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Eradicating History or Embracing Change: The Debate About Renaming Streets to Cesar E. Chavez Ave. in East Los Angeles in the 1990s

Abstract

Key Words: Commemorative Memorial, Multiethnic, Representation, Boyle Heights, Civic Memory

In East Los Angeles during 1994, the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California (J.H.S.) and the concerned citizens of Sunset Boulevard circulated petitions to halt the name change of Brooklyn, Macy, and a portion of Sunset to Cesar E. Chavez Avenue that had been initiated by the City Council. The idea that history itself could be erased was a prominent point of contention along with potential economic hardships that would be acquired by small businesses in the affected areas. Nevertheless, supporters in the community and the City Council insisted it was crucial to properly honor Cesar Chavez and provide a "positive role model" to the existing Latino population. Street names play a significant role in the way residents understand their local histories; this is especially the case in Boyle Heights, a multiethnic neighborhood in East Los Angeles. Commemorative memorials and signage can influence civic memory through the presentation and performance of knowledge by framing and deploying history. However, the process of framing history involves highlighting specific historical events while simultaneously ignoring others. This research explores why a street name change created a debate over the representation of community history in Boyle Heights. To explore this topic, I consider the following questions: How do street names frame a historical narrative and influence civic memory for both community members and those outside of the said community? How do street names illustrate how historical narratives are deployed? How do commemorative memorials, such as Cesar Chavez Ave, succeed in honoring the cultural history of certain resident groups while at the same time failing to represent others? How do these conversations play out in Boyle Heights, a historically multiethnic community that has been home to many different ethnic demographics over time? To understand this topic, this project examines documents from the Los Angeles City Council Archives compiled by the City Council during the process of changing the name; it includes letters, interdepartmental correspondences, and speeches. To contextualize these sources, I also use Los Angeles Times newspapers. The debate surrounding the name change of these streets exemplifies how people use commemorative memorials to influence civic memory. Understanding how history is deployed is critical in evaluating how commemorative memorials assert ties to the land and whom they exclude in the process.

Introduction

On April 23, 1993, one of the most acclaimed civil rights leaders in the United States, Cesar E. Chavez, died. Two weeks after his death, Gloria Molina, member of the Board of Supervisors, initiated the process to rename Brooklyn Avenue, a portion of Sunset Boulevard, and Macy Street to Avenida Cesar Chavez¹. This prompted members and merchants of Sunset Boulevard and Brooklyn Avenue alongside the Jewish Historical Society, the Chinatown Community Advisory Committee, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to protest the decision through petitions and letters. The idea that history itself could be erased was a prominent point of contention along with potential economic hardships that would be acquired by small businesses in the affected areas. This was echoed in Dean Zellman statement the Los Angeles Times, he asserted, "Change 1st street. Change 4th street. There are many parks...Mr. Chavez must be honored, but not at the expense of others' heritage."² An overwhelming majority, even those who opposed the name change favored commemorating Chavez, however, not at the price of "others' heritage."³ Nevertheless, supporters in the community and the City Council insisted it was crucial to properly honor Cesar Chavez and provide a "positive role model" to the existing Latino population. Even the starkest opposer agreed that Chavez should be recognized; however, not at the price of excluding others' history.

This research explores why a street name change created a debate over the representation of community history in Boyle Heights and the result of the debate on the community. How the city council could erase Boyle Heights's Jewish history was a prominent point of contention among active and past residents. The debate surrounding the name change of these streets exemplifies that street names play a significant role in the way residents understand their local histories; this is especially the case in Boyle Heights, a multiethnic neighborhood in East Los Angeles. Commemorative memorials in this case street signage influence civic memory through the presentation and performance of knowledge by framing and deploying history. However, the process of framing history involves highlighting specific historical events while simultaneously ignoring others.

The name change to Cesar E. Chavez Avenue also illustrates how through a commemorative memorial the city council and supporters stamped a cultural identity in an area that was historically multiethnic. Consequently, there was a growing tension in the community. This caused history to be misrepresented but more importantly it created a divide between those who the memorial privileged, the Latino population, and those, the former Jewish population, who's histories were seen as less critical to highlight given the ardent political climate. While this incident occurred in Boyle Heights it demonstrated how groups of people use commemorative memorials to frame the stories and memories of the community to legitimize claims and ideas to the land.

Understanding how commemorative memorials assert ties to the land who they exclude in the process through the framing of history is critical because cities are dynamic places that change in demographics therefore these contested places are not unique to Boyle Heights.

