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Meet Me at the Swap Meet:
Architectures of Emergent Citizenship in Greater Los Angeles, 1983-2020

by

Alexander Rupp Stewart

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Architecture

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Margaret Crawford, Chair

Professor Andrew Shanken

Emeritus Professor Paul Groth

Professor James Holston

Fall 2020

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Alexander Rupp Stewart

Abstract

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Professor Margaret Crawford, Chair

Indoor swap meets rapidly opened across Greater Los Angeles from the early 1980s through the 1990s as immigrant investors—principally from Korea—repurposed and subdivided former department stores, warehouses, supermarkets, movie palaces, and other “obsolete” buildings into indoor bazaars selling new, off-brand goods. Overlooked by architectural and urban historians, these repurposed sites of commerce housed thousands of immigrant micro-entrepreneurs who built social and financial capital through their retail operations. This dissertation examines processes of place making, place claiming, and urban citizenship through the space of the swap meet. I argue that these businesses, which were sited almost exclusively within lower-income communities where African American, Latinx, and Asian residents were in the majority, were a vital cosmopolitan crossroads in a rapidly diversifying metropolis. These quasi-public spaces played host to the formation of new solidarities between these groups and material cultures into the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Operating across transnational, regional, and local scales and focusing on racialization processes and consumer culture, this dissertation shines a light on the hidden histories which have taken place within swap meet space. My analysis begins by examining the development of the indoor swap meet as a new business type derived from multiple precedents, including outdoor swap meets and a range of indoor bazaar traditions from Latin American *mercados* to Korean *shijang*. It subsequently turns its attention to Korean-dominated indoor swap meet niche, which boomed during the 1980s alongside other business sectors including Korean-run garment manufacturing, wholesaling, and banking industries. As economic and social institutions, I argue that indoor swap meets not only helped their owners and vendors attain financial stability and material wealth. They also prompted intercultural contact between Asian, Latinx, and Black visitors, which led to a series of conflicts at several swap meets prior to the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion. While initially contentious, I argue that these conflicts produced better business practices and new solidarities between African American and Korean business and community leaders. Also during the 1980s and 1990s, swap meets’ intercultural milieus were key sites of cultural production, giving birth to new forms of retailing and popular culture. Analyzing hundreds of hip hop lyrics which reference swap meets, this dissertation links the emergence of west coast hip hop to swap meet space, examining how these emergent forms of political speech were products of their spatial context. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of attempts

by swap meet developers and managers to blur the lines between swap meet and mall retailing within Latinx-serving shopping centers.

This project is informed by a range of primary sources, archival material, and fieldwork conducted over four years. Site visits to 47 indoor and 15 outdoor swap meets as well as an examination of contemporary and historical advertisements and archival materials exposed a range of swap meet types, from indoor emporiums with hundreds of booths to small 15 booth storefronts. My informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with shoppers, vendors, swap meet managers, and swap meet owners revealed the dynamics surrounding the swap meet's social and economic lives.

Although the materiality of swap meet goods is often overlooked, it is precisely through their materiality that indoor swap meets exerted significant social and cultural force during their heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. Their loose regulation, flexible design, and accommodation of the socially marginal, made them crucibles of transgressive cultural forms that made subaltern groups visible. At the same time, they provided decent livelihoods for thousands of immigrant entrepreneurs and afforded countless families opportunities to define their identities with the latest fashions. As spaces of work, shopping, and leisure, they helped patrons and vendors alike assert their claims to economic and social citizenship within xenophobic and racist political contexts.

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Chapter 1: Swap Meet Los Angeles: Hidden in Plain Sight



Figure 1.1: Bonito Swap Meet façade in MacArthur Park, Los Angeles. Photo by author, 2016.

As a built environment scholar interested in informal commercial spaces, I began a series of long-distance bus rides across Los Angeles in 2014. Intent on learning who used public transport in a place architectural historian Reyner Banham made famous for its auto-mobility, I spent weeks speaking with riders and transit activists about their experiences.¹ Traversing the city's thoroughfares at low speed and with frequent stops, the bus rendered a far more nuanced image of the city's complex ecologies than the car or freeway ever could have.² It was by paying careful attention to the passing landscape that I saw numerous "swap meets" in repurposed Downtown, MacArthur Park, and South Los Angeles retail STOREFRONTS. I was curious why marketplaces I had assumed were ephemeral outlets of secondhand merchandise seemed to be operating as *permanent* businesses selling *new* goods within predominantly Latinx sections of the city (Figure 1.1).³

¹ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

² Alec Stewart, "The World of the Bus: A Lens for 'Knowing' Los Angeles," in *No Cruising: Mobile Identities and Urban Life in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: Global Urban Humanities Initiative, UC Berkeley, 2014), 29–42. Paul Groth was the first to introduce me to the method of understanding cities through its bus lines. As an example, see his excellent, though now dated, field manual for Oakland, California: Paul E. Groth, *AC15: Oakland as a Cross Section of America's Urban Cultural Landscape*, Experimental Edition (Berkeley: Paul Groth, 1980).

³ In this dissertation, I use the non-gendered label, "Latinx," to describe individuals whose families (or themselves) hail from Latin American countries, *including* Portuguese-speaking Brazil. I use the gendered labels "Latino" (male) and "Latina" (female) when referring to individuals, and "Latina/o" when citing other researchers who use this non-gendered term. Many Americans, reporters, and some researchers use the term "Hispanic" to refer to individuals whose families or themselves are from countries where Spanish is the primary language spoken. Like "Asian" and "Black," the terms "Latinx" and "Hispanic" are problematic because they have often been externally-imposed upon U.S. populations by

One Sunday afternoon in Los Angeles's industrial southeast, from the bus window I noticed Latinx families walking from all directions toward a large warehouse complex at the intersection of Vernon Avenue and Alameda Street.⁴ Thudding cumbia music emanated from the bright orange building, which was marked with a sign that read "El Faro Plaza." Intrigued by the scene, I followed the crowds walking from nearby overflow parking areas to what turned out to be a large example of a swap meet. The music was coming from speakers on a large stage beneath a long awning on the building's northern edge. Beneath the overhang was a fountain, a "jumper" (or bounce house for children's play), a mechanical bull, and seating for patrons dining at a handful of restaurants lining the building's edge. Past the restaurants and within a cavernous building were hundreds of small vendor stalls organized in wild juxtaposition (Figure 1.2). Masseuses, acupuncturists, and doctors operated practices adjacent to income tax preparers and auto parts stores. Shops selling racy lingerie existed near those selling baptism clothes and Catholic literature. Just across East 45th Street was the rival Alameda Swap Meet, whose even *larger* assemblage of warehouse buildings formed a horseshoe with a large plaza at its center (Figure 1.3). Blending commercial, public, and sacred elements in a loosely regulated way, the plaza brought together in a single space restaurants, kiosks, a religious shrine, a large stage from which bands and DJ's regularly performed, and even a Sunday morning mass positioned right next to a children's pony ride (Figures 1.4 and 1.5). While both swap meets contained visual referents to Mexico and most of the customers spoke Spanish, many of the vendors were Korean. When several Korean vendors told me they preferred speaking Spanish to English, I realized I had walked into a vital intercultural crossroads.



Figure 1.2: Interior corridor at El Faro Plaza. Photo by author, 2014.

government agencies and researchers, thereby blurring important distinctions between subgroup populations (based on national origin, social class, and gender, for example). More recently, however, pan-ethnic labels have been appropriated by some members of these groups for the purpose of building political solidarity. These panethnic labels are thus contested categories in continual flux.

⁴ This term, borrowed from Mike Davis, refers to industrial sections southeast of downtown Los Angeles where national automobile, steel, rubber, food processing, and other manufacturing companies opened branch plants between the 1920s and 1960s. See Mike Davis, *Dead Cities* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 191.



Figure 1.3: Outdoor plaza at the Alameda Swap Meet, Los Angeles. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 1.4: A shrine to the Virgen de Guadalupe on the Alameda Swap Meet plaza, next to the outdoor food court. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 1.5: Korean massage therapists at an Alameda Swap Meet booth offer momentary relief from shopping. In the background, a business provides vital financial services to swap meet patrons seeking to cash paychecks, prepare income taxes, and send remittances to families residing outside of the United States. Photo by author, 2014.

What was this place? Why did what seemed like a *mercado* for Spanish-speakers have so many Korean vendors? Why was all of the stuff on sale new rather than second hand, and where did it come from? What did the mixture of diverse social groups and generic merchandise say about late twentieth and early twenty first century Southern California? And how many other swap meets like these might I encounter across the city? As I began seeking answers to these questions through archival research, mapping, and site visits, I began to realize that the swap meet economy and its physical infrastructures

The existing literature on swap meets is thin. Although economic geographers and urban theorists including Ed Soja and Mike Davis have made passing references to them in works published during the 1990s and 2000s, they only hint at larger stories about their social, racial, and economic dimensions.⁵ Framed as illustrations of Southern California's growing informal economy, their representations miss the complexity and richness of these market halls. James Rojas noticed Alameda Swap Meet's role as an important Latinx social hub, but his framing obscures the fact that *multiple* cultural actors were—and are—involved in that space's social production.⁶

Edward Taehan Chang, a sociologist and scholar of immigrant entrepreneurship, offers the most comprehensive account indoor swap meet operations, yet he too frames their production in terms of a single ethnic group: Korean immigrant entrepreneurs.⁷ According to Chang, this “new form of retailing” was a product of Korean swap meet owners and vendors and contained almost exclusively within South Central Los Angeles.⁸ Connected to co-ethnic wholesale firms and garment manufacturers in Los Angeles's garment district, Chang observes that Korean swap meet vendors became outlets for an early flood of Asian imported goods. By introducing a generation of South Central shoppers to inexpensive goods from Asia, vendors were primary links to an increasingly integrated world economy.⁹

These goods became symbols of exploitation and objects of protest by community activists, who objected to their quality and cost in the buildup to the Rodney King Rebellion. As I discuss in Chapter 4, Korean swap meet vendors eventually bore the brunt of frustrations with the structural inequalities and institutional racism that these activists felt indoor swap meets represented. Chang, in contrast, constructs a redemptive narrative which frames these markets as public spaces and important arenas of economic subsistence for thousands of Korean entrepreneurs. Viewing the social relations that occur within these market halls through the lens of African American and Korean tensions, he mostly writes Latinx actors out of the narrative. Observing that indoor swap meets “afford [Korean] vendors a neighborhood atmosphere” and “safe environment for conducting business,” he addresses important dimensions of the swap meet's role as a public realm.¹⁰ While Chang astutely outlines many of the social, political, and economic dynamics that structure the swap meet economy and public life, the story is more complicated than he suggests. Perhaps because his analysis defends a Korean-dominated economic niche maligned by social justice advocates, he limits his scope to Black and

⁵ Edward W. Soja, “Los Angeles, 1965-1992: From Crisis-Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 441; Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (London; New York: Verso, 2000), 58.

⁶ James Rojas, “Latino Urbanism in Los Angeles: A Model for Urban Improvisation and Reinvention,” in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, ed. Jeffrey Hou (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 39; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1 edition (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

⁷ Edward Taehan Chang, “Korean Swapmeets in Los Angeles: Economic and Racial Implications,” *Amerasia Journal* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 53–73.

⁸ Chang, 56, 61.

⁹ Chang, 63.

¹⁰ Chang, 61.

Korean actors. However, a far more diverse set of entrepreneurs, vendors, and customers were involved in this business type's advent.

Contrary to accounts in the Korean-language press which attribute Southern California's indoor swap meets to Korean entrepreneurs, three Jewish businessmen from the San Fernando Valley were responsible for the first such enterprise, which opened in Sepulveda (now North Hills) in August of 1983.¹¹ Longtime friends and business partners who had previously operated the jewelry concession for west coast Sears Roebuck stores, they already possessed significant retail expertise when they opened the 600 booth Valley Indoor Swap Meet within a 125,000 square foot Thomas Organ factory. It was months later, in November of 1983, that the first *Korean*-owned indoor swap meet opened in Koreatown, providing the blueprint for a spate of imitators. By 1985, a handful of mostly Korean entrepreneurs had opened several very successful indoor swap meets in neighborhoods with predominantly Latinx, Asian, and White populations (Figure 1.6). It was that year that indoor swap meets began moving into predominantly African American neighborhoods amidst an indoor swap meet boom. Between 1985 and 1987, entrepreneurs of Jewish, Korean, and other origins opened these market halls at a clip of roughly fourteen per year, with 64 in operation across Los Angeles, Orange, and Riverside Counties. By the eve of the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion, 93 indoor swap meets operated within greater Los Angeles. Suffering looting and arson, many swap meets closed and the number of swap meets declined through the first half of the 1990s, until a resurgence during the latter half of the decade saw new outlets open in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties with the out migration of lower-income populations of color to the Inland Empire. Since a second peak in 2004 (88 indoor swap meets), however, the business model has been in decline, with the number of the markets dropping from 72 to 45 between 2014 and 2020.

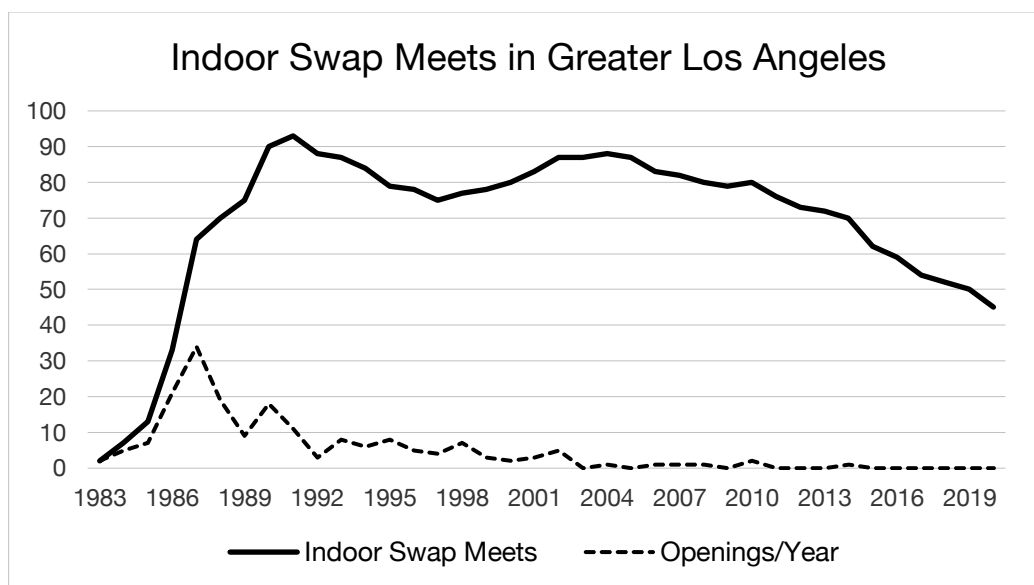


Figure 1.6: Enumeration of indoor swap meets by year. Data compiled by author. Sources: Pacific Telephone and Telegraph (PT&T) Yellow Pages, Pacific Bell Yellow Pages, GTE Yellow Pages, and SBC Yellow Page; the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Daily Breeze*, and *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*; Yelp.com and Google Maps; and personal referrals and site visits.

¹¹ Glenn Malkin, Personal Interview, July 11, 2016. See graph of new indoor swap meets in Figure 1.6.

In all, at least 187 indoor swap meets have operated across Greater Los Angeles between 1983 and 2020, most well beyond the bounds of South Central.¹² Although Edward Chang suggests that they were confined to the neighborhood, maps tell us that this was never the case (Figure 1.7). Further, although indoor swap meet entrepreneurs operated within many majority African American neighborhoods during the 1980s, they have always served a multi-ethnic clientele. As Figure 1.7 indicates, most indoor swap meets were situated within neighborhoods with majority Latinx and Asian populations in 1991, in addition to the then-predominantly Black South Central. The multi-racial composition of swap meet customers only intensified after the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion, as the neighborhoods in which they operated became even more diverse due to intensifying international immigration from Latin America and Asia (Figure 1.8). Perhaps most strikingly, indoor swap meets have almost exclusively located within parts of the city with high rates of poverty (Figure 1.9).

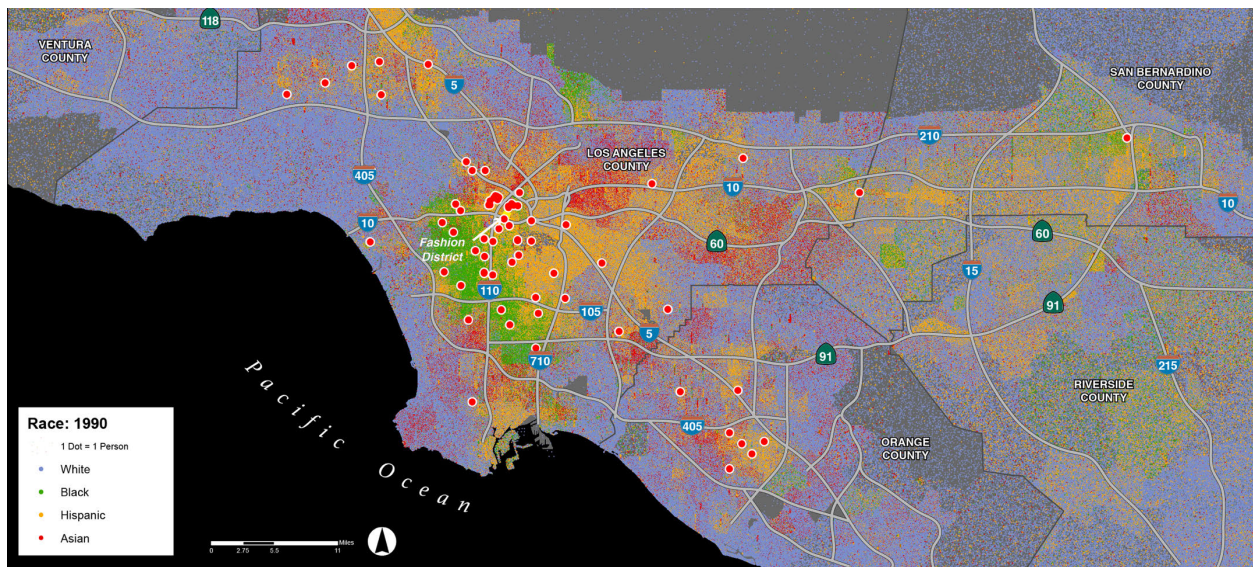


Figure 1.7: Indoor swap meets in at their peak in 1991, juxtaposed against population by US Census data for “Race” in 1990. Many if not more swap meets were situated within neighborhoods that were predominantly Latinx (or “Hispanic,” according to the US Census) than African American. Racial categories shown here are defined by the US Census, and consequently only present a crude picture of the multiple heritages and identities of Southern California’s populace.

¹² For this study, I define Greater Los Angeles as the Los Angeles, Ventura, and Inland Empire Metropolitan Areas (Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties). Using a variety of sources, I have recorded the locations of these 185 swap meets within an ArcGIS database. The *Pacific Telephone and Telegraph (PT&T) Yellow Pages*, *Pacific Bell Yellow Pages*, *GTE Yellow Pages*, and *SBC Yellow Pages*, available on microfilm at the Los Angeles Public Library, were invaluable sources in locating past and present indoor swap meet locations. Although many business operators paid for Yellow Pages listings, others did not. Thus, advertisements and newspaper articles published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Daily Breeze*, and *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition* were important supplemental sources for locating my study sites, as were websites including Yelp.com and Google Maps. For a short time, Nokdoo Printing (a Korean-American press) published a swap meet directory for operators and merchants, which catalogued swap meet locations as well as merchandise wholesalers. See: *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory* (Los Angeles: Nokdoo Printing, 1990).

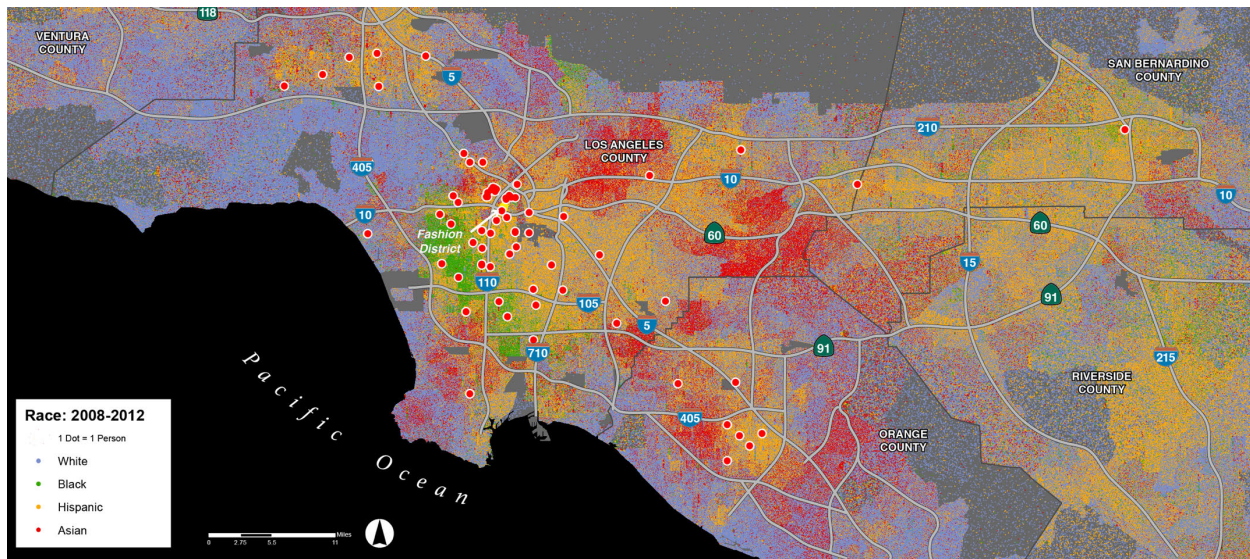


Figure 1.8: Indoor swap meets in 2016 juxtaposed with population by 2008-2012 American Community Survey US Census estimates for “Race.” By 2000, a majority of Note that as many if not more swap meets were situated within neighborhoods that were predominantly Latinx (or “Hispanic,” as the US Census states) than African American. Note: The racial categories shown here are defined by the US Census, and consequently only present a crude picture of the multiple heritages and identities of Southern California’s populace.

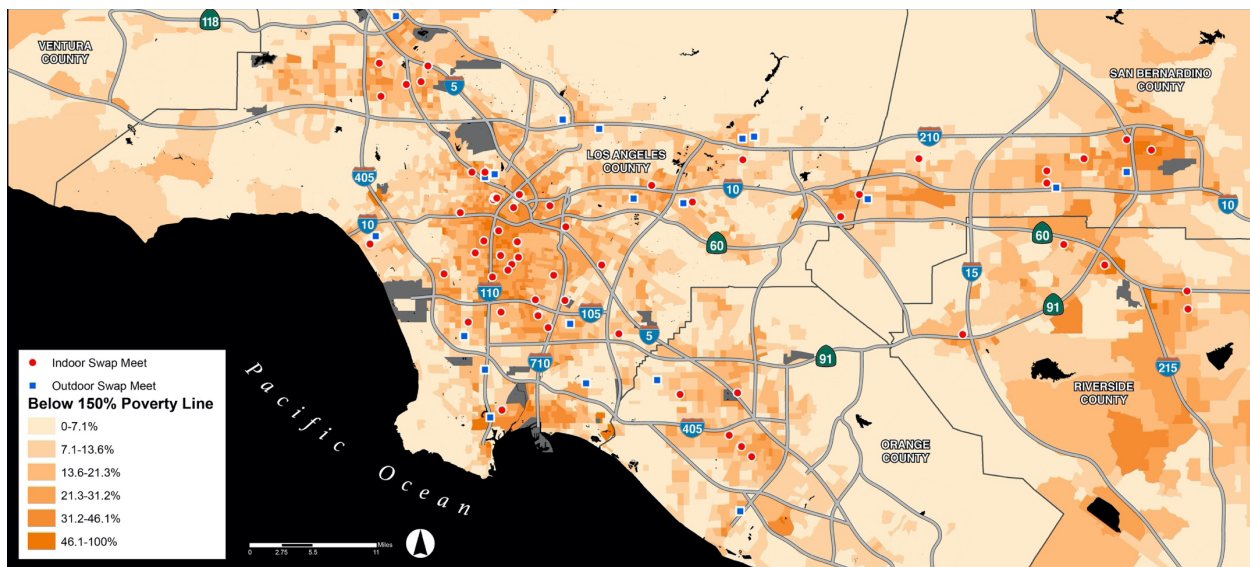


Figure 1.9: Indoor swap meets open in 2008, juxtaposed against US Census data depicting percentages of the population with income below 150% of the federal poverty line by census tract. This relationship demonstrates that indoor swap meets exist almost exclusively within poor areas.

The proliferation of this ubiquitous yet little-studied retail type reveals much about the structural shifts that reshaped Los Angeles’s built environment, economy, and social milieu during the 1980s and 1990s. As quasi-public spaces, or what Margaret Crawford and Marco Cenzatti described as “privately owned but publicly used interior spaces” that serve as points of convergence within a nonplace urban realm, they provided spaces in which people of limited means and myriad non-White

identities have interacted with and came to understand one another.¹³ These arenas are largely invisible to the middle- and upper-classes who bypass LA's lower income neighborhoods on the city's freeway system, and to most architectural and urban historians, who have concerned themselves with the city's dearth of public spaces and purpose-built commercial buildings. In training the analytical lens on original construction, many built environment scholars miss the social relations that take place as buildings are repurposed.

And yet, indoor swap meets have been hiding in plain sight within the academic literature. Architectural historian Richard Longstreth, for instance, whose prolific scholarship on the vernacular landscape has brought him into contact with countless repurposed buildings photographed several swap meets in his two books on Los Angeles retail architecture. In his 1987 shot of the Young's Market Building at 1610 West Seventh Street, he documents the Union Swap Meet, opened by Korean-run Lee Realcorp on the building's ground floor in 1985.¹⁴ Similarly, his 1989 photo of a neighborhood shopping center built between 1936 and 1939 for outlets of Thrifty Drug, J.J. Newberry, Grayson's and Owl Rexall Drugs at South Broadway and 87th Street reveals the J & C Mini Mall, another Korean-run indoor swap meet.¹⁵ Both swap meets are among the thousands of small businesses which have adapted buildings constructed by chain retailers and eventually deemed "obsolete." While architectural historians value enduring 80-year-old shopping centers for what they tell us about attitudes toward automobiles, retailing, and retail design in the late 1930s, for countless entrepreneurs today they provide—as Timothy Davis has observed—affordable and flexible spaces in which immigrant entrepreneurs across the United States have found their economic foothold.¹⁶



Figure 1.10: The Union Swap Meet, formerly Young's Market, circa 1987. Photo by Richard Longstreth.¹⁷

Figure 1.11: Back side of J&C Mini Mall at South Broadway and 87th Street, circa 1989. Photo by Richard Longstreth.¹⁸

¹³ Margaret Crawford and Marco Cenzatti, "On Public Spaces, Quasi-Public Spaces, and Public Quasi-Spaces," *Modulus* 24 (1998): 17.

¹⁴ Richard W. Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 111.

¹⁵ Richard W. Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), 192.

¹⁶ Timothy Davis, "The Miracle Mile Revisited: Recycling, Renovation, and Simulation along the Commercial Strip," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7 (January 1, 1997): 93-114.

¹⁷ Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*, 111; Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 192.

¹⁸ Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*, 111; Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 192.

This architectural history dissertation thus deals with few architects. Rather, the “architects” I address are the owners and users who repurpose, reuse, and breathe life back into aging commercial buildings.¹⁹ Real estate investors, managers, vendors, and shoppers all have played their respective roles in re-configuring and redesigning old buildings for new uses. Their interventions say much about prevailing economic trends and social relations between shoppers and business owners.

Therefore, just as Walter Benjamin sought to reveal the materiality and spatiality of late-nineteenth century Paris through the lens of the shopping arcade, this dissertation analyzes the material and social cultures of late-twentieth century Los Angeles through the lens of the indoor swap meet.²⁰ Situated in the metropolis’s expanding low-income communities of color, these indoor market halls appeared in repurposed retail and industrial buildings during the 1980s. Selling new, low cost goods in areas abandoned by mainstream retailers, they provided imperfect solutions to urban problems created by the dismantling of the liberal welfare state, the offshoring of unionized factory jobs, and an influx of immigrants fleeing Cold War conflicts in Latin America and Asia. I argue that the loose regulation of swap meets and their improvised plazas and food courts created flexible public spaces which functioned similarly to formal public squares and parks.²¹ In a city notoriously lacking in these crucial public amenities, swap meets served as stages upon which immigrant entrepreneurs and visitors of myriad backgrounds negotiated their places Los Angeles society.

The inter-ethnoracial encounters that occurred within these spaces were not always peaceful. Indeed, swap meets were key sites of simmering social tensions between people of African American, Korean, and Latin American heritage through the 1980s. Rooted in deep structural inequalities, systemic racism was experienced in everyday microaggressions in everyday spaces such as retail establishments. Nevertheless, as a public commons, swap meet spaces helped to mediate the interactions between disparate ethnoracial groups while influencing—through their material and shopping cultures—new notions of what it meant to be Angeleno. Through public speech, protest, and everyday acts of inhabitation amidst people of color from around the world, swap meet owners, vendors, and visitors developed new conceptions of ethnic membership and urban citizenship.

These emergent citizenships, I argue, are rooted in immigrant economies, consumption practices, acts of architectural reuse, and informal place-making. In examining contentious issues in Los Angeles’s recent past that took place at indoor swap meets, I demonstrate how the built environment served as a flashpoint for social and political tensions surrounding the city’s changing demographics. Viewing these tensions and conflicts through the lens of the swap meet, I examine some of the roots of our now national anti-immigrant backlash while pointing to the possibilities inherent within built space to build more inclusive communities.

Anchors of Urban Revitalization Amidst Demographic Change

The market environments I address fit within an “American” tradition of public “sanitary” markets, as well as festival marketplaces and gourmet food halls. As Daniel Bluestone observes, the public markets that appeared in cities across the United States during the late-nineteenth and early-

¹⁹ Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Reprint edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Paul E. Groth and Todd W. Bressi, *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (Yale University Press, 1997); Chris Wilson and Paul E. Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999).

²¹ Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (Routledge, 2006).

twentieth centuries were responses to public anxieties about unregulated street vendors.²² Products of the Progressive Era, they offered solutions to the perceived disorder street vendors generated by “clogging” public rights of way with their working class and often immigrant bodies. Constructed by municipal governments with public funds, sanitary markets brought a range of heretofore unregulated market functions under the watchful eye of state agencies. Indoor swap meets in the 1980s responded to a similar set of concerns. Throughout the 1980s, as Chapter 2 reveals, LA’s increasingly popular outdoor swap meets generated a slew of complaints about the people who did business there. In Pasadena, Long Beach, and jurisdictions in Orange County, public objections about congestion, disruptive shoppers, and visual “blight” led some cities to shutter existing outdoor swap meets while limiting the construction of others. To address the public outcry and meet demand for these marketplaces, the private rather than the public sector stepped in. While city governments once funded the construction of public markets, the private sector was the solution during the neoliberal 1980s, as immigrant entrepreneurs converted old warehouses, department stores, and retail buildings into indoor swap meets that would house displaced outdoor swap meet vendors and new entrepreneurs alike. Where public markets once consolidated *produce* vendors under one roof, indoor swap meets convened dealers in a growing stream of inexpensive consumer goods emanating from local sweatshops as well as those in Latin America and Asia.

The buildings in which these new market places were housed provide but one example of the widespread recycling of aging commercial infrastructure within Los Angeles’s vast inner suburbs. Architectural historians have discussed at length the evolution and proliferation of suburban shopping centers, department stores and malls in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles, but far fewer have addressed their second and third lives once regional and national chains abandon them. A shifting emphasis in the commercial real estate and design professions toward large floorplate buildings during the mid-twentieth century provided an ample inventory of flexible spaces. These buildings became available in large numbers as global economic shifts during the 1970s and 1980s led to the closure of manufacturing plants and department stores across Los Angeles. This dissertation examines the ways in which swap meet managers and their tenant vendors breathed new life into buildings considered practically—though not functionally—“obsolete,” converting many into new kinds of malls.

Swap meet owners, managers, and vendors were therefore among a cast of immigrant entrepreneurs who helped revitalize the industrial and commercial landscapes of Greater Los Angeles. This revitalization is, however, of a different sort than the suburban “retrofits” championed by urban designers and architects.²³ Within the design professions, the menu of interventions aimed at stemming (sub)urban “blight” generally consists of capital-intensive projects, which work only in gentrifying areas. Smaller capital investments and less expensive design solutions implemented by immigrant mom-and-pop entrepreneurs have remade far larger swaths of American cities between the 1980s through the 2010s. Domenic Vitiello, Thomas Sugrue, and others have recently recognized immigrant-driven “revitalization” as one of the major forces that saved American cities from the urban crises of the mid-century.²⁴ Contrary to narratives which frame the “great inversion,” or the “return”

²² Daniel Bluestone, “The Pushcart Evil,” in *The Landscape of Modernity: New York City, 1900-1940*, ed. David Ward and Oliver Zunz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 287–312.

²³ For example, see Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia, Updated Edition: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*, 1 edition (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2011), xxviii; Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, “Dead and Dying Shopping Malls, Re-Inhabited,” *Architectural Design* 87, no. 5 (2017): 84–91.

²⁴ Domenic Vitiello and Thomas J. Sugrue, “Immigration and the New American Metropolis,” in *Immigration and Metropolitan Revitalization in the United States*, ed. Domenic Vitiello and Thomas J. Sugrue (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 2. See also: Davis, “The Miracle Mile Revisited”; Davis, *Magical Urbanism*; David R Diaz and Rodolfo D Torres, *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy, and Redevelopment* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

of empty nesters, suburb-raised millennials, and the so-called creative class to the center city, as primary driver of urban revitalization, this new body of literature shifts the focus toward the significant contributions made by the working class immigrants who began arriving in American cities en masse during the 1970s.²⁵ Andrew Sandoval-Strausz has recently laid out a compelling case study of Chicago's Little Village and Dallas's Oak Cliff neighborhoods, which illustrate the mechanics of Latinx-led repopulation and revitalization of American cities during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶ In Los Angeles, immigrants of *multiple* national origins played their roles in the city's immigrant-driven revitalization, by developing swap meets within languishing commercial buildings. In doing so, they integrated design precedents from Asian, Latin American, and North American contexts.

Invisible to most Angelenos, swap meet entrepreneurs employed thousands of workers by creating new retail outlets in neighborhoods which previously lacked them, thereby softening the region's transition from an industrial to post-industrial economy. Anticipating Walmart's entry into Southern California markets by at least a decade, the low quality and inexpensive goods broadly available within indoor swap meets stretched the purchasing power of shoppers grappling with the effects of declining wages in the post-Fordist economy. In the vanguard of retailers dealing in lower-cost consumer goods, swap meets came into being amidst broader societal shifts toward consumption-based identities rather than those rooted in production.²⁷ Because shopping has become such an important means of self- and group-identification, it makes sense to study shopping environments as arenas of identity formation.

Performing and Negotiating Ethnicity at the Swap Meet

The identities we subscribe to, as well as those ascribed to us, are many. Gender, race, ethnicity, class, and place-based affiliations structure how we see ourselves, and how others see us. Institutional actors including researchers, governments, and corporations assign their subjects, citizens, and customers into generalizable categories for myriad purposes. However, because official datasets (developed by agencies including the US Census) are assembled through surveys with pre-determined categories, they obscure the fluidity and nuance of individuals' identities. Indeed, such categories are rarely clear, static, or singular in anyone's lived experience; rather they are multiple and constantly renegotiated through a variety of social practices. At swap meets, these identities are enacted, reinforced, and challenged through the materiality of these spaces and a variety of spatial practices.

Ethnicity is one such identity and category. If we accept, as Fredrik Barth writes, that ethnic groups are defined by a process of boundary formation continually negotiated by group members and outsider actors alike, then we must also accept their inherent instability.²⁸ Throughout this dissertation,

²⁵ Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

²⁶ Sandoval-Strausz observes that "more than twenty-five million Hispanic migrants and immigrants saved vast areas of American cities, repopulating neighborhoods and revitalizing economics that had been in decline for decades." See A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 18.

²⁷ I draw here upon Frank Trentmann's observation that "with older producer-oriented labour politics in crisis, political energy and legitimacy have moved more easily to consumption as a site of action and mobilization." See Frank Trentmann, "Citizenship and Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 148.

²⁸ The state, NGOs, and researchers are among those outside actors who seek to define ethnic categories "from above." See: Fredrik Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 300. The work of Barth complicates earlier scholarship by Max Weber who writes, that membership in an ethnic group is a "presumed identity" in which members "entertain a subjective belief in their common descent," rooted in *imagined* commonalities such as perceived biological traits and historical geographic origin. See: Max Weber, "Ethnic Groups," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 56.

I engage with Rogers Brubaker's notion of an "everyday ethnicity" that is "embodied and expressed...in everyday encounters, practical categories, commonsense knowledge, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, mental maps, interactional cues, discursive frames, organizational routines, social networks, and institutional forms."²⁹ Instances of everyday ethnicity are instantiated within indoor swap meets through public acts of shopping, musical performance, religious ritual, public discourse, and perhaps above all, the displays of merchandise that signal ethnic affiliations which may or may not reflect the identities of vendors.³⁰ Sometimes explicit, sometimes lurking below the surface, the performance and negotiation of ethnicity through such place-based practices renders a nuanced mosaic of dynamic and overlapping affiliations.

In examining how and under what conditions indoor swap meets were created, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how the signifiers of ethnicity inscribed in Los Angeles's commercial built environment affected regional perceptions the region's unfolding demographic shift. Unlike market bazaars, *mercados*, souks, and other market types around the world, indoor swap meets emerged *after* modernist and middle-class retail forms had saturated the Los Angeles market.³¹ In contrast to supermarkets, shopping centers, department stores, and regional malls, swap meets appeared to some middle class White observers as evidence of the region's economic and social decline. To some who ventured inside their nondescript walls, the visual chaos of micro vendors and the off-brand and inexpensive products simply appeared as dangerous matter out of place.³²

For early 1990s writers like David Rieff, who visited Los Angeles to escape what he perceived as the chaos and disorder of immigrant New York, changes of this kind were profoundly disturbing. In *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, he paints a dark picture of city he had hoped would be free of the "souks and obstacle courses" of his native New York.³³ Deeply skeptical of "multiculturalism," he frets that in American cities of the early 1990s, no one seemed to be assimilating. "Nothing was melting," he writes, "except, conceivably, the public school system under the heat of the demands being placed upon it."³⁴ Indeed, Rieff's noir vision of a multicultural, non-White Los Angeles echoed the fears of many White Angelenos that their city was doomed to dysfunction. Lacking a homogenous public realm in which people share common languages and backgrounds, a dystopian Los Angeles, in Rieff's view, would retreat behind walls as other "third world" cities have. In such a city, assimilation would be elusive, public discourse would founder, and democracy itself would fail.

With the benefit of hindsight, Rieff's anxieties today seem a nightmare fantasy of right wing politicians and pundits. Contemporary scholarly accounts of immigration-driven changes in the region's racial and ethnic makeup have moved away from narratives that frame the region's diversification in relation to a presumed White majority. Increasingly, accounts of Southern California focus on an emergent "suburban, cosmopolitanism ethos," which Wendy Cheng writes "challenges long-held associations of Whiteness, middle class, and suburban as normative ideals that were tightly bound together."³⁵ Within residential neighborhoods, at school, and in the workplace, Wendy Cheng

²⁹ Rogers Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6–7.

³⁰ Brubaker et al., 167–68.

³¹ Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*; Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*.

³² Here I reference Mary Douglas's work on heterogeneity in relation to the modernist state. I return to this theme in Chapter 4. See: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

³³ David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

³⁴ Rieff, 22.

³⁵ Wendy Cheng, "East of East: The Global Cosmopolitans of Suburban LA," *Boom: A Journal of California* 5, no. 1 (2015): 22.

has convincingly shown in her recent monograph on the San Gabriel Valley, that interactions between people of color *in the absence of Whiteness* increasingly structure notions of ethnic identity in the United States.³⁶ However, intercultural interactions—particularly between non-White populations—perhaps most frequently occur within the public and retail realms. In these markets, migrants to Los Angeles negotiated their places within the metropolis. Contrary to Cheng, who positions the commercial realm as a secondary actor in the structuring of social relationships and personal identities, I argue that it is central to this process in a society in which neoliberal ideologies privilege the idea that we are what we consume.

For this reason, I examine how the materiality of swap meet space as well as the goods sold within affects its inhabitants. In other words, I explore, to quote Daniel Miller, “how the things that people make, make people.”³⁷ Counter to narratives that frame indoor swap meets as extractive businesses within the neighborhoods of color in which they have historically operated—their physical and regulatory openness created spaces of possibility. Indeed, identities have long been forged in and around spaces of consumption. Social movements too have taken root in swap meets which, defined by their openness and *carnivalesque* qualities, have proven particularly fertile hearths out of which several new cultural forms have emerged. As I detail in Chapter 5, west coast reality rap (known popularly as “gangsta rap”) was one such form influenced by the swap meet’s material culture.

Spaces of Possibility, Liberation, and Protest

Indoor swap meets are embedded within ethnic ecosystems of garment manufacturing firms, wholesalers, banks, real estate agents, ethnic newspapers, and community organizations that have reconfigured Los Angeles’s social, economic, and built environments. Breathing new life into the city’s aging manufacturing plants, warehouses, department stores, and smaller retail stores, Korean entrepreneurs revitalized decaying parts of the city with little outside assistance. As Angie Chung observes, ethnic organizations, or those founded by and/or oriented toward specific ethnic groups, supported this revitalization. In Los Angeles, Korean financial institutions, media outlets, churches, chambers of commerce, mutual aid associations, and youth organizations helped other Koreans “overcome some of the disadvantages associated with marginal social status and residential isolation in low-income urban communities,” according to Chung, while providing “alternative ladders of social mobility” that helped investors, developers, and business owners build up an enclave economy that ultimately helped thousands of Korean families attain middle-class status.³⁸ Scholars have noted that businesses play a central role in providing a “crucial stepping stone” for immigrants who “experience structural disadvantages in mainstream labor markets.”³⁹ In other words, ethnic and immigrant-owned small businesses not only provide an alternative to dead end menial jobs in the mainstream economy. They also help train recently arrived immigrants by orienting them to local marketplace dynamics and social customs that help them later establish their own businesses.⁴⁰

³⁶ Wendy Cheng, *The Changes Next Door to the Díaz: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

³⁷ Daniel Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Materiality* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press Books, 2005), 38.

³⁸ Ethnic organizations, according to Chung, stimulated the development of Korean-owned businesses across Southern California, while also compensating for deficiencies in mainstream institutions such as public education, welfare, and social service systems. See: Angie Y. Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 12.

³⁹ See (Light and Bonacich 1988; Portes and Stepick 1993; and Zhou 1992) and Chung, 12.

⁴⁰ Chung, *Legacies of Struggle*.

While it is important to recognize arenas of consumption as places of empowerment, one should not lose sight of exploitative labor relations within business. Maintaining an awareness that most swap meet goods are produced in sweatshops, whether in Los Angeles or abroad, complicates such empowerment narratives. As I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, swap meet vendors rely heavily on easily exploitable informal and family labor, drawing intense criticism from community members. Swap meets then, are to be both celebrated *and* critiqued for their ambiguous roles in providing opportunities for employment *and* self-exploitation for vendors, convenient yet overpriced shopping options for customers, and safe yet surveilled arenas for public assembly for the residents of South Los Angeles communities lacking in government-run parks and public spaces.

Yet, for many vendors, employees, and visitors, swap meets have nonetheless served as spaces of possibility and liberation. Retail spaces have repeatedly acted as stages for struggles over various forms of rights. In 1930s Harlem, Black boycotts of White-owned businesses that refused to hire African American employees advanced struggles for equal employment, as did the Montgomery lunch counter sit-ins and bus boycotts in the 1950s and 1960s. These “citizen consumers,” as Lizabeth Cohen has called them, understood retail spaces as part of the public realm, and used them as stages upon which demands for greater inclusion as citizens were articulated.⁴¹ Although Cohen decries the late-twentieth century “commercialization of public space” with the increasing prominence of purpose-built shopping malls in public life, the social life of the swap meet nonetheless offers evidence of a dynamic public realm taking place under a private roof.

In addition to acting as arenas of liberation, indoor swap meets also provide a public commons in which everyday acts of citizenship are articulated and performed. Since the 1990s, there has been a convergence of scholarship on citizenship and consumption. The “public” and “private” spheres—long regarded as discrete and opposing entities with their own scholarly traditions—are now widely understood as blurry and overlapping.⁴² Thanks in part to the rise of gender studies as a field, spaces of consumption are now considered part of the public realm.⁴³ In the 1990s, Nancy Fraser and Rosalyn Deutsch were among those who challenged conservative formulations of the “bourgeois public sphere,” arguing for an expansion of the spaces we consider “public” far beyond the government owned parks and squares in which order and civility are emphasized.⁴⁴ Blurring the boundaries “public” and “private” spaces, Margaret Crawford claims streets, vacant lots, front yards, and other “everyday” spaces as unexpected arenas of economic exchange and sociability between multiple publics.⁴⁵

Far from early critiques that viewed conspicuous consumption and consumer society as coercive tools wielded by elites to control and distinguish themselves from the masses, spaces of commerce today are recognized as arenas in which acts of resistance and political protest may be performed.⁴⁶ On a global scale, Frank Trentmann observes that consumerism has long been instrumental in creating “a shared public domain” that transcends places of work, residence, and

⁴¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Vintage Books, 2004).

⁴² Trentmann, “Citizenship and Consumption,” 147.

⁴³ Trentmann, “Citizenship and Consumption.”

⁴⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80; Rosalyn Deutsche, “Boys Town,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, no. 1 (1991): 5–30.

⁴⁵ Margaret Crawford, “Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life,” in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 22–35.

⁴⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136.

classically-conceived of public spaces maintained by the government. For centuries, consumption arenas have “functioned as an alternative sphere of political action and inclusion for groups excluded from the formal body politic, [whether] women in the metropole [or] men and women in the colonies.”⁴⁷ In turn of the twentieth century San Francisco, for instance, architectural historian Jessica Sewell shows how women harnessed new commercial forms including restaurants, theaters, streetcars, and retail stores as an alternative sphere for public activism in their fight for women’s suffrage and gender equality.⁴⁸ Department stores and clerical jobs—both recent inventions at the time—gave women a reason to mix with men on downtown sidewalks, which pro-suffragist street orators used to their advantage in advocating for the right of women to vote.⁴⁹

We hear echoes of previous protest movements in the emergence of west coast reality rap (or “gangsta rap”), which took root in the record stores, aisles, and parking lots of Los Angeles swap meets in the 1980s. As in San Francisco and Montgomery, this emergent form of public speech emerged within the commercial realm. Shut out of the mainstream record industry, hip hop DJs and MCs found swap meets to be spaces of possibility, whose record stores distributed early recordings of the genre’s first artists. As I discuss in Chapter 3, these Asian-owned swap meet record stores emerged as allies for African American artists, whose forceful lyrics were considered taboo by mainstream retailers. Laden with critiques of racial and state violence, early west coast hip hop lyrics aired the grievances and demands of South Central residents to a rapidly expanding public. As reality rap lyrics traveled from swap meet mixtapes to the airwaves, and later to commercially distributed tapes and CDs, their lyrics, made household names out of “inner city” neighborhoods long-forgotten by middle class White America and neglected by corporate businesses and government agencies. Laying claim to Inglewood, Compton, Long Beach, South Central, and other neighborhoods and cities, hip hop artists laid claim to these parts of the region by cataloging its streets and commercial spaces. Swap meets, which appear in over 300 hip hop tracks to date, are among a handful of place types recognized by west coast hip hop artists as a verbal shorthand for “the hood.”

In making these claims to space, hip hop artists articulate their urban citizenship and their right to the city through public speech *mediated by* consumption practices. Reaching their listeners’ ears by way of tape, CD, and sound system, hip hop lyrics link private domains such as the home and the car with public discourse about the city. In recording and distributing these lyrics, rappers utilized everyday consumption practices to influence how social systems and public infrastructure were perceived and experienced. In studying how people wield consumption practices, we observe writ small “the everyday workings of politics” that are part of claiming citizenship.⁵⁰

These politics are also evident in the actions of the immigrant vendors who constitute a vast majority of indoor swap meet vendors. In setting up micro businesses within the matrix of the market hall, they laid an economic claim to membership in American society intended to overcome their cultural “otherness.” Often working as non-citizens on a national scale, the swap meet removed many barriers to entering the labor force as entrepreneurs. In realizing economic self-sufficiency, immigrant small business owners at once met their immediate needs while conforming to a culturally conservative

⁴⁷ In the former colonies Consumption politics have also been wielded by governments for the purposes of stoking nationalism. As Trentmann points out, the “Buy Empire Goods” campaign in 1920s Britain, and countless other government-led campaigns reinforce a sense of nationalism. See: Trentmann, “Citizenship and Consumption,” 149.

⁴⁸ Jessica Ellen Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890-1915* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁴⁹ Jessica Sewell, “Gender, Imagination, and Experience in the Early-Twentieth-Century American Downtown,” in *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson*, ed. Chris Wilson and Paul Groth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 237–54.

⁵⁰ Trentmann, “Citizenship and Consumption,” 155.

American narrative of “boot strapping.” In doing so, they engaged in claiming cultural citizenship, which Aihwa Ong describes as a “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.”⁵¹ To be sure, this conception of cultural citizenship speaks to the impulse within a neoliberal and globalizing society to define “good citizenship” in terms of human capital.⁵² Within this regime, Ong states that immigrants are incentivized to accrue human capital in order to become “entrepreneurs of *themselves*” in an effort to demonstrate “good” citizenship.⁵³ To exercise cultural citizenship, immigrants of various Asian origins and disparate social classes have been “constituted as a subject who exercises or submits to power relations.”⁵⁴ While Ong presents compelling evidence of state-led efforts to steer immigrant groups toward opposing ends of a White-Black racial hierarchy in the United States, she presents little evidence of non-government actors in this process. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how the commercial realm of swap meet entrepreneurship provided a means through which consumer society played a role in citizenship claim-making and subjectification in the presence of weak state institutions.

With the rise of globalization and neoliberalism, the liberal democratic conception of national citizenship has been under growing scrutiny and in a state of heightened crisis in recent decades. As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai have pointed out, global cities—with their diverse sets of peoples and publics—have served as “strategic arenas” for the development of new forms of urban citizenship that respond to the challenges of a cosmopolitan society.⁵⁵ Because formal national citizenship is not an option for the growing numbers of urban noncitizens, local governments extend substantive civil rights and privileges to urban *inhabitants* regardless of their national affiliation.⁵⁶ Some of these rights and privileges make urban governance easier; others have been won through grassroots struggles and social movements articulated through collective action in (sub)urban spaces.⁵⁷ From the streets of the United States to the *banlieues* of Paris, marginalized residents responded oppressive structures including systemic racism in policing and governance as well as gross class inequality to demand “a life worthy of citizens.”⁵⁸ As public services have deteriorated and urban inhabitants are increasingly left to fend for themselves, Holston observes new solidarities emerging as residents meet their needs by constructing the city for themselves through social and building practices.⁵⁹ “This making,” he writes, “is the basis of their claim to have a right to the city, a contributor right to what they have made, a claim that has nothing to do with formal or informal statuses of work, housing, or immigration. To the contrary, it only has to do with the active life of residents.”⁶⁰ The right to urban citizenship, then is thus rooted in the co-construction of many forms of public commons.

⁵¹ Aihwa Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making,” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996): 738.

⁵² Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵³ Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making,” 739. As the American welfare state has crumbled, Ong explores “the wider implications of American citizenship for the poor, and on the country’s shifting sense of who are deserving and undeserving citizen-subjects.” See Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*, xviii.

⁵⁴ Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making,” 738.

⁵⁵ James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, “Cities and Citizenship,” in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2. James Holston defines “urban citizenship” as “that form of association for which the making of the city is both the context and the substance of belonging, for which making is understood as the sum of activities of residents, and for which residence is the primary criterion of membership.” James Holston, “Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City,” *Anthropological Theory* 19, no. 1 (2019): 129.

⁵⁶ Holston and Appadurai, “Cities and Citizenship,” 4.

⁵⁷ Municipal ID cards are one example of cities extending formal urban citizenship to national noncitizens for the purposes of public safety.

⁵⁸ Holston, “Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City,” 126.

⁵⁹ Holston, 121–22.

⁶⁰ Holston, 129.

Swap meets—built by immigrant entrepreneurs and appropriated by shoppers and nearby residents through everyday practices—are one form of public commons constructed by Los Angeles residents in the absence of adequate neighborhood services and investment. At the swap meet, people of disparate backgrounds converged and co-created a space where they articulated versions of urban citizenship. These emergent citizenships were articulated through everyday design and spatial practices that empowered their actors to lay claim to the city, be it through constructing the markets' physical spaces, income producing work, consumption practices, artistic practices, and public activism. By focusing on the swap meets dotting Southern California during the 1980s through the 2000s, we can better understand the processes by which thousands of residents negotiated what it meant to access the city and become Angelenos.

A City in Flux: Los Angeles at the Dawn of the 1980s

While my narrative begins during the early 1980s, the events I describe in this dissertation were ushered in by significant social, demographic, and economic shifts that began in the 1960s and 1970s. The region's demographic mix during those decades was largely White due to nearly a century of uninterrupted White migration to the region from various parts of the United States, although sizeable Mexican American and African American communities also resided in the city due to its legacy as a Spanish and Mexican territory and the Second Great Migration.⁶¹ Between the 1920s and 1960s, overtly White supremacist efforts by civic boosters, city officials, and federal agencies created a segregated city with racially homogeneous neighborhoods.⁶² African Americans, who had been confined via formal and informal mechanisms to the city's Black "ghetto" of Watts and South Central, rebelled against decades of mistreatment just days after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1965. The Watts Rebellion, which raged from August 6th to 11th would have long-reaching consequences for South Central Los Angeles and its surrounding neighborhoods. Over the ensuing decade, national retailers and the predominantly Jewish- and Japanese-American owners of the area's commercial real estate would withdraw their assets from the affected communities, leaving a significant inventory of vacant retail space available for investment.

The industrial sector was similarly rocked by structural change. By the early 1970s, major American corporations, in response to the 1973 oil crisis, successive reductions in tariffs under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the strong union presence in Los Angeles's branch manufacturing plants, began shifting production to non-unionized Sunbelt cities as well as overseas. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, US corporations shuttered manufacturing plants across Southeast Los Angeles's once-robust manufacturing belt, including Firestone Tire in South Gate (1980), Ford Motor Company in Pico Rivera (1980), Bethlehem Steel in Vernon (1981), General Motors in South Gate (1982), and General Motors in Van Nuys (1992). The closure of these recently integrated union shops devastated African American communities, which had finally won access to middle-class jobs following a decades-long struggle for equal pay and equal status on the factory floor. Losses in the manufacturing sector were compounded with the conclusion of the Cold War and

⁶¹ These began during the 1880s and extended through the 1970s. Between the 1887 and the 1900s, rate wars between the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe Pacific induced the first flood of migrants to settle in Southern California. By the 1920s, good transcontinental highways and vigorous promotion by booster organizations such as the Automobile Club of Southern California and the All-Year Club touted the region's booming economy and tourist amenities. For a detailed and still-germane account of the succession of population booms between 1870-1940, see Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1946), 113-37.

⁶² See, for example: Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

ensuing termination of military contracts that sustained the region's defense industries. During the 1990s, a wave of aerospace plant closures added to the layoffs in Southeast Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. Black residents who had only recently started to enjoy the benefits of a unionized manufacturing economy found themselves contending with worsening economic prospects. By the mid-1990s, economic hopelessness, rising crime rates, a growing drug epidemic, and increasingly brutal policing tactics in South Central drove many African Americans toward the outer suburbs.⁶³ While many long-time Black residents remained in the communities in which they were raised, others resettled in less expensive and safer exurban locales during the 1980s and 1990s, including Moreno Valley, Riverside, and San Bernardino.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the Immigration and Nationality Act was signed into law just months after the 1965 Watts Rebellion, ending the restrictive national origins quota system that had virtually closed the United States to migration from non-European nations. Responding to these new rules, immigrants from countries affected by Cold War conflicts including Korea, Vietnam, and numerous Latin American nations streamed into the United States in growing numbers. Since 1970, Los Angeles County's foreign-born population has more than tripled (from 11 to 35 percent) as immigrants—primarily from Latin America and Asia—remade Southern California's demographic landscape within its inner suburbs (Figure 1.12).⁶⁵ Accounting for native-born individuals of Latin American and Asian heritage, the shift is even more clear: while Asian and Latinx populations comprised 3 and 15 percent of the county's population in 1970, they grew to 13.8 and 47.7 percent of the total by 2010, dwarfing once-numerous non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans (Figure 1.13).⁶⁶

⁶³ Worsening gang violence during the 1980s peaked between 1991 and 1993 with 3,200 homicides. Nearly all killed were Black men. Josh Sides, "Introduction: A Brief History of the American Ghetto," in *Post Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles*, ed. Josh Sides (Berkeley and San Marino: Huntington Library and University of California Press, 2012), 4. For a discussion of "White flight" from South Los Angeles, see: Becky M. Nicolaides, "How Hell Moved From the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community," in *The New Suburban History*, ed. Kevin Michael Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 80–98.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of motives driving the migration of South Los Angeles's African American residents to the Inland Empire, see Deirdre Pfeiffer, "Moving to Opportunity: African Americans' Safety Outcomes in the Los Angeles Exurbs," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 33, no. 1 (2012): 49–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X12459359>. For an overview of Black suburbanization in California, see Lawrence B. De Graaf, "African American Suburbanization in California, 1960 through 1990," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), 405–49.

⁶⁵ In 1970, roughly 11 percent (792,000 people) of Los Angeles County's population consisted of foreign-born individuals. By 2010, the foreign-born share of the total population had risen to 35 percent (3.47 million) of the total. These figures are derived from US Census data compiled by Steven Manson et al., *IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 13.0 [Database]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018), www.nhgis.org.

⁶⁶ Here, "Hispanic" refers to individuals who self-identified as such on US Census questionnaires. The term, in common use amongst demographers, sociologists, and other social science researchers including the U.S. Census Bureau, refers to individuals whose families or themselves are from countries where Spanish is the primary language spoken. "Latinx" (or "Latina/o"), used throughout this dissertation, refers to individuals whose families hail from Latin American countries, including Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

Figure 1.12: Foreign Born Population, Los Angeles County⁶⁷

	1970		2008-2012 ACS Est.	
	Population	%	Population	%
Total Population	7,016,848	100.00%	9,835,214	100.00%
Total Foreign-Born	792,283	11.29%	3,472,775	35.31%
<i>Foreign-Born Latin America</i>	301,791	4.30%	2,029,805	20.64%
<i>Foreign-Born Europe</i>	294,088	4.19%	175,279	1.78%
<i>Foreign-Born Asia</i>	95,462	1.36%	1,170,179	11.90%
<i>Foreign-Born Canada</i>	67,774	0.97%	30,133	0.31%
<i>Foreign-Born Africa</i>	6,357	0.09%	53,787	0.55%
<i>Foreign-Born Other</i>	26,856	0.38%	13,592	0.14%

Figure 1.13: US Census Classifications of Race and Ethnicity, Los Angeles County

LA County	1970	% Pop	1980	% Pop	1990	% Pop	2000	% Pop	2010****	% Pop
White*	5,989,293	85.36%	5,132,131	68.67%	5,032,261	56.88%	4,590,261	48.27%	5,225,618	53.13%
Hispanic**	1,051,405	14.98%	2,065,245	27.63%	3,305,078	37.36%	4,242,854	44.61%	4,694,506	47.73%
Black	761,590	10.85%	900,055	12.04%	988,527	11.17%	890,800	9.37%	839,551	8.54%
Asian	210,560	3.00%	444,398	5.95%	923,459	10.44%	1,123,286	11.81%	1,360,370	13.83%
Total Population	7,016,848		7,473,338		8,847,419		9,510,536		9,835,214	

* Hispanic and non-Hispanic

** Before 1970, includes "of Spanish descent"

*** "Negro" 1970 and Earlier

**** Data derived from 2008-2012 American Community Survey Census Estimates

At the beginning of the 1980s, Los Angeles was beginning a transition from a relatively segregated Black and White city into a patchwork of co-existing and occasionally overlapping ethnic groups.⁶⁸ By 2010, members of numerous ethnic groups at once maintained discrete cultural spaces within community centers and ethnic-serving businesses while living in close proximity to each other. Public and quasi-public spaces thus became everyday crossroads in which people of different backgrounds interacted.⁶⁹ As Wendy Cheng has observed, some Southern California cities, especially those in the San Gabriel Valley and southeast Los Angeles, are largely non-White and very diverse. In the absence of Whiteness, Chang details the construction of a “regional ethnic consciousness” in some of these communities that challenges notions of ethnicity that are defined in relation to Whiteness.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Historical US Census data for 1960 through 2012 compiled by Manson et al., *IPUMS NHGIS*.

⁶⁸ James Paul Allen and Eugene Turner, *The Ethnic Quilt: Population Diversity in Southern California*, Fulcrum.Org (Northridge, CA: Center for Geographical Studies, California State University, Northridge, 1997); Laura Pulido, Laura R. Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng, *A People's Guide to Los Angeles, A People's Guide to Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), <http://california.degruyter.com/view/title/555701>.

⁶⁹ Crawford and Cenzatti, “On Public Spaces, Quasi-Public Spaces, and Public Quasi-Spaces,” 17.

⁷⁰ See: Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazs*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “ethnicity” is has strong ties to the word *heathen*. Fredrik Barth builds off of this notion, asserting that ethnic groups construct and maintain boundaries that are mutually negotiated and recognized by insiders and outsiders (Barth 1969, 295-301). Thus, scholars have been complicit in social “othering” by labeling their subjects as “ethnics.”

Whereas Chang's research focuses on the domestic sphere, I argue here that commercial spaces—and the cultural products they display and produce—are also instrumental in forging new multi-ethnic identities. In late-twentieth century and early twenty-first century Los Angeles, indoor swap meets emerged as a new business type defined by repurposing of buildings deemed obsolete. Given new life, they harbored a broad range of entrepreneurial activities as well as forms of public life that had little place in the mainstream public realm.

It was within this context that Korean and other immigrant entrepreneurs opened their first swap meets in Los Angeles's low income neighborhoods of color. Encountering few job opportunities due to limited English language skills, many immigrants became entrepreneurs. A sizeable subset discovered the swap meet industry to be a lucrative niche. With inexpensive warehouses and retail buildings available in abundance in neighborhoods affected by racially-influenced disinvestment, many Korean investors seized the opportunity to go into business for themselves. As immigrants from Latin America settled in the region in increasing numbers, they too entered the swap meet business by opening stores and even managing some locations.

The same structural forces that prompted LA's reindustrialization paradoxically opened United States markets—particularly Los Angeles—to an influx of cheap commodities from Latin America and Asia, which were distributed through the region's ports, local importers, and wholesalers. Adding to this flow of inexpensive goods was a garment manufacturing economy taking root in downtown, filled with non-unionized sweatshops staffed primarily by Korean and later Latin American immigrant seamstresses. Indoor swap meets provided outlets for the off-brand garments imported and produced by fashion district firms. Before inexpensive imports became widely available through big box discounters like Walmart, warehouse stores like Costco, fast fashion outlets like Zara and Forever 21, and dollar stores like Dollar General, indoor swap meets became known for their cheap Asian imports. Ironically, although the very neighborhoods of color served by indoor swap meets were among the first to receive soon-to-be-hip off-brand streetwear, they have only recently received outlets of the very national chains that capitalized on the trends that indoor swap meets help to usher in.

Immigrant entrepreneurs from Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere have, since the 1960's, remade the physical fabric of cities across the United States by transforming their buildings and landscapes. Through capital investments, design decisions, and social practices, they have endowed the commercial built environment with new social and ethnic symbolism. This symbolism makes visible the dramatic demographic shifts that have taken place across the country during the past 50 years.⁷¹ Showy signs and unique goods arranged in aesthetically distinctive ways mark immigrant-owned and immigrant-serving shops and businesses, amplifying awareness of the immigrant population amongst their American born neighbors.⁷² Nowhere is this trend more visible than in Los Angeles. If, as William Deverell argues, Los Angeles was Whitewashed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, these landscape transformations make visible what some have called the *reconquista* of the

⁷¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly 13.3 percent of the United States population is foreign born, up from 4.7 percent in 1970. In California, 27 percent of the population is foreign born, up from 9 percent in 1970. See: Hans Johnson and Sergio Sanchez, "Just the Facts: Immigrants in California," *Public Policy Institute of California* (blog), May 2019, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/immigrants-in-california/>.

⁷² The 2015 Kauffman Index found that immigrants were twice as likely to become entrepreneurs than the American population as a whole; thus, this effect is especially pronounced. See: Robert W. Fairlie et al., "The Kauffman Index: Startup Activity | National Trends" (Kansas City, MO: Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 2015), https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/kauffman_index_startup_activity_national_trends_2015.pdf.

city.⁷³ Indeed, retail development rather than residential development is a defining characteristic by which cities are shaped and reshaped in the post-industrial economy. Although housing takes up far more land area, and has laid at the center of important social justice battles, changing commercial environments provide the grist with which urban change is assessed and critiqued in academic and popular discourse.

Methods

As a shopper and participant observer, I have spent many hours browsing swap meet aisles by myself and occasionally with friends between 2014 and 2019. In all, I visited 47 of the 70 extant indoor swap meets and 15 of 26 extant outdoor swap meets during this period.⁷⁴ My research began as a swap meet shopper, where conversations with vendors about their merchandise helped familiarize me with the material world of indoor swap meets. Because swap meet vendors purchase nearly all of their merchandise at brick-and-mortar wholesale showrooms in Los Angeles's fashion district, they are incredibly knowledgeable about the origin of their goods. Informal conversations with vendors while shopping helped me understand a considerable amount about LA's garment industry, which I detail in Chapters 2 and 3. I also recruited shoppers, vendors, swap meet managers, and swap meet owners for semi-structured interviews about their experiences in their respective roles. During site visits, I also was a participant observer of concerts and special events. I documented many of these with photographs, along with swap meet aisles, plazas, and vendor booths. During my visits, I also collected ephemera and purchased swap meet apparel and accessories which my friends and I wear today.

As this project examines the recent past, my "archive" includes newspapers, phone directories, blog posts, and internet forum comments in microfilm, print, and digital formats. I found many of these materials at the Los Angeles Public Library and University of Southern California's Korean Heritage Library. Compiling location data and ownership information for each site (where available) into a GIS allowed me to map and juxtapose this data against various publicly-available datasets, including those on race and country of origin, and income.

Dissertation Structure

Defined by their looseness, abundant materiality, and their contradictions, indoor swap meets emerged as exceptionally fertile sites of cultural production, rights claiming, and citizenship formation by the turn of the twenty-first century. Having birthed distinctive musical genres and fashions, they complicate our understandings of race, ethnicity, and social class in major urban centers like Los Angeles. Intercultural interactions and alliances that take place within swap meet space point to the pitfalls of associating sets of urbanistic practices with *single* ethnic categories. Instead, the design and social lives of these spaces reveal ethnic categories to be more fluid, multiple, and co-created than initially apparent. Intercultural encounters that occur at swap meets—whether between workers, customers, or visitors—help map the everyday dimensions of race, ethnicity, and citizenship in turn of the twenty-first century Los Angeles.

The intercultural social milieus within indoor swap meets have roots in several global precedents. In Chapter 2, "From Outdoor Market to Indoor Bazaar, 1983-1985," I discuss these

⁷³ William Deverell writes that "Los Angeles became a self-conscious 'City of the Future' by whitewashing an adobe past, even an adobe present and adobe future." See William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*, Reprint edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7–8.

⁷⁴ Occasional return trips to selected case study sites allowed me to investigate new questions that arose as I wrote. Since my first visits, 25 indoor swap meets have closed, or 36 percent of the 2014 total.

multiple origins and engage with themes of architectural obsolescence and reuse through a discussion of the indoor swap meet's domestic origins. The first indoor swap meet, which opened in the San Fernando Valley in 1983, integrated design ideas drawn from Southern California's outdoor swap meets as well as permanent indoor flea markets on the east coast. The former, which have operated in Los Angeles since the 1950s, are the namesake for their indoor counterparts. During the 1970s and 1980s, as vendors gradually transitioned from secondhand to new (overstock and slightly defective) goods, these outdoor markets served as a proof of concept for indoor swap meet developers. Thus, although the region's first such bazaar cultivated a reputation for its unique craft items, it also established the strong garment industry ties that future indoor swap meet operators and vendors would draw upon. While it drew large numbers of White middle-class shoppers and even notable celebrities, this swap meet's physical form was quickly emulated for a far less-affluent clientele by Korean immigrant entrepreneurs.

Chapter 3, "Swap Meet Dreams: Immigrant Entrepreneurship and the Korean Swap Meet Boom, 1983-1992," focuses on the activities of the businesspeople who were responsible for an explosion of indoor swap meet construction across Southern California during the 1980s. Tracing the indoor swap meet's transnational origins through the actions of Korean real estate investors, financiers, and aspiring entrepreneurs, the chapter argues that the business type grew to serve as an important outlet for LA's booming garment industry and wholesaling economy. Underwritten by Koreatown-based banks, which also held assets in Korean-owned garment industries, Korean swap meet entrepreneurs moved into underserved and under-resourced parts of the metropolis affected by the enduring legacy of the Watts Rebellion. Utilizing ethnic business networks to construct a lucrative economic system they helped to channel low-cost off-brand commodities from Asian manufacturers and Los Angeles sweatshops to local wholesalers and swap meets. Through these activities, this chapter concludes with an examination of how notions of citizenship and belonging are given meaning through cultures of entrepreneurialism and representations of identity within material culture. It shows that indoor swap meets offered immigrant entrepreneurs from Korea opportunities to prove their social and financial worth through entrepreneurship. Profits made within modest businesses housed within indoor swap meets allowed Koreans to settle in middle- and upper-middle class suburbs in Orange County, the San Fernando Valley, and San Gabriel Valley. For Latinx and African American customers, the material culture of the indoor swap meet had different meanings. These were—and continue to be—expressed through the material culture of the products sold.

Chapter 4, "Maligned from Above and Below: Resistance, Regulation and the Rodney King Rebellion," begins with the violent backlash against Korean swap meet retailers during the Rodney King Rebellion, this chapter explores the significant resistance encountered by indoor swap meet operators in various forms. From both the top down and bottom up, city officials, activists, neighbors, and shoppers objected to early forms of indoor swap meets. From the right, White suburban homeowners bemoaned the noise, congestion, and "matter out of place" swap meets were perceived to introduce. On the left, labor and social justice activists decried their exploitative business practices. City planning departments, state assembly members, and other state officials—responding to these concerns—pushed to implement regulations that would define, formalize, and ultimately rein in this new form of commerce. This chapter traces various resistance movements to the semi-formality of indoor swap meets and explores the results and implications of these movements.

Chapter 5, "Straight Outta Los Angeles: Swap Meet Space and the Development of West Coast Hip Hop," traces intertwined histories of indoor swap meets and west coast hip hop, arguing that the market halls are a form of "hip hop space" as defined by architect and theorist Sekou Cooke. Using interviews, rap lyrics, and site visits as evidence, I link hip hop lyrics with the material culture of swap meets, which emerged as important outlets of custom apparel (made in small shops with embroidery and screen printing machinery), bling, and recorded music alongside west coast "gangsta"

rap. Just as hip hop lyrics have been recognized as forms of political speech, I demonstrate how they also lay claim to swap meets as hip hop memorials.

Chapter 6, “From Swap Meet to Mall: Latinizing Los Angeles’s Multi-Ethnic Marketplaces, 1990-2008,” analyzes three Latinx-serving indoor swap meet clusters: the Central American-serving swap meets in MacArthur Park; Los Angeles’s Alameda Swap Meet and Orange County’s Anaheim Indoor Marketplace; and Plaza Mexico. All three are situated within repurposed buildings within low-income neighborhoods, all utilize theming tactics and cultural programming to attract Mexican and Latinx customers, and all are managed by diverse staffs. Considering formal design interventions executed by management as well as the informal tactics employed by vendors, I observe that the abundant and loosely-regulated vendor booths contribute to a *carnavalesque* atmosphere that—in spite of its Latinx theming—fosters cross-cultural interactions. My work complicates the literature on “Latino urbanism” and “Latino vernaculars”—which privileges residential landscapes—by pointing to the polyphony of actors who shape many “ethnic” retail spaces. Further, the rise of Korean-owned Hispanic-themed retail developments that used indoor swap meets as an anchor during the early 2000’s represent a maturation and upscaling of swap meet management, which reflects the increased assets, clout, and aspirations of the Spanish-speaking population. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the “upscale” of the indoor swap meet model at Plaza Mexico, which provided a blueprint for David J. Hidalgo Architects to theme and revitalize struggling malls across the country. Since the mid-1990s, Hidalgo Architects has used the indoor swap meet concept to anchor numerous mall renovations including those in Phoenix and Fort Worth.

I conclude with “Wither the Swap Meet?: The Financial Crisis, E-Commerce, Gentrification, and COVID-19, 2008-2020,” which examines the future of brick and mortar retail amidst a convergence of crises, including the enduring fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of electronic commerce and the “retail apocalypse,” and the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these events pose grave questions about the future brick and mortar retail. Even as swap meets have as been upheld as recently as 2017 by developers, architects, and urban designers as a means of retrofitting suburbia, these crises seem to indicate that the almost four decade-long era of indoor swap meet retailing is drawing to a close.⁷⁵

Conclusion: “Meet Me at the Swap Meet”

In the third season of the hit television show, *Transparent*, its transgender leading character, Maura, visits the Slauson Swap Meet to attempt to “rescue” a woman she had earlier counseled on a suicide hotline.⁷⁶ As a wealthy Jewish college professor from the city’s west side, Maura is so overwhelmed by the swap meet’s aural din, abundant merchandise, nail salon fumes, and a challenge to her White privilege that she suffers a panic attack and passes out. The transgender African American woman who Maura had been trying to find suddenly appears and comes to *her* aid, and the episode ends as paramedics wheel a disoriented Maura past clothing, shoe, and wig booths en route to the county hospital as an anonymous “5150 (Figure 1.14).”⁷⁷ Maura’s encounter with people she regarded as social and racial “others” serves as a metaphor for how many upper- and middle-class White Angelenos continue to be oblivious to indoor swap meets and the humanity of their patrons.

⁷⁵ Dunham-Jones and Williamson, “Dead and Dying Shopping Malls, Re-Inhabited.”

⁷⁶ Jill Soloway, “Elizah,” TV Show, *Transparent* (Amazon Prime Video, 2016), www.amazon.com.

⁷⁷ A “5150” is medical code for a patient who is psychologically unstable.



Figure 1.14: A befuddled Maura, lead character of the TV show, *Transparent*, wanders around the Slauson Swap Meet. Source: Screen capture.⁷⁸

While indoor swap meet space remains illegible to most middle- and upper- class Angelenos and Americans, pop cultural references to them lurk everywhere. They have been with us since the late 1980s, when Dr. Dre and Eazy-E began rapping about the market places from which they sold their iconic hip hop mixtapes and debut album. It was through tapes and records which initially circulated at swap meets in Compton, South Central, and elsewhere that west coast hip hop fans encountered the first gangsta rap recordings. That swap meets were crucibles of this nascent genre is reflected in the lyrics and music videos for hundreds of hip hop tracks, including recent releases from the late Nipsey Hussle as well as Tyga, whose music video, “Swap Meet,” has as of May 2020 over eleven million YouTube views.⁷⁹

In the music video for their 1996 remix of their platinum-certified hit, “California Love,” rappers Dr. Dre and 2Pac (the stage name for Tupac Shakur) succinctly express the centrality of the swap meet to everyday Southern California life in the song’s opening exchange. “Meet me at the Compton Swap meet,” Tupac tells Dre. “*Just meet me at the swap meet.*”⁸⁰ For hip hop fans and those who came of age during the 1990s, these words hint at a larger truth: that indoor swap meets were a crossroads for thousands of Angelenos from various walks of life. In frequenting these quotidian spaces as owners, vendors, shoppers, and consumers of pop culture, the swap meet emerged as an iconic place in which people realized their livelihoods, met their material needs, and developed their own understandings of what it meant to live in an increasingly multicultural society.

⁷⁸ Soloway, “Elizah.”

⁷⁹ Tyga, *Swap Meet*, Music Video (EMPIRE & Last Kings Music, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DFBcS3bQQ0>.

⁸⁰ 2Pac and Dr. Dre, *California Love (Remix)*, Music Video (Interscope Records & Death Row Records, 1996), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDDcXq4cQ90>.

Chapter 2: From Outdoor Market to Indoor Bazaar, 1983-1985

On an August morning in 1983, crowds massed outside of a low-slung warehouse in the San Fernando Valley, awaiting the grand opening of the Valley Indoor Swap Meet. Just a few years earlier, the 125,000 square foot building had housed assembly lines for Vox synthesizers and Thomas organs until the Whirlpool Corporation discontinued organ production at the site.¹ Now, a market bazaar with over 500 booths from which independent micro-entrepreneurs sold their wares was about to open inside the building. As the vendors prepared for their first day of business, an observer would have seen them arranging brand-new, hand-crafted, and second-hand items within self-constructed booths. A dizzying array of goods sourced from manufacturers, importers, and wholesalers in downtown Los Angeles's garment district defined the material qualities of what was the region's first indoor swap meet. As a newspaper advertisement later put it, the swap meet sold "everything," including "state of the art video equipment, the latest designer fashions for men, women and children, electronics, art, linens, jewelry, plants, records, tapes, bake goods [sic], computers, antiques, and an extraordinarily delicious selection of farm fresh produce" (Figure 2.1).²



Figure 2.1: Print Advertisement for Valley Indoor Swap Meet. Los Angeles Times Section F, page 13. May 10, 1984.

When the swap meet opened at 9 am, roughly 12,000 customers streamed into the building to peruse its offerings. Far surpassing the expectations of Valley Indoor Swap Meet president, Glenn Malkin, opening day crowds were so large that customers could barely move through the building's aisles.³ With foot traffic more than double that of other prominent Southern California warehouse

¹ Built to produce Pacific Mercury televisions for Sears Roebuck Corporation, the plant started manufacturing Thomas Company organs shortly thereafter. Whirlpool purchased a majority stake in Thomas Organ Company's parent, Warwick Electronics, in 1966. See: LA Times Staff, "Million Dollar Television Plant Opened in Valley," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1954; Elliot Peikoff, "Personal Letter from Elliot Peikoff to Thomas Harkenrider," Personal Letter, February 19, 1959; Whirlpool Corporation, "Whirlpool Corporation: 100 Years at a Glance," 2011.

² "Print Advertisement for Valley Indoor Swap Meet," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1984, sec. F.

