A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Betsy Kalin, *East LA Interchange*, Los Angeles: Bluewater Media, 2015. 57 minutes; colour

East LA Interchange[1] opens with shots of Boyle Heights, east of downtown Los Angeles. It is a community full of life, beauty and color – a patchwork that is matched by the documentary's interviews, photographs, found footage and new footage, quilted together by Danny ("*Machete*") Trejo's narration. A girl in her *quinceañera* ("sweet fifteen") dress walks down the street, her joy and excitement embodying the vibrancy of Mexican cultural tradition. *Mariachis* in full uniform, instruments at the ready, sit in the plaza. This is a rich story of place informed by LA's historical conjunction of white supremacy and planning, told in the voices of many of its diverse residents. It finds strength in this diversity, yet does not fully explore the resulting rifts around gentrification and struggles over the future of the barrio, underpinned by deepening inequalities and development forces increasingly tied to international circuits of capital.

"What does it mean to be equal?"

George Sánchez, author of *Becoming Mexican-American* (1993), talks about how Boyle Heights was one of the rare places where all were welcome. On its streets, everyone was from a different somewhere else. Jews from Eastern Europe, whites escaping the Oklahoma dustbowl, Mexicans, African-Americans, Japanese. Momo Yashima describes her first taste of a tortilla. A kid who grew up speaking Yiddish and Spanish recalls being stuck in remedial English. No surprise, then, that Boyle Heights is known as the "Ellis Island of the West Coast", a "laboratory of democracy", a "working class neighborhood that has steadfastly fought to maintain its community, surviving discriminatory legislation, devastating freeway development and environmental racism". Although none of these threats have really gone away, today it is gentrification that looms largest.

1 Directed by Betsy Kalin; Executive Producers: Betsy Kalin and Eric Waterman; Produced by Vanessa Luna Bishop, Christine Louise Mills and Gretchen Warthen; Written and Edited by Christine Louise Mills; Cinematography by Gretchen Warthen; Original Music by Michael Feldman and Raul Pacheco; Additional Music by Germaine Franco; Narrated by Danny Trejo. See http://www.eastlainterchangefilm.com

We see vendors of *elote* (roasted corn) and *tejuino* (a fermented corn drink), offering the kind of culinary cosmopolitanism that once belonged only to the spaces of the working class, of poor whites, not-quite-whites, people of color and immigrants. They have lately been "discovered" for more generalized elite multicultural consumption (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013; Molz 2007). It feels wrong, yet how do you restrict access to spaces celebrated for their openness?

Boyle Heights has always been a place tolerant of difference, but such a vibrant mix of people and culture and gastronomic delight only came into existence because of the intolerance of US-born whites. Los Angeles is first among US cities in the development of racially restrictive covenants. Inserted into the property deeds of homes preventing their resale to non-Caucasians, such covenants blanketed much of the city. Boyle Heights was one of the few places left to everyone else.

But Boyle Heights, the documentary reassures us, was no melting pot. Cultures did not blend into some amorphous mix, but were kept more or less intact. People were able to borrow and experience various aspects of multiple heritages in ways that many remember fondly. Shaped by its diversity, its respect for different cultures, and a working class culture of mutual support and generosity, Boyle Heights stood in contrast to much of the rest of Los Angeles, unified principally by insistence on its whiteness.

East LA Interchange captures a handful of very powerful stories embodying some of these dynamics as they developed over a momentous century. Evelyn Waterman talks about a little newspaper she started up with her friends, and tells stories of dancing under streetlights. Cedric Shimo's parents were deported to Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor and Cedric himself was interned in a concentration camp before going on to serve in the US army. After WWII, he brought his parents back, and he remembers both their bewilderment at how much LA had changed and their sighs of relief when they returned to Boyle Heights. They immediately felt they were home.

The 1930s and 1940s also witnessed the formalization and incorporation of racial criteria into the housing market. Geographer Laura Pulido – a path breaker in understanding

A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

how struggle around culture, race and language cannot be disentangled from the economic struggles of work and class (Kun and Pulido 2013; Pulido 2000, 2006; Pulido et al. 2012) – describes the government's real estate mapping of Los Angeles into four areas color-coded by the age of its dwellings and the race and class of its occupants. Banks would not lend to those living in red areas such as Boyle Heights – hence the term redlining. Thus we see the pull of post-war subsidies and new homes working in tandem with the push of redlining along with stigma (the reaction of the parents of someone you're dating who lives outside the neighborhood; the difficulty of getting a job when employers catch sight of your zip code). The impossibility of obtaining mortgages in Boyle Heights meant that as definitions of whiteness expanded to include Jewish communities and European immigrants, people began to leave.

"The spirit in Boyle Heights cannot be broken by CA planners"

Racially restrictive covenants and redlining are only the beginning of how development and planning practices formed and deformed this community. Next came the freeways – and who now can imagine LA without them? Coming after white flight, and sometimes enforcing it, they were rammed through central neighborhoods and inner-ring suburbs to facilitate the movement of traffic from the outer suburbs. In order to build what was then the biggest interchange in the country – known as the "spaghetti bowl" – the Russian community was almost entirely removed from Boyle Heights. We see old-school graphics of freeways coming through and knocking down houses to the sound of children's building blocks tumbling. But it is not just about the destruction of homes. Massive concrete barriers divided neighborhoods, and the vehicles they carry spew death and disease. The air is full of particulates, causing chronic asthma. And noise pollution, as 9,921 vehicles take the freeway over the community every hour – that's 235,000 vehicles per day, every day. The Mothers of East LA (MELA) organize to oppose the environmental racism inherent in freeway siting and the refusal to mitigate its impacts.

