IT WAS A QUINTESSENTIAL JUNE AFTERNOON in Southern California: sunny, dry, and so hot that the car steering wheel was too painful to handle. I pulled up to a shopping center in Diamond Bar, a master-planned suburb in Los Angeles’s East San Gabriel Valley, also known as the East Valley. I met longtime resident Carl Schoner for an oral history interview in one of Diamond Bar’s two Starbucks stores (three, if you include the kiosk inside the Target on the other side of the parking lot). After we ordered iced teas, we got to talking about what living in the area meant to him. I wanted to meet Carl after discovering his self-published books, *Suburban Samurai* (2006) and *When We Were Cowboys* (2009). In the former, he wrote about the “Asian invasion of the San Gabriel Valley,” noting it was a “friendly invasion” but “an invasion nonetheless.” The latter is a set of stories of the “fondest memories of all young people who were lucky enough to have grown up in the more open expanses of Southern California’s San Gabriel Valley back in the good old days of the 1960s and 1970s.” Carl’s memoirs reflect two strands of how residents and outsiders alike understand the region’s past and present: a once-rural place filled with folksy equestrians, farmers, and ranchers, and contemporaneously, a collection of newer suburbs that would later be known for their sizable Asian populations. In both works, Carl eulogizes a life he and thousands of residents experienced before the valley suburbanized and emerged as an Asian immigrant hub. It was a place people like Carl revered and reveled in until it was taken away from them—or so it was felt.

Carl’s background is not unlike other East Valley natives or settlers who came of age in the post–World War II years. Born in 1953 to an Italian American mother and German American father, Carl’s family resided in the area when it was still rural. They briefly lived in New York City to take care of his

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grandfather until 1961, when they returned to Diamond Bar. For them, the East Valley was a reprieve from living in the city, a place he and his mother did not regard as a decent environment for families. One of Carl’s earliest memories upon returning was seeing the emerald hills and idyllic ranches he grew fond of as a kid. He threw himself back into the western lifestyle he missed. Well into his teenage years, Carl worked at Phillips Ranch “shoveling poop at the horse stalls,” fixing fences, and riding horses. At the ranch, Carl felt most in touch with nature and himself. It was where he went to escape reality, especially amid the cultural and political turbulence of 1960s America. Before the ranches and farms were bulldozed to make way for single-family houses, he claimed the East Valley was true country—open hills, freedom, a community where cowboys roamed: “It was absolute heaven.” But by “the middle 1980s,” Carl said “it began to change,” a sentiment laden with sadness and bitterness that I heard in nearly all my interviews with homeowners. “Change” denoted their frustrations with development and density. “Change” was also a veiled,
less provocative way to describe disapproval of the valley’s population shifts, particularly the rise of Asian immigrant settlers and their impact on the community. While some folks were outraged, most critics of change—aesthetic, demographic, or otherwise—were simply dissatisfied with disruptions to the status quo. Peoples, cultures, or everyday practices that did not fit a white frontier imaginary challenged their understandings of what it meant to live in L.A.’s countryside.

White families sought a peaceful, “rural” albeit suburban lifestyle, but so did Chinese, Filipino, and Korean immigrants who settled in California after the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which relaxed decades-long immigration restrictions from Asia and Latin America. Judy Chen Haggerty, a Chinese homeowner in Rowland Heights, settled in the East Valley with her husband—who is white and originally from Pennsylvania—in the early 1980s. They established roots during the building boom and shortly before the influx of Asian settlement later in the decade. As a new resident, Judy regularly experienced overt and covert forms of racism, including moments with her spouse. To build a support system in the East Valley, she founded the Rowland Heights Chinese Association in 1989, around the time Chinese associations were founded in the neighboring suburbs of Walnut and Diamond Bar. Over time, Judy liked seeing other people who looked like her and appreciated the groundswell of Chinese shops. By 1996, with Rowland Heights as a separate anchor, the “Chinese Golden Triangle” of nearby Hacienda Heights, Walnut, and Diamond Bar contained approximately 1,869 Chinese businesses. By the 2010s, 4,683 Chinese service-sector businesses operated in the area. Retail conveniences and the rising Asian population forged a sense of permanence and community. But critiques about change in L.A.’s hinterland came from Asian homeowners as well. This included Judy: “When we bought the house, there [were] still cows [around town]. It [was] so nice . . . [and] actually, I’m sorta missing it [now].” Like Judy, her father believed it was necessary to speak English, socialize with non-Chinese people, and live in a community that fostered assimilation. As the Asian population rose, some Asian suburbanites—like their white neighbors—asked: Was the East Valley still rural after these transformations?