³ Malkin, Personal Interview.

retailers such as Price Club and Fedco, the swap meet's first-weekend success was a strong indicator of the business type's long-term viability.⁴

This overwhelming opening day response generated an immediate and unforeseen problem for Malkin and his management company, Metropolitan Marketing: It attracted unwanted attention from the building's owners, Tullie and Sam Deutsch, who recognized the swap meet as a stellar business opportunity for themselves. Indeed, on the swap meet's first day of business, each of its 12,000 customers paid a \$1 admission fee which, combined with monthly booth rental fees of several hundred dollars paid by each vendor generated significant profits. Consequently, on the Monday following the its opening, the Deutsches served Metropolitan Marketing with a thirty-day eviction notice.⁵ Although the long-time Southern California real estate investors ultimately took control of the building, Malkin and his business partners staved off eviction for six critical months, during which they leased a new building in Woodland Hills and relocated nearly all of their vendors.⁶

Why pay attention to this dramatic but little-known small business story? First, it pinpoints the origins of the indoor swap meet, a business type that became within the decade an important economic niche for Korean immigrants with limited social capital and a source of inexpensive products for low-income Angelenos. This new business type, which takes its name from the outdoor "swap meets" that had operated within Southern California parking lots since at least the 1950's, was a local manifestation of the age-old indoor bazaar.⁷ As I discuss in detail in Chapters 3 through 5, the emergence of this new entrepreneurial niche set the stage for well-known inter-ethnic struggles over social belonging and urban citizenship within increasingly multicultural Los Angeles. Second, the act of repurposing an organ factory into a lower-end retailing emporium is a synecdoche for Southern California's unfolding transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist economy. This economic restructuring, wherein manufacturing jobs within unionized firms were replaced with lower-paying and more precarious retail jobs, represents one of the most important social and economic transformations in the past half century. Third, as these changes devastated growing swaths of industrial and retail districts in suburbs across the United States, the repurposing of the Valley Indoor Swap Meet building—and hundreds of other indoor swap meets—exemplifies the revitalization of the nation's inner-suburban infrastructure through small-scale interventions by entrepreneurs, do-it-yourself urbanists, and community activists. Like recent scholarship that has expanded conversations on urban revitalization well beyond those focusing on the "state," real estate interests, or the "creative class," this dissertation argues that immigrant entrepreneurs helped to reinvigorate the urban landscape through their everyday business activities.⁸

⁴ Compare the Valley Indoor Swap Meet's opening day foot traffic total with Costco, which in 2012 served a daily average of 5,000 customers per store. This figure is based on the company's claim of serving 3 million customers per day in its 600 stores. See: Lori Gordon Logan and Michael Beyman, "Costco: Breaking All the Retail Rules," *CNBC.Com*, April 25, 2012, <https://www.cnbc.com/id/47175492>.

⁵ Glenn Malkin, "Email Correspondence," July 25, 2017.

⁶ Malkin, Personal Interview.

⁷ "Swap meet" is a term endemic to Southern California, which has since the 1950s referred to outdoor flea markets held in drive in movie theaters and parking lots. See: Robert Montemayor, "Swap Meet in El Cajon Under Fire," *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1981, sec. SD_A1. Across the United States, these indoor bazaars are alternatively referred to as flea markets, marketplaces, "swap marts," "farmers markets" (in Atlanta), among other terms. I use "swap meet" in this dissertation because it is the term most commonly used in Southern California.

⁸ This recent literature focuses on grassroots activists and "do-it-yourself" or "tactical" urbanists, as well as immigrant entrepreneurs. See for example: Domenic Vitiello and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *Immigration and Metropolitan Revitalization in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Gordon C. C. Douglas, *The Help-Yourself City: Legitimacy and Inequality in DIY Urbanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*.

This chapter offers an origin story for indoor swap meets, examining their roots in several retailing arenas. I examine how several retailing threads, including the precedents of outdoor flea markets, festival marketplaces, indoor antiques malls, and indoor market bazaars were woven together by a handful of entrepreneurs before crystalizing into a retailing form that quickly spread across Southern California, and later the United States. This crystallization and dissemination was a product of a unique confluence of local circumstances, including the growing availability of inexpensive retail and warehouse space, booming local garment manufacturing and wholesaling economies, and the devaluation of labor wrought by factory closures, efforts by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce (Storper et al) to boost low wage employment, and immigration. Initially, these factors fueled an outdoor swap meet boom during the late-1970s and early 1980s, as the first substantial wave of immigrants following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 faced blocked economic mobility upon arrival to Southern California. By the early 1980s, however, numerous instances of local resistance to these outdoor markets drove them indoors.

These acts of opposition by community members and their city councilors were primarily concerned with the physical appearance of outdoor swap meets, which many perceived as messy and disordered reflections of the region's growing racial diversity. In a region once famous for its seemingly homogeneous landscapes of modernity and Whiteness, the mixing of old and new merchandise as well as the White, Black, brown, and immigrant bodies at outdoor swap meets was viewed by some as material evidence of a crumbling White social order. For vendors and would-be swap meet managers, a solution to this perception problem and increasing public consternation was to move outdoor swap meets indoors. By hiding their myriad offerings behind walls and under a roof, indoor swap meet managers learned that they could entice vendors to sign leases by the month rather than by the weekend by erecting permanent booths. Vendors, increasingly reliant on swap meets for their income, recognized this new arrangement as a far more stable and attractive alternative to outdoor swap meets, which occurred only on weekends and required fourteen to sixteen hour days in variable weather conditions.

Southern California's indoor swap meets were inspired by several business types, including the outdoor swap meets that have operated in the region since the 1930s, indoor "flea markets" that emerged on the east coast during the 1970s, and indoor market bazaars that have existed in Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa for centuries. As we will see in subsequent chapters, indoor swap meet operators and vendors looked to these precedents for inspiration, experimenting with uniting various elements of disparate market traditions. Booming visitation to outdoor swap meets, instances of community resistance to them, and a lack of room in which to build new ones created the conditions in which indoor swap meets first thrived.

Retailing at the Drive-In

The indoor swap meet's predecessor—the outdoor swap meet—emerged in Southern California amidst the mid-twentieth century golden age of roadside architecture. The region's love affair with the automobile had prompted an efflorescence of roadside businesses, including suburban shopping centers, department stores, supermarkets, and drive-in restaurants.⁹ One such business type was the drive-in movie theater. Designed for use after dark, outdoor theaters exploded onto the national landscape during the 1940's and 1950's, but began facing budgetary problems shortly thereafter. Facing stiff competition in a saturated market, theater owners began experimenting with ways to boost their income through daytime business activities in their expansive parking lots. Daytime

⁹ Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*.

swap meets proved an ideal use, and several opened in Southern California drive-ins during the first years of the 1960's.

One of the first such markets was the Paramount Swap Meet, which Joseph Bianchi opened at his Radium Drive-In movie theater in 1955.¹⁰ The theater, which opened in May of 1948, was part of a national drive-in building boom which saw an increase from roughly one hundred such theaters at the advent of World War II to over 4,000 by the mid-1950s as drivers took to the roads in unprecedented numbers.¹¹ With nearly fifty such theaters operating in Southern California by 1960 and the region's outdoor theater market growing ever more competitive, operators began looking for additional revenue streams.¹²

It was in this environment that Bianchi leased daytime use of the parking spaces at his drive-in to Sam Comfort, an entrepreneur who had recently opened what some call California's first swap meet in National City in 1951.¹³ Applying his know-how at the Paramount meet, he began operating a daytime flea market during the drive-in's off-hours. Joining other theater owners across the nation, who were already experimenting with novel architectural forms, events, and other sorts of programs to attract additional paying customers, Bianchi may have been the first to marry the flea market concept with the drive-in theater form.¹⁴ While other drive-in operators experimented with events including dance parties, concerts, and even church services in their theater parking lots, the swap meet would prove the most profitable and enduring use of drive-in theater infrastructure (Figure 2.2). Within a few years, a crop of imitators took root in drive-in theaters, raceways, and other large parking lots across the region. According to the Paramount Swap Meet's website, the market's rural location in its early days made it a place where "you could find a used plow or milking machine, or even bid on livestock. As word got out and the crowds increased, more and more people were coming out and selling their used items."¹⁵ By the mid-1960s, on any given weekend, at least twenty new swap meets operated in drive-ins and lots situated on previously rural lands on the suburban fringe.¹⁶ As those

¹⁰ Bianchi's Modern Amusement Company opened the drive-in as The Radium Drive-In on May 21st, 1948. On September 8, 1950, the company opened a second Radium Drive-In in Torrance. The Paramount Radium was re-named the Paramount Drive-In on July 13, 1961 to distinguish the two. See: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-07-18-hl-14445-story.html> and <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/14912>.

¹¹ The first drive-in movie theater to open in Southern California—and only the second in the United States (after Camden, New Jersey's Park-In Theater in 1933)—commenced operations on the site of a former bean field at the intersection of Pico and Westwood Boulevards in Los Angeles. See Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 154–55. For a tally of drive in theaters nationally, see Kerry Seagrave, *Drive-in Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (McFarland & Company, Inc, 1992), 234. In Los Angeles, enterprising developers built drive-ins on open land in rural locations adjacent to the highways and freeways leading into Los Angeles. By 1949, Pacific Theaters, the outfit that built the drive-in at Pico and Westwood, operated fourteen drive-ins throughout Southern California, and 34 by 1986. See: "New Drive-In Theater Will Be Opened," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1949, sec. E2; Ruth Ryon, "Drive-In Theater to Play Other Role," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1986. The number of operating drive-in theaters in California peaked at 223 in 1967, roughly 50 of which were located in greater Los Angeles. See: Jay Allen Sanford, "Field of Screens: A Complete Illustrated History 1947 Thru 2008," *San Diego Reader*, August 1, 2008, <https://www.sandiegoreader.com/weblogs/bands/2008/aug/01/drive-in-theaters-in-san-diego-complete-illustrate/>.

¹² For number of drive-ins operating within Greater Los Angeles, see: Don Sanders and Susan Sanders, "When Drive-Ins Were the In Place to Be; The Outdoor Theaters, Once Ubiquitous in the Southland, Influenced Hollywood Careers and Teen Culture," *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2000.

¹³ Camilla Haag, "Festival of Abundance: It All Comes Out in the Swap Meet," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1970.

¹⁴ For a discussion of architectural tactics drive-in owners employed to attract movie goers, see: Shannon Bell, "From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower: An Architectural Study of Drive-in Theaters in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C.-Richmond Corridor," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 9 (2003): 215–27.

¹⁵ "About | Paramount Swap Meet," accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.paramountswap.com/about/>.

¹⁶ Peter Bart, "Price of Parakeet? A Rolling Pin: Just About Anything Is Negotiable at a 'Swap Meet,'" *New York Times*, November 8, 1965.

lands were hemmed in by new developments, the early agrarian focus faded, and the markets became synonymous with amateur vendors selling discarded household items from the trunks of their cars.

With its mild weather and no shortage of large parking lots, Southern California was an early swap meet epicenter. Just a decade after the first opened, a 1965 *New York Times* feature observed that “swap meets, which embrace ingredients of an oriental bazaar and the Paris Flea Market, have become the latest craze in Southern California.”¹⁷ The thousands of people flocking to their expansive parking lots each weekend seemed to underscore the growing disenchantment with the mass consumer economy. As outlets for hand-crafted and reused goods, swap meets epitomized the spirit of growing 1960s countercultural movements in opposition to department stores and chain retailers which had recently transformed shopping into an experience defined by standardized store layouts and mass-produced brand name goods. For the budding environmental movement, swap meets also offered outlets for those interested in extending the life of old goods. As a 1970 *Los Angeles Times* article put it, “Problem: How to join the ecology movement and recycle this stuff [junk found in the garage]. Solution: Try a swap meet.”¹⁸



Figure 2.2: Sunday church services, like these held at El Cajon’s Aero Drive-In Theater in 1956, were among a handful of daytime activities hosted by drive-in theater operators that reflect mid-century American enthusiasm for the automobile.¹⁹

For many early shoppers, unique used and handcrafted products were a potent lure. As a *Los Angeles Times* reporter wrote in 1976, “it must be said that the heart and soul of any swap meet is its used merchandise.” Handcrafts, antiques, “vintage” apparel, and cast-off junk were among “those treasures from someone’s garage or attic that you just can’t live without.”²⁰ Through the 1960s and 1970s, much swap meet merchandise resembled that available at a garage or yard sale. Cast offs sold by amateur hobbyists offered weekend leisure shoppers the prospect of finding one-of-a-kind items (Figure 2.3). Adding to the excitement was the widespread belief that the merchandise was stolen or

¹⁷ Bart.

¹⁸ Haag, “Festival of Abundance.”

¹⁹ Sanford, “Field of Screens: A Complete Illustrated History 1947 Thru 2008.”

²⁰ James Brown, “A Bazaar Twist: Swap Meets Are Much Like the Old Open-Air Marketplaces. Here’s Where to Find Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1976.

illicit, leading some to deem early swap meets as “thieves’ markets,” even though little swap meet merchandise is ever actually stolen.²¹

While some swap meet vendors were amateurs who sold once or twice to clear out an attic, many more became regular traders who obtained their goods from pallets, estate sales, and other area swap meets. Because most outdoor swap meets operated only once or twice per week, many full time vendors sustained themselves by selling at multiple meets. On a national scale, a subset of swap meet vendors migrated from one region to another with the seasons.²² In Los Angeles, which enjoys easy access to the full gamut of products from low end commodities to high end antiques, full time vendors have had an easy time staying local in Southern California.



Figure 2.3: El Cajon's Aero Drive-In “swap fair,” pictured circa 1960.

Photo URL: <https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-ZlU65m5b91o/U6r-FTLSEfI/AAAAAAAAAW0/QRHmYHSNURs/s1600/Diswap4.jpg>

In recent years, on any given weekend, thousands of swap meet vendors operate outdoor swap meet booths across the region. Their twelve to sixteen hour days begin as early as 3:30 am, when they drive their trucks full of wares to the swap meet entrance. In the pre-dawn hours, vendors hurriedly locate their piece of asphalt, set up their tents, and arrange their wares. If setup concludes early, some vendors will peruse other booths and buy choice items for later sale before the swap meet opens to the general public at 6 am (in some cases 5 am). Once the swap meet concludes—usually at 3 pm—vendors must again re-pack their merchandise and leave the premises before the gates close.

Constructed on the urban edge and often surrounded by fields, many early Southern California swap meets juxtaposed mid-century modernity with then-popular frontier nostalgia. Several early swap meets, including the Paramount Swap Meet, even held farm equipment auctions in their early days. Reporters at the time further emphasized that the markets reinvigorated the social practice of bartering. In a 1965 interview, the operator of the Paramount Swap Meet remarked that “folks are

²¹ Swan Fernando Swap Meet owner William Hannon, for instance, asserted in a 1979 interview that this association was “untrue.” Quoted in Ken Lubas, “Buyers Try to Stretch Dollars at Swap Meets,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1979.

²² Jim Goodridge, *Goodridge's Guide to Flea Markets*, West/Southwest Edition (Holbrook, Massachusetts: Adams Publishing, 1995), 8–10.

bored with just going into stores and buyin' things. People still have that old horse-trading instinct—they like to wheel and deal.”²³ Fourteen years later, the owner of the San Fernando Swap Meet similarly observed of his market that, “I figure one of the main attractions is that [shoppers] get to bargain before they buy.”²⁴

Although farm machinery is no longer sold, frontier aesthetics evoke what Genevieve Carpio calls the “Anglo Fantasy Past” at some swap meets, particularly “vintage flea markets,” which cater to Whiter and wealthier clientele. At the Melrose Vintage Flea Market, for instance, mounted deer heads, rustic furniture, vintage apparel including cowboy boots, leather belts and flannel shirts join Colonial, American, and Confederate flags in a carefully curated display (Figure 2.4). These emblems of Americana point to and valorize the legacy of White settler colonialism when settlers in the Los Angeles region actively erased the legacies of California’s native and Latinx peoples.²⁵



Figure 2.4: The carefully curated vintage goods on offer at the Melrose Trading Post, including American and Confederate flags, taxidermed animals, and rustic furniture “speak” to the Whiter and wealthier clientele of higher-end swap meets and “flea markets” by evoking Los Angeles’s whitewashed past. Photo by Alec Stewart, 2015.

While such markets and carefully curated displays are the exception, they point to a central and underlying tension between White and middle class swap meet vendors and shoppers who *expect* to find this kind of merchandise at all swap meets. When the reality proves this assumption false, confusion and resentment ensue. At an outdoor flea market in Glendale, an older White swap vendor explicitly voiced this sentiment to me, emphasizing his resentment of immigrants, which he associates with high real estate prices, crime, and the “junk” he believes pervades many outdoor and indoor swap

²³ Paramount Swap Meet operator Sam Comfort, quoted in Bart, “Price of Parakeet?”

²⁴ San Fernando Swap Meet manager Harold Solie, quoted in Lubas, “Buyers Try to Stretch Dollars at Swap Meets.”

²⁵ Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*; Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

meets today. To him, “vintage” flea markets are the only legitimate second hand markets because they harken back to the region’s Whiter, less diverse past.²⁶

Whether in the 1960s or the 2020s, the prospect of discovery, the thrill of bargaining, frontier mythos, or dirt-cheap merchandise has attracted outdoor swap meet shoppers, who constitute a broad cross-section of society. As a socioeconomic crossroads, outdoor swap meets can be considered modernist counterparts to the archetypal fairs, marketplaces, or carnivals in which “rich folks and poor alike rub elbows to get the most for their money,” as a swap meet manager put it in 1987.²⁷ This jumble of goods, people, and classes constituted a world apart from the shopping centers and malls which dominated the American retail imaginary during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. In contrast to those tightly controlled and regulated environments, outdoor swap meets operated as spaces of heterogeneity and possibility, where unlikely combinations of working class bargain-hunters mingled with upper- and middle-class novelty seekers.

As outdoor swap meet operators became more sophisticated, some added live entertainment to entice weekend shoppers. Still today, some swap meets hire usually-unknown bands to perform on a central stage in an effort to create a festive atmosphere. The Santa Fe Springs Swap Meet, 17 miles southeast of Downtown Los Angeles on Interstate 5, takes this tactic to an extreme, maintaining late hours on Friday and Saturday evenings during which a steady stream of cover bands which draw crowds in the thousands.

The combination of social mixing, commercial activity, and revelry that took place at outdoor swap meets recalls the work of cultural theorists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who framed markets and carnivals as spaces of social and political possibility. As quotidian spaces of exchange and revelry, swap meets also have been sites of tension between the official and unofficial and “high” and the “low” cultures. While relatively stable most of the time, the outdoor meets also have emerged as sites of contestation when hegemonic powers have sought to eliminate them. “For long periods,” Stallybrass and White write, “carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects...given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as a *catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle*.”²⁸ As we will see later in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, outdoor and indoor swap meets have become sites of political speech acts and several high profile social conflicts.

Immigrant Vendors, Wholesale Goods, and the (Outdoor) Swap Meet Dream

By the 1980s, vendors turned to the outdoor swap meet trade for full time work rather than mere weekend amusement. Where once vendors intermittently sold their hand-crafts and cast offs, a growing number found the markets fertile grounds for new enterprises selling surplus merchandise from wholesalers and liquidators. Karl Bucuvalas, who began selling hand-tooled leather at the Rose Bowl Flea Market during the early 1980s, was one vendor who realized the advantages of selling mass-produced items. By 1987, having noticed that other vendors were shifting to easier-to-obtain items, he switched to framed art. “People used to come out to sell whatever they had or what they made,” he observed in 1987. “Now you see people selling what they think people will *buy*....It’s not the ‘60s anymore, man.”²⁹ In 1979, San Fernando Swap Meet owner William Hannon acknowledged the

²⁶ John, Personal Interview, October 18, 2015.

²⁷ San Fernando Swap Meet manager Harold Solie, quoted in Lubas, “Buyers Try to Stretch Dollars at Swap Meets.”

²⁸ Italics in the original. See: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 14.

²⁹ Emphasis added by author. Quoted in Wes Hanson, “Malls of Stalls - Swap Meets Become Big Business,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, December 21, 1987.

growing heterogeneity of his swap meet merchandise, noting that it “usually comes from department store surplus, garage sales, or is hand crafted.”³⁰ By 1987, the shift to manufactured goods was even more pronounced. “I know some vendors who go down to the Price Club [predecessor to Costco], buy up a lot of stuff and then come here and sell it for a little more,” he said. “Anybody can sell new stuff. It’s entrepreneurship at its best. It’s America.”³¹ Hannon and Bucuvalas’s comments reveal that anti-industrial maker’s sentiment of 1960s swap meets was giving way to the imperatives of a globalizing economy while becoming more democratic. That “*anybody* can sell” manufactured goods opened the door to a new class of vendors who drove a mini-boom in the popularity of outdoor swap meets.

As early as the 1970s, immigrants from Asian and Latin American countries constituted a growing segment of this class. Amidst a strengthening immigration boom and the massive restructuring of the regional economy, growing numbers of immigrant microentrepreneurs transformed markets once dominated by hobbyists into vital sites of economic subsistence. For native-born Angelenos and immigrants alike, they offered spaces for individuals with limited financial resources, social capital or English language proficiency to open a business that supplemented their income. Many migrants facing blocked economic mobility found swap meet entrepreneurship preferable to other menial jobs including those in gas stations, restaurants, and grocery stores. Loosely regulated, swap meets have for decades offered an informal niche in which recently-arrived families find their economic footing.

Whether relying on swap meet businesses for supplemental income or their entire subsistence, many immigrant families came to depend on weekend outdoor swap meets. For some, swap meet vending was a central tactic to achieve social mobility. As Jeffrey Juarez writes in his master’s thesis on outdoor swap meets, “in the case of my family’s experience, we saved up the money made at the [Paramount] swap meet and used it to support family in El Salvador (e.g. transforming my grandmother’s one-story shack into a large two-story house), sent me to private parochial school rather than an inner-city public school, and put a down payment on a mortgage for a modest house in South Central Los Angeles.”³² Whether a space of profit or subsistence, Juarez concludes that these outdoor markets “help make life more bearable” for countless families “from socially disadvantaged, economically strapped, or resource-deficient neighborhoods.”³³

This story of economic subsistence has repeated itself in various forms for countless outdoor swap meet vendors since at least the 1970s. Miguel, a vendor I met at Montclair’s Mission Tiki Swap Meet, has relied on income from his jewelry sales since he began selling at Southern California swap meets in the late-1990s.³⁴ As I spoke with Miguel, passersby waved hello to him and shook his hand, revealing the rich relationships he has forged with vendors and customers over the years. Fondly recounting stories of enormous crowds in the “golden age” of swap meet selling—the 1990s—he recalls that the enormous volume of foot traffic and sales enabled many vendors to earn a decent and in some cases substantial income.³⁵ Some vendors became so prosperous, Miguel recalls, that they purchased multiple houses. Steady swap meet incomes allowed for investments in human capital as well. Miguel tells me about nearby vendors who sent their daughters to college: one became a school

³⁰ San Fernando Swap Meet owner William Hannon, quoted in Lubas, “Buyers Try to Stretch Dollars at Swap Meets.”

³¹ Hanson, “Malls of Stalls - Swap Meets Become Big Business.”

³² Jeffrey Juarez, “Swap Meets, Flea Markets, and Open-Air Public Markets: A Community and Economic Development Model for Low-Income and Underserved Neighborhoods” (Master’s Thesis, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 11.

³³ Juarez, 10–11.

³⁴ Name changed to protect informant’s identity. “Miguel,” Personal interview, December 11, 2015.

³⁵ At times, Miguel recalls, crowds were so large that management turned away arriving vehicles. “Miguel.”

teacher; her sister a professor of English. While Miguel acknowledges that some kids “get into trouble doing things they shouldn’t be doing,” stories about children who have secured middle-class careers exemplify a common swap meet dream: By working hard to support their families, immigrant swap meet entrepreneurs hope to build a better life for their children.



Figure 2.5: A swap meet vendor specializing in Pro Club, Pro 5, and Shaka brand athleticwear (common swap meet brands) sources his goods from pallets of overstock merchandise. He and his family make their living by separating out unblemished articles and selling them at retail prices. Photo by Alec Stewart.

For Michael Hong, a vendor at San Bernardino’s Pro Swap Meet, selling items in this way proved lucrative enough for him to quit his job in real estate and take over his father’s swap meet business when he fell ill.³⁶ His father, who migrated to Southern California from Korea and began selling at area swap meets in the early 2000s, came to specialize in Pro Club and Shaka brand t-shirts. Pro Club, a t-shirt manufacturer whose merchandise is sold in virtually every indoor and outdoor swap meet in Southern California, was started by a swap meet vendor in the 1980s/90s?? (Figures 2.5 and 2.6). Highly regarded for their thickness and high quality, the company’s t-shirts are quintessential streetwear items. As Michael observes, “some guys wear brand new Pro Club t-shirts like I would wear an Armani shirt. They are affordable status symbols.”³⁷ In the 2000s, the elder Hong became adept at extracting value from pallets of potentially defective Pro Club and Shaka shirts. On average, Michael estimates that 30 percent of the garments he purchases in a pallet are unblemished; he is able to sell these for full price and the others at a discount. By carefully sorting their products in this manner, Hong asserts that his family enjoys a strong return business from loyal customers who appreciate their dependable products and honesty. “Even on really slow days,” Hong remarks, “I still have customers

³⁶ Name changed to protect informant’s identity. “Michael Hong,” Personal Interview, December 9, 2015.

³⁷ “Michael Hong.”

looking for me and my shirts.”³⁸ In a retail sector defined by thin margins, a loyal repeat customer base provides free word-of-mouth advertising. Although Michael wants to put his college degree to work and return to the real estate profession, he acknowledges that know-how and customer loyalty have allowed his family to make a “decent living” in the outdoor swap meet trade.



Figure 2.6: Unblemished t-shirts, carefully packaged and arranged at Michael Hong’s Pro Swap Meet stall, are gleaned from pallets of mostly defective merchandise. Photo by Alec Stewart.

Liquidators, Salvage Brokers, and the “Reverse Logistics” Economy

Hong’s reliance on goods gleaned from pallets and Bucuvalas’s shift away from hand-tooled leather to framed art reflects an evolution of the swap meet’s longtime role as a secondary market. Whereas swap meet vendors in the 1960s sold mostly unique items—whether handmade or sourced from home—their counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s increasingly dealt in overstock and returned goods purchased at deep discounts from liquidators and salvage brokers. As swap meets expanded in number and size, these suppliers clustered through the 1980s in the city’s garment and central industrial districts alongside existing garment manufacturers and wholesalers. By 1990, the Korean language *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*, a trade publication for the then-considerable number of Korean swap meet entrepreneurs, listed over 250 such firms, with most in the Los Angeles Fashion District, and the rest clustered in the nearby industrial cities of Commerce, Industry, and Vernon (Figure 2.7). Liquidators, salvage brokers, and wholesalers of all kinds of merchandise would ultimately come to define what was sold at swap meets, with their vendors making multiple trips per week to these suppliers to pick up product.

³⁸ “Michael Hong.”

convenient outlets for such wholesalers, which cultivated customers through trade publications distributed through swap meets.⁴²

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Figure 2.8: Full page print advertisement for MBA Trading Company reads: "Various trucks arrive every day from different stores. Red Label Sale: Monday April 22 from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Big discounts on selected pallets, come and take advantage!!" Source: April 2019 edition of Solo Mayoreo.

⁴² *Solo Mayoreo* is one such publication. *Western Merchandiser* is another.

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Figure 2.9: Display ad for VIA Trading. Ad reads: “Liquidation Merchandise! Hundreds of products from 5% of the price in stores! Lots from \$99. Warehouse open to the public, personalized service. New merchandise daily. Four monthly events with large discounts! Profitable merchandise to resell in discount stores, online, flea markets, etc.”

Source: July 2016 edition of Solo Mayoreo.

While MBA Trading Group was founded in 2008, liquidation firms like it have supplied swap meet sellers for decades. As early as 1970, when a *Los Angeles Times* reporter wrote that “many men support large families by purchasing surplus goods—foam rubber, bell bottom pants, paper products, underwear—by the lot and selling them at swap meets for a substantial profit.”⁴³ Although bell bottoms can no longer be found in liquidator pallets, they still contain a broad range of popular and

⁴³ Haag, “Festival of Abundance.”

brand name merchandise. As Jim Goodridge writes in his 1995 guide to flea markets, “From computers to crafts, produce to pearls, it’s all at today’s flea market. If you can pronounce it or describe it, a vendor somewhere has it for sale. Even the great name brands, Levi’s, Calvin Klein, Dockers, Guess, Nike, etc., once the exclusive domain of the overpriced department stores, now line the flea market rows.”⁴⁴ These name brand articles, gleaned from pallets, not only represent exciting bargains for shoppers, they also illustrate the role of swap meets in the disposal of overstock, returned, and liquidated goods.

Critical suppliers of the swap meet economy, these businesses are important nodes in “reverse logistics” chains that divert returned, damaged, and out-of-season products away from zero-value destinations such as landfill or corporate donations toward secondary markets.⁴⁵ Amateur sellers and sophisticated swap meet entrepreneurs alike rely on these firms for cheap merchandise packaged in pallets for heavily discounted goods. Liquidators and salvage dealers grew in tandem with outdoor swap meets.⁴⁶ Sometimes sold by the pound, sometimes with a manifest, pallets contain a trove of goods ranging from cosmetics to power tools, downgrading once differentiated merchandise back into commodities. Because pallet purchasers are unable to inspect the merchandise within them, they assume the risk and responsibility for disposing of potentially damaged or undesirable merchandise. Nevertheless, many outdoor swap meet vendors earn good money by sorting and siphoning off the high value goods contained within pallets (for instance, brand-name clothes, higher value electronics, and cosmetics). Purchased at a wholesale cost of five to ten percent of retail, vendors can sell such goods at significant discounts while still realizing substantial profits.

To this day, many outdoor swap meet vendors purchase their merchandise from liquidators. Depending on the quality of the merchandise and the degree to which sellers separate undesirable from desirable goods, a swap meet visitor can easily identify liquidated goods by the way in which they are displayed. Discount tables, where everything is sold for a fixed price ranging from 50¢ to \$5 per item, are a common strategy to dispose of pallet items. At Orange County’s Cypress College Swap Meet, for example, vendors offer a broad range of deeply discounted everyday goods, from groceries to designer clothes. The booth depicted in Figure 2.10 sells snacks, candy and nuts, sometimes in damaged boxes or near their expiration, are sold at a flat price for a fraction of retail. The same goes at a clothing vendor which sources its high end garments from Nordstrom and Macy’s stores with their original return receipts (Figure 2.11). Returned yet like-new appliances and electronics are another common swap meet niche (Figure 2.12).

⁴⁴ Goodridge, *Goodridge’s Guide to Flea Markets*, 9.

⁴⁵ Dale Rogers and Ronald Dibben-Lembke define “reverse logistics” as firms and supply chains which move goods from “their typical final destination” (usually retail stores) toward alternative markets “for the purpose of capturing value” for their original retailers or manufacturers. for their producers. See: Dale S. Rogers and Ronald Tibben-Lembke, *Going Backwards: Reverse Logistics Trends and Practices*, 1999, 2.

⁴⁶ Ronald S. Tibben-Lembke, “Strategic Use of the Secondary Market for Retail Consumer Goods,” *California Management Review* 46, no. 2 (2004): 90–104.



Figure 2.10: Sellers of groceries reclaimed from closeout pallets at the Cypress Swap Meet offer deep discounts on popular items. Photo by author, November 2015.



Figure 2.11: Department store returns at the Cypress College Swap Meet. Photo by Alec Stewart, 2015.



Figure 2.12: Returned appliances and home goods at the San Fernando Swap Meet. Photo by Alec Stewart, 2015.

For American- and foreign-born vendors alike, many (though not all) outdoor swap meets thus transitioned from markets for vintage and cast-off personal effects to distribution hubs in the “reverse logistics” economy. As places where larger economies of recycling and reuse at a time before larger retailers relied on retail outlets and discount stores, outdoor swap meets provided a needed outlet. Although larger retailers—particularly in the apparel industry—have since formalized this process of disposal through a network of factory outlet stores, these semi-formal disposal channels still exist.

Wholesalers

While many outdoor swap meet vendors exclusively source overstock and liquidation goods, others rely on the hundreds of wholesale firms clustered in Los Angeles’s central industrial districts. The Los Angeles Fashion District, located on downtown’s southern edge, boasts one of the largest concentrations of apparel, textile, and furniture wholesalers in the country, with over 2,000 firms located there as of early 2020.⁴⁷ These wholesalers, which serve clients around the world and do business with all market segments, as I discuss in Chapter 3, typically specialize in specific niches, whether general merchandise, garments, toys, or cosmetics. When Karl Bucuvalas shifted from selling hand-tooled leather to framed art, he likely procured his merchandise at a deep discount from a wholesaler.

ACE Wholesale, which sells groceries and other general merchandise, stocks brick and mortar as well as swap meet vendors. Anyone with a wholesale buyers permit may purchase large quantities of goods at discount rates, to supplement inventory gleaned from pallets or to fully stock a swap meet booth. Located southeast of Downtown Los Angeles in the “Central Manufacturing District,” ACE is one of many cash-and-carry merchants in the vicinity upon which swap meet vendors rely.

⁴⁷ “Wholesale | LA Fashion District,” accessed April 15, 2020, <https://fashiondistrict.org/wholesale>.

Wholesale firms like ACE allow vendors to buy and transport small quantities of merchandise by pickup truck or van to swap meets where it is sold for a modest profit. The lifeblood of the swap meet economy and more numerous in Los Angeles than nearly any other city in the world, wholesalers are one reason outdoor swap meets exploded on the scene in the 1970s and 1980s.



Figure 2.13: Ace Wholesale at South Alameda Street and East Washington Boulevard. Photo by Alec Stewart, July 2016.



Figure 2.14: T-shirt aisle of ACE Wholesale, where Pro Club, Pro 5 and other popular undergarments sold at swap meets may be purchased. Photo by Alec Stewart, July 2016.

Swap Meet Inc.

While liquidators and wholesalers supported the growing number of outdoor swap meets on the supply side, swap meet management firms joined drive-in owners in responding to the growing demand for the markets. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the swap meet business became more formalized, with the emergence of small firms specializing in swap meet management. R.G. Canning

Attractions, Americana Enterprises, and Norton Western Limited joined the ranks of drive-in theater owners and swap meet operators including Modern Development Company, Sun Recreation Corps, and De Anza Land and Leisure Corp.⁴⁸ Leasing parking lots from public entities including stadiums, high schools, and community colleges, these newcomers joined the older category of swap meet manager in their interest in reaping income from underutilized land.



Figure 2.15: The Rose Bowl Flea Market, operated monthly by R.G. Canning Attractions draws thousands of patrons. Photo by author, 2015.

R.G. Canning Attractions is perhaps the first such swap meet operator. In 1968, it opened what today is the largest outdoor swap meet in Southern California at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena (Figure 2.15). Perhaps because of its location, or the owners' backgrounds in running vintage car shows, the swap meet managers privileged antique and vintage vendors over those selling household junk.⁴⁹ Today, this preference is reflected in the Rose Bowl Flea Market's advertising materials, which employ a mustchiod White man in a straw hat vest, and bow tie to evoke a sense of nineteenth century Americana (Figure 2.16). The Long Beach Antiques Market, opened in Veterans Memorial Stadium by Americana Enterprises in 1982, emphasized from the beginning its American heritage in location, name, and theme. Emphatically an antique market, and *not* a swap meet, its organizers,

⁴⁸ The De Anza Land and Leisure Corporation operated the Mission Tiki Drive-In and Swap Meet, Roubidoux Drive-In and Swap Meet and South Bay Drive-In in San Diego.

⁴⁹ "RGCSHOWS | 50th Anniversary," accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.rgcsHOWS.com/50th-anniversary/>.

according to *The Downtown Gazette* in 2002, “refuse to rent spaces to anyone selling new items. All sellers must complete a form and agree to only sell antiques and collectibles.”⁵⁰



Figure 2.16: Promotional materials for two R.G. Canning Attractions outdoor flea markets (the Rose Bowl Flea Market and the Ventura Flea Market) use a mustchioed White man in a straw hat vest, and bow tie to evoke a sense of American nostalgia that attempt to distinguish them from swap meets. Photo by author, 2015.

Precipitous declines in local tax revenues, following the 1978 passage of Proposition 13 by California voters, also drove swap meets into the parking lots of municipal stadia, public schools, and community colleges. Desperate for new funding sources in the face of unprecedented budget cuts, public institutions and agencies invited swap meet management firms to operate markets in their parking lots when their facilities were closed on weekends. Among the earliest to mitigate against the effects of the ballot initiative was Pasadena City College, which opened one of the region’s first community college swap meets in 1978. Within five years, the swap meet expanded from fifteen to 350 booths at its Sunday meet, generating \$50,000 per year for the college from its \$20 per day booth rental fees. Golden West College in Huntington Beach followed suit, opening a swap meet in 1979, which was netting \$100,000 annually by 1983.⁵¹

Enticed by these additional revenues, community college campus across the region and state added swap meets during the early 1980s.⁵² However, the relationship between swap meet operators and college administrators was uneasy. As one official in the California Community College

⁵⁰ Amber Berglund, “Veterans Stadium Antique Show Celebrates 20th Anniversary,” *The Downtown Gazette*, September 12, 2002.

⁵¹ Rich Connell, “Colleges, Scraping ‘Bottom of the Barrel,’ Try Swap Meets to Raise Money,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1983.

⁵² These campuses included Compton Community College, Harbor College, and Los Angeles City College.

chancellor's office remarked in 1983, the proliferation of swap meets in junior college parking lots was a tactic of last resort, which "just shows they're scraping the bottom of the barrel for funds."⁵³ Underscoring the discomfort felt by some public officials in hosting entrepreneurial activities in public facilities, this remark reveals one of many difficult moments in the shift away from fully funded state services toward a new era of chronic underfunding. As a *Los Angeles Times* reporter wrote in 1983, "some college officials admit they are uneasy about getting involved in a commercial venture with no direct relationship to education."⁵⁴ Nonetheless, feeling the pinch of neoliberal austerity, many community colleges reluctantly embraced swap meets during the early 1980s as a means of padding dwindling budgets.

Whether leasing public infrastructure or operating at the drive-in, both categories of firms coordinate the logistics for outdoor swap meets by leasing (or auctioning off) spaces to hundreds (and in some cases thousands) of vendors, operating concessions, providing security and sanitation services, developing advertising campaigns, and hiring live entertainers. In return, they rake in entrance fees, concession sales, and daily vendor rents, among other revenue streams.

Resistance to Outdoor Swap Meets

The growing number of outdoor swap meets, while beneficial to city governments and community college districts, did not come without friction. Given their large geographic footprint, riots of merchandise, and massive weekend crowds all coming together in view of passing motorists, these outdoor swap meets operated under high levels of public scrutiny. Unlike the markets held at drive-in theaters—which often were built on the urban edge far from residential neighbors—swap meets held in public parking lots drew the ire of neighboring residents. Across Southern California, citizens waged numerous battles against outdoor swap meets during the 1970s and 1980s, with community resistance generally focused on the quality of goods on sale, swap meet aesthetics, tax revenue, and the identities of swap meet shoppers themselves.

In the 1960s, outdoor swap meet operations were legally dubious within the City of Los Angeles. According to a 1970 *Los Angeles Times* article, the city placed onerous restrictions on the sale of used merchandise—the lifeblood of the outdoor markets. City codes, according to the *Times*, "make it impossible for meets to operate in the city. The city requires that used merchandise purchased for sale be reported to police and held for 21 days before going on the market. Second hand dealers are required by city codes to have a specific business address, a requirement impossible for swap meet sellers to meet."⁵⁵ Only in 1981, when the city law explicitly banning swap meets was nullified by a new state law which explicitly allowed them, did outdoor swap meets creep into Los Angeles. While "the police weren't too happy about" the prospect of "parking and traffic congestion [as well as] swap meets' reputation as havens for stolen or counterfeit goods," according to Police Detective Jim Wilke, they eventually realized that much of the merchandise carried at the outdoor markets consisted of new goods.⁵⁶

⁵³ Charlie Klein, aide to Chancellor Gerald C. Hayward, quoted in Connell, "Colleges, Scraping 'Bottom of the Barrel,' Try Swap Meets to Raise Money."

⁵⁴ Connell.

⁵⁵ W. B. Rood, "Conviviality, Profits and 'Good Vibes': Swap Meet Fans Wheel 'n' Deal," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1970, sec. OC1.

⁵⁶ Hanson, "Malls of Stalls - Swap Meets Become Big Business."

Proposition 13 Saves the Rose Bowl Flea Market

Nonetheless, outdoor swap meets carried a host of negative connotations well through the 1970s and 1980s. Even the most popular of today's outdoor swap meets—the Rose Bowl Flea Market—was met with vigorous resistance. A decade after it opened, residents upset with the noise and traffic congestion they associated with it successfully lobbied the City Board of Pasadena to revoke the market's operating contract with R.G. Canning in April of 1978. Flea market fans from around Southern California complained via letter and phone call in response.⁵⁷ Between hearings in May and November, 160 letters in support of the flea market and forty against were filed with the city clerk. Nearly all opposition came from residents of Pasadena, while only twenty eight letters were filed in support by city residents.⁵⁸

With its contract revoked, the Rose Bowl Flea Market's fortunes changed with the passage of Proposition 13 in on June 6, 1978. With property tax rates newly rolled back to 1975 levels, and tax increases allowable only at the rate of two percent per year (well below inflation), the city found itself facing a \$4 million budget deficit. In November of that year, the Pasadena city board, citing budget concerns, voted five to one to extend its contract with R.G. Canning. Citing Proposition 13, the city's mayor argued that the flea market had suddenly become a critical source of tax revenue in the face of Proposition 13 induced cuts, generating \$144,000 in tax receipts for the city in its first year.⁵⁹ Ironically shielded by Proposition 13 (which was made law with support from Los Angeles County residents), the Rose Bowl Flea Market has survived public opposition for decades in the name of contributing to city coffers.⁶⁰

City of Paramount vs. Paramount Swap Meet

The documented tax benefits at the Rose Bowl did not insulate other swap meets from tax revenue squabbles. In June of 1985, the Paramount City Council, believing it was missing out on significant tax revenue, passed an ordinance requiring the Paramount Swap Meet to pay a \$1 daily business license fee for each of its vendors, and vendors to pay a \$1 daily fee to the city.⁶¹ The swap meet owner Modern Development subsequently delayed paying what would amount to \$335,000 in fees until after the April 10, 1986 election, in which it spent \$80,000 on four opposition city council candidates who *opposed* the tax.⁶² Only after all four of its candidates lost, did the swap meet pay its back fees. Further resisting the ordinance, Modern Development then sued the City of Paramount in Los Angeles Superior Court, which also decided in favor of the city.⁶³

This struggle at the Paramount Swap Meet was but a prelude to larger efforts to rein in swap meet operators. In August of 1987, the California state Assembly Revenue and Taxation Committee approved legislation introduced by Senator Ralph C. Dills (D-Gardena) “to establish a pilot program

⁵⁷ Bert Mann, “Bowl Swap Meets Given 3 Months,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1979, sec. SG1.

⁵⁸ Mann.

⁵⁹ Mann.

⁶⁰ In June of 1979, the City of Pasadena board voted to extend RG Canning's operating contract for an additional three years. The new contract stipulated that the city would receive 20 percent of RG Canning's gross revenues for each event, and a minimum of \$2,000 if the event was rained out. “Pasadena OKs Swap Meets For Three More Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1979, sec. GB8.

⁶¹ Mark Gladstone, “Swap Meet Crackdown Bill Gains,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1987.

⁶² Lee Harris, “Swap Meet Goliath Spent \$80,000 in Election Fall,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1986.

⁶³ Gladstone, “Swap Meet Crackdown Bill Gains.”

to crack down on vendors who fail to pay state tax at swap meets and flea markets in Paramount and Compton.”⁶⁴ Although the program was first intended to be implemented statewide, opposition from the California Swap Meet Owners Association forced Dills to limit the bill’s jurisdiction to the cities of Paramount and Compton, which supported it. Within those cities, the bill empowered the State Board of Equalization to require swap meet owners to direct vendors to obtain sales permits and issue receipts. Although nine Board of Equalization inspectors were to be stationed at swap meets operating in both cities, enforcement was never rigorous, and the pilot program never expanded.

Matter Out of Place in El Cajon

While issues of taxation were the chief concern in some localities, in others, residents objecting to swap meet operations *themselves* prompted their governments to take regulatory action. In November of 1981, a small group of roughly fifty homeowners in El Cajon’s Bostonia neighborhood became fed up with weekend swap meets held at the Aero Drive-In. Although the theater and swap meet predated the nearby housing tract, its inhabitants vehemently objected to unpermitted vending, traffic, noise, and litter they associated with the meet. The residents, according to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, “complain that sellers, in their effort to get in line for choice positions on the drive-in parking lot, arrive at the gates as early as 3:30 a.m. on Sunday, the meet’s most popular day....The meet attracts so many people that late-comers park as far away as a mile—usually in front of homes—turning the usually quiet area into a ‘mob scene.’”⁶⁵ At a hearing on December 1, 1981, several property owners characterized swap meet patrons as “undesirables.” Jim Dore, a neighbor, exclaimed, “how would you like 350 undesirables in the vicinity of your home? People do urinate on our lawns. No one picks up the beer bottles on my grass.”⁶⁶ Milo Miles, another nearby property owner, further characterized swap meet patrons as dangerous. “I have been threatened by people who have attended the swap meet,” he remarked.⁶⁷

Additionally, residents objected to what they perceived to be lax regulations over vendor activities. El Cajon’s director of building and planning, Ray Henson, observed that “The swap meet operation is pretty much unbridled. It is unregulated the way it is run now,” with no restrictions on how many vendors can operate there. “It appears to us that as many people who wish can show up there and buy a selling space. And they absolutely fill the swap meet. Then the people who come to purchase items have to park in the neighborhood, leaving them no space within the swap meet confines.”⁶⁸ In the face of this opposition, swap meet owner Don Johnson recruited San Diego State University professor, Robert W. Winslow to conduct a resident opinion survey, which revealed that 65 percent of the 358 local residents polled favored the swap meet. Additionally, the “Save the Swap Meet Committee” collected 5,000 signatures from El Cajon residents who favor the swap meet.⁶⁹ Residents ultimately were successful in their lobbying efforts, convincing the city planning department to issue a conditional use permit that would mandate that the swap meet operator “regulate selling and parking,” by setting aside 150 parking spaces for swap meet patrons.⁷⁰ The swap meet site was ultimately redeveloped as housing in 2003.

⁶⁴ Gladstone.

⁶⁵ Montemayor, “Swap Meet in El Cajon Under Fire.”

⁶⁶ Richard Paddock, “Swap Meet Debate Heated in El Cajon,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1981.

⁶⁷ Paddock.

⁶⁸ Montemayor, “Swap Meet in El Cajon Under Fire.”

⁶⁹ Montemayor.

⁷⁰ Montemayor.

Swap Meet Prohibition Ballot Measure Passes in Carson

Perhaps anticipating similar struggles, City of Carson residents waged a political campaign to prevent a new outdoor swap meet from operating in their city. After the liberal three-person city council majority passed an ordinance allowing swap meets at Carson's drive-in movie theaters in January of 1983, a conservative former councilmember and a local activist named Joan Scholl placed Proposition A on the June 1983 ballot. The initiative, which would reverse the January ordinance, specifically asked voters whether West Los Angeles swap meet promoter Sun Recreation Corps could open a swap meet at Carson's South Bay Six Drive-In movie theater.

In the lead up to the election, Scholl framed the issue in local media coverage in terms of what Mary Douglas has termed "matter out of place." Stating that a swap meet would bring unwanted elements to Carson, including crime, traffic, and trash that she claimed to have observed at the nearby Long Beach Drive-In swap meet, Scholl, and conservatives like her, were concerned with preserving an image of order.⁷¹ Their concern with maintaining orderly aesthetics was probably about keeping out lower social classes and people of color. Liberals, on the other hand were less concerned with the aesthetics of order than they were with creating conditions favorable to small business owners. Carson's swap meet proponents were its liberal councilmembers, who were concerned with "defending the right of free enterprise, of any person to operate a business."⁷² Conservative concerns in El Cajon echo the preoccupations of chambers of commerce in early-twentieth century American downtowns, which Alison Isenberg has observed were less concerned with protecting free enterprise than they were with preserving a respectable *image* of "commercial dignity" for business districts and businesses.⁷³ After swap meet opponents spent \$20,000 and proponents \$60,000 on the initiative, voters defeated it, allowing the swap meet to remain.⁷⁴

Santa Ana: The Fight for Outdoor Swap Meets and Small Enterprise

Even more dramatically, residents in the Orange County seat of Santa Ana resisted swap meet operations on the basis of the crowds they attracted. Since 1979, swap meet operator Norton Western operated a swap meet at Eddie West Field under contract with the city. By 1986, the city earned roughly \$300,000 annually from the swap meet's operation.⁷⁵ When Norton Western established a new swap meet at Rancho Santiago College at the beginning of 1987, residents of the Washington Square neighborhood strenuously objected. Now sandwiched between the Eddie West Stadium and Rancho Santiago College swap meets, they complained that the cumulative impacts of two swap meets on their neighborhood were too onerous to bear. According to councilmember Dan Grisct, residents of the neighborhood felt that the stadium swap meet had "outgrown its site" and should leave the neighborhood.⁷⁶ By June of that year, a group of Santa Ana residents complained to the city council about too much noise, trash, and traffic, as well as parking problems at the Eddie West Field and

⁷¹ Mark Gladstone, "Carson Votes to Keep Swap Meets Out," *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1983.

⁷² Sylvia Muise, a liberal councilmember who backed the January ordinance, quoted in Gladstone.

⁷³ Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 42–77.

⁷⁴ \$40,000 of the funds in favor of the swap meet were donated by Jack McDonald, Sun Recreation's treasurer. See: Gladstone, "Carson Votes to Keep Swap Meets Out."

⁷⁵ Robert Schwartz, "Swap Meet Operator Says He'll Fight Santa Ana Order to Close," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1987.

⁷⁶ Bob Schwartz, "Santa Ana Pressured to Close Swap Meets," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1987.

Rancho Santiago College swap meets.⁷⁷ As nearby resident and president of the Washington Square Neighborhood Association contended, “I can hear the music they play over the loudspeakers during the day from my house....It’s not being regulated, and any other business would be under strict regulations.”⁷⁸

As the controversy unfolded, Norton Western president Richard Norton, perhaps cognizant of earlier resistance to outdoor swap meets elsewhere, vigorously responded to the concerns. Addressing neighbor complaints, he hired four security guards and crews to clean up the nearby neighborhood. He also organized a petition drive, collected 16,000 signatures from vendors and swap meet patrons in support of the swap meet. In newspaper interviews, he was outspoken, not only highlighting his swap meet’s tax contributions, but also lambasting homeowner politics rooted in xenophobic and racial fear. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a majority of “the 400 or so vendors at the Eddie West Field swap meet, along with the majority of the estimated 18,000 people who attend the meet each weekend are Latino.”⁷⁹ Norton thus asserted that complaints about his swap meet’s detrimental impacts on nearby neighborhoods were not only unfounded, but that “the bottom line is...*the neighbors are white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who don’t want Hispanics in the neighborhood.*”⁸⁰

Where other swap meet owners found themselves on the losing end of community resistance, Norton and his swap meets ultimately prevailed by further politicizing the issue. Prior to a July 6, 1987 city council meeting, Norton dramatically announced that he would challenge incumbent councilmember Daniel E. Griset in the November 1988 election. Expressing his belief that opponents to the swap meet were racist, he explained that he was running “as a statement to the Hispanic people that I intend to support them on all issues.”⁸¹ Perhaps in response, an overflow crowd of 600 people packed the Santa Ana city council chambers to debate the future of the two swap meets. A majority of the attendees were swap meet vendors, patrons, and supporters. As the *Los Angeles Times* reporter covering the meeting recounted, many in the crowd were “wearing black arm bands and toting small U.S. flags,” while others held signs with slogans such as “Mourn the Death of Free Enterprise” and “Swap Meets Feed Our Children.”⁸² Swap meet opponents, in marked contrast to the vendors, were predominantly White, and wore red white and blue lapel pins that identified each as a “voter.”⁸³

At the meeting, residents and swap meet vendors spoke in favor of the market. Santa Ana resident and Swap meet vendor Linda Mendoza explained that she depended on her swap meet business to support her three children. “Before you give your vote, please think of how many families will be hurt,” she said.⁸⁴ Councilmember John Acosta sided with swap meet proponents, implying that his own constituents were bigoted. “It takes a lot of courage to say what I’m going to say....[opposition to the swap meets] is purely a racist position by my people who live in the Washington Square neighborhood and north of 17th Street. Some of them told me that ‘The Mexicans are taking over,’ or that ‘We have to get rid of these people.’ Those kinds of things really make me sick.”⁸⁵

Although the council voted 5-2 to shut down both swap meets, with John Acosta and Miguel Pulido Jr. opposing the measure, Norton ended up having the last word. Although the city put an end to the Eddie West Stadium swap meet in September, the Rancho Santiago College swap meet

⁷⁷ Schwartz.

⁷⁸ Schwartz.

⁷⁹ Schwartz.

⁸⁰ Schwartz.

⁸¹ Bob Schwartz, “Crowd Packs Santa Ana City Hall to Debate Future of 2 Swap Meets,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1987.

⁸² Schwartz.

⁸³ Schwartz.

⁸⁴ Schwartz.

⁸⁵ Schwartz, “Swap Meet Operator Says He’ll Fight Santa Ana Order to Close.”

continued to operate under the auspices of the “Santiago Club,” a non-profit booster group.⁸⁶ In August, 27, 1987, Richard Norton filed suit in Orange County Superior Court seeking to allow his two swap meets to continue operating beyond the September 30th close date imposed by the Santa Ana City Council. In January of 1988, the Orange County Superior court struck down the city’s order to close both swap meets and operations resumed.⁸⁷ While Norton lost the November 1988 election, he ended up being elected to the council anyway, winning an April 1989 special election to replace councilmember Dan Young.⁸⁸

By 1987, as we will see in Chapter 3, a flood of indoor swap meets had opened in Los Angeles and Orange Counties since the Valley Indoor Swap Meet opened in 1983. In Santa Ana, the struggles over Norton’s outdoor swap meets appear to have prompted the opening of Orange County’s first indoor swap meet. In an article published in the *Orange County Register* a week after the Santa Ana city council meeting, reporter Gina DePaola identified indoor swap meets as a potential solution to the outdoor swap meet controversy. Taking out a ten-year lease on a 2,500 square foot building at 3412 Westminster Ave in Santa Ana, she writes that Jae Shim, “a former vendor at swap meets in Santa Ana and Orange,” had recently opened a “swap mall.”⁸⁹ The Santa Ana Mini Mall, which initially held 100 vendors and still exists, was deemed an acceptable alternative to outdoor swap meets by the city’s planning manager, Melanie Fallon. “Because the Westminster Avenue meet will be indoors and have on-site parking,” she contended, “it will not cause the same problems.”⁹⁰

As I document in Chapter 5, indoor swap meets elsewhere were not immune from local criticism. But many did manage to avoid the kind of aesthetic complaints and xenophobic protests leveled against their outdoor counterparts. The “matter out of place” baldly visible in parking lots given over to ephemeral outdoor bazaars was neatly tucked behind building walls. By the 1980s, as limited opportunities presented themselves for new outdoor swap meets to open amidst surging demand, indoor swap meets looked like an increasingly attractive alternative to would-be operators, as large vacant industrial and commercial buildings became available in abundance.

A Long Island Import?

“Markets have run the gamut from the Orchard Street push carts to the modern department store...and the minimall seems a natural evolution. I’m not saying that it will replace the department store, but it definitely will offer a more exotic way of shopping as well as an enterprising way to earn a living.”

— Sid Feldman of Feldman Brothers, the developers of Yesterday’s Square, quoted in 1975⁹¹

⁸⁶ Under a 1988 agreement, the club agreed to pay 20% of vendor receipts back to the college, with Norton Western continuing as operator.

⁸⁷ John Spano, “Santa Ana Loses Lawsuit to Stop Swap Meets,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1988.

⁸⁸ In the November 1988 election, Norton was defeated by Dan Grisct, “a 7 year incumbent and former mayor...in a particularly vituperative race.” See: Bob Schwartz, “Santa Ana Vote Means Little Has Changed,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1988, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-11-10/local/me-82_1_santa-ana. In a five-way race, Norton garnered 26% of the vote in the April 1989 special election, beating favorite Lyle Overby, who was backed by mayor Dan Young and mayor pro tem John Acosta. See: Bob Schwartz, “Swap Meet Operator Wins Santa Ana Race,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1989, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-04-05/local/me-1071_1_swap-meet-operator.

⁸⁹ Gina DePaola, “Santa Ana Swap Meets to Make a Move Inside,” *Orange County Register*, July 16, 1987.

⁹⁰ Melanie Fallon, quoted in DePaola.

⁹¹ Monica Surfaro, “Minimalls Making L.I. Retail Scene,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1975.

“We see the flea market as a return to the mom-and-pop stores of a bygone era....First there were the pushcarts and the mom-and-pop-type operations. Then there were the department stores, then the discount houses, and now we've come full cycle.”

— Jay Factor, manager of the flea market at the Roosevelt Raceway on Long Island, New York

On the other side of the country a precursor to Southern California’s indoor swap meets had taken root as early as 1974. Real estate brokers, seeking new uses for abandoned grocery and department stores in New York’s Long Island and New Jersey suburbs, began subdividing the stores into antiques “minimalls,” indoor market halls, and indoor flea markets. Repurposing large (60,000 to 100,000 square feet) and in many cases relatively new buildings whose previous tenants were felled by a wave of department store bankruptcies during the mid-1970s and 1980s, local real estate investors saw an opening for smaller retail concepts in a market tired of conventional department stores.⁹² In the concept’s early years, developers inoculated themselves against potentially negative community perceptions by shrouding themselves in an armature of nostalgia for the turn of the twentieth century United States. With names like Old Towne Village, Yesterday’s Square, and Shop Village, “minimalls” purportedly dealing in antiques also dealt in discount merchandise. By the early 1980’s, newer entrants to this growing retail sector eventually settled on the more descriptive term of “indoor flea market” (Figure 2.17)



Figure 2.17: Tri-County Flea Market exterior. Constructed in 1955 as Mays Department Store. Levittown, New York. Photo by author, 2019.

In 1974 and 1975, at least three gay nineties-themed antiques malls opened in repurposed buildings in the New York suburbs of East Setauket, West Babylon, and Levittown, at once

⁹² Ellen Mitchell, “Flea Markets Set Critics Hopping,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1982; Robin Young Roe, “Flea Market Fought,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1980; Alan S. Oser, “Real Estate; Refilling Abandoned L.I. Stores,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1980; Surfaro, “Minimalls Making L.I. Retail Scene.”

challenging and reinforcing the ideals with which these communities had been founded.⁹³ In Levittown—the quintessential post-war blue collar suburb—the Feldman Brothers in 1975 converted the town’s 90,000 square-foot Great Eastern Discount Department Store into an antiques “minimall” called Yesterday’s Square. Housing 350 10-foot by 15-foot shops, the enclosed “mall” provided space for artisans including leather workers and glass blowers as well as first-time vendors selling commodities from apparel to carpet.⁹⁴

Anticipating by several years the expensive and high profile festival marketplaces that opened during and after the United States bicentennial, early indoor flea markets responded to similar desires for an authentic sense of place by cultivating an aesthetic of novelty and nostalgia in repurposed buildings. Like the Rouse Company’s themed redevelopments of Boston’s Faneuil Hall (1976), Baltimore’s Harborplace (1980), and New York’s South Street Seaport (1983), indoor flea market developers on the east coast channeled a similar nostalgic impulse by branding their projects as antiques malls designed to rejuvenate declining commercial centers. Less ideologically ambitious than their up-market and urban counterparts, and financed with only modest investment capital from local sources, developments like Old Towne Village and Yesterday’s Square allowed for a less controlled and more spontaneous shopping experience than could be found in the suburban department store.⁹⁵ Filled with micro entrepreneurs, indoor flea markets downsized and diversified the shopping experience in ways the Rouse Company only later achieved through trial and error.⁹⁶ Indeed, the Rouse Company introduced pushcarts and other forms of micro vending to its Faneuil Hall Bull Market, only after it had failed to fully lease the space upon its opening in 1976.⁹⁷

“Festival marketplaces” for everyday suburbanites, antiques malls and indoor flea markets opened in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut suburbs of New York City, filling vacant buildings including those cast off by local department store chains hit by bankruptcy in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁸ In 1982, the *New York Times* noted thirteen indoor “antiques malls” and two “indoor flea markets” in a local interest story on the topic.⁹⁹ These were increasingly joined by a growing number of “indoor flea markets,” which lacked overtly nostalgic theming. The Tri-County Flea Market is characteristic of this new class of retailer. Opening its first branch in 1982 after acquiring a recently-shuttered Levittown branch of the struggling Mays department store chain, the Tri-County Flea Market to this day features vendors selling a broad range of merchandise on the building’s three levels. In the basement and first floor, a “bazaar” of vendor stalls offered a mix of used and new goods, while the second floor was dedicated entirely to a jewelry exchange, which today claims to be the largest in Long Island (Figures 2.17 and 2.18).¹⁰⁰

⁹³ The first of these was Old Towne Village, which opened in East Setauket in 1974. Shop Village and Yesterday’s Square opened in West Babylon and Levittown, respectively, in 1975. See Surfaro, “Minimalls Making L.I. Retail Scene.”

⁹⁴ Surfaro.

⁹⁵ One exception is the Port Haven Shopping Center development, which gave over 50,000 square feet of a former Billy Blake department store to a branch of Brent Discount Stores with financing from a joint venture between industrial designer Jarvis Lamson and a Bahamas-based investment company, Deltec Pan America S.A.. See Oser, “Real Estate; Refilling Abandoned L.I. Stores.”

⁹⁶ Jon Goss, “Disquiet on the Waterfront: Reflections on Nostalgia and Utopia in the Urban Archetypes of Festival Marketplaces,” *Urban Geography* 17, no. 3 (April 1, 1996): 221–47; John Metzger, “The Failed Promise of a Festival Marketplace: South Street Seaport,” *Planning Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2001): 25–46.

⁹⁷ Goss, “Disquiet on the Waterfront,” 233.

⁹⁸ Mitchell, “Flea Markets Set Critics Hopping.”

⁹⁹ See the map of “Town-by-Town Key to the Flea Market Map,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1982, C1 edition.

¹⁰⁰ Mays—not to be confused with May Department Stores or The May Company—opened its 160,000 square foot Levittown branch in 1955. See “Mays in Levittown: Brooklyn Store Plans to Open Branch There Next Year,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1954. See also:



Figure 2.18: Tri-County Flea Market interior. Photo by author, 2019.

It was this type of indoor flea market that inspired Glenn Malkin to bring the concept to Los Angeles. A one-time concessionaire of jewelry counters in west coast Sears stores, Malkin was well-positioned to recognize indoor flea markets as an extremely lucrative business model. On a 1982 trip to renegotiate his contract in New York, he saw this emergent retailing phenomenon for the first time. After a day of meetings in which it became clear that his Sears contract might end, he took a drive through southern Long Island to sightsee. As a visitor visiting Long Island for the first time, it is likely he was curious to understand how the local retailing scene compared to that in Southern California. Malkin remembers that,

I saw this department store that had been closed, and converted to a flea market. And I said, ‘let’s go in there!’ So I went in there and it was not the way that California did flea markets. There was no food, there was no music, there was just vendors and public. And I came back, and I’d talked to a bunch of vendors there, asked them what they paid, etc. etc., and I talked to my two partners, and I asked them, ‘What am I missing? These guys are paying \$4 per square foot per month, and the rent’s like 50 cents. That’s a big spread, somebody’s missing something here.’ But we weren’t!!¹⁰¹

This stand-alone department store—which Malkin recalls was formerly a Mays branch—was either the Tri-County Flea Market in Levittown, the Busy Bee department store in Massapequa, or a similar such outlet.¹⁰² Intrigued by the prospect of exiting the national department store business, he

¹⁰¹ Malkin, Personal Interview.

¹⁰² Malkin notes in a July 25, 2017 email that the building he saw was “an old stand alone May Dept. store (not May Company)”. See also Michael Winerip, “Our Towns; Art on Demand: A Quick Pastel At the Busy Bee,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/23/nyregion/our-towns-art-on-demand-a-quick-pastel-at-the-busy-bee.html?mcubz=0>.

began speaking with two high school friends about opening Southern California's first indoor swap meet in Sepulveda.

Conclusion: The Outdoor Swap Meet Moves Indoors

When Malkin opened the Valley Indoor Swap Meet, it remedied—albeit unintentionally—several of the problems of the outdoor swap meet retail model. By the 1980s, the land upon which many drive-in theaters were built was ripe for redevelopment. Hemmed in by surrounding subdivisions, assailed by neighborhood protests, and sitting on increasingly valuable land, numerous drive-ins and the swap meets that operated within them were given over to new uses.¹⁰³

Moving the popular markets indoors held other advantages. As Anne Hamilton, publisher of *Swap Meet Merchandising*, later observed, “open-air is saturated....It’s easier to work indoors because the vendors, especially the immigrants, tend to be more permanent nowadays and they can leave their stalls and their goods overnight. Outdoors they have to take it down everything and set up at 6 in the morning. That’s a pain.”¹⁰⁴ A further advantage of the indoor markets was their protection from the sun and heat.¹⁰⁵



Figure 2.19: The Thomas Organ Company factory pictured on company letterhead, circa 1950s. The building would be repurposed as the Valley Indoor Swap Meet in 1983.

Perhaps above all else, indoor swap meets became easier than outdoor swap meets to build. Unlike the large parcels of land required for outdoor meets, large vacant buildings were increasingly plentiful amidst the region's deindustrialization and economic restructuring. When Malkin and his business partners began scouting sites for their version of New York's indoor flea markets, they had their choice of any number of shuttered department store buildings and industrial facilities. Hailing from Woodland Hills, they scouted close to home, eventually settling on the former Thomas Organ factory (Figure 2.19). Heralded by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “modernly streamlined” structure of innovative “tilt-up concrete slab construction” when it opened in 1954, the building was deemed

¹⁰³ As Pacific Theaters Vice President and president of the Theatre Association of California Robert Selig put it, drive-ins are “impressive assemblages of land—12 acres or more—that are very well located at the confluence of freeways and arterial highways.” In the mid-1980s, several articles in the *Los Angeles Times* covering Pacific Theaters' conversion of their drive-in theaters into new uses. One such article detailed plans to convert a theater in San Pedro to self-storage facilities. See: Ryon, “Drive-In Theater to Play Other Role.”

¹⁰⁴ Anne Hamilton, quoted in Hanson, “Malls of Stalls - Swap Meets Become Big Business.”

¹⁰⁵ In a 1984 article touting the rise of the “new and popular marketplace” model that “is fast becoming a tradition across the country,” the *Los Angeles Times* was among the first to observe that they were moving indoors, noting that “A new trend is to hold them indoors to avoid the heat.” See: Jerry Berns, “Area Swap Meets Bring Out the Weekend Crowds,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1984.

obsolete and abandoned by the Whirlpool Corporation by the early 1980s.¹⁰⁶ Like many shuttered manufacturing plants of the era, the building languished for several years before Metropolitan Marketing leased it. In mid-1983, they subdivided it into a vast market hall with 500 small vendor stalls ready to open in August.

Following the Valley Indoor Swap Meet's successful opening day, Metropolitan Marketing staved off eviction for several months, before locating an empty aerospace facility Woodland Hills at 6345 Variel Ave.. In April of 1984, the swap meet moved all of its vendors to the new location, while the building's owners opened the Van Nuys Indoor Swap Meet, an apparent facsimile of the original enterprise. Although the latter swap meet remained in business for 10 more years, it struggled to find new tenants, and went out of business when the owner's nephew (Jack Bortnick) was caught embezzling company funds.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, the Valley Indoor Swap Meet grew aggressively. In need of buildings capable of accommodating its 600 vendors as well as a parking lot big enough for large numbers of customer *and* vendor vehicles, Malkin and his colleagues found that an ideal building type was becoming available—even plentiful—in the San Fernando Valley: the aerospace plant. Amidst a wave of plant closures as the Cold War wound down, these facilities were becoming broadly available in the area.

Within a two-year period, the Valley Indoor Swap Meet occupied two former aerospace facilities, both in Woodland Hills. When its first Woodland Hills home was displaced by a Pace Warehouse Club in 1986, the swap meet moved into its permanent home a few blocks away. This time, the swap meet was housed within a former home of electronics and aerospace giant, Litton Industries, which had assembled components of the Apollo spacecraft on site (Figure 2.20). There it existed for 23 years, until the land was sold and redeveloped as condominiums. The appeal of both locations was twofold: they had large parking lots that left plentiful space for customers after hundreds of vendors parked their vehicles, and their vast interiors were conducive to the informal construction and configuration of plywood vendor booths.



Figure 2.20: Valley Indoor Swap Meet housed in the former Litton Industries plant in Woodland Hills, circa 1990s. Photo courtesy of Glenn Malkin.

¹⁰⁶ LA Times Staff, "Million Dollar Television Plant Opened in Valley."

¹⁰⁷ Malkin, Personal Interview.

In its final home, the colloquially-known “Woodland Hills Swap Meet” established itself as a financially lucrative enterprise and a beloved community institution known for its weekend entertainment. The formula proved lucrative. In 1987, Glenn Malkin disclosed that Metropolitan Marketing—the operator of the Woodland Hills swap meet—had earned a “\$1 million profit on \$4 million in vendor rentals, food concessions and admission fees,” with its vendors likely grossing \$50 million.¹⁰⁸ High demand for vendor spaces ensured an uninterrupted cash flow and a stable business model. In 1987, Malkin claimed that “thousands of vendors are on a waiting list for any stalls that become vacant,” a list which likely grew once the swap meet transitioned from weekend-only to six days per week operations.¹⁰⁹

Having established a successful business model, the Metropolitan Marketing team expanded quickly. In April of 1986, it acquired a former Orbach’s department store in Panorama City, and in October it acquired a former Sears in Pomona’s Indian Valley Mall.¹¹⁰ In 1987, they even expanded to northern California, opening a Valley Indoor Swap Meet in Santa Clara, however, the lack of a garment district in the Bay Area made it nearly impossible for apparel vendors to stock products and electronics suppliers couldn’t move product fast enough to survive. The Valley Indoor Swap Meet’s two remaining locations in Pomona (1986) and Panorama City draw thousands of customers to their locations within repurposed department stores. They remain two of the largest indoor swap meets in Southern California, patronized by a diverse group of customers (Figures 2.21 and 2.22).

The case of the Valley Indoor Swap Meet demonstrates how an extreme factory makeover marked the birth of a new retail form just as it epitomized the region’s deindustrialization. To the swap meet’s owners, their swap meet’s impressive opening day foreshadowed the viability of a business model that would soon sweep across Southern California. In the process, indoor swap meets would offer stable employment opportunities to tens of thousands of immigrant entrepreneurs, as I describe in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁸ Hanson, “Malls of Stalls - Swap Meets Become Big Business.”

¹⁰⁹ Hanson.

¹¹⁰ Orbach’s fell victim to rising competition in the department store sector during the 1980’s, namely discounters and the consolidation of regional department store chains. When the Netherlands-based Amcena Corporation purchased the Howland-Steinbach-Hochschild, department store chain, which included Orbachs stores in its portfolio in June 1986, it announced plans to close Orbach’s 12 remaining department store locations that same month. East Coast stores were converted to Steinbach department stores. Amcena announced plans to sell/liquidate its six West Coast stores Andrea Adelson, “Orbach’s Holds a Sale on Entire Stores,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, August 25, 1986.



Figure 2.21: Pomona's Valley Indoor Swap Meet, opened within the former Sears Roebuck building at the Indian Hills Mall in 1986. Photo by author, 2015.



Figure 2.22: Panorama City's Valley Indoor Swap Meet, opened within a recently-shuttered Orbach's department store in 1986. Photo by author, 2015.

Chapter 3: Swap Meet Dreams: Immigrant Entrepreneurship and the Korean Swap Meet Boom, 1983-1992

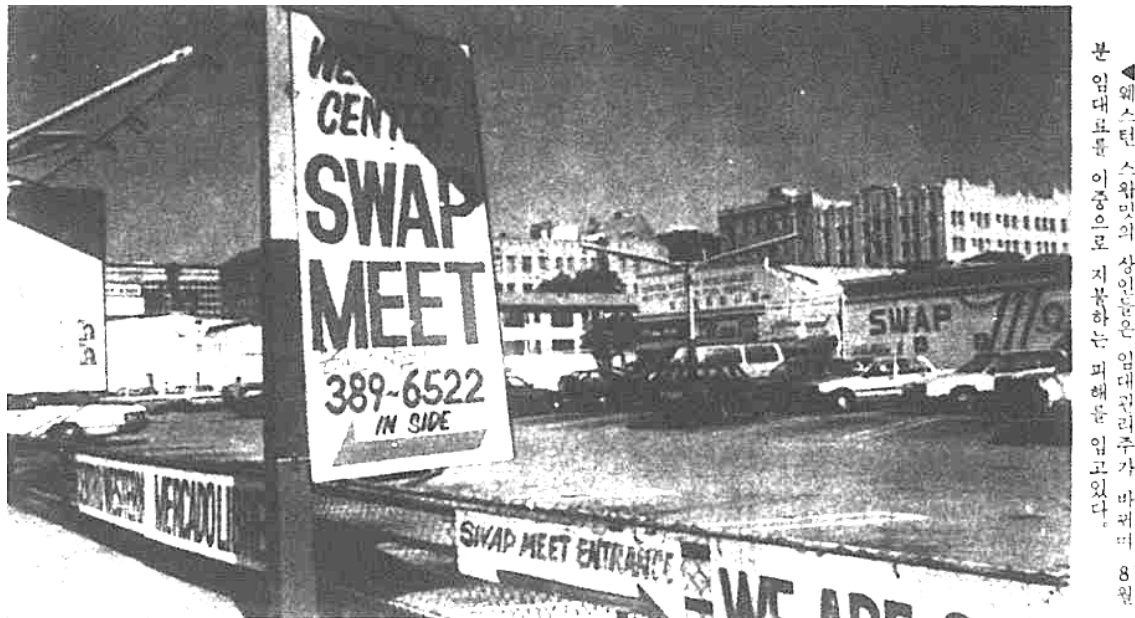


Figure 3.1: Western Swap Meet pictured in a 1985 *Korea Times* article.¹

In November of 1983, just months after the Valley Indoor Swap Meet's successful debut in the San Fernando Valley, Choi Seung-hyun leased a vacant car dealership at the intersection of 9th and Western Avenue and opened the Western Swap Meet (Figure 3.1).² Within the 10,000 square foot one-time auto showroom, he erected roughly eighty small vendor booths (Figure 3.2).³ These micro-modules proved advantageous to would-be vendors for several reasons. First, unlike expensive brick and mortar storefronts, the booths were available for modest monthly subleases of \$200 to \$400. Including utilities, professional security, and climate control—convenient and cost-saving amenities absent in traditional storefronts—these ready-to-go units were a bargain for tenants and lucrative for the swap meet operator. Adding to the appeal for swap meet vendors was the fact that nearly all of the booths would be leased to fellow Koreans. With limited English language abilities, the presence of other recent immigrants promised a comfortable and relatively sociable work environment. Third, like a shopping mall, the swap meet's diverse businesses—from men's and women's clothing to gifts and electronics—would ostensibly funnel a higher volume of foot traffic than street front and strip mall real estate. Moreover, the modularity of the vendor booths empowered merchants to expand and contract their selling spaces with changing economic conditions. During busy periods, vendors would be able to lease several contiguous booths at a time and remove the partitions (typically either moveable fiberboard or metal grates) that separated them. During economic downturns, shopkeepers

¹ Staff, "Swap Meet: A Dispute Over Rent," *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, November 14, 1985.

² On a 1951 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, the building was home to the North Star Auto Wash, with two buildings behind it to the east: One marked "Auto Sales & Service," and another marked "Auto Repair Garage and Paint Garage." In a 1979 aerial photo, the entire block seems to have been taken over by the car sales lot. See: La Chul-sam, "Indoor Swap Meet BOOM: Little capital, Popular among Koreans," *The Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, November 2, 1985, University of Southern California - Microfilm. Staff, "Swap Meet: A Dispute Over Rent."

³ Most indoor swap meet booths are 10 feet by 10 feet in size.

in turn could scale back their floor area by leasing fewer booths. This ebb and flow meant that Choi's swap meet—once fully occupied—had roughly fifty tenants operating out of eighty booths.

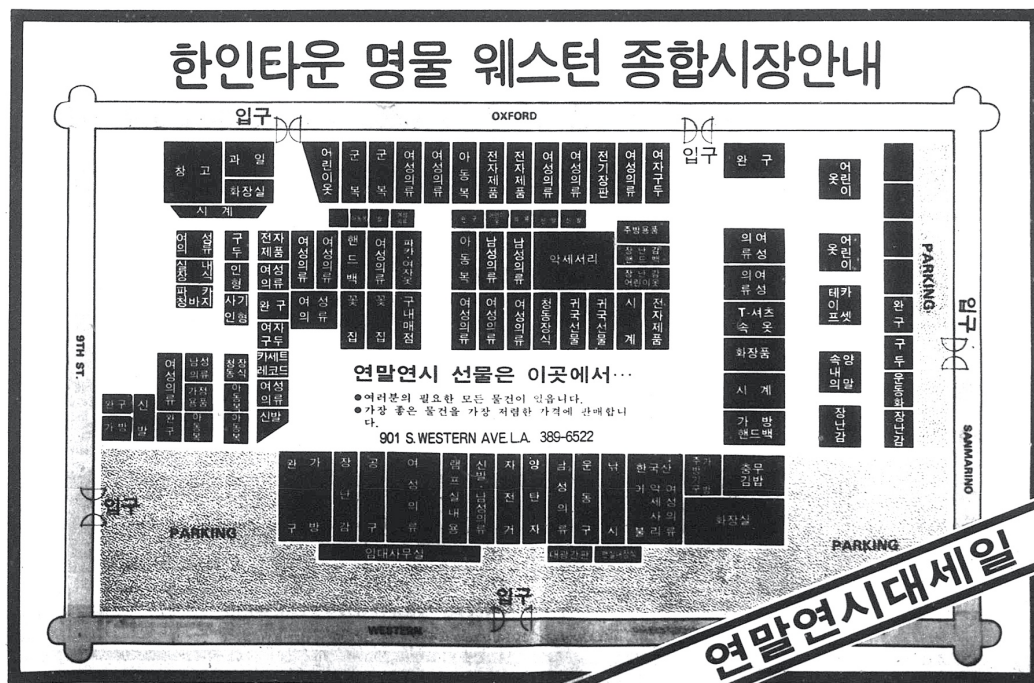


Figure 3.2: Western Swap Meet floorplan as depicted in a January 8, 1985 advertisement in the *Korea Times*.

After the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act abolished the immigrant quota system, Koreans migrated to the United States in growing numbers, and Greater Los Angeles was one of the chief destination cities.⁴ By 1980, 74,130 Korean-born individuals had moved to the region, and that number more than doubled to 194,182 by 1990.⁵ Few of these early migrants arrived with sufficient financial or social capital to enable them to secure a white-collar job.⁶ Therefore, during the 1970s and 80s, many Korean immigrants turned to entrepreneurship. Some opened businesses in Koreatown, which had recently shifted to the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue from its earlier

⁴ After the Korean War (1950-1953) and before 1965, many Koreans migrated to Europe, Latin America, and under certain conditions the United States. Brazil, for instance, recruited Korean migrants during the early 1960s to “open” new agricultural lands; however, most quickly moved to cities such as São Paulo, where they carved out a significant entrepreneurial niche in textile manufacturing. At roughly 50,000 individuals in 2005, Brazil’s population of individuals of Korean descent became the largest in Latin America. See: Ernesto Friedrich Amaral and Wilson Fusco, “Shaping Brazil: The Role of International Migration” (Migration Policy Institute, June 1, 2005), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/shaping-brazil-role-international-migration>. After the Brazilian government blocked further migration from Korea during the 1970s, Korean emigrants increasingly chose to move to other Latin American countries and the United States.

