

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

Mapping Ephemeral Music Forums in Latina/o Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4p76g0nt>

Journal

California History, 97(2)

ISSN

0162-2897 2327-1485

Author

Leal, Jorge N

Publication Date

2020-05-01

DOI

10.1525/ch.2020.97.2.124

Peer reviewed

MAP ROOM

Mapping Ephemeral Music Forums in Latina/o Los Angeles

JORGE N. LEAL

ABSTRACT This essay examines how maps created by Latina/o youth created “ephemeral forums,” improvised ad hoc spaces that served as music venues in 1990s South Los Angeles. The maps included on “Rock *en Español*” event flyers demonstrate how Latinx youth envisioned Los Angeles and proclaimed their sense of place in the metropolis at a moment of social and demographic transformation. These maps help us understand how they and other Californians of color create and claim belonging, both past and present. **KEYWORDS:** Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, Huntington Park, Latinx youth, Latinx history, youth culture, Rock *en Español*, music venues, ephemeral forums, Los Angeles history, Los Angeles maps, 1990s

The hand-drawn maps shown in Figures 1 and 2 were included as the backsides of “Rock *en Español*” event flyers in 1993 and 1994, respectively. These performances took place in “ephemeral forums”—that is, in improvised, ad hoc spaces, often backyards, empty storefronts, and other local-*esin* South Los Angeles and nearby Huntington Park, California, which enterprising youth transformed into short-lived music venues.

“Ephemeral forums” are the temporary and improvised spaces that participants in L.A. youth culture created and utilized in the absence of formal commercial musical and leisure venues. These ephemeral forums drew on the tradition of the do-it-yourself ethos of American punk rock and merged it with the fringe sites known as “*Hoyos Funky*” that arose in the marginalized neighborhoods of Mexico City, where youth culture took refuge in the aftermath of the violent repression of student protests in 1968. Similar dynamics led to the emergence of comparable ephemeral forums in Los Angeles. This city was also in a moment of drastic demographic change, as white residents poured out of its metropolitan districts, part of the nationwide trend of white flight from the 1960s through the 1980s. They left behind a dilapidated built infrastructure that young migrants ingeniously repurposed, temporarily, into their own cultural sites.

Promoters designed and printed flyers for *tocada*, as these music gigs are colloquially known in Spanish, in the dozens, sometimes in the hundreds, for distribution among local youth. Although hand-drawn, these maps are fairly accurate and detailed in terms of coordinates and landmarks. The accomplishments of the pamphlets’ uncredited creators are remarkable, given that they were produced before the internet and before data from geographic information systems (GIS) were easily accessible to the public. Both promoters and audiences understood that the flyers and the performance sites themselves were inherently ephemeral.¹ Nonetheless, these impromptu advertisements and events reveal how communities of color—in this case, recent migrants to Los Angeles as well as U.S.-born Latina/os—created and mapped their own communities. The travels undertaken by Latina/o youth as they relied on hand-drawn maps to guide them through the metropolis in search of their destinations, typically outside their own, familiar neighborhoods, created a sense of space, place, and belonging in Southern California that was uniquely their own.

Consider the Huntington Park flyer advertising a 1993 backyard show. Its map provides intimate details of the streets and public infrastructure of this formerly white, working-class district.