To explore this topic, I consider the following questions: How do street names frame a historical narrative and influence civic memory for both community members and those outside of the said community? How do street names illustrate how historical narratives are deployed? How do commemorative memorials, such as Cesar Chavez Ave, succeed in honoring the cultural history of certain

¹ This is later changed to Cesar Chavez Avenue except for near ELAC

² Los Angeles Times Article sent to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 13 September 1993, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³ Ibid

resident groups while at the same time failing to represent others? How do these conversations play out in Boyle Heights, a historically multiethnic community that has been home to many different ethnic demographics over time?

Literature Review

Current research surrounding Boyle Heights revolves around its multiethnic character. For example, works by George J. Sánchez and Mark Wild discuss Boyle Heights's multiethnic environment in order to debunk previously accepted theories of ethnic succession, which advances the notion that one ethnicity would replace the other as the former improved its economic status. George J. Sanchez argues that the theory of ethnic succession has been used to recast histories of multiethnic neighborhoods that downplay radical politics and multiracial coalitions.⁴ He addresses the redlining, political conservatism, and racial segregation that plagued Boyle Heights, which resulted in a multiethnic neighborhood. While Sanchez focuses on the politics of Boyle Heights, Mark Wild's approach consists of examining a wide array of community spaces ranging from parks to the communist party headquarters.⁵ Like Sanchez, Wild challenges the idea that Los Angeles's immigrant newcomers replaced one another and kept to themselves. Instead, Wild argues that these separate ethnic communities interacted in a plethora of different spaces, thus creating a multiethnic environment. Both authors analyze multiracial interactions and coalitions in these neighborhoods to disprove dominant narratives of ethnic succession and illustrate the multiethnic character of Boyle Heights. However, neither author delves into the connection between Boyle Heights's history and how it is actively represented today.

Research on Boyle Heights addresses racial interactions in the neighborhood, without exploring how it is represented daily through the built environment. William Deverell and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explore the importance of representation. For example, Deverell argues that "city-building whites" distanced themselves from Mexicans through their views on race by "whitewashing" the city's past, thereby making Mexican denizens invisible. The author clarifies that this is not an analysis of what Mexicans produced in Los Angeles but instead of how Mexicans were portrayed by Anglo Americans. This monograph discusses issues of representation through the built environment.⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett expands on the discussion of representation through her analysis of complex tourist economies and heritage sites. She explores the "political economy of showing" and is primarily concerned with "agencies of display in museums, festivals, world's fairs, historical recreations, and tourist attractions." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that exhibitions and tourist sites perform a narrative.⁷

Dolores Hayden adds to these ideas through her analysis of debates over the preservation of a variety of buildings. She argues that buildings that have a strong connection with public history create ties to people and the land stressing the importance of not overshadowing the histories of minorities.⁸

⁴ George J. Sanchez "What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews": Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside During the 1950s." *American Quarterly* 56 (3): 633–61.

⁵ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005).

⁶ William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).

⁷ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).

⁸ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995).

Methods

My research goal is to add to these discourses by analyzing the role that the renaming of Brooklyn Avenue to Cesar E. Chavez Avenue had in framing local history and altering the representation of East Los Angeles in the late twentieth century. My approach differs from the previous analyses because I explore how a multicultural neighborhood like Boyle Heights is actively represented through signage. In order to understand this topic, this project examines documents from the Los Angeles City Council Archives specifically file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, compiled by the City Council during the process of changing the name; it includes letters, interdepartmental correspondences, and speeches. The aforementioned source incorporates a top down approach because it is composed through the Los Angeles government. In order to provide a wholistic view I also use Los Angeles Times articles that covered the change.

The number of primary sources related to this specific event is limited therefore I apply a micro historical approach. Similar to Robert Darnton approach in his article, "The Great Cat Massacre" in which he analyzes limited sources in relation to a cat massacre that occurred in France but contextualizes them to a broader discussion of the realities of pre industrial France.⁹ By using this approach, I can understand why the name change caused tension amongst past and current residents in the community but simultaneously explore the broader history of California in relation to this incident.