⁵ The growth in Greater Los Angeles’s Korean-born population was significant: Between 1980 and 1990, it outpaced the region’s overall population growth by 135 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau did not issue nativity statistics for Korean-born individuals prior to 1980. For the number of Korean-born individuals in the five county Greater Los Angeles area, see the U.S. Census Bureau Summary File 3 for 1980 and 1990. This data is available at Steven Manson, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, and Steven Ruggles. IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 12.0 [Database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 2017. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D050.V12.0>

⁶ Before 1979, Korean law prevented migrants from taking more than \$2,000 per adult and \$1,000 per child out of the country. Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 109.

location in Exposition Park. In this new immigrant enclave, a growing Korean population offered amenities and services useful to those lacking the English language skills necessary to access mainstream business and social networks. A robust niche economy formed within a matter of years, offering economic opportunities to newly-arrived Korean immigrants, especially in the wholesale and retail sectors. The *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition* summarized this process, observing that “the typical immigrant fresh from the motherland heads straight for the beacon of Koreatown....With little cash, little English, and little knowledge of the American way of life, most of these immigrants set up small businesses in Koreatown—usually swapmeets or other ‘mom and pop’ operations.”⁷

The Western Swap Meet, while the second such bazaar to operate in Los Angeles, was the first of many that were Korean-owned. Choi, a recent émigré from Korea, helped to catalyze this phenomenon by siting his swap meet near the heart of Los Angeles’s newly-emerging Koreatown. As a new cultural and economic crossroads, the district had in recent years swelled with Korean businesses, residents, and shoppers. This influx contributed to ballooning retail rents as well as fierce competition between mom and pop vendors, which created a difficult retailing environment for would-be shop owners. With modestly-proportioned and affordable vendor booths, the indoor swap meet offered a solution to these problems (Figure 3.3). Because information about the swap meet circulated widely in the Korean-language press, the market type was widely emulated by Korean entrepreneurs.



Figure 3.3: An African American man visits a Korean-owned jeweler at an unspecified indoor swap meet. Source: November 2, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times*. Korean-language photo caption reads: “An average size of a booth is 100 sq. ft. It’s small but you can be a merchant with less than \$10,000, so many people are coming to indoor swap meets.”⁸

⁷ Joan Jie-Eun Kim, “Homing in on the American Dream;” *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, November 7, 1990.

⁸ La Chul-sam, “Indoor Swap Meet BOOM.” Translation by Mili Yoon.

In the ensuing two years, droves of Korean entrepreneurs followed Choi's lead. By November of 1985, the *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition* published a Korean-language article heralding an "indoor swap meet boom," fueled by Korean immigrants who had opened at least thirty such bazaars across Greater Los Angeles.⁹ Ranging in size from repurposed storefronts with fewer than ten booths to vast, multi-level buildings containing over 600, indoor swap meets were prominently acknowledged within the Korean language press as major employers of Korean immigrants. By 1985, somewhere between 1,500 and 2,250 mom-and-pop micro retailers already had made the transition from employee to business owner under a swap meet roof, with thousands more to follow.¹⁰

Building an Intercultural Commons

Los Angeles's booming Korean immigrant population, combined with their strong propensity to become entrepreneurs fueled the indoor swap meet boom. Utilizing ethnic networks and institutions, Koreans constructed, funded, staffed, and stocked the bazaars. Although owners and vendors of other backgrounds also participated in the sector, Koreans accounted for at least 60 percent of indoor swap meet operators and a vast majority of vendors by 1992.¹¹ Together, they integrated design ideas from varied cultural heritages and developed a new and hybrid retail type. Unlike the gas stations, grocery stores, liquor stores, dry cleaners, and other retail niches dominated by Korean entrepreneurs, indoor swap meets were a *new* sector introduced and popularized by Koreans. Loosely regulated, they became quasi-public social spaces in many communities and places of possibility. As people of myriad backgrounds and ethnicities worked together, shopped together, and relaxed together, they built new social and material cultures informed by their intercultural encounters.¹² This chapter examines the activities of a range of Korean actors and institutions involved in constructing these spaces.¹³ In building the indoor swap meet, these actors not only sought to create "alternative opportunity structures" designed to assist in the pursuit of a "Korean American Dream," they also built a non-white public commons that served as a space of relational racialization and citizenship claim-making.¹⁴

The opening of the Western Swap Meet marked the beginning of this ethnic economic niche. By lowering barriers to small business ownership for Koreans lacking financial and English language skills, swap meets served as ladders to financial and social stability for immigrant entrepreneurs facing blocked economic mobility.¹⁵ Supportive industries controlled by Korean entrepreneurs, including garment industries and ethnic banks, assisted with the growth of the sector.

⁹ La Chul-sam. In this chapter, the term "Greater Los Angeles" is synonymous with the U.S. Census Bureau's "Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA Combined Statistical Area," which includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura Counties.

¹⁰ This very rough 1985 estimate is based on an average of 100 to 150 booths per swap meet, derived from the 1990 *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*. Because many swap meet vendors lease multiple booths, I've divided the estimated number of booths by two and multiplied that by the thirty swap meets the *Korea Times* claimed were operating in 1985. See: La Chul-sam.

¹¹ Of the 129 swap meets operating during this period, I located management information for 55 of them. Of these, 34 were either owned or managed by individuals with Korean surnames, or approximately 62 percent. In 1992, at least 94 indoor swap meets that had opened since 1983 remained in operation.

¹² I discuss these cultures in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

¹³ These include business associations, churches, newspapers, banks, and garment wholesalers and manufacturers.

¹⁴ Kyeyoung Park, *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Howard E. Aldrich and Roger Waldinger, "Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship," *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990): 114–15.

Securing financial security through hard work was a central plank of what Kyeyoung Park calls the “Korean American Dream.” Park defines this dream in terms of *anjong*, a Korean concept which roughly translates to “stability” or “security.”¹⁶ In the United States, Korean immigrants followed different paths to *anjong* than they might have in Korea, where academic and professional occupations are venerated. In contrast, Koreans in the United States incorporated an American respect for small business ownership into a definition of the “Korean American Dream” that also emphasized marriage, home ownership in “good” middle- and upper-class suburbs, child rearing, facilitating the migration of family members from Korea to the United States, and sending children to college.¹⁷ Vendors echoed these values in my conversations with them, which drifted away from their businesses to their children, home lives, and favored hobbies. Operating a swap meet or a swap meet business was a means to achieve these ends.

However, indoor swap meets were more than mere places to make money; they were also unintended sites of intercultural encounter. “Middlemen minorities” in a capitalist system defined by systemic racism and underinvestment in the neighborhoods they served, many Korean entrepreneurs found their dreams tainted by conflict with some customers.¹⁸ Because Korean entrepreneurs tended to open businesses in low income communities of color far from their suburban residences, they exposed themselves to allegations of absentee ownership, economically extractive business practices, and insufficient cultural competency by African American patrons. Thrust into this position, as were Jewish and Japanese shop owners before them, swap meet vendors found themselves “caught in the middle,” between White power structures and disenfranchised African American customers.¹⁹

The spatial diffuseness of Korean residential settlement in Greater Los Angeles exacerbated this perception. Because Korean immigrants largely settled directly in middle class suburban locales across Los Angeles and Orange Counties rather than clustering in enclaves near their places of business, they were removed from their customers by physical distance as well as social class. Forging ethnic “communities without propinquity” through a constellation of religious and cultural institutions as well as newspapers and telecommunications technologies, Korean immigrants built strong social and business networks across considerable regional distance.²⁰ Enjoying the privilege of automobility, Korean immigrants moved widely across the urban expanse between these institutions to meet, socialize, and share business information amongst each other in churches, social clubs, and places of business.²¹ Spending long hours in their booths near fellow Korean vendors was one way swap meet entrepreneurs maintained ethnic ties. On the job, Korean vendors relied on each other to navigate the

¹⁶ Park, *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City*, 3.

¹⁷ Park, 3–4.

¹⁸ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Edward Taehan Chang, “Jewish and Korean Merchants in African American Neighborhoods: A Comparative Perspective,” *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 2 (1993): 5–21. Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in the New York and Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁰ Wilbur Zelinsky and Barrett Lee call this phenomenon “heterolocalism.” In opposition to the concepts of assimilation and ethnic pluralism, which alternatively stress the shedding and maintenance of cultural identities in a host society, “heterolocalism” describes how ethnic groups may reside in a dispersed manner while preserving cultural characteristics over physical distance with the aid of transportation and communications technologies. In localities across the United States, Korean immigrants have repeatedly established such “communities without propinquity,” defined by diffuse residential settlement patterns, loose clusters of Korean-owned and -oriented businesses, and strong ethnic institutions. See: Wilbur Zelinsky and Barrett A. Lee, “Heterolocalism: An Alternative Model of the Sociospatial Behaviour of Immigrant Ethnic Communities,” *International Journal of Population Geography* 4, no. 4 (1998): 285.

²¹ This privilege was not always enjoyed by swap meet customers, many of whom traveled there via transit or on foot. Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

complexities of social difference and cultural gaps with their customers using a shared language. These conversations often spilled onto the pages of the *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*.

This economy, although constructed as an ethnic niche by Koreans, was almost from its inception designed to serve Latinx and African American customers. I argue that Korean entrepreneurs developed an understanding that Latinx and Black were ideal for swap meets, and then consciously *chose* to do business in them. While motivated by a desire to make money, they filled a vacuum left behind by reactionary disinvestment by corporate as well as Japanese and Jewish small business owners following the 1965 Watts Rebellion.

Operating in virtually every low-income neighborhood across Southern California, indoor swap meets also served as sites of inter-ethnic encounter. Almost completely devoid of White vendors and shoppers, they became important sites of “relational racialization,” a process of articulating racial identity in the absence of Whiteness and in the presence of “othered” races and ethnicities.²² Numerous swap meets across the region evolved into vibrant public realms within which vendors and customers of myriad identities asserted their right to the city and claimed urban citizenship.²³ Whereas I discuss the implications of these overlaps in Chapters 4 through 6, here I examine the logics and the mechanisms by which swap meet operators “set the stage” for this phenomenon by deliberately expanding into predominantly African American and Latinx communities.

Building indoor swap meets and selling at them not only constituted a means of subsistence, but also a process of “city-making” in which Korean immigrants built economic, political, and social stakes in 1980s and 1990s Los Angeles. I argue that swap meet building was the basis for the consolidation of financial wealth and political power for thousands of mostly Korean immigrant entrepreneurs. Wielding the capital accrued through swap meet entrepreneurship for a range of purposes from the philanthropic to the political, some vendors found the swap meet a tool for cultivating claims of social and political membership within society writ large. Within a neoliberal governance structure, which Aihwa Ong claims judges the citizenship worthiness of immigrants in terms of self-sufficiency and economic power, swap meets were instrumental in cultural citizenship claim-making.²⁴

As material objects, swap meets and the goods within them reflected and shaped an emerging hybrid vision of a multiethnic society. As with the “Korean American Dream” (a hybrid of transnational ideals), the indoor swap meet not only fused design ideas from American, Korean, and Latin American contexts, it also harbored the microentrepreneurs who crafted—in their booths—a new image of the city. Through their daily activities, Korean entrepreneurs wove important strands into the city’s social and material fabric. Building their stake in the city alongside government agencies, booster organizations, advocacy groups, real estate investors, and business owners, Korean merchants would later awaken as political as well as economic actors.

These themes unfold in this chapter’s four following sections, which trace how indoor swap meets became ubiquitous in Greater Los Angeles’s lower-income neighborhoods. While *envisioning* the indoor swap meet, Korean real estate investors adapted Korean market precedents to a local context

²² Here I draw upon Natalia Molina’s concept of “relational racialization,” which rejects binary notions of racialization in favor of those which acknowledge that “racial projects” take often place in a multicultural social context. See: Natalia Molina, “Examining Chicana/o History Through a Relational Lens,” *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 4 (2013): 520–41; Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). Wendy Cheng offers an example of this approach in: Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes*, 10–13. See also: Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

²³ Holston, “Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City.”

²⁴ Aihwa Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making,” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996): 737–62; Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

to suit the needs of thousands of would-be immigrant entrepreneurs. In *building* indoor swap meets, they blended financing from informal as well as institutional Korean banking institutions to take advantage of significant untapped business opportunities in Latinx and African American neighborhoods. In *staffing* their swap meets, operators almost exclusively used Korean social and business networks to build a predominantly Korean vendor base. In crafting this ethnic economic niche, investors and swap meet operators unintentionally constructed the indoor swap meet's intercultural milieu. As a growing cadre of vendors *stocked* their swap meet booths, they introduced a range of inexpensive and off-brand goods manufactured in the sweatshops of Asia, Latin America and the Los Angeles Fashion District to Latinx and African American customers. Sourced from the region's intense agglomeration of manufacturers, importers, and wholesalers, these goods became—along with the racialized bodies of the vendors themselves—the face of globalization in parts of the city paradoxically neglected by institutional capital.²⁵

Swap Meet Dreams: Envisioning the Indoor Swap Meet

Although Choi Seung-hyun opened the Western Swap Meet just months after the Valley Indoor Swap Meet (discussed in Chapter 2), he drew from distinct design precedents. The small booths and grid-like layout of the Western Swap Meet resembled its San Fernando Valley counterpart on a smaller scale, but it lacked the entertainment and gathering spaces of its larger cousin, where holiday celebrations, gift giveaways, and programmed entertainment evoked upmarket festival marketplaces in vogue at the time. Instead, Choi's swap meet was almost certainly influenced by Korean textile markets (*shijang*) popular in Seoul. At the same time, Choi's Koreatown swap meet both reflected and capitalized on an emerging reality: that Korean immigrants disproportionately were small business owners. As investors conceived of and opened indoor swap meets, they sought to become commercial landlords of this burgeoning population.

Korean Entrepreneurship in Los Angeles

Numerous scholars have observed that Korean immigrants have displayed an above-average propensity to own a business. In Korea, limited professional employment prospects following the Korean war led many to become entrepreneurs. By 1990, one third of South Korea's workforce was self-employed.²⁶ This trend continued in Los Angeles, where Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich found that Koreans led a sharp uptick in small business formation in the 1970s because they “did not simply fill existing vacancies,” they also “increased the business population of Los Angeles County” through self-employment at roughly double the rate of native-born Angelenos.²⁷ Their over-representation as small-business owners was a reflection not of some innate entrepreneurial tendency, but an instance of “making do” within a difficult economic and social context. Indeed, many Koreans from White-

²⁵ Michael Storper and Susan Christopherson, “Flexible Specialization and Regional Industrial Agglomerations: The Case of the U.S. Motion Picture Industry,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 1 (1987): 104–17.

²⁶ Ivan Light, Im Jung Kwuon, and Deng Zhong, “Korean Rotating Credit Associations in Los Angeles,” *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (1990): 40.

²⁷ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 15. Supported with impressive statistical evidence, Light and Bonacich suggested that Koreans were drawn to entrepreneurial pursuits. See: Light and Bonacich, 8–9, 14.

collar families and armed with credentials from elite Korean universities migrated to Los Angeles with aspirations to work as professionals, *not* entrepreneurs.²⁸

In pursuit of better prospects than those available in Korea, those without college degrees and even many well-educated Korean immigrants quickly found that only menial jobs were available to them in Los Angeles.²⁹ Professionals trained as lawyers, architects, businessmen, and doctors experienced significant difficulty finding jobs with American corporations, which were uninterested in hiring people with limited English skills and diplomas from unfamiliar Korean universities.³⁰ Within this context, saving money gleaned from scant incomes, many Koreans dreamed of starting their own businesses. Shut out from their professions, some well-educated Korean immigrants were forced to initially seek menial work through co-ethnic social networks, including as gas station attendants, custodians, grocery clerks, and liquor store employees in underserved low-income neighborhoods. As one worker lamented in the 1970s, “we never expected to lose our profession when we immigrated to this beautiful and wealthy country. Today, most of us find ourselves in a job that is inconsistent with our qualifications and experience. We are living on starvation wages.”³¹ Another professional explained, “So what if you’re college educated? No matter how well they may read English, English conversation is out of the question for many [Korean immigrants]. No one—I don’t know of any—works for an American company.”³² Simply put, it was far easier for Korean immigrants to find jobs in Los Angeles’s Korean economy than it was to do so in the mainstream economy.³³

Many Koreans made the best of difficult employment markets drawing upon “class resources,” or embodied forms of capital such as educational attainment, professional training, bourgeois socialization, and “ethnic resources,” or cultural values that can be transacted for financial gain. Raised in a society that emphasized Confucian values of hard work, nepotism, and chauvinism, many Korean men and women worked long hours and relied on unpaid family labor to reduce operating costs, weather unexpected financial challenges, and squeeze profits out of thin margins. Although these values ultimately created conflicts with the communities they served and business owners themselves, this cultural capital nonetheless helped many Koreans overcome the difficulties of operating small businesses.

²⁸ Following the Korean War, those with means sought professional training at Korea’s numerous colleges and universities. Between 1945 and 1975, college and university enrollment in Korea increased at a 12.1 percent annual clip. Many enrollees became nurses and doctors at institutions that trained them to American medical standards in spite of low domestic demand for expensive western medical treatments. Consequently, professionals in healthcare and other fields struggled to find jobs domestically. See Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 111–12.

²⁹ The Korean government encouraged this process by making it easy for professionals making less than \$100,000 in assets to emigrate. It hoped that by relieving economic pressures at home, migrants would one day send remittances and inject social capital accrued in the United States back into the Korean economy. See: Light and Bonacich, 109. Abelman and Lie discuss in detail the drivers of emigration from Korea. See: Abelman and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 123–30.

³⁰ This is in spite of the fact that Korean educational attainment prior to migrating was higher than that of native-born Angelenos, and over half of Korean business owners surveyed by Light and Bonacich claimed to have grown up in families in which the primary bread winner held either a “white collar” (35 percent) or “professional” (15.6 percent) job. See: Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 120–21, 178.

³¹ Quoted in Bong-youn Choy, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 250.

³² Quoted in Abelman and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 127.

³³ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 186.



Figure 3.4: Exterior view of the Pyong Hwa Market in Seoul, which contains thousands of textile shops and vendors.
Photo by author, 2018.

In envisioning the Western Swap Meet, Choi Seung-hyun established a much-emulated practice of relying on ethnic and class resources. His bazaar is a clear adaptation of the sprawling indoor textile markets of Korea, particularly those in Seoul's famed *Dongdaemun* and *Namdaemun* market neighborhoods (Figure 3.4).³⁴ Petty traders had conducted businesses in those districts since the turn of the twentieth century, although the market buildings in both neighborhoods were destroyed during the Korean War (1950-1953). When the war concluded, thousands of North Korean refugees sought to make a living in Dongdaemun, setting up small shanties along the banks of the Cheonggyecheon River, from which they sold clothes refashioned from surplus U.S. Army uniforms. During subsequent decades, many of the outdoor markets that initially clustered in the area moved into purpose-built buildings which formed the nucleus of what eventually became a ten square block fashion hub. Today, the neighborhood houses twenty six shopping malls, 30,000 shops, and 50,000 small manufacturers.³⁵ A center of South Korea's garment industry, the Dongdaemun district—along with the Namdaemun district across the city—remains an intense hive of mom and pop retailers who sell goods produced in nearby factories.

³⁴ I am not the first to make this observation. See: La Chul-sam, "Indoor Swap Meet BOOM."

³⁵ http://english.visitseoul.net/shopping/Dongdaemun-Market_/62



Figure 3.5: The Pyoung Hwa Market’s aisles, pictured in 2018, closely resemble swap meet interiors in Los Angeles. In both market types, booth areas are only a few hundred square feet and yellow lines on the floor delimit the areas in which vendors may display merchandise. Photo by Alec Stewart.

Among the most notable of Seoul’s indoor markets is the Pyoung Hwa Market (“Peace Market” in Korean), which was the first to open in Dongdaemun following the Korean War. Initially outdoor and informal, the market was formalized within a decade, beginning with the construction of the neighborhood’s first permanent market building, the Pyoung Hwa Fashion Plaza in 1962. Three stories in height and four blocks long (due to successive additions), the market building today houses over 2,000 small stores that employ roughly 5,300 workers (Figure 3.4).³⁶ Like those businesses in Southern California’s indoor swap meets, the micro enterprises housed in the Pyoung Hwa Fashion Plaza occupy small frontages that brim with merchandise, seemingly in spite of the yellow line on the floor that marks the boundary between shopfront and access aisle (Figure 3.5). Small, uniform signs that hang from the ceiling inject a modicum of uniformity to an otherwise visually chaotic scene. The Western Swap Meet, as with the many indoor swap meets that followed it, incorporated nearly all of these design elements.

As in Seoul’s indoor markets, nearly all of Choi’s Western Swap Meet vendors were Korean immigrants who purchased their merchandise from wholesalers and garment producers in LA’s nearby garment district. Many of these swap meet suppliers were often owned by immigrants and not infrequently Koreans. According to the *Korea Times*, many had migrated to the United States during the previous two or three years, opening their stores with limited resources saved from working multiple menial jobs.³⁷ Although many Korean immigrants were born into white collar families and

³⁶ “평화시장,” accessed May 6, 2020, http://pyounghwa.com/eng/company/com_2.php.

³⁷ La Chul-sam, “Indoor Swap Meet BOOM.” The Koreans who opened indoor swap meets migrated to the United States during the 1970s and 1980s during a unique geopolitical moment. Following the Korean War (1950-1953), economic, social, and political upheavals prompted many well-educated Koreans to flee their country. Until the 1980s, few well-paying blue- and white-collar jobs were available in spite of a robust education system which pumped out more college

possessed advanced degrees, a dearth of work opportunities in Korea led many to seek work as entrepreneurs in the United States.³⁸ To make ends meet in Los Angeles, many worked months or years as gas station attendants, sweatshop seamstresses, or retail clerks in existing businesses. These humbling jobs enabled them to scrape together just enough capital to invest in small businesses of their own.³⁹ While many Koreans opened grocery and liquor stores, doing so required an investment of at least \$100,000.⁴⁰ To open a booth at Choi's swap meet, on the other hand, only required around \$10,000 to purchase inventory and cover the costs of renting and improving a booth (\$200-400 per month).⁴¹ Compared to the startup costs for brick and mortar stores, \$10,000 was a bargain. As a toy store owner at the nearby Union Swap Meet (on 7th Street) remarked in 1985, "In most cases, [swap meet vendors] are husbands who cleaned or painted, and wives who went to sewing factories to save \$10,000. They can't even think about opening another business with that money. For them, the indoor swap meet is the most suitable."⁴² By making it easier to start a business with limited means, Choi's Western Swap Meet seemed to promise a path to the middle class for prospective vendors able to bank even modest wages from a year's worth of menial work.

For prospective swap meet operators, enterprises like Choi's hinted at the monetary rewards of operating such a business. Commercial real estate investors swiftly realized that with minimal building improvements they could generate significant cash flows from monthly vendor leases. A 2016 comparison of retail rents in Los Angeles shows that on a square footage basis, indoor swap meets generated rents between one and a half to five times the income of retail storefronts in comparable areas (Figure 3.6). Similar advantages existed throughout the 1980s and 1990s as well.⁴³ In 1990, a fully-occupied 100 booth swap meet, for instance, generated between \$400,000 to \$1 million in monthly booth rental income.⁴⁴ Even after paying for overhead costs such as electricity and security

graduates than could be absorbed by the industrializing economy. Even those lucky enough to secure employment at one of the fledgling government-sponsored industrial conglomerates (*chaebol*) faced long working hours and scant worker protections. Backed by American military and economic aid, the dictatorial Park Chung-hee regime used its police powers to quash political protests and attempts to form worker unions, thereby contributing to growing civic discontent and outmigration. The most violent of these protests was the 1980 Kwangju Uprising shortly after Park's 1979 assassination in which 2,000 pro-democracy protestors—mostly university students—were killed by government troops.

³⁸ In a telephone survey conducted by Light and Bonacich in the early 1980's, 51 percent of LA-based Korean business owners indicated that they had come from middle class families (35 percent white collar; 15.6 percent professional). See: Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 120. In an effort to stimulate remittances and knowledge transfer back to Korea, Korean President Park Chung-hee made it relatively easy for workers to emigrate to the United States with his signing of the Overseas Emigration Law in 1962. However, currency restrictions imposed by his regime allowed emigrants to bring only \$2,000 per person (\$1,000 per child) with them to the United States until they were lifted in the early 1980s. See: Light and Bonacich, 109. Chong-Sup Kim and Eunsuk Lee, "Growth and Migration to a Third Country: The Case of Korean Migrants in Latin America," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 23, no. 2 (2016): 79.

³⁹ Carol Park, *Memoir of a Cashier: Korean Americans, Racism, and Riots* (Riverside, CA: The Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies at the University of California, Riverside, 2017).

⁴⁰ In the estimation of Jay Lee, Slauson Swap Meet's manager in 1991, a minimum of \$100,000 was needed to open a liquor store. Quoted in Richard Reyes Fruto, "Swapping for a Piece of American Pie," *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, April 17, 1991.

⁴¹ In 1985, LA Downtown Swap Meet owner Jang Young-moon estimated that a prospective merchant could open a booth with less than \$10,000. Over 30 years later, many merchants have told me that it is still possible to start a swap meet business with around \$10,000. See: La Chul-sam, "Indoor Swap Meet BOOM."

⁴² La Chul-sam.

⁴³ Malkin, Personal Interview.

⁴⁴ In the 1990 *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*, the average swap meet contained between 100 and 150 booths. The average price of booth rentals is assumed to fall within a range of \$400 to \$1,000 per month. *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*.

services, swap meet operators kept a large share of their rental income. These realities prompted hundreds of investors to make their first forays into indoor swap meet building.

Neighborhood	ZIP	Swap Meet Rent/SF	Trad. Retail Comp Rate/SF	Swap Meet Booth (100 SF)	Store Front (400 SF)	Store Front (1,500 SF)
MacArthur Park (LA)	90057	\$3.50 - \$6.40	\$2.36	\$350 - \$640	\$1,180	\$3,540
Alameda (LA)	90058	\$4 - \$10	\$1.98	\$675 - \$1,100	\$990	\$2,970
Panorama City	91402	\$6.75	\$1.75	\$675	\$875	\$2,625
Compton	90221	\$4 - \$8	\$1.75	\$800 - \$1000	\$875	\$2,625
Lynwood	90262	\$5 - \$6	\$2	\$1,000 - \$2,000	\$1,000	\$3,000

Figure 3.6: Sources: Swap meet rents compiled from interviews with swap meet vendors and managers. Store front rent data averages gleaned from Loopnet.com in September of 2016.

Building the Indoor Swap Meet

In building indoor swap meets, Korean entrepreneurs responded to the growing number of large floorplate buildings that were made available when department stores and manufacturing plants withdrew from the region's residential and industrial suburbs. Just as outdoor swap meets provided a revenue-generating secondary use for drive-in movie theater operators, indoor swap meets met a sudden and urgent need for retail and employment options within districts affected by structural disinvestment. Overwhelmingly, the districts most affected by the offshoring of unionized manufacturing plants and department stores were within the "blue collar suburbs" undergoing significant demographic transitions from exclusively lower-income white to African American (and later Latinx and Asian).⁴⁵ It was in these districts that Korean immigrants purchased and leased a variety of businesses and buildings including gas stations, grocery, and liquor stores, as well as indoor swap meets.

The sudden closure of the Western Swap Meet in July of 1985 accelerated this process. Just as it was proving its commercial viability, new owners of the three-acre city block on which it stood decided to raze the building for what they saw to be a higher and better use: a 430,000-square-foot, "\$25 million, tri-level, indoor mall" designed by architect Ki Suh Park of Gruen Associates.⁴⁶ According to newspaper reporters, city planners, and developers, the mall was envisioned to serve as an anchor for Koreatown and to elevate the status of the emerging ethnic enclave. In January of 1985, property owner Joong Nam Yang asked Choi to surrender managerial control of the swap meet. A messy and prolonged legal fight ensued after Choi refused. Even after a court order required him to vacate the swap meet at the end of July, he collected August rent from his former tenants, placing them in the difficult position of paying double rent to Choi and Yang.⁴⁷ When Yang ultimately evicted the tenants, many refused to leave. The son of a Western Swap Meet jeweler remembers an ugly scene on eviction day: The Los Angeles Police arrived "literally dressed in riot gear," and they violently removed those who were slow to vacate the businesses they had poured two years of their lives into establishing. They "threw grandmothers over the fence" to get them off the property, the son recalls.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Nicolaides, "How Hell Moved From the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community"; Sides, "Introduction: A Brief History of the American Ghetto."

⁴⁶ Staff, "\$25-Million Koreatown Shopping Mall to Rise: Three-Level Enclosed Retail Facility Seen as Major Visitor Magnet," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1985, sec. Real Estate.

⁴⁷ Staff, "Swap Meet: A Dispute Over Rent."

⁴⁸ Western Discount Department Store vendor, Personal Interview, November 24, 2018.

While the Western Swap Meet's closure underscored the precarity of the emerging business niche, it ultimately strengthened it. Experienced vendors and the former owner immediately decamped to new indoor swap meet locations in non-Korean and non-White neighborhoods. The former Western Swap Meet owner opened the Imperial Swap Meet in South Gate six months later, writing in a January 29, 1986 opening advertisement in the *Korean Street Journal* that "I opened the indoor swap meet in South Gate thanks to the support of all Koreans."⁴⁹ The evicted jeweler, meanwhile, relocated to the brand new Union Swap Meet in MacArthur Park, and his son remembers that "many of the vendors followed my father [there]....Many [also] went to [the] Slauson and Alameda Swap Meet[s]. Some opened their own store[s] in Koreatown. Also Compton became one of the biggest swap meets a few years later and many reopened there as well."⁵⁰ Moreover, his three uncles and three of his cousins *all* entered the swap meet jewelry business, opening outlets at the Compton Swap Meet, Alameda Swap Meet, and the Slauson Swap Meet in the ensuing years. This single family—like many others—created a loose network of jewelry businesses across four of Southern California's largest and most enduring indoor swap meets. In this way, the Western Swap Meet was "patient zero" for the spread of the business type.⁵¹

Opening one of the bazaars involved several steps. First, prospective operators identified desirable sites and available buildings. With few exceptions, these were located within low income neighborhoods of color in which structural disinvestment had created low real estate prices. Next, the operator would pool funding derived from prior entrepreneurial activities, the assets of other Korean business partners, and small business loans from Koreatown banks. Occasionally these modest assets were augmented by *kye*, or Korean rotating credit associations. Finally, because nearly all indoor swap meets operated within repurposed buildings, operators would engage in modest building renovations prior to recruiting tenants. At each stage, entrepreneurs relied on information circulating within Korean newspapers, social circles, and business networks.

Although a handful of Korean swap meet investors followed Choi's lead and sited their bazaars in the center city neighborhoods of Koreatown and its adjoining neighborhoods, they quickly realized that market saturation and a dearth of suitably-sized buildings with adequate parking facilities limited future growth potential there. Cutthroat competition between vendors occupying the same niche, as well as escalating commercial rents drove many would-be entrepreneurs toward neighborhoods with non-Korean populations.⁵² Consequently, Korean as well as non-Korean swap meet investors almost immediately expanded outside of Koreatown, opening several indoor swap meets in 1984 in Hollywood, Covina, Woodland Hills, and Van Nuys.⁵³ With the exception of the Jewish-owned Valley Indoor Swap Meet, which moved into the mammoth Litton Industries aerospace plant in Woodland Hills, these swap meet openings were few compared with the flurry to come.

⁴⁹ "Print Advertisement," *Korean Street Journal*, January 29, 1986.

⁵⁰ Western Discount Department Store vendor, "Email Correspondence," November 25, 2018.

⁵¹ I attribute this idea to a personal interview with an anonymous Western Discount Department Store vendor, Personal Interview.

⁵² In 1979, a *Korea Times* article attributed this competitive atmosphere to the clusters of like businesses within the district. Eighth Street, for instance was home to sellers of "gifts, cosmetics, and flowers," while vendors of commodities clustered on another. See Ki-sun Park, "Rents Continue to Rise," *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, July 5, 1979, University of Southern California - Microfilm. As realtor Ed H. Park noted in 1990, "Everybody's doing the same thing....They undercut each other, so the profit margin goes down while the rent goes up." Quoted in Kim, "Homing in on the American Dream."

⁵³ With the exception of the Covina Swap Meet, opened in a Covina strip mall by Hong Im, the other early indoor swap meets were large operations housed within former industrial and retail buildings. The most notable of these was the Valley Indoor Swap Meet in Woodland Hills. The Van Nuys Swap Meet was the successor business to the original Valley Indoor Swap Meet location discussed in Chapter 2. See: Malkin, Personal Interview.

The Indoor Swap Meet Boom

By 1985, an indoor swap meet “boom” was on. In that year, real estate investors began repurposing even larger grocery and department store properties in the inner suburban communities of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, Norwalk, and Santa Ana (Bristol). Despite this construction, demand for vendor space was so intense that some swap meet managers fully leased their facilities almost immediately. As the *Korea Times* breathlessly observed in November of 1985, Korean entrepreneurs were briskly opening large market halls in Downtown as well as South Central Los Angeles. “The LA Downtown Swap Meet on 3rd Street leased its 220 booths in less than a week since it” began renting booths, the paper observed. “The Crenshaw Swap Meet on Crenshaw and King Blvd. leased 70 percent of its 150 booths the day it began leasing them on [October] 22nd.” Moreover, “the Compton Fashion Center, which opened on July 1st, leased its 300 booths very quickly,” and “the building owner says there are about 250 people on the waitlist.”⁵⁴ These rosy accounts—which downplayed the difficulties of operating businesses in underserved neighborhoods—surely piqued the interest of the paper’s readers who dreamed of near-instant wealth.

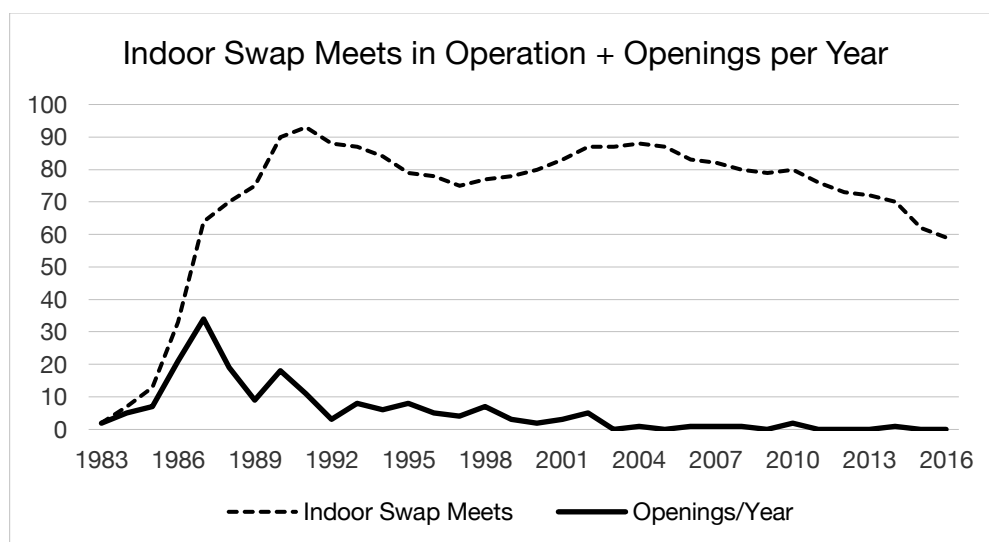


Figure 3.7: Indoor swap meet openings in Greater Los Angeles by year. Data compiled by author. Sources: Pacific Telephone and Telegraph (PT&T) Yellow Pages, Pacific Bell Yellow Pages, GTE Yellow Pages, and SBC Yellow Pages; the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Daily Breeze*, and *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*; Yelp.com and Google Maps; and personal referrals and site visits.

Indeed, 1985 was but a prelude to an explosion of swap meet retailing in Southern California. Unrelenting demand for swap meet vendor space led to a doubling in the number of swap meets by 1987, with at least thirty four opening in that year alone (Figure 3.7).⁵⁵ While the pace of openings cooled toward the end of the decade, investors continued to open swap meets at a steady clip until looting and arson during the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion destroyed several of the enterprises. All told, between 1983 and 1992, at least 129 indoor swap meets opened in Greater Los Angeles, with

⁵⁴ La Chul-sam, “Indoor Swap Meet BOOM.”

⁵⁵ This count understates the actual total because it only includes swap meets with a *written* record of their existence in 1987. Because many such businesses were never mentioned in newspaper articles, print advertisements, telephone directories, nor swap meet directories, this count likely omits many indoor swap meets.

roughly 90 operating on the eve of the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion.⁵⁶ In that year, the bazaars housed as many as 8,000-10,000 small businesses.⁵⁷ In spite of their growing ubiquity, few Angelenos and even fewer scholars of the built environment have noticed the proliferation of indoor swap meets. Indeed, nearly all indoor swap meets operated within an ethnic economy out of view of middle and upper class White Angelenos.

Site Selection + Mobility

Contributing to the diffusion of Korean-owned businesses were the aspirations for a middle class suburban life and high quality education opportunities held by many swap meet operators and vendors. Consequently, Korean immigrants flocked to a handful of Southern California suburbs between 1984 and 1992, a trend accelerated by the Korean government's relaxation of limits on how much their citizens could take out of the country.⁵⁸ As the *Korea Times* observed in 1990, "as soon as they can afford to, usually within three to five years, [Korean immigrants] will *flee the chaos of Koreatown for the greener land of the suburbs*" to live as well as work.⁵⁹ Cities with strong school districts, especially Glendale, Cerritos, Torrance, and several Orange County jurisdictions saw the greatest influx of Korean immigrants through the 1980s.⁶⁰ While shop keepers and business owners enjoyed the expansive mobility automobile ownership afforded them, this diffuse settlement pattern likely contributed to the early decentralization of indoor swap meet geography (Figures 3.8 and 3.9).

Swap meet operators also found opening swap meets in decidedly down-market sections of the city to be quite lucrative. During the 1970s, deindustrialization and white flight had exacted a harsh toll on the region's blue collar inner-suburbs. South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and other predominantly African American neighborhoods became increasingly impoverished as factory jobs disappeared. National retailers—seeing declining profits and problems of poverty (such as petty theft)—pulled up stakes in areas they had long served. Branches of Sears, Newberry, Vons, and other department, five-and-dime, and grocery stores abandoned their sizable buildings, which sat vacant for years at a time. With major chains removed from neighborhoods of color, commercial real estate prices were low enough for small and relatively inexperienced investors to capitalize on sizeable discrepancies between the potential and actual ground level rents. In recognizing the "rent gaps" that mainstream (usually White) investors either failed to see or deliberately ignored, Korean investors injected new retail options into underserved neighborhoods while extracting sizeable profits.⁶¹ As the

⁵⁶ The 129 estimate is based upon my enumeration of swap meets listed in the following sources: personal interviews, newspaper articles published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Daily Breeze*, *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, the *Pacific Bell Yellow Pages* for Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles Counties, and the *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*.

⁵⁷ These figures are gleaned from numerous sources, including telephone books and local newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Korea Times*, and the *Los Angeles Daily News*. My count roughly aligns with an estimate by the *Korea Times* that roughly 80 indoor swap meets operated in the Los Angeles area in October of 1990. Cited in: Chang, "Korean Swapmeets in Los Angeles," 57.

⁵⁸ In 1990, this figure increased to \$200,000, a significant increase from the restrictive \$2,000 limit during the Park regime. See: Kim, "Homing in on the American Dream."

⁵⁹ Emphasis added. See: Kim.

⁶⁰ According to realtor Walter Park, roughly 70 percent of Korean house buyers in 1990 cited schools as the primary criteria for selecting a place to buy. See Joan Jie-Eun Kim.

⁶¹ Neil Smith defines a "rent gap" as "the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use." According to many economic geographers, the process of outside investors rent gaps are fundamental to processes of gentrification and neighborhood change in low income neighborhoods of color. See

Korea Times put it in 1985, “old buildings that have not been leased for two to three years, or buildings that could not easily be leased because of their large size, can be cheaply obtained and leased out within days as indoor swap meets without much capital.”⁶²

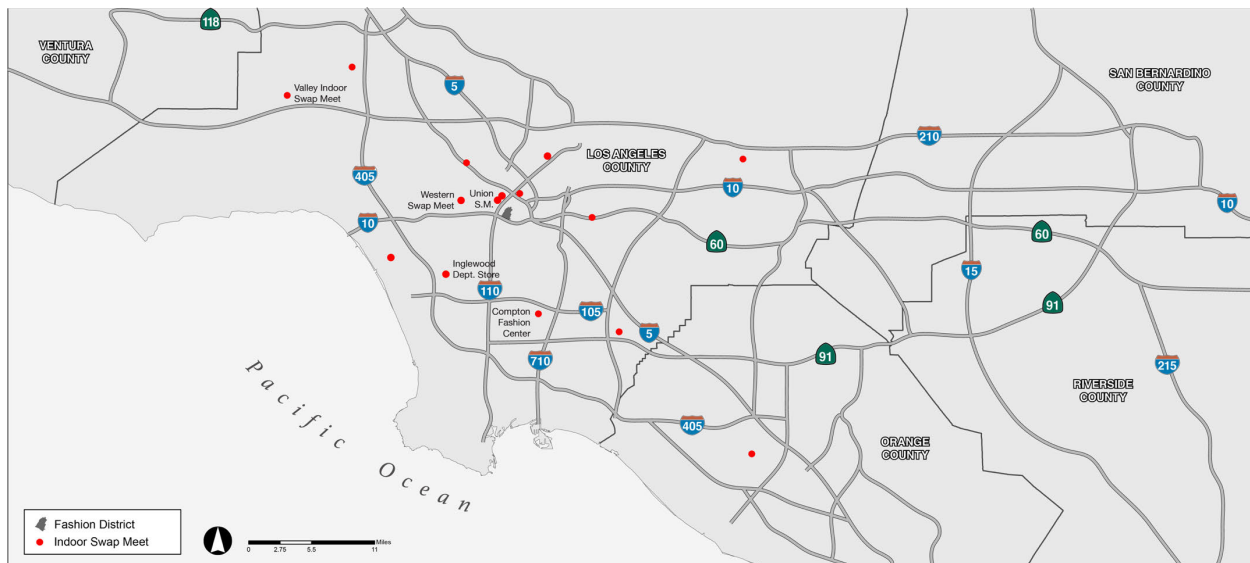


Figure 3.8: Indoor swap meets in 1985 operated in a decentralized pattern across Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Cartography by author.

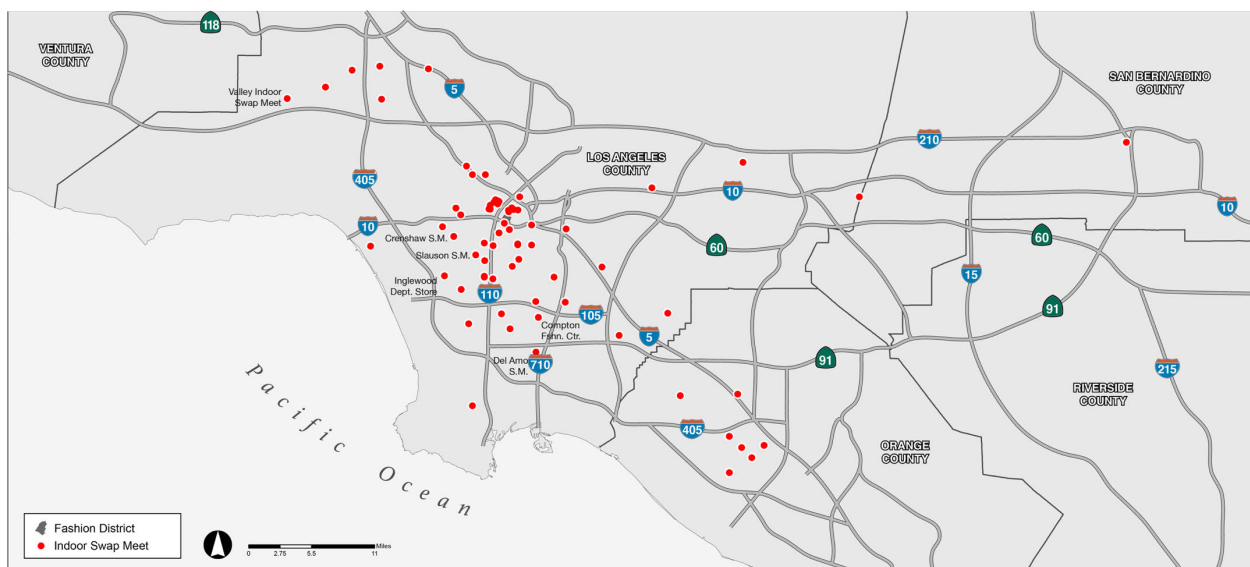


Figure 3.9: By 1991, indoor swap meets show a clear clustering pattern around the Downtown Los Angeles Fashion District and South Central Los Angeles. Cartography by author.

Financing and Building

Being an indoor swap meet operator at its essence involved learning how to be a commercial landlord to large numbers of microentrepreneurs. With booth rental prices ranging from a few

Neil Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (October 1979): 545, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908977002>.

⁶² La Chul-sam, “Indoor Swap Meet BOOM.”

hundred to several thousand dollars per month, a well-run indoor swap meet building with several hundred vendors could generate millions of dollars in monthly income for its operator. Minimal building improvements were needed to realize high returns on investment. With extraordinarily high demand for vendor booths through the 1980s, prospective swap meet operators could expect to generate sufficient cash flow to cover lease payments and generate a handsome profit within a few months to a few years. Many prospective swap meet operators thus chose to lease their buildings, given the relatively low barrier to entry and high remuneration potential.

Raising startup capital for a leased building was relatively simple: one needed only to save enough money to cover the costs of building improvements and the first several months of building rent. Many operators and vendors relied on *kye* (the Korean term for a “rotating credit association”) to accelerate the process of pooling the necessary capital.⁶³ Within these informal saving groups, twenty to thirty trusted friends and acquaintances from work, church, and college alumni networks met monthly for one to two years. At each meeting, members contributed a fixed sum (usually between \$500 and \$2,000 in the 1980s; \$5,000 to \$30,000 today), *except* for the person whose turn it was to collect their payout. Especially popular amongst middle- and upper-class savers, *because* they provide social incentives for thrift, *kye*’s were a critical savings mechanism for down payments and business expenses for Korean looking to form a business. Even after becoming Vice President of IJ Healthfood Corp., Korean businessman Jaeis Chon claimed in 1993 that despite access to the mainstream banking system, he frequently participated in Kyes, noting that “it’s way better than banking. It’s instant cash right away.”⁶⁴

As the eviction of the Valley Indoor Swap Meet from its first location demonstrates (see Chapter 2), leased swap meet buildings carried risks. The prospect of eviction and increasing building rents threatened to upset or even destroy established swap meets. For this reason, many Korean operators preferred to purchase their buildings. Those who chose this path raised capital in distinctive ways. Some formed investment groups with other Korean entrepreneurs, pooling funds saved through prior business activities for a large percentage of the down payment. Many obtained small business loans from the growing number of Koreatown banks set up catered to Korean entrepreneurs. Although many operators are reluctant to discuss their financing, the examples of the Union Swap Meet, Compton Fashion Center, Inglewood Marketplace, Slauson Swap Meet, Del Amo Plaza, and the City Swap Meet paint a partial picture of the financing and building process.

Compton Fashion Center

In early 1985, with plans to open an indoor swap meet, six Korean business partners purchased a former Sears department store in the City of Compton’s largest shopping center (Figure 3.10).

⁶³ In Korea, *kyes*, or rotating credit associations are a centuries-old way to save funds outside of a formal banking institution. Following the Korean War, when many banks in Korea had negative interest rates, they resurged in popularity. Korean immigrants—especially wealthier individuals—brought the practice with them to Los Angeles during the 1970’s and 1980’s, and used them as a means to gather capital for investment as well as consumption purposes. Kye’s usually consist of up to 20-30 trustworthy friends and acquaintances, each of whom usually join with a specific individual or collective goal in mind. Although there are no interest rates, some *kyes* allow their members to submit a cash bid to receive the first round of money. These bids typically go to the organizers. Each *kye* designates at least one *Oya* (organizer) who is responsible for collecting and disseminating money. See: Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*; Light, Kwuon, and Zhong, “Korean Rotating Credit Associations in Los Angeles.” In 1993, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Many Koreatown residents were in two to three kyes at a time. Robert J. Lopez, “The Bucks Start Here: Unable to Obtain Traditional Loans, More Entrepreneurs Are Taking a Chance on Cash Pools,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1993.

⁶⁴ Lopez, “The Bucks Start Here.”

Constructed in 1945 and shuttered in 1978, the standalone structure anchored the Compton Center on the once proud but now struggling Long Beach Boulevard retail corridor. After the site had laid vacant for several years, the city's Community Redevelopment Agency had purchased the building with hopes of finding a chain retailer to fill the space. Unable to do so, it accepted a bid from BJS Development Corporation, a new holding company established by Korean immigrant investors Boo Wong Choi, Edward Lee, James Ahn, Frank Lee, James Lee, and Stanley Lee. Each of these men had experience working in the city's garment industry, and Ahn at one point had served as president of the Sewing Association.⁶⁵ With these connections, and likely aware of other extant indoor swap meets whose vendors purchased goods from the garment district, the men proposed a "Fashion Center" for the Compton site. Appealingly to the redevelopment agency, the center housed microentrepreneurs whose clothing businesses would loosely replicate the *range* of products sold by Sears and complement the center's other tenants, which included Sav-on Drug, J.J. Newberry, and Boys Town (a nonprofit organization). In 1985, the redevelopment agency reached a deal to sell the building to BJS Corporation for \$5.5 million. After receiving over \$2 million in federal redevelopment funds, the firm paid only \$2.3 million for the 240,000 square foot building.⁶⁶ Although it is unclear from where the BJS Corporation partners raised these funds, they likely drew on saved income from past entrepreneurial activities in the garment industry.



Figure 3.10: Sears Department Store in Compton, CA circa early 1960s. Opened 1945, closed 1978.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ According to the *Korea Times*, Ahn was the former president of an unspecified "Sewing Association" in the garment district. See: Staff, "Korean Swap Meet Management: 6 People Buy 240,000 Square Feet of Store Gold," *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, July 3, 1985.

⁶⁶ The \$2.3 million figure is listed in a legal complaint against BJS Development. *Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers' Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.*, No. B031397 (Los Angeles County Superior Court November 30, 1987). According to the *Korea Times*, \$2.5 million of federal funds lowered the price. The discrepancy between these two accounts may be due to undisclosed additional sources of financing or inaccurate reporting by BJS in the legal complaint. See: Staff, "Korean Swap Meet Management: 6 People Buy 240,000 Square Feet of Store Gold."

⁶⁷ Robert Lee Johnson, *Compton*, Images of America (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 105.

In April, BJS began renovations on its future swap meet. To bring the building up to code, the business partners spent \$618,000 to improve the building's roof, electrical infrastructure, fire sprinkler system, and plumbing.⁶⁸ They settled on a floor plan, which subdivided the first floor into a nearly symmetrical grid of almost 500 booths separated by twelve aisles and four cross aisles (Figure 3.11). The booths were densely packed, and most were only 100 square feet in size. Smaller than those at Western Swap Meet, these micro dimensions allowed the operators to offer affordable rental prices *and* maximize rental revenue on a square footage basis. Moreover, their back to back configuration would make it easy for vendors to lease contiguous booths should they desire more selling space. In the years to come, this flexible layout became a model for other large indoor swap meets.

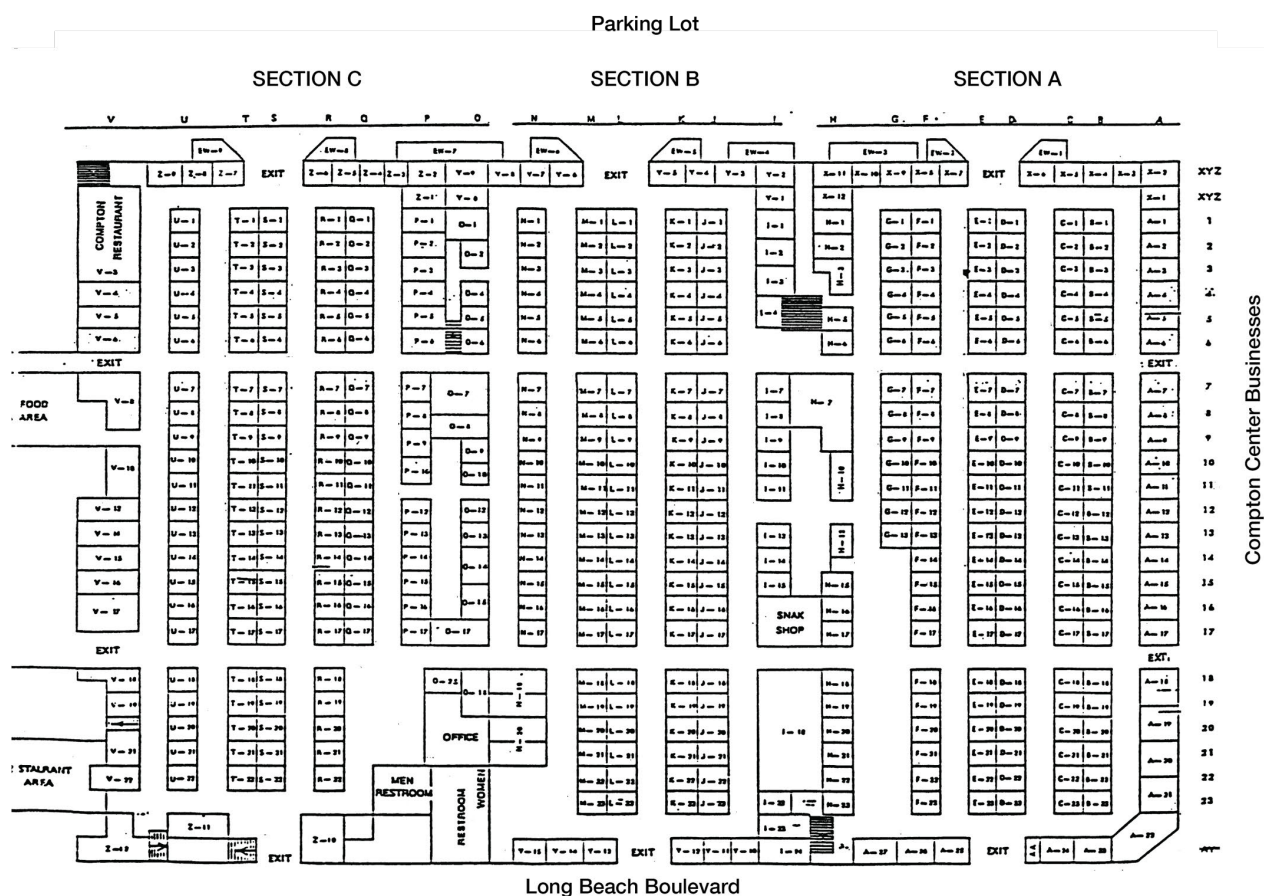


Figure 3.11: Floorplan of the Compton Fashion Center, circa 1986.⁶⁹

The Compton Fashion Center (also known as the Compton Swap Meet) was leased in phases. During the months prior to the swap meet's grand opening, BJS Corporation leased the 177 booths situated on the building's southern end (labeled "Section A" in Figure 3.11). Uncertain demand for vendor space, likely contributed to the decision, and the southern side's proximity to Sav-on Drug and other existing shopping center tenants meant that the first vendors could take advantage of existing

⁶⁸ According to court documents, these expenses included \$400,000 for electrical improvements, \$140,000 for a new roof, \$80,000 for fire sprinklers, and \$60,000 for plumbing. See: Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers' Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.

⁶⁹ Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers' Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.

shopping traffic. In a flyer distributed to interested vendors, BJS advertised booths priced between \$260 per month for a “Prime Space” and \$320 per month for a “Center Space” (Figure 3.12). “Section A” was fully leased over the ensuing months, and this portion of the swap meet opened on June 28, 1985. Due to heavy demand for vendor space, “Section B” (with 159 booths) opened just one month later, while “Section C” was fully leased by December of 1985.⁷⁰

L.A.’S MARKETPLACE FOR BARGAINS!

COMPTON INDOOR *Rain or Shine* **SWAP MEET**

Thank you for your inquiry about the Compton Indoor Swap Meet. We are located in a prime building of about 240,000 square feet of space with air conditioning and heating.

Rain or shine — we are open every Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Doors for vendors

are open at 7:00 a.m. Special loading areas are provided (see map). Vendors may choose from over 600 available booth spaces. New parking lot allows up to 1500 car spaces directly in front of two main entrances.

Vendors may design their own permanent booths and leave them

on premises as long as they are renting the space. 24 hour security will be provided by licensed security company. Booth spaces will be sold in blocks. Each block consists of four (4) weekends. All renewals must be done seven (7) business days before expiration of the rental period.

BLOCK RATES	DAILY (SAT. & SUN.)	MONTHLY
	Center Space	\$25
Prime Space	\$20	\$260 PER BLOCK

Electricity in the booth is also available for an additional \$20 per 4-week block.

Make checks and money orders payable to: BJS Development Corporation.

FURTHER INFORMATION:
may be obtained
by calling our business office
(213) 635-6939
between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.
(except Wednesday)

All vendors must have “Seller’s Permit” registered at Compton Swap Meet, 2100 N. Long Beach Blvd., Compton, CA 90221. Said permit is free and can be obtained at:
State Board of Equalization

Figure 3.12: English language promotional flyer distributed to prospective Compton Fashion Center tenants, circa 1985.



Figure 3.13: Compton Fashion Center pictured days after opening. Source: July 3, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times*.

On its first day of business, the Compton Fashion Center marked the occasion with an opening celebration. Joining in the festivities were four pastors: two from a Korean church and two from a nearby Black church.⁷¹ As the faith leaders made their remarks, a crowd of predominantly African American customers and 200 mostly Korean vendors looked on. Amidst the show of intercultural unity, it was possible to detect hints of what the swap meet would become: a locus of quotidian interactions between non-White customers and vendors of starkly different class and cultural backgrounds. A *Korea Times* reporter viewed the proceedings in a slightly different light. An

⁷⁰ Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers’ Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.

⁷¹ Staff, “Korean Swap Meet Management: 6 People Buy 240,000 Square Feet of Store Gold.”

article published a few days later observed that the “Compton Fashion Center appears to be the largest indoor swap meet in Southern California,” and the building in which it was housed would be a source of “gold” for its investor owners (Figure 3.13).

Union Swap Meet

Joo S. Lee was one Korean swap meet operator who understood that a large swap meet *building* would almost sell itself to large numbers of existing outdoor vendors. Founding Lee Realcorp in March of 1985 to manage what he hoped to be a growing real estate portfolio, he leased the historic Young’s Market Building at 1610 W. 7th Street in the middle of the year with the intention of opening the company’s first indoor swap meet.⁷² Over the ensuing months, he subdivided the building into 100 booths, opening the Union Discount Center & Swap Meet in August of 1985 (Figures 3.14 and 3.15).



Figure 3.14: The Young’s Market building after conversion into the Union Discount Store & Swap Meet pictured between 1985 and 1993. Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles City Planning Department. See: [http://cityplanning.lacity.org/complan/HCM/HCMDatabase/images/113 Young's Market Building.pdf](http://cityplanning.lacity.org/complan/HCM/HCMDatabase/images/113%20Young's%20Market%20Building.pdf)

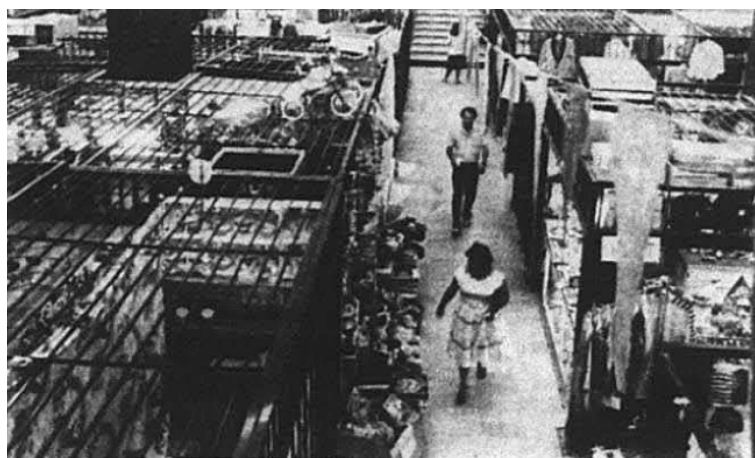


Figure 3.15: The interior of the Union Swap Meet, housed within the former Young’s Market building, reveals an early example of configuration. Photo published in the November 2, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times*.⁷³

⁷² Lee Realcorp was incorporated in March of 1985. See: <https://www.corporationwiki.com/California/Los-Angeles/lee-realcorp/41130728.aspx>. The Young’s Market Building, designed by architect Charles F. Plummer in 1924, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

⁷³ La Chul-sam, “Indoor Swap Meet BOOM.”

Slauson Swap Meet

Michael and Sandra Yoon may well have been among the readers of the *Korea Times* profile on the Compton Fashion Center. Having operated booths at outdoor swap meets on weekends among other menial jobs during the early 1980s, they realized that the superior working conditions of an indoor swap meet would likely entice outdoor vendors into a seven-day-a-week operation. In Korea, Michael had worked as a financial advisor, and he viewed swap meet ownership as a path back to a middle class life.⁷⁴ In 1985, he and his wife leased a 176,853 square foot warehouse at 1600 West Slauson Avenue in the heart of South Central, subdivided it into booths, and made modest building improvements. Like the BJS Corporation and a growing number of indoor swap meet owners, the Yoons leased out their building to subtenants in phases as their financial resources and vendor demand allowed. In November of 1985, the business opened with 35 vendor subtenants, and during the ensuing years the Yoons gradually leased the building's entire floor area to 150 vendors.

Inglewood Marketplace

Paul Cho was among the growing number of Korean entrepreneurs who viewed the emerging indoor swap meet sector with interest. Having arrived in the United States from Korea in 1977 with limited English proficiency and only \$180 to his name, he worked a succession of menial jobs, beginning as a delivery man for a Korean-owned TV store, then as a cook, painter, and a luggage vendor at the Paramount Swap Meet. While working at the outdoor swap meet, he became intimately familiar with the shortcomings of the outdoor business model. As the indoor swap meet boom picked up speed, he realized the potential rewards of opening such a business for himself. With savings from these occupations and financing from the California Korea Bank (a subsidiary of the Korea Foreign Exchange Bank based in Koreatown), he leased the former J.C. Penney department store building on downtown Inglewood's Market Street (Figure 3.16).⁷⁵



Figure 3.16: J. C. Penney Co. grand opening in Inglewood, California, June 9, 1955. Closed early 1980's.
Source: Inglewood Public Library. <http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt0h4nd1xr/?brand=oac4>

⁷⁴ See: Fruto, "Swapping for a Piece of American Pie."

⁷⁵ Seth Mydans, "For Them, Racial Harmony Is Work," *New York Times*, May 27, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/27/us/for-them-racial-harmony-is-work.html>. For a discussion of Korean banking subsidiaries, see: Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 266.

In the mid-1980s, the shopping street once known for its glamorous art deco façades and middle class retailers was experiencing a wave of closures, and the street's retail trade in Cho's words was "going down...going dead."⁷⁶ Where national retailers like Penney's and the Boston Store departed the street, Cho saw an opportunity to do business with the city's considerable African American population. Familiar with the outdoor swap meet business, Cho emulated the precedent set by the Compton Fashion Center by repurposing a vacant department store for an indoor swap meet. There, he hoped to attract Korean vendors as well as entrepreneurial Inglewood residents. Subdividing the store's upper and lower levels into roughly 80 booths, Cho and his brother opened the Inglewood Discount Department Store in January of 1986 (Figure 3.17).

Operating on a lean budget during the two years it took his business to achieve profitability, Cho resorted to extreme measures to drum up business and keep his expenses down. Determined to attract customers, Cho stood on the sidewalk in front of the building waving a flag for the first several weeks, beckoning people inside. "During daytime, I waved to invite people," he recalls. "I also cleaned this building as janitor. At night, I'm [the] security guard."⁷⁷ After having been shot by a Black man while working as a cook in the late 1970s, Cho was initially fearful of his Black customers, spending nights in the upstairs office with a shotgun.⁷⁸



Figure 3.17: Inglewood Discount Department Store, later renamed the Inglewood Marketplace, circa 2012. Photo Credit: Inglewood Marketplace.

Del Amo Plaza

Like Boo Wong Choi, Paul Cho, and the Yoons, David C. Kim entered the indoor swap meet business as an immigrant looking to consolidate already considerable wealth earned from prior business ventures. Upon arriving in Los Angeles from Korea in 1978, he opened a typewriter store in Koreatown oriented toward Korean speaking clients immigrants before realizing that *real* growth potential lay in the English-speaking "American" market. As he opined in 1991, "if you go toward the

⁷⁶ Jae-woo Lee, "A Good Neighbor: Paul Cho Reaches Out to Black Community," *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, September 4, 1990.

⁷⁷ Lee.

⁷⁸ Mydans, "For Them, Racial Harmony Is Work."

American market, your direction is unlimited because it's a big market, big potential. But if you go in the direction of the Korean market, you're going to die."⁷⁹ Accordingly, he began teaching himself English and founded DK Copierland, which specialized in the emerging and highly lucrative technologies of photocopiers and (later) fax machines. During the 1980s, the company rapidly expanded, and by 1991, it operated ten outlets across Los Angeles which grossed \$20 million in sales.⁸⁰ Highly religious, an admirer of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, and an adherent of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Miracle Power of Positive Thinking*, Kim embraced his next business enterprise with almost evangelistic fervor. In July of 1990, Kim opened the Del Amo Jobbers' Fashion Mart in a 101,604 square foot warehouse across the street from the brand new Del Amo light rail station. With a self-proclaimed vision of providing an outlet for garment vendors seeking escape from the overcrowded Fashion District, he subdivided the building into spaces for 127 mostly Korean vendors.⁸¹ Within an unincorporated part of Los Angeles County adjacent to Compton, Del Amo Plaza came to serve a mix of Latinx and African American customers in the ensuing years.

City Shopping Center

Even after the indoor swap meet boom crested in 1992, the Korean investors continued to be drawn to the business. In 1994, John Park repeated this bootstrapping narrative in pursuit of his Korean American Dream. His path was slightly different from earlier swap meet pioneers in that he entered the business having worked as an indoor vendor himself. Like his counterparts, however, he too converted modest savings into significant wealth through a series of highly leveraged and risky investments. In 1978, John Park moved to Houston from South Korea with less than \$2,000 in his pocket. Working menial jobs, he saved enough money to make a five percent down payment on a residential condominium building.⁸² Just a year later, he sold the building and made a \$20,000 profit, with which he bought four condominium buildings. After selling *those* buildings, he purchased a Houston supermarket, where he noticed its lucrative check cashing business.

Park moved to Los Angeles in 1985 with the idea of opening a check cashing business of his own. Noticing the booming indoor swap meet trade and their throngs of low income customers, he began opening Western Union check cashing franchises within five area swap meets, including the Compton Fashion Center. Seeking anchors to draw people into its vast interior, BJS Development offered Park free rent for five years if he opened a check-cashing business at the swap meet's rear. Park recalls that his former customers would walk straight to the check-cashing counter before going anywhere else in the swap meet. Because there were few banks in the area, many swap meet patrons had few choices but to cash their paychecks and welfare checks at Mr. Park's business. He emphasizes that many of his patrons were on federal assistance, and that upon cashing their checks, customers spent much of their cash—sometimes almost their entire paycheck—at swap meet businesses. During the 1980s and 90s, as immigrants from Latin America and elsewhere accounted for larger shares of his business, many of his customers also sent remittances to their families through his outlets. With

⁷⁹ Quoted in Kay Hwangbo, "Duplicating American Heroes," *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, September 1, 1991.

⁸⁰ Hwangbo.

⁸¹ George Cunningham, "Wholesale Dream Short on Parking," *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, October 15, 1990.

⁸² John Park, Personal Interview, January 9, 2016. Park is emphatic that this investment was made possible by very generous federal loan assistance which enabled him to purchase the \$45,000 building. He claims that at the time, the federal government offered "75% loan assistance," which enabled banks to make loans with requirements of only 5% down. In contrast, the government today only underwrites 50% of commercial loans, resulting in requirements of 15-20% down payments, according to Park.

this dependable flow of business, Park amassed a small fortune that enabled him to climb to the top of the swap meet revenue pyramid.

In 1994, John Park opened the City Shopping Center directly across Long Beach Boulevard from the Compton Fashion Center inside a vacant appliance store he purchased directly from the bank with cash.⁸³ Park purchased the two-story structure and its small rear parking lot for a relatively small sum outright. For many years, his swap meet (and other enterprises) afforded Park a comfortable upper-middle class existence that in 1995 allowed him to purchase a large house in an upscale suburb.⁸⁴ Today comfortably wealthy and an elder in his church, Park's story perhaps best illustrates the promise many immigrants perceived as they entered the Southern California swap meet business. In pursuing their dreams of financial security, suburban living, and frequently, leadership positions in their churches, Korean real estate investors relied not only on positive thinking and hard work, but also on representations of their prospective businesses to prospective vendors.

Staffing the Indoor Swap Meet: By Written Word and Word of Mouth

Swap meet operators recruited vendors through several channels, including ethnic networks, advertisements in Korean language newspapers, and direct recruitment at outdoor swap meets. Each tactic relied on representational advertising strategies that ranged from relatively accurate to radically embellished. While indoor swap meets offered clear advantages over outdoor vending, newspaper advertisements tended to misrepresent the financial promise of operating a swap meet booth and the social implications of operating businesses in Black and Latinx neighborhoods as a Korean vendor. which obscured the racial reality of the neighborhoods within which the markets were located.

Many indoor swap meet vendors were recruited directly from outdoor swap meets. Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, Korean immigrants discovered outdoor swap meets to be convenient places to supplement incomes pieced together from a variety of jobs. For a time, these venues provided convenient selling spaces to anyone who could afford the nominal fee for a piece of asphalt and had on hand a potpourri of used or overstock items. However, outdoor swap meet work was grueling. According to numerous vendors with whom I've spoken, twelve to fifteen hour work days are common. One indoor swap meet vendor who grew up helping his parents before they moved to the (indoor) Western Swap Meet, recalls long working days bookended by the laborious processes of setting up and tearing down.⁸⁵ Variable weather conditions and unpredictable stall locations were further strikes against outdoor swap meets. As Union Swap Meet manager Joo Kyung-sun explained in 1985, "there are many people from outdoor swap meets who come [to indoor swap meets] for a more stable place....They get tired of having to relocate often, not getting sleep at night, and getting sunburned during the day. So they want a store they can regularly commute to, even if it's small."⁸⁶ Indoor swap meet operators realized this and they moved to recruit this vast pool of potential tenants. To do so, some resorted to aggressive tactics. As the manager of a large indoor swap meet in Orange County remembered of his recruiting efforts, "we'd go to the other swap meets and kind of spread the word, *creatively*....We'd put flyers on cars, and sometimes we'd get kicked out when they [the outdoor swap meet managers] found out about us."⁸⁷

⁸³ According to Park, the store had sat vacant for "six or seven years." Judging from Park's timeline, it is likely that the store closed sometime in the late 1980s, amidst a worsening economic situation during the construction of the 710 Freeway just to the north.

⁸⁴ Park, Personal Interview.

⁸⁵ Western Discount Department Store vendor, Personal Interview.

⁸⁶ Quoted in La Chul-sam, "Indoor Swap Meet BOOM."

⁸⁷ Ted Holcomb et al., Personal Interview, August 31, 2016.

Word of mouth recruitment also occurred through social channels. During the 1980s and 1990s, a common refrain amongst Korean immigrants was that “whoever you met at the airport would likely determine what you would do professionally.”⁸⁸ There was significant truth to this joke, especially in Korean churches. As one vendor explained,

The churches play a vital role for Korean immigrants to find the resources they need to assimilate into the mainstream society quickly. When immigrants become a member of the church they are often placed on small group of bible study groups [that] meets once a week. They are often treated like a family which shares all the info they need such as jobs, schools, and where to live. They rotate the members of these bible study groups every 6 months to meet others so they could gather even more info. I'm sure this was one of the big reasons how the popularity of swap meets began spreading.⁸⁹

In this way, personal networks inside and outside the church served as conduits through which information about swap meet retailing quickly circulated. As they heard of the lucrative business model, many Korean immigrants began gathering information about the business. For this, the Korean-language press was critical.

The Korean-language Press and the Creation of the Indoor Swap Meet Niche

Shortly after the 1964 Immigration and Nationality Act loosened federal immigration policies, a vibrant Korean-language press took root in Los Angeles to serve the city's growing Korean immigrant population. Major newspapers in Seoul were quick to establish newsrooms in Koreatown, with the *Korea Times* (*Hankook Ilbo*) opening its first office on Wilshire Boulevard in 1969 and the *Korea Central Daily* (*JoongAng Ilbo*) doing the same in 1974. With corporate and editorial independence from their Korean parents, the *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition* (referred to hereafter as the *Korea Times*), the *Korea Central Daily*, and the *Korea Street Journal* (a free Koreatown-based weekly paper) joined the ranks of older Los Angeles-based foreign language periodicals such as *Rafu Shimpo* (Japanese) and *La Opinión* (Spanish) in delivering news to immigrant populations residing in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles-based Korean-language dailies quickly established sizeable staffs, which reported extensively on issues of concern to the region's growing Korean population. Perhaps because of the above-average levels of educational attainment of Koreans and Korean-Americans, both papers achieved large circulation numbers.⁹⁰ Even today, the paper remains popular amongst older indoor swap meet vendors, who keep copies of the *Korea Times* and *Korea Central Daily* near their check stands and pass the time in between customers reading them.

Korean-language newspapers not only helped construct and bind together a heterolocal Korean-American public dispersed across significant distance.⁹¹ They also served up a steady stream of information about Korean-American owned businesses with special emphasis on Korean business

⁸⁸ Western Discount Department Store vendor, Personal Interview.

⁸⁹ Western Discount Department Store vendor, “Email Correspondence,” November 29, 2018.

⁹⁰ In 2017, the *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition* boasted a circulation of 200,000 home and 5,000 business deliveries for a metropolitan region whose Korean immigrant population numbers roughly 225,000. For further circulation data, see: Korea Times, “Korea Times U.S.A. Media Kit,” 2017, 9-10, http://service.koreatimes.com/info/mediakit/KOREATIMES_MediaKit_2017.pdf; According to the Migration Policy Institute's tabulations of US Census data, 225,000 foreign-born Koreans lived in the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana Metropolitan Area between 2011-2015. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “Korean Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, February 8, 2017, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/korean-immigrants-united-states#Distribution_State_Key_Cities.

⁹¹ Zelinsky and Lee, “Heterolocalism.”

niches in the Southern California economy.⁹² Targeting their highly entrepreneurial readership, stories about international trade, profiles of successful Korean-American entrepreneurs, and recent real estate deals were regular fare. Advertisements touting employment and investment opportunities further defined the boundaries of the Korean business community. Together, articles and advertisements offered critical information for prospective business owners while reinforcing an aspirational ethos that placed entrepreneurship at the center of Korean dreams about accruing financial wealth.⁹³

Classified ads placed in the *Korea Times* provided a crucial source of information about business opportunities for Southern California's Korean speakers. On a typical day, the paper's classifieds section was fifteen to twenty pages long, including a broad range of job ads and commercial real estate listings. Light and Bonacich found that on May 13th in 1981 and 1982, the *Korea Times* contained nearly the same number of commercial real estate listings as the *Los Angeles Times* (the region's largest English-language daily), in spite of its comparatively miniscule readership.⁹⁴ Moreover, there was little overlap between the listings in the two papers, with the *Korea Times* containing far greater numbers of small businesses and commercial buildings for sale than in the *Los Angeles Times*. With fast food restaurants, liquor stores, grocery stores, dry cleaners, and garment factories among those businesses dramatically over-represented in the *Korea Times*, its readers were exposed to a large variety of business opportunities within specific industries that English-speaking *Los Angeles Times* readers were not. Moreover, a large number of these listings were located within lower-income sections of the region, including South Central Los Angeles. Conversely, many industries represented in the *Los Angeles Times* classifieds section were completely absent from the *Korea Times*. These findings hint at the powerful role the Korean-language press played in funneling Korean entrepreneurs and employers into low-level and less desirable entrepreneurial niches and neighborhoods. In a similar way, the *Korea Times* and *Joong-Ang Ilbo* were central actors in the formation of the indoor swap meet economy.

Together, business news coverage and extensive advertising in the *Korea Times* and *Joong-Ang Ilbo* opened a vendor recruitment pipeline for swap meet owners. By the early 1990s, even non-Korean operators were placing ads in Korean language newspapers. As the White manager of an Orange County swap meet remembers during the early 1990s, the *Korea Times* was "just where [we advertised]. *The swap meet vendors are Korean!*"⁹⁵ This telling remark not only reflects the enduring overrepresentation of Korean vendors within the swap meet economy, it also illustrates that Korean newspapers were instrumental in *determining* who worked in the sector.

Recruiting advertisements used several tactics to portray indoor swap meets in most positive of lights. First, advertising *language* emphasized the centrality of location and the proximity to "ideal" swap meet shoppers. Second, the ads deployed representational strategies that emphasized the modernity of swap meet buildings while downplaying their less attractive qualities. Images and descriptions of architecture and infrastructure emphasized up-to-date HVAC and security systems,

⁹² Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*. An very high percentage of *Korea Times* readers continue to be self-employed; in 2017, 45 percent of the paper's readership fell into that category. In the 1980's, when Koreans faced greater difficulty accessing mainstream English-language labor markets, this number was likely much higher. *Korea Times*, "Korea Times U.S.A. Media Kit," 9.

⁹³ The business emphasis of the *Korea Times* is revealed in its two daily sections: the main section, which dealt with political and social issues, and the business section, which was filled with information about the entrepreneurial activities of Koreans doing business in Southern California. The newspaper's magazine frequently profiled successful entrepreneurs, offering models that new immigrants might emulate while reinforcing the Confucian notion that hard work begets success. (Also the Korean American Dream). However, it also published more nuanced perspectives that highlighted the struggles of possessing little financial and social capital. While the economic rewards of owning a small business were made clear, so too were the sacrifices of working long hours away from their families.

⁹⁴ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, 187–88.

⁹⁵ Emphasis added. See: Holcomb et al., Personal Interview.

which promised workplace comfort and safety. Third, the ads' visual and textual qualities portrayed the non-Korean and non-White demographics of the surrounding neighborhoods as locational advantages, while obscuring the legacies of structural racism which contributed to fraught relationships between customers and store owners. Together these tactics not only influenced vendors' expectations of their future workplaces, they also shaped how vendors came to understand their roles *in relation* to the non-White communities they served.⁹⁶

Compton Fashion Center

As the indoor swap meet economy emerged, early vendor recruitment advertisements drew favorable comparisons to their outdoor counterparts in an effort to entice vendors away from those weekend markets. The first ads for the Compton Fashion Center are characteristic. In the April 15, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times* and *Korean Street Journal*, a full page announcement of the opening of “a gigantic indoor swap meet in Southern California” within “the largest shopping center in the City of Compton” emphasized the superior qualities of an indoor marketplace (Figure 3.18). A large image of the streamlined former Sears department store building and the large parking lot in front of it headlined the ad, hinting at its ample parking and prime location in a shopping center anchored by national chain retailers. Moreover, “24 hour absolute Anti-Theft Security (year-round storage facilities for merchandise available)” implied that comfortable facilities lay beyond the swap meet walls. A map which placed the new indoor swap meet at the center of a trade area bounded by Huntington Park's rapidly Latinizing Pacific Boulevard shopping district and two of Southern California's most prominent outdoor swap meets (the Paramount and Radium, discussed in Chapter 2), drove home what the text made explicit: the Fashion Center was located within a “prime” shopping area with a demonstrated demand for swap meet goods. In case the building's facilities and location were not enough, the BJS Development Corporation promised an “extravagant” advertising campaign to make clear the swap meet's advantages to prospective customers.

