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Community, Politics, and Policing in Macarthur Park

Paula Preda



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Paula Preda

Abstract: Over the course of its 140-year existence, Macarthur Park in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles has witnessed a range of diverse phases, from a luxurious recreation area to a locality grappling with issues of crime and poverty. Through the lens of local news coverage, this paper explores the changing landscape of community, politics, and policing in the park and how it has shaped identity and revitalization efforts. By critically analyzing policing initiatives and community-oriented efforts aimed at mitigating crime, the paper outlines the park's evolution into a vibrant, safe space while shedding light on the challenges posed by racism and immigration status. The focal point of the paper revolves around immigrant political activism in Macarthur Park, focusing on multiple case studies, including the May Day Rally in 2007. This rally, disrupted by LAPD violence, becomes an example of infringement on the First Amendment right to speech and assembly of immigrants. The study concludes by reflecting on the role of park politics in creating a venue for democracy, refuge, and community for Central American immigrants.

Key Words: *Macarthur Park, Immigrants, LAPD, Revitalization, Westlake*

Introduction

Macarthur Park, located in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles, has been the venue for recreation, politics, culture, and crime throughout its 140 years of existence. One of the densest neighborhoods in the city and a hub for immigrants, the park reflects the enduring struggles of immigration policies and political representation. The mean household income here trails behind that of South-Central LA, with 30% of residents under 55 living in poverty (Brown & Gelt, 2007). The neighborhood grapples with economic disparities compounded by inadequate social support systems and diverse immigration statuses. Despite these adversities, Macarthur Park has emerged as a crucial refuge and rallying point for its residents, offering avenues for cultural expression, civic engagement, and communal empowerment. In the 21st century, the park has become a unique space for political activism. Unlike cities where immigrant communities are sprawled and disunified, the Westlake neighborhood has seen foreign-born residents come together to improve crime and poverty conditions through art, recreation, cultural events, and political activism. This paper delves into the demographic evolution of the park and the pivotal role played by immigrant communities in shaping its trajectory. Specifically, it will illuminate the revitalization efforts initiated by residents and how these programs have helped foreign-born people find new identities in the US.

Moreover, the paper examines the intersection of politics and policing within Macarthur Park, using the May Day Rally of 2007 as a case study. Through an exploration of policing strategies and their ramifications, this paper shows the complex interplay between public spaces, identity formation, and political contestation. While the immigrant community has steadfastly asserted its right to the city through the political milieu of Macarthur Park, instances of policing have posed challenges to their freedoms, warranting critical examination and discourse. Beyond the space itself, the history of Macarthur Park serves as a microcosm of broader societal struggles and triumphs, offering insights into the enduring quest for equity, representation, and belonging for immigrants in urban America.

History of MacArthur Park

To understand the immigrant community that exists in MacArthur Park today, it's important to note the transformations that the physical space has undergone and how that has affected the neighborhood. Prior to its opening, the land mass was a drought-affected wetland and a site for dumping city waste. Beginning in 1885, Los Angeles Mayor William Workman led a campaign to turn it into a city park (Los Angeles Times, 2022). He, like many others, owned property in the area that was depreciating in value from the eyesore that was the unused land. On Thanksgiving weekend of 1890, the park opened and soon became one of the most luxurious recreation areas in the city (Los Angeles Times, 2022). Fresh water was pumped into the lake, and elite Angelenos flocked to go boating, picnicking, and strolling along the new scenic green space. For two decades, property value soared as tourism and businesses developed in the area. However, in the 1930s, plans to expand Wilshire Boulevard across the entirety of the city caused the park to be severed in half. Thus began decades of economic decline for the park and neighborhood (Strawn, 2008). The park not only lost its charm as a vast, green oasis, but the automobile industry encouraged rich Angelenos to move out West by the ocean and away from downtown. Though this made way for many Central American immigrants to occupy the area, it also brought an end to the city's efforts to retain the glory days of the park.

