Narrating Silver Lake: Place Attachment and Community in a Los Angeles Neighborhood

by

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“[Silver Lake] really is a little land unto itself… We could be in Geneva, we could be up in mountains, we could be anywhere but we certainly weren’t in L.A.”

- Resident Elizabeth Austin
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Introduction

Throughout my childhood, at different times of day, on different days of the week, I would see a man, shirtless, wearing white socks, running shoes and synthetic shorts, and reading a newspaper as he walked swiftly down the streets of the Los Angeles neighborhood of Silver Lake. Sometimes he would be wearing a sweatshirt or talking on a cell phone, but this was a rare occurrence, enough to incite commentary with whomever I was with at the moment. I did not know his name, but I knew he was a doctor and that his back looked like leather after years in the sun. As far as I could tell, everyone in Silver Lake had a moniker for him – “The Walking Man,” “Dr. Jogger,” “The Silver Lake Walking Guy,” but for as long as I can remember, my friends and I referred to him as “Reader Walker.” He was a Silver Lake staple, almost like a neighborhood mascot, and he may very well have been its most informed and in-shape resident. But on July 22, 2010, at the age of 58, he took his own life.

Silver Lake as a whole, as a community, mourned the death of Marc Abrams. I do not know if it is possible to fully articulate how much his passing affected the neighborhood, but his death and the tributes that followed made the front page of The New York Times (Cathcart). Over four hundred people attended a memorial walk in his honor, including Los Angeles City Councilmen Tom LaBonge and Eric Garcetti, both of whom represent Silver Lake. He had previously been featured in two murals in the neighborhood, and on the days after his death, many flocked out to enact makeshift memorials at these sites, writing messages on butcher paper and leaving flowers and even pairs of running shoes. I do not know many people who knew him
personally; I was not even sure of his given name until he died, and I was far from
being the only one. But his regular presence and then absence in the neighborhood
were felt deeply by many residents. In many ways, Marc Abrams embodied one thing
that so many residents love about Silver Lake: that, despite its proximity to the heart
of downtown Los Angeles, theirs is a neighborhood that fosters street life; that their
public spaces and streets are friendly to walkers and joggers; that, despite the hills, or
maybe because of them, Silver Lake is a neighborhood of pedestrians and outdoor,
communal life.

Abrams had moved there in 1980 and had run a family practice clinic in North
Hollywood until a year before his death, when he came under investigation for
prescribing drugs to a twenty-five-year old patient who died of an overdose (Glover
and Girion). All of these facts came out after his death, and the neighborhood grew to
know a little about the man it had embraced at face value. In addition to the murals,
before his death, Abrams had inspired a short documentary and a handful of
newspaper articles that provided small insights into his life, but the number of people
who watched or read them surely did not match the number who saw him, day after
day, walk around the neighborhood. Because he remained so elusive, he inspired all
sorts of narratives, constructed by anyone and everyone who came across him on a
regular basis in an attempt to explain who he was. As shown in the documentary,
some people believed he walked because of a health condition that required him to be
perpetually in motion; others claimed he had some form of Obsessive Compulsive
Disorder (Malkasian). And while the stories residents made up and circulated about
this one resident of Silver Lake might be, in the grand scheme of things, insignificant,
I open this thesis with the story of Marc Abrams to make a larger point about Silver Lake: that it was through these minor and mundane stories, through the way they persistently circulated among residents, that Reader Walker became a fixture and found his place in the present history of Silver Lake. Many of the tales that people created about him were false or misconstrued, but I want to argue that, ultimately, this is unimportant or irrelevant. Rather, the mere fact that people talked, that we all felt invested in the production and circulation of narratives about Abrams, speaks to the power these narratives have in helping shape people’s perceptions of social reality, their senses of place, and even their experience of community.

In this thesis, I examine the ways in which people in Silver Lake frequently talk about Silver Lake, about its history, about its entrenched values and concerns, about the built environment and physical characteristics of the area as a whole, and about the characters who reside in it. As local writer Dan Koeppel said to a reporter covering the Abrams’s story for The New York Times, “This part of town is unique because there is a street life and an intellectual and verbal commerce of people. We bump into each other on Sunset [Boulevard]. We get to know each other” (Cathcart). Silver Lakers staunchly speak of their neighborhood as more than just a neighborhood or district of Los Angeles; they feel that it is a very particular community within a somewhat stereotypical large, American city, a thoroughly unique entity in the greater Los Angeles region. To begin to understand how this neighborhood and its peculiar sense of community came about, and why so many people care about defending its existence and reputation, we turn our attention to the narratives constructed by its active residents. I argue and aim to show that when residents articulate their
experiences in and impressions of Silver Lake, these narratives go on to shape the subsequent experiences of residents and influence the decisions they make about its future development and their own involvement in it. By deconstructing them, we can begin to see the larger themes that connect people in and to Silver Lake and to understand how the neighborhood was transformed into what many of its residents perceive as “a community” through resident investment and action.

The neighborhood of Silver Lake is located five miles away from downtown Los Angeles, is comprised of hills and winding streets, and has a large pair of water reservoirs at its center, which provide both the semblance of a natural landscape in the middle of a city and an amenity around which residents have rallied and which they have worked to protect. The neighborhood has a rich history of civic engagement and cooperative spirit. In the 1920s, it attracted much of the city’s creative class and was home to the budding film industry. When the studios moved out, many self-described communists and gay residents moved in. And, although it was crime-ridden in the 1970s and ‘80s, it managed to attract residents eager to live in an urban area but also to reshape what is commonly understood as the urban experience. During my interviews, residents conveyed a general fondness for the urban life and a rejection of what is entailed in suburban living, but they oppose the words historically used to describe cities – anonymous, sterile, and impersonal (Simmel and Wolff; Wirth). They would rather focus on the realities made possible by life in cities because of the vast array of people, cultures, and opportunities they realize.
While Silver Lake has long had a reputation for housing a diverse population, this thesis is mainly concerned with a middle-class, mostly white subset of residents, the kind that we have always been told belongs in the suburbs; and while I do provide a statistical picture of Silver Lake’s social composition, this thesis is mostly concerned with these residents’ ideas of what “diversity” means. They are, then, the focal point, and thus I am aware that I will not fully do justice to the history of the Latino and Asian communities of the area. Their own perceptions of the events and histories told and analyzed in this thesis is a story that remains to be written. My interest in the more middle-class sections of the neighborhood and the recent history of activism among its residents stems from the fact that I grew up as part of this community, hearing the adults around me constantly affirming Silver Lake as a special place, as a tight, unique, and ultimately “successful” community. But, what exactly made it so? My decision to focus on this subset of residents is also based on the fact that, at the height of the so-called white flight from American cities, their presence was atypical of an urban setting (Hayden; Kruse). Here these white, professional residents flocked, possibly because of the neighborhood history, or because of the topography, or because of more practical reasons like the proximity of the neighborhood to their jobs at the time. In a way, the reasons why they moved to Silver Lake contain little meaning, but their motives behind staying, laying roots, and becoming active citizens speak to their own imagined possibilities of fostering place attachment and building successful communities in urban settings.

From my experiences growing up in Silver Lake and from my in-depth interviews and conversations with residents during the summer of 2011, I know that a
few themes resonate deeply with people in the community. A number of key concepts repeated throughout my interviews were inclusiveness, diversity, and progressiveness. These values, which residents believe to be fundamental to life in Silver Lake, are lived out through narratives and individual and collective action to benefit all. While the reality of some of these principles, particularly diversity, can be assessed statistically, I use this data in order to contextualize narratives, not prove or disprove them. I am interested in how people view Silver Lake, regardless of whether or not this fully matches the reality of numbers, as something that holds power in itself, as one of the sources of commitment to these values, prompting action and affective involvement. I intend, with this focus on narratives and experience, both individual and collective, to contribute to the American Studies and Urban Studies fields by deepening our understanding of how place attachment and sense of community work in urban neighborhoods (Altman and Low; Cresswell; Barlett).

The interviews I carried out last summer involved fifteen residents, all chosen individually because of the respective roles they play in the neighborhood either through government, business, public education, or local committees and community centers. All of these individuals are, each in their own way, actively involved, but they represent a variety of interests in the neighborhood.

My mother, Marianne Jenny, was the initial inspiration behind this thesis. Throughout my upbringing, she frequently articulated to me the reasons why we lived in Silver Lake, why I was being raised in an urban neighborhood, why we participated in community activities, and why I went to public school. She backed up
these assertions by becoming heavily engaged at my local elementary school and, over the years, involving my brother and me in a variety of neighborhood activities. Stories constantly circulated in my household about how the values of Silver Lake reflected my parents’ own, values that they hoped to instill in me. When three families from my fourth grade class move to the nearby suburb of La Cañada, I did not quite understand why we did not also opt for a bigger house and a swimming pool; when two girls from my middle school trekked off to Phillips Exeter Academy, a preparatory boarding school in New Hampshire, I questioned why my parents valued and supported the overcrowded, under-funded local high school instead. My mother always had answers to my questions and never failed to offer them to me, and while my younger self may not have grasped the larger implications of her decisions, I now look back and have an appreciation for both my mother’s choices and her at-times cutting and stubborn responses.

The parents of many of my classmates and friends echoed my mother’s sentiments, and I interviewed a few who could offer greater insight into their own choices regarding their decision to live in Silver Lake. Carolyn Foster, a social worker, also raised two children in the neighborhood, as did Monica Sharp, who currently works at the local high school. Elizabeth Austin raised a daughter in Silver Lake, and her husband wrote a number of the Los Angeles Times articles I cite in this thesis to provide a historic look into the neighborhood.

Since commitment to public education is a common narrative thread among Silver Lake residents, I interviewed teachers and parents directly involved in local public schooling. William Ray, a physics teacher, taught at the local high school from
1961 until 2009. I also spoke with Kerry Weber, who has a young daughter and has taught at Ivanhoe Elementary for almost two decades, along with Amy Wilson, mother of a third grader and the current president of Friends of Ivanhoe, the booster parent organization of the school.

Since local government has had and continues to have a significant role in the development of Silver Lake, I interviewed Tom LaBonge, a Los Angeles City Councilman who represents Silver Lake, along with his Field Deputy, Sonya Valdez. I also interviewed Eric Howell, an employee at the office of Los Angeles City Councilman Eric Garcetti. I spoke with James Higgins and Casey Edwards, both members of the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, a local government board. Edwards is also a small-business owner in the Sunset Junction section of the neighborhood. I also interviewed Janie Pratt, who founded the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce, and Nina Watson, who founded the Committee to Save Silver Lake’s Reservoirs, now the Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy; both are community activists and longtime residents. Finally, I interviewed Elena Hernandez, director of the Silver Lake Recreation Center. I changed each of my interviewees’ names in order to maintain their privacy, with the exception of my mother and Tom LaBonge, who is an elected, public official.

Beginning around 1990, the year I was born, Silver Lake began to undergo a series of dramatic changes associated with rising real estate prices and the construction of new residential developments. This process has notably intensified in the last five to seven years, and the future of Silver Lake development remains
unclear. Most of the individuals I write about in this thesis have lived in Silver Lake since the 1990s or earlier; they experienced a different neighborhood and, in the last few years, have watched it change. This thesis is not about gentrification, and until the epilogue, it will not directly address the realities brought about by the influx of new, more affluent residents who are accelerating the process of change. In my opinion, it is too soon to comment on how permanent these changes will be, whether they will be damaging, positive, or harmless and, most importantly, whether this new population will stay. My thesis, rather, is about the neighborhood’s more entrenched citizens, those who moved into the neighborhood during the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, not knowing whether the relatively high crime rates would improve. Yet, they moved in anyway and stayed because they fell in love with Silver Lake’s history, appearance, and character. This thesis is about the active residents who helped shape Silver Lake during those decades and the ones who say they will remain long after the new gentrifying trends. It is about the means through which citizens have turned Silver Lake into what they believe is a thriving community and about how the reservoir and other features of the landscape have always remained at the center of residents’ motivations to stay and to act. The first chapter examines the history, these topographic features, and the social role they both played in the formation of a sense of community in Silver Lake. The second chapter looks at the ways these elements of Silver Lake’s landscape made the neighborhood uniquely suited for the development of place attachment among residents, a process that I examine through a period of intensified local activism. The third chapter documents how a mixture of individualized and collective forms of place attachment and the circulation of
narratives about Silver Lake worked to affirm and disseminate certain “communal” values that encourage resident participation and the perception of Silver Lake as a “community.”

I am not claiming that every citizen of Silver Lake is an active, entrenched member of the community. No enclave can claim this, and I know this is not true of Silver Lake either. Not everyone in the neighborhood participates, or participates equally, and not everyone contributes to or shares in its enchantment. But as Nina Watson stated during our interview, “It takes a small group of very dedicated, consistent people who have [an idea of] the greater good in their hearts and in their actions.” And that is, as I aim to show in this thesis, what it took, at different moments of its history, to turn Silver Lake into the neighborhood that it is today. But I believe that even those who do not seem to be actively involved in the development of Silver Lake benefit and do contribute, even just by taking a walk around the neighborhood, as Marc Abrams did on most days during his lifetime.
Chapter One: Historicizing Silver Lake

INTRODUCTION

Residents have described it in a myriad of ways: Oz, Geneva, Italy, but Silver Lake is merely an urban neighborhood five miles north of downtown Los Angeles. In *The Urban Neighborhood: A Sociological Perspective*, Suzanne Keller argues that neighborhoods are “local areas that have physical boundaries, social networks, concentrated use of area facilities, and special emotional and symbolic connotations for their inhabitants” (88). Officially, Silver Lake encompasses a 2.75 square mile area, bordered by the Glendale and Golden State freeways, Hoover Street, and Hyperion Avenue, but practically, these streets bound Silver Lake only on paper, as there are no notable physical limitations (*Silver Lake Mapping L.A.*). Throughout the city, various signs around the edges of neighborhoods quietly inform passersby when they have crossed a boundary, but these signs, blue with white letters, just like all of the street signs in the city of Los Angeles, are meant to be informative, not exclusionary. William Ray, a local teacher and resident of the area since 1961, was surprised to learn during our interview that Silver Lake was, in fact, demarcated by official perimeters; he said that in his experience, the neighborhood has “amorphous boundaries,” as one does not live in Silver Lake without constantly interacting with neighboring areas and the city at large. Rather, the pertinent physical landmarks of Silver Lake are not its borders, but the reservoir that lies at its center and the various other landscape characteristics that make the neighborhood unique.

In addition to the landscape, the social characteristics of the neighborhood impinge upon it more than any physical boundary. As Keller notes, a “certain
collective character” (90) is essential, as a neighborhood must attract people who share some attribute. Keller also states that “concentrated social activity” (94) helps to distinguish neighborhoods from other districts in a city. In this regard, Silver Lake has been a unique area of Los Angeles since the beginning of the twentieth century, as it has attracted both creative and political types, and has long been known for being progressive, tolerant, and inclusive. Silver Lake, while distinctively urban and complete with city-like characteristics, has a significant amount of public green space that is frequently used by residents. As a seeming extension of Silver Lake’s public spaces, numerous neighborhood organizations exist, along with community centers, all contributing to a larger communal atmosphere.

The use of these neighborhood facilities and the emotional ties that residents have to Silver Lake will be discussed in subsequent chapters. In what follows I provide a physical depiction of Silver Lake and discuss how the neighborhood’s topography has historically attracted residents and a unique type of architecture. If neighborhoods are supposed to give people a chance to live an urban life without succumbing to the anonymity and sterility that often accompanies city life (Simmel and Wolff), how then, did Silver Lake become a successful or credible neighborhood? How did attachment to the place come to inspire community development? From my conversations with current residents and city officials I learned that examining Silver Lake’s topography and history would be the right first step in my attempt to understand how this neighborhood created a sense of community.

I would first like to note that, in this chapter, the names Silver Lake and Edendale are used interchangeably. The name Edendale is not in use anymore but
rather denotes a historical area in Los Angeles that was broken up and absorbed by other districts. Present day Silver Lake is comprised of a combination of the original Silver Lake and the eastern part of Edendale. The rest of Edendale is now part of Echo Park, an adjacent neighborhood, but since the area has the same historical significance as Silver Lake, they are often grouped together, along with Los Feliz, to make up the East Side of Los Angeles. Silver Lake, Echo Park, and Los Feliz, in other words, while distinct, share many similarities, and residents of all three districts cross into one another on a regular basis, usually without even realizing it. Nevertheless, today, Silver Lake does function as its own neighborhood, with its own history and identity. The physical makeup of the district still has the same attractive qualities that draw people who want to live in a city but appreciate the natural world and value the peace and openness afforded by the hills. The artistic and activist roots of its residents are heavily felt, as the creative and self-described “progressive” classes still fill the Spanish homes.

**TOPOGRAPHY AND PHYSICALITY**

The topography of Silver Lake, unique for a city neighborhood, has played a crucial role in its historical and present development. The majority of Silver Lake houses are set in the hills, up narrow, winding streets and are partially obscured by a variety of green life. The architecture of the neighborhood is diverse, although Spanish, Craftsmen and Modern styles are the most common, with houses built mainly between the 1920s through the 1970s (Mintz and Minor). While the majority of Silver Lake lies north of Sunset Boulevard, there is a section south of Sunset that is flatter
and that tends to be socio-economically poorer, a division of the neighborhood that will be discussed later in the chapter.

A central feature of the neighborhood is the water reservoir, which is split into the upper Ivanhoe Reservoir and the larger, lower Silver Lake Reservoir, although the two are typically referred to simply as the Silver Lake Reservoir. Together, the two halves hold over 800,000,000 gallons of drinking water for south Los Angeles and, at the time of their completion, they made up the largest reservoir in the city (“Silver Lake Nearly Ready”). Construction began in 1904 in the scarcely population region:

![Figure 2.1](image)

Finished in 1907, the reservoir was named after Herman Silver, a former city council president and water board commissioner, after whom the neighborhood is also named (“Silver Lake Reservoir”). The dam in the reservoir was built using a “hydraulic” method, a technique that did not require human hands (“Lesson Here on Damming”). This revolutionary system attracted the engineers behind the Gatun Dam
of the Panama Canal, who came to visit Silver Lake in 1907 to see the method firsthand in order to implement it in their own project.

