In 1965, Natalia Barraza placed a full-page advertisement in her hometown paper, *El Eco de Nayarit*. She wanted to spread the word about her two restaurants, the Nayarit and the Nayarit II, where customers could count on excellent service and delicious, freshly prepared food. They would just need to travel some thirteen hundred miles, to Los Angeles, where the restaurants were located.

I saw the ad decades later, when I paged through leather-bound volumes of old issues of *El Eco* at the Hemeroteca Nacional de México, National Newspaper Library of Mexico. As a historian of race and immigration, I wasn’t surprised to see ads for businesses like the Nayarit run by *los de afuera*, particularly in Los Angeles.¹ A large number of immigrants from Nayarit had settled there, and many stayed tethered to their homeland. But the ad for the Nayarit restaurants still took me aback. It was so much bigger than the others, and—beginning “Cuando Visite Usted Los Ángeles, Calif.” (When You Visit Los Angeles, Calif.)—it seemed to promote the city itself, suggesting that the restaurants were on par with other, not-to-be-missed attractions.² That took some chutzpah. So did the inclusion of Natalia Barraza’s name, in large, confident letters at the bottom of the page.

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Yet the column of stock photographs running down the right-hand side of the ad would give most Angelenos pause. The top photo shows Los Angeles City Hall and the bottom one, Wilshire Boulevard along MacArthur Park—lovely municipal sites but not exactly tourist attractions. The middle photo does show the famous intersection of Hollywood and Vine, including the iconic Capitol Records Building, designed to resemble a stack of records on an autochanger, with a tower whose light blinks out the word Hollywood in Morse code. The caption, however, reveals an unfamiliarity with the area, and with the English language. “La famosa South on Vine Street de Hollywood, Calif.,” it reads, neglecting to mention Hollywood Boulevard. It is not clear what “South” refers to, perhaps the direction from which the photograph was taken. Neither of the Nayarit restaurants was particularly near to or had any identification with the landmarks pictured. The larger restaurant, the Nayarit, was located between downtown and Hollywood, in Echo Park. The Nayarit II was located two miles east, on the northeast edge of downtown Los Angeles. The ad suggested that these restaurants catered to insid-ers but revealed that their owner was an outsider, navigating multiple cultures.

She was poised to help others do the same. “NAYARIT PRIMERO Y NAYARIT SEGUNDO,” the text proclaims, are “bellos rinconcitos de nuestra patria que le brindan comidas y cenas de lo mejor atendidos por personal netamente Mexicano” (beautiful little corners of our homeland that provide the best lunches and dinners served by a clearly Mexican staff). The ad goes on to read, “visite usted estos restaurantes y estará como en su propia casa, en un ambiente elegante y distinguido” (visit these restaurants, and it will be like you are in your own home in an elegant and distinguished environment). Clearly, the ad plays on the concept of patria chica (literally, “small country”), which refers to the highly localized loyalty an immigrant has to their hometown, village, or region.³ By evoking the visitor’s connections to a particular home state, the restaurant would satisfy that feeling of patria
Figure 1. Doña Natalia’s ad for the Nayarit in El Eco, August 1965.
chica. Mexican visitors could feel safe at the Nayarit, a space where they could speak their native tongue, be served only by fellow nationals, and escape whatever prejudice they might fear having to face in the city as a whole. Analyzing the operation and extent of those prejudices and dangers—from daily slights to large-scale terror campaigns like mass deportation—has been at the heart of my work as a historian over the past twenty years. That work has shown how thoroughly being Mexican shaped people’s access to space, including where they could live, work, worship, play, go to school, and even be buried.