Brief Historical Context on Boyle Heights

Brooklyn Avenue, a portion of Sunset Boulevard, and Macy Street were all in the process of being changed to Avenida Cesar Chavez; however, Brooklyn Avenue and the portion of Sunset created the most tension and push back. Brooklyn Avenue located in Boyle Heights; East Los Angeles was highly contested because of the multitude of histories that had taken place on the Avenue. In 1940 the population of Boyle Heights was about 35,000 Jewish, 15,000 Mexicans, and 5,000 Japanese, with other groups such as Italians, Armenians, African Americans, and Russian Molokans making up a smaller portion of the population.¹⁰

Originally Boyle Heights was created as a suburban escape from downtown Los Angeles. However, city zoning laws in 1908 imposed on the Wests of Los Angeles classified it as a residential area whereas East Los Angeles was classified as industrial.¹¹ Incoming immigrants and minorities were barred from the Westside thereby many allocated in the East and Southside. Boyle Heights' geographical positioning was perfect as it allowed for close access to work opportunities. The zoning laws of 1908 caused the ethnic composition of Boyle Heights to change dramatically resulting in a multiethnic neighborhood.

While the neighborhood was undeniably multiracial by the 1940s the perception of characteristic varied throughout time. For example, in 1939 the Federal Housing Authority gave its lowest possible rating because of "detrimental racial elements." The F.H.A. characterized Boyle Heights as, "[Boyle Heights] is a "melting pot" area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous."¹² The F.H.A.'s gave Boyle Heights the lowest rating because it was multiethnic which made it harder to secure a housing loan in that area. This perception had material consequences as many of the buildings fell into disrepair. Whereas later on in 1954 the Fortnight magazine published a piece that highlighted Boyle Heights as "ethnically dynamic, religiously

⁹ Robert Darnton

¹⁰ Sanchez 635

¹¹ (Sanchez 635)

¹² Sanchez 637).

and politically tolerant, and community proud."¹³ The article described the coalition between cohabitants of various ethnic groups that resided in the area in order to fight the construction of the Golden State Freeway.

Brief Historical Context on Boyle Heights in the 1990s

The conversation over the presentation of its multiethnic past would come into discussion again with the initiation of the name change in 1993. By the early 1990s the demographics of Boyle Heights had shifted from being a mix of ethnicities to being predominantly Hispanic. The Los Angeles Almanac reports using U.S. census data that in 1990 the total population of Boyle Heights was approximately 90,778 people of which 85,447 were Hispanic.¹⁴ When citing the justification for the name change one of the main reasons was that Brooklyn Avenue represented the Jewish community and since the majority had moved to the Westside it was only appropriate to change the name to one that recognized the current Hispanic community. The Jewish Historical Society and residents stated that this neglected neglects to acknowledge the neighborhood's rich history. However, these arguments were interpreted by the media as the Jewish Historical Society privileging their histories over the importance of giving representation to the current community.

The impression that the Jewish Historical Society was privileging their own histories was partially because of the extreme xenophobia of the 1990s directed at minority communities in California. Gloria Molina when justifying the name change to the city council stated it would give residents in the area a form of representation in a time in which the community of Boyle Heights was under attack. This was exemplified through the continuation of anti-immigrant sentiment through Proposition 187. Proposition 187 was approved by California voters on November 8, 1994 and was aimed at denying public services to illegal immigrants. The agencies that provided public services were obligated by law to report those suspected to be illegal immigrants to the Immigrant and Naturalization Service. Under this context the city council thought it was important to assert their constituent's ties to the land through a symbolic change. Another example of the xenophobia directed at minorities was Proposition 63 aimed at passing local and federal laws to make English the official language. Supporters of the movement argued that English was in danger of being replaced by other languages, "especially Spanish."¹⁵ On the surface the movement presents itself as moderate, only seeking to promote national unity through the preservation of America's English-language heritage. However, as a Los Angeles Time article from February 19, 1989 by Mary Nicholas states, "English-only policies only encourage hostility toward immigrants and increase intolerance toward citizens, especially Asians and Latinos, whose first language is not English." This was exemplified in Monterey Park during 1987 by the candidates elected for City Council who promised to enforce the measures at a local level. The newly elected council members stated their concern regarding the number of non-English books in Monterey Park Libraries, even though these books represented less than 10% of the library's collection.¹⁶ This prompted the council in October of 1987 to take control over library management using "financial account-ability" as the justification. Afterwards the council during 1988-89 cut the library's budget for foreign-language materials from 11,000 to about 3,000. Proposition 63 and 187 exhibit the attacks directed towards minority communities.

¹³ (Sanchez 633).

¹⁴ (Los Angeles Almanac).

¹⁵ Mary Nichols, "The English-Only Movement Legitimizes Attacks on Brotherhood and Tolerance." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, February 19, 1989.