One of Los Angeles County’s last bastions of wilderness, the East San Gabriel Valley had given way to mass suburbanization by the 1960s. Families
flocked to the region because planners, developers, builders, and realtors promised buyers a slice of western “frontier nostalgia” or what they commonly called “country living.” This referred to a way of life where residents relished the open space, prioritized family time, and cherished the folksiness of small-town America. This idea of country living rested on the myths and lore of an old American West, where rugged individuals appreciated nature, traditionalism, and a republican spirit of independence. Knowing this form of modern agrarianism had cachet, private actors packaged “country living” for upwardly mobile families. It was not organically built. It was a lifestyle reliant on formal or informal methods of social control to regulate “rural” space and culture. Whether one resided in a brand-new home within a master-planned tract or in a decades-old, self-built farmhouse, everyone lived in the “country.”

This book is about the suburbanization of Los Angeles’s East San Gabriel Valley and how a handful of country living suburbs grappled with spatial,
demographic, and political change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I argue that myths of American suburbia, the American West, and the American Dream informed residents’ expectations. Furthermore, I argue that residents’ allegiances to the ideals, rhetoric, and iconography of country living shaped their identities, subjectivities, and perspectives, thus informing how they engaged with civic affairs. Beyond politics, the romance and fantasies of western rurality affected residents’ day-to-day lives, from neighborhood aesthetics to where they shopped. For generations across the American West, people created the mythology of country living. East Valley residents made country living tangible, bringing it to life and giving it specific meaning as a unique suburban experience. For over four decades, country living widened residents’ opportunities for material gain, social clout, or political power. It influenced how they defined or organized themselves and their towns in relation to the city (i.e., L.A.) and other suburbs, while also narrowing the scope of who or what belonged in these suburbs.

Country living is not just a framework for understanding the East Valley. It is a way to understand why suburbanites across Southern California acted upon or reacted to broader changes in a modernizing, globalizing America. Specifically, for people of Asian descent, engaging with the organizing concept of country living as a culture and a space illustrated the limits of suburban racial inclusion. It forced Asian suburbanites to wield or weaponize their influence in complicated ways because country living suburbia was a landscape not designed for them. Residents often contradicted themselves in how they defined country living and how they lived this lifestyle. For some, “country living” was an all-encompassing term—which I refer to throughout the book—to describe a community’s commitment to egalitarianism, humility, neighborliness, and a respect for tradition. These traits rested on Jeffersonian notions of the honest yeoman. For others, particularly settlers of the 1980s and 1990s, country living was about worldliness, sophistication, and exclusivity. In general, residents understood country living as a static landscape reserved for Americans of European origin (i.e., white). Over time, homeowners used this rhetoric in local politics to stave off unwanted development. Critics also used “country living” to express discomforts with the presence of Asian culture—that is, languages, religions, design practices, childrearing methods, and everyday customs. Residents used this seemingly innocuous term to describe not only a lifestyle; it was also a class- and color-blind mechanism for controlling peoples and places. Strategic deployments of the country living ideal were examples of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls
“racism lite” in the era of American multiculturalism and diversity.\textsuperscript{10} Suburbanites who said they wished to protect country living veiled their intolerance, rage, or fears of the unknown through these modes of subtle prejudice.

Calls to curb change through the politics and language of country living enabled homeowners to conceal discriminatory motivations and allowed policies or attitudes to prevail at a time when social norms discouraged explicit bigotry commonplace before the civil rights movement. Though white homeowners frequently used the term “country living” for political purposes, Asian homeowners adopted it for their interests as well. Like their white neighbors, some Asian residents held racist, classist, and anti-Asian views. They aligned with the political right under the banner of protecting country living to guard their assets as a propertied class. Moreover, by standing with conservative interests, Asian immigrants could claim their worthiness as suburbanites and their willingness to Americanize—a criticism white residents had of their foreign-born counterparts. Asian families were not necessarily seeking white approval. But acceptance made it easier for them to feel a part of a landscape purportedly not designed for them (i.e., suburbs). By embracing local cultures grounded in western frontier nostalgia, Asian immigrants and their children were afforded degrees of privilege and a proximity to the privileges of whiteness their co-ethnics did not receive or experience in lower-middle- or working-class suburbs.

Even when residents expressed a commitment to multiculturalism, diversity, or inclusion in country living, they nonetheless held Asian immigrants to higher standards because their ethnic traditions, practices, and origins were deemed threats to the Euro-American mores of postwar suburbia. Asian families were generally accepted into (and in some cases embraced in) East Valley society as long as they minimized ethnic expression and fit into the mold of the “model minority.” By complying with or bending (not breaking) norms, Asian homeowners were able to gain influence as well as cultural capital. As they reached critical mass in the 1990s and 2000s, Asian immigrants—who were once the outsiders—slowly became insiders or part of the political establishment, influencing who and what was allowed in country living.