By the 1980s, the park fell into disrepair, becoming a hub for drug dealing, prostitution, and gang violence (Sousa & Kelling, 2010). Amidst the backdrop of the Salvadoran Civil War, refugees fleeing the conflict sought refuge in MacArthur Park. In a display of defiance, they formed one of the nation's largest and most perilous street gangs, known as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). This gang emerged as a response to U.S. intervention in El Salvador, where the Kennedy administration had provided support to paramilitary factions. These factions later evolved into oppressive forces, resulting in the deaths of approximately 800 individuals monthly (Kraul, Lopez & Connell, 2005). As peasant groups united to challenge the dictatorship in El Salvador, the United States injected \$6 billion into the government to suppress

the uprisings. Fueled by resentment and exacerbated by poverty within the Westlake neighborhood, MS-13 membership swelled, extending its influence not only across Westlake but also into 33 other states across the U.S (Kraul, Lopez & Connell, 2005).

While the park was known as a center for crime, it was also growing into one of the largest immigrant communities in the US. In 2007, a mural appeared at the corner of 6th Street and Rampant Boulevard, designating the parking area unofficially as “Central America Town” (Watanabe, 2007). Westlake-MacArthur became a beacon of hope and opportunity for immigrants seeking refuge. A census of the MacArthur Park neighborhood showed that, in 2023, the area surpassed 98.5% of US neighborhoods in its foreign-born resident population (Neighborhood Scout, 2023). While criminal activity waned over time and the neighborhood is now considered safe, the continuous influx of immigrants has led to significant social and political transformations.

Revitalizing the Park: Policing

The mission to mitigate the criminal landscape of MacArthur Park was undertaken with various degrees of success by both the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and MacArthur Park community members. In 1994, Captain Nick Salicos of the LAPD began ordering increased police surveillance in the park (Doherty, 1994). Four times a day, eight to ten officers were dispatched to make rounds around the park on foot and arrest anyone committing even the smallest legal infractions. Over the course of three weeks, 200 arrests were made, but many community members were dissatisfied with the efficacy of this method. Dorothy Loftus, a resident, expressed concern for the homeless people who used to sleep in the park, saying “Unless we’re willing to have the police, health department, and housing department hound people into getting the help they need, they’re going to be a headache and burden to someone” (Doherty, 1994). Another man claimed that he saw the same people who had been arrested two days prior back in the park selling drugs. Others felt that the surveillance was inhibiting recreational use of the area, saying “People don’t drink in the park anymore because the

police were arresting them” (Doherty, 1994). In 2001, the Los Angeles City Council spent \$1.6 million to settle five lawsuits involving personal injury and civil rights claims at the hands of LAPD officers (Los Angeles Times, 2001). Among these claims was a man who had his leg broken by police during an arrest and was held in jail for too long. In 2003, the LAPD began the Alvarado Corridor Project. Following the same model that was experimented with in 1994, police presence was increased through surveillance cameras and increased arrests (Sousa & Kelling, 2001). By 2005, the FBI had formed a national task force to deport MS-13 gang members (Kraul, Lopez & Connell, 2005). While police initiatives discouraged visible crime, police surveillance created tension in the community’s relationship with law enforcement. As a predominantly immigrant community being targeted with petty crime arrests and police violence, Macarthur Park often became a venue for political outcry about human rights violations.

Revitalizing the Park: Community-Oriented Efforts

While the efficacy of the city’s method to control crime is debated, it is no secret that a strong social identity arose in the Westlake-Macarthur neighborhood at the end of the 20th century. Even before police interference in the 1990s, community members began their initiatives to eradicate poverty and make the park a safe space. Francisco Rivera, a Salvadoran refugee from the 1980s, found support from community volunteers upon arriving at the park (Watanabe, 2007). Nonprofits and churches were providing legal aid, housing, and medical care to immigrants like himself. Wanting to reciprocate the goodwill that he was shown, Rivera founded a community organization to aid Central American refugees called El Rescate. Though the reputation of MS-13 often overshadowed these efforts at the time, a strong and supportive immigrant community was slowly transforming the culture of the neighborhood.