¹⁶ Ibid

Avenida Cesar Chavez

Gloria Molina initiated the renaming of Brooklyn, Macy, and Sunset to commemorate the late Cesar E. Chavez. The name change was originally introduced by the city council as an honorary memorial for the accomplishments of Cesar Chavez however, a debate soon erupted because it was viewed as a stamp of cultural identity that imposed a set of behaviors. The Public Works Committee began its report by introducing the change as a means of honoring the accomplishments of Cesar Chavez.¹⁷ In their discussions about Chavez the City Council brings attention to Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi making connections between the leaders because of their similar non-violent manner of bringing about reform. The report continues to highlight non-violence as a key factor in their reasoning to commemorate Chavez. Going as far as stating, “The proposal will provide appropriate recognition of leadership provided by Cesar E. Chavez in the struggle for justice and dignity and serve as a positive role model for Latinos living in East Los Angeles.”¹⁸

The inclusion of a “positive role model” along with the emphasis on “non-violent manner” is reflective of the city’s attempts to distance itself from violent means of demanding change. The L.A. riots represented a more radical and violent approach at addressing and highlighting racial tensions. The L.A. riots were a result racial tensions of which the catalyst was the Rodney King trial. On April 29, 1992, the officers who were facing felony charges were acquitted. Following this announcement riots erupted which resulted in 53 deaths, 10,000 arrests, 2,300 injuries, more than 1,000 buildings lost to fire.¹⁹ Afterward there was a repeated emphasis of peaceful protesting demonstrated by the city’s efforts to highlight peaceful reforms in history while disregarding the more radical approaches. Through its exalting of Chavez as a “positive role model” the city indicated which parts of history the city chose to acknowledge and present. This sheds light on why Chavez was honored by the city of Los Angeles whereas his more radical counterparts were seemingly absent from public praise. In addition, the city council was signaling to the residents of Boyle Heights that Chavez was a “positive role model” that was Latino therefore the Latino community in Boyle Heights should accept him as a representative and role model of the community.

Chavez’s exaltation did not go noticed by the citizens of Boyle Heights because through the ethnic association the city council was imposing Cesar Chavez as a cultural stamp. Many were quick to protest thorough letters written in protest people pointed to better locations than East Los Angeles to commemorate Chavez as the letters pointed that Chavez had little ties to East Los Angeles. As one letter from Arthur B. Noriega, a resident from Macy Street states, “It seems to me that the city of Los Angeles has better things to do- than changing street names and why way out here in East L.A. why don’t they put the street name change in ‘San Fernando.’ That’s the place where most people knew Mr. Chavez.”²⁰ Arthur’s views of Chavez as an outsider were not unique as a petition to halt the change that was submitted to the city council on July 23 1993 gathered 1565 signatures. The title page of the petition stated that, “Although the many contributions of Cesar Chavez deserve recognition should not require the obliteration of a cultural landmark to generations of immigrant Americans, including Hispanics. To enact this ordinance without the consultation of the community is unconscionable. To assume that all Hispanics would agree to this name

¹⁷ Public Works Committee, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Victor A Matheson and Robert A. Baade, “Race and Riots: A Note on the Economic Impact of the Rodney King Riots.” *Urban Studies* 41, no. 13 (December 2004): 2691–96.

²⁰ Los Angeles Archive 85

change is presumptuous.”²¹ The rhetoric present in the petition to “save” Brooklyn characterized Chavez as an outsider to the community. It contended that not all Hispanics would agree to change the name based on ethnic association. The petition highlighted the complex history behind the name Brooklyn.

Jewish Brooklyn Avenue or Brooklyn Avenue?

There were a multitude of reasons that residents opposed the name change however, regarding Brooklyn, the City Council focused on the concerns of the Jewish community in order to shift the discourse away from preserving the multiethnic history of the community. Through the portrayal of the debate as an interethnic conflict the City Council created an “insider outsider” dynamic thereby, justifying the change as necessary to represent the current demographics of the neighborhood. When changing the name of Brooklyn Avenue to Cesar E. Chavez Avenue the Jewish Historical Society protested as they contended that the memory of the Jewish community would dissipate.²² The City Council attempted to appease these complaints through their submission to the Cultural Heritage Commission to classify Brooklyn as a Historical Cultural Monument that would give it proper signage to commemorate the contributions of the Jewish community. The act of giving commemoration to address some concerns demonstrates how the city would continue to acknowledge and highlight the contributions as an important part of the neighborhood’s history. This negotiation shows the importance of how history is presented. In the application to the Cultural Heritage Commission to declare Brooklyn a Historical Cultural Monument it stressed that Brooklyn Avenue “symbolized” the western migration of the Jewish population from New York to Los Angeles.²³ The word “symbolized” creates the ethnic connection between Brooklyn Avenue and the Jewish population. However, the original name Brooklyn Avenue was never intended to represent the Jewish community.