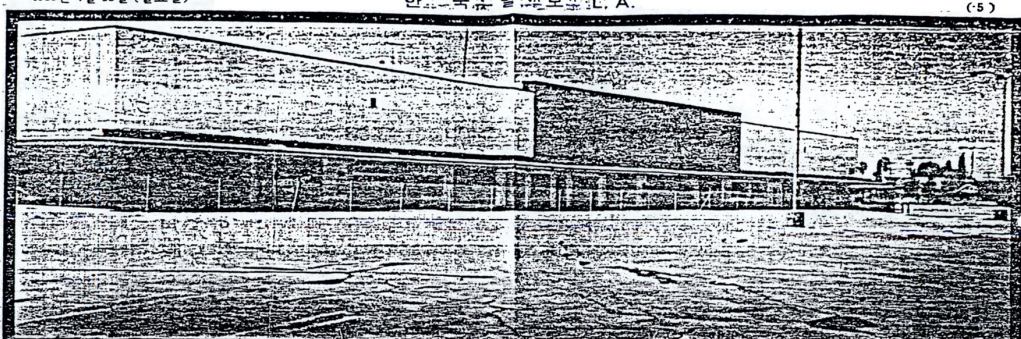
By invoking its centrality in Southern California's shopping landscape, the advertisement worked to place the indoor swap meet at the center of an imagined retail landscape taking shape within the minds of Korean microentrepreneurs. In opposition to the “Anglo-serving” shopping malls for which Southern California was famous, Latinx- and African American-serving outdoor and indoor swap meets were positioned as primary. The ad's textual and visual logic suggested that the Compton Fashion Center stood poised to convert the area's 270,000 residents—many non-White—into swap meet customers.

Seven months later, another of the Compton Fashion Center's many ads confirmed the efficacy of BJS's vendor recruitment efforts: the building's booths were “100% sold out [and] ready for business” (Figure 3.19). Having leased the building's first floor vending area, the company shifted focus to a second critical regional geography: the business of importing and wholesaling. The basement's warehouse facilities were “perfect” for a wholesaler tenant, the ad explained, because of the building's modernity and its prime location between the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and Downtown LA. Each just 10 minutes away via the Harbor Freeway, the two sites were significant for reasons well-known to vendors and wholesalers alike: nearly *all* of the imported goods sold at the swap meet entered the United States through the ports, while the Downtown Los Angeles wholesale district was a prime retail distribution node. Meanwhile, the 91 Freeway offered easy access to Orange County suburbs popular with Korean immigrants, such as Fullerton and Buena Park. With up-to-date

⁹⁶ Here I draw upon Natalia Molina's concept of “relational racialization,” which rejects binary notions of racialization in favor of those which acknowledge that “racial projects” take often place in a multicultural social context. See: Molina, “Examining Chicana/o History Through a Relational Lens”; Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*. Wendy Cheng offers an example of this approach in: Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazzes*.

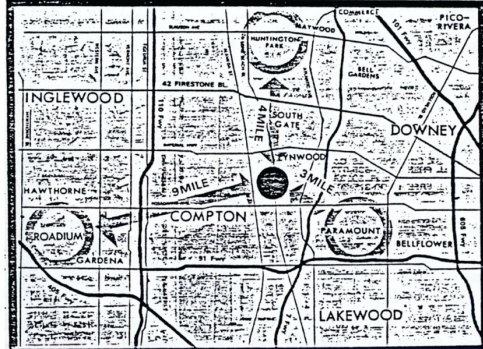
amenities, a central location, professional management, African American and Latinx customers, and a building constructed by one of the pioneers of American mass-market retailing, the Compton Fashion Center seemed to set the standard for other swap meets to follow.

1985년 4월 15일 (월요일) 한국일보 (Korea Times) L.A. (5)



INDOOR SWAPMEET 입주식행내

- 240,000sq.ft.의 거대한 旧 Sears 빌딩
- City of Compton에서 제일 넓은 Shopping Center (Boys Market, Newberry, Savon-Drug 수용)
- 1500대 이상의 차가 항상 주차 할수 있는 9에이커의 Parking장
- 반경 5 Mile 내 270,000명이 상주하고 있는 인구밀집지역
- Huntington Park 상가지역 4 Mile
- Paramount Swapmeet 3 Mile
- Radium Swapmeet 9 Mile
- 24 hr's Full Security의 완벽한 도난방지 (상품을 항상 보관할 수 있는 시설완비)
- Southern California내 대규모의 Indoor Swapmeet
- 거리에 위치한 최적·최대 상가지역에 위치
- 최정상급 Hollywood 선전·음역회사와의 계약으로 경품잔치, Show 등을 일간 공연하며 선전문 배포, Radio, 신문 등에 대대적인 선전으로 Customer 최대 동원에 자신(L.A. Times, LA Opinion 등 참조)
- 주 7일 영업 Booth(기존 Shopping Center와 함께 위치함)
- 주 3일 영업 Booth(금·토·일)



★ OPEN 예정일 1985년 6월초

입주문의 대표전화 (213) 635-6939

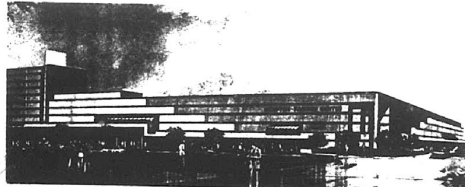
2100 N. LONG BEACH BL. COMPTON, CA.90221 (旧 SEARS 빌딩)

※ 월요일(4/9일자) 전화번호는 잘못된 것으로 653국을 635로 정정합니다.

Figure 3.18: First print ad for the Compton Swap Meet in the April 15, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times*. The map depicts the Compton Fashion Center's location relative to the the Radium and Paramount swap meets, the two largest outdoor meets in the area.

LEASE APPLICATION NOTICE!

입주신청 안내!



INDOOR SWAP MEET

FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL
(213)608-7000~5
(In the Old Sears Building)



성원하여주신 덕분에 COMPTON INDOOR SWAPMEET의 상층 140,000SQ.FT.의 600점도가 100% 입주완료와 300여 입주희망자의 기대속에 성황리에 영업개시하게된 것을 지면을통해 감사드립니다. 아울러 금 11월부터 12월까지 하층 130,000SQ.FT.에 WAREHOUSE 및 수출입 도매업자에게 임대코자하오니 많은 입주신청을 바랍니다.

- 1) 입주면적 : 130,000SQ.FT.
- 2) 입주신청자(단위면적) : 500SQ.FT~50,000SQ.FT.
- 3) Long Beach, Harbor 및 Sanpedro Harbor를 L.A. Downtown과 연결하는 91Fwy, Harbor Fwy에서 10분거리의 교통편리.
- 4) IB SEARS가 사용한 WAREHOUSE로서의 완벽한 시설, 도난방지및 최신 Parking System 구비.
- 5) 600 Booth의 소매업자가 입주완료된 도매업의 시장조성 완료.

BJS DEVELOPMENT CORP.
COMPTON INDOOR SWAPMEET
2100 N. LONGBEACH BLVD. COMPTON, CA.90221
TEL: (213)608-7000~5

With your support, COMPTON INDOOR SWAPMEET's 140,000 sq. ft upper floor has opened with 300 interested buyers (those interested in booths) and 600 booths 100% sold out, ready for business. From November to December, the lower 130,000 sq. ft will be on lease for warehouse and export/import wholesalers. Please contact us if interested

- 1) Leased area: 130,000 sq. ft
- 2) Available area for lessees: (500~50,000 sq. ft)
- 3) Convenient connections to the 91 Freeway and Harbor Freeway. Long Beach Harbor, San Pedro Harbor and Downtown LA 10 minutes away.
- 4) Warehouse constructed by Sears. Perfect facilities, anti-theft equipment, new parking system
- 5) 600 retailer booths have all moved-in

Figure 3.19: Vendor recruitment ad for the Compton Fashion Center in the November 22, 1985 edition of the Korea Times. In the building image, two men in suits are depicted in the parking lot.

The Union Swap Meet

And follow they did. Over the summer of 1985, the newly-incorporated Lee Realcorp recruited tenants for its soon-to-open Union Swap Meet in the *Korea Times*. Emphasizing its position “at a traffic hub of the city” amidst “the best population density in the L.A. area,” the company touted its position just off of Wilshire Boulevard at the intersection of 7th and Union, in the MacArthur Park neighborhood (Figure 3.20).⁹⁷ Situated between Koreatown and Downtown, and known more for its walkability than its parking, the district was less attractive to mass market retailers than it was to Korean swap meet operators whose primary demographic consisted of low-income shoppers unable to afford a car. The neighborhood’s growing population of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America looking to deal exclusively in cash represented a growth market for Lee Realcorp. Its July 8th ad, which disclosed that “70 percent of booths [were] rented out as of now,” plainly articulated the stakes of waiting “your golden chance to start business without paying a premium” was quickly slipping away.

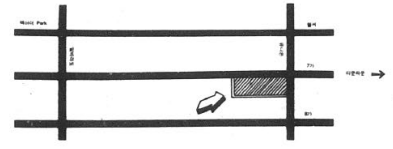
⁹⁷ Ad text translated from the original Korean by Mili Yoon. The Young’s Market Building has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Booths for Rent

INDOOR SWAP MEET 입주신청안내

- 1610 W. 7th St. at the corner of Union
- 25,000 Sq ft., at a traffic hub of the city
- 70% of booths rented out, as of now
- Your golden chance to start business without paying premium!
- \$275+/mo and up
- Open 7 days/wk, 10am-7pm

- 1610 W. 7th St/Union코너
- 25,000Sq.ft의 최요지 지역
- 현 70% 계약돼 있음
- 최고의 인구밀도 L.A.지역
- 권리금 없이 Business를, 절호의 기회!
- 월 \$ 275/and Up
- 주7일 영업 10A.M.~7PM



OPEN예정일 8월초

입주문의 : (213) 387-6922
LEE REALCORP
 4047 Wilshire Bl. #201 L.A. CA.

Grand opening: Early August

Figure 3.20: Vendor recruitment ad for the Union Indoor Swap Meet, published in the July 8th 1985 edition of the Korea Times Los Angeles Edition.

Slauson Swap Meet

The intense demand for vendor space was echoed in a December 4th advertisement in the *Korea Times* for the “L.A. Slauson Swap Meet.” Among the building’s purported virtues was its central location, “high population density in the surrounding area,” and “convenient transportation” infrastructure which would deliver car driving customers to a “wide parking lot” that accommodated up to 1,500 vehicles (Figure 3.21). “Continuous advertising and promotion for tenants” would generate a substantial customer base. And the bazaar promised to be relatively low risk, with “\$5 million in fire and liability insurance” that would guarantee safety. Perhaps most enticing to Korean readers, was the ad’s emphasis on the merchant community. The building’s owners, Michael and Sandra Yoon, overtly “welcomed Korean families to grow together.” Only “5 minutes from Koreatown,” vendors would never be far from community-serving businesses and wholesale suppliers. Although the travel time estimate and the notion that the swap meet would become a Korean community hub are both unrealistically rosy, the ad speaks to the aspirations of Korean vendors looking to become entrepreneurs in the emerging swap meet industry.⁹⁸ Absent from the ad was any mention of the customers the vendors would engage with, an omission with consequences in the coming years.

⁹⁸ Google Maps estimates the journey to Wilshire and Western takes ~15 minutes with no traffic See: Slauson Swapmeet, Print Advertisement, *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, December 4, 1985.

GRAND OPENING!

L.A. SLAUSON SWAPMEET
PRESALE BEGINNING

OPENING SCHEDULED:
December 5th

Selling quickly (Sunday also
available)

- As the Swapmeet Commercial
Zone is secured, we welcome Korean
families to grow together.
- Please visit to inquire about
moving in (All inquiries by phone)

한 국 일 보 L. A. (14)

GRAND OPENING!

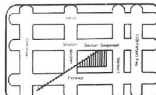
L.A. SLAUSON SWAPMEET
분양개시

OPEN 예정일 : 12월 5일
현재도 절찬리에 분양중(일요일도 분양합니다)

- 대단위 상가 조성 예정
- 좋은 상권으로 입주자 수익 보장
- 입주자를 위한 지속적인 광고 및 홍보
- 한인타운 5분거리
- 주변 인구밀도 집중지역
- 점포수(76개 정도)
- 넓은 파킹랏완비(약 90,000Sq. 1500대 파킹가능)
- 교통이 편리합니다(Western과 Slauson코너, Normandie인접)
- 안전보장(5백만불 라이어빌리티 보험 & 화재보험)

※ Swapmeet상권 확보에 따라, 함께
성장할 한인 가족들 환영합니다.
● 입주문의 하실분의 방문을 바랍니다
(전화문의 일체 사절)

SLAUSON SWAPMEET INC.
1680 W. SLAUSON AVE. L.A. CA. (213) 232-6088



- Large-scale shopping mall planned
- Good tenants guarantee tenant income
- Continuous advertising and promotion for tenants
- Koreatown 5 minutes away
- High population density in surrounding area
- Number of stores (76 revision)
- Equipped with a wide parking lot (approximately 90,000 sq; 1500 cars can be parked)
- Convenient Transportation (Corner of Western and Slauson; Normandie adjacent)
- Safety Guarantee (\$5 million liability insurance & fire insurance)

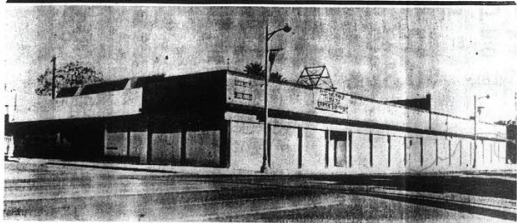
Figure 3.21: Advertisement for the Slauson Swap Meet, placed in the Korea Times on September 29, 1985.

King and Crenshaw Swap Meets

During the second half of 1985, as indoor swap meets moved into predominantly Latinx and African American neighborhoods, overt discussions of race crept into indoor swap meet ads. This shift may have been a response to growing concerns that Korean entrepreneurs, due to their ownership of over three quarters of South Central Los Angeles's retail businesses, were increasingly targets of anti-Asian protest and violence from Black patrons.⁹⁹ It is also probable that indoor swap meet operators recognized that the residents of predominantly African American and Latinx inner suburban communities were primary swap meet customers. In either case, vendor recruitment advertisements began citing the racial composition of their neighborhoods as *selling points*.

⁹⁹ On January 1, 1992, the Korea Times reported the "commercial supremacy" of Korean business owners, who it estimated owned 80 percent of retail businesses in South Central Los Angeles. See: Chanhaeng Lee, "Conflicts, Riots, and Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1965–1992" (Stony Brook, New York, Stony Brook University, 2012), 44.

INDOOR SWAP MEET OPEN




1. ADDRESS & PHONE(SWAP MEET現場)
4100 S. VERMONT AVE.
LOS ANGELES, CA. 90037
(213) 231-2332
2. 分譲場所 電話
(213) 750-6480~84
3. GRAND OPENING DATE
1985年 10월 10H
4. COLISEUM, SPORTS ARENA 및 USC가 1Mile 이내 소재
5. 安定된 Residential Area (Black 50% & Latin 50%) 이므로 Swap Meet 場所로서 最適地임
6. OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK
7. 41街와 VERMONT에 位置함으로 交通 편리한 INDOOR SWAP MEET.
8. VERMONT AVE.上的 最大建物인 1BLOCK BLDG(25,000SQ FT)으로 100여개의 SELLER
9. CENTRAL HEATING & COOLING SYSTEM
10. 풍부한 자체 PARKING LOT.
11. 絶판러 분양중

1. Address & Phone (Swap Meet)
4100 S. Vermont Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90037
2. Phone number: (213) 750-6480
3. Grand opening date: 1985-10-10
4. Within 1 mile distance: Coliseum, Sports Arena, USC
5. Stable residential area (50% Black, 50% Latino), so the best location for a swap meet
6. Open 7 days a week
7. On the corner of 41st St. and Vermont, so transportation is convenient
8. Biggest building (25,000 Sq Ft) on Vermont Ave, 100+ sellers
9. Central heating and cooling system
10. Large parking lot
11. High popularity lease.

Figure 3.22: Advertisement for King Swap Meet, placed in the Korea Times on September 25, 1985.

In September, an advertisement for the King Swap Meet just blocks from the University of Southern California articulated directly what was emerging as common knowledge: “the best location for a swap meet” was in a “Stable residential area (50% Black, 50% Latino)” (Figure 3.22). In addition to a well-maintained building and a location near good transportation infrastructure, the King Swap Meet owners suggested that vendors view lower income and non-White areas as advantageous market territories. The advertising campaign for the Crenshaw Swap Meet echoed this mentality. When that swap meet’s Korean management team advertised the 150 booth bazaar to prospective vendors, the racial composition of adjoining areas was presented as a major selling point. Situated in an “exclusive” 45,000 square foot streamline moderne building just across from the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, the swap meet is presented as a part of “LA’s biggest shopping center” adjacent to three major department stores and nearly 150 other retail shops (Figure 3.23).¹⁰⁰ While the site promised “unlimited marketability and good prospects for development,” and the 10-minute drive to Koreatown promised convenient access to the Korean enclave, the site’s demographic profile received top billing just under the ad’s headline. Second only to the superior location was the area’s demographics, which are plainly described as “80% middle and upper class” in a “Black-concentrated region” with “Mexican” and “Japanese” residents mixed in. This prospective clientele—perhaps more than the ample parking, anti-theft equipment, and two elevators—suggested the swap meet’s future success. However, Korean-speaking sellers unfamiliar with the area’s social dynamics would have had little way of knowing that in spite of the affluence of Baldwin Hills, the ad’s portrayal of the area—and the positionality of Korean vendors within it—painted an unrealistically rosy picture.

¹⁰⁰ When it opened in 1947, the Broadway-Crenshaw Center was among the first regional shopping malls built in the United States. Anchored by a Broadway department store, Woolworth variety store, and Von’s supermarket, it had 550,000 square feet of floor area and 13 acres of parking.

Parking: About 8,000 cars

Race: 80% middle and upper-class.
A black-concentrated region, plus
Mexican and Japanese

A popular sale for
sellers!

Location: An exclusive
45,000 sq. ft modern
building inside LA's
biggest shopping center,
Crenshaw Shopping
Center, with perfect
facilities. Anti-fire,
anti-theft equipment,
elevators, cargo/freight
transportation installed

Marketability: Located at
the center of 150 retail
stores such as May Co.,
Broadway, Newberry,
J.C. Penny, and Vons, so
unlimited marketability
and good prospect for
development.

10 minutes from Koreatown
5 minutes from Inglewood

CRENSHAW SWAPMEET **점찬리 분양중!**

① 지 역 : L.A. 최대 사할 센터(Crenshaw Shopping Center) 내 단독건물 45,000SF의 현대적인을 일찍한 빌딩, 화재 및도난방지, 화물운송, 역세역이외 설치

② 인 종 : 80%중상류층 흑인중산층지역 및백사단 - 일본인

③ 주차조건 : 약8만여의 거대한 주차시설

④ 시 장 상 : May Co., Broadway/Newberry, J.C. Penny, Vons이외 등 150여개의 소매상가 중점의 중심위치하여 무한한 시장성과 발전성있음.

⑤ 분양개수 : 150개 정도.

⑥ 판매업종 : 꽃가게, 공구점, 생활용품, 문방구, 과일야채, 식재, 가구점, 가발, 유아용품점, 주방기구점, 실내장식품, 악기점, 운동구품, 기타 하드웨어업종 포함.

⑦ 분양조건 : 일종제한 선착순

⑧ 신청장소 : 본 건물내 사무실

* 대우조건 : 직과 동등한 조건(여성, (전희숙님)
* 구 인 : 저산자 및 저소득층(대우소나미(주)에게)

CRENSHAW SWAPMEET CO.
3700 W. KING JR. BLVD. LA., CA. 90008 ☎(213)292-1345

①분양일 : 10월22일부터 선착순
②OPEN : 11월15일

Swap meet booths for sale: ~150

Conditions for sale: limits on types of business, on rolling basis

Registration: At the office inside the building

*Move-in questions: Visit the facility (No phone calls)

*Help-wanted: manager, women office worker (English, Spanish, typing)

Desired businesses: Flower shop, hardware store, life necessities, stationery store, fruits and veggies, restaurants, furniture, wigs, kitchen/cooking appliances, interior design/decoration, musical instruments, athletic goods. Hardware stores welcome

Figure 3.23: Ad for the Crenshaw Swapmeet, in the November 7, 1985 edition of the *Korea Times*. Translations by Mili Yoon.

Inglewood Discount Department Store

Like the Crenshaw Swap Meet, the Inglewood Discount Department Store opened in what its owner Paul Cho described as a “mostly Black upper class” area (Figure 3.24). On January 18, 1986, Cho took out a full page ad in the *Korea Times* business section, and emphatically proclaimed his swap meet to be the “best choice,” in the “best location,” which would offers a “golden opportunity for people who want to start a business with little capital.”¹⁰¹ The repurposed JC Penney building is depicted from its side parking lot just off Market Street, with its clean white façade juxtaposed with ample parking in the foreground. In blending attractive building and demographic characteristics, the Inglewood Discount Department store promised not only promising business prospects, but also a pleasant work environment defined by architectural modernity and an affluent clientele.

Instrumental tools in creating a Korean business niche, indoor swap meet advertisements also linked the very definition of what an indoor swap meet was with the racial characteristics of the neighborhoods they served. As a Korean vendor at the Western Discount Department Store (across the street from the former Western Swap Meet) trenchantly observed in 2018, “*This isn’t really a swap meet because we don’t have any Black or Latin American customers. We only serve Koreans.*”¹⁰² While indoor bazaars persist to this day in Koreatown, they do not qualify as indoor swap meets in the mind of this vendor in spite of their near identical morphology. Instead, in his mind—and likely those of many other Korean vendors—indoor swap meets are businesses defined *not* by their physical form but by the Latinx and Black people they serve. During the mid-1980s, while indoor swap meets were rapidly opening within Latinx and Black neighborhoods, we see the evolution of this idea in vendor recruitment ads.

¹⁰¹ Inglewood Department Store, Inc., Print Advertisement, *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, January 18, 1986.

¹⁰² Western Discount Department Store vendor, Personal Interview.

1986년 1월 18일 (토요일) 한국일보 L.A. (53)

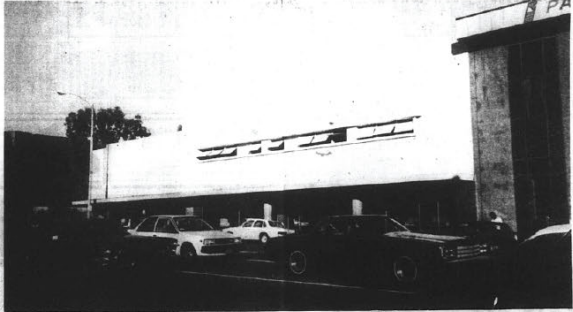
잉글우드 스왑밋

성황리에 분양중

최고의 위치

최선의 선택!

소자본으로 사업을 시작하시고저 하는분들의 절호의 기회



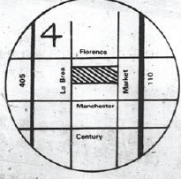
※총면적 78,000S.F.의 잉글우드 쇼핑센터 최고 중심지

※구 J.C. Penney 백화점 건물

※주민의 대다수가 흑인 상류사회인

Leasing Office Hour : 10AM-5PM

Inglewood Department Store, Inc.
 139 S. Market St. Inglewood, CA. 90301
 128 S. Market St. Inglewood CA. 90301



Best Location!

Best Choice!

A golden opportunity for people who want to start a business with little capital

Total area 7800 sq ft, in the heart of Inglewood's Shopping Center

Old J.C. Penney Building

Residents mostly black upper class

Figure 3.24: Vendor recruitment advertisement for the Inglewood Department Store placed in the January 18, 1986 edition of the *Korea Times*.

As I discuss in Chapter 4, the portrayal of Black and Latinx residents as “ideal” swap meet customers in vendor recruitment ads contributed to the gross misunderstandings of them by Korean indoor swap meet vendors. By framing these swap meet customers solely in terms of their buying power, contributed to unrealistic expectations about the customers Korean vendors would serve. When first-time vendors set up shop in the economically-disadvantaged areas, many found themselves stuck between providing vital goods and services on the one hand, while on the other participating in an economic system that many of those same customers regarded as fundamentally exploitative. When recruitment advertisements failed to mention this fact, they obscured the structural racism and disinvestment that frequently led swap meet buildings to be abandoned in the first place.

Stocking the Swap Meet: Buying Merchandise in LA's Wholesale and Garment District

The same forces that shuttered the manufacturing plants and department stores in which indoor swap meets opened also drove a rapid re-orientation of the regional economy to international trade. Endeavoring to outpace their west coast economic rivals in San Francisco and San Diego, local boosters and civic leaders fought for and won successive improvements to Los Angeles's port, rail, and highway facilities, which cemented the region's status as the west coast's leading entrepôt.¹⁰³ Early and sustained investment in these logistics technologies stoked the region's importing and wholesaling industries. By 1994, Southern California surpassed New York as the nation's leading port of entry for imported goods, and by 2001, 70 percent of the Pacific Coast's waterborne trade moved through the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.¹⁰⁴



Figure 3.25: The Stanford Wholesale Mart at the intersection of 12th Street and Towne Avenue in the Los Angeles Fashion District is one of several massive “marts” which house hundreds of garment wholesalers. Within each firm’s showroom, retailers may purchase bulk quantities of apparel for sale in their stores. The BBCN Bank sign (near the top of the building) signals the presence of at least six different Koreatown-based banks, which operate branches in the District and cater to Korean-owned wholesale and garment contracting firms. Photo by author, 2015.

¹⁰³ By reducing the cost and increasing the speed of international shipping, containerization rendered many domestic manufacturing industries cost prohibitive. Located at *the* primary nexus of transpacific trade Los Angeles increased its global trade volume at an impressive 16 percent annual clip between 1970 and the late 1990s. For an account of how infrastructure improvements drove regional economic growth. See: Steven P. Erie, *Globalizing L.A.: Trade, Infrastructure, and Regional Development* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Moreover, 70 percent of California’s overall international trade moved through its ports and airports. See Erie, 9, 11–12.

These developments ushered in a flood of inexpensive imported goods from Pacific Rim nations, which predominantly consisted of electronics, cars and trucks, and “apparel, footwear, and toys.”¹⁰⁵ Although chain retailers and major brands were responsible for many of these imports, a sizable share were off-brand. The garments, footwear, and toys which did not move directly to corporate warehouses flowed from the port to wholesale firms in the Los Angeles Fashion District, just southeast of Downtown Los Angeles. The district houses thousands of merchandise showrooms which line its streets and are cloistered in a handful of multistory wholesale “marts” (Figures 3.25 and 3.26). These firms and showrooms multiplied during the 1980s and 1990s in tandem with the booming indoor swap meet economy, as Korean and other Asian entrepreneurs, with financing from the growing Koreatown financial sector, founded wholesale as well as garment manufacturing firms.

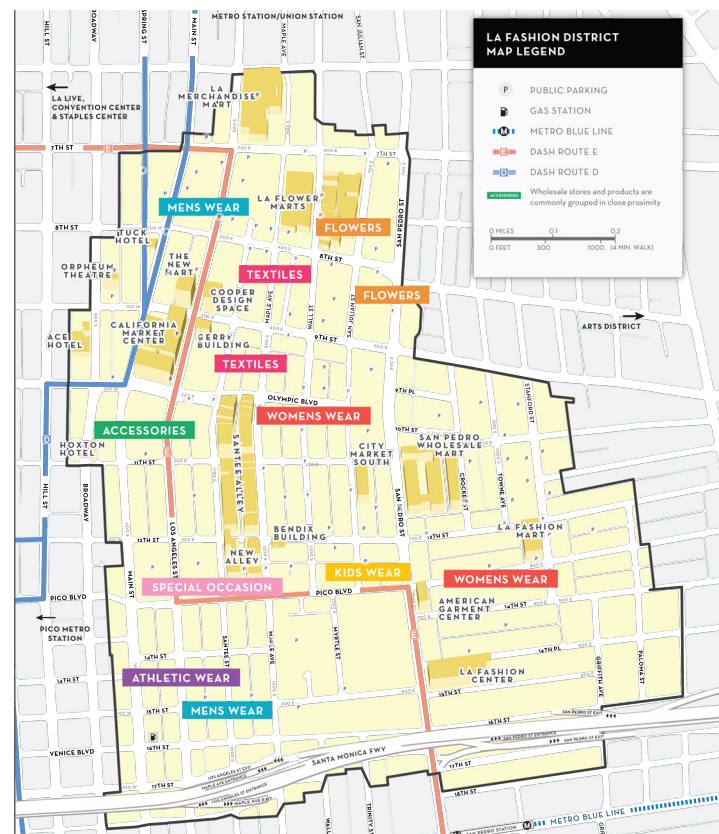


Figure 3.26: Map of the Los Angeles Fashion District, circa 2020. Source: Los Angeles Fashion District https://fashiondistrict.org/files/docs/lafd_map_final_expansion--forprint.pdf

The influx of easily-exploitable undocumented immigrant workers during the 1980s concurrently spawned a host of “replacement industries” as the unionized branch plants of heavy manufacturing firms shut down. As James Curtis has observed, Asian immigrants were instrumental in forming these small non-union firms, which included a broad range of low-wage activities including “textiles, apparel, and dyeing; furniture making and upholstery; food and beverage processing; paper manufacturing and recycling; warehousing and storage; petrochemical refining and pharmaceuticals; light metals fabrication and recycling; wrecking and welding operations; toys and novelties

¹⁰⁵ According to the U.S. Census, \$200,670,000 of Los Angeles’s \$269,781,000 in international merchandise trade consisted of imports in 2001. Three quarters of the merchandise which moved through the region’s ports originated from Pacific Rim nations. In 2001, Japan led with \$45.6 billion in imports, China with \$44.9 billion, South Korea with \$15.7 billion, and Taiwan with \$14.9 billion. Erie, 10–11.

manufacturing; and industrial-toxic waste disposal.”¹⁰⁶ Korean entrepreneurs were especially active within the apparel industry, forming “garment contractors” which execute the cutting, assembly, laundering, and finishing of apparel while shielding clothing companies from unionization attempts and efforts to improve workplace conditions. By 1998 Edna Bonacich observed that nearly all of the “literally thousands of garment contractors in Los Angeles” were immigrants from Asia, with Koreans maintaining a high profile in the garment district by owning “some of the largest shops.”¹⁰⁷ With backing from Koreatown banks, Korean apparel contractors (i.e. sweatshops) densely clustered within the garment district, and by 2000 employed half of the garment workers in Greater Los Angeles.¹⁰⁸ Apparel manufacturers, along with other “replacement industries,” restored industrial employment levels in the region to roughly those of its 1970’s peak, but the working conditions were more precarious and the pay worse than tens of thousands of unionized heavy industry jobs they replaced.¹⁰⁹

The variety of merchandise available through Fashion District wholesalers and in turn sold by swap meet vendors often exceeded that available within conventional department stores and malls. In any given indoor swap meet, shoppers would encounter vendors specializing in a broad array of goods, including an impressive range of custom made items. Men’s and women’s clothing (formal wear, fast fashion, athletic apparel, socks and underwear), shoes, jewelry, beauty supplies, auto parts, stereo equipment, furniture, vacuum supplies, kitchenware, pet supplies, and animals themselves can be had from swap meet stalls. Service providers including florists, acupuncturists, tattoo parlors, hair and nail salons, custom embroidery and screen printing services, legal and tax services, and even mortuary services drew a steady business to these environments (Figure 3.27).

Today, thousands of Fashion District showrooms continue to distribute imported goods to retailers in from high-end to low-end market niches. Just as outdoor swap meet vendors depended on “liquidators” and “salvage brokers,” nearly every indoor swap meet stocked their booths with a dizzying array of merchandise from Fashion District wholesalers. In turn, many wholesalers rely on the swap meet trade and some have built their businesses around it. The owner of Yago Apparel, for instance, estimates that it distributes over half of the men’s shirts, pants, and sweatshirts it produces *directly* to swap meet vendors, who purchase small quantities of merchandise in person at its modest

¹⁰⁶ James R. Curtis, “Barrio Space and Place in Southeast Los Angeles, California,” in *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places: Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America*, ed. Daniel D. Arreola (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 139.

¹⁰⁷ Edna Bonacich, “Organizing Immigrant Workers in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 4 (1998): 11, 15.

¹⁰⁸ According to Bonacich and Applebaum, “garment contractors” in Los Angeles. Korean See: Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 135–63. In 2000, although Korean-owned contracting firms accounted for 23 percent of contractors, their large factories employed about half of all garment workers in the region. Bonacich and Appelbaum, 145.

¹⁰⁹ Between 1993 and 1998, Los Angeles added 26,000 apparel jobs, establishing itself as the largest industry in Los Angeles (ahead of aerospace) and as the largest garment employer in the United States with roughly 150,000 workers. See: Bonacich, “Organizing Immigrant Workers in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry,” 10. By 2016, New York had reclaimed its position as the number one garment employer, with 183,000 employees versus Los Angeles’s 99,000. See: Joint Economic Committee, “The New Economy of Fashion” (Washington, D.C.: United States Congress, February 2016), https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/01498736-4605-4715-a894-4a04f65b01fc/the-new-economy-of-fashion---joint-economic-committee-final-lp-.pdf. Among the most prominent heavy industrial plants operating in Southeast Los Angeles prior to the 1980s were Firestone Tire and Rubber, Bethlehem Steel, Consolidated Steel, Aluminum Company of America, Continental Can, Owens-Illinois Glass, and Weiser Lock. Meatpacking plants including the Union Stock Yards (located in Southeast Los Angeles from 1922-1963) and Farmer John also operated there. Before 1980, furniture, textiles, apparel, food processing, chemicals, and trucking/logistics firms emerged as secondary industries. See Curtis, “Barrio Space and Place in Southeast Los Angeles, California,” 134.

showroom on Santee Street (Figures 3.28 and 3.29).¹¹⁰ The rapid spread of indoor swap meets was fueled in part by the ease with which vendors were able to purchase small quantities of goods at downtown wholesalers in the morning, and then sell them from their booths that same afternoon.



Figures 3.27: Women's underwear for sale at the Alameda Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2015.



Figures 3.28: Yago Apparel wholesale showroom at 1504 Santee Street. Photo by author, 2016.

¹¹⁰ Personal Interview with owner of Yago Apparel, a wholesaler with a showroom at 1504 Santee Street.

From the Fashion District, then, Korean-owned garment manufacturers and wholesalers anchored a constellation of indoor swap meets that reached across Southern California and the Southwestern United States. In opening thousands of garment contracting firms, wholesalers, and indoor swap meets, Korean immigrants constructed a vertically integrated ecosystem that helped them pursue financial stability and personal wealth. The entrepreneurial gusto with which Korean garment contractors, wholesalers, swap meet operators, and vendors constructed this ecosystem rapidly transformed Los Angeles's industrial, wholesale, and retail landscapes within the city's inner suburbs.

Conclusion: A New Immigrant Opportunity Structure

For many owners and vendors, the indoor swap meet business was a pathway to the Korean American Dream. While working long hours and involving their extended families in their business operations, many indoor swap meet vendors were able to leverage minimal investment capital into lucrative businesses that enabled them to enjoy the comforts of middle class American suburban life. "Nicolas," a Korean swap meet jewelry vendor at the Alameda Swap Meet, epitomizes these dreams of suburban homeownership, marriage, children, education, and an active life of leisure outside of the workplace. In 1986, he migrated to the United States to enroll as an undergraduate at the University of Southern California (USC). Majoring in accounting with the hope of one day becoming a certified public accountant, Nicholas took a part time job at a jeweler at the Slauson Swap Meet to help make ends meet. During his third year at USC, he realized that his struggles with the English language might hamper his job prospects as an accountant, even with a college degree. When his boss offered to sell the Slauson jewelry store to him, Nicholas determined that the indoor swap meet business offered a more promising career path. Thus, in 1989 and at age 22, he became the sole owner of a very lucrative swap meet business. Working full time serving his mostly Black customers and socking away significant savings, he dropped out of USC. During the subsequent three years, his store's brisk business enabled him to purchase a suburban home, secure a middle-class lifestyle, and start a family.¹¹²

Nicolas mostly enjoyed this work until 1992, when vandalism and looting during the Rodney King unrest closed the Slauson Swap Meet for several months. Spooked by these events, he sold the jewelry store and leased a restaurant in Koreatown. However, he quickly discovered operating a restaurant to be more challenging and far less lucrative than running a swap meet business.¹¹³ Struggling to earn enough revenue to even pay his lease, he left the restaurant business and returned to swap meet vending. Thus, in 1996, Nicholas opened a jewelry store in a corner of the expansive Alameda Swap Meet. During the ensuing twenty years, he made a very good living selling jewelry to the booming numbers of undocumented immigrants who frequented the swap meet. This prosperity enabled Nicholas to purchase a large home, send his children to Ivy League universities, and develop a passion for spear-fishing and abalone diving in Monterey, Mendocino, and Bodega Bay. During my visits with him, he proudly showed me pictures of his children and recreational pursuits, clearly relishing the trappings of full economic citizenship and an upper-middle-class lifestyle.

However, these dreams were often tarnished by thin profit margins, long work hours with only few days off per month, and difficulties with swap meet management. Deceptive recruitment advertisements lay at the root of many of these difficulties. After the Slauson Swap Meet erroneously advertised parking space for 1,500 cars and television ads on the major networks, its vendors sued. Misrepresentations of the swap meet customer demographics were another prevalent problem. As *Korea Times* reported in 1987, "the majority of the ads include something like 'middle-class Black

¹¹² "Nicolas," Personal Interview, March 3, 2016.

¹¹³ For Nicolas, the economics were brutal. His astronomical \$25,000 per month rent for his 5,400 square foot restaurant meant that he had to make \$9,000 per day in sales just to break even. "Nicolas."

and/or Mexican residential area,' but for many ads, this is a false statement, not an exaggeration. If one drives around the South Central LA area for ten minutes where indoor swap meets are concentrated, this becomes obvious right away."¹¹⁴ Moreover, as they opened in Los Angeles's "hoods" and "barrios," indoor swap meets became socially contentious emblems of exploitation in the eyes of their new Black and Latinx customers. Although largely invisible to middle-class Angelenos, the bazaars quickly became everyday emporiums for Southern California's working class people of color. As I discuss in Chapter 4, African American patrons were among the most vocal critics of the business type due to the persistent perceptions that businesses sold shoddy goods and offered inferior customer service compared to the mainstream retailers which had recently abandoned their neighborhoods. As Korean vendors tried to deal with these objections—which were often about matters outside of their control—they struggled to overcome the difficulties of intercultural communication. Far from the ideal consumers portrayed by vendor recruitment ads, Black and Spanish-speaking customers presented unique and often unanticipated challenges for vendors who spoke little English or Spanish.

Also unanticipated were clashes between Korean swap meet vendors and operators. By 1987, the *Korea Times* saw fit to publish an article titled "Conflict Between Management and Tenants," which enumerated several instances of "extreme security deposits, false advertisements, the use of physical force, and lease renewal issues."¹¹⁵ At several swap meets, operators charged extortionate "security deposits" as high as \$20,000 in order to *renew* a booth lease. To protect themselves against such exploitation, vendors at several indoor swap meets formed sellers associations.

The Compton Fashion Center was among those indoor swap meets which engaged in extractive business practices. Just four months after opening in 1985, its management charged its existing tenants an additional one-time fee of \$1,500 to \$2,500 per booth on top of their previously-agreed upon rents, prompting a coordinated organization effort.¹¹⁶ In early 1986, 97 Korean vendors organized the "Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers Association" (CFCKSA) after BJS took actions to evict three vendors who objected to the new fees. Later that year, they sued the swap meet for "extortionate" business practices and false advertising, noting that the building's air conditioning system had never been activated.¹¹⁷

Vendors at the Slauson Swap Meet and elsewhere also formed merchants associations, which evolved into democratic bodies responsible for coordinated acts of citizenship in the ensuing years. As I discuss in Chapter 4, some such groups engaged in fundraising, community outreach, and donations to demonstrate good "microcorporate" citizenship. In an effort to soothe relations with their communities, these groups joining swap meet owners in organizing charity golf tournaments, toy giveaways for children, turkey giveaways and Santa visitation during the holidays (Figure 3.31). Korean swap meet vendors began exercising their rights as emerging citizens on urban and national scales. Thus, during the final decades of the twentieth century, as Korean immigrants built indoor swap meets, they thus began to fundamentally refigure the social and built environments of Southern California's low-income neighborhoods. As I discuss in Chapter 4, swap meet owners and vendors alike deployed considerable social capital to help to revitalize neighborhoods suffering from under-investment.

¹¹⁴ Ahn Sang-Ho, "Conflict Between Management and Tenants," *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, November 21, 1987, sec. B, University of Southern California - Microfilm.

¹¹⁵ Sang-Ho.

¹¹⁶ Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers' Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.

¹¹⁷ Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers' Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al.



Figure 3.31: Patrons line up for the Valley Indoor Swap Meet’s annual holiday toy giveaway. Photo by author, 2018.

Because the management tactics of swap meet operators were often loose, their heterogeneous building interiors served as incubators for new design ideas. With tens and sometimes hundreds of independent entrepreneurs under one roof, the interstitial spaces of indoor swap meets doubled as new forms of public space. Moreover, in building indoor swap meets so rapidly and in such large numbers, Korean immigrants swiftly created thousands of new jobs for recently arrived immigrants from Korea (and later) Latin America. In just a few years, they inserted an entirely new opportunity structure for immigrants to Los Angeles that was almost entirely off the radar of the region’s White population.

In negotiating the boundaries between owner, manager, vendor, customer, and community member, *all* participants within the “arena” of indoor swap meets were forced to contend with many of the questions and dilemmas of citizenship within a contemporary and multi-ethnic city. In building swap meets, Korean entrepreneurs created public spaces in which new kinds of social and ethnic mixing began to take place. As I argue in Chapters 5 and 6, these encounters contributed to the type’s resilience and importance.

Although sites of social mixing, indoor swap meets were harbingers of an American retail landscape increasingly stratified by social class. In part because of widening inequality and the declining fortunes of many Americans, relatively new discount retailers such as Costco, Walmart, and Dollar General became household names between the 1980s and 2010s. Indoor swap meets were on the leading edge of this phenomenon. Among the first to serve the growing regional market for new and inexpensive everyday goods, they saturated Southern California’s retail landscape during an era of regional experimentation in discount retail forms. Locally-run warehouse stores, big box emporiums, and 99-cent retailers were all present in 1980s Southern California, with regional chains like Price Club (San Diego, 1976) Fedco (Los Angeles, 1948), and 99 Cents Only Stores (Commerce, 1982) experimenting with new retailing concepts. The same qualities that made Price Club and 99-cent stores popular—namely their stripped-down warehouse settings, an exceptionally broad range but ever-changing selection of goods, and an aesthetics of abundance—also fueled the popularity of indoor swap meets in neighborhoods that wouldn’t see these chains for a decade or more.

When the Western Swap Meet was replaced by Koreatown Plaza, a mall designed by one of the world's most famous shopping mall developers, Gruen Associates, many observers heralded the development as a new public commons for Koreatown.¹¹⁸ Onlookers may also have surmised that as Korean real estate investors built indoor swap meets, they *really* aspired to upgrade their properties to full-fledged shopping malls. Missing from these analyses was the fact that many indoor swap meets already acted as public spaces. Yet, while professionally-designed shopping malls held significant cachet in the eyes of civic boosters and city leaders, indoor swap meets decidedly did not. During the lead-up to the Koreatown Plaza's construction, a spokesman for property owner and developer Joong Nam Yang noted the hopes attached to the new center: "In opening this center, we are going to attract American customers to the Korean community. We are going to promote it to the American community and the ethnic communities. We are going to have monthly events inside the shopping mall not only for the businesses but for the Wilshire community people."¹¹⁹ By 1985, many indoor swap meets were already filling these same social roles across Los Angeles.

¹¹⁸ Staff, "\$25-Million Koreatown Shopping Mall to Rise: Three-Level Enclosed Retail Facility Seen as Major Visitor Magnet."

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Nancy Yoshihara, "Koreatown Embarks on a New Phase: New Retail Plaza Aims to Broaden Customer Base," *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1987.

Chapter 4: Maligned from Above and Below: Resistance, Regulation and the Rodney King Rebellion



Figure 4.1: The Hollywood Swap Meet at 6501 Hollywood Blvd. (at Wilcox) was completely destroyed by arsonists during the Rodney King unrest. Photo Credit: Gary Leonard, 1992.

Around 4 pm on April 29, 1992, less than an hour after the acquittal of the four White police officers who were videotaped brutally beating Rodney King, a crowd of people gathered in David and Yang Nam Lee's Pay-Less Liquor Store in South Central Los Angeles. Outraged by the verdict, they refused to pay for their purchase and hit the owner's son with a bottle of beer. As impromptu protests, looting, and arson spread across Los Angeles during the hours and days that followed, Korean small business owners across Los Angeles were dismayed to find their businesses targets of much of the destruction. Although many participants in the uprising seized the occasion to air grievances against oppressive policing tactics and systemic racism through "redistributive justice," some went so far as to express a desire to directly evict White and Korean bodies from their neighborhoods.¹ As one explained, "I'm telling you, dude, this was great! We were throwing rocks and bottles and we were just chasing White people out of the neighborhood." Another continued, "Hell, they chased Rodney King out of his car and got him. So let's get *them*."²

The "them" in this man's telling were not only White people, but also Korean-owned businesses, which were regarded by some protestors as community invaders. According to Naomi Bradley, an onlooker during the first day of looting, one crowd of African American teenagers went from store to store in a mini mall, one of them shouting, "*That's a Korean store. Go for it! Get them out of*

¹ Paul Davidoff, "Working Toward Redistributive Justice," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 41, no. 5 (1975): 317–18.

² Frederick Rose and Sonia L. Nazario, "Rodney King Verdict: The Aftermath," *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, May 1, 1992. Emphasis added.

our community. And if they try to come back, we'll kill them.”³ Across town at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Crenshaw, one reporter observed that “1,000 people ripped the steel gates from the concrete walls of the Crenshaw Swap Meet building, then ran from it with jewelry bunched in their arms and rings on all of their fingers.”⁴

The Crenshaw Swap Meet was but one of at least thirty indoor swap meets looted during the uprising (Figure 4.1).⁵ As television viewers across the country watched dramatic images of buildings succumb to arson, impromptu militias of young Korean men surveying the scene from store roofs with hand guns and rifles in hand, and looters of all ethnicities carrying merchandise out of stores, some may have noticed the burning indoor swap meets. James Lee, the owner of the nineteen booth Super Swap Meet at Vermont and Manchester, became one of those viewers while visiting his ailing mother in South Korea. After receiving a panicked and tearful phone call from his wife in Los Angeles, he watched his swap meet burn to the ground on live television from 5,800 miles away (Figure 4.2).⁶ His swap meet was one of fifteen burned down or severely damaged in the uprising. While the English-language news media largely focused on the destruction major retail chains and Korean-owned markets and liquor stores, at least fifteen indoor swap meets were burned to the ground, 317 swap meet businesses were looted or destroyed, and well over 1,000 swap meet vendors lost their places of work.⁷ Of the estimated 2,280 Korean-owned businesses damaged in the uprising, those housed within swap meet buildings accounted for the largest share (Figure 4.3).⁸



Figure 4.2: The burned out shells of the Super Swap Meet (formerly Soul Mart) and ABC Swapmeet on Vermont Ave., between 84th St. and Manchester Ave. Source: Jim Mendenhall, Los Angeles Times.

³ Rose and Nazario.

⁴ Robert D. Davila, Ricci Graham, and Sam Stanton, “Looters Laugh, Victims Weep Amid Violence,” *The Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1992.

⁵ “List of Damaged Businesses,” *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, May 4, 1992, sec. B6-B11.

⁶ Alan Janson, “Getting Burned: Merchant Devastated by L.A. Riots,” *Daily Breeze*, March 23, 1993.

⁷ Richard Reyes Fruto, “Riot to Affect KA Banks,” *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, June 1, 1992.

⁸ Edward Chang estimates that roughly 2,280 Korean-owned businesses were damaged in the uprising. See: Chang, “Korean Swapmeets in Los Angeles,” 53.

Korean proprietors affected by the uprising expressed bewilderment at the intensity of the devastation. Joon H. Lee (of no relation to James), a real estate investor and indoor swap meet owner/manager summarizes the professed shock of many Korean business owners to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter: “I don’t see the reason why they want to destroy a swap meet. *It’s not like a liquor store or something.* It doesn’t have a bad impact on the neighborhood.”⁹ Lee’s dismay at the destruction of Korean-owned swap meets was shared by many owners and vendors, but their surprise was unwarranted. During the previous decade, while Korean-owned liquor stores garnered notoriety through numerous well-publicized boycotts and protests, indoor swap meets were not immune from community objection. In fact, protests and boycotts against them were significant and ongoing occurrences between 1987 and 1992.

Korean-Owned Businesses Damaged in the Rodney King Unrest			
Business Category	Businesses Damaged	Damage in Dollars	Percentage Damaged
Swap Meet	317	\$51,188,800	19.7%
Other	304	\$51,876,870	18.9%
Market	243	\$60,243,850	15.1%
Clothing	181	\$30,656,250	11.3%
Liquor	162	\$33,618,500	10.1%
Restaurants	78	\$9,237,500	4.9%
Laundry	72	\$19,269,500	4.5%
Electronics	51	\$13,550,000	3.2%
Automotive	45	\$7,952,000	2.8%
Beauty	39	\$5,607,300	2.4%
Gas Station	36	\$4,492,000	2.2%
Jewelry	35	\$4,793,000	2.2%
Video Stores	25	\$4,022,000	1.6%
Furniture	18	\$3,340,000	1.1%
Total	1607	\$299,847,570	100.0%

Figure 4.3: This table appeared in the May 4, 1992 edition of the Korea Times Los Angeles Edition (Hangook Ilbo), the day after the Rodney King unrest concluded. A May 11 report in the Joong-Ahn Ilbo revised these numbers upward.

Almost from their inception, indoor swap meets were perceived as ‘matter out of place’ in the neighborhoods they served.¹⁰ Due to their novel and unfamiliar physical forms, the “strange” cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their vendors, and their exuberant displays of off-brand merchandise that many perceived as sub-par, messy, and disorderly, the bazaars were viewed as illegitimate by customers, neighbors, and regulators. Indoor swap meets, which juxtaposed “in a single real place,” to quote Foucault, “different spaces and locations that [were] incompatible with each other,” were kinds of heterotopias where individuals of multiple cultures and classes crossed paths.¹¹ Anxieties over

⁹ Quoted in Jube Shiver Jr., “Tensions, Bargains Share Space at Indoor Swap Meets,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1992. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (Routledge, 1997), 554.

their informal design elements as well as perceived incompatibilities between Korean vendors and their Black and Latinx customers attracted a range of attacks from the “bottom-up” and the “top-down.” African American grassroots activists and city officials each framed indoor swap meets as undesirable entities, and they challenged their right to operate through protests, boycotts, and regulatory actions.

These challenges in many ways stemmed from the rapid demographic shifts and widening class divides wrought by globalization. The breathtakingly swift offshoring and shuttering of southeast Los Angeles’s manufacturing plants ripped out the region’s economic backbone and left its predominantly African American and Latinx populace with worsening job prospects and diminished purchasing power. Once-proud department and retail stores pulled up stakes from Compton and Inglewood to Pomona and Panorama City, paving the way for Korean entrepreneurs to set up shop within the region’s blue collar suburbs. Because mom-and-pop swap meet vendors lacked the economies of scale and the supply chains enjoyed by the stores they replaced, they were often forced to sell lower quality goods for higher prices than the Sears, JC Penney, and Montgomery Ward stores that preceded them. Indoor swap meets therefore attracted complaints about the character and quality of the goods sold there. These goods, often designed locally and manufactured overseas (or in Los Angeles sweatshops), were sold wholesale by hundreds of lower-end design houses in downtown’s “Fashion District” directly to Korean swap meet vendors. By moving clothes, toys, and accessories from wholesalers to market, swap meet vendors introduced inexpensive and off-brand imports to their predominantly African American customers. Although many customers grew to appreciate some of the unique, custom, and knockoff styles available only in indoor swap meets, others resented what they perceived to be sub-par merchandise lacking the quality guarantees of national retailers.

Grievances against swap meet entrepreneurs were also responses to the same legacies of systemic racism as those which produced the inhumane policing tactics that provoked the Rodney King Rebellion. When African American organizers boycotted the businesses, their complaints were often framed as extensions of Civil Rights Era struggles for equal access to goods and services in retail establishments.¹² Seeking a shopping atmosphere free from disrespect and harassment, some directed their ire at what was perceived to be rude customer service and shoddy merchandise. Others complained about the dearth of Black owned swap meet businesses, and the lack of swap meet jobs available to community members. Because many vendors—facing extremely low profit margins—kept costs low by relying on unpaid family labor, swap meet vendors failed to offer a ladder out of poverty to the communities they served. Even the more successful swap meet vendors who hired part-time workers offered only minimum wage, sometimes less. These actions fueled significant tensions between employers, who were frequently Korean, and their employees, who were most often Latinx and Black. Together, the swap meet boycotts addressed in this chapter reaffirmed the commercial realm’s enduring role as an important arena of social contestation, as African American patrons asserted their right to equal treatment in retail spaces.

During this same period, city governments across the region ranging from upper- and middle-class suburban enclaves to blue-collar communities also took regulatory actions against swap meet owners. Between 1986 and 1992, eight Los Angeles County jurisdictions enacted anti-indoor swap meet ordinances, which in some instances shut down existing businesses. However, unlike the community activists who objected to their customer service and hiring practices, “top-down,” city officials used a language of aesthetics to criticize their perceived visual and social disorder as evidence of negative neighborhood and social impacts. As Greater Los Angeles grew more and more diverse, and an emphasis on urban clean up before and after the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics built up steam,

¹² Most notable are the 1950s and 1960s sit-ins at lunch counters in Greensboro outlets of the Kress and Woolworth five and dime stores.

cities—with the help of NIMBY groups—focused on eradicating visible “dirt,” “disorder,” and “matter out of place,” in an effort to keep Black and brown bodies *in* their place.¹³

Objections to indoor swap meets were not only rooted in contrasting visions about what form the retail built environment should take, but also a perception that the businesses epitomized out of control and undesirable urban growth. City officials, scholars, activists, and neighbors in various ways maligned their heterogeneous aesthetics as chaotic and disorderly, their labor conditions as exploitative, and their non-local ownership as extractive, fueling a low-level, ongoing controversy about their legitimacy in the urban landscape. Indoor swap meets thus reflected an increasingly unstable social milieu while contributing to the rapidly shifting visual culture of the inner city urban landscape. The tropes of social disorder and chaos frequently invoked by cultural critics such as Mike Davis were thus directly linked to the perceptions of visual disorder and chaos many saw within informal and semi-formal vending spaces.

This chapter is organized into three thematic sections. I begin by examining specific boycotts and protests against indoor swap meets in South Central Los Angeles, which critiqued the hiring and business practices of the bazaars. Next, I discuss numerous attempts to regulate indoor swap meets in jurisdictions ranging from lower to upper-middle class municipalities. While these challenges substantially differed in terms of their tactics and stated rationale, I argue that they were moments of intercultural reckoning, which provoked improved community outreach efforts and intersectional coalition building by swap meet operators and vendors.

In many ways, the destruction of indoor swap meets along with liquor stores during the Rodney King Rebellion was predicated on the idea that Korean-owned businesses were somehow allied with White business interests. As efforts to regulate the enterprises demonstrate, this belief oversimplified a complex reality in which they didn’t fit within obsolete Black-White racial binaries. With each boycott, protest, and regulatory effort, I argue that Korean entrepreneurs carved out a place for themselves within a new and increasingly multicultural urban order. The conflicts which led up to the uprising, then, are best understood as processes of everyday place and citizenship claiming, which ultimately led to improving intercultural awareness.

Simmering Tensions, Boycotts, and Rebellion

“The *Sentinel* said it almost 60 years ago: ‘Don’t buy where you can’t work!’ Today we need to add, don’t buy where you’re not respected!”

- Danny Bakewell, Brotherhood Crusade President¹⁴

As the residents of South Central Los Angeles found themselves doing business with the Korean entrepreneurs who acquired retail stores in droves during the 1970s and 80s, smoldering resentments within the African American community about discrimination and blocked mobility in the retail sector bubbled to the fore. Amidst growing economic distress as heavy industries, the influx reminded some of the dearth of Black-owned businesses in their community, which had only grown worse following the dismantling of legal segregation. With prospective Black entrepreneurs eschewing retailing in favor of better professional opportunities in other industries, the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Program, which called for full employment, support of Black entrepreneurship, and “an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our Black and oppressed communities” seemed further from

¹³ I draw here from Mary Douglas’s framing of “dirt and disorder”—in this case socially “othered” groups—as “matter out of place.” See: Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ron Dungee and Marsha Mitchell, “Black-Korean Tension Mounts; Leaders Call for Reason Calm,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 20, 1991.

reach than ever.¹⁵ Reluctant loan officers acted as further deterrents to those looking to open their own stores, as commercial bank lending to South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods was extremely tight after the 1965 Watts Rebellion.¹⁶ Korean entrepreneurs, on the other hand, sidestepped mainstream banks by taking out loans from Koreatown lending institutions as well as family and friends. By January of 1992, a *Korea Times* report estimated that 80 percent of South Central businesses were owned by Korean entrepreneurs, including at least twenty swap meets and hundreds of gas stations, dry cleaners, and beauty supply shops.¹⁷

This “commercial supremacy,” as the reporter put it, contributed to growing resentments within the African American community. This sentiment was captured by the only Black vendor at a 260 booth swap meet, who remarked in 1987 that Koreans “make all the money here and take all the money away...[to] Downtown and Koreatown.”¹⁸ This sentiment illustrates the “middleman minority” status of many Korean vendors who were caught between White producers and low-income customers of color.¹⁹ In this way, Korean vendors and distributors were exposed to critiques from activists, who accused them of attaining middle class status at the expense of African Americans.

Tensions between Korean retailers and their African American customers began to bubble over as early as the summer of 1983, when the city’s oldest African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, ran a series of stories on the topic. Executive editor James Cleaver was among the first in the community to allege that Korean entrepreneurs mistreated African American patrons, and his newspaper vociferously fanned the embers of community discontent into righteous outrage with its coverage. A flurry of letters to the editor recounted instances of rude and in some cases violent interactions between customer and vendor. One such letter proclaimed that if a Korean vendor “ever puts his or her hands on me, they’d better be prepared for another version of the Vietnam War.”²⁰ The *Sentinel’s* rhetoric became so strident that Eugene Mornell of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission reprimanded Cleaver and his paper for its “inflammatory” invocation of racial stereotypes.²¹ While the paper condemned outright violence as a solution, it did encourage collective action by reminding its readers of the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott.²² With Civil Rights Era boycotts in mind, individuals as well as social justice activists engaged in various forms of resistance against Korean swap meet vendors, including organized protests and boycotts. Alleging overrepresentation of Korean merchants in their communities, rude customer service, and unfair pricing, these individual and collective actions for the most part sought to win changes in the way swap meet vendors did business.

¹⁵ Black Panther Party, “The Ten-Point Program” (October 15, 1966), <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>.

¹⁶ In the late-1980s, Cheng and Espiritu observed the reluctance of mainstream financial institutions to lend to black-owned businesses in South Central Los Angeles. Lucie Cheng and Yen Espiritu, “Korean Businesses in Black and Hispanic Neighborhoods: A Study of Intergroup Relations,” *Sociological Perspectives* 32, no. 4 (1989): 527.

¹⁷ Lee, “Conflicts, Riots, and Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1965–1992,” 44.

¹⁸ Joe Davidson, “Black and White: Melting Pot Boils as Influx of Asian Merchants into Black Neighborhoods Is Greeted Grimly,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 1987.

¹⁹ Min, *Caught in the Middle*.

²⁰ Quoted in Ivory 1983, quoted in Patrick Joyce, *No Fire Next Time: Black-Korean Conflicts and the Future of America’s Cities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 121.

²¹ Joyce, 121.

²² Staff, “A Time for Prudence,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 15, 1984.

Crenshaw Swap Meet: Discriminatory Management and Unequal Access to Capital

The first such boycott took place at the Crenshaw Swap Meet in 1987. Within a year of opening, it had drawn the ire of patrons and nearby residents who accused its manager, John Wong, of refusing to lease booths to Black vendors. In May of 1987, a handful of Black business owners staged a week-long protest outside of the Crenshaw Swap Meet at 3700 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.²³ In addition to objecting to the purportedly discriminatory actions of the swap meet owner, spokesman Charles Cook stated that his group wanted to “end exploitation of Black people.”²⁴ Echoing a view heard in Black communities across the country, Cook claimed that the Crenshaw Swap Meet’s several hundred Asian merchants were “raping the Black community and draining it of what little resources exist.”²⁵ By denying prospective African American merchants the opportunity to operate at the swap meet, they argued, its owner engaged in unfair competition with their nearby Black-owned businesses. While Wong denied these claims, he admitted that five of the swap meet’s 150-200 booths were leased to African Americans and the rest were operated by Korean Americans.²⁶

More serious were Cooks allegations of the systemic disadvantages encountered by Black merchants who wished to start their own businesses. Cook, who owned a beauty shop next to the swap meet, alleged that while Asian merchants enjoyed easy access to capital through federally guaranteed loan programs, African Americans were largely cut off from these opportunities. As Cook asserted, “we would like to share in the loan money and other assistance Asian merchants are receiving....Why are they able to receive loans, but we can’t because we’re told that we must have collateral?”²⁷ Cook believed that because of these discriminatory lending policies, “Asians are taking over our communities while we are nothing more than customers, never owning anything.”²⁸ Perhaps unaware of the ethnic resources Koreans relied upon to purchase South Central businesses, Cook’s critique nonetheless drove to the heart of the matter. After Cook’s pleas for mediation from city officials and state representatives, were met with deaf ears, the US Justice Department’s Community Relations Service (CRS) stepped in to mediate the dispute, which it helped to resolve over a year later.

OMNI and the Slauson Swap Meet Boycott

In 1989, a group of African American citizens disillusioned with their experiences with Korean shop owners formed the Organization of Mutual Neighborhood Interest (OMNI) to boycott stores believe to discriminate against Black patrons. Its members, led by Ward Wesley, were motivated by negative experiences with Korean small business owners who, among other things refused to accept returns, followed Black customers around their stores, and admonished them not to touch the merchandise. As one OMNI member observed, “it reminds me of Texas. I’m from a Black-White society. When I was a little girl and we went to buy clothes [Blacks] couldn’t try them on. It’s the same thing with Koreans. And I’m telling you...we don’t need any new Massa’s.”²⁹

²³ The protest began at 10 am on May 13th and ended on May 20th. See: F. Finley McRae, “Crenshaw Merchants Launch Asian Protest,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 14, 1987; F. Finley McRae, “Russell Sets Confab as Protest Continues,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 21, 1987, sec. A8.

²⁴ McRae, “Russell Sets Confab as Protest Continues.”

²⁵ McRae.

²⁶ Joyce, *No Fire Next Time*, 124.

²⁷ McRae, “Crenshaw Merchants Launch Asian Protest.”

²⁸ McRae.

²⁹ Itabari Njeri, “Cultural Conflict: Blacks and Korean Americans Have Become Antagonists Instead of Allies,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1989, sec. VIEW.

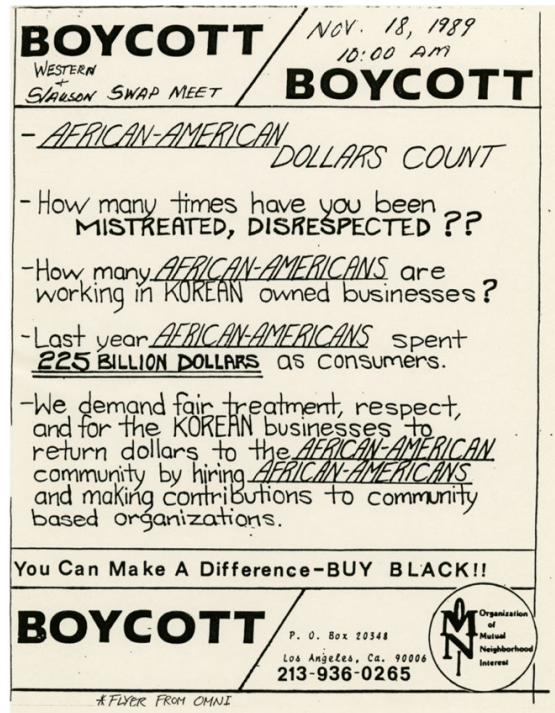


Figure 4.4: Slauson Swap Meet Boycott Flyer. Source: UCLA Department of Special Collections³⁰

At the height of the holiday shopping season on November 18, 1989, OMNI initiated a 30-day boycott in an institution filled with hundreds of Korean vendors: the Slauson Swap Meet. Unlike the Crenshaw Swap Meet boycott, where a specific allegation of discrimination fueled sustained protest, OMNI issued a set of general demands for “fair treatment, respect, and for the KOREAN businesses to “return dollars to the AFRICAN AMERICAN community by hiring AFRICAN AMERICANS and making contributions to community-based organizations” (Figure 4.4). Although the boycott initially attracted about 20 protestors, its numbers quickly diminished. Having dealt with the persistent Crenshaw boycott, the U.S. Community Relations Service (CRS) again intervened, but the boycott’s “staying power was difficult” this time, according to CRS mediator Stephen Thom.³¹

One reason for the boycott’s dwindling support may have been the steady stream of positive coverage in local newspapers about its operator, Michael Yoon. The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, for instance, published an article acknowledging that Yoon had addressed many of OMNI’s complaints *before* the boycott even began. Indeed, during the preceding years, Yoon had slowly integrated community outreach efforts into his business operations. Unlike other Korean swap meet operators, Yoon recruited vendors by advertising in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* as well as the *Korea Times*.³² He ensured that the swap meet’s two largest service contracts were with a Black-owned and minority-owned firm, whose employees were 80 percent African American.³³ Additionally, his swap meet manager Jay Lee, had hired Jeff Park, a Korean-born security guard whose father was African American and his mother Korean, in a clear move to ameliorate disputes between vendors and customers. However, many African American customers distrusted Park’s fluency in Korean, believing that he would side with Korean merchants in disputes. Finally, Yoon and the Slauson Swap Meet vendors association made

³⁰ Image available in Lee, “Conflicts, Riots, and Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1965–1992,” 119.

³¹ CRS Mediator Stephen Thom, quoted in Joyce, *No Fire Next Time*, 124..

³² Slauson Swapmeet, Print Advertisement, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 12, 1986.

³³ Ron Dungee, “Renewed Efforts to Ease Racial Tension,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 14, 1989.

regular charitable contributions to community nonprofits dedicated to helping African American community members. Earlier in 1989, they had given thousands of dollars in donations to five such organizations, including the People Who Care Youth Center, Youth Gang Services, Explorer Scouts, Kedren Community Mental Health Center, and the Youth Intervention Program.³⁴ According to the Youth Intervention Program's director, Margo Wainwright, the Slauson Swap Meet's support was especially significant since White- and Black-owned businesses refused to deal with an organization that provided services to society's most stigmatized groups. "They didn't want to [support] to anybody who was running a school for gang-bangers, thugs, prostitutes, and pregnant girls," Wainwright observed. Her partnership with the Slauson Swap Meet, on the other hand, "gave me space, they pick up all my utilities. They've given my kids scholarship money. *They realize they're taking something out of the community and they've got to give something back.*"³⁵ By partnering with Wainwright, the swap meet revealed a broad willingness amongst the Korean business community to deal with stigmatized and otherwise neglected groups across Los Angeles. This willingness in the absence of other forms of support illustrates the moral agency of Korean business owners as well as their "middleman" positions within a structurally racist society.

Thus, while OMNI boycott organizers painted Korean retailers with a broad brush and somewhat arbitrarily targeted the Slauson Swap Meet, other Black community leaders recognized the efforts of some swap meet operators to be good faith community players. As Wainwright disclosed to a reporter covering the ongoing boycott, "They say these merchants are not supportive of the community where they do business and that's not true. They contribute to just about every non-profit agency around this community."³⁶ Because Yoon and other swap meet operators were relatively low-key about their community contributions, many of their customers were unaware the owners of these bazaars were already addressing their grievances on an institutional level.

The larger issue, however, was that this institutional agency did not compensate for the microaggressions of the swap meet's hundreds of vendors. Each swap meet business operated according its own customer service policy (or lack thereof), and this heterogeneity created ample opportunities for misunderstandings between customers and merchants. In spite of the efforts by swap meet managers, bad experiences with single vendors swiftly circulated within the African American community and press. Moreover, significant cultural differences around customer service norms created an impression that Korean merchants were generally disrespectful when held to American standards. As Wainwright observed during a trip to Korea, brusque service was pervasive in the country and not specifically reserved for African Americans in the United States. "They are aggressive people, even among themselves," she opined to a *Sentinel* reporter during the boycott. "They're just pushy, abrupt people. It's part of their culture. If you look at the Japanese, the Koreans—all of the Asians—and how they converse and speak with each other, you see that they're pushy and to the point with each other and everybody else."³⁷ Such cultural stereotypes notwithstanding, these differing customer service approaches lay at the root of general tensions between Korean vendors and African American swap meet customers as well as the Slauson Swap Meet boycott.

Lurking in the background were deeper problems of structural racism and xenophobia within the United States. Like all Americans, the worldview of Korean vendors and Black customers was shaped by racist depictions of Black people and immigrants in movies, news reports, and political rhetoric. As consumers of American media even before migrating to the United States, Korean immigrants were well-aculturated to racist notions about Black people. As *Korea Times* editor, K.W.

³⁴ Dungee.

³⁵ Quoted in Dungee. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Quoted in Dungee.

³⁷ Quoted in Dungee, "Renewed Efforts to Ease Racial Tension."

Lee put it in 1991, “in Korea, most of what we see of Blacks in movies and television is negative.” However, he observed, Black people also form prejudices about Asian people because of what they read and see. “Much of what we see here in the U.S. relating to Koreans, Chinese or Japanese people is [also] negative.”³⁸

Compounding the prejudices of Korean merchants were real fears borne of experience. In March and April of 1986, four Korean merchants were murdered in their stores by African American burglars.³⁹ During the ensuing years, Black and Korean business leaders formed the Black Korean Alliance (BKA) to serve as a forum for community leaders in the Korean Chamber of Commerce (KCC) to negotiate grievances between the communities. Meanwhile, the *Korea Times* extensively covered the violence against Korean merchants and the potential for it with a rhetoric of criminality.⁴⁰ While these fears contributed to the decisions by Yoon and other Korean community leaders to build bridges with African American community institutions, they also drove individual Korean swap meet vendors to occupy a defensive, suspicious, and distant stance toward their customers.

Significant *geographic* distance between vendors’ places of residence and their workplaces deepened the gulf between Korean entrepreneurs and their Black customers. Because Korean swap meet vendors tended to settle in middle-class communities with good schools, such as the Los Angeles County cities of Glendale, Torrance, Hacienda Heights, and the Orange County cities of Fullerton and Irvine, they enjoyed considerable geographic and social mobility relative to their customers.⁴¹ Thus, Korean entrepreneurs were perceived as *double* outsiders, marked as “foreign” not only by their language, culture, and skin color, but also by their middle-class suburban places of residence. Compared to the experience of African American home and business owners who had just a generation earlier been confined to center city “ghettos” through institutional as well as overt acts of discrimination including redlining, “steering,” and everyday acts of racism and aggression, the dominance of Korean-owned businesses in South Central combined with the knowledge that their proprietors earned their social and geographic mobility with “Black dollars” was a bitter pill to swallow.

Wainwright’s comments thus exposed the complex social dynamics at play within the indoor swap meets. On the one hand, many African American customers viewed Korean-run enterprises as fundamentally extractive because of the aforementioned factors. On the other, some community members recognized the swap meet’s contributions and the structural forces that worked to make merchant-customer interactions fraught.

After the boycott, Yoon and Lee held a series of meetings with their vendors, as well as OMNI, and they subsequently implemented managerial changes designed to quiet objections to their business practices. First, they began mandating that all vendors issue receipts with the merchant’s name and booth number, while implementing a 72 hour return *and* exchange policy.⁴² Second they established two vendor training programs designed to ease tensions and mitigate future conflicts. Jointly operated by Wainwright’s Youth Intervention Program and the LA Unified School District, the first taught

³⁸ Ron Dungee, “Critical Mass in Melting Pot,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 22, 1991.

³⁹ For a discussion of these murders, which took place in liquor stores in Watts and South Central as well as hamburger restaurant, see: Lee, “Conflicts, Riots, and Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1965–1992,” 107.

⁴⁰ Jae Chul Shim, “News Coverage of Racial Tensions and Its Relationship to Korean Newcomers’ Community Participation” (Paper submitted to the Minorities and Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, D.C., August 1995), <https://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A3=ind9602a&L=AEJMC&E=0&P=5144345&B=--&T=text%2Fplain>.

⁴¹ Kim, “Homing in on the American Dream.”

⁴² Up until then, swap meet merchants had only allowed customers to exchange merchandise, *not* return it. This policy—which deviated from the standard department store return policies expected by American customers since they became customary in nineteenth century department stores generated *many* conflicts between merchants and patrons.

customer service skills with an emphasis on Latinx and African American cultural competency. The second, operated by the same organizations, was an ESL program intended to facilitate better in-store communication. Both Yoon and Wainwright hoped that the programs would reduce the incidence of misunderstandings, verbal arguments, and violent conflict. Finally, the swap meet management pledged to work with the Urban League to recruit students from Crenshaw High School to work as employees at vendor booths.⁴³

Perhaps most significant was the hiring in 1990 of an African American customer service specialist whose sole job was to handle customer complaints. Although the swap meet already employed a half-Black, half-Korean security guard, the customer service person was to coordinate English-language PA announcements and to be a first point of contact for disgruntled customers. As Yoon's daughter, Patty observed after attending a meeting with OMNI, "it was basically the language problem they were stressing. They [protestors] have to understand that Koreans have only come here recently, most only know a couple of words in English. They should try to understand our point of view, too."⁴⁴ To bridge these cultural and linguistic gaps, Yoon and Lee hired Herman Bias, who chose the position over several other well-paying job offers. A native of the community with a gentle demeanor well-suited for mediating conflicts, Bias gravitated toward the job *because* of the challenging opportunity it presented soothe racial tensions and improve shopping conditions within his community. When Bias accepted the position, he estimates that the surrounding neighborhood was nearly 80 percent Black, with nearly all of those residents utilizing the swap meet for everyday shopping needs. In contrast, now that the neighborhood is mostly Latinx and better shopping options exist nearby, Bias believes that "only 30 percent of the neighborhood" shops at the swap meet.⁴⁵

While perhaps less warranted than other Korean-owned South Central Los Angeles businesses, the Slauson Swap Meet boycott can be viewed as a productive protest action that helped to put in place policies and trainings designed to improve intercultural interactions at the swap meet. By 1990, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported positively about the concessions won through the protest, while the *Korea Times* ran a profile of the swap meet in 1991, titled "L.A. Slauson Stands Above the Swap Crowd."⁴⁶ Writing one year before it was looted and burned during the Rodney King Rebellion, reporter Richard Fruto painted a rosy scene of intercultural harmony: "Michael Yoon, owner of L.A. Slauson, proudly shows off two trophies that the swap meet won for its entry [Korean folk dancers] in the Black History Parade last month," he wrote. "Rap and soul music blare from home stereos in different stores. Black shoppers walk the narrow aisles festooned with colorful displays of clothes, sportswear and shoes."⁴⁷ This scene, a reflection of the joint efforts of Yoon, Lee, Bias, Wainwright, and the Slauson Swap Meet's merchants association may have helped to improve working conditions there. However, intractable problems of systemic racism, underinvestment, and allegations of poor service continued to color perceptions of the swap meet ecosystem in South Los Angeles.

⁴³ Itabari Njeri, "Swapping Lessons: In Black-Korean Conflict, Both Sides Gain a Better Understanding," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1990.

⁴⁴ Njeri.

⁴⁵ Bias recounts that he chose the swap meet job over an offer to be a bus driver for the Los Angeles Rapid Transit District. Herman Bias, Personal Interview, November 13, 2015.

⁴⁶ Richard Reyes Fruto, "L.A. Slauson Stands Above the Crowd," *The Korea Times Los Angeles*, April 17, 1991, Monthly English edition.

⁴⁷ Fruto.

Inglewood Marketplace Boycott

Just after OMNI concluded its Slauson Swap Meet boycott, it turned its sights on the Inglewood Marketplace. Ward Wesley and his group once again demanded better treatment by the swap meet's Korean vendors and demanded that its operators, Paul and David Cho, hire more Black employees.⁴⁸ Although only thirty of the swap meet's 100 vendors were not Korean, OMNI somewhat ironically targeted a swap meet with an even better community relations record than Slauson, with the swap meet's owner, Paul Cho, having pioneered several of the same tactics later employed by Michael Yoon and Jay Lee. When he opened the enterprise, he offered discounted rent to Black tenants, but few took advantage of the offer.⁴⁹ One his first employees was an African American security guard, and as soon as the Marketplace's cash flow allowed him to bring on additional staff, Cho became the first indoor swap meet operator to hire a Black-owned public relations firm to handle customer complaints (Figure 4.5).⁵⁰



Figure 4.5: Inglewood Marketplace owner, Paul Cho, walks through the swap meet with its Black security guard, Charlie Hawk in 1990. Photo by Bart Bartholomew for *The New York Times*.⁵¹

Additionally, Cho was quick to embrace other forms of community outreach. Embracing an ethos of corporate giving, he donated thousands of dollars annually to various Inglewood organizations including a scholarship fund for local high school students, the Inglewood Senior

⁴⁸ Lee, "A Good Neighbor: Paul Cho Reaches Out to Black Community."

⁴⁹ Alan Janson, "Storing up the Anger: Korean-Black Tension Simmers in Some Areas," *Daily Breeze*, September 8, 1991.

⁵⁰ Cho signed a five year deal in 1988 with the Media Marketing Group, its president, Victor Harris handled customer complaints alongside the swap meet's existing security guard, Charlie Hawk. "Inglewood Department Store Signs Pact," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 21, 1988.

⁵¹ Mydans, "For Them, Racial Harmony Is Work."

Citizens Center, the local branch of the YMCA, and Inglewood Police Department.⁵² Additionally, he joined the Inglewood/Airport Chamber of Commerce and donated toys to an annual giveaway program for needy children.