I have a unique connection to the Nayarit. Natalia Barraza is my grandmother. I never met her, but I was named after her, and my mother, María, was her right-hand assistant in the business. I grew up surrounded by people who worked at the Nayarit or had been regular customers, listening, fascinated, to their stories about the restaurant and about Doña Natalia. They all spoke of her with admiration for her strength, her talent, and her generosity with relatives in Los Angeles and Nayarit. She had come to the United States on her own, on the heels of the Mexican Revolution, and worked through the Great Depression. She could not write, read, or speak English, but she ran a successful business, sponsored dozens of immigrants—many of them single women and gay men—gave them jobs and places to stay, and encouraged them to venture out and explore L.A. Sometimes she would loan the women clothing and jewelry for the occasion. No one, however, described her as a warm person. She was formidable and removed. My mother never called her “mom”—only the more formal “my mother”—and everyone else referred to her with a title: Tía (Aunt) Natalia, Doña Barraza, or Doña Natalia. “Doña” conveys a bit more respect and a higher rank than “Mrs.” or “Miss,” and it captures my own sense of my grandmother. I think and write about her as Doña Natalia.

Over the course of her life, Doña Natalia started three restaurants called the Nayarit. The earliest, which I call the original Nayarit, was at 421 Sunset
Boulevard, between Broadway and Spring Streets, and was in operation from 1943 to around 1952. What the ad in *El Eco* refers to as the “Nayarit Primero” was founded in 1951 at 1822 Sunset Boulevard. In 1964, she opened what the ad calls the “Nayarit Segundo,” and what some people called the “little Nayarit,” at 640 N. Spring Street, around the corner from where the original Nayarit had stood. It catered mainly to downtown office workers and closed in 1968. But it was the main location, in Echo Park on Sunset, that I grew up hearing about. It was the largest and the longest-lasting, and the place where Doña Natalia spent most of her waking hours. My cousin, Doña Natalia’s granddaughter, told me that when her family visited our grandmother, they rarely did so at her home. Instead, they came to the restaurant. The Nayarit was the center of the community Doña Natalia helped build, and she was there seven days a week, ensuring it ran smoothly.
At the time, Echo Park was something of a cultural crossroads, a haven for gays, liberal whites, ethnic Mexicans (referring to both Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants), and an abundance of other immigrants. Living alongside one another made it easier for people to develop comfort with those outside their racial and ethnic communities, and while the Nayarit’s largest customer base was ethnic Mexicans, it catered to a diverse clientele and became a fixture in the community. Alexis McSweyn, whose ethnic Mexican parents had begun taking her to the Nayarit when she was nine, told me years later that she was shocked if she ever met someone in the neighborhood who hadn’t been to the Nayarit: “You’d think, ‘What?!’ The Nayarit was Echo Park.”

Doña Natalia died in 1969, two years before I was born. María ran the business for a few more years while caring for me and my older brother, David (born in 1965), but sold the lease in 1976 to new owners who kept the old name. I have scant memories of the Nayarit from those first few years of my life, but I grew up in the neighborhood it fed, in a home Doña Natalia purchased, in a place she helped make. By the time I was five years old, I felt perfectly safe venturing out from the restaurant where my mother was busy with work to walk a couple of doors down to the corner to get a Cuban pastelito at El Carmelo Bakery. The regulars there knew one another, had known my grandmother, knew my mother, and knew me. The neighborhood was an extension of home. A number of former Nayarit employees went on to open their own restaurants nearby, including Barragan’s and La Villa Taxco and El Conquistador and El Chavo, which were havens for gay clientele. When my family and I would eat at these restaurants, we were also visiting fictive kin. I played with the children of Nayarit workers and customers, attended christenings and weddings and funerals of family and friends with ties to the restaurant, and learned from them to be curious about the wider world. Even now, when we go out together, they are eager to see how restaurants approach decor, menu planning, plating, and service. They go to all sorts of
restaurants, all across the city. To get more information about both restaurants and the experiences of workers, they tend to find a Latinx immigrant server or busboy whom they pepper with questions. What is in the mole that gives it that distinctive taste? Where are you from? Do they treat you well here? Sometimes they end up getting off-the-menu extras, like salsas made for staff meals in the back, shuttled to our table.