Rather than expelling and arresting its inhabitants, community efforts were made to revitalize the park by fostering respect and sanctity for the space. In 1984, the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design began a project to reverse the area’s decline

through art (McMillan, 1985). Before the project, the park's maintenance supervisor remarked that, despite continuous repainting efforts, every bench and wall area would be filled with graffiti (McMillan, 1985). After a group of multi-ethnic local teenagers painted the mural, it became the only area of the park that wasn't being vandalized. Rather than previous "plop art" initiatives, in which an art piece with no relevance to its surroundings is placed to beautify the area, this piece became a catalyst for reviving care and respect for the park. In 2010, a similar project took place. Local school kids painted a mural to envision Macarthur Park in 2020 (Truax, 2010). Among the things that they wanted to see were: affordable housing, a free health center, and quality education. Gerald, an 18-year-old project participant, noted "It's important to me that there is a sense of unity and that people feel that the neighborhood is theirs" (Truax, 2010). He said he wanted people to feel proud of where they were living and abandon the concept that Macarthur Park is "a ghetto" (Truax, 2010).

In 1996, a local artist named Bernie Zimmerman and the general manager of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Department met to discuss the possibility of recreating the glory days of Macarthur Park by returning the tourist and recreation programs that had been killed as soon as wealthy residents fled the area (Krikorian, 1996). They proposed that by returning paddle boats, giving out concession contracts, and hosting community events, families and residents would return to the park. Instead of imposing an artificial model of a tourist area, they wanted the Latino community to bring its own culture and business to the venue.

Today, the Westlake-Macarthur neighborhood has not only become safe but also boasts culture and community. From authentic Central American food to nightlife and art galleries, the efforts that began in the park have expanded to make the area a desirable destination and a new target for gentrification (Brown and Gelt, 2007). A monument in MacArthur Park depicts the journeys of war refugees and a diaspora in blue and white and references the shared colors in the national flags of El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. The strong and proud

immigrant community, with its efforts, has overcome many of its social and economic disadvantages to become not only a vibrant neighborhood but also a force for political unity and activism.

Politics in the Park

As the unique history of Macarthur Park converged with its revitalized community spirit throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, it became an increasingly prominent space for immigrant politics. The May Day Rally in 2007, the DACA Protest Rally in 2017, and the Families Belong Together Rally in 2018 were three instances of the immigrant community exercising their freedom of speech and their rights to the public space that is Macarthur Park. The most notable of the three, the May Day Rally in 2007, gained national notoriety when it was disrupted by violence on the part of the LAPD.

May Day Rally

On Tuesday, May 1, 2007 thousands of immigrants marched through downtown Los Angeles in white shirts, calling for an immigration policy that would allow undocumented workers to keep their families together in the US (Castro, 2007). “There are 600,000 women in danger of deportation with 3.3 million children,” a Veteran Latino activist, Javier Rodriguez purported. Because so many people in the Westlake-Macarthur community had been personally affected by raids and deportations, immigrant injustice issues were bound to reach a boiling point here.

This wasn't the first year that this protest was held, while the previous year had seen a turnout of 650,000 people, this number dropped dramatically in 2007 to only 25,000 (Castro, 2007). The decline in marchers resulted from a proposed bill threatening to classify illegal immigrants as felons. Community leaders also urged kids to stay in school and discuss the topics there rather than at the protest. The small fraction of community members who showed up to protest were committed to peacefully having their voices heard and wore white shirts to symbolize the amity that they brought to the rallies. Concepcion Lara, a protestor

and immigrant from El Salvador said, “We pay our taxes. We contribute. We’re not on welfare. All we want is to not live in fear (of deportation) and to one day get our legal papers, maybe even our American citizenship” (Castro, 2007).