While built solely to provide drinking water to the area, the reservoir became the center of the neighborhood, providing a “natural,” yet physically concrete, oasis in the middle of the city. Aesthetically, it provided a break from the conventionally urban. As stated in a 1908 *Los Angeles Times* article, “the irregular outlines of the bank give the impression of a natural body of water,” and today, even though the reservoir is fenced off and has visible sloping concrete sides, the “natural” effect of its original design still resonates ("Silver Lake's Bright Smiles"). The reservoir could not be mistaken for a natural body of water, but planners and residents alike have worked to give it organic qualities. In 1911, the park department was granted ownership over the land surrounding the reservoir and went on to plant several thousand trees to beautify the area and further its “natural” qualities ("Rush Work on Great Parkway"). Today, the hills remain covered in an abundance of green, which often stands in stark contrast to the rest of the city and works to counteract city life.
During its early years, the Silver Lake reservoir also functioned as a fishing spot. When it was built, the Ivanhoe reservoir was covered to keep out pollutants, but because of the large size of the Silver Lake section, there was no plan to cover it ("Biggest Roof on Reservoir"). Instead, the city used alternative means of keeping the water pure, including stocking the reservoir with black bass in order to control the minnow population that would inevitably enter the reservoir from the Los Angeles River, the reservoir’s main water supply ("Silver Lake Nearly Ready"). As a result, Silver Lake was open to fishermen starting in 1916 ("Silver Lake to Open Next Month"). In its present state, however, the reservoir no longer holds fish. As it is fenced off, there is no direct access to the water, but its role in the neighborhood still extends beyond its solely visual effects.

Today, the lake serves at least three distinct purposes: It is an attraction, a rallying point, and a social space. Real estate with lake views is priced higher and accrues higher taxes for the city. Even those who own homes without a direct view of the lake are acutely aware of how the reservoir affects the atmosphere of the neighborhood. I grew up on the other side of the hill that faces the reservoir and still considered it to be a central feature of my neighborhood.

The lake as a rallying point, a concept that will be examined more fully in the second chapter, stems from what can be characterized as the contentious and even precarious position of the reservoir. Citizens have a long history of defending the reservoir, as the city government and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) have worked on its structure and remodeled it endlessly, even threatening to cover it at times ("Study Pledged").
Moreover, residents have had a direct effect on the lake’s role as a social space, as they have used political strategies to create more open, green areas on the property. In the last ten years, residents have been instrumental in the development of a walking path around the reservoir and a park on the property named the Silver Lake Meadow ("Silver Lake Master Plan"). The walking path is actually still being constructed in certain sections, but it has become a widely used and loved community amenity, and at any given hour of the day, there are people jogging, strolling, walking dogs, and enjoying the outdoors. The Meadow joined the Silver Lake Recreation Center as park space surrounding the reservoir. The Recreation Center was built in 1928 when the Los Angeles Playground and Recreation Department bought a site adjacent to the reservoir to build the playground and community center ("Playground"). Today, the Recreation Center provides children’s sports programs, a summer camp, and additional green space for the community. These outdoor amenities that have opened up urban green space are the result of years of resident investment and action, a product of individual place attachment that I discuss below.

While the lake is the physical focal point of the neighborhood, Silver Lake has other unique features that also contribute to its character. Because of its undulating surface, the neighborhood is peppered with more than sixty staircases that connect the streets through the hills; these staircases date from the days when streetcars were a main source of transportation (Fleming 7). Since most of the streets in Silver Lake are narrow and twist through the hills, as resident Elizabeth Austin described, “like spaghetti noodles,” the stairways provided direct routes for pedestrians to reach the
streetcars below. Today, they remain intact as both an aesthetic oddity and a practical feature, as walkers use them for exercise and leisure.

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4
In addition to the stairs, most of the street lamps in Silver Lake are from the 1920s, adding to the character and distinct aesthetic of the neighborhood. In 1988, the city sought to replace the traditional lights with modern ones, but after an uproar by residents, the project was canceled (D. Smith). As Elizabeth Austin said to me, “Most of [the lampposts] are really old-fashioned. They light nothing, but who cares? We don’t care. They’re beautiful. They’re beautiful.” They lend the neighborhood a historical atmosphere, an important aesthetic link with its own past, one that residents such as Austin value over their intended purpose. Even though this may seem like a trivial fight to an outsider, I want to argue that actions such as this one make residents feel invested in the physical and historical aspects of Silver Lake, and this investment is critical in their attachment to place.

Despite being close to the downtown area of a major city, Silver Lake houses a wild animal population, consisting primarily of skunks, opossums, coyotes, and raccoons. While the animals, wild and unmanaged, have adapted to the urban world, residents have also become accustomed to their existence in the neighborhood. During our interview, William Ray informed me of “the family of skunks that comes down [his] back walkway every night to get water” and I countered with stories of the two raccoons that frequently break into my house through the crawlspace to eat my cat’s food. While nuisances much of the time, many residents understand these creatures to be part of the layered, multiplicity of Silver Lake, with its simultaneously urban, small town, and “natural” feel.

It is important to emphasize the extent to which the attractive qualities of Silver Lake’s physical space have historically managed to integrate their aesthetic,
practical, and social purposes. The reservoir, built to provide drinking water, grew to become critical political and social space in the neighborhood. The stairs that connect streets through the hills, meant to give residents easy access to streetcars, are now a unique feature that encourages walking in the city and residents’ presence in the streets. In many of the hills, the utility and phone lines are buried underground, partially to avoid earthquake damage but more so, as local real estate agent and resident since 1974 Nina Watson informed me, to enhance the beauty of the neighborhood. In these ways, urban planning decisions intended to address urban living necessities have actually contributed to consolidating the unique character of Silver Lake.

As I aim to show in the next section, the physical makeup of Silver Lake played a direct role in attracting residents in the early half of the twentieth century. The lake and the hills allowed people to have it both ways: They could live a quiet, secluded life adjacent to a major, urban center. Furthermore, the hills provided a sense of privacy and security, allowing communists and gays to feel safer in the city during discriminatory eras. The topography of Silver Lake contributed in important ways to the rich history of the neighborhood, just as it continues to play a principal part in the life of residents today.

THE HISTORY OF SILVER LAKE

Silver Lake’s physical environment has been the backdrop for a strong process of identity formation and political engagement in the city. Throughout the twentieth century, the neighborhood was receptive to artists, communists, and gays, all of
whom successfully formed communities in the hills. In the nineteenth century, Hugo Reid, a native of Scotland, named the area Ivanhoe after the Sir Walter Scott novel. Though its name has changed, many of the streets retain names taken from Scott’s book, such as Herkimer Street and Rowena Avenue, and the local, public elementary school, which opened in 1889 and is one of the oldest properties in the neighborhood, is named Ivanhoe Elementary.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, before Los Angeles became densely populated and built up, the Silver Lake area was scarcely inhabited countryside. It quickly became a destination for the first movie studios, bringing an influx of creative types into the hills. In 1908, William Selig bought the first studio lot in Edendale and expanded the Selig Polyscope Company there (Wanamaker). The New York Motion Picture Company, Mack Sennett Studios, Pathe West Coast Film Studio, Walt Disney Studios, and others soon followed (“Edendale”; Haynes). Most of the studios produced Western and silent films at that time, and Edendale’s countryside was well suited for the horses and cows that many studio executives owned.
The film industry and most of the current architecture of Silver Lake developed during the same period, through the first decades of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, when city officials began to consider the development potential for Silver Lake, planners began to build cement streets through the hills to encourage residential growth around the film studios and industry-related buildings (“About the Silver Lake Community”). Before the end of the decade, as the silent film industry thrived, stars like Charlie Chaplin and Antonio Moreno came to work in the area. Nina Watson told me during our interview that Moreno had an influence on the neighborhood aesthetics, as he was responsible for undergrounding the utilities and using high-quality housing stock. As residential development skyrocketed in the 1920s and ‘30s, he built the Moreno Estates, or what is now known as the Paramour Mansion (“Home Building”). The Spanish Mediterranean estate inspired more of this kind of architecture and development in the area, now reflecting the style of many homes, with stucco, arches, and roof tiles (“Silver Lake Architecture”). Even today, a street remains named after Moreno.

In the 1930s and ‘40s, Silver Lake became a destination for modern architecture. Many of the houses built took advantage of the sloping hillsides and appear to be one-story from the street while actually opening out into multiple stories below (V. Smith). Homes built around the lake used this technique to take advantage of the views but even houses on the other sides of the hills maintained a similar style.

Richard Neutra, one of the most well known architects to work in Silver Lake, was notorious for building homes “in complete harmony with [their] surrounding landscape, physically and emotionally” (Sheridan). Silver Lake was the perfect
canvas on which to implement his theory of “biological realism,” which he defined as “the concept that people’s physiology, psychology, and architecture are intimately braided” (Dreyfuss, “Neutra”). He took advantage of the natural views, building homes that overlooked the lake and mountains in the distance. Neutra built his home in Silver Lake in 1932, which was donated to the Cal Poly Pomona College of Environmental Design in 1980 and went on to become the current VDL Research House (“Architect's Home Given to Cal Poly”). He was one of the foremost architects of modern design in Los Angeles. As stated in a 1957 Los Angeles Times article, “If Frank Lloyd Wright was the father of modern architecture, then it was Neutra who breathed life into it and nurtured it in an earthy eloquence that changed the living habits of millions” (Hubbart).

![Neutra, at his Silver Lake home](image)

Neutra, a native of Vienna, had an international reputation and took “seriously the role of nature in architectural empathy” (Hubler). He was a master of simplicity: clean lines, cubic designs, glass, steel, and, in later years, wood and stone. Architects
R. M. Schindler, Gregory Ain, and John Lautner also used Silver Lake as inspiration (Townsend; Mills). Like Neutra, Schinder and Lautner were proponents of complementing the indoors with the outdoors, while Ain worked with communists in 1948 to build cooperative housing units and was primarily interested in providing housing for low-income residents (Hurewitz 168).

After the 1930s, the studios moved north to the valley, leaving Edendale and Silver Lake to become a haven for artists, who quickly formed a cohesive and tight knit community in the neighborhood. Daniel Hurewitz, author of Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics, describes what Margaret Landacre and her husband happened upon when they moved to Edendale in the 1927:

They found a fairly well organized community, albeit a contradictory one. It was decidedly artistic, although not made up exclusively of artists. It was hidden, yet vibrant. It brought them isolation, yet it tied them to the extensive cultural and economic networks of Los Angeles… Emotion, economic, and creative – such were the roles that that community played in the Landacres’ lives. (Hurewitz 79)

Hurewitz describes in detail the social structures that the artists developed in Silver Lake: sketch clubs, discussion groups, and social events, all of which contributed to creating a respected and entrenched community. During the Depression, when the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Project began work in Los Angeles, they used the organizational structures already in place in Edendale (Hurewitz 79). Consequently, the political and social implications of the New Deal drew the artists even closer to activism. As they began to gather to share ideas, they simultaneously began to take on political interests. As Hurewitz notes, “… the artists of Edendale explicitly fashioned a community and a set of organizations to sustain them in the
project of being artists and in their efforts to pin down precisely the importance of the inner self. In doing so, they forged a template for building a community around a shared passion and shared identity” (80). Through art, they worked to answer questions about social responsibility and political engagement.

Hurewitz concludes:

Clearly, these groups, intimately imagined, constructed, and sustained, were powerful in shaping the emotional and financial condition of their members. They reveal the significant organizational structure Edendale’s artists built for themselves and the seriousness they attached to their investigations of expressions, emotion, and relevance. These were not simply occasional parties or random get-togethers. The artists were not just discovering each other at the local bathhouse or park; their gatherings were more consistent than that. These events were more ordered, more regular. The artists and their supporters quite self-consciously constructed a social world for themselves around their artistic identity. In this way, they transformed individual self-consciousness into a larger social phenomenon: a community. (96)

The community of artists in Edendale was, therefore, not an accidental one; the residents actively worked to build it. Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s, this community laid the foundation for the political movements that would soon sweep through the Silver Lake hills and leave lasting legacies that still reverberate today.

In a parallel development, as early as 1931, communists also began to settle in and hold meetings in the neighborhood. Dubbed the “Red Hills,” Edendale provided a secluded area in which communists could resist the hostility of the era (Hurewitz 161). Just as the artists did, communists promoted an active relationship between the individual and society, and used organizations and meetings to form a cohesive community in the hills. Party members flocked to Edendale in what Hurewitz describes as “chain migration” (159), another way of saying that “like begets like,” a
phrase resident William Ray used to describe the neighborhood, a theme throughout Silver Lake’s history all the way to the present.

Just as communists found a home in the hills, perhaps more than anywhere else in the city at the time, gays were able to freely live their lives in Silver Lake. Harry Hay, one of the nation’s first gay rights activists, formed the Mattachine Society, one of the earliest homophile organizations, in 1950 in a house on Cove Avenue in Silver Lake (Hurewitz 3). As Hurewitz explains, the neighborhood provided “both an organized communal life that sustained artistic effort and a new aesthetic sensibility that privileged art which plumbed and revealed the emotional life.” This was, Hurewitz notes, critical for Hay, who found in “that expressive community… the first template that Mattachine used in organizing around sexual identity” (77).

One could argue that Harry Hay became a sort of comprehensive archetype of the Silver Lake resident: artistic, political, lefty, and gay. He was extremely political, with ties to the Communist Party and to People’s Song, a movement started in the post-World War II period that produced songs to promote leftist and labor support. Woody Guthrie was also an active member of People’s Song, and even though the movement was based primarily in New York, Guthrie, Hay, and other producers and financiers lived in Edendale (Hurewitz 177). Always holding political and community meetings at his home, Hay focused the meetings towards gay rights when the Mattachine Society began. The Mattachine Society was not only about promoting rights for homosexuals, however; it was about a group of people attempting to define how they felt and redefine how they wanted to live. Following the example of the
artist and communist communities, the Mattachine Society was interested in fostering a closer relationship between the individual and greater society.

Ever since, the gay community has had an important presence in Silver Lake. The neighborhood has continued to be known as a fairly progressive and tolerant area, and it received notoriety in the 1980s during the AIDS epidemic as being a safe and welcoming place for gays, though there were still incidents of gay bashing. Typically, gays in Silver Lake tended to be older and more established than those in West Hollywood, another heavily gay area of Los Angeles. According to a Los Angeles Times article, in 1982, more gays were out in this neighborhood than in others, and many businesses in Silver Lake were either gay-owned or gay-friendly, which created an environment of tolerance that was ahead of its time (Maltun, “Gay Community”).

Still, there was some hostility between the Los Angeles Police Department and gay residents during this decade, especially after a number of incidents of violence towards gays and gay establishments that some felt were handled inappropriately by authorities. In typical Silver Lake fashion, in order to combat the hostility, activists set up meetings to allow residents to vent and to bring the sides closer. Quite successful, these meetings quelled misconceptions on both sides, even though multiple meetings were needed throughout the decade, as the tensions between the two groups never fully dissipated (Maltun, “Gay Community”; “Forum Scheduled”).

Silver Lake had its share of bathhouses, but many closed during the 1980s AIDS epidemic (Gordon, “Bath Club Closes”). “No cruising” signs were erected on
Griffith Park Boulevard in 1997, the result of a joint effort between the police and residents of the street after numerous reported incidents of public, gay sex and prostitution. A *Los Angeles Times* article from the time notes how this issue raised questions about Silver Lake’s reputation as a gay-friendly neighborhood and about its community values (Boxall). While there were some who believed that the new law unfairly targeted gays, a gay condo owner on the street who was quoted in the article understood it as a quality of life issue that had little to do with gays or gay rights. Still today, it is illegal to make a U-turn here between midnight and six in the morning, even though this rule does not seem to be enforced, as cruising has all but ceased. In September 2011, the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council voted unanimously to remove the signs (Allen).

We have seen how the artists, movie stars, communists, and gays created a place for many different communities to thrive. But in the 1970s and ‘80s, a new set of tensions arose, and there was a collective push to establish one cohesive, yet diverse, community. At the time, there was an established working- and middle-class Latino and Asian presence in the neighborhood. As more and more gays moved to the neighborhood, despite the history of openness toward gay residents in Silver Lake, the older ethnic groups reacted against the newer, affluent gay population, even resulting in some beatings and the firebombing of a local gay club (Simross). This conflict led to the creation of the Sunset Junction Street Fair in 1980, a community fair established primarily to bring the two opposing groups together. The Sunset Junction Neighborhood Alliance, the committee behind the Fair, recruited gang members as security guards with the help of El Centro del Pueblo, another
community center, and four of the area’s rival gangs declared a temporary truce during the weekend event (Kaplan, “Gay Street Fair”). Once the Fair became a well-established part of the neighborhood, residents made it clear that it was a community event, one that was not geared towards any particular ethnic or minority group. In 1985, the organizers stated that the Fair had become a “celebration of the polyglot population of the Silver Lake-Echo Park-Los Feliz area” (Gordon, “Sunset Junction”). The Fair continued for the next 25 years, but 2011 marked the first summer when it did not occur due to a dispute between organizers and the city, a decision that will be discussed in the third chapter.

Ultimately, as Hurewitz concludes, Silver Lake “was a neighborhood of shared purposes” (163), and, as I intend to show in the rest of the thesis, it still is. An important reason why these progressive communities were drawn to the area was that it contained affordable housing (160). But from my conversations with residents and officials and other evidence I have gathered, I believe it would not be misleading to conclude that artists, communists, and gays also came to Silver Lake because of the physical environment and the potential it had for building community. All of the neighborhood’s features – the “natural,” yet urban setting, the seclusion, the quiet, and the growing cohesiveness amongst residents – combined with economic reasons to attract residents and ensure that they stayed.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

What then, are the implications of this history for residents of Silver Lake today? For one, I would like to argue, it has contributed to the development of a sense of
community in the neighborhood. The concept of “sense of community” has its roots in psychology. David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis proposed four elements that contribute to a sense of community – membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection – and this four-fold understanding of sense of community is widely accepted in the field (9). While a study could be conducted about sense of community in Silver Lake using psychology’s instruments and methods, I instead have chosen to focus on residents’ own thoughts and feelings in order to understand how members of this particular neighborhood might convey a sense of community through narratives.

What became evident during my interviews is that part of the sense of community in Silver Lake arises from knowledge about its history, and the implications of this history for today. Some residents knew many facts about the neighborhood’s past: William Ray described it as an “art colony” that housed “writers, artists, leftists and commies;” Nina Watson made connections between the culture and the architecture of the area:

> It was very bohemian and communist and beatnik… and a lot of the architects that [are] so famous for being in Silver Lake: Gregory Ain and [Richard] Neutra and [Raphael] Soriano and [John] Lautner… had commissions from people who lived in Silver Lake because they were the Avant Garde, the bleeding edge… It does make Silver Lake kind of an architecturally international spot.