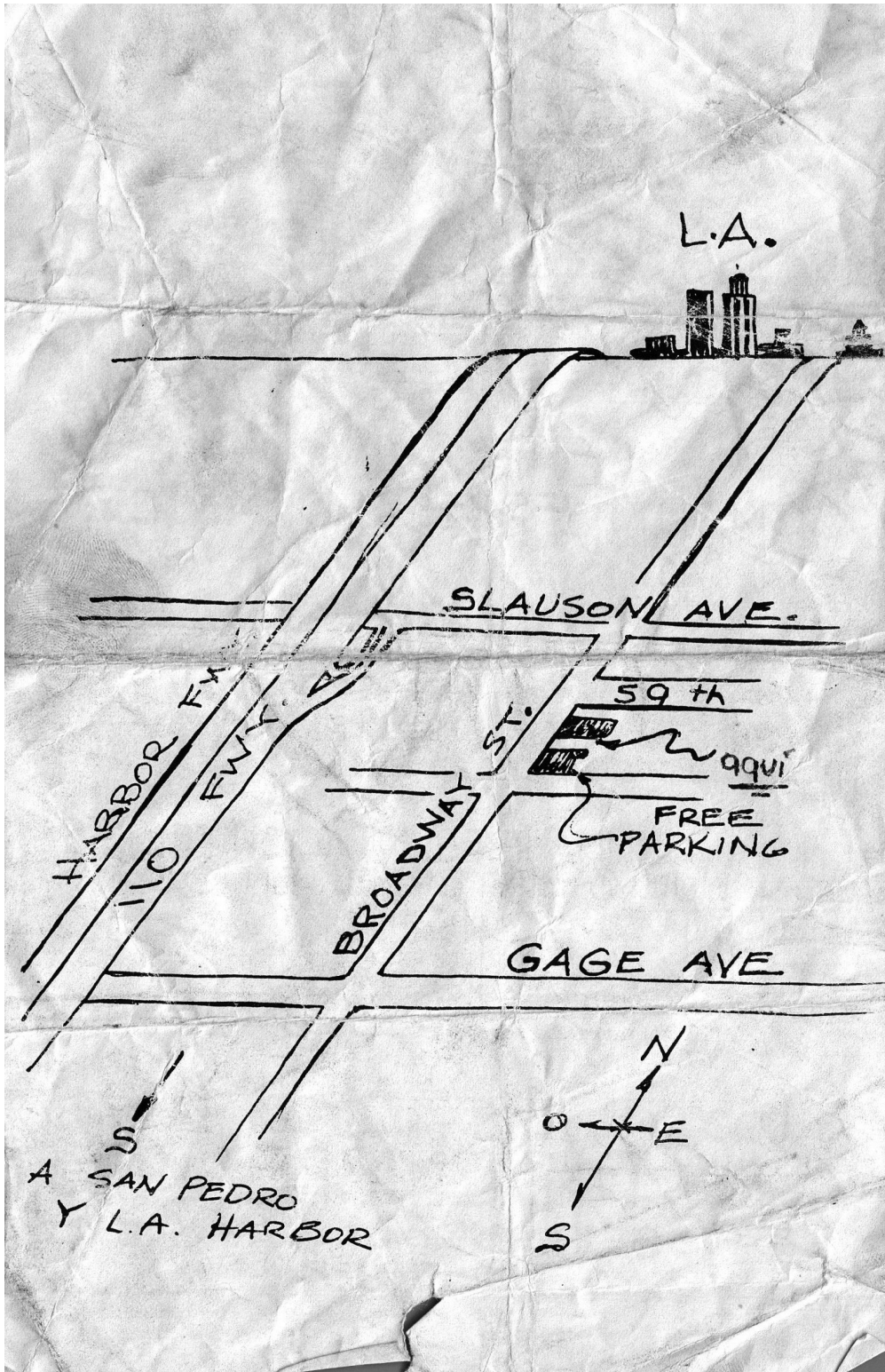


Figure 1. Map for a “Rock en Español” backyard party at a Huntington Park home, July 1993. The map was printed on the back of a flyer promoting the event. The note at the bottom translates to “Don’t dare skip this!” Author unknown.

