertise to a report on the future of Los Angeles. Even then, the river posed a considerable challenge:

The river presents a very serious problem, and one which cannot be solved with entire aesthetic satisfaction. A river bed that is for most of the year dry and that has on both of its banks a railroad is not an attractive object.⁴⁶

Now, the river runs year round, mostly flowing with tertiary-treated sewage wastewater, creating what ornithologist Kimball Garrett has called "habitat by mistake."⁴⁷ The railroad tracks are packed even more tightly along its banks. And these are penned in by industrial, and some residential, infrastructure. It is wrapped in cement. With an increasing number of developers, residents, advocates, politicians, and others weighing in, interest in the river is at a high point. In all that comes next, a closely focussed, historically informed gaze could not be more important.

⁴⁴ Colin Dwyer and Kirk Siegler, "See the Sweeping American Landscapes Under Review by Trump," National Public Radio, accessed June 30, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/28/525883061/photos-see-the-sweeping-american-landscapes-under-review-by-trump>

⁴⁵ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 180.

⁴⁶ Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, 261.

⁴⁷ Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, 287.

If I were to summarise this thesis in as few words as possible, I would choose just two: *it's complicated*. Water is complicated. Graffiti is complicated. Weeds are complicated. Regarding cities as nature-free zones, or corralling nature only into those places that are officially designated as parks or gardens, short-changes both us and the more-than-human world. Damaged, strange, and compromised landscapes—of which the Los Angeles River is an archetypal example—matter profoundly to our present and to our future. Knowing them historically and emotionally is a beautiful and important act of intimacy, of belonging, of attentiveness, and of deriving sustenance from the places where we live.

Long before taking up public office, Ed Reyes grew up in East Los Angeles. As a child, he learned the topography of gang territories long before he could name the actual streets where he lived. As a teenager, he learned to count the whistles as gangs would call in their members—too many whistles and your life was in danger. At the river, sometimes, there would be no gang whistles and the waterhole right by Taylor Yard could be to Ed and his friends “that Shangri-La, that place where you can just decompress.”⁴⁸ As an adult, Ed was a councilmember. He stood on a mound in the newly-opened Rio de Los Angeles State Park and that childhood waterhole was only paces away:

There was a full-blown soccer league game going. All the other soccer fields were full. The baseball diamonds were full. The basketball courts were full. The water splash pad was full. The parking lots were full. Families were coming and going. People were having picnics. You could hear the intensity of the families.
And I was on this mound; I can see it now.
I could see the oxbow and how it was growing.
I was like, *Wow, we got here*. I felt like an eagle. I felt like I was soaring, I was all of it.
I just couldn't believe it. It was very emotional. That was a very intense moment. Everything that it meant, in terms of what happened to me and my friends, and all that. The gang stuff. The guys that had perished because of violence or drugs.

⁴⁸ Ed Reyes, February 6, 2016, digital recording at Marsh Park, Elysian Valley; unofficial river access point near Taylor Yard parcel; driving in East Los Angeles; and Elysian Park.

Then everybody had a chance. These kids have a chance. They have an outlet, a different influence in their lives.⁴⁹

An intimate environmental history, like this one, exists to construct vantage points like that mound that Ed Reyes stood on. Vantage points that allow us to regard nature in cities as important, instructive, and so much more than a consolation prize. Strange places, like the Los Angeles River, are not second best when waterfalls, lakes, and forests are out of reach. They are beautiful and important places that abound in meaning and significance in their own right. Their meaning and significance is intensely emotional and intimate. They are loved, and worthy of it. Paying close attention to cities as emotional terrains is both an obligation and a grace of environmental history.