Others noted that throughout its history, Silver Lake has housed progressive, artistic types, which has influenced who moves to the neighborhood today. As James Higgins, resident since 1988 and a Silver Lake Neighborhood Councilmember, said, “I think the kind of person who moves to Silver Lake… at this point certainly, would
move here because it is Silver Lake and Silver Lake has a very distinct personality. It has a distinct culture, it has a very active community politically, it is a very liberal community, [and] it is artistic.” Local resident and mother of two Monica Sharp reiterated, “Silver Lake has always been a haven for kind of left-wing, artist type people… I think [that] what it was is what attracts people [today]… there are a lot of music people here, artsy [people], and it has always kind of been that way.” Kerry Weber, who has taught at Ivanhoe Elementary since 1992 and lived in the neighborhood since 1999, acknowledged that Silver Lake appeals even to residents not professionally involved in the arts:

I think it is really creative. I think there are a lot of people in the community that have jobs that are in the creative industry [and] movie industry: they’re artists, they’re writers, they’re poets, they’re musicians, they’re [television] set designers, [they’re] costume designers, [they’re] caterers… and even those who don’t do it for a living here seem to have this collective appreciation for art and aesthetics.

Some residents directly addressed the concept of community on their own during our conversations. James Higgins spoke of his own love of the neighborhood, which he said stems from its sense of community, one that he felt almost instantly:

I fell in love with Silver Lake almost immediately when [I] moved here. I just loved the whole feel of it. I particularly liked the sense of community [even just] on this street. [It] is a cul-de-sac [with] thirteen houses and within a couple of weeks, I knew almost everybody on the street. They would drive by [and ask] “Hey, how are you” [or say] “Welcome,” that kind of thing, whereas in [my previous neighborhood of Laurel Canyon in West Los Angeles], I lived next to people for eight years and barely knew them… When I moved [to Silver Lake], there were still a lot of the original homeowners [on my street] so that gave it a real sense of community and history… [Our street] even had our own newspaper [for a couple of years] called the Lindsay Lane Gazette, which was put together by a couple of guys at the end of the street. It was just a little photocopied thing but people would write
little things about their vacations or recipes or things that were going on in the neighborhood. This was pre-Internet you know, so we had this little paper that we did, which I thought was just wonderful… I would never have seen that in Laurel Canyon… [Silver Lake] was just a special place, you could tell. It was a special place from the beginning.

Casey Edwards, a local business owner who is on the Neighborhood Council with Higgins, believes that there is a sense of community in Silver Lake because of the permanency of many residents:

I think it is its own little community. It is its own city… [although], of course it exists in cohesion with the city at large… Los Angeles… in particular [is a] transitory [place], so people come to try to be an actor for two years and then they move. That’s what people do, they leave L.A., and then more come in every day and then people leave. I [have] found that people in Silver Lake are here. They live here, they dig in and they make their lives and their homes here, and that is appealing. I feel that it is different than a lot of Los Angeles, which can feel temporary.

Carolyn Foster, mother of two and resident since 1988, agreed with Edwards, and added, “Here, there’s almost sort of an energy… there’s an excitement. [The same] people can stay but still have so much excitement.”

The sense of community to which these residents variously refer, either explicitly or implicitly, seems to be grounded on a set of shared values, ones that they believe have been present throughout the neighborhood’s twentieth century history. As we will see in the following chapters, these values hold power in that they inform resident’s perceptions and actions, which have implications for community participation.
TODAY’S DEMOGRAPHICS

Silver Lake is still known for being progressive and tolerant. A 1984 Silver Lake Area Guide printed in the *Los Angeles Times* sums up widely held perceptions of the neighborhood very succinctly:

> Tolerance has made it easier for Silver Lake to play host to large population of Asians, interracial couples, artists, Latinos, gays and lesbians. The area has drawn an even bigger contingent of hard-to-define types who might best be labeled individualists, people whose thinking about politics, values, and traditions is outside the mainstream.

The guide goes on to describe “the Silver Lake way”: “Live and let live, and, if there is friction, work to solve the problem” (Dreyfuss, “Silver Lake Area Guide”). As a native and long-time resident of Silver Lake I believe that these sentiments are still true today, as it continues to be a community that values acceptance and dialogue. It is also quite diverse across the board – age-wise, racially, and socioeconomically – though there is some disagreement amongst residents about the extent of this diversity, especially because real estate prices in the hills tend to favor the wealthier and push the poorer residents to the flatlands. Residents frequently discuss diversity, as both a characteristic and a value of the neighborhood, and it accompanies inclusivity, creativity, and progressiveness as adjectives in the widely circulating narratives. Going by the numbers, Silver Lake seems to live up to its diverse reputation.

The Los Angeles Department of City Planning estimated that there were 32,890 people living in Silver Lake in 2008, based on the 2000 census numbers (*Silver Lake Mapping L.A.*). Latinos were the majority with forty-one percent,
followed closely by whites with thirty-four percent. Silver Lake has a high percentage of Asians for Los Angeles, with eighteen percent. The median household income in 2008 was $54,339 but the percentage of households earning $20,000 or less was high for the city. Overall, the neighborhood is comfortably middle class, with both wealthier and poorer outliers. Silver Lake is a combination of single-family homes and apartment buildings. Slightly over sixty-four percent of the neighborhood rents their housing unit, both houses and apartments, and thirty-four percent of residents twenty-five years or older have a four-year college degree. The percentage of residents with both a bachelor’s and master’s degree or higher is high for Los Angeles. In terms of age, Silver Lake is quite diverse. While the median age is thirty-five, there is a significant population of older residents. The average household size is 2.3, low for the city, as many residents do not have children, though currently, the neighborhood is experiencing a small baby boom.

While Silver Lake is undoubtedly diverse by national standards, and it would be almost impossible to live here and not encounter a great variety of people, there is some de facto segregation that would be misleading not to acknowledge. A 1984 article in the *Los Angeles Times* describes it:

> In recent years Silver Lake has developed into two distinct areas that have little in common: A more affluent area of professional, mostly Anglos and Asians, in a leafy, amphitheater-like setting surrounding the reservoir named for Herman Silver (a member of the city’s first Board of Water Commissioners), and older, more bustling working-class neighborhoods, mostly of Latinos, to the south along Sunset. (Ramos, “Residents”)

While the split may not have begun in the 1980s, it was perpetuated by the influx of new residents, as the first wave of gentrification hit the neighborhood.
Today, it may be a stretch to say that the two, north and south, areas have little in common, as the Sunset Boulevard section of Silver Lake, the Sunset Junction, is very much considered part of the neighborhood and the walking path around the lake attracts many users, even those who may have to drive to it. Generally, the separation tends to stem from property values and housing prices, and not racism or prejudice. The entire neighborhood is represented by the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, which is divided by region in order to ensure that every voice is heard.

School zoning, however, presents neighborhood residents with a difficult reality. There are two public elementary schools and one public middle school in the neighborhood. Ivanhoe Elementary serves the lake district of Silver Lake and boasts a high Academic Performance Index (API) score (how the state of California evaluates schools) for Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), while Micheltorena Elementary, the boundaries of which include the poorer region of Silver Lake south of Sunset Boulevard, struggles. The differences between these schools, disturbingly, neatly map onto class and racial disparities, which are well known to have real implications for children’s academic success. It is important to note, however, that Micheltorena is improving and that Ivanhoe only recently became overwhelmingly majority white. Ivanhoe will be discussed in subsequent chapters, as it is both a community builder amongst families in the neighborhood and a site of major change as Silver Lake has gentrified.

Both elementary schools feed into larger middle and high schools. Thomas Starr King Middle School and John Marshall High School do not live up to the academic standards of Ivanhoe, and residents’ public school options after elementary
school are admittedly troublesome. Still, there is the potential for children to succeed, as there are gifted magnet programs at both King and Marshall. There is a constituency in Silver Lake dedicated to supporting the public schools and committed to sending their kids to them through high school. I attended both Ivanhoe Elementary and John Marshall High, but my parents opted to send me to a public middle school outside of the neighborhood, a choice with which many families grapple. I will examine how there is a wide discussion concerning public education in the neighborhood, and how Silver Lake’s public schools and their supporters have influenced greater community values in the following chapters.

During the late 1970s and ‘80s, a wave of crime hit the Silver Lake area (Maltun, “Northeast L.A.”). Today, while violent crime is uncommon in the area, property crime is on the rise. During the six-month span between May 30, 2011 and November 27, 2011, there were forty violent crimes and 462 property crimes in Silver Lake, for a total of 152.6 crimes per 10,000 people, higher than rates in nearby neighborhoods (Silver Lake Mapping L.A.). Property crimes are on the high end for the city, while violent crimes fall towards the middle. Violent crimes tend to be robbery or assault, while property crimes include burglary and vehicular theft. Generally, throughout my interviews, residents said they feel safe in the community, understand most crimes that occur to be random, not targeted, and attribute crime as part of living in an urban neighborhood.

The progressive and liberal ideals that colored the neighborhood in the twentieth century have remained as fundamental characteristics of Silver Lake. We see it with the Mattachine Society and communist meetings of the past and we see it
with the liberal tendencies of today’s residents. Just as the artistic, communist, and gay communities sought to unite the individual with greater society, residents today seem to have the same commitment, achieving it through community activism and shared principles. There seems to be a general concern to keep Silver Lake unique and independent. In the 1980s, councilmen set controls over the construction of mini-malls, encouraging rather pedestrian-friendly and locally owned business centers (Pool). This continues to be the trend today. Janie Pratt, resident since 1973 and the founder of the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce, told me, “The motto around Silver Lake was ‘the mall is evil, the mall is evil’ and there has always been a strong, very strong contingency of community people and business owners to keep franchises out of Silver Lake.”

If Silver Lake’s unique topography is tightly woven into the history of the neighborhood, how exactly has it contributed to the development of place attachment among current residents? In the chapter that follows, I address this question theoretically through the concept of place attachment as a component of community building in urban environments and then examine the ways that place attachment has been a critical ingredient in the development of Silver Lake as a neighborhood, encouraging local investment and fostering communal ties.
Chapter Two: Place Attachment in Silver Lake

“[When we moved to Los Angeles, a friend said to me], ‘It is big, it is huge. It is an overwhelming metropolis. But when you get there, find your village. Find your village.’”

- Resident Kerry Weber

“To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the place one is in.”

- Edward Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place."

PLACE ATTACHMENT

Place attachment, as an academic concept and subject of research, has a varied history. It originated in the 1950s and ‘60s, but it was only truly embraced by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and environmentalists in the 1970s and ‘80s. The concept has been approached from a myriad of standpoints; scholars have focused on place attachment from the perspective of home (Tuan), length of residence (Cuba and Hummon; Brown and Perkins), self-identity (Proshansky), group membership (Rivlin), environmental issues (Vaske and Korbin), and neighborhood deterioration (Brown, Perkins, Brown). The idea of place attachment itself seems simple: Anthropologist Setha Low swiftly defines it as “the bonding of people to places” (2). But this broad definition raises questions: What exactly constitutes a place? How big or small need a place be? What role does culture, history, or geography play in the development of a place? Do people shape places or do places shape people?

In the 1970s, there was a movement among geographers who advocated the inclusion of people in place studies and the examination, by extension, of how place affects human experience. One of the leading geographers at the time was Yi-Fu Tuan, who argued for the distinction between “space” and “place:” “Undifferentiated
space,” he writes, “becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). He was amongst the first geographers, known as “humanistic geographers,” to theorize about place from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology has been defined as “the interpretive study of human experience… [the aim of which is to] examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences” (Seamon and Sowers). Edward Relph, also one of the first humanistic geographers, along with Tuan, explains the application of phenomenology to place studies:

The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial or mundane experiences… The essence of places lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines place as profound centers of human existence. (43)

How, then, does place arise? In line with phenomenologists like Tuan and Relph, as well as cultural anthropologists like Low, Tim Cresswell argues that place arises out of the interplay between people and the landscape, between residents and the natural and built environment. Cresswell discusses the work of geographer David Harvey, who understands place to be socially constructed. Cresswell explains: “… What is it that is socially constructed about place? Two things stand out: meaning and materiality” (30). Materiality, to address his second point first, concerns the physical construction of a place, and it is easy to imagine how this applies to Silver Lake, as both the neighborhood and the reservoir are human made. As for the meaning through which we also construct places, Cresswell argues that this stems from our experiences in place.
But how is such an experience assessed or measured? Cresswell importantly grounds the concept of place in its philosophical, experiential roots: “To think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures” (11). Low, for her part, elaborates on her broad definition of place attachment and argues it to be “an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions in reference to place” (5). Place studies and place attachment, then, particularly if approached from a phenomenological or an anthropological standpoint, are dependent on the subjective, contingent on personal experience and feelings, which are impossible to quantify. This is why I believe that to account for the past and present history of Silver Lake mainly through facts and statistical figures would give us only a general and superficial sense of the neighborhood – the boundaries, the population, the overall demographics – and would fail to capture fully the interplay between the physical environment and the residents’ ideas and attitudes about the neighborhood, which have gone on to shape and reshape Silver Lake as a place. By instead focusing on how people think about Silver Lake, on the narratives they construct about the neighborhood, and on how and where these narratives circulate, I aim to get closer to the meanings by which individuals form a sense of place and to develop a broader understanding of how these personal and collective constructs impact communal action and experience.

In Silver Lake, place attachment begins with the obvious – the central lake, the houses built into the hills, the green life – all, as we will see in what follows, attributes perceived by residents as aesthetically pleasing and uncharacteristic of an
urban setting. To speak of natural, urban space may seem like a contradiction – cities are generally believed to be the opposite of “natural,” if not sterile, metallic entities devoid of earthy elements. But the amalgamation of the urban and the “natural” in Silver Lake is fundamental to the neighborhood’s identity and character. Because the combination is rare, and even somewhat paradoxical, Silver Lake is distinctive among urban neighborhoods. Not completely urban and definitely not natural, with an air of small-town charm, residents believe that Silver Lake straddles boundaries, a characterization that then extends beyond the physical and into the social and moral atmosphere. The rare combination of “natural” and urban physicality is not lost on the residents – in fact, it is central to why many have become so attached to the area. As Elizabeth Austin, resident since 1984, explained, the Silver Lake landscape ignited in her a childhood fantasy that has yet to lose its luster.

Austin, a native Angeleno, never intended on remaining out West. She grew up in East Los Angeles before moving across town to Culver City when she was ten, and later attended the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, a suburb north of the city. When she went off to New York in the late 1970s and married a man from New Jersey, she was set for a life on the East Coast. But in 1984, when her husband received a job offer from the Los Angeles Times, Austin was on her way back to Los Angeles, a city she never loved, and admittedly, still does not. But when she talks of her neighborhood, her deep love for Silver Lake is palpable. Sitting at the Coffee Table, a local café, with me last summer, she recalled her first childhood experiences with the area, passing through it during her daily commute to and from Friendship Day Camp: “My parents, being the Lefties that they were, enrolled me in this day
camp… this kind of progressive, all races… You have to remember, this is like 1960.

I was eight-years old, [so it was] kind of ahead of its time. We literally did sing

Kumbaya…” On the bus trip from downtown, she would pass through the tunnels of

the 5 Freeway before hitting Silver Lake: “I remember being in awe. I thought it was

like Wizard of Oz land. I mean there was this lake, in the middle of L.A., and there

were all these Spanish houses, and it was so magical to me, and then of course, it was
gone.” As an eight-year old, Austin was enthralled by the physical makeup of Silver

Lake, and when asked fifty years later about why, she responded with the same

enthusiasm she felt as a child:

Because this doesn’t look like any place else in L.A. It wasn’t flat, it

wasn’t the valley, it was full of old buildings, either Spanish buildings

or these 1940s kind of hipster boxy things, which [I] know now were

Neutra’s and stuff like that, but I didn’t know that [then]. And there

was this big piece of water… We could be in Geneva, we could be up

in the mountains, we could be anywhere, but we certainly weren’t in

L.A. L.A. doesn’t have lakes, L.A. has the ocean, and it has the valley.

The childhood glow of Silver Lake in Austin’s mind seems to have only increased

with time:

About three times a week I take an early morning walk, and there’s a

game that I play with myself: Who gets the nature or visual award of

the day? There is a hummingbird weathervane that has won the award.

There is [metal] grillwork at somebody’s house on Moreno that is in

[the shape] of a frog with [exercise] weights that’s won the award. And there

are bougainvilleas in bloom that have won the award. And, of

course, the herons [that reside next to the reservoir] have won the

award several times. Sometimes the breeze wins the award, and

sometimes it’s just the way the light falls on the lake. I don’t know

how in one forty-five-minute walk, in any city, [would] I get Spanish

tiles and this lush foliage and squirrels and herons and a duck sighting

before I have to go off to work.
James Higgins echoed Austin’s sentiments: “When I come home, when I drive around the lake, as I get closer to my house, I just can feel like the city slipping away from me, but look where I live,” he said, as he gestured around his patio filled with countless plants, trees, and flowers. “I live in a tree house basically, so when I come home, I could be in Italy, I could be in anywhere.” Both Austin and Higgins see Silver Lake as an escape from the urban -- within the urban. Austin believed “the reason [Silver Lake] is special is because it is in the middle of this big city.” Similarly, Higgins celebrated its location: “I feel like I have got the best of both worlds. I’m right here and, in ten minutes, I could be downtown at the Ahmanson at a play. It’s fantastic.” Silver Lake’s strength, in fact, does not come solely from its “natural” features but rather from its dual character of urban and natural.
As Kerry Weber explained:

Silver Lake embraces that urbanism… Part of what makes it hip and edgy is that it is in the middle of the city, and I don’t think…people in Silver Lake try to deny that they live in the city. I think, for the most part, they’re proud to be Angelenos, and they are proud to say, “Yeah, I’m urban.”
After all, the residents of Silver Lake I spoke with live in a city for a reason – it is a conscious, deliberate, and significant choice. My mother, who moved to Silver Lake in 1984 from Houston, was raised in Kirkwood, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Much like Austin, she never imagined spending her life in Los Angeles, yearning to live in the North East instead. She talks of New England as if she were president of its tourism board, even though she has never lived east of Ann Arbor, Michigan. But when my father was to start his medical residency at the University of Southern California, she was westbound and took it upon herself to find a suitable urban neighborhood:

It was very important for me to be in the city. I had been out of college since ‘75, and I had only lived in the inner city. I was intent on it… I wanted to be in the city because I wanted to live with people that were not all like me. I didn’t want to live with middle and upper middle class white people only, the way I had grown up. I had not been comfortable with growing up like that.
Nina Watson agreed during my own interview with her, and also acknowledged the desire to move away from what had become too familiar. “I’m a San Fernando Valley escapee,” she said. “It was too white, too redneck, too many trucks, too many eighteen-year old girls with children, not the way I wanted to live.”