To be sure, critics’ motivations against development or diversity were not always purely based on racism and classism. These were not simple cases of whites versus Asians, middle-class versus rich. It was complicated. In country living, alliances formed and disagreements occurred within and across demographic lines. Residents’ feelings and perspectives ran the gamut. And
while “country living” evoked a lifestyle and regional aesthetic, it meant different things at different times and held different purposes. Residents weaponized the term depending on what interests were at stake. Their expectations, contradictions, and double standards resulted in a suburban experience where everyone was doing too much or not enough, specifically people of Asian descent.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the East San Gabriel Valley held the promise for families to have it all: a home, a stable quality of life, and social citizenship in what people around the world considered the promised land, Southern California. Thousands of families achieved the American Dream in these frontier-themed suburbs. But through what means? I am motivated by a handful of other questions as well: How influential were myths of the frontier and the old West in motivating families to settle in these suburbs? Why was country living understood as a static, timeless, never-changing place? How did those ideas inform their expectations? What did race, ethnicity, class, generation, and political ideology have to do with the experience of country living? Why was change considered pernicious? Why was it crucial for residents to protect and preserve country living? What was lost or taken away? While their reasons varied, ultimately, the people of the East Valley sought an atmosphere illustrative of their values and in alignment with their expectations of life in postwar L.A.

Los Angeles is among America’s most studied and misunderstood metropolitan areas. As Mike Davis, Michael Dear, Robert Fogelson, and Allen Scott have described, L.A.’s form is what makes it distinct from the likes of New York, Chicago, and the urban Rust Belt.11 Like its Sunbelt counterparts of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, L.A. is a sprawling collection of lower-density communities that together make a city. Greater L.A. fragmentally extends across the five counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. As such, critics bemoan L.A. as a chaotic postmodern metropolitan nightmare of multiple centers in search of a core and an identity; its neighborhoods and suburbs ostensibly lack a clear sense of place or character; and its built landscapes are reproductions or simulations of other locales causing geographers and theorists like Edward Soja to dub such places as “the real fake.”12 Indeed, whether they are well-known “old money” suburbs like Palos Verdes or “new money” suburbs like Calabasas
and Coto de Caza, L.A.’s upper-middle-class and well-to-do enclaves were inspired by verdant, quixotic landscapes beyond US borders. Housing, retail spaces, and whole communities were designed as imitations of English country cottages, Mexican plazas, or Mediterranean villages, thus calling into question if L.A. suburbs have organic identities or architectural styles.

L.A.’s sharp contrasts, lack of physical cohesion, and “inauthentic” aesthetics are what makes it a city that fascinates and frustrates. But I am more curious about why metro L.A.’s unknown parts do not capture the public’s attention or register in the scholarship of Southern California, particularly the under-the-radar suburbs of the East Valley. I am specifically interested in its modern development, its people, and what “everyday urbanism”—as John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski call it—looks like in country living communities. Rather than solely focusing on race, class, and materiality, I am also curious as to why residents—particularly homeowners—viewed the world the way they did. Some settlers genuinely saw themselves as living a rugged lifestyle akin to the days of the old frontier. Yet many homeowners resided in full-scale, contained, master-planned communities, which they considered markers of refinement, cultivation, and modernity. In country living, disconnect and contradictions are part and parcel of this particular suburban experience. As Karen Tongson notes, “National discourses about the suburbs . . . perpetuate the mythos of its racialized, classed, and sexualized homogeneity.” These popular assumptions did not always apply in L.A.’s metropolitan fringe. Pockets of nonwhite, working-class, and queer folks existed. Yet Americans across racial lines sustained these myths because the white, middle-class, heterosexual suburb and suburbanite held social capital. Finally, the scale of upper-income Asian settlement in the East Valley further set these communities apart from comparable towns of the San Fernando Valley, Inland Empire, and Orange County, thus piquing my curiosity in wanting to answer the question: “Why here?”

*Resisting Change in Suburbia* joins robust fields of research on L.A., post-WWII suburbanization, and post-1965 Asian settlement. I build on nearly three decades of pioneering studies. Despite L.A. County containing thirteen Asian-majority suburbs and several unincorporated areas, there is minimal research in the humanities intersecting these three fields of academic inquiry. In the 1990s, a group of social scientists took an interest in the San Gabriel Valley’s demographic turn. They focused on Monterey Park, a West San Gabriel Valley town whose rapidly growing Chinese immigrant population forced the question of immigrants’ “rights to the suburbs.” In their respective
studies, Tim Fong, John Horton, and Leland Saito focus on conflict, political representation, and white antagonism. Fong and Horton examine the impact of resistance toward the Chinese, oftentimes positioning the Chinese as victims of systemic racism and xenophobia. Taking this further, Saito focuses on the ways in which Asian residents built diverse alliances—namely with Latinos and empathetic whites—to reach interracial accord.