In spite of these efforts, however, his swap meet generated complaints as it took form. Its interior, which its opening ads promised would serve an upscale Black clientele, assumed a shabby appearance compared to the department store it replaced. Vendors—in control of the aesthetics of their respective booths—made ad hoc design decisions that in spite of their best efforts, lent the swap meet interior an appearance lacking in visual unity (Figure 4.6). The vendors themselves, many college-educated but poorly versed in English and unfamiliar with American customer service norms, were perceived as standoffish and rude by their African American clients. As a *Los Angeles Daily Breeze* reporter observed of the situation, “Blacks complain [that] Korean merchants fail on common courtesies of smiling and saying hello, thank you or goodbye. Some complain Koreans are afraid to touch them when they return change, throwing the money on the counter rather than putting it in their hands. Through many African-American eyes Korean merchants are detached, disrespectful and even arrogant.”⁵³ Furthering the problem was the fact that many Korean swap meet vendors—seeking to eke out a better life for their families on thin profit margins—did not hire any employees.



Figure 4.6: The interior of the Inglewood Discount Department Store in November of 2015. Like many indoor swap meets, design decisions are ad hoc and customer service policies vary from booth to booth. Photo by author, 2016.

It was in response to this situation that OMNI launched its boycott. To the group’s surprise, however, the Chos met their demands with enthusiasm. Following the boycott, the brothers redoubled their efforts to deepen their dialog with African American customers and community institutions. As

⁵² In 1988, these donations totaled \$7,000. See: Lee, “A Good Neighbor: Paul Cho Reaches Out to Black Community.”

⁵³ Janson, “Storing up the Anger.”

Paul Cho remarked in 1990, we “live in this community together. That means I get their income. I have to return part of this income to them because it belongs to them.”⁵⁴ Responding to the boycott’s stated demands, the Chos hosted workshops to help the swap meet’s vendors improve their interactions with customers. Moreover, he switched banks from Koreatown’s California Korea Bank to the downtown Inglewood branch of Great American First Savings Bank.⁵⁵ He even took out a full page ad in the magazine of a grassroots organization dedicated to encouraging African Americans to patronize Black-owned business.⁵⁶ These efforts led OMNI member Jan Ford Atkins to marvel of the Cho’s, “they are not angry with us. They understand and respect what we are doing....I had thought it was them against us. It’s not. They are trying and willing to work with people in the community.”⁵⁷ This recognition from OMNI and other Black community leaders notwithstanding, the Cho’s efforts were not enough to fully stop ongoing conflicts between his customers and vendors or to heal the much larger rift between Korean vendors and Black customers. However, his actions did buy him considerable social capital within the African American business community that he would benefit from in later dealings with city governments.

Inflated Pricing, Shoddy Merchandise and Poor Shopping Environments

In spite of improvements at the Crenshaw, Slauson and Inglewood indoor swap meets, the business type as a whole continued to be viewed as undesirable and down market across Southern California. Objections to the cost and quality of the merchandise sold at the bazaars added heft to critiques of their business practices. Although many customers appreciated the affordability of the merchandise sold there, some patrons lambasted the low quality of some goods as well as their uneven and sometimes inflated pricing. Sourcing their goods almost ubiquitously from garment district producers and wholesalers, these concerns mirrored critiques of the emerging “fast fashion” clothing category which also alleged poor quality.⁵⁸

Of more pressing concern to activists were anxieties that swap meets served as outlets for goods that violated moral standards. Ward Wesley, for instance, was vocal in his assertion that some Korean swap meet merchants dealt in pornography and drug paraphernalia.⁵⁹ These “taboo goods” sold by a handful of swap meet vendors were perceived as further evidence of disrespectful and immoral behavior by the Korean business community. In one well publicized instance, a Carver Junior

⁵⁴ Quoted in Lee, “A Good Neighbor: Paul Cho Reaches Out to Black Community.”

⁵⁵ Dirk Broersma, “Don’t Discount the Resilience of Market Street,” *Daily Breeze*, August 13, 1990.

⁵⁶ Cho placed the ad in *Black Bottom Line*, a magazine promoted by the business association, Recycling Black Dollars. See: Chris Richard, “A New Brand of ‘Recycling’: Black-Owned Businesses Form a Loose Alliance,” *Daily Breeze*, December 22, 1991.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Njeri, “Swapping Lessons.”

⁵⁸ Like many swap meet vendors, the founder of the fast fashion apparel behemoth, Forever 21, started out selling garments procured from Los Angeles Fashion District wholesalers. Founder Do Wan Chang, like many Koreans who migrated to the United States in the early 1980’s with limited social and economic capital, followed a well-trod path to affluence. Working nineteen hour days across three menial jobs, he entered the garment industry after realizing that many Koreans had made millions in the sector as contractors. Determined to emulate their success, he took a job at a clothing store to learn the trade and save enough money to open his own store. Three years later, he and his wife invested \$11,000 of their savings to open Fashion 21, steps from the Highland Park Swap Meet. Within their first year of business, the Changs sold \$700,000 worth of closeout merchandise obtained directly from garment manufacturers. With these profits, they began aggressively expanding their business—renaming it Forever 21, and opening new stores every six months. With 723 branches and \$4 billion in sales in 2018, Forever 21 is a recognized clothing leader and an originator of the “fast fashion” retail category, along with Zara (Spain, 1975) and H&M (Sweden, 1947). Sara Idacavage, “Fashion History Lesson: The Origins of Fast Fashion,” *Fashionista*, June 8, 2016, <https://fashionista.com/2016/06/what-is-fast-fashion>.

⁵⁹ Ron Dungee, “Blacks, Koreans Meet to Diffuse a Potentially Explosive Situation,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 8, 1990.

High School teacher discovered one of her students using a mechanical pencil made to look like a syringe in 1991. The twelve-year-old student had purchased the “hypodermic pencil” at nearby Alameda Indoor Swap Meet at Vernon and Alameda. In light of the drug “epidemic” afflicting South Central and other low-income neighborhoods of color across the United States, parents and social advocacy groups were particularly intolerant of drug paraphernalia sold by community “outsiders.” In response to the appearance, the teacher, along with the Community Youth Gang Services (CYGS) and Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA) called a press conference in which they alleged that Korean swap meet vendors cared little about the epidemic and were grooming Black and Latinx kids to be future consumers of intravenous drugs. In response to the article, swap meet operator Tim Williams, traced the source of the pencils to Mirage Imports and Brandy Trading on Winston Street in Skid Row’s “Toy Town” neighborhood and stopped their sale.⁶⁰

The sale of counterfeit goods was another Black mark against indoor swap meet businesses. The Los Angeles City attorney’s office raided the bazaars and their outdoor counterparts periodically to check for counterfeited goods. According to Sue Frauens, supervising attorney in the City of Los Angeles consumer protection unit, “You can name the problem. Not only do they [indoor swap meets] sell fake goods, but sometimes they even sell gray market goods or illegal products.”⁶¹ According to Richard Reyes Fruto, a reporter for the *Korea Times Los Angeles Monthly English Edition*, “Some vendors also have run afoul with law enforcement authorities for selling counterfeit goods, such as fake Louis Vuitton bags, Nike shirts and NFL jackets.”⁶²

Activists, neighboring business owners, and civic boosters lumped indoor swap meets into the category of undesired and blight-generating businesses, even though Korean-owned liquor stores generated most community complaints. In 1991, Al Slater, the co-chairman of the Downtown Division of the Inglewood Chamber of Commerce complained that it was difficult to attract retail chains downtown because “the street has a *swap meet mentality*. Everybody who shops on Market Street is basically looking for a bargain. There’s nothing wrong with looking for bargains, but we need other stores as well.”⁶³ Slater’s complaint suggests that the Inglewood Department Store’s informal and visually chaotic atmosphere had spilled beyond its walls and onto Market Street. Fretting that this atmosphere was contagious, Slater’s comments vaguely echo the fears of planners from an earlier generation about urban blight. For him, the negotiable prices and off-brand swap meet merchandise were signs of social and economic decline. One year later, the *Daily Breeze* complained that Market Street, which was now anchored by the Inglewood Department Store, had been refashioned “largely into a Korean-owned enterprise, or what disgruntled Blacks call a massive swap meet.”⁶⁴ To the article’s author, the problem extended beyond mere aesthetics or merchandise quality; it was that non-Black and non-mainstream foreigners were responsible for the informalization of the once-proud shopping street.

Many in the media have portrayed the protests and boycotts of Korean-run retailers as a causal factor of the widespread looting which took place during the Rodney King Rebellion. However, Patrick Joyce has suggested that incidents of violence, including the mass violence of April 29, 1992, were caused by incidents of violence between Korean merchants and customers rather than boycotts and protests. Instead, *more* protests and boycotts—like those which occurred in New York during the same period—might have helped to peacefully diffuse the tensions that ultimately fueled widespread

⁶⁰ Jarrette Fellows, “Black Community Outraged Over Hypodermic Pencil,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 1, 1991.

⁶¹ Fruto, “Swapping for a Piece of American Pie.”

⁶² Fruto.

⁶³ Quoted in Broersma, “Don’t Discount the Resilience of Market Street.”

⁶⁴ Janson, “Storing up the Anger.”

looting during the uprising.⁶⁵ In the absence of stronger activist groups and civic governance which might have resolved the lingering resentments, there was little reason *not* to loot following the unjust acquittal of the officers involved in Rodney King's beating.

Fleeting Victories

As a whole, the boycotts in Crenshaw, Slauson, and Inglewood fall into a long tradition of rights- and space-claiming actions in the retail realm. As groups including OMNI sought to rectify on a micro scale the intractable problems of everyday racism and intercultural conflict, they began to appropriate indoor swap meets as community spaces of their own in spite of their Korean owners and vendors.⁶⁶ While these activists successfully prompted increased dialog between swap meet operators, vendors, and customers in the three sites they targeted, these advances were not enough to ameliorate broader community resentments toward the thousands of Korean merchants operating in the region's lower-income neighborhoods of color. Customer complaints continued well after the conclusion of the 1989 boycotts. During an 1990 interview, Wesley alleged that swap meet patrons seeking refunds for defective items "are often told they just want the money to buy dope. Most often, they are told that the merchandise was not purchased where they are trying to return it."⁶⁷ This belief was still circulating in 1992, when Barbara J. Stanton, the executive director of the Los Angeles Entrepreneur Education Center, opined that swap meet vendors "treat you like a suspect instead of a customer."⁶⁸ This stance, according to the director of Los Angeles chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, made indoor swap meet complaints among the most difficult to resolve, even though they accounted for a small fraction of her office's annual total. "I think the majority of Asian merchants are doing a fairly good job of respecting and being courteous to customers, but it's hard to communicate with them once a disagreement occurs," she observed.⁶⁹

Amidst these controversies, Black consumers continued to patronize indoor swap meets in large numbers, even though many owned cars and could drive to other stores. This fact suggests that their popularity was rooted in something more than mere proximity, and that the complaints against them were not enough to overcome their convenience and affordability. Some critics such as OMNI member Reverend M.A. Robinson Gaither attributed the swap meet's enduring popularity to "a passive kind of mentality" borne of a "400-year-old process of conditioning" to endure abuse. However, I suggest that swap meets were popular in part because boycotts and protests helped to make them more accessible to Black and (increasingly) Latinx customers.⁷⁰ In short, community critiques of swap meet operations provoked reforms that not only made the markets more accepted within the communities they served. They also affirmed that swap meet spaces were realms for political and cultural expression. By transforming the indoor swap meet into accepted community spaces, community activists indirectly helped the business type proliferate in the years to come.

⁶⁵ Joyce, *No Fire Next Time*, 169.

⁶⁶ I explore this process in greater detail in Chapter 5.

⁶⁷ Ward Wesley, quoted in Dungee, "Blacks, Koreans Meet to Diffuse a Potentially Explosive Situation."

⁶⁸ Shiver Jr., "Tensions, Bargains Share Space at Indoor Swap Meets."

⁶⁹ Linda Hughes, quoted in Shiver Jr.

⁷⁰ Dungee, "Blacks, Koreans Meet to Diffuse a Potentially Explosive Situation."

Regulating the Swap Meet Economy: Swap Meet or Mall?

While grassroots reform efforts made indoor swap meets more appealing community institutions, some city governments attempted to prevent them from opening. Common points of contention were swap meet aesthetics. Their physical forms—often minimally adorned warehouses and retail stores—rendered them mysterious and unknowable in the eyes of city officials and their critic-neighbors. Hidden behind their nondescript concrete walls were maze-like aisles bursting with material goods—invisible to passersby and a source of bewilderment and concern to city regulators. Their rich materiality—perceived by middle- and upper-class visitors as visual chaos—led to a sense of mystery and danger in the uninitiated visitor. In line with a long tradition of exoticizing and fearing racialized others, regulators attempted to shut them down and stamp them out. Many persisted in spite of these efforts, at times due to lax regulation, and at others through the initiative of their owners. In the jurisdictions where they survived, the bazaars became codified under the ordinances and regulations of most, though not all of Southern California’s city planning departments.

Just as problematic as tensions with their customers were those with the governments that regulated swap meet operations. A common and enduring misconception about the markets was that they were mainly outlets for stolen and counterfeited goods. While there have been documented instances of swap meet vendors dealing in illegal merchandise, these are small in number relative to the overall volume of goods changing hands. After the Western Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition was formed by international manufacturers including Nike and Microsoft in the early 1990s, these cases became even fewer. Nonetheless, because indoor swap meets were erroneously perceived by their constituents as hotbeds of illegality, city officials scrutinized them carefully. During the 1980s and 1990s, at least eight regulatory actions were taken by jurisdictions against the bazaars (Figure 4.7).

1986-7	Carson shuts Try-It Indoor Mini Mart
1986-7	Los Angeles city council entertained proposals that would limit indoor swap meets.
1987	Gardena city council passes “emergency moratorium” – affects Do Re Mi Indoor Swap Mall and “Gardena Swap Shop” at 2040 Rosecrans
1990	Inglewood stops opening of the “Gold Mart” swap meet on Market Street
1990	Pasadena blocks Paul Cho from building the Fair Oaks Department Store
1990	Covina grants preliminary approval to ban indoor swap meets. Unclear if ordinance passed.
1991	Glendora City Council bans swap meets
1992	Anaheim indoor Marketplace – initial code violations, but it survives. An example of successful adaptation by hiring White management which successfully solves regulatory challenges and those of attracting an audience.
1992	POST RIOTS - LA City Council makes it difficult for swap meets to re-open (Sets up Alameda vs. El Faro conflict)

Figure 4.7: Regulatory actions against indoor swap meets, 1986 to 1992. Table by author.

Swap Meet or Mall? Regulation in Carson

Just months after the opening of the Compton Swap Meet, James Yu, an immigrant from Korea, decided to try his hand at the indoor swap meet business. Likely inspired by the successes of other Korean swap meet operators, he scouted prospective locations during the summer of 1986, and settled on a property in the City of Carson, a residential and industrial suburb ten miles southwest of the Compton Swap Meet and just northwest of Long Beach. Observing that relatively few indoor swap meets operated in southern Los Angeles County, Yu located a vacant 14,000 square foot

hardware store on Avalon Boulevard, a north-south arterial linking Downtown Los Angeles to the Port of Los Angeles (Figure 4.8).

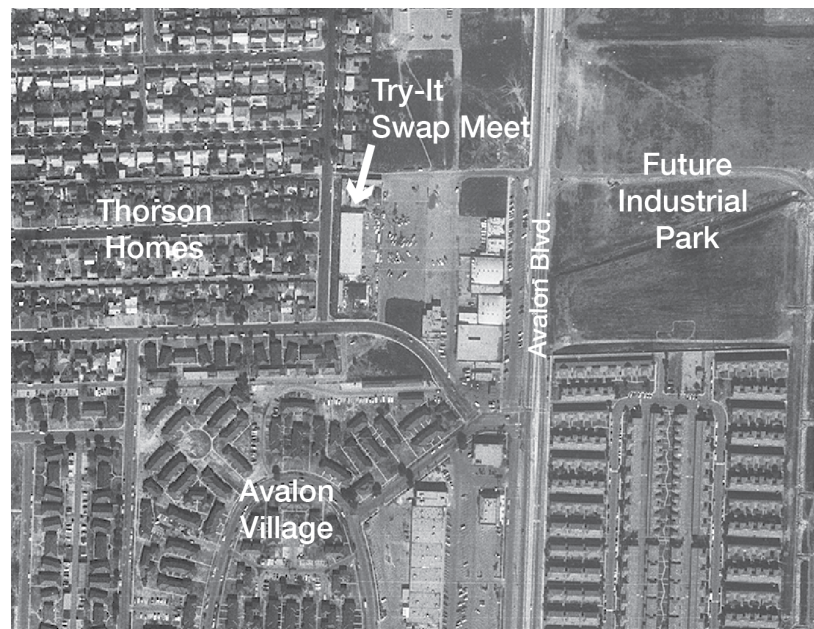


Figure 4.8: 1972 aerial image of shopping center in which the Try-It Indoor Swap Meet operated.

Source: Flight TG_7300, Frame 14-36, December 31, 1972. See: http://mil.library.ucsb.edu/ap_images/tg-7300/tg-7300_14-36.tif

At first glance, the building and its location would have appeared to be a poor site for a retail store. Although it sat at the rear of an ample parking lot, the store was difficult to notice from Avalon Boulevard. Passing motorists would almost certainly have relied on roadside signage to find the store, as a row of 1940s era retail buildings at the front of the parcel obscured the view from the street.⁷¹ But the condition of the former store itself presented a far greater problem. As Jesse Carr remembered in December of that year, the building “was an eyesore for Carson...in disrepair and in bad need of paint.”⁷² Further, its location across Avalon Boulevard from a growing industrial park and a Shell Oil refinery cut the shopping center off from the residential neighborhoods and prospective customers to the east. Out of the way in an aging mall the site seemed ideal for an indoor swap meet.

The area’s diverse and working class demographics were favorable as well. Like other industrial suburbs in Los Angeles County, Carson saw its populace grow more heterogeneous during the 1980s, as its foreign-born population increased from 18 to 28 percent of the total between 1980 and 1990.⁷³ By 1990, Carson’s population was roughly two-thirds non-White. In the neighborhoods immediately

⁷¹ Many shopping center developers ceased placing their parking lots *behind* retail buildings rather than in front of them during the early 1940s. For more on this subject, see: Richard Longstreth, “The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept during the Interwar Decades,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56, no. 3 (September 1, 1997): 268–93.

⁷² James Bronson, “Carson Keeps Mini-Mall’s Fate up in the Air,” *Daily Breeze*, December 16, 1986.

⁷³ Although I use “Latinx” elsewhere, “Hispanic” is used here to conform with the terminology used by the U.S. Census Bureau. The foreign-born population increased from 6,601 of Carson’s 35,691 residents in 1980 (18 percent) to 10,234 of the city’s 36,126 residents in 1990. Hispanic: 8,938 of 35,691 (25 percent) in 1980 to 9,167 of 36,126 (25 percent) in 1990; Asian: 6,482 of 35,691 (18 percent) in 1980 to 10,450 of 36,126 (29 percent) in 1990. Black: 8,764 of 35,691 (25 percent) in 1980 to 8,425 of 36,126 (23 percent) in 1990; White: 15,704 of 35,691 (44 percent) in 1980 to 12,577 of 36,126 (35 percent) in 1990.

adjacent to the shopping center, foreign-born residents accounted for an even larger share of the population, growing from 25 to 36 percent between 1980 and 1990.⁷⁴ Many neighbors of the prospective swap meet—especially those housed in the World War II-era Avalon Village (1944), and the modest Thorson Homes single-family residential subdivision—seemed ideal swap meet customers. From the Korean-language press, Yu would have understood that indoor swap meets thrived in such neighborhoods. Moreover, because it was removed from the growing social problems of Compton, the location's appeal was clear: It had a large non-White population and few other retail options.

Armed with this knowledge and optimism, Yu signed a \$12,000 per month, five-year master lease of 22939 S. Avalon Boulevard in August of 1986, and he made plans to upgrade its infrastructure and configure its selling floor into between 20 and 30 vendor booths.⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, he hoped to emulate the successes of other Korean swap meet operators by capitalizing on the high per square footage rent gap between what he *hoped* to charge his subtenants and the \$0.54 per square foot he was paying on his lease.⁷⁶ It is not surprising, then, that Yu was motivated to invest the significant resources required to perform the structural and cosmetic upgrades needed to convert an abandoned building into an indoor swap meet.⁷⁷ Over several months, he made modifications to the building envelope and interior, erecting the pegboard partitions and metal grates that would delineate his vendor booths. As he applied for the permits to implement these modifications, Yu learned that obtaining government approvals was far from straight-forward. At several points in the permitting process, city inspectors required additional building modifications, which Yu performed. By the time the city approved his business, Yu had spent roughly \$115,000 to bring his building up to date and comply with city codes.⁷⁸

A famous place in south bay area

(Carson, Torrance, Long Beach, San Pedro, Wilmington, Gardena area)

사우스베이지역의 명소

(칼슨, 토렌스, 롱비치, 샌페드로, 윌밍턴, 가데나지역)

TRY IT INDOOR MINI MART



◎감사의 말씀 및 잔여 BOOTHS 분양안내◎

저희 TRY IT INDOOR MINI MART의 개장을 위해 그간 관심 양면으로 아낌없는 지원을 해주신 여러분께 저희 MINI MART가 사우스베이지역의 명소로 탄생하게 되었음을 지면으로나마 인사 올리며 결산리에 분양이 완료되어 성업중이니 앞으로 여러분의 아낌없는 지도편달을 부탁드립니다. 안녕은 BOOTHS를 마지막으로 분양드리겠습니다. 관심있는분의 연락바라며 일차 환영하에 문의바랍니다.

●주방기구(조리용)

●침구, 이불, 침대커버, 타월등

●화장품

●TOOL(공구)

●조화 및 생활(물품)

●Sports Coat

●아동복(트랙스류)

●발대어

●Nail Salon

●새 코드

약 20,000Sqft의 넓은 매장

9.5에이커의 넓고 편리한 주차장

육인 중산층 및 멕시코 중산층 밀집지역

TRY IT INDOOR MINI MART

22939 AVALON BL. CARSON, CALIFORNIA 90745

(213) 835-8171

OR 973-6810

*A large market of about 20,000 sq. ft

*A large and convenient 9.5 acre parking lot

*An area of middle-class blacks and middle-class Mexican

Thank you for supporting the grand opening of TRY IT INDOOR MINI MART. We are a famous place in the South Bay now, and our booths are sold out and open for business. We ask for your continued support. We are leasing our last few booths, so please contact and visit us if interested.

Figure 4.9: Vendor advertisement placed in the November 4, 1986 edition of the *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*. Translation by Mili Yoon.

⁷⁴ California Census Tract 5437 comprises both neighborhoods.

⁷⁵ The building's owners, Hal and Rhea Coskey were likely White. Monthly rent figure of \$12,000 referenced in James Bronson, "City Codes May Not Let Store Try-It," *Daily Breeze*, November 15, 1986.

⁷⁶ In the middle of the first indoor swap meet boom (1985-1987), Yu knew that his building would likely command a similar rental premium as other indoor swap meets in southern Los Angeles County, where square footage rents of between \$4 and \$5 were the norm. Bronson.

⁷⁷ Bronson..

⁷⁸ Bronson.

As construction drew to a close, Yu recruited vendor subtenants. Like other Korean swap meet operators (described in Chapter 3), he placed vendor recruitment ads in the *Korea Times* that described the neighborhood demographics in terms of racial and class characteristics. One such ad, placed on November 4, 1986, described the Try It Indoor Mini Mart's location as "an area of middle-class Blacks and middle-class Mexicans," signaling to would-be vendors that the neighborhood was both suited to an indoor swap meet *and* its customers would be easy to deal with because of their class position (Figure 4.9). By the end of August, twenty-six vendors had signed booth rental agreements. By the time the swap meet opened on August 26th, a range of businesses specializing in women's clothing, bicycles, kitchen ware, "cosmetics, televisions, radios, and blue jeans," appliances and sporting goods, among other items, were open for business.⁷⁹

Figure 4.10: September 4, 1986 ad placed in the *Daily Breeze* labels the Try-It Indoor Mini Mart an "Indoor Swap Meet."
Source: Torrance Public Library microfilm collection.

Yu's well laid plans took a disastrous turn when he placed a print ad in the *Daily Breeze*, the South Bay's English-language daily. When the ad ran on September 4th, the newspaper included text in the ad that described it as an "indoor swap meet" (Figure 4.10). Yu later claimed (and the *Daily Breeze* confirmed) that this text was printed in error; it should have read, "Quality at Swap Meet Prices" to avoid using the "swap meet" moniker. The wording mattered in this instance because Carson voters had approved an ordinance banning swap meets in 1983. Unfortunately for Yu, the ad prompted the city to inspect and shutter the business, even though the language of the ordinance did not expressly ban *indoor* swap meets. Although Yu's business clearly did not fit the definition of a business "conducted for the purpose of selling new or used merchandise in a drive-in theater or other location

⁷⁹ Bronson, "Carson Keeps Mini-Mall's Fate up in the Air."

not primarily devoted to such use on a daily basis,” its self-identification as a swap meet sparked a months-long legal struggle.⁸⁰

Following an inspection carried out that week, City of Carson officials shut down the Try-It Indoor Mini-Mart on Wednesday, September 10, 1986, only seven days after its opening, citing violations of not just the swap meet ban, but also the city’s covered mall policy. Further, city inspectors found that almost none of Try-It’s tenants possessed a valid business license, violating local and state law.⁸¹ Despite these infractions, there were several problems with the city’s argumentation. The first and most significant was the fact that Yu’s business clearly was not a “swap meet” as defined by the 1983 ordinance, as it neither operated outdoors nor was it temporary. The city’s approval of Yu’s architectural plans, building permits, and business license *before* its regulatory intervention may hint at internal conflict between city staffers regarding the business’s desirability, or it may simply signal confusion over how to regulate a brand-new land use type within the city. Initially, Carson Community Development Director, Patricia Nemeth, argued that the building’s configuration as a multi-tenant vendor market was enough to violate the 1983 law.⁸² Following a review of the case, the city reversed its rationale, finding that the swap meet ordinance as it was currently written in fact did *not* apply.

Although the city could have dropped its case against Yu at this point, it pursued other means to shut it down. Finding legal support in neither its 1981 General Plan nor its zoning code, city officials turned to its covered mall policy, which prohibited “folding tables” and “peg walls” within buildings serving as multi-tenant malls. Notably, the policy also required operators to maintain pedestrian aisle widths of 30 feet or more, far greater than Try-It’s 8- to 10-foot wide walkways. Ultimately it was this ordinance that enabled the city council to temporarily shut down the swap meet.⁸³ As City Attorney Glenn Watson later observed, “there’s no question they [Try-It Mini Mall] don’t meet the basic construction requirements for a covered mall. The market does not have proper aisle or booth construction.”⁸⁴ Admitting that Yu’s swap meet complied with the letter, if not the spirit, of the anti-swap meet ordinance, the Carson City Council allowed Yu’s business to reopen temporarily on October 15th while it considered how to formally regulate it. On November 3rd, the city council ordered staff to prepare an emergency ordinance that would prohibit future indoor swap meets. Ultimately incorporated into the city’s zoning code, the ordinance addressed the specific circumstances of Yu’s case, namely that (in the words of the final ordinance) “any sales use which is *advertised* as a swap meet or variant shall be construed as a swap meet under this definition.”⁸⁵

In essence, Carson’s code update was triggered by a novel business type that city staff considered undesirable. As a spokesman for Yu perceptively observed, “they keep changing the rules. They never told us it [Try-It Indoor Mini-Mart] doesn’t meet the requirements of a covered mall.”⁸⁶ Further underscoring the arbitrary city response was Watson’s later admission that the city would not have acted had Yu worded his *Daily Breeze* advertisement differently. Tacitly acknowledging its *post hoc*

⁸⁰ Ordinance language quoted in Hector Gutierrez, “The Inside Story of a Swap Meet Is a Confusing One for Carson,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1986.

⁸¹ Gutierrez.

⁸² See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this law.

⁸³ Gutierrez, “The Inside Story of a Swap Meet Is a Confusing One for Carson.”

⁸⁴ Quoted in Bronson, “City Codes May Not Let Store Try-It.”

⁸⁵ The city’s swap meet ban now includes a sentence that reads: “Further, swap meets shall not include indoor mini-marts or auction houses or similar businesses conducted on a permanent basis. Any sales use which is advertised as a swap meet or variant shall be construed as a swap meet under this definition. (Ord. 86-763U, § 2; Ord. 87-813, § 2; Ord. 98-1135, § 3).” Section 9191.670 of the *City of Carson Municipal Code*, entitled, “Swap Meet (Including Flea Markets)” See: <https://www.codepublishing.com/CA/Carson/html/Carson09/Carson09010900.html#9191.670>

⁸⁶ Spokesman James Doyle, quoted in Bronson, “City Codes May Not Let Store Try-It.”

rationale, Carson ultimately allowed Yu to operate for twenty months (until July of 1988) so that he could recover the cost of the significant capital improvements he made to the building. As James Doyle, a spokesperson for Yu, remarked following the city's decision, however, "if we can't operate at the end of 20 months, there's no way in God's world we'll ever get our money back. We're having a terrible time."⁸⁷

At its December 15th meeting, Carson's city council made permanent the indoor swap meet ban in spite of emotional appeals from merchants and staff and a 600 signature petition requesting that the city allow the swap meet to remain open.⁸⁸ Security guard Jesse Carr, who helped Yu with his of renovations, pushed back on the city's purported objective of barring an undesirable land use. Prior to the swap meet, he asserted, "the building...was an eyesore for Carson. Neighbors were throwing garbage and debris there....*We have not polluted the City of Carson [by opening the swap meet]. We have cleaned it.*"⁸⁹ Carr's statement reveals the heart of the matter: In the eyes of the city, because the indoor swap meet was perceived to be a disorderly public nuisance, it needed to be 'cleaned up' through regulatory action. Faced with a choice between shutting out an undesired business type and salvaging the livelihoods of 30 vendors whose families, the city elected to shutter the swap meet in the name of preventing future swap meets from doing business in the city. Again and again, similar fears stimulated similar opposition from jurisdictions across the region. However, Carson was only among a few which successfully banned them entirely.

Partial Regulatory Failures in Gardena, Los Angeles, and Inglewood

Inspired by the regulatory success of the City of Carson and faced with a growing number of swap meets within its small land area, the neighboring City of Gardena, just north of Carson, followed suit and passed an emergency indoor swap meet moratorium in January of 1987. Lacking legislation that legally defined the business type, the city council decided to take action when it began receiving phone calls from individuals interested in opening their own swap meets within city limits. As City Attorney Michael Karger observed to a *Daily Breeze* reporter, *any* of the city's vacant supermarkets and warehouses could be converted to a swap meet at a moment's notice.⁹⁰ One such developer, Don Gaube, whose plans to convert an abandoned supermarket into a "discount store" (code for indoor swap meet) were thwarted by the moratorium, noted that the ordinance also prevented stores from subletting departments to outside operators.⁹¹ Because department stores from Sears to Nordstrom rely on such a concessionaire model, the moratorium effectively banned department stores from operating in the city. Undeterred, the city council passed the ban and codified it in its zoning code.

While the moratorium successfully prevented indoor swap meets from opening within Gardena, it was only a partial victory for city leaders concerned with their local impacts. Two modestly-scaled indoor swap meets had already opened in *unincorporated* Gardena in 1986, and the city was powerless to regulate them. The enterprises, housed in a former roller rink at 2040 Rosecrans Boulevard and in a one-time furniture store at the intersection of 156th and Crenshaw, reminded

⁸⁷ The swap meet's five-week closure along with the immediate departure of six of its vendors significantly reduced Yu's cash flow, and hence his ability to pay off his debts. Bronson.

⁸⁸ Bronson, "Carson Keeps Mini-Mall's Fate up in the Air."

⁸⁹ Emphasis added. Bronson.

⁹⁰ Alan Janson, "Impact Can't Be Discounted: Swap Meets Still Draw Big Crowds, Heated Debate," *Daily Breeze*, January 28, 1987.

⁹¹ Janson.

Gardena city leaders of the underlying demand for them.⁹² Moreover, the City of Gardena housed a large number of Korean immigrants who already worked in the indoor swap meet trade. Michael Su, a Korean investor who initially proposed an indoor swap meet in the city but was rebuffed after more than 1,000 homeowners objected to his project, was nonetheless determined to tap into Gardena's large population of prospective vendors. In the summer of 1988, he revised his plans and applied for a conditional use permit for a "shopping mall" that he hoped would elude the city's swap meet restrictions. His proposed project would sit directly across the street from the Roadium Swap Meet, the venerable outdoor market where many of the region's indoor swap meet vendors had first entered the business. On the site of a nursery he purchased for \$8.5 million, he proposed constructing a new building with 186,000 square foot of floor area subdivided into 550 units ranging from 180 to 2,500 square feet. An adjacent three-level parking structure would include space for 1,150 cars.⁹³

Several features of Su's mall are remarkable. First, its micro units of roughly 200 square feet are nearly identical in size to those operating within indoor swap meets. Second, Su proposed a design feature typical of malls in Asia, but highly unusual for those in North America: mall vendors would *buy* rather than rent their stores for between \$80,000 and \$100,000.⁹⁴ As Erica Allen-Kim has observed, this business model has only in recent decades taken root in American and Canadian cities where large numbers of Asian immigrants have settled.⁹⁵ Su's desire to recruit Asian vendors was made even more clear in an internal memo obtained by *Daily Breeze* reporters in May of 1988. If constructed, mall management estimated that 60 percent of the vendors at the Roadium "will apply for leases at the new Redondo Beach Shopping Mall....We also have estimated that we have 30 percent of the spaces already reserved for Asian business people from Korea and Taiwan."⁹⁶ Gardena residents as well as those from neighboring jurisdictions stiffly opposed the proposal, questioning the traffic it would generate, its large scale, and the vendor mix it would attract. Some residents even took to calling it a "rabbit hut," in reference to the large number of vendor booths. Su ultimately withdrew his application after it became clear that the Gardena City Council would not approve it due to community opposition.⁹⁷

While the defeat of Su's Redondo Beach "Shopping Mall" was due to the actions of a city government, the small footprints of many South Bay cities left behind dendritic-like fingers of unincorporated Los Angeles County land. Indoor swap meets flourished within these interstices, and despite a possible indoor swap meet moratorium put forth by the Los Angeles County supervisors in November of 1986, the Planning Commission declined to support it. The Los Angeles County cities of Huntington Park and Inglewood joined Gardena in banning indoor swap meets in 1986. Both with historic "main streets," the two cities embarked on efforts with the purported purpose of fending off inferior merchandise and what Inglewood Chamber of Commerce co-chair Al Slater described as a "swap-meet mentality."⁹⁸

⁹² The Gardena Swap Shop, which opened in April of 1986 at 2040 Rosecrans and remains in operation today, contained 60 vendor booths, according to the *California of Southland Swap Meet Directory*. The Do Re Mi Swap Shop opened in November of 1986 at 156th and Crenshaw, however the number of vendor booths is unclear.

⁹³ James Bronson, "Gardena Mall Plans Protested," *Daily Breeze*, August 10, 1988, sec. News.

⁹⁴ James Bronson, "Proposed Mall Draws Opponents," *Daily Breeze*, May 9, 1988, sec. Local.

⁹⁵ Erica Allen-Kim, "Condos in the Mall: Suburban Transnational Typological Transformations in Markham, Ontario," in *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History*, ed. Sandoval-Strausz A.K. and Nancy H. Kwak (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 133–65.

⁹⁶ Memorandum prepared by President Investment Co. Quoted in James Bronson, "Proposed Mall Draws Opponents," *Daily Breeze*, May 9, 1988, sec. Local.

⁹⁷ James Bronson, "Developer Drops Gardena Mall Plan," *Daily Breeze*, September 8, 1988.

⁹⁸ Al Slater, quoted in Broersma, "Don't Discount the Resilience of Market Street."

In 1986, after the Pacific Swap Meet opened on Huntington Park's storied Pacific Boulevard, over 150 merchants petitioned the city council to prevent similar businesses from opening in the future. Fearing that the swap meet's 35 vendors "don't always carry the *better type* merchandise," the Huntington Park Chamber of Commerce helped lead the effort to attract "established" businesses to the street and prevent indoor swap meets from opening there.⁹⁹ Since all Pacific Swap Meet vendors sold new merchandise—just like at other indoor swap meets in the area—it is clear that the objections of its neighbors went deeper than simply merchandise quality. As Peter Guerrero, the head of the Chamber's Retail Merchants Committee trenchantly observed, the crux of the matter may simply have been that "the word 'swap meet' turns everybody off."¹⁰⁰ Within weeks of the Pacific Swap Meet opening Huntington Park merchants won a moratorium and then outright ban on future indoor swap meets on Pacific Boulevard.¹⁰¹

The City of Inglewood dealt with even more acute anxieties about the future of retailing on its "main street." Inglewood's main shopping corridor, Market Street, lost all of its national retailers during the 1980s, including J.C. Penney (1984), the Boston Store (1987), and Sears Roebuck and Company (1988) to outlying shopping malls as the city's demographics shifted from predominantly White and middle-class to African American and Latinx and lower income. Two of its three movie theaters closed during the decade, and the one that remained switched to exclusively adult content. Lower-end discounters with names including the Dash Discount Store, Solo Uno Discount Store and the \$3 Store took the place of these venerable retailers. Making matters worse was a 99-cent store, an 89 Cent Store, and the Inglewood Discount Department Store, "honeycombed" with 100 booths.¹⁰²

In 1990, controversy erupted around plans to open a second indoor swap meet in the 30,000 square foot old Boston Store building. The Korean owner of the building—Kee Duk Kwon—initially tried to emulate the jewelry marts of Downtown Los Angeles, opening the "Gold Mart" in December of 1989. However, after only achieving 20 percent occupancy, he appealed to the City of Inglewood for a zoning change that would allow him to open an indoor swap meet. He was met with stiff opposition from City Councilmember Jose Fernandez, who said, "I think the citizens of this city are opposed to another swap meet. It will be very difficult to bring in quality establishments to downtown if you keep having swap meets develop."¹⁰³ Al Slater, who wore two hats as a Market Street business owner and Inglewood Chamber of Commerce co-chair, probably summarized the concerns of many merchants when he complained that the low prices of Market Street discounters prompted his customers to "ignore the price tag and say, 'well, you know, this is too much,' and *'I don't want to pay that.'*"¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, Kwon's swap meet never opened, and the Chamber won a battle in its larger war against its ultimate enemy: the informal retail practices associated with swap meets.

Into the 1990s, other cities passed indoor swap meet bans simply because they did not fit the bourgeois aesthetics of their retail districts. The Pasadena City Council, which unsuccessfully attempted to close the now-famous Rose Bowl outdoor swap meet in 1978 due to fears of "undesirable elements" (discussed in Chapter 2), attempted to pass an ordinance banning *indoor* swap meets in

⁹⁹ Huntington Park Chamber of Commerce president Dwayne Duncan, quoted in Carment Valencia, "Huntington Park Reacts with Moratorium: Nearby Merchants Fear Vendor Bazaar's Effect," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1986. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Valencia.

¹⁰¹ "Huntington Park Ban on Vendors Proposed," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1987.

¹⁰² Dirk Broersma, "Don't Discount the Resilience of Market Street," *Daily Breeze*, August 13, 1990.

¹⁰³ Broersma.

¹⁰⁴ Al Slater, quoted in Broersma, "Don't Discount the Resilience of Market Street."

1990.¹⁰⁵ Attempting to build on his financial success operating the Inglewood Department Store, Paul Cho acquired a former Thrifty Drug Store in a predominantly African American part of Pasadena and spent \$27,000 remodeling it to accommodate 38 vendors.¹⁰⁶ However, as with James Yu in Carson, Cho's plans to open his "Fair Oaks Department Store" were thwarted when he was notified that it lay within the "Fair Oaks Redevelopment Project," and thus was subject to approval by a resident's committee. At a hearing with the Fair Oaks Project Area Committee, its chairman James Hall echoed policymakers in Inglewood and Huntington Park with a familiar refrain: the swap meet and its vendors "would downgrade the quality of the stores" in the neighborhood and make it "even more difficult to bring [in] quality merchants."¹⁰⁷ As elsewhere, the "quality" of the swap meet's off-brand merchandise and its Asian vendors were not only undesirable, they were *contagious* elements that conflicted with the city's hopes of reversing its ongoing diversification.

When the city denied Cho a final inspection and passed an ordinance banning indoor swap meets, he filed a lawsuit alleging discrimination.¹⁰⁸ Having built bonds in the preceding years with Black community leaders, Cho and his allies organized an anti-discrimination protest with Black and Asian supporters in Pasadena. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported the protest approvingly (Figure 4.11). Although Cho ultimately lost his lawsuit, his protest proves that he had come full circle. Once on the receiving end of Black antipathy, he had succeeded in winning the allegiance and support of key members within the African American business community.



Figure 4.11: Paul Cho, Charlie Hawk, and others picket in support of Cho's Fair Oaks Department Store in Pasadena. Source: July 26, 1990 edition of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of the public debate about Rose Bowl Flea Market's continuing presence in Pasadena, see: "Pasadena Takes a Second Look at Swap Meets," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1978; Mann, "Bowl Swap Meets Given 3 Months"; "Pasadena OKs Swap Meets For Three More Years." For the City of Pasadena's indoor swap meet ban, see: Franki V. Ransom, "West Covina May Ban Indoor Swap Meets," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1990; Shiver Jr., "Tensions, Bargains Share Space at Indoor Swap Meets."

¹⁰⁶ "Multi-Racial Coalition Supports Korean-American Business Man," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 26, 1990.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Shiver Jr., "Tensions, Bargains Share Space at Indoor Swap Meets."

¹⁰⁸ Ransom, "West Covina May Ban Indoor Swap Meets."

Other efforts to reign in indoor swap meet development spread east from Pasadena and into the San Gabriel Valley into the early 1990s. West Covina similarly moved to prohibit indoor swap meets from operating within its bounds in 1990 shortly after Pasadena's ban was implemented. Although no such market ever operated within West Covina city limits, neighboring Covina unsuccessfully attempted on numerous occasions to shut down its Covina Mini Mall, a modestly-proportioned indoor swap meet which dates to 1984. Concerned about traffic, congestion, and potential conflicts akin to those in Covina, the West Covina City Council followed precedents set by Carson, Huntington Park, and Pasadena, and passed a ban on "multi-tenant vendor markets" on September 24, 1990.¹⁰⁹

The City of Glendora, nestled against the San Gabriel Mountains, followed suit when it passed a 45-day emergency moratorium in 1991 on such businesses in response to the opening of the "Swapmeet Club" inside a former supermarket in the Newberry Shopping Center. City officials justified the moratorium on the grounds that there was nothing in the city code expressly "permitting indoor or outdoor swap meets."¹¹⁰ Proprietor Mehdi Farkhondehpour claimed to have opened his business before the moratorium took effect, putting \$100,000—a combination of his life savings and loans—on the line to take out a 30-year building lease and conduct the needed capital improvements to open. Unfortunately for Farkhondehpour, a Los Angeles County Superior Court judge declared that his swap meet had opened after the moratorium took effect, forcing it to close, and dashing the aspirations of vendors who had opened businesses there. Farkhondehpour's mistake, according to city business license inspector Pat Michler, was that he misconstrued his business license as a "green light" to open a swap meet. Instead, the licensing department was solely a revenue-collecting agency with no regulatory power; thus, it was up to applicants to gather all of the proper approvals from other city departments before opening.¹¹¹ Regardless of culpability in this sad story, merchants who had opened shop in the swap meet again suffered. As Jackie Dryden, a coffee vendor who invested \$4,000 of her business complained, "It's a rip-off....There were people there selling [when the swap meet opened] on Nov. 29. How can they give a permit and then pass a law at night banning the business after it's started?"¹¹² For his part, Farkhondehpour reported that he would probably have to file for bankruptcy if he was forced to remain closed. "[The city] has been putting us through hell. I feel that knives are *stabbing us in the back*... and someone with power is trying to kill us, business-wise."¹¹³

While some cities successfully imposed moratoriums and other passed outright indoor swap meet bans, the vast majority of indoor swap meets went unchallenged by their jurisdictions. Nevertheless, these regulatory stories expose the oft-contentious relationships between swap meet operators governing entities, *especially* in smaller cities like those discussed above. Whereas both the City and County of Los Angeles *considered* ordinances that would have banned indoor swap meets, the size of their jurisdictions and diversity of their constituents ultimately led to bureaucratic inaction. Smaller jurisdictions, on the other hand, proved to be more adroit regulators. As the operator of the Valley Indoor Swap Meets in Panorama City and Pomona related to me in 2016, "You're a little bit more invisible in a big city. You're not invisible in a smaller municipality, [where] everybody feels that they need to justify their existence in a government agency by passing a bunch of rules, so the smaller

¹⁰⁹ See Ord. No. 1858, § 2, adopted Sept. 24, 1990, cited in City of West Covina, California, "Chapter 26 - Zoning, Article IX - Nonresidential Uses, Sec. 26-598. - Multi-Tenant Uses,," in *Municipal Code*, 2018, https://library.municode.com/ca/west_covina/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=MUCO_CH26ZO_ARTXINOUS_S26-598MUNAUS.

¹¹⁰ Franki V. Ransom, "Council Extends Ban on Indoor Swap Meets," *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1992.

¹¹¹ Ransom.

¹¹² Quoted in Ransom.

¹¹³ Quoted in Ransom.

you are, the more subject to them you are.” In larger cities like Los Angeles, “the codes are the codes, and you either comply with them or they shut you down.”¹¹⁴

Conclusion: Laying Claim to the Swap Meet

These stories of protest, boycott, and regulation reveal how anxieties about demographic and cultural change often express themselves in retail space. Indoor swap meets, which were largely unnoticed by the region’s middle- and upper-class residents, evoked strong reactions from the people and communities in which they operated. In spite of the throngs that descended upon them most weekends, they nevertheless suffered a pronounced image problem, as individuals and institutions leveled pointed critiques of their visual appearance and business practices. Shoppers complained about encounters with cold—and sometimes hostile—immigrant shop owners unaccustomed to American customer service norms. Neighbors accused them of attracting crowds of “undesirables” in barely concealed racialized language. Social justice activists denounced their poor working conditions and the sweatshop-produced goods they sold as lamentable consequences of systemic racism, globalization, and the crumbling welfare state. City councils and planning agencies—at times directly responding to public pressure, at others simply implementing status quo planning ideologies—regulated several indoor swap meets out of existence. To critics, the rapid spread of indoor swap meets epitomized an out of control city, growing and shifting so rapidly that it was no longer legible to them.

In 1992, all of this culminated in five days of urban unrest following the Rodney King verdict. The multiple ethnicities participating in the looting of Korean-owned stores laid bare the common misconception that the communities in which the rebellion occurred were predominantly Black. In fact, many neighborhoods on Los Angeles’s “greater eastside” had since 1980 seen a steady influx of immigrants from Latin America. As they moved into region’s modest bungalows and apartment complexes, transforming their front yards and streetscapes, they also transformed nearby commercial landscapes.¹¹⁵ While Black newspapers like the *Sentinel* and social justice organizations like OMNI agitated for better treatment within Korean-owned businesses and broad community support of Black-owned businesses, the very notion of a territorially-rooted ‘Black community’ was becoming more complicated amidst declining segregation and growing diversity.

After the Rodney King Rebellion, indoor swap meets continued to register the cultural and demographic anxieties within the region. As anti-Latinx xenophobia increased during the 1990s amidst a ‘wave’ of immigration from Mexico and Central America, swap meet booths again became the visual and linguistic shorthand for “undesirable” demographic change in the eyes of the region’s dwindling White population. When Van Nuys Homeowners Association president, Don Schultz, proposed a moratorium on indoor swap meets in 1997, he argued that “we’re trying to maintain the integrity of our neighborhood, and you can’t do it when you have businesses operating illegally.”¹¹⁶ By implying that indoor swap meet businesses were “illegal,” his meaning was clear: their increasingly Latinx proprietors also did not belong in the San Fernando Valley. Randy King, a supporter of Schultz’s moratorium and the owner of a venerable western wear shop on Van Nuys Boulevard from 1946 to 1996, completed the association by suggesting that the street’s indoor swap meets and their Latinx clientele informed his decision to relocate his business to Studio City. “Our customers were complaining they didn’t like coming to our store because the neighborhood didn’t feel safe,” King

¹¹⁴ Malkin, Personal Interview.

¹¹⁵ James Rojas, “The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles,” in *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B. Jackson*, ed. Chris Wilson and Paul E. Groth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 275–92.

¹¹⁶ Sherry Joe Crosby, “Busy on Van Nuys Boulevard: Residents Oppose Swap Meets,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, March 29, 1997.

remarked in 1997. “It [the indoor swap meets] gives the appearance of Van Nuys being a Third World city. I’ve got customers who say this place looks like Tijuana.”¹¹⁷

King joined a growing chorus of xenophobic voices lamenting the region’s “third worldization” as the twentieth century drew to a close. Attempts to revoke social services from undocumented noncitizens through the statewide ballot initiative, Proposition 187 (1994), and books like David Rieff’s 1991 jeremiad, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, sought to resist demographic change that had already happened.¹¹⁸ In spite of the efforts to ban indoor swap meets, their inevitability is highlighted by the great irony in King’s story. After a six month search, he ultimately leased his Van Nuys Boulevard building to the only bidder, an indoor swap meet, before moving his store elsewhere.

In spite of efforts to slow their spread, indoor swap meets opened across Southern California relatively unimpeded by organized protests or municipal bans. As they made their mark on the region’s retail landscape, the markets were nevertheless shaped by African American customers and activists. Though acts of protest, negotiations with Korean proprietors, and challenging “rude” vendors for perceived slights, African American activists and swap meet visitors co-created these commercial landscapes, laid claim to them, and made them their own. In doing so, they were active participants in processes of city building by “regulating from below,” and shaping land uses through acts of insurgent citizenship.¹¹⁹ In defining swap meets as dynamic arenas of everyday public life, these activists and customers shaped themselves as active urban citizens. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the vitality of these arenas gave rise to—and was reflected by—the emergence of one of Southern California’s most famous discursive products: west coast hip hop.

¹¹⁷ Crosby.

¹¹⁸ Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*.

¹¹⁹ Here I draw on Faranak Miraftab’s concept of “insurgent planning.” See: James Holston, “Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship,” in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999), 155–75; Faranak Miraftab, “Insurgent Planning: Situating Radical Planning in the Global South,” *Planning Theory* 8, no. 1 (2009): 32–50.

Chapter 5: Straight Outta Los Angeles: Swap Meet Space and the Development of West Coast Hip Hop

Tupac: "Meet me at the Compton Swap Meet..."

Dr. Dre: "Uh..."

Tupac: "Just meet me at the swap meet!"

- "California Love Remix" (music video), Tupac Shakur, 1996¹

Shortly before Christmas in 2014, several hundred vendors at the Compton Fashion Center (known locally as the Compton Swap Meet) received extremely bad news: the building's owner had sold the vendors' workplace to Walmart, and they were to vacate their booths within thirty days (Figure 5.1). After twenty-eight years in operation, the swap meet owners hung "Close Out Sale" signs on the façade, forcing the vendors—nearly all immigrants from Korea and Latin America—to sell their stocks at cut rate prices. One longtime vendor was instructed to clean and vacate her space with "not even a thank you" after over two decades in business.² With the swap meet's closure, the City of Compton lost one of its most iconic sites. Long-time customers and Compton residents lamented the indoor market hall's closure in terms of its cultural and social significance. One longtime customer recalled that the swap meet was "poppin,' literally and figuratively [with] African American culture" during its heyday, while another trenchantly observed that it was "the holy grail of the hood."³



Figure 5.1: Compton Fashion Center shortly before closing in January 2015. Source: <http://a-xicanas-journey.blogspot.com/2015/01/compton-fashion-center-closing.html>

¹ Hip hop artists 2Pac and Dre, *California Love (Remix)*.

² Francisco Orozco, "The End of Compton Small Businesses," *Comptondemocrats.Com*, January 4, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151224022152/http://www.comptondemocrats.com/the-compton-swap-meet-closes/2015/1/4/9xi5b8r4ad7gvv2czkcfcx78sljmr>.

³ Respectively, see Akisha B.'s 6/29/2014 and Fatima B.'s 11/22/2014 review of the Compton Swap Meet on Yelp.com. See also: Orozco.

Acclaimed hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar affirmed these views months later in his hit music video, “King Kunta,” which he filmed at the swap meet in mid-2015.⁴ To a withering funk bassline, Lamar is shown dancing on the swap meet’s marquee and in its parking lot alongside hundreds of Compton residents (Figure 5.2).⁵ Against this backdrop, Lamar—also a Compton native—raps about his hometown roots and his songwriting prowess, rebuking rap industry and hometown critics who seek to “cut the legs off him” (as he raps) because of his success, just like the song’s namesake, Kunta Kinte.⁶ Lambasting successful MCs who abandoned Compton for elite Southern California suburbs, and criticizing rival rappers who hire ghostwriters, Lamar reasserts an old school vision of hip hop in which fidelity to place and authenticity in speech are paramount.⁷



Figure 5.2: Kendrick Lamar dances on the Compton Fashion Center’s marquee. Source: Youtube.com screen capture.

It is not surprising then, that the song is filled with images of Lamar’s hometown. The music video opens with a close-up of a road marker that reads, “Welcome to Compton,” and quickly cuts to

⁴ Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta,” released in 2015, has 128 million views on YouTube as of June, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRK7PVJFbS8> Following the release of his first studio album in 2011 (*Section.80*), Kendrick Lamar enjoyed a rapid ascent marked by the platinum certification in 2013 of his 2012 album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* by the Recording Industry of America (RIAA). His subsequent albums, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and *DAMN* (2017), have earned RIAA platinum and triple platinum certifications, respectively as of June of 2019.

⁵ The bassline is inspired by and interpolated from “Get Nekkid,” by fellow Compton natives Mausberg and DJ Quik.

⁶ The full line is: “Bitch, where you when I was walkin’? Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin’, King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him, Kunta, Black man taking no losses...” Colloquially, “walkin’” refers to the time when Lamar was poor (walking like the rest). “Kunta Kinte was the fictional 18th-century black slave featured in Alex Haley’s best-selling novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. In the novel, Kunta had his foot cut off to prevent him from escaping his plantation.” See: <https://genius.com/5027993>

⁷ Drake, a popular hip hop artist, is the most notable of Lamar’s rivals. The two have critiqued one another’s work in various interviews published in the popular press. Katie Rife links Lamar’s repeated and multivalent reference to yams to four things: authenticity (Ellison), sex (slang for woman’s legs), drugs (slang for balloons containing cocaine and heroin), and wealth/status (Chinua Achebe’s Igbo people’s use of yams). Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* when his protagonist “relishes a rare moment of defiant authenticity” after eating a yam from a New York city street vendor. See: Katie Rife, “Kendrick Lamar Imbues a Root Vegetable with Literary Meaning,” *The A.V. Club*, November 13, 2015, <https://music.avclub.com/kendrick-lamar-imbues-a-root-vegetable-with-literary-me-1798286383>.

Lamar cruising the city's streets in a 1990 Cadillac.⁸ In a series of stops, he raps at the center of an energetic street party featuring talented break dancers, attractive women, and tricked out lowriders. In the background are a series of everyday Compton landscapes. According to Lamar, each site was deliberately chosen because of its personal significance: a mid-century suburban house (owned by a friend) bears a close resemblance to the one in which he was raised; the Warwick Terrace apartment complex is one of the city's numerous Section 8 housing communities; and the Compton Swap Meet was for several decades one of the city's most notable shopping centers.⁹ As emblems of Lamar's roots, these sites also bolster his newly-earned acclaim by signaling his affiliation with one of hip hop's most important cities. Deploying classic hip hop tropes of "the local" and "the real," the video's lyrical and visual language hammers home Compton's distinctive identity.

Just as Compton's starring role in Lamar's "King Kunta" video is not incidental, neither is that of the Compton Fashion Center. As Lamar disclosed in a 2012 interview, he was a lifelong customer of the market hall: "I've been going to the swap meet my whole life....As a kid, that's where I used to get all my cassettes, all my CDs. My pops, too—he'd buy music. I'd get my Nikes there."¹⁰ Indeed, it was from the swap meet's parking lot that an eight-year-old Lamar and his father watched renowned rap artists Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre film a music video for their hit single, "California Love."¹¹ At the beginning of the video, Tupac implores Dre to "meet me at the swap meet," where the two embark on a joyride through Compton. As Fidel Martinez observes, this choice of locals is notable because both artists—both of whom had released several platinum-certified albums—certainly had the means to shop at LA's fanciest retailers.¹² But the Compton Swap Meet conferred a status far-more precious than that of a mainstream mall or any luxury brand: that of "realness." By siting his video at the swap meet, Lamar follows a long line of hip hop artists who use swap meets as visual and linguistic shorthand for the low-income neighborhoods in which they were raised.

Thus, while the Compton Fashion Center's several hundred Korean vendors regarded the market hall as their gateway to financial security and the (Korean) American Dream (as discussed in Chapter 3), Lamar saw in it a cultural landmark and hip hop memorial. Imbued with significance by the hip hop artists who distributed their music and outfitted themselves in the latest street fashions through its vendors, it enjoys the status as one of hip hop's most iconic places. According to Lamar, watching his musical idols film at the swap meet inspired him to pursue a career in hip hop. "I couldn't describe how I felt at that moment," Lamar recalls. "So many emotions. Full of excitement. Full of joy and eagerness. 20 years later I understand exactly what that feeling was. INSPIRED."¹³

⁸ According to the producer of the King Kunta video, Director X, scenes of Kendrick Lamar cruising the streets of Compton were intended to evoke Dr. Dre's 1999 hit video, "Still D.R.E.". See: <https://www.complex.com/music/2015/04/director-x-king-kunta-interview>

⁹ According to the *New York Post*, Lamar grew up in a modest ranch house at 1612 W. 137th Street, four blocks from the site of acclaimed hip hop venue, Skateland U.S.A., and a 25-minute walk (1.3 miles) from Warwick Terrace Apartments. See: Zachary Kussin, "Inside Kendrick Lamar's Childhood Home," *New York Post*, March 4, 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/03/04/inside-kendrick-lamars-childhood-home/>.

¹⁰ Kendrick Lamar, quoted in Ross Scarano, "Kendrick Lamar's Guide to L.A. Compton Swap Meet," *Complex*, October 26, 2012, <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/10/kendrick-lamar-guide-los-angeles-compton/compton-swap-meet>.

¹¹ The video, shot in 1996, was a "remix" of the original 1995 video. See: Fidel Martinez, "How NWA, Tupac, And Kendrick Lamar Made The Compton Swap Meet A West Coast Rap Historical Landmark," *Uproxx* (blog), July 5, 2017, <https://uproxx.com/music/compton-swap-meet-kendrick-lamar-tupac-nwa/>.

¹² Martinez.

¹³ Quoted in Evan Minsker, "Kendrick Lamar Writes Tribute to 2Pac" September 13, 2015 <https://pitchfork.com/news/61180-kendrick-lamar-writes-tribute-to-2pac/>

The inclusion of the swap meet in Lamar's video is not only a nod to his personal connection to it, nor is it simply a gesture to an important retailer in his hometown. It is also a tribute to the genesis of west coast gangsta rap. More than simply associating himself with his musical forbearers and a significant hometown landmark, Lamar's use of the swap meet is part of a powerful claim to his place in the pantheon of hip hop's greatest rappers. Indeed, Kendrick Lamar's music video underscores what few outside of the hip hop world know: that swap meets and their vendors were crucibles of the west coast hip hop industry.

West coast hip hop's genesis owes much to swap meet spaces. Their small record stores—which offered extensive inventories of mixtapes from up and coming artists as well as out of print used titles—were goldmines not only for fans of the quickly-evolving genre, but also for DJ's themselves, who coveted the old funk and R&B records from which they sampled the beats for their hip hop tracks. The obscure titles desired by DJs were difficult to find at corporate record stores like Tower Records and The Wherehouse. In contrast, obscure records were available in abundance at swap meet record booths. Hip hop writers thus acknowledge the Radium (outdoor) and Compton (indoor) swap meets as key sites in the geography of hip hop music production, in no small part because record stalls operated at both markets served as distribution and information hubs about the fledgling hip hop music scene.¹⁴

Before the internet's advent, the Slauson Swap Meet, Compton Swap Meet, Inglewood Marketplace, and over 100 other Southern California indoor swap meets furthermore were important hang out spots for a generation of African American and Latinx teenagers who used their spaces like White kids used suburban shopping malls. Finding it more convenient to patronize local retailers within walking distance or a short bus ride, many teenage residents of the region's "hoods" and "barrios" hung out at the swap meet rather than large regional malls (near South Central, the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall and Fox Hills Mall were exceptions).

Moreover, Black and Latinx teenagers interested in the latest hip hop trends knew to go to the swap meet because its small shops offered cutting edge hip hop goods. Swap meet vendors provided a dazzling array of goods attractive to young teenagers. Car stereo shops stocked with sound system components, jewelers selling chains, earrings, and other bling in various forms, specialists able to make custom screen printed t-shirts and embroidered hats for special occasions, and vendors of wardrobe staples including high quality t-shirts from trusted swap meet brands such as Shaka and Pro Club. High end fashion was also available at the swap meet: designer labels from Louis Vuitton to Gucci could be purchased as knockoffs, providing equal access to status symbols while challenging markers of class distinction.

It is not surprising then that Lamar's is but one of hundreds of hip hop tracks that mention swap meets in their lyrics and music videos. A survey of hip hop songs on Genius.com reveals that as of 2019, 227 hip hop artists have referenced swap meets generally, name dropped specific locations, used them as metaphors, and critiqued their material cultures on 333 tracks (Figure 5.3).¹⁵ This doesn't account for the thousands of songs that are not published on Genius.com. Beginning in 1985, when Dr. Dre began rapping about the swap meet where he sold his mixtapes, through the present, swap meets have retained their cultural and symbolic power. In his hit 2019 music video entitled "Swap Meet," for instance, hip hop artist Tyga dances through the aisles of the Slauson Indoor Swap Meet

¹⁴ See in particular: Terry McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, April 14, 2002, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/14/magazine/tm-37890>; Sam Quinones, "Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/28/entertainment/la-ca-ms-compton-swap-meet-20120729/2>.

¹⁵ Author's analysis of hip hop lyrics gleaned from on music lyric database, Genius.com.

while invoking his listeners to “keep it ghetto for me, like a swap meet” (Figure 5.4)¹⁶ Compared with other region-specific sites acknowledged within hip hop tracks, swap meets are a west coast analog to “the projects,” the widely-acknowledged birthplace of east coast hip hop.¹⁷ Testament to their power as hip hop icons, swap meet references *increased* just as the bazaars began closing en masse during the late 2000’s. Capitalizing on nostalgia, up-and-coming hip hop artists have paid homage to hip hop’s roots by citing the bazaars.¹⁸ With the wave of swap meet closures, the references assume new significance as they become linguistic memorials to old school rap and swap meets themselves.

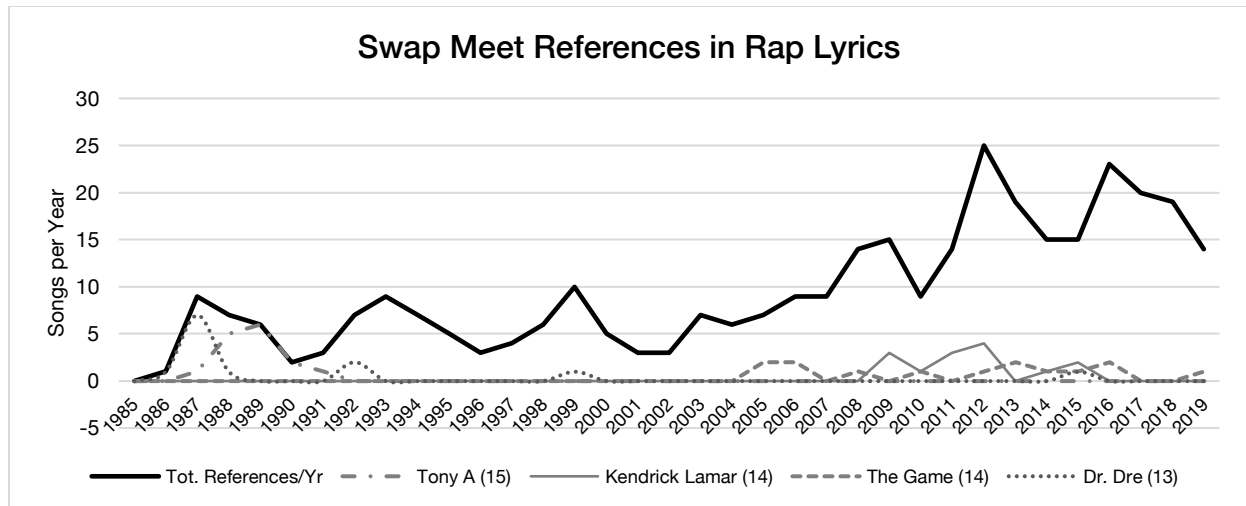


Figure 5.3: Swap meet references within hip hop songs. N = 333. Table by Author. Data source: Genius.com



Figure 5.4: Tyga dances in the Slauson Swap Meet in his 2019 music video, “Swap Meet.” Source: screen capture.¹⁹

¹⁶ Tyga, *Swap Meet*.

¹⁷ Although not as numerous as songs referencing iconic sites in the development of east coast hip hop, those citing swap meets are significant in number. Enumeration of songs containing references to “the projects” and “PJs” (a common referent to the projects) by author, with data gleaned from Genius.com and Songlyrics.com. By the author’s count, 275 songs refer to the projects as “PJs.” Songlyrics.com returns 1,000 hits for songs referring to “the projects.”

¹⁸ Another possible reason for the increase is the rise of internet-based self-publishing platforms such as Soundcloud and DatPiff (a mixtape distribution platform specializing in hip hop music), which have democratized music publishing, leading to a new golden era of raw, underground music. See: Christopher Vito, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip Hop’s Rebels* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). There is some irony that the rise of so-called “Soundcloud Rap”—which has helped kill off brick-and mortar music stores—has coincided with a growing number of swap meet references.

¹⁹ Tyga, *Swap Meet*.

Indoor swap meets, which were initially envisioned as outlets for mass-produced and inexpensive Asian imports (as I discuss in Chapter 3), became recognized within hip hop lyrics as icons of “ghetto realism.”²⁰ This status acknowledged that the goods sold at swap meets—especially “hip hop” goods, which I define later in this chapter as graphic t-shirts, athletic shoes and athletic wear, custom-made apparel, and “bling”—signaled one’s allegiance to the “hood” *as well as* aspirations of wealth. As emporiums of this kind of objectified cultural, swap meets as cultural institutions exerted significant force on the garment and wholesale industries. In doing so, they shaped the cutting edge of hip hop tastes and street fashions that eventually were disseminated from Los Angeles design houses to retailers around the world.

This chapter examines the rise of west coast hip hop in relation to the proliferation of indoor swap meets, each of which were products of the same time, place, and socioeconomic context. Amidst the well-publicized anti-swap meet protests and boycotts of the 1980s (discussed in Chapter 4), early hip hop producers made their *own* claims on swap meet space. Their recordings, clothing, and jewelry, sold from Asian-operated booths helped define the bazaars’ materiality. Beats and rhythms recorded on hip hop tracks and played from loudspeakers in swap meet aisles shaped their sonic character. And hip hop lyrics, which routinely “name dropped” swap meets, coded the bazaars as distinctly hip hop spaces. In appropriating swap meets as their own, I argue that hip hop producers co-created with Asian swap meet vendors a new and intercultural public realm.

In constructing this realm, and fostering the new sonic and material cultures that emerged within it, hip hop artists and swap meet vendors recombined heterogeneous elements. Like hip hop music production, which involves the sampling, remixing, and layering of musical quotations and rapped rhymes, transforming swap meets into hip hop spaces was an inherently palimpsestic activity. When acts of recycling, appropriation, layering, and remaking take place in the built environment, hip hop scholar and architectural theorist, Craig Wilkins, describes these actions as “hip hop design.”²¹ Transforming spaces neglected by White upper and middle classes into sites of empowerment is a central tenet of this design philosophy, according to Wilkins, and discarding prevailing notions of how spaces *should* be used is critical to the construction of a “hip hop spatial consciousness” which helps to birth new and synthetic forms.²² Housed within repurposed buildings and convening profusion of people and merchandise from around the world, indoor swap meets are prime examples of hip hop architecture. They have forced regular interactions between social groups otherwise separated by race and class, while introducing a wild range goods from varying origins to predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods. This milieu cultivated a richly cross-cultural artistic ferment that produced pointed critiques of a range of contemporary concerns including globalization, immigration, economic inequality, gender identity, police brutality, and other forms of systemic racism.

²⁰ I deriving “ghetto realism” from the commonly used phrases, “keepin’ it real,” and “ghetto fabulous.” The former loosely means being true to one’s self and behaving in an authentic manner. The latter roughly refers to the possession of “objectified cultural capital” in the form of showy clothing and material possessions while lacking financial wealth.

²¹ Craig L. Wilkins, “(W)Rapped Space: The Architecture of Hip Hop,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, no. 1 (2000): 11.

²² Wilkins, 11.

Reality Rap and the Power of Place

Gangsta Gangsta!
It's not about the salary,
It's all about reality!
- N.W.A., 1988

During the 1970s and 1980s, amidst the growing economic devastation wrought by a wave of factory closures in south Los Angeles County, the Los Angeles Police Department began ramping up its anti-gang initiatives, which targeted young African American men. As deindustrialization dealt a succession of brutal blows to the region's African American blue collar work force, the LAPD initiated its "Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums" ("CRASH") program to ostensibly suppress gang activity in South Central Los Angeles. Within this increasingly impoverished area, the program encouraged racial profiling and led many police officers to use brutal tactics to apprehend "suspected gang members." In reality, many of the Black and Latinx youth arrested, roughed up, and beaten, were doing little more than occupying public space. Police were known to pick up teenagers and take them into a back alley and beat them up, then return them to the streets.²³ These practices intensified with the introduction of Operation Hammer in 1987, which empowered special police units to use tanks to break down the walls of homes suspected to be sites of drug sales. As with the CRASH program, Operation Hammer resulted in wrongful property destruction and injury. Both practices fueled a strong disdain for the Los Angeles Police Department within Los Angeles' African American communities.

These deteriorating social, economic, and living conditions constituted an urban crisis that provoked varied grassroots responses. While protests and boycotts directed at the arrival of immigrant businesses (discussed in Chapter 4) offered implicit critiques of racial capitalism, artistic expressions of discontent with the worsening conditions also emerged. Circulating underground before exploding into the mainstream, "reality rap"—also known as "gangsta rap"—emerged in the mid-1980s to powerfully critique the increasingly militarized police response to worsening poverty and violence.

As journalist Cheo Hodari Coker remarks, the surging popularity of reality rap in the mid-1980s was a response to these intensifying conditions. "It was an incredibly harsh and wild, and scary-crazy environment for someone growing up in South Central to deal with. And so, it was only inevitable that [hip hop] music eventually began to talk about" what was happening.²⁴ Both critiquing and claiming this worsening milieu as their own, gangsta rappers performed substantial cultural work [reference?] in drawing attention to the physical places affected by these societal shifts. By the end of the decade, the emerging genre matured into a driving force in American popular culture.

The built environment was a central actor in the maturation of this subgenre, just as it had been in hip hop's initial emergence in New York in the 1970s. Jeff Chang, in his history of the "hip hop generation," connects Robert Moses's slum clearance programs and the ensuing malign neglect of the Bronx and Queens to the efflorescence of the city's graffiti and DJ cultures during the 1970s.²⁵ A confluence of location-specific factors, according to Chang, contributed to the intensely competitive and experimental ferment that birthed hip hop.²⁶ It was within the apartments and recreation rooms

²³ Mark Ford, *N.W.A.: The World's Most Dangerous Group*, Video (VH1, 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7HoVypBqug>.

²⁴ Coker, interview in Ford.

²⁵ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

²⁶ These include the declining cost of stereo equipment, the introduction of the Jamaican "dub" tradition of playing that equipment like musical instruments, and the easy availability of the recreation rooms and open spaces of the city's housing projects for parties and breakdancing. Jeff Chang was himself once a DJ, record producer, and pop culture writer for

of New York's housing projects in particular, where Chang and other hip hop historians assert that young DJ's developed the foundational tools of hip hop DJing. Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash were among the inventors of foundational DJ'ing techniques including sampling, mixing, cutting, and looping that are required to splice together short audio clips from a variety of musical genres into the musical mashup that provides the basis of a hip hop track. Similarly, the introduction of rapping and scratching, two techniques that distinguish hip hop as its own distinct genre, also occurred in New York's projects.

It is for this reason that Jeffrey Melnick writes that if we are to understand post-world War II popular music, youth culture, and African American life, we must "start looking at, instead of past, the community centers, basketball courts, and stairwells where so much history was made."²⁷ Melnick's observation that New York's housing projects are intertwined with the development of numerous African American musical genres anticipates the existence of an analogous relationship in Los Angeles County's midcentury retail landscapes.²⁸ Whereas the apartments, rec rooms, and stairwells of New York's projects were in many ways responsible for hip-hop's birth, the streets of Los Angeles, its single family houses, and its swap meets strongly influenced the emergence of its west coast subgenre, "reality rap."

In the mid-1980s, many of New York's top hip hop groups rapped not about the projects from which they came, but about their facility with rhymes and abilities on the turntables. "Rappers Delight," recorded and released in 1979 by the Sugarhill Gang, is representative of the rappers to focus on these themes, as well as New York's club scene. It begins, "Now, what you hear is not a test, I'm rapping to the beat, And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet."²⁹ Chang writes that most New York hip hop groups were still rapping mainly about their technical skills by the mid-80s.³⁰

By the mid-1980s, a new school of Los Angeles rappers turned for inspiration to the vast terrain of social injustices on a hyperlocal scale. Los Angeles resident Tracy Marrow—who records under the name Ice-T—was one of the first to depart from east coast stylistic norms when he released "6 'N The Mornin'" in 1986. The track details in quasi-journalistic style a day spent with friends on the streets of Los Angeles. In nonchalant story rhyme, Ice-T incorporates themes of police harassment, incarceration, drug use, misogyny, and street hustling into a semi-autobiographical tapestry.³¹ Inspired by his exploits and those of his friends, the song synthesizes fact and fiction in

numerous publications. See Chang, 67–125. Numerous scholars of the genre have observed that hip hop DJ's, producers, and engineers, "employ digital technology as instruments," as Tricia Rose writes. See: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Cultural Expression in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 96.

²⁷ Jeffrey Melnick, "Project Culture: The Popular Arts of Public Housing Projects," *Babson Faculty Research Fund Working Papers* 46 (2009): 18.

²⁸ Melnick focuses on the linkage between doo-wop, an acapella choral genre that originated in Black barbershops, and New York's housing projects. Beginning in the 1950s, numerous doo-wop groups named themselves after the projects within which they lived, identifying themselves by the stairwells and restrooms they repurposed as their rehearsal spaces. Melnick likewise positions hip hop's ascendance within the projects as a *continuation* of this tradition. The practice of hip hop MC's competing in head-to-head "rap battles" is, according to Melnick, an extension of the "battles" between the housing project affiliated doo-wop groups of the 1950s. "While not as romantic as a down home jook joint or a crowded Pentecostal church," Melnick observes, "it turns out that the stark modernist landscape of the postwar American housing project might have been just as significant to the development of African American music." See Melnick, 27–28.

²⁹ Sugarhill Gang, *Rappers Delight*, 1979.

³⁰ Long Island-based Public Enemy is a notable exception, given its lyrical focus on the tenets of the Black Panthers and Black liberation.

³¹ "6 'N The Mornin'" begins with a 6 am police raid of the narrator's home—likely conducted under the auspices of the LAPD's CRASH program—which prompts him to flee "out my back window." Uniting with his crew on a street corner and then "rollin' in a [Chevy] Blazer with a Louie [Vuitton] interior" down Crenshaw Boulevard, he suffers a second run-

what Ice-T calls a “play-by-play [of] an L.A. day.”³² At a time when few outside of South Central Los Angeles understood the region’s escalating gang activity and LAPD’s aggressive policing tactics, the song offered a template for those seeking to broadcast these harsh realities to a mainstream audience.

Music journalists recognize “6 ‘N The Mornin’” as one of the first hip hop tracks to relate the quotidian and often brutal realities of being a young Black person in Los Angeles.³³ Inspired by Philadelphia rapper Schoolly D’s “P.S.K. What Does it Mean?”, Ice-T realized he wanted to emulate the song’s portrayal of a confident Black man willing to flaunt his wealth, enact violence, and allude to his gang connections. After hearing the song in a Santa Monica night club, Ice-T went about creating a similar kind of track. “I wanted a song with that kind of vibe,” he remembers. “Next thing I know I’m talking about running from the cops [in his recorded music]. And I struck a nerve! And my fan base just exploded! The homies was on it. They like ‘this is yo shit, aight? What you doing—nobody’s talking about the street, talking about drugs and crime and stuff like that. *Go in!!*’ And I’m like ‘if they like this, then I could do this forever.’”³⁴

While Ice-T was recording his breakout track, other Los Angeles hip hop artists were beginning to dabble in reality rap. Chief among them were two DJs in a popular electrofunk group called the World Class Wreckin’ Cru. Andre Young and Antoine Carraby—known today as Dr. Dre and DJ Yella—began laying down hip hop tracks with their friends O’Shea Jackson (Ice Cube) and Eric Wright (Eazy-E) after attending a sellout concert at the Los Angeles Sports Arena by New York hip hop group Run-DMC.³⁵ Their first recordings were mixtapes, consisting of sampled beats overlaid with their original scratches and rhymes. Initially developed for and distributed to a swap meet audience, these early recordings were packed with commentary on the widening social inequality and systemic racism taking place in South Central. Rapper Chuck D. compares early reality rap recordings to “a CNN that Black kids never had.”³⁶ In an era prior to the internet, their street reporting emerged as a central way to disseminate information about the worsening social problems of the hood. Sold at outdoor and indoor swap meets, the tapes flowed through an informal distribution network that media scholar Jared Bell likens to “an African American underground communication and press.”³⁷

in with the police when they pull over the car, discover “an Uzi, four-four and a hand grenade,” and throw the friends in jail. After serving a seven-year prison term, the narrator is released, where he resumes a life of drug dealing and violent crime. A composite of the deeds of his friends, the song at once sensationalizes the drug and gang cultures of the time, while also laying bare the increasingly contentious relationship between Black communities and the police.

³² Ice-T, quoted in Soren Baker, *The History of Gangsta Rap: From Schoolly D to Kendrick Lamar, The Rise of a Great American Art Form* (New York: Abrams, 2018), 14.

³³ Inspired by Iceberg Slim, a former Chicago pimp whose 1969 memoir achieved mass popularity amongst African American readers, Ice-T began writing story rhymes about his friends as a teenager. When he started rapping in the early 1980s, Ice-T remembers that “I tried to rap like New York...so I was...battle rapping.” Eventually, his friends convinced him to rap about them. Ice-T recalls, “you know, my little crime crew, they was like, ‘talk about us! Talk about what *we* do! You know, you got these rhymes, you talk about us all the time, all this hustling and shit.” The commercial success of “6 ‘N The Mornin’” prompted him to adopt a reality rap style going forward. See: Peter Gibaldi and Ice-T, *Ice-T Speaks On Robbing Banks, Influencing NWA, Almost Signing Eminem + More*, Video, The Premium Pete Show, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HML3w3NNRwA>. See also: Baker, *The History of Gangsta Rap*, 4, 6.

³⁴ Gibaldi and Ice-T, *Ice-T Speaks On Robbing Banks, Influencing NWA, Almost Signing Eminem + More*.