Most of the individuals I spoke with said that, around the time they decided to move to Los Angeles, they were interested in the values and opportunities attached to cities. But while they may have set out to live in a city, no one seemed to have explicitly sought an urban, yet natural oasis. A common denominator in their stories was that they came upon Silver Lake by chance, that they were somewhat surprised by, and genuinely excited and appreciative of its physical peculiarities. Most people I spoke with stumbled upon Silver Lake as they looked for a neighborhood in the city that would be close to their job at the time. But just as universal was the sentiment that coming across Silver Lake was refreshing, as if residents had not been entirely aware of their desire for a neighborhood that, while decidedly urban, possessed features that would offset some of the problems of cities like Los Angeles, such as lack of green areas. As Monica Sharp said during our interview, “[It is] like living in the country, in the city. I mean, there are very few places [in the city] where you can go out and you have that beautiful lake... and hills.” Austin elaborated:

To this day, whenever I go anywhere and I come back, and [I] get in the car at [Los Angeles International Airport], and [I am] on the… freeway once again, and [I] see Los Angeles in the distance, and it is this one big metropolitan mess, there is something so satisfying about getting off the freeway, going past Echo Park… turning off Glendale Boulevard onto Armstrong [Avenue, and] going past the lake, because my neighborhood is extremely satisfying to return to. It’s calming.
Even after over twenty-five years in Silver Lake, Austin is still in awe of its physical features:

It’s still remarkable to me. I still have guests who come and look out over my view and say, “This looks like Italy,” and I don’t [even] have a view of the lake! Frankly, if I had a view of the lake, I don’t think I’d ever leave my house! I’d just be in a stupor… The lake has herons on it, the lake has coyotes in it, the lake has ducks for Christ’s sake! And we’re in L.A., it isn’t Maine!

As Casey Edwards stated, “If you feel like having a really urban experience, you can and if you feel like having a tree-filled, more hillside, nature-filled experience, you can have that, too.” These residents believe that both types of experience are readily accessible to them, and, from their words, this is evidently a choice that they appreciate.

In *Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World*, a collection of essays edited by Peggy F. Barlett, various authors outline the different kinds of connection people in cities make with nature, most notably emerging emotional attachment, purposeful action, and commitments to political action (3). For example, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, in “Preference, Restoration, and Meaningful Action in the Context of Nearby Nature,” look into the full implications of place attachment, which, they argue, move individuals to act: “Special places, places for which we have a strong attachment, are likely to be ones where we are invested in meaningful action. They are places where we feel needed, where our participation can contribute to their long-term viability” (279). Barlett herself, in the conclusion to the book, reiterates: “Deeper connection to place can lead to political struggles with entrenched interests” (310). Emotional attachment to place, then, would be one of the strongest reasons
why one would be inspired to act and defend a place; it fosters a sense of investment and ownership. Furthermore, as evidenced by motivations articulated by residents, such participation, in turn, may then strengthen attachment, as the two contribute to the development of a sense of community, which itself prompts participation and connects residents to each other as well as to place.

THE RESERVOIRS AND COMMON GREEN SPACE

In Silver Lake, the Kaplans’ point is best exemplified through residents’ investment in and defense of the reservoirs. Richard C. Stedman writes, “higher place attachment is… expected to be associated with greater willingness to engage in place-protective action” (567). While there are various arenas through which I could discuss the effects of place attachment in Silver Lake, I have chosen to focus on activism regarding the reservoirs, as an example of such “place-protective action,” because the reservoirs, in their physical and social dimensions, figure centrally in residents’ descriptions of what links them to the neighborhood; therefore, exploring the political and social implications of this attachment in regard to the reservoirs will shed light on the power of attachment to prompt action. In addition to this, while it was a small group of residents who took on this fight, as I aim to show, its methods, goals, and achievements reflected a larger, collective understanding of the issue’s importance to the community.

Tom LaBonge, Los Angeles City Councilman and native of Silver Lake, talks with the passion of someone who has worked his entire life for his neighborhood.
Some of his answers to my questions had the flair of a politician’s speech, as he represents several areas of the city of Los Angeles and understandably does not want to intimate preference of one over another. But, at times, his love for his neighborhood sneaks out, like when he said he would be willing to bet that Silver Lake is one of the top twenty-five neighborhoods in the country, a pretty hefty wager.

I spoke to LaBonge during two separate sessions, the details of which reveal much about his unique position as one of Silver Lake’s official advocates. The first was a scheduled interview at Los Angeles City Hall that I had envisioned as a sit-down in his office. Instead, the interview took place in the main chamber, as the morning voting session had run over by hours. LaBonge, even though the lengthy process stressed him, had promised to accommodate me. During our interview, he would bounce back and forth between his assigned seat on the voting floor and the benches in the audience where I sat with his intern and my recorder. He would string me a few lines answering a question before popping up and rushing back to the front to cast a vote. With no end to the session in sight, he eventually instructed an intern to show me around City Hall, as he exclaimed the views from the top were worth seeing. Somewhat dejected, I left two and a half hours later with just over twelve minutes of disjointed, chaotic recordings.

Three weeks later, as I settled into my house back at Wesleyan, I received a call on my cell phone from a number I did not recognize. It was LaBonge, who spoke with me on his speakerphone as he drove home from downtown and dropped three visiting French students off at the Griffith Park Observatory on the way. Tom LaBonge was an important person with whom to speak for a number of reasons.
Since he both grew up in the neighborhood and now works to represent it, he is a knowledgeable source. But, more importantly, he is an advocate of the neighborhood, active and dedicated, and he is perceived amongst residents to be, as William Ray put it, “a big force in Silver Lake.” He is a natural supporter of the neighborhood, and he fills with pride and joy when describing it. As an elected official and an urban issues expert, he understands the significance of the topography:

It’s a wonderful neighborhood in which we live, and I think it’s because there’s some central things to it: There [are] hill[s], there’s a road configuration, there [are] views – you can see the beautiful Hollywood sign and the Observatory from one part. [From] the other side you can see the beautiful San Gabriels, sometimes snowcapped. You can see downtown, but in the heart of it is this beautiful body of water, formed in 1904 by William Mulholland and others to build a reservoir system for the city. The Silver Lake reservoir is one of the jewels of the city, so that connects people, and people walk around that reservoir, and it’s a very special thing.

LaBonge is acutely aware of the power the reservoir holds among residents, and he is not the only one. During my conversation with Elizabeth Austin, she repeatedly expressed how important she felt the reservoir is to the neighborhood:

“I’m just scared periodically,” she said, because “they always say they are going to cover it up… I’m telling you, people would lay their bodies down.” As individuals feel a personal investment in the lake as a key feature of their neighborhood and as a social space for the community, it begins to function as a rallying point; thus the reservoirs take on the role of “connecting people,” to use LaBonge’s words, which goes beyond its mere function of providing water to the city.

By 1987, then, the Silver Lake reservoirs were cemented as both a central feature and rallying point of the neighborhood. Between the years of 1907, when it
was completed, and 1987, residents had incorporated the reservoir into their daily lives, enjoying the surrounding park space and using it as a fishing spot during the first half of the century. Some even banded together in 1973 against a renovation plan announced by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) (McPhillips). But in 1987, as I alluded to in the first chapter, the LADWP announced that it was permanently covering both Ivanhoe and Silver Lake and building an industrial-style filtration plant onsite in accordance with new state and federal standards concerning drinking water quality. Almost immediately, the Committee to Save Silver Lake’s Reservoirs (CSSLR) was formed by a group of concerned residents. When the residents realized that Silver Lake was one of ten reservoir communities in the city that was being threatened, the group aligned itself with activists from other neighborhoods to form the Coalition to Preserve Open Reservoirs (CPOR) in opposition to the LADWP. Through their activism, these citizens prompted the Los Angeles City Council to mandate mediation between the LADWP and the CPOR, mediation that continues to this day. These residents forced the LADWP and the city to consult the neighborhood during community meetings before any development occurred on the reservoir property. As Rachel and Stephen Kaplan would say, the reservoirs had become that kind of “special place” that moves people to meaningful action. In this way, the reservoir property became a rallying point around which community members could unite for a greater cause. Their activism and participation, cast in terms of “saving” and “preserving” the reservoirs, was posited, in the Kaplans’ words, as making possible their “long-term viability.” Not simply a storage unit for drinking water or an aesthetically pleasing attraction to boost
property values and taxes for the city, the lake had taken on another role that resulted from individuals’ attachment to the place and resulted in what we can only characterize as a sense of communal ownership.

Nina Watson, a self-defined reservoir enthusiast and champion of free access, recalled her involvement with the LADWP mediations with pride. A charming woman with grey hair and glasses, she made gestures and imitated voices while telling me about the fight between Silver Lake residents and the LADWP, as if she were recalling a historic boxing match. She took me through the years, starting in 1987, the year her house overlooking the reservoir was completed, and the year the LADWP announced they were permanently covering it. “My reaction to that was, of course, over my dead body.”

What followed was a series of heated meetings and boisterous discussions between the LADWP and the CSSLR. One concerned solely with adhering to the new governmental standards and the other invested in preserving the aesthetics of its neighborhood and developing green, social space for the community, the two groups hired a mediator in an attempt to avoid any future litigation. Early on in the discussions, when covering the lake seemed to be inevitable and the fight turned temporarily to how to salvage some semblance of natural beauty, Watson recalled inviting a man from Glendale, a neighboring city, to give a presentation at one of the community meetings. The man had recently devised a way to plant grass on top of buried concrete reservoirs and turn them into active parks, something the LADWP claimed was impossible: “He was very proud,” Watson said. “He was in charge of making sure that it was all safe and tested… so he made his presentation, and I can
remember this vividly, this was twenty-five years ago. I sat up in my chair and looked straight at the guy who was especially opposed to the concrete covers and grass and said ‘Well, it seems to answer that question, doesn’t it?’” Watson said, as she laughed and then took a sip of her tea.

Her feistiness highlights how serious the residents believed this issue to be. To further stress the primarily social and aesthetic value the lake had for residents then, it is important to note that, interestingly, the water in the Silver Lake reservoirs does not flow out of Silver Lake taps; instead, it serves communities south and east of the area. In some ways, maybe Silver Lakers had the luxury of viewing the reservoirs as simply a significant place without any greater responsibilities; the water quality did not directly affect them. But residents of Silver Lake have not been solely concerned with the aesthetics of the place or failed to acknowledge the intended function of the reservoirs: In 2007, when the LADWP determined that the level of bromate, a chemical formed when chlorine-treated water is exposed to sunlight, was too high in the reservoirs, the neighborhood agreed to cover them with small, black balls to block the sun, arguably an unsightly measure, but one that residents readily accepted and understood (Vara-Orta). But eliminating the reservoirs altogether was an entirely different issue. The resident mobilization in 1987 was about defending a place that had become a crucial point of community life. It was about ensuring its long-term viability, which, I argue, speaks to the power of place and place attachment in Silver Lake and its rootedness in the physical environment.

During the 1990s, things calmed down and a good working relationship was developed between the opposing sides. The city compelled the LADWP to approach
each of the projects to modify the ten reservoirs with specialized plans and individual community input instead of through its original, all-encompassing agenda, which benefited Silver Lake, as its reservoir was one of the only city reservoirs in the middle of a residential neighborhood. However, this didn’t end Watson’s or the rest of the Committee’s involvement: Silver Lake was far down the LADWP’s priority list and after it completed Rowena and moved onto Hollywood, as it tackled Stone Canyon and Elysian, Watson and her fellow comrades decided against waiting for the LADWP to draft its own plans for the project. Instead, the Committee decided to draw up its own Master Plan that would include a vision for future projects on the reservoir property to benefit the community, as well as proposals for how best to complete the LADWP-mandated plans. The reservoirs, the Master Plan indicated, are on 127 acres of land owned by the LADWP, 101 of which are taken up by the water basins, access roads, and LADWP operations complexes (“Silver Lake Master Plan”). Two acres of land are leased to the Department of Recreation and Parks for the Silver Lake Recreation Center, while one is leased to the Neighborhood Nursery School, which operates its outdoor preschool adjacent to the Ivanhoe Reservoir. The remaining twenty-three acres, the Master Plan noted, had been closed to the public since the 1940s, and one of the main objectives of the Master Plan was to create communal, social space in these areas. The outlined projects – a walking path, traffic signals, and the expansion of green space—were separate from the LADWP’s actual plan for the reservoirs, which had yet to be finalized or implemented, and were meant to be used as a tool for compromise; residents would agree to construction and changes at the reservoir if the LADWP gave something back.
Committed to representing the community as wholly as possible, the CSSLR never takes a position without polling residents, and Watson noted that the organization “advocate[s] what the community wants.” During the development of the Master Plan, the Committee led community workshops to ascertain the opinions and concerns of Silver Lake residents. According to the timeline published on the Committee’s website, the idea for the Master Plan came about in February 1996, although the Committee did not begin to develop it until the LADWP made a commitment to be involved and take its recommendations into consideration. While this agreement came about in the spring of 1997, it wasn’t until the spring of 1998 that LADWP General Manager S. David Freeman announced the LADWP-funded contract for the Plan. In February 1999, the landscape architecture firm Mia Lehrer and Associates was selected to create the Master Plan, which was completed and publicly presented in March 2001. In 2002, when the LADWP began to draw up plans for its own Silver Lake project, the community met to vote on four potential options. Because the federal regulations now called for covered reservoirs, the LADWP sought out to build buried water storage units on the reservoir property instead of physically covering Silver Lake and Ivanhoe, which the LADWP now knew would lead to community outrage. Silver Lake residents settled for an option that included five years of major construction that would eventually result in buried tanks for the LADWP and the opening of common green space for the community. Since many brought up the issue of traffic in my interviews as something negative about living in Silver Lake, this agreement speaks to what residents were willing to compromise in order to preserve the reservoirs.
Things took an unexpected turn in 2003 when, before initiating construction, the LADWP announced that it had retained another site for the storage units and would no longer need to build on the Silver Lake site. Additionally, the Silver Lake reservoirs would be removed from service altogether, concluding that any long-term water quality projects were now unnecessary. Instead, the LADWP would need to build a pipe connecting the new site with the existing structures under the Silver Lake reservoir to transport the drinking water to its destination. This water would be of an entirely different source from the water in the reservoirs, which would now be re-categorized as “view lakes.” This seemingly good news, however, came at a cost, as the LADWP no longer had the obligation to follow through with funding the community projects outlined in the Master Plan. Since funding was now an issue, the Committee had to turn to its local representatives and the government and was ultimately able to secure the initial funds through state assembly members Scott Wildman and Dario Frommer and city council members Eric Garcetti and, predictably, Tom LaBonge.

The Master Plan devised by the Committee to Save Silver Lake’s Reservoirs is split into three phases. The first phase included “the creation of an accessible, continuous pathway for walkers and joggers around the entire reservoir that is separated from vehicular traffic” (“Silver Lake Master Plan”). The idea for a walking path actually arose in 1986, as visitors to the reservoir were already using the perimeter area for exercise and recreation, but for lack of an alternative were doing so in the busy streets (Gordon, “Silver Lake Jogging Trail”). This plan did not come to fruition, though, until the implementation of the Master Plan. Construction of the first
segment of pathway was completed in October 2005, beginning at the intersection of West Silver Lake Drive and Armstrong Avenue. The second phase sought to continue the path on Silver Lake Boulevard from Armstrong Avenue to Van Pelt Place, and this segment was officially opened in December 2008 ("Silver Lake Blvd. Walking Path"). Currently, only a small side street lacks an official pedestrian pathway, as budget issues have delayed its construction ("Pedestrian Hit").

The third phase involved the creation of the Meadow, which was opened in April 2011. A large open park off Silver Lake Boulevard, the Meadow attracts walkers, sunbathers, picnickers, and people tossing Frisbees and playing catch. Immensely popular, the 2.5 acres of grass provide Silver Lake with extended green space to socialize in a variety of ways.
There is still discussion on whether residents will gain access to the still city-protected Eucalyptus Grove on West Silver Lake Drive, where Great Blue Herons nest. LaBonge and Watson have disagreements over the extent of access residents should have – LaBonge, on the one hand, wants to leave the Eucalyptus Grove to the birds while Watson, on the other, wants the fences down and a meandering path through the trees – but the community has yet to approve plans or secure funding for any changes to the Grove.

Many residents of Silver Lake extol the changes that have been made to the reservoir property, particularly because they encourage walking in the neighborhood. James Higgins said to me,

Particularly with the walking path and the new Meadow, [there is] much more use of the outdoor… [and] green space that’s available… I just see people walking and biking everywhere, which you didn’t used to see so much… The reservoir is so heavily used, I mean, [it’s] just incredible. So it’s a… huge community asset and I see many, many more people using it now than ever used it before because it’s safer for one thing, [because] you don’t have to walk in the street. I think… one
of the best things to happen to the neighborhood since I moved here was having the walking path and creating the Meadow.

Overall, the Silver Lake Master Plan has been remarkably successful and is a testament to the power people in Silver Lake have had over their neighborhood and the places they value. As Eric Howell, employee for Councilman Eric Garcetti said, “Silver Lake, to me, has always been ahead of the game… They’ve always had that mentality of ‘we can do this.’ In my opinion, that puts them at a distinct advantage; it attracts people who are politically active and want to do something.” The CSSLR is an example of this effort and mindset.

The CSSLR was renamed the Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy (SLRC) in 2009 after councilman Eric Garcetti pointed out that the group had successfully saved the reservoirs. Officially, it remains “an all-volunteer, non-profit corporation dedicated to preserving and enhancing the historical, aesthetic, ecological and recreational benefits of Silver Lake’s open waters and surrounding open space” (Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy). The mediations between the LADWP and Silver Lake are ongoing although their required frequency has decreased from twice a month to once a quarter. Because the reservoir is going offline in 2015, Watson told me that the Committee is discussing with city officials the possibility of re-opening a connection between the reservoir and the Los Angeles River to incorporate the lake into the system that cleans storm water runoff:

Right now, the commitment from the DWP is to keep water in the reservoir at the operating level, which is 440 feet above sea level… They said they would but we don’t have anything in writing… [Making the reservoir a part of the storm water sanitizing system would] make it productive and useful because we are concerned that a view lake is [eventually] going to be empty.
Despite, or perhaps because of, the CSSLR’s positive impact, there is evidence that the LADWP has recently attempted to circumvent community involvement on another issue, if with little success. Last summer, an issue arose when a few residents noticed red paint on sycamore trees on the so-called Grassy Knoll next to the Silver Lake Recreation Center. The LADWP was going to remove the trees to make space for the construction of a pipeline for the reservoir, without informing the neighborhood. James Higgins, Silver Lake Neighborhood Council Board member, explained to me that once the Council heard of the plans, it immediately formed a Silver Lake Reservoir Complex Committee to act as a watchdog and advocate against the LADWP. By creating community awareness, the Council was able to motivate the LADWP to find another way to carve out the space necessary for the construction. Higgins said:

Amazingly, they came up with an alternate plan, which they hadn’t even… considered, [one] that saved the trees. It means closing the street down, [allowing only for] one-way traffic for maybe eight months to a year, but no trees will have to go. And somebody said, “Well, it’s going to push traffic onto neighboring streets, onto other narrow streets,” which is true, and one of the persons who lived on one of those streets said, “You know what, I can replace a rearview mirror if somebody knocks it off, [but] I can’t replace a sixty-five-year old sycamore tree.”