The Nayarit has taken on renewed prominence in my life over the past few years, as I see the ways Echo Park is changing. When I attended college at UCLA in the early 1990s, I grew accustomed to classmates dismissing my neighborhood as a “bad part of town.” One wrong turn on the way to a Dodgers game, they would say, and you risked ending up in the barrio. If I told them that was my ’hood, they would fall into uncomfortable silence. I knew their viewpoints were shaped by a lifetime of seeing barrios and ghettos depicted as dangerous places inhabited by dangerous people. They had been given no historical understanding of how these places came to be, or what they meant to the people who lived there. In the ensuing years, though, Echo Park has undergone remarkable levels of gentrification. Hipsters have replaced homeboys, high-end coffee shops have pushed out mercaditos—and some of the “pioneering” new businesses have now been priced out themselves. Echo Park is no longer the subject of urban decline but of urban renewal. Ironically, it’s the diversity of the neighborhood, its “authenticity,” that makes it attractive, and yet this is what is most threatened as those with higher incomes move in. Similar changes are afoot in the traditionally Latinx neighborhoods of Boyle Heights and Highland Park and in cities across the country.

Echo Park and neighborhoods like it are often perceived as lacking a rich history, as though nothing much happened before the arrival of wealthier newcomers. People who have built their lives in such places know otherwise. So as the neighborhood has become less and less familiar to me, I kept circling back to this place, and these people, because I recognized that they get at something important, something that history books, popular media,
and landmark timelines rarely capture: how marginalized people can create their own places in ways that reclaim dignity, create social cohesion, and foster mutual care. This book is meant to call attention to such creative actions, to the ways communities can define places on their own terms, sometimes as a direct challenge to the existing environment and sometimes as an alternative.

PLACEMAKING AT RESTAURANTS
The ethnic Mexicans who worked and ate at the Nayarit were not just putting food on the table or into their mouths. They were creating meaning, establishing links with one another, and tending to roots both old and new. They were also asserting their place in a nation that often seemed intent on pushing them to the margins: the fields, the barrio, the kitchen, or back across the border altogether. The subjects of this book knew firsthand that, as the theorist Henri Lefebvre wrote, “Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics. It has always been political and strategic.” The politics of space include the politics of race, which can become codified in public policy, cemented by institutions, and bound up with public perception and presumption.

Throughout this book, I use the term “racialized group.” Terms like “race” and “ethnicity,” although useful, tend to reify the categories they describe rather than underscore their constructedness. In addition, these categories can and do change over time based on a host of factors, including time period, region, skin color, class, language, and generation.

Following George Lipsitz, who writes that “social relations take on their full force and meaning when they are enacted physically in actual places,” I explore how race “takes place,” not just figuratively but also literally. Just think of how labeling a part of the city a “barrio” or a “ghetto” suggests that certain types of people live there. Consider, too, how people’s lives unfold in place. Their sense of connection to—or alienation from—their home is often
about feeling rooted to a particular place: a neighborhood, a park, a newsstand, a restaurant. The subjects of this story, most of them working-class immigrants who did not arrive in the United States speaking English, endeavored to make places their own. They went to work, worshipped in church, attended school, ate out, and, in Doña Natalia’s case, opened a restaurant where people could come together for labor, leisure, and access to a ready-made social network. I call them placemakers.

In my work here, I mobilize a rich scholarship on placemaking in order to center the question of who gets to define a place and how they do so. Public spaces can be hostile to marginalized, racialized people like the ethnic Mexican immigrants whose lives this book chronicles. Semipublic spaces like restaurants provide a safer and no less vital site to host and shape community life, and a more capacious definition of the term “placemaking” can encompass this other, important work by racialized people. To see how racialized people are placemakers, we need to turn to such semipublic spaces, beauty salons and barbershops, bars and coffee shops, bookstores and bowling alleys, places where community members congregate on a regular, sometimes daily basis and sometimes for hours at a time. Though such businesses are certainly economic actors, the placemaking that goes on in them is social and cultural, sustained by countless small acts of everyday life that build and sustain affective relationships in a particular time and place: eating, laughing, gossiping, debating, celebrating, claiming space, bonding, forging community. If we treat placemaking more expansively, we can see the city not just as it might look from a bench in the park or on a city planning map, but as people used it.