Photo courtesy of Jorge N. Leal

Like Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, by the late 1970s Huntington Park had been transformed by white flight and rising Latina/o immigration into a majority-Latina/o community. The cardinal point in this map is east, not north, signaling the cultural significance of this geographic area to the city’s ethnic Mexican and Latina/o communities. The main South and East L.A. thoroughfares are clearly depicted, including Florence and California Avenues and Firestone Boulevard. South Gate’s main park, Salt Lake, is also shown, giving map-holders an immediately recognizable reference point for locating the backyard event. Prominently featured are L.A.’s ubiquitous freeways, with the State Route (SR) 110 freeway shown mired in perpetual rush-hour gridlock.²

The principal coordinates for the 1994 *tocada* in the South L.A. map are north and south, identifying the location of the show at the corner of Broadway and 59th Street, here portrayed as parallel to the San Pedro/L.A. Harbor Freeway, or SR 110. Here promoters were signaling that show-goers were traveling deep into South Los Angeles. The map includes its major streets—Broadway, Slau-son, and Gage—and, of course, SR 110, which bisects the various neighborhoods of South LA as it connects them to downtown. Downtown appears at the top of the map, the skyline whimsically depicted by the city’s most iconic buildings: City Hall and, newly constructed in 1989, the Library Tower. The map places downtown at its farthest point top and right, indicating north both as a map coordinate and as the city’s center of gravity.³



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/article-pdf/97/12/124/400005/eh_97_2_124.pdf by University of California Riverside user on 21 February 2022

Figure 2. Los Angeles from below: map printed on the back of a promotional flyer for a “Rock en Español” performance in South Los Angeles, January 1994. Author unknown.

Photo courtesy of Jorge N. Leal

The primary purpose of these maps was to direct audiences to event locations. Despite their strictly topographical purpose, we may still analyze these ephemera as symbolic renderings of imagined space, in which *tocada* promoters and attendees proclaimed their sense of place and belonging. Whether promoters or attendees, most were teenagers or young adults; the majority were likely recent migrants to Los Angeles or else first-generation Californians. Like the musical performances themselves, the maps helped young Angelenos claim Los Angeles as “home.” They identified the infrastructural elements—streets, parks, freeways, and other landmarks—that defined the physical spaces in which young Latina/os lived, while helping them navigate the radical changes they were experiencing as immigrants or as the American-born offspring of immigrants. South LA itself was in flux, as white flight continued and as African Americans fled South LA in the aftermath of the 1992 uprising. In contrast, Latina/os were flooding into South LA, accounting for roughly half of the district’s residents by the 1990s. Southeast Los Angeles saw a similar spike in the same decade, with Latina/os reaching demographic majority.⁴

For historians, the maps created and shared by U.S.-born and immigrant Latina/os, circulated casually via self-published flyers and similar ephemera, provide new insights into the ways that Californians charted their own streets and neighborhoods. By marking their territory, even in this temporary way, they made it their own.

NOTES

1. These flyers, in the author’s personal collection, are now part of the digital public history project “Rock Archivo LA,” at <http://www.instagram.com/rockarchivoLA>. This shared archival crowd-sourced effort collects and shares photos of Los Angeles “Rock en Español” ephemera, providing captions that offer historical context and analysis of events, locations, and participants.
2. This map is available at https://www.instagram.com/p/BzruC99g_Lw/.
3. The front and back of the flyer are available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvUeGkuBgas/>.
4. According to U.S. Census figures analyzed by Jared Sánchez and Jennifer Ito, between 1980 and 1990, the South Los Angeles population experienced an increase of 16.7 percent, while the African American population decreased by approximately 16.4 percent. See Jared Sánchez and Jennifer Ito, *Changing Demographics of South LA* (Los Angeles: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, 2011). Latina/os accounted for 81 percent of the residents in Huntington Park in 1980 and had grown to 90 percent of the population by 1990. Over 60 percent of these Latina/o Huntington Park residents were under age thirty-four. Information derived from the U.S. Census and compiled by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation and the Pew Hispanic Institute; see Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, “Demographics and Regional Profiles—Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation,” <https://laedc.org/2017/02/21/economic-profile-latino-community-l-county/> (accessed January 20, 2020). See also Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project RSS, “Mapping the Latino Population, by State, County and City,” August 29, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/states/state/ca> (accessed June 27, 2015).