Another recently completed project is the creation of public space at the current site of the biweekly Silver Lake Farmer’s Market. An island bordered by Griffith Park Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, and Edgecliff Drive has been expanded by the closing of streets to motor vehicles to accommodate moveable tables and chairs and a basketball hoop. In this much busier, commercial section of Silver Lake, the Sunset Triangle Plaza stands out, for reasons beyond its polka-dot façade:
It is part of a pilot project by Streets for People, an initiative of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health and the City of Los Angeles Planning Commission, which seeks to “transform underused streets into public spaces” ("Pedestrians and Bikes"). As the Silver Lake Improvement Association, the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, and local businesses supported this project, it is another example of Silver Lake residents’ commitment to pedestrian-friendly, common spaces that foster and support community life ("About S4P"). Through these bouts of activism, residents have directly impacted the physical environment of Silver Lake. Attached, active, and vocal, residents exhibit their place attachment through their investment in the defense and transformation of space.

**Attachment Beyond the Physical: Narratives and Experience**

The storied history of defending the lake exemplifies how place attachment can prompt meaningful and sustained action. From my conversations with residents in
Silver Lake, it is clear that the creation and circulation of narratives – how people talk about Silver Lake and how, in turn, these narratives mediate their experiences in and their relationship to the neighborhood – are also a manifestation of such place attachment. Narratives begin to permeate experience as soon as people begin feeling attached to their surroundings. In Silver Lake, the physical landscape and its history have had a profound impact on the narratives many have constructed to describe and explain their neighborhood, and these narratives, in turn, have informed the experiences of individuals as well as their efforts to build community in this section of Los Angeles. Narratives and experience are intertwined.

Residents *produce* narratives about Silver Lake not for any significant reason other than to articulate, explain, and authenticate their neighborhood to themselves and others. These narratives impact how people live in Silver Lake, the expectations natives and outsiders have about the area, and the reputation and stereotypes that proliferate both through casual word-of-mouth and media outlets. But most importantly, these narratives inform the experiences of residents and are critical to why and how they decide to act on a particular issue. Silver Lakers incessantly talk about Silver Lake; residents like to discuss its character, its reputation, and its identity to the point that it is impossible to conclude whether the narratives or experiences came first. But this distinction simply does not matter; only the interplay between narratives and experience of place is significant. In his reflections on how Apache social experience is always an “emplaced” experience, Keith Basso writes:

> Now and again, and sometimes without apparent cause, awareness is seized – arrested – and the place on which it settles becomes an object of spontaneous reflection and resonating sentiment. It is at times such as these, when individuals step back from the flow of everyday
experience and attend self-consciously to places – when, we may say, they pause to actively sense them – that their relationships to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt. (54)

Basso goes on to incorporate the significance of narrative in place attachment:

Locally significant places get depicted and appraised by established local citizens… Surrounded by places, and always in one place or another, men and women talk about them constantly, and it is from listening in on such exchanges and then trying to ascertain what has been said that interested outsiders can begin to appreciate what the encompassing landscape is really all about. (56)

While Basso writes of cultural geography, particularly Apache forms of attachment to land, the dialectic between reflection and sentiment of which he writes is relevant to how I think place attachment works among Silver Lake residents. Basso’s aim is to theorize, from Apache cultural knowledge, experience, and connection to their land, that experience is always “emplaced” experience and that cultural narratives are always narratives of place, an idea that, I would argue, is pertinent even in this urban setting of Silver Lake. Developing a sense of place, of any place, fosters the same feelings among any people who are attached to their landscape, and prompts attachment beyond.

COMMUNAL VALUES

While place attachment in Silver Lake seems to be initially inspired by the physical, no resident stopped at describing the hills or the lake. Their attachment to Silver Lake extends beyond the tangible and into the social and political values that many feel resonate throughout the community. Residents acknowledged certain characteristics of Silver Lake when discussing its history and their own sense of community in the
first chapter, and from my interviews, I learned that particular themes are at the core of the experience of living in Silver Lake.

First and foremost, as previously acknowledged, it is a very liberal enclave. James Higgins joked, “It’s funny when you go to vote in the elections, because they clearly know how many [Democratic voters] there are. They have like ten booths for Democrats, five for Republicans.” My mother echoed Higgins’s assertion:

[When I moved to Silver Lake,] I pretty quickly got involved with some Democratic politics. I have precinct walked many, many elections, and I did quite a few in the early and mid ‘80s… I worked in some elections where there hasn’t even been a Republican vote cast in Silver Lake, in my precinct… and I don’t think that that has changed. It is extremely Democratic, but as well as being Democrat, it is progressive. I think people are very tolerant.

The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, a local governing board that was established in 2003, has a motto, “Celebrating our traditions of diversity, innovation, and harmony” (“Welcome”). These seem to be widely accepted values, along with progressiveness, that, many expressed to me, unite residents. When I asked Carolyn Foster to describe who lives in Silver Lake, she responded without missing a beat: “Predominantly Democrats, very progressive in their thinking… and [people who have] kids that [they] want to be exposed and not protected.” Janie Pratt reiterated these sentiments:

Some of the values that I would say are really pretty dominant are, you know, really accepting every kind of person, being vocal, expressing your opinions, maybe believing in a certain democratic process, [and] being active [and] involved, whether it’s on your block or [in] the community itself. I think there is sort of an ethic of really supporting people… The community comes around so there’s a lot of caring about your neighbor, [that] kind of thing.
Diversity was a topic brought up by residents in every one of my interviews. Some residents felt that they could not even speak to common values in Silver Lake because of the diverse population. William Ray told me that he “[could not] describe the typical Silver Lake resident but [could] describe the probable Silver Lake resident,” before going on to characterize one using the same descriptions stated above by other residents. At first, when I asked Casey Edwards if she felt there were any overarching values or concerns amongst residents in the neighborhood, she said, “I would never deign to speak for the diverse population of Silver Lake.” As we discussed further, she did grapple with some common threads:

I think I would like to think of my neighborhood as super progressive and super tolerant of all of these other cultures. I think that’s what we’re sort of known for, absolutely. But is there an overwhelming philosophy…? Being individuals is being individuals, and I think that, if anything… [Individuality would be a characteristic], and the respect of that, so that would cover then [tolerance].

When diversity is discussed amongst residents in Silver Lake, people are not crunching or looking at the numbers or debating over percentages. Even though my interviewees were a subset of white and middle class residents, they overwhelming characterized Silver Lake as diverse, and more significantly, stressed this neighborhood trait as one of utmost importance. Depending on whom you ask, some will say that Silver Lake is racially diverse while others will acknowledge the segregation between the pricier, hilltop houses where many white families live and the cheaper homes north of Sunset that tend to be more Latino. Some will characterize the neighborhood as middle class or even upper-middle class although the numbers show an actual range of incomes. Many different kinds of people live in Silver Lake, from artists to lawyers, infants to retirees, Asians, whites, Latinos, the
rich, the comfortable, the working class. But the general consensus from my interviews was not that Silver Lake was specifically racially diverse or economically diverse; residents were mainly talking about the people in their immediate spheres of action and experience.

James Higgins illustrated the diversity when discussing his block, “Even on this little street,” he said, “we have several gay couples, we’ve got elderly people, we’ve got young people with babies, we’ve got Asians, we have Latinos, we have… African American[s]… I mean that’s only thirteen houses.” During my interview with Kerry Weber, my second and fifth grade teacher, who still teaches at Ivanhoe Elementary and has a second grader there, she explained what she believes her daughter Grace gains from Silver Lake’s diversity:

The things that she accepts and tolerates and doesn’t even think twice about are remarkable… Many, many of her friends have two dads, two moms… it’s completely fine to her. She’s got kids at Ivanhoe and prior to that at her preschool from every ethnic background, language background, religious background, and she just takes it all in.

Weber exclaimed to me with astonishment, “I remember in our second grade classroom, we had seven languages in there… we had seven home languages in that class! To me, that’s a gift we can give Grace, and we didn’t have to do anything. We just raised her here, and it’s all around her.” The people I spoke with seemed to believe that the neighborhood as a whole values such things, and this greatly affects the construction of a community. Austin, who has a twenty-two-year old daughter, said to me, “You can meet a lot of people but [it doesn’t matter] if they don’t share… the way you see things politically or how you want to raise your kids or have your own sense of humor… It just so happens that I’ve been lucky enough to find thirty-
five people like that.” As Austin and everyone else I spoke with would say, this fact, which makes Silver Lake special, if not unique, in their estimation, strengthens residents’ sentiments—one could say attachment—towards Silver Lake. There might not be an ultimate explanation for how or why these principles are widely held dear in Silver Lake – after all, people in cities tend to be more liberal, and there is a history of progressive ideals in the neighborhood. But these values color residents’ ideas about their neighborhood; Silver Lake’s progressiveness, inclusion, and diversity are things widely discussed as characteristics of the neighborhood further attachment and inform action.

Most importantly though, residents expressed a belief that anyone could find a place in Silver Lake, with the exception, Janie Pratt joked, of someone “very politically conservative.” The interviews were a collection of narratives that described Silver Lake not as diverse when it comes to its values, but as diverse because of its values. Over and over again in interviews, words such as “inclusive” and “accepting” were used, not to promote Silver Lake as the sole progressive enclave in the city, but to explain the tendencies that residents believe run deep, through its history and through its hills.

Interestingly, the common concerns people usually have about living in a city like Los Angeles were generally scoffed at when I brought them up in my interviews. People talked openly about crime and safety and acknowledged the more common property crime and the very rare shootings. Over and over again, respondents would reveal whether they watched the crime rates and discuss general trends they saw, but only when prompted did most admit, as an afterthought, that they had been personally
affected by crime, always property-based. Even so, there was general confusion about why I even asked, as most people felt that dealing with these occurrences was part of life in a city and in no way outweighed the benefits, even for those raising children. “I didn’t let my kids wander when they were seven,” said Monica Sharp. But some restrictions on freedom and higher concern about safety are not viewed as major issues. My mother explained the reasoning:

There’s a standard saying in America: “It’s a great place to raise kids,” and for me that’s a euphemism for “It’s white and boring and in the middle of Iowa and has no crime,” and to me, the [so-called] great places to raise kids are [where] you might produce a very boring kid because they won’t ever see any adversity. I did not want that for my kids. Obviously, I wouldn’t want that if I lived in the middle of a city. I knew they would be exposed to crime, I knew they would be exposed to many types of people from many socioeconomic groups, and I felt that was very important. Now, I was not happy that they could not walk out the front door on a bicycle. I was not happy with that, and that was a tradeoff.

Kerry Weber agreed:

There are helicopters at night, there is graffiti around, there are gangs [and] part of me, on the one hand… can’t stand [my daughter] seeing it but on the other hand, especially as she gets older, I realize this is life. I’m not celebrating it or rubbing her nose in it but it’s around her, she lives with it and she learns to cope.

Instead, what was distinctive about my conversations is that people rallied around the good and explained how they learned how to deal with the bad, which was made easier by the proliferation of common values. Austin recalled a time, over a decade ago:

I remember coming home. I was coming down West Silver Lake Drive, rounding the corner where the [Silver Lake Recreation Center] is, and there were gun shots… I flipped out. But I have to say the community response was, the police must have gotten about seventeen
hundred million calls, like “You will get your butt into this neighborhood, and you will clean this up.”

Just as people rallied for the reservoirs, my interviewees emphasized how residents actively worked to keep the community as safe as possible. Two of them, Sonya Valdez and Kerry Weber, have been involved in Neighborhood Watch; Valdez formed a group with neighbors when she moved to the neighborhood in 1978 and Weber recently started a chapter on her block. As Valdez explained to me, “we started to get to know our [Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)] officers that patrolled the area and that opened up a whole bunch of ways to start making connections for public safety… identifying actual problem spots and then trying to work with LAPD on those issues in particular.” The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council also has a Public Safety and Crime Prevention committee open to the public that meets once a month.

While a commitment to diversity and inclusion stand out as fundamental, general progressive ideals are equally significant. Whether it is fighting for the legalization of gay marriage or adopting green habits, many residents commit themselves to these principles. When individuals develop an attachment to place, it gives them an arena in which to invest and articulate these values through action. As Basso describes, “Fueled by sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness to the past, sense of place roots individuals… holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood” (85). From my conversations with residents, I would argue that it is from this shared identity that community is formed. As residents come together with similar values, shared narratives, and common goals,
community takes root. Through both official organizations, such as schools, booster clubs, the Neighborhood Council, and youth sports leagues, and more casual gatherings on the walking path, in the Meadow, or at neighborhood events, people become attached to more than their surroundings; they become attached to other residents and the neighborhood as a whole, a fundamental ingredient in the building of a community.
Chapter Three: Action and Participation in Silver Lake

_In a culture best identified by its uncompromising commitment to individual rights, enlightened self-interest, and the icon of the self-made person, any discussion of a life lived in place and in common with others will seem quaint, romantic, idealistic, and thoroughly backward looking. But we forget, or never knew, that there is an alternative view of human nature that sees membership in a community as the central feature of a successful and prosperous life._

_- William Vitek, “Rediscovering the Landscape”_

_The second you move to Silver Lake, start a business here or decide to be part of this community, you’re part of this community._

_Resident Casey Edwards_

**PLACE ATTACHMENT AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

What are the implications of place attachment in the formation of a community?

Interestingly, literature pertaining to the relationship between place attachment and community participation is scant. Lynne C. Manzo and Douglas D. Perkins acknowledge precisely this gap in the literature. They write:

> It is possible that because place attachment and identity began with a focus on individual meanings and experience, the applicability of these concepts has been less readily apparent to those working on the neighborhood scale. But communities are composed of individuals with histories, values, identities, and attachments and these do not develop outside of place; they also play a critical role in place-based improvements and planning. (344)

Silver Lake has a history of such “place-based improvements and planning,” as seen in the fight to save the reservoir detailed in chapter two. But what does this kind of activism have to do with the community at large? When studying the development of communities, scholars have focused primarily on “sense of community,” which is thought to “stimulat[e] satisfaction with one’s residential environment, encourag[e] neighboring relations, and enhanc[e] one’s perception of personal and group
empowerment to influence what goes on around [one’s] homes” (Chavis and Wandersman 72). Amongst other things, scholars have resorted to the concept of sense of community to discuss participation (Chavis and Wandersman) and empowerment (Florin and Wandersman; Speer and Hughey).

A link has been established between place attachment and sense of community: Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston argue that both “attachment and sense of community have implications for community dependence, in that the affective, cognitive and behavioural features of both can enter into a person’s assessment of the quality of a town and the comparison of this quality with alternative communities” (276). But while their study was more concerned with individual concepts of place identity and self-in-community, Manzo and Perkins focus on the connection between place attachment and sense of community as the two relate to community participation and development. Manzo and Perkins, in fact, argue that any attention given to sense of community ought to consider “place-based psychological ties to the community” lest we ignore “critical contribution to effective community development and planning efforts [these can make], as they are a source of community power and collective action” (337). They, therefore, advocate for studies that emphasize the interplay between place attachment and sense of community, for reasons that are critical to the overall argument in this thesis: “Both…manifest themselves behaviorally in participation. Both can be especially valuable when tied to practice” (Manzo and Perkins 339).

From an anthropological point of view, Keith Basso, in his discussion of the relationship between sense of place and cultural narratives, affirms the importance of
the connection between place and the social community: “Thus represented and
enacted… places, and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social
life, anchoring it to features of the landscape and blanketing it with layers of
signification that few can fail to appreciate” (57).

In this chapter, I examine the ways that the narratives residents produce about
Silver Lake simultaneously influence and are influenced by community involvement.
In the previous chapter, I argued that becoming attached to place, taking ownership
over it, and investing in the local led many residents to participate or become
involved in Silver Lake. As I aim to show in what follows, participation itself has an
effect on community building in the neighborhood. In the case of Silver Lake,
participation is possible at a variety of levels: through official organizations,
community centers, educational institutions, and yearly local events. What I learned
from my interviews with residents and city officials is that, through such
participation, residents believe they are working to make their neighborhood a
community and, in the process, are strengthening the values that, they also believe,
are already characteristic of Silver Lake. By getting involved in local government,
remaining active at the public schools, or remaining committed to the local youth
sports league, residents aspire to form individual ties and contribute to a larger
communal atmosphere.

From my conversations with residents I also learned that, in these efforts, it is
the idea of a set of shared values that prompt many people to invest and participate. A
commitment to diversity and progressive practices weaves through the rationale
behind many of Silver Lake’s myriad community organizations as well as through
residents’ stories about and visions for the neighborhood. In other words, working towards a diverse and inclusive neighborhood seems to be a vital motivation behind the actions of invested citizens. But these themes are not simply words with no greater meaning; residents strive to act in order to ensure that these concepts have real-world implications. In Silver Lake, as I discuss below, one could say that individual sentiments toward the neighborhood lead to collective action, personal investment, participation, and, finally, a self-described sense of community.

OFFICIAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are a large number of official organizations in Silver Lake, ranging from local government agencies to private, non-profit and community-based associations geared towards resident interests and neighborhood advocacy. Besides the Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy detailed in chapter two, I chose to examine two of the larger, more comprehensive organizations: Silver Lake Neighborhood Council and the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce.

The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council (SLNC) is an official government body that was established in 2003. It is the product of a City Charter approved by Los Angeles voters in June 1999, which created the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE). According to the SLNC website, the purpose of DONE “is to promote more citizen participation in government and to make government more responsive to local needs through a citywide network of neighborhood councils,” one of which is Silver Lake’s. The mission statement on the SNLC website reads: “The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council will work to honor diversity, build community,
forge bonds with neighboring communities, and promote participation in city
governance and decision-making processes to improve the quality of life for all of
Silver Lake’s Stakeholders” (“Welcome”). Here, the terms “diversity” and
“community” are at the forefront of the SLNC’s stated commitments, and when I
spoke with two Council members, they both reiterated that making these values
reflective of the board’s actions were main concerns. When I sat down with James
Higgins and asked why he became involved, he teasingly responded: “Ignorance,
complete ignorance.” But he proceeded to describe the Council and its
accomplishments with pride and the conviction that its main mission is to represent
the community as a whole, with diversity as a driving force:

I definitely think that this particular board is very, very diverse. [It]
represents quite a cross-section of Silver Lake, and I think that
everybody approaches it in the same spirit, which is “we are there to
represent the community and to get feedback and to provide
information if we can.” In that sense, we are very representative, very
keenly attuned to the fact that we speak for a lot of people who don’t
even know we’re speaking for them. They’re not even aware of it, but
we have to be out there on their behalf. So it’s been, I think, it is
representative in many respects. It’s a very diverse board. Racially, it’s
a mix of people. And there are many people on the board who have
been on it for a very long time because they have invested a lot in it,
and that’s great, and… [there are] a lot of new people [who] came in
[during] the last election, with particularly more sustainable agendas.

