As I made my way through unincorporated East Los Angeles—the area east of Boyle Heights—I marveled at its tranquility. Everywhere I turned, the streets were empty. No children playing or teenagers hanging out. The often flat, sometimes inclined blocks resembled each other. Their mostly small, peach-colored cement homes stared blankly. A few homes had trees, but most featured cement yards. Excitement came about every fifth house, when a dog or two rushed out of hiding with only a chain-link fence checking them, bark, bark, bark. Their commotion stopped with a last warning, a hoarse woof!

East LA’s simplicity confused me. Past media coverage showed streets teeming with bald Mexican gangsters wearing white T-shirts, baggy khakis, and long white socks that reached the knees. Iconic East LA gang movies like Blood In, Blood Out and American Me also glorified them. Their characters had street handles like Popeye, Huero, and Little Puppet. These vatos locos, or crazy ones, rode a roller coaster of drugs and violence—a life of pura locura. I did not see them. A dónde están?

East LA’s main boulevard, Whittier Boulevard, provided a partial answer. The busy street interrupted the community’s calm: Mexican
restaurants, fast food joints, clothing stores, music stores, street
vendors, hot dogs here, tacos there, crowds of people, standing here,
walking there—all of it provided energy. And underneath the boule-
vard’s whirlwind of feet and faces, underneath its mariachi and co-
rrido music, underneath its defining feature, an arch proclaiming
“W H I T T I E R  B O U L E V A R D”—like a gold rainbow crossing from
one side of the street to the other—I got glimpses of the legendary
Maravilla gangsters.

They were not Maravilla’s younger generation, nor the young-
sters who spent most of their time indoors to avoid police harass-
ment. The Maravilla legends are the veteranos, or the older, retired
gang members. One knew them through their tight grip on the past:
brushlike mustaches; traditional comb-backs with no fade; creased
khakis or blue jeans; Buster Brown or Stacy Adams shoes; thick plaid
Pendleton shirts; and a fedora or tango or tando hat. Old-school.
They come from close to twenty separate, unrelated gangs, or “neigh-
borhoods,” that call Maravilla home. Maravilla, which means “mar-
velous” or “wonderful,” is a local term for East LA and is often
attached to a gang name. For instance, several Maravilla neighbor-
hoods took on the following names based on the street the gangs
formed on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arizona-Maravilla</th>
<th>Lomita-Maravilla</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Hoyo-Maravilla</td>
<td>Lopez-Maravilla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ford-Maravilla</td>
<td>Lote-Maravilla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fraser-Maravilla</td>
<td>Marianna-Maravilla</td>
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<td>Gage-Maravilla</td>
<td>Moeriya-Maravilla</td>
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<td>High Times-Maravilla</td>
<td>Pomeroy-Maravilla</td>
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<td>Juarez-Maravilla</td>
<td>Raskals-Maravilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kern-Maravilla</td>
<td>Rock-Maravilla</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A legend would introduce themselves to others by saying, “I’m Joe from Ford-Maravilla,” “I’m John from Lopez-Maravilla,” “I’m Tempo from Arizona-Maravilla,” “I’m Guano from Juarez-Maravilla,” and so forth.

Then they sometimes told outsiders (like me) their history.

During the early 1990s, the different Maravilla neighborhoods—whose gang members often battled each other—united against the most powerful prison gang in the United States, the Mexican Mafia, or La Eme. This homegrown Mexican American gang controls all the Southern California Latino gangs.¹ In fact, it demands that all Southern California barrios follow its rules and pay a tax on its drug sales. If any gang resists, then La Eme puts a “greenlight” on its members. This means that all Southern California barrios must assault resistors on sight. In return, La Eme provides structure and protection in jail and prison. Since the Maravilla gangs united to resist La Eme, a greenlight was put on them. The Maravillas then endured a brutal twelve-year period, from 1994 to 2006, that was perhaps unrivaled in the gang world.

I met many aging Maravillas who experienced the greenlight. Surprisingly, the physical and emotional traumas they experienced in prison became a lifelong source of pride for them. Even evangelical Maravillas, who battled inner demons not only with Christian love but also with Christian rage—felt proud of their greenlight status. I wanted to dig deeper into how this Maravilla pride came from extraordinary pain and harm.

For guidance, I perused the gang literature in the United States. I found that the research, though important, generally focused on the situational themes of youth gangs: gang-related status, structure, bonds, income, symbols, and thrills.² But I wanted to follow C. Wright Mills, who argued that we must link history, social structure, and biography to comprehend society.³ Most people understand
themselves within personal orbits, such as family, work, and neighborhood. Mills, though, urged us to link immediate experiences to changes in the economy, technology, and social structure. In other words, we must understand people through history.

I also wanted to heed the call of sociologist David Brotherton. He criticized gang scholars for bracketing historical moments; for making the gang experience seem timeless or transhistorical; and for taking the existing social arrangement (which favors the privileged) for granted. Such researchers made gangs appear as cultural misfits or system errors that just needed alignment—which stripped them of humanity and context.

I did find the rare scholars who integrated gangs into history. Sudhir Venkatesh and Steven Levitt showed how crack cocaine’s rise during 1980s changed Chicago Black gangs from a “family” into selfish crack dealers. Similarly, Dennis Rodgers showed how crack cocaine’s rise in Nicaragua during the late 1990s changed pandillas (gangs) from beloved barrio protectors to feared crooks and drug dealers. And historian Deborah Levenson showed how Guatemala’s history of corrupt politics, political coups, labor uprisings, military cruelties, state-sponsored torture, and poverty all changed the harmless peer-based maras, or gangs, of the 1980s into violent gangs obsessed with “necro-living,” or death, by the late 1990s.