Geographers, sociologists, and economists interested in Asian suburbanization continued to prioritize the West Valley well into the 2010s. However, rather than focusing on conflict, researchers examined the impact of local commerce vis-à-vis transnational markets. They sought to explain how globalization “reached” and affected suburban L.A., particularly what Wei Li coins and classifies as “ethnoburbs”—that is, suburban Asian ethnic enclaves whose economic or geopolitical pull extended beyond their municipal boundaries. Li and Min Zhou, for example, illustrate how Chinese banks, import-export firms, and retail made the valley a critical Pacific Rim node. While Li and Zhou acknowledge that racial and spatial politics informed the day-to-day lives of Asian residents, they did not make this a main area of inquiry. Wendy Cheng’s study of Monterey Park and three neighboring suburbs—Alhambra, Rosemead, and San Gabriel—places race and racial positionality at the center of Asians’ everyday experiences. Unlike Fong, Horton, and Saito (whose studies focus on white and Latino reactions to Asian settlement) and unlike Li and Zhou (who are principally interested in political economy), Cheng focuses on how Asian and Latino residents crafted “regional racial formations.” Simply, these two marginalized communities formed ideas about each other based on geography, landscape, and quotidian encounters. Cheng’s research provides a useful model for thinking about racial difference and the social dynamics informing interethnic exchange in this part of the valley. Ultimately, these studies are less focused on how class played a role in homeowners’ interests, political ideologies, racial attitudes, and intra-Asian suburban identities (i.e., Asians in affluent suburbs versus Asians in working-class suburbs). In the East Valley concept of country living, matters of class intersected with race, thus influencing the texture of everyday life. Controversies over Asian-inspired design on buildings, for example, illustrated this intersectionality because critics believed such aesthetics denoted inelegance and a low-class citizenry.

As a cultural historian, my first and primary point of departure is to understand and locate how myths about suburban life, the American West, and the American Dream shaped residents’ expectations and politics in the

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East Valley. Early in my research, I noticed a recurring theme in print media and during conversations with residents: the allure and ubiquity of country living. As settlers of the modern American West, foreign- and native-born residents articulated a thirst for a romanticized way of life. They expressed an interest in seeking out a piece of a frontier past that may or may not have been there. The East Valley embodied what Henry Nash Smith refers to as “virgin land.” It was a western landscape purportedly ripe for conquest. It was given meaning thanks to myths, symbols, and Americans’ constant desire to distinguish “progress” from “primitivism.” Here, the agrarian spirit of “Manifest Destiny”—an ideology that has shaped modern American culture since the nineteenth century—was personified in country living suburbia. Over time, residents believed the old West was dying, adding heft to the myth. As Neil Smith notes, “The greater the separation of events from their constitutive geography, the more powerful the mythology and the more clichéd the geographical landscapes expressing and expressed through the mythology.” Or, as Roland Barthes suggests, “Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things.” Real or fictional peoples, places, things, or experiences are made more powerful when they disappear or appear to be gone. Ultimately, myths stay alive even when all else has left. With these myths undergirding residents’ perspectives, the further away the East Valley moved from its rural heritage, the more its residents worked to protect and preserve country living.

In the East Valley, I suggest that the myth of the American Dream—the belief that anyone no matter their origins and life circumstances can attain stability and success in the United States if they work hard enough—intertwined with myths of suburbia and the western frontier. For to achieve the American Dream with suburban homeownership as the ultimate marker of success, one must toil with grit and tenacity to make it happen—which are among the purported characteristics of true westerners. From the built environment to local culture, frontier imaginaries informed residents’ ideas about race, class, and national belonging. White residents and corporate homebuilders alike crafted ideas of California rurality: an isolated landscape of cowboys, agrarians, and untamed land. To be sure, people around the world absorbed cultural representations of an organic frontier filled with such images. These consumers included the valley’s Asian immigrants, who—like their white neighbors—often perceived these myths as reality or wanted them to be reality, especially in the early years of suburban development.