The board meets once a month and is comprised of twenty-one members.
Fourteen of the members are elected from the seven geographical regions of Silver
Lake (two per region) and seven are elected At-Large to ensure that the board remains
representative of the neighborhood as a whole. They are elected in the citywide
elections to one- or two-year terms and can serve a maximum of four consecutive
terms (“Bylaws”). Casey Edwards, who is currently serving her first term, agreed
with Higgins and believes that because the board itself is diverse, it is better able to adequately represent the neighborhood:

I’m proud of a lot of what the Council has done. I think they bring dialogue to the neighborhood. I believe in the Neighborhood Council system, it’s a very cool system; it’s not everywhere so I’m glad it’s here. We’ve had really diverse decisions about where our money’s gone and that makes me happy. We’ve supported a community garden at the local elementary school, we’ve supported the… Sunset Free Clinic, we’ve supported the Shakespeare festival, we’ve supported at-risk youth who are in… a police-training program. I feel like we have really done a great job… I don’t think anyone could accuse the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council of just having one special interest where the money goes. We really have tried to represent the community as a whole, and that’s a hard job to do, and we’re a diverse board and that’s why it works: Because all of the different people on our board bring different projects and concerns to the board. It’s not a bunch of people who always agree. So it’s cool, I’m very proud of us. We are a contentious bunch, but we’re Silver Lake, we’re individuals!

James Higgins added that the SLNC’s role extends beyond monetarily supporting community projects:

It’s not just giving away money, it’s [also] about community awareness. The Neighborhood Council has gotten crosswalks installed [at] really dangerous [intersections,] [we have] worked really hard… [on] public safety issues, and… [we have] create[d] public awareness about development… We don’t have any power; all we can do is recommend but the City Planning department takes our recommendations very seriously.

In addition to the Governing Board, the neighborhood council has eleven other committees that the public can join, all geared towards current community issues representing the broad array of interests of Silver Lake: Arts and Culture, Budget and Finance, Friends of Silver Lake Animals, Governmental Affairs, Outreach, Parks and Beautification, Public Safety and Crime Prevention, Reservoir Complex, History Collective, Transportation and Public Works, and Urban Design
and Preservation. Each of these meets separately from the general meeting, with ample opportunity for members of the community to become involved in issues of their choosing.

The History Collective, in particular, underscores the commitment that many feel towards the neighborhood. Started in 2005 by community activist Bea Gold, the History Collective seeks to obtain oral histories of long-time, active, or interesting residents of Silver Lake. To date, the Collective has conducted over fifty interviews involving over seventy people. Higgins, who co-chairs the committee, described the process:

It’s all oral histories. They last about an hour. We have a cameraperson and an interviewer go to the person’s house, usually… We interviewed Neutra [and] some of the people you’d expect, major local artists. But we’ve also interviewed a lot of, like several of the people I’ve interviewed have already passed away. They were in their late eighties or nineties at that point. That’s one reason we wanted to interview them because now their stories are preserved, and they wouldn’t have been otherwise.

He also noted how these individual interviews contribute to the community as a whole, particularly because of the history that is uncovered, even the most minor of anecdotes:

It’s their lives in connection with Silver Lake [that we’re interested in]. It’s ‘Where were you born, how did you end up here’… We try to get a picture of what life was like where they were at that time, and it’s different in each era. We have people that were born here, and we have memories from the ’20s and ’30s of people, [who] remember the original film studios that were here before, it’s fascinating history. There used to be a creek that ran right by Sunset [Boulevard]. It’s been long covered up, [but] they used to go down as kids and play in this creek… It’s things like that that you discover.
That the Neighborhood Council deemed this a worthy project speaks to the premium neighborhood residents place on stories about Silver Lake as a way of making sense of it. Silver Lake residents believe these stories, and the experiences to which they refer, to be significant enough to record, archive, and showcase as evidence of the neighborhood diversity. It also shows how the proliferation of narratives about Silver Lake, detailing its past and present history, plays a key role in the relationship residents form with their neighborhood. The recordings have been archived at the University of Southern California Doheny Memorial Library, which has made them accessible to the public (“SLNC History Collective”).

Janie Pratt, co-chair of History Collective along with Higgins, is an active community leader who started the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce (SLCC) in 1987. A local chiropractor, she moved into an office on West Silver Lake Boulevard in 1982 and was approached by another businesswoman about starting the Chamber:

There was another woman who started the Backdoor Bakery and was, you know, pretty entrenched in her business there and knew that I was serious about staying in business there [as well], and she asked me to start the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce. Silver Lake never had a Chamber of Commerce, and she kind of convinced me to do it. And then she completely flaked out so I was sort of left holding the bag. And I never considered myself much of a businessperson really and didn’t really know much about Chambers of Commerce at all, but it was Silver Lake, and I just figured I’d go ahead with it and see how it went.

Today, there are approximately 280 business owners in the Chamber who get together for quarterly mixers. The Chamber even provides “sustainability guidelines” for those hosting mixers to ensure that events are as green as possible, as environmental issues are very important to most Silver Lake residents and especially important to the
Chamber ("Sustainability Mixer Guidelines"). The Chamber, while primarily meant to bring together business owners in Silver Lake and collectively address their concerns, also has an interest in the community as a whole and on how businesses can contribute to the improvement of the neighborhood. On its website, under the “Our Purpose” section, the Chamber’s commitment to an inclusive community is made prominent:

The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce is a voluntary action agency designed to meet both business and community needs. We believe that if the community does well and prospers, businesses in that community will also prosper.

Among other things it is a civic clearinghouse, a public relations counselor, a human relations promotion medium. We are interested in total community development which matches community needs with community resources. The Chamber seeks to work harmoniously with its membership and other responsible constituencies in the community as an organization with a special role of leadership in our area. We seek to be progressive and innovative. We want to attract the greatest number of individuals and businesses into membership, thereby creating a pool of resources from which can be drawn ideas, energy and finances for the betterment of our community. We also exist to promote our area so many are encouraged to shop, dine and become familiar with the many resources and attractions of the Silver Lake community. We wish to support programs to assist and inform businesses and residents of issues that include crime prevention, city ordinances, small business management issues as well as organize a network of professional and business contacts in Silver Lake (“Our Purpose”).

Through this statement, Pratt and the SLCC cast the mission of the organization primarily in relation to the larger goal of positively impacting the community as a whole as a way of advancing business. If the community does well, business will do well.
The more in-depth SLCC profile available on the website provides a narrative that is strikingly “Silver Lake” and posits why both the neighborhood and the Chamber are unique. Once again, it reiterates goals of both inclusion and diversity.

The two-page institutional biography quotes two Silver Lake residents:

Attest prominent theater artist and Silver Laker Michael Kearns, “I am the HIV-positive parent of an African-American daughter, and our little family finds acceptance on these streets, in these shops, at these markets and from our neighbors.”

“Diversity is not only tolerated in Silver Lake; it’s celebrated,” adds SLCC Chairwoman Dyan Collings Ralph. “That was very important to my wife and me when we decided to open a Curves franchise here in 2003. But it’s much more than polite acceptance; there’s a genuine sense of neighborhood and of shared passions binding us together, and that’s reflected in the Chamber (“Silver Lake Chamber”).

The profile goes on to explain how it differs from other Chambers of Commerce:

Collings Ralph ventures: “Chambers of commerce tend to be politically conservative and oriented toward growth. Ours seeks to embrace the values of all our residents and to be an advocate for responsible growth.” Eschewing the stuffiness of the standard chamber, the SLCC has also made a point of mirroring what Collings Ralph calls the “infectious joy” percolating throughout Silver Lake. Among the Chamber’s early outreach successes: pageants. “We did three years of Queen of Silver Lake pageants, which evolved into a dog pageant and then a pageant for elementary-school kids,” Pratt relates. “These events helped create a ‘brand’ for the neighborhood that was clearly not the work of your typical, strictly business-oriented Chamber of Commerce.”

It is important to remark here that, in affirming a neighborhood atmosphere and set of values that it believes already exist, the Chamber contributes to the production and reproduction of such an atmosphere by positing it as true, providing evidence of it, and promoting it as a continued goal. Business owners bring their experiences to the Chamber and use them to construct a particular kind of narrative that will promote
future experiences reflective of the same values they already think have been
historically fostered in Silver Lake. We see a sort of dialectic of narratives and
experiences played out, with an emphasis on the production and reproduction of
shared, communal values.

The SLCC formed a Green Committee in 2007, which is focused on the goal
of creating zero waste amongst businesses in the area, promoting sustainable
practices, and making possible the implementation of biodegradable take-out
containers. “Going green” is somewhat a current trend, but committee founder Ann
Le wants to ensure that real change is occurring:

The board felt ‘greenification’ was often being misused for marketing
purposes. We were frequently approached with green opportunities
and wanted to be a filter to distinguish between legitimate initiatives
that could have real impact and opportunists trying to ride the green
wave. Our biggest concern was making sure that ‘green’ and
‘sustainability’ weren’t just meaningless buzzwords. We wanted to
create a thoughtful committee that surveyed all the possibilities and
provided value for our membership – not just jump on the next big
‘green’ thing (“SLCC Green”).

In its own words, the committee has gone on to:

…work aggressively to persuade all local food businesses to eliminate
Styrofoam, plastic and paper take-out products and switch to
compostable containers and cutlery, and to begin using food-waste
bins for composting; hold workshops on reducing pollution from
storm-water runoff; call for and assist in the elimination of all new
single-use plastic bags in Silver Lake; circulate information about
green roofing and walls, among other eco-friendly building and
retrofitting practices; encourage the use and expansion of the public
transportation network available in Silver Lake; and further refine the
green practices of the SLCC itself (“SLCC Green”).

The Chamber both affirms and acts on the progressive tendencies that it shares with
Silver Lake residents, emphasizing the importance of turning values into action.
When I asked Janie Pratt about owning a small business in Silver Lake, she acknowledged that it is an attractive place despite the typical struggles that come with owning a business:

There’s been a lot of gentrification around Silver Lake, so the clientele for businesses has more money than they used to. It’s a very desirable place to have a small business. It’s still a struggle, you know, the economy’s been bad so a lot of businesses that have been here for a really long time have had to fold, but there are plenty more people who want to come here.

The Chamber holds onto its official motto, “Shop Locally, Keep the Silver in Silver Lake,” and many of the residents I spoke with felt indeed committed to shopping in the neighborhood. Because of the physical makeup of Silver Lake, there are five separate business districts rather than a traditional Main Street, as shown here in the Chamber’s figure:

![Figure 4.1](image)

Pratt acknowledged that this has been challenging for the Chamber but also an attribute that most people enjoy:
I think that in a way the layout is a little difficult... It was difficult for the Chamber because there really are five different business districts and five different areas. We really wanted to have some kind of DASH (local bus) or something that would take people around but never got that. So it’s a little bit spread out compared to Atwater that has one main boulevard, [or] even Glendale. But the fact that it is five different… business districts, five different kind of residential areas, people really like that. They like it.

With a variety of business districts instead of a central one, the physical diversity of the neighborhood is increased; patrons can live, shop, and play in different areas of the same neighborhood. This feature characterizes Silver Lake in contrast to other neighborhoods in the area and increases its potential for diversity, as there are more spaces for businesses and patrons and a variety of areas within the neighborhood that cater to separate needs and wants. Interestingly, in the case of Silver Lake, residents’ perception is that this “unique” physical and economic diversity goes hand in hand with social diversity. As Casey Edwards acknowledged, it is quite possible that such physical diversity spurs community diversity:

There are nooks and crannies [in Silver Lake], and it’s not a grid. It’s unique: the topography is unique [and] the architecture is unique. It’s not a cookie-cutter neighborhood by any stretch of the word, physically. And therefore I think the people who come here are not cookie-cutter either.

The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council represents an opportunity for residents to get involved in the government of their neighborhood while the Chamber gives them a forum in which to discuss how the economy of the neighborhood can be approached in conjunction with a certain social and political vision. The two combined forces in 2007 to create and install signs around Silver Lake that read:
"Silver Lake Celebrates Our Traditions of Diversity, Innovation & Harmony," the official motto of the SLNC, printed in English, Spanish, and Tagalog ("Silver Lake Celebrates Diversity"). Pratt and community activist Jason Lyon spearheaded the project, which was funded by the Neighborhood Pride Initiative committee of the Neighborhood Council. By identifying diversity and harmony as "Silver Lake traditions" and promoting what many people deem to be community-wide values in Silver Lake, the signs work to reproduce and circulate a narrative of the neighborhood that both reflects and informs residents’ experience there.

**COMMUNITY CENTERS**

As Casey Edwards stated during our interview:

> There are a million clubs in Silver Lake. Whatever you’re into, there’s a club in Silver Lake that’s into it with you. There’s a lot of architecture in Silver Lake, so there are lots of architecture clubs and architecture tours and preservation societies. We’ve got Barnstall Art Park. Whatever you’re into, there’s definitely a collective of people in Silver Lake that are meeting once a month about it.

Various community centers throughout Silver Lake, including the Silver Lake Recreation Center, the Griffith Park Senior Center, and the Jewish Community Center, actively contribute to neighborhood life through programming aimed at bringing people with an affinity of interests together. I chose to focus on these three places both because they were discussed during a number of my interviews and because they provide examples of the age diversity that many described as a characteristic of Silver Lake. These programs cater to specific subgroups within the neighborhood, but these clubs and centers not only give individuals an outlet through
which to meet people, they also aim to create places in which the diverse population
can participate in the community.

The Silver Lake Recreation Center, adjacent to the Silver Lake Reservoir, is a
small facility, with an indoor Pee Wee basketball court, a Pee Wee soccer field, two
playgrounds, picnic tables, and an outdoor basketball court. There is a frequently used
dog park on one side and a grassy hill nicknamed the “Grassy Knoll” on the other, the
site of the dispute over the sycamore trees. This park, run by the City of Los Angeles
Department of Parks and Recreation, boasts a year-round sports program and summer
camp, and the facility was an essential community builder during my upbringing and
continues to be today. It primarily serves families with children, but the dog park and
outdoor basketball court attract people of all ages. My mother described the
importance of the park during my childhood:

[It] became a big center of our life. It was a very, very basic park. If I
went to see my sisters back east, it was a world of difference from the
kinds of facilities that my nieces and nephews had. It was very, very
plain and basic. But it became… a social center…because we didn’t
have yards… We sat there and talked to each other, and our children
played together, and children of all different walks of life and color
and socioeconomic [backgrounds] would gather in that park. Then we
started learning about the sports programs there and embraced those
sports programs and our kids played year-round sports from the time
they were four till the time they were thirteen or fourteen.

The Recreation Center facilitated year-round youth basketball, soccer,
football, and baseball programs (the Recreation Center has since stopped summer
sports and now runs a summer camp). At the time, it was predominantly Latino and
white – some of my teams even had Spanish names – and affordable to all. Carolyn
Foster and my mother remember that being in Silver Lake and remaining committed
to the public sports program were important to many parents, despite subpar facilities.

As my mother explained:

It was a discussion among parents… Our kids lived in an urban neighborhood and we wanted them to be part of it. We knew that there were other programs such as [the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO)], which just brought you out of the neighborhood and brought you into a suburb and we had no interest in that. We knew they were better programs with better facilities and better coaching… Parents would make a concerted decision, a definite decision that, “I’m not leaving to go to Glendale, I’m not leaving to go to Pasadena to play in AYSO, I want my kids playing right here.” The sports leagues were probably predominantly Latino, more Latino than white… more than half of the coaches and the director were Latino and we valued that and our kids valued that.

Carolyn Foster remembers Silver Lake sports as both an investment in the urban neighborhood and a weekly activity that helped to develop bonds between both parents and children in the neighborhood:

The sports [were] absolutely [community builders], it was…putting them in, again, the city, the Department [of Parks and Recreation], and that just became our social world. I didn’t need a social life outside of that. We didn’t need to go anywhere. It was the weekends, it was the practices, [and] from age five through forever, we had stuff going on. It was fantastic.

Because the Silver Lake Recreation Center does not have the proper fields for games, we utilized nearby parks, including Elysian Valley, which was in a neighboring, high crime area. Instead of parents shying away from these places, they found a way to make them safe. With the help of the Northeast Police Department, parents became proactive in ensuring that this sports program would work. My mother explained:

When we started going there, we were confronted with a lot of kids smoking marijuana, which is not something you want your five-year
old around. We actually saw weapons. (You) were presented with a
gun at one point, and there were times when we drove up to the park
and there was yellow tape, meaning there had been a serious crime,
including murder. We continued to play there. But not without
enlisting the help of the Northeast police.

My mother still remembers one of the officers by name, Joe, and recalled how
the two groups initially communicated about park safety:

They said, “We know about this, we understand, we want people to
play sports, we want these children to be able to play sports, we know
you don’t have space over in Silver Lake, [so you] have to branch out,
[and] we will support you and help you.” And they were very candid. I
remember the time I drove up for a practice and saw the yellow
[police] tape, and I said, “Should we go home?” and he said, “You
may play, but just please don’t ask any more questions, and don’t talk
about it. You may play and if there is any reason that you can’t, we
will tell you,” and we trusted them. For better or worse, we trusted
them. And we never did have an incident.

To my mother and Foster, it was too important for their children to develop bonds
within the community and play in their local, urban environment. As Foster argued,
“We all chose to live in the city and live… within all [of] this excitement but at the
same time, [we wanted] kids to have neighborhood teams and [to] have a
community.”

To this day, a decade later, many of the families that partook in Silver Lake
sports during my era remain close friends, both parents and children. And to this day,
the program still exists, and remains as diverse. Elena Hernandez, the current director
of the Silver Lake Recreation Center, is a Latina woman who lives in Sun Valley, a
district north of Silver Lake. When I interviewed Hernandez, she confirmed the
diversity the sports programs, touching on both race and socioeconomics:
It’s a very mixed breakup… we have Caucasians, we have African Americans, we have Asians, we have Hispanic children, we have a little bit of everything… It’s a very affluent, primarily a very affluent community, but we also do have our fair share of lower income families that come in requesting discounts and scholarships for programming.