Brooklyn Ave was never meant for the Jewish community as the application to the Cultural Heritage Commission depicted it. This is not to say that the Jewish community did not have ties and history to the avenue but rather that the name itself did not represent the Jewish community. The name Brooklyn came from a land company. Andrew Boyle, one of the first “white”²⁴ residents, after the land was under U.S. control, purchased a lot of the land and used it to plant vineyards. Andrew Boyle’s son in law William Workman made numerous attempts as mayor and council member of Los Angeles to give the land the necessary infrastructure to grow its population and transition from a rural location to an ideal suburb. William Workman and Brooklyn Land and Building Company made large investments to brand the area a suburban escape from the busy city. They wanted to make Boyle Heights a mythic landscape that would be known for its beauty and tranquility as exemplified second street’s residential properties that are Queen Anne and Victorina style homes.²⁵ These developments were aimed at attracting Anglo-Americans who desired a suburban lifestyle. These developments along with various street names changes such as Brooklyn, Michigan, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Chicago were in place to attract people from the east coast by making the new landscape feel familiar. The vision was short lived because of an economic downturn.

In addition, the statement to the Cultural Heritage Commission neglected to highlight the diversity of Boyle Heights. City zoning laws of 1908 imposed on the Westside of Los Angeles classified it as a residential area whereas the Eastside was classified as industrial. As previously described incoming

²¹ SAVE It

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ *SurveyLA* , Los Angeles Historical Resource Survey , 30 Dec. 2014

²⁵ Ibid

immigrants were barred from the Westside, the alternative Boyle Heights located on the eastside allowed immigrants near access to work opportunities.²⁶ This resulted in Boyle Heights becoming a multiethnic neighborhood. Brooklyn Avenue served as a commercial strip where a range of residents could shop for their needs. This history was absent from the discourse thereby creating the narrative that Brooklyn was attached to just the Jewish community. This justified them changing them because as they stated in the application “This group has now resettled to the west end of town.”²⁷ The city council’s use of language furthered the idea that because Brooklyn symbolized the Jewish population and they had now reallocated that it was only appropriate to change the name.

This was echoed in the media. As Bruce Phillips, the son of a Jewish merchant recalls, “I remember hearing a show on KPFK 90.7 FM (Pacific Radio Station) talking about the name change with students from Roosevelt High who said incorrectly that it was called Brooklyn in honor of the Jews who lived there and since they were mostly all gone there was no need for that name.”²⁸ This recollection further pushed the rhetoric that Brooklyn represented Jewish people. While Phillips doesn’t remember his father having “strong feelings” about it, a large part of his memory revolves around how the connection between the Jewish community was portrayed in order to demonstrate how the name was no longer needed and created an insider outsider dynamic.

The Los Angeles Times also furthered the idea of an insider outsider dynamic in various articles. One entry titled, “A New Name Can’t Change a Street’s History” by George Ramos, a Mexican American journalist, states that changing the name to fit a changing demographics was not a new concept in Boyle Heights. He cited that various Jewish activists and prominent leaders pushed for name changes that would represent them. Therefore, names like Hollenbeck, German sounding, gained more favor than Boyle, Irish sounding. This could still be observed in the names of the Hollenbeck Police Station and Hollenbeck Junior Highschool.²⁹ He presented this story to disprove the statement from Steve Sass of the Jewish Historical Society who stated, “Don’t obliterate Los Angeles’s Jewish history.”³⁰ The argument presented by Ramos and the comments from Steve Sass neglected that there were other communities to whom the name Brooklyn mattered. Brooklyn was important to those outside the Jewish community. As Bruce Philips recounts, “Interestingly some older Hispanics who grew up there STILL refer to it as Brooklyn Ave for Nostalgia reasons: it evokes the old feel of a vibrant shopping neighborhood with lots of bustling street life.” This demonstrates that Brooklyn was not only important to the Jewish community but rather to the multiple communities who lived and shopped on Brooklyn Ave. Other examples include sentiments written by many non-Jewish folks in their letters of opposition. For instance Shun Ling, owner of Ling’s Dept. Store states, “The name Brooklyn Avenue has a nostalgic tune with me, because I have grown accustomed to it, for [I] have been here 33 years.”³¹ Another resident stating, “It’s not a matter of being Jewish or

²⁶ Ibid Sanchez, 635.