As an Asian Americanist, my next point of departure is to explain why the East Valley became a hotbed of Asian suburbanization. Long overshadowed
by America’s “first suburban Chinatown” of Monterey Park, the East Valley’s rapid rate of development and Asian suburbanization in the 1980s and 1990s is worthy of examination since Asian enclaves continued to emerge beyond the West San Gabriel Valley and “the 626.” Finally, I illustrate the overall social and political impact Asian immigrants made on these suburbs. In the Northern California town of Fremont, for example, Asian families significantly altered neighborhoods. This was oftentimes measured through their influence in housing and retail. From Asian-owned “McMansions” to Asian strip malls, Willow Lung-Amam claims these “landscapes of difference” became “the focus of new city planning and design policies that tried to manage and mute their difference.” Similar actions and responses occurred in the East Valley as early as the mid-1980s amid an influx of Chinese settlement. At the same time, a contingent of affluent Asians sought to keep the aesthetic status quo in place, particularly in well-to-do suburbs or neighborhoods of country living. Consequently, rather than solely focusing on the politics of design and land use, I am equally interested in how Asian residents influenced electoral politics as activists and community leaders. Asian immigrants have played a key role in suburban governance for decades, yet there is minimal attention paid to their impact on civic life. Finally, despite Asian immigrants long being characterized as cryptic and old-fashioned, Asian suburbanites who settled after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act came to symbolize a form of American modernity rooted in transnationality. Their affluence and mobility afforded them a type of social capital based on wealth and cultural exposure. White critics who railed against Asian families increasingly saw well-heeled immigrants as figures of a contemporary world that did not include them, and for some, that was unsettling.

As a historian interested in qualitative research, I rely on archives, libraries, and digital databases when researching a subject. While there are innumerable materials on Los Angeles, this is not the case for the suburbs of the East San Gabriel Valley. In researching an under-studied region, I had to be creative about obtaining primary and secondary sources. The way I absorbed local histories and gained critical insights on everyday life was to talk with the people who lived there. I conducted approximately fifty oral histories to learn about trends, phenomena, and details not covered by media. The East Valley was often out of the geographical scope and interest of daily urban
Even community or regional newspapers with reporters on the beat did not have regular access to city leaders, nor did they thickly describe how residents felt about esoteric neighborhood issues. Oral histories filled in gaps of information not provided in articles, books, city council minutes, or photographs. Oral histories were also useful for getting a sense of how people understood the past and how memory operated (i.e., what people remembered [or chose to remember]). Finally, interviews were helpful in learning about historically marginalized populations (e.g., Asian immigrants) who were peripheralized in print journalism and in the archive.

A majority of oral history respondents were US-born whites, followed by foreign-born Asians of Chinese, Filipino, or Korean ancestry (all but three Asian interviewees were born abroad), and several Black and Latino residents. Whites and Asians received the most attention from local figures and regional or national media because of their visible presence or influence in country living suburbia. Interviewees currently or previously lived in the East Valley suburbs of Diamond Bar, Walnut, and Chino Hills; Phillips Ranch in the city of Pomona; and the unincorporated areas of Hacienda Heights and Rowland Heights. Some interviewees worked in the area as well, though many commuted to jobs in Los Angeles or in Orange County. Most interviewees worked in traditionally white-collar fields and held at least a bachelor’s degree. Among white interviewees, professions included public school teachers, doctors, business consultants, government bureaucrats, and stay-at-home mothers. Among Asian interviewees, professions included accountants, bankers, engineers, import-export workers, and entrepreneurs. Interviewees were generally between the ages of forty to seventy-five years old at the time of the interview. To properly trace change over time, I primarily spoke with interviewees who moved to the area no later than the early 1990s.

I encountered several challenges in locating interviewees fully representative of these suburbs’ demographics. First, while I identify as Asian American, there were cultural and linguistic barriers between myself and residents of the area's three largest Asian populations (i.e., Chinese, Filipino, Korean). Not being able to speak their native tongue during interviews posed a challenge for immigrants who struggled to articulate their thoughts in English. This deterred some people from participating, which meant I obtained the perspectives of Asian residents whose comfort with English afforded them privileges over their counterparts with a lesser grasp of the language. Immigrants with a stronger command of English were likely privy to information
and local knowledge less accessible to others. Second, residents who were key players in regional politics between the 1980s and 2000s felt uncomfortable speaking about recent history fearing retribution, particularly because those whom they mentioned were still alive. The elected or appointed officials I spoke with typically did so on the condition that their identities remained anonymous. Regardless of age or race, interviewees worried their words would offend their neighbors or allies given the intimacy of these communities. Third, it was challenging to find residents able or willing to commit to a whole day (or even an afternoon) for an interview. This is an obstacle researchers encounter when soliciting participants. As a result, interviewees with full-time careers reserved less time than retirees or those without jobs and familial obligations. Together, these logistical reasons made it harder to solicit Asian immigrant voices compared to others. Finally, figures who played major roles in the development and politics of the region prior to 2000 had relocated or passed away. This forced me to rely on a limited archive or the word of living interviewees who knew them.