"Barrio means neighborhood"

MELA are not alone. Boyle Heights has always been home not just to a diverse working class but to a vibrant mix of artists and activists. Perhaps the film needed a little more about this, how these categories overlap, come together, clash. How individuals rarely fit into one or the other, but take on or are assigned different identities depending on where they are and who they are speaking to.

Boyle Heights always fought back. It was a sanctuary for radicals during the McCarthy witch hunts. The home turf of Edward Roybal, the first Mexican American to be elected to the city council in 1947. That same year, Roybal founded the Community Service Organization with Fred Ross and Antonio Rios to build power among everyday people, training Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta before the United Farmworkers, and connecting East LA to the national tradition of community organizing consolidated by the Industrial Areas Foundation's Saul Alinksy. 1968 brought the student walkouts, led by Roosevelt High School.

Through the 1960s, those considered "white" continued their outward flight and African Americans increasingly took their place alongside the Latino community. It is only at this point that we hit the image of Boyle Heights that has dominated since the 1970s – of gangs, drugs and violence. Of course, Boyle Heights has a long tradition of gangsters going way back. LA's own Micky Cohen (1975) grew up there during prohibition and ran numbers and stole crates of candy long before he joined up with the likes of "Bugsy" Siegel. But Anderson Cooper of *60 Minutes* does his "exposé" of gang culture among youth of color, seeming to confirm a shrunken outside perception of Boyle Heights and East LA. What remains is fear and judgement. All the while these neighborhoods suffer the withdrawal of the investment and city resources they are crying out for, the way every poor US community of color does.

"We are the developers"

The final section of the film somehow feels shorter, less weighty, muted. In the debates about development, community organizations who have been fighting displacement for many years, such as Union de Vecinos and ELACC (East LA Community Corporation) go unheard. Perhaps because they don't always agree; these debates are complex, and the past few years have seen old alliances fall. There is some focus on tenant organizing in the portrait of Comité de la Esperanza, their struggle for their right to remain in Wyvernwood Gardens. We hear of the controversy around the introduction of light rail; intended as a way to reduce driving and confront climate change, it brings with it a certain kind of residential and commercial development designed to attract the middle-classes from outside the community. There is still little sense of how long people have been fighting gentrification here, including the mariachis of Mariachi Plaza featured so prominently (Avila-Hernandez 2004).

This is gentrification in all its race and class complications, art galleries and cafes posed as the opening wedge. Boyle Heights is, after all, the seat of the debate around *gentefication*, or the gentrification of Latino neighborhoods by Latinos (Delgadillo 2016; Medina 2013). It is complicated in the documentary and in life by the sense of loss that comes of growing up in a neighborhood full of poverty and violence some felt they had to get out of to get ahead. A neighborhood they wanted to make better. will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas asks how to do it well, which is perhaps answered most successfully and articulately by people like Josefina López. She founded Casa 0101 Theatre in 2000, which has sunk deep roots and fostered local actors and writers. Some of the answers lie there.

Yet answers also lie in an understanding of the demands of residential development now tied into financialization and investment capital that continue to drive segregation in Los Angeles, and yet are not faced squarely here. The power that residents with money have to change the neighborhood to suit themselves, compared to the ongoing struggle of current residents to build and improve the neighborhood they love while also fighting for their right to remain there in the face of inexorably rising rents and home prices. Surely Boyle Heights'

future lies in a commitment to development which builds on the many strengths *East LA Interchange* excels in laying before us. In the words of Leonardo Vilchis, a community organizer who has been working alongside residents to improve these neighborhoods for over 20 years, the problem is believing that development alone is the answer. In conversation he tells me:

> From our perspective development needs to have a preferential option for those people who have been historically left out of the process. That is, they need to be the primary targets and beneficiaries as they guide the process through organizations and mechanisms of participation that are truly accountable to the community.

These debates could have been explored more fully. They will shape the future, and the survival of all that this film celebrates in closing, just as it opened, with Mariachi Plaza and the mariachis themselves. Boyle Heights is portrayed here as a community that is working, a community that others might aspire to in the ways it has grown through a history of openness, tolerance and diversity. But there are warning signs that it could be easily lost, as witnessed by gentrified neighborhoods across the US. Not all of the dynamics are visible here, but an understanding of this rich history of both diversity and the structural racisms embedded in residential development and transport planning are undoubtedly necessary tools that residents need in the fight to protect its future.[2] Perhaps Boyle Heights can continue to show a way forward by maintaining its long tradition of welcoming the new without displacing the old, creating new hybridities and a radically accountable development as it does so.

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2 The connections between constructions of race and constructions of the city as they articulate with capital can be found in Laura Pulido's work (Kun and Pulido 2013; Pulido 2000, 2006; Pulido et al. 2012), and that of Ruth Gilmore (2002, 2007). Other good places to start thinking about this in more depth, and understanding how history informs the social justice struggles of the present, would be with Scott Kurashige's *The Shifting Grounds of Race* (2008) and Eric Avila's *The Folklore of the Freeway* (2014).

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A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

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