The Silverlake Independent Jewish Community Center (SIJCC) also provides a place for children and families to come together. On its website, the SIJCC says it aims to celebrate “an expression of Judaism that welcomes people of all backgrounds,” and many of the families I knew who utilized the Center during my upbringing had one Jewish parent or none at all (“About Us”). It was built in 1951 and remained affiliated with the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Los Angeles (JCCGLA) until 2001. Financial issues threatened its continuity because the JCCGLA was no longer able to fund it, but the community banded together to create the non-profit, independent JCC. There is a preschool and after-school program at the SIJCC, along with extracurricular classes for both children and adults. The SIJCC also holds annual events open to the entire community.

During my childhood, the SIJCC played host to a youth theatre program. From this grew the Silverlake Children’s Theatre Group (SCTG), as local parent and screenwriter Broderick Miller took over the casual SIJCC productions and formed this official, nonprofit organization. The SCTG’s mission is “to use the power of theatre to develop critical thinking and self-confidence, as well as to engage the imagination.” Its educational goals are also explicit: “Our plays and programs are designed to develop and nurture young talent while broadening their awareness of culture, politics, aesthetics and the human condition.” The aims of the SCTG reflect
the community-oriented values of the neighborhood; while the theatre group seeks to both challenge and provide educational, structured activities for children, its “most important” motive is that “the SCTG builds community” (“About the SCTG”).

While the Silver Lake Recreation Center and SIJCC cater to children, the Griffith Park Adult Community Center houses the Griffith Park Adult Community Club (GPACC), formerly the Silver Lake Senior Club (the group changed its name when it moved into the Center). Established in 1999, the Club organizes trips, facilitates classes, displays artwork of local artists in its own gallery, hosts lectures and forums, and puts on fundraising and charity events. Much of the extensive programming is free and the yearly club dues are ten dollars (Griffith Park). The GPACC is a well-known community organization that has become a presence in the neighborhood. During my interviews, James Higgins, Janie Pratt, and Monica Sharp all mentioned it even though none of them actually participate. Higgins touted the writing program, and Sharp described members as a “bright, vocal group.”

These community centers attract residents based on age and interest and give people an arena in which to forge social ties in their own neighborhood. The same values spurred on by the Neighborhood Council and Chamber of Commerce are played out through these organizations, and they represent only a handful of a large number of arenas in which residents of Silver Lake can become active.

PUBLIC SCHOOLING

Along with a commitment to promoting the values of diversity and inclusion, there is in Silver Lake evidence of a commitment among residents to support and send their
children to public schools. Amy Wilson, mother of a third grader, articulated during an interview why she wants her daughter in public schools, an answer that was echoed by several parents of children of my generation:

I like that she is exposed to children of different financial backgrounds and different learning abilities. I just think that public schools are a window to the world. This is the world... Life is about everyone; it’s not just about people who can afford to do whatever it is [they] want to do. That’s important to me. I also think that... that’s what the country is built on... educating [our] children, and I very firmly believe in the notion of public schools. I do believe that our taxes should pay for [them].

Ivanhoe Elementary, the primary school that serves the northern part of Silver Lake and part of the adjacent neighborhood of Los Feliz, is one of the most successful in the district, boasting a 2010 Academic Performance Index (API) score of 938 out of 1,000 (“2010... Ivanhoe Elementary”). Because of this, houses within the Ivanhoe boundaries are in high demand. One local real estate agent, Dan Ortega, has a blog entitled “Ivanhoe Elementary Silver Lake Real Estate” (Oretga). Another, Brock Harris, claims that the so-called “Ivanhoe Premium” is worth about $100,000 when it comes to real estate (“The Must-Have Map”). Even though this is a somewhat new phenomenon, as part of a recent trend in rising property values, Ivanhoe has long been an attraction in the neighborhood.

Aside from its strong academics, Ivanhoe has proven to be a significant community builder for families in the neighborhood, both during my time and now. During my time there, parents were very active and still today, there is significant parent involvement. My mother and Monica Sharp were two parents who volunteered for the school, getting involved in the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for
Restructuring Now (LEARN) program and the booster organization Friends of Ivanhoe. My mother described her initial involvement and impressions of the school when my older brother entered in 1993:

It had been academically good for a very long time, but it was on the up and up. It seemed to be getting better and better. And it turns out that when I started is when an entire new movement in [the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)] started. The year I started, I started… in 1993, LEARN started, which was a collaborative effort to have parents involved…on schools boards along with the teachers and administrators so it was a three-way street to run schools. And I felt that it was a very successful thing. It has ended and been taken over by other things, but I was very involved with LEARN… It became quite a part of Ivanhoe, and it was embraced by the administration and the teachers there, so that also helped to bring parents in who could offer [something]. We could offer policy, we could offer help in the classroom, and then, most importantly, start fundraising for the school.

The next year, Friends of Ivanhoe (FOI) was started as a booster organization, and now exists as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. My mother was heavily involved with fundraising; she said that FOI raised about $25,000 per year in the beginning and up to $100,000 when she left in 2001. She described the motivation behind FOI and the contributing parents:

We had quite a gambit of kids: wealthy kids, mostly middle class kids and some upper middle class kids there and some kids that were at-risk whose parents had not gone past third or fourth grade, and then a fairly large number of kids whose parents did not speak English and came into the school not identified fluent in English. So, of course, they were at a huge disadvantage to succeed in school, and we wanted everyone at the school to succeed. We didn’t just want our kids [to succeed]… Most of us who were working in Friends of Ivanhoe had the ability to be very involved with our kids and were not too worried about them so the intent was to make a very good school for everyone there.
Wilson, who is the current President of FOI, has very similar views about the school over a decade later. Today, FOI has become a fundraising machine, raising over $250,000 last year. Some of this stems from a greater need – the Los Angeles Unified School District is facing a major budget crisis, and Wilson told me that recently, the district informed Ivanhoe that it would receive a hundred thousand fewer dollars next year. In this sense, FOI has become a way for Ivanhoe to fill gaps that the district has left. Its fundraising achievements are also a reflection of the change in the demographics of the school due to recent waves of gentrification, which I will address in the epilogue of this thesis. But putting aside the analysis of its success, FOI is a manifestation of how Silver Lake parents are active and involved in the elementary school, lending time and support to ensure that it thrives. Kerry Weber, who is both a teacher and a parent at Ivanhoe, acknowledged how much the efforts of parents affect the school:

I’d rather teach at Ivanhoe than anywhere because [of] the parents. They love that school [and] they are so committed to it. You’ve lived with it, you’ve seen it, they love it so much, they just bleed water from a stone to make that place work, and now I’m one of them, and I totally appreciate it. I totally appreciate how hard parents at Ivanhoe have historically worked and what they give back.

When discussing her daughter Caroline’s extracurricular activities in the neighborhood, Amy Wilson commented that many other Ivanhoe families take part as well, an indication that the Ivanhoe community extends beyond the classrooms and schoolyards. And as my mother acknowledged, these networks not only transcend institutions but can also transcend time:

I still can see a kid that I worked in a classroom with who was a third grader in 1995 who will wave and talk to me because of that, and this
is sixteen years later. So [the work we did at the school] was very much a community builder. And it was important, I think, that the kids left the classroom and saw each other on a field and saw each other on a Sunday afternoon.

Another neighborhood grade school is Micheltorena Elementary. This school serves the Sunset district of Silver Lake, which tends to be poorer, and though the school is not as academically successful as Ivanhoe, but there have been and currently are major initiatives to improve it. During our interviews, both James Higgins and Casey Edwards, Silver Lake Neighborhood Council (SLNC) members, mentioned how the SLNC recently gave Micheltorena funds to build a garden for the students. The school also happens to be the site of the monthly SLNC board meetings. Likewise, parents at Micheltorena are currently working to block a charter school from essentially renting out some of the school’s classrooms to ensure that focus is not diverted from efforts to improve Micheltorena before defaulting to charters (Raymond).

While Ivanhoe Elementary is a draw to the neighborhood, public schooling in Silver Lake is not without its challenges. Parents, even those deeply committed to public schooling, face difficulties when it comes to Micheltorena and to the local middle and high schools. The Los Angeles Unified School District is an underperforming, overcrowded, and bankrupt district, and this is inevitably reflected in Silver Lake’s schools.

Thomas Starr King Middle School serves all of Silver Lake, and was considered the most socially integrated school in Los Angeles in the 1970s when citywide attempts were being made towards desegregation (Ramos, “Plan Dismays”).
Currently, it is sixty-six percent Latino, nineteen percent Asian, and eleven percent White (Silver Lake Mapping L.A.). Academically, it is not nearly as successful as Ivanhoe Elementary. Therefore, even when parents move to the area for this premiere elementary school, they must face difficult choices six years later. In 2001, King had an API score of 541 (“2001 Academic”). My parents, for example, despite being staunch supporters of public schooling, did not send me to King, opting instead for an honors program at a public school half an hour away. They sent my brother to King only for eighth grade, after two exhausting years of busing him an hour each way to a magnet program in the Valley. In our interview, my mother recalled that local, public middle school was very much a discussion amongst parents in the neighborhood and that many decided against King for a variety of reasons:

You could base it on many things. If you believed in test scores, the test scores were abysmal. They were way below average…The school had a particularly unfortunate makeup in which a number of Armenian students and Latino students constantly fought each other and had some gang activity, and the combination of that fact [produced]… you can almost call it white flight from the school. I imagine we’re guilty of that, but that combined with having an eleven-year old in the school was very scary to many of us.

Carolyn Foster sent both of her sons there initially, but pulled her younger one out in favor of a charter nearby. Her older son was part of the inaugural class for a gifted magnet program that is still active today. Sonya Valdez, a Field Deputy for Tom LaBonge, was a co-founder of the magnet. She described the process during our interview, how she and another local mother approached the principal at King in the late 1990s and facilitated the introduction of a gifted magnet with both arts and technology courses. Valdez’s children did not benefit from this magnet; they attended
the school before the magnet existed. When I asked her why she thought it was an important venture even if her children would not attend, she responded, “Because I knew it was the right thing. I knew it was the right thing for the neighborhood, and it was the right thing for the school. It was a great idea, and it would improve the community. It would benefit thousands of other children, and that was the important thing.” This ethos is in line with the motivation behind parent involvement at Ivanhoe and what others in the community have described as a general sense of understanding larger goals and fighting for common causes.

The Sharps did not send their daughters to King Middle School, sending their oldest to Immaculate Heart, a nearby private girls school that many families choose instead of King, and their youngest to the same middle school I attended in North Hollywood. Kerry Weber, who has her seven-year old daughter, Grace, at Ivanhoe, is unsure of where she will send her to middle school:

King has come so far. I would really look at King, absolutely, they have a really great magnet program over there that’s been there now for awhile and, then, now just this year, they’re starting an Environmental Sciences magnet over there, and it’s single track (as opposed to year-round) which makes a big difference. So I would look at King, I would look at Immaculate Heart, ideally, I would love… for Grace to go to King, I really would. I’d love to just keep supporting public schools and feel good about the education that she’s getting at a public school.

Amy Wilson was a little more hesitant, but was keeping the option open and acknowledged that in order for King to excel, it needs parents who are willing to invest efforts into the school. Kim Jones, a former Ivanhoe teacher, recently moved to teach at King, and Wilson says that she is hopeful that parents will follow:
[Jones] moved from Ivanhoe to King so she has sort of… encouraged some movement over there from Ivanhoe which is all good and that’s what it takes. It takes people every year saying ‘you know what, we’re going to jump in the water, we’re going to test.’ Whether I’m going to be one of those people, I don’t know, but I think it’s great to hear that it seems to be really improving.

King’s API score has skyrocketed in the last decade, and they received a score of 738 in 2010 (“2010…King Middle”). The same dialogue regarding middle school that took place amongst parents during the time I was a public school student continues today, which shows how much parents who believe in and support public schools grapple with this decision. Though it has been common to leave the neighborhood for middle school, many children, like I did myself, return and attend John Marshall High School. Marshall, technically in the neighboring area of Los Feliz, serves a greater area than just the neighborhood of Silver Lake. Of the 3,479 students enrolled during in 2010, sixty-six percent were Hispanic, twenty-one percent were Asian, and nine percent were White (Silver Lake Mapping L.A.). Because of the massive size of the high school, it was on a year-round track system for a number of years (it just returned to single track in 2011 when enrollment decreased) that led to fewer, but longer, school days, which was less than ideal for the quality of education. Marshall posted a 685 API score in 2010, and this could have been a reason for parents who could afford an alternative to shy away from the school (Silver Lake Mapping L.A.). But Marshall is not King. It has an established gifted magnet program that offers honors and Advanced Placement classes for high-achieving students; it has a higher, though still troubling, graduation rate than the district as a whole; and it consistently sends graduates to good colleges. For my entire life, my parents told me I
would never go to Marshall; in fact, I went as far as to briefly attend a private school and a far-away magnet program before enrolling in Marshall. It was a difficult decision but in the process, my parents and I learned that, despite the many issues that come along with such a large, diverse school, if families are interested in a good, local, public education, Marshall can provide it, which is ultimately the main reason why many families return to the neighborhood for high school.

Monica Sharp, who sent her two daughters to Marshall and believes it to be a great school, now works there, for a federal grant called GEAR UP that aims to keep low-income, minority, first-generation American students in high school. This program has had success, and Sharp believes that Marshall caters successfully to a range of kids, “I think Marshall for a public high school is really pretty good, you have sports….you do have the magnet there, you do have the School of Advanced Studies (SAS) program, you do have [Academic Decathlon], you have a lot of things there that help make that school very successful.”

As many of the parents I interviewed expressed, they are committed to supporting the local public schools, with their mixed-income and ethnically diverse populations, and believe that they play important roles in establishing a strong community for themselves and for their children. As Carolyn Foster noted, “I would say it was weird when people chose [to send their children to] private school, and that was definitely the minority. Not a bad thing, but they definitely have started losing their connection [to the community], which has happened.” Through personal investment in public, local schooling came a strong community, a notion that definitely reflects my own experience growing up in Silver Lake.
NEIGHBORHOOD EVENTS

There are a number of yearly grassroots community events geared toward bringing together the residents of Silver Lake. These include the Sunset Junction Street Fair and the Silver Lake Jubilee. For thirty years, the Sunset Junction Street Fair successfully took place every summer after its commencement in 1980 to bring the older, Latino generation together with the newer, gay population in Silver Lake; the Fair was very representative of the neighborhood even though it attracted people from all over Los Angeles.

Interestingly, the Fair did not take place this past summer for the first time since it began. The city canceled the event three days before it was set to begin because of a dispute over unpaid fees from the previous year and uncertainty over whether the organizers could afford to pay for the upcoming one that year (Zahniser). Organizer Michael McKinley argued that the $267,000 bill from the 2010 event was inflated,
but the monetary concerns are merely one of the many problems with the now-controversial event (Roberts).

Instead of the family-oriented community fair of the past, it had become a major music festival geared towards teenagers and young adults, prompting many to wonder if the organizers had forgotten its roots and main purpose to bring together all of the different factions in the neighborhood. Even though the city of Los Angeles ultimately denied the permits because of financial issues, it is telling of neighborhood opinion surrounding the event that the Neighborhood Council voted to pull its support from the Fair and testified before the City Council against granting the permit. In addition, some of the residents with whom I spoke voiced their own concerns regarding the event. In many ways, the destruction of the Fair confirms how significant the values of inclusion and community are in Silver Lake. Once the Sunset Junction Street Fair, an event started with the primary purpose of bringing two vastly different groups of people together in harmony for the greater good of the neighborhood as a whole, became more about profits at the expense of community, residents withdrew their support.

James Higgins articulated the concerns that many feel about the direction the Junction Fair had taken:

I’ve been going for a long time, and I [understand the] people who say “I’ll never go again,” although I do go if I can. I think the spirit of it was really great originally. I think it’s really changed; it’s become very commercial and very exclusive. Putting up chain link fences everywhere and blocking people from getting in, and charging twenty dollars is just totally against the concept of why it existed in the first place, and a lot of people are very upset about that and have been for years… I would like to keep it here. I think it’s really a part of Silver Lake. I wouldn’t want to see it moved, but I’d like to see it returned
back to a more community-based event as opposed to a commercial event.

The fences and entrance fee that Higgins brought up were relatively new, a change implemented only in the past few years. The fences personally affected Casey Edwards because she owns a small business on the Sunset Junction block of Sunset Boulevard, where the Fair takes place:

I supported it when it was a free, donation-based festival that didn’t fence in my community and my business. The second they put up those gates and started charging exorbitant fees to walk down a city street, everyone had a problem. I like cotton candy, I like rock and roll… I certainly don’t want to be known as like the girl who helped kill the party... [but] it’s just outrageous. It’s just absolutely outrageous.

While the organizers claim that the fences were necessary to control alcohol sales and that the entrance fee was to help cover general fees, for many years, the Fair existed and thrived without them. Kerry Weber remembered how the Fair used to be:

I love what it stands for and why they first started it. For years, it was “pay what you can, if you can.” We haven’t gone the last two years and… for the last couple years, I think there have been a growing number of locals who said, “No way, no way. It’s become too big, it has forgotten what it’s about.” I don’t even want to take [my daughter to it] and we love big community fairs… but that one? It doesn’t feel menacing or dangerous; it’s just not family-oriented [anymore].

In February 2012, the organization that arranged the Fair, the Sunset Junction Neighborhood Alliance, filed for bankruptcy. Court documents revealed that the organization owes over 200 creditors a total of over $900,000 (Lewis). These developments mark the predictably permanent end to the Sunset Junction Street Fair,
an end marred by a series of decisions that, many believed, put the Fair at odds with its original purpose.

The Silver Lake Jubilee started in 2010 and many residents look to it as an alternative to the Sunset Junction even though the Jubilee is during Memorial Day weekend, months before the summer Fair, and the two could easily coexist. The two events actually have much in common: Both are coordinated by not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organizations, the Fair by the Sunset Junction Neighborhood Alliance and the Jubilee by the Los Angeles Arts & Athletics Alliance; both take place on city streets, with music, food, and vendors; and both cost twenty dollars per person (because this is a dramatic hike in price from last year’s five-dollar Jubilee, so the Jubilee website provides a breakdown of where the money goes, and while some of it goes to cover event fees, half goes towards “community programs”) (“Jubilee Tickets”). But unlike the Fair, the Jubilee is smaller and more community-oriented, characteristics that residents felt the Fair had drifted away from in the past few years.

When the Los Angeles Times music blog announced the lineup for this year’s Jubilee on March 2, 2012, it described the event as “local-centric” (Martens). These traits make the Jubilee more in line with how residents characterized the earlier years of the Sunset Junction Street Fair, one they supported until it lost its original spirit: to bring together the entire neighborhood for a community event.