Though oral histories were a primary source base, I still turned to community and regional newspapers for foundational information. Ethnic- and immigrant-oriented periodicals were useful as well. What Chinese, Filipino, and Korean journalists found newsworthy may not have been the case for the mostly white staff at the Los Angeles Times, Orange County Register, or San Gabriel Valley Tribune. Beyond newspapers, I sifted through publications such as homeowners association newsletters, chamber of commerce bulletins, and city and county government documents (e.g., planning commission minutes). I also extracted information from developers’, builders’, or planners’ paperwork including iterations of master plans, architectural blueprints, and tract housing advertisements or brochures.

Throughout this book, explanations or recollections of events and how residents responded will seldom make sense. This is not a tidy story. In fact, it is messy and befuddling at times. The things people did or how they reacted were rarely clear, logical, or consistent. Rumors, gossip, and suspicion influenced residents’ views on changes in their neighborhood and everything else happening around them. These paradoxes and contradictions exist because residents’ views shifted or evolved over time. Moreover, sensitivities about race and class made people cautious about what they said, which did not always align with what they believed.

I acknowledge upfront that Resisting Change in Suburbia is not a synthesis or comprehensive historical study of the San Gabriel Valley or suburban
L.A. While race and racism are key themes in this story, I do not chart or chronicle relations between all racial groups, particularly whites, Latinos, and Asians—communities that constituted the valley’s demographic majority. In taking this approach, I do not suggest people operated in bubbles or lived lives apart from others. Rather, this allows me to delve deeper into the groups who comprised (or would comprise) the racial majorities or pluralities of country living communities and subdivisions (i.e., whites, Asians). Finally, narratives of white-Asian conflict or tenuous white-Asian alliances dominated press coverage and the oral histories I conducted. Much of the concern in media or in community discussions was on the impact of Asian suburbanites. The pace of Asian settlement and scale of property acquisitions across L.A. (mostly purchased by Chinese immigrants with overseas capital) thrust Asians to the front of public debate—and panic—over the valley’s changing landscapes. Despite a significant Latino population in the valley, Latinos’ impact on country living suburbs was seldom mentioned in oral histories and written sources, presumably because of Asians’ “exoticism” and distant points of origin (i.e., across the Pacific). They were what Ronald Takaki calls “strangers from a different shore.” This made them extra vulnerable for scrutiny and social policing. Latin—chiefly, Mexican—culture was legible to white Californians. Generations of European and white settlers consumed romanticized ideas of Spanish colonization and Mexican traditions, embodied in regional architecture and simplified folklore about Alta California and the mission system. Finally, I do not cover the intricacies of local history because I am more concerned with how wider trends, phenomena, issues, and cultural beliefs influenced the spatial organization, politics, and daily lives of country living residents.

Lastly, regarding terminology and names: Throughout the book, I refer to Americans of European origin as “white.” Numerous oral history interviewees referred to whites as “Anglo,” “Anglo American,” “Euro-American,” or “Caucasian.” Asian oral history interviewees sometimes referred to whites as “American.” For simplification, I use “white” as a catch-all way of identifying residents of European descent. Moreover, ethnicities within the category of “white” (e.g., British, French, German) carry similar weight when measuring the privileges of whiteness, and thus “white” is most appropriate here. While there are cultural distinctions between foreign- and US-born Asians, I generally refer to people of Asian descent as “Asian” rather than “Asian American.” This is to be more inclusive of differences in citizenship and national identity. Moreover, most oral history interviewees used “Asian” more than
“Asian American.” It is worth noting that in mainstream press sources I cite, “Asian American” is used as often as “Asian.” It is also worth noting that the majority of Asian residents settling in the East Valley between the 1980s and 2000s were immigrants, not all of whom became US citizens. This is still the case in recent years: 67 percent of Asians in the valley are immigrants. Typically, oral history interviewees referred to Asian residents by ethnicity (e.g., Chinese, Filipino, Korean). Unless an ethnic group was specified in my sources or oral histories, they will be referred to as “Asian.” To respect the privacy of my interviewees, I have assigned pseudonyms to all who requested it. I also assigned pseudonyms to interviewees whose sensitive content warranted one. Throughout the book, I frequently use the terms homeowners and residents interchangeably because most interviewees owned a house and because homeowners were at the center of local politics. Finally, the use of ethnoburb is widely accepted among scholars to describe suburbs with sizable nonwhite populations, particularly Asian or Latino immigrants. In this book, ethnoburb is typically used to distinguish suburbs with an overt Asian cultural presence in the built environment rather than describe a community where Asians constituted a racial majority or plurality. For example, Walnut’s population was majority Asian with economic and political ties to the Pacific Rim. But the aesthetics of Walnut’s commercial districts were not as explicitly Asian in design as was the case with parts of Rowland Heights or Hacienda Heights—places that residents, interviewees, and scholars considered towns with ethnoburb-like qualities.