³⁵ DJ Yella recalls that “there really was no west coast rap until the Wreckin’ Cru....Once we saw run DMC come around, that was the start of us doing [rap] music.” See: DJ Yella, interviewed in Mike Corbera and Andre Relis, *NWA & Eazy E: The Kings of Compton* (STS Media, 2016).

³⁶ Rapper Chuck D. in 1990, quoted by Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 171.

³⁷ Cummings, 171.

Sites of Distribution and Memorialization

Outdoor and indoor swap meets are among a handful of spaces uniquely tied to reality rap's booming popularity on the west coast. Like all recorded music, hip hop tracks move through a series of *spaces* as they progress from the song's initial conception in an artist's mind to a listener's ear. When recordings were sold as physical media during the pre-internet era, they moved through a series of production, distribution, and consumption spaces on this journey. While highly-specialized spaces including professional studios, record plants, and corporate record stores served as the conduits for music produced by mainstream labels, underground music relied on a different—and far more diverse—set of spaces. Everyday spaces in particular occupied a key role in the production and distribution process of underground music. When home recording technologies became broadly available in the late 1970s and 1980s, aspiring artists transformed bedrooms, rec rooms, and garages into ad hoc recording studios and cassette tape production facilities. Small-time record stores assumed outsized roles as not only distribution hubs for self-made hip hop mixtapes, but also as de facto record labels who advised artists on what was and was not selling. With intimate knowledge of what was popular on the “streets,” mom and pop record store owners became unlikely “mavens” (as journalist and social science writer Malcolm Gladwell calls them) in the hip hop record industry.³⁸

Because most hip-hop artists were Black, one might expect that African American record store owners would have filled the void. Indeed, as historian Joshua Clark Davis observes of the American south, Black-owned record stores were vital economic and social institutions from the post-World War II era through the 1970s.³⁹ Instrumental in bolstering economic self-sufficiency and “sustaining [a] black public life” in which shoppers could feel welcome regardless of their color or social class, Black-owned record stores were for a time important community institutions throughout Los Angeles's African American enclaves. However, like many Black-owned businesses, record stores gradually closed during the 1970s. By 1986, only 17 were listed in the *Greater Los Angeles Blackbook*, compared to 202 listed in the *Pacific Bell Central Los Angeles Yellow Pages*.⁴⁰

The demise of Black-owned record stores in Los Angeles and elsewhere was a product of growing competition from large record store chains and a larger abandonment of the retail sector by would-be Black entrepreneurs after the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act.⁴¹ The hollowing out of the Black retail sector was reinforced by a declining feeling that “blacks should shop whenever possible in black stores.”⁴² One store that weathered these changes was V.I.P. Records, which was founded in South Central in 1967 and expanded into the predominantly Black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, Compton, Carson, Inglewood, and Long Beach by the 1970s (Figure 5.5). As hip hop music took off during the 1980s, owner Kelvin Anderson built a recording studio in the back of his store to drum up

³⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002), 30–88.

³⁹ Joshua Clark Davis, “For the Records: How African American Consumers and Music Retailers Created Commercial Public Space in the 1960s and 1970s South,” *Southern Cultures* 17, no. 4 (2011): 73–75. Specializing in jazz, funk, soul, and R&B recordings, Black-owned stores were, as Davis writes, “perhaps *the* place where [Black] consumers most commonly interacted with [Black] individuals who made their living from popular culture.” Davis, 72.

⁴⁰ The *Blackbook* was a directory of Black-owned businesses in Los Angeles published from 198X? to 199X.

⁴¹ White-owned record store chains including Sam Goody, The Wherehouse, and Tower Records seized market share from Black-owned stores as they began carrying funk, soul, and R&B genres during the 1970s. At the same time, upwardly mobile African Americans increasingly turned to employment in corporate services as limits to institutionalized discrimination were slowly implemented. On a national scale, whereas independent retailers accounted for 30 percent of Black-owned firms in 1969, they accounted for only 9 percent by 2002. See Davis, “For the Records,” 84.

⁴² For example, in a 1968 survey, 70 percent of Black respondents claimed that “Blacks should shop whenever possible in black stores,” compared to only 38 percent of respondents in 1984. Davis, 84.

business and provide a safe space for aspiring DJs to hone their skills.⁴³ During the late 1980s and 1990s, Anderson claims that Sir Jinx, Warren G., DJ Quik, Jamie Foxx, Snoop Dogg, and other notable rappers got their start practicing on the turntables in the studio in the store's parking lot.⁴⁴ The case of V.I.P. Records illustrates how a robust Black-owned record store sector *might* have been a leading force in popularizing west coast hip hop. With limited locations and market reach, however, an unlikely group of Asian-American swap meet record store owners stepped into the void.



Figure 5.5: V.I.P. Records, pictured here in 2009. Photo by Flickr user, “jondoe41”
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jondoe41/3841297381>

Far more important in distributing hip hop records were the region's swap meets, which served a diverse swath of customers ranging from casual bargain hunters to hardcore record collectors. Vinyl aficionados had long regarded outdoor swap meets and flea markets as fertile rummaging grounds from which they might discover the next additions to their record collections. At the Pasadena City College Swap Meet, record sellers and collectors have been meeting for much of the market's history. Periodic swap meets set up specifically for record collectors are another fixture in the area's music scene: The first dedicated exclusively to record trading opened in the parking lot of Capitol Records'

⁴³ With the assistance of a local rapper Sir Jinx, who was a founding member of C.I.A. and Dr. Dre's cousin, Anderson purchased an E-Mu SP1200 drum machine, which Jinx set up in a storage room in the rear of the store. From from 10 am to 10 pm, the studio was open for neighborhood kids who wanted to learn how to sample, mix, scratch, and DJ on the studio's equipment. Anderson remembers that Sir Jinx “taught two guys that worked for me how to program and do beats....Our first studio was the drum machine, two turntables, and we mixed everything down to a cassette deck. Years later, we ended up having a full and complete recording studio” and record label called Thin-Lyne Records, which Anderson ran. Kelvin Anderson quoted in Bruce Smith, “VIP Records Owner Kelvin Anderson Recalls Recording Snoop Dogg's Demo,” *HipHopDX*, November 22, 2013, <https://hiphopdx.com/news/id.26363/title.vip-records-owner-kelvin-anderson-recalls-recording-snoop-doggs-demo#>.

⁴⁴ Snoop, for instance, recorded his first demo tape in the V.I.P. studio, a fact he later acknowledged in his first major music video, “Who Am I? (What's My Name?),” which features him rapping on the roof of the store next to its distinctive googie-style sign. See: Snoop Dogg, *Who Am I? (What's My Name?)* (Death Row Records, 1993), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2soGJXQAQec>; Smith, “VIP Records Owner Kelvin Anderson Recalls Recording Snoop Dogg's Demo.”

Vine Street headquarters in 1977.⁴⁵ Immensely popular, other record swap meets emerged soon thereafter, attracting people seeking rare records, coveted bootlegs (unauthorized recordings) of live performances, and LPs at bargain prices.

Most press coverage of Los Angeles swap meet record sellers emphasized that they were emporia of rock and roll and jazz records. However, early hip hop DJs and MCs also enthusiastically turned to swap meet music vendors, particularly dealers in hard-to-find funk and disco recordings. Samples and remixes of the genre's beats and basslines served as the grist for the wildly popular emerging genre of west coast hip hop. Small businesses and other informal distribution channels proved crucial infrastructure for these emerging artists, since many early hip hop tracks were built upon unauthorized samples. As music and urban historian Alex Sayf Cummings observes, many early hip hop mixes violated U.S. copyright law. Nonetheless, these synthetic recordings were one piece "of a larger complex of jobs and businesses that New York youth created for themselves, whether it meant starting a record label, getting a record deal, mixing music at clubs and parties, or selling bootleg tapes on the street."⁴⁶ In Los Angeles, a city notoriously inhospitable to pedestrians, it is fitting that early hip hop artists relied on outdoor swap meets as both a locus of source material and an early distribution point for their mixtapes.

Like V.I.P. Records, swap meet record vendors played important roles in the development of west coast hip hop. The Roadium (outdoor) Swap Meet, the Compton Fashion Center, and the Slauson Swap Meet are especially central, as the three evolved into mixtape distribution hubs and vital third spaces for aspiring DJ's and MC's. On any given weekend, hundreds of hip hop heads descended upon these swap meets to hunt for records, rub elbows with up-and-coming artists, and to watch up-and-coming DJ's perform on the turntables set up in their stores. Several years before V.I.P. opened its studio, the first and arguably most significant swap meet record store was opened at the Roadium Swap Meet by an unlikely figure: a Japanese American high school guidance counselor named Steve Yano.

The Roadium Mixtapes

When Yano and his future wife, Susan, were undergraduates at California State University, Los Angeles, they took a part-time job selling tapes and records at the Orange County outdoor swap meet, where they learned the second-hand record trade.⁴⁷ Recognizing that they could make significant money in the record business, they opened their own stand at the Long Beach Swap Meet with stock purchased from his former boss. They continued operating record stands through school, moving to Gardena's Vermont Swap Meet after the Long Beach Swap Meet closed, and finally to Gardena's Roadium Swap Meet (Figure 5.6). Like other drive-in theaters in the region, the Roadium had long held a sprawling weekend flea market on its grounds, providing at nominal rates hundreds of spaces from which micro entrepreneurs sold their goods. At this point, Steve Yano was an educational psychology graduate student considering a career as a high school guidance counselor. However, when he realized that he could make more money working a three day-a-week job at the swap meet than as a full-time school psychologist, he dropped out of school and devoted his full energies to the record trade. Yano remembers that "I spent the week, Monday through Friday, searching for

⁴⁵ Dennis Edwards, "Swap Meets for Rockers Rise Again," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1981.

⁴⁶ Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century*, 168.

⁴⁷ "Steven Gregory Yano | 1952 - 2014 | Obituary," Fukui Mortuary, 2014, <https://www.fukuimortuary.com/obituary/2702987>.

product....Weekends, I'd sell at the meet." At the region's pawnshops, Yano found that "you could buy 10 records for a dollar. I knew I could sell three of them for two bucks each" at the swap meet.⁴⁸



Figure 5.6: The Roadium Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2015.

Long interested in music, Yano stayed current on emerging trends.⁴⁹ At the Roadium, Yano paid particular attention to the preferences of his African American customers, who thirsted for the sounds emanating from New York's hip hop scene. As Yano remembered, "there started to be this new type of talk—R&B, Grandmaster Flash, Kurtis Blow, Run-DMC....These guys are popping. Kids are talking about it."⁵⁰ Already, Yano's stall was considered a goldmine of potential source material for DJs seeking obscure records from which they could sample unique breaks and beats. In conversations with his clients, Yano realized that that virtually no mainstream record stores were carrying hip hop.⁵¹

Recognizing a business opportunity, Yano developed a network of unsigned hip hop artists and distributors who provided him with hard-to-find underground titles. One such artist and distributor was Lonzo Williams, a local DJ and the leader of the World Class Wreckin' Cru, an electro funk DJ collective popular in South Los Angeles.⁵² Williams was one of several distributors upon whom Yano relied to advise him on emerging trends and provide him with hot content from both the east and west coast hip hop scenes. Quickly solidifying a reputation as the go-to distributor for cutting edge electro funk, disco, and east coast hip hop [is this true!?? Who *were* Yano's distributors?], Williams began approaching Yano with new titles. Soon, his catalog exceeded 100 hip hop and electro funk

⁴⁸ Steve Yano, quoted in McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics."

⁴⁹ Yano and his wife, for instance, became known for the disco parties they threw at their home on Mondays. See: "Steven Gregory Yano | 1952 - 2014 | Obituary."

⁵⁰ Steve Yano, quoted in McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics."

⁵¹ "Nobody [record retailers] has it," Yano remembers. "They've never heard of it." See Steve Yano, quoted in McDermott.

⁵² Prior to forming the Wreckin' Cru, Lonzo had run Disco Construction, the first group with which Dr. Dre and DJ Yella were affiliated.

titles, which he sold by the hundreds each week.⁵³ For a brief moment, Yano became *the* go-to place for emerging hip hop talent. As he recalls, “I become for a while a very important guy. I’m buying 500 copies of a title. The first place anybody called in L.A. was me. ‘Play this. Whattya think?’ All these label guys are starting to bring me their new records. I could tell the first weekend if something is going to sell just by how the kids react.”⁵⁴

As Yano strengthened his relationship with Williams, he visited Eve After Dark, the club where the World Class Wrecking Cru held its all-night dance parties. In a back room, Yano met Dr. Dre and DJ Yella as they were preparing a mixtape for KDAY, a historically Black radio station that was in the midst of converting to an all-hip hop format. Station manager Greg Mack had hired the pair to be the station’s—and the nation’s—first “mixmasters,” or the DJs who pre-mixed an evening’s worth of music for his Saturday night programming slot.⁵⁵ Dre and Yella’s mixes were instantly popular, catapulting KDAY to the top of the ratings charts, and prompting other stations around the country to convert to hip hop formats. As listeners heard Dre and Yella’s mixes, many wondered where they could purchase them commercially.⁵⁶

At Williams’s club, Yano marveled at the mix Dre and Yella were producing. As he watched the duo work the drum machine, turntables, and mixer, Yano asked whether they would make a custom mixtape for him to sell at his Radium record stall. As Yano remembered in an interview shortly before his death, “I asked them, ‘hey, if I bring you some records, could you do that?...And they said, “sure, bring your records...we’ll mix you up a tape.””⁵⁷ Thus began an informal business partnership that lasted from 1984 to 1987. In exchange for roughly \$200 per tape, Dre and Yella produced a slough of hip hop recordings containing original rapping and scratching over bootlegged copies of recent hip hop hits.⁵⁸ Using an inexpensive and newly-available piece of recording equipment called a four-track mixer, Dre and Yella joined other hip hop DJs in harnessing the technology to lay down lush multi-track hip hop mixes. The duo became experts with the technology and occupied the leading edge of a wave of mixtape production that flooded the market with experimental hip hop recordings throughout the 1980s. Although produced expressly for Yano, the “Radium mixtapes” proved so popular that pirated copies of them eventually spread to swap meets across the United States.

If new hip hop radio stations were instrumental in recruiting new hip hop listeners, cassette tapes were perhaps even more so. Less expensive than vinyl records and more compact, these material objects were easily transported in a pants pocket and conveniently playable on recently-available Sony Walkmans and car stereos. Further, blank cassette tapes—which retailed for roughly \$1 apiece—not only enabled audio pirates to replicate virtually unlimited copies of popular albums, they also provided the canvases upon which aspiring artists could inexpensively record new records. As Alex Sayf

⁵³ McDermott, “Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics.”

⁵⁴ Quoted in McDermott.

⁵⁵ Hired by KDAY in 1983, Greg Mack decided to steer the station to a hip hop-only format while driving the streets of Los Angeles after moving there from Houston. Listening to its soundscape, he realized hip hop’s popularity in African American neighborhoods. Because “everybody out here played their music loud...if you wanted to know what everybody was in to, all you had to do was roll your window down and listen. I heard groups like Run-DMC and Sugarhill Gang and said to myself, “I think the people here like rap.” See AllHipHopStaff, “Exclusive: Greg Mack Breaks Down The History of 1580 KDAY,” December 30, 2013, <https://allhiphop.com/features/exclusive-greg-mack-breaks-down-the-history-of-1580-kday-FvXDEEXvxkqJ6B4iixnCfw/>.

⁵⁶ When KDAY launched a mid-day hip hop show called Traffic Jams, other stations again followed suit.

⁵⁷ Steve Yano interview in Corbera and Relis, *NWA & Easy E: The Kings of Compton*.

⁵⁸ First released as the Tascam “Portastudio” in 1979, four-tracks (and later, eight-tracks) eventually became so widely available that even toy stores carried them. This easy availability democratized music making, allowing aspiring DJs to record their mixes and demo tapes from virtually anywhere with a power outlet.

Cummings observes, this new technology ushered in a “democracy of sound” in which the lowered cost of audio recording granted cheap access to recorded music on an unprecedented scale.⁵⁹

Although several Asian-American men were important distributors of hip hop mixtapes, Steve Yano is perhaps the most pivotal, serving as a de facto record label and producer for several of west coast hip hop’s most celebrated artists before mainstream record labels would sign them. In handling the business side of mixtape production and sales, Yano and his swap meet stall provided Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, and eventually the rest of N.W.A.’s founding members space to hone their DJing and MCing skills. Many of the scratching, cutting, and mixing techniques for which Dr. Dre and N.W.A. are famous, were first featured on Yano’s “Roadium mixtapes.” Indeed, these mixtapes were the medium in which early west coast hip hop artists developed the techniques that ultimately transformed the entire genre of hip hop.

In 1984, Dre began producing mixtapes for Yano before eventually handing over those duties to Tony Alvarez (Tony A), a DJ from the San Pedro Harbor area in 1987. Dre and Yella’s first swap meet tapes were *’85 Live* and *’86 In the Mix*, which at an hour in length were expertly crafted mashups of electrofunk and hip hop hits from the likes of Grandmasta Flash, the Beastie Boys, and the World Class Wreckin’ Cru, were tied together by Dre’s cutting and heavy scratching. Tours de force, they set the tone for a succession of popular mixtapes that featured Dre’s considerable DJing skills. A hallmark of these tapes were shout outs to Steve Yano and the Roadium swap meet. On *’86 In the Mix*, for instance, the tape begins with DJ Yella asking, “hey, yo Steve, you got a level? Artie, you ready to go off? Well, check it out. Right about now, Dr. Dre is on the wheels and I’m about to cold tear shit up!” At the beginning of Side B, Yella again asks, “Hey, yo Steve, what’s up? Check this out, right now, Dr. Dre is making house calls at the Roadium...so listen up.”⁶⁰

Most of Dre and Yella’s subsequent tapes adhere to this standard format. Many begin with a spoken or rapped introduction by Dre, Yella, and the other DJs and MCs, who often included shout outs to friends and important places. A one- to two-minute “megamix” previewing the tape’s full-length songs in rapid succession ensues, followed by the full-length songs themselves. For instance, at the beginning of Dr. Dre and DJ Yella’s 1987 tape, *In Effect*, Dre lists a long list of rappers who are “down with us,” including Eazy E, Ice Cube, Tony A., and notably, the recently-formed hip hop collective, N.W.A. (Figure 5.7).⁶¹ As in most of his other mixtapes, Dre advertises the central roles of Steve Yano and the Roadium Swap Meet, giving shout outs to the man and the place on *both* sides of the cassette. At the one minute mark of *In Effect*’s Side A, Dre raps that “Steve at the Roadium is down

⁵⁹ Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century*.

⁶⁰ Dr. Dre, DJ DR. DRE - 86 IN THE MIX - COMPTON ROADIUM SWAP MEET MIXTAPE FROM 1986, Audio Recording, 1986, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA_-tPekpbg&list=RDdZYHPTjVtg0&index=2.

⁶¹ Placing a west coast spin on Bronx-based Boogie Down Production’s “I’m Still #1,” Dre raps in a similar cadence, “Eazy E, is down with us. MC Ren, is down with us. DJ Yella, is down with us. Arabian Prince, you know he’s down with us. Tony A the Wizard, is down with us. JJ Fad, is down with us. Timmy T, you know he’s down with us. DJ Pooh, boy is down with us. Toddy-Tee and [Mixmaster] Spade, they’re down with us. My boy Ice Cube, you know he’s down with us. Crazy D, is down with us. That nigga Master Rhyme is a motherfuckin’ punk. DJ Dazzie Dee, is down with us. Big Lay Law [Dre’s brother], is down with us. Michel’le, you know she’s down with us. The Rhyme \$yndicate, is down with us. I’d like to mention, so pay attention, to where I’m from: Compton, but the tapes are from the Roadium. My name is Dre, listen while I play, by the way. I’m also down with N.W.A. Steve at the Roadium is down with us. Slangin’ funky tapes, it is a must. We’re number one (one, one, one)!” See: Dr. Dre and DJ Yella, *In Effect*, Mixtape, 1987, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Eq_VwA32Q. According to David Ma, the beef between Romeo & Master Rhyme and NWA stemmed back to high school days (Master Rhyme and Eazy-E both went to Manual Arts Senior High in L.A.).” It escalated when Romeo & Master Rhyme released the 1987 single, “Crackerjack O.G. Version,” which refers to NWA’s “seven sorry suckers.” See: David Ma, “The Secret History of Delicious Vinyl, the L.A.-Based Indie Label That Birthed Some of the Most Iconic Rappers,” *Okplayer*, 2018, <https://www.okayplayer.com/music/secret-history-delicious-vinyl-tone-loc-wild-things.html>.

with us. Slangin' funky tapes, it [Steve's record stall] is a must."⁶² Likewise, at the beginning of Side B, MC Ren (a member of N.W.A.) similarly raps that "Dre makes the tapes," while "they're sold by Steve (Steve) for the price of ten (ten). Come out with the cash. Start movin' your ass (ass), Because a tape like this (this) is movin' helluva fast (fast)."⁶³

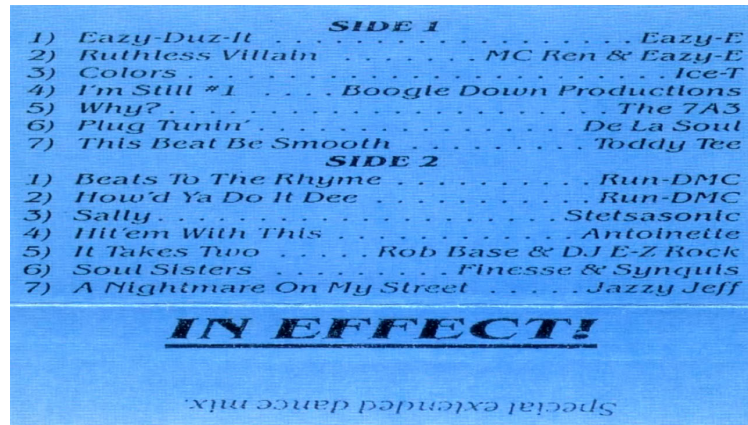


Figure 5.7: Cover to Dr. Dre and DJ Yella's 1987 In Effect mixtape.

In spite of the tapes' amateur production or their relatively high \$10 price tags, Steve Yano's Roadium mixtapes moved "helluva fast" because of Dre's technical precision (and later that of Tony A) on the turntables and mixer. With his swift cutting and scratching, Dre became known for his lush mixes and place-specific raps at the beginning of his tapes. In spite of the technical limitations of the four- and eight-tracks upon which they were recorded, listeners continue to regard them as expertly-crafted.⁶⁴ DJing skill aside, Dre and Yella's mixtapes enjoyed broad appeal because they presented popular and difficult-to-find hip hop releases on a single tape compiled by the genre's emerging tastemakers. One DJ describes the importance of Roadium mixtapes when he was a young teenager. "Growing up in Southern California, we didn't have too many outlets where we could find new music. I mean we had one radio station, you know that sounded really static-y. So you know, when mixtapes circulated, everyone was really eager to see, you know, 'let's see what's on here.'" He continues, "we had no internet, no Google."⁶⁵ In spite of their ubiquity at swap meets, Roadium mixtapes were prized possessions. One listener characterizes their appeal by remembering that "my older brother had a couple of these mixtapes from Dre. I would borrow them without his permission and risked an ass beating but I took em anyway."⁶⁶

⁶² Dr. Dre and DJ Yella, *In Effect*.

⁶³ Parentheses denote repeated words in the lyrics. To a funky beat, MC Ren raps, "Dre makes the tapes, then recreates (ates), those cuts that can identify the fate (fate). So let's begin (gin), it's not about Ren (Ren), They're sold by Steve (Steve) for the price of ten (ten). Come out with the cash. Start movin' your ass (ass), Because a tape like this (this) is movin' helluva fast (fast). Don't try to record (cord), If you can't afford (ford), Go get the same sound it'll give you a bore (bore)." See: Dr. Dre and DJ Yella.

⁶⁴ Professional studios at the time had sophisticated mixing boards which allowed for the layering of far more tracks. As one listener succinctly states, "How the F does Dre [in the 1980s] sound better than a [contemporary] digital track"? Comment by Youtube user "Mark Hoodzy" See: Dr. Dre, *DJ DR. DRE - 86 IN THE MIX - COMPTON ROADIUM SWAP MEET MIXTAPE FROM 1986*.

⁶⁵ John Elkins, *FANS TALK ABOUT THE ROADIUM MIXTAPES / TONY A. THE WIZARD / DR. DRE / STEVE YANO*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9f3Yvz_gyc.

⁶⁶ "The Homeboy Channel" (listener comment) Dr. Dre, *DJ DR. DRE - 86 IN THE MIX - COMPTON ROADIUM SWAP MEET MIXTAPE FROM 1986*.

Well before Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, Eazy-E and other hip hop luminaries became household names, the street buzz generated by Yano's Roadium mixtapes helped these and the numerous other artists who appeared on them to establish their credibility. DJ Tony A., for instance, emphasizes that the mixtapes he produced for Yano afforded him and the artists he worked with their first distribution outlet and a means of establishing street cred with their listeners.⁶⁷ During an era in which record companies were not signing rap artists, street buzz was key to establishing this credibility. Perhaps more important, mixtapes offered a tight feedback loop in which DJs and rappers could sharpen their voices and see what worked. As Ice Cube recalls of his first experiences rapping with Dre, "we was doing mixtapes for the swap meets. We was doing hood shit on the mixtape, because we knew that would only sell in the hood."⁶⁸

Playlists for a pre-internet age, mixtapes and swap meet record vendors solved the exposure problem for early hip hop artists, while priming national markets for the eventual release of hip hop studio albums. Although made for Yano for sale at his record stall, Dre and Yella's mixtapes were distributed far beyond the Roadium. Record vendors at indoor and outdoor swap meets across Southern California carried the "Roadium Mixtapes," thanks to the ease with which cassette tapes could be copied on home cassette players. As one mixtape fan recalls, "basically people were dubbing the original Rodium [sic] tapes (that were ONLY sold at the Rodium [sic]) and passing them off at other swap meets but with different (and lame) artwork."⁶⁹ Although Dr. Dre complained about this piracy, he had little recourse since he himself was engaged in piracy by selling unauthorized copies of hip hop recordings. In hoods across the United States, mixtapes produced by and for Steve Yano were available at the local swap meet, indirectly yet undeniably helping to launch the careers of several of the most famous names in hip hop.

N.W.A. at the Roadium

"Niggaz With Attitudes," better known as N.W.A., is surely the most famous of hip hop groups with swap meet origins. As Terry McDermott writes in a 2002 *Los Angeles Times Magazine* article, N.W.A. owes its existence to Yano and the Roadium, not because they provided Dre the platform from which he built N.W.A., but because Yano connected him to Eric Wright (known today as Eazy-E). Wright, a 22-year-old drug dealer looking for a way out of a violent and precarious profession, knew Dre from high school and had been following his development as a DJ. With nearly \$250,000 in assets, Wright regarded Dre as a potential business partner and sought to reconnect.⁷⁰ In 1985, Wright began purchasing records at Yano's Roadium stall, and asking him to tell Dre that he

⁶⁷ In an interview with George Perez, DJ Tony A. recalls his motives for selling mixtapes to Steve Yano. George Perez: "[With your mixtapes,] you were just looking for what, street buzz, street cred?" Tony A.: "That's all it was. I was getting paid \$200 for each cassette I was making for Steve." Off-screen voice: "That was a lot of money back then too." Tony A.: "Yeah!" George Perez: "But still, right now for what you had been doing, you would probably get 10 G's off the top." See full interview at: Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio, interview by George Perez, Video, August 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSNdWXve8g>.

⁶⁸ Ice Cube interviewed on Corbera and Relis, *NWA & Eazy E: The Kings of Compton*.

⁶⁹ In Southern California, the Compton Fashion Center and Kobey's Swap Meet in San Diego were well known places where one could buy a copy of the Roadium Mixtapes. Listener comment from "Benovite" on "Listener Fodder," "The Mix Machine #2: Dr. Dre - '86 In The Mix! (MP3s)," Blog, *WFMU's Beware of the Blog* (blog), September 11, 2008, <https://blog.wfmu.org/freeform/2008/09/the-mix-machi-1.html>.

⁷⁰ See: McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics." See also: Jeff Chang, "The Last Days of Eazy-E," *Swindle*, April 24, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071025012955/http://swindlemagazine.com/issue02/eazy-e/>.

was looking for him.⁷¹ Initially ignoring Wright's weekly questions, Yano eventually mentioned Wright to Dre, and the two shortly thereafter phoned Yano in the middle of the night, asking if he would show them how to open a record store and start a record label.⁷² While Yano deterred Wright from opening a record store and refused to start a record label, he did share his knowledge of the business with the pair.

The rest of the story is well-documented, particularly in the 2015 Hollywood blockbuster, *Straight Outta Compton*. Reacquainted with Dre, Eazy bailed him out of jail in 1986 on the condition that he produce a track for New York-based hip hop group, H.B.O. (Home Boys Only), which was signed to Eazy's new record label, Ruthless Records.⁷³ During the studio session, H.B.O.'s members refused to rap the lyrics to "Boyz-n-the-Hood," a song written by Ice Cube about a Compton crack addict and a car thief who, "knowing nothing in life but to be legit," cruise the streets of the city and engage in a series of exploits before inciting a prison riot.⁷⁴ Faced with lost studio fees, Dre convinced Eazy to rap the lyrics himself, and the resulting track became an instant hit upon its 1987 release.⁷⁵ Widely regarded as the song responsible for popularizing gangsta (or reality) rap on a mass scale, the track provided the foundation upon which Eazy built his label. With this popular single in hand, he recruited music industry veteran, Jerry Heller, to run Ruthless Records with him, and in 1987 signed N.W.A., the pioneering gangsta rap group that included Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and other Roadium mixtape guests as members. Under Heller and Eazy's management, the group released a series of hits on its first album, *N.W.A. and the Posse* (1987) and platinum-certified *Straight Outta Compton* (1988). The unvarnished depictions of structural racism, police brutality, and imagined responses to these injustices within the first three tracks of the group's sophomore release ignited a firestorm of national controversy, even prompting the FBI to write a letter accusing N.W.A. of "encourag[ing] violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer."⁷⁶ Widely credited for supercharging N.W.A.'s album sales, the letter inspired Dr. Dre to opine, "we're like news reporters. We tell exactly what's going on the streets. You know? That's all it is. Street knowledge."⁷⁷

In typical Hollywood mythmaking fashion, the *Straight Outta Compton* movie glosses over key details about the birth of Ruthless Records and N.W.A.. Produced by Ice Cube, DJ Yella, and Dr. Dre—all of whom have privately expressed gratitude to Steve Yano for his mentorship during the early stages of their rap careers—the movie nevertheless omits him, because his Asian American identity would have complicated a central tension of the film's script: conflict between a normative White society and a subaltern Black one. In doing so however, the film almost completely leaves out

⁷¹ Yano recalls that Wright would ask him to "Tell [Dre that] Eric came by.' And I'd say, [disbelievingly] 'ah, OK sure!'" Yano interview in Corbera and Relis, *NWA & Eazy E: The Kings of Compton*.

⁷² Yano remembers that "Eric wanted to open up a record store, and Dre wants to start a record label." Quoted in Yano interview in Corbera and Relis. According to Yano, "I tell [Wright], 'Don't do it. It's a bad business. I can show you how, but don't do it.'" Yano quoted in McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics."

⁷³ See for instance: McDermott, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics"; F. Gary Gray, *Straight Outta Compton* (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2015); Ford, *N.W.A.: The World's Most Dangerous Group*; John Rabe and Stephanie Lopez, *White 'Straight Oughta Compton' Writers Talk #OscarsSoWhite*, Off Ramp (Southern California Public Radio, 2016), <https://www.scpr.org/programs/offramp/2016/02/19/46519/straight-outta-compton-writers-talk-oscarssowhite/>.

⁷⁴ Jeff Chang speculates that the shootout at the conclusion of "Boyz-n-the-Hood" is intended to echo the 1970 Marin County Courthouse shootout involving Jonathan Jackson and Angela Davis, a former UCLA professor and Black Panther Party member. See Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 304.

⁷⁵ Eazy was able to launch his label with minimal industry experience, thanks to Hollywood's fee-for-service Macola Records, which enabled recording artists to press XX LP records for a fixed sum.

⁷⁶ Milt Ahlerich, "Letter from Milt Ahlerich to Gui Manganiello," Official Correspondence, August 1, 1989.

⁷⁷ Dr. Dre, interviewed in Ford, *N.W.A.: The World's Most Dangerous Group*.

how “Boyz-n-the-Hood”—and indeed much underground hip hop music—was marketed by swap meet record retailers in addition to street teams Eazy signed a distribution deal with Priority Records.

Omitting swap meet record vendors from the film not only masks the multicultural context in which west coast hip hop was first distributed, it also leaves out one of Eazy and Dre’s most important professional advisors. After several years of producing mixtapes for Yano, Dre considered him as a de facto record label executive, even asking him at one point to formalize things by starting an *actual* label on which Dre would produce studio albums. Although Yano repeatedly declined to do so, Dre, Eazy, and other MCs and DJs recognized Yano a pivotal hip hop industry figure when major labels considered hip hop as a passing fad. Similarly, Eazy turned to Yano for advice when forming his label.

In 1986, Ruthless Records was merely an idea, and it was at the Radium Swap Meet that it took physical shape. As both Yano and Tony A. recall, Eric Wright only committed to the Ruthless name after consulting with Yano at his stall. Thus it is not surprising that Wright valued Yano’s council as he contemplated Ruthless Records’s future. According to Yano, Eazy approached him one weekend in (late 1986, early 1987?) and asked, “Whattya think of Ruthless? Ruthless Records?” Yano replied, “That’s [a] cool” name for a label.⁷⁸ Wright asked Artie T., the air brush artist working at the back of Yano’s stall, to design what was to become the Ruthless Records label (Figure 5.8).⁷⁹ Thus both the name and the visual image of Ruthless Records were articulated at Yano’s Radium stall.



Figure 5.8: Side 1 of the first Macola/Ruthless Records first release of Eazy-E’s hit single, *Boyz-n-the-Hood*. The Ruthless Records logo was developed in Yano’s Radium Swap Meet stall. Source: <https://www.discogs.com/Eazy-E-LA-Is-The-Place/release/1779388>

Curiously, *Straight Outta Compton* director Andrea Berloff has revealed her awareness of this omission yet fails to grasp its full extent. In a 2016 interview, she disclosed that while researching the film,

I loved the world of the *Compton* swap meet...[which] was really the place where Eric [“Eazy-E” Wright] discovered Dre’s music....[He] was sort of wandering around the swap meet and wandered past this music booth, this booth that was selling mixtapes. He saw how people

⁷⁸ McDermott, “Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics.”

⁷⁹ Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

were going crazy over Dre's mixtapes. And to me, that moment of hearing the music and how amazing and fresh and interesting it was, seeing the crowd's reaction to that but also how much money was changing hands, and they kept talking about money, money, money. And him realizing that there is commerce around this incredible music and this incredible sound. I loved that world and I loved that moment.⁸⁰

In this quotation, Berloff conflates much of what happened at the Radium Swap Meet with another significant swap meet frequented by Dr. Dre and Eazy E. As I describe below, the Compton Swap Meet indeed played an important role in hip hop's development. However, the ignorance of a movie executive so intimately involved with one of hip hop's most important biopics reveals just how misunderstood outdoor as well as indoor swap meets remain in hip hop's origin story.

First, the DJ techniques that made "Boyz-in-the-Hood" an instant hit had been honed over years of practice on Radium mixtapes. As DJ Tony A observes, if "you listen to the cutting and scratching on the hooks [of N.W.A's first album]...Dre was already doing that stuff on Radium mixtapes! All he did was implement what he was doing on the mixtapes."⁸¹ Second, while the film depicts the "Boyz-in-the-Hood" recording session as a revelatory experience for its participants, the group was initially ambivalent about the song. On the first pressing of the record, the track was relegated to Side B, *after* "L.A. is the Place," and "Fat Girl," which appeared on the A side. As Tony A. recalls, Dre, Eazy, and Yella turned to Yano and the swap meet as a market research venue before pressing their first record. "I remember when they brought their first three songs to Steve Yano," Tony A. remembers. "And they asked him, 'play [the recordings], and let us know what the crowd—the swap meet, you know, *the underground*—has to say.'"⁸² Although the crowds loved "Boyz-n-the-Hood," Tony A. remembers that, "to a certain extent, they were somewhat like, nah, nah, we're gonna try to go with 'LA is the Place.'"⁸³ Only after "Boyz-n-the-Hood" blew up did Eazy follow Yano's initial advice and correct his mistake by placing "Boyz-n-the-Hood" and a radio edit of the song on Side A of the record's subsequent pressings. When N.W.A. later rapped, "you are now about to witness the power of street knowledge" at the beginning of *Straight Outta Compton*, they may well have been referencing the power of *swap meet* knowledge.

Building Hip Hop Space at the Swap Meet

At the swap meet, Yano's record stall became known as a hip hop destination unto itself (Figure 5.9). The mixes produced by Dre, Yella, and eventually Tony A drew large crowds to the stall. Johnny De Leon, a DJ with a near-complete collection of Yano's swap meet mixtapes, remembers being struck by the unique mix Yano was playing on his stereo during his first Radium visit in 1984. "They was playing 'The Traffic Jams' [KDAY's famous hip hop radio show] on the stereo [and] I asked what's playing? Steve said it was a mix tape & brought out the binder with covers of the mixes that he had. Every other week I started to go & see what's new & buy more tapes."⁸⁴ For many young hip hop listeners, buying a mixtape at Yano's stall was a rite of passage into Los Angeles's hip hop community.

Indeed, the Radium's openness afforded an expansive canvas upon which Yano's clients transformed a mere record stall into a distinctly "hip hop" space. As was standard practice at independent record stores, Yano played selections from his stock on a stereo throughout the day, which enabled his customers to listen to a recording before buying it. Unlike other retailers, however, Yano maintained a pair of turntables, which he turned over to DJs who wished to showcase their

⁸⁰ Andrea Berloff, quoted in Rabe and Lopez, *White 'Straight Outta Compton' Writers Talk #OscarsSoWhite*.

⁸¹ Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

⁸² Tony A.

⁸³ Tony A.

⁸⁴ Johnny De Leon, "Email Correspondence," August 13, 2019.

talents. Impromptu DJ sets became draws in and of themselves. As Yano recalls, “At the end of the day, tables would be out, I’d be dropping the pegboards down, pulling the records off [the shelves]. I’d put the pegboard over to the shiny side. OK? Flatten them up next to each other. [A] DJ scratches, and then these kids would come out and they’d start break dancing. Unbelievable. Woulda never believed this would have happened.”⁸⁵ Recognizing the importance of breakdancing (also known as b-boying), Yano encouraged rather than quashed the ephemeral DJ and MC performances, and the spontaneous b-boy “battles” that took place at his stall.



Figure 5.9: Yano’s Roadium stall. Photo courtesy Susan Yano.

Steve Yano also invited graffiti writers and airbrush artists to make t-shirts at the rear of the stall, introducing hip hop’s “fourth element.” One such artist was Mark Machado, the Chicano son of a lithographer from San Pedro, who is now known as Mister Cartoon, one of the most important muralists and tattoo artists in Southern California, famous for his “fineline style” of tattooing. As a child, Machado was inspired by the graffiti he saw near his home in San Pedro, and he decided to learn the art of airbrushing. Just after graduating from San Pedro High School, the 17-year-old learned some basics from his karate teacher, and he convinced his father to help him start an airbrushing business at the Roadium swap meet.⁸⁶ After he made one thousand dollars on his first day in business, Mister Cartoon occasionally set up at the back of Yano’s stall, spray painting custom designs for small entrepreneurs, gang members, and anyone else who wanted a unique piece of airbrush art. “Being that I was a little weird,” Mr. Cartoon remembers, “I could draw weird shit. Like if some Crips [gang members] came up, if they wanted fucking ‘Hoover Crips’ on the back [of a shirt], I would write that shit in Old English and put Crips with the Jheri curl and a fucking corduroy cap and cuffs on the bottom. They would come back and flip out that I was able to do those little weird details because I

⁸⁵ Steve Yano interview in Corbera and Relis, *NWA & Easy E: The Kings of Compton*.

⁸⁶ Machado recalls telling his father, “Pops, look, we can get a 10×10 booth, table, I’ll paint this black banner, we’ll go to The Roadium [swap meet], I’ll airbrush T-shirts...’ I made a thousand dollars the first day” creating custom designs for “whatever anybody came with.” See Bobby Hundreds, “Shades of Grey :: My Conversation with Mister Cartoon,” November 14, 2018, <https://thehundreds.com/blogs/bobby-hundreds/mister-cartoon-interview-2018>.

people watch. I study people, I study that little shit, how they stand, you know all their posture and all that.”⁸⁷ To a hip hop soundtrack, Machado and the other Chicano graffiti artists Yano recruited to operate next to his stall provided a material culture component to what was a distinctly hip hop space. Another Chicano air brush artist to work out of Yano’s stall was a man known as Artie T., who later designed the Ruthless Records logo on site.⁸⁸ Mister Cartoon, Artie T., and other air brush artists at Yano’s stall helped to synthesize a distinctly west coast hip hop visual vocabulary that integrated African American east coast hip hop vernacular with Chicano motifs including lowrider cars and fantastical depictions of the afterlife.

It is notable that Yano’s business reflected the demographic complexity of 1980s Los Angeles. As a crossroads of myriad cultural influences, it placed African American and Latinx clients in contact with its Japanese-American owners. Its Chicano airbrush artists were commissioned by Black gang members to create shirts that represented various blood and crip “sets.” The swap meet was thus also a site of cross-cultural hybridity in which two closely-aligned artistic styles converged, with Chicano men creating custom shirts for Asian American and African American business owners as well as gang members.

Until mainstream labels finally embraced hip hop in the early 1990s, Southern California’s swap meet vendors secured a central role for themselves in hip hop distribution networks by stocking mixtapes and stoking demand for them. As swap meet record vendors across the region began stocking bootlegs of Dre and Yella’s mixtapes, they elevated the profiles of both Yano and the Radium Swap Meet. As DJ “Tony A. the Wizard” observes in a 2018 interview, “what made these tapes so unique was not only [Dre] cutting and scratching, but he was also rapping on ‘em. These tapes were highly place-specific. He would mention, ‘Yo, what’s up, this is Dr. Dre here, chillin’ with Steve here at the Radium Swap Meet in the City of Gardena, and I’m about to tear shit up.’”⁸⁹ Thus, anyone who got their hands on one of Dre’s mixtapes knew about Dre and Yella’s “homeboy” Steve as well as the Radium Swap Meet.

Tony A the Wizard

After the success of “Boyz-n-the-Hood” and the release of N.W.A.’s debut album in 1987 (*N.W.A. and the Posse*), Dre stepped back from producing mixtapes, and Yano asked him to find a DJ to serve as his successor. For this job, Dre tapped a Chicano teenager named Tony Alvarez. At age 11, Alvarez had worked for Yano when he operated at the Vermont Swap Meet, and he rediscovered Yano through Dre’s shoutouts on his Radium mixtapes. “I was just blown away” by Dre’s ’85 *Live* tape, Alvarez recalls. “And [when] I heard...Dr. Dre say something about Steve at the Radium [on ’86 *in the Mix*], I was putting two and two together.”⁹⁰ Intrigued, Alvarez “went to pay my friend Steve a visit... [and] he recognized me right away. First thing he asked me [was] ‘what are you doing now?’ I said, ‘I DJ.’ He said, ‘Can you tear it up?’” At Yano’s stall, Tony A. began “cutting it up, and Dre taps me on the shoulder. Tells me, ‘man you did a dope job!’”⁹¹ On the spot, Dre referred Tony A. to

⁸⁷ Machado quoted in Hundreds.

⁸⁸ Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

⁸⁹ Tony A.

⁹⁰ Tony A, Tony A Talks Making Radium Mixtapes With Dr. Dre & DJ Quik’s Contributions To Hi-C’s ‘Skanless,’ interview by Soren Baker, January 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wu2ouYTmDiU>.

⁹¹ Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

a job DJ'ing on an album being produced by his cousin Sir Jinx.⁹² Soon after, Dre asked Tony A. to take over his Radium mixtape gig full time.⁹³

Between 1987 and 1991, and initially under Dre's tutelage, Tony A. produced over 30 mixtapes for Yano in collaboration with numerous hip hop luminaries, including Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, Ton-Loc, JJ Fad, Hi-C, Second II None, AMG, and even Steve Yano.⁹⁴ More prolific than Dr. Dre, Tony A. made a name for himself within underground west coast hip hop communities, which continue to associate his well-crafted mixes with the Radium. Tony A. so attributes his early career success to Yano and the Radium Swap Meet that he has recently produced *The Radium Documixery*, which recounts in depth the nexus between swap meet space and hip hop mixtape production.⁹⁵

While the members of N.W.A. initially rapped on Tony A.'s mixtapes, once they became internationally famous in 1988, Yano suggested that Tony A. replace Dr. Dre with a blood named Crawford Wilkerson who was "selling clothes at the end of the swap meet," as Tony A. remembers. "Why don't you go talk to him?" Yano asked. "He's been bugging me that he wants you to listen to him."⁹⁶ Hi-C, as Wilkerson came to be known, started rapping on Tony A.'s mixtapes, and the duo became well known locally, releasing two popular singles on mixtapes. The first of these, a takeoff from James and Bobby Purify's 1966 hit, "I'm Your Puppet," was released as "I'm Not Your Puppet" on the *Hi-C* mixtape in 1989. In 1991, a takeoff of Billy Stewart's "Sittin' in the Park" debuted on the *Skanlist* mixtape in 1991.⁹⁷ Both tapes—which featured Hi-C's raunchily rapping over oldies beats—generated significant street buzz. As Tony A. recalls, "'Steve would tell me later on that [the *Hi-C*] tape actually went gold on the streets."⁹⁸

Once again, Yano cultivated the commercial success of unsigned hip hop artists at his Radium stall. But by 1991, even hip hop-hungry record executives were compelled to trawl for talent at the swap meet. With *Straight Outta Compton's* (the album's) commercial success and swap meet roots, record executives finally realized that swap meets were hotbeds of the emerging hip hop talent they would need to sign to their labels in order to stay relevant. As heirs to Dr. Dre's swap meet legacy with recent underground hits, Tony A. and Hi-C were logical targets for an unlikely procession of record executives. In 1991, Tony A. and Yano were approached by an employee of Hollywood Records at the Radium record stall. A recently-formed subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company,

⁹² Tony A. subsequently got the job and earned his first studio credits as DJ on rapper Dazzie Dee's debut 1988 EP. The tracks are: "You Better Think" and "Turn It Loose." See: Tony A.

⁹³ Tony A. recalls Dr. Dre telling him that "I'm getting tied up doing these records. Would you want to take over doing the mixtapes for Steve? We'll still rap on them." Dr. Dre, quoted by Tony A. Honored "to have a guy like that pass the baton to me," Tony A. enthusiastically agreed. See Tony A, Tony A Talks Making Radium Mixtapes With Dr. Dre & DJ Quik's Contributions To Hi-C's 'Skanless.'

⁹⁴ De Leon, "Email Correspondence," August 13, 2019. Dre was invested in ensuring sonic continuity on Yano's mixtapes, teaching Tony A. the rudiments of using a four-track. Tony A. cites Dr. Dre's tutelage as key to his success. Before Alvarez made his first mixtape, Dre invited him to his house. Tony A. recalls asking "how are we gonna do it [make the mixtape]? And he said, I'm gonna show you. And he brought a little box, the Tascam porta(studio) 1. And that's what he showed me how to do four track mixtapes." Once Tony A. mastered the technique, he recalls that "Dre would come to my house. Eazy would come to my house. Cube would come to my house....And all those guys came to my house, and they would rap off of my mixtapes." See: Tony A, Tony A Talks Making Radium Mixtapes With Dr. Dre & DJ Quik's Contributions To Hi-C's 'Skanless.'

⁹⁵ Tony A, *The Radium Mixtape Documixery*, Documentary, 2019, <https://www.documixery.com/>.

⁹⁶ Tony A.'s recollection of a conversation with Steve Yano. See: Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

⁹⁷ De Leon, "Email Correspondence," August 13, 2019.

⁹⁸ <http://uniqueaccessent.com/tony-a-shares-skanless-stories-with-hi-c-disney/>

Hollywood Records had yet to sign a hip hop artist.⁹⁹ As Tony A. recalls, a man named Stewart “came with a cassette, and they asked Steve... ‘Who did this cassette?’ We thought it was like, FBI, or somebody gonna bust us for bootlegs. So we were afraid.... Steve right away says, ‘He did it’ [pointing at Tony A]. And I said, yeah, but [pointing to Steve Yano] ‘he sells ‘em,’ you know?”¹⁰⁰ Upon discovering that Stewart was a record executive, the duo ended up getting a \$140,000 record deal from two mixtapes “when we weren’t even really looking for” a record deal.¹⁰¹ Later that year, Hi-C and Tony A. released their debut album, *Skanless* on Skanless Records, a label run by Yano and released by Hollywood Records. Tony A. and Hi-C made their transition from underground to mainstream at the swap meet, initiating what was to become a major record deal with one of Hollywood’s largest entertainment corporations.

Today, while Dr. Dre is a household name, Yano and Tony A remain in relative obscurity. But on the streets of Los Angeles, and everywhere his mixtapes were sold, Tony A achieved celebrity status thanks to the swap meet. He recalls that “I didn’t know that from ’87 to ’88, that my name would be out there in the street, that I would be considered ghetto fabulous. You know that people would tell me, ‘man, you’re that guy on those mixtapes?’”¹⁰² That a Chicano man came to be considered “ghetto fabulous” through his mixes sold at a Japanese American’s swap meet stall illustrates how interactions across multiple groups significantly influenced early hip hop music.

The Compton Swap Meet: Hub City’s Hip Hop Hub

“And yeah, I’ve been to the CPT, To the ING and the LBC, To the VIP and the Compton Swap Meet, Had to watch my back, cuz them gangstaz pop heat”

– “West Coast Playaz” - Oral Bee (2005)

Also working at the Roadium were recent Korean immigrants Wan Joon and Boo Ja Kim, who noticed Yano’s popular record stall. Arriving in Los Angeles from Korea in 1976, they joined many of their countrymen in operating an outdoor swap meet stall as a first job. From their vantage point selling barrettes and hair clips, they noticed the crowds at Yano’s stall. When the Korean owners of a soon-to-open indoor swap meet stopped by the Roadium to recruit vendors, the Kims were ready to emulate Yano’s successful record store model at a brand-new swap meet with no established competitors. Wan Joon Kim remembers a key part of the owners’ sales pitch: the new swap meet would be “a bigger, nicer place,” than the Roadium, with *indoor* amenities including protection from the sun, utilities, security, and most importantly, a permanent place to store merchandise overnight.¹⁰³ Monthly, rather than daily leases promised further stability and heightened appeal. Because several of the new swap meet’s owners had sold at outdoor swap meets prior to investing in real estate, they

⁹⁹ Founded in 1989 by Michael Eisner, the label had yet to sign any hip hop artists as of 1991.

¹⁰⁰ Tony A., Tony A. The Wizard on Curious Radio.

¹⁰¹ Tony A.

¹⁰² Tony A, Tony A Talks Making Roadium Mixtapes With Dr. Dre & DJ Quik’s Contributions To Hi-C’s ‘Skanless.’

¹⁰³ As Wan Joon Kim remembers in a 2012 interview, “the owners were coming around to individual vendors, saying they were going to open a bigger, nicer place.” Among other benefits, a permanent stall at the Compton Swap Meet freed the Kims from the significant time needed to set up and tear down an outdoor swap meet stall. See: Sam Quinones, “Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/28/entertainment/la-ca-ms-compton-swap-meet-20120729/2>; John Rabe and Stephanie Lopez, *White ‘Straight Outta Compton’ Writers Talk #OscarsSoWhite*, Off Ramp (Southern California Public Radio, 2016), <https://www.scpr.org/programs/offramp/2016/02/19/46519/straight-outta-compton-writers-talk-oscarssowhite/>.

intuited that throngs of Korean vendors would happily transition from setting up stalls on a daily basis at outdoor swap meets, to operating permanent businesses at an indoor market hall.

After the Compton Fashion Center opened, nearby African American and Latinx patrons embraced the Sears-turned swap meet. Where the former department store had once served the community, over 500 retailers now met the needs of lower-income shoppers searching for new clothing, shoes, and other everyday consumer items.¹⁰⁴ As in other South Central Los Angeles communities, the indoor swap meet became one of the few places where Compton residents could obtain affordable goods and services. As one former customer put it, the Compton Swap Meet was simply “Compton’s mall.”¹⁰⁵

Among the items sold at the swap meet was recorded music at a stall operated by the Kim family. When the swap meet began accepting applications, the Kims were third in line and ready to pay their \$500 per month lease on booth Z-7, just inside the building’s main entrance (Figures 5.10 and 5.11).¹⁰⁶ From this highly-visible location they operated the Cycadelic Music Corner, a record store that soon rivaled Yano’s Radium stall in terms of its selection of underground hip hop music. Initially encouraged by their wholesaler to stock hip hop, funk, R&B and gospel music, the Kims quickly pivoted to genres popular at the swap meet.

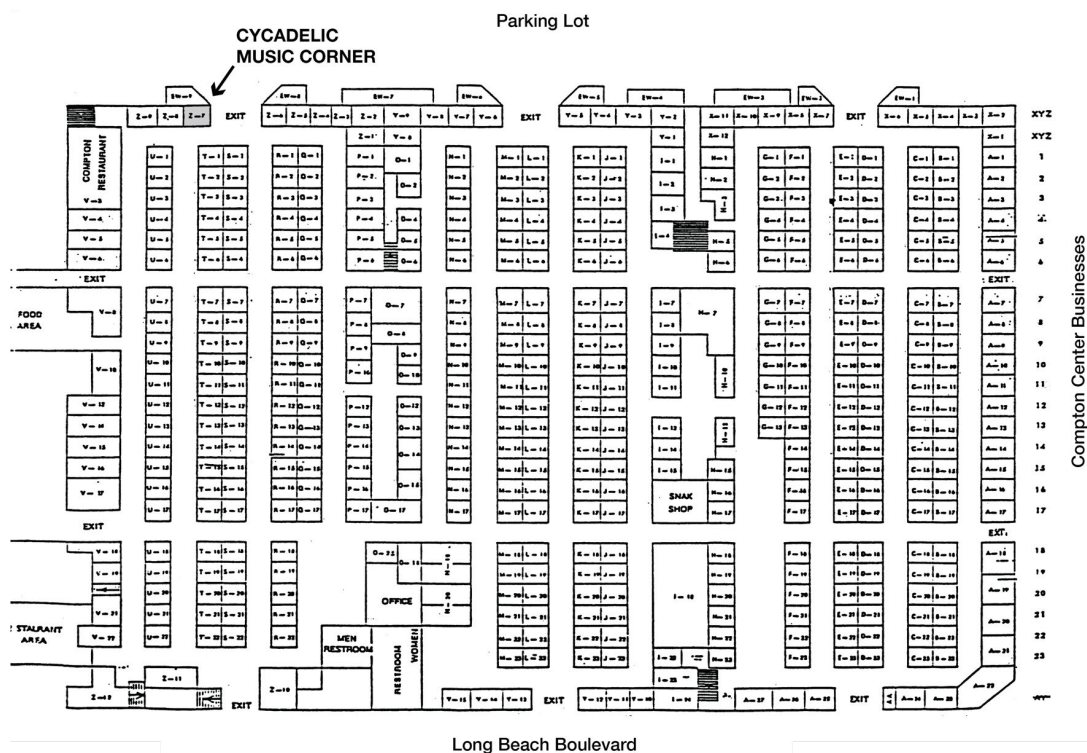


Figure 5.10: In the upper left hand corner, note the Cycadelic Music Corner booth within the Compton Fashion Center, circa 1986. Floorplan Source: Compton Fashion Center Korean Sellers’ Association Et. Al. vs. BJS Development Corporation, Etc., Et. Al., No. B031397 (Los Angeles County Superior Court November 30, 1987).

¹⁰⁴ These goods were in some instances locally-produced by the city’s then-thriving garment manufacturing sector (sweat shops), but were far more often inexpensive imports from Asia distributed by local wholesalers. This off-brand merchandise was often cheaper than that sold by chain retailers, but typically of inferior quality.

¹⁰⁵ Juan H., Yelp.com user review, October 24, 2013, https://www.yelp.com/biz/compton-swap-meet-compton?hrid=ZsaXsxWo1I8kHkSdUKtPw&utm_source=ishare&utm_content=review.

¹⁰⁶ Quinones, “Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start.”



Figure 5.11: Cycadelic Music Corner at the Compton Fashion Center, circa late 2000s. Source: https://www.yelp.com/biz/photos/cycadelic-music-corner-compton?select=PSBBSFg2crEuJ1_qYu73PA

In listening to their customers, the Kims discovered that Compton's vibrant hip hop scene was not represented on recordings offered by their wholesalers. Before N.W.A.'s first hits in 1987 and 1988, neither labels, distributors, nor mainstream record stores carried hip hop music, so Cycadelic began stocking self-produced albums and mixtapes from MC's and DJ's directly. With the help of their English-speaking children, the Kims also began stocking t-shirts, hats, and other apparel that lent the stall a distinctly hip hop vibe. After their son Kirk took over the business, he recalled that "you [could] come, you [could] give my dad five, ten cassettes or vinyls, and he would put it up on the wall and try to sell it. And if it sold, then he would re-order. If not, you [could] come and get your product back eventually."¹⁰⁷ Arlandis Hinton, who raps as BG Knocc Out, remembers that Compton rappers seeking their break "didn't know nothing about signing to a record label, so they made music for their own neighborhood...[and] they took it, to the Compton swap meet. [Wan Joon Kim] was like their first distributor."¹⁰⁸ One such rapper was Brian Wilson, a Watts native who recorded and self-produced an album entitled *Comin' From Watts* upon his release from prison. After being rebuffed by fifteen record retailers, Cycadelic provided Wilson his first break by agreeing to stock his album. An immediate hit, the cassette sold 15,000 copies during the ensuing year.¹⁰⁹

In offering consignment sales of mixtapes alongside albums released by major labels, Cycadelic Music Corner became one of the Compton Fashion Center's most popular hangouts and an iconic place for aspiring rappers to make their name. Not only did the store's inventory of hip hop CDs attract customers who spent time perusing the albums, it also afforded young Black men a place to rub elbows with emerging hip hop stars. Before signing a record deal with Priority Records, Eazy-E distributed his first single ("Boyz-n-the-Hood") at Cycadelic Records. Ice Cube also sold his early solo

¹⁰⁷ Kirk Kim, interviewed in ESECHUYGE FAMILY, *Kirk Kim Cycadelic Records*, YouTube Video, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9P6SImk4Ck>.

¹⁰⁸ Quinones, "Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start."

¹⁰⁹ As Wilson remembers in a 2012 interview with Sam Quinones, Kim "gave me my shot." See Quinones.

recordings at the stall.¹¹⁰ A few years later, DJ Quik distributed his first recordings there as well, initiating a long relationship with the entire Kim family. As current Cycadelic Records proprietor Kirk Kim states in a 2017 interview, “DJ Quik is very special to us. You know, my parents knew him. I knew him....Whenever he has time, he comes out here and supports us. He’s a really good friend of us.”¹¹¹ By the late-1980s, a stop by Cycadelic Records promised the possibility of an encounter with hip hop’s leading artists and producers. As Kendrick Lamar recalls of the swap meet shortly before recording his *King Kunta* video, during the 1990s, “you might see [rap producer and Death Row Records CEO] Suge Knight, other folks from Compton” at Kim’s booth.¹¹²

The hip hop artists and fans who fondly remember Cycadelic Music Corner’s owners help complicate narratives about contentious relations between Korean merchants and their Black customers in pre-Rodney King Los Angeles. Contrary to discourses labeling Korean merchants in Black and Latinx neighborhoods as exploitative, the Kim family established itself as a *part* of the community through its involvement in the hip hop business. Thus, the consequences of the “middleman minority” position of some Korean swap meet merchants were blunted by the development of mutual respect between merchants and customers.¹¹³ At Cycadelic Music Corner Wan Joon Kim recalls that although “most of my customers were the gang-bangers and drug dealers...I built a friendship with them....They were good to me as I was good to them.”¹¹⁴ Likewise, Kim’s former clients remember him fondly. Rapper Brian Wilson remembers that “I think he understood my struggle, more than anything... [because] he’s in the heart of Compton.”¹¹⁵

Even when rappers competed with Kim by selling their products from the Compton Fashion Center parking lot, they eventually developed a mutual understanding. Rapper OG Daddy V, who sold his first album out of his van near the swap meet’s entrance (and Kim’s store), remembers a contentious relationship with him early on.¹¹⁶ “Me and [Kirk’s] pops didn’t start off on a good note,” OG Daddy V recalls. Following in the footsteps of countless entrepreneurial rappers who hawked their products from parking lots and sidewalks as a cost-saving measure, he drew the ire of Kim who accused him of unfair competition. Dropping three albums from the Compton Swap Meet parking lot, including his debut studio release, *Dogg Food*, OG Daddy V joined other famous rappers including Daz Dillinger and Kurupt utilized the parking lot as a sales space as well. Memorializing the event in his 2010 track, “Homage to Daz & Soopafly,” Kendrick Lamar raps:

*Back when Dogg Food dropped in the Compton Swap Meet parking lot,
Daddy V had three, sold one to my pops,
We was popping out, the trunk in the Caddy was rocking out....*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Karen Grigsby Bates, “Gangsta Rap Swap Meet Proprietor Wan Joon Kim Has Died,” *All Things Considered* (NPR News, March 14, 2013), <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/03/14/174334510/gangsta-rap-swap-meet-proprietor-wan-joon-kim-has-died>.

¹¹¹ Shortly after the Compton Fashion Center closed and Kirk Kim reopened Cycadelic Records in the City Shopping Center, a small swap meet across the street, DJ Quik did an autograph-signing event at the new stall. See Kirk Kim, interviewed in ESECHUYGE FAMILY, *Kirk Kim Cycadelic Records*.

¹¹² Kendrick Lamar, quoted in Scarano, “Kendrick Lamar’s Guide to L.A. Compton Swap Meet.”

¹¹³ See: Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in America: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*. See also: Min, *Caught in the Middle*.

¹¹⁴ Quinones, “Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start.”

¹¹⁵ Quinones.

¹¹⁶ In an interview with Kirk Kim, OG Daddy V. remembers that “you had me outside, in the van, you know with the mixtapes.” *TRStv Interviews Kirk of Cycadelic Records in Compton*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSrGglEB9ig>.

¹¹⁷ Focus (feat. Pro-Verb, Ras Kass, Kendrick Lamar & Latoya Williams), *Homage to Daz & Soopafly*, Audio Recording, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DS68m0X4hkg>.

Ironically, this form of parking lot vending and “everyday urbanism” ultimately elevated the swap meet’s status as a hip hop destination and indirectly benefitted Cycadelic Music Corner. Consequently, “in the end of all of that hip-hop history,” OG Daddy V remembers, he and Kim “ended up being buddies. Shaking hands, you know?”¹¹⁸ By claiming the parking lot as an *extension* of the Compton Fashion Center’s hip hop public realm independent of the swap meet’s rules and regulations he, along with Dillinger, Kurupt, and other hip hop artists enhanced the swap meet’s cultural power.¹¹⁹

Hip Hop Fashion at the Swap Meet

*‘I’m a star, That’s why my T’s stay extra crispy,
They so white, niggas might try to sniff me,
Bought some new jeans, ball cap, keep it simple,
Shoes clean, my closet look like a mall window,
Little bit of Foot Locker, little bit of Men’s Land,
Whole lot of swap meet and half of Lids man”*
– Bishop Lamont, “Hood Psalm” (2007)¹²⁰

Just as with Cycadelic Music Corner, Yano’s Roadium record stall, and a handful of swap meet record stores across South Central Los Angeles countless hip hop careers, vendors of swap meet clothes, jewelry, and other goods were hip hop tastemakers as well. As the primary retailers in lower income African American and Latinx enclaves including Compton, Inglewood, and South Central Los Angeles, indoor and outdoor swap meet vendors wielded considerable influence over local fashions. As outlets of *new* off-brand goods procured from wholesalers in LA’s Fashion District, they stocked a full range of merchandise ranging from athletic to formal wear and from jewelry to car stereos.

For rapper Petey Pablo, the swap meet was the go-to place for what N.W.A. defined as west coast hip hop’s uniform: classic sneakers, dark baggy pants (worn below the waist), a large crisp white t-shirt, and a baseball cap. On his 2008 mixtape, he describes this distinctive hip hop style: “Give me some white on white’s,” he raps, “and Slauson Swap Meet Pants, 4x Pro Club for my back, And a baseball cap.”¹²¹ For decades, swap meets have offered seemingly-endless variations on these items, including white on white fashion sneakers (in Pablo’s case, Nike Air Force One’s), baggy “swap meet pants,” white Pro Club t-shirts, and baseball caps in all manner of styles. Swap meet vendors additionally carry an ever-evolving selection of popular athletic team jerseys, graphic t-shirts representing local hoods and hip hop groups, and an endless array of inexpensive jewelry and custom bling (Figures 5.12). Thus, when Bishop Lamont compared his wardrobe in 2007 to “a mall window,” it is not surprising to learn that it contains a “whole lot of swap meet” items rather than those from mainstream retailers.¹²²

Like the work of its DJs and MCs, hip hop’s material culture evolved out of a context of economic scarcity. Emblematic of this scarcity were indoor swap meets, which stood at the center of retailing landscapes in Compton, Inglewood, South Central Los Angeles, and other communities from which many west coast hip hop artists hailed. While goods overflowed from their vendor stalls, swap

¹¹⁸ TRStv Interviews Kirk of Cycadelic Records in Compton.

¹¹⁹ Crawford, “Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life,” 30–34.

¹²⁰ Bishop Lamont, *Hood Psalm*, N*gger Noize (Mixtape, 2007), <https://www.datpiff.com/Bishop-Lamont-Ngger-Noize-mixtape.2956.html>.

¹²¹ Petey Pablo, *White on Rice, Life on Death Row* (Mixtape, 2008), <https://www.datpiff.com/player/m51f1458?tid=3>.

¹²² Lamont, *Hood Psalm*.

meets nonetheless bore the stigma of poverty. Chaotic arrangements of goods lining their aisles stood in stark visual contrast to normative aesthetics of homogeneity, order, and Whiteness that predominate at shopping malls (at least in the popular imagination). Off-brand clothes and knockoff shoes, handbags, and accessories available in abundance at swap meet stalls only strengthened associations between the swap meet and the aesthetics of “the hood.” Thus, when swap meet patrons wore clothing manufactured by off-brand labels for the swap meet trade, they were legible as *swap meet shoppers* by those who read their *lack* of a certain kind of objectified cultural capital.¹²³ During the 1990s, however, any negative class connotations associations of swap meet apparel were gradually refigured by two decades worth of hip hop lyrics, which appropriated the goods as icons of hip hop realness.



Figure 5.12: Baseball caps, plain Pro Club t-shirts, and graphic T's on display at the Union Swap Meet at Vermont and Santa Monica Blvd. Photo by author, 2015.

Perhaps the earliest clue that swap meets lay at the center of hip hop material culture was an early episode of *Yo! MTV Raps*. The iconic MTV television show, which first aired in August of 1988, is widely credited with popularizing hip hop music on a global scale. Tellingly, one of its first episodes (shot later that year) featured N.W.A. inside the Compton Swap Meet. In a raucous clip filmed at a clothing stall, the group discusses underwear with its hosts, Ed Lover and The D.O.C.. Lover begins the segment, “Yo, we’re at the Compton Swap Meet...and we’re all over here discussing underwear. Underwear is the topic. Since they [N.W.A.] always wear black, I was wondering, Ice Cube, do you always wear black underwear?” As a nonplussed Cube mutters, “that’s an important question,” the camera settles on a very young Dr. Dre, who holds up a White crew neck t-shirt wrapped in cellophane and a pair of black underwear (Figure 5.13). Although he doesn’t speak, he highlights why N.W.A. is shown at an underwear and t-shirt vendor in the first place: Aside from the humorous conversation the setting provokes, it reveals to predominantly White American suburban audiences *where* many west coast hip hop artists outfitted themselves with their trademark shirts and accessories. At the conclusion of N.W.A.’s debut *Yo! MTV Raps* appearance, host Ed Lover remarks, “Now don’t forget we’re gonna be here all week with the D.O.C., Eazy-E, N.W.A., A.T.L., and Michel’le over here, trying

¹²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

to find the *meaning* of swap meets. Meaning of swap meets, ladies and gentlemen.”¹²⁴ As tongue-in-cheek as this closing comment may seem, rappers in the ensuing decades sought to answer the implied question: What *is* the meaning of the swap meet?



Figure 5.13: Dr. Dre (left) displays a piece of black underwear at the Compton Swap Meet in a 1988 episode of Yo! MTV Raps. Eazy-E, Ed Lover, and the D.O.C. stand to the left of Dre. Source: Youtube screen capture.¹²⁵

Yo! MTV Raps returned to Compton in 1989 to film a second episode with N.W.A.. Again, the hip hop artists further underscored the swap meet’s importance by taking their hosts to the Compton Swap Meet en route to touristy Venice Beach. Filmed in front of the swap meet dressed black pants, black and white t-shirts, gold chains, and black caps emblazoned with LA Raiders logos, host Fab 5 Freddy asked Eazy to tell the audience “all about” the Compton Fashion Center. A soft-spoken Eazy replies that “the Compton Swap Meet is something like a flea market. You know, we come here and get the Locs [sunglasses popularized by N.W.A.] and shirts, and Levi’s, and the whole hookup, you know?”¹²⁶ Dr. Dre sheepishly adds that the swap meet is a great place to pick up “females.” In their second rendering of swap meet space, N.W.A. continued to build up the swap meet as a hip hop icon and place to buy fashionable streetwear.

For N.W.A., the swap meet meant many things. As I’ve discussed, Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, Ice Cube, and Eazy-E owe much of their early success to the openness of swap meet space, as well as their relationships with Steve Yano at the Roadium and Wan Joon and Boo Ja Kim in Compton. In spite of this, N.W.A.’s founding members went on to portray the swap meet as a site of “ghetto fabulousness.” On Dre’s triple platinum certified 1992 debut album, *The Chronic*, he raps on its fourth track, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over,” that the Slauson Swap Meet was a place to “gank” a VCR during the Rodney King Rebellion.¹²⁷ Similarly, a talk-track satire of the popular CBS game show,

¹²⁴ Eazy E N. W. A. Warren G *The D O C AT COMPTON SWAP MEET YO! MTV RAPS 1988*, Yo! MTV Raps, 1988, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENLPmuUx3IU>.

¹²⁵ Eazy E N. W. A. Warren G *The D O C AT COMPTON SWAP MEET YO! MTV RAPS 1988*.

¹²⁶ Fab 5 Freddy *Visits N.W.A. in Compton California Swap Meet the Beach*, Yo! MTV Raps, 1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTC2TrFbjZQ>.

¹²⁷ “Gank,” according to urbandictionary.com, means “To steal or take something that does not belong to you.”

Pyramid, (“\$20 Sack Pyramid”) uses a prize of \$20 worth of marijuana and a \$35 gift certificate to the Compton Swap Meet to telegraph to a global audience that marijuana and swap meet merchandise were subaltern emblems of hip hop cool.¹²⁸ These early representations made the “meaning of the swap meet” explicit to generations of global hip hop fans. In what was the most prominent invocation of the swap meet as hip hop space to date, Dr. Dre inspired hundreds of imitators to name drop swap meets as linguistic shorthand for the “hood.”

From Counterfeiting Hub to Locus of “The Real”

In the same year as MTV’s first Compton visit, rappers began acknowledging the influence of indoor swap meets merchandise on the material culture of the hood. On a 1988 track about LA’s drug dealers, Ice-T contrasts the sartorial choices of these “high ranked officials of our city streets” with the quotidian realities of swap meet customers. “High Rollers,” both the title and object of his song, were dressed in silk shirts, leather suits, and eel skin boots adorned with “diamonds and rope chains.” “Yes their fashion’s high and hard to beat,” Ice-T continues, and “they buy their Gucci from Gucci’s, *not the swap meet.*”¹²⁹ Implicit in Ice-T’s message is the prevailing feeling at the time that although swap meets were relatable fixtures of “the hood,” they were decidedly outside of the dreams of aspiring hip hop artists. T’s “high roller” hopefuls would never dream of dropping tens of thousands of dollars at an upscale swap meet stall like IF & Co.. Rather, the 1980s vision of success lay with *authentic* designer labels such as “Gucci’s” (sic), not with *inauthentic* swap meet knock offs.

In February of 1992, Sir Mix-a-Lot renewed hip hop artists’ attacks on indoor swap meets and their merchandise. Using explicit verbal and visual language on “Swap Meet Louie,” the fourth track of his *Mack Daddy* album (which incidentally, immediately followed his megahit, “Baby Got Back”), Mix-a-Lot renders Korean swap meet vendors as villains. “Mary Pong,” the song’s central character, is represented as a sassy, conniving, and ultimately menacing trickster who tries to pass off fake Louie Vuitton as the real thing to unsuspecting (and willfully naïve) customers. “Now you know brown Louie is played, But you’re drunk and you just got paid,” Mix-a-Lot raps. “So you bought the gear, little Mary says “See ya,” Little did you know it was ‘Made in Korea?’”

Mix-a-Lot’s accompanying music video reinforces an image of greed and illegality as it cuts between a dimly lit swap meet stall and a dark and foreboding sweatshop. In the song’s second verse, this menacing backdrop is reinforced by increasingly sinister behavior on the part of Mary Pong. Through increasingly racist lyrics (and cinematography), Sir Mix-a-Lot articulates the frustrations of many Black swap meet customers who in the early 1990s resented what they perceived to be rude customer service and low quality goods. Mix-a-Lot raps in verse two:

*Victim number two, a rich young couple from Bellevue
Welcome to the swap meet, another dumb couple 'bout to get beat
Out came little Mary Pong, she had the big Louie Vee gear on
The couple got sprung and the wife want some
Louie Vee hat with the diamonds
Shes thinkin' she got that deal, 2 for 1 is a steal
The hat mighta had a L V on the back
But at the swap meet that ain't jack
But she bought it, cost about three hun*

¹²⁸ The TV game show, Pyramid, was hosted by Dick Clark and aired on CBS between 1973 and 1988.

¹²⁹ Ice-T, *High Rollers*, LP, *Power* (Sire, 1988).

*Mary Pong said you're the one
 But when the girls Lonie got wet she started complainin'
 Baby girls Louie started fadin'
 Now she's tryin' to take it back
 But the swap meet don't play that
 Cause when a customer tries to intimidate
 Mary Pong pulls a .38
 She ain't about to get bum rushed
 She's strapped an' she's ready to bust
 But at the swap meet you don't pay tax
 They're movin' out fake Louie by the batch*

As with the numerous anti-swap meet protests discussed in Chapter 3, this imagery picks up a long legacy of anti-Asian racism (by *White* perpetrators) as well as prevailing anxieties about swap meet commerce within African American neighborhoods. Linguistic (and visual) images showing Mary Pong exploiting and intimidating her customers, evading sales taxes, and sourcing her products from foreign sweatshops, the swap meet vendor is clearly rendered as a transgressive presence to be rooted out and punished. This is exactly what Mix-a-Lot and his friends do after discovering Pong committing the *ultimate* offense: selling bootleg copies of Sir Mix-a-Lot mixtapes. The song and video end with Mix-a-Lot and his friends looting Mary Pong's store and re-selling her goods for cash at (ironically enough) a swap meet.

In Sir Mix-a-Lot's representation of the swap meet, outrage over the March 16, 1991 shooting death of the 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by a Korean liquor store owner in South Central Los Angeles bubbles just below the surface. Released just months before the April 1992 Rodney King verdict, the song foreshadows the extensive looting of Korean-owned businesses during the five day uprising. Although his song's racism toward Korean merchants is extremely problematic, it lends a sense of agency at a place and time in which many felt disempowered. It also sublimates many of the anxieties about the middleman minority status of Korean entrepreneurs in historically African American enclaves (discussed at length in Chapter 2).

In the months following the uprising, rap lyrics became a key place for community members to process the implications of the events. Decidedly negative television coverage of the uprising cast the widespread looting of Korean-owned businesses as senseless and random. To the rappers writing during the second half of 1992, indoor swap meets were depicted as one of several classes of exploitative businesses that extracted the hard-earned wages of African American residents. On his debut album, "The Chronic," (released December 15, 1992) Dr. Dre devoted an entire song to "The Day the Niggaz Took Over." Dre raps of the Rodney King verdict:

*Sitting in my living room, calm and collected
 Feeling that gotta-get-mine perspective
 'Cause what I just heard broke me in half
 And half the niggas I know, plus the niggas on the Row is bailing
 Laugh now, but cry much later*

The "gotta-get-mine perspective" stemmed from decades of feeling their shopping spaces were overpriced and out of local control, and looting was tantamount to making the best of a bad situation. As Dre continues,

*It's jumping off in Compton so I gotta get my loot on
And come up on me some furniture or somethin'
Got a VCR in the back of my car
That I ganked from the Slauson Swap Meet*

In the decades following the Rodney King Rebellion, depictions of swap meets within the rap genre have become far less critical of swap meet space. Anxieties over authenticity remain paramount, however now, swap meets—and the merchandise sold there—themselves have been transformed into symbols of “realness.” Hip hop references to swap meet space as emporia of urban streetwear and bling represent the ultimate convergence—and acceptance—of hip hop aesthetics and swap meet space.

Hip Hop Lyrics and Swap Meet Merchandise

Among the first groups to explicitly associate hip hop fashions with swap meet space within song lyrics was rap group W.C. & the Maad Circle. On their 1991 debut single, “Dress Code,” they defend an emergent west coast hip hop image defined by white t-shirts, black hoodies, loose dark khakis pants, and black baseball caps from escalating mainstream attacks. Pushing back against business owners who imposed bans on “gang-related” fashions including hoodies, baseball caps, and sagging pants, MC W.C. exclaims:

*I don't carry a gun, though they consider me a threat,
I guess I got 'em scared by the way that I dress,
Unlike you I couldn't afford to shop at Macy's or Penny's,
So it's off to the swap meet for a fresh pair of Dickies,
So what you're tellin' me, is now I'm a crook,
Who wrote the book on how a kid in my position's supposed to look?’¹³⁰*

Reflecting the negative racial and class connotations of swap meet clothing, W.C. & the Maad Circle re-claim hip hop attire from conservative critics who have long linked it with lawlessness.¹³¹ Instead, they assert that the swap meet clothing they wear is a reflection of their *class position*. Within an economic context defined by declining purchasing power and a dwindling number of department stores, the swap meet had arrived in the collective hip hop consciousness as a shopping destination of *first* resort. As W.C. suggests, Dickies, along with other workwear brands popular within the hip hop community (including Ben Davis and Pendleton) could be purchased at the swap meets at an affordable price. A cascade of hip hop artists have reinforced this opinion, with over 110 hip hop tracks and more than 30 artists disclosing through their lyrics that shoppers looking for hip hop merchandise will find what they seek at the swap meet.¹³² Such references reveal that as a business

¹³⁰ M.C. & the Maad Circle, *Dress Code, Ain't a Damn Thang Changed* (Priority Records, 1991), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPhTSXsf12I>.

¹³¹ Incidentally, the acronym, “Maad,” stands for “Minority Alliance of Anti-Discrimination.”