OUTSIDE PERCEPTIONS

While the residents I spoke with describe their investment and involvement in Silver Lake largely in positive terms, I learned from a few conversations that from the
outside, Silver Lake’s neighborhood activism may sometimes be perceived as entitlement. While an entirely different thesis could be written on the neighborhood from the perspective of both those who do not live in Silver Lake or its Latino, Asian, and working-class residents who are alluded to but not truly represented in this thesis, I would like to remark on some outside opinions I was able to discern in a few of my interviews.

When describing the neighborhood, Elena Hernandez, Director of the Silver Lake Recreation Center, who works but does not live in Silver Lake, used some of the same adjectives that residents used – political, artsy – but also characterized it as affluent and entitled. She described the ongoing fight with the LADWP over the sycamore trees on the “Grassy Knoll” section of the reservoir property (mentioned in chapter two) in a different tone from the one used by residents when they articulated the issue:

The community here is very outspoken and if they want something done or they want something not done, then they will let it be known. They will go to the council offices, they will go to whoever will listen to them. One thing that is happening right now is…[the city is] taking the reservoir offline and so they have to… relocate some of the pipes and they’re redoing the irrigation here at the facility as a result. They’re putting in a regulation station here at the facility, so there’s a lot of construction... There are some trees that are supposed to be cut down in this process. Well, the community is up in arms about this and they actually have set up a meeting next Monday here, and they’re meeting with the Bureau of Engineers and the Council office and the community to let them know what is going on and to see what other options there are and how they can get around cutting these trees down.

I asked Hernandez if she has experienced this sense of entitlement from the entire community or more along racial or class lines. She replied:
It hasn’t only been white. I’ve had different ethnicities and different economical backgrounds [display a sense of entitlement]…I think they just rub off on one another. I don’t know, because I have had lower-income immigrant families [make demands]. I had a Hispanic lady who was having a fit and wanted things her way, and I was like “That’s just not the policy. I can’t break the rules for you.”

Sonya Valdez has been a resident for thirty-four years and has worked as a Field Deputy for Councilman Tom LaBonge for four years. While she complimented the neighborhood’s persistence and organization, she offered some perspective:

[In] Silver Lake, I have seen people really organize quickly together in a tight group to get what they want, and then they just push, push, push until they get what they want. Usually, what they want is to benefit the entire community so it’s a good thing, [but] sometimes they’re pushing when it’s so incredibly hard to try to make it happen…They pushed to make [the walking path around the reservoir] happen. Both Councilmen Garcetti and LaBonge were able to locate funding to make it happen but now we’re in a constant struggle to find funding to maintain it. Unless all of the players come together - the Neighborhood Council, [the Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy], the [Silver Lake Improvement] Association – to constantly…do fundraisers…it’s going to fall by the wayside. It’s absolutely worth it. Hundreds and hundreds of people use that path; it’s benefiting their health, it’s a good neighborhood watch for the area, it’s good all the way around but it’s not for free.

While these perspectives provide a more nuanced view of the neighborhood, they also, it must be noted, work to further the notion of Silver Lake as a community. Even if there is some disagreement when characterizing residents’ intentions and actions -- as activism or as entitlement -- the fact that someone like Hernandez would view the neighborhood as a community with values and attributes that may be shared across class and ethnic lines suggests that, even from the outside, Silver Lake is sometimes seen as a cohesive enclave with certain specific characteristics.

Furthermore, Hernandez and Valdez’s experiences do not contradict, but actually
align, with residents’ narratives about their neighborhood being special. Many of the residents with whom I spoke attached the word “unique” to Silver Lake; while they were describing their neighborhood from their own point of view, a perception they all share, one that is arguably a factor in their personal attachment and investment in the community, outsiders may understand this self-described uniqueness as a sense of entitlement.

CONCLUSIONS

What I have ascertained from my interviews is that residents participate because they believe in the existence of a community in Silver Lake. People may be involved in different arenas based on their personal interests and stage in life, but there seems to be some consensus regarding defining communal values and experiences. Residents participate as a result of their attachment to place and with the hope of connecting to people. My mother felt connected through family-oriented activities, while Janie Pratt got involved in the government and business side of Silver Lake. Just as Kerry Weber teaches at Ivanhoe and founded a Neighborhood Watch on her block, Carolyn Foster stayed committed to public school and utilizes the reservoir walking path on a regular basis. People form their own connections based on interests but from my interviews, I ascertained that the presence of these organizations and associations promote a general feeling of community in Silver Lake.

By participating in these organizations and promoting the work they do as community-building, by attesting to the values that they believe are already dominant in the neighborhood as a whole, residents work to construct a discourse about the
neighborhood and its history that very much colors their own experience of Silver Lake. By articulating why they stay committed to public schools or advocate to create signs that display common neighborhood principles, residents look to affect one another’s vision of the neighborhood and to positively impact the formation of a sense of community, while promoting shared values that give Silver Lake neighbors an identity.

In other words, I argue in this thesis that by using words such as “diverse” and “inclusive” to describe Silver Lake, residents describe both the place in which they live and the place in which they want to live. I grew up having an acute awareness that there were challenges that accompanied urban life — the threat of street crime, struggling public schools, tensions between different sections of the neighborhood, and limited public facilities. However, I also grew up constantly hearing the adults around me proudly say that Silver Lake was a successful urban community. What exactly was meant by this is the question that I set out to explore in this thesis; it is this exploration that led me to the realization that both an attachment to Silver Lake as a “place” and a commitment to certain values are what motivated residents to become involved, their actions going to reinforce the vision they had for the neighborhood where they already felt a sense of belonging. In the last few years, I have noticed a new recurrent theme emerge in residents’ talk about the neighborhood. Monica Sharp made reference to it in a way that the majority of my interviewees echoed. She said, “I think Silver Lake is definitely a successful urban community. I think it’s changing, the people here are changing, but I think it’s still very much a community.” The changes alluded to by Sharp will be addressed in the epilogue that
follows. Even though it is evident from historical accounts and my interviews with residents and officials that Silver Lake has always been an ever-changing neighborhood with a rich history of activism driving that change, there is increasing concern among the older generations in Silver Lake that a new kind of change brought on by gentrification is transforming the neighborhood in undesirable ways. This transformation has prompted worry and apprehension among many residents about the future of Silver Lake. Still, Janie Pratt sees Silver Lake as a place that will always attract a certain person: “You know, no matter what, there is a different kind of person that lives in Silver Lake than lives in the Valley or Beverly Hills… There really is a strong community here, and I still feel like the community itself is very diverse. I think Silver Lake will always be pretty unique in Los Angeles.”
Epilogue: Looking Forward in Silver Lake

Throughout the summer of 2011, as I completed my research for this thesis, I frequented the Coffee Table, a café located on Rowena Avenue in Silver Lake. I conducted some of my interviews with local residents there, some of whom independently suggested this as a meeting spot. With mosaic-tiled tables, funky artwork, and an outdoor patio, it had been for fifteen years a well-known neighborhood joint, even functioning for many as a sort of office away from the office, since the café had free wireless Internet and a welcoming atmosphere. I remembered getting Italian sodas there as a child after school, as Ivanhoe Elementary was across the street. The Coffee Table opened in 1997, on one of the less frequented, less successful commercial streets in Silver Lake, but it survived and prospered.

This is what it looked like in the summer of 2011:

Figure 5.1
And this is what it looks like today:

The Coffee Table closed on September 11, 2011 with little warning. A printed sign displayed on the first of the month on the outdoor bulletin board announced the sudden plans to close it. Soon after, the owners revealed that Fifteen Group, a private investment firm, had bought the building and declined to renew the café’s lease. The group plans to build a mixed-use development: forty-five condominiums and some retail space, an important telltale sign that the gentrification of the area is underway (“Developer Prepares”).

This sudden closing accompanied another around the corner from the café. Burrito King, a shack-like but popular Mexican restaurant with covered, outdoor seating, linoleum benches, and grimy floors was quickly transformed during August of 2011. On Hyperion Boulevard, one of the busier commercial streets in Silver Lake, the restaurant was directly across the street from MJ’s, a gay bar, and Trader Joe’s. It was the kind of place I went to with friends late at night for greasy bean and cheese
burritos, walking distance from my house. It had been around since the 1980s, the creation of Julian E. Montoya, who achieved burrito stand success during the decade, with restaurants all over Southern California and even one in Bogota, Colombia. A 2003 *New York Times* profile revealed that his empire had shrunk and only two restaurants remained (Broder). Now make that one. I watched it transform during that month of August but naively took the changes to be just renovations; I passed Burrito King multiple times a day, and the thought that it was being replaced never crossed my mind. I later read online that Burrito King was no longer, and Mixto had moved in. Mixto is a fusion, healthy “Mexican” stand, with three-dollar tacos and kale Caesar salad that caters to a new clientele, one that is fast becoming a presence in Silver Lake. By all indications, this new population is financially well off. The property values in Silver Lake have risen so dramatically over the past decade that only a select few can afford to buy or rent in the neighborhood today (“Silver Lake Home Prices”; Mintz and Minor).

A few of the residents I spoke with mentioned various population shifts that have recently occurred in Silver Lake, the first, although minor, wave of gentrification coming about in the late 1980s. Those who lived in Silver Lake in the 1970s and early 1980s remember what was a very different neighborhood than the one it is today, when words like “hip” and “trendy” were not appropriate adjectives to describe it (Lubow; Kudler).

My mother noted that when she moved to the neighborhood in 1984, she was aware of its “seedy” reputation, commenting that many of the people my father
worked with at the University of Southern California (USC) hospital would make fun of the neighborhood or refuse to come there:

Despite the fact that it was close to USC, none of his friends [or] other residents that joined the program …at USC lived in Silver Lake, and a number of them made fun of us. They would come over and say ‘How could you live here?’ because… Sunset Boulevard was not a pretty picture [and] Griffith Park Boulevard wasn’t [either]. It was urban, it was somewhat poor around… the edges of Silver Lake… and these people… despite the horrible distance… were living on the West side.

Nina Watson recalled that when she moved to Silver Lake in the mid-1970s, it was an older neighborhood devoid of children. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, she says, it was a neighborhood of high crime rates:

When we bought our first house in Silver Lake, it was 1974, and it was pretty dicey. When I told people at work, they said, ‘Ohhhh Silver Lake? Are you sure?’ It was very crime-ridden. There had been lots and lots of gay bashing because Silver Lake was a gay enclave even way back then… When we were building our [new] house, in 1985, there was lots and lots of crime, so much crime that we built in a lot of fortress-y kind of things, and put in a very high-end security system… and then it got better. It could have been a change of police, it could have been demographic change, it could have been a whole mix of things. A lot of the artists became a little more public about Silver Lake… and, as with almost anything, if a place is deteriorated and artists move in, then they (build it up) and it becomes gentrified. So it had kind of a first wave of gentrification with a small ‘g’ in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.

My mother watched the change occur, but she believes that it could have easily gone the other way:

I came from St. Louis where you watched cities [and] urban neighborhoods generally do the opposite, which was to totally deteriorate, especially when there was incoming crime, especially when there were issues such as Silver Lake being known as, quote, a gay neighborhood. In some other cities, that might have meant a deterioration of the neighborhood; other people might have had white flight and middle class flight out of it. I would not have been surprised
at all. Also, if you read any kind of national press, what you generally would have read was that the school district was the second worst in the country, as well as the second largest and had nothing but problems. The high school looked a little suspicious, just from the large number of kids pouring out of it without books, appearing unengaged. But as we lived here, stores started to change, just, for instance, a Trader Joe’s came in. I’m not a huge supporter, but to the neighborhood, that was a very good thing.

Along with this first wave of gentrification in the late 1980s and early 1990s came an influx of new families and young children, a change from the time when Watson moved there in the 1970s. She recalled that during that period, there was even talk of closing Ivanhoe due to a small enrollment. So it is accurate and fair to say that since the 1980s, Silver Lake has been gentrifying, but there is evidence that in the last five to seven years, gentrification has visibly accelerated (Lazo). The idea of full-blown gentrification had many of my interviewees concerned and anxious. They seemed content with the slower rhythms of improvement in the neighborhood, appreciative of its lower crime rates and new coffee shops, but the thought of a gentrified neighborhood did not illicit positive reactions. These older and well-established residents appeared to understand their own move into the neighborhood in the 1970s and 1980s as part of a process that was independent of what is going on today.

While changes such as the closing of the Coffee Table to give room to new condominiums and the transformation of Burrito King into Mixto reveal two typical facets of gentrification, the changes underway at Ivanhoe Elementary are perhaps the most striking. While Ivanhoe was still successful during the time I attended from 1995 to 2001, it was admittedly a different school from the one it is today. In 1999, its
Academic Performance Index (API) was a respectable 773, still above average for the district although much lower than the 938 it boasts today (“1999 Academic”). The demographics were also vastly different. Of the 336 students who attended Ivanhoe during the 1998-99 school year, 143 were white, 101 were Hispanic, and 68 were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander (“U.S. Department of Education”). Thirty percent of the students back then received free or reduced lunch, and twenty percent were classified as English Language Learners (ELL) (“1999 Academic”). In contrast, ten years later, during the 2008-09 school year, of the 354 students enrolled, 200 were white, 56 were Hispanic and 58 were Asian (“U.S. Department of Education”). Only thirteen percent of the students received free or reduced lunch and ten percent were ELL (“2009 Base”). These numbers are some of the most telling of the recent changes taking place in Silver Lake, as property values rise and the neighborhood experiences the influx of a white, more affluent class.

The perceptions of Ivanhoe today among the people I interviewed are mixed and reflect their broader opinions about gentrification and the direction in which Silver Lake is heading. Monica Sharp, an instrumental figure at the Friends of Ivanhoe (FOI) organization when her daughters attended from 1992 to 2000, is uncomfortable with the direction that this booster organization has taken:

I find… [that with] the people who are moving in now and the money, [it] is very different. I feel like we were much more focused on everybody, where I feel like now, when you go to Ivanhoe, [you are told during] your first orientation [that] the expectation is that everyone will give $100 per month, per child, and we never said that.
Amy Wilson, the current FOI president, confirmed that the organization asks every family to donate $1000 per year, per child, a new development in the last five years. She explained the reason for this:

This is the reality in California, this is just what it is: If you want to keep services at your school and not just fund luxurious [or] extra services, if you want to keep some basic things at the school like [physical education], music programs, art programs, academic coaching, things that, quite frankly, have helped Ivanhoe achieve the status that it has, you have to pay for it.

Wilson went on to say, “We kind of frame it as ‘you’re getting a private school education at a public school price.’” This statement is perhaps one of the more compelling about the new direction in which Ivanhoe is moving, in terms of the values reflected in the desire to make it “like a private school.” Interestingly, Wilson sees herself as an adamant supporter of public education and says she has a commitment to it. In many ways, she is simply trying to make Ivanhoe a great school, just like my mother and Sharp did in the 1990s. But the narratives that are circulating about the school, the collective vision for it and the motivations behind action, have changed. My mother, who has never met Wilson and does not know of her opinions, said independently during our interview, “There is some semblance, some feeling that there are some parents who would like to make it a private school for themselves. And I never had any interest in that. I totally believe in public education, and I totally value it.” Wilson would absolutely agree with her last sentence, but the two women would probably clash in their perceptions of what public education means and in their visions for the school’s future.
Wilson also said that, when it comes to prioritizing where FOI’s money goes, academic coaches are at the top of her, and the organization’s, list. Because of a decrease in district funds next year, the school may have to sacrifice art, music, and physical education courses, but she notes that parents can supplement those programs outside of the school. My mother stated that during her time with FOI, the organization was fundraising specifically for art, music, physical education and field trips because many of the children who attended Ivanhoe at the time were not financially able to receive such extracurricular programming; Monica Sharp said, “We bought books.” Both women expressed that buying positions instead did not sit well with them. Ultimately, the school is not the same as it once was, and the choices that are being made at Ivanhoe today are a direct result of the changes in demographics in the neighborhood and at the school.

Still, for me, learning about the changes at Ivanhoe does prompt broader questions about the new residents. I think, specifically, of three: Assuming the new residents are there to stay, what kind of sense of place and place attachment will they develop? How will residents’ values, the ones that today connect people and place and prompt meaningful action, change? And what will the new narratives about the neighborhood be? Right now, there aren’t answers to these questions, and only time will tell. But as the changes in Silver Lake become more and more evident, these concerns are being voiced. During our interview, Elizabeth Austin was apprehensive:

My concern is that the hip, tattooed, young, very svelte mommies with the cappuccinos and the strollers, how long are they going to stay here? Once their kid is... they may think Ivanhoe is adorable but really? They’re going stay for King? They’re going stay for Marshall? How long are they going stay? Are they here right now because it’s hip...? Are they going to fight for the neighborhood? I don’t know.
My mother, when discussing the new, almost too-cute establishments that have popped up around Silver Lake asked, “Can we have some grittiness here? Can we have an urban neighborhood? Or are we going to start to look like a suburb that’s just a little too cool?” Nina Watson concluded, “[The neighborhood] is now agonizingly trendy.”

Casey Edwards, who represents both the newer and entrenched generations, as she is in her thirties and has an infant son but has been in Silver Lake for over fifteen years, believed that there is a tension between the new reputation of Silver Lake and actual the community that exists there:

I believe Silver Lake has a reputation and a reputation that has grown specifically over the last fifteen years… It’s the place where all the bands are from and the cool bohemian artists are. And… I think it has a reputation nationally. It’s sort of like the Williamsburg, New York, situation. But that has nothing to do with me and that has nothing to do with how I see my community. But I believe people might move here now under that guise.

She voiced similar concerns to the ones expressed by older residents, asking of the new residents, “‘Did you move here five years ago because you thought it was going to be [you] playing your mandolin?’ What happens to them? We don’t know yet.” She chose instead to focus on who she feels makes Silver Lake, Silver Lake: “What I’ve found in Silver Lake is that it really is people who dig their heels in and are going to stay here so absolutely, that makes it more of a tight knit community, because you see people, not day after day but year after year.” The new residents do not represent her Silver Lake, but it does not mean that they cannot. The big questions remain: Will this new generation stay? Will they become entrenched? And if they do, how will they narrate their neighborhood?
If the physical environment of Silver Lake, particularly the area of the central reservoirs, retains its power to provide green, social space and act as a political rallying point, it should also maintain the ability to attach people to place. If the history of creative and engaged individuals and progressive ideals continues to inspire narratives of Silver Lake as an inclusive neighborhood, residents should still be able to find common ground and shared values. But—I venture to argue here—if people stop talking about what Silver Lake means to them and stop narrating their perceptions and visions for the neighborhood, then, it will truly change. While it may take on new identities and new meanings with gentrification, if residents, new and old, continue to articulate their values, goals, experiences, and impressions of the neighborhood as part of their efforts to create a cohesive community, Silver Lake could remain more than a beautiful, urban setting or backdrop indefinitely into the future.
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