Resisting Change in Suburbia serves as a window into the mindset, perspectives, and lives of typical upwardly mobile suburbanites who believed they lived on the L.A. frontier. Regardless of race or country of origin, homeowners demonstrated through their actions and politics the lengths people went to experience, protect, and preserve their idea of country living. Their motivations and actions illustrate the power of how myths shaped one’s expectations and sense of place. As the chapters ahead reveal, East Valley residents sought a lifestyle that was suspended in an era removed from the forces of modernity and globalization. However, change occurred rapidly, particularly the growth of Asian settlement. Some white residents vehemently resisted their Asian neighbors. But many were open to them as fellow suburbanites. That openness, though, came with conditions. While
Asian settlers attempted to negotiate the boundaries created by their white neighbors, most worked within them as a means of achieving acceptance. Asian residents embraced well-intentioned albeit problematic ideas of color-blindness, multiculturalism, and the “model minority” to make suburbia work for them. Taking a moderate or conservative approach to dealing with race or racism and forging class-based alliances with white residents provided Asian homeowners greater opportunities for social and political clout in a setting that did not belong to them as immigrants and people of color. Like their white neighbors, middle-class and affluent Asian homeowners enjoyed the privileges of a desirable zip code. Yet unlike their white counterparts whose whiteness was understood as the default in the suburbs, Asian suburbanites—willingly or through pressure—made additional concessions so they could comfortably call the East Valley their home.

Chapter 1 broadly traces the suburbanization of the East San Gabriel Valley since the 1960s, particularly the towns of Diamond Bar, Walnut, Chino Hills, Phillips Ranch, Hacienda Heights, and Rowland Heights. By the 1980s, these rural outposts-turned-bedroom communities coalesced around a shared aesthetic or theme of western agrarianism, or what were often called country living suburbs or communities. I argue that planners, small- and large-scale developers, builders, realtors, and other figures packaged a lifestyle predicated on myths of the old West. By promoting these images and ideals, regional actors successfully attracted families to the outskirts of L.A. County, each hoping to experience the romance of a bygone era.

Chapter 2 focuses on the people of the East Valley. Three waves of post–World War II settlers held varying but overlapping views of country living and collectively worked to uphold this lifestyle. While homeowners moved into the region for practical reasons (e.g., initial affordability of houses, distance from work), I argue that the country living ideal was a primary motivator. Moreover, for many residents, ideological beliefs informed where and how they lived; how they engaged in civic life; and how they viewed the role of government in their day-to-day lives. For wealthier Asian immigrants, country living was enticing partly because residing in these trendy suburbs gestured their assimilation into America. Unlike their white neighbors who easily built their lives in suburbia, for Asian immigrants, the process of suburbanization was a test of citizenship too. Developers, builders, and realtors lured Asian buyers to the East Valley through strategic marketing and customized architecture. But their perceived otherness made it difficult for them to integrate and quickly feel at home.
Chapter 3 examines Asian immigrants’ impact on the East Valley’s built environment. As Asian families exercised their rights to the suburbs, critics questioned their behavior and customs. From the construction of Buddhist temples to the emergence of Chinese supermarkets, some residents believed ethnic spaces disrupted country living and were inherently anti-assimilationist. Even residents who claimed to support diversity and multiculturalism chastised Asian suburbanites. While Asian immigrants’ actions were seen as deliberate transgressions, I argue that their integration of ethnic and cultural practices were nominal acts of assimilation. Asian immigrants continued to purchase foreign goods, speak their native tongue, and congregate with co-ethnics. But their investment in western frontier nostalgia and willingness to conform through a variety of measures were actually bold gestures of amenability and assimilation. Furthermore, ethnic spaces generated a sense of place and kinship among immigrants. Ironically, the spaces Asians were criticized for transgressing were typical fixtures of suburbia (i.e., churches, temples, shopping centers). The only difference was that these catered to Asian residents, not whites. In these moments, white critics attempted to frame immigrants as the exclusionists, not the other way around. Particularly on matters of space and land use, Asian suburbanites typically aligned with the local cultures of country living because this lifestyle presented them a range of privileges or an adjacency to white privilege that Asian suburbanites in less prestigious ethnoburbs or working-class towns did not receive or experience.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ways in which Chinese, Filipino, and Korean families were seen as friends and foes of East Valley country living, particularly in the realms of education and politics. They were “model minorities” whose traditionalism and affluence marked them as ideal neighbors. Yet Asian immigrants were simultaneously labeled threats because their perceived exoticism undermined the whiteness of these western suburbs. I argue that while Asian residents perennially stood in this “in-between” zone, at times they leveraged this position in ways to materially or politically benefit them in the long haul. By aligning with the right in numerous local issues, Asians demonstrated that they too could be good suburbanites and, by extension, good Americans. Moreover, by playing up their status as “model minorities” in school and in civic life, they gained community trust and cultural capital. As Asians reached critical mass, they wielded their influence over the white establishment (also known as the “Old Guard”) or built strong, class-based interracial alliances with each other in the collective spirit of protecting
country living. This was possible because Asian immigrants took a third lane to keep the peace. That is, they subscribed to parts of assimilationist ideas and rejected others, and they acquiesced to as well as ignored pressure from white residents as they saw fit. These strategies ultimately conferred on Asian immigrants varying degrees of power even when white homeowners thought they remained in full control. By meeting in the middle, Asian immigrants claimed a space for themselves in the suburbs.