¹³² Since 1991, over 30 rappers have disclosed in their lyrics that swap meets are a requisite stop for shoppers seeking hip hop merchandise. These artists include: W.C. & Maad Circle (“Dress Code”), Ice Cube, A.L.T., Dr. Dre, Hi-C, Kam, Steffon, Ras Kass, B.G. Knocc Out, Sir Mix-a-Lot, South Central Cartel, Mack 10, Yuckmouth, MC Ehit, DJ Quik, The Golden State Project, DJ Unknown and DJ Mekalek, Murs, Sly Boogy, MC Jin, J Bigga, The Game, 4th Avenue Jones, People Under the Stairs, Visionaries, Mickey Avalon (2006), WC, Bishop Lamont, DJ Khaled, Choice 37, Petey Pablo, and others.

type, the swap meet is the most significant emporium of goods and services central to hip hop aesthetics.

Indeed, considerable overlap exists between swap meet and hip hop material cultures. Plain t-shirts, graphic t-shirts, flannel long sleeves, utility pants, sports jerseys, custom screen printed and embroidered t-shirts and baseball caps, tattoo parlors, salons and barbershops, athletic shoe stores, jewelers selling a parade of bling, and of course, hip hop record stores themselves define the very materiality of the swap meet. In turn, hip hop artists recorded on at least 114 tracks have paid tribute to swap meet goods, invoking them as signifiers of a litany of values. In addition to thrift and resourcefulness, swap meet goods are also cited to illustrate the poverty of their consumers, and to critique the vendors and consumers of the occasional counterfeit item. On Mack 10's 1997 track, "Inglewood Swangin'," he asserts that:

*I'm a million dollar nigga and still shop the swapmeet,
What I'm in right now probably ain't worth a hundred bucks,
A beany, t-shirt, khakis and a fresh pair of Chucks,
That's a real nigga foe you that's me so don't knock it,
I got everything I need plus money in my pocket.*¹³³

Above all, however, the "meaning of the swap meet" crystalized during the 1990s into an icon of "realness." Through that decade and beyond, rappers increasingly cited swap meets in their lyrics to pay tribute to the hoods from which they came, and to emphasize that they were places where one could buy *all* of the requisite articles to signify that one was "keeping things real."

T-Shirts

Among the most important articles of hip hop fashion are simple, unadorned t-shirts. As inexpensive wardrobe staples, crisp, white t-shirts carry a special kind of cachet amongst hip hop artists. Because they are so cheap and nearly anyone can afford to look "fresh" in a brand new tee, they are viewed as a sort of social leveler that democratizes street fashion. As rapper Wes Michaels explains, "in my opinion no matter what social class you identify with you can still look fresh asf [as fuck] with a 'Fresh White Tee.'"¹³⁴ Michaels, a virtually unknown rap artist with only one song to his name, is nonetheless echoed by some of hip hop's biggest names. Since Hi-C rapped in 1993, "take me to the swap meet, it's time to get dressed, I want a t-shirt and some khakis, can't freak with the Guess," twenty artists including Kam, Ras Kass, B.G. Knocc Out, Mack 10, South Central Cartel, MC Jin, Jay Rock, Kendrick Lamar, and Boogie have rapped about buying t-shirts at the swap meet.¹³⁵

¹³³ Mack 10, *Inglewood Swangin', Based on a True Story* (Priority Records, 1997).

¹³⁴ Wes Michaels, "Fresh White Tee Annotation," Genius.com, 2018, <https://genius.com/WesMichaels>.

¹³⁵ These artists include, in chronological order: Hi-C, *Got It Like That, Swing'n* (Skanless Records, 1993); Kam, *In Traffic, Made in America* (East West America, Elektra Records, 1995); Ras Kass, *Everything I Love, Soul On Ice Demo*, 1995; Eazy-E, *Gangsta Beat 4 Tha Street, Str8 Off The Streets Of Muthaphukkekin Compton* (Ruthless Records, 1996); Mack 10, *Inglewood Swangin'*; South Central Cartel, *All Day Everyday, All Day Everyday* (Rush Associated Labels, 1997); The Golden State Project, *Bounce, Rock, Golden State, Training Day: The Soundtrack* (Priority Records, 2001); MC Jin, *I Got a Love, The Rest Is History* (Ruff Ryders, 2004); CJ, *I Want You*, Video Game Soundtrack, *Grand Theft Auto IV Soundtrack* (Rockstar Games, 2008); Jay Rock, *Black Friday*, Mixtape, *Black Friday* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2010); Jay Rock, *No Mask On, No Mask On* (TDE, 2009); Blue Scholars, *Hi 808*, EP, *OOF!* (Blast Off Productions, 2009); Kendrick Lamar, *Determined, Kendrick Lamar EP* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2009); Kendrick Lamar, *For the Homies* (Self-Release, 2010); Grip Grand, *Flat Top Rules, Rewinder* (Rewinder, 2011), <https://gripgrand.bandcamp.com/album/rewinder>; Mac Lucci, *Cali Life*, CDr, *The Pre-Hustle* (Built 2 ball Publishing, 2011); Quincey White, *California*, Mixtape, *Never Content*, 2014, [https://genius.com/albums/Quincey-white/Never-](https://genius.com/albums/Quincey-white/Never-Content)



Figure 5.14: Pro Club and Shaka t-shirts for sale at the Pro Swap Meet in San Bernardino, California. Cellophane wrappers sometimes are used to ensure that the t-shirts are unblemished. Photo by Author, 2015.

Several t-shirt brands—distributed through wholesaling catalogs such as *Western Merchandizer* and *Solo Mayoreo*—are widely available at swap meet vendor stalls and well-known by swap meet customers. At nearly every indoor swap meet, one can find multiple vendors selling Shaka, Pro Club, and Pro-5 brands for \$3 to \$7 apiece (Figure 5.14). Of these, Pro Club t-shirts are held in the highest regard. As a 30-something (and college-educated) Korean-American vendor remarks, “Some guys wear Pro Club t-shirts like I would wear an Armani shirt. Some of my customers drive all the way from Vegas to purchase Pro Club shirts because they are status symbols.”¹³⁶ A reason for this status is that Pro Club shirts are regarded as the highest quality available at the swap meet: They are nearly twice as thick as competing brands, which allows their wearers to forgo an undershirt.

Tellingly, Pro Club was founded at a Southern California swap meet; thus the shirts they now distribute to stores across the country were developed with a swap meet customer in mind. Several rappers express their appreciation for Pro Club shirts, including Petey Pablo (referenced earlier) and Kendrick Lamar. In a 2010 self-released single, “For the Homies,” Lamar raps about his childhood shopping trips to the Compton Swap Meet.

*“Thinking back when we used to run in the swap meet for the Rollie chains,
Pro Club t-shirts, whiter than Anglo-Saxons,
Make it a 1X-Tall, crispy with the cotton fashion,
That’s fashion if you come where I’m from,
Compton California, One love to the murder capital under the sun.”*¹³⁷

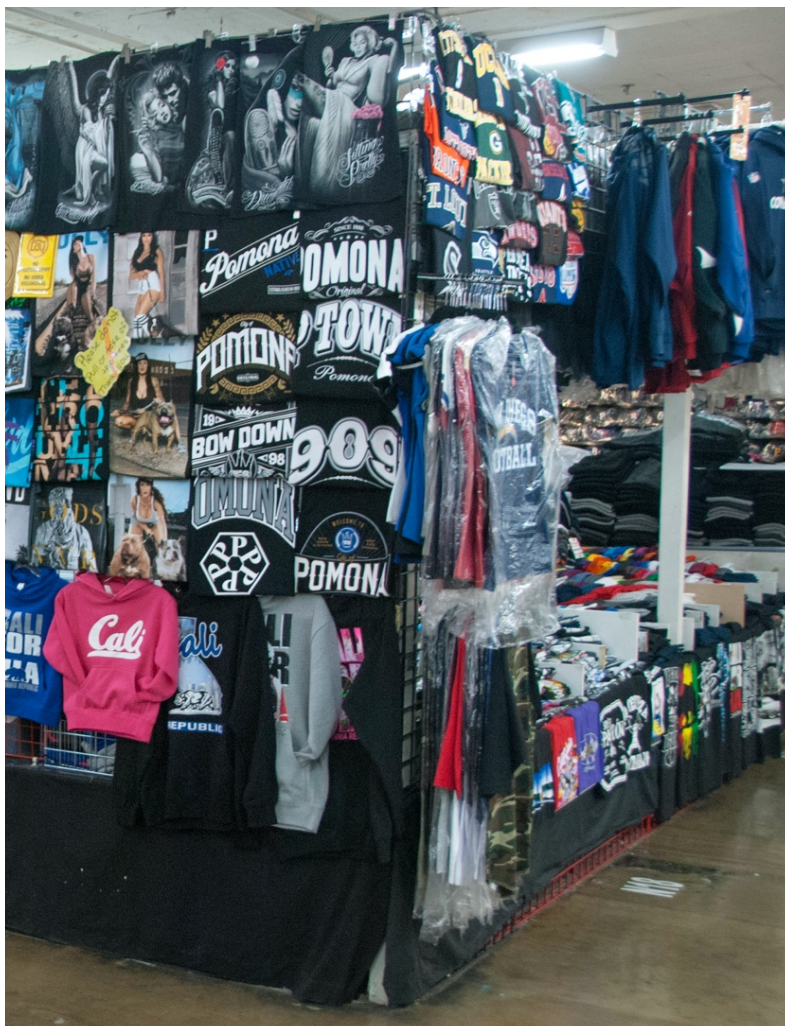
content; Boogie, *NIgga Needs, Thirst 48 Part II* (Self-Release, 2016), <https://soundcloud.com/boogieofficial/sets/thirst-48-1>; K\$upreme, *Hunnits, Flex Muzik 2* (Self-Release, 2018), <https://soundcloud.com/1ksupreme/sets/flex-muzik-2>; LeiKeli47, *Droppin, Acrylic* (Soundcloud, 2018); Wes Michaels, *Fresh White Tee*, 2018.

¹³⁶ “Michael Hong,” Personal Interview.

¹³⁷ Kendrick Lamar, *For the Homies*.

Also expressing appreciation for Pro Club shirts is Wes Michaels, who remembers “buying Pro-Clubs from the Inglewood Swapmeet back in ’99 as a little ghetto skater kid....I’d cop those daily it seemed, *throwaways ya know*.”¹³⁸ For the more affluent and image-conscious swap meet customers, maintaining a fresh and clean look meant treating swap meet t-shirts as single-use items.

T-shirts embellished with designs representing popular hip hop artists and local place names complement their “cleaner” and simpler counterparts. Visible from almost any swap meet aisle, their large logos and gothic text lend otherwise inscrutable swap meet interiors a distinct sense of place and mark it as distinctively hip hop space. While rappers themselves may not wear the hoodies and t-shirts emblazoned with these logos, fans can express appreciation for favorite artists including N.W.A., Tupac, and the recently murdered Nipsey Hussle (Figures 5.15 through 5.19). Inexpensive shirts inspired by African American and Latinx aesthetic traditions and available at the swap meet mark their wearers as proud hip hop fans as well as swap meet patrons.



Figures 5.15: T-shirts a Valley Indoor Swap Meet booth in Pomona represent the city and its area code.
Photo by author, 2015.

¹³⁸ Michaels, “Fresh White Tee Annotation.”



Figure 5.16: Tributes to murdered hip hop legends Tupac and Nipsey Hussle on display at the Slauson Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2019.



Figure 5.17: West Coast hip hop legends (including Tupac, Snoop Dogg, Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, and Ice Cube) represented on a Shaka branded tank top at the Union Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2019.

Although the vast majority of swap meet attire is low-end, several higher-end streetwear brands have swap meet origins. Karl Kani is among the most famous. As product of the bicoastal hip hop revolution during the 1980s, Brooklyn-born Kani, frustrated with the tight-fitting urban fashions of the time, began making loose-fitting jeans and shirts for sale at neighborhood basketball tournaments and nightclubs. Aspiring to grow his business, he moved to Los Angeles in 1989 to take advantage of the city's growing garment industry. As in New York, he generated his initial Southern California customer base by selling his clothes at area swap meets. The South Central Cartel's 1997 track, "Hit the Chaw," name drops Kani's presence at the Slauson Swap Meet with the line, "Bangin Scarface as I bend Slauson, To the swap meet to get the Karl Kani hook-up." Building on associations with the most popular gangster movie of the 1980s and the brand's association with swap meets and hip hop artists, Kani helped popularize a new wave of street fashion defined by baggy jeans and logo t-shirts.¹³⁹ Today fashion brands including Streetwise, a "clothing brand dedicated to those who come from the struggle and are determined to succeed by any means necessary," operates stores at numerous indoor swap meets including the Anaheim Marketplace and Slauson Swap Meet. Like Karl Kani, the apparel brand uses indoor swap meets as sales outposts for their refined logo wear (Figure 5.19).



Figure 5.18: Compton, Lynwood, and Cali t-shirts arrayed alongside those representing the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles/Oakland/Las Vegas Raiders NFL franchises at the Slauson Swap Meet. Photos by author, 2019.

¹³⁹ See Karl Kani Infinity, Inc. History at: <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/karl-kani-infinity-inc-history/>



Figure 5.19: Streetwise Store at the Anaheim Indoor Marketplace in Orange County. Photo by author, 2015.

Shoes

Swap meets located in areas with large African American populations are known for their selections of both real and knockoff versions of popular athletic shoes. Nike's Air Jordan and Air Force 1 sneakers are lasting icons of hip hop material culture. According to numerous rappers, the swap meet—rather than Footlocker—is the least expensive place to purchase these coveted shoes. As Chinese-American rapper, MC Jin raps, despite his material wealth, he prefers to shop for his Air Force Ones at the Slauson Swap Meet.

*“Ain’t no – credit card, spendin’ cash on Rodeo,
And me? I’m at the Slauson Swap Meet,
Lookin for a pair of Air One’s and white tee’s,
She want champagne, I got Sisco and Kool-Aid,
Why go to the movies? Let’s watch the bootleg”¹⁴⁰*

In contrast, some rappers cite the fixation on expensive sneakers as evidence of the industry’s fixation on conspicuous consumption. Murs, for instance, points to the popularity of Air Jordans and similar shoes to critique the consumerism he sees as rampant in hip hop music. In his 2003 track, BT\$, Murs

¹⁴⁰ MC Jin, *I Got a Love*.

satirizes a rapper who spends money as quickly as he earns it: *I'm over budget, I'm recordin,' When that check comes, I hit the swap meet and I buy some new Jordans.*¹⁴¹ Swap meet vendors are indifferent within this debate. In markets unserved by mainstream retailers, swap meet vendors for decades have carried extensive lines of athletic shoes popular with male hip hop fans (Figure 5.20).



Figure 5.20: This somewhat unique open-front booth at the Slauson Swap Meet carries an extensive range of athletic shoes. Like many swap meet stalls, it is under Korean ownership. Photo by author, 2015.

Baseball Caps, Athletic Jerseys, and Jackets

Baseball caps and sports jerseys have also occupied a central position in hip hop fashion since N.W.A. began wearing Los Angeles Raiders and Chicago White Sox baseball caps during their 1980s ascendance. They too are available in abundance at swap meets, sold at clothing stalls and specialists in custom embroidery. Within an urban terrain demarcated by rival Blood and Crip “sets”, black and white athletic jerseys and baseball caps became neutral sartorial choices that advertise regional affiliations that transcend the “turfs” controlled by rival gang “sets.” Some customers choose to embellish their caps, jerseys and jackets with custom embroidery, which is widely and cheaply available at the Korean-owned embroidery shops at nearly every swap meet. Chicanx rapper 2mex portrays the appetite for custom work in the Visionaries’ 2006 track, “In the Good,” remembering that “I used to run around the swap meet with my liquor store hat, Before I ever even rapped I would be there just loitering with my Raiders Starter jacket trying to get some embroidery.”¹⁴² The seemingly endless stalls offering customized clothing including screen-printed shirts and all manner of embroidered apparel reinforce hip hop aesthetics rooted in values of appropriation, re-combination, and free-form self-expression.

¹⁴¹ Murs, *BT\$, The End of the Beginning* (Definitive Jux, 2003).

¹⁴² Visionaries, *In the Good*, CD, *We Are The Ones (We’ve Been Waiting For)* (Up Above Records, 2006).

Bling

Perhaps the largest market for custom swap meet goods exists in the jewelry business. Jewelry stores are among the longest-tenured indoor swap meet merchants because their margins are high relative to other swap meet businesses. Vendors dealing in silver and gold chains, earrings, bracelets, and rings obtained from wholesalers in Downtown LA's Jewelry District carry a broad range of styles and fashions popular with hip hop artists and fans. As Jay Rock raps in 2010, gold chains from the swap meet (along with white t-shirts and Nike shoes) are an essential part of a tough hip hop look that affirms hip hop masculinity. "Headin' to the swap meet," he raps, he "Cop[s] a thousand white tees, Cortez Nikes, *chains all icy*." In this uniform, he continues, "niggas know better, it ain't no point to try to fight me."¹⁴³ Rock's emphasis on "icy" jewelry—meaning it is diamond-encrusted—is a hallmark of pieces popular amongst hip hop fans and artists. At the Slauson Swap Meet's Susan Tiffany Jewelry stall (no relation to its world-famous namesake), customers browse inexpensive chains and bracelets (Figure 2.21). Pendants and charms in the shape of popular symbols including AK-47's and marijuana leaves are covered in fake diamonds.



Figure 5.21: Susan Tiffany Jewelry at the Slauson Swap Meet. Source: <http://www.slausonsupermallinc.com/jewellery.html>

Dominated by Korean American and Korean immigrant merchants, the swap meet jewelry industry has produced a handful of Asian American celebrity jewelers who have built multi-million dollar businesses around catering to hip hop stars. IF & Co Jewelry is Southern California's most prominent (Figure 18). Famous for "icing out" hip hop and Hollywood celebrities, IF & Co was founded by Korean American cousins Ben Yang and Steve Her in 2004 as Icee Fresh & Co at the Slauson Swap Meet.¹⁴⁴ Her, known as "Slauson Steve" because of his background working in his father's swap meet jewelry store, creates diamond-encrusted pieces that routinely sell for well over \$25,000.¹⁴⁵ Yang, who earned the nickname "Ben Baller" while playing football and basketball at the University of San Francisco, is the son of a UCLA history professor and one-time music producer for

¹⁴³ Jay Rock, *Black Friday*.

¹⁴⁴ Today, IF & Co claims that "IF" stands for "Internally Flawless" (a reference to a diamond's clarity) rather than Icee Fresh.

¹⁴⁵ Camillo Smith, "73 Carats and Counting," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-dec-23-ig-bling23-story.html>.

Dr. Dre who leveraged his hip hop industry connections to cultivate a star-studded list of clients. As IF & Co's liaison with glitterati including Paris Hilton, Michael Jackson, Tom Cruise (Yang's sister, Jeanne was the Cruise family stylist), Drake, Tyga, A\$AP Ferg, and Korean American Olympian Chloe Kim among others, Ben Baller has brought swap meet hip hop fashion into the mainstream.¹⁴⁶ According to NBC News, Yang and Her are among a handful of Asian American jewelers who have made similar crossovers from flea market origins to crafting \$500,000 chains for rappers such as Tyga.¹⁴⁷ Although the pair recently opened a showroom in Beverly Hills, they maintain their shop and create their pieces production at the Slauson Swap Meet, where the business began.



Figure 5.22: IF & Co counter in Stall J-01 at the Slauson Super Mall. Its sleek aesthetics—which reflect its American-born millennial owners—are anomalous within the swap meet. Photo courtesy of the Slauson Super Mall:

<http://www.slausonsupermallinc.com/map-images-new/J-01.jpg>

Under the same roof and just a few aisles over, Mr. Bling Gold Teeth offers grillz for a fraction of the prices charged at IF & Co (Figure 5.23). Founded by Jason Shin in 1999, Mr. Bling Bling was among the first to manufacture “grills” in the United States (Figures 5.24 and 5.25).¹⁴⁸ Like other jewelers at the Slauson Swap Meet (IF & Co. excepting), Mr. Bling Bling's target market is a diverse cross section of low- and middle-income Latinx and African American clients from the surrounding neighborhood as well as moneyed celebrities who travel to South Central for Shin's custom work. In contrast to IF & Co., which recently sold a grill to rapper Mac Miller for \$12,000, Shin's grills start at

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.iac.com/media-room/press-releases/electus-announces-hollywood-babble-week-new-web-series-kevin-smith-and>

¹⁴⁷ Chris Ip, “Hip-Hop Took These Jewelers from Flea Market Stalls to Flagship Stores,” *NBC News*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/hip-hop-took-these-jewelers-flea-market-stalls-flagship-stores-n718466>.

¹⁴⁸ Grills are gold dental caps that are sometimes encrusted in jewels. A jeweler in New Orleans is rumored to have invented the grill.

a few hundred dollars, making them attainable to a broad market of swap meet shoppers.¹⁴⁹ Low overhead afforded by a swap meet set up has enabled Shin to expand and contract his business in concert with hip hop trends. After Nelly released a 2005 track called “Grillz,” soaring demand for the prosthetics prompted him to briefly open a storefront at the Riverside Discount Mall, but as interest in grills faded, Shin closed the store as well as former outposts in Oakland and Denver.¹⁵⁰



Figure 5.23: Mr. Bling's “Grillz Talk” Location at Del Amo Plaza in Compton. Photo by author, 2015.

Renewed national interest in grills during the 2010s, prompted Shin to open new stores at indoor swap meets across Southern California and hire the Korean American son of one of his friends.¹⁵¹ “Daniel,” in his 20s, soft-spoken, and conservatively-dressed, tells me that he is now learning the craft of making grillz under Shin’s tutelage. An advantage of the trade is that “you don’t have to go to school to learn how to do it!” As he explains the differences between various styles (including lower-cost ways to mimic the visual effect of diamonds with gold), he discloses that his college-educated friends can’t believe that he creates custom jewelry for hip hop artists and fans at a swap meet. New acquaintances share this incredulity, marveling over his celebrity clients including Oscar de la Hoya and model Jasmine Sanders. In transgressing professional norms ascribed to bright Asian American males, “Daniel” is part of a growing cadre of hip hop entrepreneurs who have elected to work in the hip hop industry. And unlike counterparts who struggle selling lower margin swap meet

¹⁴⁹ Katherine Manning, “Ben Baller Makes Mac Miller A Grill Worth \$12,000,” *Atlanta Celebrity News* (blog), July 31, 2019, <https://www.atnightspots.com/ben-baller-makes-mac-miller-a-grill-worth-12000/>.

¹⁵⁰ Darla Tucker, “Profile: Mr. Bling Bling Jewelry, Hip-Hoppers Grin, Bare It,” *Business Press-California*, July 3, 2006.

¹⁵¹ These include the Slauson Swap Meet, Del Amo Plaza in Compton, the Palmdale International Shopping Mall, the Waterman Discount Mall in San Bernardino, and a downtown Los Angeles location just south of the Fashion District. See: <http://www.mrblinggt.com/my-story.html>

items like underwear and t-shirts, “Daniel” *enjoys* working at the swap meet in large part because his Latinx and African American customers appreciate and even celebrate his work in hip hop image-making.



Figure 5.24: Grill for sale at Mr. Bling’s Grillz Talk booth at the Slauson Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2016.



Figure 5.25: Grillz for sale at Mr. Bling’s Grillz Talk booth at the Slauson Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2016.

Conclusion: Monuments to Hip Hop’s Origins and “Realness”

While assumptions persist that swap meet goods are knockoffs or fake, these negative connotations have largely fallen away thanks to the hip hop tracks that complicate the narrative. For hip hop celebrities and fans in 2019, purchasing a grill from a Korean American swap meet vendor in South Central Los Angeles almost surely contributes to its perceived authenticity and “realness.” Gangsta rappers thus paint a complex and somewhat ambiguous picture of swap meets. As emporiums

of purportedly illegitimate goods serving a social class written off by mainstream retailers as too poor and too dangerous to serve, swap meets became important sites in hip hop lyrics.

As I have shown, references to swap meets by the mid-1990s had become linguistic shorthand for “realness” as swap meets were accepted as a crossroads for LA’s fledgling hip hop community. In turn, they are today recognized through hip hop lyrics, through which a host of MCs, including the biggest names in the business pay homage to these market halls. Hip hop artists thus *appropriated* swap meets as spaces of hip hop citizenship. Moreover, as rap lyrics, music videos, and TV shows, and the content of hip hop lyrics shifted away from social commentary *about* swap meets to use of them as *symbols*, the swap meet as an idea lives on discursively even as physical locations close. Akin to linguistic memorials to west coast hip hop’s physical origins, swap meet references illuminate a complex of social and political events in which hip hop artists and fans claimed South Central Los Angeles as their own.

Kendrick Lamar’s use of the Compton swap meet as a backdrop for his “King Kunta” video echoes Tupac Shakur’s inclusion of the market hall twenty years earlier in the videos for his hit songs, “California Love,” and “To Live and Die in L.A.” (1996). Although neither of Tupac’s songs mention swap meets in their lyrics, they nod to an already well-established corpus of hip hop tracks that explicitly name check them. When Tupac asked Dr. Dre to “meet me at the swap meet” at the outset of their 1996 “California Love” video, it was *not* because the swap meet was convenient to either rap star (Figure 5.26). Tupac and Dre each lived at the time in Woodland Hills mansions, sixty miles away from the swap meet. Instead, Tupac chose the Compton Swap Meet because it exerted enormous symbolic power as a locus of “authentic” hip hop fashion, as a hip hop monument, and as an oppositional emblem.¹⁵²



Figure 5.26: Tupac (left) and Dre (in the background) meet at the Compton Swap Meet prior to cruising the streets of Compton in “California Love” (1996). Source: screen capture from music video.

¹⁵² I first made this claim in “Straight Outta Los Angeles” (conference presentation). Fidel Martinez has since made a similar observation in Martinez, “How NWA, Tupac, And Kendrick Lamar Made The Compton Swap Meet A West Coast Rap Historical Landmark.”

Chapter 6: From Swap Meet to Mall: Latinizing LA's Multi-Ethnic Marketplaces, 1990-2016

"In Los Angeles, Chinese have Chinatown. Japanese have Little Tokyo. Koreans have Koreatown. Vietnamese have Little Saigon. But there's 5 or 6 million Mexicans in Los Angeles, and they don't have a place."

– Donald Chae, Plaza Mexico owner¹



Figure 6.1: A replica of Jalisco's government palace façade at Plaza Mexico. Photo by author, 2017.

In September of 2017, the Spanish-language television network Univision aired “Unidos por Los Nuestros” (United for Our Own), a televised campaign to help Latinx families recover from a series of natural disasters that struck Puerto Rico, Mexico and the Southern United States. At a benefit concert in front of a traditional *kiosko* (Mexican bandstand) and the façade of Jalisco's government palace, famous recording artists including Ana Barbera and Jencarlos Canela performed, while boxer Oscar de la Hoya and comedian Eugenio Derbez snapped selfies with the crowd. The popular entertainment news show, *El Gordo y la Flaca*, covered the event and projected images of it to viewers across the Americas.²

In spite of the legibly Mexican backdrop, the event took place not in Mexico, but at Plaza Mexico, a Mexican-themed shopping mall in Lynwood, a Los Angeles suburb adjacent to Compton and Watts (Figure 6.1). The mall is not only remarkable because it serves as a frequent backdrop for live Univision broadcasts. It also integrates indigenous, Spanish-colonial, and nineteenth century

¹ 2005 Chae interview, quoted in Jorge N. Leal, “Las Plazas of South Los Angeles,” in *Post-Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles*, ed. Josh Sides (Berkeley and San Marino: Huntington Library and University of California Press, 2012), 18.

² “La ‘Plaza México’ reunió a decenas de estrellas dispuestas a ayudar a las víctimas de los recientes desastres naturales,” *El Gordo y la Flaca* (Univision, September 25, 2017), <https://www.univision.com/shows/el-gordo-y-la-flaca/la-plaza-mexico-reunio-a-decenas-de-estrellas-dispuestas-a-ayudar-a-las-victimas-de-los-recientes-desastres-naturales-video>.

elements, which are direct replicas of precedents from across Mexico. Doorways from Guadalajara and Mexico City, an arcade from San Miguel de Allende, and the façade from Jalisco's government palace (known locally as "La Fachada") are unified by stucco walls and *cantera* cornices. And at the main plaza's north end, a replica of Mexico City's *Ángel de la Independencia* powerfully invokes Mexican nationhood while serving as a rallying point for crowds of people after victories of *El Tri*, Mexico's national *fútbol* team. These adornments have made Plaza Mexico an important gathering place for Southern California's Mexican and Chicanx residents, who visit to shop, to conduct official business at hometown association offices and a Mexican consulate, and to attend its frequent special events.³ For undocumented non-citizens, and those with limited financial resources, the mall's themed public spaces provide, as Irazábal and Gómez Barris have observed, a "surrogate for a Mexican homeland" to which they cannot return.⁴

When it opened in 2005, Plaza Mexico's distinctive architecture and cultural programming generated significant interest. Media outlets on both sides of the border deemed it an instant "Mexicotown." Urban studies scholars including Macarena Gómez-Barris, Clara Irazábal, and Jorge Leal have noted that its architectural theming, public spaces, and cultural events help shape the transnational and immigrant identities of its patrons.⁵ These accounts, which focus on the design work of the mall's American-born Chicanx project architect, echo the literature on "Latino Urbanism," which focuses almost exclusively on the social production of places by and for people of a broad range of Latin American identities.⁶

However, this scholarship neglects to mention that behind the Jalisco palace façade and at Plaza Mexico's heart is an indoor swap meet that contains roughly one hundred and fifty micro entrepreneurs (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). Surprisingly, many are not Latin American but *Korean* immigrants, who sell an enormous variety of new and inexpensive goods. The presence of these vendors, and the everyday products they sell, subverts the mall's essentialist Mexican image while hinting at a key truth: The mall and swap meet are owned by Korean immigrants Min and Don Chae, who leased the building after it had been abandoned by its original tenant, a Montgomery Ward store. In 1993, they subdivided the store and opened what was then called the Lynwood Marketplace. For a decade, the Chaes saved the profits from this operation and eventually purchased the building, along with several adjacent

³ The mall, which was once a forlorn shopping center that was renovated in 2005, has since emerged as an important gathering place for Southern California's Mexican and Chicanx residents. While most visitors are residents of Lynwood, a municipality south east of Los Angeles, whose populace was 88 percent Latinx in 2018, some travel from as far as 100 miles away to enjoy the mall's Mexican-themed public spaces, cultural events, and amenities.

⁴ Clara Irazábal and Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 5, no. 3 (2008): 191.

⁵ Representative accounts in the contemporary media include: Dante Parma, "Bienvenidos a Mexicotown," *Revista Cambio*, March 31, 2002; Mary Ballesteros-Coronel, "Méxicotown," *La Opinión*, February 5, 2002; Sam Quinones, "Non-Latinos Mine Southland's Mexican Market," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2004, sec. California Metro; Part B; Metro Desk; Amanda Bronstad, "Plaza Mexico Revamping Seen as Key to Community Revival," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, February 2, 2004. Scholarly accounts include: Irazábal and Gómez-Barris, "Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico"; Macarena Gómez-Barris and Clara Irazábal, "Transnational Meanings of La Virgen de Guadalupe: Religiosity, Space and Culture at Plaza Mexico," *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 3 (November 1, 2009): 339–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610903287419>; Leal, "Las Plazas of South Los Angeles"; Yessica Garcia-Hernandez, "Sonic Pedagogies: Latina Girls, Mother-Daughter Relationships, and Learning Feminisms Through the Consumption of Jenni Rivera," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28 (2016): 427–42.

⁶ Here I extend James Rojas's concept of "enacted environments"—which he uses to describe predominantly residential built environments in East Los Angeles to the commercial realm. See: Rojas, "The Enacted Environment."

parcels to develop Plaza Mexico. The swap meet remains Plaza Mexico's primary anchor, and it continues to sustain the mall through its rents and foot traffic.⁷



Figure 6.2: Plaza Mexico's Marketplace interior, a former Montgomery Ward Store, hosts 150 vendors on its two floors. Photo by author, 2015.

Figure 6.3: A womenswear booth in Plaza Mexico's Marketplace. Photo by author, 2015.

The appearance of this market bazaar in a former department store highlights a widespread yet largely unnoticed retailing trend in 1980s and 1990s Southern California. During those two decades, Korean entrepreneurs remade a broad range of vacant buildings into indoor swap meets, as I discuss in Chapter 2. Department stores, warehouses, grocery stores, movie theaters, and smaller retail spaces on older commercial strips all proved ideal candidates for reuse. Hidden within each of these "boxes" are grids of vendor stalls selling *new* rather than used merchandise, just like in Plaza Mexico (Figure 6.4).⁸ The repurposing of these buildings underscores the fact that "obsolete" suburban commercial real estate often offers a more vital and better mix of mom-and-pop businesses than their expensive center city counterparts. As businesses, indoor swap meets offered a ladder into the American middle class for their proprietors and vendors, while filling growing retail deserts in Los Angeles and other American cities.

Despite the numerous scholarly accounts of Plaza Mexico, none have focused on the swap meet that is the mall's economic engine.⁹ The "Market Place," which has operated continuously since the early 1990s, contains nearly 200 vendors who provide the Chaes with the very significant and consistent cash flow that underwrites the entire operation. Although I was unable to interview the Chaes, one Korean vendor complained to me in 2016 that while the management takes in considerable

⁷ Although exact vendor booth rents are hard to ascertain, they range from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month, or \$6 to \$8 per square foot.

⁸ Quinones, "Wan Joon Kim of Cycadelic Records Helped Gangsta Rappers Start."

⁹ Irazábal and Gómez-Barris, "Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico"; Gómez-Barris and Irazábal, "Transnational Meanings of La Virgen de Guadalupe"; Leal, "Las Plazas of South Los Angeles"; Garcia-Hernandez, "Sonic Pedagogies."

rent, it fails to provide basic services such as functioning air conditioning. Further, Wayne Brandt, the former director of RBS Greenwich Capital, and now affiliated with UCLA's Anderson School of Business, estimated in 2004 that "indoor marketplaces" (indoor swap meets) typically generated sales of \$1,000 per square foot, compared with \$300-400 per square foot in centers anchored by supermarkets.¹⁰ Suffice to say, without the Market Place, the entire Plaza Mexico development would likely have been impossible to build, and it almost surely would be impossible to maintain its rich cultural programming at its current level.



Figure 6.4: Los Amigos Mall interior corridor, Los Angeles. Photo by author, 2014.

In many ways, by becoming a true shopping mall anchor, Plaza Mexico's Market Place represents the apotheosis of indoor swap meets. While many indoor marketplaces—like regional shopping malls—rely on interactive activities and cultural programming to maintain a steady flow of foot traffic through their spaces, the Chae's have perfected the practice by employing theming tactics designed to appeal to a Spanish-speaking clientele. Many Southern California retailers began marketing to Spanish speakers during the 1990s as mass marketing strategies became increasingly ill-suited to the United States's diversifying population. By 2000, the jacket of Marilyn Halter's book, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* contended that "the nexus of business and ethnicity is already seen as the hottest consumer development of this decade" (the 1990s).¹¹ As advertising discourse moved away from the "mass" consumer economy, new trade organizations and journals with names like *Multicultural Marketing News* joined venerable publications such as *Advertising Age* in providing the latest advice in reaching "ethnic" markets. A flurry of marketing books serve a similar purpose, and many offer essentialist visions of the Spanish-speaking U.S. market. Jim Perkins' *Beyond Bodegas*, for instance, un-ironically includes a chapter titled "Dance to the Salsa," in which he exhorts his readers to "move from marketing in Spanish to marketing in-culture to U.S. Hispanics....But don't sit on the side and

¹⁰ Bronstad, "Plaza Mexico Revamping Seen as Key to Community Revival."

¹¹ Halter provides an overview of these shifts as well as an introduction to a new generation of "ethnic marketing experts." See: Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000).

watch. Instead, dance the salsa, eat a jalapeño, sip a sip of *horchata*, or have an original Cuban sandwich underneath a palm tree in the heat of a Miami summer.”¹² Essentializing and vaguely racist cultural stereotypes aside, marketing to Spanish-speaking and Latinx-heritage customers *is* big business, with *Advertising Age* reporting that “Hispanic” purchasing power hit \$1.5 trillion in 2015.¹³ Accordingly, brick and mortar retailers such as J.C. Penney and Target have for several decades hired consultants such as LatinWorks (Target) to create advertising campaigns designed to induce Latinx customers to patronize *their* stores instead of the countless mom-and-pop retailers who cater to ethnic preferences.¹⁴

Although many such retailers are operated and managed by Latinx immigrants, it is a mistake to confuse the ethnic orientation of a store with co-ethnic ownership. It is rather common, in fact, for non-Latinx entrepreneurs to exploit the “Hispanic” market niche. Superior Grocers, which features on-site *tortillerias* in many of its stores, was in fact founded by Mimi Song, an immigrant from South Korea. Latinx-oriented furniture chains like Curacao (founded by Israeli immigrants), food manufacturing firms such as Cacique (started by Gilberto Cardenas, a Cuban immigrant), and many other categories of retailer have positioned themselves to serve the tastes of an explicitly “Mexican” market without the owners themselves having hailed from Latin America. As Sam Quinones has observed, non-Hispanic Southern California residents—*especially* immigrants from Asia, “mine the potential of one of the world's wealthiest Mexican consumer markets more effectively than Mexicans themselves.”¹⁵

From the beginning, some Korean indoor swap meet owners recognized the profit potential of marketing to the region’s growing population of Spanish-speakers. They began experimenting with ad hoc marketing tactics, including using Spanish-language business names, introducing Spanish-language cultural programming, and executing “Spanish”-influenced building designs.¹⁶ Others adorned their spaces with Mexican and Central American symbolism, and some constructed *plazas* that accommodated *mariachi* and *banda* groups, *ballet folklórico* competitions and beauty pageants, and everyday folk who came to sing karaoke and play *lotería*.

¹² Jim Perkins, *Beyond Bodegas: Developing a Retail Relationship with Hispanic Customers* (Ithaca: Paramount Market Publications, 2004), 144.

¹³ Ashley Rodriguez, “Retailers Duke It Out for Hispanic Shoppers’ Dollars,” *Advertising Age*, April 6, 2015, 26.

¹⁴ For example, in Southern California, a number of regional chains have grown up with its immigrant population. Food retailers are among the most obvious examples. Roadside signs that once carried the names of “Ralph’s,” “Vons,” and “Albertsons” now announce the ethnic affiliations of a growing crop of regional supermarket chains. Outlets of Baja Ranch (founded in Monrovia in 1979), Northgate González (Anaheim, 1980), Cardenas Markets (Ontario, 1981), Superior Grocers (Covina, 1981), El Super, and Vallarta Supermarkets (1985) dot the greater Los Angeles landscape. Founded during the 1980s, these supermarkets today are a notable presence in the region’s supermarket landscape, offering one-stop shopping for Mexican and Latin American goods otherwise unavailable at mainstream supermarkets. Spanish-speaking staffs, music, and in-store promotions, along with services including Mexican restaurants, free shuttles to and from the stores are intended to further induce co-ethnic Latinx shoppers to patronize these growing chains. For information about the owners of Northgate Markets, owned by Teresa and Miguel Gonzalez Jimenez, migrated to Southern California from Jalostotitlán, Jalisco, Mexico in 1976, see: <https://www.lataco.com/the-northgate-grocery-chain-loses-its-matriarch-teresa-reynoso-de-gonzalez-90/>; Jesus and Luz Cardenas founded Cardenas Markets in 1981. See <https://www.dailybulletin.com/2017/07/08/what-the-cardenas-markets-merger-means/> for additional information. Mimi Song, an immigrant from South Korea migrated to Los Angeles in 1977 with \$5,000 with which she founded Superior Grocers in 1981 See <https://www.friedas.com/karensblog/there-is-a-special-place-in-hell/>. Enrique Gonzalez Sr., a cousin of Teresa and Miguel González and an immigrant from Jalostotitlán, founded Vallarta Supermarkets: <https://vallartasupermarkets.com/en/about-us>

¹⁵ Quinones, “Non-Latinos Mine Southland’s Mexican Market.”

¹⁶ The first indoor swap meets with Spanish names opened in 1987, including the Hernandez Swap Meet (ownership unclear), Plaza del Sol (Steven Jones Development & McNeil Enterprises), Amigos Indoor Swap Meet (ownership unclear), Casa Olympica Swap Meet (No ownership info), and Mercado Independent (No ownership info).

Whereas in Chapter 2, I discuss how Korean entrepreneurs imported a well-established Korean commercial form—the textile market—to Southern California, here I trace how this form was adapting to and shaped by its local context. In many instances, Korean-owned swap meets—which are based on Korean *shijang* (markets) that resemble Latin American *mercados* in their gridiron forms—also assume key functions of Latin American plazas and public parks through usage patterns of their customers and theming attempts by their owners. As multicultural commercial and public spaces, the indoor swap meet evolved into something distinct from its predecessors in both Korea and Latin America. Together, the cases in this chapter speak to the cultural complexity of late-twentieth century California while demonstrating the dangers of cultural essentialism. At their heart, indoor swap meets, which shifted from serving African American customers to those of Mexican and Central American heritage as the 1990s wore on, increasingly stood at the confluence of Korean, Latinx, and African American spatial practices. Akin to yet distinct from markets in Mexico and Latin America, swap meets evolved into something distinctly Los Angeleno by synthesizing multiple architectural forms and bringing together unlikely cultural influences.

Plaza Mexico, although exemplary in its cultural embeddedness within local Latinx populations, is far from an isolated swap meet-turned-mall success story. In this chapter, I trace the evolution of the business type from marginal to middle-class, a process which is linked to the professionalization of swap meet management and the concurrent embrace of the region's booming population of immigrants from Central America and Mexico. I begin by discussing the cluster of indoor swap meets in the MacArthur Park neighborhood, which saw its Central American population explode during the 1980s and 1990s. Adjacent to Koreatown, the district was one of the first places aspiring indoor swap meet owners turned after realizing that the Koreatown market was saturated in the early-1980s. Second, I turn to the Alameda and El Faro swap meets, which are situated across the street from one another in an industrial section of South Central Los Angeles and “read” as a single swap meet complex. By the early 1990s, the swap meets had already established themselves as vibrant “third spaces” for the burgeoning Mexican and Central American immigrant populations that flocked to the area and its adjacent municipality of Huntington Park during the 1980s.¹⁷ Finally, I turn to the Anaheim Marketplace which, by virtue of its more affluent Orange County location and professional management has established itself as one of the region's largest indoor swap meets. With intensive cultural programming ranging from weekly dance classes to a soccer league, the Marketplace offers a broad range of opportunities for Anaheim residents and their Orange County neighbors to (re)produce Mexican, Chicana, Latinx, and other identities.

Blurring the Boundaries Between Swap Meet and Street Vending in MacArthur Park

Sandwiched between Koreatown and Downtown Los Angeles's garment district to the east, it is perhaps only natural that the MacArthur Park neighborhood, also known as Westlake, became an indoor swap meet hub during the late 1980s. Between 1985 and 1992, at least eight indoor market halls opened within the MacArthur Park neighborhood, and today, it hosts the highest concentration of indoor swap meets in the metropolis (Figure 6.5).¹⁸ This density, combined with a streetscape that bustles with heavy foot traffic, sidewalk vendors, and public transit users, defies tired stereotypes of Los Angeles that malign the city for its impoverished public realm and its decentralization. MacArthur

¹⁷ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁸ These included the Union Discount Swap Meet (1610 W. 7th St., opened 1985), LA Downtown Swap Meet (1408 W. 3rd St., 1985), Westlake Swapmeet (710 S. Alvarado, opened 1987), Amigo's Indoor Swap Meet (1629 W. 6th, opened 1987), Wilshire Discount Store (2323 W. Olympic Blvd., opened 1990), Metro Mall Swap Meet (1919 W. 7th Street, opened 1990), Grande Mall (600 S. Alvarado, opened 1990?), and Wilshire Alvarado Swap Meet (634 Alvarado St., opened 1991).

Park exuberantly refutes these tropes with the city's highest population density, a gracious park, and vibrant public life in which indoor swap meets play a significant role.¹⁹ However, because they are embedded within an exuberant urban fabric that evokes Latin America through its colorful Spanish-language signs, diverse materials, and immigrant population, the neighborhood's numerous indoor swap meets do not offer the same public spaces and cultural programming as larger counterparts like Plaza Mexico, which occupy significantly larger former warehouses and department store buildings. Nonetheless, subtle design interventions employed by swap meet operators in MacArthur Park acknowledge and reflect the preferences of their Latinx customers. As seemingly informal extensions of the public realm, these indoor bazaars echo the vibrant density of the neighborhood's street vending landscape, yet in more formal terms.



Figure 6.5: The former Westlake Theatre and Westlake Alvarado Swap Meet, now closed. Photo by author, 2014.

Initially developed as an enclave for the city's elites during the late nineteenth century, the MacArthur Park neighborhood is one of Los Angeles's densest. Two- and three-story apartment houses, once-grand hotels, and mixed use buildings from the 1920s building boom cluster around MacArthur Park and along the beginning of Wilshire Boulevard's famed "Miracle Mile."²⁰ By the 1970s, decades of disinvestment left it with a low-income populace and high crime rates, and many residents moved out while immigrants from Central American nations began moving in.²¹ Arriving in

¹⁹ In 1990, nine of Los Angeles County's fifteen densest U.S. Census tracts were located within the MacArthur Park neighborhood, while the other six were in Koreatown, less than a mile to the west. In aggregate, MacArthur Park had a population density of roughly 38,000 residents per square mile. Data gleaned from 1990 U.S. Census Summary File 3 data in Manson et al., *IPUMS NHGIS*. The densest U.S. Census tracts in 1990 were: Tract 2091.01, Tract 2119, Tract 2089.01, Tract 2094.02, Tract 2134.01, Tract 2124, Tract 2123.02, Tract 2113, Tract 2087, Tract 2122.01, Tract 2098, Tract 2117.02, Tract 2094.03, Tract 2122.02, Tract 2118.01.

²⁰ Initially named Westlake Park and renamed in 1942 to honor the World War II general, Douglas MacArthur, MacArthur Park is intensively used by the neighborhood's dense population. With a large lake at its center surrounded by meandering walking paths, the park is one of the city's largest neighborhood parks.

²¹ While roughly 150,000 foreign-born Central Americans lived in greater Los Angeles in 1980, a decade later, that number had nearly quadrupled to (roughly) 560,000 Source: US Census Bureau.

the United States without legal status or financial resources, many Central American immigrants moved to the MacArthur Park district because of its pre-existing Chicanx and Mexican immigrant community, and its convenient public transportation to jobs in the Fashion District's burgeoning garment sweatshops.²² By 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau classified roughly three quarters of the neighborhood's population as "Hispanic," driven largely by a quadrupling of its Central American-born population to 52 percent of the neighborhood's residents.²³

As MacArthur Park's shops and restaurants began to cater to this growing Latinx population, immigrant entrepreneurs replaced many older White-owned businesses. While some of these proprietors were Latinx co-ethnics, many were Koreans seeking business opportunities outside of Koreatown's cutthroat retail environment. MacArthur Park's close proximity and non-Korean demographics appealed to Korean investors seeking business opportunities in less-saturated markets, and it was Korean developers who, unsurprisingly, opened the neighborhood's first two swap meets. Lee Realcorp formed in March of 1985 for this purpose. In July, it issued a vendor recruitment ad for its Union Discount Swap Meet, which was to open the following month in the old Young's Market building at 7th and Union (Figure 3.14). The ad says nothing of its gracious and historic building, instead emphasizing its location "at a traffic hub of the city" amidst "the best population density in the L.A. area" (Figure 3.20).²⁴

Claims of high population density and traffic volume would entice many retailers, but they were particularly attractive to prospective swap meet operators. For one, the building was just a block off of Wilshire Boulevard, one of the city's most significant east-west corridors and long-famed for its "Miracle Mile" of retailers and office buildings just a few blocks to the west. Second, the neighborhood's dense population had no shortage of potential indoor swap meet customers, whose limited mobility, low incomes, and precarious legal status rendered them likely to shop at trusted vendors close to home. Lee Realcorp understood—and signaled to prospective vendors—that MacArthur Park was ripe for indoor swap meet development.

Between 1987 and 1992, six additional swap meets opened in the neighborhood's one-time retail stores and movie theaters. In 1987, the modest Amigo Indoor Swap opened at the intersection of West 6th Street and Union, and in that same year, Lotfi Mehdiian opened the 50 booth Westlake Swap Meet in a one-time "moving picture" house at 710 S. Alvarado.²⁵ Three years later the Metro Mall opened in a repurposed apartment (Figure 6.6). A few blocks away at intersection of 6th and Alvarado, the roughly 40 booth Grande Mall occupied the ground floor of a brand-new mixed-use

²² Unlike other parts of Los Angeles where the Latinx population consisted primarily of Mexican and Chicanx residents, MacArthur Park became a significant gateway for Central American refugees during the 1990s. At the beginning of that decade, the U.S. Census Bureau categorized the neighborhood's populace as majority "Hispanic" (73.8 percent), but minority foreign-born, with only 21.4 percent and 12.7 percent of its populace hailing from Mexico and Central America, respectively. Source: 1990 U.S. Census Summary File 3 data in Manson et al., *IPUMS NHGIS*. Percentages derived from these calculations: Guatemala: 9827/94,545 Honduran: 1422/94,545, Nicaragua: 540/94,545, Panama: 50/94,545, Mexican: 20255/94,545, Other Central American: 159/94,545 Central American: 11,998/94,545 = 12.7 percent Central American; 21.4 percent Mexican; 31.7 percent White.

²³ Those born in Mexico increased only modestly to 25.2 percent of the total. Of MacArthur Park's population of 98,664 people in 2000, 74,055 identified as "Hispanic," 24,827 as born in Mexico, and 51,424 as born in a Central American nation. Immigrants from El Salvador accounted for the largest share of the Central American foreign-born population at 11,986 people (12.1 percent), followed closely by those from Guatemala at 11,881 (12.0 percent). Source: 2000 U.S. Census Summary File 3 data in Manson et al.

²⁴ Ad text translated from the original Korean by Mili Yoon. The Young's Market Building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

²⁵ According to the July 1953 edition of the Sanborn Map Company's fire insurance maps for Los Angeles, the building was used for "Moving Pictures." See Sheet 56 of the July 1953 map book. For information about 710 S. Alvarado, see: <https://portal.assessor.lacounty.gov/parceldetail/5141019002>

building (Figure 6.7). Today owned by Jamison Properties, which was founded by Korean immigrant David Lee and one of the city's largest landlords, the Grande Mall swap meet has for years generated significant revenue, while the building owner invested little in the building's upkeep.



Figure 6.6: The Metro Mall Swapmeet, located on three floors of this building at 7th Street and Westlake Ave, houses retail businesses as well as medical offices within its booths. Photo by author, 2016.



Figure 6.7: Grande Mall, on the ground floor, is the retail anchor of this mixed use building of 1990s vintage. Photo by author, 2014.

The largest of the neighborhood's swap meets opened in 1991, when the Westlake Theater closed and the grand 1920s-era movie palace was repurposed as the Wilshire Alvarado Swap Meet (Figure 6.5). In September of that year, the theater was designated a historic landmark, and in 2008, the now-defunct Community Redevelopment Agency purchased it with a plan to redevelop it as a mixed-use building. When California Governor Jerry Brown cut off funding for the state's redevelopment agencies in 2012, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency maintained the swap meet for a few more years before closing it in 2014. In March of 2018, Korean-owned Jamison Properties, one of the city's largest commercial real estate owners, purchased the vacant building.²⁶

The aftermath of the 1992 Rodney King unrest proves the local vitality of the swap meet sector in MacArthur Park. When looters and arsonists destroyed the Westlake Swap Meet, its owner quickly moved to erect the neighborhood's first purpose-built swap meet building on site. The 35-booth reincarnation of the old swap meet, which opened in 1993 featured an airy atrium with a skylight, as well as free children's rides on the ground level. These amenities suggest the swap meet's profitability prior to its destruction as well as a successful insurance payout. Grande Plaza Mall, which opened on the ground floor of a new apartment building, and Alvarado Plaza at 731 S. Alvarado, rounded out the three purpose-built swap meets built in the MacArthur Park during the 1990s (Figure 6.8). These financial outlays on new construction underscore increasing acknowledgement of the swap meet as a business model worthy of significant monetary investment by Korean real estate investors within Latinx neighborhoods.



Figure 6.8: Alvarado Plaza swap meet was purpose-built after the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion. Street vendors operate on the Alvarado Street sidewalk as an informal extension of the indoor swap meet economy. Photo by author, 2015.

Through the end of the 1990s, six additional swap meets opened within vacant MacArthur Park retail buildings.²⁷ By 2000, the local swap meet market appears to have reached full saturation,

²⁶ <https://therealdeal.com/la/2018/03/08/jamison-has-new-plans-for-old-westlake-theatre/>

²⁷ These include the modest La Oferta swap meet at 1544 W. 6th in 1995, the Bonito Swap Meet in the mid-1990s, and the 170-booth Selecto Plaza Mall in 1999. Alvarado Plaza: <https://portal.assessor.lacounty.gov/parceldetail/5141019019>.

with only two more modest swap meets opening during that decade.²⁸ All share common characteristics of compact configuration and a lack of cultural programming. Unlike their suburban counterparts, which serve more affluent, mobile, and acculturated Mexican and Chicanx populations, MacArthur Park's swap meet operators have not offered cultural programming to their Central American customers. Where the region's most successful swap meets facilitate the (re-)enactment of Mexican cultural pastimes through their large plazas and gathering areas, MacArthur Park's swap meets lack these spaces. Instead, MacArthur Park and the neighborhood's sidewalks host a vibrant street vending scene and public life which serves as a de facto extension of swap meet space, and a vibrant public realm for the neighborhood (Figure 6.9).



Figure 6.9: For several blocks of Alvarado Street in front of MacArthur Park, street vendors do business underneath colorful umbrellas. This 2016 scene on the sidewalk in front of the Bonito Swap Meet and Grande Plaza Mall is as a continuation of the vending landscape inside indoor swap meets. Photo by author, 2016.

Informal street vending has dominated MacArthur Park's sidewalks since the 1990s, when immigrants (frequently women) began establishing small businesses on the sidewalk to make a bit of additional money to support their families. The experience of one vendor, who has sold clothing and miscellaneous goods at the *same* sidewalk location since the mid-1990s is indicative of the dense social and micro-economic networks that have taken root in the neighborhood's public realm.²⁹ Although Los Angeles leaders have attempted to eliminate street vending from the city's streets for over 100

International Mall + Burlington Mall – Parcel listed twice on Loopnet; first in 2007, then in 2016 <https://www.loopnet.com/Listing/15136583/1815-W-6th-St-Los-Angeles-CA/>

²⁸ The International/Burlington Mall at 1815-1819 6th St., and the El Tropical Plaza in 2010 at 1717 W. 6th St.

²⁹ Sahra Sulaiman, "You Can't Plan Mexican Hot Chocolate: How Monique López Deploys a Justice Lens in Her Engagement of Street Vendors," *Streetsblog LA*, June 27, 2018, <https://la.streetsblog.org/2018/06/27/you-cant-plan-mexican-hot-chocolate-how-monique-lopez-deploys-a-justice-lens-in-her-engagement-of-street-vendors/>.

years, indifferent enforcement, combined with the legalization of street vending in a MacArthur Park pilot zone during the 1990s, has allowed street vending to evolve adjacent to the neighborhood's indoor swap meets.³⁰ This ecosystem is in many ways an extension of the indoor swap meet trade. Sidewalk vendors—though they deal in some second hand goods—sell many of the same products as those indoors with dramatically cheaper overhead.³¹

Because of these similarities, indoor swap meet managers allege that sidewalk vendors directly compete with their tenants. As one remarked in 2016 shortly before Los Angeles legalized street vending, that “we have a lot of vendors outside [and] most of them don’t pay rent! They don’t pay taxes. They don’t pay nothing....We try to work with the city [to remove them], but they don’t do anything.”³² This tension between swap meet management and street vending further underscores their overlapping domains.

The largest and one of the most significant of MacArthur Park's swap meets is Selecto Plaza, which like many of its counterparts bears some resemblance to the configuration of street vendors lining Alvarado Boulevard (Figure 6.10). Efforts to formalize the swap meet since the mid-2000s have emulated some of the aesthetics of informal commerce, while sophisticated management practices distinguish it from its outdoor counterparts. When a Latinx entrepreneur opened Selecto Plaza Mall in a former furniture store in 1999, he erected partitions that subdivided the building into nearly 200 vendor booths without plans or permits. For reasons that are unclear, the swap meet struggled and the lessee defaulted on his lease in 2004. The building's long-time owners took control of the swap meet in that year, and they brought in managers with advanced business degrees to ensure a profitable return on their property.

Although this team introduced new management procedures, they also sought to rectify several problems with the swap meet's interior organization. First, the aisle configuration was labyrinthine, making it difficult for customers to locate vendors. As one manager remembers, traversing the aisles “was like taking trails around to find them... it was just chaotic.”³³ In addition, the booths were of inconsistent size and the partitions constructed of sheetrock, an immovable building material that made the booths impossible to reconfigure when vendors wished to expand or reduce the square footage of their stores. To remedy this inflexibility, the new managers created booths of a near-standard size of roughly 90 square feet as well as a simple gridded layout on both the upper and lower levels (Figure 6.11). Booth partitions are now made of metal grates and pegboard, which have the advantages of easy movability. Yellow lines painted on the aisle floors not only grant an additional 10-square-feet of inventory display space in front of the booths, they also clearly demarcate

³⁰ Leslie Berestein Rojas, “LA’s Plan To Make Street Vending Legal Has Been Approved. Here’s How It Will Work,” LAist, accessed August 13, 2020, https://laist.com/2018/11/28/sidewalk_vendors_could_sell_legally_under_la_permitting_plan.php.

³¹ For an ethnographic account of street vendors in MacArthur Park, see: Lorena Muñoz, “Selling Memory and Nostalgia in the Barrio: Mexican and Central American Women (Re)Create Street Vending Spaces in Los Angeles,” in *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City: A Global Perspective on the Practices and Policies of a Marginalized Economy*, ed. Kristina Graaff and Noa Ha (Berghahn Books, 2015), 101–16.

³² Anita, Personal Interview, July 14, 2016. Vending activists and city officials have long debated the merits of legalized street vending. A 1999 pilot vending district, for instance, attempted to permit and regulate MacArthur Park's street vendors, but it was phased out in 2004 after its provisions proved too restrictive to make participation attractive. In February of 2017, shortly after the Donald Trump administration began to make aggressive moves to deport undocumented immigrants, the Los Angeles City Council de-criminalized street vending to protect its undocumented population from prosecution. Anxieties about unpermitted street vending in Westlake/MacArthur Park echo concerns expressed about indoor swap meets as they spread across the metropolis during the 1980s (discussed in Chapter 4). Ironically, the neighborhood's indoor swap meet owners have joined the chorus of community pushback against street vendors, perhaps to distinguish swap meets as regulated commercial entities.

³³ Selecto Plaza Manager 1, Personal Interview, May 25, 2016.

aisle width regulations set by the fire department. According to one manager, these renovations “saved us....I’ve never done an analysis on what building these units in this fashion has saved us, but we are all certain that we’ve saved a great deal.”³⁴



Figure 6.10: Selecto Plaza Mall at 1816 6th Street. Photo by author, 2017



Figure 6.11: Diagram of Selecto Plaza's upper floor. Similar configuration on the lower level accommodates vendors in roughly 200 booths. Diagram courtesy of Selecto Plaza management.

³⁴ Selecto Plaza Manager 1.

The swap meet nonetheless adopts an indoor-outdoor spatial form that affords a seamless transition between the neighborhood and the marketplace. Renovations executed in 2014 removed the front walls and opened the entire façade to the street, an effort that its owners claim is intended to provide pedestrians direct lines of sight to the swap meet's rear wall. As one manager put it, "we have a crosswalk at Bonnie Brae [that] barrels right into our building. [The renovations] mean that the crosswalk is absolutely aligned with the aisle system in the building's interior. Psychologically, people can walk or run right into the building."³⁵ While some swap meets in the area have highly compressed and almost cave-like entrances (Figure 6.12), Selecto Plaza's *six* entrances on 6th Street alone reinforce an impression that the mall's interior is a *continuation* of the sidewalk. Mothers pushing strollers and police officers on bikes are able to roll directly from the sidewalk into the swap meet's aisles. Perhaps not coincidentally, Selecto Plaza Mall has no full-time security guards.



Figure 6.12: Grande Mall swap meet entrance at the intersection of 6th and Alvarado. Photo by author, 2014.

Unlike indoor swap meets that exert control over their vendors by tightly regulating their operating hours, penalizing them for showing up late, and stipulating how many businesses of a given product category may operate under their roofs, Selecto Plaza's managers employ a hands-off regulatory approach. For example, the swap meet welcomes the children of vendors where others prohibit them. As "Anita," the swap meet's tenant manager remarks, "we don't mind, you know? Their kids are here, they go and pick them up from school," thereby saving on significant child care costs.³⁶ Whereas many swap meets impose hefty fines when their vendors open as little as ten minutes late, Selecto's managers allow their vendors to keep their own hours. When I asked one of Selecto's managing partners whether they do so, he emphatically remarked:

³⁵ Selecto Plaza Manager Two, Telephone Interview, April 28, 2016.

³⁶ Anita, Personal Interview.

NO! We're *laissez faire*. If you don't want your business to be open... we're not requiring everybody to be open. I don't even think we could. Nor do I think it would be a good idea. Because it would cause our tenants to have more employees. Many of our tenants...are wives whose husbands work. So Selecto is a second income for them. And they have other responsibilities. No, we don't [regulate vendor hours] at all. We figure their clients know when they're open.³⁷

In addition to this lack of paternalism, Selecto Plaza's management maintains longer-than normal opening hours, and keeps the swap meet open 364 days per year (New Year's Day excepted). These practices reinforce Selecto Plaza's sense of openness and convenience. While nearby businesses and other area swap meets close at 7 pm, Selecto closes at 9 pm to empower its vendors to serve clients who wish to shop after a day's work. As one of its managers remarked, "I can't figure out what the other swap meets are thinking! If you drop by Selecto in the evening, you'd find we have a lot more customers in the evenings than we do during the days."³⁸

Perhaps *because* of its hands-off approach and collaborative rather than adversarial approach to its vendors, vendors did not complain about Selecto's management in my conversations with them as they did at other swap meets. Its managers appear eager to help its mostly Central American vendors cope with and succeed within the difficult social and political context. As "Anita," an immigrant from El Salvador explains, "a lot of our tenants...don't know how to fill out applications and stuff like that. We do all that for them. We help them file their taxes. We push them. Some of our tenants are not legal here, so we [also] try to help them with legal advice. Like, 'go to this lawyer. Do this....' We help them fill out papers, applications... [including] the applications for their kids to go to school. They bring the applications and we...do the applications for them." A White managing partner from Selecto, who holds MBA and law degrees from Ivy League schools continues,

'Anita' spends a *large* part of her time helping our tenants. Our tenants generally only speak Spanish. And generally, they receive notices in English. Our tenants have legal issues to deal with. And they have little clue. And sometimes she will send me documents, and say, 'boss what does this document even say?' And I'll tell her, because 100 years ago I practiced law... [and] I can read a [legal] document. For example, until about four months ago, our barbers and beauticians couldn't be licensed. But recently, the State of California has let illegals be licensed....Under California law, they have to take a great deal of very expensive training. And yet, many have a great deal of work experience in their home countries. And "Anita," on her *own accord*, read through California's B&B regulations, and discovered that they could get credit from their years practicing in Nicaragua, El Salvador, or wherever. And she is working with these tenants to go to the consuls of each of those countries to get those records put in an official form that we can give to the State of California to make our tenants legal! I mean, tell me a swap meet that does that. That *thinks* to do that!³⁹

In contrast to other swap meets that seek to ingratiate themselves to nearby residents through gift giveaways and special events, Selecto's managers instead provide *real* social resources and an economic incubator for aspiring entrepreneurs in the neighborhood. Although "Anita" regularly does market research at competitors including the Alameda Swap Meet, her desire to host the types of

³⁷ Selecto Plaza Manager 1, Personal Interview.

³⁸ Selecto Plaza Manager 1.

³⁹ Selecto Plaza Manager 1.

special events that distinguish swap meets outside of the neighborhood is tempered by the proximity of MacArthur Park just a few blocks away, and the lack of suitable space within the swap meet. She observes that,

“The Alameda Swap Meet is *way* different from us. [They serve] a Mexican community. So they have horses, and on the weekend, they do jumpers and they do banda. They do things different. I used to live around there when I was small. So I used to shop there. We cannot bring horses here. We cannot... So I was like let’s put balloons, make a party. Maybe that will bring people. Because I see that families go, like, to have fun in there. Like they go for a weekend. Instead of to a park, they go to the Alameda swap meet. So I thought that maybe they could come like that to here. We could do parties, we could do raffles and stuff like that. [But] we haven’t done it because it doesn’t make sense. People would just come for the raffles and then leave.”⁴⁰

Rather than entertainment, MacArthur Park’s indoor swap meets provide unadorned economic spaces within a neighborhood with few other shopping options. Unique to these swap meets, however, is the fact that they are part of a larger complex of sidewalk vending, which creates the appearance of a contiguous commercial and public realm. Indeed, the neighborhood’s residents, many of whom are undocumented and speak little English, rely on Spanish-speaking street vendors and swap meet entrepreneurs for many of their everyday consumer needs. While MacArthur Park’s swap meet operators and vendors may resent the presence of these sidewalk vendors, this unique retailing ecosystem nevertheless helps to generate the foot traffic that sustains the highest density of indoor swap meets in Southern California.

Building a Mexican Sense of Place at the Alameda Swap Meet and El Faro Plaza

“There are two types of swap meets: those for Black people, and those for ‘Hispanic’ people. The Alameda Swap meet is for Hispanics, and the Slauson Swap Meet is for Black people.” – Raphael, Alameda Swap Meet vendor

In 1991, acclaimed *Los Angeles Times* food critic Jonathan Gold wrote that,

Next to a Raiders game, the **Alameda Swap Meet** may be the most overwhelming place you can visit on a Sunday afternoon, an immense converted factory complex south of downtown swarming with people, stuffed with hundreds of stalls selling everything from sea-turtle extract to straw *ranchero* hats,...and alive with the racket of two-dozen pumped CD players blasting trumpet-bright *norteño hits*. You are reminded that the Mexican population of Los Angeles is second only to that of Mexico City itself.⁴¹

Like many urban explorers, Gold introduced his readers to a place that *seemed* culturally homogeneous by way of its shoppers, food, and ambience. However, if he looked at *who* was selling much of the merchandise, he would have come to find that it was *Koreans* who made up the majority of the market’s vendors.

Billed the “World’s Greatest Swap Meet” in its phonebook ads and on its business cards, Alameda Swap Meet may well deserve the title. Unlike many competitors, which cut unassuming

⁴⁰ Anita, Personal Interview.

⁴¹ Jonathan Gold, “Plaza de La Masa,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1991.

profiles in their host neighborhoods, the Alameda Swap Meet *commands* its location. Its gabled warehouse roof doubles as a sign, which announces the swap meet's name to passing drivers and pedestrians (Figure 6.13). Its aesthetic assertiveness is enhanced by the sounds and smells that emanate from it. From blocks away, music from the live bands and DJs who perform on its plaza beckon visitors. Adding to the scene are street vendors who gravitate to the swap meet, selling their produce, sundries, and homemade tamales in the swap meet's rear parking lot and next to its East 45th Street entrance. The Alameda Swap Meet is not just a hub of neighborhood activity, it is a destination unto itself for thousands of Latinx visitors each weekend.



Figure 6.13: Exterior of the Alameda Swap Meet, viewed from El Faro Plaza. Photo by author, 2015.



Figure 6.14: Produce vendor at the Alameda Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2016.

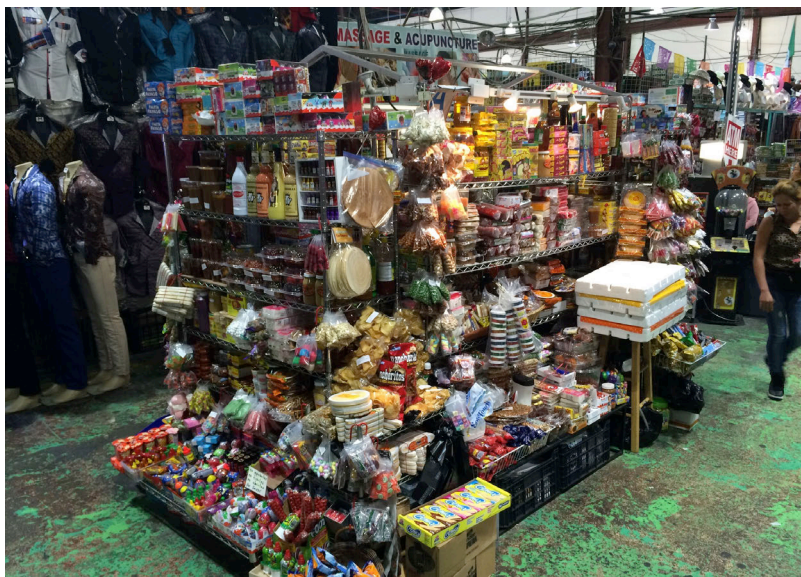


Figure 6.15: *Dulceria* (candy store) at the Alameda Swap Meet. Photo by author, 2016.

The swap meet interior is defined by both a sense of enclosure *and* of vastness. Within five warehouse buildings spanning half a city block are roughly 300 vendor booths arrayed in a loose grid that is disrupted by the convergence of each building. Sightlines are obscured by this convoluted floorplan, as well as the merchandise that bursts from its ten foot by ten-foot vendor booths. Furthering the sense of disorientation is the vast array of vendors, each of whom specializes in a product class, including jewelry, charro wear, lingerie, men's formal wear, women's wear, shoes, kitchen supplies, Mexican "nostalgia" items, herbal medical products, cleaning products, and other every day essentials. Vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish are available within the Alameda Produce Market from numerous vendors, including four butchers, four produce vendors, two fish mongers, and two *dulcerías* (candy shops) catering to Mexican tastes at affordable prices (Figures 6.15 and 6.16). Across East 45th Street, the scene is much the same, with 291 booths in the El Faro Plaza offering a similarly wide range of products (Figure 6.16).



Figure 6.16: Floorplan of El Faro Plaza, circa 2015.

The affordability of swap meet merchandise relative to other neighborhood retailers has long attracted nearby residents with limited incomes. Before Walmart opened its first Los Angeles store (in 1998) and initiated an aggressive expansion into the Los Angeles market in the mid-2000's, indoor swap meets were among the most affordable retail emporiums serving the region's low-income neighborhoods.⁴² Consequently, their mall-like environments remained among the few places where

⁴² Due to opposition from local politicians, advocacy groups, and department store and grocery workers' unions, Walmart was a relative latecomer to Los Angeles. The first Walmart store to open in Los Angeles did so within a former Broadway Department Store at the Panorama City Mall in 1998. South Los Angeles's first Walmart store opened in a former Broadway store in the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza in 2003. Los Angeles County's first Walmart *Supercenter*, which includes a supermarket in addition to general merchandise, opened in Palmdale in 2005. See: Michael Baker, "Multilevel Wal-Mart Store Opens Today," May 20, 1998; Natasha Lee and David Pierson, "L.A. County Gets Its First Wal-Mart

immigrants working minimum wage jobs could afford to purchase food and clothes, given the lagging State of California minimum wage, which in 1995 was only \$4.25 per hour. In a *Los Angeles Times* interview that year, Salvadoran immigrants Samuel Pineda and Maria Hernandez disclosed that they relied on the Alameda Swap Meet to stretch their scant income of only \$973 per month to support themselves and their two children.⁴³ At the swap meet, they found inexpensive produce, meat, and groceries, as well as the rare gift they were able to afford for their young children. Although brand name toys were available there, they were sometimes defective, as was a Barbie doll Pineda purchased for his daughter, which, unbeknownst to him, contained only one eye.⁴⁴

While the Alameda Swap Meet is an imperfect financial lifeline for many of its Latinx patrons, its significance extends far beyond its affordable merchandise. It is also an important hang out spot for Latin American immigrants from around the region, and an institution whose cultural programming practices are emulated by many other swap meet managers.⁴⁵ One key to its success is an extensive food court, which houses restaurants selling a host of regional Mexican specialties including hard-to-find items like *huitlacoche* (a mushroom that grows on corn stalks). From the tables at Diablito Taqueria on the plaza, diners may pay passing Mariachis for a song while watching the public life unfold on the plaza (Figures 6.17 and 6.18).



Figure 6.17: A crowd dances to the music of a band in Alameda Swap Meet's plaza. Photo by author, 2015.

Figure 6.18: Patrons eat at the El Diablo restaurant, adjacent to the Alameda Swap Meet plaza depicted in Figure 6.17, while the *payaso* (clown), "El Chilaquil" stands at the right side of the frame. Photo by author, 2014.

Central to the ongoing success of both the Alameda and El Faro swap meets are the broad range of events they host each weekend in their makeshift plazas. Live musical acts are the main attraction, and both swap meets have stages that feature bands that perform in the afternoons. On Sunday mornings, people flock to Alameda Swap Meet's plaza, where mass services are held (Figures 6.19 and 6.20). In the afternoon, *norteño*, *cumbia*, and *banda* groups perform from noon into the evening (Figure 6.21). As on *zocalos* across Mexico, where couples dance to live music on weekend evenings, similar crowds gravitate to the energetic beats emanating from the swap meet plaza, dancing in its center and watching from its edges.

Supercenter," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2005, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-aug-31-me-supercenter31-story.html>.

⁴³ In 2019 inflation-adjusted dollars, a 1995 monthly salary of \$973 is roughly \$1,623. The 1995 federal and California state minimum wage of \$4.25 per hour would be worth roughly \$7 per hour in 2019.

⁴⁴ Nora Zamichow, "Surviving on \$4.25 an Hour," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1995.

⁴⁵ Anita, Personal Interview.



Figure 6.19: Mass on the Alameda Swap Meet plaza. Photo by Noah Allison.

Figure 6.20: Mass on the Alameda Swap Meet plaza. Photo by Noah Allison.



Figure 6.21: A crowd watches and couples dance to banda music at the El Faro Plaza's Vernon Street stage.

A similar scene unfolds at the El Faro Plaza across East 45th Street, where bands perform a similar array of music on a stage positioned at the end of a covered “plaza” that faces the swap meet’s north parking lot on East Vernon Avenue (Figure 6.21). Unlike the plaza at the Alameda Swap Meet, which is protected by buildings on three sides and El Faro Plaza to the north, the covered performance and dance area at El Faro Plaza is considerably more exposed to the through traffic on Vernon and Alameda Streets (Figure 6.22). Although a concrete roof provides shade and partial enclosure for the patio, the stage backs up to the swap meet and opens onto Vernon Avenue and Alameda Street to its north and east. Thus, when bands perform on the El Faro Plaza stage, they *project* their music into the surrounding neighborhood, their sound is amplified by the swap meet wall and patio roof. While the Alameda Swap Meet’s plaza and stage are relatively private and protected, El Faro’s covered plaza on its northern edge beckons passersby from two major streets when bands and DJs perform there.



Figure 6.22: The El Faro and Alameda Swap Meets each occupy a complex of several contiguous warehouse buildings. Dedicated parking lots are at overflow capacity each weekend. Open-air plazas facing one another across East 45th Street form a lively public realm protected from passing traffic on Vernon Ave. and Alameda St.



Figure 6.23: Special event billing at the Alameda Swap Meet in July of 2016. Photo by author, 2016.

The print advertisements that adorn swap meet walls reveal that bands are not the only swap meet attractions (Figure 6.23). On a flyer for a July 17, 2016 show, a *payaso* (clown) by the name of “El Chilaquil” is featured alongside the five musical acts. Fixtures in *zocalos* (town squares) across Mexico, *payasos* are popular public personas who attract large crowds and fuse crude humor with social commentary. They also invert gender and class norms through interactive comedy routines.⁴⁶ Though *payasos* no doubt take on a different cultural resonance in the United States, their presence in the swap meet plaza nonetheless is meaningful in that many patrons are aware of their status as entertainers as well as public voices. The presence of the clown thus invests the swap meet plaza with additional meaning by enhancing its *carnavalesque* qualities.



Figure 6.24: Glenn Gonzales takes on Guadalupe de Leon on December 13, 2008, in the final Los Angeles fight of *Solo Boxeo*'s lineup.⁴⁷

Occasionally, the Alameda Swap Meet's plaza has been transformed into a boxing arena for semi-professional matches (Figure 6.24). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “the swap meet is an important stop for boxers on the road to Las Vegas,” hosting numerous fights over the years.⁴⁸ Several of these were even televised by *Solo Boxeo*, a Spanish-language program that highlighted matches in smaller venues. In January 4, 2008, for instance, Filipino boxer and former world flyweight champion, Brian Viloria resuscitated his ailing career at one such match in the Alameda Swap Meet plaza. From the boxer's perspective, the location and conditions were from ideal: according to the *Los Angeles Times*, “it rained that night, a hard downpour that blew sideways,” while Viloria's manager, Gary Gittelsohn, later recalled that “I kept seeing the lighting fixtures on the canopy (covering the ring) swaying back and forth.”⁴⁹ The conditions were so wet that Viloria, who had won his world title at the Staples Center

⁴⁶ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-subversive-noncreepy-charm-of-mexican-street-clowns>

⁴⁷ <http://philboxing.com/news/story-21111.html>

⁴⁸ Lance Pugmire, “Solo Boxeo’ Comes to L.A. for Final Time,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 2008, https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/sports_blog/2008/12/solo-boxeo-come.html.

⁴⁹ Robert Morales, “Viloria a Long Way from L.A. Swap Meet,” *Press Telegram*, January 9, 2010, <https://www.dailybreeze.com/2010/01/09/boxing-viloria-a-long-way-from-la-swap-meet/>. Gittelsohn is quoted in: Bill Dwyre, “Boxer Brian Viloria Is Poised for Another Run at the Top,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-jan-22-la-sp-dwyre-boxing22-2010jan22-story.html>.

and was accustomed to far nicer venues, requested that his handlers carry him across a flooded parking lot and into the covered ring so that he would not slip during the fight.⁵⁰ Over eight rounds, Viloría won the first of six consecutive matches—including another bout at the swap meet in December—that ultimately propelled him to the 15,895 seat Araneta Coliseum in Manila where won the International Boxing Federation (IBF) light flyweight championship.⁵¹ In a later interview, Viloría recalled, “When I won the world title, fighting at the swap meet was worth it....I just told myself, ‘I don’t want to get back to the Alameda Swap Meet.’”⁵²

While Viloría’s unpleasant memories of the swap meet reveal its low social status, his appearance there allowed him direct access to his working class fans. As multipurpose entertainment venues, the plazas of indoor swap meets exist within a broad network of socialization sites that cater to the region’s Latinx and Chicana populations. As culturally significant public realms, the Alameda and El Faro swap meets are on par with nightclubs specializing in *banda*, *cumbia*, and *norteño* music, stadia that host *charrería* events (Mexican rodeo), and indoor venues like the venerable (but now-shuttered) Olympic Auditorium in Downtown Los Angeles.