Towards the end of the day, as protestors were marching through MacArthur Park, over 200 police officers in riot gear began clearing out the park (Castro, 2007). With no warning, they shot rubber bullets into the crowd, which included women and children. The events that followed were grim and violent, leading to several hospitalizations and 164 claims filed against the LAPD for inappropriate conduct. On the night of the incident, the Chief of the LAPD stated that the commotion began because a group of “agitators” threw objects and plastic bottles at police officers (Almada, 2007). A subsequent investigation of television footage and the park’s security cameras showed that the alleged attacks on police officers had taken place hours before the riots began. The Independent Media Center in Los Angeles, which carried out the investigations of video footage, insisted that people were not adequately warned that the police would begin firing rubber bullets and beating people with batons if they didn’t disperse (Almada, 2007). Two days after the incident, LAPD Chief William J. Bratton acknowledged that the protestors had a permit to stay in the park until 9 p.m. and that the use of “less-than-lethal” devices was unsolicited (Winton and Blankstein, 2007). In addition, Bratton conceded that “two hundred and forty rounds with no arrests are of grave concern to me” (Winton and Blankstein, 2007). If there had been any illegal activity, then arrests would have taken place, but the police found no activity warranting arrest. Instead, eyewitnesses contended that violence erupted when LAPD officers rode motorcycles into a crowd of Aztec dancers on Alvarado Street (Zahniser, 2007).

On Wednesday, May 9, the Austin Chronicle reported that the National Lawyers Guild and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a class-action lawsuit against the Los Angeles Police Department on behalf of community groups that organized the rally (Smith, 2007). The National Lawyers Guild, in a press release, said that the suit wants to see changes in LAPD and how they respond to demonstrations in the future.

“This lawsuit is the only way to afford justice to the victims of this outrageous assault on Latinos calling for comprehensive immigration reform,” they said (Smith, 2007). By September 7, 2007, 258 legal claims had been submitted with complaints from residents who were struck by batons, rubber bullets, or were otherwise injured as they were fleeing (Zahniser, 2007).

The events that occurred on May 1 and the subsequent legal battle that ensued are a testament to the resilience and political unity of the people in Westlake-Macarthur. Although most immigrant families lacked the resources and power to sue for police violence and injustices that had been occurring for decades in the neighborhood, this event was an opportunity for the community to gain power in numbers. Because the violence was well televised and the entire community was on the same page about what happened, the police’s wrongdoings were inarguable. Additionally, the misleading commentary that they had provided immediately following the incident called attention to possible misinformation practices in the PD.

In 2009, the city council approved spending \$12.85 million to compensate 300 protestors who were attacked by police (Alvarado, 2009). Not only did people achieve financial compensation for their damages, but the events of the May Day Rally forced the police department to review its policies and retrain its officers on how to act during protests to protect the First Amendment rights of those involved.

Even before the legal battle ensued, immigrant activists proved their determination and commitment to solidarity by returning to the streets only two weeks after the incident. On May 17, 2007, 2,000 marchers gathered to walk down Wilshire and into the park with signs reading “no deportation” (Quinones, 2007). Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles’ San Gabriel Region called it a day of “peace and solidarity with all those who marched on May 1.” Instead of feeling threatened and retreating after the brutalities of the previous march, immigrants from around the neighborhood took advantage of the momentum to claim their right to the city’s public venues for activism. At the march, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said “Here in Los Angeles, we all have the right to march peacefully. We’re here because

we love this great country and we want to share in the American dream” (Quinones, 2007). With two prominent leaders on their side, the community was overcoming its previous limitations based on citizenship and socioeconomic status.

Continued Activism

The year following the 2007 May Day Rally, people returned to MacArthur Park for the annual protest. As a consequence of calls for LAPD accountability, the police officers who were dispatched for this event had been required to partake in a crowd control retraining program that was assigned to 9,000 officers (ABC 7, 2008). Additionally, to avoid the lack of communication that had caused innocent civilians to come into the line of fire, the police department implemented new technology that could communicate with demonstrators in multiple languages (ABC 7, 2008).