²⁷ Jay Oren, to the Cultural Heritage Commission, 3 February 1994, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

²⁸ Email Correspondence with Bruce Phillips

²⁹ Los Angeles Times Article sent to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 20 September 1993, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³⁰ Los Angeles Times Article sent to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 20 September 1993, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³¹ Siu K. Wong and Wei M. Wong to the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering, 4 October 1993, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

Latino. It's a matter of Brooklyn being Brooklyn."³² This is further evident through the petition titled "Save It" which collected many signatures from merchants and residents and stated, "Although the many contributions of Cesar Chavez deserve recognition should not require the obliteration of a cultural landmark to generations of immigrant Americans, including Hispanics. To enact this ordinance without the consultation of the community is unconscionable. To assume that all Hispanics would agree to this name change is presumptuous."³³

While the city council's rhetoric, article, and media rooted their arguments in "history" it was a conflict rooted in whose history was highlighted. This was echoed in Richard G. Polanco's statement about the name change, "I suggested then and I believe today, that our city's various ethnic and racial communities will continue to compete for the right to influence public policy. And we must find ways to compete in a healthy manner – in a way that embraces our diversity and respects our differences."³⁴ This shows that history itself was not the point of contention but rather who got to power to frame the stories of the community and to what end. The final decision was to award Brooklyn as a Historical Cultural Monument as yet there is no signage present in the specified locations. The act of giving this status shows how the neighborhood's multiethnic past was erased therefore moving forward with the name change while acknowledging portions of the past framed the community's history in order to further the political messages sent through the name Cesar E. Chavez.

Symbolic or Real Change?

Chavez was an important symbol, but Los Angeles County was cautious in their representation on a national level and statewide level. The original proposition brought forward by Gloria Molina stated the name would be changed to "Avenida Cesar Chavez" however, this was soon dropped, and the Board of Supervisors and City Council opted for "Cesar E. Chavez Avenue." While they did not explain the change directly, there is reasoning for the change in the 1990s because using a language other than English was a political statement which the County of Los Angeles was not prepared to make.

Language was an ardent political topic in California at the time of the proposal. "Avenida Cesar Chavez" would be representative of the Mexican American community; however, in California at the time there was a large anti-immigrant sentiment. It became clear that it was an attack on Asians and Latinos, because for many that was not their first language. This was affirmed through the remarks of Mayor Barry L. Hatch was surprisingly frank about his view that the public library's services should be extended only to citizens able to read English," Hatch said. "I think if people want a foreign language, they can go purchase books on their own." This exemplifies the attack on foreign languages. Cesar E. Chavez Avenue would allow the Mexican American community to highlight their presence and legitimize their claims to the space while simultaneously representing those outside of the community they were assimilated into Anglo-America.

³² Los Angeles Times Article sent to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 13 September 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³³ Petition to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 4 October 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1 Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³⁴ Richard Polonco, 11 October 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

This was further exemplified through the continuation of anti-immigrant sentiment through Proposition 187. Proposition 187 was approved by California voters on November 8, 1994 and was aimed at denying public services to illegal immigrants. The agencies that provided public services were obligated by law to report those suspected to be illegal immigrants to the Immigrant and Naturalization Service. With both proposition 63 and 187 being proposed at the time it is evident that the switch from “Avenida Cesar Chavez” to Cesar Chavez Avenue was not arbitrary. The way a simple change in signage can represent and communicate the histories of a community different exemplifies how signage can further agendas through the inclusion or exclusion of stories.

ADD quotes on people’s accounts of how they believed the change was symbolic rather than tangible

Strictly Professional?