Placemaking has worked in distinct ways for racialized groups. The kinds of spaces created, how they were used, the relationships that sprang from them, and the nurturing of collectivity and inclusivity they enabled resulted in a placemaking that could be resistant and oppositional—a counter to dominant spatial formations and imaginaries. The ethnic Mexican immigrants who congregated at the Nayarit were attempting to
carve out a niche for themselves in their new homeland. Their story is not simply about struggling to gain access to urban space by grabbing a slice of the existing pie; it is an expression of challenge that, in its own way, works to remake the existing city altogether.11

At the Nayarit and places like it, immigrants lived out values of mutuality, public sociability, and collectivity. The restaurant provided immigrant workers and customers with the familiarity of home and a ready-made social network, offering local history, introductions, and information about how to navigate the system—all invaluable assets for newcomers attempting to negotiate a large, daunting foreign city. The resources and networks available there allowed working people to assume full identities that went beyond who they were as laborers. At the restaurant, immigrants might not feel any more American (nor was that necessarily their goal), but they were insiders.

The spaces that marginalized and racialized placemakers have cultivated—including restaurants, bars, jazz clubs, music stores, and performance spaces—help communities find their moorings. I call them urban anchors. They are different from what urban planners describe as “anchor institutions”: large public or semipublic institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals that are vital to community growth. Some anchor institutions, like libraries, nonprofit organizations, or cultural institutions, can also function as urban anchors of a sort, if they serve as important sites for community building. (I don’t know what I would have done as a kid without my local library where adults helped me track down what felt like an endless supply of books that served as my gateway to all things I was curious about.)12 But on the whole, urban anchors tend to be smaller, built by the community for the community. If we fold them into our accounts of urban history, we can broaden our conceptions of who creates meaningful public places, what those places look like, and how community dynamics take shape.

Restaurants like the Nayarit reflect the cultural politics of a wider society as it plays out in everyday life.13 They influence the rhythm of people’s days,
their feelings about their surroundings, the way they claim space or are pushed out from it, and the ways they conceive of race. They can also be sites of political resistance. Consider what happened on the other side of the country from the Nayarit, at a Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina, when, on February 1, 1960, four African American students sat down at the whites-only lunch counter. The Greensboro Four, as they came to be called, did not move when they were asked to leave or when patrons began yelling at them and throwing food at them. Joined by fellow students and community

Figure 3. Placemakers: a celebration at the Nayarit, April 1968. Clockwise from top left: María Perea; unknown woman; Ofelia Encinas (customer); Natalia Barraza; María del Rosario (“Chayo”) Díaz Cueva; Pedro Cueva; Salvador (“Chavo”) Barajas; Ramón Barragan; Ramón’s sister Dolores (“Lola”) Barragan (in profile); unknown woman and man. Photograph provided by María Perea Molina.
members, their actions became a template for nonviolent protest across the
South, throwing segregationist policies into stark, ugly relief. After a sum-
mer of intense struggle, the South reluctantly began to integrate its dining
facilities, thus marking an early victory of the Civil Rights Movement and a
crucial step on the path that would lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act
of 1964, which outlawed racial segregation in public facilities.15

But resistance also takes quieter, less well-documented forms, in what
the political scientist and anthropologist James Scott described as the strug-
gles “waged daily by subordinate groups,” which can be more subtle, “like
infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum.”16 Bars and restaurants
were where people held their strategizing meetings, met before protests, and
debriefed afterward. Just as important, they were where individuals came
into contact with others to discuss and debate the politics of the day or sim-
ply to hang out with people who perhaps, like themselves, felt excluded
from other places because of citizenship, language, skin color, or sexuality.
The Nayarit played host to all these activities, and the lives of residents in
Echo Park were better for it.

COCINA CONFIDENTIAL
Los Angeles has long been known for its robust restaurant scene. As early as
1910, it was declared the number three “Top Restaurant City” in the coun-
try.17 Today, Los Angeles is a foodie mecca, renowned not only for the work
of celebrity chefs but also for a broader gastronomic landscape characterized
by racial, ethnic, and immigrant diversity. For those who have moved to the
city from elsewhere—and these days, it can be hard to find someone who
isn’t a transplant—restaurants are often first points of contact with a new
neighborhood or even a new culture. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that
much of the public, printed discussion of the L.A. restaurant scene focuses
on novelty: diners and critics eat at new (to them) restaurants in new (to
them) neighborhoods. Ethnic restaurants, in particular, entice residents