Korean Ownership of an Iconic “Mexican” Swap Meet

In spite of its heavy Latinx theming, one of Los Angeles’s wealthiest Korean immigrants own the Alameda Swap Meet. Property records reveal that Steven S. Koh, a businessman whose fortune stems from numerous enterprises, purchased the swap meet through the “Alameda Family Limited Partnership” in March of 1992.⁵³ Koh, who founded the Pacific Steel Corporation in 1975, a few years after his arrival in the United States (1971), built a strong reputation within the Korean business community in Los Angeles.⁵⁴ In recognition of his acumen, he was appointed to the Wilshire State Bank’s board of directors in 1986, and named its chairman in 1993.⁵⁵ The bank, which was founded on Wilshire Boulevard in 1980, is the city’s second-oldest Korean-American financial institution. Through several mergers, it has grown into the only super-regional Korean-American bank in the United States, with branches and Small Business Administration (SBA) loan origination offices in nine states. Renamed the Bank of Hope following its 2016 merger with fellow Koreatown financial institution, BBCN, it has emerged as a key player in underwriting Korean-owned businesses across the United States.⁵⁶ Koh thus wields significant financial power and influence within the Korean business community as well as within the national banking industry.

Although Koh does not advertise his affiliation with the Alameda Swap Meet, its Korean vendors are aware of the high profile of its owner. One vendor informed me that he attends church with Koh, speculating that he likely takes in roughly \$500,000 per month in revenue from vendor booth rentals alone.⁵⁷ After overhead expenses, Koh’s swap meet income is likely substantial, perhaps the reason why he has retained his interest in the swap meet despite other income streams. Probably

⁵⁰ Dwyre, “Boxer Brian Viloría Is Poised for Another Run at the Top.”

⁵¹ Eduard Cauch, “Triunfal regreso de Viloría en LA,” *La Opinión*, January 5, 2008.

⁵² Morales, “Viloría a Long Way from L.A. Swap Meet.”

⁵³ “Los Angeles County Property Records” (West District Office, Culver City: Los Angeles County Assessor, February 19, 2016).

⁵⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=756956&privcapId=414570>

⁵⁵ <https://wallmine.com/people/12022/steven-koh>,

⁵⁶ “The Roots of Bank of Hope,” *Bank of Hope*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.bankofhope.com/the-roots-of-bank-of-hope>.

⁵⁷ Koh’s swap meet income probably compares favorably to his Bank of Hope salary, which is estimated by _____ at \$133,000 per year (of course, the majority of Koh’s compensation likely comes in the form of stock, which is likely much higher). <https://wallmine.com/people/12022/steven-koh>

due to their high profile, the Kohs have deputized two Latinx managers who closely guard the identities of the owners, and handle the swap meet's daily affairs.

In contrast to major indoor swap meet operators, who are forthcoming about their operations, Alameda Swap Meet's management team is extraordinarily secretive. Its managers have withheld basic information from me about the rental prices of their booths, their criteria for selecting tenants, and even how long the swap meet has existed. The swap meet lacks a website—highly unusual for a swap meet of its stature—suggesting that it is successful enough that it doesn't need one, and that its owners and vendors wish to remain out of the public eye. This desire for anonymity may reflect past negative press generated when the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in 1991 criticized the previous owner for allowing his vendors to sell mechanical pencils resembling hypodermic needles.⁵⁸ Although no vendors were involved with the sales, the issue was serious enough to warrant coverage by the *Korea Times*, which made sure to emphasize that although the swap meet was managed by K.C. Kim, “none of the vendors selling the pencils were Korean.”⁵⁹

Perhaps more fundamentally, the low profile of the Alameda Swap Meet owners may reflect what some vendors and patrons most desire, which is protection from outside scrutiny. As I assert in Chapter 4, anti-swap meet resistance in the form of city-led regulations and protests by African American community leaders prior to the Rodney King unrest reinforced this desire. Furthermore, many customers and some vendors shop and sell at indoor swap meets precisely because they lack both legal immigration status and the economic power to do so elsewhere.

The physical form of the Alameda Swap Meet and El Faro Plaza—which collectively form an enclosed plaza bisected by a public city street, helps shoppers maintain their anonymity within a dynamic public-private realm. Its plaza, which lies at the center of the two swap meets, is the heart of most of the public life that takes place within them. It is protected on three sides by building walls, and by a semi-opaque wrought iron fence along its lightly-traveled East 45th Street frontage. El Faro Plaza, which is not under Korean ownership, has a far more outward orientation, and it exercises its high visibility on heavily traveled Vernon Street and Alameda Boulevard to announce its presence to passersby by blaring live music into the intersection.

Channeling the *Carnavalesque* at the Anaheim Indoor Marketplace

As at the Alameda, El Faro, and other area indoor swap meets, a poly-ethnic management team is responsible for a high degree of Latinx theming in Orange County's Anaheim Marketplace. Owned by a Korean investor, led by a White man who speaks only rudimentary Spanish, and supported by several staff members of Latinx identities, the swap meet's marketing and administrative team have energetically and systematically targeted the “Hispanic market” through theming tactics and frequent cultural events. Its interior—like hundreds of similar market halls—vaguely evokes a Latin American *mercado*, with its grid of vendors stalls, businesses selling traditional Mexican snacks, and its exuberant material culture. Its weekly slate of cultural programming only reinforces this theme. An indoor studio and outdoor *placita* are placed strategically toward the rear of the market hall. Weekly *lotería* and karaoke contests, performances including *ballet folklórico*, mariachis, and banda, and even *lucha libre* and boxing matches take place there, reinforcing the Mexican heritage of the market's many visitors. A soccer field at the rear of the swap meet provides a popular venue for a *Liga Swapmeet* (swap meet league), which hosts 16 to 20 intramural *fútbol* games per night. Seasonal events including *Fiestas Patrias* and *Día de los Muertos* contribute not only to the *carneavalesque* atmosphere of the swap meet, but

⁵⁸ Fellows, “Black Community Outraged Over Hypodermic Pencil”; Jarrette Fellows, “‘Hypodermic’ Pencil Traced to Chinese Manufacturer,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 8, 1991.

⁵⁹ Richard Reyes Fruto, “‘Hypodermic’ Pencil Outrage,” *Korea Times Los Angeles Edition*, August 18, 1991.

also reinforce its status as a working-class pleasure realm where leisure and consumption bleed together.

Given its high level of theming it is perhaps no coincidence that the Anaheim Indoor Marketplace's 100,000 square foot building is just a five-minute drive from Disneyland. In spite of a rather non-descript building façade, the Anaheim Marketplace self-consciously positions itself in relation to its world-famous neighbor. Its roadside sign, which mimics the marquee that stood at Disneyland's Katella Avenue entrance between 1989 and 1999, clearly communicates the intentions of the marketplace management (Figures 6.25 and 6.26). On both signs, a set of flag poles fan from the base to a trapezoidal marquee topped by their respective business names. The six flags flying above the two ensembles are of virtually identical hues. Through a shared representational language and similar proportions, the Anaheim Marketplace sign promises its visitors a fantasy experience like that of its high-profile neighbor while revealing the mass-market aspirations of its management. While its customers may not be able to afford an expensive Disneyland ticket, a trip to the Anaheim Marketplace is well within a working-class budget.⁶⁰



Figure 6.25: The Disneyland Sign on Katella Avenue circa late 1990s. Photo credit: <https://www.cheatsheet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Disneyland-sign-1955.jpg>



Figure 6.26: The Anaheim Marketplace sign at 1440 S. Anaheim Boulevard. Photo by author, 2015.

Yet, like many suburban retail emporiums, the distinctiveness of the roadside sign does not express what lies behind the Anaheim Marketplace's façade.⁶¹ Inside its non-descript "decorated shed," is a succession box-like vendor stalls selling the same low-cost merchandise as hundreds of other area swap meets. Organized in rectilinear grid which evokes a straightforward efficiency, they nonetheless subvert the attempt at order with a chaotic display of merchandise (Figures 6.27 and 6.28).

⁶⁰ In March, 2019, single day Disneyland tickets started at \$100, a large discretionary expense for most low-income Southern California residents. A discounted three-day ticket for residents of Southern California and Baja California, Mexico starts at \$179; the park's least expensive and highly restrictive annual "Southern California Select Passport" starts at \$399 per person, per year.

⁶¹ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977).



Figure 6.27: Anaheim Indoor Marketplace interior. Photo by author, 2016.

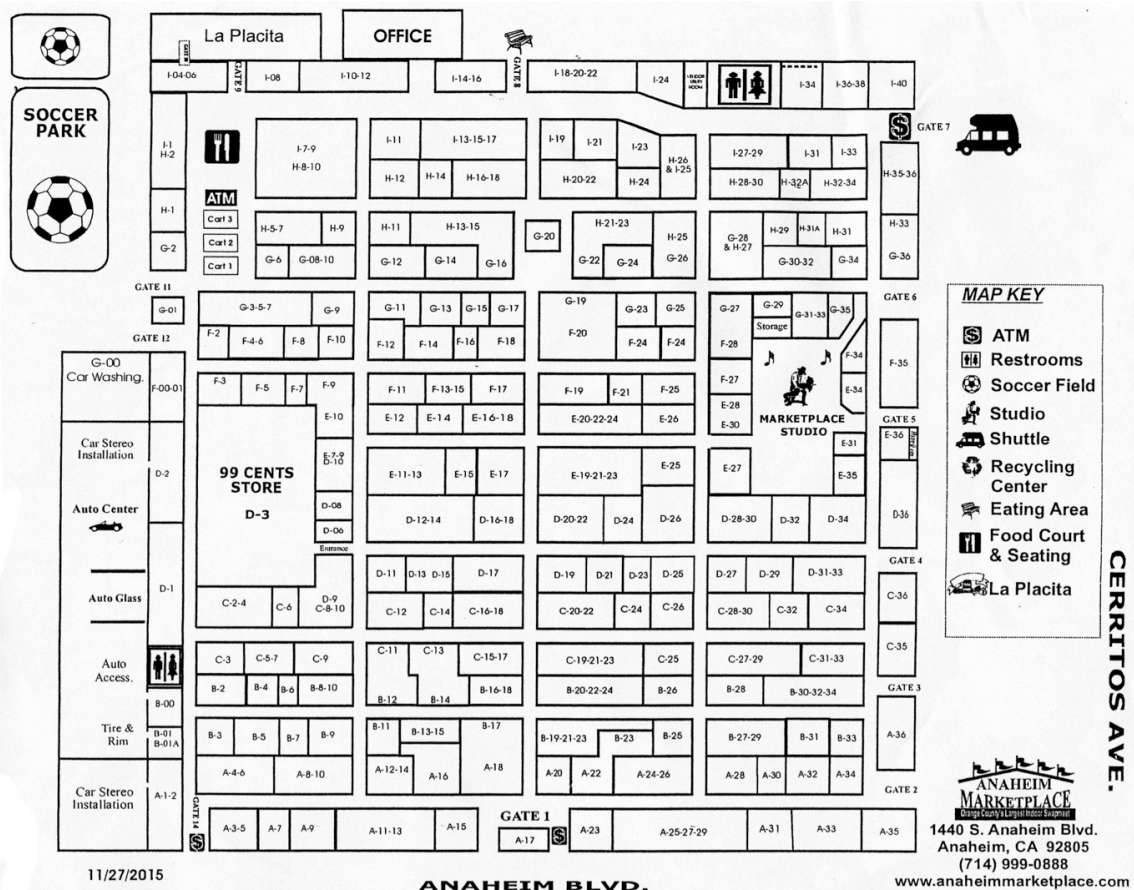


Figure 6.28: Anaheim Indoor Marketplace floorplan, circa 2016.

In spite of the mass-market aspirations expressed by its roadside sign, the Anaheim Marketplace rejects the conservative social values of American nationalism and cultural homogeneity often ascribed to Disneyland, which as John Findlay and Eric Avila have both observed was initially designed to promote mid-century American ideals of Whiteness.⁶² Only vaguely themed, its loosely regulated spaces and heterogeneous aesthetics bear far more resemblance to the arcades of Coney Island than to Disneyland. Nearly all of its events—along with its dazzling array of products, sites, and sounds—are free. Its range of participatory activities from free concerts to *lotería* games foster a sort of mingling absent at the theme park. Compared to Disneyland’s carefully controlled themescape, the Anaheim Marketplace—like other swap meets discussed in this chapter—is a site of exuberant working class culture.

Sandwiched between a warehousing zone to its east and a trailer park to its west, the market hall seems a world apart from any fantasy realm. Its low-slung building and its quotidian aesthetics evoke lower end products. Its working-class neighborhood is a far cry from the orange groves and the lily-White suburbs that once surrounded it. On the ‘wrong side of the freeway’ from Disneyland, the Anaheim Marketplace gives material form to the social realities of much of twenty first century Orange County.⁶³

Hoping to capitalize on out-of-town visitors who grew bored with the highly-controlled environment and exoticized otherness of Disney’s lands, the Marketplace’s management ran a free shuttle which ferried visitors to the swap meet. Hoping to position the Marketplace as an *extension* of Disneyland, its managers are active participants in the anesthetization of informality. Promotional flyers placed in the lobbies of nearby hotels advertising the marketplace (and shuttle) promised a bazaar-like market experience defined by unique goods and bargain prices. The nearby Pavilions Hotel, for instance, writes on its website that “you can shop for fresh, local produce, pastries and meats along with artisanal gifts and treasures” at the Anaheim Indoor Marketplace.⁶⁴ So successful were these efforts that the Anaheim Marketplace is one of the only indoor swap meets with its own Tripadvisor page.

Due to this aggressive marketing, unsuspecting tourists with expectations of a high-end farmers market, hipster bazaar, or perhaps a lowbrow version of Epcot’s World Showcase, left disappointed. Rather than a market defined by artisanal products, they found a vaguely-themed *mercado* dominated by inexpensive off-brand goods. As one startled visitor from Tennessee remarked in a Tripadvisor.com review, “I had no idea this was an all Hispanic flea market... everything was written in Spanish, we were the only two White people in the building....*It is listed as a flea market but it should read for Hispanics only.*”⁶⁵ Another shopper from Adelaide, Australia, remarked that “upon arriving we were very disappointed. This place was dirty, tacky and DIRTY!”⁶⁶ On the other hand, an Australian

⁶² See in particular John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 52–116; Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 106–44.

⁶³ Between 1990 and 2019, profound social shifts took place in Orange County, where the demographics have become far less White and the politics far more liberal. The lesson was clear: Despite Orange County’s past as a bastion of White conservatism (John Birch Society, etc.), its growing immigrant population meant that new marketing and theming strategies would be needed for the Anaheim Marketplace and business like it to succeed.

⁶⁴ <https://pavilionshotel.com/anaheim-indoor-marketplace/>

⁶⁵ Tripadvisor review by anonymous member, July 1, 2018. See: https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g29092-d280547-r592269720-Anaheim_Indoor_Marketplace-Anaheim_California.html

⁶⁶ Tripadvisor review by anonymous member, March 10, 2009. https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g29092-d280547-r25923840-Anaheim_Indoor_Marketplace-Anaheim_California.html

visitor remarked, “this place was so interesting, all sorts of products from Mexico, colorful characters, unusual (for us) foods, a real glimpse into another culture.”⁶⁷

From its inception, the ownership and management of Anaheim Marketplace has been distinctly multicultural. When the Dae Woong Group of Anaheim acquired and renovated the building in which it was housed, which formerly was a White Front Department Store, it initially believed its customers would be English speakers.⁶⁸ After opening in June of 1991, the owners failed to sublease more than a fraction of the 100,000 square foot vendor booths, managing to recruit only a few dozen hand crafts vendors to its Americana-inspired market.

To drum up business, the swap meet owner hired a recent college graduate who had earned his bachelor’s degree in marketing and communications from Long Beach State University. With minimal experience in the sector aside from his coursework, Ted Holcomb began experimenting with promotions and live events to attract shoppers. Initially, he hired country bands and other groups he thought would appeal to the White suburbanites who frequented the nearby Orange County Marketplace, a popular outdoor swap meet. However, when few people showed up at these initial events, Holcomb began to realize that he would need to differentiate the indoor swap meet from its popular outdoor counterpart. Mindful of the region’s growing Spanish-speaking population, Holcomb hired a mariachi band that drew, in his words, “everybody in Anaheim.”⁶⁹ This strong response encouraged Holcomb to experiment with additional Spanish-language promotions. Today Ted Holcomb and his staff organize over 50 events per year, and the Anaheim Marketplace website touted 35 events alone during the first four months of 2019.⁷⁰ As one staff member remarked of the events, “you’ll never want to come back another time once you have been here on a weekend!”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Tripadvisor review by Angela E., March 28, 2016. https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g29092-d280547-r359577633-Anaheim_Indoor_Marketplace-Anaheim_California.html

⁶⁸ Hyun Shin was listed as a previous president for the business listed at 1440 S. Anaheim Boulevard. “Agent” was Melvin Bernard Rogow, Esq. (Admitted to California Bar in 1978; “not eligible to practice” due to lapsed MCLE requirements on 3/12/1993). See: <https://www.ca-registry.com/C1498108-dae-woong-group-inc>, <https://www.corporationwiki.com/California/Anaheim/hyun-sung-shin/42099453.aspx>

⁶⁹ Quoted in Quinones, “Non-Latinos Mine Southland’s Mexican Market.”

⁷⁰ See: <http://anaheimmarketplace.com/>

⁷¹ Holcomb et al., Personal Interview.



Figure 6.29: Ballet Folklórico performance at the Anaheim Indoor Marketplace's La Placita. Photo by author, 2016.

Over time, Holcomb convinced the swap meet owner to build three on-site events spaces which would accommodate an increasingly ambitious array of Mexican-themed events. The most important of these is *la placita* (the little plaza), situated at the swap meet's rear, which is covered by a canopy and bounded by a stage at its north end, restaurants on its west side, and a parking and overflow event space to its south and east. On weekends, the plaza hosts a steady stream of free entertainment, including *ballet folklórico*, a "variety show," and live performing artists on Saturdays. On Sundays, *ballet folklórico*, a live *norteño* band, and a Karaoke contest provide similar attractions (Figure 6.29). On both days, the plaza draws capacity crowds, which must walk through the swap meet and past its many shops in order to access the plaza. As an activity hub, *la placita* serves as a sort of swap meet anchor, whose frequent events ensure a regular stream of foot traffic past the swap meet's hundreds of vendors. The "Marketplace Studio," an indoor ballroom located on the marketplace's south side, provides space for weekly dance classes in various forms of *ballet folklórico* (folk dancing), *salsa*, *merengue*, and *cumbia*, while providing an additional source of revenue when it is leased out for special events such as *quinceaneras* and weddings. Additionally, the swap meet also provides space for nonprofits such as the Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development (OCCORD), which offers citizenship classes.⁷² During the evenings, an outdoor soccer field adjacent to *la placita* is a significant activity hub, which hosts the *Liga Swapmeet*, an all ages soccer league with 220 [check this number] active teams consisting almost exclusively of Latinx players.

Together with the swap meet's 100,000 square feet of selling space and hundreds of vendor booths, its special events venues provide ample space for Orange County's Latinx community to socialize. This remarkable assemblage of spaces in a single location accommodates an array of events that are highly valued by the local Mexican and Chicanx populace. *Fútbol* matches and regular *ballet folklórico*, *lotería*, and live *banda* and *Norteño* concerts transform quotidian spaces into ephemeral realms for the enactment and (re-)production of Mexican identities. The presence of these spaces within

⁷² See: "Citizenship Fair - February 3, 2018" https://www.occord.org/citizenship_fair_20180203

Orange County—the home of Disneyland and the crucible of the “New Right”—is central to the de-territorializing and re-territorializing of Mexicanidad.⁷³ In addition to these weekly spectacles, larger events such as *Fiestas Patrias*, *Carnival*, and *Día de los Muertos* celebrations, spectator sporting events such as *lucha libre* and *boxeo*, and special appearances by politicians and Latinx celebrities underscore the Anaheim Marketplace’s central role in Anaheim.

Anaheim Marketplace’s weekly *ballet folklórico* performances draw large crowds to *la placita* each weekend.⁷⁴ The numerous folk dances that emphasize Mexico’s rural roots carry special resonance amongst the rural to urban phenomenon given over a century of successive displacements of small farmers from their ancestral Mexican villages.⁷⁵ For this region, *ballet folklórico* may be even more significant in greater Los Angeles than in Mexico City, since many Mexican migrants reminisce not only about their Mexican homeland, but also the rural countryside.

During the *Día de los Muertos* festivities of November of 2016, I met “Daniel,” at a communal table at a restaurant overlooking *la placita* and its performance stage. A solo man in his 50s, “Daniel” and I were among the few restaurant guests unaccompanied by friends and families; thus we struck up a conversation in Spanish when he sat down next to me. As teenage girls and boys danced on the stage, “Daniel” explained with considerable pride the origins and significance of the dance steps, costumes, and music of each routine. He reminded me, for instance, that marimbas are characteristic of traditional music from Oaxaca, while *banda*—with its brass-heavy instrumentation and Germanic polka influences—is from Mazatlan, Sinaloa. As our conversation unfolded, “Daniel” told me that he visits the swap meet each weekend to take in its performances and activities because it is near his Santa Ana home. Within his modest means as a *cocinero* (cook) at a Mexican restaurant, “Daniel” appreciates the swap meet for its varied and inexpensive amusements. While he enjoys watching the swap meet’s numerous free concerts and performances, he most looks forward to singing in its regular karaoke contests, including one later that afternoon. As if to emphasize his point, he sings along with several of the songs being performed in the background.⁷⁶ For “Daniel,” the swap meet entertainment provides a critical social and leisure outlet, and is one of the highlights of his week.

Many other customers visit the swap meet because of its broad range of activities, of which its weekly *fútbol* contests are its most significant. On any given evening as the Marketplace begins to close, *fútbol* players in athletic attire—the more serious in matching uniforms—begin to walk toward the rear of the swap meet for an evening of soccer and socializing. Tucked just behind *la placita* are not one but *three* miniature soccer fields, which spring to life as teams begin their warmups. Enclosed by waist-high walls as well as nets that keep flying soccer balls inbounds, each field is emblazoned in numerous places with logos that read, “*Liga Swapmeet*” (Figure 6.30).

⁷³ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁷⁴ *Ballet folklórico*, or Mexican folk dancing, is a pageant-like event that features choreographed performances of traditional dances endemic to Mexico’s disparate regions and cultures. Its dances reinforce notions of Mexican nationhood through ritualized displays of regional difference, *mestizaje* (the fusion of indigenous, European and African cultures), and *indigenismo* (indigenous rights movement) within the Mexican state. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *ballet folklórico* was an instrumental tool in forging a sense of Mexican nationalism, so much so that the government-led Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes initiated sponsorship of the dance form in the Ballet Folklórico de México in 1952. See: <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/ballet-folkl%C3%B3rico-mexicano>

⁷⁵ Sarah Lynn Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA* (Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ Daniel, Personal Interview, November 6, 2016.



Figure 6.30: The soccer field and bleachers behind the Anaheim Marketplace is the site of hundreds of games per week on average. Photos by author, 2016.

The *Liga Swapmeet* is one of several arena soccer leagues in greater Los Angeles, and one of many *fútbol* leagues that cater to Latinx populations in cities and towns across the United States.⁷⁷ As Marie Price and Courtney Whitworth observed in the Washington, D.C. region, Latinx *fútbol* leagues serve as important social institutions for the Mexican and Central American diaspora, providing ephemeral “third spaces,” in which immigrants enjoy one of Latin America’s most popular sports while maintaining vital social networks. Doubling as the only ethnic social organizations in which many Mexican and Central American immigrants participate, Price and Whitworth found that *fútbol* leagues also provide protection for players who are subject to harassment from park officials seeking to limit the presence of Latinx adults in the public realm.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Arena soccer is a variation of the game of soccer (or *fútbol* in the Spanish speaking world), played in a walled arena on synthetic turf. Because of the smaller field size and greater ball speed, teams are limited to a maximum of 5 to 7 players per side.

⁷⁸ Marie Price and Courtney Whitworth, “Soccer and Latino Cultural Space: Metropolitan Washington Fútbol Leagues,” in *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places: Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America*, ed. Daniel D. Arreola (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 173, 178.

CANCHA 1	CANCHA 2	CANCHA 3
6:00	6:00	6:00
6:40 Toluca vs Pumas	6:40 Manchester vs CDIGU8	6:40 Chivas vs Buchonas
7:20 Arcadio vs Adidas	7:20 Nasty vs Chelsea	7:20 Indepe A vs Clambrica
8:00 AH Anaheim vs Mexico	8:00 Lowell vs Thunderbolt	8:00 Indepe B vs Real M
8:40 Estrellas vs Chelsea	8:40 Buchonas vs Neza	9:00 Cuernavaca vs Resurrection
9:20 BFC vs Aguilitas	9:20 Arsenal vs United Acto	10:00 Amigos vs Resurrection
10:00	10:00 CAZACOS vs H.B	

EQUIPOS QUE NO PRESENTEN CREDENCIALES
PERDIERON TODOS SUS PUNTOS.

Figure 6.31: Liga Swapmeet schedule for April 24, 2019, lists 16 matches. Photo by author, 2019.

The participants in Anaheim's *Liga Swapmeet* fit a similar profile. Nearly all players are under the age of 40, and most are 20 and under, with a sizeable teenage contingent. From 6 to 10 pm every night, as many as 20 games will take place in the league, which claims that 5,000 to 10,000 people attend or participate in its games every week. On a Wednesday evening in April of 2019, 16 games alone took place between 6:40 and 10 pm (Figure 6.31). The league has well over 200 small teams of between five and six players apiece, with men's teams fielding five players, while women's and children's teams field six players (Figure 6.32). As the games take place, families, friends, and teams awaiting their match socialize on a small set of bleachers while consuming snacks and beverages purchased from a long table selling American as well as Mexican treats.

The existence of a Latinx arena soccer league in Anaheim thus serves a clear social need. Although the City of Anaheim—like many Southern California communities—sponsors an official adult soccer league, it fields only twelve teams, all of which have Spanish-language names. Further, its high registration fees of several hundred dollars deter many players.

The *Liga Swapmeet*, while supported by clear demand, it is also a product of the swap meet's community involvement and a past partnership with the nearby Disney Corporation. During the mid-1990s, the latter company created Disney GOALS, an afterschool program which served the dual function of providing community outreach and promoting ice hockey amongst “underserved youth in select Anaheim neighborhoods.”⁷⁹ For Disney, its GOALS program was part of an aggressive cross-promotion effort intended to simultaneously support its *Mighty Ducks* movie franchise (with releases in 1992, 1994, and 1996), as well as the Anaheim-based NHL team, the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, which it founded in 1993. Envisioning an after-school hockey venue accessible to the adjacent

⁷⁹ According to <https://web.archive.org/web/20190425062351/https://anaheimcolony.com/ToDo/Youth.html>, “Disney GOALS is a multi-service organization that involves underserved youth in select Anaheim neighborhoods. GOALS after school activities include mandatory academics each week, weekly ice hockey at Disney ICE and periodic community service where GOALS participants help others in the community. In the past year, more than 1,800 local youth participated in GOALS activities.” Little other information exists about GOALS on the Internet.

neighborhood's population of low-income children, Disney approached the Anaheim Marketplace about building a hockey rink in the early 1990s. Funded by 41 donors and built by Disney's design and construction company, the Disney Development Corporation, a new outdoor roller hockey rink opened behind the swap meet in 1995.⁸⁰ However, after a few years of low participation and general lack of enthusiasm likely due to the high cost of hockey equipment, the rink was converted into two soccer fields with synthetic surfaces. Since 2001, the *Liga Swapmeet*, which is independent from the swap meet but attracts some of its customers, has hosted thousands of games featuring teams of all ages.



Figure 6.32: An evening soccer match underway at the Anaheim Marketplace field. Photo by author, 2019.

Lucha Libre, a form of wrestling popular in Mexico, is also among the Anaheim Marketplace's many special events.⁸¹ With exaggerated theatricality and verbal engagement with the audience, *lucha libre* performances often engage with contemporary social and political issues in dramatic fashion. The parking lot adjacent to the *fútbol* field and *la placita* serves as a regular venue for events organized by World Power Wrestling (WPW), an Orange County *lucha libre* league (Figure 6.33). Martin Marin, a

⁸⁰ According to <https://web.archive.org/web/20190425062351/https://anaheimcolony.com/ToDo/Youth.html>, "Disney GOALS is a multi-service organization that involves underserved youth in select Anaheim neighborhoods. GOALS after school activities include mandatory academics each week, weekly ice hockey at Disney ICE and periodic community service where GOALS participants help others in the community. In the past year, more than 1,800 local youth participated in GOALS activities." Little other information exists about GOALS on the Internet.

⁸¹ With its transnational origins, *lucha libre* bears many similarities to its U.S. counterparts such as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The sport, which was established in 1933 when Salvador Lutteroth brought American style wrestling to Mexico City from Texas, has since evolved into a popular pastime in the capital and across northern Mexico. Matches are 'fixed,' in that its 'combatants' stick to a script that usually pits *tecnicos*, or *luchadores* who are paragons of morality, versus *rudos*, who represent villains such as criminals and gangsters. Today, combatants also reinforce and complicate prevailing gender norms through displays of masculine bravado as well as cross dressing. They critique fraught local and international political issues including U.S.-Mexico relations through parodies of Donald Trump. Decidedly low-brow, *lucha* provides a highly participatory social environment in which the audience becomes part of the show by heckling and opining on the unfolding narratives. See: Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), xii–xiii.

former *luchador* (known as “El Genio”) in Mexico City, founded the WPW in the mid-1990s.⁸² Since then, he has trained hundreds of Southern California men and women in the sport, and he organized weekly *lucha libre* events at the Anaheim Marketplace during the mid-2000’s.⁸³ The events, which attracted a broad spectrum of people from children to the elderly, are perhaps most popular with families, which enjoy the rapid action, superhero costumes, and absurdist political and moral comedy.⁸⁴ Rafael Medina, an Orange County landscaper who brought his boys to an Anaheim Marketplace *lucha* event in 2006, observed that the events are “a way we can relax together and not have to think about work.”⁸⁵



Figure 6.33: Promotional flyer for *lucha libre*, posted in the Anaheim Marketplace in 2015.

⁸² Kimberly Edds, “Beyond Good vs. Evil,” *Orange County Register*, July 22, 2006, <https://www.ocregister.com/2006/07/22/beyond-good-vs-evil/>.

⁸³ For the combatants, the swap meets provided an opportunity to wrestle where few others existed. A 2004 profile on a 28-year-old luchador from Anaheim, The Orange County Register emphasized the sport’s importance to Anaheim’s Chicana youth, and the marketplace’s central role in the sport locally. Matthew Castañeda, known by his lucha name of Chippy Sanchez, “is a recovering alcoholic and former gang member who... [once] seemed destined to live and die on the streets,” reporter Justino Águila writes. When he met Marin, who trained him as lucha libre wrestler in a ring behind the Anaheim Marketplace, Castañeda became an accomplished wrestler. Lucha libre offered him “a chance [to] become a wrestling superstar,” as he competed in front of modest crowds of a few hundred people at the swap meet and other modest venues in Southern California. Justino Águila, “Off the Ropes: A Former Gang Member Finds Salvation from a Self-Destructive Lifestyle Through Lucha Libre, a Theatrical Form of Wrestling,” *Orange County Register*, August 22, 2004.

⁸⁴ Although internationally recognized thanks to positive representations of the sport on Mexico’s television networks and in major Hollywood films such as *Nacho Libre* (2006), lucha nonetheless operates on the margins of respectability in Southern California. In spite of its apparent popularity, *lucha* leagues in greater Los Angeles and the American southwest commonly operate out of marginal and working class venues such as warehouses, clubs, and swap meets. The Underground Independent Professional Wrestling (UIPW), for instance, hosts its *lucha* events at the Boys and Girls Club of East Los Angeles. The International Mexican Wrestling (IMW) utilizes a modestly sized room in the Chavas Café (a nightclub) in Downtown Los Angeles, while the Lucha Wrestling Puroresu presents a Japanese variant of lucha libre at the Inoki Dojo (inside a tile warehouse) in Huntington Park. For the Chicana and Latina audiences who attend these events, the sport offers an exciting, socially transgressive, yet nonetheless family-friendly entertainment that resonates with conservative working class values of Mexican nationalism, masculinity, and hard work.

⁸⁵ Edds, “Beyond Good vs. Evil.”

Televised celebrity appearances are the most visible events held at the Anaheim Marketplace. In 2014, for instance, Univision’s hit show, “El Gordo y La Flaca,” visited the swap meet during its annual Thanksgiving turkey giveaway (Figure 6.34). Two months later, he returned with his co-host Lili Estefan for a live broadcast of the show amidst hundreds of screaming fans. These celebrity appearances, though rare at most swap meets, reflect the initiative of enterprising swap meet managers.



Figure 6.34: Anaheim Marketplace management with El Gordo y La Flaca host, Raul de Molina.

So too are visits by politicians, who have recognized the marketplace as a strategic place to connect with Latinx voters. In the run up to the 2005 special election in which recently-elected California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was promoting ballot initiatives that would have curtailed the power of the state’s democratic elected officials, visited the Anaheim Marketplace to promote his political agenda (Figure 6.35).⁸⁶ Prior to the 2016 election, the swap meet’s managers even attempted to host a polling place on site (they were refused), and U.S. Congresswoman and U.S. Senate candidate, Loretta Sanchez made a campaign stop there. These repeat visits by politicians reflect the importance of Orange County’s growing Latinx population, which in the 2018 election was a critical constituency in flipping U.S. House of Representative seats from Republican to Democratic.



Figure 6.35: California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger greets children in the aisles of the Anaheim Marketplace.

Source: <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9770948/ns/politics/t/schwarzenegger-too-busy-meet-bush/>

⁸⁶ John Gittelsohn, “2 Latino Groups Back Ballot Initiatives,” *Orange County Register*, October 19, 2005, <https://www.ocregister.com/2005/10/19/2-latino-groups-back-ballot-initiatives/>.

The Anaheim Marketplace's unadorned aisles, vendor booths, and themed special events spaces together host a broad range of events for Latinx visitors. Intentionally orchestrated by swap meet management to drum up business, these spaces and events serve critical social purposes for the city's Latinx and Spanish-speaking populations who use them to stay connected to their communities and politicians. The frequency, variety, and quality of these events, while relatively unique in the world of swap meet retailing, nevertheless illustrate the social and cultural potential of these bazaars as Latinx hubs.

Plaza Mexico: From Low-End Marketplace to Mall Anchor

"Over the past five years, we've had multiple centers turn from struggling assets to renewed, thriving ones by re-tenanting anchor shop spaces with Hispanic retailers." – Steven Hogberg, quoted in *California Centers*

At Plaza Mexico, the indoor swap meet was fully realized as a viable shopping mall anchor. In its sophisticated theming and cultural programming, its owners perfected a set of tactics already in use at the Alameda and Anaheim swap meets. Concerts and religious festivals marking significant Mexican holidays, frequent presentations on Univision, and the use of the site for major political rallies and protests signify its status as an important cultural node. In constructing a mall around a stand-alone swap meet, its Korean owners looked to precedents like Anaheim and Alameda Swap Meets. In doing so, they elevated the type to arguably its highest purpose: a shopping mall anchor.

An intercultural partnership between Korean owners and a Chicana project architect produced a mall that, as an assemblage of Mexican iconography designed to appeal to a diasporic population is in this way distinctly American. Like West Coast hip hop in Chapter 3, here again I argue that Plaza Mexico is another product of a confluence of cultural influences that synthesized an entirely new cultural form. Together, developer and architect pioneered a new retailing concept for failing regional shopping centers by invoking cultural essentialism (in this case, *Mexicanidad*) through architectural adornment and cultural programming.

When the Chae's migrated to East Los Angeles as children during the 1970s, Donald got his first job at age 15 in the textile industry, an economic niche dominated by Koreans globally. As he learned Spanish and made Mexican friends, he and his brother Min developed a taste for Spanish-language music. In the early 1990s, some of his friends convinced Chae to begin organizing concerts in Lynwood, a city that—like many cities and neighborhoods in South Los Angeles County—was transitioning from equal parts White, Black, and Latinx to majority Latinx. When his concerts, which featured famous *norteña* groups and Mexican pop icons like Juan Gabriel, drew throngs of Spanish-speakers and along with them, significant profits, Chae decided to focus his business entirely on the exploding Latinx market.⁸⁷

With proceeds from his concerts, Donald and his brother Min formed M+D Properties and saved enough money to lease and subdivide a vacant Montgomery Ward building into the Lynwood Marketplace in 1993 (Figure 6.36). Based on information gathered from Korean friends, as well as the crowds at the Compton Fashion Center just down Long Beach Boulevard (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), the Chae brothers understood that the indoor swap meet would probably succeed, especially given the dearth of major national retailers in the area. After several years of saving, they made the move to begin assembling land for Plaza Mexico. For financial assistance, they approached Lynwood city councilmember, Arturo Reyes, who arranged for \$7.5 million in city money to be

⁸⁷ Parma, "Bienvenidos a Mexicotown," 9–10.

granted to M+D Properties so that they could assemble the land.⁸⁸ Through their co-ethnic networks and the Korean-language media, the Chaes filled their swap meet with Korean vendors, many of whom continue to do business there today.⁸⁹



Figure 6.36: Lynwood Marketplace prior to its remodeling as Plaza Mexico. Photo courtesy of David Hidalgo.

Business was good at the swap meet, and the Chae's realized they had found a viable use for a long-troubled retail site. However, unlike many of their counterparts, they were not content to remain indoor swap meet proprietors; they instead aspired to convert the site into a proper shopping mall with a department store anchor. After national retailers promised to re-invest in South Los Angeles following the 1992 Rodney King unrest, the Chaes tried for a time to recruit a department store to replace the swap meet. However, they learned that those promises fell flat in Lynwood, whose populace was viewed as too poor to fit the financial models of chain retailers. As Donald Chae remembers, "I literally presented the plan (to build a new shopping center in Lynwood) to every single major department store out there, but none of them opted to invest."⁹⁰

By the late-1990s, the Chaes became convinced that, with the right mix of tenants and cultural programming, a Mexican-themed mall would succeed where decades of redevelopment efforts had failed. They gave up their plans to attract a department store, and began assembling properties adjacent to their swap meet for a revitalized shopping center. Ultimately, they purchased the Montgomery Ward building, an adjacent supermarket-anchored strip shopping center (the "Lynwood Towne Center"), and a handful of industrial and residential properties that stood in between the two sites. With design assistance from David Hidalgo, an architect raised in East Los Angeles, the Chaes developed their vision of a shopping mall based on a Mexican pueblo (Figures 6.37 and 6.38).⁹¹

⁸⁸ Parma, 10.

⁸⁹ See Chapter 2 for a detailed explanation of the process by which the Korean owners of indoor swap meets across Southern California recruited vendor tenants.

⁹⁰ 2005 interview with Donald Chae by Leal, quoted in Leal, "Las Plazas of South Los Angeles," 17.

⁹¹ David Hidalgo, Personal Interview, April 23, 2018.



Figure 6.37: Aerial view of the Lynwood Marketplace and Lynwood Town Center prior to redevelopment. Image courtesy of David Hidalgo Architects.

Figure 6.38: Proposed elements of the Plaza Mexico plan, prior to construction. Image courtesy of David Hidalgo Architects.

Hidalgo, a California native and self-described “good old American ‘baseball’ guy,” fell in love with traditional Mexican architecture during a study abroad trip to Oaxaca as an undergraduate at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc).⁹² Hidalgo remembers that “when I went to Oaxaca, it was just an eye opener. The colors, the textures, the small little towns...[all] had their own mercados....Learning that deep culture as a 22-year-old really stuck with me.”⁹³ In spite of his training with SCI-Arc professors Eric Owen Moss and Ray Kappe, who are known for their modernist architecture, Hidalgo carried his admiration for traditional design into his professional career. His first commissions after establishing his architecture practice in 1987 were a few houses, churches, and in Hidalgo’s words, “boring *gringo* malls” such as the Brea Center and Lake Forest Market Place, vaguely mission-style supermarket-anchored neighborhood shopping centers completed in 1994 and 1996, respectively.⁹⁴ Hidalgo’s fortunes began to change in 2001, when a mutual business contact referred Don and Min Chae to his practice. As Hidalgo remembers, they “came and knocked on my door and said, ‘we want a Mexican village.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, you want a little *pueblo*.’ So I told them, yeah I can do something like that.”⁹⁵ During a lengthy initial meeting, Hidalgo shared his vision for a shopping center that incorporated plazas, arcades, and Spanish colonial architectural forms. He also shared his family’s deep ties to Mexico: his uncle, Rodolfo Pérez Gutiérrez, was a general in the Mexican military and, according to family lore, he is a direct descendant of Mexican revolutionary and “father of the nation,” Miguel Hidalgo. These connections and Hidalgo’s passion for the traditional convinced the Chaes to hire him.

David Hidalgo’s relationship with his uncle played a pivotal role in Plaza Mexico’s development. It was Gutiérrez who suggested that Hidalgo invite the Chaes on a research trip to San Miguel de Allende in the Mexican State of Guanajuato for design inspiration. It was also he who set up meetings with key government officials including the mayors of San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, as well as the governor of the State of Guanajuato (Juan Carlos Romero Hicks) for Hidalgo and the Chaes. These connections helped Hidalgo find and hire Luis Felipe Nieto, an

⁹² Hidalgo.

⁹³ Hidalgo.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Parma, “Bienvenidos a Mexicotown,” 11. See a selected project list on Hidalgo’s website, circa 2014: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141216094521/http://davidhidalgoarchitects.com/firm.html>

⁹⁵ Hidalgo, Personal Interview.

archaeologist living in San Miguel Allende who advised on the selection of architectural details, materials, and icons imported from Mexico to make the project feel authentic. On their trip, Hidalgo and the Chaes took over 3,000 photographs of buildings, architectural details, materials, and street life, which Hidalgo integrated into his final project design. Hidalgo and the Chaes took repeat trips over the ensuing five years for additional inspiration, and in the project's later stages to recruit retail tenants.⁹⁶

The mall is even more clearly themed than the Anaheim Marketplace, thanks to the design team's careful field research and attentiveness to evoking a Mexican sense of place. Hidalgo expresses the ambivalence facing many Chicane Los Angelenos remarking that:

The culture stuff is important. And it's not really where I came from, but I gravitated toward Latin life. None of my brothers have that kind of thinking about our culture. I mean, like Mariachi music, they sort of like to laugh at it. But I *like* it!... You want to create these elements like in Plaza Mexico, so people have the same feeling. I'm not the only one either: People like to have a nice space. When I walk into modern museums, or the Disney Concert Hall, the stimulation is great. But I couldn't hang out there.⁹⁷

Plaza Mexico, to Hidalgo should be a place where people feel comfortable... and ideally at *home*. Or at least, as David Lowenthal writes, the mysterious sense of "elsewhen" one often feels when "both the architects and audiences lump it all together, commingling epochs, disregarding calendars and contexts."⁹⁸ Still, amidst the growing nationalism of the late-twentieth century and increasing restrictions on travel across the U.S.-Mexico border, Mexican- and Latinx-themed environments serve the more benevolent purpose of providing 'a little bit of Mexico' within the United States. With their architectural references to Mexico and replicas of *actual* Mexican buildings, statues, and icons, they take on the gravity of pilgrimage sites in which the American-based proxy assumes the significance of the original.⁹⁹

Religious and cultural rituals enacted around key holidays lend Plaza Mexico a sense of sacredness during key holidays. One such event is the "Día de los Reyes," (or Three Kings Day), which marks Epiphany each year on January 6th. This celebration, which is widely celebrated in the Spanish-speaking world, is also observed by Latinx people in the United States. Yet, few spaces exist in the United States where rituals associated with important Latin American holidays can take place. Plaza Mexico thus provides a venue for the enactment of traditional rituals that require a physical *place* for their social reproduction. As a 2013 *La Opinión* article put it, "Jennie Jaen was born in the USA and her parents never celebrated the Day of the Kings. 'I had heard about tradition, but we had never celebrated it,' he confessed. Her husband, Heber Jaen, on the other hand, brought with him his memories of the celebration from Mexico City."¹⁰⁰ Joining roughly 1,000 other participants, the space and the publicness of the co-participants allowed the ritual to assume its necessary spatial and collective dimensions. Notably, the celebration is sponsored each year by Plaza Mexico's Merchants Association, not the management of Plaza Mexico. Dominated by Korean vendors, who directly underwrite these events, in an effort to drum up business.

⁹⁶ Hidalgo.

⁹⁷ Hidalgo.

⁹⁸ David Lowenthal, "The Past as a Theme Park," in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, ed. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 16.

⁹⁹ Gómez-Barris and Irazábal, "Transnational Meanings of La Virgen de Guadalupe."

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Gaglianone, "Los Tres Reyes Magos Hacen Su Visita Anual a La Plaza México," *La Opinión*, January 7, 2013, <https://laopinion.com/2013/01/07/los-tres-reyes-magos-hacen-su-visita-anual-a-la-plaza-mexico/>.

The mall takes on another sacred dimension: the (partial) bracketing of social class. While many have criticized shopping malls as exclusionary, Plaza Mexico functions in the inverse. Although surveilled by security cameras, it affords safe haven to poor neighbors, gang members, and political activists, who appreciate the space because it is not “the streets.”¹⁰¹ As Young observes of themeparks, pilgrims to Plaza Mexico they leave their identities (middle class, lower class, etc.) at the entrance to absorb the place’s message, which is pro-immigrant, vaguely nationalistic and overtly capitalistic.¹⁰² An unforeseen result of this has been a surprising tolerance of political demonstrations within the plaza. As in Mexico City, Lynwood’s *Ángel de la Independencia* is a focal point of political rallies, including the 2006 student walkouts and protests over the immigration reform legislation. As Irazábal and Gómez-Barris observed, mall management did *not* require political protestors to leave when they massed at the *Ángel* before marching to Los Angeles City Hall, complicating prevailing views that malls quash, rather than support political expression.¹⁰³ Indeed, Plaza Mexico’s management—like that of the Alameda Swap Meet—*engages* in state and national politics, inviting 2016 presidential contenders Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders to rallies at the mall (Figure 6.39).



Figure 6.39: Hillary Clinton speaks at Plaza Mexico campaign in 2016. Photo by Karla Enriquez.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: Swap Meet America

With their abundant materiality and their cultural hybridity, indoor swap meets complicate our understandings of race, ethnicity, and social class in the twenty-first century. Korean entrepreneurs have played a central role in the production of cultural landscapes heavily utilized by Latinx and Chicanx Los Angelenos. In doing so, they have helped shape regional, place-based attitudes toward ethnicity and race while providing alternative opportunity structures for countless migrants to Los Angeles.

¹⁰¹ Gómez-Barris and Irazábal, “Transnational Meanings of La Virgen de Guadalupe,” 347–48.

¹⁰² Terence Young, “Grounding the Myth: Theme Park Landscapes in an Era of Commerce and Nationalism,” in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, ed. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 7.

¹⁰³ Irazábal and Gómez-Barris, “Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico,” 189–90.

¹⁰⁴ Karla Enriquez, “Clinton Visits Plaza Mexico,” *Talon Marks* (blog), accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.talonmarks.com/news/2016/06/14/clinton-visits-plaza-mexico/>.

Having successfully repositioned Lynwood's failed Montgomery Ward, Plaza Mexico's Chicanx project architect, David Hidalgo, has achieved significant fame. His ideas have circulated within publications of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC). For over a decade, Hidalgo has promoted the swap meet-as-anchor concept as a solution to dying regional malls within Latinx neighborhoods across the US. For example, in 2004, he redesigned Fort Worth's Seminary South Center as La Gran Plaza, which is anchored by a "Mercado," built to resemble one of LA's indoor swap meets (Figures 6.40 and 6.41). In Phoenix as well, Hidalgo has repositioned the struggling Mercado del Cielos mall as a Mexican themescape also anchored by an indoor swap meet.¹⁰⁵



Figure 6.40: La Gran Plaza in Fort Worth bears a strong resemblance to Plaza Mexico because of its shared project architect. The mall's sign is a near facsimile of Plaza Mexico's marquee. Photo by author, 2019.

Figure 6.41: One of La Gran Plaza's anchor tenants is a swap meet housed within a repurposed department store. Photo by author, 2019.

Don Chae, meanwhile, has gone a different direction, pursuing his dream of major mall development. In 2018, M+D Properties invested some of the proceeds from Plaza Mexico into a new Korean-themed mall in Buena Park called "The Source." Initially conceived as a K-Pop themed mall, with a recording studio funded by Psy as the anchor, the mall's only major anchor is a movie theater.¹⁰⁶

Together, these case studies complicate the literature on "Latino Urbanism," which largely ignores the agency of *non*-Latinx actors in the creation of *visually* Latinx commercial environments. As the growing body of literature on "Ethnoburbs" reminds us, Southern California is a locus of complex cross-cultural interactions that have resulted in a polyglot built landscape.¹⁰⁷ By adjusting their retailing and design practices to this new and complicated reality, a handful of enterprising Korean swap meet owners collaborated with Chicanx designers to develop a hybrid retail type.

¹⁰⁵ See: <http://ktar.com/story/699528/ariz-sen-john-mccain-launches-unidos-con-mccain-hispanic-coalition/>

¹⁰⁶ The EB-5 Immigrant Visa Program stipulates that non-citizens who invest between 500,000 and 1 million dollars may be granted a U.S. Visa. <https://ocweekly.com/will-buena-parks-new-retail-center-the-source-put-it-on-the-map-or-be-its-biggest-boondoggle-7901875/>

¹⁰⁷ See Timothy P. Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Wei Li et al., "How Ethnic Banks Matter: Banking and Community/Economic Development in Los Angeles," in *Landscapes of the Ethnic Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes*; Cheng, "East of East: The Global Cosmopolitans of Suburban LA."

Chapter 7: Wither the Swap Meet? The Financial Crisis, E-commerce, Gentrification, and COVID-19, 2008-2020

Although large indoor swap meets came to anchor Mexican-themed malls across greater Los Angeles, Fort Worth, and other metro areas during the first decade of the twenty-first century, their smaller counterparts struggled to stay afloat. Through the late-2000's and 2010s, a growing wave of swap meet closures signaled the business type's decline. A series of events including the 2008 financial crisis, slackening immigration, the rise of electronic commerce, and gentrification rendered the once-important social and economic roles of indoor swap meets less relevant to a new generation of Angelenos. Traces of the indoor swap meet economy remain etched in the Los Angeles built landscape, but like the retailers and industries they replaced a generation ago, the markets now are being erased from the urban landscape.

The 2015 closure of the Compton Swap Meet (discussed at length in Chapter 5), is perhaps the most famous instance of an indoor swap meet closure because of its prominence with hip hop fans. But it was neither the only swap meet closure in that year, nor in the years preceding it. Indeed, it was part of a gradual drop off in indoor swap meet retailing that began with the 2008 financial crisis. Until that year, the number of the bazaars was relatively steady after its 1991 peak of 93, with a net loss of eleven swap meets between 1992 and 2008. In contrast, 37 of the bazaars have closed since 2008, displacing thousands of immigrant-owned small businesses. In July of 2020, I estimate that 45 of the markets remain in operation, with many more threatened by the plummeting sales and dwindling foot traffic wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

While the 2008 financial crisis led some swap meet entrepreneurs to hopefully speculate that business might increase at their bazaars, the ensuing years proved otherwise. As early as 2009, the Migration Policy Institute observed that the collapse of the house building industry was dampening work opportunities for undocumented immigrants from Latin America, many of whom had populated Los Angeles's blue collar suburbs during the 1990s and 2000s and become the chief indoor swap meet customer base.² By 2012, it had become clear that the pace of undocumented immigration to the United States had declined to the point that its undocumented population was no longer growing.³ And in 2020, while thirty-six percent of Los Angeles County residents were foreign-born, eighty percent of that population had lived in the US for over ten years.⁴ With fewer immigrants arriving in Los Angeles and the city's existing foreign-born population accruing the cultural and financial capital which enabled them to shop elsewhere, indoor swap meets became less relevant, as places where consumers could conveniently conduct business in Spanish and peruse "nostalgia items" from Mexico and Central America.⁵

¹ This estimate is based on an online survey of Google Street View images and Yelp.com reviews from 2019 and 2020. In-person visits like those conducted between 2015 and 2018 are needed for a more accurate count.

² M. P. I. Staff, "The Recession's Impact on Immigrants," migrationpolicy.org, December 2, 2009, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/recessions-impact-immigrants>.

³ Douglas Massey, "Immigration and the Great Recession," *Recession Trends* (The Russell Sage Foundation and The Stanford Center on Poverty and inequality, October 2012).

⁴ Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, "State of Immigrants in LA County" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, January 2020), 12, https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/SOILA_full_report_v19.pdf.

⁵ Richard Mines and Sandra Nichols, "The Mexican Mercado Paisano: A Framework to Study Its Development Potential in Migrant-Dependent Communities." (Unpublished, 2005).

Gentrification was a second demographic shift contributing to the indoor swap meet's demise. During the decades preceding and following the Great Recession, Los Angeles, like other North American cities, underwent what Alan Ehrenhalt has called the "great inversion," a demographic phenomenon in which the wealthy have increasingly chosen to settle in center city and inner suburban neighborhoods while poorer groups have departed for the exurban fringe.⁶ The refiguring of the city's demographic geography dramatically transformed Downtown Los Angeles and its outlying areas. Whereas Curtis Roseman and Diego Vigil wrote of a "reoccupation of a gringo landscape" along Broadway in 1993 (or "Latinoway," as they called it), twenty years later an invasion of professional dog walkers, pricey restaurants, and hipster cafes signaled a vigorous refashioning of the corridor's cultural landscape.⁷ Indoor swap meets, which once served as anchors for the Latinx shoppers who once frequented these retail corridors have been swept up in this economic vortex.

Further dampening swap meet sales was the rise of electronic commerce. Although the internet was popularized during the mid-1990s with the advent of the Mosaic web browser and America Online, it remained the purview of the middle and upper classes until the late 2000s, when smart phones began affording inexpensive access to the web.⁸ As a vendor at the Union Swap Meet told me in August of 2019, "people couldn't buy much of anything on their smart phones in 2009. Now, people can buy much cheaper and better quality merchandise online than at a swap meet booth. The indoor swap meet business is dying."⁹

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of closures appears to be accelerating. The Los Amigos Mall, an indoor swap meet which opened within a complex of repurposed industrial buildings in 1991, just six blocks east of the University of Southern California, is one of several pandemic casualties (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). Over the years, the swap meet had become, according to James Rojas, "the economic, social, and cultural center for the growing South LA Mexican and Central American community."¹⁰ Somewhat uniquely operated by the Latinx-led Versati Company and staffed by mostly Latinx vendors, the swap meet had indeed become an important place of business and community crossroads. In mid-May of 2020, however, Versati's president, Roberta Torres, served her approximately fifty vendors with thirty day eviction notices.¹¹ The evictions, like those in other shuttered swap meets, dealt a brutal blow to vendors, who had been anticipating reopening their businesses on June 1st after two months of lost revenues due to California's state-wide shelter in place order.¹² On June 18th, one day before the swap meet was to close, vendors moved thousands of dollars of inventory out of their booths and onto the sidewalk in a last attempt to liquidate their inventory. Other vendors disputed the eviction and have yet to move out. As one vendor who operated a booth at the swap meet since its 1991 opening remarked, "Why would I leave

⁶ Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City*.

⁷ Curtis C. Roseman and J. Diego Vigil, "From Broadway to 'Latinoway': The Reoccupation of a Gringo Landscape," *Places* 8, no. 3 (1993): 20–29.

⁸ In 2009, three quarters of US adults used the internet compared to 90 percent in 2019. See: "Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.

⁹ Union Swap Meet Vendor, Personal Interview, August 14, 2019.

¹⁰ James Rojas. Email correspondence, May 29, 2020.

¹¹ Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "Under Siege by a Virus That Thrives in Crowds, L.A. Swap Meets Face a Reckoning," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 2020, sec. California, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-03/los-angeles-swap-meets-struggle-coronavirus-pandemic>.

¹² "We were hoping we could reopen June 1st, but they [refused to] open the swap meet again," vendor Rosa Catalina Vides explained as she moved her possessions to the sidewalk after being evicted. *Los Angeles Times*, *L.A. Swap Meets Try to Rebound from COVID-19 Shutdown*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=78&v=OWhXjLED_00&feature=emb_logo.

after 30 years of being there? That's an entire life. I've dedicated more time to that business than my kids, my house and my marriage. It's unfair."¹³



Figure 7.1: The courtyard of Los Amigos Mall. Photo by author, 2018.

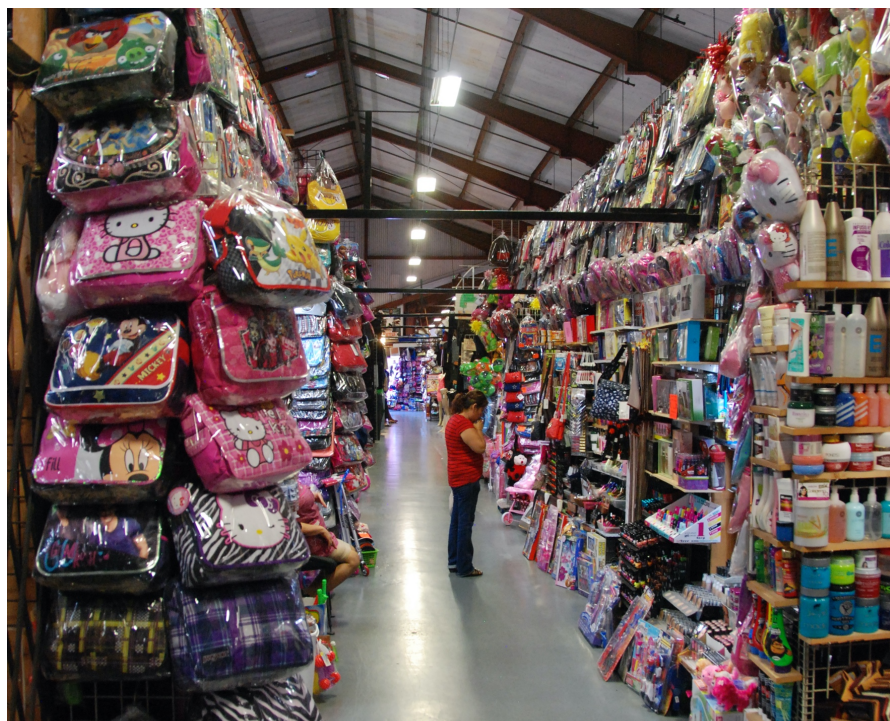


Figure 7.2: A corridor within Los Amigos Mall. Photo by author, 2015.

¹³ Rosa Maria Gonzalez, quoted in Reyes-Velarde, "Under Siege by a Virus That Thrives in Crowds, L.A. Swap Meets Face a Reckoning."

In June, the owners of the Alameda Swap Meet similarly notified over 200 of their vendors that they would face eviction should they fail to make several months of missed payments on their booths. Absent normal sales revenues in a business known for its thin margins, it seems unlikely that many will make their payments. Even the economic lifelines handed to other small business owners may be unavailable to swap meet vendors because many are undocumented and thus do not qualify for the federal government's Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Payment Protection programs.¹⁴

As the Trump administration continues to abdicate its responsibility to implement sound public health policy, and local governments scramble to pick up the slack, swap meets—like other brick-and-mortar stores—appear more vulnerable than ever to slumping demand, gentrification, and competition from e-commerce titans such as Amazon.com. Meanwhile, like their counterparts in service jobs, logistics facilities, meatpacking plants, and other low-wage industries, Asian, Latinx, and Black indoor swap meet vendors have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic-related fallout.

The Rise and Fall of Swap Meet Cosmopolitanisms

This dissertation has demonstrated how immigrant entrepreneurs, particularly those of Korean heritage, drew on precedents from around the world to build an indoor swap meet economy that employed and served thousands of Los Angelenos. A distinct socio-commercial form from American sanitary markets, outdoor flea markets, Latin American *mercados*, Korean *shijangs*, and other market forms that preceded them, indoor swap meets were products of historical and geographic circumstances particular to late-twentieth century Los Angeles. In a city being remade by global immigration flows and offshoring, the markets—like their counterparts in other places and times—emerged as a cosmopolitan crossroads in working class suburbs once known for their Whiteness.¹⁵ Harboring vendors, customers, and working class *flâneurs* in their aisles and ad hoc plazas, they provided surrogate public spaces for the city's growing Asian, Latinx, and African American populations. Largely unrecognized by scholars of urban and architectural historians in spite of their formal qualities as public spaces, indoor swap meets refigured the urban fabric of Los Angeles by introducing new material cultures to the city's low-income neighborhoods and serving as the sites of political protests and public life.

Whether through organized protest, cosmopolitan solidarity, or the everyday enactment of place-based rituals, swap meets—as public spaces—were both products and sites of various forms of urban citizenship. As places where people with little cultural capital could build financial wealth, the swap meet offered vendors a ladder to attain full economic citizenship. These market spaces—most of which included public eating areas, plazas, and in some cases athletic facilities—soon became regarded as arenas of various forms of public life. As a private-sector “commons,” indoor swap meets were the site of contentious battles over the degree of access granted to African American customers and prospective vendors. Through these battles over the right to inhabit urban space, the swap meet assumed the significance of other forms of public spaces, such as the urban parks which are notoriously few in number in Los Angeles.

In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how Southern California's mid-twentieth-century outdoor swap meet trade set the stage for a later generation of indoor swap meet development during the 1980s. Like the indoor “sanitary” produce markets of turn of the twentieth century New York, indoor swap meets were partial products of public battles over outdoor swap meet aesthetics and anxieties over

¹⁴ A question on the application form for both programs asks applicants to certify that they are “not engaged in any illegal activity (as defined by Federal guidelines).” <https://covid19relief.sba.gov/#/>

¹⁵ Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*.

informal vending. Just as social reformers and city planners of another generation worked to move pushcart vendors on New York's Lower Eastside into the more formal market space of a public market, weekend outdoor swap meet vendors were actively recruited to move their operations into decidedly more formal seven-day-a-week indoor selling spaces. Unlike New York, however, this transition in 1980s Los Angeles was mostly prompted and executed independently from public-sector regulatory agencies. While municipal planning departments worked to regulate outdoor swap meets, and provided some incentive for their vendors to move elsewhere, it was largely through the entrepreneurial activities of Koreans that these markets took physical form. Meanwhile, as newly arrived immigrants identified the outdoor markets as spaces of economic subsistence and set up shop within them, they took advantage of reverse logistics infrastructures to make a living. Those infrastructures, which were designed to capture value from returned and defective merchandise, introduced new merchandise back into outdoor swap meets, thereby paving the way for the new goods that would later dominate the *indoor* swap meet trade. By tapping into "alternative" swap meet markets, outdoor vendors began to accrue financial power which opened up access to full economic citizenship.

This process of economic citizenship building continued at the indoor swap meet. In Chapter 3, I show how Korean entrepreneurs embraced the market form with gusto, incorporating retailing practices from outdoor swap meets and fusing them with design precedents from indoor garment markets in Korea. In building swap meets across the region, vendors and swap meet operators not only consolidated significant financial wealth, they exposed their African American and Latinx customers to a flexible commercial form which was remarkably receptive to new meanings and uses their users would later assign to them. In deliberately targeting non-White neighborhoods of color, however, Korean entrepreneurs ventured into "middleman" positions within White power structures, setting the stage for conflict with and resistance from some of the residents they served.

Chapter 4, which details the conflicts preceding the Rodney King unrest, reminds us how retail spaces can serve as flashpoints in larger social justice struggles. Like earlier twentieth century civil rights struggles for equal treatment on public busses and lunch counters in the Jim Crow south, patrons unhappy with perceived discrimination at the hands of Korean swap meet vendors opened an ongoing dialog with the swap meet operators and vendors. Mediated by swap meet space, this dialog, I argue, led to growing intercultural solidarity as Korean businesspeople and Black customers developed better understandings of one another. As the Rodney King Rebellion demonstrates, however, these understandings and the social roles of non-Black business ownership in South Central Los Angeles were subject to ongoing negotiation.

West coast hip hop's emergence within indoor swap meet record stores, and the ongoing citations of the business type in the music's lyrics, underscores how musical genres reflect the physical spaces that birth them. As Chapter 5 illustrates, the swap meet provided a dynamic physical and economic forum from which up-and-coming hip hop artists exercised their voices to articulate their claims on American society. Through recorded music, they rendered graphic images of the violence of systemic racism and militarized policing in an era before cellphone videos. Hip hop groups such as NWA thus used swap meet space to form powerful counternarratives about American society, which assigned agency to the young Black and brown men targeted by systems of oppression. The power swap meet spaces provided young hip hop artists has since been memorialized in hip hop lyrics, which nostalgically reify the markets' physical spaces and materiality.

Chapter 6, which traces the Latinx theming of indoor swap meet space from ad hoc tactics to formal design interventions, highlights the growing solidarities between Korean and Chicano businesspeople. The relationship between Plaza Mexico's Korean owners and their Chicano project architect is but one instance of intercultural collaboration in and around swap meet space. As Black and Latinx hip hop artists have made explicit, and as such non-White solidarities reveal, indoor swap

meets emerged as cosmopolitan arenas as Los Angeles County's demographics have shifted from majority White to predominantly Latinx and Asian.

Integrating market concepts homegrown in the United States, imported from Korea and Latin America, swap meet entrepreneurs of Korean, Latinx, Jewish, Black, and other backgrounds created infrastructures for obtaining various forms of cultural and urban citizenship. In the archipelago of indoor swap meets they created across greater Los Angeles, they built arenas in which intercultural contestation gave way to "swap meet cosmopolitanisms."¹⁶ These cosmopolitan forms, developed by working class people of color within swap meet space, were defined by an grudging embrace of racial and cultural difference as well as aesthetic heterogeneity. These cosmopolitanisms are perhaps the business type's most enduring contribution to Southern California's social and political scene. In creating these spaces, Koreans joined Latinx entrepreneurs in reinvigorating the city's physical retail landscapes in a multicultural image.¹⁷

Conclusion: Swap Meet Afterlives

As the crises of slowing immigration, quickening gentrification, widening economic inequality, and the COVID pandemic sweep away indoor swap meets for new uses, we see a reclaiming of once-marginalized urban infrastructure by elites. While these changes often result in upgraded urban infrastructure, these new landscapes are often defined by social exclusion. The afterlives of indoor swap meets, ushered in by a succession of crises, offer a less accessible and democratic sort of space than the bazaars that preceded them.



Figure 7.3: The Broadway Trade Center's entrance prior to its redevelopment as a gourmet food hall. Photo from Urbanize LA.¹⁸

¹⁶ Here I echo Wendy Cheng's notion of a suburban cosmopolitanism rooted in a "radical acceptance" of racial and cultural difference. Cheng, "East of East: The Global Cosmopolitans of Suburban LA."

¹⁷ Vitiello and Sugrue, *Immigration and Metropolitan Revitalization in the United States*; Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*.

¹⁸ Chris Loos and Steven Sharp, "Exclusive: Urbanize Tours the Broadway Trade Center," *Urbanize LA*, July 20, 2016, <https://urbanize.la/post/exclusive-urbanize-tours-broadway-trade-center>.



Figure 7.4: The spartan interior of the Broadway Trade Center shortly before its closure. Photo from Urbanize LA.¹⁹

The Broadway Trade Center, which opened in 1987 inside the A. Hamburger & Sons (later May Company) flagship department store at 8th and Broadway in downtown Los Angeles, was one of many long-time indoor swap meets whose tenants have in recent years been evicted to make way for new luxury projects (Figure 7.3 and 7.4). In 2015, real estate firm Waterbridge Capital hired Los Angeles architecture firm, Omgivning, to rehab the historic ten story building into a mixed-use office, hotel, and retail complex with its ground floor devoted to a “retail and market collective” with fifty restaurant tenants envisioned in the model of New York’s upscale Chelsea Market.²⁰ Interestingly, this was not the only swap meet makeover to invoke the gentrified upscale market hall.

Two years earlier in Santa Ana (in Orange County), a similar process played out on Calle Cuatro, the city’s main drag popular with Spanish speaking shoppers. Since the late-1980s, when Korean immigrants Brian B. Ouh and Susan Ouh opened the Fiesta Bargain Store (later the Fiesta Marketplace), it served as an anchor of the city’s Mexican-American community. A mini-swap meet with eighteen stores, the swap meet was recognized in a 1999 *Orange County Register* article as “one of the most popular downtown spots for Hispanic immigrants,” where “you get anything from television sets to natural herb soaps and teas for hair growth and weight loss to pedicures and palm readings.”²¹ Key to its success was owner Brian Ouh’s efforts to recruit vendors who, according to a 1994 profile in the *Los Angeles Times*, spoke Spanish and would “respect the community where they did business.”²² Dedicated to doing business with those of Latin American heritage, Brian and his wife Susan hired a manager in 1988 who helped build up the swap meet’s reputation for unique and affordable items that

¹⁹ Loos and Sharp.

²⁰ Loos and Sharp.

²¹ Janeth Hernandez Avitia, “One-Stop Shopping: The Fiesta Bargain Store Offers Variety of Shops All Under 1 Roof Downtown,” *Orange County Register*, September 23, 1999.

²² “Santa Ana’s Korean Merchants Fitting In: Efforts to Promote Rapport With Latinos Are Succeeding, Fortunately for Everyone,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1994, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-03-20/local/me-36294_1_santa-ana.

reminded patrons of Mexico.²³ The swap meet proved so popular that nearby residents made multiple trips a week, while others commuted there over considerable distances.²⁴



Figure 7.5: The 4th Street Market in Downtown Santa Ana. Photo by author, 2019.

Figure 7.6: The 4th Street Market now houses upscale eateries and quotes from famous chefs. Photo by author, 2019.

In 2013, however, the Fiesta Marketplace closed after as tenants struggled to pay their rent, and the building's owner foresaw a more lucrative use for the building. What had previously been a predominantly immigrant neighborhood had changed as children of immigrants from Latin America demanded more sophisticated and upscale offerings as they came of age, and as the “great inversion” picked up steam. In 2013, Ryan Chase and his father invested several million dollars to convert the former swap meet into an upscale market hall, which—like Omgivning architects—Chase compared to Chelsea Market in New York City. To cultivate young and hip entrepreneurs, he included a demonstration kitchen and 10 “incubator kitchens” that chefs could rent by the hour (Figures 7.5 and 7.6). With considerable irony, Chase notes that:

I think [the shift] fundamentally ties back to incubators—the ability for up-and-coming people to start their first restaurant or their first business. We were trying to get these young entrepreneurs to get in there, because *at the end of the day you don't want chains*. You want to be different; you want to be unique....The idea is basically, you move in; it's pretty much turnkey, ready to go. The only thing you do is you buy what's under your hood... your cook line. I want their kids [the kids of immigrants who once patronized the swap meet] and

²³ In a 1999 interview, he cited a long waiting list for vendor booths and a brisk business of about 100 customers per day, that on the “weekend is a zoo.” Avitia, “One-Stop Shopping: The Fiesta Bargain Store Offers Variety of Shops All Under 1 Roof Downtown.”

²⁴ As one San Juan Capistrano resident put it, to Downtown Santa Ana each Saturday. “If you come to Santa Ana’s Downtown regularly, you hear about it fast. They have Mexican products that you can’t find elsewhere. I exclusively come here to buy a herb soap that’s good for hair growth. My grandmother used to put it on me as a child. I couldn’t believe it when I came here and saw it.” See: Avitia.

their kids' kids. I want the second, third generation who are just like me, who are on Facebook, who are college-educated.²⁵

The aesthetics of the market, with black and white images of downtown Santa Ana and quotes from celebrity chef Thomas Keller, however, do not celebrate immigration so much as an “Anglo fantasy past,” an aesthetic imaginary which Genevieve Carpio has recently argued is being deployed throughout Southern California in an effort to erase legacies of Latinx, Asian, Black cultural landscapes (Figure 7.7).²⁶



Figure 7.7: 4th Street Market Place interior, with black and white images of Downtown Santa Ana from a time when the city's populace was predominantly “Anglo.” Photo by author, 2019.

Of course, the Fiesta Marketplace, like hundreds of indoor swap meets, offered “business incubators” well before upscale market halls came in vogue. In its heyday, the tiny swap meet exerted substantial pull because of its independent entrepreneurs who nimbly responded to the needs of Orange County’s emerging Latinx population, in much the same way that the incubator restaurants were responding to preferences of an emerging Chicanx middle-class. In many ways, the transition from swap meet to hipster food hall encapsulates the evolving character of the ethnic economy in old immigrant gateways such as greater Los Angeles, where once-enormous immigrant populations have settled in, and their American-born Latinx children come of age with increasingly upscale preferences.

Similar processes of gentrification are currently playing out at the 34 year old Union Swap Meet on Santa Monica Boulevard in East Hollywood.²⁷ In early 2019, its operator and landowner, Lee RealCorp, leased the property to Jamison Properties, which announced plans to build a seven story, 177 unit mixed use building. A mere half block from the Vermont and Santa Monica Metro subway

²⁵ Ryan Chase, quoted in Alejandra Molina, “The New Fourth Street Market Is to Open in Late Spring: Building Owner Converts Swap Meet Into Eateries,” *Orange County Register*, October 3, 2013.

²⁶ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

²⁷ The swap meet, as I discuss in Chapter 3, was established at 7th and Union in the Westlake neighborhood in 1986. It later opened a second outlet at 4632 Santa Monica Boulevard, which is its last remaining location.

station, the project is a textbook case of an “underutilized property”—in the parlance of urban planners—giving way to transit-oriented development.



Figure 7.8: The Union Swap Meet, pictured in 2015. Photo by author, 2015.

Figure 7.9: A new mural and paint scheme were applied a few years before the Union Swap Meet’s 2020 closure and demolition. Photo by author, August 2019.

Tellingly, during the lengthy waiting period for the requisite environmental approvals, Jamison Properties repainted the building’s exterior (Figures 7.8 and 7.9). Whereas the prior façade loudly combined shades of lime green, purple, yellow and red with airbrushed murals of young people of color, the new paint scheme overlaid subdued yet realistic images of actual swap meet vendors atop a tasteful shade of lavender. Inside the swap meet, little had changed since my last visit in 2015, however. With the exception of a “pop-up” of a highly regarded Korean-fusion restaurant, Baroo, the swap meet had the same aesthetic appearance and fewer vendors than before. Indeed, the rebranding strategy implemented by Jamison Properties seemed superficial at most. Although the firm had while launched well-designed website and attracted other restaurant fusion “pop-ups” to the swap meet, its attempts to do so with other hipster retail establishments largely failed. Following a series of arts pop-ups in the summer of 2019, uncertainty surrounding the swap meet’s impending closure prompted many longtime tenants to relocate their businesses. In July of 2020, after the project received its environmental approvals the swap meet was torn down (Figures 7.10 and 7.11).



Figure 7.10: The Union Swap Meet, after the repainting of its façade. Photo by author, 2019.

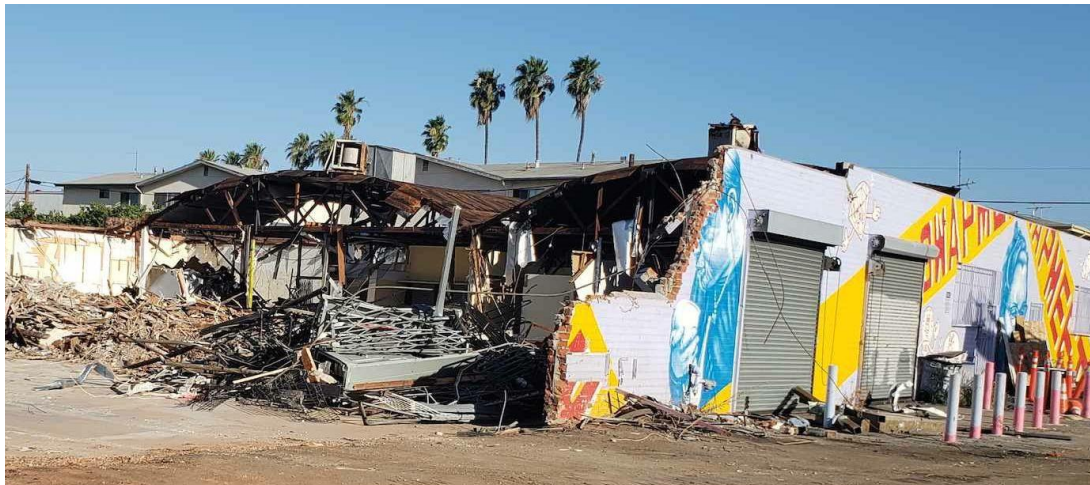


Figure 7.11: The Union Swap Meet, during demolition in July of 2020. Photo by Barry Lank, July 11, 2020.²⁸

A similar fate likely awaits other swap meets as the COVID pandemic continues. While some swap meets have enjoyed afterlives as high-end market halls, some are being torn down, other former swap meet buildings have returned to their roles as chain retail buildings. In March of 2017, I visited Compton's newly opened Walmart store, which had just opened within the onetime Compton Fashion Center (Figure 7.12). As shoppers bustled in and out of the store, I spoke with "Steve," a former cop turned security guard, who shared his thoughts about the encroachment of a multinational chain in Compton. Steve remembered the old swap meet, but he was happy Walmart had arrived. "I think it's a great thing that a big corporation has finally *invested* in this neighborhood again," he said. The "owner [of the swap meet] was absentee, in another state. Plus, he let the building deteriorate!....For decades, we haven't had *any* chain stores in this town, not even a 7-Eleven or a brand name gas station. I think it's a good thing that Walmart is spending money on this building."

²⁸ Barry Lank, "Partly Demolished Union Swapmeet," The Eastsider LA, accessed July 17, 2020, https://www.theeastsiderla.com/neighborhoods/east_hollywood/partly-demolished-union-swapmeet/image_cad45b4-c39d-11ea-960c-5735694b8fb2.html.



Figure 7.12: Compton Walmart, once the Compton Fashion Center and before that an outlet of Sears Roebuck, viewed from the parking lot. Photo by author, 2017.

For “Steve,” Walmart’s opening marked Compton’s re-entry into the mainstream economy and the breaking down of an ugly legacy of redlining and segregation experienced by African American communities in Los Angeles. There is significant merit to this reading. Walmart’s opening, however, also reveals broader demographic and social shifts experienced across Greater Los Angeles, but especially in South Central between the early 1980s and 2020. During this period, immigration has transformed the area’s population from predominantly Black to mostly Latinx. In the past two decades, the pace of immigration to Los Angeles has slowed, and the economic fortunes of long-established immigrants within Los Angeles have stabilized while those of their children have improved. Moreover, the mass-market economy has grown more sophisticated in marketing to diverse cultural groups, removing some of the perceived need for specialty mom-and-pop businesses that cater to specific tastes. While swap meets in East Hollywood and Santa Ana illustrate the powers of gentrification and *gente*-fication, Compton’s swap meet makeover is a gentrification narrative of a different sort, if it is one at all. The decline of swap meets across Los Angeles, and their replacement with multi-use buildings, gourmet food halls, and multinational mass-market retailers thus reveals the various forces of globalization at work while complicating narratives about gentrification.

Since the 1980s, the swap meet economy has rehabilitated “obsolete” buildings and drawn African American and Latinx customers into neglected parts of the metropolis. Swap meets have provided safe harbor for thousands of microentrepreneurs who could not afford to lease a dedicated storefront, and catered to customers who found mainstream retail stores too expensive, inconvenient, or absent altogether from their neighborhoods. Unlike gourmet food halls and Walmart, they have allowed the undocumented and the disenfranchised to make citizenship claims based not on the arbitrariness of their nation of birth, but on their basic right to *inhabit* urban space. By building businesses and providing spaces for public discourse and protest, swap meet owners have created imperfect, yet democratic, public spaces. These spaces have played an important role in the Los Angeles retail landscape for nearly 40 years by providing space for people to engage in acts of cultural production, consumption, and leisure. Together these acts have allowed people to legitimize their presence, register their claims to the city, attain middle class status, and realize their American dreams.

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