Supporters were aware of the importance of giving representation to the community and commemorating Chavez. However, a portion of community members remained skeptical of the real reasoning behind the City Council’s actions. Letters written in opposition to the name change insinuated that the reasons were more personal and selfishly political. For instance, a property owner on Sunset Boulevard in a letter to the City Council stated, “Why is it that so many persons in authority feel it necessary to change facilities or streets to reflect their affiliation to other politicians, etc. I’ve had enough of this self-serving accolades for politicians or others who want to make it big.”³⁵ The frustration exemplified in this letter is echoed by many others letters sent in opposition that stated it was a political move rather than a simple commemoration. Gloria Molina the sponsor of the name change had previously worked with Chavez; however, their relationship was complicated. During Molina’s first campaign Chavez endorsed her opponent, Richard G. Polanco, by slandering her name. In an interview Molina recounts, “. He got César Chavez to write a letter to the district saying, ‘Polanco is my person, and Gloria is antiunion, antifarm worker.’ ...I was really personally upset.”³⁶ It is evident that she was upset about the situation, yet she was the one to initiate the name change. During the interview she was asked if during a campaign image mattered more than substance. Molina responded that image was more important than substance.³⁷ She lamented that it was unfortunate but getting a recommendation was crucial. For example, she states, “Can you get Jimmy Carter to write a letter for you? ‘You know, this community loved Jimmy Carter.”³⁸ Endorsements are critical in political campaigns; therefore, the negative statements from Chavez were detrimental to her career. Through her sponsorship of the name change Molina tied her legacy to Chavez’s name and gained a favorable relationship with the United Farm Workers. The personal benefits to Molina’s career were evident and further supported by the addition of a small stretch of Sunset Boulevard that was added in order to include Councilman Mike Hernandez’s district thereby creating political relationships.³⁹

³⁵ Cecilia Cohen to the Board of Public Works Board, 14 September 1993, Council file 93-0907, Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

³⁶ Gloria Molina, Oral History Interview, conducted 1990 by Carlos Vásquez, UCLA Oral History Program, for the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program, 266.

³⁷ *Ibid* 261.

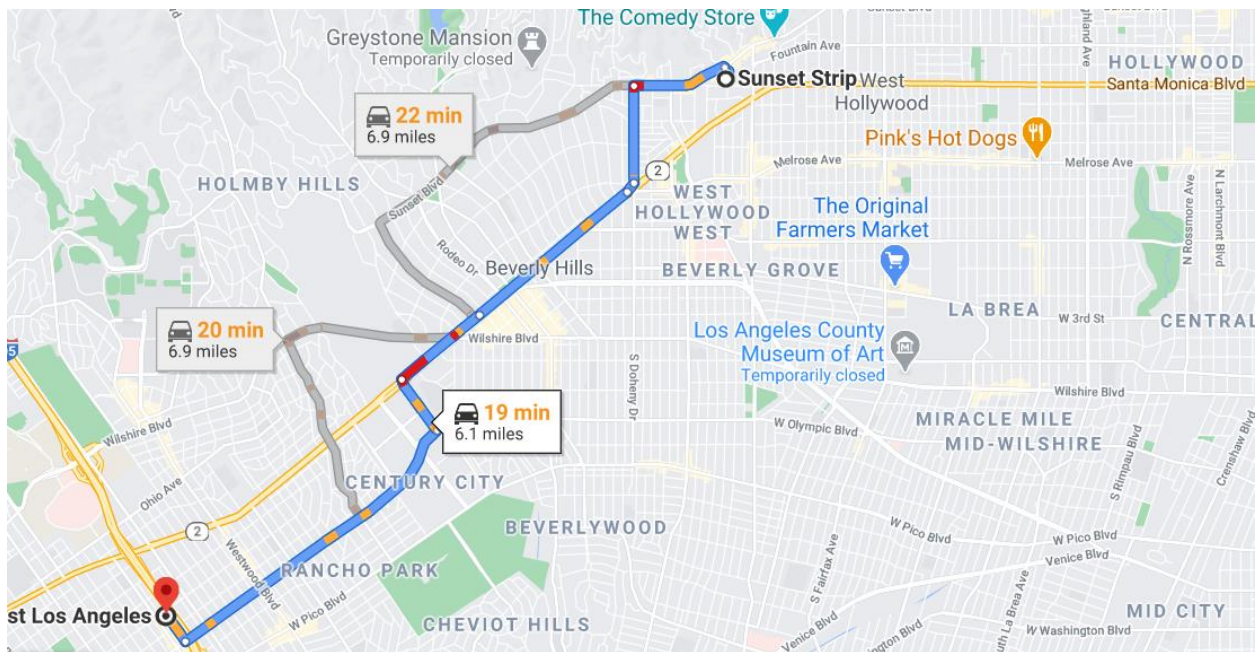
³⁸ *Ibid* 261.

³⁹ Los Angeles Times Article sent to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 13 September 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

The benefits brought to Molina’s career demonstrate how symbolic action is effective in communicating the beliefs of a community.

What about Sunset?