In 2017 and then in 2018, two more notable rallies were held in the park. At around 3 p.m. on Sunday, September 10, hundreds of people gathered in support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) and in opposition to the Trump administration’s plans to deport 800,000 illegal immigrants (Daily News Los Angeles, 2017). Esau Andrade, a 22-year-old immigrant spoke to the Los Angeles Daily News about his experience with the DACA program. At three years old, his family had brought him to America. His DACA status allowed him to obtain a work permit if he stayed in school and out of trouble (Daily News Los Angeles, 2017). With former President Trump’s campaigns, the Westlake neighborhood was showing out in support of people like Andrade who were similar to many other members of the community. This day of protest also included a counter-protest by Trump supporters who asserted their disdain for DACA. Despite the two opposing protests, the rally remained peaceful, showcasing the political integrity of the park space. Here, two oppositional political groups were able to coexist and express their opinions.

In 2018, the park hosted the Families Belong Together Rally, in which immigrants and allies condemned the Trump

administration's "zero-tolerance" immigration policy. This policy had criminalized and separated thousands of immigrant families at the US- Mexico border. As part of a nationwide campaign, the Westlake-Macarthur neighborhood showed its solidarity with the cause.

Conclusion

Central American immigrant culture and political activism continue to underscore Macarthur Park today. Although census data shows a community of significant economic disadvantage, with a per capita income lower than that of 95% of neighborhoods nationwide (Neighborhood Scout, 2023). the social structures and identities people have created here are uniquely resilient. In June 2023, a "sanctuary city" ordinance made Los Angeles a safer space for incoming immigrants by disallowing the use of city resources for removing them (Duran, 2023). As of today, Westlake-Macarthur remains a beacon of hope for people escaping political violence and looking for better work opportunities and freedoms. Immigrant-owned restaurants, bars, and shops continue to provide jobs and resources. Additionally, the return of recreation opportunities has allowed the park to once again become a place for Angelenos to relax, enjoy nature, and interact with each other. The presence of an accessible and safe green space is vital to promoting physical and mental health in an urban area. Community efforts to revitalize the park have also resulted in a vibrant ethnic culture. Many of the people calling for the city to designate the neighborhood as "Historic Central America Town" are doing so to promote acknowledgment of community members who have selflessly aided incoming residents and provided resources of free medical care, temporary housing, and food.

That isn't to say that policing issues have subsided. In July 2022, a man was shot to death due to LAPD helicopter interference. The man, who was wielding a knife towards a police officer, was disarmed and shot in the leg. But once the helicopter responded to the call, another police officer came in and shot the man three more times, causing his death (Jany, 2022). This

contemporary example of policing and violence calls for further discussion and reflection on what methods might be useful in controlling and preventing crime. Seeing as policing efforts in 1994 and during the Alvarado Corridor project resulted in civil rights infringements and expensive lawsuits for the city, it seems that police intervention without community welfare programs can be ineffective.

As the park evolves with the influx of new immigrants, the significant historical and political movements that have taken place here will continue to affect how people lay claim to this space. The stories of impressive community efforts and unearthed racial prejudices that the park holds have the potential to empower a new generation of community members to continue advocating for their rights to live, work, and enjoy recreation in Los Angeles.

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Author Bio

Paula Preda (she/her/hers) graduated from UCLA in March 2024 with a BA in History and Communications. On campus, she is co-director of the UCLA Farmers Market and has worked for the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative as Built Environment pod assistant and undergraduate staff coordinator. She also participated in the Sustainable LA Grand Challenge research program focusing on transportation equity in South LA. Her passions for urban equity and environmental justice have led her to attend law school next year, where she hopes to gain the tools and knowledge to pursue a career in environmental law and policy.