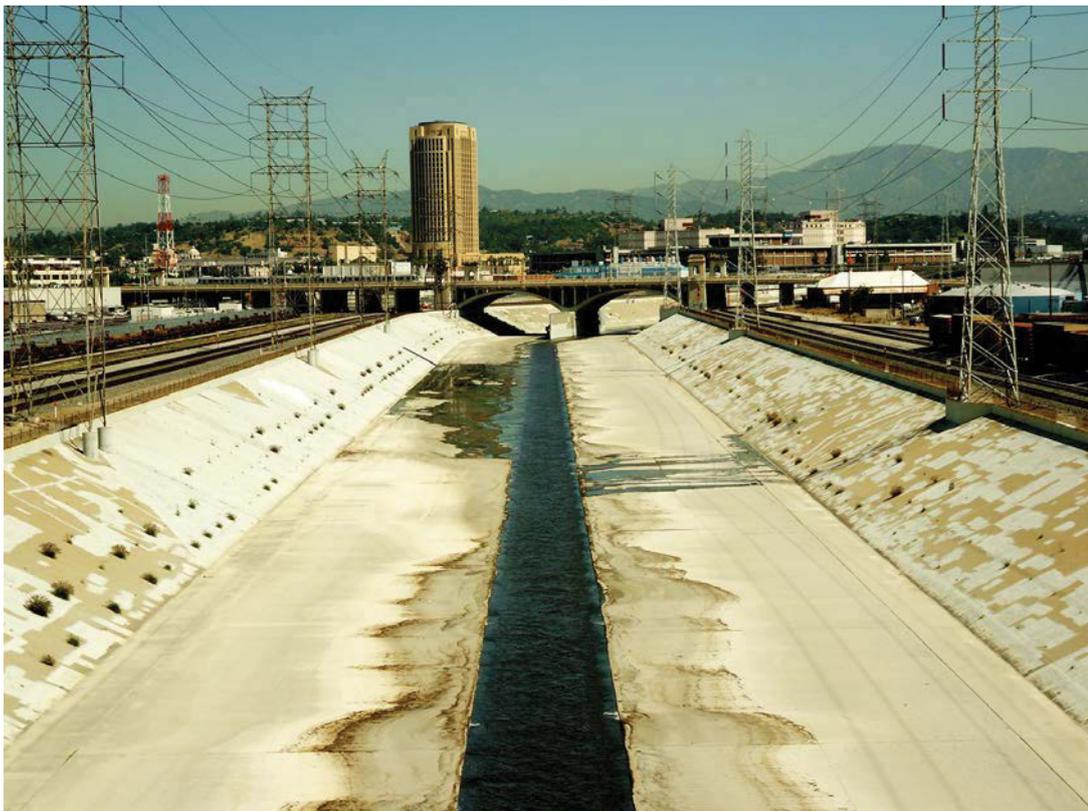


Figure 55: A river of history, Downtown Los Angeles looking north. Photo by the author.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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Appendix 1: Oral History Interview Protocol

Interview Prompts

- Meeting the river
- Tell me about a time when you have felt hopeful/optimistic about the river?
- Tell me about a time when you have felt hopeless/pessimistic about the river?
- Walk me from one end of the river to the other—headwater to mouth or mouth to headwaters—narrate places and memories [usually no time for this question]
- You've been connected to the river for __ years. What's something the river has taught you?
- Can you describe your relationship with the river?
- Important times, turning points?
- Tell me about an aspect of the river you know very well.
- Tell me about an aspect of the river that is unknown or mysterious to you.
- What does the river give you?
- What do you give the river?
- Final word prompts: e.g. trash, weeds, concrete, graffiti, homelessness
- That's all the questions from me. I'm interested to know if there's anything else you would like to add before we finish up this interview [allow time for reflection]. The process from here is that I will listen to and summarise our conversation. You're welcome to make corrections, deletions, and additions. If anything else occurs to you, you are welcome to provide additional information at any time. Is there anything you would like to ask?

Interview Themes

- First interaction with the river
- Optimism and pessimism about the river
- Places and memories
- Important times, turning points
- What does the river give you? What do you give the river?

Appendix 2: Thematic Summary of Interviews

Anthea Raymond

- Changes to the river
- Cultural connections between ocean and the river
- Boating

Carol Armstrong

- Riverliness, river drama, and river therapy
- City and Mayoral attitudes to the river
- Future opportunities

Ed Reyes

- Childhood
- Social inequality and river opportunities
- Being in, and leaving, public office

George Wolfe

- Slowness of progress (with some exceptions)
- Expedition leadership
- Kayaking

Jill Sourial

- River therapy
- Connecting to the river often
- Ed Reyes and City direction for river

Jim Burns

- Fishing
- Desire for and fear of change
- Nature

Joe Edmiston

- Power of nature
- Showing what is possible
- Anti-graffiti

Joe Linton

- Progress is slow
- River walks and the book
- Policy landscape

Joshua Link

- LA's distinctive landscape
- The river as the entire watershed
- Future of the river

Julia Meltzer

- Vandalism
- Public art and Bowtie Parcel programming
- River development/change

Kat Superfisky

- Speaking for the river, next generation
- Comparison with other landscapes, and shifts in thinking
- Magnetism of city and river, river as family, and the river family

Leo Limon

- River Catz
- Autobiography as artist
- Spirituality, identity, and belonging

Lewis MacAdams

- Mythology
- Life choices, autobiography as poet and activist
- Gathering by the river

Lila Higgins

- Nature place, resonance with childhood
- Freedom, rogue events
- Connecting people to the river

Man One

- Meeting of Styles, event and fallout afterwards
- River as a canvas
- Graffiti and gang culture

Melanie Winter

- Underachievements of FoLAR
- Water management and politics, projects tend to stay as pilots
- River revitalisation measures are ecologically and functionally deleterious

Mia Lehrer

- Progress is slow but opportunities are especially ripe now
- Need for more communication with the public about the river
- Friction and river gossip

Saber

- Dangers of the river
- Always an outsider, to river and (currently at least) the art world
- Painting the LA River piece

Shelly Backlar

- FoLAR
- Nature at the river
- Contributions of other organisations and agencies