Discourse surrounding Sunset did not revolve around race in the public sphere but rather the boosterism that the name Sunset gave the merchants and residents. This can be largely attributed to Sunset’s cultural notoriety. The area of Sunset that was being changed was located near Chinatown with primarily Chinese tenants; however, unlike Brooklyn the history of the street was not racialized but commodified. The value that the street name Sunset was given shows the influence that street names have in framing history and conveying a dominant narrative. The reason being is that Sunset is not necessarily in the Westside, but it is associated to it. Therefore the association dramatically changes from the East because of the original design of the city.



Sunset Ave. caused petitions and prompted various protest letters from merchants in Chinatown. The Chinatown Chamber of Commerce (CCC) and the Chinatown Community Advisory (CCA) Committee both opposed citing the cultural capital they would lose if the name were changed. Previewing the complaints, all the letters contained a variation of the phrase, “I have absolutely no objections to honoring the name of Cesar Chavez...” This along with a phrase acknowledging the accomplishments of Chavez.⁴⁰ This seemingly irrelevant phrase continually appeared not only in the letters of protest from merchants in Chinatown but people, in general, to acknowledge the actions of Chavez as important while simultaneously regarding his actions as not enough to change the name. This demonstrates a contradiction in the language

⁴⁰ Petition to the City of Los Angeles City Council, 4 October 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

being used because there was a recognition by the community of the importance of Cesar Chavez while simultaneously opposing it because of the notoriety of Sunset. This hints at the fact that there was a form of cultural authority present in the name of Sunset.

Streets hold cultural capital and thereby have a form of cultural authority. The Chairperson of the Chinatown Community Advisory Committee, Don Toy stated, “Please note that some Sunset Boulevard property owners and businesses regard Sunset Boulevard as a prestigious address, well known throughout the United States and is a part of the historic Route 66...”⁴¹ Terms such as “prestigious” or “well known” indicate that the street name was important to the community because of its ties to Hollywood glamour and notoriety. This is further reinforced as various letters reference a variety of plays and films made about Sunset Street. One letter directly tackles this issue by stating, “depriving us all from using the street name as a marketing tool...”⁴² Through the value set to Sunset over the title, Cesar Chavez demonstrates that Sunset had cultural capital and what it represented, white Anglo America had a form of cultural authority through its marketability. While Chavez was known enough for a majority of the letters to cite his cultural and social impact it was not as easily marketable as Sunset. The profit generated by Sunset shifted the conversation from race and instead towards profit. The city council attempted to mitigate complaints by offering aid to pay for expenses generated from the change. However, merchants on Sunset stated that it would not address long term financial loss and the eraser of history. Similarly, to Brooklyn history itself would never be erased but the potential to have influence in keeping and profiting from the name Sunset was.

Conclusion

The debate over the name change illustrates the importance of how narratives are used. While many merchants, residents and the Jewish Historical Society grounded their arguments against the change in history. The real point of contention was who had the power to include or exclude narratives through symbolic signage. Today many shops in Boyle Heights still retain the name Brooklyn Ave, but many new residents have very little understanding of what it is referring too. With vague research it would be difficult for the everyday person to uncover Brooklyn Avenue’s multiethnic past. It is crucial to understand names and monuments because they can be methods of contesting space and having cultural authority throughout the United States. It is important to understand this to see how history is not just being created but also deployed.

While the debate on Brooklyn was mainly focused on erasure through the exclusion of community history the debate in Sunset had similar concerns of erasure however, at the center of the conversation was money and prestige. Sunset Boulevard

Expanding and Moving Forward

This project highlights how commemorative memorials exclude while simultaneously privileging other histories; however, there are other examples within the community that show this is not always the

⁴¹ Don Toy to the Councilmember Mike Hernandez, 11 October 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

⁴² Siu K. Wong and Wei M. Wong to the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering, 4 October 1993, Council file 93-0907 , Box 1, Folder 1, Los Angeles City Archives.

case. One of the most notable Jewish places of worship in Boyle Heights was the Congregation Talmud Torah also known as the Breed Street Shul. The Shul was nicknamed by residents the “Queen of Shuls” because of its large and beautiful Byzantine Revival design. After large portions of the Jewish community moved out the Shul fell into disrepair and after earthquake damage it was in risk of being demolished. Large community effort by volunteers from both the Jewish and Latino community created a coalition that was able to halt the demolition process. In addition, they were able to gather 1.3 million dollars in public and private funds to repair the Shul. Today the Shul is a community space that pays tribute to the memory of the Jewish community while serving the needs of the Latino community. This demonstrates how through a democratic process and coalition building it is possible to have memorials that serve and honor the history of the community. Moving forward I would like to further explore the dynamics of coalition building.