Those historical studies inspired me to focus on the period between the 1960s and early 1990s, during which La Eme became the most powerful prison gang in the United States. This period later set up the clash between the Maravillas and La Eme. If La Eme had not formed, the Maravillas would likely have experienced typical gang violence. But since it did form, the Maravillas experienced La Eme’s greenlight wrath. The violence they experienced increased, which changed how they regarded their lives. History mattered in how the Maravillas lived and understood themselves.
Maravilla Matters

I committed my research to the Maravilla old-timers for a few reasons. First, most gang studies focus on the crime, violence, thrills, and status pursuits of young gangsters. But old gang members matter too. The O.G.s, or veteranos, pass the torch onto the youngsters because of death, faltering health, drug addiction, and finding Jesus. Second, the aging Maravillas die quickly. Drug-related health issues, such as liver and heart disease, strokes, and heroin overdoses, shorten their lives. Since I began my research in 2012, seven Maravillas have died before the age of sixty-five. Others I met in passing also died during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, I found that the aging Maravillas wanted to matter as complete human beings. This theme of mattering guides this book, which I credit to critical scholars Luke Billingham and Keir Irwin-Rogers. To explain violence among young people, they show how mattering means more than just earning status and power on the streets. Mattering is an intrinsic human need regardless of social position and location. It starts at infancy and continues into adulthood as one interacts with family, peers, community, and society. To matter is to feel needed and heard, to feel like a provider of joy and stability. At best, one feels valued and impactful. At worst, one feels the “trauma of failed influence” and falls into a “terrifying abyss of insignificance.”

The story of mattering is the story of the Maravilla participants. They felt like stars because of their bloody battle with La Eme, and they wanted to matter as violent men. Just as gender scholars R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt note about marginal men, the Maravillas had little chance to exert power in society’s mainstream social, economic, and political institutions. As a result, they showed hypermasculine toughness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and domination on the street and in jail and prison. In such
spaces, violence determined where one stood on a masculine hierarchy. Many of them then became experts in violence. They had to matter as courageous men.

But they also struggled to matter as men to children, friends, neighbors, and lovers. Sometimes they felt important through religious activities or community building. Other times they felt worthless because of drug addiction and declining health. This is when they struggled to negotiate their various identities, when they seemed not to know which identity to portray: a dopefiend versus a Christian; a violent person versus a friend; a masculine man versus a vulnerable one. And when they fell into the abyss of pain and misery—of insignificance—it seemed as if they wanted to erase their existence or die. I would see it all: their hope and laughter, their crying and despair. Their deaths.

Last, I want to emphasize that the Maravillas matter historically. As citizens of the world, they have much to say about current events. They offer political commentary on immigration policy, former president Trump, and religion. They also discuss the volatile race relations between Mexicans and Black people, and the distrust between the old and new generations of gang members. They say this all to matter in a world that they perceive makes them irrelevant or relics of the past. But mattering in such ways is not uniquely Maravilla. Their views tie into larger political and social movements across the country, and even across the world. The Maravillas do not stand outside of history; rather, they reinforce political and cultural narratives about certain people and places. They matter to our times.

The Format

In my research, I always ask three basic questions:

1. How do history and social structure shape who people become?
2. How do people make meaning of what they do?
3. What are the consequences, good or bad, of being who they are and doing what they do?

To answer these questions I have divided this book into three parts. In the first part, I discuss the history of Los Angeles and East Los Angeles, where racist policies and rising drug markets set the stage for the participant’s lives. Then I reveal the family and neighborhood factors that shaped their biographies as gangsters and drug addicts. I also discuss their prison experiences, which reinforced their Maravilla identity and violence. Finally, I document their conflict with La Eme, which led to unprecedented violence and victimization. In the second and third parts I analyze the everyday lives of the aging Maravillas. Here I document their homelessness, drug addiction, street life, and religious experiences. I also examine how they negotiate politics, racism, fatherhood, and aging as they try to matter in the world.

Maravilla: A Day in the Life

The revival lowrider scene on Whittier Boulevard was amazing. On Saturday evenings you would see lowriders, or bombs, the classic, immaculate cars from the 1940s to the 1960s. Shiny ones, sparkling ones, small ones, large ones. The Bel-Air, the Riviera, the Monte Carlo, the Torpedo, the Coup de Ville in all colors (hot pink, lime green, cherry red, rich purple, royal blue) and in all styles (iron top, cloth top, convertible down)—a throwback to another era. And the oldies music was all around us, a time capsule that made us emerge within a wall of 1960s sounds:

♪
It’s just like heaven, being here with you,
You’re like an angel, too good to be true,
But after all, I love you, I do
Angel baby, my angel baby . . .

♫

It was the music that solemn-faced drivers played, wearing shades, cruising with an arm around their lady; the music that made the crowd feel giddy and brought them back to their teenage years. It reminded them of being young men who gathered in ranflas, or cars, and drove down the boulevard looking for rucas, or girl-friends, for the night; or of being young women, dressed up, hair high, makeup on, looking for vatos, for someone to slow dance with for the night.

♫

When you are near me,
My heart skips a beat,
I can hardly stand on
My own two feet,
Because I love you,
I love you, I do,
Angel baby, my angel baby
Woo-hoo, I love you
Woo-hoo, I do
No one could love you
Like I do . . .  

♫

Getting ready for Whittier Boulevard was serious.
The old-timer Marcos: “Ah man, you iron and starch your pants. Iron shirts. Some would iron their boxers and socks. I say, man, it took me a good hour to get ready, put my cologne on and shower, shave, and all that good stuff. Put on my clothes nice and slow, try not