Chapter 5 situates the “Slow Growth” movement in relation to broader concerns about change in the East Valley. Homeowners worried that country living was coming to an end amid rising densities. As mass suburbanization continued well into the 1990s, residents believed they needed to curb development and harness control from out-of-touch politicians or bureaucrats. Concurrently, residents’ pleas to stop change happened amid sharp demographic turns (i.e., Asian settlement). Taken together, critics feared shifts in the peoples, places, and politics of the region disrupted country living. I argue that the Slow Growth movement and synchronous calls to incorporate were not just about residents’ fears about development and the death of country living. These were movements meant to minimize the presence and influence of Asian immigrants.

Chapter 6, which builds off the previous chapter, focuses on the reasons for and legacies of cityhood. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, residents in Diamond Bar, Chino Hills, Hacienda Heights, and Rowland Heights urged their neighbors to back incorporation for the sake of civic autonomy. Advocates believed city councils and commissions ensured greater local control. Particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s, as development continued to sweep across the valley, pro-cityhood forces (along with Slow Growth activists) promoted incorporation as a key strategy for safeguarding country living. In some communities, however, arguments for or against incorporation were tinged with xenophobia and anti-Asian motivations. The simultaneous rise of Chinese settlements in places like Hacienda Heights generated fears of an Asian takeover, which included the arena of suburban politics. I argue that over time, activists’ efforts to incorporate (or not incorporate) became more about the need to limit Asian influence and less about the need to protect country living. By keeping the East Valley low density and mainstream (i.e., white), the myths of suburbia, the American West, and the American Dream that residents were wedded to remained intact. For residents across racial lines, that was the goal.
The East San Gabriel Valley has a distinct past from other regions of greater Los Angeles. Country living was the heart of its aesthetic, cultural, and political identity. Through vignettes of local history, *Resisting Change in Suburbia* illustrates how residents’ allegiances to myths and popular ideas informed their perceptions of time, place, and the people around them. For native- and foreign-born families alike, expectations did not always match lived experiences. Through their actions and rhetoric, homeowners tried as much as possible to align their dreams with reality. Desires to experience, protect, and preserve country living coupled with pressures to achieve the suburban American Dream encouraged homeowners to make calculated decisions. Beyond myths, class interests played a key role in influencing why residents did what they did and how they interacted with each other. Homeowners acted in ways that benefitted them at the expense of others, thus limiting opportunities for community building that did not center around material gain or the protection of privilege.

Meanwhile, under the guise of promoting tolerance and diversity (i.e., color-blindness, multiculturalism), suburbanites across demographic lines supported degrees of racial liberalism as a means of opening up country living. While these ideas and social attitudes made it easier for Asian immigrants to feel at home in suburbia, concurrent pressures to assimilate into the Euro-American mainstream encouraged Asian families to acquiesce in ways that curtailed their freedoms of ethnic expression. Interestingly, many Asian homeowners publicly or passively supported calls to restrict “Asian-ness” because it did not fit the country living model and that restrictions purportedly served the greater good. Protecting western rurality protected people’s status—something important to all suburbanites including immigrants who wished to distinguish themselves from their poorer co-ethnics. Ironically, exclusion and promoting a white suburban West served as a source of neighborhood unity for the largely white and Asian communities of country living. Ultimately, what bound these disparate groups together was a collective fear that change undermined the myths and ideals that brought them to the East Valley to begin with. The families who had attained the privileges of country living homeownership believed nothing should stop them from experiencing a lifestyle they worked hard to achieve.